Storm Warning

by Blueinkedfrost

Summary

Skie Silvershield leaves her privileged existence for the adventure of a lifetime. AU to BG1. Complete.

Notes

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Chapter 1

1. Dear Diary: 19 Nightal 1365 DR


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19 Nightal, 1365 DR

My dear Skie--

For this solstice I send you neither jewels nor frippery, but a gift similar to one my own great-aunt once bestowed upon me. Vain, frivolous and empty-headed you may be, but you do know how to amuse an old woman. The act of keeping a diary over the years has given me great personal satisfaction, and it is my hope you will be inspired to do the same.

With my affection,

Your Aunt Cincilla.

2. Dear Diary: 21 Nightal 1365

21 Nightal, 1365 DR

Dear Diary,

Aunt Cincilla gave me this. Solstice party was tedious. I wanted to leap out the window when I had to dance with Bran Gangric. I think he has three left feet. Father gave me a blue garnet ring.

~Skie.

3. Dear Diary: 20 Hammer 1368

20 Hammer, 1368 DR

Dear Diary,

I can't believe it's been just over two years since I wrote in this. Poor Aunt Cincilla died not long afterwards. It was so soon after I stayed with her on that long visit; I was so shocked. She left me a pair of embroidered dancing slippers and some jewels. Mummy says they're too old fashioned to wear, so I haven't...where she can see me, anyway.

What I really wanted to write about is how horrible Madam Irene is! I hate her dancing classes. I do the same old exercises over and over again while she hits me with her stick and lectures me about balance. I balance perfectly well when I'm running along the roofpoles to sneak out even when the estate's iced over.
There is an incredibly gorgeous bard who plays in a place called the Three Old Kegs. I think his name is Elrond or something like that. More importantly, I think he winked at me standing there in the audience. I must sneak out again to see him!!

~Skie.

4. Dear Diary: 22 Hammer

22 Hammer

Dear Diary,

His name is Eldoth! Eldoth Kron to be exact. He's from the island kingdom of Ruathym originally, although he also grew up in Waterdeep. I love the Ruathym accent. I love the way he says my name. We talked after he finished singing and I bought us some wine. He even reached across the table to clasp my hand but I had to run to get back for an early dress fitting. I hope he doesn't think I was too forward. He's so sophisticated and he must have met a lot of women in his travels.

~Skie.

5. Dear Diary: 15 Alturiak

15 Alturiak

Dear Diary,

Today I am finally independent! I told Madam Irene exactly what I thought of her and said that I wasn't going to put up with any more of her dancing lessons. She left! I hope Daddy isn't going to be upset. I can pretend to be his proper young daughter, but having to do it in my own time is just so boring. I need to stand on my own! That's what Eldoth says. He thinks I should become my own woman. Tonight he's taking me to an inn called the Helm and Cloak. It is shady, and I think some of his friends are even rogues! It's so exciting.

I've even confessed to him who I really am, and he still likes me even though he doesn't think much of the Grand Dukes. I have to agree that some of Daddy's rules are terrible.

Anyway, I must fly to Eldoth! I have to check my hair and buff my nails one last time.

~Skie.

6. Dear Diary: 7 Ches

7 Ches

Dear Diary,

I can deny it no more. Eldoth Kron has won my heart! I wasn't home until nine this morning and I think Irissa might have realized when she saw ivy leaves in my room as she came to clean it. But I don't care! I want to elope with Eldoth and have great adventures. That's what he said to me last
night, while we were kissing (and more!)...I must sneak to a herbalist's so we can have more trysts. I want him to be my first and my last, Eldoth forever.

Irissa's come back. Daddy is calling for me. Must hide this. Tymora help me, what if he knows all? I'm so worried.

~Skie.

7. Zephyr: 8 Ches

8 Ches

Dear Diary,

It has been an even worse tragedy than I thought. Daddy wasn't alone when I went to see him. It wasn't Eldoth with him, or anything romantic like that--wouldn't it be beautiful if Eldoth rode in and rescued me like an adventure story? But Eldoth said he had more practical plans than that for running away together, so I should listen to him. Daddy was just talking to some boring old mage he met back when he was an adventurer!

But then comes the tragic bit. The old mage wanted me to go back to Candlekeep with him, and Daddy (who must have taken a Potion of Insanity or three) actually let him! I begged him and begged him and even cried, but he packed me off anyway. So here I am with this diary and the few clothes I was able to tell Irissa to grab in the hour I had to pack, on a caravan to a walled fortress in the middle of nowhere.

However will I be able to get in touch with Eldoth again? I used to ask Daddy to have me travel on one of the caravans like my big brother but he never let me, and now he has it's separating me from Eldoth. I think I'm crying for real. Please let Eldoth find out where I am and come to rescue me!

Maybe I'll just sneak out and walk back home. Just watch me!

~Skie.

8. Zephyr: 9 Ches Hour 12

9 Ches, Hour 12

So the old mage has all sorts of anti-sneaking spells. I hate this caravan and I wish he'd stop treating me like a child already.

9. Zephyr: 9 Ches Hour 13

9 Ches, Hour 13

All sorts of anti-bandit spells also. I think it best to stay with the caravan.
Dear Diary,

Welcome to Candlekeep. Our staff consists solely of ancient, wittering monks and blockheaded gatewardens who don't want to let you go anywhere. Your room is a cell seven by seven, and for entertainment, you can hear the cows mooing. Old mage is boring. (Did I say that already?) I want to go home!

There is one other in Candlekeep below the age of eighty. Her name's Imoen and she lives with this old innkeeper man. I thought that he was as boring as everyone else at Candlekeep, but she said that he's a retired thief. I asked him nicely about it and he told me to...well, it involved elven rear ends so I won't repeat it. Imoen is quite nice though and I offered to teach her some dance steps. She also showed me an old secret passage into the library (not really a secret one, but one not every visitor knows about anyway). When Winthrop started yelling at her to do chores I got a book on the history of Shadowdale, and then I went looking for more passages. There's one on the east wall. Daddy's habit of putting magical traps around my room has really given me a good eye!

I think Gorion (that's the old mage's name) noticed though. When I was walking to my room he said something like, 'So you've found it's not so miserable a fate after all'. I ignored him with dignity and went to read my book. It had a lot of detail on Lord Jyordhan and the Black Network that my tutors wouldn't have wanted me to read about. Very interesting.

~Skie.

Today I spoke to Imoen about the passage I'd found, and she told me she spotted it the first day she came here. Then she showed me the quick way out of Winthrop's inn, and when I asked about the roofs we climbed up there and raced along the thatching. She won, but she's been here most of her life. Winthrop and Gorion brought her and the innkeeper's practically her foster father. Her favourite rooftop is to the west and it's a good place to view the ocean. You get up there by jumping from the windowsill and climbing up the oakbranch. In Baldur's Gate we have the port, but Daddy never took me there much, so I find it quite a nice view. We raced each other back as well and I nearly won that time...and then I helped her hide from Winthrop to avoid chores. She's better at finding passages, but I'm slightly better at being sneaky. She also takes things from the monks for fun, putting them back afterwards... Tomorrow I'm going to try for Phylida's inkwell. Five copper pieces ride on it.
I'm still bored here, though I don't want to hurt Imoen's feelings. Reading is fine but I'd rather have interesting places or dances to go to as well. And shopping. If I don't get any more new gowns I might have to wear the same clothing even two days running!

Goodnight, Eldoth. I hope that you feel this same starry night wherever you are.

~Skie.

13. Heya, It's Imoen!: 19 Ches

19 Ches

Dear Diary,

Gorion is making me do my own laundry. I cannot believe the tyranny of this place. I'd sneak off except he would make me do it later.

Will return once this period of penal servitude is over.

~Skie.

PS. Five copper pieces mine, all mine!

14. Heya, It's Imoen!: 30 Tarsakh

30 Tarsakh

Dear Diary,

Maybe I should've written more; it's been a while now, and all I've bothered to write have been some book notes. Sylvan is such a beautiful language. There's still hardly anything to do here, and it's so quiet! I don't know why Daddy sent me here, and why in such a hurry either. I got a letter from him (with my allowance--Imoen and I may attempt a shopping spree in the near future) and he says nothing about Eldoth or my nightly adventures, just a polite your-stepmother's-doing-well-and-your-brother's-still-off-with-the-caravans-how-are-you.

Anyway, my lockpicking skills are improving. Imoen and I got into the cellar and abstracted a bottle of Arabellan Dry for a small party on the roof. When I got back half drunk Gorion started interrogating me on my reading.

I think he has some interesting things to say about Khelben Blackstaff. I must ask him again while sober. I thought he looked a little worried as he was talking to me...maybe it was just the wine. His study door's locked now.

The monks here don't celebrate Greengrass properly, so Imoen and I are going to have our own little festival tonight. I nicked some roses off Ulraunt's garden.

~Skie.
15. Change in the Air: 1 Mirtul Hour 7

This is an A/N to clear up where this story goes AU:

_The sage Gorion, a Harper, spent the greater portion of his life upon good deeds of adventure. The prophecies of Alaundo were one of those matters in which he acted, particularly those telling of the Bhaalspawn. Indeed on one occasion he led a raid against an outpost of Bhaal-worshippers seeking to sacrifice the innocent children for the sake of the dead god; but arrived mere instants too late. Years later, on an adventure with his old, rougieish friend Winthrop, Gorion happened across a young girl called Imoen, who found a fate her guardians considered safe as the innkeeper's foster daughter. Gorion, meanwhile, continued to correspond on the subject of Bhaal's prophecy, seeking tales of women harmed by gods. In this alternate universe, he found a prospect..._

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1 Mirtul, Hour 7

Dear Diary,

Some gentleman introducing himself as Shank pestered me when I stepped into the priests' hut to see if Parda left his books there. He (Shank, not Parda) tripped over the table and fell into his own knife. That's one of Daddy's sayings, never run around with an open blade. I called for the nearest monk so I wouldn't have to deal with the blood. Must change clothes.

What a boring place.

~Skie.

16. Change in the Air: 1 Mirtul Hour 8

1 Mirtul, Hour 8

Dear Diary,

Why did it have to be exterminating rats?

I blame G. for it all.

~Skie.

17. Change in the Air: 1 Mirtul Hour 9

1 Mirtul, Hour 9

Dear Diary,

I have to _leave_?! Not that I don't want to get away, but I want to go back home to Eldoth, not somewhere else altogether! But Gorion said that wasn't where we were going, he said he'd tell me on the way. Am I being kidnapped? Imoen wasn't even allowed to come along (but I'm not so sure that's going to stop her). She said there was a letter from Daddy signed E, but it didn't say exactly _why_...what is going on?
I have to pack and buy journey stuff this time. Not even one gown...as soon as we get into a city, I'm going on a shopping spree. And then I'm pickpocketing a Bag of Holding so I never have to go without a decent wardrobe.

I'll pack my bow, of course, and a shortsword. If it's just me and Gorion on the road there might be danger!

~Skie.

18. Change in the Air: 2 Mirtul Hour 1

2 Mirtul, Hour 1

He's dead. I can't believe it. I saw him die...that huge armoured figure with the glowing yellow eyes. Eyes aren't supposed to glow like that. It was horrible. I ran like he told me, and hid, and he died. Gorion...he told me things about the histories I was reading, and he was nice once I got to know him, and Daddy seemed to like him. He was Imoen's foster uncle, and we had a cry on each other's shoulders before we had to leave.

We couldn't even bury him. (At least, I was trying to convince Imoen to bury him. If I knew how to deal with dead people I'd have become a cleric.) There were wolves chasing us and we had to run. Imoen said that the guards from Candlekeep would come for him.

I read the letter on his body. It wasn't my father's handwriting at all. Someone else with the initial E, who knew about me at Candlekeep? Duke Eltan's one of Daddy's friends, but I've only chatted to him a few times. Unfortunately E couldn't possibly be Eldoth.

We can't go back to Candlekeep even with Imoen's life there and the Silvershield name--I checked. And we can't walk all the way to Baldur's Gate, because of all the bandits in the woods they say are only getting worse. Imoen and I may have wanted to leave, but it's not funny any more.

Maybe this diary will be found on my corpse. Please resurrect Imoen and myself if possible.

~Skie Silvershield, daughter of Grand Duke Entar Silvershield of Baldur's Gate

19. Adventures in Necromancer Sitting

2 Mirtul, Hour 6

Dearest Diary,

Saved! Imoen and I have met some nice adventurers along the road who gave us some healing potions and offered to accompany us as long as we go where they're going, Nashkel. Imoen and I thought of going to the Friendly Arm inn for Gorion's friends E mentioned, but we decided it would be better to make our own paths--as adventurers. Imoen hasn't warmed up to the new adventurers yet, but we still plan to travel with them for a while.

Onward!

~Skie.
20. AiNS: 2 Mirtul Hour 15

2 Mirtul, Hour 15

Dear Diary,

I'm so glad our new companions joined us! Shall I write about them a little bit? Montaron is a cute (but he snarls if you say he is) little halfling who picked Imoen's pocket. (I saw him and asked for tips, and returned Imoen's bag to her.) Xzar is a skinny human wizard who acts like a wizard from a story, mystical and interesting. Although I think I'll ask him politely to stand downwind, as some of his spell components don't smell so good. I haven't told them about Daddy. It's nice to be taken for just a normal adventurer.

Nashkel awaits!

~Skie.

21. AiNS: 3 Mirtul

3 Mirtul

Dear Diary,

Killed five gibberlings, three wolves, and an ogre with a belt fetish! Not that it was really me who killed all of them, as Imoen helped me shoot at them while Montaron and Xzar used their weapons and spells, but I think that this was my first full day of being a true adventurer. My hair is mussed and I want a hot bath. Why didn't we just go to the Friendly Arm inn and pick up Gorion's probably-ancient friends? Maybe they'd run me a bath.

Have to go. One of the belts we picked up is having a weird side effect on Xzar and he is yelling about it in a very high voice.

~Skie.

22. AiNS: 4 Mirtul

4 Mirtul

Dear Diary,

Xzar still a woman. Instead of fussing about it any more, he keeps draping himself (herself) over Montaron. I don't think Montaron likes this very much. Are humans and halflings even compatible? We hope to find a cleric who can remove the curse, but we probably couldn't afford it at the moment anyway. I don't know why his wizarding robes turned skimpier as well.

We stopped in Beregost to pick up supplies, and took a short break to listen to a performance at the Red Sheaf Inn. Silke, thespian extraordinaire, was playing; I remember seeing her when I was younger, with Daddy and Mummy and Eddard. She was truly spectacular. There was also a blond bard who wasn't quite as talented as Eldoth (of course I just said his music was very nice when he
asked, and it is). In fact, he wants to hire us as mercenaries for three hundred gold pieces; our job starts tomorrow. I could use some good studded leather armour, Xzar wants spell components, and Imoen needs a new sword. This iron crisis thing is really causing problems.

~Skie.

23. AiNS: 5 Mirtul

5 Mirtul

Dear Diary,

I can't believe Silke turned out to be an evil witch! We beat her, but Montaron was badly injured and we had to buy him some healing potions. She had a good quarterstaff that Xzar has appropriated. Garrick, who originally hired us, wants to join our group. I recommended that we let him because we could use someone else to help out. Montaron was against it, but I got my way when Imoen agreed with me. Xzar couldn't help us decide as he was telling a long story about dragons with feet like rabbits to someone or something we couldn't see. I think that he must really be a mad wizard.

Tonight I got a bath in Feldepost's inn, so I don't feel adventuring is always so bad. Xzar called me a slanderous harlot when I recommended he do the same.

~Skie.

24. AiNS: 6 Mirtul

6 Mirtul

Dear Diary,

I have a quest! When I left Feldepost's and started looking for shops, I found a mercenary business run by this dwarf. He asked us if we were looking for work, and I said yes. Then he told us that the job was to look for my brother's caravan! If only Gorion had kept me in Candlekeep just a little longer, I might have received a letter about it myself, and known sooner. Eddard, where are you? Once we find him I'm sure he can escort me and Imoen to Baldur's Gate, and we'll all be safely home.

Montaron and Xzar (still a woman!) have decided to go into the Nashkel mines by themselves because Kagain's quest might take too long. I hate the feeling that they were thinking about my brother as an inconvenience, but I guess I'd rather not go into some scary mines either. Imoen suggested that we meet up later, since she thinks the mines are worth wasting time on, but they refused us. Garrick chose to stay with Imoen and me. Maybe he has a crush on her.

So I'm an adventurer looking for her brother. I think there's a song about that...I must ask Garrick if he knows it. Won't Eddard be surprised when he sees me on an adventure?

~Skie.

25. Reach of Death: 7 Mirtul
7 Mirtul

Eddard is dead.

My big brother is dead.

It feels so strange to write that. Eddard was six years old when I was born. He used to swing me in the garden after our mother died and helped me learn to shoot a bow. Once he beat up Chal Verras for being rude to me. He was always being trained to be Duke Silvershield, and he would have been good at it too. I wish I had spent more time with him. He was always away at school or learning about Daddy's business, and it seemed as if we had nothing in common...but we did. He was my brother, and he didn't deserve to die.

One thing makes it even worse. He and his caravan were near the Coast Way--not far from where we passed as we headed for Beregost. If we had been more watchful, if we had taken a little longer on the journey, if... we might have saved him from those bandits. He nearly made it into Beregost. That seems more dreadful than falling in the deep wilderness.

Eddard is dead. We can't get him back. It's now vitally important that I get a message to my father.

I don't want to be an adventurer. I can't write any more.

26. Reach of Death: 9 Mirtul

9 Mirtul

Spent most of our gold on a good messenger to Baldur's Gate. Kagain grumbled like a vulture but I told him I had given my father his name and house to send a reward to. That shut him up. I think I hate him.

Garrick is playing at the Jovial Juggler and Imoen and I are staying there for free (he's kind). I would like to wait until the messenger comes back, but Garrick's contract only lasts another week. Imoen says she's heard news about a bounty for five thousand gold pieces in the Red Canyons. I've worn dresses that cost nearly that much, but I have to admit that right now we are in somewhat exigent circumstances. When I think about Eddard I tear up. My eyes hurt almost too much to cry. Eldoth, can you come and help me?

27. Reach of Death: 16 Mirtul Hour 6

16 Mirtul, Hour 6

Imoen, Garrick, and I are travelling southwest to find this Bassilus since we were thrown out of the Juggler and nobody else wants to give free lodgings to a bard. I went on a pickpocketing expedition through Beregost and got some gold (thanks, Eldoth and Montaron), but Imoen is dragging us on this adventure in spite of that. She has some vague concept that it's a good idea to hunt down dangerous clerics for public safety. Public safety, when Eddard's already dead?

Just as we left the city, Kagain joined us again because of the bounty. I can't forgive him for what he said about Eddard, but we probably do need someone as tough as him. Garrick, Imoen and I are all much better at bows and crossbows than going one-on-one with an enemy.
28. Reach of Death: 16 Mirtul Hour 9

16 Mirtul, Hour 9

Someone called Roe wants to let his Mirianne know he's doing well. Kagain says he knows Mirianne and wants to give it to her for the reward. I hope what happened to Eddard and Gorion won't happen to them.

29. Reach of Death: 16 Mirtul Hour 18

16 Mirtul, Hour 18

As we entered the Red Canyons, we met a talking chicken. Kagain wouldn't stop teasing it and Garrick was egging him on. (Oh no, now I'm doing it too!) I eventually calmed it down and put him in my pack. Once we've found Bassilus and collected the bounty, we'll take the chicken to his master, some powerful wizard just outside Beregost who sells magic items. Kagain hopes Thalantyr is going to be grateful.

We should rest now. Unfortunately I have the dawn watch.

30. Reach of Death: 17 Mirtul

17 Mirtul

Found Bassilus. He thought I was his mother, which was very embarrassing (travel-stained as I might be, I certainly do not look, what, sixty?), and I got zombie gunk all over my hands. I spun him the story that I was his mother for a little while, and then he remembered that his mother was dead in Zhentil Keep. I tried to distract him for longer by telling him details I've read about the Keep, but he was angry--so I ran and hid until I could get a clear shot. Luckily most of his undead minions were destroyed in the temper tantrum, although when Kagain was done it was just as well we had those healing potions from the cave to the east. Imoen, Garrick and I were all snipers at the skeletons and zombies, and Garrick cast a Magic Missile spell. Eldoth once told me that Larloch's Minor Drain is a better weapon. Not that I know much about magic. I like history and languages but I could never make a spell stick in my mind.

I hate zombie gunk. Five thousand gold isn't that much. I can get by without weapons and armour, really.

31. Reach of Death: 18 Mirtul Hour 7

18 Mirtul, Hour 7

I hate skeletons!
32. Reach of Death: 18 Mirtul Hour 8

18 Mirtul, Hour 8

Did I mention that I hate skeletons?

33. Reach of Death: 18 Mirtul Hour 9

18 Mirtul, Hour 9

What I hate is that there are so many of them, and they all have darts and good bows and things! It's too much for the four of us. Thank Lathander we have Kagain wading in at them. I'd be dead by now.

34. Reach of Death: 18 Mirtul Hour 10

18 Mirtul, Hour 10

What, the spell component is a human skull? Melicamp, you're going to pay! I don't wanna fight more skeletons!

35. Reach of Death: 18 Mirtul Hour 12

18 Mirtul, Hour 12

So that's what an Anti-Chickenator spell looks like. Imoen bought a Magic Missile scroll to see if she can study it; Gorion used to teach her cantrips. I thought about pickpocketing the mage but decided against it. Melicamp is still clucking.

Flesh Golems make me shudder.

36. Reach of Death: 19 Mirtul

19 Mirtul

Met an elven ranger called Kivan who escorted us out of High Hedge when I asked nicely. I wish I could shoot a bow like him. He told us that he wants to hunt bandits and is looking for adventurers to accompany him, but right now we just want the bounty on Bassilus and to finally hear from my father. I don't know why he wants to hunt bandits specifically. They killed my brother but it would be hard to work out which ones did it... I hope he finds better adventurers than us and achieves his goals. He seems quite an imposing gentleman.

37. Reach of Death: 20 Mirtul
Back to Beregost and 5000 gold richer! Kagain immediately made off with two thousand of it. Higher than his fair share, but I guess he was the one who actually killed Bassilus.

Father hasn't gotten a message back to us yet. We could easily live on the money we have until then with these cheap inns, but Imoen wants to look at the mines. Xzar and Montaron didn't come back. It's sad if anything happens to them, but I'm not going there without a cleric. We get hurt too many times.

38. Descent: 25 Mirtul

After days of nagging me about Nashkel, we hear there's a carnival there and Imoen suggests we go. I concur. Perhaps they're selling some nice things. Kagain is coming in case we run across anything else worth a bounty.

Garrick asked me about Eldoth today, so I told him all about our true love forbade by my cruel father. My telling of it mustn't have been very well-done, because Garrick excused himself from the conversation after ten minutes, but of course I don't have the same way with words as either Eldoth or him, being bards. I suppose Imoen must have mentioned Eldoth to him in the first place.

39. Descent: 26 Mirtul Hour 8

A Black Lotus tent! How beyond decadent! I pass over sundry tribulations with kobolds to get here. I feel strangely sleepy...

40. Descent: 26 Mirtul Hour 10

Kagain threw me in a pool to sober up. I am wet and miserable. Purchased weird potions from a very pressing merchant. Garrick says that they do what is advertised, but have such terrible side effects nobody would voluntarily take them. Also bought a pretty (and expensive!) golden necklace with a few magical properties to it.

41. Descent: 26 Mirtul Hour 11

Scary exploding ogre. Scary exploding ogre. Aargh! I have a cold from being so wet. I wanna go home.
42. Descent: 26 Mirtul Hour 14

26 Mirtul, Hour 14

Rescued stone maiden. Garrick wanted to pay the weird halfling five hundred gold pieces to save the fair damsel, but I told him and Imoen off in my most authoritative voice. It wasn't my fault the pretty necklace cost so much. Then I managed to 'trip' over him and steal the scroll. It wasn't fair for him to profit over her anyway.

Branwen's older than she looked while she was turned to stone. She's all the way from Norheim, petrified by a horrible bandit called Tranzig. I like her, but because she's a cleric Imoen now wants to drag us into the Nashkel Mines. Kagain has also perked up at thoughts of reward.

Rescued a diviner too. At least, Imoen, Kagain, Branwen, and Garrick did. I'd found a booth selling hairbrushes at last and was completing the important task of choosing the best one.

43. Descent: 27 Mirtul Hour 20

27 Mirtul, Hour 20

Nashkel mayor collared us as we entered the town to beg for help. Three adventurers--Xzar, Montaron, and some other wizard--have already tried and failed, and so the iron crisis is worsening. I suppose I should continue to travel with the others. It's not like I have anything else to do for now and they are my friends (Imoen is; Kagain isn't really, and we haven't known the other two for very long).

Ran into bountygiver who mistook Kagain for someone called Greywolf and wanted to give him gold. I corrected him, which annoyed Kagain, but I pointed out that now he can earn more from collecting real bounties. I hope we don't run into the real Greywolf. Weird guy with allegedly talking hamster also wanted to recruit us for something. Maybe he wanted to sell the hamster.

Am writing this while camping not far from the mines--I wanted to stay in Nashkel Inn, but Imoen thought we should move on. I hate camping but the Nashkel Inn is probably close to it anyway, being such a poor town in the middle of nowhere.

Our sleep has already been interrupted by a scary ghoul. Branwen went after it with her magic hammer. She's almost as good as Kagain.

44. Descent: 27 Mirtul Hour 21

27 Mirtul, Hour 21

Such strange dreams.

45. The Depths: 28 Mirtul Hour 8

28 Mirtul, Hour 8
Emerson gave us a day but I want out now! There are kobolds everywhere and they keep firing at us. Branwen and Kagain rushing at them help, but sometimes they can't get to the ones at the back in time. Branwen has been healing us but it still hurts when arrows hit you. I got one in my stomach and I thought I was dying. I wished I was because it was so painful.

I hate this place. We're scrambling to rest so Branwen can petition her god to allow her to hold least some healing spells.

46. The Depths: 28 Mirtul Hour 20

28 Mirtul, Hour 20

They have flaming arrows help me

47. The Depths: 28 Mirtul Hour 21

28 Mirtul, Hour 21

It's so dark in here. My cold isn't getting any better.

48. The Depths: 28 Mirtul Hour 22

28 Mirtul, Hour 22

Imoen's magical studies (she's a transmuter now!) seem to have really hurt her trap-detecting skills. I helped her find and disarm four traps, but on the last we had to dodge around it instead. Kagain offered to set it off for us because of his healing abilities. He regenerates. It's not fair.

Fought horrible giant spiders and ghouls and the kobolds with the flaming arrows. I hate them! I hate this place! I'm running out of perfume.

49. The Depths: 29 Mirtul Hour 8

29 Mirtul, Hour 8

Found Montaron's body. The ghouls had been chewing on it. I don't think there was enough to raise and I wasn't going to carry that thing out of here. He and Xzar came close to the centre of the mines.

We found Xzar chained up with another wizard in Mulahey's chambers. He was still a woman and his robe was much more tattered than before. The half-orc was making her serve him drinks.

The big fight was scary. Kagain went after Mulahey himself, while Branwen kept back his creatures and the rest of us shot. The most awful thing happened when Imoen got hit by a kobold arrow. She was screaming, and I think she was dying. I tried to stop the bleeding with my tunic, and something happened--it did suddenly stop and I swear the wound closed over. It felt like a current of energy running from me to her. Maybe I'm just hallucinating. I'm glad she and Garrick are still alive. He ran away halfway through the battle and didn't come back until it was over.
Xan, the elven wizard Mulahey called his other pet, told us about the secret exit. It's so good to see the sun again. Xzar insisted on seeing Montaron's body. I think he cut off a souvenir from it. Ew.

The letters from Mulahey's chest showed he was being given orders by Tranzig. Branwen's eyes lit up like a wild tigress when she read them. We're travelling to Beregost as quickly as possible to kill him. Since he petrified her and is involved with the bandit raids, I think it's a good idea.

I hear someone screaming. It's not me this time.

~Skie.

50. The Depths: 29 Mirtul Hour 10

29 Mirtul, Hour 10

Kagain is dead. The revenant killed him because he wouldn't give the dagger back the first time the revenant asked. He fought hard, but the revenant had a powerful strike against him. Maybe if the rest of us had done something different. I think his last word was some swearword. Then the revenant took the dagger and disappeared. We found a few potions. It's not exactly a replacement for him.

51. The Depths: 29 Mirtul Hour 11

29 Mirtul, Hour 11

...

52. The Depths: 29 Mirtul Hour 12

29 Mirtul, Hour 12

Death and murder make me want a manicure.

53. Splitting Plans: 29 Mirtul Hour 13

29 Mirtul, Hour 13

The big weird man with the allegedly talking hamster turned up again and saved us from an evil slime-controlling wizard. He's Minsc. He was hit on the head and has no sense of direction. Garrick says that he has heard tales of a gnoll fortress to the west of here--Minsc was going completely the wrong way to find the person he's looking for. I thought he just wanted to sell his magic giant space hamster. When I remarked on that he and the hamster growled at me.

His wychlaran was captured by gnolls who want to eat her. But we have to find Tranzig and defeat the bandits if I ever want to go home (though Daddy's escort is sure to help, Branwen still wants very badly to have her revenge). And do I ever want to go home and have a nice hot meal! I didn't want someone else to die... I'm not very strong, and I'm not smart enough to memorize spells, and I'm only a little better at sneaking around than Imoen... but I can keep going for a long time (Madam Irene was
sarcastic at me if I couldn't last four hours on pointe), the boots this hobgoblin was carrying seem to help sneaking, and there's a potion of invisibility in my pack I pickpocketed in Beregost.

Branwen, Garrick, and the two mages if they can do anything after their traumatic experience (Branwen grudgingly promised to turn Xzar back into a man once her god grants her those spells) are going to kill Tranzig before he leaves the inn. Minsc and I are going west. Garrick wanted to join us, but I told him that since the mages are so traumatized Branwen might need him to fight Tranzig. Imoen has all our speed potions and the gold in Mulahey's chest, and she'll buy all the invisibility, speed and healing potions she can afford, and run back to Minsc and me. We can sneak in, turn the witch invisible, sneak out again with her, and meet again in Nashkel...it's probably a terrible plan but it's all we have. Daddy used to tell a story about his old adventuring buddies using invisibility spells and potions to sneak all the way into Menzoberranzan and steal a spellbook belonging to Gromph Baenre.

I am so sick of dirt and dust in my hair!

54. Doggie: 1 Kythorn Hour 5

1 Kythorn, Hour 5

Covered a lot of ground. Brief stop when a boy begged us to find his pet; couldn't bear to disappoint him when he looked at us like that. So we went back to find the dog and quickly noticed him when a bundle of red fur leaped to Minsc. Minsc tripped over what must've been a stray root and fell down. The cute doggie licked him, sniffing at the pouch with the chew toy.

"Rufie!" The dog recognized his name from me. "Aww, who's a nice doggie?" I do like dogs. It would never have been proper for me to have more than an annoying little lapdog like Mummy's; little Albert is a lucky boy to have such a companion. "Who's a fuzzy wuzzy Rufie!" He got off Minsc and came to me, wagging his cute tail. I petted the thick fur of his head. "C'mon, let's get you back to Albert."

"'Tis a big dog. Boo does not like big dogs," Minsc commented, brushing himself and his hamster off.

"He's just a lovely furry baby, aren't you darling?" We had to get him back to the child quickly; he licked my hand with his very warm tongue as we led him through the woods.

A hunting party was walking about; they hailed us, and I thought one of them looked a little familiar. Luckily what she said meant I didn't have to try too hard to remember her face.

"I am Sendai, of the noble merchant house of Argrims, foremost family in Amn. Delgod, Alexander, and I have come out here to hunt game. Though perhaps you would make for better sport. I assume you would have no problem with this?"

"Sendai! How lovely to meet you again," I said. When we met at those boring parties she was one of those tedious girls who can't talk about anything other than horses and hunting, but it would have been rude to say so. "We were first introduced at Baron Ioril's last year...I suppose you do not recognize me incognito." I'm so glad I had my hood on while I talked to her, because my hair is very mussed.

No longer looking at me through her nostrils, she seemed startled.
"I'm Skie," I reminded her. I suppose she doesn't have so good a memory. I nudged Minsc so he would not tell her our full circumstances. "This is Minsc, one of Daddy's, uh...special guards."

Sendai looked at him. It took her some time to look at all of him. "You...have been eating your vegetables, haven't you?" she remarked.

"A vegetarian diet is most honourable for great Rashemi warriors!" Minsc commented. "Boo will only touch grains and leaves and cheese, and Minsc likes to eat the same! Only much, much more."

"Very special," the left-hand henchman said. The other giggled.

"We have, alas, become separated from our other companions," I explained to Sendai. "I have had business here searching for my brother--poor Eddard--" I hurriedly talked about other things, lest I break down. "Now we seek another friend, in a frightful hurry I'm afraid."

"Skie Silvershield!" Sendai said. "I'm sorry to meet you like this, for I too must return shortly. Could I lend you some healing potions or anything of the sort? We simply must catch up together when I am next in Baldur's Gate."

"That would be kind of you," I said. I'll probably have to invite her to a social or two next time we meet. Mummy will probably remark about her father being only junior among the Argrims, and Sendai doesn't have the personality to make her welcome to the good parties, but I can listen to her drone on about horseflesh for some little while. Her left henchman's horse whinnied as his rider looked among the saddlebags for potions, and I had an idea. "Could you lend us a horse as well?"

"A horse?" Sendai glanced at Minsc. "Surely one of our horses...I doubt your companion's size..." Minsc would break the back of any Amnian horses.

"For me, not for Minsc. If..." The gnolls were going to eat the witch. We didn't know when they were going to get hungry, so... It was a very stupid thing for me to do. "We would be most grateful to you. Where shall we stable it once we have completed our mission?"

"Beregost; none in Nashkel is really trustworthy, I find. There is a grubby, but quite reliable, dwarven mercenary who owns a stable I rely upon for these occasions."

"He is..." I sniffled. "I'm sure I'll find someone there. Thank you."

"Delgod, dismount," Sendai ordered the right henchman. "Until we meet again, Lady Silvershield. It would be delightful to hunt together."

"Bye, Rufie," I told the dog. "Minsc will take you back to Albert. Good doggie." Delgod's horse startled, led too close to the dog--finicky animal--and I mounted a safer distance from little Rufie.

"Skie mounts? Boo wants to remind Minsc that he and Minsc will never keep up, even though Minsc is nearly as big as a horse!

"I'm going to ride to the fortress thing," I said. Honestly I must have been mad, but after Sendai had been so cruel and tactless as to bring up Eddard and Kagain, I thought it was a good idea to get to the fortress before whenever gnoll dinnertime is. "You can wait near the fortress for Imoen and the invisibility potions, and I'll come back to join you. I guess I can scout around--I hope I can scout around--and find out when we need to get her out. I don't want to fight any gnolls. I might, like, break another nail." I'm getting really worried about my nails.

Minsc consulted his hamster. After a little while he turned back to me. "Boo thinks that plan must be followed to save Minsc's witch Dynaheir. But Boo says to be careful. The mighty team of Minsc and
Boo have fought many gnolls, and know that they smell like rotting leaves and the corpses they eat! Skie should smell like that as well while she is near them, lest they detect her in the shadows."

I wish he hadn't said anything. That, dear diary, is exactly what I have been doing since I finished my wild ride: rolling myself in rotten leaves until I smell absolutely foul. Even my outfit is being ruined. It was such a nice black for escaping Daddy's estate in, with delicate green embroidery on the sleeves. I used to have a version in pink as well, but I traded it to Imoen for some discreet green-coloured earrings exactly the right colour to match this outfit. I like pink but not as much as she does. If Eldoth could see me now he'd probably want to dump me, and that would be terrible. I need a hot bath.

I'm writing this while I wait with Sendai's horse tethered not too far away. It wasn't too hard to find the gnoll stronghold, as it's quite big. There are large figures guarding what looks like the only bridge to it. I hope they're the sort of large figures who sleep. Gnolls are nocturnal, so since it's almost dawn I hope the large figures sleep soon. I'm tired.

Rufie was such a cute doggie. I expect Minsc gave him back to his young friend hours ago.

~Skie.

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A/N: And a slight shift to first-person narration begins...

55. A Nuisance of Gnolls: 2 Kythorn

2 Kythorn

"My safety is in the hands of a novice adventurer?" Dynaheir said, which wasn't very nice of her. "But I do thank thee for thy aid, and offer my services in the arts magical."

I didn't reply. Too busy helping her shove an old chest to block the narrow cave entrance.

I knew it was a stupid plan...

The large figures guarding the bridge seemed to be resting, and so I crossed over as quietly as I could. The chasm below looked deep enough that it would muss my hair if I fell through it, and the slats were old and wanted to squeak. Only just after I snuck onto solid ground, I saw a gnoll patrol coming, and gulped down the invisibility potion. Maybe I was cowardly to drink it so soon; I didn't want them to catch me. I ran around, hearing their growls to each other.

"We are sstrrrrong! Eat our foesss!"

"Would rrrratherrrr eat witch."

The wychlaran was still alive, like that other gnoll had said.

"Chieftain rrrritual. All ssshall conquerrrr!"

They cheered at that.

"Golot, you sssmmell funny," one said. "Eating human and not sssharrring? Trrraitor!!"
"No, I have not conssssumed flesssh. Ssslanderr!"

I left quickly. The fortress is a large place, with many staircases and paths; I wasn't worried at first because I know invisibility potions last a long time as long as you don't attack anyone, but after a few hours I was concerned. Especially after seeing all the xvarts and gnolls all lined up, guarding their fortification.

I climbed to the top of the stronghold, careful not to dislodge any stones. A large group of gnolls slept, with just one posted on watch; I crept past him and past the sleeping ones. One of them was bigger than the others, wearing more ornaments; I did my best to stay away from him. Near him was a sinkhole, and I looked down in shock to see what was inside it: fragments of human corpses and clothing, smelling like...like I am not going to describe it.

I had to... I went down into it, into the darkness that hid me from the sentry. I really didn't want to get caught and killed. Not like-others. I made myself sm...

Anyway. I got out of the sinkhole to keep searching. Near it was a second hole, and there she was, one gnoll guard dozing beside her. I only meant to look; if she wasn't going to be killed soon, I could just wait for Minsc and Imoen. But the way she looked down there—they'd tied her up, of course, so she couldn't use her hands to cast spells. Her purple robes were tattered and torn, and compared to the gnolls she looked so small and frail and starved, but still her expression and demeanour were so regal and dignified somehow (Queen Biancavere, led to the stake to die for her true love Sir Halberdmuch...). I crouched down on the ground above her, and knocked a small pebble to hit the top of her head. She paid it no heed; I released another, and a third. Thankfully no gnolls were waking up and looking in our direction (objects moving by invisible hands can be noticed, Daddy says when he tells his invisibility story).

Dynaheir looked up in my direction. She didn't say anything; I loosed another pebble with my invisible hand, and climbed down next to her.

"Tasssse...yes, tassssssste..."

I stiffened, and waited; the gnoll was still lying next to the sinkhole. Still dozing. I drew my sword, and placed it on Dynaheir's bonds.

"Art thou here for me? From thy subtlety, thou art not Minsc," she whispered.

"Minsc is coming," I whispered back, sawing through the rope, carefully so as not to hurt her further.

"Have thou nought to do with the Red Wizards?"

"Of course not." Was she going to complain about being rescued? "I...I've...it's just me right now, but I have these sneaky boots that I can lend you, and a necklace the merchant said was magical, though I wasn't paying attention to his description. Have you got spells?"

"Without components, and still less sleep, there is very little I can do. I recommend for us to slip out--thou mayst not attack whilst invisible, and I am all but helpless."

I slipped off the sneaky boots, Sendai's healing potion, and the pretty necklace. Away from me, they shimmered into appearance; the ground was rough and I immediately regretted the boots.

"My thanks to thee. I feel much improved." She drank, and examined the other items. "These boots were made for walking, and that's just what they'll do. Though they do pinch rather, as though completely unsuited for those of my nature." She reached for the necklace; she looked surprised as she fingered it. "This...this contains charges of a spell of mine own school, though 'tis one I am yet
unable to memorize. Be certain that I shall cast it to full effect."

"Let's try sneaking, all right?" I hissed to her. I hoisted myself out of the pit, waiting for her; lifting her out might have made some gnoll see me. The sentry still drowsed.

She arose from the sinkhole, moving awkwardly; I tried to discreetly steer her into the shadows. We started to walk back to the stairs, but one of the sentries let out a yell. She reached for the necklace; I saw her smile like a last stand.

"I recommend thee to stay back," she warned, brandishing the necklace as though it was a sword; and the day was suddenly bright. A ring of fire spread almost to our faces. Gnolls screamed and died. The bigger one kept moving, coming toward us with his huge halberd; Dynaheir cast the necklace again, and he died.

"'Twas their chieftain. The rest ought to become disorganized, as a chicken headless." She fired a third blast, further away this time; it cleared us a path. "Come!" she commanded.

Down the steps, xvarts rushed at us, and were held off with flames from Dynaheir. Behind them were more gnolls, coming too close. We ran; they had us backed into the fortress wall. Dynaheir thinned out some of their ranks, but still they came. I strung my bow; I wanted to live through this--I might have been marginally better at fighting than her, but neither of us were Minsc or poor Kagain--

"Trust me, child." I don't know why she called me a child. For all she knew I could have been an ancient five-hundred-year-old elf under the potion of invisibility. She grabbed my wrist--some of the gnolls must have realized there was an invisible person, from their yelling--and she threw us over the stronghold wall.

It was quite a long way down. I remember screaming; then I remember feeling the air soften below us, our fall becoming like gliding.

"'Tis one of few spells available to me in this state. From me it cost much to secure in my mind while in this place."

Gnolls above us, throwing rocks and their large weapons; we ran, keeping to the shadows as much as possible.

"I looked down and saw caves near here!" I called to her. "If we find shelter.."

We reached overhanging rock, preventing the gnolls from throwing any more large missiles in our direction.

"One can only maintain a standing against besieging foes for a brief time," she said. "But else we will surely die. 'Tis better to live for a time, and sell our lives dearly." Xvarts, as blue and loud as in all the stories, were ahead of us; her fire vanquished them. My invisibility seemed to be wearing off anyway, so I took down the last few with my bow. We ran into the first cave, but were massed by xvarts and a horrible white creature I don't know the name of; like a giant bloated wyrm, trying to eat us. I hope I won't ever know it.

"There are limited charges in this necklace," Dynaheir said as she fired it. We fled, leaving the burned creature behind us; the cavern next to it was narrower, seeming a better prospect. Our weapons scattered more of the xvarts; we took it for ourselves.

"The chest," Dynaheir said. We shoved it to partly block the entrance, waiting for the gnolls to come.

"Tell me about thyself, child," she said. "Where didst thee encounter my strong companion Minsc?"
"In Nashkel. He was selling his hamster. Or at least, I thought he was." (I thought I heard her mutter, "'tis a shame", but must've imagined it.) "We were with other friends, but they had to go after a bandit. What brought you here?"

"'Tis known as my dajemma," she said. "My acceptance as a witch of my people." She hadn't needed to define it; I've read about Rashemi wychlaran traditions. "Most interesting times have been foreseen for the Sword Coast. Now let us fight."

The gnolls were upon us.

"Hold! We have slain thy leader, and shalt do the same to thee!" Dynaheir's voice rang out. She did not use the pretty necklace yet; they kept coming.

"I have the kobolds' arrows!" I hissed to her. The flame ones, that gave us so much horror in the mines... "Burning ones."

"Fire, and be quick about it!" she whispered in return.

I aimed; I think my hand shook. The arrow came to rest on the ground before them; a miss, but it burst into hot flames. "We will murder you all with fire!" I screamed at them. It was more likely that they'd do some murdering, I was thinking.

They'd all noticed the arrow; it stopped them, briefly. Trying to be more careful, I aimed another shot; it struck one of the gnolls in the lead in his arm. Flames around him singed two next to him.

"I strongly advice thee to duck--now."

It burned close to me as I flung myself to the ground. The gnolls had been massed together; some of them died. I struggled to my feet. Hurry, Skie--keep them away--I don't know how I did it. I'm sure my hair must have looked terrible. Dynaheir encouraged me to keep shooting, waiting for them to get close enough together for her fireball blasts to be worth it. The kobold arrows ran out, and the pretty necklace melted away in her fingers like water--it was a shame. I'd wanted to wear it again.

I downed a badly-burned gnoll, and made a second falter; they came, though, to the chest that hardly formed a proper barricade, and I drew my shortsword. The first was wounded and easy for me to stab, lunging over the chest; the second, not so.

"Sssslay you...then ssslay the witch."

"Pardon me while I put up a fight!" Dynaheir threw a chunk of rock from the cave walls at it. I don't think it hit. I reached for my bleeding arm. I was hurt, and I knew we didn't have any more healing potions. Its breath stank; I grabbed my sword with my left hand and stabbed up. I shoved its body on top of the chest, but there were more behind it... I was hurt again, fighting. Dynaheir tried with her rocks, but she wasn't very good.

Then of course they came for us.

"GO FOR THE EYES, BOO! GO FOR THE EYES! EVIL MUST TASTE HAMSTER JUSTICE!"

The voice shouting that battlecry. A figure in pink was the first we saw, sparkling into existence to slit a gnoll's throat, melting into thin air only to suddenly appear again, moving at the speed of a typhoon: Imoen.

"Hey kiddo miss me?" she called quickly, downing another invisibility potion in the blink of an eye;
behind her, Minsc fought his way through, unstoppable through similar potions.

"DYNAHEIR! YOU WILL BE DEFENDED! EVIL'S BACKSIDE, MEET MY BLADE!"

I think he is at least a little insane, as he found it very hard to stop fighting, but he and Imoen did rescue us and make it into the cave.

"Ph-ew! Did I tell you that you totally stink?" Imoen said. I flushed. This was very embarrassing.

Dynaheir amazed me after all the complaining she'd done about being rescued. "Do not speak to her thus," she said. "The heroine seen before thee saved my life by journeying among the gnolls' poor, former captives. Take thy battle-spoil."

A book, scrolls, some gold, and three potions I was hardly able to trust, from the chest; it was all very nice of her, but I was bleeding to death. Or at the very least felt like it, and that is the important thing.

"I got some healing potions." Imoen distributed one to each of us; I drank, and felt much better. "Plus this old thrown-out spellbook I figured might... Yup, gotcha." Dynaheir quickly took it from her hands. "Now, our last two potions of speed and you're outta here!"

We recaptured Sendai's horse, and as soon as we reached a stream I burned my clothing and bathed while Minsc watched for peeping toms and monsters. Dynaheir also needed to remove the grime of the gnolls, and Imoen joined us as well; even though it was only a stream out in the woods, I began to feel a little human again. The three of us kept watch during Minsc and Boo's turn to bathe--he is almost the size of the three of us combined--and I swear Imoen peeked, as she made a comment about what they say about Rashemi men. (They say the same thing about halfling men, I've heard from Eldoth's rogue associates, but I didn't notice her doing the same to poor Montaron. Then again I'm not sure if he ever bathed.) As for me, I have a true love in Eldoth.

I read the book and it disappeared in my hands. I don't really believe in those theories on how to instantly gain friends and influence others anyway; it all seems so trite and shallow. But I felt a little better about my appearance after tidying my hair.

56. Gale of Nashkel: 6 Kythorn

6 Kythorn

We walked leisurely back into Nashkel in late afternoon, exactly as planned. Branwen waited for us, her voice carrying far from the bridge on which she stood:

"Hire me to kill a helpless woman? How cowardly, blaggard! Tempus should strike you down for your dishonourable ways!"

"I care not for your barbaric god, northwoman," the red-robed man with whom she was arguing replied. "If you will insult me with your refusal of my generous offer, begone!"

"Not so fast!" Garrick interjected. "This woman, near a gnoll stronghold? Could it be..."

"Do not tell me you have had past dealings with this witch! (It is most unfortunate. Surely she cannot have allies already.)"

"We might, and we might not," Garrick said. "Perhaps you could explain your tale, good sir?"
"We need no explanations from cowards!" Branwen wielded Bassilus' old hammer; lightning crackled ominously about its head.

"Oh please cease your prattle, undereducated barbarian. (Fools, they know not the danger of the witches.)"

I looked across at Dynaheir; she smiled, whispered to Minsc to secure Sendai's horse to a tree, and calmly and quietly crept forward.

"You are a coward and a fool, wizard!" Branwen lectured. "Is the staff you bear for the purpose of resting legs as crippled as your soul?"

"The harbinger of your own destruction. (No, I should not use such syllable-intensive words about these simians.) Me Edwin, me powerful wizard! Dynaheir bad, you kill! Stomp once for yes, twice for no."

"Base villain! Such Lokispawn shame by their mere existence."

"Lackey, prepare to pay for your insolence, what?"

Dynaheir tapped him gently on the shoulder. I swear he jumped several feet up in the air, quivering in shock and revealing skinny legs under his red robes.

"W--witch! (Allies. All is precisely as I, renowned wizard Edwin Odesseiron, deduced.) I'll not suffer your depravity! Dynaheir is not to be trusted. I urge you to cast her from your party immediately!"

"Crawl back to Thay and refine thy manners, Red Wizard. Thou hast assuredly no place here." She held a dagger Minsc had from the evil slime-controlling wizard; her spells were far deadlier.

"Excuse me," a black-clad man called to them, striding from the rough direction of the town proper. I didn't think we'd seen him before.

"You dare insult me? You only sign your own death warrant, witch!"

"Excuse me." The man in black sighed, glaring at me across Edwin and Dynaheir's locked horns. He was rather fashionably dressed; I liked his look. "Why NIMBUL has been hired to deal with the likes of you I'll never know."

"My power is no less than thine. Dare thou to show it, Thayvian?"

"Heed my words!" The man stamped a foot. "I am NIMBUL. I am Death come for thee."

"Wychlaran, step out from behind your excuses and we shall end this here!"

"I said, I am Death come for thee! Surrender, and thy end shall be...quicker!"

"An unfortunate decision, wizard! Pardon me while I put up a fight!"

"Death?" I asked. NIMBUL flung back his black sleeves theatrically and began incanting something. I did the sensible thing and screamed for the town guards. "Help! Murder! Help!"

"Hold; I see that thou must await my response, Red Wizard," Dynaheir said. She too chanted something; Edwin, distracted, turned to face NIMBUL.

"Now before you kill all these simians, allow me to remind you I am not in the least concerned with
any of them!" Edwin said. "Help! Let these fools lose their own lives! I am done! Help!"

"Tempus forgive my cowardice!"

"Brave, brave, Sir Garrick, Sir Garrick ran away!"

A pink burst fizzled briefly from Dynaheir's hands. "These odds are idiocy! Retreat!"

A Horror spell, I knew from Daddy's stories. Since the guards didn't seem to be coming yet, I aimed my bow; Imoen liked to remind me that the one thing to distract a mage was often a well-placed arrow. Beside me, Imoen cast a spell of her own, the Magic Missile. Her favoured pink hit NIMBUL as he muttered. I missed; his feet took him out of the way quickly.

"NIMBUL will taste hamster justice tonight!" Minsc rushed up to the well-dressed wizard, swinging his large sword. I shot again at NIMBUL.

Behind me, a woman's voice spoke. "Be your name Sky?"

"I'm Skie," I said, not paying particular attention. Minsc yelled; NIMBUL's spell had hit him.

"Then it may be a touch unladylike--but I'm going to split your skull, I will!"

I couldn't move, even though a strand of my hair had come loose. Imoen stood frozen the same way.

"Now if you'd been a good girl and come into the Inn, we could have had this over a long time ago!" the woman lectured me. "Seeing as you're all nice and still, let's have a little fun, right?" A glowing hammer appeared in her hands. I'd seen Branwen use them against ghasts and kobold commandos; I knew how much damage it could do. When I just wanted to go home, and have a hot meal and a bath, and...

"Who dares to steal the kills of NIMBUL?" The magician came striding down to us. I'd rather die at the hands of someone with fashion sense any day.

"Ah, Nimbul is it dearie? I am Neira, servant of Mask, and you should see how much I'm getting paid for this job!"

But Daddy could pay you more! I'd have told her if I could speak. Anything to stay alive.

"My name is NIMBUL, N-I-M-B-U-L, private assassin, all contractual offers and proposals of marriage to be directed to the Red Sheaf in Beregost. At least have the decency to speak my name properly."

The hammer hit--it hurt a little less than I'd expected on the scale of blinding, bone-shattering pain. I would have reeled and collapsed but for her hold on me.

"Oh, yes, dearie. Oh yes!"

In the corner of my eye, Xan, safely behind Garrick, moved his hands. Neira attacked NIMBUL; he was graceful, though, and avoided her well enough to cast another blasting spell. She screamed, but recovered in time to hit him--I cringed inwardly at the impact--and then he stabbed her in the back with a shining sword. She fell.

NIMBUL smiled at me and, all businesslike, prepared his spell.

"Thine evil shalt not go unpunished!" Fire lanced from between Dynaheir's hands; the Horror spell had concluded, and she had her revenge.
"Cloud the mind of Edwin Odesseiron? This outrage has not gone without notice." Edwin's own
missiles hit NIMBUL; Garrick, too, fired crossbow bolts in the mage's direction with more
desperation than accuracy. He was a spellcaster more powerful than any of us (and with great hair
and robes!); how could we win?

"GO FOR THE EYES BOO, GO FOR THE EYES!"

Minsc. I won't describe how he ran from where he had fallen, ramming NIMBUL with all his
considerable strength; suffice it to say--NIMBUL was gone.

"I need aid, lest...my hamster...become an orphan..." Minsc sat on the ground; Branwen went over to
him.

"You're at the end of your rope I'll wager."

I tasted mud and blood beneath me. Frozen, dying; I would not even know the killer's face. I would
have cried and sniffled if not for the hold upon me and Imoen.

Suddenly, the power stopped--I squirmed aside just before the new fighter's blade hit the ground. He
was a dwarf; short and grubby.

"Why? Why are you doing this?" I pleaded.

"Dunno. Don't care," he said. "A price is a price and a head is a head, and here's old Karlat makin' 
his living. Damn whore Silke threw me out of her tavern and here I am now."

He swung at me again; I only narrowly dodged it.

"I can pay you more! Whatever you're getting from his rivals, my father can pay you much more!"

"And I can't think of anything that shortens the assassin's career faster 'n turning on clients."

It hurt. I--wanted to live; I felt adrenaline that's supposed to happen in these situations, the pain from
my grievous wounds lessening. Ducking and weaving, I didn't try to fight; Imoen, nearby, aimed her
sling and spells.

"Skie! Hold on!"

Garrick sang. It was something about daring heroes avoiding a vast stone golem; it even helped, a
little. Then I tripped over Branwen and Minsc, who were fixed in place, unmoving.

The chant which bound them--there were four women behind the dwarf, all of them staring at Imoen
and me!

"Now, now, my good gentle...ladies; please note that I am utterly detached from this bedraggled
group. (Perhaps they will kill the witch first? I can only live in hope.)"

Green vines sprouted to trap his legs. He groaned. Dynaheir, her hands glowing, reached for them.

"You see, Telka? I told you that speeding redhead was interesting," one of the women commented.
"And now see! Hurry up and answer me truly, girl, for your life depends upon it," she said in my
direction. I was busy stumbling away from the axe-wielding dwarf. "Is your name Sky?"

"Help me!" I pleaded.

"That doesn't precisely answer the question," she said.
"I know who they are!" Xzar came out from hiding behind Xan and pointed dramatically. "You're in league with the rabbits! Die!" I saw a flash of white build between him and the woman to the left of the speaker.

"Maneira, kill all the wizards! Zeela, Telka, make ready! As for you, good dwarf, step away if you wish to live. You have weakened our prey enough for our tastes."

Karlat paid attention to them; I ran. "Stealing my kill?" he said. "Why, I'll end you all f'r it..."

A flaming arrow landed in his chest and came out the other side. Imoen and I scrambled away from his burning body.

"Do you know them?" I called to Imoen. 'Speeding redhead' indeed.

"Yeah! They were up above the mine exit. I yelled to 'em to look us up in Nashkel when they hailed me!"

Mental note: familiarize Imoen with concept of stranger danger.

'Maneira' unscrewed the tip of a yellow bottle she held.

"Run you fools run! Oil of Fiery Burning!" Edwin shouted. A wall of flame appeared where the wizards and Garrick had been. We were cut off.

Minsc and Branwen, held. Imoen, who'd already cast some of her spells. Me, wounded.

The two women in heavy armour advanced toward us. "Nowhere to run. You've managed to annoy..."

It went green. Imoen pulled me back; I reeled in nausea at the smell of the cloud of vapours, like the stench of cabbages multiplied hundredfold. Moments later, Dynaheir's pink missiles whistled through its depths.

"Fair ladies!" Garrick, his eyebrows scorched off and face blackened, held up a mage's scroll. "I shall assist you!"

Within the smoke, it looked like three of them were unconscious—and the fourth getting up. I took a deep breath, paused over NIMBUL's horrible corpse, and ran. Dynaheir'd given me back the sneaky boots; I circled around, stabbed blindly at the woman with NIMBUL's shiny sword without daring to breathe, and fell back out of the cloud. She was coming at us; ugly black stuff grew under her feet from Garrick.

"A most incompetently cast Conjuration," Edwin said. "(I could have done far better myself, but my spells are not for wasting--) Eugh!" He'd been hit; Garrick's spell did nothing to slow the long-range weaponry, and the other three had started to wake up.

"A Dart of Wounding. A healing potion for the Red Wizard is urgently required—though of course it is ultimately pointless, since we are all likely to die within the next several minutes," Xan ordered. "Should, of course, we last even that long."

I ran up the bank from the heavy-armoured woman. Moving out of the black field, she came after me; Garrick hit her a couple of times, but she seemed unstoppable. Imoen held out a wand she thieved from Tetthoril, and used it to shoot pink at her. It gave me time enough to...jump up a nearby pine tree. (Like climbing over the estate walls. Very much like climbing the nice trees at home.) A flaming arrow buried itself in the trunk next to my head. Sendai's horse screamed; pulling itself loose,
it ran in the direction of the archers, knocking one down.

"Help! Murder!" I called again. There were town guards not far from us; they were bound in vines thanks to the other heavy-armoured woman.

"Zeela, fling me that potion! We'll get you down right enough one way or another," she said. I just kept hiding behind branches.

*It's a dance. It's a dance set in the woodlands with pretty fairies and cute gnomes, and all I have to do is spin around that tree! Then Madam Irene won't be sarcastic after all...* I could tell myself things were happening that way. *Ah, the wychlaran is firing pretty pink missiles! I like pink! Oh, the big lady playing a big ogre has drunk the brown potion! She is grabbing at the tree, and oh!*

The tree was a club; I'd fallen awkwardly to the ground as it was ripped up from its roots. She swung it, knocking Imoen off her feet, poor frozen Minsc and Branwen as well. I ran again; Garrick's crossbow bolts and sling bullets from the mages whistled in the direction of the other heavily armoured woman, who had been chanting something. Sendai's horse made a horrible, high-pitched noise, which stopped suddenly.

*Dodge the tree. Dodge, dodge the tree*, I reminded myself. It was large; it wasn't hard to see it coming and move. I hadn't survived years of dance classes and Bran Gangric for nothing. How long before the enraged, heavily armoured woman lifting trees got sick of this business of dodging? Maybe long enough to--

"Aaargh!" Finally, the second armoured woman fell. Her projectile-wielding companions most certainly had not. I heard Imoen crying out, and Xan chanting something. Was Imoen okay? I couldn't see beyond the tree being waved in my face.

"Yes! Sleep spell...gimme a healing potion!" Imoen called. It distracted me, and a branch hit me in the side of the head. Blackness danced in front of my face. I fell.

"Wake, wake--the valiant heroes' daybreak--the urgent swing of battle--"

Garrick's singing brought me back to the circumstances. The tree was on top of me so that I could scarcely breathe, my ankle hurt badly, and the assassin's boots were coming rapidly closer. NIMBUL's shiny sword that I'd abstracted was somewhere I couldn't reach.

"Help! I don't want to die!" I'd already attacked her once. Why wouldn't she stop? I could reach my quiver; I stabbed up at her with an arrow. She easily deflected that, pinning my wrist to the ground. She collapsed.

"For Tempus!"

Branwen reached down for me. "My healing spells must be reserved for the berserker warrior," she said, dragging me out from under the branches. She, like me, was bruised and bleeding, especially from where the tree had hit both her and Minsc. "You are likely to live. We received Tempus' favour that she was wounded in the back already."

I didn't want to try and stand; it hurt so much. I only wanted to curl up someplace and cry. I looked across and saw that Sendai's horse was dead next to the two sleeping assassins.

Edwin, pale-faced, forcibly stopped himself from leaning upon Dynaheir. "All that remains for us to do is slit the throats of our drowsing assailants. I recommend the pink-clad stray for the deed. (Really, these lackeys should not require so much dictation.)" I wasn't going to object; but Dynaheir did.
"It is not appropriate to slay the vulnerable. They may be..."

"Turned over to the custody of the town." A guard made his way over to us. Some help they had been. "Come forward, men. Take this fine pair to the garrison."

"Ha! Turned over into a paper-walled prison," Edwin argued. "They will clearly escape only to threaten my life again. (For I may be the most important of these rabble, though I must admit they proved an equal threat to the simians and may not have attempted my life with knowledge of my identity.)"

"All right. Word is that you lot are the Heroes of Nashkel—or at least, the blondes with the hammer and the harp are the ones who turned up for the reward. Young Harman here—" the guard commander gestured to one of his men, a beardless youth—"says the ladies up and attacked you, no reason given. That right? Yep. Brigands after your reward, I suspect. We'll let you know what they say in interrogation."

Our assassins had been hauled away; Edwin looked miserable, but raised no further complaints.

"C'mon, Skie." Imoen dragged me up. I cried out when my weight rested on my left ankle. Imoen herself didn't look good, bruised and with blood on her face; I remembered her screaming during the battle. "Broken, huh?"

I couldn't answer her. It was all too much. Nearby, Branwen was healing Minsc of the worst of his wounds.

"Okay, let's head down to the inn and Branwen can heal the rest of us tomorrow!" Imoen said cheerfully. "Who wants to help me with Skie?"

I had Minsc to one side and Imoen the other, hopping on my undamaged leg; I can't remember thinking much of anything. *Please, rest at last. Too many fighters. Poor Sendai's horse. Would the killing never end?*

Imoen counted heads. "Room for Skie 'n me, room for Branwen and Dynaheir, room for the guy mages—Mr Red Wizard, this is the bit where you chip in—room for Minsc and Garrick. I guess Xzar can be with us, or go with the other guy mages...er, complicated..." She rummaged in her pocket for change.

At last we would rest.

A brown-haired man tapped me on the shoulder. "Pardon me, friend. You have the look of travellers worn." It was true; Garrick and Minsc had been badly burned by magic, Imoen hurt, each of us wounded. *At the end of our rope. Truly.*

"Worn certainly, but Boo instructs patience before evil has its next butt-kicking! The nice priestess of Tempus will aid us all!" Minsc said.

"I wasn't talking to you. Might you pair of young ladies have been told to look for friends...after travelling from Candlekeep?"

"We...uh, kinda sorta didn't," Imoen said. "Not us, no siree! Didn't have any foster uncles giving us directions we kinda ignored, no way no how! So, if you wanna go away now, sort of busy here..."

"There were others besides me in the Friendly Arm Inn," the man said. "Quite the fighting couple, her with the temper and he with the heavy armour. I had hoped to meet you at the gates, but finding you here may be better for me. You see, I believe you travelled from Candlekeep."
Suddenly there were four of him weaving through the inn. I blinked.

"EVIL! MORE EVIL WIZARDS TO KILL--"

Minsc dropped me. Our attacker fired a spell, hurting him. Branwen and Imoen tried to fight the real assassin, hacking at false images. Xzar and Garrick hid under the bar.

I don't remember reaching for my bow, but I remember it being in my hands afterwards. I think I tried to shoot from the ground. I don't think it did much good, but Branwen and Imoen made some of the images disappear. Dynaheir fired a spell, Edwin used his staff, and Xan helped out with a sling. Then Bassilus' hammer went into the wizard's real neck.

I do remember hobbling to my foot and letting my bow go slack. The person trying to kill us was dead. We were going to rest, but he'd even attacked in here. How horrible. Branwen was bent over Minsc again, bandaging his wounds.

Edwin flung back his sleeves, in a similar dramatic gesture to NIMBUL. He overacts. "Is there anyone else who desires the opportunity of dying messily (or being taken captive by those incompetent soldiers)?" he called to the tavern at large. "Well, simians, I invite any further attention of that sort to have it over with! (At least, I admit, all these assassins have done us the benefit of publicly announcing their intentions.) Anyone?" I do not think there were many remaining patrons after the disturbance. "This shall be your last chance, bestowed by Edwin Odesseiron himself. The opportunity is disappearing...disappearing...disappeared!"

Edwin turned sharply to face Dynaheir, his robes whipping about his ankles.

"Now it's our long-interrupted turn, witch. I note I have been far more miserly in my spells than you during this battle, and you have no ability to cheat with that hulking though incapable so-called protector; let us have it out--that is to say, allow me to kill you in the most humiliating manner I can design! (Ah, sweet, sweet taste of bat guano and victory.)"

"Wizard, I wouldst duel thee at any..."

I remember only white, blank light.

"Nooooo! No more people trying to kill us!" Edwin was the nearest person to me. I fell over his robes and started crying on his shoulder. "It's enough! I c-can't take any more! I broke nails!"

He sat down with me. Imoen has it on record that she and Branwen glared at him quite forcefully, in a 'You broke it you can jolly well fix it' manner. "Now...now. (Oh, she stains my robes. How dreadfully disappointing.) There...there. (Loviatar's lash administered before the eight Zulkirs would be less humiliating.) The bad people are gone now, chi...young woman. (Will someone make her cease her noise?) Hush now. Please hush now. (Sigh. Many sighs both long-suffering and injured.)"

57. Interlude: Maneira

Interlude: Maneira: Between 5 and 6 Kythorn.

The Amnian cell was small and populated by rats. Maneira's head ached from the magically-induced slumber, and her wrists were already raw from the cuffs wrenching them behind her back. A speedy trial and execution would be their fate upon the morrow. The cold moonlight outside the bars of the window shining on the erect hangman's pole offered no mercy. Lamalha and Zeela were already dead and for their failures she and Telka would follow.
Telka's moaning had not ceased. Trampled by that fucking horse. Maneira had yelled for a healer until her throat was scratched, but they had not seen fit to provide one. What did it matter if an assassin died before righteous citizens could hang her? Blood soaked the thin tunic that was all they had left Telka to wear, stealing her precious armour. Both thieves had been more than thoroughly searched, their hard-stolen armament taken.

Nonetheless they had left Maneira her boots and the skeleton keys hidden in their soles. Was she a capable picklock or was she a capable picklock? She had nearly completed maneuvering upon the ground to spring the lock on the cuffs behind her; her wrists slippery with blood, at last Maneira heard the metal slide free. She sighed softly in release. Telka's keening hid at least that noise.

*We serve the Iron Throne and our names were Telka and Maneira, independent thieves, Zeela and Lamalha, clerics of Cyric. The son of our leader is Sarevok and our mission was to murder a young girl he shows interest in for reasons we do not know. Also, we have family deep in Amn and the residence of Maneira's mother is the Street of the Fruitsellers in Athkatla... They could extract that information with ease, if they had the sense to do so.*

Maneira bent over her comrade. In the same hiding place on Telka was another lockpick, and more importantly a small but much-sharpened razorblade she knew that Telka kept well concealed. She went to work on the cell-lock, ignoring the pain in her wrist; Telka's noise covered her clinks. It parted for her.

"I am escaping. Can you understand me, Telka?" she whispered; Telka moaned again. Maneira listened again for guards. In this small arse-end of a town, night-shifts would be inattentive. "Then I will give you Cyric's mercy."

No more moaning. Maneira arranged Telka's tunic to cover the new gap in her throat, making that blood seem at first glance as though it was from the horse's wounds. She waited to see if guards should notice the lack of noise; the night was dark and silent as Telka's stilling wounds. Nothing; she had noticed the shift passing outside the building, in front of the window every half an hour or thereabouts. She closed the cell door; concealed herself within the shadows; and walked out of the prison at exactly the right moment between the guard-change.

58. Beregost Correspondence: 7 Kythorn

7 Kythorn

I woke up at morning in a small room at the inn with a fully dressed Dynaheir touching my wrist.

"I trust thou slept, Skie," she whispered to me. In her hand were several parchments.

"My ankle hurts," I said. It felt sprained, rather than broken; I remembered injuring myself like that from dancing once. Sleep had helped. She placed a finger to her lips.

"I wouldst this conversation in private," she said. "Remember that the walls of this place are thin." Some of Imoen's gear lay next to one of the two other beds, her pink stuffed Tarrasque sitting on a pillow; we were alone.

"All right," I said muzzily. My bruises had not exactly stopped hurting overnight either. Would Branwen come and heal them soon?

"I ensured it was mine eyes to first view these, and made certain to arise at an early hour." Dynaheir
gave me a stack of four pieces of parchment. "Thou must read them, Skie. They appear to concern thee most deeply."

I was tired, but I looked at the first of them. The reading kept my attention.

**BOUNTY NOTICE**

Be it known to all those of evil intent, that a bounty has been placed on the head of a young woman travelling from Candlekeep known as Sky.

Last seen with the sage Gorion, this human is described as small, dark-haired, and possibly in the company of a red-haired human girl.

This offer has been extended to all appropriate guilds. Those returning with proof of the deed shall receive no less than three hundred and fifty coins of gold.

As always, any that reveal these plans to the force of law shall join the target in their fate.

The second parchment was exactly the same, but for six hundred and eighty gold pieces; the third was lower, the reward set to two hundred.

"Why?" I asked. There were only two reasons for a price on my unattached head, one moderately reasonable—to get to Daddy—and the other more tenuous, Mulahey's nasty associates. But since the note talked about Candlekeep, and Imoen only--Imoen! I must warn her!--it must have been sent before we'd killed Mulahey. So, it was to hurt Daddy, like I'd already guessed.

"Thou mayst take some consolation in the fact of the amount incre..."

"I think I know what you were going to say, and bounties aren't funny!" I interrupted Dynaheir. "I have to talk to Imoen about it, she's there too. And..." I looked at the note. "They didn't even spell my name right!"

Saying that--my pulse beat harder and my breaths hastened in fright. *Not my name. If they don't know my name...*

*If they don't know my name it's not about Father. If they don't know my name it's not about Father. For once, they didn't talk about Father when they talked about me. If they don't know my name it's not about...it's about Candlekeep. It's about Gorion and Imoen. About them. Maybe at least the four women and NIMBUL were hired by that rude Ulf from the Counting House or something. The fourth letter seemed more reasonable.*

**Nimbul,**

*The money you have received from Tranzig should cover your usual fee. (NIMBUL had scribbled in the margins, What money? NIMBUL estimates 890 gold plus 50 gold late fee.) Your assignment may be difficult, but I'm sure you are up to the task. There is a group of mercenaries who should be coming through Nashkel in the next few days. They are led by a human whelp named Sky. Kill her, and all that travel with her. I warn you: they may be dangerous. Good hunting!*  

**TAZOK.**

Tranzig, who'd given orders to Mulahey. This was about the mines. Naming me and not Imoen or anyone else was strange, since it was Imoen's idea to go there. I mean, in a party with a pink-loving wizard-in-training, a singing bard, a tall battling cleric, and a really tough dwarf, they name (and misspell again) the petite one good at sneaking around? I don't know at all about this leadership
thing. Tranzig apparently hadn't paid NIMBUL...because Branwen had caught up to him. Dated 1 Kythorn, not long after we killed Mulahey. Magical scrying, I guessed. We'd have to ask the mages to protect against that.

Dynaheir showed no reaction to the spelling correction. She'd never seen my name written down, and I knew the Thorass alphabet for Rashemi and Thayvian Mulhorandi would both transliterate it phonetically, whichever she used when she was at home. (I'd wager five dances with Bran Gangric that it's the former, from her old-fashioned accent.)

"Another thing thou ought to know of: one of the women imprisoned was found dead on their cell floor this morning. Wounded in the battle, probably at the hooves of that brave horse, she was murdered by her own companion rather than face interrogation. Her companion is no longer present." Dynaheir sighed. "Truly, thou did good in allowing their lives to be spared rather than dishonourably killed--" I was too tired to tell her that dishonourably killed was no great loss as far as I was concerned, disgusting as the actual process would have been--"and yet I must own that the Red Wizard's words proved true in this instance. Nonetheless, good may yet arise from thy noble choice."

"I'll see what Imoen thinks," I said.

"A reasonable decision, I suppose. I, too, must decide upon plans for the future. I do not recommend introducing these matters as knowledge beyond thyself; Imoen must be cautioned to have care." This long advice-giving was her parting remarks. I waited for either Imoen or Branwen to come back for me.

"Heya! Here ya go, we got some more potions when Branwen collected the reward for that mine thing. And Branwen says she'll take a look at your ankle, don't make such a fuss! And, hey...doya remember last night?"

Imoen was delighted to regale me with the whole embarrassing story. I must talk with her about everything. --

7 Kythorn, Hour 16

A day of strange partings. I can't wait to finally enter Beregost and meet up with the escort Daddy must have sent by now. I hope the poor soldiers aren't getting too bored waiting for us. When Branwen healed and bound my ankle for me and I came down to join the others, Xzar and Xan were the first.

"Good late-morning, m'dear Skie. I was so hoping to catch you awake before our departure. A change in plans as to my body, you see," Xzar--she--said. Her acid-green robes looked clean for once, and she'd bothered to brush her hair.

"Are you...are you staying that way?"

"No, no, of course not. It's just that I happened to remember that, before our fateful meeting in--wherever it was--Monty and I had been spelunking about a nasty stone tower southeast of here. Or is it southwest? I always forget. Never-eat-slimy-wyverns, or never-wyverns-slimes-eat? I found the most delightful book that has given me a sudden urge to become a priest of Cyric and thereby dispel that spell myself. We unfortunately couldn't get any further in the tower; all those nasty ghasts and succubi and the like. 'Twas fortunate I had a scroll or two of invisibility to keep us safe. I'm mad, not stupid. In any case, innocent Skie, there should be a similar tome remaining there that I strongly advise you to read. You'll need it, little rabbit." She patted me on the head, giving me a rather
disturbing glance from green eyes.

"Well, I don't really have plans to...

"And now--Xan and I are off to Evereska!" she announced. "It should be tremendously exciting. I offered to travel with him so we can look after each other. After all, when I think of all we shared in Mulahey's dungeons-what was it again?"

"I have decided I must make my report to my superiors--" Xan sneezed--"and, since wandering on my own would be completely suicidal, I...well, accept Lady Xzar's companionship. I must be as mad as her, or he." He looked wretched, but he had always done so since we had found him. "I'm sure we shall find our throats slit by bandits in the first few minutes on the road."

"And then my new god Cyric can resurrect you! O happy day," Xzar gloated.

"No laundry service? The sooner departed from this barbaric town the better. (It is still a barbaric hour of the morning, at that.)" Edwin the Red Wizard approached, gesturing to the slightly damp sleeves of his robes as he ranted. "I hold you fully responsible, girl," he said, pointing at me. "Would requesting reparations of you be too much to ask?"

"Uh, I did learn how to do laundry in C...for a little while in this place my father sent me to...but I burned three of my shirts and accidentally flooded the vestry with soapy water," I said.

"Hmm, well, you've obviously found some service in this place," Edwin said, turning to Xzar. "I see you've...freshened up. (It is welcome to meet female wizards more appealing than the Rashemi savage.) Might I ask your name, dear lady?" He straightened the collar of his robes.

Xzar shook back her honey-blonde curls. "It is Xzar. You introduced yourself as Edwin of Thay, I believe?"

"You're perceptive. I admire that in a woman. Perhaps, once my business is concluded, we could retire to somewhere more private...and compare our spellbooks? (By which I mean: overwhelm her with Edwin Odesseiron's mastery of the erotic arts, second only to his wizardry.)"

"Oh, delightful, delightful; divinations and enchantments I adore next to my own beloved school, but conjurations I'll accept. Were we talking about laundry?"

"Indeed--for her crying upon my shoulder half the night, I'd rather the service you appear to have enjoyed. I compliment you again upon an almost Thayvian standard of appearance. (Perhaps if her hair was a good deal shorter.)"

"It's only a matter of skills learnt myself while living rough; travelling the Sword Coast with poor dear Montaron, you see." Xzar patted a spell component pouch that I hoped didn't contain what I thought it contained. "I'm flattered at your questions to little old me."

"(So that's how she acquired that lovely tan.)" Edwin puffed out what chest he had. "Be flattered. I must admit that you pique my interest as both a lady and a wizard; more the former, since after all I am already a master wizard."

Xzar bent across and whispered something in his ear. At first Edwin seemed charmed, and then he blanched and pulled away, almost as shocked as he'd been when Dynaheir had surprised him.

"A...a-hem! I must immediately go! Farewell, sir wizard!"

"Tata, Skie." Xzar's little wave as he dragged Xan with him was their exit.
Edwin sat down rather suddenly. "To business, then I feel we know each other quite well by now."

"Sure." You do feel as though you know someone if you've cried on their shoulders half the night. I joined him at the table. "Please don't attack Dynaheir?"

"For now I decide a brief truce (if only to avoid the noisemaking), and Edwin Odesseiron has a distinct habit of keeping his word. Until crying children no longer hinder me, of course. How did you come to meet her?"

"Minsc saved us from an evil slime-controlling wizard--" talking about my silly mistake when first seeing him in Nashkel would have been really embarrassing--"and then he told us she was in the fortress. We went down there and got her out."

"Out of the goodness of your hearts?" He narrowed his eyes.

"I wouldn't leave Bran Gangric in a place like that. Minsc and Imoen turned up to rescue both of us, and that's how it happened," I told him. "Weren't you talking about that stronghold to Branwen and Garrick? How did you know she was there?"

"(Such pathetic attempts at subtle questioning will not sway me.) Like her, I have my own reasons to travel the Sword Coast. Has she mentioned hers?"

"She and Minsc are on their dajemmas, of course. I guess you're on official business too." Why wear the robes of a Red Wizard so far west?

"Oh, of course the Rashemi fools are on their dajemmas." I wondered if he was a Red Wizard apprentice himself; he looked about Xzar's age, fairly young for a wizard. "Hmm. You say you extracted the witch from the gnoll stronghold, and she and the berserker voluntarily came here with you."

"Yes. Weren't you listening?"

He sighed. "(Ignorant simians. Could the witch possibly be travelling with them simply to entertain herself at their incompetence?...No, Rashemi witches have no sense of humour and I must continue my mission.) You must allow me to join your party. As a renowned wizard, I am sure I will be of far greater service than any other."

"But we don't really need you," I said. "We're just going to Beregost to meet Daddy's escort and go back to Baldur's Gate. Dynaheir, Garrick and Imoen all cast spells, so..."

"The witch is evil! You have already fallen prey to her deceitful guile. Allow me to join you and I shall watch her with the patience of one who understands her ilk!"

"I told you, we don't need you. Not that it's my decision or anything, I could ask Garrick and Imoen, but I think Branwen already doesn't like you, and obviously Minsc and Dynaheir..."

"(I cannot believe it has come to this. Still, the weeping wench seems biddable enough.) I grant you one month of my services as a wizard. So I promise, and Edwin Odesseiron keeps his word. The fine print: claim on any magical treasures pertinent to my profession, the bubbleheaded bard sees to my needs while travelling, the cleric or another imbecile with more muscle than pea-sized brain carries the surplus supplies appropriate to a wizard of my calibre, and my rest to memorize spells must be undisturbed. I'm sure you agree that my guidance as a wizard will prove more valuable than any ransom you could name."

"I can't promise the fine print on their behalf!" I could only imagine what Branwen would say for
bargaining away her services...or do. "I don't think..." He looked disappointed enough that I felt sorry for him.

"Accept him, Skie." Dynaheir's rich voice carried well as she poked her head around the door. The inn walls really were thin. Edwin looked furious.

"Um, yes! Yes, I accept. What do you want to do first?"

"What do I... (Ah, yes, though I fear a trap of the Witch, this girl is biddable indeed. Wait! I recall!)" He looked suddenly taken aback. "You will be so kind as to tell me why apparently every hapless assassin on the Sword Coast recently took up residence in Nashkel for the purpose of killing you and the others."

"We helped stop the Nashkel mine poisoning which I suppose made us a few enemies, and...and it's also my father," I said. The most believable lie is one mixed with the truth, Eldoth quoted to me once. "I know it sounds a lot like boasting, when I'm here alone and penniless, but..."

"Yes?" Edwin tapped his fingers impatiently.

"I mentioned the escort we were meeting... The fact is that Daddy is one of the Grand Dukes of Baldur's Gate. His rivals must think he's vulnerable at the moment because...because my brother Eddard recently..." It's still too soon to think about it.

He quickly started patting my hand. "There, there. (Please Mystra don't let it set her off again.) Your father, a provincial nobleman, is already under distressed emotional circumstances and his rivals desire to eliminate you to further destabilize him. (Ah, in Thay I suspect she would be already dead.) Correct?"

I nodded.

"Very well. With this escort of yours and my magical skill, such things will cause no difficulty. (Ah, my intuition that it was nothing serious proved correct. It was perfectly wise of me to refrain from asking this question before offering the girl my under-regarded services.)"

A guard's head at the door was an interruption. "Package for a Lady Skie, tagged, cleaned and labelled as best we could, like the witch said." I looked into the large wooden crate, and recoiled: I recognized the belongings of the dead people.

"Don't be so squeamish, child." Edwin pulled out a blue potion and read the paper tied around its neck. Potion of Magic Blocking. What a disservice to my skills. Scroll of Magic Missile--infantile--scroll of armour--already know it--scroll of Burning Hands--that will be mine. (The cheating witch will not be the only one aware of it!) Enchanted helmet--the fools couldn't tell what for. Hmm. Oh, that's a very good-looking giant battleaxe. Very nice giant battleaxe..."

"You totally palmed that ring, didn't you?" Imoen joined us, sticking her tongue out at him.

"No I did not I was merely examining it. Not the Ring of Wizardry I dream of someday finding, I fear. I am sure it is mere trash." He threw it carelessly up in the air; Imoen caught it.

"There's a label saying 'unidentified ring' on it, should I get Garrick? Oy, Garrick, over here!"

Garrick obeyed the summons, still running a comb through his hair.

"It's a Ring of Infravision, for seeing in the dark like elves," he said--I remembered one of Xzar's comments on the subject, and shuddered--"and this is a helmet that does the same thing. And this enchanted studded leather, Skie, this would probably fit you, or you could wear this twice-enchanted
leather..." The second outfit had a dark stain on its midriff the Flaming Fist cleaners had been unable to remove; I fancied the shape of horse's hooves.

"We killed people for these things! I know, I know, we had to go through Mulahey's stuff and everything, and take weapons and things, but--I'm not wearing anything belonging to dead people and I don't see why you're all so excited!"

Garrick dropped the armour he held; Imoen sighed. "Look, be realistic," she said. "Ol' Gorion and Winthrop've told me all about proper adventuring. These people nearly killed us, don't ya think we ought to have some protection? How'd you like it if Garrick here got an arrow through the chest if not for some nice studded leather?"

I paled at the thought of more friends dying. "All right, I'm not saying it's wrong or anything." Garrick did have nothing more than thick cloth protecting him. And Imoen with that kobold's arrow through her down in the mines... I remember just trying to stop the blood; I'd have done anything.

"Wrong? Ha! Looting corpses personally is typically below a Wizard of my position, but it is well known to produce useful results," Edwin said.

Imoen nudged him with a boot. "Havin' you on the side isn't a good thing, y'know."

"I...I would think that you are right, Lady Skie!" Garrick burst out. "We should have what we only buy honestly..."

"Garrick with an arrow through the chest if not for some nice studded leather. "No, wear it, Garrick... The studded leather is almost your size. Really, Imoen's right. I've still got the shiny sword I took anyway."

"And a nice ring of infravision for the girl sneakin' through gnoll strongholds. I'm taking these good-looking boots...should be handy dodging arrows if I'm gonna be the greatest transmuter wizard in Toril...."

I did wear the ring.

"Minsc and Boo are overjoyed to see everyone up again, except for the Nasty Red Wizard." He clumped into view, Branwen and Dynaheir beside him. "You have the valiant spoils of battle collected! Minsec's witch has said these are for little Skie, as battle-plunder seized from wicked gnolls." He handed a pair of gauntlets to me. "Boo says they make others as nimble-fingered as little Skie and Imoen the pink witch."

A grey potion half-slipped from Edwin's hands as he did some unintentional, frantic juggling.

"How dare you startle me!" he fumed. Imoen giggled. I passed the gauntlets to Garrick.

"Skie, Imoen: wouldst thou exit with me?" Dynaheir asked. She carried her full pack with her, as did Minsc. "Perhaps we may wander about the town. It astounds me; the streets of Rashemen are empty compared."

"I've been to this town before too," Garrick volunteered.

"'Tis best thou complete thy identifications, good bard. Come, Imoen. We shall discuss a new spell for thee."

Edwin scowled, but did nothing. "(Attempting to hide in the shadows would be beneath my dignity. I suppose I shall extract the truth from the little thieves later.)"
"This scroll is an invocation to create a shield, which I scribed for thee early this morning; dost thou understand the runes?" she explained to Imoen. "Its effect is of a magically crafted shield, best effective against missile weapons, but not useless against others. The necessary component is..."

I couldn't follow them; I trailed along beside them, paying only polite attention.

"Yep, I think I got it! I'll scribe it into my own spellbook tonight," Imoen said, bringing out her tattered collection of pages covered in pink cloth from her hood's lining.

"Take care, for an error in concentration mayst spoil the scroll itself, leaving thee with nothing," Dynaheir warned. "Now, Skie." I jumped as she called me. "Thy plans are to travel to Beregost, and there meet guardians to take thee and Imoen to thy home?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then Minsc and I shall depart. We shall be in Baldur's Gate ourselves ere a month has passed; thou and I must meet again."

Meet again. They were leaving—I was surprised. It hadn't been long since we had known the Rashemis, but she and Minsc had both saved us, in their way. "But...why?" I hoped we would not encounter more assassins or bandits on our journey up to Beregost.

"I am not ungrateful of thy rescue," she said. "The Red Wizard has sworn himself to thee, and once knowing I am no longer present shall depart without anguish. Do not, of course, inform him of this promise. At that time, Minsc and I shall be in thy city. Thou art most welcome to seek us out...and indeed I may do the same. So I bid thee farewell."

"Yup, look us up," Imoen said. "I'll learn more spells 'till I'm the best lockpicking wizard on the Sword Coast, don't ya worry about that! Skie?"

That was of course the cue for Imoen and I to rehearse our Plan we've worked out. The Plan; a cheering reminder even after many assassins. We even have all the special gestures memorized, because sometimes you can't make noise in case guards hear you: "Go to Baldur's Gate, join the Baldur's Gate thieves' guild, and be the greatest thieves and theiving wizard on the Sword Coast!" Our fists bumped together and we did the extravagant handshake signal, dancing in the streets.

Dynaheir looked as if she were stifling a very bad head-cold, her mouth opening and her eyes popping out--"Truly I didst not consider thy specialist class of Transmuter to have been chosen with that aim in mind, Imoen. But thou hast noble souls, I am sure. Farewell."

"Boo will miss his companions in butt-kicking!"

Edwin hasn't talked to anyone all the time we've been walking today. I'm so happy we're nearly to Beregost and Daddy's escort.

Theoretically we briefly rest on our journey, but Branwen is talking about 'fighting drill' and 'my conscience as a priest of Tempus shall not rest if my companions cannot defend themselves in true fighting spirit!', and glaring at Imoen, Garrick, and me in particular. Maybe I can plead my ankle to get out of it; it still feels rather stiff. We're nearly home free.

59. Blowing Wind: 8 Kythorn

7 Kythorn, Hour 21
It's sweet! Branwen's gone to join Minsc and Dynaheir. We only had to fight one group of gibberlings on the way here (Edwin helped when one of them got too close to him, and Imoen is pestering him about Conjuration spells), and made it to the town gates. (The assassins...well, I know with an escort and in Baldur's Gate we'll be safe.)

"So we have reached the town in good health," she said. I yawned; we'd been walking for some time, and the forced combat drill...! "If you need my hammer no further, I shall march onward in the hope of slaying more vile bandits of Tranzig's ilk! By Tempus the debt I owe you shall be always remembered, but I have given you some little training, and I should much rather complete fighting deeds than join an escort to that merchants' city!"

"(Your brains shall undoubtedly not be missed)." Edwin muttered something it was difficult to hear.

"Well, thank you," I said to her. "You rescued us and healed us so many times...we'll miss you. There's no debt."

"As well...the fine berserker warrior mentioned his witch intended the direction of the Red Canyons," she said more softly. "After we fought side by side, he did compare me to the strong fighters of his homeland, paying compliment as a fellow warrior...if I were to meet the pair again, do you think that they would welcome my battle-prowess?"

"Yep, definitely," Imoen said. She winked at me. "I think he'll like that."

"He is a fine warrior. A man as large and strong as those in my homeland, but with respect for women..." She touched her cheek.

"Yes, that's really... I think you'll get along nicely." I said. A chance for matchmaking! It's so sweet that Minsc and Branwen can pursue a further connection. And maybe, for the unknown assassins, it's best they all leave.

"Like-minded, evidently," Edwin commented under his breath. I hope he doesn't tease Garrick about Imoen.

"Then farewell, noble companions!" She slapped me on the back so hard it hurt, and set off east.

And when we went into the town, we met Elminster. Actually, it was the second time. Imoen and I ran into him not long after meeting Monty and Xzar, but he just seemed like an ordinary old man then; I'm glad we were polite to him. In Baldur's Gate my stepmother and her friends would do anything to get him at one of their parties.

It was...very strange talking to him. Of course one has to be respectful to mages like him (Edwin was not helpful here), but he carried on about bandits to the northeast above Peldvale. Well, of course I'll tell the escort to avoid veering too far to the northeast--bandits are still less deadly than the Cloakwood--but it's not like we're planning to go bandit hunting. That would be stupid.

Since nobody's found us yet, tonight we rest in the Burning Wizard. (Garrick has said Feldepost's inn got pretty...disturbed...when Branwen went there, and we won't go to the Jovial Juggler again.) Tomorrow we look for either a letter from Daddy or the escort. They'll protect us from any more nasty assassins.

8 Kythorn

It's a horrible letter left at Kagain's house. I don't know what to think about it. I can't write; the paper is smudged.
The news of my son's death has been received. I enclose 50 gold pieces for the mercenary who performed this service.

When Gorion first contacted me regarding you, he told me only a tale of divinations and a need to send you to Candlekeep in order to protect you. Yesterday, I received two letters that told me the true story: one from Candlekeep, that Gorion was killed; the other from Gorion himself, sent to me in case of his death. It told this: you are not my daughter. Despite Gorion's honeyed words about your mother, I believe that she betrayed me. Perhaps Eddard was also no son of mine. Perhaps the fault was part mine in marrying too young a woman, but an unfaithful spouse is not a crime to be taken lightly.

In view of your partial service to me to inform of Eddard's death, I would send you gold in compassion for your plight, but I have heard other tales of your disgraceful conduct. Were you in fact my daughter, I would disown you for willfully cavorting with such disreputable folk as Kron. With corruption in your inheritance, the only advice I offer is to avoid further trespasses against society and law as best you can. Should you return to Baldur's Gate, the Flaming Fist guards will be warned of your criminal conduct.

Entar Silvershield, Grand Duke of Baldur's Gate.

Not Daddy's daughter? How can I not be my father's daughter? I have his eyes--everyone says so. Hazel, sometimes brown or green under different lights, occasionally yellowish (although that last part is mostly just mine). I know I look a lot like my real mother, at least the formal portrait of her, but Daddy has to be my father. Daddy's fair, my stepmother's fair, my mother was dark, I'm dark-haired and so is Eddard. Eddard--he looked more like me than like Daddy, but he definitely took after him in mind! Why did Gorion tell such a wicked lie? Or mistake. And I thought that my father was being cruel when he locked me away from Eldoth--

Imoen thinks Gorion wouldn't lie. Since he was her foster uncle I suppose it's natural she believes him. Gorion even admitted to lying the first time he talked to my father! At least she's a friend, when I need it most...

I have to get to Baldur's Gate. But how can we do it alone? Maybe Eldoth will come and help us--I know his refined speech could convince anyone the sky is green and grass is blue...

I didn't go on this journey wanting to make anyone want to hurt me. Lately I've just wanted to go somewhere with soft beds, warm water, somewhere close to home.

I've lost everything I used to be.

60. Sssr'dssnssts: 1364 DR

Sssr'dssnssts: 1364 DR

There was a day on which the Golden One came to conquer the pod of Sssr'dssnssts, the day on which the Golden One conquered each of the eighteen pods the Red Master had held. Sssr'dssnssts remembers the day most brightly.

In the caves of home Sssr'dssnssts wrestled with its podsib Rsssjss'nssts. There was a pleasant darkness and salt-scent of the lapping sea, and the strong smell in their breath of jellyfish-prey the
pair had caught and consumed before their game. Of the same nourisher and same birthing and identical in natural appearance, this first of Sssr'dss' sibs was as great a match as any; and Sssr'dss was nearing victory through none but its determined will. Today it was not practicing combat with mind-skimming, where the crucial trick was to breach through to only the opponent's combat-reflexes rather than become overwhelmed by a vastness of mental debris. Today Sssr'dss wished to practice pure fighting only. Sssr'dss falsely aimed to Rsssjss' side to provoke a shielding from its sib; Rsssjss grasped at the shifting. Sssr'dss had considered its following move in its head, dreamed clearly of the motion of right-hand bones extending and the vital cut made at the very point of Rsssjss' distraction. Ssr'dss could taste the pleasant victory even now.

But then on that day different to so many other play-wrestlings, the rumblings of a loud call echoed through the caverns, the summons of a Greater, the very earth shifting under a power that was perhaps even that of the Red Master.

"Hasten, Rsssjss!" Sssr'dss reluctantly lowered its hand to cease the fight. Something attacked the pods.

"It may be monstrous," Rsssjss the more fearful responded.

"Then it will be a shape almost suitable for us!" Ssr'dss said. It had not its gift-stripes yet from either Greater One in its pod, but it was only a season from reaching maturity. Would that the Red Master was less cautious in Its ways. It ran to the pod's meeting-place. The Greater One Wsssstssstsss'nssts had been birthed by the same nourishing parent as the podsibs, and Sssr'dss hoped that Wsssstssstsss would recall that the high blood might well appear in it also, especially in a time of crisis.

Sssr'dss hastened along the narrow passageways. Challenges to the Greater Ones were called in the pod-centre; but today, there was merely chaos. Ssr'dss called to the veteran Lsssrsss, a decrepit old one who told tales of impersonating and consuming thousands of primates in its lifetime, and who was always willing to gossip, though generally Sssr'dss preferred to hear the tales of conquest.

"Lsssrsss!" it called. "Where is--"

Asking the feeble old thing, Sssr'dss realized, had been a waste of time.

MY SERVANTS THOSE TRULY SERVING ME TO HALL TO HALL TO HALL

The Red Master. And Sssr'dss had all but missed this event! It grasped at its podsib's arm, dragging Rsssjss onward.

"I do not feel the compulsion-requirement," Rsssjss protested. "Should we not remain, and later--"

Ssr'dss' pod were all running about like stupid primate-animals flopping about with their heads removed, as Lssssrss' stories often had it. The Red Master's hold upon them was suddenly weak. Sssr'dss felt as if its footing had been lost on an egg-hunt, that while climbing the cliff the rock had turned to none but air, and Ssr'dss was falling.

Ssr'dss would see this event; perhaps it would be the one to rescue the Red Master and prove it could become a Greater One; perhaps any change could occur. A fall was an avian-flight by the proverbs. Ssr'dss felt faint dark stirrings inside itself; it had never known the Red Master's leash so weak before. It had never guessed that it could feel such...uneasiness. But Ssr'dss told itself that it would try.

"Sssr'dss, please--" Its podsib was too weak. Ssr'dss ran to the hall of the Red Master, the protesting Rsssjss drawn with it.
The Red Master lived in luxury within the centre of the nobles' large warren of caves. The centre of it was a large cavern, floored in pale tiles, where blood in fights was often spilled whilst a magical dome confined the combatants. Sometimes the Master forced two Greater Ones to battle each other for Its amusement, sometimes a Greater One to face a beast It had procured, or sometimes even one of the Master's own race, in ritual challenge against each other. The Red Master Itself was undefeated; it had been Ssr'dss' privilege, only once, to watch It destroy a Greater One of another pod who had displeased It.

It was not one of the Red Master's race who battled under the mage-field today. It was a large primate who wore heavy dark armour; the armour of the elven primates was supposed to be fine, so its classification would probably be a human, Ssr'dss thought. Around its chest were strapped a series of small vials, each containing purple liquid; it paused in the swing of its large sword, and raised one of the vials to the darkness of its helmet. The empty glass fell to the tiles, shattered by a step of the primate's metalled boots. From the glittering shards lying about them upon the tiles, the potion was not the first that had been consumed.

"My mind is empty, Ssr'dss..." Rsssjss wailed. The blows of the sword forced the Red Master back; but these did not prevent It from attacking the strange warrior in return. A blinding headache took Ssr'dss, and the voice was restored.

TO ME MY SERVANTS AID ME NOW

The Red Master's tentacles struck the primate warrior a blow that would have felled any Greater One. The warrior did not falter; its sword struck powerfully, and one of the red-patterned tentacle was almost severed. It hung from the Master by a single thread of flesh. The Red Master's scream was terrible to hear for Its servants.

The command forced Ssr'dss and Rsssjss to the crowd massed about the arena, the Greater Ones at the forefront, the mass of the Master's servants attempting some means of breaking through. The sealing was triggered by battle and prevented escape from the duels of the Red Master; it did not need to prevent the escape of this warrior. Ssr'dss caught the beginnings of a chant of a ritual of dispelling from some of the Greater Ones. It recognized Wsssstssstsss'nssts amongst them, a worried look resting on the Greater One's face. The pain of the Red Master continued to throb in Ssr'dss' head.

"We cannot obey the order! Please, can we not run?" Rsssjss pleaded. They could not do that; the compulsion-requirement was too strong. The Red Master ruled them and they could not abandon It.

The primate gulped another potion; discarded another sparkling vial to be crushed. Ssr'dss saw it as though Ssr'dss itself stood in that arena, the primate's height and strong bulk, the enchanted armour, the sword shining some dark colour--Ssr'dss would never have used that phrase before this moment--the horned helmet, and the glowing yellow eyes Ssr'dss saw, as the Red Master flew to hit the side of the arena's shield and the primate turned to face them. It raised a gauntleted hand that held two tentacles; and dropped them upon the ground like so much waste.

Golden eyes. Ssr'dss could no longer call it only, the primate.

TO ME TO ME TO ME...

The blinding headache took Ssr'dss' vision. It heard Rsssjss crying out, and steeled its own jaw. It could be strong in the defence of the Red Master, it told itself. It could be strong if only...

Ssr'dss found itself able to look up in time to see the arena's shield dissipate. But the golden-eyed one was too fast, too powerful, despite the weight of its armour. It had taken up the Red Master;
grasped its neck in one hand; and had slain it. Sssr'dss could see the body hanging, the sword withdrawn from it.

Five Greater Ones were the first to attack the primate. Then the battle-dome appeared again in existence; Sssr'dss, who had been running to do likewise, was cut off from it. It would never tell Rsssjss, but it wished to void its bowels at the possibility of battle with that warrior.

Then the one with the golden eyes spoke for the first time, its voice full and deep, speaking the Common tongue.

"I am your new master. You shall serve me, or die now."

Wsssstssstsss, who was quite old for a Greater One, was amongst the five, and became the first to be sliced in two by that sword. Two Greater Ones used magic to speed themselves, mirror images for protection; yet the quickness and strength of the golden-eyed one overcame them. Another cast a spell to wound, which seemed to fizzle and die at the warrior's flesh and only burned its caster; and the fifth of the Greater Ones was simply wounded deeply, flung aside like so much offal. Blood washed over the tiles like a flood.

The exercise had held scarcely ten breaths of time. The warrior marched to the arena's shielding, which still appeared because the last Greater One was dying rather than dead, and the power of his sword was sufficient to break it.

None other dared challenge it. The remaining Greater Ones, and Sssr'dss and Rsssjss and the other lesser, gave obeisance before it. A new master. Sssr'dss knew the absence of the Red Master, and held the thought of the new.

"Our eighteen pods--all our eighteen pods we pledge to you!" the Greater One of the north-west caves cried out.

"All of you will leave with me and join a caravan," the golden-eyed one said. "You will serve the Iron Throne; and my mortal father."

"It shall be as you say, Golden One," a second Greater One spoke; an older being by the sound of its voice. Golden One would be the name of the pods' new master, then. "You are more than mortal..."

It was more than mortal. Sssr'dss, on impulse--a simple thought-skimming found but a fraction of what lay on the surface, to the other it did not even feel as an attack--let its mind reach out, briefly, to the human-appearing golden thing. Sssr'dss' probe was narrowed to a needle's thinness, searching for the merest trickle of what lay within the Golden One's eyes. This smallest of glimpses all but destroyed Sssr'dss.

Power. Naught but that golden power lay behind its eyes, exploding brighter than any astronomical light. Perhaps a single word: murder? A fire ignited in Sssr'dss' head that burnt its thoughts to a fragment of ash; and an instant later it was behind its own skull again, with a howling and dark fear that the Golden One had detected it. With trembling terror Sssr'dss watched ready to beg for mercy. The golden eyes gradually turned to a more somber amber, but it was not possible to doubt the fury that could have been summoned back with the briefest of thoughts. Sssr'dss could not stop itself from shivering.

Orders were given. The pods of Sssr'dss' people would follow the caravans, join the Golden One's people, gain power through serving them. Their own people had not even time to clear their dwellings before the departure; there was no need for material possessions by a noble people, but even so Sssr'dss had once valued fishing-nets it had twisted, cunning traps it had laid in the waters.
Sssr'dss followed the Golden One with great willingness, knowing its strength and power. The replacement to the Red Master was a better fate.

Clan-legends told of the pods under a band of the Tentacles conquering a tower to the south crafted by the short-bearded inferiors, and that was greatness and memorial amongst their superior people. This, Sssr'dss hoped for down to its shifting still-shivering soft bones, would be identical.

The Golden One was a god, a god in the form of an inferior primate, a deception that marked it akin to the Noble People. They must also pretend not to serve the Golden One, Sssr'dss and its pod and the other pods learned in some order; instead they must feign that the lowly primate masquerading as the parent of the Golden One was their true master, until the Golden One destroyed it.

(The words that Sssr'dss read in the caravans, plucked out of minds far easier than the Golden One's blinding power, were: Father, Son, Merchant. How Sssr'dss longed to steal these inferior forms and to consume the inferior flesh that smelt sweeter than any other it had devoured. It was a deception that marked the Golden One as their true leader.)

The Golden One was the new god of Sssr'dss; and Sssr'dss' only wish became to achieve Greatness and adventure in Its sight.

61. Attack of the 4 Foot Vampiric Wolf

10 Kythorn

We're travelling again. Garrick tried to cheer me up about the letter:

"Seemingly half the population of the Sword Coast tried to kill us just a few days ago, and we were victorious! I know you can get back to the city, or...or achieve whatever you want, Skie."

"We killed them. Gorion, Eddard, Bassilus, Mulahey, Montaron, Kagain, Tranzig, NIMBUL, the cleric, that mage, Karlat, those three women, gibberlings and kobolds and gnolls and horrors." That list is too long. Also too melodramatic. "I don't know what to do any more! I don't know where to go!" I don't want to kill anyone else. (Sometimes we have to.) I can't go home now.

"Lady Skie, I promise I'll...I should like to stay by you..."

"You should go." The notes only mentioned Imoen and me; not Garrick, and of course not Edwin. "If there are more assassins, it's not fair on you! Just leave me here. I'll find something."

He said he wouldn't leave. Imoen...I did talk to her. If she likes him back, I won't try to make him go, and she said she didn't think he would leave. I told her about the people trying to kill us, the ones talking about Candlekeep and Gorion.

"There are people trying to kill us who must have spied on Candlekeep. I don't know who the spy was. Anyone who hadn't been there long and heard you talking to me. Maybe that weird man Shank who accidentally fell into his own knife in the priest hut. They only know me as Sky, they know you, and they knew Gorion. The man in the spiky armour, the one who killed Gorion...maybe they were connected. When he said 'hand over the girl and nobody will get hurt' I thought it was just because I'm a young woman and they were bandits... But now I think maybe he was one of those assassins after us. I'm sorry. I know what happened was awful..."

"Yeah, I saw it too," Imoen said fiercely. "Didn't hear it, only saw it.. You running into the bushes and all. Ya really thought they wanted to ravish you?"
"I was also carrying more gear than Gorion! I know I ran away. He told me to, I know I'm a coward. The two ogres he killed, the spiky man, a spellcasting woman with a Kozakuran accent...I couldn't see her face. It was too dark and wet. I think I'd know their voices again...and of course the glowing eyes are a dead giveaway." I didn't mean to pun. "Was he even human? Are there any demons or devils with eyes like that?"

"You'd've been toast with a critter like that there. So'd most of Candlekeep," Imoen said.

"Like that demon Errtu Drizzt defeated twice, who opened a gate to the Abyss, let countless fiends through, teleported instantly, used a lightning sword in a pool of water, and a whip of..." I stopped quoting books. "Yes, I don't want any devils and demons."

"All right, all right. So bad guys are after you and know I exist," Imoen said.

"Yes. The letters don't actually say...kill the red-haired girl. If you left, that might make it harder for them...But I think...I think if I were an assassin, I'd find and kill both the people mentioned...I didn't know I was doing this to you! I'm sorry!"

"If'n you think I'm leaving yer a bufflehead," Imoen said. I'm so glad. Even though it's selfish of me, Imoen's the best friend I have. "So what d' you think Mr G. did?"

Imoen was right; Gorion's magic was probably it. "I don't know. He mostly talked to me about history; obviously you were the one he told about magic. There's certainly no reason for these...people to think I knew his magical secrets. I'm just one of his friends' daughters."

"But they didn't know that," Imoen said. "And of course there was a little gossip about ol' Mr G. bringing a young girl home with him..."

"Ew!" we said at the same time, collapsing into nervous giggles.

Imoen pointed a wavering finger at me. "Foster auntie haha!"

We looked at E's letter again: an elliptically-phrased warning and vaguely-worded suggestion that assassins might find it harder to navigate the wilderness than Candlekeep. Not a very helpful suggestion, I thought bitterly. No sense in seeking the people called Jaheira and Khalid; from the last assassin's taunt, they had gone. It had been so foolish of me to have this journey on our own, when we could have had fighters helping us. Could E be Elminster? He made no reference to the letter when warning us about bandits; indeed he seemed in a hurry to be off, resisting Imoen's questions about him and Gorion. Damn him for underspecificity.

Also: Edwin. "I'm putting you in danger! I shouldn't take your services any more," I tried to explain.

"Surely the danger is decreased thanks to the...news received?" Stop being logical, you idiot. "I have no wish to remain in this squalid town while you drown your various sorrows. Inactive outward, inactive inward; I would I did not suffer these fools."

Maybe I should tell Edwin the truth. He's Thayvian, there's no way he's involved with whatever strange thing wants someone called Sky dead. But Dynaheir said I should keep it quiet, and...can I trust someone who introduced himself by wanting to kill one of our friends? That's an obvious no.

If I dismiss him from the month he promised with a 'we hate you, go away', he'll look for Dynaheir again. She has Minsc and Branwen with her-he's not going to win. That might mean he'll die. Like Kagain, unable to be raised- And getting Edwin trying to kill Dynaheir really defeats the purpose of sending him away to protect him. Or if he wins the fight, Dynaheir dying is even worse. On the other hand, if I keep Edwin with us and we make it to Baldur's Gate in a month (Eldoth can
help us if he is there!), I can talk to Dynaheir again and figure out some way to settle it without anyone getting hurt. And until then, I have to protect him from assassins. He's a wizard, he's not very strong and he's a little clumsy. But I also have to keep Imoen safe, and I know Garrick's not very good at fighting, and it's not as though I'm any better.

Garrick has a solution for that, though. He's heard gossip that to the east there's a warrior who likes to challenge passers-by for twenty gold pieces. We've got several hundred gold pieces as a result of the people who tried to kill us and a white wolf Minsc killed near the Cloudpeaks. If we can make it there, we should be able to hire her for some time. I was going to leave the gold for Sendai as partial compensation and give her a new horse when we met again, but screw Sendai's horse. (Not literally, thank you Edwin.) I never liked Sendai anyway and now she can have fun telling the story of how Eilma Silvershield's bastard stole from her.

It's making it through the wilderness to hire the fighter that's the problem...but we've taken steps. My hair is a dark green now that Garrick was nice enough to say goes with my eyes, and Imoen's is a lovely, very pale, pink. The cloak Garrick gave her looks wonderful, and I have to admit (but never to anyone else!) that I was partly responsible for helping them out. He showed it to me first, saying it was a treasure he thought I might like when he found it near Tranzig's rooms and that I was nymph-like, but obviously it's pink, so: Imoen! He looked shy and afraid when I said he ought to give it to her, but thankfully he must have gotten over it.

We've also got antidote supplies against spiders, a few good arrows for Imoen and me (she's decided to go back to the bow rather than her mage's sling), magic sling bullets for Edwin, and more provisions. That's all we could afford. If only I were home... Into another painful 'adventure'.

11 Kythorn

The Temple warned us! They warned us about monsters!

I cannot believe we are still alive. (Still haven't made it to Garrick's fighter either.)

We went out, trying to stay north of the ridges but still south of Larswood, where Elminster and Tranzig's letters said bandits were. Successful...up to a point. There was howling in the distance; Garrick loosened his armour and started reciting a spell. Suddenly there was four of him, like that assassin had created.

"I'll hold them off!" he told us. "The wolves shall have to defeat four of me before harming you fair ladies!"

Wolves racing toward us. Much larger than the ones Imoen and I ran away from outside Candlekeep; two light brown, the third even bigger than either of them with fur stained a dark purple-black. Garrick stood in front of Imoen and me, his shortsword drawn. I shoved him.

"Sense of smell-wolves have a sense of smell, Garrick!" I'm a city girl, but I've read that much. Magical images weren't going to stop him getting hurt. I ran. "Nice doggies! Nice doggies! Please don't chase after the spellcasters!"

Imoen was reciting something, too, throwing blue pebbles around me; a green arrow Eldoth showed me once hit the giant black one, from Edwin. The three wolves turned on me. Their breath smelled of rotten meat. The light-furred ones had unbrokenly black eyes, but red glinted in the stare of the third. I spun away from them. Stupid plan; what choice was there? You need someone racing into the fight, and I couldn't do magic like the others...

"Mysta curse me are dreadwolves hurt by normal weapons..." Edwin was saying. "Spells on the big
one! Attempt bows on the others, lackeys! No wasting!

No useful trees to run away to, here. I lashed out at random with NIMBUL's shiny sword, and heard a growl; cloth across my calf tore open.

**Imoen with her throat ripped out. Garrick with a wound in his chest. Edwin pale and killed.**

One leaped at me; I ducked, rolled, and got the other light-furred one between me and the black. Unnatural beasts; the smell was as bad as the gnolls' prison. Balloné grand; a three-quarter spin; spells from Edwin and Garrick hit the black one. I swear its howl made my hair stand on end. A green burn spread on its fur where the arrow's acid ate into it.

Three of Imoen's good arrows stuck in one of the light ones chasing me. It still nipped at my heels. Imoen was fiddling with her cloak, letting it billow around her. I kept trying to distract the wolves, which meant trying not to get killed.

"Yes! Bite 'em, doggie!" Imoen gestured; I was left with one chasing me, as the other leaped for the throat of the black. "This cloak is so great!" She's so good at magic.

**Just one. I can cope with just one doggie, right?** I kept running in circles. Wolves are too fast.

The wolf attacking the black one fell, stiff, to the ground. Then there was a lot of dark blood when its body was ripped open, and the other one kept panting after me.

Edwin's drain came over my head, Imoen's missiles from her wand, Garrick's crossbow bolts; I risked the chance to hit the wolf myself. NIMBUL's sword went into it like butter. Since it was already wounded, it worked.

Then there was the black-coated monster. I didn't want to look at its red eyes; I feinted and ducked around it. Claw-wounds in my leg hurt.

Its teeth went into my thigh. I screamed, struggled away, and tried to stab it. Not much of a try-I just scraped along its cheek. The second time it bit me, I was gone. Frozen again, helpless just like all the other times this happens to me. It was going to kill me. Crossbow bolts from the four Garricks went into it and did absolutely nothing. It knocked me to the ground, aiming for my throat.

It caught on fire. The black fur turned into a smoking mass. It howled and fell. Imoen yelled, hoarse-voiced in victory. She had so much fun learning that spell with Dynaheir, helping her cook dinner with it, those happy days when we were on our way back to Nashkel. I felt light-headed; there were important veins and things where I'd been hurt, I think.

She pulled the disgusting corpse off me. "Ya okay?" she asked. "Guess my shielding spell needs work. Hey, guys! Should I pour a potion down her throat?" Dynaheir had certified the potions from the gnolls' cave were genuine, as weird as that was to believe. I guess magic doesn't discriminate.

"You would drown her, you great fool. (Not that it would be any loss.)," Edwin said. "I would imagine staunching the bleeding might be a good idea?"

"Huh, yeah."

I felt very light-headed. The clouds above me were so pretty and fuzzy. I'd never realized that Imoen looked like a small fluffy pink chipmunk before. She tied up my wounds. I hoped they wouldn't scar.

"Is she all right? What did that foul beast do to her?" Garrick said.
"It will wear off (now if I could apply such a thing to his tongue, that would be beneficial indeed). Only the bite of a vampiric wolf, after all, a small thing to a mage of my ability."

"Vampiric wolf?" Imoen and Garrick both exclaimed. If I wasn't already held, that might have been a good moment to swoon.

"We beat a vampiric wolf?" Imoen yelped.

"A...a vampiric wolf! I have heard songs but never..." Garrick gasped.

"Indeed. The credit for the defeat of a vampiric wolf and two dreadwolves is mine...by which I mean, you lackeys were of some small assistance to me. (However did a mage of inferior talent memorize a fire spell long used by the Red Wizards and occasionally their barbaric outlands? I believe I have an appointment with her spellbook awaiting me.) Speaking of which, fool of a bard, I informed you your crossbow bolts would be of no use against the creature-necromantic energy is completely suffused throughout their bodies, mundane weapons are worthless (every student in Thay knows this!)-and yet you fired them in defiance of my instructions. Observe your utter ineffectiveness. Still, I suppose your wastage was minimal."

"Excuse me for trying to save Lady Skie's life!" The four Garricks were quite loud. "I think you know nothing of chivalry, Red Wizard!"

"It is the last province of fools, fool. Is the crying little thief recovered yet, apprentice? (Perhaps I ought to leave them...if that damnable witch had not deceived me so...)"

Imoen offered the healing potion; I came out of the hold gasping. Drinking it made me feel better. As long as there weren't scars.

There were more howls coming from the south.

"Uh, guys? I kinda think we should..." Imoen said.

We ran for it. Fortunately the urgency of it made me forget almost everything; I think I pulled Edwin along (mage robes are about as practical as dresses for running) and just concentrated on getting out of there alive. The Temple did not specify vampiric wolves!

We're still breathing. I even dared to check for scars, and it looks like it'll fade in time. I guess I should go help Garrick with dinner.

62. Shar Teel

12 Kython, Hour 5

Wakened too early by a band of gnolls. It was horrible! Nobody had any spells, and Imoen used the last two charges in her wand!

I went forward again (Imoen and I are the best at dodging, so it had to be one of us) and tried to get their attention. There were four of them, so I guess it wasn't quite as bad as the stronghold—why am I thinking these things? I'm not used to this sort of thing!

Dodging halberds is not ideal when all you have is a short sword. Imoen magicked one gnoll with her cloak, and he helped beat the other ones; I found a nice clump of trees to yell mean things at them while dodging around. Unfortunately this meant that one of Garrick's stray bolts grazed my left arm,
which hurt. One of them got too close to Imoen and Edwin, and I stabbed it in the back...there was so much blood. It's so cold too. Imoen snapped her useless wand and threw it away.

We keep moving, even though it's not even dawn yet. Where is Garrick's fighter?

—

12 Kython, Hour 20

We met her. She'd strong plate armour, a giant two-handed sword, a crossbow hanging from her belt, and really scary tattoos.

"Hold, travellers! I am Shar-Teel, and I challenge your best warrior to a duel. I don't fight women, so only men should step forward." Her harsh gaze raked first Garrick, then Edwin. "Though neither of you seem much like men to me!" she taunted. "Which of you weaklings shall be your champion?"

Garrick half-raised a shaking arm. "I could maybe...write you a ballad? About all the adventures you've probably had?"

"And Edwin's a wizard, he can't possibly fight you with a sword," I said before Edwin could say something completely tactless. "We came to ask if we could hire you."

"Hire me? Let me show you the scalps of my last adventuring party. Stupid male leadership did them in." She grinned. I was rather surprised her teeth weren't filed to sharp points. "And the party before that. And the party before that."

I swallowed. "All right then! How does your dueling thing usually work?"

"Twenty gold to me if I win. In the unlikely event I am defeated by a male, my offer has been to pledge my sword to their cause. So far none have met with victory, though sometimes I've had to slay a few cheaters who failed to get the message." She gave her sword-hilt a congratulatory pat.

Good; we'd expected something like that. "Yes, we can pay you twenty gold per enemy defeated." That might've gotten us a lot of the way to Baldur's Gate. "Garrick's said there's this reward out for bandits..."

"Don't you understand, little girl?" Shar-Teel gave me the same kind of contemptuous look she'd given to Edwin and Garrick. "I don't do this for gold. I do it for the pleasure of rubbing the nose of men in their humiliating defeats. I love watching their expressions just before I get the final stroke in...sometimes they piddle themselves like animals. Men are the weaker sex."

"Yes they are!" Imoen said. She winked at me, and tried to look mysterious by swirling her cloak again. "I am Imoen the Pink, a Great and Terrible Wizardess! Please can you join this group of...powerful women?"

"Very well, children, let's leave this foul sh...respectable warrior to her business," Edwin said. "(If nothing else, we can always fling the crying thief to the wolves and flee with alacrity whilst they fight over her body.)"

"Ah, and don't mind our sidekick Edwin," the Great and Terrible Wizardess said.

"Sidekick? How dare they mock me? There is but one Great and Terrible Wizard here, and he is not a pink-obsessed apprentice!" Edwin muttered to himself. "(Or a vacant-brained bard who has failed as yet to mend my robes.)"
Shar-Teel scowled at Imoen. "Do you attempt to manipulate my mind, witch? Woman or no, I will spit you as I would a plump bird!"

"Okay, maybe we shouldn't be, uh, hasty!" I said. "I guess we'll go and...run into bandits...and probably all die horribly..." I felt like Xan.

"Yes, probably," she said. "Point any male fools you wish to the end of my blade, and consider yourselves fortunate I did not gut you here and now."

She turned away; Edwin spoke out loud. I saw a white feather in his left hand, his sling in his right. "I accept your challenge!" he said quickly; and finished casting a magic spell.

Shar-Teel had her sword ready in her hands, and started toward him; Imoen ducked, trying to pull him back.

"Edwin, yer an idiot! What're you doing?"

"(Call me a sidekick, will they? I will show them my true place! Ha, sidekick. Great and terrible wizard, indeed! We shall see who the great and terrible wizard around here is!)"

Shar-Teel advanced upon him with homicidal intentions; and...stopped.

"Discretion is the better part of valor! I must...I must..." She raised a hand to cover her face, dropping her sword. "How can this be?"

Edwin looked at her in satisfaction. "Get away from me, chit," he ordered Imoen, "and hurry and pass me those gauntlets, you prancing imbecile of a bard!"

Garrick stripped Minsc's gauntlets off without a word and handed them to him.

"Excellent, excellent. (The lackeys are learning. Yes, though slow, they have proven themselves capable of learning.)" Taking careful aim with the sling, he let loose a bullet that we heard impact on Shar-Teel's armour. His second attempt, he missed, but the third grazed her cheek; she ran in first one direction and then another, making her an easy target at close range. Imoen or I could have shot her, but of course we couldn't intervene. She reeled backward, hitting her head on a branch; and then blinked, returning to herself. Her armour was pitted in several places from Edwin's stones. As she glared at him, the rest of us prepared to flee.

And she laughed. "A clever trick, wizard. I own that I am beaten." She advanced; she caught up to him, leaned down, and grasped him by the neck of his robes. "If you ever try that again I will rip out your spine and use it for a belt."

"(So this is my reward. Ah, I expect no less than threats of physical violence from the bestial specimens I am forced to travel with.) Very well. Put me down now; please put me down now."

Shar-Teel turned her attention to the rest of us. "If I'm to lead this party I'll do a better job than any man would. Bandit-hunting, was it? We shall find and slay every male bandit in these woods!"

"And why have you taken it upon yourself to lead?" Edwin said. It was very brave of him.

"Because I don't expect to see you marching in front and risking death with every swing of your blade, wizard! Keep pace or we aband—"

Garrick paled. "There is some creature ahead of us!" He pointed somewhere behind Shar-Teel. I saw a flash of dark orange scales.
"My petssssss...attack," a voice said near the movement. "I hope you enjoy...the artwork my prettiessss will make of you..."

"Run," Shar-Teel ordered. She screwed open the lid of a bottle she carried on her belt and downed its contents, which made her glow pink and her armour almost painful to look at. "Generous of the last adventurers I fought to leave me this! Girls, don't look at anything with scales. Find that voice and shoot it. Males, follow them. My sword will do the rest."

We obeyed her, hearing her cry 'If it bleeds, I can kill it!'. As we ducked and wove past the trees, we saw pale statues decorating the woods, figures in the exact shape of adventurers, human and halfling and elf. Moving below the raised arm of an half-orc, we stared at each other. None of us needed to say the word, basilisk.

"Has it occurred to anyone that we might follow the woman's first instructions to the letter, and simply run?" Edwin said. "(No, never mind. They are simply not intelligent, and I must bear the yoke of that burden.)"

"Do you have more spells?" I called to him. "You complained this morning you hadn't been able to memorize overnight, but you cast that horror! Can you..."

"I am not a spell-dispensing automaton, brat! I had but one spell reserved for emergency, and it has been used!"

"I'm out too," Imoen said. "So...where is he?"

"Attack, petssssss..."

"Okay, we can get up that tree!" Imoen said. The four of us scrambled up its branches for safety and camouflage. I saw a glimpse of the creatures, fighting the glowing Shar-Teel, and six gnomes. I fumbled in my pack.

'This is no time to indulge your vanity, girl—" Edwin said when he noticed what I had. "Oh, very well, carry on then."

My hand mirror; my hair was a little mussed. I quickly passed it to Imoen.

"I need it held here, in front of my face! I just want to see the gnomes..." Six identical gnomes in blue-and-brown robes. Had to be magic. He was chanting something; I drew my bow and aimed carefully for the gnome on the right. It winked out of existence when I hit it; none of the gnomes turned around. White light sucked at Shar-Teel. How many scaled creatures was she fighting? Two, three? We couldn't risk finding out. A second illusion disappeared. I heard Shar-Teel grunting loudly.

An arrow seemed to glance off the shoulder of one of the images, and fell to the ground in front of the gnome. He saw us—stuttered in his spell—and gestured. "Art in treess...yesss, get them, my pet...You will be art forever."

I didn't have time to duck. Imoen, her own eyes closed, still held the mirror; there was light green, and a flash that made the ground rush up to hit us. Edwin was the only one who remained on the tree, clinging frantically to a higher branch; Imoen, Garrick and I fell together. Blackened, twisted fragments cascaded out of Imoen's hands. My stepmother had her maid choose it for a gift to me one Midsummer, one of the fashionable mirrors blessed by Sune's shrine for unbreakability and reflectivity, decorated with mother-of-pearl roses. Some time ago, that would have mattered to me.

"SSSSTONE?" The gnome touched his pet: an eight-legged statue. The silver mirror. "YOU HAVE
TURNED MY PET TO SSSSTONE!

Four of him came rushing toward us, wielding his wooden staff. I cringed back. "For yearssss I have sssought appreciatorssss of my art. Become Mutamin'sss bride, fair human, and thisss world ssshall be our gallery..."

"Mr psycho gnome, I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but we are not interested in your rock garden," Imoen said, disentangling herself. "Right, Skie?"

"Yes. Completely disinterested. Will you let us go now?"

"If you refussse my offer of marriage, you mustsst burn!" He cast another spell, the acid arrows Eldoth explained were almost as strong as the arrows he makes for himself; I doubled over in pain. When Eldoth showed me, the green fire was pretty. It's not. "Pet? PET?"

"I love bloodshed," Shar-Teel announced, fresh from a victory over the other basilisk, and calmly cut him and his mirror images in half. I still have blood on me. She didn't even stop after that. She just bent down, searched the corpse, and drank two potions he was carrying.

"You've wasted a perfectly good wizarding robe, I hope you realize," Edwin commented from his tree. "Ahem. Would...someone perhaps like to help me down?"

This was another time we've nearly died. It's such a relief antidote potions aren't bad against acid arrows. I've asked Shar-Teel to teach me how to fight better. She'll start tomorrow morning.

We were also approached by an undead monstrosity who cried something about 'Korax'. Shar-Teel cut him down with one shot from her crossbow.

63. Early Lessons in Adventuring

13 Kythorn

The Silvershields are warriors. I've known the story of how we received the name since I was a baby. My great-great-grandfather Einar was a warrior, and he had a silver shield. It sounds like a frivolous thing for an adventurer, but there was a reason. Once he was a blacksmith's apprentice, and in the well of their village by the River Chionthar there was a trapped basilisk that turned everything that came near into stone. Nobody dared to go near it, but because Einar was in love with the baron's daughter, he made his own shield of dazzling silver. Then, carrying the handkerchief of his true love, he descended the well to the very bottom, just before midday. As the bright noontide sun rose and hit the bottom of the well, he brandished the silver shield. The monster could not help but view its own reflection, and turned itself to stone with a scream heard a thousand leagues away. Since then, Einar bore his silver shield in name and deed, and so have his descendants...

I'm a plagiarist, but I'm not even a Silvershield any more, and not a warrior.

She hit me in the jaw as soon as I woke up (and I did get up at the right time, dawn) and went out to her. Just to show me it was serious, she said.

"You're a spoilt little rich girl and because you asked nicely I'm going to whip you into shape. And I'm going to enjoy it." She pierced the ground with a longsword, just short of spitting me.

I got to my feet and pulled it out of the cold ground.
"I'm only giving you a one-handed blade. Thank me for generosity." She was holding my shortsword instead of her own weapon. "Which hand do you favour?"

"Both." I passed the sword into my right hand. All the weapons-instructors and tutors I've had made me use my right, but I still use my left hand sometimes in practice when I'm not thinking about it.

"Start with your left, then. I suppose we'll have to make use of any small advantages you have."

I started one of the standard exercises for the shortsword; it was different with a longer, heavier blade.

"Sloppy. Try to hit me."

"It's not blunted," I said.

"Exactly."

I swear to Torm I tried. I ought to have had the advantage with a longer, sharper blade, but I couldn't so much as graze her. All she did was defend, again and again and again. I dropped to the ground, exhausted, at the point I could not stand any more.

"Call yourself a rogue, don't you..." she said, running her thumb along the edge of my sword, looking hungry for bloodshed. "Try better feints, next time I allow you to duel me." She demonstrated. "Then go in for the kill. If you're not ruthless enough..."

I didn't duck in time. She left a precisely-placed nick in my earlobe, just below Imoen's right earring. Ruthless.

"Stand up, pick up those two rocks over there, and practice lifting them up and down until I'm ready to break my fast."

She ignored me as she ran through her own exercises; she was amazingly fast, for carrying such a large sword. I did not dare disobey...

My feet hurt. So does everything else.

—

14 Kythorn

Training again this morning. Shar-Teel made me do the feint she showed me the last session, over and over again. Even after I'm sure I had it right. And still she kept deflecting it...

"Try to fight? It's a surprise you tie your own boots in the morning, ninny!" she taunted. I think that's her general pedagogical strategy. "Again!"

It's a simple enough move. Draw the opponent's blade, shift twenty degrees, and make the strike to their ribcage. The way to a man's heart is a slit to the stomach then up and under his ribs. I bet she took that from somewhere. She had the counter for it, and kept doing it and hitting my shoulder.

"Stop it—please—"

"I thought you'd give up sooner or later, spoiled-brat, but not this quickly. Probably would've died fast anyway." She half-lowered her blade.
Contempt on her face. For the incompetent who keeps running away. She was leaving.

"Distracted! You're distracted!" Bring the sword up. Fast-as-possible. Get past her guard for once—

"Idiot—"

She blocked; I'd come almost a nail's breadth to hitting her. The closest I'd ever made it— I didn't want to start sobbing at how hopeless that was. She threw me off, knocking me back a pace; I tried again to attack her. Quickly.

"Show some spirit, brat! Rogue's tricks if you must!"

"Rrrrraaaaa..." Battle-cries. Hatred. She was Sendai at her most annoying; Kagain wanting payment for Eddard; one of those assassins; the kobold who shot Imoen. If I didn't think about it, I could try to hack away at her for longer.

*Rogue tricks. Rogue tricks rogue tricks rogue tricks. Hate this hate this hate this.*

She was going to kill me if I gave up. Someone else was going to kill the others if I gave up. The dishonourable throw-dirt-in-the-face trick I'd read about. It wouldn't work with her watching all the time. She was moving even faster than she had at the start.

The trees. A tree-branch. It took time to come up with ideas, six times she would have killed me in a real fight. When she stepped to block the feint again, I ran back instead of finishing the move; I dived under the tree-branch and pulled it back to throw into her face. A bit more daring, and I might have jumped forward and hit her, using the fact I'm shorter to get under the branch...

"Enough for now." She didn't let me do it. Stopping, it felt a great relief; I looked to the side and saw Imoen there, watching. I hadn't noticed her; too busy being angry and fighting. I felt myself breathing heavily, sweating like a horse. (*Perspiring like a lady*, my stepmother would say; except I couldn't be further from that now.)

"Go move some rocks, weakling. I'll tell you when you're done."

It was such a relief to collapse down when it was finally over. It hurt; but Imoen was smiling at me, and that made it feel better. She even passed me some bread-and-water.

"Hey...nice going there, Skie. 'S good you're working on it."

It was good to rest at last. And to eat something. "Thanks."

"It's like I learned magic to protect you. Now you're trying to protect us."

"Yeah. Imoen...Thank you," I said. That's Imoen: amazing. For her to help me like she did, for so long.

"No big deal," she said. She leaned back in the grass, staring up at the blue sky. "Y'know, when I was all alone in Candlekeep, I used to wonder what it'd be like to have a big sister or brother," she continued. "Someone else to be ol' Puffguts' or Mr G.'s foster kid. Someone to look out for me, cover for me when I got caught nicking stuff, help out with the chores... And then I got you to look after, kiddo."

"I wasn't that bad!...Was I?" There are questions to which one never wishes to know the answer.
"Anyway, you don't know I'm not older than you," I said. "When's your birthday?" We could celebrate it; make sure she had a good one.

"Dunno. You know how ol' Puffguts found me?" Imoen had told me the story of how Winthrop caught her picking his pocket while he and Gorion had been journeying, and how she was then adopted by them. "The travellingfolk I was with then, they told me they found me as a baby. Lying by the side of the road crying my head off. They figured I might be bad luck because who abandons a baby, but they were nice enough, even in all that trouble—and then I came to Candlekeep. So I don't know anything like that. About who I really am."

"Maybe your family wanted you to be picked up for some—some good reason," I said.

"Candlekeep's my home. So it doesn't really matter anyway," Imoen said.

"Share my birthday. Then we don't have to argue about who's older," I said. "Third of Marpenoth. A pink cake with candles." It's been a long time since I've wanted a birthday celebration. "Guest of honour?"

"Deal. Big birthday bash—in the Baldur's Gate thieves' guild!" We did the fist-bump again for the sake of the Plan. It was nice, sitting there; almost like Candlekeep, lazing on the rooftops in the sun and gossiping about everything and nothing, or celebrating Greengrass with Ulraunt's roses and Winthrop's fruit muffins. When I was young I used to want a sister, too.

Then of course we had to go on the march again.

After a while—when the pain started to fade a little—I guess I noticed that it was green and lovely. Trees of all sorts, oak and hawthorn and kinds I don't know the names of. We stayed well away from bears and weren't disturbed by anything else that morning, and that was good; nature is dirty and troublesome, but sometimes it's not as bad as usual.

—

14 Kythorn, Later

I'm such a great trap-spotter.

It was exciting at first. Shar-Teel was walking along in front of our group, in this place she says is the Wood of Sharp Teeth on the way to Larswood, when I saw something and yelled at everyone to stop.

"What is it?" Shar-Teel said. "If it's your feet, your cold, your nails, your headache, or your hair, I am going to chop you into small pieces and feed them to wyverns."

"(Emphatically seconded)," Edwin muttered.

I remembered a little about ettercaps setting traps from a book on Battles of the East. "Just get back. Um, please?" I picked up a stick once the others were clear, aimed carefully, and threw it to meet the thin line of spiderweb.

"See? It's an ettercap trap! Surprisingly complicated for their low-intelligence species," I said. The grey webbing had popped into existence over the grass and my stick, viscous and maybe poisonous. At last I'd noticed something they hadn't.

"Yes, congratulations, it's a trap," Edwin said. "Speaking of which, you brainless nin..."
Those who set the trap.

Two ettercaps and three giant spiders emerged. I didn't know ettercaps had claws so large, or looked so disgusting. But Imoen, Garrick, and Edwin all chanted their spells at the first spider, and it collapsed; Shar-Teel was already in front and ready to fight.

I could only draw my bow. Five good arrows left; I started using them on the first ettercap while the spellcasters concentrated on the spiders. Shar-Teel didn't hesitate to rip through its pale stomach, smiling as dark gunk exploded and spattered her. The second reached her, and its claws sunk deep between her armour, too close for her to swing her large sword properly. I aimed for the stomach she had ripped open—torso shots, easier to hit than head-targets, they say—and sunk the last of the good arrows to bring it down. Imoen's final magic missile sped past me and killed another spider. They still look so horrible when they're dead...

Shar-Teel, yelling wordlessly, took a dagger from her belt, slitting the ettercap's throat to get it off her. It fell; I shot an arrow for good measure.

The last giant spider was coming past Shar-Teel, to us; they're waist-height, those spiders, with fangs and too many eyes and disgusting fur. Imoen and Garrick used their bows on it, and Edwin his draining spells; I was close, and had to stab at it. Better Shar-Teel's longer blade, for enemies as horrible as this... She came, anyway, and finished it off.

"Antidote. Give it to me." She looked surprisingly pale beneath her tattoos; there was red blood on her armour as well as that belonging to spider and ettercap. Imoen gave her one of ours.

"D-do you need it bandaged?" I asked her. I'd been stupid again.

"Spiderweb will staunch it." She pulled some thread out of the head of one of the dead spiders. She glared at me. "Search the ettercaps for treasure and take any arrows you can reuse. From now on, you'll be marching at the front with me. Spot the traps and don't start any stupid bloodshed."

