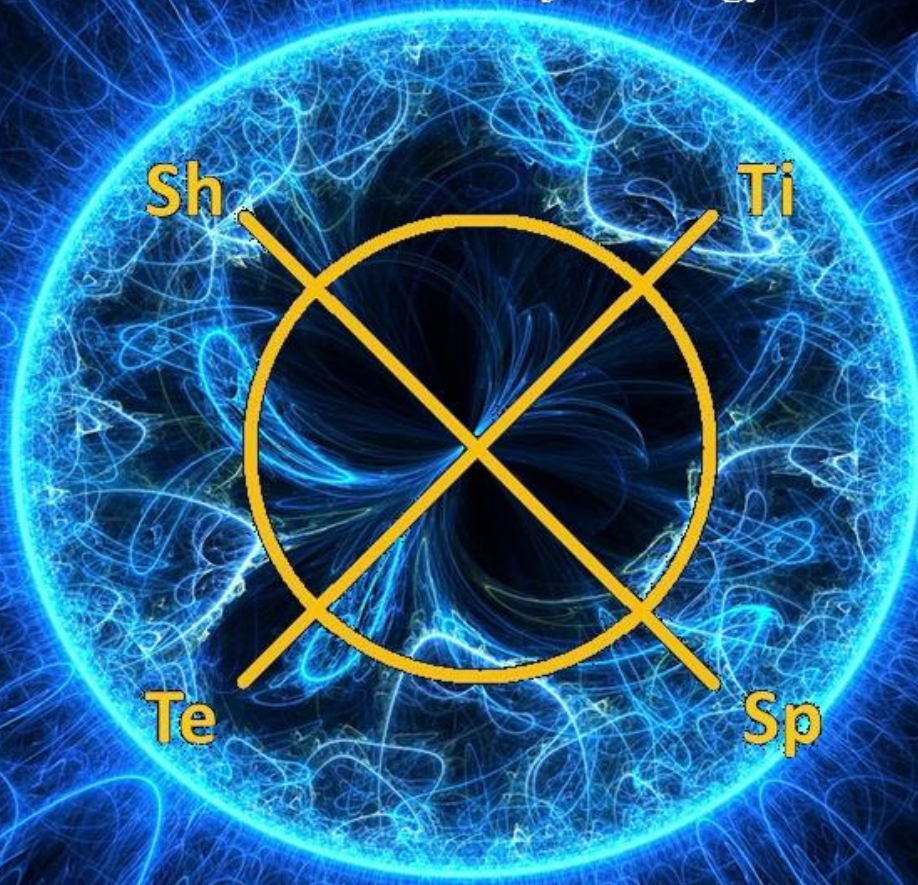


Chosen

Book 1 of the Majaos Trilogy



Gary Stringer

Chosen

(Majaos Trilogy Book 1)

Majaos is a world of magic. Magic is Life. It flows all around, infusing almost every living thing. Not that everyone is a professional mage. The people of Majaos – the elves and dwarves, hobbits and gnomes, orcs and humans – are diverse in their aptitude for magic as for anything else.

On the continent of Mythallen, Techmagic devices bring light and warmth, comfort and security to homes and businesses everywhere. But now the world is threatened by powerful new magic. Old magic. Magic that should be impossible.

An Ancient threat has returned. Hiding in plain sight for years, she has learned everything she needs while the world has forgotten its history. At last she has made her move and war has begun.

Eilidh is a bright, resourceful student of magic who believes in solving problems with her intelligence and just wants a quiet life. She hates Prophecy and has no real power of her own, yet she is Chosen to save the world. How can she possibly succeed?

Maybe she can begin by saving a single life.

Prologue

The streets of Merlyon, the capital city of Mythallen, named after the Great Merlyn of legend, were arranged in a wheel-type pattern, the main streets forming concentric circles and eight straight radial lines like spokes. The first of these circles served as a boundary between Central Merlyon and the eight outer districts. Each of these districts was dedicated to one of the Nine Secrets of Magic. The Elemental Secrets - Earth, Fire, Air and Water - sat on the cardinal compass points, while the Ethereal Secrets - Shadow, Time, Spirit and Techmagic - occupied the ordinal points in between. Central Merlyon was mainly dedicated to the Ninth Secret, the Secret of Life, representing the way this Secret sat at the heart of all other magic.

A young woman, dressed in pristine white robes with red hood and cuffs, walked along one of the streets of Central Merlyon, reflecting on the day's events. Today had been Graduation Day, and so the city was filled with more than the usual activity. It was evening – the time when daytime businesses closed and night-time businesses opened. A time of change. A time of ordered chaos. The young woman stopped at her favourite market stall to buy a warm blueberry pie and as she waited in line, she glanced once more at her Graduation Scroll. It had taken them two goes, but they had finally got her name right. “It’s pronounced Ay-Lee, like Hayley without the ‘H’,” she had told them, “but it’s spelt E.I.L.I.D.H.” Her mother’s name had been similarly unusual, she knew. She liked her name, even though it was sometimes a pain to explain to others. It was different, unique, individual.

She paid for her pie and thanked the stall holder, and after savouring her first bite, she continued walking alone. She was always alone. Eilidh had never known family, and she couldn’t honestly claim to have any friends to speak of. She knew she wasn’t pretty or funny or any of the other things that made a person popular, and even before ‘the Incident’ as she liked to call it, Eilidh had never quite ‘got’ the social thing. She simply wasn’t the social type, preferring a good book to idle gossip. As for small talk, the entire point of non-relevant conversation escaped her. When Eilidh had something interesting to say, she would say it, but it seemed to her that the only purpose served by small talk was to fill silence with noise. Eilidh liked silence. She liked a peaceful, quiet life.

Since early childhood, she had been cloistered at Merlyon's Church of Life, learning to use her Life Gift as one born to the Secret of Life - a Catalyst. A mage of sorts. A mage with no real power of her own, but with the ability by birth and by training to convert magic from its dangerous raw state into the safe, usable form known as Life. Without a Catalyst to Grant Life to them, the mages of the other eight Secrets were extremely limited.

All Eilidh’s other classmates who had graduated today, were out together as a group. No doubt they were revelling in the wondrous adventures they would enjoy as personal Catalysts to up-and-coming archmages. Every single one of them would be convinced that they were destined to be the magical support to the greatest wizards, warlocks and sorcerers of their generation. Idiots! What made them think they were so special? She had even heard one fellow student make the outlandish claim that he was sure to be the legendary *Du y Kharia*.

The mythical Well of Life was said in religious terms, to be the gift of Natus, the God of Magic, to the people of this world called Majaos. In physical terms, it was the source of all magic. Prophecy held that someday a Catalyst adventurer would discover it, led there somehow by Natus himself. In the language known as Pre-Ancient Elven, that Catalyst was termed ‘*Du y Kharia*’, translated into modern language as the Chosen One.

Eilidh rejected the whole notion of the Chosen One. It was fallacy born of the delusion of prophecy. In centuries past there had been mages who called themselves Prophets, but that was just a pretentious term for Temporal mages who extrapolated possible future events from known facts with the aid of magic. Truly being Chosen by Destiny would be a violation of free will and there was nothing more important than that.

Still, let them have their dreams of adventure if they want them, Eilidh thought, as she made way for a noble elf lady who looked at her like she was something unpleasant she had almost stepped in. *Just as long they leave me out of it.*

The elf's reaction was nothing new to the young Catalyst. She got them all the time. It was, she supposed, the price of fame, if `fame` was the right word. It seemed not to matter how long ago the Incident occurred, it was still newsworthy and Eilidh's graduation had been the perfect excuse to drag it all out again. All she had done was tell the truth – a truth people did not want to hear. From a certain point of view, the response had been proportional: an inconvenient truth revealed in exchange.

She didn't care. She used to when she was younger, but no more. Not for a long time. She possessed the Life Gift and she knew the joy of working to maintain the delicate balance in magic. Eilidh had been delighted to be offered a research position at the church following her graduation. There, she could be left alone to study and learn about the detailed workings of magic with the minimum of contact with anybody else. In this way, she would further the cause of magical balance without the dramas of adventure.

Adventure never did anybody any good, so far as Eilidh could tell. Adventure wasn't fun and romantic; it was being terrified, in pain and not knowing from one moment to the next whether one was going to live or die. As far as she was concerned, her peers were welcome to their dreams and their adventures. She was planning on a quiet drink and an early night before returning to the church in the morning for quiet reflection at the start of her quiet working life.

Eilidh had barely finished her pie, when before she could act or even think, she was surrounded by a flurry of black robes. Then darkness claimed her...

* * * * *

...When she regained consciousness, Eilidh lay on a sofa, in a dark, candle-lit chamber. The colour of the sofa was not exactly to her taste: a kind of green that made her feel somewhat queasy, especially when her head already felt as if her brain had imploded. This green sofa had a purple trim at the bottom, which clashed horribly with the green, red highlights, brown tassels and a single, bright orange cushion. When she tried to prop herself up by leaning against this cushion, she could have sworn the sofa let out a stifled cry, but she put this down to her aching head.

At that moment, a door appeared in the wall in front of her and opened, apparently by itself. A figure entered, wearing predominantly black robes that identified the individual as an Enforcer. The red hood and cuffs declared that he, like Eilidh, was aligned with the Balance. The door closed silently behind the figure - again, apparently by itself - and promptly disappeared again. As a Catalyst, Eilidh could see and sense the flow of Life in the room change as a result of a spell. The walls now glowed but it wasn't just illumination but a shield spell.

Clearly, this Enforcer wants privacy, the Catalyst deduced.

In an effort to slow her beating heart, she began breathing deeply, focussing her attention on the seal of the Council of Magic and the declaration beneath: *Majaos y Natus* – Magic is Life.

The flow of Life around the room changed again as a result of his use of magic, and the room lit up. There followed a deathly silence, during which she had the distinct impression he was studying her intently, although the Enforcer gave no visible sign of this. He just stood before her, motionless, his face completely shrouded in the darkness of his hood, hands clasped before him, as was proper for one of his order. The Enforcers were highly disciplined, trained to use silence to emphasise their complete control over themselves and everything around them. This, in combination with their black robes, helped to instil a sense of fear and respect in others. The archmage knew that he could learn in a few moments of silence, everything he needed to know about the young Catalyst sat before him, much more efficiently than hours, days of interrogation.

Eilidh had been sitting in silence for what seemed like hours, but was in fact, no more than a handful of minutes, before she realised the great disrespect she was showing by remaining seated in the archmage's presence. When she made to rise, however, mumbling something incoherent by way of apology or excuse for her behaviour, a slight hand movement from the Enforcer caused her to sit again and keep her mouth shut.

Suddenly, the Enforcer spoke to her, which was almost more nerve-wracking than the silence.

“Welcome Eilidh,” he said. The use of her name made her choke, but she stifled it instantly, as the Enforcer's forefinger twitched slightly. “I am Gamaliel,” he continued, “Chief Archmage of the Red Alignment of Balance, and I have something very important to discuss with you.”

At a gesture of his hand, Eilidh found herself seated on a business-like chair at an equally business-like desk. Gamaliel was sat opposite her, hands clasped before him once more. The sofa disappeared at a word, and when he spoke again, it was to her.

“What I am about to tell you, you will recount to no-one.” The use of the word “will” and not “must” did not surprise her.

“Of course, Master,” Eilidh replied, having found her voice again.

“You will undoubtedly be aware of the...” Gamaliel hesitated “...problems which the cities of Mythallen are facing, with the sudden invasion of...” he hesitated again “...so-called monsters of chaos.”

“Except Merlyon, Master,” Eilidh pointed out, enthusiastically, pleased to be talking about something she understood, and keen to show that she was far from ignorant in worldly magical matters, despite being little more than an apprentice. “Our capital's permanent magical shield protects us from invasion, even by things like that!” Eilidh said this with such a flourish of the hands that she nearly sent a bright orange paperweight - which she could have sworn hadn't been there a minute ago - flying across the room. Eilidh blushed, opened her mouth, and then shut it again, feeling very awkward once more. She wished she could learn to talk without moving her hands so much. This was not the first time it had got her into trouble.

“Indeed, you are correct,” continued the Enforcer, as if nothing had happened. “At least, you would be, under normal circumstances. However, if circumstances were normal, you would not be here now.” Then, seeing Eilidh flush even further, he said, “Let us dispense with formalities.” With

that, he pulled his hood from his head, so that his full features could be seen. The golden hair, the sharp, angular bone structure, and the pointed ears: it all marked him as an elf. But there was something else; something distinctly non-elven...and something in his aura of magic was off, too...

“Yes,” said Gamaliel, “you are intelligent and perceptive, Eilidh. I am, indeed, more than a typical elven mage.” Eilidh was unsure whether he had read her mind or just her face. “I am a half-elven cleric-mage,” he informed her.

There were no religious symbols embroidered on his robes, which was unusual. However, Eilidh knew that some Enforcer-clerics felt that such detail detracted from the effect of their plain black robes and made do with simply wearing their clerical symbol on a necklace chain.

With a hand gesture, Gamaliel caused a wine bottle and two crystal glasses to appear and hover above the table. It was nothing special - just simple household magic. It barely counted as a real use of Life. “Please, you will join me with a drink.” It was a statement, not a question, and without waiting for a response, Gamaliel glanced at the wine bottle, which obediently poured some of its contents into each of the glasses. The bottle continued to hover in position, while the glasses floated over to the mouths of their recipients. After sharing the drink in silence, the bottle and glasses disappeared again, much to the apparent annoyance of the paperweight.

Eilidh put that ridiculous observation down to drinking the wine too fast. She did feel better for it, though.

“As you say,” Gamaliel continued, as if there had been no interruption, “Merlyon's shield protects our capital from harm of any sort, usually. How long that will remain true, however, I would not care to say. The magic is failing, Eilidh. But that is not what I brought you here to discuss.” Seeing the multitude of questions and emotions on her face, he held up a hand to silence any she may have spoken, and said, ominously, “Let me start at the beginning...”

* * * * *

“A little over two hundred years ago, before the end of the Tech Wars, a Favoured Servant of Mortress found a young human girl of about sixteen summers, who had wandered into one of Avidon City's Dark Temples. Her parents were never traced, so the Cleric adopted her. The girl's name was Niltsiar. Niltsiar was a Dark-aligned mage, born with the Life Gift in the Secret of Spirit; in fact, one of the last generation of necromancers to be born.”

One of the final blows of the Tech Wars, Eilidh knew, saw every single necromancer – indeed everyone with an affinity for Spirit magic – mysteriously died. Since then, inexplicably, no more necromancers had been born.

“After hurtling up the ranks of that obscure order, she disappeared, never to be seen again,” Gamaliel told her.

“About five years later,” he continued, “a young woman of about eighteen summers arrived in the city of Shakaran. No one knew where she came from, but there were no apparent suspicious circumstances, so at eighteen, if she wanted to keep her childhood a secret, it was entirely her own business and no investigation was ever conducted. This girl, curiously named Niltsiar, was a powerful White-aligned mage with the Life Gift in the Secret of Earth. She was very powerful, completing the conjuror and magician grades in a fraction of the normal time. She rose up the wizard ranks, with

equal efficiency. Everyone assumed that she would take her place among the most prominent and successful mages of Mythallen. Before she could do so, however, the wizardess disappeared, and was never found.

“Since then, four similar curious incidents have occurred and I now believe that they all are somehow connected. These Niltsiar women had, up to this point, appeared in each of Shakaran and Avidon once, Keothara, and Baltacha twice, but never in Merlyon. Each one possessed the Life Gift in one of six of the Nine Magical Secrets, omitting Techmagic, Life and Fire. There is nothing obviously connecting these girls, other than the name - after all, they have appeared over two centuries, with different Life Gifts and each of the three alignments has been observed. Indeed, most of the other mages of the Higher Council are not at all convinced that any connection exists. I say they are wrong. I think that it is precisely this ignorant disbelief that has allowed recent events to occur.”

“Forgive me, Master,” Eilidh ventured, “but what connection could there possibly be? Sometimes a remarkable coincidence is just that: a remarkable coincidence. Perhaps the name Niltsiar is known to some people in legend. It could merely be a case of a mother naming her powerfully Life Gifted daughter after an obscure mystical figure. At the same time, it is not uncommon for such highly Life Gifted mages to disappear on some quest and get themselves killed, leaving an orphan child behind. The Church of Life here in Merlyon has a memorial to Catalysts who were formerly trained there before being attached to such powerful mages - Catalysts who disappeared without trace. I would say, with the greatest of respect, that it is simply a hazard of adventure. It is a common mistake to see connections where none exist. A mistake that anyone can make - even great mages such as yourself.”

“True,” Gamaliel allowed, “but it is also a common mistake to assume there is no connection simply because one does not know what it is.”

“Then perhaps if you could tell me what has happened to make you believe in this connection, a fresh perspective might be useful. Sometimes one can be blinded by one's own superior knowledge.” Eilidh prayed that Gamaliel wouldn't think of that as arrogant presumption. That's how it sounded to her own ears, but she got the impression that Gamaliel appreciated straight talking.

Certainly, he didn't seem to mind, the way he brought his story up to date.

“A few years ago, a woman in her mid-twenties arrived in Merlyon, born with the Life Gift in the Secret of Fire. Yes, she had great power, but such a thing is not uncommon with Fire mages. Her name was Niltsiar, and she soon became a high-ranking White War Witch. It came as no surprise when she became leader, or `Guardienne` of the White Mages.”

Eilidh was well aware of the official titles for the leaders of the three divisions of magic: Guardian/Guardienne of the White Mages of Light, Master/Mistress of the Black Mages of the Dark and simply Chief Archmage of the Red Mages of Balance. She knew the names of all the top ranking mages, even with the recent wholesale changes, but she never planned to be important enough to be worthy of their notice. Why Gamaliel should be interested in her now, she could not imagine, but she dared not be so rude as to ask for an explanation. She was his guest until he decided otherwise. That fact didn't thrill her or scare her; it was merely a fact.

“Her In her advance,” he continued, “she overtook both Kylan, who had been expected to remain Guardian for a few years yet, and Merlana - a very distant, female descendant of the Great Merlyn - who we all thought would naturally succeed him.”

Eilidh tried not to show her derision at the bloodline claim. It wasn't her place to question the Prime Magus, but she had done a study on this very thing during her church training – it was the thing that had started all the trouble. Eilidh had produced a detailed thesis that, among other things, demonstrated that if every mage who claimed to have Merlyn blood in them really did have Merlyn blood, then Merlyn and each of his descendants must have had an average of approximately fifty children, at least half of which must have possessed the Life Gift.

To her, it had merely been an academic exercise. Somehow, it had transformed into a political and social weapon, with many proud families accusing others of faking bloodlines, of lying or buying their social standing. Feuds escalated into open hostility and Eilidh, already something of a social outsider at school, was shunned, bullied and even beaten. Even those who might have been sympathetic were afraid to be associated with her, lest they get the same treatment. In the end, someone hit on a way to calm things down in the capital: discredit the source. Suddenly, certain inconvenient truths about Eilidh's origins came to light and the news spread like wildfire.

The story took on a life of its own. Truth became tainted with half-truths, exaggerations and bare-faced lies and she was tainted along with them. Her inherited condition was now, apparently, the touch of death. Still, being ostracised had its advantages – at least they stopped hurting her. They didn't dare. They might catch something!

Until Graduation Day's news, things had calmed down a bit. There were even a number of fellow students with whom she could have a professional discussion, but that was as far as it went.

Thinking of professional discussions reminded Eilidh of where she was and she admonished herself to pay attention.

“It was no surprise when Niltsiar challenged my direct superior,” Gamaliel was saying, “for his position as Prime Magus of the Council of Mages. This is normal procedure, of course, but what happened during that challenge was far from normal.

“I was one of the three adjudicators; the highest ranking mage from each Alignment, after the two contenders. This was necessary because, as a White Mage, Niltsiar's challenge was to be fought under a magic suppression field, to avoid any real injuries or death.

“Niltsiar opted to gradually wear him down, simply blocking the best her opponent throw at her. There was no doubt that she would win, but it would take time. Frankly bored, I began to practise my clerical Anti-Magic shield, and I was very pleased with myself when it held and I could feel no magic penetrating it.”

Eilidh understood what he meant. A magic suppression field was used in many magical contests to make them non-lethal, but one could still sense the flow of Life. How else could one keep score? But a cleric's Anti-Magic shield would have blocked all trace of that Life flow.

Gamaliel continued, “My self-satisfaction was cut short with a blinding flash and before I knew what was happening, there were death cries all around me. Then my world went black...”

“...I remained unconscious for several days, with healers tending me constantly. When I finally awoke, I added my own clerical abilities, to speed the healing process. A couple of days later, when I had recovered my full strength, I received a visit from the Acting Master of Dark Magic, Drizdar.”

Eilidh had heard of him. Though he was an elf dedicated to dark magic, she'd heard he had a penchant for vaporising anyone who called him a `dark elf`.

“Drizdar had been the natural person to assume control of the Council during the crisis, being the highest ranking mage not to attend the contest. He commands a natural respect both on his own merits and through his reputation as the former apprentice of Akar-Sel.”

Akar-Sel had been a supremely powerful renegade Warlock, who was known to be the chief architect of the terrible atrocities of the Tech Wars. Techmages designed, created and controlled magical devices, rather than using magic directly. This set them apart among the Nine Secrets. Something that led to misunderstanding, distrust and ultimately war. Although Akar-Sel died two centuries before Eilidh's generation was even born, it was history that could never, must never be forgotten. Akar-Sel turned out to be a double agent, stirring up trouble between the Techmagi and mages of the other Secrets. If not for him and his followers, the war may never have happened. He was tried for his crimes after the war and sentenced to the torment of the Turning. This spell, known only to the Executioner, entrapped his living soul within dead stone. His soul would continue to live this living death for eternity. The Turning spell was irreversible and reserved as punishment for only the most powerful renegade mages who were so dangerous that even death could not be guaranteed to stop them. It had been employed no more than a handful of times in the entire history of Mythalen.

The horrific images in Eilidh's mind made her feel nauseous, but she fought it down to reply, “Yes, I know the history of Akar-Sel, Master.”

“Gamaliel.”

“Pardon?”

“Gamaliel,” repeated the Enforcer, with a slight smile but still a serious tone of voice. “I said we would dispense with formalities and that includes titles. Between you and me, I never much cared for titles: I think they create unnecessary problems. Alas, they tend to be an unfortunate consequence of prominent positions, but I would appreciate it if you could refrain from using them.”

“I am honoured, Master - sorry - Gamaliel,” she answered. “It's just hard to get used to.”

Eilidh had the strange impression of the paperweight giggling at this point, but she chose to ignore it.

Gamaliel's smile flickered for a moment and then disappeared, leaving the usual Enforcer impassive stare. He continued, “Drizdar had immediately sent for the best Chronomagi in Mythalen. With the aid of about a dozen Catalysts, they managed to create a Time Image of the disturbing events. Let me show you.” Gamaliel gestured to a large, rectangular screen on wall – a Techmagic device that could display moving images. With a wave of his hand, the device began replaying the attack, along with an analysis of the Life flow. Eilidh knew her Catalyst training should be more than sufficient to identify the spells used in any contest, and yet how Niltsiar managed to dispel the magic suppression field was a complete mystery. What came next made even less sense. Niltsiar cast an

Enforcer's Nullmagic on everyone else and finally, cast a witch's Raistlin's Revenge spell, apparently killing or stoning everyone else, before teleporting away. And all without the aid of a Catalyst.

"But that's impossible!" Eilidh gasped. "A witch can't use Nullmagic, and no mage can expend that much Life without a Catalyst to maintain their Life Store!"

"I know," Gamaliel agreed. "But the evidence is clear. The only reason I survived is thanks to my clerical shield. When it was hit by Niltsiar's power, my shield tried to absorb the energy, failed, collapsed and channelled the remainder into my body. Although the spell itself couldn't harm me, being hit by all that energy all but killed me, anyway. Fortunately."

"Fortunately?" Eilidh wondered.

"It apparently convinced Niltsiar that she had killed me. If she'd thought I was still alive, I wouldn't have been for long."

Eilidh nodded. "Of course, even Catalysts can't detect Cleric magic. It's too different. That's why it doesn't show up on the analysis."

"Precisely," Gamaliel concurred.

"This is incredible, Gamaliel. I knew there had been a lot of changes in Magical Government, recently, but I never imagined this was the reason."

"We've been trying to keep things under wraps to give ourselves time to plan, but now with the influx of these chaos creatures, we have no choice but to act. So far the gateways to their plane of reality have eluded us, so we must go to war. After some...`persuasion`...Drizdar has agreed that I should become Prime Magus, while he takes on the mantle of Supreme War Master and Merlana assumes Guardianship of White Mages of Light."

Merlana's part made sense, Eilidh thought. Since she had been only third ranked White mage before the attack, while her Black and Red counterparts were both second, she could not assume leadership. However, if Drizdar had studied under Akar-Sel, Eilidh found it hard to imagine how anyone could `persuade` him to do anything. It was all very interesting to Eilidh's analytical mind, but she still didn't understand what any of this had to do with her.

"You have listened patiently," Gamaliel commended Eilidh, when he turned off the screen. At some point during the display, the paperweight had disappeared and in its place stood a turquoise blue and ruby red lamp with a tangerine shade, which she only noticed because she nearly knocked it over.

"Patience is good and I commend you for it, but doubtless you are wondering what all this has to do with you, beyond playing your small part in the war effort."

"It would be a lie to deny it," Eilidh agreed, carefully.

"Very well, I will tell you. We are planning a great ceremony to mark my inauguration. Not for vanity, but for strategy. There will be many fine words of victory and glory, of honour and triumph, but they are all just so much window dressing. It is all supposed to focus Niltsiar's attentions on the war effort and, more specifically, on me. I want her to know that she did not kill me." His voice grew louder. "I want her to know that she has erred! I want her to worry about what that error is going

to cost her!” Reaching a climax, he roared, “In organising the forces of war, I will be making a lot of noise and attracting a great deal of attention! So much so,” his voice dropped suddenly, to little more than a whisper, “that Niltsiar will not notice a small party of adventurers, going quietly about a quest to secretly discover how to stop her.”

Eyes wide, Eilidh gasped in sudden understanding of the brilliance of the plan, “So in a way, this entire war is--”

“--A massive deception, yes,” Gamaliel concluded. “Meanwhile, this small party will investigate the clues about Niltsiar, discover her weakness and strike while her attention is diverted.”

“That is truly fascinating, Master, but I’m sorry, I still don’t understand why this is any of my business.”

“This small party must have a leader,” Gamaliel explained. “That leader is to be you...”

Chapter 1

... That leader is to be you.

Eilidh could still hear those words echo inside her mind, even though it had been several hours since Gamaliel had said them.

“So many people dream of being sent on a mysterious quest of vital importance to King and Country,” she grumbled to herself, “but not me. If he wanted to send a newly qualified Catalyst, why couldn't he have sent Peter or Si'lana?”

In fact, just about any of her peer group would have jumped at the chance. But instead, for reasons known only to Gamaliel himself, he had chosen Eilidh, “and that's the reality of it. That's what I have to deal with,” she reprimanded herself. “Reality is reality and no amount of wishing will change it...but it's just so...so...” Her head hurt so much, she couldn't even think of the right words.

“Pull yourself together,” she ordered herself. She often talked to herself – it wasn't as if anybody else was interested in talking to her. “Like it or not, I am the leader of a small party of adventurers that doesn't exist yet, that is supposed to go on a quest to find something or someone, I know not what or who. I have to search the entire realm, if necessary, maybe beyond Mythallen's shores, out over the ocean. But I've only ever left Merlyon once, and that was only to go on a day trip to Baltacha with the church when I was about five years old. My party of adventurers must follow me of their own free will, and yet I'm not supposed to tell them anything - not that I know much myself!

“Oh, this is all just too much,” she muttered to herself, irritably. “It's all very well, the Leader of the Council holding a window dressing ceremony and telling me that I should go home and get some sleep! How am I supposed to sleep, when my head feels worse than when I was abducted?”

Eilidh got up then, deciding to clean her novice quarters, pack everything that she might need, and tidy away all her possessions that she had to leave behind. The church would keep it all in safe storage for her until she returned. If she returned.

“People die in adventures,” she reminded herself.

She promptly told herself to shut up, and at that point she decided she was in real danger of taking this talking to herself business a bit too far. That was an interesting thought: maybe if she could plead insanity, Gamaliel would send someone else instead.

Then again, she reflected, that might just make me eminently qualified for this madness!

Pushing such thoughts aside, she threw herself into her work, focussing her mind on the simple tasks at hand and generally working herself into a state of complete exhaustion. With any luck, sleep would come naturally.

Eilidh attacked her cleaning with a vigour that bordered on vicious. In fact, she found she enjoyed the physical domestic labour, making the place look better than she could ever remember. Shame she wasn't going to be staying around long enough to enjoy it. She finished by washing all the crockery, cutlery, glassware...and that odd blue-green teapot with the purple handle, red spout and bright orange lid that always made her smile.

“Funny,” she said to herself, “this teapot reminds me of something...something about the colours...” but she was too shattered to think anymore, about anything.

At last, Eilidh lay down on her bed and closed her eyes. Her final conscious thought, before sleep overtook her, was the bizarre realisation:

I don't own a teapot!

* * * * *

In the morning, Eilidh set out early, to go in search of anyone who would join her, thinking it unwise to leave Merlyon and walk into the unknown alone. The Catalyst had just stepped out of the church doorway, when she was approached by a small figure in the beige robes of a magician. Running through the crowd, the red hood of the robes slipped off its wearer's head, revealing a female hobbit, about Eilidh's own age.

“Excuse me,” she asked, “Eilidh Hagram?”

“Yes?” the Catalyst acknowledged.

“Oh,” she said, catching her breath, “thank goodness I caught you.” She giggled. “Master Gamaliel would not have been happy. I meant to come earlier but I overslept.” She gasped, “You won't tell, will you? Please promise you won't! I'd get into trouble and it doesn't happen very often, well, not too often anyway, I mean no more than most people after a tough day. Hey, have you got anything good to eat on you? I missed second breakfast this morning to make sure I caught you, which I nearly didn't. But leaving without anything in my tummy would be just terrible.” Another giggle. “I'd probably have passed out on the way here from lack of food. Lack of food makes me hungry; you ever find that? Mind you, humans don't seem to eat much from what I've seen - elves are worse though. At least dwarves know how to eat. My dad told me this funny story about the time a dwarf beat him in an eating contest. Can you believe that? The very idea of anybody able to eat a hobbit under the table! I think Dad must have been sick or something. I've never had an eating contest with a dwarf myself. I think it would be fun. Fun, fun, fun,” she giggled again. Then she blinked and asked, “What was I saying?”

“I have absolutely no idea!” Eilidh laughed good-naturedly. She couldn't remember the last time anybody said so many words to her in a whole day, never mind in one breath. It was something of a novelty. “Why don't you start from the beginning, slowly?”

The hobbit blushed. “Tolbrietta Hobbnobb.”

“Excuse me?”

“My name, Tolbrietta Hobbnobb – but you can call me Toli, all my friends do.”

“Well it's nice to meet you, Toli, but unfortunately I'm in a bit of a rush. I have to leave Merlyon,” Eilidh paused to deal with the bad taste in her mouth before adding, “on an adventure.”

“Adventure?” Toli clapped her hands and started jumping up and down. “How wonderful!”

Oh please, Eilidh groaned silently.

Toli snapped her fingers. “That's it! That's why I needed to see you. Sorry, I'd forget my stomach if wasn't properly weighed down with food!” She giggled. “Master Gamaliel sent me to give you these provisions, this bag of gold and this accompanying letter.”

Eilidh accepted these gifts, gratefully, putting the gold and food safely away, before examining the note:

~~~~~

*Dear Eilidh,*

*There are a number of important things I would say to you, so please read carefully.*

*Firstly, I draw your attention to the provisions. You should take charge of them for now, until you can build up a party you can trust not to waste them. You will have to buy more as you go on, but carry only the bare minimum provisions. You should travel light so that you can move quickly. There's no telling what interesting things you will discover on your travels and you don't want to run out of space in your pack because of all the food although I suspect the hobbit messenger I am sending might not entirely agree. As a cleric myself, I am qualified to point out the value of clerical powers to create food and drink out of the ether. So, a cleric in your party could end any starvation worries, but even then, whenever another safe source of food presents itself, you should not hesitate to capitalise on your good fortune. Waste nothing: not food, not water, not energy and not magic.*

*Secondly, the bag contains 600 gold pieces. This large sum of money is my gift to you and you alone. It should be spent wisely. Some may be spent on magical training, but the majority is to be used to obtain the most valuable (and most costly) thing in all of Majaos: knowledge.*

*Thirdly, you should never have more than a dozen persons in your party at any one time, so as not to draw attention to yourself. Be careful whom you allow to join your party: people (as all things) are not always what they seem.*

*Finally, I wish you success, for all our sakes. I do not expect to see you again until you have completed your quest. Then I will welcome you and whatever party you assemble into my tower to receive the honour you deserve. Then we will meet not as Prime Magus of the Council and novice Catalyst, but as friends.*

*Yours in Magic,*

*Gamaliel.*

*Majaos y Natus*

~~~~~

Seeing Eilidh look up from the note, Toli smiled and said, “I don't know exactly what your quest is, but it must be important if Master Gamaliel is involved. Could you use a magician? I'm only Life Calling, I'm afraid, but—”

“—But I could use a friend,” Eilidh put in, still half distracted by her own deep thoughts.

“I can be that, too,” Toli agreed, simply.

Eilidh was startled by that response, but fixed Toli with a penetrating stare as she laid out the facts.

“If you join me,” she said, “you will have to accept there are things I cannot tell you. My quest is connected with the sudden changes in Council Leadership and the chaos creatures. Beyond that, I can't tell you the details of my ultimate goal. As a matter of fact, I'm not altogether sure what my ultimate goal is. It will be dangerous, of that you can be certain.”

Toli shrugged. “It seems to me that everywhere is dangerous right now,” she pointed out, matching Eilidh's serious tone. “If I don't go with you, I will be fighting in the war. I'm only a grade one magician, so I don't think I can make much difference in that way. On an important quest with you, maybe I can be of more help. I understand the risks, Eilidh, and I appreciate the need for secrecy. I hope, in time, I will prove myself to you so you can tell me more. Until then, I'm content to follow you on faith. Please take me with you! At the very least I can be a friend to you and that can only be positive.”

Despite not being entirely comfortable with the faith part, something for which Eilidh had little time, it made sense to accept Toli's help. “When you put it like that, Toli, I would be honoured to consider you an ally and a friend.”

Eilidh and Toli had just shaken hands, when both were startled by the voice of a man from behind them. “I say, O Esteemed Leader,” said the very jolly sounding voice, “this is all ever so touching an' all, but would you mind turning the lights on, so to speak?”

They both whirled around, Eilidh held her dagger ready, while a spell began to take shape in Toli's mind, but they could see no-one.

“Egad!” came the voice again. “I do wish you wouldn't do that! I mean, I'm all for exciting rides, but you nearly blew my lid off!”

“Er, exactly where are you?” Eilidh asked, somewhat confused.

“And exactly what are you?” Toli added.

“Whaddy think this is?” demanded the irritated voice. “Quiz night at the Red Dragon Inn? `Is it animal, vegetable, mineral or magical`?” The voice continued, doing a very bad impression of the barkeep of that well-known tavern. Having apparently made its point, it suggested, “If you'll kindly take off your travel bag and take out that teapot you washed so lovingly last night, I'll be happy to tell you everything I know. Well, maybe not everything. Since I know everything it would take me a very long time to tell you all of it.”

Eilidh obediently did as she was asked, despite feeling a little silly talking to a teapot in a bag. Immediately after she put it on the ground, it disappeared and in its place, stood a tall, handsome man of indeterminate age. He was dressed in a white silk shirt, which billowed out of the sleeves of his red velvet jacket. A pair of blue-green, silk breeches and purple hose covered his legs. His clashing ensemble was finished off with a pair of black shoes and a brown hat, sitting on his own short brown hair. At a movement of his left hand, a similarly bright orange silk handkerchief fluttered down from

nowhere. He caught it and held it up to his face, which was now wearing an exaggeratedly distraught expression.

“Egad!” he exclaimed. “I thought I was going to suffocate in there! And then to be whizzed about like a spinning top! I would've thought you'd be satisfied with sitting on me and squashing me, and then nearly sending me flying off the desk, to the other side of the room. Even that lamp, which I would have thought was easy enough to see...sink me dear girl, you could have set fire to the place! I don't think The Chief Balanced One would've been so keen to `dispense with formalities` then. You're lucky he didn't send for his Dark and Silent Guards to lock you up as a danger to yourself and everyone around you.” With that, he promptly flopped onto a bright blue sofa that had just appeared, draped the orange silk over his face and sighed, “Egad!”

Unimpressed by this melodrama, Eilidh demanded, “If you've quite finished, I would appreciate it if you would tell me who you are.”

He peered at the Catalyst with one eye from behind the orange silk. “You mean you don't know?” he demanded, apparently quite put out. “I'm definitely going to have to talk to my PR people about this,” he grumbled. A notebook appeared out of thin air, along with a pen, which wrote in an entry all by itself. As this strange individual stood up, the diary, pen, orange silk and sofa all vanished. “Let me introduce myself,” he offered. “My name's Kismet,” he bowed, theatrically, “and I'm at your service...for a while, at least. I say, isn't that what the Lady Moriah said when she started her fifth affair? ...Or was it her sixth? ...No, it was definitely her fifth. Her sixth one was with that fat bloke...what was his name...Vash? ...Vora?” He snapped his fingers. “Oh I remember: Vorash - King Vorash, that was it. Anyway, I'm here to help from time to time.”

Eilidh wasn't sure she wanted to encourage this Kismet, with his scandalous repartee, but on the other hand, she decided he might just be daft enough to volunteer. So she asked if he would join her quest.

“Sorry dear girl, I'm afraid I'm far too busy for that,” he replied. His diary reappeared in front of his nose and the pages flicked over by themselves. “Hmmm, yes, that's what I thought,” he mused. “The diary's just too full.”

Tolbrietta jumped up and snatched the diary out of the air. “Full? It's blank!” She objected, flicking through the pages. “Every page is completely blank!”

“Well of course it's blank!” Kismet replied, indignantly. The diary vanished. “Do you really think I'd write down all my business in a diary for all to see? Imagine if it got stolen! If it's blank it doesn't matter. Nobody can use it to cause trouble.”

“But in that case, what's the point of carrying a diary?” asked the Catalyst.

“Oh, I'd be lost without my diary. Absolutely lost. I'm a busy man and I wouldn't have a clue where I'm supposed to be without my diary.”

A bewildered Eilidh decided to let it drop at that.

“But hey,” Kismet continued. “I've got a bit of free time right about now, and I did say I'd love to help, so help I shall.”

“Oh good,” Eilidh remarked, dryly, “I'm delighted.” Her sarcasm was lost on Kismet.

“I suppose you'd like my advice as to what to do next? I dare say you'd like me to,” he wiggled his fingers, “conjure up a merry band of people for you, as well.”

“Could you really do that?” Toli wondered.

“Sink me, dear girl. I was actually joking! Still, I suppose I could help a bit. First, I think it's worth pointing out, Eilidh, that your Oath of Secrecy doesn't apply to me. After all, I was there all the time and heard every word. Now, let's see...”

“Hold on just a minute, what do you mean you were there all the time? How could you possibly? ...Great Abyss!” she swore in sudden realisation. The Catalyst had a growing, nagging suspicion that if one could cut through all the ridiculous nonsense Kismet spouted, there was an important grain of truth to be learned. Even in the heart of the most profound chaos in the world, there was usually the seed of order. “The sofa, the paperweight, the lamp, all you?”

Kismet bowed. “And of course the teapot.”

“Shapeshifting magic? Kismet, don't you know how irresponsible that is? It's fine for dragons because they don't age they way us mortals do, but you can lose up to a year of your life every time you do it, don't you realise that?”

He spread his hands, helplessly. “Who wants to live forever?”

Eilidh rolled her eyes, but she wasn't going to be distracted. Her first thought was that it was some kind of elaborate illusion, but that wasn't it. As a Catalyst, Eilidh was by Gift and by training able to sense and identify every kind of magic on Majaos. She knew what illusion magic, magic of the Secret of Shadow, looked like. This was altogether different. No, this wasn't illusion magic, this was, well, it was unlike anything she had ever sensed before. This was something new...something old.

“But shapeshifting into inanimate objects is impossible and even if it wasn't,” Eilidh continued. “Even if a human could use magic to change into, say, a teapot, there's no way for a teapot to cast the spells necessary to change into a human. Inanimate objects are magically Dead and as soon as you changed into one, you should be magically Dead too. It is therefore impossible to change back.”

“Things are only impossible until they're not,” Kismet insisted. “Anyway, never mind me, what about this party of yours? I think it's high time you thought about who you want to join you.”

Like I can just pick and choose! Eilidh thought to herself. “And what would you suggest?” she asked aloud, trying hard to keep her flip tongue under control.

“Well,” Kismet scratched the back of his neck with his left forefinger, pondering the question. “You may even be better just grabbing a warrior for protection and going off to Shakaran. Their war preparations have been going on for a long time, if indeed they ever stopped – you know what they're like down there. Still,” he mused, mostly to himself, “I daresay a lot of people will be very grateful to the Shakaran people before this is over. It's a risk, but a reasonable one, I think. Once there, it should be easy enough to find people who are willing to go on a `mysterious quest of vital importance to King and Country`.”

Eilidh blushed at hearing her own expression repeated back to her.

“I really must stress the importance of adding a fighter to our merry band, though. Just in case we run into trouble along the way, which I’m sure we won’t. Just in case.”

* * * * *

Eilidh and Toli paid a visit to the Merlyon Warrior's Guild and discretely asked around while Kismet stayed outside. It wasn't a good day. Of those who would even talk to Eilidh, most were not interested, unwilling to miss out on earning glory for themselves in the coming war. Those who were interested all seemed wholly unsuitable, ineffectual fighters, drunken dwarves or arrogant ogres who thought they should be party leaders. Sadly there were no Knights of either light or dark orders, and balanced Knights were little more than a myth. Everybody seemed to know a friend whose sister had met someone in a tavern who overheard the bartender telling someone that a customer had definitely seen a Knight of Balance. Not terribly useful. Knights could be a bit stuffy and rigid in their ideals, but at least they would be well-trained, skilful warriors who could be relied upon to commit themselves to an honourable quest. In the end, they had to give up, and decided to try their luck at a nearby inn.

A young woman swept into the Elven Home Tavern just behind them, golden plate armour flashing in the sunlight, blue cape flying behind her, displaying a gold falcon crest of whichever noble house her family belonged to. She strode powerfully but gracefully over to the bar, removing her helm and flicking back her long, wavy ginger hair. She ordered an ale and sat down. Just then, Eilidh was nearly knocked over by a dwarf staggering toward the bar. “Out of my way *braeghwar!*” Eilidh wasn't familiar enough with the ancient dwarven language to translate the word, but the meaning was clear enough. “Yer sort ain't welcome in 'ere,” he grumbled. “Barman!” He banged his fist on the bar. “Dwarf Spirits! Now!”

Toli gasped, “Eilidh? Didn't you see the way he just treated you? So rude!”

The Catalyst shrugged. “No more so than most.”

“You mean others treat you that way, too?”

“All the time, it's quite normal.”

“Well it's your business I suppose, but I'm sure I wouldn't stand for it.”

It seemed Tolbrietta was not alone in her opinion, because the Knight glared at the dwarf and said, “Methinks that thou hast surely had enough already. Certainly, it can only be thy inebriated state that didst cause thee to display such incredible lackings in thy basic common courtesies.”

“Ye wanna make somethin' of it, Knight bitch?”

“Art thou intending to offer a challenge, sir?”

“Yer damn right I am!” He lifted his battle-axe above his head to strike and let out a drunken battle cry at the Knight lady who had yet to move. She was unconcerned. Her opponent had already made his mistake. It was one of the most basic truths of hand-to-hand combat: a thrust is always faster than a swing. Quick as a flash, her gauntleted fist shot out and caught him square on the nose.

Ordinarily, knocking a dwarf off his feet was near impossible, but with the effects of alcohol and the already precarious balance of swinging his battle-axe backward over his head, the Knight's punch was enough to send him toppling backwards and crashing to the floor. Eilidh was reasonably sure he'd passed out before he'd even hit the ground.

“If there is one thing I canst nary abide,” the Knight remarked, “’tis bad manners - especially to women. Come, Catalyst and magician, sit with me and prithee tell wherefore art thou here, if nothing prevents thee, for I perceive it is not merely for the charming company.” She indicated the comatose dwarf. “In my reckoning, thou art adventurers. What dost thou seekest? Mayhap I canst help thee?”

The two new friends took places beside the Knight, who removed her gauntlets and shook their hands, introducing herself as Lady Hannah Collins, Knight Initiate of Paladinia. Eilidh and Toli offered their names in return and the Catalyst explained their need for a warrior for protection on their quest intended to investigate the many strange circumstances central to the declared war, with a hope to `strike at the heart of the matter`. Eilidh decided that phrase would likely appeal to a Knight. It did.

“Thy quest doth sound both intriguing and most honourable. I would deem it a personal favour if thou shouldst consider me a suitable companion for thee.”

Eilidh glanced quickly at Toli, who gave an instant nod of assent. “The honour would be ours, Lady Collins.”

The Knight waved that aside, “Please, simply Hannah will suffice. Now, I do perceive that thou art anxious to be off.”

“It's true, although I don't know why I should feel this way. Since I have no real clue where I'm supposed to go, you wouldn't think it would matter how fast we get there. But somehow it does.”

“Then let us away. I must needs only report to the barracks and request to be placed on detached duty. My commanding officer, Knight Officer Sir Warren Mitchell, wilt doubtless support me in this endeavour - a finer gentleman thou canst scarce imagine. It shall be my way of fulfilling the questing requirement to become a Knight Warrior, so ‘tis but a formality that must needs be observed. Then I shall be fully at thy command.”

Chapter 2

“We will use the Corridors as far as Shakaran's borderlands,” Kismet told the three of them, “but then we must walk. We'll be going out of our way a fair bit but it's better than getting clobbered by some Creature of Chaos, or more likely having to answer a lot of awkward questions about why we're casually using a major Corridor in wartime. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but certain overzealous Enforcers might consider you an unusual group.”

Eilidh bit her tongue to keep from sniping back, “You think we look unusual, have you looked in a mirror lately?”

Without further discussion, they stepped into a Corridor – one of a network of space-time tunnels that had criss-crossed the continent since Ancient times - and an instant later, they found themselves amongst trees and bushes and flowers. Smooth, rolling hills, none high enough to attract white snowy peaks, just misty summits. Eilidh could identify elm and oak, sharing the land with smaller bushes and shrubs. There was a small stream meandering by, weeping willows framing the banks. Eilidh didn't know much about flowers but at least she knew wild roses when she saw them. The land existed in a semi-wild, semi-tamed state. They were exactly where they were supposed to be - standing within the Borderlands of Shakaran.

“Right now,” Kismet declared, “I don't expect to be attacked, but we really should keep as quiet as possible and not draw any attention to ourselves.” Then looking down at himself, he exclaimed, “Egad! These clothes will never do!”

“You think?” Eilidh couldn't resist saying, acidly.

“Absolutely, I'm bound to get dirty and you can never get grass stains out.”

His attire then instantly changed to a leather doublet and breeches, in a shade of green that blended nicely with the surrounding foliage, along with tall brown leather boots and brown leather gloves. His brown hat remained as it was, but then a bright orange feather appeared in his hand. Sticking the feather in his hat, he remarked, “I call it Macaroni! Do you like it?”

Kismet smiled as if at some clever joke, but the humour was lost on his audience, so he just shrugged and led them away.

* * * * *

After walking for some time in the oppressive, muggy conditions, Eilidh asked Kismet to stop for a while as they were beginning to feel tired and hungry. At least the two magic-users were. Hannah could probably have gone on for hours and would never have voiced a word of complaint no matter what.

“Sink me!” he cried. “I was getting so carried away with the excitement of it all, I'd completely forgotten about mundane things like food and rest. Tell you what, though. Rather than waste your provisions, O Esteemed Leader, that plant over there's quite edible.” He indicated a kind of thick green vine, which appeared to be quite abundant in the region. Picking up a twig, he wrote three letters in the soil.

K I J...Kij. “That's its name.”

“A Kij vine?” Toli wondered.

“No, no. It's pronounced `key`.”

