

While Mialee struggled to read what was written on the card, Varis took out his knife and reached for the baby.

“What are you doing?” Mialee cried out as she saw what he was about to do.

“It’s a Drow. They’re evil,” Varis said.

“It’s only a baby,” Mialee said.

“It’s still a Drow.” Varis replied. “A cub differs from a wolf only by scale.”

“And a cub can be brought up among elves to be tame and protect elves if you start from an early age. We’ve never killed an orphaned wolf cub.” Mialee told him.

“You’re not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting are you?”

Varis asked angrily, with his knife still ready to cut the baby’s throat.

“We haven’t any children of our own.” Mialee said. “It’s not from lack of trying. This card has written on it ‘Thia Nailo. Raise her with love’.”

Varis growled low in his throat. “This goes against my better judgement but I love you and trust you. I’ll do as you wish. I hope you can convince the village elders as well.”



Varis and Mialee had an uncle who lived out of the town. Many years ago he’d been an adventurer and had returned home with a large amount of gold which he donated to the town. Although he also had many fantastic stories, no one really believed him, but it

was clear he had been touched by magic since he had quite a thick beard, whereas elves were supposed to have no facial hair and little body hair. Most people knew him simply as 'old uncle' and he liked to keep to himself in his house at the edge of the forest just out of the town. He was getting old however and was finding it harder to get to town. Varis and Mialee decided to offer to swap houses with him so that he could be closer to the centre of town and they could stay in his house and try and keep their new baby a secret for as long as possible.

Moving to a house just outside the protection of the town and resigning from the patrols and actually volunteering to do the goat herding, which was a job usually for those with nothing else to offer, would not go unnoticed. Added to that, Varis and Mialee never went out together, unless they were going to tend the goats and each time they were seen to be carrying a bundle that was always getting bigger.

Rumours started to get out of hand after someone in the forest had seen a young child and the sound of a baby crying had been heard from their house. Everyone had seen enough of Mialee to know she hadn't had a child and so after a few years they decided it was time to make their daughter known. Varis and Mialee asked anyone who was interested to meet in the town square just after they'd finished work.

They were surprised to find most of the village had gathered but everyone was immediately outraged by the Drow that was clinging to Mialee's leg with the shouts of the villagers making her even more scared. This was the moment Varis had been dreading.

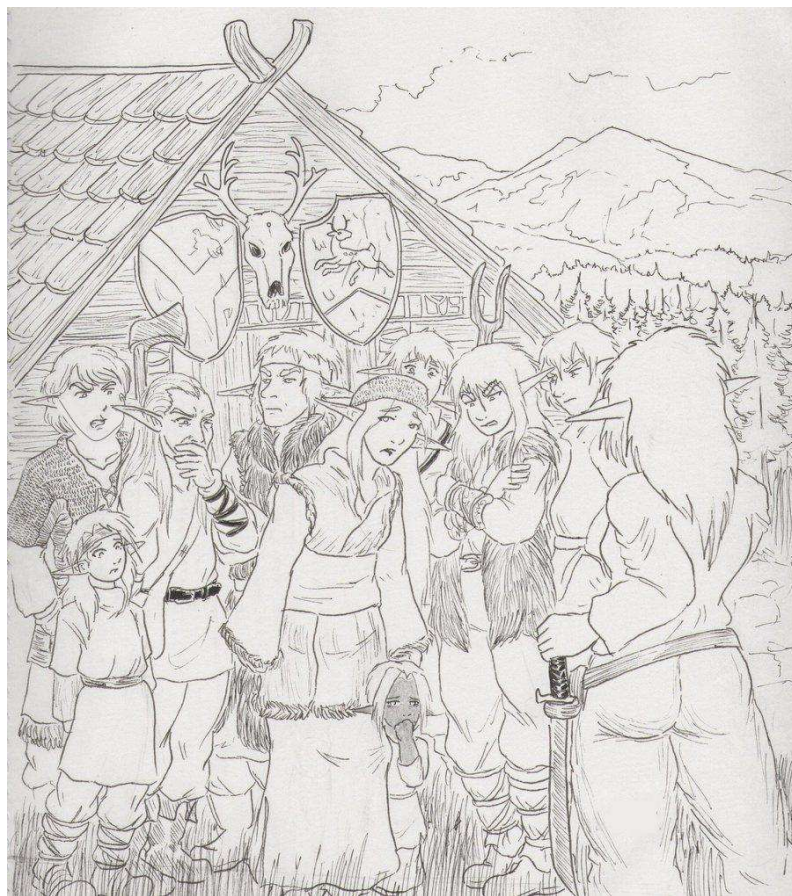
"Please, let me explain myself," Mialee pleaded to the elders. "Don't judge this girl for WHAT she is. I know that the Drow are usually evil, but that because they are brought up that way. How many of us have brought up a baby wolf to be as much as member of your family as your children and with amazing loyalty."

"Are you asking us just to accept her?" one the elders asked in an acid voice.

"Look at who she is." Mialee said. "At the present she's a scared child, just like yours would be in her situation. When we found her she was orphaned and alone. What would the gods have us do? Leave her to the mercy of the orcs?"

“People,” the elder said. “I cannot tell you to accept this girl but I ask you to look beneath her black skin. We don’t allow evil creatures in our village but our faith overrides our laws and we know what the gods would ask us to do.” He turned to Varis and Mialee. “I will have to leave it to the others to make their own decisions, but she will have the same protection that our laws give anyone else. Anyone who lifts a hand to her without provocation will find themselves exiled.”

The crowd dispersed but Varis and Mialee, with Thia still clinging to them, just stood for quite sometime not quite sure whether they were dreaming, not expecting the elders to rule in their favour to this extent.



Old Uncle was pushing 750 years old and although most of the time he was okay he did have spells of his mind going and needed someone to look after him. Now that Thia no longer needed to be kept a secret Varis and Mialee decided to move back into their old house with Old Uncle and look after him.

Although looking after the goats and sheep was not a very popular occupation it brought in a large part of the towns income and the reputation they had, made up for them not being on the map. Thia

also felt she belonged there more since seeing a black sheep but being told that a sheep was a sheep.

When the shearing season came, every adult had to help out but there wasn't really anyone to look after the children. Old Uncle had been left to look after Thia and she asked him if she could go out to play. He knew that she wanted to play with the other children but they never accepted her and she always returned upset. He decided that it was a problem she would struggle with but something she would have to face and let her go.

Thia first of all went to one of the shearing buildings and watched what was going on but when an older elf child came up, he told her to bother someone else so she went to find some more children of her own age. The children were usually prevented from associating with her by their parents but Thia thought that this time she might be able to join in.

She found the children at the edge of town playing a game using model sheep they'd made out of acorns and sticks as tokens.

"Can I join in?" she asked them.

"We only play with elves, Freak," one of them told her.

"Clear off, you're not one of us," another said. "This game requires brains."

"I'm a quick learner." Thia said.

"Look! I told you to get lost," the first one snarled. "We won't play with you, even if you were the last person in the world and we had an uneven number of players." He threw one of the sheep tokens at her, catching her in the face.

"I'm sorry to have troubled you." Thia said very upset and she ran off and sat down and started to cry when she was out of sight.

One of the girls, Vall Siannodel, followed her.

"Don't worry about them," she said. "I'll play with you. I'm sure we can make a herd of sheep much better than theirs." She gave Thia one of the sheep she'd brought along. "I know plenty of games that only need two players."

"Thank you." Thia said. "I will have to be back for lunch. What's your name?"

"I'm Vall. Vall Siannodel." Vall said.

"I'm Thia Nailo," said Thia.

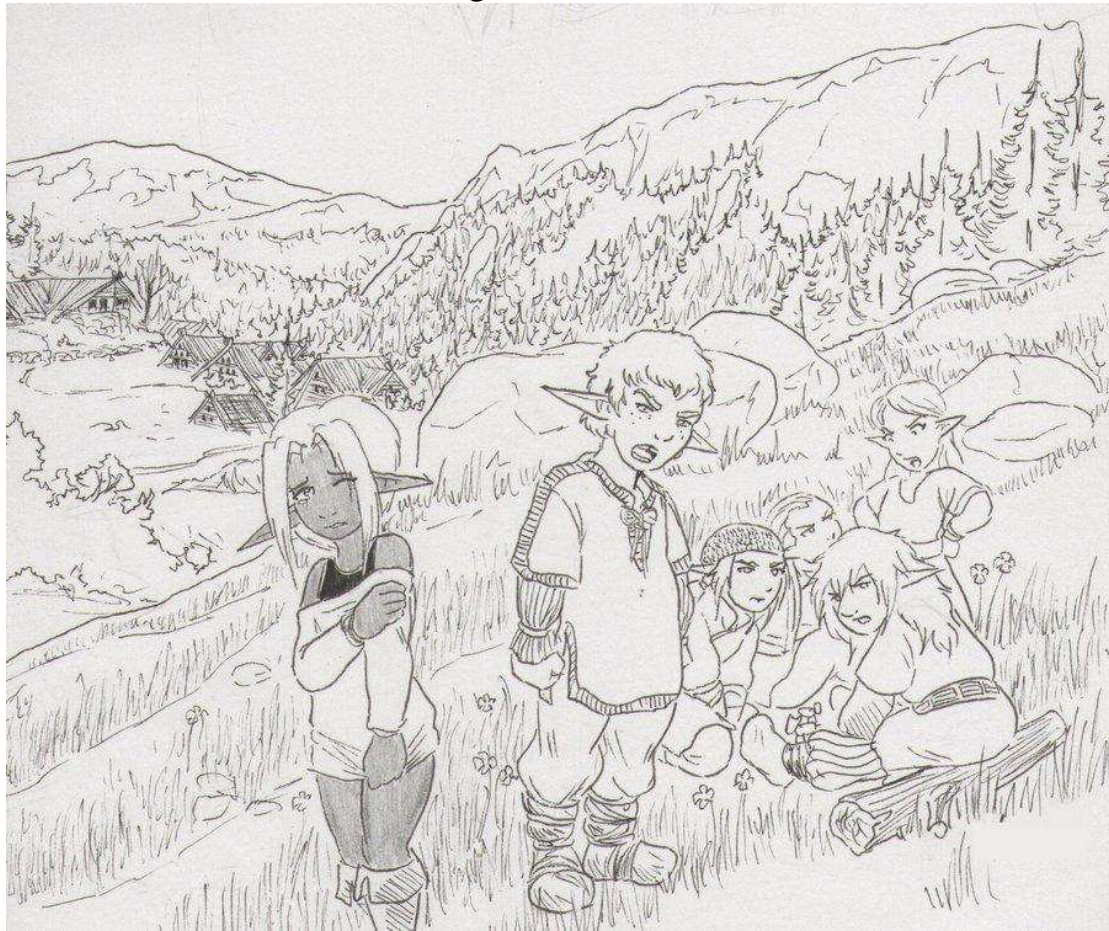
"Nailo and Siannodel," Vall said. "They go together well."

"How do you mean?" asked Thia.

“Nailo means Night Breeze. Siannodel means Moon Brook.”

“I don’t get it.” Thia said.

“You see the moon best at night.” Vall said.



“Have a good day at school dear,” Mialee said to Thia on her first day at school. She handed Thia her lunch. “Pay attention to what you’re taught.”

Mialee was worried about how Thia would get on at school knowing that she didn’t get on with the children apart from Vall and hoped that the children would ignore what they had against her since they would be learning along side her. If they spent more time with her they might see her for who she was.

Since Thia had the same rights as all the other children in Nablara, that included the right to an education. She decided to apply her self at school in the hope of proving to the other children she was as good as them in the hope they would accept her.

Most of the children grumbled about the lessons. They found things like religion, law, traditions and myths interesting most of the time

but things like reading, writing and counting they didn't enjoy or feel was necessary.

“Remember children, knowledge is just as important as strength, if you can read your surroundings like you read a text, then you will be that much more apt to survive,” the teacher told them.

She had been a scribe and also was rumoured to have dabbled in sorcery in the past but was certainly good at putting across concepts and explaining them and so was given the job of teaching the children.

“My fafer kan't read two lette's togefer, an' 'e still 'av' more goa's an' sheeps that anybody elf in ver village,” one boy said.

“And because he can't count, every time a trader comes to the village, he gets tricked,” the teacher said and hit him with a stick.

The teacher didn't enjoy hitting the children but believed that any misbehaviour or resistance to learning had to be punished and prevented. If any of the children complained and said they'd tell their parents the teacher said that she was given permission to punish the children for misbehaving and if they told their parents, their parents would most likely punish them for telling tales and might also punish them again for misbehaving at school.

Thia always paid attention and worked hard but being the best in the class only caused the children to bully her more. Amongst themselves they would grumble about why she got to learn the same as the rest of them.

Varis had been worried about how Thia would take the bullying. Thia wanted to take things from the children. Things that wouldn't be missed or noticed but she knew that was wrong so she would take things from their lunch. Since everyone had a right to the same food in the village she misinterpreted the lessons on law and thought that what she was doing was not counted as stealing but it meant the other children would sometimes end up hungry and since Thia was taking food, there was never any evidence.

The teacher didn't like Thia and wanted nothing more than to beat her with the stick. She shared the same prejudice as the rest of the children but Thia never gave the teacher a reason to beat her.

The teacher instead asked Thia to perform an errand for her each day. She was able to always come up with something. Thia didn't understand why she was always the one to run it but always seemed willing to do it rather than get hit by the stick.

The lessons only ran in the Autumn. Getting to the hall where the children went to learn meant going past an old building that was crumbling and was deemed unsafe to go into. It was going to be pulled down once the Winter started but three days before the end of the Autumn it collapsed during the night and blocked up the main entrance to the hall. This would have delighted the children if there hadn't been another entrance on the other side.

The next day when Thia was sent to run the errand she couldn't take the most direct route because of the collapsed wall and went round the other way which took her past a window to the hall. As she glanced in she saw the teacher had taken out a different book that she'd never seen before and was teaching the children things from it. Thia immediately realised why she was being sent on these errands and wanted to know what the other children were being taught that the teacher didn't want her to know.

At the end of school that day while the children were finishing off writing up things in preparation for the last day the next day, and while the teacher's attention was taken, Thia decided to punish the teacher but taking an apple from her bag. As she did this she noticed two books in the teacher's bag and knew one of these was the book the teacher used to teach the other children things. Thia decided to take the book as well and look through it and return it when the lessons resumed.



The absence of the book didn't go unnoticed but the teacher thought she'd mislaid it somewhere but by the next day was convinced one of the children had stolen it and kept an eye on all the children during the day in the hope that one would look worried at being discovered or guilty but Thia had become so good at hiding her emotions that she was also able to look just as innocent as all the other children.

At the end of the day however the teacher let the children go but called Thia back. She wanted a child to punish and decided that she'd be able to get away with it if she punished Thia. She had no evidence against her but didn't care.

The beating she gave Thia was worse than anything she'd given any of the children and if Vall hadn't come back looking for Thia and grabbed the teacher's stick as she raised it to hit Thia again she would have probably stopped only when Thia was unconscious. The teacher told Thia if she ever told anyone she would find her and beat her senseless. She'd only hit Thia on the body where her clothes would hide any marks apart from one mark that could just be seen on her leg which Thia told Mialee was where she'd tripped and fallen.

Later that day the teacher came round to Thia's home and accused her of stealing the book. Mialee was there and asked the teacher if she had any evidence.

Vall turned up a few moments later wanting to see how Thia was feeling and if she was feeling up to come out to play. When she saw the teacher there she told Mialee to ask Thia to take her dress off. As Mialee took Thia into her bedroom the teacher turned to get out but found Varis was standing behind her blocking the way.

Mialee brought Thia out without her dress for Varis to see what the teacher had done and then let Thia go and get dressed again.

"Have you got any evidence that Thia took your book?" Varis asked her.

"She's a Drow. That's all the evidence I need," the teacher replied.

"Can you prove it?" said Varis the tone of his voice growing rather angry.

When the teacher said nothing, he asked if those marks were the result of the teacher and the teacher didn't reply. He looked at Vall. "If I hadn't come in and stopped her," Vall said, "I don't know how long she'd have gone on for."

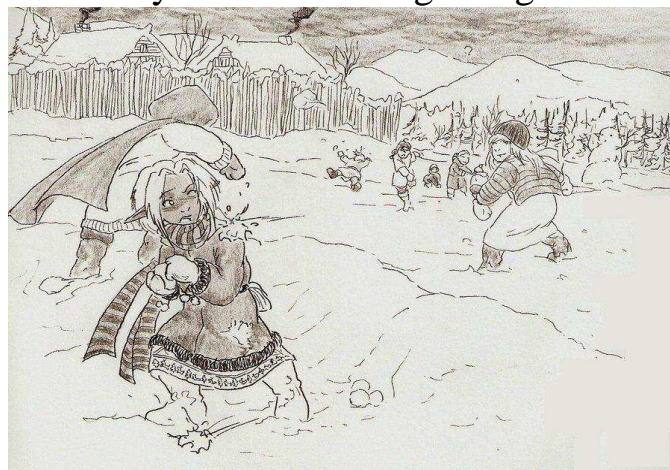
Varis pushed the teacher outside and closed the door behind him. Then he looked at the teacher and said in a voice that would have made a dragon whimper, “If you ever hurt my daughter again, you’ll be picking your teeth up off the floor with ten broken fingers.”

Mialee and Varis complained to the elders and when asked, the other children admitted about being hit by the teacher. In other towns teachers had that right but in Nablara that was not allowed and the teacher knew that and was exiled.

Nobody ever asked Thia if she took the book and Thia had concealed it prior to looking through it and after the damage the teacher had inflicted healed, she forgot about it.

It wasn’t until the coldest days of Winter had set in that Thia remembered the book and wanted to read it and find out what she’d been missing in the lessons. She found out one day that Vall was not feeling too well and couldn’t come out to play with her so Thia decided to conceal the book and go and find somewhere to read it. Mialee and Varis were surprised how ready she was to put on her Winter attire that day since Thia usually tried to resist wearing it since she found the snow refreshing and wasn’t too keen on looking ‘cute’ as she was always thought of in her warm clothes. This time however, the coat was suitable for hiding the book and she went out to try and find somewhere to read it hoping that she could avoid the other children while she didn’t have Vall with her.

As Thia made her way through the village looking for somewhere quiet but warm enough to take off her gloves, some of the children playing snowballs noticed her and it only took a shout from one of the children before they all had one single target for their snowballs.



The children didn't think that rules needed to be followed when 'a monster' was involved and took full advantage.

"Watch out!" cried Thia. "That's got ice in it."

"No it hasn't," the girl who threw it said. "It's got a stone in it."

Thia put her head down and ran away and the children followed her throwing snowballs and looking for more stones to put in them.

In the end Thia ducked into a barn and ran for the back door at the other end.

As she got there, she noticed a ladder, on the right just before the door, leading up to the second floor of the barn so she opened the door and then scampered up the ladder and laid low. She could just about see the children who'd come into the barn go straight out the door she'd left open and smiled to herself as she heard the crunch of the snow as the children rushed off, not noticing that there were no footprints.

Her smile failed as the last child past the ladder and tripped against it. He took one look at it and then followed the other children out the door but it caused the ladder to fall down leaving Thia trapped on the second floor of the barn. The drop to the ground was too high and all the walls of the barn were straight so there was nothing to break her fall if she tried to jump out of one of the windows.

Thia knew she'd have to wait until someone else came into the barn so she could call for help but took the opportunity to have a look at the book. Hot from running she took off her hat, cape and boots and felt the cold refreshing as she made herself comfortable.

What she didn't realise was when she had stolen the book she had taken the wrong one. If she'd have taken the one the elder was teaching the children from, the elder probably wouldn't have cared but this book was something completely different.

As Thia looked through the book it didn't seem to make much sense and she soon got bored of it. Looking on a shelf near where she was sitting she found a piece of charcoal and a bit of chalk and drew some doodles on the floor.

After a while Thia opened the book again and as she drew some of the symbols there on the floor she read out loud the words that accompanied them. After going through them a few times and making the gestures indicated the book accompanying them she felt a warm glow in her left hand.

She gasped when she saw a ball of fire in her hand. It didn't feel like it was burning her hand but when she touched it with the piece of hay, it singed it just as any flame would do.

Not knowing what to do with the fireball, Thia flung it out of the window into the snow where it went out just the way any flame would in snow.



After trying a few times, Thia found she could produce the fireball every time and taking a candle from the shelf practiced until she could light the candle each time.

She realised she might be able to understand the book a lot more now she realised what it was about, but was feeling cold, tired and hungry. At that point she heard a voice.

“Thia. Are you here?”

It was Vall's voice. She was feeling better and had gone to look for Thia. Thia quickly concealed the book beneath her coat and rubbed out some of the more magical symbols before answering Vall.

“Vall? Is that you?”

“Where are you?” Vall called back.

“I'm up here,” Thia replied.

Vall come round to the door and looked up and saw Thia looking down at her. Thia pointed to the ladder and Vall picked it up and put it in place so Thia could climb down.

Thia explained about escaping from the children but didn't mention about what she'd done up there.

"I'll do those children if they ever throw a stone at you while I'm around." Vall said angrily.

"They won't do that." Thia said. "They only did it this time, and owned up to it because you weren't there."

"Don't let them bother you." Vall said. "Think how stupid they are that they ran out the door to find you when there weren't any footprints there."

Both Vall and Thia knew if the children had caught her they would have pushed her to the ground and filled her clothes with snow as they usually did.

Thia looked at the sky. "I'm going to be in serious trouble when I go home for staying out so long," she said.

"Come to my home for tea." Vall said. "You can tell them that's where you were. They might be angry that you didn't let them know but will probably forgive you for coming back late."

Thia continued to practice what she'd learnt and tried to make sense of the rest of the book. It was not easy since she had no teacher but she managed to learn some of the more simple spells and cantrips inside. One that seemed to come naturally was called Dancing Lights and enabled her to create four torch-sized lights making them appear as torches, lanterns or glowing orbs hovering in the air for one minute shedding a dim light for about 10 feet.

Thia found she couldn't tell anyone about this, not even her parents or Vall who were the people she trusted most but found keeping a secret like this was a huge burden.

In the end she decided she had to tell someone and decided to tell Old Uncle. If he told anyone else they wouldn't believe him and although he might not believe her, he would at least humour her, which was all she needed.

When she was alone with him one afternoon she decided now was the time. He certainly didn't believe but told her stories of his days as an adventurer where he had actually been a wizard. He said that

he still had his spell book and Thia wondered where it was but didn't want to ask him and he didn't volunteer the information.

Thia didn't give him a demonstration of what she could do, not wanting him to get a heart attack but he did seem more forthcoming with stories.

When Thia told Vall about Old Uncle's stories, her parents said they were fools to listen to his lies even though they had themselves in the past sat there and listened with their mouths open wide.

Thia brought Vall round to her house one day to listen to a story. It was a nice day to go out and play but they decided to listen to a story first and then try and re-enact it later on.

"Are you going out to play?" asked Mialee. "Don't go too far away. There's always a chance of rain that comes without warning at this time of year."

"We want to hear a story." Vall said.

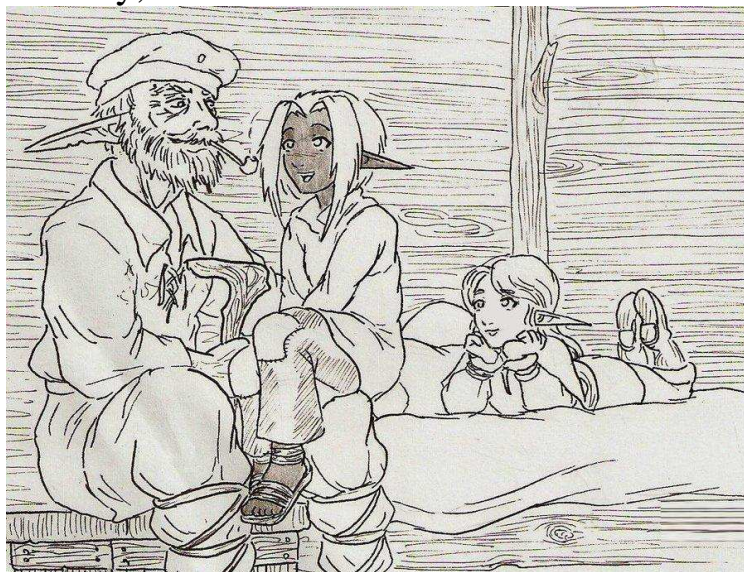
"I don't know any good stories." Mialee said. "Maybe you should wait until this evening when Varis gets home. He can tell a good story once he's had his dinner."

"Old Uncle will tell us a story." Thia said.

"That old devil lies." Mialee said. "But I have to admit he tells them well," she added thinking that Varis would probably have made one up.

Thia and Vall went into Thia's bedroom where Old Uncle had been sitting since it got the best sun at midday. Vall lay on the bed while Thia sat on his knee.

"Tell us other story, Old Uncle."



Old Uncle usually embellished his stories to make them more interesting but he knew that Thia and Vall believed him and so he decided to tell them the truth.

When Thia and Vall went outside to play afterwards they talked about Old Uncle's stories and dreamed about going on adventures like he did. Moon Elves weren't naturally magical though. They usually could cast one cantrip but it took long study to be anything more magical. Drow's on the other hand we're a bit more magical but Vall and Thia believed if they ever went on an adventure, they didn't have to be magic users. They could find wizards, warlocks or sorcerers to join them.

This dream didn't turn out just to be a passing fantasy and Thia and Vall would work together and hunt together and always had the idea of adventuring near the front of their minds.

They both took lessons in fighting from the patrols who kept an eye on the Orcs. Vall took to sword fighting like a duck to water but Thia found herself more suited to smaller weapons and range weapons.

Mialee and Varis gave Thia a crossbow and a dagger. They had taken them from the bodies of their parents for her. They hadn't told her yet they were from her parents and wanted to wait until she took on an adult name before telling her.

While Thia and Vall were hunting they had been tracking a large beast quite far from Nablara and had gone further than they should have. As they moved silently they followed the beast but couldn't get too close without alerting it.

Finally they rustled some leaves and the beast heard them and ran off making a loud noise. Thia and Vall jumped up and tried to run after it before giving up realising the attempt was futile.

When they had stopped Vall noticed some new tracks nearby and went to investigate while Thia reloaded her crossbow. Thia heard a sound and thought Vall was trying to tell her something and looked round to see an Orc advancing on Vall but Vall was too absorbed in inspecting the tracks to notice.

Thia instinctively fired her crossbow at the Orc but in her haste to do so it jammed.

"Look out, Vall!" she yelled but knew the Orc was too close to give Vall a chance to react.

Thia as quick as she could held up her free hand, and threw a fireball at the Orc. This was the first time Thia had used it in a real situation rather than just practicing.

This shocked the Orc giving Vall enough time to move out of the way and Thia threw a second fireball hitting the Orc this time which caused the Orc to think twice about what it was doing and decided to flee.

“Are you alright?” Thia asked.

Vall was too shocked to answer. “Did you just...?” she started and stared at Thia.

Thia didn’t know what to do. She hadn’t wanted anyone to know what she could do. Especially not Vall since she was her only friend and didn’t know if it would change how she thought about her.

When Thia didn’t answer Vall jumped and hugged her. “You just saved my life.”

“It was the only option I had.” Thia said as if she was trying to explain for doing something wrong.

“I won’t tell anyone your secret.” Vall said. “It could come in useful.”

“Like today.” Thia suggested.

“If you can do that, why do we need other magic users on our adventure? We’ve faced and defeated an Orc. No other person our age has done that.”