Hadn't she punished me enough after the training? I went and used a stick to poke around the bodies, only touching them when she yelled at me to stop being finicky. One ettercap had two human rings jammed onto its claws. Shar-Teel claimed them, of course.

—

64. Red Wizards in the Wood

14 Kython, Evening

Chanting sounded in the woods ahead of us; Shar-Teel ordered me to 'scout ahead and do that shadow-blending rogue's knack', so I hid behind trees and saw them.

"It's four wizards dressed like Red Wizards of Thay," I said. Very odd for them to come so far west, but there was Edwin. "Two men, two women. Are they connect..."

"I hate wizards," Shar-Teel said. "Remember, girl, a wizard always finds it hard to concentrate with a sword in his ribs. First you and I run in and start killing them, then you three pick one target each and fire missile weapons." It wasn't fair; I know I can't be good enough for that.

"I suppose, being Red Wizards, they are evil..." Garrick said.
"If'n the rest of yer're in, I guess I'm in..." Imoen chimed in.

"But what if they're wi..."

"They're probably my supervisors! You are not permitted to kill my supervisors!" Edwin loudly wailed. "(Unless I carefully arrange the assassination. Yes, and attain my own zulkirdom.)"

The chanting abruptly stopped.

"Well, well. One can recognize young Master Odesseiron's dulcet tones from quite some distance. Greetings." A tall man in a red robe stepped down from his stairs to approach us. His colourless eyes rested briefly on each of our group. "I trust you received your updated instructions? I shall not harangue you about the witch's newly-gained renown as a heroine for too long..."

"Yes, Denak. Master Denak. Yes, of course I received your instructions, and that is why I am here in this group," Edwin said. "Naturally I am far, far more successful than the witch thanks to your instructions. Obviously I am following your instructions."

"Good. Zulkir Nevron would be most disappointed if he were to hear that you failed. That is all that really needs to be said."

"As...as a matter of fact, Master Denak..."

"Don't be mean to him, Denny," a matronly-looking wizardess said, her long robes flapping behind her as she approached Edwin. "Now Eddie, these people can't be taking good care of you. Look at those shabby robes!" She dusted him down; Imoen and I exchanged a glance. "Your mother asked me to look in on you, and she would be so disappointed to see you like this. Don't forget to trim that straggling beard of yours now! And not even a hello for your auntie?"

"Hello, Auntie Lasala."

"That's a good boy. Is he eating a proper diet, lots of greens?" she asked me. "Eddie's never been very strong, and his mother and the remainder of his aunts would be so upset if anything happened to the dear boy. Of course cousin Sulia could resurrect him as one of her undead servants, but it just wouldn't be the same." She pinched his cheek. "If I don't see healthy roses on those next time we meet, I'll tell your mother to put you back on the formula she used when you were twelve. Do you remember how you used to try to summon hell-hounds to eat your cabbage?"

Imoen and I giggled.

"Auntie Lasala! I am a mature wizard and...and (And perhaps I ought not to distract myself from the stunning exercise in subterfuge to follow.) Master Denak, your instructions were most...most enlightening. I read them—nay, devoured them—with the greatest of joy. However, I also found them a little...yes, a little subtle. A trifle subtle, as befits your ready wit. Perhaps you could...re-explain them to me in a brief verbal discussion? In private?"

"Humility at last from Master Odesseiron." Denak smiled thinly. "The same Master Odesseiron who widely circulates unflattering sketches and commentary upon the intellectual, sexual and physical inadequacies of his tutors?"

"I was almost completed the summoning circles before grossly interrupted—"

"Master Odesseiron, who widely circulates unflattering sketches and commentary upon the intellectual, sexual and physical inadequacies of his tutors?"

"Many apprenti—fully qualified and widely experienced Red Wizards have the initials E and O."
"Let it be known for the record that I have never overcompensated for anything! Master Odesseiron, so close to 'perfecting a method to preserve my godlike physical form and divine wisdom and intelligence in order to avoid the primitive lichdom of zulkirs I shall replace in due time'?"

"Another project I was most brutally interrupted in—" He looked at us staring at him, and sighed. "Enough! Please, Denak, may we have this private discussion of your oh-so-gracious literary skill?"

"Modesty is praiseworthy. A tragic lack of reading comprehension is not. Come, Edwin. I will explain these...political complexities...as simply as possible."

Edwin obviously didn't want us following; well, antagonizing five Red Wizards might not be a good idea. Stupid bloodshed, probably mine. I asked about Dynaheir:

"Dy—The witch is a heroine? Is she the one Edwin wanted to kill? Was there any mention of a cleric with her?" Hopefully Branwen had caught up to them.

"The witch is a heroine for her alleged redemption of a madman called Brage," the other male wizard said, so soft-voiced that Imoen and I had to strain to hear him. He was the only one of the four who wore the traditional Thayvian tattoos over a shaven head. "I assume that she had the usual bodyguard complement, but we care nothing for that."

A sudden, strong harp-note rang through the clearing; we looked to Garrick. His small harp was in his hands, but it wasn't him playing; the second wizardess, a blonde woman, stood over him. I hadn't seen her move at all.

"I like music," she said. Her large, violet eyes were the only spot of colour in a thin, almost skeletal face. "Please play something."

Garrick grimaced. "I have...I know very few songs of the Red Wizards, and those are not, well, er..."

"Flattering?" she said gently. "But we like those ones best. They signify our potency." She paused, twirling a stray lock of fair hair between two fingers. "Or you can sing about corpses. I like corpses."

"How about...uh..." One of her arms snaked around his shoulder, her red-painted fingernails quite close to his neck. She rested her chin on his shoulder. "How about a nice lullaby? A...another wizard I met used to like those..."

"All right," she said. I would have gone down and tried to help him, but Lasala laid a hand on my arm.

"Ignore Diana," she said firmly. She sounded so much like the housekeeper who came when I was eight—who ruled the stairs unquestioned with an iron fist and hefty knot of keys—that it was clear she had to be obeyed. Garrick's soft harpsong rung about us while Shar-Teel glowered. "Now, you were saying that you and little Eddie met the evil witch? And thus she lives?"

Lie for Edwin, or face the wrath of his aunt?

"Dynaheir is—" Imoen started indignantly. I made a quick decision in favour of the former.

"Dynaheir was tricked!" I said. "I'm still not sure how he did it, but Edwin's a real smart guy. He tricked that witch and sent her to the dangerous forests near Nashkel, so we could travel in peace!"

"Yup. He really tricked that darn evil witch all right," Imoen said, sounding as though she was experiencing a bad case of lockjaw.
"Then I suppose that's something to go favourably in Eddie's apprenticing reports," Lasala said. "He's so close to finishing, with full honours... He's a talented boy really; the family would never turn out anything less. I have some engravings here, if you are interested..."

"Oh yes," Imoen said firmly.

The wizardess produced a long string of miniatures from some extradimensional storage space. "Here's young Eddie's parents together—his mother's one of my sisters, of course; can you see the resemblance?" There wasn't much similarity between the plump wizardess before us and the tall and hook-nosed woman in casual dress, but we nodded politely; "These two he finds quite embarrassing, but it's good for him really, and they are adorable pieces of art..." In one, a naked, chubby baby splashed in a bath; in the second, he appeared engaged in blowing spit bubbles. "Here's another for his apprenticing-start, one his mother sent me. Not the most flattering expression, but we were all very proud of him." A very pimpled young Edwin glared at the artist, wearing red-edged robes that seemed to swamp him; "And here's my own daughter Bellissima next to him." Bellissima in her apprenticing-portrait was a short, roundly built girl with enormous spectacles that seemed to cover her full face. "She's a full-fledged enchantress now; here's a more recent picture..." She still wore large spectacles, but they did not distract from oversized front teeth and very freckled ears. "Like Edwin, she's done so well—why, her zulkir said to her just the other day..."

I knew the word for her tone of voice: family. Talking about the large number of people she loved to anyone showing interest, boasting about offspring and nephew—like one of our nicer cooks, her first son who was a guard and her second son who worked for a merchant and her daughter studying to be a priestess. For me at home, it was mostly tutors and nurses; everyone else always had their own concerns, my stepmother's socials and Daddy and Eddard's soldiering and business, and mostly I was left in the library. Lucky Edwin.

"...actually, there's been talk of matchmaking between them, but it's better to let the young things have their careers first, and the poor boy's never been fortunate with women. Not as confident as my Belle, sadly. He hasn't been embroiled by any foreign seductresses, has he?"

Imoen grinned. "Well, yes actually! An, um, exotic blonde necromancer, probably working for some secret evil organization to solve the iron crisis..." I'd told her about the interplay with Xzar, of course. "She sounds quite delightful. Is there a chance we'll meet her?"

Imoen shook her head. "Alas, it didn't last too long..."

"What a shame! He even finds it difficult to secure concubines' company...strange. He's a darling, sensitive boy deep down. Are you interested in the wizarding arts yourself, dear?" Lasala asked, switching subjects. "Oh, I knew it! Which specialist school?"

"Transmuter. I wanted to cut out necromancy," Imoen said.

Lasala tut-tutted. "Don't let Diana hear you there, my dear. Though transmutation in itself is no bad choice; a handy school for crafting if you've a dextrous hand. 'Twas the path of another of my sisters, Lerella; the poor thing poisoned herself with powdered acid making a magical blade for her zulkir. It acted so fast that cousin Sulia couldn't do a thing with the body... On happier notes, I am an abjurer—most handy protecting against assassins, not that you'll want to know those joys; Diana practices necromancy (how much, don't ask her); Denak is a conjurer like Eddie, of course; and Brendan..."

"Illusion," Brendan said in his soft voice. He was vanished into thin air before he'd finished speaking; Shar-Teel placed her hand on her sword's hilt while Imoen poked the air in front of her. He reappeared behind us out of a pattern of shimmering lights.
"I can't wait to learn that!" Imoen said. "Useful for...y'know, Skie...our sorta stuff." She managed to look shifty.

"And what is your role?" Brendan asked me quietly.

"Sneak through the shadows and stab things," I answered promptly. If Thayvians have to have muscle or rogue to accompany them, in their traditional proverbs they prefer it of very inferior intelligence. "I like stabbing things. Stab stab stab." I waved encouragingly to Garrick, whose notes were starting to falter thanks to Diana draping herself over him. "Shar-Teel does too."

"A fine figure of a woman," Brendan mused, watching her continue to scowl. It was just as well she probably couldn't hear him.

"I think that you would make a very pretty zombie," Diana said to Garrick.

Edwin and Denak returned to us, the former looking very blackly indeed at Imoen and me, still with Lasala's portrait collection in front of us.

"Children, I think you two must stop bothering my aunt immediately and be gone from here forthwith. (Has she shown them those pictures? Why must the fates treat me so unjustly?)"

"Why, they're quire nice young things, Eddie!" Lasala said. "They're not bothering me at all. Do look us up if you ever get to Thay, my dears. And I think that perhaps you will."

Perhaps we will. This is only the first time I've travelled outside home. If there is a civilized way to get to Thay... I'm sure that my spoken Mulhorandi is very rusty, but it would be interesting to see places I've only read about. I said, until the next, the standard Thayvian farewell, in her language.

But Shar-Teel still thinks we should kill all the bandits before we go back home. So, for now... It's just as well they disentangled the necromancer from Garrick to take her away in a teleport.

"That cousin Bellissima of yours, Edwin..." Imoen started.

"Is very talented at her chosen profession (Despite a generally underpowered specialist school) and happens to never appear well in portraits."

"You were once so very cute, Edwin..." I said.

"Be silent! (When I am zulkir I shall fireball those incriminating pictures with the most extreme prejudice possible.)"

"Really gifted at blowing bubbles," Imoen added.

"That is enough prattle! (Perhaps a torturous death for these children would also satisfy.)"

"Enjoying baths."

"Eating cabbage."

"Quiet lest I feed you your words on the end of my boot!"

"We lied for you too," I said.

"Lied? W-whoever said I told any lies back there?"

"Lied for you about Dynaheir," Imoen said. "Said you outsmarted her and that was why you haven't
"killed her. Of course we won't let you kill her anyway."

"You told Denak something like that, right?" I said.

"Obviously, yes," he said, his nose in the air. "The requirements of a Red Wizard...naturally since the Witch is not here and annoying me I must be given some credit."

"Yup, thought so. Wonder how we guessed the kind of lie you'd tell." Imoen and I exchanged a grin.

"What? Am I becoming predictable? Well, lackeys, a certain amount of law and order is all too desirable in a society! (Also when it comes to anticipating my wishes. How could servants possibly anticipate my wishes without some degree of consistency? But if they truly anticipated my wishes, I would not be obliged to clean our crockery in the evenings... Ah, drudgery.) So my supervisors are duly pleased with my acts."

"Can...can we please stop talking about it?" Garrick pleaded. Poor Garrick. His ordeal with Diana the Necromancer must have been tough.

"Oh, very well, since you have done me an unwitting service in the matter, bard (The only type of service I imagine you capable of)," Edwin said. "What I should be announcing is this: I have a new purpose for striding across Faerun, one that has none to do with the Witch. (Though it will be most enjoyable to kill her should she find herself in my way.)"

"That's nice," I said.

"I don't suppose you could accompany me to Beregost and relieve me of the remainder of the month?" he said, carefully examining his nails. "There is some degree of time-sensitivity; and it has occurred to me you have acted out of some inexplicable desire to preserve the Witch's life that no longer happens to apply. (Unless she dares interfere, of course.)"

Ruthless, Shar-Teel said.

"No. We'll need your help with the bandits."

He sighed. "Very well. I suppose I may keep my word for a little time longer (after all, I am a wizard and there is penalty in an untrue vow), but I will have no patience with foolishness."

"Yeah, you should stay, Eddie. I haven't finished copying all the spells from your spellbook yet," Imoen said.

"You—you WHAT? Ignorant little imbecile, a wizard's spellbook is sacred, akin to his very soul, precious beyond your imagining! You moronic simian, you have no right to desecrate my property! You know-nothing, repellant, obstreperous, intolerable, asinine, delinquent, thieving, irritating, pea-brained, meddlesome, merely-apprenticing brat! How dare you!"

"...Hey, just kidding. Heh heh," Imoen said. I wasn't sure if that was the truth or not. "Thanks for letting me know, Master Wizard."

"(Master Wizard is it now?) Then if you've no objection to...sharing spellbooks...I should like that fire spell from yours. I can give you the Horror incantation in exchange. (I am sure you are gullible enough.)"

"Hey, I know that's Necromancy, I'll never be able to cast it! I reckon...maybe one of those acid-arrows instead?"
"(I shall get the better of her yet.) Perhaps a nice Grease, then, also from the most superior school of all."

"Already learnt it from Garrick and it's easy." She stuck out her tongue. "C'mon, acid arrows, they seem pretty powerful. Unless you've got some nice lockpicking spells, which I don't think you do..."

"Which you have no reason to know, brat."

"Just guessing. Y'know, that you're too...classy and all to have nice lockpicking spells. Yeah, too superior."

"It is true I do not concern myself with petty theft. A delightful infliction of Blindness?"

I'm sure they would have continued quarreling, but there was screaming ahead of us.

"Help! Help, thieves! Help me!"

He was grey-haired, and wore a pale and dirt-stained tunic over leather armour. I gave him a hand to get back on his feet.

"Thank you, travellers. A band of tasloi assailed me—they ran east in the direction of the ettercaps' lair, where most likely they have been killed. They took a scroll of wisdom that the ettercaps may have stolen for its aura. I shall be wandering here for the next few days. Were you to return my scroll to me, I feel sure it would increase your karma." He looked hopefully at us.

Shar-Teel scowled. "The bandits we seek to kill are to the west," she said. "Why waste our time?"

"Karma," Imoen said, smiling. "We're adventurers, right? Let's find more ettercaps!"

"Idle delays for obviously incompetent druids I do not consider worth my time, but your idle delays are of no importance to me," Edwin said.

"Yes, we'll help," I said.

Edwin let out a sudden squawk. "It's biting me! Help me! Some giant poisonous creature! Aargh!"

There was an odd lump under his clothing. He danced around like he'd suddenly decided to do a tarantella, pulling up his robes to get it out: a very large squirrel fell, several scraps of light red material in its mouth.

"Foul—foul beast! Get away from me!" He kicked at it with his robes still lifted to his thighs, but failed to connect. It scampered away; Imoen giggled.

"It's so kind of you to aid an incompetent druid like myself," Fahrington said.

We set off east.

65. Traitors of the Ettercap Lair

15 Kythorn


Ettercap lair. We were going slowly so I had time to spot traps. We found tasloi bodies lying on the
ground. When there started being lots and lots of traps we knew we had to be close.

"C-could we stop here for the night?" Garrick pleaded. "A yawn is a sile..."

Shar-Teel gave him one of her glares. "No, male. Do any of your songs tell of the fates of adventurers foolish enough to camp on an entrapped ettercap route?"

He shook his head miserably.

"Go ahead until you see their lair's entrance," she told me. "I think we will rest south of here, knowing where to invade at dawn's light. My blade hungers for blood."

I saw a dark patch within the cliffs and three ettercaps around it. I ran back with a giant spider chasing me and we killed it. The casters got to memorize their spells; Shar-Teel kicked me awake early while she had the last watch. She said she liked exercise before slaughter.

We went in, disabling their web traps along the way.

"Reserve the spells, casters," Shar-Teel ordered. "Missile weapon backup. As for you, brat, guard them and try to learn something."

It was so black inside the cave. Then there were many shining ettercap eyes, and Garrick lit a torch he gave to Edwin. Ettercap upon ettercap, with spiders between them. All pressed and packed in together, webs thickly designed to protect them. As though they had expected an attack..

"Step aside, Eddie. I'm clearing a path right now!" The fire Edwin envied scorched out of Imoen's hands, burning through the sticky strands. Enough space for Shar-Teel to fight.

She's amazing to watch. No, amazingly horrible, I mean. (I want to learn how to protect the others like that.) Swinging as widely as possible; with the creatures so close together, she had to make her strikes account for several at once. Seven-in-one-blow.

They surged forward, past her despite her efforts. Some descended from the roof of the cavern. At first it wasn't so difficult to fight them; every time I stabbed, there was something on the end of it. I had no shield, only my shortsword in my other hand. Shar-Teel probably thinks shields are for weaklings.

One of Imoen's arrows embedded itself into the eye of a spider in front of me. I lunged forward to finish the job; poison poured out of its fangs, merging with its black blood. Everything smelt of carrion. You expect blood you've just shed from spiders to be warm, but it's cold; and you don't know whether that's worse or better. It crawls across your skin like a plague of maggots. Then there was an ettercap's claws, rising in defence of the pet. What was truly wrong was when it spoke.

"Prey...meat...badsscent..."

Words in Common. Ettercaps aren't supposed to speak.

"No!" I stabbed into it. I was lucky to find the vulnerable section on its underbelly. I felt it die; another spider took its place. Fangs pierced my wrist before I could do anything. I fought back; grabbed an antidote and drank, while Imoen fired a spell to save me, desperately snatched up my blade again. We kept killing.

"Not bad. Antidote," Shar-Teel said, breathing heavily. The leathers she wore with her armour were ripped and torn; lighter blood than black appeared on her left arm and shoulder; and deep markings striping her tattoos did not seem to be only dirt.
"Our last," Edwin commented.

"We're going down there." Shar-Teel pointed at a hole in the ground, in the middle of the closely-packed corpses. I tried not to think about the blood and the smells of it. "Probably trapped, so—you're first, rogue."

"We're...right behind you," Imoen said. If she hadn't spoken, I'd probably have broken and ran; it might have been better for all of us if we'd done that.

I knelt down and groped, touching more congealing blood. The light touch of a string of spiderweb; sever it quickly with the shortsword. Further down, in those sharp black rocks that anything could jump out of...

"I c-can't...I can't see anything down there yet, but... Ettercaps see better in the dark than humans, I know I've read that somewhere." I twisted the ring I wore. It must have been even worse for the others. I tried not to speak so loudly. "I think I've found all the traps up here so..."

Shar-Teel pushed me in and jumped down behind me. Webbing sprung up when my feet hit the floor; she escaped, I didn't.

So many more ettercaps. She charged into them.

I hate being frozen. I hate being trapped in my body while other people are free to kill me. I hate breathing and staring being the only things it's possible to do when everything else is horrible.

Imoen, mage-lights floating around her head, lowered herself in after Shar-Teel, climbing over me to escape free of the traps. "Gonna get you outta there. Hurry up, Eddie, Garrick!"

"Sshort oness firsst..."

That voice. It wasn't Shar-Teel or any of us speaking. It was something in the back; deep behind the other ettercaps. A bloated female on a roughly-carved throne.

Imoen. An ettercap darted up and hit her, knocking her into the back wall of the cave. Shar-Teel was trying to rush forward, let the casters and archers have their chance like all the strategy texts say, but—too many—Edwin's missiles came down from the roof, at one of the ettercaps fighting Shar-Teel. Two were coming to me, and I couldn't see Imoen any more—

Ettercaps are considered Aberrations, affected by magical entities outside this plane. Therefore, ettercaps' web traps are closer to the wizard spell of the same name than to the webs of natural, finger-sized spiders. These webs are more magical than physical. Because they are magical, they have a stronger effect on the ettercaps' prey. Also because they are magical, there is a small chance of them breaking.

I was lucky that day. The spell-strands relaxed. I ran to Imoen; she was trying to dash and duck from them long enough to defend herself. She was hurt already across her chest and on her arm.

My instructors at home wouldn't have been at all impressed with my random strike. Just hitting out at the closest one to Imoen. But I didn't have to hold them off for long. Her fire spell warned them back.

Kill the short ones first. Statistically, in the history books, spellcasters often cause more total casualties than ordinary fighters. Smart of them to want to kill Imoen and Edwin first. Smart of ettercaps?
Imoen and I ran for Shar-Teel's protection, dodging the webbing. It caught two of the attackers, but there were spiders around us. Poison-danger. Shar-Teel screamed a loud battle-cry.

"Assistance!" I heard Edwin cry. An ettercap was climbing up after him; I tried to get the spiders away so Imoen could shoot a spell to distract it. That must have given him enough time. The one after him dropped and ran, the same with several more around the room: Horror.

Several Imoens appeared in a row, dancing away from the enemies; they all reached for their cloaks.

"Distracted. Gotcha!" One frightened ettercap broke away and started to fight for us. "Two!" She sent a second into his own spiders. "Hurts." Blood on all of the images, staining her pink clothes.

"Imoen..." One of her images melted out of existence; she fumbled, dropping to one knee and rolling away from the spiders chasing her.

Guard the casters.

I flung myself at her; fell through one intangible image, dived down past another two, and found Imoen's blood on my hands. I couldn't stop her bleeding.

"Tymora..." One of her mirror images collapsed. The ettercaps and spiders were running closer. "Tymora, help—Silvanus—" We were doing this for a druid. "Imoen—" There was a lot of blood.

Her eyes opened. "Hey, lemme work here, kiddo." She sat up, feeling for her spell components. It had felt—well, it had felt like Silvanus had actually taken pity on our group and healed her. Like an electric shock striking me from her wound, feeling it close over—(this doesn't mean we have to join him now, does it?). I fought. It just had to be for a spell's duration, only a spell's duration—

Shar-Teel was nearing the ettercap on the thronelike chair. Method in her bloodshed after all. Imoen's spell released with a very bad smell. An ettercap I was fighting fell unconscious, the spell's border at the very edge of my nose.

Silvanus help us.

"You'll stop this."

"Foul—foul human—"

Shar-Teel had reached her goal. Her sword was held to the bloated ettercap's chest: the heavily pregnant ettercap.

"Tell them all to walk into that cloud."

"No—not sssurrender—" A spider attacking me fell back as Shar-Teel became still more of a threat to their queen, the sword beginning to open a cut.

Shar-Teel snapped her fingers in my direction. "Skie! Tell the intelligent ettercap exactly what we came for."

"Me...? I...The scroll!" I said. A scroll fitting Fahrington's description had been placed beside the throne, as though in a place of honour. Shar-Teel was trying to negotiate. That was good. "We came for the scroll that was stolen, so if you let everyone be knocked out then we can all get out of here alive. Please?"

"The ssscroll made by one of the massterrss...our greatness treassure..."
"First, order your servants into the cloud. Second, give us the scroll like she said." Shar-Teel can be terrifying. I wouldn't have said no to her under those circumstances. Or indeed anything other than 'help' or 'aieee'.

The ettercap howled. "Hate you...more children will avenge, hagsss. Lie in the foul air, my children. It sshall not be long."

They all...filed out, into Imoen's cloud. Two were still running from Edwin's fear spell; they eventually found their way into the vapours. Most lay down unconscious immediately.

Shar-Teel tossed me the scroll, keeping her sword pressed to the ettercap's stomach.

"Tell me, girls. Have we completed the nice little charitable adventure for that druidic dungheap?"

Imoen's robes were ruined with blood; her face was pale and dirt-streaked, with deep scratches on her arms and cheeks. I could feel my own cuts and bruises, especially now the fighting had stopped; I wanted to drop my sword and hide away somewhere safe. Down here in the dark, when we'd all been hurt. Not worth it, I guess Shar-Teel wanted us to say.

"Guess so," Imoen said.

"Good. A question: what exactly are you?" Shar-Teel asked her prisoner.

"Tell you nothing, beast." Intelligent defiance. These creatures—abominations? I doubted Shar-Teel could get more information than that, from their queen.

She shrugged. "Kill them all."

"Treach..." The ettercap could not finish her thought. Shar-Teel sliced open her stomach; she had been pregnant. Half-formed ettercaps in translucent shells, a large litter of them, gushing out of her in a torrent of pale liquid. Some of them were making faint noises, like small kittens—Shar-Teel crushed them under her boots.

"We said we wouldn't kill them—they're unconscious—" I said. Imoen had already drawn her bow.

"What would they do to you in the reverse situation, simian?" Edwin, climbing down from his perch in the cave above. He fired a magical missile into one of the ettercaps trying to stand up. An escaped spider was after Shar-Teel; they would show us no mercy now. I took my own bow from my back. "Personally, though, I find the creation of such clouds most unreliable. Horror is both effective against enemies and has the ability to discriminatorily avoid party members." Another two missiles rose from his hands.

"Shut up, Edwin," Imoen said. One ettercap was screaming, running to us out of the cloud in berserker's rage at our betrayal. I had to shoot it; Shar-Teel stabbed it in the back. We killed them all.

Something that sounded like a rockfall came from behind us. "Are you—are you in danger? Do you need help?"

Garrick had his shortsword drawn, and was looking at the enemies we had already killed. A bit late.

"We have to burn this place," Imoen said, closing her eyes. Talking ettercaps. Monsters. We had to.

Shar-Teel kicked at one of the dead ettercap-babies. "Very well. Raid for treasure, scorch the earth outside first, and let nothing escape."
"The imbecile ran the moment he could," Edwin murmured to me, glancing ahead of us at Imoen and Garrick. "I suppose it satisfies your ego to drag along the cowardly swain? It certainly fails to improve the competence of this group." I know how Garrick must have felt.

"Garrick's making his own decisions, and I can't tell him to leave unless Imoen says so," I whispered back. It would be wrong to send him away before she has time to make up her mind. "And I would very much appreciate it if you didn't mock either of them about it."

"If—ah, if Imoen says so?" He sighed. "(Once again it is apparent I am misunderstood and talking utterly at cross-purposes. The mentally deficient constantly defeat themselves through their complete lack of sense.)"

Shar-Teel made Garrick study the scroll, and it turned out it had a curse on it. The only thing we could do was to take it back to Fahrington...

He healed us; when he bent over Imoen, I saw Shar-Teel glaring, watching him carefully.

"Talking ettercaps," Edwin said. "Do explain your excuses for your tawdry scroll...good sir," he added, perhaps remembering the rabid squirrel. His right hand made a slight jerk in the direction of his nether anatomy.

"Yes, you may keep the scroll, adventurers. It will no doubt raise your karma after you laboured so hard to recover it." He went to Shar-Teel, frowning as he tapped her scars. "I see you have been in a good many more battles than the children you lead, lady."

"Children? I am several years the senior of those other infants!" Edwin said, quietly. "(I suppose the ugly and ancient druid envies my robust and glorious youth.)"

"I like to murder men who send me on false quests," Shar-Teel said.

"Oh, well, I find violence very personally distasteful, you know," Fahrington said. "That's why I like to travel out here and commune with the bears; lovely creatures." The growl of a lovely creature sounded, apparently not far from him. "I also dislike getting robbed, so I prefer to make these scrolls for some token comeuppance on the thief filching them." He looked at Imoen and me as he said that sentence. "But the story you have of this group of ettercaps—yes, very strange indeed." He finished Shar-Teel and moved on to me.

"Male, my sword aches for more slaughter."

"Patience, patience," Fahrington said. "You do not need to know these things. Events have concerned myself and my order of late. The death of Osmadi and others in his grove from bandits. The testimony of Corsone the Shadow Druid. You have confirmed certain of my fears, adventurers, and removed one band of enemies from the Sword Coast. It is not beautiful, and it is only truthful as far as I have found, but that is all you need to know. Go with good karma." I felt much better as his healing spell finished.

"Payment for our time?" Shar-Teel demanded.

"Surely—the karma scroll? Ettercap loot?" We had found some cheap jewellery and coin: things that sparkled, that ettercaps collected. "My healing time and resources?" He shook his head. "Greedy adventurers. Here, ten gold pieces and my eternal resentment. Good day."

"Thanks for the heal?" Imoen said; but the druid melted into the forest's shadows as smoothly as
water soaking into the ground.
I think... I think human bandits will be better than those spiders.

66. Peldvale Rains

16 Kythorn


We marched for most of the night to get up to Larswood, away from the areas with bands of creatures. Shar-Teel killed two giant spiders. Then, Black Talons, in their uniforms. Announcing themselves by shooting arrows of ice. Edwin ran for it. Shar-Teel drew their fire. Her armour blocks most of it, but... I ran around the side, trying to get past trees to come at them from behind. They have better armour than I do. (Too heavy.) Shar-Teel and I made them put down the bows, but they were both much better than me. One of Imoën's arrows got the second one in the end, when I was trying to run away from him.

We had to bandage Shar-Teel with what we had. Tried to rest, for a little while. It was her right arm. Worrying. A deep bruise; her armour stopped the arrow, but the ice still froze her skin. She'd also been hurt with a sword, at her waist. Not deeply, but still bad. Imoën will have to make use of the arrows from their corpses. (More people we've killed. When I bent down to check their quivers, I closed their eyes. One had light brown eyes like my brother, the other baby-blue. Then, of course, there's the—logistical problems—with collecting bounties on bandit scalps. Horrible. Horrible.) I'll have to fight in spite of all this.

Worgs woke us. Could have been worse—could have been vampiric wolves again. Deep tooth-marks in my arm Garrick bandaged for me—my right arm. I can still swing a sword with my left, or so Shar-Teel says. Even grit my teeth enough for my bow. We went up past an old druidic henge—Shar-Teel spat on it—and ran away from bears who chased us after we stumbled across a cub. It's a long, tiring walk to Peldvale, and I hate that we have to do it. We're all exhausted.

We need a useful plan to get past the bandits. We need a safe place to sleep.

—

17 Kythorn

Addition to our doomed band. (Shades of poor Xan.)

"Help me! If you don't help me, he'll kill me!"

The cloaked woman ran out of the clump of trees, barreling into Shar-Teel; a dark-skinned hand showed beneath her sleeve. Human-dark, I thought at first; then I saw clearly, drow-dark.

"He who?" Shar-Teel demanded. "Some vile male?"

"They accuse me when I have done nothing to them!" she panted. "I may wish to, but I am no fool and this iblith has not listened—" She made a sweeping gesture behind her; the Flaming Fist officer stepped through the trees, his sword drawn.

"I serve the Flaming Fist! Do you harbour the drow, travellers? She is evil and wanted for mur...!"
"Farcical Fist. My lucky day!" Before any of the rest of us could say anything, Shar-Teel leaped on the attack. She seemed confident until he hit her right arm; I had to shoot him to help her. She was already hurt, from before...so we had to support her. Viconia is incredibly fast; she ran behind the Flaming Fist and brained him with her mace. It really wasn't pretty, and that was before she took the helmet and parts of the armour to wear for a trophy. We dug a shallow grave because Imoen and I wanted to.

The woman folded her arms impatiently. "My name is Viconia. I am a servant of Shar. Keep me from the accursed sun and I am willing to travel with you."

Shar-Teel nodded. "Surface god. Good. Prove yourself with a healing spell or two." She held out her arm.

"I can do more than healing." Viconia chanted something quickly, her eyes on Edwin, and he collapsed to the ground instantly. I suppose that's quite useful... She did show us her healing powers, too, after Edwin woke up and complained.

Other Flaming Fists will assume the man was killed by bandits, not us. Viconia's offered to help us. She must have been through some tough circumstances for her to be here, and it's only fair to believe in her when there's no evidence we know of otherwise. Of course, Shar-Teel did the exact opposite to the Flaming Fist, just because he was male... Well. I'm not proud of killing someone who might have just been doing his job. But we can't undo it; not easily enough to be convenient, anyway.

Viconia is an interesting person. I think I like her.

There were flinds who tried to stop us, a few hours later, and demanded our iron. It was easier with healing. Shar-Teel and her battlecries for blood, cutting through the centre of them; Viconia petitioning her goddess to force one to lie on the grass, his throat bared for Shar-Teel; Garrick spinning an encouragement with his voice; Edwin and Imoen, slings and arrows. I stabbed from the back; they are big, and then they fall. Bright golden strips across their shoulders and dark blue skin. Giant swords I didn't quite avoid. Viconia: we need you.

It started to rain. I want a bath with clean water, a warm drink, something other than sitting on wet ground not daring to light a fire in case of bandits. The trees are hardly any shelter at all, and it is getting dark.

"There is no rain below the earth," Viconia said, sniffing. "Only the deep rivers through the chasms. None of this water from the roof." She sneezed; Shar-Teel flung her a spare cloak from my pack.

"If you've a cold, drow, I'd rather not share it."

"That is the surface word for this?" She wiped a hand across her nose. "How suitable. I have been like this since the first water-day I witnessed in this territory of the surface; when I travelled away from the caravan's sands. A cold. Do not stare, male. Fetch me something to eat," she ordered Garrick.


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67. Bandits

19 Kythorn
A lot has happened. There's a lot left to happen. Imoen and I discussed this possibility with Shar-Teel and the others, who agreed to it; it's happened.

Bandits attacked while I was on watch that night. Shar-Teel struggled out of the tent to fight; I went to back her up. Imoen's fire crackled in the air; warm and useful. Edwin came out with a battle-cry of 'How dare you disturb the rest of a Red Wizard!', and Garrick and Viconia helped from the back.

The man I was fighting was young, I think.

"Last 'un, I kicked 'im in the head 'till 'e was dead! Give it a go, girlie?"

Shar-Teel likes to fight dirty. I caught him in a parry and kicked him; it seemed to hurt. He kept fighting, though—I could dodge him, but he's stronger than me— A magic missile from Imoen hit him; he cried out.

"'Tis your choice which hits the ground first: your swords or your heads!" The speaker was walking toward me, a man in heavy chainmail and carrying a large warhammer. I saw movement in the trees behind him; only once, but...

He had confidence to talk. We didn't.

I lowered my sword; jumped back from an uncontrolled swing from the bandit still chasing me. Maybe I had already begun to learn something from Shar-Teel. "We'll not fight you. In fact we want to join your group."

Bandits. Join them and—it's safe again?

I wasn't being attacked any more; a break in the fighting.

"Now there's a laugh! Why should we take you rattle-pates?"

"'Cause dungeonrobbing's a mug's game!" I said, loud enough for Imoen and Garrick to hear me. "C'n see the flag-wavin' that yer where the bits o' tin are these days." I expected the others would notice the accent. Picking up Baldur's Gate thieves' cant around Eldoth and his friends was much easier than learning Mulhorandi or Alzhedo; rhyming slang, carelessness with dental fricatives, and h-dropping for emphasis.

"Yeah, the boys saw you waste that Flaming Fist," the man said. "What do you call yourselves?"

His hammer was still a threat; and a Bowman behind him was showing himself.

Killed your brother.

Killed the young Black Talon with brown eyes.

You are not my daughter. "I'd be Lucrezia the Bastard." I spat on the ground. "Sneaksman and treasure seeker, a dab shot with bow besides. Pink cove back there's no rank rider neither, barmaid's prodder an' master in bells." (Lockpicker and spellcaster, I had to explain afterwards.) "She's— Bathory the Axe. Splits skulls wiv the bells. Shanky 'ere's a bung nipper sure enough alongside 'is pipes and bells—" I pointed to Garrick, who nodded frantically—"an' Eddie's a Red Wizard, fearsome enough they be. Vic the drow be worth 'er price inna moonlit, and the fronting-doxy and her toothpick be Shar-..."

"Shar-Teel the Man-Slayer, we know 'er repute already."

"Yes. Yah, well." Shar-Teel was fighting three bandits at once, wild-seeming strikes that had them all kept cautiously back from her; lost to the fight. Would we have won against all these, if we'd
"Asset or liability?" He clarified the phrase for Lucrezia's sake. "If the camp bosses like you, maybe you're in. Or we can fill you and your man-hating friend full of arrows here and now if you can't stick to our orders."

"Thick cullies or thin rogues? Don't think it matters to 'er, we're all for th' patting. Oy, cut it!" I called to her, hoping she'd listen. "Down the toothpick now, new takings fer the rolling!"

"Lay down your weapons, boys," he ordered. "They're new recruits good enough for me. Take them to Tazok."

Shar-Teel reluctantly backed away from the fight. A relief. Infiltrating the bandits solved one problem. Tazok: the name in Tranzig's letters. Perhaps not let on knowing; perhaps, and rather quickly, dispose of the Black Talon scalps in Shar-Teel's pouch.

"From the Gate, aren't you?" he said to me.

"Yep! That Duke Eltan liked me 'ead so much, I'd'a been riding the rope for him to get a hold of it. So I ran and th' bunch of us joined up for pieces together..."

"Hey, mister! What'd you say your name was?" Imoen asked him. "It's so nice of you to let us join! We'll be rich as queens in no time!"

"You're welcome to call me 'Captain Raiken', or 'Commander Raiken'. Let's see how well you keep up."

The bandit camp up beyond Peldvale. My feet hurt; Viconia and Garrick were lagging behind by the time we reached the end of it. There were twelve men besides Raiken; the one I'd fought was called Kerl. They all kept close to us, during that walk. Running away now wouldn't be encouraged. At least we'd all been able to gather our equipment.

"You're sure, Sk...you?" Garrick whispered to me. "All these bandits..."

"Sneaking, Shanky. They tried recruiting us, it's easier like this." Like Imoen's and my grand Plan to be great thieves. Bandits.

"RAIKEN! Who are these ones?"

A large half-ogre. I think his voice was enough to make my hood ripple and fall back.

Our captain stood at attention. "Keeping numbers up, Tazok. We'll not have time to bring more from Iriaebor, and Kerl spotted them murdering a Flaming Fist with the drow here, so I thought..."

"YOU DON'T THINK! I THINK!" Tazok's orange-tinged eyes weren't as bright as those of the one who killed Gorion, but reminded me of him; I cringed back. "WE PAY BLACK TALON TO DO STEALTH HERE, AND YOU RECRUIT THOSE YOU ROB? WHO ARE THESE WEAKLINGS!"

Shar-Teel took a stride forward. I'm scared when she smiles like that. That is, more scared. "I don't take any crap from ogre garbage. Go scare some schoolboys, snaga."

Talk about fighting words. He just rushed at her, roaring, and she rushed back.

I guess she and Tazok have a lot in common. Shar-Teel's probably smarter, but in that fight
intelligence didn't count. Just two heavy swords hitting each other, fast and forceful. He was half again her size, large and tall and terrifying. Though she clearly didn't find him so. It was difficult to do anything but watch them, in those first bloodthirsty moments. No sparks flared in the air with each metallic strike as in bards' songs, but the swords moved so quickly as to blur; Tazok's harsh attacks as though to cleave her in two, armour and all, Shar-Teel's quick deflections, somehow bearing up under that power—

Wait. Shar-Teel on the defensive. Shar-Teel breaking a sweat while the ogre laughed; Shar-Teel slipping to the side, like I do when I'm failing to fight her. Shar-Teel in tr... She had been fighting already, and done the long march; maybe he had also come to the fight like that, maybe not. But that was a sequence of slicing blows from him, and there was Shar-Teel, in time to counter them but not to do anything else. Shar-Teel taking a step backwards, even, no longer smiling. No, that was better for her. That was a sudden, fast movement that might make it past his defences. But: he was blocking it. That—sent her down to one knee, if only for a second. She didn't say anything, or try to taunt him; only parried and forced herself to her feet again. Moving with less grace than she had done; favouring, slightly, her left side this time. Probably the half-ogre noticed.

Revenge, if anything happened to her. If anything happened to her, the same to the rest of us. Raiken did nothing as the beginning of spells were muttered; when a hit from Tazok had Shar-Teel in the shoulder, I took from Imoen's quiver the ice-arrows we had gained. I fired; it stopped him, briefly, from another blow. If this was a one-on-one duel, we had cheated and had to not die for it; the spells hit the instant later. Shaken off, from Viconia; some slight damage, from the lesser ambition of the arcanists.

"These odds are more fun. Show me how you fight, pinklings." He was laughing at us. The arrows seemed to hardly hurt his hide, and Shar-Teel—it was a hard hit she received; she was losing despite everything. I heard her grunt in pain blocking a low blow. The metal gauntlets covering her wrists crumpled from the strength of it. Imoen's fire and Edwin's acid seemed to barely distract him.

Shar-Teel went down. Not dead; knocked onto her back with a hit to her left side. Trying to get to her feet again—too slowly—I kept shooting. Tazok stopped to yank the arrow out—Viconia flung bullets in a sling Imoen had twisted for her—Shar-Teel stumbled out of the way. She wasn't giving up, in spite of everything; would never surrender to a male. Stood up, somehow, for the end game.

Maybe her perseverance would win through. No—probably not. No movement, still, from the other bandits. They must have known nothing would work. Shar-Teel, sweating, moving slowly. Block. Parry. Turn. Tazok, smiling as yet another missile turned away from him. He forced her down to her knees, his sword crossing hers and bearing down; all she could do was try to hold a little longer. The way her face looked when she knew she was beaten... I hadn't thought she could be defeated like that. Kneeling to a man.

Tazok ended it.

A strange test.

"Heh! Stop now!" he yelled. "That mean you in the back!" He lowered his blade, and brushed at a trace of acid on his arm. "You fight pretty good. I think you make fine bandits. Go have run of camp. I have business to do but Ardenor and Taurgosz will keep eyes on you! Patrol! Tonight we leave!"

"I won't ask where you got those arrows, eh?" Raiken said quietly. "Go introduce yourselves to Tenhammer. Make yourselves useful or heads'll roll."

Taurgosz 'Tenhammer' Khosann, who once killed ten men with a single blow from his hammer, has no people skills.
"You lead these rivvin, jaluk?"

"Last time I saw the head of a drow bitch I was nailing it to a cliff face."

Relations did not improve.

Credus the second newest recruit showed us around the camp: the Chill hobgoblins, the gnolls, Tazok's special tent with the special papers in it (interesting), better still, Damon formerly of the Baldur's Gate Thieves' Guild, and best yet: Sique of the same previous affiliation.

Sique is the kind of thief that normally one only reads about. His face is perfect, his hair is gorgeous, he's witty and intelligent and bathes regularly, and he was a specialist in locks and traps before he and Damon had to leave the city.

"Best I do here's lift a barmaid's frock once in a while to save the effort of splitting a chest, or take down a bit of ettercap webbing...but a job's a job. Lucky my cousin Vairvon got us this gig."

"Could we see you work?" Imoen asked him, putting on her biggest smile.

"Eh...Tersus keeps the supplies locked up tight, I reckon if there was a reason I could get into 'em. You need the regulation armour?" Suddenly I wished I wasn't wearing armour, like Imoen.

"Nope. Can't cast my spells with it, mucks with the hand gestures," she giggled.

"Wizard, eh? And here I thought they were all old long-bearded coves. Not but that Venkt's not so bad for a wizard," Sique said.

"Venkt?" I said.

"One of 'em who spend quality time in Tazok's tent. Connected to the bosses. 'E's learned his way 'round the throwing darts—walked in on a friendly-like match once, walked off with the pot. Some say, bloody wizards, prob'ly dirty bells somewhere, but I say, best prove yerself a man like the rest of us! Savin' your company, ladies."

"Oo, the bosses!" Imoen said. The bosses: take down the Nashkel mine, have bandits steal iron, and thirdly—profit from their own iron stocks, lead an Amnian or other force to take over the weaponless city, or some third option. That much was obvious.

"Zhentarim this time, Vairvon said to me," Sique whispered, a frown on his cleanly chiseled features. "Heard it from the cheese—Taurgosz Khosann himself. Zhents."

Certainly they're capable of banditry and iron sabotage. But this doesn't suit their style, somehow—like the puppet ruler of Shadowdale, or the seizure of Darkhold.

"Nasty!" Imoen said in an imitation of an approving tone.

"Come on and I'll see you get equipped." Sique said. He briefly flashed the end of a lockpick from his sleeve. "Rank-and-file supplies are under Tersus—none of the real good stuff, 'cause 'e's only a gobbo."

"Seen 'em about. The gnolls too," I said.

"Yeah. No bitter ends, we ain't," Damon said darkly. "Here just for this 'un's marks. Were ye in the stab—or one o' them lone wolves?" Thieves' Guild or no: there were bad rumours about what happened to lone wolves.
"Were but a few hands' lengths," I muttered. "Under the Ravenscar." Thank goodness Eldoth talked about these things sometimes.

"Bungled the swag or worse?" It was hard to avoid the stare of Damon's beetle, sinister eyes. Some gentleman thief!

"Reckon it were the killin's, like. Crashed a few too many an' the guard got all curiouslike." I shrugged modestly. It's not like I haven't killed people; boasting about it's easier, though.

Damon rolled his eyes. "Damn stupid newborn cullies. Okay, Princess Bloodthirsty. Show what'cha can do, iffen you made it into Ravenscar's."

I assembled my collection of picks little by little, from different locksmiths I visited with excuses of lost keys to jewelry boxes. The chest in Tersus's tent looked relatively crude, old and battered; first a hook pick and a torque wrench to get the feel of it. Three pins.

"Rake pick?" Imoen suggested; she's good at using the tools she inherited from Winthrop. Was it trapped? I felt for any unpleasant surprises; no, and it would be better to hurry up with it.

"You!"

The head of my pick snapped off when the hobgoblin's yell surprised us.

"You!" he repeated. "What you doing in Tersus' stuff? You two with Black Talons, but you not supposed to be here. Tersus keeps all the stuff for the Chill and Black Talons. You can get out!"

"Calm down," Sique said. "These two're new recruits. Checking their weapons."

The hobgoblin stockboy looked suspiciously at Imoen and me. "That pretty good armour. And she has pretty good shortsword, too." My studded leather and NIMBUL's blade.

"She don't." Sique pointed to Imoen; her shortsword had been bought during the iron crisis, and although she hardly used it, the blade was chipped and tarnished.

"I was told to give leather armour. You want leather armour?" Tersus snapped, glaring pugnaciously. "I have couple swords, but nobody told Tersus to give them out."

"No thanks." Imoen rolled her eyes; the armour was torn in several places, and smelled strongly of what I assumed was hobgoblin, for its similarity to Tersus' odour. "Could use a sword."

"NOT TOLD 'BOUT SWORDS!" Tersus snatched up the chest from me, holding it tightly to his body. "NO THEFT! Stop confusing Tersus!"

"Hey, didja know your name'd be Susret spelled backwards..." Imoen commented.

"AAAARGH!"

A real bandit camp. Interesting! About seven bigger rough huts beside Tazok's tent, a larger shed, and a few simple tents for the men. Gnoll patrols and hobgoblins march in their routes between the Black Talon clusters. Each building looks very temporary; the bandit camp switches locations every few weeks or so, and gets rebuilt on a location Tazok specifies. Credus says that only a few men Taurgosz Khosann picks out are allowed to carry Tazok's tent and the chests stored in there. The camp's never built too far from Peldvale or Larswood, where most of the raids are based. That leaves the iron-carrying merchants to pass through the Cloakwood if they want to avoid us, which is in the direction Tazok's patrol headed toward. Pass through the Cloakwood to avoid us. Are we proper
bandits, yet? Shar-Teel practices with her sword against both Viconia and me at the same time, and says rude things to any bandits watching us. Then we've just had to patrol the camp's border so far, in case of Flaming Fists.

We join the bandits for a meal on the fire—mostly horse, squirrel, and vegetation, with the odd dried supplies the Black Talons imported. It's not wise to inquire what the hobgoblins and gnolls eat.

"Sing a lullaby, prettyboy!" A Black Talon with a large moustache slapped Garrick on the back, nearly pushing him into the fire.

"Ballad of Whorehouse Nell—know that one on yer sweet lil' harp?"

"No—no, I don't know that one—"

"Be a shame if'n anything happened to them bowstrings." A swarthy man next to him, grinning.

"Nell was quick/And Nell was kind/And Nell'd a great big—" came the raucous cry across the fire.

"Er—if you don't mind—I think I'd rather—"

"Shaddup, Shanky." The moustached Black Talon put a meaty hand over Garrick's arm. "You got girly hands, prettyboy. Ever do any real work?"

"If a man is known by the company he keeps, then I shall be known as an illiterate bully."

Brave Sir Garrick—

"I think prettyboy here's insulting us, Smitt! Think you should teach him a lesson?"

"Yeah, Jorm. Too bad those girls ain't here to protect you, Shanky. Hey, why don't ya wear skirts like that wizard of theirs?"

Laughter at this witticism.

"I did not mean—" Garrick tried to escape them.

"Leave 'im alone!" I threw down a knife, into the ground near the fire. It was enough to make the Talon called Smitt jump back. "Shankan's too good with the bells. Knows songs'd drive you mad—mad—"

'Simple' never works, dear Skie. The more outrageous and outré a performance, the more likely to be believed. Eldoth.

"Lu the Bastard, ain't it?" Smitt looked up and down my body in a way men in taverns sometimes used to, when I waited to meet Eldoth.

"Yeah. Shanky's one o' ours." Not too clever a retort.

"What'cha gonna do about it?"

Blood. "Something. There's a saying in the Gate." Stealing from a novel, but the Talons didn't seem especially strong on literacy. "A good rogue, can stab to the kill before you've time to draw your blade." I'd a second throwing knife ready, shining in the fire's blaze; I made sure it caught the reflection for his gaze. "A really good rogue, she's finished the job before you know she's there at all. 'Fore you know it, yer face's beaten in by yer own ribs and blood's fountaining from your—"
He reached for his dagger; his belt whistled above his head and landed in my right hand. Garrick's good with sleight-of-hand. We've all learned each other's skills.

"Come an' get it, boyo." I probably shouldn't have said that. He did stand up and rush for it, and he's a lot bigger than me. I roughly sidestepped—he wasn't armed, so I tried a slash that shallowly touched his shoulder.

"Ye'll pay fer that, ye little—"

"Halt—" Garrick's voice, singing a single pure note. Only distracted Smitt for a second—I kicked him on the shin (blood smell but no killing him—)

"Puny humans no music!" A hobgoblin's yell from their own firepit stopped the action.

"Calm down, Smitt. They've proved 'emselves to Teven," one of the men said. He stood; offered me a handshake. "I'm Knott. You and the boy ain't bad. Enough, Smitty."

"Just testing ya." Smitt muttered. "Get the drow to heal me and we'll say nothin' more about it."

"Get 'er yourself. An' for no hard feelings: Shanky 'ere's a great cook. What's that stuff on the fire, horse?" Silke and the Dale Wind Troubadors both made Garrick serve his apprenticeship doing all the chores; he's the only decent cook in our group. I haven't experience, Imoen likes experimenting too much, Edwin whines, and Shar-Teel and Viconia refuse outright.

"Yeah. Stewed with a few spuds."

"All right. I'll do my best to work on it!" Garrick said.

Yes. With seasoning and some supplies Garrick had in his pack, even horsemeat wasn't bad. Rowdy, interesting conversation; Knott talked about how he joined up, getting himself out of trouble he didn't specify from Nashkel and escaping a life of mining. Sique and his beautiful voice and deep green eyes was there too. Bandits and thieves and they think we're good enough rogues to be one of them. Sique showed us a small chest, and picked it himself in the dark while Imoen and I watched and learned. Rogues need a good sense of touch, and of course Sique has long, delicate fingers. Lovely professional thief.

It's good that Garrick's a great cook. Thanks to Viconia we have drow sleeping poison we can use to deal with the camp. If we want to deal with the camp.

—

*Last time I saw the head of a drow bitch I was nailing it to a cliff face*—While the Forgotten Realms article on Taurgosz Khosann doesn't seem entirely reliable, I liked the concept of this little detail.

### 68. Summer Solstice

20 *Kythorn*

Summer solstice: a long day.

They called for proper-patrol, not just skulking around guarding the camp. (The Black Talons seem to be paid quite well. Better than the hobgoblins.)
"All right, new-ones. Time to prove your worth. Wizard!" Edwin turned his head to give his attention to Alf, one of the Talon captains. "You're with my patrol. Lucrezia, you too." I tried to look eager to kill people. "Damon, I'll have you fer extra strings. And Greywolf." A tall man in studded leather, his hand already to his swordhilt, grunted an assent.

Greywolf—Greywolf—Greywolf— Where I'd heard the name came to me. The bounty hunter we'd been mistaken for in Beregost; a tough one from the sounds of it. He didn't seem to have any visibly lupine features, although there was something disturbing about his stringy hair and twisted grimace. Lucrezia might know the name, depending on where he'd been. If he was a bounty hunter: was it bandit scalps or iron he wanted here?

"Yer a pig's secretary?" The slang was too derogatory for the bounty hunter. I kept on after his growl. "I mean—yer a good hunter?"

"Yeah, I'm a bounty hunter, off an' on. What's it to you, girl?"

"'S just, the name Greywolf's one on the clockwork. 'Tis on the roses wherever ya go in the Coast Way—want a mowing, hire Greywolf fer the grass; want gullynappers fetched, find Greywolf for the squeakle..."

"Shaddup before I spit ye, brat!" Alf ordered. "Silence on the patrol!"

"If ye want some tips, ye can join me in my tent later," Greywolf whispered with rancid breath, nudging me. I saw Edwin's smirk.

Most merchants had been quite sensibly scared off, I thought. It was why we hadn't wanted to come this way. So we were just—making sure beyond a doubt the iron crisis would last. Just doing that, of course.

We wandered around the forest until my feet hurt; Edwin, too, was starting to fall behind.

"All right, men. We head back to the camp."

"And about time too, simian," Edwin complained. "In this completely unprofitable endeavour my time would have been far better spent, say, counting the hairs in my beard (Which is resplendent, virile, and not in the least 'straggly' as certain undereducated people would have it)."

"Greywolf, silence the bellringer."

A short silence. "I shall ensure there is no need for gratuitous violence. Sir," Edwin said. "(The gross indignities these chimps inflict upon me.)"

Along the Coast Way, back again; then, there were sounds in the distance. Alf gestured for silence.

"Spread out, men! Archers, wizard: make yerselves ready!"

A semicircular formation, well spread out. I quietly waited in the branches of a tree, ready to fire. Let it be nothing.

We waited. The noises grew louder; something, clearly. Then I saw a bright glint of metal. Had to be an armed caravan, hurtling through this forest as though desperate to escape...us. I steadied my bow.

"We have you surrounded!" Alf yelled. That was the cue for spells and arrows. I could see the Merchant League's emblem drawn in bright yellow paint on the first caravan, and the ten guards in escort. My arrow hit the ground in front of a horse ridden by a man in mage's robes; the beast
"Startled. "Your iron or your lives!"

"Kill these brigands!" the finely-dressed mage howled, trying to regain control of his mount. Edwin cried out his spell, a thick black miasma materializing below their horses' hooves. The other archers sent a rain of arrows, with me, against the soldiers' shields. I saw one man, hit—I don't know by me, or no; I'd aimed for the mage's horse—and a flash of blue light.

"Helm protect us!"

A priest. Healing the others, like Branwen used to. The mage had rolled from his wounded horse, and chanted something of his own: six wolf-shaped things appeared out of thin air beyond Edwin's spell, howling and running for the throats of the fighters with us.

*The one thing to distract a mage is often a well-placed arrow.* The wizard began another chant; I loosed a shaft, and missed, and saw him turn pale grey. Shielded.

"Help—help us—" Edwin's second spell had spread to them; some of the soldiers lost their courage, but Helm's name was cried loud into the air to regather them— No choice but to keep to target.

Fire to my left; Edwin screaming and a smell like burning meat. That wizard—like Dynaheir killing the gnoll chieftain.

If Edwin had his way, he would be safe in Beregost. I didn't want to miss. I wanted the mage to die. He couldn't be allowed to cast more spells. He was moving, casting; I aimed carefully, and that one hit. The spell faltered.

Edwin cried out again, less painfully. White, draining light from his direction, trying to heal himself. *Good. The drain of life—no! Good that my team heals*— I could not stop.

Greywolf and the others charged on the humans, the wolves nipping at their heels. The wizard gathered some dust in his hand, chanting quickly, and threw.

"Blind!" Alf choked, grabbing at his eyes. I saw the wizard, moving into another spell-posture, that rhythm and incantation for the flames again. I saw one arrow take him despite that ghostly armour; saw him scream, and the fireball spread centred on him, the smell of burning again. His mage robes were on fire and he attempted to beat them out. I saw a second arrow, a hit to the eye, pierce whatever protections had remained after the fire. It was easy to feel rage.

Greywolf and the priest of Helm. Greywolf's sword shone, dramatically gold and dark-bladed, and he shouted a barbaric battle-cry. He and the others butchered the burned caravan's guard one by one, and I helped them.

There was worse than that. A frail League's merchant and his son sitting and shaking within the caravan. The son was not a child.

"Prisoners? These ain't much use to the other lot, idiot! Kill them!"

There were iron stocks, headed south. Some gold. Mundane provisions. A few bolts of rich silk, some expensive Waterdhavian wine to sell. The spell for blindness wore off.

"Is his spellbook remaining, I wonder?" Edwin stood over the wizard's body; what remained of the enemy's robes still smouldered, along with what remained of Edwin's beard. "(Ah, Fireball. If only I may write that spell if only I may write that spell...) Perhaps someone will assist me by searching the corpse."
Damon scraped through the wizard's robes, peeling off a few rings and necklaces and recovering a few blackened pages; and yanked the arrow from the wizard's eye. "I take it this stick be yours?" he interrogated.

"No, as you appear to be indicating, it belongs to the ill-mannered interrupter of a mage's duel I was clearly winning. (In Thay she would be executed for such a thing.)" Edwin held out his hand impatiently. "Keep the baubles, I care for the true power."

"Last time we'd a mage to fight, twasn't good." Damon said. "Ye've proved yerself with us, Lu. 'M keeping a finder's fee though."

Reflexes; catching a single copper-coloured ring. Very warm to the touch.

"The spellbook?"

"Don't seem to me your prissy spells worked much. Up to the lady, ain't it?" I shifted from Greywolf and his yellow and gap-toothed smile. In one of his hands hung a dripping, severed head; my gaze shifted quickly to the symbol of Helm in the other.

"Edwin's right. About everything."

"Ha! It is...about time that my greatness was acknowledged. Yes, the spellbook. (My great powers were instrumental in the defeat of those previous assassins. I am talented in the use of my magic to kill humans and I certainly do not feel nauseated by these particular events.)"

"Good work, men. Return to camp!"

Iron and a tenth reserved for the employers, the rest split amongst us. They begged Viconia to come out from the shade being fanned by a number of younger bandits and heal; she eventually did that, for everything but Edwin's beard.

I was alone, just outside the camp. A large History of the North I'd obtained in Beregost, the first time we were there. I was halfway through the tome, I knew; the words danced on the page, swimming and blurring before my eyes. Illefarn—Nimoar—War Lords—dead—foes—dead—Then movement; Lucrezia stowed away the reading material quickly.

"Leadin' me a bit of a dance? I don't mind, girlie." Greywolf's bulk leaning against a tree. Breath and clothing smelling like singed, rotting meat.

"Greywolf? I..."

"Ye said yer wanted tips." Tips: etymology from tippen to poke or touch lightly from Uthgardt dialect of old Illuskan. Common meaning to give something originating from historical thieves' cant. He grabbed me. "C'mon. Have some fun."

"N-no thank you. It's very kind but I..." I tried to escape.

"Ya know you want it. Oh Greywolf! Greatest hunter on the Sword Coast!" His voice lingered on a high, cracked falsetto. "No sense in turning shy on me. Not alone in the woods like this. Ye never know what might be lurking in the trees."

A tree root behind me; I fell.

"Ye don't want any violence." He grinned. "Hey, yer not upset at the killing there, are ya? Thought Lu the Bastard was already a murderer. My kind of lady."
"Go away!" I did have a sword. Good women are supposed to fight or die first. Not good; killing gets easier. Not with his magic sword. "Get..."

Inspiration. Eldoth, help.

"You've been in Beregost! You went to the Jovial Juggler!" Bounty hunter. Bounty hunter at least in Nashkel. Guesses, working in my favour for once.

"Yeah," he said. He was smiling; standing over me. He wouldn't have to do much. "And I've seen the real power here, and I've been loyal longer than you. Be nice, and we'll both keep our secrets, won't we?"

A movement, behind him. A flash of pink.

"Oh, no! I thought I was practicing my powerful magic completely alone out here, and I think I'm losing control of the spell! Help! Run!"

Imoen's subtle hand signals. Gonna do the smoke trick. Steal from him!

That small pouch around his waist Greywolf liked to finger, as though reassuring himself it was still there. I couldn't!

You can! Do it!

"Greywolf, look out!" I took one last deep breath; the smoke hit, and I rolled to one side. Greywolf swore; I ducked under a large, swinging arm, severed the pouch with my dagger, and ran back with Imoen for a nice patch of shadows.

"Heeee! We made it! That was great!" Imoen laughed. "C'mon, open it! What'd we get?"

A pair of matched green emeralds. I've never seen a finer cut; the gems in my hands were brilliant and clear, a colour that ran deep and true. I felt the murkiness of our deeds reflected in that sea-like surface, an unblinking eye accepting all in its calm, limpid reflection.

"D'you think they're real emeralds, Skie? We've got to be the best pickpocketing team ever! Can I hold on to them? I love shiny stuff like this!"

"You'd better hold on to them," I said. I looked away from the jewels. "Magically disguise them or something, maybe."

"The old secret pocket in the spell component pouch." She giggled again. "No stinky old waist-bag for these pretty things, nope! It'll be a nice home with Auntie Imoen until we find something good to do with you."

69. Interlude: Edwin

Interlude: Diar...Journal of Edwin Odesseiron, nephew to Tharchion Homen Odesseiron of Thay and Red Wizard: 7 - 18 Kythorn, 3472 Mulhorand Calendar

I know it was wrong to sneak it out of his pack and read it. My spoken Mulhorandi is terrible, he's been absolutely right about that, but I remember my written Mulhorandi quite well, and he doesn't know that. So I looked at Edwin's journal and wanted to find out his and Thay's plans...and found them, to a certain extent. I tried to skip over the bits that weren't about his mission, and I'm pretty sure
that would be physically impossible anyway even with demon concubines, not that I got enough time with Eldoth to try much of anything.

—

7 Kythorn, Painfully Early (circa. Hour 10)

Following yesterday's glorious battle (I think I shall include it in my memoirs sans humiliating aftermath): I declare, the witch has most assuredly found allies. She has attached herself to a seemingly bedraggled group, no doubt from one ulterior motive or another; I must conclude they form part of Rashemen's goals, and will follow they and her until the convenient moment when I shall destroy her in a blinding haze of superior magery.

Descriptions follow. A hulking thing native to Rashemen calling itself a man and the future small rug that keeps it for a pet. An ill-tempered and unnecessarily belligerent cleric. A childish and babbling bard I anticipate may see to my personal needs. A craven elf and a rather devastatingly attractive necromancer. A pink-clad stray with some minor level of talent in the magical arts...and a crying little thief who has stained my robes. She seems easily manipulated and I shall order her to launder my clothing in repayment, though the pink stray has suggested her general incompetence.

I shall interrogate them after breakfasting. (These barbaric hours!) If this line of inquiry proves futile to discern Rashemen's goals, my brilliance will surely find another.

—

7 Kythorn, Still Painfully Early (circa. Hour 12)

Deceived! Tricked out of my mage's words! Doomed to remain with these strays whilst the witch in fact pursues her true goals!

I was sufficiently prudent that it is a mere month. Surely the witch's inferior talents leaves me plenty of time to catch up to her at some later date. The new lackeys shall not serve me ill during this period; I am sure my magical gifts already awe them.

Grossly betrayed by the attractive necromancer in a manner I do not wish to contemplate.

—

8 Kythorn

Condemned to the hole of Beregost for indefinite period. The crying little thief's family appear to have rejected her—somewhere between sixteen and twenty years too late, I should think. The tedium starts to overcome me. Why do I suffer these fools? Oh, yes, breaking a magical promise allegedly leads to negative effects, I daresay some of my more foolish tutors babbled about it. I shall not tolerate this nonsense!

—

12 Kythorn

We have met a monster and invited her to join our party. Tall, brutish, short-tempered, red of pelt. I triumphantly defeated her in single combat through superior wit and martial skill (if the world were just, the babbling bard would attempt to pen a song in my glory, but I have never cared for such insipid music, must not encourage his puerile strumming in any way whatsoever). I was hoping we could use her for the purpose of flinging her in the way of passing beasts whilst fleeing, there being
more of her to consume than the crying little thief, but she has become a shameless dictator. She comprehends and abuses my allegiances to my Weave-bound words.

—

13 Kythorn

Enjoyed moderately intelligent conversation with our crying little thief. (Who refrained from crying at the time, for which I am grateful for the sake of my robes.) While no intellectual peer to myself, she has made some desultory study of Thayvian history and even revealed vague comprehension when I uttered a Mulhorandi proverb, perhaps attempting to hide her meagre light out of ladylike modesty. Naturally I corrected her in many important points in the saga of Thay's greatness and gave her the correct pronunciation of, 'Greetings noble wizard I abase myself before you', the traditional Thayvian salutation. I trust she held me in greater esteem than a mere escape from our terrifying shrew of a leader's attempt at tutoring her.

—

14 Kythorn

Fortunately managed to run into Denak and successfully deceived him that I had received his instructions and was following them to the very letter (probably sent to the inn behind us). Received unwitting service from the bard as testimony to said instructions: my quick thinking determined him to be of approximately the correct age and male like the ancestor, therefore close enough to what my supervisors seek that I convinced Denak he was the child and I was travelling with him in order to persuade him to Thay. Naturally my intelligence will discern the true one and then I shall bring him back to Thay whether by verbal convincing, magical force, or otherwise. They will then be so delighted by this they will question no physical or mental metamorphoses from the idiotic bard they briefly glimpsed (and perhaps immediately raise me to zulkir or at the very least graduated from apprenticeship).

Auntie Lasala was accompanying Denak and unfortunately that simian giggling pair interrogated her and viewed Those Pictures. I am prepared to tolerate their insubordination only so far and no further.

Was the witch sent on a similar quest to mine? Well, the madman the crying thief informed me of is clearly not the one. The Rashemi may boast of her useless skills at divination but what is really needed is a keen observational eye such as mine. I shall complete this and return to Thay a hero, in time.

—

18 Kythorn

Joined a mess of uncultured bandit chimps. Oh joy of all joys. Will take further notes once the subnormal children and The She-Brute Whose Name Shall Not Be Mentioned see fit to vacate this barbaric location. It is at least the source of some power, in this region, though I seek another entirely...

—

That's where all that could be relevant ends.

Other than Dynaheir out of the way, the Thayvians want the child of...some important man. Someone around Garrick's age and male—or only probably male? Most men don't only have male
children. Men and women, let's say between fifteen and twenty-five since Garrick's twenty—that's only a somewhat large proportion of the Sword Coast. The implication seems to be that the child should have inherited powers, but...

So Edwin is obviously looking for Elminster's secret son-or-daughter! Actually, that's a completely unsupported hypothesis. I might as well say, Edwin is looking for Gorion's secret child, Edwin is looking for Duke Belt's secret child, Edwin is looking for Drizzt Do'Urden's secret child who was secretly polymorphed into a squirrel... Is Dynaheir really on the same mission? Maybe not; she seems to be chasing after madmen when she could be divining for the person. What is her purpose here?

It...sort of fits. With the assassins; with Dynaheir wanting to get back in touch with me and Imoen; with Elminster dropping in on us.

Imoen said she didn't know who she really was. She's an amazing wizard; she's special. Edwin shouldn't dismiss her like he does. So—I have to keep her safe. She'd still be behind Candlekeep's walls if she hadn't come to find me. (Probably bored like I used to be at home, but now I know what the world can be like bored sounds good.) It's my fault and I have to try... It's best everyone keeps on thinking that the person supposed to be assassinated is someone-called-Sky-Gorion-told-something-to.

There's the alternative, of course, that they didn't mistake me for her after all. That goes with the idea that I'm not really my father's daughter—but that's ridiculous. I won't believe that of my mother without proof; everyone who's ever told me about her says she-was-very-beautiful-and-very-kind. (That seems to be almost all I know about her. She was only a few years older than I am now when she died.) And Shar-Teel thinks I'm completely incompetent, and I am compared to her. Viconia's quite willing to act as her deputy. Edwin calls me a simian or an idiot at least once an hour, although he does that to everyone. Imoen and Garrick are just nice. So it would be...vain and cruel for me to think such a thing.

No more! Must practice traps! Sique is pretty.

70. Gangrenous Gibberling Great Grandmother

21 Kythorn

The pickpocketing adventure would explain the following complicated chase scene about the bandit camp.

"Thieves! None cross Greywolf and live!"

Magical blade. Shearing an inch above our heads while we dived either side of a barrel. My somersault brought me to familiar, solid boots; we ducked behind Teven the bandit captain for a shield.

"Stand down, cap'n! Gonna show these brats what happens to thieves in Calimshan." It doesn't actually happen to thieves in Calimshan; the idea that they cut off people's hands is an archaic penalty long obsolete. I ducked again out of the lethal path of Greywolf's sword.

Teven passed a hand to his forehead. I guess there was a long trail of debris and ripped tents between here and the originating step of the pursuit. "Let me get it straight for my later amusement. You're complaining about being stolen from in a bandit camp, Mister Greywolf?"
"My emeralds! 'Twas them two sluts all right. Now lemme at their blood."

"Well, I guess I may as well watch the show 'till it's done," Teven said—and stepped, to our doom, aside.

"Yer not—going to help us?"

"Well, gee, Lu, you're complaining about being attacked in a bandit camp." Ah. Yes. We kept running.

Split and cloak! Imoen's hands said. Good idea—a barrel of old stew; I grasped a handful from it and flung it at Greywolf. He managed an inarticulate yell, but must have seen Imoen flicking her magic cloak. He went for her; she ran, and her cloak caught on a spar of wood. It came free from her shoulders at the last instant before Greywolf's sword would have hit her. He trampled it further into the mud.

"Can't—" A few pink sparks flashed in Imoen's hands; that second of delay gave Greywolf a chance to catch up. "Balls! Skie, it's not working!"

Nowhere to run for help—past tents, past bandits laughing at us. I tripped into a table and fell on some glass, a smell like rotting eggs sprouting around us. Edwin and various spell components: red robes waved angrily.

"Uh, Eddie?" Imoen said. "Ed! Really really great wizard! Y'know, I am so sorry about all those small lizards and spiders that mysteriously keep finding themselves in your bedroll. Can't imagine why it happens. So, little help here with the bandit with a big sword?"

"Wretched—meddling—children—my experiments—"

"!" We ducked behind him as Greywolf hurtled up. He kicked Edwin's overturned table, letting it hit us; Edwin scattered.

"Insults—chimps—dare they—"

Edwin's tent was behind us. One of Greywolf's mad swings mysteriously ripped through both it, spilling the spare red robes from his pack. I felt guilty about reading his journal.

"Insolent—monkey-brained—whelps—flaming death (flaming death, I say)—(I will show them all how it is done!)—"

Imoen and I tried to fight, avoidance for the most part; suddenly, Greywolf stopped. Edwin smirked.

"And this, children, is a display of true magical talent. The spell to ensnare another, to bind their will to none other than mine: the charm that your foolish cloak attempted to duplicate. (Surely such a magical item should have been entrusted into my safekeeping. Ah, well.) Do feel free to applaud." He paused dramatically; he walked steadily toward the lightly-swaying fighter.

"Y' did need to cast it twice, I heard you," Imoen muttered sotto voce.

"Now, now...what's this simian's name again, simian?" Imoen told him. "Ah, Greywolf. Mr Greywolf. I am your friend, am I not?"

Greywolf's eyes rolled in his head; he drooled slightly as he spoke. "None cross Greywolf and live. But you are my friend, you are. My true friend."
Edwin rubbed his hands together. "And you want to put down your magic sword, don't you, Greywolf?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And you want to stop attacking me...and those children, I suppose. The pink one and the weepy other one."

"Yes...They stole my emeralds," Greywolf said. I was shocked to see a tear run down his cheek. "They stole my emeralds I was going to sell. Oubleck was cheating me. I wanted to sell them."

"Yes, yes (I do not care about the simian's petty acquaintanceships). Very well, they did not steal them," Edwin said.

"They did not steal them?"

"Yes, that's right, serf. In fact, you gave your emeralds to the other girl. You gave them to her because for some inexplicable reason you find her attractive—because your second most recent carnal partner was obviously a gangrenous gibberling great-grandmother." Edwin smirked.

"Yes...gave me the Calimshan itch, it did..." Greywolf scratched; Edwin shuddered.

"(I did not want to think about anything of that sort.) You freely gave them to this girl and you will remember doing that."

"I will remember doing that."

"There will be no need to pursue or annoy her, me, or the pink one. (Me and my possessions, in particular. Very especially me.)" Edwin pointed to himself emphatically.

"Yes, friend..." Greywolf repeated, nodding.

"After all, she returned your generous gift with munificent erotic attractions (not in the least comparative to Thayvian concubines, but I imagine you will never meet a Thayvian concubine nor would a concubine ever regard you at even the level of the very lowest scrapings of slime from a weak apprentice's discarded experiments)."

I did not. "Edwin!"

Greywolf was drooling. "Yeah...she was a fun lay...flexible...worth paying the emeralds..."

"And that is all, my friend. Good day before the spell runs out. Worry not, lackeys. You can demonstrate your abject gratitude to me later." Edwin snapped his fingers; elaborately smoothed down his wizard's robes.

"Thanks a lot," I said stiffly.

The next principal recollection from Imoen and I would be a burning pain in our foreheads. Shar-Teel, lifting us both by the collar and slamming our heads together, our legs dangling at least a foot above the ground; worse behind her, the Tenhammer, and even Viconia, cloaked as always in the sun.

"This is the—"

"Ow!"
"Kind of stupidity—"

"No!"

"I expect from—"

"Please!"

"Males, but you—"

"Aaah!"

"In the Underdark, *s'lat'halin*, insubordinate young *baut'waelen* would be beaten with tentacle rods for three days, lashed to posts in the atrium of their Academy," Viconia commented, sidling next to Shar-Teel. A series of flashing stars danced before our eyes.

"We've found ourselves volunteers to feed the gnolls. Or to *be* food for the gnolls!" Tenhammer yelled.

Cleaned up the camp. Fed the gnolls. Found out exactly what carrion they eat, the degree to which they prefer it uncooked, the enormous iron cauldrons to drag around and clean, and how to dodge. Back hurts.

"Y'know, kiddo, you've really got to stop coming up with all these buffleheaded pickpocketing ideas and getting us into trouble. Specifically, armpit-deep-in-gnoll-food trouble."

"Whatever you say, Imoen."

—

*s'lat'halin* - fighter

### 71. Dreamfronts

#### 23 Kythorn

In the evening I toasted a dead man.

"Vairvon and Arras," Damon said. "Dead not far from the patrol route. Should've seen what those Fist bastards did to their heads."

"To Vairvon and Arras." Our two cups of bad wine met inside the bandit hut. One had been Sique's cousin.

"Turned up on 'is doorstep, Sique and me, an' Vairvon got us this booty. Good bloke. Ever since we were kids.

"'Twas a branch o' the Iriaebor Guild for me an' Sique, th' local guards for Vairvon. The three of us'd still drink off hours, atimes even swap stuff...we'd get rid of nasty blokes from the Guild while 'e'd tell us patrol routes ahead o' time.

"Dragged 'im along in civvies once, t' be the pair-o'-eyes waiting outside this merchant scum's place. I'd grabbed me goblins and prodded 'is basement, forced open a maiden's treasures bustin' wiv apples, green beer and berry wine and more milk than ye've ever seen afore." A trapped chest,
emeralds and rubies and pearls. "I started to lift th' swag—then 'e yells the signal from outside, surprise patrol thereabouts.

"So Sique an' me, we featherfall outta there fast, an' see—there's this sewage cart 'twas running through the streets, and what d' we notice but that Vairvon's upended the thing over them draftsmen! Covered in none but crap, they were, decided not to run chase after that." He laughed. "We lagged it outta there real fast. Only sad thing is, 'e must've been seen by someone or other... 'twasn't enough proof fer the shackles, but the guards drummed 'im outta there and 'e was off to find 'is fortune with the Black Talons."

Damon drunk again, heavily.

"A good fighter, Vairvon, too. More 'n worthy of the Talons. 'Twas but one time I ever beat 'im in a fight. Said I saved his life. A caravan running southwards, this young firebrand with a sword atop the regular guards—he'd killed Orrin and Idram already, so's Vairvon stepped in and took him on. I'd been helping with the other coves. A hard enough moonlit night it was, two crossbowmen hidden at the back firing into us an' half a score of guards to fight."

"Sounds a right lay." I drunk again; we'd not known the men, but might as well listen.

"Yep, some Mister Noblebritches on the caravan laying about himself like a pit fiend. Vairvon, three others 'round him, Vairvon was holding 'im back but even four weren't slowing that one."

This story. This story could be familiar.

"Then I heard Vairvon screaming, 'e'd been stabbed bad. That's when I stepped outta the shadows and gave a nice shouldertap right between the armourjoints. Bloody aristo didn't know what hit 'im."

A stab in the back. Of course. Of course.

"'E turned around, stared at me shockedlike with the sword sticking out his back, an' fell atop Vairvon stone dead. Donated a nice healing potion fer our trouble too. So's that's how I beat Vairvon. Got some nice plunder, too."

He rummaged in his pouch. There was, of course, a silver signet ring.

Then the dreams came.

—

Mulahey dies. It's Kagain; his axe a grey arc whirling up, burying itself in Mulahey's thick neck, piercing and manufacturing a gap between jagged gorget and brown-stained breastplate. The kobolds are screaming. The skeletons' bones are chittering together. Branwen cleaves a skull in two.

Mulahey stays dead long after all depart. The mines become black. It might be a day or a year that has passed. Empty nothingness fills this lonely space. Mulahey is dead in the darkness.

Mulahey's corpse rises in white light. He is as dead as he always was; he spins in the air, his wounds open and decayed. He waits. He may be expecting a blow, or healing, or whichever afterlife calls him. He was a Cyricist. Beside him shimmers a dagger of bone that signals the intention, a death beyond death. The dagger is pale and cool and heavy when held, and rests easily within the curve of a left hand.

In this darkness Branwen's hammer shattered skulls. In this darkness Kagain's axe killed many. In this darkness Garrick wept. In this darkness Imoen bled.
Hands over Imoen's stomach and about the kobold arrow, the remembered power returns. To heal friends.

The dagger falls to the ground and turns to dust. The invader of the mines is gone and dead. He is cold when his soul passes to Cyric. Perhaps his corpse gives half a smile at the last.

Only three words remain in the darkness, and they echo like thunder.

"You will learn."

—

There is another dream.

—

A bird flies freely. A sparrow high in the air carols. It is a triumph in thievery, a landslide in larceny. A fortified camp the bird sung its way through. A dance in the air. Barred to all others in the world, yet to pass within was easy.

Then the bird is a bird no longer. A lodestone drawn by the harshest of calls to earth, falling so quickly it begins to burn. It slips within the ground as easily as a hot knife passing through melting butter; like a teardrop dissolving into the centre of the sea, leaving no trace behind.

Below the ground lies a cavern within the core of the world. The lodestone must have some means of seeing, some form of conveyance. Stumbling forth into the hidden depths reveals an object. It is not seen, perhaps, but felt in patterns a uniform shade of grey; intersecting planes in the night, akin to infravision's betrayal of constructed objects.

It is a statue. Smooth stone. A complete likeness, down to each individual strand of hair, entirely unmov ing. Bare eyes opened, staring into the distance. There are flaws to it, some hidden and others not. The weakness compared to the strength of fighters. The clumsiness if contrasted with true sophisticates. The inability to bespell. Selfishness and laziness and fear buried alone in a locked and guarded estate. If you only...my little angel, you would be much improved if you troubled to listen to me once in a while. It's not as though your opinion is well-formed, is it? The statue was a hair's breath from shattering.

A mocking voice as smooth as rain.

"I see pride undeserved, great one."

Pride in thievery. Pride in reading history and gabbling in Alzhedo, Shou, attempting Sylvan from a few Candlekeep books, Mulhorandi, memorising old Illuskan verb-tenses. Pride in education, manners. Pride is—wrong, is it not? There are others greater—

"Was there pride in your name, once?"

Familiarity, certainly. The only life she had ever known, for all it had felt like a cage of late.

"Or pride in mere gold?"

One never knew the value of gold until searching an ettercap's dead body for it, hands slippery with darkened blood.

"The pride will be a second revenge, oh conqueror."
The burning wind turned all else to ashes carried in its way. Anything for revenge. Anything to destroy them all. "Death. I want to kill them." He was my brother, and he didn't deserve to die.

I apologise for this dirty bit of business, but I must seek your death— the man in the priests' hut said.

"You will learn to remember. Credit where it is due, and due where payment is demanded. Steal this revenge..."

The bone dagger forms from the blackness. It flies true to the statue's heart. The pain is as though rent asunder.

"You were made as you are. You can also be broken."

There are flashes of a bloodstained knife. Again and again. One. Two. Three. He is dead. The counting does not stop.

—

The dreams may have ended here.

—

72. Shear

Imoen Winthrop saw Skie Silvershield walk out of a bandit hut covered in blood.

"I learned who killed my brother," she said to Imoen. "I killed him. I remember something else too. I remember telling that Shank fell into his knife in the priests' hut, just before Gorion left with me. I lied. Shank didn't fall into his knife. He fell into my knife. He fell into my knife forty-seven times."

Imoen was, perhaps, shocked. But Imoen knew what she wanted to do. She pushed Skie Silvershield back into the hut and told her to hide the body and to secure the door. Then she went to tell Garrick to start the bandit camp plan. Then she found Shar-Teel and then she talked to Edwin. When she had given up trying to find Viconia, she went to her part in the plan. She waited for Taurgosz Tenhammer to come out of his hut and with her tattered cloak she told him that Ardenor Crush had said that he was tired of the human orders and wanted to take over the bandit camp. Then Imoen found Viconia and Taurgosz went to hunt the hobgoblins.

Venkt, Britik, Raemon, and Hakt were meeting in Tazok's tent, as usual. It was possible to quietly climb to the roof of it. There were traps and mage's wards protecting it. But the mage's wards were not very different to those outside a bedroom a long time ago. Then it was possible to slit a small hole through the hut's roof. Because it was dark, they saw no sudden light to alert them to it.

The goal was to surprise them. The wizard should be the most dangerous. Skie Silvershield dived from the roof for his throat first. His skin turned pale and hard, but it was important to keep attacking. In the fight, she pulled him back rolling around on the floor with him and the first arrow fired went into his back. The enchanted sword managed to open his throat into a second smile. His body caught two more arrows, and the edge of Raemon's sword. It was important to get away from Raemon. Skie Silvershield skidded back across the floor under the gnoll's legs.

Be broken. Be broken.

Britik the gnoll did not wear much armour. Skie Silvershield's hands turned red and she did to him
what other people did to her. It only took a second and then he could not move. She slit open his femoral artery so that he could bleed to death and tried to run away. An arrow hit and she fell.

Then the door finally broke open and Shar-Teel and Viconia rushed in. It was a plan to surprise the bandit leaders. Viconia’s hands glowed with dark light as she commanded the hobgoblin archer down. Shar-Teel fenced against Raemon, much stronger than he.

The arrow had only glanced off Skie after all and it was not as bad as it had looked. Or was that simply an excuse for the power? She got up again and attacked the hobgoblin while he was down. Shar-Teel defeated Raemon and then they made sure the frozen gnoll was dead.

Outside of course the camp was wild and in chaos. Edwin the conjurer and Imoen the transmuter cast spells to affect everyone. Green clouds and a lot of running around and screaming. Hobgoblins fought humans and humans fought everyone. It was important to protect the spellcasters, so Shar-Teel charged forward. Skie went to back her up. Viconia called a small cloud of magical fog to confuse everything in Shar's name.

Shar-Teel did most of the fighting. The main duty was to watch her back and stab anyone who got too close. With the fog and the spells helping, it was possible to defeat a few hobgoblins and the lesser bandits. There were hardly any Black Talons yet, as the Black Talons were fighting Ardenor Crush on the west side of the camp. Killing was much easier than expected.

His name was Knott, and he was trying to fight with a torch, against Viconia's fog in the darkness. Skie fought him while he kept calling her 'Lu' and asking, why. The torch fell, and when he overbalanced she was able to kill him. The huts started to burn.

In Tazok's tent there were papers and maps, and the fire was claiming it. Skie hurried to break in and find them. A chest, a trap; Sique and Vairvon had taught a lot about disarming traps. There was smoke everywhere, in her throat and stopping her breath. The entryway was entirely alight. Skie quickly gathered the papers into her pouch and prepared to leave via the window. But there were also the prisoners. She crawled to open the area where they were imprisoned and both bound: a human and an elf. It was important to only free them quickly and let them make their own way out if they could. She cut the elf's bonds first, and he saw her face.

"You!" he said, knowing her. "Dhaeraow; ndenginaer. I have heard your voice outside my prison. Dark-hearted inyahuan."

The elvish meaning for two of those terms, betrayer, murderer, the third unknown. Kivan took up Raemon's sword and attacked, as fiercely as though he was a thing shaped from the flames that surrounded him. Skie ran away from him out the window. She did not attempt to make him understand.

Kivan pursued her. Tazok's hut collapsed behind them in hot ash. The human prisoner was dead and his skeleton lay under there after he was burned. Skie yelled Tazok's name, but Tazok was at the bandits' other site and Kivan might have known it as well. The execution of the prisoners was delayed by Tazok's own instruction; they were his personal prisoners, and it was possible he had gloated to them of their fate.

Kivan's sword swept the darkness; Skie lost a hank of hair and gained a wound across the back of her neck. She ran on, toward where few fights were. The bandits guarding the gnoll punishment cave had left to defend against the others. She had not thought of the plan she enacted until she happened to be running in the right place, but she did it. She ran briefly into the gnolls' cave, and called, "Food's ready for you just outside!" Some of them tried to attack her after being in the cave for so long, but she had had to dodge them before, and she was able to fade into the shadows of the
trees and circle back to fight with the others. She did not see what happened to Kivan and the twenty
gnolls around him. Ardenor Crush and Taurgosz Tenhammer lay dead together.

Shar-Teel was still fighting, in a clump of blades and movement before lines of poisoned, sleeping
bandits. Only the two wizards stood behind her now. Skie did not see Viconia near them, and had
not seen Garrick for some time, but she did not think about him at that time.

Greywolf was fighting. Almost as well as Shar-Teel; Imoen's arrows helped her in the battle, but
Shar-Teel was amidst the crush of bandits and hobgoblins, surrounded, a stern gate between the
bandits and weak wizards. Greywolf's enchanted blade sliced silver ribbons from her platemail.

Skie gathered the shadows about her. There was one hobgoblin archer, smearing what was under his
nails upon an arrow, to try to shoot into that crowd; she went for the throat. A young and weak
hobgoblin. A quick death. Then there was the battle remaining.

It's easy, Shar-Teel says, to hit one's own (wo)men, if you're a large crowd without discipline. Skie
found it simple enough to duck into that fight, weaving amidst the bandits. Perhaps some believed
she was one of their own, or perhaps the blood covered her darkly.

That's when I stepped outta the shadows and gave a nice shouldertap right between the
armourjoints.

There was no weakness in Greywolf's blade or his sword arm, but there was weakness in Greywolf's
armour. The term, 'shouldertap', is a non-literal thieves' euphemism for a backstab, or rather any kind
of surreptitious attack. There is no requirement that it must involve either shoulders or back.
Greywolf's studded leather was pierced in the groin. A lot of blood.

Shar-Teel charged, free of that magical blade. Skie helped her; struck at bandits attempting to attack
Shar-Teel from behind, stabbed out to finish those Shar-Teel no longer wished to dance with. It
wasn't hard, that time, to remember the lessons. She was still covered in blood. The two of them
danced on.

Broken.

At some point, the attacks ceased. The ground was welcoming; impossible to go further, necessary to
sit amidst the corpses. Smoke stained the air, the fire blazing too close.

Viconia deVir approached, weaving amongst the bodies like a dark and graceful ghoul taking her
feast, singing words in the underworld language of her people. Her right hand bore aloft an ebon
disc, black and shining as though bathed in wet ink, stealing tendrils of light from its surrounds. In
her left she held a dagger, black-hilted, stained in blood upon its dull grey blade.

"Shar," she invoked; the priestess silenced forever the moans of a dying bandit. Her prayer carried
upon the wind, shifting to her next sacrifice.

"Where's Garrick?" I said.
__

Note: Chicago, 'Cell Block Tango': "He was crazy, and he kept on screaming, 'You've been
screwing the milkman.' And then he ran into my knife... he ran into my knife ten times."

73. Shaft's Mark
We had to beat out the fire, first, lest it consume the forest and us, with water from the stream and Shar-Teel wielding shovel and axe as strongly as a sword. Bind wounds and try to stay upright. Then, we searched the bandit camp. Garrick was in the woods, the overturned, poisoned cauldron behind him. He had managed to run some way.

"Garrick!" Imoen and I both rushed to him. His face was green; near him was blood, bodies of bandits; he was half-buried. We both dug to find him. His crossbow had fallen some distance away. He had drawn his sword at some point; it lay near him, broken. Another sword, hobgoblin-coarse, was also too near. "You can't be—you can't! Viconia!"

She bent over him, touching his chest, lowering her face to his. "As good as dead," she said.

"No!" So stupid. I clutched to the idea of Garrick in danger in my head. It was easier to think about (but this too is blood you have shed). "You have to do something!" Imoen joined me. "You have to!"

The priestess of Shar was smiling. "For a useless male, you demand of me...?" She shook back her hood, releasing her light hair, allowing the moment to last: taking pleasure in the power she held. "You have made a poisoner of him; and for that I shall petition my surface goddess to grant me those remedies. Xuil l'mriggan d'Shar."

For what felt like hours, Viconia sung her prayers; coated her hands with charcoal dust, spread it across his skin; opened a slight cut to shed blood from his left arm, mixing it into the dust; covered him darkly and thrust strange herbs down his throat.

Imoen's hand was twisted in mine; I think it was she doing the comforting, strangely enough.

"He'll be fine. He has to—" I heard Imoen say.

"Odd. It was a thankfully short acquaintance, but it seems to me the barbaric Northwoman was a more gifted cleric..." Edwin commented. "Will this never end?"

Viconia paused her ministrations; Imoen and I glared at Edwin. "In the Underdark there was no more devoted acolyte of the Spider Queen than I, jaluk. For centuries I devoted myself and rose to unimaginable heights upon her power, casting transcendent rites it is beyond your ability to envision. Yet Shar has granted me succor in this roofless world." She slapped Garrick's face. "Huertar, jaluk, elg'cahlir. Guuan."

Her grim task continued. We saw Viconia nod her head, once, her hands pressing heavily upon Garrick's chest.

"Funny," Imoen said. "It was my bow on Damon's cousin dead in the woods, Damon killed your brother, you killed him, and then Edwin killed Sique. Ruined his face first. I thought those acid arrows were powerful. Funny ol' world, huh?"

It was all so very clear.

"I'll kill them," I said. Imoen was staring. "I have to kill them. I'll find out who I need to kill—" I released Tazok's scrolls. Three were incomprehensible runes, magic spells; two were not. I opened them and read.

"The Thorass alphabet. Thorass, but it's not right; it's not spelling out any language I've heard of."

"So they have obviously encoded it, brat." Edwin stood over us, impatiently reaching for the papers. "What an unexpected precaution to take for an iron conspiracy. You're smearing blood all over it, befouled wench. Give it to me; my superior intelligence ought to decode it."
"Yes, you're right, Edwin," I whispered back; Garrick and Viconia. Think about the writing, to avoid cold fear. "X-gh-j-l-p. K rr-l-m-sh x-k-gh-x... It's merchants' cipher! Thorass letters to confuse it, but Common merchants' cipher—every house in the Gate uses some variant. I guess anything more complicated would be hard on Tazok. So I can help you..."

"Hinder, more likely. I must remember—what are those two characters, the ones placing that miniscule dot to the top or bottom?"

"The ie'jami? Gha above or—"

"Or the other one below, yes, I was expertly educated in language as all else." The other one below was gim. "(I should like to see this featherbrain attempt to keep a spell in her head. Magic is the most important field.)"

"Lend me a quill, too, Eddie," Imoen said softly. "Let's figure these creeps out."

The messages emerged.

**Tazok,**

I hope that everything moves along smoothly. I have written to give you instructions from our superiors. I have been told of a certain person who might cause the Iron Throne some trouble in the future. You are to insure that they don't live to upset our operations. Obtain the services of the assassin Nimbul, he should serve you well. Deliver more bounty notices also if you see fit.

DAVAEORN

**Tazok,**

I have noticed that your shipments of iron ore have slowed as of late. It is imperative that we receive another tonne of ore. Step up your raids, and get a shipment to our mines in Cloakwood within the next week. We need to stockpile as much ore as possible before our ultimatum is given. Also, Sarevok wants to know what has happened with the band of mercenaries at Nashkel. Have they been killed? You had better insure that they have been, as Sarevok will not take kindly to any other news.

DAVAEORN

There was a crude sketch, too, upon the back of the letter. Given that it was the Cloakwood, the roughly-drawn path marked was enough for an idea of the iron mines' location, near the Chionthar banks. Their secret supply source to profit from the shortage.

I don't think I know anyone called Davaeorn.

But Sarevok? The Iron Throne?

Not Sarevok Anchev of the Iron Throne?

How many Sarevoks are there in Faerun? How many Sarevoks work for the Iron Throne? How many Sarevoks work for the Iron Throne on the Sword Coast? Sarevok Anchev. Tall, broad, amber-eyed, Rieltar Anchev's foster son. The last time I met him at a ball I think we danced once and conversed about the weather and a ship that had lately come into harbour, above half a year ago now. Eddard used to tell some wild stories about his fighting skills. Possibly every one of those wild stories are true. Or the nasty stories about him, the reason why girls dance with him and nothing else, the thing that happened to Amadia Rossit and the story about that Calishite woman. No wonder he is
only danced with. Sarevok: the golden-eyed figure in the darkness murdering Imoen's foster uncle?

Sarevok Anchev. His father and mine might so easily have negotiated something, Iron Throne to Silvershield; or I would have trusted him as an acquaintance, if he'd only offered Imoen and me an escort instead of this complicated business. (And then of course they would have killed us.) His assassins think my name is Sky. Just like the letters describing Imoen and me in Candlekeep.

"I'm going to kill Sarevok Anchev." The words rested easily upon my tongue. "We'll get to the Cloakwood mines, and we'll do it before any other messages can get there. We can find him there and kill him. For everything."

I'd spoken too loudly. "Skie," Garrick croaked, staring up at us, his head lolling back an instant later.

Viconia stood, releasing him. "Your poisoner will live, jalil. Xuil Shar udos te-smur."

"Crisis successfully averted, I suppose. (As though I would not be delighted to end these moronic simians myself!)" Edwin fumbled for his pack, on the ground behind him. "I take it you will continue to abuse my oath for my valuable services? Rational enough, to attack before they slaughter u—I mean, you brats, for...this." He waved a hand weakly at the destruction of the camp. "Brats! You suddenly take it into that pinhead of yours to blatantly murder one of them, dragging the rest of us into this fool's vendetta—fools!"

"It was my fault. Not Imoen's," I said.

*Stabbed Damon forty-four times. Three less than Shank. They were already dead—*

*Sarevok Anchev's fault."

"Sorry."

"As you ought to be," Viconia said. "You may grovel, baut'wael."

"Yes, grovel before the drow, lick her boots and such. Especially if you bathe first," Edwin said.

Shar-Teel returned. Possessions she carried fell to the ground, clanking loudly. "Bloodlust is acceptable," she said. She took Greywolf's sword from the pile. "Seems you're not completely weak after all. Should've waited for that snaga to come back. No male beats me twice. Here."

She held the gold-and-black hilt toward me, her gauntlet lightly wrapped around the blade.

"Allow me." Viconia, smooth as silk, took it gently, cradling it between her hands, caressing it as though it was a work of art rather than weapon. She closed her eyes. "I know its nature. The scent of Shar. Shar's creation on the heart of its first owner. She was a warrior, murdering hundreds upon hundreds of betrayers to the faith. At the feast of the Moon Bitch, in darkness, she became the sacrifice. They sheathed the sword in her life's blood, turned her skin to ice, bound her to Shar's altar. They promised her life again, but she was forgotten and left to wait in eternal cold. What insane hatred can you imagine arising from such a thing, giving power to those who accept it? When her tomb was found at last, not a trace of her remained: only this blade, calling for a frozen death.

"I trust you will use this in a manner my goddess would approve."

She handed it to me, a sword as cold as snow on a winter's morning. A strong enough sword to carry in the Cloakwood; to warm its edge in battle.

"Witch, here."

Shar-Teel flung a rent, blackened, and bloodstained mage's robe to Imoen; one I
"...Ew? It's all..."

"It's magic. You're the spellslinger, use it." She stowed away a clinking bag in her own pack, next to a large bow. " Seems enough gold for a while, one of those enchanted bags. Sword for the bard." A short, shining blade, like the one I'd been using. "Carry the potions, girl." She'd gathered a selection of bottles, some blackened from the fire; I picked them up, cringing at the heat. A healing potion among them, for Garrick. Shar-Teel herself now wore parts of Tenhammer's full plate. "Drow: Tenhammer's weapon?"

"It ought to be mine to wield, sargtsinss." Viconia produced it from somewhere about her person, stretching idly. "Mmm, Tenhammer. Perhaps the man ought to have been called Tentongue...a most interesting time between us. Such antagonism, such passion. The many things that man was willing to do, large and strong as the finest of pleasure-slaves, dextrous enough for my pleasures. I had not expected to meet a rivvil able to perform the position of the sarah hamil five times sequentially, so it was agreeable to me when he..."

Imoen made a disgusted face accompanied by a loud noise.

"Ah, well; one taste of the meat is sufficient. Or rather, seventeen tastes."

"Loot goes to the party, drow. Use it, but bear that in mind."

Imoen's enchanted robe gathered around her, shimmering clean and bright orange-pink the instant she put it on. I hope it protects her enough.

"We have to leave. We can drag Garrick, can't we?"

—

Xuil I'mriggan d'Shar - with the guidance of Shar

Xuil Shar udos te-smur - with Shar we shall prosper

sargtsinss - female warrior

sarah hamil - camel

74. Ankheg Knight

24 Kythorn

The path is clear before us. South-east to the Friendly Arm inn; east into the Cloakwood; along the map's trail until Sarevok's iron lair is visible.

We planned to use the inn to get the translated letters anonymously to Duke Eltan of the Flaming Fist. They would never believe us under our own names: too young, too disinherited, foreign, a drow, known by the sobriquet Man-Slayer. But, if our fight there attracts attention, if Eltan receives other evidence—then he may believe it.

I didn't think Shar-Teel could get any harder on me in practicing while the others rest, but she is. It feels as though she's after that part of me in the bandit camp, the part that killed everyone, beating me
to summon it out again. It hurts so much. *But I need it to kill Sarevok Anchev.*

It feels strange not to have bathed, done my hair, cleaned my chipped nails. The worst of the blood came off when we forded a stream, and I discarded the stained clothes when we stopped for a brief rest. But we don’t have the time; to break into a mine with a band this size seems all but impossible even if we surprise them. (May the wizards’ protections against scrying hold.)

Garrick drank enough healing potions to walk again. I’m too secretive, about the healing and the red hands. I may have to make it obvious, if he needs it, but... Imoen looking at me like that is *enough.* This is the only way I can see how to fix it.

We walked past a small fishing village; a long way, but this time I didn’t complain (much). Poor Garrick and Viconia.

"Some party going on." Shar-Teel jerked a thumb in the direction of a gathering of village labourers in the distance, all of them standing about a cleared patch of earth.

A giant green monolith rose out of the ground and spat out a fountain of acid.

"Hit the dirt!" Imoen pulled me down; the acid burned. Shar-Teel was quick to action. The creature was covered in thick green armour, a harsh, ugly shell; a squawking sound came from the clashing of mandibles bigger than my arms. Its gaping maw lashed toward her.

Shar-Teel’s blade struck, glancing off the jointed carapace. I reached for Varscona, ducking out of the line of acid. Viconia’s bullets, aimed for its vast, multifaceted eyes, had greater effect: the next stream of acid came at her. She fled behind a tree; I heard her chanting a healing spell.

*Varscona, the cold sword.* Not as weighty as Shar-Teel’s strong weapon, but upon the edge of one of the monster’s midsection-plates, it drew faint green blood. Then its hooked pincers hit pain.

Garrick, this battle, had chosen striking spells above songs. Pink energy almost grazed my cheek; I swear he sung a deeper casting than before, two missiles leaving black traces upon the shell. Fire from Imoen, glittering dust flung from Edwin; I could hardly see, and the creature seemed to disappear before our very eyes.

Edwin shrieked loudly and high. He came plummeting from the sky, flung away by the monster rising again from the earth; and landed on me in a flurry of caustic spell components.

Really, he could use more exercise.

"My spell disrupted! Does the humiliation never end?" I felt him roll away; he jerked his robes sharply away from their tangle around me. Someone else grabbed me.

"Maiden, do you require assistance?" A roughly dressed man, clinking as he walked, trying to help me up. I can’t trust strangers. I pulled away, rising from the dirt. A bright light flashed, near where Shar-Teel fought: Imoen, probably.

The ground shook: I tumbled away from it, having enough warning this time. The stranger raised a battered, patternless shield instead of escaping, drawing a sword and moving cautiously down. The second creature erupted, larger than the first—and with clicking, sharper limbs.

"Edwin!" Needed his spells. "Er...back over here, you thing!" Toward the open ground about the village; then we could at least see the things coming. Shar-Teel—needed to kill the first one *quickly.* I flung a throwing knife to glance off the carapace. Its vast head turned to me rather than the stranger; I ran back. A stream of acid—I flung myself down, somersaulting away.
"Cry for your lives, they are over!" Edwin—too close to the monster, shouting out Imoen's fire spell, roasting it. I had to dive to him, try to get him out of the way; the stranger did not back down, careful and steadfast.

"Look—draw it back—" I begged the stranger. Varscona made a hit last. I screamed; a pincer struck me.

"Stay beneath my shield, milady!" he gasped. Another of Edwin's spells launched, pale and cold light. I tried again to fight. I could see the man's strength, despite a sword in as ill condition as his armour. Streams of acid hissed, pouring down his shield. The black chasm between the monster's powerful jaws seemed to enlarge. The stranger would not budge.

The sounds of Shar-Teel's steel grew closer. She, too, drove the creature she fought; ignoring the acid, protected by Tenhammer's armour, she forced it back and back. Imoen's missiles hit their spots.

Two monsters too near. The stranger finally allowed the creature some distance to the clearer ground; Imoen and Garrick emerged from the trees and made further castings. I lunged for a fleshy point between its shieldings—Varscona's cold sunk in. It maddened the creature only; but I heard Shar-Teel's monster fall like a giant oak, her sword in its head, spells upon its thick shell.

Imoen advanced, gleefully firing her bow. "Gotcha good." The monster we fought whirled; an arrow sprouted from its eye. The stranger blocked its flailing pincers, stabbed it; Varscona and Shar-Teel, the same. Violently green blood coated it, staining the white of its armoured underbelly. It screamed loudly.

"It calls—" the stranger said. Imoen shouted another spell, missiles aimed at that screaming mouth. She cried out.

A third creature rising. Imoen down, her head hitting a rock. The stranger and I rushed to it:

"Har'l'il'cik!" Viconia's power overcoming it. A moment long enough for us to start to kill it. Shar-Teel came, having killed the other—two down. It raised itself, flailing with pincers at twice the speed as before; acid burned my cheek. I saw the stranger's shield protecting us. He distracted it; Shar-Teel leaped to its neck, balanced herself, and neatly plunged her sword into what passed for its brain. We watched for another earthquake, but this time the ground moved no more.

"Uurgh." Imoen raised her head, patting at a small cut on her forehead. "'S hard to dodge in these stupid robes. Nice one, Vic."

"Bloody ankhegs." Shar-Teel was quick to wipe the acid from her blade, plucking leaves from a tree. Ankhegs. The farmer's underground friend. I'd imagined them to be...smaller. The three monsters lay still.

I looked at our interloper, noting the detail of his appearance for the first time: as shabby as he had seemed at first glance, a round-cheeked and blond young man with the remnants of pimples on his face. His armour was so badly corroded and damaged that it barely deserved the name, his shield likewise battered and partly melted. He stared at us in return; I remembered that Shar-Teel had replaced several bandit scalps to hang from her belt. Then he saluted.

"Halt! Be you friend or foe!"

"I think we count as 'friend', circumstances and all, and you might've noticed we're kind of already halted." Imoen sat up slowly, passing her arm across her forehead and leaving streaks of blood behind on her robe's sleeves. I thought of healing her, as soon as we had a chance. I rubbed at the
acid upon me, allowing a little effort to have the pain and scarring begin to fade.

"(Pardon me? We have just made strategic use of your pathetic unsolicited assistance in our battle. Is this simian fool, madman, or both for the grand prize of my ever-unravelling sanity among these chimps?)"

"Allow me to aid you, maid—" He held out a hand for Imoen, but she stood herself.

"No problem. Who are you?"

He saluted again. "I am Ajantis! Squire-paladin of the Order of the Most Radiant Heart, servant to Helm, crusader against bandits, son of the noble family of do you travel with a drow?" he gasped; Viconia had emerged from the cover of the trees, her hood blown back by the wind.

He was a paladin: a good and noble divine knight. Viconia is also good at her occupation.

"How strange, I don't believe I've heard of that family." Edwin inspected his nails with an expression of deep ennui. "Let me guess, you tatterdemalion tin-can. Shall we move straight toward demonstrating magic's supremacy over your pitiful efforts to punish us for harbouring the epitome of all delightful (and depraved, I'm sure very depraved) evil?"

I entered the conversation quickly. "She abandoned her evil underworld ways and fled to the world above to do good deeds and write pseudo-philosophical journal entries. Haven't you heard of Drizzt Do'Urden?"

"Rivvil, I will whip you bloody." Viconia directed a malevolently red glare at me.

Ajantis stared dubiously at her. "Are you claiming she is Drizzt under the influence of one of those girdles of gender transformation? I don't see any scim—"

"Not really. Just trust us," I said. Viconia hissed, tossing her pale hair. "We've been—crusading—after bandits too. Wrecked their eastern camp and found there's a hive of them in a secret iron mine in the Cloakwood prepared to conclude their plans for an illicit iron monopoly in the Sword Coast."

"It sounds a noble though an unlikely quest." Ajantis looked contemplative. "The people of this village also suffer. The only son of Farmer Brun was today buried." He made a sweeping gesture to the area of cleared earth the villagers had gathered around. "His body was found in the depths of the ankheg lair. Such is the explanation for my disgraceful appearance: the creatures' potent acid.

"The impoverished fishermen have also brought a tale to me of an evil witch visiting persecutions upon them. I seek fellow adventurers with whom to vanquish her and restore prosp..."

We don't have time.

"Ending a mine's bigger than a few fishers," I said. "Your witch will keep. Do you want to come with us?"

He frowned as though in deep thought. "I do not intend to doubt your word, lady, but I would like to know what proofs you..."

"We've their letters. We'll buy you new armour when we drop them with a messenger at the Inn—can we afford that, Shar-Teel?"

She scowled. "Yes." One more warrior; stronger than me. I did not wish, though, to meet his pale eyes.
"I am willing, then," Ajantis said.

Garrick strummed an elaborate chord. "We are surely at the beginning of an epic tale, sir knight! Lead on."

"I may take your head someday, male. Keep up if you can."

Shar-Teel set a punishing pace; a band of hobgoblins, interrupting us. Together—I stood in the back with my bow—we beat them.

I am better than I used to be. It's easier to aim to kill. It had better be enough to kill Anchev.

There is a paradox in the name of hobgoblins: Hearth, Hob, Goblin of the House, Hob Goblin. Yet nothing further from friendly housekeeping could be imagined. A shining red-gold ring rests in Imoen's hands.

We're tired, but we'll make the Friendly Arm. Easily.

75. The Wood Trail

25 Kythorn

We did not even rest in the Inn, camping a few hours out from it once our business was completed, keeping our journey as quick as possible. Horses are useless in the Cloakwood, so I know we have a chance ahead of any surviving bandits as long as we keep the pace. Unless, teleportation magic. (The Mirrorshades do not have anything; we did check.)

It is a vast castle; an old temple of Bhaal. Gorion's friends are certainly no longer there. Ajantis has his plate armour and longsword new; Shar-Teel paid for Tenhammer's full plate to be properly fitted for her, and passed Ajantis Tenhammer's shield to boot. Potions; powerful bullets and arrows; Gellana Mirrorshade's healing for Garrick; on Edwin's initiative, a new set of orange robes (orange? I do not mean just the colour's effect on his complexion) embroidered heavily in gold thread, premade for someone slightly more muscular in build than him. Supplies. As prepared as we can be for murder. (Doubting the practicality of Edwin's sartorial tastes. Then again, I'm not one to talk.)

Garrick sung outside the Inn, gaining a few coppers; he asked Imoen and I to juggle or dance or perform her magic tricks with him, as we've done before. Of course we refused, for no time to spare.

Our first experience of the mighty Cloakwood was a band of predatory tasloi; one dropped a cloak that I now wear, since Garrick divined that it protects against magical detection of unseen movement. A useful item to possess in order to stab Anchev in the back. It matches the description of a cloak an old dwarf in Beregost had stolen; but we are a long way from Beregost.

Then there were three spiders. Viconia screamed about the vengeance of Lloth falling upon her, useless in the battle. A teleporting spider leapt on Imoen and me, my Varscona stabbing desperately at its head. I killed it, the other two falling to Shar-Teel and Ajantis. Viconia still shook after the battle was done, her eyes blank and unseeing, needing to be chased after in her wild, illogical running away. Imoen's comfort may not have been enough, but:

"If profit on a drow head outstrips your use in battle, Sharran, I'll add the first to other bounties."

Shar-Teel walked on; Viconia followed her. The next time the spiders attacked, she hit with her sling, a priestess victorious.
We passed near a hunting lodge owned by a man I knew, a little: Aldeth Sashenstar. He recognised me and called me the Grand Duke's daughter; he wore a very tacky diamond ring on his left little finger, a stone the size of an eyeball. He asked Ajantis for help against druids, but I made Sashenstar admit he had killed one of their number; that was enough to allow our paladin to comply with our plans. Not as strong, quick, or even as quick-thinking as Shar-Teel, but the knight is useful. A healer, too.

A diamond the size of an eyeball joins the hidden pocket in Imoen's spell component pouch.

More spiders. We crossed over a bridge—perhaps there was a distant whistling, but no creature emerged to attack us. We were obliged to battle dreadwolves for a place to rest, near to the remains of a wooden hut far older than Sashenstar's. Compared to a vampiric wolf...they were still scary.

Again, Shar-Teel tried with me, while the others rested, when my limbs were so tired I might as well have been boneless, making pitiful attempts at learning to use a sword. I woke black with bruises.

The watcher above—though she would have preferred to be called, The lady, or something similarly respectful—continued the role of her named occupation. The forests thickened; the canopy of trees gave heavy shadows to the ground, the leaves deep green, oak nuts fecund, borne in heavy clusters by high branches.

The group's female leader marched not far from the quick, and quiet, girl in front; that one sometimes looked above her head in case of higher-placed traps, but had naturally failed to observe the observer. The orange-clad young man wrestled yet again with his elaborate and impractical clothing; which was becoming progressively less elaborate. The priestess picked her way slowly through the forest at the group's rear, and the fair-singing boy stood close to his recent-made friend; he did not touch the harp he carried, and nervously twitched upon occasion.

It was the endearingly foolish squire who was the true focus of her attention, and at this time he did not look up. His new plate shone in a way he would surely be proud of, like the jackdaw was proud of collecting silver to its nest. How irritated the boy would be if she told him such a comparison; but she did not seem to be bound by the standards of his Helm, not that such technicalities were of import. The belief at least kept him well behaved and gave him a feeling of usefulness. Nourishing a healthy sense of self-esteem in the young and unsophisticated was so important.

The girl with the pale pink hair lost a tin platter carelessly fastened to her pack, and spent a cantrip to retrieve it from the ground; the lady rather approved of magic in general. A mixed group—marching in the direction of further danger, no doubt, even if they had chosen to leave the man who had helped to kill a druid to his fate—

The watcher sighed.

—

76. Missing Brother

26 Kythorn

Spiders and ettercaps! None of them speaking, it is a great relief. The forest grows thicker; I walk ahead to check for the web traps, and run back behind Shar-Teel and Ajantis when the creatures who
set the trap inevitably see us coming. I will observe that Edwin's new robes have already met with a series of petty disasters, only one of which could possibly have been Imoen's fault.

*I-sense-evil-in-this-party-but-also-some-good*, Ajantis rabbits on. Well, he jolly well ought to, at least with Imoen and Garrick. Something in me wants to cheer Edwin on at what he says in return to all that...probably the same reason why I don't wish to think about Ajantis' paladin's nobility.

Paladin's nobility, ha. I swear he attempted to sneakily save bits of our meal last night, shuffling some of the candied nuts Imoen bought (or didn't buy) off into one of his waist-pouches when he thought nobody was looking.

We came to the smell of salt in the air, crossing a stream that fed into the Sea of Swords, the sound of crashing waves not far in the distance.

There was a boy. Shar-Teel had her hand on her sword, although he was only standing there, unconcealed.

"Please, let me speak! Before you attack."

"Of course on my honour as a squire we shall hear you out!" Ajantis said, before any of the rest of us could speak.

"Thank you!" the boy sobbed, the tears easy to hear in his voice. "Thank you so much for listening. It's my brother, you see, he went into the Cloakwood, he said to me to wait for him here...

*It sounds foolish, but we found the sword Spider's Bane—we thought we could be heroes of the Cloakwood*! the boy's story ran. *My brother hasn't returned yet...but it's been more than a sevenday, and...my mother would be so shattered if..."

"One less foolish male in the world," Shar-Teel sneered; Viconia stood ready to back her up. "Move on."

"Then I am sorry...I am sorry for troubling you..." the boy sniffed.

"This is morally abhorrent! I will aid you in Helm's name!" Ajantis jumped in. He blocked Shar-Teel's path, standing in front of her:

"I remain because I feel it my responsibility to guard the young ladies from your evil path," he lectured. I took a step away from him. "We will find your brother, lad!"

"Yeah, I'm with the paladin," Imoen said. "Hey, maybe if he killed a druid too, we wouldn't have to feel guilty about abandoning him either..."

Garrick spoke up, his voice pitched forcefully, compelling attention. "*Spider's Bane is a legendary weapon originally forged by Yeslan the Anvil of the Orothiar dwarves in the Cloakwood,*" he recited. "It was presented to the Grand Dukes of Baldur's Gate in a ceremony intended to foster goodwill and was wielded by them for a century. The blade was then ironically lost in a fight against ettercaps and spiders that caused the death of the Grand Duke Arragar Belt, as told in the *Baldurian Century Saga*. It is a weighty two-handed sword enchanted to strike true, and protects the wielder from all magics that would imprison them against movement."

Shar-Teel and Ajantis glared at each other, neither budging. At last she turned her head and spat upon the ground.

"Very well. Witch."
"Yep?"

"Coloured lights. Know that one? When we find the body, send up some. We won't drag it back here."

"My companion means if," Ajantis quickly said to the boy. "If we find him alive, the witch can send white lights...I think that is possible? I know little of magic. Then it shall be my duty to return him."

Imoen stood near the boy. I saw her hand moving; she'd the diamond, releasing it to his cloak. A much better place for it.

"Good luck, lad," she said.

"Please search quickly. His name is Chelak. I saw him going in that direction. Be careful."

"I feel Helm blesses this endeavour." Ajantis laid a hand briefly on the boy's shoulder. "We shall find Chelak."

"Then haste, boy," Shar-Teel said. "And raising false hopes is as foul an action as any," she added quietly. "Skie, start looking."

The light glistened on a trap not a hand's span from Ajantis.

"Ajantis, st..."

Webbing caught us, and three huge spiders raced in. If it were not for Viconia's drow's-immunity...

"March ahead, halfwit."

There is a marking on the bandits' map that resembles a rough spider; the path illustrated is north-west to reach a stream, avoiding that region. I watched for spider-web traps; the shadows of evening deepened.

"That's three you've managed to disarm in fifty steps," Shar-Teel said. "Hunt for where they're thicker." She tapped a tree; some of its branches seemed torn and ragged, and on closer inspection I saw marks on the wood. "See this, city brat? I'm no ranger, but this was cut by a sword. Stupid use of a decent blade. We're closer."

"We shall, as the poor young boy so attempted, find the foul lair of the creatures and purge this evil before we dare rest," Ajantis declared. Edwin glared, but a trailing gold thread of his was caught upon a tree branch; cursing under his breath, he untangled the costume.

Viconia sniffed the air. "I note the stench of surface-orbben, even stronger to the east. Praise Shar's might in sparing us from the spider queen's vengeance."

"Grant praise instead to Helm," Ajantis said. "His justice and goodness are to the foul Shar as potent midday to withering dusk——"

"Silence, ust'dan! The divine Shar has governed the party since the day I joined. She is a goddess of conviction and purpose." Viconia said.

"Your evil temptation may have weakened the vulnerable of this party, but it is clear Helm has sent me to place it upon the right path and redeem it of all that is dark!"

"Darkness comes to all things. Yield to her, and Shar shall spare you countless torments!"
"The stench of evil clings to you in the most vile manner. Helm give me strength against this vile heretic!" Ajantis was not trying to conceal his yelling; Viconia's voice had also risen high.

"In the Underdark you would be fodder for the Kuo Toa, ibliht!"

"In the name of Helm you would be purged, evil one!"

"If you wish to die, surface scum, I am pleased to assist!"

"By Helm, I sm—!"

Shar-Teel had suddenly turned; punched Viconia to the ground; elbowed Ajantis tightly against a tree with her other hand, and prisoned him there.

"...smite...you..." he wheezed.

"The day I meet a god who gives a crap is the day I pick up knitting needles," she said. "Your impudence will get you killed, boy."

"Don't kill him!" Garrick and I joined Imoen in chorus. Edwin rolled his eyes.

"You are ilharess, matron to this party," Viconia breathed, nursing a bleeding nose. "We shall obey."

Shar-Teel's evil scowl only deepened. "Don't plaster your lips to my arse and pretend you wouldn't stab us in the back."

"One does what lies in one's own interests." Viconia smiled, I thought, beneath her hand.

"I—do—not accept your leadership." Ajantis struggled to say.

She released him. "Asking for my sword ticking your innards, boy?" She left her back open, her head turned from him; Ajantis could have attacked then, gained the advantage he'd need by stabbing her in the back. But her contempt was right. "Waste of my time. Get ahead with those traps, Skie."

Faint whispers continued from the rear of the party:

"...someone's headed to the Wall of the Permanently Cranky...Helm...saved from the Underdark...Shar...sponsored a squire...vile unbeliever...crude freethinker..."

"I think they're really starting to bond," I whispered to Imoen.

There were, of course, spiders. Including the ones with swords for legs. Anchev is probably worse.

Spider blood and fluid coated us; Imoen least thanks to quick tree-climbing, Shar-Teel's and Ajantis' armour utterly black with the substance. A teleporting spider tried to tear through the spellcasters. So many antidotes needed.

Seven more web-traps; we saw the structure, covered with grey webs, slightly too regular in shape to be natural. Rotting wood and vegetation were moulded together into a rough, thick dome. The only visible entrance to it was a small, dark hole set on low ground. It would have been easy to miss if not for the rough path that seemed to lead to it, turned-over dirt and faint brown-coloured stains, as though many things had been dragged along it and inside that waiting mouth.

"Widen it with that blade of yours, girl."

"The stench of evil clings to that sword in a most vile manner," Ajantis said.
Varscona's enchantment; I stood back from the webbing and let the sword cut through the thin strands. Aberration-web; Shar's-sword. When it was wide enough for Shar-Teel and Ajantis to get through we were ready.

"Got antidote potions, everyone?" Imoen said determinedly. "Let's squash us some bugs."

"Arachnids. (And I know she's plagiarising from somewhere.) Curse these damned robes!" Edwin called in place of a battlecry.

It was dark; my ring could not disguise that fact. Shar-Teel burst through, Ajantis not far behind:

"Helm, give me strength!"

That certainly got the enemies' attention. Sword spiders, from ceiling and walls, leaping for us. A swarming mass. In the centre of that gloom was a bloated pile of...something. It spoke, a horrible cracking half-noise from the middle of all that distorted flesh:

"...ssspiders...kill them all..."

I stood with the casters; an ettercap, breaking past Shar-Teel, rushed for them.

"Darn stupid torn-up cloak—" I heard Imoen muttering; Edwin and Garrick hit the ettercap at the same time, their spells flaring bright red on its hide. I stabbed at it:

(Shar-Teel Sarevok Damon kill)

It moved. Heavy claws swung my way, the creature's nails coated in grime; I twisted back.

"Shar—" My ettercap cringed, but did not fall at Viconia's cry. A brief enough distraction; Varscona opened its shoulder, blood that iced into a hundred crystals at the very point the blade struck. A giant spider joined it.

Of course Imoen and the paladin would never leave the prospect of a missing brother. The ettercap's claws raced down my shoulder, and the pain was almost enough to run from. The wound burned; and that is the sign of poison, a thousand green darts striking in the bloodstream. With my right hand I took the flask from my belt, a practiced move, and gulped desperately; the poison continues to hurt, and you wonder if the antidote has failed and you will die after all.

The ettercap slashed again; I ducked away. Just an ettercap. Just one ettercap. Viconia laughed softly, and behind the spider she brought down a reddened hand on it, a reversal of healing. It lashed out its legs in pain. Then she darted behind me; the spider's sharp legs caught on my sleeve, though did not pierce.

...my sspiders—to my prissson— The bloated thing had, perhaps, once been female. Its skin was underground-pale in its folds of flesh; its features sunk into its face like unformed clay.

I parried the next strike of the ettercap's claws. Its hands moved up; that was an opening, and I stabbed into its chest. It squealed; bled that dark stuff. Only an ettercap. Bleeding badly; it fell. Varscona swept to the spiders around it.

Shar-Teel and Ajantis fought a row of the spiders with metallic-coloured legs, vicious swords. Edwin cast again, a longer spell this time. Spiders—all their limbs—Varscona's ice across them hurt them. Kill them to pass. Edwin's spell swept over me, equally cold; and one fled. That gave Varscona a chance to put down one spider, slashing across its eight black eyes and down. Imoen cast, missiles that burned a sword spider; and then there was only one standing between Shar-Teel and that bloated...
figure in the centre of the cave. Ajantis caught sword-legs on his shield.

One more spider; block it. I spun away from the fangs. Shar-Teel was nearly... Her sword swept through the sword spider's body.

The figure spoke directly to her. "Beware, human...I warned...you cannot sslave—"

A sense of something in the air like a trap set by magic; Ajantis crying something. I'd my own chance to bring the sword's point under the thorax of the spider I fought—try to kill it—

Shar-Teel didn't hesitate. She moved, and that heavy blade would have bisected the thing. But everything went white. It all happened at once: pale bars that came into existence around the bloated woman; Shar-Teel's body flying backwards; the clang, her armour hitting the wall, the second noise when she fell to the ground and didn't move. There was white fog that crossed the ground of the cavern, encompassing our calves and feet, and the dead creatures within it began to twitch.

The ettercap I had killed rose. Its eyes glowed white and its body was coated with the fog's paleness. Dead sword spiders slowly returned to their legs around Shar-Teel's body. Ajantis went to her, and his shield forced one away from biting her; but they came even though he slashed at them.

Varscona sliced through the bodies, and iced with cold they came ever onward. Already dead.

"...My prissson, foolss. Jon thought it mercy to be ssso easssy, you sssee...

The white bars were rooted around the prisoner, from ground to roof of the cavern. They spared her from death at our hands, and in the cage she waited for us to die.

Edwin cast; missiles from his hands burned the flesh of the dead ettercap before me, and did nothing at all. Garrick's song was a dirge, the mourning for us— The ettercap's cold claws, the spider's carved fangs, lurched slowly to my skin. I moved aside, but sooner or later they would find. The fog lay steady over the ground.

Imoen whispered.

"It's a lock," she repeated. "It's a lock. It's a lock. And I'm going to pick it."

Varscona left lines of ice over the ettercap's dead flesh. I spun away from the spiders once more. Imoen chanted: she summoned a large pink hand.

"(A simple cantrip! —I would strategically retreat—)" Edwin muttered. Ajantis cried out, defending Shar-Teel, blood on his leg below an armour-joint. The dead could easily make alive things bleed.

Imoen's mage's hand reached to the ceiling of the cave. It shook the roof; just above the bars.

"'S changed, y'see, since the casting," she whispered. "Anchored to where the ground used to be. I'm picking it." Her hand moved the ceiling; the bars of the prison shook—

I could only try to defend against the spiders. The pink hand set rocks shaking, the cave ceiling unstable. Edwin also cast:

"(A pathetic apprentice's cantrip! My own are far more effective—)"

His mage hand was reddish, and slightly larger than Imoen's. It did the same: above and shaking the white bars, and then the rocks came crashing to the ground—

Ajantis braced himself against the wall and by Shar-Teel. The casters were near the entrance of the
cave, away from the worst of it; rocks fell and smashed into the creatures. I stepped back; a pointed stone fell to crush the skull of the ettercap I fought, which still stood. It was moving still; the fog held —

There was no clear shot, but we held magical arrows—sheathe Varscona, draw bow. She had to be killed.

Three arrows through the falling rocks, seeking aim; on the third the body began to convulse, an arrow spread with poison in its own right.

"That's it," Imoen said. "Keys to the spell—"

I saw the fog melt like mist. Only dead in here with us, and we lived. Ajantis bent down and methodically cast upon Shar-Teel, healing her by paladin's hands.

Imoen stepped over the fallen rocks, nimble as a fox; I heard her pained cry.

"He's...I think he's here..."

A large two-handed sword that shimmered with enchantment. A heavy silver ring engraved by elaborate runic design. An opal-studded bracelet. Four copper pieces. The body of a boy with green-coloured lips, spiderweb covering it...

For a moment, unbidded, a sight half a dream rose before the eyes; blue hands that drained poison instead of red hands that froze enemies as the dead. But that was gone. Tiber's brother was dead.

Blood-red light rose high into the air outside the spider cave, Imoen's voice hoarse and low.

—

27 Kythorn

Almost halfway. The map shows the line of a river to follow, shows a bridge to bypass, sketched out between cave-like markings of landscape. To the north-west to circuit thick forest and deeper gorge; to the east along the river and another bridge. Then further to the east as the Chionthar continues; and there the Cloakwood Mines are marked. We have traversed the land from the west of the Friendly Arm, up to the rocky promontory to the sea; have reached the river where once more the trees grow thickly and horses cannot pass for that reason rather than the harsh pebbles of the cliffs of the Sea of Swords. It is easy to decipher the route; we have killed four spiders today. It will not be long before we reach the mines of Sarevok Anchev.

77. Bardic Encounters of an Eldothian Kind

29 Kythorn

We walked, following the stream; the forest thickened, further north, and Viconia lowered her hood to walk in the shade, her pale hair free to blow in the wind. A hostile brown bear Shar-Teel and Ajantis fought; many arrows and spells. We rested when we could, and hurried on:

A man sat below a tree in dappled sunlight, wearing fine brown and green cloth that did not quite blend into the forest. A second man, armoured, beside him; who was much less important. Next to the man on the grass glittered a silver flute, and a knife flashed between his hands, an arrow forming slowly out of the shape of a stick. It was as though we had entered into a romance tale.
"Eldoth!"

I do not need to say I ran to him; flung myself into his arms.

"Oh, Eldoth, I just knew you'd come to find me!"

"Indeed. I assure you I've hardly slept since your...unfortunate abduction." Thankfully he looked well enough; he had scarcely changed from the last time we had bid each other farewell, little knowing so much would happen. "What in all the planes have you done to yourself? You resemble a deranged druid." I remembered, ashamed, the changes in my own appearance: the hair-dye gradually growing out, dirty, bloodstained, foul-smelling. I drew back.

"I had to—Eldoth, so much has happened—Gorion and iron mine and killing Sarevok Anchev and..."

"Skie, do attempt to be comprehensible. Women," he remarked aside to the man beside him. "While you gather your thoughts: this humble woodsman names himself Peter the North."

"Swallowed a magical compass as a lad. M' stomach hurts when I'm facing the wrong direction." He burped. "I investigate subterranean trees, all right? If you don't mind I'll be going now."

A clang: Shar-Teel, drawing upon Eldoth and his friend? Just because she hates most (all) men—

"I have never seen a subterranean tree, and I ought to know," Viconia said, standing beside her.

"You're no druid. Nice armour," Shar-Teel said to the man. "What do you know about—"

"Help me!" Peter the North called quickly to Eldoth. "I gave you that wyvern poison, I—"

"Allow us to work this out," Eldoth said, placing an arm about the man's shoulders. "Peter; have you seen these gentlemen and gentlewomen before?"

"No. There's no sense in attempting the ruse any more is there? I was already ready to avenge myself upon your blackmail. I am training wyverns to serve as guards for the Iron Throne and I look forward to placating them with meat. Yours!" He scrambled with a whistle he held about his neck. "My pets—" He brought it to his mouth. A dull thump sounded an instant after the instrument's shrill noise.

"That wyvern poison is terribly efficient, really." Eldoth withdrew his arrow from the back of Peter the North's neck as the subterranean woodsman crumpled to the grass.

"You killed him! Just like that—" Imoen cried. Peter the North had been Iron Throne; had admitted it. Eldoth had to.

"Perhaps the tedious recriminations for aiding you may wait, my dear young girl? His so-called pets —"

Three wyverns broke through the trees. Wyverns in stories are five times or more the size of a human; these were only Imoen's height, slightly taller than me.

*Baby* wyverns.

I drew Varscona and rushed into fighting them, Shar-Teel in front of me.

Eldoth, chanting something. His magic would help; he sung his words for some time, his low voice casting its spell.
The middle wyvern turned into a small toad. Shar-Teel crushed it with the heel of her boot; she turned to the second wyvern, and I fought beside her.

("Magic tricks from a mere musician! I may better—")

Edwin's acid arrow hit the wyvern's head, narrowly missing its eye; it howled. Garrick, almost at the same time, released his own spell, two pink bolts striking quickly. Ajantis shielded Shar-Teel and me; a pattern we'd fought before, melee and casters. Good for confronting the Iron Throne. Imoen ran close to the fight; her fire spell burned from her hands, and then she raced back quickly in case of reprisal. Shar-Teel finally felled the wyvern with a thick wound to its neck.

One wyvern left; its tail lashed out at me, and I did not have time to duck. The poisoned spike sunk in; the last antidote potion on my belt. Eldoth helped to save us again—like Edwin, the acid arrow spell, eating into the wyvern's crumbling flesh; a few more spells and it also fell.

I reached back for Eldoth's hand. "Thanks, everyone! I'd like you all to meet my fiancé Eldoth." As if formal introductions would work in such a setting. Well, the wyverns were gone; for a moment we weren't being attacked, cleaning up after the battle. Ajantis' hand glowed a faint blue, healing himself. "Eldoth, I know this is all so sudden, I promise I'll explain properly—I'd like you to meet my friends," I said.

"I shall be delighted."

"This is Imoen. She's my best friend—and, of course, a Great and Terrible Pink Wizardess." Imoen smiled back at both Eldoth and me. "This is Garrick; he's a bard, like you. This is Edwin—the-greatest-wizard-on-Faerun."

"(She finally realises my true place!—Wait, Faerun only? There are other continents—) Good day, bard," Edwin commented.

"This is our party leader, Shar-Teel."

"I dislike still more the turn our gender ratio takes. Annoy me and you're likely to find a sword in your guts." Shar-Teel bared her teeth at him.

"And—and here's Ajantis the paladin!" Ajantis can be trusted to be more polite. "And this is Viconia, a healer. She's very nice and very kind."

Viconia hissed. "The warnings I have given you of speaking of me so weakly involve the concepts 'flaying', 'to the bone', and 'extreme pain'." But she probably wouldn't really; I can run for longer than her anyway. I'd been worried that Eldoth might take some time to understand about Viconia, but I needn't have doubted him:

"Charmed to meet a woman of your dusky beauty," he told her.

"This male is not worth my breaking." Viconia sniffed.

We kept on—"Druids to the west; barking mad, if you'll pardon the lowest form of humour, much better to avoid them," Eldoth explained, and as we walked I told him everything.

"Yes, Skie, I abandoned the city not long after you, a trifling matter between gentlemen; your father cutting you off—I remain unable to believe, by the way, that you heard no previous rumours; a secret, concealed iron mine...that you and this—motley band—" Edwin, especially, glowered at that —"wish to raid."
"With you with us—Oh, Eldoth, it's so wonderful to see you again." He's told stories about fighting armies of gnolls, here in the Cloakwood forest on his own. He'll aid us easily.

"Or are you too weak, jaluk?" Viconia had wandered near to us, almost whispering her taunt to him. The ends of her hair blew into his face; in the shadow under the closely-grown trees.

He watched her, his eyes half-lidded. "I find nothing more tedious than idle contests of strength. Perhaps we shall talk over my Aluryath wine upon our rest, dark maiden. I've never met a lady such as you; I am desirous to know you better."

"Must I accept such arrogance from a male? On your knees," Viconia bantered.

"It surely has not escaped your notice, oh thorn of blackest jet, that such roles are reversed upon the surface?" Eldoth said.

"I thought so when I first fled the caverns of the Underdark. But Shar-Teel is proof that you surface dwellers alter the rightful order, and that traces of it remain," Viconia said.

"One wild boar does not make a herd," Eldoth said, somewhat softly.

"Boar? I have not heard that surface word," Viconia said.

"A hunted animal. Large, foul-smelling, tusked, and entirely uncouth." He doesn't know Shar-Teel properly yet.

"Ah; you intend to insult her. I quite prefer breaking men with some pretense to a spine." Viconia seemed to eye his back.

Eldoth lifted his muscled shoulders, posing for strength. "You would find my spine sufficiently erect for any eventuality."

