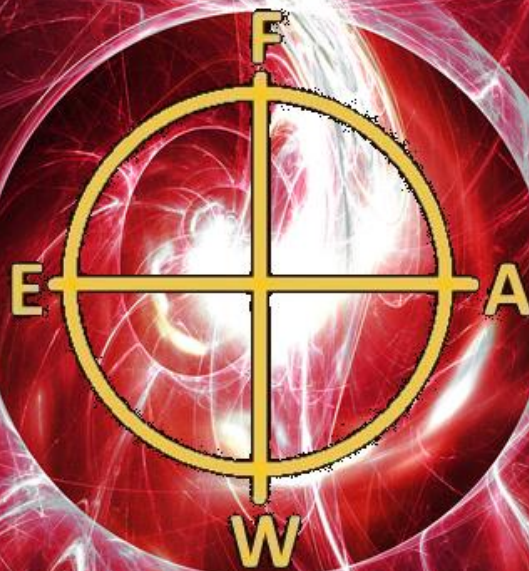


Consequences

Book 2 of the Majaos Trilogy



Gary Stringer

Consequences

(Majaos Trilogy Book 2)

Eilidh's company of friends has splintered.

Rochelle is hunting for clues in the magical capital, Merlyon, assisted by the strange old man, Artisho. The war is outside the barrier, the politics are on the inside...and the danger is everywhere.

Phaer is returning to his people – the people who despise him. They'll execute him and he knows it...unless he's killed on the way.

The obsidian dragon Loric is seeking the mysteries of the Penta Drauka quest, while silver Callie embraces her true self, but in these days of Ancient magic, the world can be a dangerous place...even for dragons.

Meanwhile, Eilidh leads a band of four on a mission to a golden temple of the dead, at the behest of a sage known only as the Wise One. Will she find the answers she needs, the key to success...or just whole heap of trouble?

They may fail, they may succeed, but either way...there will be consequences.

Prologue

Merlyn was the greatest mage in the world: a man of great wisdom and experience, but also one with a great responsibility, a great burden.

The magic was dying. It had ever been a weak, insubstantial force in this world and now it was nearly spent. For years now, while others had made futile attempts to preserve or revive the magic, he had been scrying for a new home across the cosmos. The relocation plan was ambitious. He called it his Great Endeavour. It was little short of madness - something he had been accused of more than once. Now he was about to attempt something scarcely less ridiculous: a meeting with other magic users from across the world.

Mages were a solitary, secretive people by circumstance if not by nature. They met rarely, if ever, and when they did it was not often a peaceful encounter. Merlyn believed that needed to change, especially now. Therefore he had sent a message out to wherever magic still clung to the world, seeking out magic users of all kinds. The message was cryptic, since he dared not risk revealing too much. It simply requested in the strongest possible terms, an audience on neutral ground that was sacred to them all: the Great Stone Circle. It was a prudent choice, since no mage would ever harm another within the Circle. Especially not at the time of the meeting: sunset - the time-between-times when it was neither day, nor night; neither dark nor light. It was imperative that this meeting pass peacefully.

So it was, then, that at that sacred time on the appointed day, in that most holy of places, mages came from distances great and small, gathering at the behest of the wizard Merlyn. Some came because they feared or respected Merlyn. Some came because they believed in the concept of sharing magical knowledge. Some came to voice grievances or outrage at being summoned thus. Others came because they dared not risk a rival gaining an advantage by attending while they stayed away in ignorance. Still others came because they were simply curious. Motives were many, but absences were few and that was what counted in Merlyn's eyes. In the outside world, some of these mages were rivals - even enemies - but here they met in peaceful tolerance.

Satisfied, and indeed gratified beyond all expectation, Merlyn strode into the crowd, coming to stand by the central standing stone as the last red and purple tendrils of the sun faded into black. Thus began the very first Council of Magic in history.

“I welcome thee, one and all,” boomed Merlyn's deep, resonant baritone. He was dressed in a humble robe of coarse sackcloth dyed red in the blood of a sacrificial virgin lamb. It was by far the simplest garment of any worn by the assembled crowd. None would dare do otherwise. In all other walks of life in this world, status was symbolised by clothing. A rich noble wore expensive trappings to demonstrate his superiority over the simple farmer, who in turn wore greater finery than the hired stable hand, and so on down to the lowliest slave. In the world of magic, this worked in reverse. A novice would wear fancy attire, and gradually shed his earthly trappings as he grew in the magic. It also served a practical function - in many places, magic was reviled and those who practised it burned. The lack of earthly finery made it easier to move in the world unnoticed. They did not stand out in a crowd. Indeed, mostly they were paid little or no attention whatsoever. This suited the magic-users very well. Merlyn was the greatest wizard of his age and so he had shed all but the barest of earthly possessions.

“Prithee, I beg thine indulgence for not sparing greater detail in my missive, but rest assured that this is a historic meeting of the utmost importance to us all.”

“If it be thine intention to engender our fullest attention, Great One,” said a female voice, in a neutral tone, “then thou hast succeeded. What, pray tell, is this dire event of such universal consequence?”

“Truly, madam, events are dire indeed,” Merlyn agreed. “The erosion of magic is happening slowly and quietly, not suddenly and forcefully, but that doth make it all the more dangerous. However, universal it is not,” he argued, “as ye will see. Let me be plain: I hath called ye all here to discuss the future. Our future. The future of all magic.”

“It will be a short meeting, then,” said a derisive shaman from a land far to the South; a man with ebony skin, shaven head and a muscular upper body of which many a warrior would be envious. “For I see no future at all for us or for magic in this world.”

“Though thou knowest not, sir, thou hast squarely hit the mark. It is true that the magic of this world is dying and doth seek to take us with it, but perhaps it need not be so. That is what I hath asked thee here to discuss.”

That caused a stir. Could it be true? They wondered. Had the Great Merlyn found a solution to their plight? Was it even possible?

“Er...E-excuse me, er, s-sir?” It was a nervous young apprentice from the land of the Cymru. Artemis by name, Merlyn recalled. “W-what a-answer dost thou p-perceive?”

“An excellent question,” Merlyn smoothed, encouragingly. A true apprentice was a rare thing these days, since there appeared to be such a bleak future for magic. If only the lad could see true success in magic, it would do wonders for his self-confidence. In the meantime, a few simple words would have to suffice. “The answer is all around thee, or should I say, above thee. Look above; what seest thou?”

“Why, I see only the night sky,” said the beautiful, exotic, raven-haired sorceress he had always found so beguiling. She hailed from the Emerald Isle just across the sea. “The stars in the heavens, like the jewels of the gods, so they are, aloof from our mortal concerns. What dost thou seest?”

“I see as do you, Lady Ganieda. The stars in the heavens; but mere jewels they are not. I have discovered, as I long suspected, that each one is, in fact, a sun like ours, shining down upon worlds like ours. Like, yet unlike. Long have I gazed at the stars and probed for magic, for surely it must exist elsewhere. Alas, it would appear that magical worlds are rarer than I had hoped. Indeed, I was close to giving up when one day I was met.”

“Met? Met by whom?” The voice was lost in the crowd and Merlyn could not see the individual to whom it belonged.

He let out a long, slow breath as he considered his response. “Tis not an easy thing to explain. Even now I know not what words will suffice. Let us simply call it a vision - no, a visitation; a visitation from...an angel of magic, perhaps.” He hid a private smile at his choice of imagery. “This `angel` didst guide my gaze unto a world of such magic as thou hast never felt before. A magic so

potent that every living thing doth pulsate unto its rhythm. In this world, magic users such as we wouldst be a minority group no longer, distrusted and hunted, burned at the stake by society's majority. We wouldst be the majority!"

"That sounds like a wondrous dream, aye that it does." Ganieda softened her scepticism with the smile that danced in her green eyes. "But how do we know that is not all it is? Can you show us this world so we might judge for ourselves?" Privately, she was inclined to accept Merlyn's word. He was nobody's fool and would not make such a wild claim if he could not back it up. He was ruggedly handsome, with short dark hair and a toned upper body. She often laughed to see the old man with long flowing white beard that was his favoured form in the world of ordinary mortals. They could not handle the truth that he was Emrys - Ageless. It was, according to legend, a consequence of the unique circumstances of his birth. His mother was of the long-lived Faerie race - as was Ganieda herself and young Artemis of the Cymru. Merlyn's father had been the late, great Taliesin, Penderwydd - Chief Bard, who had possessed the power to move heaven and earth with his voice. Indeed, legend had it that Merlyn had, in fact, been stillborn and that his father sang his own life essence into his baby son, knowing the cost would be that of his own life. Who could say what effect this unique convergence of magic could have on a new human life? In times past he had been known as the Great Myrddin Emrys; Merlinus Ambrosius to the Latin speakers. Among magical circles these days, he favoured the form, Merlyn.

Ganieda had met him long ago, in the forest near her father's home, when both were only barely out of adolescence. She smiled at the memory - he had not looked so regal then. He had just escaped from the *Bean Sidhe*; dirty, smelly and naked but for the skin of the wolf he had slain. Wolf Boy she had called him then, but she had been instantly fond of him. Years later, when her powers had grown beyond what she could hide from her people, Merlyn helped her fake her own death to end the witch-hunt. Perhaps if things had been different, the world more accepting, a romance might have been possible. Perhaps, if he was now suggesting what he seemed to be suggesting, there could yet be a chance. But she could not allow her feelings be known to others. There were those who would suspect collusion and refuse to listen on no further grounds than the fact that she was in favour. She had to at least give the appearance of scepticism, but still she could phrase it tactfully - play the diplomatic role. That was her best chance to help, she thought.

"Thou art quite right, my Lady," responded the great mage to her request. "In fact, I have prepared for thine eminently sensible point. Behold the world of Majaos!"

The wizard gave the assembled crowd the co-ordinates for their scrying magic. So, they all looked for themselves and felt the magic emanating from that blue-green bauble so far away. Some insisted on performing a myriad of magical tests and Merlyn allowed them time and space to satisfy themselves. In the end there was only one conclusion that could be reached: Majaos was real and it surpassed all their expectations. That agreement was a start, but far from an end.

"What hopest thou to gain from showing us this?" Someone demanded.

"What do I hope to gain? Why, I doth propose to make this world our own!" There. It was said. No going back now. The genie could not be put back into the bottle. Now all he could do was sit back and wait for the inevitable reactions.

* * * * *

A stunned silence had descended upon the Great Stone Circle at Merlyn's revelation. Even for Ganieda, hearing the words had been profound. To leave this world and seek another, it was incredible, unbelievable! And not everyone approved. There were many objections. Some couldn't imagine that such an undertaking was possible. Merlyn insisted that while it was true that even with magic, one could not do the impossible, he was confident that a solution could be found if they worked together and did not waste their energies by focussing on the enormity of the problem.

Another group were against interfering with another world. "There are people there. People who are different from us - not human. How can we know what effect we will have on them and they on us?"

Of all the points, Merlyn had the greatest respect for this one. It was a valid objection, but he was convinced that in many ways these other races were not so different and strange as they first appeared. Merlyn and many others were excited and fascinated by the prospect of co-existing with these other races, sharing knowledge with them.

Inevitably, there were those who would be conquerors, seeking to take this world called Majaos by force and enslaving the `backward` indigenous species. Merlyn was quick to make it known that any such attempt would be faced with his wrath. He wasn't naive enough to expect that to be an end to it, though. It was a danger that would have to be faced and fought if and when the inter-world jump proved successful. One thing at a time. It was foolish to worry about tomorrow's meal when today's predator was at the door.

Some refused to believe that magic was dying at all. "Everything goes in cycles," said a spokesman for that faction. "As the moon doth wax and wane, so the magic is surely waning only to wax again unto its full glory."

"How long would you have us wait, you great lummoX?" Ganieda demanded. "A decade? A century? Until the beginning of the New Age? And all that time we act like the ostrich, hiding our heads in the sand, saying `All our troubles will go away by themselves, so they will`! Aye, and pigs might fly!"

Of course, there would always be those who advocated the status quo. "We should take no action that might interfere with forces that we do not understand."

Merlyn had heard enough and called for order. "This is a momentous decision," he declared, choosing to drop the archaic speech in favour of a more modern but still formal mode of address, "and ye all have thy points of view. I cannot force ye all to act if it is not thy will. But I am determined to seize this chance of a future for magic. It is my hope that those who think in a likewise manner shall remain here that we might pool our knowledge and experience of magic, to find a way to reach our new home. There is a time limit, for I fear the magic shall not survive here for much longer. If the magic falls below the level required for this spell, and we are still here, then we will have missed the boat. We will die here in a world devoid of that which we all hold most dear. I will not allow that to happen! I say that I and those with me, shall make the attempt ere the sands of time run out. We will succeed and embrace a new life, or we will die with honour, sure in the knowledge we did all we could. Those who wish to join me know this: I intend to depart this world with the fires of Beltaine next year. Those who wish to stay in this world, ye all are free to leave with the dawn, but ye shall have no part in our journey, successful or no. Decide and decide quickly: Work with me, take a chance with me, or leave and refuse to try, always wondering what might have been. Choose now."

As it turned out, it was not quite as simple as that. Merlyn, true to his nature, consented to allow those who were undecided three days and three nights to make up their minds, during which he and his followers did all they could to persuade them to this noble cause. In the end, of those mages who had attended the meeting, close to three-quarters chose to stay and work together. Taking into account those who were absent, Merlyn reckoned on a support of over two thirds of all magic users. The first session of the Council of Magic had begun with promise. Now all that remained was to make it a success.

* * * * *

The days lengthened and the wind warmed. The moon moved through its phases until one evening, as it rose full in the time-between-times, they made their final preparations. As dawn approached, they observed the rite, which marked the year reborn: the kindling of the Beltaine fire.

On that day, all other fires were extinguished so that the Beltaine flame, pure and perfect, might be the mother of all flames throughout the year to come. Each year, in days gone by, this fire burned without cease, and anyone needing fire was given live embers from the Beltaine bed so that each settlement received warmth and light from the same pure source. These days, only the Learned observed the Beltaine ceremony.

Those mages who had stayed to work on the Great Endeavour, gathered at the Great Stone Circle, watching with baited breath, waiting to see Merlyn light the Beltaine fire. They prayed it would light first time, providing a good omen for their flight to a New World. Merlyn's sackcloth garments were gone, replaced by robes of fiery red, covered in silver runes, golden pentagram medallion glittering along with the golden torc of a king that he wore, as they caught the light of the full moon. Omens good or ill, and they would still make the attempt, for it was their one last hope of a future. "Better to die trying," Merlyn had said, "than wither away here."

Accordingly, by the silvery light of the moon, they gathered the Nawglan, the nine sacred woods whose unique properties produced such wonderful benefit when brought together. They obtained a goodly quantity, which they bundled with strips of rawhide. In the centre of the Circle, they placed the bundled wood on a lamb's white fleece.

Before dawn, the company assembled in prayer to the gods, lifting their voices to properly present the Nine Sacred Woods as the Nawglan offering:

"Alder of the marshes we bring, Foremost in Lineage, for assurance."

"Hazel of the Rocks we bring, Seed of Wisdom, for understanding."

"Willow of the Streams we bring, Moon Goddess, for fertility."

"Birch of the Waterfalls we bring, Lofty Dreamer, for high-mindedness."

"Ash of the Shadows we bring, Stout-hearted, for honesty."

"Yew of the Plain we bring, Bringer of Death, for rebirth."

"Elm of the Grove we bring, Great Giver, for generosity."

“Rowan of the Mountains we bring, Mountain Lord, for Justice.”

“Oak of the Sun we bring, Mighty Monarch, for Benevolence.”

They could not use magic to light the Beltaine fire - that would be to cheat the omens portended by the ceremony. Would the Beltaine fire be lit first time? In silence, then, there in the time-between-times they kindled the flame. Gripping the greenwood bow, Ganieda drew the gut line, spinning the length of rounded yew in the deep-cut notch of an oaken bole. At the first glow from the wood, Merlyn applied the dried plant called *tan coeth*, which caused the infant flame to burst bright and blush crimson - as if drawing life from the very air.

Merlyn had done this countless times before. But this time, as he touched the *tan coeth* to the wood, the spark glimmered brightly for a moment, and then died in a wisp of smoke. Ganieda saw the flame fail and drew her breath in sharply; the bow fell from her fingers and her face turned white. Merlyn's heart lurched in his chest.

He glanced to the east, towards the rising sun, even as his hands fumbled to retrieve the bow and yew. The first rays of the sun touched the horizon and there was no flame to greet the day. Beltaine had dawned black.

But there was a sharp, collective gasp from the crowd then as, before Merlyn could move to make another attempt, a small flame reappeared. Then the fire suddenly leaped up high and held. The Beltaine fire was lit, but what of the omens? What events did this portend? What warning did it hold - if warning it was? No-one knew - such a thing had never happened before in all the years since Beltaine had been observed.

The celebrations were subdued, the mages nervous. How could they celebrate when everything was held in the balance? If they made it to Majaos and this New World was all they hoped for, then they would rejoice. But their thoughts were consumed by fear of the strange Beltaine fire. Was the world angry with them for abandoning it? Many felt as if they were attending the wake of their own funerals. Were these fears justified? Were they real? Or were they simply last minute nerves? No-one was prepared to say.

* * * * *

It was the second night of the Beltaine festival and time seemed to crawl as they fixed their gaze on the eastern horizon, awaiting the first rays of the Sun. At last someone cried out, pointing towards the horizon. At first the others could see nothing and the even sorceress who had spoken was beginning to doubt herself, but then there came another flicker of light. This time everyone saw it. A deep hush fell upon the assembled masses as the sky became streaked with red and purple. Everyone who saw it, even the most cynical among them, swore it was the most beautiful sunrise they had ever seen. Could a dawn on Majaos ever match this? They all wondered.

Many wept openly at the sight; there was no shame in their tears. Merlyn wiped away his own and declared. “Tis time. The moment we hath worked so hard for hath arrived. We must all harden our hearts and prepare to cast the last great feat of magic this world will ever know!”

There were many preparations to make before they could begin the final spells, preparations that proceeded all through the day, beyond dusk and into night. Finally, at midnight, a full moon high in the sky, all was in readiness. Every mage had his or her own part to play in weaving the complex

magic. Merlyn, taking a leading role, was to reach across the vastness of space to Majaos, tapping into its potent magic. This part had been the greatest challenge to the entire project: They had quickly realised that the magic of Earth was insufficient to the task. In order to reach Majaos, they needed the magic of that world. But if they could not reach Majaos, how could they tap into its magic, make the power flow to Earth? It was Artemis, the nervous apprentice, who pointed out that since they could detect the magic of Majaos, that meant the power was already flowing to Earth. All they needed to do was increase that flow. Turn a trickle into a river. All mages knew that magic was much easier when one had something to work with - enhancement magic required less effort than creation magic.

Even so, turning this theory into practice was easier said than done. At last, though, they calculated how to bring their power to bear upon this `stream`, widening it first at their end and working their way back through the flow to its source at Majaos. Once this was accomplished, it would be left to Merlyn to give the Majaos magic the final push, creating a tunnel of time, space and magical energy. If all went well, they would then have the power to travel `up river` through this corridor of magic. It required precision timing and a great deal of effort by each mage involved. Their numbers were so few! If just one faltered or failed to pull their own weight, the attempt would fail and there would be no Terran magic left with which to make a second attempt. It was all or nothing.

Clouds, dark and brooding formed above the Great Stone Circle, yet the moon was still shining brightly as the elements created a ring of their own - a roughly circular gap, almost like a corridor to their cosmic partner. But the corridor was not leading to the moon, nor from it, but through it and from beyond it. Indeed, it was merely coincidence that the moon happened to be in that unique conjunction in the sky.

Coincidence or providence? Merlyn wondered.

Certainly this was a time for great omens, both strange and frightening. As if to prove his thoughts, the magic had the unexpected effect of enhancing the lunar light until it took on a brilliance that could have outshone the sun.

The other mages had done well. Their Terran power had almost touched Majaos and it was Merlyn's place to make the breakthrough. Taking slow, deep breaths he brought his power to bear, channelling it upstream to this strange, New World. He could almost see the Majaos terrain, smell the air, hear nature working in concert with magic. It was all he could do to force himself not to stop and stare. Time enough for that later, if they were successful and that was up to him. He flew on the astral plane to the place the visiting `angel` had revealed to him. Here was the source of all magic on Majaos. Perfect. Inexhaustible. Eternal. Its location was to be a closely guarded secret - the angel had been adamant on that point. Only Merlyn must know and he could never share that knowledge with anyone. The Well of Life it was called and Merlyn vowed to keep it secret, sacred and secure until the coming of the *Du y Kharia*.

Calling upon his vast resources of gift and experience, he tapped into the Well of Life, drawing from it a stream of magic, flowing towards the corridor through time and space.

“It will be curious about you,” the angel had warned. “It will whisper seductive promises to you.”

“Ye make it sound as though it were alive,” said Merlyn, curiously.

The angel considered that. “In a manner of speaking, yes, I suppose it is. *Majaos y Natus*,” he replied, cryptically. “At any rate, you must resist its pull, for no-one can tame it, nor should anyone try.”

“Very well,” Merlyn vowed, “I shall heed your warning.”

Merlyn had had no idea what he was promising then, but he did now. The energy of this Well of Life was so pure, so enticing...almost irresistible. A term came unbidden to his mind: Life Infinity - a state of magical being beyond any he had ever even imagined. But no, Merlyn was not greedy. As it was, the possibilities of magic on Majaos would far outstrip anything he had ever experienced on Earth. He would be content with that - more than content. So he resisted the call and completed the spell. His consciousness rode the wave of magic through the Corridor back to Earth. Lightning flashed - blue lightning and green and red, the clouds swirled, the air electrified by this inrush of energy. The connection was complete, the path to Majaos lay before them - now all that remained was to walk that path - literally walk. The mind boggled at the apparent simplicity of it; there was nothing simple about the magic involved.

The mages lined up and entered the mouth of the Corridor. Merlyn was impressed by the orderly nature of the exodus, no rushing or pushing. Mind you, after performing such a feat of magic he doubted any of them had the energy for rushing or pushing - he himself certainly didn't. Ganiada and Artemis remained until the last moment, and then they, too, were gone.

For a moment, there were tears in his eyes once more, as Merlyn took a long last look at the world he knew. He breathed deeply one final breath of Terran air and then faced the Corridor with a new sense of steely determination. He was Merlyn; the greatest mage in the world and his Great Endeavour was a success.

“The future,” he said to himself, “is this way.”

Chapter 1

“Excuse me, sir,” Eilidh objected, “but as fascinating as this is, I didn't ask for a potted history of Merlyn. I asked about Niltsiar.”

Eilidh was thrilled to meet this man of knowledge, and another time she would gladly spend every coin she possessed to sit there and learn from him. Right now, though, she had rather more pressing concerns.

“You're right, Eilidh,” Toli agreed. “I'll bet we could have asked our bard friend here to tell us the Merlyn story.”

“Aye, lass,” Granite replied. “And at a much lower rate, too! A thousand gold indeed!” He shook his head in wonder. “I reckon I'd sing the entire history of the world fer that!”

“Ah, the impatience of youth,” the sage intoned, shaking his head. He fixed his gaze on the Catalyst. “My dear young lady, I do not intend to waste your time. At my age, time is in short supply and one learns to use it wisely. But what you must realise is that the question you have asked cannot be answered simply. There are connections to be made and I--” his flow was interrupted by a sudden fit of coughing.

“Are you alright, sir?” Toli asked, concerned. “Oh dear, I'm afraid our healers have left the party for a while. Maybe there's someone we could fetch for you...I could run back to the Corridor, zip back to Shakaran Palace and have someone back here in a jiffy, whatever a jiffy might be. I've always wondered that...a jiffy...what exactly is it about that that's supposed to be symbolic of being quick? In fact, what's the point of a symbol if nobody knows what it means, or rather, well, I suppose we do know what it means symbolically, but we don't know what it means literally...but at any rate, jiffy or not, I could be there and back pretty fast, if you want me to...oh you seem to be better now.”

“Yes,” replied the Wise One. “Please do not concern yourselves. It comes and goes; it will pass. If you will excuse me for one moment, I shall fix myself a herbal tea. Boiled elven spring water and a few well-chosen leaves, that always settles me down.”

The sage rose from his ornate oaken chair and moved behind the red curtain into his private living area. While the golden-robed figure was gone, Eilidh reflected on how they came to be there.

* * * * *

Toli and Princess Mystaya had both found riding on the back of a sea serpent to be quite exhilarating. They laughed and told stories - or rather Toli had told stories, often losing her thread within a few breaths, but the princess seemed delighted by the irrepressible hobbit. Granite meanwhile had, by contrast, grown increasingly dour and foul tempered. Dwarves loved to be close to rock and stone and soil, and were not fond of water. They hated sea travel. The way the water beneath them moved and changed constantly was offensive to their sense of the solid, the omnipresent, the permanent. It wasn't that dwarves disliked travelling altogether. On the contrary, it was said among the races of Majaos that dwarves were born in the saddle. Certainly, they were riding horses as soon as they could sit up and hold the reins and it was not uncommon for a dwarf to learn to ride before they learned to walk. Strictly speaking, the word `pony` would be more accurate than `horse` but dwarves disliked that term, seeing it as a prejudice against small stature.

In general, it was the elves who were always most associated with wild animals, but when it came to horses, the dwarves were undisputed masters. They explained this by saying that horses were flighty beasts by nature with constantly shifting passions. Elves tended to get caught up in this, while dwarves gently exerted their stabilising influence on the creatures. They never sought mastery and control, but partnership and co-operation.

The two main dwarven belief systems both linked strongly to horses. One denomination said that when a dwarf died, his spirit would be united with a horse in the spirit world - a world of unchanging rocky mountains and grassy plains - free to roam with the wind for eternity. The other believed that horses contained the reincarnated souls of dwarves. A dwarf would have nothing whatsoever to do with donkeys, which they thought of as a `horse gone wrong` and quite possibly the dishonoured dead, damned to this shameful existence as punishment for their misdeeds in their dwarven lives.

It was a common sight, then, to see dwarves riding around Mythalen on their ponies, exploring far and wide. Granite Longbeard was a typical dwarf on that score, but riding a sea serpent was disturbingly different. With horse riding, one could feel the solid ground beneath the horse's hooves, so the dwarven rider was still connected to rock, stone and soil. Sea travel was so...unnatural. Besides, dwarven bodies had no buoyancy and invariably they would sink like a stone.

Eilidh cared little one way or the other for the mode of transport. It had simply been the fastest way to get back to Shakaran and the sooner they got there the better. The prince had promised to lead her to a source of information to help her in her quest and she needed that information because, quite frankly, she was at a loss as to where to go or what to do next.

As for the strange old man, Artisho, he had spent the entire trip asleep without ever appearing to be in any danger of falling off. How his battered old hat remained firmly on his head Eilidh had no idea, considering the terrific speeds they reached in open water.

At last they had slowed and come to rest in a river that ran through the borderlands to the North of Shakaran City. They all dismounted, except for Artisho who still had not woken up.

“Be careful out here,” the sea serpent had warned. “There is a great deal of fighting going on in the area. It's still sporadic yet, but you'd better keep your wits about you.”

Artisho had chosen that moment to wake himself up with a sudden violent sneeze, swiftly followed by two more that conspired to make his hat fall over his eyes. “I've been blinded by the gods!” He had whispered in awe. Princess Mystaya helpfully reached up and took away the offending article. “It's a miracle!” The old man exclaimed. “Are you an angel?” he had asked, squinting at Mystaya.

“No,” she replied, good-naturedly. “Just a princess, I'm afraid.”

“Ah well,” he said, holding up a finger for emphasis. “That's the next best thing, miss...er...I'm sorry, have we met before?”

“Sir,” the serpent interrupted. “It's time to go before you really embarrass yourself.” Then without another word it had turned its massive bulk and taken off back down river, Artisho clinging on for dear life. Soon, from the companions' perspectives, they had grown smaller and smaller as they

sped into the distance. Very faintly, they heard the old man's plaintive cry, "The angel...she's stolen my hat!..."

* * * * *

During their short walk to the nearest Corridor entrance, the evidence of battle had been all around them: scraping steel from one direction, a flash of magic from another, the smell of burning from yet another. Fortune had shone upon them, however, and they made it to the Corridor without incident. Upon reaching Shakaran City itself, they had been stopped at the inner gates. The princess protested at first, but relented when the gatekeeper explained the situation.

"I am sorry, Your Highness, but since you've been gone, attacks by the chaos creatures have increased markedly. The numbers are nothing we can't handle for the moment, but there are a few species that have some strange magical abilities. I can't rule out the possibility that you may be an enemy, posing as the Princess Mystaya in order to gain entry to the palace and strike at the Prince Regent. As the Shakaran guard, we are the ring of steel around the Prince and will fall to the last warrior before any harm threatens him. If you will wait here but a moment, I have sent a priority message for an Enforcer to verify your identity. Then, Your Highness and your guests will be permitted to pass with my apologies and great gratitude for your safety."

The princess indicated that she understood and commended him for his vigilance. The man just shrugged and said he was only doing his job.

The wait had afforded them a good look at the city. There had been some subtle changes since their last visit. On the face of it, people continued to go about their business. Hawkers still touted their wares in the market place and the blacksmiths' forges still burned and smoked; street musicians still played and artisans still painted. People walked by, apparently undaunted, but there was a greater sense of urgency about their stride, a slight hush in their tone and their eyes shot furtive glances around them. Their manner, however, was that of vigilance, not fear. One could not deny the impression that they were preparing for fight, not flight. Eilidh decided she liked Shakaran...despite the palace, raised without magic. That still gave her the chills. The people were sensible, practical. After all, Merlyon's magical shield aside, Shakaran was the most heavily defended city in all Mythallen, so where would they run to if they had the chance? If danger visited them here, there was nowhere safe. Anywhere else would just be more dangerous still. Better to stay and fight for the defence of their homes and families. Still, one had to admire their courage, Eilidh decided.

The thought that these people might admire Eilidh's own courage, if they only knew, never occurred to her.

At length, an Enforcer had appeared in their midst. The way the powerful mage had been enshrouded in the black robes of that order, it had been impossible to tell race or even gender of this individual. Height gave some clues, but had been insufficient evidence on which to base an opinion. The absence of any second colour on the cuffs, hood and trim, had told them that they were aligned with the dark side of magic. That this dark Enforcer should be in the Prince's service was no surprise, since His Highness was aligned with the balance. Doubtless this individual saw royal service as a means of building a personal power base and they wouldn't achieve that by harming the Prince or, through neglect of their duties, allowing others to strike at him. Eilidh could see the logic in that, as she and her companions stood at ease under the Enforcer's intense magical scrutiny. Then the black robe had bowed respectfully to the princess, apparently satisfied that she was who she appeared to be.

The Enforcer uttered not a single word in conversation, but instantly teleported them directly inside Shakaran Palace throne room; something that, Vorden's attack notwithstanding, was possible only for very few individuals who were privy to the shield's precise magical frequency. Even before the companions' eyes had adjusted to the change in light, the Enforcer had bowed once to the figure seated by the throne and stepped from the room.

The high-ceilinged throne room was exactly square in its dimensions and dominated by Imperial Purple - the furniture, the curtains; even the marble floor was purple and white in wide, concentric circles, each edged with gold. Great tapestries hung alongside stained glass windows, telling tales of great deeds from a glorious past - not that the present was any less glorious. Hanging from the ceiling to hover over the king's throne was a human-sized painted metalworking of the city crest: a lamb, an owl and a lion in a descending line, gold on a purple background, and silver lettering that read, CALIMNI MENTUS VOLENTE meaning peace, diplomacy and war. This reflected the Shakaran philosophy of first offering the hand of friendship and peace, then if that is rejected enter into negotiations to seek a diplomatic solution, but if all else failed, Shakaran was ready, willing and well able to wage war against its enemies.

The companions had instantly recognised Prince Garald sitting in the chair to what would be the king's right if he were present. Even though the king was too ill to hold court and the prince was fulfilling those duties admirably, still he was only the Prince Regent and would therefore not presume to occupy the king's throne.

He was deep in the study of very important papers and without looking up, he said, "I am told this is important, so please say whatever it is you have come to say. I regret my lack of hospitality but I'm afraid I have much to do."

"Father," came the voice of Mystaya. A single word, spoken softly, but filled with such love, respect, happiness, relief, concern and a hundred other emotions, that it seemed as if surely the whole world must have heard it.

Upon seeing his daughter, he looked at her strangely, as if not fully believing his eyes. "Mystaya?"

"Father, it's me," she coaxed, gently. Still she did not raise her voice, despite the power of her feelings.

Joy filled the prince's face as he shot from his seat. Those documents that had seemed so vital a moment ago scattered over the floor and he cared not one bit. He ran down the steps from the podium upon which the throne stood and Mystaya, too, discarded all royal dignity as she raced to meet him. Tears flowed from both of them...and why not? The most precious thing in Prince Garald's world had been taken from him and was now returned, safe and well.

Safe? Eilidh wondered, ever the realist.

Was anyone truly safe these days? Perhaps they were relatively safe for the time being, she conceded. Let them have this moment, she decided. The gods knew they deserved it - they all did. Mystaya had borne her kidnap and captivity with righteous royal courage, and had been gracious to her rescuers. Now at last she could cry.

When at last she and her father broke their embrace, they approached Eilidh, and her two companions.

“My friends,” Prince Garald began, “I just can't thank you enough for bringing my daughter back safely. Since you've been gone, I've replayed my actions over and over in my head, and part of me is ashamed. Your Knight friend, Lady Hannah, was right: to blackmail you into helping me was not honourable. What you are doing is, I'm sure, far more important, from the world's perspective...ah, but my objectivity and my honour are uncertain where my daughter is concerned. Therefore, ashamed though I am, I can live with it.”

“I understand, Your Grace,” Eilidh replied with a bow.

“Aye,” Granite agreed. “In dwarf clans, there's nothin' more important than family.”

“No problem at all, Your Grace,” Toli echoed. “It was a really great adventure and Mystaya is a really nice girl and - sorry, I mean *Princess* Mystaya, I don't mean to be disrespectful, it's just with everything that's happened and the ride home on the sea serpent--”

“--Sea serpent?” Garald interrupted.

“Oh yes! It was terribly exciting, you see--”

“--Why don't you tell me the whole story, from the beginning?”

“Father,” Mystaya chided, gently, giving him a playful shove. “These people have come a long way and risked many dangers for us. The least we can do is offer them some comfort and refreshment. Come to that, I wouldn't mind some, myself; I look simply frightful and probably smell even worse.”

Garald smiled. “You're quite right, my dear--” he began, then seeing his daughter's arched eyebrows, amended quickly, “--that we should offer our friends every hospitality.” To the trio, he said, “Please forgive my enthusiasm. Just one question before I let you go,” he added as an afterthought. “I can't help noticing there's only the three of you...I trust nothing untoward has happened to the rest of your party?”

“Not at all, Your Grace,” Eilidh replied. “In fact our numbers grew significantly after we reached Avidon and I'm pleased to say there were no casualties.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she realised she was wrong. In fact, she was appalled that it could have slipped her memory even for a moment. “Ah, actually, Your Grace, I'm afraid that's not quite true.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I'm sorry to say we did lose one companion. I don't know how to break this to you gently, I know he was kind of a friend of yours, so I hope you'll forgive me if I just say it: Your Grace, Kismet is dead.”

Garald laughed. “Kismet?” He dismissed it with a wave of his hand. “He's indestructible.”

“I told them as much myself,” his daughter agreed.

“With respect, Your Grace--”

“You don't know him like I do, so you'll just have to take my word for it.”

“But, Your Grace, we saw--”

“Whatever you think you saw, I'm sure there is another explanation. Now, not another word until you are refreshed.”

Moments later, palace servants were leading them away to bathe and change. Eilidh could only wonder at Prince Garald's refusal to accept the truth...if it was the truth.

* * * * *

“...And so the serpent dropped us off at the river to the North, before speeding away again with Artisho clinging on for dear life,” Eilidh concluded, several hours later in a relaxed lounge room. “The rest you know,” she added with a shrug.

The furniture on which they sat had the ingenious feature that the individual could adjust their height off the ground. This was obviously designed for diplomatic reasons, so as not to offend the smaller races, whilst still being comfortable and relaxing for humans or even tall elves. Eilidh was a bit suspicious at first, but after some gentle magical probing, she discovered that her chair had at least been constructed with the aid of magic, even if it did not require magic to adjust it. That made her feel a little better about things.

“So, this Z'rcona was an agent,” the prince mused. “Well then, it seems there was a connection to your main quest after all. How interesting.”

“Father...” Mystaya spoke up.

She was now dressed in a silken gown of her favoured shade of blue, with slim corseted waist, full skirt and low-cut bodice in the modern style. Her raven black hair was done in tight curls and sported a delicate silver tiara, matching her necklace and the bracelets she wore over her long white silk gloves. Her face was lightly painted just to highlight and soften her striking features. She was every inch the regal princess - a far cry from the girl they had rescued. Indeed, it was hard to believe this was the same person - apart from one particular accessory. A sword hung in a scabbard at her hip, and if Eilidh wasn't mistaken, it was the one she'd 'borrowed' from Bunny in Marina Fells mine.

Bernice, of course, was looking out for Phaer and despite certain misgivings about the sumorityl, on balance Eilidh was glad he wasn't all alone out there. She hoped her half-elven friend was alright. Still, it was not in Eilidh's nature to worry about things she could not change, so she did her best to put those concerns to one side in favour of more practical ones.

“...I can't help thinking,” the princess continued, “that this is precisely the sort of story the people need to hear right now. A tale of modern-day heroism coupled with the return of their Lavender Rose.”

Lavender Rose was an affectionate title that the Shakaran people had bestowed upon their beloved young princess.

Prince Garald considered that for a moment. “You’re right, my dear,” he agreed. “It would inspire them to the courage they will need in the days ahead.”

It seemed to Eilidh that the Shakaran people's courage needed very little support.

“However,” the prince continued, “we must be careful not to jeopardise the secrecy of Eilidh's mission. Unless I am very much mistaken, it is vital to all of us that she and her followers are allowed to continue unhindered.”

Mystaya directed a dazzling smile at the dwarf sitting opposite her. “Why, I'm sure a bard of Mr Longbeard's distinction could compose a suitable ballad that would put over the essence of my rescue, whilst maintaining a certain discretion towards the parties involved.”

The dwarf knew he was being flattered into submission, but he laughed in spite of himself. “Aye, Yer Highness, I'll do that for yeh. I'll get onto it straight away...or at least as soon as I get paid for services already rendered.”

It was Garald's turn to laugh. “Subtlety notwithstanding,” he said, “I shall send for your gold forthwith and have training arranged for all of you, at a time that suits you.”

“All of us?” Toli wondered. “You mean me too? I mean you already sent me that book to help me with my magic, are you saying you'll train me to yet another grade? It's really incredibly generous of you, but I wouldn't want to think I was stretching our agreement or anything, because that wouldn't be fair at all.”

“One grade or two,” Garald shrugged. “Who's counting? I cannot possibly be generous enough to properly repay you for bringing Mystaya home to me.”

“Speaking of repayment, Your Grace,” Eilidh prompted. “You promised to give me information about someone who may have knowledge to help me?”

Shakaran Palace naturally had easy access to good Techmagic communications and a quick bit of research had confirmed enough of Gamaliel's story to be confident of the truth of the whole. Every citizen of Mythallen had been registered by law for centuries. Most of the details were, of course, confidential, but Eilidh didn't need any of that. Just names, places and dates, which were public record. Normally, information on citizens who lived under the rule of the Hand of Darkness in Avidon or other Libration Front controlled villages were an exception, but the fact that Gamaliel knew of two appearances of a Niltsiar in Avidon meant those records existed in Merlyon and so that took care of that.

Gamaliel had not told Eilidh specifically what he believed connected these Niltsiar women, so the Catalyst could examine the evidence with a critical eye. First appearance of the name was indeed a sixteen year old Spirit mage during the Tech Wars. After that, the name popped up just six more times up the present day. If Niltsiar was a name from legend, why did the name suddenly pop up only in the last two centuries without any such legend becoming popular? Gamaliel had been right to dismiss that theory, Eilidh accepted.

Furthermore, there was no birth or death record for a Niltsiar. They simply appeared, happened to have an exceptionally strong Life Gift, rose rapidly up one particular branch of magic and

disappeared again. Almost as if she had learned all she needed in each case. But that didn't make sense...unless...

...unless it was the same person each time, Eilidh concluded.

She knew it wasn't exactly conclusive proof. It would imply that Niltsiar was more than two hundred years old, but it was the only working theory she had. Now she needed help.

"And I will withhold the information no longer," promised the prince. "In a small hut in the wilderness at the edge of the Shakaran Borderlands, there lives a wise sage who seems to possess the knowledge of the ages. It was my father who first stumbled across his hut and told me about him. Known only as the Wise One, he sells his knowledge - for no small fee, I might add, which is why you might find that my chief treasurer has `miscalculated` slightly with your gold. If you visit the Wise One, believe me, the gold will not be yours for very long."

"I suppose we can hardly blame him," Toli decided. "After all, everyone's got to make a living somehow haven't they? If you're strong you can be a warrior, if you've got magic you can sell your skills in that area. Bakers sell their bread and artists sell their paintings, so if this man knows things that no-one else does, it's only fair that he should make money from it. So long as the knowledge doesn't fall into the wrong hands, or someone is intent on harming him, or--"

"--He has ways of safeguarding against unwanted visitors," the prince interrupted. "That's why I said you would never find him without my help - his hut never seems to be in the same place twice."

"Are ye saying that he can teleport his entire home wherever he wants?" Granite wondered.

"Actually, the truth is stranger than that. As much as I understand is that the Wise One's hut stays put - it's everything else that moves so the route is constantly changing. In some ways, it's a little like Corridor travel: you just focus on your destination; the route is irrelevant. This magical phenomenon of the Wise One's hut works against teleporting, also. I heard one unconfirmed story about someone who tried to teleport to the Wise One and materialised on another continent. No-one can reach the Wise One unless they are invited."

"Then how did your father manage to `stumble across` his hut?" Eilidh questioned. "And, more importantly, how are we to get there without an invitation?"

"Oh, my father was invited - he just didn't know it - and so shall you be." Prince Garald took off the ruby ring from the little finger of his left hand and put it into Eilidh's palm. "Take this ring - it was the Wise One's gift to my father. The wearer has standing permission to visit him."

"Isn't that a little dangerous?" Toli wondered. "I mean we'll take good care of it, obviously, but it could be given to anybody, or lost, or stolen..."

"No, Miss Tolbrietta, the ring cannot be taken - only given. Even then it is not my choice who should have it. If you were not intended to have it, it would not even have come off my finger."

"This Wise One thinks of everythin' doesn't he?" Granite observed.

Toli shrugged. "I guess that's why he's called the Wise One." Then, after a pause, "What?" she demanded as everyone stared at her, startled by the most concise statement any of them had heard her make.

Eilidh hid a smile. "Nothing, my friend, nothing at all."

* * * * *

So, here we are, Eilidh thought, as the Wise One came back into the room with a steaming mug of herbal tea. He took a sip and sighed contentedly.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the Wise One apologised. "I should have thought to ask; would you like some? I have plenty and I can always pick more of the leaves myself. They grow quite abundantly in Shakaran Borderlands."

"What kind of leaves are they?" Eilidh inquired.

"The leaves of the Kij vine, would you like some?"

Eilidh's face turned pale and her companions tried hard to keep from laughing. "I think I'll pass, thank you," she insisted, firmly. "Please just explain to us what Merlyn's story has to do with Niltsiar, would you?"

"Ah, well now," he began, pausing as he sat down and took another sip of his tea. "When the Terran mages settled here on Majaos, many things changed. Not least their relationships with each other. No longer the feared and threatened minority group, they were free to practise magic in the open and free to pursue personal feelings. Most notable among these mage pairings was Merlyn and his long time love, Ganieda. In due course, they were wed and Ganieda conceived a child. When that child was born, it was a girl; a daughter they named Niltsiar."

Chapter 2

“I don't like it here!” Callie complained.

Far from the city of Shakaran, or any other city for that matter, two mismatched dragons flew over a desert furnace. One was a silver female, her scales shining with dazzling brilliance. The other, a male, one could be forgiven for thinking was a black, but the keen observer would notice a sparkle to his scales, growing in the blazing sun, that spoke of a jewelled dragon - an obsidian.

“It's so hot, so barren...so dry!” continued the silver. “My scales are starting to itch,” she added, sullenly.

Her discomfort was understandable. Silvers were, after all, forest dragons, fond of lush greenery, teeming with life. They especially loved to make their nests in high places - hills and mountains above the treetops, though not too high so as to be cold. Silvers, like most dragons, disliked the cold, but when it came to heat, they preferred the steamy, humid kind of heat of the rainforest. Dry desert heat caused their scales to become flaky and that, as Callie said, made them itch.

Quite frankly, Loric was getting a little sick and tired of hearing the female dragon whine, understandable or not. He knew the litany by heart now: she didn't like the heat, didn't like the desert, the air was too dry, not enough life, flying here was boring, why couldn't they stop for a break, where were they going to find water to drink or bathe...and so the list went on, incessantly. It wasn't as if this was an ideal environment for an obsidian dragon, either, native to the swamps, tar pits and marshy wastelands of Majaos.

Calandra/Callie seemed to have almost dual personalities. Calandra was a serious, wise elven priest, filled with a faith in the Light personified in the god Patrelaux, Father of Light. Callie was a young silver dragon, an immature adolescent, or at least the dragon equivalent, who whined continually when things were tough and awkward and she wasn't getting her own way. It wasn't that Callie was physically so young - by dragon standards she was old enough to be considered an adult. A little young to be thinking about her first mating flight or her first clutch of eggs, perhaps, but still physically an adult. Emotionally, she was underdeveloped at best, childish at worst.

Dragons did not measure their lives in numerical terms based on the cycles of Majaos - years, decades, centuries. Since their natural life span was indefinite – perhaps infinite - such numbers would be meaningless. To draconic thinking, one was an adult as soon as one was physically and emotionally developed enough to be ready for independence. Metallic dragons did not like to push the emotional development of their hatchlings the way jewelled dragons did, preferring to allow such development to occur in its own time. After all, what was time to a dragon?

Chromatic dragons showed no patience at all with their offspring. Tending to belong to considerably larger clutches, a chromatic wyrmling spent the first moments of its life fighting and killing most of its brothers and sisters. All newborn wyrms were starving when they hatched, demanding to fill their bellies from the outset. However, among chromatic dragons, the mother -(the male having long since been ejected from the nest, if not killed)- offered no help to her young, beyond providing some suitable live prey - something weak and defenceless before even a small and awkward hatchling. The food was limited, forcing her young to instinctively compete for food. Some would steal a kill right out of the mouth of a brother or sister. The mother would look on without mercy toward those that moved too slowly, those that hesitated and were killed by their peers. Once the

surviving few had each eaten enough to take the edge off their hunger, they would begin to play with their food. Finding new and inventive ways to torment the creatures, the wyrmlings would torture them, take them to within a scale's breadth of death and then sit back to watch, fascinated to see how long it took for the pathetic thing to die. The dragon mare would take pride in the handful of survivors from her clutch. Often she would favour one true heir - the biggest, the fastest, the most vicious - lavishing all her attention and efforts on that one. At one year old, it was not uncommon for the heir to be three or four times the size of the others and the development gap would only widen with time. For the strong to survive, the weak must be eliminated - that was the law, as taught by Divine Mortress to her chromatic children.

Jewelled dragons condoned no such cruelty, instead believing in helping the young hatchlings to help themselves; giving them the tools they needed - physical, emotional and (in the case of ruby, sapphire and emerald dragons) magical. They were taught, they were stimulated and yes they were pushed even when they didn't want to do whatever was demanded of them.

The metallic dragons simply trusted in Father Patrelaux to guide their young - He knew what was best for them and they ought not to interfere.

There was some considerable debate among mortal scholars regarding the three sets of five dragon species known on Majaos, over the issue of how much of their tendency toward a particular alignment was predetermined by their species and how much was the result of their upbringing. Nature or nurture: which had the greater influence? Theories were many; answers were few. Loric had never been the philosophical type or he might have considered his search for the mythical Elder Dragons to be a major piece of the argument for one side or the other, depending upon what he found. But Loric was a dragon that saw only zero and one, not the myriad of possibilities in between. The Elder Dragons were of interest to him only in terms of the unique training they could give him, at least according to legend.

Loric did not really know anything about Callie's past - among dragons it was considered unthinkable to ask - but the scintillating silver seemed to be a classic case of a wyrmling who had flown the nest much too soon. These cases, in Loric's experience, were usually the result of one particular traumatic event in a young dragon's past; something that had upset her enough to fly away - far away - from its source. Young dragons were creatures driven by powerful emotions, feeling deeply upon them the effects of the world. Much of growing up was learning to handle those emotions and he felt Callie had not yet learned those lessons fully. Still, there was hope. He had helped Sara; he could help Callie. True, Callie was not an obsidian or even a jewelled dragon, but at least she knew a dragon was what she was. For the time being, he would just have to close his ears to her incessant voice.

For the next several leagues of flight he did just that, so he only caught the tail end of Callie's latest remark.

“...red dragon?”