“Oh, a Kij vine,” Toli repeated, this time with the correct pronunciation. “How interesting. Well there's plenty of it to experiment with. I mean, we can try it raw, obviously, but we can boil it, or just let it simmer. There might even be some other vegetables around here. Get a fire going we could make a stew. Hmmm.”

“While you eat and rest,” Kismet offered, “I'll scout ahead a bit.” With that, he strode off, and disappeared over the brow of a hill.

The three companions sat down to relax and talk about inconsequential things for a while, getting to know one another. At least, Hannah and Toli did the talking while Eilidh mostly just listened, giving short, simple answers to specific questions. The conversation turned to a discussion of how it had been a dark, damp and gloomy kind of day, but thankfully it hadn't actually rained. That was just about all the small-talk Eilidh could stand. The weather was what it was. They could all see it and feel it. What was the point of talking about it? Keeping her dark comments to herself, she decided to leave her friends to their socialising and get on with the practical task of collecting and preparing the vine for their meal.

Eilidh stepped over to a particularly abundant patch of the vine and, knife in hand, she began to cut it. Suddenly, she let out a cry of pain, as the vine wrapped itself around her, like an octopus' tentacles. The vine squeezed tighter and the Catalyst cried out again. She fell to the ground as the vine began to drag her slowly but inexorably along the grass.

Hannah and Toli had already leapt to their feet to save her, but they quickly found they had their hands full with the tentacles that were snaking towards them. Hannah used great swings of her sword to try and defend the vulnerable magician, who was frustrated at not having learned any offensive spells yet. In the end she made do with a dagger in her hand and a Vorpal Plating spell to make her stronger. Together, they might be able to fight their way over to Eilidh, Hannah thought, but at the rate they were gaining ground, she was afraid she would be old and grey before she could really help her new friend and comrade. Eilidh retained enough self-discipline to Grant Life to Toli. Although she was well aware that a grade one magician wasn't equipped to handle this kind of situation, at the very least she might be able to use her magic to help defend herself and fix any minor injuries she sustained.

Eilidh's dagger wasn't much help, either, against the tough vine, given the awkward angle she was presented with, but she still had to keep her head and do her job as a Catalyst. Right now, it was all she could do. When the tall grass parted, it revealed the `head` of the plant. Its jaws were wide open, displaying sharp `teeth`, rather like an oversize version of the carnivorous flytrap plants she had read about. The thought of playing the part of the fly in this drama made a scream escape her lips.

At that moment, a male half-elf in brown leather burst into the open, loosing a volley of arrows into the jaws of the beast. The Kij vine possessed no voice with which to scream, but it reacted to the pain in other ways, giving Hannah the momentary lull in the fighting that she needed to take the half-elf's lead. The Knight sheathed her sword and took up the spear tied to her backpack. The instant she let it fly toward its target, Toli hit on an idea, casting a Fireflash spell on the wooden spear. It wasn't normally a combat spell, designed instead to set wood alight for a cooking fire. But since

Hannah's spear was also made of wood, the hobbit decided it could be used to enhance the Knight's strike. Meanwhile, the half-elf was still shooting his arrows as he instinctively dodged and side-stepped the outreaching vines. It looked for all the world like some kind of dance. A deadly dance. The flaming spear was apparently too much for the Kij vine, as it abandoned its attack and pulled its vines around itself in an almost impenetrable defensive barrier. Eilidh found herself being helped up by the strong arm of her half-elven saviour.

“Don't waste time talking,” he warned. “Let's leave this place. Now.”

Eilidh nodded her assent and joined the others, walking hurriedly away from the scene. The half-elf didn't stray too much, but just picked up a handful of spent arrows, discarding a couple that were broken and not reusable.

A few hundred yards from their disrupted campsite, the half-elf declared, “This should be far enough now. You can all relax.”

“Thank you. I don't know who you are, but I'm grateful.” Eilidh said, breathing heavily.

“Yeah, me too,” Toli agreed.

“Indeed, thou didst demonstrate both skill and honour, good sir.”

The half-elf waved aside the thanks. “I'm a ranger; I'm just doing my job, guarding the routes into Shakaran, making sure city folk like you don't get yourselves killed out here.”

“Well I'm still grateful,” Eilidh insisted.

“Might we know thy name, noble ranger?” Hannah asked. “I am Lady Hannah Collins, Knight Initiate of Paladinia.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said the ranger, shaking the offered hand. “I am Phaer of the House of the Fountain.”

Not to be outdone, the mage offered, “Tolbrietta, Magician of the Hobbnobb Hobbit Clan.”

“Eilidh,” the Catalyst stated. Phaer raised an eyebrow, as if expecting more. “Just Eilidh,” she insisted.

“So tell me, `Just Eilidh`,” Phaer asked, “Whose bright idea was it to attack a Kij vine?”

“We weren't attacking it. We were planning to eat it.”

“You were what!”

“We were told it was edible.”

Phaer laughed, “Funny, the Kij vine thought you were edible.”

Eilidh paled. “I noticed.”

“I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, it's not funny. Who told you something so ridiculous anyway?”

“Kismet. Our guide, of sorts. He's gone to scout ahead.”

“Self-appointed guide,” Toli pointed out.

“True,” Eilidh allowed. “But he's the only volunteer we've got and since I have no better ideas of where to go myself, I plan to keep following him.”

“Even after this?” Phaer wondered.

“Hey, if a human-eating vine is enough to frighten us, we'd better go home right now, because I suspect we'll have to face much greater dangers in our quest.”

“Tell me more about this Kismet. You speak as if you don't know the man very well.”

“If `man` is accurate,” Eilidh remarked.

“What does that mean?”

“Indeed,” Hannah put in. “He didst appear to be a man.”

Toli snorted derisively. “He also appeared to be a teapot earlier but I don't propose to accept him as such.”

“The truth is,” Eilidh smoothed, “we're not sure what the deal is with Kismet, I just feel he's important to have around somehow. Besides, as I say, he's our guide and I don't have any better ideas of where to go.”

“And if he turns out to be an enemy?”

It was Lady Hannah who answered, “As the Sacred Code of Paladinius states, `Keep thy friends close at hand and thine enemies closer still`.”

“It looks to me like you could do with someone to watch your back and keep you out of trouble,” Phaer said.

“Art thou volunteering thine own services in this regard?”

Phaer smiled, “Sure, I'll tag along, why not? I've got nothing better to do.”

“Then as your first service to your new friends,” Toli suggested, “maybe you could tell us if there's anything around here that really is edible and won't attack us for our trouble.”

The ranger laughed and got up. “I'll see what I can find.”

* * * * *

When Kismet returned from the direction of the site of their battle with the Kij vine, he was wearing an unusually concerned expression, but he still managed to launch into a wise-crack. He conjured up his orange silk and covered his mouth and nose with it. “Egad!” he exclaimed. “Did your mothers never teach you to eat properly? I've never seen such a mess as you made back there!”

“You said the Kij vine was edible!” Eilidh shot back.

“It is,” he insisted.

“Well that's odd because according to Phaer here, it's the other way around: we were very nearly food for it!”

“You mean you hacked at a live vine?” Kismet gasped. “Well of course it attacked you - I'd attack you if you tried to eat me alive! Come to that, I'm not mad about the prospect of being eaten dead, either, but that's beside the point. First, you're supposed to chop off the head while it's dormant. Then you can carve up the tentacles as much as you like until it has time to grow a new head sometime the next day.”

“You never told us that.”

Kismet shrugged, “Sorry, dear girl, but I thought everyone knew that.”

Phaer looked sceptical. “Even I've never heard that before and I've spent much of my life in the wilderness. I've always been taught to stay away from Kij vines.”

“I've been taught to stay away from bulls in full charge,” Kismet returned, “but it doesn't stop me eating beef.”

Phaer folded his arms across his chest; not liking having fun poked at him in his own element by this dandy. “There's a big difference between facing down a bull and eating a cow.”

“There's also a big difference between the wilderness Kij vines and tame, docile borderlands species,” Kismet pointed out. “Anyway, never mind all that, we have much more important things to worry about.”

“Like what?” Toli asked, while Phaer responded to Eilidh's look by silently indicating he wasn't sure whether Kismet was telling the truth or not.

“Follow me,” Kismet said, mysteriously.

* * * * *

The two humans, one half-elf and one hobbit hastened up the hill after Kismet. When they reached the top of one of the hills along the way, they could see a bright, sunny glade in the distance, which was a little odd, considering the dull overcast that was still prevalent everywhere else. Still, weather patterns could be like that sometimes. Hannah had once seen a perfectly natural rainstorm on one side of a street while it was still dry on the other. That was without any magic being involved. Kismet suddenly stopped, almost causing a pile-up behind him, and held up a hand. “Halt!” he commanded. “Don't go in there: that glade isn't supposed to be here!”

“What do you mean it isn't supposed to be here?” Phaer asked, still not sure he liked or trusted this strange man and his games.

“I mean it wasn't here when I came this way last,” Kismet answered.

“You mean you're lost.”

“Oh no! I'm sure we're going the right way.”

“Just so I can gauge this properly, are you more certain or less than you were about the Kij vine being safe to eat?” Eilidh asked.

“That's not fair,” he objected. “Alright, O Young-and-All-Knowing One, you go in there, if you like! I am staying here!” With that, Kismet folded his arms and refused to move.

Eilidh sighed. “OK Kismet, I'm sorry about the snipe. If you say the glade is dangerous, I'm not about to take foolish risks at this point. Just so long as we reach our destination.”

“I never said it was dangerous. I said it's not supposed to be here.” He squinted up at the sky. “It's not supposed to be sunny, either.”

“So what dost thou suggest?” Hannah inquired.

“If you're asking for alternatives, of course we could always backtrack, and take another route.”

Phaer shrugged. “Since you don't seem to have a specific timetable to keep, I don't suppose it matters how long it takes us to get to the city.”

Having no logical reason to do otherwise, Eilidh nodded her agreement.

“Ah,” said Kismet, looking very pleased with himself, “so you do listen to some of my advice. Good. I'll scout ahead.” Before anyone could say a word, he disappeared.

* * * * *

Eilidh was going to like this half-elf ranger, she could tell. He was living up well to her best impressions of elves. More than once, she even found herself drawn into conversation as they walked. Actually chatting to him! As soon as she realised she was doing it, however, she immediately became self-conscious and clammed up. All in all, though, carnivorous plant aside, this was turning into a rather pleasant day out. Still, there was something odd about Phaer that Eilidh had been struggling to put her finger on. When it finally hit her, she missed a step.

Almost all life on Majaos was magical to some degree. That is, they attracted magic forming a concentrated `bubble` of Life energy around themselves, protecting them from the ravages of raw magic. The greatest attraction was seen in professional mages with the Life Gift. Professional mages with only Life Calling showed a lesser attraction to magic, but still more than those with Life Calling who did not use magic professionally. People with only Life Potential did not attract enough magic to use for anything more than simple everyday tasks.

As a Catalyst, Eilidh was highly sensitive to magic. The flow of Life was a bright, colourful thing, not unlike the aurorae that lit up the far northern sky. The pattern and dominant colour depended on the magical order to which someone belonged and the area of magic in which their speciality lay. In other words, to which of the Nine Secrets they were born. The intensity depended on whether an individual possessed the Life Gift, the Life Calling or just Life Potential.

Around Phaer, there was no light, no colour. It wasn't a black light like there would be around an Enforcer; there was no light whatsoever. Phaer's body simply did not attract magic at all. In fact, he repelled it. To Eilidh's magical senses, seeing this was rather like watching someone walking through a thunderstorm and yet remaining absolutely bone dry. In the same way, there was magic flowing all around Phaer, without `wetting` his skin. The effect was really quite disturbing.

Realising she was staring, the young woman tried to cover her rudeness but did not hide it quickly enough for Phaer's sharp eyes.

"Don't worry," he said, "it's a common reaction; I'm used to it."

Of course he would be, Eilidh realised. Elves were a highly magical people by nature and even non-mages would, to some extent, be able to sense what Eilidh could see. She couldn't imagine what it must have been like for him growing up in elven society with no magic. His peers would view it much like a disability. Despite the fact that vast majority of elves were aligned with the Light, Eilidh recognised that some of their cultural attitudes could be laced with prejudice. Many elves would believe that Phaer's human parent, whichever side he got his human blood from, had contaminated his/her son. But the elves would never ever say such a thing - it would be totally against all the edicts of elf culture. However, humans were better at reading unspoken emotional signals than were elves, who were themselves less good at hiding them. Thus, the half-elf child would have to suffer constant sympathy and even pity. Eilidh couldn't imagine how that must have been.

The Catalyst suddenly felt very guilty and reprimanded herself for doing to Phaer what so many others did to Eilidh herself - judging on the basis of superficial things and forgetting what really matters about a person. Treating someone as a member of a stereotypical group instead of as an individual was a very bad habit. It was wrong.

"I'm sorry," she offered, "I didn't mean to cause any offence. It's just that I'm a Catalyst; I deal in magic. Magic is my Life, if you'll pardon the pun. I've never met anybody who was magically Dead before." She pulled a face. "I never even realised what a horrible phrase that is, until now. Please, forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive. It's just a phrase. But I assure you, magic isn't all it's made out to be. Not to me, anyway."

"Fair enough. I can't imagine living without magic, but then I suppose you can't imagine living with it."

Phaer grinned. "I think we make quite a pair."

Eilidh smiled back. "We do indeed."

A couple of minutes later, Kismet reappeared, looking quite flustered. "Quick!" he cried out, waving his arms wildly. "Back to the glade! Run! Fresh centaur tracks!" He bolted past the group, and then suddenly changed direction to skirt around the foot of the hill rather than climbing it again. Eilidh and her companions had no choice but to run after him.

"You know, Eilidh, I'm still not convinced about that Kij vine," Phaer said, "but at least he has the good sense to stay away from centaurs!"

“Are they really as vicious as people say?” Toli wondered, keeping up surprisingly well, despite her little hobbit legs.

“Worse,” Phaer confirmed.

“Indeed,” Lady Hannah agreed. “Tis no dishonour to say that I should not like to have to face more than one such beast, even were I on horseback. The Sacred Code of Paladinius states that one Knight on horseback is worth ten afoot, but a single centaur is worth twenty.”

“No offence, Lady,” Phaer said, “but I suspect your Code is talking about experienced Knight Warriors, maybe an Officer, not just an Initiate like yourself.”

“Thy words are true, but nevertheless I shall do all in my power to protect thee should an attack come.”

“Well, hopefully it won't come to that,” Eilidh said, ending the discussion. No point inventing battles that didn't yet exist and might never happen.

Chapter 3

The group entered the glade, though it took little short of brute force to get Kismet to cross its boundary. Eventually they succeeded, after hearing the sound of hooves in the distance, making everyone think `centaurs` and run for their lives.

After they had been running for some time, they stopped to catch their breath.

“I don't suppose you'd be interested in a particularly nutritious plant I've spotted, would you?” Kismet offered. Then seeing all the scowls, he cried, “Egad! Didn't your mothers ever tell you? If the wind changes your faces will stick in those ghastly expressions!” He then casually wandered off and no-one had the energy to stop him or the inclination to care.

While they were resting, a black raven flew down out of the cloudless blue sky to join them, squawking away. After making a few futile attempts to `shoo` the noisy bird away, they started throwing a few crumbs at it, which it gobbled up, greedily.

Silently, Eilidh reflected on how the glade seemed to be considerably larger than it had appeared to be when Kismet first showed it to them and it certainly looked out of place. The entire landscape of the borderlands was a series of gently rolling hills and valleys with the edge of the city growing ever larger in the distance. There was nothing particularly spectacular or breathtaking about the scenery, or challenging about the walk. It was just mildly, pleasantly aerobic and the local prevailing weather was perpetually warm, damp and misty. That was Shakaran's Eastern Borderlands, everywhere except right here in the glade. Here the land was flat - unnaturally flat - as if some great giant of a creature had decided to cut out a section of Shakaran with an immense sword or stamp on it with his boot. In addition, the weather was crisply dry, cloudlessly sunny and considerably hotter. It had to be magic.

It was a neat bit of work; Eilidh was impressed. She could not tell whether it was real or illusion. It probably didn't matter much, she decided; since none of them had any illusion-countering magic, they would be forced to treat any threat as real. Besides, despite Kismet's reaction, there was so far nothing threatening about the glade, unless one considered a raven threatening.

The whole group was feeling refreshed and remarkably relaxed, until Kismet returned. Taking one look at the raven he asked, “How long has he been here?”

“Quite a while, actually,” Eilidh replied, lazily. “Anyway, what makes you so sure it's a he?”

Kismet rolled his eyes. “Sink me, dear girl, I don't care what sex it is. What concerns me is that it's here!”

“What are you talking about?” Phaer asked, with obvious irritation. “It's just a bird, probably just as curious about this place as we are.”

“Look, never mind the bird, just shut up and listen, all of you!” Kismet demanded. “I saw something up ahead. Something very dangerous.”

“What seest thou?” asked Hannah, getting up, hastily. “Centaur?” she wondered, checking her sword was free in its scabbard. Once satisfied that it would come readily to her hand, however, she chose not to draw it at that time.

“No,” Kismet allowed, “but something almost as bad: Enforcers! I sensed wizard magic, too, so I’ll wager, if they haven’t detected you already, they will soon know all about you, thanks to the cosy time you’ve been having with your fine feathered friend, here.” At this, the raven squawked and flew off. “So, O Esteemed Leader, what are we to do?”

“I don’t see what you’re getting so worked up about, Kismet,” Toli argued. “I can’t imagine what Enforcers would be doing way out here, but it’s not a problem. We’re doing nothing wrong, just going to visit Shakaran. I mean, I know war has been declared and that will make everyone a bit more cautious – OK, a lot more cautious - but that’s no reason why we can’t go about our normal business. There’s been no curfew on travel as yet, so what’s the problem? Enforcers may look scary but if we leave them alone and don’t break any laws, they’ll leave us alone, too, I’ll wager.”

“Oh yes!” Kismet agreed, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Just like wasps - they’re probably more scared of us than we are of them.”

“Now that’s just silly,” Toli complained.

“Although,” Phaer offered, “if you’re going to use that analogy from the natural world, then the solution to dealing with the two species is much the same: if we keep calm and don’t make any sudden movements, they’ll most likely leave us alone.”

“Well I’m glad you’re all so sure of yourselves,” said an exasperated Kismet, “but if you don’t mind I’ll keep on being worried.”

“Go right ahead,” Phaer sniped back. “It’s your life you’re cutting short with stress.”

“Look, Kismet,” Eilidh soothed, holding her arms out, gesturing for calm as she tried to get everyone back to more constructive conversation. “Why don’t you show us what you’ve seen? Then we can decide what to do about it.”

Kismet grinned and bowed extravagantly, “I’m delighted to have such a wise and practical leader.”

“Whatever. Let’s go. Quietly.”

* * * * *

Kismet changed his clothes once more - “Just in case,” he said - to full scale armour, sword, gauntlets and shield. Nobody bothered to ask where he’d managed to conjure those from. They had already come to expect the unexpected from Kismet. On his shield was painted a beautiful, detailed scene: A blue sky with fluffy white clouds above lush green fields through which a swift-flowing stream meandered its way from a fresh water spring. It was painted in such a way that it almost gave the impression of there really being water flowing across the shield. Eilidh couldn’t help thinking this piece of artwork would look better in a frame, rather than on a shield which was likely to have blood, flesh, and all kinds of other stains on it after a battle, as well as all the dents and scratches. The

beautifully depicted terrain was obscured in one corner by a picture of a bright orange wand. “My family amulet,” announced Kismet, proudly.

They crept forward until they could see the four figures standing in the clearing. Two of them were clearly Enforcers, looking like pieces of night against the glorious sunshine. One of the others, in stark contrast, was wearing the white robes of a Catalyst. The fourth man was dressed in a white shirt that billowed out at the cuffs of his purple velvet jacket, matching breeches and white silken hose that were not unlike like Kismet's usual style, only more tastefully coloured. A magnificent-looking sword hung by his side.

“A warrior of some sort,” Hannah observed. “Or possibly a ranger,” she suggested.

“No,” Phaer refuted. “The walk isn't right. He walks like a man used to command and so he instinctively sets himself above and apart from nature. A ranger is a part of nature and wears the wild lands like a cloak.”

“A most impressive piece of observation, sir,” Hannah complimented him.

Phaer shrugged off the praise. “It's just like a sailor can tell a 'land lubber' at fifty paces because of the way he walks. Similarly, I'm quite certain this man is a warrior – a warrior of considerable rank, I might add.”

“I can clearly sense the Life surrounding him, Eilidh,” Toli offered, although she knew full well a Catalyst's magical senses were considerably sharper than were her own.

“Secret of Earth, purple aura,” Eilidh mused. “A wizard like Kismet said. A high-ranking warrior-wizard.”

Kismet yawned and remarked, “Sink me, but you lot can be boring. What do you think this is? Bird watching?”

“A Knight shalt always avail themselves of any opportunity to observe a potentially hostile situation before engaging in any course of action,” Hannah quoted from The Sacred Code of Paladinus.

“Wise words,” Eilidh agreed. “Now, our options would appear to be try to go around the glade, hide and wait for them to go away or talk to them.”

“Or attack them,” Kismet put in.

Eilidh just stared at him in utter disbelief.

“We're dealing with Enforcers here,” Toli pointed out. “If we move they'll detect us, you can be sure of that. That's assuming they don't already know we're here. We could simply be beneath their concern.”

“If we hide and they detect us, we shalt make ourselves suspicious, methinks,” Hannah offered.

“There's too much magic, too much power here for my tastes,” Phaer offered. “I've travelled this way countless times and I've never seen a group like this before. I don't know what to make of it.”

Toli indicated Kismet, “And despite what he says, I certainly don't fancy attacking them.”

Phaer nodded. “It would be suicide.”

“Why are we even talking about that?” Eilidh demanded.

“We do not propose that we attack legitimate authorities, Eilidh, but it is surely wise to consider all our options, is it not?” Hannah said.

“It's not an option! How can it possibly be an option? It's ridiculous to even be discussing this! There's only one choice: we talk to them.” Her tone brooked no argument.

“OK, but I'll stay here and keep watch,” Kismet offered. “That way, if we end up having to fight, which I'm sure we won't, I'll be able to surprise them.”

Eilidh thought everybody was relieved to hear that. Kismet seemed to have a habit of attracting trouble and trouble was one thing they did not need right now. Better that he should keep out of the way.

They entered the open clearing, Lady Hannah insisting on taking point while Phaer took rear guard, both ready to protect the magician and Catalyst.

What alerted the Enforcers to their presence, they would never know. Perhaps it was the sound of their footsteps, although they were being careful not to make a sound. Perhaps it was the light reflecting off the Knight's golden plate armour, Toli or Eilidh's robes rustling, or their staves upon the ground. It's hard to imagine what the silent, graceful, leather-clad half-elf could have done to give them away. Perhaps it was the sound of their breathing or the whispered prayers to Natus, Patrelaux, or the Balanced One. Perhaps it was the squawking of the raven, perhaps it was none of these: the Enforcers, it was said, were trained to hear the night itself creep up on them. Whatever it was, the group all knew they didn't have to worry about startling them. With Enforcers around, there could be no element of surprise.

Just as they were thinking about surprises, they got one and a rather nasty one it was, too. There came a deafening roar as an obsidian dragon appeared overhead, crash-landing into the glade. The dragon appeared to be wounded and angry – never a good combination - and now that it was grounded, it shapeshifted to the form of a human in chainmail armour, a powerful-looking broadsword in his hand. He didn't appear to notice Eilidh and her group, but immediately advanced towards the others.

Eilidh cursed under her breath: she had a bad feeling about this. She looked around frantically, all the while knowing it was futile. There was no escape possible and Kismet was nowhere to be seen. She supposed he could be hiding, ready to leap to their defence at any moment. Somehow, though, she knew that would never happen. They were on their own and one way or another, they were going to get caught up in something nasty.

The Catalyst admonished the others to stay back. "It's got nothing to do with us. I--" but before she could say any more, Hannah gave a battle cry, saluted with her sword and charged forward.

Phaer was ready an instant later, nocking an arrow to his bow. "Toli," he said, "when I release this arrow, can you do that trick you did before with Hannah's spear?"

"You mean Fireflash? Sure. Halfway between here and your target, the arrow will be on fire."

"Good," he acknowledged. "Maybe magic has its uses after all," he added with a crooked half-smile.

Toli grinned back.

Eilidh despaired as the scene around her erupted into chaos.

"This is madness!" she cried, but she knew there wasn't a damned thing she could do about it.

As Phaer nocked his first arrow, the longbow burst into flames, forcing him to drop it. "Toli, you were supposed to do that to the arrow," he yelled as he drew his sword, "not the bow!"

"It wasn't me, I swear!" The hobbit protested. "It couldn't possibly be me, my magic's gone! I felt their Catalyst Drain my Life."

"Then how come you aren't being burned by raw magic?" He may be 'Dead', but he knew that much about magic.

"Oh he's left me with enough for protection but not enough to do anything with. Life Draining doesn't hurt or anything, as long it's done carefully. Plus my Life Store will regenerate given time."

"I don't see why you should have to wait for that!" Eilidh said, indignantly, but she was stopped by the voice of her counterpart.

"Grant her Life and next time I Drain it all!" He warned. "My Enforcer friends will be over shortly to remove your magic their way, but I'm afraid you'll have to wait - they're a little busy right now!"

He was right about that. One of the Enforcers cast a paralysis spell on Phaer, while Lady Hannah Collins was a victim of a Fire Rings spell from the other. Less than a minute into the battle and already all four had been successfully removed from the fight. Very Enforcer-like: efficient and effective.

"I told you this was madness," Eilidh muttered, darkly.

All this left the dragon-turned-warrior who went straight for the gentleman in the posh clothes. The dragon warrior launched himself at the other with his sword, but quick as a flash the other drew his own blade and parried the attack with apparent ease. The gentleman proceeded to fence the dragon, frustrating every stroke.

"You fight well, sir," the gentleman complimented, "but I am on something of a tight schedule, so if it's all the same to you, I think I'll end this now."

After a complex flurry of strokes from the gentleman, the dragon-warrior found he had lost his own weapon suddenly. It was now on the ground three feet away. But the fight wasn't over yet, as the sword obediently flew back to its owner's outstretched hand. He pressed his attack and his opponent was momentarily caught off-guard, but his defence was well up to the challenge.

"That's a fine sword you've got there, sir," the gentleman admitted. "But mine's better!" And with his next breath he called out, "Hawk Strike!" His sword flashed in response and his next parry caused the dragon-warrior to yelp in pain and drop his sword at his feet. In the second that he reflexively nursed his wrist, his opponent grabbed the sword and held it firmly in his left hand. He wasn't getting it back this time.

With a growl, the big warrior tried to revert to his dragon form, but was shocked to find he was bound tightly by magic. "Now, now," said the gentleman, tutting. "That really wouldn't be fair now would it? I'm afraid I can't allow dragons to attack me whenever they feel like it and fortunately my Enforcer guards have ways of ensuring that any such attacks take place on my own terms, so I can rely, if you'll forgive the conceit, on my own not unremarkable swordsmanship. Now then, it's been a pleasant little workout, I'm sure you'll agree." The dragon-warrior was sweating and bleeding - the wizard-warrior wasn't even breathing hard. "But I don't have any more time to play. Awfully sorry about that." Turning to the Enforcers, he commanded. "Restrain him and the others, but do it in a way that allows them to walk. Then search the glade thoroughly. Make sure there are no more of these vagrants lurking about."

Both black robed individuals bowed low. An instant later, rings of fire surrounded both the dragon-warrior and Phaer, then the latter felt the paralysis lift. The Catalyst worked with both Enforcers to keep their Life Store topped up so they could keep casting these complex spells. Then the Enforcers cast Nullmagic on Toli and Eilidh, before disappearing.

"Vagrants, sir?" Hannah demanded with typical Knightly indignation, ignoring the mages' activities. "How dare ye? Dost thou not recognise mine armour?"

"Stolen, no doubt."

Eilidh would not have been surprised if the Lady Knight had gone for him, fire rings be damned, but she kept her dignity as she responded with words, holding her head high. "I am Knight Initiate Lady Hannah Collins of the Fourth Merlyon Infantry Division, under Knight Officer Sir Warren Mitchell. Thou hast captured me in battle and I expect to be treated in accordance with Mythallen General Law as laid down after the Tech Wars."

"Yes, yes, you will be given a trial and if you are found innocent, you will be allowed to go free. But if you - any of you - say one more word unless asked a specific question, I will make your trial posthumous! Now you are going to walk the rest of the way to Shakaran. Those of you surrounded by Fire Rings, I assure you they will allow you to walk, but try to run or make any sudden movements and they will cut you into sections. Move."

They had no choice but to obey.

Eilidh's quest was not starting out well.

Chapter 4

Eilidh was puzzled to note that she had grown much calmer once they left the glade behind. The others seemed to have relaxed, too.

“Why did we do that?” Phaer whispered. “You were right – we should never have got involved. It was obvious that we shouldn’t. But somehow...”

“...Somehow you couldn’t stop yourself,” Toli finished. “I felt that way, too.”

“As did I,” Hannah concurred. “It was indeed most foolish, against all my training. Why didst we act thusly?”

Eilidh frowned, deep in in thought. “I don’t know. There was strange magic in that place, maybe it was affecting us all, somehow.”

“Except you,” Phaer pointed out.

“Yes, I did seem to be less affected, but I could still feel...something. Something odd.”

“Because you’re a Catalyst, maybe?” Phaer

“That would be my guess,” Eilidh agreed. “You ask good questions,” she added. “Especially about magic.”

The ranger shrugged. “Magic is all around us. To ignore it just because I can’t use it would be stupid. I’ve been around and I’ve picked things up along the way.”

Eilidh smiled, encouragingly, but her mind had already moved on to consider their situation, and she concluded things weren’t as bad as they seemed. After all, they had wanted to go to Shakaran City and now they had a very capable escort.

An escort for which they quickly learned to be grateful as they were frequently attacked by fearsome-looking creatures that none of them could identify. They had never been in sufficient numbers to stand against their captor, however, who handled each situation with a graceful ease that had even Phaer inwardly applauding. Each attack was met with magic or steel, or a combination of the two.

Eilidh was confident that this man would prove true to his word, grant them a fair hearing and everything would be sorted out, revealed for the misunderstanding that it was. Eilidh believed in justice and got the impression that this man would see it done.

Just as the Catalyst was pondering on this, the two Enforcers returned. “Your Grace,” one said, respectfully. This was clearly a very important man in Shakaran City. “We conducted a thorough search of the glade, until it disappeared.”

“Disappeared? What do you mean, it disappeared?”

The Enforcer, an elven female, spread her hands, helplessly. “I mean it disappeared. The glade is no longer there and the normal borderlands landscape has returned. I tell you truly, Your Grace; I have never seen magic like it before. I could not begin to tell you how it was done.”

“I see,” replied His Grace. “So what about before it disappeared? Did you find anyone else?”

“No, Your Grace, there were no other persons in the vicinity, but my partner did find something odd.”

The other Enforcer, a human male, held up a small wooden bucket with a bright orange handle. It was the sort of thing one would expect to see a child playing with on the beach to build sandcastles. The gentleman tried to hide a smile at the peculiar clash of images: a powerful, deadly Enforcer with a child's toy in his hand. “A bucket,” His Grace observed with a raised eyebrow. “Hardly worthy of your attention, surely?”

“As you say, Your Grace,” the Enforcer stated in a voice that told Eilidh that he did not agree, but was far too respectful of His Grace's position to contradict him in front of strangers. Eilidh wondered, not for the first time, who this man could be that commanded two such powerful Enforcers as personal guards. Not that he had so far shown any sign that he needed to be guarded - he was more than capable of taking care of himself.

“But?” the gentleman prompted.

“But there is something special about this bucket.”

“No, No!” protested the bucket, cheerfully. “Really, I'm just an ordinary bucket. A plain, uninteresting, wooden bucket. Nothing special about this bucket whatsoever.”

Eilidh shared a glance with Toli and winced while the others were understandably startled. Their captors' Catalyst was, by now, feverishly making superstitious signs to ward off the supernatural. Eilidh could feel him probing for magic and observed that His Grace had gone quite pale. (She half-smiled briefly at the unintended pun.) Phaer, with his sharp elfsight, later swore he managed to catch a glimpse of the highly disciplined Enforcers, glancing at each other nervously when they never normally even acknowledged each other's presence.

Meanwhile, the bucket continued to prattle on, undaunted. “Please, fill me with water. Wash your hands in me. Wash your clothes in me. Soak your feet. Soak your head!” Then, after a brief pause, it said, “Egad! If the wind changes your faces are going to stick in those ghastly expressions!”

Suddenly, His Grace's face cleared and his lips parted in hearty laughter. “Kismet!” he cried, “Kismet, you fool! Don't you recognise me? It's me, you rattle-brained mage. Me! Garald!”

In an instant, the bucket disappeared, to be replaced by a familiar figure: Kismet, back in his wildly clashing, colourful ensemble. He grinned and tried to move, but the male Enforcer still restrained him by what was now his collar.

Kismet fixed Garald with a very theatrical, exasperated expression and said, “Really, Garald! What kind of thugs do you have working for you, these days?” At a nod from Garald, the Enforcer immediately released Kismet, who turned on him, hands on hips. “Yes, unhand me you lout!” He demanded, indignantly. A pair of white leather gloves appeared in one of his hands, which he used to slap the Enforcer once on each cheek. Eilidh half expected the irrepressible Kismet to be vaporised for his audacity, but the highly disciplined mage just stood there, motionless, hands clasped before him. They could all appreciate the effort this restraint required.

Giving a final, “Hmph!” Kismet grinned and made the gloves disappear. Honour apparently satisfied. “Still,” he said, “no hard feelings.” He turned around to face Garald and the next thing they knew, Kismet was giving him a warrior's embrace, which Garald returned with equal ferocity.

Suddenly, Kismet pulled out of Garald's grip and cried, “Egad! I'm being so frightfully rude! Garald, let me introduce my...erm...acquaintances.”

Before he could give their names, though, Garald jumped in. “What's this? Do you associate yourself with thieves and brigands now?”

“Garald! I'm shocked! However could you think such a thing? This admittedly mismatched group are fine, upstanding, albeit young and inexperienced, members of their respective professions! And,” he added in a conspiratorial whisper, “they are currently on a top secret quest of vital importance to King and Country.”

Oh how I wish I'd never said that, Eilidh lamented, silently.

“A top secret quest which you know all about, of course,” said Garald with a broad smile.

“Naturally,” Kismet grinned back.

“Well, that's good enough for me.” He gestured to the Enforcers who immediately dissipated the fire rings, and cancelled the Nullmagic spells.

“Eilidh, O Esteemed Leader,” Kismet announced, “may I present His Grace, Prince Garald, Heir to the Throne of Shakaran.”

In fact, he was not only a prince, but the Prince Regent – his father the King was suffering from a terrible debilitating disease that wasted both body and mind. Therefore, the rights and responsibilities of rule fell to Garald by law. In essence, then, he was the Sovereign, although he could not be crowned King until his father breathed his last.

Kismet then indicated the Catalyst, who seemed even less pleased with Kismet's sudden appearance than he had been with the idea of a talking bucket. Eilidh decided she could relate to that.

“May I also present Cardinal Radisovik, High Cardinal of the Church of Life in Shakaran.”

Eilidh gasped - he was one of the most influential and revered individuals in the Church throughout Mythallen. He dealt primarily with the spiritual side of things - faith in Natus, the god of magic - rather than the more practical elements of dealing in magic. Eilidh personally had little time for religious trappings, but had been nevertheless prepared to show the proper respect by kneeling had the prince not stopped her.

“No, please,” he said, holding up a restraining hand, “there is no need to kneel. However, there is just one thing you might all clarify for me: If you are not, in fact, thieves and brigands, then why did you attack me?”

It was Lady Hannah who spoke up. “Your Grace, if I may, thou hast misunderstood our intentions. I was never attacking thee - I was attacking him!” She pointed to the dragon warrior.

“Oh, so this one is not with your group, then?”

“He is not, Your Grace.”

Fire Rings reappeared around the dragon-warrior, as the Knight continued. “Tis ever the sworn duty of a Knight to protect the innocent from unprovoked attacks, although I do now perceive thou needest not mine protection. Indeed, I do applaud thy skilful swordsmanship.”

Prince Garald nodded. “Of course you couldn't have known that at the time. Your intentions were good and honourable. Worthy of a true Knight. Please accept my sincere apologies for insulting your honour. I have the highest regard for your order and I regret my hasty words and actions.” Turning to the others, he said, “Obviously, the three of you were backing Lady Hannah.”

Toli and Phaer agreed, but Eilidh said, “Not me, Your Grace.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I said it was madness to get involved right from the start.”

Garald laughed and told the others, “You should listen to your leader in future; she has a good head on her shoulders. The way things are at the moment, one cannot be too careful. There are always thieves and opportunists ready to strike during wartime. That's why I acted the way I did when normally I would welcome visitors to my city. Please, put these events out of your minds. I still insist that you accompany me to the palace, but as my guests, not my prisoners. As long as you don't think it will jeopardise the secrecy of your quest, we won't use the private Corridor, directly into the palace itself, but rather enter Shakaran through the main gate. That way I can show you some of my city. Then I will do my best to compensate you for all your trouble.”

“Your Grace,” Phaer put in, “if I may be so bold, when you say `compensate` does that mean you'll buy me a new bow to replace the one your guards burned to ashes?”

“That is the very least of what it means,” he confirmed. The prince turned his attention to his attacker. “Now you, dragon-warrior. Do you realise that an unprovoked attack against the Prince Regent is considered a capital offence in Shakaran?”

“Do you realise that knocking a dragon out of the sky is considered a capital offence to my kind?” he retorted.

“Explain.”

So he did. He told how he was flying to Shakaran from Avidon to stretch his wings and hunt for food. He had spotted a couple of stray wild horses and dove to snatch one in his jaws, but just as he had committed himself to landing, the horses changed before his eyes - they were not horses at all, but centaurs using illusion magic. Now, two centaurs are no threat to a dragon so he didn't even bother spitting his acid breath at them. That was a mistake because no sooner had he landed and smashed the life out of one with a great forepaw than the rest of the herd appeared. Centaurs could run pretty fast when they hunted, so they were upon the dragon before he had really registered the danger.

“There must have been four score at least, maybe as many as a hundred.”

That was too many even for a dragon.

They had set upon him, their weapons breaking through his scales and biting his flesh, leaving ugly, bloody gashes. His only thought was escape, so he spat at the thinnest section and they fell back from his acid breath - at least, those who were still moving. That gave the dragon all the time and space he needed to take to the sky. Even then, their archers shot arrows into him and a spear stuck itself in his soft, vulnerable underbelly. He roared in pain and anger, showering them with acid again before speeding up his flight to outpace even the swiftest centaurs.

Just when he was beginning to relax, he spotted the glade and it felt like flying into a wall – an invisible wall of energy. That, coupled with the pain of his injuries was enough to force the crash-landing they had all witnessed. Identifying the cluster of magic-users he felt justified in attacking them.

“You're all lucky I was far enough away from the centaurs or you'd all be dead. What you did to me was the unprovoked attack, setting a dragon trap like that!”

Prince Garald exchanged glances with his personal Enforcer guards and the cardinal. Satisfied with their silent responses, he said, “It seems we have another misunderstanding.”

“Is that what you call it?” the dragon-warrior demanded.

“Wouldn't you? Considering we did not create the glade or the barrier that caused you to fall from the sky. The dragon trap – if that's what it was – was not of our making.”

“It's true,” said Cardinal Radisovik. “I know the details of every magic spell in use today, yet I tell you truly: I do not know what magic could be used to make that glade appear and then disappear. I am something of a student of the legends of our ancestors, the Ancients. There are many stories that suggest they possessed powers well beyond what we now know. Why those powers were lost is unknown but my faith tells me that the gods must have taken them away lest we use them to destroy our world. Perhaps the glade was some kind of remnant of our ancestors' handiwork: a relic or trap of Ancient times, though I do not know how that could be so.”

“Anyway,” His Grace interjected, “the point, dragon-warrior, is that we were not there because we created either the glade or the barrier. We were there because a regular patrol reported it. That glade was not supposed to be there.”

“Told you so,” Kismet remarked, sticking his tongue out at Phaer.

“We came simply to investigate,” Garald concluded.

“And what did your investigations tell you?” The dragon demanded.

“Nothing. We have no more idea where the glade came from than we did before. The same goes for the energy barrier that brought you down.

“However, I did already suspect,” continued the prince, “that the barrier was designed to prevent flight. As you know, I'm sure, as a wizard I have magic to control animals, so I summoned a raven to examine the glade from the air and while it could fly freely within the glade, it was unable to leave it. It couldn't even get close to the barrier. Of course, a raven is just a small bird, whereas

dragons are the most powerful flyers in all the world. It is conceivable, then, that you might be able to break through but clearly at a cost, especially when already injured.”

Eilidh spoke up at this point. “Why would anybody want to create such a barrier?” she wondered. “Why bother preventing flight when anything could walk through at ground level?”

“I don't claim to understand why,” the prince answered. “I'm just saying what we've observed. The whole thing is a mystery.”

“Also, Your Grace, if I may,” Eilidh added, “I believe the strange magic of that Glade was affecting you all.”

Garald looked to the cardinal, who answered Eilidh directly. “You are very perceptive, young lady. I believe that, as Catalysts, you and I may have been largely spared.”

“That’s what Phaer said.”

The cardinal frowned. “Did he now? Well, I think one of his kind ought to keep out of magical affairs!”

Eilidh bristled. “And what exactly do you mean by that?” She demanded, her face like thunder.

“Young lady,” the cardinal said, “the Magically Dead have no business--”

“--no business using their brains to form rational conclusions about the world around them?”

“No business talking about magic when Natus himself has judged them unfit to receive his blessing!”

“It seems to me you're only one doing any judging around here!”

“Have you forgotten who you're speaking to?”

“I don't care who you are. I'm not going to stand here and--”

Phaer interrupted her with his touch, trying to calm her. “It's OK, Eilidh,” Phaer assured her. “I appreciate what you're doing, but it really doesn't matter what he thinks.”

“Doesn't matter?” the cardinal demanded.

“Enough!” Prince Garald insisted, exerting his authority. “Cardinal, we'll have words later.”

“Your Grace!” Radisovic protested.

“Later!” Garald repeated.

Toli tapped Eilidh on the shoulder. “So you'll stand up for him but not yourself?” She whispered, pointedly.

Eilidh did not reply.

“Well?” Garald prompted the dragon-warrior, returning his attention to the matter at hand. “You’ve heard our explanation, such as it is.”

“Why should I believe you?” the dragon-warrior asked, still a little suspicious, more on principle than any basis in fact.

“Because I’m letting you go.”

Prince Garald gave the nod and the fire rings around the dragon-warrior dissipated once more. The prince then handed him his sword and deliberately turned his back. The dragon had to concede that he had no evidence against the prince, certainly not enough reason to stab a man in the back, and what he said made sense as far as it went. He then felt the binding magic leave his body, so without another word, he walked a little way off, changed back to his natural dragon form and leapt into the air to fly back to his Avidon home.

Chapter 5

The city of Shakaran was a heavily industrialised place, where magical and technological crafts co-existed side-by-side. It was also a military city that considered itself a nation in its own right. Streets were cobbled rather than smooth paved as they were in Merlyon and that was just one minor example of the many differences between Mythallen's two largest cities. They were only just approaching the outer city gates but already Eilidh was impressed by what she saw. The air was filled with the sounds of merchants touting their wares and the ring of steel on steel as the city guard trained for battle. Among the many smells were those of the blacksmiths' forging fires, mingled with freshly baked bread. It was a large and sprawling city that had long since extended beyond its own secondary guard walls. Indeed, the very existence of a second wall proved this was a trend that dated back centuries. The first wall had begun to squeeze the city within until there was simply no land left and there was no choice but to build outside their protection. In time, a second wall had been raised further out, but now even that was too restricting. Unsurprisingly, there were plans already in place for a third wall, but for now there were but two.

The royal palace was a castle or fort built on an imposing scale and it appeared to be carved out of the rocky mountain itself, rather than simply constructed on top of it. Prince Garald confirmed Eilidh's observation, citing Ancient Dwarven architectural techniques.

Catching something in his tone, Eilidh gasped, "You mean, it wasn't built with magic?"

"That's right. No magic whatsoever went into constructing this palace. It was an experiment – the architect wanted to prove whether it could be done. ”

Eilidh suddenly shivered involuntarily. No wonder the structure felt so creepy. No magic! The very concept was so...unnatural. Every building ever constructed in her Merlyon home had been created by magic, at least in part if not in totality.

The exterior of the palace somehow spoke not of threat but merely defence. It was a place where if you meant well, you were welcome; if you intended ill, then ill would befall you. Inside, the palace was bright and vibrant with colour, decorated with artwork and great tapestries. Some of the windows themselves were stained glass, depicting famous figures from Shakaran's glorious past. Torches flickered on the walls, providing what was for most people comfortable illumination. Eilidh, however, eyed the lighting with a suspicious glare, deliberately walking in the centre of the passageways so she could give them a wide berth. There was no way to be sure, but she was worried that they might have been lit in some strange non-magical way.

When she retired to her quarters that night, Eilidh made a point of using some household magic to remake her bed from scratch. She even asked Toli to cast a Fireflash spell on the logs in the hearth and light the room by causing the walls to glow. The Catalyst supposed it was a frivolous waste of her Life Store, as she proceeded to Grant Life to her magician friend, because she knew she would still be drained in the morning until the sun's rays could start the regeneration. Still, she couldn't imagine what possible need they could have for Life magic during the night. Toli now once again had enough to ignite the fire and create light in her own room if she so wished. The only problem could be if one of Toli's spells fizzled - that was the trouble with Life magic, even with the simplest spells, there were no guarantees, especially for low-rank, inexperienced mages. Yes, Eilidh's actions were frivolous and unnecessary, especially since the walls would gradually lose their luminescence over the next hour or two. But it made her more comfortable. She had brought Life to this Dead environment.

Ever since she was a little girl, Eilidh had found any magically dampened place very cold and frightening. To find herself now in a place that was completely Lifeless was borderline terrifying and she knew without doubt that she would never be able to sleep without the caress of magic around her.

Before setting her head on her pillow, she gave the magic in the room a good `stir up`, making pretty, soothing patterns. It was a little technique Catalysts played with early in their training, as they strived to control the flow of Life. It didn't do anything in of itself, but it was important nonetheless. She supposed it was a little bit like a musician practising breathing techniques that they would never actually use while playing. Breathing control was an important skill to master, and if they could control breathing beyond what was necessary for their instrument, that ensured they wouldn't have to think about their breathing even in the most complex pieces. In the same way, Catalysts learned to control Life to the extent of creating works of art. No-one but another Catalyst could see them properly, but that wasn't the point: the fact that Eilidh could master such delicate control meant she could focus on the real demands of her job without being distracted by the basics. Eilidh's Advanced Life Manipulation course tutor had been fond of the mantra: Focus on the goal, not the task; the solution, not the problem. He had likened it to drinking a cup of tea. One did not think about reaching out one's hand, grasping the handle, lifting the cup whilst keeping it level so the tea did not spill, gently blowing on the hot liquid, and so on. One simply thought about the goal of having a drink, not the tasks involved in achieving that goal. For the best Catalysts, Life manipulation was the same: an almost unconscious task employed for a specific goal.

With a yawn and a stretch, Eilidh did something that she hadn't indulged in since she was little: she played with the flow of magic to create the image of a glowing, multi-coloured bunny rabbit tucked up in bed with her. She smiled at the rabbit and whispered `goodnight` before drifting off to sleep.

* * * * *

Morning came and Eilidh remembered that she and the others had been invited to breakfast with the prince.

Only Kismet had declined the invitation saying, "I'm afraid I should be bored stiff, just like the Baron Darovich was once, halfway through one of the Emperor's five day `State of the Empire` speeches. Stiff as a board he went; I had to soak him in a vat of wine to limber him up."

"What could possibly make a man go like that?" Toli asked. Eilidh predicted that her hobbit friend was going to regret the question.

"Turns out he'd died less than a day into the speech," Kismet explained. "He turned up, sat down and then," he snapped his fingers, "just like that."

"And nobody noticed?" Lady Hannah rose to the bait further, obliging Kismet with the scandalised reaction he seemed to be hoping for.

Kismet shrugged. "The bloke never said much anyway and when he sat, he used to hold himself so rigid. So you see, he didn't seem all that different with rigor mortis. I always told him his bad posture would kill him one day. I was wrong. He was bored stiff."