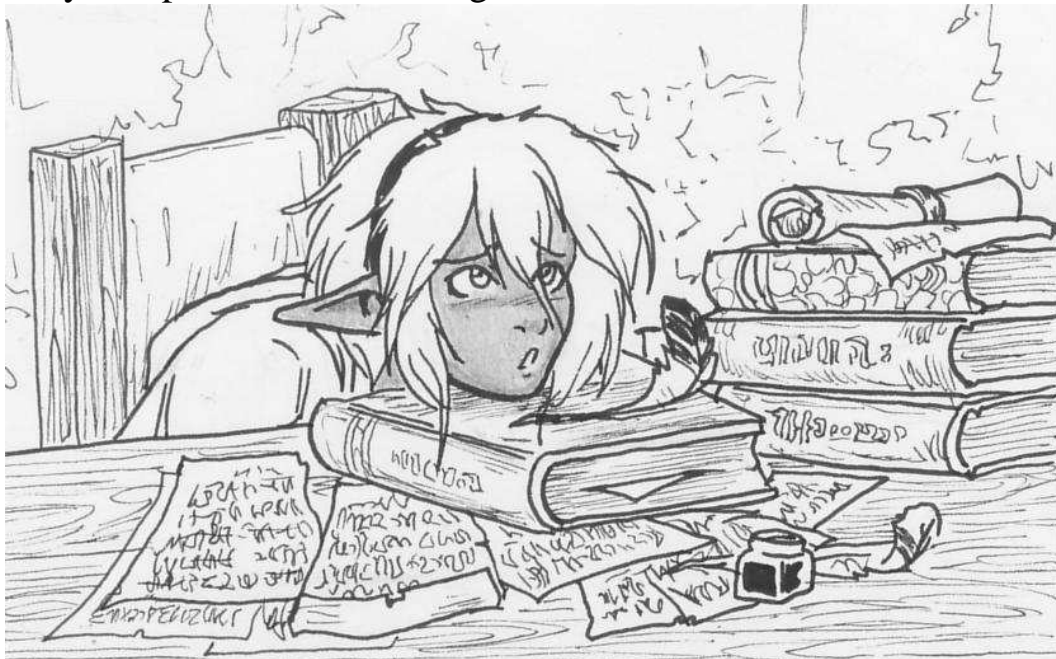


Thia’s parents wanted Thia to get an apprenticeship at one of the guilds in the city. Some of them didn’t want to teach Thia their skill but most said that if she was willing to learn and to work hard they would take her. Thia didn’t know which she wanted to join. She would have liked to work for the brewers, distillers and vintners or for the cooks and bakers since they would have extra benefits when you took your work home but neither of these wanted her. In the end

Thia decided to join the calligraphers, scribes and scribes. Although Thia didn't get paid much, she saved up everything she did earn until she had 50 gold pieces.

Without a teacher Thia had managed to learn as much as she could from the book she'd stolen. These were four cantrips and six spells. The rest of the book was beyond her and she didn't want to have a book that was mostly full of information that she couldn't use. The next time she went to one of the large markets with her parents, the same one where Mialee had bought her a soft toy unicorn years before, she went off on her own and bought a spell book which was a leather bound tome with 100 blank vellum pages. She concealed it to get it home. What she hadn't considered was that spells needed to be written in fine inks which weren't cheap.

Thia found working with the calligraphers, scribes and scribes, they would allow her to use the fine inks which she needed. It took a little while to copy the spells since she had to do it carefully and when she wasn't being watched, but she was happy when she had finally completed it and could get rid of the book she'd stolen.



Although elves usually claim to have reached adulthood at the age of 100, in Nablara elves were usually encouraged to choose their adult names at an earlier age since in a small town with opportunities elsewhere, not all elves would remain there for 100 years.

On the first day of spring there was a ceremony for any elves who wanted to take their adult names even if they planned to stay in the village for a long time, as most of them did.

These ceremonies usually didn't happen every year and several elves would take the ceremony together, even though they could be different ages.

On the year that Thia and Vall were encouraged by their parents to take part in the ceremony there was an unusually large number of children who wanted to become adults and the ceremony promised to be one that would be remembered and talked about for many years to come.

Thia and Vall had no intention of attending however. They wanted to be adventurers and this was going to be the best opportunity to leave unnoticed. They knew if they told their parents they would be prevented from going, however that morning Mialee and Varis wanted to tell Thia about how they found her. Most of what they told her she'd guessed but assured her parents that they were just as much her parents as those who gave birth to her. Varis also told Thia that her crossbow and dagger came from her blood parents.

Thia went out to meet with Vall and promised to be back for lunch. She and Vall wanted to visit some of their favourite places around the village and then leave after lunch.

When Thia returned for lunch she found she couldn't leave without saying goodbye. Varis was not there but she decided she had to tell Mialee about her plans.

"I knew this day would come." Mialee said. "I won't try and stop you because it was inevitable. I was hoping that you would have stayed longer and been accepted, but after how some of the guilds didn't want to accept you, you may have been older than old uncle before that happened."

"This is not goodbye," Thia told her. "I won't be missed. We will return and before our final return we will visit. I will keep in touch and let you know how we're getting on."

"Don't say you won't be missed." Mialee said. "You know that isn't true."

"I didn't mean it like that," Thia exclaimed. "Surely you knew what I meant."

“I do dear,” Mialee confessed. “I wasn’t thinking. I said that before I thought about it. I can’t let you go without equipping you properly.” Mialee said.

“Vall and I have been preparing for months.” Thia protested. “I doubt we could be better equipped for an adventure.”

Although Vall had put together an Explorer’s Pack, Mialee had a Scholar’s Pack that she insisted Thia take with her. She also had been preparing for the ceremony and had plenty of food to give Thia to take with her and finally gave her a cape.

When Thia left to meet up with Vall and get going Mialee insisted on coming to see her off.

Vall knew that if she told her parents they would probably tie her to her bed if that’s what it took to stop her going, so after the lunch she dressed in her adventuring gear, collected her things and climbed out of a window to meet up with Thia at the edge of the village.

When she arrived she was disturbed to see that Thia had Mialee with her.

“Don’t worry.” Thia told her. “She’s here to see us off.” She gave Vall a second cape that Mialee had given her which matched the one she was wearing.

“I never thought you’d look so grown up.” Mialee said. “I can see you both look ready for whatever this world has in store for you.” She was only vaguely aware of the tears on her face and took out a cake she was concealing. “I had baked this for tonight but I want you to take this with you.”

Thia and Mialee exchanged hugs and Thia asked Mialee to say goodbye to Varis for her. She was disappointed she couldn’t say it to him in person but guessed he might have tried to stop her.

“Look after her, Vall.” Mialee told her.

Just as they were about to leave they heard a shout, “WAIT!”

Vall’s father was coming up.

“You fool,” he said to her as he approached. “Going off on an adventure.”

“Don’t try and stop me, Dad.” Vall said.

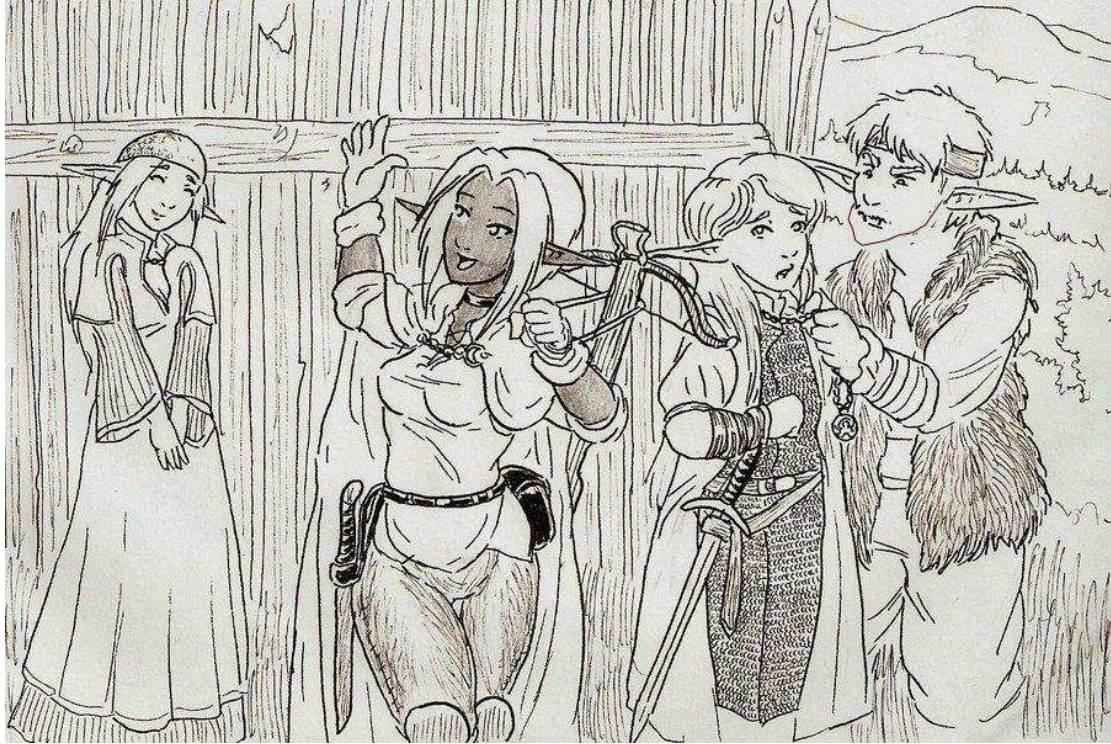
“Who’s stopping you?” her father said. “You’re as stubborn as your mother, but you’re not leaving without saying goodbye.”

Vall and Thia breathed a sigh of relief.

“If you’re going on an adventure, you need to be prepared.” Vall’s father said. He took off the chain mail coat he’d put on and put it

over Vall's head and attached his sword to her waist. He also put a locket around her neck.

Final goodbyes were exchanged before Thia and Vall made their way down the path not daring to look back knowing that seeing their parents might give them second thoughts.



As Thia and Vall headed down and out of the mountains, two fathers sat together in the beer tent, toasting their daughters.

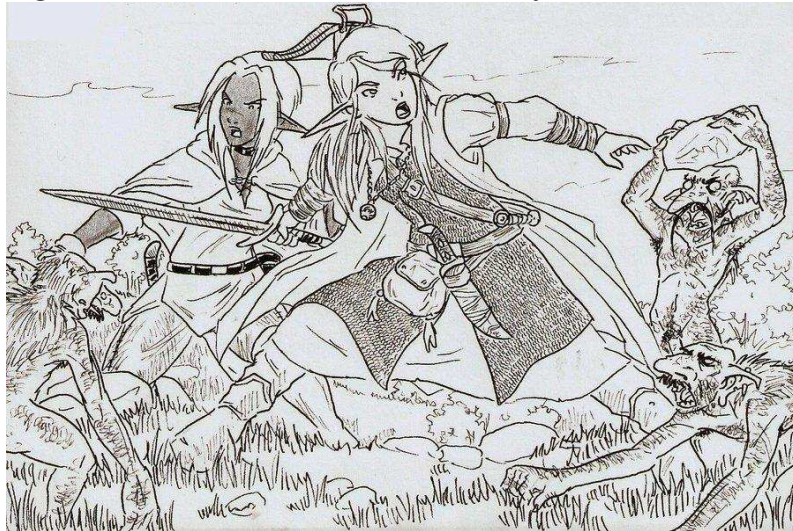
Thia and Vall kept to the road to begin with since the orcs rarely came near the road but after a while they decided to leave the road in order to avoid some of the surrounding towns. They didn't want anyone who knew them to see them on their way out and Vall had suggested they keep away since it was believed a certain former teacher lived in one of them. They knew that adventures wouldn't just turn up and announce themselves and so they decided to leave the mountains then join a road again. The road would have to lead somewhere and each town they passed through, they could stay in for a few days and listen for adventuring news and if they didn't hear anything useful, follow the road to the next town. Eventually they'd get to a large enough town that should be frequented by adventurers. They did have an advantage of not needing to find anywhere more than a stable or at least somewhere sheltered to rest. Elves don't sleep but meditate deeply remaining semi-conscious where they dream after a fashion. Four hours of this gave them the same benefit of eight hours sleep which meant using their night vision they could

travel in the dark although they preferred to only travel at night when Selûne was at least half full. They also decided to only travel for forty minutes at a time and then take it in turns in getting ten minutes rest while the other kept watch so as not to strain their night vision or over do it. There was nothing to suggest this was necessary but they decided to take the precaution all the same.

Thia and Vall had managed to save up quite a bit of gold and expected that if it started to run low they could try using entertainment to raise some more. Elf literature was rich and varied and they could try telling stories or teach the stories to bards and they later found that if Thia wore a cloak to cover her black skin she could get quite an audience from her dancing lights cantrip. As they travelled through the towns though they discovered that in this area adventures were not as easy to find as they'd expected or as Old Uncle had made it seem.

As they travelled further they noticed that a number of the caravans had guards with them. One of them even had as many as a dozen. The people they met told them that the territory they were entering was known for the high population of monsters and two lone women were not advised to go there – although many avoided them not wanting to talk to a Drow or anyone with a Drow.

The warnings were well founded when they came across three orcs.



There wasn't much cover nearby and the orcs couldn't approach without being noticed. One of them advanced on Vall but she had her sword ready to defend herself. Another one approached Thia while the third kept its distance and threw rocks at them.

When the one that was advancing on Thia got within 30 feet Thia suddenly threw a fireball at it.

The orc snarled in pain and was surprised but didn't back off. It charged only to find Thia's dagger hitting it. She'd attempted to miss in an attempt to keep the orc out of range and the orc had run into its path. Thia threw another fireball at the orc and its yell in pain was its last sound.

The other orc had been throwing rocks at Vall and mainly hitting the orc that she was fighting. It started throwing rocks at Thia. Thia jumped behind a tree to avoid a rock, which hit a branch braking the branch much too easily. Thia looked at the tree and saw that it wasn't going to be much good since it had been severely damaged by lightning. She grabbed a twig from the tree and pointed it towards the orc as she cast the Witch Bolt spell. A blue arc of lightening formed between her and the orc dealing massive damage to the orc. Thia found if she concentrated she could maintain the arc for a minute by which time the orc had been completely electrocuted.

Thia looked at Vall who had easily dealt with the last orc after the damage it had taken from the rocks.

As it began to get dark, they saw the lights of a tavern up ahead and decided to get a meal and see if there was any mention of how many other orcs could be around.

Thia usually put the hood of her cloak up to hide the colour of her skin and they were joined by a group of people who told them that there was a serious problem in the area from goblins. They told Thia and Vall that a lot of people were leaving the area and opportunities were diminishing and that they should leave the area too.

The only route away was the road that Thia and Vall had been travelling down and from the amount of time they'd spent on it, they really didn't want to have to go back.

They were just about to leave when they heard one of the group saying that the goblin problem seem to be organised and was believed to be run by three orcs but nobody had seen these orcs yet.

"I thought that orcs and goblins were usually found together." Thia said. "I would have thought there would be more than three orcs around."

"We believe there could be a goblin cave nearby," the bar tender who'd been listen to the conversation said. "The rumours are that the

orcs moved in and started organising the goblins but there definitely aren't more than three. That's why no one has seen them. They are getting the goblins to do most of the work and are just attacking lone or small groups of people."

"He's right," another man from the table said. "The two of you ought to look out. You really should head back. You're just the type the orcs would attack."

Thia and Vall didn't really want to say that they had faced three orcs. That would have drawn too much unwanted attention.

"We passed the bodies of three dead orcs early this morning." Vall said.

A huge man jumped to his feet. "Really?" he exclaimed. "Where?" Vall pointed in the direction they'd come. "Just over 20 miles that way," She said.

"We've got to go and check this out." He looked at the rest of his party. "We'll leave at first light."

Thia wondered if he was going to ask her and Vall to join them but was relieved when he didn't. She suggested to Vall they leave before they were asked and so they headed further down the road before they found a sheltered spot to meditate.

The stories of the goblins turned out to be true and over the next three days, they found themselves attacked by about two goblins at a time each day. There was a town up ahead and they decided they might stay there for a few days to give themselves a break from the goblins and see where they should head for next.

That evening they decided to take a rest while one rested the other kept watch. While Thia was resting Vall woke her up. There were more goblins approaching them.

Vall drew her sword and then realised that Thia had already cast as many spells as she could that day and although she could still cast cantrips, they weren't as effective as spells.

Instantly Thia tried to cast a Witch Bolt spell, which caused an arc of energy to come between her and the goblin. It was already dark and the energy bolt lit up the surrounding area. The other goblins saw what was happening and fled. Thia ended the spell and cast a ball of fire in her hand. The goblin that had taken the damage took one look at her and fled with the others.

As Thia and Vall headed towards the town, Vall was very confused. As they approached the gates she had to ask Thia what she thought was going on.

“I thought you could only cast two spells a day.” Vall said. “That was your third spell and it wasn’t any less effective than any of the others.”

“Obviously, with practise I can cast more.” Thia said. “I’ve had quite a bit of experience in the last few days.”

Vall agreed with that. Indeed her own practice had enabled to be able to do an Action Surge where she could push herself beyond her normal limits for a moment although she couldn’t do it more than once a day. She looked at Thia and then herself.

“We haven’t chosen adult names yet,” she said “but I think we ought to use adult names in the town.”

“What name are you planning to use?” asked Thia.

Vall thought about it. “Valanthe,” she said. “That will allow you to continue to still call me Vall as a shorter version.”

“I think those who know you, would probably use the name they know you as anyway.” Thia said.

“What name are you going to use?” Vall asked her.

“I’ll stick with Thia,” Thia said. “The beauty of it is that as well as a child’s name it is a female adult name and I’m perfectly happy with it.”

The town appeared to be quite a busy route for travellers and as Thia and Vall visited different taverns to try and get the latest adventuring news, they saw more races than they’d ever seen before.

Thia still kept her clock covering her though because they didn’t see any other Drow. After they’d rested Vall found there was a fighter’s guild in the town and went there to see if she could learn some more manoeuvres.

Thia found there was a School of Evocation and decided to give it a visit. She’d managed to learn six spells from the book she’d stolen but hoped that with a proper teacher she might be able to add a couple more spells to her own spell book.

The mage at the School of Evocation didn’t care that Thia was a Drow and would probably have taught her even if she had been a demon. She told Thia how she could change her Produce Flame cantrip to become a fire bolt. She wouldn’t be able to produce flame

in the same way but using the Fire Bolt as a weapon it would cause much more damage. The other advantage was she could only hurl a fire ball thirty feet, the mote of fire from the Fire Bolt could travel 120 feet.

The mage asked Thia what kind of evocation spells she would like to learn. There were five spells available to her that were of a low enough level for her to cast. Witch Bolt was one and the mage told Thia she could probably learn two more. Two of them were Magic Missile and Thunder Wave but Thia's interest was drawn by Burning Hands and Chromatic Orb.

Burning Hands meant that if she held out her hands with her thumbs touching and her fingers spread a thin sheet of flames would shoot forth from her fingertips damaging any creature within fifteen feet. The Chromatic Orb allowed her to hurl a four inch sphere of energy up to ninety feet. She could choose the energy to be acid, cold, fire, lightning, poison or thunder.

She found that studying here she could use half the gold and time as usual to copy the spells into her spell book.

Before she left the mage showed Thia how to Sculpt Spells which would allow her to create relative pockets of safety from the effects of her spells, which Thia realised, could protect Vall.

When Thia and Vall met up again they both felt much more robust from their training and decided to get a meal in a tavern before deciding where to head to next since there were several different roads out of the town and each would hold different opportunities. They had been too involved in their training to listen out for any adventuring news and hoped they might get some that evening and went to the inn where they were staying to get some drinks since it seemed to be frequented by a wide variety of people who probably knew of different adventures on each road out.

This didn't appear to be the case. Most of the people seemed to be engaged in whispered conversations and just by looking at them you could tell they didn't want anyone to join them, not even two attractive elven women so Thia and Vall sat on a table on their own and found they had to whisper their discussions to keep within the ambient noise of the room.

"I've been thinking about the goblins," mused Vall. "We heard they were being led by three orcs which could have been the three we took out a few days ago. They must have come from somewhere

near here and seem to be staying on the road that eventually leads back to Nablara.”

“You don’t think they want to join with the orcs in the slopes around Nablara?” asked Thia.

“Nablara’s a long way off.” Vall said. “I doubt they know about them and wouldn’t travel that far unless they did. I doubt the orcs would want goblins with them unless they had their three leaders with them. Maybe we should see which is the quieter road and take that. I think there would be more adventures somewhere where the inhabitants are not preoccupied by the goblins.”

“I was thinking about them too,” said Thia. “I think that without their leaders they may be very disorganised. I think if we could find their den we could assess the situation and report what we find. A band of warriors would probably be sent to ‘remove the problem from the source’.”

As they were discussing this, a dwarf came over to their table. “Can I buy you girls a drink?” he asked.

Thia and Vall were drinking Flyish, which was a fruity wine. It wasn’t made with an elf palette in mind and was a bit drier than they preferred but did taste a bit like the fine wines of Nablara.

“Add two Flyish to that,” he called towards the bar. “I couldn’t help overhearing a little of your conversation,” he said.

Thia and Vall looked around hoping they hadn’t been talking too loudly but everyone still seemed too deeply engrossed in their conversations. “May I join you?” the dwarf asked.

“Please do.” Vall said. “I’m Valanthe and this is my friend Thia.”

“I’m Rurik,” the dwarf said. “I heard you talking about goblins.”

“I’m sure you’re aware they’re quite a problem around here.” Thia said.

“Not for long,” Rurik said. “My friend and I have found their cave. We were looking for someone to join our party.”

At that moment a large man came over with a tray of drinks. He towered above even Thia and Vall, even though elves are supposed to be taller than humans. He had arms like tree trunks with muscles bulging out of them. His hair was as black as Thia’s skin and his own skin was a dark mahogany. It was clear he was a Turami, who came from the south of the inland sea.

“This is Stor,” Rurik said. He seemed to read the question on Vall’s face and added, “His parents are Turami but his parents moved to the

extreme north-west and so decided to give him an Illuskan name to help him fit in round there.”

Stor stood there grinning. He was not the kind of guy you would mess with but his face was the type built to be always smiling. He handed Thia and Vall their drinks and gave Rurik his. It was a deep brown spirit that neither Thia nor Vall had ever seen before. He noticed them looking at it.

“This is Skullbuster,” he explained. “It’s a dwarf speciality. You’d have to be a dwarf to fully enjoy its gritty taste. I don’t recommend you try it though. It can put a non-dwarf under the table in three minutes flat!”

“This is Cloud Ale.” Stor said, speaking in a voice that suggested he didn’t do a lot of talking. “Ten pints of this, gives you the strength of a Hill Giant.”

Thia wondered how many he had already had. “You’d probably need the constitution of a Hill Giant to stay conscious after ten pints of Cloud Ale,” she said.

“I think we’ve found the people we need to join our party.” Rurik said to Stor.

Stor looked at them. “These are woman,” he said.

“I’ve heard them talking.” Rurik said. “They can handle anything the goblins throw at them.”

“What are your plans?” Thia asked.

“We know where the goblins’ cave is.” Rurik said. “We plan go and have a look and see what it looks like. The four of us should have no trouble going in and taking out the goblins.” He looked at Vall.

“You’re an elf. You and I can see 60 feet into dim light as if it were bright light, and see in darkness as if it were dim light.” He looked at Thia and continued, “you’re a Drow. Your superior dark vision will have a radius of 120 feet. I don’t think your sun light sensitivity will be a problem once we get to the caves.”

“I don’t have any sun light sensitivity,” said Thia. “What gave you that idea?”

“I was told the Drow have a sensitivity to sun light.” Rurik said.

“Thia was raised by moon elves,” Vall said. “She will have learnt to cope in sun light.”

“I hope her dark vision is fully developed.” Rurik murmured.

“Don’t worry about that.” Thia said. “My dark vision is fine.”

“It’s true,” Vall agreed. “There’s no one I’d rather travel with in the dark.”

Dear Mummy,

I hope I haven't left it too long before writing my first letter but there's been very little happening. Adventures weren't as easy to find as we thought.

Until we arrived at this city I thought Nablara was big but this city is massive in comparison and we are told this is small.

I also find it hard to believe that there can be so much space between settlements.

Your daughter is now an adventurer. Vall and I have joined a party to explore a cave that may contain goblins. There are seven in the party but three of them are off doing something else at the present so we have joined the other two in order to deal with a minor problem and then we'll meet the others.

I will send you another letter after our adventure and let you know how it went.

Please give my love to Daddy and the Old Uncle. Vall says she is not much of a writer and so will write a letter to her family after our adventure so please pass our love to them.

Here is a picture of us on our first adventure.

Lots of love,

Thia.

At the entrance to the goblin's cave the next day, Thia and Vall were filled with a sense of dread. It wasn't too late to back out but they were sure the first sight of it would have the same effect on anyone. Having the superior dark vision, Thia led the way with Stor next to her. She was able to ensure he didn't stumble and if they were engaged in a fight she could cast a light cantrip to allow him to see, which would create a 20 foot sphere of light with a further 20 feet of dim light.

After the main opening of the cave, they followed a narrow passage that opened with large rectangular spaces on either side. They were both empty and there didn't seem to be any reason for them. Thia, Vall and Rurik searched for signs of traps but didn't find any so they continued on. As they neared the end of the passage they saw two goblin guards arguing with each other. Thia threw a fire bolt at one. She was waiting for the opportunity to test out her two new spells but while she could only cast three a day she had to choose the best times to use them. The fire bolt briefly gave enough light for Stor to see the goblins and he leapt forward and took them both out before they could raise an alarm. Just a flash of light was all that was needed for him to be almost as lethal in the dark as he was in the light.

The passage opened up into a wide cave with strange inscriptions along the walls.

"Look at this, Vall," Thia said. She then wondered if she should have used 'Valanthe' but guessed that Vall sounded like a shortened version.

Vall came over to look at the inscriptions. There was an uneasy feeling of enchantment about the cavern.

“Wait here,” Vall said to Stor and ventured further in with Thia to investigate.

They could finally get a better view now. Vall thought the characters looked familiar because he was familiar with them having been taught at school during the lessons that Thia has missed, running errands for the teacher.

Just as Vall was about to tell Thia that the script was similar to something she'd seen before the enchanted feeling of the cavern vanished along with the inscriptions. Thia and Vall looked behind them to see a rock fall and they just managed to jump out of the way. As long as Rurik and Stor has stayed where they were, they wouldn't have been affected but it did mean Thia and Vall were separated from them and the way out was blocked.

Vall wanted to call out to Rurik and Stor to see if they were okay but Thia pointed out that it would probably alert the rest of the goblins. They'd just have to hope that the others had got out. Their immediate problem was that with no way to shift the rocks, this cave might become their tomb.

“How are we going to get out?” asked Thia with quite a note of fear in her voice.

“There were guards at the entrance of this cavern.” Vall said. “The goblins won't be able to move these rocks. They wouldn't block it off if it's the only exit. There has to be another way out.”

They searched around the cavern and found a passage leading out and down and followed that.

In less than an hour, Thia was had been able to try out her new spells and she also found the fire bolt cantrip with its extra range and 'punch' much more useful than the produce flame one. Finally she and Vall could feel a draught and knew the way out had to be close. Thia was glad she had chosen the spells she had. One of the options had been Thunderwave which would have brought the cavern down around them. By the time they reached the passage that they hoped led out, it seemed clear that they'd taken out most of the goblins and any left wouldn't stand much of a chance on their own.