I'd better respond to this one, Loric decided, to put her at ease. “Don't worry, I don't think we're likely to run into one of those. If we see any other dragons at all, they'll probably be golds or maybe the odd ruby. You can usually tell a red dragon's territory - they like volcanoes for one thing and at any rate, their magic taints the land for some miles in all directions, cracking the land and making it even more desolate than the desert naturally is. This area is pretty flat, barring a few sand

hills, so we should have plenty of advance warning and if we do spot anything, I promise we'll avoid the area. Even I don't pick fights with reds unless I have a very good reason."

Callie rolled her eyes, flying ahead quickly to hover in his path. "You haven't been listening to a word I've said, have you?" she accused him. "I didn't say I was worried about running into a red dragon. I said I think I've just spotted one!"

Loric nearly stalled in mid-air.

"Oh don't worry," the silver added with a full-toothed dragon grin. "I'm pretty sure it's dead. Look over there!" She pointed with her right foreleg and Loric could see she was right. There was something on the ground; half buried in sand, but unmistakably red and reptilian...and very big!

"That's odd," Loric mused. "That's very, very odd. Let's go take a look, but be alert just in case it isn't quite dead. The only thing more dangerous than a red dragon is a wounded red dragon."

The pair banked their wings and glided towards the unmoving red shape, descending slowly until they were close enough to discern that it was indeed quite dead and posed no threat. They landed on the sand a couple of dragon lengths from the body and took up their favoured humanoid shapes. Almost immediately, Loric observed a change come over his companion. No longer Callie, but Revered Daughter Calandra.

"You are right to call this odd, child," she intoned. "For a red dragon mare, in the prime of her life, to be struck down in this fashion is most unusual. My healer's art does not really extend to accursed chromatic wyrms, but perhaps an examination will reveal something to me." She probed, poked and prodded, smoothed and stroked every inch of the dragon corpse, shaking her head and muttering to herself all the while. Of particular interest was the way the belly was ripped open but there was little left inside. Indeed, it was little more than a carcass: scales, skin and bone. Yet the corpse seemed less than an hour old. How could scavengers have done their grisly work so quickly?

"Do you know? It almost looks..." she stopped and shook her head.

"Go on," Loric prompted.

"No, it's ridiculous."

"Tell me anyway."

"Well," she paused once more, letting out a long, slow breath. "I was going to say that it almost looks as if...as if something...attacked this dragon..."

That didn't sound so ridiculous to Loric - it probably had a run-in with gold dragons or maybe even another red challenging it for this territory. He opened his mouth to say so, but the cleric, guessing his line of thought, stopped him with a raised finger.

"I mean, it looks as if this dragon was attacked...and eaten: hunted for food." She shrugged. "As I say, it's ridiculous. Clearly the examination of this creature is beyond my abilities."

Loric forced a smile, "Well, whatever happened here, I can't say I'm sorry about there being one less red dragon in the world."

“Then I guess I shall pray alone, child,” the Revered Daughter said, pointedly. She sounded a little disappointed in him, somehow.

His smile evaporated. “Pray? For a chromatic dragon? What’s a cleric of Light doing praying for a creature of evil?”

“We each can be only what we are, child; no more, no less. All life is sacred and loss of life is a thing of great sadness, even if the world is a little safer as a result. If Lady Hannah were here, she would tell you that the Knights engage in purification prayer and ritual cleansing before going into battle. They must lay their own sins at the feet of our all-forgiving Father, receiving his blessing and forgiveness for the lives they will take.”

“Well I’m not a Knight and the only cleansing ritual I use before battle is to make sure my sword is clean so it will slide easily into and out of my enemies’ bodies. And I’m certainly not going to pray or lose any sleep over a red dragon meeting a grisly end. Well done to whoever did it, as far as I’m concerned!”

His words were intended to shock, but Calandra didn’t look shocked...only increasingly sad. “Given that you are aligned to the Balance,” she said, “I would have expected you to be more receptive. Are you not supposed to believe in the notion that evil has a place in the world?”

“That’s not what the Balance is about.” Loric disputed. “We’re just a bit more realistic about things than the Light, and realistically this isn’t about good and evil; it’s about survival. I am an obsidian dragon and a warrior. Chromatic dragons, reds especially, are my enemies. They make themselves so by their tendency to attack me and threaten my interests. When one of my enemies dies while I still live, I don’t mourn - I celebrate! Good Health and Long Life to my enemies’ enemies!”

“Then I must ask that you step away and `celebrate`” she spat the word “at a suitable distance so that you do not contaminate the rites I shall perform.”

“As you wish,” Loric agreed, curtly. And so he moved away - several dragon lengths away - regretting more with every step, his decision to bring the silver along with him.

* * * * *

Back in the air, they flew in silence; neither willing to even look at the other. They still had several leagues to fly in search of the lair of the Elder Dragon of Fire and locating it would not be easy, even with the map.

It was a good thing their flight speed had slowed somewhat, otherwise they might have missed the pair of gold dragons sprawled awkwardly on the sand below, wings bent at sickeningly impossible angles. At least Loric supposed they must be golds, even though their hides had lost their healthy sheen, making them more of a dull beige than gold. Gruffly, he told Callie to “Look” and then to “Follow” him down to conduct a closer inspection.

Once more Calandra examined the bodies, growing ever more puzzled: their condition was strikingly similar to that of the earlier red. She covered her growing sense of unease, demanding of

her companion, “Well? Are you going to *celebrate* this, too, or will you judge these two individuals *worthy* of your prayer?”

Loric swore. “I wouldn't want to *contaminate* your rituals with my *unclean* presence,” he growled. “I'll wait over there.”

“Fine.”

* * * * *

In Ancient times, when the first humans settled on Majaos, they were fascinated by dragons. There had been legends of such beasts on their old world, but even they did not know whether there was any truth to such stories. They were awe-struck to discover that dragons were actually sentient and capable of communicating with mortals, even take their form - including those dragons who apparently possessed no other magic, except their breath weapon, of course. There was, however, early confusion over the colours of the dragons' scales. Somehow they expected browns and greens in the forests, golds and yellows in deserts, perhaps blues in the water. After further thought, and discussions with the dragons themselves - (not usually the chromatic ones, for obvious reasons) - they realised their mistake. They were thinking in terms of camouflage: concealment, which was primarily a form of defence. What need did dragons have of concealment? They had no natural predators on all of Majaos. Territorial fights were common enough, especially with and between chromatic dragons, but no dragon could ever turn cannibal - they simply could not digest the meat.

Yet there in the Scorched Desert far from all civilisation, after a total of four gold, three red and a ruby dragon, all presenting the same picture in death - their insides ripped out and devoured - the situation was frighteningly clear:

There was something out there among the shifting sands...and it was hunting dragons.

Chapter 3

Hunted. That was the word he was searching for. That's what it felt like: being hunted.

The first Phaer had held any such suspicions, was almost one whole moon cycle into his journey. Up until that time, he had been alone with his own thoughts, as he preferred it. He had much to consider, he felt.

He had happened upon Eilidh en route to Shakaran, purely by chance. He paused his thoughts.

Was it merely chance? He pondered.

Why not? Chance it was and not a particularly unlikely chance at that. After all, he was a ranger by trade, guarding the remote passes into Shakaran City. Once Eilidh had decided to take that route, guided by a strange man known as Kismet, it was natural for Phaer to become aware of it. However fortunate the timing of that awareness, allowing him to save the girl from the jaws of a carnivorous Kij vine plant, chance was sufficient explanation. After all, that was his job.

What was not his job, was running around the occupied city of Avidon, outpost of the Hand of Darkness Liberation Front. Nor was it his job to become embroiled in encounters with strange creatures of fire on magical bridges that apparently had no beginning, no end and no foundation to support them. And rescuing princesses was most definitely not his job either. Yet he had done these things nonetheless. Mostly, though he would scarcely admit this even to himself, he had done these things for the young human Catalyst, Eilidh Hagram.

Why should he do such things for her? Why should he feel compelled to do anything for her? She was plain, unsophisticated, unworldly, possessing little in the way of social skills or humour. That's not to say she was ugly or ill-mannered or vindictive. Not at all. Eilidh was a person, as far as Phaer could see, who gave others no particular reason either to like her or to dislike her. As if she expected everyone to have somehow formed a firm negative opinion of her before they met and simply saw no point in making any effort to change it.

Yet Phaer liked her.

Him, a magically Dead half-elf of dark elf origins, liking a human for whom magic was all! It was preposterous. Eilidh made no pretence to be anything more or less than who she was and he appreciated that. Above all, Phaer respected Eilidh. Perhaps that was at the heart of it - he respected her and she him. At least, he had thought she did. Until she finally condescended to reveal her quest: to find a way to defeat Niltsiar.

Niltsiar. The name made him shudder. Humans characterised the feeling as `like someone walking over your grave`. Well, if this Ancient power had truly returned, there would be plenty of graves and the only ones left walking would be those who stood with her and did not displease her. And where would the dark elves fit into her plans? Would they side with her as they did in Ancient times? Phaer was unsure. In a way, he couldn't blame them if they did, for he himself certainly did not wish to stand against her. But standing with her? That would be impossible. One of his kind could never fit into Niltsiar's vision of a perfect world. In a way, he supposed, he was already standing against her, simply by being alive. Well, doubtless she would correct that oversight in her own good time.

So, here he was, walking ever closer to a place that was carefully hidden from outsiders: the home of the dark elves. He knew the way; that was not the problem. No, the problem was that he had no idea what he was going to do when he got there. He had set out with the intention of warning his people, and that was the problem, right there: They were not his people. He had been born of them, raised by them and lived with them, but he was not one of them. They had made that perfectly clear all his life. As with Niltsiar, his very existence stood against everything the dark elves believed in. Yet still he had to warn them. The return of Her Divine Excellency was a pivotal event in dark elf history. It was happening now; he knew and they didn't. Perhaps bringing such news would alter their relationship with him...

...Yes, they would probably slit his throat.

That is, if I'm not killed on the way to my own funeral!

Phaer had already been forced to deal with small numbers of chaos creatures. Sometimes he ran, sometimes he hid and sometimes he killed them. But no matter what he did, whatever it was that was hunting him never lost its quarry. Phaer resisted the temptation to stop, or double back, or walk in a circle, or use any other tricks to try and identify this hunter. He simply continued walking along the route towards dark elf territory, doing only what was necessary to deal with the threat of chaos creatures. Phaer knew he was hunted, but so long as his hunter didn't know he was aware of it, Phaer had the advantage. The hunter would think to catch him by surprise, but Phaer would be ready for it. That could swing the eventual confrontation. Reacting to the threat now would only serve to warn the hunter and thus the half-elf would lose his advantage. So he walked on.

The closer he got to his destination, the more tense he became. Why hadn't the hunter attacked him yet? What were they waiting for? If they followed him into dark elf lands, the elves would kill them as a potential threat. Not necessarily right away, though. No, they may well decide to take them for sport. Phaer hoped that would not happen. He did not like to see people caged and tortured. Sure, they were hunting him, perhaps waiting for the right moment to kill him, and if they attacked him, he would kill them without regret; he was simply trying to survive. But he could not allow them to be collared and caged.

The idea flashed through his mind that perhaps it was one of these chaos creatures stalking him, but somehow that didn't ring true. The half-elf had never heard of such subtlety and skill from them. No, in avoiding his keen senses, the hunter displayed a knowledge and feel for this world that he was sure chaos creatures could not possibly possess...well, almost sure.

* * * * *

Five strange creatures caught him by surprise. Each possessed shiny black skin, four arms with vicious-looking claws, a thick exoskeleton protecting their backs and antennae upon their squat, neckless heads. Phaer thought they looked rather like giant bipedal beetles. The swiftness of their ambush, in a dense patch of trees, was unexpected but still, he was ready with his bow and shot one through the chest at close range. The fall of that one slowed down the others, which gave the half-elf time to throw a knife at the closest one. It, too, was dead before it hit the ground.

Two lethal strikes out of two attempts - Phaer was impressed.

The remaining three beetle-like creatures approached him more cautiously now. Phaer drew his swords and manoeuvred, using his keen natural senses to guide his feet around this rough terrain, so that the creatures would be in each other's way when they tried to strike. Numbers were not always as they seemed and as a ranger he was trained to make sure that a group of this size could only attack him one at a time.

He drew them in closer, then suddenly darted around a tree to stab the rear one in the side. Green blood oozed onto the ground from the wound for a moment, then in a flash another giant beetle-creature appeared on that spot. The one Phaer had just wounded instantly healed. The half-elf hacked at the new one to give him time to pull back - another creature grew from the spilled blood. Now, once again, there were five - he was back where he started.

Phaer had to think quickly. He remembered hearing about these creatures from other rangers. Those who had survived at any rate. They were called Umchara and the only way to kill them was with a single, lethal strike. If the blood of a living umchara touched the ground, another would be spawned and the first would heal. And he had another problem: He was very, very close to the border of dark elf lands.

While they were on this side of the invisible boundary, the dark elf guards would do nothing, but if they crossed that line Arrows everywhere, striking umchara, wounding umchara, bleeding umchara, spawning more umchara.

"Dear gods!" Phaer breathed, blocking a blade-like umchara claw that came closer than he intended. "We could end up with an army of the things!"

Trouble was, it had been so long since he last visited dark elf lands that he couldn't be exactly sure where the line was.

Ducking and twisting under the slashing arms of another umchara, he quickly reversed direction so he could move the battle away from the danger zone. Now all he had to do was kill a hand of these things, each with a single blow. That was beyond his skill and he knew it. He'd been lucky to achieve two successive lethal strikes before and the way things were now, he might as well not have bothered.

He had to be patient, analyse the enemy, wait for a clear opportunity. They were fast enough if they could simply charge in a straight line, he observed, but they were clumsy if forced to change direction rapidly. These creatures had no intelligence; only instinct. Phaer, on the other hand, was blessed with elven grace. He was used to the wilds, trained to observe instinctive behavioural patterns and he had stamina aplenty to see this through if he could play to his strengths. He couldn't fight the way the enemy wanted to fight or he would lose. He had to fight his way.

He continued to use the terrain to put trees between them, or force them to come at him uphill. The umchara instinctively seemed to recognise a single leader and followed that one, always in a single line. The exact orientation of that line varied with the terrain, but the line was never broken. This, too, played to his advantage, Phaer realised. It made it easier to face only one at a time, and he needed to kill only one to break through their line. He wished he could put a little more distance between himself and the umchara - he was a better archer than he was a swordsman, but he couldn't see how that was going to be possible.

In the distance, Phaer's sharp eyesight saw a majestic falcon dive to catch a small rodent in the grass, and a plan formulated in the ranger's mind. It was time to add a new dimension to this fight. He just had to wait for the right moment.

Most humans would have long since given up on the idea, as they became frustrated with their own inaction, but Phaer possessed patience in abundance from his mother's side. Sooner or later, he knew his patience would be rewarded.

Suddenly, one of the umchara - the one in the centre of the line - stumbled over an exposed tree root. Phaer seized his opportunity and launched himself at the distracted creature with blinding speed. Thrusting his right hand short sword straight through its heart, he allowed his momentum to carry him through the line, spinning and lashing out with the hilt of his left hand weapon to give him extra space. He sheathed his swords, jumped and in the same fluid movement caught an overhanging limb, swinging himself up until he was standing on it. Then he leaped forward and up to easily grasp a higher branch that was still thick and strong enough to hold his weight. He sat down on the branch, perfectly balanced, unslung his bow from his back and nocked an arrow. The umchara were clearly confused by this sudden, unexpected act. They seemed unsure as to what trees were - he had seen them slash them occasionally with their claws as if testing to see if the trees were some kind of threat. The way they had never once glanced upward suggested that the umchara had a two dimensional view of what was to them a strange and frightening world.

At last, collectively, they looked up to try and find Phaer's location among the dense green leaves. Phaer had noticed their preference for shade and dislike of sunlight, and took full advantage with his choice of tree branch. Sitting there, he forced the umchara to look directly into the sun. The four searched as one and covered their eyes with their claws.

An arrow struck one of the four umchara, and without shedding a single drop of blood, it dropped to the ground. Before the remaining creatures could react, Phaer dropped down out of the tree, landing with a loud impact on the closest umchara and thrusting a knife through its chest. Without stopping to retrieve his weapon, he ran on, though not quickly enough to completely avoid the slashing claws that raked his side. He cried out and frantically drew his swords to block the rapid claw strikes of the last two umchara. They were right on top of him and it was all he could do to defend himself. Especially when he didn't dare fight back.

Dammit but they were just too fast!

His plan had almost succeeded and if only he had recognised the creatures for what they were in the first place, they would all be dead by now. But as it was, he knew he couldn't win, especially the way he was losing blood.

The half-elf wished that his blood could do the same trick as umchara blood. "Another me would be very welcome just about now," he said to himself.

Phaer was astonished when his wish came true: there with him, guarding his wounded left side, stood another half-elf.

No, Phaer corrected himself, not just any half-elf: another me!

He had no idea how this could be - perhaps it was merely a hallucination brought on by loss of blood. Well, if it was a hallucination, the umchara were apparently having the same one. They

seemed to take an instant dislike to his doppelganger, shifting the focus of their attack and ignoring the real Phaer completely. The hallucination made no attempt to fight, but seemed to be able to dodge more quickly than anyone alive. The umchara grew increasingly frustrated, which only distracted them further. Phaer chose to take the age-old advice about not looking gift unicorns in the mouth and he ran.

After a while, Phaer was forced to stop and shut his eyes while he picked some sticky webbing off his face. "I think that trail must have been spider central," he grumbled to himself. Clearly no-one had been down here for a while and he supposed he was a little sorry about destroying their painstakingly laid flytraps.

His eyes snapped open. "Traps! That's it!" He caught a small money spider crawling down his right hand and held it up, saying, "You clever little thing. You don't try to fight the flies, do you? They're too fast for you to catch that way, so you lay your trap and wait. Once they are in your web, you can pick them off on your terms." He placed the arachnid gently on a leaf. "There you go. You spin your webs and I'll spin mine."

He was on high ground, with enough visibility to have advance warning when they came for him, but hunkered down among the bushes as he was, at least they wouldn't see him. Even so, he knew he did not have any time to waste, so he just emptied the entire contents of his backpack on the ground and rummaged to find what he needed. He found them. Souvenirs, they were, from the abandoned mine at Marina Fells: bear traps - two of them. He thanked the spirits of his ancestors for such providence and added a brief, silent prayer of thanks to the people of that ill-fated village, that they would design these devices to capture without maiming. Like Phaer himself, they obviously knew how much pressure a bear's leg could take without injury...unfortunately he couldn't be sure how much pressure an umchara's leg could take. Too slack and the creatures would be able to free themselves and Phaer would die. Too tight and blood would be spilled, creating more of the creatures, so Phaer would still die. He needed to guess right.

It turned out that the trigger mechanism on one of the traps had rusted, so he quickly had to remove it and adapt the one from Vorden's strongbox. That delayed him just enough so that he was still working on the second trap when they appeared. Dear gods they were too early. No matter how fast he worked, it would not be fast enough, he knew. But he had prepared for this possibility in his mind, and he knew there was but one solution: he would have to leave out the safety mechanism and hope he wouldn't lose his hand while trying to set the trap. That thought had no sooner registered than the trap snapped shut and only Phaer's half-elven reflexes saved him. Sweat began pouring off his skin as he worked rapidly but without panicking. The umchara slowed, sniffing the air, trying to pinpoint his location. That bought him the time he needed to hide the second trap. He had briefly been tempted to shoot an arrow at one of them but had decided against it. That might alert the other that he was ready for them. Besides, he might miss the lethal strike and then he would have three. This way, unless he was extremely unlucky, he would have at least one stationary target, which he could guarantee to kill. Then he would have to take his chances one on one with the other. If he was quick, before the blood loss wore him out too much, and if he was lucky, he might just survive...long enough to attend his own execution at the hands of his people.

"One problem at a time, Phaer," he told himself.

From the perspective of the umchara, the half-elf creature sprang up out of nowhere and started hurling small pebbles at them. Phaer's stones ran no risk of bloodletting; he just wanted to

provoke the umchara. Phaer ran further up the hill and the pair of unchara charged as one. The first creature stepped right over where one of Phaer's adapted bear traps was laid. Phaer swore. The second cried out in shock and pain as its ankle was caught. One out of two wasn't bad. Phaer's keen elfsight could see there was no blood and it was with a sigh of relief that he loosed one of his mithril arrows. He only had a few - a gift from Taka that had already saved his skin once. They were too valuable to be squandered, but they were faster, truer and quieter through the air. The trapped umchara never knew what hit it when it died.

The sole remaining umchara was so startled by its companion's sudden death that it hesitated, partially turned around and took a reflexive step backwards into the waiting metal jaws. Phaer smiled a dark smile: victory was his; time was his. The last umchara had no chance. None. The mithril arrow flew straight and true, piercing the creature's chest. It dropped, still and lifeless to the ground. Dead.

Phaer, too, sank to the ground. Exhausted.

Chapter 4

She was a hunter.

She had been hunting for hours. Surrounded by wood and leaves, hunting for the one thing that would silence the questions that filled her head. She needed to get her teeth stuck into something and this was the place to do it. The hard part was locating her desired prey within the many twists and turns of this draughty place. She was determined, though. She would track down what she had been sent for and return with the evidence. She would not, could not fail: too much was at stake. She had to prove she could be useful to the cause. It was here - it had to be; she could almost reach out and touch it. Perhaps magic would guide her attack, so she could take what she needed and devour it.

“Then again,” Rochelle said to herself, “maybe I should just ask somebody.”

* * * * *

Rochelle had arrived at the barracks of the Knights of Paladinia on the outskirts of Merlyon, with Lady Hannah, on the back of the bronze dragon, Brash. They were welcomed, or at least Hannah and Brash were welcomed, while Rochelle had been politely tolerated. She couldn't fault the Knights for being wary. After all, although she was a druid dedicated to the balance, she was also a warrior trained by the Hand of Darkness Liberation Front. How could the Knights be sure where her loyalties lay? Bronze dragons were unusual in Paladonian barracks, but as a metallic dragon, he was a natural ally and revered figure, since the Knights believed the metallic dragons were the firstborn children of their All-Loving Father, Patrelaux.

Rochelle hadn't stayed there too long; there was no sense in making everyone uncomfortable for no good reason. Besides, none of the Knights she met had any interest in her philosophical ponderings. They saw the world in very black and white terms: right or wrong, good or bad.

Perhaps it's an effect of all that heavy armour, she considered silently. Surely the human body, especially the head, is not designed to carry such a load, so maybe after a time the brain gets squished. I suppose that could lead to a compacted view of the world and damage their ability to appreciate more delicate, peripheral thought.

Of all the great wonders of Majaos, she concluded, there's nothing so firmly clamped shut as the human military mind.

* * * * *

Rochelle had been a little surprised, not to say disappointed, to find that Merlyon's streets were not, in fact, paved with gold. Not quite. It was still a stunning, sparkling city, though. Most of the buildings were made from magical sunstone, which had the property of absorbing the sun's rays all day, only to emit the stored light when it went dark. It was night time now - perhaps an hour before dawn - and all the buildings seemed to be glowing a different colour. Red here, gold there, midnight blue beyond that, and colours that the gnome did not know the names for. The main streets formed concentric rings and eight straight radial lines, reminiscent of both a wheel, and a fundamental magical symbol known as the Twin Circles of Life. In the central hub stood the Council of Magic - the seat of all magical governance on Mythallen and perhaps the world, though the overseas lands were largely a mystery. According to legend, Merlyn himself had magically raised the Foundation

Stone of the Council building. The building had been refurbished and extended countless times since the days of the first humans, but still the original Foundation Stone remained. At least, that's what the legend said. Merlyon was a magical city built on two levels, like one immensely huge two-storey building, all completely surrounded by a bubble or dome of magical energy, protecting Mythallen's capital from harm. The upper level was suspended magically above the second. There were a few physical supports, but they were merely ornamental, part of the overall design.

The streets were bustling with activity, teeming with the wealthy and well-to-do. Central Merlyon, it seemed to Rochelle, was full of aristocrats and those who wished to be seen with aristocrats, as if being close to them could somehow cause the nobility's money and influence to rub off onto them. Those who were not dressed in robes - professional mages or clerics - were dressed in the finest clothes modern fashion could provide. The men wore tailored suits, perhaps with a top hat and even a cane for the highest noblemen. The ladies wore brightly-coloured closely-tailored dresses with flowers woven into their complex-braided hair, or perhaps a bonnet. A few, those above a certain invisible line of rank, carried a pretty and doubtless expensive umbrella. As an accessory, it was the height of fashion - completely pointless, since climatomagi worked tirelessly to ensure that it never rained inside Merlyon - but still the height of fashion.

These people were apparently unconcerned about the war going on in the outside world; it was an excellent source of gossip, to be sure, but they were untouched by it here. All Mythallen's major religions were represented in Merlyon, along with the differing cultural interpretations of the various races, but Rochelle found it intriguing that all people could unite under a single act of faith: the absolute, unshakeable belief in the shield of magic. It had always been there, like the sky, and, like the sky, it always would be. That was the consensus. The idea that it might fail had most likely never occurred to anyone.

The Council of Magic was one of only two buildings to reach up through what might be considered the roof of Lower Merlyon through to the upper level. The second was where Rochelle had come: the Central Merlyon Library of Magic, otherwise known simply as the Great Library. There, among the vast, draughty corridors of wood and innumerable leaves of paper, she was hunting for answers to the questions that burned in her mind. The library was the single largest building the gnome had ever seen, raised and shaped magically from the granite bedrock of the city. It possessed no fewer than fifty stories, plus a basement, each with corridors that must have been nearly a quarter of a mile long. Its most curious feature, however, was also one of Merlyon's most famous landmarks: the Nine-and-a-Half Towers. This name was derived from the fact that while there were indisputably nine towers within the library, sometimes from the outside, it appeared to have a mysterious, shadowy Tenth Tower. No-one understood why this was so, but then there was much that was not understood about the magic of the Ancients. In a way, that was why she was here.

Having got nowhere by herself, Rochelle headed back to the main entrance, under the Seal of the Council of Magic: *Majaos y Natus*. Magic is Life. Reaching the reception desk, she approached the librarian for the section on Magic: Ancient and Obscure - a human male who looked to be in his early twenties. His robes declared him to be a white Catalyst; Rochelle wondered if he might be one of Eilidh's former classmates, but she decided it was best not to ask.

She approached him with a smile and whispered, "I'm looking for answers, and I think this section stands the best chance of providing them. Could you help me?"

"I will if I can, miss...er..."

“Ribbons.”

“Certainly, Miss Ribbons. What questions are on your mind today?”

“Well, I want to know how a single mage can cast spells unique to sorcerers, wizards and warlocks.”

“Excuse me?”

“One person casting the magic of illusion, creature control and war.”

“You don't need any books to tell you the answer to that,” he answered, affording the gnome a dismissive look. “It cannot be done; it's impossible and forbidden.”

“That doesn't make any sense,” Rochelle argued.

“Oh really?”

Ignoring the sarcasm, she explained her thoughts. “Impossible and forbidden.” Rochelle said. “That's nonsense. If it's impossible, why would it need to be forbidden? Is it forbidden to walk across the ocean to the next continent? No, because it's impossible. Is it forbidden for a dragon to fly to the moon? No, because it's impossible. There's no point making prohibitive rules against impossible things. So going back to my question, which is it: impossible or forbidden? It can't be both.”

The Catalyst folded his arms and fixed Rochelle with a look that could have cut steel. “Y'know, there was a girl studying at the Church of Life in my year. Stuck up bitch, she was - thought she was too good to go out and socialise with the rest of us - not that we'd have wanted to be seen with `her sort`.”

Rochelle spotted the inherent contradiction in that attitude, but kept the observation to herself,

“She used to spend all her time shut in the vaults, reading the gods know what. Nothing of any use to anybody, that's for sure. Nothing normal. She was really annoying and came out with the same sort of centaur dung that you're saying.”

Rochelle had to bite her tongue to keep from saying that she knew the person he was describing, and that his description and reality could scarcely be more different. She wanted to say that she had calmly thought her way through more than one `impossible` situation and faced down `forbidden` dangers that would no doubt leave the young man before her faint with terror. Sure, Eilidh and Rochelle had not seen eye to eye on some things. Indeed, if it had been up to Eilidh, her party would have left Rochelle to her fate back in Avidon and in all likelihood, Rochelle would not now be alive. The gnome was philosophical about that, now that she understood what was at stake. In the end, willing or not, Eilidh had saved Rochelle's life and Rochelle was determined to prove her worth. Eilidh herself could not return to Merlyon to conduct research. Too many people would recognise her - this difficult librarian was proof of that. Therefore, Rochelle was the sensible second choice. She didn't expect it to be easy, but neither did she expect to have to stand there and listen to her friend being slated by this...this nobody.

“It's impossible,” the librarian continued. “Everyone who knows anything about magic - which is everyone who matters - knows it's impossible. Impossible and forbidden.”

“I realise it's unheard of,” Rochelle allowed, patiently, “but--”

“--Oh in the name of the Father, you're worse than that stuck up bitch I used to know. At least she learned not to bother others with her stupid, nonsensical ideas!”

She wanted to point out that the `stuck up bitch` he was referring to had been specifically chosen by the Prime Magus himself, to save them all from Niltsiar, but she dared not.

“CAN'T. BE. DONE. Not now, not ever. Simple, black and white, no grey areas. IMPOSSIBLE AND FORBIDDEN! GOT IT?” By now, the pair were attracting a great deal of attention and Rochelle began to think that maybe Eilidh just knew when to let things drop and perhaps she ought to take that advice herself now.

At that moment, a rather dour human woman walked over. She was wearing robes of imperial purple, with white hood, cuffs and trim. She was not old - perhaps approaching middle age, but her hair tied back, shoulder-length hair was pure white. Her pale blue eyes looking down her nose at Rochelle, she demanded to know what was going on. Rochelle opened her mouth, but the Catalyst got in first.

“This gnome was asking for forbidden knowledge, Mistress Merlana.”

Rochelle gasped in fear, dropping to one knee, as was proper for one so lowly to address the Guardienne of White Magic. “Mistress, forgive me!” Rochelle begged, deciding that standing her ground and fighting her cause was likely to do more harm than good.

This was a very dangerous situation. Merlana was a powerful force for the Light and a fanatic to boot, by all accounts. Officially, she was part of the Council of Magic, and sat in session with mages of dark and balance alignment. Unofficially, she was said to have no tolerance for anything she viewed as evil or unwholesome...and there was much in the world she adjudged evil and unwholesome. People whispered that she would banish night if she could...and winter, too. Rochelle was from Avidon and trained by the Hand of Darkness. Could Merlana detect some stench of Darkness around her? What would she do if she did?

The white wizardess gestured to someone behind Rochelle, and the gnome felt all her magic leave her in an instant.

Rochelle was too terrified to dare turn around, but she didn't need to, to know what had happened. There could be no doubt: she had just experienced a Nullmagic spell. The mage to whom Merlana had gestured, was obviously an Enforcer, with the power and authority to disable and capture any possible magical threat. Now with war declared, that authority was even more wide-ranging. Merlana would need little excuse to have Rochelle arrested and locked up, or worse, without charge or trial. The only thing that could save Rochelle then would be a direct appeal to the Prime Magus, Gamaliel, as leader of her own red division and indeed the full Council of Magic. But that would require her to tell the truth, the whole truth about what she was doing causing a scene in Merlyon's Library of Magic. She trusted Gamaliel, of course, but there was no telling what other ears might be listening. That could jeopardise Eilidh's quest. No, she dared not involve Gamaliel.

Then, as if her thoughts had summoned him, a tall male Enforcer strode over to them. He wore red on the hood, cuffs and trim, as well as the symbol of the highest order of magic and that of the Balanced One around his neck.

Rochelle prayed fervently for the ground to swallow her up but sadly Egali-Te didn't feel like changing the laws of nature just at the moment. Risking a glance, she was surprised to notice something in Merlana's respectful lowered gaze: worry. Why would the head of white magic be worried by the presence of her counterpart of balance?

"Is there a problem here, Merlana?" Gamaliel asked, pleasantly.

"Why not at all, Gamaliel," she replied, self-consciously smoothing down her robes. "Just a minor disturbance...I simply happened to be here and decided to give this young druid a lesson." Turning to Rochelle, "Go," she commanded, imperiously. "And next time please conduct yourself with a somewhat greater decorum."

It took every ounce of self-control for Rochelle to stand, bow and walk calmly out of the library. As soon as she was outside, the great doors shutting behind her, she bolted and didn't intend to stop running until she reached the barracks of the Knights of Paladinia.

Eilidh had stressed the need for a low profile, the gnome reflected, and here was Rochelle attracting the attention of both Mistress Merlana and Prime Magus Gamaliel! All she needed now was to run headlong into Master Drizdar and she'd complete the set!

* * * * *

Rochelle suppressed a shiver. It wasn't particularly cold in Merlyon, but ever since the Nullmagic spell, she had keenly felt the absence of the sweet caress of Life. Her senses were ill equipped to interpret the sensation; the closest she could tell was that she felt cold and so Rochelle shivered.

The druidess didn't see how she was going to get her magic back anytime soon. Merlana had ordered the spell as punishment and that news might have been passed on to the Church there in Merlyon. Nor would it regenerate on its own in sunlight, Nullmagic prevented that.

Rochelle could not accept that her self-appointed trip to Merlyon would turn out to be fruitless. Something was bothering Rochelle about what she had just been through, perhaps more than one something. Right now, though, Rochelle was still scared witless. It was fortunate, she reflected, that she had a place to retreat to. A place of safety and security. A place where magic held no jurisdiction even in the magical capital of Mythallen.

Chapter 5

Hannah's fitted golden plate armour possessed a fresh, dazzling brilliance that threatened to outshine the sun. She had spent most of the past week tending to her full ceremonial uniform, even to the extent of embroidering her house crest onto her new red cloak in the finest golden thread available in Merlyon. Her red cloak replaced her old blue one, marking the distinction between a Knight Initiate and a Knight Warrior. Her blue cloak would have to serve her but one last time.

Hannah could have sent her embroidery to one of the tailors that were renowned for their fine service to the Knighthood and she had no doubt that the work would have been exemplary, but she preferred to do the work herself. It was a chance to put some of her girlhood skills to use, as her mother had taught her, long before she had demonstrated aspirations for Knighthood and felt the call of Patreleux to enter into the defence of His world and His children. She was a warrior, but she was also a woman. Sometimes, then, she liked to give her feminine side a chance to surface and express itself.

Actually, she reflected, that was not a good way to think of it, because it implied two separate halves where a single whole existed. Knights most commonly favoured the sword, but they were trained to handle other weapons with no less skill and effectiveness. Blades and spikes came in all shapes and sizes - to Hannah, the needle pulling thread was just one more. Her embroidery was not a separate skill to her combat effectiveness - it was the same thing. Like combat, it required a steady hand and a cool head. Anyone could strike someone with a sword, it was a question of how, when and where to strike. That was a lesson often lost on male warriors, who believed strength alone was the key. Hannah's swordplay was a matter of skill, accuracy and precision - just like her embroidery. The difference, of course, was that this way she was able to use her skills to create rather than destroy. That brought her a deep sense of satisfaction and she whispered a prayer of thanks and praise to the Father of Light whom she was sure guided her hand.

It was a paradox of war that those called upon to do it were among those who hated it the most. Those like Hannah who were required to put their lives on the line understood the true cost of conflict, but she also understood that it was important to draw that line and say, "This far. No further." Some of the older Knights continued to hold to the notion that female warriors were a mistake and female Knights a disaster. They dared not voice such thoughts aloud, however, for Hannah and those of her contemporaries had been accepted and trained as Knights and that was that.

The Sacred Code of Paladinus stated:

A Knight shalt conduct themselves with honour at all times, nary stinting in their lauding of another's skill. A Knight shalt not demean another - neither friend nor foe - with unfounded insults or disparaging remarks. A Knight shalt not bear false witness, nor question the honour, veracity, skill or courage of another without clear evidence of lacking in the other's own conduct. Where evidence exists of such lacking in a fellow Knight, the grievance shalt be presented first to the ranking Knight Officer. In extreme cases, or where the accused are themselves of Officer rank, the Knight Commander must be informed, that the matter may be brought before the High Council for due consideration ere a trial is convened. Where the accused is acquitted, it shall be determined whether the accuser acted in all honour, but in error, or whether they didst violate the aforementioned rule prohibiting false witness. Matters of personal honour, among those of equal rank, may be settled through personal combat. (See section pertaining to Duels and Contests.) Such duelling shalt be adjudicated and every effort shall be made to ensure that they are non-lethal in nature, ending when

the accuser or accused do yield. (Rules pertaining to the subject of challenges where adjudication is not possible shall be discussed in Appendix 3.) In wartime or declared state of emergency, challenges shall be conducted only with the direct permission of the highest ranking Knight there present.

In short, Hannah was a Knight and no other Knight could ever question her right to be one without clear evidence...evidence they could never find.

After spending one whole day in fasting and prayer, and all night prostrate on the stone floor before the symbol of her god, Hannah was properly prepared. So it was that she was standing there, armour shining in the sun, blue cloak flapping in the breeze as if to make a flag of her house crest, mithril sword sheathed at her hip. Her name was called and she strode forward majestically, accompanied by a fanfare of trumpets and flanked on each side by a squire. Hannah climbed the circular stone steps to the dais upon which the Lord High Chancellor, Sir Charles Barrack, waited. The squires stopped five steps below the dais, while Hannah continued alone. Once at the top, she dropped to one knee before Lord Barrack and handed him the hilt of her sword.

The Lord High Chancellor was a tall man with white hair touching his shoulders. He was an old veteran, but he wore his years with vigour. His grip on Hannah's sword was firm and sure, his eyes were fierce with determination and with the Divine Father's love. He did not shout, but his commanding voice easily carried over the assembled throng.

“Who among our ranks doth sponsor this woman to be accepted fully into the Knighthood of Paladinius?”

“I do, my Lord!” A voice from the crowd declared.

Again the trumpets sounded as Knight Officer Sir Warren Mitchell approached the dais, flanked by two Knight Warriors. His escort stopped three steps below the dais, while Warren continued alone. He bowed once and thumped his fist to his chest, over his heart, in salute. He himself was to be promoted later, to the rank of Knight Commander. He was glad this was to be his final act as Knight Officer.

“Dost thou attest to the skill, honour and courage of this woman?” asked the Lord High Chancellor.

“Indeed I do so attest, my Lord. Whilst under authorised detached duty to her division, Lady Hannah Collins didst undertake a quest in the noble tradition of our Order. While the details of said quest must needs remain, for the time being at least, secret, in accordance with the Questing Rules of the Sacred Code of Paladinius, I do swear upon my Oath and upon my honour that her deeds are worthy of such recognition as offered by this ceremony.”

“Indeed,” Sir Barrack acknowledged. “For the record, I do have in my possession, a letter from an undisclosed person or persons of sufficient rank and station, verifying the aforementioned quest and the role of this Knight Initiate in that noble undertaking. I do therefore declare myself satisfied that by all military standards, this woman doth qualify most admirably. However, battle skill, courage and even honour are not sufficient for a Knight of Paladinia. Faith is a vital ingredient and must be demonstrated through fasting, prayer and ritual cleansing in the sight of Divine Patrelaux. Who, therefore, will attest to this woman's religious commitment?”

“I will so testify!” The voice belonged to a woman, distinctive among the sea of Knights by her white robes, every square inch of which was embroidered in silver and light metallic blue with the symbols of the Father of Light. Another fanfare announced the cleric's approach to the dais, flanked on either side by a Knight Commander, indicating the deep respect accorded by the Knights to a Revered Daughter of Patrelaux. The Knights stopped just one step short of the dais, while the unnamed cleric took the final step alone to stand before the Lord High Chancellor. The name of the cleric was not spoken because it was unimportant - in this she was a representative of the Father of Light. Indeed, many Knights believed that the god himself spoke through his priest and the cleric was but an instrument of His Divine Will. It was for this reason that the Chancellor bowed to the cleric, not vice versa.

“I can verify with all certainty, veracity and truth that this woman did fulfil the requisite sacred rituals to prepare her soul as well as her body for this ceremony. Upon inquisition, this woman did prove herself to be a scholar and believer of the Word of the God of Light and Goodness.”

“By thy testimony, therefore,” Lord Barrack concluded, “I do declare this woman's spiritual requirements fulfilled.”

A fanfare of trumpets filled the pause before the next part of the ceremony.

“The induction of a True Knight is a solemn and sacred matter, not to be undertaken lightly, or selfishly, but with reverence and proper forethought. It must needs be entereth into with all honour. Therefore I must needs ask all Knights here present, that if thou knowest of any just reason why this woman shouldst not be accepted as a Knight Warrior within our ranks, thou art honour-bound to declare it now.”

All was silence.

“Lady Hannah Collins, dost thou swear an Oath by the Code, upon thine honour and before thy god, that thou knowest not of any impediment or failing that doth prohibit thine promotion under the laws laid down by Lord Paladinius?”

“With all my heart, my Lord, I do swear it.”

“Then, Knight Initiate Lady Hannah Collins, for services to this kingdom and others, in keeping with the honour and tradition of Paladinius, by the power and authority vested in me by said tradition and great Patrelaux, our Father of Light, I do hereby promote thee to the rank of Knight Warrior, with all the privileges and responsibilities of that rank.” As he spoke, he touched the flat of Hannah's blade to her left shoulder, then over her head to touch her right.

“Arise, Lady Hannah Collins: Knight Warrior of Paladinia; Fourth Merlyon Infantry Division. Congratulations!”

She got to her feet. “Thank you, my Lord Barrack.”

Hannah accepted her sword back, sheathed it and saluted with her fist over her heart. All the other Knights present, including Lord Barrack, returned the salute.

As her sponsor, it fell to Warren Mitchell, to unpin Hannah's blue cloak and unbuckle her plain gold breastplate, revealing the layer of mail beneath. The Knight Commander at Lord Barrack's

left side held Hannah's new breastplate, displaying the mailed fist that indicated a Knight Warrior. He handed it to Warren, who buckled it in place on Hannah's body.

Next, the Knight Commander on Lord Barrack's right, passed over the red cloak, emblazoned with Hannah's house crest. Warren fastened it in place with the Infantry Division brooch.

She saluted once more and the trumpets blared anew. Knight Warrior Lady Hannah Collins turned on her heels and marched quickly back down the steps, the entire escort of Knights at her back. Her pace did not abate until she had left the ceremonial arena and disappeared inside.

Chapter 6

“Merlyn's daughter? Here? Now? In our time?” Eilidh exclaimed. The others were speechless. “That's impossible!”

“Just because you do not know how to do something,” the Wise One scolded, “that does not mean it cannot be done.”

Eilidh flushed deeply, hearing one of her own favourite expressions repeated back to her. “Forgive me, Wise One,” she said, suitably admonished. “I spoke before I thought.”

“A bad habit,” the old man warned. “Always think, young Eilidh. Use your head. There is nothing more important.”

“I understand. Thank you for reminding me of that lesson. Please, tell us what you can about this. I won't interrupt again.”

“Good,” said the Wise One. “As for the how, I would have thought that was obvious. You know that elves live far longer than humans, so...”

“So likewise, the Faerie live far longer than elves,” Eilidh concluded, nodding in understanding.

“Elves are to Faerie as mayflies are to humans,” the Wise One explained, settling back with his tea. The leather-bound chair creaked and groaned as it enveloped him. Candles flickered at the slightest movement, every breath causing shadows to act out great epics on the walls of the hut.

Eilidh couldn't help but wonder how this room could possibly fit inside the small hut they had entered. Indeed, she wasn't entirely convinced that the dark walls she could see were, in fact, solid. Part of her would not have been surprised to find them just insubstantial curtains of shadow with space leading beyond.

Yet, at the same time, the entire room was taken up by their chairs and the table at which they sat - just barely large enough to seat four people. Otherwise, the only feature of the Wise One's home was the red curtain leading, apparently, to his own private quarters at the back. The two perceptions of the Wise One's hut were at odds, but she couldn't say that either was inaccurate.

Interrupting her thoughts, Toli asked, “Do you think we should maybe ask Jayne to come in? It looks like we could be here for some time yet.”

“Not bloody likely,” Granite grumbled. “I still donnae trust her.”

“Whyever not?” Toli wondered. “We trusted Loric and this girl is some kind of fighter protégé of his.”

“She claims,” Granite huffed.

“She knew things about Loric that seem to ring true,” Toli pointed out. “And she managed to identify us from that story of yours...”

* * * * *

Before setting off to visit the Wise One, there had been a feast at Shakaran Castle to celebrate the return of the Lavender Rose. Prince Garald invited members of the wider city community to join in, which was in keeping with Shakaran culture, and a monarchy that prided itself on being in touch with the people. It also served to make sure that Eilidh and Tolbrietta would not look suspicious or out of place. A bard, of course, never looked suspicious or out of place. Bards were an essential part of any celebration and Granite fulfilled his commission to compose a ballad of Princess Mystaya's rescue, though names and some of the details were changed or omitted to protect the vital secrecy of their true mission. Granite had been convinced that no-one could possibly identify the three of them as characters in his story. Nevertheless, almost before the final chords had shimmered into silence, a half-orc approached Eilidh, introduced herself as Jayne and asked straight out if Loric was with them.

By way of explanation, she said that she could recognise Loric's `heroics` in the bard's story because she was the Black Dragon's warrior student - a long story of her own that she insisted was entirely beside the point. "Master Loric," she spoke in a very strong city dialect, "'e's got a sort o' special auror about 'im, Miss Eilidh, and it's got a way o' rubbin' off an' markin' those who fight wiv 'im. That's 'ow I knew you were 'is friends."

Eilidh had to force herself to really listen so she could understand her, almost translate it in her own mind. Not that it was a problem. No, her problem was more to do with the way girl's eyes shone with such complete devotion as to turn Eilidh's stomach. That blind faith, coupled with the total absence of anything resembling intelligence made her absolutely terrified. The only reason the Catalyst had asked her to join the much reduced party, was that she shuddered to think what trouble Jayne might cause if they let her stay behind out of their sight. Still, Eilidh certainly did not trust Jayne enough to let her in on the exact nature of their quest. If only they could have confirmation from Loric himself; if only he could have been there to vouch for her. But he wasn't with them. He was off on some dragon-type quest of his own, and no amount of `if onlys` were going to change that.

As she had said to Jayne, however, "He's found us twice already - I daresay he'll find us again when he's ready."

Jayne considered that to be the height of wisdom.

When all this started, Master Gamaliel had told her that the members of her party must follow her of their own free will. Eilidh had decided to interpret that to mean that if they freely chose to join, they could also freely choose to leave at any time. Mind you, she wasn't above a certain degree of manipulation when she felt it necessary. She had done it with Phaer when he spoke of leaving when they first got to Shakaran after he had saved their lives. That was the first time he saved them - or at least Eilidh herself. Her manipulation had proved justified when he saved them a second time, in Avidon, and once again in the mine at Marina Fells. The latter, of course, had been thanks also to the timely appearance of that aquatic bronze dragon...what was her full name again? Katakaran - that was it. She had been with them so briefly and during a very heated time in their rescue mission, so she barely knew a thing about her, beyond Artisho's casual claim that she was a princess of the aquatic kingdoms. She doubted if even the more social members of her group had learned much more.

First there was Kismet, then the ridiculous old man Artisho, and then Taka. Eilidh supposed Jayne was simply one mysterious stranger too many, and while the others had proved more-or-less benevolent, she wasn't about to push her luck. No, for now Miss Jayne Corr would stay where she was. On the outside.

Coughing now apparently abated, the Wise One continued his history lesson, backtracking in the narrative to cover a period he had previously skipped over to answer their impatience.

“For a time, all was peaceful in the New World. Old feuds became meaningless in the face of seemingly limitless magical possibilities. But those possibilities raised a debate: How should the magic be used? What was the true place of magic in the New World?”

“For the first time since arriving here, Merlyn called all mages together to discuss this issue. There were, it seemed, three main factions: The first insisted that magic should be used only to help people. No magic should be used that did not directly bring good to the people. The second faction argued that the power of magic in this world was too important to be constrained in that way. Magic, they said, was the tool by which mages should rule the people and there should be no limits placed on the use of magic. The third faction believed that both of the other philosophies had merit, but knowledge, not power, was the key to determining the best use for magic. All three factions shared a single, overwhelming belief, however: above all, the magic must be protected. Any threat to magic itself must be met with deadly force. Majaos was alive with magic. This world needed magic to survive, so a threat to magic's existence was a threat to all life.

“Therefore, the Council of Magic became an official body, charged primarily with the defence of magic itself. The three factions became the White, Red and Black divisions, in line with the pre-existing religious factions of Mythallen. Unlike the clerics, however, mages of all three divisions would meet on peaceful terms to discuss matters of magic that transcended their differences. Magical laws were developed and order established. Then came the baby: She changed everything.

“Niltiar was extraordinarily talented,” the Wise One explained to his guests. “Her rapid grasp of all things magical was at once exciting and frightening. From the dawn of her adolescence, she began to question the order that her parents had worked so hard to establish. In later years, some of her ideas and magical practices became dangerous. She was not blind to the danger, but rather she embraced it as an essential part of her vision.”

“What was so dangerous about the magic she practised?” Eilidh wanted to know.