"Perhaps you both have good points?" I tried.

"Skie, don't bother us right now," he said. Some more of Viconia's white hair fell into his face; he pushed it away. "You would possess charming hair if you'd a chance to brush it once in a while, coal-wench."

"That shadow on your face would make you appear virile—for a human—if only you'd the masculinity to enlarge it."

"I see your wit is sharp as your war-hammer, priestess."

"I see your tongue would be better exercised elsewhere...musician."

"Quiet," Shar-Teel ordered.

"And do stop monopolizing the time of our cleric," Edwin said coldly.

Eldoth had the good wine he promised, and although under the circumstances we could only sample it, it was a nice evening meal. Ajantis would not touch either of the two squirrels Shar-Teel had from her crossbow—there's a reason why squirrel meat isn't sold in the city, I admit—and did his trick of surreptitiously-shuffle-leftover-fruit-into-a-pouch yet again. Kleptomania does run in some noble families, although I haven't heard of it afflicting the Ilvastarrs. (I can give it up any time I want.) It must be such a trial for a paladin to have.
We rested; Eldoth shared Viconia's time at watch. I suppose the two of us would have been too
distracted. Only a short distance to the Iron Throne. Eldoth, Eldoth, Eldoth, I should have been
thinking; and yet I still longed for Sarevok's death.

"This forest has a sense of evil about it."

Giant wyverns burst out of the wood in front of us that morning, one with a cow still in its claws.
Not babies. Huge. There wasn't even time to be afraid of them.

"Get back!" Shar-Teel stepped under cover of the trees; not out of fear, it was easy to tell—but
because of delay. Eldoth, though, was still in the open; he looked up, started running—and they
swooped down. Shar-Teel cursed.

"Bows!" she ordered. I need to save most of my good arrows for Anchev; having Eldoth to help us
doesn't stop that fact. I aimed a flaming arrow, which blazed into its burning oil of impact in the
wyvern's black flesh. The beady eyes of the giant beast started to turn on me.

Shar-Teel's crossbow and Viconia's bullets were next to hit. Eldoth was singing a spell; and then
Edwin cast.

A fireball scorched the clearing. I was on the edge, able to roll away, only a part of my hair singed;
poor Eldoth cried out.

"Ha! Take that! Your worthless lives end at my power!" Edwin cried jubilantly. Garrick and Imoen,
too, had used spells; but neither seemed powerful next to that one. Eldoth was burned, I saw—and
the wounded wyvern was almost upon him.

"I don't know how much longer I can bear the company of so many fools!" I was trying to help him;
he sung, and a pale light gathered about his right hand. For an instant he lurched forward, thrust his
hand toward the wyvern's side; and suddenly his skin was its normal light tan again. The creature
howled. He ran for cover as the wyvern snapped at him, its flesh torn and the curve of its neck
beginning to sink down.

"Gotcha!" It was an acid arrow from Imoen; the first wyvern finally collapsed. "What? I totally
picked it up from a dead ettercap! And you should've given it to me anyway!"

The second. Ajantis fought it: knight against wyvern, his shield raised again, Shar-Teel's crossbow
peppering it. It ripped into his armour with a claw, knocking him back. Shar-Teel swore again.

"Pathetic, boy," she was sneering, drawing her sword. She attacked, darting free of its claws; I used
my bow, Imoen her fire spell. The wyvern kept screaming while we took it down; its barbed tail
turned a tree into so much stray bark and leaves. Ajantis healed himself, rose, brought his sword
against it again; Imoen sent two quick acid-arrows in a row, and it fell like a giant oak.

Edwin stepped forward to examine his handiwork. "Splendid," he said. He plucked a burned leaf
from its branch to admire. "(Ah, now just wait until they're sleeping peacefully...then BOOM.)"

"Wizard, any nearby mine-guard would have seen that spell's light," Shar-Teel said.

"And need I remind you that injuring one's allies is hardly a display of competence?" Eldoth said.
"Why, if it was not for the lovely..."
"Silence, male, my healing's reserved for our leader this day," Viconia said.

"Watch and learn, child. Watch and envy." Edwin gloated, quietly, to Imoen.

"Just wait 'till you see the one I got from the bandit camp, I bet it's even better," Imoen said serenely. "Y'know, Eddie, all this running around casting spells in the middle of battles, all the deadly danger and the assassins after Skie's head on a platter...it really makes you better at it, doesn't it? Sort of fixes the spells right into your brain."

"I don't take advice from tavern maids pretending to be hedgewizards."

"See, you've gone to casting the Fireball-which-you-should-really-share-because-sharing-is-nice, and I've gotten so much better you're afraid I'll catch up soon, and I reckon it's all the fighting that did it."

"As if—I have been tutored in the art of manipulating the Weave since before I could walk! I was sung lullabies listing spell components! (Eye of newt and toe of frogge, wool of bat and tongue of dogge...) Practiced the standard somatic movements since I could understand verbal instruction! Educated at the greatest academies of Thayvian magics! (It is a mild technicality preventing my long-awaited graduation.) You're deep in denial, child."

"And still: I'm definitely catching up. Or go look at the bard over there, he's got turn-wyverns-into-toads spells..."

"...Be quiet you insufferable simian!"

I was trying to read the map, while walking, I think. We should have been nearing the bridge; the forest was quiet around us. Green surrounded us in every direction, a mass of dark and bright leaves, each delicate and individual as the trees from whence they came and precious and alive. A line of a Sylvan poem flew to my lips: *Green-mother, green-circle, all that is will be—Growth-mother, the tree-home, badmen come with iron and stone*— Those were not the words I deciphered at Candlekeep.

There was nobody around. Only the trees, the grass, the water that fed them. Not only each leaf, each blade of grass impinged itself upon awareness: each growth-pattern, each root-path below the earth, each play of dappled light and shadow upon its thin stalk...

The giving of life. This was where life began; in the rich soil, clays and fragments of iron and packed roots and bodies, not dead but still-living, giving strength to all planted within, teeming with squirming, vital worms and ants and beetles travelling through, offering their services and nourishment. If only I had given more thought to these questions before.

Home. True-home, the acorns holding the life; defend the forest from all encroaching. It would be safe, here. Alone in the peaceful clearing, the awareness of the green constantly beating like a single heartbeat; alone, except for Oak-mother. I walked through the trees.

Further into the clearing waited a woman. A painted woman, not quite a real woman (but she was very real), brush-strokes capturing the lines of her hair, her face the image come to life, the marks of the paint-brush and even the painter's thumb visible on her body. Her canvas. I knew her; I used to see it almost every day of my life before Brilla had it moved to a dark corner of the attics, and even then I went up sometimes to look at it. Her painted black hair flew long and alive in the wind; and her slender arms moved from her side to beckon. She looked out of eyes as green as grass, sparkling by a dot of pale white paint in their centre.

'Mother' was her name. Her arms were not insubstantial, made three-dimensional. The same lines of
paint covered both sides, the underside of her fingers identical to their surface.

_Do you miss me, Skie_, she sung.

The familiar portrait; living and breathing as she must have been, once. At least two heads taller than me, large enough to completely embrace—though I was told once that she was small like me in build. That was not thought of.

_I never knew y/Of course I do._

In the forest where nobody could hurt anyone. In the arms of a mother, not one of several nurses. The trees were slowly singing, holding notes that could last a hundred years, creating steady and flawless harmonies with each other.

_Do you want to know of your father?_

Then a squirrel bit my rear.

"Ow!" Scampering off into the trees again, it was, a vivid red streak on the ground. There wasn't anyone here any more—yet my bow was drawn and ready. I'd dropped my pack. Something strange.

I hadn't looked behind, and there were those in the party who walked with natural silence.

"Lil'ahurl!" Viconia's hammer hit me. Disorientating, horribly aching; I turned to face her and she kept attacking. She did not know me; I ran.

Edwin was wandering about the trees.

"Yes, my fine beauty," he muttered to himself. "Observe my perfect form and immense prow—"

"Skie! Look out!"

An acid arrow flew narrowly above my head. Ajantis ran from the trees, a gauntleted hand raised.

"Red Wizard, if I must hurt you thus, learn the penalty of evil!" Magic missiles promptly flew into him; he gasped and punched Edwin in the face nonetheless. "For the glory of Helm!"

Edwin fell, bleeding. "Nottheface(nottheface)(nottttheee..." He slumped to the grass, seemingly unconscious. Ajantis had probably enjoyed that rather too much.

"What do you think you're doing?" I cried.

"That you ask demonstrates your freedom from it," Ajantis said. "It is a vile and frightening illusion of this evil creature of the forest! Aid me in this battle!"

"My mother—"

"I too saw visions," he said quickly. "Through Helm's grace we are freed!"

Viconia had found us. Her sling began to whistle through the air; I leapt behind a tree, and Ajantis covered himself with his shield.

"Cease!"

Garrick's voice commanded a storm of magic missiles.

"Ilharess? Ilharess, usstan—" Viconia had used the first word to refer to Shar-Teel; _Matron, Matron_
"I, if usstan was a corrupted amin— "Iblith! Uk zhah ussta'dalninuk!" Her body scorched, she began casting something, calling Shar's name.

"Friends!" Garrick called to us.

"Garrick? Garrick, we—" Viconia's command bound me to the ground. Ajantis was coming, too late; a slingshot hit me in the side of my head. There were stars.

"A charming knight; his lady's ribbon; a fair lance in the wood—" Garrick sung. I found myself able to raise my head; a stream of blood ran from my scalp.

"Abbil," she declared, looking at Garrick with the closest to a soft expression we had ever seen in her scarlet eyes. Then she shook her head as though to clear it. "Iblith! You deceive me! Tell me now, male, who must be executed for this?"

"A...hamadryad." Ajantis pronounced the word carefully. "I cannot see her now."

"The opposite direction from which she sent us! Once more unto the breach dear friends!" Garrick panted. Brave of him. We dashed into the trees beside him, Ajantis slow in his armour. A sense of unease grew around us, as though the forest had become suddenly dark, and yet it was still perfect daylight.

Garrick hummed a half-song, coarse but a melody of sorts. Focusing on that, the call of the forest was less apparent; he aided us, the song preserving our selves.

There was a clearing. A woman, all we could see within it at that distance, standing with arms raised, crying out—a green-haired woman with skin the colour of bark, not-the-mother-not-really, incredibly beautiful. She gestured before herself, shrieking incomprehensibly. An arrow whistled past her head; she raised her right hand, and a yell I recognized from Imoen sounded out. I ran to it.

Eldoth was covered in vines. Suspended between two trees, caught about the arms and legs, one wide strand winding ever thicker at his neck, most of his body already smothered by harsh green. Worse, Shar-Teel was advancing jerkily toward him, her sword ready.

Shouting, he struggled against the bonds and a pale beam came from his hands; the green woman howled in pain, and for another moment Shar-Teel's dreadful progress was delayed.

Mother-curious-green-mother-you-leave.

The painted woman's visage was suddenly laid over the green face, rippling, gradually solidifying.

A harsh, harped discord. The woman wavered, and was the hamadryad once again. Garrick. Varscona struck; the hamadryad's skin was as tough as wood. Some sap oozed from her.

"Help—" Imoen was being pulled into a muddy stream by the vines binding her. Her head barely remained above the water and thick dirt. "Teeth!" Magic seemed to crackle about her pink head. She screamed again. I saw Ajantis, rushing to her.

Fighting the hamadryad. Shar-Teel, turning back to defend her. I could not win there; a second stab to the attacker, and I ran as Shar-Teel's tutoring prescribed. Viconia's sling aimed behind us.

The spell holding Eldoth was finite. He was working himself free enough to cast again, labouring against being strangled. Eventually an acid arrow hit the hamadryad, just as Shar-Teel's sword stuck
for an instant on a branch slightly above my head. Garrick's song seemed to grow louder, and Viconia had the hamadryad cry out again. Then she disappeared.

"Reveal yourself foul creature!" Ajantis fiercely scanned the horizon for the hamadryad; Imoen, gasping and muddy, was pulling herself up on the bank. I ran away from Shar-Teel.

The hamadryad was there. Ajantis' sword hit the riverbank; Imoen rolled out of its way. She called for help again.

A stroke of fortune. The path of Shar-Teel's blade paused; she lowered it, and shook her head. "Useless male dungheap!" she yelled, and went for Ajantis and Imoen.

I saw the hamadryad teleporting again to the far side of the clearing, her face and hands moving. A good arrow, to disrupt her spell. Again, Garrick's song guiding the aim. Eldoth's magic. It was some time before we could defeat her.

She teleported a last time, and fell prone to the grass. Dark sap flowed from her body.

Shar-Teel held Ajantis face-down in the mud, his sword discarded some distance away. Imoen slowly drew herself up, brushing dirt from her mage's robe, running a hand across her face and hair and smearing them dark brown.

"I think—I am myself once more—by Helm I cannot breathe—" Ajantis' armoured feet kicked frantically. Shar-Teel finally let him up.

"The fish had teeth the fish had teeth—" There was blood on Imoen's ankles.

"It's all right—" I said.

"No it's not, I lost the cloak—" She scrabbled back in the mud. "Really big teeth—"

"More likely some fragment of a thornbush," Ajantis scoffed.

"I know teeth when I see them! Feel them. I—" She tugged at the cloak's fabric, beginning to lift it from the mire. "Ha. So at least I—"

Two black, spiderlike pincers rose from the mud; and glowing white teeth shone not far below the water. It snapped upward and grasped half the cloak in the jagged pincers. A tearing sound seemed to echo between all the trees. Imoen stumbled back from the stream with a few ragged threads left in her hand. The thing with teeth disappeared once more.

Ajantis closed his mouth.

"Let us not speak of this again."

Viconia summoned us to the hamadryad's body; with some effort, she turned it over.

"It is not the first time she has been wounded." There were the dark marks of oozing sap where we had hurt her; but older, jagged marks also lined the dryad's brown skin. She looked like an old patchwork doll, shorn of life.

"I have heard sung that a dryad feels each stroke of the axe to her tree," Garrick said.

"How weak," Viconia said. "Your surface so-called 'forests' disgust me."

"She may bear the evil of the Iron Throne upon her body," Garrick said; and there was a large, dark
scar to her lower back, a deep and roughly circular stain. A broken path led to it. "Perchance she would only that all humans would leave her alone..."

"And perchance she didn't bother to mention that!" I said. "She regenerated from those, let's make sure she's finally dead!" One dismembers things, and throws the parts into fire, in the stories.

She seemed almost like a human woman lying there, and we cut her to splinters. The broken parts of a person are so hard to tell apart after a certain point. Fingers, bits of arm, bits of leg, strands of grass-hair falling, dark sap everywhere. A fairly quick wood-chopping job, with all of us.

—

79. Invasion Intentions

1 Flamerule

"Viconia, you saw your...matron in that illusion?" I said.

"The Matron Mother, yes. Ask me further of the Underdark only if you do not cherish your life."

"...What about you, Edwin?"

"(What? Ah!"

"(What? Ah!) He jumped slightly; he had held a handkerchief over his face all day, hiding the marks of Ajantis' fist. "Oh, four expensive concubines, a deep marble bath filled with milk and rosepetals, three large jars of honey, and a sponge or two. What did you expect?"

"There speaks a virgin," Eldoth said.

"Women of my rank are difficult to find!" Edwin protested. "Watch your words when addressing me, you squalid little social climber, lest they be fed to you with the aid of a Fireball."

"My, my. A single Fireball marks a wizard of your rank? I have known lady wizards inclined to enchant themselves threefold with resistance to the element, and then to bathe in multiple castings...sometimes with a companion."

"That's nothing compared to the erotic uses of...Of a Shocking Grasp spell," Edwin said sulkily. "(Necessity is the mother of invention!)"

"No doubt that spares you from hirsute palms, considering all they say of apprentice wizards."

"Many Eltabban concubines would say otherwise. Once I met one who, well, if you understand what I mean..." Edwin's accompanying gesture, I suspect, would have been incomprehensible to anyone.

"How tedious. I was once—acquainted with a lord's daughter; half a paladin, and without her armour very f..."

Ajantis looked back; his cheeks and ears had turned bright pink. "You pair of degenerates shall watch your mouths around the fairer sex!"

"What did the dryad do to you?" I asked him.

He sighed. "A beautiful maiden of the forest trapped within the very mine we seek awaiting our rescue. With gentle purity," he added over a crass comment from Edwin.
"Males, I hear something," Viconia said. "Something that resembles humanoids in armour, marching as gracelessly as our own pimpled specimen."


I saw the six guards before they saw us where we waited in the shadows of the trees. They wore rather good chainmail, with a red and grey design on their sleeves and tabards that at a distance resembled Black Talon banners. All were armed equally with longswords and shields.

Then three sets of magical missiles hit the tall man in the lead, and Shar-Teel ran toward the band. One raised a bow, but Viconia dealt with him; for a moment, Shar-Teel fought the four, and then one was already dead and Ajantis and I had reached her.

I faced a strong man with iron-grey hair beneath his helmet. He struck quickly; blocking it almost winded me. Shar-Teel killed her second man; brushed his sword aside with her own, and stabbed into the flesh near his shoulder and down.

The man I fought let down his guard—or did not do so, for he showed loyalty to his masters. "Tam! Bear news!" he cried, and left his upper-right open. He did not block the left-handed blow with his shield, and Varscona sliced partway into his neck.

Tam ran—quite young, he was, I suppose younger than Eddard, hair the colour of Garrick's under lamplight; and I gave chase. Imoen's bow shot after him, but the trees were too close for a reliable target. I am equal to Imoen in swiftness of foot, and I do not wear either robes or plate. Tam ran as prey—his comrades died behind him; their last cries were audible—and I pursued. I heard him panting like a dog. Perhaps he felt horror at what was happening to his companions; or perhaps he was afraid only for himself. I gained on him until scarce three feet remained between us. Then he turned. His choices were to kill me quickly or risk a stab in the back; if he could achieve the first, he could make the message reach Sarevok.

He half-growled, half-snarled when he abruptly turned to attack; he surprised me though I understood what he had meant to do. I stepped back, quickly; and his wild swing made no connection.

That was the key, perhaps. In Shar-Teel's lessons and fights such as this. A rogue does not have to be as strong at her; a rogue dodges, a rogue waits for the opening, and it's that chance to—

To kill—like all the bandits—

He was slow and unwieldy, and about to bolt again. Lean out of his way; feint to his right; he cut me, but that was necessary. Varscona found the opening he left. His breath smelled like onions, and he looked surprised. He was already dead when a storm of magic crashed into his chest and burned a deep hole in his chainmail. Edwin. There was blood on my arm, but I could still move it; it hurt.

"The rest of them gone, Edwin?"

"Such gratitude!" he sneered. "Why, Edwin, thank you ever so much for saving my worthl...I mean, somewhat pathetic life," he mocked. "Why Edwin, now I see the true value of your magic aiding me upon this childish venture..."

"I killed him." Human eyes could still see nothing beyond the thick trees, but it was time to scout. After Viconia's healing. "Come on, let's go bury the bodies." The men would, at some point, be missed; we would attack soon, and there were many things in the Cloakwood. I was supposed to
find out exactly what.

The forest was thickly grown here, and sometimes there was even the howl of distant wolves. The rest of the party was back-east-under-the-tall-reddish-tree, I could tell myself; but, unable to see them, it felt as if I was completely alone in the wood.

Which was good, since not meeting any guards was the idea of scouting. Shar-Teel had tried to teach me some things about forest battles. The wind rustled through the trees; where had Tam been running to? I searched for human-made noises.

There was a lake; or would it be more properly called a stream of the Chionthar? The water was wide and ran further than I could see, but the isle in its centre seemed even wider. The woods grew even more densely upon it; I could see nothing but green and brown wrapped tightly together.

The sounds of someone walking. I clambered up a tree, and hid; Damon used to say many things about hiding. *Shadows are the canter's best friend*. The sounds of metal came from a northward direction, though I could hardly see the guards through the trees; when they passed, I travelled there.

A wooden bridge stretched over the lake. The ropes holding it in place were thick and dark-coloured, and its planks stretched tautly; it looked, even, relatively new, as far as I could tell at that distance. Something of a hint. The thick trees blocked the view of the islet beyond it. Then there was a guard walking near it on the other side, and I fled for the shadows.

The guard was from the isle. There had to be some way to get a closer look, without walking up to that guarded bridge in the open. I followed the line of the lake. Looking carefully at the trees, I thought I could see the neat lines of fenceposts here and there between the leaves, a high shield against prying eyes. A second man-made bridge joined together two separate islets.

At last I found a part of the lake that seemed relatively narrow; and, better, a depression on the opposite side of the water, a crack to hide in. I could hear nothing. The studded leather armour was relatively light, and besides it I carried only Varscona; no born Baldurian does not know how to swim. Without splashing, I stepped into the cold and muddy water; nothing with teeth touched my ankles.

A few human voices were louder upon the other side. The depression took me close to Sarevok's walls; I found a crack to peer through, and tried to find what Shar-Teel needed to know.

The shadows are a canter's friend. It's not real magic, our ability to hide; but to melt into areas of obscurity and darkness is a trick of the mind as well as the body, dancing one's self into that dark weave of threads. It's the strongest shield of all. I waited; listened; and found just enough.

"The mine entrance is probably somewhere on the eastern side. Heavily fenced all the way around; one bridge; soldiers' barracks, I saw about twenty guards and a man in wizard's robes, there's probably more that that; some buildings that are probably for storage, there were sacks being carried out of them; and there are the slaves, of course," I said.

"Is it possible to bring down the fences?" Shar-Teel said.

"Fireball!" Edwin said happily.

"I think it would take a lot of those; they're large," I said. "And the water is quite deep; swimming with heavy armour could be..."

"I have trained for that," Ajantis said.
"Fireballs from the riverbank, then swim in, bring the rest of the fencing down, and attack... Might take too long," Shar-Teel said. "Better to rush the bridge if we have to."

Fire... That was a rogue's idea. Successful military attacks in history books can use *stealth*.

"Ajantis could put on a guard's armour," I said hesitantly. All I had seen were male, and he was the one in our group who looked most like the guards. "If he goes in, gets quickly into the fortification, leaves the gates open, sets something on fire as a distraction, and then we..."

"What about the slaves? We can't hurt them," Imoen said.

"Slavery is morally wrong *and* economically inefficient," I recited. "Also extremely illegal. The Iron Throne's slaves are more valuable than the slaves themselves might realise; Ajantis can fire one of the evil guards' buildings or whatever, and they'll probably evacuate the slaves themselves."

"I strongly dispute that," Edwin said. "One slave matters little, and the Iron Throne makes a sane decision to use such manual labour. (What else are slaves for?)"

"They have to use a lot of their resources kidnapping the slaves and keeping their operations a secret," I said, "and even when that's not necessary, paying guards to prevent slaves from escaping or rebellion and healers to ensure their ability to work is a huge expense..."

"Yes, but you ultimately save on gold since you don't have to pay slaves because they're slaves; you're missing the point yet again, my dear child. They're an untapped source of useful labour and items for trade that has given Thay some of its greatness."

"Shut up, Edwin," Imoen said.

"They also stop Thay and other nations from achieving things—they stifle innovation," I quoted. "Because with slaves it's easy to use 'buy more slaves' as the solution to a problem—"

"It's a solution that works," Edwin interjected. "Perhaps after a whipping or two."

"You will be silent about your abhorrent nation, Red Wizard," Ajantis said.

"But with freemen, the solution to the problem becomes, 'innovate the methods'. So you're less efficient," I said.

"And morally wrong, Skie," Imoen said.

"We are wizards and we craft new magics all the time. You are wrong; own your inferiority. Even a few slaves can be traded for wealth most of you westerners could hardly dream of; and looking at allocative efficiency, our system wherein they carry out labour wizards would scorn..."

"Close your mouth or I shall give the righteous smiting you richly deserve."

"Do be quiet, dunce; I am trying to give the girl a lesson in basic economics..."

Shar-Teel growled.

"Very well; plans. I agree. Let us set something on fire, I purchased an Oil of Fiery Burning myself that I shall very generously lend you. I would suggest adding a slight fuse to it to escape the vicinity beforehand (these simians never manage to grasp the simplest of safety instructions)."

"Get area-effect spells and spells against enemy casters," Shar-Teel ordered. "We strike as soon as it is dark."
"Our destruction of this evil mine shall be just and noble. Despite the means."

"Right." Imoen dropped down to sit cross-legged under a wide-leaved tree. "Spellbooks!" She stared at her muddied, pink-bound pages, bringing her eyebrows close together above her eyes and screwing up her face in deep concentration. "I'll take magic missiles, Grease, that Stinking Cloud, a Mirror Image just in case..."

"Magic missiles? Larloch's (Which your inferior talents will never manage to cast) is a far better disruption to an enemy caster...and very enriching to oneself," Edwin corrected.

"I am in agreement," Eldoth said smoothly; white light played about his right hand.

Edwin seemed to gape at that.

"On second thoughts Magic Missile really becomes quite an effective spell for a wizard as gifted as myself; multiple projectiles and that sort of thing," he added. "Larloch's was really designed with the apprentice or dabbler in mind."

"You forget Charms," Garrick said rather loudly. "Charms to ensnare a person, to make them follow you out of love and gain despair..."

"Yes, yes, prepare your little cantrips, I require peace and quiet," Edwin said. "Iink nitre nab..."

"My goddess grants me precisely what I shall need," Viconia said. She laid a hand on my left arm; the one which usually wielded Varscona. "Xal oloth plynn mina. Let darkness prevail."

—

80. Cloakwood I: Aquerna, Imoen, Edwin

? —Flamerule, probably

This is a long tale; let it begin with a small squirrel. Any unexpected help is better than none...

1. Aquerna

Ajantis is a very silly boy, who could make much better use of the intelligence he has; he spends too much time polishing his sword (in a purely literal sense, of course) and too little time thinking for himself; and he sees evil everywhere he looks for it, which is to say everywhere he looks at all. But he is my silly boy, and fairly often a good boy; and it was long past time he stopped feeding her candied nuts on the sly and letting her watch from a distance and finally introduced her to his friends, Aquerna his companion squirrel thought. Before they did something very silly to him without her guidance. (They might also give her more candied nuts, but Aquerna preferred to think of matters beyond simple instinct.)

Pardon me; but what exactly are you strange people planning to do to my boy? she spoke out at last, aiming the projection of her words to all of their heads. (A squirrel's vocal cords were most limited.) Ajantis, dear, I told you that you simply must not keep me hidden any longer; one would almost think you were ashamed of your holy steed.

The orange—formerly red—lad had clearly abandoned all his defenses, openly prepared for hilarity; but the magical pink girl began to smile at Aquerna. She was quite good company for Aquerna's boy, a nice young lady really. The cruel lady who killed non-talking squirrels was glaring; she'd
practical sense and battlefield experience that Ajantis could learn from, although no ethics at all. And then there was the bard of the pretty music and the bard of the depressing music, that green-haired girl who thought of killing, and the priestess.

"Aquerna...please...I..."

"A squirrel! It is a squirrel!" the orange lad chortled. "(Perfect ammunition against the armour-brained ass!) Oh, paladin, do not tell me that your holy steed is forest vermin? Now I think of it, I do see the resemblance; it's somewhere in the vacant, animalistic expression and overly prominent teeth —"

"Aquerna is my...holy steed, yes," her boy admitted. "As it were. Or rather my due punishment for arrogance; I requested a noble warhorse that listened to my commands from my Lord Helm, at a time I see now that I was not worthy of the honour, and Aquerna... Mock, wizard, if you truly must."

"Shar would never treat her followers so," said the poor dark elf. She had terrible sorrow in her past, Aquerna mused in her presumptions; and despite her goddess, or perhaps because of her open avowal of that goddess, was no danger to her boy.

"Yes, my dear boy wasn't enthused at the prospect of you people meeting a squirrel for his holy steed," Aquerna said. "But I have my strengths even though I'm not technically a steed. Or even always holy. See, Ajantis, I've already made the orange lad completely defenceless with the way he's laughing at you. I like the pink girl; she's nice and she's magic."

"Yep, talking squirrel, that's some kind of magic all right," the pink girl said. "Awww! She's so cute!" Aquerna did not boast, but she knew she was still a young and smooth-furred squirrel; she was a little older than she looked, but humans had every right to notice her good grooming. It came from being a talking, intelligent squirrel steed-substitute. (Regrettably, the talking was her only unusual ability; but intelligent talking was a very useful ability.)

"As I have told you, Aquerna, we must face this Iron Throne and their evil mine..." Ajantis said.

"Not without my open help you will not," Aquerna said with all the telepathic firmness she could muster, and added an emphatic squeak in squirrel-talk. "Believe me, you'll need it. Remember that poor angry hamadryad?"

Ajantis' lips set thinly together. "I told you she must have been evil!" He succumbed to Aquerna, though; she had never known herself to be wrong before, after all. "I must do this—we must reach the Iron Throne somehow," he said. "You can hide in Imoen's pack, if you have to..."

Her boy was a terrible actor; although in his borrowed armour he did have some basic resemblance to the other guards Aquerna had seen from her forest perch, as much as most humans looked the same to her if she did not take careful stock of the colouring of their pelts. (She probably knew more about the Iron Throne's layout than even the spying girl; leaping from tree to tree and climbing fences was a much faster way to learn everything.) "Then do not say anything to them, Ajantis. The password to the gate guard is, Ravage. Say that your captain said to go straight to—Davvyorn, I believe the name is, probably a most horrid person. But keep your mouth shut unless you absolutely must speak." The boy sounded like the Waterdhavian noble he was born; it was a respectable accent, but he had no dramatic ability to disguise it in the least.

"Then I must do this; and I shall," Ajantis said.

Aquerna could not help but feel doom approaching, as she had before most of the previous important battles Ajantis had been previously involved in, such as his final squire's examination before his
mission to the Sword Coast, or the horror of his ankheg quest. Yet she knew the boy wished to do his duties, and she could give him helpful advice. "I will be near, kit."

"Thank you."

"And someday I will tell all of you the whole story about how I became the boy's favourite holy steed he's ever had..."

"The only holy steed I have ever had..."

"Yep, come into my pack! You're adorable!"

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2. Imoen

The warmth of the squirrel's tail brushed the back of her neck; that heat was welcome in the cold night, waiting for Ajantis. Skie was holding onto that fancy sword and staring unfixedly at the bridge looking horribly grim, as far as Imoen could make out in the dark. Those bandits—Skie wanted to kill the bloke in charge, Sarevok-whatever-he-was-like, and he'd done all those things trying to kill them and probably deserved it. But seeing Skie covered in all that blood back at the camp, and then watching her go all this way without complaining once, marching through all the tiredness and spiders and hamadryads wanting to murder him, wanting to ignore that nobleman and that boy... Made her almost miss the complain-all-the-time Skie. The thing with bows and spells, Imoen thought, was that you didn't have to get too close with 'em. You didn't have to stab people ridiculous numbers of times and walk out of bandit huts covered in torrents of blood dripping all over the place so's your best friends couldn't hardly recognise you.

But it was still Skie; the friend who'd come to Candlekeep and helped her nick Ulraunt's roses and run across every rooftop in the place and drink stolen wine. Splatting a few kobolds and bandits'd come easier to Imoen than to Skie, at first—hadn't ol' Puffguts and Mr G. told her all those adventuring tips? Skie'd taken to it too, yep, and they were just gonna splatter a few more evil-bandit-mine-poisoning types here. Never let a best friend down, no siree.

Imoen reached across, and touched Skie's hand where it held that sword; and her friend did acknowledge it, turning to meet Imoen's eyes, though she didn't smile back. The thing was, Imoen noticed, was that Skie's fingers above the hilt felt as cold as something dead.

Then there was an explosion of flaming death and Imoen's hand went free; she'd a spell to cast. It filled her mind and left no time for any other thought. Rotten egg, hand gesture, words, concentrate; she reached out into the air for the threads she needed and there they were, green things she had to plait together like they were strands of hair. She practiced cantrips every night even when she was so exhausted she could hardly see, and each time it was easier and easier to scoop out what she'd need to change the world. Heh, prob'ly Edwin the conjurer even felt the same, magic filaments that turned red-orange for him somewhere aboutwise, though when he reached into the woven threads his hand always went deeper. Never tell him though, he was still running scared of her.

Imoen's green cloud hit the other side of the bridge an instant after Edwin's fireball. Then Shar-Teel the Bloody charged across the bridge, and just when she reached the other side two guards had dodged the spells and attacked. There were screams from men:

"...damned fire! Hurry—"

"Alarm—attack—"
Skie'd sheathed that sword and drawn her bow in a few quick movements (why take the sword out first, anyway?); her arrow hit and there was a cry. Imoen didn't like the light here, dark night and confusing fires; she chanted a second quick spell to put white light behind her eyes, and drew her bow as well. She could see perfectly as though it was day, and aimed quite well.

Then a rushing wind blew past them. Skie was down but rolling aside, bleeding a little over her armour—it was a man-shaped blur, running at inhuman speed—Imoen tried to shoot at him, aim for that moving target. His weapon glittered golden. Edwin screamed.

"If I must." Skie's evil boyfriend of evil; sounding resigned and even bored if anything, casting something himself. The instant Skie'd let slip he made her pay for drinks when they snuck out to meet with each other, Imoen'd known he'd be bad news. Well, maybe not quite known 'till she'd met the guy, Skie did make out like he was better-looking than Lathander and fought armies of gnolls for fun. Okay magician, but completely sleazy in the way he eyeballed Vic right in front of Skie—

The blur slowed to a normal fighter's pace. A brown-haired man, raising his gold-coloured morningstar above Edwin's head for a second hit. Imoen's arrow slammed into his left shoulder, and he twisted; he met Skie coming at him with her sword. The girl'd really tried hard with Shar-Teel, Imoen thought. She was blocking him, meeting every blow, and he was bleeding out from that arrowhole. Imoen aimed a second time.

"Cross the bridge now!" Skie screamed, and they ran for it—Garrick and Skie just ahead of Imoen, one arm-of-Edwin apiece..

Chanted spells in the air. Imoen darted back; suddenly there were more blurred men, Skie in the thick of three of 'em, Garrick stumbling aside with two more waiting for him, Edwin down. Another Cloud, Imoen tried; if she could aim like she'd done before, she'd...

No, not quite; it'd saved Garrick, not quite Skie, Imoen thought in despair; then—

"Help me!"

"Ogres!"

"Flaming tanar'ri!"

Edwin, casting; "Drow! I...do not feel so well; heal me—" he called from the ground.

"You are well enough to cast, male!" Viconia struck out wildly with her mace, dancing through the battle; she'd not so much casting favour from her goddess as Branwen used to have.

Thank you Mystra, Lady of Magic— Imoen tried to think of the pretty goddess, the seven stars bound into her Weave.

"Viconia!" Skie nagged the dark elf, taking her place in the fight. Her dance might have been slightly stronger, if not so graceful—

Garrick was kneeling by the dead man with the morningstar, pulling off his boots. Imoen didn't have time to stare at that; "Speed—" she thought she heard his voice, crying into the smoke-seized wind behind the path of her bow. Shar-Teel fought beyond, and Imoen thought that she looked content. A uniformed guard that could only be Ajantis was fighting other guards, nearing her.

"Take the weapon too, jaluk—" Viconia's voice sounded. More chanting.

Skie cried out, clawing at her neck; acid-arrow. Yet the girl began to make the wound disappear
almost as soon as it had appeared. Imoen searched beyond the fire for the casters, looking between ashes. She ran from a beam falling in a shower of sparks and thick smoke; it was hard to breathe.

Skie must've been working on her rogue's eye, Imoen thought hazily; she and Viconia attacked something invisible together, and when Imoen looked down she could see footprints in the ash after all. There was too much smoke blowing around them. Viconia held the gold morningstar in hand. Time to aim more arrows; magic-invisibility was invisibility-to-magic, the reasoning came to Imoen and made sense for the first time, so instead she aimed her bow—

Edwin finished the final syllable of a spell and five kobolds erupted out of thin air, chittering and jumping around, spreading out in front of them. One of them was butchered in seconds, and Imoen tried not to think about how hard the mine kobolds'd been for them to fight.

"Move!" Shar-Teel stood over a second body dressed in mage's robes; Ajantis swung his shield wildly against a swift-moving, brightly-dressed warrior. Then Shar-Teel moved herself, and decapitated the enemy; Spider's Bane was bright below the blood, and Imoen thought she could sense the magic of it in that moment. The head rolled along the ground. Imoen ran.

A narrow bridge joined the two isles, like Skie'd said. Viconia summoned a thin fog about them; Imoen could see the fire was keeping the guards busy. She saw one man in a shift who might have been a slave, struggling with a bucket of water. She felt guilt strike her; but that could be later, best she helped the kid now. When they got to the other side, Skie added a flaming arrow to her bow and stopped a few pursuers; four more guards waited. Three men, one woman, Imoen noticed hazily, and conjured (invoked) a magic missile at the woman in the lead. Skie's fiance took a green-tipped arrow and used that, out of the fancy bandit bow Shar-Teel hadn't said he could have...

They'd made it across. Garrick had run much too quickly, dancing from one foot to the other in the dead man's boots. Ajantis and Skie held off the guards, and Shar-Teel hacked through the bridge's ropes. There was a giant wooden structure, Imoen saw, with several large doors into it; she went back to using her bow, and the outnumbered guards were beaten. Gorion and Winthrop had both hated slavers.

The doors were locked from the inside. Imoen pointed to the one with the most well-trodden ground near it, and Skie went deep with her tools to twist it open. It led to a small and cramped area that could barely fit the group, with a large shelf taking up the entirety of the space on one of its walls.

...Kit? Do tell me you haven't stranded yourself— the voice echoed from behind Imoen. She reached up to pet the squirrel, reassuring herself that Aquerna was still there. Holy animal, yeah.

Ajantis looked momentarily confused; then came that particular look in his eyes, as though he too cast something not unlike infravision upon himself; the one that made Skie and Eldoth shy away. "I sense evil and corruption beyond that!"

Imoen helped Skie lever the shelf open, and there was the lift within the long shaft leading below. Guards ahead, and coughing and the clink of iron upon stone.

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3. Edwin

His side ached horrendously; the priestess was failing to look after him properly. Was it not necessary to protect his spellcasting talent? And if that weeping brat was right about her Sarevok to be found here, then he would be obliged to keep up with her. So irritating, the way she and the apprentice could run so quickly.
Edwin knew himself a great Red Wizard to be, and was proud of that noble station; he sought the power in this region. His researches now suggested Anchev was the one for him to return to Thay a hero. Skie would not kill the man (as if it were particularly likely a fool like her could kill...one of Those, if Sarevok Anchev was indeed one, but Edwin's intelligence was too great to leap to unwarranted conclusions from her descriptions); but since the bandit camp Edwin had rejoiced that the inferior band were serving his goals once again. (After taking advantage of his word against his will and stranding him with those unclean peasant bandits instead of escorting him to the nearest town as he had requested at the time, but Edwin Odesseiron had the power to repay their slights in a manner deserved.) Deny this Sarevok his goals in the guise of an Orange Wizard, and he would willingly accompany Edwin the Red Wizard to Thay. The lackeys were subconsciously learning at last.

Narrow mine walls, and groaning and scarred slaves. Edwin's rank in his homeland placed him far above the task of slave-supervising in the Odesseirons' various holdings in farming and crude crafting, and he was learning one of the reasons for this; the passageways were disgustingly narrow and the air had begun to smell foul. Edwin did not want to think about the probable descent.

"Guards! Andarsson's speaking ill of Davaeorn... You're not the guards! Guards! Guards!" It was only natural for a slave to be faithful to his betters, despite the present inconvenience to their group. However, the thickheaded tincan took offence:

"A slave who betrays his fellows? Evil!" he cried. This indeed caused further guards to attack following the raised voice. Edwin let a stream of magical missiles flow easily from his hands.

"No, Skie, you'll hit the slaves!" The apprentice tried to discourage her friend from her bow; the passage was becoming very crowded.

"Go find the way down!" Shar-Teel yelled. She and the paladin blocked the narrow passageway, fighting the guards before them with some effect; Edwin fled backwards along the warren, watching Skie's grey cloak fly behind her and trying very hard not to trip over his robes.

A blur of curly hair, old boots tied around the waist, and a flopping bumblebee-yellow doublet hit him from behind.

"Oh, gosh, I'm sorry, didn't see you!" that foolish bard said. "I found a slave who said there's a guarded plughole up there, if we find the key ... Do you think these boots are a bit much?" he said, inflicting a fast-paced version of his generally irritating voice upon Edwin's ears.

"...Ohandthere'reguardschasingmehurryupEdwin!"

Cursing, Edwin ran on.

*Help me, dear sir...save me— slaves cried to him; Get me out of this hell hole—*

A corridor.

"New mercenaries, huh? Hey, lemme ask you a question. M' wife, she's been complaining about our latenight activities, the starch's gone out of me maypole if you catch my meaning—"

How dare they ask him such questions. "Be silent you fools!" Edwin shouted, and lashed out with his quarterstaff; it was very important to have the substance of a long piece of oak between him and a well-armed simian.

"Oh, you ain't mercenaries. You're that group causing all the trouble!" The simian made the (naturally obvious, these people were fools each one of them!) deduction. The end of Edwin's staff
had met the simian's breastplate; Edwin waved the weapon about to try and stop the man from moving. But suddenly, quickly, the guard had drawn his sword, and the quarterstaff was no longer that great distance between them.

"Die as you should!" Edwin howled. He ought to have cast a quick spell; but the walls were pressing and the simian too close. With rapidity and entirely too much efficiency, the sword swept toward his wounded body that suddenly felt clumsy indeed.

"Into the breach—into the breach—" The bard and his pretty little shortsword. Edwin watched him blur with the guard, a complex scuffle and what seemed to be quite a lot of blood— A scream from Garrick and a grunt from the guard. A bleeding wound moving at that speed looked like something much less lethal, like red-coloured sand laid out for a spell component.

Bracing himself against the wall, Edwin started to mutter a spell; if he did not have the mental fortitude to cast simple missiles then he did not deserve the name of Odesseiron. Or the mental fortitude for a spell he was still more familiar with, even if he was not the only one to prefer it—

He felt slightly healed of his (many, grievous, and pathetically ignored) wounds. The guard grappling with Garrick cried out and fell back; the bard's short sword must have finally done its job (Simians! Incompetent the lot of them!). Garrick too flopped to the ground beside the dead man.

"My...goodness. I think I..."

"Spare me your whimpering and swallow your healing potion, imbecile," Edwin said. He had no intention of dirtying his own hands by attempting to patch that wound.

"Er. I'll...I will try..." The boy, with one hand, slowly twisted the cap from the bottle and raised it to his lips. Edwin waited for the results. Then he extended a hand to the bard, hoping that it would be used by the least dirtied of the simian's limbs.

"We have to find Skie, do we not?" he said coldly. The bard's stare met his own; the boy rose to his feet again.

"Yes," Garrick said. "I know I must." He suddenly grabbed Edwin's arm. "C'monIcanImust—"

Pulled along in the frantic bolting run, Edwin had no choice but to complain.

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81. Cloakwood II: Viconia, Garrick, Ajantis

4. Viconia

Surface dwellers. Cha'kohk mina jal: a curse on all kivvin. These mines were a mere mockery of the glories of the Underdark. It was difficult to rank the surface-dwellers by degree of her despisal. The arrogant servant of the vile Helm was certainly lowest in her estimation, a slave not fit to clean her boots with his tongue; Shar-Teel she detested the least; but the subtle gradations between Edwin's nasal whine, Imoen's foolish optimism, Garrick's simple foolishness, were quite difficult. Her drow senses had begun to die, she thought, sniffing the air; had she entirely lost her ability to feel the underground? Home welcomed her no longer.

She searched the tunnels, moving quietly and quickly beneath her cloak. She could see clearly in this familiar darkness. The rivvin slaves did not dare approach her, and the grace of her form was
sufficient to preserve her silence in motion. For guards she would run to the safety of the group, however much it was beneath her dignity after the power she had once wielded.

The patterns of cave-draughts hit her skin. She slowly blinked her eyes, concentrating. *Down to the presumed inner sanctum.* A drow would design a stronghold to avoid the possibility of becoming trapped like an animal in the bowels of one's own domain; but if the *rivvil* master of these mines believed it safe enough, it was perhaps wiser for him to wait at the very bottom rather than risk falling in the first attack. Humans could not be credited with excessive sensibility. Viconia opened herself to the caresses of the dank air, and felt the stiller, mustier strain within. She travelled through a down-running trail—past several, in fact, because the design was clearly foolishly done by the surface scum—and saw a large door set below a series of steps, heralded by a long slope.

She reached out like the quick-striking snakes of the surface deserts, her hand curving about a lone slave's neck, her nails ready to slit its throat.

"*Down there,*" she hissed in the slave's common tongue. "*That is where your master hides, is it not?*"

"A drow—!" Her grip tightened; she glared into the male's shocked face, praying for a small degree of Shar's holy power to illuminate her own presence. "Davaeorn—yes, below the prisoners—please, I know nothing, I beg—"

She released him. Their leader Shar-Teel would not object to her killing a male, but he would perhaps be the enemy of his master given sufficient incentive; Viconia preferred her bloodshed with a touch of meaning and purpose. "Go and tell that the Drow—and the Man-Slayer, if that has any meaning—seek to destroy your master," she ordered.

She returned to the scene of fighting, following her ears; there cacophony, there a large knot of those clumsy guards. When she was near, Skie grabbed her wrist and pulled her into a side-tunnel.

"You're back. Good. We flank them—"

"Our path is there, surfaucer," Viconia said.

"And the others are cut off back there," the *ligrr*, girl-child, whispered in the tunnel. The male wizard and the infant bard she had also with her; and, of course, the sword of Viconia's goddess. "I try fighting, you cast, we can reach them."

*Over a pile of dead rivvin bodies.* Viconia quite approved.

"Now." In another circumstance, Viconia would have told the little *craz* that she could not presume any kind of command and punctuated it with suitable expression of her power; but Skie was hastening toward the battle, half-cloaked in shadows, and Viconia readied her sling. Behind the gathered foes Viconia could hear the sounds of Shar-Teel and the Helmite in battle.

Skie reached the hindmost guard, and stabbed him in a way...that would have shamed a novice drow assassin, but did some duty on the human before her. Turning, he attacked her; but Viconia's own excellent aim with a sling cut through the narrow space and her stone hit soundly to his forehead, below his helmet. Unwisely enough the bard neared the area of battle, aiming his crossbow at close range; it took some time for Viconia to recall the weak vision of humans. Skie slashed wildly and broadly enough, but the fear of attack on both sides was itself sufficient to panic the guards. When Edwin at last finished reading a scroll, panic truly spread. Viconia saw Skie stab downward, through the neck of a fallen guard attempting to flee; the little human was improving in ability. There was something in her that could be compared to the sharp, quick teeth of a rat trapped in a corner,
perhaps.

The guards had possessed the same idea of surrounding, Viconia thought, striking out with the shining morningstar gifted by the fallen male. A fine-crafted weapon with a feeling of some slight power to it, easier in her hands than Tenhammer's weapon of strict strength. Shar-Teel and Ajantis killed their way through, pursued; the boy attempted to guard their commander's back, while she left a trail of corpses they stepped through. Imoen and the bard Skie believed was her male, inconsequential compared to Shar-Teel's blood-soaked glory, hastened between the fighters. From somewhere Eldoth had taken a spear; a useful weapon in the confined space. He fought another guard grasping a similar weapon, quite well; and a spell from his fingers had the killing blow. Imoen flung herself to the ground, shrieking; an arrow whistled over her head, one of many—more-than-one. Viconia felt piercing pain bloom in the flesh of her right arm. She fell to the slight shelter of the tunnel wall.

Shar— She had faced far worse in the Underdark. She forced herself to dig out the shaft with her left hand, ignoring the flow of blood that gushed freely. Her goddess would heal her; she was careful to conserve her calls upon Shar's favour as yet. Her lips formed the chant; there would be loss and suffering in this place, and let it redound to the goddess. The pain drew softly into the air, and she was released to flee with the others to break past that door. She ran from human pursuers.

Stone stairs twisted below them. She and the children with magical aid could see more easily than others, it appeared; Ajantis hardly kept his balance in that improvised armour. She could smell blood here older than the fresh slaughter they had committed, and the distant stench of undead.

"Come friends." Garrick panted, leaning against the door closed behind them; he nervously shifted from foot to foot at an incredible pace. "Where are we now what're we doing?"

"Their little prison," Viconia said; and suddenly a bolt of lightning lanced through the air.

Their little trap. Viconia flung herself to the ground in time; the screams of male wizard and bards were almost indistinguishable. The ricochet caught the edge of Shar-Teel's armour, though the Helmite male was fortunate; the young harp-player, the foolish infant, did not stop screaming whilst the tide of bright blue whistled about the room even after it had passed by him.

Then the guards were upon them. A faint taste of alcohol hung in the air alongside roasted meat and fouler fare, and the spellcaster's laugh was not completely steady; but nonetheless the battle was no simple matter. No drow with the least wit could ever make that assumption; at any moment a single piece of luck from an enemy—or betrayal of an ally—could kill. Viconia wove between the guards to Shar-Teel, prepared to heal their leader as necessary. Arrows from the young females, fired from the stairs behind, whistled above her head in the general direction of the caster, who gathered a bright shield about herself. Her chants grew still louder.

Shar-Teel charged; Viconia found herself flanking alongside the Helmite. Her drow grace was supreme above the surface-dwellers; they would not dare to hit her. The enchanted weapon struck true in one or two cases; and yet—pain followed her. Bleeding, Viconia dedicated it to her goddess.

At last the spellcaster cried out; Shar-Teel's spider-blade had found its way through. Viconia could not spare a moment for thoughts of others; she sweated, she a proud drow, she struggled against the enemies; guards defending their caster encircled the three of them, spilling nearly to the steps of Viconia's own temporarily-allied wizards. Fire cut a temporary path before Viconia; she used the opening as any drow would. The paladin gasped and panted no less than she; and Shar-Teel trampled a richly embroidered wizard's robe underfoot.

The number of surfacers remaining to stand against them was marginally improved, Viconia thought.
She faced a male—not a boy by a surfer's lights, beginning to age in the way of drow slaves in the Underdark, coarse-faced and spewing futile speech at her. Besides his sword he wore a bow strapped over his shoulders. A strong male; he blocked her with comparative ease, and she was obliged to sidestep rather than parry his attack. She called quickly for a dark blessing from Shar. Centuries ago she had learned combat from the best mistresses Menzoberranzan offered; Viconia DeVir would not fall to this human filth.

(However little, granted, that she had need to personally practice combat in the intervening centuries, when males would cross lava to kiss a dog that had licked her hand.)

The morningstar made its hit, though Edwin stole victory from her with violently coloured acid. Viconia did not care. She sheltered behind Shar-Teel's back, and began the casting of a healing spell whilst the last of the surfacers were dealt with.

"As entirely tedious as this all is; as useless and shallow as his assistance proved to be—Garrick ran using boots of speed. The first to be lost," Eldoth said; the spear he carried was heavily bloodied. Skie stood beside him, a body near her feet.

"Then go find him," Shar-Teel said. "Slave dungeons here, isn't it?"

"Yes." Viconia finished her casting; it closed the more important of the warrior's wounds. Shar-Teel took a healing potion from her belt.

"One of this lot might have the keys. Well done volunteering yourself, male. Don't bother coming back without the stripling."

You're a funny man, that's why I'm going to kill you last had apparently given their leader a better impression than Shar-Teel, your lot in life is to bake cookies and bear children. Eldoth looked somewhat stunned.

"She's right. Make the slaves fight back," Skie said; she didn't even trouble to look at the male, the sharpness of a trapped rat's teeth still bound to her slight human frame.

Viconia gave Eldoth a ravishing, confident smile that lasted until she and the others had rushed into the next narrow passage.

For the Lady of Loss.

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5. Garrick

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Coward. The stone blurred horribly around him and he couldn't stop running. He burned—his stomach, his arms, charred black if he looked down, which he wouldn't dare to do—

Some clinking behind him runrunrun—!

Traps—exploding behind—

Thick door slamrunescape—

Foot after foot after foot after foot echoesrunningawayaway—

Run for hoursminutes fast tearlegsapart—
Nobreatheforscreaming—
Toofasttoofast—
Doorandstoneandnowhereandtears—
Strawawallfirmedoorbehindhim—
Running; falling.

Ricocheting against stone wall. Bump the size of an egg crack your skull open like an eggshell it hurts everywhere

Stone door swung shut behind alone in rotting straw

Failing alone down abandon away skin scraping

Garrick curled around himself and sobbed.

Tears and snot soaked through his breeches, his knees moist. He could not stifle his wails. His body would not move, his legs jelly. The rock was harsh against his flesh. The blue lightning whirling—the guard stabbing into him—couldn't stop it—However long the screamed whimpers came from him, it was impossible to make it end.

There was a sound of knocking on the stone behind him. He continued to weep loudly.

"Laddie?" A voice. They had come for him at last. He did not cry for mercy. Grief; shame; the end of it all. He had no will left to restrict the sobs tearing through his throat.

The knock on the wall repeated itself.

"Ye'd be new here, I'd imagine." The voice was low and gentle, a man. It reminded him, strangely, of his mother. Singing a lullaby. She would never know what had happened to him here—

His tears did not stop.

Two calm, steady, taps.

"They'll hear ye, lad, and silence ye," the voice said. Garrick took in a sobbing breath, between cries. The howls and sniffs forcing themselves from his mouth and nose had become hoarser. His voice was taken from him.

"Hush, laddie, I canna hear meself think. Can ye speak of what they did?" the voice from the wall said.

Only an incoherent cry came from Garrick's mouth. He tasted salt and blood, pain from where he had bitten his tongue at some point. He still whimpered in the dark.

"Breathe, lad," his voice in the wall told him. It was quiet and calming; kind. "Easy now. Ye've all the time ye need. One breath at a time now."

The air Garrick drew into his mouth was cold, and came out in a series of sniffles. He quietened slightly, but that was because his body was losing the strength even to weep.

"In and out, lad. Take it one by one," the gentle voice said. "Here ye'll be safe enough—for now."
Another ragged breath seared into his throat. His friends—how long had it been since he'd left them? What would have—

"There be no dank holes Clangeddin's might and mercy can't find its way to. I'd heal ye if I could, but there be no way between us."

There was a broken bottle on the floor next to Garrick; sharp fragments had cut into his elbow. A waste of what could have helped him. He found himself gasping for more air between his teeth, his nose blocked.

"What's your name, laddie? I be Yeslick, once of clan Orothiar."

The ability to form words hardly made it out of Garrick's mouth. But at last it came from him in a series of hoarse sobs. "'S Gar..garrha...rick. Garharick."

"Garrick, then?" The voice did not quite say it as he normally did, but Garrick managed a faint syllable that sounded like yes. "And what be causing you to take up the cell behind mine, eh, Garrick?"

Hearing his name—having someone kind to talk to—it started spilling out of Garrick, alongside his damp tears. "L—lightning bolt. Lightning bolt and before, they—they stabbed me, Edwin—I went with them then—and then I came here."

"A lightning bolt at ye? Aye, they've mages with that gift, curse the bastards. 'Tis Clangeddin's blessing ye live tae tell of it."

Clangeddin was not a human deity, some of Garrick's mind returned to him. "Are you a...dwarf?" he asked slowly.

"That I be, Yeslick Orothiar. Ye'd be a longlimb, I've no doubt," the voice said.

"That I be...am," Garrick said, sniffling.

"Merchantfolk, are you? Tis where most of their slaves are gained from. I won't be lying and saying it won't be bad as ye think, for 'tis more so; but it is Clangeddin's word to face with strength such times," the dwarf called Yeslick said.

Garrick slowly took another breath of the dank air. "No. I'm...I didn't come here like that. We didn't come here like that. We thought—we thought we could do... I was running away from them because they hurt me. I left the others." He still felt too weak to move; he didn't know if he was dying or not. The shards of the potion bottles were the strongest pain he could feel.

Yeslick's voice suddenly took on an urgency rather than its previous kindliness. "Ye mean you're no slave, lad? Ye came with others seeking to end the Throne?"

"Yes," Garrick said simply. He remembered Edwin helping him to his feet, urging him to carry on; and then he had run away again. That horrible moment—the mage-lightning sparking against the rock bouncing straight for him—how it had hurt him—"I ran for...s-somewhere safe—"

"And are ye even locked in there?" Yeslick asked fiercely. "By Clangeddin's twin axes, lad, answer me now!"

"...n-no. I don't think it's locked. Just shut..." Stone between him and the people who were going to hurt him. He despised himself, but could do nothing about it.
"Then it's up and at 'em, Garrick!" Yeslick shouted. "No layin' about here when there's battle tae be done! Return right to your friends and give the blaggards an axe in the face from me! Ye'll not stand by why this happens!"

Yelling at him; as the others would do for his cowardice. Though Skie and Imoen didn't yell. He wanted to cry again at the hopelessness of it all.

"I can't," he said resignedly.

"Ye shameful—ye longlimbed worm—" Yeslick cried, telling Garrick only the truth about himself. "Nay—" Yeslick said more softly, as though speaking to himself—"Come now, we'll see a chance yet—"

"No," Garrick whispered.

"Yes, tell me about those friends o' yours, young lad; say what brought ye here; I'll give it my ear. Speak of it, Garrick."

It came spilling out in Garrick's misery, almost without thought from him. "Skie's beautiful—she was beautiful, but in the troubles—we're all dirty and exhausted. She's a friend, I followed her—she's been my friend." Perhaps that was all that mattered, in the end. "Imoen—she's funny and she's clever with magic, she's Skie's best friend. Then there was Edwin, he calls us all monkeys. But sometimes he needs help." A long cough tore its way out of Garrick. "And Shar-Teel, she's scary and only laughs when I'm not trying to sing comedy. Viconia can heal people when she wants to. Ajantis is a knight, and Eldoth is horrible and he treats Skie like she's nothing. They...I..."

"These friends o' yours, lad, the beautiful longlimb," Yeslick said. "Ye care for them as much as all that?"

"S-sure," Garrick said. "But I—they maybe don't even need me—I'm useless—"

"Lad, listen to me; and I'll tell you one thing at a time. Ye'll help them all and your beautiful lass. Ye must stand, boy, open your door first. Take—thirty paces, it'd be, to a longlimb—to your right, 'till ye've made it from the cells. Five more paces to your left and it's a guards' storeroom ye'll come to; an' up on the door to the right is a hidden alcove near the second brick, which is where the bastards keep a set of keys. I haven't been there meself, but Rill was sure. 'Twill no be guarded if the mines are under attack. Then all ye must do is find your way back down to me in the hole behind this cell, unlock the door—and I'll heal ye. Think you can manage that, lad? A few steps to open your door again, that's all ye must do, ye saw no lock there."

"The magic boots," Garrick said. "They'll make me run too fast. I feel it'll rip me apart again—"

There might have been a sigh from the other cell. "Right, laddie, then take off the boots. Laces first, good and slow and steady. One thing at a time and ye'll be safe."

When Garrick rose to his feet at last the pain of the lightning bolt hit him again. His clothes were stuck to his flesh, blackened; and he tottered, sickened, feeling ready to collapse again at any moment. He ran a hand across his wet eyes, the dark cell blurry before him.

"But a few paces there; slow and steady, like I say," Yeslick said quietly.

One bare foot in front of the other. Garrick staggered, once; fell to his knees; only a few steps away, he told himself. Crawl forward; open that door. It hurt. Yeslick's gentle encouragement reached him. One painful movement at a time. Three paces to the door. Two paces. One, and he was pulling himself up against its weight, using it to labour to his feet again. It was heavy, and he feared that his
strength would fail at the task of moving it.

"Easy, now, lad. It'll come open," Yeslick said quietly. "Then all ye must do is walk down the hall; lay hands on the keys; and down the second passage. Soon we'll have you iron-sided as ever you were, fit to take on the blaggards. The door, lad."

The door. Garrick felt each breath he took, his burns and spilled blood crying for him to stop. Pull. Open the door and that's all you have to do, he told himself. Open the cursed door, Garrick.

He heard a small scraping of stone. It wasn't fastened. That slight noise meant it was budging after all.

"Bit by bit, if it's heavy for ye," Yeslick said.

He pulled back; leaned against the frame near it. You don't even have to push it all the way, Garrick told himself. Just enough to fall through.

His knees shook, and he fell into the narrow distance he had opened. He touched, at his fingertips, the cold of the opposite wall.

"Up and at it," Yeslick told him; and halfway to his feet, Garrick moved into the first pace down the corridor, clutching his wounds.

A long passageway. He thrust his left hand against the cell doors, hardly propping himself up on the long stumble. There were other prisoners in there that he had failed to hear on that wrenching run; someone moaning; someone begging for water; someone calling for help for a fellow prisoner—

He stumbled further on his way. Thirty paces, Yeslick had said; three hundred and he might have felt the same. Only one further each time.

Faint images seemed to float before him, as if he was drowning in something. Perhaps his own body.

You are a poisoner now, cruel Viconia taunted him, floating in the air, her dance inhumanly graceful.

Garrick, we have to kill Sarevok, Skie told him; slender as an assassin's blade, blood staining her deft hands, her sharp cheekbones like the set of a skull. He had seen her troubled, had known nothing to do to help her from that ruthless pit.

I thought you a man of honour and integrity, but your cowardice betrays what you truly are. Ajantis the noble knight stared at him, his pink face rippling into the darkness.

Garrick took a final step, collapsed against the door sealing the guards' storeroom, and put up a hand to the right as it let him through. A brick and a ring of keys fell on him.

He continued to almost fall to the floor; his shambling steps seemed slower and more laboured than ever. This passage was near to but not quite where he had come from. In the far distance he thought he heard someone screaming, or perhaps it was memory. Something sharp cut into his bare feet, though the pains in his body had stopped being so strong. Instead it was almost as if he cast some spell of oblivion, singing himself above and away from this. The stone was numb and blurred.

Somewhere there was a keyhole, at the very end; a narrow door, narrower keyhole. Once in the Duke of Hlath's Beloved, he had played a manservant, a small part, unlocking an intricate chest of drawers on the stage as part of a magical trick—the memory made him all the more light-headed—and then he fell forward into a muddy, confined pit.
A whispering voice not far away, *Clangeddin*. Blue-tinged hands were near him; not far from the blue of the lightning, and at first he wanted to cringe back. Not that his body cared much to obey him.

"Near squashed me flat, ye did!" That was...slightly better. He could feel his chest now, but everything was coming back to him. It hurt. "Now, this'll cause pain; but lie still and it'll be over. Bite this."

It hurt. He tried to scream over the thick, muddy bit of cloth in his mouth. Someone was digging into his body, scraping away flesh—burned flesh, the clothing that stuck to it—scraping—it wasn't his will to lie still under this—

*This is the fourth time you've made that mistake in the chords, Garrick. Really, darling, try harder,* Silke told him, tapping her long fingers impatiently, her silver hair a fine, loose cloud about her head. *Some days I don't know why I trouble at all with apprentices.* Allen-of-the-Dales turned quickly and kicked a wall in temper, his scowl dark and his black eyes flashing: *Arrogant puppy! It's a living we make here, how dare you threaten to give us up to the guards—* This was probably the part where his life flashed before his eyes, Garrick thought.

"By Clangeddin's might!" As if—as if a catapult thread had suddenly snapped, flinging him back to this world. He looked down at himself, and saw dirt and ragged clothing rather than torn flesh as the reminder of what they had done to him. He lay in mud, near a grey-bearded dwarf with him in the small—it would be called a hole, rather than a cell; behind him was the stone wall. The earth was damp underneath them.

"Give me a hand up, lad, it's a prison for longlimbs they made here. I'll fetch the other prisoners out. Rill's sure-and-certain to be amongst them, though I've not heard from him in a tenday—and you get those magic boots. Seems we'll need all help we can muster."

"Y...yes sir!" Garrick managed, dizzy.

Six prisoners of the Iron Throne; all somewhat wounded, gathered about a small alcove, where perhaps they would not be seen. Garrick suddenly felt as if he were flaunting himself among them, his thick clothing and weapons, the fact that despite their exhausted chase after the Iron Throne he had neither starved nor been whipped. (Flippant comments about Viconia would be entire planes from appropriate.)

"My name is Rill," the man in the centre of them said; he was as emaciated and sickly-looking as the others, and things crawled in his beard. He stood alone in their small circle, and something in his feverish stare reminded Garrick of a priest of Cyric he had once seen in the streets: piercing, burning. "For now, I speak for the others. There is a price on the head of a woman named Sky; do you travel with her?" Garrick nodded. "We don't have much time. There is a captain on the first floor not known for his loyalty. I can bribe him to look the other way while I escape, and the other forces will be preoccupied with you. I need a hundred gold. Will you do it?"

"I have fourteen gold and some coppers," Garrick said blankly. Deeply inadequate. Shar-Teel carried several hundred gold pieces in that enchanted bag—gold was heavy—and to fail because of that—

"Perhaps you could bribe the captain with fourteen gold *and* a magical object someone smuggled in," he said. Garrick rummaged for the heavy, ornate silver ring lodged halfway to the bottom of his pouch, and held it carefully in the palm of his hand. It might have been the cause of the death of that boy, in the spiders' nest... "You've no idea how difficult it was for me to convince the wizard *not* to wear it." Edwin refused to believe it wasn't a ring of great power that Garrick was keeping for himself, and it certainly had a strong enough enchantment to it...of folly. "Also, we set a fire on the
surface—and we took down the bridge, or rather Shar-Teel did—and our passage through the first part of the mines wasn't exactly secret—so there's going to be enough going on to slip away in but something might've happened to your first captain—"

"I'll offer the bribe to the first captain coming my way, then," Rill said, "and if he won't take it one way he'll take it another."

"I can follow. I know spells to charm people, I can help—" Garrick said.

"And I've black-hearted rats to drown and heads to bust," Yeslick said.

"Drown?" Garrick asked Rill, travelling with him up to the mine—the slaves were kept near where they worked, Rill said, and many guards would also be.

"There is an enchanted plug holding back the river. The dwarf thinks if it's released, the entire mine will be flooded—and I've no reason to doubt his word. Far better we bring an end to this whole stinking operation," Rill said. "Into the back with you now, there's a squad of them coming this way. Hurry, or they'll suspect something."

Garrick could not see where he crouched; but he heard the voices.

"Good cap'n." Rill spoke softly; then there was a sound of metal hitting flesh.

"Don't you know orders are to get to your quarters, slave? Dangerous mercenaries running about, as if we didn't have problems enough!"

There was pain in Rill's voice. "Sorry, s...sir. It's m' legs, sir, not what they used to be, slow as a snail they are, might be all that pushing carts, sir—"

"Silence!" Garrick ran the syllables he'd use to cast spells in his mind. Silke had taught him the chords and soft melody of a charm; it had actually worked once, to bring Viconia from the hamadryad. Perhaps if he tried he could reach for raw magical missiles as well, or even a song potent enough for the same horror he had felt fleeing from the bandits, when they had forced his own concoction down his throat— His throat still felt hoarse, blocked by his fear.

"As you say, sir. Just, m'lord, I've information might be better for your ears only, m'lord—" Rill's tone became more servile and ingratiating.

"Sir!" Another guard. "I know this one. Troublemaker named Rill. Can't trust him, sir!"

Could he cast the spell in stifled whispers? Wrap his hood about his face, sing only to himself, and make the magic work?—and make them obedient to Rill their leading rebel, at that?

Hums began low in his throat, ragged and soft; he felt the glimmerings of a spell start to sparkle through his fingertips. It wasn't that the sound did not exist, just that he was too soft for their ears to know—so a powerful spell would fail, of course, he suddenly thought, let it be something subtle enough to change them—

They would kill him if they caught him, Garrick thought. But is this not the second time they have nigh done so? He let the brightness of the melody begin to flow into the back of his mouth, surprised at himself.

"Yeah, I've seen this one around."

Garrick slipped his head briefly around the passageway and cast carefully. Thou art tempted for
green-eyed jealousy, lest the captain raised to a lion—

"I'll make sure he doesn't run off on the way back to the pits, sir, if you wish," the guard said. Garrick wasn't sure if that meant his spell had worked or not.

"Please, sirs, please not the whip," Rill pleaded. It was wrong that he should have to grovel in such a way; Garrick hated listening to it, and enduring it was no doubt worse. "I'll tell you everything, I will —"

There was a very faint clink; and Garrick peeked around the corner just in time to see the captain place a boot over a fallen copper piece.

"No need, Nahal. Get back in place. I'll deal with the troublemaker myself. Follow to your posts. Move!"

Where the guard captain was taking Rill—was in the way where Garrick would be seen by the remainder of the patrol. How to follow? The mine passages confused him; Garrick tried to think—if he went to the left, perhaps that would lead him up and around—

"So this is the home for lost lapdogs. I'm shocked to find you other than deceased," Eldoth's voice said near him.

Garrick stared at...nothing but a bare passageway. "What? Where are?—Is this?—"

"Not all of us quite plumb the depths of your tedious lack of wit, boy. It's a simple invisibility spell."

He hated the man and how he treated Skie. "Rill—a Ring of Folly, a guard—what are you doing? Are you running away from her—" As Garrick himself had done.

"Raising up a slave rebellion to serve the purposes of a distraction," Eldoth said.

"Come on, Eldoth, we need to go left, I think, need to catch up to Rill," Garrick whispered back. He couldn't tell whether Eldoth was following, but made his way as quietly as he could. If Rill was harmed—

"A slave? There's enough of the fools loosed already; I acquired keys from the bitch of a mage. Now I may as well see what wealth lies free at the bottom of the mine."

"No. We have to save the people," Garrick said, "so you can help me—"

"Spare me from brainless ideals, boy," Eldoth interrupted. "So let us..."

It was Rill, and the guard captain. Drool ran down his chin and he stared vacantly at Garrick, the ring on his hand.

"It's done," Rill said. "Can you charm him to speak well?"

"That I can," said Garrick, not certain but willing to try. He started softly—

"Delightful. All the appeal of an unbroken adolescent's voice—" Eldoth muttered. Garrick continued nonetheless. The song built; the person for which it was designed turned to stare at him with mesmerised gaze.

"Your orders are," he said as firmly as he could, "...Ah, Rill...?"

"To release all he can find, tell them to go to the surface, and order the guards to protect the iron
stores on the second level,” Rill said.

"Stop drooling and repeat exactly as I say all the orders from—Davaenor," Garrick said. He felt the magic running through his voice; and some beginnings of what might be called hope stirred inside him. "Davaenor has commanded you to take all the slaves to the surface—"

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6. Ajantis

Evil; true evil; wherever he set his clear gaze as granted by Helm. Still further through this vile and fetid place. Many spells had bound guards unconscious and horrified; the drow's dark magic had commanded obedience to some of their enemies; and still their foes outnumbered them.

Hastening through the twisted passageways, they had clambered down another set of long stone stairs to a chamber, where human and hobgoblin guards faced them alongside a vast ogre-mage and a second wizardess. The deception he had practiced for the cause of destroying this sorry nest wore on him, in a manner most tangible: the chainmail was weak compared to plate, and abraded away some parts of his body even below his clothing where the fit of it was narrow. Not that that discomfort ought to be compared to the wounds he had received. The Iron Throne tabard was at least principally torn from him so that he no longer masqueraded under its evil.

"Helm!" he prayed. The divine power came to him, rushing through his wounds; he began to believe he would have strength enough to end this fight. At least the sword he carried was his own, strong within his hands. The men he fought and shielded against—evil in each one of them, and yet still not quite as foul as the ogre chanting some abominable spell behind them, too far a distance for him to strike holy and true.

Dark magic flared from the Red Wizard; an answering chant grew from the evil witch. Send evil to battle evil if they must, but Ajantis had ensured the Red Wizard knew that his influence would not be tolerated to spread within the party.

"Kit, behind you!" Aquerna frantically called, and he turned in time to parry a villain's attack. He saw the squirrel, briefly, her red-brown fur behind Imoen's neck, the witch casting bright fire from her hands. There were many times he regretted the companion given as a penance and the meddling approach she invariably took to what ought to have been his business—but he felt concern for her, in this dark and evil place.

"Simians! Back to me!" Edwin called out; he seemed in no immediate danger, the drow and Skie near to the two spellcasters, fighting with the bright-coloured morningstar and the evil sword—

Ajantis carefully smote at his foes with all the strength his knight's training had granted him. One man hammered against his shield, the other he used his sword against—he must succeed in this battle, do duty as a squire and purge evil wherever he found it—

Shar-Teel was stepping back from her fight with a soldier almost as tall and strong as she—less 'stepping back', really, Ajantis saw from the corner of his eye, as 'allowing him to overreach and running him through', but others were surrounding her, and acid from the ogre-mage burned one side of her helm—

There were four of the female wizard, though Imoen had already reduced that number considerably, and she was chanting again.

Then around him was fire, and it burned him deeply even as he called for Helm's aid.
"Die here and now!" Edwin cried, though he might have been panting. "(Yessss. And now I should like to lie down and be tended by half-naked concubines.)" Ajantis was half-blind, in pain—his prayers were weak, he had exhausted himself—

"You—you horrible rat of a wizard! Look at what you've done to him!" Aquerna screamed.

And still the battle was not done. Like him, the men he had fought were roasted in their armour, but the ogre mage yet stood—Ajantis half-saw it, in his blindness, the walls blackened, what was probably the female wizard on the ground. The ogre, shielded in a blue bright enough for even him to see, reared its sword for him. It faltered, slightly, when more untrustworthy magic whirled through the air.

A tall figure aiding him; matching a sword against the ogre—matching its strength, perhaps. Shar-Teel. Ajantis had sunken to his knees—the burning—

"Come on!" Skie's voice. A hand on his seared neck he did not know was a hand until after the feeling began to return to him, as though she had cast a spell of healing—

"Potion off some guard. I need you to drink." She took a place at Shar-Teel's flank, aiding her perhaps—

Potion bottle; smelling right. Ajantis placed it to his lips; forced himself to swallow. The magic acted and his vision and wits started to return to him, though he knew he still bore the marks of the wizard's shameful spell. He stumbled to his feet; he sensed evil intent in the still-moving female wizard, merging with Shar-Teel's own corruption when the warrior drove Spider's Bane through her. There were few of the depraved guards breathing still.

The Red Wizard was seated on the foul ground, slumped, his back against the wall. "Be grateful I instructed the inbred imbecile to move! (I ought not to argue with a squirrel, of all things. Let me alone.)"

"No," Aquerna said, as fiercely to Ajantis' recollections as her voice had ever been. "You tried to murder my boy! Your disgusting spells—"

"Hey, come back!" Imoen reached down for his animal; she was away and racing across the ground.

"—Are more important; or did you somehow fail to see I won the battle? (It no longer matters whether the chimps behave or not—)"

"Are not more important than his life!" She leaped to his face and...clawed; the wizard struggled clumsily.

"Gah! Get it off—get it off!" Edwin bled; the scratches were deep-clawed. Imoen grabbed Aquerna by the scruff of the neck and tried to hold her away.

"Ha. It...Hurts." Edwin tapped at a cheek, torn open. "I want to rest here. Catch my breath; plead for healing from you fools."

"You deserve nothing, you bastard!" Aquerna screamed within his head. She could be impulsive like this, at times; hurried conduct that was not what Helm demanded of proper holy steeds. Even though the wizard had goaded her to it.

"Quiet," Ajantis bade her.

"I am exhausted; I do not think I could heal without rest and prayer," Viconia said.
"Find the door," Shar-Teel ordered tersely. "Viconia, with me. Skie, Imoen: take the other direction. Boy, go with them. Wizard—do as you wish."

The hidden door to the chamber of the master of the mines was somewhere near, though only a few of this place were permitted to know of it. Viconia had interrogated a guard trying to run from them; the sight of the drow using her vile power against the will of the human had been utterly repulsive. Ajantis took the northward passage behind the young girls. There was much evil to be fought here.

"Sarevok isn't here," Skie said irrelevantly; it seemed that the man called Davaeorn was the principal figure of this dark place.

Imoen jiggled the handle of a rough door set in the passage they traversed.

"Nobody here either," she announced. She and Skie bent down together over what passed for a lock, and sprung it open; thieving was evil, but to explore an area in the service of good acceptable. An empty room, luxurious by standards of a place such as this, a plain bed and two locked chests.

"D' you think there'll be anything useful in them?" Imoen pointed.

"It's not worth our time," Skie said softly. "Im? How would you kill a powerful wizard?"

"I would smite him, of course. Helm would grant me the strength to rid the land of his evil," Ajantis said. This Davaeorn was a more powerful wizard than the Red Wizard, quite probably; but it was his duty to meet such foes.

"That's very clever, boy, and I mean that in the most sarcastic way possible!" Aquerna said. "Stop rushing into things!"

"Edwin's face, for example?" Ajantis supplied, wanting an end to her pestering.

"My brain's startin' to run a bit empty now, it's hurting just to think of magic," Imoen said. "Arrows, arrows're easier, s' long as he doesn't have missile-dodging boots like mine. Then we're in more trouble."

The young women pried open the second lock; this room was less tidy than the first, but similarly unoccupied.

"What about wizard protections? They always stop if you hit them enough, don't they?" Skie pressed.

"Yeah. Yeah, reckon they do," Imoen said. "Sometimes these things called triggers, contingencies, I can't do 'em and not even Edwin can, Mr. G mentioned them a couple times. Lots and lots of spells go off at once."

"But if you hit a wizard the right way he dies," Skie said. "Before he's much of a chance to cast."

"Yeah. I guess. But—calm down, all right? Let's just get out of here."

"When we're finished," Skie said; and Ajantis found himself saying almost the identical phrase.

A high-pitched scream broke through the air; a trifle north of them, it seemed.

"A damsel in distress!" Ajantis said almost instinctively, and ran toward the sharp sound.

"Yes, and it may well be your other friends causing that distress!" Aquerna lectured him.
Two rooms further up the passageway, was a door ajar; and just within was a stiff booted foot almost protruding from it. Skie and Imoen raced after Ajantis, but he was first to reach the scene. He saw the body of the man lying on the ground; the victim wore a guard’s armour, and would have been tall and muscular in life. His mouth was frozen open in his final scream; his eyes gaped in horror; and his throat and a good portion of his chest were a gaping mess of blood and trailing organs. The cause was immediate: an undead wolf stood over the corpse and lapped at its meal. Its eyes glowed a bright red; its yellow teeth dripped a darker colour; and there was a dreadful macabre cracking noise as it began to crunch at a bone, extracting the marrow from it.

"Silvanus has sent you to me," a female voice said; and Ajantis took one step further into the room to see a young maiden clad only in a bedsheets.

"I—ah—er," he said. Seemingly unconcerned for her modesty, the damsel crossed the room toward him; her brown hair hung loosely down her shoulders, and her deep-set eyes gazed up at him.

"And you are not with him?" She pointed down at the corpse; her wrists were marked, as though she had been recently bound. The armour he wore; Ajantis stepped back, trying not to appear as a threat.

"No, he's not Iron Throne, just dressed that way," Imoen said helpfully, appearing behind him.

"Then my visions from Silvanus were correct that assistance would come to me," the maiden said. "I am Faldorn; I was sent by the druidic henge west of here; and I shall put an end to these men of the Iron Throne who defile sacred woodlands." She put two fingers to her lips, and called softly through them; the wolf bounded away from its prey to join her, submitting to her petting of it. A druid’s summons, then.

"I...er—I am Ajantis, a Paladin...squire paladin...of the Order of the Most Radiant Heart, servant to Lord Helm, and a son of the noble family of Ilvastarr." Ajantis gave the words of his introduction; as a squire, he had practiced introducing himself in full formality...

"Yeah, that's important right now." Imoen softly kicked him in the leg. "You all right there, Falwhatsit?"

"Nature will rejoice at the moment we finish destroying this evil mine." Faldorn knelt by a chest-of-drawers, roughly opened it, and began throwing clothing to the floor; when she located a brown-coloured jerkin and breeches that seemed the smallest available, she flung away the sheet. Ajantis closed his eyes as a gentleman.

"Er." He kept his eyes clasped tightly shut. "How did...how did you come to this foul place, miss? That man on the ground—"

"He was the chief bodyguard to Davaeorn, the leader of these abominable despoilers of Nature," Faldorn said. "The druids arranged that one from our order drawn by lot should travel to this place, and with blessings bestowed by Silvanus dismantle these. I was the one fortunate to be assigned to the task. They felled me not far from the entrance and took my weaponry, and there I briefly felt I was lost. But then this man ordered me taken to his dwelling, and thus Nature works for the destruction of the mine."

"The man—he defiled you, then?" Ajantis said. Curse that such foul evil existed.

"Not a tactful question!" Imoen hissed.

"No," Faldorn said levelly, an answer that relieved him. "My wolf is never far from me. It is a sign that Silvanus favours our efforts."
"You can open your eyes now," Aquerna told him.

"A companion animal," Faldorn said, now more decently clothed. She raised her fist and uttered a few words; several glowing blue berries appeared in her hand. "Would you like some?" She made several squirrelly noises.

"Trying bribery? I think I'll have to like you," Aquerna scuttled up to her; willingly took the berries.

"One more's useful," Skie said. "Do you have any idea where Davaeorn is, Faldorn?"

"No, but we shall find his lair." Faldorn declared calmly. Her dedication to their just and noble cause was deeply admirable; so many Ajantis had met fell short of such ardent purity of mind. "I shall heal you. Follow with me, friends."

She led them past the long corridor, past a room bearing a table covered in a red cloth; and then a dark and bolted door proved to be a torture cellar. Someone had committed acts abominable beyond imagination. Ajantis would have offered his responsibility to enter that place smelling of blood and worse, but Skie had darted in—none still lived, she said, and he did not look himself. A further reminder of the necessary destruction of the mine.

It seemed they had walked lower through the earth; the passageways turned and wove further, and Ajantis prayed they would shortly discover the secrets of the lair. A broad passage led to the right, illuminated by closely placed bright torches, the brackets which held them carefully engraved.

"Are you mercenaries come for my temple?" demanded the deep bass of a man's voice. He wore black, Ajantis saw, and to his belt was bound a twisted figure that resembled a darkened sun.

"Yes, Sarevok hired us from the Gate, all hail Cyric," Skie lied. She ought not to commit these sins—a due reprimand and the holy smiting of a Cyricist was shortly to follow, by Ajantis' vows. Even to briefly feign the worship of a god as evil as Cyric—

"You must come to the shrine. I have something for you," the cleric said; Ajantis stepped forth.

"She lies—"

"My god told me that already," said the priest. "Do follow anyway."

"By Helm—!" Ajantis lunged forward; Imoen had her bow, and loosed an arrow pointlessly into the walls; but the image of the Cyricist had seemed to dissolve in the slight shadows between the torches—

"A trap," Skie said. "Literally, Ajantis; so stop moving, or you really will. Forever." She half-laughed to herself; he felt the nonchalance of it disturbing. He allowed her to bend down to a flagstone near him that seemed indistinguishable to others around it. Skie pushed it up slightly with a dagger, and did something to the ground beneath.

"Finished. But we ought to try another way," she said.

The stone walls wound yet further underground. The air was foul to Ajantis' nose; naturally as foul as this place. Any deeper and they... Ajantis fortified his resolve; it would not be long. He did not know how great a time he had already been promising himself that. Skie's grey cloak had disappeared yet again in the darkness before them.

"I feel we near the unnatural wizard," Faldorn said quietly. "This place presses upon me; we must be close to the source of this foulness."
"It is good that you are with us," Ajantis said. He could distinguish no particular evil amongst the remainder that spread itself within this place. Within this group, he counted only Garrick and Imoen with truly noble intentions, and Imoen committed acts of petty theft; he admired Faldorn's apparent moral clarity. Aquerna, stained with blue, seemed to admire her berries.

"It is Nature's will," Faldorn agreed; and they continued to set themselves to the path.

Skie returned between the dark shadows. Her hood had blown back from her face. "There are five men in that room over there," she said; Ajantis saw her smiling as she did so, and did not like that expression in a place such as this. "With very good armour; standing in front of a wall that only looks like a wall; they've got a black-and-red stripe at their shoulders."

"The remainder of Davaeorn's personal bodyguards," Faldorn said firmly.

"At last," Imoen said. "Then we're gonna get out of here!"

Skie ran a hand through her hair, spreading blood into it; she didn't seem to notice. "Waiting there, because if we don't kill him, it's only a matter of time while we're lost down here. Distracting the guards; that's easy. But being invisible, moving behind them and into the wizard's chamber before he's a chance to start casting his spells, to kill him—"

"Your boyfriend says he knows invisibility spells, I don't," Imoen said. "'S too bad he's not the sharing type."

"Let's find the others," Skie said.

Not far, apparently, from the temple of Cyric. There were more hobgoblins than Ajantis had before seen in one place. They swarmed him; any attempt to build a line against them, to give Faldorn and Imoen freedom to cast, was utterly futile. Shar-Teel's battle cries sounded distantly jubilant, but she and Viconia were thoroughly encircled; the accursed Edwin was shielded by some stonelike magic, but seemed nearly overcome. A dwarf Ajantis did not know fought near to them, a battleaxe against hobgoblin knees. The priest of Cyric appeared to direct the foes; he stood upon blue carpet some distance in front of the altar to the evil god, gesturing into the air, and Ajantis began his duties.

Faldorn had barely uttered a syllable when two of the goblins fell upon her; her wolf dived to the attack, but her spell was broken. Ajantis struck against the closest of them, praying she would be spared. The wolf's attack hamstrung the hobgoblin it fought, bringing it fallen to the ground, but there were more and still more. An illusionary Imoen thrust a frantic arm through Ajantis' chest; Skie fought, but she had allowed herself to step away, following the angle of a slice to a hobgoblin's neck, becoming separated from him and surrounded. They stood alone, and though one hobgoblin was no threat to a true knight a great array of them most certainly was—

Faldorn. She screamed when her wolf howled; two hobgoblin blades cut through it. Valiant as its mistress, it tried a final bite; fell to the ground truly dead and shimmered into some oblivion—

The maid herself flung her body upon them in vengeance; her form shifted to that of a young bear, and with claws and teeth she aimed for the flesh of her foes. Ajantis fought to defend her; he shielded against two who attacked his left, striving to reach her. The beasts stood in his path. He saw the bear, too many hobgoblins to quickly count surrounding it, more of them falling upon Ajantis himself—An arrow hit his left side, scraping through his chainmail, the impact almost taking his footing. He stumbled, and a sword opened the mail across his right forearm before he could defend. Skie was backed into the wall, blood spreading across her face, and the images of Imoen died one by one. Aquerna fled to the roof, crouched hidden and able to do nothing.
Three hobgoblins had fallen about the bear; far more opened wounds in its flank. Ajantis shouted his intent to aid Faldorn, fought onward despite his wounds; more arrows flew about him, deflected by his shield. The bear's howl was desperate.

He reached her at the moment the wounded body of a young girl appeared between their swords. Faldorn was smaller than the bear had been, and fell with a space about her; Ajantis flung himself near, defending her.

"My wolf—they..." she breathed; she seemed to try to struggle to her feet, but she was injured badly. The need for a holy vengeance filled his mind; each drop of hobgoblin blood he spilled was necessity, and the will to fight these evil creatures erupted within him. But there were too many. They came; and they came; and they came. Faldorn could not heal herself whilst they attacked her, lying vulnerable on the temple's bloodstained carpeting, and he could not kill them all. There was none he could do but fight whilst breath remained in him. The next arrow struck his thigh.

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82. Cloakwood III: Eldoth, Shar Teel, Skie

Warning: This is the highest rated out of the three Cloakwood chapters, and indeed as high-rated as this fic gets. Please take caution if you have triggers.

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7. Eldoth

If there was one thing he loathed above all, it was tedium. The slaves were sheep; herding them was dull work.

And they milled about him precisely like sheep. Perhaps if even one of them were a moderately attractive and terribly grateful woman he could forgive, but this he could not. (The cook certainly failed to fall under the description.) His invisibility had dissipated, though its restoration was but a simple melody from him. He hummed three low notes and at least gained vision in the darkness, the layers of darkened planes and the more vivid colours of the living. The air was still filled with smoke and caused both the slaves and the mooncalf boy to cough. Obviously not jaded sufferers of black lotus.

On the opposite bank, ashes lay on the ground, and armed figures trampled the wreckage; two ropes had been stretched across in place of a proper bridge, such that the crossing was possible though no easy affair. Simple enough to swim, if it came to it.

He watched and waited for the guards across the way to notice something wrong; to see and disbelieve that their orders were so foolish when they saw the hordes gathered here. He hefted his flute ready in his hand; better a coward than a dead man, and better yet a prepared man.

Yet Garrick the mooncalf was already trying something highly counterproductive.

"Davaorn's orders!" the foolish boy called across at them; at the least he had completed some slight cantrip beforehand to give him more than a female adolescent's voice.

"Yeah? So they got those bastards?"

"Yeah!" There was a rather excessive dose of the party paladin in Garrick's yell. "You get to patrol
and look for their friends, Davaemor says!

"—Hey, that you, Frias?"

"Sure!"

"Nope—hey, wait—the slaves up here? Come—Calban—"

They were not quite yet in the position he would have wanted them, but with the potential of a mob at his direction it was simple enough. These odds certainly favoured him; and as in any gamble, favourable odds dictated an action.

The melody Eldoth cast from his flute was a variation upon an old dance tune, a rill of high notes that were crafted to make anyone wish for hornpipe or tarantella. When combined with one or two low notes that could force anyone to cease all motion: it was a satisfying spell to cast on enemies. The four guards were close enough that its effect spread against all of them, and each became immediately paralyzed; it could have been one, none. He allowed himself a slight sigh of relief.

"Go ahead and take your righteous vengeance," he inflamed the mob.

"To—kill—" Garrick stared. Some of the former slaves were already clambering across the ropes as best they could; his darkvision showed him one more in the patrol, racing to the defence of his fellows. Eldoth wasted an allotment of magic-forged missiles at him. "What's that spell?" Garrick burst out.

"An unpleasant little number trying to replicate a trifle of divine power. Entertainingly sadistic if coupled with a herd of summoned monsters; but these slaves will have to do for now." The guards were falling easily to the slaves' improvised weapons—a rock here, ripped timber there, even a dropped dagger or two. With the infravision he could see the amusing look of popeyed terror in the eyes of the frozen guard in the forefront just before he was dragged down.

"What they're doing—" Taking a bloody revenge on their erstwhile owners, of course. The true tragedy in it was that the pest had probably not been dropped on his head as a child as an explanation for his mind. "I'm not sure. It's—"

"You've no idea how those bastards treated us," said a slave, standing away from the massacre. "Ilmater may not condone such things, but I'll not stop them." Whip marks ran down his back; he looked at Garrick. "The way's clear for us to leave. A blessing to you and your friend."

"The Cloakwood's dangerous," Garrick said, again stating the obvious. "I'll—I have to find Yeslick, don't I?" he said, nervously, looking again briefly to what the slaves had done to their erstwhile masters; and back to the slave leader. "And...and I have to come back. You need help."

"We waste enough time," Eldoth sneered. Skie's little revelation of bastadry had denied his plans; at least this mine had sounded to be a venture of some potential profit. The note to recall his invisibility was simple, quick, and high. He snapped a prepared eyelash between his fingers, and remained unseen.

The mines were emptier now; and Garrick and his bright clothing, in as dreadful condition as it was, would divert attention away from Eldoth himself. It was easy enough to follow the trail of bloodshed to where that boar of a woman et al had forced themselves to.

"Eldoth, why do you treat Skie so badly?" the boy attempted in conversation with his better.

"Why did Skie lead me to believe that she was her father's trueborn daughter?" Eldoth said. This was
the room where they had killed the mage bitch and the others with her; a guard's slit throat grinned red at him. He'd already taken what was worth thieving from their corpses, and the mage's robes still gaped open across her bare breasts. Garrick looked carefully aside from the scene.

"Because it's some mistake. Because she thought you could sort it out for her." Some vestige of immature chivalry; how quaint. They stepped through the large kitchen area; Eldoth had done enough wandering to search for slaves to incite that he knew the way to this point, at least. The long tunnels were cursed confusing, and if Garrick the simpleton continued to gasp every time he ran into something in the dark, he might even have to teach him to cast infravision. Softly and repeatedly calling out directions past the invisibility was another irritant.

"Daddy dearest would hardly listen to the likes of me," Eldoth said. Build enough of a habit of wives and daughters opening their legs to one, and jealous and wealthy men started to become...mildly peeved. It was also, of course, that to them he was nothing: a Ruathym northlander, a bard schooled in New Olamn and the son of fishers and poisoners. Skie had thought it terribly exciting that he knew how to steal.

"She deserves better than you! You keep telling her, be quiet, your opinion's not worth anything, you're not worth anything—and you're wrong."

It was the boy's poor taste that flashed sheep's eyes at the insipid brat; particularly when there was such a charming drow also in the party. Bodies fell at the end of this particular passage, marking their way clearly. "Speaking frankly, Skie is a particularly feather-brained female talented at spending her father's gold."

Bodies in here, also. One guard appeared to have fallen some distance from his fellows, and the number of wounds upon him seemed slightly more than necessary to have killed him. Scorching spellmarks also marked the path before them; the young wizards had been busy, it seemed.

"That's horrible, and you're wrong," the boy fiercely lectured. Another realm of rough stairs further into the Cloakwood's hidden secret; more marks of their delightful companions' passage about them. Eldoth impatiently waited for Garrick to slip upon them; if he was lucky, the boy might even break his jaw in the course of the fall. "She's—once she ran into a vampiric wolf to save me. She's stronger than you think."

A stone door swung open on hinges almost destroyed. "You praise women for their strength? I'm afraid I always imagined your clumsy flirting to consist of boasting to a lady that you are now enough of a man to shave each Shieldmeet, and perhaps soon you may even start to drink ale," Eldoth said.

More bodies lay beyond. The boy's cowardice showed itself again in his pale face and trembling step. Eldoth rifled through the corpses in case of valuables missed, not heeding Garrick's distress.

"It—doesn't matter what you think," the boy said, when they had passed by that scene. "I know what I have to do now. You only wanted to use her. But Shar-Teel hates you even more than I do, Imoen sees right through you—and Skie is strong. Stronger than either of us; than you. In some ways."

Ridiculous. Eldoth was a strong man, Skie a weak girl; and though he would freely admit his studies in the Art did not transcend dabbling—spells were useful enough, but he'd no care to bury himself in books for long years and small returns—he was still beyond the younger Thayvian and the childish Imoen when he deigned to cast, knowing more powerful ways and turns within the Weave by song's instinct.

There were the sounds of battle, audible now; "Hurry, whelp," he ordered. They passed through;
down; and looked over a small army of hobgoblins making easy work of their fellow adventurers within a place marked by the Dark Sun.

Were the odds more favourable to retreat? No, Eldoth thought; they had come so far, and the rewards might be considerable. Garrick gasped, loudly; it was an intimidating enough sight—only Shar-Teel's height and, partly, Viconia shielded by her goddess were visible amidst the attack; all others presumably far within the thick groupings of hobgoblins. From Garrick's white face, Eldoth did not trust the boy's courage to hold; but instead of running, or of futilely charging in and having himself killed—he stood his ground. For the time being.

"Perhaps you know what we have to do," he told Eldoth, who wearied of cryptic pronouncements; "—have to, together, because—" So it was that particular song the hapless child wished to attempt.

"Phrygian mode on the third key," Eldoth ordered. He gave Garrick a soft tuning note, repeated it once more; they could afford no mistakes. As little as the boy's voice was to his own musical tastes—slovenly technique, thin, overly sweet—it found the Weave as well as any other bard's. And two combined could attempt to be exponential in effect.

Garrick began to sing the melody. Eldoth held the counterpoint, depth, strength, and careful fingerings, the elaborate and complicated harmony that progressed from discord to resolution in half a breath. Enthrallment, this; he reflected briefly that hobgoblins had small minds, and that tactical reassurance alone cost him effort he should not have spent. Songs were usually a means to an end for him; but in the sheer physicality of it—breathing sparingly in the few times permitted him, air hastening to his lungs; mouth and teeth and tongue and spit calling the notes; fingers precise and careful and beginning to sweat—beyond the palpability of it lay the power. He piped the notes demanded of him such that the cantors would become transmuted by the canticle, seared by its inferno into faded and falling ashes tossed to the wind. Crescendo, Garrick's voice still clear enough, Eldoth's counterpoint labyrinthine in its details and flawless in execution—

The hobgoblins began to look to them. Supple-limbed Viconia drove her dagger through the neck of one that had flagged its attention to watch. It was the goblins, not their acquaintances, that they sought to subdue, and Garrick's voice sharpened to direct the spell in such a manner. A quick arpeggio flashed across Eldoth's fingers; a hobgoblin had started to advance towards them. Fortunately the boy adapted to it, indeed singing well enough to halt it temporarily in place.

Potent enough music to briefly capture all of them; Eldoth felt a prickling of fear at all the yellowish eyes turning their direction. He played steadily even as an arrow was loosed and fell inches above their heads. A single falter in the song and they would both be lost. Subdue the archer. A bloodstained Imoen, perhaps weeping, stabbed a hobgoblin near to her in its spine. She thieved its sword to replace hers and attacked; near to her were two fallen figures, an unknown girl and the paladin.

The web he and Garrick cast trembled like rain-soaked goassamer, filling this Cyric-marked domain. Fragile and intricate, in the sight of the Weave the dull silver strands of his flute entwining the pattern against sunny yellow. Flimsy as the slightest disruption or discord would break it; a thing of complex allure in its way, deadly as the strands became soaked in blood. As much as he generally believed Shar-Teel should shut up and off herself as a service to all humanoids, her battle-cries blended into the song as a counterpoint again to his and Garrick's careful timing. (If playing at an exhibition of animal tricks: the music is matched to the pace at which the horses dance, not the horses to the music.) The web bound the hobgoblins; a sputtering cantrip spilt from Edwin's hand, a bloodied Skie seemed to fade from vision behind the shadows of her enemies, a dwarf's body jerked slightly upon the ground. All tremulous portions of one spellbinding.
And the black-clad priest sought to utterly destroy it. He stood on his altar, a prayer raised against the song's influence. In Eldoth's manipulation of the Weave he felt it as a nauseating darkness, the spreading control of a blackened sun. Garrick's voice wavered, and the Cyricist's power spread; arrows flew about Shar-Teel and Viconia.

The girl Imoen cut and run, gathering her wizard's robe about her. Eldoth knew he'd no such luxury of turning back. Garrick's voice deepened; Eldoth lowered his flute's tones to imitate it, and would have cursed his growing-ever-more slippery fingers if he'd either thought or breath to spare. Many hobgoblins yet lived, and the priest's directions worked against the spellsong.

*Cease; must hate and death return; cease! must men kill and die; cease! drain not to its dregs The urn of bitter prophecy*—Garrick's words sounded; not at all the lyrics Eldoth would have chosen. The frail web faltered, the hobgoblins within it almost ready to attack its creators. Eldoth could detect a note of hoarseness, now, in the boy's voice; he sweetened his flutesong as best he could. If they chose, they could control these array of brutal servants.

*A brighter Toril rears its mountains, from waves serener far; a new Chionthar rolls its fountains against the morning star*—

Cruelly and pathetically optimistic. Yet that much, Eldoth supposed, was somewhat antithetical to the Dark Sun. For himself, let it be the negative beauty of the Maid of Misrule, as she had no doubt turned her eye to him from birth—but there was no time. Soon the hobgoblins would end the music in the simplest possible manner. While it bound the creatures, let those who could murder as many as possible do so. The unknown girl raised herself slowly from the ground, making as if to cast a healing upon herself.

The Cyricist's chanting stammered for a bare second; and for that moment many hobgoblins stopped under the song's power. The exertion of it had begun to pain him; Eldoth would swear that it was drops of blood and not water running from his forehead. Such joined spells exhausted. He and Garrick would transform to ash indeed, desiccated dust upon the wind. Many of his songs ran so, for man's cold grasp at these matters could never last for any great time.

Someone was loosing arrows at the Cyricist, and a third found its way to the priest's neck: Imoen the wizard. These noble-minded fools could be relied upon to risk their lives, after all. The song flowered; the hobgoblins were arrested to his will; and Garrick sung between the flute's subtleties. Shar-Teel behaved as expected.

'Twas Garrick first to slump silent and hoarse to the ground when the need for the song was ended; but Eldoth would have admitted truly that he also was an exhausted man. He wiped an arm across his forehead and found it damp; he crouched leaning against the wall and let others plunder for the time being, if they would. They had bound a force of goblins in place long enough for them to be slain; perhaps he would place that within an epic chant at some time. Leave out, probably, Shar-Teel's credit; dark elves, though, were ever a fascinating subject to the fantasies of a small-minded audience.

"Yeslick!" cried Garrick, and Eldoth would have taken the word for simple brain-damaged nonsense, but the boy's path took him to kneel beside the fallen dwarf. A name, come to think of it, that some of the slaves had muttered, of little importance as that had been.

"Knight! Silvanus bids you to rise!" the girl's harsh voice commanded; the paladin was in the position of a pincushion amidst dead hobgoblins, and Eldoth dared to hope the tedious imbecile had met a deserved end.

She began to chant something, pulling the arrows free and laying her hands where blood gushed.
"No. I shall not allow Nature's despoilers to—"

"Viconia!—It's Yeslick, he needs—" There were tears upon Garrick's stained face.

"Force a healing potion down his throat, rivvil," she throatily commanded. She devoured one herself, her fine body smeared by offal and blood. With Shar-Teel, she leaned against the wall; both, it seemed, taken to their limits.

"But I don't have one, I—"

"I think there's a trap." Imoen pointed to the Dark Sun's altar; three potion bottles stood above it upon a shelf. "Magic. I can't, it feels all...I don't think I...Edwin, you?"

The wizard, pale and moving slowly, had himself swallowed one such potion. "Subtle. (Probably harmless.) If I truly must—"

"Yes. You should," Imoen said.

Ajantis coughed and spluttered, the girl's hands upon him. (Likely he would cough and splutter at any female's hands upon him, given paladins' acclaimed prudishness.) "Hurts—" The pathetic squirrel companion leaped from the roof to his side.

"I shall cast more blessings upon you shortly, I promise. Shall I next heal the dwarf?" the girl said.

"Hurry," Garrick begged.

"Simple, simple, little magic traps," Edwin muttered to himself. He stepped gingerly to the altar to Cyriss. "(Do I need to understand its pathetic intent? I think not!) Scarce above cantrip level, I imagine. Easy to avoid—(There is not much to it, is there?)—easy to lay hands upon. (I think I see...half of a conditional rune; perhaps leading to further beneath?—But it is inactive, apparently wizardly might is not the intruder designed— Enough. As if I were a useless diviner to care.) Several potions of healing among other things. Behold." He gathered the bottles into his hands and backed away from the altar. "Very useful, indeed." He immediately drained one himself, and was met by various glares from most of the others.

"Give them to me, iblith," Viconia hissed, the wall at her back supporting her upright.

"Hush, dear, don't fuss." Nevertheless he yielded to the drow; no wonder she had no respect for Edwin as a man. Viconia and Shar-Teel passed the flask between themselves as if it were wine.

Skie rested quietly on the ground; she was draped upon a hobgoblin's large corpse as if it were some silken divan within her father's mansion, the enchanted sword fallen beside her. She said nothing. Her pale skin was crossed with blood and dark bruising; not all of the blood was hers. Give anyone a sword of that nature and even emptyheaded noblewomen like her could...

"You're old," the healer girl announced, bent over the dwarf still.

"Mock if ye must—but I'll swing an axe as well as any of ye pipsqueaks, I'll see this mine beaten back to the watery tomb it belongs—"

"Age and experience are a part of Nature's cycle, I intended no insult," the girl said. "It is only that you must rest; I cannot fully heal you of the damage—"

"Yeslick, she might be right; don't hurt yourself—" Garrick said.
"Nay, give me a breath to catch and I'll cast the healing myself, I will. I must—"

"Heal Shar-Teel whilst your power remains, jalil," Viconia ordered the girl. "She is the strongest of us."

"Of course." Fortunate that they had found such a stray, Eldoth thought; soon he would have to stand once more. He'd still the spear he had gained, even if the threads of his music hung tattered and torn about him and his body exhausted.

"Then Skie," Viconia continued. "She's no caster to need rest."

"(That is because masters of arcane knowledge are simply more powerful—)"

Skie. The drow indeed hated men, to choose her. But the girl showed enough healing talent to cross to each of them in turn, ending with Eldoth.

"This will grant you vitality," she said; her light touch restored some potency to Eldoth's limbs, though his ability to cast yet scarcely flickered inside him. One of those deranged forest druids, from her speeches; this Faldorn was quite a pretty girl below the battlestains. In two or three years and cleansed of dirt she might make an attractive woman. He stood.

"Kill the mage quickly," Shar-Teel said. His chambers stood behind a secret door; protected by guards.

"I'll kill the bastard; I'll see to it the rats don't—" Garrick tried to plead with the ranting fool of a geriatric dwarf again. Eldoth took out the scroll he had plundered; he should have sold it for a pretty enough sum upon abandoning this place, but it was not the only scroll he had obtained, and ought to aid them in their escape.

"Murdering wizards works best quickly, doesn't it," Skie chattered.

"Indeed." Shar-Teel watched her.

"I could be invisible enough; I might even be fast enough. Varscona isn't even the only weapon I can use on him," she said; and yet again Eldoth doubted her mental stability. Then again, her foolishness was precisely what he had counted on within his now-ruined schemes.

"Quiet; fast; and you've seen magical traps," Shar-Teel said. "Then why not send you first?" Eldoth had heard her whining about Daddy's leaving of magical traps around her bedroom: to be more specific, non-lethal magical traps around her bedroom. She'll probably die, Eldoth thought, and believed the same idea rested in Shar-Teel's eye; but a distraction for the wizard was worth a trifle of sacrifice.

"I'll enchant you if I must, Skie dear. And cast a spell of hasting at that," he said aloud.

"A scroll? That's mine by rights. Hand it to those of arcane superiority!" Edwin said; Eldoth was gratified that the fool would perform the labour for him. The blindly egotistical were so easy to manipulate.

"I wish you wouldn't, Skie," Garrick said. "But—if you are—the boots of speed, they'll fit anyone..."

"Cast without meaningless chatter, rothen." Viconia moved more closely, for the spell of haste to spread properly across the group.

"Kill the chief of this unnature." The druid girl smiled with slightly crooked teeth. "Power remains to
me to fight his bodyguards whilst his door is opened, for the woods themselves cry for the destruction of the mine. A blade of flame to slay them." Blazing fire appeared between her hands, and Eldoth leaned away from it. "The strength of the bear." Her chant wrapped a pale light about her short frame, and her stance shifted into one implying greater mastery of a sword. "The agility of...the squirrel, perhaps, good lady." She took the paladin's animal to her shoulders. "It will last long e—"

The spell of hastening ran through him; Eldoth took in his grasp a poisoned arrow and held it ready.

—

8. Shar-Teel

If you could have asked of Shar-Teel her exact feelings at that time, she would have said that she could scarcely remember being happier.

Certainly there had been other battles that had equally excited and challenged her; but this was the most recent in time. And it had been too long, a part of her exulted.

A pair of unnatural warriors wielding swords glowing the colour of blood, in addition to all others she had fought. The world was filled with males to slay. She almost appreciated that incompetent boy's heavy footfall which had set this merry couple upon her path, nearly tearing him to pieces. She could hear noises of the battle with the wizard ahead. Any half-decent woman or man with a sword could slay a mage if they were close enough to them; grant her these undead horrors.

Davaeorn's human bodyguards, behind the door, had proven to have another cleric amongst their number. The numbers were not ill, but given weak casters against strong metal— The girl Faldom's blade from its sounds set them afire.

To think that two nondescript girls and a couple of scrawny males wandering near basilisk country had brought her to this point. The lair of the mad ettercaps; that snaga of a half-ogre she'd yet to kill and his camp; the spiders and various repellent creatures; a few mages, a large number of pathetic hobgoblins; and this.

Behind their helmets was the same red light that shone from their blades. Their black armour fit man-sized about what a rational guess would have placed as empty space, or cracked old bones; bulky, it gave no impression of mere nothingness beneath, and she would rather fight than idly calculate. Shar-Teel kicked at a table, overturning it between herself and them. Delicately filigreed crockery smashed to pieces on the stones. Her sword first blocked the attack of the one nearest to her, and then slid to score a hit across its metalled chest. The deep scratch she left was bright silver, briefly; and then it reddened and turned to black as if it had never been made.

She looked again at what they were: the armour that appeared to move on its own; the swords; a blood-coloured substance that was not fire, greatly different to the druid girl's efforts. As if from something in those other planes—well, male wizards had the worthless ego to try to play with things that would happily destroy them.

Her sword met the red blades again; for a moment she saw her own face reflected in the light gathered about them. Tazok—forcing her to kneel to a male—

She yelled a battlecry. These probably-male things would—

Ten years ago. The damned Red Falcon lot—led by a woman, avatar's light shining from her eyes, routing the mercenary forces arrayed against—

The time when gods set foot on mortal planes and made work for the likes of her. The reflection
filled her vision; as if time had ceased to run. Tethyr, that invasion. She’d hired with a band mostly of useless males, half-orcs and half-ogres besides the humans. Tear up the country, seize the loot, set a few villages on fire. The promises of pay and carnage had been good enough for her.

They were destroyed by the Bloodhawk. Shar-Teel remembered the red-armoured woman upon her warhorse at some distance from her, the standard of her Knight flapping against the sky—the glow of a deity's power behind her face. Avatar of the Red Knight, goddess of strategic warfare. Her company of the bird-blazoned, red cloth with bloodstained beaks and claws, not faltering regardless of what was done to them. The Order of the Red Falcon. There were times Shar-Teel would have enjoyed such odds, and at that time at the least she had been older than the girls with her now, but on that battlefield she had known discretion was the better part. She'd tripped over a corpse opened from head to groin whilst running for cover, stumbling over wastes of males lying dead on the ground. That long-distance sight of a part-god had been enough for her. Now she was a greater warrior than she had been, but yet these extraplanar scum brought back to her such failures and fears—

The ground shook below her. She moved again; the air was cold, and that long moment was the work of sorcery—

Her weakness was allowing them too close to her. A blow touched her armour, and searingly melted it to her skin. She continued to watch those swords. There were other fears waiting there, she knew of herself, and her strike to get the horrors away from her was not as powerful as it ought to have been.

Perhaps she could call for a spellcaster's dispelling of their powers, as if she needed any kind of help. No. She was a stronger warrior than that, she would swear, lacking in male weakness; she would defeat these—

"If it bleeds, I—" Her sword sunk into a joint in the shoulders of the left-hand horror; the unnatural red light trickled from it, and again the armour merged whole across the wound. These did not bleed. And there was fear within them.

She did not fear males. She had never feared males. She would not see within the substance of those swords.

No time to yell a grim battlecry. She felt herself backed against a shelf, stocked with strange components in jars; her elbow sent eyeballs marinated in liquid scattering across the flagstones. The swords swept close to her and she blocked with her enchanted steel.

Fear gripped her. If this pathetic witchcraft spared her those memories, that would be enough.

She stepped forward. The attack of one seared her armour again; her sleeve below it was caught on fire. Her arm burned. They were close to her. She raised her sword, and aimed for a clean slice across the neck.

Cut off the head, store under running water, light a holy candle in the mouth? Almost anything dies that way.

A helmet clattered to the floor. She kicked it far from the body; red gathered at the neckjoint, over empty space. That one's headless frame flailed at her still, but the fear in its blade was dead. It fell slowly, the armour unravelling into dust.

"Feeling—lucky, are you, scum?" She faced only one now. It gave no sign of hearing her. In its sword remained—nothing worth the noticing. It tried a sudden attack, its strength weaker than hers. She forced it back, step by step. It fought in ways that nothing in the mortal planes would, the
armourjoints contorting into shapes none could imitate, its battle carried with no concern for its wounds. A dark shape; she gave her mind to the movement of its gauntlets more than the blade.

She had it into its corner, triumphant. Cut off the head— The second black helmet fell to her. Whilst it crumbled into dirt, she beat out the fires upon her arm. She had paid no attention to the battles extending beyond these horrors; now it had ended, and she heard.

Somewhere behind her, Ajantis' voice was loud.

"He is evil. Kill him," the paladin said.

—

9. Skie

We had passed by the torture chambers. There were parts of men fixed to the walls; various devices hung upon a mounted display; two braziers filled with burning coals. The owner, I supposed, had left abruptly to fight us. The metal devices in the flickering light were pincers; long claws; knives strangely shaped such that they would cut in interesting ways; spiked objects the shape of pears; iron boots with screws hanging from them; bridle-like instruments sized for humans. I didn't really know the names of many of them. Partly it smelt of roasted meat, above the taste of blood. It doesn't seem that a person smells too differently from an ordinary roast.

There were two arms mounted on the left side of the wall. They seemed to have belonged to different people, one bulkier than its neighbour. Next to them was a torso, maybe once female, but hard to tell. It was just the torso, skinned, with breasts and all else removed from it. Next there was a bent leg tied to a shield. Male genitalia. Female, splayed out and nailed to the wall; difficult to tell what that was. A hobgoblin head, spikes passed through its eyes and tongue. A left leg fastened to the right of the wall.

"Just a dungeon in here, Ajantis," I said. "Don't bother coming in." One's voice seemed to coldly echo in here. It was a relatively small room. Screams, probably, would be suppressed and confined within this place, turning back upon themselves.

A table with thick straps attached to it stood near the centre of the room. Next to it was a wooden frame, manacles bound to it. Dark fluids patterned those fastenings. There were also four stakes driven to stand tall between the stones of the floor, one shorter than its siblings.

There was faint moaning, actually, in the corner of the room, that scarcely gave an echo at all. It used to be a man. They had taken his limbs from him and left black marks upon the four stumps. Burning so as to stop the blood loss from killing him too quickly. There were branded marks on its chest across whip's wounds. Dark emptiness at its groin. A small portion of what smelled like flesh seemed to be burning in the brazier next to it. No ears. A red wound in the centre of its face that snuffled a bit. Bloodstains to the corners of its mouth; it seemed to lack a tongue to speak past its moans. And its eyes could not close any more. It would have taken a fine dagger to slice through eyelids and leave those staring eyes unable to look away from what was being done; that might have been the first step.

"There is—nobody we can aid, then?" Ajantis called, in his place outside the doorway.

I stabbed down at it. Ice gathered around its heart. The man stopped trying to move.

"No. There's nobody alive in here."

_Murdering wizards works best quickly, doesn't it?—Invisible enough; fast enough; and not only_
It was one mistake, I swear.

The others were attacking Davaeorn's guards, who separated from the secret door. I could open it, the lock not beyond me, its intricacies bending away from its secrets. Inside the master of the mines' chambers was not dark, but a gold-coloured space well-illuminated by magelight in crystal spheres and torchlights bright against the wall. Eldoth's invisibility spell held, and there was no time. I could feel the redness gathered in my hands that froze other people stiff as if they were dead.

There were traps on the ground, small tripwires, a space upon the edge of a rich red carpet that did not quite look right. I ran forward; jumped over. The boots had me flying faster than ever before in a dance, a quick twist in the air for a quieter landing. A soft and graceful landing is part of every good ballet leap. Running further, there was something in the air that smelled like death; the eyes of a floating skull seemed to follow behind me.

The heavy footfalls behind me were probably Ajantis bursting through to help as he had planned, and the mage himself walked to find us.

He did not see me; he looked about himself, his hands reaching for the components he wore attached to his belt. I was close; had only to find my way behind him. He reached out an arm whilst I passed by; I spun out of its path, and he did not touch me. Ajantis was making noise far behind.

"I can hear you. Why have you come? To steal my riches; or seek to righteously punish me for my affront to your morality? In any case; —I have little desire to become acquainted with the dead." He blinked into thin air, beginning to chant.

I reached for the back of his neck. My hands were cold. The grave's touch in my hands failed to hurt him; and then his contingency of protections came around him. Eight—or nine?—of him, moving back and forth, plucking spell ingredients from his belt; a shining cylinder of purple about him; pale blue light over his form with its sharp glowing shield. I skidded back when his protections expanded into being, the invisibility vanishing from me; he cast his spell and disappeared into a glistening silver door in the air.

A race to find him, then. Shar-Teel saying, *Bloodlust is acceptable*; a voice in the dreams. Why think at all about it when one could kill?

The boots carried me quickly, running into his tapestried rooms. He chanted beyond; suddenly a lightning bolt flowed from his hands, and I somersaulted below its luminous blue. It burned, ricocheting and sizzling at the edge of my waist. My chin hit the carpet; the glow of red in my hands was no more. Pain, but not death. Ajantis' voice cried out in greater shock.

Chanting. I flung myself to my feet; the sound was near enough. Quickness of feet could find a clear shot. An iced arrow to the bow, flying; I did not know if it could hit the real wizard, but it pierced at least one shield of purple. The second arrow, perhaps, distracted him enough to make him flee again through his magic.

Ajantis ran past the passages; as I sped to the wizard I saw three figures fighting at the back. Two of them bore blades the colour of dark blood—

Another arrow. The wizard stood in front of a shrine, before the symbol of a skull blazoned upon the wall. The images of him flickered and died simply enough, even if enough were preserved to temporarily shield him. Three arrows of magic remained; I had wanted to kill Sarevok, but now it was the mage of the mines. Killing wizards. He deserved his death. Sinking a shaft to his heart
would be fun. Piercing the tortured thing had been stronger than backstabbing hobgoblins, and this
the more so—

He chanted. The protections of his images replaced those that had fallen. The final ice arrow seemed
to meet something, for this time he squawked while disappearing. I ran searching for the mage's
door; Ajantis hit the skull suspended in the air.

An explosion shook the chambers and fragments of bone erupted about the room. I rolled out of the
way of the debris; the knight's steps shuddered back.

The wizard's voice grew in strength. I lowered the bow, took Varscona to hand; stabbed forward,
carryed by the magic in the boots. Danced forward, prepared to finish the ballet's steps.

Curse wizards' disappearances. "There!" Ajantis pointed; I overtook him in chasing Davaeorn, and
then a forest of ogrillons appeared out of thin air. Hefty fists, frames scraping the ceiling. Surrounded
—

Ajantis, caught up. His shield opened enough of a path for me to dodge away from the vast fists; he
faced the monsters efficiently enough, blocking and striking. I heard him yell about evil, that the
wizard had to die— Davaeorn was ahead of us. I ran after the wizard; Ajantis held back the
summoned creatures.

The spell he cast was complex, in a language I knew nothing of. Its flow seemed to fill the air of his
halls.

Wanting to kill—

The spell finished before I could lunge forward. We were all frozen; not simply me. The torches and
magelights did not flicker or lower in their blaze, and yet the air was cold. The images of the wizard
first appeared to still, and then faded from sight. I could hear nothing but the wizard himself.

"Are you the one the Iron Thone seeks?" he said aloud; he was the only thing I could hear or see that
still possessed power to move. The chambers had become still, no overheard battles or screams
remaining; feeling the coldness seep through my body, one could not imagine that it had no effect
upon the others—

There was a brightly polished dagger in his hands, and I saw him walk slowly closer. If it had frozen
everything, then perhaps it was no ordinary holding but a binding elsewhere, compelling over—

"I don't expect you to answer, dead one. Either way, I can find uses for you as a spell component,"
he said; and the dagger fell closer.

But there was a sound, behind; made by a creature large enough that his walk on the stones was easy
to hear. And a roar overheard; but its attack was not for me, the wizard—

"You mess with me, you make us cold—"

Davaeorn called the words of another spell; red light spilled from his hand that I knew had the power
to hold the ogrillon in place. Iron dust crumbled from his fingers.

"Fascinating. Summoned creatures must take offence to that," he said; and then the ground shook
again below us. The master of the mines looked almost startled, turning his head quickly from one
side to another. "You, however, have no more time—" The dagger slid forward.

The ground shaking—Things started to move again, and that was the end of it. The dagger reached
my neck, but slid shallowly to the edge of it; I slipped to the side and forward. Ajantis ran with me. Ogrillons chased him, but his sword was reaching the wizard. We beat at his protections. Davaeorn chanted; there were two blades on him, and that distracted the spells. There were images—one or two—remaining; the purple shielding fell, and to fight searching to hurt the real wizard was not impossible. It might have been Ajantis' anger to bloody and destroy him at the last, or it might have been Varscona and my hand—some lines of red iced over, some marks of Ajantis' fury. When the last image faded, Davaeorn fell to the ground; cuts at his thigh, his arm, his face, a deep wound on his side that finished him. His eyes were open, and frozen. The ogrillons disappeared at the moment he must have died.

There was a broad stain of blood on my left hand, and both of our blades showed what we had done.

"He is dead," Ajantis said; and the pale light behind his eyes was uncompromising. "But—that, over —"

I'd heard the movement. The boots carried me easily to the evil henchman trying to run—a boy. Several years younger than Faldorn or me. He tried to gasp out a spell while I caught up to him; but it failed when I found him, had him pinned to the wall. I held Varscona to his neck.

He pleaded, and cried. "I'm just Davaeorn's apprentice! Stephan Capetri. Please—"

"Tell us more about the plan," I said. A slim line of blood already ran down the boy's neck, since I had pressed a little too hard to simply threaten him. I passed a hand over my own; the cut the wizard had left slowed in its bleeding, so that I could concentrate upon this.

"I'm just the apprentice! I don't know anything—I—I know just a little! Please!" Snot and tears ran down his face.

"Who are the leaders?" Ajantis said.

"—I don't know! I swear it! The Iron Throne—there are three I think, three leaders but I don't know their names—one's a wizard and I don't know the others—"

"Sarevok. What does he have to do with this?" I said.

"I tell you true, I've never heard the name but there was someone besides the three giving Davaeorn orders—south west of the city's the Iron Throne building! I've never been there but you can—"

"We know where it is."

"What was your evil purpose?" Ajantis demanded. He faced the boy, standing over him far taller and broader; even without the sword pinning him back, Stephan could not have run past him—

"Please—um—in war! If there was war—they could ride in and pretend—raise iron prices and get rid of the competition—but that's all I know—"

"War with Amn?" I said.

"Yes, with Amn—if an Amnish attack, all those rumours—raise the prices to sell the weapons—"

"And the bandits?" Ajantis pushed.

"Bandit raids—" Stephan gasped, crying still. "Raiding the iron for the shortage—Nashkel too—he was called Mulahey and a half-ogre I don't know—if you killed him—I never met—all I know—"
"All you know?" The cold sword had turned the line of blood to red ice. It must have given him pain.

"Only Davaeorn's apprentice—only that—" he begged.

"Then you have told us all?" Ajantis said. "I do not sense a falsehood—"

Stephan Capetri knew what we knew; he had not been lying.

"All true! Please don't kill me! You said—please let me go!"

"Should I kill you?" Fear of death reigned over the boy's wide eyes; and I held it there, on purpose. I spun it as a piece of ribbon, unravelled it for amusement's sake. "Ajantis, do you think I should kill him?" The sword remained at his throat; beads of thick sweat ran down the boy's face. I could feel his desperation, and at that time it was sweet to me. "What do you see when you look at him, paladin?" I said, and Ajantis turned those pale eyes at the boy Stephan. Probably not on me, at that time.

"He is evil. Kill him."

I did—

It was Ajantis who screamed. Not the apprentice, who had died quickly. I looked back; I saw Ajantis upon his knees, staring with blue eyes at us, at the body and its slit throat falling to the floor.

One mistake. That's all it was, for Ajantis. It wasn't even him to do the killing. And yet he was on the ground crying to a god that didn't seem to hear him at all.

"I can't see." He could see me well enough; it wasn't that form of vision he had been talking about. "Helm—Skie! I can feel him no longer—I know it has happened—separated—"

He raised his right hand; no twists of bright blue came around it, as it did when he healed us.

"I—asked you to kill an evildoer; I told you that boy was evil and he was; but what have I done that I should lose—"

"Ajantis, it was me—"

I murdered a boy. I sat beside Ajantis. The crime shared between us, both of us doing the act— But if he had said nothing, it could have been done nonetheless; or if I had only ignored him—

"Get some sleep," was all I could say. "Maybe once you've had some rest—Viconia needs to rest and pray about her spells, I don't know anything about it really but maybe if you calm down like her and wait—"

"You dare to say—I am no evil Sharran! Or—but I know this; Helm does not heed me—I am F—"

"Don't say it!" As if saying it or not saying it would make any difference as to the cold reality of it.

"Fallen; I still hardly understand—but a child is dead—but he was evil—I beg forgiveness—I ought to be dead myself rather than this—"

Shar-Teel came; the dwarf and Garrick weren't far behind.

"Get up—" I heard her say; Ajantis appeared not to hear her. "Find that key; take what you can—That includes you, bard—"
"Fallen—I am Fallen—" Ajantis muttered, still staring at his hands, as if some vanished power still remained with him. I remained next to him.

"There's some jellies—help!" Garrick said; Shar-Teel and the dwarf, it seemed, quickly fought them with him. The others had started to find their way.

"Then I'll smash it open if you can't pry it—"

"Protection spells; and scrolls, here—"

"The key. Find the key."

"A glorious robe—a spell in here, perhaps, that halts time— (Spells! Even if I must wade through—)"

"I'm keepin' an eye on you—that spell, I felt it, very bad—"

"Well, I am studying this book myself; so kindly go finger a lock or whatever it is you—"

"I don't care about you being a jerk, I care about gettin' out alive—"

Ajantis and I waited. I think he wept; there was something in his eye. I looked at the boy, made myself do it; brown hair, a mostly-smooth face, very young. I can remember Eddard being that age. Stephan Capetri. A child with a slit throat.

"I believe I do sense it." Viconia came to stand above Ajantis; and she placed a hand upon his chin without much resistance from him, looking scarlet-eyed into his face. "You no longer belong to your god, nau? I feel your despair, your loss; remember that I—"

"Stay away from him!" The commanding tone was the squirrel. The druid had come to us; she stood straight as an oak despite the absence of her flame blade and the bruises and cuts she bore. Aquerna rested at the back of her neck.

"Ajantis," Faldorn called his name; the squirrel left her neck, proving that she was no illusion. She rushed to Ajantis, scuttling across the floor; and seemed to leap into his arms.

"As if I did not feel what has happened—I know what you helped her do!" Aquerna stayed with him nonetheless.

He stammered. "You—then if I am truly fallen, then you must—"

"No. Don't you dare banish me to the planes—" she told him. "You wouldn't get on without me—if you do that, I shan't be able to fight my way back through Helm and the other troglodytes who'd take a companion away from a boy when he's in trouble—as if you don't need me more than ever! That was wrong—you know you made my boy do it—" she snapped in my direction.

"And what do I do? What can I do against it?" he pleaded; Viconia made as if to speak.

"You can get out of the mine," Aquerna instructed; that seemed enough to make Viconia reconsider.

"Someone speaking sense at last. Rothen, I command you to get up," she ordered.

There was Imoen, I remember. Skie? What have you done—

I'm sorry—
Stumbling into a rough lift; Edwin firing a cantrip to make it go. Eldoth was alive; he'd found Garrick, they were here again—all of us. If only we had not—

Ghouls wrapped in rags lurched toward us, crudely, while we searched for the gate of the flood. Dressed like the slaves—

"That one used to be Joryval," Yeslick said, grey-faced, "and the other has Karan's eyes—" People. But we still had to kill them.

Imoen's voice sounded bright and clear, and an arrow of fire materialised in her hand; she flung it, and the first ghoul burned and collapsed. Shar-Teel finished them.

"I told you my fire spell was better," Imoen said in Edwin's direction, "and can we get out of here now already?"

"Turn the key to loose the flood," Yeslick said. "For Clan Orothiar. Best start running, friends."

"So you need magic to pull the plug and speed to run away?" Imoen said. "Skie, I don't want to know what you've been stepping in, but hand the boots over. I bet I can fix this and escape fast—"

"'Tis my clan—"

"I might be lacking a bit on spells right now, but sure as the Nine Hells I'm a lot lacking in patience here, Mr. Dwarf." There was little more resolute one could see than Imoen's scratched, dirt-stained face at that moment; she stared at the lock as if another flame arrow were about to burst from her eyes. "So that's how this key fits. I got it. Get to the surface!"

The dwarf looked at her, then slowly nodded. The mines were dark; we left them behind, and at the surface the time was at a dawn.

There were people waiting for us; for Yeslick. Former slaves, ragged, hungry. Imoen was last, running quickly from a tide of rushing waters; I waited near the ladder and gave her a hand to help her up, and the waters came crashing behind and over us as we fell to the clean grass. That marked some sort of boundary. It was cold; below us, the dark waters rose high. Darker shapes whirled within them.

"We've been waiting for you," a bearded man said to Yeslick; the group of people milled around him, above the flood.

"Ye fool. Then we'll travel together," Yeslick returned gruffly. "There's much to be done—we'll all march, ye hear? To that rat bastard Rieltar; tell the Grand Dukes what he's done—"

They were free. I saw that something like a bridge had been restrung between the isles, that the burned buildings had stores piled in front of them, brown sacks and boxes. That there were armou-clad bodies on the ground.

"It was time itself that Davaeorn stopped," Edwin pronounced gravely, "(and curse him for illegible spellbooks—) and for us down there it won't have been alike to here—"

"'Twas nothing my clan's knack couldn't end; for these folks, it's not been so long as all that, and for you adventurers, a little younger than ye ought to be makes no difference—"

I had seen the mage-lights freezing against the walls; Davaorn moving within his suspension to speak. It was a dawn here; and which dawn I didn't know.
Garrick came with spare cloaks from the packs we'd left stored behind; Imoen and I were shivering and wet, soaked by the flood. I did not feel cleansed by it.

"Skie, I wanted to talk to you—I don't know what happened down there and—" We hugged; he was warm. "Do you need me? I mean, here with you?"

"No," Garrick's innocence—from the view of cold kill things cold, it was useless runs away not very strong however much that was false because his songs were beautiful and his spells helped us and his crossbow was quite good; and from the view of friend, it's best they all leave. "What do you want to do?"

"I'll go with Yeslick. Help him make sure these men are safe," Garrick said. "This I can take care of; I've thought that I might be better at writing songs than living them, but Yeslick helped me—and I want to do this, because I think I can."

"That's good, Garrick. Take care of them." He could save people; Garrick always was a kind and gentle person.

"If Eldoth tells you that you're worthless, he's wrong," Garrick said, strangely enough, "and you're braver than I am, I think—you're a good friend, and no matter what, I think you're a beautiful person—"

I murdered a child. In other times, I might have also said that Garrick was only being kind, especially with Imoen and Viconia in the party. "Good luck. You should go."

A final hug. Garrick—everyone—we could hardly think clearly, exhausted. Dirty. Finding places to rest, taking the slavers' buildings that were not flooded. I had Eldoth there with me.

"I ought to congratulate you, dear," he said; we were alone, in a small room of the guards' lodgings, near to a fire made with stray pieces of wood. "Success in battle."

"It wasn't anything like success. I don't want to tell you."

"You don't need to, my angel. I know such things must upset your feminine temperament. But don't you feel just the least little excitement at a victorious conquest?" He crossed the floor in a smooth movement, and took me in his arms; I clung to him, closing my eyes. It was Eldoth, and in him was the comforting familiarity of the days before everything happened.

"It must have been interesting for you, watching the knight kill the master of the mines," he continued. "The inevitable physical excitement. One feels at first, that the scheme is highly impractical; but after exerting oneself, and seizing the day..."

He kissed me; somewhere near my ear, working down slowly to my mouth. As intensely as if each one left a bleeding wound, a burning brand rising between us. It was true that I had felt something when I had killed—guards of the mine. Killed guards and bandits.

"Keep doing that—" I asked of him. Eldoth was right; there was an—exhilaration about it.

Not the comforting familiarity of the old days at all, really. It was Eldoth carrying the spear, Eldoth fighting the guards, that was behind this. My wet clothes slipped from me. There was the smell of smoke in the air, the thick taste of drying blood; and through it all I wanted Eldoth as much as I had wanted to kill. Fighting stains your body, and that too was the choices rooted in flesh—

He pulled me down; we were on top of his cloak, near to the flames. Naked. I felt his teeth on me, his forceful movement; tasted his skin in return. Called his name.
We were together; there was pain like the pain of a fight at first, but it faded. Sweat and fluid between us, blood warm in our veins, his strength holding me under him. Using our bodies almost to the extent we fought in the mines. At some point, entangled with him, I fell exhausted into darkness...

It was cold when I woke.

—

_A/N_: Garrick quotes from Shelley’s poem _Hellas_, slightly baldurised. The time-stopping spell mentioned is not standard.
83. Cythandria

*Excerpts from the Journal of Cythandria, Wizard of Baldur's Gate*

5 Mirtul

Darling Sarevok; darling, debacle-rising, disaster-mongering Sarevok is returned. Sans two of my dear pets. One ought to be upset at these matters, but it simply wouldn't do. He's so unpredictable in a rage. I take for granted tactless Tamoko has delivered nagging reprimand already: his mission failed. Gorion's young whelp, so lately brought to Candlekeep, adrift upon the unprepared world. A shame her arrival did not coincide with Koveras' own term at Candlekeep investigating the prophecies. It must be said, at least the mage himself is dead. I shall order our spies whipped once they return.

Today's casting: Wall of Stone.

Cntrl: cube of granite 2/2/2 w. 9.2 mat., std. verb., std. som.: result 1/2 in. thick 110 sq. ft. spn. 20 ft durn. indefinite (good I cast nr. rock garden, Ughh & Arghh can repurpose).

Exp. #1: As above + 0.25 pnd. gold dust (insp. by Wall of Iron scroll) mat., std. verb., std. som.: result 1/4 in. thick 82 sq. ft. spn. 15 ft. V. irreg. shape + gld. dust sprinkles through it, unsuccessful. Poss. vary verb. & use stabilizing agent, water?. Gld. dust appears multiplied, expect dur. of that limited, 1st law Alc.

Conc.: Exp. #1 unsuccessful but shall cont. tomorrow. Overall has v. narrow practical app. but new spell is new spell.

6 Mirtul

Sarevok's doppelgangers mill around Iron Throne secret basements like so many lost and bored puppies. Two are within the Seven Suns, but 'tis only a start; Rieltar found more uses for them when Sarevok first achieved them, need to find *something*. Perhaps I could cut up one or two for spell components. I should like to find more about the shapeshifting trick, some innate Transm. obv., but details could be interesting. Do the creatures feel pain as ordinary humans? I could vivisect a small one. Is not like I'm necromancer but I could even publish if I felt like it, little research done on them. Is the ability closer to polymorph or potential for Tenser's, and what's the reason for the ones with mirror-imaging and evoc. abilities? Maybe pursue interview-based research, would hate to have throat slit by objecting minion. One of the things professed admiration of my profession when we inspected them; they're creepy enough beings, one can't even tell if they're male or female.

Winski proposes sending three to infiltrate the Undercellar. Such a perfect application for their skills from what I hear about that den; plausible denial if they get caught, for who will believe the respectable Iron Throne involved in criminal doppelgangers in such a place; teachings given to them about Baldurian customs. Need to clear with Sarevok and Rieltar. Other plans for the doppelgangers ought to be soon, provided that our iron supplies continue as anticipated: as it wanes in Nashkel, it waxes for us. Already our stockpiles are nigh to bursting upon their metallic fruit.

Must prepare for late-night conference-via-Sending between Winski, Rieltar, Sarevok, and myself, a few head officers of the Throne. How one loathes missing out on beauty sleep for Sembian time. But with Sarevok, should expect little beauty sleep anyway... A few little wards ought to keep Tamoko
from interference.

Today's casting: Wall of Stone, Exp #2.