The passage was quite large and had the roof reinforced by wooden beams. Before heading towards the draught they decided to investigate the other end of the passage for more goblins. Thia had one spell left and her cantrips could be cast as many times as she wanted.

As they ventured down the passage they heard an odd sound. They were suddenly rooted to the spot for a second when they saw two huge creatures that appeared to be a cross between ogres and goblins embodying the worst characteristics of both, lumbering down the passage towards them. Although they were stooped to fit in the passage it didn't slow them down and they were running as fast as greyhounds.

"We've got to get out of here." Vall cried. "Have you got anything to slow them down?"

She looked at Thia only to find Thia was holding her head in her hands the expression on her face showed she was in great pain. She probably couldn't think about a spell, much less cast one.

"What's the matter?" Vall asked her.

"I've just had a spitting headache come on," Thia managed to say. "My eyes went blurred for a second and then it came on. I can't think straight."

"Your eyes went blurred?" Vall asked.

That gave Thia the idea to cast a Light cantrip.

The light immediately cleared Thia's headache and she grabbed Vall's hand and cast the Expeditious Retreat spell. As she did so Vall's locket glowed brightly. Thia thought she was going to have to pull Vall along with her but found that somehow Vall was able to keep with her. The spell was enough to keep them ahead of the beasts until they could get outside at the different entrance and the spell lasted for ten minutes as they headed back to the town.



"What happened there?" asked Vall as they walked back towards the town when the spell had worn off.

"I saw your locket glow." replied Thia. "Is it magical?"

Vall thought about it. “Not a far as I know,” she said. She thought about it again. “Hang on,” she said. “I seem to remember hearing that it was supposed to be magical but we didn’t think it was since we’d never seen any evidence. My father didn’t give it to me because it might be magical.”

“I grabbed your hand while I cast that spell,” Thia said. “Maybe if I hold you hand and you’re wearing your locket you’ll get the benefit of any spell I cast.”

“I don’t think it’s as simple as that,” Vall said. “I think it would only apply to one type of spell or just one spell. If you cast Expeditious Retreat I might get the benefit. I might get the benefit on any transmutation spell.”

Thia thought about this and was about to answer but Vall stopped her.

“What I wanted to ask was what happened with your headache?”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” Thia said. “I don’t like the conclusion I’ve come to. When I cast the light cantrip it went. Rurik mentioned about whether my dark vision was developed properly. Although I can see as well in the dark as any Drow, I don’t think I’ve ever tried to see in the dark for longer than an hour.”

“We’ve been travelling at night for weeks.” Vall exclaimed.

“Yes, but we rested every fifty minutes.” Thia said. “Look at my eyes, they’re blue. Most Drow have red eyes. My eyes turn red in the dark but I think I may not be able to manage more than an hour without a light source.”

At this point they were coming into the town. They decided to go to the inn and find out if Stor and Rurik had returned. If they hadn’t they needed to go back to the cave and see if they needed help and hope they’d kept back and not been buried by the rock fall.

The inn keeper told Thia and Vall that Stor and Rurik had returned earlier and had paid up and said they’d meet up with their companions. Everyone has assumed Thia and Vall wouldn’t be returning.

“Rurik told us that the entrance to the goblin cave had been sealed off but buried you in the process.” the inn keeper said. “They said your deaths weren’t in vain since the goblins are now trapped and won’t bother us again.”

“That is not the real story,” Vall said.

“Evidently,” the bar tender said, “as your presence indicates.”

A warrior sitting at the bar was listening. "Can you tell us what really happened then?" he asked.

"The rock fall that sealed off the entrance did happen." Thia explained. "We had moved in far enough to avoid being buried by it. We were actually worried that Stor and Rurik were buried."

"How did you get out?" the warrior asked.

"There is another exit." Vall said.

"Can you show us where that is?" asked another man who'd also been listening. "If we can seal that one off, our problem will be sorted."

"I think we can say, we've sorted your problem for you." said Thia. "My friend and I have taken out almost all the goblins in the cave. I don't think any left will be much of a problem."

"There are a couple of large goblin like ogres in there." Vall said.

"We can show you where the entrance is for you to seal off but you may want to get rid of them first."

The inn keeper told them they could stay at his establishment for as long as they liked, free of charge for their services. He offered to give them a letter to take to the next town they went to to give to an inn keeper there that would also give them free lodging but they declined.

This evening however, everyone was much more forthcoming with adventuring news. Thia and Vall decided to show a group of warriors where the other entrance to the goblin cave was the next day and then continue on that road. They were confident that they would be able to deal with any remaining goblins on that road and found that the next town along it would be holding a festival in a couple of days. This would be a great chance for them to find a party to join to start their next adventure.

Before they went to sleep both Thia and Vall wrote letters home detailing their adventure and decided to post them the next morning on their way out.

When Thia and Vall arrived at Thrisk, which was a large fishing town, the festival had already begun. They found out that it was the Festival of the Rings, however nobody they talked to seemed to be from Thrisk. They'd just come for the festival and nobody knew what it was about. It was clear they didn't care. As long as there was

plenty of food, plenty of drink, music and dancing that was all that seemed to matter.

Finding somewhere to stay wasn't going to be easy. When they'd stayed at the inn in the previous city, they were recommended The Warrior and Spear, The Green Flagon or The Cursed Candle but each of these were fully booked and the arrangements had been made almost before last year's festival had ended.

In the end Thia and Vall wandered into an alley some way off from the revellers. The alley was called Muck Alley and was aptly named. It was in the middle of a labyrinth of other streets full of noisy taverns. There was an inn there called The Topaz Cauldron, which was opposite the workshop of a half-elf tailor called Imroth. The inn was a two-story stonewalled building, with a blue tile roof. Accommodations consisted of several small rooms with beds and woollen mattresses. The meals ranged between two to four silver pieces and all came with a drink. The innkeeper was a heavysset gnome named Atris. They later found out that he possessed a magical sword that once belonged to the gnome ranger Atris, who vanished in the Dread Lair of Ruin.



Joining in with the festival was easy. At first Thia decided to wear her hood to hide her race but after a while she didn't bother after they realised that nobody cared who or what you were as long you were determined to have a good time. When the inn keeper found out they were here for the festival he was able to find two dresses

which fitted them which were the local fashion and much more presentable at a festival than their travelling clothes.

Although there were hundreds of people at the festival and many of them were adventurers, adventuring was not mentioned and it was only the next day when everyone had recovered that Thia and Vall decided to see if anyone in the inn wanted to talk about adventures. It seemed everyone in the inn was talking, telling others about themselves and what news they'd heard on their way here and Thia and Vall guessed there were in just the right place.

The first person they noticed when they came down for a meal was an elf with grey hair and hazel eyes, wearing fine clothing and silk gloves. She also appeared Fey in appearance and so Thia decided to ask the innkeeper about her before she decided to talk to her.

"Her name is Serielye," the innkeeper said. "She comes in every few months. She's definitely an elf. She's an expert entertainer. She always brings her dog, Subhkeir, with her. She usually has a pint each evening that she comes in and her dog gets half a pint. On the rare occasion that she has a bit more than a pint, her dog gets a bit more too. I don't know much more about her. She doesn't talk much but seems to take in everything that goes on."

There was another elf sitting there but there was something about him that turned them off so they ordered a meal of roasted trout with cinnamon and dried cherry with a glass of cider and joined a man with black hair and grey eyes. He looked very wealthy although with the gold they'd found in the goblins' cave they weren't doing bad themselves.

He was reluctant to talk to Thia at first so Vall led the conversation and he began to accept Thia more. His name was Wicbert and he was an aristocrat but although he was stoic, he was also gullible. Wicbert told them he was looking for a company of adventurers who could escort his daughter safely to the dwarf city of Hariholm, although he wouldn't say why.

Vall noticed there was a dwarf who might be able to help Wicbert. She was common in appearance with messy auburn hair and light hazel eyes but was wearing fine raiment and jewellery. She was on her own and seemed to have things on her mind but when she saw Thia and Vall she welcomed them over. Her name was Khali and she was also an aristocrat. They told her about Wicbert.

"He doesn't say why?" asked Khali.

“No.” said Vall.

“That does seem a bit suspicious,” Khali said. “I have a gift for being able to see people’s alignment. That elf over there,” and she pointed to the man that Thia and Vall had wanted to avoid, “is evil. Wicbert I can see is lawful and neutral. I know of Hariholm and might be able to help him. I want to atone for some sins from my past but the dwarves in Hariholm are not on friendly terms with elves. I wouldn’t recommend you joining us.”

“Do you think anyone else here could help you?” asked Thia. There was a gnome with white hair, sharp blue eyes and small ears sitting near by and a human with silver hair and dark blue eyes who was dressed as a peasant. The human came over when they looked at her.

“I hope you don’t mind me overhearing a bit of your conversation,” she said. She sounded very kind and charming. “My name is Aenad. I might be able to help you on your quest. It would also benefit me. I’m looking for a company of adventurers to clear my name against false charges of forgery. I’ve heard that the silver dragon of the Lost Barrow of Chaos may help adventurers for a price.”

The gnome was a hedge wizard called Thari. She too was seeking to clear her name but in this case from charges of heresy. It was clear she was lustful and sarcastic but agreed to be the fourth member of the team. She told them that the route to Hariholm went through the Dismal Moor. They wanted to avoid that route because a spectral dragon had been seen there. She’d also heard that the wizard Perce the Wise possessed a remarkable collection of visions and prophecies.

As Thia and Vall retired that night they reflected that they had got together a party of adventurers but would not be joining them. They weren’t sure how long anyone was going to stay now the festival was over and may have missed their chance. However just before they went to their room the innkeeper told them an elven caravan was expected to arrive, supposedly carrying apples from Llane which grant eternal youth. Whether the apples did as they were told was unimportant, there would be a lot of people either with the caravan or in the city when they heard about it. He’d already had all the other rooms booked so they might have better luck the next day.

The next morning Thia and Vall rose late since they had nothing major planned for the day. At breakfast they heard that Wicbert, Khali, Aenad and Thari had eaten a quick breakfast early and left at first light. Serielye was nowhere to be seen, nor was the evil elf. Thia and Vall found out where and when the caravan was due to arrive and decided to steer clear.

In the end Thia suggested that there were some hills a few miles outside the city and they could climb them to get an idea of the lay of the land. It did appear that everyone else knew the area much better than them and it would help planning adventures if they had an idea of the terrain they'd be crossing.

When they finally did climb a hill the view was impressive. You could see other hills, forests, rivers, lakes and towns. Even the mountains where Nablara was situated were still just visible in the distance. It was hard to believe they had come so far from home. As they were looking around they suddenly heard a shrieking sound in the sky and two harpies swooped down scratching them with their claws before moving out of range of their weapons. The harpy that attacked Thia tore her clothing while Vall had the advantage of her chain mail. This didn't stop Thia though, and she shot at the harpy with her crossbow. The harpy easily dodged the crossbow bolt and screeched a taunt before the two dived for them again.

Thia and Vall, this time, had time to drop to the ground to avoid the harpies. Thia rolled onto her back in the same movement.

"We're changing the rules," she said and threw a firebolt at the nearest harpy. The firebolt was a lot faster than a crossbow bolt but the harpy expertly dodged it. Enraged it dived at Thia again scratching her face and arms before moving out of range again.

Thia spared a glance at Vall to see she also had her face and hands much more badly scratched but now had her sword out and had cut a piece out of the harpy's wing.

She could only spare a glance before having to roll out of the way of the other harpy, having not had the time to get on her feet.

Vall was on her feet. The harpy she was fighting was not able to fly but it buffeted her with its other wing sending her flying. Thia wanted to cast a Witch Bolt spell but wasn't getting a chance to get out her twig from the lightning tree while she had to either throw firebolts, which the harpy could dodge, or have to dodge it herself.

As the other harpy pounced on Vall tearing at her legs and buffeting her with its wings Vall managed to use an Action Surge to sit up and swing her sword cutting the harpy in two. The other one screeched in rage and flew over to Vall clawing at her face and buffeting her with its wings knocking Vall out.

Thia could only look on horrified. It was clear that Vall was lying there dying and with the other harpy moving back to attack her she couldn't tend to Vall. As the harpy flew towards her, Thia had the time to pull out a piece of string and a bit of wood to cast an Unseen Servant spell. This created a mindless, shapeless, invisible force that could perform simple tasks such as fetching, cleaning, mending, folding clothes, lighting fires, serving food or pouring wine. Telepathically, Thia was able to command it to get a healing kit from her backpack and use it to stabilise Vall.

As the harpy hovered above Thia, she used her left hand to throw firebolts at it. Each bolt the harpy would be able to dodge so Thia aimed to miss luring the harpy closer. When it was close enough, she jumped up and threw the contents of her hip flash over it, which she'd been fumbling with in her right hand. The harpy was momentarily surprised and at this close range, that moment was all Thia needed to throw a firebolt at the harpy that it couldn't dodge, turning it into a ball of fire. Thia threw her dagger at it finishing it off and waited for its remains to burn out before retrieving her dagger.

In the mean time she ran to check on Vall who was still unconscious but stable and dismissed the unseen servant.

Unfortunately Thia didn't have any healing potions or know any healing spells and knew that Vall needed to rest to recover so she lifted her up and carried her into a small wood where they'd be protected from any more harpies.

As Thia sat Vall against a tree, a leopard lying on one of the branches above them jumped down and took a long hard look at them.

Thia wasn't sure what to do having dropped her weapons to carry Vall but before her eyes the leopard transmuted into the shape of a man. Thia had heard that Druids could take on animal forms but had never seen it.

"Your friend doesn't look too good," the Druid said and he laid his hands on Vall. After a moment she opened her eyes and looked

around. Before Thia could thank him, the Druid turned into a wolf and ran off.

“How do you feel?” Thia asked Vall as she helped her up.

“I’ve been better.” Vall said and looked at the still burning remains of the harpy. “That firebolt really packs a punch,” she said.

“I know.” Thia said. “Being a cantrip I can cast it as often as I like. I think if I had been on my own, I would have been out of spells by now.”

“You’ll always have me by your side.” Vall assured her.

“I know,” Thia said. “We’ll always be there for each other.”

“I could do with learning some magic,” said Vall, “but as a fighter I don’t think that would work.”

When they had finally taken in the view and got an idea of the area they decided to head back into town. It was dark when they neared the border of the town. They saw nearby in a ruin a light and went to investigate. As they approached the light moved further into the ruin beckoning them to follow.

Thia and Vall both heard alarm bells ringing in their heads.

“Wait a moment,” whispered Thia. She cast her dancing lights cantrip nearby. As she guessed, they saw the light move towards them as if confused.

“It’s a will-o’-the-wisp,” Thia hissed to Vall.

“We ought to get out of here,” Vall whispered back.

“We can’t do that.” Thia whispered. “These are hostile evil creatures. We can’t allow them to be this close to the town.”

They heard in their heads a roaring sound. It was the will-o’-the-wisp. Trying to lure them forward. No doubt there was an unstable wall somewhere in the ruin. They derive their powers from the life forces released by creatures when they die, and as a result spend a



lot of time trying to lure creatures to their death. The dancing lights looked like four more will-o’-the-wisps and moving to examine them meant Vall was able to strike at it with her sword. The will-o’-the-wisp immediately focused its

attention on Vall and shot a bolt of energy at her. The energy threw her back and she lay several feet away dazed. Thia by this time moved in with burning hands. The will-o'-the-wisp, although being a magical creature, had never been attacked by magic before. It tried to attack Thia the same way it attacked Vall but unable to work out where she was, it missed. Thia threw a Chromatic Orb at it and it fizzled out.

Thia helped Vall up. She needed more medical care than Thia thought she could provide and she helped Vall back to the town and took her to the southern edge of the city where they found a healers shop still open.

He wanted to charge them nearly three hundred gold pieces for healing her but then just used a healing potion, which could be bought, in the market, for fifty gold pieces. Healing potions weren't easy to find though and there wasn't a market open so they didn't complain. The healer did mention that there was both a mages' guild in the city and a fighters' guild. They would be closed to all but members now but Thia and Vall thought they might want to visit them during the day.

While Vall was being healed Thia decided to have a look in a Magic Shop they had passed on their way to the Healers. When Thia went in, the mage immediately recognised her magical aura and recited an incantation. Thia found that her clothes that had been torn by the harpies were repaired.

Thia asked the mage if he wanted anything for that but he said it was 'on the house' – the least he could do for another magic user. Thia decided to buy a component pouch to put the material components of her spells in so she could get at them easier.

Their main concern was getting back to the inn to get something to eat. Thia thought getting Vall to bed would help her but Vall insisted the potion had cured all the damage and a meal was what she needed. Thia agreed but knew that if she were going to try and find an adventure, Vall would want to be present.

In the inn there were all different people except for one. Serielye was there again with her dog. They were sitting alone as before and looked like the wanted to be on their own.

Thia and Vall ordered braised shellfish and leeks with a glass of wine for two silver pieces each and sat down at a table opposite a dwarf. She was exceptionally beautiful, with cropped red hair and dark hazel eyes. She was wearing leather armour.

“Hello there,” she greeted them. She noticed Thia’s skin colour but decided to ignore it. “You look like you’ve had quite a day.”

In their haste to get a meal Thia and Vall hadn’t thought to tidy themselves up. The scratches from the harpies could still be seen on Thia, and Vall’s clothes looked ruffled.

“We met a couple of harpies.” Vall said.

“You’re lucky to get away so lightly,” the dwarf said. “I wouldn’t venture out of the city after dark.”

“It was dark when we got here,” said Thia. “We also fought a will-o’-the-wisp.”

Vall wouldn’t have mentioned that but liked the look on the dwarf’s face.

“There’s more to you than meets the eye,” the dwarf said. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Jora Holmgidotr. I’m a ranger.”

“I’m Valanthe,” said Vall. “This is Thia,” she went on gesturing to Thia.

As she greeted Thia and Vall, they noticed she had a maimed left hand.

“What brings you to these parts?” asked Jora.

“We were hoping to join a party of adventurers,” Thia said. “We thought we’d find plenty of opportunities at the festival. I’m a wizard and my friend here is a fighter.”

“Maybe you could help me out.” Jora said. “I’m looking for my lost sister.”

“Do you know where to start looking?” asked Vall with the memory of the view from the hilltop coming to mind.

“Last time I heard from her, she was in the Tempest Hills. She knew a bookbinder called Symund there. I’ve heard he’ll be coming here at the end of the week so I’m going to wait until he arrives. If he can’t give me any new leads, I’ll start there.”

A half elf who had been buying a meal at the bar heard a mention of the Tempest Hills. He came up to them. He was slender, with curly golden hair and bright amber eyes. He was wearing hide armour.

“If you are going to the Tempest Hills, could I join you?” he asked.

“Are you headed there?” asked Jora.

“I’m Theny,” he said. “I’m an inquisitor but I’m looking for my missing daughter and my search takes me there. If that turns up nothing I’ll go on to Moor Court.”

“Please join us,” said Thia glancing at Vall and Jora for agreement.

“I’ve heard that Cynre the merchant is in town again,” Jora said. “He deals in magical weapons but they’re all cursed.”

“I thought the mage’s guild told him not to show his face here again.” Theny said.

“They don’t have the authority to ban him from the city,” Jora replied. “I don’t think he plans to trade here and is passing through. I wonder which unfortunate town he’ll try and trade in next.”

“I’ve heard that someone has been looting tombs at the Temple of Angels.” Theny told them. “I believe our journey passes near there. We should think about giving it a wide berth.”

Another half elf approached them, drawn by the sight of two elves and another half elf. She had a long face with thick blond hair and grey eyes. She looked like she’d just heard some disturbing news.

“Is something bothering you?” Thia asked her.

“I’ve just heard that the barmaid at the Demon and Serpent tried to poison a company of adventurers. May I join you? I stayed there not long ago.”

Jora pulled up a chair for her and the innkeeper hearing what she’d said, offered her a drink and assured her it wasn’t poisonous.

“I think,” the half-elf said as she sat down, “next time I come through here I’ll stay at the Clerics’ guild. Although I do feel safe here.”

“Cleric’s guild?” asked Thia, remembering the two guilds they’d passed on their way in earlier.

“Yes,” replied the half-elf. “I’m a cleric. My name is Nimrellye. We have a guild in this city in the Temple of Tempus.”

“Would the mage’s guild be prepared to teach anything to a wizard seeking to further her skills?” asked Thia.

“After taking out a will-o’-the-wisp, you’ll have no trouble asking for training.” Jora said.

The surprise of Nimrellye’s face was evident but she didn’t say anything.

“I was meaning to ask,” Theny said. “Why was there only one? I didn’t think will-o’-the-wisps were solitary creatures.”

Thia had learnt a bit about them since they were magical creatures, “you can encounter one to three of them.”

“I’m looking to find out who murdered my family.” Nimrellye said. “I’m heading for Moor Court. Hundreds of bats were seen swarming down there last night.”

Since they would be waiting for Symund before embarking on their adventure Thia and Vall thought they could use the time visiting their respective guilds to see if there was anything they could learn. The mages’ guild was near to a healing shop but a different healing shop to the one they’d visited the day before. The fighters’ guild was always at the northwestern corner of a city but with the winding streets you needed to leave plenty of time for getting lost.

Thia found that the mages’ guild told her that they could teach her any magic rather than just evocation spells. They decided she could probably learn some more powerful spells and let her choose two to learn from the level she could cast.

After what she’d learnt about Vall’s locket, Thia was interested in learning a transmutation spell and chose one called Alter Self. It allowed her to gain the benefits of aquatic adaptation, to change her appearance or to grow claws, fangs, spines or horns which she could use as natural weapons. Each time she cast the spell she could choose a different one or change it during the spell. The other spell she chose was an evocation spell called Scorching Ray. It allowed her to create three rays of fire and hurl them at targets within a range of one hundred and twenty feet. It could be at one target or several. She found that later on she might be able to create more rays.

Belonging to the School of Evocation she was, as before, able to spend half and gold and time as usual copying the evocation spell into her spell book but it took longer and cost more for the transmutation spell. She wouldn’t be able to cast more than two of these higher level spells per a day but was told she could probably manage four of the lower level spells. She found however if she tried to cast Witch Bolt as a higher spell it would do twice the damage, and also could increase the damage of Burning Hands and Chromatic Orb in the same way.

When Vall started her training she was told she should choose a Martial Archetype. These were different approaches that different fighters take to perfecting their fighting prowess. She could choose to be a Champion, a Battle Master or an Eldritch Knight.

Eldritch Knights combined the martial mastery common to all fighters with a careful study of magic. The techniques would be similar to those practiced by wizards. She would only be able to learn a comparatively small number of spells but would be able to commit them to memory rather than using a spell book.

Vall remembered what she said to Thia the previous day after they fought the harpies – that she could do with learning some magic. It also brought to mind how she'd attacked the will-o'-the-wisp as a fighter and taken serious damage while Thia had finished it off using two spells and not taken a scratch. She thought an Eldritch Knight could be what she wanted. However she had wanted to learn manoeuvres and as a Battle Master there was the opportunity to learn some that were not just standard manoeuvres. The Fighters' Guild called them Superiority Manoeuvres. She could only use one per attack and only up to four times a day but were the kind of thing she'd been interested in.

Vall decided she had chosen to be a fighter rather than a wizard. Improving her skills as a fighter while Thia improved her magical ability meant they complemented each other well. Vall decided to choose Battle Master which involved employing martial techniques that had been passed down through the generations. To a Battle Master, combat was an academic field, sometimes including subjects beyond battle such as weapon smithing and calligraphy. Not every fighter could absorb the lessons of history, theory and artistry that are reflected in a Battle Master archetype, but those who did were well-rounded fighters of great skill and knowledge.

Vall was offered the opportunity to learn to become proficient in one type of artisans' tools of her choice. After hearing the names of different places over the last two days and not knowing where any of them were, Vall chose to learn to use cartographers' tools, after all you needed a map to find the Fighters' Guild. When Vall came to learn the manoeuvres it was suggested she learn three and learn some more after she got some experience.

After a week of training Thia and Vall returned to the inn and asked Jora what she'd heard from Symund.

“Symund hasn't turned up.” Jora told them. “He's sent no message so I can only assume he's been delayed but if he doesn't turn up today, we can't wait for him.”

“Are you talking about Symund the book binder?” asked the inn keeper who’d been able to hear their conversation from the bar.

“Do you know him?” asked Thia.

“No,” the inn keeper said, “but I have heard of him. I heard he mysteriously disappeared in the Tempest Hills last week.”

“I think we need to start there then,” said Vall.

At that moment Theyn and Nimrellye turned up. Jora filled them in with what they’d just heard.

Vall had drawn a rough copy of a local map and they used that to plan their route. They had already agreed to give the Temple of Angles a wide berth but that would take them very close to the city of Bamor but they didn’t want to go anywhere near there since it had been decimated by a deadly plague. Vall’s map showed there was a kind of ‘northwest passage’ that went through the ruins at Duli’s Delve and should be far enough from the other two places. They needed to do that section in one day. There were rumours that it was not a place to spend the night – although no one knew why.

That night as Thia was preparing to retire, Serielye approached her, at bottom of the stairs.

“I heard about your quest,” she whispered. “I have a gift of temporal perception. I can’t see into the future but I when I hear something I can tell if it is important for a particular situation.”

“What do you know?” Thia asked in an equally low voice.

Serielye moved her mouth close to Thia’s ear and quietly said, “Riffin the merchant has been spending coins, each bearing the image of the sun eclipsed.”

Thia looked confused on how that would relate to their quest but Serielye was not finished.

“A fair princess is held imprisoned within the Shrine of Demonic Devastation. Don’t ask me why these are important. That I do not know. All I know is you need to bear these in mind.”

Thia went to her room and told Vall what had happened.

“Has she been drinking?” Vall asked.

“I think she was very serious,” replied Thia. “If she knows things that we ought to know, I wish she was coming with us.”

“Theyn’s a thief.” Vall said.

“I know,” replied Thia. “It means we’ve got a well balanced party. Two fighters, a magic user, a cleric and a thief.”

“Do you think he is really an inquisitor?” asked Vall.

“I don’t know,” Thia said, assuming a meditation position. “It doesn’t really matter but we’ll probably find out before long.”

At first light Thia and Vall met up with Jora, Theny and Nimrellye for breakfast to get ready to head off. Just as they were about to go Serielye approached them with her dog. This time she was dressed for travelling and asked if she could join them.

This came as a bit of surprise but a glance around at everyone’s face indicated she was welcome. Thia had told them about her discussion the previous evening but no one mentioned it now.

Serielye told them she was a bard and this could help inspire them and heal them.

The route they planned to take to the Tempest Hills would take several days and Vall wondered if they could get some horses. When she asked, she was told there was a trading post outside the city that sold horses but it was in the wrong direction and was so far out that you needed a horse to get there. Walking on that road was a bad idea since almost anyone who walked would get found by the forest bandits.

They set off on foot on the road away from the forest. Thia and Vall found out after the first day that the journey was going to take longer than they expected. Serielye was the only other one who could just meditate for four hours. The others needed eight hours sleep each night and Subhkeir also preferred more than four hours. This meant Thia and Vall would take a turn with Serielye at keeping watch.

As they set out just after dawn on the first day it was warm and the sun was shining and everyone felt in good spirits even despite the objective of the journey for three of them. They managed to keep up a good pace and were all impressed about how well Jora kept up with her short legs.

On the road to Thrisk, Thia and Vall had encountered a couple of goblins left from the goblin’s cave but apart from that they had a mainly quiet journey which they hadn’t had since the first couple of weeks after they left Nablara. They’d almost forgotten what a quiet journey was like and for the first day were a bit wary.