“Ah now, that is a good question.” The Wise One approved. “Well, of course, magic in its raw state is dangerous by its very nature. It is harmful, corrosive and in all ways damaging to living creatures, but the way magic was used in pre-Ancient times led to very few problems. The indigenous sentient races would spend generations on magical projects. Their relative longevity gave them patience. There were many magical wonders in pre-Ancient times that had been developed over many years, decades, even centuries. In the two centuries before humans, however, the pace of change had slowed to a virtual standstill. For humans, that would never do.

“It is human nature to fight those things that stand in the way of their ambitions. These were powerful and resourceful mages who were not to be put off by the volatile nature of magic in this world. They studied long and hard to find some means of safely harnessing the incredible powers that surrounded them.”

“Catalysts,” Granite offered.

“No,” said the Wise One.

“What?!” The trio shouted in unison.

“No,” the sage repeated. “Catalysts came later. No, the Ancients found their first solution by observing nature. There are many magical species on Majaos - both animals and plants.” He held up his drink for emphasis. “The Kij vine for one.” He took a sip and pulled his face. “I’m enjoying providing your education so much, I’m letting my tea get cold. It doesn’t do any good unless it’s hot.”

“Please, allow me,” Toli offered. She cast and held a small Fireflash spell over the cup. With some concentration, she kept the flame hovering in place long enough for the Wise One’s tea start to bubble and steam. Then she put the fire out.

Eilidh Granted Life to the magician, more for the magical exercise than any real need. After all, the Life cost of a single Fireflash spell was minimal to a mage of Toli’s growing power and expertise and her Life Store would soon regenerate once they were out in the sun.

The Wise One took a sip of his re-heated tea and sighed contentedly. “Ah, that’s much better. Thank you my dear hobbit. Are you sure you won’t have some? How about you, Granite? Eilidh? It’s very good,” he assured them.

The companions declined.

“Very well. As I was saying, there were many magical species on Majaos, not least the dragons, that seemed to use raw magic without any ill effects. However, studies showed that they did not, strictly speaking, use raw magic, but rather converted it into a safe form. Magical creatures produced an excess of this safe magic, which dispersed on the wind and flowed across the world. It coated and protected all the non-sentient creatures of the world, so that all were touched by magic, yet protected from its ravages. Some higher animals have barely enough for that protection, and slight breaks in their magical coating are the cause of a number of magical diseases. The same protection worked for sentient beings, but there was simply insufficient for their needs, especially with the arrival of humans. The solution, therefore, was to use the natural abilities of living magical creatures to harness and increase the magic conversion process. This is one reason why the safe form of magic came to be known as Life. Mages took to the habit of keeping small magical animals as pets and training them to Grant Life as needed. Ultimately, the majority found this to be the most convenient method.”

“Familiars!” Toli gasped in understanding. “That’s what you’re talking about, isn’t it? Wow, familiars. Even today some mages keep familiars, though they’re not necessarily magical creatures - they could be any animal, really. Small animals, mostly, though I did once hear about an old white wizard who kept a unicorn as a familiar. I don’t think anybody has any clue of the origins of this tradition...it’s just a tradition...and I can’t imagine it would even occur to anyone to use them in the fashion you describe...why bother when we have...Catalysts...oh my...”

As Granite latched onto Tolbrietta’s line of thought, his face - at least as much of it as was visible under his thick facial hair - turned a deep shade of red. Jumping to his feet and shaking his clenched fists, he demanded, “Are ye tryin’ tae say that we Catalysts are nothin’ more than familiars?” His voice rumbled like thunder. “Just animals - pets - that mages keep around because it’s convenient?! How dare ye? I dinnae plan tae stay around here bein’ insulted!” With that, the volatile dwarf stormed out of the hut.

Eilidh was torn. She needed to know more, yet leaving Granite alone with Jayne did not seem sensible. She could send Toli outside, but quite frankly she wanted her friend with her for personal reasons as well as the practical point that it made sense to have a second pair of ears listening to the Wise One. Then again, of course, time was marching onward while they were cocooned in here and she really ought to be doing something practical to work against Niltsiar. Doing nothing was ultimately no different to working for the enemy.

“O Great Wise Sage,” she began, “I’m afraid I really must get right to the point here: Can you tell me how to stop Niltsiar?”

“Ah, now that is a very different question to the one you asked before.”

“Excuse me?”

“You came in here and said, ‘What can you tell me about Niltsiar’? That question is so broad, it would take me a great deal of time to answer you fully. Asking how you can stop her is a much more concise question and the answer a good deal shorter. Precision with words is a valuable lesson, young lady - learn it well.”

“I take your point, sir,” Eilidh accepted, gracefully. “Now, to my new question: Can you tell me how to stop Niltsiar?”

The Wise One leaned forward in his chair and motioned for the two friends to move in close. “I cannot guarantee success, you understand,” he whispered, “but there is one thing you could do, as a first step along that road. A task; a quest, if you like. Do not undertake this thing lightly, for it is fraught with danger, perhaps forcing you to confront your greatest fears. Choose wisely.”

“For myself,” Eilidh stated, “I choose the danger. Tolbrietta Hobbnobb must make her own decision.”

Toli placed a small hand gently on Eilidh’s arm, and in full understanding of what she was risking, she pledged herself. “How many times must I tell you, my friend? I’m with you to the end. Where you go, I go; it’s as simple as that.”

“Good,” the Wise One approved. “Now pay attention, both of you, and I will teach you what you must do.”

Chapter 7

Loric and Callie flew side by side in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, until Callie yelped as she slammed into a wall that wasn't there. The force would have been enough to knock most dragons out of the sky, but silvers were natural expert flyers, so she was able to catch the air currents a little under two dragon lengths from the ground. She hovered, trying to clear her head, and was astonished to see that Loric had flown on ahead unhindered. She wasn't sure if it was just an effect of the collision, but to her eyes, he seemed to be sort of fading away. It wasn't until she called out to him that he noticed Callie wasn't with him and turned around to return to her side. Once again, he passed right through the invisible barrier.

“Are you alright, Callie?” Loric asked, genuinely concerned.

“Yeah, more or less,” she replied. “Though I'll probably have a headache for a while,” she added with a smile.

“Yes,” Loric agreed, “I remember.”

“Pardon?”

“Oh of course, you weren't with us at the time, were you?” Loric realised.

He suggested they land and talk.

He told the tale of how he was tricked by centaurs in the borderlands of Shakaran, and his frantic escape, only to crash-land in that mysterious glade. That, of course, was when he had first met Eilidh and her then small group of companions.

Not for the first time, he wondered how the Catalyst fared. He felt a little guilty about leaving her without his protection, but if he could gain the training of the Elder Dragons, his protection would be that much more effective. When he needed to find her, he would, he was sure of it. After all, he had done it before.

“If this shield is like the other one, you might be able to walk in without any problems.”

“Well, I'll give it a go, but if it's like the other one, how come you got through it so easily this time?”

“My guess is that it's got something to do with the Elder Dragon of Fire. We're close, I'm certain of it.” He shrugged and left the sentence at that.

It didn't turn out quite as Loric said. When Calandra first attempted to walk through the shield, she entered side by side with Loric; yet when they got to the other side, they each discovered they were alone. They both instantly stepped back and were relieved to find each other again.

“Perhaps you should go on alone, child,” Calandra suggested. “It does seem as if you are invited while I clearly am not.”

“Out of the question!” Loric refused. “I'm not leaving you alone out here - not with some dragon predator lurking about.”

“Don’t worry, I don't plan to sit here waiting to be attacked and I've got no desire to get into a head-on scrape with whatever-it-is. I'm a silver so I'll play to my strengths - I'll pick the shortest route between here and Shakaran and fly there as fast as I possibly can.”

“And what if this thing can fly, too?”

“I don't care what it can do,” Calandra said, indignantly, “Nothing out-flies a silver.”

“And what happens when I want to get back to human civilisation? I don’t wish to sound selfish, but if there is a monster out here, I might need your help.”

“Well, I--”

“Look, there must be a way to get you through this shield.”

“Why must there?” Calandra countered. “Isn't the whole point of a shield to stop people from entering a place uninvited?”

“Yes, but surely somebody must have considered the possibility of an invited dragon having a friend along. Besides, what if this is some kind of test? Come on, let’s at least try a few things before we split up, alright?”

Calandra considered that for a moment and then nodded.

For over an hour, they flew around the circumference of the shield, periodically landing to try to find a ground level entry point. Each time gave the same result - while Callie could pass, she ended up in a different place to Loric. Or rather, Loric appeared in a different place while for Calandra the barren, featureless desert terrain simply continued unbroken. They flew to the very pinnacle of the shield, where they hovered and tried to gently lower themselves through the barrier. Still Calandra could not enter the secret place.

“It's just so damned frustrating!” Loric fumed, pacing up and down. “I bet if Eilidh were here, she could tell us in a second how to get through. She’d probably be having a good laugh at the pair of us, too!”

Calandra, stood calm and still in her pristine, if slightly sand blown, white robes. She raised an eyebrow and gave a crooked half-smile as she paused in her prayers for guidance.

“Indeed, child, neither of us are experts in magical matters. Perhaps--”

She was unable to complete her thoughts as Loric pointed to the sky with his sword and shouted, “Look!”

Approaching fast - impossibly fast - was a red dragon. Such was its speed that the two onlookers did not need to be magic experts to recognise a Haste spell in force.

“It would seem there is something faster than a silver, after all,” Loric teased.

“Oh please!” Calandra said, rolling her eyes and somehow managing to control her rising panic. “Every silver nestling learns the Haste spell almost as soon as they can fly! Ah...a silver dragon under the power of Haste...now that's fast, but it's cheating. You can draw lines in the sky with vapour

trails, but that's all it's good for, really. Fine for flying in a straight line, but who wants to do that? It's so boring. Takes about half an hour to stop, too!"

Loric had no time to wonder at the clearly `Silver Callie` mode of speech being used by `Revered Daughter Calandra` as he latched onto something she'd just said. "Hang on...that's no vapour trail it's leaving in its wake...that's smoke!"

"Smoke? How can it possibly...hey that looks wrong...that looks very, very wrong!" Calandra shivered. "Its tail is on fire! But that's impossible!"

There were three sets of five species of dragon on Majaos. Each of those five was born with a magical breath weapon. Obsidian dragons such as Loric, along with black and brass dragons could spit corrosive acid, while silvers like Callie, plus blues and sapphires could send forth a bolt of lightning at will. Golds, rubies and reds, however, possessed the most destructive weapon of all - they could breathe fire. Another quirk of magic was that dragons were immune to anything related to their own breath weapon. Early human scholars reasoned that this natural trait made sense; otherwise a dragon might accidentally kill themselves with a sneeze. Callie was therefore immune to electrical storms. This was useful given a silver's natural habitat of high places in hot, steaming rainforests where thunder and lightning were commonplace events. While most dragons would be all but grounded by such weather, silvers along with their chromatic and jewelled counterparts, had nothing to fear from being struck by lightning. In fact they would be energised by it. This phenomenon also explained why otherwise weaker, ice-and-frost-spitting white dragons thrived in the far north, such as around the city of Avidon: they were not simply immune to the cold, they thrived in it - a distinct advantage for a reptile. By the same token, then, fire-breathing gold and ruby dragons were completely impervious to all forms of heat and fire...and so were reds. By all known laws, for a living red dragon to be on fire was, as Calandra rightly said, impossible.

"Impossible," Loric agreed, gruffly. "But then again, so is the concept of a dragon predator."

Calandra didn't like that connection at all.

The red was now close enough to identify as a mature male, sporting ugly gashes along its flanks, blood mingling with the smoke. His manner suggested Loric could be correct in his implication. Clearly terrified, the red dragon was straining every sinew in addition to his Haste spell - Calandra thought he was getting remarkably close to some of her own speed records. This dragon was normally a vicious hunter - now he was prey.

Suddenly, the air shimmered on the ground just behind the dragon and a huge reptilian form materialised into existence. It was something like a dragon, yet clearly not. Loric was big by dragon standards, but this creature was at least two-and-a-half times his size. Its body was proportionally leaner than a dragon's would be at that size, but its front appendages were jointed differently, more like arms than forelegs. Its sandy-coloured scales were smaller than dragon scales and appeared to lie flat like a honeycomb, where a dragon's scales interlocked three dimensionally so that they were raised up in the direction of the tail. Sharp spines formed a double row down its back, either side of its central backbone. When they reached the tail, they merged into a single row and became gradually smaller down to the very tip. The great lizard's head was a round, bony scalp that gave way to a kind of beak, lined with hook-like teeth designed for tearing and rending flesh rather than chomping great chunks of meat from an animal's hide in dragon style. That was consistent with Calandra's observations of the dragon corpses. The creature had wings, which were not designed for flight, but

would allow it to glide through the air and cover dozens of dragon lengths with a single springing step. The hind legs were perfect for cushioning the impact of its landing, as well as naturally taking the animal into its next jump without loss of momentum. In this way, it could effortlessly achieve great speeds over long distances. And, apparently, it could become invisible.

Loric threw himself at Calandra, knocking them both to the ground and covering them with sand.

The giant lizard leaped up at the red dragon, only to be foiled when the dragon winked out and reappeared a few dragon lengths back. Red dragons were intelligent and highly gifted in dragon magic. The Spatial Displacement spell was extremely difficult to pull off accurately, but whether by skill or good fortune, he got it spot on, timing it just right to rake his claws along the creature's back as he flew on. The giant lizard let out an ear-splitting shriek as spines snapped and blood spilled from its wounds. It could do nothing about the attack because its wings were only capable of smoothing its descent - it could not fly up higher to get at its intended prey or change direction to avoid the onslaught. The dragon was flying more slowly than he had been, since it was impossible to maintain a Haste spell through the Spatial Displacement, but again the intelligent red used that to his own advantage. The instant the predator sprang at him once more, he recast Haste on himself and shot forward. Even so, as it glided after the fleeing dragon, it managed to bite at his sensitive, flaming tail. Red scales rained down upon the desert sands as the dragon bellowed in pain and fury. With a combination of cunning, speed and magic, the red might have escaped, but it was obviously unfamiliar with the territory, as it flew headlong into the magical shield.

There was a sickening thud and a crackling of energy as the dragon's magically enhanced momentum was brought to an instantaneous halt. The red was lucky not to break his neck...or then again perhaps he would have considered himself lucky if he had. The predator folded its wings and dropped almost vertically to land on top of the struggling dragon, crushing it once more against the shield. Dazed, the dragon fell to the ground, struggling to clear his head and get to his feet. He had no chance.

Wasting no time, the predator started ripping and tearing at the red with its front claws and tried to bite his neck. The red fought instinctively - all thought of magic or cunning vanished from his panicked mind. He unleashed a huge and powerful jet of flame from his jaws, but the fire faltered before it touched the giant lizard, as if it had thrown up some kind of protective shield. But it was more than that. This strange force changed the fire and flung it back at the red dragon, searing his face. His bellow of agony was unlike anything either of the onlookers had ever heard from another dragon. His cry cracked and bubbled as his scaly skin melted in the intense heat. Blinded and driven wild by his pain, the once proud and arrogant red's resistance faded into feeble thrashings. The predator's jaws clamped around his neck, compressing his windpipe. The red dragon thrashed once more...twice...then faltered...and finally he lay still.

An immortal red dragon - the most powerful creature, the most feared living sentient being in all the world, the top predator - had been hunted down and killed. Now it was nothing more than food. For the first time in his long life, Loric - the famed Black Dragon of Avidon - was terrified. Normally so quick to the fight, here he was considering flight... *Flight! That's it!*

Focussing on his idea helped Loric to hold back the terror. With a clear run, a fast natural flyer with a Haste spell could surely outpace even this monstrosity, especially with a head start.

“Callie, listen,” he whispered. “You weren't exaggerating about your flying speed, were you?”

“Certainly not!” She hissed back, indignantly. “Why--?”

“Shhh! I hope not, because I'm about to put you to the test.”

“What--?”

“Callie, you were right. I've put you in danger and I'm sorry. You've got to get out of here. Your only chance is to fly. Fly as hard and as fast as you can - and then some - with the best Haste spell you can conjure up. Fly to Shakaran - the mortals there were well prepared for battle and the Knights have strong barracks with their silver and blue dragonriders. This thing can't fight an entire city.”

Calandra wasn't so sure. “But what about you?”

“Didn't you see? It can't get through the shield! All I have to do is move a couple of dragon lengths to my right and I'm fine.”

“But as soon as I change to dragon form,” Calandra objected, “that thing could be on me before I even get in the air and then it's going to take a bit of time for me to get to full speed!”

“I know. That's why I'm going to buy you some time. I'll bet it's never fought an obsidian dragon before. No fancy tricks of magic, just my powerful muscles, my sharpened claws and my razor-like teeth. You think the Black Dragon of Avidon is famous now? Just wait 'til they hear about this fight!”

“I don't like this!” Callie complained. “You can't fight this creature even as a distraction - you don't know what it can do!”

“It doesn't know what I can do!”

“No, Loric, don't do this. You have to do what you came here for - the power of the Elder Dragons. Then you might have a chance, but not here, not now. I beg of you, please, think about what you're doing.”

“There is no other way,” Loric insisted. Without another pause for breath, he sprang from his hiding place and transformed to his dragon form.

It was Calandra, not Callie, who stood, and called out, “Yes, child, there is another way - just one!” With her hand on her clerical symbol, she prayed with all her strength. Hold Creature was the name of the prayer and Patrelaux answered her. Loric was paralysed.

The giant lizard had been initially quite startled at Loric's sudden appearance. It glared and sniffed the air. Perhaps, as Loric had said, it had never seen a dragon of Loric's colour before and was trying to decide for sure whether he was a dragon at all. That momentary pause was all-too-brief, before it screeched and leaped for the immobilised Loric. It was fast, but Callie was faster. The flash of her silver scales as she shape-shifted seemed to blind the creature, causing it to miss its target by a few hundred feet. Skimming the ground with her flight, Callie crashed headlong into Loric and her

momentum carried both dragons forward, tumbling through the shield. Callie struck her head, the impact jarring her neck painfully and transmitting through her body. From the pain, she was sure something vital had snapped. She slid to a stop at a strange, awkward angle. She couldn't fly away; she couldn't even stand. There was no point anyway, that abomination of nature would be upon her at any moment once it realised the shield was passable at ground level. But it didn't matter. It could only get at her; it couldn't go where Loric had gone, teleported away to the realm of the Elder Dragon of Fire. It had been the right thing to do. Her life must be sacrificed so that Loric could gain the power to kill this thing.

Only one last thing to do, as her world went mercifully black: she prayed that her All-Loving Father would accept her soul into His Eternal Embrace in Paradise.

Chapter 8

Phaer's first indication that he had crossed the boundary into dark elf territory came as he was suddenly surrounded by a dozen elven guards, each with an arrow pointed at him. There was no way for him to resist even if he'd had the energy to try, which he didn't. He had managed to stop the bleeding, but he was still very weak.

Their cousins in the ancestral forests called them dark elves, for they had given themselves over to Darkness and had therefore been expelled from the Light. Most people of non-elven race confused the term dark elf with those such as the Supreme War Master, Drizdar, and other elves who embraced the magic and worship of Divine Mortress. In other words, a dark elf was an elf who was aligned with the Dark.

The way elves used that term, however, was quite different. Young forest elves were encouraged to travel all over Mythallen, making friends and associations with people of other races, and discover their own path for themselves. Not only did it help their youth to grow in maturity and experience, but it also served to create the bonds that reflected and strengthened the more formal ambassadorial and diplomatic relations of their elders. While it was true that most forest elves were aligned to the Light, there were those who followed other paths and that was part of the natural order. Most forest elves firmly believed that `Light was Right` but to try to enforce that would be to create conflict.

As a rule, the forest elves abhorred conflict and violence, although that did not stop them being prepared for war. Their defences remained strong, ever ready to repel any invader. It was simply that they did not go out into the world to seek out and destroy all their potential enemies.

The dark elves were altogether different. Even Drizdar, the most prominent and powerful of forest elf servants of the Mistress of Death, hated and cursed them. Drizdar was well known for his penchant for vaporising anyone who referred to him as a dark elf.

Dark elves believed their path was the One True Way. They believed that it was fundamentally impossible for different races to live in peace with all their differences. Therefore the only way to achieve a lasting peace was for the Master Race to rule over all others. Their law, their world, their way. And one day, they believed, they would have it. In Ancient times they had been beaten back and forced to retreat - through duplicity and betrayal, of course, not due to any failing on their part. But one day they would rise up and take the world and reshape it according to their design.

The dark elves had long ago rejected the social order, setting themselves above nature, above the world. They believed that elves were superior to all other races. In fact, they believed themselves to be the only truly sentient race in creation. The other native races of Majaos were little more than cattle and as for humans, well, the dark elves considered them more like a disease, a cancer that had infected the world. The only thing that was arguably worse than a human was a half-elf. Half-breeds in general were an abomination. Still, with other races, such degeneracy was only to be expected. Elves really ought to know better.

If humans were a disease, then human-elf couplings were the equivalent of people deliberately infecting themselves. These individuals were obviously insane and under dark elf law, the elf concerned would be slaughtered along with the human partner and any half-breed offspring.

The dark elves had created their own religion, dedicated to `returning the world to its original, and intended state`. In other words, back to when elves were the only people, the only race on Majaos. Of course, in reality, even that far back in history, there were dragons, too, but when they were the rulers of this world, there were things that could be done about dragons.

This is what caused the forest elves to banish their dark elf cousins in legendary times. To act so violently against the natural evolution of Majaos was beyond shocking. This was not merely a different philosophy, but something much darker and far more dangerous. It was a desire for destruction on an unparalleled scale. Not only destruction of life and culture, but of nature. They wanted to reverse all the progress that had been made and once they had achieved their ideal world made in their own image, they intended to bring about status quo. Absolute, eternal stagnation. Even the wisest forest elves knew not what the result would be.

In the days of powerful chronomagi, the ones called prophets tried to use their Temporal magic to simulate possible futures for the world. One of great academic interest was the path the dark elves would choose. The mages saw many terrible things down that path, setting them down in the form of prophecy but what about after the dark elves achieved their goals? What did magic see then? Prophets were much feared in their day, but their answer was the most frightening thing ever to be heard from their lips.

“We see nothing.”

By this, they did not simply mean that they could not see what was there. Nor did they simply see a gap. What exactly they did mean, no-one ever understood - not even the prophets themselves. What they saw was real, tangible. They could almost touch it as one can touch the wind. But it was not wind. It was nothing. It existed, yet it was nothing. The paradox was never explained.

The dark elves clung still to the traditional elven belief that they were all merely following the path of destiny. They were just pebbles in a great river, but according to their forest cousins, dark elves had forfeited their right to exist in the world, precisely because they had taken themselves out of that great river. Still, they would not press for the destruction of the dark elves, for that, too, would be against the natural order of the world. So in the end, they approached their dark elf cousins in the same way as any other potential threat: they prepared and they waited, hoping that the battle would never come.

* * * * *

An elf whom Phaer had once known all too well, stepped within the circle of guards. It was T'lar, one of the most important members of the House of the Fountain. In theory, T'lar answered to the Sovereign, but in practice, he was more-or-less in sole charge of the day-to-day affairs of not only his House but the entire dark elf city.

“Well, cousin,” T'lar said. He spat the word `cousin` as a curse. “It is so...good to see you again.” The look on his face said otherwise.

If they were human, Phaer was sure T'lar would have struck him. But they were not human, they were elves and elves did not touch those without honour. Those such as Phaer. It wasn't a question of what Phaer had done to lose honour - he had been born without honour; he had been born, that was crime enough.

“When you left us the last time, you were warned what would happen if you ever returned,” said the tall, slender elf with the jet-black hair. He gestured to the guards. “Bring him.”

Dark elf guards routinely performed special cleansing rituals in order to ward off the effects of touching those who were dishonoured, as their roles often required them to do. It may not have the power to affect them in any spiritual way, but it still made their skin crawl and in special cases such as this, it would take several moons of bathing to entirely wash off the stench. Preferring to avoid such contact as much as possible, they pushed Phaer along with their spears.

“What warning is that?” Phaer demanded.

He knew it was his brash human side talking and that would only serve to condemn him further, but what did that matter? He was home, among his people, here to give them news of impending doom at the hands of an Ancient and powerful force. How much worse could things get? One way or another his death was assured and his elven side was prepared to accept that fate with good grace. His human side, however, was concerned with a single, crucial difference: He had to share the dread tidings of Niltsiar prior to his execution. These days of course, necromancy was, ironically, dead. Therefore there was no chance of giving his warning posthumously. Legend held that this had been dark elf practise in ages past: kill first, ask questions later. It was imperative that the dark elves be warned. His encounter with Z'rcona in the mine of Marina Fells proved that one of them was already involved, and if something affected one dark elf, it affected all dark elves. That was the way of things. Suddenly a chilling possibility occurred to the ranger: what if his people already knew about Niltsiar? What if they had already chosen sides in this conflict? In that case he was doubly dead...at least the fall of necromancy ensured he could only die once.

No, he told himself. He had to assume that they knew nothing of Niltsiar's return and stick to his original plan. Therefore he gave his human side free reign. It was not enough that he should say the words he had come to say; the dark elves had also to listen, and sometimes, in his experience, one needed to give the placid elves a good shake in order to get their attention.

“You never gave me any warning,” Phaer continued to argue, “and I did not `leave`. I escaped!”

“Correction: we permitted you to escape. Had we wished it we could have easily hunted you down in the forest.”

“But you didn't, did you?”

T'lar shrugged. “Even dark elves make mistakes occasionally.”

Phaer pounced. “Was that an angry retort you just made then? A weak human response from the great T'lar? Where is your elven calm and control?”

“I was merely pointing out that allowing your escape was a tactical error.”

“That's not what you said,” Phaer persisted.

“You read too much into words. You always did.”

“Surely, T'lar, you are just a pebble in the flow of the Great River of Destiny that is merely following the course that was intended from the beginning! Surely you're not suggesting you could have changed anything that was not meant to be changed?”

By now, Phaer had been taken into the elf city proper and he was causing quite a stir.

“Enough!” T'lar spat. “You will not cause an unpleasant scene in the sacred city.”

“Sacred?” Phaer scoffed. “You don't know the meaning of the word, any of you!”

“Be quiet!”

“Or what? You'll kill me?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

“Oh, you're just full of surprises aren't you?”

“You will desist!”

“No I will not!” His voice rang clear and true through the trees, carried to sharp elven ears for miles. He knew this place. He remembered it. The acoustics were ideal. “At least, not before I cause enough of a disturbance to make sure I have everyone's attention around here so you will be forced to hear what I have to say and you will never be able to later hush the whole thing up and pretend it never happened. This is too important for that!”

He stopped suddenly on the spot, belatedly realising he was lucky that the guards' reflexes were up to the task; otherwise he might have been run right through with a spear.

That would come later. Right now he had something to say.

“Listen to me, all of you! I come with a dire warning: the Ancient One, Niltsiar, has returned!”

* * * * *

Phaer was bundled into a cage, the door bolted from the outside and guards placed - at least two to watch the prisoner, continuously. Their bowstrings were taut; if the half-breed should attempt to escape, no matter how fast he was, he couldn't be fast enough to avoid being struck by at least one arrow. And it did not even have to be a clean hit in order to be fatal. Their arrow tip glistened, betraying the herbal poison they were laced with. The tiniest nick would carry with it enough poison to drop an ogre within five heartbeats. The guards had already wagered among themselves how many steps Phaer would take before the poison killed him - if, that is, he should try to escape...and they dearly hoped he would. Phaer, however, had no intention of doing anything so futile. His elven side had reasserted itself and he was surprisingly calm. Sooner or later - probably sooner - he would die. Whether by a poison arrow or a blade or the executioner's axe, what difference? Dead was dead, no matter the how.

The main part of the dark elf city was something like the forests of their cousins. Like, yet unlike. Elves traditionally lived among great tall trees, reaching ever higher to touch the sky and

though entrances to their community were few, the surrounding area was open and inviting. In the city of the dark elves, towering, overhanging cliffs formed a roof on their world, while the undergrowth around the perimeter at ground level was impenetrable unless one knew precisely where to look. Any random explorer - even another elf - would naturally skirt around the dark elf community without ever knowing it. Of all differences, however, one reigned supreme in its significance as a reflection of the philosophy of those who lived there.

The elves' ancestral home was shaped to fit within and compliment the natural beauty of the forest. Sometimes magician's woodshaper magic was used, often after years of deep consideration, to make a minor adjustment to some natural feature, but only in a way that gently enhanced nature and benefitted the tree. It was not uncommon for an entire elven House to build a new home to make way for a tree that was growing into their old place.

The dark elf city was perfection in form, where nothing so much as a single stone had been left to its natural shape, aspect or position. A cruel sense of order prevailed there and no forest elf could bear to venture any distance into this world of twisted, tortured nature. But this was the dark elf view of how the world should be: dark elf control, dark elf power, dark elf mastery.

Phaer had explained to his people, in detail, about the rise of the woman who had taken the name of the Ancient One and decimated the highest echelons of the Council of Magic - Gamaliel just barely clinging to life and then only by chance. Who else could have such power? He mentioned also that one of their people, Z'rcona, was already working for Niltsiar. The only reason she had not stopped to kill him, as she had long since vowed to do should they ever meet outside dark elf lands, was that Niltsiar had some kind of rule against pursuing personal vendettas. That much struck a concordant note with dark elf history.

Phaer did not mention Eilidh or his role in the rescue of Princess Mystaya of Shakaran. He was determined to protect them. Besides, it didn't really have anything to do with why he was here. Still, his people were not stupid. They knew he was holding something back and they had a number of ways of encouraging their captives to reveal that which they wished to keep hidden. Whether Phaer could hold out against the torture that they were no doubt planning, the ranger honestly didn't know. His only advantage was that he was well versed in dark elf interrogation techniques. He knew what to expect and so long as he picked his moment properly, he could force the dark elves to kill him. Then the information would be safe.

He could, in fact, have taken that course of action at that very moment. If he made a determined, futile effort to escape, one of those guards would have no choice but to put an arrow in him. He didn't suppose they could learn very much from his last few breaths. But the time had not yet come for that. He first wanted to be absolutely convinced that they believed him. That was why he had come here. It was his sincere hope that the shock of Niltsiar's return, coupled with the ancient history as they told it to each generation, would force them to change. They would have to work with other races to survive and maybe, just maybe, their unique view of history would provide vital information that was lost even to other elves. Phaer was sure Niltsiar had been forgotten by the elves of the forest, except perhaps as some vague, mythical figure from the Ancient world. One side of his nature told him it was a vain and foolish hope that his people would do the right thing; the other said he had to try...strangely, as T'lar returned, Phaer realised he wasn't sure which side was which.

“Now, let me give you one more chance to go through this from the beginning,” T'lar said, smoothly. “This time you will tell me everything, leaving out no detail, or it will become necessary to resort to more unpleasant methods.”

“I can't tell you anything more,” Phaer insisted. “All that matters is that you understand and accept the fact that Niltsiar is here in the world.”

“But that is precisely the point, is it not? Why should I accept your words, half breed? Why should we believe you?”

“Oh you should definitely believe him!” came a voice from the shadows. T'lar and the elven guards whirled around until they found themselves face to face with an uninvited guest who stepped into the midday sunshine and leaned casually against a tree. She appeared to be a human female with flaming red hair, a mere two decades of age, but Phaer knew better, for how could he fail to recognise the striking, alluring silhouette of Bernice Ardra, or Bunny as she called herself?

The fact that she was standing there, calm as you please, apparently unconcerned by the multitude of arrows pointing at her, gave the dark elves reason to pause. This woman was either very foolish or very dangerous and since T'lar could not comprehend anyone - even a human - being so stupid, he was ready to assume the latter.

Identifying T'lar as the elf in charge, Bunny said, “I should thank you...er...sorry, who are you exactly?”

T'lar drew himself up to his full height of over seven feet, and answered, “I am T'lar, Chief Aide to the Sovereign.”

Smiling sweetly, Bunny expertly pierced his ego, with the admission, “I'm sorry, I'm afraid I have absolutely no idea what that means. It does sound awfully impressive, though,” she added in a patronising tone.

“The Sovereign, madam, is our ruler and I see to it that his wishes are carried out.”

“Oh I see, kind of like a king's secretary, then.”

Phaer had to stop himself from applauding. Bunny was insulting the second most powerful figure in the entire dark elf communion, but doing it with such an air of innocence and grace that left the elves looking at each other, confused and unsure what to do.

She continued, “Well, I have no fancy title to offer.” Again the veiled insult, dismissing dark elf authority as meaningless and irrelevant in her eyes. To dark elf thinking, that could only mean that she worked for someone of great importance. Someone very powerful. While they were still so unsure about who this woman before them was, they were fearful of the consequences that might result from any precipitous action.

“I am nothing more or less than an agent.”

“An agent of whom, madam?”

Phaer was sure T'lar was going to choke if he had to address a mere human as `madam` one more time.

Bunny blinked as if the answer were so obvious, it never occurred to her that anyone would ask the question. "Why, an agent of Niltsiar, of course."

T'lar and the guards took a few unconscious steps backward, and a number of dark elf citizens who had been making to pass by the area suddenly remembered they had pressing business back the way they had come.

"Anyway, as I was saying, I should thank you for capturing my target for me."

"Your target?"

Again the surprised blink and an expression that seemed to say, silently: Am I dealing with children here that I have to explain every little thing to them?

"The half-elf you have caged up - Phaer - of the House of the Fountain, I believe? I've been tracking him for some time. Quite tricky to catch, you elves, especially in these tree-bound areas. Anyway, if you could just hand him over. I'll be on my way."

T'lar was suspicious, but Bunny's manner continued to stay his hand. "Why would the great Niltsiar entrust a mere human to such a task and, come to that, how can I be sure you really are an agent?"

"Actually," Bunny replied, "those two questions have the same answer. You see..." Her face abruptly changed with a roar that sent the elves back a few more steps. "...I'm not human," she finished, although by now that was quite obvious.

"A vampire!" T'lar squeaked, making a show of clearing his throat to try to regain control of his voice. Phaer could see it was futile: T'lar had lost control of everything the instant Bunny appeared.

Bunny held up a finger for emphasis. "A vampire who is standing here in the forest around midday in glorious direct sunshine. Quite pleasant, actually." She stretched luxuriously in the heat. "I'm hoping to get a decent tan. Now I ask you: who else but Niltsiar would have the power to grant me such resistance to sunlight and fire?" She fixed the guards with a dangerous glare. "Wooden stakes and poisoned arrows don't work too well, either," she growled.

That, of course, was a lie, but since her first claim was obviously true, the elves were not about to take a chance on the others. At that moment, with little more than words, Bernice Ardra was almost invincible.

"What does your Mistress want with him?" T'lar asked.

Bunny shrugged. "I am not privy to the full extent of Niltsiar's plans. As an agent, she simply tells me to do a thing and I do it. Still, I would imagine that she will have questions to ask him and, one way or another, he will give her the answers. With the proper training, I am sure he will soon be begging to tell my Mistress everything he knows."

“Why don't you leave him here, then,” T'lar suggested, “and let us interrogate him? We will find the answers Her Divine Excellency seeks and thereby prove our loyalty to her cause.”

Phaer's heart sank at that: his people had just picked sides and they had chosen as their ancestors had. Niltsiar would once more have the support of the dark elves. He supposed that placed him on the side of those who would fight against them. What difference that would make, he couldn't imagine - he was dead either way. He could end it all right now, he realised once more. Ironically, suicide would probably gain him a small measure of honour in the eyes of his people, which he could never have gained in life. Were he an elf, he was almost certain he would do it, but being half human gave him a different perspective. He had done his best to help his people, given them a chance - there was honour in that, surely. A very human concept that: that one could make one's own honour, shape one's own destiny. OK, so he was the walking dead. That meant he had nothing to lose.

Besides, Bunny had gone to a lot of trouble to try and get him out of here; it would be a shame to spoil it for her.

“Those are not my orders,” Bunny answered, simply, restoring her human looks. “You can show your loyalty by fulfilling her wishes. I will personally bring your assistance to her attention; explain to her how you handed over the captive quickly and easily without fuss or complaint.”

Phaer was growing more and more impressed with Bunny's skills. She had taken the dark elves' declared loyalty to Niltsiar and manipulated it into a noose, which she had deftly slipped around their collective necks.

T'lar visibly struggled with the decision, which he was authorised to make without consulting the Sovereign, but he really had no choice at all. From the Sovereign Aide's perspective, if she was lying and he released Phaer, the worst that could happen was that they let one insignificant individual escape their justice and T'lar would look slightly foolish. He had done foolish things in the past and survived. However, if she was telling the truth and he refused to hand Phaer over, Niltsiar might well decide to bring the entire forest down around them. No, he dared not risk defying an agent of Niltsiar. There was nothing to lose and everything to gain by co-operating.

He inclined his head, respectfully. “Of course, the half breed is yours. Please, take him away with our compliments to Her Divine Excellency. Is there anything more we can do to help?”

“Just escort us out of your main city and I can take care of the rest until I can present him to my Mistress.”

T'lar motioned to his guards who did as they were instructed. Phaer was released from his cage into Bunny's custody. The pair walked away from the dark elf city and the guards followed close behind. A short distance into the forest, Bunny stopped, forcing Phaer to do the same.

“We will be leaving now,” she declared imperiously. “I suggest you stand back a little way - I'm not sure you would like to experience the effect of the magic up close.”

T'lar and the guards pulled back and asked, “Is this far enough?”

Bunny nodded, “Should be. Farewell.”

With a quick gesture of her hand, there was a brilliant flash of light, accompanied by a sound like a clap of thunder and a great deal of smoke. When the smoke faded, the half breed and the vampire were both gone.

Chapter 9

Hannah noticed that Rochelle was already at her specially prepared guest place at the feast table, so the newly promoted Knight joined her. It was unusual, but not unheard of, for non-humans to be present at a celebratory feast in the Knights' barracks.

Their other companion, Brash, had declined the invitation to be present, saying, "Formal dinners just don't agree with me. Dear gods, sitting still for any reason doesn't agree with me!"

He decided he would be much more comfortable in the dragon stables with the silvers. Silver and bronze dragons usually got along very well, both being quite sociable creatures. They put on none of the aloof airs one often associated with golds, were better tempered than brass dragons and all coppers cared about was hoarding treasure in their cold, remote hideaways. The forest habitats of silvers naturally intersected with great bodies of water, which were home to their bronze cousins. Bronzes loved to swim the waters just as silvers loved the skies. Most of them agreed that the two exercises were more-or-less the same thing, really. Consequently, meetings between the two species were very common and so the silver mounts of the Paladins - the females especially - would indeed enjoy a visit from a dashing young bronze buck.

Hannah sat beside her gnomish friend. "Greetings, friend Rochelle," she offered, "How farest ye?"

"Not good. I'm a druid without magic and while I acknowledge that my magical pursuits have led me into trouble in the past, this time I really can't understand what I did wrong." She went on to tell Hannah her story, but when she had finished, the Knight seemed to have little to offer.

"I am afraid, my friend, that thy troubles art this time beyond my ability to counsel thee. Magic is, methinks, a subject of which I am poorly qualified to speak."

"But that's just it," Rochelle persisted. "I'm not sure this has anything much to do with magic...it's more politics than anything else."

"Political intrigue is mayhap the one subject in this world about which I understand less than magic."

"Then maybe you need to talk to someone who's an expert in both," came a slightly quavering male voice behind them.

They turned to see the daft old mage, Artisho, trailed by several Knights who seemed to be trying to get him to leave without appearing dishonourable and disrespectful in their treatment of an elder. The way Artisho paid them such little attention, beyond the tiniest frown of irritation, made the Knights look like nothing more than flies buzzing around the old man's head. A burly Knight Commander approached the scene and confronted Artisho.

"I am sorry, Old One, but thou art not allowed in here."

For a moment, the old mage seemed to take on a new bearing. All hint of mist and fog was gone from his eyes, his walk lost its hesitancy and perhaps he stood a little taller.

"Not allowed?" he said, indignantly. "Don't be absurd, young man. I'm allowed everywhere!"

Suddenly the moment was gone and Artisho was once again just a rather scatter-brained old man. Indeed, Rochelle was not sure if she hadn't imagined the change in the first place.

"Artisho, sir," Hannah ventured, reaching out to offer a handshake or perhaps a guiding hand to the exit. "Methinks that the noble commander is just a little confused..."

"Never mind," Artisho replied, patting her hand like an affectionate grandfather, "I'm sure I'll have him completely bewildered by the time I'm finished. Now," Artisho continued, using his staff to tap the Knight Commander on the head as if knocking on a door. He spoke in a loud, deliberate tone one might use when speaking to someone who is a little deaf or a little stupid.

"Find Me A Seat, Will You? There's A Good Chap!"

The commander gestured toward a place next to Rochelle, and was startled to discover he was suddenly holding Artisho's hat and staff.

The old man rolled his eyes. "Find somewhere safe for those, would you?" the mage asked. "Dear Patrelaux, do I have to tell you everything?"

"Ah, er, yes sir, I mean, no sir. Please do sit thyself beside our other, er, special guest and, er, enjoy thy stay. I--"

Artisho turned away to cut off any further response that might have been forthcoming and the high-ranking Knight knew he'd been dismissed, so he left.

"It's those helms, I'm sure of it," Artisho said, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "Their heads can't stand the pressure and their brains get squished."

Rochelle gasped, "Why that's my theory, too!"

Artisho's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Your theory? How can it be your theory? I had it first! It's mine! Who said you could claim it?"

"Oh, well, no-one I suppose, I just didn't realise...maybe we could sort of share the theory?"

"Share it? Hmmm, well yes, that sounds fair enough. After all, they do say `a theory shared is a theory doubled`."

"What a fascinating concept! Who says that?"

"I did, just now, weren't you listening?"

"I--"

"Never mind that," he dismissed patting her hand as he had Hannah's a moment earlier. "What's this about political intrigue, eh?" Artisho wondered. Then his eyes widened in recognition. "Say, don't I know you two from somewhere?"

"Indeed yes," Hannah said, dropping her voice low, remembering the much needed secrecy. "Thou didst assist us in a certain quest."

“But I'm not wearing a vest!” he protested.

“Not vest, Old One - quest. In Marina Fells mine.”

“There you go again! You young people are all alike! How can you possibly claim Marina Fells is yours? Do you own it now? Do you have official documents to prove it? Marina Fells mine, indeed. Humph! Besides, Marina Fells is east not west.”

Rochelle decided it was best to change the subject, and told Artisho what had happened at Great Library.

“It makes no sense,” she concluded. “That Catalyst makes a bit of noise and I'm surrounded in a heartbeat. I've got Merlana the White Wizardess, at least one Enforcer with a powerful Catalyst by his side, absolutely everybody's looking at me and trying to make it seem like they're not. I get zapped by Nullmagic and then Master Gamaliel shows up. And thank goodness he did! Who knows how much further things would have gone otherwise? Under Enforcer interrogation I don't flatter myself that I would hold out for very long. I would have told them everything and put Eilidh in danger. Oh, she should never have told us! But then how could I help with research if I didn't know what I was looking for?” The druid hung her head.

“And do you?” Artisho prompted.

When Rochelle glanced up, just for a split second, she thought she saw clarity in those old eyes, but it was gone before she could blink. “No, not really. But I do know it has to be magic quite unlike what we know today. The Ancients are said to have been capable of so much that we've lost, so it makes sense to search for their magic. `She` must have figured it out somehow, that's the only way...” she glanced around at the array of Knights at the dining tables, “...the only way `the enemy` could do what she's shown she's capable of. But what did I do to make Merlana so...scared? That's what she was reacting with, you know: fear. What threat did I represent?”

“I think you've already answered that.”

Rochelle nodded thoughtfully. “I was asking questions - seeking knowledge, truth.”

“Some people would say that's the most threatening thing a person can do.”

“Merlana is asking the same questions!” Rochelle said abruptly. “And she wants to keep anything she learns to herself.”

“Politics indeed,” Hannah mused. “But why? Did I mishear when Eilidh told of the co-operation between all three factions of magic?”

“Oh, I'm sure the three leaders were serious, up to a point. Think of it like this, Hannah: Your leaders have declared a truce with the Dark Knights. There is a spirit of co-operation between you that is real and genuine - remember Sir Quentin Marr?”

“Indeed I do, but I do not see--”

“So where are they?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said: ‘Where are they?’ Looking around, aside from myself and Mr Artisho,” the old man had now fallen asleep and was beginning to snore, “I see nothing but golden armour. No black, only gold. If you are co-operating, why aren't they wandering around freely and joining in the promotion celebrations? Congratulations, by the way.”

“Oh, thank you. Well, Dark Knights hath visited here - escorted, obviously. We must needs maintain our security, protect our own interests.”

“And you say you don't know anything about politics!” Rochelle gibed. “Merlana has her own interests: interests of gaining power. Oh, I'm sure she would give it a moral dimension, something about wanting only to bring Light and Goodness to one and all, but it amounts to the same thing: she wants power. The way things are, Merlana can never lead the Council of Magic. Not ever. She's a human among elves. Even Master Gamaliel who is only half-elven, will appear to have aged little more than ten years, by human standards, by the time Merlana has died of old age. Then there's Drizdar. He outranks Merlana so even if, perish the thought, something were to happen to Gamaliel in her lifetime, she still couldn't ascend to power.”

“Is there not some way for her to challenge that?” Hannah asked.

“Certainly, but if it came down to a duel between Drizdar and Merlana, I know where I'd put my money. The White Wizardess would no doubt find the contest a fatal mistake. Merlana's only hope is to find a way to confront and stop Niltsiar. Then she would be hailed a hero and would be leader of the Council before the cheers faded.”

“Methinks, from what thou hast told me, that Drizdar wouldst not be pleased at such an outcome.”

“Actually, he may not be too bothered. He's an elf with centuries of time and patience on his side. Suppose Merlana ruled for fifty years and then retired. What's fifty years to an elf? I would have thought he would be rather more irritated about Gamaliel heading the Council, yet he stepped aside for him, which is most uncharacteristic of a dark warlock. I'm sure he has his reasons, though. Perhaps he thinks his role as Supreme War Master is where the true power lies during war time.”

Council rules prohibited the Prime Magus from holding any other top post, so Drizdar could be either Prime Magus or War Master, but not both.

“Gamaliel's lifespan could cause a significant delay in Drizdar's plans for power, but even if Gamaliel ruled until he retired,” Rochelle continued, “Drizdar would still be in the prime of life for elf when he naturally ascended to Prime Magus. But he must fear Niltsiar. She's his only true threat. She could ruin everything for him - if she let him live. So I wouldn't be surprised if he's got something going on behind the scenes.”

“Thinkest thou we shouldst warn the Prime Magus?”

“Come on Hannah, Master Gamaliel's not stupid. If I've just figured out that his Light and Dark counterparts are up to something behind his back, he probably thought of it before they did. He just has to keep an eye on them and be there the moment they find...anything...”

“What is it?” Hannah asked, apparently loud enough to wake a startled, spluttering Artisho from his slumber.

“Won't do it! Too risky!” The old man called out, still half-dreaming. “It's your own fault they think you're dead!--Oh dear, where am I?” He wondered, slowly regaining his wits. His sudden movement caused his wizard's hat to fall over his eyes.

“Struck blind by the gods,” he whispered in awe.

“Here, let me help,” Rochelle offered, and helpfully took his hat away.

“No, it's no good, the gods have made their will known.”

“Perhaps if you opened your eyes?”

“Hmmm?” He did as the gnome suggested and found his vision had been restored. “Thank the gods!”

“Actually, it was just me.”

“You healed me?”

“Well, I suppose in a way, I mean, I am a druid, but--”

“A druid? How can that be? You've got no magic!”

“Yes, that's a bit of a sore point, you see--”

“Aha! Then you can't be a druid - a druid wouldn't have a sore point. Oh no, if you were a druid you would be able to heal yourself. You can't fool me, girl!”

“Yes I'm sure that's...hang on, didn't you give your hat to that Knight Commander when you came in?”

“That was my other hat.”

“Oh.”

“So have you figured out the answer yet, girl?” Artisho asked Rochelle.

“The answer to what?”

“To the only question that really matters.”

“Which is?”

“Where?” The old man looked around frantically.

“Excuse me?”

“You said there were witches.”

Rochelle had by now decided it was easiest to humour the old man. "My mistake - trick of the light. You were saying about a question?"

"Was I? How exciting! What was the question?"

"I was hoping you might know."

"I know many questions, which one would you like?"

"The only question that really matters?" The Druidess suggested.

"Oh that question. Yes, that is a good one." He beckoned Rochelle and Hannah close and whispered. "Do you think Merlana's found anything yet?"

Rochelle leaned back, eyes wide with excitement. "You're right," she agreed. "That is the only question that really matters."

"Dost thou have an answer, friend druid?" Hannah asked. "For I must confess it is most assuredly beyond my own cognitive powers."

"No," Rochelle answered, emphatically. "That is: No, she hasn't found anything," she clarified.

"How canst thou be so sure?"

"Because she's looking in the wrong place."

"How knowest thou this to be so?"