"But what about the smell?"

“Yes, true, now you come to mention it, he did smell a little less bad than usual. Do you think that should have told me something?”

At that point, Garald had taken him away, sparing them from having to listen to any more.

Eilidh smiled at the memory as she arose, ready to begin her day, washing and dressing in clean robes provided by palace staff. The fresh clothes felt good and smelled good, too. She breathed deeply of the scent of rose petals. She briefly wondered how the staff had known that was her favourite way to launder her robes. Just a good guess, she supposed, or maybe they were so good at their jobs that they could anticipate the needs of guests even before the guests themselves had thought of them. She applauded such professionalism and quietly envied their quiet, fulfilled lives. Nobody would send the palace servants on some quest for which they were wholly unsuitable.

After saying her morning devotions to Natus - or as she preferred to think of them, meditations to clear the mind - Eilidh went to round up the others. Toli had already gone to find breakfast - the Catalyst wasn't surprised at that. By the time Eilidh and the others joined her, the hobbit would probably have had seconds and be starting on thirds. Phaer's quarters were the next closest, so Eilidh knocked on his door next. The staff had anticipated his preference for black leather for a more formal look, considering he was in royal company. His hair was swept back in a freshly done ponytail and his boots were well polished. The half-elf ranger left his new bow and arrows in his quarters, but wore his polished sword in a kind of ceremonial way.

Lady Hannah provided the surprise that morning. Both companions expected to see her kitted out in full shining golden plate armour. Neither of them was prepared for the vision of femininity that answered the door in a sparkling white satin dress and gold high-heeled shoes. Her hair seemed to have extra body to it, the way it was brushed so it gleamed and she accessorised her outfit with a gold necklace and a pair of simple gold bracelets over long white gloves. Her sapphire eyes were shining, but their ferocity had been replaced with a gentle confidence. Eilidh noticed Phaer's eyes, too, take on a new look. In his own subtle, understated elven manner, he was quite taken with the sight.

“Good morning,” Eilidh offered, covering for the half-elf, who appeared to be having some difficulty finding his voice. “I see you've made the most of Prince Garald's hospitality.”

“Good morning, Eilidh, and to thee, noble Phaer. Apparently, this gown doth belong to that part of palace wardrobe that is set-aside for VIP guests. 'Tis truly a great honour to be considered thus.”

Taking a step closer, Phaer extended his arm and asked in his most formal tone, “My Lady, will you allow me the honour of escorting you to breakfast?”

Hannah rewarded him with a dazzling smile. “Why thank you, noble sir. I perceive that thou art a gentleman and I wouldst surely, methinks, be most pleased to grant my full acceptance of thy courtly offer.”

“That means `yes`,” Eilidh whispered to Phaer, who was looking slightly bewildered by Hannah's archaic speech.

So Hannah closed her door, rested her small but deceptively strong right hand on Phaer's left arm.

Eilidh followed a short distance behind, alone again, as usual. Some things in life, she reflected, did not change, adventure or no.

Chapter 6

Back in Avidon, Loric the obsidian dragon, was resting in human form, with his back up against the large oak-framed headboard. He breathed deeply thinking about that funny human with the multi-coloured clothes. He'd never seen a human change shape before, he thought only dragons could do that. Then he began to feel something else, that pain again. It had been only a day since his battle and he could still feel a strange, burning sensation. The memory of those fire rings, perhaps. Dismissing the idea, his thoughts returned to the group of companions that the prince had now befriended. Loric was glad that things had turned out so well, after he had got them into such serious trouble that they didn't deserve. He had come to accept that that human girl with the Life magic was right. There had been strange magic in that glade that affected him. Sure, he'd been injured, in pain, and not so much scared by the centaur attack as angry with himself for falling into such an obvious trap. It was also true that Loric had a tendency to spit acid first and ask questions later, but it felt like there was more to it this time.

Maybe I should go and watch over them and see if they get in to any more battles, he considered. Never know when they might need a helping dragon's claw. Such an interesting looking group. I wonder what they were doing out there in Shakaran's Borderlands.

He thought more about this as he dressed and headed downstairs. Then he smelled something different in the air - dragon slayers.

They must be here to look in on that black dragon that they've heard lives in this area, he realised. Stupid mortals. Why do they kill things they don't understand? No matter how many slayers he killed, there were always more. Frankly, he was tired of it. Those young people I met yesterday didn't seem that way, he thought.

Sure, the Lady Knight and the others had attacked him, but only in defence of another. He wasn't going to hold that against them. He smiled as he remembered the Catalyst's remark. `I said it was madness to get involved from the start`. Loric liked that in a mortal - a kind of courage that was tempered with common sense. Someone who could instantly assess a situation and know she was out of her depth. Yet at the same time, when she was forced to act, she stayed calm and did her job. Yes, Loric liked that. *They've got to be better company than I get around here and I could use a break from this place.*

Maybe that's what that burning sensation was: curiosity. It happened from time to time. The life of a dragon was so immeasurably long that they were immortal, to all intents and purposes. They could die in battle, or accidents or natural disasters, but the concept of old age was alien to them, although there were tales of ancient dragons who had simply died from boredom, when they felt there was nothing new to see, do, or experience. That was a dragon's greatest enemy: lethargy. If one was immortal, what did it matter if one took a day off, or a year, or a century, or a thousand centuries? What was time to a dragon? To combat this, Loric had made a point of following wherever his curiosity led. After all, curiosity may kill a cat, but who ever heard of it killing a dragon?

Decision made, he said quietly, "Sorry, dragon slayers, I can't oblige you today. I have some new friends to check up on." With that, he shifted to his dragon form and took to the sky, heading south, back to Shakaran.

* * * * *

A little while after breakfast, the party split up in an attempt to expand their numbers and, if truth be told, to do some sightseeing.

“After all,” Eilidh said to Toli, “if we're going to be putting ourselves on the line in this quest, we can at least get something positive out of it by making the most of the travel opportunities.”

Shakaran was truly the industrial capital of Mythallen, as Merlyon was the magical capital. It was a tough, rough and rugged city, where Merlyon possessed an elegant beauty. Soldiers were constantly milling about the streets, guarding the populace who were simply going about their business, the war be damned. War and battle was a part of life to the people of Shakaran. They had confidence in their city guard and, failing that, whatever sharp or heavy blunt implement might come to hand, should they have to defend themselves. Indeed, the Shakaran populace were impressive in the way they were so unfazed. Eilidh could well imagine the contrasting state of sheer panic in Merlyon if the magical shield should fail as per Gamaliel's dire prediction.

It was unanimously agreed that before they went any further, they really needed a healer in their party. Lady Hannah was keen to visit the Temple of Light anyway, to sanctify herself before Patrelaux, ready for the coming battles. Phaer was not given to the worship of the Father of Light, but did not seem to want to leave Hannah's side. Besides, while the Knight was clearly capable of taking care of herself, she was more vulnerable than she was used to in her dress.

“Escorting the lady just seems like the gentlemanly thing to do,” Phaer explained with a crooked smile.

Earlier, Hannah had confided to Eilidh that she'd hidden a long, sharp dagger up her skirt just in case her `gentleman friend` became a little less gentlemanly and a little too friendly.

Eilidh and Toli left them to it, heading instead for the Guild of the Nine Secrets for additional magical expertise. Toli chatted continuously, giving critical approval to her second breakfast.

“I thought you'd had three breakfasts,” Eilidh said.

“Whatever gave you that idea? Nobody has a third breakfast. One has to leave room for elevenses.”

“But when I came down from my room, you were just finishing your seconds and then you had another.”

Toli looked puzzled for a moment, but then her face brightened. “Oh no,” she giggled, “I see where you're getting confused. When you came down this morning, I was having a third helping, but that was still only first breakfast. Second breakfast is a whole separate meal to a hobbit. I only had two helpings for that one while you were talking to Prince Garald.”

Eilidh hid a smile. “Only two?”

“That's right. It was hard to resist a third, but I wanted to keep it light.”

“I see,” was all Eilidh trusted herself to say. She really did not want to laugh at her dear friend.

`Dear friend`. Eilidh pondered those words as they came to her. Did she really consider Tolbrietta a `dear friend`? It was hard to say, since Eilidh had no frame of reference to pull from. In her whole life she couldn't remember having anyone she would have truly called any kind of friend. Acquaintances, she supposed, and people she held in a certain regard, but friends were something else. Eilidh realised she had no clear idea, in any definable way, what precisely constituted a `dear friend` but on some instinctive level, she believed Toli was just that.

Maybe I should say something.

“Toli, I--” she began, and then changed her mind. “I wonder what's happened to Kismet this morning.”

Toli shrugged and giggled. “How do you know he's not here? For all we know he could be hiding in my backpack. Hey, he could *be* my backpack. He could probably even be one of the gold coins you've got in your purse!

Eilidh laughed, “I hope not – I'd hate to short change anybody.”

Toli agreed, “I'm not sure a Kismet is legal currency in Shakaran!”

As they got close to the Guild, they were surprised to hear music. A deep, baritone voice rang out, almost knocking them back a step with the sheer power, like a great galeforce wind. They stepped inside where their attention was immediately drawn to a dwarf standing on a table in the middle of the hall, holding the entire audience in the palm of his hand with the same ease as he held the harp he was playing. The two companions sat down quietly - even Toli seemed suddenly speechless.

When the song ended, they both got to their feet to applaud. The dwarven bard was dressed in full scale armour, helm, gauntlets and armoured boots, armed with a battle axe. The axe was the traditional dwarf weapon of choice and Eilidh was certain he knew well how to use it. What really astonished her, though, was the white cloak and black wristbands he was wearing, identifying him as a dark aligned Catalyst. His allegiance to the black wasn't an issue to either Eilidh or Toli, but the idea of a Bard-Catalyst made their jaws drop in wonder.

“What an absolutely fascinating individual,” Toli remarked.

“Mmmm,” her friend agreed, “but we're not here for entertainment, we're here to do a job.”

“Sometimes you're just no fun at all,” complained the hobbit, good naturedly.

“One of us has to be practical!” Eilidh snapped and got up to ask around before everybody disappeared now that the song was over. Toli's comment had hurt her. It was irrational, she knew. Her hobbit friend was only teasing, but the Catalyst discovered that this new experience of `dear friendship` led to a certain over-sensitivity. And social skills weren't exactly her forte.

The pair split up, asking around for any mages who might consider themselves the adventurous type, but they didn't meet with much success. Not until the dwarf spoke up from his position, leaning in a corner, feet up on a table, absently carving a block of wood into the shape of a rabbit, having finished his impromptu concert. “So yer lookin' fer adventure, are ye?”

“Well I wasn't looking for it, no,” Eilidh replied, “but I found it all the same, or rather it found me, I think.”

The dwarf laughed, “But those are the best kind, lass! Listen, you might not need a second Catalyst, but would you be interested in the magic of music?”

“Sir, I am really in no position to turn anyone down, even if I wanted to.”

The dwarf laughed again, “I like you, lassie. Yer funny.”

“If I accepted you into my party, what would you want to get out of it?”

“Och well now, we'd just have to see wouldn't we?” He winked. “That's the thing with adventure, ye can never tell what ye might find. Tell yer what: if I see anythin' I like and it's not directly important to yer quest, I get first pick. Deal?”

Toli gave a nod in answer to Eilidh's questioning raised eyebrow. Eilidh wished the others were there but since they weren't she would just have to make a decision for them as leader. She didn't think there was much danger that the things that would interest a dwarf Catalyst and bard would mean much to a half-elf ranger or a Knight of Paladina, so there didn't seem to be any reason to refuse.

The dwarf got up, stomped over to Eilidh and Toli, shaking their hands vigorously and pounding them on the back. “Granite Longbeard at yer service,” he said with a formal bow from his round waist.

“Good to have you with us, Mr Longbeard.” Toli spoke up.

“Och, just Granite will do, my wee hobbit friend. No need to stand on ceremony with me, lass.”

“Great, Granite it is, then. I'm Toli and this is my friend Eilidh. Say, would you sing for us again? I really loved your music, we both did. It would wonderful to hear you again. Then maybe sometime, if we get the chance, we could have an eating contest.” She giggled. “I've got a bit of family honour to restore with that one, if you'll care to listen to the story, which,” another giggle “must be a change for a bard, cause you're always telling them. But I guess somebody has to tell them to you first, don't they? Hey, maybe you could compose a song to go with my story. I don't object to a bit of artistic license, either. Anyway my story goes like this: you see, my Dad...”

Before the hobbit could launch into her tale, Phaer burst into the guild, Hannah a half-step behind and a young elf maid in cleric's white robes with them. “Eilidh, Toli!” Phaer began, the paused as he saw the dwarf. “Is he with you?”

“Yes,” Eilidh confirmed. “Phaer, this is--”

“Introductions shall have to wait,” Hannah said. “Sorry, but we must needs make to returneth with all haste unto the castle forthwith!”

“Something terrible has happened and the prince needs us right away,” Phaer added.

Without another word, the group now numbering six, ran all the way to the castle gates, where the guards stepped aside, telling them to go straight in.* * * * *

Upon reaching Shakaran City, Loric decided that he should return to his human form, so as not to draw any unwanted attention towards himself. When he landed, he could see the group of mortals that he had seen only the day before, running towards the castle. Then another strange thing happened. Without thinking about what he was doing, he suddenly sprouted wings. He was still in his human form, but with his much scaled down dragon wings. For some time, he had been trying to find a way to access some of his dragon abilities while in human form. He wondered if this new experience could be the beginning of something he had been seeking for some time. That would have to wait until later, though. Right now he had other interests. There was no rush. He had yet to hear back from his scouts and besides, what was time to a dragon?

Being careful to remain unnoticed, his dark clothing helping him to hide among the smoke from industrial furnaces, he took off after the young group. He could not enter the palace itself, but from his lofty vantage point, he should be able to see them come out.

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It was some time, once the companions had been escorted to the War Room, before Prince Garald appeared. He looked terrible.

“Please,” he begged, “I need your help. My teenage daughter, Princess Mystaya, has been kidnapped. How this happened here in the heart of Shakaran I can't explain. The details I have are sketchy but that's a security issue for the future. Right now, the only thing I care about is launching a rescue operation. We have a good intelligence network in the city so it did not take long to discover where the kidnapper has taken my daughter, though his identity is at present unknown. On the basis of this intelligence, my personal Enforcer guards have returned with the news that they cannot rescue Mystaya.”

“I'm sorry, Your Grace,” Eilidh said, “but if two powerful Enforcers can't do it, what help can we possibly give?”

“Forgive me, I am coming to that. According to my guards there are only two possibilities for success. The first is a powerful all-out assault but that is high-risk: the kidnapper could decide to kill Mystaya, and it would also divert resources away from protecting Shakaran. For all I know, that could be the whole point - this could be a diversion prior to a major assault on the city. It would make for a tempting distraction...too tempting. I can't take that chance. I can't risk the protection of my city for the sake of one individual, even if that one individual is my own daughter. No, this approach is completely out of the question. That leaves me with the second option.”

“And that's where we come in?” Eilidh prompted.

“That's right. You see, the kidnapper is over-confident. He has shut himself in his lair, surrounded by magical defences, but his detection magic is flawed. Most of his defences are only set to activate when they detect a certain level of magical power. A low-level party like yours could probably slip in almost unnoticed.”

“Well, I can see the logic of that, but still--.”

"I will of course be prepared to pay, " Garald assured her, quickly. "Five hundred gold each now, and the same when you return, plus a total of one thousand gold for any new party members who join you and help you. Plus, of course, you are welcome to keep anything you pick up along the way. All I care about is my daughter."

"Money isn't really the issue, Your Grace," Eilidh told him. "Please understand, I'm grateful for your hospitality and feel for you over your daughter, but I have an important quest to pursue. I can't afford to get side-tracked too much. My quest has to be my priority."

"That is where the rest of my proposal comes in: While my people gather more intelligence and make the necessary preparations, I will see that you are all provided with intensive training in your various disciplines before you leave. Then when you return, I will give you certain information that I guarantee will be invaluable to your main quest. There is somewhere you can go, someone I can lead you to - a wise sage who possesses information and knowledge lost to everyone else. There is no doubt that he will be able to get you on the right trail. If you rescue my daughter, I will take you to him. Without me I can guarantee you will never find him or the knowledge he alone possesses. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. Please, help me. For my daughter, I will do anything short of jeopardising my people."

Eilidh looked around at her party, then asked, "Your Grace, would you give us a moment to discuss this in private?"

"Of course," he replied, "but please bear in mind that the first part of my offer is negotiable; the second is not." With that he left.

"Opinions, everyone?" Eilidh invited her companions.

"Withholding information for our quest and using it to force us to act is not honourable," Lady Hannah stated.

"Perhaps not," the elven cleric allowed, "but this is the man's daughter we're talking about. For her he will do almost anything short of putting the entire city in danger. In that, there is an honour all its own. In fact, if we were to act with honour, we would volunteer to go anyway, so the blackmail becomes unnecessary and irrelevant. It's only blackmail if we are inclined to act without honour ourselves and refuse to help."

Lady Hannah gave a small reverential bow. "You are correct, Revered Daughter Calandra. Forgive me, for I didst speak, methinks, with undue haste."

"Our Loving Father does not ask that we make no mistakes, child, simply that we admit them and do our best to learn from them."

"That's two votes for taking on the rescue," Eilidh observed. "What about you, Granite? Where do you stand on this? After all, this isn't what you joined us for."

He winked, "Och, never mind that, lassie! It's like I said: with adventures ya never know what yer gonna get. The way I see it is one thousand in gold, first pick of any interestin' stuff we find and free warrior trainin'. Where else am I gonna find an offer like that?"

"So you'll come with us, then.

“Aye, I'll go with ye, lass.”

“Good, that's three. Toli? You haven't said much.”

The hobbit shrugged and smiled at Eilidh. “I'm your friend, Eilidh. Wherever you lead, I'll follow from now until the end. If you say we go, then I go.”

Eilidh found that simple statement of loyal friendship wonderfully heart-warming.

She was snapped out of it pretty quickly, however, when Phaer, arms folded across his chest, said, “Well, best of luck to you, then, I'll grab my stuff and be off.”

“What? You mean you're not coming with us?” Toli demanded.

“I never suggested I was,” the half-elf replied. “It was always my intention to leave once you decided on your next move.”

“But thou didst agree to join us,” Hannah objected.

“Sorry, my Lady, but I never said any such thing. I agreed to escort you safely to Shakaran City. To `watch your back` as I put it, to make sure you didn't get yourselves killed in the Borderlands. I said nothing about joining your quest. You haven't even told me what it is and it's not really my business. I've done my job and now I must get back to it. There are other travellers getting lost out there who need a ranger to guide them. That's my place - out there.”

The Knight and hobbit were struck speechless - they had both assumed Phaer was a permanent part of the group but they realised he was telling the truth: he had never actually agreed to that. Even Lady Hannah had to admit it was no dishonour to simply do one's job, especially when that job involved helping others.

Eilidh, however, was more devious than that. Fixing Phaer with her cat-like green eyes, she asked, “Are you sure about that?”

“Sure about what?”

“Are you sure you can just go back to your job, just like that?”

“Why not?”

“Well, where are you based?”

“The Borderlands.”

“Shakaran Borderlands,” Eilidh corrected.

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Who is your ultimate boss? Wouldn't you say that it's Prince Garald?”

Phaer didn't answer. He could see where this was going and he didn't like it much.

“If I understand Shakaran politics correctly, the Prince Regent has the ultimate power to pick and choose those who work within Shakaran land.”

“That's true,” Phaer conceded.

“Well, the Prince is asking you to save his daughter. If you refuse, I imagine he'll be quite upset with you. He might even decide that he no longer wants you working anywhere near Shakaran, and a bad reference from a man as powerful as Prince Garald could see to it that no-one in Mythallen will ever hire you again. Then what will you do? If I were you, I would consider this rescue mission as not so much a request as a polite order.”

Phaer could not deny the logic of Eilidh's words, but still remained silent.

“On the other hand, if you volunteer to help rescue Princess Mystaya, I imagine Prince Garald will take a personal interest in your career from that point on. It could go very well for you. To say nothing of the fact that you could be the most valuable member of our group in this rescue.”

“There are other rangers,” Phaer objected.

“I don't mean your ranger's skills, I mean that you're magically Dead.”

“So?”

“So think about it: Prince Garald said that the kidnapper's defences are designed to detect high-level magic. What better counter could there be than someone with no magic to detect? Truth be told, you could probably go and rescue Princess Mystaya all by yourself. We'd most likely just slow you down and attract magical defences that would ignore you completely. If any of us go, it should be you.”

Phaer thought through Eilidh's arguments. She was smart; he had to give her that much credit. She'd used bribery, blackmail, threats and flattery all in the course of one argument. Any one of those he might find a way to ignore, but together they bound him tightly. She was right; he didn't really have a choice.

“Alright, I'll rescue the princess,” he surrendered. “And,” he added with a crooked smile, “you can all tag along, too.” There were smiles all around. “But,” Phaer held up a cautionary finger, “let's make it clear that I still haven't made any promises about joining your quest. We go there – wherever there is - rescue the princess, come back and that's it. Then we part company.”

“Well, why don't we just cross that bridge when we come to it?” Eilidh suggested.

“Fair enough,” the half-elf agreed.

Eilidh called Prince Garald back in and told him their decision: They would rescue Princess Mystaya.

“Thank you, my friends,” he responded. “I will have your five hundred gold coins delivered to you from the royal treasury within the hour. We will begin your training immediately. There is just one small problem you should be aware of, so you have time to think of the best solution.”

“And that is?” Eilidh pressed.

“According to Kismet, the best and fastest route to where the kidnapper is holed up, is through Avidon.”

Chapter 7

Avidon. Prince Garald was right: that was going to be a problem.

The party was relaxing together after their second day of training. The rest of the group was engaged in conversation, but Eilidh, as usual, had said little, almost nothing in fact. In that way she was able to quickly extract herself from the tedium of listening to all the small-talk as the others forgot she was even there. That suited her just fine. It meant she could set her mind to work on the practical solutions of the rescue.

Avidon was the only one of the five major cities of Mythallen that had been conquered by the Hand of Darkness Liberation Front. Pretentious title notwithstanding, they were firmly in control of the city and that had led to a dangerous situation. Dark warriors had replaced the old Guard and all installations devoted to Patrelaux, Father of Light, had been destroyed or de-sanctified with blood sacrifices and given over to the worship of Mortress, Mistress of Death. The overt worship of Egali-Te was also illegal, although a few `cults` as they were perceived, were tolerated in Avidon, mostly because it wasn't worth the resources the Hand would need to expend on exterminating them all.

Clerics of any order other than the black would be executed on sight and so would Knights of Paladinia. Therein lay the problem: how to get Lady Hannah and Revered Daughter Calandra into Avidon, rescue Mystaya and get out again safely. Calandra seemed a sensible elf who might be persuaded of the wisdom of covering her white robes and hiding her clerical symbol. But Lady Hannah would never agree to anything less than stepping right up there in the full golden plate armour of the Paladins. To conceal or lie about her order would be dishonourable in her eyes. Dammit, why couldn't she have been a Knight of Zhentilon? The Dark Knights were allowed inside Avidon City, if for no other reason than the Hand would not dare to refuse them. But there was no use thinking in those terms. Reality was reality and no amount of wishing would change it. Seeing no solution immediately available, she did the only thing she could. She prayed.

Egali-Te," she prayed, quietly, "Sovereign of Balance beyond this world, please hear your mortal servant. I have a problem and ask respectfully for your help. I must guide two Servants of Light into a Den of Darkness and I do not see a way. Please, show me a path that we might tread. Let it be so."

Balanced prayers were generally simple affairs. None of the grandiose language and purification rites of prayer to the Father of Light, or the shedding of blood that accompanied prayer to the Mistress of Darkness who was just as likely to strike down her servant for daring to disturb her as grant anything. In fact the latter was often worse because she gave nothing without a heavy price being attached. The Balanced One required nothing more than basic respect and a simple request asked in a simple way. Traditional worshippers of Egali-Te had a simple concept: their god was busy. He was constantly striving to maintain universal balance and naturally that is where his attentions were focussed. Therefore, one did not disturb him unless it was important and even then, one kept one's address short and to the point. The only trick to the prayer was to keep the request open to interpretation. That's why she had not specifically stated `I want to lead Hannah and Calandra in and out of Avidon and I need you to stop the dark warriors from attacking us`. It wasn't the place of the servant to dictate to the master precisely how something was to be done. Hence, Balance prayers were always broadly worded. The Balanced One liked to leave it to his supplicant's own intelligence and wit to find the solution he had already thoughtfully woven into the world.

At least, that was the accepted wisdom.

Eilidh herself held a different view. She didn't really believe in the gods as such. To her, the `soul` was an extension of the will. It was that will that made one sentient. Prayer was nothing more or less than a meditation, clearing the mind to search for the solution that already existed but lay currently out of reach, or out of sight. She presented Egali-Te, and therefore herself, with a goal and left the details of the task open. That way there was more chance of having her prayer answered. More chance of finding an acceptable solution if she did not restrict her mind by focussing on the problem.

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It had been a week since the kidnap. Prince Garald was going frantic with worry, but reason told him that rash action would only serve to put his daughter at further risk. Now, at last, the time had come for Eilidh's party to make the trip to Avidon. The Catalyst considered their week well spent. They felt more like a unit than before. They had begun to recognise each other's strengths and how to support one another to best effect. There was much more to be done, of course, but there was only so much time.

Phaer was dressed in the dark brown leather he favoured, armed with his sword and a brand new re-curved longbow with a quiver full of arrows. Toli, Eilidh and Calandra were dressed in their simple robes, Granite was decked out in scale armour with armoured boots, shield strapped to his arm, and a helm. The dwarf was armed to the teeth with a spear and single-handed, triple-loading crossbow plus one hundred bolts, as well as his battle-axe. His harp was strapped to his backpack, but easily accessible. Lady Hannah Collins' Knightly armour was freshly polished so that one could not look directly at it from a certain angle where it reflected the glorious sunshine that had greeted the day. Kismet was still missing but had left word with Prince Garald that he would catch them up. Somehow.

At this point, they still had no clear idea how they were going to even get through the gates of Avidon, let alone affect a rescue.

As they were getting ready to leave, however, Phaer's sharp elven ears picked up the faint sound of a newspaper seller calling out the day's headline from several streets away. "Truce?" he wondered. "Hannah, I didn't know the Knights were at war with anyone, other than the chaos creatures, I mean."

"We are not."

"Then what's this truce?"

"I am sorry, Phaer, I must confess that I know not of what thou speakest."

"Oh, I just caught the newspaper headline. Calandra, did you catch any more?" Phaer reasoned that the hearing of a full-blooded elf was likely to be better than his half-human ears. Apparently not.

"Sorry, I was talking to Lady Hannah and wasn't really listening."

"Oh." Phaer was vaguely suspicious about that, but kept it to himself. "It's probably not important."

Eilidh, however, had other ideas. Her instinct started to prickle the hairs on the back of her neck. She asked Phaer to run and buy a paper for her. When the ranger returned, Eilidh read the headline out loud.

KNIGHTLY ORDERS DECLARE TRUCE		
<p>SUPREME Knight Commander Lady Amelia Mordent, leader of the Dark Knights of Zhentilon made a joint announcement yesterday, with Lord High Chancellor Charles Barrack of the Knights of Paladinia. In the course of their speech, they declared a truce, a temporary cessation in all hostilities between the two Orders of Knights. The terms of the truce do not represent any change to their</p>	<p>fundamental differences, nor are any joint operations likely. The truce, they said, simply acknowledges that the threat from chaos creatures must take 'absolute priority' in order to ensure survival. When asked about the Knights of Balance, Lord Barrak answered that both he and Lady Mordent would have welcomed a summit with the leader of that order, but it was</p>	<p>impossible since no one knows for certain where they are based or even if they truly exist. However, as things stand, Lady Mordent confirmed that no Knight of Zhentilon or Paladinia would attack a Knight of Balance unless they were attacked first. In this way, the truce could be extended among all three Knightly Orders. This is a historic move but only time will tell how long it will last.</p>

Eilidh was so taken aback by the news that she almost read the weather report aloud before she realised it wasn't relevant.

“This is it! This is how we get into Avidon.” She said a silent ‘thank you’ to Egali-Te for answering her prayers, or more accurately, she gave thanks for the gift of reasoning so she could spot the solution when it presented itself.

“How does the truce help us?” Toli wondered.

“What we need is an escort. A Dark Knight escort.”

Lady Hannah wasn't convinced. “The Knights of Zhentilon may honour this truce, but the Hand of Darkness will not.”

“They don't have to. Whatever their opinions on the matter, they will not risk a confrontation with the Knights of Zhentilon, especially with your order as allies. Hannah, we need you to put aside your personal feelings about Dark Knights and take advantage of the truce.”

“Very well,” the Knight sighed, though she clearly didn't like it.

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As the party walked about a mile towards the Eastern fringe of Shakaran, they had no idea they were being watched. In fact, Loric's eyes had scarcely left the young party this past week whenever they were outside the palace.

“So, you're coming to Avidon, are you?” he mused to himself. “Might as well wait in for you at home, then.”

He quickly used his powers to return to his dragon form and flew off into the sun. That way, even if they looked up, they would have to shield their eyes from the glare, leaving them unable to identify him.

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Eilidh decided that she and Hannah should go alone, rather than present the Dark Knights with too many reasons to refuse. After all, the truce was between them and the Paladins. It did not extend to elves or to Clerics of Patrelaux. Therefore, presenting the Dark Knights with Phaer and Calandra would be unwise, she felt.

“We cannot conceal their involvement in our quest,” Lady Hannah objected. “It would not be honourable. I will not lie.”

“I’m not suggesting we should. When it comes to the negotiations, I will make them aware of every member of our party. But before we get to the negotiation, we need to persuade them to allow us within the walls of their barracks. Under the terms of the truce, you should have no problem on that score. I am the party leader, so it’s really me who is making the request. That means I have to be there with you and since Knights have no use for magic, they have no reason object to me as a Catalyst. Let’s not give them any reason to say no at that stage.”

Hannah acquiesced to Eilidh’s wisdom, so they left the others at a nearby tavern while the two approached the barracks of the Dark Knights.

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Stone walls, solid, dark and foreboding loomed up ahead of the companions. They were decorated with skulls and bones, spiders, snakes and other symbols of death. Even the flowers that grew in the well-kept gardens were black. About fifty yards from the main gates, they were ordered to halt and state their business. Knight archers lined the battlements with their bow drawstrings pulled back, arrows at the ready. A simple but effective defence.

“I am Knight Initiate Lady Hannah Collins of the Fourth Merlyon Infantry Division,” declared the gold-plated woman. “This is Eilidh, a worthy companion in whose service I hath placed myself. It is my desire to speak with an officer in command whom hath earned the authority to hear and grant a request for assistance in a matter of utmost importance.”

“Methinks that thou art surely lost, Lady,” a spokesman shouted down from atop the wall, “for I perceive that thou art a Knight of Paladina. The Knights thou seekest are at the other end of the city.” His tone displayed a level of arrogance that wasn’t uncommon in young Knights of light or dark orders - Eilidh had never met a Knight of Balance, so she had no way to guess whether it was the same in that order. She was willing to bet that it was. Whatever their allegiance, humans were humans, young warriors were young warriors and Knights were Knights.

“No, sir,” Lady Hannah replied, calmly. “I am precisely where I intend to be.”

“Mayhap, then, thou shouldst relate the precise nature of thy inquiry?”

“Forgive me, sir, but before I respond to that, prithee tell whom am I addressing?”

“I am Knight Warrior Sir Gunthar Mason of the Third Shakaran Infantry Division.”

“Thou art young to be recognised as Knight Warrior, sir. I commend thee.”

“My rank is but scant days old, Lady, but no less valid for that.”

“Indeed not, sir.”

“Now thou wast saying about the nature of thy request?”

“Once again I must beg forgiveness, sir, but needs must that I operate with a certain degree of secrecy. Suffice to say I am come to formally request an escort.”

“Escort duty? Once again, I must ask, art thou certain that thou art not lost? For surely Knights of thine own order would better serve thee.”

Eilidh was thankful that the cocky young man had stopped short of directly implying any inferiority in the Knights of Paladinia. If he had, the result would probably have been bloodshed. Even now, the Catalyst was not sure the result was going to be any different. The way Sir Gunthar was acting, he was right on the verge of asking for it. Eilidh didn't like it, but she knew she couldn't interfere without wounding her companion's pride and honour. This was a Knight thing.

Making a supreme effort to control herself, Lady Hannah replied, “If I didst think that mine own order would be of help, sir, I wouldst be there now. Indeed, I would doubtless have had my request granted long ago and be halfway to my destination by now. Alas, in this case, unique circumstances do demand that I seek out an escort of Knights of Zhentilon. Now, sir, wilt thou grant me an audience with thy commanding officer, under the terms of the truce? For I tell thee truly, thou art sorely trying my patience and if thy compliance is not swift indeed, I shall be forced to prove my honour upon thy body!”

“And quite right, too!” called out a voice behind them.

Hannah and Eilidh turned to see a Dark Knight mounted on a blue dragon that had appeared suddenly from behind a cloud, landing swiftly and silently without so much fuss as a puff of dust. The Knight removed his skull-like riding helmet and dismounted. The man was tall and muscular, his face sporting a full moustache in the style demanded by the Knights of an elder time, before women were allowed to join the Knightly ranks, thereby making the compulsory moustache rule unworkable. This man clearly held the past in great regard. He bowed low to the two companions and then offered a salute - courtesy to a Lady and respect to a fellow Knight - Hannah was impressed from the start. Here was a man she could do business with, she felt.

“Greetings, my Lady,” he offered. “I am Knight Officer Sir Quentin Marr, leader of the First Shakaran Dragon Cavalry Division.”

Hannah introduced herself and Eilidh again, then briefly explained her request of escort duty.

“But of course,” Sir Quentin replied. “Under the terms of the truce, every Knight of Zhentilon is honour-bound to give any reasonable assistance to a brother or sister of the Paladonian Order, and escort duty is easily offered.”

“I am well pleased that thou dost see it that way, Sir.” Her tone when she said `sir` was very different to when she'd been talking to the young upstart at the wall. “Indeed, I am thankful that thou camest before I was forced to do serious harm upon the person of thy gatekeeper.”

“Yes, though I did but catch the tail end of thy conversation, I could well perceive the source of thy consternation. Moreover, I am not altogether certain I would have been sorry to arrive a moment later to find thy sword buried in his flesh, save for the inconvenience it would have caused thee. Please, Lady Hannah, I trust that thou shalt not judge our entire order based upon the actions of one individual.”

“Nay, Sir. Even within the ranks of mine own order there are young hot-headed Knights like him. In battle I doubt not their prowess, but in other matters, they are often found wanting.”

“Thank you for thy benevolence, My Lady. Now, if thou wilt excuse me but a moment, I shall personally attend to thine admittance; then I hope thou shalt allow me to courteously escort thee both unto my office, whereupon we shall discuss privately the details of the honourable undertaking that doth compel thee to cometh here this day.”

Eilidh couldn't help but think that sentence was a little excessive even for a Knight, but she kept the observation to herself.

He remounted his dragon, and flew over the wall of the barracks. A moment later, he was standing atop the battlements, whereupon he called out, “Knight Warrior Sir Gunthar Mason, come ye here immediately!” The young Knight obeyed, snapped to attention and saluted.

“Hath the current truce between ourselves and the honourable Knights of Paladinia somehow escaped thy notice?” the officer asked.

“No, Sir!”

“Then perhaps thou hast lost thy sight and in thy blinded state thou didst fail to recognise the armour that is the uniform of our new allies. Is that the way of it, boy?”

“No, Sir!”

“Come now, 'twould be nothing to be ashamed of were it so. It may be that thou shouldst wish to seek a leave of absence to immerse thyself in prayer and worship of divine Mortress, so that thou might beseech her to grant back thy sight.”

“No, Sir!”

“Ah, I see, so thou dost wish to leave the Knighthood on account of thy sudden impairment, having received insight that this is the part thou art to play in the great plan of the Mistress of Death.”

“No, Sir!”

“Then help me out here, boy! What explanation givest thou for treating a Lady and fellow Knight this way? If she were wearing black armour instead of gold, wouldst thou behave similarly?”

“Of course not, sir! But she isn't wearing black armour!”

“Under the terms of the truce, apart from taking certain precautions to preserve the security of the Dark Knighthood, thou art to treat any Knight in the same way, whether their armour shouldst be black, gold or even silver.”

“I am sorry, sir, but I am simply not comfortable with that.”

“Oh, thou art uncomfortable! Well why didst thou not say so?” Raising his voice to the assembled company of Knights, he said, “Didst ye all hear that? He is uncomfortable! Surely we wouldst never want Sir Gunthar Mason to suffer any kind of discomfort, now would we?” He was clearly mocking the young Knight and encouraging the company to join in freely.

“No, Sir!” they affirmed.

“Knight Officer Marr, Sir, if I may?” ventured one. Upon receiving a nod of assent from his superior, he offered, “Perhaps, in case of further discomfort, we shouldst provide additional padding for his armour?”

“And for his comforts at night, extra pillows!” suggested another.

“Or a whore!” a Lady Knight put in. That provoked much laughter.

The officer held up his hand for silence and he got it instantly. “Thy discomfort is irrelevant, or dost thou presume that thou knowest better than the Supreme Knight Commander and her advisors, Knight Initiate Gunthar Mason?”

“Knight Warrior, Sir,” the young man corrected.

THWACK! The officer's gauntleted fist shot out, nearly knocking the rank and file Knight off the wall - a fall of a hundred feet or more. “Art thou contradicting a superior officer, boy?”

“No, Sir, but--”

THWACK! “But nothing! Thy promotion was obviously given in haste and in error. Thou art once more a Knight Initiate.” Sir Gunthar opened his mouth to object, but the officer stopped him. “Say but one more thing I likest not - even breathe the wrong way and thou shalt begin thy training anew as a squire! Now dost thou have anything to say?”

“No, Sir,” he answered quietly, the fight clearly gone out of him. “I am sorry, Sir.”

“Very well,” Sir Quentin accepted, calm once more. “Thou shalt now report to the Chapel of Mortress and beg the High Cleric to teach thee the true meaning of the word `uncomfortable` as part of thy discipline. Now, get thee out of my sight before I simply throw thee to the ground below us.”

The humiliated Knight saluted and marched away.

“Now,” announced Sir Quentin, addressing the assembled Knights, “If these gates are not open to admit our guests in ten seconds from now, thou shalt all be given double shifts every day for the next month. Move!”

Eilidh estimated that the gates opened in seven seconds, and still within the specified ten, Sir Quentin was escorting them to his office. They paused at the door, just briefly, as the officer gave

fresh orders to a pair of Knights on guard duty. "Take a couple of dragons and scout around a little. My mount thought she smelled a rogue jewelled dragon out there as we approached. An obsidian of all things, apparently. Investigate, but be discrete and do not attack unless thou dost perceive a clear threat." The Knights saluted and left for the dragon stables.

Inside, the officer proved to be a gentleman, who was very amenable to the request. In fact he was outraged at the crime that had been committed on Shakaran soil. Knights of Zhentilon took prisoners, but kidnapping children was not honourable and as far as the Knight Officer was concerned, the kidnapper deserved to be gutted and roasted alive on a spit before being fed to the dogs. Despite their different allegiances, Lady Hannah found it impossible to disagree with that. Sir Quentin pledged to help in any way he could, and saw no problem in extending the truce to include a half-elf ranger and a Revered Daughter of Patrelaux when they were clearly embarked on a quest of high honour. Eilidh said nothing whatsoever about the wider matters they were involved with. Lady Hannah agreed that it was not a lie - just a tactically justified secret. The Knights of Zhentilon were not involved with that. They just had to provide an escort to Avidon and, on Sir Quentin's insistence, protection of their location within the city. After all, the Hand of Darkness was rife with treachery and backstabbing, so an agreement with one faction, even if kept, would not necessarily be honoured by another. Unless, of course, there was incentive to do so and the presence of the Dark Knights would provide that incentive.

When Eilidh rounded up the rest of the party, Sir Quentin suggested riding dragonback to Avidon. Calandra was unhappy, however, about riding the blues that the Dark Knights favoured and the blues were equally adamant that they would not carry elves. All chromatic dragons were born and raised with a deep hatred of elves, since they represented the Light, and since the elven forces were the natural enemy of the Dark Knights, the blues' training reinforced this idea. Under the terms of the truce, Knights could adapt to work with Eilidh's elven companions, but dragons were not as flexible as humans. Calandra pointed out that it was just as well, because the Hand could perceive a flight of dragons as a threat. It would only take one inexperienced warrior to make a mistake that would lead to a lot of needless bloodshed. No, it was better to remain on foot and use the Corridor network.

So the party moved out, flanked by a squad of twenty Knights entering the Corridor and keeping their destination firmly in their minds: Avidon's Borderlands.

Chapter 8

The Hand of Darkness Liberation Front was a loose conglomeration of dark aligned fighters who saw themselves as `freeing the world from the constraints of the Light`, whatever that meant. They included warriors, mages, clerics, thieves and just about anyone who felt like joining. Anyone except elves, whom they despised – even those few like Drizdar who were dark aligned would never be trusted. Otherwise, the Hand were not fussy. Also in their ranks were representatives of five chromatic dragon species, who saw these mortals as a welcome diversion from the weight of eternity and a way of gaining an edge over their metallic and jewelled dragon cousins.

The organisation was in reality little more than a horde of thugs who divided themselves into five major factions: Red, Blue, Green, Black and White, defined by the colour of dragon they favoured. The factions were constantly vying for dominance. Their leaders rose to power through sheer brutality, and in-fighting was an accepted part of life. Their rule of Avidon was a barely controlled contradiction between anarchy and a totalitarian dictatorship. The city existed largely in a state of lawlessness, but those few laws that existed were enforced with an iron fist. Within the city walls, people were left to fend for themselves in a dog-eat-dog kind of way. Deaths due to accident, fire and acts of violence were the norm, but nobody was allowed to leave Avidon without a visa, which was almost never granted for anything other than official Hand of Darkness business.

There was a simple agreement between the Dark Knights of Zhentilon and the Hand. The Knights did not interfere with the Hand's occupation of Avidon and recognised it as legitimate government for purposes of trade. In return, while there would be no Dark Knight barracks in Avidon, any visiting Knights could expect to be granted free entry and exit without question, their safety guaranteed. The Knights vowed to lay siege to Avidon if the armies of the Hand ever threatened that safety. The Black faction of the Hand in Avidon was all but wiped out when it organised the attempted assassination of an important Dark Knight Commander. Their attempt failed and it cost them dearly.

The Black faction had already been the weakest, because even though the white dragons were naturally the least strong physically, this was offset by Avidon's climate. Being the northernmost outpost of Mythallen, and built on high, mountainous terrain, it was prone to be freezing cold and almost perpetually snowbound. It was by no means the ideal environment for reptiles, but white dragons were an exception. They thrived in freezing conditions, and that gave them an edge over their naturally more muscular black cousins, though they still could not match their chromatic brothers and sisters - the greens, blues and reds, which were able to use magic to cope with their natural environment. The other Hand of Darkness factions exiled the remnants of the Black faction from the city, and that was the only reason why Avidon was still Hand of Darkness territory, not a Dark Knight stronghold.

It was Sir Quentin who gave the companions this modern history lesson, since accurate information on Avidon and the Hand was generally hard to come by in the other cities.

A fair distance from the city, the lay of the land afforded them their first look at the city walls. Phaer shielded his gaze from the sun reflecting off the snow and looked ahead. “The wall is well-guarded,” he observed. “It looks like the Green faction are on guard duty, judging by their uniforms, wouldn't you say, Calandra?”

Calandra turned her own elven eyes to the scene and nodded, “Yes, child, they're the Green faction alright, no doubt about it.”

The others took their word for it - elfsight was greatly superior to human or hobbit eyes, and dwarf vision was meant for dark, underground areas, not open skies and snowy-white fields. Upon reaching the city, however, it turned out that the elves had been mistaken. It was, in fact, the Blue division that was on guard duty.

There was some doubt in the minds of the gate warriors as to whether their agreement with the Dark Knights could be extended to `filthy elves` and those dedicated to the Light. In the end, they reluctantly agreed, since the favour of the Dark Knights could be a useful thing to earn and their disfavour something best avoided.

It was early evening by the time they finally found themselves inside the city. Eilidh decided to split up and search for helpful locals who could direct them to where they needed to be. Prince Garald's final report indicated that the kidnapper had fled behind somewhere called the Great Fountain of Light - a forbidden area guarded behind a locked iron gate - a gate to which the Prince had obtained a key. (He indicated that it was better if the companions did not know precisely how.) Granite struck out on his own because, as a dark Catalyst and a bard, he would be the least conspicuous of the group. The people of Avidon would probably be quite comfortable talking to him and he would learn more alone. Lady Hannah stuck with Sir Quentin, while the other Dark Knights dispersed to spread the word among the other Hand of Darkness factions about the party under their protection so there would be no mistakes. Calandra and Phaer agreed it was wise for them to accompany Toli and Eilidh, staying in public places and away from deserted backstreets where their elven heritage might more readily attract trouble.

The latter group sought out a tavern that seemed to have a certain reputation around here. It was called The Black Dragon's Claw, allegedly named after the only black dragon to remain in the city, who frequented the establishment in human form. While black dragons did not like elves, most would much prefer to be waited on than hunt their food.

Phaer recalled an old story from his homeland. “There once was young elf maid who lived on a farm. She lived alone, just hiring whatever help she needed. One day, a black dragon invaded her farm and threatened to eat her. However, the elf maid offered `Before you eat me, let me cook two of my best, fattest cows for you`. The dragon decided the fat cows looked a lot tastier than the skinny elf and he had always been fascinated by the way mortals cooked food, so he saw no harm in agreeing. He could always eat the elf tomorrow. The elf maid cooked just about every animal on her farm over the coming months, just to feed the dragon, so still the dragon did not attack her. So long as the elf kept his belly full, he decided, why waste the effort? This went on all through the summer and autumn, until a harsh winter blizzard came along. Then the black dragon decided to sleep out the storm in a nearby cave. The elf maid, seeing that he had slipped into hibernation, killed the dragon and sold the meat all over the village. All the losses she had made on the farm animals, she regained a hundred fold and became very rich.”

Toli clapped her hands and danced in appreciation. “Wow! What a great story! Do you tell a lot of stories like that where you come from? Where was it you said you were born?”

“I didn't,” Phaer replied.

“Oh well,” Toli giggled. “That would explain why I couldn't remember, because I usually have a very good memory, you know.”

“Is that right?” the half-elf wondered, gently moving the hobbit's train of thought along, onto a different subject.

“It's true! Sometimes I think if I try hard enough I could remember being born. Wouldn't that be something? I wonder what it felt like, I'd really love to know...Oh, hang on a minute - I think we're lost.”

She was right. Eilidh had got so caught up in what her friends were saying that she had lost track of the directions she was supposed to be following. Calandra and Phaer were no help - elves found it difficult to navigate human cities; they preferred to be out in the open.

“We'll just have to ask somebody,” Eilidh said. “I'll try in here. You might as well wait outside, I'll only be a minute.” She opened the first door on her left: a business of some kind, simply called `M Donna's`. When she stepped inside, she had a bit of a shock. There was a bar, at which were sat several young men and women - mostly humans, half-elves, and a couple of half-orcs - all of whom were practically undressed, apart from one striking older woman who was wearing a tight all-in-one leather catsuit, bound loosely at the front to show off her ample bosom.

Trying not to blush, Eilidh addressed her. “Er, excuse me, my name's Eilidh, and, er—“

“Welcome, my dear, welcome!” the woman enthused in greeting, cutting her off. “I am Madam Donna, how may I be of service?”

“Oh, ah, well, you see, I'm new in town and I'm not quite sure where I am...”

“Why this is my adult entertainment centre!”

“I see!” Eilidh replied in a squeaky voice. Clearing her throat, she repeated, “I see. Well, as I was saying, erm,” she stumbled on, “I'm new in town and, well, I wonder if you could help me?”

“Of course,” Madam Donna replied, “I have a number young men in my employ who I'm sure would be perfect for you. Do you have a particular preference, or...?”

Eilidh laughed, uncomfortably. “No, you don't understand, I'm not looking for...erm...men. What I wanted to ask was—“

Madam Donna cut her off, holding up a hand. “Oh, I'm sorry, my dear. Please, say no more. There's no need to be embarrassed.”

