

THORN'S CHRONICLE

Rise of the Winter King



**PART I: FROM MISTAMERE, THE BARONY OF
HALARAN TO SPECULARUM, AND BACK AGAIN**

Introduction	3
Waning half-moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Sviftmont 22, 997AC)	4
Waning half-moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Sviftmont 23, 997AC)	11
Waning half-moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Sviftmont 24, 997AC)	18
Waning half-moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Sviftmont 25, 997AC)	32
Last quarter moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Sviftmont 26, 997AC)	42
Last quarter moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Sviftmont 27, 997AC)	52
Last quarter moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Sviftmont 28, 997AC)	77
New moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 1, 997AC)	89
First quarter moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 7, 997AC)	93
First half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 8, 997AC)	120
First half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 9-22, 997AC)	125
Waning half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 23, 997AC)	131
Waning half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 24, 997AC)	146
Waning half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 25, 997AC)	167
Waning crescent of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 26, 997AC)	195
Waning crescent of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 28, 997AC)	197
Waxing crescent of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 3, 997AC)	212

Introduction

EXCERPTED FROM "THIRD EMPIRE: THYATIS' ERA UPON BRUN"

I begin this journal, as all of my order so do, with an introduction and a caution to the Reader.

I am named Marcu Markovic, third son of Petr, of the village of Stellanford. As I stood to gain no lands or security from the passing of my father, upon my Shearing I went to Radlebb, and there pledged myself to the druids, and came to be known as Thorn. I spent seven years in apprenticeship to the Circle, learning the songs and histories and lineages. I also learned the ways of marking words upon hide and parchment, that they may sing long after I have been silenced.

And now the caution: The accounts chronicled here were marked well after their occurrence, and have been reconstructed from skeins kept during the course of my journeymanhood. Some details have been forgotten, and are not omitted by intent. Others have been added in hindsight. I do not profess to have the eyes of an Immortal, and so can only guess at the hearts and minds of others, but have relayed those accounts as best can be judged from what I know of those mentioned, and in hearing of their retellings over the years.

Waning half-moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about
Swiftmont 22, 997AC)

When the weather began to turn cold, I took my leave of Nemiston, journeying south to share a fireside with some of the many shepherds of Armstead. The sheeps' coats were quite thick, and knew I'd need to hurry if I wanted to make it through the Gap and back into the Duchy before the snows closed the passes.

The next morning, I crossed paths with a merchant and his guards taking the long way 'round to avoid the Duke's Road tax. It was a strange company: the merchant gray and bent at the reins of the wagon, obviously out of sorts with the rougher trails. The two guards were my age, give or take a year, one broad across the shoulders and dark haired, the other whiplike, with fair hair and beard. And riding in the back of the wagon, a young lady -- barely more than a girl, really -- dark of hair, clad in the white and silver of The Flame. They introduced themselves to me, and I to them: **Old Seth**, merchant and wagoneer; **Varis**, recently released from service in the Duke's army; **Gilliam**, who would say naught but he was returning from travels in Ylaruam; **Ana**, initiate of the Silver Flame.

Not much was said thereafter, save Old Seth and Gilliam each cursing the early cold and speculation on whether or not we would make it through the Gap before the lowering clouds began to loose their snows. I kept my own speculations to myself, preferring, as Varis, to save my breath for the roughness of the trail.

We took a noontide meal of hardtack and salted venison, and were glad we hadn't taken the time to light a fire -- no sooner had we returned to the trails than did the first of the snows begin falling. This dampened even the spirits of the wagoneer and Gilliam, and they hunched their shoulders against the steadily falling snow.

The sun had passed across the Gap, and shadows crept steadily up the far wall of the canyon when a sharp ring of steel-upon-steel drew echoed from around a sharp bend in the trail. As one we all stopped, blinking the haze of the road

trance. There had been no sign of travelers on the trail ahead of us. A chaos of shouts and jabbering came from around a sharp bend in the trail, nonetheless.

To our surprise, Old Seth snapped the reins and let out a cry to rival that coming from around the bend. As the wagon lurched into motion behind the wild-eyed horses (the poor beasts hadn't been spurred to such action in their lives!) the old man drew a long blade from beneath his seat at the front of the wagon, the blade twirling in his gnarled grip as though he were twenty years younger.

His shout was joined by a yelp from the girl in the back of the wagon, who clutched at the ropes binding the cargo with knuckles as white as her robe, her black hair streaming behind like some battle standard.

We three men gaped at each other for a pace, and then the two drew steel of their own, Varis a gleaming blade much like that of the old man's, Gilliam unsheathing twin shortswords from across each hip. They took off at a run after Old Seth, and I had no choice but to hurry after...

The trail twisted and dropped steeply into a small bowl of a valley. The bottom of the valley, though, was barely visible for the seething mass of what I first took to be darkness or black fog of some sort.

The clashing of steel and sharp, barking cries revealed the darkness to be not fog, but... goblins. Nearly a hundred of them, if a one, swarming around a pony-drawn cart.

Old Seth's charge was cleaving a path through the teeming mass of goblinkind to the bottom of the valley, Varis and Gilliam following in its wake, mostly bowling over dazed creatures. I charged after, knocking jabbering goblins aside with my staff. We had to hurry if the travelers in the cart were to have any chance against this horde.

The wagon ground to a halt alongside the cart, bowling a dozen or so goblins away, blocking them from attacking from that side at least. The pony,

though frightened nearly witless, was also holding its own against the squat, gray-skinned attackers.

Drawing closer, we could see two short, broad-shouldered figures in the cart, one at the front, his brown cloak flapping about him as he hewed with a long-hafted axe. The other, braced in a wide stance across the back of the cart, fended off shrieking goblins with a broad-bladed hand axe in each hand. A third figure could be seen covering between the two defenders, hooded and cloaked in the same brown material.

Gilliam gave me a shove towards the front of the cart. "Go play with the horses," he shouted, and having no better plan, I took up position between the wagons' team and the mountain pony.

The battle was a swirling chaos of one gray face after another, pointed teeth bared, a rusty sword or axe or pick in a knotty gray hand. I have never known goblins to mount an attack with such ferocity, though. Normally, after the first few fall, they break and scatter. But these kept coming, one after the next.... It was not right. It was not natural, and though it was them or me, still I felt badly for each that fell.

A sharp cry from one of the dwarves on the cart turned my attention that way for a brief second. It caught the attention of the goblins as well, as the tide of them flowed towards the lowered defenses of the dwarf at the front of the cart. He'd gone to one knee, a knife visible in his leg.

"Fall back!" The order came from Ana, who leapt from over the top of the wagon, landing in front of the dwarf as he scabbled backwards along the cart's bench. With a great sweep, she cleared nearly all the goblins from before that side of the cart, falling beneath or away from the gleaming silvered blade of the scythe the girl wielded. I must admit, I was just as surprised as the goblins were, at that sight!

"Thorn, look at their eyes!" she shouted, and for the first time I looked clearly at the faces of our foes. Gray, slightly wrinkled skin, scraggly black hair, a mishmash of armors and hides. A rust-red insignia of some sort emblazoned on a clearer patch of armor. Their eyes were the watery gray-green of most of their kind

that dwelt in darkness... save that they were rimmed deep red along the lids. *Eyes rim'd red, soon be dead*, went the rhyme.

"Possessed?" It came out more of a question than a clear statement. I'd learned stories of men and beasts taken or given over to demonkind, but I'd never seen it, nor thought I ever would.

But the girl was not listening, instead had her eyes closed, the silver pendant about her neck clasped in both hands. Her lips were moving, and after a few moments, I could hear her voice rising, repeating a chant or prayer in what sounded like Old Alphatian. A light like moonlight was spilling from between her fingers. She finished the last verse, flinging her arms wide, and the light spiraled forth with a bright flash. But then it was falling, as though from an aurora, in a shining circle barely the diameter of the wagon and cart. The goblins caught along the edge of the circle shrieked and fell back, cowering away from the sliver-white curtain, clutching a burned arm, or hand or leg.

We were safe, for the time being. But for how long?

We turned towards the injured dwarf, but he was already tying off a strip of his cloak about the wound in his leg. Ana made towards him, a hand outstretched, but he waved it away.

"My thanks for keeping those gobbo's from trimming my whiskers, but this is but a scratch. Save any o' your magic for further down the road." He turned, looking over the back of the cart, at the other dwarf, who was catching his breath. "Oi, Durin, kept 'em off her this time, did you?"

The other dwarf, Durin, knelt, and patted down what looked like a bundled cloak. It moved a bit under his hands, and a lock of wavy, shining hair fell from beneath the hood, but made no sound.

"Not wounded, so it would seem, unlike you, Brother mine." He turned and stood, dark eyes beneath bushy brows regarding each of us, as though he were measuring us upon a merchant's scale.

"Suppose we'll have to cut introductions short," he said. "Kagyar only knows how long that pretty shield of yours will last, and --"

"I am Kuric," said the dwarf at the front of the cart. He jerked a thumb towards the other dwarf. "That is my brother Durin, our friend in the back of the

cart, well, we don't rightly know her name so we call her *Silva*. Explanations will have to wait for later. P'rhaps in the next world, as your spell seems to be wearing a bit thin." He hoisted himself up, using his long-hafted axe as a crutch.

"A pleasure meeting you both," said Gilliam. "You fight very well. It will be an honor to die by your side."

"A moment," called Durin. "Show me your blades, men."

"I think there is no time for that, brother mine," Kuric barked.

"It could be our salvation, brother. Your blades, quickly!"

Varis and Gilliam glanced at each other, then shrugged, laying their swords in the cart before the kneeling dwarf.

"Remarkable work," the dwarf breathed, as he picked up Varis' sword. He glanced down the edge of the blade. "Aged, but very well kept. Your grandsire's sword?"

"His father's, actually," Varis said, glancing nervously over his shoulder. The goblins had crept to within arm's reach of the barrier. "I am the fourth in my line to wield it."

"Very fine, very f--"

"Durin! Kagyar's beard, there is no time for that! Stop gawping and just do it!"

"Right. So.." he took a leather-bound box from beneath some sacks in the cart, rummaged around in it, producing several pots, which he uncorked, wetting his fingers with whatever was inside them, and began wiping down the blades in a curious manner.

"I don't mean to be rude, but..." Gilliam's voice wavered. "We can polish our blades after we're through with this rabble."

"This rabble." Ana said, "is no mere goblin clan. They are possessed, not just some of them, but all of them, all by the same entity. It has granted them immunity from your earthly swords."

"Impossible!" Gilliam breathed. "I cut through a dozen of them, at least. They fell, and bled."

“And they are back amidst ‘the rabble,’” Ana said, pointing towards a group of them, huddling amidst the crowd. Their armor was slashed, bloodied, yet they stood despite the wounds.

“It is done,” Durin growled, wiping his hands on his breeches, stowing his pots back in the box, rewrapping it carefully.

“I see no difference,” Varis said, examining his blade.

“Oh, you will, my new friend,” said Kuric. His mustaches twitched with his smile.

“Do we stand and fight, or run?” asked Old Seth. “What is the plan?”

“Seven on a hundred or so? I’ve gambled on worse odds than that,” Gilliam said.

“Pray that luck is with you then,” I said. The barrier flickered once, twice. Then vanished.

The fight was joined again.

They came at us as a screaming wall, closing from all directions. Again and again, I lashed out with my staff, battering them back, with no time to rest before more had taken their place. To one side, Ana spun, and when she did not, the gleaming silver scythe in her hands did, the edge blazing every time it rent a demon-possessed goblin. Those so touched fell away scorched, and did not rise again.

I saw a flash of light from the corner of my eye, and heard Varis curse.

“Halav’s balls! What manner of sorcery is this?”

His blade glowed a fiery reddish-orange, swirls and eddies of white light blazing upon the length of the blade, patterns swept thereupon by the dwarf’s fingers.

“A binding of fire and spirit to the blade,” shouted Durin, his own axes shining with the same light. “It will not last overlong, so make the best use of it while you can!”

Gilliam simply gave a whoop as he turned aside two attackers’ blades, his own flashing and sizzling as they cut deep.

“We cannot stand like this,” Old Seth cried, kicking a goblin away as he clobbered another over the head with the hilt of his sword. “There are too many!”

“Change of tactics,” Varis called. “A wedge. Ana at the front. Reap us a path through. Durin, you and I on the right flank. Your brother and Old Seth upon the wagon, Gilliam on the left flank. Thorn, back of the wagon, clear off any trying to follow. Move your bundle of a friend and anything you need to the wagon, we leave the cart.”

Bags flew into the back of the wagon, and Kuric gave a clumsy jump to the higher wagon seat, helping the bundled-up girl over. A flash of brown cloak, pale skin and a white gown were all we saw of her as we fought and dodged and ducked our way around the wagon to the positions Varis had called for us. His blade flashed, cutting the pony loose from the cart. It bolted, the goblins ignoring it.

Old Seth gave a shout, and the reins a snap and I had just enough time to leap into the rear ledge of the wagon as it jolted into motion, slowly at first, but then picking up to a decent pace. The clashing of blades and howls of the goblins grew more sporadic as we outpaced them. The wagon lurched as Gilliam, then Varis and the dwarf Durin leapt onto the running panels. We overtook Ana’s jogging pace, and I extended a hand as we passed, hoisting her up onto the rear of the wagon.

Between the distance and the swirling snow, falling heavier as the light of day faded, the goblins fell away.

We made camp off the trail, beneath an overhang of one of the jagged hills, which Old Seth deemed the most defensible of stopping points. Caves dotted the length of the Gap, but those nearest were too high up for hope of reaching with the wagon and horses.

As eager as we all were to hear the dwarf brothers’ tale, it was agreed that it would have to wait until morning. We huddled close to the small fire, weapons close at hand, taking watch in pairs. But the goblins did not return in the dark.

Waning half-moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Swiftmont 23, 997AC)

I watched the the darkness slowly give way to the half light of dawn, having drawn last watch. Gilliam, also, had drawn that duty, and I watched him rise and stretch, pour a trickle from his waterskin upon the ground, kneeling briefly to touch his forehead to the spot before sipping from the skin.

"You did not strike me as the type to follow the Way of Eternal Truth," I said to him.

He shrugged, handing me his waterskin. "More of a superstitious habit than a belief," he said. "Still, it can't hurt to do honor to the Immortals, in case they really are out there, watching over us."

I poured out a trickle, then took a sip. "Peace shine upon us as the sun," I said, handing the skin back.

"I could do with a bit more of that," he said, pulling his cloak about him as a gust of wind made its way through the trees.

A shriek rose from the far side of the camp, and Gilliam and I both started, scrambling for weapons and sprinting across the campsite.

It was the girl, thrashing in her sleep, rolling this way and that, jolting everyone from their own sleep with shouts of alarm.

"What in blazes --" shouted Old Seth, struggling to untangle himself from his bedroll.

The two dwarves rushed to her side, Kuric laying his hands upon her shoulders, shushing and cooing to her like a mother would her babe. Durin busied himself with a clay teapot, hanging it over the fire, and coaxing the flames back to life.

Varis slid his sword back in its scabbard. He was not peering at the girl, but about the perimeter of the camp.

"Quiet her down!" he hissed, "before she draws those goblins back upon us with that howling!"

Ana laid her hand upon the girl's forehead. "It is not hot, she does not seem ill."

“No physical sickness,” said Durin. “But she has powerful dreams. Wakes more nights than not like this.”

“Lovely,” muttered Varis.

Her voice died down, no longer crying out but whimpering, her thrashing diminishing to a fitful toss or turn. Kuric sang a low, rumbling melody, a lullaby that I was not familiar with. I listened intently. The girl’s dream passed, the tension leaving her, her face smoothing. Kuric cradled her head upon his lap, holding one of her small hands in his.

“Devil of a way to start the morning,” grumbled Old Seth, scratching at his beard. Then he stomped off towards the horses.

Durin made a feast of our meager supply of trail rations. To the salted venison, he added sausages and cheese, and a strange root that he chopped and cooked that tasted as if spiced with pepper and onion, though we had neither.

The girl awoke, and we all got our first good look at her. Her tousled hair was blonde and wavy. Or maybe it was silvery. Depending on how the light struck it, it appeared one or the other. The firelight made it dance between the two, and I could have watched it for hours.

Her complexion was smooth, very light rather than pale, if that can be said to make sense. Her ears came to a fine point at the tip, less so like an elf or even a halfling, but definitely not rounded. Her eyes were round, but tilted up at the outer edges, not almond-shaped as an elf, nor like those of Men, but something between. Unlike men and elves, they were not blue or green or brown, but were grayer than gray, almost like burnished silver.

She regarded us with wide-eyed curiosity as she sat with her knees drawn up before her, the cloak arranged about her thin shoulders. She held a steaming cup of Durin’s tea, sipping occasionally, and did not eat from the trencher set before her.

We’d all tried greeting her, but she simply blinked quizzically at each of us, frowning and shaking her head to indicate that she did not understand. Ana tried Old Alphantian to no avail, and similar successes were met with my Old Traladaran and Gilliam’s scraps of Alaysian. We even tried scratching letters in the dirt but these she also frowned upon and rubbed out with her feet in frustration.

“We tried to put hose and boots on her,” Durin said, when Old Seth wondered about her bare feet. “You’re more than welcome to try yourself, if you don’t mind a foot in the eye.”

“Can’t get her to wear anything but a simple white gown,” said Kuric. “She won’t have anything with any color in it against her skin. Stripped it right off and ran about the room in a panic,” he added with a chortle, then blushed.

As we spoke, I watched the girl. She watched us intently, her eyes going to whomever was speaking. Occasionally, her brow would furrow, but then she would shrug and take a sip of tea and go back to watching.

“Why are her lower arms bound?” asked Gilliam, spying the wrappings beneath her sleeve.

Durin and Kuric stared at each other for a long moment.

The girl, though, saw Gilliam’s gesture, and had followed his glance. She held out her arm to Kuric, who frowned. She pulled up her sleeve, and pointed to the complex knot -- it was obvious she would not be able to untie it with one hand.

Kuric patted her arm and shook his head. The girl glanced from the dwarf to the man, shrugging at Gilliam. She then tucked her sleeve back down and drew the cloak all the way about her, so just her head was uncovered.

“Bad things happened the last time her arms were uncovered,” Kuric said. “Very bad things.”

“What sort of thing could be so --” Old Seth began.

“We lost our family. Our home.”

The old man scooted away from the girl, giving her a dark look.

“It was not her doing,” said Kuric. “She is not to blame. She is alone, and scared. But we will not risk it happening again until we can find a scholar or sage that can tell us who -- or what -- she is.”

The girl smiled at Old Seth, then gave a bored-sounding sigh and rested her chin on her knees, staring at her toes, peeking out from beneath the cloak.

The sky kept its gray mantle, but though low and forbidding, the clouds did not drop any snow over the course of the day. The previous night’s snowfall had been steady, but light, so we were able to make good time through the remainder of the Gap. We made it to Highdell while there was still a bit of light left in the day.

To call Highdell a town would be a disservice to towns all across the Known World. A gathering of farmsteads, Sir Reynard's stone keep and manor house, and the mining compound make up the bulk of this wide spot along the trail into more civilized lands of the Grand Duke.

The miners' mess hall had become the closest thing to a tavern, or inn, or waystation. We were greeted warmly once Old Seth produced a baron's writ of expense.

"Well now, weren't expecting any more company to come through here, what with the snows starting so early and all," said the cook as he set steaming bowls of goulash before us. He paused, apparently waiting for one of us to ask about these other travelers. When nobody did, he wrung his hands on a rag he wore tucked into the front of his spotted apron.

"So, here on the Baron's business? How goes it?"

"That's the Baron's business," said Old Seth, picking up his spoon. "Wine all 'round. Hot water in a kettle. Then a nice long space of quiet, if you please, and you can double your petition to the baron for recompense."

The man nearly cracked his head on the table with his bow.

After he'd left the wine and Durin had brewed Silva's tea, we ate in silence for a time. The girl picked a bit at the vegetables, went after the dumplings with glee, but did not touch the meat. Sitting at her other side, I traded her my dumplings for a few bits of meat, as I hadn't seen her eat more than a few bites of trailbread over the course of the day's journey.

Kuric pushed back his empty bowl, and drew out a long-stemmed clay pipe, which he prepared and lit. After a few puffs, he cleared his throat, and began.

I pause here to note that though I worked knots as fast as I could while listening, I did not catch Kuric's tale word-for-word, and thus can impart the spirit of the tale, rather than its full flesh. Alas, neither Kuric nor Durin's spirits responded to the tolling of Chardastes' bell, so I have but this one account to go by.

The brothers, Kuric the elder and Durin the younger, would not say from which town they hailed. It did not matter they said, because it and everyone in it was gone. As with every dwarven family, each had a role in the family business, theirs being seller and crafter of fine goods, respectively. Durin had been apprenticed to a magewright, and had some of the knack for aligning the qualities in metalworks. Another few decades and he would have the lighter metals mastered, and could then move up to irons and steel.

Kuric had the duty of fetching the best prices for the family's best works, and it was that pursuit that had cost him half a day of bargaining. Rather than take the congested tunnel roads back to the village, he instead took a disused surface road. It had been blocked by rockslide for some years, and so nobody used it. Kuric laughed, telling us he had sold statuettes and ornaments made from those very stones to dwarves too lazy to move those rocks themselves for a quicker route.

The evening was cold and clear -- Matera crested the tips of the Makkres, and shone down brightly into a small spring-fed pool, turning its surface to molten silver. Just as suddenly, a mist arose, as thick as it usually did on late spring and summer mornings. Yet it was barely autumn, the conditions all wrong for ground fogs.

The fog had taken alight from the moonlight above, and from the surface of the pool. There arose a thrumming, rhythmic as if from a beating heart, rising and falling as if a breath, that could be felt in the rocks, through the frame of the cart, in the very fog itself. Violet lights streaked within the fog, from the direction of the moonlit pool, and the air took a scorched, acrid smell of freshly struck lightning, though there were no clouds above.

The brilliance of the fog flared, and a howling of wind arose, the fog spinning as though caught in a vortex, tearing itself to shreds along a circular corridor, as if becoming a great pipework made of the swirling fog. And from within the tunnel of cloud, running as though from a great distance, was the girl.

The howling changed, then. Or rather, it became not just the howling of the vortex, but also the howling of beasts -- bone-chilling howls as those of mountain cats and diving birds of prey.

The girl ran, looking back over her shoulder at something, then tripped. Yet when she fell, it wasn't to the floor of the tunnel of fog and light, but into the surface of the pool. As the moon's reflection shattered into ripples, the howling faded, the tunnel swirling smaller and smaller in an instant, until it disappeared completely, taking the wind and keening with it. The fog lingered for several minutes, but was gone by the time Kuric had reached the edge of the pool.

"It wasn't that deep, but it was cold like a slap in the face," Kuric said. "We nearly both drowned, trying to get her out of there."

"So we bundled up and made for the village, her yammering at me in her nonsense-speak the whole way. Don't suppose the chattering of every tooth in her head made things any more understandable, but still."

"It was quite the scene, Brother mine a-galloping into the estate shouting for a bath." Durin chuckled. "We thought he'd fallen off the cart and hit his head on the way home at first. But he and that girl were positively blue." He hugged himself, shivering and making a "brrr!" sound in his throat, and the girl -- who gathered they were telling the tale of her arrival -- mimicked Durin, holding her arms and nodding.

"*Eiao risi!*" she said. "Brrr!"

We all stared.

"*Eiao risi,*" she said again, her voice faltering a bit as she looked from one of us to another, but finding no real comprehension staring back at her. "*Risi? Brrr!*"

"Cold," I said. "That's got to be it."

I pointed to her steaming mug. "*Risi?*"

She scowled, then sighed, shaking her head. "*Nieah. Etah firni.*"

I'd heard those words before, or words like them.

And apparently I wasn't the only one. A shadow crossed the table, and we stared up at a tall, thin-faced man. His black eyes flashed, and something about his slow, easy smile amidst the carefully trimmed brown beard seemed... predatory.

"Pardon me," he said with a slight bow at the waist. "I could not help but overhear your fantastic tale. You see, I am a bard, and --"

"Whatever you're trying to sell, we don't want," snapped Old Seth.

Ana was staring intently at the tall man, her hands clasped tightly before her on the tabletop.

“Selling? Goodness, no I wanted to --”

“We’re not interested,” said Gilliam, making a bit of a show of cleaning his fingernails with the blade of a long knife he’d made appear as if by magic.

The man’s eyes went from Gilliam’s knife, to Silva, back to the knife, and then took in the measure of the dwarves and Varis as well, who’d adjusted the swordbelt at his waist, making it readily apparent that the hilt was well within reach.

“Apologies,” he said with another slight bow. “Please, allow me to at least pay for one last round of drinks before I go.” Two gold coins spun across his knuckles from out of nowhere, and he sent them spinning to the table with a flourish.

Silva clapped, and the man nodded towards her with another smile before turning and returning to his table at the far side of the hall.

Waning half-moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Swiftmont 24, 997AC)

We were awakened again by the girls's scream -- or rather, by the way her scream suddenly became muffled.

It was difficult to see in the long mess hall -- most of the candles had been snuffed, and the fire slept the orange-red sleep of embers. Shadows were everywhere, and amongst those, deeper shadows still surrounded us. What little light there was glinted off drawn blades.

"No, no do not reach for your weapons," purred one of the shadows -- the tallest among them. The bard stood in the center of the semicircle of men arrayed around us, one arm wrapped about Silva's waist. His other hand was clapped over her mouth, covering all of her face but for wide eyes the color of the moon. At first I thought they shone in the darkness, but saw they were tears, not magic, in those strange eyes.

She made to kick at his shins, but the man hoisted her off the ground a few handspans, and her thrashings settled.

"Give her back!" shouted Durin. He made to rise, and one of the bard's men prodded him in the shoulder. The dwarf glared, but did not reach for the axes by his side.

"I do not think you are in any position to demand anything of me," said the bard. "I would have happily paid you for her earlier, but none of you seemed interested in hearing my offer. So now I have to wonder... Just how much is this little pretty worth to you? Hmm? I am not an unreasonable man, perhaps we can come to some arrangement."

"How about your head arranged on a pike?" asked Varis.

"I was thinking a little more along the lines of money," the bard said. "I don't need decorating tips."

"We are but poor travelers upon the road," I said. "I doubt our coins would even add up to a royal between all of us."

"Poor travelers my eye," spat the bard. "You've got a fat wagon full of trade goods and two decent draft horses to pull it."

“Those are blankets and supplies for the baron,” Old Seth protested. “There’s need for them, with all the goblins raiding.”

“Well, there are others of us who could use a good warm blanket,” snarled the bard. The men surrounding us nodded, making affirming noises of one sort or another.

“So,” the tall man continued, “that takes care of your share, old man.” He walked a few paces, stopping by Ana. “I don’t even need to ask about you,” he said. “That trinket alone has enough silver in it to feed me and my men for a good month or two.” One of the men stepped forward, yanking the arrowhead-shaped amulet from about about her neck. The bard merely laughed at the outraged expression on the young woman’s face.

But his laugh turned to a shout of pain. Silva had worked one of her arms free, and dragged the nails of that free hand hard across the back of the man’s hand covering her mouth. He wrenched his hand away, nearly snapping her neck as his hand came back down across her cheek.

The two dwarves cried out, and it took two more blades apiece leveled at their necks to keep them from rushing to the girl’s aid. Varis and Gilliam heaved the dwarves back.

“You can’t help her if you’re both dead,” hissed Varis.

“Not to worry,” whispered Gilliam. “I’ve got a plan.”

Old Seth, Varis, and Ana all groaned.

“You, then,” the bard said, glaring at Gilliam. “You don’t look to have much of value, save for those boots. And maybe the swords. Thyatian make, aren’t they? Don’t look like much of a gladiator.”

Gilliam worked a thick ring off his right hand, sent it skidding across the floor to the man’s feet. “Thats about all I’ve got,” he said. “Gambled away everything else.”

One of the men picked it up, hefting it in his hand. “Heavy thing.” He bit it. “Thats gold, that is,” he said.

The bard sneered. "Probably washed in gold. Now go wash it off. Didn't your mother ever tell you not to put things in your mouth if you don't know where they've been?" He turned back to Gilliam. "That's it? One gaudy ring?"

"Like I said, gambled everything else away," Gilliam said, shrugging. "Look, why are you roughing me up and taking me for everything I've got, when the girl can very well pay her own ransom?"

The two dwarves sputtered, but the bard didn't even bat an eye.

"She doesn't even have shoes!" he barked.

"Of course she does," said Gilliam with a sly smile all his own. "She's got jeweled bracelets halfway up her arms, all wrapped up under there."

"Gilliam!" gasped Durin. "You--"

"No!" said Kuric. "You mustn't!"

Again, swords leapt to the dwarf's throat as he lunged towards the bard, who'd begun tugging at the wrappings of the girl's right arm. When it became obvious that a few tugs wouldn't be enough to unravel the knots, the bard set the girl down, and motioned one of his men to hold her.

He set her down, and motioned one of his men to hold her. The man set a hand on her shoulder, and lowered his sword when he saw her shy away from it.

"Now, then, let's see what it is you've got all wrapped up under here, shall we?" When Silva saw that the bard was reaching for the bindings, she held her arm out. "That's a good girl," the bard said, smiling at the girl, who smiled back. His long fingers fumbled at the knot, and the smile slowly bled away into a scowl. He worked and worried at the cloth strip for several more minutes, and then with a snarl, slid his grip to the girl's hand while he drew his dagger with the other, thrusting the blade towards her upturned wrist.

She gave a shriek, and flinched violently, trying to jerk her hand away. But the bard's grip held, and he wrenched her arm back towards the knife. The blade made contact with the cloth, and Silva screamed again. There came a blinding flash of white light, and everybody -- bandits and traveling companions alike -- cried out in surprise, covering our eyes against the painful glare.

For several long moments, the ghost of white light danced in my vision, with me no matter how I blinked to clear it. The hall was no longer draped in shadows and darkness... far from it, now the room was awash in a ruddy, reddish-orange light, as if from a great bonfire. I glanced around, fearful that the room should have

caught fire, yet there was no smoke, no more heat than was coming off the banked coals in the hall's great hearth.

The light blazed from a point on Silva's left arm, held before her protectively now, the tatters of the binding laying in a charred mass at her feet. She was surrounded by a hazy nimbus of yellow-orange light, a halo of silently crackling, heatless flames.

The bard was cradling his hand against his side, and there was the scent of burnt cloth, and perhaps even flesh in the air.

"Well, now," breathed Kuric beside me. "This is different."

"Not exactly what I'd planned, but good enough!" said Gilliam, and I heard the ring of unsheathing steel, and he leapt to his feet, blades flashing.

He needn't bothered to leap to the attack, though. The majority of the bandits were crowding through the door in a panic amidst shouts of "Sorcery!" and "Witchcraft!" The bard shouted and kicked at them to get them out of his way. The knot of men tumbled out the door into the cold night.

"You'd think they never saw magic before," scoffed Gilliam, slamming the door and barring it.

"I have never seen a magic such as this," Ana said, walking around the girl, keeping a safe distance from the shroud of flames that still danced around her. The girl, cocooned within the light, stared at her arm in amazement — it seemed she was just as surprised at the turn of events as the rest of us.

Her lower arm was adorned with a network of brightly glowing metal, an impossibly intricate pattern of weaves and swirls and braids, radiating from a brightly glowing reddish crystal set along the top of her wrist.

"No man or elf or dwarf could craft metal with that detail," said Durin. "Not even the most gifted of magewrights can get a metal spun so thin in such ways. When my master saw this, he wept." Durin's eyes were not dry, either, I saw, though I do not know if he wept for the beauty of the girl's adornment, or the memory of his now-departed master.

"How long does this... effect... last?" Ana asked. "Silva? Are you all right?"

The girl looked up, and Ana repeated her question. The intent of her question got through, if the entire meaning didn't, and the girl nodded, extending her arm, showing us that it was unhurt.

Ana reached out.

"Ana, I don't—"

"Fool girl what are you—"

Her hand clasped the girl's, and the wreath of hazy fire winked out almost at once. The gem went dark, save for a few golden glints within it, and Silva collapsed against Ana with a sob.

The two dwarves patted the girl's hand — the right, above which the bindings were still in place.

Varis had dragged a bench across the doorway leading back to the kitchen, and sat upon it, sword drawn across his knees.

"We'll watch in pairs the rest of the night. The rest of you, get what sleep you can. We'll be leaving at first light."

I don't think any of us did more than doze for a few hours. Silva alone slept, a deep and heavy sleep from which we had trouble rousing her.

Kuric and Durin looked from from one to another of us. "You won't be fleeing, then, like those others?"

We each answered in the negative.

"What of you, girl?" Durin asked Ana. "We've heard stories of your witch hunts. Can we be assured you won't go crying to your elders as soon as we reach a town with a temple in it?"

Ana sighed. "Those... unfortunate events are in the past," she sighed. "I do not sense an otherworldly presence here, as I did from those goblins, and until I understand more of her, I will not blindly assume that just because she can use magic I have never seen that she is evil. As you said, she is frightened, alone among strangers. I doubt very much *she* even understands what it is she does."

"You've been awfully quiet, Druid," said Old Seth. "What do you know that you aren't telling us?"

"Look, if you know something, spit it out," Gilliam said.

"I would know where it is I am going to land before leaping off a cliff," I said. "Right now, I still see only clouds. Better to wait for them to clear, and know if it is water, or sharp rocks below, no?"

Since we were already awake, we left before dawn, just as the cooks were arriving to begin preparations for morning meals.

It was slow going, as snow began falling soon after we were underway— just enough to make the track a sodden mess and dampen the spirits. As if they could get much lower. Old Seth and Gilliam had argued a good long while over whether or not to follow the Grand Duke's barge trail along the Silverrun or to take the

overland trail south, through the last of the Gap's thickly forested hills and then into the farmsteads north of Threshold.

"If the snow gets any worse, the mountain trails will be treacherous, Duke's upkeep or not. Demons take me if I'm going to get snowed into Elton's Spring ever again!" Old Seth snapped the reins.

"But—"

"No amount of ale is worth putting up with those pixies!"

While the trees kept the worst of the snowfall from hampering us, the condition of the trail became abysmal when we broke through the last of the woods and started into the flatter, open farmlands. The snows were getting worse, and we could not count on coming across a farmstead before dark.

Old Seth 'harrumphed' when Gilliam pointed this out to him, and after chewing at his thumbnail for a bit, the old man announced that we would cut east, keeping the spur of the Black Peaks visible, and make for a place he knew we could find decent shelter before the day faded.

"Wait a moment," Varis said, the first he'd spoken since we set out. "East along the spur? That is towards Lake Windrush."

Old Seth nodded. "It is."

"There is no shelter along the lake shore," Varis said slowly. "Unless you mean us to —"

"You can't!" gasped Gilliam.

"I could, and I do."

Durin huffed his way up to us, breath steaming from his beard. "If it will get us out of this wind and snow, so be it. Lead on."

"That's just it. Mistamere is a ruin," Varis said. "A crumbling curtain wall, a shell of a keep."

"There is still plenty of shelter to be had there," Old Seth argued. "The upper floors are in ruins, but the ground floor still stands. It's enough to keep the snow off our backs. Plenty of foliage in the gardens to use to make a fire. It'll be nice and cozy."

"We'll be plenty cozy with all the monsters and ghosts to keep us company," Gilliam muttered.

"Why do you think I keep you and Varis along?" asked Old Seth.

“Now, look, old man,” said Gilliam. “I am no coward, but I pick my fights. And you can’t kill a ghost with steel.”

“Mistamere is not haunted,” snapped the wagon driver. “I’ve camped there many a night and never once seen any ghosts.”

“When was the last time?” asked Gilliam.

“Why... I had to’ve been around your age....”

“Nobody goes there any more,” Gilliam said. “It may not have been haunted in your day, but it certainly is now.”

“Well, we’ll just see about that when we get there, then,” Old Seth said.

The light was fading rapidly as we rounded the last twist leading up to the shelf upon which Gygar had built his fortress those hundreds of years ago. The cold grew to something thick and heavy in the air, driven across the lake by ever more powerful gusts of wind. The snow was as a series of ever-shifting veils before us, and we were nearly upon the castle before we could actually see it. One moment, there was nothing but snow and ice, the next, the walls loomed out a few arms’ lengths away.

We needed little of the urging from the old man to hurry across the courtyard. As he’d said, the keep’s ground floor was largely intact. The high windows were empty of glass or paper or shutters, but the stout doors still hung on rusted hinges.

“Hm. Ironwood,” Kuric said as he and Varis set their shoulders against one of the great doors. “These doors will probably outlast the stone used to build this place.”

The squeal of the rusted hinges was lost as the wind keened through the broken sections of the curtain walls. We hustled inside, leaving Old Seth to see about sheltering the horses. Gilliam carried the girl, who was again asleep, having awakened briefly for a noontide meal before curling up in a sheltered part of the wagon for the remainder of the journey.

Snow had drifted into short piles where it settled after blowing through the windows. Debris from nesting animals or birds come and gone was visible in the gloom, but other than that, the entrance hall was largely bare. Three archways yawned into darkness, one each to the right and left, and a wider one ahead of us.

“Stay here,” Varis said. “I will sweep through the rooms, make sure we don’t have any company. Don’t go anywhere until we get back.”

"I will go with you, lad," said Durin, drawing one of the axes from his belt. Varis nodded, and they strode quickly through the left-hand archway.

They were not gone long before we heard shouts echoing, and shortly thereafter Varis and Durin returned, with Old Seth in tow.

"How was I to know it would be this bad? I haven't seen this place in as many years as you've been alive!"

"Not a wall unbreached in this miserable tomb," Varis said. "We may as well camp down on the lake shore, as defensible as this position is!"

"The roof is in one piece, and the interior walls are sound," said Durin. "At least it will keep the snow off our backs."

"I feel like a mouse, huddled in the midst of that Darokin cheese with all the holes in it," Varis muttered. "Too many ways in."

"I don't mean to interrupt," I said, pointing towards the shivering bundle Gilliam held. "Could we perhaps continue this discussion after we've made camp and started a fire?"

It was decided that we would weather the night in the keep's great hall. Its three doors were of the same ironwood as the great double doors leading into the keep. Indeed, a great long table hewn of the stuff ran quite the length of the hall.

"I pity the backs of the men made to shape this great thing," Gilliam muttered, running a hand through the age of dust collected across the surface.

"I pity the backs of the men made to move it here," said Kuric, rapping the table — which stood up to his chin — with the long haft of his axe. The solid 'thunk' sounded as if it could have come from stone.

"Probably the only reason it hasn't been plundered," Old Seth said with a laugh. "Couldn't gather together enough men to lift it and make off with it."

"Or it wouldn't be worth the price once you split it among all the help," said Gilliam with a grin.

"It was nice of them to leave us some chairs," said Varis, hefting one and bringing it down hard against the far side of the table. The chair flew to pieces. Barely a tremor shook the length of the great table.

Old Seth soon had a small fire going in the great hearth, and he and Durin began arguing over how best to make use of the meager foodstuffs we had left.

Silva awakened from her spot close to the fire as the dwarf and old man were in the midst of deciding the fate of the rabbits Gilliam had managed to catch on the end of a few arrows. Varis owed him a handful of cronas for that feat.

“What is it girl?” asked Old Seth with a hint of exasperation in his voice. “Enough with the tugging at my sleeve. Speak up if you have a suggestion for supper.”

She stared at him as he gestured again to the rabbits, which he’d been preparing for the cookpot. She shook her head, then began dancing from foot to foot.

“Yes, m’dear, the floor is very cold. If you would wear hose and boots like a civilized young lady, you wouldn’t—”

Ana strode over, taking the girl’s hand. I distinctly heard her murmur “Men!” from between clenched teeth as she stalked past me, snatching up one of the torches we’d set from its sconce, and leading the girl out one of the side doors.

Varis made to follow them, but I gripped his arm as he passed.

“Ladies’ business,” I said. “I don’t think they need nor would appreciate your presence.”

The young man’s jaw clenched, and then relaxed, as did his arm, as understanding lit his features. “Perhaps, yes....” He coughed.

A howl split the whistling of the wind. It didn’t even taper off before one after another joined it.

Gilliam slid across the width of the table, swinging his cloak about his shoulders, juggling a bow and quiver all at the same time.

“Come on!” he shouted, making for the door the two girls had gone through. “Those howls were close. Too close!”

Varis and I were on our feet, following him. Durin pushed his brother back to his seat by the fire.

“You’re not going anywhere on that leg,” he said. “Stay here with Master Seth and have that stew ready when we get back.”

Kuric made to reply, then buckled back into the chair with a curse as Durin pressed a fist into the wounded leg.

We were through the door in half a dozen strides, and found ourselves in an anteroom of some sort. A patch of gray-and-white fuzziness was visible through an archway across the dark stretch of the chamber. We crossed at a run, spilling through the archway into another hall, a stiff wind blowing ice and snow through gaping holes in the far wall.

From beyond those came another chorus of howls.

“How bloody far did they have to go to make water?” snapped Varis.

Two screams came from further within the ruins. We made towards the sound, somewhere off to our left. The wind and more howls quickly swallowed the girls’ voices.

A streak of white came at us, Varis barely checking his swordarm as Silva plowed straight into him, sobbing and clutching at the edge of his cloak.

“Ana! Ana *shavar*. *Etia nie rhie!* Ana *nie rhie!*” She was tugging furiously at Varis’ cloak.

“Wh— I don’t—”

“It doesn’t sound good whatever it is,” said Durin, shouldering around Varis, and gripping the girl’s shoulder. “Where?” he asked her.

She tugged at the dwarf, but he shook his head. “No, missy. You stay here.” He pointed to her, then at the floor.

A howl from the direction the girl had come ended the argument as we all charged up what looked to be some kind of short hallway.

A dim flicker was all that was left of the torch Ana had brought with them. It was barely enough to illuminate her form, which lay unmoving.

Shuffling about the edge of the weakening torchlight was a hunched form in the shadows, the low gurgling growl and ticking of claws upon the flagstone flooring leaving no doubt what it was we were dealing with.

Varis closed to the torch, picking it up gingerly, the flame wavering at his touch.

“Looks like she did a number on you,” he said, stepping forward as the beast tried to slink around to flank him. It shrank away as the torchlight fell upon it, and we all saw one side of the thing’s face was charred, the fur singed away, only one dark eye left to glare at us.

I knelt by Ana’s side, trying to find the extent of her injuries. It looked as though the thing had gotten a good bite in on her arm. Her hair was slick, damp with blood, and I whispered a prayer as I felt along the back of her head.

“Thorn, is she—?” Varis asked, keeping his eyes on the creature skulking in the shadows.

“Alive,” I said, pressing at the good sized knot on the back of her head, trying to stop the slow trickle of blood.

Durin breathed a sigh of relief.

The beast slunk back, melting into the shadows. Then it howled. Several of the answering howls sounded as though they were coming from within the boundary of the ruins.

“Rock wolves,” the dwarf said, his voice something of a moan.

“Hungry rock wolves,” said Varis, backing towards us, torch held high.

“Hungry rock wolves that smell blood,” Gilliam said grimly. He had his back to us, facing the way we’d come, arrow nocked. The wind carried the sound of panting growls.

“Varis, I need your knife,” I said. Ana’s surcoat was of an exceptionally thick weave, I could not tear through it.

“I only have two hands,” he barked, waving the torch to keep the burnt rock wolf at bay.

The sound of tearing cloth came from behind me, and I turned to see Silva ripping strips from the hem of her gown.

“Thank you,” I told the girl, taking two of the long strips. I straightened Ana’s arm — nothing seemed broken — and bound the makeshift bandages over the worst of the punctures.

Gilliam’s bow sang, and from the darkness came sharp yelps.

“Three more coming around,” said Durin, and the twin axes in his hands flashed as he set his feet, spreading his arms. “Hurry with that treatment!”

The torch flared as Varis swung it, and again the rock wolf jumped back. The growl didn’t dip into a yelp this time, though.

“He’s getting brave again,” he muttered.

“I think they all are,” said the dwarf. He waved his arms, the axe-heads flashing even in the weak torchlight.

“Can’t you make them glow again, like we did with those goblins?”

“I could, if I had my kit with me. And the time to inscribe the proper patterns on the blades. But we don’t have that kind of time.” He yelled as he swung one of the axes, driving another wolf back.

Gilliam’s bow sang twice more. On the second shot, another yelp echoed through the ruins.

The torch guttered, and the singed wolf lunged towards Varis. He danced back, but caught his foot against a broken flagstone, and his knee buckled. The beast leapt for his throat.

And was hit in the middle of its leap by a fist-sized chunk of rock. I glanced away from Varis to see Silva reaching for another stone.

The foiling of its leap was all the opening Varis needed. He brought his sword up and around, the blade sliding cleanly into the thing's chest. He used the leverage of its fall to get back to his feet, kicking the wolf off the end of his sword.

Gilliam dropped his bow, backing up a couple steps and drawing his swords. "I picked off as many as I could but..."

At least a dozen points of reddish-yellow light bobbed and flickered in the darkness beyond the torchlight.

Silva thrust her left arm before me. "*Tithemini*," she said. It didn't sound like a request.