"Well, think about it," she encouraged her friend. "Niltsiar spent a few years as White Secondmage on the Council here in Merlyon. In that capacity, she would have been in a position to systematically remove any library texts that she considered a potential threat. Even more compelling is the thought that with all the great, ambitious archmages in known history, if power like Niltsiar's were documented in the library, somebody would have found it. Now, we know it's possible to learn at least some of her tricks - remember Vorden?"

Vorden was the sorcerer who had kidnapped Princess Mystaya of Shakaran. It seemed as if on his way to sealing himself in the Marina Fells mine, he had wiped out an entire village using a combination of sorcerer, wizard and warlock magic. That was impossible; impossible and forbidden. Vorden had been an agent of Niltsiar until he indulged in his own personal vendetta against Prince Garald. That, apparently, was strictly against Niltsiar's rules and it was clear that she did not take kindly to disobedience. Rochelle thought she could understand why - the quest to rescue the princess had brought them their first real clues about Niltsiar and presented the possibility that a mage might learn to wield powers like hers and perhaps, in that way, stop her. Yes, Rochelle could see how personal vendettas by Niltsiar's agents could harm her cause, whatever that might be.

"His new abilities aside," Rochelle continued, "Vorden didn't seem to be exceptionally skilled or especially clever, so if a past Head of Council had learned such powers, the present Head of Council - Master Gamaliel - would know about it."

“Perhaps there are no books to be found?” Hannah suggested.

“Then how did the Ancients learn?” Rochelle challenged her. “There are books, but no-one has found them because they are looking in the wrong place.” She stood up, spurred into action. “I have to go back there now, tonight! There's no time to waste!”

“But whitherest thou away?”

“Excuse me?” The gnome's understanding of archaic language ended some way short of that question.

“That means, Where are you going?” Artisho translated, helpfully.

“Oh, well, I'm going to the library, of course.”

“But didst thou not just conclude that Mistress Merlana is searching in the wrong place?”

“I meant the wrong place within the library.”

“But how canst thou be sure no third party hath already searched in thy chosen location?”

“Because the place I'm looking is the Tenth Tower.”

“But the Tenth Tower doth not exist.”

“Exactly!” Rochelle exclaimed, enthusiastically. “That's how I know nobody has been there - at least not in a very long time. Look, the information I'm looking for is impossible and forbidden, right?”

“So it hath been said, but I doth fail to see--”

“--Where better to hide `impossible and forbidden` than a place that doesn't exist?”

The Knight lady decided to end this line of conversation in hopes that her head would stop spinning. In the end, she simply said, “Thou must act as thou thinkest best. As I hath said, I knowest nothing about magic. I shall await thy return here and simply wish thee luck.”

“Thanks.”

With that, Rochelle turned to leave, but Artisho called out, “Wait just a minute, would you? These old bones don't move quite as fast as they used to.”

“You're coming with me?”

“Of course, I told you I'm an expert in both magic and politics.”

Rochelle grinned. She liked him. He made a lot of sense...in an odd sort of way. “Then I'd say you're an ideal companion, sir.”

“Good,” he replied with a wink, “because I'm about as welcome here as a prostitute in a temple!”

Rochelle quickly decided that the image of Artisho as a sex worker was not one she needed running around in her head and she did her best to stifle it.

The pair had just reached the doorway, when Rochelle gasped. “Artisho, I just realised: I don't think we should have been discussing all this so openly in front of all these people. I mean, I know they're honourable Knights but still...”

“Oh don't worry, Rochelle. None of them heard a thing.”

As she looked around the hall, the gnome at first thought all the Knights were stuck in some kind of paralysis, because none of them were moving or making a sound. On further examination, however, she noticed that the steam rising from the great roasted boar hung solidly in the air like thin strands of ice. Jugs of ale were perpetually pouring frozen wine into cups, and quite comically, a young squire had just tripped over a chair leg, leaving him, along with his previously food-laden board, halfway through the act of sprawling headlong onto the floor. The Knights around him, were caught in the beginnings of now-silent laughter at the boy's expense.

“How--?” Rochelle gasped, though she realised she already knew the answer.

Artisho winked. “A little bit of Temporal magic.”

“More than a little!” Rochelle argued. “Nobody knows how to do that level of chromomagic anymore! Not for a couple of hundred years, not since the Tech Wars. Where-- When-- How--” She really didn't know which question to ask first.

“Shush a moment, would you?” Artisho interrupted. “Let me concentrate while I cancel the spell, then if you ask me again outside I'll give you all the answers.”

Satisfied, Rochelle watched in silence as the room came slowly back to life. The steam rose from the roasted meat, ale was poured out in full, generous measure and the young squire was soon picking himself up off the floor, red-faced at the humiliation of his superiors' taunts.

When Rochelle stepped through the doorway with the old man, however, the whole incident seemed to vanish completely from her mind, along with all her questions.

“I'm sure I had something to ask you,” she lamented, “but I can't for the life of me think what it was.”

“Never mind,” Artisho reassured her. “I'm sure it will come to back you later...if it's important.”

Chapter 10

Callie groaned as she regained consciousness. Her vision was blurry and while she didn't exactly hurt, she did feel very strange. Almost numb, really.

Maybe this was what it felt like in Paradise, she pondered. Funny how she didn't seem able to move, but then she probably just needed to figure out how to do it. Maybe it was like learning to fly - all wyrms were born with the instinct of flight, but if a dragon attempted flight before they were ready, the dragon would most likely only fly straight down, with potentially serious consequences.

That's probably it, she decided. It must just take a little time to get used to Paradise.

Her Father's Light and Love probably prevented her from moving until it was time to teach her to fly here. That was no problem. After all, time meant little to a dragon on Majaos and surely even less in Paradise.

As she lay there, she began to wonder what had happened to Loric. Had he made it to the Elder Dragon of Fire? In fact, if time was meaningless here, did that mean his quest had already been completed? Or perhaps it had not yet begun. Those thoughts made her head spin so she decided to focus on what, to her at least, was the present. As if by force of her will, her vision began to clear. The fog did not lift, exactly, but it had thinned somewhat, and she did not like what she was seeing.

Look out! Callie screamed in her mind, as an undead creature's sword strike whistled past Loric's right ear. Loric reacted, knocking the skeletal warrior on his left a few paces backwards while he chopped a fleshy creature in two with his Soul Crusher blade. But that gave his enemies the time they needed to close in on him. If he could have changed to his dragon form, he could have bathed them all in his corrosive acid breath, but he was bound to his human shape. Callie wondered vaguely how she knew that. Maybe knowledge like that simply came to one in Paradise. She wished she could give him some assistance with her Cleric's powers, but unfortunately there was nothing she could do; she was dead.

Loric killed one chaos creature and fatally wounded another; a skeletal warrior shattered - the fragments quivered on the ground and then lay still. Loric was grunting and sweating with the immense effort as he searched within himself. He didn't know exactly what it was he was searching for, but he knew he hadn't found it yet and he was rapidly running out of time. Callie could hardly bear to watch.

He was completely encircled now and he knew he had no chance. His sword felled two more but he had no answer for the dozen or so that remained. Their weapons pierced his armour and he dropped to the ground in pain. Mercifully, the pain didn't last long. Then he was dead.

Callie did not even have time for grief before the most peculiar dragon she had ever seen appeared within her limited field of vision. Quite apart from being quite the largest dragon she had ever seen - even bigger than the muscular Loric - his scales were a peculiar blend of crimson red, metallic gold and jewelled ruby. Red was more prominent on head and tail, his wings were predominantly golden and his back was mainly jewelled, but it wasn't a patchwork; rather it was a smooth transition of colour and texture throughout his body, each shade blending into the next. Quite handsome, but very odd...and definitely not Father Patrelaux.

“Ah, Silver One,” rumbled the dragon in a voice like distant thunder. “Back in the land of the living, then. Which is more than can be said for my student over there.” With a sigh, he invoked his magic and all the enemy creatures - living and dead - disappeared. Then Loric stood up with a groan, his injuries mostly healed, though he was clearly still sore and stiff.

Callie tried hard to make her voice work. “L-Loring? I mean, Livrik? I mean,” she paused, forcing herself to stop trying to ask two questions at once. “Land of the living? I'm not dead?”

The strange dragon laughed a deep belly laugh. Callie couldn't help but notice that it seemed an uncomfortable, forced laugh. “Not quite, my dear,” he said. “Almost.”

“Who are you?” asked the silver. “And what have you done to Loric?”

“Hmm? You don't remember?” the other wondered. “Ah, well,” he mumbled to himself, and Callie struggled to make out all the words. “Of course...in and out of consciousness...shouldn't have moved...no choice...” Snapping himself out of it, he answered the question. “Many names I could give you, but none of them are really mine. If you must have something to call me, then Fire will suffice, but I am nothing more or less than the Elder Dragon your friend has sought. Not many find me, hmm? Fewer still pass the test.”

The dragon explained that Callie had found a way to cheat the shield magic. The way she had clung to Loric as he passed through, fooled the magic in to admitting them both as if they were, in fact, a single dragon.

“You are the first to figure that one out, actually,” he said with a chuckle.

“Actually, I didn't figure it out at all. I only expected Loric to come here, while I passed straight through to be...devoured...by that monstrosity out there.”

“Yes, I know of what you speak. It troubles me greatly, yes? But I can do nothing to interfere. Your dark-scaled companion has already asked. One of the first things he said, actually, second only to your welfare. If he can achieve his ambitions, perhaps he will find a way himself. Hmm, yes, he just might. Surely a master of the Penta Drauka is sorely needed in these troubled times.

“As for Loric, why, I'm giving him what he came here for - the first step of the Penta Drauka, yes? It's not something I just hand out like a bag of sweetmeats you know! It requires dedication and training to prove his worthiness. Don't worry, though, none of what you see is real. At least, it's real enough to hurt, real enough to feel like a real battle - it wouldn't be much of a test otherwise, hmm? But all of my tests are non-lethal and all physical damage reversible.”

Callie thought he might have added `usually` under his breath, but she was reasonably sure she'd imagined it.

“What about me?”

“What about you?”

“Well, I mean, I realise I'm not exactly supposed to be here to see your secrets, but I promise to behave.”

“Oh, please don't worry about that, hmm? It's not strictly protocol, you understand, but the outward manifestations of what I teach are magnificently irrelevant. Oh yes, nothing you see here will give away ancient dragon secrets.”

“Good, I'm glad,” she replied. She was frankly getting a little peeved now, but was trying hard to keep a civil tongue. “So then,” she prompted, “if you wouldn't mind...?”

“I'm sorry, my dear, I'm afraid I'm not with you.”

This was ridiculous. “The magic or whatever it is you're using to keep me from moving. I'd really like it if you could release me now!”

The Elder dragon turned his head away quickly - too quickly for Callie's liking. Something here was wrong...something was very, very wrong.

“What is it?” she demanded. “Why won't you release me?”

“Ah, but it's not a question of releasing you, I'm afraid. Believe me, if it were as simple as that...”

Panic rising, she emitted a furious female dragon screech. “What's wrong?”

“Well, you see—ah--”

“Tell me!”

“Look, just calm down, hmm? Maybe, you should give it a little more time? Until you're a bit stronger, yes? I'm not sure, in your condition--”

“Tell me NOW!” Callie screamed.

“ALRIGHT!” he roared. “Alright,” he repeated more softly. “There is no magic of my making or any other keeping you motionless, yes? I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but you have to realise you—well, you must have accelerated at an incredible rate, and then to grab another dragon half again your size and try to slip through a magical shield. Hmmm... There was no way even a silver could possibly control her flight. Frankly, I doubt even my colleague the Elder of Air would attempt such a thing. You hit the ground at somewhere close to full speed, Loric's weight adding to your momentum. It was most unfortunate after such an act of bravery...”

“What are you saying? I hit the ground! So what?”

“If you'd snapped your backbone just two vertebrae further down, yes? You would have been killed instantly. As it is, you live. Just. I really am terribly sorry, my dear, but nothing I am doing is preventing you from moving...you just...can't move.”

Paralysed. For a long moment, Callie's mind couldn't grasp the concept. Her confusion gave way to disbelief. She could not, would not accept it. The Elder was wrong. He had to be wrong. She just needed to rest a while and --and the feeling would come back. She --she just needed time, that's all. Yes, time, that would sort it out. A paralysed dragon? Ha! Who had ever heard of such a thing?

At last the truth hit her, painfully hard, although she technically couldn't feel pain or anything else for that matter. What kind of life could a paralysed dragon ever have? At that moment, despair washed over her like a tidal wave and she wished nothing more than to die.

* * * * *

Loric was genuinely baffled. He had done everything that had been asked of him, fought many simulated battles, in both human and dragon form, yet he was no closer to achieving the first part of the Penta Drauka.

“Just tell me what I'm supposed to do!” he demanded of the Elder Dragon, currently in human form.

“Hmmm, yes, I know it's frustrating,” the Elder sympathised, “but as I keep telling you, the first part of the Penta Drauka is not something one can simply choose to do, or even be trained to do, come to that.”

“Then what are all these battles if not training?”

“They are stimuli, yes? Intended to provide the spark, if you will. But you must light the fire for yourself. Sorry, dear boy. I'm doing everything I can think of. It will happen when it happens, or it won't happen at all. That's all there is to it.”

Failure was not a concept that had ever occurred to the obsidian dragon before. “How long do I stay before it's clear that I won't succeed?” he asked. “There are other important things I should be doing.”

“That, too, is entirely up to you, my boy. But mark me well: if you should leave, you can never return. The Penta Drauka is achieved at the first attempt or it is achieved not at all. Those are the rules, hmmm?”

Loric understood, but he also knew he couldn't stay much longer. Changing the subject, he asked after Callie.

The silver dragon had grown very quiet and introverted, sinking further and further into a deep, dark depression. If he were to fail in his ambitions, Loric realised, then her sacrifice would be in vain, but he could just about accept that if only could help her.

“You're certain there is nothing we can do?”

“There is nothing I can do, yes?” the Elder said, emphasising the pronoun. “My skills are not in the area of healing.”

Loric's ears pricked up at that. “Meaning that there's something more I could do myself or there's someone else who could help her?”

“Yes,” answered the Elder, cryptically.

“Which? Me or someone else?”

“Yes,” the Elder repeated.

Word games. Loric hated word games. He hated them even more when someone's life was at stake, someone he cared about. Anger bubbled up inside him.

“Now then, my boy,” the Elder continued, “are you going to try again or are you going to quit now, hmmm?”

“Tell me how to help Callie,” Loric growled, smouldering.

“Come on, boy, forget about her, we have more important things to do. Well I do at any rate, your end is up to you.”

“Tell me now, Elder, or I'm going to bury you in this sand right up to your neck until you do,” Loric warned in a dangerous tone.

“Hey now, don't do anything stupid, hmmm? You wouldn't want to start trying my patience. Let us not forget that I am the master and you the lowly apprentice, yes? An apprentice who can't even get the first part of the Penta Drauka right. It's quite laughable, really, truth be told. Oh I've tried to be nice up until now, but quite frankly your attitude leaves much to be desired. Why--”

The Elder never completed his sentence before Loric was at him, attacking with a ferocity the Elder had rarely known before. The blade called `Soul Crusher` was a very fine weapon, perfectly balanced in Loric's hand. Loric roared as his blade flashed in the sunlight, the Elder keeping him at bay but not easily. The lad's technique was impressive, to be sure, considered the Elder, but he was not really interested in technique. That would be irrelevant to Loric in his natural dragon form and he could get swordsmanship training anywhere, but this was the only place he could have his inner fire awakened.

Loric felt a strange warmth spreading throughout his body from the core of his being, his very soul. The intensity grew until the air around him seemed to glow white hot. Yet there was no pain. No, he corrected himself, there was pain in there somewhere, but it was masked by an incredible euphoria. Again he corrected himself: the pain was not masked, it was an integral part of what he was feeling. Pain and pleasure co-existed so that it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. His was a righteous rage; he was that rage and the rage was him. Soul Crusher ceased to be a weapon at all, and became instead an extension of his arm, his will.

The Elder gave ground, grudgingly at first, then at an increasing rate, which inspired Loric to further feral ferocity. His blade was a blur until the Elder could withstand the onslaught no longer. His sword arm was knocked aside, and then Loric reversed the thrust, sinking the sharp length of enchanted metal into soft Elder Dragon flesh. An instant later, it was buried right up to the hilt as Loric let out a roar of triumph.

The flame within died down as he caught his breath, but did not extinguish completely. He instinctively knew it never would. The Fire Rage was a part of him now and would aid him in future battles. That was what he had come here to learn. At last he understood.

“Ah yes, very well done, my boy,” came the voice of the Elder Dragon, materialising a short way behind him in dragon form. With a negligent flick of a great head, the illusion shattered and the apparently dead body shimmered out of existence. “Congratulations, you have passed the first test of the Penta Drauka. I knew you could do it, hmmm? You just needed some incentive. Concern for your friend was the catalyst, with the added spark of my apparent obstruction.”

Loric relaxed, but not completely - his sword stayed out and his fire rage simmered beneath the surface. "Does that mean you'll tell me how to help Callie now?" He asked.

"As I said before, healing is not one of my skills. That is the domain of another Elder."

"So the Penta Drauka is itself the key?"

"You may interpret my words that way, if you wish," was the Elder's only reply. "I cannot interfere with the natural course of events. Sorry, my boy, but that's way it is."

Loric was beginning to read between the lines better now, and that understanding caused him to stay his hand and sheath his sword. "If I go, what about Callie? I can't just leave her here."

"You must, if you wish to help her. She will be safe enough here. Go. Pursue what you set out to do, and perhaps you will find the healing you seek."

"What about that great lizard out there? Am I going to have to fight my way past the thing?" He would never admit it, even to himself, but deep down he knew he wasn't ready for that even with his Fire Rage burning.

"Hmmm, that's a good point; I had forgotten that small detail."

The Elder Dragon considered the problem for a moment then offered to use his magic to create the illusion of invisibility for Loric. "Remember it is only an illusion, you are not invisible in any real sense, hmmm?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Ah, quite a bit!" He insisted. "Simply put, yes? The magic is not really cast upon you, but on the space that surrounds you. It creates the possibility that anyone who is not specifically looking for you will not see you. One must be very careful when using magic around that creature. If it should see through the illusion, hmmm, I dread to consider the consequences. This is as far as I will go, yes?"

Loric accepted that and wasted no time in shifting to his dragon form, springing into the air with powerful legs, unfurling his wings and climbing high into the sky. If the creature did see through the magic, he wanted to have plenty of speed and altitude to work with. That was his only advantage.

He slipped through the barrier like it wasn't there, the landscape change being his only clue. There was no sign of the great lizard, so he headed on a course that should take him to the Elder Dragon of Air. According to the information he had, this Elder was not rooted in a single place, but actively moved around Mythallen. Still he was confident that he would be able to find them. Completion of each successive Penta Drauka skill would give him the means to find the next Elder Dragon in the sequence. He didn't know precisely how, but muscles straining, he flew on, trusting in the magic.

Chapter 11

Temporarily blinded, Phaer had to rely on his elven instincts to land on his feet. He opened his mouth to object to the lack of warning, only to have a hand firmly clamped over it.

“Sssshhhh,” came Bunny’s voice in a whisper. “I don't want to risk any noises until we move away a bit.”

Phaer indicated his intention to co-operate with a nod.

It didn't take long for the half-elf's eyes to recover and grow accustomed to his dark surroundings. There wasn't much to see, except to observe that they were underground, in some kind of tunnel network. Judging by the perfectly smooth walls and geometric circular cross section, they had obviously been constructed by magic: dark elf magic, back when they still had it - long, long ago. Something nagged at the edges of Phaer's mind, but couldn't quite break through into his conscious memory.

“We should be OK to talk normally now,” Bunny told him, at length. “Are you alright?”

“I think so. You could have given me a bit more warning, though.”

“Sorry, I didn't dare. Unfortunately, in reality I'm not immune to poisoned arrows, and neither are you.”

“Point taken.”

Bunny grinned at Phaer's unintended pun. Even Phaer had relaxed enough to spare a crooked half-smile.

“Thanks for the help back there,” Phaer offered.

“Saving your life, you mean?” Bunny pressed.

“Yeah, that,” the half-elf agreed. That was as far as his pride would let him go. “You were incredible, the way you handled them.”

Bunny shrugged. “I'm a thief and a sorceress: illusion, deception, trickery, it's all part of the same thing. I just had to give them a worry, and play to their fears.”

“Yes, well, thanks.”

“You're welcome...twice!”

“Twice?” Phaer questioned.

“Sure. Remember those nasty chaos thingies you were fighting?”

“The Umchara? What about them?”

Bunny rolled her eyes. “Where do you think your double came from?”

Phaer groaned. At the time, he had been too busy and too frightened to think about how that had happened. Then with all that had occurred since, he'd forgotten all about it. Besides, as the elves liked to say, one should not look a gift unicorn in the mouth.

"Y'know, you could have avoided that fight if you'd just been paying attention," Bunny scolded. "You're more used to the outdoors than I am yet I knew they were coming before you did."

"Hey, I did sense I was being followed..."

"That would be me. My way of trying to warn you."

"Oh. Well, I did have a lot on my mind at the time, you know."

"First rule of survival," Bunny pursued. "Don't get so caught up with what's going on in here," she tapped a finger to her temple, "that you forget to pay adequate attention to what's going on out there." Her hand gesture encompassed their general surroundings.

It was hard enough for Phaer to have to admit someone had saved his life from his own people, but to put himself in a position where he had to be saved from getting killed on the way to his own execution...that was almost too much to bear.

"I suppose you think the whole thing was pretty stupid, hey?" He remarked.

"Actually no, not at all," Bunny assured him. "Remember I'm not exactly Miss Popular where I was born - well, `created` to be strict. If I went back there my father would probably react much like T'lar did with you - lock me in a cage. You knew what would happen when you came here, but you had a chance to free your people. In a sense, my father's other creations are my people and they are still caged and tagged the way I was. I don't know how they would react if I tried to free them, but I wish I had the courage to try."

Phaer suddenly saw his companion in a new light. "Don't be so hard on yourself," he told her. "Maybe one day something will happen that forces you to make a choice. Then you will have your chance and you never know, you might surprise yourself."

"Maybe," Bunny replied, non-committally. Snapping herself out of her reflective mood, she said, "Anyway, don't worry, I'll keep the first life-saving a secret...but I want something in return."

"Does everything have a price with you?" Phaer demanded, irritated at her attitude.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," she answered without a hint of apology. "But my prices are oh-so-reasonable."

"I'm surprised you didn't just take your `fee` out of T'lar's pocket."

"I looked. Nothing he had interested me," Bunny replied with a shrug. "Besides, you're surely not suggesting you don't owe me a debt after saving your life?"

"Alright," the ranger sighed, "I suppose that's a fair point. What is it you want?"

"Answers," she stated, simply, as the tunnel they were in shifted direction to their left. "I saved your life twice and in return, I have two questions. If it makes you feel any better, they are

probably the same questions Eilidh would ask if she were here and not worried about respecting your privacy, which I'm not."

"You'd better ask away then."

"OK, good. Firstly, it's no secret the way dark elves feel about half breeds--" Phaer bristled, but she held up her hands to ward off the verbal assault. "Their term, not mine! It's not as if I'm pure blood anything myself, is it? Anyway, it's no secret how they feel about... people like you...so why--"

"--Why was I ever born?" Phaer interrupted.

"Essentially, yes. No doubt Eilidh would phrase it more politely, but I'm pretty sure she'd be wondering the same thing."

Phaer had to admit it was a fair enough question, under the circumstances, so Bunny pressed on with her second.

"This one needs a little explanation, I suppose," she began.

She went on to describe her cautious approach to the dark elf village, deciding she needed to make a dramatic entrance if her bluff was going to work. Therefore she had to find a way to sneak in unnoticed. Being quite talented at such skills, this was not normally a problem.

"But," she continued, "I was dealing with elves here. Everyone knows how strongly Life Gifted the elves are, so I was worried about what magical traps might be set, or about being forced to quickly silence any elf who spotted me, before they had a chance to call upon their magic."

The companions came to a two-way fork, but an ancient roof collapse had blocked the left-hand passage, leaving them no choice but to take the right without discussion.

"Imagine my surprise, then," Bunny concluded, "when I discovered that there is not a single trace of magic anywhere in the city. Here we have an entire sub-race of elves and all of them, without exception, are magically Dead. Just like you! What in the name of all creation could cause that?"

The ranger sighed deeply. This was not an easy question for him to answer, but on reflection he decided it did have strong connections with Bunny's first. In fact, they were part of the same history.

"Those are big questions," he objected, half-heartedly.

"It's a big debt," the sumorityl reminded him, pointedly.

He could have cheerfully slapped her at that moment, were it not for the truth that she really did have a right to know. He would have preferred to talk to Eilidh about this but hopefully that would come later. Perhaps it would make easier telling the second time around. He doubted it.

Steeling himself to the task, he began an abridged version of dark elf history. It was a history that had faded into legend, myth or even less to the other races, yet a history that was branded onto the soul of every dark elf child of each generation.

The Great Sundering of the Elves occurred long before the arrival of humans, so the dark elf colony was well established at the time of early human recorded history. In fact it seemed to humans as if it had always been so. Life in Mythallen was largely stable and peaceful, despite the upheaval of the Exodus from Earth, until Niltsiar rose to the height of her power. Phaer was hazy on the precise details of the magic, but he knew that Niltsiar was a renegade, rejecting the Council in some fundamental ways. Indeed, she rejected the very existence of the Council and would not recognise its authority. In the Mage Wars that followed, Niltsiar was not without allies. Chief among those were the dark elves, whose philosophies matched hers so well.

“I’m sorry,” Bunny put in, “but I don’t understand why the dark elves would accept any mortal leader that was not an elf - certainly not a `mere human`.”

“Ah,” Phaer held up a finger for emphasis, “but Niltsiar was not human...in fact I’m not even sure she was mortal. She was Faerie: a race from old Earth who had strength, grace and power that rivalled and even surpassed that of the elves. In many ways the Faerie helped to bridge the gap between all the peoples of Majaos and the humans from Earth, through their contact with the elves. Most elves viewed the Faerie as kindred spirits; the dark elves viewed them as demigods. In their reckoning, however, only Niltsiar had the vision to become a true god - their god - and when she ascended, the world would be theirs to rule as they saw fit.”

During the course of the Mage Wars, the Council and their allies slowly gained ground and many of Niltsiar's followers deserted her. In the end, she stood alone except for the dark elves. Indeed, it was the dark elves that prolonged the war even after Niltsiar herself had gone.

“Gone?” Bunny wondered. “What do you mean, `gone`? Was she defeated or not?”

“As I was taught, so I will tell you: It was the Time of the Ancients...”

Phaer's words painted a scene of this Faerie woman, Niltsiar, at the centre of great and terrifying wonders of magic. Vast battles she fought, often alone. She was magic's power unleashed, untempered, ungoverned. Finally, the woman faced another Ancient mage - she knew his power but feared it not and she was defiant in the face of his authority.

“Give up the pretence`, she told him. `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. 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`.

“But she had miscalculated. The man called down power she didn't know he possessed, and threw himself at her, transporting them both beyond this world, this reality.”

“Judging by that,” Bunny spoke up, “I would say she lost.”

“Not according to my people. Their interpretation is that she merely lost a battle...the war isn't over yet. That is why they continued to fight even after Niltsiar had gone.”

The dark elves had refused to surrender and they had been taught well. Meanwhile, factions grew amid the Council, as some parties had always viewed the threat as beginning and ending with Niltsiar herself. With her gone, the war lost momentum. Other elves had no stomach for fighting and killing their cousins unnecessarily, and many humans considered the dark elves just another rival in their power struggle. The dwarves were just as suspicious of forest elves as dark elves - many saw little distinction. The other races, in the main, simply lost interest, being more concerned with getting back to normal and rebuilding their communities. The result was an uneasy stalemate. A cold war. The dark elves shut themselves in their home, content with occasional, deadly raids, and the Council could not raise the manpower required to wage a war that the people did not want. But one man could not allow matters to stand and he worked in secret to devise a spell that would neutralise the dark elf threat without bloodshed.

“Who was this individual?” Bunny inquired.

“I’m not sure I ever heard his name,” Phaer answered, “but I can tell you one thing about him.”

“What’s that?” Bunny wondered.

“This Faerie was none other than Merlyn’s own apprentice.”

“Wow,” Bunny gasped, impressed.

“The first my people knew about it was when the apprentice appeared in their midst and unleashed his power. From that moment, every dark elf was stripped of all magic. As for the apprentice, nobody ever saw him again.”

“This spell,” Bunny inquired. “Was it something like the Enforcers’ Nullmagic?”

“Well I’m no expert, but I don’t think so. As I understand it, Nullmagic merely severs the connection between a mage and his magic, and is reversible. It’s a spell intended only to facilitate the capture of a mage, to punish and make it easier to take him into custody. What that Faerie mage did has lasted for millennia and in that time, the only thing more important to a dark elf than his own interests has been the restoration of magic. They’ve never managed it.”

“That answers my second question, what about my first?” Bunny asked.

“I’m getting to that,” the half-elf assured her. “As I said, restoring the magic is a high priority, and I suppose it’s a testament to my people’s hatred of humans that they took so long to try one of the most obvious solutions: mating with Life Gifted human mages.”

There was nothing in the dark elves’ appearance to distinguish them from their cousins. As for the lack of magic, magically Dead elves were highly unusual, but not totally unheard of. Besides, nobody on the outside knew that dark elves were magically Dead - they took great pains to keep that secret.

“Knowing you as I do,” Bunny remarked, “I’m guessing it didn’t work.”

Phaer shook his head. “Not a single one of the ‘half breeds’ was born with anything so much as Life Potential. Most were culled at birth, but the Sovereign decided not to entirely waste this

`possible future resource`. In other words, he thought there was a chance that some future solution might turn up that required half breeds...if only as subjects for experimentation.”

“Bred for experimentation purposes, eh?” Bunny mused. “I can relate to that.”

Phaer recognised the connection she was making - the sumorityl was also bred as an experiment. Bunny had a disturbing way of making him see the world at an angle he didn't really care for.

“One thing I still don't understand,” Bunny pressed. “How come nobody but your people remembers the story you've just told me?”

“Well, it's all a question of perspective: To the outside world, the Mage Wars are just a myth. Who can be sure what really happened? Even if it's mostly true, it happened many thousands of years in the past, so even the forest elves dismiss it as an ancient battle that was fought and won and the world moved on. It can't possibly have any bearing on anything in the here and now. Or so they think. Would you be any different, if I were not telling you this myself? Could you conceive that events from so long ago could be directly important?”

Bunny shrugged. “You're asking the wrong person, my friend. You forget - I'm only four years old. To me, almost everything happened a long time ago!”

Phaer shook his head. “Four years old. I really can't get used to that, but it does highlight my point. The time-span between the age of the Ancients and now is so vast that the perspective of the oldest forest elf on Majaos is not that different from yours.

“The dark elves see it altogether differently, though. As I've said, they don't believe the war was ever won or lost - there has simply been a lull in the fighting. However long that lull might be is irrelevant. Niltsiar is their key to power and they have faith in her. Do you see, Bunny? To my people, this is not ancient history, but an active religion.”

Bunny had an instinct that seemed to warn her when there was something more than what she was being told. It was the same instinct that had driven her to escape from her father/creator and seek this thing she called redemption. It drove her then and now it warned her again - there was something missing. She didn't think Phaer was intentionally hiding anything, but rather that he was forgetting something. Something important.

“OK, so let me get this straight,” she pressed. “Since the time of the Ancients, so long ago, ever since Merlyn's apprentice did what he did, all of your people and all of their offspring have been magically Dead, yes?”

“That's right.”

“All of them?”

“All of them.”

“Every single one without exception?”

“Well yes, as far as I...No! No, there was one. It's a forbidden subject in the dark elf communion, but one dark elf did achieve the Life Gift.”

“Achieve?” Bunny wondered, frowning.

“Yes, achieve is right because he was born Magically Dead like the rest of us.”

“How can you achieve the Life Gift? You're either born with it or you're not.”

“I know it's supposed to be impossible and no, I can't tell you how. If my people knew, they weren't about to tell me. As I say, it's a forbidden subject. The only thing I can tell you is his name: Akar-Sel.”

Akar-Sel was the renegade mage who had instigated the Tech Wars two centuries earlier. Powerful beyond anything known to the Council with ambition to match. Supremely intelligent and devious, he hid his involvement from the Enforcers for a long time before they began to suspect. At last, through a combination of traditional magic and Technomagic invention, the renegade was captured. He was summarily sentenced to the highest punishment possible under magical law: a living death, cruel, torturous and irreversible - the Turning. Even the impossibly young Bunny was well aware of Akar-Sel - it was almost the first thing every mage was taught.

“Akar-Sel is forever cursed by my people because he learned magic but did not teach the technique to anyone else. He broke the highest of dark elf laws, so my people are pleased and grateful for the sentence.”

“Aren't we all!” Bunny remarked.

Chapter 12

Between the two warriors, Mr Granite Longbeard and Miss Jayne Corr, the small band of orcs that had attacked them had been dispatched with speed and efficiency. Magic had not been required, which was fortunate because Toli had just enough Life for one more low level spell and the two Catalysts could Grant no more until they, too, regenerated. Now that dusk was approaching, there was going to be precious little sun to power any significant regeneration, but this didn't seem the ideal place to be making camp.

It had been hard, slow progress from the Wise One's hut, running into a steady trickle of chaos creatures, orcs, human bandits, and the occasional wild animal. There had never been a large enough band to overwhelm the four-strong party, but their vigilance had certainly been tested. Running so low on magic was a worry, should a larger force present itself, but so long as they were paying attention, they ought to be aware of any such threat before it was too late to evade them or hide. There was plenty of cover from any flying reconnaissance, though that possibility was unlikely in the extreme anyway. Perhaps the foliage could protect them from ground-based onlookers as well, Eilidh considered, if they just climbed up and hid in the trees.

Tree climbing was a traditional childhood activity shared by friends all over Mythallen. Usually daring each other on to higher and higher branches. Harmless enough if they kept their heads. Eilidh had never been the tree climbing type, as a young girl. She supposed it would be more accurate to say that she had never had any friends with which to share the activity. Nobody had ever pressed her to climb a tree, although if she had, there were a few who would probably have found it a great game to see who could push her off from the greatest height. No, she chided herself, that wasn't fair. That would imply hatred. On reflection that might have been easier to deal with, but apart from the weeks immediately following `the Incident` the vast majority simply did not care enough even to hate her. She was a nobody - except in the classroom, of course. In classes, she had excelled. There had been others more intelligent than she in that class, but Eilidh had worked twice as hard as anyone else. Mind you, with no social life to get in the way, she supposed she'd had more time than anybody else.

Still, she decided, snapping herself back to the present, she was sure she could do it. Jayne Corr could do it, too, and Toli, dear Toli, would no doubt think it was great fun. Eilidh had to suppress a smile, though, as she imagined Granite's reaction to her asking a dwarf to climb a tree!

The Wise One had indicated that timing was a critical factor in this quest; so hiding for long periods was to be avoided if possible. But with their magic so depleted, prudence was also called for. In the end, to Eilidh's surprise, it was Jayne who came up with the solution.

“Begging your pardon, Miss Eilidh,” she offered, hesitantly, “but can I make a suggestion?”

“Please,” Eilidh encouraged.

“I think it'd be best if we found a wayward pine and made camp.”

“What's a wayward pine?” Eilidh asked. “I haven't spent much time outdoors,” she added by way of explanation.

The half-orc had spent practically all of her life outdoors, so she knew all about these friends to travellers. She was pleased to be sharing her knowledge, so she could make herself of value to her companions.

Rather than explain, she simply found one, lower down the trail. A wayward pine was a tree with branches like wheel spokes and boughs reaching nearly to the ground, making a safe, dry place for travellers to spend the night. A sheltering tree perfect for adventurers, providing the traveller with protection from rain, enough room for a fire, and loose-weave needles to allow smoke to escape. Eilidh was impressed. Toli was fascinated. Granite would have preferred a hole in the ground or a nice cave, but since neither option was in evidence, he grudgingly accepted the wayward pine.

* * * * *

They struck out at dawn, agreeing that it was important to make the most of the day for travelling, accepting the risk that their magic would not be available at full strength for perhaps as long as an hour. Granite Longbeard had other ideas, however, unwrapping his mandolin and strumming the chords to accompany his rich baritone voice as he sang the Rhyme of Doubletime. The sound of his singing might give away their location to an enemy, but the mages would feel their Life Store regenerate in double quick time. It was a reasonable trade-off, they decided.

The indistinct trail mercifully gave way to an easy-to-follow path. It appeared this was once a place of civilisation - the approach to a village, perhaps - which would be consistent with their destination: an ancient temple. Temples were natural focal points in a community. A temple needed worshippers and it therefore made sense to make it easily accessible.

Sure enough, as the path widened, they began to see the remains of ancient construction. Not whole buildings, but just part of a wall here and there. They were abandoned shells now, of course, but there was no doubt that sentient life had once lived here. Eilidh wondered what had happened to this unnamed hamlet. Was it simply abandoned as part of the natural movement of people, or had some disaster - natural or unnatural - befallen an unsuspecting and unprepared community? The Catalyst found herself thinking back to Marina Fells, and how that devastated village might one day look very like where there were now standing.

“Is that what happened to you?” Eilidh whispered softly to the spirits of this place.

“Pardon?” Came Toli's voice. “Sorry,” she added when she saw she'd made Eilidh jump.

“That's alright, Toli. I was just thinking out loud, letting my imagination run away with me. We have no evidence to tell us that these people were attacked. Besides, whether they were or not, it happened so long ago, it really doesn't make any difference to us here and now.” She laid a hand on her friend's shoulder. “I guess I'm just a little spooked, that's all. It's silly and I'm OK now.”

“Oh it's only natural to be spooked about a place like this. Why it reminds me of a place I used to know near to where I grew up. Well, I say `near` but it was far enough away that our parents didn't really want us - that is my friends and I - going there, but that just made it more mysterious and enticing. We used to tell stories about make-believe monsters that lived in there and one day, we--”

The magician was interrupted by a trio of man-like creatures with a disgusting oozing skin that was constantly moving around and even dripping onto the ground, only to be re-absorbed into the creature it came from. They lurched at the party, but the two warriors were easily a match for their

slow reactions. Jayne chopped a hundred small fragments out of one, with deft, rapid swordplay, and Granite had plenty of time to let go of his instrument with his right hand, so he could grab his battle-axe. He cleaved the second of the creatures in two, right through the middle of its torso.

“Toli--” Eilidh began, but her friend was already way ahead of her. The magician knew of these creatures - they had a scream not unlike that of a banshee, which could paralyse an enemy and even cause physical brain damage if the scream were sufficiently prolonged. The remaining creature opened the massive hole in the middle of its face that currently served as a mouth - its nose had dropped off almost as soon as it appeared. But Toli condensed the water vapour in a pocket of air, forming a ball of ice that she mentally shoved into the creature's mouth, effectively gagging it. Jayne plunged her sword into its midriff, and Granite neatly chopped off its head.

“Unlike your childhood adventures, Toli,” Eilidh said, “the monsters here are not make-believe.”

Toli pulled a face, but for once said nothing.

Without a word passing between them, Jayne took point while Granite placed himself as rear guard.

“You two make a pretty good team,” Eilidh remarked.

“We are not a team,” insisted the dwarf. “Och aye, she fights well enough, but I still donnae trust her and I just want tae have her up front where I can see her, that’s all.”

Eilidh decided not to pursue the matter for fear of Jayne overhearing. She didn't want to offend their companion, not least because she was proving extremely useful to have around at the moment.

“OK, Granite,” she smoothed, “you've made your point.”

The bard grunted and stomped away to his position.

Toli stretched up to Eilidh's ear and whispered, “But you don't entirely trust her either, do you?” In answer to the Catalyst's startled look, she added, “Just an observation. After all, you're my friend and friends notice these things, right? Why, I remember a time when...”

Eilidh tuned out of Tolbrietta's latest story and pondered her companion's statement, “Friends notice these things.”

Yes, Eilidh pondered silently, I suppose they do.

Still, it did feel a little creepy to have someone know her so well. Nobody had ever been that close before...nobody had ever wanted to be that close before.

Just as the map said it would, a second trail split from the main path a few hundred yards further on. The main path continued in a more-or-less straight line, into what was once the village centre. It was this new subsidiary that the party wanted, curling away at more than ninety degrees until it faced East, towards the rising sun. This was the path that led to the temple.

The path was overrun by what were once the temple gardens. The companions got the impression it was well tended in its day, with innumerable varieties of flower, tree and shrub. One particular patch, Eilidh took special care to avoid; the plants that grew there looked similar to the Kij vine they had encountered in Shakaran Borderlands. They clearly weren't the same – perhaps a different species, but they were similar enough to spark some painful memories.

The temple itself was of no construction Eilidh had ever seen or read about. No towers soared upward. No spires sought to pierce the sky. What they could see was merely the entrance: a small squat pyramid, approximately twenty five yards in each direction of the square base and just fifty feet high. There was no indication whether this was a temple of Light, Dark or Balance: Eilidh suspected it was none of these, though she did not know how that could be so. Indeed, `temple` seemed an inappropriate label for this place - crypt might be more accurate. Whatever it was, it was in a general state of disrepair, as one would expect, but here and there, clean patches shone through the surrounding dirt - shone with a dazzling, golden brilliance reflected in the form of avarice in the eyes of the dwarven bard.

“This temple,” Granite gasped. “The walls are made of solid gold! How could anyone afford to build such a place?”

“Not only that,” Eilidh said, nodding, “but how anyone could collect so much gold together in one place, mould it and cast it into this shape is beyond me.”

Jayne, still at point, found a doorway that opened to reveal steps scaling down into the crypt.

“You sure you wanna do this, Miss Eilidh?” enquired their half-orc companion. “We don't know what's down there; it could be dangerous!”

“Quite possibly,” Eilidh allowed. “But then, if I knew what was down here, I wouldn't have to look.” Once again, Eilidh's stomach lurched as the look of incredible awe on Jayne's face at hearing such profound wisdom from `Miss Eilidh`. Forcing a smile, Eilidh invited the half-orc to lead the way.

“Actually, Eilidh,” Granite said, “I think this is a job for a dwarf.” Jayne opened her mouth to object, but the dwarf ignored her. “When yer out in the open, this one,” he indicated Miss Corr, “might - just might - be OK. But if yer goin' underground, then what ye need is a dwarf leadin' the way!”

Jayne acquiesced and Granite stomped off down the steps, leaving the others little choice but to scurry after him.

The dwarf was truly in his element down there, giving him an advantage over the others. The steps ended in a corridor with a square cross-section, ending in a heavy oak door a mere twenty feet ahead. The bard pushed at the door, but nothing happened. He heaved with all his might and still it would not budge. The others lent their weight to the task, but fared no better.

“Well,” Granite huffed, “I have nae come all this way tae be stopped by a door! Stand back now,” he warned, brandishing his axe.

“Wait!” Toli cried. “You can't just stroll into a temple and start chopping doors down. Not if you can help it anyway. Even if it's abandoned, a temple is still a temple and just because people have

forgotten all about this place doesn't mean the gods have. If we could all see what we're doing, we might get along better.”

Granite was annoyed at losing his advantage, but he guessed he couldn't really expect to keep the others in the dark forever, so with a grunt he agreed.

Toli cast the Woodlight Spell, and the door obediently glowed, revealing a rope attached to a doorbell.

Eilidh felt a little silly ringing a bell when there couldn't possibly be anyone to answer it.

"Perhaps the gods will be satisfied by the attempt," said Toli.

At the very least, Eilidh decided it could do no harm to humour her friend, so she did as she asked.

The door did not open. Instead, a ghostly apparition shimmered into existence before it, barring their way. It appeared to be the spirit of a long-dead temple guard and dead or not, it seemed intent on performing its ancient duty. It stood before the door in its well-polished transparent uniform, and equally non-corporeal, but freshly sharpened sword in its hand.

“Who seekest entry into this most sacred shrine?” It asked in a bored tone.

I suppose I'd be bored, too, Eilidh thought, *after centuries of standing guard.*

Judging by the dust on the floor, she didn't think anyone had been allowed through this door in a very long time, if ever, so she was going to have to come up with something suitably impressive if she wanted to buck the trend.

Acting on sudden inspiration, she drew herself up proudly and declared, “Stand aside and let us pass, I command you, in the name of the *Du y Kharia!*”

The ghost suddenly looked interested, alert and quite dangerous. Eilidh imagined he must have cut quite the imposing figure in life. He studied the Catalyst for a long moment - Eilidh felt herself being probed by unfamiliar magic. It made her flesh tingle; at times it even made her skin crawl, but while it was unpleasant, it stopped short of causing physical pain. She remained absolutely still - somehow she knew this was a test and if she flinched away it would immediately be construed as failure. She imagined failure was most likely lethal.

The probing stopped and the guard bowed low. “Long hath I awaited thy coming, and now at last I canst give thee a warning which thou must needs hear: Turn ye back, *Du y Kharia*. Seek ye not entry into the temple for death awaiteth thee beyond this door. Thy search here is meaningless.”

“Thank you for the warning,” Eilidh replied, curtly, “but I'm afraid I must insist that you let me pass.”

“Before I canst do that, thou must needs answer but one question. Please consider thine answer with care, for if thy first is false, a second attempt shalt not be permitted.”

“Understood,” Eilidh confirmed. “So what's the question?”

“Simply this: Why should I let thee in this door?”

“Well, I have many...motivations,” Eilidh considered, deciding to avoid the word `reasons` lest the ghost interpret it as her answer.

She began pacing, as she thought about the question. “There is my ultimate goal of stopping Niltsiar, of course, and the advice of the Wise One that I might find something here to aid me in that. Niltsiar represents a threat to this world and I’ve been charged with helping to protect it.” She realised she was talking with her hands a lot again, but she decided that now was not the time to try to curb the habit, lest it disturb her reasoning. She appreciated that the others seemed to know better than to speak. Toli and Granite had seen her like this before and recognised that it was best to leave her to think things through herself. Toli offered an encouraging smile, while Granite glowered at Jayne who, for her part, seemed awestruck by what Eilidh was doing.

The Catalyst kept her focus, however, as she continued without interruption. “From what little I know, Niltsiar represents tyranny and death, and I want that threat to end. I’m doing this, in part, out of a sense of duty. Master Gamaliel charged me with this quest in his capacity as Prime Magus and I have chosen to accept that responsibility. Other motives include a desire to protect people that I’ve come to...” she hesitated, “...care about, and most importantly I’m doing it so that I may be free to get back to the quiet life I had planned before this all started.

“However,” she stopped pacing, eyes narrowing as she studied the ghost and the door that it guarded. “None of those things are the *reason*,” she emphasised the word, “why you should let me in through that door *specifically*, which is I think what you’re really asking me.” She took a breath before giving her answer. “The reason you should let me in is quite simply because it’s not your choice – it’s mine! I’m alive, you are dead, and if I choose to go through that door, then you have no right to try and stop me.”

“Then I prevent ye not, *Du y Kharia*. I merely offer thee a warning that thou shouldst not, for as one door doth open, so might another. Understand also that if thou dost ignore my warning, I shalt guard the way no longer. Entry for one is entry for all.”

"Understood," Eilidh acknowledged. "I choose to enter."

"Very well, *Du y Kharia*." The apparition accepted.

"How long have you been guarding this place?" Eilidh asked.

"Since the days of Merlyn, Ganieda and Artemis," he answered. "Not long after the Fall of Niltsiar herself."

"But that's millennia!" Toli cried.

"Aye," Granite agreed. "So long that no-one, not even Temporal mages, can agree on an exact number."

“It was necessary.”

"And you've endured this existence, this echo of life, for so long, just for someone to come along and tell you that you had no right to bar entry in the first place?" the Catalyst asked, incredulously.

"It was necessary."

"I'm sorry."

"Thy compassion does thee credit, *Du y Kharia*, but it was my free choice to do this. It was necessary. Now I am free at last to rest. Fare ye well, *Du y Kharia*."

The ghost bowed once and shimmered out of existence as the heavy oaken door swung open.

Chapter 13

The Central Merlyon Library of Magic was as imposing as ever, but Rochelle Ribbons did not have time to stop and stare. She grabbed Artisho's arm and together they casually attached themselves to a small mixed group that were just entering the building.

Rochelle had stopped along the way to buy a cloak, which she hoped would somehow provide sufficient cover for her current magical state. If no-one paid her any attention, they might not notice she was magically Dead at the moment. Even if they did notice, with luck, anyone who happened to have been present at the earlier incident would not identify her. It was the best she could do, at any rate. Even had she possessed enough money to pay for the Nullmagic spell to be reversed, which she didn't, she dared not set foot in the Church of Life. Merlana might have alerted the Catalysts to watch out for her. Regardless, it didn't seem prudent to enter Eilidh's former home. No, no fancy magic; wearing a cloak over her green lether tunic would have to do.

The lady marketer had seemed extra keen that evening, trying to get Rochelle to buy more than she needed.

Would madam like her cloak embroidered in gold thread? Perhaps madam's family symbol, or something more personal? Individualised styles were available at a small extra charge. Would madam like to enhance her new look with some jewellery? A sparkling platinum chain with tiny emeralds inserted would set off madam's eyes beautifully, and she had just the thing right there. Maybe madam would take pleasure in a pair of delicate earrings or a brooch to pin onto madam's new cloak? One couldn't help but notice how madam's hair was cut short in the latest fashion of Merlyon's more refined gnomish customers, and many such ladies were wearing thin silver circlets on their heads... And so on and so forth.