“I'm not—“

“No reason you should be. I simply hadn't taken you for that type, but of course we can cater for your needs. I run a very progressive establishment.”

“Well, that's good, but—“

The woman appeared determined not to let Eilidh get a word in edgeways. “Now, my dear, this is obviously your first time, so you're bound to be a little overwhelmed. Tell you what, why don't

you let me pick out two or three of my best girls, let you meet them and you can choose which one like you'd like to spend time with - or more than one if you wish - I know some young women like you are quite into multiple partners these days. Goodness knows where you find the energy, but it's good for business so I'm not complaining!"

"Er, Madam Donna, I--"

"Don't worry, my dear!" the lady insisted. "I know you're nervous, but believe me there's absolutely no need. Just wait there for a moment and I'll be right back."

She left Eilidh floundering. Part of her wanted to run from this place, but she didn't want to seem like an oversensitive, unworldly coward. Therefore she chose to stay - when Madam Donna returned, she would take control of the situation and explain the misunderstanding.

After a moment, the madam did return, a trio of young escorts with her. Eilidh lost the latest round of her battle for control. She couldn't stop her heart racing and it must have showed, as the girls mistook her shock and nervousness for enthusiasm and desire.

The first girl, a small blonde human who was barely twenty summers, said, "Hi, I'm Shelly. Listen, I've never done it with a lady client before, but I'd really love it if you could teach me tonight. I just know we'd have so much fun together. If you're nervous, I'm sure I'd be your best choice, because you can take control. We've got all night, so there's no rush - we can take our time. In fact that would make a nice change compared to my experiences with gentleman clients in my profession, if you know what I mean!"

"I--" was all Eilidh managed to get out, before she was confronted by a tall, broad, muscular half-ogre female.

"Forget Shelly! You need a woman with strength and power who knows what she's doing. I'm Ulgara. Hurry up and choose me so we can get down to it. I'll make you scream for more and beg to crawl back to me night after night."

Some detached part of Eilidh's mind decided that if she ever did want to sleep with a woman, whatever her type was, Ulgara was not it.

The third girl - a tall, lean, pretty elf maid brunette - stepped forward then, laughing lightly. "Oh, Ulgara, you're so crude! Can't you see this is a woman of sensitivity, of refined tastes? Don't let these two put you off, sweetie, just come with me. My name's T'Pela. We can get to know each other a little first, if you like, so I'll know the special things that make you happy. Then I promise you, when you've enjoyed a night with an elf you'll never go back to human women again."

Just as she was finishing her speech, the door opened behind Eilidh and her companions stepped inside.

"A girl costs one hundred gold for one night," Madam Donna explained. "Two at the discounted rate of just one seventy five. A little more expensive than some other establishments, I'll grant you, but I run a high-class service. For your first time, payment to me in full, in advance, is required. After that, we can discuss terms for an account and full membership, which comes with many financial discounts and other incentives for regular visits. Even the possibility of work

opportunities, though we'd have to work on your image. Anyway, there's no need to rush your decision, but have you chosen which of my three lovely young ladies you wish to try tonight?"

The Catalyst suddenly realised how this must appear from her companions' perspectives and turned bright red, which only made matters worse. Calandra looked shocked, Toli looked fascinated and Phaer was just grinning all over his face.

"Eilidh Hagram! Well, well, well!" said the half-elf, making no attempt to stop laughing. "Now I know why you wanted us to wait outside! I never suspected for a minute, but you've blown your straight-laced, practical image now, girl!"

"You know something, Phaer? You're really nowhere near as funny as you think you are," she said acidly.

Undaunted, he shot back, "Hey, don't get mad just because I've found out your little secret! It doesn't bother me in the slightest. Whatever turns you on! If you want my advice, I'd go for the elf maid, she's gorgeous and I think you'd make a lovely couple."

Eilidh just sort of growled, but she stopped when she realised T'Pela seemed to like it.

"Truth be told," Phaer added, cheekily, "I wouldn't mind sticking around for a session with T'Pela myself! I've got over five hundred gold in my purse you know. What does a simple ranger like me need with that kind of money? But you should go first. I mean, after being cloistered in a church all your life, you're bound to have repressed desires. It's only natural to want to let them loose, so if this is something you want to do, go ahead, we can meet up with you later."

Eilidh's eyes flashed. "Right now, Phaer," she said through gritted teeth, "the only repressed desire I am close to letting loose, is my desire to stick you with my knife! I suggest you encourage me to keep it repressed by keeping your mouth shut."

Phaer didn't actually believe the knife threat, but judging by the way she was glaring at him - or certain parts of him - Eilidh was just about ready to ruin his romantic chances for a while with just one swift kick. Still, the Catalyst had manipulated him into this rescue mission against his better judgement, so the half-elf felt justified in using this as payback. Besides, it was only a bit of fun. It was pretty obvious what had really happened here. For some reason, though, Eilidh seemed not to see the funny side. She was taking his words very personally and getting very angry. Had he touched some kind of nerve? What was she getting so worked up about?

"Hey, Eilidh, I'm just--"

"Not a word," Eilidh warned, eyes narrowed with genuine menace. "Not. One. Single. Word." She would never admit it, but part of her was grateful to Phaer. Her anger had burned away her discomfort and hesitation. She was in control once more. Turning to the three girls for hire, Eilidh said, "I'm sorry, but with the greatest of respect, I'm afraid you're not what I'm looking for tonight. Madam Donna, we seem to have got caught up in a misunderstanding. When I asked if you could help me, I simply wished to ask for directions."

"Directions?"

“Yes, directions - of the outdoor navigation type,” she added hastily, before there could be any more misunderstanding. “As I said, I'm new here and I have business at a tavern called The Black Dragon's Claw. Could you possibly tell us the way?”

“Oh my dear!” Madam Donna brought her hand to her face. “I'm so sorry. I just assumed...I didn't stop to listen...my fault entirely. You have to understand, so many people come in here pretending to have lost their way and simply wandered in by mistake. It never occurred to me that for once that might be true. Please, forgive me, I hope I didn't offend you.”

“Not at all, I was just a little taken aback, that's all. As my half-elven friend here says, I have lived all my life in the lofty halls of the Church, so I haven't seen much of the world beyond. If it means anything, if I ever did desire services of this type, I'm sure I couldn't find a better establishment than this one.”

“Thank you, miss, you are very kind. I appreciate your understanding. Now about those directions, I will give them gladly. In fact, I can give you something better.” She went to a drawer and pulled out a map of Avidon. “It's an advertising poster,” she explained. “This building is clearly marked, as are several other landmarks, including The Black Dragon's Claw. Is there any other way I can help you today?”

“I don't think so...Oh, unless you can tell me anything about somewhere called, the Great Fountain of Light.”

The girls gasped and for a moment there was silence except for the sound of somebody somewhere dropping a glass. Madam Donna looked troubled and ushered the companions towards the exit. “Be careful who you talk to about that,” she warned in a low voice. “It could get you into serious trouble. That place is forbidden.”

“Can't you just tell us where it is?”

“I'm sorry, I dare not. My business relies on the good will of Avidon authorities. I cannot risk offending the Hand. You will have to ask elsewhere. Maybe you will find someone at the inn. Alcohol often makes people talkative. Now, please, you must go.” With that, she ushered them out.

“You've been most kind, Madam Donna. Thanks. Farewell.”

“Goodbye, Miss Hagram.”

The companions were back out in the street, when she called out again.

“Wait a minute! Eilidh Hagram? Don't I know that name from somewhere? Are you any relation to Ahlidh Hagram?”

Eilidh did not answer, but her companions noticed her quicken her pace, somewhat.

A little way down the road, Phaer said, “I'm sorry about what I said in there. I didn't mean anything by it.”

“I know, just don't do it again.”

“Are you OK, Eilidh?” Toli asked with genuine concern. “You seemed really troubled in there, I could see your pulse beating from across the room! We never actually thought you were really going to pay for -er- you know. You didn't think we thought that, did you? Not that I'd mind if you did want to, but I can't think how you could seriously have thought we were thinking that you did. But if you did think that we were thinking that you thought that we were thinking you were going to do it, I'm sorry we made you think so, but I don't think you did think that, did you? Wouldn't have thought so...sorry, what was I saying?”

Eilidh smiled at her friend, but Calandra could see she wanted to be alone with her thoughts, so the cleric distracted Toli and gently guided her away to one side.

Phaer silently stepped closer to the Catalyst and asked softly, “So who's Ahlidh Hagram?”

Eilidh's face was a mask. “Tell you what, Phaer: you don't ask about my family and I won't ask about yours.” She had noticed that the half-elf was never exactly forthcoming with details of his own background.

The ranger appreciated the sentiment, so he offered a half smile, inclined his head slightly and just agreed, “Fair enough.”

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It was a simple matter to follow the map to The Black Dragon's Claw, and they decided to settle down with a drink for a while before asking about this Fountain of Light place everyone seemed so frightened of. Inside, the inn was dark and seedy, which made Calandra in particular quite uncomfortable. The Revered Daughter's white robes stood out like a full moon in the midnight sky and she steeled herself against the dark stares and mutterings. The message was quite clear: she was not welcome here. As an elf and a cleric of Light, that was hardly surprising - it was hard to imagine anything more offensive to a city controlled by the Hand of Darkness.

Around one table, a group of the tavern's customers and staff were gathered around an apparently popular warrior, listening to his wild stories of battle. The crowd obscured the companions' view of him, but his voice carried well.

“If he's really as good as he says he is,” Calandra suggested, “he could prove useful to our cause.”

After a time, the warrior put aside his stories and began playing an old air on his lute. Eilidh was not experienced in sensing the unique magic of bards, but she had a hunch that this man's music was just pure music, which of course had a power all its own without it being bard magic.

A young barmaid with flaming red hair came over to the companions' table and asked, “Can I get you something to eat or drink? It might be best if you just stayed in your places and let me serve you. We are a welcoming tavern, but we don't like trouble and while you don't look like the kind of people who would start anything, you could get caught up in something if you move around too much, even to go to the bar.”

“You are wise, child,” Calandra said. “We will do as you suggest.”

The group ordered a bottle of elven wine and the house special for four. With a glance at Tolbrietta, Eilidh corrected, "Actually, better make it five." The girl smiled, knowing a hobbit's appetite, and left.

Soon they were drinking their wine and eating some freshly cooked steak, over which even Eilidh felt compelled to comment favourably.

As they ate their meal, three large warriors loomed over their table, emitting what could only be described as fermented body odour. One of them - apparently a leader of sorts - sniffed the air and demanded, "What's this? I smell elfish scum! What are you doing in our place, elf dirt?" The companions chose to ignore that. To Calandra, he said, "You, wench, I asked you a question: what are you doing sitting in our spot and contaminating it with the stink of elf? Me and my mates don't like anyone taking our place, especially not slime like you!"

"Yeah!" his thug friends remarked.

It was one of those times when Eilidh simply lost control of her flip tongue. "It's `My mates and I'," she corrected calmly. "Not `me and my mates`. If you're going to insult us, you can at least get the grammar right."

The lesson seemed to be completely lost on the warrior, who just repeated, "I'll ask again, tell me who you are and what you think you're doing in our place!"

"Repeat yourself a lot, don't you?" Eilidh observed, examining her fingernails. "I find that to be a symptom of a limited vocabulary."

The other two warriors piped up together to echo, "Well, wench? What you doin' in our place?" They were trying to sound like they were the biggest thing next to a giant or a dragon. They were bullies – used to scaring people with their size. The disinterested non-reaction they were getting from Eilidh and the others had them confused.

"Let me guess," said the Catalyst. "You two are the brains of this outfit, right?"

The first man spat, "Elf sympathiser!"

"Sympathiser? My, what a big word! I wouldn't have thought you'd be capable. I wonder if you know how to spell it. Why don't you go find another table and think about it for a while?"

Phaer stood up, his sword just one swift movement away from his hand.

"Yes, why don't you do that, before somebody takes offence to your tone and decides to hurt you?"

"We'll kill you, half breed!"

"Ha! You're like a trio of toothless old wildcats trying to frighten us with your roar."

In that moment, the warriors drew their weapons, and Phaer did the same, sword in one hand, dagger in the other. He wasn't keen on facing three big warriors alone in such a confined space, but he had little choice. He knew Eilidh and Toli couldn't do much with their magic, and Calandra was torn

between helping and staying out of it, since a prayer to Patrelaux was a capital offence in dark Avidon and might make things a whole lot worse. By now, though, the warrior who had been entertaining the crowd had pulled his sword from its resting place on his back and had begun to draw in some inner strength from his blood. One of the smaller thugs turned and saw the new threat and tapped their gang leader on the shoulder, who turned and paled. They had heard tales of a white-haired warrior that dressed in all black and wielded a sword that could steal one's soul. Phaer suddenly recognised him, too, and given their last meeting, he wasn't sure whether to consider him friend or foe. At least he was a welcome distraction for the moment. The thug leader got over his initial shock and waved his two stooges to attack the man Phaer knew to be a dragon. That left Phaer free to concentrate on the biggest one.

The staff and other customers didn't react as one might expect. This was a common occurrence. The mysterious Black Dragon warrior would soon despatch his attackers and losing a pair of inner city trouble makers wouldn't make much difference – there were plenty more out there. As for the ring leader versus the half-elf, a few thought that might just be entertaining enough to be worth a small wager.

Phaer didn't like close quarters combat, but at least the odds were better. At the critical moment, however, the red-haired barmaid appeared seemingly out of nowhere, to stand behind the big thug's back, who stiffened as something cold and metallic pressed against his skin.

"You feel this dagger?" the girl purred seductively, almost like a lover. "It's my favourite one because it's so long and slim. Now, make any sound at all, and it'll find its way up to your heart. Move and I can't guarantee the results. You might get away with it, but then again I might accidentally sever your spine. And just in case you feel like you want to take your chances, if you did somehow escape me, my friend over there," she dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "he's a dragon you know." In a normal tone, she instructed the thug, "Now, drop your weapon." He simply let go and his sword clattered to the floor.

Phaer sheathed his own weapons, seeing the dragon-warrior put his away, too, having dispatched one of other two antagonists and grabbed the second by the throat, who then found himself physically thrown out of the tavern by the dragon warrior. Phaer gave him a nod of respect in acknowledgement and thanks.

Calandra, however, was decidedly unhappy with the young barmaid's intervention. "You would stab a man in the back?" she demanded, indignantly.

The girl cocked her head and raised her eyebrows in a facial shrug. "I find it's the safest way. Besides, the way I see it, if a man is stupid enough to threaten someone whilst leaving his back unguarded, he deserves whatever he gets. In this case, though, I don't think killing will be necessary. Now, my loud-mouthed friend," she continued, addressing her captive, "just stay perfectly still and relax...this won't hurt a bit." She was holding her dagger in her left hand, so with her right, she produced a mace from under her dress. Holding it the reverse way, she gave the warrior a sharp rap with the handle, catching the nerve perfectly. The big man crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

"Nice move for a barmaid," the dragon-warrior commented.

“I'm no barmaid, I just borrowed the dress from a girl I met a few minutes ago. She isn't likely to need it for a while...she's a bit tied up. Tell you what, why don't you get to know these good people while I change. I'll be right back. Betcha miss me already!”

Blowing a kiss and slapping Phaer's backside, she left.

Taking her advice, the dragon-warrior introduced himself to Eilidh. “M'lady, I am known as Loric. Thanks for giving me an excuse to sort those guys out. They've been coming in here the last few days while I've been away and giving everyone a hard time. They also did something that they shouldn't: they stole from a little blind girl who was selling flowers. That is one of the reasons why I came back today. That and to give what money I had from a job, to the local orphanage so that she could have a place to live.”

“Very commendable behaviour,” said the white cleric.

“Yes,” Toli agreed, “a bit different to the last time we met.”

“My friend makes a good point,” Eilidh added. “Not that we're ungrateful for what you just did.”

“I regret what happened down in Shakaran and I'm thankful that the misunderstanding was cleared up without bloodshed. The prince seemed like a decent person, and so did you. I've given you a lot of thought since we last met, which is why I've been following you.”

“I thought so.” Eilidh remarked.

“You did?”

“When we visited the Dark Knight barracks, Sir Quentin dispatched a pair of dragon-riders to hunt for a rogue obsidian dragon his mount had sensed. It seemed an unlikely coincidence.”

Loric nodded. “That was me. It was a close call. Blues have sharp senses and the Knights train them well, but I managed to avoid them. Just.”

Toli whispered something to Eilidh, who nodded, encouraging her hobbit friend to speak her mind, so she did. “Since you seem so much into children's causes, and you regret attacking the Prince, maybe you can help us to help him. His daughter, Mystaya, has been kidnapped and we're here to rescue her. My magic is, well, it's not up to much, offensively speaking, so we could probably do with another warrior on our side. Will you help?”

“Kidnapping a child? I'll string him up when I get my claws on him and anyone who gets in the way...well, they'd just better not, that's all, or they can become real men and try to pick on the famous Black Dragon of Avidon instead of children!”

Chapter 9

The two Knights had been having little success in gathering information. They had discussed approaching Hand of Darkness officials at one of the administrative government buildings, or at least the closest thing the Liberation Front had to such a thing. They rejected the notion, however, not wanting to have to answer difficult questions about their mission. The Hand had done such a fine job of enforcing their laws regarding forbidden areas that the general populace refused to speak of it even if they knew anything. It was most frustrating.

The codes of both orders of Knights prohibited drinking alcohol whilst on duty, but when they came across a quaint little coffee shop, they both agreed that a tea break would be a good idea. They could discuss whether to continue the search for knowledge, or simply ask the whereabouts The Black Dragon's Claw, where they were to rendezvous with Eilidh and the others.

In the time she had worked with Sir Quentin, Lady Hannah had slightly revised her view of the Dark Knights. She still did not like them; she still found their black armour chilling and their very existence blasphemy. Now, though, she had a greater respect for them, or at least one Knight in particular. His devotion to Mortress aside, he was everything a Knight should be: brave, efficient, proud and honourable. Both Knights knew there were certain topics they should not discuss, but by respecting and accepting that, they were able to converse freely.

The coffee shop seemed to be quite popular and when they paid for their pot of tea, looking around, they realised that all the tables were taken.

“My goodness, you two make a curious couple I must say!” Someone called out.

The Knights followed the sound to a small table in one corner, at which sat a single individual. Lightly armoured in green leather, she was only slightly shorter than the average human, with the lilac skin and large pupils that identified her as a gnome. She gestured to the empty seats at her table, inviting the Knights to join her.

“Current events must needs an alliance between our respective orders,” Sir Quentin explained, sitting opposite her.

“Mmmm, yes, the chaos creatures. I heard that Keothara and Baltacha are under heavy attack.”

“Indeed,” Hannah concurred, taking the seat between them. “The Knights of Paladina stationed there hath reported some significant battles.” What the Knights termed ‘significant battles’ most other people called ‘all-out war’. “Shakaran hath been targeted only by small rag-tag groups thus far, easily despatched. Merlyon seems to be of great interest to them, but as one would expect their efforts are proving somewhat futile against their magical shield.”

“But let us cease this discourse of war,” Sir Quentin suggested, “and seek other topics.”

“I’ll drink to that!” the gnome concurred but then discovered her mug was empty.

“Please, allow me,” Hannah offered and poured out the tea.

The gnome thanked her and took a sip.

“Sugar?” Sir Quentin offered.

“Oh great, a decision, I do so well with those,” the gnome said sarcastically. “I don’t suppose this one would make much difference, though, would it?”

“It would make your tea sweet.”

She waved that aside. “Yes, it’s a matter of taste, obviously, but otherwise, would it make any difference?”

“Not really.”

“But,” the gnome continued, putting her tea down and holding up a finger for emphasis. “Suppose I could use my magic to control people's taste buds so that they didn’t like sugar anymore? That would make a difference. Sugar sales could drop, causing massive disruption all the way down the supply chain. All the way back to those who cut the cane.”

“My grandfather,” Lady Hannah put in, “when he retired from the Knighthood he was still fit and hale and certainly not ready to take to his bed. He used his Knight's stipend to buy a sugar plantation. He employed people to work the land and tend the sugar cane. He turned it into a very successful business. He was able to pay generous wages so his workers could keep their families well.”

“There you are then,” the gnome concluded. “If everybody had stopped taking sugar, your grandfather's business would have been badly affected and so would all those families.”

Sir Quentin scowled darkly, and said, “If all this obsession with sugar had never started, my great great grandfather would never have lost his land. Wealthy developers camest with great interest in his home, across the sea, simply because fine grade sugar cane didst grow there. They didst offer money on the condition that he leaveth. He would not. He had no interest in either sugar, or money; he was a man of simple pleasures who wished merely to be left in peace to tend his own land. If sugar had not been so powerful a motivation, then, my great great grandfather wouldst not have been kidnapped, chained up and sold as a slave here in this very city! Sugar hath done no favours for my family. 'Tis only through good fortune and hard work that my family hath risen up from slavery to Knighthood in scarce five generations!”

Lady Hannah was stunned to hear such a tale, but the gnome simply accepted it as justification for her philosophical line of thought. “You see,” she said. “Whether or not I take sugar does make a difference.” She absent-mindedly tossed a sugar lump into her tea and stirred, as she continued her line of thought. “Every choice has consequences,” she said. “Even the smallest ones. In fact, sometimes it’s the smallest choices that make the biggest difference.”

“Life is indeed ever thus,” Lady Hannah agreed.

“Yes, thou speakest true,” Quentin concurred.

After a moment of reflective silence, the Dark Knight said, “Mayhap we shouldst introduce ourselves. Our lofty titles wouldst doubtless be of little interest to thee, so suffice it to say that I am Sir Quentin of Shakaran, and this is my comrade Lady Hannah of Merlyon.”

“Nice to meet you. I'm Rochelle Ribbons of Avidon, although I would gladly be Rochelle Ribbons of Somewhere Else. Even under siege in Baltacha would be preferable to here where my life is so messed up. A crisis of faith, you might say.”

Rochelle explained that she was a druid-fighter and enjoyed the balance her healing gave the killing she had to do as a warrior. The trouble was, she was leading a double life. The Hand of Darkness Liberation Front, who demanded the worship of the Mistress of Death, gave the only warrior training available in Avidon. Her personal feelings, however, lay towards the Balanced One, which was why she secretly studied her druid healing magic under that alignment. Unfortunately, she was due to take her vows of service to Mortress in a few days and the dark clerics would see right through her deception. Then she would be executed. Trying to leave the city without official licence would get her killed on sight for desertion.

“So you see my problem,” she said. “It’s too late to change my magical alignment – it would just attract attention. Whatever I do, my name will appear in front of Hand of Darkness officials and then they will know that I have been lying to them. So they will execute me. You are looking at the walking dead.”

“Your tale is indeed a tragic one,” Sir Quentin agreed, “but thou didst bring it on thyself with thine deception.”

“Perhaps,” Hannah allowed, “but thou canst hardly expect the populace of an entire city to align themselves to the dark just because the ruling parties say it must be so.”

“’Tis only a problem because she chose to become a warrior in the Hand of Darkness armies. If their rules were not to her liking, she should have chosen otherwise.”

“And therefore her skills and talents wouldst go untempered. As Rochelle hath intimated, elsewhere in Mythallen she wouldst have had wider choices. ’Tis unfair to penalise and even execute someone for reason of her place of birth. We shouldst help this individual.”

“Under the terms of the agreement between the Knights of Zhentilon and the Hand of Darkness, I am forbidden to interfere, even should I wish it.”

“You might be so constrained; I am not. Upon my honour, Rochelle, I pledge myself to thee and thy safety. Thou shalt leave this city unharmed whereupon thou shalt be free to pursue whatever thou shouldst wish.”

“Really?” Rochelle asked. “You'd do that for me?”

“The deed is not without risk, but I will help you if thou wilt but sayest the word.”

Rochelle shrugged. “Risk is irrelevant. Any risk sounds very attractive to someone who's facing certain death.”

“This is a matter for thine own honour, Lady Hannah,” Sir Quentin said. “But I warn you that shouldst thou commit thyself to this course, I must needs end my association with thee and thy comrades. If I were to learn the details of any plan thou makest, I wouldst be honour-bound to inform the Hand of Darkness.”

“I understand, but our agreement is technically at an end anyway. Thou didst agree to escort duty and thou hast performed admirably in that regard. When we embark on our mission, thou and thy Knights shouldst merely return to thy myriad other duties. At that time, whatever Rochelle and I shouldst choose to discuss shalt be beyond thy knowledge.”

The two Knights shook hands to seal the agreement, and then Rochelle spoke up. “Er, excuse me, mission? What mission? What exactly are you doing here in Avidon anyway?”

Lady Hannah explained the situation.

“Kidnapping the Princess of Shakaran!” Rochelle whistled in amazement. “Has it occurred to you that maybe the Hand are involved in this? It's the sort of thing they would do, you know. A little ambitious, maybe, but the Red faction might be able to pull it off if they put their collective minds to it.”

“We cannot discount that possibility, but thus far all the evidence indicates that the kidnapper is working alone, without any outside assistance, although his true motives do remain unclear.”

“Well, maybe I can join you and help? It seems only fair and my skills could come in useful.”

“Indeed, thou wouldst be ideal protection for our vulnerable mages and white cleric.”

“Absolutely - that's the position in which warrior-healers are trained within the Hand's armies. We stand ready to protect our magic-users from physical attacks while we heal our front line fighters. It's a good system.”

“Well, I have no experience in fighting with magic – it is forbidden in my Order - but I know that others in our party wouldst welcome thine efforts most heartily.”

“Plus,” Rochelle added, “if this kidnapping is the work of the Hand, I know how they operate, so I should be able to spot any signs.”

“Then thou art doubly welcome.”

The three finished their drinks at that point and left, making a beeline for The Black Dragon's Claw.

* * * * *

“My, My! Who knew the Black Dragon of Avidon would be so melodramatic!” exclaimed the beautiful redhead who had rejoined Eilidh and the others without anyone noticing. Her barmaid's uniform was gone, and she was now wearing a sultry red dress. The bodice was low cut around the breasts and the skirt possessed a slit up the left side, exposing her thigh. “Of course,” she whispered, “I know you're not a black dragon at all. You're an obsidian.” She moved sensually close to Loric and whispered, “I like your kind better, so I won't tell anyone else, I promise.”

“Actually, Eilidh here already knew that,” Loric replied, “but then she had the advantage of seeing me down in Shakaran.”

“Why? What difference does that make?” Eilidh wondered.

“My scales lack the shine typical to my kind due to the cold climate up here, but when I visit a warmer climate, some of the sparkle returns. Mind you, warm or cold, most people don't know dragons well enough to tell the difference. The Hand knows, of course, but I've had a pact with them ever since I saved the Red Division Leader's eldest son from being a griffin's midnight snack. I must admit I do love griffin...once you get past the feathers. Anyway, for most people, given the history of the black wing of the Hand of Darkness, having a single black dragon around looking out for mortal children makes for a good story, so they don't question any further. People believe what they want to believe, and see what they want to see. Except, that is, for a few sharp-eyed individuals like you and our young barmaid friend, here.”

“I told you, I'm not really a barmaid. Although, if that's the image that turns you on...” She left her offer hanging, and then continued. “When you've had to survive the way I have, you learn to keep your eyes open. Now, do you think one of you gentlemen could be so kind as to find me a chair?”

Phaer leaped up. “Take mine, my Lady.”

She flashed him a dimpled smile. “Thank you, kind sir. I must say it makes a nice change to be referred to as a Lady. I don't believe anyone has ever used that particular form of address with me before. I've been called many things but never that.”

Seeing her wrinkle up her nose at the still form of the unconscious warrior, Phaer made eye contact with the Loric and suggested they take the trash out together. Loric was quite capable of removing the man himself, but then he suspected the half-elven ranger was, too. He was looking for a show of co-operation, so Loric obliged him.

“Just a moment,” the girl said, as if remembering something. She crouched down and an instant later she was holding a moneybag, estimating its weight. “Hmmm, about fifty gold; I suppose it'll have to do. Go ahead boys, you can send him on his way now.”

As the girl took the ranger's place, she was once again on the receiving end of one of Calandra's frowns of disapproval. “That money is not yours, child.”

“It is now, Rev.” She winked. “Think of it as my fee.”

“Your fee?”

“For sparing his life and teaching him to be more vigilant in future. Where else could he buy such a service for a mere fifty gold?”

The two men returned then, accompanied by Lady Hannah, Sir Quentin and Rochelle. The young woman in the red dress took in the sight of the two Knights and said, “Well, don't you two make the most curious couple!”

“That's what I said,” Rochelle agreed.

“Greetings, Eilidh,” Lady Hannah offered. “'Twould appear that thy party hath grown most considerably.”

“Apparently so,” agreed the Catalyst. “I don't recall having that intention when I left Shakaran, but I'm still within the limit set down for me.” She just stopped herself before adding ‘by Master Gamaliel’. “Just before you arrived, we were discussing fees,” she continued, “and I was just about to make Loric an offer for his services.” Turning to him, she explained, “Under the terms of our agreement with Prince Garald, you'd be up for a reward of one thousand in gold upon the safe return of the princess.”

“A thousand!” He whistled. “That's what I call a reward!”

“Yes, I imagine you could do a lot for the local children with that kind of money.”

“You're not wrong. That's the second incentive you've given me to do this. I'll join you gladly.”

“In that case, I'll give you a third incentive - a half share, five hundred gold now, given on the condition that you split your eventual reward with me in repayment.”

“That is very generous. Do you have that kind of money?”

“Yes, she does, as a matter of fact,” the redhead answered.

“And how would you know about that?” the Catalyst asked.

The girl held up a very full purse. “This belongs to you, I think you'll find.”

Eilidh gasped, “My purse! Where did you get it?”

“I borrowed it while you were at Madam Donna's.”

“I never saw you there.”

“No,” she agreed. “I don't suppose you did.”

“Why did you take it?”

“I heard you talking about the Great Fountain of Light and decided to help you. I took your purse just in case I had problems sneaking out of work, to make sure you'd have to come back. Madam Donna's pretty vigilant and she's caught me a couple of times before.”

“You work at Madam Donna's?” Toli wondered.

The girl nodded.

The cleric nearly choked. “You mean you're not only a thief, you're also a...” she couldn't bring herself to say the word.

“Prostitute, hooker, wanton miss, courtesan, whore, harlot, wench, concubine and a variety of other terms I don't like very much,” the redhead supplied, unapologetically. “So please don't use any of them because then we might just fall out, and that would be a shame when we're just getting to know one another. Besides, a girl like me's got to find some way to learn her sorcery on the black market, since nobody legitimate would train me.”

Eilidh took a quick reading and confirmed the Life Gift in the Secret of Shadow. She was a sorceress, no question.

“Sex work and stealing keeps me in a nice income, and I'm very good at both!”

“Why wouldn't they teach you at the Guild?” Toli wanted to know. “Magic, that is,” she clarified.

“Well, it's all to do with this.” The young woman's face changed, suddenly, frighteningly, her beautiful features became a gross parody of themselves and sharp fangs grew in her mouth.

Everybody shot to their feet. “You're a vampire!” Calandra cried, horrified.

Her face changed back as she said, “Oh do sit down! I'm not going to bite any of you! Don't you think you've attracted enough attention already?”

Cautiously, they retook their seats.

Eilidh was puzzled. “I've heard of vampires being taught by mages before, although they don't get a vote on the Council.”

“You're right, but you see I'm not exactly a vampire.”

“Then what are you?” Phaer asked.

Her answer was a single elven word: `Sumorityl`, meaning `sub-life`.

Calandra was even more shocked at this latest revelation, but the girl cut her off. “Hey Rev, don't you get all holier-than-thou on me! Just remember - I didn't have to tell you any of this. I'm choosing to, because I want to join you and I want to be completely up front with you before you inevitably succumb to my sparkling personality and agree. I simply think it's important to be honest about who and what I am.”

“She doth indeed make a telling point, Revered Daughter,” Lady Hannah said, gently. Phaer and Eilidh exchanged a glance while others shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

The cleric softened. “You're right. May Patrelaux forgive me for passing judgement when I have no right. Why don't you tell us about yourself, child? Start from the beginning, if you will, with your name, perhaps.”

“Alright. My name is Bernice Ardra; everyone calls me Bunny.”

“A deceptively gentle nickname for a woman with such sharp fangs,” Rochelle observed.

“Maybe so, but then I don't think my fangs show all that much, do they?”

“No, as a matter of fact they don't,” Phaer agreed, prompting another dimpled smile from Bunny and a sharp look of warning from Eilidh to be careful. Bunny may not be inclined to bite anybody, but romantically speaking, Eilidh suspected she could eat any man alive.

“My ‘mother’, for want of a better term, was a vampire. A wizard captured her, along with a number of other demonic and supernatural creatures. They were used for experiments in the creation of life. The wizard had extensively studied the old experiments and believed he knew where they all went wrong. His techniques improved, so he could ‘grow’ a new creature from a relatively small part of an original, like growing a plant from a cutting. His first major breakthrough happened with my mother – or part of her – I was the result and he was very pleased with his work. He described me as ‘almost perfect’ and proof that his ideas could work. He always made a point of telling me that, as I developed.”

“You mean as thou didst grow up?” Sir Quentin wondered.

“No, Sir Knight, I did not ‘grow up’ as you understand it. Tell me, how old would you say I am?”

“Twenty? Twenty-one?”

She smiled and shook her head. “Would you believe I’m not yet five years old? I was fully mature within six months of my creation.”

“That’s unnatural!” Calandra exclaimed.

“I thought we’d established that? I was artificially created, ergo I am unnatural. But I don’t see why I should have to apologise for being what I am. As a matter of fact, for the most part, I rather like being me.”

“Who is this wizard and where is he based?” As a Catalyst, it was Eilidh’s duty to ask.

“Sorry, those are questions I will not answer. That wizard is the closest thing I have to a father.”

“And you love him?”

“Love requires a soul, Eilidh. He gave me life, and I am simply grateful. Besides, I happen to agree with some of what he’s doing. Not all of it and certainly not his methods, but some of his principles...well, I’m the best specimen my father ever created. Almost perfect. So it can’t be all bad.”

“You realise it’s highly illegal, though,” Rochelle put in.

“No it isn’t, actually. Technically, the law prohibits the use of sentient life-forms or any natural animals for the purposes of life creation magic. My father fully supports that law, but legally, vampires and demons are neither sentient, nor natural. Therefore he is not technically breaking the law.”

Rochelle turned that over in her mind for a moment, and then she agreed, “She’s right.”

“Yes, she is,” Eilidh nodded, recognising a fellow student of magic.

“Your ‘father’,” Rochelle continued, “is exploiting a legal loophole by using soulless, non-sentient creatures. That’s clever. I’m not saying I agree with it, but it’s clever.”

“But why is he doing it?” Eilidh wondered.

“Ah, now that's the part I don't like very much. He sees us as an expendable military force and no doubt he would point to the current invasion of chaos creatures as proof that there is a need for a manufactured, expendable army. Well, I decided that didn't much care for the idea of being expendable. I rather like living and I intend to enjoy my life, especially since, having no soul, it's the only one I'm likely to get. So I left.”

“You left your father, just like that?” Calandra demanded. This was all too much for her moral sensibilities to cope with.

“Yes, just like that. Once I'd figured out how to pick the lock of the cage he'd kept me in all my life, it wasn't all that difficult.”

The Revered Daughter looked as if her head would explode if she had to hear one more `shocking revelation`, but she kept her own counsel.

“Eventually I came to Avidon, and I'll say one thing for these Hand of Darkness people: they don't ask many questions. It wasn't hard for me to lose myself in the crowd, but I needed money. Stealing was OK, but then I felt the pain of my Life Gift and needed help, fast.”

As everyone in Mythalen knew, the Life Gift did not develop gradually as Life Calling did, but in bursts, and when it flared, the mage in question needed the help of a Catalyst to get it under control. Otherwise, the mage's Life Store would become destabilised, exposing them to the ravages of raw magic. A horrific and painful condition, fatal if left untreated.

“I got help from a Catalyst living with a dark aligned sorcerer who was willing to teach me magic, as well as providing a more general education, but his price was steep. That's when I heard about Madam Donna's. She didn't ask questions, either. She didn't care what race I was so long as I kept attracting the punters and didn't steal from them inside her walls. That's how I've survived for close to two years.”

“And now?” Eilidh prompted.

“Now I want something different. Now you come along, asking about the Great Fountain of Light and everyone says it's forbidden. In my experience, when something's forbidden, it usually turns out to be quite interesting. I know where it is, so I decided to attach myself to your group. You're looking for something and so am I. Maybe together we'll all find what we want. At the very least it sounds fun and I like fun.”

“What seekest thou?” Lady Hannah asked.

Bunny answered, looking directly at Calandra. “Redemption. Or at least recognition; some kind of place in the world. I don't want to be Sumorityl: sub-life. I want to be recognised the way humans are, or elves, or hobbits, or - gods help me - even orcs! And I've decided to start with you people.”

“Why us?” Eilidh asked.

“Because you lot are the most interesting thing that's happened around here since – well, forever as far as I'm concerned.”

There followed a deep, thoughtful silence. No-one knew quite how to respond. Bunny's story had shaken many firmly held beliefs and it was going to take time to recover.

When Granite Longbeard returned alone, Eilidh broke the silence. "Well, we're all here, we've got what we need, and it's time to do what we have to do."

"And me?" Bunny asked.

"Yes you, too. Please do join us, Bunny. We'd really like to have you along. What do you say?"

The redhead smiled and nodded. "I'd be happy to join you, if for no other reason than the way you said 'please'. Using that word when talking to me has never occurred to anybody before."

"Recognition, Bunny?"

"It's a start, Eilidh."

"Good, now *please* may I have my purse back?" Bunny handed it over. "I presume it's all here."

"Of course. Well, minus my ten per cent finder's fee."

"That's a hundred gold!"

"One hundred and ten, to be exact - you had eleven hundred in your purse. Surely you know you shouldn't carry that kind of money around with you. There are thieves in Avidon, you know."

"Really? Imagine that!" Eilidh replied acidly.

"Hey, the thieves out there won't be nearly so generous as to give nine tenths back!"

Eilidh laughed. "When you put it like that, thank you, I think."

"You're welcome. Now, if you'd all like to follow me, I'll take you to the Great Fountain of Light. By the way, why are we doing this?"

"I'll explain on the way."

Chapter 10

The party had not gone far when Loric smelled something burning. He quickly saw smoke. His keen ears picked up on children's voices screaming and crying for help. Without warning, he bolted towards the source of the fire. Loric's wings formed, though he was still otherwise human, then as soon as he had the necessary space, he changed fully into a dragon, his large frame winging away, like a large shadow in the air.

Eilidh looked questioningly at Phaer, relying on his superior elven senses. "Fire," stated the ranger. "Probably a school, judging by the dominance of children's voices."

"There's a children's home in that area," Rochelle told them. "Actually more of a dumping ground for orphaned and abandoned kids. You've no idea what it's like in this gods forsaken city."

"What, they're just left there on their own?" Phaer asked.

"A few people give a bit of their time, servants mostly. That's as close they get to anyone in authority. Accidents and fires are all too common around here, I'm afraid."

"I care not how common it is," Hannah said, "We must needs at least try to do something."

"Of course we must, child," Calandra agreed.

The dark Knight stood by his Paladnian counterpart. "'Tis a shame my order didst halt their attack on this city all those years ago. 'Twould have been better for the city were we in charge. It is not for me to question policy, but I can at least make a difference on this one occasion."

Phaer disagreed. "Well that's up to you," he said, "but we have an important job to do. We can't make ourselves a slave to everyone in need."

"Aye," Granite spoke up. "It's not every day that a dwarf agrees with an elf, but this time I must."

"It's also rare that a gnome agrees with both elf and dwarf," Rochelle said, "but I know what it's like to live here. If I dived into every burning building I came across, I wouldn't be standing here refusing to do it now because I'd be dead."

Toli was torn, "I want to help; I really do. I'd love to be able to help everyone, but Rochelle's right, that would be a full time job. Standing here knowing those kids could die is awful, but every moment we delay, who knows what could be happening to Mystaya? What do you think we should do, Eilidh?"

Eilidh was aware that everyone was looking at her, expectantly. *Why is it suddenly my decision?* She wondered. Finally, she spoke.

"I'm not sending anyone into a burning building, Rochelle," she said, "but I'm not stopping anyone, either – this time. We go, we assess the situation and we help where we can, but just this once. After this, I don't care if the sky falls in: we have a job to do. For now, just let's try to keep public attention firmly on Loric. He's already famous; we don't want to be."

“Low profile, got it,” Phaer agreed.

Without further discussion, Rochelle led the way.

At the scene of the fire, Loric transformed back to human form in mid-air, just keeping his wings sprouted to break his fall and land safely. Once grounded, he lost the wings and was fully human once more. Without a thought for his own safety, he ran into the burning building and started to bring the children out two or three at a time. The onlookers were stunned; they couldn't believe anyone was willing to do such a thing.

When the others arrived on the scene, Rochelle and Calandra were ready to administer healing. Druid healing worked in concert with the patient's own Life Store, so Eilidh and Granite directed those with the Life Gift and Life Calling to her, while the Cleric helped those with only Life Potential.

Eilidh noticed Bunny wasn't with them but she didn't have time to deal with that at the moment.

By this time, Loric did not look good. He was suffering from burns and the effects of smoke, and there was a nasty gash on the back of his neck where something heavy had dropped on him but he was ready to go back in.

Lady Hannah and Sir Quentin stepped forward to prevent him from putting himself at further risk. “Thine efforts are honourable, sir dragon,” said the latter, “and thou hast earned mine admiration, but please allow us to continue in thy stead. Our armour shouldst protect us from the worst of the heat.”

Loric opened his mouth to protest, but Hannah cut him off. “Please, sir, I really must insist that thou doth tend to thyself and allow us to continue.”

“Actually,” said a voice behind them, “that won't be necessary.”

“They turned to see Bunny, now wearing a very dirty green servant's dress, climbing out of the sewers with a line of children in tow.

“How--?” Loric began, before succumbing to a fit of coughing.

“Let's just say I got them out the back way.”

“I didn't know there was a back way.”

“Fortunately, I know a back way to everywhere. As a dragon, Loric, you're used to seeing the world from above, whereas I'm used to seeing it from below. It's amazing what a change of perspective can reveal.”

“You did good,” Loric said, between coughing fits.

“Indeed you did, child,” Calandra concurred.

Bunny made a dismissive gesture. “The danger was minimal my way. Fortunately, I didn’t inherit my mother’s aversion to fire.”

“Calandra,” Eilidh put in, “I’m no expert but I think Loric needs healing.”

“My apologies, child,” Calandra replied, “but I can heal no more. I must rest.”

“I’m drained, too,” Rochelle reported.

Eilidh and Granite could Grant no more Life, which left only Toli and Bunny with a few Quick Fix spells. It was little more than First Aid, something any mage could do, but it might just stop the bleeding and dull the pain. Using up all the last of their Life Store would leave them quite vulnerable in this dark place, but it couldn’t be helped.

Loric insisted he’d be fine so long as he could go and rest for a while. He decided to go to a local lake to cool off.

“That is indeed a sound tactical plan,” Lady Hannah pointed out. “Doubtless there are those in this city who wouldst seek to take advantage of this opportunity to make a trophy of our winged friend whilst in his weakened state.”

Loric invited Bunny to see the world from his perspective for a while.

“Sure, I’ll go with you.” Bunny agreed. “I could use a bath myself. As for the rest of you... Rochelle, do you know the Druid chapel on Foxhole Lane?”

“I know it well.”

“Good, then that seems like a sensible place drop off the kids. We’ll meet up with you there in the morning.”

Eilidh hated having to delay their quest to find Princess Mystaya, but the situation was what it was and wishing wasn’t going to change it. Bunny’s plan was sound so it made no sense to argue.

Bunny climbed onto Loric’s broad dragon back. She could feel his body heat, radiating from his dark scales, and the unnatural heat from his burns, but before she knew it they had taken flight and the rush of air began to assist the cooling process. They were soon well under way to Loric’s favourite spot.

As they flew, Bunny could tell that Loric was going slow. Due to his injuries or just to give her a safe and gentle ride, she wasn’t sure. Then her nose picked up on something - Dragon blood. The large gash on his back had opened up again close to the base of his long, sinuous neck.

Hmmmmmm, she thought. Dragon blood...how exotic!

She firmly snapped herself out of that feeling, regaining control. She ripped a large piece of cloth out of the skirt of her green dress and pressed it against the wound. She could feel the dragon’s pulse quicken in response to her touch - the response was no different in dragons than it was in the humans or elves she’d been with. She found that fascinating.

“I couldn't help noticing your change of outfit,” Loric remarked, conversationally.

“It only took me a second to borrow it – I’ve inherited some vampire speed from my mother – and there was nobody around in the sewers to object to me changing on the run. I thought the kids would be more likely to trust a servant girl than a scarlet woman. It didn't slow me down or put the kids in any danger, I assure you.”

“Oh, that wasn't an accusation. I just think green suits you.”

“And now I've gone and ruined it,” she pouted.

“No point taking it back then, I suppose.”

“Which means I technically stole it.”

“All in a good cause, though.”

Bunny sighed, regretfully. “The girl was such a helpful soul as well. She didn't speak a single word of objection. OK, I may have taken the precaution of gagging her, but even if I hadn't, I'm sure she would have given me her dress, had she known the situation. After all, lives were at stake and I didn't have time for a long, difficult conversation.”

“You made the right decision,” Loric agreed, enjoying Bunny's free-flowing banter.

“I knew you'd see it my way. Actually, now that I think about it, the dress may not be a total loss. With a needle and thread I could take the skirt up, make it into a mini. What do you think?”

“I think I'd like to see that.”

“In that case,” she said, tearing off another strip, “I suggest you stop bleeding so much, otherwise there won't be enough material left to work with.”

“I'll do my best,” he promised.

“Good. A girl can't wear her skirt too short you know; it gets her a reputation.”

“Quite cold, too, I'd imagine. Especially up here in Avidon's mountains.”

“Oh, that doesn't necessarily have to be a problem. There are always ways to warm up, some of them quite enjoyable, as a matter of fact.” Bunny could sense the dragon responding to her and she briefly wondered what it might be like to feel such emotions: Affection...real affection...even love. But as she had told the Catalyst, `love requires a soul`. No, she was incapable of such feelings. Her creator, her father, hadn't built that into her design – it wasn't the point of his research and he was always quite single minded about his work. There were times when she could almost believe...almost feel...but no, all she could do was simulate them, physically. And the dragon was just about the only race she had never...`simulated` with.

At that moment, Loric descended into a soft and gentle landing. When Bunny dismounted, he turned himself into his human form. She ran hungry eyes seductively over his frame. He was toned and well built, with large and powerful arms that were capable of crushing a man's body, yet equally capable of such gentleness. Yes, an encounter with this individual could be very interesting indeed.

“Well,” she remarked. “I’ve had men between my legs before, but never quite like that. Thanks for the ride.”

The way Loric smiled, she could see that pursuing this would have to wait. He was at the end of his strength. She cast a Quick Fix spell just to keep him conscious, and then set about bathing his wounds.

At last, Loric reverted to his natural form and retreated into a healing sleep.

Bunny sat down a short distance away where she lit a small fire and used the last of her available Life Store to conjure an illusory copy of herself...mostly for someone to talk to, not that she expected to get much back.

“My favourite spell,” she said to herself, satisfied.

“When you’re a sorceress, who needs mirrors?” Her copy quipped.

Bunny eyed her copy up and down. Her copies had never been this responsive before. She was having a good day.

Pulling a face, she said, “Considering I’m such a mess, I’m not sure that’s a good thing right now. In fact I’d better go clean myself up.” And with that, she turned to walk away. “Don’t go anywhere, will you?”

The copy rolled her eyes, “I’m a construct of magic, not a real person. Where do think I’m going to go – the nearest tavern for a drink? Pick up some bloke and let him buy me a drink? A drink and a show? Champagne, a show and a sha--”

“—Look, I’m not doing that anymore, OK?” the real Bunny snapped, cutting off her copy and quite startling herself. Where did that suddenly come from?

“Sex? Come off it! You were just thinking about the dragon!”

“Thinking’s one thing,” she countered, deciding to sit back down for the moment. “Besides, I was mostly referring to the escort gig.”

“You’re leaving Madam Donna’s? Why?”

“Don’t you know?”

“You think I’m a perfect copy in every detail with a complete record of your thoughts and feelings, past and present?”

“Aren’t you?”

The copy snorted. “You’re not that good! I can talk, I can perform simple actions, I can fight and I can...well, I can do that thing you’re apparently not going to do anymore.”