I shook my head. "I do not —"

"*Tithemini!*" she said again, pointing to the knot in the binding by her elbow. She mimed an unwinding motion.

I began working at the knot. But blood-slicked fingers made it difficult, and I could hear the men behind me shouting, clanging their weapons. The rock wolves would have nothing to do with being frightened off, though.

The first loop of the knot slipped free, and I heard more snarling and yelping. Varis cursed, and Durin shouted something in dwarven that I think I am glad I could not translate.

Finally, the knot came loose, and the girl darted past me, unraveling the cloth from about her left arm. She held her arm up in front of her, hand clenched.

Varis leapt back to avoid a mouthful of slavering teeth, nearly colliding with the girl. He twisted away from her with a curse. She gave a sharp cry, ducking as the wolf lashed out at her.

"Get her out of the way!" Varis yelled, smacking the beast along side the head, drawing it away from the girl.

She gave the delicate bracer on her arm a disdainful look, then took up another rock, and hurled it sidearm, connecting with a solid "thud" on the rock wolf's flank.

She did not revel in her success, but stooped and picked up another rock, turning, and using the momentum to send the stone whizzing between Durin and Gilliam, to strike another of the wolves that was about to lunge for an opening.

The beast gave a yelp, and Gilliam slashed it across the snout. It slunk back, shook its head, and the fight seemed to leave it. It turned and bolted.

After a few more feints and swings, the other rock wolves did the same.

Varis allowed no time to catch their breath. We made a makeshift litter of a couple cloaks, Gilliam's bow, and Varis' sword, hurrying with Ana back to the great hall so we could better treat her injuries.

"It just leapt from out of nowhere," Ana said. "I was lucky to get my arm up, or it would have taken me by the throat."

"Gave him a good whack with the torch," Varis said, around a mouthful of stew.

She shook her head. "I dropped the torch when that thing bit me. Silva must have hit him after I fell." She glanced over at the girl, who was running a pale finger over the swirls of silver that ran up her other arm nearly to the elbow.

Ana had awakened shortly after we returned to the great hall, as Durin had been cleaning the wounds on her arm with a hot, damp cloth. She gritted her teeth, occasionally pointing out when he'd miss a spot. She then directed him to grind a few herbs from her pack into a poultice, and pack it over the bite before he rewrapped her arm with fresh, clean bandages.

She brewed herself a cup of willowbark tea to ease the ache in the back of her head.

"Its nothing, just a bump. I had worse than this growing up," she said. It made me wonder just what sort of childhood she'd had, if a lump the size of a robin's egg was 'just a bump.'

Gilliam and Varis had been debating whether or not the rock wolves would return. Varis seemed to think they would, since they bothered to show up in the first place. Gilliam argued that they had been hungry, and the corpses of their fellows would give them an easier feast than battering down doors of ironwood to get to us.

Kuric nodded in agreement with Gilliam. "If the rock wolves around here are anything like the kind we have back home, then they'll go for the easy meal. If they attacked out of hunger —"

"And if they didn't?" Varis asked.

"They are animals," Gilliam said. "They are not the best hunters — I think they stumbled upon us by chance. Or we upon them. Sure, they hunt in packs, but they rely on mob tactics, rather than coordinated assault like a real wolf. You saw

what happened once we took down the strongest of them. They lost their nerve and broke. They won't be back."

"I still say we set double watches," Varis said, crossing his arms.

"Darokinian in a thieves' den," muttered Gilliam.

"Better wary, and a hand on the dagger at your belt than content, and a dagger in your back," answered Varis.

The excitement of the evening acted better than any sleeping draught. I slept deep and dreamless until Durin shook me awake for our shift at the watch. Silva slept undisturbed through the night, not even stirring when Durin carefully rewrapped the bracer.

Waning half-moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Swiftmont 25, 997AC)

Dawn came bitterly cold, but the snowstorm had blown itself out over the course of the night. When the ladies arose and made to leave, Varis had to be almost physically restrained from following them. Ana brought her scythe, though Varis grumbled about her ability to wield it properly.

This time, it was Old Seth's cries that we found ourself responding to, grabbing weapons and charging through the ankle-deep snowfall that had piled up in the rooms exposed to the night's storm.

He'd tucked the horses and wagon into another of the ruined chambers, and it looked like the rock wolves had indeed made a feast.

"Come along," Varis said, heading of the girls as they approached. "The wolves got to the horses. We'll make better time into town on foot anyway."

The sky was still low and leaden as we filed from the ruins, following the ghost of a trail that lay buried in a foot or more of snow.

"*Risi*," Gilliam said, pointing to a drift of snow, and shaking the woolen stockings at Silva.

But she kicked when he reached for her foot. "*Nieah!*"

"I'm fairly sure that means 'no,'" I said.

"Why? Why do they have to be so difficult? Ana, you try." Gilliam handed her the stockings.

Ana took them, then lifted the leg of her breeches, showing her that she wore similar woolens.

Silva merely frowned and huddled in a ball, her gown pulled down to her toes.

"Please?" asked Anna, but Silva shook her head violently in the negative.

Gilliam snatched the woolens back. "Fine," he said to the girl. "Then you can walk in that." He pointed to the snow filling the courtyard, where the rest of us waited.

He took two steps out, then turned, waiting for the girl. She set a foot in the snow, and the stuff came up, past her knees. She jerked her foot back, shaking it, beating the clinging snow from her gown.

She held up her arms to Gilliam. "*Haltimi.*"

"What was that?" he asked her, turning to me with a frown.

"Help her?" I guessed.

Gilliam turned back to the girl. "*Nieah,*" he said slowly, trying to get the pronunciation right.

She glared at him, her hands on her hips. "*Etah risi,*" she said, pointing to the snow. Then she held up her arms again. "*Haltimi.*"

"I don't understand," he said, showing her an exaggerated shrug. Then he turned and took another few steps towards us.

"Gil-yam!"

He turned again, and she was still standing with her arms out.

"When you travel a lot in the mountains," Varis said behind me, "you sometimes get to see the roundhorns going head to head. They'll just clash and clash until one finally batters the other into submission. This reminds me a lot of one of those bouts."

He shook his head, and turned back to us, saying "Come on, maybe she'll have learned some sense when we return with the horses."

"You can't just leave her there!" said Kuric.

I trudged back to the girl, and reached to pick her up. She backed away. "*Nieah,*" she said, pointing past me. "Gil-yam."

"I think she's taken a fancy to you, Gilliam," Varis said, clapping him on the back.

"Well, she can keep it," he spat. "You tell her to put on some hose and boots and follow along, Thorn."

"I know 'hot' 'cold' and 'no.' None of those seem to be of much help here."

I thought for a bit, then swung my staff around behind me. "Here," I said, lowering it to her. "Sit there and I'll carry you on my back."

She must have gotten the gist of it, or given up on the hope of Gilliam carrying her, because she stepped between my back and the staff, and I felt her settle on it gingerly. Two small hands clasped themselves just under my chin.

“Ready?” I asked her.

“*Neh?*”

I hoisted her up and she gave a small yelp in surprise, nearly choking me as her arms tightened about my neck. I leaned forward, and she squirmed about, the pressure easing from around my throat.

“Are you settled?” I rasped.

When she finished her wriggling, I took a few steps. After a few more, I felt her relax against me, and the tension smoothed from her arms by the time I’d reached the rest of the group.

Gilliam gave me a sidelong glance. “Pushover,” he said.

Judging from the sound the girl made from behind me, I assumed she was sticking her tongue out at him, and Gilliam returned the gesture.

An hour into the hike through snowy fields, I was regretting my decision. Silva had fallen asleep, and my back and shoulders burned. Yes, she was small, just a handspan taller than the dwarves. She was slender, but not scrawny, but certainly not weightless.

After another hour — my legs having turned to lead, it seemed — a walled manor house came into view, and Old Seth struck off for it on his own. The rest of us continued into town, Varis and Gilliam surrendering their swords to peacebonding. The guards looked askance at Ana’s silver-bladed scythe. Rather than turn over the weapon to the guards, she removed a few pins and slid the blade free, handing it to them, leaving herself with a long staff of birch.

“Is that cheating?” asked one of the guards. Ana merely smiled at him.

The dwarves were reluctant to give up their axes, but Varis assured them that they would not be “accidentally” given to the wrong person.

“You two don’t exactly blend in with the rest of the townfolk,” he told them, “nor will your weapons resemble any of the others kept under lock and key.” Durin beamed at this.

Varis wound his way through town, across the main market square, to an inn bearing a sign of a short-bladed axe and farmer’s sickle.

“Oh, I like this place already,” Kuric said.

The barman looked up, clearly not expecting any business this early in the day, and certainly not of such a motley group as we must have presented. Still, he seemed to know Varis, as they clasped arms and patted each other on the back. I found a chair close by, and deposited Silva in it as gently as I could, sinking onto the nearby bench.

“Now you see why I didn’t volunteer for that,” Gilliam said with a smile.

We loitered about the common room for several more hours, and were taking a noontide meal by the time Old Seth clomped in, kicking snow off his boots. He, too, greeted the barman familiarly, handing him a rather large pouch, gesturing in our general direction.

“Your packs and personals are all in the stableyard,” he said. “Your pay, as promised,” he said, producing a few more pouches, and parceling them out to Varis, Gilliam, and Ana.

He turned to the dwarves, handing Kuric yet another pouch. “A gift, from the baron. Enough there for you two to see a tailor and get some fresh clothes, since most of your belongings were lost when we had to abandon your cart. There’s also an allowance in there for the girl to get a proper gown. I think maybe Ana should see to that. That is, if you don’t mind?” he asked the young lady.

“Certainly not,” she answered. “Perhaps, if the seamstress could meet us after a bath...?”

Old Seth nodded, then clapped the two dwarves on the shoulders as he rose.

Kuric finally found his voice. “Thank you, friend Seth. We are in your debt, and the debt of your baron friend as well. If there is—”

“Oh, there is,” Seth said with a smile. “He will send a man around to fetch you two after you’ve had a chance to settle in here. He is keenly interested in your situation—” he held up his hands to forestall Durin’s remark. “No, not like our friendly bard in Highdell. The baron has friends in various places, though, and he may have some information for you.”

The dwarves clasped Old Seth’s hands.

“Right, enough of that then. I have other business to attend to. Varis, Gilliam, if I ever have need of guards again on another damn fool mercy mission anywhere, you might just be the first two I contact. Ana,” he bowed. “I thank you for your cooperation. Your company was certainly more bearable than those two oafs. Best of luck on your journeys.

“And you, Thorn, keep out of trouble.”

I nodded.

He squatted down next to Silva, at the end of the bench. “You keep those two out of trouble, you hear?” The girl looked from Old Seth to the dwarves, then back to the old man.

“*Neh?*”

He patted her on the head, then turned and left, whistling an old marching tune.

We finished our lunch in a somewhat more somber mood, after which Ana and Silva retreated upstairs with a seamstress.

I retrieved my belongings from the stableyard and retired to my own room at the inn — graciously arranged by Old Seth and the baron, the innkeeper told me. I meant only to sit on the feather mattress for a few moments, but must have dozed off. I awoke to a setting sun and someone pounding on my door.

“What is it, Gilliam?” I asked. “Surely, the supper is not that good that you must —”

“Kuric and Durin, have you seen them?”

“Not since shortly after lunch. Why?”

“The barman says they left with the baron’s man around the middle afternoon.”

I rubbed the stickiness from my eyes. “And..?”

“And the baron’s man has just arrived, apologizing for his tardiness.”

I grabbed up my cloak and staff, and followed the other man down the stairs.

Varis was pacing the length of the common room. He bustled us out the door, and into a waiting carriage bearing the mark of the wall and tower.

I barely recognized the two ladies sitting opposite us — Ana wore her hair swept back, and was in a white gown edged in silver. It was nothing terribly dressy, but it certainly suited her much better than the jack of scales, breeches and tabard.

Silva sat next to her in a plainspun long-sleeved robe over what looked like a matching gown of white. Her tangled hair had been combed and plaited in a thick braid. A woolen cloak dyed white and lined with a coarse fur was clasped about her neck with a heavy crescent-moon pin that matched the silver-gray of her eyes.

She glanced at the door when it shut behind us. “Koo-ric? Do-rin? *Alevati?*”

The carriage jolted into motion, and she flung herself towards the door.

“*Aleva* Koo-ric? *Aleva* Do-rin?”

Ana reached for her arm, but the girl shook her hand away.

“We don’t know,” Gilliam said, taking Silva’s hands as she groped for the door latch. “We don’t know where they are but we will find them.”

She sobbed against Gilliam the entire length of the trip to Tarnskeep.

I must say, our arrival certainly could not have been what the baron was expecting, and I give him credit for being such a gracious host in the worst of possible means of introductions.

His smile dissolved as the coach door opened, and I could have sworn I saw tears brim in his eyes as Gilliam stepped from the confines of the coach, bearing the girl.

“Is she hurt?”

Gilliam shook his head. “No, your Lordship. Upset.”

The baron nodded, hurrying up the steps ahead of us. He'd finished giving curt instructions to the seneschal by the time we filed past into the greeting hall. The baron motioned for us to follow him into a side room — a spacious study, dominated by a long table littered with books, but also containing two cushioned settees flanking a low serving table. A maid had just finished filling mugs from a steaming teapot, and she measured a pinch of something into the last mug.

“Please, sit. There is tea, or something stronger if you like. I have added a little something for the youngest lady, to calm her nerves.”

Once Silva looked up from Gilliam's shoulder, she swallowed her hiccuping sobs as best she could, wiping her red and puffy eyes. Her face was red from the cold air, and the fit of sobbing, but it flushed deeper as she slipped quickly to her feet, eyes downcast, and offered a deep, fluidly graceful curtsy. Instead of immediately rising, though, she held herself at the dip, letting go the corners of her gown and sweeping her arms to cross over her chest, her hands resting before opposite shoulder.

We stared, as did the baron. We all moved to bow, or kneel, or offer similar obeisance, but the baron waved us up. “None of that,” he said. “Bowing and scraping is for ceremonies before the Duke, not in my home.”

Silva had not moved. She stood perfectly still, like a statuette of palest marble.

The baron's brow creased for a moment.

“Your Lordship,” I said quickly, “she does not speak the Common, nor any language any of us know. She does not mean disrespect.”

A smile creased his face then, and he chuckled. “Oh, no,” he said. “Far, far from it. I have only read of ceremony such as this, many, many years ago. Let me see if I remember how to properly close it.”

He bowed before the girl, stooping quite low to bob his head at level with hers, and took her right hand in his left as he straightened, touching the knuckles to his forehead, before straightening fully. This drew Silva back up to stand at her minuscule but nonetheless full height. She stood, hands clasped before her.

The baron motioned somewhat exaggeratedly for her to sit, which she did with another slight curtsy. He handed her a mug of tea — moving the spiced one to the side, took up a mug himself, and they sipped in unison.

He patted himself on the chest, and told her “Sherlane Halaran.” He repeated it when she frowned, and she seemed to turn it over in her head, and then nodded.

“*Namas’te Sherl-ane Hal-ah-ran,*” she said, stumbling slightly over his name. “*Eiao Mel—*” she stopped herself, biting her lip. After a pause, she said “*Caellimi Silva.*”

“Whatever that was,” Varis murmured to Gilliam, “it certainly did the trick in snapping her out of it.”

“What that was,” the baron said, retrieving a chair from the other side of the long table and placing it between the two settees before sitting down, “was a ceremonial greeting reserved for the meeting of kings and queens and emperors.”

“I have never seen its like,” I said.

“I highly doubt you ever will,” the baron said. “The ceremony is so ancient as to be extinct.” He glanced at Silva, who had her mug of tea in her lap, and was kicking her feet slowly back and forth as she glanced around the room. “Or perhaps I should say, it is timeless. And suddenly, the fragments of information I was to pass on to the dwarven brothers shine with a whole new light, revealing other avenues I must explore.”

“Dreadful,” Baron Halaran breathed, when we’d briefed him on the situation. His blue eyes, which had been soft and on the verge of tears themselves when he met us at the coach hardened into chips of ice. “Of the lowest, most cowardly — I should have clapped him in irons the instant he showed his face in town.”

“Who is this villain—”

“‘Villain’? No, do not be so generous in calling him that. He is a sneak, a scoundrel, a weasel of a man who does the bidding of a certain other baron in the west, along the coast. This reeks of his handiwork. Kidnapping is just his style. I fear

Stefan's cousin is better informed than I suspected, as this latest move of his agent attests."

"M'Lord," Varis started.

"In the Common, Halaran, please. From the beginning?" finished Gilliam.

"This agent,' you mean the bard we encountered?"

The baron made a sour face. "A bard? Is that what he tried to pass himself off as? Your friends may be in graver danger than ever, if they ask to hear him sing. Bargle couldn't carry a tune even if he used both hands."

"Bargle the bard?" Varis asked. "It does have a certain ring to it..."

"The only ring that man is involved with is the Iron Ring," Halaran said coldly. "If he hasn't already sold your friends to one of Ludwig's mines, he no doubt will once he's done using them to get his greasy hands on this girl."

"Ahh," said Gilliam. "Now you're speaking plainly!"

"What is so important about one girl?" Varis asked.

"Varis," Ana said, causing Gilliam and I to start. She'd been so quiet the entire time, she practically disappeared. "Think about it, given what we know, and what we've seen here."

Varis sat back, arms crossed, brow creased. "It makes no sense to me," he said. "Do they want her for some kind of ransom, perhaps?"

"Well... that is certainly one possibility," the baron said. "If anything else, she is worth twice her weight in platinum for the sheer curiosity value. I can think of at least two princes in Glantri — ah, but now I get far afield of myself!"

"Our first priority is rescuing Kuric and Durin," said Varis. "You seem to know much of this knave of a bard who might be holding them. Where is it that he lairs?"

The baron chuckled. "I know of Bargle mostly by his reputation, and it is quite appropriate that you should refer to him as some sort of beast. If he is in this part of the duchy, then he most likely is holed up beneath the ruins to the north. Either there, or the caves west of town."

"Well, that settles it then. We split up, and —"

Halaran held up a hand. "No, Bargle is too crafty. He is a sneak and a coward, and going at him in numbers is most likely your best tactic. I will send what Townguardsmen I can spare to root out the second lair."

Varis and Gilliam discussed tactics and possible layouts of the two hideaways for nearly an hour, and I found that the tea and soft cushions of the settee worked as if it had been my tea that had been spiced. I stifled a yawn, and the baron rose, ringing for a chambermaid.

"You will all sleep here. I will have one of my porters return to the Hook and Hatchet to retrieve your belongings. When you are ready to retire, as Master Thorn seems to be," the baron smiled warmly at me, "ring the bell and Ilsa here will show you to suitable quarters."

Last quarter moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about Swiftmont 26, 997AC)

A deep night's sleep and a hearty breakfast at the baron's table had me feeling like a new man. Gathering the barest of essentials into my battered pack and taking up my staff, I descended to the greeting hall, and then went out to the stableyard. The others were there, and it sounded as if the argument had been going for some time.

"I have said 'no' and I am not changing my mind!" Varis shouted. "She stays."

"By bringing her, we risk her being hurt. Or worse, her capture by the very man we're trying to keep her away from," said Gilliam.

"Better we should take her now than have to keep looking over our shoulders for her following," said Ana. "We don't need that kind of distraction."

"And she won't be any less distracting if she is with us," Varis said. "Its hard enough when a scrap breaks out having to watch out for your own hide, I don't need to be tripping over hers as well."

"I seem to recall that if she hadn't been around to trip over, you would most likely have been a meal for a rock wolf," I said.

Varis gaped like a landed fish.

"I do not think you have to worry much about her own safety," said the baron, leading a pony from the stable, atop which sat Silva, kicking happily at the side-saddle. She was garbed in a long woolen robe, deeply hooded, slit to the knee on each side for ease of movement. "She allowed me to examine those fabulous accoutrements you seem so keen to keep under wraps. They both radiate very strong defensive and offensive magics. Neither one holds any hint of evil that I was able to detect, so it is safe to assume that they are not fueled by a bound presence. Or if they are, it is not of malevolent intention. Also, there is this." The baron gestured at his throat, and Silva reached into her robe and produced a pale yellow-gold stone, mounted in silver, dangling from a delicate chain about her neck. The stone seemed to glow slightly, light tracing along veins of silver deep within the gem.

"What is it?" asked Gilliam. "I have never seen a stone such as that."

The baron nodded. "Nor have I, and I have made a bit of a hobby of gemcraft. It is the same with the two stones adorning those bracers she wears. Strange, how we seem to keep saying that of this girl, 'I have not seen its like.'

"But observe," the baron said, and swung his fist at the girl.

We leapt to restrain him, then stopped. Though he stood right next to her, his fist swung wide. The girl flinched, but did not jerk back overmuch from the strike. By all means, it should have connected. There was no possible way he could have missed. She swam out of focus in my vision, and I blinked.

"Did you —"

"She just—"

Ana was peering intently at the pony. "Its.... As though my eyes simply don't want to see her. They look everywhere but straight at her...." She even cupped her hands about her eyes, but we saw her head bob this way and that.

"I have never—" she said.

"—seen its like," we all finished, more or less in unison.

When she swam back into our vision, Silva was blushing. She tucked the stone back under her robe.

"*Daar it nidaar*," she said with a shrug.

"Very well. But I know I will regret this decision," Varis muttered, and we headed out, back to the fortress ruins to the north.

Mistamere looked nothing like I'd imagined it, days ago in the fading light of a growing snowstorm. Bleak gray stone walls tumbling to ruin around the edges of the keep made it look more forlorn than imposing, a sad reminder of glory long past, if the stories of Gygar held much truth.

As we passed through the halls, barely a sign of our previous visit could be seen. The rock wolf corpses had vanished. Varis led us off to the right, into the room opposite that where we'd battled the beasts to save Ana. Through the northern doorway was a corridor that ended to the east in a weather-eaten set of stairs that yawned into darkness below.

“Good thing the coin-spin indicated we go left, rather than right,” Gilliam said. “Imagine tumbling down those in the midst of all that snow.”

Varis coaxed a torch alight with flint and steel and started down the steps, torch aloft, sword drawn and ready in his other hand. Ana lit another torch from Varis’, and we filed down the steps after him: Gilliam, Ana, Silva, and then me.

Gygar’s dungeon was as cold and gray as the ruins above. We descended into a large chamber, the edges of which we could barely make out at the edges of the torchlight.

Gilliam moved quickly to the door to the south, pressing his ear against it, listening for several heartbeats. Varis was doing the same at the north door. Both the doors looked half-rotten, and it was a wonder that neither man’s breath caused them to collapse in heaps of splinters.

“Anything?” Varis asked in a whisper that carried through the chamber as if he’d shouted.

“Quiet as a tomb,” Gilliam whispered back. “Which way?”

“One way is as good as another,” I said.

“We go left,” Ana said, making towards Varis.

“What makes you chose that direction?” Gilliam asked. “I have a perfectly good coin we can spin.”

“So spin it, then,” Ana snapped. “Be quick.”

“Halav, we go north, words, we go south,” he called, tossing a royal with a flick of his thumb. He caught it in midair, slapping it to the back of his hand. Halav’s profile greeted us when he lifted his hand.

“North it is. Varis, the door if you please?”

Ana bit her lip. She looked pale.

“If we do this at every turn, I will go mad,” she murmured.

“Could it be that you are not comfortable underground?” I asked her.

“It could be. But we are here with a purpose, and I will see it through.” She took a deep breath, giving the room a sweep with her wide, blue eyes. They lingered on the ceiling, and she swallowed nervously. “Somehow.”

Varis shouldered the door open, and it gave way with a puff of dust and a series of sharp cracks.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“We’re in a dead wizard-king’s dungeon, not your grandam’s parlor,” Gilliam hissed, stepping over the wreckage. Varis drew a breath to reply, but Gilliam brought a finger to his lips, pressing himself against the wall just before the corridor branched off to the left. He made a “stay here” sign, then eased around the corner.

We heard the dry rustle of his boots and a clinking of the swords at his waist. There was a pause, and then the sounds repeated as Gilliam reappeared.

“I hope you weren’t trying to sneak up on anyone,” Varis breathed. “I’ve heard quieter troops at the parade ground. At full march.”

“I thought I was in your deaf grandam’s parlor,” Gilliam whispered back. “Ten strides down is another chamber, reeks of old grease and mutton.”

“Oh, so its your grandam’s kitchen, then?”

“There was movement, scuttling,” Gilliam said after a long look at Varis. “Sounds of chewing and growling.”

“Rock wolves?” I asked.

“Nothing so pleasant,” Gilliam said flatly. “It was pitched wrong for goblin voices. My guess would be —”

“Kobolds!” Varis hissed.

“Good guess,” Gilliam said.

“No, behind you,” I said, shifting the grip on my staff and crouching in a defensive stance.

They huddled at the edge of the torchlight, one of them sniffing, as though tasting something in the air between us. The other had a hand on the hilt of a shortsword at his waist, but its posture, as well as the look on its doglike face suggested curiosity rather than aggression.

The one that had been sniffing nudged its companion, and said something that sounded like a combination of a bark and a growl.

After a few barks and growls back and forth, the one with the sword beckoned towards us, indicating something hidden around the corner from it. Which could only be Silva.

“Be you bring more slaves for Master?”

“Slaves?” Varis asked. “We most certainly did—” the rest of what he was going to say left in a wheezing rush as Gilliam struck him hard in the side.

“Silence!” he barked. “I hired you to hold the torch and keep those two in line. Now hold your tongue or I might just throw you into this deal as well.”

Varis glared, rubbing his side.

“Yes,” Gilliam said with a nod. “Show us to him at once.”

I felt a hand at my shoulder, and Ana handed me the shaft of her scythe. She slipped the blade into a leather sheathe and slid it behind her back, concealing it under her dark woolen cloak. Gilliam gave Varis another nudge in the ribs, giving the fighter’s sword a long look. Gilliam sheathed his own swords slowly, and gave the kobolds a nod after Varis’ sword slid home in its scabbard.

The kobolds bobbed their heads, then turned and padded down the corridor. We followed them into a good sized chamber which was cluttered with three long trestle tables, each flanked by low benches. The tabletops were a mess of wooden bowls, tin plates — most of them dented — and lumps of what at one time could have been either bread or meat. The floor was similarly littered, with the addition of many gnawed and broken bones.

The kitchen they led us through was worse than the mess hall. A cauldron taller than the kobold cooks bubbled atop a large fire. The cooks barked and yapped at each other, one of them hopping atop a rickety crate and tossed what looked like a snake into the pot. The hissing had nothing to do with liquid sloshing over the side and dribbling into the flames.

Our escorts turned left halfway through the room, taking us through a door that looked to’ve been replaced recently — the carpentry was hardly first rate, but at least it blocked out most of the stench from the kitchen cookpot.

An overly large kobold sat upon what looked to be a cheap imitation of a throne, set upon wooden dais. It looked up at our intrusion, mouth full of what I hoped was mutton, the rest of the haunch clutched in its large hand.

Its question — no doubt something to the effect of “Why have you disturbed my meal?” judging from how our two escorts cowered — came out a thunderous, throaty snarl.

They yapped a bit, beckoning towards us, and Gilliam pushed Ana towards the center of the room, then gave Silva a shove. She stumbled and fell, looking up at Gilliam with a hurt expression. She made to rise, but he winked at her, and motioned with his hands for her to stay down. She sank back to the floor.

Varis and I tried to look as imposing as we could. Well, I tried. Varis didn't have to give it much effort, with his height and broad shoulders.

Gilliam gave a flourishing bow, mimicking the general motions of Silva's curtsy to the baron the night before, but not waiting for the burly kobold to return the gesture before he rose to his full height.

"Behold!" he said, gesturing towards Ana and Silva. "I bring these two as tribute, to show you the fine quality of the rest of the slaves that I have brought with me from the far corners of the duchy."

The kobold had kept chewing through Gilliam's introduction — choking a bit at the bow. It swallowed, then reached for a dented silver goblet, taking a deep draught, wine dribbling from its jowls and trickling over the mismatched leathers and other bits of cobbled-together armor. It unhooked its leg from over the arm of the throne, motioning at the girls with the half-eaten leg in his hand.

Ana certainly looked convincingly frightened, and sidled meekly forward, dragging Silva behind her.

The big kobold sniffed at her, then pushed the hood of Ana's cloak back. He'd taken a bite of the leg, but spat it out half-chewed at her feet. He barked a laugh as she jumped back with a small squeak.

"That one is no good," the kobold rumbled, shaking the leg at Ana. A gobbet of meat fell to the floor with a 'plop.'

"What is wrong with her?" asked Gilliam, in a shocked tone. "She's a healthy girl. A bit skinny, sure, but those are some fine childbearing hips." She turned, eyes wide, face going red.

"Not what the Master wants." He fished about in a pouch at his waist, producing two coins. He flung one of them at Gilliam, who caught it in midair.

"Is her hair the color of that coin?"

Gilliam turned the coin in the torchlight. It shimmered between gold and silver, depending on how he looked at it. I felt something flutter in my stomach.

“Well, no, but look how it shines in—”

“Master does not care for shine!” the kobold barked. “So R’yтик cares not for it!” It rummaged in the pouch again, producing a tangle of twine. He shook it vigorously until it unraveled, then held it out at arm’s length next to Ana. The tip of the twine brushed against the floor, and the kobold held the other tip, the length coming to well below Ana’s shoulder.

“Too tall! Master does not want taller than the rope!”

“Perhaps we could just take her off at the knees —” Gilliam started.

“No!” the kobold and Ana spoke at the same instant. She swallowed quickly, bowing her head in apparent meekness.

“No no no!” the kobold continued. “Master insists she is unharmed. Master hit R’yтик when last one had tender spot on arm. So R’yтик beat kobold that squeezed it too tight.” The kobold nodded assertively. “No tender spots or R’yтик maybe beat you, too?”

Varis snorted and Gilliam shot him a grin.

“Oh, no, Great R’yтик, we certainly can’t have that!” Gilliam said with an almost-convincing quaver in his voice.

But the kobold’s attention was again on Ana, this time peering intently at her face, pawing aside some of her hair to get a better look. He had to reach up slightly to do that, even standing as he was on the raised wooden dais.

“No, no, no!” he shouted again, and I saw Ana’s breath quicken as bits of the kobold’s meal flew as he shook the haunch. Several bits bounced off her.

“Eyes not right either!” The second coin spun from his fingertips, but fell short, bouncing and spinning across the floor. Torchlight flashed on the silver coin as it spun.

The fluttering in my stomach stopped, but only to settle with an almost physical weight. My grip tightened on the ash staff I was holding for Ana.

The kobold squinted at Gilliam. “Even R’yтик can match looks to charcoal scribble, even if other squiggly lines do not make any sort of picture. Even *Kr’rvies* can make match,” the big kobold pointed to one of our escorts, and that kobold straightened. “Right?”

The other kobold made a show of appraising Ana, its snout inclining as it looked her up and down. "Errrrum... not match?" it croaked, looking to its companion.

The escort not under the bigger kobold's glare shrugged. "All pinkskins look alike, just like they all taste alike." Its stomach growled.

The big kobold turned his beady eyes upon Silva.

"Stand up," he growled. When she didn't move, he repeated himself, barking the words. He glanced over her head, at Gilliam.

"You bring me one that has no ears?" it asked.

Gilliam laughed. "Skittish as a doe, she is."

R'ytik straightened up, puffing out his chest. "As she should be," he snarled, taking a great bite from the haunch. He repeated his order for her to stand, but this time gestured with his free hand, the twine bobbing.

Silva rose slowly to her feet, the top of her hood coming even with the big kobold, standing atop the wooden dais.

His snout split into the doglike equivalent of a smile, as he held the twine just above his eye level.

"This one is the right size," he said, giving Ana a scowl. He dropped the twine, reaching for Silva's hood. She flinched back, just out of his reach.

"Be still!" he barked, reaching again. He tipped the wide hood down, his snout less than a handspan from Silva's nose, which she wrinkled as he breathed on her.

"Good, very good," he growled. "This! Shiny like silver, shiny like gold. Yes." He held a lock of her hair, let it trail through his greasy fingers. Had he a tail, I'm sure it would have been wagging.

He caught her chin in those same greasy fingers, and tilted her bowed head. His eyes narrowed and the smile on his snout slid into something closer to a smirk.

"Eyes of the moonlight," he hissed, and Silva scrunched up her face against his foul breath. "Master will reward me well for this!"

He raised his head and let out a howling cry.

The kobold “king’s” audience chamber had an extraordinary amount of doors — another along the wall in addition to the one through which we’d entered. A door behind us, two on the wall to our right.

And it seemed like all of these doors burst open at the exact same moment, flooding the room with short, yapping doglike kobolds. A good number of them had short-swords. Many had clubs of some sort or another. One, coming from the direction of the kitchen, looked to be wielding a mop.

They gave us very little time to react. Gilliam and Varis had their swords out, but a line of dogmen two deep streamed through the room, cutting us off from the two girls.

“Thorn!”

Ana’s cry snapped me to attention, and I tossed the ash staff towards her, then had to turn my attention to the ring of kobolds closing on me.

They were all kicking feet and swinging clubs and yapping snarls. There were too many blows to block all of them. For every one I blocked ahead of me, two more rained down on my back and legs.

Judging from the cursing Varis and Gilliam were doing, they were having the same luck I was. The kobold pressed at us like a rising tide. Some thuds and yelps indicated Ana was having somewhat better luck than we were.

Suddenly, above the clamor and chaos, the kobold R’yтик roared, the tone indicating both surprise and outrage. I felt a chill at that howl — he was expected to bring Silva to her fate unharmed. Had the kobold mob struck her?

The babble from before the throne and dais went from snarling to whines and yaps of confusion, like a pack of hounds suddenly off the scent.

“Silva, run!” Ana shouted. Anything else she was going to say was cut off by a sharp cry, and we saw her sink to one knee. The kobolds swarmed over her.

Gilliam, Varis and I tried to wade through the press of kobolds, to reach the girl, but there were too many crowded between us. A cudgel struck my knee, and it buckled. I could not catch myself in time on my staff, or if I did, a clever kobold managed to kick it out from under me. The torchlight in the room went dark, obscured by kobold after kobold as they leapt atop me, pinning me down. A clawed foot swung at the limit of my vision, and pain exploded behind my eyes.

Another kick, and the yammering kobold mob was swallowed in silence as awareness fled.

**Last quarter moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about
Swiftmont 27, 997AC)**

I awoke to darkness, punctuated by a rustle and clank of chain. Somewhere behind me, a soft cough and muffled sobbing. I tried sitting up, and quickly found that to be a mistake, as it felt like the floor was tipping out from under me. I quickly sank back to the cold stone floor, fighting down a nauseous dizziness.

"Lie still. Deep breaths and it will pass." Ana's familiar voice drifted from somewhere beside me, and I felt a hand pat my shoulder.

"Where—"

"Still below. Deeper."

"Are you all right with—"

"Its not so bad in the darkness. I will weather it."

"Shh!" came another voice from a corner. Unfamiliar. "They'll punish us again if you keep talking!" the voice whispered, and several other voices joined in a chorus of "shushes."

A heavy bang sounded from the door of the room we were in, a sound like a tree crashing against the metal of the door. The sound filled the room like a physical presence, and the chorus turned to shrieks of fright.

"QUIET DOWN IN THERE, UNLESS ONE OF YOUSE WANTS TO BE MY BEDTIME SNACK!"

The voice boomed louder than the fist against the door, causing the door itself to shake on its hinges. The pronunciation of the words was heavy and slurred.

"Let that be a very big, very drunk man," I whispered.

"Ogre," Ana whispered flatly. "Caught a glimpse before they locked us in here."

"Shhhh!"

I rolled onto my back and from there managed to make it to a sitting position. The floor stayed where it was, though red and white lights burst in my vision with every heartbeat. The nausea settled as I rested my head against my knees.

With nothing better to do, I closed my eyes against the darkness, and drifted in a doze, waiting for whatever it was that was to happen next.

We were jolted from sleep by the harsh rasp of a bolt being drawn. The door screeched open, and torchlight flooded through the room, casting the figure in the doorway in shadow. The figure was tall and lean, something familiar in the posture.

The girls scooted as far back from the doorway as the chains about their ankles would allow, some wide-eyed and shaking, others glaring fiercely at the figure in the doorway.

"I should thank you," the man in the doorway said, "for saving me the time, trouble, and expense" — he leaned heavily on that word — "of tracking you all down and bringing you here the hard way.

"I should... but I won't. Do you know why?" His tone was so nonchalant, so conversational, that for a split second it seemed entirely natural to converse with bound prisoners in this manner. Of course, from what little I knew of this man, this could very well be normal.

When neither Ana nor I answered, he slapped his leather gloves against the door, causing it to ring sharply.

"Do you know why?" he repeated, this time an edge of anger creeping into his tone.

"Could it be that you still haven't managed to find a lone little girl wandering your maze of a dungeon?" Ana asked.

The bard stood for a moment in silence, his posture pensive. "All right, that, too." He leaned back, looking over his shoulder.

"Grodeg! Get up those stairs and tell that simpering king of a kobold that if he doesn't find the girl soon, his head — crown and all — will be the garnish on your next meal!"

"Find girl or head is guh- guh-...." came the slurred response. "What is that word means, Master Bargle?"

The man in the doorway sighed heavily. "'Garnish' is a decoration to make a meal pretty." He spoke slowly, making sure Grodeg soaked in every word.

"But, Master Bargle, kobolds is not as pretty as is younglings. So that make meal not as pretty."

"Just go, and tell him to find that girl!"

“And Grodeg not like kobold. They is stringy. Not plump like is younglings.” Several of the girls covered against each other, sobbing.

“GO!” the bard shouted, pointing down what was apparently a hallway outside. Then he turned quickly back to the cell, squatting down, and making calming motions with his hands.

“Shhh, shhh, there now. The big nasty smelly ogre isn’t going to eat anybody,” he said quietly.

“What about Lispeth?” asked one of the steely-eyed girls.

“She’s gone home, just like I promised.” The smile seemed to slither onto his face. “You’ll all go home just as soon as we find this one, troublesome and very irritating young lady. In fact,” he said, his face brightening, “these two, as well as their other friends in the room down the hall, know where that slippery little wench is hiding. Maybe you can convince them to tell me, and then we can all go back home in time for supper.”

“And our two royals for the trouble?”

The bard stared blankly at the spokesgirl. Then he beamed. “Right! Yes, two royals apiece for this unfortunate mix up. And remind your mums and dads not to go showing that off to the Grand Duke’s tax collectors!”

“Best make it three royals,” Ana said. “We could be here for a good stretch, while he and his kobolds play ‘foxes and rabbit’ with our friend.”

We were left to sit in darkness. Some of the girls had taken up sobbing again, and we heard others doing what they could to calm them. Eventually, the girls settled down — it could have been minutes or hours, time had very little meaning in that cold, black cell. I think I drifted off to sleep for a brief time, for I started in shock at the sound of the bolts on the other side of the door being drawn sharply back.

The bulk of the doorway was obscured by a great hulking figure, lit from behind by what I can only call a ghostly light, bright as a candle, but not the familiar yellow-orange flame. It was more like the bluish-silver of moonlight, shot through with flickers the purple-black of moonlit shadows.

Ana’s hand tensed on my arm.

“Have you ever...” her voice drifted in my ear.

I felt myself smile. “No,” I said, rising stiffly to my feet. My feet — cold and partially numb from sitting for so long — felt as if they weren’t my own as I took a few steps toward the doorway.

There came a tug at my tunic. “What are you doing? Don’t go out there!”

I patted the girl’s hand, gently disengaging it. “It will be all right, this can only be our friend, come to find us.”

The girls were not as convinced, and they scuttled further from the doorway than when the man Bargle had appeared before us.

Ana and I made our way to the doorway. The ogre Grodeg took a lumbering step back, staring at us with dark eyes, its face slack of any expression. His skin — a bit yellowish to begin with — looked almost waxen in the strange blue-white-purple glow.

One great arm lurched towards up, a ring of keys held between its thumb and forefinger. I took the keys, working my way through them until I found the one that matched the shackles around our feet. I moved into the cell, freeing the other girls as quickly as I could, and while they rose to their feet once freed, none was eager to set foot outside the cell.

“He’ll eat us for sure!” one girl moaned.

“It’s a trick,” another said.

“He’s only freeing us so he and the others can have a feast!”

I looked up from the last shackle, which was giving me some trouble. “Others? You mean there is more than one ogre down here?” The lock finally turned, and the girl kicked her foot free, scrambling to her feet, backing away from the door, pressing her back against the far wall of the cell.

There came the metallic shriek of rusty metal-on-metal, and the protest of rusted hinges. “Thorn!” Ana called, “I need those keys!”

I tossed them to Ana once outside the cell, hearing a babble of voices — familiar and unfamiliar — coming from within the second cell. One by one, Varis, Gilliam, Kuric and Durin filed out, rubbing their arms and wrists.

We kept our reunion brief, handshakes, nods, claps on the back.

“But where is Silva?” Durin asked.

The ogre took another lumbering step, a jerky motion to the side, revealing the girl standing behind it, her right arm outstretched, the wrappings about the gauntlet in tatters. The gem on her right wrist glowed with the blue-white-purple of moonlight and shadows, bright as a handful of candles. A hazy webbing of misty strands drifted from along the metallic tracery of the gauntlet, over her right hand, and trailed across the floor to somewhere along the ogre's back.

Durin rushed over to her, nearly bowling her over with the great hug. Indeed, she seemed totally unaware of him until he'd wrapped his arms about her. She blinked, as if waking from a doze, then pushed insistently at the dwarf's shoulder with her left hand.

"Tithemini!" she squeaked, with what little breath his hug had left her. Durin's arms flung wide, and he stumbled back a few steps, his joyful expression crumbling into one of confusion.

As she appeared to awaken, the stone pulsed with an angry purple flash, and the misty webbing began to dissipate. The ogre's face went from slack to a snarl, the eyes brightening in fury as the brows dropped.

It pushed itself away from the wall with a growl, reaching for one of the braver of the girls who'd just stepped out of the cell. She screamed and ducked, huddling in the doorway,

"Niamat!" Silva shouted, her right hand outstretched, hooked in a grasping gesture. The gem on her wrist pulsed blue-white, and the light seemed to reinforce the wispy strands linking her to the creature.

The anger on its face twisted into pain, then fear. It roared again, the great muscles of its body bulging as though it strained against chains of thickest iron.

"Tyagami!" Silva clenched her fist as she said the word, the blue-white light flaring now, rather than just pulsing. Her eyes seemed to glow as they reflected that light. It chased its way through the misty webbing, like tiny bolts of lightning amongst clouds. The creature roared again, this time more of desperation than anger.

The roar tapered off into a growl, and then the ogre's expression sank back into slackness, the arms dropping limply to its sides.

Silva's arm was shaking, her grip white-knuckled. She was breathing as though she'd arm-wrestled the ogre physically. Her pale lips were set in a grim line, her eyes locked on the ogre, her brow creased in intense concentration.

Light flared, orange-yellow, down the far end of the corridor.

"By the Immortal's fury, Grodeg, you'd better have a very good reason to be bellowing at this hour. I was in the middle of a particularly good dream, and —"

Bargle's voice stopped as he rounded the corner, torch aloft, the light gleaming from his eyes gone wide. For a moment, his expression was as slack as that of the ogre.

"Well," he said with a weak smile. "Isn't that the most amazing thing?"

He threw down the torch, turned, and ran back the way he'd come.

Varis practically had to tackle Gilliam to prevent him from chasing after the cowardly bard.

"He's getting away!" Gilliam protested.

"Think, Gilliam! Right now he is the least of our worries. We have no weapons." Varis said.

"We can't just leave these girls to fend for themselves. We've got to get them back to their families," Ana said.

"They say there is more than just this one ogre roaming around down here, too," I added. "So, unless you can do this trick of Silva's, you'll be fighting them bare handed."

Gilliam's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Fine," he said. "At least let me take a look around and see if there isn't something laying around we can use." He followed the wall a ways until he found another doorway opposite the cells, probably some sort of guardroom.

Ana and Varis busied themselves with getting the girls into two lines.

"They look to be in fairly good condition, all things considered," Ana said as she ushered another girl into place along the wall.

"Oh, that scoundrel made sure we were all fed, and had plenty of water," Kuric said. "To have done otherwise would have been bad for business, I imagine."

Durin spat. "I still can't believe he planned to sell us, like we're nothing more than... than... cattle!"

"Moo," said one of the girls, and a few around her giggled. Ana smiled a faint smile at that, and I noticed that her gaze strayed from the ceiling, which she'd been glancing up at repeatedly, nervously, as if expecting a great stone block to come crashing down atop our heads at any second.

"Relax," Durin said, patting her arm as she passed. "The stonework here is solid. Not as solid if it had been worked by my kind, but still quite serviceable."

Kuric elbowed his brother in the ribs. "You really need to work on your reassurances, Brother Mine," he said.

Gilliam appeared, his arms laden with weaponry and bundles of cloth.

"I feel like Father Yule," he said, as we gathered around to reclaim our weapons and cloaks. He'd also procured cloaks for most of the girls. He gave his own to one of the girls who didn't have one, and Varis donated his to the other girl who was without.