Cntrl: cube of granite 2/2/2 w. 9.0 mat., std. verb., std. som.: result 1/2 in. thick 105 sq. ft. spn. 20 ft
durn. indefinite

Exp. #2: As above, granite w. 9.1 mat. + 0.25 pnd. gold dust + 4cc water, pur. mat., mod. verb. w/
3rd cond. re: changed mat., std. som.: result 1/3 in. thick 60 sq. ft. spn. 15 ft. Shape more reg. but
height diminished rel. to cntrl.

Re: Exp #1: Gld. dust faded; had Ughh & Arghh knock it + prev. cntrl down, 15 secs #1 (purchase
of that Gond device v. useful), 25 secs cntrl. Also had current cntrl down, 26 secs (poss. due to
improvement in self, v. good).

Conc.: Pure water decent stabilizer, area too low, must be gld. dust secondary effect. Know virg.
blood nt. good stabilizer no matter what Winski says, is old fl. Cld. use Semaj though, dead shouldn't
count. Rookery much improved.

7 Mirtul

Arrival of the pair called Slythe and Krystin to our most humble domain: namely, the highest tower
of the Iron Throne's marble glory. A man with a face like an orc following some collision with an
adamantine anvil; Krystin seems presentably attired and clever enough, though, and they seem
tsickeningly affectionate to each other. Quite nice to talk shop to a female mage rather than That
Clerical Whore Tamoko. Slythe could hardly object to I conversing with her; I should try to make
dear Sarevok as jealous as him, but one can imagine that plan turning horrifyingly successful...
Certain of her spells seem most fascinating. A self-taught hedgewitch, not that I would say so to her
face; I should run afoul of a Cloudkill spoiling my complexion in a rather permanent manner, I am
sure of it. She and her orc-faced appendage are ordered to arrange a creative accident to one Fyodor
of the Counting House, a noble making unfortunate inquiries into our business. Should they prove
themselves and cause temporary upset in the Counting House, we may increase our share in their
ships whilst we are ungenerous with our iron. It is sadly impossible to upset the Silvershield market
power, but we will see what we are capable of...

Today's casting: Wall of Stone, Exp #3.

Cntrl: cube of granite 2/2/2 w. 9.3 mat., std. verb., std. som., summoned kobold inst. to run toward
me: result 1/2 in. thick approx. 105 sq. ft. spn. 17 ft at widest, durn. indefinite merged to rookery,
kobold escaped.

Exp. #3: As above, granite w. 9.2. + 3cc water, stabilizing agent + summoned kobold inst. to run
toward me, goal was if stabilizing helps manip. Result: 1/2 in. thick approx. 100 sq. ft. spn. 18 ft at
widest. durn. indefinite merged to rookery, kobold trapped.

After summon. durn. ended, Ughh & Arghh disposal, 27 secs cntrl, 20 secs Exp #3.

Conc.: Stabilizing agent seems higher cntrl, lower stability. Rookery getting rather large, may
experiment otherwise.

8 Mirtul

Transmutation castings within the ancient temple in the Undercity, continuing to clear away the
rubble. Before Sarevok made these discoveries, I had not expected such a place existed below the
modern city. This temple to a dead god came into its potency long before the Time of Troubles (for
me, it was direst fear that my cantrips no longer worked; I ripped out my own hair in frustration and believed at first it was my own fault magic no longer lived in me—); when this city was yet young.

"None of his children were sacrificed here," Sarevok said; knowledge he must possess through his divine parentage, for he did not make this city his home until later in life, when he found that there were those like him here, and that he would be able to launch his conquest for godhood from it. "My father left it for my ascension. A dead temple for a living god—"

He reclined upon the throne he uncovered at the high place of the temple; it is shaped almost as if made for him. A god...and his favoured consort.

He battled eight skeleton warriors for amusement. I'd spells prepared to halt undead—I have knowledge of what to expect in this setting—but upon his orders used none of them. I use my researches and my pretty pets to gain power, but in Sarevok it is in his very form, glorious when unleashed in battles when I prefer to be far away—sometimes I fear him, and yet desire him—

Today's casting: Monster Summoning III, var.

Cntrl: see prev. results

Exp #164: hessian bag internal area 10 sq. in., wax candle unlit 5 in., 1 cc. clay mud mat., verb. sub. w/runes as below, length + specificity aimed for, usu. pers. som., result: 3 ogres, Ughh & Arghh take 8 mins to dispose of.

Conc: 8 mins an improvement over #163, #162, #160. Ughh & Arghh the best pets—Exp #42 still best by long chalk, my large babies know they're my favourite. Pair of them still busy devouring experimental remnants in the garden...

9 Mirtul

News of the Counting House returned that cannot be traced to the Iron Throne's doors; and a quite delightful outing to the markets with Krystin. It is lovely to have female not That Whore Tamoko to associate with, despite the lady's lower antecedents... There are prices to be paid in one's society, and yet she is welcome company. The alteration spell she cast over her face turned her nigh as horrible in visage as her husband, protecting herself from male gaze and rendering me still better by comparison. The virtues of a plainer companion cannot be underrated. There was a certain disputation over giant squid spell component tentacle pieces, resolved by amiable agreement to share and swap my custom Wind Wall for her own spell. (It was an academy project; water and steel extra components and various alterations to verbal and somatic aspects, creating beautiful and sharp fragments of ice within the wall; I recall winning a commendation for it from the masters. I must revise it myself one of these days.) Krystin's new spell shall be a new experimental subject... I don't know if Sarevok is fond of tentacles, but there are other practical uses.

Today's casting: Black Tentacles, cred. to Krystin

Cntrl: tentacle piece w. 0.5 mat., Krystin verb., Krystin som.: result 4 tentacles avg. len. 9.8 ft., std. dev. 0.2 durn. 62 secs.

Exp #1: summoned 4 kobolds & cast cntrl. as above, kobolds grappled without input from self., 3 kobolds dec. at exp. of tentacle durn. 5 tentacles avg. len. similar to cntrl, durn. 60 secs.

Exp #2: summoned 4 kobolds & cast cntrl. as above, result 5 tentacles avg. len. similar to cntrl, approx. durn. 60 secs, followed quick Charm Monster directed at tentacles, tried pantomime, tentacles broke free & caused dec. of 4 kobolds in 12 secs, ran inside & locked door until durn.
I dreamed last night of meeting Sarevok for the first time, long before he knew of his divine destiny. My dreams mean nothing; I forswore divination for infinitely more useful arts; but a charming memory nonetheless.

I was a near-graduated mage, back in Silverymoon; all that beautiful city, laid out for me like so many splendid delights. Amusing, we senior students found it, to befuddle the wards with transmutation and enchantment and slip out into the city of nights. Men had only begun to find me beautiful, as well, for a year or so—and still I am far from an old crone; it is Tamoko who has begun to appear more and more crone-like—and these light excursions were typically Illisia and I amidst a coterie of male admirers, young and willing to rejoice in our bright futures.

It was a summer's night; we were near a fountain, of silver magelight as well as of water, and there was already dancing there—a bard singing a song upon the pavers, the nearby tavern opening its doors, flowing wine and conversation. And he was brooding upon the fountain's marble seat. We saw each other; conversed—like me he was present in the city to learn, though for him it was fighting techniques and research he only hinted of to me at that time. Muscular and far more handsome than any of the scrawny boys passing for my mage classmates. I remember that we talked of our studies, exchanging our frustrations with incapable and low-minded teachers, the knowledge that we both shared more ambition than other fools. Sitting together on the marble ledge below the shining waters.

(I'd no knowledge of Tamoko at that time. If I had, I would have challenged her the same.)

Neither of us yet knew of his great destiny; it was later that he would discover it. He spoke of an interest in libraries, and we agreed to get him into the academy's—I wanted to see him again, and he would do no real harm. (He did no real harm, simply reading; I would not share my personal library with the general public, but the school's was fair enough game.) He researched his prophecies, I hid him with illusion spells and took him to my dormitory. We spent much time together, in that month we had before his stepfather called him to return to Sembia; and when I achieved the highest honours amidst that band of mentally shackled fools, as a graduated mage I became loyal to the Iron Throne—

And Sarevok the Lord of Murder discovered his true parentage, and will be a god...

He spent last night with Tamoko, this I know.

Today's casting: Fireball. On immature Wall of Stone sculpted to resemble Tamoko's head.

Exp.: 0.1 cc bat guano, 3.9 cc sulfur mat., ratio 2.5% v. dang., ext. verb. for cntnr. purposes. Devast. w/ 5 casts, stone charred by 3rd, exploded 4th, unrecog. black fragments dust at 5th. Rookery also dam. Fashion statement.

Conc.: Explosive cmpnt. v. useful in big explosions, control difficult w/ high sulfur ratio, obv. reasons. Satisfying!

11 Mirtul

The bounty hunter quartet have returned to us—a Waterdhavian mission, a very much former business associate of Rieltar's, revenge upon a slight dating some years ago. (The son has learned
ruthlessness from the obvious teacher; and there will come a time when a mortal father will be worthless to him... Escaping the notice of the Blackstaff and his ilk, I imagine, shows some degree of skill. I have seen him once at secure distance, when he came to confer with the archmages of Silverymoon, and have not forgotten it; they say that Mystra herself gave him his gifts of silver fire and the ability to create his famed staff. To be the chosen of a god; that is worth working toward—!

The Underdark doppelgangers report acquaintances with courtesans, owners and blackmail victims; I'd no idea Aldeth Sashenstar took an interest in things of such lurid description. I've gained one from the labour pool of temporarily underemployed assassins, allowing it into my study; it is uncanny to look at their pale eyes, to wonder precisely what they can impersonate. I dare not take my eyes from it. There are stories that the creatures even mate with humans, if one can believe it from their gangly and strange unclad forms. It told me that its ability to detect surface thoughts was limited—I had cast a mind shield in advance; of course I knew that, and recast a stronger version during the experiments —and stated that it could turn into either a form it imagined or a form whose appearance it knew.

Imagine the changing of identity in a thought. I never have forgiven uncle Havordon for telling me once I was the scrawny duck transforming to the swan; I'd prefer not to remember such childhood days. A doppelganger daring to steal my form would count itself well-fortuned in beauty before I ordered it executed. My mind also proved much sharper than yours, didn't it, my dear family?

Today's casting: doppelganger investigation

Cntrl: N/A, see meas. below

Exp #1: Instructed it to turn to Tamoko 7 times from base form, timed ea., result: avg. 4 secs, std. dev. 0.5 secs. Stated it had seen Tamoko at Iron Throne, w/ Sarevok, etc., & knew some of her thoughts, surface ones mostly in the way of honour, concern re: Sarevok, prayers—appears Tamoko's surface thoughts expectedly tedious & depressingly little help against her.

Exp #2: Instructed it to turn to Illisia based on full length illusion I conjured (fuzzy in some places, has been while since I saw her), performed feat in 29 secs from first appearance of image. Stated had never seen Illisia; this seems likely since she married after graduation & settled in the barbaric Jalanthar, no ambition. Stated also having to study the illusion was reason for extra time. Result: Shape produced good approx. to real person as she was when I knew her, clearly based on illusion. Voice not like, thoughts def. not.

Exp #3: Summoned picture; spell fetched one of Winski's. Picture entitled Portrait of the Murannian Ogre-Mage by Harmenszoon, see appendix. Instructed doppelganger to turn to central subject based on it, performed feat in 49 secs from first appearance of portrait. Stated had never seen the Murrianian Ogre-Mage (creature is supposed dead). Stated also imagining unseen parts of picture was difficult, that it supposed it varied between doppelgangers and it was particularly good at it—that hypothesis needs verification. Result: shape realistic approx. of portrait, I would have assumed was real ogre-mage if saw it in streets. Voice low like genuine ogre-mages Sarevok has on occasion dragged to meet w/ Iron Throne, doppelganger confessed it imitated one of those. Asked it for higher voice & it complied, then for countrified accent like Zhalimar's; complied. Asked it to change head only, eyes further apart, tusks thicker, ears smaller; complied, shape still convincingly ogre mage. Asked it to attempt imitation of ogre-mage's spellcasting, failed, asked me for tutorial. Refused. Apparently is difficult for even the doppelganger spellcasters to cast in shifted form, another hypothesis to test.

Then told me it preferred not too many shapes per day, tired, obv. no stamina. May re-experiment later. Still think creepy.

12 Mirtul
A cache of scrolls found in the Undercity. Winski, Semaj, and I have worked to decipher them—information about Sarevok's history, and that alongside glorious spells—both which are to be concealed from Rieltar.

I shall be in my study for the next few days—

16 Mirtul

Sarevok does not distract me from my reading by the means I would prefer. Latest sibling still uncertainly alive; slippery girl, apparently. How many bounty notices was I called upon to magically duplicate, altered accordingly for the personal compensatory milieus based upon assassins' repute? Zeela and the remainder of her uncouth group (Cyricists, I ask you; insanity is not among my lists of praiseworthy traits, Tamoko is the only of them I know to be remotely sane and my opinion on her is obvious; the god I choose to worship is the new Lord of Murder and not the raw portfolio) are sent off to do the deed, or else.

Today's casting: A thick cloud of black poison, billowing as potent as a nightmare trapped and distilled to principal elements, cast from a copied scroll—too potent for me to yet understand fully, but I shall. Those scrolls—I truly am in amour—

Cntrl: This 1st serves as cntrl—will spend much more time upon these. 2 cc. blood (own, didn't bother sending out), 2 pinches gravedust (Sorc. Sund.), 1 cc. viper poison (Silence); verb. as written, som. as written, casting time 18 secs. Result: black cloud approx. 1000 cb. ft., 10/10/10, slightly irreg. shape, durn. 7 mins. 9 kobolds, 2 dreadwolves ordered into it, all yellowing dust in seconds of exposure—

22 Mirtul

Time has flown—most noticeable through preceding pages of copious notes upon the new spells; I have transmuted this journal to double its size. Many blank pages remain for my records of magic and power. The best went to Winski; I would curse that old fool but Sarevok will not heed such talk.

Ordinary work for the Throne beckons once again. It's a spell of Rieltar's original devising, for a change; illusion combined with conjuration, transmutation, and divination aspects. Regrettably it falls to me to drown myself in our receipts and records, reacquainting myself and preparing summaries; Alai and Naaman are of assistance, but in truth they are utterly incompetent acquaintances. Sarevok deserves better acolytes.

A foundation of conjuration to establish slightly more permanency, but a primary rune of illusion to suspend the numeric image in the air. Then transmutation to manipulate it, divination to use it—The representation of the Iron Throne accounts in simple charts, examining our gold and our proportions in bright shapes of metaphor. Rieltar does little of the labour for it, and perhaps is having us work on something of comparative uselessness. A certain network at some point shall object to our—blackening—of their name; some do-gooder or sibling may rise against us—and Semaj and I (not quite in his general interests) solve the intellectual problem of predicting the next sum of financial gain in a semi-random series? Combined spellcasting is...yet of certain complexity.

Sarevok teleports to Tazok's base tomorrow. I have every intent of farewelling him thoroughly.

Today's casting: Black Tentacles, cred. to Krystin

Cntrl: summoned 3 goblins, tentacle piece w. 0.4 mat., Krystin verb., Krystin som.: result 3 goblins dec. at 32 secs, 5 tentacles avg. len. 9.9 ft., std. dev. 0.1 durn. 59 secs.
Exp #1: as above, revised verb. summoned 4 goblins & cast as above, followed by Lesser Geas, som. gestures used to control. Result: goblins grappled acc. to som. dirs., 3 dec. at exp. of tentacle durn. 4 tentacles avg. len. similar to cntrl, durn. 64 secs.

Exp #2: as Exp #1 + revised mat. w/ 1 cb. sugar, followed by Lesser Geas. Result: 4 tentacles dripping w/ moist syrup, avg. len. 10.1 ft., std. dev. 0.3, approx. durn. 60 secs. Som. gestures used to control, texture v. sticky, syrup subst. poisoned remaining goblin from #2, discontinued pers. hands-on study of exp.

Conc.: Lesser Geas commands subj, w/ success; sugar tentacles syrupy & gen. more disgusting than assumed, spell obv. for enemies.

23 Mirtul

Entrusted with the diary of Sarevok whilst he is in transit. I swore that I should keep it upon my person until his return; it is a great victory above the likes of Tamoko. I shall miss him so...but we do not always need the men in our lives to be about, no?

Speaking of which; I have viewed some of Krystin’s work. Hedgewitch practices, sliced-up domestic animals for necromantic components and out of the husband’s need for amusements. There are rooms deep within the Undercellar, barely out of the dripping sewers and with the scent of such—a temporary home for our happy couple, and kept in such a state as to be so. I gagged, and enchanted a quiet pomander to preserve myself.

I’d quote such things as Szass Tam’s equations on the distinction between 2cc animal and 1.5cc human blood, but Krystin would neither understand nor care. That...waving field of black tentacles guarding her door, decorated with clean-picked bones of dogs; she does not know the formalism to create such a thing and endow it with permanency, and yet it functions for her. The subtlest of factors balance the ideal mix of components and method for each caster, I have been taught. Krystin’s love is the fieldwork; artistry in the most exquisite ways to exsanguinate a corpse by her lights, amusement in casting her Cloudkill on goblins summoned by myself.

_Killing four Grand Dukes?—Why, such an exciting challenge, dear; and I do so enjoy these technical discussions—_

Today’s casting: Flesh to Stone.

Cntlr: 1 oz. quicklime 1 oz. water 1 oz. fuller’s earth as in orig. mat., std. verb., std. som., cast. time 6 secs., subj. 1 summ. male kobold appar. age 15: result pale stone even constncy hrdness approx. 8.

Exp. #1: As above w/ mat. quantities double, verb. and som. to 4 secs, subj. similar ibid.: result no effect, kobold yipping v. annoying (nb. kill kobold w/ extr. pain & suffering if exp. continues unsuccessful).

Exp. #2: Retrial of Exp. #1, 4 secs time goal: result greenish stone uneven constncy hrdness approx. 5. Query if durn. still indef.

6 hrs later: Exp. #2 durn. lasting. Nb. must improve constncy & hrdness, more expns. Packed off novelty kobold art to Iron Throne warehouse & went to summons from Winski. Old fl. treats like apprent., v. annoying.

25 Mirtul

The Zhentarim have made inquiries. Ranafal of a small Sembian Iron Throne delegation, a Zhentish enchanter. _Very_ fond of wine.
The Iron Throne authorities granted this task to Rieltar. He proved his fitness of it at some cost to himself; and Ranafal was not quite so certain of that as he ought to have been. Furthermore— (did Winski divine, or deduce? 'Twas creditable I am forced to admit—) the servants gave after interrogation that Ranafal sent and received no messages to his quarters. Only the casks of wine he ordered sent to him, and that he smuggled back in emptied casks—

He saw us whilst we had it seized, and were engaged in decoding it. His contingencies burst into life as a dragonet hatching from its egg; a blinding flash of red. I was temporarily frozen; I could do nothing—

Winski's own trigger converted itself to action. A splash of green covering the enemy spy, blocking against extradimensional escape; two prismatic sprays inflicting wounds; white light of trueseeing banishing the enchanter's illusions—divination, bright and fierce. One of very few useful spells of the school! The Zhent's second casting was sleep, Winski's a dispelling; that freed me. In a few moments after regrasping my breath I gathered Ughh and Arghh to my side—I think I feel paralysis beyond spells in such situations. Winski conjured individual-targeted invocations, fire against the enchanter's weak powers, and my pets attacked with all their might. Ranafal became quite the mess upon the carpet; I leaned against the wall attempting to regain some measure of composure—I am no Sarevok to fight in personal battles—

Winski called me to aid once again in the cryptography. I flatter myself that at least I have a few spells there that are more specialised than his; we rephrased the messages to lay blame to the Shadow Thieves; had one of my creatures transport a portion of the remains near to one of their known bases. I fancy Winski will engage in some necromantic arts to attempt to divine information on the Zhent's fellow agents.

At which point there remained nought to do but summon imps to clean the floor. Winski bade me farewell; "I am not quite an old fool, my dear—" My accounts are well protected. My mind is shielded. Surely not possible...?

Today's casting: Flesh to Stone.

Ctrl: cf. 23 Mirt.

Exp #1: ibid. mat. verb. som., cast. time down to 3 secs, subj. 1 summ. male ogre appar. age 20 (not one of beloved pets), result spell failure.

Exp #2: cast. time down to 3 secs, subj. ibid., result spell failure. Nb: ogre resist. expected greater, lessr. casting time may lead to greater chance.

Exp #3: subj. ibid. w/ 2 Greater Malison, 2 Lower Resist.. Cast. time 3 secs, subj. ibid., result spell success, pale green, good constcy, hrdness approx. 8.

Conc.: Good spell, needs luck/low resist. to work if more than kobolds. Warehouse complaining re: novelty art taking space & not curr. saleable, start new experimental focus.

29 Mirtul

Winski's divinations reveal the decease of that smelly half-orc in Nashkel. I wish I could say I was truly surprised. One of course entrusts the least important portions of a scheme to the less capable flunkies (what other uses are there for said flunkies? I would much rather employ the likes of him than abandon Sarevok to Tamoko), but if their inevitable defeat will have such a vital effect upon the plan as to leave Sarevok in present vile mood, this ought to prompt one to reconsider.
Scrying for Mulahey's assailants revealed a scantily-clad blonde in chains that little pervert Semaj was far too enthusiastic about (acid-green robes, really, so last season; daring tattoos, though), and but a brief glimpse of a dwarf we assume to be male (and one does not wish to give deep consideration to that question regarding any dwarf). Ah, divination, that ever-reliable tool, that noble art I so unwisely forsook in return for spells with tangible effect. Perhaps we should assume these characters associates of Gorion's girl? Tazok has at least not failed us yet, and though our Nashkel outpost is gone we have time remaining to consolidate our monopoly before the mine is repaired.

No word as yet from the assassins; either our prey slips silently through their net or has fallen already in some distant wilderness. Perhaps we should give in and pay Slythe and Krystin their ridiculously exorbitant travelling fee? I haven't yet heard them recite bad poetry whilst on duty. But no, Sarevok says, he must test the mettle of this girl, it's no fun to squash her without some respect to the father, assassins are so much cheaper if one chooses those closest to the prey's degree of skill, better to use the flytrap for the fly rather than six Delayed Blast Fireballs. (I would reply, six Delayed Blast Fireballs always work, but boys will be boys.) It's been months since he murdered the previous sibling; men crave excitement. He has returned to Baldur's Gate & continues powerful & handsome as ever...

Today's casting: Animate Dead.

Cntrl: skull from Sorc. Sund. 2nd fl. black onyx cabochon Sorc. Sund. ord. mat., verb. from Necromantix Compendium my alt., som. ibid. my alt. (these books always include at least one instruction that would kill the unwary user if cast as written, basic intelligence test to fix): result animate skull, mental but somatically expressed link to direct. (Unexciting, single skull.)

Exp. #1: Substitute dec. skeleton warrior from Sarevok's temple for skull otherwise mat. ibid., ibid. verb., ibid. som.: result yellowish astral aura, sound of screaming, the onyx gem incinerated and as it burned the skull appeared as the skull of the symbol atop the bones and the control link broken, the broken skeleton rose and walked and destroyed one of my walls, I cast dispels & finally it collapsed —

Conc.: Do not do that again.

Wall of Stone casting, completely std., to partly fix property.

1 Kythorn

A trigger sends news of Tranzig's decease. He was one of Rieltar's men in his engagement to message-pass to Tazok, so it is not entirely to Sarevok's ill; but it fails to rest well, this implication that these adventurers have discovered the trail. (Mulahey: which among your feats of incompetence led them this far?)

Today's casting: doppelganger investigation

Cntrl: had prev. doppelganger brought again (see 11 Mirt.), conj. a weight variable by som. command starting 50 lbs. (metamagic: Minor Creation var. + Stone Shape var.), tested native str.: handled 140 natl. form; natl. form 5'7'' 165 lb.

Exp #1: instructed it to take form of kobold & retrial weightlifting. Max. weight handled 80 lb.— higher than avg. kobold as per The Malarite's Almanac. Verbal inquiry: what happens to body mass given smaller form? Reply: instinctive process, not known.

Exp #2: form of ord. human—male, slightly taller than natl. form, circa. 5'9'', 170 lb. Max. weight handled 145 lb. Monitored shapeshifting w/ Invoke Weave Aura, took parchment of Weave pattern;
initial interpretation is to apply Lapina's Polymorphic Equations—certainly anomalous compared to the spell, but with a transformation function in the four-dimensional space the calculations seem to work...

Exp #3: form of half orc—female, 6'2", 175 lb. Monitored again, resembled Lapina's but w/ anomalies. Strength measured at 170 lb.

Exp #4: form of ogre, resemblance to Arghh though shorter, 10'3", 180 lb. Strength measured at 190 lb. w/ visible reluctance.

Exp #5: requested form of larger ogre, refused, extra mass claimed too much. Suits the hypothesis: greater shapes need greater natl. magical energy.

Exp #6: cast Lower Resist. w/ consent, then willing Polymorph to ogre. 11'5" height, 680 lb. Strength measured, 750 lb., dramatic increase from its own shift. Verbal inquiry: is strength limited above a certain natl. point? Response: muscles & forces shaped by doppelganger itself in their bigger forms, unable to go too far beyond natl. form's strength. Doppelganger subject began to mention a superstition called absorption—"I have often felt my absorption must have been greater than many of my fellows—" but stopped. I am not sure I care re: cultural fairytale nonsense.

Conc.: Limitation to the doppelganger weightlifting is a weakness—put on pointy hat & doesn't make one Elminster. (Also v. not fashionable.)

2 Kythorn

Decent news from Davaeorn: a sum of twenty-three slaves and iron safely delivered from Tazok's group, his own mining performing according to expectation. Sarevok in somewhat improved mood. Rieltar, too, evolves plans; Nashkel, within Amn's territory, does not have to have an iron shortage in order to be perceived by our fair city as such—

Today's casting: Corrosive Effect

Cntrl: Vial of Mulahey's potion, ingredient list as ibid., poured on std. longsword, corrosion in 43 secs.

Exp #1 (casting: self): 2 cc Mulahey's rust mat., verb. cf. notes, Contagion-based w/ Trans. axis modifier for physical effect som.: result none.

Exp #2 (casting: Semaj): ibid. mat., verb. ed. cf. notes, ibid. som.: result red dust appeared around (not within) std. longsword.

Exp #3 (casting: Naaman): 2 cc Mulahey's rust + 0.2 pnds iron mat., ibid. verb, ibid. som.: result after 6 min holding rust appeared in top of blade...

... 

Exp #18 (casting: self): 2.5 cc Mulahey's rust + 0.1 pnds iron + 1 cc powdered animal hoof mat., latest verb., latest som. w/ Shaper's Axis motion: result casting time 15 secs rust shows after 30 secs, still requires simplification for mages of lesser capacity...

3 Kythorn

Continuing to develop the replacement corrosion process; our mercenaries led by my poor inferior Semaj and delightfully sensible Diarmid shall target the known iron caravans to Baldur's Gate, even if they should bypass Tazok's forces. A greater doppelganger is already present as assistant to
Emerson, to give news through sending-spell on when to expect... The first caravan of intact iron, by Rieltar's orders, shall pass to the city gates unmolested, in order to give a chance to demonstrate that Iron Throne ore will be the only reliable.

Our transmuted projections show anticipated three hundred percent profit; Turnipsome losses are set behind us. The Seven Suns doppelganger warn that the house seeks to enter private deal with Jannath over Beregost wheat. The Merchant League makes a reckless purchase of twenty new caravans and mercenaries commanded by Dabron Sashenstar himself. Personal news from the house of Silvershield; Eddard deceased, Skie guilty of some disreputable conduct...either eloping or pregnant from wherever Daddy packed her off to, I imagine. Perhaps that opens possibilities, and certain buried memories.

Today's casting: Corrosive Effect

Cntrl: see prev.

...

Exp #41: 0.5 ord. iron. rust + 0.2 pnds iron + 0.3 cc powdered animal hoof mat., latest verb., latest som.: result casting time 10 secs rust shows after 50 secs (acceptable); within mental cap. of self, Semaj, Naaman, & Sakul. (Not Prat, apparently. Explained to him whilst he ominously fingers that rather fascinating axe of his.)

5 Kythorn

My birthday, and after a discreet reminder Sarevok sends me gold. Men are so insensitive. Still, he has been upset re missing sister's status. New spell components will do nicely, I suppose; and an emerald-set necklace I have been eyeing for some time.

Today's casting: Sepia Snake Sigil, cast upon certain of my books to protect them; powdered and adequately purified amber is so expensive these days. Std. mat., verb., som.

I have learned that subtle manipulation may offer better results than outright violence; sometimes I wish Sarevok better understood the concept. But it is for that reason the women behind powerful men achieve their own dreams.

8 Kythorn

Nashkel; word received. A collision of assassins (a murder of assassins? a silence of assassins? a stab of assassins?)—and each one gone, bar some traitor escaping Nashkel's garrison? The Heroes of Nashkel who (have not) saved the mine; the little girl with the vaguely druidic name Sarevok's agents described with Gorion. Surprisingly capable of survival. Not as—strong as Sarevok? Then lucky.

There are times I swear 'twas Beshaba frowning upon my life from the cradle. I remember, vaguely, once—Winski and Semaj and I, mages locked in the deepest of the witching hours and our spirits somewhat buoyed by alcohol, musing upon the parts we are called on to play; puppets in a god's destiny, but better that than unfortunate and utter obscurity and death in history...

Rieltar is displeased; the Cyricists provided him with good services in the past. Sarevok claims to him that the girl is a dangerous mercenary, that she will unravel their plans; it suits both of them to hasten with the plans. Doppelgangers are dispatched; Drasus et al will wait in the Cloakwood, for that is the vital part of the scheme.

Today's casting: Axial rearrangement of Obscure Object

NB: if works will have protective conj. & small-scale proof of mage school reversal
Cntrl: small jewellery box subj., 1/2 diam. circ. cham. skin mat., std. verb., std. som.: result settled aura seemingly impenetrable to divination, verified in prev. exp.

Exp #1: small jewellery box subj., 1/2 diam. patterned cotton bag mat., conj. axis. verb., conj. axis. som.: result—nothing, think verb. slip.

Exp #2: small jewellery box subj., 1/2 diam. patterned cotton bag mat., conj. axis. verb., conj. axis. som.: result—flicker, quick dissipation.

Exp #3: small jewellery box subj., 1/2 diam. patterned cotton bag mat., conj. axis. verb., conj. axis. som.: result—control, gateway flickers, trad. sparkling marble of subplane, aura settles & lasts 20 secs...

Conc.: Extraplanar material successfully summoned; re-test w/ conc. on durm. Extraplanar shielding I can test for protective quality...

14 Kythorn

Who invited Krystin and Slythe to attack cleansed Nashkel iron upon its entry into the city gates? The thing is ridiculous. Working with Diarmid and Semaj's men, the hedgewitch labours to cast the subtle spell for the quiet corrosion of iron so carefully carried—and she casts with such intensity the cart explodes; the guards posted to the caravan attack; and there is immediately a lovely selection of fireworks easily visible from the Iron Throne's tower walls. I hear her second spell was her favoured Cloudkill, suffocating all nearby witnesses—and Diarmid cleaning up as best he could, endeavouring to create hints of a caravan of volatile ingredients destroyed rather than iron... There was indeed a Jannath caravan recently taken; Prat (what were parents/himself thinking!) was sent to communicate between the bases of Larswood and the Cloakwood, and idly mentioned finding spell components that the bandits thought valueless. (Needless to say, his idle mention prompted myself to an investigation!) Slythe himself did nothing to restrain the lady, too invisible herself to receive a reprimand.

Sarevok has fumed, yet excessive violence is not foreign to his nature. Rieltar proved coldly angry, exercising his authority; he himself invoked a mage's duel to school Semaj in his failure of command. Alas poor Semaj (alive, but I wager does not wish to be)... That the nominal leader of the Iron Throne is a caster of reasonable power and cunning in his spare time is not a fact spared for visitors.

Today's casting: Cloudkill itself in the Iron Throne's large cell reserved for volatile magical experiments, endeavouring to demonstrate that it can be controlled.

Cntrl: 5 goblins summ., std. verb., std. som., n/a mat.; result diameter approx. 9.5 ft., death 18 secs for final goblin, spell sweeps approx. pace 8 ft/5 secs, bounced from admantine wall moving back, gases sinking.

Exp #1: 6 goblins summ., acuity scroll on self, std. verb., std. som., n/a mat., Wind Wall mod. to that version w/ control: result diameter approx. 9.7 ft., death 17 secs for final goblin, Wind Wall kept motion to approx. 12 ft in two directions . Conc: Wind Wall pleasing control about it but needs fine tuning, thought also of telekinesis spell but despite recent study of it have no energy for it.

Exp #2: As above, 7 kobolds dead 12 secs, directed Wind Wall keeps Cloudkill in designated place, manipulation of gases by wind somewhat possible. Moment of difficulty when nearly bounced to myself but thankfully forced it back...need to rest.

15 Kythorn
In atonement from Slythe is received the head of one Arravis Bhetel, a brave and noble and clerically powerful Fist. Sarevok's man there could have dealt with the woman using...less dramatic methods. Remove the pieces upon the chessboard too quickly, and one's opponent acquires a suspicious mind. Give us two further tendays—Davaeorn is ordered to work the slaves as harshly as he can, for Sarevok will have no real use for the mine afterwards—and that is sufficient to our needs. Two bloodthirsty assassins in the names of others will serve the cause of the new Lord of Murder...

Sarevok came to me; upon the roof of the Iron Throne building we saw into the darkness. I believe I promised him various things; one makes these statements of loyalty for the sake of the moment. In all honesty I loathe the cold of the night.

"What will you do to serve me, Cythandria?" he said, tall and powerful. I clung to the warmth of his body, twined my arms about his mighty shoulders.

"Anything you desire, my lover—as a matter of course."

"Promises, promises, woman," said he. "My sister lives still."

"It is possible," I replied. That she or her companions dispatched the Nashkel assassins—but there is none else of her as yet, and in reality the most exciting of would-be heroes often die ignominious deaths tramping in tedious forests. But the blood she shares ought to come to her aid— Some are so unfortunate as to have neither that power nor the lust of those possessing it.

"It is truth. I feel the taint; and I shall take their power before I ascend. Ought I ask Tamoko to take care of this matter, Cythandria?"

Tamoko is a whore who does not care for Sarevok's divine destiny; and a rival. Either answer had its pitfalls.

"You should ask a servant with the most enthusiasm for the task; and ability to chase a shadow through the wilderness, of course." A girl of little presence, the divinations have shown.

"How lacking in commitment," he said; in the old days it surprised me that he was capable of rhetorical games alongside wizardly scholars.

"Tamoko is the one who fails upon that score," said I; speaking truth, though overt jealousy is a dangerous tool against another woman.

"And you will supplant her as my consort if you earn it—" he specified; Sarevok knows the fine art of promise-making.

"Then judge the sibling as you have planned, my lord. Wait for those you have sent, Davaeorn's man; and choose your next move. She is weaker than you—"

"And yet chaos will be sown from their passage."

His voice is deeper when he recites the prophecies.

Today’s casting: Wizard's Cunning. Diamond, 0.9 car., brilliant cut; 3 lacewings; 4g boiled liquorice root. One of the most idiotic and moronically foolish things to do is to attempt to transmute one's own brain without all possible preparations and precautions, and when you think you have completed those repeat them threefold; for you will be left a gibbering imbecile for eternity and do I make myself clear this is your sole and final warning—

would you learn the spells that drowse my soul how many griefs from knowledge flow hast thou
known how I fashioned thee truth may seem but cannot be to weaker view ore laid black wisdom hue ye should have cause to rue death lays icy hand are you come to wield the fiery brand the death fires danced at night lonely without the sense of sight

A Flare spell is a simple invocation cantrip consisting of verbal component only expected casting time 4 secs the novice may take up to half a minute upon an initial attempt the verbal component in the opening rune invocation spake clearly without hesitation the visualisation burst of bright dazzling light focus single person or creature expected light to stun flare flare so strangely you dazzle my eye bright take forever from my sight

The old scroll was skeletal ash and verbal rune in same harmonic range & durn & eigenvalue mapping ash of a skeleton the speaking expected simple instants the result noted simple light simple dazzling light spell components it is not quite a cantrip for component interaction but effect simple effect dazzling radiant flare radiant beings went and came when the cities floated Winski knew this easy simple given for that reason skeletal ash had skeletal ash on hand chanted light did not dazzle words old skeletal ashes tomb underground in the time of temple and Lord of Murder and flares that coded ash on fingers casting

over and over: flare and flare and is obvious meaning, dazzling light cryptogram knowledge the inward sunlike eye to the universe prophecy murder blood decode key here clear simple flare and flare murder war essence to the planes for legacy claiming a bloody massacre claim obvious ready take LordLady Of Murder αδφδιλξεαωξκδλάξιξεψειτοίαώ...

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Addendum, morning of 16 Kythorn

How incoherent my writing gets when I allow my mind to expand in that fashion; the raven Huginn is always faster than the hand. I must confess I'd hoped for some impressive plan to see rid of That Whore Tamoko. But...Sarevok will be pleased to have the decoding of my scribbles. It seems, on the face of it, that the flare signals from the old tomb are encodings to claim that after sufficient lands running red with blood & all that and so on, the essence has to be claimed from within the planes... I shall inquire about the exact mechanism and moment of ensuring a sibling’s destruction; always a fascinating tale when Sarevok speaks it. An interesting adjunct to his knowledge.

—

20 Kythorn

Doppelgangers have their uses. Shalak, its name far more sibilant and unpronounceable in its own language, leads the expedition to the Merchant League; Aldeth Sashenstar absent upon a hunting trip. The reports of the Seven Suns flow promisingly. Sherdis is the name of the one primarily participating in my experiments, or the relatively pronounceable name I choose for it; and I've a scheme of assurance...

Today's casting: Rappaccini's Floral Nightmare

Cntrl: 1 rose petal (fresh) + 1 cc pure spider venom mat., Beatriz 1310 verb., Beatriz 1308 som., cast time 8 secs. Result 15x roses, durn. 5.5 hrs, poisonous to 1 kobold (summ.).

Exp #1: 4 rose petals (fresh) + 4cc pure spider venom mat., verb. w/ rule of sq., som. w/ rule of sq., cast time 16 secs (rule of pair sustenance). Result 46x roses, durn. 3.4 hrs, poisonous to 3 hobgoblins (summ.).
Exp #2: 8 rose petals (fresh) + 8cc pure spider venom mat., verb. w/ rule of cub., som. w/ rule of cub., cast time 27 secs (rule of n-change sustenance). Result did not count but sufficient number to fill room, durn. 2.3 hrs, spent many summ. spells to test deadliness, ogres w/ resist. of 12 mins exposure, spiders immune, gibberlings v. vulnerable. A room filled with roses of a mage's spectrum of colours, as deadly as they are beautiful...

24 Kythorn

Meeting of the Iron Throne heads, together with Sembian emissary; in which Rieltar boasted (truly, withal!) of profits whilst Sarevok played the dutiful son—and I the wizard-demonstrator. Controlled projections; threat (reality) of war and profits in our pockets from the Cloakwood. So pleased, the Throne, that they grant additional concession...and a doppelganger accompanies them upon their return.

Today's casting: Lovelace's Helpful Calculation

Exp #1: Less experiment than actual use; mat. 2 1/2 in. rods galv. iron, parchment encoded holes as diagrammed, cf. verb., std. som. Result echoed approx. of the rising asymptotic curve confirmed by Rieltar and Winski's divinations. Profit intended to ensue.

30 Kythorn

Our Peldvale camp destroyed!

Parts of it burned. As far as we have found, not a man living. Protections from scrying invoked by the intruders, but Winski has some idea of what they are. Sarevok, is your sister truly playing into your hands?

Next—

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A/N: Quotes on 15 Kythorn taken from Quiller-Couch Book of English Verse.

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84. The Red Wizard's Ally

Finished. A merciful release from this company of fools!

Edwin shouldered his pack, grunting at its weight; one of his rank had slaves or servants to do menial labour, and regardless of what that shrewish barwhore Shar-Teel repeatedly forced upon him he would never accustom himself to such plebeian sufferings.

He troubled to cast a final look back at the mines. Those slaves had dissipated, and he had seen some of the party snoring in various makeshift shelters. He himself had also needed to rest, but forced himself to make this departure in time.

Quite the opportunity to finally prove himself before the Zulkir and everyone else who would ever dare to dismiss Edwin Odesseiron and his gifts. His fingers went to the folds of his mage's robe, smoothing its silken and elaborate patterns in the form of dancing red dragons and rearing yellow-black basilisks, feeling its powers. A mighty archmage's robe, his by right of conquest he had earned (bah, lackeys!), a valuable protection for him upon his journey to the city...
The sound of the oily voice made him jump, a wretched reflex, turning and gaping as if he was some halfwitted diviner's apprentice looking to the figure making its way between the trees—

"I do apologise for lateness, wizard." The bard smoothly ran a hand along the fastening of his jacket. "Skie kept me rather occupied, you see. Insatiable little vixen."

"And what exactly do you..." Edwin snapped, quickly (of course!) recovering from confusion and surprise, replying in intelligent speech to the monkey. "Go away. Are you unable to see that I am busy?" Eldoth himself carried a well-filled pack, and held that enchanted spear.

"Oh, I'd hardly blame you for jealousy," the insufferable Eldoth said. (Some women simply had imbecilic tastes!) "You travel with four women—three if one discounts Shar-Teel—and yet not one was willing to grant you so much as a time of day, Odesseiron? Young Imoen and that uncouth ogre hardly ran to my tastes, but our delicious Viconia is certainly imaginative; and while one can hardly compare Skie's maiden charms to the drow's mastery of *eros*, the girl proved quite dextrous in the course of the night..." The man shrugged almost modestly.

Edwin had seen—Viconia paying the bard far more attention than he deserved. And of course that fool of a Skie was utterly besotted, and of course the bard was now boasting of a more interesting night than Edwin's weary packing. Well? In Thay many concubines would certainly favour an Odesseiron above a nobody! "Oh, shut up," Edwin said. "I weary of you."

"Not planning to abandon your companions, are you?" Eldoth said; his greedy eyes looked to Edwin's pack. "I'm sure the former paladin would be absolutely fascinated to wake suddenly and hear that the evil Red Wizard is a deserter."

"I am not a deserter because their mission was never mine and I have given enough to she who malignly tricked me and it is only a trifle of days before it ought to have ended and I have business in the city that the likes of you would never be able to comprehend," Edwin said, with the haughty regality of a Thayvian noble as was clearly his wont.

"Yet the city is also my destination, wizard," Eldoth said. "I do not need, but would not object to, travelling in company; you, upon the other hand..."

There were various monsters in the Cloakwood and even the mightiest wizard was willing to employ a staff of peasants to crudely hit things. "And what are you deserting for?" Edwin interrogated. "Abandoning your dearest fiancee; that crying little brat..."

"That crying little falsely penniless brat. A man must eat, and engage in more entertaining pastimes besides." Eldoth shrugged. "I have recouped some of my losses, at any rate, and should stand for a trifle more." He gestured lightly to the materials he carried; far more than his fair share of the plunder, it seemed. Peasant-born thief. "Shall we come to some mutually satisfying arrangement? We will tell none of the others of our journey, and we may as well travel together. I'm sure you have a few of your little spells still up your sleeves."

Edwin carefully considered. And why not? In truth he was not fully certain of the way to the city from this location and monsters could attack the bard rather than him. "Agreed."

"That ruby ring you wear and—twenty-five gold, then, if you please," Eldoth said. "Protection will cost."

Edwin hissed. The Odesseiron coffers were great in his homeland, he reminded himself. "Very well, you obnoxious twit—"
"Now, now. You would hate to be left to the spiders, wizard," Eldoth said.

"And one final matter to conclude this settlement," Edwin instructed. It was an obvious point. "You will not turn Skie in to the Iron Throne."

A half-smile flashed across Eldoth's face. "Now, really, wizard. You suspect me capable of such a vile thing as to sell a young woman I have so recently shared intimacy with, to enemies who wish her dead? I am, frankly, shocked and appalled at such a low opinion—"

"Because I want to do it," Edwin said.

"—Shall we split the proceeds by half?"

The imbecilic simian bard was exactly the kind of scum Edwin had imagined him to be. "That does not suit my purposes," Edwin said. "There will be a...delay due to the manner I intend to do it; there are matters I must take care of beforehand. So I am willing to buy your share of the Throne's reward in advance. You may have these clerical scrolls; two potions; and these enchanted bracers—of protection, I believe. (Mere gold-valued treasure to the simian; political goals to the master.)"

"Add those spell scrolls you have kept; one more of those potions of speed; and—shall we say roundly a hundred gold in addition?"

"You're cheating me," Edwin said through clenched teeth. "It's only information of her that we have to trade, and you are only entitled to a half share at absolute most." Kidnapping and dragging the weeping child would be troublesome for both personality and Shar-Teel-related problems. "I travelled with her before you did."

"But you are asking me to surrender a reward on pure speculation. Pay for your politics, Red Wizard. It is that or nothing." A smirk. How Edwin longed to lash forward with his oaken staff, forget the power of Fireball to make him and all of the other wretchedly irritating people burn like the fools they were, in this case he would rather something close and personal but the bard was crudely stronger than him—

"Enough! You may have your vulgar bribe, simian," Edwin said. "I shall not forget this."

"Nor shall I your charming company."

Eldoth was whistling a tune under his breath. Even at the city gates at the last, that cursed song echoed through his head; but at last Edwin Odessairon had shed every one of those pathetic and annoying companions and was certainly well upon the road to achieve his due greatness and the completion of his mission...

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85. Crosscurrents

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4 Flamerule

"The very minor detail of murdering a child and making my boy Fall," Aquerna lectured. Ajantis himself sat silently on the ground, next to a sputtering, white-ashed fire set in a small pit. His eyes were wide and unmoving, and he yet seemed both blind and deaf to the world. It was a condition to
"Shut up and stop telling her," Imoen lashed out. "I don't care—I do care—of course I care—but you're not helping and I wish you'd just be quiet and pretend to be a normal squirrel again."

"The lady of the forests has every right to speak out," Faldorn said. "Would you deprive one of Nature's creations of the voice she has earned?"

"Heck, she isn't one of Nature's creations anyway!" Imoen said. "She's a paladin's animal and they're from like the planes and..." She paused. "And they're supposed to go away, and they're not squirrels —"

"My punishment for arrogance as my Lord Helm has punished me now by turning his face by leaving me alone," Ajantis spoke in a flat monotone, still looking at nothing.

"—But they're still s'posed to go away, after—things happen." Imoen slammed a fist into her palm. "So what the heck's up with you, you lying little—"

"It may well be," Aquerna's not-precisely-a-voice hissed, "that little boys trained strictly; little boys whose families know any wild weaving as a grave sin and dire shame; little boys who throw themselves to prayer; little boys who deny what is in them; that if that little boy asks too soon for a companion of a different sort; that one cloaked in another sort of power may slip through and find; but in that case, such a companion might have power such as to discourage challenge most severely —"

"—But I am Ajantis' companion as long as he doesn't banish me, and the dear boy doesn't have at all a trace of any sort of power in his bones, I imagine he'll be slightly more vulnerable to evil magic spells than he used to be, at least until he can atone and retrieve his connection to the divine," Aquerna finished more conversationally. "I only want his own good, my dear girl. And that charming young murderess you're sitting next to—"

"I said I was sorry!"

Sorry is not good enough. I was crying.

"Well, 's not like we can turn back the clock," Imoen said after a long pause. "Or, 'least, if I got to be an archmage I probably could turn back the clock, but 'cause of paradox and quantum and not accidentally killing your own grandma I couldn't change back the clock."

"The Spider Queen obliged us to kill young ones in the Underdark; and that male was old enough for some degree of threat," Viconia said. Stephan was a wizard's young apprentice. He couldn't have done anything to really hurt us. "You bore me, abbil."

"The Iron Throne was a poisoned oak sinking its corrupted roots into the innocent ground," Faldorn said. "Will we now find the evil ones who sowed the seed?"

"—We don't need to," I sobbed. I'd only murder more of them—there was something wrong with me. "We finished them in Nashkel and we finished their alternative source of iron here. The iron crisis is over and we don't need to do anything more to the Iron Throne because we stopped their plan, we can go somewhere else or just stay here and—and I don't know—"

I kept on stabbing Damon because he murdered Eddard. Like I helped rob the other caravan. Then I killed more of the bandits, and then we came all the way here and there was Stephan— I couldn't bring myself to care about Sarevok Anchev any more. It was all over anyway.
"Couldn't find either the swine or the wizard fool." Shar-Teel came into view, Spider's Bane swinging behind her and her crossbow upon her belt. "Or a lot of what we took. Remind me to kill them, next time they dare look our way."

I had woken lying across Varscona's sheath, my fingers wrapped around its hilt. The fire was out, and Eldoth gone with his clothes and weapons. The room had been almost bare. "If they're really g-gone...then at least they're safe." I couldn't stop crying. Eldoth deserved much better. So did Edwin; I helped Dynaheir trick him in the first place.

"I made myself Fall," Ajantis said suddenly. "I was not responsible for Skie's actions; but I was responsible for my own. And I am the one to deserve that harsh penalty and far more."

"—Um, I don't know, I used to think you were a pretty nice person, this classic knight in shining armour and all, even if you were a bit pernickety about people's rings going missing and suchlike..." Imoen said. "I mean, you don't need to hurt yourself too much, though of course—I don't understand it!" She stared at me. "What were you thinking, Skie?"

I wiped my sleeve across my eyes. "I don't remember, much." And I made that true by not thinking about it. "I'm truly sorry."

I wasn't good at killing anything. A few months ago I was an ordinary girl at home. I wasn't strong like Minsc or Shar-Teel; I couldn't shoot arrows into people's heads and dig through their belongings; I didn't even feel as if I could lift a shortsword any more.

"Finished whining?" Shar-Teel clouted the side of my head. She squatted down to stroke our fire in the open back to life; there were two dead birds slung to her shoulder. She threw one to Imoen. "I'd say, it would be just as well to finish the Throne bastards off. But what'll be left in the city, a few fat merchants?"

"The Flaming Fist would be sure to deservedly arrest us for wanton slaughter of merchants even if we showed them proof of what they have done," Ajantis recited. "In the name of good and law the important thing is that this story will reach Duke Eltan and he will mete out justice; and it will, by the escaped slaves."

"He's right," I said. "We've done everything we needed to stop their plans. So we can—" I couldn't start to face anyone in the city; not...a man who didn't want his first wife's bastard; and certainly not I shall be in thy city. Thou art most welcome to seek us out and indeed I may do the same—Dynaheir, so upright and good, so very disappointed and reproaching she'd be— "I want to go somewhere else. Somewhere where we don't have to do this. Anywhere else but here."

"It is a large surface, rivvil," Viconia said.

"We can go and... we can go and..." Not kill anyone else. "Ajantis was looking for an evil witch when we met him!" Finally that was an answer. "We can go and help the village and stop the evil witch!"

Shar-Teel and Viconia glanced at each other, and both shrugged lightly.

"If I perceive your acts to benefit the cause of Nature, I will continue with you," Faldorn said. "But should you breach the Balance you will be gravely punished."

Viconia smothered something that sounded almost like a laugh. "A dalhar, it is, and I will have much amusement from it. I order you to commit many healing spells to your memory," she said to Faldorn, "which shall free me to petition Shar for the more intriguing ones of active darkness, since I
am far more than a mere healer." She stretched out her body, smirking easily.

"I stand higher in the favour of my lord Silvanus than you by your dark goddess, woman!" Faldorn burst out. "I prefer spells of damage myself against those who would harm Nature, and from our powers the chief divine advisor of this party must only be me—"

Viconia's slow smile was awful and terrible to behold. Imoen and I could not tell exactly what strange ritual passed between the priestess and the young druid within their glares at each other; we could only watch and wonder deeply...

"The evil witch...the evil witch," Ajantis passed a hand along his forehead. "I feel no guidance from Helm. I feel nothing. Before I thought it would be Helm's will to find and slay this witch; but I still know nothing of it. If I do sufficient good and righteous deeds, will I ever be able to atone for my crimes? Will Helm ever welcome me again into his sight?"

"Helm had certainly better," snapped Aquerna. "And if we're absolutely certain that the wizard boy and that greasy songster don't intend to return with our possessions, I suppose we may as well return to the road."

—

dalhar - child

86. Two Sides and a Witch

8 Flamerule

—A twelve-year-old girl stood in front of the plain wooden cabin.

Ajantis had offered her sweeties.

"You are trespassing on my land-home; the seas cry for vengeance; and in the name of the Bitch Queen you will all meet your end here."

She wielded a flail half her size that glittered with enchantment, and the power of a cleric gathered about her left hand.

"But I only had two left...they're sugared almonds and... And we're only looking for an evil witch, little girl, so that we can slay her in righteousness to protect you and others from her, and..." Ajantis shook his head; and the little girl shouted "Die!" and aimed what seemed to be a command spell at him. He withstood the effect, shaking his head in bewilderment.

"Sonner and Telman sent you! I can tell!" the girl cried. Suddenly the plants around us were as damp as if a sea-wave had fallen upon them, and they rose up to bind us in place as if they were shackles of wire, shaped as and smelling as seaweed. "The Bitch Queen does not brook murderers like you!" None of us could move; Faldorn muttered some words to release herself, and Shar-Teel and Viconia exchanged a grin of mutual amusement whilst the little girl's next quick move was to slam the flail into Ajantis' lower midsection, denting his old plate.

"Some...misunderstanding...young missy..." the squire gasped out.

"All right, kid, the male's a fool, but it's time you told us what's going on." Shar-Teel freed herself with a stroke of her sword, and stepped forward.
"I will keep killing you!" the girl cried. I could see that she was a child, much younger than Faldorn, short although thick-boned; she stood with a confidence not unlike the druid. Thunder seemed to erupt from her hands when she clapped them together. In a deafening blast of sound, Ajantis fell backwards to the ground, and I could scarcely hear anything. Shar-Teel's lips were moving again, and the child stared up at her; Faldorn also said something, and the girl then clasped her hands to her face and seemed to yell fiercely back. Tears of anger flowed from her eyes.

Imoen clapped one hand to her ears, gesturing; *Hurts—can't spellcast, but just a kid*—she signalled to me. Viconia's lips moved under her hood; she clutched tightly at her head with both hands, and the expression on her face resembled a scream of agony. So the girl was an Umberlant, from her words; all my father's captains pay tribute to the temple in the docks before they sail, though he worships Tyr himself... The buzzing in my ears gradually began to clear.

"—murdered my mother and stole her bowl and I want it back and I want you to fetch it for me!" the girl cried to Shar-Teel.

"...But...are you sure you don't know an evil witch? Are you sure you're not the evil witch attacking the village fishermen?" Ajantis said; he still lay prone.

"I have more power than mother had, I have Umberlee's anger and the will to beg the seas!" She kicked out at him; I cringed in reflexive pain. "But I get so tired. The goddess is so demanding. Fetch my bowl, please."

"Umberlee is an evil goddess..." he said "But you are only a child—"

"I will teach you only, you fishgut-breath bastard son of a squid-brained octopus spat out of a slime-scumming oyster's rear end show respect to the Bitch Queen or else—"

"I see our houj'jaluk is defeated by a female infant," Viconia said; and laughed, still clutching her ears somewhat painedly.

"Please stop it, little—ah, stop it, milady Tenya! I think—I think we should help you after they murdered your mother!" Ajantis yelled, raising his hands to block the furious attacks.

"Excellent," said the squirrel on Imoen's shoulders. "You're thinking, boy."

Shar-Teel shrugged. "What's in it for us, kid?"

The girl Tenya drew herself to her full, compact height, standing perfectly still. Something blue and terrible seemed to glitter behind her eyes. "For the Bitch Queen, who is not patient...and you are not yet upon her good side."

It took us hours to walk back to the village, and we were attacked by ankhegs; it was still breeding season for them, so said the druid. We knew better how to defeat them. Ajantis seemed slow and hesitant in his fighting, wounded by acid and healed by Faldorn; I only stood at the back, and tried to aim arrows at the creatures...

"Sonner. Telman. Jebadoah," Ajantis said heavily, to the three who had come in from some labours, hauling nets and stinking grey bodies of fish, sea-stained, their clothing old and ragged.

Shar-Teel was not so dramatic. "Hand over the bowl, males."

"I warned you she was a treacherous witch!" The man on the left opened his mouth to shout; he smelled strongly of fish, and a ragged scar was cut on his right cheek. "Gone and believed her lies, have you—"
"I cannot tell who lies or not!" Ajantis cried. "I thought you innocent farmers; when I could measure intent I did not see—"

"The bitch priestess cheated us for years!" the second man said. "The price just kept climbing, and we couldn't sail without paying! The cleric of Talos said—"

"Another evil deity," Ajantis said.

"Males have such an ability to waste time." Viconia's eyes glowed a bright scarlet in the evening; and with her hood lowered she stepped forward. "Our leader won't ask again, iblith. I despise men who kill priestesses."

"A drow—"

"Observant are we not, jaluk?" Viconia's dark blue cloak swirled away from her body, revealing the combination of parts of plate that sculpted to her form and tight leather armour she wore as protection. She spoke in those particularly deep and throbbing tones, where I could not tell if she added a divine compulsion, or needed none to strengthen her persuasion. "Would an offering of your foul rothe blood be an insult to my dark lady? I shall find out."

"You can have the bowl. You can have the bowl. I kept it on me for safety. Please don't kill us." The third man brought it out from his cloak; a yellow thing, made of something that seemed too smooth for wood yet without the gleam of brass or copper, evenly carved and varnished. He passed it into Shar-Teel's hands. "You gave us little choice. The Storm Lord will know who it is that opposes him. I should stay well away from any Talos shrine if I was you."

"We won't kill you—" I began.

"You sure?" Shar-Teel casually tossed the bowl to Viconia, and reached for her sword. The fishermen ran quickly from us, as if they were afraid of what we would do.

_The Storm Lord will know—_

It had begun to rain, and somewhere beyond the waters, dark clouds were gathered, and starting to flash with the pale blue of lightning. I could see the huts of the villagers, built from some dark wood, and the fields that were stretched further away. Somewhere there was the burial ground where the funeral of the farmer's son had been when first we came to the village; and somewhere the storm continued to move across the sea.

"No killing the fishers," Ajantis repeated hollowly. "Were they evil? If they killed Tenya's mother...but she was a priestess of Umberlee...but they are Talosians. We should give Tenya her lawful property of the bowl, at least, I suppose..."

Imoen patted him companionably on the shoulder. "C'mon, it's raining. Let's find a room for the night somewhere here. You don't want to stay out here all night, do you, Skie?"

Faldorn sniffed. "The purpose of the cycle of the rain is to cleanse the earth and refresh the roots. You shouldn't fear it, Imoen."

"—It rusts armour, too," Ajantis said.

Farmer Brun; the man who had lost his son to ankhegs, I remembered Ajantis saying from before. I do not know how old the son was when he died. In any case, the old man put us up in his barn for some coin; and I know that Imoen added extra to the sum, from things taken from the mine. Warm there, with a fire, wooden and primitive, not dissimilar to that storage place at the time I spent with
Eldoth, before he went—it's better like this because he can live. We'll need more supplies soon, and either the rough brown bread or the village's water makes me slightly ill.

We trudged northwards again; we would not enter the city. Perhaps if we go north for long enough, we could find Waterdeep, or Ruathym, or the isle that Branwen once said she came from; anywhere but here.

"The bowl," Tenya told us, and grasped at it greedily. "Umberlee is mother now, and she is well pleased. If they are wise they will never set sail again, for the sea will take their worthless lives." She raised her hand in gestures like a wizard trying to disappear; but Shar-Teel, Viconia, and Faldorn had all moved forward to grab her—

"Not so fast, kid," I heard Shar-Teel say. "You were swinging that flail like a male peasant. If you're going to humiliate men twice your size, do it properly."

"We priestesses ought to exchange some degree of wisdom," Viconia followed.

"And Umberlee of the waters serves a part of the Oak Father's domain, so I must aid you," Faldorn finished. The three of them gathered closely around Tenya for some time; and Imoen, Ajantis and I do not know exactly what she was told, but in the end she finished her disappearance, the expression upon her face a great deal more intimidating than it had been...

"You will be paid by the Sea Queen...in time."

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houj'jaluk - failure

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87. Another's Son

10 Flamerule

One day fishermen; the next absolutely disgusting zombies. How long has it been since I've paid proper attention to basic grooming? My hair—the green dye's growing out, and it needs cutting badly; split ends. Imoen's also returning to that lovely deep red. I might as well start thinking about that sort of thing again. We have solemnly covenanted to trim each other's hair, after we buy ourselves new hand-mirrors and a really decent pair of scissors.

"You promised a really good shopping trip, once," Imoen said, standing over the last zombie; she'd used magic missiles to blast it to the dirt, and then I'd finished it by the sword. "Imoen and Skie, thieving wizard and thieves extraordinaire, let loose on an unsuspecting world—"

I sheathed Varscona. "You need a new tunic; and these breeches I've got are awful; and one of those new-fashioned Waterdhavian-style hairnets, the silver ones, the style would be perfect for your hair—"

"And pretty dresses, if we've got enough gold or chances—pink for me, green for you; and spell components for this brilliant spell that magically opens locks that I found; and—"

"And perfumes, we all need those," I said; Shar-Teel and Faldorn tend to have difficulty with the general concept. "And I'd like a good belt, maybe something in black, and you need new earrings—"
Imoen had lost one of her silver studs somewhere in the Cloakwood; I can't believe I didn't notice at the time. Faldorn and Ajantis seemed to be staring oddly at us, but Imoen continued;

"And facepaint. Puffguts used to yell at me for the idea, but I want to see what it's like on me and glamorous wizardesses can wear whatever they want. And sometime let's drag Faldorn along too, no matter what she says—" Imoen laughed, the first I remembered in some time. "That's good, Skie, better than— I can't wait—"

"Thank you for cleaning out those zombies from our farms," the farmer Wenric said, a little blankly, and handed a bag to Shar-Teel.

She rifled through it. "An acceptable payment, male."

"Do you know of any other heroic quests we could undertake, goodman?" Ajantis said, approaching the farmer.

"Come to think of it..." He looked thoughtful. "There's m' cousin, Mistress Therella of Ulgoth's Beard, not far from here. I've heard word that her son's in trouble again, that Dalton—but he's a firebrand if there ever was one, always off chasing adventure with that group of his. Mayhaps ye'll go to find him already in town, but she's been looking for someone to commission a search of late."

Ulgoth's Beard; named after that beacon so long ago. The pirate Ulgoth, with a bristling beard and evil reputation, often attacked Baldur's Gate without any warning. Therefore, the beacon was built on the clifftop; and then Baldur's Gate knew the next time he attacked, and our ships went out to fight him. It was a glorious battle at sea, the stories say, and many pirates perished, including Ulgoth himself, who was killed by bowmen while flying with a magic ring, so that his corpse flew out to sea pierced with as many arrows as a porcupine. Ulgoth's beard was singed by the warning beacon yet on the cliff face. It's a small place; but if we can rescue that boy, if we need to rescue that boy... Ajantis agrees with me. We'll go there, and see what we can do for work.

—

The widow Therella...and an interesting selection of magical goods in the inn, some supposed to be made by that strange wizard Shandalor. I still feel a little ill; maybe it'll go away in a few days more. We didn't earn a lot of coin from the mines, but we've further supplies and arrows; some painfully enchanted crossbow bolts for Shar-Teel. It's a nice inn, only recently constructed; much better than what we've been sleeping in since...well, now I think about it, the last time we slept somewhere proper was when we set out from Beregost to find Shar-Teel, and then so many other things happened... I'm sleeping on a soft bed indoors! And the food is warm and really quite good.

We will rescue Therella's son; and we'll—Allegedly there are many awful monsters to fight and treasure, which satisfies Shar-Teel enough; and Faldorn has said strange things about 'wishing to consecrate the foul artificial dwelling back to nature's power'; and Viconia thinks we are no worse fools than any other surfacers to whom she might choose to lend her services. And I shouldn't be thinking about this, but the tower has a history, and I've read some things in the past, and it would be interesting to... I don't deserve to think such things. Ajantis and I and Imoen, we're going to rescue the boy.

I sparred with Imoen, after we finished with each other's hair; I tried a layered cut for her. Short swords, like we did in Candlekeep a few times.

"You're...lots better than you were." Imoen chanted a spell, conjuring up a blue shield for her free arm. She fended off one of my attacks with it, taking a step back in retreat. "Aww, heck, you weren't that bad before."
I tried to press her like Shar-Teel would have told me to try, changing direction as quickly as I could in the strikes I made. She blocked, and I went back for the riposte. "You were good at everything." It wasn't a fair fight; Imoen had spent a lot of time training hard in spells lately, while I tried with Shar-Teel. But she was as quick and sharp as ever. "Eh—watch your right flank?"

"Yeah, you're cheating, ya sinister scum!" Most of the time in Candlekeep, we'd exercised right-handed, orthodox; I attacked her right side, relatively unprotected. She stuck out her tongue and spun away, raising her magical shield to almost hit me with it.

"Cheating only counts when you're not winning!" I quickly stepped forward, avoiding her shield; my wrapped blade hit, lightly, her wrist. "That's three to one!"

"I cast magic missile!" Imoen broke out of her stance and waved her shield hand at me, just before I lunged forward. "Two to three, catching up!"

I feinted down, as if trying to slip under Imoen's shield; she brought it down to tangle the blade, and attacked my right with her sword—exactly what I'd have done. I shifted under the strike, grabbed her sword arm with my free hand and pulled; she stumbled forward, and her shield blinked out with her sudden loss of balance.

"Heh, pretty good, kiddo!" Imoen always recovers quickly; she twisted back to the attack. We moved into it, stepping up the speed to make the practice almost too fast to talk; Imoen sometimes seems to have a never-ending well of energy at her service. But I kept up, scoring more points—she's not nearly so strong as Shar-Teel; and at six to three we stood corps-a-corps, swords crossed over each other. Probably, I could push her blade down and out of the way; we stared at each other, half-smiling in resolve—

"Hey, Skie, does it bother you, about Eldoth and Edwin?" she asked suddenly, watching me; then I spun out of the position and attacked in what a tutor at home would have called quart, pushing a thrust to her right thigh.

"They're safer wherever they are and that's the important thing." It was obvious. I loved Eldoth, and I want to think of them both as alive. Imoen blocked an attack.

"I wouldn't say I hated either of 'em," Imoen said, stepping back from a strike aimed at her ribs, trying to riposte to my right. "But I'm still pretty m... But I don't mind that you're acting more like you used to be. I was friends with the old Skie."

I could keep up easily with the sequence of strikes she was trying; from Shar-Teel I knew good counters for most of them, but for the sake of the exercise kept up with Imoen in the regular forms. "And I miss them but I should want them to be safe. Saving people is better. You'd say that."

Imoen suddenly shifted to press a low attack; I saw the direction her feet had changed to, and moved to block. "Good to see m' wise advice finally sinking in," she said. "Garrick, d' you miss him much?"

"Of course. He was a good friend." And he'd left to do something that was better for him, and told us he was going. I let Imoen push the attack for a while, and practised the defensive forms. "Are you? —I'm sorry, I did think..." He let us stay with him, and travelled with us; I thought Imoen was a lot of the reason why—

She stepped back, moving to a more defensive position; I switched to attack. "A good friend. Really," Imoen said, "I'm not buffleheaded like you—there's so much more to do than goop over some boy—"
"Goop?" I lightly tapped her shoulder with the shortsword; she spun away again.

"Don't question a wizard's vocabulary!" she laughed.

"Goop is not a word for anything found in nature," Faldorn said primly. She had come up behind, watching; "And I am not sure why you choose those unnatural weapons of metal. Strong oak serves us druids well."

"'Cause they work," Imoen said, and looked suddenly a little sad; "It's not that nice to do, and I know I'm not really that good at bladework; but, hey—you should practice with us." Faldorn's quest, she says, is to travel the Sword Coast and prove her devotion to the druids' ideals, and while we behave appropriately she will help us. By her tones, I do not think that we get a say in the matter; —but I would like to like her, and Imoen and I will make her have something in common with normal girls like us eventually.

"I can get my club," Faldorn said.

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88. Cow Machinations

13 Flamerule

We have bravely defended a cow from a band of attacking xvarts, as much as saying the sentence feels so silly. I didn't break a nail on my bow. Hulrik the farmer gave us some fresh milk; Ajantis and I used what we did not drink on a journeybread recipe. Domestic; I think I dare to say I'm proud of the results, that I'm learning. Garrick taught me a lot too.

"It's the new milk," Ajantis explained, "and making sure to rub in the butter throughout—you just have to pay more attention to what you're doing, Skie." The stories do not speak of knights trained in cooking; but his masters expected him to be skilled in such practicalities. There seems a shadow upon his face when he mentions the name of Keldon Firecam, a knight of the Order I read mentioned once as the hero of a great battle with Tethyrian outlaws, though he must be ages old by now. Practically decrepit, probably.

"Fetch me a waterskin—Skie, this time; male-of-loss, remain preparing our meal," Viconia asked lazily, sprawled elegantly in the shade. "I thirst."

"I will not convert to your evil deity no matter how you press me, drow," Ajantis said.

"And yet you have lost, and will continue to lose; do not trip, Skie, surface dwellers can be so graceless." She took a long sip of water, and handed the skin back to me.

"Ignore her, dear, she's becoming rather repetitive of late," Ajantis' squirrel said openly, one of Faldorn's goodberries between her paws. Aquema sunk her small teeth into the blue, ripe fruit; sharp and pale teeth, like an embroidery needle into yielding silks. The Duchess Liia Jannath usually carries her monkey with her on her shoulders, and occasionally it chatters to other people. It's rather cute.

"You are an edible lower being, this much I have learned on the surface lands." Viconia showed her own teeth in a brief, carnivorous grin. "Druid, it is acceptable to eat what one hunts, no?"

"Viconia, I have no desire to quarrel," Faldorn said, straightening her back as if trying to be
dignified. The tips of her fingers twitched slightly. "It is acceptable to eat what one hunts, but it is not acceptable to hunt among one's own pack unless grave offence is committed. And the lady is a noble companion."

"Thank you, my dear," the squirrel said, in those tones of a mature human woman; I could imagine her voice belonging to a lady tutor, one of those strict ones, a firm wrinkle drawn between their eyebrows, hair pulled into the strict bun that never loosened below any weather or torment, layers of corsetry so firm and disciplined it looked as if they'd been poured into them full-formed at birth. "Conduct yourself with civility, Goodwife DeVir, and there will be no need to dispute." It irritates Viconia, that title; but she has told of her four husbands in the Underdark, with very detailed descriptions of how she disposed of each of them. Some of us haven't even been married once.

"Ajantis," Viconia said, huskily; he looked up at her, and she shifted position on the grass—I can't dance like that, she's an elf, I still don't know how she does that sinuous twist that makes it look as if she's triple-jointed—"Do you feel any...compensations for what you have lost? For what you are permitted to look upon, and wonder?"

His face had turned slightly red; the pan he held slipped from his hand. I rescued it from the fire. "I-will-not-be-tempted-drow!"

"You deny it so pitifully." Viconia laughed. "Do not mistake me, boy; the only position I would willingly grant you would be to lick the boots of some duergar slave of mine, and that would be only after you crawled across a deep pit of broken glass to beg for it. And yet I know you crave acceptance; long for all the darkness that you lack."

"He still denies it," Faldorn said; looking surprised, Ajantis turned his face to her. "Shar is a primordial force and I respect you, but there is light as well as darkness."

Viconia hissed. "The light burns my eyes; a foul invention of the Moon Bitch. You will learn the power of the night."

"I could try to make you a poultice for that," Faldorn said. "I have not met drow before, but I have some idea of how to adapt the recipe. Do you think your eyes will adjust in time?"

"Perhaps, if you wish; I do not care—you will need my sight at the destination to which you tread in any case." Viconia essayed a graceful shrug.

"In nature, most animals advance through the gradual survival of the strongest offspring, rather than alter themselves in a single generation," Faldorn said. "But your species used to live upon the surface, at one time, or so I have heard. Will you shed some of your underground adaptations as you continue to travel the surface?"

"An insolent question and assumption, craz." Viconia snarled.

Faldorn took a pouch from her belt, and opened it; she had gathered herbs to fill it since we left the mines, boasting of the varied species of mushrooms she found near the Beard. "I've still no wish to argue," she said quickly, and Viconia seemed to accept that as her due. "This is goldenseal, here, and the vidya flower, called so because of its shape, and white milk-vetch, which often grows in areas such as this. If I steam them in boiling water, I can..." She continued her explanation of the brew.

"Vidya flower, that one? In the Underdark there was a moss which bloomed to a similar scent. I made recently a sleeping poison of substitute ingredients..." Viconia sighed. "Bring those into the shade, little girl; you surfacers understand so little of obedience."
"And you call this cessatre leaf?" Viconia continued, pawing over Faldorn's collection. "Shape and smell...is it for the relief of deserved pain?"

"Almost; it's a coagulant, one of the primary ingredients of healing potions," Ajantis said suddenly. "It needs to be boiled to gain the full effect, and added at the second steeping of the ingredients..."

The priestess and druid both raised their heads to stare at him. "I was taught some healing lore, of course," he said stiffly.

"A good effort," Faldorn said; he nodded gravely.

"To continue," Viconia said, "I know this kind of mushroom growth; it is a poison to surfacers as well?"

"Yes, a rare type of the species that we druids call destroyer's wings," Faldorn said. "The light yellow of its gills show that it has the Disintegrare condition, a magical mutation that makes its action more swift. Usually magic is unnatural, of course," she added with disapproval, "but this kind is rare; I found it by carefully looking near a damp log, near the caves, and—"

"And how is the mutation created? We have our own pet wizard, I imagine—" Viconia said curiously.

"Well, this pet wizard's gonna be busy studying her own spells tonight while the pet cleric gets to wash up," Imoen said; she and Shar-Teel had returned from their foraging. Shar-Teel carried two skinned rabbits, one with an arrow still through it.

"Silence your insolence, jalil." Viconia's shoulders shifted lightly; usually I help her with such tasks. She isn't accustomed. I might have to talk to her sometime soon; I'd not ask Faldorn. Maybe not, if things change.

And I had to try to fence against Shar-Teel. It's generous of her to teach me, and it's necessary to live through the travel. I don't think I get as tired as I used to be from it, and it's no trouble to scrub the pots and pans afterwards.

I remember we've passed by what used to be the bandits' camp; and past the garden of the statues of the gnome a day ago, wherein Imoen fashioned blindfolds for protection. It's very green here, and damp on the grass, for it must have recently rained. The days are long and warm, but will shorten when the leaves begin to redden in later months.

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craz - brat

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89. Tower Waiting

15 Flamerule

We can see the tower at this point: a dark squat glimpse at the edge of the landscape at the setting sun, clouds of dust billowing at its base like brown ghosts. We no longer travel through green grass. The supplies we carry should be sufficient for the journey within; we should not take long, for no doubt Dalton will perish of thirst or starvation if he remains trapped.
"There will be traps. There will be monsters. You don't touch anything unless you're sure it's not trapped, poisoned, cursed, or about to summon some abomination from the Nine Hells—and if you're sure, you check again. You don't step anywhere unless you know it won't kill you. You don't walk anywhere alone. You listen to orders and you don't screw up." Shar-Teel has—she calls it tomb-robbing—before; ready to keep us in line.

At last I gathered the resolve to go to Viconia in the night, asking her to come away from where the others rested; I was still ill. I think she knew something was wrong, although she did not cure it immediately. I lowered my breeches in the dark, and answered her questions—it would have been worse to ask Faldorn...

"Similar to a variant in the Underdark, occasional among pleasure slaves," she said, too calmly. "They would be culled for possessing such infection, but I am aware of the prayer for the curing. It will take another day or so to prepare it, and three more days to take full effect; you will suffer but not die."

"I see. Thank you, Viconia." It was cold, and undignified as well as horribly uncomfortable to be waiting with bare legs, probably palely obvious to anything that might walk past.

"Males need to be kept in proper control; much like you are." She flexed her long fingers. "That bard of yours needed a firmer whip hand, did he not?"

"I...he wouldn't have known about this..." I said. "This...well, personal illness..."

"That I doubt." Viconia made a sound that I would have almost called a snort, if not for her elegance and grace. "I see I was wise to limit the acts I performed with him; my brief dalliance." She was smiling, admitting it; and there was nothing I could do. "He was very willing to experience the gifts of the drow, your male, Eldoth; entertaining me with his tongue for a brief while under the night, but I grew rapidly tired of him. Does that you had a male I discarded anger you, ligrr?"

Who knew what Viconia expected. She stood cool and remote as a dark star, blended with the night about her. "He isn't here to explain his side," I said. "So this is being unfair to him." I fumbled to pull my clothing back up; one's fingers are always a little stiff and unwieldy when it's cold.

She move swiftly forward; an arm gripped my shoulder with surprising strength, and a hand scraped down the nodes of my vertebrae. "You are not a fleshy tanth, a crawling thing with not a bone in your body, child. Or are you?...Perhaps I have broken you all too well. That almost pleases me." Suddenly she pushed me back against the tree behind me, smiling. "Will you make me some tea? The lavender kind. One of few aspects of the surface I find pleasurable."

I turned to go back to the camp, to find the leaves and make the simple brew; and yet she stopped me again.

"There were no other consequences?" she hinted. One of her hands restrained my wrist; the other became a set of sharp nails running across my cheek. "Surface humans, I am told, breed like kuo-toa beasts..."

That, she meant. Sometimes I imagined what it might be like, when we married; a boy with Eldoth's eyes, or a girl with dark hair like both of us. But I wouldn't be properly able to watch over a baby, not at this time; so it was foolish to imagine it.

"No, I remember you have had your courses since then; human forms lack grace," Viconia said. It's hard to conceal such things on the road. "I do not know the surface charms of protection, but I do have the power to reach inside and end a growing life, if need be." she ended softly.
A dark cleric of Shar—such things are never spoken of openly, in the blackest alleyways of the city —

I pulled away from her; stepped quickly back. "Let's have tea." I'm fond of the lavender tisane myself, though it's too sweet for Imoen's and Shar-Teel's tastes. Simple enough a drink for me to make.

Viconia is our friend.

I dreamed, that night, with that pain tugging at me like a manacle at my ankle chaining me to the world, like a room with a lit brazier that I remember as if it were something that I read happened to another person. I dreamed of bathing in a wide river, or it may have been the sea by the harbour of home; and then a flood came, like a torrent washing away everything we knew. There were currents and eddies, undertows in the tide; pockets of calmness, and violent whirlpools. I dreamed of swimming through, navigating the patterns that I chose; of imagining myself in another place, swiftly taken by the tides. I obeyed, as far as anyone knew, following the whims and finding where I wished to be. Yet no sooner had I swum one way that the current tossed me another. There were rocks embedded in the floor of the sea and rising through the tides, offering secure handholds; one covered in a red moss, a static colour that shone in the light; two more composed of rock that seemed light blue, a colour for some reason unlike the sea; and in the distance a fourth.

I would not seize them; the sea bore me away. The tide swept over me, wave by wave; but of course I was lying on the ground, I was not buffeted as I felt I was. I slept, shifting uncomfortably. In the distance was the tower, waiting. It changed shape as though made of water; an eye that was not an eye watched and waited somewhere deep inside it. We would enter; would face what was there; betrayal and shadow and flame. Something inside the tower was a great creature beyond any of us.

I became a red arrow loosed from a bow, drawn by a taut string, hurling into the sky and flying as far and as fast as I could through the air, through the air alone. It was a form of escaping; but I did not want to use those presents. Not to, my sleeping throat did not croak out. The arrow; the thing that was not a person in the dark armour. Wrapped into the darkness beyond were face-stealers and ghouls and phoenixes.

In the torrential currents I whirled about, and the tide took me to places I did not know. Therella moved her hands across each other while she talked about her son, her fingers intertwined and ever-shifting, as if she needed some task to pretend to suppress her longing, as she wondered if her son had already been killed by someone. Xzar patted the top of my head, a green robe slipping across golden-brown tanned skin, and instructed the rabbit to learn more. Faldorn claimed she would recover the land for nature, a fierce wolf pacing by her side.

"When one deals oneself," Eldoth said, dressed in a fine silk vest, an earring in heavy gold dangling boldly from his right ear, "a pair of finely matched queens from a pack of cards, upon one's next turn one does not make the move of a discard."

"When one is given a diamond ring," Imoen said, Aquerna riding on her shoulders, "pried by another from someone's left little finger, one does not gift it once more, except when one truly wishes to do so."

The flood willed itself along, wiping images and shaking itself through the mind; and then I remember the daylight shining through my closed eyes. It is simply yet another day of what we must do; I have enough sleep to be as ready as I can.
90. Edwin's Acquaintances

*Edwin: 4-12 Flamerule*

The city, at last; Edwin impatiently paid the toll, bid a merciful farewell to that foul bard, shook the slime from himself, and in a quiet corner passed a cantrip across his extraordinarily powerful new robe. (Would it be recognised as that of the master of the mines?—Perhaps, as much as it galled his pride to do so, he would be cautious with it until he fully understood its enchantments and modified them duly—) A resplendent wizard in dark grey. A resplendent wizard with little funding to draw upon, thanks to Kron's crude bargaining; but he was an Odesseiron, future heir to riches any barbarian would envy, and the present monetary condition strictly temporary.

Lodgings, first. He thought briefly of the possibility of concubines—of granting the foreigners the benefits of the erotic onslaught of Edwin Odesseiron—and regretfully decided on other tasks to take priority. The streets to the north-east might suit his purposes and budget, or so he had gathered from that crying little thief... Skie, if he had to give that ill-starred group their names. In the end they had served his purposes in the way he had desired of them, though at times they had seemed regrettably non-compliant to his wishes.

At last he found his way to a dark and low tavern, occupied by roughly dressed, thuggish men who spoke very quietly to one another. Eldoth Kron would have been quite at home. The scarred bartender regarded Edwin's coin as well as any other, in any case. He ordered a room, and dared a meal of slightly burned flounder, sitting alone and relying on an imposing and forbidding glare to turn away any stares from the brutish and hygienically challenged in his direction. What they called "sea ale" here burned his throat, so different to the clear refined grain vintages of home. He jotted notes and agenda in Mulhorandi, upon part of his low-running stock of spare parchment at his side. It would be necessary to gain confirmation first; Denak would demand that, as if the wretched conjurer enjoyed to pretend that the word of an Odesseiron Red Wizard was insufficient. His notes then turned to jotted musings on the fireball casting he had mastered of late, with lists of various people he wished to cast it upon, and a few small and entertaining illustrations in the margins of the paper...

Yes; coherent and obvious plans that would have to succeed. He retired carefully to the narrow, dirty, and deeply inadequate room assigned him, and slept away exhaustion from all he had recently endured.

For a minor first step in his plots, Sorcerous Sundries was a gaudy building that reminded Edwin of some of Thay's magical structures, though there was too much blue and too little red to its stained-glass roof and windows, and it was smaller than most of Eltabbar's equivalent architecture. With the sun almost at its zenith, the glass glistened brightly, reflecting rainbow patterns into the stone-paved street. He'd continue to keep such reasonable hours for as long as he could, Edwin had resolved; would not need to be summoned from his rest at any unmercifully early hour any longer. A spare, inferior robe; parchment; candles; components; —he could not allow himself to be excessively tempted by the scrolls, though some intrigued him and the hedgewizard pretending to be in charge spoke some lowborn rudeness to him when he lingered too long by their racks, studying the rune for raining minute flaming meteors upon one's enemies.

The Iron Throne, he found easily enough in the centre of the city; marbled and windowless. He could not afford to linger long by it, only to begin his investigation by understanding the goal...
Later, he sat alone in the narrow room, by candlelight, at last ready to write in the code his supervisors used:

Denak,

I require one wizard to assist me if I am to succeed. He needs no qualifications beyond willingness to serve me and minor matters I shall explain; there is no need to waste any with powers almost equal to mine.

My location is...

No doubt he would wait several more days. Perhaps his postscript regarding the need for more coin ought to have been written in a larger hand. He practised his spells, frequented the public bathhouses for the limited purposes of cleanliness and warmth, and carefully walked in the parts of the city with more fresh air and better-kept streets; no need to spend any more time in that disgusting inn than necessary.

One night as usual he returned, dark-cloaked, from his—meaningless tramping about the city that might as well have been uncomfortably adventuring all over again, it was supreme and wondrous forbearance upon his part that he tolerated such fools that also allegedly completed work for Thay—back to the inn for tasteless food and bad wine. Talking to the bartender was a young man with a rattery front chin and short, untidy light brown hair; Edwin would have paid no account if not for the dark red wizard's robes and the accent. The boy gestured expressively, asking his questions in an excessively loud and earnest tone of voice.

"Yes, have you a wizard staying here? I'm meant to meet him here; if you charge for the information I do understand. Lovely place you've got here. Pardon me, I'm sorry, sir. I can't quite hear..."

"Close your mouth and cease embarrassing yourself!" Edwin commanded. So Denak mocked him with this specimen? At least the boy had the sense to tone down his robes.

The boy smiled and waved. "Why, that's my brother in the Art now! Wonderful to meet you at last, dear fellow; if you've ever heard about me, my name's Philias..."

"Sit down and have a drink," Edwin commanded through gritted teeth. The bumbling fool's voice was far too loud. Grubby faces had started to turn in interest to them.

"Thanks very much; I've had such a journey, you know how teleport-lag takes it out of one." Edwin took the idiot searching for a village's arm as forcefully as he could, trying to stop the imbecile's babbling. "I'd really like some grape juice, if there's any of course, I don't want to be an inconvenience. Is this place supposed to be an example of the western atmosphere? It seems fascinating. I'm sure it's very thrilling, isn't it?" He looked around himself with wide, excited eyes.

"Sit down and shut up," Edwin hissed. "And let us talk where we can be uninterrupted by gibbering chimps," he added in Mulhorandi. "(Oh, wait, you are a gibbering chimp. Never mind.)"

The boy settled awkwardly into the nook Edwin had chosen at the far side of the room; under his breath Edwin muttered a quick spell to temporarily block their words from the hearing of others.

"Spell done? Marvelous." A light, cheery yellow colour flared briefly around Philias' right hand, and he seemed to poke at Edwin's spell for himself. "First off, I have a verbal message from Denak, which you can probably guess at, it's just to, ah, continue working," the young apprentice said (probably translating something much less courteous! Denak never appreciated his talents, Edwin mused to himself), "and also this..." Phillias drew a sealed letter from his robes and pushed it across
Edwin passed his fingers across the magic in the red seal, examining it for breaches; it didn't seem that this imbecile had tampered with the scroll, but one never knew for sure.

The enclosing parchment felt Thayvian in origin to Edwin's hands, a certain texture he felt the absence of when he ran his hands over the scrolls of these western barbarians. Certainly unsurprising, that. The seal was standard to Thay, keyed to the magic of the the designate Red Wizard, in this case himself. His callsign rune was scripted to it, and his fingers travelled across all parts of seal and paper. Pristinely unbroken.

The apprentice was rabbiting on again, whilst Edwin finished his examination of the message with the due caution of a wide-respected Red Wizard.

"You see, I'm actually with Lauzoril's lot, not Nevron the Conjurer's like you—just graduated six months ago," the boy explained. (Fools were able to graduate! Edwin thought. And great wizards like he were forced on these ridiculous projects!) "And when I heard that you needed someone, I just metaphorically put my hand up and volunteered to help you, because you see your cousin Liss has always been so kind to me since I started, and I..."

Edwin unsealed the note; it was merely a few quick lines of Mulhorandi, written in a sharp and decisive black script he knew well enough after years of collaborative written magical exercises worked between them.

_I am only a Challesme by family, with no connection to the Odesseirons or Leonovs. Liss was always so nice to me at work, always explaining things to help me—and now there's this mission. I hope—" His fair cheeks reddened. "I hope to prove myself to you, that I might someday approach Liss as an equal; that one day I could dare so far as to openly ask..."

A Leonov, related to the Odesseirons, would never be permitted to throw herself on a climbing weed like this, Edwin thought; and it was plain that Lissa herself was aware of it. "You wish to wed my cousin?" Bellissima Leonov had many fine qualities, as various people under her Charm spells regularly testified, but none of them were of a marriageable sort, surely. "Do you suffer from any kind of...blindness problem? Because although you will insult my cousin at the cost of a slow and
"She's the best woman in the world!" Phillias said. Edwin sighed, considered casting a temporary deafness spell upon himself, and resigned himself to the realisation that even his godlike reflexes were not swift enough for the task. "Ever since that first day at work, when I didn't know the slightest of things and everyone was laughing at me for coming from Stavalian—" he named one of the very lesser-known Thayvian academies, a far inferior school to Edwin and Lissa's own. "Liss explained the spell to me, so clearly that it stayed in my mind forever—she has the most beautiful voice, doesn't she? Like a violin played by a master—and she's the most intelligent person I know, and she has a wonderful laugh—I love it when her eyes crinkle up at the corners, you know, and the way her hair curls into those little fine hazel threads when the air's damp with transmutation energy and—"

"That's. Enough." Liss was civil to this fool? His unbelievably earnest adoration—now if an equally foolish woman gave it to Edwin as his due, but the difference was that he deserved it... "We will discuss my plan now, and nothing but. (A plan no doubt too cunning and intricate for the likes of your comprehension, but I shall do my best to duly simplify.) What personal transport spells do you have available, boy?"

"I know the dimension door incantation, my casting time's down to three seconds, and I should be able to cast it from what I've got—the old substitute-feather-for-powdered-pearl trick, of course you know, actually has a time advantage when you activate the casting as long as you time the breath right." Edwin had never done so, but recalled discussing the spell with the proper ingredients in the course of his studies. "And I've the spell components for two teleport castings," Philias went on—rogue stones, most likely, Edwin thought. It appeared even this Challesme had some idea of what constituted reasonable funding. "I've a scroll for Sefrakt's careful target variant as well as the standard version in my own spellbook; in truth I've memorised that even now, in case of emergency." The idiot gave a nervous laugh. "If you need the scroll, I'm quite willing to lend that to you..."

An adequate selection. That would work; and he would not have to spend his own precious time attempting to instruct the pathetic and undoubtedly block-headed novice. "I find that acceptable. You will memorise each of them as many times as your limited capacity may allow, to be cast as quickly and with as little direct access to components as possible," Edwin ordered. "I will take the scroll for safekeeping." Perhaps at last this time the paper would not betray him as he tried to force the teleportation spell to his will, conquer it at last and pen its wayward ways into his own book.

"Ensure that you gather your spells exactly as I command it. We ought to carry out the plan with suitable alacrity." Edwin temporarily dispelled his ward to allow the barmaid—an older woman whose craggy visage he shuddered to look upon, rather than a maid of reasonable appeal who would surely have become one of his many feminine conquests—to set two clay tankards in front of them. He thought once more of the plan in his mind. Impatiently he renewed the spell once the female departed. "You may drink, Eddard of Thay—" Where had he thought of that name? Oh, the brother that crying little brat had whined about every so often. "Edmund of Thay," Edwin said, for Eddie the Red Wizard had been the arcane might to engineer and guide the defeat of the nest of bandits. "Once we retire to attain greater privacy, I will tell you of everything you have done, and everything you will tell about doing..."
It was a trifle unrealistic to expect to march unchallenged through the barbarian city streets dragging a man bound in silver mage-ropes, Edwin knew (though in Thay it was the eminently sensible custom that Red Wizard authority should go unquestioned); so in his formal visit to the Iron Throne he cast an invisibility spell on his fellow Red Wizard first. The point was to diplomatically make the gain for Thay; and a gift as a first step in the diplomatic process was standard, as he knew. On this his own ambitions rested (and they would see; and they would all see, so he promised himself).

He strode boldly toward the Iron Throne's chief edifice, in robes returned to his customary and magnificent red, a large ruby at his throat to show dignity. Phillias' family had given him a surprisingly large amount of gold for the interests of the mission, and Edwin's book bristled with the spell scrolls he had purchased. (Naturally for the sake of the greater glory of Thay. Simians could be most gullible.) He majestically ignored the gate guards and knocked, once; the mark of an important man was that he should only need to knock once.

"'Scuse me," the ape-faced left-handed guard said. "Got an appointment?"

His disrespectful tone Edwin temporarily let pass. "Announce to the junior Anchev that the Thayvian representative has arrived, my good man. And..." Upon the unlikely case that his first phrasing would go unlistened to. "You may also mention that I have an account of a bounty I know him to have set."

"Master Sarevok's up in the ducal palace all day," the second ape-face said. "Ye've no appointment. Leave, sir, or you might not like what we'd have to do."

Edwin would have empathised, perhaps, with Sarevok Anchev over such insolent lackeys as these, if their insolence had not been directed towards his own person. "You will show me to his nearest inferior, then," he demanded grandly. (It would be reasonable to begin to make his impressive figure known to Anchev's second-in-command; though of course he must win the trust of the man himself.)

"Do ye even known the name ye're looking for?" These simians had truly suspicious minds. How much longer would his invisibility spell last? Edwin heard snuffling begin to come from the air near him; perhaps he had arranged the ropes too tightly about Philias' nose and mouth. Sooner or later even these fools might begin to become suspicious.

Edwin's mind quickly tried to fix on names he had heard over the course of his investigation; Rieltar Anchev was the irrelevant adopted father, there was some wizard with a name beginning with W, western syllables that he did not wish to twist his tongue about on the spot. Why waste his mind on unimportant petty details? But at this moment it was hard to know externally who was truly in the Child's confidence and personal hierarchy; he had to think quickly...

"Temoka?" Edwin attempted. The man in question seemed to have the repute of some loyal henchperson, either the godbotherer or one of the principal bodyguards he'd heard mentioned. Edwin decided to take a decisive course of action, allowing sheer confidence and innate superiority to substitute for any possible pronunciation difficulties. A foreign name; perhaps Kara-Turan, fewer syllables than that other bootlicking lackey. "Yes, you will escort me to Tomake immediately. The truth is that I carry a captive, invisibly concealed; and your master would be most displeased were this particular prisoner to slip through his fingers."

The simians glanced at each other; the right-hand one nodded. "Right. I'll ask the lady if she's in a mood for visitors, and if you're not the type, Keron here'll throw ye off the steps."

"No sudden hand movements, please, sir, or it might be my duty to act," the second guard said. "Let's wait calm and civil-like. Mind if I check the truth of your story?"
"Oh, go ahead," Edwin said, sparing half a thought for Philias, invisibly groped by this other fool. He impatiently tapped his foot, waiting. Tomeka; here referred to as a woman, some sort of personal bodyguard to Sarevok Anchev, his information had run.

"She'll see you," announced the first simian; and through the Iron Throne's marked doors Edwin’s spells dissipated. What greeted him and Philias were three swords, pressed rather too closely to Edwin's form for comfort; and a stocky woman in heavy armour, scowling. Temako's features were indeed of Kara-Tur and quite unattractive, Edwin thought, her nose apparently broken and badly set in several places. She stood at about Philias' moderate height, though her thick build made her appear far more substantial than he, and she bore a large and sharp flail at her belt.

She was moderately intimidating. "For what have you come, Red Wizard?" she said coldly, staring at Edwin as if he were some unpleasant cockroach upon the floor. He swept the female a magnanimous bow.

"I have brought one of the mercenaries for which there is a bounty," Edwin replied, pointing to the gagged Philias; "a countryman of mine, it is true, for which I have come to apologise in person to your master." Something in the composition of Temeka's thin lips seemed to change at the use of that last word, but Edwin tended to pay little attention to such things. "Edmund is his name; a fool whose title deserves to be lost. I come as an Odesseiron to make amends...once you escort me to the young lord Anchev."

"I see," the woman said slowly. She was armoured as a warrior; perhaps she was as educationally sub-normal as the typical brutish fighter, Edwin considered. Still, he had used relatively simple words to make his explanation, so she surely understood him. "You will follow, and wait. Diarmid, you should take them to the cellars; watch especially the mercenary. I think you may have your wish of seeing my lord," she said to Edwin; her accent was strong, he observed. A sign of linguistic unintelligence. "It may go more ill for you than you believe, mage."

It was no time to raise trivial objections; Edwin shrugged. "Then I shall look forward to more of your charming company," he said, trying not to let the sarcasm bleed too far into his voice; no doubt his personal magnetism would win over the woman at some point.

It was dark and cold, and though only Philias was bound, there was a guard who glared fiercely at Edwin's evey movement, knowing him to be a powerful caster. He loathed such waiting; and yet, when they were taken to the huge form of Sarevok Anchev himself, Edwin felt a slight flash of apprehension pass through him at last. Philias was meant to tell, finally, a few details of their band, and to make an exit for which Edwin was not to be blamed at all; but when the other Red Wizard was chained down, the bones in his right hand first to be shattered, Edwin's mind lost ability to concentrate with fear.

The boy screamed on and on, and Edwin waited for the confession to spill from him.

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91. The Games Room

16 Flamerule - Durlag's Tower, Upper

Dark warriors with flaming, searing swords. My arm became charred and burned. They came quickly upon us as if rising from the dirt, though the swirl of the dustclouds made sight a difficult thing, in the path to the tower itself.
They were fierce in the attack. Shar-Teel evaded them, but Ajantis was stabbed and burned, his armour melted; it was Viconia closest, to reluctantly heal him. I felt the sting of the fire; my own flesh roasted, and they pressed Shar-Teel closely. Inhuman and worrying. I couldn't yet feel the pain that I knew would come.

"Druid! Cast a dispel, immediately—it is their weapons that hold power! Hurry!" Viconia commanded. She lithely dashed away from the battle, hiding herself behind the falling stone columns that no longer guarded the path, breathing harshly in desperation when a searing sword cut deep into stone not far above her white hair.

Faldorn chanted; her voice did not sound as secure as usual, invoking a plea to Silvanus' name and titles many times. "By the Oak Father! Banish this foul magic—banish this unnature—"

Imoen's power flared openly into the first construct; the missiles left no stain on the grey armour, though the figure stumbled. She chanted again, standing brave and ready. Shar-Teel did not falter in her defence.

"—In the name of the Oak Father!" Faldorn shouted.

The flaming swords melted to normal blades; Shar-Teel's sword pierced deeply into one of the warriors—I may also have wildly stabbed with my right hand. Imoen's whirling missiles hit the second, letting Viconia move away. She chanted, allowed her hand to glow red, and then reached out to grab the backplate of its armour, which melted in response to her touch. Faldorn chanted some words over sling bullets she held, to bless them. Her throws pitted and spotted the dark guard, and in the end it was Shar-Teel to finally shatter the pair of them. Faldorn bent to heal us.

Viconia smoothed her hair back in place, adjusted the straps of her leathers, looked smug; did little to correct that impression. "Male, rise," she ordered Ajantis. "You have become impotent and lacking since that time, hmm? A liability."

"You should stop it, Vic," Imoen said. She carelessly brushed the dust from the casting off her hands.

"Never you mind, jalil," Viconia said. Towards the great doors of the tower, the undead served as guards.

Bows and slings do not work effectively against skeletons. They seemed...practically to regenerate themselves from the earth. From people that were buried there in the past, no doubt. Many of the skeletons seemed dwarven, some more human-sized; but Viconia was the first to say that some of those were a thing neither human nor elf. We tried to smash them to pieces; fragments of bone lingered on clothing and, worse, in the throat as we breathed. One became converted to the service of Shar; the blood seemed to drain from Viconia's face whilst she controlled the walking bones, her skin dull and grey-black.

"I have power over the undead," she repeated. "By Shar, this will increase; in Shar's name—lil'ahurl, you will fight for Shar—" She moved her skeleton to a gathering of others; it was soon torn apart, but by then Shar-Teel had sprung upon the enemies, her sword and the blunt force of Faldorn's rough club shredding them to pieces.

We passed below a gate that would be great even for an ogre, of weathered and sturdy stone. Beyond it, a wooden bridge covered a deep and dry pit. There were old and dark stains on the timbers, but they did not creak as we walked atop it. The stone doors had been passed through by others; they yielded to Shar-Teel and Ajantis' pushing of them.
The first floor was silent, and burned. There were charred remains of—we thought, humans; black charcoal and white bone fragmented on the floor. No remnants of armour or weapons; not likely to be the adventurers we searched for, and Viconia claimed they had been dead some months. A frame still hung lopsided on the wall, a stone shape blackened by soot; there were fragments of a torn picture still within it, coloured in an indecipherable darkness after this time and damage.

We had brought in a wind from the door, and a fragment of parchment shifted, floating up to my hands. Words in Common filled it:

...come...Durlag's Tow...no touching tapping knocking rapping patting poking prodding standing sitting stroking jabbing spindling most EXCRUCIATINGLY fiendish TORTURE devices known to man...

"I don't think I see any traps that did this," Imoen said. "Can't feel any spell-trigger things, you'd need...some engine to spit fire everywhere..."

There didn't seem anything embedded in the walls that could spill out flames like that. On the floor, there was something about one of the flagstones, standing in an open, shadowed doorway; it seemed slightly smoother, cleaner than those around it. Ignore the black ashes that one stood in, concentrate on enumerating what was there; stained walls with deep scratches upon them, smaller rooms opening from the round entryway, a stone spiral staircase set in the centre.

"No traps? Then it's some firebreathing monster," Shar-Teel said. "Raise a light, witch, and hunt for what's lurking here."

"Shar gives me the knowledge that the flagstone will harm us if we tread on it," Viconia said, pointing to that smoother stone. "I sense undead, undead greater than simple skeletons, nearby; but I cannot hear what caused these fools to burn."

"Right. Disable it, Skie, take a year and a day about it if you must," Shar-Teel said; I went forward and knelt down, dug around to reach the trigger; and a grinning ghast larger than the thing called Korax lurched out at us, twisted claws dripping with rotting flesh slashing out. A crossbow bolt flew above me, as if I was supposed to be the distraction on behalf of the others. It flashed into a miniature lightning bolt, forcing itself to rest in the throat of the undead creature, and it fell back; there were more...

I drew the sword, moved forward; I had wanted to come here and look for the boy. Ice did not do great damage to creatures already with the cold of the grave. Shar-Teel and Imoen aimed their weapons above me, stemming the group of them, the four ghasts that came for us. Ajantis stood, shielded; he was slow and wounded, but at least he resisted being held into place. Both of us were marked by claws by the time the last ghast fell to Shar-Teel's bolt.

"Oil; torch them," Shar-Teel said abruptly.

"I know well how to deal with undead abominations," Ajantis said. Faldorn, bent over him, cast her healing spell; the slashes on his face faded more slowly than his own healing power had done for himself before. On the ground, one of the animated dead had carried a round stone, a rune carved into it. Faldon cautiously ran her fingers over it, and placed it carefully in one of her pouches. Then she summoned a small flicker of flame between her fingers, to finish the burning of the creatures.

"The hargluukkin build less above than below ground," Viconia said; "it would be well to first clear the upper floors."

On the second floor, two skeletons, lurking; Shar-Teel was first up the stairs, and she and Viconia
took them to pieces. Above there stood an old kitchen that we searched through, with a vast fire-range bigger than any I remember seeing. How many dwarves must have lived and laboured here, in the old days? There were what used to be bedrooms near the kitchen, as though the people here delighted in the warmth. Sometimes the warmest parts of a large, cold house are the kitchens. And there were spike traps here, and tripwires which triggered acid and fire. The bedrooms had once been carpeted a rich rose-pink; some chests within them had been plundered already, and lay bare and splintered. A door outside led to the rooftop.

Basilisks. Viconia flung her cloak over the first's eyes with excellent aim, and fled indoors to protect her skin from the sun. We ran forward; tried to fix the cloak over its eyes, stab its body through. There were many statues of gnolls about, some dwarves badly weathered by rain and partly devoured. One frozen figure was of a strange slim humanlike creature, not quite an elf. Above on the roof—Faldorn called down lightning from the skies before the other creatures could see us; a powerful spell, and she shivered and shook afterwards in exhaustion, but the basilisks' bright scales turned to a burned, sizzling black, and their eyes closed. There were two cruel jets embedded into a chimney-pipe, that seemed designed to spill out fire; the mechanism below was part spell, components mixed together and prepared for a quick eruption. I poured a little water on them to neutralise it, carefully scraped them away; and then one could reach inside that trap to find what had been stored there.

Rashad's Talon; but even though druids consider scimitars a honorary weapon of their order because of the history of its development, Faldorn does not believe in metal. Are the acid-tipped arrows kept with it coated in basilisk venom?

Two floors of Durlag's tower. Deadly traps; signs of others' attempts at this area; Dalton not yet found. The staircase above was still clear, showing that others had passed. At the top of the steps we found another death. The man looked eighty or ninety at least, shrivelled and ancient, his wrists spindling, so many wrinkles set in his skin that his features had vanished, a few clinging strands of white hair falling long from his scalp. There was little stench from him; the way he lay reminded me of an exhibition of ancient Mulhorandi mummies I once saw, dried and desiccated things with all moisture drained from them. He'd worn leather armour too large for him, and in his possessions he had apparently carried a sword, some tools, treasures he must have taken, a few small gems and a lock of hair the colour of yellow ash. Why would an old man make the attempt?

"His age is not natural. He did not enter the tower like this," Viconia said.

"Then can you tell how long this poor man has lain here?" Ajantis asked. Therella had said that her son Dalton wore a protective name-day charm around his neck, that he'd a birthmark on his left forearm, that he was tall and fair-haired. This man had neither of the first two markings, as gruesome as it was to tell by examining him.

Viconia's hands grew a coating of darkness about them. "If your begging amuses me, male; but in the meantime..."

It was a silver transparent shape in the air rising towards us in the glow of Imoen's pink mage-light, and it spoke. Our first ghost of the tower. The rough shape of a dwarf, in swirling robes, speaking;

"Durlag...Your debt owed..." A voice like the turning of an ancient hinge, rattling and creaking as if it had forgotten words.

Faldorn rushed ahead; none of us stopped her, for it happened so quickly, and in her right hand she held the stone she had taken from the fallen ghast. "Let your debt be paid, spirit. Let us pass, and return to your natural rest."
The ghost spoke again. "You are not Durlag, child..."

"I am a Shadow Druid and not counted a child," Faldorn said, facing it with courage. "You and this place serve no purpose, therefore you will depart."

"I agreed to aid Durlag, but he is not here. You bear his stone, but you are not him. You bear his stone, but you are not him. I promised to Durlag. To Durlag, I must..."

The spirit was incoherent, faltering; it attacked with magic, insubstantial itself, casting eight images of itself and burning us. Weapons magical had some effect to the ghost's weird ectoplasm; Shar-Teel swung to pierce through as many of the spinning reflections as she could, and I had to stand beside her. We cut away at its ability to speak the words of its old spells. It seemed to dissolve and retreat, returning to wherever it had come... Ajantis moved the man's body to a more dignified place, covering it with a scrap of ancient rug in a corner. None of what that victim had carried, Imoen said, had such an enchantment as to cause his ageing.

The third floor was a library. Horrible rats ran out at us. Bookshelves were splintered and damaged, but some tomes remained—dwarven-rune, ancient and to be carried with us. A yellowed skeleton lay chained to a table, in front of cupboards; these were entrapped, but contained potions. One or two of them even still potent, below the thick layer of dust and spiderwebs that coated them. A dark spider the size of my fist jumped out, whilst I was clearing away the traps, slowly understanding them... It was Viconia to smash it to the ground, grinding it down with the heel of her boot. Faldorn drained what venom it had from my skin.

And set to the north of that floor: a chapel in white marble, age-stained, cracked, but still intact. Heavy pews in a smooth, dark brown wood; twin axes set into the wall that had once been silver, the symbol of the dwarven deity Clangeddin Silverbeard. Dwarven runes were inscribed below them, carved with dignity into the marble. We held, I have to admit, two phrasebooks of ancient dwarven; there had been a dwarven merchant trying to sell off the last of his stock in Ulgoth's Beard, and they seemed like a good bargain at the time to me. I could decipher a few of the words: warfare, wisdom, a verb form probably to learn...

Below the altar, in a small compartment, rested a book. When I lifted its brown cover I could read it in Common, but the words seemed to dance upon the page as if it contained some magic to translate it to the native tongue of the reader. According to Imoen, the magic of it was not harmful. The words told tales of the great battles between the ancient dwarven king Melair I and the drow... It's not literature that Viconia would appreciate, but it is difficult to put down. I longed to read it while we rested, but we had our task to carry out; I should not have thought of such.

The staircase in the library ended at the floor above, and we expected to find ourselves at the tower's highest floor. Dust coated each step. We went up to see what creature was kept there; what ghost, or prisoner...

She was tall and unimaginably beautiful, with a cloud of yellow-ash hair floating to the middle of her back; her lips were a deeper colour than a red rose, her complexion of dark honey, and her eyes a shade of brown that seemed almost crimson in the scanty light that illuminated her floor. Her garb was a simple white shift wound about her body, but it was not the white created from careful washing and soaping; her shift was white as if a rainbow of colours blurred below the surface of the cloth into one prism's vision. The folds of her dress seemed to obscure a definite direction and reason why they hung as they did. It was as if we saw her floating in a palely translucent sea. The shadowed gleam that surrounded her did not come from anywhere that we could identify.

"I have been so lonely," she said, with a voice smoky as rich incense; it was Ajantis to whom she first granted her gaze. "Will you relieve my boredom, if nothing else? Would you wish to come and
offer me a kiss; or accept a lock of my hair as a gift, fair male?"

To see her was to feel slowed, to have movement drained, as if by her existence time itself ended.

Then she looked to me, and I remembered the soft locks that I had placed in the pouch I kept for needles and thread, as I had placed away the gemstones the man had carried. Mending adventurer's clothing is a task removed from the embroidered tapestries I once completed. "It is you I hold to keep me company now," the woman said. "I would much prefer a man; but do you talk, at least? Or while away the endless years with a game of chess?"

"My name is Skie Silvershield. I do know how to play chess..." I thought while I said it that I had little talent; but I had played the game enough times to perhaps show her that experience.

"She is a demon from the nether planes and you will not answer her!" Aquerna spoke.

The woman's teeth were an almost blinding white when she bared them. "Small creature, I despise your very existence. Your friend is already my toy until she ages and perishes, and your bones will lie buried in the tower forever."

"What...is your name...unnatural beast—" Faldorn spoke with strong effort. Her voice was deep and strained, and cords in her throat stood out like the lines of a tree-trunk.

"For as long as you live you may call me Kirinhale, little druid." The lady laughed, in a tone not unlike Viconia's; not a laugh comparable to the high tinkling of small bells, but the mellow sound of a splendid old violin played by a master. "Would any other of you desire a lock of my hair, or to taste the favours of my flesh?"

"We'll...kill you..." Shar-Teel breathed out; Viconia seemed to join her in the wish.

"Great Helm; I beg you; allow me to resist this evil demon," Ajantis asked.

"Shut up and leave us alone!" Imoen cried; Kirinhale shifted gently in her position, and not one of us moved. The floating paths of light about her seemed to solidify into lines of symmetry about her back, as if she was given the wide veins of wings rising behind her.

She reached out graceful fingers to Ajantis' chin. "Will you accept the lock of my hair freely from the girl, as my gift to you? Your holy god has rejected you and I find you not repulsive. Seek the lower planes between my silken thighs and I promise you ecstasy that you will imagine lasts a thousand years."

"I will not further sin through you—" he cried out. "Lord Helm, I beg once more—"

"He is withdrawn from you," Kirinhale said once more. "Then you will serve me by your death, virgin knight. I am geased against binding you to my will by force, but I can shed your blood and slay you inch by inch for your refusal." Her smooth, clean fingernails were suddenly sharp claws that raked Ajantis' flesh, drawing lines of blood upon his cheeks. His blue eyes steamed with hatred for her; but the look upon her face and the set of her eyes and lips remained as tranquil and beautiful as since her greeting to us, despite the violence of her words. "You will die with your soul yet destined to the dark planes and knowing that you have refused the rapture I would have granted."

I...do not like it when my friends are hurt.

"No! If you promise not to hurt them, I'll play chess with you!" I cried; it made her laugh.

"You accepted a part of me, and you are bound to keep me company for the next four hundred years.
Of course you will live for but a small portion of it, little human; but there is nothing you have to bargain with. I order you, begin to amuse me."

"I'll...play chess with you," I repeated. She was the one who had mentioned the game. "If I win—out of three—will you promise to let them go safe? Safe and out of here until they reach another place safe for them while they're alive and healthy?" There are so many stories of loopholes. Ulgoth the pirate used to set prisoners free by walking them with their hands untied off the plank.

"Skie, you shouldn't!" Imoen shouted.

"The best out of three," Kirinhale mused, delicately brushing her chin with her fine nails. "But you need a stake also, to make it more exciting to me." She tilted her head to one side, her features suddenly foxlike in their slender lines. "We will play three times, no fewer. For each time you lose I shall drain a precious memory from you, that you will never know it again. I will enjoy the savour of that, I think. If you lose, I will feed upon your exquisite agony as all those you brought with you live their final moments, and you will remain my companion until your death."

"And let Dalton and his party go as well," I said. "They're somewhere in the Tower too. Unless..." There was no sign that Kirinhale had murdered others up here; but I waited nervously for her answer.

"I do not know that name," Kirinhale said, and I was relieved. "Perhaps he is a prisoner of those below, or perhaps already dead. I will stake that your friends may attempt to rescue them; I think I will add to my forfeits in return. As well as a memory, I shall subtract a single year from the end of your life, each time you lose. That I shall also enjoy, though I shall have to make the rest of your years last until a better plaything comes to me. Win or lose, you have freely accepted a part of me, and will never leave the tower."

"Fine." That was the reason why we'd come here. It didn't really matter what I promised, not after the things that had happened.

She clapped her hands as if in childlike joy; a wide and almost girlish smile spread across her face. I thought that I saw colourless fog swallowing the others, that Kirinhale took me by the arm and led me through a grey passage that could not possibly exist. I forgot, for a while, why I was there and what I was doing—

It was a small, ornate room; we sat on smooth chairs coloured an ebony black, and the walls and ceiling were painted a silvery white, flecked with gold-leaf. Large pink pearls were set into the wall in deeply irregular patterns. It was a room of games. There was a glittering deck of cards at the bottom of a golden shelf, with a proud black-eyed Queen set at the top of the pile; a board of squares with black and white tokens as for that Kara-Turan game, the black pieces opal and the white moonstone; a checkerboard set with four kinged pieces upon the board, of light cypress and dark walnut; a set of three rods all of the same height, with a stack of eight golden rings in decreasing diameter upon the middle one; a brightly coloured wheel with a black arrow attached to it, the names of different spells printed upon it in a silver and shifting script; and three seven-sided dice that looked as if they had once been the knucklebones of something large, polished to such an ivory sheen that they seemed to glow.

The chessboard rested in the centre of a table of pale marble, its centre inlaid with intricate patterns in a reddish wood. One could view their indecipherable runes easily below the game, as the board itself was made of transparent glass, marked out with the lines of the squares cut into its surface. Kirinhale's pieces were the same shade of dark crimson as her eyes, and before me were chessmen made from a light-coloured jade. The pieces given were usual enough. Eight small pawns, each sculpted as a scrawny foot-soldier. Two giant rooks, muscled and solid. Two brave knights errants,
atop rearing, galloping horses. Two priests, their magic ready to defiantly throw at the enemy. A king with a noble face, and a queen serene, unreadable, and powerful.

"We play," said Kirinhale.

I moved my king's pawn forward. I did my best to think about protecting my pieces, about what Kirinhale would try to achieve. I thought about where the other pieces were on the board; I weighed each choice carefully.

"Check," Kirinhale said, and I used my black rook to protect the king.

"Check and mate," Kirinhale said, three moves later, for I had lost. "Give me your hand, little human."

Her flesh itself felt cold and light to the touch, but where my hand touched the flow of blood through her veins, it burned.

"A memory. Perhaps the obvious, to begin with?"

I was with Eldoth again, fiery and slick and exultant, and I should have blushed at the thought of Kirinhale seeing this, but I was too deep within the vision to know it. It was dark but strong, and it felt like victory just as much as the moments of slaying Davaeorn and the boy, before the regret had fallen down upon us. Eldoth was strong and had killed that night, and that I revelled in, his muscles pinning me down. There was some pain, but a savage glee in that; and the thrill of pleasure, him inside me, my nails in his back and digging into skin. I felt his harsh breathing, dirt and sweat between us. There was only the excitement of the moment—nothing else to think about, nothing separating our bodies. His hands tightened around my arms, leaving trails of rough bruises, as my own hold of him deepened. He bent his head to my shoulder, biting, and at the time the passion drove away everything else—

The memory changed. Eldoth had drawn me to his muscled chest, touched me and I'd willingly asked him for the same he wanted of me. But that moment was blank and gone. Pain and splinters from the rough wood under me. Pain as he pressed me, torture as I felt him; knowledge of the murder I did. I'd once wanted this, but it was black and twisted—no longer even a measure of some satisfaction, only cruel torment. Once it was shamefully violent but no violation, and what Kirinhale took left me without even that. Lost to me forever...

"Unimaginative, but such a thing feeds my nature," Kirinhale said. "Have we a sweet appetite for evil, little human? Now I take the second forfeit."

She lowered her mouth to my hand, although she did not break the skin with a bite. Instead she drew something slowly away from me, an unravelling and then a sharp cutting of thread from a reel of thin rope I never knew existed in me.

"Your taste is acceptable to me, and I will take more," Kirinhale said. "That you give this in ignorance is particularly sweet. Let us play the second time."

She negligently waved a hand, and the pieces rearranged themselves in their order. The injured kings and queens returned to their duties as if they had not been damaged or defeated. This time I sat for the dark crimson, she the fair jade; and Kirinhale began her first move.

The dark shade of the pieces was almost the colour of old blood, and when I laid hands on them they felt as if something writhed and pulsed beneath their surface, though the stone they were made of remained still. They writhed more strongly upon a capture of the jade enemy.
I played for defence. I sought to protect my own pieces before even to consider capturing hers. The game was slow and drawn-out; I did not return Kirinhale's aggression for aggression, but retreated about my king as much as I could.

Kirinhale stole my queen; I destroyed both of her priests with two protected pawns, and the foot soldiers seemed to grow slightly in size with the capture. I hastened back to cover on my side of the board, and her own queen attacked. She cut a swathe of offence; I tried to protect, and it became simple attrition. Slowly, she cut away my army from me. The end was coming no matter how I tried, and I knew I'd failed miserably. Twelve more moves, twelve attempts at evading death...

"Your king is dead. For your second forfeit, I know now what I shall deny you." Lost in grief at the meaning of what Kirinhale's second victory would mean, I let her; she found it inside me, and for the last time I lived through the moment—

It was one of the earliest memories I had. The grass was cool and green in the garden, and the trees were close-grown and sheltering. Delicate vines wrapped across the swing, flowering white; and my tall brother Eddard pushed me back and forth. He was so young, his dark hair cut into a bowl-like shape over his forehead, neatly dressed in dark blue trousers and jacket. Not long afterwards he would be sent away to school, and no longer have much time for his little sister. This was probably a composite of memories, packed into one imagination of a scene, in the way that memory played such tricks...

"I remember Mother, and you don't," he said. I liked it when he spoke to me; he was never shrill or stern. I didn't remember that I minded much for the words of it.

"She had lots and lots of black hair to her knees and she was very ill," the child in the swing babbled.

"No, you're just saying that because that's what they tell you. They cut off her hair after she had you, Skie. If you remembered her you'd know that. She said to me that it felt too heavy for her."

The swing went higher. The child inside it was joyful at the excitement and motion, and wished she had the courage to jump out of it and see if she could fly. She laughed and cheered for more.

"I'm telling you because Brilla is going to want you to forget," Eddard said. "She wants me to forget, too. But I'm never going to call her my mother no matter what."

Mummy-Brilla was the yellow-haired woman who sometimes came to the nursery, the child Skie knew. She was their new mother. Eddard had never liked Brilla, but she was the only one Skie remembered.

"Mother died because of you, but it wasn't your fault. You were one year and nine months old. She was so tired all the time, but none of the priests Father brought could do anything. They were always around her, but she had you and me brought to her whenever she could. I recited my lessons to her and she kept you close."

The swing swept up again; the sky was a bright and perfect blue.

"She said you were truly my sister, and I had to watch over you. So you have to promise to remember that when I go away, Skie..."

He meant that he was going away to school; but that memory might have been shadowed by other things...

"Okay. Push me again—" the child called out, laughing, and then it was dark. Nothing was left.
Then something else was taken from me. I'd lost, two out of three, and Kirinhale only smiled triumphantly.

"The third, now? I did promise myself," she said. I moved in anger before she could see to prevent it, grabbed the glass board; and smashed it open on the table in a thousand sharp shards. There was blood on my arms and cheek. I screamed in frustration, threw the pieces at the walls, and stomped heavily on them, repeatedly.

"A tantrum of temper! It perhaps amuses me...but stop that," she said, and because I held her lock of hair I did so. But there were things she hadn't yet commanded not to do, and quickly I struck a tinderbox flare and held the hair to it...

It flared quickly to fire, like human hair, and unlike human hair remained afire. It was not consumed at all. The flames danced about the yellow locks, and the only burning was of my own hands. I dropped the hair in pain. Kirinhale laughed loudly and long.

"I am a succubus of the Nine Hells, and you try fire against me?" She made a small gesture; and the flames spread to cover all of her body, licking along her skin and shift and hair, illuminating her with its beauty, and burning her not a whit. "Feel my flames, human."

She laid three fingers to my wrist, and I saw them sear the skin black, and smelled the burning of my flesh. I cried out in pain. She watched me shake in fear and spread myself to the other wall, and she laughed again to herself. Then she simply waved a hand across the table, and the board and pieces appeared intact and arranged once more.

"I hope this third game will amuse me again," she said; I cringed away from her, afraid. She let her flames die, and I had to take her hair once more. "Begin."

I've never truly understood...what chess players really mean when they talk about predicting many moves in the future, of understanding that a knight in king's bishop five and a rook in king's rook six can mean a feinted attack to your right flank. It's one of the reasons why I'm not very good at chess. I tried again; I thought there was little difference between this game and the last two she had played in the sort of moves she chose to make. It was three hundred years since Durlag's death.

"Was it Durlag who trapped you here?" I asked of her.

She moved a pawn forward with a slim hand, her lips curved slightly upward. "Durlag and I disagreed," she said. "He bound me with spells and wards and took my wings, and set the time of my sentence to seven hundred years."

Three hundred years did not give her much that was new to consider. I could take her pawn; then she could take my rook if she chose; then I could take her king's priest. Her pieces were arranged with most of them going forth; and I did not like the way her white priest had an open way before its. I thought about it; I had only read the beginning of the tome about King Melair. Some of its advice came suddenly to mind; he had sent dwarven knights to go silently into drow territory by day, and raise a mighty alarum to signal the attack when the drow priestesses were unprepared. It wasn't advice that could be directly translated to chess, but I still tried to think...

"Continue," she said. "I will not wait."

My king's knight-errant was moved to skirt her lines, and then my queen's priest tried to attack her pieces. I brought my queen herself closer to Kirinhale's side of the board, trying to prevent it from capture. She had used her priests to attack first, then her knight-errants, then her queen at the end of the game. I'd sacrificed my queen's knight against her king's rook. There was a path; she was
attacking me, but one of my foot-soldiers became a queen.

"Check," I said. This time was a closer match than the first attempt. "What about the best of five?" She would refuse, and there was a danger in asking, but it was natural to try it.

"That is too arrogant; I will drain you when you are old and wrinkled, or when I am no longer amused." Kirinhale blinked twice, and selected her knight-errant to threaten my first queen.

We both lost pieces; her priests, a queen from me; my knights; her knights, a rook and a priest. It continued through several checks and blocks, spun out like fine thread—

And she was leading me into a trap; and there wasn't an escape left.

"I will checkmate in ten moves."

I tried; it was twelve moves. When she reached again for me I raised my hand to attack her, but I could not do that under the enchantment.

"You are insipid and pathetic, I think. How strange. I want your sense of loss; for my last I choose a memory of happiness."

Candlekeep was a dull, foreign place, until that day when I first saw the girl with red hair.

"Heya! I'm Imoen! What's your name? I'm the innkeeper's daughter."

"I'm Skie! I came here with Gorion. What do you do here?"

"Not much! I'm telling you, this place can get so full of dry ol' sticks-in-the-mud. There's only so much a girl can read and clean up after."

"I like reading, but I miss dancing. And there's someone else I miss a lot too."

"Hey, race me to the guardhouse over there?"

She was my age, and we smiled at each other and talked, and chased each other over the rooftops and found all the secret passages. We both wanted to be adventuring rogues someday, and talked so much about what we dreamed and hoped for. She took me to the highest point of Candlekeep, a roof overlooking the sea, and we watched the spray of the waves rising above the rocks like the white frills of a lace veil. We drank a bottle of Arabellan Dry together on that rooftop, intoxicated and thrilled with our own daring, and put flowers in each other's hair for Greengrass after I held her ankles while she raided Ulraunt's roses from above.

She knew everything about the fortress and ran very quickly, I found out about her that first day, and we agreed to be friends and kept on meeting every single day, all the time except when one of us couldn't avoid a chore. We discovered new ways to abstract pens and inkwells from the monks and get them back before anybody noticed, and when we weren't stealing we were talking about everything and nothing under the sun.

I don't think I ever told Imoen how much finding her friendship meant to me, how lonely I was before I met Eldoth. I didn't have a best friend before. She's incredible and intelligent and bright and beautiful, almost like a sister—

And then I could remember nothing about how I met her.

"The game is done. Your companions die to feed me." I couldn't fight her. That lock of hair weighed
as heavy as a leaden chain; you needed holy water for demons, I thought, or a strong cleric to one of the righteous gods. Neither were going to be possible.

Back within Kirinhale's main chambers, a metal door was bolted over the steps. There were no windows, and no escape.

"You said you were bored, Kirinhale," I said, praying that they had had enough time. "How long has it been since you've had to fight? I suppose you find it exciting."

"Games of the mind and subtler torments are more to my preference." A pink tongue lightly licked the edge of her lips; she watched Ajantis. "Would you like to choose which of them will go first?"

"Viconia," I said, because the dark elf had started to smile in triumph, and then they all attacked.

Viconia has resistance to magic; spell-effects will usually wear away from her more quickly than any of us. All of us were free to move, and Shar-Teel's sword was close to spitting Kirinhale—

The demon moved with incredible speed. She'd her claws out, and swayed the path of Shar-Teel's sword with her bare hand.

"I see you have made use of your time!" she said. "It has been centuries since I last met drow. A shame my arts are wasted on a fellow vixen."

Her claws raked across Viconia's face, leaving four ugly gashes behind; Viconia screamed the name of her goddess, and slumped weakly to her knees. Ajantis struck with his blade, but it touched Kirinhale as if her skin were iron; likewise Faldorn's club left no mark, Imoen's spells meeting resistance. At least Kirinhale shifted away from Viconia, lithely bending away from her attackers.

Then Shar-Teel took a first blood, a cut on Kirinhale's shoulder that closed over seconds after the making. Her sword, the strongest in our possession—

"Ajantis, use this!" I unbuckled Varscona and threw it to him; I couldn't act directly, but that didn't mean I could do nothing. Shar-Teel kept attacking, and each cut she inflicted healed more slowly upon Kirinhale's flesh.

"An evil blade!" he cried. He was going to get himself killed. Though he held Varscona's scabbard in his shield arm, Kirinhale grasped his neck, and held him like a living shield against Shar-Teel's attacks; his struggles weakened, and the succubus' wounds quickly healed on her. His skin was almost as pale as the ghost.

"Come to my aid—" Faldorn hissed, and her undead wolf appeared from thin air, slavering yellow fangs dripping into the air, red eyes glowing bright. It sprang at Kirinhale's throat, and had her drop Ajantis; and then he finally discarded his lesser blade for one with the power to hurt her. Imoen, when she had a clear shot, peppered arrows at the demon's back, some of them even hurting her.

The slashes on Kirinhale's body deepened, stopped healing as quickly, though with incredible speed she turned between those pressing her closely. She shouted in shock, I think, that she was being hurt at all.

"Any bargain with the dead won't count!" I called, and Kirinhale looked at me—briefly, but Shar-Teel's greatsword went into her back once more, slicing down across her shoulderblades. "You're going to die today and return to the Abyss!" She was trying to kill them; I truly had to encourage her death.

Shar-Teel, Ajantis, the undead wolf; Kirinhale gave a powerful kick, and Faldorn's animal flew to
the opposite wall, its bones shattered to protrude whitely through its flesh. But Varscona sung cold in
Ajantis' hand, piercing the demon's smooth skin, and Shar-Teel's strikes showed no sign of
decreasing in ferocity and an even greater strength. Kirinhale's bright blood flowed over her shift in
many places; she shouted again in pain. She would have bled badly if she was human, and I thought
that perhaps they had already killed her—

She disappeared into thin air. And moments later, Imoen screamed, trying to pry invisible claws from
her throat, pushing herself wildly forward and stabbing her sword at something that seemed not to
exist.

"Imoen!" I couldn't feel anything around her; she was pale but still standing, wildly glancing about
and searching for the next attack.

"Spells gone—" she panted; and then a flame arrow came from thin air toward Shar-Teel, burning
her chest. Then magical missiles, a flood of them summing to more than Imoen usually conjured; the
musical laugh again, the presence somewhere in the air.

"I can keep this form forever, little flies," Kirinhale's voice said; first it seemed to come from one end
of the room, then the other. "This may be even more amusement than I had thought. Tell me, any of
you, how long do you think I can remain ethereal?"

"As long as you last before we kill you." Shar-Teel had gulped a healing potion; her armour was
blackened and burned.

"The wrong answer. As long as I like," Kirinhale said, and a blue lightning bolt slipped out. I flung
myself on the ground and it passed over my head; it was chaos and pain as it bounced from each wall
at speeds all but impossible to follow, the demon's perfect laughter echoing in the sharp crackle of its
flight. I thought I saw fear in Imoen's eyes. Kirinhale would be untouchable; she couldn't leave the
floor and neither could we; we'd tire, she'd drain and then—

"Water—" I said to Faldorn.

"Fool, you think a Sharran or a lorugvith'rell may make holy water?" Viconia called. She had not
healed herself; her torn skin hung in ragged strips from the gashes in her face. She looked far less
beautiful than usual, curled vulnerable upon the ground. "For once I wish we'd a worshipper in good
standing of one of those nauseating deities—"

The lightning bolt had faded.

"There's no natural water to call here," Faldorn said; she started another chant, and the succubus' claws interrupted. She rolled backwards with a harsh shriek; Ajantis and Shar-Teel dashed forward
to strike where something had been, and found thin air.

"Water—" I gestured incoherently. Faldorn smiled suddenly, and reached for her canteen; stole
Viconia's, and Ajantis and Imoen surrounded her and guarded her. She broke the seals quickly, with
a sound like snapping wood.

"Oak Father...bring it to my will..."

Ajantis swung Varscona through the air, seeming to impact on something; Imoen chanted a cantrip,
and for a moment Kirinhale seemed to leave a shadow on the carpet. But her ethereal form was as
quickly renewed; Imoen struck wildly about herself with her shortsword, and Faldorn kept saying
her words—

The water rose from its containment and spun about Faldorn's hands like a silk skein. It left her
hands, mutating into a thousand tiny drops. Faldorn flexed her fingers as if pulling open the lid of a jar, and the other canteens we carried burst open in an instant. The droplets whirled around all of us, like Imoen when she chose to juggle eight silver balls with shining magic. Faldorn in her fierce belief was at the centre of it all.

The water thinned into blue sheets barely the width of cotton thread, protectively travelling about all of us, droplets seeking out patterns in the air. Faldorn searched with a druid's instincts. For Kirinhale's unseen abilities had enough physical force to them to attack, and where it was not possible to use fire's smoke against a demon one could use this to trace her presence. The liquid shield swept across the wide room, and then outlined in its sheen were a set of long claws. Ajantis and Shar-Teel knew again where to fight—

I could almost feel the Sharran blade transfixing the demon. It was cold, and Kirinhale's blood boiled a brighter red than human. She hissed, trying again to flee, trying to attack Faldorn; but we were all by her. Kirinhale was a blank figure outlined in the bright droplets Faldorn manipulated, and when she bled it fell to the thick green carpet.

"Four hundred years more—and I would be free to the highest plane of the Abyss instead of the lowest—" Kirinhale said. Once more she became visible, panting; Ajantis had forced Varscona through her ribcage, pinning her to the wall; and Shar-Teel had her pierced through the thigh. Then Shar-Teel ripped out her blade from Kirinhale's flesh; blood poured from the large wound. She raised the greatsword high. "Pray it takes beyond all your lifetimes for me to crawl back," Kirinhale said; and her voice was not natural, for it was far gentler than it was when she had otherwise spoken, as high and sweet as glass crystals tinkled by the breeze. "For you release me, one way or anoth—"

Shar-Teel cut through Kirinhale's neck, and the lips moved silently when the head flew free, yellow-ash hair streaming behind it. The body removed itself from Ajantis, bleeding copiously by tearing itself from the blade, taking two tottering steps forward. The arms caught the severed head in the midst of its trajectory. Beneath the body there was the smell of crackling brimstone and a black portal, and red and terrible things moved below it. Something laughed. Kirinhale's body slowly fell within that place, dissolving into nowhere that any of us could bear to look upon. Her hair streamed above her head when she fell, and then under our feet the blackness disappeared. I searched for her lock of hair; only grey ashes remained. The floor was cleansed of her blood as if Kirinhale had never lived in the tower at all. She'd been a demon; she'd been bored and unchanging for so long, and that was why...

Faldorn gracefully gestured, and the water she wielded took on a bright, white glow for an instant; she spread her hands wide, and it poured back into our containers as if of its own accord.

"This place is purified," she said with a sigh, and sat beside Viconia. She raised a weary hand to pet Ajantis' squirrel, emerged from a hiding-spot behind a damaged vase. "I would much rather work with earth than water. And I hate it up here," Faldorn said. "It is unnatural to be so high up in a stone building like this; I can sense little of nature."

"And," Imoen said, looking down at the metal door that still remained fixed to the room's only exit, "you might have to keep on hating it for a while..."

Kirinhale was gone. I'd been such a fool.

"What kind of lock is it, Imoen? Did you test it?" I said.

"This kind's bolted from the outside," she said. "We all saw it when Vic freed us, we can't pick this...oh, I get what you mean. Hope you're right about that. Yeah, she was the real prisoner here."

Imoen scowled, and ran a hand across her stained face. "We've gotta rest. No spells...a succubus..."
I moved, not as exhausted as the others, to that iron door, and stepped through it; when you thought about the illusion, it turned to air in front of you. The stone stairs were comforting to reach again. They had been free to run from the demon's prison all along, and I'd failed to realise it any sooner.

"You defeated," Viconia said, looking at Faldorn slumped to the ground beside her, the pale and wounded Ajantis, Imoen leaning drained against the wall, "one of the lesser forms of demon; whose power lies in seduction rather than any variety of fighting skill—" though she gave a small, self-congratulatory smile at that—"already imprisoned with her powers bound. And it was because of one fool who took what she should not have."

"Two," Imoen said. "You know us rogue types and shinies." She gave a sheepish grin. "Er...I'll try to make the divination spell say more specifically what everything does next time. I was right that it didn't directly cause that poor guy to get all energy-drained, wasn't I?"

Shar-Teel cuffed her on the side of the head. "Fool. Anything else here that's not cursed or damned?"