“But if I left you with friends—“

“You don’t have any friends.”

“Yeah, but if I did and I left you with them, with people who knew me well, couldn’t you make them believe you were the real me?”

“Not a chance. In fact, they wouldn’t even have to know you all that well to see right through me.” To prove her point, the copy picked up a piece of burning wood from the fire and held it close to her body which appeared slightly transparent.

“Hey, I can see right through you!” The real Bunny observed.

“Exactly,” said the copy, putting the branch back on the fire.

Bunny eyed her copy suspiciously. “You’re trying to be funny, aren’t you?”

The copy shrugged. “I get that from you.”

“Well obviously, you get everything from me! But if you’re making wise-cracks, then...” she broke off, jumped up and quickly snatched up a burning branch, holding it close to her copy who squealed and scrambled out of the way.

“Hey, careful!” protested the copy. “Are you trying to set my world on fire or what?”

“You’re made of magic, you can’t feel pain.”

“No, but I can simulate it, like you simulate other things – oh sorry, I mean the way you used to simulate things.”

“I don’t believe it! My magical copy is winding me up!”

“Well you know what you always say: if there’s one thing you can do...”

“...It’s wind people up!” finished the sorceress. “And you got me good and proper.” She carefully moved the flaming torch closer once more. “You look solid enough now, though.”

“Oh yeah, so I am,” the copy agreed, seemingly genuinely surprised and interested.

“So were you putting on the transparency thing for effect or what?”

“No, of course not...at least, I didn’t think I was.”

“And you certainly sound like me.”

“A little less annoying, I’d say.”

Bunny chose to ignore that. “Are you sure you couldn’t pass for me if I wanted you to?”

Her copy thought about that for a moment. “Maybe I’m more real than I gave myself credit for.”

“Maybe I’m just a better sorceress than you gave me credit for.”

“Or a better person.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, maybe I’m not just a copy. Maybe I’m an image of how you see yourself.”

“How very metaphysical!”

“Yeah, but think about it: If I’m an image of you and I’m more real than I thought, then maybe...”

“Maybe I’m more real than I thought? Father always insisted otherwise and as much as I objected, I guess part of me always believed him.”

“You believed people would see right through you if they got too close. See you weren’t real. A fake person. A copy.”

“But maybe that’s wrong,” the real Bunny considered. “Maybe I really can be more than I was made to be. Not fake, not an illusion, not a copy, not sub-life, but real. As real as humans and elves. Real as Eilidh or Phaer, or that great hulking dragon over there.”

“That’s a lot of maybes,” the copy pointed out. “Question is: do you really believe it?”

Sitting back down, Bunny took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I don’t know. But maybe I have a chance to find out now.”

“That’s another maybe,” said the copy, acidly.

“Don’t get smart. I’m having a serious philosophical conversation here.”

“With yourself,” her copy pointed out.

“With a *copy* of myself,” Bunny corrected. “A copy I created with my magic,” she marvelled. “Look at you: you’re as much me as I am!”

“Damn I’m good!” They laughed together.

After a pause, the real Bunny got up, “Well, I really think I should get cleaned up now.”

“About time, too! The way you look reflects badly on me, you know.”

“Very funny. OK, keep an eye on the slumbering beastie, will you?”

“You know me – I always let sleeping dragons lie.”

Bunny smiled. “Nice chatting. Must do it again sometime,” and with that she wandered off to have a wash.

* * * * *

“Do you think I should have told her?” said the copy to a nearby tree, when Bunny was well out of earshot.

“Told her what?” asked the tree.

“That she’s not quite as good as she thinks she is. That creating a fully sentient and self-aware magical construct isn’t quite within the realm of a grade three Life Gifted sorceress. That sort of thing.”

“Egad! Certainly not!” the tree exclaimed. “Sink me, dear girl, but I’m trying to build up her self-image here! Besides, I think she knows deep down. Her magical talent really isn’t the point. She needed someone to talk to, a way to reflect on her life.”

“And what better way to reflect on her self-image than with a reflected image of herself,” the Bernice copy concluded.

“Precisely.”

“So...when she comes back...?”

“She’ll find a simple illusory copy of herself guarding Loric over there.”

“But I won’t be discussing the finer points of philosophy.”

“No, I’m afraid not. Sorry.”

“Blimey,” the copy remarked, as her self-awareness faded. “Talk about dumbing down!”

Chapter 11

Loric awoke to the smell of roast beef. As he came to, he saw a cow turning on a spit over a fire. Bunny was sitting in her underclothes, using her bare foot to keep the spit turning while she mended her green dress. She looked up as he stirred, not at all self-conscious about her near nakedness. “I thought you'd probably be hungry. A good meal will help restore your strength.”

She stood back to give him room as he devoured the very well prepared cow.

The dragon was briefly surprised to find the carcass almost completely bloodless, but then he realised why. He decided not to pass comment, however, as he suspected it might make her uncomfortable.

“I slaved away for hours on that meal, and you wolf it down in two bites!” Bunny quipped, hands on hips in mock indignation.

“Sorry. Thanks,” Loric replied, simply.

“If you're feeling well enough to travel,” said the sorceress, “we should be getting back to Eilidh. I promised to take you all to the Fountain of Light and I intend to keep my promise.”

Loric was briefly tempted to feign greater injury in order to spend more time alone with this unique creature, but then he remembered the kidnapped princess and anger snapped him out of his selfishness. So once they had erased all signs of their having been there, they took to the air, flying faster this time, back to the city of Avidon.

* * * * *

Eilidh's party now numbered nine, plus the Dark Knight Officer Sir Quentin Marr who had insisted that his escort duty was not finished until they were ready to enter this forbidden area wherein lay the Great Fountain of Light.

The Catalyst looked around at those who were now her followers under her leadership, though she preferred not to dwell on that particular point. There was the dwarf Bard-Catalyst, Granite Longbeard. His motives were clear enough: personal gain. That didn't bother the young woman at all. It was straightforward, it was honest and he wasn't demanding anything excessive. His solo jaunt around the City of Avidon had not proved as successful as she'd hoped. While people were ready to talk to him and let slip information on any number of things, on this particular issue, the grip of the Hand was too tight. That information had been provided by this Sumorityl vampire who called herself Bunny.

Bunny was something of an enigma. Searching for redemption and recognition, and it seemed none too fussy about how she achieved her aims. *No*, Eilidh reprimanded herself. *That isn't fair*. Bunny had done what she had to do to survive and while some of it made the Catalyst slightly uncomfortable, she wasn't about to tell her how she should live her life. So the Sumorityl had made some questionable decisions – who hadn't? Eilidh made no claim to perfection.

The Church had always taught her that Sumorityl were wrong and while Bunny's creation might not have violated the letter of the law, it had certainly broken its spirit. But did that automatically mean Bunny had no right to live? OK, she was unnatural, artificial, but so what? Druids

and Clerics practised all kinds of magic that assisted with pregnancies that would otherwise never happen, and births that would otherwise go horribly wrong if left to nature. Some non-mages were even using Techmagic devices to aid fertility and monitor developing foetuses in the womb. Wasn't that `unnatural`?

There were three principal reasons why the mages of old had outlawed life creation magic:

First, no healthy creatures had ever been produced. They were always twisted, bloated monstrosities that lived out their brief existences in constant pain with no reward but the peace of death and oblivion.

Second, as the body became Sumorityl, the soul became twisted into Helyxshada, or simply `Shades` - probably the most dangerous and frightening creatures in the world. Pools of liquid darkness. A kind of void creature existing on the border between life and death that could never truly die or truly live. Anyone who had even the briefest of physical contact with a Shade became a Shade themselves. Thankfully, they were always tethered to the place they were created. If that were ever to change, chaos monsters would seem like puppy dogs and kitty cats in comparison.

The Third reason was simply to appease the Clerics who believed the creation of life was the business of gods, not mortals.

Bunny certainly wiped out the first argument. She was fit, healthy and stunningly beautiful, with a sharp wit and intelligent mind. The second reason was also null and void. Since Bunny had been created from a vampire, there was no soul to worry about, and Eilidh was not sorry that there were a few less vampires in the world thanks to the wizard that Bunny called `father`. As for the third, Eilidh dismissed that completely. Clerics were entitled to their beliefs, but they had no right to prevent magical progress. Her own red division would probably support this man's ideas and call for a recognised legal distinction for Bunny and any like her. The black mages would see power in it and even the white mages might be persuaded.

As Eilidh watched, Bunny was laughing and joking, arm in arm with Loric who had quickly warmed to her charms.

That brought her to consider the obsidian dragon for a moment. He portrayed himself as a black dragon who held a certain fame, even infamy, in Avidon. A fierce, confident mercenary with a love of mortal children in need. They had met earlier, she reminded herself, on the road to Shakaran. The resulting misunderstanding was dangerous, but soon resolved without any real harm having been done. In a way, he was the reason they were here to rescue Princess Mystaya. If that herd of centaurs hadn't attacked Loric, if he hadn't crash-landed, if that mysterious glade had not been there with its magical barrier and if Prince Garald had not been investigating at that precise moment, then they wouldn't have met up again here. If, if and if...there was something a bit too neat about that set of coincidences for her tastes. Eilidh always considered the notion `I don't believe in coincidences` to be utter nonsense. Coincidences happened all the time, but she did not always trust coincidences, and this one made her suspicious.

Lady Hannah Collins, Knight of Paladina stood out proudly in her shining golden plate armour, yet she, too, had revealed a different side back at Shakaran Palace. A warm, silky, feminine side. Frankly, Eilidh wished she could be so well balanced. Hannah was a fierce warrior and a

powerful woman - strong arm, strong heart. Motives: honour, glory, renown and simply doing the right thing.

Calandra, Revered Daughter of Patrelaux was deep in theological discourse with the Paladinian Knight. It was natural for those two to pair up as friends. Eilidh had caught the elf maid looking at her strangely when she thought she wasn't looking. She couldn't imagine why.

Meanwhile, Hannah regarded the elven cleric with an almost reverential awe, although she wasn't afraid to question the cleric's opinions and interpretations sometimes. However, they both clearly demonstrated, to Eilidh's mind, the problem with such complete devotion to the Light: sometimes their high noble ideals simply bore little resemblance to reality. When forming judgements, they often failed to include the real world in the equation. As a Catalyst, she had no magical way to gauge a Cleric's ability, but she was the one they'd found, so that was the reality they had to work with.

Then there was the half-elf, Phaer. Despite having been so taken with Hannah back at the palace, he now seemed utterly fascinated by Bunny. As a ranger, Eilidh thought Phaer must have snared, cooked and eaten many a rabbit in the wild. Yet here he was, snared by a Bunny who looked ready to eat him alive and raw. Even as the Sumorityl walked and talked with Loric, she looked over at the half-elf and smiled. That was all she had to do, smile, and the ranger suddenly lost touch with his graceful, aloof elven side. Not that she blamed her for what she was doing. Men adored her and she was used to playing up to that. She probably didn't even consciously realise what she was doing.

As for Phaer himself, Eilidh hoped he would agree to continue to accompany her on her real quest after this. She found him a fine addition to the team, and as for him being Magically Dead, she found she barely even noticed now. But if he were to stick around, it would have to be his own free choice. She would not manipulate him into it the way she had over this rescue. She hoped that this experience would bring them all closer together as a group so Phaer wouldn't want to leave.

Hope is not a strategy, she reminded herself. If Phaer was going to stay, she would have to find a way to give him a reason to want to stay. Sadly, she had no idea how she might do that, which was a shame, because having him around was kind of...nice.

Rochelle Ribbons was a very mixed-up individual, in the Catalyst's opinion, who had got herself into serious trouble leading a double life. It seemed churlish for her to criticise anyone for studying too much, but while she respected Rochelle's academic mind, she felt justified in criticising her failure to think clearly about her life. As far as Eilidh could see, Rochelle's choices had been based on wishing things were different, instead of applying reason to the reality of her situation. Eilidh was inclined to agree with Sir Quentin: Rochelle should have to face the consequences, even if that meant execution. The Catalyst did not believe that this was something they should be getting involved in, but Hannah had committed herself to Rochelle's protection as her personal Knight in Shining Armour, and Eilidh needed Hannah, so this had turned into a double rescue. But if it came down to a choice, once they had the princess with them, she would leave Rochelle behind - Hannah too, if necessary. There were other Knights, after all. Mystaya was her priority, not this gnome. Eilidh didn't think she was being heartless - just practical. The gods knew somebody in this group had to be!

That left Tolbrietta Hobnobb. Her dear, sweet, hobbit friend Toli. Her motive was the purest of all: friendship. "I'm with you until the end." she had said. "If you say we go, then I go." Even now it threatened to bring a tear to her eye. Nobody in her entire life had expressed such simple, powerful

loyalty to her. She had no idea how it had happened, but Toli was the first real friend she had ever had, and consequently the unknowing recipient of many prayers for her safety and welfare.

In fact, in a strange, irrational way, Eilidh almost wished Toli wasn't with the group so that she wouldn't be in danger. She couldn't tell Toli how she felt, of course. The hobbit couldn't possibly understand the effect her simple friendship was having. The hobbit probably made five new friends every day, while Eilidh grew up with people who barely tolerated the fact of her existence. No, the Catalyst could not explain that to Toli because she would ask too many perfectly natural questions. Personal questions. Madam Donna had been a close call; just when Eilidh thought she had escaped from her past, one wrong turning was all it had taken to find it was lurking in the shadows even this far from home. Now, through her chance encounter with Prince Garald, she was associating with royalty.

"Eilidh Louise Hagram," she said to herself, under her breath, "what are you doing?"

* * * * *

They had been walking through the city for the better part of the day, when Loric spoke up, shaking Eilidh out of her deep thoughts. "Why don't you go on up ahead and let me talk to the leaders of the Hand here. Their Headquarters are not far and I have a few questions to ask them about the fire."

"What about the fire?" Eilidh asked.

While I was saving those children I found a dagger with a Hand of Darkness motif."

"That proves nothing," Rochelle insisted. "Hand of Darkness daggers can be found all over the city."

"I realise that and I'm not sure if they would do such a stupid thing, knowing that I am around. But fires like that shouldn't just happen."

"Nevertheless they do," Phaer disagreed. "How do you know it wasn't some kid playing with magic fire sticks? Kids do that, you know. In elven families, it's actively encouraged."

"That doth not sound wise," Hannah said.

"Yes, it's very dangerous, surely." Toli agreed.

"It's done under parental supervision," Phaer pointed out. "Elven parents simply believe that fire is something children have to learn about the hard way. The kids get a small burn and they are denied magical healing. I still have a small scar from mine if you look closely enough." *If you can spot it amongst all the other scars, that is*, he added silently. "The thinking behind it is that every child will burn himself once but he won't do it again. There's no actual harm, but children learn to associate fire with pain and lasting injury, which teaches them the proper respect for it."

"Dwarf families do much the same thing," Granite added. "There are almost no fire-related accidents in dwarf cities. We can't risk it underground. In human cities, though, they are all too frequent."

“Even if the fire was indeed started deliberately,” Sir Quentin put in, “it could merely be the work of a single drunken warrior. 'Tis certainly not evidence of a plot at command level. That is why our vow to lay siege to the city connects only to a proven link with an officer. If the Knights of Zhentilon were to react to every minor scrape with a warrior of the Hand, this city would have been ours long ago. It would be simple enough, should we wish it, of course. This rabble is of no moment to a few trained Knights. My point, Loric, is that whilst I do applaud thy motives, thou canst not react to every perceived threat this way. The plot, if such it was, hath been well foiled and the best way of providing for their future care wouldst surely lay in the acquisition of gold from young Eilidh's quest.”

“But I must be sure. I must see this through and that means visiting the Hand's lair. Besides,” he added with a laughing smile, “I think our young ranger here would like some of Bunny's time.”

“Excuse me?” Phaer demanded, bristling at the implication.

“Bunny` will spend her time with whomsoever she chooses,” the Sumorityl stated, not pleased by the dragon's presumptuous tone. “Your presence or otherwise makes no difference.”

“The answer is no,” Eilidh insisted, deliberately, calmly standing in Loric's path in a way that brooked no argument. “The kids are safe - at least as safe as anyone can be in this place. The danger is past, there is no evidence of deliberate Hand of Darkness involvement at any level and I can't have you running off on your own vendettas right now. As I say, those children are safe; Princess Mystaya is not. We have to prioritise, Loric. Right now I have hired you to do a job and so help me you are going to do it. No more side trips and certainly no talking to the Hand. Is that clear?”

“Mayhap I can be of some assistance?” Sir Quentin offered. “I shall leave behind two of my senior Knight Warriors to complete our escort duty. Meanwhile, the rest of my company and I canst...assist the Hand of Darkness in their fire investigations.”

“I thought thine order wast prevented from interfering?” Hannah inquired.

“Assistance is not interference, unless they hath something to hide. Either way, when ye all hath returned unto Shakaran, thou shalt have thine answer.”

“I'd appreciate that,” Loric said.

“Now is not the time for heroics,” Eilidh insisted. “Heroics come later. Now is the time for stealth and a low profile. I'm sorry, Loric, but I need you with me.”

“Alright,” he agreed reluctantly. “We'll do it your way.”

“Good,” Eilidh said. Subject closed.

“Speaking of stealth,” Bunny piped up. “Everyone walk slowly now and stay close to the walls. The gate that guards the forbidden Fountain is around the next corner and then about half a mile straight ahead. It's always guarded so we can't just walk right up. You should all take the side streets that run parallel to get closer and let me get rid of the guards.”

With a salute to Hannah and Eilidh, Sir Quentin left the most senior Knight Warrior in command and headed for the Hand of Darkness Headquarters. The two remaining Dark Knights set up positions where they could remain out of sight, but still act if it should prove necessary.

Before the others began their approach of the gates, Bunny asked to `borrow` Phaer and Calandra for a moment. "I need your elfsight," she explained. "It would be an advantage to know how many guards there are, their races and how vigilant they seem to be."

"Very well, child," the cleric agreed. "Phaer, I suggest that we get close enough for you to see clearly. Two pairs of eyes are better than one, after all."

"I bow to your wisdom, Revered Daughter," he replied.

The two accompanied her and followed her along the main street for a short distance. "I can see them clearly enough now," the half-elf said. "There are just two guards, one's definitely a human male, white division, the other one, the large one, is red division. He might be a half-ogre, but I'm not sure. Let's stop walking and listen for a minute. If we can catch their conversation, we'll be sure."

They listened for a long moment, until Phaer whispered, "Ah, hear that, Revered Daughter? Doesn't that sound ogreish to you?"

"Yes, child. That harsh, guttural voice is unmistakable. His ogre side is strong in him. It makes him quite distinctive."

"But the other man is definitely human?" Bunny asked.

"Yes, child, he's human alright."

"What about that figure beyond the gates?" Phaer wondered.

"Yes, I was wondering if you'd noticed him," Calandra said. "What do you make of him?"

"It's hard to tell from this distance, but I think he may be some kind of mage, with his robes."

"Robes could mean a cleric, of course, or just ordinary everyday robes."

"What would an ordinary citizen be doing in a forbidden area?" Phaer pointed out.

"Yes, I see your point, child. It may be as you say."

"So long as he doesn't interfere, I don't really care at this stage." Bunny concluded. "Well thank you both for your help, now leave them to me."

The elf and half-elf ducked down a side street and rejoined the others. Calandra did not see the suspicious looks Phaer was giving her behind her back.

Eilidh and the others got themselves into hidden positions, which was not difficult in the fading light of dusk. They could just see Bunny as she worked her charm on the two guards. She stepped up to them oozing sex appeal and acting very provocatively. She quickly got down to seducing them. In moments she had them in the palm of her hand, dancing to her tune. The party could not hear what was being said from their position, but they could see Bunny make gestures for

the guards to accompany her to a clearly abandoned warehouse off to one side of the gates. They hesitated for a moment, but not for very long. She led them away and they disappeared into the building. The party stayed where they were, not wanting to risk moving too soon and ruining Bunny's plans. They were rewarded for their patience when the sultry young woman left the warehouse alone and wandered casually over to them, smiling like the cat that got the cream. Eilidh reflected that she would not have been at all surprised to hear her purr.

“We can go now,” Bunny told them. “I still suggest we move quietly, but there should be no problem. The guard isn't due to be changed for hours yet, so no-one will even know we're inside.”

“I suppose you took their money,” Calandra noted with disapproval.

“Of course, Rev! I've told you before: it's my fee for letting them live and teaching them to be more vigilant in future. Besides, when they wake up, they'll have no reason to suspect it was anything more than a simple robbery. Perfectly normal in Avidon.”

“When they wake up?” Lady Hannah wondered.

“That's right, I persuaded them to sleep for a while.”

“Persuaded them how?” Granite wanted to know.

“With this,” she answered, holding up her mace.

The dwarf chuckled. “I like you, lass. Yer my kinda girl!”

She flashed him a dimpled smile. “That's so sweet of you!” Taking Phaer's arm, she whispered, “Don't worry, darl, I only have eyes for you really.” She planted a kiss on the half-elf's cheek and then scampered away.

Eilidh ignored her games and simply took out the key Prince Garald had given her. She led her party over to the iron gates; she fit the key in the lock and the gates swung open instantly. That startled her - she hadn't expected them to move so suddenly - but fortunately the gates were well-maintained and made no sound at all.

Once they were all inside, Eilidh put Loric and Hannah to work closing the gates behind them so she could lock them again, while Phaer scouted ahead silently to check out the mage or whoever the third individual was. When he returned, he was not alone, but was accompanied by a tall man who was dressed in a familiar outfit of clashing colours.

“Egad!” he exclaimed. “It's about time you lot showed up!”

Chapter 12

"I say!" Kismet declared, squinting. "Are my eyes playing up or are there suddenly more of you?"

Eilidh sighed, though she had to admit part of her was glad to see the strange man, if `man` was accurate. She made the introductions. Bunny had disappeared for a moment, but soon returned, sporting yet another costume change: a tight brown leather outfit that was almost a feminine version of Phaer's attire. Where she'd managed to acquire it, Eilidh couldn't fathom.

"Kismet, did you see anyone else while you were lurking about around here?" Eilidh asked.

"Lurking about? Lurking about! My dear girl, I don't believe I've ever lurked anywhere in my life, though I'll admit it does sound like enormous fun."

"Don't worry, Eilidh," Phaer said. "Kismet was the third man I saw."

"Him?" Toli asked. "But he's not wearing robes."

"I most certainly am not!" Kismet objected, indignantly.

"Yes," Bunny agreed, casually moving seductively over to him. "Of course he's not in robes. Can't you all see that this is a man of exquisite taste and flair, who is keenly aware of the latest fashions at court?"

"I say, what a wonderfully perceptive young lady you are, my dear." Kismet said, preening himself. "You're right, of course, these breeches are quite simply the latest word in fashion." He pulled a face. "They do chafe the legs a bit, though."

"Ah the price people like us must pay to look our best!" Bunny remarked.

"Too true, my dear, too true." His orange silk fluttered down into his hand and he held it to his face looking distraught as Bunny made sympathetic noises.

Eilidh inwardly applauded. She herself had used her sarcastic streak to good effect against Kismet, but Bunny had just taken irony to a whole new professional level. Another time, another place and the Catalyst would have laughed at the performance. *Mind you*, she pointed out to herself silently, *I'm not at all sure it's such a good idea to keep encouraging him.*

"By the way, Phaer," Bunny said. "You're wrong about something - this isn't the third man."

"I assure you he is," Phaer countered.

"No, you don't understand. I'm quite prepared to accept this was the man you saw beyond the gates, but he is not the third man. Only the second. Some help you were with your elven sight, I don't know why I bothered to ask!" she complained.

"Oh that," the half-elf said. "Yes, I see what you mean. Sorry, but it was all in a good cause."

"Is this something you'd like to share with the group?" Rochelle wondered. "How two guards plus this Kismet makes only two men? I've often wondered about the philosophical implications of

mathematics myself. I mean, why does one and one make two? But try as I might, I have never managed to make one plus two into anything other than three.”

“Apples and oranges, Rochelle,” Phaer answered, cryptically. “So why does one and one make two?”

“I’ve no idea. I was hoping you might know.”

“Is it just me, or does nobody else understand a word these people are saying?” Loric demanded.

“It’s elementary, my dear dragon,” Bunny said. “Two guards plus one Kismet equals only two men because one of the guards was a woman. Cute and sexy, I’ll admit, so I’m not complaining too much. Still, I would like to know why Phaer and Calandra specifically told me both guards were male - to say nothing of the fact that the male guard, whilst being satisfyingly big, was quite clearly human with no ogreish blood in him at all.”

Quick as a flash, Phaer drew his sword and pushed the point against Calandra’s throat. Not enough to draw blood but close enough to be felt and prevent any movement.

“Phaer, what is the matter with thee, noble sir?” Hannah gasped. “Hast thou lost thy mind?”

“Nothing wrong with me,” the ranger assured the Knight. “I knew Kismet wasn’t wearing robes, just like I knew the guards were, in fact, one male and one female, both human. I heard their speech on the wind and heard none of the harsh, guttural, ogreish speech our priestly friend here talked about. Moreover, when we first approached Avidon, I knew the sentries at the walls were blue division, not green. That was my first deliberate mistake; my first test after my suspicions had first been aroused back in Shakaran. Tell us, Revered Daughter, how come you never heard that newspaper seller calling out the headline from just a few streets away?”

“I told you, child, I was talking with Lady Hannah and was not listening.”

“I was talking to Toli at the time; I wasn’t listening, either, but I still heard the words `Knights` and `truce` clearly enough. Don’t bother lying anymore; I grew up around full-blooded elves and I know that my senses of sight and hearing are nothing special compared to the average elf. Yet you have now made at least five separate mistakes. Five times I have heard or seen something plainly that you could not detect at all. Give up the pretence, Calandra, and tell us: who are you? Who are you really?”

“Yes, who are you really?” Loric echoed, as he drew his blade. “I’ve been around elves a fair bit myself. I’ve lived with them, fought with them and Phaer has made some very sound points. So tell us who you are, or feel the sting of my blade. It is called Soul Crusher. I’ll let you work out why for yourself.”

“Excuse me,” Kismet interrupted, nonchalantly walking between the men and their target, causally brushing their weapons aside. “This is all ever so entertaining, but we do have rather more important things to worry about, you know. Like getting away from the gate in case somebody sees us!”

“Kismet's right,” Eilidh agreed. “We do have more important things to worry about. Put your sword away, both of you, and let’s get on with the rescue.”

Phaer was incensed. “But she's not who she appears to be!” he protested.

Eilidh rounded on him, her eyes flashing. “Are you?” she shot back. “Am I? Is he?” she nodded towards Kismet. “What about Bunny or Rochelle or Loric or any of us? I accept you all at face value and you accept me. Some of us have secrets; things we don't want to share and I respect that. As far as I'm concerned, all those I work with are entitled to their secrets, so long as they don't put us in danger or jeopardise our quest. Calandra hasn't done that. So what if we can't rely on her elven senses? I'm happy to rely on yours, Phaer. Now put the sword down and let’s go. Unless you'd rather we all have a major get-to-know-you session, in which case you can go first.”

Phaer reluctantly sheathed his weapon. “Alright, I guess if you're not bothered, you’re the leader so it's up to you.”

Loric also sheathed his weapon, though he was still smouldering silently.

Calandra, who had remained calm and silent throughout the confrontation, offered Eilidh a small smile and a nod by way of thanks.

“I say, well done! I'm delighted that you've sorted that out, O Esteemed Leader,” Kismet told Eilidh. “Now follow me. There's something you're going to want to see.”

* * * * *

Along the way, Toli casually asked Kismet about his ability to change into anything at will.

“There's a bit of a story attached to that,” he said.

“Great, I love stories!”

So the pair dropped to the back of the group and Kismet began his tale.

“It all began when I was a child. I was out with my brother, Nat. Or was it Nate? No, it was definitely Nat. Like all children, we had heard many ghastly stories about children being taken away by the Enforcers, never to be seen again.”

“Those are just stories told by parents to frighten kids into behaving themselves,” Toli objected.

“Well we were children and we were frightened. Those stories were real enough to our childish imaginations. One day, though, it actually happened - we really were chased by a pair of Enforcers. So, not wanting to `disappear`, we ran into the wilderness, hoping to escape. Obviously, though, it takes a great deal more than a few trees to fool the Enforcers! After we had been pursued for some time we split up. It seemed the Enforcers weren’t interested in Nat because they all kept chasing me. I took a wrong turn and found myself at a dead end. I stood, waiting for the inevitable capture and I remember thinking to myself, `If only I were a rock; they'd never find me then!` Then the Enforcers appeared, and that's when I saw they weren't Enforcers at all. They were creatures I'd never seen before or since until recently - they were chaos monsters. Anyway, to my surprise, they

couldn't see me, or at least they paid me about the same attention as any other boulder. After that I practised, and soon found I could change myself into anything, without even thinking about it!"

"And your brother?" Rochelle asked.

"Oh, he was fine. Like I say, they weren't interested in him. Haven't seen him for ages but you know how it is – we're both busy. He's a very important man, you know."

"Really? What's he doing?"

Kismet seemed to concentrate hard for a moment before answering. "Do you know...It's completely gone out of my head! Don't you just hate it when that happens?"

On the face of it, Kismet's story was nonsense, but once again Eilidh couldn't help the feeling that if one could only pick through it, there was a grain of truth to be found. A truth so profound that it had to be hidden to shield the world from its full impact. It was a strange notion, but without knowing exactly why, Eilidh believed it.

The party rounded a natural sharp bend in the path they were following and were faced with an opening in one of Avidon's many mountains. If it had a name, none of the companions knew what it was.

Being at the rear of the group, little Toli couldn't see why everyone had stopped. "What is it?" she asked, straining to see.

"A tunnel," Eilidh answered.

"A dark and mysterious tunnel?"

"Absolutely."

"Leading to unknown dangers?"

"Probably."

"Lets you in but doesn't let you out?"

"Possibly."

"Fantastic! What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

Eilidh couldn't help but smile at her friend's enthusiasm and while she didn't exactly share it, there was no other choice. The tunnel was indeed dark and mysterious, and Granite led the way - his dwarven eyes were used to this kind of environment, which was preferable to torches or magical light that might attract attention. Also in their favour was the fact that although the tunnel wound its way through the mountain in all directions, there were no major side-tunnels, leaving them but one way to go. The tunnel had clearly been carved with magic, but either the magician was drunk, suffered from an irrational fear of straight lines, or was simply in no hurry to reach the other side. The companions did reach the other side eventually, and found that they were shielded from view of the gate by the mountain. Calandra prayed for illumination, so everyone could see properly once more.

As the companions walked along through the valley between the mountains, everyone felt comfortable enough to engage in small-talk in a normal voice level. Everyone, that is, except Eilidh, who continued to almost religiously resist all attempts by the others to draw her in. She was surprised to note that Phaer spent a good portion of the journey just behind on her shoulder, but he respected her desire for silence. To him it was not so strange. Elves tended towards a greater economy with words than humans. Phaer himself mostly used small talk to put others at ease and keep them away from things he did not wish to discuss.

A mile or so further on, as the companions reached an old town square, the conversation suddenly halted as the sight before them left them awestruck. A column of multi-coloured light whirled and spun more than twenty feet into the air before spilling out at the top and falling back down to the ground, rivers of light flowing through it. Shimmering golds and silvers danced among blues and reds, greens and purples, along with soft beige and browns, white and black adding contrast. It was a stunning sight that took everyone's breath away.

Phaer broke the silence. "This must be the Great Fountain of Light," he said. "It's certainly well-named."

Granite rounded on him and demanded, "Ye can see that, lad?"

"Of course I can."

"What do ya see, lad? Describe it."

The half-elf did just that.

"And ye all see the same thing?" the dwarf persisted.

"Of course we do," Hannah affirmed. "What is it that thou art driving at, sir dwarf? Thou doth seem most unusually distressed by this sight of natural beauty before us."

"Yer damn right I'm distressed! You shouldnae be able tae see it at all. None of yeh, apart from Eilidh and me. Especially not Phaer, or you, Hannah!"

"Eilidh," Phaer prompted, "do you have any idea what he's talking about?"

"Yes I do, actually, and he's right: you shouldn't be able to see it. Let me try to explain. What you see before you now is how Catalysts see the world all the time. Every living creature - every plant and animal, every sentient being, every demon, orc, vampire and supernatural creature - to my eyes, all life gives off a colourful pattern of light. It is the natural reaction of Life magic with the air of the material world. Only inanimate objects and magically Dead people like yourself give off no light."

"I've heard something like this before," Phaer said.

"Good. Now, under normal conditions, not even the most powerful mages can see this aura; only those born to the Secret of Life, only Catalysts like Granite and me."

"Yet we can all see this Fountain of Light," Phaer mused.

“In fact,” Rochelle put in, “we are such a diverse, almost representative group, that it makes sense to assume anybody and everybody could see it. That's got the Hand of Darkness scared, and that's why this place is forbidden.”

“Actually, it's more than that,” Kismet said. “You see, there have been recorded instances when mages of other Secrets have seen the light of Life.”

“That's right,” Eilidh confirmed. “I read about that at the Church and I had intended to research the issue. As I understand it, it's usually the most powerfully Life Gifted mages who see the light, but no-one is sure exactly why.”

“It's a simple question of purity,” Kismet offered, offhand, as if it were a fact so obvious it should be common knowledge.

“That was my guess,” Eilidh nodded in agreement. “I don't know why exactly; it just seemed to make sense.”

“Quite right, my dear. At normal purity levels only Catalysts can see Life because they are naturally more sensitive to its presence and behaviour. They have to be; otherwise they wouldn't be Catalysts. Now, think of the flow of Life as being like the flow of water; it flows in all dimensions instead of just three, but it's a good enough analogy otherwise.”

“All dimensions? How many dimensions are there?” Rochelle wondered.

“Oh, ten or eleven, depending on who you listen to. But never mind that. Just think of water. It doesn't all flow at a constant speed or direction. Sometimes the same bit of water can get caught up in one place.”

“Like an eddy,” Phaer contributed, pulling on his knowledge of the natural world. If magic had analogy in nature, maybe it wasn't so alien after all.

“Exactly,” Kismet agreed. “Now, Life gets caught up in eddies, too, but in this case, it attracts more Life to itself, increasing its purity. When the purity reaches a certain level, it becomes visible to powerful Life Gifted mages of other Secrets. As it grows purer still, less powerful mages, including those with just Life Calling, can see it, too, and so on.”

Phaer surprised himself at how easily he grasped the concept. “So what you're saying is, there comes a point where the Life Eddy is so pure, so concentrated that it's clearly visible to everyone, even if you're Magically Dead like me.”

“This highly concentrated Life,” Callie put in. “Is it dangerous?”

“Don't see why it would be,” Granite said. “As long as nobody stirs it up and energises it too much, it should be safe enough.”

Rochelle tended to agree. “The flow of Life is all around us,” she reminded the cleric. “The fact that we're privileged enough to see it like Catalysts do changes nothing. What do you think, Kismet?”

"Under normal circumstances, you're right," he agreed, "but in the wrong hands it could be very dangerous indeed," Kismet agreed. "If a mage could figure out how to tap into the power of this Fountain, they would be the most powerful mage alive. They could even have power to rival the Ancients. That's why the Hand of Darkness keeps it guarded, albeit not very well."

"Security in this city is based mostly on fear and intimidation," Loric told them.

"Aye," Granite agreed. "That's why nobody would talk about the Fountain, even to me."

"The trouble is," Rochelle added, "the Hand doesn't even trust its own guards not to stick their fingers in the proverbial pie."

Bunny nodded, understanding. "The guards are there to watch each other more than keep people out. That made it easy for me to entice both of them away at the same time."

Eilidh began walking forward as her mind latched onto something new. "The Well of Life – the source of all magic - it must be like one of these Life Eddies!"

"What a remarkable conclusion," Kismet noted, noncommittally.

"It must dwarf this one - no offence, Granite."

"None taken, lassie. I'm as fascinated as ye are yerself."

"There's still more to it, though," Kismet said. "As powerful as this Fountain would potentially be if someone tapped into it, it would only last so long before it was used up, or rather returned to the natural Life flow of the world."

"But if someone were to locate and control the Well of Life," Eilidh took up his line of thought, "that source would not only be far more powerful but also inexhaustible, in theory at least."

"If this Fountain looks so beautiful," Bunny observed, "the Well of Life must be incredible!"

"Actually, no," Rochelle disagreed. "I'm pretty sure that the Well of Life would be invisible even to a Life Gifted Catalyst, even to the Lord High Cardinal himself."

"What?" everyone demanded at once. Even Eilidh was not following this peculiar twist of logic.

"No, really, it's true," the druid insisted. "Think about it: what we're basically seeing here is the interaction of Life and air. It's the mixture of the two that makes the light. If it's absolutely pure air with no Life, it's invisible, so surely if it's absolutely pure Life with no air, that must be invisible, too. No air, no interaction, no light," she concluded, counting the points off on her fingers for emphasis.

"You've got it right," Kismet said with a hint of pride. "All of it." That's when he suddenly noticed Eilidh wasn't standing with him anymore. She was walking slowly forwards, getting ever closer to the Fountain. She told herself her it was her natural curiosity and researcher's mind drawing her in, but a small part of her suspected it might be something more.

"Eilidh!" Kismet cried out, panic in his voice. "Get away from there now!"

The Catalyst laughed off the warning. “Oh it's alright, Kismet! It's not as if it's going to reach out and grab me, is it?”

At that very moment, the Great Fountain of Light did exactly that. A stream of Life shot out like a tentacle and grabbed her. Kismet ran forward and tried to pull her clear, but Eilidh was oblivious to any danger. With a serene smile and glazed eyes, she intoned, “It's so beautiful. It's calling to me. It wants to know me,” she breathed. “All of me.”

“All of you?” Kismet asked quietly, motioning for the others to stay back. “Are you sure that's a good idea? What about your secrets? All the things you don't want your friends to know. You've never had friends before, have you? Do you want to risk losing them now? What about that, Eilidh Hagram?”

The Catalyst suddenly snapped out of her trance, and gasped, “Kismet pull me out! Get me free! Don't let it get me!” She felt a new power then. She felt the power of the Fountain and something else she didn't recognise. It was magic, but unlike any she had ever encountered before. A magic of an older, more Ancient order.

No, she corrected herself, *not `Ancient`*. That word meant something quite specific in Mythallen - the time when humans first arrived. This felt older than that, much older. More like - she searched for the right word in her mind - Primal... Primeval... Primordial. What its source could be, she had no idea, but whatever it was seemed to make the Fountain's tentacle recoil. But that was not the end of the danger. The colours swirled rapidly and a large section began to separate itself from the main column. It shaped itself into a ten-foot tall, roughly humanoid shape. It let out a loud roar-shriek and advanced on the party. Somehow, Eilidh instinctively understood that it had reached out to her in curiosity, seeking to understand her existence. Whatever it had learned, it had tried to copy and it didn't seem to like her very much.

No change there, then, she reflected, sullenly.

Phaer moved close to Eilidh and quipped, “What is it with you and things with tentacles that want to grab you and eat you?”

Eilidh flashed him a smile, understanding that this was the half-elf's way of asking if she was alright.

As the magical creature pulled itself free from the Life Eddy that had spawned it, the flow of the Fountain changed, triggering a magical shield that grew to form an enormous dome, cutting off the way back into the city. Looking around frantically, the companions couldn't see any other way out.

They were trapped.

Chapter 13

With typical Knightly disregard for her own safety, Lady Hannah moved to intercept the creature, Loric a step behind, but Kismet pulled them both back with a strength that surprised them. “Stay back! Don't go near it, any of you! No weapon you possess will be effective against it and you'll just make things worse!”

“Then what can we do?” Hannah asked.

“Well, if my guess is right, it won't be able to stray very far from its source.”

“May all your guesses be right!” Calandra prayed.

“In that case,” Phaer said, “we just have to get past it somehow and keep running until it can't follow us any further.”

“That's not much of a plan if we can't get through the shield!” Rochelle objected. “I should have known this city would never let me out!”

“There is a way out,” Eilidh assured her, forcing herself to stay calm and keep thinking. When the Life flow changed, her Catalyst's eyes had spotted a section of the shield that didn't quite match the rest. A section she could only describe as door shaped. It could be wishful thinking but she didn't think so. “I just need a minute to work out how to do what I need to do.”

“You'll need a distraction, then,” Loric suggested. “Maybe a dragon would do the trick?”

“Kismet?” Eilidh prompted.

“So long as you're careful not to let that creature touch you. It's absolutely vital that you remember that.”

“Not a problem,” Loric stated, confidently.

“I'm with you, brother,” Calandra said, prompting questioning looks from everyone else. She smiled. “Phaer's right - I'm not what I appear to be and I think the time has come to drop the pretence.”

The elf shimmered softly and an instant later a stunning silver dragon was taking to the skies. Loric looked on approvingly for a moment.

Very nice, he thought. Then he too changed to his dragon form and flew after her. They made quite the contrasting pair - Calandra's scales shone with a dazzling brilliance, making Loric seem like a dark, three-dimensional shadow. Loric was larger than Calandra, which was to be expected from a male dragon, but the silver mare was lean and lithe, implying superior manoeuvrability.

“Time for some fancy flying, if you're up to it!” she said.

“Up to it?” Loric demanded, indignantly.

“Just teasing. Come and show me what you can do, handsome!”

“I’m with you, Calandra.”

“Call me Callie,” she replied, flashing a dazzling dragon smile.

Those on the ground were able to take advantage of the distraction provided by their two draconic companions to sneak past the creature.

Eilidh drew Granite’s attention to the section of shield she was interested in. He confirmed that it was definitely real. “But none of us have access tae any of the spells that might open it. Even my Bard magic will nae touch it. It’s just too strong, and I’m sure I don’t need tae tell ye it would be lethal tae the touch.”

“I’m not planning to open it,” Eilidh told him. “I’m planning to break it down!”

“How?” He demanded, incredulously. “Even a Life Link wouldn’t be anywhere near powerful enough,” he said, referring to the way Catalysts could join their Life Stores to enhance their abilities. It was similar to what Catalysts did all the time with mages to stabilise them following raw magic exposure.

But Eilidh knew there was no time to explain. The theory was clear in her head. Now she had to act.

She stared intently into Phaer’s eyes, and said, “Will you trust me?”

He answered with a sharp nod.

“Everybody else stay back and don’t get between us and the Fountain!” Eilidh ordered.

The Catalyst took Phaer's left hand in her right and led him over to the shield door, whereupon she took a deep breath and without warning, slapped his palm against the barrier. Too late, her friends cried out a warning, but to their amazement, they were fine. Eilidh had swiftly moved to stand back to back with Phaer, using his body as a shield. Phaer’s Magically Dead nature protected them just as Eilidh knew it would...at least in theory. She also knew that the shield door was a relative weak point, so she energised the flow of a stream of Life from the Fountain and redirected it at high speed towards the door. Eilidh had no idea how a mage might use this power to cast spells, but all she needed to do was move it around as Catalysts did all the time. It was like using the power of a raging river to break down a barrier. Standing in its path was profoundly dangerous, but she was confident it would be OK as long as she had Phaer: he was her anchor. Sure enough, the shield door gave way, revealing a previously hidden path through the mountains. Eilidh quickly shifted the flow of the Life stream away from the gap, so their exit wouldn’t get flooded by the Life from the Fountain. Trouble was, there was a risk that the main shield dome would simply fill the gap, and bar their path, just as breaking down a door with such violence could cause the entrance to collapse. Quick as a flash, then, she shoved the half elf into the gap and let him go. She thought he would merely act as a support, preventing the collapse, but instead his presence seemed to cause a catastrophic failure of the main shield, bringing the whole thing down.

Even better, she thought.

Job done, Eilidh told the others to gather together and get ready to run.

The Great Fountain of light faded and disappeared, but the creature it had spawned was still very much present as the two dragons continued their `fancy flying`, performing twisting rolls and somersaults like a pair of gymnasts who never needed to touch the ground.

Eilidh noticed that the Avidon City Crest fixed to the archway above their newly revealed escape route was a design that predated the rule of the Hand. That made it...she tried to estimate in her head...well, it made it very old indeed. She didn't have time to think about it any further, however, as Bunny spoke up to point out a flaw in her plan.

"They're holding off the Magic Man while we get away, right?" She said.

"Magic Man?" Eilidh wondered.

"You really want to argue its name now?"

"Point taken. So what's your problem?"

"So who's going to hold it off while they get away?"

"Thou art forgetting how fast dragons can move," Lady Hannah pointed out.

"I'm forgetting nothing, Hannah. If that thing is made of magic, how do you know how fast it can move?"

"Sorry to interrupt," Phaer said, "but I think we have a new problem."

"Another one?" Eilidh asked, wearily. This really was getting too much.

"Look up there." The others looked where Phaer was pointing, but could only see a speck of light in the sky. "It looks like a dragon," the ranger explained, "but it's made entirely of fire."

"A fire dragon!" Rochelle breathed in awe.

"But they're a myth!" Toli protested.

"Well your myth is coming this way," Phaer informed them.

Making a quick decision, Eilidh said, "Kismet, take the others on ahead. Toli, Phaer come with me, I've got an idea and I need your help."

Kismet led his group away while the two dragons continued to swoop and dodge the reaching Magic Man. Occasionally, Callie would fire a lightning bolt from her jaws, while Loric spat acid. It didn't seem to do any harm to the Magic Man, but it certainly kept it angry and focussed on them to the exclusion of all else. Toli and Phaer stood close to Eilidh as she briefed them on her plan. "Phaer, can you shoot an arrow far enough to reach the fire dragon?"

"Probably yes, but I can't guarantee to hit it at this range."

"You don't need to hit it, just get close enough so it seems like an obvious threat."

"You want to threaten a fire dragon?"

“That's what I said. The trick is, you need to shoot your arrow from behind the Magic Man, create just the right angle so that the fire dragon will think the Magic Man fired the shot.”

“I can do that, but I don't see how the fire dragon would think an arrow had come from that creature.”

“That's where Toli and I come in. Toli, you've got pretty good at using Fireflash in combat, and I need you to do it when Phaer shoots his arrow, but wait for my say so.”

“Sure thing, Eilidh. Do you think fire will hurt a fire dragon?”

“We don't want to hurt it, just get its attention. That's my part - I'm going to intercept your spell at the instant before it creates the fire. I'm going to turn Phaer's arrow into a bolt of Life. That will hopefully convince the fire dragon that it's under attack from this Magic Man.”

“That's going to take some pretty accurate timing, Eilidh,” Toli pointed out. “Do you think it will really work? I mean, I've never heard anything like it being attempted before. Is it even possible?”

“My dear Toli, I can't wait to find out!” She replied. Once again, it made sense in principle, but she'd never had the chance to try it in practice.

Still, nothing ventured... “Now, let's get to our positions.” As they moved apart, Eilidh called out, “Loric! Calandra! Give Phaer a clear shot at the fire dragon and as soon as it gets close enough for the Magic Man to see the new threat, both of you get to the ground, change form and run after us!”

“Understood!” Loric assured her.

“Sure thing, Eilidh!” Callie echoed.

“OK, here goes. Phaer, when you're ready.”

Phaer nodded, nocked his arrow, and mentally drew the target to him. When he was sure he would be close enough, he let his arrow fly. About halfway to its target, Toli acted on Eilidh's signal and cast her Fireflash spell. Eilidh followed the flow of Life from the magician to the arrow - to the Catalyst's magical senses, it was as if she had all the time in the world. The instant before ignition, she reached out with her mind and changed the flow of Life to prevent the spell's completion. Fireflash was a simple spell and she doubted whether she would have any luck in doing something similar with more advanced magic, but for this particular spell on this particular day, she was successful. The arrow became a bolt of Life, which only Eilidh could see. She was counting on a fire dragon having keen magical senses, otherwise it might not work. She motioned quickly for her two friends to move out and together they ran after the lead part of the group. The fire dragon roared in anger at the apparent attack and sped its flight toward its assumed assailant.

Between them, the two dragons decided that Callie should get out of there first, since her silver scales made her stand out more and her innate magical nature also tended to attract the Magic Man more than her obsidian counterpart. At last, the Magic Man detected the incoming fire dragon and paused for a moment. That was what Loric had been waiting for. With one last spit of his acid breath, he flew to the ground, changed to human form and ran from the scene. There was a major concussive impact as the fire dragon threw itself at the Magic Man. Loric was almost sorry he couldn't

stick around to watch what was bound to be a titanic battle. But he reminded himself about the kidnapped princess and that refocused his mind.