That night as they sat around the camp fire they all exchange stories of their past. Theny revealed that he had trained to be an inquisitor but found he had a more natural talent as a thief. From what he learnt from his training he could see rich people who had become rich by

unethical means. He had taken to stealing from them and using the money to help out the less fortunate. He found out that a thief was a useful occupation for an adventurer and decided to put his skills to good use, but found his daughter had gone missing and so this was his first adventure.

Serielye took a different approach. Bards thrive on stories whether they are true or not. Her background and motivation wasn't as important as the stories she told about them. If a Bard had for example a secure and mundane childhood, they would realise there was no story in it and paint themselves as an orphan raised by a hag in a dismal swamp or some such thing.

Serielye decided to tell them a story but made sure it didn't portray her as being able to do anything other than what she really could do. It reminded Thia and Vall about how Old Uncle thought he may as well embellish his stories since no one believed him, even when he was telling the truth. When he saw that Thia and Vall believed him though, he decided to tell them only the truth.

The following day after a quick breakfast they continued on their way. The weather remained good but the road turned into a track that went through the forest and several times they found the track fizzled out and they had to back track until they could find out where they went wrong. Finally the path came to a stream and although it didn't follow the stream, Vall's map showed that the stream flowed out of the wood not far from the path and so they decided following the stream was easier. They had hoped to reach a town for accommodation that evening but found that the amount of time they wasted meant they wouldn't reach it before dark. Although all of them had dark vision they didn't really want to travel at night unless they had to.

"Did you note anything on your map where we could stop?" Thia asked Vall.

Vall was looking at her map. "It is only a hastily made rough copy," she said. "I only really included things that we might need to know about."

"Shall we just find somewhere to make camp?" Nimrellye suggested.

"I marked some land marks on the map." Vall said. "We will be passing a ruined castle before dusk if we keep this pace. That might have some shelter."

“The last ruins we went into, we found a will-o’-the-wisp,” Thia reminded her.

“This track leads to the castle and joins a road. I would think being close to a road might keep monsters away.” Vall said. After she said that she suddenly felt less sure.

“Those ruins are perfectly safe. We’ll have no problems staying there.” Serieleye suddenly said. She usually said very little but the way she said this quelled all their doubts.

“Fine.” Vall said. “If we keep up this pace, we’ll be there by dusk. I was hoping to get to the next town but if we don’t waste too much time tomorrow we should be just outside the ‘northwest passage’ and able to start through it the day after.”

As they reached the ruins they found that on one side, some of the rooms were still intact and so decided to sleep there. Serieleye and Subhkeir shared a room with Thia and Vall, Jora and Nimrellye shared another room and They had a room to himself.

There were no signs of any monsters and the ruins seemed safe. They were glad of the walls since a cold wind had started to blow. The ruins were probably quite popular for passing travellers. As they left the next day, Nimrellye noticed that somebody had carved into the wall, “Please leave this hotel as you would like to find it”.

Although the wind had dropped by the morning, it had started to rain. Nobody enjoyed it much apart from Nimrellye but it was understandable that Jora was not pleased. The rain persisted all day and at times was just drizzling and at other times was quite heavy but not torrential.

As they followed the road they found it branched off to the right. The road was signposted for Bamor but a road block had been placed there with a sign warning people of the deadly plague. Two guards were also standing there.

“You are not heading for Bamor are you?” one of the guards asked them.

“We have heard about the plague,” Jora said. “We were heading there but have adjusted our plan to avoid it.”

“The deadly plague has been contained,” the guard said. “How close are you passing?”

“We’re going through Duli’s Delve.” Vall said.

The guard gave them a strange look. He obviously knew the rumours about it. He waved them past.

The muddiness of the road had slowed them down but there was no where to shelter from the rain and if they tried camping out they'd all be sick by the morning. Thia used her light cantrip to help them see and it was better than nothing until they come to the town close to Duli's Delve and found an inn to stay.

The inn appeared to be a fairly pleasant place. There were some minstrels playing music with most people standing or sitting at the bar watching them. There was a group of men playing cards but three of them were becoming suspicious of their friend's 'winning streak'. The accommodation was upstairs. The landlord wanted Subhkeir to stay in Serielye's room but after asking if could she join the minstrels and after playing a few songs on her pan pipes the landlord seemed to change his mind.

Vall managed to find a local map of the area and used it to improve her one. Thia found it necessary to wear her hood but when she realised she hadn't cast any spells that day she decided to cast Alter Self to make her skin appear the same colour as Vall's. It only lasted for an hour and she could cast it only twice but she decided to use it to talk to the bartender about the road up ahead.



The bartender also knew the rumours that you shouldn't linger in Duli's Delve but also didn't know why. He said that this area had its fair share of monsters and they were lucky to have not seen any signs of any. He did warn Thia that the road up ahead did sometimes have trolls. Since they could only come out at night they either needed to be safely in a town or have someone keeping watch. Nimrellye disappeared after her meal wanting to pray to her deity. Although she was a member of the clerics guild in the Temple of Tempus, she had mentioned that Tempus was not her deity.

Everyone retired early that night. They wanted to leave early and get in and out of Duli's Delve before dark.

The next morning, everyone rose before light. The bartender had agreed to make them an early breakfast and they were on their way just as it was getting light.

"I saw you talking to the bartender last night." Vall said to Thia. Everyone else apart from Serielye was surprised, not remembering seeing Thia the previous evening, since with white skin, they hadn't recognised her.

"I was asking him about the road up ahead," she said. "He's also aware that we shouldn't linger in Duli's Delve after dark but doesn't know why."

"It is because an undead knight in the ruins still stands watch over the tomb of his queen." Serielye said.

After what Serielye had said, there was an uneasy feeling amongst the group as they entered into Duli's Delve. There didn't seem to be any animal or bird sounds. As a cleric, Nimrellye had the power to turn and destroy undead but guessed this knight might be out of her league.

The road was in a state of disrepair and although it was seldom used there were indications that people still came this way but not often. The road was flat for only a short way before it went steeply uphill. It was slow going and the rain from the previous day had made the road slippery and although the weather was dry, it wasn't sunny and would take some time to dry up the mud. After quite some time the road became more level as it took a sharp turn to the left. In that direction you could see the ruins. The road was overgrown and hadn't been used for many years. At this point a path, visible only because it had been used by everyone who had come this way for years, continued straight ahead. The path was much more muddy than the road and the hill was a lot steeper. They decided to stop and look at the map.

"We're not going to get through before night are we?" Nimrellye asked.

Vall shook her head.

"Can we go back?" asked Jora.

“We’ve come too far,” Vall said. “If the road wasn’t slippery we might make it back but if we hurry with the road the way it is we run the risk of tripping and breaking our necks.”

Everyone thought about this.

“Even if we do go back,” Vall continued, “we’ve got to come this way at some point. We’re trying to avoid two other dangerous places and to go around them, we’ll never get to the Tempest Hills.”

“What should we do then?” asked Nimrellye.

“That’s obvious,” Thia said. “Head on up the hill and try and put as much distance between ourselves and the ruins before night.”

Nobody seemed to like that option but it was the only thing they could do.

Heading up the hill was hard work. The gradient was bad enough without the mud and they all slipped over several times. When they reached a level section they were all covered in mud although Subhkeir didn’t seem to mind.

The road ahead was only level for a short way before it continued up just as steep. To the right was an even steeper slope that they’d all have trouble getting up but it wasn’t very high before there was a flat place to make camp. It has begun to drizzle and there were trees at the top where they could shelter. They weren’t nearly as far from the ruins as anyone would have liked but it was already getting dark and it was without question that travelling at night was out of the question, even with Thia’s Light cantrip.

As they sheltered under the trees Nimrellye suggested they draw a chalk circle round the campsite but she didn’t have any chalk, nor did anyone else.

As they were thinking of trying to sleep, They had a thought.

“Serielye, you said that an undead knight in the ruins still stands watch over the tomb of his queen. Is that right?”

Serielye nodded.

“Surely that means that as long as we don’t enter the ruins or disturb the tomb, he’ll leave us alone.”

Everyone thought about this but said nothing. For some of them it was a very long night but Subhkeir slept right through.

The next day, despite some of them not getting any or much sleep they managed to clear Duli’s Delve. The drizzle had abated by the morning and by early afternoon the sun was shining. After getting

through Duli's Delve, they heard the bird song again. There had been no animal sounds in Duli's Delve. They could see the Tempest Hills up ahead in the distance now. They decided to get accommodation in the first town they came to. They could have gone to the next one but they decided not to over push it today and catch up on any sleep they'd missed.

Thia, Vall and Serielye all wanted to spend an extra hour of two in meditation. Nimrellye found there was a temple to Thor in the town and decided to go and pray there. She told them Thor was her deity but as well as bring a thunder god, he was also a war god which was what Tempus was which was why she was welcomed into the Temple of Tempus in Thrisk easily. They didn't turn away other clerics since the guild was there but preferred to limit them just to the guild rooms.

Now that they were closer to the Tempest Hills, Thia and Vall decided to make some enquiries relating to their quest.

"Symund the book binder." the bar tender said. "He disappeared mysteriously. He isn't the only one. I don't expect to see any of them again."

There was no word on Jora's sister or Theyn's daughter.

"There do seem to have been a lot of murders recently," the bar tender told them when they asked about Nimrellye's family. "These murders started some month's ago. They seem to be organised in some way. They're not being done by any one person but there's nothing to relate any of the victims. Most of them are young, some are children or even babies or pregnant women."

"Is that why people are disappearing?" asked Thia.

"Some of them could be but I think some of the disappearances are not necessarily murders but are related in some way," the bar tender said. "I think if your friend had her whole family murdered she was probably a bit unlucky."

Vall stared at him thinking the remark was a bit unsympathetic.

The bar tender noticed that. "I didn't mean it to sound like that," he apologised. "What I was meaning is that the murders seem to target individuals rather than families. With these types of murders it's not common for a whole family to be murdered. I say she's unlucky that her whole family got targeted because they were probably targeted individually."

"And this just started?" Thia asked.

“As far as I know,” the bar tender said. “There was a rumour that the Drow are behind it but as far as I’m concerned that is just people looking for someone to blame. I expect you’ll get some more information when you actually get there.”

Thia believed the bar tender didn’t hold anything against the Drow but was glad she’d used her Alter Self spell again. There may also have been people around who may not be so tolerant since rumours did tend to get out of hand.

The next day they headed for the Tempest Hills. The weather was quite good but they could see up ahead that it was not going to remain that way. There had to be a reason how Tempest Hills had got their name and it now looked apparent.

There were known to be quite a few small villages in the Tempest Hills but no one could think of why people would want to settle here although Nimrellye seemed to like the idea.

Vall’s map was rather vague when it came to the Tempest Hills but there was a small village just inside where they hoped they could find an inn. The prospect of making camp was not very appealing. The boundary wasn’t a clearly defined line, the weather just seemed to be getting gradually worse but by the time they reached the village it was clear they were in the Tempest Hills. Thia, Vall and Theny had all seen how dogs can be bothered by thunder but Subhkeir seemed totally unfazed although it was clear he wanted to be somewhere he could dry off.

When they came into the town they were able to find an inn. The accommodation wasn’t much to write home about, it was mainly straw beds around the hearth but the menu was extremely varied. The sounds of the storm outside could still be heard.

“How do you sleep through these storms,” Theny asked the bar tender.

“We just get used to it,” the bar tender told him. Most of the patrons were locals and were also used to it.

“My deity is Thor.” Nimrellye said. “He grants me favours so I don’t like to ask for any extras but I can ask that he grants sleep for you guys during the storm.”

“You only need to ask that he does it for Jora and Theny,” Vall said.

“Thia, Serielye and myself will be meditating so we won’t be bothered.”

“I will pray to him,” Nimrellye assured them. “He can only say no. I feel closer to him here.”

The next morning they planned to leave at first light but found the weather was no better and it was still dark outside. After waiting for a while they decided it was not going to get any better and decided to use Thia’s Light cantrip to help them although they got momentary flashes from the lighting. Although lightning was not attracted to metal Vall decided to remove her chain mail in the wet and just hoped she’d be able to stand up to anything that passed their way.

Jora knew which village Symund came from which was where she planned to start her search. It was the main village in the Tempest Hills so they guessed Theny and Nimrellye would want to go there to ask around.

The darkness gave Thia and Vall an uneasy feeling but it was probably only because since joining this party they hadn’t journeyed in the dark before but they were well used to it. There was still some nagging feeling at the back of their minds but they both knew they’d be happier in the next village and would be much relieved when they were finally out of the Tempest Hills.

As they were heading up a hill to a high spot they heard the sound of heavy footsteps in the mud and turned to see three trolls coming towards them. They were large and fat and about as tall as Thia, Vall and Serielye, which made them about a head taller than the average human. They had muscular limbs and incredibly ugly faces.

It was a shock to see trolls during the day but with the thick clouds they were in no danger of them turning to stone in the sunlight. Jora was giving them a hard look. She had been expecting them to be Hill Trolls which most dwarves loathed due to wars between them that had raged since before recorded history. These were Common Trolls. Usually they were part of an army, trained in combat and ready to practice their favourite hobby – being thoroughly evil, against anything humanoid. These looked a bit more primitive. In the Tempest Hills they probably hadn’t had the benefit of military training but should not be underestimated.

The trolls looked at them and decided that although they weren’t humans, they would make a welcome change and charged towards them swinging their battle axes.

Serielye pulled out a rapier but moved back. She had something else in mind than straightforward fighting. Jora had a war hammer, which she was ready with. Theny drew his broadsword and Nimrellye had a footman's mace. Vall also drew her sword but decided to remember that she wasn't wearing any armour. Thia was ready to try out another of her new spells and it was clear that Subhkeir was also a seasoned fighter. He always had his weapons ready.

The first troll headed for Jora and swung its battle axe at her. Jora was able to duck with the troll not having thought that as a dwarf she could get down lower. Jora slammed her hammer into the troll's leg but the troll barely seemed to notice but did feel something when from behind Theny hit it with his broadsword, although against the troll's rock like skin, it only did minimal damage. The second troll advanced on Nimrellye and swung its battle axe at her. Nimrellye tried to dodge and got a gash to her leg. She tried to ignore it and hit the troll with her mace. It did no damage and she found she couldn't stand and fell to her knees.

Meanwhile the third troll advanced on Thia and Vall. Vall was swinging her sword while Thia was preparing a spell. Although Moon Elves are not naturally magical, they could usually manage one cantrip. Thia had taught Vall one called Prestidigitation. It was a minor magical trick that novice spellcasters use for practice. Vall cast it to create showers of sparks to emanate from her sword. If the troll thought it was enchanted it might think twice about getting too close.

The troll wasn't paying attention though and swung its battle axe at Vall. She jumped back. Her experience with the harpies had taught her to improve her reactions. Having cast the cantrip, Vall was unable to make an attack but Thia's Scorching Ray had all three rays focused on the troll and its skin didn't provide quite the same protection from magic.

Serielye was standing back using stirring words to inspire everyone. When Vall jumped back Serielye saw that she felt uneasy not wearing her armour and so she touched her casting Mage Armour spell to give Vall the benefit of some armour even if it wasn't as much as her chain mail.

Nimrellye was lying on the ground but by no means out of action. "It's time to call some lightning," she said.

"Haven't we got enough already?" Vall yelled back to her.

“Watch this,” said Nimrellye and calling on Thor’s aid, the next lightning bolt that came down was actually pinpointed on the troll that had attacked her. The trolled reeled from a massive dose of lightning damage and the troll that had attacked Jora was only five feet from it and suffered the same damage.

The damage the trolls have taken was enough to make them more vulnerable to martial weapons than they had been.

Vall was now able to move in to attack the troll. The troll slashed at her again with its battle axe. The damage Vall took would have been serious but her Mage Armour reduced it.

Jora and Theny were having a hard time finding an opening to attack. At that moment Serielye stepped forward with another spell ready. She was able summon up fey spirits to take on beast forms. Suddenly the troll that was fighting Jora and Theny had sixteen wolves leap up at it scratching at it with their claws and snapping with their teeth. Subhkeir joined in. The troll may have not had a problem with three or four wolves but sixteen wolves and a dog were too much. The wolves damage wasn’t its main problem though, with seventeen canines snapping at it, it was unable to make any attacks at Jora or Theny who could move in a deal with it.

“Can’t you control the weather? Give some clearing in the clouds?” Vall called to Nimrellye. “Just a few seconds of sunlight is all we need.”

“That spell is too advanced for me,” Nimrellye called back.

“Besides, it takes ten minutes to cast.”

Nimrellye’s call on the lighting hadn’t just been affecting the first bolt and each new bolt of lightning was targeting the troll. The troll was enraged and swiped at her before succumbing to the damage. Nimrellye tried to move out of the way but being on the ground there wasn’t much she could do and the battle axe sliced across her stomach. Nimrellye started bleeding uncontrollably and lost consciousness.

The lighting gave Thia the idea of casting the Witch Bolt spell but, this time using the energy she used for casting one of the more advanced spells, she was able to double the damage which the troll stood no chance against.

Serielye ran over to Nimrellye and cast a Mass Heal spell which caused everyone to be completely healed apart from Nimrellye. She wasn’t going to die anymore, but needed to rest but they were able to get her to her feet and help her to walk with them.

With Nimrellye needing rest they knew they would not reach the next village before night although that didn't mean much in the Tempest Hills but they wanted to get some shelter to rest.

They found a cave inside one of the hills and decided it was better than nowhere. The cave had a large sheltered area and another cavern inside that had an opening to another smaller entrance further round. It was also not used by trolls.

There was a space to light a fire at each opening. They suggested he sit by the fire at the smaller opening to dry off leaving the woman the privacy to do the same at the other fire, although Subhkeir stayed with him to keep him company.

They laid Nimrellye a suitable distance from the fire and made sure she was comfortable before seeing to themselves.

As they kept watch that night they saw a pack of aarkor and a couple of ogres in the distance but although both were hostile beings, their campfire was probably too small to be seen so far away in the continual tempests and they were probably too far away to be bothered, but knew that they had to keep their wits about them the next day.

The next morning they found their clothes were now dry after the soaking the previous day and were not looking forward to getting drenched again, although Nimrellye didn't seem bothered, after Serielye cast another healing spell on her. They decided to consult Vall's map to see how far the town they were heading for was but found that it had been ruined in the rain.

It was less than two hours later that they spotted it and headed there. They'd have liked to have got in the previous night but found an inn to stay and decided just to enjoy being in the dry. The inn was called The Badger's Cellar and was a two story stonewalled building, with elf-wrought tables and chairs. There was a collection of exotic drinking vessels on a log shelf and the street outside was lined with carved stone columns.

Everyone was especially thankful of the accommodations, being several large rooms with beds and feather mattresses, especially after the accommodation of the last two nights.

That evening when they'd all dried off and rested, they decided to get a meal and make some enquiries. Vall was also interested in

getting a local map to copy which she'd have done even if the other one hadn't been ruined since they were about to leave it.

They ordered poached deer and leek or baked pheasant and sharp cheese each, which cost two silver pieces and came with a glass of cider. There were only two other people in the tavern. One was a halfling who had an angular face with copper hair and green eyes. He was wearing expensive clothing and an amulet of a luminous crystal. He was eying them up, Thia in particular, and there was no question he was evil. The other was also a halfling but it was clear she was a priest. She had long white hair, amber eyes and a sharp nose. She looked like the one you'd rather talk to.

Thia decided the first person to talk to was the bar tender though. He was a cheerful human named Wealde.

"Do you know Symund the book binder?" asked Thia. Instead of using an Alter Self spell she was wearing a hooded cloak but with Vall sitting with her didn't look too suspicious.

"Yes." Wealde said. "He used to come here frequently. I haven't seen or heard anything from him for around two weeks."

"Did he know a dwarf?" Thia asked.

"He did," the bar tender said thoughtfully. "A dwarf called Ilde. They used to come in together."

"Have you heard from her?" asked Jora.

"Not recently," the bar tender replied. He thought for a moment.

"The last time I saw her was two days before Symund disappeared. I wondered where she was when he came in without her. As far as I know she left no word."

Thia, Vall and Jora exchanged glances. They assumed that if Symund had gone somewhere that Ilde would be with him but now it seemed they'd disappeared separately.

"Did you know a girl called Arizima?" asked Thia. "She's looks in her late teens."

The bar tender looked at Thia. "You're Thia the inquisitor aren't you?" he said.

"Yes." Thia replied simply.

"Your daughter Arizima spoke very highly of you."

"You knew her." Thia said. "Where is she?"

"A little while ago, she was looking distressed. She said she had to investigate something at Moor Court. She must have gone there. I haven't heard from her but I did ask my cousin who keeps an inn called The Foolish Maiden to keep an eye out for her."

“Do you know what was bothering her?” asked Thia.

“I’m not sure,” the bar tender replied. “She told me she’d heard that ghouls are gathering in the crypts beneath the Temple of Gardens but I doubt that was her reason for going to Moor Court but she did also mention that mysterious lights have appeared in the Barrier Peaks.” At that moment the halfling who’d been sitting by herself came over to order a drink. It was obvious she’d heard some of the conversation.

“I know something else about Moor Court,” she said checking to be sure the other halfling couldn’t hear her.

“What do you know?” asked Thia.

“I’ve heard there’s a magical portal in the highest tower of Leybrook Castle,” the halfling said. “I have also heard that the Black Temple of Sorrows is haunted by the ghosts of dragons.” She returned to her table leaving the others in silence for a moment.

“Could any of those have interested your daughter?” Thia asked Theny but he didn’t answer and was deep in thought.

When they asked about Nimrellye’s family, the bar tender hadn’t heard of them but suggested they ask his cousin in Moor Court. It looked like Moor Court would be where they would be headed for next but everyone opted to stay put the next day and leave the day after. After a fight with trolls followed by a night in a cave they decided they wanted a day somewhere dry before they headed into the storm even if that would finally lead them out of the Tempest Hills.

They headed towards Moor Court. It wasn’t a journey they were looking forward to but since it was leading them out of the Tempest Hills, that was the main thing on their minds. As with coming in, there was no clear boundary, the rain just got lighter until it had stopped altogether and very soon the path was dry suggesting that where they were, it hadn’t rained for days. The next step of the journey before Moor Court would take them through the marshes. There were stories told of the monsters that inhabited them but they all tried to remember that they were just stories.

As they headed towards the marshes they came to a town.

“After the fight with those trolls I want to get some healing potions,” Nimrellye said. “There’s a market here and I think I know where I can find some.”

The others had a look around. Serielye bought some warm pasties to hand round. As the stall holder gave her change she saw two of the coins had the eclipsed sun on them.

“Riffin?” she said.

He smiled and reached under the table and took out a sword and handed it to her.

“You may need this,” he said. “You can only use it once.” He refused to say anything more on the matter but Serielye felt he was doing what she usually did.

She showed the sword to Vall but Vall told her it wasn’t anything special. If they tried to sell it they wouldn’t get anything but they might be able to swap it for something, but nothing more expensive than a cup of cold tea.

The pasties were well received, especially by Subhkeir. Serielye showed Thia the coins because she’d told Thia about Riffin spending these coins the night before this adventure had started.

Nimrellye took a while to get back but looked satisfied when she did return.

When they reached the edge of the marshes they knew not to enter in the late afternoon. There was no way they’d be through in a day but decided to wait until dawn to venture in. Since it was dry they took the opportunity to make camp since they would lose a few hours if they stayed at an inn in the nearest town.

The name of the Tempest Hills suited the area perfectly, they just hoped that same wasn’t true for the Ghoulmoor Marsh!

“Does your map show the way through the marshes?” Serielye asked Vall.

“No.” said Vall. “It only shows them. I thought you might know a song or tale that tells of the way.”

“I don’t know the way.” Serielye said. She looked at the others who all shook their heads. “Subhkeir might.”

The next day they had Subhkeir lead the way. He seemed to know where he was going. They didn’t know if he knew the way or was able to smell the route others had taken. The marshes were covered by undergrowth that was not easy to get through although there did seem to be a path of sorts, which Subhkeir could follow. There was mist hanging in the trees. Sometimes thin wisps in places, in other places, as thick as pea soup.

They couldn't have found the path without Subhkeir and when they looked back they couldn't see the way they'd come. After a while they came to a section where the path was clearly defined and stopped to take a break.

Looking away from the path it looked spooky and dangerous. There were probably swamps and bogs everywhere. As they followed the path they heard just off of it to the right a moaning sound that sent shivers down their spines.

"What is that?" They hissed.

"That sounds like a Marsh Wraith," Jora said. They could still hear the moaning.

They gripped his sword.

"It's warning us that we're close to its territory but the path leads in the opposite direction." Jora assured him. "If we heed the warning and follow the path, it will probably leave us alone."

"I hope you're right," said They but kept his hand on the hilt of his sword until the howling had stopped.

The visible path didn't last long and although it appeared from time to time for short stretches, Subhkeir was needed to keep them on the path. No one was enjoying this. Thia was wondering if they'd been better off in the Tempest Hills and Vall was wondering the same thing, even though here she could wear her chain mail.

They were feeling pretty miserable when Nimrellye pointed out something in the path up ahead. As they approached, it appeared to be a silver plate with several semi-precious gems on it. Each gem could pay for the costs for a comfortable lifestyle for a month. Thia called a stop.

"Doesn't this look a bit suspicious?" she asked.

"How do you mean?" Jora asked.

"Treasure lying in a prominent position in the path like that. Gems actually on a plate." Thia explained. "That's a trap if ever I've seen one."

"Do you suggest we leave it?" Jora asked with a disappointed tone in her voice. It was no secret about a dwarf's love for gems.

"I'm not sure," Thia replied thoughtfully. "This has the signs of a Mist Vampire."

At that moment from out of the mist they heard cries for help.

"It's a Mist Vampire." Thia said with a tone of authority in her voice. "They try and distract you with treasure or equipment and

then make the sound of cries of help to lure you from the path. Let's continue."

"What if someone really is in need of help?" Nimrellye suggested. "She's right," said Theny. "We can't just ignore them. They sound genuine to me."

Thia looked at the others. Jora was distracted by the gems but what Nimrellye had said was in everyone's minds.

"This is a bad idea," she said but followed the others as they went towards the cries for help.

After a few minutes, the cries for help didn't seem to be getting any closer and came from different directions. All of a sudden they stopped. If they'd failed to help whoever was calling they thought they should head off before they were the ones crying for help. As they turned round, out of the mist, wavering like a spectre, moved a pale, vaguely man-shaped spirit. Vall was nearest and swung her sword at it. Her sword passed right through it having no effect.

Thia pulled her back out of its reach. "Don't let it touch you," she yelled at the others. "That's a Mist Vampire. Instead of damaging you, it will damage your ability to fight and dodge. When you can no longer fight, it will suck out your soul. The more times you lose when battling, the more chance you've got of losing the next round. Only magical weapons can damage it."

The others looked worried. None of them, not even Thia had any magical weapons.

Vall thought of casting the Prestidigitation cantrip to make her sword look enchanted but quickly dismissed it. Mist Vampires were quite intelligent and she'd already demonstrated that her sword couldn't hurt it.

Nimrellye was eyeing Jora's hammer. "Are you sure that's not magical?" she asked.

Jora looked at it. "I've never seen any signs," she said. "It's always worked just like any war hammer."

"Can I have a look?" Nimrellye asked. They were moving away from the Mist Vampire but she noticed that it was getting a bit close. She thought about casting a Thunderwave but the others were too close since her spell affected a fifteen foot cube centred on herself. As they continued to move back, Jora handed Nimrellye her hammer. Nimrellye swung the hammer a couple of times and then handed it back to Jora. "Try it now," she said.