Trying a different tack, she had explained her wife ran the finest equipment shop in Mythallen, and she was sure she would have something to attract the eye of a warrior in the city guard. Rochelle wondered how the marketer would have reacted to the truth that she had been trained by the Hand of Darkness Liberation Front, not the City Guard, but she had wisely kept that knowledge to herself and gently but firmly extricated herself from the woman's clutches.

* * * * *

Once inside the library, Rochelle headed over to the area where she felt the Tenth Tower ought to be located, if it were solid and real: somewhere between towers five and nine - dedicated to the Secrets of Shadow and Life, respectively. There was, of course, nothing there. Nothing obvious at any rate. At a loss as to what else to do, Rochelle suggested they glance at some of the books on the nearby shelves, in search of anything that might give them a clue.

They had been there for a couple of hours and the sky outside was growing dark. Decorative, multi-coloured glow baskets brightened along the pavements, and the sunstone buildings began to emit the sunlight they had been absorbing all day, albeit in a more mellow and subdued way, more tasteful for the late hour. The library became quieter, as people left their studies for another day. There were night mages in Merlyon, of course, but they did not often appear much before midnight and the wee small hours of the morning. This gave Rochelle the advantage of thoroughly searching the rooms with impunity.

When she heard Artisho gasp from two rooms away, she ran back to him, thinking he had perhaps found something. She found him on the edge of his seat, eyes wide at the piece of literature in his hands. It appeared to be an example of a new kind of entertainment that the gnome had heard about but never seen. It used small boxes of colourful, sketched pictures, which animated the characters when viewed in sequence. The actual writing was minimal, restricted to something apparently called a `speech bubble` indicating to which character a section of dialogue belonged. It was called a comic book.

“Goodness me,” Artisho said, almost breathless, mopping his brow. “This really is most exciting! The Knights of Balance are guarding an important secret but it seems like events may require them to make a choice over sharing it with someone. I do hope they choose wisely. That is if any of them survive the coming battle against the chaos monsters. There are...rather a lot of them. Next week we'll find out if the Knights can defeat them, despite being so heavily outnumbered,” the old mage explained. “Oh I can't wait a whole week!” He wailed.

“Curious,” Rochelle remarked. “The story does seem, shall we say, quite contemporary.”

“You could say that,” Artisho agreed.

Rochelle turned the pages back to take a look at the front cover. The title read, Silver Saviours. “I've heard of several of these comic book titles, but I don't recall this one.”

“I'm not surprised - it hasn't been written yet.”

“Excuse me?” Rochelle wondered, confused.

“Shush, will you? I'm trying to read the second story.”

“There's a second story in there?” It didn't seem possible - there couldn't be more than two dozen pages in the whole comic.

“Yes, and according to the mage forums, there's even supposed to be clever plot link with the first story in some later issue.”

“Oh, I see. So what's this second story about, then? More Knights?”

“No, actually, this is about a poor silver dragon almost fatally injured in a flying accident and now she can't fly. Completely paralysed she is, poor dear.”

“A paralysed dragon?” Rochelle scoffed. “That's ridiculous!”

Artisho just shrugged.

Rochelle shook her head to clear the cobwebs. “Look, Old One, we're supposed to be searching for a way into the Te--” She lowered her voice when another library user wandered past. “The Tenth Tower,” she continued in a whisper. “It's important. We don't have time for comic books.”

“One should always make time for entertainment,” Artisho disagreed. “It keeps the mind fresh and you never know when you might learn something.” Rochelle opened her mouth to object, but the old man raised a weathered, gnarled finger to silence her. “Time and tide wait for no-one, but

sometimes time requires us that we wait for it. We're in the right place - you know we are. But we can't get in. Why not? Why can we not find what we're looking for? Because it's hidden, that's why!"

"Well obviously, but--"

--But why hide it in the first place? Why hide anything at all?"

As counter-intuitive as it was, Rochelle decided there was only one philosophically valid answer to that question. "You hide something with the intention that it be found," she stated. "If you want something to never be found, why not simply destroy it?"

"Perhaps you intend it to be found only by yourself," Artisho proposed.

"That may be your intention, but you cannot guarantee that result. To create a method by which you can find what you've hidden, is to create the possibility that others may find a way to duplicate or circumvent that method. A man might place his wealth in a locked chest for which he has the only key. But a thief could steal the key or pick the lock, or break open the chest by force. Even if you introduce magic, there is no such thing as absolute security. No, if you want it never to be found, you must destroy it. If you hide something, you must intend that it be found."

"Very good," Artisho commended. Then with a stern look, he tapped his staff on the stone floor and demanded, "But the application, the application!"

"Well, we are searching for the knowledge of the Ancients, knowledge that is hidden. They must have had a good reason for hiding it and part of that reason must have been the intention that it be found when the time is right."

"When the time is right," the old man echoed. "As I said, time and tide wait for no-one..."

"...but sometimes time requires that we wait for it," Rochelle finished. "Yes, I see. Now, we're talking about magic here, so it's sensible to assume that the `right time` must involve some kind of magical trigger. But thanks to that Nullmagic spell, I'm effectively Magically Dead."

Artisho winked, "Maybe that's part of the trigger."

The druid's eyes widened. "What a fascinating concept!" She said, trying hard to keep her voice down amid her excitement. "Through the millennia, people must have tried searching for the Tenth Tower using all kinds of clever magic. I bet it's never occurred to anybody to try it with no magic whatsoever. That would make me different to all the other people who have searched before, but there must be something more, an external trigger." Just as quickly, her face fell. "And we have no idea when that will happen."

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than the library lights flickered wildly, and a quick glance out of the window revealed the same was happening in the streets. Books and other items that were being held in mid-air with simple levitation, crashed to the ground, along with food and drink and household goods all across the city. Most frightening of all was that Merlyon's magical shield, normally invisible, was suddenly creating multi-coloured light shows in a shell-like dome surrounding the city. All over, people cried out in fear, shock and pain as they felt their own magic drained to feed the city - an emergency measure that had not been used in living memory. Many grew

nauseous or faint at the violation, but Rochelle, having no connection to her magic, remained unaffected. In the room where she stood, a door shimmered into existence in the north-east wall.

“Right about now would be by guess,” Artisho suggested, facetiously.

Doubtless, Rochelle decided, had it been Eilidh standing there, she would have considered all that was going on around her and questioned the wisdom of entering a door that did not exist a moment ago. Considerations of how she might get back if it disappeared once more would have entered her head. Perhaps she would have demanded some answers from Artisho, the ridiculous old man who really didn't seem all that strange just then.

But Rochelle wasn't Eilidh, so Rochelle simply dived through the door with the same wild abandon that had got her into so much trouble in the past.

* * * * *

“So, Bunny,” Phaer said, when faced with a crossroads in the tunnel network. “Which way?”

The young woman shrugged. “You tell me.”

“Me? How should I know? You teleported us here.”

“Teleported? I'm not that kind of mage, that's a Fire mage spell. I'm a Shadow mage.”

“Whatever,” Phaer dismissed irritably, having no wish to discuss the intricacies of magic.

“No, I don't think you understand,” Bernice persisted. “I'm a sorceress - I deal in illusion. Hopefully, my illusion of teleportation was as convincing to the rest of your people as it apparently was for you.”

“Illusion of teleportation? What are you saying?” He asked. Then, with his bad feeling growing inside him, he demanded more slowly and forcefully, enunciating each word, “Bunny, what have you done?”

“You remember that magical device I took from Z'rcona, back in Marina Fells?”

“The orb-type thing?”

“Yes, that's it,” Bunny confirmed. “On the way here, I started to worry about it. I can't be sure, you understand, but the more I examined it, the more it seemed to be a bit like the tracking devices my father used to pin on all of his creations, whenever he let us out of our cages. I never liked it then and I don't like it now.”

“Especially considering who's probably monitoring!” Phaer pointed out.

“Precisely,” Bunny concurred. “Anyway, I hit on a way to use it to my advantage in my plan to get you out. In my experience, when you break objects of magic, they tend to go out with a bang. So when we were out there with your people sufficiently backed away, I used my vampire speed to throw the thing as hard as I could at one of those hard, jagged rocks.”

“Hard, jagged rocks?” Phaer breathed, eyes growing wide as an old memory took shape.

“Yes, that's right,” she grinned. “It certainly made for a good cover! And I even fooled the person standing right next to me?” She whistled. “I know I'm good, but sometimes I'm even better than I think I am,” she preened.

The ranger couldn't contain himself any longer; he reached out, grabbed the sumorityl firmly by the shoulders and demanded, “Bunny, in the name of the Abyss, stop playing games and tell me straight: WHERE ARE WE?”

The sumorityl did not take kindly to being manhandled in such a way and had to fight her natural instinct to let loose her vampiric form. “Let go of me,” she growled, green eyes smouldering.

“Not until you start taking this seriously and tell me exactly what you did back there, because if my suspicions are right, we are in real, serious danger!”

Picking up on Phaer's genuine fear, Bunny relaxed a little. “Alright then. Serious explanation coming up,” she promised.

Phaer let her go and waited impatiently.

“Here it is in simple, non-magical terms. It may have appeared that I teleported us away - that was the idea - but in reality, I didn't take us anywhere by magic.”

“Then where are we?” Phaer repeated.

“I've told you before, a thief never goes in anywhere without having a back way out. Before rescuing you, I searched around a bit until I found one. The rocks gave it away - they looked so out of place and from what I know about dark elves, nothing in their world is ever allowed to be out of place.”

“True enough,” Phaer allowed.

“The rocks marked an entrance to this network of underground tunnels - my back door. Destroying that orb created a diversion so I could slip us both down here. I figured that there must be another way out, someplace, and I was hoping you might know where it is.”

Phaer collapsed against the tunnel wall, heart beating rapidly. He felt his skin go so pale in terror, the half-elf wondered if he'd turned transparent. “Out of the frying pan, into the fire,” he breathed.

“What's the problem?” Bunny demanded. “What are these tunnels?”

Phaer didn't answer, but just said, “Come on, we have to move quickly. The sooner we get out of here the better!” Without pausing to see if Bunny would follow, he set off at a pace down the left hand tunnel.

Apart from a half-step hesitation at some junctions, their pace only quickened with time and even Bunny found herself completely turned around, unable to determine which direction was which after the innumerable twists and turns they had taken.

“What are we running from?” she insisted on knowing as she strained to keep up. Still no answer. “For the gods' sake tell me!”

Phaer rounded on her. “Will you keep your voice down?” he hissed.

“If you tell me what's going on,” she replied, defiantly, “I will.”

Rolling his eyes, the ranger relented in his attitude, if not in his running speed. It seemed it was time for another dark elf history lesson.

From before the time of the Ancients right up to the end of the Mage Wars, the dark elves had been fond of what they termed `sports`. They usually involved `testing` the `lesser races` to prove dark elf superiority. As one might expect, the tests were not exactly fair. One of their favourite sports had involved throwing captives down into the constructed tunnel maze and letting them try to escape. Wagers were placed and then the whole event was relayed magically onto large, smooth viewing walls. To make things more interesting, the dark elves provided the captives with extra incentive in the form of large, ferocious and very hungry carnivorous beasts freely wandering the maze. The captives were forced to escape or be eaten. Of course, on the rare occasion that a captive managed to get out of the tunnels, they were hunted down and executed by dark elf rangers. After all, according to dark elf psyche, if a captive survived the test, it did not disprove their inherently inferior nature...it just meant the test was too easy and their captive probably cheated. Therefore they deserved to die.

“But since the fall of dark elf magic,” Bunny pointed out, “there could be no way for them to watch the show.”

“Quite true,” Phaer, agreed, “and so those sports have been abandoned. Even essential regular tunnel maintenance has been impossible since the fall of magic - remember that cave-in a while back?”

“Yes, and I don't suppose they could capture fresh ferocious magical monsters, either.”

“Your point?”

Bunny rolled her eyes. “You're talking about something that ended during the time of the Ancients. Any nasty critters that were left down here are long since dead and gone to dust!”

“Bunny, you may be absolutely right,” Phaer said. “But you might also be absolutely wrong.”

“Oh great, a riddle! We're running from mortal danger and you give me riddles! *Are* we running from mortal danger or is this just a fantastic workout?”

“There was one particularly nasty test called the Basilisk Snare.”

“Basilisks?” Bunny exclaimed, increasing her pace. “They're real?”

“I'm not sure,” Phaer admitted, “and believe me we don't want to find out. Remember all this business with sports and testing is myth wrapped up in legend. I have no idea whether such creatures exist, or ever did exist, but I'd rather not take my chances.”

“You'll get no argument from me,” Bunny agreed.

“That makes a change.”

“Charming!”

“There's one other thing I think you should know,” Phaer said.

“What's that?” Bunny asked, fearing the answer.

“For the last couple of hundred yards, there's a sound that's been bothering me. I wasn't sure at first if it was just my imagination. Now I'm sure it's not. Bunny,” he said, “there is something down here with us, something very big...and the way the air moves through these tunnels...it's got our scent.”

Chapter 14

Knight Scout Leader Lady Tanya Nightingale was nervous. She was nervous because her dapple grey mare was nervous and a good Knight should always trust the instincts of a well-trained mount. There was no good reason that she could detect why the rest of the company should not pass this way, if they chose, but perhaps her horse had a good reason. She motioned to two of the three male Knights under her command, and they immediately kicked their horses into a trot, flanking wide and moving ahead a little way out of sight, whilst remaining easily within earshot. The four horseback Knights made little more noise than the breeze that rustled through the trees. The mounts were trained for stealth as much as their riders were, so they took great care over where they trod, never so much as snapping a twig.

Still having no good reason to do otherwise, the quartet continued to head for the high ground. It was for this that they had come - the unique vantage point that these peaks offered. So far they had only rumours and second-hand testimony about the large force of chaos creatures in the vicinity; the Knights needed to know for certain. The scouts had been sent out to bring back reliable reports upon which battle plans would be laid. Tanya met the prospect of joining the war with caution and, yes, even a little fear, though her training kept that closely in check. Fear, if properly channelled, could be an ally in battle. There was nothing quite like a healthy fear of death to keep the eyes sharp, the mind clear and the reflexes quick. It was not at all an irrational fear. After all, fear of death was the natural flip side to a strong desire to live, and there was nothing more rational than that. She was prepared to lay down her life if the situation demanded it, but life was not a thing to be sacrificed lightly.

She pushed such thoughts to one side, admonishing herself to focus on the present and do her job. This was not Tanya's first time in command of a Scout unit, but it was still early days and she was eager to prove worthy of the promotion.

They had not travelled much further before she noticed a change in the slight sound of their horses' hooves upon the ground. A little way on and the sound changed back. Curiosity piqued, she whistled the stop and regroup signal. When the four were back together, she instructed the men to ride around the area a little way, listening intently for sound changes. They continued at this task for several minutes before Lady Nightingale signalled cease. Dismounting, Tanya used her artistic skills to make a rough sketch of their immediate surroundings. Next, she combined the observations of her fellow Knights with her own, to shade in the areas of sound change. The result confirmed Tanya's suspicions: the new sound she had first noticed was a kind of hollow sound and the pattern she had just sketched indicated the existence of underground tunnels. The precise geometric pattern of said tunnels ruled out the possibility that they were a natural phenomenon. No, what they had here were artificially constructed underground passageways - perhaps a maze of some sort. Well, her orders had been to search for `anything out of the ordinary` and this seemed to qualify.

Mounting up once more, Tanya chose to sacrifice some stealth for speed, and issued that command to her subordinates. Widening the area covered by their horses, they were able to expand their picture of the maze. Tanya had always excelled at spotting patterns in complex systems and even the most chaotic system usually contained an element of order, especially if it was a system designed by sentient beings. People were not very good at complete randomness. Mazes were always built on a pattern - after all, the people building it needed to remember how to get out. This maze was vast, but even with a relatively small fragment to work with, the Knight Lady was reasonably sure where the nearest exit ought to be. Spurring their horses, the Knight quartet cantered through the trees.

Eventually the man on Tanya's left flank pointed out a jagged grey rock in the distance. It was distinctly out of place here, matching none of the surrounding natural features. It was at that moment, that Tanya first heard the cry for help.

They responded according to the Knights' code, galloping to the rescue. Tanya saw that she was correct about the maze and it seemed there was a person or persons unknown trapped down there. Tanya and one other Knight dismounted, leaving the other two to keep watch and protect in case of attack. The rock was a marker, Tanya confirmed, for there was a large pit nearby, cleverly covered and hidden by means of a wooden latticework, supporting leaves and ferns, with natural wild growth providing further cover. One could easily pass by this way without ever knowing it was there. It also seemed quite sturdy; Tanya believed that her entire Knight division could ride right over it without risk of falling in. Down in the pit were a half-elven male and a very attractive human woman.

“Get us out of here!” the half-elf pleaded - a cry punctuated with a slightly muffled roar that echoed down the tunnel. It sounded as though it was made by a creature of almost dragon proportions, but Tanya was pretty sure it was no dragon down there.

“And sooner rather than later, if you wouldn't mind!” the young woman added, with a glib attitude that seemed quite inappropriate under the circumstances. Still, there was no telling how any one individual might react to stress.

The other three Knights each tied a strong rope to the wooden grillwork and attached the other end to his horse's harness.

“We've managed to cause a cave-in a way back there,” the half-elf offered, “But I'm not sure how much longer it'll hold the thing back.”

The Knights were just mounting up when there came an almighty crash and rock dust billowed out of the tunnel in a great cloud, choking the three individuals closest to it.

“Not--Not very long, I'm afraid,” the woman spluttered, between coughs.

At Tanya's signal, the other three Knights spurred their horses to charge, typical Knightly discipline maintaining a perfect straight line. The ropes uncoiled and pulled taut. With a resounding crack, the wooden grill broke open under the power of the charging war-horses. A heartbeat later, Tanya had a rope ladder lowered down the pit and Tanya quickly slid down to guard the two individuals while they made good their escape. The human girl climbed up first, swiftly followed by the half-elf. The latter still had one foot on the ladder when a huge grey-skinned creature burst into the open. It possessed no scales or hair, but the smooth, naked skin of an amphibian. Its forelegs were like tree trunks, built to support its great weight. Hind legs were absent on the creature, locomotion being achieved by means of a long prehensile tail that looked not unlike a giant grey leech. Tanya had always been fascinated by the study of nature and her observations of this creature suggested to her that it could move in sudden great bursts of explosive energy, its tail acting like a great coiled spring, launching the body forward. And the great head, framed by a shield-like crest, hooked, beak-like jaws, and the eyes...those eyes...

“Don't look into its eyes!” Someone shouted in warning. Tanya immediately slammed down the visor of her helm. The vision slot was designed to allow clear vision of a human-like enemy and

protect against being blinded by dragonbreath from above; the angle required for looking up at this creature's eyes was now simply impossible.

Tanya knew there was no chance of her moving fast enough to get out of the pit before the creature struck her. Therefore, she was prepared to fight, broadsword and tower shield in her hands. Inside she was terrified, but her strict training and discipline held her together to face death with calm dignity - at least on the outside.

The two rescued parties had other ideas, however. The half-elf began shooting arrows at the beast - mere pinpricks at best - but then he threw in a mithril-tipped projectile and that penetrated, causing pain if not actual bodily harm. Showing intelligence, it was now more cautious of this wooden rain.

“I’m going to try some Shadow magic,” Bunny said to the three male Knights, “but without a Catalyst, I only have a few magic tricks up my sleeve, so I suggest you pretty boys get her out of there while the thing's distracted.”

The Knights did not waste time arguing the toss over taking orders from a civilian, or her disrespectful form of address, but saluted in acknowledgement. Two of them crouched at the edge of the pit, ready to pull Tanya to safety. The third stood on standby to assist where most needed as the situation unfolded.

Bunny whispered a quick prayer - to any god who was willing to listen to a creature that was not part of their great plan - that her magic would not fail her at this critical point.

Meanwhile, something had been bothering Phaer...it was so hard to remember these things that were half-heard in childhood, or more likely overheard. How was he supposed to sift out the truth from the legends, myths and dark elf propaganda? But there was definitely something nagging him about basilisks...and about magic...

“Bunny,” he began, “I’m not sure you should--”

But it was too late; she was already committed to the spell. She unleashed her power at the Basilisk, but the magic hadn't even reached its target before the creature launched itself at an unbelievable speed, straight at her. The sumorityl's natural, instinctive defence caused her physiology to change to that of a vampire, but even she wasn't fast enough. The impact sent her flying across the forest floor, eventually coming to a halt in some bushes more than fifty yards distant. Phaer reacted with elven agility, sprinting to the nearest tree, vaulting and swinging himself up to sit on a high, sturdy branch - a vantage point from which he could fire his arrows. The wooden sticks were nothing more than an irritation to the beast, but it seemed unable to understand where his unseen assailant was. If the ranger only could only keep the basilisk distracted, it would give Bunny - who was miraculously still alive, if a little groggy - a chance to perhaps find some safety.

He cursed his memory. “I should have remembered,” he berated himself. “I should have remembered!”

However, his actions had given the Knights the time they needed to get organised. With the basilisk gone from the pit, Tanya Nightingale had been able to climb up the rope ladder unaided. A heartbeat later, all four Knights were mounted up and riding a short distance to one side. Two of them lowered their visors, wheeled their war-horses around and accelerated rapidly. Halfway through the

charge, they each picked their lance from where it was attached to the saddle and tack, smoothly lowering it to a horizontal aspect. The basilisk was taken completely by surprise as the Knights hit their target with a loud impact, lances penetrating its hide in two places. Roaring in pain and rage, it swatted one of the lances with its right leg, flinging the weapon to one side. The Knight was lifted from the saddle and impacted a nearby tree with a bell-like clang. He dropped to the ground like a broken doll and lay still.

Such use of its leg, however, had forced the basilisk to use its tail for support, effectively rooting it to the spot, which was precisely what the Knights wanted. Tanya came charging in with her partner, the remaining member of the first pair withdrawing complete with lance. The perfect timing was a marvel to behold. There was no way they could even have seen a picture of a basilisk before today, yet it seemed to the treetop ranger as if these Knights had been fighting basilisks for years. Again, their skill and training proved equal to the task, penetrating the already bloodied hide twice more. The basilisk swatted Lady Nightingale's lance aside, but expecting the move, Tanya had already let go of her weapon. She pressed her attack with her sword, dodging and weaving on her agile dapple grey. Meanwhile her partner pulled his lance free and withdrew.

This time, the two male Knights attacked together, but one swung around to attack the opposite flank. By desynchronising their charge, they were able to take advantage of the creature's repetitive behaviour. The first Knight connected as Tanya's mount jumped well clear. As predicted, the basilisk tried to swat it away. The Knight let go and withdrew as his partner connected with precision timing from the other side, aiming squarely for the other leg. It worked better than they had dared hope. The lance penetrated at the shoulder joint and the now injured leg could no longer support the basilisk's bulk on its own. The beast crashed to the ground.

Discarding their lances, the Knights drew their swords and encircled the fallen basilisk as best they could, there being only three of them.

Before Tanya could give the command for any further attack, however, the half-elf shouted out, "Stop!"

Bounding down from the tree, he ran towards the Knights, waving his arms wildly.

"Stop!" He repeated. "Don't kill it!" Without waiting for a response, he pressed, "It doesn't want to fight anymore - it never really did. It took us both a while, it being rather out of practise and me being only half-elven, but we've found a way to communicate."

"Communicate?" Tanya wondered, raising her visor to better see him.

The half-elf waved his hand to indicate a correction to his choice of words. "Well, I'm not sure if it's sentient, exactly, but it's certainly intelligent. You're lucky it's been in hibernation for so long - its mind and body haven't quite got going yet. Otherwise the outcome of this battle would likely have been quite different." He paused and implored, "Let it go. Please."

"What!" Demanded a familiar female voice. Phaer turned to see Bunny, still in full vampire mode. She was limping slightly, skin and clothes covered in patches of blood, but relatively fine, considering.

"It won't attack anyone except in self-defence," the half-elf assured her. "It instinctively hates magic; that's why it went for you."

“That monster killed that Knight--”

“Killed?” Tanya gasped. There had not been an opportunity to examine her fallen comrade. When they were such a small group, the Knights' Code - and basic battle prudence - demanded that the enemy be killed or incapacitated first.

“Well, if he’s not, I suspect he soon will be,” Bunny replied. “There was certainly plenty of blood!”

Phaer was worried that she seemed *pleased* that there was plenty of blood. Thinking of blood, he noticed she had some on her face – from her injuries, or...? He preferred not to think about the `or`.

“Two of us almost dead and it's only just got free,” Bunny continued. And you,” she poked Phaer in the chest, “want us to let it go? If you won't finish this thing, I will...I wonder what Basilisk blood tastes like. Probably not as exotic as dragon blood, but still.”

She was acting very strangely: aggressive and belligerent in an erotic kind of way. Her vampiric face displayed an extremely dangerous hunger and most frightening of all, was the way she seemed to be enjoying it. She exuded sex appeal - even more than usual - making Phaer both attracted and horrified at the same time.

The ranger tightly grabbed her shoulders, held her at arm's length and looking unflinchingly into her eyes, he told her to snap out of it.

“Bunny, this is not you! Something's got a hold on you and you've got to fight it!”

Meanwhile, the basilisk had regained its feet. It kept its eyes deliberately lowered, but made no attempt to move.

Bunny struggled, though not with the strength Phaer believed she possessed, for it was not enough to break his grip. “It's a dangerous monster and it must be killed!” She shrieked.

“There are those who would say the same thing about you!” He snapped back, immediately regretting it.

Bunny stopped struggling almost instantly, her face returning to its human form. Hanging limp in Phaer's arms, she looked mortified at her behaviour. There were even tears in her eyes.

“Maybe they're right,” she sighed.

Phaer felt moved to pull her close, but she pushed away his affection. She moved to one side and sat down on the grass, head in her hands.

“It would seem I have a decision to make,” Tanya said. “You say it is not normally a predator?”

“Only to cattle,” Phaer answered. “And then only if it’s really starving.”

“I see, and is it true that looking into its eyes can turn a person to stone?”

“As I recall, that’s misstating the fact. Say rather that it can turn you to stone if it makes eye contact with you.”

“The difference being?”

“A leopard has teeth and claws that can rip a person apart, yet I have often walked right by where one was lying in the sun. Should I have killed it?”

“No, of course not.”

“Why not? It's a dangerous animal, a predator, it might harm someone.”

“Yes it might, but unless it actually does, it has as much right to live as we do...Ah, yes,” the Knight scout agreed, responding to the ranger's pointed look. “I think I see what you mean.”

The two uninjured male Knights looked to Tanya for orders, and she gave the signal to dismount and tend their injured comrade.

They were allowing the basilisk to leave.

At Phaer's projected reassurance, the basilisk began to walk away, slowly but inexorably, its injuries healing before their eyes.

It seemed to refuse to alter its straight line course for anything - great old trees crashed to the ground, flattened as easily as blades of grass. Tanya got the impression that once this creature got into its stride, the very mountains would do well to move aside if they happened to be in its path. She agreed with Phaer's assessment - it had been cold and slow, just out of hibernation. A second battle now would already have been much different. Suddenly the Knights' oh-so-effective lances looked like twigs.

“I thank ye for thy most timely rescue, my Lady,” Phaer offered in his best Knight-speak. “And thine display of compassion towards the basilisk is, methinks, an act most noble. Thou art surely a true Knight.”

Tanya removed her helm, shaking out her wavy brown tresses, swiftly followed by her armoured gloves. Phaer took her small hand, marvelling at how soft and delicate she seemed, yet so strong and confident. Phaer was certain he had never seen a more magnificent woman in all his years.

“Thy thanks art surely unnecessary, for it is ever the Knight's honour and privilege to provide assistance and aid to those who art in danger. 'Tis indeed a pleasure.” That last word was somewhat lost in a giggle and then quite suddenly, she was laughing out loud. Shaking her head, she said, “I’m sorry. I'm afraid I wouldn't make a very good Knight of Paladinia. I know I shouldn't make fun of my brothers and sisters in arms, but the way they talk...” she confided, quietly. “Isn't it silly?”

“I've never dared say so in front of one,” Phaer quipped.

Tanya laughed again. “Probably wise,” she agreed. “Even more so if it's one of those Dark types.” She shuddered. “All those skulls and dead things they use to decorate their armour...besides,” she giggled again, “black just isn't my colour.”

“Sorry,” she apologised again. “I’m finding it a little hard to control myself. Exhilaration after a tense battle always sets off my giggles. It’s highly inappropriate, but I just can’t seem to help it. Sorry, where are my manners? I haven’t even introduced myself. Knight Scout Leader Lady Tanya Nightingale, Cavalry Division, Knights of Balance.”

Of course: silver armour, the half elf thought silently. “Phaer of the House of the Fountain,” he replied out loud.

“Well then, Phaer--” she paused as one of the other Knights approached, saluted and informed her that he had been able to heal their fallen man sufficiently to enable him to travel. Apparently this Knight was also a cleric. The Knights of Balance were the only one of the three Orders to include warrior-clerics trained and included as fully-fledged Knights, Tanya explained.

Military healers in full combat armour; it was not hard to see the advantages, Phaer considered.

Tanya told her subordinate to tie him to the saddle so he wouldn’t fall off, and then be prepared to move out. “Worthwhile though this has been,” she said, “we still have a scouting mission to accomplish and quickly.” The Knight-cleric saluted and moved away again.

“Well then, Phaer of the House of the Fountain,” Tanya resumed, “You seem to know a lot about basilisks; I thought they were a myth.”

“So did I,” the ranger admitted. “But if the childhood stories I heard are true - and today lends pretty solid evidence that they are - they were magically created in Ancient times by the dark elves.”

“And how would you know about dark elves?”

“Because he is one,” said Bunny, who had crept up silently. “Or at least, half of one.”

“I see. And you are?” Tanya prompted.

“Bernice Ardra.” To Phaer’s surprise, she did not offer her nickname.

“Miss Ardra,” Tanya mused. “Vampire, but not a vampire. Human, but not human.”

“That’s me,” Bunny agreed, apparently back to her usual flippant self. “Like the basilisk, I too was created as an experiment in magic.”

Tanya raised her eyebrows. “A sumorityl and a half dark elf.” She paused for a moment, as if considering the implications. Then she burst into a grin and offered her hand to shake. “It’s a pleasure to meet two such rare individuals! Now, you can tell me more about yourselves as we go - that is, if you will accompany us?”

“Can you help us get back to the human cities?” Phaer requested. “Shakaran, ideally. If you could spare some horses and a guide, it would be a great help to us. We have friends waiting for us.”

“Certainly. We’ll soon be returning to our main force. Once there, our leaders will be pleased to help you on your way. As for a guide, I’d like to take you myself, with my commanding officer’s

permission. I suspect you two would be interesting company. Whether with me or someone else, we can at least spare a couple of horses to speed you back to your friends.”

“Bernice?” Phaer enquired. “Shall we?”

The young woman shrugged. “Sure, it's about time somebody offered us a ride,” she said, petulantly. “My feet are starting to hurt.”

Chapter 15

The lights in the Tenth Tower glowed dimly at first, but gradually illuminated sufficiently for Rochelle to take in her surroundings. She found herself in a room that looked much like all the others in the Great Library. There was nothing in its design or structure that distinguished it in any way. The gnome supposed that made sense; the Tenth Tower had been part of the original construction of the library, and in the time of the Ancients, no doubt people came and went freely. Until the day it was sealed. How or why she did not know, but surely there had been a good reason. Part of that reason, as she had deduced earlier, must have been the intent that the hidden knowledge should be found at the appointed time - she guessed that was now. But this tower was wall to wall with filled shelves and bookcases, not to mention magical artefacts that even she had more restraint than to touch.

“How can I pick out the volumes I need?” she wondered aloud.

Her answer came in the form of a door of magical energy that simply appeared in mid-air, in the middle of the room. The frame seemed to be `drawn` first, and then the door itself was filled in, followed by three steps, leading down to the floor. The door opened and a tall, graceful woman in golden robes walked regally down the steps. She appeared human, at first glance, with complex braids of raven hair, that seemed to be spun out of the fabric of the night, but she floated with a grace and beauty that would have made any elf maid appear clumsy and awkward by comparison.

She moved unhurriedly to stand before Rochelle and when she spoke, her lilting voice was like music.

“Greetings to you, follower of the *Du y Kharia*.”

“Thank you,” Rochelle replied, not knowing the proper response.

When the apparition smiled, it was as if the sun had suddenly burst from behind the clouds. Inclining her head, she added, “And greetings to you, my friend. It has been too long, so it has.”

It took Rochelle a moment to realise it was Artisho this apparition was addressing. The druidess had quite forgotten he was with her.

The old man doffed his hat.

The apparition returned her attention to Rochelle. “You seek the knowledge of what you would term the Ancients. I am come here at this moment to assist you in your search.”

“My--my Lady,” Rochelle cried. “I am humbled...I--I don't even know how to address you.”

“My name is Ganieda,” answered the apparition with a warm smile. “Now, please, be at ease and tell me why you have come here at this time.”

Despite her vow of secrecy to Eilidh - a promise she took very seriously - the gnome told Ganieda everything without hesitation. There was no doubt in Rochelle's mind that it was the right thing to do.

“Well done, brave druid,” Ganieda complimented, placing a gentle hand on Rochelle's shoulder. The gnome was surprised to find that Ganieda was indeed no apparition, but solid and real, flesh and blood like she herself.

No, she reconsidered; flesh and blood she may be, but not like me, not at all like me.

Rochelle would have gladly worshipped this Ganieda, save for the unshakeable feeling that it would offend her...and that was unthinkable.

Instead, she found herself saying, “Druid no longer, I'm afraid. I am without magic.”

“Aye, of course,” Ganieda soothed. “That was one of the keys required to unlock this room - the lack of magic, or at least magic as you think of it. But that doesn't mean you have to be that way to exit, so it doesn't. My gift to you.” There was no gathering in of will and Life. She simply snapped her fingers - though Rochelle got the impression that even that was simply an affectation - and Rochelle's connection to her magic was restored. Then it grew, multiplied and suddenly she realised she had knowledge of druid magic beyond what she had so far learned.

“Taking you too far too fast would be damaging,” Ganieda said. “But this much is only right and proper, to be sure. A reward for getting this far.”

Over the next hour, Ganieda gave Rochelle a guided tour of the Tenth Tower, while Artisho fell asleep in a corner. She politely refused to answer direct questions, but rather directed the druid's attention to appropriate references in particular books. Rochelle had no idea how she was going to carry the stack of books, which was currently taller than she was. But Ganieda came up with an ingenious magical solution. It began as a simple black velvet bag that was never large enough to contain even one of the tomes. But Ganieda invoked magic, waving her hand over the bag or perhaps more accurately, the space inside the bag. The end result was a device that worked on a similar principle to the Corridor network. It was a manipulation of space and time allowing the holder of the bag to access items that were really stored in another dimension. The holder felt no weight beyond that of the bag itself. Insignificant to be sure.

Certainly, no living chronomagi could have performed the feat, Rochelle knew. Moreover, manipulating the dimensions within such a confined space must surely take considerable power, yet Ganieda did it with apparently little effort and no Catalyst. Rochelle realised with a jolt that she had just witnessed that which she can come to read about in books: the magic of the Ancients.

“You--” Rochelle began, hesitantly, uncertain, searching for the unfamiliar word. “You are...Faerie,” she said, finally, in an awed whisper.

Ganieda smiled regally and inclined her head slightly.

“But are you...could you possibly be...*the* Ganieda?”

“Ah well, that all depends now, doesn't it?” she teased, gently. “Aye, it does! You'll need to be a bit more specific, so you will.”

“I mean, Ganieda of the Old World? Of Terra? Earth? Ganieda, who supported Founder Merlyn, in his Great Endeavour? The Exodus?”

“Well let me see now,” she mused; a mischievous light danced in her eyes. “I do seem to recall something about that, now you come to mention it. But I think we'll just leave it at that now, if you don't mind, before your next question even forms in your head, let alone passes your lips.”

“My next question?”

Ganieda was right - it hadn't even formed in the druid's head yet - her mind was still reeling from the answer to her last one.

The Faerie leaned close and whispered, “It's not polite for even another girl to ask a woman her age.” She added a wink for effect.

Rochelle agreed to let the matter drop.

“Seriously, though, I'm afraid you're out of time for questions, my gnomish friend.”

“Out of time? Why?”

“One of the conditions that allowed you to come here was quite specific. No, I can't tell you what it is,” she refused, quickly, anticipating Rochelle's unspoken question. Under her breath, she added, “I'm afraid it will become all too obvious all too soon, aye it will.” Rochelle did not hear her. “For now,” she resumed in a normal tone, “you need to take your books and get out of here: She is coming.”

“She?” Rochelle wondered. The gnome realised the answer almost before the word was out of her mouth. “Niltsiar!” she gasped, heartbeat accelerating rapidly.

Ganieda nodded, sadly.

“What about you?”

“I must return the way I came. A meeting between the two of us would not be pleasant.”

“But you obviously have power - can't you help us?”

“I have helped you in the best and only way I can. A power battle must be avoided at all costs. It's not the way...” she paused. “...it never was,” she whispered. “Now go. Take your friend with you and don't go out the way you entered; use the South-facing door.”

“Is that safer?”

“No, it's extremely dangerous,” Ganieda answered. “But if I'm right about why she's here, you need to see this.” She offered a warm smile, and said finally, “Farewell, Rochelle Ribbons. Follower of the *Du y Kharia*.”

Without another word, she walked over to the shimmering steps and climbed them, until she disappeared through the door. The door closed gently, and then the whole structure faded into nothingness.

It was a wrench for Rochelle to leave this place. What other secrets did this tower hold? She told herself that was the reason for her hesitation, but it was not. In truth, it was the Faerie Ganieda,

whose presence seemed to linger somehow like a hint of expensive perfume. The gnome had never felt so contented, so at peace, so alive. Outside that door lay struggle, war and death. But that was what must be faced and dealt with if a contented, peaceful life were to be possible for anyone.

Looking out through a window, Rochelle saw that the magical shield was fluctuating wildly, lights were flashing on and off, people were running and screaming in panic. Cocooned as she was in there, she had not realised how far things had deteriorated. She stood, mesmerised at the scene in Mythallen's magical capital. Distracted as she was, she never noticed the magic that flowed into her mind making her forget that she had access to the Life Store that once more flowed around her. It was not a new Nullmagic spell, but rather it felt to her senses as if the original one had never been dispelled.

“Sorry, my dear,” said Artisho, in a kindly old voice. “Ganieda means well, but I think it's a little too soon for that, what with the shield ripping away everyone's magic. You must forget for a while longer, but trust me, you will remember everything. When it's time. When it's safe.”

That message planted itself in her mind like a hypnotic suggestion. Her conscious mind in a trance.

Rochelle was startled out of her daydream by a weathered, leathery hand on her shoulder. “I think,” Artisho said, softly, “that we had better leave now.”

Reluctantly, Rochelle nodded.

* * * * *

Together with the Knights, Phaer and Bunny rode for an hour or more, following a course determined by Lady Tanya Nightingale. She didn't even need to consult her map - the terrain itself providing all the directional markers she needed. The injured Knight had still not regained consciousness, but the Knight Cleric was confident he would make a full recovery given time and rest.

Tanya gave the sun an annoyed glance, as if it was all its fault that time was slipping away so fast. She had been away from the main force longer than she had anticipated. Hopefully, one of the other scouting parties had found more favourable terrain for the coming battle. She supposed it didn't really matter. The fact that her party was delayed would be message enough that the main body should not march in this direction. Plus, once she reported in, knowing the location of dark elf territory would give her commanders a strategic benefit. She also knew that the rescue of these two remarkable individuals would be considered ample reason for her tardy return. Still, she wanted to get back as soon as possible.

Admit it, Tanya, she thought, allowing herself a wry smile. You just don't want to miss the fight. Not a very professional attitude, perhaps, but an understandable one.

Tanya sent one of her men to range ahead as they approached the former location of their base camp. She needed to find out where the main force had moved on to so she could plan an approach that would keep her group out of the way. She couldn't risk wandering into the middle of a battlefield. Quite apart from endangering their own lives, she might well scupper a very delicate battle plan. But the Knights' Code dictated that her commanders would have left messengers behind to direct any late returning scouts.

Sure enough, a few moments later, her Knight scout returned with a squire messenger. Tanya signalled her group to halt while she moved a short distance away. Then remembering one of her rescues was a half-elf, she doubled the prescribed distance before listening to the hush-toned message. She tried to be discreet about it, so as not to offend her guests, but in the end, security was security.

Tanya directed the Knight Cleric to accompany the squire and take their injured comrade to safety while she continued on with her two rescues and one remaining subordinate.

It took at least another hour's ride over difficult highland terrain before they were in a position to see the chaos horde from their lofty vantage point. They had come down out of the Eastern mountains and were swarming into the valley below. Tanya's geological knowledge told her that this had once been the site of an immense glacier, forming a large frozen lake below, before narrowing further upstream into a river of ice. The ice had disappeared long before humans had first set foot on this world, but it had left a legacy - a landscape that was going to give the Knights of Balance an edge. By the looks of the size of this horde, they were going to need every edge they could get and then some! Estimating their numbers, her maths suggested that her comrades in arms were going to be outnumbered by perhaps fifteen to one. She couldn't imagine how they could possibly hope to succeed, but they had to. There was only one reason for the creatures to come this way, only one destination that made sense along this south-westerly route: the city of Shakaran. Standing between this overwhelming force and that important military stronghold was the entire company of the Knights of Balance.

Well, if we can't stop them, Tanya thought, we can at least cut them down to size - hopefully a size that will then be crushed at Shakaran's city walls.

It was for moments such as this that the Knights of Balance had been created...it was just a shame they couldn't have had another fifty years or so to increase their number and swell their ranks.

“Oh well,” Tanya whispered, dismounting. “I suppose this will have to do.”

“When I was a child,” Phaer said, making Tanya jump since she hadn't heard his stealthy approach. “My people decided to change the course of a river. Its new course disturbed a colony of ants and I remember watching thousands of tiny black dots swarming across the land in search of a new home. It looked a lot like this.”

Tanya could appreciate the analogy.

“There are quite a lot of them,” Bernice agreed.

“So, where are your Knights?” Phaer asked.

“From what I know of the battle plan, they should be appearing any moment now,” Tanya replied, calmly. More calmly than she felt.

As if on cue, fifty infantry Knights marched out of the trees to the South, maintaining a strict, disciplined formation. They were split into small cohort divisions together forming a line ten long and five deep. Fearlessly, they broke into a run, shouting, chanting and bashing their swords against their shields.

“Excuse me,” Bunny piped up, “I hate to poke holes in your battle plan, but don't you think you could use a few more Knights...like, say, a hundred times more, for instance?”

“Five thousand Knights of Balance? There can't be more than two thousand in the whole of Mythallen, I'm afraid.”

“Then you have a problem.”

* * * * *

The horde screamed and charged recklessly at the small force of silver armoured Knights, who threw their spears at the enemy. The missiles mostly hit home, but the loss of a few individuals had no significant impact on an army of close to thirty thousand. It did, however, enrage them, resulting in a mass acceleration, committing themselves to the attack. The Knight skirmishers threw their second spears - each being equipped with two as standard, in addition to their sword and shield - and then slowly withdrew, splitting their formation into several smaller units, a broken line with gaps wide enough to allow another unit through unimpeded. That was the intention. The plain narrowed to a pass between the mountains, and there a larger force of Knights appeared from among the trees, ready-formed into their small units. They marched quickly between the gaps in the skirmishers' lines, and then combined into a single line, ten deep and wide enough to reach across the width of the gorge. At the appointed place, just before the advancing horde, they stopped, shield wall in place and long pikes at the ready.

The first chaos creatures never stood a chance: their own momentum and the surge from behind impaled them on the long metal spikes. It took the deaths of over two hundred for the front lines to stop, forcing those behind to crash into them, often trampling, scratching or stabbing those who got in the way. As the pikemen began their work, two further forces of pike-wielding Knights hit with precision timing - each charging down the hillsides to attack the enemy's flanks. The horde suddenly found themselves surrounded on three sides and the battle was truly joined.

The next addition to the Knights' plan was then put into play. Knight archers and slingers fired their deadly missiles into the enemy from the safety of the hillsides. Much of horde's compliment were trapped by their sheer numbers, helpless before the rain that fell upon them.

There came a rumble, like distant thunder from the North. Tanya and her group looked to see a great cloud of dust travelling at high speed towards the battlefield. A moment later, it was clear - they were the Knight Cavalry Division at full charge. Whether the Knights wore gold armour, or black, or silver, it was always the most impressive sight in Mythallen warfare - the most terrifying if you were on the opposing side. The cavalry hit the rear end of the horde with a great crash, neatly closing the box. Phaer and Bunny watched in awe - Tanya with pride - at the revelation of Balanced Knight battle tactics: both steel and terrain neatly trapped the chaos horde. Their numbers were useless to them here. In fact, they just made the plan that much more effective. As one cavalry unit withdrew, to prevent being swept into the middle, another wave took their place without a moment's breath or respite for the chaos creatures. But there was one final element still to come.

Two dozen sapphire dragons with mounted Knights dived from above the clouds, spitting lightning bolts into the horde, sometimes swooping low enough for the riders to attack with their long lances. No sooner had they flown out of range then a similar force took their place. With the lid on the box, the chaos horde lost what little semblance of order they'd ever had, descending ironically into

chaos. The terrified creatures hacked and slashed at one another in a futile attempt to escape and flee. The damage they were inflicting on themselves was almost as much as that being done by the Knights.

The box pushed gradually inward, the dimensions shrinking as the numbers inside diminished. The Knights never allowed the creatures any space to move, but squashed them ever closer together, fuelling the chaos and panic within. Never did a single Knight come close to being swept inside that churning mass of death, such was their discipline. There were Knight casualties, inevitably, but they were few in number and the Knight Clerics were quickly on the scene to rescue and heal the fallen. Many returned to the battle within moments.

The Knights' clean lines never faltered. Tactical reserves were sent in to reinforce them before there was any real danger of a breach. All the while, the cavalry continued to pound in from behind like a great battering ram, shoving more and more enemies onto the long pikes at what Phaer arbitrarily thought of as the front end. The pike weapons were ideally suited to this task - this was what they were designed to do. The chaos creatures simply couldn't get close enough to strike at their wielders and trapped inside the box as they were, they couldn't outflank the Knights. The archers and slingers were mostly out of ammunition by this stage, but the dragon cavalry were more than enough to provide aerial bombardment.

At the start of the battle, Bunny had feared this would be a short fight. On reflection, she was absolutely right...and absolutely wrong. It was indeed a rout, but the victory belonged to the Knights of Balance. The bards would sing of this day for ages to come...assuming any of them survived the larger war. Almost before they knew it, the battle was over.

Chapter 16

Upon stepping through the doorway, Eilidh and her small group were met by a powerful gust of wind, carrying with it the stench of rotting flesh. Eilidh wanted to gag. Tuning in her magical senses, the young woman tried to determine how the corridor they were in had been constructed. The impression she got was...well...she wasn't exactly sure what her impression was. She consulted Granite as both a fellow Catalyst and a dwarf with strong cultural ties to subterranean construction. He was equally baffled.

“If it was constructed with tool and muscle alone, then their skills and methods were far beyond anything I've seen in dwarf history,” Granite admitted grudgingly.

“And if they used magic?” Eilidh pressed

“Then it's magic so alien that I cannae recognise it. Sorry I cannae be more helpful to ye.”

Eilidh smiled but said nothing aloud. *Alien*, Eilidh mused silently. *An interesting choice of words.*

Further reflection was cut short, however, as their torchlight fell upon a message scrawled on the wall in what appeared to be blood.

“Eilidh,” Toli said, with a tremor in her voice, “I think it's for you.”

Leaning closer, the Catalyst read the words:

Turn ye back, Du y Kharia!

Death awaiteth ye here.

Thy search here is meaningless.

Turn ye back!

“They're quite keen for us to go away ain't they, Miss Eilidh?” Jayne observed.

Undaunted by that grizzly writing, Eilidh was adamant that they were going to press on.

A short distance further down that perfect straight-line passage brought them to a second door, similar to the one they had just used, except this one had a clear hand panel to one side that would open it.

A final greenish warning admonished them:

Turn ye back, Du y Kharia!

Enter not, O Lost Soul.

Disturb not the Spirits

Turn ye back!

With a cavalier shrug, Eilidh ignored the advice completely and hit her palm against the door switch. A whole section of wall rose rapidly in response.

“Our quest lies this way,” she said to her hesitant friends. “Coming?”

Only a few paces down the continuing corridor, the door slid shut with a boom that echoed throughout the crypt.

“Miss Eilidh, I thought dat guard said anyone could get in ‘ere now?” Jayne asked, confused.

“Exactly,” Granite gruffed. “He said anyone could get in - he did nae say a word about gettin' out! And that means anyone who gets in here will be trapped in here with us...and we'll be trapped in here with them...if ye take my meanin'.”

Jayne scoffed, “Who else'd be way out ‘ere?”

“Oh, someone who wants whatever's in here as much as we do, I'd imagine,” Eilidh answered.