Varis was giving the girls their marching orders, and Ana drifted back towards where I kept a nervous watch over Silva and the ogre. I also kept an eye on the end of the corridor, expecting Bargle to return at any minute. But not another sound came from the far end of the hallway, and Silva and the ogre Grodeg seemed content to simply stand in place.

"Thorn, Silva, we're ready to go," Ana said, giving the girl as wide a berth as the ogre.

I pushed away from where I'd been leaning against the stone wall, and Silva stirred, blinking as if clearing sleep from her eyes, though they'd been open before, staring intently at the ogre.

"Do we even know where we're taking these girls?" I asked.

Ana shrugged. "Up the stairs, then we'll have to blunder along until we find someplace familiar, or another route to the surface."

"Not much of a plan."

"What else can we do?"

"*Kshanem kri!*" Silva blurted. We turned, and she said it again, a touch less insistently. She flushed, her mouth working to speak, but not knowing a word of

our language. She snapped her mouth shut and made a growling, frustrated sound in her throat.

The ogre did the same.

We stared immediately at the great creature, and the ring of steel being drawn down the hall indicated that Varis and Gilliam had both heard the growl as well. But it hadn't moved. Silva was staring at the gauntlet, watching wisps of the vapory tether drift around the complex pattern of loops and swirls that seemed to flow from the oddly-shaped gem, which kept the steady blue-white glow.

She looked up at the ogre, making a soft jerking motion of the wispy connection. "*Kathayatemi*," she said.

Some tension returned to the ogre's face, but all it did was glare at the girl, making an effort to keep its great mouth shut.

"*Kathayatemi!*" she said, making the word more a command than a request. She emphasized it with a snap of her wrist, and the ogre paled as it flinched.

"Grodeg knows a way out," the creature slurred, the words coming out almost a moan. "Grodeg can show youse."

"How can we trust you?" Varis asked.

"We don't," said Gilliam. "We trust Silva. He would dance a jig with every girl here if Silva commanded it of him."

"It couldn't be any worse than dancing with that brother of yours," one of the girls whispered, and several of them giggled.

We all turned back to Silva and Grodeg, and motioned for her to take the lead. Gilliam turned it into a sweeping bow which drew more titters from several of the girls.

As the ogre passed, the distance between it and Silva was as if a patch of the winter storm had been plucked from the other night and wound into a hazy, smoky web of threading. I shied away from it, chilled both along my skin but also somewhere deeper inside, as if someone had run a cold finger up the back of my neck.

I never thought I would pity an ogre, but I shuddered to think of how it must feel to Grodeg.

We rounded the corner, and ascended roughly-hewn steps. Grodeg led, Silva walking slowly behind him, her steps like those of a sleepwalker. Varis and Durin followed her, then Gilliam and Kuric and Ana interspersed through the group of a dozen girls, and I brought up the rear of our column.

Four torches had been given to the girls, and it was something of a relief to be out from under the cold light of Silva's stone.

Varis had us pause at the top of the stairs. "Remember," he whispered. "Not a word. We move as quickly and quietly as possible. If you can't do that, then just turn around and go back to Bargle now, because I won't have any of you dragging the rest of us back there. If there is trouble, you get as close together as you can and let us surround you. Heads down. Is that clear?"

A dozen heads nodded. More than a few swallowed nervously. I saw several hands join and squeeze between the two columns of girls.

"Right. You are all very brave. Halav be with us," Varis whispered, kissing the hilt of his sword. He set a hand on Silva's shoulder, nodding. She gave her hand a twist, and the word "*Iya*" echoed back to me. The ogre took the last few steps up, and we followed as quietly as we could.

Grodeg led us to a meeting of corridors, and turned into the right passage after a brief pause. Judging by the wrinkling of noses as we rounded the corner, I wasn't the only one who noticed the steadily growing stench.

The ogre alone was unaffected when it let us around a bend in the corridor and into a room heaped with refuse. Despite Varis' warning of silence, a chorus of choking coughs sprang up. Varis tried to silence the girls, then finally motioned for them to cover their noses and mouths. He secured a scarf around his own face, then wound a strip of cloth from one of his sleeves around Silva's lower face.

The ogre shuffled through the middle of the room, stepping through piles of rubbish that were ankle deep on it. It got to the doorway and stopped.

"*Iya*," came Silva's muffled command. But Grodeg looked over his shoulder, its teeth bared in a snarl.

"No," he said, his voice coming through ragged breaths. Sweat stood out on his great yellowish brow.

"Iya!" Silva barked the word, clenching her right fist. But the light coming from the stone was flickering between the blue-white and the blackish-purple.

"NO!" The ogre roared the word, stomping one great foot as it did, and across the room at the back of our column, I could feel the tremor through the floor.

There came a chittering and scratching from within the refuse, piled high along the walls, and ankle-deep most of the way along the floor. And then there was a sound like a rushing of hundreds of wings.

But it wasn't wings, it was tiny, clawed feet. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands, stirred into motion by the ogre's resistance:

Rats. A great, black and brown tide of them, closing on us.

The screams began almost immediately, and Varis didn't even bother to try to quiet them. He was too busy kicking and slashing about.

Not all was lost to the girls, though. As Varis had told them, they were attempting to bunch together. The girls with the torches had the sense to wave them about, driving most of the vermin back, and were touching off the refuse about them, forming a semicircle of flame.

"Well done!" Gilliam shouted. Within moments, he and the dwarves had found makeshift torches amidst the debris, lighting them and adding to the girls' circle of fire.

I motioned to the two torchbearers closest to me, even as I kicked at the squirming carpet of rats.

"You two," I called, "open a path. We go back!"

They nodded, wide-eyed, one of them crying, but they waved their torches so as to create a breach, calling the others through.

Being of one of the scholarly orders of druidkind, the workings of magic were not a particular strong point of mine. Still, we were taught the basics, and I focused on drawing upon the spark of elemental fire that dwells in myself, calling also to that of the torches, and even of the girls and my companions as well.

Focus the mind, harness the will, speak the word to call the element to your bidding.

"Fernath!"

I spoke the Word of Fire, and felt a rush of warmth flow through my arms as twin flames, bright as the torches leapt to being in my hands.

I didn't have time to appreciate the "oohs" and "ahhs," but immediately flung the flames downwards, aiming for the spots where the ring of flames was dying out.

"Thorn, Durin and Kuric, keep those girls back!" Varis shouted, "Ana, Gilliam, Silva needs us!"

Silva had brought the ogre to its knees, but as before, it appeared as if every one of its great muscles was bent on pulling it away from the ghostly hold that Silva's magic had worked upon it. Its great mouth was open, as if in a scream, but it made no sound, save for its ragged breathing.

She sat, panting, leaning heavily on her left hand, the right held clenched, close against her heaving chest. Her face was drawn into a fierce grimace, her hair in complete disarray.

Varis and Gilliam both made to strike at the ogre, but Ana stayed their hands. "No! We do not know how tightly bound they are. Striking one could harm the other. Killing one could kill them both."

Ana sank to her knees beside the girl, but stopped short of touching her. She seemed intent on observing the gauntlet, the gemstone, and the misty webbing. After a long moment, she looked up at the two men.

"Be ready. I am going to try to break this connection."

"Be ready for what?" Gilliam asked.

"I don't know," Ana replied. "Anything. She does not look to have much time left."

She rose, chanting, stepping towards the ogre. The cadence rose and fell, and I recognized it as the same spell she'd used the first night we met, a warding against evil.

Ana's voice rose in the last of the incantation, and she cast her arms open, one palm towards the ogre, the other directed at Silva.

There came a flash of silvery light, and Silva and the ogre both let out cries that set teeth on edge even as my blood seemed to turn to ice. The ogre collapsed in a heap, filling most of the far doorway. Silva, though, gave a sharp jerk, as though she'd taken a physical blow, and fell back into a pile of moldering garbage.

Gilliam rushed to her side, propping her up as Ana bent to check on the girl.

"Breathing," she said. "But her lifebeat is very dim, and her skin is like ice."

I let out a breath, not realizing that I'd been holding it. I heard whispers of "Shes all right" pass back along the string of girls. Then from one of the girls crowded back along the corridor's bend came a cry.

"Ogres! Everyone go back! Go back!"

"Durin! Kuric! Over here, and take Silva," Varis shouted, trying to be heard above the tumult of the girls. "Nobody is going to get eaten!" he yelled. "Stick to the plan, huddle, heads down!"

"But it's garbage!"

"It stinks!"

"I think I stepped on a rat!"

Varis and Gilliam joined me where we'd entered the room originally.

"Well, at least they can only come at us one at a time through these corridors."

Gilliam had moved along the wall, and was heaving at a particularly high mound of rubbish.

"Help me get this into the doorway," he called.

"That won't hold them off," Varis scoffed.

"It won't," said Gilliam with a fierce grin. "But the smoke it puts off sure will. Quickly now!"

Between us and a handful of the girls, we'd built up a barricade about waist-height in a matter of minutes.

Gilliam had taken one of the girls cloaks, and wrapped it between two half-rotten wooden stakes. He handed it to the girl.

“Fan,” he told her, then snatched a torch from another girl’s hand and ignited the far side of the barricade.

A couple of the girls had mimicked Gilliam, finding planks and other long bits of wood to use as makeshift fans. It served a double purpose of keeping the refuse alight and pushing the smoke down and around the corridor.

We were rewarded after several minutes by the sound of guttural choking and coughing from back the way we’d come. A cheer went up.

Varis got them organized, rotating girls out when their arms tired, having others keep the refuse pile from burning out by heaping it higher. I invoked the runic flames again, hurling them down the corridor when one of the ogres dared its way through the smoke.

But the room was also filling with smoke.

“We can’t stay here for much longer,” Ana said with a cough.

Varis and Gilliam pushed past the still-unconscious Grodeg, each with a torch in one hand, sword in the other.

“We’ll see where this leads. If you hear a whistle, move the girls towards whichever of us is signaling.”

I saw one of the torches round a bend a little ways down the corridor, while the other kept going straight. Varis had just set his ear to a rickety door his torchlight had revealed when a shout and clang of metal on metal echoed from the hallway Gilliam had taken.

Gilliam staggered backwards into view. “Kobolds! This way is no good!” he shouted, then turned his focus back down the side hall, and there came the sounds of battle.

Varis gave up on the stealthy approach, kicking in the door, and flashing the torch about. He didn’t bother whistling, charging up the corridor to reinforce Gilliam.

“It’s clear. A chamber. Go!” Then he was around the corner.

We hustled the girls down the hallway as quickly as we could, two other girls helping the dwarves bear Silva upon a makeshift stretcher of cloaks.

The shattered door opened into a roughly square chamber. A statue stood along the right wall, facing a rubble-choked corridor.

Ana immediately looked up at the ceiling. "Oh, Flame preserve me!" she whispered, going as pale as the ash staff upon which she leaned.

Durin rose from where he'd settled Silva, hustling across the room to examine the rubble.

"It's all right, girl. This is not the same stone that makes up this maze of a catacomb." He picked up a loose chunk of rock, holding it out to her. "See? This is the same stone as that of the fortress above. Why, we must be directly below it. See here, how it —"

"Enough, Brother Mine," Kuric said. "Let it be enough for her that she knows the room isn't about to fall in on our heads."

"Who is this statue of?" one of the girls asked, staring up at the carved figure in long robes.

"My guess would be Gygar," I said. "He was said to've been a great king who ruled here a thousand years ago."

"Even greater than Halav?"

"Nobody's that great!"

"I couldn't tell you if he was greater than Halav. The legends aren't that specific."

"Then maybe they just said that for the legend."

"Yeah! Halav is great 'cause he defeated the Beastman king and drove them away."

"Maybe this Gygar made it up and he was really a bad king!"

The girls' chatter was interrupted by Varis and Gilliam's return

They each bore many shallow cuts and Varis favored one leg as he walked. They waved Ana away when she tried to examine them, though.

"This is nothing. Just a scratch or two. So, do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"I think we could all do with some good news," Kuric said.

"We found the way out." Gilliam didn't exactly smile as he said it.

"It doesn't get much better than that," the dwarf said, making to gather up a corner of Silva's litter.

"The bad news," Varis said, "is that the entire tribe of kobolds is between us and the way we got here, originally."

"Well, the entire tribe, minus the half dozen or so we dispatched," Gilliam said, sliding to the floor and wiping at a cut on his arm.

"What stops them from coming and capturing us again?" Ana asked.

"Laziness," Gilliam said with a shrug.

"They seem to think we're in some sort of dead-end. Either the ogres will come get us, saving them the trouble, or they'll just wait us out a few days until we're too weak to resist. Its what I'd do," Varis said with a shrug.

The two dwarves looked up from the far wall of the room. "Preposterous," Durin said. "There's a perfectly good exit right here, provided we can get it open."

What I'd taken to be some kind of bas relief, depicting several robed men in crowns before what looked like a setting sun, Durin and Kuric both assured us was indeed a doorway. The decorative border to the relief turned out to be the outline of the door. Whats more, the linework along the doorway seemed to be lettering of some kind. It appeared runic, but none of the lines formed letters that I recognized.

"Well open it quickly," one of the girls said. "We're getting hungry."

"I hear they serve up a great fried rat down the hall," Gilliam said with a wide grin. "Or there is always Bargle's House of Bread and Water down stairs..."

The girl shot Gilliam a dark look, but didn't reply.

It was difficult to tell whether it was night, or even day, so it seems silly to say that we made camp for the night. We were all tired, and so most of us got some rest, while others kept watch, who were then relieved by others who couldn't sleep.

I dozed, off and on, too anxious for kobolds or an ogre to come crashing through the doorway to actually trust myself to sleep.

I drifted awake to the quiet patter of bare feet upon stone, the rustle of cloth upon cloth. I made to adjust my position to ease the kink in my back, but a hand on my arm and Ana's voice in my ear bade me be still and watch.

One of the girls had found a cache of candles behind the statue, and she had lined the pedestal upon which it stood with several of them, that we might save the torches for the deeper darkness of whatever lay ahead.

The girls slept in small groups, mostly divided up as they had been in their cells. Silva walked among them, kneeling briefly, tugging a cloak up around a shoulder here, brushing a lock of hair away there. With each, and presumably with others before I'd awakened, she kissed her index and middle fingers, then touched them to the girl's forehead, and murmured something I could not make out. She repeated it with each girl, the same soft cadence.

"What do you make of it?" Ana whispered.

"A prayer? A ritual of some sort? It is not anything I am familiar with from Karamaikos or Thyatis. You don't think it is some sort of spell, do you?"

"No... I have felt nothing from the stone since severing her from that ogre."

The stone on her right wrist was dark and dull, seeming to almost absorb any of the candlelight that reflected off it. Every now and then, though, there seemed to appear a glimmer, deep in the purple veinwork within the stone.

"I know a good portion of the legends and stories of the Traladaran and Thyatian folk, and none of them make any sort of reference to a magic such as this."

"Then it is older than Traldar and Thyatis," Ana said. "It is something they have not seen before, or if they have seen it, it has been forgotten."

"If it is any consolation, it is beyond anything I have studied at the Citadel. It strays dangerously close to evils I have sworn by the Flame to extinguish. And yet... It does not feel right. Wrong. Oh, I do not know what to make of it. Good or evil, it is both. Or neither. It is an old, old magic. Old and wild."

"And potentially dangerous," I said.

"Potentially? It *is* dangerous. Very much so. When have you ever seen an ogre afraid of anything?"

"Anything smaller than a dragon?" I paused to give it some thought. Nothing came to mind.

"Precisely," Ana said.

"It wouldn't be a problem if I had my tools," Durin said. "A tap here and there, and I'm sure this door would swing right open."

Kuric heaved a rumbling sigh. "I have been over this doorway half a dozen times, and I tell you there is no latch. The stonework is sound. No hidden compartments, no counterbalances. If that door is meant to open, then it will take magic."

"It's nothing a good maul could not take care of," Durin muttered in a hurt tone.

"Then perhaps your head will suffice," snapped Kuric.

"Why won't it open?" asked one of the girls.

"Maybe it's the wrong time of year," said another.

"Maybe it's broken. It is old, after all..."

"What if you need the right words to open it?"

"Yeah! Like in the Alaysian story of the boy and the lamp and the cave!"

"See? Gygar's not that great... he had to copy a story to get an idea about how to guard his treasure!"

"Well how would we even know what to say?" one of the girls asked. "This place is old and everyone who knew things about it is long dead by now."

"If you want to know about old dead things you ask a druid," yet another girl said, and a dozen pairs of eyes turned towards me.

"The legends say Gygar was a great and learned king, ruling these lands from great Mistamere..."

"We know that part. Get to the good stuff! Ow!"

"Shush, and let him prattle!"

I smiled as graciously as I could, and tried not to grind my teeth. "He made a study of the heavens, and worked out the calculations for the solstices and equinoxes independently of the Gatekeepers, and also tabulated preliminary findings for the crossings of the various planes. In fact, several tales say that his was one of the first orreries made in the land, and kings from the surrounding city states marveled at its complexity.

"So.. He may very well have locked the door using an alignment of the heavens. The carvings give very little to go by, though. That setting sun could be from any day of the year. And whatever script he used to line this door, it is not Traladaran nor Thyatian in origin."

A sudden thought struck me.

"Silva?"

She looked up from where she was attempting to teach one of the girls a game involving a grid scratched out upon the flooring, and some arrangement of stones she'd scavenged from the collapsed hallway.

I pointed to the inscription bordering the doorway. "Can you read this?" I don't know why I bothered to ask, since she didn't show any sign of understanding what I'd said. Still, apparently, the gesture was enough. She rose to her feet with the grace of a cat, and took the candle from Kuric's hand.

She ran her fingers over the lines, clearing dust and cobwebs, standing on tip-toe. I took over, clearing away the cobwebs she couldn't reach along the top of the stone slab, and holding the light up for her so she could see the lines and markings.

"*Atra,*" she read, sliding her right fingers along that side of the door, "*Nidrati zazavat raajan.*" She pointed as she read the words above, "*Udgatayatemi ayana yazastemi ciitan raajan.*" Then she traced the words running to the left: "*Vadya cetemi pradusya.*"

A shudder ran through her as she read the leftmost scripting, and she wiped her hand across her dress as she lifted her fingers from the lettering.

It was only when she finished pronouncing the last word that we noticed how quiet the room had become. Silva blushed as she realized that most of the eyes were upon her. Then she looked at the slab, then back at me.

"*Pathitaavan,*" she said, pointing to the words along the doorway. "*Idaniim kim?*"

"It's your door," I said to the dwarves. "May as well try it now."

"Magic doors," Durin scoffed. "Silliest thing I ever ——" His words trailed off into a startled grunt as the slab swung about its centerpoint with the slightest bit of pressure the dwarf had applied to the stone. He fell through the doorway, a great cloud of dust billowing out from his landing.

We staggered back, coughing and sneezing.

"Well," wheezed Durin, his voice echoing in the newly exposed chamber, "looks like this isn't a dead end after all."

"It would appear that you spoke a bit too soon," Ana said, the torch she held aloft illuminating two long rows of low stone sarcophagi. At the limit of the torchlight stood two great pillars, and the room yawned beyond the reach of the wavering light.

An age of dust covered every surface, and was topped again by sheet upon sheet of cobwebs. Varis was going to have to slice a path through the gauzy mess, unless we wanted to come out the far end shrouded head to toes in the stuff.

"Not a sign of disturbance," Gilliam said, inspecting the carpet of dust on the flooring. "Nothing besides the usual creepy crawlies." He looked over at the two dwarves. "Do either of you see anything further ahead?"

"Cobwebs," said Durin.

"More cobwebs," said his brother. "Wait a moment... movement, above. Something big..."

We all looked up, but could see naught but cobwebs, and the shimmer of dust still settling.

Then there came a cascade of dust, pluming off the webbing at the limit of the torchlight, first a small puff or two, then turning into a cloud of grayish gloom surging towards us. A dry, rasping skittering sound rushed and echoed along the room.

"Block the doorway!" Varis called, "whatever this is, don't let it through!"

"What if we get locked in?" I asked.

One of the girls nearby swung her cloak off, twisting it into a tight bundle, holding it along a corner of the doorway. "Close it!" she called to us.

Gilliam leaned back against the door, and it swung smoothly along the pivot, jamming against the girl's cloak, the opening now only a sliver less than a handspan's width.

Gilliam had just enough time to turn and draw his swords when the cloud of dust consumed us, graying out Ana's torchlight, the torch to guttering and hissing.

That sound was matched by a hissing and chittering that seemed to come from all sides. The dulled light revealed looming, hulking figures, the most notable

features being waist-high rows of beady dark eyes, long, furry forelimbs, mandibles tipped with gleaming fangs.

The spiders moved quickly, and we had a time keeping up with their movements. We would strike, only to find that they'd darted aside, and another one would leap from the webbing. One would fall, and two more would scramble over the husk, fangs exposed, lashing out. We closed to a tight circle, the two dwarves in the center, unarmed save for the torches that we passed to them as the spiders closed.

Several times, I felt snags and pulls at my cloak and would beat back a spider, but fortunately, they did not manage to land any bites which allowed them enough purchase to inject any of their venom. I did get a handful of the stuff as I blocked a bite with my staff, the ichor pulsing from the tips of the fangs as I struggled to keep the creature at bay. Gilliam dispatched it with two slashes of his swords, and the thing shrieked as it fell away, legs twitching.

After several waves, as abruptly as they'd appeared, the remaining spiders vanished, the webbing around us thrumming and shaking off dust as the beasts scuttled away.

We'd not even caught our breath from the skirmish when there came a terrible roar and the sound of splintering wood from the chamber behind us, followed by screams.

"Pratiyaa! Pratiyaa! Tvaramana!"

We could hear Silva's voice, filled with the same tone of command that Varis' had every time we joined battle.

The door had barely swung wide enough to allow passage, and already the first of the girls was scrambling through, pale and wild-eyed. Much as we wanted to rush out into the room to defend the girls, they were streaming through both sides of the doorway.

A sharp cry rang out as one of the last girls caught her foot on the stones Silva had gathered for the game. The girl's foot skidded to the side, and she fell hard, crying out anew as her hands and elbows hit the stone flooring.

The ogre in the doorway laughed, stooping and reaching for the prone girl. A rock struck it between the eyes, and the creature yowled, the hand that had been reaching for the girl flying up too late to block another rock, this one bouncing off its forehead.

“Katarin!”

The girl who’d just come through the doorway turned as Silva called her name.

“*Tasyaa tantrayati!*” Silva called, pointing to the girl who was still trying to catch her breath from the fall. She threw another rock as the ogre followed her signal, and it roared, turning its attention back to her.

“Blasted, foolish girl,” breathed Durin, watching from one side of the doorway. “What does she think she’s playing at?”

“How many is that?” asked Varis, looking over his shoulder at the girls huddling on this side of the doorway.

“Eleven,” Ana said. “No — ten, there goes Katarin!”

The girl Silva had called out to dashed from the doorway, and knelt by the other girl’s side, head down, hands moving along her arms.

“Good choice,” I heard Ana murmur. “Either her mother is a Wisdom, or she’s got younger brothers.”

Silva redoubled her attacks with the rocks, peppering the ogre’s face and shoulders. And she was not simply lobbing them at the creature, either — each one left her hand after a sharp turn of her wrist or snap of her elbow, and more that struck drew blood than didn’t.

Katarin had gotten the other girl’s arm up over her shoulder, and was half-carrying, half-dragging the girl towards the doorway.

The ogre saw the movement, taking a step into the room, blocking its face with one arm while it reached suddenly with the other towards the two girls.

Katarin screamed, twisting to shield the girl beneath her.

The girls brave enough to watch what was going on screamed.

Gilliam cursed the loss of his bow and arrows.

Silva charged the ogre with a cry of “*Uther! Ekada uta sadaa!*”

Varis and Gilliam both nearly leapt over the huddling girls and charged themselves.

“We need your swords here if those spiders come back!” Ana told them sharply. “That girl can take care of herself. Remember the stone about her throat.”

Sure enough, as the ogre turned to swat at her, Silva seemed not so much to disappear as... not be wherever it was we looked.

The ogre made several more passes with its great hands, its brow furrowing deeper and deeper with frustration at every grab.

“STAND STILL!” it roared, turning this way and that, looking for the girl.

The other two, in the mean time, had gotten back to their feet, the injured girl limping, leaning heavily on Katarin’s shoulder, favoring one ankle.

We heard a quick pattering of feet, and Varis suddenly staggered back with a grunt. The doorway swung back towards the wall where he’d been standing, settling with a dull, grating thud.

Durin and Kuric both cried out in dismay, pushing at the door to no avail.

Varis, however, wheezed a laugh as Silva’s form wavered into view, bent over her knees, gulping in deep breaths.

The girls cheered, rising from their huddle to hug Silva. She patted a back or arm awkwardly, and more than once looked down at the gem as if it would save her from this onslaught.

Finally, she made her way to where Ana was examining the girl who’d fallen. She and Katarin had their heads together, speaking softly to each other and the girl.

“Brynne, *kuzala?*” she asked, sitting carefully by the girl’s side, looking anxiously at her ankle, which was growing dark as it swelled. Silva bit her lip. “*Samaami,*” she said, taking the girl’s hand in hers, and bowing to touch it to her forehead. “*Etia rhie yatahami.*”

The girl stared at her, wide-eyed, looked around at all of us for help.

“Don’t look at me, I only know ‘hot’ and ‘cold,’” I said.

“Um...” she said. “Its all right. I’ll be fine.”

Silva didn’t move, and didn’t release the girl’s hand.

The girl reached over with her other hand, patting Silva's shoulder awkwardly, and this finally relaxed Silva's grip. She sat back, watching as Ana wrapped the Brynne's ankle with a roll of cloth from her pack, and then bound it between two unused torches.

"Its not pretty, but it will have to suffice," she said, dusting her robes off as she rose to her feet.

Silva slapped away Katarin and Ana's hands, extending her own to the girl to help her to her feet. She would not allow any of the other girls to help Brynne, insisting that the girl lean upon her shoulder the rest of the way through the catacombs beneath Mistamere.

I am relieved to be able to relate that the remainder of our journey through the dungeon was uneventful. We made our way through the crypt, finding another door further into the room. While we heard the scuttling and hissing of the spiders above us, they were not inclined to attack so large a group.

We passed through many smaller, seemingly unused chambers after that, one leading through to another. The same age of dust that covered the crypt lined the floors and surfaces of the rooms we moved through. Varis listened carefully at each door, motioning quickly this way or that, depending on whether or not he heard signs of kobolds on the other side.

Ana breathed a prayer of thanks to the Flame when we finally found the stairs up to the fortress ruins. It was difficult to say who ran faster up the flight, her or the girls.

Judging from the light streaming through the gaping holes in the walls of the fortress, it was not even yet midday. Though mid of which day was difficult to say.

Varis was all for setting out immediately for Tarnskeep, but Ana called for a rest and regrouping, drawing the warrior's attention to the weary stoop to Silva's shoulders as she helped Brynne to a seat on a stone bench.

Gilliam and I went through the packs, dividing up what little was left of the rations amongst the girls.

When he judged that enough of the fatigue had lifted from the girl, he called for the girls to form up in the two ranks he and Ana had organized them into prior

to leaving the cells. Despite some grumbling and dragging of feet, they filed into two lines.

“If he wants us to march, I swear to Petra, I’ll kick him in the shins,” I heard one girl mutter.

The rank and file lasted through the hallway and antechamber. But once Varis put his shoulder against the great ironwood doors, the girls broke into smiles, some running, others skipping towards the opening to full daylight.

By the look on his face, you’d think that Varis was facing a dozen kobolds or goblins as the girls rushed him.

“Wait,” he told them as they approached. “I haven’t—”

But the laughing and cheering drowned him out, and he pressed himself against the door as the girls streamed past. More than one hand brushed his arm, and amidst the cacophony, more than one voice spoke a “Thank you.”

The laughter and merry-making came to an abrupt silence, the sound choked off with squeals and several cries cut off midway.

“Ixon burn those girls, I told them to wait!” Varis shouted, drawing his sword and charging through the doorway.

Gilliam and I followed close behind, edging through the half-open doors, weapons readied.

We nearly crashed into Varis, who’d stopped dead three paces out the doors. He stood, sword lowered, and we surveyed the same scene he did: the courtyard was filled with a line of mounted soldiers, their armor bearing a silver badge emblazoned with an ebon bird of prey. Half had lances lowered, the others aimed crossbows in our general direction.

Another squad of footsoldiers had the girls corralled in a ring of drawn steel, several crossbowmen covering them from a bit further off.

Sitting at the middle of the mounted knights, on a horse the same glossy brown as his hair, was a familiar face, though garbed now in leathers of red and black rather than roadworn traveling clothes of an itinerant bard. He leaned

forward, an elbow against the pommel of his saddle, regarding us with that warm smile that didn't reach his dark eyes.

“So, about that girl?” Bargle asked. “I’ll give you eleven of mine for one of yours. Alive or dead, well.... that just depends on how quick you are in deciding.”

**Last quarter moon of the Leaves' Turning (on or about
Swiftmont 28, 997AC)**

I raised my hand, palm outward. "Parley," I said.

"What are you doing?" Gilliam asked. "There aren't that many of them. We could—"

Varis closed his hand over Gilliam's wrist, lowering his sword. "They would just as soon kill us as those girls, to get to Silva. We can't defend any of them if we're dead."

"But—"

"Thorn has the right of it."

Bargle sat up straight, crossing his arms. "Parley? This is not war. Or a siege." He laughed. "Besides, that only works between honorable men." He motioned towards the girls, and several of the boltmen hoisted back the draw on their crossbows.

"This is the barony of Halaran, and thus is under the Grand Duke's law, not the machinations of the Black Eagle," I said. "We have most likely been gone longer than the Baron would have liked, and no doubt he has a contingent of men on the way here."

Bargle turned to one of the men on horseback. "Lucas? Did you encounter anyone on the way here?"

"Some rabble along the road, hardly worth the effort to raise a sword," said the man with a dismissive shrug.

"Armed? Armored?"

"Yes, but as I said: rabble. Couldn't have been more than townguardsmen."

I felt my gut tighten a bit at that.

"See now, we'll have plenty of time before Old Halaran sends 'round another batch of guards. Plenty of time for us to be off and away from here, that is. Which means you do not have so much time."

Bargle pointed at one of the girls. "You. Stand. Count 100. When you finish, another will stand and count." He turned towards us. "You have until the last girl finishes counting to produce the little witch.

He turned back to the girl. "Why haven't you started counting yet?"

She blanched, swallowed, then began to count in a weak voice.

“He’s going to *what?*” Ana asked, rising to her feet and throwing down her staff.

“Monstrous!” grumbled Kuric. He sputtered, then began what could only be a long string of colorful curses in his native tongue.

“Second girl is at 50,” Gilliam said, from his post at the doorway.

Silva was looking from one face to another, her brow furrowed in a blend of worry and frustration. It was obvious she knew something was wrong, but could not grasp what exactly was going on.

She slid to her feet from the bench, making her way across the floor to the doorway.

“Is that such a good idea?” Varis asked, moving to intercept her. She shook his hand off her shoulder, and he stepped back, but followed her as she peeked around one of the doors.

“*Nieah,*” she breathed. “*Nieah, nieah, nieah!*” each repetition of the word grew stronger.

Varis followed her next glance, which was at the rubble-strewn floor. He caught her wrist as she reached for a stone.

“No!” he said. “*Nieah!*” Their gazes locked.

“A fourth girl is up,” Gilliam reported.

Silva glanced out the doorway, then back up at Varis. She pushed against his grip again, but he tightened it.

“*Nieah!*” he said.

The look she gave him rivaled the chill of the blizzard earlier in the week. Then in a sudden flurry of movement, she stepped towards him, setting a foot behind one of his boots, pulling his arm awkwardly across his body. She leaned into him, and he let go of her wrist as he tripped backwards over her foot, landing hard flat on his back. Even from halfway across the room, we heard the hard “whoosh” as the fall knocked the breath from him.

She sat on him, kneeling hard on his sword arm, and snatched the long dagger from his belt. Varis barely had the breath to cry out as her knee ground into the soft part of his wrist.

"Samaam," she said, leaping to her feet and dashing past Gilliam.

"Why didn't you stop her?" Varis wheezed, rolling awkwardly to his hands and knees.

"She had your knife! And I shudder to think what she'd do with it if she can do *that* barehanded. I'd like to keep all my fingers, thank you," Gilliam said, following the girl out the door at a respectable distance.

We followed, Ana helping the injured Brynne.

The steady counting of the sixth girl stopped, and all the girls stood, calling to Silva to go back as she stumbled to a halt halfway to them.

Bargle, however, broke into a great, beaming smile, clapping as he dropped to his feet from the saddle.

"Well, hello, little miss," he said, with a friendly wave, starting towards her. Silva stared at him, as a cat watches a larger dog.

"Oh, come now. No need for any of that," he said, still smiling. He held a hand out for the girl, inviting her to take it. "Come along, we're here to take you back to your father."

She stepped backwards, keeping the distance between them. She stopped when he did, her gaze still wary. She clutched the knife harder in her left hand.

Bargle beckoned her towards him, making a show of keeping his hands away from the knives at his belt.

"Come along, now," he said, the smile straining, a bit of an edge slipping into his voice.

Silva shook her head. *"Nieah."*

When the bard took a step forward, she held her ground, but dropped into a fighter's stance, knife pointed towards the man. Gilliam whistled.

"Seems our petite flower has a few thorns," he said.

"I could have told you that," Varis wheezed, still massaging his wrist. An ugly bruise was starting to form.

"It's quite obvious we are at a standstill," I said. "If you tip the balance any further, there will be bloodshed. Some of it could be yours, from the looks of it."

The bard turned away from Silva, his hands up in surrender. He looked up at us.

"I am a reasonable man," he said.

"I've heard that line before," Gilliam muttered. The bard scowled at him.

"It is quite *obvious* that you haven't the slightest idea what it is you are dealing with here," he said. "So, now that I have the girl, you may go."

He waved a hand dismissively. The lances swung up, and the horses nearest the path off the plateau sidestepped out of the way.

"Go on. Run away. Shoo," he said, making fluttering motions with his fingers. "If all you want to save here is a handful of giggling little girls, then please, *please*," he leaned heavily on the word, "take them with you as well while my men and I do what we have to to secure the Duchy and the entirety of the Known World."

"The Black Eagle is anything but the 'save the Known World' type," Varis muttered. "And this man of his doubly so."

I had to agree with Varis' assessment. I turned, looking down at the bard.

"You will let the girls go, and we will accompany this one wherever you will take her."

"Are you mad?" he asked. "You are in no position to be telling me how it will be."

"If you try to take her by force, none of us know what she is capable of. She disarmed a seasoned fighter as you might take a sugarcake from a child," I said.

At this, Bargle chuckled. "I do like sugarcakes," he said with a broad smile, giving Silva a sidelong glance that hinted at approval.

"She holds a magic that bound your ogre in her thrall, so much so that he nearly wet himself than cross her. Would you care to see if that little trick works on your men?"

Bargle barked a laugh worthy of the kobolds. "What do I care for these men?"

"Maybe you'd like your own soul bound, then?" I asked.

At this, his smile slackened, and the approving look he'd been giving the girl turned fear-tinged. His fingers twitched.

"If your men attack her, she will disappear and you will never find her," I said, "and then you are right back where you started. Further back, even.

"Let the girls go, and we will accompany this one," I repeated. "The morning grows shorter."

He turned things over, his face going pensive, a finger unconsciously curling at the goatee at his chin. Then he looked up sharply.

"Very well. It shall be as you say." He smiled his broad, charming smile. "You drive a hard bargain, druid."

With some shouted orders, and waving of hands, things did indeed turn out as we'd agreed.

The ring of men surrounding the girls sheathed their swords and stepped back with a few murmured apologies.

Silva lowered the dagger, looking around nervously.

Rather than skipping away in a mass of confusion and fright, the girls filed out, some patting Silva's arm, others hugging her, whispering to her.

She stiffly returned the sentiments, blinking back tears.

Some of the girls waved to us, and one or two blew kisses at Gilliam, who blushed. Ana elbowed him in the ribs when he made to return the gesture.

One of the taller girls stopped in front of Bargle, staring up at him, hands on her hips. Then she held out one hand, palm up.

He glanced at her hand, expression blank.

"You owe me three royals," she said.

His mouth dropped open. Then it snapped shut with a sneer. "That was only if you helped," he said.

The girl closed her hand slowly, looking over her shoulder at Silva.

“Fine,” she said. “Then make it three royals not to tell the baron what happened here.”

Bargle’s eyes widened. “That’s blackmail!” he sputtered.

“And this was kidnapping,” the girl said, gesturing over her shoulder. She held her hand out again.

Grumbling, but with a twist of a smile on his lips, the bard fished out three coins from a pouch at his belt, and handed them to the girl.

She hefted them, then dropped them at his feet.

“Real gold, if you please, sir.”

Bargle laughed, ruffled her hair, and handed her three more coins., the heft of which seemed to satisfy her.

“Come see me in a few more years in Halag,” he said. “I can find a use for a girl like you.”

She smiled sweetly up at him, then kicked him soundly in the shin before turning and walking away down the path.

We watched the girls depart, and she was not the only girl to deliver such a parting gift to our host.

Silva seemed genuinely confused that we willingly accompanied the troop of armed and armored men. But Durin and Kuric both patted her hand reassuringly, and Ana nodded when the girl appealed to her with a frightened expression, and that seemed to calm her somewhat. But she still held herself like the proverbial long-tailed cat in the mill.

The biggest shock came after we’d made our way down from the rocky plateau and onto the roadway along the lake: another squad of soldiers waited there, along with an ox-driven supply wagon.

“Well, it looks like the Black Eagle has more than just a passing interest in her,” Varis said to Gilliam.

“The baron has spread quite a bit of gold around in his search for this girl,” the bard said. “When we reach Halag, I suppose I could petition him on your behalf, and he would reward you all quite well.”

“I’d as soon take poison as the Black Eagle’s gold,” said Ana.

Bargle clucked his tongue. “There are many more rewards than mere gold,” he said.

“Prison, torture, slavery, take your pick,” Gilliam said with a laugh.

Bargle laughed along with him, and none of us were reassured by that.

We broke from the roadway almost as soon as we met up with the Black Eagle’s reinforcements, and headed south and west, following a trail they’d left on the way through the fields. We’d been given horses, so as not to slow down the column. Silva rode with Ana, but the two dwarves refused their horse, and opted instead to ride in the supply wagon.

Bargle let us stay together, but kept us in the center of the lines. Occasionally he would trade his horse for a seat on the supply wagon, and page through a large, leatherbound tome, turning the pages as carefully as he could upon the rough track, snarling at the driver if the ride was too bumpy. He would look up from the book every few pages, his dark eyes set on Silva.

After several hours, the sun passing midpoint in the grayness above, the column came to a halt in the woods just before they broke and opened onto the Windrush Road. There was much rattling and rustling as the soldiers climbed down from their saddles, and filed to the wagon to retrieve a meager ration of waybread and a large cup of wine.

Varis and Gilliam slid from their saddles, motioning for us to do likewise, and we all stretched and made our way to the wagon.

Bargle was leaning against the side, and held out a hand.

“Bread will cost you a silver. Two for the wine.”

We stared.

“You jest,” Ana said.

“Certainly not,” he said, and though he smiled, it reeked of something put up to hide an annoyance.

“They didn’t pay,” Gilliam said, pointing towards the soldiers.

“Well of course not. It is deducted from their monthly pay. But last I checked, none of you had sworn fealty to his Lordship von Hendriks, nor were in his employ, and so, if you eat his food, then you must pay him for it.”

“Ridiculous!” spat Ana.

Bargle shrugged, cleaning his fingernails with a knife. “I suppose it won’t be so ridiculous in a day or so, when you’re even hungrier.”

We reached into coin pouches, and Bargle looked up as he was counting the handful of coins we’d presented to him.

“Oh, it will be another silver apiece to rent one of the baron’s cups.”

“I would sooner drink—”

Gilliam clapped a hand over Ana’s mouth, and dropped two more coins in Bargle’s hand.

“This one is on me,” he said to her, giving her a long look, and then shifting his eyes to Silva, who was taking in the whole conversation with wide eyes.

She reached for her belt pouch, rummaging through it. Bargle’s eyes lit up at the sound of few but heavy coins clanking together. Gilliam, too, glanced back at the girl, his expression sharp.

“Who gave her any money?” he asked.

Kuric and Durin shrugged. “She’s always had a handful of coins about her. But we have had enough between us that she’s never actually had to use any of her own.”

Durin reached for her hand, a handful of coins ready to pay her share.

“Nonsense, let her pay her own way!” Bargle snapped, his fingers striking quickly, snatching the single coin from Silva’s fingertips.

He was about to slip it into his own belt pouch when he paused, frowning as he glanced down at the coin. He peered closely at one side, then the other, his dark eyes bright, an almost feral grin creeping across his features.

Then he looked up from the coin, clenching it in a fist. He turned to leave, but Gilliam grabbed his shoulder.

“Hold there, you owe her some change. That was a gold coin.”

The bard jerked his shoulder from Gilliam’s grip, brushing at the leathers.

“Do not lay hands on me,” he said, his voice flat but laced with menace, “ever.”

He tugged at the sleeve of his leather coat, then produced a handful of coins, holding them out for Silva.

She held the large chunk of waybread in her mouth, and cupped her hands, eyes widening as the silver coins filled them nearly to spilling over. It was easily two or three times what we had handed the bard.

“You truly have no idea, do you?” he asked. Then he left, shaking his head as he rounded the wagon, Silva’s coin dancing across the knuckles of one hand.

We had barely enough time to fetch our bread and drink before the call went up to remount and move out.

Bargle was again atop the wagon, another great book upon his lap, paging through it furiously, the coin between his teeth or flipping between his fingers as he paused to read.

“What is this great mystery he keeps rubbing our nose in?” Gilliam asked. “I don’t much like his tone, or being left to play ‘I know something you don’t know.’”

“Come now, Thorn, surely you must have some inkling,” said Varis.

“An inkling? Maybe not even that,” I said. “Nothing certain. I must speak with the Mastersingers, and secure access to the deeper histories. Things she has said, I know I have heard them elsewhere. They ring in my head! Its like... a song that you’ve heard before, and words you know, but cannot get the two married in your head.”

I reigned my horse in next to Ana and Silva. The girl was having a time keeping her hand synchronized with the gait of the horse, and she probably had more wine slopped over her wrist than left in the cup itself. I reached over and took the cup from her. She looked somewhat grateful, even as she blushed and wrung some of the liquid from her sleeve.

“Might I see one of your coins?” I asked her, pointing at the pouch at my waist, producing a coin, and then to her coin pouch.

After a moment, she nodded, again holding her half-eaten waybread in her mouth as she fished in the pouch at her waist. After plucking blindly and coming up twice with Bargle's silvers, she huffed impatiently, then brought out a full handful of coins and held them out to me.

I saw among the angled edges of the Duke's coinage a glint of something other than silver, and picked out the heavier, slightly thicker coin.

It had a smooth, rounded edge, and was stamped with a bearded figure's head in profile — but it was not Halav, nor the Emperor Thincol, nor any of the Eastwind kings of our neighboring Darokin. A flowing of script traced the space beneath the representation of the man. Again, they were not in the common lettering, nor the dwarven or gnomish runic alphabets. It appeared more elven than anything else, but if it was, it was a form I'd never seen.

"What does this say?" I asked the girl, pointing to the words along the bottom edge.

She glanced briefly where I pointed.

"Ah. 'Uther.' It 'Ekada uta sadaa.'" She repeated it slowly, pointing with a bobbing finger to each of the words, which ran from right to left around the coin.

I felt a tingle at the first word.

No, not a word. A name. A name from in the oldest of songs about the World that Was....

Black Uther, Rectifier, last of the barons, first of kings

Freedom is what the Hawk of Andahar brings

To his people, his Blackmoor...

I turned the coin over in my hand. On the reverse was the likeness of a striking bird of prey, wings back, talons outstretched: The Hawk of Andahar.

Silva coughed, her eyes wide, hands suddenly fluttering to her throat. Ana gave her a solid whack on the back, and the girl coughed again, the bit of waybread flying from her mouth.

She leaned forward, breathing deeply, her face even paler than her normal complexion.

Ana directed a frown my way, her eyes nowhere near as gentle as the hands that patted Silva's back.

"What did you say to her?"

I blinked. Had I spoken?

"I... I was lost in my thoughts of this coin. Ana, I think I have figured something out." I edged my horse even closer to hers, our knees nearly touching. I held the coin out to her.

"Have you ever seen this imprint on a coin before?"

She took it, turning it this way and that. "It does not look like any coin I have seen, but I am still not entirely familiar with the coinage of the West. I fail to see anything that would have you or the madman behind us in such a... a..."

"Ana, this coin, or rather, the imprint upon it, should not exist."

She frowned, this time at the coin, rather than me. She rubbed her thumb across it, as if the design would wear off like wax, or fade as if an illusion.

"But it does. It is here, before us."