The chess pieces lay broken on the ground in the room of games, the metal and jewels tarnished in decay. Many of the pieces, I thought, were probably Tethyrian-human, the style of Haedrak I's Empire or even before... That is not important. There were a few broken weapons kept stored in a dusty cupboard; a clean, white porcelain bath, completely dry; in a chest a richly embroidered blue cloak, long enough for a human or elf, that none of us dared to wear. There were no rats nor other vermin on that floor; no sign of life left.

"We must rest," Viconia said tightly; "or rather, I must petition Shar for restoration and rest; mend my cloak for me, Skie, and I need something to eat."

"Y'know, sometimes I'm not entirely sure you pull your weight in the party, Vic," Imoen said; and the two of them went into an argument on the skills of drow noblewomen.

It was dark outside, after all that had happened; the end of the day, Viconia cursing the moon before she prayed.

—

lorugvith’rell - treeshagger

—

92. Statues

17 Flamerule - Durlag's Tower, Four Guardians

We found another human body in the floor at the end of the stairs: a man not matching Dalton's features with a poisoned dart in his gullet, from a wall trap set off by a pressure plate that reset itself, a complicated arrangement of machinery... I ought to have thought about the death; was he one of Dalton's friends? Maybe he'd human family like Therella who worried about him; like probably every person in the Cloakwood mines. He had not been dead long, but his face was black and his tongue horrifyingly thickened and protruding from his lips. I tried to look away from it.

There were ghouls and ghasts; undead that appeared to materialise out of the very walls. Their flesh sloughed away like melting tallow. There was a room at the end of a winding corridor only wide enough for one human, and too small for Shar-Teel and Ajantis' height. At the end of it unliving jewels were buried in the ground, but no keys. For there was a hidden door beyond the dead man, of
the sort of lock no picks can unravel, set to open for one key alone.

Faldorn stepped forward with the piece of stone she had taken from a ghast. It bore a dwarven rune, and without explaining what she was doing, she simply held it up to the secret door; and then it slid quietly aside for us. On the hinges were traces of fresh oil, as if the last here had done something to ensure that it would open again on their return. The lock was on the outside, but the door itself was set slanted to return to its original place. It closed again, when we stepped through; and by Imoen’s mage-light we saw a dark banquet-hall decorated with a red-clothed table.

"Faldorn, stop moving!" She’d walked confidently down, as though following something none of us could detect; and glinting in Imoen's pink glow were two silvered jets on either side of her, embedded in the walls.

A fire trap; mageflame. "I think I've directed it so the fire will fizzle out," I said.

"Don't think. Either you're sure or you're not," Shar-Teel said. "Druid, get back from her—"

There was a small explosion—a wave of heat; I flung myself to the ground, and nursed badly singed eyebrows. The jets themselves were far more damaged, blackened and the machinery ruined; it stung, hurting badly. Faldorn healed the worst of it.

She walked onward, into the room's darkness, surefooted. "This is where the real stone begins," she said. "I must reclaim it for the Oak Father; test how far the rock extends."

We caught up to her, and saw her sitting cross-legged where the hall opened still wider. I stopped in shock at the sight of four short figures, standing in the shape of a square; but they did not move. Statues. Faldorn chanted softly for a while; nothing seemed to happen, though her voice continued.

Imoen sent her light directly over the heads of the statues. We stepped forward to examine them. They had the form of dwarves, and seemed to be baked out of some sort of clay. Some of their features were similar, but the four bore very different aspects. One was in black, his face covered by a mask, carrying a sharp and strangely shaped blade that I did not wish to try to take from his hands. A second was strongly armoured in shining plate, bearing an axe slung to his back, standing straight-backed and with a large, bristling beard. The third was much shabbier by comparison: his sculpted robes were a ragged grey, his eyes wide and staring, one hand clasped to an ear. The fourth wore a bright red robe embroidered with deep purple grapes, his face pink-cheeked as a rosy apple. It was detailed work, with the look of enough flexibility that I could imagine them walking from their places, but I could see no switch or control for them to do so. Though the look in their eyes seemed to follow us, they remained still.

"It is not comparable to the art of the Underdark," Viconia said. She flicked her fingers against the cheek of the grey-cloaked one; it made a faint, almost metallic sound, but nothing happened. "My House possessed many fine examples of drow sculpture; mature and sophisticated pieces, such as Ghesifae's "The Congress Between The Draegloth, the Three Succubi, the Glabrezu, and the Lowly Male Slave," or DeGavarta's "The First Matron In Her Pleasure Chambers," or Zhalin's "The Spiders' Slow and Torturous Execution of the Traitor Drizzt," or..."

Ajantis had placed his hands over his ears after the first artistic title.

"Look here," I said. The wide, heavy stone table between the dwarven statues was marked only by a slight hollow in its surface, with a rune engraved below it. The shape reminded me of the wardstone Faldorn had used for the first secret door, but the rune itself was plainly different. "It's another key that lifts the slab. Another door, I think."
We'd have to search for that new stone, with no guarantee that we would find it at all; what if Dalton's group had already found it and taken it with them? Or we could try to pick the lock somehow; but it would be almost impossible to recreate something like that...

The ground trembled, and Shar-Teel swore in Faldorn's direction. Faldorn herself didn't look up, her palms pressed tightly to the stone and her eyes closed, humming some tune in a low voice. It looked as if the rock rippled about her hands, as if she had lowered them lightly into a pond instead of rested them on solid earth; a pattern of force, circled lines of the stone yielding to her...

And the statues were very quiet. I did not see the moment that they first began to move. Then they were walking, in utter silence. Shar-Teel grabbed the shoulder of the armoured one with a gauntleted hand, but he stepped free of her, though doing nothing against her. No sound came from the four, and they walked to surround Faldorn, one in each cardinal direction. They waited mutely. I don't think I had seen anything so creepy as those waiting statues before; I could have drawn blade on them, but they did not move further. The air was chilled and clammy and still, and everything waited. From Shar-Teel's expression, with her hand on her undrawn sword, she felt something similar. Imoen wrapped her arms about her chest and shivered.

Faldorn opened her eyes. She did not seem to react in shock; she watched the statues, and their unmoving eyes watched back. I had the distinct impression she should not have done...whatever she had been doing.

It was the armoured statue who first spoke, if it could be called such, his face moving, his mouth falling open, the movement only a little cruder than a natural dwarf speaking. It was disturbing especially because the artificiality was slight.

"Fuernebol," the word came from its mouth, a rusting and clanking voice of many years' decay; and then, "You are not like him. But like me."

"Please be—clearer, good dwarf," Aquerna spoke, her tail twitching. "If we have disrespected this place, those of us more brutishly inclined will regret it." The statues, and Faldorn, ignored her.

"The others...were not afraid not to heed to find..." the grey-cloaked figure said.

"Yes, I feel what they did," Faldorn said. "It was not enough."

"...You take your power easily..." a hollow voice came from the one in black. Its knife did not move in the darkness.

"Of course. I expect to reclaim this place for the Oak Father."

"...And you are not restrained." The red-robed one might have been expected to have a sweeter voice than the others; but it was a creaking monotone, slow and firm. "Fuernebol...young, but not him..."

"So then you advise us to examine why. Durlag built this unnatural thing and was duly punished, I know that," Faldorn said. I waited, horrified, in case the dwarves took offence to her. Then the armoured one spoke again:

"You will answer me this.

"I am the warrior's fate.

"I raise him above his brethren, I amplify his deeds.

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"You will answer me this.

"I am the warrior's fate.

"I raise him above his brethren, I amplify his deeds.
"He becomes scornful, where once he had respect.
"He becomes a giant, where once he was a man.
"Yet I lack the proper honour—
"Raise me up in glory!"

Imoen shook her head. "Riddles!" she said. "I've heard this kind of story before."

"Pride," Shar-Teel said. We looked to Faldorn's haughty glance at the four figures.

Second was the statue in black; Imoen's light moved slightly above the statue as it spoke, glimmering in the surface of its blade.

"I am the warrior's curse.
"I steal his future, I mar his past.
"The more he has, the less it seems.
"He becomes a slave of glittering things.
"Yet I hunger—
"Feed me that which glitters beyond all else."

"It's not love, is it? A **good woman, above rubies**, y'know, glittering beyond anything else," Imoen quoted, and shrugged. "I like rubies by themselves, though."

"**Ssinssrigg** is a weakness," Viconia said. "But you of the inferior races lie; I think we must search for something that truly glitters."

The grey-cloaked one spoke third.

"I am the warrior's bane.
"I live in the darkness of his soul.
"I bring him to his knees, trembling and weeping.
"Unable to lift a hand in his own defense.
"Yet still I sleep—
"Awaken me!"

The last line was almost yelled, shockingly loud. Imoen drew in a sharp breath. "Fright," she said; and her face looked pale in the darkness. I remember all the times I have been frozen in place, forced to do nothing while people tried to kill us, and the desperate fear that would have made me unable to do anything even if I could have moved. And I remember Imoen smoke-stained and bleeding, wanting to escape. I can only remember her on the road, miserably fighting off death beside her...

"'Tis a disgraceful flaw we all must seek to rid ourselves of," said Ajantis; and I remember that I have read that paladins are given power to withstand fear.

Then the last, the red-robed statue, spoke, its apple cheeks widening.
"I am the warrior's madness.

"I curse him with trust and respect.

"I slow the battle in its course by stealing his passion for blood,

"And offering a softer emotion in return.

"Yet I thirst for more—

"Give me the drink of sweet crimson."

"Love," I said. Painful memories.

The four statues moved again, as silently as before; and returned to their place about the stone slab. Faldorn raised herself to her feet.

"Care to explain that fooling about, idiot?" Shar-Teel said.

"I found the shape of the stone," Faldorn said. "The heart of this place lies below our feet. The other adventurers reshaped the walls and bypassed all the enemies, because of how many people are dead here."

"Then that would make the previous guests powerful, would it not?" Viconia said. That was good; it must have been Dalton's people.

"There is a deep pit further in the rock." Faldorn frowned, her eyebrows knotted as if over a difficult mathematical problem she could not express in words. "The pit is not right. The stone that Durlag unnaturally carved allowed them so far, but there was a wrongness there that they could not overcome even from behind. I am already behind, but we can learn. It will not allow us through yet. I suppose we must answer the questions."

"Fuernebol," I quoted the word that the statues had said to her. A dwarven word, perhaps a name. "Do you know what that means?"

"No," Faldorn said. "All they told me was that we ought to answer their questions."

"Imoen, could you make your light a bit brighter over here?" I have worn the ring to see in the dark for some time now, but I can't read with it. "It might be important. I'll try..."

"Answer riddles. Typical male puffed-up buffoonery," Shar-Teel said. "Then we'll hunt. Is the word important, Skie?"

I traced through the indexes of dwarven runes in the book. "Fuernebol... In three syllables like that. It's probably a name, some relation to the root word for home. Peace-home-child, if the written runes are shaped that way..."

Faldorn snorted, folding her arms with attempted dignity. "I am sick of these spirits calling me young." She was, probably, younger than Imoen and me...

I swallowed. We'd taken her here. "How old exactly are you, Faldorn?"

She lightly flushed below her tanned skin, and chewed on her bottom lip.

"Sixteen years of life...come Midwinter," she admitted finally. She looked around; Imoen and Ajantis were staring at her. She raised her upturned nose high into the air. "Stop watching me like that, you
ignorant defilers of Nature. I will be a woman and a full-fledged druid as soon as I complete my quest."

"Should we have brought you here?" I said. Dragged her, into this tower; against Kirinhale...

"Yes, of course," she said irritably. "I am destined to serve the Oak Father here, and am I incompetent? Am I incapable of using my powers?" Bright red streaked temporarily about her right hand; Viconia muttered that, for an infant, she had some ability from her inferior male god. "I'm no different to squire Ilvastarr trying to prove himself a man."

"I'm twenty," Ajantis volunteered. "And I do not know if ever I will prove my worth once more..."

"You did a fine thing to catch up, though," Faldorn said to him, in a tone I had to assume she meant to be consoling. "You told me you have only studied seven years, so you must have risen above your city family for coddling you in that disgusting blight on the landscape. I trained to be a druid for all my life, so I'm at the same growth of maturity as almost everyone, or even more because I don't care what my hair looks like or giggle over stupid things."

It was Imoen and me at whom she glared superciliously, and Imoen snickered. "We're taking you to the markets when we're back in the city, Faldorn. And a bathhouse and a hairdresser's. No excuses."

"I have passed well over six centuries," Viconia said, smirking.

"The lot of you brats, shut up and follow me and the drow. Pay attention," Shar-Teel said. The ghouls in the walls came for us...

We found ourselves standing in a circular stone chamber; four heavy, pale books sat in four recesses, covered in dwarven writing. The pages were of a thick kind of vellum, heavy and glossy and unblemished white; perhaps there was a minor enchantment to ensure the books lasted across the centuries, or perhaps a quality of the parchment itself: not made from any material I recognised. The gleaming white of the books was much purer than the best of unborn calfhide. Books; "I could try to work out what they say..."

"I don't have a good translation spell," Imoen said. "Does one of 'em have a helpful list of all traps and ways to get down underneath?"

"I only hope! I can try, just to skim them—you be careful." We had to solve the guardians' riddles, apparently, to pass; in stories it was a test of the worthy. And of course these books, so especially displayed in the room, had to be understood. I started to decipher what they were about; dwarven language is related to Old Illuskan, and gradually the accounts became clear. It's better to understand a language by studying it than by any translation spell, because there are so many cultural implications and allusions that one misses by taking the easy way. Faldorn's ressumoned wolf crept around my feet, and time seemed to slip away. I should not let myself go.

Like a god of battle, Durlag waded into the drow horde slaying thousands; his warriors dug two tunnels, one to the west and one to the north, far from the notice of the drow, and on two sides the drow armies were attacked. They yet outnumbered the dwarves three to one; but Durlag slew an enemy warrior with each swing of his blade. The strong sorceress Islanne and the servants of Haela Brightaxe were ordered to cast spells of discord, and the vicious drow turned against each other on the very battlefield.

"Skie, hurry—skeleton warriors and flesh golems—" Imoen's transparent image blinked briefly in the air, calling for help. Faldorn's wolf tugged at my trousers to summon me to where they fought. Skeleton warriors are giants, many different skeletons melded together, carrying broadswords heavier
than Shar-Teel's. Viconia could not command them, though she attempted. Terrible flesh golems that we tried to use poison upon, wraith spiders with part-translucent bodies and poisonous fangs; and a pile of burned and charred human bodies, in a dreadful hallway with a multitude of cruel, subtle flame jets buried in the walls. One could not know whether all the traps of it had been disarmed. We still hoped that Dalton was able to be found below...

It was Shar-Teel, and the fact that most of the creatures were mindless. We tried to lure them into narrow passageways, only a few at a time, and then she could fight them. Faldorn sent healing spell after healing spell; Ajantis tried to support Shar-Teel with a second blade; the rest of us stood away and aimed from a distance. So many arrows and bolts yet stored in the tower, from people too dead to use them. We used what we could. We dug deep among Durlag's possessions.

"Magic in this thing, too complicated what, but it's not a trap or a confinement." Imoen waved a small metallic circle at us, which had been protected by four skeletal warriors with unsettlingly inhuman bones. "And there's old books in this lot of trash—and a couple of mage scrolls. Wizard stuff's all mine, of course." It seemed to be a bookcase that had been splintered, most of its contents already plundered.

Edwin would have argued with her about the scrolls, and probably would have been fascinated by the succubus. And Garrick, and Eldoth... Far away. "Are you sure you can't guess? It could be part of the riddles."

Imoen struck it an experimental tap with her hand; the sound echoed against the stone walls. "Makes a little bit of noise. And at the end there it's shaped like it's meant to go into something else that wraps around it, like a holder, like it's an ornamental plate. Can't be that, wrong shape. I'd need to make something shaped so the circle slots in—I'm a transmuter, I ought to know—let me at the armoury again, the sort of crafts the dwarves were up to." She stuffed it back in her robes. "Ready to shove open those doors back there?"

A treasure room. Gemstones in a heap as if casually thrown into the small room with the rusted lock behind the bodies of the flesh golems; a glinting rainbow of green and red, blue and gold, tear-cut sapphire and polished opal, dark-coloured rubies, shimmering small diamonds, fine emeralds. Entrapped.

"These are dead things," Faldorn said. She was right, and carrying them would not help us live; but Imoen was smiling at the excitement of a cavern of bright treasures.

"Shiny dead things, Fal." Imoen held up a large, ovoid blue stone; fiery sparks flitted across its surface for brief instants, and the colour was the green-tinted shade of the ocean in late autumn, before the cold of winter. "Isn't it pretty? It's pretty." She would easily and happily pass it on to the next person she saw in need of it.

"Beljuril," I said. "There's a poem about their fireflashils; the glittering call of a fire's blue heart, Malleth called them."

"It is not possible that this great treasure is what is supposed to glitter beyond all else?" Ajantis said.

"Maybe! I'd better hold onto it then, right?" Imoen said, and placed the beljuril carefully in one of her pouches. "Look at this, Skie."

What she held was part of a strange key; and a small drawer turned for it. A bunch of purple grapes, as fresh and ripe as the berries Faldorn could create. The back of the wood of the drawer felt itself strangely warm, touched by a film of oil that smelt like a fruit tree.
"Growth magic clings to that, and it is still bound to this place," Faldorn said. "It must be able to regenerate. I did not expect natural magic here. A precious item, even if it is made from a noble vinewood that was brutally murdered by being cut down." She glared at the chest-of-drawers.

Things long dead attacked as we sought to use the ancient winepress. Wine, in an old and dusty bottle; a scent at first as rich as aged Berduskan dark, and then so melancholy as to bring tears to the eye of lost, sad memories. Better never to touch such things at all, perhaps.

"You bring the gem," said the black-clad guardian. "I am Avarice. I will bring doom upon you in this cursed place."

"Avarice is a great fault indeed," Ajantis said. "If I must fight you, I shall."

"Perhaps you should not be eager to fight," Aquerna said. Her furred face twitched.

The wine, to the red-robed, red-cheeked guardian. "I am Love. I must be murdered in this cursed place."

It was a statue. "Agreed," I said. To kill love is only a murder of a metaphor.

"Pride and fear," Shar-Teel said. "If I'd a blade on that vile dwarven male where we stood—"

"We know, ilharess. Sudden and unimaginative bloodshed." Viconia seated herself next to the wall, not far from a rotting barrel. "Transmuter, discover the nature of that unusual magic. Ligrr, page through the clumsy duergar tongue; I lack patience for it."

"So you know duergar speech, then?" I asked. The duergar are deep dwarves, but the language is supposed to be related to standard dwarven speech.

"I loathe to wrap my tongue about it. In any case it is separate to the language of Durlag, and I have cast several times and ought to rest." There was a large bruise on Viconia's cheek despite Faldorn's healing spells, and her clothing had been torn and stained, whitened by bone-dust. She seemed very tired.

Durlag's books spoke to me once more.

_Vissilitysmee was no match for the mighty Durlag. The dragon's spells could not harm him and her breath was as a gentle breeze to Durlag. She was a vicious black dragon who had preyed upon many dwarves, of dimensions larger than a great hall; yet Durlag's armour was a shield against acid, the prayers of his companions a protection against foul magic. Durlag strode into the battle and thrust a sword into Vissilitysmee's wide eye, and beat upon her thick skin with his axe. He took her black scales, and offered them to his people; he took her bones, and used them as foundation within his clanhome..._

The next book seemed all upon the adventures of Durlag and an Arlo Stoneblade.

_And Durlag moved through the Troll Mountains killing all the foul beasts. The brave Arlo Stoneblade was his man-at-arms, and side by side they fought alone for much of the way. Back to back they cut a path through the trolls, and where Durlag removed one's head, Arlo would set fire to the remnants such that it would be destroyed forever._

The fourth book had a cover streaked in a livid red. The further ventures of Durlag, to places even beyond...

_It came to pass that Durlag Trollkiller and Arlo Stoneblade ventured into the bowels of the Great_
A tanar'ri. There had to be more detail, for a...a demon from the Nine Hells. At the bottom of a page was listed the names of other heroes, Grael, Hengriffe, Chalmon, Tuorna Brightarm... The demon's gaze was said to be awful, its teeth and claws vile and hungry and cruel, its speed unmatched and its hunger for blood unstoppable. A thing that seemed too dreadful to describe, for the account of it was far shorter than the other tomes of Durlag's great deeds.

I said the final words of the last book: And these are the greatest deeds of Durlag Trollkiller. So ends the saga of his mighty axe and sword. It was all historical information, as far as skimming could tell. A shame that it did not discuss the traps; or where Dalton was likely to be.

There was a sound as if of sparking lightning. I'd adventured long enough that I flung myself to the ground; but nothing hurt me. Then in the passageway I saw the blue glow, and went to it. Raised on an altar was a sword, shining. A monument to Durlag's Pride, a sword fused into the rock, saturated in blue light.

"You have raised my deeds in glory. I am Pride. I am the curse of this place," spoke the armoured guardian.

"There is no doom to be proud of what you have made yourself," Faldorn boasted; and Shar-Teel nodded.

"Don't let the bastards grind you down." Illegitimi non carborundum.

"It's some kind of mallet," Imoen called cheerfully, brandishing the pale circle with a makeshift stick attached to it. "We've got to find a stick that looks like this piece, here—and the signature sort of matches the magic gong! I wrapped the runes in my head, it's sort of like when Edwin used to cast a Horror, but sideways and upside down and like it's trying to feed off itself, and I can't explain it like Mr G. would've, but I'm sure. Scavenge for a stick that matches, and—"

"We'll have all four. After they talked about bringing doom into this place, being the curse of this place, and having to be murdered," I said.

"Yes," Faldorn said. She stared at the statues as if she saw something none other of us could. "I will be ready to fight. Will you, Viconia, Ajantis?"

"Yes," they chorused in unison, and Ajantis scowled in distaste.

We searched methodically; dust-swallowed cupboards, each gap between the flagstones, dilapidated barrels, between overturned furniture and rusting, dismembered armour. In the end Imoen's gong handle was near to the statue that demanded it, the grey-cloaked fear. She marched boldly into the forge, tied back her hair with a leather cord, and lit the coals with her mage's fire. It flickered strong and golden, Imoen's face red-cheeked and sweating, her thickly gloved hands sure while they manipulated the artefact between two pairs of tongs. The forge seared the gong and mallet into one, and they merged so easily and seamlessly that it was plain they had been crafted together. The transmuter showed her triumphant grin.

Durlag's music room held a large golden harp, its frame dented, its strings cut to shreds; broken and trodden fragments of crumhorns; thick rolls of rotting parchment dotted with regular holes; an old harpsichord, on its side and with ivory keys scattered like broken teeth around it. I bent between spiderwebs to press a remaining key, and heard no sound at all. The gong stood alone in its corner, dusty and seemingly intact. No webs were spun across it, no signs of vermin running below it, no

Ryft. They fought the hideous tanar'ri Aec'Letec, and with a single blow of his axe Durlag slew the demon's body and entrapped it in an enchanted dagger.
crack or signs of displacement; as if anything that neared it had been compelled to leave that particular instrument alone.

"Hold on," Imoen said. "Spells first—I'm gonna make you all a bit faster, a bit luckier—this one's kind of cobbled together from different stuff I've been reading, but it ought to work. I hope. Vic, Faldorn? We have to be ready, in case they go after us..." Faldorn's sword of fire appeared in her hands.

"By Shar," Viconia said, raising her hands, glancing malevolently at Imoen and Ajantis, "I cast the blessing of darkness on us. May we bring loss and suffering this day; may the pain of our own loss be accepted, as all here accept your power, Mistress of the Night—"

Ajantis looked horrified, but something dark appeared to settle upon him, as it did with all of us; and then Imoen's spell finished, giving a feeling of new lightness and energy.

She struck the gong.

Fear. Eldoth dead, his throat slit lengthways, his face bloodless, chained to a dark-stained table—Imoen dead immolated in white fire that consumed her like paper—Stephan Capetri dead—razor teeth in night knives pin back skin show nothingness like butterfly dead glass forever alone never enough—

"Valas—" Viconia called the single word like the cry of a wounded bird. Shar-Teel opened her mouth, but said nothing.

"Oak Father—" Faldorn pleaded.

"Boy, no—" Aquerna said.

"I couldn't do it in time I couldn't do it—" Imoen whispered. The deafening echo of the sound ricocheted from the walls, spread through the stone structure—

"I cannot atone—I can atone—Avarice I can slay—can prove—" Ajantis was gone, running quickly despite his armour; we followed him. Imoen held an arrow in one hand, her bow ready in the other.

"I am Fear. I will destroy you in this cursed place," the words rang.

The four figures we saw, standing about the heavy slab of stone, each come to animated life. Love, glowing warm purple, raising its hands, chanting; Pride, glittering a harsh silver, its axe raised high; Avarice's knife glinting in a golden blur as the statue ran to attack; the ragged Fear weaving shadows about itself—

Imoen's fiery arrow pierced into Fear in the moment before it disappeared into darkness; Ajantis rushed to attack the black-clad figure of Avarice.

"Skie, get the caster—" Imoen called. "I swear I'm not afraid—" She whispered a spell of her own; a pale light gathered about her eyes, and she lunged toward something in the darkness.

I struck at the red-robed caster; Varscona's ice cut into what it possessed instead of flesh. Pale ice formed on the edges of its bright robes. Then a thick blue bubble appeared, and flung me backward with the impact. The statue kept casting, and a lightning bolt sprung from its hands.

I dropped flat on the ground. The bolt whistled above my head, promising that charring pain, and ricocheted off the stone wall.
"Viconia, duck!" She rolled to the ground, nimbly as ever, and the bolt whirled above her. Varscona hit the shield's surface; enough hits and mage shielding wore down, only enough strikes needed—

Avarice was blurred, fighting Ajantis, moving at the unnatural speed of a spell. Ajantis kept his shield raised; but the blows of that knife struck sparks against his armour, his defence difficult. He seemed in trouble; he'd be in more trouble if the statue cast another spell.

Varscona pummelled the shield again. The blue sphere shook, and I thought that at least disrupted the movement of those hands of flexible clay. The speech of the dwarf was deep and gentle in its casting.

Faldorn's fiery sword burned into the armour of the statue she fought, Pride bearing its heavy axe against her. She stepped back; one hit would hurt her badly, and carefully she sought to burn it down. Her wolf's slavering teeth snapped at it. Shar-Teel came behind the statue, cracking open its form piece by piece. There was another chant from the red-robed dwarf—I tried to disrupt it, I did not stop attacking the shield—and both Shar-Teel and the undead wolf stopped, stumbled away from the fight; they'd been hit by a red-shaded spell of some kind— Faldorn was left alone against the dwarven Pride, and she snarled and transformed herself to a young bear.

Killing Love. Varscona whistled coldly against the shield. The surface of it was identical in all parts, and where the blue sphere met the ground there was still no way through it. I could see no weaknesses; I stuck in the same place each time, aiming carefully and hoping that it would bear down. The statue watched with its wide eyes.

Viconia was chanting; something dark flew from her hands, and in the corner of my eye I saw Ajantis' opponent stumble and slow. He fought on, wounded but continuing, calling to Helm that he worked to eradicate the thing.

"I'm not afraid!" Imoen cried again, her eyes white, fighting an unseen shape; and then she raised her hand and sent a row of missiles to Love's shield. Those seemed to blister its blue surface; Varscona pushed through on that exact position, and began to slice into the statue's moving hands. The statue fought back, blocking, calling out for burning fire. I heard Viconia cry out; she was running from the black-clad guardian, her thigh bleeding badly, Ajantis yet fighting.

Couldn't let him have another spell—I wasn't as fast as I'd been before. Not quite putting as much strength to it, not quite as eager to hurt it— Love grew creatures into existence, a flock of large and scaled white birds that descended on Shar-Teel, who wrenched herself from them. Varscona sliced ribbons across the red and purple robes.

Then a—lucky attack. I struck through a weak spot in the statue's joints, deeply scarring its form, cutting off a gesturing hand. The statue fell back; Viconia was near to me, Ajantis holding against the guardian who pursued her.

"Will you slay love?" I heard come from its spell-chanting mouth, a dwarven statue with the fresh scent of wine clinging to it, crimson passion and affection. A severed hand lay on the ground, twitching. For a moment, I stopped, although the statue had begun to call out more spell-words.

To slay love—

Viconia brought her morningstar down upon its head, and splintered the clay to shreds.

"Waelen iblith!" The statue fell for her, and she glared at me, her eyes bright red. I could not have, did not wish to, but for me she'd—
I reached for my bow; shot a strong arrow into the back of Durlag's Pride. It seemed to screech with
the poison of acid on its back; the bear atop it bit down harshly, and the claws sent the axe of it
flying. Shar-Teel had returned, and aided Faldorn, though it was the druid who'd the final blow, and
then she melted back into a human—

Imoen stabbed down and deeply into something unseen. The grey-cloaked form of Fear turned to
visibility, ragged and still; and Imoen fell herself atop it, bleeding, some of her wounds tinged with
the green of a poisoned blade. But she held a vial of antidote in her hand, forced some of it through
her lips; she was not dead of it—

Ajantis fought; the black-clad Avarice was strong and quick. I used the bow, arrows into its back like
a pincushion; it fell, when Shar-Teel aided him finally.

The stone hall was quiet and still. Faldorn, on her feet after aiding Imoen, bent down into the red
robes of Durlag's statue for his love. She rose from it; bore a second marked wardstone in her hands,
and laid it on the central slab. It opened into darkness below, a dark box like a coffin, hung by a
heavily wired and strung device.

Shar-Teel brushed at a cut on her temple. "You two," she said, Ajantis targeted by her glare as well
as me, "have turned pathetically weak as any male. You'll need to be stronger."

"We have no obligation to rescue the young male—" Viconia said.

"But we will," Imoen said, breathing heavily, resting on her hands and knees, lifting a haggard face.
"I learned magic because I was afraid we'd all get killed. I was afraid I'd have to look after everyone.
But in the end I—"

"We must enter," Ajantis said. His voice only wavered a little.

—

Waelen iblith — idiotic piece of excrement.

—

93. Queries of the Throne

*Edwin: 14 Flamerule*

Highly...unpleasant, it was. Deeply unpleasant. When his father had a few months before his
departure casually ordered the house slaves to be interrogated over a missing ruby figurine inherited
from Edwin's great-grandfather, had it been like this below? Philias was screaming, and the questions
did not stop. And yet what he told seemed close to what they wanted to know.

*The strong and bestial Shar-Teel,* Edwin's mind enumerated.

"Yes—their leader—she's called the Man-Slayer. She's supposed to be strong and built like a male
—" Philias screamed, his flesh burning.

*The luscious drow cleric.*

Shar—please."
Such beauty would be wasted on the Iron Throne's swords but there would be other wenches, Edwin had thought of Viconia. It seemed a far thing from this cellar.

The idiot Ajantis of the Order of the Radiant Imbeciles.

"A knight—an Ilvastarr—Waterdhavian—Amnian—paladin, he thought he fell in the Cloakwood—a foreigner—" Philias cried.

Imoen the apprentice wizard.

"A little girl—no, red-haired—a wizard. She wasn't—please—a wizard girl, young, a transmuter—" It was a clerical spell that the acolyte Zhalimar chanted, and Philias' eyes bulged the colour of egg-whites at horrors only he could see.

The helpless bard Garrick.

"A bard. There was a first bard—not too clever—harpist—no; no knowledge of the Harpers—just a bard—" Zhalimar raised a sharp knife, and brought it down. Edwin stared at the stone walls, thick enough that doubtless little sound escaped them.

The fool Eldoth Kron.

"Kron. From here, they said—all the group said—no—no, I shouldn't have been with them. Please. The second bard—Waterdhavian too, I think—just a bard—came in the forest—"

And the crying little thief.

"Skie! Her name's Skie. Yes—short and dark-haired. No—yes—yes, of course she did—please. She sewed robes once—" Philias screamed yet again. Edwin remembered telling Philias that brief tale; the girl had agreed to help him in the days before her nervous breakdown with those bandits. Proven a halfway acceptable seamstress. It mattered not, of course, but the memory of Skie quietly bent over her tidy needlework was a thing so far away from this scene.

"Zhalimar, burn him once more," Sarevok demanded suddenly, his voice suddenly far harsher and deeper. Of what importance was Skie? The incompetent girl snivelling on his shoulders half the night, Edwin thought—

"Silvershield—" the boy's voice sobbed out. "Some...provincial nobility here—" Edwin's own words echoed back at him.

"The Silvershield girl was missing," the Kara-Turan woman said. She had stood in the corner of the dark room, her arms folded across her chest; she had not participated in the interrogation at all.

"Sky. Skie Silvershield was—" Edwin could not help but look at Anchev's eyes, as if they belonged to some animalistic predator that hypnotised its favoured prey against flinching from the fatal glance; bright amber, almost gold—Sarevok drew his heavy sword despite the cramped room; there was by a narrow margin enough space to bring it down as if he would slay them all.

"Wagakimi; you should not destroy them, when they may have other information—" the woman pleaded, stepping forward; Edwin had flung himself to the opposite wall, pressed against it as far out of the reach of that yellowed sword as he could possibly escape to. "Ignore the second coward; I beg that you would listen to me," she said.

Anchev, oddly, lowered the greatsword. "Foul incompetents serve me."
"Is it not the lady Cythandria with the most information upon the Silvershield affairs of merchantry?" Zhalimar Cloudwulfe said; the female cleric appeared to respond to the name, her mouth twisting.

"So it is. Inquire, Zhalimar. He will describe why that girl has escaped the traps. Gorion sought to play us for fools."

The name—the man had been some sort of relation to Imoen, some acquaintance of Skie’s father, Edwin's mind scrambled over the vague recollections of tales gabbled in monkey-voices near his hearing, killed on the road before he had met the group. It was not a fact he had seen fit to describe to Philias at all.

"The girl was lucky! The girl had magical aid—" Philias pleaded for his life. "None of them said the name Gorion—I swear that they concealed it—"

"Then," Zhalimar said, "the old man confided in them..."

That was it, Edwin thought. Skie (and Imoen) must know some information, some piece of some intrigue that the man called Gorion had confided in one or both of them. For the alternative was horrible beyond belief to contemplate.

"Yes, he must have," Philias said; he screamed, writhing like an eel trapped in a cage, and Edwin was careful to look away, at the dark lines of the stone wall above the head of the torturer. "They said nothing—they must have lied to me—I promise I know nothing of Gorion—"

"Is he telling the truth, Tamoko?" Anchev said; and the woman's eyes seemed to take on a dark glow.

"No—please! I know nothing—I have never heard the name—"

The cleric gave a slight nod. "The Red Wizard speaks truth," she said.

He and Philias had worked to protect against divinations, Edwin knew, abjuration spells against those who would pretend to tell true from false. But how powerful was this Tamoko? The concern of it was heavy in his mind, but he could do nothing but stand and wait.

"Has she power, that foolish girl?" Anchev said.

"I don't know! Nothing of any powers—no powers—"

Tamoko spoke again. "He has witnessed no unnatural abilities."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know! She was in Cloakwood—" Edwin had heard screams like that of Philias once, on a hunting expedition he had only reluctantly accompanied for he hated the stench of sweat and animals and being invariably left behind in the mud while others rode onwards, where one of the Tharchion's wizard guests had slowly strangled a wild deer with a spell tightening gradually around its neck. The animal's cries had been high, slowly fading away. "I know not where now—stop, I beg—"

"He is very ignorant," Tamoko said. The duration of her spell faded from her eyes, or so it seemed to Edwin, and gratitude to the fates swept through him.

"A mortal fool." Sarevok Anchev commanded the room in which he stood, Edwin could feel that; his uncle Homen Odesseiron in one of his sterner moments with a face as if carved from granite, zulkir Nevron that he had only personally met twice, sneering and stinking of brimstone from the
demon he used at his whim... "Zhalimar, take the prisoner. I will send others—I will send trackers—" His gauntleted fist hit the wall; to Edwin's shock, it left a dent in the stone the size and depth of the clenched hand. Godlike strength. "There will be a war. She is irrelevant; she is behaving as nothing; and you." The yellow eyes—suddenly they blazed at Edwin, and any man would have lost control, would have feared that horrible voice and that knowledge of what Sarevok Anchev was. "I have no use for traitors," the man who was not entirely a man said, and those spikes would spit him like a roast pig and he would bleed and die here and never again—

"Sarevok, it is not necessary."

The cleric. The ugly cleric laid a hand on Sarevok's arm, speaking in her soft manner. "I loathe a traitor as much as you," she said, and her black eyes were pitiless and unreadable when they rested on Edwin. "But you could bind him instead to your service. For you, I think it would be the better choice. He is a mage."

And in the name of the lady Tamoko—a geas, a geas that he was never going to be able to explain to his superiors, a compulsion that his life would be forfeit for betrayal—he was alive. Respite—a need to change his robes—washed through Edwin. *But Philias would not be...*

"Make no mistake that I despise you, Red Wizard," the woman dictated to him, when he'd no choice but to listen; *"Uragirimono: you betray your own countrymen. What I do is for Sarevok alone. Your blood will be shed if you prove any threat to him. Do you understand me, Thayvian?"

"Yes," Edwin struggled to speak, his mouth as dry as if he would never be able to cast a spell again. His grand plans lay tattered in ashes about him; he was as weak as he told the little thief Skie that she was and could for the time being do nothing...

Tamoko left him alone. He would not die; confidence did not return to him. He could have screamed into the wall, punched a helpless cushion as if a child's temper tantrum. If he had not left; if he had done anything else; if things were different and he would not lose control...

Zhalimar Cloudwulfe had Philias, taking the last of the information from him. The apprentice insisted, at one point, that *he had done nothing and he wasn't even there and do it to Edwin do it to Edwin instead leave me alone—* And yet it was a lie, to Zhalimar and his knives, a lie he was made to recant. What Zhalimar wanted was spoken aloud, at the cost of more pain. Edwin saw some of it, as though glancing at it through a thick distorted glass wall. He saw a brief flash from Philias' left hands that was another attempt at the spell of escape, and what Sarevok's acolyte did in response to that was...not worth the recounting of it. Chains weighted against magic held down the other Red Wizard, and perhaps he would stop that awful crying; perhaps...

There was so little that lay within Edwin's capacity to do; so miniscule. He was not watching the torture, only witnessing—and that was bad enough. Troublesome enough. Bellissima Leonov would kill him slowly.

In the dark of the night the—the vaguest of solutions came to him. A slight manipulation; a manipulation that could only be accomplished by consent, Edwin told himself, consent from the howling part-flayed thing bound to a stone slab. He detested trivial attempts at quietness, as if he were a rogue instead of a noble wizard impressing others with his sheer power, but tolerated it in this instance if he must. His mind had raced frantically and repetitively on the same lines, in that condition of studying through the midnight hours for a test on the morn, though this was nothing so innocent and no test at all; the idea had come to him...

He cast, the spell a barely-studied attempt, inadequate, hardly working. A tiny zone of dead air, lacking the necessary gases to breathe, an invisible thing in motion through the air like a bird.
Zhalimar had gone, had locked the door of the cell on the prisoner. Edwin had concealed himself and could see only a little within the bars of the cell door. He uttered the words of it quietly. The boy’s eyes were blue and accusing, meeting his; and he moved his hands to manipulate the casting across the bars. It was not his fault, not his fault at all; the best choice to protect the mission. A mutual choice at that. The small void of dead air moved, positioned across Philias' face. It was no betrayal of Sarevok because he had already given useful information about the group. Edwin would have seen the Challesme move to escape it and gasp fresh air, or signal that he wanted something else; but sweating, bleeding and burned, the boy let it cover his mouth and nose, slowly perishing through suffocating—

The deer, slowly strangled. Edwin had intended to look but could not, turning away in the final moments. The face (the face of the boy, Edwin might have thought, but truthfully Philias was of an age near his own, there was no matter of that sort...) was tinged a purplish blue, no visible evidence of what had happened as if it were a natural enough death, the casting residue to be outside the cell. A faint wheezing, perhaps...

It certainly wasn't the first time Edwin had directed his magic against another person. To say nothing of trivial duelling in his education in Thay; self-defence roaming the land, that odd time in Nashkel with the Witch and all the others after the girl, slaying that merchant mage, the guards of the Cloakwood.

Philias was dead and would not give further secrets and would be tormented no longer and he must escape. Edwin fled, invisibly, back to the quarters allocated him.

All in the name of Thay. All in the name of what I must. All in the name of frankly I hardly wish my intelligence and person destroyed by barbarians when I've scarcely conquered anything or concubines or life itself I have no wish to perish in this place of fools all...

If he had stayed those few remaining days with the crying little thief, would the information have been vouchsafed to him? Perhaps doubtful. Perhaps it mattered not; a profitless tool.

Edwin closed his eyes and tried to rest in the low room in the closed quarters of the Iron Throne. His body twitched despite his efforts otherwise, and he pulled a thin sheet close around himself as if it could hide him.

—

94. Family History

_Durlag's Tower, Ghosts_

The carpets were rich on the floors. Embroidered in detail, fine threads in vivid dyes, sparkling below the magelight. Our boots sank into a bright red-and-yellow design of a dwarven warrior wielding an axe above the head of a blue creature; nice and soft, feeling rather homely... The decoration on the warrior's armour and weapon was different to the runes describing Durlag's apparel in the histories of himself; probably not the dwarf himself.

"How far down are we, druid?" Shar-Teel said; the guardians' box, designed by dwarves, had hurtled some distance through blackness. It had felt like a narrow coffin indeed, crushing us; and there was the nervous feeling that it could have chosen to drop us somewhere even less pleasant than this ominously silent set of rooms.
"We are still some way above the centre," Faldorn said absently. She sniffed the air. "I do not like this smell. Not dead, and yet not alive. Foreign to my experiences."

Empty pieces of dwarven armour were piled, and sometimes hung, about the room; and old, crumbling weapons near them. Past a crumbling archway lay old statues, some broken; others twisted into odd poses, apelike and sinister in their grinning expressions. The carpet in that room showed a detailed portrait of a blue-skinned humanoid monster, with bright yellow eyes that bore a hole in the viewer's face wherever one looked. To either side of its face were set a pair of ugly statues.

Words in dwarven were carved darkly on the opposite wall.

"Moved...ne'er by rage and ne'er by anger. Cold is the trait'rous...doppelganger?" I said slowly.

"Heethir'ku; shapeshifters," Viconia breathed. "I have heard of them. That is their natural form."

The grey-blue figure with sharp teeth below our feet. Its eyes stared, pointing to the statues on either side of it. Both, when one looked closely, had hinges built into their joints.

"What do you think, Imoen?" Beyond the rug with the doppelganger's image lay nothing but a pile of rubble, old shields and crumbled statues; the only visible doors were to our left and right.

"Well? I can't spot any triggers on 'em. Go ahead and press if you can't spot anything, sometimes you find things first." She studied them with me; I reached forward, and pushed the one to the right.

The ominous sound of stone creaked, and a small cold disturbance in the air reached us. A door had slid open.

Quite an elaborate room; carpet, cushions, paintings still intact, a chest of drawers and a red four-poster bed sized for a dwarf. A beautiful wooden cupboard, with marquetry laid over it in a cobalt blue design; and a lock that looked suspiciously inviting.

Faldorn was already at the chest-of-drawers. "Another runestone," she said; and grasped—

"It could be a trap!" Imoen called.

The stone door slammed closed. Shar-Teel cursed.

"But it's natural," Faldorn said. She held the red-runed stone. "This was intended, I think."

"Fools," Viconia hissed.

"Islanne..."

Islanne was the name of the dwarven sorceress, heroine of Durlag's war against the drow and of the siege of Falwin, his wife Islanne...

None of us had spoken the word.

"Islanne..."

It was a dwarf. Grey-bearded, powerfully muscled, his features slightly older and vaguely similar to the four statues above. He wore cloth rather than armour, not dressed for war; several layers of various shades of practical brown covered him below his thick beard.

"Islanne, my love, your hair is down..." The dwarf didn't look at any of us; he called her name.
"Ghost," Imoen whispered. "Hey! Mister dwarf ghost!" she called defiantly, her voice only faltering a little. "Can you hear us?" Viconia fixed her with a fierce glare, moving her hands about her dark circle and muttering words of prayer.

"'Tis time we slept, my sweetling. Islanne, gold-honeyed Islanne, my treasure-of-the-earth, my *splendarr-findar*..." The dwarf looked at something beyond us, passing through as if we were nothing to him. An echo—the one who had loved Islanne. A spectre, walking over the carpet and past the old chests-of-drawers, as if he had done so a thousand and more times.

**Splendarr-findar**: something that shone, something that gave good fortune. The dwarf must have spoken in his own language, surely. But except for that phrase which I knew in the dwarven tongue, it had sounded as the common language to me.

"A ghost is a male as any other." Shar-Teel snarled, and wrenched out her sword. "It's solid enough."

"It is not a ghost." Viconia held up a hand to stop her, and her skin seemed slightly grey under Imoen's light. "Tell me what you are, *hargluk*!"

"The torches gutter and darkness falls," the dwarf said; he neared the bed's bright curtains. There was something tragic to it, that he loved and he sought and she was no longer there. "Islanne, my love, my *taerin*, my *taerin*, my *taerin*," he said; for *taerin* is the dwarven word for love, and means to them a true and deep love in that tongue, deliberately in contrast to the yearning for gold or simpler pleasures, like in old Chessentan humans used the word *agape* when they spoke of the highest love possible.

Faldorn's mouth suddenly opened. "Sulphur," she said, "get down and away! Now!—" Panic had darkened her eyes; she flung herself to the ground; we were quick to react to her.

"Islanne, my love, my *thsss*, my *thsssss*..." It was a hiss. There was no translation for it in any language. Suddenly there was a long pale dagger in the dwarf's hands, suddenly it plunged into the heart of a woman and opened her to bleed. And then there was fire to immolate us...

Burning. It set everything ablaze, but all that belonged to Islanne was yet there. All the cushions lying still, her red curtains and her cupboards and her carpet, unmoved and tranquil; and the monster that crept into her bed standing tall and inhuman and grey, silver-eyed and with flesh that shifted as if it belonged to a rotting corpse, casting spells with a voice too deep to belong to any dwarf or human, suddenly five of it gesturing with sharpened claws.

Shar-Teel, of course, attacked then, and Viconia was behind her. Imoen was screaming, and I did not try to heal her but only put an arm around her, because I did not want to try to do it. Shar-Teel stepped easily forward with her sword, cutting into the doppelgangers' flesh, which shifted in response to her as if she cut into the ocean. Ajantis, after a delay, cried something himself, trying to join her; a deep three-clawed wound scored itself in his cheeks below the open-faced helm.

"*Heethir'ku*," Viconia called, her voice as strong as when she spoke with her deity, "I know not how you are here, but you will die this day—"

A black-coloured bullet from her sling hit one of the doppelgangers in the forehead; it disappeared. An illusion, a twisting and shaping illusion.

"Get 'cha bow. Do I have to tell you everything, kiddo?" Imoen said, and she was smiling with a grin I last saw on a ghoul's face, set in place and frightening to the enemy.

I aimed. An arrow could hurt an illusion's image, could show which was right and which was
wrong. A rogue's eye saw into shadows, a rogue's eye saw what lay below a raised stone or inside metal gears of a lock; that in itself did no violence. The arrow struck between Shar-Teel and Ajantis, not hurting either of them, having a false doppelganger cease to be. But the doppelganger itself wouldn't lie down; its body shapeshifted to protect against wounds, its claws sliced forward again.

Faldorn, calm again, stepped forward with her flame blade; cautiously struck below Shar-Teel's protection. Her sword could burn, leave the doppelganger's shifting flesh black; Shar-Teel's blade scored deeper marks. It took a long time to kill.

The doppelganger's body fell to the ground, light-coloured blood flowing about it from so many wounds. An arrow stuck out from it; otherwise, false flesh was sliced into ribbons. And there was no sign of the bleeding on the thick carpet about it, upon Islanne's fine furnishings and site of her death.

Shar-Teel punched down at the head of the body; and instead of the skull shattering her fist was halted by a pale light that sprung up around the head, the doppelganger's corpse preserved by some magic.

Islanne, my wife, I love you still. 'Twas just your form they made me kill.

The stone doors slid open once more.

Imoen sat over parchments from Islanne's cupboard, occasionally asking me to explain the sorceress' dwarven notes where the magic was difficult for her to read. Red and black runes swam across Islanne's papers like a school of tiny fish, glittering deep under the sea's depth and impossible to keep all in one's mind for me; but for Imoen they could be translated into the Weave that she could see. Faldorn and Viconia had healed us all, and needed to rest lightly; Shar-Teel and Ajantis sat slumped on the ground, the latter with his armour laid aside. I paged through more of the tome about Melair I, from Clangeddin's altar. In battles, he'd used all honourable means available to him at the foe, through swift marching and maneuvering to make the enemy believe he had the advantage, attacking quickly and moving onward once the objectives were attained.

"She'd want us to use her spells to help, probably," Imoen said, sketching some patterns in the air with her fingertip, leaving traces of pink light to glow in front of her, as intricate as small spiderwebs. "Need to understand more. Mr G. and Dynaheir helped, Edwin, he was all recite-this-do-that-control-that, Garrick, he imagined it and sung it out, I want to fiddle with it but I don't know enough, yet. She must've thought up this one, and I can't wrap my head into even the first part to get what it does. What's it about?" She pointed to a few lines written in a tight dwarven script, next to the complex magical patterning.

"It says only..." I searched the phrasebooks. "It makes them vulnerable. That's all."

"The doppelgangers?—No, they killed Islanne if it happened that way, she wouldn't've known," Imoen said. She stared fiercely at the scroll again, her tongue sticking out of the side of her mouth. "Nope. I'll ruin it like that other one if I keep trying. Have to wait 'till later." She placed it carefully at the bottom of her pack, and went to the next scroll in her small pile. "Hmm, I think this one's kinda like charming people. Maybe this'll work..."

The next part we explored lay beyond another heavy door, a great stone hall, a long carpet in scarlet and gold, a raised throne behind it, of red granite on a white dais, thick curtains behind it. A throneroom, entrapped by pressure plates guarding the entrance, by a razor-sharp tripwire at slightly below the ankle-height of a human. On the white stone that ornamented the dais lay a helmet gilded gold. Thin banners made of pale rotting cloth hung from the sides of the walls, hung over stone columns. On a few of them remained enough fabric to recognise the remains of insignia from the accounts of Durlag's chief dwarves of his clan; foremost among them, his eldest son Kiel Legion-
"Cold and dry," Faldorn said, sniffing disapprovingly at the air. "Nature needs a home here."

"Think carefully before you attempt anything, child," Aquerna said, perched at the top of Imoen's pack.

Ajantis' armour creaked slightly as he pointed. "That helmet," he said. "Does it have a purpose here?"

"Too small for even your sad little head, jaluk," Viconia taunted. "Skie, there is a door to the left, examine it."

Locked with the same kind of unbreakable seal that held the other stone doors in this place. I went forward instead; the helmet glittered a reddish gold under the light Imoen raised, and carved before it:

*Here fell Kiel, the Legion-killer.*

There was something that lay in the shadows under the helmet's bowl. "I'm going to pick it up," I said unsteadily; for...

"Kiel! Kiel, my first-born!" the armoured dwarf said jovially; strong and barrel-chested, he was the same man who had greeted his wife Islanne. The plate he wore was gold-coloured, but not elaborate in design: simply very well-fit to his body, and tough in appearance. "Why so stern all the time, my boy? Come down from that throne!"

I poised an arrow ready; —and Imoen aimed a shaft faster than me, into the dwarf's chest. It simply dissolved into thin air. The dwarf heeded it not. Shar-Teel aimed her crossbow, one bolt after the next, and they all failed to cause injury. The dwarf came closer and closer to the throne and the dais, and I ran back and away from it.

"Revel with your family for a spell! Ale and good company, 'tis no *findar* to brood so long alone," the dwarf said, and at the throne he took down his axe and brought it into the neck of his son from behind.

*Here fell Kiel, the Legion-killer.*

Imoen screamed as green smoke filled the room and left them unconscious. Three of the doppelgangers were at once all in the room, the doors sealed, making their gestures to cast their spells —

Faldorn's wolf was free against breathing the smoke, and ran for the throat of the first. Shar-Teel, stubborn, yet stood, her crossbow working at last, bolts thrust into that foreign flesh and sparking fiercely with the lightning enchantment upon them. One lunged at her.

"Fight, you fools!" Viconia held a cloth over her face, coughing, spluttering green and swaying on her feet. She vomited on the ground. Imoen lay still.

It was an ordinary arrow—well, a poisoned arrow, dishonourable. I'd a short range and a clear aim for the backs of the doppelgangers; it wasn't wrong to protect friends. The arrow embedded into the back of the nearest, and interrupted what it chanted; it turned, and I remembered the words that doppelgangers were cold. It was out of the gas cloud; my second arrow was fire, and bloomed in its chest as it raced toward me. Then I drew a sword, and tried to hold it off. Its shapeshifting did not hide the burns of its chest.
Viconia shrieked out a few words; —Shar-Teel stabbed through the throat of the one that lay down in front of her, and she struggled through the fumes. Ajantis helped Imoen, Faldon chanted a spell and where she walked the green gas faded away—

The doppelganger I fought was not colder than Varscona, because after all he was still breathing. Or she. It was fast and it ripped into my leathers; I bled again and all I could do was to hold the creature away. Its movements stayed fast, though it had been pierced by arrows. The burn marks remained despite its shapeshifting.

Imoen cast a spell; her flaming arrow, magical, hit the doppelganger I fought in the back, and made it cry out. It stumbled, its body smoking; I hurt it badly, stabbing into its torso and cutting down. The light-coloured flesh tore apart. These—repaired themselves, could take far more injury than a human.

I stepped back; it pursued me. I shifted out of the way and below Kiel’s throne, an impromptu shield. The claws raked the marble and left no trace of a cut in it, just as Islanne’s furniture had been unharmed. Enchantment. The throne was a shield and I ran around it; Shar-Teel and the others had moved close to the one other doppelganger, slicing it apart by pieces.

Varscona hit, almost at random, taking a small strip of skin from the doppelganger’s hand. It walked on two legs; it was alive; I was only trying to fight it because there was no-one else near.

And yet I had to. Imoen’s magic missiles had it distracted, raising its outstretched arms and trying to fend them away, and Varscona made a stronger hit in the doppelganger’s body. Shar-Teel and the others had left the second in a pool of its own blood; and I duelled...

I don’t know if doppelgangers have hearts in the same place as humans, or have them as all, and I won’t ask Viconia if she knows or how she might know. There was an opening when the doppelganger attacked and missed and I was lucky enough that Varscona went somewhere into the middle of its torso, and it seemed to die.

The wardstone that was left under the helmet was bright yellow, almost golden. Kiel’s. The stone doors opened to a room of weapons and symbols, gold engraved with accounts of the battles of the Legion-Killer, disorganised heapings of what Durlag’s son had once been. It was also a chamber filled with traps for the unwary; and filled with ash and the husked bodies of creatures that had dared it, guarded by the off-white shells of some large creature, as if giant versions of the terrifying carrion crawlers had made nests here...

Kiel the Legion-killer gained his name in a war against the drow; nimble, he ran into the fierce battle alone behind the enemy’s lines, and one by one slew them, and not one of their attacks could pierce him for speed.

There was a bridge that ran from Kiel’s trophies, over vast streams of a smith’s materials. Some form of steel or iron, still flowing in wide channels—what great projects did Durlag and the smiths of his clan create before the tower was invaded?

Four voices, interwoven: a female soprano, two males in tenor, one in deep bass.

"Durlag, my taerin, come to me, lay down your kuld, your agland, I will cast against you—"

"What beldarak be this, I swear on my samman I will fight it—"

"Father, father, I will use my bow if I have to, stop this deladar—"

"'Tis time we slept; 'tis time we all slept—"
They saw us; they attacked just like the others had done—

"Hey, can you understand us?" Imoen shouted. "Viccy says you're sapient! D' you want to be trapped in here forever?" She scooped up a rock from the ground, and flung it instead of a more deadly arrow. "Maybe we don't even have to fight!"

Maybe we don't—

The one I kept back from her and Viconia with Varscona had changed to its grey-fleshed form, its silver eyes and alien stare.

"You could surrender and we won't hurt you! You must be trapped down here just like us, and you're outnumbered so it's not fair!"

"Not—" Shar-Teel's sword ripped into the two doppelgangers she fought, sending them a step back in retreat; and then she quickly took a healing potion from her belt, for she was bleeding badly from her right arm.

"Fei'ir? The act of the lowest of oolos," Viconia murmured, and carefully aimed a sling bullet to the back of the head of a doppelganger.

"Yeah, well—you're not listening, are you?" Imeon called again. She aimed a striking spell into the head of the one fighting Ajantis and Faldorn; its head turned to her direction, but no noise came out of its mouth; they only said words when they played as the dwarfs... "All right then, I can see I'm getting through like a toothpick on a stone giant. If we have to hurt you, that's it."

Imoen had thought of that. That was Imoen; I knew what I'd done.

"Canna nil da ultok," I asked for a meeting in the dwarven tongue, stepping back from the doppelganger I fought, raising Varscona away from it; and just like it had done to Imoen it failed to reply. Then I cut into its flesh...

We had fought the other doppelgangers. We killed those four, leaving their bodies discarded on the ground. Fire arrows and spells hurt them to a greater extent than poison, repeated sword-cuts to the same part of their bodies, and one had to guard against the awful claw-strikes when the limbs would suddenly extend and grow... Doppelgangers. A difficult fight. Over the bridge we were bathed in the faint red light of the substances that streamed underneath. Little of relevance; we did not find another ward-stone upon the bodies that had fallen.

And in the passageway from that bridge was a horrible trap. A steel anvil twice as long as Shar-Teel's height, that slammed down from the ceiling and pulverised everything under it. I only realised by looking up, seeing the slight difference in the normal ceiling. Fortunately they stopped when I screamed, and then when I threw a misshapen lump of iron into the centre of it, after a second or two the roof slammed down and smashed it to dusty fragments.

"Well spotted," Shar-Teel said, after the anvil had slowly squealed back into the roof, attached on a giant corkscrew.

"I can't hold a thing that size up!" Imoen said, gasping; she had been closest to it when I had screamed. "How're we supposed to get through a thing like that? I don't want to know what that Durlag was thinking—I've got a few thinks for him—"

"Calm yourself, jalil," Viconia said. "We've a druid in our possession; a druid who loathes iron and steel for particularly foolish reasons."
We brought down the steel trap again with debris we threw under it; and Faldorn jumped to the top of it, casting a spell to rust and destroy iron upon the large screw that raised and lowered it. The steel block that would have killed us all fell by itself to the ground, not to rise again.

A row of yet-burning torches lay beyond; an enchantment of some sort, for they shone a sober blue-white, etched with dwarven runes of mourning, I found through reading. At the end of a long dark passage, four shadows of dwarves stood about a sealed coffin.

Viconia stared at them, a flash of darkness crossing her already-blackened eyes. "Haruks'argt," she said. "These are spirits bound to undeath. It would be the act of a fool to disturb them."

We passed by the grave, quietly; Kiel, Clan-Prince of this dark tower. You made your death your finest hour. So it was written for him.

The spirits stirred, when Faldorn passed, though she did nothing. "Fuernebol," came from the first of them, whispered out like a snake's hissing.

"Too young to fight," said the second.

"Young samman," said the third.

"A healer and an archer," the fourth said.

Faldorn looked at them. "I am no dwarf," she said. "And I am no child."

"So Fuernebol said also, that latter," echoed the warders.

"But it is an injustice of nature that the young should die for the actions of others. May I seek to correct it?" Faldorn said.

"Young, but with power." The dwarves were black shadows, unclear and half-ghostly, waiting for us.

"You may pass."

Faldorn made her low-pitched chant to summon her wolf, as if she needed to prove something.

Further in the darkness was a chamber of ashes enclosed in urns, shelves engraved with names. Hallanuk Rogmor. Slain by doppelgangers whilst guarding Clangeddin's shrine. Erilla Fahil. Slain by doppelgangers whilst training with axe. Smergar Hollowhand. Slain by doppelgangers aiding Kiel the Legion-killer. Alanon Thradmul. Slain by doppelgangers within the library. Long-dead dwarves. The dread of it came when one looked up, and one looked down, and one looked across: and there were too many urns for one person to account. A small temple was marked dedicated to Moradin with the silver symbol of his anvil; and on its altar lay another wardstone, taken by Faldorn.

We passed through traps; a silver axeblade designed to swing from the ceiling and sever an invader's head from their body; or their torso from their legs, for an invader Shar-Teel's height. A spiderweb-thin tripwire. A triggering device with a principle I'd seen before, but with a result of fierce fire. Shar-Teel's words had begun to make complete and full sense: You don't touch anything unless you're sure it's not trapped, poisoned, cursed, or about to summon some abomination from the Nine Hells. You check again if you're sure. You don't step anywhere unless you know it won't kill you. You don't walk anywhere alone. One misstep, and they would all be hurt because I made a mistake...

The wall ahead of us was part wood instead of wholly stone, and complex; a network, tinged by magic. Polished oak and ash were laid out in a tight geometrical trellis and fortified by stone that
would be difficult to break through, and showed dark spaces of an area beyond them. Hollowed-out marble spaces in the structure suggested the placement of runestones, and Faldorn stepped forward. The ground below her was also overlaid by wood, and showed signs that it had been burned in the past. Yet I had not seen a trap within it.

A golden rune lit below Faldorn's feet where there had merely been dark marks before; clearly dwarven magic, and dwarven magic she seemed comfortable enough with at that. She brought out the wardstones she'd saved, arranging them within the hollows in motions somewhere halfway between cooking and juggling, displacing and rearranging them as if they were eggs to be slotted into the right space upon shelves.

"Silvanus aid me to decipher this," she muttered. "Those who guard; Islanne; Kiel; those otherwise fallen. There must be a way through."

"I'm the transmuter wizard here, Faldy," Imoen said, elbowing her way in beside her. "What d' you think goes where?"

"And what do you think," Shar-Teel said, "is going to explode in your fool's faces?"

"Well, I'm trying," Imoen said, cheerfully and reasonably. "We've got to pass through here, right? Haven't found the way down yet, maybe we just need more wardstones."

Faldorn slipped the golden wardstone into the leftmost slot, and with her head tilted to one side considered the effect. Imoen reached for Islanne's, and laid it above.

They disintegrated before our eyes.

"Death is not something to mourn," Viconia said. Ajantis cried out suddenly and loudly, and took a step back from where they had been; Imoen, gone—

"Heya!" Imoen's voice sounded cheerily from behind the barrier. "'S a teleport thing, right, Fal?"

"Faldorn," Faldorn said sulkily.

"Get on the rune, all of you, we'll fetch you over," Imoen said, and then I heard her gasp loudly. "You've...got to see this."

There were implements on the walls like something I had once seen in a nightmare somewhere deep underground. Knives and other tools and a table with hinges. Cold ash that lay where fires had once burned. Most obviously, there were the cages, many of them. They were made with iron bars, but in the spaces between the bars the light did not reflect normally. And at the bottom of seven of them lay dead doppelgangers. Two of them showed signs of having been wounded by ice.

"They're the...ones we killed," I heard Imoen whisper. "They're here. They're not really dead."

On the table waited a goblet almost running over with some dark, viscous fluid; richly made and hammered with goldleaf, though the black engraving in it was roughly done. It drew the eye to it; the only implement that did not have an obviously painful purpose.

"The shapeshifter lifespan," Viconia said, "is not supposed to be greatly above a century-and-a-half."

The cages of the doppelgangers were glassed over their iron frames, transparent bell jars. Shapeshifters; they might have transformed their bodies to pass through bars alone. Pale light danced over the seven doppelgangers. I squinted to look more closely, and it appeared that their wounds were gradually healing.
"So they're summoned here when they die," Imoen muttered. "And then they heal all over again..."

"The cycle must be broken, for it is not natural," Faldorn said, and raised her hands. "I will try to call a strike of nature's flame within that cage."

"Because it's a punishment," Imoen said. "They have to be trapped like this because of a punishment. Free them—" she ordered.

Faldorn finished her chant and clapped her hands together; but only the faintest of a spark showed within one cage. She shook her head.

"There's more obvious way."

"Taste my fear."

"Fear can kill you," Faldorn said. "I know a casting for it. It summons a frightening image from nature, perhaps a banshee or a redcap, and sometimes your victim who defiled nature is so scared that their heart fails and they die cold without the need to lay a hand or whip upon them. It was what I inflicted upon my sister for her betrayal with my husband, and alone in that cavern with her I believe that it was my own face she feared above all. Shar is also a goddess with power over the black weights that steal your soul in the darkness. You and I may discuss our methods, dalhar, later, perhaps..."

"Morally reprehensible," Ajantis' squirrel remarked.

"If fear can make you die like that," Imoen said, sweeping her right hand through the air, "then it's what we have to do. We can't leave anyone like this, even doppelgangers—" She glanced at the tools upon the wall, and turned her head. "Icky, but it's right."
"Shall I? This existence is certainly unnatural. It is not entrapped?" Faldorn's hand slowly reached for the goblet, and her long, coarse fingers wrapped around its broad filigree and engraving. "I should like to believe that he would have restored the fear to them himself, if he was still here."

She went to the cage Shar-Teel had broken, and poured a few droplets upon the doppelganger within. The thing convulsed; its silver eyes opened and bulged, staring; it writhed and made a faint, gasping noise from its mouth. It was afraid, and then it shook. Its pale body moved and shifted and melted, like frozen mud peeling apart on a warm day. The skin parted, in places, growing black and decayed, with long holes sliced in it like a tanner's knife parting a leather jerkin and the skin flapping freely. The body withered before our eyes, not into a pile of dust but into shrivelled skin stretched over bones, roughly torn and sliced apart. Shar-Teel stepped forward to push down with her sword again into the body, and this time the protection was not invoked. To attack with fear was to send them away forever...

Faldorn placed a few drops of blood into each cage, one by one. The goblet's fluids were drained, more slowly than one would have expected by its size. There was still some darkness in the wide bowl of the goblet, and Faldorn reached into it and took a wardstone embedded below the blood. The stone was coloured dark for its soaking in that substance, and the cup's blood slowly dripped from her hand.

"And this stuff," Imoen said, pointing to the tools, "we're—wrecking, at the least." We did not leave that equipment in good condition for another.

There was a door that would have been small even for a dwarf, at the end of the dungeon chamber; and the wardstone opened it. It swung through roughly, with a thick sound of stone grating, and across from it were two cobblestones that triggered fire and a slim tripwire. Then further in the room: two rows of finely carved levers, with dwarven writing engraved above each of them.

Slowly we could decipher the meanings. The doors to Islanne's chamber. Kiel's. The furnace room. The bridge. The tombs below. And Fuernebol. There were far-away sounds of doors scraping open, slight changes in the air that could have been promising gusts of wind.

Faldorn led our steps to the door that was marked with the name of Durlag's younger son. There were dark shapes in the shadows that raised the shape of weapons at us; we tensed and prepared to fight, but they were only training-dummies. They hid caches of arms that had not been used against the old doppelgangers. Imoen reached for a quiver of arrows, and then the doors slammed upon us.

The old dwarf's form was jovial, red-faced, laughing. He called; "Fuernebol, my son! Trade your bow for a lute and play something mournful for your father, will ye?"

"He was young," Faldorn breathed. "And he did not know how to fight well; could only play..."

*It is not wrong for a child to play a lute,* perhaps a dark whisper came from the sound of the training dummies, rusting to oblivion.

"Why do ye hesitate, child? 'Tis your father's face beneath this beard." The dwarf's thick arms spread widely; he welcomed his child for an embrace.

There was a sound as if of a bow suddenly releasing, an arrow skittering away across the floor. None of us had acted.

The dwarf's face turned to a scowl; "Fire upon your very father, would ye, dwarfling? Thsss—don't make me laugh—"
A doppelganger at last. It changed to full height and gestured, starting a spell; but we had no chance to aim our weapons, for Faldorn dashed the remaining contents of the goblet upon its face. It screamed; it fell...

"This is the wardstone we need," Faldorn said simply, and reached below where Imoen's hand had been to take a wardstone patterned in green runes. "Pups who cannot defend themselves should not die, not like this." She gestured; a small grouping of long blades of grass appeared between her hands, tied lightly together with a vine. Then she bent to the ground, laying the rough posy below dwarven lettering carved in stone:

Too young to fight, except to fall, Here died my son, young Fuernebol.

The final threshold was marked by the need for the wardstones, and a dance with the dead. Giant skeleton warriors, green fumes that caused us all to sicken and fall, easy prey for their vast swords.

We escaped by falling, down through a dark twisting tunnel that led deep below, slipping over slick moist steps and tumbling into the depths of the labyrinth Durlag left behind.

Shar-Teel forced herself upright to brace against an archway before us, and one by one we fell into her strong back, groaning and grunting, lying dishevelled and nauseated upon the stone ground. In front of her was a pit of fire that renewed itself every few seconds...

95. Imperial in Gloaming

Durlag's Tower, Pawns In Durlag's Game

We ran. Fire swept through the black-and-white tiles in a circle both wide and narrow-roofed, but we were only singed: for Faldorn's protection, for Imoen's magical speed. At the other end was a door, and my red-hot lockpicks coaxed it open; a dwarven-crafted lock, bound by ingenuity rather than wardstone. Durlag meant this way to be passable.

A dwarf's skeleton behind us, from which a strange voice came; a quintet of cold statues. The ceilings had widened to a vast height even for a human, taller even than the great halls of the High House of Wonders in the city.

"Adventurers are not known for their wisdom, otherwise they would have chosen a safer profession." The tones were neutral, slow and yet vicious in their certainty, the skull opening to blackness in order to feign to speak. "Take the five fools that stand behind me, frozen in stone. Once warriors who sought to rob Durlag of his treasure. They stand vigil over Durlag's bestiary; they can be awakened with a touch. But they will loathe their commanders and turn upon them. Now ware the children of Vissilithysmee, whom Durlag stole in the egg and determined as his guardians." Dust, suddenly, spread from where the skeleton had stood, yellowed dust that fell to the ground. And still the voice spoke a final sentence. "Ware the children of Vissilithysmee..."

Suddenly it was apparent that there were sounds beside the constant beating of the flames; sounds of large reptiles, noises of scales gliding along stone. Perhaps a reason for the fires that singed behind here...

"Vissilithysmee," Shar-Teel said, in a voice set to tones oddly calmer than her norm. "That would not be Vissilithysmee the black dragon that you have mentioned that Durlag fought at one point, Skie?" She cursed. "Every other kind of monster, why not bloody dragons! Damned male—"
"Vissilithysmee attacked with acid from her mouth and she could cast spells too and her scales were very thick," I recited. My tongue seemed to try to stick to the surface of my throat.

Shar-Teel swore again, and spoke quickly to give orders. "Take the legs, or the eyes if you can aim at them. Watch the tail. Dodge the breath; acid goes through a lot of things that you don't want to think about. Witch, Sharran, get off all the offensive spells you've got, don't hold back. Like she said, the scales are tough. Magic doesn't always work. No attacking it with acid, use fire, ice, bad air, or lightning—get the area-effect ones in before the boy and me start charging." The sliding seemed to become louder. The noise of a scaled creature, slowly stepping through Durlag's dungeon behind us—I looked behind the statues and saw a set of dead white bones, each one of them wider than I was tall, impossibly gigantic. "Skie, go wake the statues and run back to use your bow," she ordered, and I rushed to obey. "Don't go in close unless we need you to distract the creatures. Druid, start any protections you've got. Get ready, weaklings."


Faldorn's aid rolled across all of us like a warm wind. First Imoen's light shone bright in the air, and then we saw the matched pair of shapes. Their scales were shaded an onyx black that gleamed with life, and around their necks were matched, glittering emerald collars. They had not attained the legendary height and breadth of dragons, that which the bones behind them even exceeded; close to the size of an adult wyvern each. Their long dark tails scraped behind them. Vissilithysmee's children. Adolescents. Durlag's guardians.

A lightning bolt from Imoen whistled blue into the air and through the scaled flesh; Viconia gave a harshly shouted command. Faldorn raised other protections around us, calling to Silvanus. Three of the statue-warriors rushed in, and the hobgoblin and sirine loosed their arrows. The arrows fell to the ground, though the lightning did not; it ricocheted off the bones of the giant wyrm and back again through the second dragon, an excellent aiming from Imoen—A weblike substance that looked as if it was fashioned of living night briefly captured the dragons' feet, but quickly dissipated. Viconia called her goddess for another prayer.

I stood near the sirine, slinging arrows alongside her. The enchanted ones we had found, anything we had; she carried arrows of her own in a quiver strung across her lean blue-skinned back, over the grey scraps of sailcloth she wore as a shift below the covering of her pale sea-green hair. The eyes of the black dragons were a dark topaz, set deep within their skeletal faces, covered by the prominent lines of dark-scaled skull. Some shafts came close, others less so; the dragons' heads snapped forward at speeds hopeless to follow, Shar-Teel and Ajantis attacked about the legs of one whilst the roused warriors hacked at the second. Imoen cast again, a second lightning bolt aimed above the heads of the warriors through the dragon's stomach, her voice clear and high. The dragon tried to reach her, but the human's axe distracted it with a blow to its wings.

The acid breath rained down. Shar-Teel jumped easily aside, Ajantis less ably but nonetheless escaping it in time; green and poisonous, even more dangerous than those snapping white fangs—The hobgoblin laid down the bow he had used, and ran when the dragon came close. But the tail lashed forward; its point flicked out against him, impaled him against the wall. He cried out hoarsely as other hobgoblins who had died at our hands.

Two—young—dragons. The ogre's spiked club hit repeatedly on the left flank of the dragon on the right; he was as tall as the top of its leg, large and obeying the orders Shar-Teel yelled. There were signs of dark blood flowing over the scales; but the dragon struck with a kick and threw the ogre down, slipping across the ground with claw marks in him.
The sirine was the first to pierce a target with her arrow; the pale shaft plunged into the eye of the dragon fighting her fellow warriors, making the dragon howl and bleed. "Arrows, little one?" I heard her musical whispering. "Use what is within your quiver; aim a bow as if you were a sister—"

Sirines have a voice that is supposed to charm. Her bow was long and taut, her wiry form strong to draw such a force. I tried to focus only upon the task, aiming an arrow to near the dragon's head; it slipped, though, into neckscales as the dragon whipped its teeth down to attack. Faldorn rushed forward; she cast a quick healing spell over Ajantis, whilst Shar-Teel hacked at the creature, and then he returned to the battle—

Imoen went forward. She was close to the dragon Shar-Teel fought; she stepped close to it, and fire erupted from her hands. It scorched a knee; and the dragon's wings whipped from its sides like a cloak torn away by wind. It reached into the air, shaking away the fighters below like so many gnats flicked away by a dog's tail; Imoen ran, but the acid fell around her and she slipped to the ground.

Imoen!—

I aimed fire arrows; let it be distracted let it over here— Shar-Teel had managed to take up her crossbow, the electrical arcs of her bolts pinholing the dragon's wings. I tried the same with the fire; the cavern was narrow for a dragon but the flight was above our heads, leaning down to snap and bite but more difficult to hit—

Faldorn was by Imoen, with some effort dragging her away from the stream of acid by her robes, casting quickly. She'd be all right, she had to be. The dragons hadn't cast spells yet, just everything else. Two arrows hit a wide wingspan, and then Meiala the sirine and I both scattered back; hiding behind the large bones, the remnant of the other dragon, unimaginably giant.

Meiala was a fighter as amazing as the skeleton had promised; all the warriors were. She used the old bones, not only hid among them; the dragon flew in pursuit of her, and she had power over its flight that she led it, using the bones herself to jump upon and raise herself to its height. The dragon hit the hefty weight of—of I suppose its mother's—spine and Meiala flew down on it as if it was a ramp, the grey moccasins she wore on her feet sliding down the shifting bone. Even as she slid, her arrows loosed one after the other in quick motion, one after another of her powerful shafts sinking into the dragon's flesh; and it howled in pain, pierced like a pincushion. I tried with my own bow; perhaps fifteen arrows I could use left, fourteen. Beyond that only ordinary arrows and acid arrows that would not harm it. Another shot from Shar-Teel's crossbow spiked lightning through the dragon, and it spewed out that acid breath again as everyone near it ran desperately.

The other dragon had a wing torn by the ancient warriors surrounding it, pressing on it. Ajantis fought with them, though his sword completed less damage than that of the human warrior, or even the quick half-dwarf slipping his axe through the joints of the dragon's tail. I should have thrown him Varscona again, but there was no time—

Thirteen arrows left, and the dragon was on the ground again, thrashing about itself with blows through the air that I could imagine destroying the likes of Tazok by their touch, any vast monster that we'd seen before. There was Imoen's fire again, at the other dragon; so she was still in the fight. Viconia chanted in a very hoarse voice, as if her body was breaking, and something dark seemed to pass over the dragon. Ten arrows left. The ice I had shot spread in wide diameter over the dragon's left wing, and its howls were stronger when Meiala's next shaft struck deeply in its chest. The movement had slowed, a little; a fire arrow hit its neck.

Eight arrows. The second dragon bled, thrashing out at the warriors by it; Imoen added a third flame spell, and ran back to use missiles instead. The half-dwarf stood on its long back and hacked down with his axe; he was wounded himself, but did not stop fighting for us. It stayed to the ground;
Ajantis raised his sword high and brought it down on its left flank.

Five. Acid breath spilled again. I ran desperately behind the stone pillars that held the ceiling; my left sleeve and my skin burned. I opened a potion of antidote and poured it over; there was enough muscle left to aim a bow. Three arrows remaining; the dragon we fought was badly pierced, but enraged rather than falling down. Two. One. Meiala hit it and its head snapped to her direction; I aimed for the eye. It missed. None.

—a red arrow in dreams— Meiala was smiling to herself; the dragon howled, brought its tail over its head to strike at her, and she somersaulted away. Nothing left that I could do, I thought. I aimed an ordinary arrow, which did nothing but make it turn to me, while Meiala the sirine hid.

A large scaled creature with teeth and breath, bearing after you and so much faster that it's almost impossible to run—

Shar-Teel sunk a crossbow bolt through the eye. The lightning within it flared into the dragon's head; it paused for a long moment, its head convulsing in blue. Then it snapped its head down, but Shar-Teel is always fast; her sword struck into the blind spot, piercing deeply and making the dragon's head bleed, dark red-black caustic blood that melted Shar-Teel's gauntlets. She grunted, and pushed it further in. The dragon convulsed; Meiala's arrows bit over a long time, and it was hurt. Its other eye closed; its legs slipped from under it and we could feel its bulk falling to the ground by the impact upon the ground. A fallen dragon.

"Skie, for good measure, hack off the head—" Shar-Teel ordered. The other dragon was bleeding badly, dying from the warriors who stood around it, Meiala's arrow in its skull. Imoen aimed another round of missiles at it; and Shar-Teel joined the fight. I brought down Varscona just above the dragon's collar; the sword only cut a little into the dead scales. Again. Wood-chopping of a giant tree, not that I ever did wood-chopping in the old life. Again, and there was a little blood on the sword: it did not hurt the blade. The emerald collar glittered. Again.

The second dragon fell, having lost enough blood at last. "Fallen to Tarnor's axe!" the half-dwarf gloated, and raised his weapon. Then Shar-Teel was behind him, and she slipped her sword into his back—

He died, looking surprised. "Ignore that," Shar-Teel ordered, and the wounded ogre and the human stood and waited. "Skeleton said they'd attack when time was up," she said, and pushed her blade in through the human's neck. He fell. "Stand still, ogre." She aimed carefully, placing her blade where the dragon's teeth had wounded him; her sword and strength went easily through his thick skin, and he died.

The collar had that tingle to it that one can use to detect and disarm a magical trap. Durlag's control of the young dragons, perhaps preventing them from casting a dragon's spells, or from becoming too fierce for their captor's liking. Varscona finally cut through the last of the dead neck, and I picked up the collar;

"Meiala?" I said; the sirine watched Shar-Teel cut down the other warriors Durlag had imprisoned. "Does the spell really make you turn on us after it's over? I know you can cast charm spells, but—"

She gave a laugh like the flickering of waves cascading over silver shells of oysters. "Of course we all wish to die slaying everyone," she said, and drew a spear-like long blade of jagged coral and flew at me.

We fought her; then she lay dead as the other warriors.
"The skeleton warned us they would turn on us," Imoen said miserably, and sat down, her robes ragged and melted by the acid. Viconia was the only among us who was not wounded in several places, and her casting had exhausted her. Faldorn used as many healing spells as she was able. Shar-Teel and Ajantis had armour badly damaged; they were too exhausted to do more than roughly try to wrench it back into shape and brush over the markings of acid. We drank our healing potions and sat next to Vissilithysmee's bones, trying to rest... Two dead dragons; five dead warriors.

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*Down four tunnels lie four foes. Kill all four and the game begins.* A room of staring ceramic masks, all giants' faces, grey and expressionless with blank cut slits for eyes. Invisible creatures lying in wait to stab us in the back, Durlag's old weapon caches. I took a short sword, well-balanced in the blade, its hilt a light walnut with two smooth florets in green sapphire; lightly enchanted, it hung easily enough to the right of my belt. Imoen passed along arrows and bullets. We shut and barricaded a thick stone door to a small maze garden, where the *ashirukuru* waited in hedges, tree-spirits invisible to most.

"They wish to escape here," Faldorn said, and strangely enough wept for their fate. "Without uprooting their entire garden I cannot free them, and yet if I were to stand there for the casting they would give to their instincts and attack."

Imoen and I had searched the shadows for the ashirukuru, raiding the stored weapons that lay under a topiary statue of Durlag; sometimes we could see their bone-sharp twiglike daggers before they slid into us, and sometimes not. We had bled for what we had taken.

*Durlag...is playing a game.*

Fire. Ice. Slime. Wind.

Faldorn and Viconia cast, and we could move in the icy winds that simulated the far north. There were polar bears, larger than Faldorn's form; winter wolves like those near the Cloudpeaks. They fell to Imoen's flame.

Then muddy slime; striding waterlogged through a green swamp. Puddles of ooze that moved and spat, and had to be killed with blunt weapons and incinerated by fiery arrows. Otherwise one split apart would turn into two, the pair equally deadly and able to overcome everything with its ill vapours.

Blasts of air that only Ajantis and Shar-Teel could really stand under; like cyclones, heavier than the strongest sea breezes I could remember and smelling of nothing. The aspects of air were part-translucent, shaped roughly like light grey wyverns that soared on the wind, vulnerable enough to a sword— On the high cliffs of whatever the place Durlag had built to contain them, they fell down. Viconia took a vial of their blood to return to the tower.

*She who fires flame must be killed before her bow is drawn.* I walked through the shadows between the pools of boiling magma, the heat sufficient to strip flesh even at some distance, protected by Faldorn's casting; and stabbed. She was not human, a creature of living flame that was only shaped like a human; and when she died she exploded in scorching fire that had to be run away from. Imoen aimed ice arrows toward her companions...

Then we returned from that final tunnel to the chamber of the masks; and the walls shifted. Everything was dark; Shar-Teel cursed at the last. There was a long moment of black unconsciousness.
Then I uncoiled myself and found that I stood on a white-stoned square of some pale rock. Faldorn was to my left, still sleeping, curled around her black wolf's fur that blended with the dark stone around her; Shar-Teel was on the right, slightly further away, across from an empty black space and upon another white square. The others were beyond her, in a neat line of alternating black and white.

_I do know this pattern—_

Shar-Teel threw herself quickly to her feet, her sword drawn, searching wildly for enemies. She stood in the middle in the place of the king of a chessboard's black pieces, Viconia crowned as queen by her side. Imoen and I twinned as knights-errant, myself in Shar-Teel's file and Imoen upon Viconia's; Ajantis and Faldorn in the place of the rooks, Faldorn next to me and Ajantis as the queen's rook upon a white square.

Viconia took a slight step forward; and then a storm of lightning came through the air. It played in the middle of the chessboard; it did not touch our squares as we all stepped as far back as we could. Dangerous and frightening; we were afraid of future mistakes and punishments—

A voice spoke in the storm's wake. "Lightning will be sent to punish your transgression, should you move into the incorrect square."

Across from us, we could see now a row of white pawns, taller pale figures behind them, lingering in some blue light that seemed to remain from the lightning's storming. A first pawn took a step forward, a dwarven figure in thick plate mail—

"Remember, when one king falls, the game is done."

The enemy queen began to spellcast, and Imoen shouted out missiles at her. Faldorn muttered, her eyes closed, and pawns of our own appeared: a row of five wolves howling, leaping for the throats of the dwarves opposite, guarding against the enemy pawns.

"Skie, I'm not trusting you on how to play!" Imoen called out. "Vic, d' you know chess? 'Jantis, someone who plays it better than us?" She flung another set of missiles quickly; but from the queen's hand spun a fiery arrow at one of Faldorn's wolves. It swiftly died.

"This is not _sava_, fool!" Viconia did not move from her place as queen; she cried out to Shar, and a long arc of dark shadow materialised before us, like a thick black ribbon hanging in the air. She thrust her arms out sharply; it hit each of the enemy's pawns, and seemed to crack lightly their armour. "Shar, for your gifts I thank you—"

"I am a rook, then—I knew I was no knight—" Ajantis said; "Faldorn, summon further pawns, please. If it is the king then I will target him—"

He ran forward, a rook's move to cross the board in a straight line. He fought the pawn that lurked there, and was looking toward the king; though the two knights of the white side both leaped their way to menace him.

"Shar-Teel, you won't be able to move in time—" I said. She had her crossbow, and peppered the queen to disrupt the spellcasting, not trespassing from her king's space. "Just stop their king, Viconia, please; Imoen, stay back—" I could take a knight's move; could tumble two forward and one to the right, bypass the group of three squares. I drew Varscona; had to, to protect my friends, I told myself.

The pawns were tough and fierce. Faldorn's wolves roamed the board, howling and nipping, summoned up as quickly as they could be killed by the powerful axes. I duelled a pawn, tried to slip blade through gaps in the heavy armour, find the joints to open— It wasn't easy to step aside from
the axe staying on the small square; I had to take chances to pierce the armour. Where Viconia had weakened it Varscona's blade could slip through; the pawn did not bleed but collapsed, transfixed, to its square. A successful capture.

*To reach the other end of the board crowns a pawn. I want to be more than a pawn, I think I do—*

I jumped a second move: two forward, one right. A wolf of Faldorn's occupied the pawn in front of me; when I made the knight's move again, the king was a diagonal square away and the queen directly in front. It is the queen that is supposed to capture the knight in such a position; but I could help keep her busy, though the queen's priest lowered a heavy mace down upon me.

"Silvanus grants me no further summoning," Faldorn's voice rang out. She flung scattered seeds across the board, and chanted again; thick green vines rose up around the enemy's pieces and held them in place. Viconia's sling bullets, darkened with power by her connection to Shar, flew against the king in his robes. Ajantis struck down the black king's rook, called *Helm* probably without thinking about it, and marched against the knight—He was tall and hefty and well-plated, strong enough to be a tower.

"Withdraw," Imoen cried from her place in the back. "Pawns, king's knight-errant, queen's rook, retreat—"

We obeyed, and the black pieces could not follow us under the entanglement. Then before our noses Imoen flung something reddish that simmered through the air; and the white pieces faced an exploding fireball—It was as red and hot and bright as Edwin's efforts, fierce and powerful.

"Yes, it worked, thank you Islanne!" Imoen called in triumph, and aimed a set of missiles at the king, who was badly scorched; "Forward again, pieces! Beware the archmage who knows the rules of living chess!" The entanglement had been burned to ashes by her power; I held away bishop and queen's rook, trying to deflect their blows with Varscona in left hand, shortsword in right—

"Shar, command him to his doom," Viconia hissed, and she forced the king down by her will; he knelt, his neck bared. Ajantis rushed his rook's way through the knight and bishop, to the opposing king's square, and raised his blade high above the king's pale neck. Viconia breathed: "You are *my* rook by your surfacer's game, fallen knight, are you not? You are the toy of the black queen. I order you to act."

"I do this to protect the group," Ajantis said, and brought down his longsword.

The pieces crumbled when the king was beheaded—*shah mat*, in the ancient Calishite tongue of the people of the Marching Mountains, the king *is ambushed*, oft translated as the *king is dead* in Common—The board itself shook; I saw cracks open beneath my feet, and flung myself across the board's edge to the grey stone of the other side. Those in the back rushed forward; there was another door awaiting us, and it opened readily. Shar-Teel stooped to take up the white king's two-handed sword, as heavy as her Spider's Bane and shimmering with an enchantment shaded a dark purple of that hue they sometimes call imperial...

"*Not many live to speak,*" breathed the mist beyond the door with the appearance of a silver and shimmering dwarven man, "*and fewer live to leave.*"
Edwin: 16 Flamerule

The equipment of this mage's study was efficient. One shelf for thick blank books bound in calf leather of good quality, some already filled and numbered and with the slight familiar tingle of magic across their spines that Edwin could sense across the room of privacy wards holding them closed; three further shelves full of Mordenkainen, Larloch, and other invaluable works of magical theory, showing usage but still good condition; large quantities of well-stocked and regularly labelled ingredients within a sealed case of warded glass that occupied in full a second wall; clean vials, braziers, sinks, and tubes; an astrolabe as intricately crafted as any Thayvian work and multiple sets of weighted scales; meticulously mapped spell-circles on the polished oaken floor; well-shined cages of varying sizes adequate for various summons; a convenient doorway to a large adamant cell reserved for volatile experiments; and a second large doorway in the name of the occasional need for fresh air.

The woman Cythandria dictated to him.

"Five oils of fiery burning; ten potions of explosion; and ten potions made according to the bottom script." She gestured to a trio of neat parchments on her table. "I have marked this area for you. Frankly, I hate to share my study; you will move when you can prove you do not need oversight. If you can't prove it, I suppose I'll have to invite you to participate in some of my experiments. There are interesting ways to bribe summonings from the lower planes. Or I could simply send you to Semaj."

"Do not doubt my capacity. I have graduated from the finest academies in Thay. (Mostly graduated. Practically graduated.)" Undeniably a beautiful woman; and one who had not witnessed his humiliation to come here. Perhaps he would grant the conjurress a chance despite her insolence. In some ways Cythandria resembled the unfortunate necromancer, though more genuinely and obviously a woman: similarly of a tall and slim, though more well-favoured, figure; fair-haired, and in her study she wore a sleek twist the colour of gold carefully pinned behind her graceful neck instead of wild, loose streaks of light brown; and her eyes had the striking shine of a carefully incised emerald rather than a weird, catlike green. No tattoos ornamented her face; she wore no cosmetics or illusion spells that he could tell, and her complexion was the smooth pink rose of an educated lady rather than the tan of a wandering adventurer, her lips a deep red colour. Cythandria's mage robes were smooth layers of yellow and white, heavy in material but well-fitted about a graceful figure that seemed to float rather than walk. She had already turned her green eyes from him, reaching for one of her own blank books and impatiently paging through it.

He examined the recipes before him, since after all the woman's current posture showed little of her charming proportions. Her hands turning the pages were slender and elegantly shaped as befit a wizard, her fingernails clean and meticulously trimmed. From a woman of her comely appearance he would have expected longer nails and fashionable, attractive paint upon them; but she was a wizard and some concessions must be made.

The first receipt for oil of fiery burning was similar to one he had used as part of his curriculum; local mineral oil instead of the refined oil from Thayvian seals from the north of the country, a lesser charcoal proportion that he supposed would account for the difference, a slightly greater amount of saltpetre preferred. Memory easily returned to him and he felt confident in the instructions before him. The second was a more difficult potion, though of course based upon the basic principles he had undeniably mastered as an intellectual giant among wizard peers properly represented as gnats. Cythandria had taken up an eagle-feathered quill herself, engaged in penning some notes within her blank book with complete indifference to her fellow practitioner of the Art; Edwin used her example, and sketched out a few alchemic equations in order to remind himself of the key proportions and transformations. (He was an Odesseiron heir; it had been clear to his intellect in his academy days
that whilst simple alchemy was accounted a certain proportion of the assessment by tutors, in his future he would leave it in its true role as the province of inferiors whilst his studies favoured true spellcasting.) The third account he judged after careful reasoning to be a poison of some particularly virulent variety: adder's venom, cat's eye ichor, basilisk's scrapings. Best to finish reading it, and then to concentrate attention upon the first potion asked of him.

Boiling oil as the base for the first group of potions, heated in a medium cauldron plated in shined tin by a careful cantrip. It was tedious monkey-work as it gradually warmed. (Better to concentrate upon this business than any other present concerns.) Oak sap to be moulded into a paste. He had the correct quantity of saltpetre measured into a beaker of Cythandria's; the charcoal—he spent another cantrip to turn it to the dust required, these things were far from his true abilities. The black dust blew into his face a moment later (this was why he detested alchemy so; the ingredients were more prone to spilling than the standard smaller items of arcane focus, particularly irritating if caustic or dirty). He drew a handkerchief of Thayvian linen and removed the stain; then in due time ceased the oil's heat. The wizardess was chanting, standing near to one of her circles, carefully moving her hands through the intricate gestures of a conjuration. Her motions were deftly precise, and the power she drew upon...adequate. Clearly adequate. Edwin made the seven counterclockwise stirs to blend the sap and charcoal. A motion typical of his studies; the mixture turned the appropriate dark colour of this stage. He drew the phoenix-feather stirrer; pronounced the cantrip; then it transmuted to its due reddish-gold volatility...

Cythandria finished her chant; a dark hemisphere covered the circle before her, and something appeared within it. He saw the glitter of scales below the shifting smoke of the barrier, and heard minor reptilian noises. A summoning spell, obviously; some sort of containment. She added another spell, and her container shrunk. Slowly strangling what was inside, he supposed.

Bottling. Let this tedious monkey-work be over with. He set up the cantrip, and scribbled a little more upon his study of the second potion. Yes, and he could drain the magical residue from the bottling for the second step, just intensify it for the required volatile response... He quickly flung together the sulphur and the wyvern's blood, the iron filings further ground, the saltpetre. Activated; he looked with complacency upon his handiwork. Perhaps he could study his spellbook instead whilst this recipe finished. Balancing it neatly below the third recipe as if he used it to reconcile some concept from it, he traced instead the runes of the precious fireball in his mind; certainly he should practise that one in a space for it. It exploded in his mind, undeniably hot and powerful and anyone who opposed him gaping-eyed and gormless as Garrick or else charred fragments on the ground...

There was the sharp cry of a woman, and he withdrew from his studied daze.

"Fool!" Five green hands grew from Cythandria's frantic casting. Edwin turned, momentarily surprised at one who dared to intervene with his magic; something bubbled in front of him. Volatile eruptions of simmering wyvern's blood; he frantically thought to remember—

"Get the sleepsand as a stabiliser!" Two of the green hands smothered the fire, one lifted the brew away; two more for bearing away the vials. He—could see the reason in that; searched methodically amongst labels, scattered the thin grains amidst the flames and brew, trying to smother.

"I was attempting to save time by relying on Sieg's transference rules," Edwin said sulkily, looking at Cythandria's smoke-stained face; his own was no cleaner, and a portion of his hair lightly singed. "(They misunderstand my genius.)"

"Oh, indeed," she said curtly. "Then that explains—no, would have worked if added lead in time—" She shook her head fiercely, her golden hair slightly loosened at its twist. "Fool! Blockhead! Apprentice!"
"I intended wax treated by the arsenic of the third receipt," Edwin said, "self-cleansing as well—"

"Never work; Mordenkainen's Elementary Brewing, fifth and eight equations, I can't believe you missed those—" Cythandria lectured.

"Would; Szass Tam's fourth treatise—" Edwin told her, irritated at the challenge;

"Not unless one changed the—" Cythandria said, and paused for a moment—

"Yes; electrified the—" Edwin said.

"Iron filings, obviously—" Cythandria finished the sentence, and added; "My eyes!"

"Lose potency quickly following termination—" she said. She opened one of her boxes; a very small and very dead basilisk lay inside, and Edwin saw her neatly cut out the pair of jewelled eyes covered by reptilian eyelids, placing them in a solution of clear potion. "You may scrape the corpse for me later. Now clean properly, salvage the potions you can...and get the door," she added in impatience, slicing at her second child-basilisk. Something had made a knocking noise.

Edwin decided not to object to her treatment of him as if he were a servant; upon the other side of the door stood a grey-skinned monster, and he stepped back in shock, magic already upon his tongue.

"Sherdis, come in," Cythandria ordered it; must be one of her summons, then. "Ignore the cowardly fool."

"(As if you do not wish you'd thought of electrifying the iron filings yourself.)"

"(As if I'd done it I wouldn't have remembered to add the wax in time.)," Cythandria hissed back in kind, and Edwin felt himself momentarily surprised at a simian's perception of his thoughts. She ran a smoke-stained hand across her face; the streaks of black soot by her gold hair rendered the colour more dramatic, the absence of its previous perfection creating a woman of realistic detail.

"I have gained the transformation of magelight, Lady Cythandria," the monster spoke in a high voice. "In fleshy form, no less..."

"Then take his form and show me," Cythandria said, pointing to Edwin; who suddenly realised what the creature must be.

_Doppelgangers, who could steal a mind and soul away..._ He'd only read about them, a conjurer ought to know the many beasts he could summon and control, control being not quite present at this moment—

The monster's form melted, and he stared at a copy of himself, backing away—obviously an inferior copy, it was scrawner and with a less resplendent beard than he ought to have, not quite so gloriously masculine—and then it muttered words below its breath, its hand materialising—those were _firefly wings_ in its palm, or were they manifestations of the shapeshifting power only?—and then a light an icy blue in colour gathered about the monster's hand, of course not the vibrant red of Edwin's own magelights, it was not real...

"Very good," Cythandria said; "your verbals are long, but that is satisfactory. Odesseiron, meet Odesseiron."

"Ssssr'dss," the doppelganger said out of Edwin's mouth. "Perorate commands that I musst collect the potions."
"He managed to complete some of the requirement. Do so," Cythandria said, her hands still busy with her own research.

Edwin passed on what he had brewed to Thayvian standards. "You must be ambitiousss, to be working with the lady wizardesss," the monster remarked, its accent its own rather than Thay's noble voicings.

"Blizok lokotok, da ne ukusish!" Edwin said, denying it by his own language, you're pathetic and weak to my potency, you couldn't even bite your own elbow—it would not defeat him, he was powerful—

"Vidna ptitsa po polyotu," the monster replied after a brief pause—the bird is known by its flight, I am proving to you what I can do—and Edwin staggered back in surprise. Cythandria smirked.

"Sanctus cerebra," she said, and pointed to her head with an icy yellow briefly at her forehead. A protection against mind-magic... "Weak shieldings, Odesseiron. Clever, Sherdis."

"I live to grow ssstronger, as you do," the doppelganger said;

"As do I!" Edwin added in outrage; he was a great wizard, and he would not allow the doppelganger to have knowledge of his thoughts. Carefully he jumbled his surface mind into a hurricane, refusing to allow it to read below. Naked Cythandria—yes, naked Cythandria, a monster wouldn't find that attractive and it was an image he could certainly conjure within his mind, below those heavy robes the balanced figure outlined therein, let surface thoughts crowd out all other possibilities...

"Return at the fourteenth hour," Cythandria instructed the potion-carrying-monster; "I intend further polymorph comparisons."

"Yessss. And I wisssh you luck with your apprentice," the doppelganger spoke, shifting to its normal form and blinking those awful silver eyes; Edwin maintained his noble composure. Mercifully, the door closed at last.

"Sherdis claims that its fellows call it akkariss-jheriss, wouldbe-primate," Cythandria said, neatening herself with an embroidered handkerchief of her own, gesturing for a cantrip to rebind her hair with invisible hands. "I use it for experiments. A case study."

"How fascinating," Edwin said, simply out of courtesy whilst his mind still raced in an attempt to think. She uses a doppelganger that wants to pretend to be human—I see, she still maintains power over it because she is better at being human than it—he managed to think, rationalising and understanding.

"You don't seem entirely stupid," Cythandria said—and she was half-smiling upon those dark cherry lips of hers, sensual and yet not overplump in her face of classic proportion, and Edwin thought it was not entirely a gloat... "Continue, Red Wizard. Keep a watch over...improvisations."

Basilisk's scrapings and wormwood tincture, cat's eye ichor and adder's venom... He still had perfect confidence in himself to understand the equations, he told himself, and when Cythandria's green eyes met his across vials handled by both he returned the glance with aplomb.

—

97. Souls That Lost
It was short, of course. A misty dwarven apparition, unclear to mortal vision. *Not many live to speak and fewer live to leave.*

"Are you Durlag?" Faldorn said breathlessly, stepping forward. *Jok oc Durlag,* in his language, subject-verb-object to phrase a question. Ghosts did not care.

"It is a ghost and no heethir'ku." Viconia whispered her words; but they echoed nonetheless.

"It's a male like any other," Shar-Teel said; her contempt gave some confidence to the remainder of us.

"Am I...Durlag?" Its voice was a whisper colder than Viconia's, hesitant and whistling like wind that bore sleet and old seaspray. "You have cause to wonder... you have seen traps, and illusions, and phantoms..." The ghost's pause was long, and it seemed to turn toward Faldorn's direction. "Are you...Fuernebol? You laid...grasses over a stone...one young as he..."

"I am not," Faldorn said. Her voice was confident; but Ajantis stepped to stand beside her.

"Phantom, if you dare to harm her..."

The ghost—was it Durlag?—ignored him. "You wish to...to holan?" it whispered. To take this. "Three paths...another..."

"I thought when I entered that Silvanus wished me to reclaim the land for Nature and to rebuke you," Faldorn said; and we stiffened, placing hands upon weapons. The ghost's form flickered, but it did not attack her. "Now I am not sure that I must rebuke," she said. "But I can end it for you. Grant me the key."

"Gand xoth...Oen gand under..."

To gain understanding; and to beware of dark secrets.

"You don't know anything of Dalton...do you?"

The spirit hung within the air, and spoke no more.

These passages had once been lined with still more traps than the other parts of Durlag's stronghold; and many remained still, though we saw signs that other humans had passed through.

"Gloomy, and I smell something decaying," Aquerna said, wrinkling a furry nose. "But if you say we near our goal, my dear, then I shall believe you."

Into green-glowing caverns, moss on the walls that glowed a weird and poisonous light; to touch it made human skin burn. The thick smell of slime rose from sewers untouched for...one did not wish to think upon it. The ghouls came; as did white carrion crawlers with green mire dripping from their maws. Within the gnoll fortress once I prayed not to meet them again, giant and bloated and white and horrible. Their bites even stopped Shar-Teel and her emperor's blade in place, though Viconia took that one through the brain with a sling's bullet. We brushed rotten flesh and slime from our bodies, waded through painful ooze that ate into boots.

In the furthest reaches of the slime-soaked depths was a rough voice that hailed us; a grotesque that held dark brown flesh above black eyes that burned in their depths, the skeleton that lay below it warped and twisted. Five ghouls stood about it in a pattern so regular that it shocked the eye to see it,
as steady as a military formation. Their leader stood taller than Shar-Teel; but of the five, four were
dwarven-sized.

"My name was Grael!" it spoke, and then in its hands appeared a sword set on fire. And in the hands
of the others also came weapons drawn: a mace, a crossbow, a warhammer, a polearm, an axe
wielded by a still-muscular left arm. "Great heroes we were! Ours the souls that lost!"

There had been a list. Of Grael, the noble warrior; of Hengriffe once called Clangeddin's arm; of
Chalmon Keen-eye; and of Tuorna Brightarm, the greatest axe-wielder of Durlag's armorers.

It came to pass that Durlag Trollkiller and Arlo Stoneblade ventured into the bowels of the Great
Ryft. They fought the hideous tanar'ri Aec'Letec...

"I—you were Grael the hero?" We must have the knowledge of the history; for a moment I forgot to
be afraid. "You fought the demon?"

The ghoul spoke again, darkness whistling through its gaping jaws. "An evil so grand only fools
chase and fight! A Tanar'ri true and horrible! Its name you do not speak unless its attention you wish
to bring!"

Aec'Letec, ran through my mind. I did not speak it.

"What happened? Can we help you?" Imoen said.

"No longer against unthinkable evil! The demon's gaze that is not a gaze, but a look into your soul.
We fought along with Durlag to encase the evil away. Islanne's was the casting that weakened, his
the blow that won, ours only the also-foughts that legend ignores! Here we stay, turned to evil and
unredeemable, but heroes still and not to be killed! A cruel charity...as is given to you, fool who
chases another! Fallen as we!" The black gaze of the ghoul upon Ajantis, the six rotting faces turned
to him; and he stepped away, grown pale once more.

"Boy: hold and have courage," Aquerna spoke.

"Then you are...undead abominations," Ajantis said, hesitating over his words. "Is the right thing to
destroy you?"

"Or to subvert you to serve?" Viconia hissed, raising her dark circle of Shar; and Grael screamed his
own name once more.

"Take my name from this place! Take the memory of battle and my name and we will be free from
the shadow of Durlag and that damnable demon! Fight now, that you can say true that we battled
ferocious! Hengriffe, Aughym, to right and left flank! Chalmon, to fire! Lamai, centre! Tuorna, to
me! You will take the memory from here!"

Shar-Teel's sword found his flesh, and the axewoman her. Viconia fell, a crossbow bolt in her arm,
her holy symbol flung from her hand. Imoen's spells ignited, a pair of flaming arrows into the ghoul
at the back; then Ajantis rushed forward behind his shield, to take the archer. Faldorn chanted of
preying undead, and commanded the very slime to hold them, the moss to bloom vines from the wall
to seize the arms of the ghouls and hold them back from their weapons. I did not use the blue to heal
Viconia; instead arrows to the wielder of the polearm, Lamai who in Durlag's history was once
called the Storming Fury, bride to noble Grael. She burst to fire and was frozen by ice, her dead flesh
melting from her.

Grael's blade burned. Shar-Teel shouted her battlecries, though the ghouls did not bleed; she fought
to slough their flesh from their bones, her greater sword cleaving through the head that was once
Tuorna, axewoman of the bright arm. The fire was uncanny to my eyes, and prompted wonder at it; Imoen sent another spell of missiles, pure force that showed how ferocious she could be. Faldorn's wolf leaped for their throats.

Aughym came to me bearing his warhammer blazoned with the runes of the clan of Trollkiller. Varscona in the left hand, the shortsword of one of Durlag's graves in the right to serve; the ghoul's form was strong, but I held it back, wounded it by a slash of the cold sword. Faldorn cast to slow it, manipulate it by a green fog that clung to its grinning undead face; and I stabbed to the heart, killed a ghoul as it wished to die.

Lamai to Imoen's bow; Tuorna Brightarm to Shar-Teel's fury. Then Viconia had healed herself, and cast a black fog upon Chalmon Keen-eye; Ajantis fled from it, and the ghoul collapsed within her poison of Shar. Hengriffe to Faldorn, forced to sink within the slime's poison, finally stabbed by Ajantis with the head removed. Grael joined battle against Shar-Teel, the greatest of our warriors in turn; she carved him slowly but she carved surely. She was as strong as he; as skilled as he; as quick to riposte as he; but it was that she was able to change her strategies and strikes whereas he was dead and gone long ago. Grael's memory that he was strong remained: he fell as he demanded.

I will write of this history, perhaps...

"A wardstone," Faldorn said, bending to grasp it from the ghoul's dark body; marked blue-black on stained grey stone.

"Demons can do that to you, just by a gaze," Imoen said, sitting down upon a projecting stone that stood relatively clear of moss. "Just looking at you. That seems so harsh."

"Nature is harsh," Faldorn said, though her voice cracked a little.

Viconia smiled in the darkness. She bent down and picked up the crossbow, testing it in her fingers; "This instrument is lightweight," she said, "and my goddess does not have quite the same scruples as more foolish surface deities. The concept appears simplistic enough. Faern, measure it for me..."

But Imoen was already casting her spell to identify upon the burning sword; which I had taken from the ground. It sat oddly in the hand. The rune upon it was not dwarven, nor any other old language of which I had ever heard.

"Before Neverwinter was warm and before Anauroch was desert and before the North was ice and snow," Imoen said, "or I could just say once upon a time like a made-up fairytale. A long time ago, anyway. There are few relics of such a time, and fewer still have a purpose that we could understand. Toldja I wasn't much good at this spell," she added as an aside. "There's fire in it, that's easy to see. And something in the rune—" Her brow furrowed; her white-tinged eyes examined the flame sword closely. "Something in the rune talks about the earth, the magic says. The Burning Earth, that's what it's called. The burning comes from the earth. I can't see anything about who made it, or why or how or even when. It looks like it'd fit a human hand. Wouldn't hurt you. 'S all yours, I guess."

A sword with a rune from a language nobody knows and from a time divination can't find... I swung it in place of Varscona; Imoen was right that the grip fit a human hand, and fit my hand. It had that same magicked edge that spurred it toward a target, burning fast and strong and light in my grip. A very serviceable sword. And yet something in it was wrong: it strained the forearm a touch, did not fit my hand just right. For whoever it was made for, perhaps it was not quite for anything humanoid...

A sword with a history that I didn't know. The rune was five lines, two scratches, and a circle, two characters combined; definitely not the style of the Dethek runes, the futhorc used by some Uthgardt...
tribes, or the still-older Untheric cuneiform. I did not wish to put it down...

"Take the cold blade in her stead, chi'dilok," Viconia said; both of those words had something to do with falling. "You shall become slightly less impotent than usual with it, I think?" Ajantis opened his mouth, looking gravely offended.

"Yeah, just take it." Imoen looked at the crossbow; "Enchantment for a light draw; enchantment to make the aim better; enchantment to make bolts hit harder. Here you go."

"Members of the clergy should not wield sharpened weapons," Ajantis said sharply; a debate upon that began, but he picked up Varscona to carry.

Faldorn stepped lightly ahead; we returned from the slime, walked through stone passages. Further tripwires, further ceilings that would slam iron-hard upon anything in their path. The passages widened, and became decorated by the remains of gold filigree at the walls and elegant tiles upon the floors. Stained, of course, by the trails of filthy green we left behind. She inserted the wardstone to gently open a door; and there in a wide hall stood a white marble throne more elaborate than Kiel's seat, pyramids of tribute in jewels set below it. Most importantly, another wardstone within the treasures;

"Think we've kind of got enough shiny things for now," Imoen whispered miserably. "Maybe I'll think of it later and kick myself for leaving it all behind, I guess. But I don't want any more jewels, I just want out of here."

Dalton; "Soon," I said—though I was in no position to promise anything; Imoen was stronger, her magic powerful.

"Can't stand the buzzing..." she said; and suddenly brightened as we turned another corner in the labyrinth of Durlag. "Fal! Wardstones?"

A machine device, yet running after centuries. The air forced from it raised Imoen's mage's robes, setting them flapping around her ankles; and she touched it and cast spells upon it, seeking to understand it as if it were a thief's trap. She grinned when the buzzing stopped, and pointed to etchings hidden below a panel of it that seemed to show another path. It lay quiescent behind us like a resting monster. Our feet sank into red carpet runed by gold. The runes led to another path above streams of molten rock that served the machinery with fuel; and translucent wraith spiders that released their poison deeply. There was a well beyond them, but not a trace of water and with only darkness below it.

It was Imoen to pick up a stone, drop it down, and listen. After the passing of a minute there was but a faint rustling that was not unlike the rustling of paper of a book; and then no sound at all. Even Faldorn made no comment. In the corner of the chamber stood a clay statue of a dwarf; and it spoke.

"Questions I have of you: none but kin of clan may pass."

The hall shifted; the floors moved below our feet; the walls closed in upon us in a perfect circle; three other dwarves rose up from the ground. Shar-Teel made as if to move, and found she could not; runes bound her feet to the ground, held all of us to await the questionings.

"I am ready," Faldorn said. Her brown eyes glinted a reddish shade; the flickering light had no visible source.

The first statue spoke, its face not dissimilar to that of the silver ghost: "The mother of the sons, Kiel and Fuernebol. The matron of the clan: what is her name?"
"Islanne," Faldorn said, before any of the rest of us; "Islanne," Imoen echoed, glancing down at scrolls she carried.

"Durlag, builder of the clan, had a name bestowed by deed of the fortune of battle. With axe and fire he cleansed the land when axe alone would not suffice. If you know of Durlag, tell the name he earned for himself."

"Durlag Trollkiller," I said, and spoke truth.

"Then the father's father of Fuernebol and Kiel. The wanderer who lived by the strength of his weapon. The clanless man who engendered the building of this tower."

"Durlag was son to Bolhur Thunderaxe," Faldorn said, which showed that she had listened to what I had told her.

"Three answers. Now know my fear."

"A true druid is not afraid of anything..." Faldorn said.

"And that is a most foolish notion, young lady," Aquerna said.

The three set about the room spoke. One's face twisted to an ugly sneer that did not belong on the face of human or dwarf, and it spoke as a hiss; the second's face widened to a blank, desperate fear; and the third narrowed to a scowl, its face guarded. They talked in unison, each one of us hearing only a portion of what was spoken:

"We were the fearr made flesssh! We came to the home that Durrllag built and we hid in the people he forrrmed. We were the fearr made flesssh: but it was already here!"

"We followed Durlag. We were his people. We were the future, his family, and if we were lost so was he. We hid the fear beneath. We followed Durlag. We were his people."

"We built here against all that would come. We built retribution into the tripwires, vengeance into the fireballs, hatred into every nook and cranny. The foundation was his fear that the same would happen again. We built here against all that would come."

The last voice thundered to cut them off.

"Trace the path of my fear. My father roamed. Well respected he was, but he had no home. He died with no dwarven kin by his aside. I would not allow myself to follow his steps that far. I would not be Durlag the clanless. From where did the fear began, and where did it find its last home?"

"It won't seem like much," Imoen said, "but I'll tell you how I knew the most fear. There was that ogre attacking me and Skie not long after we left, and it was just the two of us with Monty and Xzar, mad mage and halfling. I remember just thinking, Oh, hells, we're going to die. Oh, Tymora, Mystra, we're dead. Big ogre, swinging his club and knocking over trees and the crazy wizard screaming like a little girl, and I reckon I was screaming too and I dropped my sword. Then it stumbled and missed me, but I was on the ground shaking like a leaf, and I knew for sure I'd have to learn spells not because fiddling with cantrips used to be fun if you could stand all the boring books and memorisations, but learn spells to stop us dying...

"The first fear came from what was inside you; you wanted a home because you hadn't got one, and I...well, for me I just really wanted not to die, and I'd got kinda used to looking after Skie too." She patted my arm.
"Then you buried it under building your clan," Faldorn said. "I... The first time I tried to be initiated as a druid, I failed. They laughed at me and said I was only thirteen winters. Though I had used the words to call on Silvanus' power many times before, they dried in my throat when I was in front of them and I could not cast. Then my teacher Corsone brought me to another grove, and the second time I gained the initiation and bound my wolf to me through a hunt. Then I was powerful enough to be sent to the Sword Coast to be tested. Silvanus knows my true faith.

"You buried your fear while you built your clan."

"I hide away from things and don't tell about things," I said. "I never went to my father and asked him why he didn't talk to me, and I wanted to run away with Eldoth rather than defy my family. I'm not clever enough or strong enough or pretty enough for...people to care about me. I was surprised that Eldoth did, he was so sophisticated and charming and good at magic and adventuring. I run into the shadows instead of fighting...but it still comes after you.

"You built over your fear, and that's why the invaders came."

"A charming sharing of insecurities, kivvin," Vicomi said in a low hiss. "In the Underdark we do not call upon weakness so freely." And yet: she was no longer in the Underdark, it seemed not entirely by her own will. "You had your fear of loss of clan, built upon it, and invaders came at the crude temptation of gold. Then it became your home more than the mere stone of this place. One lives with loss; shapes it... I killed several of my sisters myself, and there is little of my family I would have so much as spit upon should I have come upon them set afire by some useful rival. None," she added fiercely.

"Your fear was your home."

"You begin to understand," Durlag's shape said. "Now tell us of the pain."

Tangling voices spoke as if they pleaded for something we did not know how to grant.

"It began with usss...and the mastersss...Durlag's own family ssssought his life, and he sssslaughtered their falssse facesss. It began with usss, from the wessst..."

"This is not my face. My child rose against me. It was not my child. I was in the south among the last; but not the very last. This is not my face."

"I was hired after the battles were done, from the east. Durlag's visions grew darker and soon we could not see. I was never truly sure whether he wished to keep the intruders out, or himself in."

Durlag's statue stood in the north of the compass rose across the runes, and spoke last.

"Then from where did my pain come? Where did my pain stab home? Where did my pain take root? Where does my pain now reside? You will speak now."

"Your pain struck from the west, because you were a fool," Shar-Teel said harshly. "You kill them when you first can before they kill you, and you should know to expect pain."

"It stabbed in the south when your own children attacked," Ajantis said. "I know the feeling of that which you love turning to black and rotted ash in your hands, when it has slipped away from your grasp perhaps forever."

"Then you hired people to make it worse for you," Aquerna spoke. "Really, 'twas not the most sensible of decisions, as troubled as you surely were. One ought to listen to wise counsel and reason." She flicked her tail in her position on Ajantis' shoulderplates, and the dwarven statue
seemed to glance briefly up at her. "I understand what pain is, but one does not have the right to
make others miserable." She sounded complacent in her pronouncement, slightly too complacent to
make that judgement; but surely she was right.

"And it rests—" Imoen began.

"In you," I finished.

The statue's features shifted again; half a smile. "You understand a little. You must also understand
the blame."

"We came to kill, but not without reasonssss. We were here before. The dwarves did not hide their
wealth. The bait too great to passs. We came to kill, but not without reasonssss."

"There was no warning, but it would not have helped. The Trollkiller was our provider, and he
would protect us. We put down our swords to live the life he always wanted: we lived as family.
Suspicions were for outsiders, guards for wartime. There was no warning, but it would not have
helped."

"We crafted as we were told. We trapped every inch of every step, and made sure that to enter meant
death. We have killed many over time, though it was not our will. Because the challenge is there,
they will come. We crafted as we were told."

"This is the end of all things," spoke the statue of Durlag. "Here I stood and struck them all down as
they came. My family and my clan, with their false faces. I killed the doppelgangers that had taken
their forms. I cursed the doppelgangers for destroying my dream. But the real evil could not save my
people before this deception. The real evil hid from life in the face of this tragedy. The real evil
deserves the blame. Understand where the blame lies."

It was horrible for him, I found myself thinking, the dreadful story. I wouldn't kill something with
Imoen's face, I couldn't.

"You think the monsters were not to blame. I cannot fathom your reasoning," Ajantis said. "They
were monsters..."

"And he tortured them," Imoen said.

"Monsters are to be killed! Evil is to be purged! —Especially in oneself..." Ajantis said, stricken. "I
do not accept these monsters had justification for the bloodbath they committed," he added more
slowly. "But it is plain what Durlag thinks." He stared at the statue with the twisted sneer.

"Your family were foolish weaklings who failed to see the danger," Viconia said. "The imbecile
ghost treats them too kindly! If your foolishness is the cause of others suffering, then the drow would
say that it is the fault of the one who did not abandon the failure in time. You do not hold the one
who caused the suffering to blame because they showed some childish courtesies in the past..." Her
eyelids dropped, as if she looked to something inside herself. "It is a poor fool who becomes sacrifice
to things of another; a poor fool who shall cease to exist."

"The craftsmen made all the traps and made sure that people would be killed," I said. "We came to
rescue a boy who might have already been hurt by them; I'd blame the craftsmen—" One did blame
a thief for exercising her skills; one couldn't pretend you had nothing to do with what happened.
"But you don't blame the craftsmen, because they crafted as they were told."

"Dalton is his name," Ajantis said, his voice steadied once more. "We come to spare a boy's life. The
blame... You blame yourself for all that happened, Durlag. You blame your fear; as I have blamed
my judgement."

A long silence, as if we had gravely offended the statue. We waited for its promised vengeance, shifting weight from foot to foot. It spoke at last:

"You have understood. You may yet survive what I could not."

White fog surrounded us, forced us to lie with closed eyes on the ground; the workings of the room turning and turning.

My hair was awry, flung to the left after lying on stone. I sat up, rubbing my head; Imoen was beside me on the floor, drawing a sleeve across her eyes as if to wake from sleep. Viconia swore softly in drow, a long string of indecipherable curses; Shar-Teel leapt to her feet, scowling as usual, the pair of greatswords crossed behind her back. We were once more within the passage we had first entered beyond the game of chess. Ajantis stirred, Aquerna resting on his chest.

I saw that the ghost was here, and that Faldorn stood by it.

"A...creature below...powerful beyond all..."

Shar-Teel impatiently shook her head. I thought: Not more powerful than Durlag's young dragons; than Grael or the chessboard or the golems; please...

"You must remove...or it shall make this place its own...such a fortress...impenetrable if remade in its image..."

"We shall," Faldorn said, promising things on our behalf. "I see that would be even worse; by Silvanus I won't let it happen."

"There were others...it was not defeated...you must have a care..."

Viconia yawned theatrically and stretched, in a way which was unlikely to have an effect upon a long-dead dwarf. "Hargluk, what manner of creature might it be?"

It seemed to speak to Faldorn. "A great evil...that I did not place here...that came from far below..."

"Things forged in what is barren and molten and still below that," Faldorn said. "I understand."

"So young...but the god you favour...what he wishes the earth to be aids me," the ghost spoke. "But my son...my young son too much a child to fight...perhaps your way, Fuernebol..."

Imoen rose to her feet, holding her spellbook in both hands, her arms folded protectively across it. "Faldy's still got to act like a normal girl. I'm sorry about your son and all, but you're not supposed to know how to fight when you're young..."

"I have faith in Silvanus," Faldorn said simply. To the ghost, she added: "The earth was father and mother to me, the Shadow Druids my teachers since my first memories. My family gave me as offering, and I learned knotwood club in place of lute, the words of callings to Nature's power instead of songs. I am different, and because of it I set you free."

"Fuernebol...I will show you the way..."

The ghost's silver finger pointed at a featureless wall; it slid open, showing the path to come. This time, the way was dark and narrow and dirty; few traps, only wooden boxes that had rotted by time, layers of dust and grime upon the floor, rubbish stored. We entered into a larger storeroom that stood
with crates smashed to pieces though methodically piled, signs perhaps that someone had been within in recent memory. The walls seemed solid, with no obvious way out from it bar the path we had came; Imoen and I went to search the walls, alert for secret levers and panels designed to open. *If we ought to be so eager about a great evil...* Something of what I’d used to be was returning, perhaps. The Burning Earth hung ready on my right hip.

We had searched for some time, fruitlessly; and behind us was something that we ought to have seen if it had been there before. A dwarven woman. Her dress was a translucent pink that looked as if it had once been a warm red, a thick and rich fabric; her beard hung in three full brown braids, her hair bound with gold. The expression on her broad face was remote and sad, her features clearer than those of Durlag. She spoke.

"Children...you have come far and seen much...leaving is what I offer."

"—No," Imoen said, "we can fight what's down here." She looked suddenly stern and resolute, and then shrugged; "Puffguts and Mr G. never backed down when they were adventuring. 'Leastways, so's they always said."

"I cannot see the madness that lurks here. You are as stubborn as my Durlag..."

Islanne. I saw Imoen look at the ghost with renewed curiosity. "The depths belong to the dead...the world above is yours..." she told us.

"You ought to be freed of this unnatural place," Faldorn said.

Islanne shook her head sadly. "My Durlag...I will not leave until he..."

"And could you tell us more about your magic?" Imoen said, irreverently practical. "Got your fireball and your strong charming, but some of your others don't hardly make sense..."

The phantom seemed to blink, translucent eyelids opening and closing. "Not spells alone...wisdom to defeat what lies ahead. I will send you when you wish. Would that I could send the weight from his shoulders thus..."

Behind her, something tapped upon the wall; and we pressed open the panel and went forward with weapons ready.

She was human and grimy and stood below a curling stair, a longbow shaking between her hands; yellow-haired and armoured, a face like a hungry fox and a voice full of fear. We stared at her as she stared back; she threatened that she would shoot; and then she told us her name.

"Clair De'Lain; I should be dead. A Demonknight! Such a thing as rare as it is evil! It flings fireballs at whim, it only troubles to draw its sword if it believes you worthy. It has the Mirror of Opposition. It made a simple gesture with its hand, and all the hells broke loose. It created doubles of them all, and laughed as they all killed themselves. Dalton screamed the loudest; he was the youngest, and I think he's still alive..."

Ajantis looked at me. I knew his thought, our eyes meeting alike: *rescue a boy, this time...*

"Fear not," he said to Clair, and sounded like a knight in shining armour. "We will face it, and we will save you and Dalton both."

In preparation, we sat under pink magelight Imoen conjured. "Flings fire," Imoen muttered as she paged through her spellbook, "could be what we saw in the entrance, that means..." She glanced briefly to Varscona at Ajantis' side while he cleaned and patched his armour, but said nothing.
Viconia and Faldorn spoke their prayers, one pleading to Silvanus to hear her despite being in unnatural construction and the other appealing to Shar to forgive what was likely the wrong hour to pray. I opened the book of Melair, the one which had borne the word wisdom; turned through the pages until the very last; and it melted in my hands, though the words seemed to be within my head still. *Warfare and wisdom, to learn more to help the others fight...*

Demonknight.

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**98. Tower's Tempest**

*Durlag's Tower, Endgame II*

A short staircase. We wouldn't want to waste any more time. Above it, a banded door in oak, blackened as if by fire but not broken. Below it, a high balcony in white stone, the walls of it grey-coloured and the bars of its balustrade more for function than form. It broke to allow yet more steps that led down to a floor covered in black and red tiles with a disordered pattern that hurt the head to look at, in the centre of it a rectangular object covered by off-white cloth. By it stood a figure not so very much larger than a tall man, dark armour with a thick helm that seemed to cover only blackness below.

It spoke only briefly, inhumanly. "Spider to fly. The parlour welcomes. You have come to die, and I know best." Its voice was like a shard of glass scraped along rusted iron, like teeth rattling against copper nails; even while it spoke we tried to destroy it. We'd a battleplan, that Shar-Teel and Ajantis should attack to prevent his casting; protections raised against demonic fire; Faldorn and Imoen to summon and Viconia to cast against him; a bow for me and the icy blade for Ajantis. Shar-Teel ran for the demonknight, Ajantis not far behind, Imoen's voice strong as she began something not unlike Edwin's summoning rituals, Faldorn's wolf snarling and slavering.

Then it flung the cloth away from the mirror, and we saw ourselves. In the shadows of the others the demonknight himself vanished, invisible among the crowd that emerged. A tall and broad copper-haired man drew a two-handed sword. He wore a well-pressed tabard that declared him a Flaming Fist above his strong armour, the only thing about his dress not relentlessly shined and polished a crude clay necklace beaded as an amateur would design. Shar-Teel set eyes upon him, herself a barbarian by garb, armour functional though not polished, a woman who slew males and Flaming Fists—and straight at him she went, curses in her mouth and her sword flashing swiftly through the air. But if anything, he was swifter than her.

There was a pink-haired corpselike thing that shouted spells to cover itself by glowing light, and that moved inhumanly fast. "I...might have...dreamed of you, once..." Imoen breathed, and sent a fire arrow into its monstrous hide; but the flares dissolved into the spell protections it had laid up for itself.

Ajantis faced the helm of a knight in jet-black armour, who bore a small red-eyed corpse as a familiar upon its shoulders. The black knight's hands glowed red, and he yelled foul words of calling to underworld powers.

"I...swore I would not; I swore I would not embrace my Fall; I am *not this*—" Ajantis cried, pale; the Blackguard knew each move before he made it, beating him back with a sword that was yet not as dark as Varscona's blade...
A drow priestess who bore the symbol of Lloth's spiders upon her breast, dark power gathered about her, looked to Viconia. "Yibin wael," she said, and in her left hand held a crying drow baby by the nape of its neck, in her right a sharp flashing knife. She brought the knife down, and raw power seemed to gather around her; the crying stopped...

(\textit{...an illusion of a child, surely—})

Another Faldorn, clad much the same to the Faldorn we knew, almost entirely alike in feature, stood barefoot on the tiles with her hair loose about her face. Where she stepped, she smiled, and black tar came where she placed her feet; she raised a hand into the air and curled it to a fist, and a sickly brown smoke materialised in it whilst her body gathered a shield of light blue. A wolf-creature stood by her, tall and upon two legs and as black-furred and red-eyed as the old companion; much larger and more fearsome.

"You \textit{drain} from the earth's power instead of serve it; can you not see that?" our Faldorn's voice cried at her; and:

"Of course I do, for how I use the earth is to serve nature in the end. You will soon learn that I am right." The two-legged wolf flew up to Faldorn; she growled like an animal, her flame blade in hand, held with a druid's conjured strength rather than that of the fifteen-year-old girl she was. The giant wolf bore down upon her.

I'd not been idle, aiming arrows, keeping to whatever was left of the plan. A shaft to the breastplate of the male Fist; one of Durlag's ice arrows that froze a spot upon the armour of the Blackguard; a poison arrow that bounced from the protections of the monster with the vague appearance of Imoen; another poison attempt for the other druid. Automatic movements enough. Behind the five was a sixth, and she seemed to direct them within the fight.

"Aww, don't you people read \textit{any} histories?" Shining dark hair was smoothed into a bun that seemed flawless. Her hazel eyes sparkled, her body almost as unbearably graceful and slender as Viconia's. Her voice was high and clear and well-carried. "Change dance partners! Blackguard, help the Fist with the barbarian, she's better than the boy. Great Druid, you keep the boy busy with a few summons. Slayer, bring down all their protections. Matron, keep casting against the ones on the balcony." Perhaps she only seemed perfect; she stood and spoke as if she expected to win, her head tilted slightly in an elegant line, poised and balanced and sure of herself. She looked far more well-bathed than I, what I could see of her hands neatly groomed as she lifted a finely made bow. To her I was slow and dirty and clumsy.

\textit{She was the evil mirror fiend's creation...}

They obeyed her advice. The Blackguard turned, and ran his sword into Shar-Teel's shoulder, past her armour; she broke free with a yell, her blood falling from her. Ajantis found himself within a sea of wolves, trying to use his shield everywhere at once. The chants of the monster and the priestess of Lloth grew loud.

She knew I looked at her; she met my eyes and spoke, her voice silvery and cutting and high enough to be heard above the sounds of battle. "I guess you're thinking I'm the evil you're not, and killing me means killing everything you don't like about yourself. But I'm not evil like some of the others. I'd never know they existed if we hadn't all been summoned like this. I'm not better or worse, I'm just fighting so I can be alive and take your place. The real difference is confidence.

"That's why Eldie still follows me; I'm strong enough to keep him and I know it," she said—and she was me and I her, she knew as she said it that it would hurt. \textit{Wanted Eldoth; kept him.} "You won't change what you know's bad about yourself by attacking, so why bother at all?" I'd not yet aimed an
arrow at her—hands on the bow, paused, her words shouldn’t have been enough to make them shake — ”You’d still be miserable even if you won. Oh, I’m Skie, I’m helpless and hopeless and about as bright as a bowl of wet pastry. I’m your opposite for being better than you. You know how bad you are.”

Remembered Eldoth—did she remember the boy? Did she remember everything that had happened but she’d faced it with grin and dash, courage and verve and poise? She—

Had she read for wisdom?

I loosed an arrow at the mirror itself, flying above her head. But the arrow broke; the mirror too powerful. She released an arrow of fire from her own bow, and I ducked and rolled away. Then the monster’s spell finished, and I felt the mage protections stripped away a second afterwards. The stone of the balcony was seared dark by the flames.

The demonknight flung fire. Viconia cast against the other drow, screaming the name of Shar against Lloth; Imoen’s spells pierced into the giant wolf-creature, which cut horribly at Faldorn with its claws. I ran, let not-me loose her next shot and the drow cast a black cloud of fog to materialise where I’d been—not that clumsy, not that clumsy, please—

An ice arrow. It whistled through the air and the shot was true enough, though the corner of the mirror rather than the mirror itself. And failed yet again to destroy it.

I heard the other Skie’s clear laughter; and then I saw her jump, somehow running forward and flinging herself high in the air, leaping above the battleground, standing easily on the balcony. Not human to do that—

"Stop that," she said. "Now this is one of the things I can do. I can do nice things too, of course, but not to you.” White gathered in her hands—she cast some sort of spell, draining the way Edwin or Xzar did; taking blood and life from me in a way that...

I’d cast some sort of healing over Imoen the first times I learned about it; gained red hands to stop people like a ghoul to kill them; dreamed...

I drew the Burning Earth. She jumped easily down from the balcony to meet me; of course she knew similar thrusts and ripostes to me, able to predict the actions. Her own sword was fine, but not of the same magic. "Are you trying to murder me?" she said, her voice amused as a swashbuckling heroine out of a storybook, her poise still elegant perfection. "If you think you’re worse than me, you’re probably right. I liked killing Davaeorn, but I never killed a boy because I had so little of a self that it was all right to let the idea of wanting to kill everyone take it over.” She wielded a small buckler strapped to her left arm, sparkling with magic, her sword in her right hand; she knew everything I knew, and she was just a little bit faster. She used the opposite hand to lead as me. They call the left hand sinister, and proper people are trained out of using it entirely.

Maybe...

Imoen cried out, a skeleton warrior by her that was controlled by the laughter of the Lloth priestess.

I want them to live and I want to live.

I struck fiercely at her left; she dodged as I’d known she would, but the blade sank deeply into the stone of the balcony. Then to her right; again it missed her. She lunged forward with her sword. It pierced through the leathers over my right arm. She kept hold of her hilt; I lunged forward. I struck her with my body—the sword wasn’t at the right angle, the reach too close to really hurt her, but it
burned her. Her blade still cut through the flesh of my left arm, and it was weak; then behind her the balcony gave way upon either side. We fell.

*That move she had not discovered in time.*

She landed below me. In the battle raging below it was chaos about us. She looked horribly vulnerable, hitting the tiles with a crack, her hair loosened and fluffy around her face. I dropped the hilt of the sword, lifted her head by the hair, and slammed down her skull to the ground. There was blood on my hands and her eyes were closed. She could jump and to drain energy; she'd dreamed, talked for a *reason*. In my dreams I became a red arrow loosed from a bow...

I used the blue power to heal my arm to strength; it took little time. I unravelled the bow from my back, drew it—the monster who couldn't possibly be Imoen was coming near to me, I told myself there was no time for hesitation. I concentrated, and the arrow formed at my will just as the red hands; and like them it was a glittering red. I loosed it...

One of the wolves at Ajantis' flanks suddenly leaped in front of the arrow's path; I despaired. But it passed through the wolf's body, deeply red, an arrow more powerful than the physical—I was done, it might not matter now if the monster got me first—and hit the mirror. The mirror cracked from side to side...

*(when it did that originally, the lady had seen something she could never have; that was her curse...)*

The enemies' forms dissolved and blurred, features obscured and removed from them, their ability to speak and to cast immediately taken. Shar-Teel managed to sink her sword deep into the breast of the Flaming Fist, and that form of a mirror fiend collapsed; but though the spells of the Matron and the monster stopped, they remained, clawed and quick. The creatures summoned, the werewolf upon a bleeding Faldorn and the skeleton warrior against Imoen, the wolves about Ajantis—they'd disappeared, and that was all I'd time to notice. The fiends that had been twisted to Imoen and Viconia were after me.

The Burning Earth, swung widely, kept them partly away. There was a voice behind them: "The mirror was but a toy. You served us well by your passage here. We shall use this tower." The demonknight: its sword hit. I fell across the floor with a wound deep in my back, skidding on blood away from the creature—unliving *thing*, only darkness below the armour—

"To...guard and protect," I heard Ajantis say, speaking slowly, turning away from a featureless mirror fiend he had sent to the ground. "I cannot allow you..."