“The Enemy!” gasped the half-orc.

“Fortunately, no,” Eilidh disputed, shaking her head. “I get the impression that she is not one to get her hands dirty if she can avoid it. She has people working for her,” she reasoned. “So we're far more likely to run into agents of hers like we did at Marina Fells.”

“We'd best stay sharp then, eh, Miss Eilidh?” Jayne remarked.

“Always,” Eilidh agreed.

Eilidh was concerned about her hobbit friend. Toli had been unusually quiet since they'd entered the crypt and seemed to be retreating deeper into a shell with every step. The Catalyst was learning something of people management on this journey, and she sensed her friend would not want to discuss whatever was troubling her in front of the others. Therefore, she asked both of their companions to scout ahead - carefully. Jayne was unhappy about leaving her rear guard station, but accepted Eilidh's reasons.

“Nothing can come at us from behind without coming through that door,” the Catalyst pointed out. “Remember the noise it makes? If you hear that, run straight back here. Otherwise, you know we're safe.”

It also wouldn't do any harm, she added to herself, to give dwarf and half-orc a chance to work out their differences.

Once the pair were out of earshot, Eilidh moved close to her friend. “Are you alright, Toli?” she asked.

The hobbit gave a weak smile. “I'm not fond of enclosed, underground places,” she remarked.

“You didn't seem to object to the Marina Fells Mine,” countered the Catalyst.

“True, but most of the time I could at least feel the draught from the entrance and besides, we were fighting so much, I didn't have time to worry about it.”

“Oh, so you'd feel better if we were being attacked?”

“Eh? Oh well, no, of course not, it's just--”

“So would I,” Eilidh told her. There now. She'd said it. In talking to Toli about her fears, she had found the words to express her own.

Toli's jaw dropped. “You're serious?” she demanded, incredulously.

“Quite serious. Think about it: We've now been warned three times about some terrible danger lurking in this place--”

“--Warnings you seem to be ignoring,” Toli put in.

“I'm not ignoring them, I'm dismissing them,” Eilidh replied. “There's a difference. This place has been abandoned for a very long time and so these warnings are obviously equally old.”

“So they don't matter?”

“No, the danger they're warning us about may be very real, but there is no such thing as prophecy. All you can do is extrapolate the future from your knowledge of history and current events; plan and strategise for the future as best you can. With Temporal magic you can even simulate possible future paths, but ultimately whoever put up these signs couldn't possibly have known the exact current situation.”

“But the Wise One does.” Toli nodded in understanding. “So you've decided his instructions take priority. That makes sense. There could be all kinds of situations when coming here would be a bad idea, but given current events, the Wise One must believe it's the right thing to do.”

“Exactly,” Eilidh agreed. “That's the judgement call he made and he's the best source of information I have right now, so I'm choosing to trust him. But no, I'm certainly not ignoring the warnings. In fact, I'm deeply worried about them. They're telling us it's dangerous down here and it should be dangerous, so how come we're just strolling along here having a nice friendly little chat? Yes, I would feel better if we were being attacked, because that would be normal. Something's wrong here. It makes no sense. Your claustrophobia isn't irrational, Toli: in enclosed spaces there's nowhere to run.”

“No offence, Eilidh, but that really didn't help much.”

The young woman laughed. “No, I don't suppose it did. Anything else on your mind that I can singularly fail to help you with?”

“Not right now, thanks, but I'll let you know if--”

She never got to finish her sentence as a small group of skeletal warriors pulled themselves up from the ground behind them.

Taking discretion as the better part of valour, the two friends ran deeper into the crypt, calling for Granite and Jayne, but they were stopped in their tracks by a quartet of zombies that shuffled into view a short distance ahead.

“Don't worry,” Toli assured her friend. “I've been studying the books Prince Garald gave me.”

“The spell books?”

“Oh they're much more than that. They're actually complete tutorials,” she explained. “Study manuals designed for learning outside the classroom. Anyway, I've learned quite a bit,” she continued, with a glint in her eye. “So you see, we're not so defenceless as we were back in Marina Fells.”

Concentrating on the lead group - the group that was cutting them off from the rest of their team - Toli focussed her magician's powers. The result was a small, concussive explosion, setting fire to the slow approaching zombies. As a magician, of course, she could not actually create fire - that was conjuror territory. Instead, the magician's approach was to increase the concentration of natural flammable gases in the air surrounding the enemies. The zombies themselves generated the stray spark that caused ignition.

“Yes!” Toli cried.

Unfortunately, being undead, they were not slowed by physical pain, even when the remains of their hair, skin and ragged clothing were set alight. Onward they came, slow but steady, with the skeletal warriors ever narrowing the companions' space.

Toli was about to launch another spell, when there came a combined orcish screech and dwarven battle cry. For a moment, one zombie's torso sprouted a battle-axe, then it was cleaved in two by a curved sword, the twin to which skewered a neighbouring zombie's blackened heart. It had not even hit the ground before a third zombie was reduced to a bloody pulp from a thousand cuts from the scimitars dancing in Jayne Corr's deft hands. Granite Longbeard appeared then, amputating the remaining zombie's legs at the same time as the half-orc decapitated it. It squirmed on the ground for a moment, then lay still.

“Sorry about the delay, lassies,” Granite huffed, retrieving his second axe. “We ran into a few more of these up that way.”

“Dat passage just kept goin' in a straight line, by the way,” added Jayne. “Pretty pointless if you ask me!”

“Aye, right to a dead end. Anyway, as I say, we ran into a few o' these zombie types and we were just finishin' the job when we heard yer cries...what the--?” He trailed off as he saw the approaching skeletal band.

“We found a chest,” Jayne remarked, as she visually assessed the enemies, “wiv some pretty fine weapons in it.”

“Aye, we did,” Granite agreed. “Always good tae have spare weapons an' it looks like we'll be puttin' 'em tae good use!”

Jayne grinned. “Let's get to it, then, mate! Bet I can kill more than you!”

The dour dwarf actually belly-laughed at that. “Yer on! *Clanna na cui!*” With that war cry, he launched himself forward at the enemy, singing at the top of his rich bard's voice.

The two warriors chopped apart the animated skeletons, despatching them in short order, but from the dust that fell to the ground, more were spawned to take their place.

Toli looked on, frustrated. No magic she had learned was going to help much here.

“Eilidh,” the hobbit began, keeping her eyes firmly on the battle in case one bag of bones decided to make a break for them as the more vulnerable members of their party. “I’m afraid my magic’s not much use to us right now, and our friends can’t keep holding them off indefinitely, but I don’t know what else we can do!”

When the Catalyst didn’t immediately answer, Toli turned around, discovering that her friend had left her side. Eilidh was ignoring the battle completely in favour of examining the wall to one side. She was running her right hand along the smooth surface and periodically tapping the wall with the staff in her left.

“Eilidh? Did you hear what I just said? I mean I don’t mind repeating if you didn’t, but you might have told me you were going to wander off, it’s not good for me to be talking to myself you know and...Eilidh? What are you doing?”

“I heard you perfectly,” Eilidh said by way of answer. “And you’re absolutely right. We’re not going to get out of this with magic or weapons.”

“Then what have we got left?”

“Our minds, Toli. That’s all we ever have, really. Magic and swords are just tools. It’s our minds that are the true weapons. Use your head, Toli! Think! This passage keeps on running in straight line to a dead end, right?”

“That’s what Granite and Jayne said, but I don’t see--”

“But this is some kind of temple or crypt or something. It’s a building that people once used, yes?”

“Granted, so?”

“So who uses a single, straight, empty corridor? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Now you come to mention it, no it doesn’t really, does it?” Toli agreed.

“Which means there must be a hidden door around here somewhere.”

“OK, but if we assume this was once a place of magic built by the Ancients, wouldn’t they have naturally hidden it with their magic? If that’s the case, feeling for it won’t help and we don’t have the right kind of magic, so I guess we’re screwed.”

“Maybe you and I don’t have the right kind of magic,” Eilidh considered, “but maybe someone else we know does.”

The two warriors were still holding their own against the skeletal soldiers, but of course, one of them wasn’t just a warrior - he was a bard.

“Hey Granite!” Eilidh called out.

“Hey yerself! Have ye got any bright ideas on gettin' out of this, yet? I'm winnin' the count by two, but I cannae keep this up all day!”

“Maybe you won't have to. How do you feel about giving us a tune?”

“Ye want me tae sing?” Granite wondered, parrying a skeleton's blow with his axe and snapping a spinal column with his other fist. “Any special requests?”

“I'm not sure, do you have anything that might show up any magically hidden doors?”

“Aye, lass, I've got just the thing.” Clearing his throat, his rich baritone filled the entire tunnel with the ethereal Watchwood Melody, used to seek out things that were hidden in the dark.

Within moments, a pinkish-purple hue developed at a point just within view on the left hand side of the tunnel.

“Well done, Granite!” Toli enthused, applauding and jumping up and down, quite forgetting the danger.

A walk of just a few steps revealed it was indeed a hidden door. Eilidh tried the handle - it was unlocked. She mimed for Toli to be ready with a spell in case there was something waiting behind, but the passageway was empty.

At Eilidh's signal, Granite and Jayne made one last frenzied attack to force the skeletons back a pace, before running to meet with their companions.

The skeletons were not sprinters, so even the short-legged dwarf could outpace them easily enough.

Not taking any chances, Eilidh was ready to slam the door shut as soon as all four were safely on the other side. The Catalyst's theory that the door would be invisible to the skeletons' undead eyes appeared to be accurate.

“There you are, Eilidh” Toli said. “Now we've been attacked. Happy?”

“Yes!”

“Well I'm glad yer enjoying yerself!” Granite grumbled.

“I'm happy because I think I'm starting to figure this place out,” Eilidh replied, cryptically, and without a word of explanation, the Catalyst pressed on relentlessly, eager to examine the wonders that lay beyond.

* * * * *

In accordance with Ganieda's instructions, Rochelle allowed Artisho to lead her through the South facing door and down the spiral staircase beyond. The magical light that lit this windowless stairwell flickered wildly, which made Rochelle feel a little queasy. She kept her stomach in check, however, and concentrated on securing her footing on each step. The stairs seemed to go on forever,

taking them down to the basement. This worried Rochelle, because as far as she knew, there was only one thing in the basement of Merlyon's Central Library of Magic. When they finally reached the bottom, the druid's suspicions were confirmed. They were in a large circular room, with magical symbols of power etched into the white marble walls, floor and high domed ceiling. Dominating the room was a raised dais, upon which stood half a dozen statues. Except that they weren't statues - they were people: or at least they used to be. This was the Chamber of the Damned. It was the place where the most infamous renegade mages in Majaos history had been executed. Individuals who were decreed by the Council of Magic to be too dangerous to be allowed to live...or even to die.

Back in the days of necromancy, of course, it was entirely possible for a powerful mage to cause trouble even from beyond the grave. Therefore these vile people were sentenced to the Turning - a kind of living death. Outwardly, they were turned to stone, but it was much more than a simple stoning. The spell - known only to the Executioner - left the soul trapped in limbo, neither in the world of the living nor the afterlife. Not even the most gifted necromancers at the height of their power could contact one who had been punished in this way, and it was absolutely irreversible. But in case anyone should try some sort of mischief, the only people allowed down there were the leaders of the three divisions of magic and the Executioner - along with their Catalysts, of course. For anyone else caught down here, the penalty was death. Ordinarily, high security magic barred entry to unauthorised personnel, but now all magic in Merlyon City was failing.

Artisho put a finger to his lips to advise silence and then gestured for them to keep to the shadows and concealed places as they made their exit. His instructions were entirely unnecessary, in Rochelle's opinion. She had no intention of doing anything to give themselves away, unless the Executioner could hear the sound of a person's heartbeat, in which case she might as well be playing the drums.

Three figures appeared at almost the same instant. First, was a well-built man in distinctive robes of three colours: White, Red and Black in wide, diagonal bands. Only the Executioner wore robes like that, symbolising the fact that, under normal circumstances, they could act only with the agreement of the leaders of all three magical divisions. Magical justice was unbiased and could not be swayed by considerations of Light, Dark or Balance. A threat to magic was a threat to all. The state of emergency brought about by the current war only made the Executioner that much more dangerous. At this time, he was freed from the usual constraints to act independently in the name of swift justice. He would not be interested in explanations or excuses. He would simply kill the intruders and not lose so much as one minute's sleep over it. To describe this man as `burly` would be to call a mountain a bump. Rochelle would not have been surprised to learn he had some ogre blood in his ancestry.

With him, naturally, was his Catalyst: a pale green skinned male half-orc. Although he wore white robes, like other Catalysts, his hood and cuffs reflected the three-stripe pattern of the Executioner for the same reason.

The third individual was a tall, slender woman in robes of pure, dazzling gold. Her resemblance to Ganieda was striking, Rochelle thought, but her features were harder, sharp-angled, too perfect, and she held a look that showed contempt for a world full of creatures that were beneath her. Rochelle couldn't recall ever before having such a powerful negative reaction to someone at first sight. She was undeniably beautiful, but in the same way that a carved graveyard statue was beautiful.

This woman was as cold and unfeeling as stone.

She will soon have that smirk wiped off her face, that's for sure, the druid thought silently. *And I will be glad to see it.* The druidess could not imagine why she would be so stupid as to enter this place. Underestimating the Executioner could literally lead to a fate worse than death.

The Executioner was about to unleash some his powerful Enforcer magic upon this intruder, but paused at the last moment as recognition dawned.

"I know you," he said in a deep, gravelly voice. "You're that woman that's got everyone so bloody nervous...what's the name again?"

"Niltsiar," the woman stated, voice calm, unconcerned. That worried Rochelle. The Faerie did not seem to perceive any threat in this situation.

"Ah, of course. Niltsiar. You'll have to forgive me, love," the Executioner mocked, "I don't have much calling for remembering names in my line of work - names make little deference to the dead."

"I understand completely," agreed the woman in gold. "That's why I shan't trouble myself to ask yours."

The Executioner's eyes flashed. "You've picked the wrong mage to threaten, love! As things stand, I don't think the Council will mind skipping your trial." His smile was dangerous. "You know, I suppose I should thank you. The rewards I will be able to demand of the bloody Council for your execution will be quite...lavish!"

"Perhaps you haven't heard what I did to your pathetic little...Council." She spat the word as a curse.

The Executioner dismissed the whole event. "Bah! I know all about your grand exit from the Challenge. I couldn't care less. I have an advantage over even the Prime Magus himself."

"Ah yes, this Turning spell. You have no idea how long I've wondered how that works."

"Of course! All you had to do was ask, love. I'll be glad to give you first-hand experience...the last experience you'll ever have!"

There were no more words; only a gesture from the Executioner signaling to his Catalyst that he was ready to perform this complex and demanding spell. It was no less demanding for the Catalyst, who had to continually Drain Life from the target and Grant it to the Executioner. No mage had enough Life to cast the spell himself. No-one could amass that much Life. Nor could the target mage be allowed to retain any magic, so the Catalyst was the key to the process.

Rochelle didn't have a Catalyst's magical senses, but she could still feel the flow of Life change. Out of Niltsiar, through the Catalyst, to the Executioner, then back to Niltsiar in a different form.

Niltsiar cried out, eyes tight shut in pain from the dual attack - the Life forcibly wrenched from her store and the transformation her body was undergoing. Her skin turned grey and began to slowly thicken and solidify. The effect grew from her feet upward until it reached the base of her neck.

Abruptly, she stopped screaming and her eyes flew open. A moment later, it was the Executioner who was screaming. The stoning effect faded from Niltsiar's body and began to encase him instead. The Catalyst tried to stop the flow of magic, but he couldn't. He no longer had control - he was now merely a conduit for Niltsiar's destructive power. The Executioner was soon fully Turned - to all appearances, a mere statue.

Rochelle jumped when Artisho whispered in her ear. "I think it's time we were making our way out of here. Slowly and quietly."

The druid nodded and began to move, very, very carefully.

Meanwhile, the Catalyst bolted for the nearest exit, but he never had a chance of making it. Agreed conventions of magical warfare stated that one did not deliberately target a Catalyst unless they were actively trying to Drain one's Life. This law applied to all mages of all orders and all three divisions. Anyone found guilty of acting against this convention would be labelled a renegade and executed as such. Magic was too powerful, too dangerous to allow a renegade to live. Order in magic must be maintained. Even the black division agreed with this - in fact, they were perhaps magical law's strongest supporters, for their prime directive was to protect the magic. Whatever personal ambitions a dark mage might have, it must not endanger the essence of magic itself. A dark mage must put the magic first, himself second and the world a distant third.

Niltsiar, however, cared nothing for magical laws or warfare conventions. The only magic that mattered was her own. And she hated Catalysts. They were an abomination that allowed magic to exist in this sickening state of weakness. She was looking forward to executing every last one of them and now one of them had kindly helped her learn how she was going to do it. She floated towards the Catalyst who was rooted to the spot, and placed her right hand in claw-like fashion over his head. Then she unleashed her magic at his mind, ripping away the parts she did not need. He screamed as pain exploded in his skull, a long, piercing, agonising scream.

"Quietly, my child," Niltsiar soothed, and he fell instantly silent. In moments, his personality, his identity were gone, leaving only a walking, breathing receptacle of knowledge that would respond only to her stimuli. "That's much better. Now, my child, you will assist me. All you have to do is perform the role you would normally play in a Turning. I shall take care of the rest. Come," she commanded, and the Catalyst mindlessly followed her to stand near one particular statue - that of Akar-Sel.

Niltsiar spoke soothingly, almost lovingly, to the statue. "You have long been my foremost agent. You performed your role beyond even my expectations and you have paid a high price, endured much in my name. Now I come to reward you and return you to my service. Come, I have need of thee."

As Rochelle tiptoed ever closer to the exit door, she witnessed Niltsiar performing the Turning spell...only it wasn't the Turning spell, not quite. This was different somehow. The doomed Catalyst silently maintained the flow of Life, even as his body began to change. At the same time, the

stone of Akar-Sel's statue began to transmute into flesh. Rochelle had to rub her eyes before she could believe what they were showing her. Niltsiar was reversing a Turning spell - a feat that no-one in history had ever achieved.

At that moment, Artisho sneezed and then a second time and a third.

The old man shook his head in wonder. "It's always three," he remarked.

"Who's there?" Niltsiar demanded. "Show yourself or I shall level this place and bury you in here!"

"Oh dear!" Artisho breathed.

On a sudden impulse, Rochelle said, "I don't think she can do anything to us while she's working such complex magic."

"A very astute observation, Miss Ribbons," the old man agreed, impressed. "That being the case, I think it's time for Plan B."

"We run?"

"We run," Artisho affirmed.

Chapter 17

Tanya gave the order to mount up and led her group carefully down from the mountains, making straight for a particular pair of Knights - a man and a woman. Each wore a cloak of silver and bore on the breastplate, the symbol of crossed swords encircled in the centre by a crown. It didn't take much deductive reasoning to realise these were the supreme commanders of the Knights of Balance. The man was none other than the grandson of the founders, although there was no right of succession in the Code of Balance. Tanya and the other Knight dismounted, dropped to one knee and clamped a fist over their heart. Phaer also bowed the knee, and so too did Bunny, though she used an unnecessary excess of grace and charm. Her sensual body was a weapon she wielded with the skill of a Knight swordsman. Phaer was just grateful that these two powerful individuals did not really possess anything that might conceivably be...`misplaced`. On the back of that thought, Phaer made a mental note to check his own pockets, just in case.

"Lady Nightingale, stand please," the female Knight leader invited, kindly, "and introduce us to your companions."

The group stood and Tanya gave a brief account of the scouting mission that turned into a rescue.

The Supreme Knight Commander entirely agreed that Tanya had acted properly, as a true Knight ought to. "Moreover," he said, "the knowledge of the location of the dark elf village could prove extremely valuable. Standing orders will be issued to all Knight Commanders to avoid the area by a reasonable margin. There is nothing to be gained by a confrontation with the dark elves at this time, though I suspect that time may come."

His consort seemed especially interested in the fight with the Basilisk. "Are you sure the creature was not seriously injured?"

Tanya deferred the question to Phaer, citing him "an expert in Basilisk physiology."

"I don't believe its wounds were in any way life threatening, My Lady, and it has the innate healing capacity of a dragon. Most likely, it will go to ground somewhere to rest. Somewhere warm, ideally, so it can regain its full strength after its long hibernation."

"Yes," she agreed. "That would be my assessment as well...based on what you have told us," she added quickly - too quickly, in Bunny's opinion, but the sumorityl kept the observation to herself. She noticed that both top ranking Knights had slight wounds from the battle. Nothing serious, just enough to draw a little blood. Just enough for her to smell, and hers smelled odd.

The Supreme Commander turned his attention to the rescues. "I am pleased my Knights were in time to save you. Lady Nightingale is right to describe you as `rare individuals` but it strikes me that the reason for the two of you being together out here must be more than coincidence. Tell us, if nothing prevents you, what business are you about?"

"I'm sorry, Sir," the half-elf apologised, inclining his head, respectfully, "but it's a long story and we're not at liberty to tell it."

Bunny, however, piped up, "We're on a top secret quest for King and Country to save the world from Niltsiar, fighting the same war as you, in our own way, in our own time and, so far, on our

own feet. Any chance of some horses?" She paused. "Please." As a further afterthought, she added, "Sir?"

Phaer just stared at her in utter disbelief.

Excusing them both from the commanders' presence for a moment, the ranger dragged Bunny to one side.

"What did you do that for?" he demanded. "You've pulled some stunts before, but this... This isn't a game, you know; our quest is meant to be secret!"

Bunny snorted. "You're one to talk!" she said, pointedly. "I just thought they should hear the short version from us before he makes a scene."

"He? He who? What--" the half-elf stopped in mid-breath at the sight of a powerfully built man with white hair and a familiar arrogant swagger about him. At least, he appeared human at the moment, but Phaer knew better. In his other form he was known as the Black Dragon of Avidon, although he was actually an obsidian. He was being escorted by a group of half a dozen Knights with weapons drawn. The ranger didn't know much about Knights of Balance, but if their Code was anything like that of the Paladins, according to Hannah, a Knight did not draw a weapon unless they intended to use it or at least until a clear threat had been identified. Going into an unknown situation with weapons drawn could be interpreted as a threatening act, forcing the other party's hand into starting a fight. The Knights believed that it was not honourable to start a fight with those who had not demonstrated themselves to be an enemy. At least, that's what the Knights of Paladina believed. If these silver-armoured cousins of theirs held to a similar notion, then they were anticipating bloodshed. Phaer observed that none of the Knights were using a sword to threaten Loric, favouring spears for the task instead. He didn't know if that meant anything.

Phaer's mind flashed back to when he first met Eilidh en route to Shakaran and how the ill-timed appearance of Loric the Black Dragon had got them all arrested and, frankly, lucky not to be killed. If history were to repeat itself here, he didn't fancy the chances that his luck would hold a second time.

"I've told you before," Bunny admonished the ranger. "Don't pay so much attention to what's going on in here," she tapped her temple, "that you forget to pay adequate attention to what's going on out there." Her hand encompassed the wider world.

"He's spotted us," Phaer observed, ignoring the sumorityl's snipe.

Bunny sighed, deeply. "I suppose that means it's too late to just get on a horse and ride away before the blood starts flowing?"

The half-elf glared at her.

She held her hands up in mock surrender. "OK, OK, leave it to me," she advised, as she gave Phaer a patronising pat on the shoulder. "I'll go talk us out of this mess...again." And then she was all smiles, sensuality and seduction as she floated over to where Loric stood seething.

"Loric!" Bunny enthused. "How wonderful to see you again!"

The effect of her voice on Loric's rage was akin to pouring cold water onto a fire. It died down to glowing embers, smoking, smouldering and while less dangerous in the immediate term, it would be wise not to get complacent or take him lightly. If left unattended, he could yet spark a forest fire.

“Bunny? How did you get way out here?”

“By way of a city full of dark elves, an army of chaos creatures, four Knights of Balance and one Basilisk,” she replied, flippantly, making a show of examining her nails. “Nothing I couldn't handle. How about you? What are you doing here?”

“I was following a lead in my quest until I saw the bodies stacked up down here.”

Loric had been naturally curious as to what force could kill so many, but at first, hadn't wanted to get side-tracked - the need was too great. Somehow, though, he had been unable to resist. It had felt like he was being pulled down, as if a great weight had been placed on his back and it was too much for him to carry. Then a group of sapphire dragons with silver armoured riders burst out of the clouds and demanded that he leave the area immediately.

“With some fast talking, I managed to convince them that I needed to make an emergency landing,” Loric continued.

The Knights had consented to allow it, on the condition that Loric accept an armed escort to their Supreme Commanders who would decide his fate. Loric had reluctantly agreed to their terms.

“Well, lucky for you, Phaer and I are already great friends with the leaders of these tin soldiers. So you see,” she concluded, “you have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

Paying the guards' protests no mind, she slipped up beside the Black Dragon of Avidon and snaked her arm firmly around his.

“By the way,” Bunny added. “Where's Callie?”

“I had to leave her so I can try to get help.”

“Help? Help for what?”

“Later,” he insisted.

Sir Marcus Braithwaite, Supreme Commander of the Knights of Balance, listened to his officer's account of Loric's appearance. He then asked Loric to explain his actions. Phaer was thankful that Sir Marcus seemed wise enough to simply ask questions in a dispassionate manner, as one seeking truth, never implying any kind of accusation. This attitude did much to soothe Loric's temper, staying his hand against any precipitous action.

Having listened to Loric's side of the story, Sir Marcus turned to the sumorityl, asking, “You say you know this individual, Miss Ardra?”

Phaer had to resist the temptation to turn around and see who the Knight was talking to - it was so strange to hear his companion addressed by her proper name. Until they ran into these Knights, he couldn't remember her using it more than once or twice.

“Oh yes!” she enthused. “This is Loric, the famous Black Dragon of Avidon. We go way back!...Sir.”

Phaer cringed at her habit of `almost forgetting` the “sir” but so far the Supreme Commander had given no indication that he even noticed.

“Hey, girl,” Loric protested, “don't exaggerate. A handful of moons is hardly `way back`.”

Bunny shrugged. “It is when you're five years old.”

“I thought you were only four?”

The sumorityl grinned. “It's my birthday!”

“Oh, many happy returns!” Tanya offered.

“Thank you,” Bernice replied with a warm smile.

As a half-elf, it was difficult for Phaer to comprehend the notion of a fully grown individual having lived for just five years. He couldn't imagine how Loric must feel about it, for whom five years was scarcely time to draw breath.

“Perceptions of time aside,” Sir Marcus said, not allowing the situation to leave his control, “you know each other and have travelled together.”

Phaer decided to cut off any potential flip remark that might fly from Bunny's lips. “Quite right, Sir,” he confirmed. “We travelled together, fought together, nearly died together, in fact.” The ranger decided that ought to appeal to the mentality of a Knight. Friendship and camaraderie forged through shared adventure and hardship.

“Well, Mr Loric, Black Dragon of Avidon, I see no fault here,” Sir Marcus concluded, “though I would like to get to the bottom of this strange `pull` phenomenon you spoke of.”

“Me too,” Loric agreed, casually popping his neck, “I need to know if it's safe to take off again. I've got things to do, you know!”

Sir Marcus' female partner spoke up then, asking the Knight Cavalry Officer, “Have you had any unusual reports from our Sapphire Knights?”

“None whatsoever, My Lady.”

“Sapphire Knights?” Bunny interrupted. “You mean dragons, don't you?”

“Why of course I do, child,” the Lady affirmed, seemingly a little confused by the question.

Bunny raised an eyebrow, but whether in response to the diminutive or something else, Phaer was not sure.

“Our dragons are not pets, you know!” The Lady admonished the sumorityl. “Nor are they merely steeds like our horses, as valued and honoured as our equines surely are. Dragons are sentient beings - the eldest residents of this world that humans have adopted. Our sapphire wyrms are considered fully fledged Knights - our comrades, our brothers and sisters in arms.”

“We are highly honoured by their commitment to our organisation,” Sir Marcus added, reverently.

Loric was impressed by their attitude and began to see these silver-armoured Knights in a new light.

The Supreme Commander dismissed the Dragon Cavalry Officer, who saluted with a fist over his heart and turned on his heel, walking briskly away.

“Now then, Mr Loric,” Marcus said, “I hope you will forgive our taking precautions and not hold it against us.”

“Not at all, Sir,” Loric assured him. “In fact, from what I've seen of you lot so far, I'm impressed. Man!” He whistled in wonder. “Taking out a group of chaos creatures that size was really quite something - I wish I'd been here to watch! Then having done it, any other force would be busy celebrating by now! But you were still vigilant enough to spot a single rogue dragon and act to contain me without antagonising me...and believe me,” Loric added with a dangerous grin, “I'm not easily contained but very easily antagonised.”

Sir Marcus laughed. “Then I'm glad we got it the right way around!”

“But seriously,” the Lady smoothly interjected, “I wonder, could you tell us something of your quest?”

“Normally, I wouldn't talk to mortals about it - it's a dragon thing and they wouldn't understand. But I think maybe you would, at least partly. First, though, with your regard for dragons, I have to warn you about something: There is some kind of monster out there...”

“Monster?” The others wondered in unison.

“A beast of frightening size and power - even by my standards. It's fierce and deadly...and it slaughters dragons by the dozen.”

Chapter 18

Rochelle and Artisho sprang out of hiding and rushed through the door. Wooden stairs led upward to the library's main entrance. Not even halfway up, Artisho slipped, sprawling on the steps. A hail of razor-sharp shards of ice struck two inches below his feet, encouraging him to get up quickly and continue upward after the gnome.

"I guess that means she's finished," Rochelle remarked when the old man joined her at the top.

Artisho was too out of breath to respond and an exploding fireball, close enough to singe his beard, threatened to empty what little air remained in his lungs.

Rochelle grabbed his sleeve and pulled him onward. If they could just get out into the city, she thought, they could lose their attackers in the streets of Merlyon.

So intent was she on looking back and worrying about their pursuit that she failed to pay adequate attention to where she was going. She tripped over the threshold at the main entrance, and ploughed headlong into scarlet robes.

Those robes, as she tentatively looked up, were trimmed in black and bore the night blue symbol of Dark Magic. That symbol was worn only by one person: the Master of Dark Magic and Supreme War Master himself...Drizdar.

"Master!" Rochelle squealed in terror.

Niltsiar behind; Drizdar in front: `between a rock and a hard place` didn't do it justice.

The Master of Dark Magic glowered, about to launch a vicious tirade - of words or of magic, the gnome was not sure - when a pair of lightning bolts rushed towards them. Drizdar's elven reactions were instinctive, shielding against the attack. Those reactions had saved him from innumerable attacks in the past and his vast experience allowed him to switch instantly from defence to attack, where other mages would have been forced back on their heels - if they survived at all.

The dark archmage forgot all about Rochelle and Artisho, pushing them roughly aside and out of his way. Running into the Master of Dark Magic was one thing - a magical attack was something else entirely and it demanded the ultimate retribution. His Catalyst had already replenished enough Life to compensate for what the shield spell had cost. She stayed close behind her elven master for protection from any stray magic that might harm her and prepared to support Drizdar in his fight.

Drizdar, however, was not prepared - not for the sight of his enemies. When they emerged out into the cool night air, he recognised both of them, for he had watched Niltsiar's meteoric rise up the magical ranks with interest, awe and not a little fear. As for the other, he had known him for much longer.

"*Shalfi?*" The Dark Archmage breathed in wonder, using the elven word for master or teacher. It had been more than two centuries, but that didn't matter. He could never forget that he had once been apprenticed to this individual. In fact, the young Drizdar had been instrumental in exposing

his master as a renegade and key witness at his eventual trial. A trial at which Akar-Sel had been sentenced to the Turning. What strange magic had Niltsiar used to free him? Drizdar wondered. No one else, not even Gamaliel, would have a clue, but the apprentice of Akar-Sel had learned much more than he would ever let on. More, even, than his former master was aware of. Therefore, while Drizdar could never duplicate Niltsiar's magic - and wouldn't even if he could - at least he could make some educated guesses as to how it was done.

“Well, if it isn't my treacherous apprentice!” said Akar-Sel, voice dripping with arrogant superiority. “Master of Dark Magic and Supreme Master of War, no less! You've done very well by your betrayal.”

Drizdar shrugged, “You'd have done the same in my place.”

“Of course I would have!” Akar-Sel agreed. “I always knew you had potential - that's why I took you as my apprentice. It's just a pity you chose the losing side.”

“It is not too late for you, Drizdar,” Niltsiar offered. “You would make a fine agent. I could use you.”

Drizdar was barely containing his boiling anger. “No-one uses me. You are a threat to the magic and I will stop you.”

“Oh really? Then why are you standing there, weak and impotent? Surely you must long to strike me down! Go ahead, smite me...or are you afraid?”

Drizdar gave a derisive snort. “I will not be goaded by you!” he said, with a contemptuous flick of his flowing dark hair. “Don't insult my intelligence. I know what you did to the Council and I realise I can't stand against you in a direct fire-fight. But I have plans in motion, and one way or another I will see you destroyed.”

Throughout this exchange, Rochelle had been trying to sneak away. She got the feeling this was going to end badly and she didn't want to be around when the fireworks started. Unfortunately, she had only managed to move a few yards before her companion sneezed...once, twice...then a confused look spread across his face.

Niltsiar's expression also changed to shock and perhaps even a hint of fear. Some detached part of Rochelle's mind noticed this curiously - Niltsiar viewed the most deadly warlock in Mythallen as little more than dust beneath her feet, so why should she be frightened of this daft old man?

“You! How can you be here?” Niltsiar demanded.

“Eh? Hugh? Hugh's here?” the old man wondered, looking around, frantically. “Hmmm? What? You mean me? Sorry young lady, but you must have me confused with someone else. My name isn't Hugh...it's...er...that is, I mean...ah...well, it's definitely not Hugh.”

“Thou art correct,” Niltsiar agreed, haughty, superior look returning rapidly. “My mistake. `Artisho`, that's what we all called you is it not? `Artisho, Artisho, Artisho`!” she mocked. “It was always three, wasn't it, old man?”

“Not this time, apparently,” he remarked. “There must be a third one in there somewhere. Wait a minute...don’t I know you, young lady?” He started forward in uncertain, tottering steps, squinting his eyes. “You look familiar somehow, but I just can't place you...the old memory starts to go at my age, you know.”

The instant he reached her, there was a flash of magic that sent the old man sprawling several feet away, floundering on his back, hat smouldering off to the left. He sneezed violently.

“Three!” exclaimed in triumph. “I told you it's always three!”

Drizdar took full advantage of that momentary distraction, launching a huge ball of liquid flame at Akar-Sel and the renegade's hastily cast shield only partially protected him from the blast. Then all hell broke loose and Rochelle dived for cover. Rationally, she supposed she should run away, even if that meant leaving Artisho, whom she rather liked. There was no way she could help him anyway. Besides, he had an unlikely ally in the person of the Master of Dark Magic.

A ball of superdense air was blocked by Drizdar's column of rock that grew instantly out of the ground. As the rock shattered, the archmage threw shards of ice at his shalfi, but a shield of fire melted them harmlessly. Akar-Sel followed up with poisoned darts, but Drizdar simply teleported himself and his Catalyst to one side. Lightning bolts shot out from both palms, but Akar-Sel anticipated the attack.

His response was something Rochelle had never seen in her life: He countered lightning with lightning. Electrical bolts shot out from his palms, too, only it was some kind of black anti-lightning. It connected with Drizdar's bolts and soon both were grunting and sweating with physical effort. The two forms of lightning seemed to cancel each other out where they met; Rochelle couldn't understand how that was possible. The pair locked themselves into this deadly contest, committing their whole being to whatever the outcome might be.

Drizdar's Catalyst had highly efficient raw magic conversion skills, it was one of the reasons she'd got the job as Drizdar's personal magical partner. Dark mages tended to have a greater Life Store than their counterparts, valuing instant power. Dark Catalysts, then, specialised in a high `raw magic to Life conversion ratio`, feeding their charges large refills of Life. White mages, by contrast, usually possessed a lesser Life Store, so their Catalysts tended to Grant Life in smaller, more frequent bursts. Many texts had been written on the subject, each reaching a different conclusion over which system worked best. The truth was that they were probably roughly equal, just different.

As one Balance aligned magicologist wrote:

The question of which system is best is not unlike comparing the physical fitness level of a sprinter to that of a long distance runner. It is, quite simply, horses for courses. Those of the dark alignment prefer instant access to great power over a short period of time - thus their attacks tend to be swift and deadly. Our white magic colleagues, on the other hand, prefer a more defensive style, opting for a lesser expenditure of Life over a sustained period. Statistics from contests of magic lend their weight of evidence to the hypothesis that the longer a battle continues, the more likely it is that the white mage shall be victorious.

This contest, however, was between a dark warlock and a renegade. Since the renegade had no Catalyst, the text books said Drizdar should ultimately win, but it was time to throw those text

books away as the dark lightning from Akar-Sel's hands grew inexorably longer, eating into the silver-blue lightning of Drizdar's conjuring. Rochelle was not sure what would happen if that dark lightning should reach the Master of War, but it surely wouldn't be pretty.

Meanwhile, Artisho had got to his feet, apparently none the worse for wear, but there was a dangerous gleam in his eyes as he said, "Now then, young lady, that wasn't very nice, but then you always did lack the social graces."

The battle that ensued between them was very different. There was no elemental magic, no electrical magic, in fact there were no physical manifestations whatsoever. They seemed to exchange charges of raw magic. Great columns of purified magic threatened to smash into one, only to be dissipated or swept aside by the other. Concentrated raw magic rained down, only to be blocked by the magical equivalent of an umbrella. This was in addition to the mental attacks that flew in each direction, only to be resisted by force of the other's will. As frightening as the other battle was, Rochelle decided this was more so, by several orders of magnitude.

The magic Drizdar was using was far more terrible than anything Rochelle would ever be capable of because she was Secret of Water not Fire, but she had studied war magic during her training with the Hand of Darkness armies in Avidon, so she understood what he was doing.

Akar-Sel's lack of Catalyst was disturbing and his black lightning was odd in the extreme, but at least it was recognisable as an electrical attack. Convert magical Life energy into electrical energy and direct it with your will. That was how it worked. That was how all magic worked: converting Life into some other form of energy or matter as directed by your will. Akar-Sel was the most powerful and dangerous mage in modern history - perhaps the most powerful since the Age of the Ancients. In that case, the idea that he might have amassed an incredible Life Store could be seen as an eminently logical conclusion. Also, if he knew spells that even Drizdar did not, that too, was only logical, from a certain perspective.

Rochelle could use reasoning and some imagination to comprehend what was going on between those two, but the battle between the not-so-crazy old Artisho and Niltsiar was altogether different. A huge hammer the size of an adolescent dragon swung down on Niltsiar, but an anvil shape appeared and the hammer collided with that instead. As it recoiled, it even rang like a blacksmith's workshop. It was ridiculous! The magic had no physical substance, so how could it make a sound? In fact, the whole thing looked frankly bizarre and if she had not known how lethal Niltsiar had been to the Council of Magic, Rochelle would have laughed out loud at such a display.

As if reading her mind, Niltsiar suddenly burst into laughter herself - a harsh, cruel, mocking laugh. "This is really quite ludicrous, don't you agree, old man? You know full well that your attack is no threat to me. This is nothing more than a play, a lightshow with high drama! Why hold back so? Why not smite me down?"

"Don't tempt me," Artisho growled in reply.

She laughed again. "Such angry words...such angry, empty words. You will not fight me with your full power. You can't!"

"I wouldn't count on it!" the old man snarled.

Niltsiar laughed derisively. "You wouldn't dare! Just as my father never did."

Artisho was physically shaking with fury. "You leave your father out of this. He was a great man and you destroyed him!"

"Yes I did. I destroyed him because he was weak. He held back the true potential of magic in this world, and this-" she swept her hand out to encompass the continued pitched struggle between former teacher and apprentice "-this is where his `reforms` have led." Her look was one of utter contempt. "Pitiful."

"He had good reasons, he--"

"Yes, yes, he always had his reasons. Reasons for the erosion of power in this world. Reasons? Excuses I call them!"

"I'm warning you to stop speaking of your father like that, or--"

"Or what? You'll destroy me? You're welcome to try; indeed if only you would try there might be some hope for you. But you won't, because you are a weak, snivelling coward, just like my father."

Artisho's face had turned bright red by now. "STOP!" He roared. "Stop it now or so help me I WILL show you my full power, use it as I did once before and it just might surprise you!"

Niltsiar threw her arms wide in a mock offering of herself. "Come then," she invited him. "Show me. Unleash a terrible something on me! My magic shall rise to counter yours, the two shall combine, multiply and grow!" Her voice was a great, controlled crescendo. "And together, you and I, together we shall destroy the world! Come, great mage, let us forge a new world in a baptism of fire!"

Rochelle's heart started racing with terror as the magical aurora surrounding Artisho grew larger and larger. The air fairly crackled with a power greater than a thousand suns and still it grew. Niltsiar's aurora grew to match; her laughter was borne of exhilaration, ecstasy...and unbridled ambition.

Niltsiar was right, Rochelle realised. Together their power could well destroy the world! It was all going to end right here and now and there was not a thing she could do about it. Tears coursed unchecked down her cheeks in a flood of emotion.

Artisho bellowed in fury, barely able to contain the power that longed to be unchained. Then his cry changed to frustration and despair.

"NO!" he cried as his aurora flickered, faltered and died. "No," he whispered, panting and sweating, leaning heavily on his staff in utter exhaustion. "No," he repeated. "I will not do it. I will not help you destroy this beautiful world. Such power cannot be allowed, that was the whole point...the reason...for all of it." He seemed ready to drop. Frankly, Rochelle was amazed his heart could stand up to the strain at his age...come to that, she was surprised her own heart was still beating! The fact that Akar-Sel's dark lightning was now mere inches away from Drizdar barely registered.

Niltsiar allowed her own power build-up to vanish harmlessly into the air. "Such weakness!" She said. "Such a distressing lack of spirit! It is sad to see, though not surprising."

Artisho shook his head. "You just don't understand. I don't need to fight you, power against power to defeat you. There are other ways, other strategies."

"Strategy?" Niltsiar barked a laugh. "Don't talk to me about strategy! I could always defeat you at chess, old man."

In a heartbeat, the powerful, anguished battle mage was gone. His eyes glazed over and he became once more the scatter-brained old man, Artisho. "Chess?" He wondered in confusion. "Who said anything about playing chess?" He tapped his staff on the ground in the manner of old men seeking attention. "Chess indeed! Humph! Boring game anyway," he muttered. "I'm playing poker," he announced, "and I have an ace up my sleeve!"

Out of nowhere, a bronze dragon materialised in the air above them - it was Brash, coughing a magical cloud of toxic gas at his enemies below. Being magically directed, the cloud only affected those his mind targeted as his enemies. Taken completely by surprise, both Akar-Sel and Niltsiar were soon coughing and preparing hasty counter-spells. Drizdar took full advantage of Akar-Sel's distraction, ceasing his lightning attack whilst simultaneously teleporting to one side where this time he trapped his opponent within a cylindrical cage of fire. The walls contracted, searing and burning the renegade. Drizdar continued to press home his advantage relentlessly, mercilessly.

"Now then," Artisho continued, examining the playing cards he had just taken out of a pocket in his robes - along with an ace from his left sleeve. "If I add that to my two royal pairs..." Two silver dragons materialised, complete with gold-armoured riders, joined a split second later by a lightning-spitting pair of blues ridden by Dark Knights. "...Yes, I would say that gives me a winning hand.

"Rochelle?" He called out - the gnome ran out of hiding to his side. "I'd say it's time we were going, wouldn't you?"

Rochelle nodded, unable to speak.

Artisho snapped his fingers and they were both teleported onto Brash's back in mid-air. Only yesterday, Rochelle knew she would have been greatly impressed by such precision teleportation, but after the last few minutes, it seemed entirely mundane and ordinary.

"How did you know the dragons were coming?" Rochelle asked as the bronze sped them on a course for the Paladinian Knights' barracks.

Artisho tapped her on the head with his staff. "Weren't you paying attention back there? This is high drama, my girl. And you know the secret to high drama, don't you? Just like comedy..."

"...It's all a matter of timing!"

Brash strained every muscle and sinew to achieve his best possible flight speed. Bronzes were not such fast flyers as silvers, but desperation gave him extra pace. He couldn't keep this up for long, but that wasn't important. All he needed was to get away from the immediate vicinity as quickly as possible.

Rochelle's stomach wasn't enjoying the experience, and she gave it voice to complain, "Can't we slow down a bit now?"

“Unwise,” Artisho advised. “Even dragons won't keep Niltsiar at bay for long, I'm afraid.”

As if to prove the old man's point, the air above the Great Library ignited and four charred objects streaked down to hit the ground like a meteor shower. Brash was thankfully outside the blast radius...but not by much.

“Timing indeed!” Rochelle breathed. “How--?”

The after-effects of the explosive spell snatched her question away from her. First, they caught some severe air turbulence, throwing Brash's flight rhythm off. Then the sudden change in local temperatures made the air thin. The bronze fought, faltered and stalled, trying in vain to catch suitable air currents, but they proved elusive as he plummeted, spinning towards the ground.

Chapter 19

“A dragon predator?” Suddenly alert, heart accelerating with fear and dread, Phaer had to stop himself from physically grabbing Loric and shaking the details out of him. “What was it like? Describe it! Don't ask why; just tell me! Quickly!”

Loric obliged and Phaer sank down onto the ground as if all strength had faded from his legs. Shaking his head, he muttered, “What have we done? It's madness; utter madness. Not enough that `She` is back, now she has a pet as well.”

“Pet? What are you talking about?” Loric demanded.

“No, it's no good,” Phaer said in despair. “It's all coming apart, all of it, the whole world. How can we possibly fight this?”

Unlike the ranger, Loric did not trouble himself to hold back. With a burst of anger and speed, he picked the half-elf up off the ground and threw him around, roaring. “You know something about this, don't you? You know and you're not telling us! Well you are going to tell me! You're going to tell me now or I swear I'll kill you where you stand!”

“Hey!” Phaer protested. “Let me go! What the abyss has got into you?”

“This is way beyond your little secrets, half-elf! Callie's life is at stake!”

“Callie?”

“Yes, Callie - Calandra - you remember her? She was injured when that thing attacked! She saved my life and her reward? Paralysed!” He spat the word.

“What?!” The others gasped.

“That's right - her spine snapped and now she can't move. She's a silver dragon - she belongs in the sky, finding joy in flight and now she can't even walk, can't even stand. And by all the gods and demons I will find a way to help her but first I need to get past that...that...monster out there. And you,” he yanked Phaer roughly to his feet once more, “are going to tell me everything you know about it!”

“Alright! Alright!” Phaer agreed. “But let me be clear,” he warned, setting his jaw. “Don't even think about laying your paws on me like that again, or you're going to lose them!”

Loric growled and went for his sword, only to remember he had surrendered it to the Knights as a show of his peaceful intentions. Sir Marcus now held it and the Black Dragon gave him a meaningful look.

“Far be it from me,” he said, “to interfere in your private dispute, and of course your blade is yours whenever you wish, but if Phaer has information you require, I'd suggest you let him share it before you cut out his tongue.”

“Stay your hand, Loric,” intoned the Knight Lady, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Control the Fire Rage.”

“Control the what?” Bunny wondered.

“Later,” Loric insisted, although Bunny wasn’t looking at him, she was staring intently at the Knight Lady.

Her words had a remarkable impact on the Black Dragon, cutting through his anger, as a lifeline to his reasoning. With an acknowledging bow of the head, he took a firm grip on his fraught emotions and took a step back from Phaer.

“Thank you, My Lady,” said the ranger.

She smiled serenely but said nothing.

The Supreme Knight Commander asked if they needed privacy, but Phaer shook his head.

“Actually, Sir Marcus, given that you have dragons in your Knighthood, you need to hear this, too.”

Popping his neck, menacingly, Loric simply said, “Speak.”

And so, once again, Phaer – half breed and outcast of the House of the Fountain - secretive by nature and necessity, prepared himself to give another lecture on the dark elves.

* * * * *

It was well known that the dark elves were driven by the belief that they were the supreme race on Majaos and all other races were inferior. In fact, Phaer explained, it went even deeper than that. Ultimately, it was their desire and intent to become the only sentient race on Majaos, other than perhaps keeping a few as slaves or caged in a zoo. The dark elves would think nothing of slaughtering all other races, hunting them down to extinction. They saw it as their duty to `restore` the world to a state in which elves were the only sentient life. Indeed, they referred to it as The Restoration. In Ancient times, the dark elves grew so powerful that at their peak, under Niltsiar - their god - the possibility that they might succeed was very real. The biggest stumbling blocks they could see back then were the dragons. This drove them to certain magical experiments in an attempt to create animals that would become dark elf weapons against the wyrms.

“The basilisk we encountered earlier,” Phaer told his audience, “was one of the few viable creatures to come out of these experiments.”

“Then the basilisk that we allowed to go merrily on its way is a dragon predator?” Tanya wondered.

“No,” Phaer replied, firmly. “As I understand it, the basilisks were by-products of the process, nothing more.”

“That's one hell of a by-product!” Bunny remarked, sullenly. Discussions of the magical creation of life forms to be used as weapons made her uncomfortable, hitting rather too close to home.