"'Once and Always,'" I said. "That face is Uther's. And on the back is the sign of his house, his kingdom. The Hawk of Andahar."

Silva suddenly snatched the coin from Ana.

"*Avazyamti kathayana!*" Silva whispered sharply. Her voice trembled, her eyes verging on tears. "*Yaacatetemi, avazyamti kathayana!*"

Ana and I both stared, first at her, then at each other.

"What—" I began.

Silva gulped a few deep breaths, then opened her hand. It was still shaking. She turned the coin over, then pointed to the hawk. "*Nieah....*" She paused, thinking. "*Nieah vaada....*"

"I don't think she wants us to say 'An—'"

Silva's fingers flew to Ana's lips, as though she could keep the name from coming out that way. She looked back and forth, between Ana and myself.

"Right," I said, with a nod. "I understand." I made a sign of sealing my own lips, and she let out a sigh that drained all the tension from her.

I made a quick bow from the saddle. "*Samaam,*" I said, hoping the word meant what I thought it did.

She smiled, leaning over, reaching, and laid two fingertips on my forehead. "*Astu vismra,*" she intoned solemnly.

It was probably my imagination, but my forehead tingled when she took her fingers away.

We camped that night along the outskirts of Verge. Bargle took a horse into town, but informed us that we were to sleep there, in the middle of the camp. When Gilliam asked him about the price of the night's meal, the bard shot a dark look at Silva, and grumbled that it had been paid for in advance. His eyes dipped ever so slightly to the pouch at her waist, and then he wheeled his mount, galloping off without another word.

The evening meal was actually pleasant — the outriders had brought back a couple sheep that they claim to've found stranded in a snowdrift, and so we had mutton to go with our bread and wine.

New moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 1, 997AC)

The Black Eagle's men traveled light, so there were no tents raised, just row upon row of bedrolls. Along with perimeter patrols, shifts were also devoted to keeping the dozen or so fires going through the night. The winds coming down the Foamfire Valley seemed to get colder with every gust.

The night's rest was uncomfortable, and thankfully short — I'd seemingly just closed my eyes to doze a bit more, and was getting prodded by Gilliam.

"Peace shine upon you, my friend," he said, handing me his waterskin as I sat up.

"And upon us all," I answered, completing the ritual and taking a sip.

"Two silvers," he said with a grin and a laugh as he helped me to my feet. The cold, hard ground had done things in the places the saddle had not.

"Perhaps we could get some of these men to beat us in the few places that aren't pained," I said as I winced, shrugging my cloak into place after working at a kink in my shoulder.

"Quickly, quickly!" one of the soldiers said, waving his arms as he made his way towards us.

"But, what of water, for some morning tea?" asked Durin.

"No time for that, Dwarf," he growled. "Clouds are getting lower, and it looks to be snow before midday. I want us to be under cover of the woods to the south by then. We break our fast on the trail."

He moved off, shouting more orders.

The procession was somewhat louder, most of the knights having opted to don their breastplate and forego the rest of the armor, leaving it secured to the back of their mounts. The lieutenant also kept the column moving at a canter, as opposed to yesterday's walk.

We circled wide around Verge, avoiding most of the outlying homesteads as well. By late morning, we cleared the foothills of the Black Peaks, and the clouds began to sift the first of their flakes down upon us. But as with our trek from

Highdell to Mistamere, our going slowed considerably once we made our way out of the foothills and into a stretch of pastureland. The snow dogged our every step, growing heavier every hour.

It was late afternoon by the time we finally reached the edge of the woodlands, and took another mile before the cover of the trees provided any protection. As it was, heavy collections of snow slid from the higher branches with a slithering rustle, followed by dull 'plups' as they hit the forest floor.

Evening approached, and we found another reason behind the lieutenant's wish to hurry along: along one side and the other of the trail were the remains of their camp from their original journey through here.

"Not a bad tactic," Kuric said as he and his brother wandered up, "returning in the footprints you left on the way. Many trade caravans do this — why, many dwarven roads beneath the mountains support regular hostels, spaced roughly a day's journey apart."

Varis nodded. "Not a bad plan. I'd heard that they do something similar along Thyatian roads. Perhaps the Grand Duke will do the same here someday."

Gilliam snorted. "Whats wrong with spending a night out in the open, under the stars?"

"Snow?" asked Ana, looking up from combing Silva's hair.

"Rain," suggested Durin.

"Bandits," said Varis.

Gilliam rose to his feet. "I'm going to gather more firewood," he said, his voice nearly as stiff as his saddle-sore gait.

"Remember, take only what has been left on the ground," I said after him.

He returned a short while later, bearing an armful of branches.

"I didn't go far," he said, after depositing the wood atop the stack the soldiers had allotted us. "Didn't feel like having a clanking escort. But as I circled the perimeter of this campsite, I got the strangest feeling we were being watched." He shivered slightly.

"*Risi*," Silva murmured, stretching her toes towards the fire.

“No doubt there is a contingent of Greenwardens watching us,” I said.

I admit, I had to do a double-take when I was met with silence.

“Its a bit far to the west, but we are still under Radlebb’s boughs,” I said. “Of course they would have a group as large as this watched.”

“Greenwardens?” Ana asked, looking to Varis and Gilliam with a slight frown.

“Knights of the forest,” Varis explained, “or so the stories say.”

“If you think of these woods as you would a city, then the Greenwardens are the watch,” I said.

“So, then, they will help us to flee from these men?” Kuric asked, pointing over his shoulder at a cluster of men about the next closest campfire.

“No,” I said, and spent the next few moments quieting the dwarves’ and Gilliam’s protests.

“These men have not harmed us, nor have they threatened to do so. They have fed us. We are not shackled. The Greenwardens — indeed, any of the druids we should stumble across here — will not interfere unless we should be in peril of our lives.”

“They *have* been a bit more civil since that scoundrel left,” Ana noted.

Gilliam snapped a couple of twigs in two and tossed them into the fire, then huddled deeper into his cloak.

“If it will make you feel any better,” I said, “they won’t stop you from trying to escape, but they also will not do anything to help you.”

“And what of you, then?” asked Durin.

I shrugged. “I will see this through to wherever it takes me. Where you go, I will go, for I feel that the fates peer closest at our threads in the tapestry of events. Surely, I will lend what aid I can, but my brothers leave me to my own fate, as they do you to yours.”

Kuric scratched at his beard. “It is an odd brotherhood that lends no aid to its own.”

I shrugged. “They merely act to preserve the balance.”

“You mean ‘don’t act,’” Gilliam muttered.

“As you say,” I replied. “I would, so they will not.”

Gilliam still scowled. "Well, its not right."

I shrugged again. "Balance isn't about what is right and what is wrong. Its the point between the two.

"Besides, where could we possibly run? We are days from anywhere in any direction. The weather does more to keep us captive than these men."

That remark seemed to stem any further conversation, and shortly thereafter, the others shook out their bedrolls as close to the fire as they could get them.

I took the first watch at the fireside, keeping it from going out, also keeping an eye out for any of the Greenwardens. But they did not reveal themselves to me if they were there, which only affirmed in my mind what I'd been trying to impart to my companions earlier: something was meant to happen that I needed to chronicle, and the only way for it to happen was by going wherever these men were taking us.

**First quarter moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont
7, 997AC)**

We spent five more days on the road, with very little break from the routine: rise, break camp, a short rest for noontide meal, then more riding until the shadows grew long, and the next campsite came into view.

At noon on the sixth day from Verge, the lieutenant drew the column to a halt shortly before midday. We were kept back from the bulk of the forces, but it was soon apparent what was discussed. Easily two thirds of the men split, continuing along the path we'd been following along the western border of the Radlebb.

The remainder of the troops formed up around us, and we found ourselves turning sharply west, the forest thinning considerably as we wound our way around and over a series of hillocks.

It was several miles before any of us realized that the only sounds were the muffled hoofbeats of our horses, their heavy breathing as they struggled through the snow, and the clank and rattle of our armored escorts.

The few birds out and about in the snows and cold had gone silent. The men as well, their occasional chatter or complaint having tapered off to a heavy silence.

Following a bend around a particularly steep hillock, the horses — every one of them — shied, stopping abruptly with a snort or a whinny, eyes wide.

The snowy expanse before the highest hill stretched before us. Gray stones jutted from the blanket of snow at odd and uneven intervals. We tried to edge the mounts further along, but they resisted, tossing their heads and stamping their feet. One man gave a yell and pitched into the snow on his back as his horse reared. He barely had time to roll out of the way as his mount danced back away from the stones.

More than a few of the men had hands on swords, and looked about anxiously. But the surrounding hillocks offered no good vantage points for any sort of ambush.

The lieutenant ordered us to dismount, and I staggered as my feet hit the ground.

My vision swam, and I felt bile rising in my throat. For several seconds, everything seemed awash in a reddish-brown haze, as though I were peering through a veil of blood. The ground, it seemed, canted away from me, and I clutched the saddle, only to find that it — and the horse, too— were reeling the same direction.....

Varis' hand on my shoulder brought me back to myself with a start. I realized then that he'd called my name, and had been for some seconds.

The world was back to normal, the haze gone from my eyes, everything upright as it should be. But still a sick feeling clutched at me, twisting my stomach, causing my pulse to rush and roar in my ears.

I assured him that I was all right, but he shook his head. "I've seen some of the fellows in my troop go into battle after a night of hard drinking, and they looked then about like you do now: white as a sheet and green in the gills at the same time."

A horse whinnied behind us, one of the soldiers struggling to get his mount to turn about. "I should have gone with the others, I knew this place was haunted!" he said in a voice high with panic. He gave the reins a snap, and the horse struggled back along the trail the way we'd come.

"Coward!" the lieutenant shouted after him. Then he glared at the rest of the men. "Anybody else soil themselves over this pair's theatrics? Any other cowards had best turn back now."

I glanced over at Ana. She was leaning forward, hands on her knees, trying to take deep breaths, but coughing with every second or third. Her pale skin had a yellowish cast to it, and was beaded with sweat despite the near-freezing temperature.

She and I both looked up at her horse, where Silva was trying to untangle her gown from the saddle horn. We both spoke at the same time:

"Do not let her down!"

The lieutenant dropped from his saddle, kicking his way through the snow to Ana's horse. Before any of us could get around to that side of the animal, the

lieutenant had reached up, taking Silva by the waist, and hoisting her up and over the saddle.

She laughed at the sudden rush of movement, her face lit up in a smile.

The smile dissolved as she sank into snow nearly up to her knees. She sucked in a sharp breath, and had I not felt sickened at the touch of the ground here, I would have thought she'd stepped on something sharp hidden beneath the snow.

She staggered, her gown dragging in the snow, and she tumbled forward in an uncharacteristic loss of balance and any semblance of grace.

The lieutenant was quick to catch her by the arm before she pitched headlong into the snow. He hefted her like a sack of flour, taking her by the waist under one arm, and began trudging towards the field of broken and tumbled stones. She squirmed against him, but as he threatened to set her back down upon the ground, she ceased her struggle.

We had no choice but to follow.

A chill even colder than the knee-deep snow ran through me with every step I took after the lieutenant. Even in the dead of winter, there is a feel to the ground, a buried warmth of the land waiting to come back to life. I did not feel that here.

In the earliest days of my apprenticeship, I accompanied my Master up into the Black Peaks. A rogue red wyrmling had thought to settle there, and provoked the ire of the great Azem, who quickly put the whelp in its place. Their battle was fierce but very short, and contained to a somewhat secluded valley. Within, there was very little left alive — what trees in the small grove that hadn't been blasted to charred splinters lay flattened, great roots exposed like many-fingered skeletal hands reaching up from the ashen soil of their graves.

The ground was blackened and split where dragonfire had washed over it. Some of the very rocks of the mountain bore the same markings. In one wedge of stone, a pristine image of a dragon's outstretched, clawed forelimb is marked out, the rest of the stone partially-melted around it.

The ground beneath the snows felt very much like the worst of the dragonfire-seared patches of ground in that valley. It was similar, but worse — the valley floor was simply dead in those places. Here, the land still lived, but it was...

"I'm going to be sick," I heard Ana moan, and there came the telltale sounds of her doing just that.

"That's it," I said, the realization suddenly fitting into place. "This place. The land. It's sick. Deeply sick, like a... a wound left to fester."

"How can the ground get sick?" Gilliam asked. "Its rock. And dirt. Rocks and dirt don't get sick. When was the last time you heard a boulder sneeze?"

"No, he may be onto something," Kuric said. "Certainly, there's a feeling here, an uneasiness..." His voice drifted off and he shivered. "It grows every step closer we get to you keep upon that hill."

"Sick ground," Gilliam muttered. "Next thing he'll be telling us that it rains because someone hurt the sky's feelings."

Durin was inspecting one of the huddled rocky shapes that poked up from the snow.

"Well it was once worked stone," he said, a gloved finger tracing a nearly invisible seam that seemed to flow along one portion of the surface. "But it's as if the lot of it has been... smelted together. Heated up and poured back out."

"Only dragonfire, or the fires within the earth itself are hot enough to melt stone of this type," Kuric said.

"There has not been a dragon sighted in these parts since Halav's day," I said. "They keep mostly to the mountains." I looked at the other stonework, some huddled, some standing a bit taller. At first glance, the placing appeared random. But then...

"This is the town," I said.

"Town? There's nothing here," Gilliam said. "Is nobody going to talk sense today?"

"Koriszegy," I said. "Two lords, brothers, summoned a terrible power they could not control, and in begging for their own lives, threw away those of every man, woman, and child in the township. Every animal and plant under care of men — gone, devoured when the... power—"

"It was a demon," Ana said. "Blood-hungerer. The stench of it clings to these rocks."

Durin leant closer, inhaling deeply. He frowned, stuck his tongue out, then thought better of it.

“But it was hundreds of years ago. Surely—”

“Those people were not just snuffed out. Oh, they did die, eventually.”

“How could you... Not even the Mastersingers know exactly what happened here!”

“Nor do I, but I can read the signs. I have seen this... before.” Ana swallowed, closing her eyes and taking several deep breaths.

One of the guards trooping behind us cleared his throat, gesturing us onward with his sword.

“Sooner we get you to the keep, sooner we can begone from this blighted place.”

Koriszegy’s Keep was in only somewhat better repair than Gygar’s Mistamere. The drab gray walls were mostly intact, and the main keep was visible peeking above the parapets. A square tower jutted one or two floors above the keep. There was no roof, just jagged remnants of the tower’s topmost floor.

We caught up with the lieutenant just as he rounded a spur of bare rock jutting from the hillside, where rough steps had been cut into the hillside itself. The narrow stairs climbed for 20 or 30 feet — long enough that the closeness went from stifling to claustrophobic.

The courtyard we stepped up into was long and broad, the keep’s curtain wall rising half again as tall as any of us. Still, the hundreds of years of neglect showed — the tops of the walls were heavily weathered, the mortar crumbled away, stretches of the wall sagging inward.

Even though we weren’t yet inside the keep itself, it felt as if a heavy weight of stone pressed upon us. Varis and Gilliam, who hadn’t felt any of the effects of the tainted grounds below, looked around nervously, balanced on the balls of their feet, as if expecting attack at any moment.

“Well, it looks as though we’re not alone up here,” Gilliam said, pointing out two other less-distinct sets of footprints still visible in the courtyard’s accumulated snow.

We were marched across the courtyard to the great doors of the keep — double doors of the same ironwood used by Gygar. Two of our escort pulled at the doors and they swung open with barely a complaint of the great brass hinges.

“Recently oiled,” Kuric muttered. “Perhaps the two who came before us have been keeping house?”

“I cannot imagine actually living in this place,” Ana said, her voice shaking as much as the rest of her. She covered her mouth and nose with part of her tunic sleeve, but it did not appear to work, and she let her hand drop back to her side, breathing short, shallow breaths.

An age-darkened carpet — worn thin in more places than not — lay upon the smooth stone flooring. Tapestries hung from the entry foyer’s walls, the threads having long lost their colors, making each not much more than a drab gray or yellowed-white curtain.

Through the archway straight ahead of us the familiar orange-yellow flicker of a well-laid fire could be seen, and it was through that arch that the lieutenant led us.

“Here in this chair should do nicely,” came a now-familiar voice, oiled as well as the hinges of the ironwood doors. “Yes, those shackles are for her. Don’t be squeamish, man, you’ve seen what she is capable of.”

We stepped into the room just as the lieutenant fastened the second metal cuff over Silva’s wrist. She was seated in a plain wooden chair, close by the fire. Several other chairs sat in a friendly semicircle before the inviting hearth, and our host bowed and greeted us.

“Please, please take a seat by the fireside. Warm yourselves.” He stepped to one side, revealing a sideboard topped with several decanters and an array of goblets. “Would you care for some refreshment? A mulled wine, perhaps? Maybe a nice warm glass of Callarian brandy? Just the thing to warm you up from the inside out.”

“Tell me,” Gilliam said, putting his arm up over the back of his chair as he sat, “do you actually have to rehearse being servile to keep the sneer from your voice?”

Bargle merely smiled his oily smile, putting the stopper back in the decanter. "Well, I suppose it is a bit early for that," he said. "Perhaps some lunch? The aide I brought along makes a wonderful blood pudding."

Ana had no sooner settled into her chair then shot back up to her feet, hand at her mouth, eyes wide.

The bard motioned off to his left. "Water closet is off to the left down that corridor, dear," he said, not even missing a beat.

He had finished chuckling by the time Ana returned. He crossed the room to her, handing her a goblet.

"Oh, go on, take it. Its a fine Alphetian white. Figured you could use something to cleanse the palette."

She took the goblet hesitantly, sniffed, then took a sip. She took another, then lowered the goblet, holding it in her lap.

"There, you see?" He smiled a wide smile. "No black tongue. No tossing about on the floor with your fingers turning purple. No coughing up blood." I'd never before heard a man speak of poisoning and make it sound as if it were a minor annoyance.

"I suppose you're wondering why I brought you all here," Bargle said, going back over to the sideboard, pouring himself a glass of something so red it looked almost purple.

"Not especially," growled Kuric. "We're here because she is." He pointed towards Silva, who was shifting uncomfortably in her chair, causing the manacles to clank. "What do you want with her?"

The bard actually appeared to pout, Kuric having taken all the wind from his story's sails. Bargle blew out an exasperated breath.

"I have something I must do for a client, and I need her," he pointed to Silva, "in order to do it. Once I am through with that task, I plan to sell her to another associate of mine."

The room fell silent, save the crackling of the fire and the rattling of the length of chain between Silva's wrists.

"And... you are telling us this, precisely... why?" Durin asked. "You know we won't let you just... sell her."

"Oh, you won't have much choice in the matter," Bargle said, setting his goblet down. "Soldiers, swords, all that rough stuff that goes along with them." He fiddled his fingers at each other in a pantomime of battle.

"To be perfectly honest," he said, "I don't much like the look of this man claiming to be the girl's father. No pale skin or pointy ears about him." Bargle chuckled, almost to himself. "Look, you don't need to fight *me* to keep her from going anywhere. Just wait until I've taken the man's money. I have no qualms whatsoever about you fighting *him*."

Gilliam laughed, and Varis and Ana both shot him narrowed-eyed looks.

"Well, it *is* a pretty good plan," Gilliam said. "He gets his money, we take care of a problem of his, and he can honestly say he did not lift his hand against his client. So, how much do we get for eliminating this troublesome 'friend' of yours?"

Now Bargle was the one to laugh.

"I don't know which has me more ill," Ana said, "this place, or the fact that you're discussing payment for killing a man."

"This man kidnaps, steals, extorts, plots murder and Immortals' only know what all else, and you'd help him out to keep him 'honest?'" Durin's face grew slightly redder with every word.

"And the money," Bargle supplied. "One tenth, I think, is all this troublesome man is worth."

"Hardly worth the effort to lift my swords," countered Gilliam.

"Fine, a tenth, and half again that much."

"One quarter," Varis said, and all our eyes turned to him. He shrugged.

"Robbery!" cried Bargle.

"Murder and robbery, actually," muttered Kuric. "Wouldn't have anything to do with it for less than a third."

Ana took a long gulp of wine.

A cacophony of crashes, rattles, and clangs echoing through a doorway in the far corner of the room ended the negotiations rather abruptly. We all jumped,

Bargle included. A long, throaty howl echoed after the metallic clamor, and Bargle slammed his goblet down on the sideboard with a snarled curse. He stalked across the room, a scowl crossing his hawklike face.

He went to an archway a bit further past the one through which Ana had scurried earlier.

“Confound it, Hyazha, I am trying to conduct business. To do so, I require some peace and quiet!”

“Hyazha is unhurt! But the or— or— the machine is not doing the moving so Hyazha thought—”

“Hyazha thought?” Bargle asked, his tone bordering on the incredulous. “Hyazha does not think! Hyazha does what he is told, and that is to get that orrery working!”

“Hyazha thi—,” the throaty, bubbling voice stopped as this ‘Hyazha’ caught himself. “There could be problem, Master Bargle.”

“Hyazha? Did you break it?” Bargle had stopped shouting, his voice sliding into a soothing tone, loud enough to carry to wherever it was that Hyazha was, but no longer a shout.

“Hyazha think it broken already and Huazha only help it to be so.”

Bargle bit off another curse, his face flushing red. He clenched a fist, only relaxing it after his color had returned to normal. He turned to us, that smarmy, oily smile again working its way across his face.

“If you will excuse me for a moment, there is a little something here I must attend to,” he said. “Please don’t try to escape while I’m away, hmm?”

“Begging your pardon,” I said, getting to my feet. “But I heard you mention an orrery. I have had some experience with those of my order, and may be able to assist in repairing this one.”

Bargle’s eyes narrowed. “Why would you help me?” he asked.

Durin also got to his feet, brushing at the seat of his trousers. “If its mechanical, no better man to fix it than a dwarf,” he said.

The bard stared at us for a long moment. “Very well,” he said. “Can’t very well make any more of a mess of it than that worthless excuse for a goblin. Come along then.” He gestured through the doorway.

"All of you," he said, when Durin and I took a few steps and everyone else remained seated. "None of this 'we'll distract him while the rest of you make your getaway.' Go on, up the stairs. You'll know when you get there.

"You, too," the bard said, snapping his fingers at Silva, who jumped at the sound, as though startled awake.

She glanced down at the floor, then slid to the edge of the chair, setting her toes upon the floor as if she were testing a sheet of ice to see if it would support her weight. She jerked her foot back with a pained hiss, pulling her feet up to the edge of the seat and giving the floor a fearful, wide-eyed look.

"Etah risi!" she said, pointing. *"Etah atiiva risi!"*

Bargle crossed the room in half a dozen great strides. "Come now, child. It won't bite you!"

She shrank away from him as he approached.

He took a deep breath, smoothing his hands over his dark brown hair. He squatted down before her, but even still, had to look down his hawklike nose to meet her eyes.

"Come along, and I will show you the most wonderful machine," he said, the edge of impatience gone from his voice.

She held out her hands to him, spread as far as the manacles would allow. *"Haltimi,"* she said.

Next to me, Gilliam choked back a chuckle.

"What's so funny?" the bard snapped, glancing over his shoulder at Gilliam.

"The floor is cold and she wants you to carry her," Gilliam said, his words infused with the laugh that he was fighting to keep from coming out.

Bargle rose sharply to his feet, tugging the short black leather coat into place at his waist. He glowered down at the girl, then snatched the chain binding the manacles together, and gave a sharp tug as he turned to stride back to the doorway where we'd gathered.

Silva gave a squeak of surprise and barely caught herself from landing on her knees on the floor. She staggered after the bard, biting her lip and walking as though the floor were live coals. Her expression eased a bit as they passed over the tattered carpet along the middle of the room, but she gasped and bit her lip afresh

as Bargle swept her across the last stretch of bare flag stone, through the doorway, and up the steps.

We found ourselves once again following the girl.

The clanging began after the first turnback of the stairs, and by the time we'd passed the second floor landing and made our way up to the third, the sound beat upon our ears and rang in our heads just as surely as Hyazha's hammer must be beating at the machine.

The sound stopped abruptly, and was replaced by gibbering apologies from a shabbily-dressed gray-skinned figure huddled on the floor, groveling at Bargle's feet.

Still clutching the girl's manacles in one hand, Bargle leaned down and snatched a bent length of brass tracking from the goblin's long fingers.

"This is fixing it?" he asked, shaking the piece of gearwork at the goblin's head. He threw it down, nearly missing the goblin, the metal clanging as it skittered across the floor. He then snatched up the hammer.

"I told you to oil it and make sure the gears ran smoothly," the bard cried. "I need this in working order tonight! By sundown!"

Bargle looked up at us, from across the expanse of metal and stone that nearly filled the room. We were spread along the wall by the stairs landing. The bard flashed his disarming smile.

"So hard to find good help these days," he said, giving the goblin a not-so-gentle shove with one booted foot.

The goblin gave a grunt, then scuttled back to out of arm's reach.

"Hyazha only try to help," it blubbered.

Durin and Kuric needed no prompting by the bard to take a look at the machine. They stared at it with eyes alight, silly smiles on their faces as though they'd just been kissed by their ladies fair. I gave an involuntary shudder at the thought of their ladies fair, wondering if the rumors of beards were true.

I, too, took a look at the marvelous machine. It appeared to be made mostly of brass, a great intertwining of gears and levers and metal rods. The purpose, of course, was to mimic the movement of the heavens, the turning of the major stars and the moon. The stars, as any child can tell you, are the heavenly beacons

marking the alignment of the unseen realms that interact with the world, bringing the seasons, and seasonal events. As the dwarves busied themselves with the twisted bit of mangled brass the goblin had been.. Helping with.. I walked the perimeter of the great machine, marveling at the carved-stone and gemwork representations of the world, the moon, and stars.

On the nearest thin rod was mounted a diamond. Daanvi, the realm of Order, constantly fixed beacon by which all the sailors of the Known World navigated.

A ruby marked Fernia, realm of eternal fire, which was currently in retreat away from the world, but would return with the end of spring.

A brightly polished, if dusty sphere of red slate stood for the wandering star Shavarath, the place of eternal battle.

A great gold disk rode up and over the blue-white stone orb representing the world, marking the movement of the sun, Irian, Ixion's home of Eternal day.

A rounded onyx marked Dolurh, the dark star of the realms of the dead.

Closer than any of the stars was a gray slate orb marking Matera, the moon. And at the point where the moon would be new, its face hidden, was a wedge of obsidian — Mabar, the Endless Night. Closely following Matera was a marble of quartz: this would be Dal Quor, the realm of dreams.

Spun out along another geared path was a brass rod ending in an intricate setting for an emerald, fashioned to look like leaves curling about the gemstone. Lamannia, the Twilight Forest, would spin closest to the world in another two months, heralding the coming of spring.

Wheeling on an inward path was a sapphire, its mounting of silver, made to look like icicles. Risia, the plane of ice.

Something clicked in my head, and I stopped my circuit of the great gearwork.

Risia. *Risi*. Cold. Fernia. *Firni*. Hot.

The wandering stars were named ages ago, before Thyatis rose to prominence, before the Alphatians walked through their tunnel in the sky to reach this world.

The astrologers of Thonia first named the stars, and the scholars of Blackmoor took and kept those names as they calculated their paths across the heavens.

“Silva,” I said, and beckoned her to my side. She rose from where she’d huddled against the wall after Bargle had let her go. The bard was staring absently out the window, puffing at a pipe of sweet smelling tabac.

She walked without a hint of the searing pain of the chamber below, but her attention seemed fragmented, and she kept cocking her head, as though trying to catch a sound which she could not pinpoint.

I pointed towards the emerald. The main table of the machine came to my waist, mid-chest on Silva.

She glanced at the gem, then at the arrangement of the other gems and stones and the loops and interlacing of the geared paths.

“Lamannia,” she said.

Two languages, the same word.

She took a deep breath, and then chanted, in the sing-song cadence of something memorized as a child:

*Upariti ziras Syrania, bahirlok etah Irian,
Fernia, Lamannia, Mystara, Mabar,
Shavarath, Thelanis,
Dal Quor, Risia, Dolurrah.
Cavarrti sparza at chaayaa
Dolurrah, Kythri et Xoriat!*

Through the chant, she’d indicated the stars she’d named, pointing to the corresponding gems. Her finger faltered at the last word, one that struck me as not familiar, at least with regards to the heavens.

“Aleva Xoriat?”

Bargle raised an eyebrow at that, and the steady puffing at his pipe skipped in its rhythm.

She frowned, and tried to put her hands on her hips, but the length between the manacles was not enough for her to do so. It was almost comical, the stern look of a teacher affronted dissolving into frustration at the bonds.

"Etah bhinna," she said, her voice tinged with disdain as she waved her hands dismissively at the great machine.

"Ah!" cried Kuric. "There's the problem." He gave a grunt, then slid from under the machinery. "Now just wind it up and set the date, and she should work perfectly." He dusted off his hands, then grabbed one of the handles located below the main plane of the apparatus, and began hauling it back towards me. From the gearworks below came a rattling, ratcheting series of clicks.

Along the opposite side, Durin was spinning the main disk, counting on his fingers a bit, then giving it a couple more ticks. He nodded, then announced "She's ready, Brother Mine."

Bargle tapped his pipe out over the windowsill, slid it back into his leather coat, and eased himself away from the window. He looked over the arrangement of the stars in their cradles of brass, placed this-way and that along the paths plotted by sages in Blackmoor millennia ago, and confirmed again and again by skywatching Druids.

"You are certain of this arrangement?" Bargle asked.

The dwarves nodded. "At the very least, we may be off a day, but not more than that."

I checked the location of the moon in relation to the blue-white stone, and nodded my agreement. "The alignments look about right for this time of year."

He smiled a slow, oily smile. "Well, then. We shall wait for sundown and then I shall have a surprise for you."

Knowing the character of our host, and the nature of the sitting room in which we waited, it was no small wonder that none of us did more than pick at the bread and apples and cheese that the bard provided. Ana did not touch her plate at all. Silva's fidgeting in her chair by the fire grew more and more agitated the further the sun sank towards the horizon. At one point, she drew her feet completely up

upon the chair with her, and clapped her hands over her ears, eyes squeezed tightly shut.

Bargle did not prevent Kuric and Durin from going to her side, and with a short ring of a silver bell, the goblin Hyazha was dispatched to a kitchen somewhere amidst the ruins and returned with a kettle of steaming water, so the dwarves could brew the calming tea that Silva seemed to like so much.

The bard took a passing interest in the concoction, taking a small pinch of the herbs, rubbing them between his fingers, and sniffing and tasting the results.

The sound of the great ironwood door booming shut a few rooms away greeted us after what seemed an eternity of staring at each other and the walls and the fire.

A guard poked his head into the room, announcing that the sun had just sunk in the west. Bargle gave a cry of delight — a truly chilling sound — and got to his feet, ushering us back up the stairs with a great smile upon his face.

We filed in along the wall, and Bargle threw open another shuttered window. His smile dissolved when he saw that the sky was still clad as ever in the low, ominous stormclouds. He gave a bit of a snarl at the weather, then turned to a brazier in the corner. It was not there earlier in the day — perhaps Hyazha had brought it in from another room in the tower. He had also lit several torches along the walls to push back the evening gloom.

The bard reached into his coat, withdrawing a small cloth pouch, from which he took a pinch of blackish-silver powder. He spat a few words, then tossed the stuff into the coals, where they gave a sizzling “crack!” and released a plume of gray-green smoke. The smoke did not dissipate, however, but hovered and roiled at about eye level.

“Zadamar,” he said.

The cloud tossed and roiled a bit more, then part of it melded into a hooded head and shoulders, a sharp chin the only feature visible beneath the smoky cowl.

“I asked for Zadamar,” Bargle sneered. “Fetch him.”

“The First Child is predisposed. You will speak with Jaleel.” The figure’s voice was feminine, but deep, the spell giving it a bit of a smoky resonance.

“I have his toy working. But there is the small problem of those infernal clouds of his. He said they would not be a problem. They are just such.”

The smoky head bowed once. “Your pardon. The First Child’s labors have proven more difficult than anticipated. We shall clear the skies above as promised.”

The head bowed again, and the cloud of smoke roiled once, then shredded as a stiff wind whipped through the open windows. Hoods and cloaks snapped in the sudden gale, and Silva gave a squawk and fell back against the wall, the wind having pushed her a few steps in its fierceness.

As suddenly as it came, so too did it stop, and as we blinked the tears from our wind-stung eyes, we saw not the gray of the clouds but a clear stretch of the night sky.

The great stretch of stars, Syrania’s belt, washed across the sky, and I picked out several major constellations at once — the Dragon, the Hydra. Glancing up from the Chalice was Daanvi, shining bright and steady marking the way north.

Matera, half-full, shone bright halfway up her arc in the sky. But... I blinked. It couldn’t be right. Between the rim of the mountains and Matera’s half-circle was a bright blue star where there should not be one for another month.

Varis and Gilliam didn’t immediately see what it was that I saw, but they gauged by the look on my face that something was amiss.

Bargle reached across the orrery and gave the spindle holding Risia’s sapphire a sharp tug.

Durin and Kuric both gasped at the sharp rasping of gears and the jolt the machine gave.

“You said you needed it fixed!” said Durin, “and now look what you’ve done to it!”

“I did need it fixed. But now I don’t,” the bard said, and he drew his knife and pried the sapphire from its mounting. He held it up to the torchlight, turned it this way and that, then tossed it carelessly in the corner. Gilliam’s eyes followed the gem as it skittered into the shadows.

But my gaze was on the bard, who’d pulled a white cloth from his pocket, and was carefully unfolding it.

“Hyazha,” he said as he worked.

The goblin popped up from the stairwell, giving us a bit of a jolt. None of us had heard his approach.

“Hyazha is here Master,” the thing wheezed.

“Did you do what I asked you to do in the cellars?”

“Yes, Master. Hyazha do, not think, not try to fix. Hyazha not feeling so well.”

The goblin didn’t look very well, either. Its gray skin was pasty — pastier than usual, that is. And its eyes looked sunken and glassy. It licked dry, cracked lips with a tongue gone slightly yellowish.

Ana’s hand found my arm, and she squeezed so tightly I thought she meant to snap it off above the elbow. She and Silva both had their eyes locked on the pitiful goblin. Sweat beaded Ana’s brow, and Silva’s breath came in short, sharp gasps.

“Something isn’t right here,” Varis said, his brown furrowed.

Bargle reached across and snatched Silva’s manacles, dragging her several steps around the device, and out of my reach. Ana’s deathlike grip on my other arm prevented me from following to try to grab the girl back, though.

The bard brought the girl’s hands up over the disk of the orrery, holding them over the blue-black stone that lay exposed on the white cloth.

His dagger flashed in the yellow torchlight, and Silva gave a shriek of surprise that quickly turned to one of pain.

Bargle had run the length of the dagger along the girl’s right hand, a bright streak of crimson forming as we watched.

“Why didn’t she vanish?” asked Kuric.

“Where is her cloak of flames?” Varis asked. “She did that trick last time he pulled a knife on her.”

Bargle chuckled as a single drop of blood fell with a clearly audible “pat,” upon one corner of the cloth, and blossomed as the cloth drank it in.

The effect on the goblin was immediate, and horrifying.

It leapt the few steps to the edge of the machine, directly opposite Bargle and Silva. Its hands grasped the brass rim of the outermost edge so hard the metal shook and rattled with the effort. The yellow-pink tongue again licked out, and the goblin

stared at the corner of the cloth with wide eyes gone red about the bottom, the pupils gaping open, something flickering deep within.

"Come along, then," Bargle said to the goblin — but it was not to the goblin that he spoke. Nor was it the goblin that answered.

The voice that rasped back sounded of dust, decay, and bloodshed. If such things could be said to have a sound, this is surely what they would sound like.

"We are free now, as we bargained. We have this body — wretched though it is. Our deal is done."

"I have a new bargain for you, Old Friend." Bargle gave Silva's wrists a shake, and another drop of blood fell, nearly perfectly atop the first.

The goblin licked its lips again.

"Would you care to hear it? Or you may walk free, as was promised, away from the imprisonment those brothers worked on you. I would warn you, though, quite some time has passed, and their line has died out. You will not find any sons upon which to vent your wrath."

The goblin wheezed, its breathing irregular, while the entity within pondered.

"We will hear it."

"That shoddy goblin will not hold up for very long. And when it goes, you will be locked within it."

"Which is why we will leave immediately, to find another!"

"Why trouble yourself with leaving? There is one right here I would give you."

The goblin sniffed, licking its lips again.

"It is sweet," the dusty, rasping voice crooned. "But it was taken, not given, and it is fouled."

"Trivialities," scoffed the bard. "You took from all those in the village below."

"They were given! A gift!"

"And I give you hers," Bargle purred.

"It is not yours to give!" the creature rasped, drawing itself up to full height.

"I won her in battle," the bard persisted, his tone a bit hurt. "Fair and square."

The thing laughed a wheezing, choking laugh.

“Won by deceit and under duress,” it said, drawing the last word into a hiss. “Trickery gives you no claim, certainly not to this one.”

“I should think your kind would admire trickery.”

“Not when the blood is at stake. Not in a bargain such as this. We dare not touch it.” The voice sounded almost... wistful.

“So my suspicions about her are correct,” the bard crowed. His laughter shook more drops upon the white cloth, pattering a trail and splattering on the dark stone in the middle of it. Silva hissed in pain and bit her lip to keep from crying out.

“You mock us!” The thing's eyes were locked on the white cloth. Its hands shook harder.

“You're a weakling and a fool if you choose not to take what I offer.”

“She is not yours to give, mortal. But... she is ours to take from you!”

The goblin vaulted atop the surface of the orrery, and sprang, arms and long fingers outstretched, teeth bared, red-rimmed eyes wide.

Silva screamed, and the air around us seemed to snap, like a tightly held thread tugged just a bit harder. Almost as one, we all drew deep, shuddering breaths, shaking our heads as though awakening from a doze.

Varis and Gilliam drew swords and leapt across after the goblin. The dwarves stood ready to aid, but without weapons, did not wish to engage just yet. Ana pushed past the dwarves, and began searching through the bookcases along one wall, fingers turning jars and bottles, her eyes flashing from one label to the next.

The closest to Bargle and Silva, I leapt just in time to catch the goblin's left arm as it swung down to slash at the wild-eyed bard. The creature's right hand bunched itself up with a handful of leather coat, and that was the only thing that kept Bargle from tumbling backwards to the floor.

“You said I would be unharmed!” His voice was high, thready.

“You were not. But now our deal is at an end.” The goblin gave the man a shake, and I hauled with all my strength against the other arm, though it inched closer to its prey.

Bargle whipped the dagger up, dragging it through the goblin's right arm, and there was a clear sound of the blade grinding against bone.

The goblin wheezed a laugh, a sound like dust and ash sifting through the air. The wound was knitting itself closed, and the creature's grip did not waver in the least.

"Cold iron does not bind our magic as it does hers. You will not make us bleed so easily, mortal."

"See how you like the taste of this, then," Ana said, flinging a handful of powder at the goblin. The powder shimmered and sparkled in the torchlight, and at a harsh word from Ana, burst into bright silver-white flame. The goblin shrieked, throwing me away, dropping Bargle to the floor, its arms flapping as it tried to extinguish the flames.

Durin scrambled around the machine, a knee on Bargle's chest as he searched the bard's pockets. After several minutes, he came up with a ring of keys, and he began working through them to find the one to unlock Silva's manacles.

By that time, I'd regained my feet, reaching towards the torches in the room and drawing on their flames to call forth a burst of Elemental Fire, flinging it at the creature.

Its shriek nearly drowned out Durin's cry of triumph. Silva scrambled to her feet, backing as far away from the bard and the orrery as possible, giving a slight squeak as she hit the wall. She slid down, hugging her knees, her silver eyes wide as she stared at the flame-wreathed creature.

I gave it another burst of flame, but this one was smaller. My magic could only stretch so far, and there was not enough left in the torches to pull any more. The last thing we needed was to fight this beast in the darkness.

"Get off me!" Bargle snarled, trying to push the dwarf aside. "If you don't want that thing to rip you all to pieces, let me up!"

"Yes, because it looked like you were doing such a good job at keeping things under control earlier," said Gilliam.

"Ana?"

"There is not enough silver powder left. And my powers are severely hampered since *somebody* took the symbol of my order."

"What of another of your circles of protection?" Kuric asked. "At least you could contain it while we escaped."

“We can’t let this thing loose. It must be destroyed,” Ana said.

“I was afraid she’d say that,” Gilliam muttered.

“How?” Varis asked. “Your powers are crippled, our weapons won’t even scratch it. If we press this fight, we’re done for.”

As if to emphasize his point, the flames sputtered and died around the goblin, and the blackened patches of skin began sloughing off, revealing fresh, healthy flesh beneath. It wheezed another laugh.

“It has been so long since I have been able to play,” it said with a smoky chuckle.

“Let me up!” the bard hissed.

“Here, let me help you,” the goblin purred, and it took a shuffling step to the edge of the orrery, reached down, and plucked Durin off the bard as if he were nothing more than a mewling kitten. The dwarf gave a shout, his arms and legs flailing for purchase that was not there.

Bargle scrambled to his feet, tugging his coat back into place. He opened his mouth — no doubt to say something snide — when the goblin tossed Durin aside, its hand streaking up to catch the bard by the throat. His mouth snapped shut as his eyes bulged.

The goblin cocked its head, a smile stretching its mouth.

Bargle met its smile with one of his own.

“You face our wrath, mortal, and yet you smile?”

Bargle croaked something, and the goblin frowned.

“I said,” the bard rasped when the creature loosened its grip just enough, “you’d best watch where you step in a dead wizard’s lab!”

His hand withdrew itself from the pocket of his coat, and he struck the edge of the orrery with a long, U-shaped bit of metal — a tuning fork.

A crisp, clear note sang out, amplified by the metal in the rim of the orrery. The goblin glanced down, red-rimmed eyes wide with surprise.

It was standing on the white cloth, its toes smeared with Silva’s blood.

The blood flared with a silvery-reddish light, that light snaking across the cloth, and up over the stone, where the blood had also spattered.

The smoky, dust-filled voice of the demon raised itself in a howl, the creature throwing Bargle aside, the bard laughing even as he gasped and coughed for air.

We stared, in awe of this new spectacle. The light began to fade, and the bard again rapped the tuning fork, this time against the tower tall.

And then a second note joined it, another crisp, clear note in a perfect fifth harmony.

Silva was on her feet, singing, right hand outstretched, pointing towards the goblin.

Or rather, she was pointing to the stone upon the orrery. The black stone pulsed once, twice, then burst into its own purplish-blue light, answered by the steady glow of the similar stone in Silva's bracer.

Bargle struck the tuning fork again as the sound began to fade. Silva took a deep breath, matching the note, this time in a perfect fourth.

The light responded, flaring brighter, the upper edge dissolving into smoky strands and tendrils. The goblin shrieked, eyes bulging, fingers hooking into claws. Darker, oily-looking smoke was rolling off the creature's exposed skin — by its howling, one would think that it was indeed being burned alive.

The two eddies of smoke swirled about each other, the brighter, redder-tinged tendrils weaving through the darker, sootier essences steaming off the goblin.

The light began to subside, the smoke-tattered edges of it sinking down, down towards the blood-touched black stone. The light flickered, then the stone and the blood upon it went dark. Silva's voice faded, as did the tone from the tuning fork.

Hyazha gave a sigh, then collapsed over the edge of the orrery, landing hard on the stone floor.

Bargle broke the moment's silence with a sharp, triumphant cry, snatching the stone up in the square of blood-stained cloth. He reached over, and wedged the gem into the silver mountings that had held the sapphire.

"There," he said, stepping back from his work, tucking the white cloth into his coat. "As above, so below."

“What have you done?” Kuric asked, leaning forward to inspect the geared mechanisms of Risia’s path along the orrery.

“I wouldn’t touch that if I were you,” the bard warned, as the dwarf reached for the dark stone. “Hyazah was the last one to touch a stone such as this, and just look where it got him.” The goblin didn’t budge when Bargle prodded him with the toe of his boot.

“You used that goblin to bring the demon up here,” Ana said. “If it had escaped...”

“It was not about to go anywhere,” Bargle said. “The girl ensured that.”

“You knew the girl would be able to do that?” I asked, pointing to the stone. Bargle simply smiled another slow, oily smile.

“So,” he said, “we’re finished here. Everything all tucked away nicely. Duchy saved and all that. Shall we go back down stairs for a drink?”

Ana was still glancing at the stone.

“Come now, dear, that thing won’t harm anybody as long as they don’t touch it. And be honest — who in their right mind would ever come here?”

I had to admit, the bard made a good argument.

“Only a madman,” muttered Gilliam.

“Or a madman’s lapdog,” said Varis.

Bargle scowled at the men.

“I don’t —” Ana began.

“Do you feel the presence of that thing any longer?” the bard asked.

Ana frowned. “I— There is too much interference. I cannot reliably—”

Bargle took her hand, leading her to the stairway. “Come, then. Downstairs, where the air is... clearer.”

She jerked her fingers from his grasp, wiping them on the white surcoat. Bargle bowed, extending his arms towards the stairwell in a gesture of welcome subservience.

“I am a humble servant of the Flame,” she told him as she passed. “Do not bow to me.”