Varscona met and parried the demonknight's blade. Shar-Teel, still bleeding, fought another creature. Faldorn chanted, her hands held high, and made something descend on Ajantis; and when the demonknight called down fire, though he screamed he was not burned to death.

I cast for the blue again; it wasn't enough to heal what the demonknight had done. But enough to stand again. Shar-Teel's movements were slow and pained. She tried to hold against the three mirror fiends that remained upright. Viconia seemed to be trying desperately to heal herself by her chanting, Imoen gulping down a dwarven healing potion. Ajantis was worst, most greatly weak in comparison to his terrible foe—and I stabbed the demonknight in the back as it tried to split Ajantis' skull.

It turned on me, and only laughed. *It was* fire; I ran away—Ajantis in his turn stabbed the demonknight from behind. If he could only forgive that...

On the balcony Imoen was burned and bloodstained and pale. But she flung spells, missiles at the fiends, spinning slowly but steadily out of her hands. I took Shar-Teel's right flank; helped her there,
and the Burning Earth could cut through the mirror's fiends at the edge of their blurs, formless but
clawed shapes passing through the air. I remembered her teaching me, and tried to fight like it. Bony
claws scratched across my collarbone; Shar-Teel struck high into the mirror fiend's head. Then I was
at her back, the three of them wildly slashing about us. She was so strong, and I kept them away
from us.

Faldorn leaped like a hunting cat down from the balcony; her club was wreathed by green vines, her
face bleeding. She hit the demonknight with as much force as Shar-Teel could muster. Ajantis cried
out to warn her away, but she fought nonetheless:

"I am one with nature," I heard her say, "the laws of nature must be enforced."

Some of Shar-Teel's blood had soaked into my skin, seeping from her armour on her back. But
Imoen's missiles hit the mirror fiend that Shar-Teel fought, and she lunged forward whilst it was off-
balance. I heard it fall. Two remaining; the Burning Earth strained my forearm, and bit at the
formless thing in front of me.

The demonknight parried Ajantis' strike by its sword. Then its left gauntlet lashed out as a swift
whip, and Faldorn fell to the ground. It spoke briefly. Tongues of black leaped about the sword's
blade like serpents, and it rose to strike down upon her— Ajantis put himself in its way, and the
sound was hissing steam and discordant bells. He stepped back with the armour on his left shoulder
buckling and broken, his shield dangling limply from a twisted arm. Varscona still sought what lay
under the demonknight's helm.

Viconia's voice was low and confident. She pointed a graceful finger at the demonknight from her
pose on the balcony; she spoke a final word sharply—and a sound like rolling thunder burst upon the
demonknight, heavy and cold; cracks suddenly appeared in the armour, the same darkness within as
below the helm.

"Shar grants me greater power; I have practiced well—" Viconia spoke with a breathy satisfaction
beyond that with which she used sometimes for men.

I watched the movements of the mirror fiend I fought, parried one hand of claws with the Burning
Earth and the other with the dwarven shortsword. Flame cut into it; I saw an opening and stabbed
under and up, like Shar-Teel would have; then quickly to what would have been the neck in a
human with the shortsword. Help the others—

Shar-Teel managed to slay the one she fought; she stood there simply panting, and I let the last of the
blue heal some of the deep wound in her shoulder. She stared incredulously, but there was no time;
the demonknight, huge and dark and inhuman.

The four of us came to it. Shar-Teel's grim, exhausted strength; Faldorn's recovered, fanatical steps;
Ajantis' wounded determination; and...me, tired. Its blade had us scattering from the fierce blows;
once I dashed below it, stabbed with the shortsword and threw myself away from it. But Ajantis had
the blade of ice; for all he suffered, for all the times the demonknight made him bleed with his shield
arm ruined, he returned to it. Faldorn managed to cast a spell in a clear and ringing voice. The
demonknight was halted in place, and Ajantis ran it through with Varscona...

Parts of the armour were dust; parts were simply empty. A small dagger fell to the ground. Faldorn
placed a foot upon the bare helm. I saw that she was smiling in a way not unlike Xzar...

"Silvanus, hear me now," she said, and no interruption was possible. "Let this last unnatural creature
become the focus; let the abilities now be granted to me. This tower must be purified; this tower must
be reclaimed; by nature, for Durlag, for—Fuernebol." It was the first time that I had heard her speak
that name. Her wolf howled between her words; paced by her, guarding her legs. "Oak Father, the fate of Durlag's Tower lies in you!"

"Imoen, get the woman—Clair whatshername. Don't slack," Shar-Teel ordered. "Skie—" I knew what she'd say; to the back of the demonknight's arena was a crack too narrow for the demonknight to slip through, an open place to—

Ajantis was on my heels, but he couldn't quite fit through. There, a small dark alcove beyond—human waste was scattered all around it, the smell vile—the human who had made it shaking there. There was a stained silver charm at his neck, his hair below the grime that covered it fair, his build slender but tall if he stood, his chainmail and clothing ripped open across his left arm and a dark brown mark visible there.

"Therella sent us, Dalton. You're going to be safe."

Ajantis helped Dalton back to Faldorn with only his right arm, where the presence of Clair seemed to calm the boy slightly. Whatever Faldorn was casting, it was lengthy; her eyes rolled up in her head like raw eggs, her voice loud and crude, the druidic words coming from her mouth like hailstones sent purposely to a target.

"She's not listening to us," Imoen said, "I don't know—"

A fierce ululation came from Faldorn's mouth, and we saw the first of the vines: sprouting as if from the earth under the tiles, breaking the floor apart as they rose, seeming to grow thicker in diameter each passing instant. They twined about and broke apart tile and stone, growing child-vines that spread thin and whip-strong to tear apart the tower's construction, growing high and approaching the room's ceiling. Plaster and tiles flew down upon our heads...

Imoen was already looking at her spell components; "Oh Tymora she's going to kill us all. Looked up protection spells, found a really good one, gotta cast it on invocation, gotta use enough power. Me, that'll help; and diamond's the hardest crystal you can find." She showed a large stone from Durlag's treasures; with no qualms about destroying it. "'Jantis, your shield's enchanted, hand it over, I need it." A hank of her hair had fallen across her mouth; she gnawed it while she desperately searched through her materials. "Got all my gum arabic together, can't leave home without it. Gotta evoke this—think of it like invoking. Build it. Hurry up, Imoen," she told herself. Clair De'Lain stood with Dalton, old friends finding each other again. Neither of them spoke; Dalton simply stood blankly in place, while Clair watched the destruction with nervous eyes.

The balustrades came down, crashing and rolling across the floor, torn by the vines. The room in which we had found Clair must be overwhelmed by Faldorn's wild spell by now. The vines were as broad as Shar-Teel's shoulders. They pierced through the walls, tearing up all in their path. Faldorn chanted still.

"Reclaim this for nature." The debris flew toward us, a rolling tide of an earthquake that we stood in the epicentre of. A falling tile struck Viconia in the shoulder, cutting her open. She stared at the moving plants; she hissed in fright, seemingly lost for words.

Faldorn's yellowish grin was full and intense, and she spoke again. "Take my hand!" she said. "Silvanus has promised it shall not take our lives..."

She reached to Imoen and Ajantis on either side of her. Imoen took one of my hands, Dalton the other and Clair holding to him. Viconia and Shar-Teel stood with Ajantis, all joined to each other. Faldorn was the calm at the centre of the storm she raised; hurricane winds whipped around her, carrying and forcing the stone of Durlag's Tower to break and fall about us.
Imoen started to cast, reciting the words of her own spell. "Don't intend any of us not to get out alive!" she shrieked into the raging wind, and then her words of magic. The diamond rose before her, growing and expanding; Ajantis' shield flew by the powers of the wind, and fixed itself before us while sharp fragments of stone blew into it. Faldorn called to the Oak Father, stone yet falling about us. I thought that I saw the body of a chess queen flying, the bone of a dragon falling, tiles coloured black and white last seen below a fiery furnace... The vines multiplied, created new deep cracks; the winds howled; even the earth below us rose and rebelled and sought to swallow everything that lay below it.

The final word of Imoen's spell set a sphere in place, and we were surrounded by crystal, by blue struts that had fashioned themselves out of Ajantis' shield. The tower still collapsed beyond our crystal, and through the translucent walls we could see the chaos continued unabated. Durlag's tower was eaten at the roots by what Faldorn, for the time being, governed...

Silver reflections chased each other in the surface of Imoen's pale sphere. Tortured doppelgangers, fallen dwarves, Grael screaming. The image of a lady dwarf, flickering across and within the crystal ball, whispering in a sound reflected by diamond: The way is open... A male dwarf not far from her side. Durlag's torment, Durlag's spirit. The shadow of a lock of hair of a creature of beauty. The hand of a statue that had once been red-robed and bearing grapes.

Faldorn sweated; Faldorn spoke. The earth and the winds moved, the vines pierced each part of the tower ever touched by something not natural. Imoen's sphere rose higher; stone sought to suffocate it, but the crystal was harsh and steady. Imoen stumbled, like Faldorn in great exhaustion. Slowly it rose: through parts ripped apart by vines that seemed to gather nourishment from the destruction, through every foundation torn down from the vast tower. It had taken many decades to build, and after all of that it returned to simple piles of rock. No more traps; no more monsters; no more ghosts and memories in agony. The dark levels of the tower flew away from us in our ascent, the crashing of the stones like a thousand drums. A blackened picture from the lowest level; bones of a skeleton once strapped to a table; sharpened shards of a porcelain bath; a jade knight's piece... It all fell about our heads.

Rubble was below our feet. The crystal faded away, ruined, and above us there were stars. Below, the ground rumbled four times more and became still, only a pile of jagged black rocks above a natural hole below, a jumble of old materials. Faldorn knelt on it, whispering Silvanus' name in hoarse gratitude. Her wolf licked the sweat from her face.

Imoen held my arm with a deathlike grip, thin fingers digging into me like a skeleton's bone. She could barely stand; I helped her sit, her face white and her eyes wide. We all stared at each other. Clair and Dalton collapsed together, watching the sky. We should never visit the tower of Durlag again.
99. Trouble They Are

_I have two eyes, but am blind without three._

_Edwin: 19 Flamerule, Evening_

"Does he think we're bloody apprentices? Have the screws finally fallen so far from his decrepit old mind that he's forgotten trifling minor details such as, sending talented magicians to retrieve minor spell components is something like, shall we say, an utter waste of our talents? Has he somehow, in speciality-induced blindness, failed to bloody notice the utter uselessness of the divinational arts as cheap and unreliable tricks suitable barely for the carnival? Or is it simply approaching senility from a mind so porous in the first place as to be used as a substitute for sponge in spell components? An old fool!"

Edwin, invisible, found his feet stumbling over one of Cythandria's small wooden stools for reaching the highest of her shelves (to his chagrin, though he stood masculinely taller than she he had required the use of one himself for a bottle of onyx flakes placed above her charcoal dust). "Such ladylike language," he vented, hopping upon one leg against the aching pain in his ankle.

He had not expected the burning pain of the slap to his cheek that showed Cythandria was rather better than he at judging relative position whilst mutually invisible. "_I am_ a lady by birth, Thayvian. Remember that."

Very touchy of her. Of course she was neither of Thay nor an Odesseiron and therefore could not compete with he; and she was a concubine at that, albeit of... A potential future deity, let it be said, attempting not to think more about the brutish man more than absolutely necessary. Edwin supposed that at the least she was educated, and when not invisible quite pleasant as aesthetic interest.

"_Know my memory to be flawless as the remainder of my brilliant intellect. Practically eidetic in fact. (Cursed be those few with actual eidetic memory! What I possess is certainly more valuable than mere parroting.)_"

"One of flawless memory would learn quietness to accompany invisibility," Cythandria retorted. "Give me your arm, Odesseiron; and follow as quietly as you can."

She held the sleeve of his robes, pulling him along as if it were a leash. (Perhaps it had been unwise of him to purchase such a flowing style. He had heard that in certain of Eltabbar's districts there were concubines who were paid to lead men around in such a way. If only malevolent events had not conspired to keep him from exploring such districts in further detail before his posting to the barbaric west.) "These are _steps_ here, Odesseiron. They are approximately three inches high. Could you avoid tripping over them, perhaps?"

The gauntlets he wore _had_ aided him to achieve nimbleness above even his previously dextrous abilities; it was simply a matter of getting accustomed to the invisibility she had cast on him. "Now, Cythandria, one of somewhat clever memory would learn quietness to accompany invisibility."

"I'll give that to you, Odesseiron," she said, her gold-bell voice faintly amused, "because you earn so few."
The Hall of Wonders was dark and quiet; Cythandria had sent the doppelganger she experimented upon during the previous day and night to ascertain the movements of the guard. 'Twas not sufficient a cause, apparently, to allow a doppelganger to take the place of one of the Hall's maintainers. She had researched and shared the plebeian spell to magically open locks, and ordered him to cast it softly upon the main door. For one agonising moment as he reached for the heavy door he imagined that he could not budge it, that it was too much for one mage (a silly conspiracy to make such as he seem weak!); but instead of requiring a spell for strength it slid eventually open at his will, and he paused at it to remain sentinel, prepared to cast against any simian who dared try his magic.

(He had seen Cythandria in the space of eight minutes summon her pair of giant ogres, cast five somewhat impressive fireballs at targets without a pause, followed by a conjuration of eight imps to clear away the damage and a flesh-to-stone incantation at one of the imps who dared tread on her robes. Her casting ability was...quite good, and in addition she had aptitude to study and modify spells to useful effect. And yet he had more experience of practical battles, even though he would tell neither her nor anyone the detail of them. She had been more than willing to give him the aggressive role in this affair...)

There was a creaking noise above, glass sliding on something; Edwin looked up and saw a small window loosed and blowing by the wind, circular of shape like illustrations in children's books of the portholes of boats, though he supposed eastern barbarians didn't often use glass on boats. (In any case the dirty business of a harbour was not regularly a place for an Odesseiron.) They ought to take better care of maintaining their buildings. He looked down at Cythandria, making her way to the object requested: lenses a subject for some divination, some gnome-made device that was exhibited here. He had met the man Winski Perorate and did not feel particularly inclined to cross him: a tall and cadaverous wizard who dressed in black like a necromancer particularly prone to invoking stereotype, although in fact he was merely a diviner, sardonic and dominating in conversation. (As for the actual necromancer—Semaj—the least that would be said would be better.) Cythandria treated Perorate with some degree of respect when in front of him, and he appeared to tolerate her above many others among the servants of Anchev, lurking in the corridors as a dark spirit haunting graves for lack of a better occupation in unlife. The night was quite warm compared to his home province of Surthay, but cool after his years in Eltabbar's academy and its sophisticated magical control of climate. Edwin drew his robes more closely about himself. He could hear nothing but Cythandria's cursory touching of the lock in preparation for her enspellment, no sound of guards patrolling. That infernal window was most irritating.

"Blast and bother!" someone—something—suddenly spoke in the darkness—startling Edwin's invisible form—a voice not loud by ordinary standards but high and easy to hear in the silence—shocking that anyone was there and Edwin prepared his fireball—"These locks have always given me trouble!" it lectured cheerfully. "Trouble they are!" Down near—down near the lantern-like device glowing with faint silver light, something...

Not a goblin? A small shadow; dangerous. "Go no further! I require an account of what you are!" he called, the bat guano and sulphur ready in his hands. The dangerous and deadly goblin poked up from the shadows...hair of a distinct shade of pink, still more vivid and tasteless than the apprentice Imo... Best not to think upon that unfortunate gang of bedraggled incompetents.

"Sufferin' snapdragons, I've been nabbed again!" yelped the voice, a halfling, a young halfling girl, who jumped back several feet from the shadows below the lamp's holder. "Wait...Yer not playing ghosts, are you? Or ventrilo...ventrilo-thingies. I saw some o' em at a carnival back home once, folks that made their voice sound's if it came from thin air or a dummy on their lap... Hey, you're not the guard, are you?"
"No we are not." Speaking was insufficient to end the spell covering him; had Edwin been visible, he would have given the child a magnificent and dignified look such as to cow her utterly into good behaviour.

"Well, gee! You scared the beejeebers outta me. You've a nice voice, haven't you? I bet you'd be really nice if'n I could see you." The girl grinned in his direction. "Are you a mage? You must be a mage if you can go invisible, right? I knew a mage once but he was pretty stuffy. You don't sound like that."

Her mannerisms seemed...strangely refreshing. "Of course I am a mage! (And the opportunity to meet this Red Wizard of Thay destined for future greatness is entirely your privilege.)" He waited for her admiration; but instead the halfling's attention had suddenly switched to Cythandria's form, which had just appeared out of thin air. Her robes first, followed by her hands bearing the small copper key she used for a spell component, and finally her bright hair and her pale face.

"Holy kitty cacophony! You'll scare someone half to death popping out o' the air like that one of these days!" the little thief said, melodramatically clutching her heart in surprise. "Gee, you were pretty quiet there," she added, looking up at Cythandria. "Are you a mage too? You must be pretty good on your feet to be so quiet. I bet if you wanted you could be a proper thief!"

Cythandria glared; rage flew to her face, making it suddenly ugly, a pair of livid red spots flaring on her cheeks. "Odesseiron!" she called in shrewish accusation to him—Edwin suddenly remembered idle words he had spoken whilst enchanting her, some approximate estimation of the hours that a wizard of his great capacity could make the casting last, just before she had made him invisible in return...

"My lady Cythandria," he said (best to use courtesies for an unfairly aggrieved member of the less rational sex), "it is plain that opportunity for completing the task assigned us yet remains. Shall we continue?"

"Say, are you adventurers?" the halfling said. "I've had lots of adventures! Well, I've had lots of times seeing the city at night and poking around all the interesting places that people lock up, all the fun shiny things there are to see. Are you on a Quest for the Farseer? I just came in to look at the Everlight, it's beautiful! And the locks on everything are pretty beautiful too, if you like locks, I mean. So the invisible mage with the nice voice is Odesseiron, and you're Cythandria?" she said. "My name's Alora. Leapin' lavender lizards, it's good to make new friends!"

"You waste my concentration and will be silent while I cast," Cythandria hissed with what dignity she could manage under the circumstances, and began speaking her words of the spell. She turned her back on Alora; and Edwin saw the girl stick out her tongue and make a face at her. Cythandria finished the spell, and reached a hand forward to open the glass case protecting the telescope. The lock did not budge.

Alora giggled. Edwin was starting to like her better each moment. "So you're a mage just like Odesseiron after all. Those locks have the triple-reverse-catch to 'em, of course!" she said. "Didn't 'cha come here not knowing even that?"

"We are not petty rogues," Cythandria said through her teeth, and produced another copper key from her component pouches. "I am a wizard—and it is true I have not often cast this spell, for there is very little that I must steal. May the guards capture you for your distraction, thief!"

"Heh, I s'pose I count," Alora said. "But stealing stuff doesn't mean we have to be bad, right? Mostly I'm just curious. Here, have you seen the Steam Dragon before, Odesseiron? Nibbling nutbunnies, when they switch it on in daylight you can't hardly tear your eyes away watchin' it go!"
Edwin looked down at it; a construction primarily mechanical instead of arcane. Intricate enough to satisfy even his mind for some brief moments of deduction, but he was little interested in what offered scarce benefit. "Fascinating. How was that attempt, Cythandria?"

She tapped it again, with much the same result as previously; and used further unladylike language, slamming the side of a foot clad in a delicate slipper into the side of the case.

"Tee-hee! That's what the triple-reverseit-catch does," Alora danced lightly on her feet. "Wouldja like me to show you how..."

"You unutterably foul little imp—" Cythandria raised a hand as if to slap her, but Alora was too nimble on her feet. "Brat. Get away from me, or I swear I'll strike you down by a lightning bolt from the heavens. Odesseiron! Down here," she commanded, smooth-voiced once more and shaking her magnificent head. "Renew my invisibility spell; I will enchant you to strength and us both to haste; then we shall smash the case and be out of here. Come."

He obeyed her, walking carefully down the stairs to the case; the halfling girl pouted, and even stamped her foot. "Y' can't get away with this, lady!"

"I believe I just did," Cythandria said temperamentally; Edwin felt his muscles expand to godlike strength. Then she began the cadences of the hastening spell. Obviously he listened to her, Edwin thought; duties for the Throne...

"Odesseiron's human like you, isn't he?" the thief said, a reasonably clever deduction; "I know what human women like you are like!"

Cythandria glared at her again. "Oh, go ahead and do enlighten me, halfl—; no, quarterling, a half in wit and a half in stature, multiplied by each other."

"Your sort thinks you can be all rude and mean and nasty all the time, and that's not very nice!" Alora said. Edwin's smile was invisible. "And it's just because you're too tall and too skinny and your hair looks like straw and you make yourself smell like dead flowers that'll probably get the guard on your trail and put paint on your lips that you think you can get away with being nasty to other people!" Edwin glanced carefully at Cythandria, thinking about that particular question of her rosepetal mouth. "But you've got curves in all the wrong places for a halfling matron! And your silly robes probably pinch in a lot of really painful places!"

It would be not sensible to snicker, Edwin thought; the halfling's rant continued to the temporarily halted Cythandria.

"Sure, humans'll be nice to you 'cause they might think you're pretty and a wizard and all that. But you're real nasty inside! And down here I can see all your skin pores. Gaping huge skin pores like something out of the Abyss! So there's no need to be rude and nasty with your stinky perfume and giant gaping skin pores, 'cause you're mean, mean, mean on the inside! I don't like you and your huge gaping skin pores!"

Cythandria's eyes were wide and green, her mouth opened slightly in shock. Edwin doubted she had heard such frank criticism in some time. She closed it, then opened it again. "One of the...best indignant rants I have heard in years," she said weakly. "Show us how to open that lock."

"Oh—" Pink sprung to Alora's cheeks. "I didn't mean to be really mean! But sure, I like making new friends. Where do you two wizards come from?" Small silver wires suddenly appeared between her hands, and she sprung to the lock like a mouse escaping pursuit, slipping her tools inside and moving them swiftly.
"We are...profitably employed," Cythandria said; her thick eyelashes lowered.

"Double good and done!" The thief stepped back from the lock. "Triple reverseit, you see it takes those fancy spells and turns them away through a bell slide in the lock. So I just reversed it again to get it back, so your silly magic spells should work now!" She giggled. "Cheating it is, but I've always thought magic was kind of fun! We used to have a gnome illusionist trader back home who'd do wonderful tricks with pink ribbons out of the air and juggling. Can you do that like him?"

"Not while I'm invisible myself," Edwin said. Illusion was a frivolous and undemanding school, and one that he spared little time for compared to his true art; likely the halfling girl considered hedgewizardry of eggs out of ears the height of a conjurer's art.

"One bypasses the non-detection wall with a somatic barrier," Cythandria said absently, "haven't you read Wightman's Lectures, thirteen-sixty-seven Nightal, Odesseiron? Never mind; of no importance right now." She cast her lockpicking spell for the third time, and the door of the glass box slowly slid open. Perhaps there was even a triumphant grin shared between her and Alora; Cythandria reached inside and took the Farseer.

In the night after invisibly escaping pursuit, the three of them dared to relax in the shadows of the Elfsong's northern eaves. Edwin mopped his sodden brow.

"(That was a little too close for comfort. I have no desire to rot in barbarian cells.)"

"Teehee! Pretty good takings," Alora said. "Are you going to get back your ogres, Cythi? Cythandria?" she lengthened again after apparent reconsideration. "I wouldn't want the guard to get hurt 'cause of little old us, 'cause that would be just mean."

Cythandria clapped her hands together in arcane signal. "My pets are safe," she said, her voice rather caressing when she talked of those pair of beasts. "After all, there is no need for us to commit murder tonight," she added, irony her intent.

Alora giggled. "They're big pets! Are they really tame?"

Edwin answered: "Of course! Any conjurer worth his title has absolute control over any creature he summons. (Wait until I have the likes of Asmodeus emptying my bedpans.)"

"They're dear babies," Cythandria said, a maternally proud glint in her eyes. "Two of my greatest experiments. So nicely obedient. The one with the slightly larger nose is Ughh; the one with the darker facial bristles Arghh. Eleven-footers, both of them; ninety-ninth percentile of their species. For some reason their favourite meal is goblin feet, charcoal-roasted...Or halfling feet an acceptable substitute."

"Aww, friends we are now, and nice ones too!" Alora said, obliviously. "One for all and things like that. Want to do this again, like all the time? We could join up permanent! Fun for all, I just know it!"

Cythandria blinked twice. "Indeed," she said. "Perchance the Iron Throne could find a use for you."

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**100. Sack Away**

*20 Flamerule*
"Alas, but I am only a priestess of unholy magics," Viconia said, shifting gracefully on her dark blue cloak set on the dusty ground. There was no hint of regret to her tone.

"I am sorry," Faldorn said, and truly sounded so, her face furrowed in concentration. "My healing is of the forest, not the planes. I wish I did know enough to fix it."

"'Tis my just punishment," Ajantis said, his blue eyes wide and his twisted arm hopelessly flexing between Faldorn's long hands. "Were I not—my own holy powers could easily have repaired the evil taint—a sign from Helm. It is already sunken into my body..."

He'd taken the demonknight's blow on his left arm to save Faldorn in the abyss of Durlag's tower. I'd been hurt by it too, but not as badly as him... "There's a temple of Helm in Nashkel," I said. "If there's any chance they can save your arm, we have to go there." Surprisingly enough, Shar-Teel nodded; it was useful to us to have Ajantis in good condition.

Aquerna scuttled up on Ajantis' right arm, to rest on his shoulder by his cheek. "Kit, the young woman speaks common sense for once," she said. "It is only right for you to try what you need to heal."

"A demon..." Ajantis spoke hollowly, shivering. "It burned black, not red," he said simply, and glanced down at Varscona by his side.

In Nashkel temple the hand over the door was chipped and stained in its stone, the old light brown granite of the walls weathering away, the white of the graveyard tombstones amidst green grass better kept than the temple itself. Here lies Joseph beloved husband of Hannah, foully slain 1368 Mirtul in the mines... A white tombstone that gleamed particularly brightly in the sun held an inscription about the iron crisis; a miner who'd died by kobolds. Probably before we'd turned up there. The words upon it were smooth and small enough that they were likely magicked rather than carved by hand; that sort of thing is quite a difficult casting, and rather expensive. A young man was bent over by a section of the grass, uprooting a stubborn weed. A groundskeeper, I thought, only a little older than Imoen or me. He'd a set of some tools by him, and a crutch rested on the side of a tombstone near to where he worked. Suddenly he raised his head, seeing us; and slowly got to his feet with the aid of the crutch. It was his right leg that caused him to need it, withered and ill-formed. A birth defect or childhood injury, perhaps, if he worked for a temple and yet the priests had not healed it, though Helmites are stricter than Ilmatari or Tymorans about recompense from even the poor. The young groundskeeper drew from what I had thought were only tools a set of light pauldrons for his shoulders; and his lopsided walk was quick and efficient to cut us off upon the path. Not a groundskeeper after all, then. The miniature iron gauntlet hanging from his neck swung from side to side. His stance was stiff and straight and disciplined; with dark clothing and long black hair flapping in the wind, he looked like a crow bearing omens of misfortune.

"Petitioners," he said brusquely, sticking out a hand to Shar-Teel; "Nalin of Helm." It took a few seconds to gather that it was meant to be his name. "Adventurer's patch jobs: which of you needs it most?" He looked at Dalton first, standing by Clair De'Lain; "You, I suppose, boy," he said, rather hypocritically by his own apparent age. "Don't know why they send you children out to be hurt—"

But Nalin said nothing that would have caused Ajantis to flee. "I see you want help. Best come in the temple. Helm's duty's not to turn away those who need it."

"It was a demonknight," Faldorn explained to Nalin, "one which drew from the element of fire. Its sword was a dark black and it drew from some casting when it harmed him, and in the end he slew it..."
with a blade that uses cold ice. And that one was trapped near to it for some time." She pointed
dismissively to Dalton. "Can you heal them?"

Viconia and Shar-Teel had left the temple grounds, neither fond of Helm. Ajantis sat stripped to the
waist; I couldn't bear to look at that arm. There were yellow parts and livid red parts and black parts
along it, the whole twisted in more than one way; and looking at Nalin's face wasn't the least
couraging either. Dalton turned his head from it, grimacing; Clair helped her friend sit on one of
the few, uncomfortable-looking chairs carved from a similar stone to the temple walls. The tall image
of Helm's gauntlet, thoroughly cleaned, stood above a ewer of clean water at the head of a set of
steps in pride of place in the temple. The building was small and far from as imposing or richly
furnished as the shrines in Baldur's Gate; Helm is popular among the Flaming Fists, of course, and
Duke Belt once served as a cleric of the Guardian. Clean bare stone surrounded us.

*Helm is apt to punish those who murder...*

An old man was inside the temple, shuffling around with a broom he leaned on. He stood near
Imoen and me; I looked at him and saw salt-and-pepper hair, perhaps not so old as his shambling
pose made him appear. Ill, seemingly; plainly not a priest himself.

"What am I?" he said in an oddly high voice, and Imoen and I jumped. "What am I? What is it?" he
continued. "For it has neither mouth, nor teeth; yet it eats food steadily. Neither village nor home nor
hands nor feet to call its own; yet wanders everywhere. Neither country nor means nor office nor
pen; yet ready for fight always. By day and night wailing sounds about it; and it has no breath yet to
all it appears—"

"Brage," Nalin said, softly and quite gently, "there's no need for you to pester these young women. If
you like, you can go to the garden. You've done good work this morning."

The man raised a shaking hand to us, the fingers calloused; I pulled Imoen back from him. So
strange... He stumbled out in obedience to the priest, his head bowed.

"Death," Imoen said quietly. I looked at her; "The answer to the riddle. It's death," she said.

"A senseless tragedy," Nalin said. "Afflicted by a cursed weapon; not his fault. A Rashemi
wichlaran and her guardians were decent enough to bring him here, instead of that bloody fool
Ambroso at the garrison. Atonement above punishment. He does a careful job around the temple."

Ajantis cringed as Nalin's hands moved on his arm; "Steady," Nalin said. "Can't heal without a bit of
hurt to it. What are you prepared for, young man?"

Ajantis groaned; his face was pale. "The very worst. Will the corruption spread to reach my heart? I
have seen it grow and twist about my flesh only this day, from here to here—" He pointed to a large
section of his arm shot through with black; I cringed. "I have seen myself in the flesh as a—as a
demon creature like it; I dreamed of vile sin and death all around myself; I...could not bear to believe
that..."

"Overly dramatic," I heard from Aquerna, poised across Imoen's pack.

"Nonsense," Nalin said brusquely. "Never met a mage, demon, Cyrictist or anything that could cast
new beyond the plane they were on. Forget what they might lie about." I wondered, later, exactly
how many demons one could have possibly met in a border town like Nashkel; but the way Nalin
spoke it made you believe him, like Ajantis himself used to be able to say things. "No. Losing the
arm."
That was a different kind of horror entirely than Ajantis' ideas of becoming a demonknight himself. I heard Faldorn and Ioen gasp, and Ajantis himself looked genuinely frightened. *Without an arm...*

"Surely mutilation is an affront to Helm!" Ajantis shouted suddenly, wrenching himself away; "How could I ever perform my duties so?"

"Better than you would dead!" Nalin towered above Ajantis while he was still seated, though were they both standing the knight would have been both taller and far more muscular. Somehow Nalin managed to look demonic himself: black and tall, his dark eyes flashing. "Know the worst, by Helm. That's got to come out, boy—" He pointed to the black streaks embedded in Ajantis' flesh. "You'll be under ether. If you're lucky, you'll wake with a limb still. If not—well, I don't like giving false hope. Now sit still."

Nalin chanted a prayer to Helm, pressing his hands into Ajantis' upper shoulder; Ajantis sat barely moving even to breathe, his lips pressed together so that they were utterly white. "Suspends it for now," Nalin said. "Now for you." He turned abruptly to Dalton. "Ha! A bad sight," he said, looking into Dalton's face. "A simple enough healing spell—" He chanted the spell as quickly and efficiently as Branwen had used to heal us. Dalton looked slightly more healthy, a better colour drawn to his cheeks. "As for how you feel...a more difficult problem," Nalin said. He whirled upon Ioen and me. "Need anything, you two? Then you don't need to stay to gawk."

We'd only wanted to watch if Ajantis was all right. "Here," I said, and pushed across a large ruby from the tower.

"Obliged. Go off to the garrison and send for Chiron the sawbones to come and help me. I'll need his hacksaw. It'll be a long night," he said to Ajantis, who was still pale. "Take your friend into the second alcove down the hall—should have a mat," he said to Clair. "You too, off with you—" he added to Faldorn.

"Can you not tell I can heal also?" Faldorn said. He looked her up and down and nodded curtly. "You'll do. Rest of you, off now."

—

In the Nashkel Inn it was quiet; dusty and small compared to the Friendly Arm and even to Ulgoth's Beard. Neither Ioen nor I felt a need to talk of it.

"They already took the large room at the top," the girl explained. With a nervous air about her, she quickly pointed to Shar-Teel, taking care not to draw her attention. Shar-Teel sat paring her unsightly nails with a small dagger. A tankard of ale and a platter of roasted meat lay on the table in front of her. Then I recognised the dagger as that taken from the demonknight's body; wanted by a dwarf in Ulgoth's Beard as ancestral work.

"They're with us," Ioen explained. "She's not so bad, really." She added in a whisper to me: "Depending on how much you like permanently antisocial androcidal psychopaths."

"Yes, miss," the maid said; but she must have seen in Ioen's smile a reassurance that made her give up the deference. "That cloaked lady too?" she added in a whisper.

"Face burned off," said Ioen, "horribly deformed, you know." She could give at least some humour even now. "Wouldn't ask her about it if I were you," she went on cheerily. "Absolutely hideous, y'know. Of course, below it she's all sweetness and light despite her tragically disfigured and misshapen exterior and attempts to steal other people's evil boyfriends and refusal to help with the chores. Gives all her adventuring gold to save baby animals and build homes for orphaned
children.” She'd never have gotten away with all of that if Viconia was in the least within earshot; but here she passed, the inn’s maid shaking her head in approving empathy.

"Now I can give you rooms on the second floor, only eight silver a night." Imoen insouciantly flipped a large, glittering coin in dwarven gold to the countertop; the girl stared at it, and she'd know that we'd been in the hoard of Durlag's tower...

"Have this ring instead," I said quickly, and dug deep in my bag to give her something from the bandit camp; genuine gold set with a small but well-cut yellow sapphire, at least twice-over taken from someone dead.

"No rooms 'till I ask Reynald at the store what he'll give me for it," she said; and Imoen and I sat down with Shar-Teel.

*If Ajantis does not have a left arm then she will leave him here,* I thought; Imoen let her own worry show through the cheerfulness she'd given to the innkeeper's girl. She set her right elbow against the table and rested her face on her hand, looking rather wistful. Her left hand drummed a rough pattern against the table's wood.

"Thank you for everything," Clair said quietly, approaching. "Therella will be happy; I've sent message. I'm from Dalvith myself, you see." A tiny hamlet east of the Beard; they grow oats there that the Seven Suns sell. "Known him since he was a kid. I suppose he still is. Suppose you two are, if it comes to it." At a first glance she looked relatively young herself after cleaning her face, yellow-haired and fair-skinned; but then you saw the shadows under her eyes and the webs of crows-feet in the corner of her eyes. White lines of not-quite-healed scarring lay close to her right temple. "We'll stay here for some days, whether or not you will. You've done enough."

Shar-Teel shrugged. "Go ahead," she said, probably with what counted as good-nature for her, and went back to scraping her nails with the dagger.

Imoen picked at her scrolls as the evening wore on; laid them across the table despite the glances of the Amnian folk in the inn, paged through them long after Clair and Shar-Teel had left for their rooms. "Can't focus," she said, holding one scroll sideways and then upside down and then the other side, squinting at it and creasing her freckles together.

"Then go to sleep," I said, and drank the heavy wine.

"You first." Imoen shook her head and laid her scroll back down. "If'n I read this and don't do it proper, the parchment dissolves. Spells're fragile like that. Lucky Islanne didn't have any nasty necromancy ones to sort through; most of 'em enchantment and invocation. Wonder if dwarves have the same specialist schools as humans? Usually either you're good at enchantment or you're good at invocation like Mr G., or you're equally bad at both; they're opposing schools so the way you shape your mind and the Weave is completely different, and so doing a lot of one stops you from getting really good at the other. Invocation for me." She half-smiled, and even though the Amnian maid looked shocked she lit a small fire on her right forefinger. "Enchantment's too fiddly, y'know?" I didn't, but listened anyway. "Give me stuff I can just hit straight out, like with arrows. Except I really want to get these ones." She looked down at the scrolls again; I recognised one or two as some she'd had me translate the dwarven annotations upon. "Maybe later. 'S always fuzzy at the edges with magic. 'Specially if it's sorcery." She drank more wine, and I did the same. Fairly strong; we hadn't watered it ourselves.

"You got...you," Imoen said more slowly, "and Faldy got her, more or less. And Vic got someone who stuck with the Underdark. D' you think she really killed a baby?" I didn't answer her. "Shar-Teel got, I s'pose, her long-lost twin brother. Bet she's the evil twin. Never mind about 'Jantis for
now," Imoen added quickly. "'Cept my monster. I thought after that maybe she was meant to be me from after I know the shapeshifting transmutes, how to turn people trying to kill us to nasty toads and me into a beautiful pink dragon with fuzzy wings and silver eyes. Or something else nice and fun that can help us fight. I'm going to learn to wrap my head around those someday," she said, and looked very determined. "An' now I know I've got to not get it wrong an' turn into that thing. 'S not as easy as it seems," she went on. "I quit in Candlekeep, and Dyna helped but Edwin and Xzar sure didn't. I can't just sit down with every scroll and get it right off because Imoen's the wizard, of course she's practically an archmage—Well, I've sorta explained that I was." Her face seemed caught halfway between cocksure glee and rueful, sudden modesty. "But's not that easy!"

"I've never thought it was easy, Imoen." She'd done that amazing fireball, always used her magic to help and convinced Edwin she was as good as he was. Edwin, gone, of course... More wine would be good.

"'S right," Imoen said. "An' if you do it wrong you're blowing things up all over. Like ol' Ulraunt's second best robes, heh. And Tethoril's cookie jar, didn't really mean that one. But I wasn't talkin' about that, right? Maybe more wine'll get me to remember... Hey. More wine, please." She flipped a loose pearl across the table. It seemed like very clever logic to me; the wine was much better than I'd thought at first, comforting and kind.

"Y'know sometimes you'll dega fool? Digger voo. In your sleep. You're dreaming and you think it's another dream you've had a long time ago." Imoen waved a forefinger, which seemed briefly to multiply itself. Maybe a magic trick.

"'S an old Tethyrian word. Words. Feelings of having already experienced the present situation," I explained.

"That...thingy," Imoen said. "Y' know it but y' don't know how y' knew. Monster in yer dreams years ago. Monster 'side ya. Monster that's ya." She wiped her hand across her mouth, her pink sleeve stained by the wine, and drank deeply again.

"You're not a monster."

Ajantis had not magically become a paladin again after rescuing Dalton. Helm had not forgiven; as if that had ever been possible; had not even allowed him to heal himself, maybe because of undeserving... More wine seemed good.

"Yeah." Imoen held up her hand in front of her face, and squinted. "Seeing about four too many fingers here, but no claws. Not a monster. Donwannabemonster."

"You're the least monstrous here, Imoen. She slumped forward; I patted her shoulder.


"Slayer, bring down all their protections, I'd said. "Dunnoeither," I managed myself.

"'S from dreams when I was little. Mebbe ol' book I don't remember. Dun think so though." Imoen drunk the last dregs of her cup, and swirled it around miserably.

"Dunmatter," I said. It was getting easier to forget things. I took the last of my own wine.
"Dunmatter if everything goes wrong."

"Here'sstonodreams," Imoen said. Everything was blurry after that, someone saying we couldn't have any more wine, and maybe some singing of all twelve verses of The Duke of Darromar's Daughter;
and we woke up together on the floor with the squirrel biting Imoen's ear.

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**101. Cooking Lessons**

*21 Flamerule*

"Viconia, please," Imoen moaned.

"You are kke lotha elg'caress," Viconia said, "and I have no intention of lessening the pain given to yourself."

My head, like Imoen's, was splitting in two. The grass below us spun and the sunlight was agony.

"Weakly indulging in city carousing whilst I was busy healing him," Faldorn said, overly sanctimoniously, her nose in the air. It was true that Ajantis was walking with us, his arm limp and damaged for good but still there, and that meant that he could improve. He stalked in front, though; away from the temple. "What was it to you what happened to him?"

Imoen moaned weakly. "I'm sorry...hurts..." I could not even find the strength to talk. Hard to explain; Ajantis...

*Gods are merciless*, he said. Nalin tried to call him back, but he refused to hear.

"Ogre country," Shar-Teel yelled back to us. "You don't get to sit around and sleep."

"We camp north of the Peaks at nightfall," Ajantis ordered coldly.

Viconia snarled; her eyes glittered from the depths of her hood, and she panted in her breathing. "Oh, but it burns so, torturers." There were welcome cool shadows; but also few tall trees in this hilly country. Behind every rock could lurk something more horrible than the pain that beat inside me.

Shar-Teel forged ahead. *We should have stayed in Nashkel at least a day longer;* but nothing until Ulgoth's Beard once more. It would have been easy to rest on the gold we had; she was just greedy, to want to go back and collect from that dwarf for that dagger and then sell everything in the Gate...

*Not the Gate.*

We marched on. The demonknight's dagger hung from Shar-Teel's belt. Faldorn's wolf howled.

It was late afternoon, and we hadn't been attacked by anything. Somehow the pounding pain had gradually gone down; but it was as lovely to walk all day as always, or rather as dirt-encrusted and tiring. *We could have afforded horses...* Shar-Teel had gold and platinum coin, and jewels and spare weaponry.

"We are...away," Ajantis said, and sank down below a tree that had begun to yellow already. He placed his head on his right hand. Shar-Teel scowled, but when Faldorn said that her wolf smelt nothing about allowed the early rest.

I set together sticks for a fire; Imoen dripped oil to one of her pans for the mutton we'd purchased from Nashkel.

"Stand up," Shar-Teel said to Ajantis, and kicked him in the leg; "show me what you've got left,
His balance was all wrong, I thought as they began, Ajantis using only his right hand with his sword and uncertainly moving against Shar-Teel. I could know that sort of thing, now.

"Watch it from burning!" Imoen hissed; I went back to learning how to cook.

"Yeah, and chop up the loaf—and take the cheese I put on top, it's not going to last much longer." Imoen shook her head. "And when you're done that scrape the burnt bits off the bottom, I'm not like Shar-Teel or Faldorn 'cause I've got a sense of taste left—" She sprinkled some fragrant thyme into her pot.

The barley loaf was growing badly stale; and yet everything eaten in hunger tasted better than any imported cuisine cooked by a Waterdhavian or Zazesspuran chef. From Faldorn's ideas on raw meat, she thought so for everything chased by oneself. A rare steak was acceptable in a home with a respectable cook, but otherwise... Druidic digestion. Somewhere away from us her wolf howled again. Viconia lay dramatically and indolently under overhanging rock, a book in her hands—one of the *Volo's Guide* series, the one about the Fields of the Dead. It was denounced even more than the other ones by real historians in Baldur's Gate. I sliced open the hard bread carefully; a knife could slip so easily.

"It hangs open as a drunkard's snoring mouth." Shar-Teel dealt another blow to Ajantis' left side, his thigh; it was only with the flat of her sword, and he winced and fell to his right knee.

"You have won," he said. "You humiliate me and that is all..."

"Yes." Shar-Teel examined the shine of her blade; it caught the sunlight brightly. "Nothing like making some male scream to finish the day with."

"He has known female paladins," the squirrel interjected, perched upon a tree, looking as if she intended to glare with her black beady eyes at Shar-Teel. "Certainly the boy can be inept with female company. Why, you ought to hear some of his attempts of courtesy! Lady Irlana, you are a most beautiful lady, miss and all that mealy-mouthed sort of thing. Well, I shall save the end of that story for another time. But if you seek to blame him for—"

"For taking mobile rations that talk back, too," Shar-Teel said—her hands were not particularly far from her crossbow; Aquerna released an outraged squeak and scuttled further into the covering branches of the tree.

"Disgustingly uncivil," voiced the squirrel, but Shar-Teel ignored her. She bent and rummaged through a pack on the ground, wrenching out a buckler. She threw it at Ajantis, hitting him on the head. "Think you could heft that, milksop?"

He gave her only a pale glare, forcing the small shield to be fastened to his wounded arm, and stood again. At least it stopped some of Shar-Teel's blows. When he wasn't strong enough to parry with his sword and slipped to the side; when he even raised his left arm to let her blade scrape along it. She wore a terrible grin, and smiled each time she hit him.

"He's not bad," Imoen said, the cheerfulness in her voice perhaps slightly forced. "Only just been injured and all. Pretty brave just to be doing that."

Maybe she was close to being right. Imoen scraped a root she'd had Faldorn find for her across the pot, the light brown flakes falling evenly.

"Imoen, how would you beat a demon?" I said; and then she lost control of the scraping. The root
fell; she scraped her hand on the wide knife she used, swearing. I helped her bind the shallow cut.

"Like the one Durlag fought, I mean," I added. She snatched her knife back from me, gesturing with it.

"Demons! Talk about gullynapping chitchat, ya bafflehead!" She shook her head, a hard glint in her eyes. "Don't tell me you're thinking... Don't tell me a couple days of not being attacked means you or Shar-Teel're bored already and want me to..."

"I'm just curious." I reached for the cheese she'd asked for. "We know it—" I did not say the name—"could...hurt people...by looking at them. What magic's there against that? Is it like basilisks?" In the dwarven histories I'd read of late: one had to know.

"Well, don't scare me like that, mutton-mongerer!" She furrowed her brow, chewing on her tongue. Despite the handkerchief around her hand, she kept shaving the gingifer root; I thought she might be adding too much of it. "Pretty good question there, kiddo. Some of that stuff doesn't have reflections at all or does but they can't see it reflecting back, Mr G. used to say, 'cause they're from other planes and what they look like's orthogonal to this one." I thought I understood what she meant by her magical theory. "And vampires, the reflections thing goes for vamps as well. When it's basilisks you just reflect it back at 'em with a tough enough mirror, but you're right, kiddo, you can't do that when it's...those things," Imoen said.

"So you'd just have to let people die until you killed it?" Or rather, become like Grael. That was awful because you knew it might come and there was nothing you could do about it at all: inexplicable, unavoidable horror.

"Tymora's snout, no!" Imoen said, her hands and knife moving in the air. She'd grated the gingifer entire. "Just lemme think a moment. Gazes, things against gazes, Mystra's left elbow..." She tossed the pot up and down across the fire, forcefully moving the strips of meat with the things she'd added to it. "Magic!" Suddenly she flipped the pot too quickly, and a part of the meat fell down from it.

"Well, guess Faldy wouldn't mind that piece." She glared at it, picked it up, and scraped most of the dirt away. "If'n only you wouldn't distract me!"

"Magic? What kind of magic?" I said, watching her.

"Magic potions. Found one of 'em in the tower itself, near the outside—" She held up a small, dwarven-made vial she'd hung from of her pouches. "Protect against basilisks by magic. You drink 'em; smell like silver polish and fresh water. They work by the Weave reflectin' it away...so I just bet it'd work against Nine Hells gazes. There! Imoen the Brilliant solves another problem." She sniffed at her cooking. "Mm. Not quite up to Garrick, but Puffguts'd laugh to see how I've taken to doing work."

"That's good," I said; the dirt below our feet was light brown, nothing like the stone of the tower. "Islanne's was the casting that weakened as well..." It came to pass that Durlag Trollkiller and Arlo Stoneblade ventured into the bowels of the Great Ryft. They fought the hideous tanar'ri Aec'Letec, and with a single blow of his axe Durlag slew the demon's body...

"Weakened," Imoen repeated, reaching across for bread and cheese from me, talking over her mouthful. "Well. Still don't understand it all, do I?" she said; her shoulders rose as if she was a porcupine starting to bristle. "Anyway, demonknights're enough!" She glanced over at Shar-Teel again. "Go fight her yourself if you want her kept busy, kiddo." I would, then, I thought. The Burning Earth and the smaller shortsword, in balanced coordination as tutors had briefly shown me once, as the steps to a different kind of dance that Shar-Teel showed; I was better than I'd been.
"I know," I said. "I've just been reading a lot lately, that's all." And thinking about it. History was real when you had to fight the beasts that lived in the tales...

"Well, stop being baffleheaded." Imoen picked up a waterskin. "And drink something else for a change."

—

kke lotha elg'caress: rude little bitch.

—

102. Winds at Night

Edwin: 21 Flamerule

"This cannot be. (It is not! It has not!)" But his sole deductions were that. It had not happened at that time. His fingernails ripped into the fiction he held in his hands; actual fiction, dug up as leftover property of the Iron Throne, reading to relax the mind with the insipid tale of a foolish young girl who for some reason did not wish to marry a Duke, ran away from home, and engaged in all sorts of insipid and implausible adventures. (Why refuse to marry a Duke of this city? It would be much like refusing to marry an OdEsseiron of Thay.) He felt himself losing control at last and let himself rip the page in half. (Pathetic western pseudo-literary attempts.)

Cythandria teased and tormented him by news of the circle-casting. A very clever man, Winski. Share the mental capacity of Semaj and myself for purposes of gathering the threads of the Weave, and direct by his own divinatory powers alone, for after all I do not engage with such a foolish school though I am reckoned quite powerful.

The Farsee device as component of strong divination castings. It haunted him: that the geas on him would kill him in slow pain; that Sarevok Anchev would slice through his body in quick pain. His own flesh and blood had never felt so soft to him before, or so preciously valuable. (The brain inside as the key point, naturally.)

He sees enough death in the times ahead to raise twenty Lords of Murder, Cythandria said, her green eyes glittering with an abstract and unknowing glee of what that could mean to those dragged by fools to the thick of it. (Such minds as theirs belonged distinctly outside the battle. She felt the same way as himself, he knew.)

And of two little birds about to enter the city to sing, she added. One a former guest of Rielar's; a dwarf he gave to enjoy hospitality in the Cloakwood. He must be killed as a fait accompli; Rielar must not demand to take him and allow him to escape a second time.

A dwarf, Edwin had thought in shock; probably a dwarf with an awful name.

The other? Cythandria gestured gracefully. A songbird we know not. And more behind him, a stream of ragged souls hidden to the south yet with a tale of injustice should they be willing to speak... Now, OdEsseiron, I've an appointment that I intend to keep. And in one of her most attractive robes, perfumed and with her hair a golden waterfall about her she went to their master.

Oh, divinations were foul and fidgety and ridiculously difficult to interpret at the best of times such that you'd be much better off summoning hordes of conjured creatures yourself to solve your problems instead of worrying over how to understand some pathetically overly embroidered
metaphor that belonged to pseudo-literature to entertain the merest of children and fools all. If
diviners could conjure, of course. That was the trouble: they simply couldn't accept that conjurers
and Edwin Odesseiron were better than they were and to settle for a life at gasping at their greatness.

People sometimes gasped as they died. And they stank; loosened their bowels. Not an end a noble
wizard wished to contemplate.

*I have not betrayed Sarevok Anchev I owe him no more under geas...*

Edwin ripped out another page of the novel and threw it upon the fire out of pure spite. Destroy all
foolishness. Destroy all divinations. Destroy all those with knowledge of his face and his deceptions.
No delusions that the mooncalf bard wouldn't erupt in hypocritically righteous fury at Edwin's so-
called betrayal of that crying insipid pathetic submissive stupid little twit of a girl. Foolish delusions
of goodness, that pathetically undefined word that was simply exploited by those who did not
understand that what they truly wanted was superiority. That what *he himself* truly wanted was to
return to Thay, attain a zulkirdom, all the power and all the magic and all the respect that he could
desire...

*Well, boy, a full-fledged geas to Anchev was more incompetence than I expected of you. Allow me
brief frankness: were you truly foolish enough to believe that the affairs of these western barbarians
are of such great import to us? You, of official rank of apprentice, were the least that we had to
spare. Should you succeed in bringing us the child in defiance of my expectations: you will be
suitably rewarded. Should you fail: do not expect that your family name will clear your way once
more. Your esteemed uncle has ever been willing to trim dead wood from the family tree. Or
possibly the family ingrown bush.*

Denak. Correspondence he had been obliged to burn for fear of discovery, and cast spells against
reconstruction upon the ashes.

A knocking at the door threw him from the reverie, and he jumped; spilling components and pathetic
novel alike. Then he realised that those who troubled to knock he did not likely need to fear.
Resolved to give a firm and well-deserved reprimand to the incompetent slave who dared disturb
him, Edwin wrenched open the door and stared into empty space.

Then he looked down and saw Alora.

"Odesseiron! Double good and done, I knew you'd want to hear," she burst out excitedly. His and
Cythandria's little spy, crawling about within rafters and hidden passages to overhear, thieving spell
components; she was a touch conspicuous, but one found it quite difficult to dismiss Alora
Lapineblossom (of the large and respectable halfling clan of the Iriaebor Lapineblossoms, so she
happily said to any who even vaguely hinted at inquiring). "Somethin' big on over at the docks! I
overheard it, one of the Throne warehouses on fire, Anchev just came out with Cythie and grabbed a
few of his other people and went—"

"Stay here," Edwin commanded the girl, his hands flying to the spell components he had prepared
for himself. Of course he'd his daily memorisations ready; Edwin Odesseiron could smell the stench
of opportunity when it floated to him upon the breeze... "I mean that," he instructed Alora; "remain
here and listen. (Mages' work! At long last!"

He ran from his rooms and out to the docks; none too far. Undoubtedly there was smoke; but it was
night, and against the dark smudge of the sky he could see only the crackling of flames. As he drew
closer he could identify figures further: Sarevok's bulk, the glitter of Cythandria's robes, an inhuman
figure even larger than Sarevok with arrows piercing it as it yelled, shapes from the gang serving the
Iron Throne that he recognised as those known as acolytes to Sarevok. There was a small army of
massed, dark figures that attacked the burning warehouse, surrounding it, striving to drive the men back inside it. Some raised swords, some axes, some halberds; all were dark, and as Edwin hastily completed his incantation for night’s vision he saw that they were all masked men, uniformed by thick black cloaks. Apparently not the local forces of so-called law and justice, Edwin considered. They outnumbered Sarevok’s men it was obvious, and they’d managed to set the warehouse aflame; and any priceless contents lurking within...

Something about the fire made Edwin believe it was magical; the colour of it was Fireball, the slight hint of Weave-texture to his eyes. An enemy wizard to fight. He rushed up to join the contingent of the Throne, searching to understand, reaching for the Weave in this battle. Cythandria stood still, lurking behind Sarevok with her robes and hair flying about her like a painted bird by a giant hawk.

"Cast at the sniper," Edwin heard Sarevok order her, pointing to a roof at which he himself could see nothing; and the large man ran for the battle, the vast sword drawn easily from his back.

"Invocare sempram," Cythandria began a chant, "invocare nosotros—" She stopped: it was a spell that hit her, flying missiles. She screamed, and upon instinct her ogres appeared for her; but they only had the cloaked soldiers to fight, and could not stop the next attack upon her.

Edwin looked, and could see: two figures by each other, a hooded one undoubtedly the arcane caster, flanked by one taller figure with hands likewise raised. Not far from them was a man almost the size of Sarevok Anchev, battling four at once of the Iron Throne's folk. There was only time for action. Edwin brought forth his considerable conjuration powers to bear, armed and made ready by countless battles in the field:

A swarm of kobolds appeared about the enemy casters, and they faltered. Anchev himself was fighting his way to the giant ape of a man; he cut down three of the cloaked army, who fell in a tangle of their own billowing uniforms. Then the two combatants met, both huge men armed with thick two-handed blades.

Another arrow came from the sniper's bow; the target was a half-ogre of some sort among the warehouse men, Edwin could see now, a vast orange-skinned creature—then the recognition came to him, the very one at the bandit camp that had finally shown Shar-Teel the meaning of defeat and her proper place. And at that moment it screamed of poison, and fell forward like a rotten tree-trunk, six arrows embedded in its thick hide.

One of Sarevok's men stepped back from the battle, casting; Edwin saw dark yellow flames upon that distant roof, divine power, his senses as a wizard instructed him. The enemy spellcaster had cast some flares at his kobolds; he saw them dance in pain away from the hooded figure, several burned already. Edwin cast the summoning again; an eminently serviceable spell that he could direct where apropos in the battle, kobolds to keep them all busy. As his great wizardly might had been so serviceable in that time in the Cloakwood—Never mind that. He drew his reagents of hide and wax candle; moved the threads of the Weave that another selection of creatures would arise. In his genius he felt it yield to him, a second grouping of kobolds arising from his power. (A great victory by his sole hands!)

Then he heard the voice.

"Minsc! Retreat now, I bid thee!" The hooded enemy mage was a woman; Edwin heard the cadences of her accent cacophonous as they were, heard the name of her escort. He knew it all; in as shocked horror as Cythandria but for his own reasons, paused and thought it. There was no reason for her to be here, if anything she ought to have been trudging about the wilderness servicing yet more madmen, he had never expected... The hulking ape. The rubbishy barwhore of a Witch. That rendered the third the ill-tempered cleric.
Edwin thought, and acted. His requirement was telekinetic power on a grand magely scale, the hand of a wizard that wrought changes to the world plucked from the fabric of the Weave. He reached for it, his voice not quite trembling by sudden amazement and awe at his own deductions. He grasped at the clothing of the enemies, the dark masks and cloaks, and blew them all away in half a minute's worth of casting. As he had expected: pale skulls glinted upon their heads. A deception of Witch and cleric.

"They are not soldiers but merely undead!" he called to Sarevok's men; and some stepped back from their foes with their new lease of information.

"In the name of the Lord of Murder!" called one, raising a carven skull to the air; Edwin could see the force of belief, a skeleton shattering in response to that cry even though it was at the behest of a human who was yet a human for all that he could do... They were undead. Sarevok's underlings began to turn them to the dust they deserved.

Edwin looked across once more; there was Sarevok Anchev, broad and terrifying; but the figures he fought were... Apparently non-existent. Anchev searched. That was it, obviously, the Witch had hidden them with her magic— An area-effect spell would seize them nonetheless even as Anchev chased, yelling a battle-cry and almost godlike by the light of that sword reflecting the flames—and did his eyes glow? It mattered not; he could not risk an area-effect in the vicinity of this ally; the inspired idea came to him; at the exterior of mines Edwin could recall ash and shadows and shapes—

"Cythandria!" He grabbed her left shoulder; she'd been hit by the Witch's magic, her hair and bodice stained by smoke and her head shaking in disbelief. "Invisible—I have no dispelling abjuration to hand (inferior school!), two summonings—" Clever magicians such as Edwin Odesseiron made usage of the tools at hand; he'd seen her cast five— "I require not fire but smoke! Which components of the spell govern the smoke?"

She spoke slowly, still disoriented. "Somatic, obviously. Resultant magical effects depend on continued gesture control. Elementary proof. Ah. Clever of you." Her fingers went to the pouches upon her waist. "Low sulphur ratio," she said, spinning quickly together the small ball within her fingers. "Now, then."

Her casting managed to be both fast and accurate as her target practice. The fireball gave smoke more than fire, and in that smoke were three shapes running. Sarevok Anchev's sword slashed through the air. In the confusion of it and his remaining kobolds Edwin saw vaguely the running figures, the big berserker wounded, stabbed deeply in the chest; what must have been the cleric grasping him with no doubt divinely-granted strength and trying to run with the body; the sword cutting through both of them. Edwin heard a cry that must have been from the Witch, herself barely touched by Cythandria's smoke, a grey form trying to conceal itself within the threads and hollows of the Weave. Those two things which lay upon the ground turned visible, in the time of a few seconds but appearing gradually so. A sign, a definite sign; to the spell over his eyes Edwin saw blood as dark rather than bright, a deeper shadow over the stilled items that lay there.

The Witch. She must have seen too that they were dead; Edwin gabbled some words to Cythandria to tell her to cast again, and she did. Smoke filled the air once more, covering an invisible form as Anchev struck again with that blade—

Fire erupted from the Witch's hands even as she fled from that strike; something on the ground; hard to see in the smoke but surely she had been caught wounded, Edwin thought. Thick clouds of black smoke erupted around her; then all vision was taken bar for the shine of Anchev's blade through it. The next moment, she was gone. He heard Cythandria chanting a proper banishment, reaching through the Weave to slowly untangle spell-threads. But she had gone—
"Gardush!" Anchev was yelling; calling for one of his followers. "Through the sewers! Follow her —"

The fires spread. The Flaming Fist had begun to arrive, an impromptu brigade to save what remained of the warehouse, to prevent the fires from further destruction. The Witch lived, Edwin thought in despair, running a hand across his sweating face; she knew his face—

Amnian sabotage and a Cowled Wizard. That the magefire had spread to a Silvershield warehouse next door was proof of the random choice of it. A Captain Dosan listened to their accounts of it—

A dead half-ogre by arrows.

(Tazok was one of few survivors who had seen him; and it was the red cowl of respect that was more often noticed than the face within. He often wore dark brown these days.)

An elf killed by divine fire atop the eastern building, property of the Counting House.

(He noticed that there were green and black marks across the elf's oddly smiling face. It vaguely reminded him of a figure he had glimpsed at some point in the fight against the bandit camp; but that had been rather complicated and he did not particularly care.)

A muscular, fair-haired woman and a large bald ape of a man, dead together by Sarevok Anchev's sword.

(A Rashemi berserker and unnecessarily belligerent cleric. Transmuted to Amnian agents. He had barely met them in any case.)

The Cowled Wizard— "I used a casting of magesight before she fled," Edwin said; "she is a woman; a hooded cloak; about my...shorter than me, of course; coarsely dark, far more so than sir Anchev..."

"How observant of you." The Fist captain's dark red hair was greying below his open helm; though he was tall and more or less of warrior's crude build, his form had gone rather to seed, the armour he wore obviously light on him. (Western barbarians.) Yet there was something about the way he narrowed his beady eyes that slightly unnerved Edwin, a sense of vague and unpleasant familiarity. (Undoubtedly indeed! No doubt he had seen the man on some trivial patrol elsewhere in the city.)

Cythandria had conjured water for herself to wash her face; her hands moved through her hair, neatening herself and gazing up at Sarevok Anchev. Ladylike grooming; as deft as Skie had been, careful to maintain herself even just after battles, returning her hair to an amazing order. "You were useful, Odesseiron," she praised him, looking briefly into his eyes; and then Anchev placed a hand upon her arm. She nestled her tidy head against his armoured shoulders.

"An escaped Cowled Wizard with a great vendetta against this city," Sarevok Anchev said grimly, an amber-gold light still flaring from his eyes. "We are fortunate enough to have lost little this night; the storehouse being the least of spared storage. Less can be said for Silvershield, though Entar's purse can bear it." The man could mouth the jargon of merchantry well enough. Dosan laughed, once and hollowly. It had been a rather fortunate plan of the enemies who lacked the lawful proofs that I and Skie happened upon, Edwin realised, his knee-joints suddenly empty. Resulting from it a destroyed warehouse; the dead half-ogre; men wounded belonging to Sarevok Anchev; the trick of the skeletons; the near escape. If a series of such surgical strikes upon the properties of the Iron Throne—more losses; Rieltar depriving his adopted son of authority; investigation by others that would surely reveal their own corruptions...

A Witch, a criminal; daring to strike in the night. Daring to bring out Sarevok Anchev's half-ogre to
the very city streets. Daring to slay it.

But in the end her treachery is his advantage. Sarevok Anchev craves and desires, and what he demands is so much more than can be contained in warehouses.

Long before dawn, all the city knew of the treachery of Amn.

—

103. Ulcaster Ruins

Imoen dreamed.

It makes them vulnerable.

Islanne's runes danced across the paper. She read from the beginning: mage-symbol for reach, the same as the beginning of a charm spell. The shape of the rune said purple in her mind, like an enchantment. Mage-symbol for touch, or it could be sense or pierce or. End.

If'n Skie hadn't nagged her about it.

No, this one started with mage-symbol for take, soft gold and curved and reshapeable just like the metal. Then it was surround or through or suffuse. And then the first one curved back into something else, and she had to read it again.

She could smell blood. Smelt a lot of that lately; they'd all bled down in the tower, from doppelgangers and monsters and the rest of it. It meant just as much that she could smell blood whenever she'd the curse too, she and every other woman. It didn't mean anything.

Gods, how embarrassing. She was bleeding out her robes and it pooled around her feet like a lake, and because she didn't feel wounded it had to be that. A red sphere, a sun of blood, an egg of blood, set above her. Must be nighttime. Sticky dark blood up to her ankles now, gushing out of her when she tried to read. Her brain wasn't goin' right. She read it and there was no time. Read one part, forget it, go back to it. Her head hurt.

A clawed hand reached for her. She knew very well what it was—hadn't it had a trace of pink on its head, scales and claws and all aside? The monster in the dreams. She didn't manage to think that she was dreaming of it again. Fear blocked her throat; blood welled inside her mouth. She knew what it wanted and she didn't want a piece of that, no way. She'd never. The blood was at her thighs now. She could drown in the sticky sea of it.

"Lady... Lady Winthrop. Hope...hope could return with you..." Mr G. again, she thought hazily, old and clever and telling you things you didn't realise were right until later. No. Something new. He wasn't the blood or the thing with the claws. She looked at him. He was clearer to her than the magic runes she couldn't read. "I know...ways against spirits...against spirits that take..." He wheezed like ol' Parda, who hardly went anywhere without smoking a pipe with sickly black tobacco that made her gag. Funny, she thought hazily, Parda didn't appear just because she was thinking of him this time. This one was taller than Parda, bearded and built like a stick, thin and wispy, a staff in his left hand. Blood filled her mouth and she was about to vomit; the blood moved in a torrent against her body. It was trying to drown her. It couldn't even wait until it got high enough that it would cover her mouth and her nose without even bothering. It stirred and it shook and it slipped angry tendrils around her to pull her below. Something was screaming in anger at her.
Then the other one's translucent hand reached out, and it was a lifeline given her. He pulled her up and away, and the blood washed down through a dark drain set in the bottom of the floor. Imoen set over it a plug, as if it was the inn's baths she cleaned of mould and all sorts of muck dragged in by monks and nobles who really ought to have known how to keep clean by now. That was it. No more blood. The one who had saved her was still there when she looked. He was transparent in front of a wall of scrolls.

"...come find me..." she heard the voice of it ask of her. "All for knowledge..."

She was awake in the small tent with a half-moon shining white light into it. Imoen sat up and rubbed her eyes. She reached quietly for her water and gave herself a few drops on her face, across her eyelids. Waste of it, but she wanted to know she was awake. Bad dreams. It was all quiet outside. If it was near midnight then Viconia would be on watch doing her holy rituals on whatever it was that Sharran priestesses actually did in detail she wasn't sure she wanted to know about, Imoen thought to herself. Funny how you could never think things properly through in dreams. The cool water bathed her eyes; she'd known it would make her feel better. Faldorn breathed loudly across from her; and there was Skie beside her, sleeping quietly, curled up and pale. Some of Skie's hair had fallen across her face; Imoen brushed it back, gently enough not to waken her. She'd seen Skie saying weird things in her sleep, sometimes. Maybe havin' weird dreams was going all around the party: Ajantis tossed and turned a lot in the small tent he had to himself with Aquerna, and Viconia sometimes moved around and said things in drow in her sleep that they could overhear even though she shared with Shar-Teel. And if Shar-Teel'd done even half the things she said she'd done, and Shar-Teel was more of the tell-the-absolute-truth-about-how-many-skulls-gleefully-crushed type than the idle-boasting type, then she shouldn't be sleeping the sleep of the proverbial either, Imoen thought. Maybe it was just her turn now for the nightmares. Imoen patted Skie's unmoving shoulder. 'S nothing, kiddo.

Skie got weird sometimes, even if she said she wanted to help people now; maybe she'd learned more from Shar-Teel than she wanted to admit to. Imoen'd seen her killing her other self easily down at the bottom of the tower, more easily than Imoen'd found herself able to fight the monster that hadn't even looked like her, and knowing how to fire that arrow too, and all the things that happened before that. As long as the kid didn't try dragging them against proper demons, even if she'd got sword skills better than Imoen's by now. (And that wasn't really that hard; first sneakthieving and then magic kept Imoen busy enough.) She was practically two inches shorter than Imoen (it rounded up, not down), so that way she was the little sister Imoen hadn't thought she wanted. She gave another soft pat to Skie's arm.

"Are you going to start giggling with her and keep me up all night again?" Faldorn suddenly demanded with a hiss, sitting up in her own bedroll. Imoen flung the blanket at her, and felt that she'd rather managed to relieve her feelings before settling back down to a dreamless rest. It was cold.

—

23 Flamerule

Faldorn's wolf was heard to howl loudly at the eleventh hour of the day, more so than it had done before; and when it returned it had dark human blood on its mouth.

The ground had gone dry, again; not quite the barren dust of Durlag's Tower, but a gorse-encrusted moor, a little like the dry land just outside the exit to Nashkel mines. I could still remember that slime-controlling wizard who tried to set his pets on us... Perhaps we'd veered too far east, but it was easier to forge through than undergrowth for most of us. Further to the east rose some hills; to the west more forest.
"Come here," Faldorn called to her creature. She knelt by it, examining the stains upon its maw, and looked up at us. "Some trespasser who failed to respect nature. I see."

"Dead person?" Imoen said. She'd been shivering cold that morning, but was strong enough by then. "Right. Let's go." She made a face at the sight of the wolf. "Does that thing have to eat, Faldy?"

"No; but it makes better kills when it is well-fed on flesh." Imoen raised her eyes to the heavens and muttered a brief plea to Mystra. "It's an entirely natural part of the cycle of life and a sign of the perfect designs of Silvanus that the bodies of the dead enrich the earth," Faldorn added sulkily, stroking the wolf's head.

We found the man on the ground by a rocky hill. His clothing was plain and suited to travelling in the wilderness; he decayed, the skin perhaps weathered and well-tanned and the hair dark brown. The wolf had eaten a large hole in his chest. Shar-Teel bent down heedless of the stains and scooped up his pack.

"Look, foolish surfacers." Viconia reached to the ground, and pulled loose a pale bone. It couldn't have belonged to the corpse; clean and sun-picked to white. Human-looking. "Naut-elghinyrr: the undead reign here. Shar designs all with dark purpose."

Ajantis shook his head; but he said nothing against her statement of religion. "We must see how this man met his end," he said. "At the least, because to us it may..."

Viconia ran a hand almost caressingly over the corpse's cheeks, touching the tormented skin of his neck. "Athiyk'caluss," she said, "whatever pathetic term you surfacers use for it. Rise for me; ku'lam at Shar's will..."

She prayed; darkness gathered around her hand and she stroked the body's skin. Cal was a verb that meant to eat in her language; as for athiyk I could make nothing of it. Surely she could not mean that the body had been eaten; it was the wolf that had preyed on it.

The skin sloughed from the corpse at her touch of it. Hair and scalp sliding from a baring skull; eyeballs melting to liquid and dissolving through blank eyesockets; clothing and flesh alike boiled away from the bones as if in a pot of water. The...skin-shape of the man fell down, slipping through the ribcage and below the bones, under the gaping hole of the white jawbone like the outside of a soft cloth puppet pulled away from wooden joints. The skeleton rose to stand; the pile of flesh lay on the ground in the shape of a boneless person. Ajantis looked ill.

"Come," Viconia ordered it throatily. The skeleton rose and followed her, its eyesockets dark. She smiled prettily. "There," she pointed; "that power which took this surfacer male." Stony hills rose there, after an hour or so walking east. We began to see one broad mound as greenery encompassed by a high ring of white stone, a section of its cliff with the appearance of stairs roughly carved into pale yellow rock.

It was broad daylight. Even if the undead were here; perhaps it would be easy under noonday's creep.

"Help us," a grey creaking voice like the hinge of an old house said. We looked, and Imoen took a quick step backward. It was a ghost. This hung in the air, in the sunlight; it was translucent like Durlag in the dark. Unquestionably a spirit, and it troubled to talk first to us before trying to kill us again.

Viconia stepped forward. "Shar—" she breathed, raising her dark circle toward the shape in the air. It seemed to look down at her; a tall bearded man in mage's robes. Shar-Teel's sword was drawn; I'd
magical blades too that might work on a ghost...

"Viconia, stop it!" Imoen moved quickly; she pushed Viconia aside on purpose, knocking her down on her knees. "What are you and what do you want?" she burst out to the ghost. "I thought I saw you, you're—" She sounded tense; I went to her side, to protect her if she needed it.

"...the best of schools," the ghost whispered, fluttering gently in the air. Viconia hissed, but it seemed to look only at Imoen now. "...heard the name...Ulcaster?"

Imoen took a deep breath before speaking. "Yeah. Ulcaster. Heard of it. Mage school that got all dead. Sorry, that's a bit rude. I thought you helped—"

"...a storage of arcane knowledge," the ghost reflected further. "I...was once known by that name...Lady Winthrop..." It knew Imoen's name. My hand tightened across the Burning Earth's hilt.

Imoen placed both hands on her waist, and looked jauntily across at the spirit who claimed to be Ulcaster. "So you need help? That's us. Heroes of Nashkel, once; heroes of Durlag's Tower." Viconia, cursing, took a place behind her; Shar-Teel watched, and I didn't doubt she would fight at the least provocation.

The ghost whispered again to her. "...ware those who eat flesh...But those are not the thin air that once took...a tome to describe why..."

"The—thin air that took?" It sounded too strange. The destruction of Ulcaster was a mystery; I knew little of it but one day the school was simply no more, the building a sudden ruin despite the hundreds of young students there.

"...nothing left," the ghost said, and its voice was still more bleak and hollow. "...Nothing left and we knew not why...the worst fear of a mage..." The voice, weak as it was, seemed to break. "lost, all lost...lost, all lost..."

Imoen managed a shrug that looked insouciant. "Another adventure! Let's go."

"...impolite...student..." The ghost was trying to lecture Imoen, it seemed, raising a long and spindly forefinger. "...will not pass if not..." Wind whistled around us. I shivered; perhaps it was in the power of this spirit to raise a true barrier, though it could not be powerful enough not to need us. Imoen raised her eyebrows.

"Well. I had dreams, you know that—" she said to it, then recklessly grinned. "Got it!" She pulled off her light pack and flung it to the ground in front of her. "Think I know how to say it in wizard talk. Master Ulcaster of Ulcaster. Would it behoove us—I hope that's right—" She briefly hesitated. "That I, Imoen Winthrop of Candlekeep, ought to so swear upon her magic contained within her ancient and noble form—well, her young and reasonably good-looking form—to aid thou..."

"...aid thee; or rather to aid you, since you and I know each other not..." the ghost corrected.

"...That Mistress Imoen Winthrop of Candlekeep, journeywoman transmuter—or Lady Imoen, she doesn’t mind it if you call her that either, Lady Imoen or Lady Winthrop’s got a perfectly good ring to it, ’s long as it's not Lady Puffguts—" Imoen said, "may swear upon the entirety of her arcane magic to aid Master Ulcaster of Ulcaster to find out what happened; and he in return shall recomprehense...recompense...this deed by..."

She spent several long moments burrowing into her pack, and stood up again with three scrolls in hand. None of us made any attempts to stop her.
"—By these three scrolls. No, I'll spell it out specifically: that Master Ulcaster of Ulcaster shall teach Imoen the Pink of Candlekeep that Great and Terrible Transmuter Wizardess fully each of the three spells contained by these scrolls," Imoen continued boldly on, with an air of triumph to her formalities. "That the before-mentioned Lady Mistress Winthrop daughter of ol' Puffguts...I mean, daughter of Sir Winthrop, ward of Gorion Greymantle...can scribe each one of them into her own book and cast them when she wants to cast them under the provisional that she has the mental capacity and studies them," Imoen said. "That you'll teach me properly the way you'd teach any other student," she finished. "Because I need to know, and you're someone who can teach me."

Was there a smile somewhere upon the face of the ghost, a tremble at his lips? "Imoen...wizardess of Candlekeep...upon my own magic I will teach the transmuter before me...I will teach such a student..." The cold winds seemed to die down, the sunlight reaching upon us once more. "...But you must find, Lady Winthrop...knowledge to prevent...horror of all students...I can give no more without knowing..." His wizard's robes faded and fluttered in the light. A few minutes later and we could scarcely see Ulcaster at all, nor speak with him. If he was in fact Ulcaster, of course.


"I can do that," Faldorn promised. "It is better to slay what is unnatural." She glared very suspiciously in the direction of the ghost itself.

"Aye, milady," Ajantis replied, and looked surprised as if he'd noticed that language as stale and formulaic since Le Morte de Queen Biancavere was published fifty-eight years ago.

I'd the Burning Earth in my left hand, the green-hilted shortsword in the right; we went to the foot of the white cliffs unencumbered by excess material in our packs, concealed in a gully some distance from this area. Ulcaster, Ulcaster, Ulcaster. I didn't read a lot of magical histories. Those who ate flesh and something that made mages afraid. Imoen. Shar-Teel yelled at us to keep together; had to be ready for anything. Faldorn held her flame blade aloft between her hands.

The rock had stairs to it; carved at some point. Ulcaster was old. We walked up the ring of pale yellow; above our heads there were no overhangs, nothing that would stop things atop it from hurling arrows or boiling oil or spells down. But it was still. Flies buzzed in the noon air and the sun beat down above. There were hauntings that it was much easier to picture than this scene. At the top, the grass was a luscious and moist green, exactly like an illustration of some bucolic scene of perfect farmland. Perhaps, I thought, that was because rain hit this part first; but that was silly. Surely this raised area ought to be as dry as the bare ground that surrounded it.

We stepped slowly to the grass from the stone, behind Shar-Teel's lead. There were ruins there, exactly as spoken by the ghost; perhaps a yellowy mist hung around the rusting iron and discarded granite, or perhaps it was simply a trick of the light. They were dull and dingy walls, scattered, the ground flat and the thick grass beneath them. No obvious artefacts remained within them; simply old, above-ground walls that offered only a vague understanding of historical architecture from what remained of their decay. The style of the thick walls and a fallen pole that looked as if it had been once heavily carved made the style seem perhaps inspired by the Haedrakian period in Tethyr, or one of the not-too-long-subsequent monarchs; some of the older mansions in the city try to imitate that architecture, like the Albaier family seat. But there was hardly enough of it left for a strong judgement. Empty ruins that had been plundered already; what on earth could the ghost have wanted? We stood together not far from the pale steps. Shar-Teel was first to move forward, and Imoen followed her.

Faldorn had bent down to the grass; she'd be left behind that way. I looked back at her to see her
digging, her flame blade placed into the ground by her. She stood again, armed with a handful of grass pulled up by the roots. A large clump of dark, moist soil clung to the tendrils below the green. Grass and dirt here was like grass and dirt everywhere, I supposed, not very interesting; but she asked us to look at it.

"And?" Imoen said, making an impatient gesture. "C'mon; there's got to be something among the ruins."

Faldorn did not smile back but looked grim, and squeezed the dirt she held tightly. Red crept downward over her hand and leaked to the ground below; dark red stained her skin...

She'd hurt herself. "—Are the roots barbed?" I said. I'd never had occasion to read much about grass. "They're not poisonous, are they? I don't know if grass roots can be poisonous or spiked. Can you heal yourself? Viconia could heal you—"

"I'm not injured," Faldorn said, the tone of her voice cool and flat. "This soil is very moist. If I squeeze it..."

Blood dripped from her hand. Imoen reached down where she was on the knoll, digging into the grass; she pulled up more of it and squeezed. Blood ran from that earth as well. "It smells like it," she said. "Gods."

"Human blood is quite a good fertiliser," Faldorn said; which probably none of us but perhaps Viconia wanted to learn. "The grass flourishes, but...I do not like it." Imoen and Ajantis looked nauseated; Imoen quickly rubbed her stained hand over her mage's robes, brushing it frantically as if she could remove it all by that simple movement. Instead she gave red streaks to her clothing.

"Old carrion," Shar-Teel said. "Find something that I can force to bleed. Or crack apart," she said. Viconia allowed her skeleton to follow her meekly, a tall white presence behind her along the bloodied soil.

Imoen tapped at a wall. "There's Weave-threads around here," she said, frowning, her eyes unfocused in that way that usually meant she was grasping at some spell beyond our understanding. "Doesn't feel like there was a great battle here or anything, but I haven't been too many places with great wizardly battles. Spells, but ordinary sorts of spells. 'S a bit small up here to be a legendary mage school, isn't it?" She stamped around one of the fallen slabs of rock; her frown seemed to cover up nervousness at this strange place.

"Some things were smaller back then," I said, uncertainly; "The population's increased over the past few hundred years, and when things have legends told about them rather than proper histories written it's usual they get exaggerated..."

"No," Imoen said, glancing over at Viconia, who nodded. "The old threads go under our feet."

"It puzzled me precisely how long it should take to comprehend, mal'ai, even if it is not true Underdark." Mal'ai: strength-lack, or fool. Viconia's slaves and all her siblings called her Malla Viconia, she claimed, and ai was a derisive suffix. Drow was interesting even if she wasn't.

I saw Imoen disappear from sight behind a thick slab of old wall, fallen. She shouldn't be on her own; I went to make sure I was near.

It rose out of the soil. She screamed. It was blue, because it was not living. It was thin, because it was dead. It was tall and held her by talons. I lunged forward before I'd time to think.

It dropped Imoen. It sizzled by the fire in the longsword. Arrows flew—
They had risen from the grass: warriors yellow-bone with bows. A hail of arrows. Ajantis was ducked behind a slab of stone, Imoen down, Viconia crying out and Shar-Teel running to them, arrows in her armour. Faldorn's wolf was hit—

Imoen was on the ground, but I could hear her voice. She was near the rough shelter of a wall; I tried to push forward against the creature with both blades, but it didn't move. The long talons it wore on its fingers struck. It was looking—there was a dark blue light in what had to be eyesockets, a long finlike face like the set of ancient bones mounted in the Curio Hall of the Duchal Palace, brought to the city by Balduran, a great creature that once lived in the sea before humans lived on Toril—I moved away, down, back from it. Let Imoen have the time for her spell; try to take cover in what remained of the school—

"Will you give me your flesh?" it asked. The lights in the black hollows of its face were deep as an ocean, prone to drowning sailors in their torrents. "I am Icharyd, and I would like to wear skin once more."

Imoen's spell completed; four of her rose and ran from the arrows. They weren't aiming at the one who must be leading them, Icharyd—

Perhaps one could offer oneself to him. Die, of course. He was old—undead—so much greater time on this earth, so blue and cold and numb—

*But I don't want to*, I thought.

The longsword to fend away the seeking talons, the shortsword in a quick stab to the midsection. It opened something. Icharyd hissed. The other hand moved too quickly, and scraped along my shoulder; pierced my thick leather. I felt my skin tearing. My blood fell from those talons.

"Then we take your flesh." Something changed on his shoulder; bubbling and boiling along the blue leathery skin as a sudden heat. Four light-coloured strips grew there, new skin fresh and pulsing. *My* skin—that was my shoulder, not his. He took it and grew it on his body. He ate flesh...

Shar-Teel I could hear. Arrows whistled through the air. Imoen was running. There was cover here; Shar-Teel and Ajantis had stopped some of the bow-wielding undead. An arrow took one of Imoen's images to thin air; she stumbled to find cover.

My skin on Icharyd's shoulder. Was that laughter? It sounded like the noise of the pit below Kirinhale's dying feet when she stepped back into the Abyss. But it was fairly obvious what I had to do—Icharyd was tall like Shar-Teel, talons instead of her long reach, if I tried to duck under and get close with the shortsword—

The talons struck again, but I was fast enough. Under them, close because it—he—was so tall; shortsword stabbing and slashing. He didn't bleed but he tore; blue leathery skin over bones that looked like they should have been crumbling but weren't. I tried not to look at my own skin on him. I spun away from him; he went forward, after me. An arrow flew near us, the air moving too close to my back.

"By Shar! I have the power now. Rei ulu ussta yorn—" Viconia chanted; her holy symbol was aloft and dark, shining black; she was amidst many of them and spoke as if she would capture all of them to her will—

I let the flame blade catch Icharyd's talons. That bone did not turn blacker than it was. Then Viconia screamed. On the ground—an arrow in her chest—
Imoen gasped behind me. Her spellcasting halted in shock. Viconia...

Icharyd's talons still wove through the air. Deflect; strike low; use footwork. Steps Shar-Teel had beaten into memory. Icharyd's speed was terrible and his blows shook my arms. Move under them. Wove between the remains of the school.

There was the roar of a bear; it was Faldorn, shapeshifted, running through what crowded around Viconia's body. Ajantis and Varsona sliced down. I knew the undead were not as cold as that blade. But mindless as they seemed they were led by Icharyd, this thing who wore others' bodies.

A thick rectangular block of stone lay behind us. I jumped atop it; there was height enough to slash what Icharyd had for a face. Then—it was difficult—my own skin on its shoulder, and I imagined it didn't hurt when I cut into it—

The young bear had brought down the enemy; Shar-Teel was coming up behind, smashed corpses in her wake. Then Imoen's spell was ready again, and fire scorched the back of Icharyd's neck. He did not whirl on her—I stabbed at the same time, we knew each other well enough—and went deeply into that dark blue. Imoen shouted out quick missiles to scorch Icharyd's body; and by then Shar-Teel was by his side.

When Icharyd sought her flesh he could not pierce her armour. He could barely scratch her. She sunk the end of her sword into his face, and pushed down. The undead lost control. I stabbed down at one on the ground, skin thinly stretched over yellow bones; and vaulted back, slicing at Icharyd's leg. It went through; he overbalanced ready for Shar-Teel to finish the battle. Though he lay still, blue dust flying from what remained of his bones, there was disorganisation rather than destruction of the creatures that aided him. Not quite zombies and not quite skeletons; somewhere between. Imoen cast again, her hands afire.

Faldorn knelt over Viconia. I used the burning longsword on a corpse already down, which was still twitching after Shar-Teel had cut through its ribcage. They lay scattered atop the grass; which was green and fresh and moist still.

"Dead or alive?" Shar-Teel said, with a tone as indifferent as if she was talking about the weather. Faldorn's hands were wrapped around the arrow, set in a leathered gap between the plates Viconia wore on her body, not far below her left breast and embedded past her ribs. A second arrow marked her left thigh. I couldn't see that she was breathing. Faldorn began to chant, and the arrow dissolved between her hands. Bright red blood gushed out of Viconia; Faldorn laid her hands forcefully upon the wound and called to Silvanus' name again.

Imoen looked pale. "I wanted to do this—" I heard her whisper, staring at Viconia's body.

_Wanted to kill Viconia?_ Saying that would have been sarcasm, I told myself. I'd never wanted—or maybe I had— But if you didn't do it, you didn't have to feel guilty about it. I put an arm around Imoen. "It's not your fault."

"Half an inch higher," Faldorn said, leaning back upon her heels, "and it would have gone to your heart and meant death." She next lowered her hands to Viconia's thigh; again when she dissolved the arrow, blood gushed from that wound.

Viconia screamed with a high endless cry like a tortured cat in the night. "Vost xta'rin uns'aa! Vith'ir! L'puul rivvil, iblith—" She lay back, unmoving, panting and sweating. Faldorn finished the chant of her healing spell and wiped her hands on her leather tunic.

"Dorn o'goth usstan!" Viconia shrieked, flailing her hands to push Faldorn away, and began a chant
of her own. It seemed to fail, her voice faltering and her body collapsing back. "Vith'ir! Vith'ir! Vith'ir!"

"If you wanted nature's vitality in you, I could have cast it," Faldorn said, and turned to chant a healing spell over Ajantis next, ignoring Viconia's wails.

"Ravhelen—crazen—ssussun flamgran—vith'ir—plynn ussa dal ghil—ooloth d'jal—iblithen—" she gasped out; she turned on the ground like fishbait on a hook, like a legless carrion crawler trying to raise itself up. She struggled to writhe under her cloak, failing to let it cover all of her body, screaming at the sun that hit her skin. Shar-Teel reached for the longer cloak Ajantis wore, and threw it down across her as she lay there.

"Centuries," I heard her crying, drow words thickly woven between her tirades in our language, "the power was mine for centuries, shortlives could never comprehend, I have commanded undead warriors five the size of this, bearing the best tk'parhn of the drow that any could obtain—that power I had—my lady Darkness—I hate the light more than all—I have power, you fools all of you, desert me at your peril—do not watch me, do not dare mock me! You are disgusting weaklings—all of you! In the streeatul fighting for your betters you would have perished! Slaves—rivvin—how dare they—naut-elghinyrr—disgusting skeletons—command—harl'il'cik—down before me—obey—leave me—stop your mockery—may Shar cut out all your black hearts and consume them by scorpions—"

"That's enough," Shar-Teel said. "You were reckless as any stupid male. You paid for it."

"Venorsh, ilharess!" Viconia shrieked at her. "Venorsh! —And you, they say," she said, hissing; "you stood alone in a forest challenging any who walked past—as if you are one to speak of recklessness or stupidity—elg'caress—"

"And yet I've won," Shar-Teel said, with what was for her unusual tolerance, unbuckling a potion from her waist and taking it for herself. "They say it's only stupidity if you lose."

"Curse you all," Viconia hissed again, and blackness gathered around her hands; she touched herself again, whispering to Shar, and this time the darkness seemed to become absorbed into her body. She sat up, tucking herself deeply inside both cloaks. "May you all die alone in darkness. If your jaws are hanging open and slack yet again, lackwits, you may move them back into your heads and follow down in silence." She kicked at the ground beside her. Slatted wood lay below that part of the grass, over stone steps that led downward; and Imoen was first upon them.

—

mal'ai - idiot

Rei ulu ussta yorn - Fall to my will

Vost xta'rin uns'aa! Vith'ir! L'puul rivvil, iblith - Get your hands off me, foul human

Dorn o'goth usstan - I am able to heal myself

ssussun flamgran - the light burns

plynn ussa dal ghil - take me away

venorsh - silence

—
We stepped down the old tunnel of Ulcaster, a dingy and ruined place, Imoen leading the way through her magic. She stopped halfway down dusty, ragged stairs, muttering to herself. "Threads," I heard her saying, "I c'n sense the magic thisaways—also some hanging traps, nothing much but just to test students—" She pressed her right hand to the wall and said some arcane words; a stone set there had the signs in the black gaps around it that meant some sort of magical trap to be disarmed. The stone glowed pink for a second, and then she moved on.

The air was stale and damp, the ground empty of visible footprints or human signs. None had come here for a long time, I supposed. The shadows moved in the corners of our eyes. I thought that I saw a—a ghost, perhaps, a swirl of grey mage robes rising too high above the ground for a walking human, floating across a hole in the floor; but one blink and it was gone.

Shelves bearing broken glass lined the walls as we stepped further down; potions unstopped, spilled and long spoiled. What had once been books were scattered on the floor. I picked up a dark red cover that lay face-down in front of my feet, and below it only scraps of yellowed paper fluttered to the ground.

"Look," Imoen said, pointing to a door that lay open, hinges rusted red. In the room beyond were dusty sinks hollowed out next to tables, more shelves piled with broken bottles, fragments of glass on the ground, small metal retorts fallen to their sides. "Alchemy lab," she said, and we heard something gurgling in one of those old sinks.

It was a jelly creature. We'd fought some in Durlag's tower, killed them by flames. This was no different; Imoen aimed an arrow, and I helped Shar-Teel slice down at it. It did not seem the sort of monster that could have destroyed an entire school.

Viconia raised her head from the hood of her cloak, sniffing the air. "I promise worse than this, rivvin. Spiders."

We passed into a hall that must have once been brightly painted, fragments of red and blue peeling from the walls. A dais stood at one end, old chairs overturned upon it. Stars had risen through a red mist in the old designs, shot through with portions of magical runes. It was stained by dark stripes down upon the walls, by a greyness that teemed and seethed above us...

The spiders came down from the ceiling. The Burning Earth shining on them turned them black and green-spotted; fangs and sharp legs and poisons. We took up positions, knowing how to fight these: Shar-Teel ahead, Ajantis at her right and me at her left, Faldorn and Imoen and Viconia making castings behind, standing at the doorframe and away from the spiders' territory.

"Khaleess nau!" Viconia called, a negation; "For Shar!" A long black ribbon grew between her hands; she widened her arms as if to stretch it out, and flung it as a cloud of darkness that swept across the bodies of the spiders. I saw carapaces cracking, the flow of creatures briefly halted in their way.

"I stand in Shar's favour..." Viconia huskily whispered, and drew the crossbow from the tower. She hit the crowd of spiders—one could hardly have failed to, Imoen likewise made each arrow she shot reach a target—and at least five fell by her hand.

Faldorn scattered seeds in the air, and then stamped a foot; her vines grew from her chanting, straining to grasp legs and shells, holding spiders in place for their deaths. I saw Varscona in Ajantis'
right hand send cold into the spiders' bodies, splinter them by ice; perhaps not so differently to the Burning Earth's fire. He cried out when a spider hit him, spinning down from the ceiling by its web; but it seemed it did not cut through his armour. His left arm was stiff, but he stopped at least one spider's fangs by that buckler; at the end of the battle he was still standing, Varscona covered by the icy remains of creatures. He did not immediately move to clean the blade.

"This was pointless," Viconia sneered, "this room leads nowhere." Shar-Teel stepped forward, through the spiders' bodies; near the dais there was some piled-up rubble. Not rubble: mage robes, dusty and old. She shook them out for gold, though they did not seem to have belonged to wealthy mages, silver and coppers falling out.

"Students," Imoen said, staring around the room; she was more curious than frightened, I thought. "Poor sods. C'mon, let's keep moving."

The school was a labyrinth to us, but I could see that once it might have been considered well-organised. The corners of the walls were relatively sharp even now, the passages wide and easy to go through, the rooms all carefully rectangular. We found old corpses: three bodies, also in the remains of old robes, these ones with still fragments of flesh over their bones, like old mummies in the dryness down here. Their tight-stretched skin grinned horribly over their skulls, and I wanted to move quickly past them.

Imoen frowned, looking carefully down and even nudging the remains with her boots. "Sorry," she said, "but I'd really like to find what did it to you. Y' don't have many marks... Tome of knowledge. Hope," she said to herself. "If'n they keep the book that explains why it happened."

Viconia smiled in the darkness, her teeth bright and white. "Is it not obvious what, wael?"

Imoen folded her arms, offended. "Go ahead, Vic. Try to be helpful."

"Did that first man perish of Icharyd the wearer of flesh?" Viconia said, very slowly; Imoen and I looked at each other.

"—So if he died of the other monsters in here," Imoen said, "it's something that hurts you like an energy-drain... Necromancy's nasty," she said, "but it's not the worst fear of a mage, if that ghost was right." She frowned. "Have to find it." She reached toward an old set of shelves; there were the remains of books' covers, but the paper within was ruined. "Y' know one thing? These books here weren't magical in themselves," she said. "Really good wizards stick preservation spells on books, and books with spells in 'em usually last for ages anyway because of the magic. Back at Candlekeep all the books had the preservation spells, but they still clouted you and made you sweep out stables if'n you accidentally spilled cherry juice on them or something." She sighed, remembering. "Off we go."

Shar-Teel led us along the left wall of the complex; the standard case when you didn't want to get lost. Unless it was one of those magical mazes, where walls and passageways shifted behind you as you walked, and the only reliable solution was to use a ball of yarn and tie it to the entrance to follow back to the exit. But this magic school had been dead for centuries, and there were no signs that the stones on the floor moved and changed.

More mage robes and remains lay in our path. They seemed in no particular pattern, dead in groups of one or two or three. Some had the appearance of bodies already eaten by spiders or jellies that lurked here, leaving only the cloth and perhaps a touch of dried bones, and some did not. If I'd seen this before any adventures, it would have kept me away for good... But I could look at dead people now. Perhaps I should have felt worse about it, but I didn't know them and Imoen wanted this, and at least I could feel better for feeling that I should have felt worse... A touch too complicated. We
walked past the dust of long-ago mages.

Imoen rubbed dust from another set of shelves with her forefinger, stained by ruined potions. "Spells here once," she said, "but I'd have to cast to know exactly what and I don't want to use up everything in my head. Think it'd be protections, for spell ingredients...stopped working when people died." By the shelves stood what looked like a wide fireplace; a nest of small spiders lived in the remains of a set of leather bellows. Its interior was coal-black with dust, unused for all this time. I bothered to look carefully into it in case of secrets hidden; and got only dust and spiderwebs in my hair.

"Poor things," Aquerna said from Imoen's back, her mouth stained blue with the berries that Faldorn gave to her. "A good cause to discover the terrible fate of these young ones. One would think that the rooms of the higher mages must be near, if this room is so well-appointed and protected."

"Nice one," Imoen said, flicking a candied nut from one of her pouches backwards to the squirrel. "Maybe we're close. But I'm a mage..."

The bodies we had come across were in small groups. We'd protect Imoen. Shar-Teel pointed grimly along the left wall again, and we passed through the stale air and dusted floors.

Then we came to a dead end. A blank wall. But, I thought, looking at it, and Imoen gazed at it too; it was a wall not in the direction of the earth surrounding, but an interior wall; and from what we have walked past there may be more space than that; and somehow it reminds me of...

Down in the Cloakwood, Davaeorn had placed guards about a disguised wall, where the stones were of slightly different composition and one brick was loosely mortared to serve as a trigger within. A common technique for designing secret passages. (This was nothing like the Cloakwood; no torture chamber, nobody alive to start with.) Imoen stepped closer to this stone wall, examining it with care. Then below the dirt, I saw the familiar silvery gleam of a pipe that Imoen's hands were moving closer towards...

"Down! Run!" I called.

The fireball swept through the air. Imoen was well down and out of its path, having flung herself in a long leap despite her robes. It burned long and hot enough to scorch our skin even at a distance.

"...Well," Imoen said shakily, beckoning Faldorn to cast protections on her, "I guess we've found something. Magic that still goes. Someone must've really wanted to keep that part of it safe."

We worked together on the wall, slowly uncovering the fire traps and redirecting them to burn themselves, or to break into and neutralise their ingredients with water and a liquid Imoen summoned from a cantrip. Then Imoen sketched something on the door with a finger dipped in charcoal, and pressed her hand over it, summoning a pink-coloured magelight across her fingers. "I'm a journeywoman mage," she whispered. "I could've been a student like 'em..."

The door opened for her. There was a long black table coated only lightly by dust. At its head sat a tall sharp-faced figure in mage's robes, slumped forward upon it; such a realistic pose that for the first moment I stared at him thinking that he somehow lived. There were other shapes about the table, dark-robed, in poses seated and fallen to the ground both. This wide sanctuary was far better preserved than the others in the way of dust and creatures; but the things in it that had been human were not. It was a horror to notice that the sharpness of the mage's face was no face but a white skull grinning above black flesh. The table was black because it had been burned. The other corpses seemed to have also died of flame. By the pattern of scorchmarks the fire had spread centred upon the leading figure, and then to the outer reaches of the room. What had likely once been bookcases had been blown to pieces...but at least here there were books.
Seventeen people, I counted, in burned robes on the ground and charred flesh still lying on their bones. We had opened the door and the decay would spread with whatever underground air could flow in here. Imoen looked as shocked as I felt. We'd seen dead people before...

"Books," she said with determination, and plucked one relatively intact from the debris. The books were scattered upon the blackened floor, and the shelves were badly damaged. That meant that the books had somehow survived the fireball when the people did not: enchantment, on the truly valued tomes.

"Phaelgrim's Necromantic Theory. No," Imoen said, "Ulcaster of the mage school ought to know a transmuter wouldn't help him if it needed necromancy." She laid that book aside. "Augher's Travels in the South." She flicked through it. "S about journeying, practical magic stuff. We can't carry all these..." She looked stricken; I could understand it though she was the one from Candlekeep. A good book is a great treasure. I helped her, handing her the ones with mage runes only she could read.

"Here's a History of Prospero the Mage-Duke," I said—now that was interesting, by Kallahan, and I knew his History of the Smiling Queen Tirythrene and his theories on her disappearance is a rare collector's item. But there wasn't really time; it wasn't the right place. "This one's about alchemical properties of bezoars. And this one here's on rare poisons."

"I will assist you," Ajantis said. He's not as fast a reader as Imoen, but he's educated, of course. "This tome appears to be about divinations that predict weather. This upon sorcery—by far the most troublesome and least respectable of the magical arts." His squirrel chirped something. "Well, Aquerna, it is undeniably uncontrolled and the source of some great evil in the lands, but I do not blame those who do their best to make responsible use of accidents of heritage. This one upon...different acids and their effects, so I do not see how it would be of use to you, my lady Imoen. This one must be in arcane script, for I cannot read it. A theological treatise. This one...the introduction makes mention of toadstools, so it is a herbalist's tome..."

We skimmed through the tomes; they must have been Ulcaster's treasures, those kept most securely. There was no recognisable order to their arrangement, after they had been thrown from their shelves and confused. A slim volume with Larloch's name on the cover. Two of the Mordenkainen series. Elminster's Ackologies. Laws governing mages from Calimshan to Waterdeep and the writer's criticism thereof, outdated. Astronomical textbook on the motions of Mystra's Spray in the sky. A treatise on fire spells, that one very ironically scorched so little of it could be read. Enchantments and the Human Psyche, lightly smoked at the corners. Thesis on Nineteen New Uses for Lemon Pepper in Alchemy, burned from page forty-nine onward. Imoen studied the ones in arcane script, her hair tucked into the neckline of her robes and absently tugging on her earlobe with her left hand, her pink magelight bobbing up and down in the centre of the room.

"There's so much," she said. Shar-Teel grunted impatiently. "Well, you try reading through a small library in a couple hours. A spell that... Maybe it's in one of the evocation textbooks if it killed these like that."

Ajantis reached for a book badly damaged that he had placed at the bottom of his piles, expecting that it would contain nothing useful. The contents were handwritten, and had been burned almost as badly as the treatise on fire spells. "Imoen," he said, "look at this one."

"Another year; another lot of cabbage-heads in which to pour the fertiliser of instruction. I do not mean to be so horticultural in my metaphors, and in truth I have hopes that some will turn out more extraordinary than I could expect. Young Pfernia in her interview quite challenged me upon the transference equation for unconventional transmutations; the Formoran boy strikes me as rather keen and clever. And I have yet to conclude my talks with each of our new pupils..." A long, burned-
out section. Imoen paged through it. "Notes on personal experiment: NEVER use hedgehog quills in a summoning incantation!" she read. "If I ever manage to pu..." More scorchings. "This is Ulcaster!" she exclaimed. "Got to be. That's part of the name, signing a spell—"

The ghost, tall and thin. His own notes in this room. I had an awful suspicion, looking once more at that ghoulis figure at the head of the table I'd been trying to ignore, and Imoen shivered. Her fingers flew more swiftly through the work. Some of the tattered fragments that remained were perfectly mundane: "...Strawberry cobbler at lunch dry. Robes have persistent acridine stain, consult laundry." They'd been alive and normal, once, until...

"...Malady of second-year Gis..." Imoen continued to read from the fragments that remained, turning over the pages in order. "Then there's...Heard third-year elementary conjuration, Lady Stele's teaching very... Then, My aractorium growing by eight eggs hatched, components for... This isn't useful! First-year Amad brought to infirmary by s..." She went further into the burned remains. "Again today, another, surely no... In the alchemy corridor post-curf... I fear... Life continues; third-year alchemy curriculum review." Then Imoen continued, flicking desperately through the last pages. These were badly burned, only a few fragments of writing readable upon them. "Another...everything a mage fears...I cannot...now Poull...taken to infirmary...Again, they don't leave the halls...too l...last chance; preservation...no knowledge...to my study and sanctum as the last we can...nothing...better that...not that...desperate t..." The only pages beyond that were blank. Imoen stared at me, her eyes glittering.

"It's wrong," she said; but she slowly stood and walked to the dead man at the head of the table. Grimacing, she reached for his right hand, which was curled into a claw at the corpse's side. She brought it up to rest on the table, bending the elbow bones with a creaking sound. Though the arm itself was burned black, I could see that the skin of the hand was not, leathery and preserved by the closed space of this room. Imoen, gagging, pressed back the clawed fingers with great difficulty; and she pointed to a dark yellow residue on the palm of the hand.

"He cast the fire," she said, her voice shaking; "he cast that last spell when they were all in here and he was desperate enough to want to die rather than it—"

Shar-Teel's eyes searched the room. But there was nothing in here, surely, though behind us the wall still hung open.

"I think the references to the infirmary mean it didn't kill people outright," Imoen said, glancing around herself like a hunted animal. "Gods, what's a mage's worst fear? No magic? But they'd expel you, not drag you to the hospice, and you'd be able to tell them exactly what took it from you. Maybe it's coming here again, maybe it's going to find me here—" She drew ingredients into her hands, standing wildly with spells poised. My own hands waited on the hilts of my weapons.

Viconia sat comfortably in the corner of the room, reading the theological treatise that Ajantis had set aside, tilting the book to catch Imoen's magelight. The History of the Sisters of Light and Darkness, I read from the spine, in black lettering over a grey calfhide. Selune and Shar, then, moon and night; the eternal rivals. "Never follow hope," she said to Imoen, her voice smooth; "believe no promises. The night will take you sooner or later."

"I dreamed," Imoen said, ignoring Viconia, "that I couldn't read magic. You can't read or follow chains of thinking in dreams, that's normal and then you start dreaming of blo—you start dreaming of other things or you wake up. If you lost it—if you couldn't think any more, if you didn't have any words inside you, it could turn you into less than a slug, something that's got a body but not a mind any more—"

Viconia stood, and it seemed small threads of pure black crackled along her skin. Her eyes were very
bright in the shadows of the room. "Forgetfulness," she said. "The Lady of Loss will take those with nothing else left."

*Thin air that takes.*

Imoen's eyes widened. "Oh, hells," she said. "You know it's here. It's come for me. Please," she said, "please help me."

Then she screamed. I'd sword drawn, Shar-Teel too, but there was nothing—nothing around her head. Imoen knelt on the ground, panting, and her face was slack and her mouth hung open. She did nothing.

"Imoen?" I shook her shoulder. She only stared. A soft, incoherent noise came from her mouth. "Imoen!" Invisible—I swept the sword through the air around her—nothing caught on it—

The squirrel was running away, far out of the room. Shar-Teel was ready but had nothing to hit; and *Imoen*—

She was moving her hands. *She's casting—she has to be still in there*—A jet of flame came from her; I moved out of the way and brought down the blade where she'd aimed, she had to know what was doing this to her, but there was still only blank air—The fire had sprung to Imoen's eyes. They glowed the same fierce yellow as her spell. "Imoen!"

There was no reply. She sat there, staring; silently accusing Viconia—

But Shar-Teel was there. "Sharran, talk!" she ordered; Viconia spoke—

"*Athiyk’caluss*—how should I know the term in your common surfer speech?" she cried, fiercely—but her feelings didn't matter at all when Imoen was in danger— "A thing that eats beyond the flesh of a person. The Mistress of the Night would that all use the Shadow Weave, by this book; to lose oneself is a punishment—"

"Against spirits that take," croaked Imoen's voice; but her eyes were yellow and unfocused, her face in loose despair. "The worst fear of a mage is to have no words—"

"Cast and turn it!" Shar-Teel spat. Imoen enclosed her arms around her body, and spoke again. "*But the essence needs no words.*"

Her body itself shifted; a shade of dark red swept along her neck, as if she was trying to transmute her own shape in magic. "*Drowned. Donwannabe*—"

Viconia raised her holy symbol. "Shar," she said, coldly and calmly, "I ask only for the guidance of your will." But nothing happened.

"Imoen," I said—the skin of her throat was raw by the polymorphing she or her body was trying, swept by the red material and inflamed at the edge of its spreading, and I touched it—"you might be the only one who can—" I tried to heal her, and that sorcery escaped from my right hand. She looked at me, then, the yellow in her eyes the colour of a dying sun rather than honest fire, sickening and inhuman.

"*Trying,*" she whispered, the voice from her throat strange and hoarse and strangled, "ways against spirits..." she added, as if quoting another. She raised her hands, and I saw her make signals we knew from each other: *Above my head. Four inches.* "Saw the mirror," she said in words, "—make it not orthogonal to it—I...don't know quite why I'm holding it—"
That made sense. *Saw the mirror*. Sheath blade. Step back three. Draw bow. The red arrow was like the hands that froze people, it had to hurt them—four inches up—

Ajantis rushed forward to stop me, but the arrow flew in the direction of Imoen's head; four inches above her. He fell on me, his armour pinning me to the ground and blocking sight. All that I could see in that short moment was a grey *thing*, shaped like an unformed baby, wrinkled skin with one single gnarled eye and a mouth with no teeth, three mouths that sucked in anything near, curled into the air and then fallen to the ground at the arrow’s piercing—

Imoen rolled aside, stood up, and called fire upon it with a ringing voice until it was dead.

—

"Here's yer stupid books." The *Sisters of Light and Darkness* she pitched through the ghost's transparent head; its own diary through its chest. Both very good shots. "Found it. Got rid of it. Suicidal riffraff."

"...*then knowledge preserved*..." The ghost nodded its translucent head in the direction of Imoen's backpack, which carried six books that it hadn't before. Mine had five. "...*done what I asked...would never have asked...if none of you could have...but two at least with potential*..."

"You risked the very soul of Lady Imoen," Ajantis said, his sword drawn in his right hand; "and you refused to tell her that you died by a honourless act that murdered others. Justice would demand more than that from you, undead thing."

"...*not only her soul*..." the ghost whispered. "...*I feared that...I killed own students against it...thought I saved*..."

"You deserve to be smote down," Ajantis said, unwavering, but the ghost did nothing.

"*Fear not, lad...at the next dawn I teach below other skies*..." I thought that I could see translucent tears upon its cheeks. He was an old, dead man. Once more he looked toward Imoen.

"...*come, student...teach all I can for bargain. You will all be safe here, now*..."

"All right," Imoen said, a grim half-smile on her face. She raised two of her fingers in the Baldurian sign for luck. "Yeah. Teach me everything you've got, beardy."

—

105. A Dagger Discovered

26 Flamerule

Imoen used the spell with a snap of her fingers, the fire quickly spilling from her hands against the hobgoblin, downing it in an instant with a burn across its chest. Then she began chanting; she juggled three almond shells between her hands, and at the moment of effect the casings vanished in a haze of bright pink light. The hobgoblin I fought stepped back, his stance wavering; of the two that Shar-Teel stood between, one fell to his knees as though trying to pray to her, and the other dashed away. There was no change in the one battling Ajantis, but a sling bullet from Faldorn hit heavily in its skull.

The *Burning Earth* went up and through the hobgoblin's throat; the blade seared enough of the flesh
and bone that I could shift it out by cutting left. He fell. Shar-Teel stabbed into the shoulder and
down toward the heart for the one who knelt. Viconia's crossbow pierced the neck of the one that ran
away; lightning gathered around the bolt, and the hobgoblin collapsed. The last of that group.

They attacked us first. We were nearly to Ulgoth's Beard once more. Ajantis' left shoulder was
wounded; I went to him and touched it, healing.

"I lost my gifts as a paladin—" he said (—because you're a murderer, of course—), "and you—"he
snapped—"I have seen you are granted the ability to do this?"

"It's not from a god. Odd; but useful," I said. I remember my great-aunt Cincilla had a second cousin
who was a wizard; just because there's no magic on the Silvershield side doesn't mean...

"Sorcery." His outrage was apparent by the set of his chin and the glare of his eyes.

Imoen came up to us, wiping a hand across her forehead. "What's wrong with that? She's had it a
while. All we can do is say, it's weird. Or we could always send a little note to that Anchev bloke
asking why's-on-earth-does-he-care-about-a-little-healing-charm." I needed to tell her what I'd
wondered about Anchev having actually done, before—

"Far inferior to Shar," Viconia judged. "You bore me, children."

Imoen sighed, her shoulders slumped; she looked tired. "I can do Agannazar's fire spell instantlike
now, no components," she said. "Mebbe in me it's that Dyna taught me that one, one of the first I
learned. But it feels creepy. P'raps I won't use it too often." She brightened slightly. "But Islanne's
confuse-everyone spell, beardy's not such a bad teacher, it hurts my head but I know I'm going to get
better—even better," she said, running a slightly smoked hand through her hair. Ulcaster had taught
her three complicated castings from Islanne's scrolls: the confusion, a second one about swords, and
the one she'd had trouble understanding. "Know how everything's vulnerable to me now, too..."

"Go through the bodies," Shar-Teel called impatiently to me. Hobgoblin bands usually carry a bit of
gold. It's unwise for an adventurer to just leave resources behind, even if one might feel no
immediate need at all...but it's still not particularly pleasant to search a body one just executed. One
had worn a human-made silver necklace as a bracelet, a crudely-sculpted swan ornamenting it.
Impossible to find the original owner, of course. Thirteen gold and almost twice that in silver for the
end of seven creatures.

To Ulgoth's Beard. There was a chance we'd beat the word Clair De'Lain had sent to Therella;
caravans had to be riding again by now, since most of the bandits were gone. It depended on when
the next one had left Nashkel; and the larger ones travel more slowly than smaller ones, and can't
take the same shortcuts as small groups on foot. Eddard took twenty-five days on his first caravan
trip to Athkatla, and only fifteen to return... We regathered our equipment; Shar-Teel patted the hilt
of the dagger that dwarf wanted. An ugly thing, really; I have seen dwarven work that was far better
designed. A grey-coloured metal with dark red—glass, it looked like—set into the handle, just below
the surface. Once supposedly wielded by Arlo Stoneblade (The brave Arlo Stoneblade was Durlag's
man-at-arms...It came to pass that Durlag Trollkiller and Arlo Stoneblade ventured into the bowels
of the Great Ryft and they fought the hideous tanar'ri...); ancestral value. Not an instrument I would
have picked at my nails with.

The sun had set, and the sky was a dark orange by the time the smoke of Ulgoth's Beard chimneys
rose ahead of us. Another night in an inn with a real bed. Imoen sighed in anticipation.

The inn had hardly changed, though of course it had not been particularly long since that last time. It
was quiet on that night, all but one room vacant; the brown-coloured stew they managed was cold
but well-spiced, more heavily so than the last time. I slept easily; Imoen studied her spells, and sank into the bed beside mine. We'd knocked on Therella's door in the village and told her that her son was safe; she'd been happy, no longer twisting her hands in worry and fear, joyful and satisfied. In one thing I helped to do something right, me and Ajantis. The night was cold when we got to bed, but the blankets were warm and clean.

Then it was still dark and cold, and there was a pounding noise.

"Too early for training..." I muttered; in my sleep, Shar-Teel came at me with her sword raised.

The pounding on Shar-Teel's armour—no, it was something stonelike—did not stop. I burrowed further into the pillow.

The pounding continued. The stone door was rather thick. "Waelen! I know you are there!"

"Tired just a bit longer..." Time to go back to sleep. Dreamless, preferably.

"Our ilharess commands," the distant voice spoke. "Come! Or by Shar I shall break this door to a thousand pieces."

I was drifting closer to waking. "Coming..."

Imoen shifted, starting to move; I could hear her indistinct voice. It was still dark.

"Obey orders. Now," Viconia said. I shambled out of the bed; I saw very clearly that night remained. The door slowly opened, Imoen behind me. "What do you want?" I stumbled sleepily out. Viconia's unfastened boots were the first I saw of her. Then at the top of her bare legs a loose tunic began, and above its abbreviated neckline her white hair flowed freely across her face and shoulders. That was stained, the strands held together by a sticky red. In the passage was blood: the smell of death. I came to my senses quickly.

"You see, then." Viconia pointed. It was three, I think, that we could see, three bodies lying some distance from our room, two sets of dead feet and one bloodied torso from the door of the room Viconia and Shar-Teel had shared. Imoen gasped beside me. A thick door—

"She interrogates the hargluk in the dining room. Go while I wake the druid and the fallen one."

Imoen grasped at her mage robes, to wear over her nightdress; I took a long tunic, rushing out and combing my hair with my hands. What all this meant—

The dwarf was seated at the inn's table. Shar-Teel stood over him. Blood soaked her shirt and her breeches were half unlaced; her sword was naked in her right hand, dripping red from its purple sheen. She grasped the dwarf by the collar with her free hand, lifting him close to her face. "Tell it all, male."

"The dagger—" he wheezed. Imoen started forward, as if she was about to make Shar-Teel drop him. "—They call it Soultaker—"

"The dagger—" he wheezed. Imoen started forward, as if she was about to make Shar-Teel drop him. "—They call it Soultaker—"

Imoen stood by her, watching; I waited beside her.

"Taken by friends of yours?" Shar-Teel snarled.

"No—my grandfather—" the dwarf continued.

This must be Hurgan Stoneblade, then; the dwarven grandson.
Durlag slew only the demon's body. He entrapped its soul in an enchanted dagger.

I'd read it all along.

"—Please—" the dwarf said, small and grimacing, but it wasn't for his own life that he pleaded. Faldorn and Ajantis appeared behind Viconia, Faldorn rubbing her eyes and Ajantis bearing Varscona. "They have captured it. Help me take it back to keep safe. Spare the coast from—"

—Unthinkable evil. The demon's gaze that is not a gaze, but a look into your soul—

—

106. Gaze Not A Gaze

Hurgan Stoneblade told speedily of a cult that had threatened him, that he had asked adventurers to find the dagger lest one of this group or worse was able to release the tanar'ri, a cult that worshipped as if it was a god. It had been the demonknight carrying that dagger, before— The innkeeper woke, his building in chaos; four attackers who had come to Shar-Teel's room lay dead, but with invisibility at least one had escaped, with that dagger and nothing else. His cook wasn't there—we were tired and we'd slept through the attack, I didn't know if— But we could only feel awake now.

"—And it's one of Shandalar's tendays at that," Hurgan said. "Takes himself off—Seosamh of Ilmater perhaps, none else we can call against them—"

"That is nothing, male. I'm willing to gut you myself," Shar-Teel said.

"—Aye, and spare me the trouble of dying by the tanar'ri! The bastards'd be holed up—just outside town an old estate, mansion of some Baldur's Gate lord who changed his mind—reckon that's most likely house, Thea at Mistress Mallory's spread gossip of odd lights about the place. Let me get my own hammer, lass, and Hurgan Stoneblade'll show ye his clan's pride—" He met her glare; she dropped him back in the chair.

"Demon—" Imoen whispered desperately, patting her robes and searching for things. "Gaze—"

"—Potion," I said, remembering her solution, "weakening—"

"Accepted, male." Shar-Teel said. "Outside here. No delays. How many?"

"The numbers I don't know. Yet once they unseal that dagger—" Hurgan raced to the door. "At least a score, less the ones ye say—"

"Get armed," Shar-Teel ordered; "they've invisibility—"

"I can use nature's power to sense footsteps," Faldorn said, dressed only in her leather tunic.

"Then fetch your weapons—" Shar-Teel turned on her heel.

"If they do—I'll give you the potion," Imoen said, pale and determined in her pink nightdress. "Enough for three doses, gazes. You, 'Jantis, Skie. I'll mirror image myself. Faldorn and Vic—well, you've got spells. Don't let it look at you! But I need... I'll catch up. I know the casting that weakens now, I've got to know it and how to beat it, give me time—"

Maybe we'll stop them before that. "Yes," I said. "Look at the spell. If Islanne did it, then we know
Islanne's was the casting that weakened, Durlag's the blow that won. If Shar-Teel was strong as Durlag...

And the souls of Grael's band were the souls that lost.

"You made me think of how," Imoen said, and suddenly her arms were around my neck. "It'll be all right—"

I drew on the leather armour more quickly than ever before in our room; seized the Burning Earth, bow, shortsword. A sheaf of ice arrows. Two vials of potion. Lockpicks already tucked into the belt, just in case. Coil of rope. Running back down; finding Shar-Teel and the others joining with Hurgan and a yellow warhammer he held, chainmail over his clothing.

The old estate was east of the town, past a long segment of muddy and unplowed ground. We ran across it. Viconia managed to point to footprints in the dark, that someone had also crossed of late and the cultists—

A wide dark house, dilapidated; but there was a flash of something in one of the windows, perhaps a flickering candle—

No time for subtlety. Faldorn's wolf ran forward. Viconia looked down at the ground, and spoke: "Bones are buried here. I will raise undead—"

Then suddenly I felt her slap my face; my ears rung with it.

"It was your idea of that tower, rivvil," Viconia hissed. "I tell you so that you will know: if we battle a tanar'ri and somehow live through it, I am going to kill you. I will flay the skin from your body and rub the harshest rock salt I can find into each and every one of your wounds. I will purchase a fortune's worth of your surface lemons simply so that I can pour the juice over your bleeding flesh. I will hang you upside down by your toenails above a pit of boiling acid until your scalp sloughs away in small and painful gibbets of rotting flesh. I will remove your fingernails one by one with a rusted surfacer's dining implement. I will flay you again and feed you, piece by tiny piece, to flesh-eating beetles that crawl across your body into each crack and orifice, each part of your body that you consider most sacred. I will have it last for two months at least, and boil you in oil if you do not die prematurely. Then I will raise you from the dead and begin again until I tire of it, and when I tire of it I will feed your bones to umber hulks."

She could have spoken to Ajantis as well, or Shar-Teel, who'd taken Hurgan's request, I thought. She made her chant to Shar swiftly. Two boned shapes rose from the earth, darker than the night, hunched and trembling as they walked at her command.

"Keep them behind in case," I said, "I wouldn't think skeletons could be hurt by gazes that turn into undead..."

There was a doorguard. Robed like the bodies in Shar-Teel's room in the inn; guilty. I wore the right ring for the night: drew the bow, nocked the arrow, and the shot went to its target. She still had time to give a gurgling cry, slumping down and trying to pour a potion over her throat before the second arrow and the wolf upon her. Shar-Teel stepped up to the door and broke it to force our way in; they ought to have expected we would find them.

They met us with spells and blows. They chanted, priests and mages. Shar-Teel and Ajantis rushed forward to cut into their lines, Faldorn's wolf nipping at the casters' knees. The entryway of the old
building was small but firmly built in stone; no room to aim a bow. In front of Viconia and Faldorn, I tried to keep them away.

Hurgan Stoneblade seemed everywhere at once. That golden warhammer of his whirled through the air like a mad dervish's pattern, his battlecry loud and for his dwarven family, striking into the knees of the humans who challenged him.

Two before me—bladesmen, one male and one female, lightly armoured below their robes and fast. Their eyes seemed to glitter with something; they could have been drugged, or lost in contemplation of what they worshipped—

I stepped between them; both blades tried to stab forward, and I ducked down out of the way. They didn't impale each other as they would have for a better rogue, perhaps; but they turned and I was still low enough to stab upward, into the man's groin—protected, of course, but the Burning Earth was strong enough to shear past that—

There would be nothing else but this. The man was on the tiled floor; the woman lashed out with her shield first, following with a thrust by her sword. The shorter blade, Shar-Teel says, is usually the one supposed to be used for blocking. Twist to push it to the right, just past my shoulder; then to her right flank with my left hand— She didn't cry out when the burning longsword ran down her side. Faldorn brought up her club on the woman's skull, and looked grimly pleased when she collapsed. You could see grey and red matter on the club... Then a greatsword swept toward me.

An armoured man, a knight, neared me in the melee. I heard Viconia cry out as a mage's missiles hit her skin. Over the man's plate was a symbol of—of red eyes above complicated black knots, something that confused in the midst of darkness. Too strong to turn aside properly. He was fast as Shar-Teel. You went for the armour's joints; you tried to speed faster than the opponent, use lighter momentum to get around and under their strikes. Like her he used a two-handed blade. Feint right-handed, force him to use that blade in a left parry; then thrust with the other at as unexpected angle as possible. The armour was connected by chainmail at the crook of his elbow; the burning longsword melted some of the links and strands. I'd expected him to cry out in pain, but instead he ignored it, pressing his attack. He panted; his eyes were unfocused as if he was drugged. His long reach stabbed above my shoulder.

Faldorn threw her grass seeds, calling Silvanus' name. The roots rose around the stone tiles of the floor. I knew to jump back to avoid them; the knight I fought stumbled when they wrapped around his feet, and that was an opening. A black spot between cuirass and fauld at his waist; the tip of the Burning Earth for that precise position, body angled to get out of the way of his greatsword long enough. There was the smell of burning flesh, the armour melted. It had to have been a gut wound, but he was still moving. I stepped back; pass to the right but I couldn't let him near Faldorn. Another figure was near in all the confusion a woman raising a heavy mace, her face bloodstained and sweaty.

Black smoke erupted across our faces. I heard a scream, perhaps an enemy caster. It stung our eyes; night vision couldn't help. And the Burning Earth—

A rogue ought to be able to hear properly, move properly. The knight attacked from the path of the fiery sword; I tried to parry, deflect, bend with his strength because I couldn't have taken him head-on. But in fact he was weakening—not as strong as he should have been, and then in all the smoke I heard him clank to his knees. The longsword, quickly, down through the back of his neck because there was that other coming after us. Faldorn shouted. I caught a slight gleam of armour; I stabbed with both blades, one at gorget-height and the other at waist. Then Viconia had finished shrieking some words in her language, and the black smoke died. I stood over the woman bleeding badly;
Faldorn was on her knees but getting up, a hand raised to her head and chanting, the blue of healing gathering around her. I finished the task of killing the fallen cultist; not quite murder, the circumstances obviously—

Hurgan made an armoured priest fall, his golden hammer then brought down to crush a cultist skull. Shar-Teel broke a robed woman, her skin covered in what looked like grey stone, and turned to the next. The cultists were falling; we might have been in time after all. Viconia fired her crossbow high and hit an armoured figure in the eye. Shar-Teel was quick, Hurgan was unstoppable, Ajantis was cautious but he was against the wall, using it to help shield him while Varscona cut those who dared come near. I was still in front of Faldorn and Viconia, letting them bring down the enemies from a distance. Then there was a path cleared for us to go forward. The bleeding bodies lay still; Shar-Teel's armour was draped by blood and some...purple-red thing, around her left hand as if she'd squeezed someone's insides out by her gauntlet. Hurgan's beard was dark crimson, his mail no longer clean.

But we could hear chanting. The floor seemed to shake with it. They were summoning, I thought; it had to be some kind of magic, even I could feel it and Faldorn and Viconia were wide-eyed and uneasy, as frightened as we had to be. Shar-Teel saw it, a place on the floor that opened; Viconia came running.

"Trapdoor," Shar-Teel said; "down here—"

"Tanar'ri," Viconia panted, "there is ritual I practised with the Spider Queen—prepare advantageous position, sargtisniss—simple, the Mistress of the Night allows it also, the power not in the ritual but the caster, spread the influence far enough and it shall never come—"

She sprinkled silver dust in a wide circle about the floor, calling to Shar. "For a particular priesthood ceremony of the Underdark we strongest priestesses lie with a powerful demon, you see, rivvil. We know of the rituals that restrain the creatures from doing otherwise than intended..."

Imoen's face came before me at that moment, screwing up the freckles on her forehead and sticking out her tongue. She'd be saying—Eww, Vic, aren't demons all...y'know, all spiked and everything? Ew! But Viconia finished her spell, hastily. I was just behind Shar-Teel, my hands on my bow. It was a stone room one saw down there below an off-angled staircase, very dark. The first thing that human eyes were drawn toward was a red circle across the ground. It did not glow, and so it should not have risen out of the dark as it did; and yet it was there as the centre of it all. Patterns lined its edge that drew a person into a nightmare where nothing was the true shape, twists in and on itself that were horrors all the more because they were nothing but abstract things that should never exist. Lines were either straight or curved, not both at the same time in the same place, not on any plane where geometry was true and up and down existed. The smell was old blood: rotting things, and something I could not know that lay above it.

But there were also eight people at the edge of this circle, and their bodies were surrounded by crackling lightning. Red-and-black robes whipped in a wind I could not feel; and the woman closest to us held high aloft the dagger from Durlag’s tower.

I already had the first arrow in my bow, and loosed it. It touched her the moment before Shar-Teel's sword met her body. Her chant abruptly stopped; and yet she began to laugh. From behind us there was a crash in the upper room, something happening there—I brought another arrow to bowstring, had to stop this—

The chanting woman was falling, was bleeding. In front of her was Shar-Teel, her motion suddenly stilled, lightning dancing across her platemail, her hair crackling around her face, in pain, of course. Ajantis charged past her. He stabbed Varscona forward into the heart of the second chanter; the
priest froze and fell back. On the opposite side of the circle, the second arrow went through a woman's neck: enchantment enough to pierce through their protections. Viconia stood behind. Her armour glittered a silvery blue from the ritual she had cast against demons. Faldorn said something harsh; a sling bullet of hers failed. Hurgan Stoneblade raced beside Ajantis. I could still hear the voices chanting, though it was hard to see lips moving in the darkness, in the flashing light. A third arrow loosed.

A male voice, a tenor lower than Garrick, behind us. "In the name of the One who Endures. For the kindness of the Crying One! For the protection of the lives of Ulgoth's Beard! Ilmater preserve us!"

We'd an ally: I saw blue light grow around us, past Viconia and into the room. Stronger than her; a gentle and peaceful light, even to those like me. Let no demon do harm. A fourth arrow's feathers were in my fingers, the motion as fast as I could make it. I knew Imoen's footsteps when I heard them, as well, and of course she knew all the spells. I dare to, I do hope—

We heard the woman on the ground, speaking. She was bleeding. Red lines like snakes crawled down the hand that held the dagger, rivulets and channels of what Shar-Teel had done to her. She would die. The lines and trails of blood wound down her bare arm, over her pale wrist, to the edge of the hand that held the dagger. I did not quite notice all of this at the time, but her words and her look were such that cannot be laid easily aside in memory.

"It...completes," she said, and in her face was a look of unforgettable ecstasy that I could never have seen before; not on the faces of those dosed with Black Lotus to bliss at Nashkel fair, no bard's song of joy and no lover's meeting. Afterwards I could not remember shape or colour of her eyes, but knew only that they were alight and pure as a comet's white trail in the sky, as it looks to a human. Her skin glowed with sweated exhaustion. "You have...shown what was needed. Aec'Letec awakes."

I saw the blinding smile on her features and I saw her die at the moment that the blood from her mortal wound touched the dagger's hilt. The arrow fell softly from my hand.

You could not look directly. The red circle...was no more. A shape, sulphur and brimstone stench as the pit Kirinhale had disappeared to, a large—entity, large thing—all black and red and wings. Still figures around it, a few living. The chanting was silent. The living chanters were boneless; in an instant they collapsed to the stone as bags of flesh. The being grew by their deaths. Ajantis had stumbled back, his sword arm limp. Hurgan Stoneblade stared gap-mouthed. Shar-Teel was moving again at last and she did something with her sword; it flashed forward and purple even if it was small, she was small compared to that aberrant thing.

Viconia was the first to speak; her voice was a shriek. "Retreat, abbil! Retreat, all!"

There were blue protections, suffusing the ceiling, lowering down over that cellar. We obeyed. Something howled and roared—boiling breath on our heels, acidic on skin—the trapdoor slamming down. A desperate, panting pause. It hit below our feet. The floor shook.

The Ilmatari prayed. "Let no harm come. Let the hellbeast be returned to its planes. Let none suffer." He wore a grey and sweat-stained sleep-robe; he was middle-aged and slightly overweight, breathing harshly. Imoen stood beside him, her robe over her nightgown, supplies and scrolls and blue ceramic flasks in her hands. "The—the holy water," he said to her; she took the flasks and spilt the water on the ground, above the trapdoor, across the floors. The Ilmatari kept his prayer and Viconia shuddered. I reached for the potion Imoen had given me; drunk down my share quickly, while the stone floor shrieked and the thing moved below. Shar-Teel did the same; Ajantis bent over Faldorn
"Take it," he ordered her. "I know—responsibility—it is important, and you are powerful—"

"Then if I am powerful I don't—" she said with scorn.

"There's no time," Ajantis said, and pressed the potion to Faldorn's hand and in his next movement patted the head of the squirrel on Faldorn's back, his gauntlet surprisingly gentle over it, as if in farewell. He stood on Shar-Teel's right before the shaking trapdoor with Varscona unsheathed and the simple buckler upon his left forearm, as if that alone would fend off a tanar'ri.

_The demon's gaze that is not a gaze, but a look into your soul._ The potion made your eyes mirrors, made your body mirrors, silver polish and fresh water and unshattered glass. I wished I'd thought to give mine to Hurgan. In the darkness there had been two black eyes, or a hundred black eyes, eyes in eyes on eyes like the million facets of a spider, layers of eyes and a face that was not a face and thorns, limbs, razor wings that beat... The priest was on his knees; Imoen brought her own mirrors, the images of her that danced around her true self, scrolls and spell ingredients readied in each pair of hands. Ice arrows I brought to my bow. _I won't betray you, Imoen;_ she, friends, the demon came and protecting them was the reason.

The shaking diminished, a little. The Ilmatari was on his knees, sweating; Viconia glanced contemptuously down at him.

"Weak male deity," she spat. "Do not gain complacence," Shar-Teel and Hurgan and Ajantis stayed by their post at the trapdoor; the holy water on the floor had seemed to darken and tarnish on the ground, the blue light of the prayers stained by red. Imoen had poured down more water to replace it; the last flask emptied.

The Ilmatari shook his head. "Ilmater helps all who hurt," he said gently to her. She scowled again. "Within Underdark, I would show you..."

Imoen began to chant a spell; "Just in case," she said. I felt her transmutation rush through me, speeding reflexes, making foes seem to move more slowly, spreading to Shar-Teel and Ajantis and all of us. But I dared to think that maybe the tanar'ri had gone. Conjurations had a duration of time, I knew that much, and the trembling below our feet had continued to weaken after all.

Then the outer doors opened. Debris, flying splinters, flew past; I half-turned, the explosion almost slow. Dodge and move as if it were blades instead of flying swords; take a splinter to the shoulder instead of a brick through the neck, dance away from it.

It rose before us. Coated by black earth. Dug out and above instead of by the trapdoor, and it was luck that it attacked us and not the town... The eyes slid past me. Mirrored. Imoen was behind me, mirror image on mirror image. Faldorn and Viconia were close to it, and both were screaming, coated by dust and splinters.

Ajantis was first there; the spell gave him speed. He barrelled through Faldorn and Viconia; pushed them out of the way, shielded them with his whole body.

_They fought the hideous tanar'ri Aec'Letec..._

It had scales, and hornlike polish upon parts of its mass. It moved too quickly for its weight, too lightly and yet strong enough to tear anything. It had limbs and wings and talons, uncountable. Razor-sharp. Parts of it as if several womb-formed wyverns were conjoined into a mess of flesh bulky as a slime. Parts of it dead salmon black eyes. To look at all of it at once was impossible.

_A demon._
The potion's protection didn't last an eternity. I ran to the back of the room; and strung the bow for the first shot. Hurgan and Shar-Teel went forward, and I swear that Shar-Teel was smiling. The priest was beside me, flat on his back, knocked away. His lips moved and his prayers continued in whispers.

"Shar," Viconia screamed, "grant your servant sanctuary!" She, not far from the demon, melted into inky darkness; no longer in view. I sent the first arrow above Ajantis' head. It was a large target.

Imoen, dusty and wounded in all of her images, began to cast.