“When I was a little girl,” Tanya offered, “I grew up on a ranch where my mother and father were heavily involved with breeding horses. It had been a family occupation for generations, aiming

to produce larger, sturdier cart and plough horses for farming. As a by-product, they also created a breed of sleek, fast, strong-backed horses that proved to be excellent warhorses. Lightning here," she patted her mount's neck, "is of that breed. Are we talking about something similar with the dark elves' breeding programme?"

"Yes," Phaer agreed, impressed with her insight. "That's a very good analogy. The basilisks were not what the dark elves wanted to create, but they proved to be `useful sport` so they were not destroyed. My people waste nothing that might be useful."

"So what can you tell us about the finished product?" Loric demanded, patience wearing too thin to tolerate all this talk when they needed action. "That thing that's out there now?"

"Not much, I'm afraid."

"What!"

"Hey!" The ranger protested. "Like I seem to have been telling the world lately, all this is half-heard stories, myth wrapped up in legend and sprinkled with a good helping of dark elf self-delusion, blind faith, politics and propaganda. I was basically a slave, growing up - and expected to be grateful for that much. As such, I was not exactly privy to the latest goings on at court or thoroughly educated in the classics!"

Once again, Sir Marcus' Lady Consort laid a gentle hand on the Black Dragon's shoulder and soothed his temper. To Phaer, she said, simply. "Please, friend, tell us what you can."

"Of course, Great Lady." Phaer bowed...he wasn't sure why, it just felt right. "I presumed all those aberrations were destroyed," he resumed, "but it seems that one survived. Perhaps an egg that lay dormant until Niltsiar came along to give it a biological nudge."

"Then you're convinced she is behind this?" Sir Marcus asked.

Phaer shrugged. "It's a hell of a coincidence if she's not."

"Can you be sure there is but one?" The Lady asked.

"Not completely sure, no, but there were never more than a dozen created in the first place and, as I say, even the most prideful and arrogant of dark elves believe none survived. So the probability of there being more than one is negligible.

"Now, clearly, Loric knows more about the creature's physical abilities than I do, having witnessed it first hand, but there's one vitally important aspect to the creature that you must remember: it is immune to all magic, even dragon breath weapons."

"Like the Basilisk," Tanya offered. "It reacted very badly to Bernice's sorcery."

"You're not kidding!" Bunny remarked.

But Phaer shook his head. "It's more than that. If you tried that against the dragon predator, you'd be dead. You see, it's not just resistant, it's magically reflective and the reflection is magnified, so even a minor offensive spell would be lethal to the caster. Those illusory blades of yours would

have buried themselves in your brain and twisted until you died an excruciating death. As far as I know, there is no defence apart from the obvious: use your head; don't use magic.”

Loric cast his mind back to the fierce red dragon that had been caught by the vicious creature. Pinned against the barrier surrounding the entry to the Fire Realm, it had unleashed a blast of flame of unimaginable power. The monster had been untouched while the dragon's face melted...and red dragons were immune to fire.

“That’s all I know,” Phaer concluded. “It’s not much, but there you are.”

“Well, it’s more than the rest of us knew before,” Loric admitted, somewhat grudgingly.

“Loric,” Phaer said at last, “if you're planning to fight this creature, I'd normally advise against it,” he warned. “But for Calandra's sake, I understand you have to try. You shouldn't do it alone, though. If you'll let me ride on your back, I'm prepared to come with you, do some reconnaissance. Maybe seeing the creature first hand will drag out some useful bit of memory that eludes me right now.”

“Thank you, my friend,” Loric said, all hostility past and forgotten.

“You can't do that, you stupid half-elf half-wit!” Bunny objected, physically knocking Phaer back a step.

“Excuse me?” Phaer returned, taking real exception to her use of violence.

“Think about it before you go off on some wild, romantic notion.” She lowered her voice to add, “The last one you had about saving your people didn't go too well, remember?” Back to a more normal volume, she concluded, “If that thing out there can kill dragons so easily, I dread to think what it might do to you! And believe me, I won't be talking any dragon predator out of eating you - I'm good, but even I have limits!”

“Honestly, I don't think I'd be in any danger.”

“Oh really?”

If sarcasm were water, he would have been soaked to the skin.

“Yes, really. It kills dragons because that is what it is designed to do, but it wouldn't view humans and elves as a threat.”

“Are you saying it wouldn't have attacked Callie and me if we hadn't changed to dragon form?” Loric wondered.

“No, I'm not suggesting that at all. It would have recognised you as dragons no matter what form you took. You can't hide from it that easily, I'm afraid. My people thought of that. But as for me, who knows? It might even recognise me as a dark elf. That could prove extremely useful. I can't be sure, of course, but I'm willing to try.”

“When the time comes,” Loric assured the ranger, “I’ll be glad of any help you can offer, but right now I’ve got to get back to my own quest. I’ve got reason to believe it’ll hone my skills and give me the best chance of defeating that...that...”

“Atrocity of creation?” Bunny supplied, helpfully.

“Exactly,” Loric grunted.

Been called that myself, on occasion, she thought.

Phaer’s Sir Marcus’s Consort spoke up then. “You were going to tell us about this quest of yours, great dragon?” she prompted.

Bunny was suspicious of this massaging of Loric’s ego, but said nothing.

“You’re right; it’s time I told you.”

And so he explained about the Penta Drauka quest and how he had fulfilled the first part of five. “Before I got pulled down here,” he concluded. “I was searching for the Elder Dragon of Air, so I could work on the second part. Dammit all!” he swore. “We’re still no nearer to figuring out why I was forced to land here in the first place,” he remembered.

“On the contrary, O Black Dragon of Avidon,” smoothed the Lady. “I believe we know precisely why that happened.”

Sir Marcus looked worried. “My dear,” he began, “are you sure this is wise? Especially with what we’ve just learned.”

Gently, tenderly she stroked his cheek with her soft, small hand and declared, solemnly. “Thank you for your concern, my love, but as our honoured guest rightly puts it: this is a dragon thing. I have my duty. You of all people can understand that.”

“Better than anyone,” he replied, in a voice filled with resignation and regret, but also pride and passion.

“I thought so!” Bunny piped up. “You’re a dragon, aren’t you?”

“What?!” Her friends demanded.

“Oh, come on, that much is obvious. It’s the rest of it I can’t figure out.”

“The rest of it?” Loric wondered.

“Your insight is sharp, sumorityl,” came the Knight Lady’s reply. “I hope it always serves you well.”

Bernice shrugged; she had no intention of getting side-tracked by a compliment. She’d played that card enough times herself, after all. “It’s kept me alive so far,” she allowed. “Now, you were saying...?”

“Very well. You ask what I am; I will show you.” She walked a short distance away from the group and then light shimmered all around her as she stretched, grew and re-formed into a young-looking dragon with a dazzling blend of sparkling sapphire, shining silver and midnight blue scales.

Drawing on his unique experience, Loric understood instantly: he had found, “The Elder Dragon of Air.”

“Say, aren't you a little young to be an Elder Dragon?” Bunny asked.

Phaer nudged her and whispered, “Have you no respect for anything?”

“What? I'm just asking a question.”

“And a perfectly fair one,” Loric growled in agreement. “The last Elder I met looked the part a bit more!”

The ranger rolled his eyes. “You two have all the diplomatic skills of a pair of raging bulls.”

“It's a valid question,” Bunny insisted.

“It's not so much what you say,” Phaer explained, “as how you say it.”

“Don't worry, ranger,” the silver-blue-sapphire dragon assured him. “I'm not offended. In fact I appreciate plain speaking.”

Bunny promptly stuck her tongue out at her companion.

The silver-blue-sapphire dragon collected her thoughts and explained the nature of the five Elder Dragons of Majaos.

* * * * *

The magical essence of the five Elder Dragons had existed before there was any mortal life on Majaos, but their individual bodily representatives had changed several times. The essence moved from one dragon to another when the old Elder died - like all dragons, either through fatal accident, battle, or just boredom. It was not a question of `taking over` a sentient body, but more a kind of symbiotic merging. She herself could remember being the previous incarnation of the Elder of Air, but she could also recall being the vicious blue dragon that attacked her. There had been four attackers in all, who ambushed what they saw as a freak dragon. The Elder had managed to outsmart, out fly and out-manoeuvre three of them, ultimately killing them. But the last one somehow caught the Elder - she did not go into details. The blue shredded her wings and dropped her from a great height. When she smashed her head against the terrible jagged rocks below, the Elder Dragon essence flew from her body, searching out the next host. It always chose the dragon with the best skills within that particular Elder's field of expertise. In this case, ironically, the Elder Dragon's own killer was the best and therefore chosen - her murderous actions being irrelevant to the magic.

The change had not been immediate, but gradually over days and weeks, she noticed some of her scales were changing colour, and her thought patterns, her attitudes changed with them. In the end, she gained all the knowledge of the Elder Dragons, and developed an overwhelming desire to improve her skills, although she mostly had that already – that’s why she was the best. She had no

idea that within the lifetime of this body, a Penta Drauka challenger would come along, asking for her instruction.

“Now that you have,” she concluded with a toothy smile, “I'm delighted to meet you.”

Sir Marcus gazed at the dragon, eyes filled with a mixture of admiration for who and what she was, and sadness as he realised they would be parting.

It was not necessary to ask what the Elder Dragon of Air was doing effectively grounded with a bunch of Knights. The answer clearly lay in the person of Supreme Knight Commander Sir Marcus Braithwaite.

“Now, Candidate Loric, are you ready to learn what I have to teach?”

“I'm ready,” he agreed. “What exactly are you going to teach me? Fire was about accessing the Fire Rage in combat, so Air is...what?”

“Can't you guess? Silvers, blues and sapphires: what do they do best?”

“That's easy: flying...you mean, you're going to teach me to fly? Excuse me, but I already know how to do that!”

“Arrogant pup!” spat the Elder, eyes flashing with a vehemence that forced everyone - Loric included - back a pace or two. “An attitude like that will get you and your friend killed. Are you willing to learn or not? If you'd like, I could simply test you now...test you and fail you. You know what happens then, don't you?”

He did indeed. Learning the Penta Drauka skills was a task with no time limit. A candidate could spend years on each part, if necessary. After all, what was time to a dragon? But each section could only be attempted once. Failure of any part was failure of the whole. The failed candidate would forget all previous, successful Penta Drauka skills and would be magically barred from making contact with any of the Elder Dragons for a second attempt.

Loric couldn't risk failure - there was too much at stake. So, as difficult as it was for him, he managed to swallow his pride and apologise. “My outburst was disrespectful and unwarranted. Please accept my apologies and tell me more.”

The Elder bowed her head slightly in acknowledgement.

“See?” Phaer whispered. “You can be diplomatic when you try.”

“You have learned the Fire Rage only recently, yes?” The Elder continued, paying his comment no heed.

“Yes.”

“I see. Before that, were you never angry?”

“Are you kidding? I'm an obsidian - we're born angry. Spit first, clean up the mess later!”

“So why did you need the Fire Rage, if you already knew how to get angry?”

“It's a completely different thing, you can't even begin to compare them.”

“Precisely. So it is with my Air Flight: of course you already know how to fly, just as you always knew how to get angry, but that does not begin to compare with this second segment of the Penta Drauka.”

Loric was suitably admonished.

“Now then,” the Elder continued with a mischievous glint in her eye. “I feel for your friend Callie's terrible plight, so I'm going to help you by taking you directly to the next Elder - the Elder Dragon of Water. Hopefully he will teach you how to heal her. Of course, you won't be able to truly practise your skills to that degree until you pass all five tests, but--”

“--Wait a minute!” Loric objected. “Don't think I'm not grateful, but the Fire Elder told me that you can't interfere.”

“Bah!” The Air Elder dismissed the issue with a wave of her left wing, which sent up a cloud of dust and sand that started off a coughing fit in her mortal audience. She apologised before continuing, “The Fire Elder is an old stick-in-the-mud. His trouble is, he's the original Elder Dragon of Fire - the only one of the five still living. He's so ancient he practically pre-dates the volcanic mountains of his realm! I suppose it's not surprising that he's set in his ways.

“Don't get me wrong; in the strictest sense, he's quite right: we can't interfere, but you'll probably find that the rest of us are a little more...flexible in our views of what constitutes interfering. The way I see it, teaching my skills necessitates flying; it matters not a bit which direction we choose so we might as well head in the direction of the Ocean. Where's the interference in that?”

Chapter 20

Upon reflection, Granite Longbeard supposed he ought to be delighted to be there. After all, he was a dwarf in an astounding underground construction, built by incredibly skilled hands and minds and magic - and best of all, many of the walls were made of gold. Most of his peers, if given a description of this place, would consider it to be nothing less than the dwarven afterlife. But this was not heaven and Granite was not in the afterlife. He couldn't possibly be in the afterlife because he wasn't dead, and he knew he wasn't dead by the way his skin crawled. It was a haunted house, this place; he was absolutely sure of it. Well, maybe not absolutely sure - not sure enough to tell anyone else at any rate. Besides, a dwarf was entitled to keep his own counsel. An outsider couldn't appreciate his peculiar sensibilities. If his dwarven sixth sense told him this was a haunted house, then that's exactly what it was. He didn't share the information; they'd only ask for proof. A dwarf didn't need proof about such things. A heavy dose of instinct would do nicely.

Then again, he briefly entertained the notion that it could just be this peculiar tunnel attacking his dwarven sensibilities. The walls here were not made of pure gold. In fact, at first glance they appeared to be made of wood. Further inspection from his Catalyst eyes and dwarven hands, however, revealed that gold was in there somewhere, too. Fully incorporated into living tissue - and yes it was still living - was gold. He supposed one could call it a wood-gold alloy, were such a thing not utterly impossible. It offended his dwarven love of pure ores and metals to see transient, decaying plant life contaminating it. Wood from a haunted forest, no doubt. Even the lights were haunted: torches all along the walls to either side sprang to life as they approached, and dimmed and faded as they moved beyond.

Eilidh had regarded it as simply, "An eminently sensible lighting system."

"Sensible? Bah!" Spooked, that's what it was. Dwarf cities had very little lighting - dwarf night vision being what it was - but what lights there were became lit and were extinguished when one told them to. That was sensible. This was just...haunted.

Haunted or not, the four companions walked purposefully down the passageways and tunnels, the torches giving each of them a double diagonal shadow, forming an arrowhead behind them. Granite didn't like that, either - too much like having a target stuck to one's back. And for what? They were on a hunt for the-gods-knew-what in this forgotten underground temple, purely on the word of some old hermit. Granite was still seething over the man's audacity at suggesting that the magical profession he had devoted his life to was nothing more than a convenient form of sentient familiar. The so-called Wise One was totally wrong about that.

It was symptomatic, the dwarf decided, of a wider misconception. Everybody feared and respected the overtly powerful Orders of magic, especially Enforcers and the three double-u's: wizards, witches and warlocks. Poor Catalysts, though, had no power of their own. They could only Grant Life to `real mages` and then stand back and watch. But what people didn't realise was that this role and function put Catalysts in an unrivalled position of strength. Without Catalysts, the wizards, witches and warlocks - even the almighty Enforcers - were nothing. Without the Life that Catalysts willingly chose to Grant to them, they had no way of casting the powerful spells they learned. To Granite's way of thinking, Catalysts were the proverbial power behind the throne. Indirectly, a Catalyst could cast any spell in any Order of any of the Nine Secrets - a feat that no other mage could achieve.

“Mere familiars?” Granite grumbled quietly to himself. “I dinnae think so.”

Still, the dwarf supposed he ought to be grateful for small mercies: at least there weren't any ore golems down here. His previous encounter with one had almost turned his beard white.

Eilidh was also thinking about the Marina Fells mine and getting something of a sense of déjà-vu. Once again there was a definite pattern to these tunnels. A magical pattern. In the classroom, it was called a Life Flow Diagram, being quite simply the pattern made by the flow of Life when casting a particular spell. She didn't quite recognise the pattern. She was sure she had seen it at some point during her church studies, but it was vague, obscure, shrouded. As they went a little further, a cursory glance inside the few small rooms to each side revealed nothing of any real interest. It seemed as if they had once been sleeping quarters, back when this temple had been in regular use.

During her scholastic studies, the young woman had often found that it was possible to think too hard. She was doing it now, she realised, focussing too much on the problem, on what she didn't know or couldn't remember. Slowing her breathing, she forced herself to relax, and allowed what she did know and did remember to fill her mind.

OK, she thought, never mind what the symbol represents, just focus on the shape, the form, the diagram.

Yes, the image was becoming clearer now, accompanied by the words of her favourite tutor: Visualisation, not memorisation.

Relaxed concentration was a skill he encouraged in his students, to promote the visualisation process. Pictures and diagrams were always easier to remember than text or spoken words. That was precisely why diagrams were used. Therefore, the trick was not to try to recall the text, but instead call up the image of the page on which one saw the diagram. Eilidh took her mind back to that moment...it was quite a while ago...many years...an early, introductory course in magic...a simple overview of the structure of the magical disciplines.

There was a textbook on the desk in front of the child Eilidh and it was opened on a page of Life Flow Diagrams, examples from each of the magical Secrets. She had literally gasped with delight when she saw them. They were so beautiful, so elegant. Such perfect, precise designs. From that moment, they became her art and later, her literature, almost like a language: the language of magic. Eilidh smiled to herself. Even her favourite tutor had scoffed at such a ridiculous notion. LFD's were important for what they did, not what they were. Surely `Little Miss Practical` could appreciate the truth of that.

And she had, and she did...but still...

“I've got it!” she cried. “Just like Marina Fells, I know where these tunnels lead. I don't know what it means, yet,” she told her companions, “but at least I've got the pattern in my head.” She set off at pace. “Follow me.”

Granite rolled his eyes and grumbled to himself, “Here we go again.”

The dwarf had soon lost track of all of the twists and turns, and at times even struggled to keep up the pace from his new rear guard position. He didn't like that either. All of his racial dwarf advantages seemed to have evaporated. Not only did the damn torchlight make his night-sight

redundant, but also their reluctant leader was reluctant no longer, striding purposefully and to all appearances thoroughly enjoying herself. He supposed the little idiot saw the whole thing as a fascinating magic puzzle game.

In truth, Granite was not far wrong in his assessment. For the first time since she'd left Merlyon, Eilidh Hagram actually was enjoying herself. And yes, she did see this as a fascinating puzzle, but more akin to an academic exercise than a game. She wasn't taking it lightly and she hadn't forgotten the danger. But at least, at last, she felt useful. She still maintained she wasn't cut out for adventuring, but give her a puzzle to solve and she was in her element. She had relished such things at the Church of Life where she'd trained, and she had always excelled. In addition, she had a strong interest in magicology and the history of magic, which was what this temple puzzle was all about, she was certain. And the fact that the ultimate meaning of the symbol they were scribing with their footsteps still eluded her, only made it that much more exciting. She wanted - no, needed - to find the answer, discover the secrets hidden here. The Wise One had told them to come here and she believed he had a good reason. He was teaching her something, something important, vital even, to the success of her quest. Here they would find the key to success, both metaphorically and literally, for that is what they had been sent to find: the Great Key.

"Locate the ancient temple," he had said, "and bring back the Great Key."

Key to what, she had not asked, because she already knew he would not tell her until she brought it back to him. It was a test, that's all; just a test...and Eilidh had been passing tests all her life. If Master Gamaliel had used the word `test` rather than `quest` she might have been a lot more enthusiastic about this whole enterprise.

Steady, Eilidh, she told herself silently. Don't go losing your head now.

Still, it was hard to resist the adrenaline rush at this turning point. Speaking of which, if her LFD magicology was correct, she realised, the blind right hand bend they were approaching at that very moment would be quite literally the last turning point, leading them into the main chamber...and who knew what wonders might lie in there?

Eilidh indulged herself, putting on an extra burst of speed, running around the corner and...

"Ow!" she cursed as her nose collided with a large gold plated door, spanning the width and height of the passageway.

Her startled cry of pain interrupted Toli and Jayne's conversation and brought the dwarf bard huffing and puffing, axe in hand to strike at whatever nasties were waiting for them.

Eilidh had been brought up in the Church and so it had always been natural for her to watch her language. But as she eyed the solid, inches-thick metal obstruction through bleary eyes from the impact, her adrenaline rush frustrated, she quite shocked herself with a single word.

"Bugger!"

"What do we do now, Eilidh?" Toli asked, while her friend nursed her bruised nose. "We've come rather a long way just to be stopped by a door, haven't we?" She giggled, "I remember when that actually happened to me, on one of my adventures with my friends back home when I was little. We'd just discovered this really old, abandoned building - not sure what it was - a shrine maybe. Well,

we'd been exploring for simply ages and scaring each other with strange noises, and made-up stories of the nasty things that we imagined lurked down there." She giggled again. "We were sure we were going to be in serious trouble with our parents when we eventually got back, but everybody said we'd only been gone a little while." She shrugged, and added, "I guess they just thought we'd grown up to an age where some unwritten rule said it was now OK to stay out for that length of time. It's funny how I should be reminded of that now...how did I get onto that?" She wondered, displaying her usual mannerism of blinking rapidly as she tried to recall. "Oh yes, I remember. The door! That's why my friends and I had to go back home - being blocked by a great big door with no way through kind of stopped the fun."

"Sounds like an old abandoned centre of Temporal magic," Eilidh said, distractedly.

"Wow, really?" Toli asked, excitedly.

"Oh yes, Time was flowing differently in that place, that's all. This is something similar, but it's not Time magic. It's something else and I need to find out what."

"So, 'ow are we gonna get through?" asked Jayne Corr, bringing everyone back to the situation at hand. She thumped the door with the hilt of one of her scimitars, causing it to resound like an enormous gong. Everyone winced. "Sorry everyone," apologised the half-orc. "Still, I guess we know it's much too thick to break through with weapons."

Eilidh ran her fingers over the door, searching for something - anything. At length, she stepped away with a frustrated growl.

"No secret panels, then?" Toli enquired.

"Not that I can feel," Eilidh confirmed. She turned to Granite. "Are you up to giving us that song again?"

Granite frowned. "Well, my throat's a little dry, but I'll give it a go." Unstrapping his harp from his pack, he plucked a major chord, then modulated to a minor, then a diminished seventh and he began to sing. He sang, pouring out his bardic magic, but nothing happened, nothing glowed. Not even a flicker.

Eilidh placed a hand on his shoulder and Granite gave up. The Calatyst began pacing up and down, then, muttering to herself, trying to think of anything she had learned over the years that might help with this situation.

"Use your head," she told herself. "Focus on the goal, not the task; the solution, not the problem. What material do I have to hand that I can use? There must be something. When faced with a locked door, the choices are to go around, which we can't do; turn back, which we mustn't do; or unlock the door and go through. A lock requires a key. An unusual door will likely require an unusual key. A key like...a key like...a key like..." she stopped on the spot, eyes wide.

She spun on her heel to face the door and adopting an assured, confident stance, she raised her staff, glared at the golden barrier, and in a loud voice, declared, "In the name of the *Du y Kharia*...Open!"

The hidden locking mechanism clicked, there was a rush of magical energy and the door split in the middle, gaping wide to grant them access.

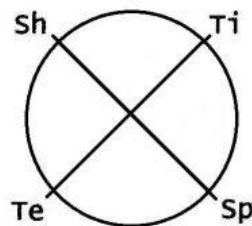
“A key like that,” Eilidh stated, satisfied.

For the *Du y Kharia*, the door had opened.

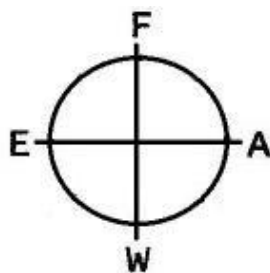
Through the door, as Eilidh had suspected, was a large chamber, shaped in the form one of the most recognisable Ancient symbols of magic: the pentagram. Gold was everywhere. The metal was used as plating for just about everything that wasn't made completely from that metal or that strange hybrid material. In the centre of the room was an altar, upon which stood a large-scale model of another, more fundamental symbolic concept in the Life Arts: the Twin Circles of Life.

As the name suggested, there were two rings, one inside the other in perpendicular orientation and at forty-five degree angles to the base. Each of the rings bore four golden spheres, engraved with further symbols of magic. The outer ring was the Ethereal Circle, while the inner ring was the Elemental Circle.

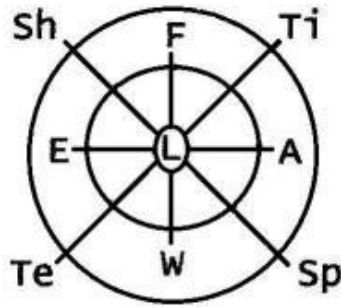
The outer ring presented small spheres, imprinted with the symbols for the Secrets of Shadow, Time, Spirit and Techmagic in clockwise order, forming a diagonal cross:



The inner ring held the symbolic spheres for the Secrets of Earth, Fire, Air, and Water in a cardinal cross formation, always presented in that order, working clockwise around the ring:



Each of the four Ethereal Spheres was arranged such that it was equidistant from three of the four Elemental Spheres, and vice-versa. Finally, in the centre of both rings was a single, larger sphere. This was the Well of Life; from which, through which and into which all magic flowed. Together they formed what was called either the Twin Circles of Life, or The Life Flow Map:



Eilidh had spent hour after hour in the Church of Life in Merlyon, copying that symbol, on paper, in model forms and in the flow of Life itself. She had studied it intently, researching its many hidden meanings, concepts and ideas in magic theory, but she had never before seen it cast in gold. It was a most peculiar and self-contradictory presentation, Eilidh thought as she admired its astonishing glow, illuminated as it was by nine spotlights. Four gave off physical light, shining on the Elemental Secrets. Four were lanterns of highly purified Life, shining on the Ethereal Secrets. The lantern shining down upon the central Life Secret was giving off both forms of energy. It was quite spectacular, but very strange.

Gold was the only metal on Majaos found to be magically inert. No wands or staves could use it, no magical amulets could be fashioned from it, no magical devices could function using it and no spells could affect it. This was the reason why gold coins were used as currency - there was no way for a mage to get rich quick by making thousands of illegal coins. It also explained why the Knights of Paladinia, who vowed to wield no magic, wore golden plate armour. In theory, gold armour could turn aside spells, but in practise pure gold gave poor protection against physical blows, so Paladonian plate was really a golden metal alloy with very little of its content being actual gold. Still, the symbolism was sound.

Legend had it that back on the Ancients' Old World - long before the Great Endeavour, before Merlyn, even - alchemists laboured to find the secret of turning base metals into gold. Even with the incredible resources of magic on Majaos, that goal was still a fool's dream.

So then, here was perhaps the most fundamental of all magical symbols, realised in a magically inert material. Upon reflection, Eilidh supposed it showed a peculiar kind of balance. She found that fascinating.

Toli tapped her friend on the shoulder, causing the Catalyst to practically jump three feet into the air.

“Penny for them,” said the hobbit.

“I'm sorry?”

“Your thoughts - penny for your thoughts. It's an old expression; I'm not surprised you haven't heard it. Most people don't use it anymore, but hobbits love odd little sayings like that. I think I heard someone say that a penny was some kind of human money from long ago, but I don't think anyone used to literally pay people for their thoughts, mind. It's just an expression, telling someone you'd like to know what's going on in their heads. How did you figure out how to get in here? I was just thinking

we might have to turn back, 'cause there didn't seem to be any way in and then all of a sudden you yelled at it and it opened, which was a pretty neat trick, I can tell you..."

"Actually, I got thinking about the very first door that barred our path. The guard was clearly not inclined to let just anyone in, but when I invoked the name of the *Du y Kharia*, he let us pass."

"But 'e didn't want you to come down 'ere," Jayne offered. Being a woman of action, it was rare for her to contribute to such discussions, but presumably she saw this as a security issue and that was the role she had created for herself.

"Yes, that is a curious thing, I'll grant you, but still he didn't forbid it or try to prevent our entry once I passed his test. He didn't say we couldn't; he said we shouldn't. Anyway, the point is, one door opened for the *Du y Kharia*, so it was reasonable to believe that others might be equally obliging."

"And so it was," Toli concluded, suitably impressed.

"Yes," Eilidh concurred. "Interesting, isn't it?"

Granite, who had been exploring the chamber, called the others over to the rear of the main altar, just behind the gold model. "Ye might want tae put yer theory tae the test with this here box. It looks like we've found our key!"

Sure enough, when the others joined the dwarf, they could see there on the altar a glass box - pure crystal and magically strengthened to prevent anyone from simply smashing it. Inside was a hand-sized ornate key of bronze, doubtless to simulate gold, when there was no way a key for anything to do with magic could be made of real gold. The alloy was encrusted with jewels: rubies, sapphires and emeralds along with black obsidian and white opals. It did not require much reasoning to understand it was the key to something important. Precisely what lock it might fit into, Eilidh could not guess but presumably the Wise One would be able to tell them that, once they returned it to him.

This could be, quite literally, the key to Niltsiar's downfall, Eilidh realised, her heart pounding. After taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she proclaimed, "Box, I command you to open, for I am the *Du y Kharia*!"

Obediently, the box clicked open, but before the Catalyst could reach out for the key, there was a surge of magic and a group of shimmering spectres appeared: nine in all, floating in positions representative of the Twin Circles of Life.

"The magical symbology in this place is simply staggering," Eilidh remarked, to no-one in particular.

Toli whimpered quietly in a mixture of fear and frustration at once again coming face to face with a threat with which her magic was quite incapable of dealing. Sometimes she couldn't help wondering if she might be doing Eilidh a favour if she left the party and encouraged her to find a more capable mage. Her friend needed magic she could rely on; magic that was useful.

Jayne and Granite had immediately gone for weapons but Eilidh anticipated their actions and stayed their hands. She had come a long way since that ill-conceived attack in the Glade-That-Wasn't-Supposed-To-Be-There. She was supposed to be a leader and she had started to learn a little about

what that meant. Mostly, she still preferred her party to have autonomy and approach things in their own way - after all, she had no better idea of what they were doing than anybody else! But there were times, like that moment, when she had to take a stand and say, "No. There will be no attack unless I say so. Clear?"

Jayne instantly obeyed. Taking orders was second nature to her. Sometime soon, she hoped she could rejoin the amazing Black Dragon - Hero of Avidon, Scourge of those who would threaten the weak and vulnerable, Champion of Children. Until then she would follow Eilidh's orders as if they came directly from him, which she supposed they probably did. Oh, Eilidh was nice enough, she was clever about magic stuff and she'd got them in this temple place, but surely it was the Great One who was running this show. Exactly how he could be directing events here when he was...wherever he was...she couldn't say, but he was the Black Dragon. He could do it; she was sure of it. He could do anything; he was amazing. But until he was able to join her in person, she'd take his orders through the girl. It was misconception she clung to with faithful tenacity.

As for the dwarf, Granite Longbeard had only one thought as he surveyed the scene. He even spoke it out loud. "I knew this place was haunted!"

The apparition in the centre of the group `spoke` in Eilidh's mind.

Greetings, Du y Kharia. Long have we waited for thee.

So I've been told, Eilidh replied, silently, immediately warning herself to lose the slightly flip edge. It was a long-established defence mechanism and it was very hard for her to control it when she got nervous.

The spectre seemed to take it all in good part, though, saying, *I sense thy time is short, so I shall be concise.*

That would be appreciated. Very well, go ahead, then.

We are here to implore thee not to remove the key from this sacred place for thou knowest not what it will do.

No, but I think I know someone who does. I was sent here on a quest specifically to recover the key.

Then one wouldst have to question the motives of they that gavest thou this quest. Art thou certain thy faith in this individual is well-placed?

It's not faith, Eilidh insisted. *He has access to great knowledge, which I respect, and what he has told me so far, though new to me, fits well with what I have learned for myself. In short, I have reason to believe he is benevolent.*

Then perhaps he is simply mistaken. Or you are.

Possibly, she allowed, *but that's a chance I'm willing to take. It's hard to see how things could get much worse whatever I do. Call it an act of desperation, if you like. But whatever the*

consequences, I am committed to this act, and like I told your friend at the entrance, this is my choice to make.

Then thou must act as thou wilt.

Good. Now we've got that out of the way, please back off and let me take the key.

“I command you,” Eilidh declared aloud. “Release the key to me, for I am the *Du y Kharia!*”

The glass box shattered and the spectres disappeared. At last Eilidh held the great key in her grasp, but just at that moment, a familiar sneering female voice startled her enough to drop it on the floor.

“How very interesting,” said the voice. “Her Divine Excellency will reward me greatly for that information.”

Chapter 21

A second large explosion rocked the Great Library just moments after the first, which strangely saved Brash and his passengers from certain death. Powerful winds tore them back up into the sky when they were just a few feet from the ground, giving Brash the time he needed to stabilise his flight and achieve a safe landing.

“That was Niltsiar again, wasn’t it? What’s she done now?” Rochelle wondered, wearily. She couldn’t take much more of this, she really couldn’t. She was turning into a nervous wreck.

It was Brash who replied, “That wasn’t her; it was Drizdar.” Dragons had exceptional, magically enhanced senses, so it was not surprising that the bronze should be able to differentiate so clearly. “An explosion of that size can mean only one spell.”

Rochelle nodded. Raistlin’s Revenge - the most devastating spell in modern magical warfare. Mastered only by the highest-ranking witches and warlocks. It was a weapon of mass destruction that could wipe out a legion of warriors half a mile away.

“Raistlin’s Revenge cast by the Supreme Master of War at point blank range...” The druidess whistled. “Messy. I suppose it would be wishful thinking to suppose Niltsiar was in that explosion?” she added, wistfully.

“Oh she was in it alright,” Brash confirmed. “It just didn’t do so much as muss her hair.”

“Niltsiar wasn’t the target,” Artisho piped up. “Drizdar’s no fool - you saw him fight, Rochelle - he ignored Niltsiar completely. Why? Because he knew his magic couldn’t harm her. No, he focused his energies on a target that he at least stood a chance of killing.”

“Akar-Sel!” Rochelle gasped in understanding.

“Indeed, Drizdar has done us all quite a favour this day.”

* * * * *

At the critical moment, Drizdar had managed to get on the offensive, thanks to the intervention of the dragons. He had beaten back his former *shalfi* and Akar-Sel had just been knocked sprawling to the ground. Drizdar would never have a better opportunity for vengeance against his renegade teacher; he had to destroy him now. Niltsiar would soon have the situation back under control and without that strange old man to keep her occupied, he would no doubt become the object of the venting of her frustrations. He had to get out of there before that happened. The problem he had was his Catalyst. Drizdar had always been meticulous at keeping track of Life expenditure in battle. The mathematics were complex, especially when fighting for one’s life, but very often it was that skill that had helped him preserve his skin. Even now, he knew precisely how much Life he had and how much was potentially available via his Catalyst, within an acceptable margin of error. That error factor was significant in this case: There might be enough, he decided, but only just.

Then he was out of time. Livid, Niltsiar turned the sky to magical flame, reducing the dragon quartet to charcoal. Then she lashed out not at Drizdar, but at his Catalyst. The Supreme War Master had no way to recognise the danger, immediately, but then the flow of Life changed. His Catalyst wasn’t Granting it any more...she was Draining it! Riding on the back of that shock was another - his

right foot was going numb. It felt like it was...turning to stone. Drizdar's eyes widened in horror. The Turning! That's what Niltsiar was doing!

But he didn't get to be Supreme War Master without having good instincts in the face of personal danger. He didn't think; he just acted, unleashing Raistlin's Revenge. It was not supposed to be a close range spell for good reason: it was too destructive and there was no way to make it enemy specific. Simply put, it would wipe out every living thing within a blast radius of approximately one mile. Drizdar would have to bring the centre in so close, his own Catalyst would be caught in the blast. Plus, since the spell was so costly to the caster, having no Catalyst would leave him drained and vulnerable. At least, that's what the textbooks said. Drizdar knew better. There was a way to get out of this - it would hurt like hell, it might even kill him, but that was better than the living death of a Turning.

The explosion threw up a massive cloud of dust and debris, cracks grew across the walls of the library; the noise was deafening. When the dust finally settled, two small black and smouldering patches marked the spots where Akar-Sel and Drizdar's Catalyst had stood. Niltsiar was untouched by such pitiful, weak spellcasting, but Drizdar, Master of Dark Magic, had disappeared.

Far away in his own fortified tower, Drizdar came around in triumph.

"I live!" He breathed in wonder.

It was ironic that he had used the very magic Akar-Sel had taught him, to destroy his mentor and escape Niltsiar's wrath. He had, in effect, used a form of dragon magic, acting as his own Catalyst, converting raw magic to Life himself. Not having a true Catalyst's magical senses and specialised techniques, it had destabilised his Life Store for a moment, subjecting him to the ravages of raw magic, and it had no doubt stolen away some years of his life. Even for a long-lived elf, years were not to be squandered lightly, but it had been an emergency. Better to lose some of his life than all of it. He had escaped and survived, that was what mattered...but at what cost?

Drizdar ripped his crimson robes open to examine his right leg - it was living stone from just below the knee. He would forever walk with a limp from this day, but he would adapt. One did not face Niltsiar and Akar-Sel in battle without receiving some kind of scar. Drizdar was the Supreme War Master; he had suffered his fair share of battle scars over the years. This was just one more. Yes, he decided, today had been a good day.

* * * * *

"Can't she just bring Akar-Sel back to life again?" Rochelle asked.

"And which piece of him do you think Niltsiar would find most useful?" Artisho barbed. "Don't be silly, Miss Ribbons. As you said yourself, the result would have been extremely messy. There's simply not enough of Akar-Sel left. Resurrection for a target that's been blown to pieces is simply impossible, even for Niltsiar. No, I assure you, Akar-Sel is dead. There is no doubt whatever about that. Akar-Sel is as dead as a doornail.

"Mind!" he expounded, "I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a doornail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin nail as the dearest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of the Ancients is in the simile; and my

unhallowed lips shall not disturb it, or Mythallen's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Akar-Sel is as dead as a doornail.”

Rochelle looked at him strangely.

Artisho looked vaguely sheepish in return. “Just something I read once in a book,” he explained, waving his hand dismissively.

“Niltsiar will be livid,” Brash said, sounding quite delighted at the prospect. “She went to a lot of trouble to come here and rescue the renegade. She must have had great plans for him. Plans that now lie in tatters.”

“Won't she just find someone else to do whatever it was?” Rochelle wondered.

“Oh, she has other agents for sure,” Artisho agreed. “But whoever the substitute is, it won't be Akar-Sel and for that we should be eternally grateful.”

Rochelle knew her Tech Wars history. The damage the renegade could have caused in this time of chaos was almost unimaginable. Artisho was right - there was no-one, besides Niltsiar herself, who was anywhere near that dangerous.

“So with Akar-Sel permanently out of the way,” Rochelle mused, “all we have to worry about is Niltsiar and her horde of chaos creatures.”

“I don't know about you,” Brash quipped, “but I feel better already!”

At that, the three of them laughed.

“Now, my dear Miss Ribbons,” said Artisho, “I suggest you save any more questions for a less precipitous moment and--” Interrupting himself, Artisho swore. “Damn and blast that woman! It's all her fault! You know what she's made me do, don't you? I was distracted, that's what it was...hard to remember everything at my age, you know.”

“Why? What's happened?”

“What's happened?” Artisho was incredulous. “Isn't it obvious?”

Rochelle started into those eyes of his but found no clue in there.

“It's gone!” He wailed in despair. “Gone!...”

“Gone? What's gone?”

“I've lost my hat!”

* * * * *

By the time Brash had carried his passengers beyond the aftermath of the explosion, all hell had broken loose. There was fierce fighting in the streets of Merlyon, the city guard were trying to contain and extinguish the fires that reflected on the golden armour of the Paladins. The Knights were

naturally in the thick of the fighting - battling creatures of chaos that had somehow found their way inside the city. Dark Knights were fighting alongside them, in accordance with the Alliance.

A pair of mounted silver dragons on aerial patrol intercepted the bronze. At the same time, Rochelle spotted Hannah among the sea of gold and passed on the information.

“We need her,” Artisho said. “Well,” he amended, “you need her; you and your party.”

“Is there anywhere I can land safely?” Brash asked the silvers.

“The barracks are still secure,” one of them informed him.

“Actually, I was thinking of somewhere a little closer.”

“How much closer?”

“How about...right here?” He coughed out a cloud of gas at their enemies on the ground and roared a warning to their allies, who scrambled to make room. Picking his spot, Brash stalled and plummeted toward the ground, wings unfurling to catch himself with scant inches to go. The vertical landing was rough, but both passengers managed to cling to his back.

“Ah,” Brash remarked, “we bronzes may not be as fancy flyers as silvers, but ask one of them to execute a splashdown landing and you'll be out of luck.”

Artisho patted his flank. “Well done, my boy. Very well done indeed.”

Hannah had not failed to notice them and immediately turned to her commanding officer. He took in the situation with a single glance and said, “Go. We art almost finished here. Catch up with thy friends. Methinks thou hast much to discuss.”

Hannah saluted with a fist over her heart and then ran over, leaping straight onto dragonback without breaking stride. Brash took off and flew them all back to the barracks.

By the time they arrived, the shield fluctuations appeared to have stopped. Hannah's armour showed evidence of recent battle: bloodstains and mud, even the occasional scratch, but she had sustained no serious damage or injury. The Knight unbuckled her breastplate and immediately set to polishing it.

“What happened here?” Rochelle asked.

Hannah explained how the feasting had been interrupted by some bizarre lighting failures. It soon transpired that the effect was not localised or limited to the barracks, but appeared to be city-wide. The lighting problems were followed by more serious failures of everyday magic and the populace began to experience pain, complaining that it felt as if their Life Store were being Drained. The Knights were unaffected, thanks to their ritual renouncing of all magic that was a condition of Knighthood. Duty and honour demanded that they therefore leave their festivities and venture out into the city to give what aid they could. Then the chaos creatures appeared, walking through the magical shield as if it wasn't there.

“That's because it really wasn't there,” Rochelle put in. “The fluctuations in magic affected the shield, too,” she explained. “In fact, I'd venture to say the shield was the intended target and the rest were just side effects.”

“Why thinkest thou this is the case?”

“Because we had a little run-in with Niltsiar at the Library. She couldn't just stroll in through a Corridor without the Enforcers noticing and presumably even she couldn't teleport through the shield, so she had to put some holes in it.”

“So the chaos creatures didst enter Merlyon by way of these holes,” Hannah said, understanding.

Both orders of Knights had been forewarned by their respective Dragon Cavalry Scouts, and each had sent a pair to investigate the strange magical disturbance in Central Merlyon. Brash knew from Hannah that Rochelle had gone to the Library and headed straight there to find her. The rest of the Knights were quick to mount a defence against the invaders.

The City Guard also seemed to be spared the magical assault. Rochelle speculated that some Ancient magical system was responsible for the mass Draining of Life in order to restore the shield. However, it wouldn't make much sense to incapacitate the city's second line of defence in the process of strengthening the first.

The guard were under orders to focus their efforts on evacuation and firefighting, engaging the enemy only in essential defence. The Knights were more than capable of handling the real battle and things seemed to return to normal...until the explosion.

“I do perceive that thou knowest something about this phenomenon?”

“You could say that,” Rochelle admitted. “We were nearly in it!” And so the druidess told her tale while Artisho dozed in a corner with his hat over his eyes, and Brash flew off to see if he could pick off any remaining chaos creatures.

When she told of Ganieda, Hannah gasped in wonder. “Truly, friend Rochelle, thou art blessed, for thine eyes hath seen one of the Ancient Faerie - a very visitation of an angel hast thou received.”

Rochelle couldn't argue with that.

“So what now?” Hannah asked, after Rochelle finished her tale.

“Now I need time to study some of these texts - I'm sure Eilidh will want to get her hands on them, too. The best thing, then, would be for us to go back to Shakaran. I seem to remember that you're acquainted with royalty there.”

“Indeed so.”

“Well I can't think of anywhere better than Shakaran Castle for safety and security.”

“Couldst we not rather invite Eilidh and our friends here? If thou dost wish safety and security, here in the barracks we Knights canst most easily provide both, especially from behind the shield of magic.”

“That would be the shield that just failed, and the barracks that are now deserted, while your comrades try to stop the chaos creatures from going on the rampage in the city, yes?” Rochelle pointed out.

Hannah gave her friend a grim smile. “I take thy point, my friend, but even so, was this not merely a single, isolated incident in an otherwise invulnerable city?”

The gnome shook her head. “You're forgetting something: Niltislar is still here.”

Hannah's eyes widened. “Thou art certain of this?”

“Of course she's still here!” Rochelle growled, getting slightly annoyed at having to explain every simple little thing. Once again her theory about heavy helmets squashing Knights' brains sprang to mind.

“Look,” she said, with exaggerated patience. “I told you that in order to enter the city, Niltislar had to poke holes in the barrier, right?”

Hannah nodded.

“And that caused a massive disruption to the whole of Merlyon, yes?”

Again the Knight nodded.

“And some kind of defence system restored the shield, agreed?”

Once more, the Knight just nodded.

“So just how do you suppose she's going to leave? We know that she can't teleport through the active shield and she can't exactly stroll up to the Corridor port and ask the Enforcers very politely if they'd mind giving their mortal enemy access to the network. They couldn't stop her, but they could destroy the Corridor entrance, if necessary. The only way Niltislar can leave, then, is the same way she got in: by punching holes in the barrier, which will cause more disruption and let in more chaos creatures. Unless I've missed something, I don't think that's happened yet. Ergo, Niltislar is still in Merlyon.”

“Thou art assuming that Niltislar doth indeed intend to leave.”

“You're right, I am,” Rochelle agreed after a moment's pause. “OK then, suppose she doesn't; suppose she's planning to build a base of power here. Do you still think this is a safe and secure location to plot her downfall - just down the road from where she's staying?”

“Thine insight doth never cease to amaze me, my friend. As thou sayest, thou must needs return forthwith to Shakaran, bearing thy books thither.”

“I'm glad you agree, let's go find Brash.” Rochelle turned to leave, but Hannah stopped her.

“Alas, I cannot go with thee.”

“What are you talking about, you can't go?”

This outburst seemed to wake old Artisho, who echoed the druid's incredulity.

“Quite so, my dear Miss Ribbons, quite so,” he agreed. “Do tell us, O Knight, by what folly dost thou propose to stay here?”

“’Tis no folly, Old One. If all Miss Ribbons says is true, then my comrades need me, especially now.”

“Indeed?” wondered Artisho. “Your friends need you - especially now!” He became quite agitated, banging his staff upon the polished wooden floor with a resounding thud. “Don't you understand? The books your friend holds are priceless. Priceless! The information they contain could be vital to your quest - vital to the world. You joined Eilidh in the capacity of loyal protector. Rochelle now needs that protection! These books must be delivered safely to Shakaran with all haste! One Knight more or less will make no difference here. Fulfil your duties to the quest and your obligation to your friends - only then can you make a difference! Don't you understand? You must come. Now!”

“I do indeed comprehend thee, Old One, but I am Knight Warrior Lady Hannah Collins of the Fourth Merlyon Infantry Division and my primary function is to obey the orders of my superior officer.”

“Yes,” Rochelle allowed, “and he placed you on detached duty or some such thing, didn't he?”

“No,” the Knight insisted. “He didst place Knight *Initiate* Lady Hannah Collins on detached duties. I hath since been promoted and such unusual orders cannot be assumed to continue unless they shouldst be reissued. So sayeth the Sacred Code of Paladinius.”

Artisho rolled his eyes. “Rules, rules, rules. That's all you Knights are good for - playing by the rules. Well there is a time for rules and there is a time for doing the right thing. Now is the latter!”

“That is neither for thee nor for I to decide, Old One,” Hannah disputed, calmly.

“But--” Rochelle began, not really knowing what she was going to say.

The Knight cut her off, insisting, “I must needs remain here pending further orders and there is naught else I can do.”

“But the prince doesn't know me!” Rochelle pointed out.

“True, but Princess Mystaya wilt recognise thee. Plus, I shalt give thee this,” she added, handing Rochelle a metal disk inscribed with the symbol of the Knights of Paladinia. “’Tis a Knight's seal, which shouldst help thee gain audience in Prince Garald's court. Then, shouldst permission be forthcoming, I shalt join thee as soon as may be.”

“Bah!” Artisho spat. “I give up! Trying to talk sense into a human in a tin can...I ought to know better at my age! Come along, Rochelle, let's leave the Knight to her rules. We'd better leave Brash, too, in case she changes her mind, so it looks like we need to find an alternative means of transport. With Her around,” he mused, “we daren't trust the Corridor network in case somebody decides to proverbially shove their staff in the works. Not to worry, I think my pet sea serpent is around here somewhere...if I can just remember where I parked...Come on, Rochelle. We've got work to do.”

Rochelle made one last non-verbal entreaty to Hannah, but her gold-armoured friend was unmoved. With a shrug, head slightly down, the druidess checked her grip on the book bag, and followed Artisho out of the barracks.

Chapter 22

The dark elf that stepped from the shadows in that crypt, arrow nocked and ready, Eilidh had seen only once before, many leagues away in the mine at Marina Fells.

“Z'rcona!” she spat.