I took Silva’s hand and led her down the stairs after Gilliam and Varis. She slowed her pace as she drew close to the dark stone, pausing to trace a complex

sign in the air with her fingers and murmuring what sounded like a prayer. I thought I saw a deep, purplish-blue pulse of light within the stone, but it could have been a trick of the torches.

Something was not right as we filed through the doorway into the sitting room. Or rather, I should say, something was *right*.

The men in the armor enameled with the Black Eagle's crest were nowhere to be seen. In their place were other soldiers — these in breastplates and chainmail jacks which were barely visible beneath ankle-length cloaks of deepest blue. They stood at attention, leather-gloved hands resting easily on the pommels of longswords, the crosspieces gilded in a gold likeness of eagles' wings.

The expression on Bargle's face at the sight of the men was worth the terrors of his dungeons beneath Mistamere, and the brief skirmish against the demon in the tower above.

He drew a sharp breath, we could all see that he meant to launch into some tirade or speech, but when his eyes fell upon the woman sitting before the fire... It was as if a bellows had just sucked all the air straight out of him. His eyes widened — even more than they had at the sight of the blue-cloaked men. His mouth hung open, and had there been a breeze within the room, no doubt would have creaked like an inn signboard.

"I am hiring a painter to capture this," Gilliam said with a smirk.

"My brother and I will pay half that commission," Kuric said.

Bargle's mouth snapped shut, and he straightened, squaring his shoulders, tugging the sleeves of his coat down about his wrists.

"Aleena," he said, striding into the room, his voice oozing a warmth that certainly didn't touch his dark eyes. "How very good of you to come all this way for a visit. I trust your father is well?"

She was perhaps of average height — sitting as she was it was hard to tell. She wore the same deep blue cloak and eagle-motif armor as the soldiers positioned at the room's choke points. She uncrossed long legs clad in fitted leather breeks. The well-kept but road-worn boots that covered her legs the rest of the way

down creaked as she flexed her feet, as if to ease muscles stiff from a hard days' riding.

"I hope you don't mind, but I served myself," she said, raising a fine crystal goblet to Bargle in salute, and sipping dark wine.

"The Glantrian plum wine," he said, his voice purring with approval. "A fine choice, but I thought for certain you would have taken the Alphatian white."

"You drink Glantrian plum wine, so I knew it would be the only one not poisoned," Aleena said, her blue eyes twinkling as she smiled knowingly. "And you would know better than I how my father is doing, since the Black Eagle still has not responded to my missives."

Bargle's smile faltered for just an eye's blink. "Well. The baron is such a busy man."

"Yes, all those others in the dungeons that he needs to interrogate before he gets to Father," Aleena said, another knowing smile made as cold as the winds outside by her tone of voice.

"VonHendricks is well within his rights to imprison and... question... those he deems a threat to the safety and security of his barony and its loyal subjects."

Aleena glanced around, at us, at the soldiers who still stood, silent but watchful. "There is no magistrate here, you needn't spout the niceties of the Grand Duke's baronial charters for *my* benefit."

Bargle's mouth snapped shut, the fingers of his right hand curled into a white-knuckled fist slowly relaxing.

"Well then, since you have invited yourself in, taken a seat, and are already drinking my wine, what other courtesies could I possibly extend to you?"

Aleena flexed a finger away from the side of the goblet, pointing towards us. "You could introduce me to your guests," she said, taking another sip before slowly rising to her feet.

"Ah. Yes. Allow me to introduce you to—"

Aleena stepped past the bard, crossing the room towards us, stopping an arm's length away.

"You can only be Ana," she said, extending her hand towards the dark-haired cleric. The girl took it, murmuring the appropriate pleasantries.

“Varis,” she said, with a sharp salute. Varis grinned, returning the gesture.

“Gilliam,” the young woman said, her eyes twinkling with the smile as she clasped his upper arm in the traditional greeting of the Ylari. I don’t know if his knees were weak from her knowing the gesture, or the wink she gave him before releasing his arm.

“Thorn,” she said, bowing her head in my direction. I returned the gesture.

“And you two can only be Kuric and Durin,” she said, clapping them each upon the shoulder.

The two dwarves pointed to each other, but their explanation of her mixing them up was lost as Aleena turned to Silva, who peeked somewhat meekly from behind mine and Ana’s cloaks. The young woman dropped to a curtsy, only rising when Silva took her hand, completing the ancient ritual as the Baron of Threshold had done many days ago.

“I greet you in the name of your own freedom from capture at the hands of the Baron von Hendricks, hereby restoring your liberties as free men— and women and dwarves,” she added with a blush, “as an agent of the Baron of Threshold, and as First Lieutenant, Thirteenth Company of the Fourth Division—”

“Oh, take a breath, Aleena,” Bargle said, rolling his eyes. “Before you turn as blue as your cloak.”

She rounded on the bard, cloak billowing.

“Another word from your lips and I will have you gagged, clapped in irons, and paraded to and through Threshold in nothing but your boots.”

He looked up from the goblet of wine he’d been pouring.

“Much as I know you would love to see that,” he said, swirling the liquid in the goblet, his tone as dismissive as the gesture, “I’ll have to see your writ of command, as well as those of the generals’ aides of Riverfork and Radlebb.”

Aleena’s figure seemed to shrink a bit within the cloak.

“Come now, girl, I haven’t got all night,” Bargle snapped.

“I haven’t quite gotten all the paperwork sorted out yet,” she said, somewhat petulantly.

Bargle arched an eyebrow. “And by ‘not quite sorted out,’ you mean ‘haven’t even petitioned the captain for detachment of the troops’?”

Aleena set her own goblet of wine down. Her hand shook.

“Aleena, you’ve got your rescue. Now run along and take them with you before I get angry. It would be a pity if I should have to mention this little breach of protocol to the baron, and *he* should get angry and do something... rash... to his prisoners in retaliation.”

There was another swirling of blue cloak, and the young woman stormed past us, making quick gestures, the men waiting for us to file out before following.

Bargle actually had the nerve to smile and wave.

First half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 8, 997AC)

It wasn't snowing, but the wind was up, cold and keen as ice, and it howled and whipped through the barren courtyards of Koriszegy's Keep.

Had we wanted to keep warm, though, we could merely have stood within arm's reach of the young woman Aleena, her fury was so intense. The wind tore most of her words away, but by the way she kicked through the snow clogging the courtyard, and the number of times she punched a fist into her other hand, it was probably better we did not hear precisely what she had to say.

We followed her across the courtyard, then down the winding stairs to the level of the village below. The ground still felt sick, corrupted. I hoisted Silva onto my back when she refused to descend the last step. I felt her shivering against me the whole trip through the ruined streets. Aleena, we noticed, did not dally, but picked the most direct route through the ruins, though she traced a path to the south rather than back east the way we'd followed the Black Eagle captain.

A short distance from the village walls, the skeletal clattering of trees was replaced with the snapping of banners. Two pavilions had been erected, and the beginnings of a picket line of horses could be seen behind the tents.

One of the men with us jogged ahead and pulled back the flap of the leftmost tent, and he beckoned us through after Aleena.

There was plenty of room inside for all of us, and braziers in three of the corners provided light and warmth against the cold of the night. Though the walls of the pavilion fluttered and flattened, the material was proof against the knifelike winds.

A simple cot and travel chest adorned the darker corner of the tent, and Aleena fairly threw herself down on the cot.

"That did not go at all as I'd envisioned it," she groaned, one arm up over her eyes.

“Fourth Division?” Varis asked her. “I served with the Goblin-Crushers.”

Aleena glanced out from under her arm. “Mountain Storm,” she said, pointing to the emblem of a stylized clouds over a mountain peak. I counted two lightning strokes descending the cloud, marking her rank as lieutenant.

Varis nodded. “A bit far from Castellan’s Keep, aren’t you?”

“Well, members of the Order of the Griffon are afforded certain liberties.”

“Operating outside your Division’s theater without writ of command? That Bargle character seems to be in pretty close with the Black Eagle. If he—”

“He won’t,” Aleena said shortly. “He was operating well off his leash in this case.”

“As are you,” Gilliam said. It wasn’t a question.

“The Order knows I have a vested interest in that man, so some provisions were made,” Aleena said. “We are simply putting things back in balance. This move of his was unexpected, so we moved to counter it.”

“It sounds as though you play at a game of Kingmaker,” Ana said. “Signs alight in the sky, demons afoot, and you play at your games?”

Aleena sat up, fixed her blue eyes on the dark haired girl.

“‘The game’ as you call it, has always been there. Games within games within games. Either we play, and stand a chance at winning, or forfeit.”

“I was never much good at Kingmaker,” Gilliam said. “Best I could do was stalemate.”

“Sometimes, that’s the best any of us can do,” Aleena said, though it sounded like she spoke more to herself than to us.

It was an uneasy night’s rest. If the keening winds outside, and the constant flapping of the tent’s walls wasn’t enough of a distraction, Silva had started to dream again. The first time, she awoke thrashing, gasping what sounded like names. Aleena’s sword was halfway from its scabbard before she realized we weren’t in any danger. She looked on with puzzlement as the two dwarves calmed Silva as best they could.

Silva’s scream sent us all jumping, again, hours before dawn.

As Aleena jammed her sword back home, she gave the girl a long look. "Does she do this often?" she asked.

"Well, there's been a lull," Varis said. "But it looks like that was the quiet before the storm."

There came a scratching at the tent's entry flap.

"M'lady Aleena, you.. Ah.. Might want to come see this," came a voice from outside.

The young woman stood up, pulling her cloak about her shoulders, buckling on her swordbelt.

She poked her head out of the tent, and her hair rippled in the strong wind that was still blowing outside.

"For the love of Petra," she started to snap, and then her entire posture went rigid. "Get the men and horses ready. A five hundred count, then we ride. Take what you can carry, nothing more."

"M'lady, but the wagons, the tents—"

"One wagon, food and extra trail necessities. Where the hell were the sentries?"

"I think that's one of them there, m'lady," the man outside said, his voice shaking.

Aleena jerked back into the tent, then went to the travel chest at the foot of her cot. She threw it open, started rummaging through it.

"On your feet," she said, without looking up. "Armed, armored, ready to run but prepared to fight as well."

"What is it?" Kuric asked, looking up from where he'd been patting Silva's hand.

"Trouble," Aleena said, as she slid a foot into her boot. She tugged viciously at the leather cords, working the bindings tighter about her lower leg. "She better be worth it."

We stepped out of the tent, and into a gently falling snow. The camp was abustle with activity, most of it towards the rear, where the horses were. There was

quite a bit of jangling of tack and harness, but the chaos of the camp was orderly, almost disciplined.

I saw almost immediately what had drawn the guard to summon Aleena: In the hazy distance, shadows huddled amidst the swirling snows and gently lifting darkness. They did not move, but even at this distance, I could feel a chill in the air that had nothing to do with the weather.

Anna drew in a sharp breath, her knuckles going as white as the ash staff she held.

"It fractured its essence when it fed," she murmured, glaring at the shadowy figures in the distance. "The fool of a bard has awakened them." She spat something in Old Alphantian, and judging from the lay of the consonants, it didn't sound like a prayer.

"Why don't they draw any closer?" Gilliam asked.

"It looks as though they've reached the edge of their defiled ground," Anna explained. "But, given enough time, like ants crossing water, they will simply pile one upon the other, expanding their reach." She turned to Aleena. "You cannot just run away. They will follow. They must be destroyed."

"We are twenty," Aleena said, "and Immortals only know how many of them there are. The entirety of the town, perhaps. We cannot hope to win against such numbers. This is the Black Eagle's mess, let him clean it up. We have accomplished our objectives here."

She turned, calling for her sergeant and her horse, and with lingering glances at the menace lurking in the predawn shadows. We turned and found mounts of our own, abandoning the camp.

Aleena set a harder pace than her adversary, and by late morning, what had been dull aches from the saddle became jarring, jolting pains. She'd struck out to the south and east, cutting through the lightly forested hills, making for the Westron Road.

"So we make for the capital?" Varis called to her.

It was hard to see if she'd nodded or if it was just that her mount stumbled as we picked through the undergrowth.

“The Grand Duke’s men patrol it regularly, so we should encounter none of von Hendricks’ men, or his lapdog. It is faster to go by road through the cities, than to cut overland this time of— in weather such as this.”

I caught the frown in her voice, even though I could not see it. And none of us missed the correction, either. Knee-deep snows this close to the coast did indeed occur... but not until the deepest days of winter, and the season had but just turned.

The rest of the men, with salutes and wishes of best luck went west, back towards Radlebb Keep. The supply wagon, with two men, and Aleena’s sergeant were all of the company that accompanied us east.

Aleena’s grueling pace did not lessen. If anything, once our numbers were diminished, she pressed even harder. The sun was low in the sky by the time the low stone hostel came into view, and we were all stiff, sore, near exhaustion.

The sergeant took care of the horses, while the two men on the wagon, along with the dwarves, saw to getting the fire going in the hearth, and began preparing a simple but hearty supper of venison stew.

First half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 9-22, 997AC)

I will spare you the details of the remainder of the trek to Specularum. Suffice it to say that when our teeth didn't chatter from the cold, the jostling of the mounts' pace did the work for us.

Aleena arranged for comfortable rooms at an out of the way inn in the merchant's district, and we were all more than willing to simply stay put as she bid us.

Ana and Silva, it seemed, spent the entirety of their time in the baths. Gilliam and Varis mended arms and armor, with help from the two dwarves. And I slept, when I wasn't busy transcribing my skeins.

Two days later, Aleena returned, with quite the mixed group for company — three men, two dwarves, their beards a darkest black, and plaited in such a way to make my fingers ache just considering the weavings. One of the Grand Duke's own elvanguard was among the company, as well, willowlike, fierce-eyed, dark haired, like all his kind in the southern Karamaikos woods. The last at first I thought a child, but turned out to be one of the small folk, a sight I thought never to see, especially not wearing the deep blue cloak of the Order of the Griffon, as were all those Aleena brought with her.

And these cloaks, they handed over to us, and thus we left as they'd arrived, all in file, hoods up, cloaks tight against the cold. Busy as the streets were — for the merchant's quarter never slept, and seemed to pay the merest attentions to the weather — we were given a wide berth, and no more than a passing glance.

"Where is it you are taking us?" Ana asked. "And why the need for such subterfuge?"

"We are watched by many eyes, and most are not friendly."

"Surely they will see through this," Gilliam said.

"Those who do are the ones we need worry about," agreed Aleena.

The young knight of the Griffon led us a winding path through the merchant's guild, until we came to a warehouse, where we again met up with our "doubles"

from the inn. We traded heavy blue cloaks for shabby ones of brown and gray. And we were off again, winding our way through the maze of ramshackle homes and businesses I later learned was aptly dubbed “the Nest.” Oddly enough, I thought for sure Ana would wrinkle her nose at picking our way through trash and refuse-littered narrow streets. Rather, she would stop every now and then, kneeling by a woman or child huddling in a doorway or alleyway, murmur a few words to them. Very occasionally, I saw her slip a coin or two into a small grubby hand.

Aleena would pause, booted foot tapping on the uneven cobbles.

“They need to know that the Flame shines,” Ana said, unruffled by Aleena’s impatience. “Better to nurture the flames, lest they be snuffed by the shadows of despair.”

Silva watched our progress with a wide-eyed sadness. She, too, reached for the coin purse at her waist, but Gilliam put a restraining hand upon hers, and shook his head.

The girl sighed, and after the second or third time, gave up, and dropped her eyes to stare fixedly at her feet as we followed Aleena through the winding streets.

We finally stopped before a dilapidated inn, bearing a sign of a dog curled on its back, paws on its belly, snout open in an exaggerated grin.

She knocked, and another answered hers, which she answered with another pattern of her own. Only then did the door creak open. We did not miss the glint of steel in the shadows as we filed into the common room.

We went back, through the kitchens, and down a set of stairs to the cellars, where a table sat, in the clear space amidst the barrels, crates and casks. A single lantern, its flame barely alight, sat on the table, shedding light on a pair of gloved hands, but draping the rest of the cloaked figure in shadows.

“Aleena,” the figure said, with a nod. A woman’s voice, bearing a distinct Thyatian lilt.

“Your—” Aleena bit her lip. “Olivia, I have brought those you sought, as ordered.”

“You have done well, child. Please convey my greetings to your uncle when next you see him.”

Aleena nodded, and, taking the hint, turned on her heel and climbed the stairs.

“Please, sit.” The gloved hand made a sweeping gesture, indicating chairs and stools scattered about the room.

We took seats, Silva bobbing a curtesy before she settled on a low stool. Gilliam and Varis traded looks at this, then inclined their heads towards the figure.

“I’ll thank you for dispensing with the formalities,” the cloaked figure said, “and get straight to the point.

“I have received reports of certain... people... entering the Duchy in some numbers, numbers which — if my husband knew of them — would certainly make him nervous, as I am.

“However, upon unravelling some of the threads of this mystery, I see that they all lead back to you.

“Imagine my surprise when I should find that these... certain people... were invited here by one of my husband’s closest friends and allies. Were it any other baron, he would be called to account and stripped of his lands and titles.

“That my husband’s dear cousin should have his fingers in these events is even more cause for alarm. The reports from his lands, if they are to be believed, have grown steadily darker and darker. While the other baronies suffer poor harvests, Halag reaps a surplus, yet his people are as uneasy and dispirited as always, when their stomachs should be full.

“And then, there are the disappearances. Far too many to be mere coincidence, not when all those gone missing bear close to the same description.”

The hooded head turned, and the figure’s gaze set on Silva.

There was a long moment of silence and then the figure’s gloved fingers laced themselves together, and the figure leaned forward.

“So, before I advise my husband on these matters, I would know your part in these events.”

I was not so surprised when my companions’ eyes all turned to me, and I summed up our doings in these events as best I could. Kuric then gave a terse account of his part in events, leading up to the crossing of our paths in the Gap.

The figure sat in silence for long minutes after our tales had finished, a gloved finger tapping against the table.

“Very well,” she said. “You shall return to Threshold, and confer with these people that Halaran has invited, and you will instruct Halaran that he is to send me, at his earliest convenience, a summary of these meetings.”

We rose to our feet, and readied to return to the common room above.

“The girl, though, will have to stay.”

“Absolutely not!” snapped Kuric.

“Out of the question,” Durin said.

Silva glanced sharply back and forth, between the dwarves, and the figure still seated at the table.

The figure extended a gloved hand. “Come, child. We will protect you.”

Silva bobbed another curtsey, but stepped backwards, huddling behind the two dwarves.

“Very well, if that is what you wish,” she said. “But after conveying you to Halaran, understand that we cannot lend any further aid. Should you return here, the next invitation the girl receives will come with an armed company of the Duke’s guard and no option for refusal.”

The Grand Duchess Olivia did not dally in whisking us away to the north. From her tone, I would not have been surprised to find the royal carriage awaiting us outside the Laughing Dog.

Oh, it was a coach, unadorned and somewhat worse for wear, but it was wide and comfortable. When we arrived back at the inn, we found fresh mounts saddled and waiting, as well as a pack mule laden with supplies.

“The Lady seems eager that we should disappear,” Gilliam said, drily, lifting Silva down from the coach, and settling her on one of the ponies.

Durin and Kuric eyed the other two somewhat nervously before mounting with some difficulty.

Varis and Gilliam checked the supplies on the mule, and whistled appreciatively. Not only had we provisions for two weeks, but also several changes

of traveling clothes, new boots, and sturdy woolen cloaks amidst the few belongings we had from our earlier travels.

It has been said that a man on a fast horse can make it from Specularum to the Duke's Road Keep in eight days. Some, they say, have made it in six.

The task must have been accomplished in the height of summer, in a stretch of eight days without rain. This, we all know, never happens. Or has not, in any of the records of the weather that I have glanced through, which stretch back to my thrice great grandsire's youth.

Making any kind of good time in weather fit for the middle of winter proved impossible. We were lucky to make it as far as the ruins of Krakatos before the sun sank too low.

Silva did not sleep well at all, amidst the broken columns and tumbled stones of what they say was once Halav's capital. Did she perhaps, dream of the beastmen? Did the ghosts of Halav's people haunt her, even these thousands of years later?

It took us more than a week to wind our way along the Highreach and Windrush rivers, and finally around the spur of the Black Peaks and into Threshold valley. We passed several woodsmen, as we neared the outskirts of villages, but ran into no danger on the roads. Only madmen or fools would be out in weather such as this. Madmen, fools, or exiles.

We arrived back at Tarnskeep only hours ahead of the first blizzard. We very nearly missed the turn in the road, the snows were falling so thickly around us.

The curtain walls of the keep took some of the bite from the wind and snow, enough that we could dismount with only a little unease. I'd had to take Silva from her pony, wrap her in blankets and hold her against me on the saddle in order to keep her warm enough, and I passed her with numb hands down to Gilliam, before nearly falling from the saddle myself.

The stablemen led us through the servant's entrance, straight to the kitchens, where Halaran's cook fussed and fretted and served us a most wonderful stew, with mulled wine to go with it.

Silva's shaking hands got more stew on the table and down her front than in her mouth. Durin scooted closer, feeding her until her hands quieted enough that she could manage on her own.

The baron was a good judge of timing, for he arrived quietly in the kitchens as we'd finished a second helping, and most of the feeling had returned to fingers and toes. He inspected our hands and faces closely, checking for signs of frost's bite, and looked especially close at Silva, but he pronounced us all in serviceable health.

"Well," he said. "You have had a long and chilling journey. I will not keep you, there is nothing so important that cannot wait until morning. Ilsa will show you to suitable sleeping quarters. I am very glad that you have returned, and I will make more formal introductions tomorrow," he said, nodding to the two dwarves. "I am glad to see you safe and reunited. And now, I will bid you good evening. Sleep well."

Waning half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 23, 997AC)

It was a trial, dragging myself from the blankets and goose-down comforter and dashing the room temperature water on my face the next morning, especially since the room temperature away from the hearth in the corner or brazier by the door was barely endurable.

One of the servants had laid out a fresh set of clothes near the hearth, and these I struggled into gratefully, enjoying the warmth of the fabric against joints aching from the cold.

Ilsa showed me the way to the dining hall, where I saw that I was at least not the last one awake this time. Durin was leading Silva by the hand through another doorway, nodding his thanks to the manservant who'd shown him the way.

We broke our fast with a hearty porridge, which the cook had flavored with honey and butter. As we finished, the baron ushered us into his study.

It hadn't changed much from our last visit, save the low table between the settees — rather than cups of tea, it was piled with several stacks of books, and a sheaf of maps, one rolled into the other, so it was impossible to determine just how many there were.

Silva peered at the pile of books, stood on tiptoe to look over the top of one of the stacks. She reached for the maps, then drew her hand back, glancing up at the baron.

"Please, please, look!" he said, gesturing and nodding.

Silva bobbed a curtsey, then unrolled the maps — carefully, as several were old and cracked. She frowned at the topmost map, which I recognized as a depiction of the Duchy. I got her attention, then gestured all around us, and pointed to where Threshold would be on the map.

She nodded, and then traced our paths up until we'd met her and the dwarves in the Gap.

She let the page roll itself closed, exposing the next map, which was a map of the heavens around this time of year. Silva hummed the song she'd sung in the Koriszegy orrery chamber, moving her fingers along the dots and circles marking in the wandering stars' places in the sky. Her finger trembled as she reached the end

of the song, though, as she looked where her finger rested on the map, along a blank expanse of sky.

Or, it would be empty this time of year, but for the bright blue star that we'd seen shining there. With her other hand, Silva slid a finger from where Risia was drawn on the map, to where her other finger held the empty space.

"Risia," I said. "But what is this? What is here?" I pointed to her right finger, which she'd used to point out the different stars.

"*Atra Xoriat*," she said simply, slowly.

"That word again," Kuric said. "My Lord Halaran, have you ink and paper? I would see how the girl writes the word."

The baron rose to his feet, and pulled a sheet of paper from a drawer of his great desk.

"Silva, dear, come here, please," he said, gesturing again.

She crossed the room, and he showed her the quill and ink.

"My dear, do you know how to write? Here, let me show you...."

He spelled out his name in the Thyatian alphabet, in large, bold strokes.

"Sherlane," he read, and Silva glanced back and forth between the letters, the pen, and the man with a nearly comical look of exasperation.

She took the quill from his fingers, dipped it in the inkwell, and wrote letters of her own. They were letters such as I have never seen, delicate, flowing, but stemming always from a bold first stroke of the pen, either across, or down. She wrote from right to left, opposite the manner of Thyatian and Alphatian letters and words.

"Sher-lane," she read, pointing to the two marks she'd written upon the page.

I leaned forward, and began singing Silva's song back to her. As I named the stars, she drew the likeness of their names in her strange, swirling script.

The signs astronomers today use to denote the stars' on their charts are but crude, rudimentary depictions of the delicate symbols that Silva drew. But they were clearly recognizable to the baron and myself, (even viewing them upside down as I was) being familiar with astronomy and the keeping of such records.

When she drew the last sign, though, many different reactions happened all at once. Kuric and Durin both jerked their heads back, and made warding signs in

the air. Sherlane drew forth his symbol of office, a silver amulet bearing a crescent moon, and kissed it with a muttered prayer.

Ana actually took the quill from the girl's hand and scratched through the word.

Silva glanced around, her own brow furrowed at the reactions.

"*Samaam,*" she said, sitting back in the baron's chair and crossing her arms. "*Etah evam Xoriat.*"

"Do not be so quick to relieve the girl of her hands, for crafting the witch's glyph," came a woman's voice from the doorway.

We all glanced up, somewhat startled.

"We would do no such thing!" Durin sputtered. "The girl surely knows not what she's written there."

"I would be willing to bet a sizable chunk of my estate, dwarf, that she has a very clear notion what it is she writes." The woman was tall, nearly of height with Varis, with wavy, curling hair to match autumn leaves and the flames dancing in the hearth. I would have said her eyes were hazel, but they had far more gold in them than brown.

She strode into the room with the bearing of nobility: back straight, shoulders squared, an air of dispassion and detached watchfulness radiating from her as if her hair *were* flame, and *did* give off a tangible aura.

Kuric stepped around his brother, and stood in the woman's path, feet planted firmly, hands on his hips. "To infer that this girl has intimate knowledge of demon summoning— that she would sully her— that she would have *anything* to do with —" He grew steadily redder about the face, and began edging towards purple before the woman stopped before him, bending at the waist and laying a long-fingered hand upon his shoulder.

"Be at ease, Master Kuric."

"Not until you take back what you have said of Silva."

The woman straightened, still glancing down at the dwarf, her lips quirked in a half-smile. "I can do no such thing, for I am bound to speak only that which is True. And this girl whom you call 'Silva' has such intimate knowledge — far deeper

than any of you could possibly know. Far from having *nothing* to do with such things, Master Dwarf, she has *everything* to do with them."

The dwarf's hands shook at his sides, and he reached back an arm, and would have let fly his hand at the stranger's face. Then Silva was there, her fingertips upon the dwarf's arm. None of us had seen her move, though all our eyes were upon the dwarf at the time.

Not a grip, no hold, just the barest weight of her slender hand upon the dwarf's wrist.

"Astu, Koo-ric. "Aham'man'ye asti atra sahaayat. "

The woman dipped and flowed into a curtsy so low, her curls tumbled from about her shoulders, and brushed the floor. She held her eyes at a point in the floor just in front of Silva's toes.

"Namas'te, Amara'Aatmajaa ap Andahar," the woman said.

The warmth that had built up in the study fled as the name hung in the air between the girl and the woman bowing before her.

Had Halaran opened the two large windows to the blizzard outside, he could not have made the room so cold so quickly. It seemed the air froze in our chests, even as the flames in the hearth and three braziers roared to twice their previous heights.

The gem adorning Silva's left arm flared and flickered in concert with the flames, shining brilliantly even through the two or three layers of heavy cloth that hid the webwork of silvery metal from sight.

Her face, half lit by that ghostly orange-yellow glow, had gone ashen, a sheen of sweat standing out across her brow. While our breath did not seem to want to move from within us, the girl breathed shallow, panicked gasps.

"Saa kaa?" she whispered, through stiff lips. She wrenched her gaze away, fixing her haunted eyes on the baron.

"Saa kaa, Hal-a-ran?" She pointed a shaking finger at the woman, who had not moved, hadn't batted so much as an eyelash at the response her greeting generated.

"Kaa iyam naarii?" The flames leapt at the question, as Silva added some steel to her shaking voice.

She turned back to the woman, and sank to her knees, then flopped — rather undignified — to her backside, gown tangled all about her legs.

"Kaa tvam?" she asked, tears welling up in her eyes. *"Bhavaan katham ajaanaat? Katham?"*

The woman still did not move, did not speak.

"Kathayami!" Silva slapped her left hand flat upon the floor as she barked the command at the woman, and the keep rocked with the sound and force of a thunderclap overhead. The windows rattled, the stacks of books tumbled from the table. The inkwell jumped on Halaran's desk. The braziers rocked, one coming dangerously close to tipping over, the flames leaping to nearly double again their height, seeming to pile higher as Silva's fear and anger grew.

"Listelle, I think it best you answer the girl before she brings the keep down about our ears," the baron said, his own voice shaking and thready.

At last the woman, Listelle, looked up, her golden eyes meeting those of silver, and the smile again quirked her mouth sideways.

"Caellimi Listelle," she said, as she sank from her bow, moving her legs in some impossibly fluid manner to suddenly be sitting before the girl, legs folded beneath her.

"Asti ahd—" Her voice caught. *"Ast—"* Again, her voice seemed to catch in her throat, and she cleared it once, twice. *"I am a teacher, and a weaver, from the Tower, in a land called Alphatia.*

"Oh dear," she said, the long fingers of her hand coming up to her lips. *"It was supposed to last a bit longer than that."*

Silva blinked, and the hopeful look that had dawned as the woman finally introduced herself crumbled. Two large tears welled up, and slid down the girl's cheeks. The fires in the room banked nearly to embers, and the gem on her wrist flickered and went dark.

There was a sharp pattering from the hallway outside, and another woman hurried into the room, her skirts drawn up in one hand, the other hand raised in a defensive-seeming manner.

There was another shift in the feel of the air, and a great shivering — as if being doused with icy water — came over me. Ana and the baron, too, shuddered, sucking in sharp breaths.

“My lady Listelle, I heard a crash, and then the fires! Are you—”

Silva scrambled backwards along the floor, her feet slipping for purchase as they tangled in her gown. She backed against my legs with enough force I needed to steady myself against the desk. She trembled nearly as hard as she had during the last few hours of our journey to Tarnskeep.

Kuric stepped to the side, coming between this other woman and the girl, and I crouched down behind Silva, taking her shoulders in my hands, and whispering to her as I would to calm an injured animal — and with just as much caution. With such unpredictable magic about her, we’d seen only a fraction of what she could do, and I, for one, did not want to see what she was capable of if these women tried to corral her.

“Nevinia, release your Power at once,” the woman Listelle said. “There is no threat here, just a very confused and frightened girl.”

The icy prickling sensation along my skin suddenly ceased, and a tension I didn’t know I was holding in my shoulders and neck abruptly released itself.

Silva, though, did not relax, and kept shaking, staring from one woman to the other.

“*Saa’te kaa?*” Silva asked, glancing up at me.

I glanced at the two women. “I think she asks—”

“She wishes to know who we are,” the red-haired woman said. “Before that, she wished to know who I was, and how I knew who she was. Before that, she told the dwarf...” She frowned. “It is beginning to cloud, but she said... said... ‘Be at peace,’ and ‘I think she will help.’”

I looked up at the scratching sound coming from the desk behind me.

There was a crisp sound of parchment tearing, and Gilliam came into view, his hands held, one upon the other, and he was shaking them. He bent, and

opened his hands, but kept them cupped. He held them out to the fiery-haired woman.

“What is this?” she asked, plucking a folded slip of parchment.

“The first question you’re going to answer,” Gilliam said. “With so many flying about, I thought it best to pluck them from the air, that we might get a handhold on them.”

“Well,” the woman said, after we’d taken seats upon the settees and other assorted chairs the baron pulled from this corner or that, “I’ve already given my name. I am a teacher of history, as well as certain arts in the weaving ways at the Tower, in Alphatia.”

“Which tower is that?” Varis asked.

“The Tower,” Ana said. “Where they snatch up girls off the street with any glimmer of magical talent and—”

“We do not ‘snatch them up!’” the other woman — Nevinia — snapped. Her back went even stiffer, and her hands clenched in her lap.

“Oh, that’s right. Girls of Alphatian citizenry are bought. It is the girls of other countries that are snatched.”

Now Varis’ back was the one to stiffen. “Is this true? Abduction? Slavery?”

Listelle rolled her eyes. “Calm yourselves, all of you. The girl paints a very stark picture, but her brush is rather wide. The Tower seeks to train girls who show ability in the proper use of their talents. The Empire pays a stipend to families that would endure hardship the loss of a daughter might incur. We have sisters wandering all the Known World, searching for others who show this same affinity for the weaving of the power of the Spheres, and merely seek to conduct them to the Tower, where we may instruct them. It is for the welfare of the girls, their families, and the families around them that we do this. That kind of power, without proper control.... Well, the results can range from irksome to disastrous.”

“Tell them what you do to the girls that do not wish to go.”

The woman fixed her golden eyes on Ana. “What happened to your sister was regrettable. Tragic. But we were not at fault. If she had come sooner—”

Ana stood up, and stalked quickly from the room. I think we all pretended that the crackling of the fire drowned out the sound of her sobbing as she left.

The baron rose to his feet. "If you will excuse me." He gave Listelle a long, searching look, and strode after Ana.

"The Tower is a school, not a prison," Listelle said. "We do not force anyone to attend, but do our best to persuade them that it is what is best. Once there, they are taught to use their gift."

Silva sat on the settee next to me, across the table from the two women from the Tower. She mostly stared at her hands, which she'd folded in her lap. After glaring at Listelle after Ana had departed, Silva had lost interest in the conversation, and she stared at the books now stacked in shorter stacks across the table. Or she would glance behind the women, at the hearth, and watch the flames. Whatever power she'd had over them earlier had diminished, for the flames were back at their proper level. The room was gradually warming again, and our breath, at least, was not clouding in front of us any more.

Gilliam leaned forward, and pointed at the woman sitting beside Listelle. "Your overprotective friend, here? What of her?"

"I am called Nevinia, and I assist the Lady Listelle in her teaching. Where she knows history, I know of the societies and cultures of which she would teach."

"And you are also a weaver," I said, remembering the icy tingle of her power against my skin.

"Yes, of course. All who teach at the Tower can do so."

Listelle and Nevinia were a study in contrasts. Where Listelle was tall and fiery, Nevinia was small and earthy. Her hair and eyes were a brown so deep as to be nearly black. Her complexion was deeply tanned, as though she spent excessive amounts of time out in the sun.

Like Listelle, she bore no lines about her mouth or eyes, and appeared of perhaps thirty years, though they both carried a weight of years in their eyes that spoke of many decades more. I had heard that women who made use of the Power, tapping into the Spheres as they did, ceased to age after a certain number of years of using their gifts. Of those I'd heard who displayed their apparent age, it was usually said that they were the ones who drew from the Sphere of Entropy, and bore

the touch of chaos in their ravaged appearance, hunched backs, and gnarled fingers.

Listelle leaned forward, and plucked another folded piece of parchment from the bowl on the serving table. She carefully opened the scrap, turned it over. The half-smile quirked her lips.

“You allow no room for any airs of mystery, do you, Master Gilliam?”

He shrugged. “Call it a dislike for being left to grope in the dark, if you would.”

She folded the paper again, setting it aside. “Nevinia and myself were summoned here by the baron to consult with him on several goings-on in the duchy in general, and his barony in particular.”

“And we’ve landed feet-first in the midst of such goings-on, haven’t we?” I asked.

“Indeed you have,” said the baron, as he entered the room bearing a tray with a teapot and several cups. He set the tray down on a clear spot on the table, and began serving. The first cup he handed to Silva, who took it with a dip of her head, and a whispered “*Dhanyavaada*.”

“The blue star Risia appearing a month and a half early, and holding the same place in the heavens when it should have moved over the course of the past three weeks causes me great concern.”

“Perhaps such is the will of the Immortals,” Gilliam said.

The baron frowned. “The Immortals do not interfere with the workings of the heavens,” he said.

“I seem to recall a legend that they turned the very stars in the skies, to remind men not to dabble in things best left untouched.”

“That is a legend grown of misinformation,” Listelle said, leveling her gaze at Gilliam. “Yes, it was a result of men treading the wrong paths in the wrong company, but it was men who brought down the disaster upon themselves.”

Varis blinked, slowly. “You’re speaking of the Great Rain of Fire? The work of men? Surely no mortal has the power to move every star in the sky!”

“The Old Magic was capable of such things, and men in the days of Blackmoor had mastered its use. And they turned that power upon their enemies.”

"I cannot imagine being so desperate as to remake the very face of the world rather than simply surrender and —"

"There was no surrendering to the demon-tainted host of the Afridhi," Nevinia cut in.

Silva gave a start, her attention snapping to the dark-haired teacher. Her tea came dangerously close to sloshing over the rim of her cup, and I set a steadying hand on her arm.

"*Uddizati na ap Afridhi,*" she hissed, drawing her fingers across her mouth.

"It would seem she does not like that word, either," said Varis.

"As well she should not," Listelle said. "The Af— those people were an ancient tribe, mountain barbarians. What few records we can find indicate that they swept from the mountains, down through the lands surrounding Ancient Blackmoor, conquering all before them. In a matter of a decade, they had gone from a primitive tribe to a wandering army-nation of ironsmiths, charioteers, horsemen and archers."

Varis' eyes went wide. "Such change does not happen overnight."

"They were also demon-worshippers, and their priests were warlocks of the darkest sort," said Nevinia. "Their foul priests were given the secrets of steel, of the bow and stirrup. Their generals made to dream of advance knowledge of battlefields, and the tactics they were likely to encounter."

"Such a force would be unstoppable," Varis breathed.

"It very nearly was," said Listelle. "If it were not for Blackmoor's sacrifice, this world would have been overrun, and every generation since would have known naught but slavery, and pain, and suffering."

"But... What can events of thousands of years ago possibly have to do with us?" Varis asked.

"Demons nearly broke the world, and Blackmoor stood against them," Ana said. "Demons stir again, and it would seem that Blackmoor once again intervenes." She stepped away from her place in the doorway.

"Impossible," I said — speaking before the rest of my thoughts could catch up. I nearly sloshed my own cup of tea, and set it down on the table.

“The records are very clear — Blackmoor, the land, its people, all of it was obliterated, sunk beneath the seas.”

“Not so,” said Listelle. “The passages read ‘Mountains rose where there were none, as others tumbled to become seas. The land and skies were rent asunder, the sun moved in the sky. It shone down on a world remade when the last of the fire and darkness fled.’”

“The druids’ histories read differently.”

“By the time the lore had passed down to your people, much had changed in the telling,” said Nevinia. “In some places, only a word has changed. A phrase. A missing passage. It is very subtle, but very deliberate. The gaps usually appear between Kingdoms. First and second, second and third.”

“Tell me, Thorn, have you studied any of the elven writings?”

“What has that to do with—” Gilliam started, but I raised a hand. Listelle’s question, while seeming to hit me from behind where I was not looking, gave me pause. It was not unrelated, there were strands, weaving it into the web of events in which we were all firmly snared. I closed my eyes, drew a breath, and paced back, back amongst the memories of my middle training years.

The elves are among some of the longest-lived peoples on the world. Some accounts put them at a mere six generations removed from the Great Rain of Fire, and their writings on events are some of the cleanest records that exist.

The most commonly known of the elven poems, of course, is that of the Last Daughter of the Lost Kingdom, set down some five hundred years ago, among the last of the writings before the elven homelands to the north went silent. Hard to forget, because of its haunting, terrible imagery.

Last Daughter of the Lost Kingdom
Keeper of Dreams, Waking Dreamer
Sleeper Wakened, Walker in Moonlight
Blood of Kings, Bane to Those Beyond
Her Life, the Prison’s Binding Chain.

“Surely, you cannot mean that she...” I said, staring at the girl next to me. Small and pale, with hair of gold and eyes that seemed to have seen too much. A girl who spoke a dead language, and bore newly minted coins from a kingdom gone for three thousand years.

Kuric only shrugged when I voiced my suspicions.

“Surely something such as this would not be beyond the men of the World that Was.”

“Thorn, you must ask yourself another question,” Listelle said. “Think not of how it was done, for that knowledge is surely beyond us.”

“But what should I...?”

The frown on Gilliam’s face suddenly lifted. “Why would the elves have any knowledge of one such as her?”

“Why indeed?” Listelle asked, with a satisfied smile.

“The elves of the north put down a demonic invasion,” Ana said. “Their workings of magic are of keen interest to those of my order, and the intricacy of the bindings are still not fully understood, even after centuries of study.”

“But how—”

“Thorn, the demons. They are the link. When they appear, she appears.”

“And what happens, once they are defeated? What becomes of her?” Durin asked.

I shook my head. “I know of no stories that tell that.”

Listelle shook her head as well, as did her assistant.

“I suppose we will find that out for ourselves, then,” Varis said.

“I wish we could just ask her ourselves,” said Durin. “I see that she would have helped us, warned us, many times, if we could but speak.”

“What of your weaving, earlier?” Kuric asked. “You could speak her tongue.”

Listelle shook her head.

“That was a... concoction, a potion, if you will. It took months to prepare, and many, many special ingredients. It is not something one can just ‘whip up.’”

“Well, start whipping,” Durin said, waving his fingers.

“The passes to the elven homeland are closed until spring,” Listelle said. “That was where the bulk of the ingredients were from. But if you were to go there, you may as well just bring the girl and try to find an elf, for her language and that of the oldest of the elven clans are very similar.”

The baron cleared his throat, and we all looked up at him, as he stood by the hearth, warming his hands.

“We may not see a springtime, at the rate this weather is going. It is Risia’s closeness which brings on this untimely cold, I am sure of it.”

“We’ll just climb a ladder and put that star back where it belongs,” Gilliam said with a smirk.

We adjourned for lunch, a hearty soup of chicken and vegetables, with more dumplings that Silva seemed to enjoy so much. Afterwards, Silva and I took up the roll of maps, and looked over them, using the baron’s large dining room table so we could look upon several at once.

Listelle had brought some maps from the Tower, these being very old, and the coastlines did not appear at all to be any I knew. Silva peered at some with intense interest, but ultimately shook her head.

I unrolled one, a map of the entirety of the Known World, and again, once I pointed out our initial location, Silva retraced her steps across the map, down to Specularum, near the coast, along the Westron road, up through Threshold and the Gap. She swung her finger sharply east, then, a winding route through the Black Peaks, up into the Altan Tepes, to southern Rockhome.

“Where next?” I asked.

She seemed to at least understand what I wanted to know, for she glanced over the remainder of the maps, but shook her head. So wherever it was she’d come from wasn’t covered on any of the maps. Which ruled out all the countries of the Known World, the Isle of Dawn, Alphatia and Bellisaria.

If Listelle’s wild notion that the girl was descended of Blackmoor worked out to be true, then that would place her homeland in the frigid oceans beyond Skothar.

The possibilities with the maps exhausted, we returned to the study, where the two women and dwarves were deep in conversation, the two no doubt grilling the dwarves for every kernel of information they could glean about the girl's appearance and what went on in her time with them.

I went to the baron's desk, where the parchment, quill, and ink still stood on the desk. I carefully scribed my name in every language I knew — which consisted of the Thyatian and Traladaran alphabets, a runic representation of the druids' shorthand, and a clumsy attempt at old elven script, the glyphics of my name about the only bits of the meandering script I knew with any certainty.

Ana joined us at the desk, and added my name in the old and newer Alphatian alphabets. Then she handed the quill to the girl.

I pointed to each rendition of my name, pronouncing it, and then the letterings, which again caused the girl to shake her head in frustration.

"Eiaoni zabda 'Thor-n'" she said with a frown. Her pronunciation of my nickname was oddly worked, as though she wanted to roll the "r" and add another syllable to the end.

I took the quill from her, and wrote my other name, which until then, I hadn't used since my Shearing.

"Marcu," I said, showing her which letters made the sounds. It felt strange on my tongue.

This she seemed to grasp, and she drew two intricate characters, which resembled sticks and snakes. I could see shadows of the elven script there, but the lines didn't add up to the proper inflections.

"Mahr-koo" she read, and Ana giggled at the girl's exaggerated pronunciation.

Silva bent, and drew another quick sign, this one looking like rushing water.

"Ahna."

"Andahar?" I asked.

She paled, glancing left and right, at the fireplace, and the braziers about the room, biting her lip.

The name looked remarkably like a sweeping hawk. She scratched through it after we'd gotten a good look.

I took the pen, and scribed my surname, pointing out the syllables and then pointing to where she'd scratched out her family name.

"Marcu Markovic," I read, putting my first and last names together, then I handed the quill back to her.

She chewed at her lip for a good several minutes, shifting from foot to foot. I knew she knew what I'd indicated.

She dipped the quill, and scratched a series of sigils, but she did not read them back to us. They were spidery, suggesting clouds and light — that is the only way I can describe what the symbols looked like to me.