Jora took the hammer and felt mighty powers surging through her body.

“That hammer was one of a number,” created as a companion to Mjölfnir.” Nimrellye said. “Those who wield it, if they are worthy, get the power of Thor. I doubt it can level mountains but I’m hoping it can pack a punch against a Mist Vampire and it just needed me to wake it up.”

Serielye had noticed that the blade of the sword she’d been given by Riffin had been replaced by a glowing blade of energy and was also a magic weapon.

Jora swung her hammer at the Mist Vampire and found it hit something hard as if she was attacking a regular monster and felt it doing damage. The Mist Vampire roared in rage and tried to grab at her. Jora ducked back holding the hammer between herself and the Mist Vampire. As the beasts “arms” moved close to the hammer it felt lightning surround the hammer’s head and pulled its “arms” away.

Serielye swung her sword at it. She felt as if the sword was slicing at something although it didn’t look that way, but the roar of the Mist Vampire was enough to confirm she’d done some damage. The way she managed to dodge its arms, attack twice and move out again made it clear that she’d studied at the College of Valour.

Thia realising that if magic weapons could damage it, then maybe magic could, threw a Chromatic Orb at it. The Mist Vampire roared and flew towards her. Thia felt the chill in its “hand” which just missed her, as Vall leapt at her at the same time pushing her out of its way. The two then slammed into Serielye and all three elves were thrown into the mud. Serielye thought Vall did the right thing but found she’d dropped the sword which had disappeared somewhere in the swampy ground.

As they got up, covered in mud they looked at the Mist Vampire just in time to see Jora strike another blow with her hammer. The Mist Vampire stopped moving and its body turned into harmless mist.

“Is it dead?” They asked.

“I don’t know?” said Thia spitting out mud and wiping her face. “I think so.” She looked at Serielye who just shrugged.

They looked around but had all lost their sense of direction, not being able to remember how to get back to the path. Even Subhkeir looked around confused.

Thia knew they shouldn't have left the path but didn't say anything. She knew that if they hadn't investigated the calls for help they'd have their conscience pricking them but what was worse, living with your conscience or dying with a clear one?

In their end they all decided to choose the direction which Vall thought was right, hoping her cartography skills may also give her a good sense of direction, but she assured them she was just guessing. Subhkeir seemed to like her choice but was guessing just as much. With the mud often up to their knees and at times up to their waists, with Theny sometimes having to give Jora a piggyback and Subhkeir virtually swimming through it. They soon realised they weren't going the right way, although they couldn't be any more lost.

As they turned to try a different direction they saw a small amphibian humanoid watching them. It was about a meter and a half tall. It had a large head with huge almost sad eyes and a wide mouth. Its body was small by comparison and covered in green scales. It had long arms and short legs that ended in wide webbed feet.

"That's a Marsh Hopper," Jora said.

"Are they dangerous?" asked Theny, his hand never far from his sword.

"I'm told they are friendly," Jora said.

"It looks friendly," Nimrellye said. "It also looks like it wants us to follow it. They're supposed to know the marshes backwards and are happy to lead lost travellers back to the path."

"Can they be trusted?" asked Theny. He wasn't naturally mistrusting but the last creature they'd followed had got them into the situation they were in.

"What options do we have?" asked Nimrellye. "We could be stuck here for days. If we don't find another monster first, one will find us."

It was a nimble creature but always waited if it got too far ahead. It was hard to believe they'd gone so far from the path.

At last the Marsh Hopper stopped and pointed. They looked but couldn't see far into the mist. The Marsh Hopper wasn't going to go any further so the path must be just up ahead. As they went to see, something came out of the mist. It looked like a thirty foot long fat snake but it had five heads! They all knew it was a hydra! None of them had seen one before, they weren't very common although they were often the villain in heroic tales.

Looking round for the Marsh Hopper they saw it had gone but it was probably hiding nearby. It wasn't friendly, it was cunning and was hoping to get some leftovers. The hydra moved so quickly it had Jora by the back of her collar before anyone knew what was happening. They suddenly all found themselves engaged against a head each, except for Thia.

The head that held Jora was pulling the front of her collar against her throat choking her. She was clawing at it unable to use her hammer. Thia shot her crossbow at the head that held Jora and followed it with a fireball. The head released Jora and she was able to swing round with her hammer. Thia rolled forward with her dagger and tried attacking the body. The hydra was unprotected there but as she tried to slice in, the head that Serielye was fighting attacked Thia biting her in the shoulder and tearing her tunic in the same place. Thia cried out and seemingly out of nowhere Subhkeir leapt in biting hard at the neck for that head. The head tried to bite him back but he moved out of range too fast for it and before the head knew what was going on, Serielye attacked the head, keeping it occupied again. When Subhkeir had leapt at the head it had given Serielye a moment to be able to cast a healing spell on Thia which allowed her to attempt to attack the body again.

Thia managed to strike a third blow before one of the heads disengaged to attack her again.

The head that Jora was engaged with went for her. It had been taking a pounding from Jora's magic hammer and wasn't as fast as the head that Serielye had been fighting. Thia managed to dodge it. The head saw she was the one who'd thrown a fireball at it but before it could go for her again it got a strike from Jora's hammer and reassessed its priorities.

Nimrellye seemed to be having a difficult time fighting off the head that she was occupied with. She would like to have cast a spell or called on Thor for some help but was too occupied to be able to think about anything else.

Thia wondered if another strike might distract the head Nimrellye was fighting and give her a chance to cast a spell. She struck the hydra again. This time the head Theny was trying to slash with his sword looked round but after feeling another slash it returned its attention back to Theny, fuelled with rage.

Thia struck at the hydra again this time piercing its hide. All five heads suddenly moved out of range of their opponents and looked at

Thia. Thia wasn't looking though and placed her hands inside the hydra's body as she cast a burning hands spell, again using the energy to cast a more advanced spell to increase the damage that was more than the hydra could take. With its body dead, the heads also died flopping to the ground on limp necks.

They looked around for the Marsh Hopper as Nimrellye handed round her healing potions. Serielye gave Thia a brooch from one of her costumes to hold the torn shoulder of her tunic in place until she could get it repaired in Moor Court. The Marsh Hopper was nowhere to be seen but they still had no way of finding the path. After following Subhkeir's best guess for a while they saw a dark object ahead. It looked like a building.

"Could this be the lost city of Gorga?" Jora asked Vall.

"An order of demonic cultists have stolen an ancient artefact for Gorga." Serielye said.

"I think we'd see lights if it was a city," Vall said.

As they approached they saw it was an abandoned building. Most of the rooms had collapsed but it had probably been used as a stopping point in the marshes since the path led to it.

Although none of the rooms were fit for shelter anymore, there was a barn outside that was in very good condition. When they found the remains of a burnt out camp fire it suggested that the barn was used by any travellers for sleeping and was repaired when needed.

At the back of the barn was a small room with a pump which pumped up fresh water which was a relief since no other water around was drinkable. There was also enough room for one person to sleep so They suggested he sleep there. There was also some dry wood around so they relit the campfire and cut enough wood to replace what they'd used. They were confident it would dry before someone else came this way. Serielye, Vall and Thia were not confident their clothes would dry before the next day if they washed them and decided they'd take full advantage of the first inn they came to when they got to Moor Court. They did use the pump to wash themselves though but felt a bit silly then putting on muddy clothes. Thia would have liked to repair her tunic but no one had any thread and even if they had, she'd never been much good at sewing.

They planned that the next morning they'd search the ruins for anything useful but didn't expect to find anything.

The next morning as they searched the rooms, they were just about to move on when Jora called to them. There was a body lying there. It had rotting maggot-ridden skin which only half hid its decaying innards.

“This doesn’t add up,” Thia said.

“Why not?” asked Jora. “I doubt it’s uncommon for people to die in these marshes.”

“Someone would not come this way alone,” Thia said. “If one of your party died, you wouldn’t leave them here, a least not without burying them.”

Vall moved in closer but kept her distance keeping her sword between herself and the body. She heard it hiss and was able to move back in time before it lunged to attack, slashing violently around with its clawed hands.

“Look out,” Thia cried. “That’s a ghoul. Their touch can paralyse a person.”

Nimrellye held out her hand chanting a prayer to Thor.

The ghoul’s body dropped and began to crumble accompanied by a rumble of thunder. The others were impressed. They’d heard that clerics could turn and later destroy undead but had never seen it in action.

They didn’t seem to want to bother seeing if the ghoul had any treasure. Although the mist was still quite thick they had a vague idea of where the sun was. It was only very vague but enough to tell them which path went in the direction they wanted.

They wondered how many more monsters they may encounter but kept to the path and came out of the marshes at dusk.

Moor Court stood ahead of them. An impressive looking walled town looking very inviting after the Ghoulmoor Marsh. They said he was going to the first tavern they found and would order the largest plate of sausages they’d ever seen.

They entered the town near the theatre ward. They walked through chaotic streets and makeshift stages. Next to what was known as a notorious brothel there was a good looking inn called The Bloody Fang. It was a two storey timber and brick building with several leaded windows. Inside it was lit by magical torches. Looking round they saw that the inn was packed and although strange aromas were coming from the kitchens it was clear that they’d be waiting for quite a while.

“Let’s find The Foolish Maiden,” suggested Serielye. “The inn keeper of The Badger’s Cellar said his cousin ran it. It’s in the market ward.”

As they passed through Groom’s Street they passed a statue of someone who looked like an adventurer. It was strange to have statues made of adventures. Usually if they became heroes and were knighted they’d be depicted as knights.

Thia found the market ward very interesting since it was known for its street magicians. The street outside The Foolish Maiden was filled with the scent of incense and exotic spices. The inn was a two-storey stone-walled building with a slate roof. It had finely crafted tables and chairs and was fancifully decorated and brightly lit by glowing gemstones set into the ceiling.

The inn keeper wasn’t available when they arrived but they were told he would be around later. They enquired about rooms and found they were quite large and had beds with feather mattresses. There was also a large private bathhouse which was available to all guests. The bar maid offered to lend some clothes to the elves to wear while they got theirs washed and dried so they decided the bath house was their first stop but could see that Theny’s idea was one of the best they had heard in a long time.

When Thia, Vall and Serielye came down Theny was sitting at a table and the barmaid was setting a large plate of sausages before him, which were being eyed by Jora, and Nimrellye and he encouraged them to help him out. On seeing the elves he called them over saying there were plenty for all.

“I can assure you these are the best sausages in Moor Court,” the barmaid was saying. “Nothing like those in The Bloody Fang.”

“What’s wrong with those?” asked Jora.

“There’s a rumour that they are made with orc meat,” the barmaid said.

They all looked at Theny’s sausages remembering that they would be eating sausages at The Bloody Fang now if it wasn’t so packed. It was clear that Subhkeir thought very highly of the sausages here. As they ate, the inn began to fill up. They wanted to make some enquiries here and were waiting for the inn keeper to return so whilst waiting they looked at what meals other people were ordering since they would be here for a few days and weren’t going to eat sausages every night. Some of meals included poached phoenix and dried

grapes, braised deer with sugar and leeks, salted oxen and walnut bread, roasted whitefish with cloves and soft cheese, boiled hare and blue cheese or boiled pork and dried lettuce. Each meal also came with a drink complementing the food and the prices ranged from nine copper pieces to four silver pieces.

The people coming in did not look like the kind of people you wanted to talk with. One was a female elf who had a narrow face and short black hair with soft grey eyes. She was wearing banded mail. Another was a male human with tangled red hair and grey eyes and another was a male halfling. He was common in appearance with golden hair and light green eyes. He was wearing scale mail. There was just something about each of them that made you feel you would be being brave if you turned your back on them or let them come too close.

More halflings were coming in to the inn and it looked like it was quite popular with them however they all congregated at the table of the other one and seemed like they knew each other. One had long hair, hazel eyes and prominent ears and looked like a merchant. Another was obviously an aristocrat. He had matted copper hair, brown eyes and numerous horrific scars. He was wearing fine raiment and jewellery. Their conversation was carrying.

“I’ve found out,” one was saying, “that mastiff which lurks outside of town is actually a polymorphed troll.”

“Did you hear that Mara was murdered by thieves in the town square last night?” the golden haired one said. “I had my eyes on her. What a waste.”

“Do you really think it was thieves?” the last one asked.

“Not for a minute,” the other two said.

Another female elf came in at that moment and joined the other one. This one looked like some kind of priestess but not the type of priestess the others had seen before. She had red hair and green eyes and was wearing expensive clothing. She also had a sling of vials and potions.

“Have you heard,” she said to the other elf, “the king plans to start using orcish mercenaries for tax collection?”



After a while Theyny said, “Shall we wait for the inn keeper? If we do, I better get in a round of drinks before we look too suspicious.” As he got up, a man in common clothing came in. He didn’t sit anywhere and just remained standing, however he winked at the barmaid, which brought a look of delight to her face. It took a moment for her to compose herself before she could take Theyny’s order. As she was pouring the drinks Theyny took the opportunity to ask her if she’d seen his daughter.

“I don’t remember seeing anyone like that, but if you ask the inn keeper when he gets back he can tell you. He knows more of the patrons on a first name basis.” she said.

As they were talking two more people came in. One was a male elf with a rounded face, braided copper hair and large brown eyes. He was wearing chain mail and had a sharp two handed sword. The other was female dwarf. She had a long face with braided blond hair and hazel eyes. She was wearing splint mail. They waited until Theyny had finished but listened with interest. When the barmaid saw them she lowered her voice to a whisper and made sure she didn’t delay in serving them. As Theyny set the drinks on the table the man who’d remained standing came over and took a seat at their table without asking. Theyny was a bit annoyed that this man was sitting where he had been, but since the seat didn’t have his name written on it in gold letters, he took another seat.

The others looked at this man. For no reason he said, “Ghosts walk the ramparts of Erswood Keep during the full moon.”

The others weren’t sure why he’d come to tell them that but Serielye asked him, “Who is that statue in Groom’s Street of?”

“That’s not a statue,” the man said. “It’s actually a petrified adventurer.”

Swapping questions of information of this kind was a bard's code in this area to tell them you had a message and needed to speak outside in private.

He got up. "It's been nice meeting all of you. Maybe I'll see you again."

After he had left Serielye whispered, "Let's finish our drinks and follow him. He's got something to tell us." As Thia got up, Serielye whispered to her, "Is your tunic dry yet?"

"I don't suppose so," Thia whispered back. "It hasn't been drying long." She wondered why Serielye expected her to know without checking.

"Go and get it." Serielye whispered. "Bring it with you."

Thia knew better than to question any seemingly strange suggestions Serielye had. They all became clear before long.

The air was cool outside and there was a light breeze. At first they thought that the man had gone but then he appeared from the shadows.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Cyne. I overheard a little of your conversation to the barmaid," he indicated to Theny. "I may be able to answer your questions but we need to go somewhere much more private."

He looked at Thia, Vall and Serielye. "I assume you have clothes drying since I see what you are wearing belongs to the barmaid. She and I know each other. She by now knows you are with me and will trust you'll bring them back tomorrow. Come with me."

He led them just outside the wall of the city. There was a small rise in the land with two trees at the top. There was shimmering glow about five feet wide and ten feet tall between them.

"This may sound strange," Cyne said, "but step between the trees." Theny led the way and disappeared. The others turned to him with angry expressions.

"Don't worry," Serielye said. "It's quite safe," and disappeared along with Subhkeir as she stepped between them. Apprehensively the others followed with Cyne coming last. They found themselves in a magnificent foyer. Cyne turned toward the doors and made a gesture with his hand and they closed and locked themselves.

"Welcome to Mordenkainen's Magnificent Mansion." Cyne said. He opened the door to a corridor and pointed to the left. "There is a room for each of you. There is a bath with hot water in a room

adjoining each bedroom if you want to use it. There will a servant to attend to each of you. They will do anything you ask. There are fine clothes for you to wear this evening. If you want a rest, let's meet in the great hall," and he indicated a door behind him, "in an hour." They each went up the stairs and went into a room each.

Thia couldn't believe her eyes at the size and luxuriousness of her room. She wasn't sure even a queen could get a room like this. It made her feel like a queen. She wanted to rest though and decided she'd explore the room later on. She was just about to use the bath when she saw her servant standing there. The servant was almost transparent as was her attire. She seemed to be dressed in a similar but posher fashion to the barmaid in *The Foolish Maiden*. She had blond hair but it wasn't easy to make out her face. She just stood there silent and motionless.

"Wait here, please." Thia said. The servant nodded and remained where it was.

Thia found herself spending twenty minutes in the bath after which she dried herself off and laid on the bed. She'd never felt a bed so comfortable.

"Wake me in half an hour," she said to the servant. She knew she'd go to sleep.

When she got up she tried the clothes on. Rather than bring comfortable, she couldn't feel them but when she looked in the mirror, she felt like a princess. As she was about to leave she saw the servant standing there. She went to get her tunic which was a lot dryer from being in this warm room, than it would have been at the inn.

She gave it to the servant and said, "When this is dry, could you repair it please?" She left her room just as Vall who was also looking like a princess came out.

"Princesses," Thia said.

"Sisters," Vall replied smiling.

When they came to the great hall they found the others there. Subhkeir had parked himself a comfortable distance from the fire and had gone to sleep leaving one ear and one nostril awake. Cyne came in and joined them. "If you would like anything to eat or drink, just ask one of the servants," he said. "There's enough here to provide a nine course banquet for one hundred people."

Although they had gorged themselves on sausages, they had been just to recover from the marsh and they found they had an appetite. They also had an appetite for information that was about to be satisfied.

Serielye thought she should introduce them. "I'm Serielye," she said. "My friend here," and she indicated Subhkeir, "is Subhkeir."

Gesturing to each of the others she said, "this is Thia, Valanthe, Nimrellye, Jora and Theny."

"I understand," Cyne began, "that you are looking for your daughter." He was looking at Theny.

"My sister has also disappeared," Jora said.

"I may be able to shed some light on this but I didn't want to do it where I could be overheard in the tavern. Mordenkainen's Magnificent Mansion is an extra dimensional dwelling. We won't be overheard here." Cyne said. He paused before continuing, "I'm afraid that it doesn't look good for them."

"Did you know them?" asked Theny.

"Not personally," said Cyne, "but I'll tell you what I do know. You may have heard there have been a lot of murders but also a lot of disappearances recently. A religious order has moved over from neighbouring lands. They've been operating from the Tempest Hills all the way to Moor Court and further. They don't really worship a god, they worship time."

"That would be Tempus," Nimrellye said.

"Tempus is the God of time," Cyne said. "They worship time itself and call her Laikas. They see time as a predator, stalking them, hunting them down. Eventually it will make the kill."

This reminded some of them about a tale of how death unleashed time but did in on the world, which is what made people mortal but not the gods.

"They fear time," Cyne was saying. "Many of them become obsessed with extending their lives. They become so obsessed in extending their lives that they forget to live them."

"How do they expect to extend their lives?" Vall asked. "Death is the only certainty in life."

"This is where the problems start." Cyne said. "They believe that by killing people they are helping out Laikas. They are giving her the time they haven't used. If they kill a fifty year old dwarf they are giving Laikas about three hundred years. They believe that by doing this Laikas will give them rewards of extra time. The more people

they kill, the more rewards they'll get. The younger the people, the more time they are giving to Laikas, and the greater the rewards. That's why children and babies are getting especially targeted. Pregnant woman are a favourite because not only are they giving Laikas the rest of the woman's time, they are also giving her the whole of the unborn baby's time."

By this time Jora and Theny were looking extremely sick. Cyne stopped.

"Ilde?" Jora said.

"Arizima?" Theny said.

Cyne nodded sadly, "I'm sorry," he said.

"Is this what's happened to my family?" asked Nimrellye.

"Whole families aren't usually targeted, only the younger members," Cyne said. "But I think in your case this is the same thing."

"And is that why Symund the bookbinder has disappeared?" asked Thia.

"I expect so," replied Cyne. "I expect Mara who was killed in the market place wasn't killed by thieves, but by Laikas's followers. I expect that fair princess who disappeared was also killed for her time."

"How do you know who they are?" asked Nimrellye.

Cyne described some tell tale signs. They realised that probably everyone in the taverns apart from the barmaid was following, or rather felt they were being followed by, Laikas.

Even the halfling who'd had his eye on Mara probably had his eye on her because he was planning to kill her. He felt that if she'd been killed by thieves it was a waste although he probably thought anyone else killing her other than him was a waste.

"Excuse me," said Nimrellye. She got up and headed in the direction of her room.

Thia, Vall and Serielye were trying to comfort Jora and Theny. Even Subhkeir had woken up and sensed something was wrong and wanted to help.

Minutes later Nimrellye came charging down the stairs. She had changed into the clothes she had arrived in and had all her possessions with her.

"I've got some business to sort out," she spat out angrily. "If these people want to do things for Laikas I'll move them closer to her."

She headed for the way out and then remembered Cyne locking the door.

“Open that door.” she yelled at him. “Get me out of here.”

“Nimrellye wait...” Cyne tried to say.

“No waiting. Open that door.” Nimrellye demanded.

Cyne saw he wasn't going to win and waved his hand. “It's open,” he said.

“Nimrellye. Come back.” Thia called after her.

“If you change your mind,” Cyne called, “this mansion will be here for another twenty two hours. The door will open to you.”

They heard nothing more.

“Why did you let her go?” asked Vall.

“There was no stopping her,” Cyne said. “All we can do is hope she comes to her senses soon.”

Thia and Vall had an arm each over They's shoulder while Serielye had an arm over Jora's shoulder and Subhkeir was licking her hand.

“One thing still confuses me,” Thia said. “What stops them from killing each other?”

“If they kill others seeking to do the same things, then it would actually reduce the time Laikas would get. They'd probably get a penalty for that.” Cyne said. “Every year, they catch three people, sometimes important people if they find any. Then they have an annual celebration and sacrifice these people for Laikas's pleasure not seeking a reward for those three.”

“Hasn't anyone in the city seen where they go?” asked Vall.

“They seem to climb up to roof tops in the night and don't come down. You'd have to be further than sixty feet away to not be seen by them but they always choose a dark moment to do so. I believe they have a major temple in another city somewhere but I don't know where it is. People there might know a bit more than I do.”

That night even Jora and They slept peacefully. The mansion seemed to have that affect. They all slept late although Jora and They regretted waking up when they remembered reality. They wished they had woken up in some inn somewhere, which would have made the previous evening a nightmare but it was very real. Although the beds were comfortable, they got up as soon as they woke and when the others came down for breakfast they were sitting together in silence in the great hall. It appeared their quest had come to an end but They wanted to see what those lights that had

appeared in the barrier peaks were, that had drawn his daughter towards Moor Court. They also decided to stay with the elves for a while since they had travelled with them without their own purposes for the quest.

The previous night after hearing the news, Jora and Theyn had lost their appetite. This morning they'd decided to go the other way. They hoped that a good meal might make them feel better and were sharing a meal one of the servants had brought them. It was six sausages, six rashers of bacon, four black puddings, four fried eggs, four hash browns, two pots of beans, two pots of chopped tomatoes, two pots of mushrooms, six slices of mega thick toast and three fried bread.



By the time the others had come down there wasn't much of that left but the others could have had the same if they wanted. They opted for fried potatoes, which would be enough to set them up for the day.

Cyne didn't seem to be around but Serielye told them that the mansion would disappear twenty four hours after it had been created and anything they tried to take with them would dissipate into smoke. This disappointed Thia and Vall in terms of the fine clothes and so when they'd all eaten they left finding the portal open for them to leave by.

They headed back to The Foolish Maiden. The elves found their clean clothes now dry and changed back into them and found the barmaid to return the clothes they'd borrowed.

The barmaid told them that Nimrellye had returned last night, paid the bill for all of them, collected her belongings and left. She'd had a determination in her eyes and a look on her face that made you want to keep well away. She guessed the others knew why but said she didn't want to know.

Jora and Theny told the others of their plans but Thia and Vall weren't sure where to go from here. They had thought they'd be in Moor Court for a few days while making enquiries but had had all their questions answered within a few hours of arriving. It was clear that Jora and Theny needed some time and so Serielye decided to find somewhere where she could perform and Thia and Vall decided to visit the city guilds.

Vall found the Fighter's Guild as usual at the northwestern corner of the city and Thia found that the Mage's Guild could actually be seen from the inn.

Vall spent her time in training to increase her strength. Thia decided to spend her time studying but was told that she had a talent she could expand. She had already picked up a good sense of direction. She had a keen mind. With training she could learn to be able to track time and direction and remember detail with uncanny precision. Thia however had been thinking about whether it might be worth getting some light armour. She decided to learn to become proficient with light armour in order to still be able to cast spells if she ever wore any armour. She also decided to see if she could learn some more spells. There was a lot to choose from but she finally choose Blur and Misty Step.

Blur was an illusion spell, which would make her body become blurred, shifting and wavering to all who could see her. Any creature that tried to attack her would be at a disadvantage. It would only last for a minute though and she'd have to concentrate.

Misty Step was a conjuration spell and allowed her to be shrouded briefly by a silvery mist and teleport to a space thirty feet away which she could see. This spell could be cast in the blink of an eye. When Thia and Vall met up again Vall was tired but felt a lot stronger. Thia felt as if she was more intelligent. Serielye met up with them and decided they should meet up with Jora and Theny again and see what they wanted to do. No one had seen or heard from Nimrellye since she'd left the mansion and they hoped she was okay.

Theny told them that it was the strange lights that had appeared in the Barrier Peaks that had brought his daughter here and caused her to be targeted by the followers of Laikas. He wanted to finish what she had begun.

At the Foolish Maiden they met up with the innkeeper. He said he was sorry he'd missed them when they'd arrived. He'd received a message by pigeon from his cousin that they'd be coming. They asked him the best route to the Barrier Peaks.

"You don't want to do there, do you?" asked the innkeeper.

"We do," They replied.

"It's a long way," the innkeeper said. "Why do you want to go there?"

"Mysterious lights have appeared there," Thia said. "Your cousin told us that."

"I don't know anything about that," the innkeeper said. "I don't like the sound of it. If you really want to go, the safest route would be through Lion's Side and head west when you get to the Dragonrend Mountains. I should warn you though that there have been some worrying disappearances in both these places. Only this morning I heard the Eval Dyley mysteriously disappeared last week in the Dragonrend Mountains and that Bertio the sawyer disappeared last night in Lion's Side."

The others looked at each other. If this was the work of the followers of Laikas they were wider spread than they realised.

They decided to get some rest and then get together food and anything else they needed the next day and then they could leave the following day. Vall decided she'd need to take a copy of a less detailed map that covered a wider area.

That evening Serielye took Subhkeir out for a run and Vall decided to get some evening air. Later on Vall returned in a hurry and made her way across to Thia.

"I've just seen some people in a nearby street," she whispered.

"They look like they could be followers of Laikas. If they climb on to the rooftops, your dark vision may allow you to keep your distance, but still see where they go."

As Thia got up, They handed her a sword. "Take this," he said.

"I don't know how to use a sword," Thia told him.

"That doesn't matter," They told her. "You may need to pass yourself as one of them. You're going to need more than just a dagger to look like one of them."

Thia reluctantly agreed to put the sword behind her back and Vall showed where she'd seen the people.

“You better wait back at the inn,” Thia whispered. “I don’t want to find you’re the next disappearance.”

Thia kept out of sight, but where she could see them. Gradually they dispersed but Thia saw one duck into an alley that was supposed to be a dead end.