Chapter 14

The party was together once more, following the path out of the mountains. It led them onto a stone bridge that stretched on before them as far as the eye – even Phaer’s eyes - could see.

Loric caught up to his female counterpart and asked her, “Please forgive me for earlier? I had my suspicions that you were a dragon, but I couldn’t be sure what kind until you changed. I’ve met silvers before but never one so beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she replied, politely but carefully.

“So you think I’m handsome?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. You’re the first male dragon I’ve met, so I don’t really have anything to compare you with.”

“You said it, though.”

“Did I? Oh yes, I suppose I did – it was just a figure of speech, though.”

“That was some pretty fancy flying back there.”

“Ah, nothing can out-fly a silver. You know that.”

“Well I just want you to know I’m here to protect you. I swear to you that you shall come to no harm while you are with me.”

“That’s very sweet of you, child,” Calandra said, patting his cheek.

“Sweet?” Loric sounded like he was being strangled.

“Don’t strain for praise too much, child; it’s very unbecoming.”

Sweet. Not quite the reaction he’d been hoping for. Emotionally, her manner was quite puzzling. He had thought flying would let her true dragon-self loose, but having reverted to elf form, that had faded almost instantly.

Phaer also dropped back to speak to the cleric. “I’m sorry, too, for the way I tricked you and threatened you.”

“You have nothing to apologise for, child. You acted without malice. You were just protecting your friends.”

“Why didn’t you just tell us you were a dragon? Why the pretence?”

“It was never my intention to deceive, but I have lived as an elf from the moment I came to Mythallen. Being in dragon form forced me to think about...things from my past that I’m not ready to deal with yet.”

“Ah, I see. I can understand that. Say no more. Like Eilidh says, everyone is entitled to their secrets.”

“An enlightened attitude, to be sure.”

The bridge climbed higher and higher by means of a combination of stone steps and slopes. At the same time, the ground already far below, began to slope sharply downward. The climb was difficult and dangerous, as the way narrowed until it was only wide enough to walk in single file in safety. Toli tripped at one point and Granite caught her arm.

“That's not a good idea this far up, lassie,” warned the dwarf.

The hobbit swallowed, turning quite pale. “How far up do you suppose it is?”

“Be careful thou dost never find out,” Lady Hannah advised.

“Hang on,” Bunny said, suddenly. “Where's the city gone?”

“What do you mean?” Rochelle asked.

“I mean Avidon - where is it?”

“Why it's back there, just behind the...mountains...er...where have the mountains gone?”

Everyone turned to look back along their route, and they realised it was true: all they could see was the bridge. It stretched all the way from horizon to horizon, but there was no way that they had walked for long enough to be this far away from Avidon. The city and even its surrounding mountains had vanished. The bridge stretched on and on to infinity in each direction. Even the ground was now apparently too far down to be visible. All that remained was the bridge, as if it were the whole world – the only thing in existence – a bridge suspended in the sky. No-one said anything, but they all felt their pulses start racing in fear. Suddenly, all the natural rules of reality had been suspended and none of them could guess what would happen next.

“Maybe Callie and I should fly around a bit, try to get our bearings,” Loric suggested.

“No,” Bunny said quickly, “you mustn't! I can feel it now, oh but it's well done! All this is an illusion, well maybe not all of it, but enough. Sort of. Sorry, I know that's a bit vague, but it's the best I can do.”

“No, yer right, lassie,” Granite agreed. “I've had experience of illusion magic, but I've never sensed illusions as solid as this before.”

“We have, haven't we, Eilidh?” Kismet prompted.

So have I, Bunny realised, but kept the thought to herself. That experience was private.

“The glade!” the Catalyst gasped. “It felt just like this. But there's more to this, even, than that. I don't think the city has disappeared at all - we have! I'm pretty sure we're nowhere near Avidon. For all I know we may not even be in Mythallen anymore. Bunny, you're absolutely right. Calandra, Loric, neither of you is to change to dragon form. If you try to fly away from this bridge, you might fly into a barrier that we can't detect - Loric, you remember what that's like.”

“Yes, I do and I'm in no hurry to repeat the experience.”

“Even if you made it through,” Bunny put in, “you'd break out of the influence of the illusion and return to reality. There's no way to tell where one ends and the other begins. From our perspective you'd disappear and you'd have to find your way back to Avidon before you could rejoin us. There's no telling how long that would take.”

“There you have it, then,” Eilidh concluded. “No matter what happens, no flying, OK?”

“We promise,” Calandra swore.

That established, they continued their journey.

Time and distance ceased to have any meaning, until a new set of mountains appeared ahead of them. It wasn't a case of gradually approaching a distant range; they were just there suddenly. As disconcerting as it was, that feeling was overpowered by a sense of collective relief. At last they had a landmark to aim for. Reality was showing signs of reasserting itself. Phaer's sharp eyes could see a tunnel through one of the mountains, not unlike the one back in Avidon, but a glance back the way they had come produced a shock.

“We've got company!” he warned.

It was a fair distance away still, but it was gaining at an alarming rate. It looked like something unexpected had happened between the fire dragon and the Magic Man. The result was something roughly humanoid shaped, more than twenty feet tall, legs the size of tree trunks and powerful arms with flailing tendrils at the extremities, but it was made entirely of a kind of liquid fire. The ranger instantly christened it a Molten Man. Everybody began to run towards the tunnel in the mountain, but they had to be careful not to be reckless, because it was still a very long way down if one of them should fall. They managed to get within about two hundred yards of the tunnel entrance but the Molten Man had almost closed the gap. They'd never make it.

Kismet, who was at the rear of the party, called out, “You all keep going, I'll see about slowing this thing down a bit!” Before he did, however, he carefully handed his pack to Tolbrietta, saying, “Hang onto this, will you? There's actually something inside for you anyway but I suppose that'll have to wait.”

Just then, the Molten Man stamped a mighty foot and the whole bridge shook. That created a new problem, forcing the party to slow down for fear of falling due to the quake.

Kismet stood just a short distance from the creature, hands on hips. “I say!” he called out, indignantly. “That's quite enough of that!” Another set of vibrations shook the bridge and cracks began to appear. “Egad! Don't you realise that someone went to a great deal of time and trouble to build this bridge? Now you propose to come along and damage it? That's really not on, you know.” The Molten Man roared and stamped a massive foot, whip-like extremities crackling with energy, causing the bridge to shake once more, the cracks growing and spreading.

Kismet looked annoyed. “Right, that does it! That absolutely does it! I can see we're going to have to do this the old-fashioned way; you're obviously not going to listen to reason. Now, how does it go again? Oh yes, I remember.”

He cleared his throat, a great oaken staff appeared in his right hand and his attire changed to greyish robes. Raising his arms, he cried out in a loud voice.

“You shall not pass!”

The Molten Man roared in response and Eilidh could feel the air crackle with magic, but Kismet was unmoved. “You are two separate entities and cannot exist as one. You will split again. Now!” There followed a clap of thunder and though none of the companions could see anything, the Molten Man acted as if it had been hit by lightning. The creature flashed and it appeared as if two creatures - the fire dragon and Magic Man were separate once more, yet still occupying the same space at the same time. Two superimposed images. It flickered once, twice, three times and then the split was complete. The fire dragon was alone, the other becoming nothing more than a stream of high-purity Life, fading and returning to the natural Life flow of the world.

“There,” Kismet declared smugly, “that sorts that out.”

Kismet turned his back on the fire dragon and began to walk back to the party, but Phaer saw the creature preparing its fiery breath, and the half-elf called out in warning.

“Kismet,” he cried. “Get down!”

The strange man threw himself down onto the stone bridge just in time as the blast of fire shot overhead, right where he had been standing a moment ago. His staff flew into the air and promptly vanished, as its connection to the illusion was broken. The fire hit the bridge between Kismet and the party, blasting a huge chunk of stone out of it and melting a significant portion of the surrounding structure. In its already weakened state, that was more than the ancient bridge could stand. The quakes were fierce and growing in magnitude, causing the bridge to sway in a kind of continuous wave, a macabre dance. More chunks of stone flew into the air and disappeared as the party clung to one another for dear life. When they could move safely once more, they began to try to move towards Kismet. Maybe they could find a way to rescue him. But Kismet yelled at them to get back.

“Leave me! Get to the tunnel; this bridge could collapse at any moment!”

Eilidh sent most of the others onward. Only Phaer and Toli refused to leave her side.

“Get back! All of you! Go!” Kismet cried, desperately.

He was right. There was nothing they could do. The gap between them was too wide. The trio started to back away, the bridge shaking ever more violently. There was a great groaning, tearing and grating sound as stone moved against stone. The cracks widened rapidly until a whole section fell away, nearly taking Kismet with it. He was left hanging over the edge, barely holding on by his fingertips.

“Kismet!” The three cried out as one.

“Oh dear,” Kismet said, as a notebook and pen appeared in the air by his nose. “It looks like I’m going to have to clear my diary for a while.”

The fire dragon looked dazed and drained of strength from whatever had happened with the Magic Man, and the next wave of vibrations knocked it off-balance. Time seemed to slow down,

everything happening in slow motion. The fire dragon had apparently forgotten how to use its wings as it teetered on the edge. Kismet lost his grip with one hand.

“Kismet!” They cried out again.

“Go I tell you! Run! Flee!”

For an instant, all was calm and still as Kismet looked directly at them and spoke in a quiet voice that seemed to fill the air. His message was simple.

"Fly, you fools."

With a hideous sound that set their teeth on edge, a further section of bridge collapsed, sending Kismet and the fire dragon spiralling down through the air towards the ground far below. The trio cried out again in horror and their voices still rang in the air when both Kismet and fire dragon broke through the illusion and vanished from view.

A new wave of shaking and groaning snapped the companions out of their shock, however, and heedless of the danger they ran as fast as they could over the last few feet to the tunnel through the mountain. Once they were all inside, they began to follow the path more slowly - it was unlikely that an entire mountain would collapse and if it did there wasn't much they could do about it. Slowly but surely they made their way through to the other side.

* * * * *

Eilidh voiced her concern over how they were to find their way back to familiar territory, now that the bridge was gone. She did not want to discuss what had happened to Kismet - she wasn't ready to deal with that yet.

“Oh I wouldn't worry about that,” Rochelle reassured her.

Bunny agreed. “A kidnapper is a kind of thief. Now, I don't take children, only possessions, but many of the same principles apply and the golden rule is `never go to ground without leaving yourself a back door`. If this kidnapper is smart enough to steal something so valuable and precious from under the nose of the Prince Regent of Shakaran, and plans to make his stand somewhere around here, he's bound to have an alternative escape route. We just have to find it.”

“In some ways,” Phaer put in, “this actually makes things easier. We won't have to go back through Avidon. Compared to that, how bad can it be?”

“Uh-oh,” Toli remarked. “You really shouldn't have said that.”

“Why not?”

“Don't you know? In every good story, whenever one of the heroes asks `how bad can it be?` things tend to get very bad indeed from then on. It's a bit like when the villain says `nothing can stop me now`. There are certain things one should never say.”

“Thou needst not concern thyself, Toli,” Hannah soothed. “This is real life, in which things do not happen as in the tales of storytellers.”

“Who knows?” Rochelle wondered, philosophically. “Maybe all this really is a story and there's somebody out there making all this up.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” the ever-practical Eilidh reprimanded her.

“OK,” Rochelle accepted, “but that wasn't what I meant anyway.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, you know, when I said you shouldn't worry about getting back...?”

“What did you mean, then?”

“Well, I simply meant that the rate we're going, we'll all be dead long before it becomes an issue!”

That cheery thought caused a blanket of introspective silence to descend upon the group.

* * * * *

The party had taken a short break from walking; resting and sharing food, which served to return some of the general chatter and conversation to the group. Still none of them said a word about Kismet, but each one knew the others were grieving in their own ways. Even those who had met him only briefly were affected by his loss.

They stood before a pair of once-proud wrought iron gates, gilded with gold, though they were now blackened in places. The right hand one hung only on its lower hinge, presenting a forlorn picture of surrender to forces unknown. The gates opened out into a sleepy little village. All around there were signs of civilisation, but no signs of life. Only death. Doors to shops, businesses and homes were left open, windows were smashed; signs were blackened and hanging from walls, or bent and twisted on the ground. Some fires were still smouldering, while bodies and body parts were strewn casually about the landscape. A stunned silence descended on the group. The irrepressible hobbit, Toli, was reduced to tears as this sight, coupled with the death of Kismet, made their quest seem suddenly...real.

WELCOME TO MARINA FELLOWS said the sign, but someone had painted on extra detail in blood, to transform the symbolic twin hills into something obscene. To the right were a general store, a blacksmith and a herbalist's shop. Straight ahead there was a small Temple dedicated to Patrelaux, and a bank. To the west was an area of farmland and private residences and to the east they could just make out what appeared to be mining works.

“The princess must have been brought through here,” Loric offered drawing his sword in case trouble was still waiting around. “There's nowhere else the kidnapper could have gone.

“And judging by the carnage, they weren't alone,” Phaer added, his bow at the ready, scanning the area with his elf sight. Suddenly, his eyes widened. In shock? Anger? Eilidh wasn't sure. He guided Eilidh to one side, away from whatever it was he had seen.

“What is it, Phaer?” she asked, gently.

“Please don't ask me to show you, Eilidh,” he said, eyes pleading silently for understanding. “You shouldn't have to see that. No good can come of it. Just stay here. Calandra, please, you too. In fact, all you ladies stay here - let Loric, Granite and me do what needs to be done.”

“Thy courtesy is most becoming,” said Lady Hannah, “but the sight of death doth hold no fear for me.”

“It's not the death part that's the problem,” the ranger replied.

“No,” Eilidh insisted, guessing his meaning. “I appreciate the sentiment, but no. I want to see,” then she corrected herself. “That is, I need to see. Everyone must choose for themselves, but I need to see exactly what horrors have been done here.”

In the end, nobody stayed behind. Some moved forward hesitantly, uncertainly, but nobody tried to rush them or hold them back.

The sight was horrific, as was the stench of death. Dozens of bodies were strewn about the place. Mostly human, a few other races and chaos creatures, too that appeared to have been killed in the struggle. Some bodies were spread out; some were piled on top of one another. Many bodies were no longer in one piece, and in some cases, even the individual's race was in some doubt, as decapitated heads were swapped and placed on different bodies. Had there been anyone left alive to identify the bodies, many would have been unable to find their loved ones. The point was moot, however. There were no survivors of this dreadful holocaust.

The bodies were blooded and torn. There were many deep, ugly scratches and gashes - it was impossible to be sure whether the victims had been still alive at the time the injuries were sustained. But most sickening of all was the way many of the bodies were grouped together with injuries to their lower abdominal areas. This is what Phaer's sharp elfsight had picked out, and while the precise details of their ordeal were best left unimagined, the general point was clear enough.

The group did what little they could to give the victims some measure of dignity in death and worked long into the night to dig a mass grave for them. Between them they did have magic that could have made the job easier, but nobody even suggested it. They all felt that this job should not be easy. Their efforts were the only thing they could give these people now.

When the job was finished, nobody wanted to talk about it. The group splintered. Some huddled around campfires, seeking comfort in each other, while others preferred to be alone with their thoughts.

Phaer for one excused himself from the group and went off by himself for a while. In elven forest clans, he knew, there was a very potent sense of `oneness` among all individuals. The pain of one was the pain of all. Phaer could remember times when elf friends would cry for days over the loss of an individual elf whom they had never met and could not have pointed out in a crowd. Humans, in Phaer's experience, tended to react very differently to loss, depending on how close the association was. Several times, Phaer had heard one human ask another in grief, “How well did you know him?” The half-elf was still not sure he understood that question.

But in this case, it was not the death itself that had so affected him; it was the horror of the pain and suffering that these monsters had not only inflicted, but also seemingly enjoyed. In the elven

forests, an assault like this would send an entire clan into mourning for half a human lifetime. Or start a war.

Although, he thought, grimly, I suppose the war has already begun.

In silence, then, Phaer of the House of the Fountain simply walked, allowing the open grasslands to gently cleanse his soul.

Chapter 15

The robed and hooded figure was seated in an ornate golden chair, at a solid, magically carved mahogany table. The room was dimly lit by a pair of suspended fiery bobs floating in the air, in which the faint smell of sulphur lingered. Yet the darkness in the room was oppressive. The door facing the figure opened to admit two individuals. The first was a male gnome dressed in robes of black, the second, towering above him was an elf female dressed in dark brown leather the same shade as the desk. She moved with the silent grace of her kind, and her face displayed an arrogant superiority as she looked down upon other lesser races, as she viewed them, for she was a dark elf.

To most other races, in modern times, this was simply considered to mean an elf that was given to the worship of Mortress and followed her dark teachings. But to the ancient elves, there was more to it than that. Much more.

There existed a fundamental difference in philosophy between the dark elf clans and the rest of their race. The dark elves believed themselves superior to all other mortals. They were taller, stronger, faster, more graceful, more magical and possessed more acute senses of sight and hearing. They believed that the elves were the natural rulers of the world and all other mortal races should bow down before them. The other elf clans expelled the dark ones in pre-Ancient days from their sacred forests, because they wanted to live in peace and co-operation with other races. Even the dwarves, despite their cultural differences, were held in respectful regard. For the elves believed that each individual, each race had a place in the world and a particular role to play. They felt no superiority because of their natural advantages. The dark elves were repulsive to them, as they threatened the social order, but beyond banishing them from their forests, they would take no action.

The gnome spoke first. "Your Divine Excellency, I respectfully present the individual whose presence you demanded."

"Indeed," the female voice answered from within the hood of her golden robes. "Leave us now."

The gnome bowed and left, closing the door behind him, while the elf approached the desk with two strides and folded her arms.

"Who are you to `demand` my presence, human?"

"Ah, so direct! My name is not important for you to know, elf child, but you will know it soon enough, along with everyone else on Majaos. I am the future of this world," the robed figure continued, cryptically. "I am also its past."

"Oh really," the elf said tartly. "You're having paranoid delusions; I'm so glad you chose to share them with me!"

The woman chuckled. "Your spirit is encouraging, Z'rcona, but your attitude needs some adjustment."

"You know my name, then. You have me at a disadvantage."

"Ah, elf child, you have no idea."

“Is that supposed to be some kind of threat?”

“I would prefer you viewed it as a warning. I have chosen you to work for me and that is what you will do, one way or another.”

“I do not work for humans,” she spat. “I work only for my own interests.”

“But you will be working for your own interests - to preserve your life.”

“Alright, that's it; I've had enough of this. Time for you to die!” Quick as lightning, the elf sprang at the robed figure with her dagger, but the weapon instantly vanished from her hand, dematerialised by some unseen force and then she herself was knocked to the ground and pinned there by that same force.

“How?--”

“Magic,” came the woman's acid reply. “Perhaps you're familiar with the concept. Oh no that's right, you're Magically Dead aren't you? No weapon you possess can possibly harm me.”

The elf found herself released and she stood up with new respect. “You're a mage? I've never seen a mage in golden robes before. What power do you have?”

“I am power beyond your imagining. Come, elf child,” she said, rising from her chair. “Let me show you what I mean.” Seeing the elf maid hesitate, she assured her, “I am not going to harm you, although there would be no way for you to resist, were I to choose otherwise.”

Z'rcona took a deep breath and walked slowly over to the golden-robed human. She would cooperate, but in her own time, thus retaining a certain degree of control.

“Dignity in the face of a superior force,” remarked the figure in gold. “That is commendable. You interest me, elf child, which is of course why you are here. Now, prepare your mind to receive the knowledge of who and what I am. Are you ready, elf child?”

“I am ready, but calling me `elf child` hardly seems appropriate,” she protested, sullenly. “I am a good deal older than you, after all.”

“You're certain of that, are you, Z'rcona?” Without another word, the one in gold placed her hand above the elf's head, fingers like claws touching her scalp. Z'rcona felt a jolt like electricity and a white light formed in her mind. The light faded and was replaced by images. People, places, events flashed before her. Z'rcona gasped as the images accelerated to the point where they blurred into one another, and yet her mind could still comprehend what she was seeing. She saw this woman before her at the centre of great, terrifying wonders of magic. Vast battles she fought, often alone. She was magic's power unleashed, untempered, ungoverned. The images slowed and she saw this woman facing another mage - she could sense his power and authority, but the woman was defiant.

In the vision, she told the man that he should give up the pretence. “Ye shall not fight me, old man. Ye know well what will happen should thee try. Our combined power shall surely destroy the world.”

“I thought you cared not for the world,” the man shot back.

“Ye have always misunderstood me, old man. I care for the world as it ought to be. I care for the world that achieves its full potential. I care for the world growing my way, under the natural order. My order. This world shall rise to fulfil my vision or it shall be destroyed. It is for the world as it exists at present, that I care not. But ye do care. That is why thy threats are surely empty and hollow.”

The woman had miscalculated, however. The man called down power she did not know he possessed, and physically threw himself at her, transporting them both beyond this world, this reality.

Z'rcona had no way to judge when these events took place, but as the images paused, she sensed that this woman was truly Ancient even by elven standards, yet she looked to be in her early twenties - a young adult on a human scale.

The images resumed and showed her more recent events from within her own lifetime, around two hundred years. The images were accompanied by an understanding - this woman had been studying, learning, observing this world as it had changed in her long absence. More than that though, it was preparation. To what end, Z'rcona was not sure, but the elf was certain of one thing: this power was not to be opposed.

The mage woman broke her contact with Z'rcona's mind at last.

“Now you understand.”

“Yes, Your Divine Excellency.”

“Good. Now, elf child, I require your assistance.”

“What can I possibly do that you cannot?”

“An excellent question. I am powerful, that is true, but even I cannot be everywhere at once. My plans operate under a timetable not entirely of my own choosing. Certain things are going to happen and when they do, I must be free to act. I cannot afford to be caught elsewhere doing other, less important things. That is why I have a number of operatives who exercise my will in the world and look after my interests. You are to be my latest such operative. Loyalty will be rewarded when I come into my ultimate power.”

“I understand, Mistress. How can I be of service?”

“One of the other people I have in my service has taken it upon himself to do something very foolish. He is bent on fulfilling some insignificant personal vendetta, even though that violates my most fundamental rule: personal agendas have no place within my service. When I come into my full power, you will be in a position to deal with anyone you wish. Life or death, pleasure or torment for millions will be your choice. Until then, you are to take no vengeful action without my personal authorisation. As I say, however, this particular agent of mine has chosen to ignore that law. His foolish actions are a betrayal of the highest order, because he has attracted the attention of one of the major powers in modern Mythallen. If he is captured and made to talk, he could very well lead them to me. The world's forces are currently fighting their diverting little war with chaos creatures - a very diverting little war, if you take my meaning.”

“I think so,” Z'rcona answered. “You're saying that it's keeping their attention away from the real power - you.”

“Precisely. I want them to keep on fighting this war - a war they can never win - but if this traitor leads them to me...”

“Then they would ignore the chaos creatures and focus on you,” Z'rcona finished the thought, “which would divert you away from your tasks, your timetable.”

“That's exactly right. You see? Now you're co-operating and proving that I was right to choose you.”

“If you don't mind me asking, Excellency, why did you choose me?”

“You have the qualities I need and your family is important to me.”

“What do you know of my family?” Z'rcona frowned. She was very defensive about such things.

“You have seen glimpses of a time beyond even the long memories of elves, when the world was divided. Towards the end, many deserted me and others stayed only because they feared me more than my enemy. Standing tall among all my allies was one great and powerful elven house that supported me because they shared my vision and believed in what I was trying to accomplish for the world. Your family has suffered in punishment since.”

“There are old stories told among the elves of my family, tales of a great past when we stood against the world and fought for it as it should be: our way. Many do not believe those stories, but I always have.”

“Then you have answered your own question. That is why you are here. With your help, your family will be great again, with you at the head of your house, answering to no-one but me. Together, you and I shall make the world show the proper respect and fear for your family, your house: The House of the Fountain.”

* * * * *

Somewhere, deep in a nameless part of the wilderness, two figures were sitting on the hollow trunk of a fallen tree. The first was a tall, handsome man of indeterminate age. He was dressed in a white silk shirt, which billowed out of the sleeves of his red velvet jacket. A pair of blue-green silk breeches and purple hose covered his legs. His clashing ensemble was finished off with a pair of black shoes and a brown hat, which sported a bright orange feather. The second figure was the size and shape of a man, but seemed to be made of fire. Somehow, however, the wood around them seemed to be in no danger of burning. They made a curious pair, but then there was no-one around to see them.

The man of fire spoke first. “That was decidedly unpleasant, sir. Being invaded like that. I feel...used...violated.”

“Oh don't be so oversensitive,” the other retorted. “You'll be fine and it was all in a good cause. With all the Life you and young Eilidh stripped away, the Great Fountain of Light is invisible again.” He grinned. “I imagine the Hand of Darkness will get a bit of a shock when they find out.”

“That's true, sir. They're bound to be upset.”

“Understandably, but we really couldn't allow just anybody to get their hands on that power. That Life Eddy was attracting attention and I don't think we want `Her` to gain any more advantages than she's already got. That wouldn't be fair at all.”

“Shame about the bridge, though, sir. It was a rather nice piece of work.”

“Yes, I know how you feel, but with that great lightshow gone, the Hand of Darkness armies might decide to do some exploring. I don't think our friends need an entire army chasing them. They've got enough problems already. No,” he sighed, regretfully, “the bridge had to go.”

“Anyway,” he continued a moment later, “what did you think to my performance?”

“Your performance, sir?”

“Yes, you know, `You shall not pass` and `Fly, you fools`.”

“Gandalf said it better.”

“Gandalf? That walking bag of bones?”

The man of fire gave his companion a curious look. “He may have been a bit wiry, sir, but I'd hardly call him a `walking bag of bones`.”

“Wiry? Hah! You've only seen the portraits. I met him in the flesh once and I'm telling you those artists used some considerable creativity in their work.”

“That may be true, but he still said it better.”

“Actually, he didn't really say the first bit at all - not exactly.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, it's true. He really said `you cannot pass`. He was misquoted, or rather the bards and storytellers thought `you shall not pass` sounded more dramatic.”

“It's not what he said, sir, it's the way he said it.”

“It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it?”

“Precisely, and Gandalf definitely said it better.”

“Oh.” Kismet looked crestfallen. “Mind you,” he considered, after a pause, “he did have a Balrog on his tail at the time,” he pointed out, brightening up again. “I dare say that would bring out my emotive streak, too.”

“Balrog, shmalrog,” muttered the flaming man, dismissively. “I ate a Balrog once.”

“I remember. You had gas for weeks afterwards, and that's quite a serious condition in a fire dragon, for other people at least. One good release and `whoosh` half a forest goes up in flames.”

“That was an accident,” protested his flaming companion.

“I’m sure the elves would be delighted to hear that. If you just explained that you didn’t *mean* to burn down their sacred wood, I’m sure they’d understand perfectly.”

“No need to be sarcastic, sir,” said the fiery individual, sullenly. “Anyway, my point was that if a mere Balrog was enough to make Gandalf emote, don’t you think I should have had a similar effect on you? After all, I wasn’t exactly myself at the time and fire dragons are generally considered fairly dangerous.”

“You? Dangerous?” He stifled a laugh. “To yourself maybe, and the occasional tree.”

“Eilidh and the others seemed quite nervous.” The fire-man sounded hurt.

Kismet waved that aside. “They’re young and inexperienced; easily impressed. I know you better, and to be brutally honest, as dragons go, you’re not exactly premier league.” The man grew misty-eyed as he reminisced. “Now Smaug, on the other hand, ah now there was a dragon of the old school. People knew where they stood with Smaug. Why, compared to him, you’re nothing but an overgrown toad.”

“Overgrown toad!” The second figure roared in anger, standing up and shifting to his fire dragon shape before unleashing a powerful jet of searing flame as bright and hot as the sun, directly at Kismet. When he’d finished, Kismet was still sat there, unhurt and unharmed, though his clothes had turned to ashes.

“That’s exactly what I mean,” he said. “Sink me but that was childish! You wouldn’t catch Smaug throwing a tantrum just because Gandalf told him a few home truths.”

“Do we have to keep talking about Smaug, sir?” The fire dragon asked, sullenly.

“You were the one who brought it up. ‘Gandalf said it better’ indeed! Humph.”

“I’m sorry I mentioned it, sir.”

“Yes, so you should be. I say, have you any idea how much fashionable clothes like these cost? They’re not cheap, I can tell you!”

“What difference?” wondered the dragon. “You can just snap your fingers and create some new ones.”

Kismet did just that, though he was still smouldering slightly for effect. “That’s not the point,” he insisted, indignantly. “It’s the principle of the thing.”

There followed a period of silence, during which the fire dragon shifted to his ‘man of fire’ form and asked, in a grave tone. “Sir, do you really think they will do it?”

“Rescue Princess Mystaya? Of course they will!”

“I was talking about the wider issues, sir. You know - ‘Her’?”

“Oh ‘Her’ well that’s a different question entirely.”

“And what would your answer be?” the fire man pressed. “Can they do what needs to be done?”

Kismet let out a slow breath, all traces of humour gone. “They're the only ones who can, my fine fiery friend. That's all I can say. If they can't do it, nobody can, that's simply the way it works.”

“Hmmm, it sounds to me like they're still going to need help, sir, wouldn't you say?”

“Oh without question,” Kismet agreed. “I'll have to keep on giving a helping hand from time to time, just like I promised Eilidh.”

“Isn't that going to be a bit difficult, sir? Considering you're supposed to be dead, I mean. If you suddenly appear to them, they're going to start asking a lot of awkward questions. Questions they're not ready to hear the answers to yet.”

“Ah. Yes, I see what you mean. Perhaps I did get a little carried away with the drama of it all,” Kismet admitted, grudgingly. “Still, there are other things I can do behind the scenes, as it were. Just like I did in Shakaran Borderlands, stirring up those centaurs so that Loric fellow would fall foul of that convenient dragon trap at just the right time to set everything in motion. Had to think on my feet for that one,” he added, proudly. “Anyway, I have every confidence that they will, in time, uncover and piece together the clues. Then they'll realise or at least guess that I'm not dead after all. Then I can return to them without it coming as too much of a shock. Maybe it's better this way.”

“And in the meantime, sir?”

“In the meantime, I'll just have to get someone else to help them out for a bit.”

“Not `him`, sir. Please tell me you're not going to send `him`.”

“Why ever not?”

“He is completely mad, you know.”

“Now you're being rude again.”

“Am I, sir?”

“Come on, I know what this is about. You just don't get along.”

“Do you blame me after last time?”

“That was an accident, just like your encounter with the elven forest.”

“You just had to bring that up again, didn't you, sir?”

“Oh do stop sulking. If the wind changes your face will stick in that ghastly expression. Now come on.” He rose to his feet and dusted down his new clothes.

“We're going then are we, sir?”

“Of course, no time to sit around and chat. There are places out there where the sky is burning and sea’s asleep and the rivers dream; people made of smoke and cities made of song. Somewhere there’s trouble, somewhere there’s violence. Somewhere there’s burnt toast and somewhere else the tea’s getting cold. Come on, my friend. We’ve got work to do.”

“Nice speech, sir.”

“Oh, did you like it?”

“Yes, sir. It was very moving.”

“Well thank you. For a moment there I thought you were going to say ‘Merlyn said it better’.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, sir.”

They walked over to the bank of a deep, wide river, whereupon the man of fire extinguished his flames and grew and morphed his body into that of sea serpent.

“By the way,” Kismet said, conversationally, climbing onto his back. “Did you ever hear the conspiracy theories regarding the whole Bilbo Baggins/Smaug/Gandalf thing?” he asked.

“I don’t believe so, sir.”

“Well some say the whole thing was staged. I mean, think about it - a hobbit just happens to wander into the lair of a dragon that could have toasted him before he could blink and of all the treasure he could have come home with, he finds that particular ring. What are the odds on that?”

“Hmmm,” the fire dragon mused. “That’s not exactly the way I remember it, sir,” the fire dragon objected.

“Ah, that’s because you’ve only read the book. I was there!”

“If you say so, sir.”

As they sped away down river, towards open water, Kismet leaned closer and whispered, conspiratorially, “You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if the whole Ring Quest was a Gandalf-staged self-promoting publicity stunt. It would be just like His Boniness to do something like that. And he did get promoted to White Wizard...”

* * * * *

Z’rcona mulled over Her Divine Excellency’s words for a while, taking her time. At last she said, “You have my pledge of loyalty, Great One. I will do as you ask.” If this ancient and powerful woman could restore the dark elves of the House of the Fountain to their rightful place in the world with Z’rcona herself ruling them all, she would do whatever it took. “Now, about this traitor - you want me to eliminate him, I presume?”

“Yes, but in a very particular way.” She held out her hand and a small glowing spherical object appeared. “This magical orb will teleport any individual here to me. All of my major operatives carry one so that I can reach them wherever they are. It’s not the most efficient tracking method, but anything more powerful might be traced.”

“I take it the traitor has `misplaced` his.”

The woman gave a half smile. “Apparently so, which is why you are to plant this replacement on his person, so I can teleport him back here and deal with him. Hence I need your skills as a thief.”

“You want me to *unpick* his pocket? That's a new one, but I can't see it being a problem.”

“Good. You must beware though, because he is a sorcerer of some note, besides having other powers with which I rewarded him for his previous good service.”

“Ah, that does complicate things a little. I can still do it, but in case things go wrong, do you need him alive, necessarily?”

“No, I don't much care whether he comes to me alive or dead, but if he's dead, he must be in more-or-less one piece so I can resurrect him and punish him properly before I let him die again...several times. Hence I'm counting on your precise ranger's skills to assassinate him cleanly, if necessary. One last thing: don't do this alone. Put together a small team from my camp here. Just a handful of people with varied skills to back you up.”

“Alright. I'll do that and be on my way just as soon as you tell me where I'm going.”

Her Divine Excellency gave her a map, saying, “Your target has gone to ground in a small village that cut itself off from the outside world millennia ago. There is a magical passage from one of Mythallen's major cities, but that is not marked on your map because I cannot allow you to use it. I've had reports of some kind of disturbance in the area that I don't want you getting caught up in. Otherwise, your route is your own choice.”

Without further comment, the dark elf Z'rcona left Niltsiar's presence and went to gather her team together. On her way out, she glanced at the map to commit to memory the name of her destination.

It read, `MARINA FELLS`.

Chapter 16

As he walked, Phaer discovered that the village of Marina Fells was well-named, built as it was around misty, grassy mountains and a large lake, linked to a trio of major rivers. A small picturesque waterfall caught the sun in just the right way to create its own perpetual miniature rainbow. Phaer allowed the sight to embed itself in the core of his being and began to walk closer to the lake, intending to wash in the cool, crystal blue water. At that moment, however, he noticed, standing by the lake, an old man with a long white beard, wearing golden robes. Phaer didn't have time to wonder where he'd come from before he saw the great arc of a serpentine body emerge from the water behind him. Phaer ran down the steep slope towards the man, waving his arms wildly to attract attention.

“Grandfather!” Phaer called out, again and again, using the traditional elven mode of address for an elder.

“Sonny!” The man called back, finally noticing the ranger a few steps short of touching distance. “Sonny, is that you? Sonny? How come you've got pointed ears, sonny? Wait a minute, you're not my grandson - you're an impostor! Ha! I may be old, but you can't fool me, boy!” He wagged his finger, sternly.

The creature in the lake, whatever it was, had partially surfaced more than once during Phaer's brief run down the hill, and he didn't need any stubbornness from this man. “I know I'm not your grandson. It's just an expression.”

“An expression of what?”

“I don't know. Respect, I suppose.”

“Oh, well, respect is good. Quite refreshing, too, in young people today.”

“You think so? Perhaps we could discuss it as we make our way back to the village.”

“Back to the village?”

“Yes, back to the village, as in `away from here`.”

“No.”

The monster in the lake, flicked a massive tail, splashing water over them both. The old man didn't appear to notice.

“What do you mean `no`? Why not?”

“I'm not going anywhere without my hat!”

“Well where did you last see--?” Phaer began, and then stopped and said incredulously, “It's on your head!” Although he could have sworn it wasn't there a moment ago.

“It is?”

Phaer grabbed the hat and showed it to the old man. “There! There's your hat!”

The old man eyed the slightly soggy hat suspiciously. “That's not my hat, sonny. My hat was in much better condition. Have you switched hats on me, boy?”

“Look, Grandfather, if you'll just come with me I'll buy you a new hat with pleasure. Please just come on!” Taking no further argument, the half-elf gently but firmly grabbed the man by the arm and started to jog up the slope back the way he'd come.

They hadn't gone far before the old man said, “You know something, sonny, I think there's something following us.”

Phaer panicked. “There is? Where?” He looked around but he couldn't see anything.

“Well if there isn't, boy, why in the name of all the gods are you making me run up this confounded hill at my age?” he demanded.

“Because there's a monster in the lake.”

The old man came to such an abrupt halt, Phaer stumbled and fell flat on his face. “The lake!” the old man cried in triumph. “That's where he went!” He whirled around to face the lake, pushing up the sleeves of his robes, which promptly fell down again. “Come out of there you lousy good-for-nothing snake! You did that on purpose, tried to drown me!”

With much bubbling and frothing of the water, a massive head raised up, at least four times the size of any dragon. It was a creature of immense size, powerful magic, incredible speed and very bad temper: a sea serpent. Even the most fiercely arrogant of aquatic dragons would think twice before crossing such a creature.

That was it. Phaer was not going to risk his own neck to save this ridiculous old man who was busy shaking his fists and giving the creature a good scolding. So without a single extra thought, he ran back to the heart of the village and rejoined the group, telling them nothing of his encounter.

* * * * *

Calandra was deep in conversation with Hannah, when she heard Loric, who had taken off by himself, call out. “Callie! Over here! Quick!”

It took the cleric a moment to pinpoint where his voice was coming from, but finally spotted him jumping and waving in the distance. Wasting not a moment, she sprang up and ran towards him.

Loric had been searching the wider area, desperately hoping there might be some survivors and he had stopped suddenly as he found one. She was a human warrior judging by her rather fine armour. She wore a scabbard that seemed to match a sword that was on the ground a few feet away. Her wounds were consistent with battle, not assault. This was further evidenced by the pile of chaos creature corpses all around her. Most importantly, she was still alive... just barely, and though it was hard to tell from her extensive injuries, Loric thought he recognised her.

The woman seemed to react to his voice and tried to speak. What came out was no more than a whispered croak, but it sounded like his name...no, it couldn't be...could it? She tried again, this time a little clearer. She was saying his name. She was saying, “Loric.”

But how could she possibly...? He broke off his own thought when he realised she was holding something out to him, as best she could. He crouched down to examine it and she immediately relinquished her grasp.

Calandra arrived on the scene then and knelt down beside the victim, gesturing for Loric to give her more space. As Loric backed away a few steps he was amazed to discover that the warrior had given him a map – a map of something he had been searching for, for a long time.

Wait a minute, he realised with a jolt, *the only person who should have this is...* He moved closer again: much closer, ignoring Calandra's protests.

"Dear gods, it is you! Sara!"

"She's a dragon, isn't she?" the cleric asked and Loric nodded vaguely. "I've learned to sense your aura and hers is like yours...an obsidian, yes?" Again, the half-listening nod.

He knew this young dragon and he knew her human form very well indeed, or at least he did before it was so badly beaten. She had found the map for him and paid the ultimate price.

"L-Lo-Loric," the girl croaked. "Found..." she was wracked by pain and began coughing up blood.

"Yes, you found them," Loric said, softly. "You've done great. Thank you. Now just save your strength, we're going to sort you out."

Sara couldn't see Calandra look up at Loric and shake her head sadly, but she didn't need to. She knew she was dying and wanted desperately to communicate with him one last time. "I...we...look..."

"You've been looking for me?" Loric guessed.

Sara shook her head.

"No? You mean not just you? Someone else?"

Sara nodded.

"Who, Sara? Who is it?"

"J...Jay--" and then she passed away.

Loric felt the gentle, sympathetic touch of Calandra. "Loric, I'm sorry for your loss," she said in a soft voice. "There was nothing anyone could do. Her injuries...it's a miracle she held on to this life as long as she did."

Loric nodded.

"She seemed to know you. Who was she? A sister? A lover?" When Loric did not immediately answer, she offered, "If you would rather be left alone, I understand. Do you want me to go?"

“No, no please stay. I'm glad that another of our kind is here. She was called Sara. Dear gods, she was so young, barely started to live! She and I met less than a century ago, on a human timescale, when a group of stupid dragon slayers forced her in to my lair.”

“They were hunting her?”

“No, the truth is stranger than that. She was merely bait. You see, at the time, she didn't know she was a dragon.”

Calandra frowned. “How could she not know?”

Loric told the story, explaining that when she was still a hatchling, too young to leave her family home, her nest had been attacked and slaughtered by a powerful red dragon. She was the only survivor - her instinct saved her. She changed into the form of a small human girl and hid. The red overlooked her and eventually she was found by some of Calandra's order, the Revered Children of Patrelaux. The Clerics didn't have the magic to sense that she was a dragon and the shock and trauma had affected Sara's mind so that she simply forgot she was anything other than human. The temple took her in as an orphan and raised her in their ways.

A few years later, she became a victim of another attack - an attack on the temple. The place was ransacked by a Hand of Darkness raid and though the clerics fought well, the attackers were too strong.

The most senior and powerful clerics were killed on the spot because they were deemed too dangerous. The youngest, most impressionable children were to be conditioned and indoctrinated in the ways of the black clerics. A number of those in between were taken to Avidon to be sold as slaves. Sara was among them.

“On one particular slave market day,” Loric continued, “a group of dragon slayers came to town looking for slaves to use as dragon bait. These weren't just your usual drunken rabble I deal with all the time. These were serious hardened professionals - Dark Knights.”

Calandra cursed. “Lady Hannah is right to feel the way she does about them!”

“Well, strictly speaking, the hunt was organised by an unauthorised splinter group, that had helped finance and plan the temple raid. The highest ranks of the Dark Knights of Zhentilon took it so seriously, that at the same time as this group was hunting dragons, the Order of the Black Rose was out hunting them!”

“The Black Rose?” Calandra wondered.

Lady Hannah joined them at that point and informed the cleric, “The Order of the Black Rose, Revered Daughter, art a small group of Knight Assassins that doth answer directly to the Supreme Knight Commander. Their function is to eliminate Dark Knights that breach their Code of discipline and honour to such a degree that they art considered irredeemable. Their lives are forfeit to receive the dread punishment of the Mistress of Death. A similar Order doth exist even among the ranks of the Knights of Paladinia. Mercifully, there hath almost never been any need to use them in such a capacity. Prithee that thou shalt forgive me for mine interjection, but I didst feel that mine knowledge mayhap be of use to thee.”

“That's OK, my Lady,” Loric said. “Anyway, for some reason – I still don't know quite why - the leader of this band wanted my hide in particular and he bought Sara especially for that purpose. He knew they had to act fast because the Knights of the Black Rose were only two days behind. Too far to prevent the rebels if everything went to plan, but close enough to be onto them if there should be any delay. Most probably their haste caused them to cut corners in their preparation and make the mistake that they did.”

“What mistake?” Calandra asked.

“Well, their plan was to force Sara into my cave, hoping that I would kill her with my acid breath.”

“Pray tell, how wouldst that help the rebel Knights?” Hannah wondered.

Calandra explained, “There is a brief moment after we dragons use our various breath weapons - just a second or so - when we are blinded and made sluggish by the effect of the magic.”

“I hath never heard that before,” the Knight admitted.

“As you can imagine, it's not something we're keen to publicise, and most of the time we learn to cover it, especially if we're flying on instinct,” the cleric pointed out. “Also, obsidian dragons, like their cousins the blacks and the brass tend to be very irritable when they're woken up suddenly by an intruder.”

Loric agreed, “We tend to spit first, clean up the mess later, but using our breath weapons the instant we wake up is the most vulnerable time for us. If I'd done that on this occasion, then I would have been blinded and relatively immobile, just long enough for the well-prepared Knights to ambush me. They used specially designed weapons that could have pinned my wings to the ground and shredded their thin membranes.”

“Indeed, that is the standard attack pattern used by the Knights of Paladina. It has been ever thus since Lord Paladinus himself didst lead a party of the very first Knights to slay the evil dragons of the enemy forces of the Hand of Darkness. Pin them, shred their wings, and use a combination of armour, shields and good position to prevent a clear strike from the dragon's breath weapon whilst attacking the tail.”

“A dragon's tail is very sensitive to pain,” Calandra agreed.

“Precisely. Thus, the pain doth build until some of the Knights hath sufficient time to strike at the flanks, keeping their weapons low to penetrate the soft underbelly. Attacking a dragon is not without risk, but the Honourable Rules of Engagement hath instructed countless generations of Knights and led them to success.”

“With me, they miscalculated,” Loric explained. “They approached from behind the mouth of the cave. That way, they thought, even if the wind changed direction, it wouldn't carry their scent into the cave and I wouldn't smell them until they were right on top of me.”

“And suddenly detecting that smell like that would cause you to wake up and spit your acid breath instinctively,” Calandra filled in, mostly for Hannah's benefit.

“What they didn’t realise was that my lair possessed an air vent at the back.”

“So their scent travelled down that vent!” Calandra marvelled.

Loric grinned darkly. “I could smell them for leagues as they approached. When they thrust Sara alone and unarmed into my lair, I knew she was an innocent, so I gently moved her to one side and blasted the Knights.”

“Thou didst slay them all, then?”

“Almost. One got away. Don’t ask me how.”

“He didst run away?” Lady Hannah was incredulous. “He was indeed no true Dark Knight. For if I hath learned anything of them, an abomination though they truly art, their honour cannot be questioned. A Knight doth not run from a battle unless there are innocents to protect. A Knight may lead a battle to a more tactically favourable terrain, but to run away like a frightened hobgoblin is not a Knightly manner in which to behave. Didst the Black Rose catch him?”

“I don’t know,” Loric said. “But as I say, this was about a century ago, so he’s long dead by now either way.”

“Of course,” Hannah agreed.

“Anyway, when the dust settled, you can imagine my surprise when I discovered Sara was a dragon the same as me. It took a long time to convince her, and I’m not sure she was ever entirely comfortable with being a dragon.”

I can relate to that, Calandra thought silently.

“I always assumed that she would eventually work through her pain and embrace her true self. Now she will never have that chance.”

“Knowest thou why she shouldst be out here?” Hannah asked him.

“I sent her,” Loric admitted, guilt and regret washing over him. “Oh, not here specifically,” he clarified before they asked. “Sara was out searching for something for me. She found it, too,” he held up the parchment, though without giving any indication of what was on it. “That’s what she was trying to tell me at the end.”

“She was trying to give you a name, too, I think, yes?” Calandra prompted.

“Jayne. Another protégé of mine. She was part of the same mission. Their paths must have crossed sometime before Sara came here.”

“This Jayne was another young dragon?” Calandra asked. Talking seemed to be helping Loric, and she was keen to encourage anything that might aid the healing process.

“No. A half-orc.”

“More dragon bait?” Hannah wondered.

Loric smiled in spite of himself. “The only time I’ve ever seen the bait kill the hunter. OK, that hunter was just a typical mercenary, not a trained Knight, but even so. He thought she was a cowed and docile kitten when she was really a tigress simply saving her strength, waiting for the right moment rip out his throat.”

“Good for her,” Hannah approved.

“Well, I was impressed. Man but she was wild!”

“And you tamed her, I take it,” said the cleric.

Loric snorted. “You don’t tame Jayne. In fact, I think it was the very fact that I didn’t try that helped me gain her trust. She completely adores me now.”

“Naturally,” Calandra teased.

Loric had the good sense to at least appear slightly embarrassed. “Anyway, she’s out there somewhere, looking for me. Most likely heading for Avidon. And I won’t be there. I sure picked a bad time to leave the city!”

“Hadst thou not, then Sara wouldst have died alone out here,” Hannah pointed out.

“At least this way you got to say goodbye,” Callie added.

“True.” Loric nodded.

That said, he asked his two companions to leave him while he buried his young friend’s body with the respect and honour she deserved.

Chapter 17

Later, when most of the group was back together, Bunny revealed, much to Calandra's dismay, that she had conducted a careful search of the bodies as they'd buried them. The white cleric was slightly appeased when Bunny assured her she was just investigating and took nothing.

"There was nothing worth keeping, and even a complete collection of gold wouldn't be worth the effort," said the Sumorityl. Then, seeing the reactions all around her, she clarified, "My point is, there was no material reason to attack these people. There is no evidence that they possessed anything of value that would make it worthwhile."