The dark elf rolled her eyes. “What did you think? That speaking my name would make me break in two and disappear like in some fairytale? You are unworthy to use it, of course, that goes without saying. And ordinarily you would die for defiling it with your filthy human tongue, but my Mistress has rules against personal vendettas. I mean, she can't have her agents running around killing people who might otherwise be useful to her...and you, human, are going to be extremely useful to her. The Chosen One, eh? My, my, my, what a prize you are.” She looked the Catalyst up and down, lip curling. “Not much to look at, though, are you?”

Eilidh's flip tongue took control to respond, “Why don't you save your insults for someone who cares? You've just told me how valuable and useful I am, which makes that arrow you've got pointed at me suddenly seem less than lethal.”

“Maybe I'll just decide to give you a flesh wound.”

“Maybe you'll miss.”

“I never miss.”

“Maybe you'll get lucky and kill me by mistake.”

“I don't make mistakes.”

“OK, so you shoot me, I'm still alive and you set another arrow, by which time my friends will kill you with sword, axe or magic, whichever you prefer.” Eilidh adopted an apologetic expression. “Sorry, but between you and me, while you're standing there all alone pointing that arrow at me...” her voice dropped to a sympathetic whisper “...you're just not that scary.”

“But I'm not alone,” Z'rcona replied. Then she called out, “You might as well come and join me! Everything's under control!”

Eilidh hadn't really had the chance to properly observe the other members of Z'rcona's party back in Marina Fells: the Catalyst and the dark cleric - both human - plus the only other non-human of the group, a hobbit warlock. But among them, one figure stood out: the Dark Knight, Sir Linarceo Leonis.

He offered a solemn, courtly bow. “Greetings, madam. It is most agreeable to see thee again.”

“Again?” Z'rcona wondered.

“Dost thou not recognise this fine young lady?”

The elf shrugged. “All humans look alike.”

“We didst meet at that ill-fated hamlet, Marina Fells, whilst tracking down that traitorous sorcerer, Vorden.”

“Ah yes, the late Vorden. Of course! Well I must say your little band is somewhat smaller than when we last met. And what about my `dear cousin`?” She taunted her. “I do hope nothing has happened to him.” She smiled a mirthless, chilling smile.

“You can't possibly believe you're going to fool me that you care,” Eilidh retorted.

“Oh but I do,” Z'rcona insisted. “When Her Divine Excellency rules all, I plan to revive all the old sports of my people. I want to make sure my `dear cousin` lives long enough to experience each and every one of them to the full before I watch him beg me to kill him, which I will...eventually...nice and slow. It would be a shame if he got himself killed before then.”

That was more than Tolbrietta could stand.

Eilidh shouted, “Toli, no!”

But it was too late. The magician cast a hasty Starflare spell at the dark elf and the air exploded around her enemy. Z'rcona was quite unharmed.

Z'rcona fired her arrow at Toli, and only a reflexive air-hardening spell saved her. Jayne made to draw her twin scimitars, but found them far too hot to touch. So hot, in fact, that they were welded into their scabbards. They would never come free again. Livid at losing such fine weapons, she went to launch herself forward anyway, but a look from Z'rcona left her rooted to the spot and gasping for breath as the air was removed from an invisible bubble around her head.

Granite threw his battle axe at her, along with his best dwarven war cry, but the sound stuck in his throat and the axe turned into a bouquet of flowers in mid-air, which Z'rcona caught deftly, having discarded her bow and arrow as unnecessary.

“Why thank you,” she mocked. “They're lovely. But I'm afraid you're just not my type. I like tall men.” Turning back to Eilidh, she said. “You see, I'm more impressive than you think. Your friends' lives are now mine, so do I have your co-operation, or do I get angry?”

A common expression popped into Eilidh's head at that moment: `Her mind raced`.

In adventure stories, when faced with insurmountable odds and imminent death, authors would write that the heroine's mind `raced`. Eilidh's mind did no such thing. It sat there, nursing the mental equivalent of a hamstring injury. The primal instinct in these circumstances, Eilidh considered, ought to be `fight or flight` - kill or run away - but she just stood there, cold and empty, devoid of all thought and sensation. This wasn't some intellectual puzzle, a test or examination. She wasn't faced with school bullies who at worst would tear up her homework or, if they were feeling especially bold, give her a bloody nose. There was no thinking her way out of this one. This was it; the end. Her adventure, her quest, her mission, her life - it was all over. She just prayed that somehow Master Gamaliel would learn of this and send someone else.

With a deep sigh, her shoulders dropped and to the waiting Z'rcona, she said, simply, “I surrender.”

“Good,” Z'rcona responded, simply, allowing Jayne the luxury of breathing once more. “I’ll let you and my Knight in shiny black armour get reacquainted while I contact Her Divine Excellency. I’ll only be a moment.”

With that, the dark elf left the room.

* * * * *

Lady Tanya Nightingale had been locked in a hushed-toned discussion with her Supreme Commander. Phaer tried hard not to eavesdrop, but his half-elven hearing made that difficult. Instead, he tried to focus intently on his internal thoughts and impressions – something of which Bunny had accused him more than once, so he supposed he should have no difficulty.

The easy manner and casual tone between the two Knights of such extreme difference in rank was a revelation to the ranger. Comparing it to his admittedly limited knowledge and experience of Knights of Paladina, he could not imagine such an exchange taking place between Hannah and the Lord High Chancellor. Indeed, his Knight friend had always spoken of superior officers with awe and reverence. He was sure that cross-rank familiarity would be quite impossible. Perhaps, to a certain extent, a bond might exist with her immediate commanding officer; Hannah had mentioned one Warren Mitchell if the half-elf’s memory served him correctly. Even then, though, he got the impression that she would probably want to ask his permission before blowing her nose while on duty. Or even off duty...were Knights ever off-duty? He wondered.

“Speaking of interfering,” Tanya spoke up at last, interrupting Phaer’s thoughts, “I just think it’s a shame your friend Callie will have to wait until Loric can learn all five skills. I mean, that could be a long time, right? Maybe - please forgive me, Loric - maybe too long. Is there any chance the Elder Dragon of Water could actually heal her himself?”

“An aquatic dragon entering the Realm of Fire?” said Loric. “Not likely.”

With this new development, The Elder Dragon reverted to her human form to more easily communicate. The strong and graceful female Knight that once more stood among them agreed with Loric. “Yes. Quite impossible.”

“I understand, my love,” Sir Marcus said, “but what our bright young scout means is this: Other than the location problem, if that were not so, if he could just reach out and touch Callie,” he pressed, “do you think he would help?”

“After a little chat from me, I’m almost sure he would. We get along really well, actually.”

“Then it seems to me that if the cleric won’t make a house call, we must bring the patient to the temple.” Tanya concluded, cryptically.

This got Loric interested. “What are you proposing?”

“When I was a lad,” Sir Marcus began, by way of answer, “I once saw a company of Knights convert a siege engine into a vehicle with which to carry a wounded warhorse hundreds of miles back to the barracks where they could tend to it and nurse it back to health. It was the damndest thing I ever saw. If they showed such care and honour towards a horse - a noble beast to be sure, but still a beast - how can we not do the same for a sentient dragon? If it were an injured human or elf, we

wouldn't hesitate to send a rescue party. We make these grandiose claims about the status of dragons in our Code. Well, it seems to me that this is a chance to prove that commitment.”

“You'd need a much larger rescue party for a dragon than you would for a human,” Loric pointed out.

The Supreme Commander agreed. “It will require no less than our entire Knighthood here present...but truth be told,” he spread his hands, “we really don't have much else to do.”

“Nothing else to do?” Bunny was incredulous. “Have you forgotten there's a war on? What about the alliance between the three Knighthoods...you do know about that, I presume...Sir?”

Once again, the Knight steadfastly refused to take offence at either her tone or her delayed ‘sir’. “I'm fully aware of the Alliance, and I support it wholeheartedly, but my Knighthood is small. We rely on secrecy for protection until we can build our numbers. And being such a small force, we really wouldn't make much difference in the thick of the war. We would no doubt be treated with honour and respect by the other two orders, but ultimately it would be all too easy to ignore us. At best, we would simply be absorbed into the greater mass; then we would lose our unique identity and with it our unique strength. I will not allow that to happen. We will remain an autonomous group, striking with speed and precision, taking on key missions, leaving the main warfare to the Knights of Paladinia and Zhentilon.”

“And you believe this is a key mission?” Loric asked.

“As a matter of fact I do. It may seem like a small thing, but...” he paused a moment to collect his thoughts before sharing them, “...but sometimes, the smallest things make the biggest difference. We'll leave the big things to the vast numbers of Light and Dark troops, while we do the small thing: rescue a single life. Even if no greater reward comes of this, it will be a task more than worthy of the Knights of Balance.”

“Just one problem,” the Elder Dragon pointed out. “Only Loric and I can enter the Realm of Fire. How will we get our Knights anywhere near Callie?”

It was Tanya who came up with the solution. “Couldn't you use some kind of dragon magic to transport her out into the normal world?”

“Probably, but my fiery counterpart will almost certainly object to the interference.”

Tanya grinned. “But that's the beauty of it! He's already interfering by keeping her in his realm where, strictly speaking, she's got no right to be. With the right persuasion, he should be delighted to get rid of her!”

The Knight Lady grinned back. “Your logic is impeccable, my dear. Yes, I'm sure I can persuade him to see it that way.”

“Actually, Great Lady, there's a bigger problem,” Phaer insisted, cutting through the good cheer with a dire reminder: “The dragon predator!”

“That's why we need the entire company,” Sir Marcus replied. “If the creature is still there, we'll have to fight it!”

With almost Bunny-like irreverence, Phaer insisted, "That's ridiculous! Do you have any idea how dangerous that thing is?"

"--Sir," Bunny added, helpfully. In her innocent eyes danced the light of mischief.

Great, Phaer thought, rolling his eyes. *She thinks she's funny!*

Apparently she wasn't the only one: Tanya Nightingale seemed to be having some trouble with `something in her eyes`, making them water, at the same time as trying to stifle a `coughing fit`.

"We are Knights!" Sir Marcus insisted. "We're trained to fight dragons, when necessary. How different could it be?"

"Sir," Phaer replied, patiently, "It could be very different."

"That's why you're coming with us."

"What?" Phaer demanded.

"You did volunteer," Bunny reminded him, sweetly.

"To observe and advise in a swift surprise strike by Superdragon here, sure," he indicated Loric. "Preferably in a covert, hopefully-it-won't-notice-me kind of way. But transporting a dragon is going to be a slow business and I don't want to be caught in the middle of it when it all blows up in our collective faces!"

He promptly sat down and hid his head in his arms. The half-elf was no coward, but as a ranger he was used to assessing when he was in over his head and it was time to quit. The trouble was he knew his people; he knew what they were capable of and, by inference, what their `greatest creation` would be capable of. That made it all too... real somehow.

"We need you," said the Knight Lady, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder.

He shook his head.

"You're the closest thing we've got to an expert," Sir Marcus added.

Once more, he shook his head.

"You can do this; you're better and braver than you think," Tanya encouraged.

No, flattery wasn't going to work.

"You'll go with them or you'll go with me, but one way or another--"

For some reason the ranger could not see, Loric never finished his warning. It didn't matter: threats weren't going to work, either.

"Well," Bunny scoffed, "if you're going to sit there and sulk, you might as well be running Callie through with your sword! At least that would be quick."

Phaer looked up through his hair. "That was a cheap shot," he accused her.

"I know," she agreed, smugly, looking immeasurably pleased with herself.

"Oh very well!" he groaned, getting to his feet. "Let's go. Now. Before I come to my senses again. After you, Bernice."

"Oh no," she refused, with a shake of her head. "Not a chance. You're the expert, not me and you've just said my magic's worse than useless. No, while you're off playing Knights and Dragons, I'm going to be doing something much more important. You'll agree I'm sure, that it's time we caught up with Eilidh and the others. While we've been stuck out here, Niltsiar could have invaded the capital and we'd not know a thing about it!"

At that, Lady Tanya Nightingale snapped to attention and formally addressed her Supreme Commander, requesting permission to be placed on detached duty. "It's only right that our guest should have an escort," she said, "and I can represent the interests of the Knights of Balance in whatever action we take against Niltsiar. All we need are a few provisions and a pair of trusty steeds."

Sir Marcus readily agreed and wished her well.

With an exchange of salutes, as the two dragons took to the skies, Tanya walked away, the sumorityl by her side.

"A horse!" Bunny exclaimed, excitedly. "Finally! My very own horse! It's about time someone spared a thought for my poor feet!"

Tanya smiled. She was going to enjoy this trip.

* * * * *

Strangely, with the dark elf gone, Eilidh's stalled mind chose that moment to restart. The situation was subtly different now, she realised. The only serious threats were a Dark Knight and a warlock: bad enough, to be sure, but if she could find a way to get them off-balance, they might have a chance to get out of the main temple chamber. After that, who knew what they might be able to do?

The young woman quoted one of her favourite mantras in her mind: *You are never without tools or weapons as long as you use your head.*

So, seeing no other alternative, Eilidh attempted something completely alien to her nature, something new and frightening: she made an effort to be social.

She knew something about Dark Knights, so she focussed on him. "Sir Leonis," she began. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Please, speakest thou freely," he responded. "It wouldst hardly be honourable to cause a captive unnecessary distress."

"That's kind of what I wanted to ask you. Why would a man of honour such as yourself, work for a dark elf? You heard her, `all humans look alike` and so on. You know what she represents, yet you take orders from her. Why?"

“Z'rcona's political views are of no moment to me. I hath been assigned to serve as second in command of her tactical unit, so I shall do my duty.”

“Duty and loyalty - to Niltsiar you mean.”

“Her Divine Excellency, yes.”

“But that's another thing: Dark Knights are supposed to recognise, worship and serve only one divine being: the goddess Mortress, Mistress of Death. So how can you also serve Her `Divine` Excellency Niltsiar? They are in conflict.”

“There is no conflict because they are one and the same.”

Eilidh was stunned. “What?”

“Niltsiar is the manifestation of Divine Mortress.”

“Most of your fellow Knights don't see it that way - they're fighting against her. What evidence do you have that you are right and they are wrong?”

“What need have I of evidence? My faith tells me what is true, and those who fail to fall before her in worship shall be punished for their lack of faith.”

Blind faith. Of course. It would have to be, Eilidh thought. There was no reasoning her way around that one. As it turned out, she was out of time anyway: Z'rcona had returned.

"Well, human," she said, "I have been in contact with Her Divine Excellency and you are to be taken to her at once. There is an old, disused Corridor entrance near here, just to the Southeast, we will use that. We mustn't forget what we came here for in the first place, though. Bring me the key," she ordered.

Eilidh had no choice but to obey. She retrieved the key from where she had dropped it and slowly, carefully, walked over to Niltsiar's agent, placing it in her hand. No sooner had she done so, however, than she heard an ethereal voice in her mind.

Du y Kharia, it said. *Is it thy will that this individual shouldst remove the Great Key from this place?*

No, of course it isn't, she thought back, *but what choice do I have?*

You are the Du y Kharia, insisted the voice.

What does that mean in practical terms? What can I do? Tell me, please.

We canst help thee, if thou doth choose.

Then by all means do so!

We awaiteth only thy command.

Consider it given. What are you waiting for?

Life, Du y Kharia. We must have Life. Life to restore the balance.

At last, Eilidh understood. This place, the symbol created by the corridors and rooms, the balance. Taking a deep breath, she declared, “I am the *Du y Kharia*...and I bring Life!”

She accessed her Life Store and created a conduit connecting with the Great Key. Granting Life to an inanimate object was the realm of Techmagic, and she had only limited experience of that, but she found it little different to Granting Life to a person. It felt a little odd and she had to draw the Life entirely from herself, since the key could provide none, but the point was it worked.

The key glowed and the room sprang into Life. Bright white light filled the chamber, magic flowed all around the room and beyond, and she could feel it. The whole temple was now active, including its defences, and she could feel it. Nine spectres shimmered into existence once more and headed straight for Z'rcona and her followers, and she could feel it. She could feel everything. This place was alive. It was a temple to Spirit magic, necromancy, the Dead Secret and she had restored it to Life. It felt...exhilarating!

Sir Lincarceo drew his broadsword, enhanced with blue dragonscales, and the warlock began casting powerful spells, his Catalyst furiously trying to keep up with his Life requirements. All doors in the temple were now opened, both physical and ethereal, allowing Skeletons and liches, ghosts and spectres to pour into the chamber, adding to the general melee.

Z'rcona activated her orb device and disappeared in an instant, unconcerned about leaving her companions to their fate.

Eilidh, too, wasted no time, but she was concerned for her friends. She needed to get them out. With a single thought, she redirected the flow of Life, and in a moment they been freed of all of Z'rcona's magical constraints.

“Let’s get out of here!” she yelled. They didn't need telling twice.

Chapter 23

The party's exit was unimpeded as Eilidh and the others rushed headlong back into open air. That was quite a shock to the system as it was just a little after midday and it apparently got quite hot around that time. They didn't let that slow their progress, however.

Granite drew Eilidh's attention to the glow of a strong vein of magic running through what remained of the village.

"Well spotted," Eilidh commended him, though she could scarcely have missed it. "Judging by the flow pattern, I suspect this vein will lead us to the Corridor entrance Z'rcona mentioned."

"What, dat glowin' fing, Miss Eilidh?" Jayne asked.

The others stopped so suddenly, they almost crashed into one another.

"Ye can see that, lassie?" Granite asked.

"Well o' course I can!"

"Remind me, lass. What are you - Life Potential?"

"That's right."

"Just barely," Eilidh confirmed, taking a reading.

"Yeah? So what?"

"That means this an exceptionally pure vein," Eilidh explained.

"I donnae know about you, Eilidh," the dwarf told her, one Catalyst to another, "but I'm gettin' a definite sense of *déjà-vu* here."

Toli gasped, "You mean this could lead to a Life Eddy, like the one in Avidon? That's amazing!"

"We'll see," Eilidh said, cautiously. "Jayne," she said to the half-orc warrior, "you're the fittest and fastest of our group. Run on ahead, following this vein as fast as you can. Find the Corridor entrance if possible, but more importantly, if you see something that looks like...er..." she struggled to find an adequate description.

"Like a giant fountain of dazzling light and shimmering colour, reaching high up into the heavens," Toli supplied, helpfully.

Eilidh grinned. "Very good," she commended her friend, who smiled back, appreciatively.

"So yes, Jayne, if you see something like that, run back to us and tell us immediately, whether you've found the Corridor or not. Got it?"

"Got it," she affirmed, before sprinting into the trees ahead. The others followed at a steadier pace.

“Well,” Toli sighed with relief. “Thank the gods that's over! I'm not exactly sure what you did, mind, but whatever you did, it was inspired! For a while there I thought we were done for and we'd never escape!”

“Actually,” Eilidh replied, “I'm not exactly sure that we did.”

“What?!” The others demanded.

“Escape, I mean,” clarified the Catalyst. “For me, the whole scene changed the moment Z'rcona got back from communicating with `Her Divine Excellency`. She immediately told us about the Corridor entrance and where to find it. Why? In fact, why would she need to take us to Niltsiar by Corridor anyway? Quite apart from the fact that I seriously doubt Niltsiar chose to build her base of operations at a mouth of the Corridor network, why would they need it? They've got those teleportation devices - we saw them before at Marina Fells, and they clearly work just as well for a group as for an individual, so long as they're in physical contact. Yet, despite telling me how important and valuable I was, when Z'rcona teleported away, she didn't make any attempt to take me with her. She made sure she got the Great Key, but she forgot about me. I was standing right in front of her, for heaven's sake! All she had to do was reach out and grab my arm and that's it,” Eilidh snapped her fingers. “I'm gone to Niltsiar.”

Toli, for once, was speechless. “But-- But--”

“Yer makin' no sense at all, lassie,” Granite objected.

“On the contrary, it makes perfect sense and there's only one reasonable conclusion: Z'rcona was ordered to let me go. Don't you see? We didn't escape at all! We got out because `She` wanted us to get out.”

“But-- But-- But why would she do that?”

“Well, I'm convinced it's connected to this *Du y Kharia* business.”

“Connected how?”

“I wish I knew.”

Jayne returned just then, forestalling any further debate, saying she'd found both the fountain and Corridor entrance.

“Come on, Miss Eilidh,” she said, “there ain't no danger. Nothin' `ere at all, besides a few lazy Great Kij vines.”

Eilidh grabbed her arm, tight, and looked intently into her eyes. “What did you say?” she demanded.

Startled, Jayne asked what the problem was.

Toli giggled. “Don't worry about it - our friend Eilidh's just got a bit of a phobia about Kij vines after one tried to eat her on the way to Shakaran.”

It was the hobbit's turn to be startled when the Catalyst shushed her, irritably.

“Jayne,” she insisted, “tell me again what you said.”

“I said there ain’t nothin’ ‘ere besides a few lazy Great Kij vines. Why?”

“Show me.”

When they reached the place Jayne led them to, Toli and Granite found their breath quite taken away by the sight of the immense Life Eddy, smaller than the one they had seen in Avidon, but growing before their eyes. Eilidh, however, seemed to completely ignore it. Her eyes fixed on the sprawling green vines and half hidden heads of Kij vine plants.

Toli was wide-eyed at Eilidh's reaction. She had never seen her friend like this before. She was beyond intense or irritated; she was angry. In fact, judging by the way the Catalyst's face was flushing an increasingly deep shade of red, she was livid. At who or what, the magician had no idea.

Eilidh growled in frustration and seemed like she wanted to lay her hands on someone and throttle them.

“So stupid!” she cried. “The arrogance!” She shook her head. “I am the *Du y Kharia!*” she said in a self-mocking voice. “Stupid!”

“Are you OK, Eilidh?” Toli asked, concerned.

Ignoring the question, she said, “Listen, all of you. We need some of that vine.”

“Ave you lost your mind?” Jayne demanded.

“Have ye forgotten what happened to ye last time, lass?” Granite wondered.

“What's wrong now, Eilidh?” Toli asked.

Eilidh stared at them as if from the other side of a great chasm. In her mind, she was already three steps ahead, and they were asking yesterday's questions. She supposed this was one of the things that helped to make her unpopular at the church school. People thought she was showing off, but she wasn't. They thought she was condescending towards those who couldn't keep up with her reasoning, but that wasn't true, either. It was just that she got terribly frustrated having to go backwards, trying to explain things, when she wanted to be moving forwards in her own understanding. She didn't even consider herself to be amazingly intelligent. She worked hard, studied hard, socialised little, but above all she liked to think. Thinking was so important, but it was an effort that all too many people refused to make.

You don't have to have a record level IQ, she would often tell people. Just use your head!

Taking a few deep breaths, she forced herself to explain her thoughts, focussing on Tolbrietta, who she felt had a lot of activity in her head, if only she could make it all go in the same direction.

“Tell me, Toli,” she began. “What did the Wise One ask us to do?”

“Well, he said we should travel here, locate the ancient temple and br--”

Eilidh cut her off. "Let's just deal with that bit first. He said we should `Locate the ancient temple`, yes?"

"Yes," Toli agreed.

"Toli, he said `Locate`,," she emphasised the word, "'the ancient temple`. He didn't say we were supposed to go inside!"

The dwarf snorted. "That's just quibbling over semantics."

"Words are important, Granite," Eilidh admonished him. "He said as much himself when I wasn't precise with my questions."

The dwarf wasn't convinced, but she continued anyway.

"What was the next part of our quest?"

Toli answered, "We were to `bring back the Great Key`. `Locate the ancient temple and bring back the Great Key`. That's what he said."

"What if he didn't say that?" Eilidh suggested.

In response to her friends' puzzled looks, she picked up a dead branch and just as Kismet had done, many moons and many miles from their current time and place, wrote in the soil:

~~KEY~~

K I J

"What if he said `Bring back the Great Kij`?" she concluded.

Toli gasped in understanding. "Before we left the Wise One's hut," she said, "the Wise One was drinking herbal tea made from the leaves of a Kij vine." She frowned. "You don't think he sent us all this way just for more tea, do you?"

Eilidh growled. "That's what's got me so angry – the idea that he just might!" Forcing herself to calm down, she continued, "Trouble is, now that I've thought of the possibility, I can't just ignore it, because for all I know, the Kij vines might be important, somehow. If Rochelle were here, I'm sure she'd remind us that anything that has medicinal properties can usually be used as a poison, and a herbal restorative could even be a weapon. I'm not saying I know what the Wise One has in mind, but there could be any number of reasons that don't involve tea. I can't afford to overlook anything, no matter how trivial it might seem."

"Remember all those warnings, too," Toli added. "They said we should turn back because death waited there – and it did – although undeath might have been more strictly accurate. If that bit was true, maybe the `this is meaningless` part was also true. If so, did we just waste our time?"

"If we did, he's going to be in a lot of trouble when I see him again!" Granite threatened.

Eilidh answered, "I know how you feel, but it was my choice to go in there, and my fault if I got it wrong. Right or wrong, done is done, and we certainly accomplished something in there."

Jayne was completely dumbstruck, not knowing what to say.

“Now, according to Kismet,” Eilidh said, “the key with Kij vines - if you'll pardon the pun - is to chop off its head before it knows what hit it. Then you can harvest the leaves and vine stem in complete safety.”

“Lucky he told us that,” Toli remarked. “We wouldn't want a repeat of last time, would we?”

Eilidh blinked and agreed. “No, you're right, it is lucky...” She hadn't considered that. Shaking her head clear, she returned to the task at hand.

“Your axe looks just about right for this job,” she suggested to the dwarf, so how do you feel about a spot of gardening?”

“Frankly,” he said, “I still think yer over analysing, but it cannae do any harm, so sure, why not?” With that, he stomped off to see to the job.

Jayne Corr offered to lend a hand.

When they were out of earshot, Toli spoke quietly to Eilidh. “You realise, don't you, that right or wrong, we let Niltsiar's agents into that temple and practically issued invitations.”

“Yes,” Eilidh replied, darkly.

“...And now Niltsiar has the Great Key from inside that temple, with who knows what powers?”

“Yes,” Eilidh repeated.

Toli sighed deeply and then there was a long silence, in which each was lost in her own thoughts until the others returned with bag full of Great Kij vine cuttings.

“You know, Eilidh,” Toli offered. “All this business with kijos and keys makes me think of Kismet. I miss him, I really do. And I wish he was here; I could just use one of his outrageous stories or silly jokes right about now.”

“Me, too,” Eilidh agreed, solemnly.

Without warning, then, Granite Longbeard looked them up and down and said, “Egad! Didn't yer mothers ever tell ye? If the wind changes, yer faces will stick in those ghastly expressions!”

Frowns turned to half smiles and incredulous looks.

“What?” demanded the dwarf. “I'm a bard, remember? I'm supposed to be cheerin' everyone up! Alas, though,” he concluded, raising his index finger for emphasis, “I donnae have an orange hanky to wave around.”

Eilidh and Toli burst into laughter at the mental imagery. Even Jayne, who had never met Kismet, joined in the much-needed release of tension, as the four of them entered the Corridor, blissfully unaware that they were being watched...

..."Egad!" exclaimed the hidden figure when they had gone. "Now I've got a dwarf doing impressions of me! Still, they do say imitation is the highest form of flattery."

With that, the figure vanished, intent on a new destination.

* * * * *

The Wise One displayed no surprise at the appearance of his guest. Indeed, he reflected, for all he knew, his visitor might have been present for a long time in one form or another. He didn't think so, though. At the moment, he appeared to be a man of indeterminate age, neither young nor old, but both and neither. His choice of clothing was colourful to say the least. Garishly colourful. It seemed to be his favourite form from an apparently infinite number of possibilities. The Wise One offered his visitor some tea, but he declined the offer.

"Egad! That was quite the little stunt you pulled there, wasn't it, old friend?" The visitor said, clutching a bright orange silk hanky close to his face, in the foppish manner of gentlemen of an age even the Knights would consider archaic. "Are you sure it was, well, wise?"

The Wise One shrugged. "It seemed a necessary step. It served as a test, an education and our friend's little gift to our enemy might just give her pause for a moment."

"You also stirred up some considerable magic and people are going to notice. In fact, I can think of at least one person who's going to get quite a shock when what you created hits them."

"I created nothing," disputed the Wise One. "Merely restored. And anyway, who are you to criticise my methods? You had your chance to guide them and you `died`, remember?"

Kismet sulked.

"After that little stunt," continued the Wise One, "you just had him and me. And now he's gone and revealed too much of himself, so I'm all they've got left. At least I have the good sense to restrict myself to a cameo role. Strictly an advisor, nothing more, and definitely not...involved."

Kismet snorted. "Not involved? Not directly, maybe. But you're still pulling strings from a distance. Egad! Suppose she traces those strings back to you?"

"That is not possible, even for her, not unless she's a lot more powerful and skilled than we give her credit for."

"And if she is?"

The Wise One shrugged, sagely. "Then we need to know that, too. Listen, my old friend. The bottom line is that I will do what I must, act as I see fit and until you stop playing dead, you have no say in the matter."

"Alright, it's your life, your choice."

"That it is," the Wise One agreed.

"I say, old friend, tell me something," Kismet asked after a pause. "How did you know I'd told them how to cut Kij vines safely?"

“I didn't get to be the Wise One without having eyes and ears everywhere,” he intoned.

The visitor flopped onto a couch that had just appeared. “Please!” he begged. “Spare me your ancient sage act!”

The Wise One spread his hands. “You wear your mask; I'll wear mine. But if you really want me to answer your question, consider this: Who do you suppose created the Glade-That-Wasn't-Supposed-To-Be-There, hmmm?”

“You? I assumed it was her handiwork.”

The Wise One snorted. “She has rather more important things to do than play with such simple, childish magic tricks.” He paused a moment and then his lips began to quiver with suppressed humour, eyes dancing with delight.

His visitor stood up suddenly - the sofa promptly vanished - and mumbled something about a sudden pressing engagement. His diary appeared in mid-air and flicked through its own blank pages as he made hastily for the door.

The booming laughter that emerged from the Wise One's lips didn't seem to fit with a man of his age and appearance. “You mean I've finally put one past you? After all this time, I've finally done it?”

“I-- I-- was busy-- so much going on --hard to keep track --gotta go! Er, Bye!”

With an entirely unnecessary puff of smoke, the visitor disappeared.

“Oh my dear Kismet,” The Wise One chuckled. “That alone almost makes this whole thing worthwhile!”

Epilogue

The reunion wasn't quite what Eilidh had expected.

For some reason, she had assumed that all of her former companions would be there to welcome them and celebrate their safe return. Again, Eilidh pondered her mental use of the word `safe`. No-one and nothing in the world was safe while Niltsiar was around, but she would have felt better to see all of her companions again.

As it was, of her half dozen outstanding friends, only Rochelle was within Shakaran Castle's fortified walls. Her excursion to Merlyon Library had proved successful indeed. Of course, Rochelle had never before been to Shakaran City, let alone the castle, so naturally there had been stringent security measures to endure, even with Hannah's seal. The presence of the daft old mage, Artisho, had smoothed things over somewhat. Apparently he was known here. Before long, Princess Mystaya had confirmed the druid's part in her rescue and thenceforth Rochelle was accorded full diplomatic honours and the Freedom of the City of Shakaran. Not to mention a heap of gold and the offer of free training. Rochelle postponed those considerations, however, preferring to begin her research.

The books were quite a find and the gnome was excited about what she had learned already from inside her own private `do-not-disturb` study room.

She agreed to leave the research to one side for a time, however, in order to exchange stories with the others. She had not got very far, however, when a confused Eilidh demanded, "What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry," Rochelle said. "What part aren't you clear on?"

"The part where you lost your magic."

"I told you; it was a Nullmagic spell."

Granite took up Eilidh's point. "What we're tryin' tae get at, lassie, is how ye managed tae get yer Life connection restored. It would have been a wee bit risky going tae the Church of Life in Merlyon, our leader's old stomping ground."

Rochelle was offended. "Credit me with some sense, please! OK, I realise I don't have a very good track record on that score, but believe me, I'd never jeopardise our quest like that."

"So how did you do it?" Eilidh pressed.

"Well, I didn't, obviously. Can't you tell? To all intents and purposes, magically speaking I'm still as Dead as a doornail."

"Dead as a what?" Toli asked, fascinated by the expression.

"A doornail," Rochelle repeated. "It's something Artisho said."

"Can you please answer my question?" Eilidh demanded, getting annoyed at the perceived evasion.

“I am answering it!” Rochelle shot back. “I keep answering it, but you're not listening!”

“Alright,” Eilidh said. “Everyone just take a few breaths and calm down. Now, let's go over it again, from the beginning. Rochelle, what happened in the library after Merlana caught you?”

“She nodded to an Enforcer behind me and they cast a Nullmagic spell, stripping me of my connection to magic.”

“OK, we've got that bit,” Eilidh assured her, encouragingly. “Now we all know that there are only two ways to cancel a Nullmagic spell: the first is that an Enforcer can dispel the effects. Did that happen to you?”

“No,” Rochelle answered.

“Right then, the second way is for a Catalyst to treat you and since there wasn't one with you, that would mean attending a Church of Life, which is not cheap at all.”

“And it would have been a very bad idea, under the circumstances.”

“Agreed. So we come to the key question: how was your magic restored?”

“It wasn't; it hasn't been. I'm still magically Dead. Can't you tell?”

The two Catalysts exchanged glances.

Granite looked Rochelle in the eye, and said, solemnly. “This is what we donnae understand, lass: Yer not magically Dead. Yer magic is just fine.”

“But--”

Toli jumped in. “It's OK, we don't think you're lying...” she glanced around with a puzzled look, and asked, “...do we?”

Eilidh smiled. “No, of course not. We just need to get to the bottom of what's been done to you, Rochelle.”

She bade Rochelle to concentrate, and after a supreme effort, she cried, “Ganieda!”

“Pardon?”

“Well, I haven't got to that point in my story yet. You haven't let me,” the druid said, pointedly.

“Then you'd better tell us.”

Rochelle continued her tale, including Ganieda's gift, restoring the druid's magic. “But then,” she paused before continuing, trying hard to recall, “Artisho did something and...I forgot. I forgot I'd had my Life restored. I couldn't feel it or use it. It was just like the Nullmagic spell, but it wasn't that because as you can tell, I still have my magic intact.”

“I wonder what magic could do that?” Toli put in.

“I don’t know, but if he hadn’t done what he did, I would have been incapacitated by Merlyon’s shield draining my Life Store and I’d never have got out. As it was, I guess I couldn’t feel it. Hang on...come to think of it, Artisho did a few other strange things with magic, like high level chronomagic...he made me forget those as well. He said I would remember when it was important...and I guess I have. How do suppose he did all that?”

Granite was the first to stand up. “I think it's time we asked him, don't you?”

The others agreed and went to find him.

When they asked around, though, they were told they'd just missed him - he'd left the castle not five minutes since. The companions ran outside, but couldn't see him. Climbing the steps to the highest turret of the castle, they spotted a figure on the back of a great sea serpent in the nearby river, sun reflecting off his golden robes, heading away from the city.

The old man's voice drifted on the wind to their ears.

“Wait! We have to go back...I've left my hat!...”

* * * * *

Eilidh Hagram had almost forgotten what it was like to not be dirty, smelly and sweaty. It seemed so long since she had woken up in a soft, cosy bed by the fireside. At last she had hot water to bathe in, clean, fluffy towels to dry herself with and freshly pressed white Catalyst's robes to wear, lightly scented with crushed rose petals. Shakaran Castle staff had even provided her with one of her favourite Techmagic devices: a hair dryer. With a simple application of house magic, which anyone with at least Life Potential could do, the object floated in mid-air and blew a warm breeze over her blonde tresses - and yes, here they qualified as `tresses`, not `tangled ball of string`. The device left her hands free to brush, comb and style her shoulder-length hair and make it shine. Dear gods it felt so good to be clean again, and she had even got used to the eerie nature of a castle built without magic. Well, almost.

She joined Tolbrietta Hobnobb in the dining room, where the hobbit was just starting second breakfast – actual second breakfast, this time, not just the second helping of her first breakfast. Eilidh had slept later than she'd realised. Her best friend - Eilidh paused to soak in how good it felt to even think such a thing - greeted her with her usual bright and bubbly chatter, all traces of their recent ordeal wiped from her face and her heart.

Toli complained good-naturedly about Rochelle, with whom she had shared a room, saying. “In the end, I had to physically confiscate her books and lay on them in bed just to get her to stop reading and go to sleep. Mind you, it was just as well; the mattress was too soft, not that I'd ever complain or anything, but--”

After that, Eilidh wasn't really listening. She had no interest in talking, but she loved to hear her friend's incessant chatter, because it meant Toli was happy. And that was important.

From what snippets the Catalyst retained in her mind, Granite Longbeard and Miss Jayne Corr had long since left the table and gone to root through the royal armoury at the Prince Regent's invitation. Meanwhile, Rochelle was busy in her study once more. Eilidh had to admit she'd been

wrong about her. Given a chance at freedom, she had proved invaluable, resourceful, quick-witted and almost as study-happy as Eilidh herself.

The mood was good, but it couldn't last. Later there would be decisions to make. That would come after the weekly war progress report that the Prince had invited them to attend.

* * * * *

When the companions had assembled in the main hall, they recognised an old acquaintance who had come to deliver the briefing message: Knight Officer Sir Quentin Marr, Leader of the First Shakaran Dragon Cavalry Division, Dark Knights of Zhentilon. He spared them a brief nod before dropping to one knee before the Prince Regent and handing him the sealed message. The Prince was looking resplendent in his full state trappings, including the great golden sceptre, ceremonial sword and imperial purple cloak. His daughter, the Princess Mystaya was in attendance at his right hand, dressed in a gown of purest white silk, adorned with silver embroidery. To the belt she wore around her slender waist, was attached a scabbard entrusted with diamonds in which rested a well-polished short sword. No reason she couldn't be armed for defence and look stunning at the same time. Freshly picked lavenders were woven in her flaxen hair and she matched her father's cloak with a long velvet train that reached the polished marble floor and continued for about half her height again. A pair of young handmaidens had held it for her while she entered, but they had now retired from the chamber, being in no way privy to this sensitive information.

Prince Garald took the message and thanked the Knight, bidding him to rise. Sir Quentin stood, bowed once, and moving to where the princess stood, he took her left hand and kissed it before removing himself to where Eilidh and the others were gathered. Mystaya had told her rescuers that this was considered the ancient and proper greeting for her rank and station: a kiss on her left hand was appropriate for an official statesman; the right hand was reserved for a suitor declaring their intentions.

When Eilidh asked why it was that way around, the princess had just smiled and confided, "I've never dared to ask."

The Prince Regent unsealed the message and declared, "Here in my hand, I hold the official document of war. Let those who hear it be warned that repeating it, in whole or in part, without authorisation, is strictly prohibited on pain of summary execution for treason."

The main doors were ordered sealed, then he took a deep breath to begin reading. Just before the doors were completely closed, however, they were opened once more to admit two persons: It was Bernice Ardra - Bunny - accompanied by a female Knight in silver armour. Sir Quentin's eyes widened slightly at the sight of a mythical Knight of Balance. The Lady Knight strode confidently up to the throne and dropped to one knee before the Prince, handing him another sealed document to add to the first.

"Your Grace, by order of Sir Marcus Braithwaite, Supreme Commander of the Knights of Balance, I am come to represent our order in all discussions pertaining to the war, in line with the terms of the Knight Alliance. My name is Knight Scout Leader, Lady Tanya Nightingale, and I place myself in your service, Your Grace. My companion is one Bernice Ardra, an associate of certain other guests of yours."

“Hi,” said Bunny.

Eilidh stepped forward. “I can vouch for her,” she offered.

The Prince unsealed the document and checked Lady Tanya's credentials. Satisfied, he bid her arise and she obeyed, pausing to kiss Mystaya's left hand. “Your Highness,” she offered in greeting.

The Prince repeated his official warning and prepared to read the report, when the door opened a second time.

“This is intolerable!” He exclaimed. “Never have I known these confidential proceedings to be inter--”

He stopped in mid-sentence when he saw the individual that had been admitted. It was another Lady Knight; this time wearing golden armour...at least, patches of it were still gold. Most of it, however, was charred and blackened and covered in blood stains. The entire hall was hushed and subdued at the sight. And it wasn't just any Knight...it was Lady Hannah Collins.

She stumbled as she approached the throne, but glared balefully at the instinctive offers of assistance. She was exhausted and barely able to stand; her face was blackened and tear-streaked; her eyes were red and puffy, but she was still a Knight and she would approach the Royal Throne of Shakaran under her own power and with dignity.

Kneeling before the Prince Regent, she said, “Your Grace, I do apologise for this inexcusable interruption and beg thy pardon for presuming to approach thy throne in my current state, but I fear I doth bring news that can in no ways wait one moment longer.”

Prince Garald offered no sympathy, no assistance, no leeway in protocol, though every part of him ached to do so, for he knew it would be offensive.

“Understood, Knight Lady. Your appearance is excused. I will hear thy news immediately.”

Without getting up, Hannah announced, “Your Grace, Your Highness, My Allied Knights, Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my sad duty to inform thee of a most foul deed of great dread: Merlyon is gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean, `Gone`?” The Prince demanded.

Hannah was clearly flagging - Bunny noticed that some of the blood on Hannah's left side was her own, coming from a deep gash where the plates of her armour parted to allow movement.

Rochelle noticed, too, but even with her Life Store intact, the druid could do nothing to help - Knights went through ritual Life Draining, renouncing all magic. The druid's healing spells simply had nothing to work with. What Hannah needed was a cleric. Fortunately, though, Rochelle's trained healer's eye told her that the wound was not immediately life threatening. Not yet.

The prince continued to show Hannah no mercy.

“On your feet, Knight Warrior!” He commanded.

“Yes, Your Grace!” Strangely, the act of obedience seemed to revive her. Standing straight now, shoulders back, head up, she told her tale to the hall.

* * * * *

It began as an electrical storm originating from the heart of the city, except that the lightning travelled upward instead of down. There were reports of a woman in golden robes standing in the middle, but all attempts to stop her proved futile. Then the shield fluctuations began like the last time, only tenfold, a hundredfold. In no time at all, the impossible happened: the magic failed in the City of Magic. First the lights went out and the sunstone ceased to shine. Household magic appliances shut down or exploded. Chaos creatures poured into the city through gaps in the shield. Knights both light and dark rushed to arms alongside the Guard. Enforcers futilely tried to re-establish order, while other mages of all types fought the chaos horde. Bards sang magical and uplifting songs even as they fought for their lives. Clerics were torn between tending the wounded and calling upon the gods to smite down their enemies. Finally, the shield flared brilliantly and died completely: the impenetrable defence shield had fallen, leaving Merlyon completely vulnerable to attack...and then it got worse.

“Worse?” demanded the prince. “How could it possibly get worse?”

“Merlyon is...or rather was...a city on two levels,” she reminded everyone. “The upper level is - was - suspended magically above the second.”

There were a few physical supports, but they were merely ornamental, not practical. It simply never occurred to anyone that magic could ever fail.

Princess Mystaya’s face turned a ghostly white; clutching at her father, tears ran unchecked down her cheeks and she wasn't alone. Three Knights: gold, silver and black clamped a fist over their hearts as one and bowed their heads. All could see where Hannah's litany was going, as much as they were desperately willing that it would not be so, that she would say something else - anything else. But the truth was undeniable.

With the magic gone, there was nothing to support Upper Merlyon and the entire level fell, crushing the level below in a gigantic mushroom cloud of dust, ash and flame.

“I was lucky that the battle hadst taken me beyond the outer edge of the city,” Hannah explained. “I believe the sound was the worst thing,” she reflected, after a moment.

“The sound?” The Prince Regent's voice was a strangled cry.

“Yes, Your Grace. When the chaos creatures didst attack the city, there was a great cacophony of sound: steel, magic, cries of agony, powerful explosions and the tears of terrified children. Then, after the upper level collapsed, there was silence. Terrible, deathly silence. Even the battle stopped, momentarily. Time slowed that we mayest witness the fullness of the devastation.”

The destruction of Mythallen's first city was utterly complete, the loss of life incalculable.

“When the fighting resumed, my sponsor Sir Warren Mitchell - newly promoted to Knight Commander - didst call for me by name.”

* * * * *

“Knight Warrior Lady Hannah Collins!” He had summoned her.

“Yes, Sir!” As she had fought to his side, a large creature loomed over her, almost like a grizzly bear with a crocodile's head...and foot long retractable claws - that was how she'd received the vicious wound to her side. She killed it, and a few others of various types before she finally got close enough to talk to her commander properly.

Without even looking at her - being quite busy at the time fighting a super-agile monster with sword blades for arms - he had just said, “What the hell art thou still doing here?”

“Sir?” she had questioned, not understanding.

“If my memory doth not fail me, I didst place thee on detached duty to pursue a quest that wouldst put an end to Niltsiar for good. The situation at hand doth lead me to conclude that thy quest is incomplete. Therefore, I ask thee again: What the hell art thou still doing here?”

“Sir, with all due respect, the Sacred Code of Paladinius doth clearly state that a Knight placed on special duties or leave of absence mayest not presume that such a situation is to be sustained post promotion.”

“Tis always the letter of the law to thee, Hannah, is it not?”

“What else is there, sir?”

“Behind just laws there layeth reason and 'tis that reason that must be obeyed even if the letter of the law is not completely adhered to. Rules--” he broke off and grunted as he fended off a heavy blow with his shield. “Rules, by their very nature, art conceived in the past whilst we must live in the present. The rules of our order must guide us, certainly. BUT. NOT. STIFLE. UAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGHHHHHHH!” His last four words had been punctuated by a series of desperate blocks and parries, until finally the creature's left blade-arm penetrated his armour.

Hannah screamed, “NO!” And with a resurgence of energy, she fought to her commander's side and slew the creature while it was still trying to free its arm from Warren Mitchell's body - with a superhuman effort, he was actually holding the thing inside him to keep it off balance and vulnerable. The creature dropped to the ground and a group of Knights - Light and Dark - formed a protective ring around them. They would fall to the last warrior before harm got a glimpse of the fallen Commander. Every breath that rattled in his chest was agony for him, but he beckoned Hannah closer. She knelt beside him.

“Thy place is not here,” he whispered in her ear. “I am ordering thee to return to thy quest and put a stop to this madness. Thou canst do it; thou art destined for great deeds. Thou wilt take thy bronze dragon and leave this bloodbath forthwith. For thee to die here wouldst be a waste of thy potential. Not honourable. This order cannot be countermanded, save by the Lord High Chancellor himself. Do I make myself clear, Knight Warrior?”

“Perfectly, Sir,” she choked.

“Then go. Now...Ah...” he smiled serenely, the pain forgotten, “...I see Father Patreleux. He leadeth me unto Paradi---” blood poured from his mouth and he exhaled for the last time. The light faded from his eyes.

Tears were flowing already, yet Hannah spared not a moment - there would be time for grief later. She stood and called for Brash, who created a space for another of his splashdown landings. A heartbeat later they were winging their way to Shakaran, whereupon Brash elected to return to his own people and inform the aquatic kingdom authorities of what had taken place.

Hannah staggered into the castle unopposed, for who would dare hinder a Knight, fresh from the battlefield?

And now she was here.

* * * * *

Prince Garald dismissed her but bade her, "If injury and fatigue permit, please stay a moment," he said, "for there is still the matter of the war report and it would be only fitting if you could bear witness as a representative of the Knights of Paladinia."

"It would be my honour, Your Grace," she assured him. "I can..." she winced, "stand a little while longer, methinks."

So, at last, the report: it was not pleasant reading.

Chaos creatures were everywhere. The smallest city, Keothara, was overrun; Baltacha, the breadbasket of Mythallen, was under heavy siege, cutting off vital supplies; the elves were pinned down in their sacred woods; the dwarves had sealed themselves inside their mountains, vowing never to surface again; the hobbit villages were burning and a large force of the monsters was preventing any approach to gnomish country.

The Hand of Darkness Liberation Front had reportedly signed a non-aggression pact with Niltiar's agents, and the chaos creatures seemed to be leaving Avidon alone as a result. The Dark Knights of Zhentilon were marching to lay waste to that city in response. It remained unclear whether the Paladins would back them.

One piece of good news was that a huge force of chaos creatures that had been spotted en route to Shakaran, had mysteriously disappeared due to parties unknown.

"Actually, Your Grace," Tanya offered. "That would be us. The Knights of Balance intercepted and destroyed them and without serious injury to ourselves, I'm happy to say."

The other two Knights, so far unsure quite what to make of her, looked at her with a new respect.

It was the princess who responded, "The City of Shakaran is grateful to your Order, My Lady."

"Indeed," her father agreed. "So now the capital city, the centre of magic is in ruins. Now Shakaran stands alone as a beacon of freedom!" He raised his voice. "Now we redouble our efforts and we fight! Shakaran will not be cowed into submission. We will fight them in the streets; we will fight them in our homes; we will fight them whenever and wherever they appear and we will never surrender! We will stand united together, or we will fall to the last man, woman and child. We may die, but we will never be defeated!"

His voice echoed around the walls and high-vaulted ceiling of the great hall.

For a moment, there were cheers as everyone in the hall was caught up in the Prince's defiance and determination. Then all was quiet, all was still. At last, Bunny spoke up: typically irreverent, but no-one could deny the truth of her words.

“Well then,” she said. “Looks like I've got here just in time for the end of the world.”

END OF MAJAOS: PART 2