Looking round the corner she saw the man climbing up a metal ladder and when he’d gone high enough Thia moved next to the ladder and put her hand gently round one of the side poles. She could feel the ladder jolting as the man climbed it and knew he’d reached the top when it stopped. She climbed as quickly as she could up the ladder herself and stopped just before she got to the top so she could just stick her head over to make sure it was safe.

She saw the man making his way across the roof tops nearby and climbed the rest of the way up. She was passing by a building that had an extended part on the roof and was able to hide under the eaves of the extension. The man up ahead had stopped next to the chimney of a building and Thia could see another person climbing over the roof toward where they first man was.



The man Thia has been following lifted up his hand and an oval of shimmering silver light appeared before him. He reached into his pouch and tossed something towards the light. What he’d thrown vanished but the light turned gold. The man jumped through the light and disappeared. Thia realised it must be a magical portal which explained why they went up the roof tops but didn’t come down. She watched as the other man got near enough to the portal and jumped through. The portal changed colour to silver but remained there and so Thia moved towards it to investigate.

She realised that if these people had a secret temple somewhere, this might take her to it and knew this was the best chance to find out where it was so she jumped through the portal and found herself outside a castle. The courtyard she was in was lit by torches but there was currently no one around. She quickly moved to hide in the

shadows before anyone came. She knew this was an occasion when her dark skin would be really useful.

Thia moved in the shadows towards the main gate. It was open but Thia guessed there may be guards above with crossbows. At that point a wagon came into the courtyard and Thia was able to keep close enough to it and get into the shadows on the other side of the gate without being seen.

The inner courtyard had more people in it but Thia managed to find the darkest corner to hide in and time her moves to the next corner to get along unnoticed.

She could see the steps to the main building. Everyone seemed to be busy so Thia choose a moment to dart in and found herself in a fork of three long corridors. She looked around and hid behind a tapestry before two people came past. She heard them talking, saying something about a 'psychopathic cleric'.

When Thia looked out from behind the tapestry, she noticed that it and all the others had decorations that could in someway be linked to time. The corridor off to the right had a glow coming from it and when she listened she could hear sounds of feasting. The corridor straight ahead was where the two people who had passed were headed so she decided to look down the third corridor and see where they'd come from.

On either side of the corridor there were doors and although Thia heard nothing at the first few, she then heard snoring coming from behind others. She remembered how late it was and that a lot of people would be asleep. Further down she saw a door that was left ajar. She could get past easily but heard from inside someone who sounded like he was praying. She didn't understand the language he was speaking in. She knew a Comprehend Languages spell but when she heard the man say "Laikas" she decided she knew all she needed. She followed the passage and found some steps leading down. Although it was dark down the steps she could make out a faint glow and decided to have a look.

It became obvious she was in the dungeons and further ahead she saw a lantern and a guard. The guard seemed too occupied in eating a very large cooked fish but guessed he would see her if she tried to go past. She knew she could get a lot closer without being seen. She could see a point further down that was past the guard and thirty feet away and decided to try out the Misty Step spell and teleported

herself past the guard. He never noticed a thing and continued eating his fish.

This passage was dark but Thia knew he had to be guarding something and continued down until she came to a door. She lifted up the cloth that was covering a small barred window in the door. Inside she could see, lit by a candle two women and a male dwarf with a long beard. She was about to talk to them when she heard the guard coming down the passage and disappeared into the darkness. The guard came up to the cell, lifted the cloth and threw the remains of the fish into the cell.

“Eat up,” he said and chuckled to himself. It was clear the fish had been for the prisoners but the guard decided to sample it first and sampled most of it. He picked up a jug from the ground nearby and took a swig and then moved back down the tunnel but sat down nearer than he’d been before.

Thia knew that if she tried to talk to anyone in the cell now, the guard would hear her. Thia crept up to the window and lifted the cover and put her finger over her lips. Then she pointed at the woman opposite her and cast the Message cantrip.

“Give me a moment and then create a commotion.” she said in a voice only the woman could hear.

“I understand your plan,” the woman replied in a voice that only Thia could hear.

Thia stepped back into the darkness and waited.

After a minute she heard cries, shrieks and screams coming from the cell. The guard jumped to his feet. “What’s going on?” he yelled.

“Stop the racket at once!”

When the prisoners didn’t quieten down he pulled back the cover but the prisoners just made louder noises and had all moved round the cell so that they couldn’t be seen through the window.

The guard took out a large club with spikes in it. “You’re going to be sorry,” he said as he unlocked the door.

At that moment in one swift movement, Thia grabbed the metal jug and brought it down on the guard’s head. “Sleep well,” she said.

The woman who she’d sent the message to came out of the cell first. “Have you killed him?” she asked.

“He’ll wake in a few hours with a splitting headache,” Thia said. She looked at the woman and recognised her from pictures. “You’re the princess.” she said and bowed to her.

“Don’t do that.” the princess said. “It’s me that should be bowing to you.”

The other woman had stepped out of the cell along with the dwarf who Thia realised was actually a bearded lady dwarf.

“I’m Arizima,” the woman said.

“I’m Ilde,” the dwarf said.

“What are you doing here?” asked Thia.

“Waiting to be sacrificed in a couple of months.” Ilde said.

“We need to get you out of here,” Thia said. “I know some people who will be over the moons to see you. Do you know where we are?”

“This is Leybrook Castle,” the princess said, surprised that Thia didn’t know.

Thia was shocked. They were only just outside Moor Court but she couldn’t get them all out as easily as she had got in.

“There’s a magic portal in the highest tower,” the princess said. “I’m not sure where it goes but if we can get there at least it will get us out of the castle.”

Thia looked at the guard and took his cloak and put it over her shoulders and cast the Alter Self spell. The others were surprised when she assumed the shape and appearance of the guard.

“Let’s go,” she said and then tried to mimic his voice. “I just hope he has high enough authority not to be questioned when he’s seen moving you.”

“Only the high priestess has that authority,” said the princess, “but she’s not here and since you’re not taking us out of the castle you should be okay.”

Thia was not so confident. She’d heard about the portal so it wasn’t a secret.

“Shall we go through the smaller and less used passages?” asked Ilde.

“We still might meet someone,” Thia said. “It’ll be a lot harder to explain why I’m using the small passages.”

Thia had seen Serielye’s reaction when Leybrook Castle had first been mentioned and she’d looked it up when she found out it was near to Moor Court. She had a fairly good idea of where the tower was and led the way.

Although quite a number of people in the castle were asleep, there were still people up and about but she passed two people on the way to the tower without being questioned.

At the base of the tower there were two guards who stopped her. “Where are you going with those prisoners?” asked one guard. “You know that those three are not to be moved.”

In an almost perfect replication of the guards voice Thia said, “Haven’t you heard there is an intruder in the castle ready to open the gates for an army? The dungeons are the first place they will look for the prisoners. They will be just as secure and less accessible in the tower.”

The guard looked at her not having heard the news. “Wait a moment,” he said.

“The army could be in any moment.” Thia said. “Your dithering is going to get these prisoners rescued.”

She could see fire in the guards eyes. He was furious but she knew she could get away with this and was role playing the guard who she’d assumed the shape of perfectly.

The guard waved her and the prisoners past, fuming under his breath. After Thia had gone through he locked the door to the tower.

With the dungeon guard having eaten most of the food, Arizima, Ilde and the princess did not have much energy and were finding the stairs of the tower extremely draining. Finally they came into a large room that was full of weapons. It was obviously an armoury. There were a couple of chests on the ground that they could sit on so Thia told them to take a break.

While Arizima, Ilde and the princess rested, Thia kept an eye on the door and the steps below. She wouldn’t relax herself until they were all out of the castle.

The others finally got up. They knew the top of tower was close and thought they could get there if they took it slowly. At that moment Thia heard a sound outside and saw three guards were coming up the steps. The guard whom she’d assumed the shape of was one of them.

Thia reached behind her back and took out They’s sword but didn’t even know how to hold it properly. She looked around quickly, grabbed a jacket of leather armour and put it on and then picked up a quarter staff. This was more to her liking. She stood in the door way.

Arizima, Ilde and the princess were standing around watching her.

“Run!” she yelled. “Fly you fools!” Looking at the guards coming up the steps she said with resolve, “You shall not pass,” and cast the Blur spell.

The steps to the armoury were only wide enough for someone to go up in single file. Thia realised if she could maintain her position she wouldn't be outnumbered.

The first guard on the steps was fighting with a sword. Half his strikes were missing due to not being able to see her clearly. Thia tried to use the quarterstaff to block some of the other strikes which meant the guard's strikes were at the minimum and not serious and even less so since the armour helped.

Thia was preoccupied in trying to block his attacks that she couldn't actually get an attack in herself.

After a minute the Blur spell ended which surprised the guard. Thia took the opportunity to swipe the quarterstaff at his legs knocking him backwards into the other two guards. He dropped his sword and it could be heard clattering down the stairs for a long time, if anyone had cared to listen.

Thia took this opportunity to jump backwards and charged towards the steps after Arizima, Ilde and the princess. As she was doing so, she pulled off the armour planning to drop it on the steps, hoping it would trip up or at least slow down the guards when they came round. She also planned to wedge the quarterstaff between the walls.

Just as she got to the bottom of the steps she felt something tangle round her feet pulling her to the ground. She looked around to see the guard she'd been fighting had picked himself up and brought her down with a bolas.

The guard wasn't armed, but would have had no chance of stopping Thia if he had gone to recover his sword first, and it seemed pointless since this room was an armoury.

The guard's face fell when she saw Thia was standing between him and the swords. Thia was in a similar situation since the only weapons near her were weapons that she had no idea how to use.

The bolas bringing her down had caused her to drop the quarterstaff that was now out of reach. The only weapon she had was her dagger and she'd seen the guards reactions to know he'd probably be able to

dodge it if she threw it at him. She also knew that even without a weapon the guard was still very dangerous.

The guard grabbed the nearest weapon. It was a long knife. Although the blade was not nearly as long as a short sword, it was still longer than Thia's dagger. Thia knew that if she was to give the others time to get away she'd have to stop the guard, who launched himself towards her, his drawn knife raised for a slashing blow.

Thia held her ground until there was no chance the guard could change his direction. Then she ducked under the blade, yanking her own dagger out.

Thia had sunk into a semicrouch, flexing her fingers around the hilt, testing its balance. Too much depended on a single dagger, a half-hand shorter than the blade in her opponent's fingers. The guard had the reach over her and the added advantage of being in thick leather, whereas Thia wore flimsy cloth. Her eyes never left the guard as she faced the man. Thia was aware of the hard stones under her feet, of the smells of spilled wines, of sweat – and fear.

The guard moved forward, amazingly light on his feet for a man of his size and age. Thia let him come, pivoted as the guard angled off to his left, a circling movement designed to place her off balance – a transparent manoeuvre. Thia felt a quick surge of relief, if this were the measure of the guard's combat strategy...

With a bound the guard was on her, knife miraculously transferred to his left hand with a motion too quick to follow, his right arm coming over and down in a blow that struck Thia's wrist as she threw herself backward to avoid, by the thickness of a hair, the hissing stroke of the foot-long blade. She backed, her arm half-numbed, aware of the shock that coursed through her like a drenching of icy water.

For a man blind with anger, the guard was a shade too controlled for Thia's liking.

The guard moved in, pressing the attack. Thia backed up, watching the centre of the guard's leather-cased chest. Not the eyes, not the knife hand. The chest! That was the spot that telegraphed the next move most accurately.

Thia shook her head sharply, rejecting the anger line her thoughts were taking. This wasn't the way to survive, not with the odds against her.

She saw the guard's arm move suddenly, swayed back in automatic evasions, saw the opening, lunged...

The sound of torn fabric was clearly heard. The pain at her waist had been such a quick stab that Thia had all but decided the guard's swipe was only a scratch when a wave of nausea swept her.

"Good try. But you're not fast enough, old man!" Thia heard herself saying; felt her lips stretch into a smile she was far from feeling. She kept to the crouch, the belt pressing against her waist, but the torn fabric dangled, jerking as she breathed.

The guard threw her a half-puzzled look, his eyes raking him, pausing at the hanging rag, flicking the knife blade in his hand. It was clean, unstained. A second realisation crossed the guard's face, even as he lunged again; Thia knew that the guard was shaken by the apparent failure of an attack he had counted on to injure badly.

Thia pulled to one side, almost contemptuously avoiding the flashing blade, and then charged in with a series of lightning feints of her own, to test the guard's reflexes and agility. There was no doubt the guard needed to finish her off quickly – and Thia hadn't much time either, she knew, as she ignored the hot agony in her midriff.

She flung herself at the guard stabbing at the leather tunic, praying the knife was sharp enough to pierce it. She spun aside barely in time, the effort causing her to gasp in pain. Yet she made herself dance outside the guard's reach, made herself grin at the other's sweaty, exertion-reddened face.

"Not fast enough, are you?"

The guard's breathing was ragged, a horse rasping. He came on, his knife arm lower. Thia backed, keeping to a wary crouch, wondering if it was sweat she felt trickling down her belly, or blood. If the guard noticed...

"What's wrong? All that rich food, fish and easy living beginning to tell? Or is it age? Time's creeping up on you. You're getting old, you know. You can't move fast enough any more, to escape time, or against me."

The guard closed in, a guttural roar bursting from him. He sprang, with a semblance of his old vitality, aiming for the throat, Thia's knife flashed up, struck the attacking wrist aside, slashed downward at the other's neck, where the leather tunic had parted. The guard's right fist caught her below the belt. Agony lashed through her. She doubled over the man's arm. With an unexpected reserve of energy, learnt from watching Vall, Thia somehow managed to pull herself sharply up from that vulnerable position. Her head rocked from the impact against the guard's descending knife, but it was miraculously

deflected. Both hands on the hilt of her blade, Thia rammed it through the leather until it grated against the man's ribs. She staggered free, saw the guard waver, his eyes bulging with shock, saw him step back, the hilt standing out beneath his ribs. The guard's mouth worked soundlessly. He fell to his knees, then sagged slowly sideways onto the stones. The fight had lasted for what seemed hours to Thia desperately sucking breath into her bruised body, forcing herself to keep to her feet for she could not, *could* not collapse.

Thia looked down at the guard. He was unconscious and although blood oozed out around the dagger, he wasn't dead. She heard the other two guards were recovering and would be here in a moment. They'd be able to stabilise the guard and get him to the healer so she retrieved her dagger and fled up the steps using the Expeditious Retreat spell. It made her feel stronger somehow that she hadn't killed the man.

When she got to the top of the tower, the others were waiting for her. In the centre of the room was a glowing yellow globe of power. Thia looked back at the door.

"Go on," she said. "I'm right behind you."

As Arizima jumped into the globe it changed colour to blue. Ilde followed her, the princess hesitated but a wave from Thia persuaded her to jump through while Thia kept an eye on the door. Thia knew that the destination of the portal was chosen by the first person to jump through it. The destination would remain the same for ten seconds after each person used it.

To try and stop the guards so they wouldn't get to the portal before the destination reset itself, Thia cast the Silent Image spell and created the illusion of an angry bear between the portal and the door. She used the nature of the spell to make the bear appear as large as the spell would allow and jumped through the portal herself. She knew this jump would take her to the same place that Arizima had thought of and just hoped she hadn't been thinking of Duli's Delve, The Tempest Hills or The Ghoulmoor Marshes. She did think about the Ghoulmoor Marshes herself though hoping that if the guards realised the bear was an illusion or if her distance ended the spell, then it might set the destination of the next trip to somewhere else.

She emerged in the warehouse district of Moor Court near to a burned out shed, a weavers workshop and an inn called The Broken Dagger.

“Interesting exit,” Thia said.

Arizima had gone in first and said “I was thinking about it as I went in. I guessed it would be a quiet enough place for us not to be seen.” Thia led the way to The Foolish Maiden. An offensive action had broken the Alter Self spell. Serielye, Subhkeir and Vall were waiting for her but so was Theny and Jora...

The scene when Theny saw Arizima and when Jora saw Ilde was one that Thia would never forget. Theny’s tankard fell from his hand in astonishment and he was speechless. He only just managed to gain the power of movement as Arizima threw herself into his arms. Jora had her back turned when Thia came back with the others but was expecting Thia and turned round to something she did not expect.

“Ilde!” she cried and the two met in each other’s arms half way. No one noticed the princess giving a signal to the barmaid before disappearing up the stairs.

Thia, Vall and Serielye watched the reunion for some minutes with tears in their eyes but then left the families to reunite.

“I was going to ask you where you’d got to,” said Vall, “but I see you’ve been busy.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t include you on this adventure,” said Thia, “but I thought this might be the only chance.” She filled Vall and Serielye in on the details.

“I think it’s time for me to write a new song,” said Serielye. “That’s the type of story I write best, stories of valour.”

“You must mention Vall alerting me in the first place.” Thia said.

“She deserves a mention.” Thia didn’t really want a song written about her but she wasn’t going to hurt Serielye’s feelings by turning down an offer of a lifetime.

“What do you think the others will want to do?” asked Vall looking at them.

“I think they may have new plans now.” Serielye said. “They achieved the objective of their quest and now that Theny has found Arizima, he probably won’t be bothered about heading for the Border Hills unless Arizima thinks there’s something important there.”

“What do you think their news plans will be?” Vall asked.
“I expect they will want to get to safety, somewhere well away from Laikas,” said Thia. “That may not be a bad idea but I wish I knew if they have a temple and where it is.”
“Let’s ask Ilde, Arizima and the princess tomorrow,” suggested Vall.
“They may have overheard something.”
“I’d like to talk to the princess tomorrow,” said Serielye.
“I’m not sure she wants to talk to anyone,” said Thia. “That’s why she’s upstairs. She didn’t want anyone to recognise her.”
“That’s not what I want to talk to her about,” said Serielye. “If you could arrange it, I’d appreciate it.”
“I’ll talk to her,” said Thia.

The next morning when Thia knocked on the princess’s door the princess let her in. She looked very troubled.

“Is something bothering you?” asked Thia.
“I want to thank you for rescuing us yesterday,” said the princess. “I just keep feeling that if they were planning to sacrifice us, they will find another three people to take our place. It gives me a feeling of guilt.”
“I give you my word,” said Thia, “no one will be sacrificed on that day.”
“Thank you.” said the princess although she wasn’t sure if she believed Thia. “Did you want to see me?”
“I was wondering if my friend, Serielye could speak with you?” said Thia.
“Was she the Fey with the wolf?” asked the princess.
“She’s an elf. I would advise you don’t ask her why she looks Fey.” Thia told her.
“I was hoping to talk with her,” the princess said. “Give me a few minutes to finish getting ready and I’ll have a chat with her.”

“I’m glad to see you are well,” Serielye said bowing to the princess as she came in.

“Please,” said the princess, “I should be bowing to any companion of Thia’s.”

“Not me,” said Serielye. “That rescue was all Thia’s doing with a bit of help from her friend Vall.”

The princess nodded but inclined her head to Serielye.

“I’m surprised Thia found you in Leybrook Castle,” Serielye told her. “I had heard you were being held imprisoned within the Shrine of Demonic Devastation.”

“I was,” the princess whispered, shuddering at the memory. “I was about to lose my mind when I was found.” After a long pause she added, “not everyone who rescues you is your friend.”

“Since we know the followers of Laikas are based in Leybrook Castle...” Serielye began and then said, “you didn’t over hear them mentioning that they have a temple anywhere did you?”

“I did,” the princess said. “They do, but I never heard them mentioning where it is. I don’t think they were going to take us there. They were planning to do the sacrifice somewhere else.”

“If we know they’ve got a base there, couldn’t you get the Royal Guard to do something about them?” Serielye asked.

“My kingdom has no control of this land. It’s not part of my kingdom. I don’t fancy asking the king here. My family and his don’t see eye to eye.” the princess said.

“I thought your families buried the hatchet years ago.” said Serielye.

“We can still remember where we buried it. I’m just a bit worried about this king if he plans to start using orcish mercenaries for tax collection.” the princess said.

“The queen is the real power behind the throne in this kingdom,” Serielye told her.

“I heard she was seen near the Caverns of Aphotic Death with a company of adventurers.” the princess said.

“Does your family have any power here?” Serielye asked.

“We can but ask,” the princess said. “I’d like for someone to accompany me home. After being caught by the followers of Laikas once, I’d feel happier if I had someone with me.”

When they came downstairs Thia asked Jora and Ilde what they planned to do.

“I was hoping to travel with you for a bit to help you out,” Jora said, “but I think Ilde would like to get us somewhere safe and I can see her reasons.”

“Hariholm is a safe dwarven city,” Vall said.

“It’s quite a distance,” said Jora.

“There’s a dwarf meeting place near by.” said the inn keeper. “If you go there you may meet other dwarves planning to go to Hariholm or they may be able to recommend somewhere nearer that’s just as

safe.” He took Jora outside and pointed out a building with coloured smoke coming from it.

Jora looked at the others. “I’m forever in your debt,” she said. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Elves don’t collect debts,” Thia lied.

“Thank you,” said Jora. “We *will* meet again. I hope it won’t be too long.”

“What are your plans?” Thia asked Theny.

“We still need to investigate those lights on the Barrier Hills,” he said.

“Those lights are the followers of Laikas planning their annual festival and sacrifice,” said Arizima. “I want to get as far away from there as possible.”

“Maybe we could join Jora and Ilde,” Theny suggested.

“The dwarves of Hariholm are not keen on elves,” Thia said. “I don’t know how they would receive half-elves.”

“Maybe we could go to Awan,” Arizima suggested.

“The town of Awan has mysteriously disappeared,” said Serielye.

“Laikas?” asked Vall.

“Not for a whole town,” Serielye replied.

“You would be welcome in Nablara,” Thia said. “That is quite a journey away though.”

“It’s also back the way we’ve just come,” Vall reminded her.

“Actually, the most direct route is in the opposite direction to the Tempest Hills.” Thia said. Now that she always knew which way was north, she could work out the direction of Nablara.

A human with grey hair, light amber eyes and prominent ears had just finished his breakfast and came over. He was wearing chain mail and had a bastard sword and shield.

“I’m Wealda.” he said. “I’m a Paladin. I seek to help the poor and unfortunate. My journey takes me almost as far as Nablara. I could escort you,” he suggested.

“That would be very kind of you,” Theny said.

Before Theny, Arizima and Wealda left, Thia and Vall gave them a letter each to give to their parents.

“So it’s just the three of us,” Thia said to Vall and Serielye.

“I’m afraid Subhkeir and I will also be leaving,” Serielye said. “The princess would like an escort home and I’d like to be able to help her see if her family can do anything about the followers of Laikas. Also it’s been quite some time since I’ve had the opportunity to perform

at a royal court. I would like to be in that kind of setting to sing my latest song.” She gave Thia and Vall a look that made it clear which song she meant. “I think you may find these useful,” she said and gave Thia and Vall one of the coins each that Raffin had given her with the eclipsed sun on them, “unless you wish to join us.” She guessed that Thia and Vall would refuse.

When Thia and Vall were alone they wondered about trying to join another company of adventurers but they could not trust anyone in Moor Court. They thought they needed to see if they could find any clues about the Temple of Laikas and that the castle would be where they would find the information. Getting to the castle undetected using conventional means was not going to be possible but if they tried to use the portal late at night if it was open they might get in and be able to search and hide when people started waking up. While they were on the roof they saw the portal open but had to wait a few nights before anyone opened it late enough. As they went near enough to use the portal, Thia thought about the first time she’d seen it.

“When I first saw the portal being used, the guy who used it threw something in which turned it gold. It had turned back to silver like it is now when I used it.”

“What do you think the gold meant?” asked Vall.

“I’m not sure,” said Thia. “Serielye said we’d need the coins Riffin gave her. She usually doesn’t know why but I’m willing to bet that they are what will turn the portal gold.”

“Let’s give it a go,” suggested Vall.

Thia took out her coin and tossed it towards the portal. The coin bounced back as if had hit something hard and Thia was able to catch it again, although she almost fell off the rooftop in doing so.

“Maybe not,” suggested Vall.

“I’m not so sure,” said Thia. “It must have something to do with these coins for them to bounce back.”

“That’s it!” exclaimed Vall. “It requires two coins together. Probably held like one eclipsing the other as the image on the coin shows. It takes two coins each but we’ve only got two.”

“I saw two people go through,” said Thia. “Only one threw an object. Maybe it gives two journeys or remains gold for a certain amount of time.”

“Let’s try it,” said Vall. She took Thia’s coin, held it with her own like an eclipsed sun and threw the two towards the portal. The coins disappeared but the portal turned gold.

“Okay, this is working,” said Thia. “I’ll go first. Wait ten seconds before you follow me to give me time to move away. I’ll jump in backwards. If you jump in forwards then it might help to be facing different directions when we come out.”

“Good luck,” Vall said and watched Thia jump through the portal before counting to ten and following her.

This time Thia didn’t emerge near the castle. She was surprised and only just remembered to move aside to make room for Vall to arrive. She was sure she wouldn’t want to find out what would have happened if she hadn’t moved. They were on a grassy area outside a small town. Nearby was a narrow slope with a sheer drop on both sides but at the bottom next to each other were two large temples. One had the symbol Thia had seen on one of the tapestries. The other had a symbol that also represented time.

“Two?” asked Vall.

“Why not?” asked Thia. “They’re not worshipping a real god.”

“If we’re not at the castle, how do we get back?” asked Vall.

“Let’s find out where we are first,” suggested Thia. “Let’s find an inn. I don’t suggest we want to hang around in the open this close to the Temple of Laikas, even at this time of night.”

“There won’t be any inns open at this time,” Vall pointed out.

“The guilds are open all the time,” Thia suggested. “If there is a calligraphers, scribes and scribes guild here they’ll give lodging to an artisan. I’m sure they’ll give you lodging too, even if you have to share with me.”

“Now I know why your parents wanted you to join a guild,” said Vall.

“Right.” said Thia. “I can rely on certain benefits that membership provides. Plus guilds wield tremendous political power. Let’s see if there is one. At least we’ll be able to find out where we are. For all we know, we could be a day’s journey from Nablara.”

Vall looked around. Even in the dark she could tell that they were more likely to be thousands of miles from Nablara than any closer than Moor Court had been.

The area was known as the Zarakzir Crag. Those at the guild had never heard of Moor Court or of Nablara but did confirm that this was where you came for the Temple of Laikas.

Thia and Vall were given lodgings that night but Thia could see they weren't happy about giving Vall a bed. If they continued to stay there they wouldn't have thrown Vall out but they both decided to get a room at the inn. There was only one inn in the town but there were usually vacancies. The inn was called The Knave's Goblet and was in a slum ward known for its organised street thugs. It was no secret that the street outside was watched by a gang of them.

The inn was a single story timber framed building, with a single salvaged stone wall and an unusually low ceiling. The accommodation consisted of several hammocks in the common room. It used to be a blacksmith's shop, and still smelled of coal smoke. Despite the accommodation and the smell they knew they'd be happier here since they were both welcome.

The next day Thia and Vall decided to look round the town. It turned out to be just a village now they could see it in the light. It was called Kragspire and had a population of just under nine hundred. The total guard was only six people but apparently eleven clergy tended to the spiritual needs of the village. Neither of them had any interest in anything the local clergy had to say.

There were two taverns in the village but they didn't have the cosy feel of the taverns they were used to in almost every town they'd stayed at since leaving Nablara and so they decided they'd eat at The Knave's Goblet. The prices there were cheap and although the food wasn't up to much it was similar to what the taverns offered at a fraction of the price. The cheapest meal was only two copper pieces and the most expensive was only twelve.