"You will not speak them?" Ana asked, pointing to the name, and then to her lips.

Silva shook her head. "*Uddizati na*," she said, making the same fingers-across-lips gesture she had earlier.

I took the quill, and dripped ink over the string of characters, and the girl seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

If she was involved with old magics, especially the kinds dealing with demons, then she was wise to keep her true name secret.

Best to play safe, and not pry too much more, then. I drew a single stroke on the page.

"One," I said, holding up a finger.

She blinked, then dragged a chair over to the desk, as she'd been standing on tip toes the whole time. She climbed up on the chair, folding her legs beneath her, then held up one of her own fingers.

"*Ekka*," she said.

We traded the words back and forth before we were satisfied with each others' pronunciations, and then I drew a second stroke on the page.

"*Dvha!*" she said, putting up a second finger before I could.

We spent the rest of the afternoon learning numbers, and after a while, the dwarves joined in the instruction, so I began to pick up their language, as well.

Waning half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont
24, 997AC)

I went to bed that night to the sound of the shutters rattling as the wind clawed at them, the same wind whispering, wailing, and moaning against the stone walls.

The silence in the wake of the storm's passing before dawn was jarring enough to awaken me.

When it became apparent after a few tosses and turns that I was not going to be able to return to sleep, I rose, washed and dressed. I was familiar enough now with the halls of the baron's keep to make my way unaided to his study.

To my surprise, the fire in the hearth had been built up. Silva looked up from where she sat before the fire, huddling on the very edge of the thick rug. All I could see of her was her shining silver-gold hair and pale face. She'd enveloped herself in a large, woolen blanket, similar to the one I'd slept under.

"Couldn't sleep, either?" I asked, taking a seat beside her.

"*Neh?*"

I pantomimed waking from sleep, and pointed to my ear, and then towards the windows.

She cocked her head, listening. "*Na tat nizam,*" she said, shaking her head with a frown. Then her eyes brightened in understanding. "*Aa! Bodhat'te Thor-n.*" She made a face as she pronounced my taken name, again, trying to roll the "r" and stifling the "n" sound.

We watched the flames for a bit. Twice, she turned to me, drawing in a sharp breath, as though to say something, and twice, she let it out with a sigh, resting her chin back on her knees.

"It would be nice to have a draught of that potion of Listelle's," I said.

She sat up, glancing at the doorway.

"No," I said. "Listelle drank" — I mimed tipping a cup — "a potion that allowed her to speak to you." I pointed back and forth between our mouths and ears.

"*Listelle na mi'pratimaa,*" she said with a glower.

I didn't need a potion to pick up the girl's dislike of the woman. I didn't know if I liked her or not, either. I certainly did not trust her.

"I guess we don't have to like everyone who helps us," I said.

Silva stared blankly at me for a moment, sighed, and turned back to the fire.

A small hand worked its way out from the front of her blanket, and she pointed to the hearth.

"*Agni*," she said.

"Hearth?" I asked, pointing to the fireplace.

"*Nieah. Etah.*" She pointed her finger within, at the flames themselves

"Fire," I said. And then, tried "*Agni etah firni.*"

Her eyes lit up, and as she smiled, I could swear the flames licked higher in the hearth. "*Saadhu, saddhu!*," she said, clapping.

So there it is. My first sentence of Ancient Thonian.

By the time the household began to awaken, I'd learned the words for most of the items around Halaran's study, and taught her the same in the Common tongue.

Gilliam nearly spat his tea across the table when Silva said "Good morning."

Her eyes went wide, as she started away from the coughing warrior. She turned to me. "Speak... not... right?" she managed, after thinking through the words.

I shook my head, smiling. "No. You just... surprised him."

"When did she pick that up?" Gilliam asked, after he'd drawn a few deep breaths.

"We had some free time this morning," I said. "She's a bright girl. But it's not as if we'd had time to sit down for proper lessons, up until now. Best watch what you say about her from now on."

He grinned at me. "Maybe I should give her some lessons of my own."

"She doesn't need to learn those kinds of words," Ana said, giving him a light punch to the shoulder as she passed behind his chair with a plate of fruit.

The baron was much pleased at his greeting, and breakfast was punctuated with Silva's naming of various implements around the table. As she would name something, I would repeat to myself the words she'd taught me in her own tongue.

After breakfast, Silva made it clear that she wished to go outside. The skies were still gray and low, but there was no hint of snow in the air. So the baron made arrangements in the kitchen for when the girl wished to return, and then closeted himself in his study with the two instructors.

We made our way to the steps of the Keep, and Silva jumped lightly from step to step, seemingly unaffected by the ankle-deep snows piled up in the courtyard. She flounced about for a bit, tossing snow this way and that, flopping on her back and making a winged maiden.

Gilliam had followed her down the steps, but sat upon a clear place on a step, scooping the snow off in a pile at his feet. As the girl played, he calmly sat, packing snowball after snowball, until he had quite a supply built up.

He waited until she'd again exhausted herself enough to catch her breath, and then lobbed a snowball, his aim true, and it plopped onto the back of her head as she bent to catch her breath.

Her panting became a squeal of surprise, her head snapping up, nearly tripping herself as she spun to face her attacker.

And promptly caught a face full of snowball.

She blinked, sputtering, and sat down hard in the snow.

"Gil-ya—" she started, and another snowball choked off her accusing cry.

As he laughed, and lobbed another, Silva winked out of sight.

Gilliam watched footprints and odd indentations appear as if from nowhere, and when the disturbances stopped, he lobbed a volley of snowballs in the general area. His effort was met with more squeals, and there was a shimmering flicker as Silva reappeared, shaking snow from her hair.

She glowered at the tracks she'd made in the snow, then stuck her tongue out at the swordsman, and blinked back out of sight.

"I'll still be able to see you," he sang, and lobbed another few snowballs at the place where she'd disappeared.

They fell on empty space.

Gilliam's smile faltered a bit, and he searched left and right, tossing and catching a snowball in one hand as his eyes swept the courtyard for signs of the girl's passage.

I thought I felt the air grow faintly colder, and felt more than heard a whisper of movement behind me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimmer of motion, a billow of Silva's dark brown cloak and a pale flash of her gown, a flicker of purple-black radiance on her right wrist. But when I turned to look, nothing was there, and the whisper-feeling of presence was gone as well. Ana arched an eyebrow at me.

"Did you feel that? See anything?" I asked her.

"Glimmers. She has crafted illusions, and the Flame reacts to all such deceptions. But I read mischief in her manner, not ill intent."

"So you won't tell him she's sneaking up behind him?"

Ana grinned. "And miss his expression when she strikes? Certainly not."

Gilliam howled as the girl dumped an armful of snow on him from three steps above.

"Revenge *is* a dish best served cold," Varis said to him.

The cook was most displeased when we returned to the kitchens. She all but threw the rough cloth towel at Gilliam, and summoned Ilsa to take the sodden and shivering Silva upstairs for a proper bath.

"I can understand the little one looking as if she'd rolled around in the snow," the cook began.

"Actually, she did. Several times," Varis said, squatting down by the fire and rubbing his arms, the last bits of snow hissing as they fell to the warm stones.

"But you— grown men! — Should know better!"

I wrung out my cloak into one of the nearby waste-water buckets.

"She's still but a girl," Durin said. "And girls need to play, even far from home." His beard dripped. "It was good to hear her laugh."

"It's a wonder you heard anything through the chattering of her teeth!" the cook huffed.

"I just hope she doesn't use any of the words she learned from Gilliam in front of the baron or his guests," Ana said, giving the young man a dark look.

A sound of clattering hooves and shouts interrupted our lunch. The baron rose to his feet at the sound, and his hurried steps quickened further at the thundering of a fist on the great wooden doors.

"Hear, now what is so— Shades of the moon, man, quickly! Ilsa! Hot water, blankets! Quickly now!"

We were on our feet as the baron raised his voice.

He was gently lowering a man to the floor. The man's hair and beard were crusted with ice and snow, the blood on his bluish lips crystalized as well. Ice cracked from his gloved hand as his grip tightened on the baron's arm.

"Verge.... Retameron needs..." The effort was too much, and the man slumped, limp, his breath coming in sharp gasps.

It was a wonder he breathed at all, for he bore a deep wound in his side, perhaps from an axe. Two arrows were snapped off close together within his shoulder. Only the cold had kept him from succumbing to the wounds.

Halaran was already pressing his hands to the worst of the man's wounds, murmuring quietly, his forehead creased with a mixture of worry and effort.

Ilsa and several other servants crowded in through the dining hall, bearing blankets, a large pan of steaming water, and a pile of clean linens.

Varis and Gilliam slipped out to the courtyard, to see to the man's mount, and called for my help as the horse skittered away, eyes rolling in fear.

"Scared half to death!" Gilliam called, ducking away as he tried to grasp the bridle and the horse nipped at him.

I reached out, murmuring to the animal, gradually bringing it down from its panicked state, and could get close without it lashing out with hooves or teeth.

"Not frightened," I said, running my hands over the horse's muzzle. I turned it so the men could see the broken-off shaft protruding from the horse's flank.

"Black shaft," Gilliam said.

“And not dyed,” Varis said with a frown. “The goblins around here mainly use mountain pine. I would be able to tell more from the fletchings.”

“Something tells me we’ll be getting a chance to get up close and personal with whoever fired these arrows,” Gilliam said.

Varis shrugged. “It was beginning to get boring around here, anyway.”

They shared quick, fierce grins, and then I pressed them into service helping to get the horse to the stables, where I got to work removing the arrow.

We found the baron, sitting by the man’s side in the kitchens. They’d set up a cot by the fire, and white wrappings could be seen peeking out from beneath the heavy blankets.

“How is he?” Varis asked.

“Through the worst,” the baron said with a heaviness in his voice. “We’ve closed the worst of the wounds, but the arrows had to be cut out.”

“Had to do likewise for his mount,” Gilliam said. “Nasty bit of work. Black shaft, triple-barbed tip of black iron.”

Halaran nodded.

“Not the crafting of goblins,” I said.

“No, there is only one smith I know that shapes tips thusly.” Halaran said.

“Such a man should be locked up,” Ana spat.

“He is,” the baron said. “His cell is just off to one side of the Black Eagle’s armory.”

“This man came in great haste,” I said. “He seemed to have a message. Was he able to deliver it?”

The baron shook his head. “No, between the exposure, the wounds, and the ride.... It’s a wonder he lived to make it to my doorstep.”

Gilliam shrugged. “That’s too bad. Would be nice to know just what sort of trouble we’re riding into.”

The baron looked up. “I cannot ask you—”

“Then don’t. Just wish us a safe journey.” Varis said, folding his arms.

"I certainly hope you don't plan on leaving without us," Kuric said from the kitchen doorway. He set down the heavy pack. "We'll need to stop by the town to pick up our weapons on the way out."

"With any luck, Lord Kelvin will not dally in sending troops. At most, they will be only a couple days behind my messengers. My friends, I do not know how to thank you for this," the baron said.

"Gold would be—"

Ana swept the haft of her scythe into Gilliam's knee, and he bit off his words with a sharp cry, which sent his horse skittering sideways.

"Let us hope the few days this takes will be clear of storms," Varis said, glancing nervously at the low, brooding clouds.

Varis set as steady a pace as we could manage from the mounts, given the depth of the snows. Some drifts brushed at our ankles, which put them nearly at Silva and the dwarves' waist-level. More than a few times, we had to haul the ponies from particularly deep drifts.

The sun was setting rapidly as we rounded the gap in the pass up to Old Antilles' Castle, and Varis was of a mind to call it a day and set camp within the walls of the old abandoned keep, but a stiff wind from the south brought with it a sharp tang of woodsmoke.

Varis stood sharply in his saddle, and then had the horse at a canter even before he'd settled back down.

"Double time, quickly as you can," he shouted over his shoulder.

"Wh— what of the camp? Dinner?" Durin asked.

"Ride!" Varis shouted. "Verge burns!"

Though the night grew steadily darker, our path only grew brighter, the closer we got to the burning village. The wind carried the snap and popping of timbers aflame, the cries of the wounded, the shrieks of the torch-bearing invaders.

The entire northern side of the village was engulfed in flames, and the winds blowing down through the Foamfire valley only served to stoke the flames higher, push them further and further into the town.

Varis and Gilliam spurred their horses to full gallops as we drew close to the bridge, making for a group of tall, gangling, loping figures. Flames silhouetted hunched shoulders and shaggy jackal-like ears and snouts. They turned towards the advancing fighters, a high, mad, laugh-like bark issuing from their barrel chests.

The two townguardsmen turned, ushering the two families they'd been protecting towards the bridge. Ana and the dwarves were calling, beckoning them to the safety of the far side.

To my surprise, Silva spurred her pony instead of dismounting with the two dwarves.

"Thor-n, *agni!* Fire! Stop!" she called as she raced past, urging the pony into a sharp turn, charging up river, towards the worst of the flames.

The heat was almost enough to make me forget that the worst of midwinter weather hovered above and around us. The air was heavy, thick with smoke and heat and ash.

Silva had abandoned her mount when it refused to go any closer to the burning houses, and I saw her struggling with the bindings on her left arm, hair and cloak whipping about her, banners of light and dark amidst the flames.

"You're mad!" I called to her, above the crackling roar, as I pulled at the knots.

"*Agni,*" she called, pointing with her other hand at the fire.

"I know!" I said. "*Firni!*"

She nodded, flapping her arm to unravel the cloth faster.

"Thor-n *harat'ti firni,*" she said, making a gathering motion with her arms.

My jaw dropped. Of course. I'd been worried about extinguishing the torches in **Koriszegy's** tower by drawing too heavily upon them. Now that was exactly the idea. There was just one flaw....

"Too big," I said. I gestured at the wall of flames, taller than both of us combined.

Silva smiled, and patted my hand.

"Saaja?"

She didn't wait for my reply, but turned, and held left arm straight up.

The red stone was nearly at my eye level, and I saw it burst to life, a thousand glints of gold and yellow light dancing madly within the strangely-veined depths.

The metal lacework along the girl's forearm caught the light of the flames, and became a mesmerizing pattern of orange, red, and yellow.

I blinked, and then realized that the metal wasn't reflecting the light... It was answering the flames with a glow of its own.

And the flames had died to barely enough to wreath the first home.

I reached out to those flames, calling to the essence within the fire, the spark of life that hungered for something more to devour. I bent my will to the task, and instead of simply teasing out a hint of the flame, I pulled, hauling as the fisherman does his netting.

The fierce rush of energy nearly knocked me down. Earlier, I had taken merely a few drops, as if a small sip from a cup. The torrent of energy this time hit me like a waterfall.

"Nadii, nadii!" Silva cried, pointing frantically towards the Foamfire.

I turned my attention to the river, reversing my pull on the flames, and went to my knees as the energy surged out of me. The Foamfire boiled, the steam billowing away as the thermals from the fire behind us caught them.

The world swam in my vision, and my ears rang and roared as I shook my head to clear it.

I blinked, and found Silva leaning over me, patting my back. I rose shakily to my feet, and the girl steadied me.

"Ekka," she said. *"One!"*

There were at least a dozen more buildings aflame.

The night is a blur, a shimmering haze in my memories. All my attention was focused on the fires, drawing them down, and then throwing the energy at the river. My head pounded, my lungs burned, with the heat, and exertion. My arms and

shoulders ached, as if I'd picked up each home, and dipped it into the river, and then carried it back. And my hands, as careful as I'd been, still blistered in a few places.

As I staggered from blaze to blaze, leaning more and more heavily on my staff as the night wore on. Silva skipped, without a sign of weariness, her eyes wide and bright, shimmering with the colors of the flames, just as the bracer on her wrist did.

I do not remember ever finishing our task. At some point, I felt her small hand grip mine, and let her guide me. But it was not into the heat and glare of another burning building that we went, but the far side of the bridge.

A cup was pressed into my hand, and I drank, and water had never tasted so sweet.

"Slowly, slowly," I heard Gilliam say.

I sat, and sipped, and stared at the hasty triage camp Ana and the dwarves had set up. Most families sat, huddled together, wrapped in the few blankets we'd brought with us. Several guardsmen stood at attention, around the perimeter, while another lay to the side, where Kuric and Durin were applying a splint to the man's arm. He appeared to be the last of the injuries, and of those, there were not just a few. Villagers, men, women, children, lay as comfortably as Ana and the dwarves could manage, bandages bright against soot-stained clothing.

I turned at the sound of hooves on the bridge, and saw Varis and Gilliam, leading a contingent of townguardsmen, the men burdened with every scrap of cloth they could get ahold of.

A flash of white and gold in the corner of my eye diverted my attention away from the men distributing the blankets and cloaks, and I turned to see Silva ghosting silently to the far side of where the dwarves worked, where there were more bundles — the covered forms of those who hadn't made it.

I pulled myself to my feet, shoulders, legs, back responding slowly, stiffly. Ana looked up as I passed her, giving my hands a hard glare.

"Thorn, let me—"

"A moment," I told her.

Past the dull roar of quiet conversation, orders, and the weeping of families reunited, there came a quiet, hiccuping sob from further ahead. A few short, shaking breaths, and then more sobbing.

I picked out Silva's voice, then, quiet but clear, murmuring with a low, steady, reassuring cadence. Though I could not make out the words, and wouldn't have understood them even if I had heard them, the intent was quite clear.

Silva knelt beside another girl, arm about her shoulder, holding the girl's head against her shoulder, left hand stroking the ash-and-soot-streaked blonde tresses. The stone upon her wrist flickered, the motes dancing angrily, and though her face showed concern, her eyes glittered in concert with the strange stone.

I stood back, not wishing to intrude, and gradually, the other girl's sobbing quieted, Silva eventually slipped away, but not before draping her cloak about the girl's shoulders. She took the girl's hand, and led her towards me, and I walked with them to Ana.

Without a word, Silva placed the girl's hand in Ana's. The cleric's eyes widened, and she drew in a short, sharp breath, and then quickly bent to the girl, taking her over towards where the soldiers were trying to organize the families.

The girl looked up at me briefly as they passed, and I recognized her through the tear-streaked soot as one of the girls with whom Ana and I had shared a cell those long weeks ago.

Silva watched Ana depart with her charge, then drew herself up, and stalked — it is the only word I can use to describe the total change in her way of movement — towards Gilliam and Varis and another man, with whom they were deep in conversation.

"Pazu da. Aleva?"

The three men turned, looking down at the girl. They glanced at each other, and then at me.

"I think she—"

"Pazu eta bandii? Harat'ta pazu tvam? Aam?"

I pondered her words as the three men simply frowned. Silva glanced from face to face, her expression stern, as though she were addressing schoolboys, rather than grown, armed men.

"I think... She wishes to know if you have... taken..." I managed, and then lowered myself to the girl's eye level. "'Pazu'? *Idam kim?*"

I could see the impatience flare briefly in her smoldering eyes, and she took a deep breath. "*Pazu*," she said, and then hunched her back, hooking her fingers as if they were claws, and bared her teeth.

The man with Gilliam and Varis barked a laugh, and then swallowed it immediately as the girl turned her eyes on him. Her whole bearing thrummed with a tension, a tightness about her mouth, the corners of her slightly tilted eyes.

He bent, leaning, hands on his knees, closer to the girl's eye level, but still causing her to look up to meet his gaze. "And why would you wish to know if we have one of these brutes prisoner, young lady?"

A flicker of frustration crossed the girl's brow, and she turned to me.

"Have you?" I asked the man.

"One was wounded, and the smith gave him quite a knot on the head with a crossbeam. I had the men secure it in the cellars beneath the town hall."

"*Nayaakemi*," Silva said sharply, pointing to herself, and then gesturing towards the village.

"My Lord Retameron," I said. "I believe she wishes you to take her to your prisoner."

The other man straightened, a frown etching deep along his brow. "I most certainly will—"

"I would advise you to take her there with all speed, m'lord," Varis said.

"She is but a child! I will not—"

"M'lord," Varis said, "she may look young, but she has knowledge, skills well beyond her apparent years. She wears my knife at her belt. She took it from me, and is more than capable of using it to defend herself."

"Very well," the man said, turning on his heel and walking stiffly across the bridge. "But if she is harmed, it will be on your heads, not mine."

"Silva? I'm more worried about the poor gnoll," Gilliam whispered as we filed across the bridge.

Gilliam was right to worry.

Lord Retameron led us to the large stone building in the center of town. One of his men followed us down the cellar steps, a torch aloft. A massive figure hunched against the far wall of the room, its overly long arms held above the doglike head by a pair of manacles secured to the wall by a large iron spike. Another spike had been driven into the floor, and it secured leg shackles of the same dark metal.

Silva looked for a long time at the beast, her anger temporarily overcome by curiosity. She watched the creature, its head hanging, eyes closed, the muzzle slightly parted as the thing breathed noisily. She peered at the arms, the broad chest easily as wide as the dwarves combined. She saw the hard, claw-like nails on the massive hands.

Satisfied she could learn no more from the creature just by looking, she stepped to within four paces of the thing, and clapped her hands sharply together several times.

We all flinched at the sound. Her small hands, combined with the stone surroundings made our ears ring.

Mildly painful for us, but an agony for the prisoner, who's snout jerked up, its howl of pain adding to the din of the room, punctuated by the rattle of chains as it fought the manacles to try to cover its ears.

"Kimarth'am atra asti?"

The gnoll blinked, shaking its head. The thing's ears twitched.

Silva repeated her question, and the gnoll still stared at her, silent. It shook its head, growling something under its breath.

Silva paced a semicircle, keeping herself within the gnoll's field of vision. It met her eyes, the muzzle curling back, a growl rumbling deep in its throat. Silva held its gaze, and then she growled right back at the thing. But she wasn't just growling. She was throwing inflections and stops into the sound.

Its eyes widened slightly, and it actually sat up straighter, barking its laugh-like bark.

Silva silenced it with another series of sharp claps, and snarled something at the beastman.

All of us glanced at each other, then back and forth from the girl to the gnoll as they snarled and growled. The tone of the conversation was clear: Silva would ask a question, the gnoll would try to evade it, and Silva would cut him off with a series of claps, causing the beast to flinch and whine. She would cup her hands slightly if it showed particular reluctance to answer, and that would cause the beastman to howl in pain, its answers coming shortly thereafter in a series of whining, groveling pants. Through it all, Silva never once broke eye contact.

Like the *primus* wolf in a pack, her every motion, her very bearing radiated a sense of dominance, of authority and superiority over the prisoner. I had a feeling that there was little need for the thing to be chained as it was, at the wrist and ankle. No doubt Silva would have had it cowering in the corner, tail between its legs.

She snarled one last question, and the gnoll simply growled, deep in its chest. She asked again, and the growl only deepened. The mood in the air changed, then, and the gnoll's growl became a sharp, coughing bark, and its great shoulders heaved.

The spike securing the manacles to the wall came free with a grating shriek, and we flung ourselves to one side or the other as it hurtled past us, clanging as it bounced off the far wall and across the floor.

The gnoll snapped its wrists and the loop of dark iron chain fell over Silva, the beast hauling her towards its great gaping jaws with a heave of those long arms.

Silva threw her arm up before her face, right in the path of the gnoll's jaws. Gnolls have been known to snap through bones of their victims, using their claws to dig the very marrow from those bones.

I lifted my eyes from where I'd thrown myself to the floor, I saw the white flash of fangs as they closed on Silva's right forearm.

Varis and Gilliam were both scrambling to their feet, swords already drawn, poised to strike, but they paused.

There was no 'crack' of snapping bone, no cry, not a sound from the girl. Her eyes were still locked with the beastman's.

"*Yudh'ya na.*" She closed her left hand around the things massive hand, curling her fingers around where the thumb connected to the rest of the paw.

“*Dráva na.*” She gave a sharp wrench, breaking the thing’s grip and twisting its clawed hand back sharply. We very clearly heard joints popping, saw the thing’s jaws clench, its shoulder twist as it tried to compensate for the angle the girl forced its hand.

“*Mrya’ti na.*” She clenched her right hand into a fist. A flare of purplish-black radiance burst from within the creature’s mouth, the light streaking out from between its knifelike teeth. Its jaw muscles bunched further, and every muscle suddenly went rigid, the beast’s dark eyes widened enough that we could see the whites. The deep, rumbling growl climbed to a high, whining, yelp of pain. Then that cut off in a choking gurgle as Silva wrenched her arm from its mouth.

The gauntlet flickered with ghostly chasers of purple, black, and blue-white light. The stone shed a smoky purplish-black light that seemed almost a *non*-radiance.

Trailing from the thing’s mouth, twined through Silva’s fingers, snaked around the length of her upper arm was a wispy, misty tendril.

“Balls and garters,” Retameron breathed, his eyes nearly as wide as those of the gnoll.

The beast stood a head and a half taller than even Varis, and should have positively towered over the girl. Had it struck while she was unaware, no doubt the gnoll could have torn the girl to shreds with teeth and claws.

It covered before her, squatting down on its haunches, cradling the mangled paw. It panted, drawing quick, wheezing gasps, its tongue lolling out to one side.

Silva breathed just as heavily. The dark stone flickered, purple bursts of light throbbing within the depths, like the beating of some dark heart. The girl clenched her hand into a tight fist, and the beast howled, a high, trilling, ragged cry. A twist of her wrist sent the creature writhing, hunching, scuttling a few awkward steps sideways.

She lifted one finger from the fist she’d made, and the creature did likewise, the foreclaw of its undamaged hand uncurling, the muscles on its arm bunching, betraying its futile effort to fight the girl’s control.

The beast gave a whimper as Silva's finger twitched but the slightest. The gnoll's claw jerked across its body, gouging into its other arm, high up, near the elbow. Its jaws worked, but the howl came out a strangled, choking cough.

"Evelina'ti jananii asti," she said, and the gnoll's finger raked across its arm, opening a deep vertical gash. Again, the beast let out a thready whimper.

"Evelina'ti janaka asti," she said, as the gnoll opened another gash in its furred arm.

The gnoll's clawed hand shook, and it wrenched its snout in our direction.

"Nieah," Silva barked, jerking her hand up, the light from the stone flaring as she did. A sooty, purple-blackness flickered to life in her eyes, and the silver swam into a shimmering blue-white, the color identical to what chased along the whorls and twists of her gauntlet.

She flicked her hand to the side.

The gnoll lurched that direction, the leg buckling, and it slammed into the wall with an audible crunching of bone, the yelp cut off as the breath was driven from it.

She turned towards us.

When those eyes fell upon me, it was as if a twisting, chilling sickness uncoiled deep in my gut. I shuddered, as if the night had suddenly gone even colder, and even still, sweat sprang up, over the chills.

"Kiyat?" she asked, her attention on Sir Retameron.

The knight looked over at me, his face reflecting much of what I was feeling.

"She asks 'how much' or 'how many?' my Lord," I said, remembering the question from our little game of sums and differences in Halaran's study.

"How many what?" he whispered.

"Dead," Gilliam said, his voice carrying the slightest of tremors in it.

The knight swallowed, licked his lips, frowning.

"I do not approve of this," he said. The white-knuckled grip on the hilt of his sword shook, whether with rage or fright, I could not tell.

"You're more than welcome to stop her," Gilliam said, forcing a chuckle.

"Kiyat?" Silva asked again, her tone insistent. Her right arm trembled, and she tightened her fist. She frowned, in concentration, and a wave of nausea rolled over us as the unsettling light in her eyes flickered brighter.

Sweat broke out upon the knight's brow, and he paled.

"No! You will not use your witchery on me," he whispered, the words stiff, as if he could barely force them past his lips.

"Kiyat? Namaan'taan."

"No," the knight said, more a groan than a word. He took a step forward, his hand tensing on the hilt of the sword at his side.

The sickness washed over us like a tide, and I nearly went to my knees with the weakness and trembling. I heard Gilliam and Varis both gasp, heard the scuffle of their boots as they, too, were staggered by the sudden onslaught. There was a ring of steel on stone as Varis dropped his sword, and it sounded as though he was being violently sick.

Retameron's skin had taken a decidedly greenish cast to it, but he managed to slide his sword free from its scabbard.

"Release my prisoner, witchling."

The swirling of light in her eyes slowed, as she looked up at the man, and their eyes met for long moments.

"Myata'ti visravat," she said, her eyes and tone hard with scorn.

She made a sweeping, dismissive gesture with her right hand and arm, and the wispy tendril streamed away from around her gauntlet, running between her fingers in a disturbingly snakelike fashion, to snap back into the gnoll with a nearly physical impact. It staggered against the wall, then sank to its haunches, panting madly.

Lord Retameron took another step towards the girl, raising his sword.

She simply stared up at him, the light flickering more and more weakly in her eyes, until they regained their cool, depthless silvery hue.

"My Lord Retameron," I said.

"She is a witch, in traffic with demonic powers."

"She is neither of those, my Lord."

"She used witchery on a prisoner in my charge!"

“And she could just as easily use it on you, yet she does not. My Lord, please, lower your weapon before she sees you as a threat.”

“She—”

“She saved half your village from burning down,” Gilliam said.

“She has saved one of your villagers, before. I recognized her, from beneath Mistamere.”

“That girl lost her parents in this attack,” I said. “I think Silva has taken that personally.”

The tension eased a bit from the knight’s shoulders, yet he did not lower the blade.

“My Lord, if you won’t be reasonable, be practical,” Varis said. “The girl interrogated the beast. If you kill her, you lose that information.”

“*Adhi’taan aayat*,” she said, pointing towards the gnoll, which hunched over its wounded arm, licking it. Then she pointed over her head. “*Zhrna?*” She pointed to her ear.

From the stairwell, the faintest of echoes could be heard: Laughing, cackling howls.

Dozens of them.

We approached half a dozen men standing in a knot at the near side of the bridge.

“How many men are able?” the knight asked.

“Us, and another half dozen. They’re on the other side, moving the families further away.”

“It sounds like at least three, probably four warpacks,” Varis said.

“Four to one. I’ve gambled on a lot worse odds,” Gilliam said.

Silva had cocked her head, listening. She unsheathed her dagger, and began making lines in the damp ground.

Varis looked down, motioned for one of the men to bring the lantern closer.

Silva had drawn a rough outline of the village.

“*Pazu atra, atra, atra*,” she said, marking spots some distance from the outlines of the buildings.

"Can she tell how many?" Gilliam asked.

"*Kiyat?*" I asked her.

Gilliam held out his fingers. Silva counted off four of them.

"Four isn't a lot," Gilliam said.

"Ten," she said, pointing to each finger.

Gilliam swallowed.

"Nonsense," Retameron said. "How can she know that just by listening?"

"*Pazu kathayami,*" she said with a glare at the knight.

"The beast told her," I translated.

She stood up, looked past Retameron at the group of townguards.

"*Paryapta na,*" she said, shaking her head. She looked at the man holding the lamp. His greaves and gloves were coated with smears of blood.

Silva sniffed it.

"Sorry, m'lady. Didn't have time to wash up. Bloody gnolls weigh a ton," he said. "Nearly strained something clearing away the casualties."

"*Kiyat?*"

"Had to be at least a dozen of them," he said. "Maybe a few more."

She glanced over at me, and I translated the numbers for her. She frowned, absently biting her lip.

Varis and Retameron were squatting over Silva's scratched representation of the village.

"If we station teams in each building here, and here, and here, a fighting withdrawal might whittle enough of them down by the time we reach the bridge," Varis was saying.

The knight nodded. "Risky, but it's better than just waiting for them to come at us full strength at the bridge.

"I still don't understand why you don't use the keep," Gilliam said, pointing towards the stone building, a shadowy mass atop the high slope on the far end of the village.

"Deathtrap in this weather. We'd never survive a siege. They'd swarm the walls. Better to run for the safety of Old Antilles' keep. Much better defenses there."

“If you don’t mind fighting your way through the monsters that keep squatting there,” Varis grumbled.

“The children could take on the goblins and kobolds,” Retameron said with a wave of his hand.

“Faster, Brother mine,” Kuric said, passing another blade to the dwarf.

“I’m working as quickly as I can, Brother mine,” Durin growled, dipping his fingers into the small clay pot by his knee. He sighted down the length of the blade, then began working the oil on his fingers along the length of steel in a swirling, looping pattern that my eyes could not follow.

“It feels no different,” the guardsman said, giving the blade a few passes in the air before him.

“It won’t, until you strike,” Gilliam said with a fierce grin. “Then watch out for your eyebrows.”

After several minutes, Durin handed the blade back to his brother, who in turn handed it back to another guardsman.

“I have just enough for a couple daggers,” Durin said. “Where is Silva? I’ll do hers first.”

They all glanced at me. As if I were her keeper for the night.

I glanced around. Ana was off towards the rear of the makeshift campsite, and had several girls cutting strips of cloth for bandages. I’d thought Silva was among them.

Durin stood up. “We’ve got to—”

“No time,” Retameron said. “Those warpacks are nearly through the treelines. I need you two with me, in the village.

“But—”

“I guess the witch only takes beasts on one at a time,” the knight said. “Let the little witch hide. She’d just be in the way, anyway.”

“Remember your part,” Gilliam said, from where we crouched on one of the rooftops.

“Yes, yes. Keep them from firing any of the buildings. And illuminate the larger threats.”

“Striking a pack leader sometimes throws them into confusion. The seconds have been known to squabble for the spot, should the *primus* go down. We can use all the chaos we can get.

“And stop looking for Silva,” he hissed at me, as I glanced about. “I need your eyes on that treeline. Maybe Antonic was right. With her out of the way, we can focus on the battle, instead of worrying over whether or not she is in danger.”

We huddled, cloaks tight around us, waiting for the gnolls to clear the trees.

Waning half moon of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont
25, 997AC)

“Motion,” I said, pointing to a deeper shadow within the darkness of the trees. Firelight from the picket fires Retameron had ordered built along the edge of the village glinted off metal and fang.

Below us, the soldiers’ armor jingled as they eased from foot to foot.

A glimmer from the very corner of my eye caught my attention, and I looked back, over my shoulder. But the light had subsided, if it had been there at all.

“Thorn! Eyes front! They’re on the move.” Gilliam hissed, laying a shaft across his bow.

The trees rustled, but it was a different sound than that of the wind. Harder, sharper. More deliberate.

A large group burst from the trees off to our left, from the far side of the village. I didn’t realize just how fast gnolls could move — the ones from the preliminary strike had merely loped along.

I raised my hand, but Gilliam restrained me.

“No, this is just a probe.” He gave a sharp whistle, and then rose, braced himself along the roof, drawing and firing in a smooth, practiced motion.

He and another archer two houses away took down half of the gnolls before they’d even reached the picket fires. The formation broke, the beastmen running for the trees with yips and whines.

Two more large groups of shadows broke from cover, and Gilliam again fired smoothly, almost mechanically.

“Four left!” he shouted.

“Three!” cried the other archer.

The beasts raced between the first line of buildings, and there came a yelp and sharp twanging, as if a great bow had been plucked.

Three gnolls went to their backs, gagging, panting, and Kuric and Durin were there, axes flashing in the dim firelight.

The fourth stopped short, turned, and made to sprint back to the treeline, and Gilliam dropped him with an arrow through the throat.

The sound of swords on shield and armor could be heard, and a harsh, barking yelp that cut off abruptly.

“Clear!” came a cry from several houses down.

“Clear!” shouted Kuric. He raised his axe towards us.

We huddled back down, trying to keep out of the stiff wind blowing down from the Foamfire valley. It smelled of heavy snow.

When the gnolls finally charged, it was in a long line that strung between three of the picket fires.

The gnolls in the front flung longspears, and Gilliam and I had to duck back down as several flew overhead. Another landed with a heavy thud, the tip sinking halfway into the rooftop support beam.

The volley of flaming arrows came next. I spread my magic as far as I could, intercepting the flames along the first three houses where we’d stationed ourselves, the streamers of flame shrinking and shrinking until the arrows merely trailed smoke as they fell home amidst the rooftops.

I sent the flames back at the gnolls in a long wave, and broke the leftmost length of the charge.

Gilliam’s arrows followed my flames, and he began dropping the first rank, sending other gnolls tripping over their fallen comrades.

More spears sailed up in long arcs, and Gilliam only weaved aside at the last moment, intent on dropping as many as he could from as far away as possible.

The gnolls ran in a hunched, stoop-shouldered gait, and it made it difficult to pick out which might be a warpack leader. They all looked huge and menacing, howling, their barking laughter giving their charge a surreal quality.

“Spearmen, brace! Shields front!” Retameron shouted. Below, we heard the tramp of feet as his men spread out between the three buildings we’d selected for our first line.

Looking at the size of the wave of slavering beastmen charging towards us, our small wall of resistance seemed pitiful.

“Halav, give us strength!” one of the soldiers shouted, and the others took up the cry.

I closed my eyes, reached out towards the picket fires, towards two of the distant houses which had caught fire from the volley of arrows.

By the time the gnolls raced into range, I was ready, and released the heat I'd gathered in wide band, settling it over the far edge of the charge.

There was a harsh barking, snarling, and yapping as the rightmost edge of the charge broke.

A cheer went up from the men, and then the gnolls smashed into the wall of shields and spears.

Gilliam charged to the edge of the roof, loosing arrow after arrow into the mass of gnolls.

At the rear of one knot of the beastmen, one larger than the others reared up, waving a great club in challenge.

I sent the heat in the air towards him, and called the air to my aid as well, and a hazy, reddish nimbus sprang up around the warpack leader.

Gilliam and the other archer both saw it, and they each took the great gnoll in the throat. It clutched at the shafts, its shout trailing to a gurgle, and then it fell into the howling mass of gnolls.

That pocket erupted in fierce yapping and snarling, and rather than fighting us, they began to turn their swords on each other.

"Fall back! Back to the second line!"

The men below began easing back, spears bristling from between the shields, and the gnolls howled, gathering to follow.

I drew a handful of fire from the air, and flung it at the gnoll's feet, and the oil they'd been tracking through burst into a wall of yellow and orange flames. As they yipped and yelped, the men broke and ran for the second defensive line Retameron and Varis had set up, another line of buildings halfway through the village.

Gilliam and I slid from the rooftops, weaving our way through the buildings to our second post.

We paused to fight off a group of gnolls that had managed to work their way through along the perimeter, my staff and Gilliam's swords making short work of the three beastmen.

Gilliam leapt atop the wagon that had been parked by the home that was to be our second vantage point, and from there up onto the roof. It took me considerably more effort to haul myself up.

I very nearly fell back over the other side of the roof when I got to my feet.

"Petra's tears," Gilliam said.

"Halav preserve us," I prayed.

"That is a lot more than forty," Gilliam said.

That many alone boiled along the streets we'd retreated down. Another large group could be seen swinging in from the far left.

"Two more warpacks at least," Gilliam moaned.

"When I was a child, I would play at Halav the Hero," I said. "But I never once thought I would really die fighting gnolls."

The men holding shield wall finally gave way, dropping their spears and drawing swords. It was close, deciding who's shouts of fright and shock were louder as the swords burst into bright orange flame — the men or the gnolls.

The men, though, took advantage of the moment of shock the wreaths of flames along the length of their swords inspired in the gnolls, and cut down the first two lines crowding to attack.

Kuric and Durin were fairly outlined in great swathes of flame, as fast as their axes worked. Let it not be said that dwarves are slow, or clumsy. I could swear that Durin worked some magic in the paths his hand axes traced in the air, for though arrows occasionally flashed through the air, those coming close to him either simply missed when they should have hit home, or burst into flame and ash as they struck the glowing wake left by his weapons.

Another warchief roared, wading through the throng, and as the gnolls cowered from his path, I focused the essence of flames around him. Though I could take some energy from the men and beasts alike, the flames on their weaponry slipped through my grasp, as if they weren't truly there. My fingers tingled with the effort of holding the flames around the gnoll, sweat beading my brow

The men at the front line leapt to meet the great gnoll, and he batted them aside, leaving them bloodied, one clutching his face, another his sword arm.

Gilliam planted several arrows in the creature's back, but it merely reached back, snapping off the shafts with a snarl.

And then Retameron was there, meeting the beast blow for blow, the ring of their swords carrying over even the din of battle around us. It readily became apparent just why the Grand Duke had bestowed knighthood upon the man. Even as he fought, he bellowed orders for his men to retrieve the wounded.

Gilliam and the other archer kept the gnolls from pressing the men as they dragged their fellow guardsmen back from the lines, and Varis was there, sword and borrowed shield in hand, keeping the tide of gnolls back.

I won't say he was anything flashy — Varis' style was efficient, a frugality of movement, knowing that he'd have to raise his sword again and again, and made the most of each thrust and chop. He rallied two more men to his side, and it became apparent that he was much more effective fighting as part of a group than on his own, as was Gilliam.

The gnollish warchief finally found an opening in Retameron's style, and with a feint and spin, sent his blade deep into the man's leg, howling.

It wasn't a weakness, though, for Retameron simply gritted his teeth and drove his blade through the chief's neck, turning its victory howl into a rattling gurgle.

As the knight staggered back and away from the great chieftain's body, he called, his voice heavy with exhaustion, "Fall back! To the third line! We'll hold them at the bridge!"

This time, we had barrels of oil, and men fired them, then poured them down the streets to cover our retreat.

We didn't have as much time as we'd calculated, though, for it began to snow.

While it wasn't enough to blind us, the flurries masked the movement of the gnolls, allowing them to slip closer and closer. By the time we reached the bridge,

the fragile lead we'd had on the warpacks had shrunk to the distance of the market square.

Through the haze of snow and smoke, we saw at least three more warpack leaders, stalking towards the front lines, barking orders to the left and right. The gnolls began spreading out, breaking up from their clusters and packs as they'd come at us in the village, encircling the approach to the bridge.

"Why do they wait?" Ana asked, looking up from treating one of the wounded men. A silvery light shone from between her fingers as she spread them over the side of the man's face. "They have us, why are they not charging, finishing this?"

Gilliam squinted through the snows. "It looks like the chiefs are arguing."

As we watched, the larger among them slapped the flat of his blade across another's snout, and two sections of the gnoll lines tensed, eyeing each other warily.

The larger chief then turned, gesturing towards the teeming beastmen, and they began to bark and yap, their eerie, laughing howls rising louder and louder into the night.

Then they began an agonizingly slow approach.

We'd lost at least four men between the first and second lines, and that many more were being treated by Ana. Retameron leaned heavily on another of his guardsmen. The two others adjusted the grips on their swords, swallowing nervously.

Gilliam drew his short swords, and Varis tightened the straps of the shield on his left arm. Kuric and Durin stood, their axes held in what appeared to be a relaxed position. Their eyes and shoulders indicated anything but relaxation, though.

I set my feet, where I stood at the foot of the bridge. Though I wasn't much, I would have to hold off anything that got through at least long enough for Ana to gain her feet. Her scythe lay close at hand, but her attention was on the wounded men.

A howling from the rear of the gnoll lines halted their approach, the war leader straightening up, his snout jerking over his shoulder, his barking high, edged more with annoyance than concern.

When the howling continued, and only grew louder, he turned fully, roaring.

From the rear, off towards our left, the snows were lit by a ghostly, flickering blueish light. And the howling came from that direction, turning barks and yaps of surprise to the sharp snapping yelps and growls of combat. The line of gnolls wavered, and then it turned on itself, the gnolls beginning to gather and drift towards the disturbance at the rear of their lines. The steady ring of steel-on-steel indicated a battle joined, and heating.

Gilliam grabbed my arm, motioning with his chin towards the mill by the river, where the gnoll line had dissolved, leaving an opening.

“But the—”

“Come on, chronicler! Don’t you want a better view of this for your history lessons?”

“They fight amongst themselves, there is no mystery in that,” I panted, as he kicked the door open and hauled me through.

I followed him up a ladder, and through the trapdoor onto the roof. I nearly ran into him, as he’d stopped dead with two rungs to go. He scrambled up and do the side, hauling me up.

“Why did you stop?”

“Thorn, look,” he said, pointing towards the market square, where the action was taking place.

The gnolls were indeed fighting each other.

But the attacking warpack was limned with a hazy nimbus of light. Their eyes and mouths shone with a brilliant blue-white light.

As did the gaping wounds upon their bodies, blazing through the rents in armor and the hides they wore as clothing.

While the defending gnolls howled and barked in their fear and fury, the attackers were silent and fluid, deadly in their onslaught.

And standing in the midst of the pack, shrouded in a blue-white nimbus of her own, her eyes ablaze with the same cold, steel-edged light, was Silva.

A tracery of lines and swirls stood out stark against her pale, shining skin, painted designs running beneath her eyes, across her high cheeks. She'd continued the tracery of the bracers, the bright metal seeming to give way to whatever dark paint she'd used, tracing up to her elbows, and working across her upper arms. Her ankles, too, bore a flamelike pattern of the dark paint, visible when the wind whipped at her gown, which blazed painfully white about her.

"Do not ask me to explain it," I said to Gilliam. "This... this is even beyond legends."

"She's slaughtering them," Gilliam whispered. I could not tell if his tone was one of awe, or fear.

Silva's warpack fought with the dancelike grace that Silva herself had demonstrated on a few occasions. One blocked a gnoll spear with crossed blades, lunging forward, teeth clamping down on the throat of its aggressor, shaking, turning, letting the dead gnoll fall to meet another.