Faldorn's wolf leaped up and upon the tanar’ri. It bit; then a wing and two limbs moved. The demon sunk talons deeply into the wolf, slipped what might have been black teeth into its neck as if to consume it. The demon flung the scraps of fur to the ground; they melted away from view. Second arrow hit.

"Your kind bleeds," Shar-Teel said, gloating, the sound of her voice nothing short of satisfied, and she was faster than the limbs could move. The blood of the demon burned and boiled, like molten iron, the stench of sulphur and brimstone. The tanar’ri struck, but the undead Viconia had raised came to fight. Hurgan Stoneblade called the name of his clan and his ancestor, and the golden hammer whirled and hit. None of it slowed or stopped the demon. It crushed the first of Viconia's skeletons with one swipe of a limb.

The Ilmatari whispered his prayers, and the demon's face—parts of the demon's face—looked at him. He grew pale; the vast black shape surged forward, escaping Shar-Teel and the dwarf; the razor-sharp wings bent in a way wings weren't supposed to, forward and over its black eyes, edges like many swords crossing over. Imoen flung herself aside, though her voice did not falter for one moment. I grabbed at the priest's shoulder, trying to drag him—

"Don't do that, young lady! Hold and wait..." He kept his prayers to his god; I rolled aside, under the buffet of that—of that motion. But his pleadings were a pitiful flicker in the face of that, the tanar'ri with the gaze that was not a gaze, they say Ilmater is a favoured target of demons—

Faldorn released her cry to Silvanus, and the ground moved. I saw stalagmites rise from the ground crafted from the tiles. Sharp and spiked; they arrested the demon in its motion, rising up and under and piercing that dark flesh, sparing the priest. Ajantis shouted:

"Behind it, Faldorn! Let it not..."

Faldorn grimly nodded, and the stone rose at her command to block the door. The demon was sealed. It had heard Ajantis' cry, and gazed upon him. He shouted; he was forced to stand still, transfixed by the glare. But the grip of his right hand was still upon Varscona; and then Imoen finally finished her spell. Pale yellow light broke from her fingers in a narrowed beam and entered the demon's body. Its skin glowed softly, as if what she had done laid separation across its scales, the rough and distorted coverings of its body; as if parts of it were inside out, black things beat near to the wings... The demon paused, eyeing her. A mirror image blinked out as easily as a candleflame.

Another arrow to it.

"—Can never allow a demon to harm—!" Ajantis broke from that thrall, and thrust Varscona forward and deep into Aec'Letece's scales, Hurgan Stoneblade hitting low. The demon's roar was rusty nails flying through the air. It snapped at them. Claws hit Ajantis' armour, flinging him back. Shar-Teel went forward in his place.

Imoen was mouthing something. The sounds drowned it out, but One more! her hands gestured, and she began to repeat the casting movements. Viconia's skeletons kept lurching at Aec'Letece, and because they were already dead it couldn't gaze at them, could only rip them apart. At his belt Ajantis
grasped a small flask and brought it to his face, lying where he was. He stood again; then he marched
toward it, drew claws away from Hurgan and Shar-Teel. And he screamed. I knew not what he saw.

"—Our souls feed the beast!" Ajantis turned his head; his eyes were dark as if he had been punched
around them. Then he spoke again, and his voice was more like his own: it was as sorrowful as that
moment beneath the Cloakwood mine, though in the time since then his voice had deepened. "Then
there is nothing more you can do to me, demon. It is a small price for your own death."

Ajantis threw himself to it, atop it, and I swear that for that moment he was even faster than Shar-
Teel. Varscona's cold blade, light as a silver ribbon in the air, cut down and through. There were—
giblets—of black flesh, some still jerking and moving, flung from Aec'Letec's thrashing body, and
the many eyes looked to Ajantis and Ajantis alone. Shar-Teel hacked at a limb, the dwarf with her:
and still she had that smile.

Then the razorblade wing shot out; Faldorn fell to the ground, a cut deep in her chest. Ajantis
repeated a battlecry—*For Helm*, as if he had forgotten for the moment—his voice desperate. I saw
the priest start to run to Faldorn, but then dark shadows spun and took form: Viconia instead made
her calls for Shar with her hands placed against Faldorn's blood. The sweating priest nodded.

Imoen's second spell took, and I had aimed ice arrows into that wing; the demon's body convulsed.
She nodded, and signalled with her hands, speaking with her voice; *Now*! And then: *It makes 'em
vulnerable to magic—and there's spells going right into that corner!*

The Ilmatari caught the understanding. He raised his hands, and blue seared from them. I saw the
demon shaking, even as I aimed the red arrow so that it would not miss. It flew from the bow, the
thought of hurting the tanar'ri within my mind; and something returned even as the arrow bit into its
mark. Scrapes and scratches closed over my body, a cold feeling like the red hands. The demon
healed me by that shot—

It was a bad thing to do. But I wasn't a demon, and we had to stop it. Imoen had a glowing pink-
orange orb between her hands, and threw. It burst against the demon's scales and seemed to do
nothing, but she had a second to her fingertips; and as I was down to five arrows, a third orb came
from her, and her smile almost echoed Shar-Teel's.

Viconia held up crossbow bolts, pronouncing words upon them; and aimed carefully in her place
beside Faldorn. Together Shar-Teel and Hurgan separated the limb they attacked, and then Shar-Teel
drove her weapon deep into the bleeding flesh while the dwarf's hammer hit down upon a wing,
weakened and falling to his height. Ajantis was still above, holding the demon's gaze, the cold sword
running across eyes while the darkness at his own eyes did not abate—

Imoen's fourth orb hit, and again no effect was obvious. Her hands spared the time to speak briefly:
*One more. Lady Luck, right?* they said, and biting her lip she wove what she could.

The sphere was bright pink and orange in the air, and flew like an arrow. Then it hit; and between
two red scales it appeared to pierce through, somehow melting into what lay below. It dissolved, and
yet seemed to spread into the demon's body. The demon stopped.

Aec'Letec froze in place, and moved no more.

"Yeah—!" Imoen whistled, screamed. She'd done it: defeated a tanar'ri. Made it *vulnerable*, cast
exactly the right spells...

There was no time. The dagger was cracked; on Hurgan's yell we cut not merely the one slice of
Durlag's that slew it before but many cuts, shearing and chopping. It surely could not rise again if it
was in sufficient pieces...

All of us were forward, swarming it. There was no chance to contemplate any we did, only to cut to try to save Ulgoth's Beard from its power. For a creature that came from fiery hells, the Burning Earth could cut through it oddly well...as if the fire within it were not quite elemental fire, and likewise distinct to the fires of the Abyss. Hurgan Stoneblade slammed his hammer into scales, shattering obsidian-like jagged bones in each furious blow. The demon's eyes no longer had power to gaze. Shar-Teel cut out something like a heart from the body.

And then at some point the frozen tanar'ri was gone. Black stains of brimstone remained on the tiles, as if the places Aec'Letec had fallen were the remains of a common house fire. A sooty black, like the ghost of dark smoke. Shar-Teel stuck the end of her blade between the tiles on the ground, and leaned heavily upon its hilt. I saw Ajantis set down Varscona away from himself, and carefully lower his shield. Our eyes met. I had seen much the same in the face of the ghoul Grael: the hero whose soul was lost.

—

107. Tossings and Turnings

27 Flamerule

Ajantis stripped his greaves from his shins, first; both smoke-stained, the left twisted and bent. Then cuisses, left and right thighs. His armoured gauntlets from his hands, then vambraces from forearms, jointed couters across his elbows, pauldrons over his shoulders. The cuirass on his chest and back, damaged from the battle. The gorget at his neck, and then the mail shirt he wore below his plate. He pulled the mail over his helm, and then the thick quilted wool he wore below that. He left his open-faced helm until last, laid it carefully atop his other arms, and stood in only tunic and breeches, unarmed and unprotected. Helm's gauntlet hung on a silver chain around his neck; he clasped it tightly in his right hand, and then removed that as well. He looked first at the Ilmatari, who shook his head.

"The gods are—merciful," the priest said. "The Watcher must know already of your sacrifice. I can give you Ilmater's Comfort."

"Then do it quickly," Ajantis said. It was so easy to see—signs, perhaps; glances at his body where you wondered how much he was already rotting like Grael, where his wounds had blackened edges and something else lived behind his eyes. "The—abomination is dead now," he said. "And that... It was worth this; it would have been worth far more than this." He groaned, leaning back against the wall. The middle-aged Ilmatari touched first his forehead, gently; then right shoulder, left shoulder, and lastly above the heart.

The priest closed his eyes briefly, seeking prayer to his god. "Ilmater grants succour to all suffering. Your cause was right. You have suffered pain for the sake of others. Ilmater's comfort and blessing lie upon you." It was quick, and I thought the priest had given it in a deliberate hurry, as if afraid what might spring from Ajantis' body and seek to devour him in the same endless hunger as Grael. He stepped back, still sweating from his castings against the demon. Viconia was not powerful enough to overcome this.

Ajantis looked again at us, his face hollowed. "I start to hunger," he said; "please, quickly, whilst I can still claim to have a soul, before I become a danger to others once more. Aquerna..." The squirrel looked up at him, and it seemed they passed a silent farewell between her small bright face and his
dark eyes. "Tell my family that I died a human."

He didn't look at any of us in particular; but I offered. "An arrow," I said; for he wore no armour, and an arrow at close range can be a speedy kill. Shar-Teel flung a brief nod. He waited, raising his head deliberately, forcing himself to still as a target. To Grael was given a cruel charity; this, perhaps less cruel. Imoen turned away, her face in her hands, already weeping for him. Clear sight was needed. I drew the bow's string back and taut.

I would have released if Faldorn hadn't run in front of the bow.

"I've decided," she said to Ajantis, "you're alive, but your soul would die because you helped me, and so you must come with me now."

A grove of old trees stood not far from the deserted mansion. We watched from a distance; I kept the bow strung, in case it was needed. Faldorn risked her life. She stood him next to the widest and thickest of the trees, its leaves dark green and plentiful and its trunk brown and healthy; and she bent down to the earth and scraped dirt between her fingers. A brown stripe painted across Ajantis' forehead; a piece of tree-root dug up and fastened to his neck with her spit; even leaves to hold in his hands. She drew druidic runes of a circle of overturned dirt around both of them with a fallen branch, and touched both of them with grass she put back in the earth. Then she chanted, the rhythm of her words much like the dispelling she had invoked against the fiery blades of the dark warriors guarding Durlag's towers. Both her hands were raised, close to his tunic but not touching him, and she stared at both him and the tree's wide trunk behind them.

The squirrel bit at her own claws. "The young woman is quite gifted by her beliefs," Aquerna said, "If any divine caster within reasonable distance were strong enough to save the boy I should certainly say it was her..." The Ilmatari gave no sign, but Viconia one of her bitter glares. Aquerna simply ignored her. "What the girl appears to be doing is not quite banishing, but a simpler ritual of transference..."

I saw a pale blaze gather around Faldorn's hands, and then she shoved forward as if she wanted to topple Ajantis down. But she made no contact: the light she held forced itself forward and through him. Then behind his back the brightness seemed to erupt from him, mixed with something black and shapeless and horrible, flying out through the air as if another demon sought to feast upon the town: and then the tree caught it.

Faldorn's stick-drawn circle flashed white and green across its scratchings in the dirt. Her hair blew by no wind I could feel; leaves rushed through and about it in spirals blown by clear air. Green chased both of the figures that stood there, Ajantis' broad body and Faldorn's shorter height. Then I looked again at the tree behind. The trunk was blackened and broken and bent; the leaves withered and dark all at once; the wood was crumbling and rotten and ready to fall.

Faldorn's voice sounded heavy with misery. "The tree is dead. The Oak Father's teaching is that one life is only as valuable as any other." Ajantis watched her; he was free, and his body slumped in relief. I think that he might have cried. "You and the others have become pack, I start to believe," she said. She raised a hand, the nails suddenly sharpened into a wolf's claw; and she scraped it across Ajantis' shoulder, as if a declaration of blood-brotherhood, touching him. "I could not have allowed otherwise even if you are all arrogant defilers of Nature. As well, it was very stupid of you to give your remedy to me anyway and you're probably the reason why Nature only promotes the survival of the fittest. Now excuse me while I mourn this tree you killed and bury it."

The dawn had come. Pale rose and bold yellow approached the east, the sky a light clear blue that promised a calm day, four small cumulus clouds high and fluffy in the air. We went back to the inn, because after all there wasn't much else to do. The Ilmatari went within his temple; Hurgan
Stoneblade came with us, resting on the wide benches at the long table. We were very tired.

"Ye saved the Sword Coast from a demon, friends," he said. He looked up at Shar-Teel. "I'd be proud to fight beside ye and your group at any time, lass." Then he unhooked the golden warhammer from his belt, and handed it to her; "Th' payment I promised: weapon of my ancestors. Ye've more than earned it."

"We did," Shar-Teel said, without a trace of humour, and threw it across to Viconia. Viconia took it and gave a few graceful swings into the air, for practice. She nodded, and then placed it in the holding straps behind her back; and for some reason did not then make any remarks on how her male duergar slaves back in the Underdark could have made a weapon three times as good in half the time and with only four times as much whipping.

"Heroes of Ulgoth's Beard," Hurgan said.

"Never got to kill a tanar'ri before," Shar-Teel replied, that scary smile on her face, rubbing her steel wool across her sword's blade to cleanse it from black blood.

"Nabassu," Viconia corrected; and I couldn't help wondering if those were the kind that drow...did things with; and thought I'd gossip about it with Imoen later and shock her about spikes. She sat next to me, her components and spellbook by her; and she was the one who'd defeated it.

"You were amazing, Imoen," I said; under the table we'd linked arms like sisters.

"I know," she said, posing dramatically and confidently, flinging a quick smile. "Told you it'd be all right, after all." Ajantis was alive and himself; he fed Aquerna with nuts he'd somehow procured, alive and ensouled, his symbol of Helm around his neck once more. No bright light had come down to proclaim him a paladin again, yet—but he'd fought a demon, he was trying...

We'd wanted to be quiet in the inn, perhaps to go to bed once more; drinking healing potions and relaxed. But Hurgan had told people, it seemed. Therella was one of the first to come to greet us once more; and then others from the village, Dushai and Ike Vendar and Calahan and Mistress Mallory. We rested out across that day and the next, lying in bed and coming down to the inn only for meals; and early in the afternoon of that second day a man called Mendas came with a reward that, to me, seemed greater than anything that anyone could have ever offered us.

We found Dalton. We saved the Sword Coast from a demon. Maybe at last it's all right to deserve something, to do something that we want to do—

"Sea-charts and sailors I do have," the burly, hairy scholar explained to us—his accent wasn't Waterdhavian, so although he'd studied there I supposed he'd come from elsewhere. "But last fighters did fail to travel on expedition. A strong group I want, to find lost papers of founder Balduran before merchants plunder and think valueless. Pay in advance, for knowledge is worth far above gold. Could heroes of Ulgoth's Beard depart very shortly, for ship is ready and provisioned?"

It took time to argue Shar-Teel into it, but after all a voyage to strange places probably has strange things to kill; and to Ajantis it sounded a noble enough mission for scholarship. What could be better for us than this? I'm a Baldurian historian and I've seen other samples of writing from Balduran, and I know the old-fashioned version of Common he spoke; and we're all seasoned adventurers who can fight sirines and sea-trolls and the like to get to his papers. (Probably. Somewhat seasoned. Shar-Teel's seasoned. Viconia's old.) It's as if... I'm not very devout in prayers, but as if someone approves of some of the more recent things we have done, and seeks to give a blessing. This is the perfect quest.
The ship departs on the next tide once we are ready. Imoen and I clinked wineglasses together; To Adventure.

In the city, Edwin laid the heavy robes about his frame.

108. Ship's Druid

29 Flamerule

Viconia vomited noisily, and thoroughly, over the side of the cutter that bore the recent-painted name of Discovery. We were sailing through endless blue, under kind skies, the sort of merchant adventure that any child of Baldur's Gate can imagine. Imoen was fast to start to climb the rigging and look out from the crow's nest. She and I had both talked to the crew and thought them rather nice men, though none of them know much about Mendas, or where that accent comes from. You'd think in a city as cosmopolitan as Baldur's Gate one ought to recognise it by now; hints of the vowel pronunciation in Old Chondathan, perhaps, if Mendas had learned that language before he learned Common. Founder's Common was based more closely on Old Chondathan than is the language we speak today, the tongue Balduran spoke and wrote in.

"Water everywhere," Viconia spat, "niar rivel'klar; you surfacers are uncivilized, undisciplined—in the caves in the black rivers of home, our mighty ozamen vessels sailed but not like this; it was between black crags on either side, treacherous reefs that extended from the deep ground; none of this ridiculous open below sunlight..." She retched again. She'd been willing to extend her knowledge of the surface world, until we'd left the sight of shore. Angrily she barked an order to Faldorn, who summoned fresh water from the air to clean her face.

Shar-Teel stood with us on the aftdeck, in loose shirt and trews, though she wore her sword behind her back. There were pirates in the Trackless Sea, still; for that reason Mendas had been interested in adventurers who could cast spells, and Imoen had talked to the men about what a ship's mage ought to be doing. For a ship's druid, Faldorn so far liked to lean over the deck and stare into the waves below the hull, watching the sea as if it was to her as a wizard's scroll to Imoen, sometimes whispering to it.

"I have done little sailing before," Ajantis said, stepping to the railings, the sea air blowing through his fair hair. "But 'tis...peaceful, here. I would see purpose in it." Aquerna was below, remaining in his cabin where she could not see the waves; like Viconia she proclaimed a distaste for it, but announced that since she was no ordinary squirrel she would become accustomed. Like Liia Jannath's monkey, I suppose; they're from the jungles, although they're more often pets for sailors than squirrels.

"Just you wait until there's a storm," I said. In truth my own history of ships was but short voyages, albeit frequently enough, and those with other nobles rather than freely, like this; but I'd seen bad weather and the noble barque tossing and turning on winds and heavy, fresh rain soaking wooden decks. I found an odd kind of exultation in it, putting on an old coat to protect my clothing, one of few to dare the decks above. A storm can be exciting, with a strange beauty all its own. When grey clouds toss and turn they have vitality and a life that belongs to them and them alone, while a blue sky is only empty; and rain can revive even while it pelts down hard. An adventure like sneaking away from home to see more of the city, perhaps.
"I hope there will not be, for the trouble it would bring upon the good men of the crew," Ajantis said. I thought that he could be ponderous like that, stiff and formal because he preferred to understand the world using the rules of his order. His symbol of Helm was above his tunic, the silver chain bright in the sunlight and the eye within the gauntlet watching. "I still feel nothing in my prayers," he said to me. "No reassurance; no knowledge. Perhaps it would have been better, otherwise—for the cause of destroying a demon bent on causing harm—and yet in this world I wish to live." 

"You have friends," I replied. "I'm...well, I'm really sorry that I volunteered to kill you but, after the debt we both owe... I don't think that I wanted to be killed myself, even in that time just after the Cloakwood. "Look after yourself, Ajantis, we care about you. It's a beautiful day." That was trite, of course. But I thought that perhaps Ajantis could see better when he was not seeing evil everywhere. Or perhaps he was only blind. 

"The priest of Ilmater instructed me that life is suffering." Ajantis' hands slid along and around the deck's edge, clutching it almost as he might take up a quarterstaff. "But also that there is mercy, and there is hope... Seosamh told me that I ought to try to do good, simply because it is." He wasn't looking at me, but instead wide out to sea. "A wise man," I said. Above in the unclouded sky, a wide-winged seabird wheeled and turned in a flash of graceful white. Then I saw it swoop down to the surface of the waves, and retreat with a grey fish that flopped and struggled in its beak. It spiralled away on the winds with its prey. 

"I was quite ashamed that Shar-Teel was so discourteous to him," Ajantis said, drawing me back to the conversation. "She was leaving the temple at the time that I came to it..."

She was behind us. "A useless priest of an even more useless male god. He needed reminding of his place."

How very like her to be bitter about the way the priest had helped us. Thank Sune Ajantis had met him afterwards and tried to sort things out. There'd been little time for us to prepare to leave, though we hadn't needed much; we'd gone to Therella's home in the dead of the night, storing armour and possessions we wouldn't need on board ship in her cellar, warded against theft by Imoen and Viconia. Mendas at least seemed to know how to provision a ship, from what I'd seen in the galley when I started the journey by helping Aatto the cook distribute the lime-juice. 

Tellarian called my name; he was the ship's navigator, formerly apprenticed as a journeyman to the Counting House ships. I'd one of Mendas' copies of the sea-charts in a waterproof oilcloth myself, studying them and confirming that the route marked was indeed close to the accounts of Balduran's last voyage that I knew of. The navigator seemed to know what he was about, though he was quite young and prone to nicknaming. A long nose dominated his broad, cheerful face.

"Lesson in swabbing the deck, Skybird?"

Only six crew-members, besides us; a long-decked cutter, fast through the waves. Not that one could see many waves bent over with mop and seawater bucket; Shar-Teel tightened ropes and pulled on the lower windlass, probably stronger than any of the sailors. She seemed comfortable with being at sea, and somewhat knowledgeable about what we had to do.

"And fetch me ten feet of waterline from the quartermaster," Tellarian added—

"After you lend me some compass fuel?" I knew that one. "Or show us the grand line between the Sea of Swords and the Trackless Sea?"

Tellarian laughed, flinging the mop across. "Baldurian. Is she one too?" He jerked a thumb in Shar-
Teel's direction. "Or Pinky?" He looked up admiringly at Imoen in the rigging, her hair loosened and blown by the wind, still brightly dyed. She'd laid aside her mage's robes for simple leggings and tunic, acrobatic and aloft. I'd join her in the crow's nest, running across the spars to work the rigging and furl the sails.

"Imoen's from Candlekeep—and not that I know of." The mop swept further across the front deck's solid boards. Shar-Teel mentioned battles she'd fought in the past, but never enough detail to identify exactly when and where; and as for family background, she might as well have grown out of a tree. Or some especially thorny bush that regularly impaled people with swordlike branches. But it was because of that she was reassuring to have around; we wouldn't be alive if she hadn't fought, and taught us.

At last I'd managed to get into a rhythm with the mop; hard work, but no harder than Shar-Teel's lessons. If you kept your movements efficient, and watched what you were doing; in that way, not so different from picking a lock or turning a trap harmless.

"You're from Velen, aren't you?" I said.

"Aye. Not a seaman by blood, as most in that city—but a runaway since I'd my thirteenth year. Better than a butcher to ghosts."

That was an interesting story; ghosts haunt Velen, and it's local custom there to leave cuts of meat for them so that they're pacified away from people. "Have you ever heard Mendas' accent on your travels?" I asked.

Aatto born in the Moonshaes hadn't, and Halderwin the captain hadn't.

"No. Funny bloke, isn't he? But if I sailed one more time with that drunkard Cap'n Kieres it'd have meant my death when the ship went down." His eyes flickered down to the copper wedding ring he wore on his right hand; he said he'd married the lady he called Rosythorn but a month past, on getting his papers for journeyman. Most likely he was right to leave the employment of the Counting House, I thought; what I knew of Ulf its functionary was that he seemed a cold man as well as ill-mannered, though it's also true my meetings with him were few. "Ah, well, Tymora and Umberlee dispose as they will. You're an educated parrot yourself for us seatars."

"I'm an adventurer," I said carefully. Ajantis was a noble, but there was no point to claiming to other people that I was any more. "But I grew up in the Gate; I like history. As you like your charts."

Tymora's chances, other people's choices that set me here; Imoen's foster uncle, Sarevok Anchev with his mines flooded, my own father, Dalton's danger, Hurgan Stoneblade asking the dagger from the tower. But this certainly was something I wished to do only because of who I was—and that was thinking too much about it, I decided, suds moist over my hands and the rough spots of the mop's wood beginning to make themselves felt on my palms.

"There's nothing like sitting at a table with the map and the dividers and the course before you, the calculation-books by your side and the way to turn the ship all up here, if you know where to look." Tellarian tapped his head. I was no navigator; mapreading and half-remembered geometry from my tutors was the most I knew. "And yet if'n I wasn't late to board the ship last Shieldmeet it'd never have happened..." He grinned, promising a story; and I tried to make sure the work was quick despite it, in case of Halderwin's captaincy noticing slackness.

"I was cabin-boy on the second ship I'd served on; an old tub that they called the Galante when the captain made the name-plate stick on straight. Actually, I'd my suspicions that what we were carrying wasn't always strictly legal, you understand. The captain was called Havarian, a slippery bloke if ever there was—and he'd go from Lantan or Chult up to Velen and then Athkatla, all sorts of goods
locked in the hold that a humble cabin boy wouldn't ever open. The fairs, Havarian thought, were 
fine opportunity for the right kinds of cargo, and we made landfall a day before. Ever seen 
Athkatla?" I shook my head. "The streets might not be lined with gold as they say, but at fair-time 
they're lined with a kind of lime sweet that glitters like it, gold-green dust, sweetmeats flung at 
anyone passing by and hardly a citizen without a mask to be found. Fountains set to flow with wine 
in the nobles' districts, tumbling-shows with priests of Tymora performing luck-magic, jugglers and 
jongleurs with sleight-of-hand, a balladeer singing some tune on every corner.

"Fact of the matter, all that wine and ale flowing around, by the time the ship left I was still waking 
up from a hangover," he said, sheepishly. "Thought I'd have to turn to the streets and beg, for few 
were hiring and still fewer with nary a testament; but Tymora's luck that I met Tharwick, ship's 
navigator of the Numerical Dragon. Showed him I knew how to figure, then they took me on as 
prentice; and I sailed with the Counting House and a year later met my Rosythorn in port. She's a 
singer, she is; a voice rich as the petals of her name. Luckiest Shieldmeet I ever drunk at, in the end."

I remembered little of the Baldur's Gate celebrations four years ago; it felt as if I was much younger 
then. And because my father never let me out much, I was sure there were more exciting festivities 
than nobles eating heavy food and talking of merchantry. In two days would come the leap year once 
more, aboard ship and upon these blue waves; and there are poets who love the sea and say that one 
needs no more than that.

"—And we've finished?" I asked, hopefully, at the last corner of the upper deck.

"And you're qualified to do it by yourself, henceforth," Tellarian said, and winked.

Upon the other side of the boat rang a shout from Lorancs, the boatswain. We looked, and a blue 
woman rose by the cutter's side.

"Be calm," Faldorn said.

The figure, as we saw it, had the shape of a woman but was entirely of water, the blue-green sea of 
her body more transparent in the sun than the ocean's depth. She would have looked glasslike, as if 
an artist had crafted a clear form of a woman and filled it with water; but she moved, alive, seaweed 
and fish and white foam flowing through her. The waterfall of hair flowed constantly across her 
back; her eyes were smooth and liquid and uncoloured; and in all her shape she was close to an older 
and taller Faldorn. A spout of water rose spontaneously from the sea to bring her by the druid's side.

"She is a nereid, a spirit of the seas, sisterkin to dryads. Her name is Thalassa," Faldorn said.

Thalassa spoke with a sound like the inside of a shell pressed to the ear, and the turnings and never-
ending motion of her form reminded me of the joy of dolphins I had seen playing at a distance in the 
seas near home.

"I greet you, little sister of the earth," she said. "May your voyage be a merry one, yes?" Her watery 
lips moved, and she returned Faldorn's smile; and then she dived into the air before the sun's light, 
flowing and shimmering and changing, the shape of a human woman slipping away like a mask from 
the living water that she was. She fell into the sea, the waves that had borne her up falling down; but 
by the bows and the waterline we could see traces of a shape to the sea, as if she danced with the 
ship for her stage.

Sailors say that nereids, rather than sirines, are good luck...
Edwin opened his book, and rehearsed the spells.

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Ozamen - drow ships

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109. Wreck

5 Eleasias

For days the winds remained steady and sure, guiding us away from the trade routes, through treacherous shoals marked on Mendas' sea-charts, the passage made easier by a small and swift ship to find paths against obstacle. Down in the waves the water lapped at the hull in forms that the eye could turn to imagine nereids dancing, though there were no more spectacular appearances. Faldorn continued to watch the ocean, standing in the bow or where the wind was strongest by the railings, breathing in fresh air. I kept busy, odd-jobbing around the boat, looking over Tellarian's shoulder on occasion whilst he examined the charts.

And yet it was not at all peaceful on board. We were cramped and trapped with each other, impossible to find solitude except high in the rigging or at rare moments; dirty and forced to know the most intimate business of each other. Rumours flew like grains of wheat bursting from an overstuffed sack.

"They say Faer'n ends in a great waterfall, unexpected where it lies in the sea, and it's that where ships are lost," Aatto the cook voiced, looking around nervously while his cleaver flew across the galley, slicing salt beef in a way rather fearful and wonderful to behold.

"Nonsense, man," Captain Halderwin held forth. "Ships can't vanish in holes in the earth. I'd blame the elves sooner."

Viconia smiled at that particular rumour. "The surface darthiri? I would believe anything of them, of course."

"More like they'd be your sort, if so damned warlike. At least we'd have you for assurance." A drow on board was another thing that had made it difficult; but on board ship we depended on the sailors, and so Viconia was almost polite at times. Sometimes it felt, though, that the most simple of her comments somehow caused later explosions of ill-feeling.

"'Tis island-sized turtles that eat whole ships," Tellarian said, perhaps a shade too gravely. "Sailors believe they are islands when they land upon them to find fruit to eat; and then the turtle rises from the waves only to drown them and eat the ship himself."

Nowell the mate snorted, winding thick rope between his hands. "More like to be a kraken. I swear I saw one rising from the waves while I was third mate on a whaling vessel. Black tentacles bigger than the ship stirring above sea level. We steered out."

"Smoking other black things at the time?" the boatswain said, Mister Lorancs (who preferred the title). Navy blue stripes of a tattoo crossed his back, and his right cheek was badly scratched with a knife scar.

Nowell shot him a dark look. "No. There's things out there in the sea, things that took Balduran, and
I had heard some of those rumours; had dismissed them as the same marine fairy-tales told to every child. The sea-charts showed a lost isle. For that, the main rumour that could be true was the secret elven nation, and if there was a secret nation they must have let Balduran land within them in the first place...

"Back to work," Captain Halderwin ordered brusquely; trying to keep a semblance of order. There were whispers on the sea-breeze still, in any moment where we were not labouring to maintain the ship. Davroan the carpenter, whispering to Faldorn: *Do ye sense any of the ones under the ocean, lass? The great old ones ancient when Toril was newborn that lie dreaming a hundred fathoms deep?* Aquerna, twittering on Ajantis' shoulders and eating Faldorn's berries, not watching overboard. Viconia, speaking softly with her body draped across Nowell's back, *Is it true, rivvil, that your myths speak of women on board ship as ill fortune? And drow more so?*

And they said that Shar was the goddess of loss, I thought. But we neared the goal at a speed ahead of time, no matter the tensions and whispers and the fight that nearly broke out in the open between Ajantis and the cook on where some hardtack had been stored away. (By Imoen, it turned out. So that one was not Viconia's fault.) Even the word *mutiny* whispered, once or twice; but who to mutiny against? All Halderwin's commands seemed fair and useful to the running of the ship, there were few of us, not all experienced, and all hands needed. The seas drew us closer, although the clearer skies became greyer, and fog lingered on the waves in the dawn. Whispers seemed to echo further in heavy air.

A distant black line was upon the waters. A farglass showed it distant through the grey of fog and cloud, and we knew that Mendas' sea-charts had been true. The isle of Balduran's last voyage was near. Not long until landing; we armed ourselves in advance of it. I took longsword to my side. The line was but a line; still far away as the fog grew, and slipped back to invisibility.

Then the storm broke.

The rain was torrential; as if all the clear weather of before had saved itself for this moment. The pelting felt the size of hen's eggs of water, massed like sling bullets aimed at their targets, like an army of grey spears lancing down from the sky. There was nowhere to escape, and the boat tipped and turned. Captain Halderwin yelled his orders to all of us, all hands on deck. Bail the water and reef the mainsail. Watch the list to starboard. Hold to your posts.

Waves rose up around us and crashed to the deck. For a moment I was drowned; the wave hit so strongly that I was half-stunned, and then it broke, water over the deck running around my feet. Then the captain's voice yelled to keep going, keep working— My hands were numbed and slow. I could hardly see two feet in front of my eyes. Grey and wet everywhere, and there was nowhere to escape the storm. The wind whipped the lower knot of the headsail free; I sought to tie it back to place, but part of the tack ripped away into the gale like a stray seabird, or a pale ghost. One frightened shout was that this was not natural, and there were cries to Umberlee that all the right sacrifices had been made. The ship tilted first to one side and then to the other, like a cork trapped in a vast whirlpool. There was no respite. The wind blew me to my knees in a sudden gust, and then halfway across the deck when the ship moved; I bled, and had to rise and work.

Halderwin was at the wheel; had lashed himself to it. He swore, steering, yelling orders. I saw Shar-Teel pulling back on knotted cords wrapped around her wrists, as a dim shadow though she was only a few feet away; saw a grey shape that had to be Viconia working, sealing down a hatch blown open, binding back tarpaulin. The rain grew stronger, the gale more fierce. Someone yelled to Faldorn to halt it, if she could. Her words back were taken by the wind. Ajantis cried out and I saw a
small shape skidding across the deck, Aquerna; I made a dive to catch her before she disappeared into the sea. I tied her into my shirt, fastening cords around her, though there was no time for it in the storm and the desperate need to keep the ship afloat.

Then came a horrible, crashing noise that shook the entire ship; and an awful scraping, Rocks. I heard the cry that the hull was torn. Below decks, water rose more quickly than we could sluice and bail it out. The ship moved and shuddered, and then another scraping of a jagged shoal. Above, wood creaked like the moans of a dying animal. Splinters shrieked and parted; water rushed above my knees, to my waist. I heard the mainmast fall like a tree; and I heard Faldorn scream.

"Abandon ship—to land—" Broken planks flowed around us, caught to float by the eddies of the whirlpool. The ship sank; I heard Faldorn's next cries to Silvanus, to the ocean itself, amidst all the other shouts and orders to cling to spars, to swim in the direction we had glimpsed the isle...

Imoen could swim. I could swim. Shar-Teel could, Ajantis could, Faldorn could. The sailors ought to. As for Viconia...

On deck Shar-Teel supported Faldorn. Imoen leaped from the side of the splintering ship, seeking wood in the water. Viconia was nowhere to be seen. I followed Imoen; a wave struck my head, and I should have unbuckled the belt that weighed me down and dragged me to the bottom of the ocean. But there was water through my mouth and eyes, blinding and deafening me; and the sea below pushed and pulled so that holding splintered fingers to the broken spar seemed like the most important thing in the world. Aquerna's head was at my collar, rising up above my chin, moving against me. I felt her desperate breath and did the same, kicking forward while a bit of welcome air flowed into burning lungs; and then a wave washed over my head again, and beyond that I remembered nothing.

—

Nothing but work, work, work while ignorant commoners slacked, Edwin thought.

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110. Awake on the Isle

6 Eleasias

Swimming through black water.

Slap.

"Hey! Wake up! Wake up already, slack-stick-muckler!"

Slap.

Cheeks stinging; there was a squirrel beside me and a red-haired girl. Salt and sand coated the inside of my mouth. I leaned to the side and spit it out; and noticed that my shirt hung loose and opened.

"Good," Imoen said sharply. "Haven't found the others. Just Lorancs and Nowell. But it was Faldorn who did something."

I remembered struggling; trying to swim across the surface of the waves until the sanded shore. It was vague and all but incomprehensible. Perhaps something pushing. I reached to my side, and there
was evidence that something had indeed aided us. That meant we could dare to hope that the others were alive.

"Water," I croaked. She guided me to a muddy stream, braken-grown, and it was as sweet and fresh as anything from a Grand Duke's fountain. I wiped a hand across my chin, and then touched the hilt of the sword at my side. We weren't defenceless, in this strange place...

"The boy's alive," Aquerna spoke up, scratching at her sand-stained fur. "Go... West, I believe. Further along the beach." An unmistakable relief was bound to her tone. At least there were that many of us who had escaped. The horizon was clearer on this dawn than the darkness of the storm, and I saw some scattered planks still floating on the waves.

On an island; on Balduran's island. Castaways. The sand was coarse; the coast was marked by a hundred small hollows and frilled inland banks. If we couldn't find all of them... Imoen looked as exhausted as I felt; we trudged in the direction Aquerna told us.

There was Ajantis at last; he stood upright, stumbling along the sands, supporting Davroan by his side. Aquerna raced along the ground to him, nuzzling her head against his legs.

"That's four of us," I said, nervous. "And Lorancs and Nowell, Imoen?"

"They went east to search," she said. "We...should keep going, I guess..."

Captain Halderwin, Tellarian, Aatto, Faldoirn, Shar-Teel, Viconia. If they lived. We stumbled along the tides and hollows, meeting none. Faldoirn at least, surely, had come to shore; she'd spoken of swimming past rivers in her groves, even through icy waters of a northern winter. Exhausted, Imoen finally gave the order to turn back to find Lorancs and Nowell once more; given to search on the eastern coastline.

We saw Shar-Teel at a distance; rising tall and strong and making her way slowly toward us. She'd made it with her sword still on her back; as if she'd ever abandon a weapon.

Then we heard a voice from the foliage of the island:

"You...smell different! Hello, you."

Shar-Teel and I had placed hand to sword, but then we saw no need for it. The speaker was a little girl, carrying a ball roughly carved out of wood, dressed in a simple pinafore of brown flax, her bright red hair separated into three pigtails. As if from her side she felt no reason to fear us in turn, she skipped out of the cover of the woods.

"You swim in?" she said. I couldn't quite put my finger on what her accent meant, drowsy and weary. "Fishies out there have big teeth, and the rocks hurt ship-homes. But if you nice, village will let you stay."

Imoen knelt down to bring herself to the child's height, and patted her on the head. "Hello, little one. Are you here all by yourself?"

The girl shook her head strongly. "Nope, silly! I live with Mommay, Poppay, my smelly little brother too. And we got three neighbours on one side and two neighbours on the other. The village is nice but I want to be alone to play."

An entire village; people, succour and sustenance... "I know some neat magic tricks that you might like," Imoen said. She closed her eyes, and even though she seemed exhausted, she moved her hands and said a few words. A glittering butterfly in pink and purple appeared between her hands, one of
Garrick's cantrip tricks that he sometimes used to illustrate his songs, and it fluttered halfway around
the child's head before blinking out into thin air. Imoen shuddered in her place; I rested an arm on her
shoulder to try to hold her upright.

"You funny people." The girl giggled. "Strangers don't often want to make friends, Mommay says,
but you not scary like the beasties."

"My name's Imoen," Imoen said, "and these are all friends just like me."

"I'm Solianna!" The girl laughed again, showing two missing baby-teeth in her mouth. Then
suddenly she looked down at the sands, and scuffed a foot on the ground. "You gotta go to the
village first, I not allowed to talk with strangers. Mommay's friend Kaishas Gan will help, she
chieftain now."

"Can you show us?" Imoen said desperately; and with digressions into interesting parts of the trees
and caterpillars that crawled over the undergrowth, we came to the settlement of people.

"We were shipwrecked," Imoen got out, "some of our friends are still...They've gotta be
somewhere..."

Kaishas reminded me of Branwen in build, muscled but not as tall as Shar-Teel. She was brown-
haired, her complexion a few shades darker than Eldoth's saturnine features. She saw us to a large
wooden shed, and gave us waterskins; it was a relief to sit down in the shade and drink fresh water.

"I will send salvage party to search for your friends," she said. "I am chieftain here, for my mate
Selaad is away. You come in a ship-home, so you are welcomed here; for our beginning was as
yours." Her lilting accent seemed gentle and peaceful. A man by her side called Tailas said nothing.
"If you behave in belonging, we help each other. We talk more when you rested, yes?"

"We talk now," Shar-Teel stood, above her height; and Kaishas, unintimidated—of course
unintimidated, she'd an entire village and we, nothing—agreed.

"You sail from mainland-home. Two carry metal and four have smell of fighters," the chieftain said.
"This village is peaceful but the island is wild. The beasts do not belong. It is favour we ask, but
beasts kill all on sight and though you are not their enemy they would be enemy to you. We ask for
your help and in return take you to mainland-home by our side. We had start to build a ship-home in
northeast where reefs and cliffs are calm, but beasts live there. If you kill beasts all free to leave. If
you know of way home..." Kaishas' words trailed off; I felt inside my clothing and found that
Mendas' oilcloth packet was still there, one copy of his sea-charts. I said nothing, though; in
merchantry one doesn't reveal everything at the start of a negotiation, even if the people seem very
nice.

"What are the beasts?" Shar-Teel said.

Kaishas shook her head. "Beasts," she repeated. "That is all tongue we use to say it. They are wolf-
like but not wolves. Man-like but not men. Strong, like this." She raised an arm, and patted around it
in a large circle to show huge muscles. "Claws on four paws. Long teeth and fever eyes."

"—Werewolves," I said, remembering tales, shocked; Mister Lorancs looked pale.

Kaishas gave a slow nod. "Wolf some on outside, man some on outside, beast in whole. Wolfweres
more correct. Wolves have peace and belong, beasts have slaughter only. No beast welcome here."

"And Balduran's ship?" I said, remembering why we had come in the first place. "The ship that was
wrecked here, by the famous explorer Balduran. The Wandering Eye, a four-masted carrack. It had
four decks, and a figurehead of a red-haired dwarven lady, and was made from Tethyrian fir for the masts, Calimshite cedar at the hull and between the decks, and Cormyrian oak on the fittings, almost a hundred and twenty feet long..." I remembered the legends I'd heard.

Shar-Teel laid a hand roughly on my arm.

"It sounds to be a wreck I last saw many years ago, when beasts numbered less," Kaishas said. "The ship-home that brought our great-great-grandmothers to the village. Now beasts hold it. It lies to north of island."

So—the beasts for the ship, I thought. Of course, that's only if the missing are...

"You may rest now. It is best after ship-home wreck," Kaishas said. "If friends are to be found, we find them for you."

When she left, Shar-Teel promptly tested the door to the shed; it was unlocked. I'd no doubt that she would have broken through otherwise. She sat and raised the water given to her mouth.

"What have we got?" she said. She drew her sword. "I have this. Skie?" I raised the Burning Earth a little from its scabbard on my belt; it still shone with fire, mostly undamaged by the waters and the sand. More importantly, I had the charts. Nowell and Mister Lorancs drew belt-knives, Davroan a hammer; Imoen produced her spellbook in its covering, shaking sand off it, though she had lost all of her components. Ajantis had nothing but the clothing he wore and his dulled symbol of Helm. Captain Halderwin, Tellarian, Aatto, Faldorn, Viconia.

Another of the villagers came to us; a man this time. He carried a cauldron of a whitish food, looking like porridge or gruel to us.

"You seem...interesting," he said, and Imoen shook her head.

"So do you lot of castaways. Who're you?"

"Forgive me. I never...I never seen your like before." He opened wide brown eyes to gaze at all of us with open, honest curiosity. For a man of his tall broad size, he moved and spoke with unusual hesitancy. "You are quite the novelty. I am Durlyle, and I am history. I mean, I am historian in your language."

"A—historian?" I said. Slowly, he served the meal he brought in crude wooden bowls, using a ladle and setting out no implements for us.

Durlyle nodded, a broad smile spreading slowly across his face like the gradual opening of a leaf in spring. "I wished to come to you and see you. Not even eldest have seen your like before, but I keep stories of the elders and the few relics we have. I learn the old tongue well, yes? I try to keep the speech, but we have been on our own for some time. What of you? What do you do?"

"Humble sailors," Nowell said acidly.

"Slayers of mankind," Shar-Teel said ominously.

"So...what is it?" Imoen poked at the bowl before her. "I've never seen this stuff before."

"Our word is daywhites. It grows in the ground and it is good, you see?" Durlyle took some with a finger from the ladle himself, eating it from his hand. So they had not invented cutlery; I did the same, and recognised the taste.
"I think it's Maztican potato. With goats' milk." I'd tasted them before as fruits of seagoing expeditions; vegetables, rather, I thought they were.

"Yes, that is close to the word of the great-grandmothers," Durlyle said. "Batata."

"—Do you know other words in that tongue?" I said, interested despite myself. "It's difficult to study the Anchorome and Maztican languages because there are still so few explorers and no standard grammar published, with all the troubles—"

*That would definitely have to wait.* I stopped. "Thank you," I said. "We need to join the search parties for our friends."

"We know lines of the beach more than you, so you would do little," Durlyle said, "but I know what it feels to do nothing while pack is in danger." Misery passed over his face; perhaps he referred to the monsters against the village. "I will show you the ways and paths myself if you eat this and recover, as a promise."

Down to the shore again we walked. We were bruised and torn from the wreck, which had started to make itself felt once more after the relief of finding water; Nowell limped, and Ajantis' bad arm did not move. Durlyle led us to where he knew tides came in, where the village fishers spread their nets over some grey rocks. We saw the search party from the village: and with them were Faldorn and Viconia, leaning on each other.

"—should have mentioned that you did not know how to swim, Viconia," Faldorn lectured her, smugly; Viconia muttered something aside on useless slaves who did not know when to keep their mouths closed and drow noblewomen not having to engage in anything so plebeian. They were both comparatively clean and unbruised; from their powers, most likely. Viconia's symbol of Shar was openly around her neck. Durlyle looked at her features curiously, but made no comment as an ordinary human would have.

"I am sorry," Faldorn said, looking at the three sailors; "I called for all the aid I could from the ocean to bring us to shore. Captain Halderwin is dead. A spar pierced through the back of his head, and there was nothing I could have done to heal him. I saw his body fall into the waters."

*Dead.* We walked further, to try to seek signs of the others. Tellarian was found by the villagers unconscious at the very edge of the rocks; Faldorn stepped to him to heal him, and they seemed surprised at her gifts. Aatto had managed to stumble to the village by himself.

There was a shout, and a fisher called Evalt dragged up a body from the sea. Halderwin, dead for hours. The sailors slowly, laboriously, dug a grave upon the shore, their custom and needing no aid from landfolk; Imoen and I remained to watch him sent to his rest.

*He was... He seemed good at what he did, and he...* There was little I knew of the man, taciturn and quite harsh in authority. *He died for doing this..."

"Valkur guide his soul to safe waters," Nowell recited. "In exploration, on the sea, he did his duty for ship and crew. As the waters still, let them bear him to rest. May the Captain of the Waves send strong waves and a hearty breeze to the ship he rides now. Let the deep find him; may he rest long in the seas he conquered in life..."

It was brief enough, and the grave-marking a scratch on driftwood. Slowly we trudged back to the village once more. Durlyle had remained, watching at a respectable distance as we. *The historian's interest in quaint mainland burial customs,* I thought uncharitably; but he did not show no sympathy in his quiet words.
"He signed up for this job," Mister Lorancs said gruffly in reply. "Didn't even know him."

"But is...hard thing, when pack dies," Durlyle said. "While you in this village we welcome you, for we are no beasts." He emphasised the last two words fiercely, in a way that seemed uncharacteristic for his hesitant voice. Perhaps he spoke as he did from past shyness, or from a concern for linguistic precision.

"We've fought battles," I said to Lorancs. "You should stay in the village; we'll help against the monsters so that we can go home." The werewolves.

Nowell grunted. "Expected no less, for all the two of ye have the look of twigs. You'd be the adventurers."

"I've fought before but I was never any good at it," Tellarian said. "But I..."

"We're used to fighting as a group," Imoen said. "Believe it or not, a powerful almost-archmagely wizardess—and a halfway capable swordswoman," she added, ruffling my hair.

Durlyle's brown eyes suddenly widened. "You mean that you are magic?" he said. "I thought was myth for pups. The stories speak of it, but none have witnessed. I believed it was tales only from the ancestors."

Imoen grinned, and started to lecture. Lorancs, who was Amnian by birth, looked stone-faced across at her, but made no comment. "Yeah, and the Weave's still on this place, whatever you want to believe about it," she said. "Like threads in the air, all glittery if you look at it right, and you reach inside them for the spells you want and hold the runes rightway up in your head. Once I get a little sleep I'll be able to do more cantrips, but without proper components I won't have anything but the instantlike Agannazar's..."

What she spoke must have seemed practically Old Chessentan to Durlyle, I thought, but he looked back at her. "Components," he said with his careful precision, "there is part of one page from old book that says it is of alchemy. It speaks that it has recipes to transform humans to moonbirds and water to ambrosia milk, but it is cut off and what it claims has failed when tested. It begins to ask for...strange objects for the making of its magic. Tale only I thought it."

"Well, I'll take a glance-over," Imoen said. "I mean, I had lessons in alchemy back in Candlekeep and all...and just because they might have kicked me out just for blowing up the lab once or twice or maybe twice-twice or so doesn't mean I'm too bad at it..."

"Don't blow up anything here, Imoen," I said, by some automatic instinct.

"She's gettin' to be a bit of a sceptic sometimes, y'see," Imoen said, linking elbows with me, "not all the time, but I tell her she's got to wise up sometime about things and what does she do, start blaming me for everything!" She snapped her fingers and whispered the words to a spell; very briefly, pink light glittered around her hand. "See? That's magic. Now my confuse-everyone spell, that's got nut shells in it, so if you could fetch me those that'd be good, and the make-vulnerable spell, I could do it with wax and gum arabic—wax from bees, gum arabic, they make that out of tree sap. And fireballs, I need bat droppings and sulphur? You know, the...yellow combustible nonmetal occurring uncombined in volcanic and sedimentary deposits? Um... Yellow and stinky? Or I guess I could just go with a rotten egg, I could get a stinking cloud out from that according to the spell recipes..."

"Jorin is better finder of lost than I, so he may help better," Durlyle said; amusement had begun to creep into his voice at Imoen's monologue. "I am interested to see more of mainland magic. I wonder," he said, suddenly changing subject. "Lights sometimes by night in the north in beast
homes. Red, yellow, faint. The elders say signals from ship-homes can do that, but with you...

Imoen brought her eyebrows together. "Gee. Thanks for mentionin' they had a spellcaster. It's not like it's important to let adventurers know about that sort of thing in advance when you want them to go half-armed after werewolves." But she'd beaten a demon; as long as she was able to prepare some of the components she needed...

"I am sorry," Durlyle said. "Many things we know not of the lands of our great-grandmother, as little as you know of our ways. We may have many questions of each other..."

"Yep, I guess you got that right," Imoen said. "So where's that Jorin bloke? Point me to him and I'll see what I can do..."

"To the east of the village his home is," Durlyle said; and looked to me. "You spoke of potato of Maztica, where I know of the word batata," he said. "Would it interest you to see the relics, and to tell more of your language?"

In horror, I had slowly begun to think:

*The accent of Kaishas and Durlyle and Solianna and all upon this island is almost the exact accent of Mendas without the few western veneers that he placed upon his. Undeniable vowel accentuation, digraph pronunciation, shortened sibilant fricatives...*

—

He had never realised the harbour was so extensive, so modernised in aggression and defence; Edwin wondered if someday he would report it to his homeland.

—

111. Lupines Of Unusual Size

7 Eleasias

"We bring what we have found for you," Kaishas said. She hauled behind herself a large basket, and dumped the contents before us.

Parts of anchor chain. Spoiled supply packing-cases. Ruined tarpaulin and sailcloth. Debris much less valuable than Durlyle's collection of relics of the past. But examining a little deeper, we began to see that there was more beside that reclaimed from the wreck: the dark blue cloak Viconia had taken from somewhere in the Cloakwood, my own stitches marking a corner of it I'd mended. It had some degree of protective enchantment, and she placed it upon herself. I found the dwarven shortsword, which was for Imoen as a backup to the few spells she would be able to cast; and my bow, which I couldn't use with the string twisted and wrecked by the saltwater. But the islanders had invented bows for hunting and fighting the beasts, though their examples were crudely made; Imoen and I both had borrowed from them. Ajantis, grimacing, hefted Varscona from the bottom of the pile. "I suppose that it will never leave me," he muttered, and secured it to his belt nonetheless, for it was an effective tool. The padded jacket that he usually wore under armour was there also, stained and ugly but still able to offer him slight protection. Faldorn had for a weapon a driftwood club, raised and knotted and reshaped by casting she had done. I rubbed my fingers together, and looked down to notice that the ring to see in the dark had been at some point lost from my hand.

"...Quite a good effort," Shar-Teel said, watching the chieftain.
"We know our own shores and tides," Kaishas said simply. "Sea-charts for mainland-home," she added, turning to Tellarian. "I keep them safe." She'd taken them from him; she didn't know of the other copy. She turned back to us. "Go well in your hunting."

Durlyle, covered by thick furs, stepped outside the gate with us. The villagers had erected a large wall about their homes, and even a tall lookout tower into the wilderness of dark trees climbing across each other and knee-length ferns and growths in the side of the island that the beasts took. Taking the first steps into the forest seemed little different to stepping into the Larswood long ago; utterly unfamiliar. Shar-Teel walked in the lead, her sword ready.

—

"Chieftain Selaad left in small boat a year before," Durlyle told the story to Imoen and me, taking us to his storehouse as he had offered. His relics of the past were such as a fragment of an introduction to some alchemist's textbook, useless to Imoen; a cracked metal flask; part of a kettle; a broken compass, the innards too damaged to be repaired; and an hourglass with but a scatter of—it was ruby dust, I thought; worth something on the mainland but useless here. A crescent moon that Durlyle had crafted himself hung on the wall, of tough grasses woven with pearls that the fishermen took from the waters simply because they were pleasant to look at. But the true value was in the history of what little he had; there were many interested in such old designs, and to handle the very objects that perhaps Balduran had touched in his time...

"And let me guess: Selaad was about so high, kind of burly and hairy...and, hey, did he take pearls like that with him? 'Cause he had a lot of gold..." Imoen digressed.

Durlyle replied that it was true. "Then he and Baresh sent you by a lie and I am sorry for it," he said. "Ought we to go to Kaishas? It is still true that there are monsters; and it is true that the monsters come too close to the natural harbour for us to build ship-home. A bad smell is a bad smell no matter the reason; but she is chieftain, and I not know her reason..."

"And Balduran's ship, it's definitely there?" I said. The artefacts looked of the correct era for it, that was certainly true enough...

"Yes."

It would be...counterproductive...if Shar-Teel were to precipitately act, then, I thought. It would be difficult or impossible to build a ship of our own; doubly impossible if the beasts held the only possible harbours. "We came for the history," I said. "You lied to us; Mendas lied to Halderwin and he's... But Mendas was still right that ordinary merchants would see no value in the ship and destroy Balduran's materials, or at least fail to keep them properly. So I want to go to the ship and fight. It's our only choice to get everyone back home."

Imoen looked at me, momentarily taken aback; then she smiled and shrugged. "Can you give us some of those to take back with us?" she said, pointing to the pearl decoration.

"It is...generous of you to offer that," Durlyle said; his brown eyes were wide and sorrowful. "It was not right to strand you here not knowing reason; should confront Kaishas..."

"After," I said, and explained myself to Imoen. "After sailing home we'll tell her that we knew of her and Mendas' plan; and tell them not to lie. I think perhaps I would have wanted to go anyway. For Balduran's ship, monsters or no monsters..."

Imoen shook her head. "Yer crazy," she said. "But I guess it's not the really bad kind of crazy, not yet."
Durlyle brought Jorin to Imoen for her components; I walked with Durlyle around the village, to learn a little more of each other's language and ways.

"Balduaran was not one of our founders. He would not belong. I value history, but value not his role in it. He rather destruct than build," Durlyle said. It was wrong, of course—Balduaran was a great explorer who founded our city. I wanted to explain to him...

A fair-haired woman came to me. "Stranger," she said, "I have nowhere else to turn to. If you would help me..." Her name was Maralee; the beasts had stolen her little boy two months before; and of course I said that we'd try. A child called Farthing, who called Viconia the pretty blue lady, asked for the return of her doll. Ajantis spoke of meeting with a fisherman, whose brother had been taken by a sea witch upon the western shores.

"Noble quests," he said; "after all, the saving of a child and of a man are of greater import than the scholarly knowledge you promised, though another has already paid the price." Ajantis had also met another stranger here, who had chosen to settle and to teach the villagers how to build boats; I filed in my mind that they had been kind enough to accept that man among their midst, rather than summoning him to be killed.

"In our favour for Umberlee we offended the Storm Lord," Faldorn said, and then I remembered the words of the fisherman north of the Friendly Arm, that Talos would know we had opposed him by returning young Tenya her bowl... "But that gale showed not the lightning-signs of Talos. And the winds were as strong as if Umberlee lent them," she said. She frowned. "The villagers feel...in harmony with the nature of this place, even though they use wood that has been chopped down; it is unusual for people to be so advanced. They feel quite different to my senses, but it must be a good thing that they are. I think it very stupid of them to wish to leave."

Imoen had spent time with Solianna as well as Jorin, playing with the child and her young friends and laughing. She studied her spellbook as best she could, speaking to Faldorn and Viconia on what they intended to cast; and was prepared when the dawn of the hunt came.

—

"Surfacers," Viconia hissed, below the shadows of a tall pine, "the sooner we have sent the animals to Shar's darkness and the sooner we repair to one of the human cesspools that at least pretends to be civilised...the smaller chance I shall have a terrible accident in your healing, or at the very least cast a command or hold and see what performance I can beat from a mere surfacer's whip without proper biting snakeheads dripping poison from their fangs."

Durlyle looked at her. "Surfacers? I know little of the fair folk, only that the tales say that a slender people with ears such as yours existed with our great-grandmothers. What is meaning of word to you?"

He had actually managed to shock her. Viconia stopped in place: "Do you mistake me for they? Waelen iblith! No surface male anywhere else would dare such an insult."

"He meant none, Viconia," I said. To Durlyle, I added: "Her kind of elves are descended from the fair folk, but they separated in a war a long time ago and chose to live underground. She left that and follows a deity of the surface, so she calls us surfacers because we were born there."

"A most charitable phrasing, little waeles," Viconia snarled.

"And one would think," Ajantis cut swiftly across her words, "that one of character would enjoy a rare chance to be judged as a mere oddity rather than as a representative of race." Some emotion
flashed across Viconia's face; she held her head high, free of her cloak, preparing a retort;

"Shut up, all of you," Shar-Teel interrupted. "No bringing werewolves down on our heads." She glared fiercely at the undergrowth in front of our heads; the land was wild here, never cultivated like the village's small set of fields, and it was easy to imagine a pack of beasts waiting for the moment to strike.

Durlyle was obviously nervous; but he walked with us and guided anyway. He was nothing like a warrior or ranger in his hesitant, big-footed steps. *Brave and...honourable,* perhaps; brave of him to choose this.

Then we were hallooed by a very human voice; uncertainly we waited where we stood, for a human's voice was not a creature part wolf and entirely beast. It was a woman's voice, with desperation in its edge much like Maralee's plea.

"You are human!" she said; a young woman, dark-haired, wearing a long pale shift, undyed and stained by blood. She staggered in her walk. "Please help. The beasts murdered my mate, please come with me and fight them for me. I am Kryla..."

She stepped forward, staggering from the wounds she seemed to bear. Durlyle said quietly: "None who belong bear that name."

Then the wolf burst out from inside the woman. There was no time to think about it, to rationalise that where a human had stood was now a huge creature neither man nor beast. It was furred and inhuman with slavering mouth and red tongue; in its mouth were bright white fangs; and it ran toward us as quickly as a thousand-pound weight would fall down through the air. Shar-Teel attacked, the Burning Earth came out of its scabbard, and there were three more of them out from the trees.

They were faster than doppelgangers, too fast. Wolfweres, not werewolves: too much beast in them. I drove the Burning Earth forward into a stab—not wanting the creature to be close; and pulled it out of the wolfwere's ribs. The burn began to knit together again. The claws struck forward for my head, my neck; down and under was the only escape, rolling below a branch and up again to a crouch, raise the sword in time to catch him on the followup—

Shar-Teel sunk her greatsword into the belly of the first beast; she released her right hand from the grip, and punched the other by her in the skull. It recoiled, briefly stunned; then it burst forward to the four who weren't fighting hand-to-hand: Imoen and Viconia and Faldorn and Durlyle, who stood in shocked fear.

There was carrion on the wolf's hot breath, blood and scraps of meat on its teeth. It tore through the forest to get to me, and though it moved away from the fire it recovered quickly from the burns. Imoen cried out—the wolfwere was upon her but I couldn't get there in time, I hoped Shar-Teel or Ajantis would—and there was the fire from Imoen's own fingers in a quick instant. She was bloodied, the wolfwere before her on the ground with a black mark across his heart, and then she knelt down and drew the shortsword and did her best to cut off the head.

The wolfwere chased, and I ran. If I went too far away from the fight others would easily find me. I circled back; I had to match for speed, I had to be faster, twice as fast—

A branch; just above my height, the space above it clear enough. I ran forward, a burst of speed to get ahead. I threw the sword in the wolfwere's direction, and he swerved to avoid the fire. The bark of the wood met my hands, and I was moving quickly enough to swing forward, up and around, letting the momentum carry me above the branch and down on the side I'd started on. The beast
hadn't expected that, striking claws forward where I wasn't any more; my feet hit his head. He was too strong, too weighty. I fell back and he only stumbled. But the hilt of the sword was there, on the grass, and I'd hit the thick skull. The wolfwere was off-balance while I snatched up the Burning Earth; I stabbed into the neck. The wolfwere stopped moving while I held the blade down, and I imitated Imoen.

Viconia had chanted her command; Ajantis had killed with Varscona, and Shar-Teel bisected the one she fought to two, still-twitching, halves. Imoen was scratched and bloodied, Faldorn already casting a healing spell on her. Durlyle watched as she knit flesh back together through the words of her druidic practice.

"You are...amazing," he said, suddenly; "your group heals by magic, you bear a fiery sword like celestial in stars. I trust in you..."

Shar-Teel spat on the broken corpse that she stood over. The wolfweres remained in that form of fur and claw and muscle upon death; if they were as doppelgangers, that meant that it was their true one. "It's not for you we fight, male dog," she said; something in Durlyle's face changed at the insult, and I wondered if it was a particularly vicious one in his culture. Perhaps it was. Their enemies were wolf-people.

"I will...bring up entanglements the next time we fight," Faldorn promised, stepping back from Imoen.

Shar-Teel gave her a curt nod. "Get out bows, if you've time; let them try healing from a stick inside them," she said, in Imoen's and my direction. The island bows weren't as good as those ruined by the sea, but we'd tested them to learn their limits. "And they shy away from fire, it seems."

"I have not heard that the beasts make fire," Durlyle volunteered, "they are supposed to eat raw."

"See? He's useful," Imoen said, healed and regaining some cheer. He'd known that Kryla was lying; all sorts of things that we might otherwise miss. "No sulphur, so no more fire spells for little ol' Imoen, but I've got two confuse-everyones, a rotten egg and at least four magic missiles ready to go, if my head holds out," she said.

"Quietly," Shar-Teel ordered. "Elf—" she added to Viconia—"use those ears."

"As you wish, abbil," Viconia said, courteously.

—

"What is it now?" Edwin sulkily snapped; but since it was that peculiarly unattractive broken-nosed Cyric-worshipper he waited.

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waeles - fool

—

112. Balduran's Fate

There were birds in the trees, the sounds of movement in the undergrowth, though Viconia shook her head as to whether the noise of wolfweres approached. We could not hear the sounds of the sea any
more, still walking inland. The natural creatures of the forest were deer and bear and hare and ground squirrels in the woods that were hunted, Durlyle had explained, to sustenance by the villagers but to concerns of extinction by the beasts. (Aquerna was not a ground squirrel.) Balduran's ship, I reminded myself; we near it. And one couldn't help but feel a frisson of excitement for that. The wolfweres were large and fast and unbelievably vicious, and I knew my hands were ready to reach the bow when they would come to us.

It was hours later; the air was cool in comparison to the mainland's forests, the sea breezes close. Well past noonday, I judged by the sun. A tangled wilderness to navigate; it would be strange, I thought, to run through this with the strong limbs of a wolf, overcoming every obstacle, in complete freedom by sheer power. Humans were confined by clothes that caught and dragged and itched, by heavy weapons and by prickles of gorse and sharpened leaves scratching into us; the wolfweres ran in simple, brutal ease. Durlyle pointed ahead, directing us northerly.

Viconia sighed, leaning briefly against a tree, her steps grown slow and tired. Imoen drooped a little, and I felt the same; we would be lucky to return to the village before sunset if we turned and departed now, let alone after picking fights.

Durlyle sniffed the air, watching. "In this clearing I...hear nothing about us; it is not so long now. You seem barely to tire but if you would rest, here I would say." He looked enduring enough himself; almost taller than Shar-Teel, and very broad-shouldered, as if he was a warrior himself. But instead of a weapon he carried a wooden staff to lean on, and he was almost unscarred, peaceful.

Shar-Teel looked across at Viconia, who confirmed with a crude nod that her ears heard nothing. "Then a rest," she said; the villagers had provisioned us. We sat, still quietly, in the woods; checking weapons for readiness, in Faldorn's case plying Aquerna with her druidic berries.

Durlyle seemed watchful and nervous, sitting on his haunches as if ready to spring and run at the first noise of a wolfwere. "Are you all right?" I said; I could remember my own first days trying to adventure.

"Forgive," he said quietly, "I have not run this far beyond the wall since I was a pup of ten or eleven winters, nor seen such fight."

"You've helped, like Imoen said," I told him, and Imoen gave a reassuring grin in his direction. "Will you tell us more of your people's history when we return to the village? I want to know more."

He returned her grin with that broad and slow-opening smile. "If there is favour in return, perhaps."

"Another one?" Imoen placed a hand to her forehead in mocking anxiety. "Not another baby, brother, or doll?"

"No; but a cloak," Durlyle said simply. "It draped our village centre; it came from the old ship-home. It is old, as old as we people. It symbolizes the past we come from, and we use it to move onward. It blew north, and beasts may have it as trophy, for it bore smell of village on it. It is symbol, it not so important as life, but it is ours."

"If we can," I promised. Shar-Teel snorted.

"If they troubled not to rip up some scrap of material," she said.

"No. Joined among the beasts are some who did not wish to belong and left the village," Durlyle said, "they know of symbol to us. You know how important symbols can be?" I agreed; so many wars in history have been fought for claimed reasons as simple as the roles of precedence at a formal
dinner, or the failure to refer to a country by its proper name, or imagined blasphemy of some deity.
"It would...interest me, to know more of your lives." I thought that he turned back to Imoen and me.

"A nauseating enough conversation that even I would demand we fight these disgusting beasts," Viconia said, bringing herself to her feet. There were a lot of aspects of surface life that Viconia found nauseating; I didn't take it as significant, I thought. Then she gave Durlyle one of those particular glances as she stood, her tunic dislodged around her chest; he averted his eyes.

"You have a splendid companion," he said to Ajantis, joining in the squirrel-petting with Faldorn. "Her coat is so bright, a different kind to those here."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Aquerna told him, rather flatly; Viconia scowled. We stood to find our way to the wreck.

When the air had started to smell of the ocean once more, Durlyle pointed to the first sight of Wandering Eye. In the distance there was a tall mast overhead, perhaps the last of the four masts, shiplines still clinging to it, perhaps the remains of a flag. Balduran had flown the city's coat of arms with pride on his voyages, field azure with single-masted galleon above a terraced field of sea on a Tethyrian-styled shield. But in such time and conditions it was impossible to expect too much to survive.

"It's magnificent," I said. Imoen stuck out her tongue at me.

"It looks to have been excessive defiling of nature's trees," Faldorn said, tapping a foot in impatience.

"It was ship-home of ancestors," Durlyle said, "but we have peace now where we belong."

We were close; I could have walked for hours after seeing that goal. The way turned downwards, now, the forest sloping on a hill as we walked to where the woods would meet the sand once more. The trees became shorter in height, but were more heavily clustered with vines and moss. Briefly we lost sight of the ship, but it came into view once more as we neared the island's northern harbour. Then Durlyle raised a hand.

"I smell—" he said; and at the same time Viconia spoke:

"Fool surfacers—I hear—"

A swift noise as if of wind. I reacted and ducked down not a second too slowly; and the next moment there was an arrow embedded in a tree, slightly above where my head had been. We separated, Imoen and Viconia diving to the ground, Faldorn beginning to cast, while Ajantis and Shar-Teel and me went for the archers, seeking cover behind the protections of the wilderness—

"Durlyle, stay down!" I called to him, for he seemed confused. He wasn't an adventurer, we needed to protect him— Then he obeyed, staying by Imoen. Another arrow whistled past me.

We didn't have Ajantis' shield any more. Shar-Teel was fastest to move, running, her course set for them. Wolves howled. The archers were in an open space, I saw, putting my back to an ash tree while arrows slammed into its trunk, past a bare grass clearing that gave them a chance to aim at any who came too close. I drew my own bow and aimed; let them flee from that, give Shar-Teel and Ajantis a chance. Imoen cast her missiles, and pink immediately flew across. I heard some howls change to pain, and then Shar-Teel was in the open. I had another arrow to the rough string; looked out from the shelter, and let it fly in the direction I could see humans and wolves on the horizon. Then Ajantis was there, the attackers' bows laid aside but a pack of wolves at Shar-Teel's feet. Faldorn still chanted.
Three humanlike beings, four wolves by their side, one with an arrow through its shoulder. I ran out with the Burning Earth. The humans erupted into the shape of wolfweres, as Kryla had done; two leaped for Shar-Teel, the third for Ajantis. Varscona swept to the thigh of a wolf; it howled and stumbled.

I joined them. I couldn't be as strong as them; but I could be quick to dodge, and Shar-Teel had taught me the vulnerable parts. The wolves snapped like the vampiric wolf and its companions to the east of Beregost temple. I'd learned since then. Slash widely; push them back with the blade's fire. Sweep away in a spin. Wolfwere, too close, claws and teeth and black fur, this time, even faster, I couldn't move in time—

Faldorn's entanglement sprouted from the grass below our feet and tripped the wolfwere. I stabbed forward, but too quickly the claws twisted the Burning Earth aside; I almost fell. A wolf snapped at me. I whirled away and brought the blade down. I saw Shar-Teel, her bloodlust in her face, cut straight through the neck of the wolfwere she fought. Then there was a scream.

I ran back. Ajantis held against the wolves, Shar-Teel duelling the wolfweres. I saw Faldorn down and bleeding, tossed aside like a bundle of rags; Imoen's mirror images fighting the wolves that swarmed her, Faldorn's wolf by her side; Viconia nowhere to be seen. A huge wolfwere, clawing Durlyle, hurting him—on purpose, it had to be, claw-slashes that weren't killing him for all Durlyle wasn't fighting properly, hung broken across a tree. *Arrows can be faster.* I aimed the shot to the wolfwere's back; the wood pierced its shoulder and remained in the wound, and it turned on me.

Another one that was too fast. My bow fell to the ground; I'd barely enough time to take up the sword once more. Bizarrely, there was an object tied upon the wolfwere's waist: the doll of a child, a pale rag-stuffed toy in a blue-flowered dress. Despite its monster's shape it wore a longbow across its shoulders.

Lunge forward, and it snarled over and across and aimed claws and teeth for your side. Recover by spinning right, and it wove past and pushed the sword aside with a blow of the claws, growling, burned but healing quickly. Then it hit; there was blood at my waist. That should mean time, a few minutes, the excitement the body fed to itself. I slashed down, at its leg; let it trip and fall. Another pain cut through my shoulder, deep and killing. My grip died. The sword stopped by the bone.

Then there was a flash of shadow behind the wolfwere; and Viconia's form appeared from darkness, her Sharran dull-silver dagger in the wolfwere's heart. She touched me and cast her healing spell swiftly. The pain stopped; Imoen was still fighting wolves, missiles called quickly from her hands. I helped her, and cleared enough of a path for her spell of confusion: the nutshellls dissolved between her hands, and the wolves howled and fled. Shar-Teel and Ajantis stood over three dead wolfweres and as many wolves. Viconia bent over Faldorn.

"Durlyle?" He opened his eyes, and spoke faintly; there was blood, but the cuts were not deep. I knelt over him.

"The hunter...kills slowly those who belong. I am less in need..."

I cast what sorcery I had left; he sat up, pale-faced, and by then Faldorn was able to cast her own healing spells, upon all of us.

Imoen took up the doll. "That little girl—" she said; Farthing was the name of the girl who'd asked for a toy taken by the beasts. She used words stronger than I'd heard from her before. "Creep," she finished, glaring and grimacing at the wolfwere's silver-pierced body; and then she winked at Viconia, pushing the doll upon her. "Hey, pretty blue lady, she asked you to help her."
We were within sight of the ship. The spike of her prow extended in the direction of the sea like the horn of a unicorn, and the legendary paint-stripped figure of the dwarven lady could still be seen upon the head. A gaping hole was in her side, though below the damage one could see the remains of the beautiful thing she had once been: the last ship of Balduran, a greater ship than even most constructed in recent years to sail the waters of Baldur's Gate. We'd killed the sentries, though the casters were beginning to tire; and if Maralee was right, there was a baby kidnapped in that place. There would be no sense in walking back to the village and allowing them to prepare more defences.

Shar-Teel had much the same thought. "More of these bastards to kill," she said, flicking blood from her blade. "Take the narrow ground with me, boy; casters, use anything you have; —and how good have you been getting at the shadow-trick, Skie?"

You change body and mind to blend into darkness; and Balduran's ship cast a long shadow, and the interior was almost black. (Which indicated that wolfweres could see in the dark, I thought.) The body weaves itself to merge into darkness, and remains there as long as one is silent and concentrating carefully; as for smell, that is less of a certain matter, and so I took the scent of one of the wolves we had killed, its fresh blood and still-warm fur, and promised myself a bath. Then stepped alone into the wreck.

It was dark; and I remembered the loss of the ring that gave better eyes, and regretted it. But outside it was day, and light crept in from crevices in the once-watertight vessel; I became used to it. The decks were large; Balduran had commanded two hundred men, more than that. Here, old barrels lay overturned and shredded to pieces, with no signs of their former contents remaining; provisions, most likely. Wolves stalked and howled and guarded, and I walked quietly past them. Ladders ought to be placed near the centre of the ship. This part of it was as holed as it was draughty; its inhabitants were a tide of wolves who could not climb, one wolfwere to guard them. Then there was the slatted ladder for the crew to climb, and in fact a broad wooden plank raised beside it as a ramp that wolves could step upon. I tested each metal ring carefully; if they squeaked, I would be seen, and most likely quick to die.

Above a smaller pack of wolves lurked; and wolfweres drowsed, piled upon each other like hunting dogs. The smell of carrion was overpowering here. I walked past the bones of a bear with rotten scraps of flesh clinging to them; fresher-killed deer that a wolfwere kept awakened sentinel over; and horribly, more than one skeleton that appeared to be human. Here there had once been more large spaces for storage, for all the provisions of a long voyage; and the lowest grouping of bunks for the men, now destroyed.

The next ladder had no ramp for those on four legs. I slowly pulled myself up, still within the shadows of the ship, and hid behind a bulkhead the moment I stepped into it, for then a wolfwere passed by and easily swung itself down. If I'd been a little later...

I should have given up and returned outside; they didn't expect me to go far, only to look in case of preparation. A beast gave a howl like that of a vampiric wolf. Here were more bunkrooms, and wider rooms designed for the storage of weaponry, casks for ruined black powder, racks on the walls for securing shields and swords and bows. Openings for cannons in the sides of the ship, long since ruined and defunct. Then there was a set of stairs to the highest deck.

This one seemed smaller, as if it had once been more elaborately walled and furnished. Fragments of peeling paint still clung to the walls; old cushions with the stuffing pulled from them and torn blankets lined it. Then I heard a child's cry.

In a splintered chest lay a fair-haired human baby, and over him bent a female wolfwere with teats. Peladan. There was no reason why wolfwere young could not appear human, I supposed; but the
child was of the description. But I couldn't rescue him then and there without us both getting killed, and the wolfwere sniffed the air. I slipped away. The concentration was growing too much for me; this deck seemed deserted, and behind a carved bulkhead I let myself step briefly out of the shadows and to take in a deep breath.

There should be a companionway up to the open air for this; Balduran's ship was four decks in height. No sound of footsteps—pawsteps—nearby. I stepped into the shadows once more.

I heard the ululations of an alto-pitched howl, up and down; from the largest cabin. Balduran's cabin, likely. I could not resist looking in the door: and saw another female wolfwere, covered by a torn and ripped robe that glittered with magic.

*The caster of the lights seen by the village.*

A spellcaster could break through shadow-hiding. I ran; if you were fast enough, you could continue quiet enough; if felt as if less weight was distributed once the body was in motion. *There.*

At last. I ran up the companionway, over broken planks atop it; and I was standing on the deck of Balduran's *Wandering Eye*. Gaping holes were torn in its once-proud timbers, and I walked in the shadow cast by a fallen mast. The wolfwere would have smelt one of their wolf-servants, I thought; but their wolf-servants seemed not to be able to climb up here, and if...

I reached the prow's spike up on the forecastle. A length of rope from the village was wound around my shoulders; I unhooked it and bound a sailor's knot around the wood. It was old, but when I pulled it held. The jumble of fallen timbers blocked me from first sight; a creature's footsteps came up on the deck, and I went down. The rope burned my hands; crying out would mean they'd kill me. Below a wolfwere prowled along the shores of the beach itself, on the water that came to the sandy rocks not far from where the ship rested. Perhaps in more time the waves would erode under the ship itself, and bring it once more into the sea for burial. The rope spooled out between my hands; sliding down, twenty feet above the ground, fifteen, ten, closer—

The rope gave way and I fell. The landing was flat, arms curled around my head, and bones shattered.

*Actually, if bones shattered you wouldn't be able to get up...* Above, the robed wolfwere had simply jumped, and stood far more easily than I'd scrambled back up. There was a howled spell and I felt myself running from her in fear. Then there was pain as if a hundred fire-ants ate at my shoulder: an acid arrow. I ran.

Imoen was there; Faldorn by her. Faldorn began to chant. Shar-Teel signalled Imoen, and she threw the rotten seagull egg far and yet with accuracy, into the hole in the bottom of the ship. The stinking cloud erupted there, and when Faldorn finished her spell a storm of insects blew over the wolfweres' caster.

I turned back to fight the wolfwere sorcerer. Shar-Teel and Ajantis raced out beside me. The caster slapped at the insects about her; and then saw us. She screamed out something over the buzzing of the insects: a single word, and we were blown away from her. A sphere of glowing blue erupted from her body and surrounded her: the insects were cast away, and she gestured to begin another casting.

"I'll *take* it—" Imoen said grimly; "Get the wolves from the ship!"

There were howls; some wolves had broken free of Imoen's cloud. Faldorn chanted the gestures to her enchantment. They rushed past us; Ajantis brought Varscona down through the skull of a wolf,
and a taller wolfwere broke past him toward me.

**Claws slashing. Can't run away—** Durlyle and the others were close behind me. **Sidestep and** speed. The Burning Earth swept through the air; elaborately quick on purpose. The wolfwere followed it. **Under in the dance. Can't wear him down—have to wait for neck or heart left open—**

I duelled him; managed to keep going. We'd stepped away from the rest of the battle, though not so close that the wolfwere could get Durlyle and the casters. The pace was exhausting in the short space of it—**not so bad as Shar-Teel, Shar-Teel's better than this—** There was a pain on my shoulder, but it couldn't be a deep cut. The flame blade glanced off the claws while my body moved away.

Then Faldorn finished her entanglement. Grasses sprung up; the wolfwere struggled, his feet taken. I spun around him to press the sword into his back, where Shar-Teel had said the heart was. He fell with a black hole in his chest, and I fought the next wolf that sprung at me.

Imoen shouted; pink missiles slammed into the wolfwere-sorceress' shield. It was a rough thing. I thought I saw: blue and only a sphere like a ball of rags was a sphere, inexact and crude: and all three of Imoen's attacks slammed into the thinnest part of it, wreaking a hole above the caster's left shoulder. The second group she cast made it directly into her enemy's body, and there was a howl. Shar-Teel's sword ripped through the belly of a grey wolf.

The wolfwere sorceress howled, the pitch so high that at first I did not recognise the sound. It was as the gong rung within Durlag's tower, the peal of all our **fears**—

**It's magic I'm not supposed to be afraid it's magic I'm not supposed to be afraid—**

Ajantis ran from the fight. Teeth sunk into my calf, and I slashed down with the sword; the bite released itself and fur burned. Shar-Teel swore; Faldorn cried out, Durlyle shouted in wrenching torment—

Imoen commanded. "Vic! Now!" she asked, and Viconia chanted. A shock of dark blue ran across us all; Viconia gasped for breath, and we were free from fear. Ajantis stepped back to his post; "Forgive me—" he panted, though the magic hadn't even lasted so long that there was something to forgive.

Both Imoen and the sorceress were casting again; preparing something. Imoen's was faster: her mage hand materialised behind the wolfwere, bigger than Edwin's had been in the lair of the spiders. The caster didn't turn her head to see, continuing her spell even as Imoen kept up her own chant; the mage hand reached for a broken plank of Balduran's ship, and lifted it high in the air directly above the wolfwere's head. Then Imoen let it fall. It ripped through the shield's weakness, and the caster's body fell, her skull destroyed.

Imoen's next casting was her confusion, scattering the enemy wolves. They howled and fell; Shar-Teel stepped up to the way inside the ship.

"More wolfweres and wolves," I said, "four inhabited decks, on the top only wolves. And the child. But he's not a hostage, right? They're looking after him, so I hope..."

"They would keep him to try to make him one of themselves," Durlyle said softly. "But he is alive, and you will rescue him..."

Ajantis nodded. "They know our position already," he said, "let us fight to save the child."

The wolves that defiled the the bottom of the **Wandering Eye** were entangled and confused; but the wolfweres and others I had seen ran down to fight. Shar-Teel and Ajantis, in front, gave thick cuts to
them; I supported them, and Viconia sunk her silver dagger into those already fallen. Faldorn chanted welcome healing spells, lurking behind us. The way was clear to step into the second level, and the wolfweres attacked. Not all of them were as strong as Kryla's band, or the hunters; and dreadfully, I saw a small wolfwere at my height, trying to fight Shar-Teel, spitted on her sword. She couldn't have done anything else with it trying to kill her, but they did have adolescents and pups themselves— A wolf, dark-furred like a vampiric wolf, sprung at Ajantis' throat; he cut forward with Varscona, and then I took its exposed belly with the flaming sword. It burned, quickly dead. A large wolfwere pushed past Ajantis, and with Faldorn's help I killed it.

*On this island, they have only the natural wildlife and a peaceful village; they aren't as well-practised killers as other monsters. They're weaker than legends of werewolves that prey on human settlements and fight armoured guards... Or it was partly that we'd become strong. Shar-Teel led, and fought them with as much strength as she'd done against the demon. The Burning Earth gave light when unsheathed, and harmed them.*

"I have no more castings," Faldorn said, her voice exhausted. On the third level of Balduran's ship—we would examine it, once there were no more wolfweres trying to kill us—we had found a brief pause. The bodies lay around us; Ajantis plunged Varscon into those adult wolfweres with still-twitching limbs.

"You are injured," Durlyle said to me, and brought out bandages and a green ointment from his own bag. He'd stayed beside Imoen, safely protected. I hadn't noticed the deep slashes on my right arm; he bound it tightly enough to stop the loss of blood, and the liniment seemed to cleanse the wound of dirt. His large hands were slow-moving and careful, gentle even though the span of my wrist would have been wrapped almost by his palm alone. Then Ajantis and Shar-Teel.

Howls echoed, and from above they came rushing down at us. The female wolfwere I had seen nursing the human child, though the child himself thankfully not in view; and four others, all huge in size. Their leader seemed to be the biggest among them: his fur jet black, tipped with silver about his shoulders and back.

"I Karoug," he howled, "and you kill witch-mate!"

"He is supposed to lead them," Durlyle said in fright, "be careful—"

He was—stronger than Shar-Teel, and still faster. His claws ripped into her, and if she'd been in her plate she might have been better; but she bled badly. She pushed her greatsword in the ship's confining space, but the wolfwere claws were too close; too easily finding her. There wasn't time—I flailed with the burning sword, two of them around me in black masses of fur and teeth. If they knew Imoen did it—

Imoen cast, empty nut-shells in her hands, and her last confusion fell. Karoug was not affected, but Shar-Teel slashed through one, shoulder to opposite waist; and Ajantis killed the female. Time and breathing-space and a temporary advantage enough, even Viconia going into the fight with her dagger, Faldorn's club brought down. In a desperate effort Shar-Teel's sword was brought through Karoug's neck, though his claws were inside her body. I lunged forward to stop the last one from reaching her.

A baby cried in the distance.

"Get off me, male," Shar-Teel said. Viconia was bent down beside Durlyle, pulling the cloth bandages tight around her.

"Your stomach is whole, rivvil," she said, "obviously the luck of the fool that you live." She
tightly closed the cloth with all her strength even as Shar-Teel winced, and carefully spread a leaf paste around the edges of the injury.

We found Peladan once more; he was adorable, and started crying the moment I picked him up.

"Give him to me, I'll do it properly," Imoen said. "Ooo's a sweet little...ew! That's disgusting!"

"An uncontrolled natural reaction," Faldorn said, although she didn't offer to hold the baby.

Ajantis sighed. "I had two younger brothers and a niece," he said, and managed to clean and swaddle the child with a scrap of cloth, who complained far less with him.

There were wolfwere pups in the ship: nine of them, shaped like beasts rather than people.

"We cannot murder them and they will die abandoned," Durlyle said; Ajantis nodded. "The village will take in and teach better; it must," he said with emphasis. They were only children, after all; at least they could be guard dogs of a sort, the mad thought crossed my mind. Three of the young wolfweres snapped fiercely at his hand when he reached too closely to them. "Will you escort village elders here and who would take them tomorrow?" he asked of us.

"Who'd suckle some monster-brat?" Shar-Teel said scornfully, pale below her tattoos and holding herself together, blood already starting to soak through the bandages. She taught me, but she never seemed...maternal, to anyone.

"They do not have to be monsters. They are but pups," Durlyle said forcefully; and even though it tried to bite him, he picked up the smallest of them, a light-brown-furred blend of monster and toddler. "I would take and teach." He spoke soothingly to the pup, almost growling in imitation of its language; and managed to tie it to his chest like a mother's sling for carrying a child. "The rest will be here with food and water until we come again."

The brig we locked behind the pups; and the rest of the ship we prowled.

"Your cloak." I found it upon the fourth deck, on the floor of the lair of the wolfwere-sorceress.

"Frail and old, and yet none the worse for wear." Durlyle handled it with reverent joy, that slow-blossoming smile of his upon his face. There was more for me to discover, and I lingered despite his poor opinion of Balduran: a golden shortsword bearing his name engraved to the hilt; a damaged book of spells of one of the ships'-mages, for Imoen to read the magic contained; the butter knife that some accounts of Balduran said he prized as a gift from his mother, still sparkling with preservation enchantment; the ship's very wheel in the fresh air on the deck, carefully carved but too big for me to do more than take a charcoal rubbing on cloth of the gravings that remained on it; a dented mage-augmented compass whose needle still swung to point northward, the old-fashioned design marking its age and great value; most preciously of all, a tattered logbook. The spidery script had been torn and damaged by the wolfweres' awful depredations and hard usage of the ship, and yet the thick cover had still kept parts of the ship's log safe and legible. Deciphering it would take time and effort, so I wrapped and packed it carefully to keep until we returned to the village. Balduran's own writing, Balduran's own logbook...

I must have seemed ridiculous in excitement, for Durlyle laughed; though it was to share joy rather than mock. "The past of your pack is important to you," he said. "My people are still young..."

"Young, but with history," I replied. He watched me; his eyes were a dark velvety brown, almost like the soulful look of a large and lovely dog. "If you would share more of it...I would be very pleased to hear."
Peladan and the pup interrupted our talk while we walked once more to the village home.

—

Did he want to go upon it? Did he wish to go upon it? Edwin started to fear once more—

—

113. Island Stories

8 Eleasias

"My great-great-grandmother came to the shore on the ship-home, but lived not long," Durlyle said, and I wanted him to continue. "I was born not a leap to the south of here, long after the beasts were cast out of the village, and here I live. I learn history from old bruxo, teacher in lore and healing. I learn much from him, but he keep stories as stories, and I wish to know of...truth."

The wolfwere pup slept in a rough cradle in Durlyle's hut, rocked with a foot. It had been a...busy day; guiding elders back to the wolfweres' ship and having to kill some grown monsters who had escaped, and the blue witch on the eastern shores. The Sirine Queen.

"I think that's important," I said. "Sometimes I've read two texts and seen two opposite ideas of what really happened—so you have to work out what the historian was trying to say, and where they learned what they say they learned. Even while we've been travelling I found two versions of the History of the Dead Three, both actually by real historians—" one in Beregost, the second in Ulcaster; the story's usually only treated as half theology and half tale instead of a proper look at the ancient time. "—It mustn't be very interesting to you, I'm sorry, that story's about three very nasty people who've been dead since I was little—"

"Please do not apologise," Durlyle said, holding up a broad hand. "You are fascinating. Both warrior of fire sword and clever historian."

He...liked what I'd helped to do for the village. "Balduran founded my city," I said. "Why do you scorn him so for the past?"

Durlyle looked thoughtful, gazing out of his square window to the air at the tranquil night beyond his cabin walls. It was cool already, though still summer; and I wondered how he could bear winter. He lit a rough lamp upon a wooden table, which warmed the room and shed golden light between us and across the fur of the wolfwere pup. "He shipped and collected, but that of no value to us. We use land for needs only, a few things for beauty or history but all share alike in labour we make. Balduran took and would rather scuttle than free. He lived with beasts for all that we care, for his traits were more in common with they." Soft shadows flitted across his face like the wings of birds while he spoke seriously; of what no Baldurian would ever have said.

His traits: more in common with those monsters? "He was much cleverer than they were, and obviously travelled far and tested himself against a lot more," I said. "He discovered Anchorome and Sossal, and fought sea elves and giant whales and all sorts of things, and made the best maps of the Trackless Sea and brought back gold and treasures for our city..."

My father tried to sail to Anchorome after Balduran himself before I was born. Balduran was brave to do it...

(And if—when—I ever told him that I'd gone to where Balduran's last ship really was...)
"Whose treasures did he bring back?" Durlyle said.

"I thought he traded for them," I said. "Because the natives have different value systems, so there are stories that he'd give them things like wine, that they didn't have, in return for the gold that they had in abundance."

_The natives_, I thought, and took another look at Durlyle. He was somewhere between Kaishas Gan and fair-haired Maralee in feature: brown-haired, brown-eyed, and broad-faced, with darkened skin not solely from working outdoors. Part descendant of the Sword Coast; part those natives Balduran had travelled with, once...

I hadn't fully read the remains of Balduran's logbook, and there were sections of the text I needed to consult other books to properly understand. But I remembered parts that I had deciphered, returning through my mind as I watched Durlyle's face.

_Here this land is almost for the taking, with only a measure of 'diplomatic' discussions as the cost, 'diplomatic' phrased for deliberate sarcasm._

_The death of so many of the crew...I shall conscript replacements this night from local populace..._

_One hundred and fifty new hands...their eyes are resigned..._

_I dislike a crew with no fire in their bellies, but I do suppose it is better than a fire in the hold..._

"He took," Durlyle said simply. "My mother-of-mothers came as slave."

There had been manacles and whipping-posts on board the ship. Not sufficient in number to carry an entire crew in chains, as was the case of rowers of the old Chondath empire. But more than enough information to feel as sickened as the Cloakwood.

_Balduran was from a different time...but that is not an excuse, any more than for me..._

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't realise...I do now. In the city itself we have never allowed slavery, even before the Grand Dukes. I know it's evil." Historians are supposed to challenge what is wrong of perceptions of the past.

"We run free now," Durlyle said. At that moment, the wolfwere started to whine; he picked him up to give comfort. There seemed already less fur on the pup's body. Perhaps it—he—was gradually becoming more human-like; Durlyle fed the baby with a pottery flask of thick goat's milk. Only five beside him had offered to preserve the lives of the wolfwere young ones. "I ought to give him name if he is to belong," he said; the pup still did not look human, but even pets had names. "Ajantis, perhaps, for one of his rescuers."

_Flattering—or not. "His name probably comes from the word for a beautiful island in Chessentan myths," I said. "So I—suppose it suits this place."

The pup at last settled from the milk. Durlyle calmly placed him back to rest.

"What do you mean when you say you belong?" I said, curious. He looked into my eyes, answering.

"The words for it are...difficult," he said. "We are a people who live as one. You would understand if you were one of us. Those who stay must belong..."

It was a good place, to be here; but we'd done this in part because we wished to leave it.
"There are outsiders, like the beast, and there are us," Durlyle said. "Outsiders have good and evil as we do, but we are respecting. You are alike us in some ways. We belong, and there is little more to it than that." He shrugged with rippling shoulders, openness in his face even though he had managed to express little.

"Do you worship a god?" I said; perhaps it was religious ecstasy of some sort they talked of. "A divinity, a spirit above." I pointed vaguely to the sky outside his hut.

"There is mother spirit in sun-warmed earth," Durlyle said, "and in harvest we burn sweet grasses for her." Then it was natural that Faldorn liked them; and I did too, for it sounded that their rites were much less extreme than her ideas. "And in skies there are stories of those among them: in winter there is shape of celestial woman with sword of fire," he said.

Perhaps that was the constellation of Cassima the Phoenix, or the Swordsman that is called Cymrych Hugh by the Mooshae people. A warmth grew in my face, remembering his earlier words of that particular celestial.

"We know of spirits of the sky by the before," he said, a certain pride gradually infusing into his voice. "Marks of a people even before us, long-gone. Those parts were close to the lair of the beasts; but now way is free to—"

I spoke before he'd finished his sentence. "And will you take me?" I asked, holding out a hand as if to seal a bargain; and he enfolded mine in his warm, broad palm for a moment that seemed longer than it was.

—

I could hear our Ajantis snoring in the longhouse allocated us to sleep; Imoen studied the ships'-mage's spellbook by the pink magelight over her head. She wore Balduran's sword, since it was enchanted so that even the wolfweres had not damaged it and either the gold or the magic interested her; or both. We had regained the emaciated Evan, I remembered, seeing Faldorn's brow deeply furrowed in her meditation. Next to her Viconia prayed in a strikingly similar pose, half-kneeling and half-croslegged, her hands upon her holy symbol rather than rooted in the earth as Faldorn's. Shar-Teel ran a rough whetstone across her blade, purple sparks flickering sharply from it. She sat close to those of the crew who were still awake, and whispering to each other.

"They're showing us their ship tomorrow or we take it," Nowell said gruffly, and to my shock even Tellarian seemed to agree with him.

"We can't take it if it's not even built; and they're holding the celebrations tomorrow," I said.

"What care we?" Lorancs gestured widely in the air. "It's a damned creepy place. You come; they teach you their ways; and you don't get to go away again."

"Amnian called Taloun in a hut by the shore," Shar-Teel said brusquely. "Castaway. Scared to tell too much." She scowled as if it had been a personal insult to her. "Came; stayed too long; became one and never made it back."

"Kaishas promised," I said. It would be all wrong for there to be a fight here. Durlyle and Maralee were nice; it wasn't their fault about Kaishas and her husband—which I guessed that Imoen hadn't let on about, which was good in terms of avoiding bloodshed. "She ought to show us that she has a boat, you're right. And when she does that, we've two copies of the sea-charts to get free by."

Tellarian nodded. "Uppity chieftainess took mine," he said, "but the job can be done with the other."
He'd a look of grim resolution; Evan at the least showed that there were perils to men on the island.

*I am a Queen among sirines; and you are but fools to dare to cross my path,* she had said, and though it was but hours before the memory was as a swift-fading dream of enchantment and a painful beauty. *Waves at my command fly higher than the seahawk's soaring zenith in the sky; the earth of the bottom of the seas is mine to crack and rend open as a thousand of land earthquakes in strength. Sharks rise at my wish to slay with teeth, and krakens are my pets in my pearl dwellings below the waves. You dare to challenge my rightful...possession?*

She had been a woman blue and scaled, streams and rivulets of water flowing always about her body, her seaweed hair the pearlenscent green of an oyster's shell deep under water. Meiala of the Tower had been beautiful, but to the Sirine Queen she was as my Great-Aunt Cincilla compared to Viconia. Faldorn had purposefully instructed Ajantis to remain behind, for sirines chose men to attract through their songs and enchantments...

"Yeah," Imoen said, looking up from her spellbook, keeping the peace. "They're so nice they couldn't get rid of the beasts themselves, so there's nothing to worry about, right? We've weapons and spells and everything."

It was true enough that no arms had availed anything against the Sirine Queen. Even Faldorn did not dare to do anything; only went to her knees in reverence at the vision and respectfully requested the return of the man, for they had taken him for nigh three tendays.

*But we sirines simply must mate with a human male,* the Queen said, deep waters flowing in her light laugh of sunlight on the sea. *They are happy to oblige when the song calls them; the song you hear even now. And I could hear the calling of voices like lyres, mother-of-pearl smooth sounds that drew to the ocean itself; one would go willingly to even a drowning by the summoning of such melodies. Viconia whispered fiercely below her breath, and that aided us to resist. It is our time and our right, spoke the Sirine Queen's flawless voice. Surely even land-dwellers understand that all have needs.*

"Do not underestimate the concealments of pathetic weakness," Viconia said, opening her eyes upon her prayer's ending; her voice was rather flat over the insult. She'd categorically refused to play with Farthing, though she had handed over the doll on the grounds that obviously it was a useless object and little girls were better off playing with toy tentacle whips. Farthing and Solianna had been inspired to braid some shore-weeds together. She wore her hood down upon her neck while she was in the village. She looked across at me. "Simply observe what this jor wun l'golhyrr has become."

"Nobody's all-powerful, yes," I said, and only after realised the insult to her. Viconia simply shook out her white hair, stealing the attention of most of the crew.

In that sea-washed cleft of green-veined rocks opened to a sharp-edged rockpool at the western cliffs, Faldorn had replied to the Queen, pleading: "Your needs, Lady, must surely have been satiated within the time. By the lore I know of, I do not think it would harm you to return the man to us. For our—for one of our other companions has vows they would be concerned with." She did not reveal Ajantis as a man. "In return I can only offer this natural gift to you."

She offered a single seashell to the Sirine Queen, raising it forth between her hands as she knelt. I feared that it would be seen as insult: but instead the Queen brought it to one of her perfect-formed ears.

*Ah, she spoke, a different kind of music to the song the dolphins echo.*

"I gave to it wolves howling as one that I have heard in the moonlight; of my memory of the beating
of an oaken heart that existed before even the first coming of the elves; of the wind through pine
needles in autumn; and of the cry of a distant eagle," Faldorn said. The seashell shimmered briefly
green-brown by her casting.

*A present sufficient to bring us pleasure*, the Sirine Queen said, and raised her hand simply in the air,
a single and almost uncaring gesture. Four sirines carried a human man between them and laid him
upon the sand. He was thin and starved, grey-haired and weakened almost to death. *You may take
him: and nothing else that lies upon my shores.*

Then she had disappeared into the waves below, diving and vanishing with a dolphin's liquid grace;
and I had to blink to clear my eyes, as if she was the reflection of light on the sea. Imoen put down a
seashell that she herself had gathered, a long one of a violet colour with a glittering inner surface.
Shar-Teel helped to carry Evan's wasted form to his brother. We returned to the village; and they
welcomed us again for what we'd done.

"We've got to go back," Imoen said, looking at me.

—

Edwin felt her body on his, red lips touching first his cheek—

—

*jor wun l'golhyrr* - rat in a trap

—

**114. Skein True and Fair**

9 *Eleasias*

The rose-pink soft fingers of the dawn's early lights rose above the pale bright rocks of the eastern
cliffs, and gold flowed across the tops of tall trees. Iridescent dewdrops crossed the thick grass; the
way was quiet and clear, and I forgot to feel tired at the early hour. There was a warmth in the air,
and a cool sea breeze from the north-east with the smell of fresh salt. Durlyle looked tired, dark
shadows under his eyes, finding that to be an adopted parent of a wolfwere pup was difficult; but
Ajantis' namesake seemed definitely less hairy by today. His skin below his sparser fur was fairer
than Durlyle's, and his eyes were a bright blue, rather sharper in colour than the original. He chewed
on a lump of goat bone inside the sling Durlyle used to carry him.

"He...woke often in the night," Durlyle confessed, trudging over the beginning of the rocks on the
eastern cliffs. "But he is quieter now; and we will enjoy this day. He will be raised in the same peace
as I."

"Did your mentor take you here?" I asked; we could see the sea now, the yellow sand of the beach
laid out below the rocks like a thick ribbon, a natural lagoon and indeed the shape of the promised
boat lying upon the waters in its obscure place between the walls of the rockface. But let the others
inspect that; Durlyle and I would go further, and to a more interesting place.

"He did; he find stories and tell clan," Durlyle said. "Here long before we came, and we cannot
carve as they. It is unknowable what people before were like and gave stones to tell."

Stone-carvings of runes, he had given me to expect.
"Only the carvings; no bones or anything?" I asked, and then felt ashamed of myself. It wasn't as if I was one of those strange necromancer-archaeologists, and it was such a subject for a day like this.

"The markings only," Durlyle said. "My teacher thought that their dwelling-places would have been near, but lie long buried by disturbances of the earth."

That had happened to other great cities of the past: taken by earthquake or drowned by mountain ashes.

"Or perhaps they needed no dwellings—" Durlyle said, somewhat whimsically. But in the distant past, I suppose, there were powerful magics before the fall of Netheril. It depended on how or if I could give an approximate date for these remains, whatever they would turn out to be.

We walked further along the cliff face, and the pup raised his head to look about. The sea flowed in soft tides across the sands, and the sun had risen to give the day a comforting warmth. We left the sight of the moored ship far behind, continuing north along the eastern coast, far into the territory that the wolfweres had held. The pup whined, and Durlyle stopped briefly to drip creamy milk into his mouth from a hide flask; human's food.

I saw it the moment before Durlyle, jubilantly, pointed it out. It was a lone half-column of stone that jutted tall and proud from the sand; it was made by no natural means; it was nobly artistic in architectural design; —and it was absolutely foreign to me.

"It has been long since I have seen it. And it awes me as much as the first time it met my eyes," Durlyle said softly, fixing his eyes to it as to a bright distant lodestar.

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: look on my works, ye mighty, and despair..." the old lines came unbidden to my lips. A vast and trunkless leg of stone; alone in the sands, nothing besides remaining. Yet the words of memory remained graven upon that pedestal. There was ineffable tragedy that clung to it: a forgotten island and a people still more forgotten, any who could see it far distant strangers to the days of its making. Carved inscriptions, I could see by squinting, marked the surface of the half-broken pillar. "Can we get closer?" The peaks were steep.

"There is a path," Durlyle said, and pointed almost gallantly to a smooth passage between a pair of high rocks that would have been almost impossible to discern. The way was steep and curved, but the rocks had been worn to smoothness by wind, and it was possible for him to pass through with the child. Then we were on the beach; and I saw more than the lone column. I was silent. The cliff face was covered by glyphs that had been carved with incredible precision even for today. "Only this remains of the before people; this and the column."

None of them were symbols that I knew of, or even knew the form of. They were intricate and somewhat of the structure of language rather than art. Some symbols occurred more frequently than others, and there seemed a sort of order where some combinations showed tendency to occur in conjunction; but impossible to decipher. Plainly non-pictographic, or at least not pictographic in a way that my understanding of symbol could pierce. We walked slowly across them, the column at our backs, our eyes taking in all that could be taken.

"These are what we believe are star-maps," Durlyle said, showing a section of more clear purpose. "Some we do not see in the sky, but others are shapes pups are taught to find by night." I saw the dotted markings of astronomical positions, geometrical lines and sketchings about them, and strange and exaggerated pictures. A creature something like a roaring leopard, rearing high and brave. A figure like nothing so much as a spinning kaleidoscope, the drawing almost seeming to rotate as the eye fixed upon it. That one was close to the tides, though; I could see below that the water had eroded the rock, and sorrowed at the dreadful loss that beckoned.
"That is the celestial lady," Durlyle said, showing it. She was, perhaps, female and human-like; but impossibly tall and slender, the sword she carried majestic in its shape of stars. Oddly proportioned; but as beautiful as a few sketched lines on stone could make it. Behind her back was a shape not unlike a wing, though it seemed not quite bound to her back. I reached up to touch the hieroglyphs that spun above it, perhaps explaining who she truly was and what she was supposed to have done. The surface of the carvings was glass-smooth. Not a technique I had seen before at all. And it had certainly succeeded to last its time. "This last of running free we make from the star in the north ourselves." The constellation was another strange image of alien aspect: furred and long-nosed, a little like a centaur and a little like a wolf and a little like a winged thrush. Was it intended as something that existed upon Faerun, or had at that time existed? So many questions; so much that a historian would die to finally gain the understanding.

We turned to the column; I had seen that it was light brown, and would have guessed it granite from a distance, or limestone perhaps. But more closely it seemed like...neither of those, not quite alike to the stones of other monuments I had seen. Nor was it of any rock I had glimpsed elsewhere on the island; not the same as the cliffs. It was cool to the touch, and covered by a multitude of spinning runes that seemed the same foreign language as the cliff carvings; the tides had eradicated some of these also, though the stone must have been far more durable than the ordinary rock. I looked at the runes, saw something within them; and then unsheathed the Burning Earth from its plain, modern-day scabbard.

The runes upon that of unknown tongue; and the runes on this place. Five lines, two scratches, and a circle, carven together as two characters combined. A similarity here, in-between other unknown and indecipherable characters; no, not a similarity. An identicality. The same tongue. I looked to Durlyle, and he saw it too.

"Is it...a common tongue in your land?" he said; his voice was reedy and half-broken in the silence that had sprung between us, no other sound audible but the waves that governed the shore.

I shook my head; I felt as if the blood had drained away from my face, down below my heart. "Neither is...a language known on the mainland. That I have the sword at all is only...coincidence..."

If only there was more than those two! If only these people had left a three-tiered stone as that found for ancient Untheric, showing a combination of Old Chessentan in the demotikan script and historical Mulhorandi in the pictographic form to translate and understand. Burning and Earth interwoven, deciphered by Iomn to have that meaning because of the magic animating the blade. But here she wouldn't be able to cast the spells, and when the cultural differences were large spells faltered. I could pick out the reoccurrence of those symbols separately in a few places, now; but they were not enough to read in the rest of it. By the celestial there was the sigil of burning, for that sword aflame she bore, but guesses of the other words of her led nowhere. Elsewhere I saw Earth reoccur three times. Common concepts of the earth in old texts were home, travel, crops; but each time I began to make that assumption on one of the nearby runes I found that it led nowhere. Burning, Earth, and...absolutely nothing. In a year and a day, perhaps; studying and searching and none else; trying to make lengthy chain of assumptions after lengthy chain of assumptions and hoping eventually to conjure a sensical story out of possibly entirely false imaginings; perhaps even if I was wrong that no scholar knew of this language, even though I was sure that in Baldur's Gate at least it was true...

It was a beautiful and amazing sight that I would have given much for the viewing, and yet of incredible frustration. Durlyle worked with me on the supplies we had taken with us, thin cloth and dark pigment to make some traced record of what those ancient peoples had made. We paid especial attention to the carvings nearest to what the tides had worn away; something at least that could be preserved for the sake of future knowledge and discovery. We laid out the cloths carefully to dry on the sand; and sat together at the column's base for something of a picnic while the tides foamed...
I'd known him for these four days, I thought, seeing Durlyle play with the pup—the baby, letting the little Ajantis crawl on the sands and examine seashells, picking him up when he came too close to our records. He was kind and caring, clearly and obviously, even enough to take in the child of his people's enemy and to frolic with that child on the beach; and he was contemplative and careful and loved the learning of history. And he was brave, the more so since he did not fight. He was broad and tall and gentler even than Minsc, for he was no warrior at all. Somewhat clumsy and taking a great deal of care in each of his movements to compensate for it; not particularly interested in the use of muscle, though his frame held little or no surplus weight. Harmless, and warm and broad and...able to enfold much in his careful arms. He'd shown what he was like by all he had done since we had come: he was a friend, and I thought that I knew all that I needed to know of his character. A good friend.

He looked up at me, and perhaps I'd been staring too long; at his bare brown arms, at his sun-drenched face and curling hair. I fixed my eyes on his own.

"You have travelled much, and seen much, in your land-home," he said, his expression warm and welcoming; "will you tell of your adventures?"

_It was dark and dripping and rather horrible in the Nashkel mines. And then Imoen and me were almost abandoned and trying to find Shar-Teel; and then Damon and everything that happened at the bandit camp...and then what I did in the Cloakwood. In truth it was..."

"The truth is that I haven't really been adventuring for long," I said, "I had some tutors for sword and bow before it, but most of what I know comes from Shar-Teel. A lot of it's...not very nice. And there are things I did that I wish I hadn't; I hurt some people that I shouldn't have. Killed some people that I shouldn't have." And yet Durlyle didn't change the look in his eyes; did not turn away in horror. "But we've done some things that I don't regret. We went to an underground tower—dwarves, you see, people from deep in the earth; and we found someone's son and rescued him and brought him to the surface. And then we saved the Sword Coast from a demon..." Things we had done, of late, that we could be grateful for.

He listened, wide-eyed, and I told the story in a few quick sentences. "There's...it's not so bad in our lands," I said. "There's much to see and travel to; a lot of places still that I think I'd like to visit someday. You could..._would_ you ever think of leaving, Durlyle? We could show you the world; there are people there as kind as you. You could see so much more of what shaped your people here, where you came from, and how amazingly different other lands can be..."

But he was shaking his head, and I stopped. "No..." he said, half-afraid in the tones of his voice, perhaps. "No, I cannot; others may wish, but there is no place for me. No place for young Ajantis..."

He looked to the child. "No, I must stay. I belong; I am content here. The other world must be only a dream of strange attractions."

"Then let it alone, and let us stay for the afternoon," I said; disappointment grew greater than I had expected, but it would be ungentle to make him feel guilty for his choice, and his responsibility. "We should remain friends, regardless of what comes."

"Yes," he said gently; and I wondered if I had not, in fact, given him the brief wish to leave and a struggle to speak of his decision. "What of you, Skie?" It was the first time I remembered him speaking my name: in his tongue the word lilted and flew upward like a bird. "What if you chose...to remain? You are heroes to this place; many would welcome you, as Taloun was not born to the village. We would..."
And I too paused, having been given the same wish to wonder if a different choice could be made. The child chose that moment to laugh, baring only slightly sharpened teeth, a sound that was not a howl but glee at finding a shell that twinkled brightly at him in the sunshine. Durlyle, this sight, his people's peace and freedom, this very isle. It wouldn't be so bad; rough, but an improvement upon the conditions of adventuring; and so content.

"But I have to go back," I said, and it was only by speaking that I was able to convince myself. "I saw... There is a man who wants me dead; and though Imoen doesn't know it yet I believe that he was the same man who killed her uncle. It's a dramatic story, but it's true. I have to go back with her; we have to find him once more and know he's not doing any more evil. I wanted to avoid him, but now I know we have to go and fight..."

It was Durlyle's sense of what was right that gave a reply of encouragement.

"I will dream of you successful, then," he said; "I have seen all of you fight to protect us. And you are so swift, so graceful. You dance; you dance with fire truly like the shape in the skies."

He knew little about fighting, for Ajantis and Shar-Teel were far better at it; but I do know how to dance. I took out the Burning Earth for him, and performed not a standard drill but movements I learned from a tutor who had performed on stage with his rapier: steps that were impractical for a true battle but elegant and a drawing for the eye, a dance with the fiery sword that would have been improved by its bright light. He smiled to watch.

"Beautiful; and impossible," he said; I sheathed the blade with a final flourish. The look in his eyes was far more of a compliment than any words. "There is one other of your skills I should like to see more of..."

We walked together further down the beach; the rock darkened to near-black stones, overhanging the sands in jagged patterns.

"Not everyone has the knack for it," I explained, "it was a kitchen-boy who taught me how, it's best to be old enough to understand when you do it for the first time... Using the shadows to hide away isn't magic, it's just a trick about how you move and how carefully you can fade away; you're not invisible, and definitely not invisible to other people who know how to do it or to spellcasters, if they want to find you. Something like Naril, Nerlan, I think his name was? He was nice, but he was only with us a tenday because he stole Cook's silver and ran away. Anyway, he showed me how; the first thing, he said, is that you stand under the darkness and stay as still as you can, not even moving a muscle..."

Durlyle obeyed; he blushed slightly, perhaps feeling a little silly.

"Even more still. Now, keep holding it... That's it." I held the child; he squirmed in my arms, but he didn't try to bite me and was warm. "The next step, which is the really difficult part and usually you can't finish it on the first try, is the mental part: you have to imagine the shadows covering you. I think of it as a bit like weaving cloth, embroidering; you've got the black thread and you're sewing it over yourself, like Imoen says she sews magic together. You think about how the shadows hide things and that everyone's just going to look past and around you, because you're just one of them. That's not so bad..."

We passed a pleasant hour or two by those hollows; laughing and talking between his many attempts to learn the skill. There were moments, I thought, when at least his legs were becoming enwrapped by the shadows; but then I'd want to say something or he'd want to say something, and we'd talk once more until at last the tides had come in far enough that it would be wise to turn back.
Then while we gave a last look to those shadows Durlyle pointed above them; to where on the rough ground of the black stone grew fronds of purple flowers, of a thick and beautiful scent that had just blown down to linger with us, and of plump and delightfully-formed petals.

"They are...simple flowers," Durlyle said, "that grow in but a few places; they are strangely alluring, and I have uses for them. Belladonna; beauty within and without... Could I ask the further task of you?"

"Willing as always," I replied, trying to swashbuckle properly for him, and clambered up the rocks; Imoen and I had done more than this in our time. I took the chance to look around, at the top of it, and plucked a bouquet for the taking.

He held them carefully and gently, and we both took in the strong scent. Somewhere between roses and sandalwood and jasmine, heavy and bewitching as if it tempted one to gently sleep in a field full of them. The deep purple colour lingered before the eyes even after one looked away from them.

"They are rare, and they are beautiful," he said. "Like many things. Like...friendship, and like other things..."

He took a single bloom from them, the one of perhaps the deepest purple and lack of blemish; and I felt him gently wind it into my hair. A blush had more than begun, I thought, in both our faces, and we stood close together. I could feel heat from his skin.

"Rare and beautiful?" I said; and quoted in a voice not certain of itself. "Go and catch a falling star; get with child a mandrake root; tell me where all past years are, or who cleft Asmodeus' foot..."

"All sights of amazement..." he said, trying to smile. "I suppose that adventuring heroes must be given...many flowers like this..."

"That's not true," I said, and his warm fingers still lingered by my earlobe. "And what of you... Many like Maralee are probably glad to know someone like you..."

"No. I have not received belladonna blooms before, or shared them..." Durlyle said, softly and slowly, and the child did not disturb the moment.

"There was one man," I said. I wanted to tell him the honest truth; and as I told it I felt that the bandages covering some long-ago wound had been ripped away, and below it was not the ugly scar expected but instead skin that had been healed. "His name was Eldoth. I was in love with him, but he left. I'm glad he did; I wanted to be glad at first that he was still alive, and now, no matter what he deserves or doesn't deserve... I've come long past him now. Grown differently..."

"I am...not used to this..." Durlyle said. We were both hesitant, and did not move out of each other's grasp. My right hand reached out to rest against the skin of his arm; there was far more of it than I could wrap inside my fingers.

"The night before he left..." Viconia, gloating of knowing, was the only person I had even spoken to; I had not even wanted to tell Imoen of it. Durlyle would be disgusted, but I had to tell him the truth. Probably it was better this way, because we would be separated. "I did it with him. I even asked for it. What I remember of it is that it was painful. Though that wasn't his fault, truly. My fault."

"No," Durlyle said, "no, of course not. I do know it's not supposed to be painful. Feelings are kind to one another. That for you, you should come to know...of others..."

"I know others," I said. We were both fumbling, leaning closer together above the child's head. I raised my face to his, he bent down and enfolded me in his arms. Somehow—for quite a long time,
actually, everything coming to a standstill for that moment—we kissed. Salt sea and belladonna bloom and sun above us, grass and stone by us, distant history within the background...

Ajantis squirmed, and we turned from each other.

"Think nothing of it," I said, and blinked heavily. "I doubt we'll forget each other, Durlyle."

Something was tugging at the corner of my eye; I'd seen the first trace while fetching the flowers. It was a distraction that I welcomed.

"There's something concealed by...almost like the wall with the secret passage at Ulcaster, I think; it might be a cave." It lay between the black stones of the beach; a shadowy glimmer that to my eyes seemed to conceal a passageway that lay behind it, a dark space that looked to run deeper than only shadows from an overhang. "Can't we go look at it before we go back?"

—

"Leave the gauntlets on," Edwin heard her request, order to him—

—

My name is Ozymandias... is by Shelley, wilful misinterpretation of it by Skie.

Go and catch a falling star - John Donne, misinterpretation again Skie's fault.

—

115. Castaway

"I have always missed to know of this place; and my instructor also," Durlyle said. The Burning Earth was enough light for us in our journey into the long black-stoned cave. "Perhaps none have come since our forerunners. The beasts have left no trace here," he said, looking about in wonder. The passageway was short enough that he had to bend down to walk through; the sword shed light on veins in the rock that glittered with bright quartz coloured green and gold and white, of swirling patterns that seemed the more mystical in the flicker of the flame blade. Above our heads the rock seemed solid enough, and the path clear to walk along. There was an unnatural sort of effect about its concealment upon the beach, as if it had been enchanted. But there were no signs inside here of previous inhabitation. But perhaps, in fact, it had once been used by those people of far long ago... I felt my heart beat faster even as we hastened along to outpace the tides. It was entirely dry where we had reached now, so if worst came to worst we certainly wouldn't drown; but our friends would be worried.

The way widened into a clear cave, the roof high enough for him to stretch and stand properly again. The rocks were rough below our feet, and a glistening stream of fresh water ran past us. Durlyle knelt down and scooped a palmful of it, sniffing at it; pure, he pronounced. The stream led us still further, and he breathed in the air.

"I smell some freshness," he said, "the cavern must lead back above ground! So we may continue. I think it must come out somewhere near the ship of Balduaran, where of course only beasts knew in the past."

"Then we have to find it, don't we?" I said, and we shared grins of excitement. Onwards to follow the stream, shining silver from the light-coloured rocks in its bed. Long stalactites hung from the
ceiling, in beautiful rock formations like a cathedral. We lingered simply to stare at what surely very few had seen in a long time. And we were near each other, trying to talk easily; it helped to be carried away by these new sights opening before us, young Ajantis seemingly quite cheery to be in the dark.

Then Durlyle lost his footing, slipping and landing on his back; and after I helped him and little Ajantis up, we saw that he had fallen upon a block of petrified wood. A block of old wood, neatly carved and sawed. We looked at each other in the flicker of the sword's fire, and I saw exactly in his brown eyes what we felt. There wasn't even a thought that we might be rushing into long-ago dangers and traps set, only that we had found signs of something living here. Our steps became faster, with no thought of anything but seeking what more there was to be discovered.

And then, not far from where the stream seemed to bubble once more underground from the hidden spring that birthed it, was a village.

There had been some sort of earthquake in the distant past, it was plain. The passage was narrow; there was a small amount of light that did not come from the Burning Earth, so it was plain that we had come close to the surface once more. Rocks lay over and buried structures that might once have been lived-in; it was a small cave after all, and the only thing in it was a hutlike building made of a similar type of wood to the fragment found. All else was destroyed and in only more fragments that lay like the rocks.

"The beasts did not build; we did not build," Durlyle said in wonder. "Can you see in your mind what it once was?" My eyes conjured visions of tall towers where rocks now blocked sight, of a hundred strangely-built dwellings like the slightly odd hut in front of us. Perhaps once this was above-ground and saw the sky, before the earth had moved; perhaps once as many people lived as the island could sustain. Or more likely fewer, but imagination has no proper boundaries. The geometrical angles of the hut that we could see seemed not quite exact, not quite of the right proportions that suited the eye and crafted a structure that would stand; skewed by the earthquake, perhaps. We must have a proper look at what lay within this remnant, and with Durlyle I went easily forward to the last survivor of the far-old village that even Balduran had never had a chance to discover.

A voice; and I know that I screamed in simple shock. I thought it a ghost. But it was querulous, and old, and somewhat unhinged:

"You're not figments, are you? You're not figments! I'm not wasting any more time talking to figments! Stop that infernal screeching, you infernal female! Figments! Bad doggies! Bad doggies... BAD DOGGIES CHEW YOUR TOENAILS OFF! Back! Heel! Down! Stay back!"

The door of his hut slammed open behind him with the sound of creaking hinges, and he stood on his front step. He was mortal and enfleshed, plainly. He was an elf by his pointed ears; his hair was long and fair, growing to halfway down his back. An old and tattered mage's robe covered the ragged clothing he wore below it. He glared, folding his arms, as if we were trespassers. That thought of normalcy compelled me to speak to him.

"Who are you...and how long have you been here?" I said, and took a cautious step forward.

He waved his hands again: "No! Only... No, wait! Bad doggie! Only you!" he said, pointing to me. "Not you!" Durlyle stood still; the elf seemed harmless so far, and it was good to try to keep him calm. "You! You're not a figment! You have the look of...a human! A mainland human! Selune's Blade! You're human and you've come at last!"

"That's right," I said, trying to humour him. His Common was antiquated; but not that antiquated.
About the time of Balduran, I thought, and that made me suspicious. I tried to imitate his accent. "I'm not a figment at all. I come from the Sword Coast."

"—Whereabouts on the Sword Coast! Oh, goodness, goodness, Selune-the-moon-above; I may be saved at last—"

"Baldur's Gate, founded by Balduran," I said. "And when—and with whom—did you come here?"

The elf’s mouth worked upon itself, and I realised that he was trying to smile. "Well, well! Come in for some of nice belladonna tea and please don't mind the subsequent painful diarrhoea. I make a lovely Amnish Dragoon soup without any dragoons in it, and lots of monkey balls and seabird-egg-and-fungus bun-cakes galore! Come to sample Dradeel of Tethir's recipes and ruminations and rudimentaries and supplementaries galore! Only you, though. That pair stay out!"

"I would not harm you, stranger," Durlyle said. But the elf seemed very disturbed in his mind—as anyone would be, stranded alone, I supposed—and paid him no attention.

"I cannot come if you will not have my friend," I said, "but I would like to help you. When did you come here?" I repeated.

"Oh, noble and all-too-mortal Balduran and the Wandering Eye," Dradeel explained. "You know it, yes? We set out from Anchorome in good weather; half of our brethren dead, but he was ever the successful adventurer. A new crew taken on; a landing party upon the time that I navigated here. Yes. I navigated!" he claimed. "I am Dradeel, Balduran's guide and navigator and mage, now recent convert to the church of Selune! Have you never heard of me within your city founded by him?"

Dradeel, Balduran's moon-elven navigator; I had. "Yes," I said, "yes, I've heard of you and your talents." That the elf, still alive now, had lived in that time—Viconia had too, I supposed, down in the Underdark. But thinking of it, that he had known the history I had sought... I stopped, amazed.

He seemed to relax slightly, and continued onward with his speech.

"We came to this isle only for fresh water," he continued. "We had a landing party. But they changed. They all changed, then." The wolfweres, I thought. "So sudden! Galan died first, his thorat torn open by one of the changed men. I couldn't tell who killed him, of course, since they were unrecognisable in their changed forms. I reached for the wand that I carried in my robes, but the abominations moved too quickly. Ten sailors in my party and seven were lycanthropes. There was no chance! Two leaped at me even while the others feasted on the bodies of the other sailors. Lightning from my wand killed one—and I know no more from that! The other wolf hit me with great force and I woke bloody before a tree. Stay back! No more bad doggie!"

Ajantis was only a baby, but Dradeel had every right to be terrified of the wolfweres. "Keep telling of how you came here," I said. "We'll do our best to get you back to the mainland."

"There was so much blood," Dradeel narrated; his eyes were unfocused as he drifted between his memories. "The lightning-struck body of the one I killed...it was over my friend Galan. He was torn to pieces. I still remember his arm, the strips of vein and muscle open to the sky. I retched at the sight. I did not have my spellbook and the wand was broken. It was only the Moonmaiden who spared me. One of my final spells remaining was invisibility. I cast, thinking that the monsters would smell only what they thought was a corpse. I crawled back to the beach, and in the side of the Eye was a vast hole as if some giant had punched through it, and the bodies of the crew gutted and hung from the rigging like a butcher's stock. Then I went further into these woods, and found the tunnel to this sunken hut under our Lady of Silver's light where all the remainder of the old town is disappeared; I used my final spell to hide and bar the way. I have lived on this freshwater stream and a peculiar
sightless fish within its pools, and the bounty of the belladonna when it grows here. With Selune, I have some few spells and wards that protect me—I will cast all of them if you attack, bad doggie! Bad doggie!—and I have never left underground since I could not defend myself. Every so often the younger among the beasts dare to attack until they learn the lessons of those before them."

He kept losing control; considering what he had been through it was no surprise. "We have slain all the beasts on Balduran's ship," I said. "They will attack no more; come back to the village, and then come away with us on a new ship."

"—No," Dradeel said flatly. "No. I am defenceless, I tell you! If I cannot defend myself I will not come, and you know very well why! I am a pauper: all I possess is Selune's few gifts. And yet..." I saw in his face a crafty look; crafty as if he were a young child who thought himself to have a clever and cunning plan to trick sweets out of a grown-up. Unused to human interaction in so many centuries. "And yet...with my spell book—my dear young lady, so, er, attractive and not at all vaguely otter-like in the face and so very kind—would you bring me the spell book that must lie still within the ship? For with it I am a powerful mage, able to leave, able to cast spells—and the bad doggies can't get me then! Of course, it is impossible to destroy under its enchantment...so you must get it for me..."

Of course. Imoen had been studying it; she'd be more than willing to give it back to him. "We found it and I can easily get it," I promised. "Point us to the exit above; let us past your wards; and we'll return promptly. And perhaps we can talk more, too." I wanted to see inside that ancient hut; but of course I couldn't if he had a grudge against Durlyle and the child. Or... Viconia might be even older than him; but he had travelled with Balduran, and he was history alive. His nature struck home to me, watching that poor tattered figure and his jumpy stare and fragmented ideas.

"Only you come!" he said, pointing to me. "Only you! None other! Not him again!" Durlyle took no offence, though; it was a very sad case.

"Can I bring my other friend, then? I know she'd like to meet you, and she's a girl from the Sword Coast just like me. She's a transmuter mage and she's taking good care of your book," I explained slowly.

"No bad doggies! Very well, I suppose another mage. Tell her to bring the Weave, then; find the threads and pack them into a green-glass message-in-a-bottle on a ship. And hurry! After centuries, one's impatience grows! I would trust in you, my dear girl..."

I nodded. "We won't betray your trust." The passage behind the hut led upwards; we had to crawl some of the way, while the rocks gave way to earth; and then it opened to the blue sky and green grass of the forest, the masts of the Wandering Eye only just visible in the distance.

"You will do good thing for that castaway," Durlyle said. We walked quickly; it was past afternoon now. It would be long past night once we got there and back; but we had to do it, after all. Imoen could cast spells to see in the dark and the beasts were gone. I would like to see inside that hut, and what had been left there from Dradeel's precursors, I thought. Durlyle could see it too, once... Once we were all gone.

Imoen was wearing clothing from the village, a long white tunic that she had belted at the waist with a string of luminescent large pearls, brushing out her hair with a crude bone comb. Viconia was there by her while I explained.

"Could you tell Shar-Teel and Kaishas for us that we'll be back? It's not that we're ungrateful about the celebrations, but it would just be unkind to let the elf wait." Admittedly, mentioning a surface elf was not the surest way to enlist Viconia's sympathies. "Durlyle's coming part of the way with us
Viconia nodded and swore briefly at us foolish surfacers, as usual; and said that she herself would much rather rest than attend the insipid offerings of these primitive ones, for the island food disagreed with her and her stomach ached. But of course she could cure herself, she added of her abilities. Imoen brought out the spellbook.

"And I didn't get hardly any of the spells in it too," she complained, "but I s'pose it belongs to him, hopefully he won't get overexcited about a mage's spellbook is like his highly extremely very precious personal private property and all that." She fastened her own spellbook securely to her side; and also added the glittering sword of Balduran to just below her pearl belt. I was already armed just in case of some remaining wolfwere. She sighed, and brought together sea-salt and the roots of some plant. "S not the proper ingredients, but I'm pretty sure I've got it working. Transmutation axis...make us fast...we'll be tired, but Vic and Faldy can fix it..."

We ran back through the woods at almost twice normal speed; she cast it again when it ended, and by the time we returned to Dradeel we were all panting badly. The sun was close to setting.

"Right...gottacatchmybreath..." Imoen leaned over against a tree, clutching her stomach. Durlyle sat down on the grass and closed his eyes.

"Over here...Imoen..." I pointed to the entrance to Dradeel's cave; we went down together.

"Gosh! Tyr's rippling biceps, this place isn't half bad," she said; she quickly conjured her pink magelight, looking up at the stalagmites overhead, the cavern and the rockfall and the remains of the houses once here. "What'd living in this for hundreds of years do to some ol' elven gullynapper?"

Dradeel coughed.

"Er...hello there, mister elf-mage!" Imoen waved cheerily. "Y' don't know me, but we're both professionals, right? Lady Imoen of Candlekeep, transmuter mage here to return your lost property, always really promptly and this time I didn't even take it."

Dradeel seemed to take kindly to the way she spoke; he let us come closer than Durlyle and I had before, taking a step toward us in the dark.

"Um, we really didn't know about you when we got the book back, you see," Imoen said, "so I was kinda looking at it, and you're obviously really, really clever and know a lot of spells... And I got the illusion that you call Moon's Blindness! Though my one question about that's just whether the moonlight's got to be visible for the people you're casting it on as well, because my elvish's not so good and I couldn't read it in the magic. And the cloth one I got right off because I saw it was transmutation, and it's really clever; d' you use a left turning or a right turning for the wind calling?"

Dradeel was nodding along as she approached him. "Left, young apprentice. Left and sinister for the Lady's mysterious gifts."

Imoen grinned happily. "Thanks! That helps. And about the conjuration on page one hundred and ninety-four, I know it's really, really difficult, but I can show you that I used it to get the small version going, you know, the simple way of opening a door in eyesight. But if'n you could show me the good version, I might not be strong enough to cast it yet but it would be really nice of you..."

"The...the good version. One hundred and ninety-four. My salvation! You must give it to me! Give it to me now!"

And Dradeel closed the distance between himself and Imoen in three long, quick strides; snatched
the book to himself; turned a page and began to speak magic words; and vanished. Neither of us were given any time to react.

"It was teleport," Imoen said miserably, and turned to kick at a stray rock. "Talk about ingratitude! He could've at leastways offered to take us back with him! Even if we wouldn't 'cause they're still waiting for us back there, of course."

"Well, he seemed happy and you learned some new magic," I said. "I'm going to look into the hut...there's a clerical sort of trap on it, but I think we can get past..."

The wood was ancient and stonelike by its hardening. Dradeel had as his abandoned possessions a rough metal pot below a hand-constructed fire; drying fish laid out on a shelf of the original building and beginning to smell; a grass-plaited basket that held mushrooms, some sort of violently green fungus that I didn't think even Faldorn would try to eat as nature's bounty, and seabird eggs; and a short book laid by a seabird's quill dipped in ink that seemed to be made from black tar, The Recipes and Ruminations of One Dradeel of Tethir, spelt in that old fashion. I picked it up; as one of the belongings of one who had willingly sailed with Balduran—however pitiable he had later become—I did not think Durlyle would begrudge it. One recipe seemed to be for belladonna bun-cake; the next that offered his supposed cure for the wolfweres' condition by drinking a belladonna preparation and slaying their leader. Dradeel seemed to have slept on the ground in a bundle of torn clothes probably taken from his old ship, some with dark brown stains upon them. The hut was windowless, with a chimney he seemed to have hollowed out himself, roughly done. For the people who had come here first... It had been intended for storage, perhaps; there were not many shelves, but if things had been piled upon the floor, perishable items that had decayed after the earthquake, or indeed that Dradeel himself had no use for. One of the shelves would have been slightly too high for Ajantis to reach; the middle one was a little above me and Imoen; and the third below it was low enough to strain anyone's back. I saw another carved fragment of the petrified wood in the corner of the room, squarish except where it had been broken away; perhaps a table. Perhaps I could study it once more with Durlyle, if there was time. If only, I told myself, we'd had the chance to interview Dradeel about the condition the place had been when he had found it. The walls would have not been blackened by the smoke of his fire, for one thing, though they did not look as if they had been marked or decorated in the old time. Imoen touched my arm.

"C'mon, we've got to go back—and I've got to talk to you," she said. "The ship they showed..."

Durlyle's voice called. "Skie? Imoen? You are all right?"

"We're coming," Imoen yelled back, and pulled me back up the tunnel. "Better go back fast," she said, "I've still got to get her to do my hair in that complicated quintuple-braid—we can't miss your people's feast, right? Come on, Skie." She dragged me along; Durlyle ran by us, the same wistful expression in both his face and mine.

Not quite affection, satisfaction as their bodies found each other again, Edwin thought; political advantage and there were those less to his taste he would have been willing to seduce—

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Exhaustion gripped us when we were finally back after dark, spurred on by Imoen's spell; but
Faldorn restored some vitality. A large fire was already lit in the centre of the village. Far above it the moon, nearly full, glittered. Kaishas spoke words to welcome all.

"For saving our land-home from the monsters; for bringing to us sea-charts; we share hunted meat and grown grain with the outsiders, that they may know of our gratitude." I caught Durlyle's smile across the centre of the circle.

"At least the beasts are gone," the man called Tailas said in a grunt. He had been taciturn when he stood by Kaishas, some sort of second-in-command, it seemed; perhaps he was simply shy rather than meaning to be rude, I thought. He lowered his head to the still-warm roast of deer, biting almost savagely though it must have been hot to the touch. Shar-Teel sat, watching; she seemed almost coiled, her muscles tightened under her skin like a snake able to instantly leap and strike.

"You live in harmony with your surrounds," Faldorn said, suddenly providing us with a representative to speak courteously, "we had no conflict with aiding you."

There was music from carved wood and bone flutes and hide-drums; songs of growing plants and giving gratitude to the earth below. It was a veritable feast of potatoes roasted in the embers with their skins, herb sauces of basil and a spice I could not identify, green tubers steamed in saltwater, a cornlike porridge they called meiza, and even a sort of barley beer, bitter to my tastes. Viconia had not made an appearance yet; and Shar-Teel partook about as much as I did of that first toast of the drink, uncharacteristic for her. Yet I could see no cause for worry. The child Solianna danced up to Imoen, asking for more pretty butterflies, and I crossed and mingled between the villagers to greet Maralee and admire Peladan.

Durlyle sat, tired; young Ajantis was still resting in his home. I'd had hardly any time to clean up properly, and of course nothing to wear, but at least not all of the village had chosen to dress particularly well. There were holes in the man Tailas' rough tunic and the gardener called Jorin had hands thick with dirt, and none seemed to wear particularly elaborate clothing. The look in Durlyle's eyes made me feel less regretful of a poor appearance.

"The first toast of calabas is called the Coatlicue, so that we may remember our grandmothers and great-grandmothers," Durlyle explained the customs. "Then so that drunkenness is not succumbed to, the feast continues and water is served. The second is called Tecuhtli, a word that means provider, for what earth gives to let us live in peace. Again we wait and talk to each other, so that behaviour that is not peace will not be encouraged." I smiled at his slight joke. "Then there is a third we call Ome, and it means the balance and belonging that we seek; it is last, and important," he said. More Maztican-influenced names; we talked of the language.