Vall tried to find a map and was told the blacksmith had one. When she asked which one she found out the village had only one blacksmith as well as only one healer, bowyer, merchant, leatherworker, fishmonger and mason and only three cobblers and tailors and two farriers and carpenters. The map didn't help Vall though. She didn't recognise anywhere on it and actually looked at the stars that night to check they were on the same world.

That evening they ate at The Knave's Goblet and had stewed mutton and pine nut bread that came with a tankard of beer. They realised

that at twelve copper pieces they could afford it and for the price found it extremely good.

The innkeeper was a young halfling named Suse. She had been stealing casks of drink from another tavern and being the only inn in town meant she had no competition but you still needed the clients. Apart from Thia and Vall there were only two other patrons. One was a female human and the other was an elf. The elf had uneven blond hair and narrow blue eyes with a flat nose. Although she was a paladin she didn't want to talk to them when she saw Thia was a Drow, but the human did want to talk with them.

She was tall and willowy, with tangled golden hair and green eyes and was wearing leather armour.

"Are you new comers to Kragspire?" she asked them. "I don't remember seeing you before and anyone like the two of you, I wouldn't forget. We don't have many elves here, apart from at the temples."

"I'm Valanthe," said Vall. "This is my friend Thia."

"They call me Browe," the woman said. "Are you a Drow?" she asked Thia.

"It depends whether you'll hold it against me?" said Thia.

"I was hoping you are," Browe said. "The clerics at the Temple of Laikas paint their skin black."

"I'm not from the temple," Thia said.

"I'm glad," Browe said. "What do you know about them?"

"We know that they believe killing others will extend their own lives." Vall said.

"That what it boils down to," Browe said. "They are not worshipping a real god and so the clerics don't get any divine favours like most normal clerics do. The high priestess actually tells the others she is Laikas the goddess."

"I thought Laikas was their name for time," Thia said.

"It may have started like that but either the high priestess says she's a goddess because it benefits her or because it helps what they do or believe."

The word 'believe' struck a chord with Thia. "Do we have the right to question someone's belief?" she asked.

"We don't," said Browe, "but what they do is try to extend their own lives by taking others. They don't have the right to assume they have any more right to live than anyone else. Plus they are killing

probably hundreds of people each to preserve just one life. I know you can't use maths when talking about life, but it is plain to see."

"If not even the high priestess gets divine favours, how does she keep the others believing she is a goddess?" asked Thia.

"She's a magic user," Browe said. "She uses magic to make it appear she has divine powers. They also have long had an image of Laikas and she looks just like her which helps."

"Is she a wizard?" asked Thia.

"I'm not sure," Browe replied thoughtfully. "I haven't thought about it before but maybe she's a warlock, received her power through a pact."

"With The Fiend, no doubt." suggested Vall.

"It depends what suits her illusion better," Thia said.

"However she did it," Browe pointed out suddenly, "she's not very powerful."

"Why do they black their skin?" Vall asked.

"I don't know." Browe said. "I would have thought that makes them quite conspicuous which I wouldn't have thought they want with what they do. I believe though that the high priestess's top acolyte is a Drow."

They lapsed into silence for a while.

"I know a magic user who is passing through here," Browe said after a while. "I hope to see him tomorrow. I can possibly persuade him to stay a day. He may know what method the high priestess uses to get her powers." Browe got up to leave and then turned back to them, "I'd advise you to stay well clear of the old well on Pit Passage. A flesh eating ghoul dwells at the bottom of it."

For an old blacksmith's forge it was cold that night in the common room, luckily for Thia and Vall, staying up for a few nights waiting for the portal to open at midnight, they both were able to sleep despite the cold. Bed covers hadn't been provided but the others staying there had made their own arrangements and Thia and Vall knew the first thing they'd be buying the next day.

The next evening when they went to get a meal they saw Browe sitting with an elf. He had a peasant appearance with blond hair and bright blue eyes. He was wearing modest garments and a wooden holy symbol.

Thia and Vall ordered vegetable stew which came with a mug of beer and joined them.

“Hello again,” said Browe. “This is Smaldo. I have told him all about you.”

Smaldo shook hands with Vall, “You must be Valanthe,” he said.

“Please call me Vall,” Vall said.

“And you must be Thia,” Smaldo said, shaking Thia’s hand. “You’re a wizard,” he exclaimed.

“How can you tell?” asked Thia.

“You have a magical aura about you.” Smaldo said. “I understand you’re interested in the source of magic for the high priestess in the Temple of Laikas. I can tell you she is a wizard and learnt a small amount of magic to make the others think she is a goddess.” He looked at Thia. “She’s not as powerful as you,” he said. “She also tries to extend her life by killing the weak and helpless. She’s no fighter.”

Thia bought him a drink and he looked at them deep in thought.

“I may be putting myself at risk by telling you this,” Smaldo said, “but I know where the high priestess learnt her magic from.”

Thia and Vall looked at him. Although there was no one else in at this moment he lowered his voice and glanced at the bar to see if Suse had heard him and to check she wasn’t too close now.

“There is a library not far away,” he whispered as softly as he could.

“The owner sells scrolls.”

“I thought scrolls could be used only once.” Browe said.

“If you’re prepared to spend the time reproducing the basic form of the spell, then deciphering the unique system of notation used by the wizard who wrote it and practising the spell until you understand the sounds or gestures required, then you can transcribe it into your spell book using your own notation.” Thia told them.

“That’s right,” Smaldo said. “If you use a simple spell it would probably take two hours, longer for more advanced spells. It would probably cost you about fifty gold pieces worth of ink per hour.”

“Fifty gold pieces an hour!” Vall exclaimed.

“That is the cost for the material components you expend as you experiment with the spell to master it, as well as the fine inks you need to record it.” Thia explained. “Most of the gold I’ve spent this adventure has gone on fine inks.”

“So the high priestess bought some scrolls or copied them into her spell book?” Browe asked.

“Yes.” Smaldo said. “He sells the scrolls and then creates new ones to replace the old ones copying them from masters in his secret library.”

“Did he know what the high priestess had in mind?” asked Vall.

“Probably not,” Smaldo replied, “but he wouldn’t have cared. With the exception of necromancy spells, most spells aren’t evil. It’s how you use them.”

“I use my spells to fight monsters. If I’d chosen to be evil, I could have used them to get my own way. They could work both ways.”

Thia told Vall.

“I think he may prefer evil clients.” Smaldo told them. “They will be more regular clients and being evil usually means they can afford to pay more.”

“I’d like to have a look at this,” Thia said.

“I thought you might.” Smaldo was whispering again now. “I’m a regular client. I don’t want him to see me with you. Normally I would continue on my journey and ask you to wait until I return. I won’t be coming this way for quite some time so I’m willing to wait for you to return.” Smaldo showed Vall on her new map where to go and then left.

Browe said she’d also remain behind but wished them luck.

That night Thia and Vall wrapped the blankets round themselves before meditating.

The next morning just as it was getting light, Thia and Vall left Kragspire and headed towards the point Smaldo had marked on Vall’s map. The terrain was easy going but had no buildings or people and had a lonely feel about it.

The terrain also began to climb and became quite cold. They weren’t sure what altitude Kragspire had been but guessed it might have been quite high. It was late afternoon when they saw a small town up ahead. It had a wall around it but the buildings didn’t look too big.

They hadn’t expected a town. They had expected to find some secluded building. The sun was beginning to set and the sky was a deep red colour when they came to the gates to the town. There were two guards there who looked bored but a place this remote probably didn’t get many visitors.

“State your business here,” the first guard said.

“We have come here to meet someone.” Vall said. “A friend told us we could find him here.” She didn’t want to mention any names and hoped she wouldn’t be asked.

The guard took a good look at them and then nodded.

“I will have to ask you give your weapons to us,” the second guard said. “You’ll get them back when you leave.”

Vall didn’t really want to hand over her sword but when Thia handed the guard her crossbow and dagger, Vall reluctantly handed it over. The guards then opened the gates and let them through before closing the gates behind them.

Thia and Vall looked at the street they were on. A signpost said that it was called ‘Spell Street’ and ran west and east. The street ahead of them was called ‘Thief Street’ and they could see the city temple at the top. There was a door on the left on Thief Street.

On Spell Street there was one door in each direction. There appeared to be blocks of three buildings in each direction with a door to the first building to the east and in the middle building to the west. The door to the west seemed quite elaborate while the door to the east wasn’t anything special but they both had signs above. Since the one to the east was nearer they went to investigate. The sign above the door said ‘Wizards’ Guild’.

“Could this be the place to find Symes?” asked Thia.

“We can try,” Vall said. “He has white hair and soft hazel eyes. I don’t recommend we ask for him by name.”

“Why not?” asked Thia.

“If he has a number of evil clients we don’t want to use his reputation to damage our own as soon as we get here.” Vall warned her.

Thia nodded and tried the door. It opened and they went in.

The Wizards’ Guild was a large room with a couple of tables with stools around the edge and a bookcase. There was a large rug on the floor decorated with runes of some kind. There were steps leading up to a mezzanine level that looked down. There were a few wizards wandering around chatting to each other.

There was one by the door who greeted Thia as she walked in. The wizard didn’t seem too pleased at seeing Vall and Vall wondered if it was because she didn’t have a magical aura about herself or because wearing chain mail suggested it was unlikely she was a wizard. He didn’t turn Vall away but Vall decided it was probably

better not to go to the upper level and keep away from the bookcase. The wizards didn't seem to object when she went and sat quietly at one of the tables while she waited for Thia.

All of the wizards were wearing pointed hoods but they didn't cover their faces and so Thia was able to see if any of them looked like Symes without making it too obvious she was looking at them and also wouldn't be asked who she was looking for. She went up the steps. The upper level ran around the lower level so you could look down. There were many more bookcases up there and shelves with books on and alcoves in the wall with more books in them.

There were more rugs of the same design and more wizards wandering or standing around. There was also a large desk that looked like a bar with a wizard standing behind it handing a glass of green liquid to another.

When Thia was satisfied Symes was not here she asked the nearest wizard where the library was.

"If you come out of here and turn right, go into Thief Street when you get to Temple Street turn right and you'll see the entrance straight ahead." the wizard said.

As they passed through Thief Street, Vall look at the sign above the door they'd seen on the left when they came in and it said 'City Guard's Quarters'. That suggested that the elaborate door may have been for the keep. They found the library easily with the sign above the door again and went in.

The library was large with books along every wall with more bookcases and reading tables in the middle. A gnome was sitting behind a desk reading a book almost half a big as he was.

Thia looked around for scrolls but saw just a small number on a shelf and had a look. The scrolls all appeared to be poems.

Meanwhile Vall took out a dusty book that looked like it had scrolls in it but it turned out not to and it told the history of a city she'd never heard of.

"Have you got any more scrolls?" Thia asked the gnome.

"We don't have many scrolls," the gnome said. "Scrolls don't hold much so we try to get as many as possible combined into books. Are you looking for something specific?"

"I was told there were a lot of spell scrolls at this library," Thia said.

“Not this one,” the gnome said. “You’d be better off looking in the Wizards’ guild on Spell Street. Failing that you try the alchemist’s shop on Book Street but I doubt he’ll have any.”

Thia went over to Vall and gave her a helpless look. They went outside and round to the entrance to the city temple that, as like all the other buildings, had its name above the door. They looked down the street that was signposted ‘Fighter Street’. One of the doors there had a tankard outside and you didn’t need to read the sign to see it was the tavern.

Inside, the tavern was beginning to fill up. Across the other side they could see a door marked ‘Accommodation’ and decided to enquire about a room. Vall went to find out what the cost would be.

“How many beds do you need?” asked the barmaid.

“Two please,” Vall said.

“Okay,” the barmaid said. “I’ve got one on the second floor for you. Who’s your friend?”

Vall pointed out Thia. The barmaid looked at Thia and recognising that Thia was a Drow a look of hate, blacker than Thia’s skin, flitted across her face. It was gone in an instant and she was glad Vall hadn’t seen it.

“Are you an adventurer?” she asked as if to make a conversation. She was hoping Vall would say something that she could use to refuse them the room. She would have said they were full if she’d know before that Vall was with Thia.

“Yes,” replied Vall. “What gave it away?”

“I used to be an adventurer. I always recognise others. I seem to know someone in every land and realm.”

“Do you know Nablara?” asked Vall.

“The elven city in the mountains. Yes, I do.” the barmaid said.

“How far away is it?” Vall asked.

“It must be over two thousand miles away.” the barmaid said.

“Excuse me,” Vall said and went over to Thia. “We’ve got a problem,” she said.

“What is it?” asked Thia, alarmed.

“We’re over two thousand miles from Nablara.” Vall told her.

“If the Temple of Laikas is here and the festival is taking place in the Barrier Peaks, then there must be a way to get there.” Thia said.

“The normal followers can’t use the magical way,” Vall said. “That means there are probably two thousand miles worth of followers of Laikas between here and Moor Court since Moor Court was only a

couple of months from Nablara. If the Zarakzir Craggs are the focus, there could be followers for two thousand miles in every direction of here.”

“Are you saying the followers of the Laikas are covering more than twelve and a half million square miles?” asked Thia.

“I hadn’t done that maths, but that’s exactly what I’m saying,” Vall replied. “This could be a serious problem for everyone else in that area.”

“Are you suggesting we abandon our search for Symes, to do something about this?” Thia asked, suddenly feeling powerless.

“What can we do that would make a difference on this scale?” Vall asked, rhetorically. “Let’s find Symes. If we can find him, he might know something or someone who can make a difference.” Vall didn’t sound confident and Thia’s enthusiasm for this suggestion was no better.

“Let’s get the key for our room,” suggested Thia. “There’s a full moon so we wouldn’t look too out of place if we have a look round this town at night. I’d like to see whom the temple is to. I hope it’s not Laikas.”

Thia and Vall went to get their key.

“I’m sorry,” the barmaid said. “The reason that room that was free is free is because it’s not available. It was damaged in a recent storm and isn’t safe. All the other rooms are taken.”

“Are there any other places to stay?” asked Vall. She didn’t believe the barmaid.

“Unless you’re a member of the Wizards’ Guild or the Mercenaries’ Guild you’ll have to see if they’ll put you up in the elves quarters.” the barmaid said and moved off before they could ask her where the elves quarters were.

As it happened the elf quarters were round the other side of the temple. The temple had a symbol that represented time on it, that they recognised from one of the temples outside Kragspire.

The elves didn’t complain about how late they knocked and went out of their way to make them a meal, find them somewhere to meditate and to ensure they were comfortable. They hadn’t felt at home like this since they’d left Nablara and decided they could ask the elves about Symes.

“Symes lives in this city,” one of the elves told them. “He lives within the civilian housing although he seems to have about a whole

quarter of the space to himself. There is no entrance, you have to have been invited to get in.”

“How do we get invited?” asked Thia.

“Are you seeking getting some scrolls?” asked the elf.

Thia and Vall thought about this. They hadn’t come for scrolls. They had come to get a look at Symes and to see his shop. However in the end Thia said “Yes.” She was interested in getting some scrolls at the same time if there were any useful ones.

“You will find a door way there sometime tomorrow. His building is on the corner of Mage Street and Scroll Street,” the elf told them and liked the expressions on their faces when he mentioned the aptly named streets. “You seemed reluctant to say ‘yes’,” he remarked.

“Scrolls weren’t our primary reason for wanting to see him but I was hoping to get some at the same time,” Thia said.

“I won’t ask what your primary reason is, but I can’t guarantee you’ll get invited if you have other plans. You’ll only know tomorrow.” the elf said.

There seemed to be something odd about this town that neither Thia nor Vall liked but they felt safe with the elves.

The next morning, Thia and Vall were ready to go as the sun was just beginning to rise. They’d been told where Mage Street and Scroll Street were and decided to head there first. If there was no door they’d look around and come back later.

They could see that there were no normal doors on this section of the building, not onto the streets anyway, but there was an illuminated red door waiting for them so they assumed they were invited and went inside not knowing what to expect.

“I understand you wanted to see me,” said Symes.

Thia and Vall looked at him. He was tall and willowy and his white hair and soft hazel eyes matched his description. He was dressed in fine raiment and had numerous rings.

“I’ve been told you sell scrolls,” said Thia. “I’m interested in seeing what you have for sale.”

“I don’t deal in regular scrolls,” Symes said. “Only spell scrolls. I can offer you any of 359 spells and cantrips from all eight schools of magic.” As he said this he held up his hand cancelling out an illusion. On the wall were shelves with scrolls on them. Thia had never seen so many spell scrolls in any of the mage’s guilds or schools of magic she’d been in and her eyes lit up, but her purse felt

inadequately light. "Have a look, see what interests you." Symes offered.

Thia lost not time in looking at some of the scrolls but they seemed unintelligible to Vall so she decided to talk to Symes.

"What sort of people do you sell spell scrolls to?" asked Vall.

"Anyone who will pay," Symes said.

"What sort of clients do you get?" she pressed.

"All sorts," Symes said. "Mainly magic users, like your friend here, or their apprentices. Bards, warlocks, sorcerers and wizards. I also get a number of merchants who want to sell them on elsewhere."

"Do you ask what they want to use the spells for?" asked Vall.

"It's nothing to do with me, what they plan to do with the spells."

Symes said. "As long as they have the gold, they can have the scroll. Apart from the necromancy spells, most of the spells are good anyway and the necromancy spells can be used for good."

"Just as the necromancy spells can be used for good," Vall countered, "the other spells can be used for evil."

"I don't care what they do with them," Symes insisted. "I'll exchange spell scrolls for gold."

Vall could see she wasn't going to get anywhere from here but was sure there was a degree of responsibility when you were providing mortals with an interface between their will and the Weave of raw magic and allowing them to pluck directly at the strands of the Weave to create the desired effect. All existence was suffused with magical power, and potential energy lay untapped in every rock, stream, and living creature, the mute and mindless will of existence, permeating every bit of matter and present in every manifestation throughout the multiverse.

"Would you charge the same amount if I wanted to copy the spell from a scroll into my spell book?" asked Thia.

"After copying it in, the scroll will turn to dust," Symes said, "so it's the same price. I'll sell you the scroll and you can take it away and copy it into your spell book at your leisure. I do have the inks and many of the material components needed which I'll charge the going price for so you can do it here for the same price if you wish."

Symes had a book on his desk that he'd been reading when they came in and now he turned back to it.

Since he wasn't looking at them Thia pointed her finger at Vall and cast the Message cantrip. In a whisper only Vall could hear she said, "I heard what you were trying to do. We've got to try to get his

conscience to recognise the effects of selling these scrolls to just anyone.”

Vall turned back to Symes, “How many scrolls of each spell do you have?” she asked.

“I have several of the more popular spells,” Symes told her, “but the ones that are not so popular I have only one of. I have got, on the shelf, at least one of every spell.”

“How do you replace them?” Vall asked.

“I have an enchanted library.” Symes said. “I have a master copy of every scroll there. The enchantment allows me to copy the scrolls, when I need more, without losing the original. But those copies, I can’t use myself.”

“Could we see this library?” asked Thia.

Symes gave her a funny look and Thia wished she hadn’t asked.

“Of course you can,” he said. He opened a door behind his desk that had a stairway going downwards behind it. “Go down there. I’ll be along in a minute.”

Although the staircase was dark there was a light at the end. When they got to the bottom there was a door with two guards standing on either side of it.

“What are you doing here?” one of the guards demanded.

“Symes told us to come down here,” Thia said. “He said he’d be down in a minute.”

“Wait in here,” the other guard said opening the door. The door led to a large room with, comfortable looking, very expensive furniture.

“Help yourself to the wine,” the guard added and closed the door behind them. Thia and Vall heard the door being locked.

Vall sat down and Thia poured two glasses of the wine and handed one to Vall.

“This wine is drugged isn’t it?” said Vall.

“Of course,” replied Thia. “Do we pour it away and pretend to be asleep or do we leave by the other door?”

“If we pretend to be asleep, we might learn something,” Vall suggested.

“This is true,” observed Thia thoughtfully, “but if things get nasty, the guards are armed and you’re not. I’m not defenceless but we don’t know how powerful Symes is and there is no reason to expect the guards not to be able to use magic.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Vall agreed. “Do we pour out the wine and set fire to it?”

“Let’s not cut off, as far as we currently know of, the only way back.” Thia suggested. She tried the other door and found it was unlocked. It opened into a dark passageway.

“Left or right?” Thia asked.

“Right,” said Vall. “I suggest you use your dark vision for as long as possible,” she suggested. “Hopefully in a hour we’ll be out or far enough away that light won’t give us away.”

Thia nodded and they headed down the passage as fast as they could.

The passage was dry and flat to begin with. At each fork they went right hoping that would enable them to find their way back if needed. At first it was gradual, but later the passage got steep as it went down, the walls were getting wet and it was getting cold. Thia was finally beginning to get a headache but she now decided they were far enough down the passage and had taken several turns that she could cast her light cantrip.

After thinking about coming far enough down the passage they wondered how far they had come. They must be in caverns well outside the town above. Did the passages lead anywhere? The library must be at the end but it looked like they’d gone the wrong way, probably from the word go. They were considering going back but were still faced with the problem of there being only one way out – which was guarded.

They knew if they couldn’t find a way out they’d have to come back or starve to death but decided to continue on for now.

The wall seemed to turn slimy and they decided to call a halt. It was decided they couldn’t keep on like this and so they decided to go back and take their chances with Symes.

When they turned back however the passage was not the same. It seemed to have reordered itself behind them and when they turned back to the way they had been going, that passage had also changed.

“What do we do now?” asked Vall.

“I don’t suppose any of your maps included dungeons?” Thia asked rhetorically.

“What does your sense of direction tell you?” Vall asked.

“Only that we’re lost,” Thia said. She also knew they were probably going to die but didn’t want to say that. Vall had reached the same

conclusion herself and was not sure there was still a way out. It felt like the rules had changed.

“Let’s go this way,” she suggested, picking a passage at random. They followed the passage, having no idea if they were going the right way. In the end the passage opened out into a dead end and they realised this was not the right way.

They took a look in the cavern and noticed a mummified corpse lying off to one side. It appeared to have something else lying next to it and they moved in to investigate. As they looked at the jewels they suddenly sensed that the mummy wasn’t as dead as it appeared. It was quite definitely undead, grimly hanging on to a semblance of life, almost as if it were too afraid to let go and die.

Thia and Vall had no trouble leaping out of its reach since mummies could only move very slowly, but Thia’s and Vall’s life forces shone out like a beacon in the darkness to the mummy.

Their first instinct was to run but realised if they went down another dead end passage the mummy would follow them and they’d be trapped without the space they had currently to fight.

Vall felt powerless without a weapon.

“What do we do?” she asked.

“I wish we had Nimrellye with us,” Thia said. “Fighting a mummy is not as straight forward as it seems. They can’t be truly killed by blows from weapons. Although they will appear to die, they will return to life after twenty minutes and follow their would-be killers, to extract revenge.”

“We haven’t got any weapons to kill it even for twenty minutes.”

Vall said. “I haven’t, but you have.”

Thia immediately threw a firebolt at the mummy. She was surprised when it burst into flames in seconds leaving nothing but ash.

“Did Nimrellye know it would be that easy?” Thia mused.

“Something doesn’t add up here.”

“Do you mean it was too easy,” asked Vall.

“It’s not that,” said Thia. “They don’t embalm and preserve the dead here. What’s a mummy doing here?”

Vall looked perplexed.

“If it can’t be truly killed except by fire,” Thia suggested, “then is that why a mummy was chosen to be down here? To try and catch people like us?”

“Does that mean if we’ve killed it that there is a way out?” Vall said, picking up the gems.

“I know only one way we might find out,” said Thia and led the way back to the fork. When they got there, it had a different number of passages leading off but they had both expected something like that would happen.

They chose one passage. They knew if the passage got less slimy it wasn’t going to be a sign they were coming back the way they came. They heard a sound up ahead. It sounded like heavy breathing and they decided to take a look. Anything that was different from the monotony of the passages had to be investigated. As they peered round they corner they gasped at what they saw. It was an enormous two headed dragon! One head was yellow, the other was purple and the body was a brown colour midway between the two. The dragon saw them and moved towards them. They turned to run only to find a crack had opened up in the floor before them leading down to some fiery depths below. Even for the agility of an elf, there was no guarantee they could jump across.

“Do you think we can make it?” asked Vall.

“Hang on,” said Thia.

“Can’t this wait?” Vall exclaimed.

“That mummy was a trap to stop us,” Thia said. “A mummy is easy to create and put in a dungeon, how many dragons are going to be persuaded to come down here?”

“Is there point to this?” yelled Vall getting ready to attempt to jump the hole.

“That dragon does not exist.” Thia said confidently.

Vall wanted to protest but Thia strode purposefully toward the dragon! The instant she touched it, it disappeared. She looked round at Vall.

“They can get their hands on a mummy. A dragon is not so easy to acquire so they use an illusion and hope we’ll try to jump the pit. If we do, it would probably open wider to make sure we can’t clear it.”

“It still blocks the way back,” Vall pointed out.

“There’s no guarantee that is the way back,” Thia said. “The way the passages change I think we’ve got a better chance of getting out this way.”

Thia looked at the wall and cast the Silent Image spell. A glyph appeared on the wall.

“What does that glyph mean?” asked Vall.

“Nothing,” said Thia. “It is unique. I’ve got a feeling about this.” Thia and Vall followed the passage. It went in a straight line. After about eight minutes they found another symbol on the wall. It was the same as the one Thia had cast.

“Unique?” asked Vall.

“Unique.” said Thia. “We’ve been here before.”

“But the passage was straight,” Vall pointed out. “We can’t have gone in a circle.”

“If you cast Presditation here,” Thia said, “what ever way we go, we’ll end up here.”

“How do we get out?” Vall asked, a note of fear in her voice.

“Haven’t you got a teleportation spell that will get us out of here?”

“I’ve only got Misty Step,” Thia explained. “It will only work on me and has to be a place I can see within fifty feet. I haven’t...” Thia stopped. She reached in her boot and took out a scroll she’d tucked in there. “I was looking at this scroll when you were talking to Symes. I wanted to ask him about it so I put it in my boot and was going to ask him on the way to the library.” Thia explained.

“Can that get us out of here?” Vall pleaded.

“It’s a more advanced spell than I can cast,” Thia said, “but I can try. At the worst it will fail, at the best it is our ticket out of here. I don’t know how far we are from the room where we waited but I can visualise that room. As long as it’s within five hundred feet of here.”

“We must be miles away,” Vall said.

“I think the dragon and the loop we’re trapped in might mean we’re almost on top of it.” Thia told her. “It will open a Dimension Door. If you stand within five feet of me, you can come with me. There’s a seventy percent chance this won’t work.”

Thia and Vall found themselves in the spot Thia had visualised. Vall saw the words on the scroll disappear and the scroll itself turning to dust. Thia felt drained. The spell had taken a lot out of her. She looked around, only vaguely taking in that Symes and the two guards were shocked to find that they’d escaped. If she hadn’t been weakened as much as she had been she could have used the surprise to her advantage but all her body wanted to do was sleep. When Thia woke up she was lying on a cold hard stone floor. She was being shaken. She got up expecting to it was Vall who’d been shaking her but it was Symes.

“You passed my test,” he said. “Welcome to my library.”

“Your test?” Thia repeated still not fully awake. She looked around. There were alcoves on every wall. Each of them had a scroll in them.

“Of course.” replied Symes. “If you want to see my library you need to be worthy.”

“This is impressive,” she said. She was impressed but didn’t think what she’d just been through was a test. Especially when she remembered the look Symes had given her when she first asked to see the library.