"Tactically, they didst appear to have little in the way of military defensive capability," Hannah observed.

"And there was no time to mobilise even that much," Phaer added. "You saw how many were armed with garden forks and rakes, when there's a basic but well-stocked armoury in the town?"

"There's not much evidence of deaths due to magic," Rochelle pointed out.

"That's right," agreed Toli. "Just the odd one here or there, but most of it seems to be tooth and claw."

"Then this whole village was simply taken by surprise and overwhelmed, overrun by a kind of feral force." Eilidh concluded.

"Dost thou adjudge this to be connected to the kidnapping, Eilidh?"

"On the face of it, I don't see why it should be. According to Prince Garald, the kidnapper is a sorcerer not a wizard. He could have no possible way to control these beasts. It could easily be coincidence. Since we don't know where we are, we have no way to judge whether this is consistent with the known attack routes of the chaos creatures. On the other hand, there's plenty going on at the moment that doesn't seem to make any sense, so maybe there is a connection."

"So you're firmly on the fence, then," Phaer remarked with a grin.

Eilidh returned the smile "You could say that."

"In that case, I guess the only option is to get on with the task at hand but stay alert," Loric said, drawing his sword and moving to a protective position in the group.

Lady Hannah agreed with his assessment and she moved to the opposite flank. She checked her sword was free in its scabbard, but kept it sheathed.

"Don't you think you'd be better with it in your hand?" Loric inquired.

"Nay, good sir! The Sacred Code of Paladinius doth state under the Honourable Rules of Engagement, `A Knight shalt not draw weapons until a clear threat hast been identified`. Such a course of action doth help to avoid the possibility of appearing threatening to innocents."

"And increase the chances of falling victim to a surprise attack, I should think."

“Not if a Knight is proceeding with all due vigilance. Surprise attacks oftentimes are the result of poor perception on the part of the warrior, rather than good strategy on the part of the enemy.”

“Then of course there's all that armour,” Phaer pointed out. “I don't know how you can even walk inside that shell, let alone fight.”

“One gets used to it, noble Phaer.”

“There's still one thing I don't understand,” Loric said. “Sara made no attempt to change into dragon form and fight when this village was attacked. I know she wasn't comfortable with her dragon form, but even so...”

“No, my friend,” Granite said, as he stomped over, stroking his beard. “You're wrong about that. She did try to change form. My guess is she hesitated for a moment and that cost her. She was prevented by a binding spell. Oh yes, its effects still linger even after death. That's why she didn't even revert to her true form when she died.”

“But that's an Enforcer spell,” Toli pointed out. “Why would Enforcers be involved in this massacre?”

“There's more,” Granite cautioned them. “While we were burying the bodies, I took the liberty of magically probing those few that were struck down with sorcerer magic and it had the same signature.”

“Signature?” Phaer wondered.

“Just as nobody has precisely the same handwriting,” he explained, “every mage has a personal signature that they use to cast spells.”

Eilidh nodded. “Catalysts have used this technique since - well, forever I suppose - to catch criminal mages and prove their guilt. Nobody can forge a magical signature because nobody can precisely duplicate the thoughts and will of another. This proves that the dragon-binding spell was cast by the same mage as the illusion magic.”

“Aye, and examination of dead chaos creatures confirms the use of wizard-style control magic.”

“Same signature?” Eilidh enquired, already knowing the answer.

“Aye, lass, same signature.”

“But that's impossible!” Toli protested. “That's three distinct magical Secrets: Fire, Shadow and Earth. No-one can cast all three!”

“The evidence says, apparently somebody can,” Eilidh countered.

“And if he can do that, then who knows what other abilities he might have?” Rochelle pondered.

“That could explain how he penetrated Shakaran Castle's defences,” Phaer suggested.

“Aye, lad,” Granite agreed. “Difficult to defend against the unknown.”

“The question doth remain, however, Eilidh: What is thy plan from here?” Hannah asked.

Before she could give the Knight an answer, Toli let out an excited cry. “Wow! That's so great! Sorry. Inappropriate timing, I know, but I've just looked through Kismet's pack and found something for me, just like he said. There's a note from Prince Garald that basically says he understands that I've felt a bit useless, since my magic's not up to much. So he left it to Kismet's discretion to determine when he felt I was ready to learn my next grade of magician spells. The volume I need is in the pack also. Poor Kismet. I miss him.” The hobbit sniffed and blinked back tears, at the memory of the unique, irrepresible individual. “The Prince Regent sends his apologies,” she continued. “That he can't offer the rest of you - that he knows about of course - the same thing, but there is no way for him to train you from a distance. He promises to set that straight when we return his daughter to him.”

“That's very kind of him,” Eilidh said, “but there was no reason for you to feel useless. I for one am glad to have you around.” The Catalyst pulled the hood of her robes over her head to cover her face as she flushed at that admission. “Can you learn your spells on the move? We really need to get going.”

“Sure thing, Eilidh, but where exactly are we going?”

“As far as I can see, there's only one place the kidnapper could have gone to ground - the mines over there to the east.”

Everybody seemed to agree with her assessment, so she set her shoulders and led the way.

* * * * *

The party stood before the mouth of the Marina Fells mine, gaping wide and toothless like some great rock monster.

“This is what we came for,” said Eilidh. “If anybody wants to back out, now's the time to say so. At this point nobody will think any less of you. But, let's face it, none of us knows that much about each other. Any one of us could be a spy, ready to stab the others in the back. Therefore, from the moment we set foot inside the mine, up until the moment we come out with Mystaya, anyone who tries to leave will be considered a traitor and an enemy. As such they will be killed. Does everyone agree to these terms?”

There were general murmurs of assent. Loric in particular was impressed, though he kept it to himself.

You wouldn't know it to look at her, he thought, but she has iron in her spine. She's not hungry for adventure or battle, but when it comes down to it, she is willing to do what needs to be done. Yes, very impressive.

“Thy rules are both fair and honourable,” Lady Hannah affirmed. “Truly, I pledge my sword to thy task.”

“Anyone who betrays you will find some of my arrows in their back,” Phaer offered in support.

“Alright then, let's go.”

* * * * *

The entrance to the Marina Fells Mine had clearly been blasted out of the side of the mountain with magic, and the tunnels shaped by magicians. A magically activated oil lamp saved the need for direct magical lighting. Eilidh was satisfied it was sufficiently low level magic that it shouldn't be picked up by the detection magic that she could sense. The way the wind howled through the tunnels ahead, sounded not unlike the snoring of some kind of large beast in a deep cavern. At least, they hoped it was just the wind. Tools lay scattered, as their owners had dropped whatever they were doing at the time of the alarm.

Perhaps they would have been better off staying here, Eilidh considered.

The party had not gone very far when they saw that some apparently had stayed and fared no better - the evidence being yet more dead bodies. Granite was quick to spot various gem fragments lying around and it became something of a competition between the dwarf and Bunny as to who would claim the bigger collection when they came out again.

About three or four hundred yards down that first dark, dank tunnel the way ahead split into two forks. They stopped to consult one another, over which path to take. The ranger Phaer, Granite the dwarf and Bunny who was used to sneaking around in dark places, each had expertise to add, but none could give any solid reason to choose one over the other.

“In that case,” Eilidh decided, “we should follow a logical search pattern, turning left at every junction, unless we have a good reason to do otherwise.”

Her followers all agreed with the practical Catalyst's judgement, so they continued their exploration of the mine, taking the left fork.

* * * * *

Lakeside, the old man in golden robes was still fuming. “Now see what you've done!” he demanded of the serpent. “I didn't even get to introduce myself thanks to you!”

“Me, sir?” demanded the serpent. “You were the one making all the fuss.”

“Fuss? Fuss! Why I've never heard such balderdash in all my life! Still, at least we got them away from the village,” the old man allowed. “Time's going on and we can't have them standing around there all day.”

“True, sir, but you were supposed to tell them a few things about the mine. That's why we came here, remember?”

“Oh they'll be alright,” said the old man, waving a hand dismissively.

“Yes, sir, I'm sure they will. Just so long as they take the first right when they get down there.”

“Ah yes, there is that isn't there?” the old man mused. “You don't really think they be so stupid as to turn left, do you?”

“They might, sir. After all, *we* know it's stupid to turn left, but *they* don't know what's down there because *you* never told them.”

The old man blanched. “Oh dear.”

On the far side of the lake, a bronze dragon slid stealthily and silently from the lake, being careful not to be seen. She immediately shapeshifted into the form of a woman and headed for the mine, following the party she had seen. She readied weapons, just in case, being careful not spill any of the arrows she was carrying. They were in the way but she couldn't just leave them lying around, so she just checked they were secure and hurried onwards. She had no reason to believe that the strange old man knew what he was talking about, but on the off-chance that he was right, she could at least try to help this assorted group. Certainly, it didn't take much of a leap of logic to believe that they were doing something important. Then, of course, there was the question of the slaughter of this sleepy little village that the outside world had long since forgotten even existed. At the very least, this situation was worthy of investigation. Her father would be furious, she knew, but to some mischievous part of her mind, that was almost reason enough in of itself. Besides, in her experience, these things always worked out for the best in the end. With no further thought, then, she rushed headlong into the mine.

Chapter 18

The tunnel the group were following took off at a ninety-degree angle to the left another five hundred yards further on. It didn't take much of a sense of direction to work out that they were headed back towards the entry side, but there was no draft that might indicate another opening. Another sharp bend to the left took them by surprise, so they were now travelling parallel to the cliff face. There was plenty of rubble strewn all over the floor, along with still more bodies, just like near the entrance. At least, that was their first impression. Closer examination, however, made Granite point out the difference. These bodies were in varying states of decay. Not all of them were recent. In fact, some of the rubble, it turned out, was not rubble at all, but fragments of bone.

They turned as one at the sound of footsteps running up behind them.

“Stop!” cried a female voice. “Don't go down that way!”

“Step into the light, miss.” It was Lady Hannah who issued the challenge. “And state thine intentions. Speak as a friend or die as an enemy.”

“Most humans call me Taka. I appear to you as a woman, though I am in fact a bronze dragon.”

“She's telling the truth about that,” Callie said. “There were bronze dragons near to my mother's nest. I learned to sense them and I can sense her in the same way. Tell us, Taka, why is it that should we not go down this way, exactly?”

“Well, I'm not sure exactly—”

Just then there was a deep groaning sound that seemed to come from the depths of Majaos and in the dim light they watched, as a large boulder up ahead slowly stood up, drawing itself up to its full height of over seven feet. It was an Ore Golem; creatures known to be created by a random reaction of magic on the minerals found in mines.

“—But I think it might have something to do with that,” Taka finished, her eyes wide.

“Everyone back up!” Eilidh called out, taking charge. “Don't get too close - it'll pound any of us into a pulp!”

Calandra said a prayer to Cause Light Wounds on the creature, but it barely noticed. Phaer shot an arrow into its belly, but it just rebounded off the rocky hide and did no noticeable damage. Bunny called on her sorcery to give the creature a mental jolt with her Mind Jab spell. It failed.

She cursed in frustration. “That's the trouble with illusion magic: I'm trying to attack its mind, but it doesn't have enough of a mind to attack.”

“Same problem with my druid magic,” Rochelle agreed. “The Sickness Spell is supposed to affect an enemy's body fluids.”

“It's made of rock,” Eilidh pointed out. “It doesn't have any body fluids.”

“Exactly my problem.”

Loric was all set to rush the creature - it was Lady Hannah who physically held him back. "I doubt not thy courage, sir, but such an act wouldst surely be most reckless and foolhardy. I am rather more protected than thou art, but I am more concerned with the defence of our group." That said, she kept her distance, but threw her spear with as much force as she could muster. It flew straight and true, scoring the first significant damage. The creature seemed incapable of feeling pain, however, and it did not even flinch as the head of the spear buried itself in its rocky hide.

Granite took note of that result and issuing a great dwarven battle cry, threw his own spear at the Golem, but his efforts were not so greatly rewarded - it just bounced off harmlessly. The bolts from his crossbow proved equally ineffective. The dwarf swore, loudly.

"My weapons art sanctified by powerful Clerics," Hannah offered. "'Tis unlikely that ordinary weapons shalt be effective".

"Don't worry about it," Eilidh advised, calmly, using her head. "The situation isn't all that serious. This thing obviously can't move very fast, so all we have to do is stay far enough ahead to lure it outside. Then we've got three dragons to help us."

"Oh, that's true, isn't it?" Toli sounded disappointed. "I guess I won't be testing out my new spells, then."

Eilidh placed a gentle, reassuring hand on her friend's shoulder and said, "I'm sure the time will come soon enough, when we rely on your new magic."

"Really?" Toli asked, brightening. "You think so?"

"Yes, I'm certain we'll all be in mortal danger and Miss Tolbrietta Hobbnobb will save us with her magician's art."

"Fantastic! That is, I mean, it's not fantastic you being in mortal danger, but if you were in mortal danger it would be great if I could save you...well, it would be great no matter who saved you, so long as you got saved, but if my magic can help, well..."

"It's OK, Toli. I know what you mean," Eilidh assured her.

Still the Ore Golem lumbered on toward the fleeing party. Suddenly, Bunny yelled, "Stop!" and threw a dagger at Taka, who was at the head of the party, having been the last to enter the chamber.

She whirled around as the dagger just nicked her left ear.

"What the hell--?" she began, but her voice was drowned out by a thick stone slab that shot out just behind her and blocked the tunnel.

"Sorry," Bunny said, "but I've been checking for traps. If you'd gone one step further it would have been you crushed by that thing instead of just my knife. I couldn't be sure if just my shout would make you stop quickly enough, but I figured if I attacked you, you'd almost have to react."

"Oh, I see," said Taka. "Thank you."

“It’s OK, sweetie,” Bunny winked. “The first one’s on the house.”

Their escape route blocked, Lady Hannah drew her sword and saluted the Ore Golem.

“Now we fight?” Loric asked.

“Indeed, Loric. Now we fight!”

“Aye! Let’s get the blasted thing!” Granite yelled, gripping his battle-axe. “You coming, Bunny?” he looked around, but the Sumorityl had disappeared.

“Now I get to save us with my magic!” Toli said, excitedly. Sadly, she realised she still had nothing that was likely to harm an Ore Golem, so she had to content herself with casting Air Armour on Loric to aid in his protection. Not that it would help much in the event of a direct hit.

“Keep moving!” Phaer advised. “That’s your only advantage - its slow movement.” He was just about to draw his own sword and engage in melee fighting himself, much as he hated it, when he was momentarily blinded by a flash of light as the lamplight reflected off something sticking out of Taka’s pack.

“Sorry,” Taka apologised, starting to remove her pack, “these things keep getting in the way.”

The offending reflection had come from an arrowhead, Phaer realised. “Wait!” he said, putting a staying hand on Taka’s arm. “Let me have a look at them. May I?” he asked.

“Sure,” Taka agreed.

The half-elf ranger carefully took one of the arrows out of Taka’s backpack and beheld it with wonder in his eyes. “Do you know what these are?” he breathed in awe.

Taka shrugged, “Just a bunch of arrows - some sea elves gave them to me after I helped them out with a bit of trouble they were having. I’m not into bow and arrows, but I didn’t want to offend the elves by refusing their gift. You can have them if you like, if we live through this.”

“Oh we will now,” Phaer said. “I guarantee it.”

To the dodging melee fighters, he called out. “Back off, all of you! I need a clear shot!” They hesitated, which came at a high cost for Granite Longbeard who was knocked face first into the cavern wall by the golem. Loric and Hannah resumed their attack on the other side, trying to draw it away from finishing off the unconscious and bloody dwarf.

Phaer turned to Eilidh and locked his eyes onto hers. “Will you trust me?” he asked.

Eilidh nodded. “Hannah, Loric - you heard the man. Back off!”

They withdrew to a safe distance as Phaer nocked Taka’s arrow and pulled back the drawstring. The Ore Golem roared and lumbered towards him, perhaps sensing the danger, but it was too late. The half-elf was committed and time was his. He let fly and with a satisfying sound through the air, it approached its target unerringly. It skimmed along the shaft of Lady Hannah’s spear, where it was stuck in the creature, and finally pierced the rocky skin.

At first, it looked like nothing would happen, but then cracks began to appear around the spear and arrowhead. They grew, lengthened, widened and spread throughout the Golem's body, and then with one final roar, the Ore Golem shattered into a thousand fragments. The spear and arrow clattered to the floor, and Phaer went to inspect them. Both were still usable. Meanwhile, his companions looked on, stunned by what they had just witnessed. A moment later, he was surrounded as they celebrated, shaking his hands, pounding him on the back and hugging him. The ranger flushed at all the attention and gently extracted himself from their adulation.

* * * * *

Loric had a nasty gash down one side, though he admitted it would have been much worse but for Lady Hannah's intervention. She had knocked him aside and taken the brunt of the powerful golem's blow. The Knight asked him to give her a helping hand removing her breastplate. It was not easy, but at last it came off and she set about pounding out the serious dent it now sported. She was limping slightly from another glancing blow to her left hip, but she would hear nothing of healing until Granite was alright. Calandra and Rochelle did what they could for the dwarf. Their abilities were limited, but they got him on his feet again and cleaned up the worst of the blood. Lady Hannah examined her bent and broken sword and sighed. "Cleric enhanced or no, I fear this fine weapon hath swung its last." Granite's axe was dulled and chipped slightly, but still useable. Dwarven weapons were often designed to double as mining equipment. Loric's dragonscale sword was good as new once he cleaned his own blood off the blade.

"How did you do that?" Eilidh asked Phaer, looking upon him with a new level of respect.

He held up the fatal arrow, letting the metal tip catch the light. "These arrows that our new friend is so casual about...they're tipped with mithril ore. Forged by dwarves and enchanted by powerful elves."

"And you didn't want to come along!" Eilidh pointed out with a sidelong glance and a nudge.

Phaer just smiled.

"Mithril!" gasped Lady Hannah. "That metal is sacred to the Knights. It is one of very few items of magical nature that we are permitted to use."

"In that case, today's your lucky day," came Bunny's voice as she wandered back into the lamplight, arms heavy-laden. "I have something here that I think you're going to like." She walked over and put her stuff on the ground. "Behold, Excalibur!" She declared, holding aloft a brightly shining broadsword. "Well OK, maybe not quite," she allowed. "It's a pretty fine weapon, though," Bunny concluded, handing it to Hannah.

"Where'd ya go and where'd ya get all that stuff?" Granite demanded.

"I hid until the golem got fixed on you lot, then I decided to sneak past and check out its lair, in case there was something we could use against it. Sorry I missed all the fun."

"Bah! It's just as well ya weren't here," he grumbled. "You'd probably've been more likely to drink my blood while I was down, than fight yon beastie."

“Not likely,” she retorted. “It takes a month to get rid of the taste of dwarf, not to mention all that hair! Yuck!”

“Fighting would've done ya good, lass,” the dwarf shot back. “Ye need some exercise - help ya lose some o' that fat from around yer arse!”

“I think that blow to the head did something weird to your vision.”

“Nothin' wrong with my eyesight, lassie. It's yer mouth that needs sortin' out.”

Bunny laughed out loud. “There's nothing wrong with you; your skull's too thick for a blow to the head to do any damage. Quit faking it and wasting the time of these good people, shorty.”

“Shorty? Don't EVER call a dwarf shorty!”

Bunny just blew him a kiss and said, “Love you, too!”

At that, Granite just turned bright red and started grumbling to himself.

“So,” said Bunny, turning back to the Knight. “How do you like your new sword?”

“A more magnificent piece I hath never beholden. A Mithril blade! Thy gift is most generous.”

“Hey, hold on there, Lady. My gift? I never said anything about a gift. Let's see, it's worth no less than five hundred gold brand new. Second hand, mint condition, it's got to be worth at least three fifty.”

“You wish me to pay?”

“Hey, I know you can afford it, so don't pretend otherwise. Tell you what, as a special favour, it's yours for three hundred but don't you dare tell anyone about my foolish generosity.”

“Thy price is fair. I accept.”

“I rather thought you might.” She then began mentally cataloguing the rest of her find.

“Dost thou not want thy money now?” Hannah wondered.

“Hmmm? Money?” the Sumorityl asked, absently. “Oh, you mean the three hundred?” She tapped her money pouch so it jingled. “Already got it. Thanks.” She winked. “I thought it would save time. Now, who wants this dragonscale knife? I'll start the bidding at sixteen gold.”

Thus began a series of items put up for auction. The dragonscale knife went to Granite, who managed to negotiate a price of twenty-five gold plus a small rough-cut emerald. Phaer accepted a collection of forty-two arrows and a pair of short swords. If he absolutely had to resort to melee fighting, he preferred to dual wield. That cost him a total of sixty gold, and he acquired a few sharp bits of metal that nobody else could see a use for, for an extra three. None of the arrows were mithril tipped, but they were finely crafted and would work fine against most targets. Eilidh got a magic lantern for seventeen, gems and minerals exchanged hands for various amounts.

The wall trap was no problem. A quick Trap Zap from Toli and some considerable brute force reopened the passage and the party got on their way.

Toli walked with Bunny and remarked, “The rate you're going, you'll be rich by the time our quest is over.”

The beautiful Sumorityl shrugged. “I could live with that, I suppose,” she said, “But it really isn't the point.”

“You mean you don't want to be rich? Why else would you do what you do?”

“It's a game, my dear hobbit. Money's just a way to keep score, but mostly it's the fun of playing the game, the thrill of it. Just like warriors like to test their prowess in battle, rangers enjoy the thrill of the chase, the hunt, and mages like to explore the boundaries of magic. I'm a thief and I like to test my skills. Plus, like any skill, it's important to practise among friends and allies, so when the day comes when it's important, maybe life or death for one of us, my skill won't let us down.”

“I never thought of it like that,” Toli admitted.

“Not many people do. If a pair of warriors duel to the death over a certain treasure; that is considered honourable. If a thief tests her skill against an enemy and steals the item, nobody gets hurt; yet the thief is scorned. That's simply the way the world works, but it doesn't stop me playing my game.”

As they walked past the entry tunnel into unknown territory, Lady Hannah took the lead with Loric, Granite taking up rear guard with Phaer, who had slowed down as he was fiddling with some of the bits and pieces he'd just acquired.

Eilidh dropped back to inquire, “What are you doing?”

“When Bunny sold me these metal shards, I realised that I could probably use them in conjunction with one or two of the bear traps I've picked up, and make them into very nasty spike traps. The people of this village were obviously respectful of animals, because these bear traps are designed to merely immobilise an attacking animal, not harm it. I imagine they used herbs or magic to tranquilise a trapped bear and release it safely into the wild. But if I can just work on them a bit and add a couple of metal shards, they would be quite vicious. At best, an enemy would step in one and lose a foot.”

“And at worst?”

Phaer smiled. He was getting used to Eilidh's practical nature of examining all sides of an issue. “At worst,” he said, “it'll do absolutely nothing which means I've wasted a bit of time and five gold pieces. I think it's a good trade.”

“And of course, there's no magic involved,” Eilidh remarked, trying to deal with the bad taste in her mouth.

“Obviously.”

“I’m sorry, Phaer, I’m just naturally suspicious of anything that isn’t at least a bit magical.”

“Does that include me?”

The Catalyst smiled, feeling totally at ease in his company. “No, it doesn’t. You’re an exception, a special case.”

“Story of my life,” he quipped. “Just trust me, OK? I know what I’m doing...more or less.”

“I wish I did,” she laughed. “Fine. Do whatever you think is best.”

“Thank you for your faith in me.”

Eilidh shook her head. “It’s not faith,” she insisted. “I’ve already lost track of how many times you’ve proved yourself to me and I’ll certainly feel better if we can reduce the chances of anything sneaking up behind us.”

“That’s the beauty of being non-magical, Eilidh. To anyone scrying for the magical signature of traps, mine will be invisible. The only way anyone is likely to even think of looking for non-magical traps if they, too, are magically Dead. They’d probably have to be a ranger, too, or a thief with elfsight.”

“That’s pretty unlikely,” Eilidh agreed. “I can’t imagine we’re going to be followed by a magically Dead elven ranger-thief.”

Chapter 19

The party continued to adopt the principle of taking the first left at every opportunity. Along the way Taka, recognising a fellow metallic dragon, walked by Calandra's side, who offered, "Thank you, child, for your timely intervention. The gentle hand of Patrelaux Himself must have guided you to us."

"Well, there's a lake near here. It's a favourite spot of mine. I'm just grateful that the Father of Light helped me to be in the right place at the right time. What about you lot? What brings you all the way out here to the middle of nowhere?"

"Well, I'm not certain it's my place to say. Eilidh?" she called out.

The Catalyst was deep in thought, and it was only when the Cleric called out a second time that she snapped out of it, and realised that it fell to her to deal with this. *Why me?* She wondered, not for the first time, but she pushed that aside and admonished herself to focus. The situation was for Eilidh herself to deal with, and wishing it were otherwise would not change reality.

Putting on her best polite smile, she extended a hand and introduced herself and the rest of the group. From her observation, Taka seemed to have caught most of their names already, but she was buying herself time to decide what to do about their new acquaintance.

"You were asking the Revered Daughter what we're doing here?" she asked.

"If you don't mind my asking," Taka replied.

"Well there you've hit the target on the nose," Eilidh said.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't tell you. Not just like that."

"Well, you don't have to if you don't want to, but—"

"—It's not about what I want," Eilidh interrupted. "It's about what I must do. All the others you see here are...my comrades..."

"And friends!" Toli popped up and added.

"Yes, and friends." Eilidh wished she could give her friend a hug in exchange for that simple statement, but that would shatter the image she needed to project. "The point is," she continued, "we've not known each other for that long, but we've been through a lot together and I trust them."

"But you don't trust me," Taka deduced.

"I don't know you," Eilidh corrected.

"I did just save your lives back there!" Taka objected.

"And you tried to warn us about going that way in the first place, and although your warning was a fraction too late, please don't think I don't appreciate that you tried."

“But nevertheless you still don’t trust me.” Taka repeated. “Fine, don’t tell me anything. I know the way out, I’ll just go.”

She turned to leave, but Eilidh grabbed her arm. “I’m afraid it’s not as simple as that.”

Taka snatched her arm back and glowered, threateningly. Immediately, she found she had weapons pointing at her from all sides as Eilidh’s party moved to protect her.

“Is this how you repay someone for saving you?” the dragon-warrior demanded.

“Not so long ago,” Eilidh said by way of reply, “a few of us had some trouble in Shakaran Borderlands. We acted to defend someone from attack, to save his life if we could.” She left out the fact that the man under attack in this story didn’t actually need any help. That wasn’t the point: their intent was what mattered. “We ended up being taken captive for our trouble.”

“So because he was ungrateful, you’re now doing the same to me?”

“No, that’s not it. You see, it wasn’t that he was ungrateful. It was a simple matter of security. He didn’t trust us. He didn’t know us. Eventually, we were invited to join him as his guests, rather than his prisoners.” Again, she left out part of the story, both because it was irrelevant and because she couldn’t allow herself to be distracted by thoughts of Kismet. “Now, our situations differ in some ways, I admit, but one thing is the same: the need for security. What we’re doing is too important to risk on the chance that someone who rushes in to save us all in the nick of time, might not be the friend she appears to be.”

“So let me go. Then I’m no danger to you.”

“On the contrary, letting you go is far too dangerous. Before we entered the mine, I gave everyone the choice to stay or go, but I said that anyone who tried to leave once we were inside would be killed as a traitor.”

“So you’re going to kill me?”

“Not unless you prove to be an enemy. As I’ve said, I trust my…” she hesitated for a moment, “friends, and yet if any one of them violated that trust, I and the others would have to act decisively. Now that you’re here, I have to make a decision. We’re not equipped to handle a prisoner, nor can I risk simply tying you up and leaving you here so that you can get out of your bonds and escape. Therefore, rationally, I have to choose to trust you and ask that you accompany us as our `guest`. I am simply making sure you understand the terms of that trust.”

“And after you’ve done whatever it is you’re doing and we get out of the mine?”

“At that time, you will be free to do as you wish,” Eilidh answered. “You have my word, for whatever that’s worth.”

“Well, it seems to me I have little choice, but let me give you the terms of my trust and remind you that when we get outside, I’ll be a dragon again, and in a much better position to fight if your word proves false.”

Eilidh nodded. “Agreed,” she said and offered a handshake, which Taka accepted. The Catalyst motioned for everyone to put up their weapons. They all complied.

“Believe it or not,” Taka offered, “I do understand the need for security. It’s something I’m accustomed to. Now, having come to terms, what can you possibly be doing way out here that’s important enough to warrant such precautions?”

“The story I told you before, about the man in Shakaran Borderlands?” Eilidh prompted.

“What about it?”

“The man in the story was the Prince Regent, Garald. We have reason to believe his daughter, Princess Mystaya, is being held somewhere in this maze of tunnels.”

“Someone took her?”

“That’s right.”

“Wow! Whoever it was must be good--”

--“To get past Shakaran Castle defences, yes, we know,” Eilidh finished.

“I don’t mean that,” Taka returned. “I mean to actually snatch Mystaya.”

“I don’t understand,” Eilidh said. “Do you know the princess?”

“Let’s just say our two families know each other.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look, you’ve got no reason to trust anything I tell you, so there’s no point giving you a family history I can’t prove.”

“Fair point,” the Catalyst allowed.

“But if you’re going to believe anything, believe this: Mystaya is not the damsel in distress type. She carries a blade at all times and she knows how to use it. I believe she even sleeps with a dagger under her pillow and she also has conjurer magic to call upon to defend herself.”

“If what you’re saying is true, then we’re in even more trouble than I thought!”

“It is true,” Taka insisted. “Don’t take my word. Think about it: Garald is the Commander-in-Chief of all Shakaran forces – a position Mystaya herself will inherit one day. Do you really suppose she hasn’t been trained?”

“I hadn’t thought of it like th—“

“—Wait!” Taka interrupted, her manner growing more urgent. “Why are *you* rescuing her? Garald has the resources of one of the strongest military forces in Mythallen!”

Eilidh explained about the shields that could detect sources of higher level magic.

“Then we have another problem,” Taka warned. “I’m a bronze dragon. My innate magic is almost certainly above the detection threshold, and if it isn’t then the magic of a silver dragon definitely is!” She looked pointedly at Calandra, whose eyes grew wide.

“Dear Father of Light,” she prayed, “I never thought of that! I may have jeopardised our mission and put the princess in danger and all because I lied about who – what – I really am.”

“It’s not your fault, it’s mine.” Eilidh offered. She wasn’t experienced in comforting a friend, but she knew she had to get the Cleric past blaming herself. “I’ve had long enough to think of it since you first showed us your true form but I didn’t. It’s hard to keep track of everything.”

“Aye, it is,” Granite agreed. “I’m a Catalyst, too, supposedly an expert in magic and I didnae think either.”

“Done is done,” Phaer put in. “We can’t undo it. If our cover is blown, then we have to move fast and not waste any more time.”

There was a general murmur of agreement and they continued, moving as quickly as they dared without being reckless.

* * * * *

As they moved deeper into the mine, strange creatures of varying sizes and ferocity confronted them, but never in sufficient numbers to trouble them overmuch. It seemed increasingly likely that the bulk of the monsters that had attacked Marina Fells had continued on their way and not entered the mine. Eilidh could not celebrate this idea, however, because it probably meant some other unprepared, unsuspecting village was going to be slaughtered like Marina Fells. Sadly, there was nothing they could do about that.

In a tunnel up ahead, stood a large group of kytes - small creatures shorter than a hobbit and thinner than an elf child. Although they were not much of a threat individually, they seemed to hunt in packs of thirty or more and they were very fast and agile, making them hard to hit. This group numbered over fifty and as soon as they spotted the party, their archers started shooting arrows at more than twice the rate Phaer could manage. The other kytes rushed the party with their knives. Granite, Hannah and Loric took the fight to the enemy, Taka alongside them, while Rochelle protected the magic-users and Phaer continued to act as rear guard with his bow and arrows. A few of the kytes had magic, summoning a pair of illusionary wolves.

“You want to play with illusions?” Bunny asked. “I’ll give your dogs a chewtoy!” She summoned a Target Dummy that drew the attacking wolves away from the party. By the time they had finished ripping it apart, Phaer’s arrows had found the kyte sorcerers. With their deaths, the wolves vanished. Eilidh restored Bunny’s spent Life.

Calandra prayed for Light Wounds on one of the kytes that got too close and then knocked it unconscious with several blows of her staff. Rochelle cast some healing on Granite and he returned the favour by Granting Life to her.

The party gradually cut down the remaining kytes with a combination of physical weapons and magic. A pair of kytes had tried to sneak around behind the party, but Bernice was aware of it.

She allowed them to get close, and then whirled around, her face changing suddenly to reveal her vampire heritage. Teeth flashing, she roared, “Boo!” and the terrified kytes fled with a shriek.

Granite, breathing hard, complained, “Ye might've done that in the first place, lass. That face is enough tae frighten anybody.”

“I have a vampire for a mother,” she shot back. “What's your excuse? Besides, I can always change back to my human face,” she added, her beauty returning. “I'm afraid you're stuck with what you've got.”

Taka laughed. “I don't know why you bother, dwarf. Her sharp tongue is a mightier weapon than anything the rest of us possess!”

“Indeed so,” Lady Hannah agreed. “If her wit were a sword, it wouldst surely shatter the finest diamond blade as easily as glass.”

“Maybe,” Loric joined in, “but if Mr Longbeard's skull were a weapon, it would make a damn fine club. Thick enough to blunt even my Soul Crusher!”

“Fine, fine, ye all have yer fun,” Granite grumbled. “Just remember, dwarves hold grudges fer a long, long time.”

The dead kytes proved to be an excellent source of arrows. Phaer estimated he had at least broken even and perhaps gained a few as a result of this encounter. The creatures had also picked up some gold, though it wasn't clear whether they understood its value or were just attracted to the shiny metal.

A little way further on, the tunnel opened up into a large chamber and no sooner had they set foot in the centre of the chamber than a translucent figure of a female half ogre appeared before them. She seemed distraught, so Calandra stepped forward and spoke to the ghost in compassion.

“What is it, child?” she asked, gently. “Why have you not crossed over into the loving embrace of our Father of Light?”

The ghost replied. “Me no go. My mate, me lose mate.” With that, the ghost floated across the chamber, as if searching for something, wringing her hands and sobbing.

There seemed to be nothing they could do for this individual, so they turned their attention to the two sets of steps, one going up, the other going down. A magic mouth in the wall identified the former as an emergency exit, while the other went down to the deepest level of the mine.

After a quick consultation, the group decided to take the exit and rest up so that they could search the deeper level fully healed and restored. From any perspective, this was a wise tactical decision. Time was of the essence, but they would not help Mystaya by getting themselves killed because they were too spent to defend themselves.

This emergency exit brought them out on top of the small rocky mountain into which the mine had been blasted and carved. There the old man in golden robes and battered wizard's hat that Phaer had met earlier, greeted them. He immediately shook the half-elf's hand, warmly.

“Well it's jolly good to see you again, sonny. Safe and well.” He embraced the startled and confused ranger. Then the old man broke away and clouted Phaer's right ear.

“Ow!”

“That's for running off like that before I had a chance to talk to you. All that worry isn't good for someone at my age.” He wagged his finger, sternly.

“Do you know this - ah - individual?” Eilidh wondered. So Phaer recounted the incident with the sea serpent. Taka backed him up, revealing that she had observed the whole exchange from underwater, which was why she'd gone into the mine to warn them.

“What are you doing here, Old One?” Eilidh asked, suspiciously.

“Doing?” he looked confused. “Why I'm talking to you youngsters.”

“No, I mean why did you come to Marina Fells in the first place?”

“Oh that!”

“Yes, that.”

“You really want to know, do you?”

“Yes, I really want to know.”

“Ah, well that could be a problem.”

“Really? Why is that?”

“Well, you see, the thing is....”

“The thing is what, Old One?”

He blushed and turned away, mumbling something.

Phaer was the only one to hear the answer and he hid a smile.

“I'm sorry, Old One? I'm afraid I didn't catch that.” Eilidh persisted.

“Look, I said I can't remember, alright?” the old man exclaimed. “The old memory isn't what it used to be - it happens at my age you know!”

Eilidh took a deep breath. She didn't have a lot of tolerance for people wasting her time, even if it wasn't really the old man's fault.

“I'm pretty sure I was sent here, if that helps,” the old man volunteered.

Eilidh brightened. “At last we're getting somewhere. Who by?”

“It's `By whom` young lady. You young people today use such sloppy grammar!”

“Alright then. `By whom`?”

“Eh?” The old man's face had gone completely blank.

The Catalyst rolled her eyes. “You were sent here!”

“I was? How exciting! Who by?”

“By whom.”

“Don't contradict your elders. It's very rude!”

By now, the rest of the party were trying hard to suppress their laughter - none with much success.

“Do try to focus, Old One. Tell me who sent you here.”

“Tell me who sent you here, *please*,” he corrected.

“Alright. Tell me who sent you here, *please*.”

“Destiny.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Why, what have you done?”

“Nothing; I just don't understand what you said.”

“Well, it's perfectly simple, young lady! Maybe you need to clean out your ears and engage your brain.” He tapped her head with his staff. “I was sent here by the wings of destiny, the wheel of fortune, the hand of fate, the something-or-other of providence!”

Eilidh sighed and rubbed her aching temples. “OK, let's try a new tack. What is your name, Old One?”

“Artisho.”

“Bless you!” Toli volunteered.

“Oh very droll!” said the old man, sarcastically. “It's not as if I've heard that thousands of times before...well, hundreds of times...well, dozens of times...more or less. Let me see, I think the first time I heard it was...yes, that's right...and then there was....hmmm...”

The conversation went downhill rapidly from that point on until Eilidh gave up.

“Now you know why I didn't bother to mention him, Eilidh,” Phaer offered in that quiet voice that was starting to prickle the tiny hairs on the back of her neck every time he used it.

She laid her hand gently on Phaer's arm, causing the half-elf to reflect that he was not generally comfortable with too much physical contact, but somehow with the Catalyst he didn't seem

to mind. He got the impression that she wasn't used to such contact, either, and was making a conscious effort to break out of her comfort zone. Well, if she could make such an effort, then he could, too.

Out in the hazy, early evening sunshine, Life regenerated and wounds were healed. The party were torn between making the most of the break, and an anxiety to save Princess Mystaya without delay. Loric invited Lady Hannah to scout ahead with him, but Eilidh refused to allow it, after they consulted her.

“Once we get down there, your plan has a lot of merit, but wait until then. There is too much magic flowing through that mine for the two of you to be cut off from us. For all we know, you could go down those steps only to find you can't get back up again. What do we do then? No. The time will come when we are required to take greater risks and believe me when that time comes I will not hold you back. We are not at that point yet. Not yet.”

So, they reached the compromise of catching what sleep they could that evening and heading back into the mine around midnight.

Loric couldn't sleep, so he decided to take a look at poor Sara's map. It was the first chance he'd had and he didn't want to waste it. He would have gladly traded the information for Sara's life back if he could. After all, he had intended it to be for her benefit as well as his own, but since that wasn't possible, he was honour bound to take full advantage of what she had given him.

For a long time he had been searching for clues to something called the Penta Drauka quest. From what he had pieced together, it was a series of rituals or perhaps tests that were supposed to enhance a dragon's abilities. There wasn't much information out there, and what there was often seemed in conflict. It was only in the last century, as mortals measured time, that he truly seemed to be on the right track. Sara had been keen to explore and search for information for him, but in truth Loric's motives had been about her, too. He had hoped that this specialist instruction, or whatever it may be, might help her to accept her dragon-self more.

Now, if the map was accurate, at last he had a rough location of one of the Elder Dragon's lairs. It was not far away, as the dragon flew and Sara had labelled it with the words `Fire` and `1st` with a big ring around it. Some additional notes were obscured by blood stains, but he could just make out `Danger` ... `-rago-` ... `--illed` ... `monster`.

What were you trying to tell me, Sara? He wondered. Whatever danger you were worried out, I'll face it. I'm doing this for both of us. I only hope that I can pass the trials so your efforts weren't in vain.

He was suddenly tempted to leave and embark on this quest that he had dreamed of for so long.

Would Eilidh let me go? Not that she could really stop me, but I don't want to leave like that. Surely, though, there are already enough people here to make sure that she gets the young princess back. Mind you, there is the issue of the thousand gold reward, which wouldn't be valid if I don't finish this.

He fancied he could almost feel the map calling to him, as if some strange, wonderful, vague magic were trying to draw him away, but he dismissed it as pure fantasy

No, my personal quest can wait, he decided, finally. It's waited this long, after all. Another day or two won't make much difference. What is time to a dragon?

That decided, he sprouted his wings and spread them over the others. Thus, if anyone should look, they were perfectly camouflaged against the dark rock of the mine.

Chapter 20

Midnight arrived and the party gathered their things, ready to begin their final push to complete this rescue.

Artisho had somehow managed to get himself accepted as part of the group. For some reason that nobody could put their finger on, it seemed the right thing to do. In fact, none of them could think of a single objection.

“Remind me,” he said, “why are we exploring this mine?”

Lady Hannah replied, “We art sworn to undertake the most noble and honourable quest to rescue the young Princess Mystaya of Shakaran who hath been kidnapped in a deed most foul.”

“Rescuing a princess, eh? I once heard a story about a young man who was rescuing a princess...what was her name?...There was another young man...the princess was his sister, but he didn't know it at the time and their father was that dreadful man in black...heavy breathing...bad breath...sword made of light. What was the girl called? ...Pretty lass... It's right on the tip of my tongue... Princess Dreya? Maya? I'll get it in a minute...”

“We really have to get going now, Grandfather,” Calandra urged, gently.

“Hmmm? Oh yes, right.”

“Wait a minute, Eilidh,” Taka said, intending to object that she didn't seem to be giving Artisho the `if you leave, you die` ultimatum. But the old man glanced her way, just for a second as Eilidh turned to see what Taka wanted and suddenly it just didn't seem important anymore.

“Yes?” the Catalyst prompted.

“Oh, nothing. Never mind.”

Eilidh looked puzzled for a second, and then dismissed it. “OK,” she said. “First off, we need some light. Who's got the lamp?”

Rochelle had it, but when she tried to light it, it sputtered and died, out of oil.

“Magical light it is, then,” Eilidh said. “Always more reliable. Toli? Would you like to do the honours?” she asked her friend.

Before she could answer, Artisho butted in. “Oh please, allow me,” he volunteered. “Let an old man feel useful!” He cast a spell and a floating fiery bob appeared in mid-air. When he pointed to the mine entrance, however, the bob seemed to shake its `head` in defiance. The old man pointed again, more firmly. Same result.

“Now just you look here!” he scolded the light bob. “You're showing us both up and I won't have it, you hear me? You're my light bob, I'm your mage and you'll do as I say! Now get in there!”

The bob floated to the very mouth of the entrance, but at the last moment it flickered and flew to hide behind Artisho's hat, which began to smoulder slightly.

“What's wrong?” Toli asked the old man.

“It's a bit embarrassing, I'm afraid. You see this light bob I just conjured...”

“Yes?”

“Well, it turns out, the poor thing...quite tragic really, mustn't be too hard on the little fellow, it's not his fault...”

“What isn't?” Toli asked. “Artisho, tell me, what's going on? What's wrong with the light bob?”

The old man spread his hands helplessly, face blushing bright red. “He's afraid of the dark!”

The young hobbit was wide eyed with wonder, “Really? I never even imagined that was possible.”

“Why not?” Bunny asked, stretching her hand out and coaxing the light bob to hover over her palm. “Magic is Life, after all, so why shouldn't magical creations like this light bob have feelings, too?” The Sumorityl moved her hand through the air around the bob, in a kind of stroking motion, cooing and making sweet noises to it. In moments, it was smouldering happily - perhaps its equivalent of a purr.

“What a fascinating concept,” the philosophical Rochelle pondered. “I really think you might be onto something there. A light bob afraid of the dark. Why, it raises all kinds of possibilities!”

“What is the matter with you all?” the ever-practical Eilidh demanded. “If the light bob goes down the mine, it won't *be* dark!”

“I know, I've tried to tell him that,” Artisho replied.

“And?”

“He doesn't believe me. I'm sorry, one of you will have to make our light.”

After that delay, Toli used her own magic to make the walls around them glow, and the party moved out, back into the mine and the haunted chamber. They assembled themselves, and with Loric and Hannah taking point, they started down the stone steps to the lowest level of the Marina Fells mine.

The steps came out at a crossroads, and they decided the time had come to split up. Loric and Lady Hannah moved down the tunnel to the East, while Phaer and Bunny took off stealthily to the West and Eilidh led the others North. They agreed to explore for approximately half an hour before making their way back to the steps.

“Do not engage in battle unless you have no choice but to defend yourselves,” the Catalyst instructed.

“Thine orders art most sensible, Eilidh,” Hannah commended her. “Reconnaissance and co-ordination art ever important in situations such as this.”

* * * * *

Phaer found that his pulse was starting to race, being so close to Bunny. He observed her every movement closely; his elven half insisting it was merely a critical, professional interest in the crossover of skills between ranger and thief. The interest of his hot human blood, meanwhile, was anything but professional. He had no real desire for her on any deep emotional or intellectual level, but he was definitely superficially attracted to the beautiful Sumorityl. He was grateful for the dim light, so she could not see his cheeks begin to flush.

For her part, Bunny was having a conflict of her own. She could practically feel the half-elf's blood pumping. What her companions did not know about her was that while she did not need to drink blood to survive, there were times when she was sorely tempted to drink anyway. Among vampires, half-elf blood was considered an extremely fine vintage. She wondered what it would really taste like...it had been so long she wasn't sure she could remember. Blood was like a drug to her and she was an addict by the simple nature of her creation. While she found pure blood more addictive, any kind of blood was a potential trigger. She had learned to control her cravings and mostly she didn't even notice them anymore, but to pretend they didn't exist was to create an opening for her addiction to surface. She was almost certain that if she succumbed once more to the temptation, there would be no going back.

A voice inside her head was saying, *Why fight it? Give in and have your freedom!*

No! she argued with herself. *I will resist. That kind of freedom is a lie!*

When she had walked free from her father's lab, into the world, she knew her father believed she would come back. He had developed certain `treatments` that according to him, she needed.

I will survive without them! she vowed.

She had hooked up with a group of vampires for a while, shortly after her escape, living as they did. She hated it. She hated being driven to drink blood whereas they revelled in it. When she left them, they were convinced she would come back for the blood.

I will survive without it! she swore.

Then in Avidon she discovered sex and the power it gave her to resist. Madam Donna's had been perfect for her for a while, but she knew that all she'd been doing was using sex as a substitute drug. It didn't actually solve the problem. Doubtless Madam Donna expected her to go crawling back, too. Everybody in her life had seemed to think she was dependent on them, and for a while she had been in each case. So, having escaped from her father's cage, she had always found ways to cage herself.

But in Avidon, she'd never really seen anything resembling a better life on offer. Until Eilidh stumbled into her life by mistake.

These people didn't think she was dependant on them. If anything, they were depending on her. That was new. But the pull of blood was so tempting.

I will survive without it! she repeated, silently, the words becoming a mantra.

She wanted a life that other sentient races enjoyed and took for granted. Redemption, salvation...mostly from herself.

She could seduce the half-elf if she wanted to – and she did want to. It would be so easy. They had time - no-one would miss them for an hour. She could take it slow, enjoy him – he would enjoy it, too. And then she could drain him. So easy...it would be so, so easy.

No! I won't do it! I will not!

She was among civilised people now. She, too, would be civilised. For the first time in her existence, she was starting to feel and understand some small stirrings of friendship from some of these people. No, her life of sexual pleasures and instant gratification was not freedom any more than her life as a vampire or her life as a laboratory animal in a cage. She had simply exchanged one kind of slavery for another.

I will survive and I will be free! she vowed. I will be ruled by my will, not my instinct.

And so she focused on the exploration and some healthy professional competition in stealth with the ranger.

There were a couple of small battles - skirmishes really - that they could not avoid. They were over almost before the creatures even knew what had hit them. Phaer would attack from long range, and while their attentions were focussed on him, Bunny would sneak up and attack from behind. Swift, silent and deadly. They made a good team.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, the Knight and obsidian dragon-warrior were travelling in the opposite direction. They made no attempt at stealth. Loric's footsteps rang out clearly and even in the dim light, Hannah's armour shone softly. Loric had his weapon constantly to hand, while Hannah kept hers sheathed until danger presented itself. They, too, were forced to engage in battle a couple of times, although most of their would-be enemies fled at the mere sight of the two imposing warriors. Loric had a wild and ferocious fighting style, while Lady Hannah never failed to pause to offer a salute before engaging in a controlled, compact set of moves. Every sword stroke was made to count, no energy wasted, deflecting enemy blows onto shield or armour rather than trying to dodge them.