Silva approached the fallen gnoll, her pack cleaving back the press of living gnolls as she moved, a wall of steel and fang and claw that kept a good half dozen yards clear around the girl. She knelt, her right hand above the gnoll's sightless eyes. She drew Varis' knife across the back of her hand, clenching her fist, her blood falling in a dark line across the thing's furred brow. She drew her finger through it, then dabbed her fingers in the gaping wound at the thing's throat.

She swiped another line beneath each of her eyes, rising, extending her hand over the gnoll. There was a crackling of blue white along the gauntlet, the stone flared, and the blue-white fire began to flicker in the thing's eyes.

I saw the girl's lips move, saw her trace something in the air with her right hand, and the gnoll gave a shudder as the guttering blue light leapt to brilliance, flooding from eyes, maw, and the terrible wounds it had just received.

It flowed to its feet more than stood, took up its spear, and began a spinning dance of death.

The living hacked at the slain, to little effect. One of Silva's gnolls lost its arm below the elbow. There was no spray of blood, the gnoll didn't even pause, but

thrust the stump into the maw of its attacker, hacking down into its neck with its good arm.

When one of her warpack was too badly damaged to rise, Silva knelt, lay her hand upon the thing's brow, and closed its eyes. The blue-white flames flickered and died, and she found another of the slain upon which to bestow them.

The cries of relief rising from the bridge stopped as Silva's gnolls hacked down the last of the living before them.

The ghostly warpack paused, briefly, and there was a long moment of cold, fearful silence. Then Silva turned her blazing eyes north, directing her pack's blades against the living packs still milling about closest to the river. More and more of the living chose to flee rather than fighting.

Gilliam and I slid down the ladder. I don't know how he could look upon the carnage. I took a few glances, and then promptly set my eyes on the river.

My footing slipped as we passed through the place where Silva's army had paused before the bridge.

"Steady, there Thorn," Gilliam said, grabbing my arm.

"I'm all right. But I slipped in something."

We glanced down at a sizable pool of blood. It was dark, but not as dark as that of the gnolls.

Ana had crossed the bridge, and leaned heavily upon her scythe. Her features had a bit of a greenish cast to them as well.

She knelt, touched her fingers to the blood.

"Still warm." She glanced ahead, and then to her right, where it marked a steady trail upriver. "We have to stop her."

"She's making mincepies out of those gnolls!" Gilliam said.

"This is hers," Ana said, thrusting her fingers beneath the warrior's nose.

"Nonsense. Those gnolls haven't even laid so much as a whisker on her."

Ana was already running. I followed, three or four paces behind.

The sound of battle seemed too loud in the cold air after the long, running stretch of silence as we followed Silva's path of destruction.

We came to a stop at the edge of the village to find Silva's pack engaged with another pack of large, dark-furred gnolls. The ground was littered with several corpses already, from both sides. As we watched, one of the larger gnolls swept a greatsword down in a powerful overhead chop, splitting a ghostly gnoll nearly clean down the middle.

Silva screamed, bending double as the gnoll under her power burst into a pillar of blue-white flame.

While it had the effect of causing the dark-furred gnoll to leap back with a bark of surprise, the blow left Silva down on one knee, clutching her side, coughing.

The handful of gnolls still under her spell closed ranks, surrounding her, swords up in guard position.

"They won't last against those brutes," Gilliam said, drawing his swords and charging.

"Fool of a man!" Ana shouted after him. Nevertheless, her grip on the shaft of her scythe changed, and she began chanting as she started to skip a complex pattern, turning, spinning, the scythe gathering light with every turn. By the time she reached the climax of her chant, the blade was a shining blur, and the collected light burst forth in a wave, falling over Gilliam, Silva, and the remains of her warpack.

It fell over the other gnolls as well, but they howled in agony, shielding their eyes, momentarily stunned by the burst of light.

Gilliam leapt into that opening, his own blades a-whirl, and he forced two of the huge gnolls back away from the girl.

Ana's scythe lost none of its momentum, between the sweeping blade and the end of the shaft, she'd pushed another two gnolls back as well.

Twin plumes of flame flew through the snow-touched darkness, and another of the gnolls howled as Durin's axes buried themselves in the thing's chest and shoulder. A shouted word from the dwarf, as he huffed up the trail caused the two weapons to burst into higher flame, and the gnoll's scream trailed into a ragged gurgle as it began to burn.

I worked my way around Ana's side, feinting enough to draw one of the brutish gnolls' attention my way, leaving her only one to have to fend off.

Which of meant that I was now its target, and my entire body thrummed as I caught the downstroke of the gnoll's sword against my staff. I had barely enough strength to turn the blade away, and then it was bringing a huge fist around. It was more luck than anything that I ducked that blow.

But we'd taken the pressure off Silva's pack, and they leapt to the attack again. They fought in pairs, leaping and slashing, moving round and round their quarry, one distracting, the other striking.

Ana came to my aid, striking the gnoll when his next swing at me left him wide open. Ana opened him further, mostly along the lefthand side. I staggered aside, and tried to keep the contents of my stomach from joining those of the gnoll as it hit the ground.

The last of the brutes fell to Silva's gnolls, and they turned, returning to her side, kneeling around her.

Silva still knelt, her hair and gown clinging to her, her body shaking with sweat-damp chills. She clutched at her side, breathing in sharp gasps when she wasn't coughing. The girl leaned heavily on her right arm, the gauntlet still wreathed in the blue-white flames. Those flames were reflecting off a pool of blood that was gathering under her right hand. Blood oozed and glittered along the swirls and twists of the gauntlet — every swirl, as if the each had suddenly grown razor sharp.

She caught her balance, and brought her right hand up to each gnoll's forehead. She wiped her thumb through the blood she'd smeared there, and then drew her hand down over the blazing blue-white eyes, closing them.

The light flickered within the gnoll, and then seemed to leap back to Silva, chasing up and along the metal of the gauntlet, reflecting darkly off the rivulets of blood, before swirling into the purple-black stone set on the girl's wrist.

The creatures simply toppled over, then, and the girl worked as best she could, arranging them with one good hand, crossing their great clawed hands over their barrel chests, breaking into another coughing fit as she hoisted a sword up to clasp a clawed hand around the hilt.

She would not accept our help, but worked slowly, steadily, until she'd arranged the last of the gnolls that had fallen around her. She laid her hand amidst the ashes and bones in the spot where the one gnoll had burned in the blue-white column of fire, head bowed.

Only then did she tear a strip from the bottom of her gown, holding it in her teeth as she clumsily wrapped her right arm, hissing as she pulled it tight around her bracer.

I dropped my cloak about her shoulders, and knelt down in front of her, holding my staff out behind me.

She smiled faintly, stepping over it, and settling against it, wiggling as I rose to my feet.

She felt much lighter than she'd been those long weeks ago outside Mistamere. I could feel her shivering, even though she radiated a feverish heat. I felt the rattling of her breath against my back.

Whatever magic she had worked, it had saved us.

But at what price had she bought our victory?

"Your horses have been saddled. I thank you for your help, and now ask that you return the way you came."

Sir Retameron's voice held fury beneath the ice.

"My lord," Varis said, "perhaps—"

"Perhaps you should ride quickly, on your way away. Before I clap the lot of you in irons as her thralls."

"My lord, the girl is gravely hurt, and—"

"Then you'd best ride with all haste to Threshold."

"Now see here," Durin said, "this girl has saved your village, and now your villagers. Surely—"

The knight's temper finally got the better of him.

"The witchling used foul sorceries on a prisoner under my protection! She used the darkest of magics to raise the dead. She has used that magic to kill. Any one of those is enough to warrant a death sentence under the Grand Duke's Law. It

is only because she has saved my village and its people that I do not strike her down myself for her crimes.

“I spare her life for the lives she has spared here. The scales are even. I will not be in debt to such a creature, and I will not suffer the sight of her a moment longer than necessary.

“You will take her, and never return here with her in your company, or her life and your freedom are forfeit.”

Durin’s face went nearly as red as that of the knight.

“Her breathing worsens,” I said. “Sir Retameron is right. We must ride with all haste.”

Silva jolted awake from the fitful doze, nearly tumbling us both from the saddle, so strong was the coughing fit that seized her. I spurred my mount up to where Varis rode point.

“I heard her all the way up here,” he said, looking down at the girl bundled before me on the saddle.

“She is so hot, the snow does not sit but a second against her skin,” I said. “And she shakes so hard it’s a wonder I’ve stayed on the horse. Varis, we must stop.”

“But it is only another two hours—”

Ana dropped her horse to a canter beside mine, leaning over. She drew her hand away from Silva’s forehead with a sharp hiss.

“She will not live those two hours,” Ana said. “She needs shelter. A fire. I have some herbs, and perhaps mixed with that tea of Durin’s...”

Varis glanced around. “Well, if we’re where I think we are, there are caves to the north, along the edge of the Black Woods. But with this snow, and the dark, it’s all I can do to see the trail.”

Ana drew forth her scythe, unwrapping the blade. She murmured a word as she rapped sharply against the metal, and as it rang, it began to shed a watery, silver light.

“It’s not much, but it’s the best I can do. And it might outlast the lantern.”

Varis guided us off the main trail, around a sharp spur of rocks, and down into a gently sloping vale nestled against the steep rise of the Black Peaks.

He passed several dark crevasses and two small, low cave openings before he finally dismounted, pushing scrub and clinging vines away from what looked to have at one time been a tomb's opening. The arch had been squared off. Bas reliefs carved to the left and right of the opening were barely visible through the ravages of wind and time.

Inside, the floor had been done over in stonework, as had the walls and ceiling. More a long hallway than any sort of antechamber, a stone archway could be seen at the limit of the light shed by Ana's scythe.

"Very well seamed," Kuric murmured, running a hand over the stone blocks of the wall.

"And level," said Durin, stamping a foot. Dust puffed, and the clomp of his boot echoed back to us. "Not too shabby, for human make."

Varis led us back, and though a damp chill clung about the stones, the bite of the wind lessened to a mere nibble as we filed into the cavern beyond.

It was wide, and deep, and very high. And while it was dusty and strewn with cobwebs, they were nothing like the crypt under Mistamere.

Varis crossed to the left, along the curve of the chamber, taking the lantern with him. It illuminated several ranks of stone sarcophogai, draped in cobwebs and dust so thick as to be mantles. He set the lantern on one, stooped, and came back with an armload of firewood, which he brought to the center of the room. Someone had brought large rocks in, and made a circle. Judging from the amount of soot built up, it had been there for some time.

"Bandits?" Gilliam asked.

"One group or another," Varis replied. "Had to flush out half a goblin tribe some years back. Got caught in a spring storm about a year ago, and remembered this place. Found it had aired out a bit, and someone was nice enough to leave a store of wood."

I knelt, laying Silva down close to the ring of stones, extending my hand towards the makings of the campfire Varis had laid. I closed my eyes, gathering warmth, just a glimmer, from each of my traveling companions. I focused it, but it

was barely enough to even call forth a candle's radiance. I opened myself again, and touched lightly at Silva's presence.

Heat and energy rushed at me in a torrent, and I fell back as a column of flame as wide as my palm soared up, flaring with fierce orange and yellow light, illuminating the chamber as if by a noonday sun. The flames nearly brushed the ceiling, which arched at least thirty feet overhead.

My shout of surprise was lost amidst those of the others.

Silva drew a deep, rasping breath, and thrashed, kicking the layers of blankets, crying out wordlessly. She fought her arms clear, and pushed herself up, hunching as she began to cough again.

"*Kim kuvran asi?*" she asked, her voice a harsh, ragged whisper. She made a snatching motion with her left hand, and my link to her elemental essence winked out, the column of fire in my hand vanishing with a puff of hot wind.

Her bracer glowed with the light of the flame, sending spidery, flickering shadows across the room, dancing around us as the reflection of the moon would upon water, but orange and yellow instead of silvery-white.

"*Avyavasaaya,*" she grumbled, giving me an exaggerated roll of her eyes. Then she leaned forward, and slid her fingers amidst the small stack of wood within the circle. There was a brief flash of tension about her eyes, and she gave a small shudder, and then the wood burst alight, as if it had been blazing for hours, rather than mere moments.

She shook the burning sleeve of her gown almost dismissively as she drew her hand away, and it and the bracer beneath it went dark. She watched the flames for a long moment, then nodded her head, approvingly.

"Thor-n? *Idam kim?*" She pointed to the flames.

Nearly frozen to death, burned alive by fever, done Immortals only know what to herself to make the dead walk and fight at her bidding, and she pauses to give a lesson in vocabulary?

"*Agni,*" I said.

"*Saadhu!*" She smiled, nearly as brightly as the flames, then doubled over with another fit of coughing. She took her hand away from her mouth, staring down at the flecks of blood.

"Saadhu na," she said with a frown.

It took Ana and Kuric both to wrestle the girl back to the floor and cover her with the blankets. In all the time I'd spend with Silva, she never would tell me the meaning of those phrases and words that she spat as she tried to get to her feet, and then at least remain sitting upright. Several of the words sounded remarkably close to such words as "mule" or "dog." She blushed furiously when I asked about the words that sounded as if they might be the 'action' articles of her speech.

But I get ahead of myself.

Durin brewed his tea, and Ana added several herbs I recognized as fever reducers and those that would ease a winter cough.

"You keep a very thorough healer's kit," I said, as I helped the girl to grind the dried herbs into powder.

"The power of the Flame is not always able to cleanse all ills, nor should it be squandered on something as simple as a chill's cough, or a passing illness. We are well schooled in medicinal concoctions."

"So you think this a passing illness?"

"She spent the day rolling around in the snow. And then taxed herself — and you, I might add — in bringing the fires under control. And then to use so much blood—"

"Blood?"

"Thorn, what do you think that is she's painted herself with?"

"I'd rather hoped it wasn't all hers," I said.

"I have seen the results of such injuries. She may be bright eyed and wanting to be up and about, but she will only make herself worse. She is a very stubborn girl."

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

We slept fitfully, in shifts. Ana and I took the first watch — she the girl, and I the archway. She woke Silva twice, and had her drink more of the tea. On the second occasion, they bundled up and made their way out to the woods.

“No rockwolves this time, please,” I murmured as they passed. Silva glanced inquisitively at me, but shook her head as Ana scowled.

“This works just as well on druids as it does on wolves,” she said, thumping her shoulder with her scythe.

After they returned, I awakened the brothers, and then sank to my own bedroll. I didn’t think I’d be able to sleep, but it seemed a mere moment after I’d set my head down that a steady hand was on my shoulder, shaking me awake.

The stories that tell of the great feats of men and women of magic seem to always leave out the part about how exhausting and taxing it is on the body. My extensive work with fire had left my hands stiff, the skin blistered in places. And I found it hurt my eyes to look at the campfire. Pinpoints of light along the length of Silva’s left bracer glared and flashed in my eyes, causing what felt like fiery needles in the back of my eyes.

Durin sat nearby, painting a length of some tough, leathery cloth. He worked a layer of ink around the edges of a sweeping design he’d traced along the cloth with one or more oils. The pattern was mesmerizing, the designs as swirling and intricate and interlacing as the metalwork he said they were to cover.

Ana had repurposed the helm Varis had borrowed from Sir Retameron, and it sat by the fireside, steaming. As I watched, she wrung out the cloth she’d been soaking, and bent to scrub at Silva’s cheek. Apparently, the other had been cleaned while I still slept.

“Hold still,” Ana snapped, tilting the girl’s head to one side. Silva scrunched her eyes shut, puckering her lips in distaste.

“Stop squeezing your eyes shut! I can’t get it all clean if you go wrinkling up like a prune!”

How I’d slept through that, I will never know.

Ana ran a finger along the edge of the bracer, turning Silva’s wrist and upper arm as she followed the twists and turns and curls. The skin was whole and mended beneath the crust of dried blood Ana had washed away.

“You saw her arm last night. It was a bloody mess,” Ana said, staring closer along the length of the gauntlet.

“That Bargle fellow gave her a pretty good slice,” Gilliam said. “And not long after we got her out of those manacles, her hand was whole, not even scarred.”

Ana peered closer at Silva’s gown, then frowned. She pushed the girl’s hair aside, and pulled the neck away, the frown deepening.

“How did you manage to paint yourself *there*?”

Silva shrugged her shoulders, trying to look innocent.

“Where else?” Ana asked.

Silva tried to huddle lower in her gown, and gathered it closer around her.

“That’s it. Out! All of you.” Ana started wringing out the cloth again.

The sun was well up in the sky, the cloud cover a bit lighter. Though it was still cold, there was no hint of snows in the air, and we made the most of our exile from the cave scouring the woods for fallen branches and such to replenish the supply of wood we’d used.

We weren’t more than five minutes from the cave, when... something... gave the hairs along the back of my neck a stir. A branch creaked, though it came between gusts of wind. Even in the cold, birds and small game were out and about, foraging in this brief respite from the snows.

Yet the Black Woods were silent. Hushed, as if holding a breath. I held mine, closed my eyes. Something was not right. It did not feel right. The woods were too silent. Watchful. I crouched, letting fall my armload of branches. I spread my hands through the mass of fallen leaves beneath the layer of melting snow.

“Thorn, what are you—”

I motioned Gilliam for silence. “Something is not right here.”

Durin and Kuric drew their cloaks tighter about themselves, hiding their axes beneath the folds. “Told you we wouldn’t need them,” the elder muttered.

There... the warmth and life of the woods, slumbering deep in this early and unexpected cold. The roots of the trees running deep. This was not the worst winter these trees had endured, and it certainly would not be their last. And then, it struck me: Not all of the trees’ roots ran as deep. More and more that I touched...

slumbered, but were not of the forest at all. There was a reek of tortured earth around them, a whisper of subtle magic.

“We must depart,” I said, rising stiffly to my feet.

“Ana will cut off our—”

“Now,” I said, making my way through trees that were not trees. “A danger sleeps here, and the longer we are here, the more likely it will awaken. We must warn the baron.”

“No, I think you’ve done just about enough meddling in my plans,” drawled a familiar, oily voice behind us.

“He turns up more often than a bad denarius!” Gilliam sighed, turning to regard that all man who leaned so casually against one of the ancient trees.

Bargle was back in his travelers’ browns and grays, the hood of his dark brown cloak drawn back.

“My liege is most upset that Verge still stands. The tales the villagers tell are most interesting. A young woman in white, two dwarves, a dashing swordsman. ”

“Hear that? You’re dashing,” Gilliam said, giving Varis a nudge.

“The druid and the pale girl who saved the village.”

“Sounds like quite a tale,” I said.

“I see the druid, but wherever could the girl be?”

“And why should we tell you?” Durin asked, crossing his arms.

“You don’t have to, Master dwarf,” Bargle said with a smile. “I am already well aware of where she is. And can only assume, since all of you are out *here* while she is in *there* that there is some immodesty involved. Which probably also means they will be unarmored and weaponless.” The oily grin slid across his features. He lifted his fingers to his lips, and whistled, sharply, twice. I do not think I was the only one to notice the ugly scar that ran up the back of his hand.

There was a great crashing and clanking and jingling of armored men running. We saw dark forms flash through the trees, slipping through the cave’s entrance.

Hands reached for weapons, but Bargle just clucked his tongue at us.

“Now, now. If you draw those, I will be forced to awaken that which lies sleeping here. It took a very long time, growing this forest.”

From within the cave were shrill cries, and shouts of men as well.

There was a flash of white and gold at the cave entrance, a gleam of golden light at Silva’s throat, and then her figure rippled, like a reflection in clear water. Then she was gone, but for a quiet burst of feet upon dry leaves.

Bargle’s smile twisted into a scowl. He slammed his fist against the tree.

“Confound it! For the love of gold, they are just two girls!”

A pair of men tromped from the cave, bearing Ana between them. They’d bound her hands behind her in manacles of cold iron. Behind them, more soldiers were bringing out their fellows, hung limp between them.

“You will heal the men you have injured,” the bard said to her.

“They are beyond my help,” the girl said with a slight smile. “As are the three that Silva bested. Barehanded.”

The soldiers shifted nervously from foot to foot.

Gilliam and Varis both raised their eyebrows. “Would have loved to’ve seen that!” the smaller of the swordsmen murmured.

Varis rubbed his shoulder. “Been on the receiving end of that. Don’t want to do it again.”

Bargle rounded on two more of the men. “And why did you two let her simply run past you? That was the whole reason you were there!”

“M’lord, she... ah... she wasn’t wearing a stitch of clothing. We... ah... weren’t expecting that.”

“Find her!” the bard snapped, and all but four men dispersed, clanking into the woods.

The sun rose a bit higher, and Bargle stopped pacing every now and then to ask “What could possibly be taking them so long?”

From within the woods, came a shriek, and a soldier hustled through the trees many minutes later, bearing a kicking, struggling figure, golden hair all in disarray.

“Finally!” the bard crowed. “Now, you little troublemaking witch,” he snarled, reaching for the girl’s arm.

She kicked his hand away with a lucky swing of her foot. The bard’s eyes widened as the girl threw her hair from her face.

Wide blue eyes met his, and the girl bared her teeth in a feral smile.

“Well, hullo. You still owe me two gold crowns.”

“I got ‘er, Master Bargle!” huffed another soldier, the legs of the girl he’d thrown over his shoulder still kicking, the white dress fluttering at her knees.

“Put her over there with the others,” the bard said, waving a hand at the small crowd of blonde girls huddling with us in a wide space between the trees.

At least the last few they’d brought in were clothed. We were running out of cloaks to lend.

From what we could gather in brief, whispered exchanges with the girls before a guard prodded us for silence, they had each been visited by Silva, in the town, some hours ago.

“How did she communicate with you?” I asked. “This ploy looks a bit complicated for gestures.”

One of the girls shrugged. “She just... when she took my hand, I knew what she needed.” A round of nods confirmed it was the same for the rest of them.

“This is dangerous!” Ana hissed. “These men are armed, they could hurt you!”

“You go running off into the woods naked for all your friends?” Gilliam asked, keeping his eyes on the twig he was whittling at with his knife.

The girls shared glances, their backs straightening. “As our sister would face her enemies, so shall we,” they all said, as one.

Gilliam looked up from the twig. “Did anybody else just feel that chilly hand run up their back?”

Ana stiffened, drawing in a sharp breath.

I glanced up at her sudden tension, and swept my eyes along where she was looking.

The faintest of ripples in the air, and a scant shifting of wet leaves caught my eye. I quickly looked the other way, and nudged Ana to do the same.

"You felt it," I murmured to her, and she nodded.

"Barely. Now that my mind is clear, she is like a A buzzing of one bee among a hive."

"The bard has done... something... here. The trees are not what they seem. I was about to ask you about it when—"

"In the middle of Silva's bath?"

"It was important!"

"Whatever it is that sleeps here would have slept another twenty minutes. Besides, even with all this ruckus, the bindings on whatever magic is in place here have not slipped."

"But the bard said—"

"Thorn, the bard says a great many things. I believe less than half of them based on our past encounters. If he said he could awaken this forest, he lied. Whatever it is, it cannot be undone so quickly."

Bargle stood up as the last of the hunting soldiers returned, empty-handed.

"All right, my patience is at an end, little girl!" he shouted. "I've caught all your little friends! And if you don't reveal yourself, I will have my men take action!"

At a motion of the bard's hand, half a dozen men drew their swords, and stepped into a loose circle around the girls.

"Here, now, that's monstrous!" Durin shouted, rising to his feet, throwing his cloak back and reaching for his axes.

Another of the soldiers turned, raised his sword.

A chunk of rock streaked from the trees, striking the soldier's sword hand, and he dropped his blade with a curse, clutching at his hand.

The other soldiers whirled towards the direction the rock had come.

The girls rose to their feet, in unison.

"You will harm none of them," they all said. "You will lift your swords only to sheathe them."

The soldiers took several hasty steps back from the girls.

“Go from this place, back to your liege. You have already failed.” Every one of the girls was looking at Bargle as they spoke.

He laughed, though it sounded somewhat forced. “A clever trick. Let’s see how effective you are without the chorus!”

“She gives you this one chance to leave in peace.”

“I am not afraid of one little witch and her ragtag army of brats!” the bard snarled. “Your little trick won’t intimidate me! Guards, I grow tired of this. Kill them.”

Most of the guards shuffled their feet, and looked morosely at their swords. One, though, stepped forward, raising his sword.

The rest stepped between us, blocking us from reaching the group of girls.

“What are you waiting for? I gave an order!” Bargle shouted.

The guard heaved his sword down.

The girl calmly stepped back, and the air rippled, and then tore apart in a shower of blue-white sparks.

Silva caught the edge of the blade along her right forearm, metal screaming as the blade dragged along the length of the bracer. With a shift of her body weight, the blade whistled harmlessly away from the girls, the guard who’d swung the blade taking a half-step back to check his balance.

One of the girls — or perhaps one of their mothers — had ensured that Silva had something to wear, a simple homespun shirt of white that hung to her knees, the sleeves coming to just above her elbows.

The girls rose, most poised to fight, others making efforts to do the same.

Silva glanced back over her shoulder. “*Nieah!*” she said to them, shaking her head.

The guard lunged. The girls cried out. Silva half-turned, raising her arm reflexively.

The blade found a gap in the metalwork, rasping along bone and metal as it slid into the girl’s lower arm.

Silva staggered, biting down on a scream, pain clearly etched across her features.

She clenched her right hand into a fist, and the dark stone adorning her wrist ignited with a harsh purple-black radiance. The stone throbbed once, sending a burst of the light pulsing down the length of the metalwork of the bracer with an angry hissing, sputtering sound.

The writhing energy raced up the length of the sword, and crawled up the guard's hand and arm like so many scuttling, spitting spiders.

The man screamed, his body giving a hard spasm, causing Silva to cry out as the blade twisted in her arm. Silva gave another harsh, sibilant cry, and the dark stone pulsing twice more, the streamers of purplish-black energy racing faster up along the sword, and into the soldier.

Smoke began to issue from the gaps in the armor, and the man's free hand curled into an agonized claw, the skin blackening as we watched, smoke curling from the tips of his fingers.

When Silva unclenched her fist, what was left of the man finally collapsed to the forest floor, jerking the blade from the girl's arm as the body fell, charred and smoldering within the dully glowing armor.

Silva glanced up, at Bargle, while she slid a finger up her wounded arm.

She swiped the finger below one eye, then the other.

With a flurry of swords and axes, the two dwarves and warriors rushed the stunned soldiers, batting aside halfhearted sword thrusts and shouldering their way through to the crowd of girls.

"Orbium!" Varis shouted. *"Formae orbium!"*

The order snapped the girls from their confusion, and they immediately crowded together in a tight circle, each sheltering the girl next to her, all the way around.

Gilliam, Varis and the dwarves crouched at four corners about the huddle of girls, weapons low and ready.

Ana and I found uses for the discarded firewood, each of us snatching up a sizeable branch.

"Which do you prefer," Ana asked the soldiers on the ground, "weaponless or senseless?"

They tossed swords aside, raising their hands in surrender.

"I told you to kill them," Bargle snarled at the soldiers surrounding the girls.

"You're going to have to go through us to do that," Varis said.

"You see? *This* is why you don't hesitate when I give an order!" the bard said, throwing his hands up in disgust.

"*Pratiiya*," Silva said, waving her hand in a 'shoo-ing' gesture.

"My dear girl, I am going nowhere without you," Bargle said to her. "Now be a good girl, and come along, before I have my boltmen turn the lot of your little army into pincushions." He raised a hand, and gestured with his fingers, and then extended that hand towards Silva.

The sound of a single crossbow being drawn back is enough to send a tingling chill down a sensible man's spine. From the forest before us, there came that sound, but from a score of crossbows, readied by a score of boltmen, who stepped from behind trees and rose up from the forest floor, leaves hanging about them like shrouds. Every one of them had a clear shot at the girls.

Silva glanced from the bard's hand, to the crossbowmen, to the girls, who were trying to huddle even closer. Then she shook her head, falling to her knees, shoulders slumped.

Bargle's oily smile broadened. "There, now, you see? That wasn't so difficult. Don't worry, my dear, I'm sure whatever it is my liege has planned for you, it won't hurt all *that* much." He leaned down to take the girl by the arm.

Silva's eyes snapped up, her left hand seizing his wrist from below.

She placed her right hand flat on the forest floor before her, and shouted "*Jvalat!*"

The bracer flared with blue-white light, and we felt a sharp jolt ripple through the ground.

Bargle regained his composure, snatching his hand from the girl's grip, tugging the sleeve of his leather coat back into place.

"Dramatic, but hardly impressive," he sniffed.

The ground jolted again, and one of the trees nearby burst apart in a flash of blue-white fire.

The girls, the soldiers, shrieked, flinching back.

Another tree detonated in a column of Silva's fire. Then another, and another, and another.

Bargle's eyes went wide, even as the color drained from his face.

There came more searing, crackling detonations from the woods, pale lights flashing from within the gloom of the trees.

Bargle's features twisted in rage — genuine rage — for the first time since we'd encountered him.

"My— You little— " he snarled, and his hand flew back to strike.

A rock whistled from behind me, and struck the bard's upturned hand, glancing off his knuckles to bounce off his head.

"You leave our sister alone!"

Another rock flew, hitting him in the shoulder.

"Don't you dare hurt her!"

Not a rock, but a clod of sodden earth and snow, hit Bargle in the cheek.

He reeled under the surprise of the attack, and with a shrill, wordless cry, Silva's "sisters" charged.

Sharp, sizzling thunder of exploding trees accompanied the girls' cry as they rushed the bard. Two hit him squarely in the legs. Two more leapt and clung to his arms, while another — in a rather spectacular leap over the back of another of the girls — hit the man squarely in the chest.

He went down with a cry nearly as shrill as that of the girls.

Those left standing rained sharp kicks at any of part of the man that they could reach.

"Not so tough without your ogres, are ya?"

"Lets see how you like being outnumbered!"

"Maybe this will teach you not to pick on girls!"

Somewhere behind us, one of the soldiers chuckled. He was joined by another, and another, until all of them, including the boltmen, were nearly doubled over with laughter, wiping at their eyes.

There were three more sizzling explosions before Silva gave a shudder, and began to cough again.

“No, you girls stay right where you are! We wouldn’t want him to get away!” Ana said as she hurried over to Silva.

The girls — all 9 of them — were sitting on Bargle, but they all peered intently over at Silva as Ana fussed. One of the girls jabbed her heel into Bargle’s side.

“That’s for making Silva sick from her magic again!”

One of the soldiers ambled over the girls.

“Young ladies,” he said. “This wasn’t personal. We were just following orders. But now that our... fearless leader... has been captured, we rather hoped you would find it in your hearts to let us go, so that we might bring word of our... fearless leader’s capture to our commanders and Baron von Hendricks.”

The girls giggled.

“Please do, sir,” one of the girls said.

The soldier nodded, seriously, and then turned to Silva. He bowed, and as he straightened, started shouting orders to the other men.

It was quite a procession, Bargle, limping, mud-spattered, with twigs and leaves in his hair, led by two of the girls. Silva followed, flanked by two girls on each side. (The rest, I make note, departed for their homes so they could properly dress.) We followed behind the girls, leading our horses. Gilliam kept an arrow on his bowstring, should Bargle try to escape.

Baron Halaran greeted us at the front gates of Tarnskeep, and though he did his very best to keep a straight face, he couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Well,” he said. “It isn’t even Yuletide, and I see that you have brought me a present!”

“This is the man who took us,” said the eldest of the girls. “And then he tried to hurt our little sister. So we showed him what-for.” One of the other girls nudged her. “Oh. Um, Your Lordship,” she said, bobbing a curtsey.

“Anyone brave enough to take down such a villain need not bow to me! But where are my manners? Do, please, all of you come in, and get yourselves warm by the fire. The cook has just started warming some cider.”

“Oh, I do love a good mug of hot cider,” Bargle said with a smile.

The baron kept smiling. "Yes, yes, some for you as well, from the comfort of your private quarters beneath the keep. Guards," the baron made a quick gesture. "Please see that our guest has proper accommodations."

Two guards marched the bard towards the stables, while the baron led the pack of girls up the steps and into the manor.

We followed, as the baron herded the girls through the dining hall and into the kitchen.

The long kitchen table was nearly completely taken up by all of us, and the cook didn't let the girls tell any of their story until they had a steaming mug of cider and a bowl of the wonderful chicken soup from the pot that never seemed to empty of it.

The cook brewed some of Durin's tea and gave that to Silva, once she'd heard the girl's wracking cough.

"No cider for you, young lady! Running around in the forest in just a tunic! It's no wonder you're sick half to death!"

Gilliam nearly choked on his cider.

Trying to get a straight story from an excited child is a lot like trying to untangle the yarn after the cat's been at it. Now imagine, if you will, a basket of yarn. And a roomful of cats.

The baron listened very patiently, and very attentively to the girls. Not once did he sigh, as did Varis, and Ana, on several occasions. Nor did he roll his eyes, as did Gilliam.

He thanked the girls, and made sure they each had another sweet pastry for their journey home, and then he escorted them out, where his carriage awaited in the courtyard.

"Now remember, ladies," he said, as he helped the last into the coach, "in three days, we will all meet again at the town hall. Be sure to bring your parents. In the meantime, be safe!" He shut the door, and patted the side of the coach, and off the girls went, back to their families.

Waning crescent of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont 26, 997AC)

"But it makes no sense, for them to attack in such numbers, in this season," the baron said, shaking his head.

"Food? Supplies?" Gilliam guessed. "Surely this weather has hit them just as hard as it has us. Last I checked, gnolls never were very good farmers."

"No," Varis said. "That attack was no mere raid for provisions. Those were slaving bands. A force that size could have easily destroyed the entire village, killed every man, woman, and child."

"They killed many," Ana said.

"Those who fought back, no doubt."

"A pity the only one who knows anything about their plans doesn't speak our language," Gilliam said.

Silva looked up as he glanced at her. She smiled, then coughed, and blew her nose into another of the baron's handkerchiefs. She sipped at the cup of tea by her elbow, then bent over the sheet of parchment she'd spread before her on the low table. She scratched at it with quill and ink, making line after line of swirling, spidery letters and ideographs. I gathered that she was writing down what she remembered of her interrogation of the gnoll.

"I still find it hard to believe that she's taken half a length of sword in her arm just a day ago," said Listelle, her head canted to the side as she watched the girl write.

"She shows a remarkable ability to heal," Ana said. "And given I hear little improvement in her breathing, I am deeply concerned about just how much damage she's truly done to herself in saving the village."

The fiery haired scholar straightened, adjusting her shawl. "Were my talents at weaving threads of Entropy greater, I would attempt to diagnose her." The woman sighed. "Were my talents greater, indeed, I could be of help in her healing."

"I have done all I can for her," Ana said. "I have tried to work further healing upon her, but it does not hold. She simply slides back to this fevered state."

Silva looked up, glancing from Ana to Listelle. A frown furrowed her brow, and she gestured to the parchment with the quill in her left hand. A faint flicker of

golden light chased through the veins in the crystal upon her left wrist. She bent back to her work with a short sigh.

I rose, and went to the window. The clouds had thinned, and patches of blue could be seen amidst the sea of gray and white cloud cover.

A sudden, chilling thought clutched at my guts, giving them a sharp twist.

“What if they weren’t looking for slaves?” I asked.

The baron and Varis both looked up. “What else could they possibly—”

“What if they were rounding the townsfolk up for use as sacrifices?”

“Monstrous!” Ana said.

I gestured at the window. “Do you find it coincidental that we foil a raid on a village, and since then, the cruelty of the weather has since weakened?”

The baron tapped his chin with a finger. “I think Master Thorn has grasped a thread of this great mystery. Which means, of course, that no doubt they will go looking elsewhere.” He rose to his feet. “If you will excuse me, I have preparations to make for the outlying farmsteads.” The baron strode from the study, ringing a bell and calling for his cloak and the carriage.

Waning crescent of the Coming Snows (on or about Eirmont
28, 997AC)

“And thus, do I present to you, my good people of Threshold, these brave young girls, and hereby name them Friends of the Barony.”

Late morning sun shone warm and golden upon the market square, the sky for once more blue than gray. We joined the crowd in a resounding cheer, and eight of the nine girls blushed, staring at their feet. The ninth, the tallest, lifted her chin and flashed the same feral grin she’d given Bargle.

Each girl curtsied, and Baron Halaran granted each a shining silver medallion, engraved with the tower and wall on one side, the other the Eye-Within-the-Eye, as the locals call the sign of Halav’s Immortal Queen, Petra.

The baron gave a start, as each girl held the curtsy, but Halaran quickly regained his composure, completing Silva’s ages old ritual. He glanced over his shoulder, and smiled at the girl, who huddled shivering in her cloak, her face lined with strain, but her jaw set firmly, determined to watch her sisters receive their honors.

We were all more than a little concerned, since this was actually the first day we were able to leave Tarnskeep without having to layer on the winter coats and lined cloaks. Yet Silva — who had frolicked in the snows in little more than her dressing gown and a cloak just days ago — now shivered, her teeth chattering even as her forehead beaded with sweat. She’d insisted on keeping her hood up, hiding her hair gone lank and dull in her illness.

The crowd cheered once more as all the girls joined hands and bowed to the assembled townfolk. Then the girls filed from the hastily erected stage before the town hall, amidst the blaring of the Duchy’s heralds’ trumpets. They trooped past Silva, each reaching out a hand to touch her shoulder as they went by.

“*Asti kuzala,*” each murmured. *Be well.*

Silva smiled, muffling a cough behind another of the baron’s handkerchiefs. She reached out her right hand, brushing two fingers over each of the girls’ foreheads, closing her fevered eyes, her lips moving, her voice nothing more than a breath. There was a glimmer of blue-black light deep in the stone on her wrist.

The girls nodded, as if some exchange had been made, and then they turned, skipping away to their families, to enjoy the feast in the town hall that the baron had prepared in their honor.

We followed the crowd into the hall, and were among the last to fill our plates, the dozens of long trestle tables full, and so we had to make do with places along the wall.

The baron had arranged for just about every minstrel and musician in town to make an appearance, and there was no shortage of music and dancing. Gilliam was nearly mobbed by the girls, as the nine gathered around him, and practically carried him off to the clear space before the musicians. It came as no surprise that he knew most of the steps to the reel, spinning each girl, one after another down a dizzying line.

I was most surprised when Varis set aside his trencher, and took Ana for one of the slower dances, a somber, straight-backed affair, but no less intricate than the lively number Gilliam had been snared into.

Silva nibbled at some fruit, between sighs that sometimes trailed into coughing. I did not fail to notice that her foot kept time with most of the livelier tunes, and her eyes drank in the steps and movements of the various dances.

I held out a hand to her. "Would you like to dance?"

She glanced up at me, smiled, but shook her head. "*Aya'muurti na anumanyat,*" she said with another cough. "*Akaravam svadat nartana.*" The last came out a wistful sigh, yet edged with a cold finality.

The dwarf brothers glanced worriedly at each other, and then up at me, having also picked up the odd tone in her voice.

The crowds had thinned enough that we were able to find seats on some of the benches that lined the walls of the town hall. While the others danced — yes, even the two dwarves — Silva and I amused ourselves with teaching each other the names of the various fruits on her plate. I did most of the teaching, as she had never seen many of them.

"Win-tur berry I like," she said, plucking another of the fat, reddish fruits.

She smiled as she popped it into her mouth, chewing. But she stiffened, her face twisting in pain, as she clutched her right arm. She drew in a sharp, wheezing breath, the fingers of her left hand curling, as she clawed at the thick wrappings around her arm.

She slipped from the bench, the plate clattering to the floor as she landed heavily on her knees, her breathing gone fast and shallow.

The music ground to a halt, and Ana and the Baron reached the girl's side at nearly the same instant.

"What is it?" Ana asked me. "Has she eaten something bad?"

I shook my head.

Silva looked up, clutching at the baron's tunic. Deep within her hood, her sliver eyes were beginning to smolder with the blue-white flames.

"Bhavaam'grham," she wheezed. *"Asura etah ustrjat. Etah ayaat."*

Ana stiffened, then rose to her feet, stepping back, glancing sharply right and left.

"Durin! We need your kit!" she called.

"Here, now, what's she going on about?" Kuric asked.

Gilliam glanced around, his hands flexing. I hadn't missed him reaching for swords that weren't there.

"Your Lordship, all these people need to leave. Now," Ana said.

The baron blinked, finally mastering his confusion. He patted Silva's hands, trying to rise to his feet, but the girl clung to him.

"Etah ayaati."

"My dear girl, before anybody goes anywhere, I would know what is going on. What has she said? What is she saying?"

Ana licked her lips. They were pale, and her forehead, creased with worry, was also beaded with sweat.

"Your Lordship, we are taught the names for demons and their kind in every known language, and even a few that are barely known. The Thonian word for 'demon' is 'asra.'"

“Thror-n, we go,” Silva said, leaning heavily on my arm. I could feel the heat radiating from her body, even between the many layers of clothing and our cloaks.

She pointed towards the western wall, where the clouds were beginning to darken the skies, and were lit from below by a pale blue light.

I lifted her into the baron’s coach, then Kuric and Durin followed me in. Ana crowded in next to them.

“This isn’t much of a plan,” Varis said, as he shut the door behind us.

“Half a plan is better than none,” Ana said. “If what the girl has said is true, it might work.”

“Has Silva been wrong before?” Durin asked.

“This wouldn’t be a good time to be the first,” Gilliam said, mounting. “Varis. Come on, we need to get to the wall and get those men organized.”

“Hurry back,” Varis said.

The coach lurched away at as fast a clip as it could manage on the streets of Threshold.

Glancing behind, I saw the group of nine families, hugging their brave daughters and sisters.

Silva, Ana and I raced back to the wall ahead of the dwarves and the wagons. Though I got thoroughly turned around in the streets, Silva seemed to know exactly where she was going, her pony stretching out to a full gallop across the now-abandoned market square. Bigger though Ana and my own horses were, Silva’s mount was quick, and surer of its footing across the cobblestones.

She staggered as she slid from her saddle, but motioned Ana and I both away, clutching her arm close to her as she made her way up the stairs.

Gilliam and Varis waved as we reached the top of the wall, one from each end of the line of men who stood, pale-faced, clutching their longbows with trembling hands. No doubt the knuckles beneath their gloves were just as white as their faces.

The girls stood spaced among the men, their hair and dresses tossing in the cold winds that gusted from the west. Frightened though they may have been, each

stood straight-backed, lips pressed to grim lines, staring with wide, blue eyes over the crenelations in the wall.

The Black Woods, visible as a low smudge against the mountains along the horizon, seemed to be burning. But the flames that licked at the trees and cast the glaring light up against the darkening, lowering stormclouds was not red, or orange, or even yellow.

The trees were lit with silver-blue flames. Every now and then, a streak of deep crimson — so deep as to be nearly black — would streak from the treetops, up to the clouds, to be answered with a bolt of lightning seconds later.

I clenched my fists at the sight, for what it was became immediately apparent to me: a working of druidic magics, so great as to be ceremonial in scope. A working to alter the weather, but on a scale I'd only read of in the legends of the elves. Larger even than that used to raise up Canolbarth.

The workings until now had been very subtle, akin to a breath of a whisper amidst a crowded room. But what was being crafted now was as a mighty roar, its weight and fury washing against my senses.

As the grounds of Koriszegy were tainted with the touch of a demon, so, too, was the fabric of this magic touched with a cold, rust-like rot of some greater demon's influence. My stomach turned, and I tried to repress a shiver that had nothing to do with the weather.

Suddenly, Silva's illness did not seem so mysterious.

Beside me, Ana had gone positively gray. She clutched at the arrowhead-shaped pendant of silver that hung at her breast.

"How could this be let to fester, to grow so powerful?" she whispered. She tore her eyes away from the trees. "Thorn, we haven't a chance against it. Not even Gilliam would gamble such odds." She tried to smile.

"How can you be so calm?" she asked me.

"One cannot chronicle while running away," I replied. "Are you ready?"

The girl licked pale lips. "As ready as I will ever be," she said, stepping forward.

Silva looked up at her, the smaller girls' posture one of complete attention.

Ana began to chant her prayer for protection, to call forth a warding curtain of silver light.

Two lines into the prayer, Silva began to chant a counterpoint, and the thin thread of Ana's magic began to unravel.

Her voice caught, as she, too, felt it, but at Silva's sharp glance my way, I set a reassuring hand on Ana's shoulder. The young servant of the Flame lifted her voice, the uncertainty fading.

Without any signal, the other girls lifted their voices, each pitched slightly differently, their chant catching a filament of Ana's unravelling spell, weaving it back among its sisters, as the girls voices blended into the most complex, haunting harmony I'd ever heard.

What should have been a shimmering curtain of light as wide as two or three men abreast blazed to life, lifted on the girls' voices, and settled into a towering wall of light, shining silvery-white, stretching the length of the section of wall upon which we all stood, from the ground before the wall, and extending the height of a hill giant above the crenelations.

Gilliam's whoop of elation punctuated the girls' weaving, dancing chant.

"Archers, ready!" Varis barked.

The men shook themselves from amazed gawping at the shining wall of light, fumbling to right the grips on their bows. With clattering and muttering, a score of longbows snapped to the ready position.

"Nock!"

Brittle, twig-like was the sound of the dozen and a half arrows sliding from quivers, and clacking against the haft of as many bows.