“I didn’t expect you to be quite as high a level spell caster as you are,” Symes said. “There’s more to you than meets the eye.”

Thia remembered Jora saying that when she’d heard about them dealing with the will-o’-the-wisp. “You’re not the first person to say that.” Thia told him.

“And maybe not the last,” Symes said.

“I borrowed one of your spells to escape.” Thia told him. “I’ll need to pay you for it.”

“You stole a scroll and used it to cheat on the test!” Symes repeated in a booming voice three times as loud as normal. His eyes turned red and appeared to burn while Thia could feel minor tremors in the ground. Thia felt him trying to cast a Phantasmal Force spell on her which would make her see illusions that would seem so real they could damage her. However she had the intelligence to see it coming and the spell failed.

This was enough to jerk Thia totally awake and she reacted immediately casting the Burning Hands spell. Symes dodged out of the way but Thia saw the look of horror on his face as the scrolls that the spell hit started to combust and the fire began to sweep round the room. Symes managed to jump through the door in the corner but before Thia could get to it there was a wall of fire in her path. Every scroll was ablaze and she could feel the heat.

She could also see the steps on the other side of the door and cast the Misty Step spell to teleport herself there and then charged up the stairs as fast as she could with the flames hot on her heels.

She found Symes’ workshop at the top of the stairs. Vall was there shocked. Symes was at his desk grabbing a pile of scrolls from a draw before grabbing another one from the desk. The fire had cut off his path from the magic door to the building but looking at the scroll on his desk he made his escape through a dimension door. Thia

grabbed Vall's hand and pulled her through the magical door back into Scroll Street behind her as the scrolls in the workshop caught fire.

As soon as they were outside Thia took out her twig, pointed it at the door, and cast the Witch Bolt spell. As she had hoped, the door vanished and she sat down to catch her breath.

"Isn't that fire going to escape and set the town on fire?" asked Vall. "Symes didn't escape outside," said Thia. "He and the guards are inside and have probably cast a spell that will put the fire out by now. Unfortunately for him, it won't be in time to save his scrolls." "Do you think he'll find what people he sells scrolls to will want to do with them first in future?" asked Vall.

"I doubt it," said Thia. "It will be a while before he can sell scrolls again though. Hopefully he'll take up a different line of work. It's just a shame we didn't get any scrolls."

Vall pulled several scrolls she stuffed down her tunic out.

"Unless you stole any," Thia added, taking them and looking through them.

She finally stopped on one. "This looks interesting," she remarked. "It's called Sleep. It will send any creature weak enough within ninety feet into a magical slumber for one minute."

"Can you cast it?" asked Vall.

"This doesn't look too difficult," Thia said. "If I went to the wizards' guild, I could probably copy it into my spell book in a couple of hours. They'll probably have the inks I need."

"You'll need to pay for them if you're not a member," Vall reminded her. "These might help." She handed Thia the gems they'd found with the mummy. They were worth about twenty-five gold pieces each.

"I'll need some rose petals," Thia said looking at the scroll.

"They had roses in the elven quarters," said Vall. "I'm sure they'd let you have some. I can wait there until you're done and then if we meditate there over night we can get back to Kragspire by tomorrow evening."

"We saw what we came to see," said Thia. "We also stopped an evil merchant. Smaldo might be a bit upset that he can't get scrolls here anymore but I think he'll agree we did the right thing."

When Thia and Vall arrived back at Kragspire they ate at The Knave's Goblet and waited for Browe and Smaldo.

When Browe arrived she joined them. "Did you see what you wanted?" she asked.

"We did," said Thia tentatively.

"You don't sound so sure," Browe said.

"We saw the person who sells scrolls to evil people." Vall said. "We also destroyed his library and virtually all the scrolls he had."

"That's probably not a bad thing." Browe said.

"That's where we're not sure," Thia remarked. "Smaldo won't be able to get any more scrolls there and I'm wondering how many good people used to get scrolls from him."

Smaldo came in at that point, ordered a drink and sat with them. "I trust you've satisfied your curiosity?" he asked.

Vall outlined what had happened. Smaldo listened without questioning anything.

"I think you did the right thing," he said. "If he was selling spells to the high priestess of Laikas, there's no telling what other evil people he could be selling them to."

"We found out that the town we came from, that had followers of Laikas in it, is close to two thousand miles away." Thia said. "If the focal point is here, the followers of the Laikas are covering more than twelve and a half million square miles."

Both Browe and Smaldo looked shocked. "I had no idea it was so widespread," Smaldo said.

"There's no way anyone could deal with something on this scale without a war," said Thia. "Even a superhero would be out of his depth."

Smaldo was deep in thought. "We could throw the whole order into chaos, probably dissolve the whole idea of killing others if we proved their 'goddess' was a mortal like the rest of us." he said suddenly.

"What are you suggesting?" Browe asked.

"Take on the 'goddess' and defeat her." Smaldo said. "She would be no match against you," he said to Thia. "You would have to make yourself look like her top acolyte but I can lend you a disguise kit. You have a few spell scrolls and I have some spell scrolls of my own which might help you prepare. What do you say?"

Vall looked unsure but Thia thought about her promise to the princess. "Let's do it," she said.

“Fine.” said Smaldo. “Meet me on the green tomorrow at midday. I’ll show you the scrolls I have and we can make a plan.”

The next day when Smaldo met Thia and Vall on the green he outlined his plan. It did seem to involve him not being involved but he told them that as a trader he couldn’t help them and didn’t fit into the plan.

“What I suggest you do, is make an investigation of the temple first. The high priestess will have a personal area and that is where you can take her on alone.”

“I should have spent some more time at the wizards’ guild,” Thia said. “If there are any more spells I can learn, I should have done that.”

“The town I’m heading to next has a wizards’ guild.” Smaldo told her. “It’s less than a day away. I’m not prepared to wait around for a week but if you come with me tomorrow, I’ll take you there and then you can prepare yourself for your mission. Don’t forget, this is an easy way or achieving what you said a superhero couldn’t do. If you can learn some new spells the high priestess won’t stand a chance against you.”

Thia travelled with Smaldo to the nearby town. Vall decided to remain and see if she could learn anything more that could help them. She had suggested she could watch the coming and goings at the temples but both Thia and Smaldo told her that the danger of being seen was too great. As Smaldo parted from Thia he gave her some powdered diamond worth two hundred gold pieces saying that he felt he should help pay towards her new spells.

Thia was told that she could learn two new spells and learn how to use the power of casting more advanced spells to boost the effectiveness of some of her existing spells.

Thia thought about her mission when choosing the spells. One she choose was called Glyph of Warding. It allowed her to inscribe a glyph, that would harm other creatures, either on a surface such as a table or floor or within an object that could be closed such as a book, scroll or treasure chest and decide what triggers the glyph. She could either use explosive runes or store a spell in it by casting the spell as part of creating the glyph.

The other spell was one she’d had her eye on right from the first time she been in the School of Evocation. It was called Fireball. The

Firebolt cantrip allowed her to hurl a mote of fire at a creature or object in range. This spell would flash as a bright streak from her finger to a point up to one hundred and fifty feet away and then blossom with a low roar into an explosion of fire. Any target within twenty feet would be affected. The fire would spread around corners and ignite flammable objects in the area that weren't being worn or carried.

Thia had now improved on her plan and knew that she may be able to cast a few more of the scrolls that Vall had stolen. As always after learning new spells she felt powerful and hurried back to Kragspire to explain to Vall the first part of her plan.

In the mean time Vall had been hearing more rumours of 'mysterious' disappearances and although they were described as 'mysterious', the local's knew exactly what was behind them.

One disturbing rumour she heard was a silver dragon was held captive within the Lost Catacombs of Arvagic, charmed there by a seductive devil. It was a good thing that this wasn't the dragon that Thia thought was an illusion.

"What I propose," Thia said, "is we wait to see which temple the high priestess comes out of. I will cast one of those scrolls, which is called Gaseous Form. It will turn me and anything I'm wearing or carrying into a misty cloud for an hour. Being able to pass through small holes, narrow openings and even mere cracks I should be able to find the high priestess's chamber. I can then cancel the spell and lay a trap for her using the Glyph of Warding."

"What will we do then?" asked Vall.

"The next day when I've rested and can use my spells again," Thia said, "I'll go in and find the high priestess's top acolyte and assume her shape using the Alter Self spell. That will be much more effective than a disguise kit. If we use the power in your locket with transmutation spells it should do the same to you."

"Why do I need to assume her shape?" asked Vall.

"They have two temples," Thia said. "If the high priestess gets too damaged I expect she'll have a magic portal and use it to escape to the other temple. I can get close enough to weaken her and if she survives and tries to escape, as she is no fighter, you can finish her off."

"You've really thought this through," said Vall impressed.

“If this dissolves the idea of killing others, it will be the greatest thing we’ll ever do.” Thia said. “We owe it to Nimrellye.”

“Think how Old Uncle would feel when he hears songs sung about us.” said Vall.

“He won’t,” Thia told her firmly. “This is not something I’m proud to do. I hope we can keep a low profile. Only Smaldo and Browe know about this. I trust Serielye but we can’t let her know about our involvement in this if we ever see her again.”

Vall thought about this and decided she agreed with Thia. It did appear to be the only way they could think of, of having any effect but wasn’t something she wanted to be remembered for.

That afternoon they went to the tailors to see if they could find Thia a cloak that matched the cloaks in the temple as best as possible.

That evening they saw the high priestess leave from the temple on the right. Thia made her way towards that temple and finding a concealed alcove cast the Gaseous Form spell.

The spell turned her and everything she was wearing and carrying into a gaseous cloud. Thia felt unsettled having a feeling of no longer having a corporal body and floating but found she could adapt to it quite easily and move as if she’d always moved like this. She found she could get into the temple completely unnoticed and float along the roof without anyone seeing her or knowing she was there. Below her she could see various people wearing cloaks but it was clear that any skin that was showing they had blackened. From their manner it was clear they all believed completely in what they did. The walls were decorated with magenta and purple hangings and the floors and ceilings in the same manner. There were a few acolytes wandering around also but Thia wondered which one was the top one until she noticed one who was wearing armour and realised she had to be the one. She also noticed, looking at her that her skin was naturally black and she was a Drow, just as Browe had said.

Thia decided that if she followed her, it was likely to take her where she needed to head towards. The acolyte seemed to be in a hurry but Thia had no trouble following her. They finally arrived at a large chamber with four passages coming into it. On one wall was a picture of the goddess and Thia could see that her resemblance to the high priestess was uncanny. Thia was about to follow the acolyte when a priestess came out from a door behind the picture and

hurried towards the acolyte. Thia realised that the door behind the picture had to be the way to the high priestess's chamber and guessed that it was locked, however she found it easy if not more unsettling to be able to move her gaseous form through the cracks. She found herself in a wide but short passage with a thick curtain over the opening. Although they had seen the high priestess leave the temple, Thia decided to move in undetected to make sure the room was empty before cancelling the spell.

When Thia was happy there no was no one in the room, she cancelled the spell making sure she was close to the ground when she did so and felt much better in her normal form. All her clothes and equipment reappeared with her and she quickly donned the cloak in case anyone else came in. It was unlikely though since the high priestess had left.

Looking around she saw a desk with several different items on it. All were involved in measuring time. On the shelf next to the desk were various incenses and candles. She thought of where she would want to be next time she was here and selected a section of the floor that was over twenty feet from there. Thia took some of the incense from the shelf and also took the powdered diamond from her component pouch. It was going to take an hour to create the Glyph of Warding. She also had a tiny ball of bat guano and some sulphur which she would need to cast the Fireball spell, which she wanted to be the effect when the glyph was triggered. She set the trigger to be when the high priestess walked over it while she was there. She wasn't sure if the second part of the trigger would work but hoped that the high priestess wouldn't walk over it, until Thia could lure her over. Thia was getting a bit worried about how long she spent there by the time she'd cast the Glyph of Warding spell. She looked in the desk and found a key, which she guessed, would be a spare key for the door and left through the door she come by and locked it behind her. She then pulled the hood of the cloak up and bowed her head the way she'd seen the other's do on her way in and headed towards to entrance to the temple. Although she passed several people no one stopped her of even spared her a second glance and before she pulled her hood down again she startled Vall when she approached her. "Mission accomplished?" asked Vall.

Thia nodded. "It hope it will be a while before I have to use that Gaseous Form spell again. Let's get some rest and meditation. We need to be in top form tomorrow."

On the way back to The Knave's Goblet they paid the blacksmith a visit and asked if he could do a special order for armour and gave him the description of what Thia had seen the acolyte wearing. The blacksmith told them he already 'had it on the shelf' and Vall was surprised when Thia asked for the armour in Vall's size.

"Why did you want my size?" asked Vall. "I thought you were going to assume to identity of the acolyte."

"I am," said Thia. "I will be in trouble if I take her shape and there are two of us wandering around. I'll need to incapacitate her somehow and steel her armour. When you also take her shape you'll need the armour."

"You've got this all worked out," said Vall. "I knew you were special from the moment we first played that sheep game, but I never realised anyone could plan to the letter the way you have."

They found at The Knave's Goblet that Browe was nowhere to been seen. They spent the rest of the evening relaxing and meditating and then headed towards the temple at first light.

Thia and Vall waited near to the temple. They'd been told that the high priestess usually went in at first light and that her acolyte would probably be there before her. Thia took Vall's hand and pictured the acolyte in her head. Vall's locket gave a glow like it last had in the goblin cave.

"Let's hope the next transmutation spell you cast affects both of us," said Vall.

"Right," replied Thia. "Okay, as soon as I cast that spell you'll assume the form of the acolyte. You should be able to conceal your sword under your cloak. Go into the other temple. It should be laid out the same. Can you remember the directions I gave you?"

Vall nodded.

"Go there. I expect the lock is the same," and she gave Vall the key she'd stolen the previous day. "Hide there, if the high priestess arrives she will probably have used all her spells and you should be able to finish her off. Get out as quick as you can then. I'll meet you. We'll have to wait for the effect."

Vall nodded. She was impressed at how confident Thia seemed and ignored any fears she had. This was too important. She thought

about what Thia had said about this being probably the most heroic thing they'd ever do, and they'd be better off keeping their involvement a secret.

Thia put on her cloak and bowed her head and Vall saw her walk unchallenged into the temple. Now she just had to wait.

As Thia went into the temple she noticed how it felt differently from yesterday. Things were just beginning to start up for the day. The previous day as she left, things were shutting down. She headed towards the high priestess's inner chamber but she wasn't in a hurry to get there. After a while she caught sight of the acolyte and followed her. As they went around a corner into a quiet part of the passage, Thia took the rose petals out of her component pouch and cast the Sleep spell. The acolyte immediately fell into a magical slumber and Thia managed to catch her before she hit the ground. It was only going to last for a minute so Thia quickly pulled her into a cupboard and gagged her and tied her up before she woke up. While she was asleep she looked so peaceful and innocent. Thia wondered how many people she had killed to prolong her own life. Nevertheless, she was a fellow Drow and so after Thia had stolen her armour she put her own cloak around her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "But what you're doing is wrong. Your high priestess is just as mortal as either of us. She is not a goddess. I will be back to release you."

Thia thought that if she took the acolyte to see the high priestess when she was dead, the high priestess's top acolyte would be the best one to spread the truth about their 'goddess'.

The acolyte suddenly became very distressed when Thia assumed her shape before putting on the acolyte's armour. Thia peeked through a crack in the door to be sure the passage way was empty before she left and she also made sure the acolyte was comfortable.



Thia hoped that Vall had now assumed the shape of the acolyte too, and was wearing the same armour so she could now get into the other temple and wouldn't be questioned about anywhere she was. Thia knew where to find the high priestess's inner chamber and hoped that her description was enough for Vall since Vall didn't have the advantage of having been here before. When Thia reached the large circular room the priestess she'd seen the day before was waiting for her there, or rather waiting for the acolyte.

"Where have you been?" the priestess asked angrily. "She's waiting for you. She'll be going mad with you keeping her this long."

It seemed clear that the priestess didn't want an answer and just gestured toward the door for Thia. Thia took a breath and opened the door. This was it, there was no going back now.

The high priestess was sitting at her desk. She didn't seem too bothered that her acolyte appeared to be tardy.

She smiled pleasantly when she saw Thia. "Could you please get me some of the large candles?" she asked and gestured to a cabinet on the other side of the room. Thia went over towards the candles and then without warning whipped out her crossbow which she'd kept hanging from her belt under her cloak. She had it ready loaded with a make shift measure to stop it going off which she removed in an instant and fired it at the high priestess.

The high priestess had lightning fast reactions and threw a Scorching Ray back which incinerated the arrow. Thia had been expecting something like that and was ready to dodge out the way with a Misty Step spell but had expected the high priestess to use Thunderwave and so for a brief moment she hesitated and felt the heat of the flames hitting her before she could get out of the way with the Misty Step taking damage from the fire. She managed to teleport herself behind a pillar and it looked like she'd been thrown there by the high priestess.



That was close! Thia thought, her hands still burning. She could see the offensive action had broken the Alter Self spell but it had served its purpose. She was just able to peer over the pillar without being seen and saw the high priestess walking towards her. Thia had another spell ready and watched as the high priestess walked towards the Glyph of Warding.

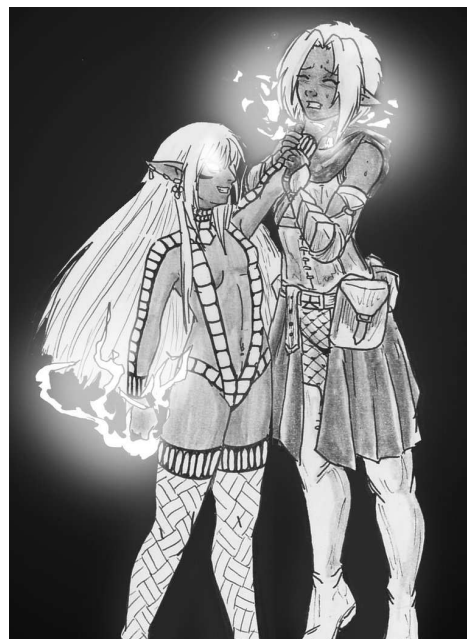
As the high priestess stepped on the Glyph of Warding, a fireball centred on her erupted and she cried out in pain. Her dexterity was fast enough to prevent her from taking the full damage of the Fireball but Thia immediately jumped out from where she'd been hiding and threw a second fireball at the high priestess.

The second fireball dealt the high priestess some serious damage but the attack had left her fuelled to fight for her life and therefore nothing short of incapacitation was going to slow her down. She cast a healing spell on herself as she moved behind a chest for some momentary shelter as she planned her next move.

Thia came out from where she was hiding. She saw where the high priestess was and had a third fireball ready. Usually she could only cast two; the Glyph of Warding had been extremely useful.

Thia threw the Fireball close to the chest. It was out of range to damage her but would go round the corner so it would find the high priestess. The high priestess cried out in pain but managed to get up with thin and wispy flames wreathing her body. The flames were shedding bright light for ten feet.

The high priestess didn't seem bothered by this and brought down the Flame Strike. A vertical column of divine fire roared down around Thia and although her dexterity was good enough to avoid the full damage, she fell to the ground too weak to cast another spell. The high priestess went over casting the Hold Person spell, which paralysed Thia. The high priestess pulled her up and held her under the chin. To Thia it felt like a Vampiric Touch but in reality it wasn't her life that was being sucked away. She just felt so much more aware of her magical aura and felt it fading until she blacked out.



When Thia came round she was sitting on a patch of wet ground up against a rock near a tree that had been damaged by lightning. She immediately recognised it as the tree she had taken a twig from to enable her to cast the Witch Bolt spell the first time they had been attacked after leaving Nablara.

Thia looked up and saw the high priestess looking down at her. “Unless I’m mistaken, you had something against me.” the high priestess said. “If someone tries to kill me, I usually like to know why.”

“What you are doing is wrong,” Thia said. “I needed to prove to your followers that you are not a goddess.”

“You don’t need to do that,” the high priestess said. “They know that and I would correct anyone who thought I was.”

“It’s not pretending to be a goddess that I wanted to stop,” Thia told her. “It’s murdering thousands of people to Laikas just to prolong your own miserable lives.”

“Laikas?” The high priestess said and thought about it. “That’s not our name for time we call her Amser.”

“I was told the temple of Laikas was here,” Thia said.

“You assumed because we both worship time that we were the same,” the high priestess said. “Our temple is to Amser the one opposite us is to Laikas.”

“I don’t care what you call her,” Thia said. “What you’re doing is wrong.”

“We don’t see time as a predator,” the high priestess told her. “We see it as a companion. Without time there isn’t life. What *you* were doing was wrong.”

“The followers of Laikas believe their high priestess is a goddess. If I defeated her the others would see she was just the same as the rest of us.”

“You can defeat someone without killing them,” the high priestess said. “Why would they think I was a goddess?”

“You’re the splitting image of her,” Thia replied. “I saw the picture of her on your door.”

The high priestess thought about the picture. “We don’t have a physical picture of her. That’s a picture of me. When I step down in a few hundred years, the picture will be replaced by a picture of the next high priestess.”

Thia didn't want to mention Browe or Smaldo but realised that what Browe had said was right but half her information was about the wrong high priestess.

"What have you done with my acolyte?" the high priestess asked her. "You came in having assumed her shape. Where is she?"

Thia explained which cupboard she'd shut the acolyte in and how terrible she had felt about having tied her up and gagged her. The high priestess appeared to believe her sincerity. Thia suddenly thought about Vall.

"What about Vall?" she exclaimed. "The Alter Self spell was going to work on both of us. She was going to go into the other temple to find the inner chamber there."

"If she had the form of my top acolyte," the high priestess said. "She will be the important person they want to replace the princess with for their sacrifice at the Barrier Hills today."

"Won't they realise she isn't the acolyte when the spell was broken?" asked Thia.

"They won't care," the high priestess said. "Your friend will be there now, about to be sacrificed."

"I need to stop it." Thia said alarmed.

"The sacrifice is in a couple of hours. There's no way you can get there in time."

Thia realised that if she was this close to Nablara that the high priestess must have teleported her over two thousand miles.

"You teleported me here," Thia said. "Can't you take me there?"

"I don't have a teleport spell," the high priestess said. She tossed Thia's twig down in front of her. "I found this in your component pouch," she went on. "I just knew it came from this tree. I've been here before and know the sigil sequence for this teleportation circle."

Thia looked around. She hadn't noticed that the stones were arranged in a circle. A lot of them seemed to be half buried but however covered and ancient the circle; it was obvious it still worked.

"If we've got a teleport circle here, why can't you take me to the Barrier Hills?" Thia pleaded.

"There's no teleport circle near there," the high priestess said.

"You'll never get there in time. If you'll excuse me, I need to rescue my acolyte. Besides it's not my place to interfere with the beliefs of other religions, regardless of my personal feelings about them. I'm sorry about your friend. Just be thankful that I defeated you and not

the high priestess of Laikas. If it had been her she wouldn't have spared your life like I have. Go home."

"Home?" asked Thia.

"You're not far from your home." the high priestess said. "Find a different line of work. I have bound your powers. If you still want to be a wizard, go home and start again. There is a wizard's guild in one of the towns below the mountains that can get you started. I'll keep this." The high priestess held up Thia's spell book.

Thia tried to protest but the high priestess wasn't listening. She recited the sigil sequence for the teleportation circle back in her temple. Disappearing she left Thia alone. She looked down at herself and realised she was still wearing the acolyte's clothes. She felt wretched being alone and powerless not even wearing her own clothes and having let Vall down in a way that would cost Vall her life. Thia felt as guilty as if she'd performed the sacrifice herself.

The following days as Thia retraced the steps she and Vall had followed just months ago and the weather seemed to reflect her feeling with unrelenting rain. Eventually though, she saw the mountain with Nablara at the top and headed up there. Just before she reached Nablara she suddenly wondered, how was she to explain Vall's absence to her family. She decided to see her own family first.

She would hopefully get an answer from the wise council of Old Uncle. She confidently made her way towards her home. She looked up at the sky to use the rain to wash away any signs of tears from her eyes and tried to walk confidently so it wasn't as if she was returning home 'with her tail between her legs'.

As she came in, Mialee heard the door and turned round. When she saw Thia she was so surprised she was speechless and dropped the cup she been holding, that shattered on the ground.

"Thia!" she cried, and rushed across to hug her.

"Thia?" called Varis from the other room and came in to see. When he saw her, he wasted no time in coming to hug her. "You're back safely," he said.

When Mialee had made her a hot drink she said, "Old Uncle will be so pleased to see you."

"Where is he?" asked Thia.

"He's in your old room," Varis said. "He's dying. We put him in your room since it has the sun for longer."

“What’s he dying of?” asked Thia.

“Old age,” said Mialee. “He’s nearly a thousand years old. It was thirteen generations ago that anyone actually reached a thousand. He will be pleased that he got to see you again.”

Mialee opened the door for Thia. “I’ll give you some time alone with him,” she said.

Thia went and sat by his bed. Old Uncle looked at her and he smiled the best he could and Thia returned it.

Old Uncle remembered how Thia used to ask him to tell her stories and said, “Tell me other story, young niece.”



Thia told him everything. Old Uncle listened until she had finished.

“What can I tell Vall’s family?” she asked.

“I heard once about sacrifices one time,” Old Uncle said. “From what I heard at the time and what you have told me, these are for the same group, although they have become a lot more widespread. They do their sacrifice by forcing their victims to jump off a low cliff into a fire. They assure them the fire is hot and it won’t take long for them to die. I heard of someone who tried to jump through the flames to the other side but she was recaptured and forced to jump again. By that time the fire had burnt down and it took her a long time to die.”

Thia shuddered. She couldn’t tell Vall’s family that.

“The high priestess told me to find a new line of work,” Thia said. “I still want to be an adventurer but being a wizard is what I am. I

couldn't be a fighter or a thief and I can't bring myself to be a cleric after what I've just been through."

"Move that cupboard away from the wall," Old Uncle said.

Thia did as she was told and found a recess behind the wall inside of which was a spell book. She gazed at it but didn't dare open it. She handed it to Old Uncle. "This was my spell book," he said. "You can still be a wizard. There are eight schools of magic. Instead of choosing the School of Evocation, choose another. I choose the School of Abjuration. That seems to be more suitable to you. If you can't choose one, I can recommend it."

Old Uncle started to gasp and cough. "Shall I get someone in?" asked Thia.

Old Uncle managed to shake his head. "Seeing you has given me some more time," he said. "I'm not going to die today. I can sit out in the sun for a lot longer now." He opened his spell book at the centre page. A light seemed to emanate from it and illuminate his face. "It was raining in the Barrier Hills the day you told me the sacrifice was on," he said in a voice unlike his own. He looked back at Thia and said in his normal voice, "the fire would have been put out by the rain. It would have looked as if Laikas had rejected her."

"Would they kill her for their usual reasons?" asked Thia. As she said this, Old Uncle gave her his spell book. All the pages went blank as she touched it but Thia felt her magical aura return, and just to be sure, she found she could cast the Dancing Lights cantrip. She just needed to relearn the others and learn some spells.

"They wouldn't get any benefits killing her and might think that if Laikas rejected her that she might be insulted if they killed Vall for them."

Old Uncle replied. "It may also send them into disarray that the high priestess sent Vall to them but Vall was rejected.

This could have the same affect you tried to do if you'd got the right temple."

"You mean Vall's still out there?" asked Thia excited.

"Tell her parents you're temporarily separated but you're going to join her."

Old Uncle said. "Go and find her, bring her home. Make me proud. Wizards together."