As Loric walked, his thoughts were drawn to the blade he held firmly in his hand. His mind filled with images of blood and killing. Through the magic of the sword, he could remember the face of every kill he had made, and occasionally, the magic `woke up` and challenged him to justify his actions.

He dimly thought he could do without the distraction at this moment, but Soul Crusher could not be denied. He would have to face his memories on its terms. His memories took him back to his mercenary days...

* * * * *

He was a young dragon, reckless and dangerous. As a dragon, he considered himself above the petty lives of mortals and cared only for the fight. He would fight anyone, anywhere, anytime for no cause other than his own adrenaline rush. He had been hired to raid deep in the elves' forest. The

mysterious tree city of the elves. Their ancestral seat of power. They had built a new battle fortress here and his employers wanted it destroyed. As he bore down on the area he had been told about, he noted that it didn't look much like a fortress, but it was definitely the right place and elves had some strange ideas about designing buildings so he thought no more of it. In fact, he was barely thinking at all, lost as he was in the lust for battle.

As he tore into the fortress with tooth and claw, its inhabitants began to pour out into the wider forest, screaming in terror. Loric was a bit confused as to the lack of resistance. Where were the archers? Why wasn't he being assailed with arrows and powerful spells?

Obviously, I've caught them off guard, he decided, arrogantly. Man, I'm good! They've probably heard of me and fear my reputation!

As he dived closer to the ground, spitting acid at will, he noticed the children. Children running, screaming, crying, dying...

Why would there be children in a secret military base? He couldn't understand it. That wasn't a tactic elves would use. Still, he had been hired to do a job and so the slaughter continued.

Then he saw her: Li'thana. A name he would remember forever. She was a highborn elf lady – the ruler and protector of her noble house. A queen among elves. She seemed to glow before his eyes as the world around him warped and faded. She was beyond beautiful to him. She was the centre of the universe.

Even as he had slaughtered her people, Li'thana had worked her magic. She hadn't tried to fight him, but had instead managed to capture him and snare him with a charm spell. Rather than seek revenge, she worked to train and rehabilitate him. She made him see that what he had attacked was not a fortress or even a city, but a quiet village with little interest in the outside world. She had been simply visiting. Somehow, Loric's employers must have discovered her plans and decided to use the obsidian to raze the village to the ground with her in it. They had used magic to encourage his aggressive tendencies and help him ignore anything that didn't fit with what they had told him. It did not negate his guilt. He could have resisted if he'd made the effort to think, but he hadn't. He had slaughtered innocent people, innocent children, and he had revelled in it.

Li'thana took Loric as her own personal guard, ensuring that he wasn't out of her sight for a moment and so it was for half a century. Then came the day of the great wars, when the elves rose to battle the orcs. His blade had no name until that day when she named it Soul Crusher. The elf queen had it enchanted through the combined talents of necromancy and Techmagic.

Freeing him from the charm that bound him, she said, "For whomsoever this blade touches, they shalt surely die and a reflection of their soul shall become one with the blade. Then forever shall you remember that face, that life. It shall not prevent you from acting as you will, but it will demand that you can justify the killing that you do."

Already the blade was imbued with the images of the elves he had killed during his raid...especially the children. Her magic ensured that he would never lose his blade. He may have other weapons, he may kill in other ways but Soul Crusher was forever bound to him. Its magic played its part in every battle he fought, even if the blade itself remained sheathed. Soul Crusher was a necromantic curse, a punishment. Whenever he took a life, he would have to be certain in his own

mind that it was justified. Only then could he live with the memory without it adding to his waking nightmares.

* * * * *

The raw violence of Loric's youth was still a part of him, and it could still surface in times of extreme stress and pain. His attack on the prince was proof of that. But the ministrations of the elf queen, Li'thana, combined with the constant reminder of his sword were usually enough to temper his actions.

Even now, as he walked through Marina Fells mine, his sword was playing a lightshow in his mind. The elven forest, so long ago, was as clear and real to him as the here and the now. The innocents he had killed. The deaths had caused. The children who never grew up because of his actions. He would see them always.

Soul Crusher was well named, but not for the reasons most people thought. It was not his enemies whose souls it crushed...it was his own.

In a flash, he returned to himself as he felt Lady Hannah's strong but gentle touch and was met with, "What troubles thee?"

He smiled, grimly. "Ghosts from the past."

"I see," was her only response, respecting another warrior's right to conceal or share his past as he so chose.

During their exploration, they found the body of a half ogre. He appeared to be some kind of local warrior. Having taken some serious injuries fighting on the surface, yet somehow he had managed to take the fight down here. By the looks of the fallen rocks strewn about, Loric considered, perhaps he had thought to cause a cave in. He had not survived, but he had taken a great many of the enemy with him, judging by the bodies of chaos creatures littered around him.

"Doubtless this is the reason for the poor trapped spirit we didst encounter earlier," Hannah told her comrade. Removing her helm, she bowed her head and clasped her fist over her heart, offering a Knight's eulogy, expressing honour and courage in this fallen warrior, fighting for his home. "I salute thee, noble warrior. May your deeds be sung in the halls of heaven!"

Loric could not help looking at the half-ogre's armour. It was called scale armour - a significant improvement on the protection of his chainmail, being a design based on the interlocking scales of a dragon. It was not as strong as the plate armour that Knights wore, but was lighter and offered greater mobility. He wasn't sure how the Lady Knight would react if he took it for himself.

His thoughts must have been playing on his face, because Hannah said, "Twould be a great honour to wear the armour of so proud a warrior. Not many would be worthy, but I perceive that thou mayest well be one of those few. If thou doth feel so moved, thou wouldst do well to take it and let it assist you in completing what he started. Indeed, one couldst even say that by such an act, thou art allowing a part of this fine individual to complete his quest for righteous vengeance. Wilt thou accept this challenge, Loric?"

The Knight certainly had a way with words and her view on this almost drove the dragon to tears, so moved was he by the nobility. When he looked, he had seen only a fallen warrior with armour worth taking. Hannah had seen the fall of a champion and a chance to honour him. The fallen warrior no longer had any use for his armour, but it might help Loric to get the bastard that kidnapped the princess and brought all the chaos creatures here to rape and slaughter the village of Marina Fells. There was honour in that.

“Yes,” he whispered, “I will accept the challenge.”

The armour fit his large frame quite well and he took the gauntlets for good measure. The chest piece could do with some repairing, he observed, but it was still better than his old, battered chainmail.

“We shouldn't leave him here like this,” Loric said. “It's not right. But we can't bury him down here and removing him seems like sacrilege.”

Hannah came up with the solution. “The Sacred Code of Paladinius doth state that when in the field, and proper burial for a fallen comrade is not possible due to rocky terrain, a cairn may be built as an acceptable alternative.” There was no shortage of rocks lying around, so a cairn was constructed in next to no time. “We canst but hope that his mate shalt now be able to move on and find peace,” Hannah said, finally.

* * * * *

As it turned, out, neither Phaer and Bunny, nor Hannah and Loric got very far before they each reached a dead end and started back. When the four of them met up, they decided that rather than wait for Eilidh to return, they would follow her up the northerly path. Sitting around didn't seem to make any sense, given that there was only one possible way to go. Whenever they reached a junction, two of them would stay there while two others scouted the side tunnels.

After a while, they met up with Eilidh's group and set up camp to compare notes. Phaer noticed the Catalyst gain a look of concentration in her eyes. She seemed to be paying particular attention to the exact pattern created by the tunnel network down there.

“What is it, Eilidh?” Toli wondered, as she too caught onto this.

By way of answer, she drew on the black rocky wall with a piece of limestone. “That is the pattern we've established by our exploration so far. Granite, does the pattern suggest anything to you? Think of the flow of Life when casting a certain spell.”

Granite shook his head. “Sorry, lassie, I was never any good at pattern recall.” Like most dark Catalysts, he was interested only in controlling the power of magic, whereas Eilidh was fascinated by its intricate workings, such as the patterns of Life Flow created by spells.

“Well, for a start, as many of you will have noticed, these tunnels have been reshaped by magic. Quite recently. There is a lot of magic down here and I believe the tunnel reshaping was done for a reason. That reason is almost certainly to magnify the power of a spell.”

“If that is so, what spell are we facing here?” Loric asked.

“I can't be sure, the pattern isn't complete enough yet...but I do have some nasty suspicions.”

Before she could say more, Artisho sneezed violently three times. With a sheepish grin he apologised.

“It's always three,” he remarked.

Just then there came a snarling sound and half a dozen large grey wolves appeared like ghosts in the dim light. The party rose to their feet, grabbing weapons, preparing spells.

“Don't worry!” Artisho called out, shoving his way to the front of the party and pushing up the sleeves of his robes, which promptly fell down again, “I know a spell that'll send them packing! Now, what's it called again? Leather Ball? No. Measure Pall? Weather Fall?”

“I think you might mean Fireball, Old One,” Rochelle offered, helpfully.

The old man brightened, “Ah!” Then he frowned again. “No, I don't think that's it.” He snapped his fingers. “Got it!” He manipulated the flow of Life and suddenly feathers filled the air, making everyone cough and sneeze. “There!” he announced, proudly. “Feather Wall!”

To everyone's surprise the wolves sniffed the air, turned around and fled back the way they had come.

“I wonder what made them leave.” Toli spoke up while all around them, the feathers slowly settled on the ground like the aftermath of the world's largest pillow fight.

“Isn't it obvious?” Artisho demanded, indignantly. “Feather Wall - works every time. Wolves are allergic.”

“They didn't seem frightened,” Taka disagreed.

“Actually, if I didnae know better,” Granite offered, “I'd say they were magical constructs.”

“You think someone conjured them?” Eilidh wondered.

“Nonsense,” Artisho insisted. “There's no-one down here but us.”

They followed the passage north, ignoring all side tunnels at Eilidh's insistence, walking more purposefully now that she had a pretty good idea where the pattern was leading. The tunnel took a sharp bend to the right.

“Now I'm sure,” she remarked, breaking into a run, so much so that some of the others began to have difficulty keeping up. They followed the right hand tunnel at the next junction, confirming that Eilidh had completely abandoned her left turn strategy. The time for strategy was past. Now was the time for action. It was time to finish this rescue.

They were confronted with a door, and Eilidh stepped through it without hesitation, the others following right behind. Less than fifty yards along the passage, the door behind them disappeared, replaced by a sheer rock face, making her companions gasp, involuntarily.

Eilidh didn't even spare it a glance.

“Don't worry,” she said, “It's only a trap.”

Chapter 21

“It's a magical one way door,” Eilidh explained, “and not the last one, I'll wager. Just ignore them. Getting out does not concern us at this point.”

“That doesn't sound very practical,” Phaer pointed out.

Eilidh flashed him a smile. “No, it doesn't really, does it?”

The young Catalyst proved to be quite correct in her prophecy of further one-way doors; there was one every time the tunnel took a sharp bend to the right. It was always right, and it didn't take too much spatial awareness to realise they were spiralling inwards.

At last, Eilidh stopped before a pair of double doors to the North. “Is everyone ready?” she asked.

They all confirmed that they were.

“OK then. One last thing, this is vitally important. As soon as we're on the other side of this door, move sideways, not forwards. Stay close to the wall, as tight as you can. Anyone who doesn't will die. If you understand, show me by looking very, very scared.”

They all did their best to comply.

“Let's go in. I don't think we need to worry about knocking.”

Once inside, they saw a large rectangular room - just for an instant, before all their lights went out. Taka tried to cast a new light spell, but it was instantly extinguished.

“A darkness spell,” Eilidh observed, unsurprised. “Just as I thought. That was part of the pattern. The rest was powering that big death snare in the middle of the room.”

“Is that what that is?” Bunny remarked. “My scrying spell is telling me there's something dangerous, but it's not telling me how dangerous.”

“Good thing you recognised the Life Flow pattern, Eilidh.” Toli said, sounding relieved. “Otherwise we might have just walked right into it!”

“Well, maybe not. As Bunny says, our scrying spell is warning us, too.”

“That's what worries me,” Phaer put in.

“Me too,” Eilidh agreed. It was not unusual for the ranger to echo her thoughts. Indeed, she felt the two of them had developed a very good working relationship. Still, she was always a little surprised to hear him voice knowledge of magical matters, and told him so.

“It's nothing to do with magic,” the half-elf said, shaking his head, not that Eilidh could see it. “It's simple common sense. What's the point of going to the trouble of laying down a death snare if you're going to signpost it?”

“If I'm right, this is the kidnapper's main chamber.”

“In the heart of the labyrinth,” Rochelle mused. It could have been a recitation from just about any adventure story ever told in Mythallen. The villain of the piece was always `in the heart of the labyrinth`.

“Of course, the kidnapper is himself a mage,” Toli realised, “so the last thing he would want to do is cut off his own powers with an anti-magic zone.”

“Precisely,” Eilidh agreed. “And signposted or not, he’s done a very nice job of restricting our movements, wouldn’t you say?”

“If this is true,” Hannah pointed out, “then surely he shouldst be here himself to deal with anyone who hath survived the many trials up to this point.”

“Yes, I expect so.”

“But,” Phaer said, not liking where this conversation was going, “that would mean that we’ve just walked into--”

“--A trap?” Called out an unfamiliar voice from the darkness. A focused cylinder of light appeared, revealing a man dressed in the orange robes of a sorcerer with the black hood and cuffs of his alignment to dark magic.”

Eilidh was calm and unsurprised as those around her went for their weapons.

“Ah-ah-ah!” the sorcerer scolded. “I fully congratulate you on getting this far, but I really must insist that you do not take even one more step.”

Another beam of light appeared, revealing a girl in her mid-teens sitting on a chair. She was tightly bound, while a strange man-creature with green skin and reptilian scales stood over her with a sharp dagger not far from the girl's throat. The girl had long jet-black hair, dark eyes and her face shared some features with Prince Garald. Despite her situation, and her young age, she held herself with strong, defiant, regal dignity. There could be no doubt - this was Mystaya and every inch a princess.

“I assume you know who this girl is.”

“Princess Mystaya,” Eilidh said.

“Ah, honesty. Good. That will save time.”

“There's no point lying about it. We are here on behalf of Prince Garald to negotiate for the freedom of the princess.”

Suddenly, Mystaya screamed, “Vorden!” and the kidnapper instinctively looked her way, betraying recognition of his name in the process.

The green scaled monster backhanded her across the face and moved his dagger to prick her throat and bring forth a drop of blood.

Mystaya glared but refused to give him the satisfaction of crying out.

“Master?” the creature asked.

Eilidh’s party all cried out, “No!” and thankfully Vorden agreed with the sentiment.

“Not this time, but this is your last warning, girl! Your next word will be your last and you won’t even get to finish it!”

Princess Mystaya didn’t regret her actions one bit.

Vorden had teleported her out of Shakaran Castle, which should have been impossible with the shields active, as they always were. She didn’t know where they were, but they were surrounded by chaos monsters that materialised with them and tore into the poor people of the village. It had been terrible to witness, but never once had she cried out. She had been trained well, and knew that she had to use her head if she was going to survive this. There was no-one around that could help her, so screaming would do no good. Neither would it help her to ask him why he was doing this or what his intentions were. That information, even if he gave it to her, would not make her any less his prisoner. So she remained silent, acting as if she was too scared to speak, when in reality it was a strategy. She gave him no reason to gag her, thereby holding on to her voice to maybe, somehow, use as a weapon when the right moment came.

This had been her chance and she had taken it. She had known she would only have time to say one word. Since none of the newcomers had used her kidnapper’s name when he revealed himself, which would have been the normal reaction, she assumed they didn’t know it.

She couldn’t be sure if it would help her would-be rescuers or herself, but it was the only thing she could think of.

Returning his attention to Eilidh, Vorden said, “There will be no negotiations. I’ve sent him my terms. His only choice is to come here or stay away like a coward. I’ll kill his brat either way, but there are many ways to die. I want him here so I can kill her right in front of his eyes. He won’t have to grieve for too long because his own death will follow swiftly thereafter. Should he decide to stay away, I will kill her slowly...after I’ve had some fun.”

Loric growled. Eilidh could feel his rage building and placed a gentle restraining hand on his arm. “Not now!” she whispered.

“Oh don’t misunderstand me,” Vorden said. “I’m not going to ...do... anything to her. Not like that. That’s not my style. I just like to watch. That’s all it ever was.”

“What do you mean?” Loric demanded.

It was Calandra who answered. “Vorden! I remember hearing the name while I was at the city temple. It just took me a moment to bring it to mind. It must be – what – over ten years ago now? Vorden was a Life Gifted sorcerer and court illusionist. Besides giving instruction on Shadow magic, he was also well known for putting on popular stage shows.” The story made her sick to her stomach but she told it anyway. Her companions needed to know what kind of monster they were dealing with. “He had been working at the castle for months before he was caught. Prince Garald walked in on him while he was....doing things to one of his many teenage students.”

“He just burst in!” Vorden complained. “Didn’t knock or anything!” As if that was the issue here.

“Prince Garald was excited,” Calandra explained. “He was going to book Vorden for a private show for his daughter’s birthday party!”

“It’s all lies!” Vorden protested, vehemently.

“An investigation revealed quite a history—“

“--I wasn’t touching them!” He interrupted.

“You were caught in the act!” Calandra screamed.

“No! That’s what they all said but it wasn’t me! Not *me* me!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Taka yelled. She was helping Hannah and Phaer to hold Loric back, but at that moment she wasn’t sure why she wasn’t letting him go and rushing forward with him instead. Except of course, they couldn’t rush forward, only around, and who knew what magic this Vorden could throw at them in the time that would take?

Bunny’s eyes widened. “A copy!” she realised.

“Yes!” cried Vorden. “That’s it! Of course, you’re a sorceress, you understand! You can tell them! Tell them I was innocent!”

“What is he talking about, Bunny?” Phaer asked.

“Sorcerers can make illusory copies of themselves,” she explained. “It’s one of my favourite tricks. At higher grades, or perhaps at some strange convergence of magic, the copy can take on a kind of life of its own.”

“There! You see?” Vorden demanded. “A life of its own! That’s it exactly. I didn’t do anything. It was the other me. All I did was watch! Garald was all for executing me but I tricked him. Oh yes! I tricked him good! All he executed was my copy. That was it, justice done, but no! He wasn’t satisfied with that! He sent Enforcers after me!”

Bunny let her vampire side out, her long, sharp fangs flashing in spite of the dim light. “Then maybe I should finish their job for them.”

“Bunny!” Eilidh warned her. Vorden was obviously highly unstable. They might be able to use that to their advantage if they chose the right moment, but this wasn’t it. She was as deeply affected as any of the others, but she knew they had to keep their heads. “Not now!” she warned her.

“Don’t try it, vampire! I can make you crumble to dust in an instant!” Vorden threatened, before continuing. “I was running for my life, being hunted down, but then I met someone. Oh yes! She soon sorted out those Enforcers! She took me into her service and I learned a great deal. Like these chaos creatures. I worked with them, learned to control them. You see, with the right kind of mental manipulation, chaos creatures like my friend over there can get quite...playful. Though they do tend to break their toys, as you may have seen from my little sideshow out in the village. All that

screaming sent them into such a frenzy, I didn't even have to do anything after that initial push. I could just sit back and watch them play. I watched them for hours until some dragon girl blundered in to spoil my fun. Put up quite a fight, she did, even though I'd bound her to her human form. Then, after she was dead, well, I just sort of lost the mood, you know?

"But I've got it back now, so it's time for my fun. The prince knew my terms but he's obviously too busy to watch his little girl die. Never mind, maybe it's better this way. If I can just have a few moments of silence to prepare myself, I can get Mr Green and Scaly over there nice and excited. Then I can just sit back and enjoy the show as he plays with the princess. I could even use chronomagic to make a Time recording for His Grace to watch over and over again. It'll only take a moment or two to set up."

That was more than Loric could stand; he threw off the hands that restrained him and shifted his weight to throw his sword like a javelin. He might not be able to charge at Vorden, but the death snare wouldn't stop his sword burying itself in his chest.

With a scream of rage, he let it fly, but Vorden flicked his hand, negligently, and Loric's sword flew across the room. Loric tried to use that distraction to run around the snare, but he found he couldn't move no matter how he strained against the unseen barrier.

Eilidh had known that would be futile, but she had used the distraction to move close to Granite. She knew he would be able to sense the Nullmagic spell that was cutting Mystaya off from her magic, just as well as she could, confirming that the sorcerer Vorden had somehow acquired Enforcer powers. The spell was strong, but if she and Granite could connect their Catalysts' powers and push together, they should be able to break through and give back Mystaya's ability to defend herself. "Granite," she whispered, trying to look casual. "Life Link. Cancel Nullmagic. On my signal."

"Got it," He agreed, indicating his understanding.

"I can crush you like a bug, Black Dragon of Avidon!" Vorden threatened. "Oh yes, I know who you are!"

While he was busy gloating, Bunny tried to run the other way, using her vampire speed, but she had barely taken two steps before she, too, was stuck.

"You are mine, all of you, until I decide to end your pitiful lives. If you only knew what was to come, you might even thank me."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?" Phaer whispered to Eilidh. The Catalyst had a rough idea, but kept it to herself. However, the sharp-eyed ranger caught her change of expression. "You know something, don't you?"

"Not now!" Eilidh whispered harshly.

Vorden seemed not to notice the exchange, but issued a final warning. "If any more of you try to move, my scaly friend here will slit the girl's throat. He can kill her long before you can get anywhere close to me. It'll spoil my fun, but if needs must..."

"Vorden!" came a strong tenor voice from behind the doorway. "Thou art truly a coward deserving naught more than to be put down like a rabid dog! Thine execution is at hand!" A new

focussed beam of light illuminated a tall Dark Knight of Zhentilon with a small assortment of companions of his own.

“Greetings,” he said to Eilidh’s group, with a formal bow. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sir Linarceo Leonis, Knight Warrior of Zhentilon and these are my companions...” The female Catalyst was Elice Relta; the dark cleric was named Franckel Ash; and finally came Tincershi - the only non-human of the group - a hobbit Warlock.

Vorden was growing impatient, but the Dark Knight answered his look, saying, “Despite the situation, sir, we shouldst not forget our manners.”

Eilidh took heart from this man's dark courage, the way he acted as if everything were under control, so she introduced everyone. At the very least, it would buy time. Everyone was polite and courteous, except Loric, who was eyeing the Knight suspiciously. There was something familiar about him. Something that made his every instinct want to strike him down where he stood. However, under these dangerous circumstances and with his sword lying on the floor across the room, even though the sorcerer’s magic bound him no longer, he allowed his good sense to prevail over instinct...at least for now.

Once Eilidh had finished with the introductions, an increasingly agitated Vorden said, “Well, now that we're all acquainted, it is time for me to decide what I am to do with you. Eilidh, your fate is sealed - you and your friends will die. However, as for you, Sir Knight, with you there is perhaps room for negotiation.”

“Thinkest thou that I shalt permit thee to harm these people, or the girl?”

“Come now, don't make me kill you, too. After all, we both serve the same dark mistress.”

“Thy words may be even truer than thou knowest,” the Knight replied.

Phaer leaned close to Eilidh and whispered, “Now what's that supposed to mean?”

“I don't know,” she whispered.

“But you suspect something,” Phaer pressed, reading between her words. “You know something don't you? You know what's going on and you’re not telling us,” he fumed.

“Not now, Phaer!”

“That’s all you ever say. ‘Not now!’ When exactly is ‘now’ going to come, eh? And why do you get to decide that?”

“Phaer, just shut up will you?” She hissed back. “I’m trying to think!”

Phaer did not take kindly to being dismissed in such an offhand way, but he swallowed his feelings for the time being and just quietly seethed in the background.

Eilidh tried to remind herself that coincidences were a common part of life, but she couldn't convince herself. This particular coincidence was a little too neat. Why should they turn up here, now? How did they get here since the bridge from Avidon was destroyed? She had no idea where

Marina Fells was in relation to the human cities of Mythallen with which she was familiar, but wherever `here` was, she was willing to bet that it was too far out of the way for this mismatched group to have just `happened by`. Still, at the moment, there was nothing they could do except watch the scene unfold and be ready to act whenever the opportunity presented itself. The `now` was coming, but it was not `now` yet.

“Thou art a coward to use a child as a hostage,” Leonis was saying, “and while I may not be a fully-fledged member of my order, I still uphold many of its principles.”

That admission roused Lady Hannah to anger - for her, the only thing worse than a Dark Knight, was a renegade Dark Knight. The effect on Loric was even more profound, for he at last knew who this man was. It didn't seem possible; it had been far too long for a human to still be alive, yet there was no doubt in Loric's mind. This man had been the leader of the renegade Knights that attacked him, willing to sacrifice the young Sara.

Eilidh sensed his rage building anew and once more caught his arm. “Not now!”

She supposed she was saying that a lot at the moment and knew her entire party was getting sick of it but she didn't care. They could hate her all they wanted if they got out of this alive and the only way they had a chance of that was to think and wait.

“Whatever your grievance, think of the princess. Just wait and be ready.”

Loric nodded slightly in agreement. She was right - things were coming to a head - his chance would come soon enough. So, he let his fury continue to build, ready to unleash when the moment came.

“Last warning, Sir Knight!” Vorden announced. “Remember I have the princess!”

“Then I hath decided,” the Knight proclaimed, “that thou shalt hold her no longer.”

“What makes you think you have any say in the matter?” Vorden demanded.

“This!” cried an unseen female voice from the shadows. Before anyone could react, the serpentine creature that was Princess Mystaya's would-be executioner fell to the ground, dead - an arrow stuck in its throat.

Vorden cancelled his darkness spell and light flared, filling the entire room. The arrow had belonged to a ranger-thief that had been hiding in the darkness ready to strike. Her elfsight had helped her to pick out her target and remove Vorden's one advantage; the threat to the princess that had been holding everyone back.

In the next second, the death snare was disabled; the Life Flow that had been powering it somehow froze, robbing the snare of all magical energy. Eilidh had no idea how that was possible or who had done it, although old Artisho was looking quite pleased with himself, suddenly. She wasn't going to complain, though, or waste time asking questions.

The other party instantly took advantage of the situation and advanced on Vorden who backed away, frantically deflecting long range missiles and spells.

“Who the hell is she?” Bunny wondered.

Phaer had the answer and he spat the name like a curse. “Z'rcona.”

Eilidh, too spoke a single word. “Now.”

Chapter 22

Mystaya felt the Nullmagic spell leave her. Bunny was with the princess in the blink of an eye, but Mystaya had already used her magic to free herself. The girl immediately sprang up and surprised her would-be rescuer by stealing her sword, pulling it clear of its scabbard and rushing at Vorden.

That was all the time Loric needed. He closed his eyes and in an instant Soul Crusher was in his hand once more, brought to him by the souls of those the blade had killed. A scent seemed to hit him, the memory of the scent of Sara. It filled him with only one thought: the death of the Dark Knight that had so long ago tried to kill him and young Sara. How it could be possible for him to be the same man was irrelevant. That he was here was all that mattered.

“Linarceo Leonis! You lowlife scum, I remember you from all those years ago! You are no Knight if you prey on the weak and the young.”

“Ah, the Black Dragon my old quarry, 'tis thee! I am sworn to prey on all those who oppose the will of the Mistress of Death. The strong rule, the weak die. That is the order of things.”

“Why don't you put aside your hunting and scheming and fight me like the Knight you pretend to be?”

“Thinkest thou canst defeat me? Thou shalt soon discover how much in error thou art.”

“Come on then! Feel the pain that you've caused; pay for the lives that you have taken. I am going take great pleasure in killing you!”

“Very well, then, have at me! Thy death shall bring the rule of my Mistress that much closer.”

Loric yelled as he launched a one-man war with Leonis and his band. He cared for nothing else; the battle frenzy was on him, rational thought left far behind. The princess, Vorden, his new friends, all of it was swept away. There was only one thing on his mind - death to the Knight and all those that were with him if they should get in his way.

The Dark Knight met him, blocking his route to the others, clearly showing that to get to them, the dragon would have to go through him. That suited Loric just fine. He wasn't interested in them anyway and so the battle was joined.

Eilidh's Catalyst's eyes could see that this Z'rcona was Magically Dead, which was how she had remained undetected by Vorden's magic. She briefly berated herself for not thinking to use Phaer in such a strategy herself - it was why she had brought him, after all. Still, there was no point dwelling on it now. She would just have to learn to do better...assuming she lived long enough.

Meanwhile, Mystaya was the first to reach her captor. She gave no battle cry – she hadn't spoken to him so far, and she saw no reason to start now. She simply thought to run him through while he was busy countering what Z'rcona and her party were throwing at him. When her blade slid through his ribs and into his heart, however, she realised it had been far too easy.

“He was a copy!” Bunny called out, confirming Mystaya's own suspicions.

“So where is he really?” demanded the princess.

“Right here!” came Vorden’s voice from the East wall. “My, my! This is entertaining! Please, go ahead, kill each other - save me the trouble! Actually, though, if you don’t mind, I’ve got some friends with me who want to play, too. Would you like to meet them?” Without waiting for a reply, he cancelled the illusion spell from the East wall and a portion of it disappeared, allowing a horde of chaos creatures to pour in, snarling, drooling and dripping with slime.

The great horde surged forward, forcing Loric and Leonis apart. Phaer instantly began shooting his arrows as fast as he could, while Rochelle, Granite and Taka fended them off with steel. Hannah managed to fight her way to the princess. “Your Highness, I do swear to be thy Knight Protector to keep thee from harm until my death.”

“I appreciate the thought, Lady Knight,” the princess replied, taking the head off a monster that had slipped through Hannah’s defences, “and I do accept thy pledge of service, but right now we need to get out of here.”

“You’re not going after Vorden?” Bunny asked before biting chunk out of a chaos creature’s neck. She wouldn’t be doing that again - its blood tasted foul.

“Oh, believe me, I want Vorden’s head on a plate, but I want to live more, so I suggest you get on with rescuing me.” She broke off to sever some twisted creature’s spine. “Sorry about stealing your sword, by the way. I would have asked, but I was in a hurry.”

“Don’t worry, Your Highness, I have much the same policy,” Bunny replied, stabbing one monster in the back with her favourite dagger, while using her sorcery to send illusory blades at another, before saying, “Sorry, Highness. Be right back,” and promptly disappeared.

Franckel, Tincershi, Tolbrietta and Calandra cast spells and prayers at the horde. Elice and Eilidh did their best to Grant Life to keep their respective mage partner’s Life Store topped up, while Granite multitasked, Granting Life, swinging his axe and singing bard songs. Rochelle was doing some multi-tasking of her own, using her druid magic to wound and heal in equal measure while defending her more vulnerable friends with a pair of long knives.

As for the strange old man, Artisho, he tried to hit a lizard man over the head with his staff, missed and fell flat on his face. His hat was kicked across the room and oblivious to the danger around him, he promptly crawled after it. Unfortunately, it seemed like every time he got within arm’s reach, it was kicked somewhere else, and he had to crawl after it again. Strangely, the chaos creatures seemed to be ignoring him.

In the confusion, Z’rcona managed to slip up quietly behind Vorden, who thought he was safe inside his protective magical shield and surrounded by his chaos legions. He was shocked, however, when all his magic suddenly collapsed and he felt a presence in his mind.

“No!” he cried in horror.

“By order of Her Divine Excellency,” Z’rcona pronounced sentence, “you are to be brought before her to answer for your crime of selfish betrayal, putting your own petty desires above Her Almighty Will. She calls you and you will go to her now!”

With a scream of unimaginable pain and terror, he vanished, sucked into a vortex of powerful magic.

Loric and Leonis tried to fight their way back towards each other, killing chaos monsters only because they were in the way, but Z'rcona called out to the Knight, "Forget him! Job done. Time to go." There was no immediate answer.

"Your Royal Highness," Eilidh began, having finally reached her side.

"Mystaya," she insisted, "We don't have time for formalities." She cast out shards of molten rock, fanning out in an arc to singe a number of monsters that got too close for comfort. Eilidh Granted Life to replenish her.

"Mystaya, then. You were brave to call out his name like that."

"It seemed like the only thing I could do," she replied.

"Well, it kept him talking and bought us time," Eilidh said

"That's not going to mean much unless we get out of here. Any ideas?"

Remembering Bunny's words about a thief always leaving himself a back door, Eilidh replied, "You tell me. You've been here a while, is there any other way out of here? An escape route Vorden had planned?"

"I wish I could say for sure, but I was blindfolded whenever the Darkness spell wasn't in effect. Wait a moment, though, he did leave this room from time to time, and I don't think he went into the mine itself. He hid one room, maybe he hid another?"

"Good thinking," Eilidh commended her.

Eilidh called out, "Listen to me all of you! We think there's another hidden room that might be a way out. We have to find it!"

Z'rcona gave a disdainful retort, "You might have to, sweetheart, but not us! Lincarceo, stop playing with that dragon. Remember how Her Divine Excellency feels about personal vendettas! We're getting out of here. Now!"

"Thou art wise to remind me, Z'rcona," the Dark Knight replied, then turning back to Loric, who was still trying to fight his way back over to him, he said, "I regret that I am unable to finish this at the present time, but my duty doth call me away."

"Come back here you coward!"

"Worry thee not, sir, for we shalt surely have our reckoning, but not today. Do try not to die down here. I want to kill thee myself. Fare thee well until we meet once more." He offered a Knightly salute, then when Z'rcona gave him the nod, he activated a magical device. There was a flash of blue light and her entire party vanished.

Loric cursed and, robbed of the energy of his fury and chance for revenge, he began to tire and struggle with the many small injuries he had sustained. Calandra prayed for healing, and Lady

Hannah was the first to fight her way towards him and come to his aid. She cared nothing for killing the enemy, but simply did enough to get them out of her way, relying on her golden plate armour to protect her.

She had no sooner reached him, when Artisho cried out loud, “Aha! Gotcha now!”

Everyone turned to look as he lunged at his runaway hat, missed and ended up through an illusory wall, so that only his flailing legs were visible.

Eilidh shook her head in wonder, “He's found it - the daft old man's found the hidden room! Come on, all of you!”

They stayed tightly packed together as a group, protecting each other as they moved over to Artisho. They hauled him to his feet, and picked up his hat in one swift movement, crowding into the small adjoining room. It was a squeeze, but they all fit. The chaos creatures were soon pounding on the wall, but they couldn't get in.

“That's odd,” Taka said, “How come we could get through but they can't?”

It was Granite who responded with, “Gift horse...mouth...ye see what I'm sayin'?”

There was a mage's strongbox standing in pride of place. A closer inspection revealed a very nasty trap constituting dozens of poisoned needles that could undoubtedly kill every one of them, were it to fire. There was some debate over whether Bunny should cast the Trap Zap spell to disarm it, knowing that if the spell failed, they would almost certainly all be killed.

Then Phaer volunteered, “Let me do it. I think this trap was designed with mages in mind. We've seen evidence before that I don't set off such traps, so I can disarm it.”

“How can you disarm magic?” Eilidh asked, sceptically.

“It has a magical trigger, but there is a physical mechanism that fires the needles. I can take it out and make the whole thing useless.”

After some debate it was agreed. Phaer crouched down by the chest and the others gave him what room they could. Once he started, nobody dared to move, they were even scared to breathe in case it disturbed the ranger. The half-elf put all else out of his mind, focussing his whole being on the task at hand. It was a delicate operation and he was soon sweating with the controlled effort. After what seemed like hours, but was really no more than two or three minutes, he slowly, gently removed the trigger device and stood up, putting it away in his pack - one could never tell when it might be useful.

“It worked,” Phaer stated in hushed tones.

“You're sure it's safe?” Eilidh whispered back.

“Why are you whispering? Of course it's safe!” Phaer shot back.

Eilidh smiled, briefly, uneasily. He did not return it. It seemed Phaer was unhappy with her for some reason that she couldn't fathom. She was worried that the bond so recently developed between them might be broken and she had no idea how to fix it.

Bunny needed no further invitation. She was on the floor, opening the box in a flash. Inside were gems, healing potions, and a Techmagic device that could cast the Safety Spell - a single use, short-range, emergency teleportation spell that would take them outside the mine in an instant. All it needed was an injection of Life from a Catalyst. Eilidh did the honours and with a flash of blue light, they found themselves outside the main entrance to the mine. There they sat down to relax and regenerate wounds and magic. All except Granite, who excused himself from the group, saying he had something to do. No-one had the energy to stop him or question him. A few minutes later, there was a large explosion and the dwarf came wandering back.

“A good mine supervisor always keeps some explosives handy just in case. I spotted the equipment on the way in and I figured I could keep the beasties from ever gettin' out.

* * * * *

They set up camp by the lake where Phaer had first met Artisho.

Princess Mystaya stood up and thanked everyone for coming to her rescue, then asked, “Where are we and how are we to get home?”

Bunny held of a piece of paper, and declared, “Maybe this will help. It's a map, showing Marina Fells in relation to the main human cities of Mythallen. It's quite a way by the looks of things.”

“Wherever did you get your hands on a map?” Rochelle wondered.

“Oh, while that Z'rcona was sneaking up on Vorden, I suddenly became very curious about what she might have in her pack. So I thought I'd take a look.”

“You picked her pocket?” Phaer asked. He was impressed, for growing up with Z'rcona, he knew his cousin's skill was not to be taken lightly.

“Yes,” Bunny replied, solemnly, catching his tone. “It was the most fascinating challenge I've had in a long time. She's good, but on that occasion, I was better. I took this thing, as well,” she held up an orb that seemed to be like the device the Dark Knight used to teleport them away.

“Twas a most honourable test of thy skill,” Lady Hannah approved.

Bunny shrugged. “Well, you never know when a magical device might come in handy,” she said, packing it away, safely.

“One other thing puzzles me,” offered the princess. “I am curious as to how my father came to choose you all for this.”

Taking it in turns, they told their story, from the misunderstanding when they met Prince Garald, their short stay in Shakaran, adventures in Avidon and ultimately how they came to Marina Fells.

Above all the rest, though, one thing stood out for Mystaya. “Uncle Kismet is dead?” She shook her head in disbelief. “Impossible.”

“Uncle?” Toli marvelled.

The princess smiled, “No, dear hobbit, he wasn't my real uncle, that's just what I called him. He was there when I was born and although he disappeared for long periods, I always felt like he was there as I grew up.”

“Who was he?” Eilidh wondered.

She shrugged, “I have no idea. Neither does my father. If you ask him, he could give you no good reason why he allowed him free run of the palace and took him into his confidence.” She laughed and added, “apart from the fact that there wouldn't have been any way to stop him from entering if we'd wanted to. Somehow, Kismet always seemed to find his way to places where he shouldn't have been and know things he shouldn't have known. He was a mystery, and I wouldn't have wanted him any other way. But tell me, Eilidh, what is it that brought you my father's city in the first place?”

“While rescuing you was a noble cause, Your Highness,” the Catalyst answered, “my primary motivation was the source of information to which your father has promised to lead me.”

Eilidh took a deep breath. It was a risk, but she had to believe she was doing the right thing. If she obeyed Gamaliel's instructions to the letter and told no-one, she couldn't do her job. Therefore Eilidh would use her own judgement, make her own choices.

“You've all earned the right to hear what all this is about,” the Catalyst told her companions. “I can't ask any of you to risk your lives if I'm not willing to take the risk of trusting you. I don't know how any of you could prove yourselves any more than you already have.”

Epilogue

For the first time, Eilidh revealed some of the details of her meeting with Master Gamaliel that had started all this off. At the end, Toli let out a low whistle. “I knew something had happened at the top of magical government, but I never guessed, I mean, how could anyone guess, after all it's so incredible, even far-fetched and unbelievable, not that I don't think what you're saying is true, of course it is if you say so.”

Phaer had gone deathly pale during the course of the story, and finally, he exploded. “I cannot believe you would keep this from us! What have you dragged me into? Dear gods, that's what Z'rcona was doing here - she's working for `Her`! Vorden was an agent of Niltsiar but he betrayed her when he kidnapped Princess Mystaya so she sent my cousin to assassinate him.”

“That's what I suspect, too,” Eilidh agreed.

“Oh you suspected it did you? Well hooray for you! What do you want, a medal? Niltsiar is back. I have to warn my people. They have to know!”

“Phaer, you can't spread this around; you could jeopardise the entire mission, destroy any chance of stopping Niltsiar.”

The ranger snorted. “You can't stop Niltsiar! You'd be better off putting your efforts into stopping the sunrise or making the moon disappear! I can't be one who stands against her, I don't dare.” He stood up. “I'm going to my people and that's the end of it.” Without further comment he snatched the map out of Bunny's hand and stormed off.

Everyone looked at Eilidh for guidance - their thoughts were plain to see `do we stop him`? The Catalyst shook her head. “Let him go. What will be will be. It's a very long way back to any elven settlements on foot. Time enough for him to make the right decision - whatever that might be. Well, Mystaya, it's time for us to take you home.”

“I think I remember the way from Z'rcona's map well enough,” Bunny offered.

“You don't need the map, young lady,” Artisho told her. “I know the way; I can lead you.”

“Why didn't you tell us that before?” Rochelle wondered.

The old man shrugged. “You never asked. It's a good thing we have three dragons with us, though; it won't take us nearly so long this way.”

Loric cleared his throat, slightly embarrassed. “Actually, I'm afraid I'm not coming with you.”

“What!” Everyone demanded at once.

“There's something I have to do over in the Scorched Desert and it doesn't make much sense to go all the way to Shakaran, when it's leagues in the wrong direction.”

“He's asked me to go with him,” Calandra added, eyes pleading for understanding, “and I've agreed. I think it's time I stopped pretending to be something I'm not and got more involved in dragon

business. Poor Sara died without ever being comfortable with what she really was. I don't want the same to happen to me. I'm sorry. We'll track you down again when we can.”

Eilidh sighed, “OK, that leaves you, Taka. Will you take us?”

“Er, no,” Taka refused, “I'm afraid not. With everything that you've told me, I should be with my people in the aquatic kingdoms, helping to protect the sea elves. I'm sorry. I understand the need for secrecy and I promise not to spread it around, but I have to tell the king. Who knows? Maybe he can help. Maybe we retain some ancient knowledge that is lost to the land bound races.”

“Speaking of which,” Rochelle put in, “I want to visit Merlyon and do some research of my own. Surely there must be something in the magical capital to help us.”

“In this current climate of war,” Hannah said, gravely, “methinks she shouldst not go alone. I shall act as her protector, by thy leave, Your Highness,” she added.

The princess smiled. “Please,” she waved a hand, dismissively, “thou must act according to thine own honour, Noble Lady. I shalt not hold thee back.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. Whilst at Merlyon, I shalt return unto mine own Order. If I know my sponsor, Knight Officer Sir Warren Mitchell, I believe he might find me worthy of promotion to Knight Warrior, by virtue of this small undertaking, whilst I have been on detached duty.”

Eilidh believed that only a Knight would call what they had been through a `small undertaking`.

“If you will give me few moments,” Taka offered, “I will ask one of my friends to come and take you to Merlyon. I know just the dragon. He'll jump at the chance.” With that, Taka shook Eilidh's hand, wished her luck and then reverted to her true form and the bronze aquatic dragon dived into the lake.

Seeing her party fragmenting before her eyes upset Eilidh more than she would have expected.

Toli put her small hand on the Catalyst's shoulder. “I'm still with you, my friend. I've told you, I'm with you to the end no matter what.”

“Aye,” Granite rumbled, “and if yer thinkin' that I'd risk missin' out on the five hundred gold reward I've got comin', lassie, ye can think again.”

“You will all receive due payment,” promised Princess Mystaya. “If my father's word were not enough, you have mine also.”

Bunny just shrugged. “I really don't have anywhere else to go, Eilidh, so I'd like to stay with you...but I'm concerned for Phaer, out here alone. Who knows what could be out here? If you think I should stay, I'll stay, but I really think I should follow him.”

“He won't thank you for it, the way he feels now. Plus, you can be quite...distracting and he probably wants to be alone.”

“Don't worry, he won't even know I'm there unless he's in trouble. Even then I could probably get in, help him and get out before he realised it's me. I can do this.”

“Well, I for one will sleep better knowing he has someone looking out for him. You have my blessing, not that I have any right to tell you what to do. Your life is your own. Go.”

Your life is your own, Bunny thought to herself. Nobody had ever said that to her before. “I'll look after him for you,” she promised.

For me? What does that mean? The Catalyst wondered, but aloud, she just said, “I know you will. Thank you, Bernice.”

The young woman looked startled at the use of her proper name, but said nothing as she gathered her things.

“Hmmm,” Artisho mused, stroking his beard. “That just leaves five of us going the same way. No problem at all.”

“That's easy for you to say, sir,” came a booming voice from the lake. A great sea serpent raised its head up high above the water. “I'm a sea serpent, not a passenger ship!”

“Don't be silly!” Artisho scolded. “At least it's not seven of us! So thanks to Princess Katakaran---“

“Princess who?” Eilidh asked, puzzled.

“Katakaran!” repeated the old man. “Taka!”

“Taka's a princess?”

“That's what I just said. So as I was saying, thanks to—“

“So when she said she wanted to tell the king...that would be her father?”

“Well obviously! Anyway, thanks to Pr—“

“Why do I suddenly seem to be surrounded by royalty?”

“I have no idea!” Artisho answered, quite exasperated. “Now will you please stop interrupting your elders?”

“Sorry.”

“I should think so, too. It's very rude! Especially when I'm talking to my pet sea serpent.”

“Pet?!” demanded the large reptile.

“Oh do shut up and listen!” Artisho snapped, looking to the heavens. “Dear gods, am I ever to be allowed to finish this sentence? As I was saying, thanks to Princess Katakaran, a proud bronze dragon will be taking two of them to Merlyon - and I'm sure you won't hear any fuss from him,” he added, slyly. “Five of us on the back of your great bulk? Bah, you won't even notice.”

“That's not the point,” insisted the serpent. “It's the way you just assume - the least you could do is ask.”

Artisho rolled his eyes. “The gods save me from a sea serpent with a bruised ego!”

Bunny shushed him, however, and approached the sea serpent, with an almost serpentine grace of her own. “Great majestic serpent,” she smoothed, in a voice dripping with honey. “Would you mind awfully if I were to humbly ask for the honour of a ride for my friends to the great city of Shakaran? We understand that you would not agree to carry just anybody, but perhaps you can find it in you to overlook our obvious failings and consider us worthy of your favour.”

The sea serpent bent down until its massive head was right next to the Sumorityl. His eyes blinked, then grew wide in astonishment and, if such a thing were possible, he almost seemed to be blushing. “What a fascinating creature you are,” he whispered, one could even say seductively. “Since you asked so nicely, it would be my pleasure to carry your friends wherever they wish to go. I am only sorry that you will not be among them. Perhaps we will meet again.”

“I will cling to that hope,” replied the Sumorityl, earnestly.

* * * * *

It was still dark when a bronze dragon, a young buck, burst out of the lake, showering them with water and landing with a flourish. “Your one way flight to Merlyon is here! Courtesy of Princess Katakaran of the bronze sea dragons,” he announced. “One Knight and one gnome passenger requested, free of charge, no ticket necessary. All aboard! You can call me Brash, by the way.”

Rochelle and Lady Hannah climbed onto his back, while Loric and Calandra moved a short distance away and changed to their dragon forms. The remaining companions climbed onto the back of the sea serpent and all were ready to go.

As the dragons took to the skies, young Brash made a point of doing some fancy flying around Callie, giving her a smile and a wink as he passed. The silver giggled and acted coy while her dark scaled companion glowered at the cheeky young bronze. Then at last, they took off in different directions, leaving the sea serpent behind. It moved through one of the wide rivers that led out of the lake, and wound through the hills, accelerating slowly until reaching the sea, where it accelerated again, cutting through the water at blistering speeds without the companions ever feeling that they might fall off.

Meanwhile, the half-elf ranger, Phaer, walked on: confused, hurt, angry, sacred, taking his time to work through his inner turmoil. Bernice Ardra was still some way behind, but she would soon close the gap. Phaer had no reason to conceal his tracks; as far as he knew, he was alone out there.

Despite their small, splintered groups, the companions looked up as one at the beautiful sunrise that lit the sky in shades of red, orange and purple. On this dawn of a new day, it seemed sad that their quest should end in this way when they had been through so much together.

But then, this wasn't the beginning of the end of their journey; it was merely the end of the beginning.

END OF MAJAOS: PART 1