"Draw!"

The sound was almost musical, the thrum of twenty bows drawn smoothly back, fletchings held to cheeks.

"Sight!"

Per their instructions as they'd gathered and lined the wall, the archers shifted their footing, lifting their arrows to siege-height. The dwindling sunlight glinted off twenty silvered arrowheads.

Varis glanced back at me, and I listened intently to the tapestry of harmony, gauging the ebb and flow of the rhythm. Ana began the chant again, the fifth or sixth repetition, and Silva's counterpoint changed to an even more complex cadence. The nine other girls followed suit, and the tightly-knit tapestry of voices scattered into a web of song and chant.

As the chant broke into waves of rondeau, one girl's voice cascading into another, up and down the line, Varis didn't seem to need my guidance any longer. He lifted his sword, and brought it down as the girl next to him sang out a high, mournful note.

As it fell, Varis dropped his sword, crying "Loose!"

Twenty silver-tipped shafts leapt from bowstrings, and it seemed that even the thrum of each of the strings was part of the magic Ana, Silva and her nine sisters were weaving.

The arrows sped up, pierced the wall of light, as the small choir of voices reached a crescendo.

The arrowheads burst into pure, bright silver flame, painfully bright to look at, and they arched up, up, canted as they were to soar over battlements. But instead, they sailed in bright arcs out over the farmsteads, hanging in the air an impossibly long stretch, before falling to the earth like stars, pinpoints of light shining out among the fields and farmsteads.

The storm, both above and among the trees, crept ever closer.

The archers shuffled their feet, fingers tapping on their bows to the rhythms of the girls' chanting. It hadn't ceased with the blazing display of silver across the sky, but their voices had dropped to mere whispers, each girl keeping her piece of the litany going just under her breath.

The resulting murmur sounded like wind through the old grove of oaks back on my father's farmstead.

We felt the earth quake with each step of the monstrous, lumbering trees, heard the hollow booming, felt it shiver up from the roots of the wall.

And when the shambling, burning trees reached the line of flickering, sputtering arrows — still burning after nearly half an hour — they let up horrid,

keening shrieks, stopping dead as the air before them crackled with a silver webwork of magic.

Behind us, teams of three men were heaving at the thick, heavy ropes, steadily drawing down the throwing arms of the baron's only two catapults.

The perimeter wall flashed again, the trees' wail climbing into something of a roar. They were losing their fear of the magic.

"Quickly!" Ana shouted. "They grow more powerful in their anger!"

"This will put the fear of your Flame back into them," Durin growled, as he emptied a bag of silver ingots into the catapult's bucket. More of the townguards had formed a chain down the stairs to the wagons loaded with the Grand Duke's precious silver stores, and they passed sack after sack steadily up to the two dwarves.

Silva stood at an embrasure, centered on our meager line of defense. She kept herself wrapped tightly in her cloak, clutching her right arm before her, but keeping it tightly covered. Her eyes watched the shimmering defensive line, and called out to one or another of the girls as the blue-limned trees thrashed against the fragile barrier of light.

The girls, in turn, altered their chanting, timing the harsher inflections to the impacts of the burning trees against the light, and the silver webwork flared, silver flames licking at the branches, scorching them whereas the blue fire did not. The chilling blue flames did not reappear where the trees became scorched.

But the effort was beginning to show on the girls — their faces slowly lost the rosininess the wind had brought their cheeks and noses, and their voices were beginning to falter.

One girl's voice broke, and she bent, doubling over with a dry coughing.

In the field, a portion of the wall flickered, and began to fade.

The two girls to either side raised their voices, sidling closer to each other, and the weakened portion of the light barrier flared, sending the trees cringing back from the light with howls of pain.

One of the archers knelt by the fallen girl, holding a tin cup to her lips.

Ana glanced sharply from one side to another.

"They cannot hold much longer," she shouted.

“Done!” the dwarves called, flinging the last empty sacks back over their shoulders.

“Silva!”

She turned, nodding as she saw the catapults ready to go. She settled her flickering blue-white gaze on Ana.

The girl swallowed nervously, then straightened her back, squaring her shoulders as she lifted her arms to either side, beginning another chant.

This was was the one she’d chanted at the final conflict at Verge. But instead of the blade of her scythe glowing, the ingots began to shimmer and flicker to light.

Silva lifted her right arm, and we could see streamers of silvery-blue light peeking from gaps in the bindings.

“*Saaja!*” she called, and the two men at the release levers tensed.

She waited a few more beats, as Ana came to the end of her chant, then snapped the fingers of her right hand.

“*Mujakt!*” she shouted.

As she heard each throwing arm slam up against the padded brace, she tore the bindings away from her arm, and sang out the note she’d sung at Korizegy tower.

Overhead, the sky was full of blazing silver, tinged with the blazing blue light coursing upwards from Silva’s gauntlet, seeming to wreath it in a blue fire of her own, lighter, paler, more delicate than what burned amongst the shrieking trees.

The girls brought their chant to a shouted crescendo, and the wall of light they maintained answered, flaring to rival the sunlight. The trees swayed back and away, smoldering against the glare.

The blazing silver ingots began to rain down, cutting through the angry blue flames with bursts of silver-white fire, the wood bursting apart with sharp, hollow pops wherever an ingot smashed into it.

The angry roar climbed to fearful, anguished wailing as more and more silver streaked into the possessed trees.

Not a flicker of their blue flame remained, just piles of blasted, smoking timber.

The men lifted their bows in a shout of triumph. The girls looked more relieved than anything, some staring dazedly out at the fields while others, quicker to recover, danced with the bowman next to them.

Silva hopped from the wall, but landed badly, leaning heavily into the battlements, steadying herself with a hand as she bent under another coughing fit.

She tried to hide her hand under her cloak, as she straightened, but we already saw the scarlet droplets on the stones at her feet.

“She is in better hands than mine with the Baron,” Ana said, when I asked her why she wasn’t with Silva. We were picking through the burned and shattered remains of the trees. A stench like bad eggs and burnt stone clung to the wood, but Ana insisted on combing through the wreckage to ensure that no trace of the demons’ possession remained.

I could feel no lingering presence within the remains, just the hollow echo of things once-living now gone. The roiling of my stomach had everything to do with the lingering stench.

“Are we finished here yet?” I asked through the rag about my face.

Ana swept her gaze across the shattered trees one last time, and then nodded. She reached into a pouch at her waist, and began scattering what looked like fine sand amongst the charred branches.

“These would have been mighty trees,” I said, as we walked back through the fields.

“They have been dead many years, Thorn. Nothing held by a demon for that long can survive. Be it man or beast or plant, it is better destroyed than to suffer that corrupting touch.”

We walked the rest of the way in silence, and by the time we reached Tarnskeep, a gentle snow had begun falling.

We returned to the kitchens to find Durin sitting slump-shouldered in front of a very large steaming mug. One whiff, and I knew that it held not tea, but a very strong brandy. He looked up as we shook out our cloaks.

“So, will you be joining me?” he asked.

Ana frowned.

“You might want one, would make breaking the news go much easier.”

“Out with it,” Ana snapped.

Durin heaved a sigh. “Which do you want? The bad, or the worst?”

Ana crossed her arms. “Start with the most recent,” she said.

Durin sighed again. “The scoundrel escaped.”

“Surely the baron’s men—”

“Half a dozen dead. Four injured.”

“How?”

“The dungeons reek of burnt stone and flesh,” the dwarf said with a wrinkling of his nose.

Ana retrieved her scythe from the corner, and left the kitchen at a very fast walk.

“So was that the bad, or the worst?”

Durin took another long pull from the mug. My eyes watered at the thought of what that much brandy would do to my throat.

“Silva is dying,” he said, his voice rough, and not, I suspected, from the brandy.

The news rocked me on my feet.

“Told you you’d want one of these,” he said, lifting his mug.

“Surely, Halaran—”

“The Baron has done everything in his power. And that is considerable. But it looks as if this is as the Immortals will it. He can ease her suffering, for a time, but...” he sighed, and took another swig.

I left the kitchens, and made my way through the keep, to the sleeping quarters. Silva’s room was easy to find — the girls were gathered in grim silence outside her door, some along the far wall, some standing, some sitting with arms around their knees.

They moved shoulder to shoulder in front of the door as I approached.

"She is finally asleep," the eldest said.

"How is she? How are all of you?" I asked.

The girls looked amongst each other. One hiccuped. There was a long, tense silence. The corner of the eldest girl's mouth twitched.

There was a giggle, behind me. Another to my left.

"This is nothing to—" I started, and then stepped between the girls, pushing the door open.

Silva sat propped up in her bed, a tray containing a large bowl balanced across her knees.

"*Namas'te, Thor-n!*" she said, her voice scratchy. "Is good." She gestured to the bowl with her spoon.

"We would have had him if you hadn't giggled!" one of the girls hissed behind me.

"It does me good to see them like this, as children should be," the baron said, watching the girls tumbling and thrashing in the courtyard's snow.

Durin roared in mock fury as snowballs pelted him from all directions.

I glanced up, and saw Silva, perched on the sill of the second floor window, dividing her attention between the girls and the scarlet-laced clouds that roiled about the Black Peaks.

"Patience," the baron said, setting a hand on my shoulder. He'd seen my gaze stray to the west, as well. "I shall go to Specularum. I will account for my actions to the Grand Duke, and will beseech him for formal aid. I will petition for an armed expedition into the Black Peaks, we will assess the gravity of the threat, and deal with it accordingly. Rushing off, blindly, and playing out our trump card on the first move of the game does not strike me as the wisest of moves." His eyes strayed upwards, and then they settled on my own.

"I have faith that Stefan will —"

"Your Grace!" huffed a man-at-arms, clanking through the snows at a brisk jog. He snapped a salute, and a stray snowball caught him across the face.

“Beg pardon, Your Grace,” the man said, spitting snow. “Column at the gate, Your Grace. Colors sable upon argent, and azure upon argent.”

The baron’s eyes hardened to ice as the frown furrowed his brow. “What in Halav’s name—”

A muted jangle of many pairs of spurs interrupted Baron Halaran, and the girls scurried from the path of the dozen armed and armored men who trooped through the courtyard. One stepped forward, and unfurled a length of scroll, holding it out at arm’s length.

“Baron Sherlane Halaran? Patriarch of the Church of Karameikos, Shield of the North, Lord over the Lake Windrush and township of Threshold and all the lands surround—”

“Yes, yes, that is me,” the baron snapped. “What business have you barging into my home of Tarnskeep without invite or preamble of hearthsharing? I assure you, if you are on your way through the mountains, you will find them thoroughly snowed-in, even so early in the season.”

“Your Lordship will pardon this humble servant of the Grand Duke,” the man holding the scroll said. “But we are here as agents of Grand Duke Stefan Karameikos, and need seek no invitation to enter the lands or houses of the Baron Sherlane Halaran, who is hereby placed under arrest, to be brought immediately to Specularum to answer to the Grand Duke’s justice.”

The list of charges was impressive, as the magistrate read them out at the Baron’s request: harboring enemies of the Duchy, consorting with witches, theft, bribery, false imprisonment.

The dwarves bristled, but Gilliam and Varis set hands on their shoulders.

We had little choice but to stand and watch, as a group of armed men entered Tarnskeep. Some minutes later, they emerged, with the ladies Nevinia and Listelle. They glanced at the baron, but he merely smiled apologetically. Their faces were cool, smooth, eyes and expression unreadable.

After another long wait, the last two men trooped out.

“Well? We were told there would be a third witch. Where is she?” the magistrate asked.

“Perhaps you were misinformed,” the baron said.

“Maybe she’s hiding among this rabble,” another of the guards said, his armor emblazoned with von Hendricks’ eagle. He reached towards one of the girls, huddled in a group to one side of the courtyard.

“You will not lay a hand upon any of them. They are my subjects, and still under my protection.”

The guard sneered, and reached again for one of the girls. She gave a gasp and shuffled back a step.

“You will hold!” the baron said, his back gone even straighter.

The guard’s eyes widened, his arm locking in place. Cords in his neck stood out, but it was as if he’d been suddenly set in stone.

Swords rang as they unsheathed from black-and-silver scabbards.

“Hold your weapons!” the magistrate shouted. “His Grace has valid claim and cause for his actions. He has not been stripped of lands nor title, and he acts in defense of his people. You, men, will sheathe your swords at once or I will dismiss you.”

I counted twice as many in the Grand Duke’s colors as those of the Black Eagle, and those who’d drawn quickly returned their swords to their homes.

“And you,” the magistrate said, rounding on the guard frozen in place, “are not the acting magistrate here. If only two were found, then that is how many we will take back to the capital. We do not have the resources for a full search of the barony, generous though the offer of aid from the Black Eagle was. We will take advantage of this break in the weather and move out at once. That is, if Your Grace would be so kind as to release this poor mistaken soldier?”

Baron Halaran nodded politely, and waved a hand. The man bound by the baron’s magic staggered, then regained his composure, turning and marching back to the ranks of von Hendricks’ men.

The baron had his carriage brought around, and he and the two instructors from the Tower got in, bidding us a brief farewell.

We gathered our belongings, and left Tarnskeep, escorting the girls to their homes. Varis and Gilliam secured our rooms at the Hook and Hatchet, and as the sun set, we retired to one of the private dining rooms, to discuss future plans.

Waxing crescent of the Deep Snows (on or about Kaldmont 3, 997AC)

"Black and silver watching the alleyways, as well," Gilliam said, of the view from the private dining room's window.

"Demons afoot, villages nearly burned to the ground, and this Grand Duke spends manpower scouring a township for a little girl," Durin said, crossing his arms.

"As far as the Grand Duke is concerned, that 'little girl' is at the root of both of those problems," Ana said. "It seems pretty clear, black on this hand, white on the other, what is going on up here in the north of the Duchy."

"Nonsense!" the dwarf barked.

"That's the rigid, corset-minded thinking we've all heard about from the followers of the Flame," Gilliam said with a smile. "We were beginning to think you were an impostor."

Ana tried to scowl, but a smile ruined it. "I am not nearly high enough in the hierarchy to have narrowed my thinking quite so much," she said, lifting her nose.

"Is it rising through the ranks of clergy that narrows one's vision, or a narrow-eyed perspective that allows such a rising?" Varis asked.

"I'd be willing to bet that they are still debating that behind closed doors," Gilliam said. He cast a sidelong glance at Ana, who pretended quite convincingly that she hadn't heard him.

The rhythmic thump-thump-thumping of Kuric's pacing suddenly ceased, and we all looked up at the silence.

"I don't like it," he said. "'Guests' of this Grand Duke until his clerks arrive to take statements? They may as well have thrown us in the dungeons beneath Tarnskeep."

"I have the feeling that if there had been more of the Black Eagle's men here, that's where we would have ended up," Varis said.

"I'll take house arrest to a cold, dank dungeon any day."

We all looked over at Gilliam, but he had gone back to staring out the window.

"I've been watching their shift changes, and if the pattern keeps up, we'll be surrounded by the Black Eagle's men in another two or three rotations."

Varis drummed his fingers on the table, and Kuric started pacing again, stomping a bit harder this time.

"Well, isn't that convenient for the Black Eagle?" the dwarf spat. "Tightening the noose around our necks for one purpose or another."

There came a tap on the door, and we all looked up, at each other.

"What is it?" Varis asked, moving to the door, a hand at the knife on his belt.

"Refreshment, if you please." Varis' hand eased from his knife, as he recognized the servingwoman's voice.

"We did not—"

"Please, sir, I am bid bring this to you from another patron downstairs."

Varis glanced between myself and Gilliam, and the other warrior stepped away from the window, the quizzical look in his eye doing nothing to soften the frown.

"Bid by whom?" Varis asked.

"Please, sir, I am just to bring refreshment, and leave the remainder of the coin with you."

Varis unbolted the door, and the serving woman bobbed a curtsy, bringing in a tray with two large pitchers, cups, and a small, worked-leather belt pouch.

I caught the scent of winterberry from the pitchers.

Durin sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of the belt pouch, and Ana sat up straighter, glancing intently about the room.

"Thank you," Gilliam said, sliding one of the silver marks from the tray and pressing it to the woman's hand.

Her eyes widened at the generosity, and she stammered more thanks as she closed the door behind her.

Varis slid the bolt back home, and Gilliam hauled the curtain across the window.

There was a rippling in the air by the hearth, right where Ana's gaze had settled a moment before, and firelight glinted off gold and silver and white as Silva

huddled before the fire, her hands shaking, the last of a hazy blue nimbus fading from around her right arm.

“*Namas'te*,” she said, through chattering teeth, and smiled a tired smile. “*Kuzalam?*”

Through word-swapping and pantomime, we were able to learn that Silva had cloaked herself and slipped away when the soldiers came to take away the baron. She'd been watching the inn for the past two days.

“But it is dangerous here,” Durin said. “It is foolish to risk discovery to simply pay us a visit! You cannot stay.”

Silva shook her head. “*Nieah*. No stay,” she said. “Go. We go.”

Varis and Gilliam both raised eyebrows and shared a glance.

“I'm almost afraid to ask,” said Gilliam, “but... where are we to go?”

“*Kva?*” I translated, when she frowned over at me.

“*Iya'te asta. Iya'te at girijaala.*” She pointed out the window, which faced the west.

Gilliam sighed. “I knew I shouldn't have asked.”

At Silva's behest, we waited. The serving woman brought us an early supper of a thick chicken stew, laced with dumplings, loaves of thick, brown bread, and nearly half a wheel of a sharp orange cheese. The serving woman frowned at the size of the meal, but Gilliam assured her that dwarves ate two or three times what a normal man ate. That seemed to satisfy her curiosity, and she left with another silver in her hand and smile on her face.

About halfway through the meal, we heard a familiar voice in the hallway — the eldest of Silva's sisters.

“Oh, no, sirs, this is compliments of the house. My uncle is most grateful for your guarding these dangerous upstarts. He's upset enough at them driving away half his normal business.”

“Well... ” hedged one of the guards. “What can it hurt? Nothing better to do than have a cup or two. I won't tell the commander if you won't,” he said, and there was laughter and a hard 'tok' of mugs meeting in a toast.

Not twenty minutes later, we heard a clattering from outside the door, followed by snoring.

“A good thing there are no dragons nearby,” Gilliam said. “This would awaken it for sure!”

There was a jangling of keys on a ring, and a ‘clack’ as the lock disengaged. The girl — dressed convincingly in the white blouse and dark skirts of the serving girls of the inn — poked her head in, smiling.

“Tea cake and winterberry pie,” she said, pushing the door open the rest of the way.

Kuric and Durin glanced at each other. “We didn’t order dessert.”

“It’s a Traladaran adage,” Varis explained. “Meaning that a task is quite simple.”

Kuric frowned, and Durin harumphed as he finished off his cup of winterberry punch. “Must all of your sayings involve food or drink? And they say dwarves only think with their stomachs!”

Silva cleared her throat, and in the sudden silence, we heard the quiet tapping of her foot. As all our eyes turned to her, she made a ‘shoo’-ing gesture towards the door.

Gilliam finished bundling the bread and cheese in the table cloth and I followed him out the door, stepping over the two slumbering guards.

The Hook and Hatchet was quiet, save the snoring of our guards at the door, and another pair in the common room. The innkeeper nodded to us politely as we filed through, pointing the way through the kitchens to the girl leading us.

We were met by the kitchen’s delivery doors by the rest of Silva’s sisters, who each handed us a pack and cloak. Another struggled under the weight of our weaponry, which clanked and rattled as she shifted from foot to foot. Her smile grew wider as we each lightened her burden.

“This way, quickly!” the elder girl hissed, tugging her own cloak about her shoulders as she darted through the inn’s yard, to the stable doors. She knocked, paused, knocked again, and one of the large doors creaked open. We hurried

across the open yard, stopping in pools of shadow as one or another of the Black Eagle's guards passed the corner.

A lantern's light shining in a rear stall beckoned us deeper into the stable, and we saw our mounts, saddled and ready, the reigns handled by several men in deep blue cloaks.

"Took you long enough," the shorter figure at the back of one of the stalls said, and we caught a flash of blonde hair and blue eyes as she drew her hood up. "Mount, and be ready to file out."

She reached up, and tugged at a peg on the back wall, and the wood and stone paneling gave a creak and shiver, then slid away to reveal the dark alleyway behind the Hook and Hatchet.

"Quickly now, while the guards are between shifts!" Aleena hissed, and we filed past her at a walk, Silva huddling on the back of the pack mule, looking like one more sack amongst the supplies.

It felt as though I held my breath the entire time we were upon the streets of Threshold, only to lose that breath at the smallest sound that was not the footfall of one of our horses: a creaking shutter in the late evening breeze, the yowl of a stray cat, upset that we'd invaded its alleyway.

Aleena overtook us on her sleek gray mare, guiding us through the darker, more deserted streets of the town, well away from the main square, or any of the town's main gates. Instead, we came to what at first seemed just a shack built up against the western wall of the town. But when Aleena dismounted and led her horse through the overly-wide doorway, the 'shack' revealed itself to be nothing more than cover for a sloping path that led steeply downward, to a long, straight tunnel beneath the town's wall.

There was barely enough room for our mounts to take half a dozen steps, and the tunnel slanted steeply upwards, and we found ourselves emerging from a roadside shrine.

Gilliam nodded approvingly, and Ana simply let out a long sigh of relief as the cold breeze knifed over us as we made our way westward along the Market Road.

Another group of shadows peeled away from the copse of trees by the roadside, and it was only Aleena's sharp gesture that caused Varis and Gilliam to stay their hands.

The cold dread I'd felt all through the nearly silent escape from the Hook and Hatchet had sat in my stomach like a lead weight. And as I saw just who it was that approached us, the lead weight dropped even further.

"Hierarch!" I managed to gasp around a tongue gone suddenly dry as the Alaysian.

"Thank you, Mistress Aleena. Your service to us is at an end. We release you from further obligation this night."

Aleena inclined her head, her blue hood bobbing. "As was agreed, Hierarch. Twice again with the turning of the season, my services are at your command." She turned her mount, and rode back the way she'd come.

The riders accompanying the Hierarch, their cloaks a green so deep as to appear black in the night, closed around us in a tight circle.

"Be at ease," the Hierarch said, and though his deep voice was gentle, even seeming to contain a hint of a smile in it, I could do nothing of the sort. The two dwarves let out deeply held breaths, though they were anything but at ease in the saddles of the shaggy mountain ponies.

"Be at ease, my brothers of the earth and stone," the Hierarch said. "Be assured that your axes bring us no offense, nor should you feel any shame in bearing them in our presence, for they have been lovingly crafted. We know of the songs that bore them into creation, over the purifying of fire and water.

"Be at ease, sister of the wind and fire," the Hierarch said, glancing over his shoulder at Ana. "For we are greatly in your debt for your service to the Black Woods. We thank you, and ask that you convey our thanks and regards to your Speaker of the Flame, whom we hold in the deepest regard."

If the Hierarch's words surprised the girl, Ana gave little indication. She simply nodded politely. "I will do so when next I am able."

"And you, walkers in the mountains, brothers to steel, be at ease. Let your arms not know the weight of sword or bow this night."

Gilliam's hands twitched at the reigns, and some of the tension eased from his shoulders. Varis still glanced over his shoulder, at the dwindling lights upon the walls of Threshold.

"And you, daughter of silver and gold, should not feel the need to huddle so miserably upon the back of that mule. The one who's voice lifted the darkness from the Black Woods should not be made to sit in fear and silence. Be at ease."

Silva drew back her hood, and sat up straight on the back of the mule. She shook out her hair, blinking as she took in the broad shoulders of the Hierarch riding at the front of the column, and the silent ring of cloaked-and-horned Greenwardens that surrounded us.

"You have seen the clouds that gather around Greyback?"

"We have," I answered.

"And you have felt it?"

I suppressed a shiver, clutched the reins tighter, my hands suddenly slick. "Yes."

"You feel it even now, then," the Hierarch said, nodding solemnly.

"It presses upon me like a blanket soaked in oil," Ana said. "And it reeks of smoke and dust and decay."

Again the Hierarch nodded. "Aptly put, Sister of Wind and Fire. It weighs heavily upon us, as well, perhaps doubly so, knowing that it is our crafts that have been twisted towards this foul purpose."

The Hierarch's voice had gone tight with strain, and he took several long, deep breaths.

"We will not allow it to continue."

All of the horses stopped at once, and Silva squawked as she tipped forward on the back of the mule.

"Thorn, you will be our eyes, our ears. Go. Observe, that we may learn the nature of this working."

One does not refuse the Hierarch's direct order. Not the farmer, miller, or even kings of old Traladara. Certainly not the journeyman chronicler.

He reached into his robes, and produced a roughly cut chunk of quartz, which he handed to me. "At moonrise, you will report to us through this. When we deem you have learned enough for us, we will open another way for you to return."

"Now wait just a moment," Durin said. "You can't mean to be sending young Thorn alone?"

The Hierarch gawped nearly as much as I did at the dwarf's interruption.

"This is—" he began.

"It is madness, is what it is," Durin said, his gravelly voice rolling over that of the Hierarch like a landslide. "What if young Thorn is captured? Or worse?"

"If he does not report after two moonrises, then we will assume the worst."

"Fine lot of help that'll do for him," Kuric sniffed, crossing his arms. "So you'll not only lose the information he was gathering, but the informant as well. Are your druids so plentiful that they can just be thrown away like that?"

"You cannot speak to the Hierarch like that!" I stammered.

"When addressing a fool, one must be sure to use small words," Durin said.

Between my shock at Durin's words, and the booming laughter of the Hierarch behind me, I very nearly fell from my saddle.

"We would not presume to commission any of you for this task," the Hierarch said. "A Greenwarden will accompany our Thorn."

"One of these?" Kuric asked, gesturing around us.

The Hierarch nodded.

"Only one?" Kuric frowned.

"It is within our power to send but two under the same moonrise." Now the Hierarch was folding *his* arms. "You wish, then, to decide amongst yourselves who will go with our charge?"

They began to argue, the dwarves and the two warriors. Even Ana shouted her way into the fray.

"Hierarch, please, do not ask them—"

"We asked them nothing," he said. "Their choices are their own."

The argument went on for several more minutes, and then Silva's voice rang forth, like the tolling of a great, silver bell, smothering the others' voices beneath the weight of its power.

"Vatu!"

Her voice broke the long silence that followed her command, asking me in a quiet, uncertain tone *"Idam kim?"* *What is going on?*

It took some time to work out the translation of events, and it was made no easier under the stern gaze of the Hierarch.

"Evam dve?" she asked, holding up two fingers.

I nodded.

She looked up at the Hierarch, hands on her hips. *"Thor-n ekatara? Kimartham?"*

The Hierarch looked to me.

"She asks... why one other?"

The Hierarch frowned. *"That is the extent of the power of the magic."*

I tried to fit his answer into what little of her language I'd mastered. She shook her head.

"Etah krtya?" She waved her fingers.

"She asks—"

The Hierarch chuckled. *"I think I see her meaning."* He nodded, in answer to her question.

Silva chewed at her lip, staring at the ground at her feet. (We still had not been able to get her to wear hose nor shoes)

"Gaayati'eti."

The Hierarch's eyes widened, not at the meaning, but the girl's tone of voice: She addressed him as though he were a serving boy, made to do her bidding.

"Bhadram'va," she added, blushing as she bobbed her head.

"She wishes you to... sing. Or possibly... recite the magic. I think that last was a 'please.'"

The Hierarch drew himself up straight, staring down at the girl, his eyes going hard, flat. "We do not simply babble these workings out at the behest of some child! There are—"

"Your Grace," Ana interrupted. "The girl has a way with the magic of others. She took a spell that should have protected three men, and made it to hold off half a dozen trees from your Black Woods."

The Hierarch's eyes widened at this. He glanced to me. "Thorn? This is not an exaggeration?"

"My Lord, I do not think Ana capable of such a thing. It is as she said."

The Hierarch drew in several deep breaths. Then he extended his arm towards the tree closest to us, along the side of the causeway, and began a rumbling, sighing chant, that sounded of water over stones, of air through leaves.

Silva listened, and squatted down, scraping a series of squiggles and swirls. One of her fingers tapped, picking up the timing of the Hierarch's chant, and she drew a series of lines once she'd found the rhythm. She looked up, then, at the tree.

It glowed with a greenish-blue light, as though hazed through heat or great distance. The nimbus flickered, as a road through the Alaysian will as it reaches the horizon. To either side of the tree's great trunk, there were ghostly wisps of... I can only describe it as "elsewhere." Rocks, boulders, and what looked to be the steep wall of a canyon.

Silva peered intently at the tree, her fine brows drawing together in concentration. She tilted her head, squinting.

"*Kathaam?*" she asked, pointing towards the tree... or perhaps at the ghostly place beyond the tree.

"Which way?" I translated, and one of the Greenwardens pointed just to the north of west.

"*Kiyadduure asti?*"

"How many.. No, how far is it?"

"Eight, mayhap nine leagues, as the crow flies," the Greenwarden said.

I held out fingers for Silva, and she counted them under her breath, glancing down at her notes, scrawled in the dirt.

The two Greenwardens nearest the tree turned, and stepped *through* it, their figures fading into the ghostly, flickering distance. The glow slowly faded from the tree, and we again stood under the weak light of Matera's cloud-wracked sliver.

"I will not be able to open that way again for another night," the Hierarch said, his voice sounding worn, tired.

Silva glanced up from where she was scraping more notations, this time with a twig she'd found. She gave the Hierarch a stern look, bringing a finger to her lips.

"*Vatu! Eaio aanayana!*" She gestured towards the lines and squiggles at her feet.

Silva stared at the figures and swirls at her feet, frowning. She counted on her fingers again, rubbed at a series of lines, and drew another figure in the blank spot. It appeared she'd forgotten to carry a ten-count.

She stood up, wiping her hands on the hem of her cloak, and glanced around.

"*Jalaazaya kutra asti?*"

At our blank stares, she fumbled at my saddle, taking my waterskin from where it was slung. She yanked the stopper, filling her other cupped hand with water.

"*Jala,*" she said, lifting her hand, dribbling water over her feet. She sucked in a breath.

"*Jala etah risi,*" Gilliam said. "See? I can make some of her words, too."

She glowered at him, gulped the water from her hand, drying it on her cloak.

"Water," I said, pronouncing the word a few times for her.

"*Wa-tuhr,*" she said, again trying to roll the 'r,' turning it into a breathy sound.

"*Jala.*" She spread her arms. "*Jalaazaya. Big wa-tuhr.*"

"Big water?" Varis asked. "The lake?" He pointed back towards Threshold.

Silva followed the line of his finger, and she nodded once she'd oriented herself. "*Jalaazaya, bhavatu!* Come. We go." She started around the horses, back to her mule.

"We just came from that way!" Gilliam said. "Just like a woman, making you dance three steps one side, then three steps the other."

Ana brought the haft of her scythe down across one of Gilliam's knees, gently, but not so gently as to make it a simple tap.

"That was for Silva, who would be offended if she could understand you."

"He has a valid point, though," Varis said. "Not about women!" he clarified, covering the knee closest to Ana. "Going back to Threshold means risking detection. And if we're caught, I sincerely doubt we'll be staying in a place as nice as the Hook and Hatchet."

"Thor-n? We go?"

I glanced back and forth between the Hierarch and Silva.

"My Lord—"

"You may go, Thorn. I sense deep power in this Daughter of Silver and Gold, and perhaps she can indeed carry all of you to the place of our choosing. If she cannot, return here and you may walk the distance between the trees. Face to face, or through the Seeing Stone, we will speak again with the next moon."

With that, the Hierarch of Radlebb's Watchers gave a brief nod to each of us, turned, and vanished into the trees with his Greenwardens.

We made our way back towards the shrine by the causeway, but Silva spoke out from her place on the mule.

"*Nieah! Enã na!*" She pointed further to the north. "*Grham'upala Hal-ah-ran.*"

Gilliam looked back over his shoulder. "She did not just suggest we go to Tarnskeep."

"It didn't sound like a suggestion," Varis said.

Tarnskeep was lit as though for a festival. Torchlight shone from the walls at even intervals, and the two posts at the gatehouse were lit bright as midday.

"Well, all that light makes it plain just who holds the keep," Gilliam said, as we huddled at the edge of the copse of trees closest the baron's castle.

There wasn't a scrap of blue cloth among the guards visible at the gate or upon the walls.

“They command quite a view of the lake from there,” Varis said. “Not to mention the road.”

Silva stared intently at the castle, the torches reflecting as pinpoints of yellow light in her liquid silver eyes. She pursed her lips, head cocked to one side, then straightened her shoulders, rising from her crouch.

Varis’ dagger flashed, and before we were fully aware that she’d even drawn it, the bindings around her right arm fell away in a tangle of heavy cloth.

Durin groaned. “Lass, must you always ruin them like that? Do you know how long it takes to prepare another—”

“Quiet!” Kuric hissed, knocking a fist on his brother’s helmet.

“*Hastu*,” Silva said, holding out her hand.

We glanced at each other, and the girl shook her hand. “*Hastu!*” she repeated.

Since nobody else seemed to be willing, I held out my hand towards her, palm up, as was her hand. Her grip was surprisingly strong for her size. The dagger flashed out, nicking my thumb.

I sucked in a breath, more from surprise than pain. In the moment it took for me to even register what she’d done, she reversed her grip on the knife, and swabbed her finger across the bead of blood that was welling up. She drew that finger across the underside of her right wrist, smearing my blood across her forearm and several threads of the silvery gauntlet.

She let go of my hand, wiping the blade carefully on her cloak, and glanced around. “*Atah*,” she said, holding out her hand again.

Gilliam, Varis and Kuric all shied away, their eyes wide and shining in the ambient torchlight.

“Such children,” Ana said, and placed her hand in Silva’s.

The girl repeated the process, murmuring a “*Samaam*,” as Ana, too, hissed at the sting of the knife.

Durin was next, and then the others reluctantly offered up their hands as well.

When she’d drawn the last line of blood across her arm, she sheathed the dagger with a fluid motion, and then held out her left hand, the palm outward.

"Ajjali," she instructed, pointing towards her hand.

Ana seemed to understand, and placed her hand against Silva's. The girl nodded, smiling. *"Bhavatu,"* she said, and gestured towards Ana's other hand.

The older girl hesitantly raised it up.

"Atha Thor-n."

I placed my hand against Ana's. There was a hint of a tingle as our fingertips met, and again as our palms pressed together. I raised my other hand, and Kuric's hand met it, a murmur escaping his lips as the tingle jolted between us.

And so on down the line, until we stood in a long line, with Silva at the head.

"Saaja?" she asked, and then held her finger to her lips. *"Zaantabhaavena,"* she whispered.

She held her right hand up before her, and the tingling shock coursed through my hands again, stronger this time, as the black gem crackled to a bluish-purple light.

Silva drew a shaking breath, and then crept from the treeline, the gem within her gauntlet held towards the guards upon the walls of the baron's castle.

We had little choice but to follow.

The world seemed somehow washed-out, beneath Silva's veil. The torchlight looked as though it shimmered through clear water, the guards' armor— while bright, appeared muted, as though lit by candles, rather than torches. The black of their cloaks seemed somehow fuzzy, shades grayer.

Even the sounds of our footfalls, the swish of boots through snow and crunch across the sanded-down roadway, were muted and dull, as though heard through the down pillows of the baron's guest rooms.

We made a fumbling, caterpillar-like stop as Silva suddenly came to a halt just the other side of the roadway. Two men atop the walls were peering down, one bringing his torch over the crenellation.

Silva's eyes were fixed on the men, and her hand closed into a fist. The stone throbbed brighter, streamers of purple coursing in its depths, the blue-black radiance brightening.

The tingle through my hands intensified, a burning, prickling sensation crawling across my palms, and over my fingers, as though I'd thrust them into a nest of reaver ants. Behind me, I heard Kuric mutter something under his breath, and it was repeated by his brother.

After what seemed like too-long to be mere moments, the guards atop the wall shrugged, and continued their patrol.

Silva tugged at Ana's hand, and we moved quickly, quietly on, keeping close to the curtain wall of Tarnskeep, where the shadows hung thickest.

It struck me as odd that, there in the semi-darkness, Silva's bracer seemed to shine all the brighter, yet that very radiance was what kept the guards from noticing us.

We rounded the farthest corner of the wall, where a narrow strip of land was all that was between the rear of the keep and a drop to the waters of the lake.

That strip eased down a gentle slope towards a spur of land upon which the baron had had built a sturdy dock, which stretched a goodly distance out into the lake — out far enough for a sizable ship, perhaps even a galleon — to moor without fear of grounding.

Gilliam let out a low breath of a whistle, and we all turned to glare at him. But he gestured ahead of us, down the last of the slope.

Guards. Two knots of them, one along the dock, the other at the dark, heavily-barred doorway that led back into what must have been the deepest levels of the baron's dungeons.

Silva stiffened, and she sucked in a hissing breath. She'd drawn her elbow in close to her side, and Ana and I both heard the breath rattle, deep in her lungs.

A slight yielding of pressure on my hand caused me to glance back. Varis and Gilliam both were motioning us back, around the corner of the wall.

"No."

I glanced back over to Ana. She was staring at the two clusters of guards.

"I can immobilize some of them, but not all. But I need both hands."

Silva looked back over her shoulder. "*Bhavatii ichaa'gaayati?*"

"She asks... if you will sing?"

Ana nodded.

The younger girl nodded. She motioned for us to crouch, and we had to avoid breaking her chain. She held her finger to her lips, and then reached over, and took Ana's other hand, stepping away.

Their figures seemed to ripple in the air before us, and then they were gone. The gasps behind me no doubt echoed my own.

We did not have long to just crouch in amazement — within minutes, commotion erupted down the rough-cut steps: shouts and the clatter of armored men in motion.

We dashed to the steps, and picked our way down as quickly as we could. Gilliam remained at the top, his bow thrumming, a few well-placed arrows keeping the men on the dock from getting closer.

Below, Ana and Silva were silver and white blurs, Ana's scythe flashing in the torchlight, keeping swords at bay. Silva's figure flickered in and out as she danced among the soldiers not clutched by Ana's holding spell. The pendant at the girl's neck flared, and she would disappear, only to reappear steps away, Varis' dagger flashing, wreathed in a silver-white fire that shimmered up and down the length of her right forearm, along the lines of the bracer. The barest touch of the knife was enough to send men toppling over, though the wounds did not look to be striking any vital points.

By the time we reached the spur of rock, five men lay around the girl, another three backed against the wall of the castle, their swords at Ana's feet. Four more men stood at ease, one with a wineskin poised to take a drink.

Gilliam was making a slow descent of the steps, the fletching of one of his arrows at his cheek.

Following his gaze, we saw the group of men along the pier, one clutching at a shaft protruding from his knee.

"Let us pass!" Varis called to them.

"You let *us* pass!" one of them shouted back. He didn't sound much older than Varis himself.

"Up the steps, around to the front gate," Gilliam said. "If anyone asks, there was a scuffle. Over a woman. Nothing to worry about."

The spokesman for the other group of guards nodded. "No trouble?"

"Not unless you cause it first," Gilliam said, backing along the edge of the castle, keeping a clear line of sight down the length of the dock. "Swords and knives in the water," he said.

I counted at least a dozen splashes.

The men filed past us in some semblance of an orderly fashion. At least the Black Eagle had spent some time training them before he sent them off.

As the wounded man limped past, Varis pressed a gold coin into his gloved hand. "A donation to Halav's temple."

His lip curled and Varis glanced back at Gilliam, who hadn't lessened any of the tension on his bowstring. "Best take that Crown, soldier," he said. "All I can spare you is two silvers."

The man swallowed, and closed his fingers over the coin, grunting for the man helping him along to move on.

"Do you really think they'll cooperate?" Kuric asked.

Silva's feet made no sound as she ghosted down the length of the dock, and we followed her at some distance.

"We bought some time," Varis said. "I just hope it's enough for the girl to do whatever it is she's going to do here."

Silva knelt at the end of the dock, leaning out over the water, staring into the blackness beneath the surface. She fished the pendant from inside her gown and held it at arm's length over the water. The rough-cut stone turned, first this way, then that, then hung still, though cold winds gusted across the lake from the north.

Those winds pulled the last of the clouds away from Matera, and her silver light, though weak, was enough for the stone to catch across several facets. There was a scintillating shimmer from the golden veins networked through the stone, and the stone threw the moon's light back out through other rough-cut faces, painting the water with wedges and slivers of silver, which danced on the gently rolling surface.

Silva reached down, and I expected to see the bits of light scatter into rippled fragments. But her hand rested on the water as if it were a plank of wood or a facing of stone.

“What manner of—” Gilliam started, craning his neck to look over my shoulder.

Kuric and Durin, though, had other reactions. They glanced at each other, and then with mighty swings of their axes, buried the blades deep in the heavy wood of the dock. They each went to one knee, their stances wide. Durin clung to his twin axes, while his brother held the haft of his battle axe tightly, his other hand spread flat upon the wood of the dock.

“Best brace yourselves, lads,” Kuric said, a thready note of unease in his otherwise gruff voice.

“And lass,” Durin said, nodding his head towards Ana.

Shouts behind us, from a distance pulled my attention to the walls of Tarnskeep. Several more torches dotted the rear wall of the keep, and there was a barely discernible babble of many voices, one, then another rising in alarm.

I glanced back at Silva. She was tapping and sliding at the silver panes painted on the water as if they were picture panels in a sliding woodcut puzzle, moving a wedge here, a long sliver up and over. All without so much as a ripple in the water before her.

Then I noticed, she was using both hands — her pendant hung suspended over the water, motionless, the leather cord swinging in the cold breeze.

Silva paused in her work, then glanced up at the pendant, giving it a curt nod.

“*Sthirii karyot*,” she said, and it looked as though she spoke to the crystal itself.

She reached out, closed her left hand over the stone, and we had to avert our eyes from the brilliant golden-white flash of light.

A heavy whistle filled the air, broken by a heavy thud.

“Boltmen!” Gilliam called. “Everybody down!” His own bow sang, his arrows streaking away with a higher, softer whine than those of the boltmen.

“Silva! Get down! Flat against the dock!” Varis called, and reached for the girl’s shoulders.

“That blazing gauntlet will make a fine target,” Gilliam called over his shoulder.

Silva’s gauntlet did indeed blaze behind us, with a gold-white light that outshone the moon above. She swept her arm out over the lake, and the surface broke in the wake of her gesture, rippling, then churning. In moments, it began to boil, and a great wall of steam burst up around us.

Gilliam gave a harsh laugh. “Brilliant! Let them try to find us in this!”

The fog grew thicker, and in addition to the frothing of the lake below us, we also noticed that the dock itself was vibrating, thrumming, in sympathy with the lakebed below us.

A purple-white flash streaked through the fog ahead of Silva, and the dock gave a great lurch. We scrambled to keep our footing, but Silva swayed with the movement, a reed in the wind, whereas the two dwarves huddled, as immovable as two boulders.

Another and another arc of lightning flared in the depths of the mists, and the dock thrummed in time with the flashes.

Silva drew her arms close, and then flung them outward, as if to embrace the lake and the mist.

A wind screamed from behind us, so fierce we were forced to lean into it to avoid tumbling from the planks and into the wildly tossing waters of Lake Windrush.

Silva’s cloak whipped around her, molded against her back by the heavy wind, which plowed through the mists, boring a tunnel through it.

Shouts came upon the wind, along with the sharp twang of loosed bows. Bolts and arrows rode the wind and streaked dangerously close to our positions.

Silva looked back over her shoulder, and motioned with her free right hand, beckoning us to the end of the dock, towards the swirling gray tunnel over the water.

“R’chaatu!” she called. *“Azzu, azzu!”*

“How—” Varis began, but Ana grabbed his arm, hauled him past the girl.

They stepped out onto the frothing surface of the water, and it held, as much to our surprise as Ana's. She paused for but a moment, and then turned and began to splash down the swirling tunnel in the fog, pulling Varis along behind her.

"You two next!" Kuric shouted, waving at Gilliam and myself. "We'll bring up the rearguard!"

Several more arrows peppered the waters close by, and the dwarves exchanged glances through their wind-whipped beards.

Gilliam's hand closed around my arm, and he pulled at me. "Come on, let's see where this takes us!" He flashed a gleeful, feral grin, and fairly leapt from the edge of the dock. He glanced back at Silva, throwing her a wink, and then we charged through what felt like ankle-deep water.

Or rather, Gilliam charged, and I kept up as best I could.

Three steps into the tunnel, and all sound seemed to be swallowed up, save a hollow-eared roaring, like a waterfall heard from a great distance. I glanced back over my shoulder, and the three figures on the dock looked as though viewed at the very edge of the horizon, small and impossibly distant, yet clear and sharp in every detail.

I could see the dwarves, tensing to leap. Then turning, as Silva's knees buckled, her small mouth opening in a cry we couldn't hear above the roaring of the gray tunnel. I saw Durin catch her as she pitched forward, saw long black-fledged arrows protruding from her wind-whipped cloak. Then the three figures began speeding away, rushing away with the speed of a diving swallow.

Gilliam's hands on my arm tugged at me as I tried to turn, to go back.

"Wrong way, Thorn. This tunnel... hall... whatever it is.... Is collapsing!"