Ajantis picked up a long, green-wrapped item from a wooden tray informally passed, a leaf of some sort that enwrapped a yellowish paste within; and he dropped it in pain at the steaming heat that rose from it. The brothers Évan and Evalt were by him, the former still thin and ill-looking; Evalt took the barded paste in his stead, easily accustomed. Then Tellarian and even Aatto passed it by, the sailors standing quietly together, waiting.

"—There are different words because not all great-grandmothers were same," Durlyle said to me, "and this tongue of ship-home became that held in common, common too to beasts. But only few words live that I know, used only celebrations..."

"In some ways, lingua communis, simplified Common with some accentuations not just Old Chondathan, but also from your other peoples...". We shared our talk; I didn't want this to end...

Kaishas raised her pottery mug and spoke again, "The second, of provision. Fields left to the beasts now open once more." Again the drinks were given; and again none of our group took more than a
little. It was wise enough to keep heads cleared for the voyage home; and if Imoen had wanted to tell of something wrong with Kaishas' ship, then surely it was fixable, for it clearly was intact and floating. She left Solianna behind and went to sit by Tellarian and Davroan. The flute's song briefly paused when it was given to another player, and the tunes became faster, the beat of the drums stronger and throbbing in one's veins. A tall man of the village offered Maralee a hand to spin around at some distance from the fire, and I did the same to Durlyle. Imoen and Ajantis came, approximating the steps of a galliard, Aquerna's red tail waving over his shoulders. We spun around each other as if we'd had far more of the drinks than we had; then Imoen changed partners, twirling with Durlyle while Maralee's partner placed his arms around my waist.

The revelry continued; I thought the last time I'd danced was in Baldur's Gate. Perhaps I'd practised with Imoen at some time?—No, that wasn't in my memories. The steps were improvised, simply movements in the rhythm of the beat of the songs. Tarantella steps for a fast part, simply because it was fun, teaching a partner to imitate; then simpler spins, no missteps mattering. I saw even Faldorn in motion, trying to enjoy herself at last.

Then the music stopped; panting, I looked across at Durlyle's red face. By the fire Kaishas had gathered all once more; ready to speak that third toast, Tailas by her side as always. They did not seem particularly close, though Durlyle had said that he was second to her by authority through becoming chosen by the village.

"Taste our final that we name Ome, and be reminded of belonging in peace," Kaishas said simply. The beer was of the same bitter taste as before. "Shar-Teel," she said. "You and your group were wounded by the beasts to bring us peace. In the beginning of our mothers' grandmothers, Balduran fought without thought, and would hear no reason. Many on both sides died for his leadership. He killed many; and I do not know his fate, only that the ancestors left him to his sinking ship. He would not belong."

A silence had fallen across the village; Kaishas spoke to invoke some ritual words, it seemed.

"We are kin," Kaishas continued. "Do you see the smiling faces around you, the peace that we know? You may find it within yourself. Take the hands of those around you. Your fate must be our fate. You will not be beasts, but instead learn to belong as we..."

It was Durlyle who interrupted first, standing. "You have no right to treat them so, Kaishas! No right to force to belong. I have not spoken before, but I know what lies in some of their wishes. You must not..."

A howling, low laugh interrupted him in turn. The formerly silent Tailas, behind the chieftain, spoke at last. "The pup speaks for outsider. I speak for us: I say nay, Kaishas, and others with me! The mongrels are never welcome!"

"They have more—more kindness than you!" Durlyle said; his words were hesitant, and courageous for it. "Leave them, Tailas!"

"They are our saviours," Kaishas said, her voice incisive enough to cut through the susurrus of conversation that had begun to break out. "You threaten them, Tailas? What sense is this?"

"—Filthy different! We are pure!"

"There is a third choice," Durlyle cried. "Let them go as you have promised; Kaishas, keep that truth at least! If—if they wish to leave."

*Durlyle himself and Maralee, Evan and Evalt; a peaceful people, though now we saw that not all*
Shar-Teel had stood too, expecting the explanation; Imoen and Ajantis were by her side.

"With the claws of the beasts the gift has been given them, and cannot be revoked," Kaishas said. At last, her words made an awful sense...and I looked down at my hands, and wished to retch at the taint that must lie where I had been wounded.

"But I stand as chieftain over them; the beasts turned them but we have taken the pups of the beasts, and so we now stand as guide," Kaishas continued smoothly. "For we are not beasts: we are masters of ourselves! You will stay; we are man, we are animal, and we are more than both. It not so bad, and you will begin to feel as we in a short time. It may be unstable for a time. You may...hurt, but you will live, and we shall all go to new forests and plains someday. Durlyle, the choice for them is only this or the folly of Tailas. They will find us proper lycantho, and noble in our peace."

"—You turned us into werewolves," Shar-Teel said; she spoke quietly, for her, and that made the menace far more strong. She was going to...

"We belong," Durlyle whispered again, miserable.

"It might not be so bad...at least we would run free..." I said, weakly and unconvinced, and I think that he saw it.

"Acteon, Solvas, Chovia, Derrol, Thalis: to me!" Kaishas said. They walked to her; loped to her, wolflike, I could see now or fancy that I saw. "Tailas, be silent!" she said then, but her second would not back down.

"Then to me, those who would live in a pack free of mongrel taint! Chantrin, Laseno, Teorias—" I found myself stepping to Shar-Teel and the others, we mainlanders together, away from all of the werewolves—Durlyle watched. Tailas was darker in the fire's light; hair grew on him, and claws roughened in place of nails—And those he had called were by him and ready.

"We don't need to fight you—" I managed to say. And none listened.

"I absolve for what you must do." Kaishas raised Tellarian's sea-charts above her head. "The charts must be saved above all else. Go!"

Then it broke as surely as old bone shattered. Tailas, furred and clawed, dashed directly through the fire. Ashes and logs scattered, and nothing but confusion reigned. Shar-Teel had her sword—she cut, trying to go after Kaishas, but the chieftain and those who followed her had run.

I thought I could see nothing but shadows and claws. There was fur—creatures—I feared of seeing what Durlyle was; I unsheathed the Burning Earth but did not wish to use it. Then Imoen screamed, and staggered back. Her pearl belt had fallen to the ground. There was blood on her white tunic. I stabbed into the darkness, and something fell.

Maralee appeared in front of us, standing before the other creatures, light-coloured fur sprouting across her cheeks. 'I'll not raise a claw in your direction. Kaishas goes to the chieftain's hut, a passage below there that leads to caves...'

Evan and Evalt. "Go! Kaishas is pack-leader; it was she who sent me to hunt by the Sirine Queen's dwelling. For troublemaking she condemned me..." Where they stood none of Tailas' folk broke through, and we moved after where Kaishas had fled.

Ajantis struck forward with Varscona, a duel with Tailas; then it was the latter who lay on the
ground, though two of his friends came after him. Shar-Teel fought.

And Durlyle—he was human-shaped, still. "This way! They all go mad! Down in the caves—east
then the third to the north-east then eastern once more—"

Imoen took off running in the chaos; the crew were with us, and I saw Nowell knock out an attacker
with a punch, a furred wolflike being. I was trying not to kill with the sword; I saw Shar-Teel
otherwise, but she did not hear pleadings to stop. There was no Imoen, no Viconia—

No, there was Imoen, running back with her spellbook in one hand, and the wrappings in which I'd
stored the charts hooked over her left shoulder. She spoke words instead of drawing Balduran's
sword, and it was a spell I had not heard her cast before. The moon shone above her.

Then there were screams, and those who were human seemed to stay human, transformations to fur
halted.

"Silver light—burning—"

"Moon's blindness," Imoen muttered to herself. She smiled, her teeth a bright white and her left hand
clutched to her bloodied side.

A dark shape attacking Shar-Teel stopped, unable to find her; I grabbed her arm and stopped her
killing blow. There was no time to waste—while they stumbled in blindness Durlyle helped us to
Kaishas' hut. The door was hide, but we barricaded it with a wooden table and chairs; those friends
of Tailas pursued still. Howls accompanied words.

"Kill the tainted ones! Kill those who have murdered—"

"They blinded us—blinded—"

"This way," Durlyle said fiercely; though it would have been obvious. Kaishas had a large, weighty
cupboard that had recently been pushed forward and back, not quite in alignment. Behind it two
wooden steps led down to a dark cavern. He pulled it free; he was stronger than I had thought,
because of being a werewolf just like they—

A body slammed against the makeshift barricade and something howled.

"I am sorry," Faldorn said suddenly, "I should have noticed what they were, and I still did not wish
to kill them—"

"Heal Imoen—" I told her; "—and Nowell—"

"That harpy'll take the ship. Get down," Shar-Teel commanded; they went, all of them, into the
darkness of the cave, and last I was beside Durlyle...

"Come," I said. They would attack him just as much, now; Durlyle, if only—

There was no time.

"I cannot." Again something slammed into the block, the walls of the hut; more howls, crowding
upon us. Durlyle's face was pale and his voice quiet. "Once you are gone they will calm. I will
defend you, for in the face of what they are now I am none already. Only, please—do not fear what I
am, here at the last..."

He transformed, then; and though I had feared him a monster I looked, and I was wrong. He was no
wolfwere in their monstrous furred shapes that took from the worst of man and beast. Durlyle was a large wolf the size of a small horse, covered by brown and glossy fur the same colour of his hair, and with a long-muzzled canine face and almost the appearance of simply a big dog. His eyes were unchanged: the same dark velvety brown, the same kindness within them, though this time tinged with sadness.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, falling across his neck; and he moved, and pushed me to Kaishas' passage. Then the wolf sprang for the cupboard and shifted it once more across the corridor. There was the sound of splintering, and then the noises of battle there— My fingernails raked across the back of the wood, tearing one of them, but I couldn't move it—

"Skie! You've got to come now!" Imoen called. "You can't waste what he did—"

The caves were dark but her magelight shone above us. Durlyle had even given the directions: east then the third to the north-east then eastern once more, the direction of the beach where the ship was moored.

Then Kaishas' group fell on us from the shadows of the caves. They had the advantage of surprise; but they were not as strong as the wolfweres, and our numbers were greater. Two of them turned to human once they were dead; and three lived, wounded and down. Faldorn chanted a healing spell I recognised as powerful over Aatto, and painfully he rose to his feet. Residue from her missile spells blackened Imoen's hands; then she chanted a spell to give us speed, for Kaishas upon that ship.

Outside over the sands the moon yet hung in the sky, unmoving. Our footprints left bloody trails on the pale grounds where Kaishas' travel had barely touched it. There was her dark shape, at the ship, standing on the deck from the rough gangway and waiting.

"Get out of the way," Shar-Teel said contemptuously, "or you're dead too."

"—Or you could leave with us if you want it so badly; just go back to the village first and stop them, please, Durlyle was there—" I pleaded.

"You have done what you must," Kaishas said; and she was no longer human but a rippling thing of fur heavier than most of the wolfweres, far more muscular than her human shape, still standing on two legs. "Now here I hold, and here you must die. You could have stayed and belonged, but if you leave others will come to kill or capture. Perhaps Selaad will bring another ship, or perhaps I will sail this myself if you have left all of my crew dead."

"They're not all dead," I said—she wasn't evil; she could save Durlyle, perhaps, she was chieftain—whatever was still happening to him now—"But we defeated all five of them; you couldn't defeat the wolfweres and we could; you'll lose and so you have to listen to us, you have to—"

Kaishas shook her head. "I am chieftain. I am loup-garou, I have what others did not: none of your steel will harm me. Come to be killed!"

Her form changed once more; Kaishas' muzzle grew to a wolf's true shape, and she could no longer speak in a human's voice. Shar-Teel ran up the gangway, and the wolf leapt at her throat. She put out her sword to spit Kaishas' form; and it did not pierce the skin. Ajantis ran beside her, and I too: and every time our blades hit they inflicted no wound to the loup-garou's fur. Kaishas' claws raked across Ajantis' face and her teeth sank into my arm. Shar-Teel beat her away by her sword as a club; Faldorn stepped up behind me, casting her healing spell. Werewolf teeth— Shar-Teel beat Kaishas a step backward, but again her sword did no damage. The crew watched us, behind, waiting. Ajantis slashed uselessly with Varscona.
Then Shar-Teel simply punched Kaishas over the side of the deck. "Cast off—" she ordered roughly; we ran on the ship, unfurling sails, casting off the anchoring ropes that tethered it to the beach. Then there were sounds of scratching: the loup-garou in the water clawed at the hull. We could feel it through the deck.

Imoen had been casting. She held Balduran's sword in both of her hands, and it glowed white in the dark, the gold of the blade bright.

"Use this," she said; she threw, and Shar-Teel caught it by the hilt, dropping her own blade aside. "It's gold: that's for shapeshifters in the stories. And it's Islanne's spell for a good sword. You have to," she said, but there wasn't a need to tell that to Shar-Teel. She had jumped in the water after Kaishas already; and then the beating upon the hull ceased. I looked down to see the woman's body floating, bloodied, facedown below the waves.

"Damages?" Nowell crisply asked, leaning over the side and flinging down a rope.

The hull was still unbreached; we had a chance. All of us...no; we had all the crew; Ajantis and Faldorn and Imoen and Shar-Teel.

"And the bloody drow doesn't think to show up," Shar-Teel said. The gangplank still remained; one rope tethered the ship in place. Imoen turned over the pages of her spellbook below her magelight, glancing up every so often to the wind that fluttered the single mainsail.

"Night though it is we're better to go without her! Better shoals than wolves," Nowell said.

I could have agreed with him. But, it came to me at last: Viconia had come with us, and I should speak openly with her if I still wanted to do so. "Wait at least as long as we can! She's an ally to all of us, and we're not leaving her to werewolves."

That, strangely enough, gained a curt nod from Shar-Teel. Then we did not have long to wait after all, for Viconia came running over the cliffs in the darkness, stepping over the sharp rocks with her inhuman grace, her clothing ragged and flying around her. As she came still closer it was clear that blood stained both her mouth and her hands. We pulled her into the ship, and cut the last of the ties.

"I've got the Dradeel spell," Imoen said. "It aligns the sails to catch just the right wind. And for sailing by night, we've got a drow."

She chanted, and by magic the sails stretched themselves to catch an easterly that blew us from the island. The island's dark mass became no longer visible to me long before Viconia saw the last of it.

*There was a hut, and there was a brown-furred doglike wolf, and a door that slammed closed amidst howling...*

There was the darkness and the slow beating of the waves. There was still a belladonna-flower in my hair...

—

Edwin selected spellbook and components and changes of robes, he went as a wizard and more than only a common soldier.

—
The journey home was with only the incident of infection. Dradeel's book, within the pack Imoen had obtained for being kept with the other copy of the charts, spoke of the cure: *To kill first the chieftain and drink a simple potion of belladonna.* Imoen made the alchemy with ingredients she drew from the ship's supplies, and the flower that I had brought. Disposed of, it was a bitter drink.

"I," Viconia boasted, "turned to the savage and mighty creature; and back again at the moment it appears that you disposed of their chief. It was a repulsive experience, but valuable for the moment of usage."

Imoen frowned. "So who did you kill?"

Viconia leaned gracefully back against the ship's wooden rail. "The Selunite surface elf it was the pair of you who told me of. We drow know the lore of monsters and of becoming them. I used the sense of smell to seek him; he lurked in the forest, drawing a casting circle by his spellbook. I simply ripped his throat out."

Selune the moon, Shar the darkness, the sisters who had sought to slay each other since before the beginning of mankind. We had let Viconia know.

"Dradeel," I said. "His name was Dradeel, Dradeel the navigator; and he'd have been better off if we hadn't helped him."

"Shar favoured me for it," Viconia said simply; though there were only a few clouds in the sky, she dared to stretch a dark arm out from her cloak into the air, her skin without flaw. "How many times have you forced me to stem your leaking blood from some foolish battle? I gained more power from it. Perhaps enough to destroy a wizard by the use of a cleric's castings alone, now."

"It's evil and I know it," Imoen said, her voice muffled and drawn, and she turned away from Viconia.

There was no chance to be free of each other's company for all the voyage home. This ship was a small single-masted cutter; and what Imoen had wished to tell me of it was that once there had been a name chiselled upon the hull, scratched out by claws, and certain of the fittings were of the modern-day city. That Kaishas had sought to conceal. Most likely once it had been a speculative spice-merchant, for some of the supplies still kept in it were of that description; wrecked, perhaps, by the Sirine Queen for Kaishas' trading of Evan (*my rightful possession*, she had said, and yet at the time we had thought little of it; it was a reason for what had happened to us within the island's strange waters at the time of the wreck...). Whether its first crew had drowned; or died at beasts' claws; or died at the claws of beasts who looked human...

(That was unfair. Some were more human than almost all humans. I had nothing tangible of him left.)

We were confined to a ship built for half of our number to be contained. The tasks did not fill all hours, and we could not be clean nor in solitude, and though the provisions had been for the appetites of werewolves they came low. By the time of landfall there was nothing any wanted more than to be alone in a room in an inn, a large one all to oneself with a scented bath and a piping hot meal set out with real cutlery.

The endless movement of the waves and the blank sky were numbly repetitive, and I tried to think as
they. The crew speculated on the ship’s identity, the names of some they had heard gossip of. It could even have been owned or part-owned by my father. Travelling from Baldur's Gate on the eastern route, caught off-course by an unusual wind or strange gale. In stories of ships found adrift on the water with no trace of any crew, they spoke of ghost ships. We had given our share of ghosts to the island.

Mendas’ sea-charts guided back to the point of joining the tributary of the Chionthar that led back to Ulgoth's Beard, and we sighted land once more. Mendas, or Selaad...

On the decks my knees almost gave way to become used to solid ground once more. There were few about at the hour; hardly any fishers visible, the afternoon beginning to turn to nightfall.

"To that man first," Shar-Teel said, unsheathing her sword, eager to kill from those days of sailing confined.

There were five other men upon the docks; two humans, a dwarf carrying a warhammer in hand, a golden-skinned elf in the black garb shot through with the ripped teardrops and jagged gold-and-silver lightning bolts that proclaimed him a doomcrow, and a gnome robed in a pattern of enchanted suns and magnifying-circles. Unusual to see an elven Talassan, I thought; trying to scare up tribute, no doubt. The elf turned his head to look at us; Viconia hissed, and Faldorn folded her arms, scowling. We were hardly in the favour of that god.

Both of the humans wore armour; one carried a longsword, and the other an axe. They were well-dressed. Magic glinted from the first's chainmail, and the second wore both bracers and boots with the look of expensive enchantment. Their clothes and hair were clean and neat, their faces clean-shaven. The dwarf's hammer was the same bright gold as Viconia's old morningstar, and the gnome's robes fairly bristled with pouches for spell components.

The taller of the two men walked unhurriedly toward us, his group behind him.

"And would you be the returning heroes of the Beard, my lady?" he asked Shar-Teel, an edge of sarcasm to his voice. "Killed a demon, did you?"

"It's hard to remember how many males we've crushed," she sneered; by her side Viconia sidled up to smirk.

"We've killed not a few she-devils ourselves," he replied, and unsheathed his sword. They were—they could have been vengeful Talassans, the thought flew across my mind; there's a shrine to Talos in the city and lots of bad behaviour from them about the times of their storm festivals—and they could have been more bounty hunters, for other reasons. I drew the Burning Earth.

They were good, it was plain. The axe-wielding human said a few words, and a blue arcane shield covered his body; and all the movements of the enemies quickened. We couldn't keep up with how fast they moved. Then Imoen made her own casting, and suddenly we were closer to them. The first man's longsword shifted through intricate patterns that stalled both Shar-Teel and Ajantis, his armour far better than the stained cloth they wore; and the axe's blade sheared past my face. The dwarf was calling a battlecry, the warhammer arcing swiftly through the air. Viconia prayed, and a sort of darkness settled on us that gave some form of blessing.

The Talassan chanted in a deep voice, his arms raised high in the air; and the gnome behind him moved. Faldorn cried her chant at the same moment, and then lightning burned from the sky above us. Clothes singed; skin burned; but Faldorn had cast her druid's protection against the lightning storm, she yelled words that were likely druidic swearing at the other worshipper of a deity concerned with nature—The blue electricity struck down from the heavens again, and for a moment
we were blinded. I ran back from the fighters. A spell of missiles spun from the gnome's hands, and Shar-Teel grunted as each hit her. She did not let it ruin the strikes of her sword.

The dwarf's warhammer fell through the air by my knees; I jumped back. Shar-Teel aimed a blow for his head, and he blocked; I didn't make it in time to stab forward. Imoen held her nut shells, reaching for her spell of confusion.

Then the acid arrow flew through the air and took her on the collarbone, and she stuttered the spell. She beat at the acid, and Faldorn and Viconia were near her so there wasn't much I could do—I blocked the axe's blow. Viconia called not for healing but for some other spell, I could tell.

The dark fire burst down from the heavens over the dwarf's head; there were scorch marks on both his armour and his skin. But rain fell over him to soothe his wounds, and hail to us: fierce winds blew at the Talassan's command, and thick stones of ice buffeted us.

Faldorn called to the skies to crackle above their heads; the casting seemed to come more easily to her than the first time I saw her call lightning. The strike seemed more powerful than Viconia's, and scorched the armoured warriors; but the Talassan was free from it.

"—Fool; waste not casting upon something that the enemy can protect from—" Viconia called to her; Faldorn swore again in her druid's tongue.

The gnomish mage was casting. Shar-Teel pushed directly through the storm, and took the dwarf's attention. Ajantis' cold blade slid across the axeman's mage-shield. I could not withstand winds as they; but I could navigate them, run with their backflows and past their damaging currents. I heard Imoen begin the words of another spell against the mage. I neared him, aiming to stop the spell—

Then Imoen and I stood alone in a maze, the leaves of autumn blowing in yellow and red and deep purple. She was behind me, finishing her chant; I stepped forward. Thorns gathered where the Burning Earth's blade struck, entrapping them. Missiles flew from her hands into a target of empty air. The grass underfoot was pointed, as if it was made of frost shaped to needles rather than pliant leaves, and coloured a strange grey-blue. In the sky, yellow and dark blue mixed together, woven into a disturbing half-sphere.

"—Where are we?" Imoen called. I looked behind the next corner of the maze, but there was nothing there and the thorns grew to reshape the path. I couldn't let her become separated; she ran behind me.

The gnome had cast.

"An illusion, it's got to be—keep moving!" Imoen said. "Don't trust anything—but I think it's you for real—" She ran behind me, crunching over the blue grass and the leaves. The thorns moved; I wove away from them.

"—You learned Islanne's spells and Dradeel's," I said. "Where's the caster?"

Thorns at each corner we searched. She held on to my arm so we wouldn't be torn apart by the maze; but we could see nothing past the changed walls of thorns, the wrong sky and the cobalt grass. Imoen's robe blew behind her as we ran to search.

I stopped; this led nowhere. "Come out!" I tried to taunt.

"Smelly gullynapper hiding away! Coward!" Imoen called, looking up to the sky.

He was not behind the maze. I tried to squint as if looking into shadows; the secret to a trap, the
The gnome's face was behind the sky; it might have as well been the vast expanse above us. He looked to float, translucently, a giant gazing above us as if we were only toys in a crystal ball to be shaken. His face was striped the yellow and dark blue of the sky's colouring; his nose was huge, the whites of his eyes like enormous boiled eggs, his cheeks thick and each imperfection of his skin made ugly for being so large.

"You are in my world now," the gnome replied, and laughed. The ornately patterned collar to his mage's robes made him look like a djinn illustrated in a fairy tale, a god of this illusion.

I stared at the false sky. There must be some break in it, some hidden spring or glimmer, a device. Anything could be happening to our real bodies, in the real world, and with Imoen's spell we had to move quickly—

I closed my eyes, and pulled Imoen through the thorn hedge. It did not hurt; the feel was only the cold pressure of rain and hailstones flying.

"—There!" Imoen cried. I opened my eyes; there it flickered, there a seam in the sky. She cast her fire spell, lowering her hands. We heard a scream, and again the illusion moved and shifted.

*Cold*, I remembered. It had been so warm with Durlyle on Balduran's isle—

The red glow came to my hands, and I reached for where that enlarged face truly was. The gnome yelled in pain, and resisted the force to still as the dead; but that moment gave Imoen the chance to attack with Balduran's blade past the illusion. The thorny hedges fell apart around us, and the coloured leaves blew into the wind and dissolved to ashes.

We were once more on the pier of Ulgoth's Beard, and the Talassan's hailstones cracked open over our bodies. Rage swept his face as he saw that we had killed his companion, and it was all we could do to stand upright and resist being flung into the sea. A hailstone hit my temple heavily, and black spots danced in front of my vision. Imoen staggered, her torn clothes blowing her away.

"Get the other caster!" Shar-Teel ordered. Then her sword went down, in a pattern that the dwarf could not block: he fell, his head split half open, bloodied and with the white of the skull broken. The swordsman saw:

"Arme! Those two; then the drow!" he called. He'd left no way for his group to retreat—good armour and weapons and preparation or no. Faldorn's wolf howled from where she had called it, and ran past the winds: its fangs tore at the elf's robes, and for a moment the wind buffeted us. The Talassan cried out in rage. Lightning lanced down from the sky, and when I rolled to one side I saw that a blackened hole had been breached through the pier's wood. Imoen raised herself up, her clothes smoked, stumbling below tides of hail and wind.

I lunged forward, and the Talassan reached for his staff ended by a spear's point. It was slender and silvery-gold, ending with three points entwined together like a hybrid of harpoon and trident, almost an elegant design of vines, and looked light and evenly-weighted enough to be thrown. The priest pierced the wolf's side with it, and then the blunted end spun into my stomach; I gagged. He spoke a word: where the spear pierced the wolf's dead flesh it glowed gold, and Faldorn's creature lay still.

He twisted it out of the body; and came to me, the long spear spinning quickly between both his hands. From Shar-Teel Imoen and I both knew, that the key to a greater-ranged weapon is to narrow the gap and close; but he wasn't leaving us any chance for it. He danced to the left and kept Imoen against casting, I lunged forward from the right and he did not do the same himself; but he was far better...
Imoen spoke with her hands. *I need time.* The spear's point almost forced me off the end of the pier; I swept myself below its gleaming, whistling cut. The winds moved him, almost letting him fly, his footsteps winged; I fought to stay standing. The burning blade met a hailstone, and the air sizzled with steam.

"—Why are you trying to kill us? We didn't hurt the Talassans—" The Burning Earth met the spear in its flight; and to prevent it wrenched from my hands I bent to his blow. Then withdrew, to stab quickly to his other side. Imoen had stepped back from him.

The priest saw I was only trying to distract, and did not reply. Then Viconia's casting swept from behind him, a black ribbon that settled across the mail he wore below his robes. The small dark tendrils of smoke dulled parts of it from the glitter of enchanted protection. It didn't stop him, but it did give time for Imoen to be away. He thrust the spear forward; I sidestepped, and blocked him against reaching her.

Imoen chanted; alone against the Talassan I still would have lost; still a long way to go to protect the others. He seemed to know every combination I had, and rode his own winds. I had to take a step back, but Imoen's casting was done. She stepped out behind the priest with Balduran's sword in her hands, and then the golden point appeared out of his chest like the centre of a red daisy, blood-blooming flowers. The air was suddenly still. The hail dropped to the wood of the deck...

The swordsman against Shar-Teel was good; but Ajantis kept the axeman away, and she was simply better than he was. The mage-speed had worn off all our limbs, and now Shar-Teel was still strong; Imoen and I had no time to do anything before her two-handed blade lodged itself in his stomach. Trailing innards, trailing parts that I ought to have been accustomed to; then she simply struck down the other from behind while Ajantis fought him. There were five people dead on the docks. We'd been attacked, we'd been seen to be attacked; we could explain it to the town, I thought. Imoen's face was bruised.

Then we searched the bodies for what was usable. The usual—weapons, armour, a few potions. Viconia had leaned over the corpse of their leader; she straightened, idly stretching.

"Goodness," she said, with irony. "You *rivvin* have...occupied yourselves." She showed, then, the scroll upon new parchment that the man had carried; and on its head were sketched drawings of all of us, our features picked out as if by direct eyewitness. *Perhaps eyewitness from this very town.* Viconia clearly a drow, her ears pointed and her skin drawn black; Shar-Teel, glowering evilly at the viewer, baring her teeth. Ajantis, scowling and well-muscled. Faldorn behind him, her hair even more badly tangled than in reality, her undead wolf's head depicted beside her. Imoen, a mage robe's collar around her neck, her hair a little shorter than it was now. And me; the face...a little different to what I remembered from a mirror, but I'd done little gazing into mirrors of late; slightly more planed and lined and coarsened, and like the others I looked like a dangerous criminal. Descriptions, rather than names, were provided. I'm not as short as all that, really, and Shar-Teel couldn't be that tall without giant blood. Below it was quite a lot of writing that was at a rather small size.

Viconia read out the list in one of her throatiest voices, almost gloating over it.

"A reward of ten thousand gold is offered for these evil fugitives from justice, dead or alive. They are guilty of the following crimes:

"Of the assault of the renowned bard Silke Rosena."

Imoen and I exchanged glances, remembering: that was how we'd met Garrick.

"Of larceny from the citizen Aldeth Sashenstar."
Imoen sniffed. "Well, it went to good use in the end." Tiber, brother of Chelak.

"Desertion of the Flaming Fist Special Forces."

A long pause.

"Aiding a drow fugitive; —never mind that...Horse theft from one Sendai Argrims of Argrims."

I'd forgotten that one, too.


Imoen flushed. "That really wasn't our fault."

"Attempted kidnapping of a noblewoman. Do you seek to frame us, jalil?" Viconia mocked, glancing at me.

"I probably don't count," I sighed.

"Impersonation of same..." Viconia said.

"That," I said.

"Fraudulent manufacturing of evidence to cause city unrest..." Viciona returned to reading, and shrugged her shoulders at the arcane verbiage.

"Environmental destruction and thefts of lands in or about Durlag's Tower."

Faldorn stamped a foot. "It was for the greater good of Nature! Citified folk are so stupid."

"Illicit retention of treasure trove."

Ajantis shook his head. "I tithed my share to Helm and Ilmater," he said.

"Banditry," she continued; I cringed. I'd helped to do that...

"Suspicion of harbouring known Rashemi spies," Viconia said.

Which was ridiculous. Dynaheir was perfectly honest about her dajemma.

"Suspicion of harbouring known Thayvian spies."

Ajantis cursed. "The traitorous Red Wizard!"

"He's called a spy here," I said. "I hope that doesn't mean he's in any kind of trouble..." He'd helped us, while he'd been here, and it was obvious from his robes alone that Edwin had not been a spy.

"Association with known werewolves," Viconia said, and that gave us pause; they couldn't possibly know where we'd been. Faldorn by mistake? Or Kaishas' husband Mendas or Selaad, if he'd been caught here...

"Vandalism of the inn of Ulgoth's Beard," she continued; and scowled. "Those thieves of the dagger caused me to miss some valuable sleep. And themselves some valuable hours of life.

"Involvement with demon summoning; disruption of a human grave. How else was I meant to have raw material for my spells of undead but by worthless rivvin corpses?" Viconia looked smug.
"Suspicion of iron sabotage within the dominion of Nashkel," she added.

So that was one of the crimes they wanted us for.

"Traitorous communications with Amnians."

"The Order merely possesses a chapter-house within Athkatla. I am Waterdhavian," Ajantis protested. "And...likely they would deny me." He stared at the ground.

"And..." Viconia paused to give suspense before the final line. "The theft of a pair of golden pantaloons with uplifting properties of the gusset that very nearly defy gravity, shaping quite nicely both the front and the rear; an improved contour to increase the self-esteem of a wearer of either sex; a continued sanctity and privacy maintained by the respective buttocks the pantaloons have held since their dim and distant origins in the very beginnings of our realm; and containing a fold to make daddy proud."

I didn't remember that. Imoen's cheeks reddened, and she slowly opened the back of her spellbook to show some golden material that had been very carefully folded to fit a small space. "The Friendly Arm, y'see..." she muttered. "Mistook me for a laundress..."


—

The fireball spread boldly from Edwin's fingers upon a mass of the enemy.

—
Chapter 4

118. A Song For Alora

Edwin: 26 Flamerule

Alatos Ravenscar blinked, the motion vaguely reminiscent of the quick lowering and raising of a reptilian's third, translucent eyelid, or somesuch of the sort of entity that tended to live under damply unpleasant rocks. "Proven yourself, then."

"I'm just so glad I decided to make you my new friends!" Alora said. "You've taken back all the bounties on me for non-guild thieving, right? Because friends just don't do that to friends..."

Alatos fingered his forehead as if a headache was rapidly developing. He did not touch and indeed hardly seemed to look at the three artefacts and the scroll Alora held high above her head. "Lord Resar, as contracted."

The Halruaan in his long robes stepped forward to take the objects. He paused, first, to examine them for the magic he expected would inhabit them. Edwin took the opportunity to glance about at the room full of thieves. He was merely here upon sufferance, for assisting Alora in the tasks she had done in advance for this; since before even the so-called Amnish attack a fiveday ago, preparing for additional force upon a problem close at hand that Cythandria had successfully apprehended. (Defeating, in fact, the other agent of Anchev's within the guild; whose pitiful efforts were as nothing compared to minds such as his own. Internal squabbles were beneficial insofar as they served to elevate those worthy above those clearly less so, and he alone would in all likelihood have failed.)

"They are correct," the Halruaan said, running a long and bony finger down the scroll's text. He placed all four items carefully within the sleeves of his robe. "And yet the daughters lie dead for the botched burglary. You've attracted attention against the contract."

"That wasn't anything to do with me," Alora said. "They were mean to the servants, but I didn't do it. I don't like those nasty things." She shook her head fiercely.

She spoke the complete truth, Edwin thought. It would prove a liability soon; Alora had indeed covered for the murders as a thief, for assassin acquaintances of Cythandria's had done the task. A nauseatingly slobbering pair of hedgewizardess and thug.

"A shame," Resar replied, arriving at the point Edwin had been told to expect of him. He reached for the spell trigger set within his own sleeve. "All loose ends must be tied. I doubt that you understood this, little one—" Which, of course, Edwin thought very bitterly, for subsequently there would be no time either, Alora had not apprehended the contents during the brief time she had held it in custody—"but Halruaa must keep its secrets."

Now came the time. Alora squeaked, jumping as Resar began his chant: "Eeek! Can't you play nice? —Odesseiron, Cynthi! Help me!"

The trigger for the dimension door from the street just outside activated. Equally to Cythandria even though he had expended the energy of casting rather than a trigger, Edwin's magical missiles reached the Halruaan's hide—only two fewer than her this time, he thought, pleased. The Halruaan snarled, but a dark green shield had sprung up around his body; magic of that foul country, no doubt, Edwin thought. Perhaps he would be able afterwards to get his hands on—but it was best to think on this.
Cythandria cast the second spell they had planned. With his tuition and their careful planning she had retained her composure so far, casting mechanically and in the order they had depended upon. Edwin began the summoning incantation to clear a path for them. So far the thieves had not intervened in a battle between great mages.

All of nine images of the Halruaan appeared, chanting in unison. An illusion; Edwin cursed mentally, not faltering in his own summons. Cythandria would be better to dispel that one. And then in the Halruaan's hands was the beginning of the very Fireball—to destroy this wooden building, to destroy everything bar in all likelihood his own shield (and he would certainly take that spell for himself, most certainly—but no time for those musings and Cythandria would not be varying her patterns—)

The summoning fizzled; the danger too great, and even this imperfect. Edwin cast his missiles in its place, disrupting with the greatest haste possible, at five out of the images present. Odds: five in nine; zero point five repeater; the misplaced grade of that enchantment class... Better than half. The mages in motion faltered, but none of the mirror images had blinked out. They shifted their positions once more, so he had not even an idea which of five had been the true one. The Halruaan began yet another spell.

Cythandria's casting concluded; and as planned, Edwin could hardly see its effect. "The protections," he called to her, for one of her spells was an eminently suitable whip effect that acted solely on an enemy. And neither the Halruaan nor any of the thieves bar Alora could now see; Cythandria had first called darkvision upon the three of them, and then magical darkness to shroud all in sight. Alora had run, and had somehow disappeared from view; the thieves stumbled, confused, but waited for the outcome. Cythandria's voice was still clear.

Summoning. He certainly had the mental reserves remaining, Edwin told himself. The group of five kobolds appeared; milling around, causing due disturbance, absorbing targeted attacks. Let the thieves think twice; Cythandria would not summon her standard ogres within this setting, but if there was a chance for it she would try additional summons.

Then Edwin saw the Halruaan's next defensive spell finish. A pale globe enwrapped both he and his images, shielding him; this would most certainly protect him from Alora. It was mage-built and tangible for each mirror image, Edwin's wizard-sight instructed him. And the Halruaan's hands had already shifted into another spell, and within his grasp—rock fragments. Cythandria stripped the wards; Edwin's mind searched for a proper counter, but neither acid arrows nor fine missiles would pierce the globes to disrupt. He moved as if searching for the answer; he saw the Halruaan's pale eyes fixed upon him. Certainly he would be the target; superior wizardry was recognised (or just possibly the first attack, but he would not think about that—)

The incantation to turn flesh to stone left the Halruaan's fingers, and at the last possible instant Edwin stepped behind a thief and used that body to shield his own. The spell hit; the man's body turned grey and cold and dropped to the floor, not quite an effect he could reverse at the moment; but he himself was intact and free of effect. This, Edwin thought, was true wizardry: the contact of mind to mind, the purest strategies taking shape out of the very Weave itself...

Cythandria's spell completed. She had targeted the globe, seemingly altering the phrasings and varying components in mid-spell to do so; a casting she had experimented upon in the past. The globe vanished, and only nine Halruuans stood. Alora became visible once more from the room's dark shadows, and stabbed the first of the nine in the back of the knees. It promptly ceased to exist.

"—All of you are mean, mean, mean! No wonder nobody else likes you and the rest of your nonuplets!—" Alora called in place of a battlecry, whirling back to hide behind the legs of a human
The Halruaan's shields over his illusionary forms must offer protections from fire, Edwin thought, deducing from what the mage had attempted to cast; and he launched an acid arrow out of thin air. One more of the duplicates blinked out of existence, but the casting was not interrupted. Unexpectedly it ended: small meteors launched themselves out of thin air, almost blindingly bright, flying about the room unerringly at their targets...

"Help! I'm burned, please help!" Alora shrieked, and Edwin felt a black stain in his own robes—he was burned himself, just below his ribcage, the expensive fabric ruined. All of his kobolds had been murdered by the storm. One of Cythandria's contingencies had at least activated, protecting her, and she still cast the dispel...

He ought to have summoned instead. Edwin began the incantation again, trying desperately that his voice not shake with the pain of burning. They had gifted Alora a potion of healing; the little flibbertigibbet surely had sufficient brain to employ it. The Halruaan's hands moved in a similar pattern. He was faster, Edwin thought; he must be faster and he must be fitter; he must be capable.

He managed three hobgoblins this time; quite large ones, he thought in satisfaction. Cythandria's second stripping hit the Halruaan, and suddenly there was only one of him again, still with that green shield. But the Halruaan had finished his own; and it was a golem he summoned, a giant of baked stone with the rune glowing on its forehead. The golem smashed aside a hobgoblin with a single hand, and Cythandria paused in shock. It would easily harm her, Edwin thought, as easily as brutal things harmed he himself. They were robed wizards, they were not for such crudities...

Edwin aimed Larloch's drain; a fast spell, easier upon his mental energies. But it bounced from the golem's hide; lore of golems, he tried to frantically remember, and of course the Halruaan had another casting. The thieves ran from the creature so heavy as to shake the floors. His remaining hobgoblins had brought swords to the wizard, who spewed a cone of ice now from his hands.

"Cythandria—" he began. She ducked and ran from the golem, which was faster than her by simple virtue of its wide tread.

"—Resistant to magic; but I can't focus to cast those spells! Clay—stone—flesh are weak to poison—floods of water or ice—Odesseiron!" she screamed.

The Halruaan had slain one hobgoblin and murdered another. Edwin directed missiles at him; the next spells would be deadly. He had neither water nor freezing spells available within his memory.

"Controlled—activated—rune—" Cythandria thought it through on his encouragement. She tripped across her robes and fell to the ground; the golem raised its fists. "Rune—"

Alora appeared once more out of the shadows and the combination of the mild enchantment upon her shortsword and her surprise cut into the Halruaan's knees, severing a tendon. After all, Edwin thought, the enemy had foolishly concentrated his resources upon defence of spells; underestimated importance of diverse strategy—But Cythandria was on the floor, and there was no spell he could cast; rushing forward with his staff to save her would be hopeless, Edwin thought, half frozen to his place knowing he could do nothing. She raised her hands in a last defence of herself, a line of grey and twitching spell component between her fingers: she summoned a simple, single ragamoffyn, a dark creature made of tattered skeins of cloth. It flew to the golem's face, and rubbed its fabric wings on the rune upon it. The golem stopped. Alora brought down her sword for the second time to the Halruaan's back. The ambassador's body shuddered still and he screamed in pain even as the light in the golem's eyes blinked into darkness. Cythandria was alive on the ground, and Edwin aimed his last selection of missiles to ensure that the Halruaan would not rise from where he lay. He saw that part of the golem's rune had been rubbed away, and Cythandria stood;
"Emet to met," she said, "truth to death. I have read of that classic formula." Edwin saw her slowly pulling herself together once more; standing, wincing to set weight on her right ankle, tidying her hair to place below her dark hood. Alora jumped away from the Halruaan's body, looking sickened.

"That'll teach you to play nice!" she said. "I don't like it when I have to do that! Even if you did want me gone for nothing at all."

Edwin managed a tone of more dignified menace, kicking at the stoned body of the thief. "Betrayal, monkeys," he said in the noble accent of his country. "Do you desire to continue to make of us enemies?"

Behind him, Cythandria raised her hands in a casting pattern; "What he said!" Alora added in confirmation, her hands at her hips, still carrying the bloodied sword. "And they're really, really powerful wizards, too, so you shouldn't mess with us and our team!"

The guildmaster spread his hands. "I knew nothing, of course. You're welcome to any trinkets from his body."

The gambit: is predictable, and duly succeeding. Edwin tried to share a satisfied glance with Cythandria, but she remained impassive.

"The thieves' guild," she said, her voice carefully soft-toned, "are responsible for the death of the Halruaan ambassador. The Halruaan ambassador is responsible for seeking out thieves. Our friend will keep the prizes of her kill."

The thieves bristled with weapons; but did not make a move against the pair of powerful wizards, Edwin thought. And of course the halfling thief. Alora examined the Halruaan's pockets and pouches, retrieving the skyship components along with his purse, his casting materials—but when she touched the spellbook, it burst into flame and ashed fragments. Edwin could not resist a cry of pain at the loss.

"In these times of unrest," Ravenscar replied, "no further—melodrama—is considered particularly necessary."

They departed the Guild.

"Fieldwork," Cythandria said, once they were sure of no longer being followed, "I see its nature."

"You have improved through my tutoring," Edwin patronised, and she sniffed. He could generously admit to her magical power, her potential and knowledge and theories; he rather liked carrying with her experiments.

"Fun 'cept for the killing parts!" Alora passed over the skyship components to Cythandria, as they had planned; and went through the Halruaan's platinum pieces and jewellery herself, happy to let the gleaming metals slip through her hands. Then she looked back up at them, her brown eyes concerned. "But all these rumours with Amn. You were there that night..." Edwin tried to keep an impassive face; the girl was inquisitive, and it was not entirely to her own good.

"You are optimistic by nature," Cythandria said, tolerantly. "And I think it would be good for you to remain so."

Alora nodded. "You can take any load a hundred pounds heavier if a smile on your face's lightening it up for you!" she said. Cythandria shook her head.

"Your robes are quite ruined," she said to Edwin; and she even touched them, lightly, where their
burnt edges gave way to reddened skin that ached. "I suppose you'll need replacements."

Alora, upon her cue, spoke: "Pink! Or purple. You think pink robes or purple for him, Cythandria? Fashionable, I am!" Her lucky rabbit's foot swung over the collar of the pink-and-purple leathers and soft cottons of her costume.

"Surprise me." Cythandria cast the cantrip to allow herself entry to the first of the doors that led to her laboratory of the Throne; she stepped within the building. "I have much to do. Thank you for your...efforts today, Alora."

Much to do; much to be concerned for. Edwin thought of the dwarf's body in the bowels of the Iron Throne, dead quickly below the shadows of Rieltar's custody; of the story that a human bard was gone, and of his own intact neck. Of the Knights of the Shield who had come but could not see the official master of the Iron Throne, for he lay badly ill. So many secrets and so little time. The Iron Throne would not yet collapse under weight of its own plots, he thought. Power came in so many different forms.

Alora tugged on his sleeve. "Let's go straight to the marketplace! I need someone to carry my things."

—

30 Flamerule

He rested at the small, well-polished table within the fashionably expensive Helm and Cloak; the elven bard in attendance played a tune on her small harp he thought rather saccharine (as if he could not have done better, despite a lack of practice for quite some years), and they talked of many other things. For Cythandria and himself it was a break in the tension; a moment of rest between all the magic they had undertaken. All the tasks of the election of the newest Grand Duke. All the death in the streets. Some of the ignorant masses wore black to mourn the assassinated Duke; even Alora, naively enough, had tied a black ribbon into her hair upon the day of the funeral. Though, considering that she had pickpocketed it from the opportunist merchant selling them, Edwin reflected, it was all too fitting a memorial for the obviously incompetent Eltan of the Flaming Fist.

"They always said he was a decent chap, for all he did to folk like me," Alora explained, an incongruously sad look across her rosy face. "Some of those guards were such nice types, let me off with a warning when I explained how pretty shiny things look to us rogues and halflings. And it's always so sad when anyone dies, isn't it? I've had friends die before, and it's still sad."

Cythandria gestured emptily to the air. "We have killed the friends of others."

"—But they were nasty, mean, and trying to kill us," Alora said. "I like you, Odesseiron. You're nice to me."

Edwin felt guilt, but suppressed it.

"It's really not fair," Alora went on happily, "Cynthi gets a gold-edged invitation to the coronation, and you 'n I don't!"

To the supplier of skyships to Baldur's Gate: a duchy. They said in his younger years Rieltar Anchev had been powerful, but he degenerated upon drugs he himself sold, distributed duties to his son and died a pathetic death in bed. Edwin had, of course, no other information.

He imagined a house of cards, dukes and queens and staves and swords, cups and coins and wizards and fools, each a death laid upon the other in a staggering pyramid; cut through as pasteboard by a
single sword in the end, and a voice and eyes that blazed with god's power.

"Wear the fleur-de-lys emeralds," Alora went on, "they're the ones that go best with your eyes, and they're so pretty! The filigree work's tiny as one of us doing it, or maybe an elf."

"Explain to me how you untangled the locks upon my jewel box," Cythandria sighed; tolerant of her once more.

"—Or you could wear the rubies, fire agates, sapphires, emeralds, the turquoise, the blue diamond, and the purple garnets, and your neck would look like a rainbow!" Alora suggested. "You've got lots of it."

"And I know each one that I have," Cythandria replied, taking a graceful sip of red wine of the same shade as the velvet dress she wore tonight. Though the cut was modest, she wore a darker cloak over it; a subdued red compared to his homeland's colouring. At her bodice the dress was cut in subtly shaded strips, clean-lined and interlaced in woven braids. About her fine throat gold and red shone; Edwin thought the collar-like necklace might have been a gift from Anchev. Most western barbarians were not particularly generous, but allowed their concubines freedoms. A gifted mage was...more of an underling, really. A rather important one within the Throne's structure.

"—I still think you should wear pastels," Alora said, "and lots of ruffles and lace, that's always nice for formals."

Cythandria raised her eyes briefly to the painted ceiling; "Gold; the classical lines of avatars of power."

"I think he's kind of scary, really." Alora said; Edwin agreed all too well, and chose to turn the conversation to irrelevant frivolities.

Cythandria gestured imperiously to order further wine, and poured it herself for the three of them from the pewter tankard in elegant gesture, her fashionably long sleeves hanging down in velvet triangles. Alora giggled, her cheeks flushed. "'S very good stuff," she said, "we can tell even better than you longlimbs, you know!"

"There is nothing wrong with celebrating," Edwin mused; he raised his own glass for another toast with the young halfling. He reached for one of the elongated sweetmeats set out on the porcelain plate, a twist of white cake baked with honey. One or two resembled delicacies he knew from his homeland; inferior, of course, but...almost satisfactory. Perhaps it was the wine affecting him, though he had consumed slightly less than Alora. Luxuries might grow rare in the time to come, but never for the rich or powerful. "(However prematurely.)"

"I'm sure the coronation will be inexpressively tedious; and you have already seen my new gown," Cythandria said. Edwin could imagine the colour of cloth-of-gold, antique and rich laces over shimmering silken panels in heavy elaborate layers, deepening the shade of her hair; and coloured to match Anchev's power. But her eyes were green, and clad in a particular shade of jade they became more vibrantly emerald and bright, with rubies banded at her throat to give the effects life. Or in even her accustomed yellow-and-white robes she was neat and quite attractive.

"'S rushed and cheap compared to the last time years and years ago, they all say," Alora said, disrespectful of how much the remark could provoke her audience, "but it's understandable 'cause of the war talk and all. I don't hate Amnians myself no matter what those dod-gasted Cowled Wizards do; but I like this city and probably they're pretty bad..."

"They're even worse. Treacherous and evil and vile and worthy of eradication from the face of
Toril!" said Edwin, with appropriate vehemence against the harlot Witch; but saw Cythandria looking at him, and decided to allow it to lapse. "You must surely agree that the Amnian restrictions upon magic are most repulsive. Attempt to imprison a powerful wizard for a few simple Fireballs? Ridiculous!"

"Indeed; but neither of us have experienced their rule," Cythandria said.

"Not personally, no," Edwin said. "(Though of course I am quite a cosmopolitan and well-learned traveller.) Amnians. Natural enemies of our sort, of course."

"I know the feeling," Alora said, taking another sip of her wine, ","s like those guards who want to arrest you for a few simple poking in around shiny pretty things. Shiny pretty things! So pretty."

Cythandria smiled at her, and beckoned the elven singer to their table; "Is there anything you would like to hear, Alora?"

She sat up, and clapped her hands merrily. "Oooh, I'd like the Sunshine Song, pretty-please. And maybe the great adventure story of Hannilla the Henna-Haired Halfling and her Heroic Heistings?"

Cythandria slipped gold pieces discreetly into the singer's hand; the elf muttered something along the lines of it being lucky that she had travelled with a few halflings before, and began the song with melody Edwin considered...frankly, nauseating. Alora smiled, laughed, and helped herself to sweets and wine.

"You're good friends, you are," Edwin heard her manage, incoherently, after her fifth song request; "all of us! Doing nice things! Being happy! I love you all! Wuggle."

She fell head forward over the table, from her high stool; just in time, Cythandria slid back the porcelain plate to save her from injury. The inn's room had gradually emptied over the night. Edwin, groaning at the weight, picked Alora's sleeping form up (for a halfling, she was—well, highly born wizards hardly needed to lift much of anything). Cythandria left a large tip in platinum for payment, and once more they stepped into the cold night.

The Helm and Cloak was in the north-west of the city; Edwin groaned while they stepped across the cobblestones. The night was busy even at this hour. Preparations and intrigues, extra patrols of guards; but two well-dressed nobles and a drunken companion were unlikely to be halted.

Cythandria shivered in the cool of the evening, drawing her cloak about her body, and then cast a spell of strength upon him. They walked together as revellers in advance of the morrow's coronation, reeling slightly and occasionally pausing to listen to gossip and crowds still on the street. Edwin found it not difficult to feign; perhaps he would have a hangover on the next day.

By the city gates their intended destination waited. They slipped into an alleyway that at last they had found deserted, where Cythandria summoned their requirements from her interdimensional storage. One of few remaining caravans departed the city; its owners black-robbed. Zhentarim deserting, Cythandria had so explained to him; their numbers insufficient to protest scapegoating. It matters not. They claim to act as merchants.

Edwin stepped forward and helped the carters to heave the heavy, wooden crate with its slats firmly nailed down up to the cart. Express to Neverwinter, the label read. In the back of the cart was a cage of small chattering monkeys, some import from the Baldur's Gate ships; Waterdeep-bound, Edwin thought he could make out. He was pushed away from reading further into the mysterious containers.

Was there a banging noise he could hear while the wheels of the cart squeaked and it set off, between the eyes of four guards, atop the temporarily-down bridge? Perhaps it was only the
monkeys. The caravan would travel to the north, passing through the city where snow never fell. They watched it vanish beyond the night's horizon.

"Cythandria, I admire your conjuration of that neverending plate of supplies," Edwin complimented her.

"Odesseiron, your enchantment of the self-filling water flask I could hardly have done better myself," she returned.

"Indeed it was masterful. And your sleeping potion also deserves a fair recognition; in fact I took the liberty of penning it within my own book," Edwin said.

"As I your cantrip to seal the nails until the destination. Most effective," Cythandria said.

They turned.

"I may, perhaps, miss her," Edwin ventured.

No longer foisting herself upon their attention; skipping from step to step and providing them details of some new and exciting discovery or chance of thievery. No longer enthusiastically rapping at his door at ridiculous hours of the morning. No longer joke-telling or encouraging the pair of them to wear more cheerful colours and smile more often.

"Be quiet, Odesseiron. I need simple beauty sleep; and I will need you to complete the list of potions tonight. Let us return in due haste."

He offered her his arm, escorting her as a gentleman to return to the Iron Throne.

"I know perfectly well that you lied to Alora of the coronation to be expected to be uninteresting," Edwin said.

—

9 Eleasias

Ten days after the Amnian attack of the city, and immediately following the murder of the Grand Dukes upon the date of Shieldmeet, war had officially begun.

Cythandria supported the mage Winski in the large-scale skyship-casting; Edwin watched and envied for Thay. (It would pay for such a prize long-envied from the Halruaans. But it was only a standard wooden nausea-inducing conveyance that happened to float in the air and therefore of much less importance to Thay's future than a certain intelligent being of great magical power, and Cythandria was quite observant.) Then the ugly wench Tamoko had summoned him, and he could not but go to the new rooms of Anchev within the ducal palace, far from the gold-drained husk of the Iron Throne.

He was posted as a battle-wizard with a company of the Flaming Fist, south to Nashkel, to the mountains of the Cloudpeak. For death, apparently. The impulse to rule; the impulse to rule as a very deity; the eyes blazed gold, the armour polished and dark, the face within of pure menace. (Subservience he detested. Necessity he did not.)

"It...will be done, Your Grace," came from his mouth.

Was there, perhaps, a cruel smile below the helmet's demon-like maw? "I will death itself; and so it shall come. Get out of my sight."
He prepared; reported to the captain in question. An older man running to fat. It did not precisely inspire confidence. But his magical gifts; he knew how to use them to genuinely seek power. He would conquer. Who knew but there could not be room for a wizard-governor of Nashkel below the sphere of the divine (until, of course, sufficient research and accumulation of power——); there was room for survival——

*But he seeks death itself. He can rise on the death of servant as well as foe. He cares not; a war is different to the squabbles seen before (be silent, Edwin! You are a great and powerful wizard the likes of which Faerun is highly privileged only to behold...)*

He simply packed the most that he could carry, far less than his personal needs required; continued to revise his most important spells for purposes of raining destruction upon his enemies. He chose the components he required methodically from Cythandria’s stores; neither she nor Perorate had yet shifted laboratories to the palace.

"Tamoko is a whore," Cythandria said; she had entered silently, that doppelganger behind her. Edwin straightened up from where he had been plundering a low drawer. (It was her laboratory; he ought not to resent silent movements. But he had been in a position very undignified for him.)

"Very uncouth and ugly. I was unimpressed with her from the beginning," Edwin replied.

"Too blatantly dissatisfied with present events. Thank you, Sherdis; leave the components there."
The doppelganger departed; the door to Cythandria’s laboratory closed with a soft click. "Did she show the usual miserable-as-a-wet-chicken face to you, Odesseiron?"

He had not particularly observed.

"She would restrain him, restrict him, force him to remain human," Cythandria went on. "To bind us all by limits. Could you imagine to will against the power of a god?"

From the expectant, distant look on her face, Edwin fancied that Cythandria perceived herself the consort of a deity. To be close to that power was quite within his own goals. In his own imaginings...

(The death of Philias, for instance. Another stray musing to lay aside as they had disposed of the halfling’s presence.)

"I have always held it unwise to set limits upon ambition," Edwin said.

"The human is all she wants. Yet still he keeps her," Cythandria said, and she drew closer to him. Edwin caught the piquant spice of her perfume.

"A shameless harlot unworthy of your rivalry, my dear," Edwin said.

"Go to the Cloudpeaks," Cythandria told him, but her body blocked his path.

"Bid me farewell," he ordered her, and that was when the space between them closed. His mouth was across the soft skin of her neck—he would leave no mark, that would be inadvisable—and she gripped his arms with both of her hands, staring at him with her eyes sharp and green and marble-cold as if to remind herself of whom she was—and not—with. He led or was led by her up deserted sidestairs, to a small bedroom that he doubted was properly hers; he aimed a locking cantrip at the door, and a silencing one for good measure. In a way, imprisoning her; imprisoning them both. On the bed boots came off, heavy mage's robes stripped quickly and yet so as not to destroy them.

"No; keep the gauntlets—" Cythandria commanded of him; those which made his fingers more nimble—and she gave orders readily enough, the floods of her golden hair falling over her pearly
shoulders and cool against his skin. Beautifully proportioned—moving against him—he listened to her, it seemed useful advice, and then thrust his tongue inside her mouth and she was silenced for a moment.

Far less pleasant he could have seduced, he thought, in a brief passage between attempts, rolling between the bed's tangled sheets. For the sake of similar advantages, perhaps he would have been willing to try Anchev—but that would have been much less attractive. (Quite intimidating.) He would convince her to miss his presence when he was gone; she was an ally here and he acted as a powerful Red Wizard adept in the onslaught of these arts. He sat up, freeing himself from the sheet about his midsection, and bent over her once more; "Lower—no, higher now—" she whispered in his ear, her nails raking but not piercing the skin of his back. She could yield like the petals of a rose but drew one into her like a graceful trap baited by honey, and their bodies slapped against each other as yet another time they drew together. He would have gloated for his own powers of endurance, but there was no time for that; Anchev would send him south, he had bare hours for this...

(Better not mention this to anyone, of course.)

Cythandria's legs wrapped around his waist and on his shoulder he felt her red mouth. In Nashkel, the fireball burned—

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119. Smuggled

18 Eleasias

"I don't believe one word of it no matter what those soldiers said of you; I kept it all safe for you," Therella told us. "Dalton stopped by—and joined an adventuring group headed eastwards, no less. But he's missed the war, and that's a balm to it. Fetch your things by night and leave, quickly, for though most in this village won't betray you I can't answer for all."

*Sarevok has done...something...to my city. My beautiful city.*

"Mendas," I managed first. "What happened to him?"

"A werewolf," Therella said. Imoen gave her face an expression of shock on purpose. "Him and that servant of his. Twas sheep and cattle they preyed upon, mind. But they were caught a tenday gone, and not all the Fist guards the Duke sent went unharmed; you can't know when those monsters'll move on to worse. So they chopped off their heads and buried them at midnight by the crossroads."

Kaishas had been a widow when Shar-Teel killed her. We had chosen to burn the charts.

"Then justice was n..." Ajantis began to say, and shook his head. "They were unjust to us and there was other death to them, but... But there is much else we must do."

"The city," Shar-Teel said.

"There were Amnish attacks, they say," Therella said. "Assassinated one of the Grand Dukes; though at the time we cared more for Shandalar's daughters. Then, at the ceremony..."

A wild, red haze rose before my eyes. Reaching out to grab Therella's throat would be wrong—would actually stop her from telling us— "Which ones?"
"Why, 'twas Eltan they killed on the street, gone chasing an Amnian sneakthief with his own two legs; and at the very coronation the lady mage Jannath, and Lord Belt himself. The last one they say is on death's very door; ill and hardly to last the year. At least a strong one like Anchev to lead..."


Imoen's hand was on my shoulder. "Yes," Therella said, "that's the one."

The four Grand Dukes have all served the city since the earliest I can remember. I'd met them and their children, seen them at so many occasions at my father's estate. But he's still alive, my father—or was the last Ulgoth's Beard heard—I have to go to him...

We left Ulgoth's Beard quietly, well-armed; barely rested. Shar-Teel seemed to understand the seriousness of it. Amn was huge; we'd lose the war—Instead of imprisoned over the Cloakwood slaves Sarevok was a Grand Duke—Garrick, I remembered; what had—

The bridge was down, of course, but Shar-Teel knew of smugglers who took people by night. We were wanted for reward; "Do you imagine I at least am not recognisable, jali?" Viconia pointed out, shaking me by the shoulders.

"Sanctuary yourself under your cloak," I said numbly. "We'll gather around you and hide you that way. Imoen doesn't have to look like a wizard. We can go as two different groups; Shar-Teel, Ajantis, and Faldorn, and you and me and Imoen. Ajantis and Faldorn could be merchants who want to sell weapons in the black market, if Faldorn doesn't talk; Shar-Teel a guard for them. Imoen and I could be wanting to get back to relatives in the city, as if we're refugees from Nashkel. Then I know there are places running off the Wide to the north-east where they don't ask too many questions for fear of their health."

Tenya's cottage on the Chionthar's shores was deserted, and by the dust across its shelves and sills had been for some time. The temple of Umberlee in the city had kept her, perhaps; for all their ill reputation, they have come to the aid of the city when it has been attacked. We waited there for the hours given us; the group of cloaked men drained much of our coin, but it didn't matter.

The streets were colder than I remembered; they did not bustle with gold lamplights in merchants still at their business after dark. A curfew. We faded into the underfloors of the Blushing Mermaid's damp, dank rooms within a complicated series of cellars. Imoen and I peeled off the clothes we had borrowed from Therella: two long dresses that covered armour, weapons, and in Imoen's case mage robes, making our appearance bulky. It had been a long journey with little rest to come here; Viconia closed her eyes on a bed almost immediately after complaining of the human stench of the place. In truth she was quite right, but we had little choice. Imoen knew it right to stop him. We slept uneasily, various—and some highly disturbing—bangings and clatterings echoing from the rooms and floors above us.

In the morning Shar-Teel knocked harshly on the door, travelling her own way through the smugglers' path and the streets; the agreed-upon rendezvous.

"Perhaps I could—go to the temple of Helm," Ajantis said. "I am guilty, but not of the crimes accused; they would defend me, perhaps exonerate us all..."

No, Anchev wouldn't.

"You're a fool, boy," Shar-Teel said. She glared around at us. "Give me what you're carrying; a merchant's less likely to cheat me than your stupidity."
"I have to go to the estate," I said. "Better alone; they can't have changed all the locks or closed all
the servants' passages."

Imoen spoke up, standing tall and chewing on a hank of her hair. "I've got an idea of my own, but it
mightn't come to anything. I'll go with you up to a point, Skie, in case you need anything."

"I cannot remain here; this city air is a foul blight and in particular here," Faldorn said. "I will go to
the seas to find the Umberlant priestess. She will not betray us after our service."

"Then I can follow and protect you," Ajantis said, perhaps trying too hard to be useful after his first
suggestion. "—Although you do not need it, there are rough elements in the docks of any city who
would attack not realising that you are a druid."

"Settled, then," Shar-Teel said impatiently. She drew the large pack of spared weapons and potions
unidentifiable by Imoen to her back; to find some disreputable black-marketeer, no doubt.

"And I simply to wait in this foul den?" Viconia said, still lying atop the greyed sheets. Anyone
would notice a drow in the city, of course. "Discarded aside as if I were a cheap concubine?"

"Nobody would call you cheap," Ajantis said suddenly. We looked at him; a blush came to his
cheeks at the attempt of a joke.

"And none at all would purchase a deformed cripple of a failed holy fool!" Viconia shot back, sitting
up.

The red flush lingered in Ajantis' face. "I apologise. I took on myself a duty to be courteous to all
ladies. Including those one would never consider for those reasons."

"You lie to yourself," Viconia said, angry now and standing, posing in an inhumanly graceful stance,
 glaring from red-brown eyes that had lost some of their scarlet fire but none of their capacity for
force. "You look at me when you cannot help yourself; I have broken hundreds stronger than you
—"

He turned his head away from her. "Perhaps, my lady, but I would have to be more foolish than I am
to follow. I am sure you will find others who are not deformed and crippled failures to their duties.
Shall we go, Faldorn?"

"Follow behind and do not make me tarry," she said, and led the way with her nose in the air.

Imoen and I slipped out of one of the other, many doors of the rabbit-warren of the Mermaid, hiding
in the shadows of the smoke. There was the same sweet odour of Black Lotus as I had seen at the
Nashkel Carnival, atop the roasting of bad meat and ill-smelling cheese. Scantily clad women plied a
trade in the doorsteps, openly inviting; we tried not to stare. I'd seen parts of this corner of the city for
myself, wanting adventures and to know more about roguery and thieving. In other times it would
have been fun to explore this with Imoen, thieves and thieving wizard together. Further in the city
streets, guards drilled openly, hands stacked and watched over supplies stored in barrels in locked
warehouses to be rationed. In the high city centre walking across the bridge of the old walls we could
see the tips of some of the tall harbour ballistae that must be intended for Amnian ships. What news
of invasions would Faldorn bring back from the docks? I turned my head from them.

"This is once where walls were built for an invasion," I said, "but the Dukes listened to the people
and expanded the defences to cover the entire city. Oberon has an estate not far north; he was one of
my father's old friends...is one of my father's friends. And in that open space—" A patrol of the
Flaming Fist marched through it. "I went to a carnival there once, when I was ten or eleven. There
were shuggyboat swings..."

And in a cage in the menagerie, I remembered, there had been an avariel elf with bloodied, torn wings, crying out for help; people poked her and the other creatures with sticks simply to see them move. The governess who had taken me reported it to the Flaming Fist, of course, but as far as I know the carnival left the city and nothing happened. Now we were adventurers, we could do something to stop that sort of thing.

"This street is called Thalasser's Walk, and goes into Hamridge and Blessingride," I told Imoen so that she could navigate it for herself.

"—And all the temples, and the magic shops?" she said.

"The temple district is east of the city except for the Umberlants, who are down by the docks in the south, and most wizards live in the east, close to the city gates," I said. "There's even a few necromancers; and Ramazith's tower to the north, even taller than the palace. That's it on the horizon, red." A stray tabby-striped cat ran between our feet; I bent to stroke it behind the head. Baldur's Gate prizes its cats in warehouses and stores.

Imoen nodded thoughtfully. "Who has the most magic books?"

"Ramazith, probably," I said; there are rumours that he is the one who boasts most often of his magical possessions. "But...find one of the magic stores; Sorcerous Sundries is the one with the blue-and-red stained glass. It's very ornate; you'll know it when you see it."

"And up this way...is where you come from," she said. The streets were wider and the cobblestones clean; a plump woman dressed in finely-made wool glanced at us with suspicion. I'd hoped to pass for a messenger of some sort, in trousers and shirt that at first glance might pass for a boy's dress, a small pack slung over my shoulders. Imoen wore Therella's dress again, gathered in at her waist, the long hem dragging on the ground and dirtied from the mud we had walked through in the Mermaid's district.

"Yes. The estate is by the north city walls, guarded by a wall itself—but there's an old gate behind some ivy on the left that nobody bothers with. I suppose I'll have to re-oil the lock to get back in. Then through the topiary and around the back by the lake; there's the second gardening shed, and on its roof it's easy to climb past the shadows of the ornamentation on the walls to get up to the second floor, then just swing up under the balcony of the blue dining room for the third..." I said. Even the smell of this part of the city spoke of the home I'd come from; faint salt from all the way across the docks, cleansed air in this quiet district away from the activity of markets and workmen, the fresh smell of gardens and trees behind walls, orange pomanders and floral perfumes that occasionally drifted by. Everyone has somewhere they remember as their own place.

"Right," Imoen said. "Y' need me?"

"No; go and buy your scrolls."

He could send for the guards and try to turn me in to Anchev; but using the lockpicks in my sleeve would be much better than spells or fighting in his house. If he—said much the same as in the letter; then that would make it over, but this time I would have tried... Or he could believe me, but bringing Imoen wouldn't help that one way or another.

I have his eyes, everyone always said; I was born a Silvershield.

"All right," Imoen said. "Good luck, have a dwarven invisibility potion, and meet you back at the
It took some few minutes, standing in the shadows under overhanging eaves of a bare-walled estate of the Ailshams, for my knees to stop shaking enough to try it.

Viconia sat scowling and meditating in the cleanest corner of their room at the Mermaid; Imoen flung herself down on a bed on her return, stretching.

Too expensive; of course the battle-wizzes got all the good spells 'fore we even came, and they won't even talk to a newcomer; in fact, bet I was really suspicious-looking... I got some of what I needed, couldn't leave Viccy all alone here all day and Skie'd worry if I didn't turn up after she was finished.

She idly snapped her fingers, letting a pink-coloured mageflame burn painlessly on her right forefinger.

Ramazith's an abjur, they say, so's he's got a big tower and lots of protections. That I can't cast. But his rival Ragefast, he's a conjurer, that's kind of important. And they say he's got a good library, too. Maybe... But I shouldn't unless it's for sure, really. We've got to stop this, and the person starting it's around near.

Or maybe it'd be fun to test myself out. If I could transmute my way past abjurations, breach the top of the tower and fry 'em all with evocations, step over the body right into those spellbooks and scrolls...

Sometimes she had things in her mind that came out from absolutely nowhere, Imoen thought. Better not shape out like crazy ol' buffleheaded listen-to-the-voices-in-his-head accidentally-turn-himself-into-a-woman necromancer, right? That'd make her accidentally turn herself into a man, and—heh—Shar-Teel'd hardly know what to think about that.

That'd be completely wrong. He hasn't even done anything that we know about, and 'sides I just beat a wolfwere sorceress and a mad illusionist, not a wizard with his own tower and everything. Yet. Maybe I just need sleep; dreamless sleep. Or picking up more gossip for what's going on; leave Vic here again to look after our things and go up and get something to drink and more than one thing to listen to.

Hey, maybe where the local thieves' guild is, for starters; Skie 'n me promised it to each other. Nothing wrong with making friends who might help you, right? Thing with war is, everyone suffers and nobody really wins... Quoting Mr G. there, Imoen remembered. He'd been right, and she promised herself she'd see the murderer gone. Puffguts'd not object to that— She thought of telling him that she was a transmuter wizardess now, practically an archmage, but she still hadn't forgotten all the rogue tricks he'd taught her, and he'd clap a meaty hand on her back and make a joke about how clever she'd turned out.

Not bad, Imoen. You've not done so bad, you master archmage lady thiefly transmuter you; got slaves out of Cloakwood, got new spells from Ulcaster's beardy, beat up a demon, tramped through old Islanne's tower, made adventuring friends. We're gonna do just fine.

She sat up and reached for her spellbook; might as well go over them all right now before getting out again. Skie'd better get back here soon, or else she'd start getting seriously worried. Some good invocations, in case of fighting; confusion, of course, so's they could get guards off their backs if they had to without killing 'em; one of Islanne's charms for the same thing, even though she wasn't really good at enchantments. She hummed as she studied until Viconia hissed at her to stop it at once, and
felt good about herself that she didn't start turning the pages extra loudly.

Then the door's handle did turn. Skie stumbled in; not the neatly-clad Skie of the morning (a *pun*, Imoen's subconscious told her off for it even as her conscious was concerned) but with clothes torn and slashed as if by sword or even claws; the dwarven shortsword in her hand; her hair wild and loosed about her face; and a fierce and frightened look that burned out of her light brown eyes.

"There's another Skie," she burst out.

—

*A/N:* 'There is another sky'—poem by Emily Dickinson. :D

—

120. Other Skie

I'd sprung the catch on my panelled window, still unfixed since I'd left, and swung a leg over into the room. As clean and tidy as I'd left it; the bed had been made with a different set of sheets, white with bluebells sewn in a pattern across the edges. I reached back in habit to push down the window once more, making its flaw unknown to most glances. There was no dust on my dressing table, and a silver-backed hairbrush lay below the enamelled mirror, polished so that no streaks showed on it. I traced the ends of the flowered patterns across its gilt frame with a finger, and there was no residue left on my hands. I wouldn't have expected otherwise; the servants would have kept it clean.

The girl in the mirrored reflection was short and slight and almost resembled the sketch upon the notice of the city's bounty, wearing a rough shirt cut like a boy's. Her dark hair had been raggedly cut short and carried traces of green dye on its ends, tied back behind her neck and tucked below the collar of her shirt. Behind the gaunt line of her cheekbones was a faint scar below her right ear; perhaps from... I'd learned how to take pain; perhaps it had even been Shar-Teel in training. Her hazel eyes were greenish in this light and dark shadows lurked below them, for tiredness and loss. There was wiry muscle across her arms and shoulders, and her stance even now was as if she feared she was about to be attacked. I untied my hair, and gathered it into a more respectable small bun at the nape of my neck. I could go to my wardrobe for a change of clothes, too, and wear one of the old dresses I'd missed, even though by now of course it would be months out of date in fashion. And steal a pink one or two for Imoen; the hems might be let down a little for the inch of her height, but other than that she was pretty in anything.

That was only putting it off. I looked one more time from the mirror's surface to the dark walnut of the wide wardrobe; and turned away to my own door, dressed like an adventurer. We still had Sarevok's letters; the only other Grand Duke had to know what he was. I crossed the wide room; there was so much more *space* than any room at an inn. But, compared to the open spaces we lived in: small, and confined by the iron bars of the windowpanes and the heavy door.

Then the door to my room had opened before I could lay hands on the knob. And instead of a servant, I saw only myself.

She was clean and neat and her dress was the blue-flowered one with the second-best lace petticoat below it, the matching lapis earrings dangling from her earlobes and a bracelet of small black pearls at her wrist. Her face was surprised, and her short dark hair was smoothed into a neat bun. Her skin was unlined and unpainted. She pulled her mouth into an expression of surprise. She was the reflection, from ages back in Ches.
I dashed past her; I pushed her into the room and slammed the door shut. There were sounds of something beating on the oak; I pushed the lock and the bolt into place, on the outside because Daddy had some strange ideas. The beating continued, but she wasn't me, she couldn't pick it, whoever and whatever she was, she didn't even turn to go for the window but only kept hitting it with her fists, or something else—

I ran for my father's rooms. The passages seemed strangely devoid of people.

He was in his bed; I forced open the door with little finesse. There ought to be healers waiting on him if he was ill; clerics at his bed, herbalists' remedies and potions... But there was only him. He lay back under the curtained bed, alone. He'd been grey-haired before; but perhaps not quite so starkly-featured, and certainly not not lying back like an old man.

"Daddy—" I managed. "I'm sorry. There's a lot—it wasn't all my fault—I didn't run away, in the end —"

Tell him, I told myself.

"Sarevok was behind the iron crisis and I have the letters to prove it. It doesn't matter if you believe I don't belong to you, it's true I've done things— But he started the iron crisis, he can't be right about this war, so you have to stop it. Please, just look at what he wanted..."

He stared at me; coldly, forbidding, and that had always made me silent before. It made me lose my voice even now.

Then his skin shredded grey and torn apart, and multiple images of the person in the bed appeared, their hands moving in unison for another spellcasting.

Since the rule was to disrupt a caster: the dwarven shortsword came from my pack, and I ran to him. It. It.

Very appropriate, for one of Durlag's children.

The thing in the bed was gone, slaughtered. There were torn rips in my clothing. Claw-marks that I had the power to get rid of. I ripped the tapestried overhang of the bed to clean the blade of the sword. The thing was grey-skinned and not human. It was not, and had never been, what I had first thought of it. My father was dead somewhere, and so never would...

The estate was indeed quite deserted. I'd lost my way, wandering. The flower-vases were smashed in the library, and the shelves were empty. Some noises, though, had come from the kitchen below; I didn't find out what they were cooking there. But nothing and nobody had seen me while I crept through the halls.

Then I saw Eddard's face. He wore his black doublet with silvered hems and buttons, his sword neatly sheathed by his side, walking slowly and easily through the portraited corridors. His face wore a contemplative expression, as so often. Thinking about some piece of business, usually, merchancy and all the things he could not share with me since he had grown out of childhood so much sooner.

"Dear sister," he said; he offered his arm. "Your dress is quite inappropriate. You ought to put on something far better for tonight's dinner with Lady Fannaline and her sons."

His eyes were the same as ever. The same hazel as my father's below my brother's dark hair, concerned and serious and kind. He wore his silver signet ring on the little finger of his right hand, and it was exactly identical to the one I had worn around my neck even through shipwreck and trouble.
"Thank you, brother," I said simply. "You're kind to me. I've missed you so since last we met." We walked past the portrait of my dead Silvershield grandmother with long fair hair, wearing a green gown with old-fashioned farthingale, her hand resting on her husband's shield.

"Since this morning?" Eddard said, and gave a sharp smile. "You're a devoted sister, my dear."

"How could I fail to be?" He led me back toward my own room. "I think I want to borrow one of Brilla's costumes, Eddard. After all, I never get new clothing for myself."

He laughed. "Frugality in a time of war, then, dearest sister. Certainly she will not object. I favour you in purple, rather. It will match me."

"That charming one with the amethyst bodice," I replied. "Brilla purchases things that she ought to know all too well would never fit her; how silly! And then complains to Cook that she has created food too heavy on purpose."

Eddard pushed open the door to Brilla's suite for me like a gentleman, and then allowed it to close behind us. There was nobody present. Her bed stood ornate and well-made, her jewel-box closed upon her own dresser. Her wardrobe hung ajar. It was Eddard who walked over to it and rustled in it for clothing.

"Here it is, sister," he said. Rather roughly he pulled the elaborate violet dress from its wooden peg, and walked back to me, holding it in his hands. "Was this the one that you meant?" He let it hang down, near to my body. "It looks as if it would fit you, though it will trail on the ground behind you for your height. Far too close-fitting for her; the low bodice...would just suit your shape, perhaps."

He leaned close, an arm around my shoulders. We'd barely touched as brother and sister, before. That was the smell of the cologne Eddard used, and sandalwood in his hair. Even my brother's clothing was exactly recognisable, fine doeskin boots and polished scabbard and that doublet. I'd wanted so to find him in the wilderness and have his protection.

"Go ahead and try it on, dear sister. Truly those clothes are unacceptable. My word, Skie, s'blood; what in the world have you been doing? I want to see you out of them, quite soon."

His hand scraped my bare shoulder, below the tears that my father had left in the shirt.

"Come now, sister. I think that we both know what we are to each other."

I stopped moving. "What is the plan?" I asked, hoarse-voiced.

"But you already know!" Eddard said, silver-eyed, and I stabbed and he changed.

He was not a caster as the one within my father's rooms. Damon killed my brother the first time through a backstab. Shar-Teel had taught me the right angle for a throat from the front. I learned a lot from both of them.

Brilla; where was she as well? That wasn't too hard to think about.

I ran out from the balcony in the east wing, down to the thick bushes of the topiary-cut tall deer. There were indeed sounds of gardeners moving about; or guards. I went past them, and back the way I had come. The letters were still in the pack. The burning sword was still unsheathed.

Imoen was there once more.
We left to find Shar-Teel, carrying arms. The trouble was we didn't know exactly where she was; so Imoen and I went down to the docks for Faldorn and Ajantis. The Umberlant temple was not far from the Iron Throne's building, but we stayed away from it. It was broad daylight, after all.

(...investigate, at least; there are surely some Flaming Fists loyal to the truth...)

Ajantis stood some distance from the Sea Queen's blue-painted house that stretched out over the waterside, watching The harbour was busy with its defences, the way I'd seen it once when a sahuagin attack was expected from the seas, from a safe distance. Ballistae; warships in port, men and guards. Ships were being constructed, slender and lightweight but sleekly and strongly lined, beams of wood lifted on carts and ropes. The design was new to me, though I didn't have time to consider the warships in progress.

"Dopplegangers..." Ajantis almost stammered. "Indeed! These are evil foes indeed; warmongers and foul... I am sorry, my lady Skie..."

I'd no wish to hear that from him.

"I've heard of illegal marketeering here in the docks in peacetime, up in the east end where the fishers are," I said, "and of course the main marketplace. We couldn't find her near the Mermaid."

"Separation, then; we do not wish to make ourselves conspicuous together," Ajantis said. "Imoen, would you care to wait for Faldorn within that house in my place? She found and spoke courteously enough with Tenya, but I do not wish to enter an evil deity's temple."

"You search the markets, I'll search the docks," I said; he'd get along better in a slightly more legitimate setting. "Try not to get into any trouble!"

The afternoon sun burned. The rigging from the harboured ships creaked; weapons were loaded to them, guards gathered around outfitted in bright steel. Possibly Iron Throne steel. To be too obviously inconspicuous was itself conspicuous; I stepped between groups of people, careful to not be the only one for notice to rest upon. Back here, perhaps I could find some of the places I'd heard of. There in the distance was that long craft known as the Low Lantern, moored and in fact chained to its position, though perhaps it still did some of the business for which it was reputed.

The smaller fishing boats rose out of the water like a flight of ducks. Cages for trapping lobsters and crayfish were fixed by the sides of the docks, mussels growing on the slick stones and wooden panels, barefoot children running through the muddy waters. A dirty sign that buried the image of an ale mug below enough dirt to fill a street-sweeper's cart swung from in front of a building; a low tavern. I was going to look inside that, but in the distance a tall figure with a sword strapped to its back caught my eye.

The figure was red-haired, exactly like Shar-Teel; I moved closer, and she was clearly recognisable. So she'd come here after all. But it was odd, to whom she was speaking; a child rather than a merchant, perhaps twelve or thirteen, thickset, wearing a greyly modest dress without tucks. Neither of them turned to see me, and I drew closer through the crowds. The red-haired girl carried a basket...
of fish in her arms, and watched Shar-Teel; her face was freckled and quite coarse-featured, upturned to listen to her. One of the girl's feet was bigger than the other—I saw it, when she moved a little; she was club-footed, and that boot dragged on the ground.

"—give the gold to Wayland, and that's all. I already gave some in the Beard. Get out of my sight," Shar-Teel said.

The girl didn't stop looking up at Shar-Teel; there was a small bag she had tucked into her plain dress. She wore a symbol of Ilmater sewn into her clothing, I saw, stitched from more homespun cloth. I knew the Ilmatari priests dressed orphans that way in the temple. Around her neck was a plain clay necklace, crudely beaded. "Please—how long will you be here?" she asked.

Shar-Teel turned her head and spat on the ground. "Long enough to kill a few. Don't try to seek me out."

I saw the girl's expression crumple, and with her club foot she took a step back. I'd come closer to them, and yet neither of them had seen me.

"Mother—" the girl managed to say. I stopped in shock.

The features they shared, red-haired, the same nose and set to the chin; the age. It was possible; one would never have imagined—

"—Are you going to...come back here? I work for Jhessen, his fishmonger's stall just over there, and he and his wife Bellivia have been very kind to me. You could meet them; I told them I had a mother who was busy in other cities..."

Shar-Teel raised a fist as if to strike her. "You shouldn't have told her that, bastard-brat. If I'd known how to get rid of you from the belly I'd have done it when I had the chance."

I should...not be listening to this at all...

"If I see you again I'll knock your teeth out."

The girl cringed back like a beaten dog. It was painful only to watch. I chose to step forward, and then Shar-Teel's glare was wild and rabid at me, as if she would draw her sword and run me through in only a moment—

"I said, run along now, Tevanie!" she said to her daughter; and in a slow, awkward stride, the girl fled from her...

"Skie," she cursed. "You'll tell none of this; none in the group or I'll see you dead." It was very believable. I couldn't speak of it; I started to stammer through the news, telling her. "D-doppelgangers, m-more— Thought— M-my father, I w-wanted to speak to him one last time; but I c-couldn't..."

"And let them know you turned up!" Shar-Teel had threatened to hit her child; she slapped my face then, without holding back. "We go through the Throne building tonight. Show them fear, not take it to the damned Fist."

—

There was a bruise on my cheek. I started to run back to the Mermaid; then realised that was too noticeable, and slowed to a walk as if I had something definite to do. Then past a narrow, shadowed street: something grabbed my arms and pulled me back before I could move or scream, and then
there was a hand over my mouth and a sword at my chest.

"You," a woman's voice said, and her other hand touched my earlobes, the greenstone I wore through them. "I see. The description; and in fact these very earrings."

There was...a man in full armour, thick chainmail; it carried no insignia below a striped brown cloak, but his helmet covered a large proportion of his face. His nose was beaked, and he carried the sword that threatened me. Nobody came to help in this dark corner of the city. The woman held me.

"I purchased those myself," the female voice continued reminiscently. Tethyrian accent, my mind supplied. She smelled of damp earth and fresh leaves. The sword was still extended before me. "A small merchant town, once upon a time in Cormyr upon various and vital business. I thought it the perfect gift for the protégée of an old, very dear friend of mine."

"Of ours, d-darling," the man said, stuttering. I became slightly less afraid of them.

"The girl in question, I recall," spoke the woman, "bore the name Imoen Winthrop. I know already that you are a thief; and that you are not she. Tell us, what have you done to her?" The steel might have drawn more closely to me. "Do not scream, or we will be quite willing to run you through. You have caused us a good deal of trouble in the Sword Coast."

The hand rose slightly from my mouth. "—I didn't do anything to her. Imoen must have seen me wearing these for ages, even if I don't..." I didn't seem to remember the reason why I liked them so much. "I'm surprised you didn't know she prefers other colours; especially if you really do know of her..." She wore a rose quartz pair now, dwarven-made.

The couple exchanged a glance. "Gorion," the woman said, "did write us something about pink. I assumed she would grow out of it. Well, if you have not proved sufficiently morally depraved on top of your other larcenies, to steal a priceless gift most carefully intended for our very dear friend's young one..."

The name of Gorion. If there is necessity: seek out Khalid and Jaheira? They have long been my friends?...Her with the temper and he with the heavy armour... I stared at the man of the odd couple. He could be a half-elf, a little short for a human man; and the woman behind me didn't seem to be nearly as tall and broad as her voice and impression made her seem.

"Y-you paid two silver pieces, and received change, if I r-recall, dear," the man said. "If this girl did thieve them, she has not done a g-great crime..."

"'Tis the principle, Khalid," the woman said. Jaheira, I knew then. "In addition to illicitly smuggling herself to the city!" she added. "Now, you will bring us to Imoen, child. Tethoril wrote of her leaving, and we have heard that she travels with you; if you have abandoned her or worse then I swear I shall..."

"No, she's with me!" I said in a hurry. They were Gorion's friends; if they wanted to betray us they'd have done it already, and they must want to look after Imoen. Protect her, though she was a clever mage. "Definitely with me. Er... You do have pretty good taste, Jaheira," I managed. "I've been wearing these ever since I can remember..." (Because I couldn't remember why other than it was something I hadn't wanted to forget; but I thought it was a good idea to try to keep on Jaheira's good side.) "And...all my other larcenies? I didn't think I did..."

"Aldeth Sashenstar told us all," Jaheira said, in a most forbidding manner. I still could not see if her visage was as intimidating as her voice. "Though we assume them trumped to excess, the long list of crimes upon your notice are none short of disturbing. Also reports of banditry."
"I...see," I said. "What have you done? Why are you here? What have you been doing?"

"There is much we cannot share with you, Skie," Jaheira said coldly; but she released me then, and her spouse sheathed his sword. I turned to look at her. A half-elf, wearing leather armour, carrying a staff; she was well-muscled in her arms, and her long golden brown hair suggested the mane of an angry male lion. She scowled, almost as easily intimidating as Shar-Teel. "This war upsets the balance. We seek to end it, for all those calling themselves our allies say." This time her glare did not appear to be directed at me. "We will join with your group if we are satisfied with your conduct."

I want the war to end just as much. This is my city. "You can meet Imoen on neutral territory," I said. "She ought to be able to vouch for you, and if she can't, we won't take the risk."

Jaheira's scowl deepened, and she seemed about to grab me again; but her husband spoke up. "S-she is supposed to be f-far too foolish and trusting. J-jaheira, dearest, is it w-wise to agree to this?"

"Go to the Elfsong tavern and wait," I said. "We'll come by eighteenth hour; enough of us to make sure it's no trap. We'll be watching."

Jaheira gave a curt nod. "And in turn we, child. Do not come late."

Khalid actually smiled. "Er...and g-give our r-remembrance to Imoen," he said. "I...s-suppose it was good to meet you."

"Come, Khalid." Jaheira pulled him into the shadows with almost a rogue's skill; and they walked on alone.

I fingered my shoulders where she had grabbed me. It could have been someone far less well-intentioned. Best to return to Imoen, and obviously as quickly as possible.

—

"—And you trust these," the man with the wide scar on his face said. It ran as a jagged cut from left ear to his chin on the right side of his face, shearing part of his nose and twisting his mouth. It was a face I'd seen in the past.

"You risk us all—Harper," hissed the aristocratically-dressed woman by his side. A small nightingale was perched on the shoulder of her flowing green gown. The scarred man gave her a reproving look for the spite, but Jaheira showed no reaction at the knowledge revealed. She simply threw down a parchment; a notice with the drawing as the bounty hunters of the Beard had held.

"They share the enemy. And have done so for longer than this," Jaheira said.

"Is that a drow?" an armoured woman said harshly, leaning forward to examine the sketched image. "You would expect a creature of evil to work against us." She looked up, saw Viconia in the flesh below her cloak, and glared.

This was a meeting two sets of stairs and several complicated turns through passages below a building, in a darkened once-storeroom where I wondered if it was part of the Undercellar; we had been blinded by Jaheira's casting to travel the exact way to its entrance, although the turns we had taken from the Elfsong were still in my mind. If I'd chalk, then like the story I could... But it would be very bad to sabotage them in any way.

"At least hear them out," said the red-haired woman by the scarred man, leaning impatiently forward; she wore a thick dark jacket, and at her collar was the glint of chainmail. Under the table she wore a sword by her side.
There were nine people beside Jaheira and Khalid. The red-haired woman and a younger man sat by the commander with the wide scar; the other armoured woman sat stiffly by them, a symbol of Helm openly on her neck. Two men with the grey robes and holy symbols of Ilmatari priests were on her left. On the right sat a middle-aged woman in black, silent, with greying hair and a patient, slightly plump face; and by her the nightingale-wizardess in green and a young woman, painfully thin and dressed in plainer olive.

Commander Scar, whose real name was— Everyone called him Scar. Duchess Sauriram—Dowager now, I supposed, married to Belt. Emerie Jannath, whom I hadn't known particularly well before, a wizardly hanger-on to her cousin; and the younger woman must be another relative.

The Duchess blinked. "Young lady," she instructed, "step into the light. There's quite a— resemblance."

Ao knew what utter havoc that other one had wreaked, wearing my clothes at that. "Duchess, it is me; I haven't been back to the city since Ches; I adventured to find my brother; I didn't know any of this, or what the girl who isn't me's done. I have the proof of his signet ring, which I'd bet those shapeshifters wouldn't have let anyone touch; and we adventured to bring back Balduran's sword. Imoen?"

She'd enchanted it with that spell from Islanne; when she drew it from her grey scabbard, it glowed as bright as it would have in Balduran's own day. You'd expect the legendary sword of our founder to have seemed impressive, along with our slightly abridged tale; but apparently it was not.

"Theatrics and diversions," Scar growled, sounding almost painfully like my father at his sternest; then Emerie spoke up again.

"Well, then, darling, your reputation has been quite ruined by...these supposed creatures. No secret premature child, hastily buried?" she said; I thought she was rather too old for that sort of gossip.

"No— I..." That one with my face...

The Helmite raised her symbol, glowing white. She stood. "I call on my truesight," she said. "A very simple way to settle this."

Her eyes were brilliant white, as Ajantis' had once been though stronger; they searched.

"The Great Guard reveals treachery. The Great Guard reveals sin," she said; and it came black to the surface, and she was repulsed by it.

"The girl is of the shape she appears, but Helm judges her for sin. The drow is no Drizzt, and I will not tolerate her evil..."

"I serve Shar, and I know the strength of our leader outmatches yours, pitiful surfacer," Viconia said. Shar-Teel snorted. "Go ahead and save your precious city on your own, guard dog. Or pick a fight, if you like dying."

"...And a squirrel?" The Helmite's gaze had turned to Ajantis. "Apostate still. And I would doubt that was ever a holy—"

"Leave them alone!" Imoen said, holding the sword. "You've got we're who Skie says we are. There's no right to get into folk's heads and mess 'round there!"

Jaheira took a step forward. "Quite well said, child. Perhaps some of Gorion's teaching lives within
"You are an overly soft weakling and when disgusting cities like this one overrun all Faerun it will not be the fault of my druidic order," Faldorn said serenely, for all she spoke to a druid at least twice her age and rather better muscled. "I am here to see grass grow in the blood of the instigators of the Cloakwood mines." Jaheira glared and tensed as if to spring at Faldorn, but Khalid laid a hand on her shoulder and she desisted from it.

"I cast my vote against," the Helmite said; she seated herself once more, scowling. "We need not side with corruption."

"I would want to...fight for right," Ajantis managed, in a soft near-whisper. "Sarevok Anchev is an evil war-monger, slaver, killer of..."

"For," Emerie Jannath said; she had examined Eddard's ring, and seemed to have cast some divination spell over it. "I see no point to turning down allies." The other mage beside her nodded.

"For," Jaheira said coldly. "In the past I trusted my life to Imoen's uncle; and they are the enemies of enemies."

"She and her husband brought them," the Helmite said. "They should not have entitlement to vote upon this."

Scar gave short assent to that, without yet casting his own vote.

"I agree with Annaclair. Against," said the younger of the Ilmatari priests, a long-nosed man who stared at Viconia and Faldorn.

"For," the other priest replied, an older man with grey hair who watched Ajantis.

"So many useless men," Shar-Teel said, glaring at Scar. "Typical Flaming Fist. Sit around and stare."

Which could so easily have ruined our chances entirely. I did remember her attacking that Fist, but he was attacking Viconia.

"For, withal," Lady Sauriram said. "'Tis hard to take in the deeds claimed by young Skie; but at least this girl is closer to the child of Entar I once knew than the one of late. I believe her tale of shapeshifters." Once she was a kind but bland and unhandsome woman always by the side of her husband; I'd never really looked at her when she and Duke Belt came to see my father and she used to pat me on the head. She had not changed by appearance, but the outline of her face and her voice seemed more...definite, these days. She was dressed in a widow's black weeds, a thick lace collar covering her throat.

"Vai, Sorrel," Scar said, addressing the two beside him: the red-haired woman with the sword, and a younger fair-haired man whose eyes seemed an odd pink colour in the low light. Flaming Fist, or at least formerly and recently so.

"—Vai? You're the name Garrick said would give a reward for the bandits," I said. "A bard with a harp. We collected some, ah, scalps..."

"Said he was an adventurer. I remember. We found one half-dead miscreant who talked of traitors fitting you lot." She looked at Shar-Teel and Viconia.

"And did he come to the city? Bring news of the mine slaves to Eltan? Because he was coming, with Yeslick—"
Scar held up a hand to end that. "Sorrel: your vote?"

He startled, almost guiltily, and spoke with hesitation at potentially disregarding his officer's will. "Sir, I would say...yes?" It was Viconia he watched, though his expression was odd enough that I did not quite think it was her figure to sway him.

Five to two; unless Scar had a casting vote, he and Vai could not change that. "Settled," he said. The Helmite's lips thinned to pale white, but she said nothing; the younger Ilmtari glanced away from Viconia. "Under one provision of truth that you achieved Vai's quest."

I half-wondered if he would take up a holy symbol of his own; I'd heard he was a Tyrran like my father. But instead of divinations, he only laid out some papers of his own.

"—They're the documents Sarevok's servant Davaeorn sent to the bandit camp, and we still have the original copies," I said; thanks to Therella's faith in us.

"I was given them in the days before Eltan's murder," Scar said. "Sufficient for suspicion. Insufficient for proof. Then came the Amnian attack—so-called; then the skyship plans, and Anchev's stock couldn't have run higher; then Eltan's death. A ring of the Shadow Thieves' insignia by the body. All too convenient."

"And I suppose my father was recorded to cast a vote in his favour." I sounded stiff enough for that. I'd cried enough before, when I'd heard from him—or thought—no, too much information implied by the letter, probably heard. After that, it would have been; not so long after that, perhaps, since it seemed I was still called the Duke's daughter. I don't always have to be slow to understand. Scar confirmed it.

"Then as to the tale of the mines: Vai went, and saw nothing but a flooded shaft and evidence of some migratory human settlement," he said. "Perhaps connected to druids. We know nothing of this friend of yours."

"Garrick and Yeslick and the slaves went to the druids of the forest and found a safe home there with them... Or so I wished to be true.

"And my poor, dear cousin. At the coronation," Emerie said, dabbing at a green-eyeshadowed lid with a delicate handkerchief she had produced from the depths of a wide, embroidered sleeve. "They exploded out of the crowd. The most horrible monsters you could imagine, as if by some illusion. His mistress—or one of them, they say—carried out some spellwork; he himself gave the appearance of striking at them. Then his own pet archmage cast a spell, and all was confusion, and most seem to believe him the hero. Fortunately my own mentality is stronger," she said, giving a stare made from an early morning's frost.

"By carrier-bird they've pushed past Nashkel into the Cloudpeaks, six days' march from Crimmor," Scar said; he unrolled a map to point out Sarevok's strategies. "Reinforcements ordered to keep the Nashkel mines. But it's the navy he's using to gamble away men's lives: ordered almost all to an immediate strike on Athkatla itself, leaving the city defenceless."

"Three fronts opened in Amn," Shar-Teel said suddenly. "Sythillis to the south; Cloudpeaks pass; Athkatla. But you break first if the new ships don't get out in time." She tried hard to say the last as if she meant to gloat over it.

"Almost as if he wants an invasion," Scar said. "Fend it off and once more the common man sees him a saviour. Sorrel?"
"There are these," the younger man said. What he passed across the table was a small disc hanging from a piece of black cord; a symbol. From the exclamations the others had, this was also new for them. We were last to be handed it for inspection, and I saw a medallion dark in colour, the back of it featureless. Upon its other side was a raised skull in sharply stylised design, coloured a sickly yellow against the dark background. Around the skull swordlike thorns flew in a deadly circle.

"They've not yet told me more," Sorrel said. "But some of his men among us seek almost to establish him as more than a simple war leader. As if a sort of dark saint, or even a Chosen of some deity. When I've seen him fight...perhaps I see their point." He drew back his shoulders in embarrassment. There was something odd about his eyes, indeed; they were pupilless and contained only a small amount of white at their edges, coloured a strange pink. Perhaps a trace of some magic.

"Do _you_, demonspawn?" Annaclair said. Scar held up a hand, and she stiffened her lips again in silence. My father used to treat other merchants with respect regardless of their origins, elf or dwarf or tiefling. An expression of some interest, perhaps inevitably, showed on Viconia's face.

"The skull reminds me of the emblems of some evil gods," Ajantis volunteered.

"Myrkul; Bhaal; the Dark Sun; no doubt more than one reptiloid or orcish deity," the priestess said, reeling off her dour list. "But this particular design is not one I know of."

"Nor we," the younger Ilmatari spoke.

"Trashy materials," Shar-Teel said, and sent the icon spinning back to the Fists. "What male doesn't have delusions of superiority? _Skyships_, you say. Saw 'em in the harbour. Like what the Halruuans have? —Then take one, and scorch the palace with him in it, or ram it. Or use a harbour catapult to shake him. Do all of you sit around useless?"

Skyships; the word caught my imagination. For all his crimes, if Sarevok had brought skyships to Baldur's Gate and gave us merchantships that could ride over sea and land alike, as possessed the Halruuans but only confined to their own countries, in case of thieving of the means... Then again, there was also Halruaa to consider. And Shar-Teel's known hatred of Flaming Fists coming to the fore, yet again.

"The doorway," Jaheira said, "is behind you."

"Petty squabbles are an artefact of soft cities," Faldorn said; although given what she'd said to Jaheira, one could doubt the entire truth of that. "I am listening; you know more than us of the circumstances."

Scar's dark eyes passed over her. "I do not doubt your claimed powers; but it is an ill thing when youths are brought to war. We will have a Halruaan attack to fear the moment one of those ships rises aloft, and yet we trade that fear against the Amnian near-certainty.

"What we do to deny Anchev support is to remove his supplies. He and Dosan order grain hoarded for their cronies; we redistribute to the folk who could least bear these times. We reach to overturn him before he leaves the city as none but a smoking husk." Angelo Dosan, I'd heard on the streets, was the name of the new commander of the Flaming Fist, though Sarevok had taken his place; Shar-Teel said nothing more, but watched Scar intently.

"And fails to recognise those of more rightful familial authority," Emerie Jannath said.

"T-that's... Stopping him is _r-right_," the apprentice said; her voice was soft and frail and half-broken, like a young bird's.
"A second objective: exposure." Scar looked across at us. "I want your group to challenge the Silvershield impersonator in the open, if she's yet present. Taros, accompany them." The older of the Ilmatari agreed. "For his daring to use monsters..." The commander smiled a thin smile. "Reveal him as one."

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122. Heavy Gold

Sssr'dssnssts: 19 Eleasias

The Golden One.

Sssr'dss said the words to itself. Sweet-smelling dry flesh and blood had lingered below its nails for days after the killing of the Dukes. The invisible primate female who laughed and cast poison-gas that covered tens of other primates in a single casting; the squat and hairy human male with the short sword that seemed to drink blood of its own will; the Golden One Itself; Its primate magician; and Its nourishing primate. The gold of the hair of the Lady Cythandria and of the Lady Cythandria's layers of stiff-rustling laced dress on that day had shone in the noon sun that had radiated through mage-secured glass of the high buttressed ceilings, suffusing the primates gathered in shining jewels and brilliant silks. When Sssr'dss looked with the thread-sight it viewed as sufficiently close to the sight of the Greater Ones it saw the lengthy and well-ordered readings of Lady Cythandria as of that colour of old gold, not nearly so glorious and inhuman as the divine that blazed from within the Golden One's untouchable mind but yet something that to Sssr'dss' mind was a match for Its power. Of the other potential nourisher kept by the Great One the power was less discernible by that particular sight Sssr'dss had learned the trick of, though of course that simply gave it the advantage of knowledge and it was a fighter of great renown.

The primates had screamed and thought and cursed the word of monster while Sssr'dss and others of its race were instructed to use terrifying forms as different as possible to each other. Sssr'dss felt that a face like that of the scaled and toothed creature primates feared called the basilisk, a body large and blackened and spread like the combination of a tree struck by lightning and a sea creature of the far depths of this place of the world, and even daring enough to represent the form of the tentacles of the Red Master at the ends of its hands was above the efforts of its fellows. There were screams and bloody deaths, and the Golden One was seen to turn on them, and did in truth slay some of Sssr'dss' own number. This was done so that others should worship It as the Noble People did so.

It was and demanded to rule above and beyond all. Certain of Its servants carried graven discs of symbol of outright worship that spread. It caused countless deaths in Its name. Yet the Golden One was not within the planes It wished for a domain, and could not yet make obvious use of the monsters It possessed.

Thus the tasks of Sssr'dss' fellows were only to maintain the primate faces taken and even in that were replaced by degrees by primates who came as new servants, since after all primates did not usually crave the flesh of primates, and to gain battling and the eating of flesh only in quiet night.

Many of the pods were satisfied by this. Rsssjss boasted of its work and thoughts of even producing a birthing with its partner Tssls'ssisl, with discussion of which would be the nutritional parent. Sssr'dss thought that its podsib was of suitable quality to feed young and for that their own pod would grow. That impersonation was not entirely unskilled for it was drawn upon a portrait and words of a primate female, and the Golden One's instruct was to bring direct word of a sight of the original primate, but still Sssr'dss would have found it uninteresting.
Akkariss-jheriss, name meant of derision, pretend-human who thinks itself primate, its pods might say. The Lady Cythandria had Sssr'dss simply because it had a talent for it. What if the Golden One in Its great godly destiny—and there was no blasphemy or disobedience in possessing such a thought, Sssr'dss rationally determined, because after all since the Golden One had such greatness any concerns of the people of Its servants were far below It—allowed them to continue with less work, or even to slay further of them to gain favour with the worshipping human-primates? Then with the Lady Cythandria Sssr'dss had learned more both of their own nature and even of what the Greater One of its own pod refused to instruct.

I tell you to lift weights in varying forms to test how much strength is affected by shape, had spoken the Lady Cythandria, briefly and absenty, writing down its words and notes and contemplating other things. From that Sssr'dss had learned that the strength was primarily innate and shape or no shape it could change liftings only by positioning: which it had learned besides the absorptions it must have committed while still within its nourishing parent's body and before memory of longing for Greatness.

I tell you to transform to different shapes to ascertain the limits of what you can impersonate, had spoken the Lady Cythandria, and from that Sssr'dss had realised securely that to imitate a shape it had spoken to was far easier than mere description, and as well that it could combine and vary shapes and voices, and that it could transform no more than nine times within a short space of time. (Perhaps this had of late increased to ten.)

Yes, I would know more of the magics cast by those you call Greater Ones, spoke the Lady Cythandria, and then Sssr'dss had dared to request demonstration. Illusions and a few invocations and transmutational enhancements, I've observed. The Weave touches you, the Lady Cythandria said, and then Sssr'dss had learned from it what it was capable of. It could begin to imitate a Greater One itself through human-primates' knowledge of casting, and one day it would be as above the Greater Ones as the Lady Cythandria itself was above them in magic. No matter what those of Sssr'dss' noble people chose to view of it. Lady Cythandria spoke of aptitude for sorcery and the meanings to it and of the tangle of equations that governed Sssr'dss' learning. Sssr'dss understood it not all yet, but it served the Lady Cythandria to know more.

Lady Cythandria, the word here of vivisect I know not in your tongue, Sssr'dss had dared to speak once to it, for the Lady Cythandria closed its mind purposefully at all times, and it had instructed Sssr'dss in what it meant. When Kssr'zsss'vsstn was for incompetence punished, the Lady Cythandria had gained the idea of numbing transformations of flesh whilst it cut into the skin of Kssr'zsss so that it should last for longer time. The detail of how the Noble People turned flesh was now known and visible. Sssr'dss saw for itself the way the bone reshaped first followed by the flesh and the skin itself last of all, and wielded the knife itself to the directions of the Lady Cythandria. In battle Sssr'dss would look to the underlying bone first. The flesh continued to possess transformative properties for some time once removed, and Sssr'dss noted that the Lady Cythandria kept the twitching mass and made use of it upon more giant transformations.

Then the primate who reached an orange-red within the threads that the Lady Cythandria held had come, as had the irritating and loud halfling-primate. The people of Sssr'dss had continued to address it as akkariss-jheriss, wouldbe-primate, but it had maintained learning. The Lady Cythandria's flesh smelled foully of artificial scent, so it did not wish to consume it, and when it spoke Sssr'dss listened in patience to the Lady Cythandria. Sssr'dss listened less to the tales and legends of its people and was among them at fewer sharings. For all new growth of firstflesh shattered bones and consumption remnants were left behind.

Sssr'dss smelt the podscent of Rsssjss its sib, which was a scent of the blood of the people and quick-coming to the cellar of their keeping. By nature Sssr'dss went toward it to first learn.
Rsssjss was cut as if by small daggers or thorns and the blood was the silver of their people rather than the red of a primate transformation. Its form maintained some of the seeming of the role it was given. Sssr'dss noted glass shards and plant material in small amount in the wounds.

Sssr'dss stopped it in its tracks by bone-hold that shifting would take time to free from, and demanded to be the first to know.

"By the orders of the Golden One—" Rsssjss said, but Sssr'dss wished to hear and offered to accompany. "The face has come, Sssr'dss; and Tssslss and Vss'zss lie dead in the primate house! It was I sent to—"

This would be news for the ear of the Golden One as well as an avian-hunt; a fall on which flight was captured.

"I will go," Sssr'dss said, travelling with Rsssjss. The actions of the primate—it had skinned sufficient surface-thoughts, had it not, to know? For the primates it had killed their final thoughts were of fear and monsters. Primates hunted monsters. The face of Rsssjss' impersonation was the face of one the Golden One chose to hunt. In the place of that primate Sssr'dss would have tried to convince the primates of the Golden One to hunt themselves instead.

The Golden One Itself had by wizardly might been transported to fight in the south of late. To achieve this correctly and a reward should await; to fail and die quickly, or painfully. The orange-red pathetic primate had more keenness for battle than the Lady Cythandria, and that one was absent. Sssr'dss debated quickly to share glory with fellow people, or with the primate of dulled gold; any failure already was that of the people. Yet should it succeed the Lady Cythandria would have given advice, and likewise should it fail that would be true.

"Darkness nears and the primates cannot see," Sssr'dss said. "The Golden One is absent. To capture or slay your face-primate for It will be glory. Let us return to its dwelling and seek. Ensure your face is not that primate's." The human primates could see identicality, as they were not utter fools and would suspect more of the same; the Golden One should easily have their heads for that. Sssr'dss glared at Rsssjss for its stupidity in retaining to form in the very streets; if it had been not seen there remained chance.

In the bowels of the dwelling maintained by their ilk was a live primate source of information, and Sssr'dss had its podsib take it through the hidden doors to find it.

"The flesh seemed plump and good in its day," Rsssjss noted in their own tongue. The primate was evidently starved and quite ill, and by its surface-thoughts terrified. Its grey-pink skin was slack and flabby, its hair and body dirtied. They had simply chained it to the wall and it tried to move away from them.

Sssr'dss had noted in the halls a picture-sketch of a similar primate, one that reminded him slightly of the Lady Cythandria simply for the yellow-coloured hair and a few trappings. The differences in primate-features meant to it only a matter of adjustment rather than personal tastes; this one was older, plumper except in the chest, lighter-haired, shorter-nosed. It also lacked the gift of mind-shielding.

Its title had been Duchess and it was kept by the Duke for primate reasons; the offspring impersonated were not of its birthing as nutritional parent. Sssr'dss searched the mind not for the recent fears that were pathetic and incoherent in despair but for the one of interest. To stimulate it changed its face to the primate Rsssjss had been assigned to emulate. That gave further memories.

—calls me Mummy, the poor motherless thing, and I do wish her brother would likewise—
—a doll in pink and quite well-behaved for her age, entertained the guests for a brief while—

—ought really to take her more often, alas for one’s memory, so quiet—

dear me, guilty of leaving room for the garden by night, such a scandal if not caught in time, and I did notice my opal brooch disappearing and reappearing—

—there must be bars on her window if she cannot stay put; was entirely satisfied with those dull history-books only a year ago—

—a scandal, I should be quite socially ruined though none could fairly blame me—

—Those monsters, they must have killed her killed Entar; monsters all monsters all nobody comes please help please—

Sssr’dss wondered if the primate had long to breathe; with sufficient information it supposed it might be killed, if its function was done with. But that was not its order to give, and if the chains had not broken for this time they would hardly break with the primate as it was now.

"Rsssjss, I shall undertake this; instruct Hrss’vsss that it must not impersonate this one," Sssr’dss told its podsib briefly, locking and barring the door firmly behind itself.

"The face came and killed—the face left, and none but I saw!" Rsssjss said. "If you possess a way to retrieve it before the return of the Golden One, do so and all shall gain, podsib."

"For that I have a plan, if the primate has at least a trifle of a brain," Sssr’dss instructed. It could not be so powerful, or else it should have killed all upon its own. It would also have been shocked by the appearance of its blood but not of its bone, for primates were foolish in that way and had few senses that could appreciate the constancy of the buzzing mind underneath and the ways of recognition that were not within the shape itself. Perhaps it had been granted sufficient time already to reflect and choose the tactic. Opportunity ought not to be wasted.

The tangle of thoughts could be mind-skimmed:

The Duchess Brilla Silvershield was trying to knock on the barred and closed door of the Ducal Palace throughout the night independent of the curfew. And that was either proof of doppelgangers—or I was wrong, and she is alive, and she has to be terrified to do that—

"A terrible attack—" Brilla Silvershield protested loudly to the two Fist guards at the heavy doors, incoherently—"I demand the Grand Duke—" About forty had gathered to witness her; it was now the early morning and the dawn’s light, the curfew complete. "I have been present all night! And that upstart—the most horrendous battle—upon my own home—that upstart—"

The stream of skimmed thoughts were pathetic, Sssr’dss thought. At least the apprentice wizard of the Lady Cythandria had shown resistant attempts with primate-pictures.

She found the bodies of what weren’t my father and brother, ran into the streets—perhaps it was possible—oh, Brilla—

Sssr’dss skimmed that mind’s surface; there was an oddity about it, but it only rendered it more hopeless. A trace of something, it was far from the strength of either of the Golden One’s consorts.

The primate face stepped forward, and its speech was not quite what lay in its mind. Perhaps a
deepthought coming to surface. There were turnings of heads and awaitings. For primate-eyes lamps still bathed white-and-gold walls with bright light.

"—I am Skie Silvershield, lately returned from travels, and I know that you are not the true Brilla Silvershield. You are a doppelganger impostor who has created a false war; surrender now and give your true shape." Its speech was high and loud and clear; it required the hearing of the crowd it saw.

Brilla turned carefully, with eyes that appeared bewildered. "Skie? Daughter?" But to look revealed the flaws within the figure. "No. You are the impostor, and a frightening one I should think. I would know my own daughter; and..."

A question, Sssr'dss thought; a question...

"Then you're the doppelganger. We know you turn to your true shapes when you die," said the primate-face. The raised daughter of Brilla rushed to attack, but the pair of guards moved to block her way. They were still diversions.

In the primate-face's dim mind Sssr'dss had noted the use of the very word. Not all primates knew of their people; Sssr'dss delved into the dark currents, and saw memories of a tower to the south...

These had defeated the tale of the pods once under the command of the Tentacles... But an idle thought.

"—Young woman, you will stop this at once; I am the Duchess—"

Then a caster; Sssr'dss' mage-sight suddenly showed it with pink-bright power, lancing forth missiles. But the Lady Cythandria had offered the suggestion of purposely numbed flesh.

Skie saw the stepmother fall to the ground, screaming in pain at the burning magery.

"Help me! Please, it hurts!"

Sssr'dss' thought-skimming extended to the caster; the scrolls of the criminals warned of spellcasters. This one had true brightness, phoenixlike, but it faltered from a ridiculous and almost pitiable fear that it had caused pain in a genuine primate. Its eyes were fixed upon the screaming and flailing woman burned by its power—truly burned, of course, and in that screaming Sssr'dss affixed a pattern of gesture by instructions of the Lady Cythandria.

The mind of that primate opened below charm, and Sssr'dss gained access to its spells. Such a low-power human-primate mage spell, and what reserves of power could be tapped by it! The analysis of threat: the dark-elven primate was ready to attack the guards to come here, and would be seen by some as the fastest threat; a nature-prostrating human still younger than this primate as another caster. But there was also the warrior, whose mind was resistant by strength as the dark-elven primate was resistant by nature to skimmings, and that Sssr'dss saw as the one to attack first.

The fire-power was not the most potent of the primate's spells, but it had a wild and strong source buried within it mixed with a certain reluctance on the primate's part, and it was speedy. Sssr'dss had the mage-primate reach for the eyes of the warrior with burning hands; and made the target. Blinded she could not fight, and called to alert the others to one foolish primate turning upon another.

The second caster was closer and immediately began the healing chant over the burned eyes. Sssr'dss had the controlled primate take one step away and commence the second spell Sssr'dss wished: the strongest spell of charming another to will. The primate-face, Sssr'dss could tell from the ground, sought to fight its way through the guards without hurting them, which was both difficult and foolish.
The spell of the phoenix-primate's body hit the caster, but it had already begun to make the warrior primate see again by a strongly powerful healing spell, the burned flesh now only a dull red. (Perhaps some of these were a little capable after all.)

"Friend Shar-Teel, go to fight the guards!" Sssr'dss made the infant-healer say. "I will stop Imoen!"

Sssr'dss possessed now two minds charmed to make to obey. It had the phoenix-primate cast a fiery arrow as the younger primate summoned its creature, both targeted at the other warrior primate. Then came the sound of yet another caster; divine, difficult to detect through primate-magesight. The holding spell came. It attacked both the bodies of the younger primate and the phoenix-primate, and imprisoned the body of the latter.

A time to use all power at its disposal; Sssr'dss, its false body weeping and crying from pain, had the young primate begin a casting for lightning. The earth and sky responded to the body and controlled mind, the same power coursing through it; and the lightning coursed down from the sky upon the head of the other primate caster.

"—Ilmater!" cried a primate's voice, half-broken—only half-broken, sadly; obviously resistant to the power. It must certainly try to heal itself; Sssr'dss had the primate perform the quick chanting for a flaming blade, and gave instruction to attack. There were sounds audible through the mind-skimming; the dark elf ought to be overcome by now.

"—Please don't kill them!" the primate-face begged the warrior-primate. "We'll need them to help, eventually—"

The warrior-primate easily knocked out one of the guards, and then Sssr'dss lost control of the charm, for the primate-face was upon it.

"—Show me your silver eyes! Show me your horrible grey skin!" it cried, the flaming blade threatening to burn. Sssr'dss had to dodge and yet not seem to be; avoid the blows even as the weak primate weighed down by thick silks and satins would never naturally have. Brilla Silvershield screamed as her stepdaughter tried to kill her— The primate-face was fast. For a moment Sssr'dss felt a loss of control.

But the Fist had come easily through the dark elf; iron filings were flung in the air. Then the spell to hold was chanted by a bass-pitched voice. It caught upon the primate-face; body only, though, rather than head. The primate-face screamed:

"I saw it! Silver eyes—a doppelganger! Someone else must have—tell me you saw the monster there!"

No human gave her an answer; by the appearance of the full patrol the crowd had begun to disperse quietly. These wore gleaming armour, high-ranked. One carried the limp form of the dark elf primate. Sssr'dss had its form take a shuddering step backward.

"It's a doppelganger, not Brilla! A doppelganger who killed her and stole her shape. Why won't you believe me?" the primate-face cried, idiotically. The cheeks of its pale face were flushed in rageful hysteria.

"That...that disturbed impostor...why, the nerve..." Sssr'dss had its false throat utter. "These are...precisely those wanted; those warned for impersonation by the guard; daring to...to, here... I demand to be returned..."

The warrior-primate had been frozen as well by the spell, and then knocked down on its face by a
blow on the head from behind. The red-haired Fist caster wearing thick golden decorations on its uniform walked forward. The dark elf and the phoenix-primate they also had; but the young primate had screamed to the others that they ought to flee, when Sssr'dss' control of it had evaporated and the other caster had come. The dark elf primate was utterly unconscious.

The phoenix-primate spoke, chained though spell-free, its voice in despair. "The Grand Duke's the one who started your iron crisis and your war. We've done nothing."

Then the primate-face joined it. "Yes. Amn's going to attack. If the city doesn't survive—we only came back to save it. The war's wrong, it shouldn't be happening. We don't want anyone to be hurt. Please, believe us."

"You're Amnian agents," the Fist captain-caster said. Its brown boot nudged at the body of the warrior-primate; it moved the primate's head to lay sideways in the mud.

"No," primate-face said. "Not one of us is. Amn is huge. The city's in danger—"

"Such altruistic motives," said the captain. It was close to the Golden One, Sssr'dss knew; a mage in its own right as well as a warrior of the Fist, and very dry of wit and cynical in ways. These primates could hardly offer more than the Golden One. "Take them away. They are the ones we want."

Or, rather, the captured primate-face was the one the Golden One demanded; no matter how many of those others still fled. Sssr'dss permitted its false face a small smile of victory.

—

123. Unto A Valley

Edwin: 20 Eleasias

In the lower reaches of the Cloudpeak Mountains their company was five days from the town of Crimmor and they expected the battle with a numerically superior force of the Amnian army to approach by the time they ventured into the Barcel Pass.

Anchev was somehow here. Not exactly, somehow; the grey-robed infant Semaj was present with him. The beardless mage simply could not be older than that idiotic paladin and therefore was an inferior wizard; Cythandria hinted at savant-like skills possessed. A necromancer by specialty who apparently possessed the capability to repeatedly teleport Sarevok Anchev up and down the Sword Coast at his desire.

Four days ago he had blazed through Nashkel. Fireballs from his hands, upon the pitiful mining town's pitiful defenders. Occasional faces that he happened to know of from his brief and unwanted sojourn in its barbaric-to-non-existent comforts offered. In one not entirely cautious fireball he had seen briefly a launderer girl to whom he had once given a two-copper tip for an acceptable cleansing of his robes, her screaming mouth visible in the glint of the flames moments before... His powers had increased, he told himself; Cythandria's talk of sulphur ratios had given benefit and the somatics and sonorous verbals and twisting of materials produced flames more glorious than ever before. (They could all suffer! They would all suffer! Zulkirs commanded a thousand upon a thousand pitiful lives of mere mortal peasants too stupid to live with a twitch of the smallest fingertip.)

The soldiers of Baldur's Gate had taken possession of the scorched garrison of Nashkel and the iron mines it governed in comparative ease. Edwin had naturally volunteered his services to maintain the
territory; as a wizard he had the power to terrify the pathetic mage-denying Amnians to submission and as a noble by birth clear natural aptitude for governing it. Denied brutally and with cuffs by fighters who dared come close to him and to illustrate the point that a mage isolated from apelike protectors and with no summonings quite ready to hand was vulnerable. In the hierarchy of the military he was somehow considered no greater than the meanest common-born recruit for all of several days from the lowest of barbarian city streets; given orders, and to disobey would have invoked other mages in the ranks as well as those who viewed intelligence to be located in the biceps.

They marched with heavy packs, and if the captains could not quite match Shar-Teel for sheer brutal dictatorship the company was larger, and therefore far less pleasant. Or those few female members of the Flaming Fist far more of the Shar-Teel build than charms of dark elves or trim neatness of overly spoiled brats. But who could set the mind on such memories that felt like fictions in the face of hours of marching past the heat of the day, yelling and the prodding, foul field rations and fouler makeshift privies used by hundreds of others, waiting for the attack of armies that outnumbered.

A skirmish two days past, and Edwin had received an arrow in his lower back and lain useless and fainted for the battle. They had found him in the mire by a fallen body, and used him for the butt of jokes of the mud that he had still not been able to wash from his robes. That time the Amnians had been overcome, a mere desperate group from Nashkel who were routed by the greater amount of their soldiers. He had taken a healing potion Cythandria had gifted to him to ease the terrible pain of it. There had been seven left; then five, and then down to four as some fool had thieved from him. (And he had not yet discovered it! No doubt it had been consumed already by one who had to want his life far less than Edwin craved his own; to breathe and to walk in the light and have what he deserved for his genius one day.)

They had assembled for the man who led them above all, who to some credulous imbeciles was an object of worship for that ridiculous amount of power he appeared to wield and that great dark sword that shone as if it pretended to be one of those legendary ones of world conquerors. (Edwin looked away from the gold glowing eyes; simply into the distance above them, so that none would see and attack him for not being willing to behold.)

Sarevok Anchev spoke, and needed no magic for his deep bass words to sound across the clearing like cracks of thunder, or earthquakes rending the earth in pieces. It was almost, Edwin thought, like the course of a spell that held the men in battered armour to its thrall.

"On this day you will murder," the actual words said; but the tone, Edwin thought, it was far more that animating tone of them that brought men to heed... "On this day I have brought you here, and in my name the fields of Amn will be soaked by blood. On this day you do murder, call my name as your battlecry, and affix me in your thoughts as the guiding hand of your strength to slay the enemy. Let there be death. Let all be unafraid of death. Let armies die, let Crimmor be left bare and salted and barren and a charnel-house. Slay the Amnians. Let all behold death. All shall know death. Take death for your cry in battle; and allow me to hear!" And from many throats came the blood-soaked roar in response, Edwin's own a weak strangled cough.

Men were beasts, Edwin thought; men were like beasts and baying for slaughter even were the slaughter of themselves. Some even raised symbols as if for deity. They all belonged to Sarevok Anchev irrevocably.

"Then go forth. Go forth and do murder. Know that Sarevok stands with you. Watch my fight and see how the slaying is to be done. Take each breath to be the stealing of life—"

So repetitive, Edwin's critical faculties decided to note. The words could so easily have been
meaningless syllables for the same response to Sarevok Anchev to be gained. The army of the Flaming Fist were puppets to him. Simple demagoguery, Edwin thought. The presence and the way...

Were, of course, convincing. Edwin looked both to the right and the left at the yelling and screaming soldiers crying worship. The gift to take this sum of people. Perhaps, he thought, in this respect Anchev had something that was enviable; some skill that he himself could perhaps learn if truly he wished to be zulkir one day... Or he could simply master more enchantments. No matter, Edwin thought. To listen to this must cease at some point, although then there would be the true fighting.

And then he was in possession of his orders doubly by command and by the binding upon him. With a score or so of fanatics; with another score-and-a-half-over of lesser fanatics; to take the form of the invaders of the Barcel Pass expected by the Amnians surrounding it.

A suicidal plan. Most were blood-soaked by faith in Anchev, some simply resigned as soldiers. Edwin was a caster—to enchant them, in connection with one other of the Flaming Fist—to foolishly try to keep these monkeys alive through Sarevok Anchev and his foolish plans where the number that would die would simply be the greatest possible.

Briefly he saw both Anchev himself and the caster Semaj within that black tent decked out for command.

"Odd... Odesseiron, it is," spoke the infant mage, a brown beard scantily covering his darker chin. "You are escorting to Witch's Teat."

The name, indeed, of a hill with wide open spaces that any monkey archer could aim at the robes of a mighty wizard.

"Correct," Edwin growled, almost spitting the word. They sent him almost to his death—they wished to send him to his death—would that he could... He must remain calm and in careful consideration. He had perfect control over his thoughts and his speech, or would so very shortly. "I realise that you and I had few common projects within the city; but we are surely the nearest peers to each other at hand. (Or you the nearest peer to my perfect magic, however far that gap—but no, now is not the time,) I thought that perhaps we could engage in studying together. (I hear you know well your Teleports, for one.)"

"I do not think I want to, at the moment," Semaj replied. "But would you like me to show you my teleportation methods?"

"(Yes!) Perhaps, if you are certain." Rogue stones he had not seen since the capture of poor foolish Philias; Cythandria had given him potions but not... (He still did not actually have the spell within his book! If he could learn it properly and perhaps even steal or beg or borrow or promise a vice-zulkirdom for the sake of the components of Semaj's version...)

"Afterwards, then, if you live," Semaj said. "There may be a little time before Sarevok returns to the city to conduct the battles there, or there may not. E—excuse me. There's a corpse I have to animate." His necromancer's peculiarity was a marked slurring form of stutter, which doubled or tripled if the person he talked to was female. Edwin glared at the grey shoulders and the last chance of escape flitting away with a calmness born of despair.

(No. No, he would not simply surrender and lie down and die. No. He would use his brilliant mind and he would act as himself, obeying Anchev's orders but as his own large brain, as all that it was possible to do...)
"Now run, you fools and sons of fools!" he howled, his boots meeting the stony ground of the pass; the storm of Amnian arrows broke open from the army who had expected an entryway to the only viable pass to Crimmor. They were—the foolish, suicidal, *distraction*. Edwin's stoneskin was up; his three mirror images likewise; and his haste spell upon them all had taken a strong and secure hold. The Flaming Fist caster was a short-haired woman who ran alongside them, likewise with stone upon her body, armoured by pauldrons and leg guards she seemed to carry with little to no effort. Her name was Ethel. All soldiers had been caught; no stragglers. Edwin sought to catch and retain his breath (immense arcane powers were more difficult to draw upon than the common peasant would suppose!). Stoneskin. Mirror Image. Dimension Door within the memory, in case of desperation and where he was no longer obliged to serve Anchev's orders in this instance. All his remaining casting strength. Four healing potions. He ran.

The first soldier screamed and fell with an arrow in the back of his neck. More missiles behind and around them, above their heads. Inanimate objects couldn't know mirror image from real; Edwin saw an arrow bloom through the shoulder of one of his doppelgangers, which then blinked out. A second and third death. They ran along the bottom of the open pass. Edwin cursed his boots upon the rough stone, but had hardly any breath, still less to curse than he would need to...

One running beside him fell to an arrow in the back; Edwin looked across in horror that it could have been him. Then the man lifted an arm to beg to be dragged along, crying out (it was audible and clear, a part of his mind wondered if the hastening influenced vocal cords and hearing speed—) and Edwin ignored him. The other wizard's stoneskin had an arrow embedded within its grey rock; she shouted a curse to Mystra and ran on.

Another fallen by him. Then a cry from one in the centre of the group, raising high an arm and medallion—obviously making himself a target, Edwin's mind thought in fear. "For Sarevok! For the —Lord of Murder fights by us!" the man called, though there was actually no sign at all of Sarevok fighting as he had promised.

(what was the death Anchev had promised, Edwin thought; but he would come through this, he would not lie down to cease his life in patience—)

An answering shout; and their still-hasted run increased in speed. The human shields about Edwin had thinned considerably. He panted, and when next he looked to his side not one of his mirror images remained.

"—The Witch!" cried the other wizard. *The Witch's Teat is beyond the Barcel Pass*— Edwin thought, frantic passages of his last night's study of the battleground; the Witch's Teat, the open hill. They crossed from the stones of the pass to the grass underfoot of the hill as if they sought to make it to the cover of trees. No; they ran hoping to make it to the cover of trees, for Edwin knew enough that to trust Sarevok Anchev to spare life was a fool's act. The Amnian archers and men had pursued along the cover that guided them down from the pass, shouting their own idiotic battlecries and rough commands. Even now it was hard to see them, while by their arrows and blows now less than half of the original armoured monkeys remained.

"—To the Witch's Teat!" took up one with the greatest lung capacity to yell orders even in this extremity; and there was even a ragged reply— It was mostly the fanatics who yet had the fool's luck to live, Edwin thought, the ones who called the name of their lord——

And then the haste spell wore off and Edwin felt bruised knees and elbows even through his stoned skin; and an arrow fell near him. He struggled to his feet, exhausted.

"—Renew the casting!" he heard the order come, and the woman took it up—better her than him, Edwin thought, then the armoured fools surrounded her with shields raised and he saw the
advantages of protection. He himself brought out the mirror images at a cost of great pain, drawing it desperately from the memory and demanding it of himself to concentrate. Even as he finished, she was chanting; more men from their number died, an agonisingly long time for it— In spite Edwin aimed a set of missiles in the vague direction of one of the Amnians, and knew not whether it would hit.

Then at last (incompetent casters! Surrounded by incompetents all!) the fresh hasting took hold. They ran across the grass, through the swell of the witch's breast (an odd reflection for the edge of death—witch's breasts, cream-pale and perfectly round and small-nippled—) Then an arrow came, more than ordinary, and it pierced through the other caster's head and then the flames exploded around her. Edwin awkwardly flung and rolled aside, warned about this, standard warning for a fireball, the female caster's body consumed even through her skin of stone, dissolved to ashes with yet more of their force— Five men besides he picked themselves from the ground. The mirror images were no more from the force of the blast, his lack of concentration; the stoneskin blackened and almost destroyed.

They ran nonetheless; the haste spell of the former Fist caster had not been destroyed by her loss. And at last there were sounds and screams from above while they kept to the hill. For the Amnian pursuit had come themselves to clearer land for Anchev's archers; for the Amnians were now in less than their perfect formations, and it was Sarevok Anchev's armoured figure that towered above all. It was not that he had come to save them: that he had found the best way to soak in Amnian blood. It was more than past time to seek cover. Edwin's half-relief at the reinforcements was busily trickling down his legs. Then before them was a cowled figure, standing on air, and although he was an incredibly powerful and mighty wizard he had already cast and maybe now he would be dead—

Even so Edwin cast simple misslies at the enemy simply to show his anger, and then cried out in pain himself as they rebounded directly upon him. The Cowled Wizard's form glittered subtly with the magical shield upon it, a reflector against spells. Edwin tried to summon the mental resources for a dispelling; the wizard called, meanwhile, the bodies of Anchev's fallen rose up from the ground like a necromancer truly gone mad. Some of the monkey-men tried to fight their way through the fallen.

\textit{Dispel...} Edwin reached for a scroll, reading; it helped the casting. \textit{The shield goes down, Amnian fool! Simian! Simians!}

It spread white-hot from his hand and reached out through the Weave. It did not unwrap all of the protections of his enemy, but at least that strong one glistening purple-black in mage-sight, fallen and spread apart so at least Edwin would not be hurting himself—

Then an arrow made from fire hit him, and as he slumped to the ground he thought:

\textit{I see. It's not truly better than fireball. The little brats were always lying to me...}

His fingers gripped the grass, uselessly. Healing potion—if he had the strength—

"Lord of Murder grant me the power!" he heard the yell of one of the remnant, and raised his head to see that one had fought his way through the undead and placed a hand upon the forehead of the caster. Then a red glow came to that hand. Edwin watched in horrified fascination as the clerical spell boiled the eyes out of the mage's head, the gauntleted hand squeezed the skull in a way that few magical shields could protect against—

The Cowled Wizard was dead and for the arrows not quite landing near him perhaps they thought him too; numbly and without daring to inspect his injury Edwin gulped down a precious potion, and felt the burn upon his chest recede in its intense pain. At long last he was not far from some kind of
cover; his dimension door carried him safely from the thick of the fray. He heard the cries for Sarevok Anchev, and only then with a sick feeling recalled his duties; he aimed an acid arrow of his own into the corpses that still moved after their master's death, so none could say that he had shirked his role, and remained behind trees and as far away from both Anchev and the Amnian forces until it was done.

They had lost nigh a quarter of their own, and massacred the force of Amnians. Those who cried the name of Anchev to give them power were stronger, and Anchev's eyes had become more greatly difficult to look upon... Or perhaps it was a trick of the light. Perhaps a trick of the light, Edwin thought.

He went to Semaj's tent in the night, after a change of clothes. To his shock Anchev was there also: he had speech-made again, congratulating upon the crushing defeat and deaths administered, claiming that Crimmor would be wide-open and under his blade any would fall. (The ridiculous thing was that one did not doubt that it was entirely true. Edwin had seen him fight this battle; a Cowled Wizard's spells had gone through his thick hide and armour to absolutely no effect at all, and every time he struck it seemed as if he'd killed some hapless fool, or even more than one with a single blow...)

Within the early days of their acquaintanceship Cythandria had employed Semaj's name to him as a threat, but of course with what he had come to mean to her she would never truly have done that. (Or—did she? Would she? Like any other western barbarian she was his social inferior, take her admittedly fairly stunning body and her mage's skills and there was nothing else to her— Would it have mattered in the least to her if he had so failed today to return from her lover's war? She was a golden key in an lake of white glass, an opaque egg secured from sight— Best to banish such thoughts where pliant women's bodies were so far from him.)

"Fellow caster, I s-see that you live," Semaj said cheerily. "Care for a glass?"

Anchev downed a third of the contents of a bottle Edwin noted as exceptionally expensive, and then slammed the decanter to break against a shield upon the wall. Wine, indeed; deserved for his day's experience, Edwin knew, and accepted the inferior vintage offered by Semaj. As his eyes adjusted to the poor lighting of the few candles that burned inside here, he saw a figure in a Fist uniform bound and gagged in a corner of the tent. Perhaps a traitor or a cowardly deserter; certainly none of the figures present paid it any attention, though the man whimpered once in a while.

"It was no victory," Sarevok declared; he remained in full armour, too tall and broad to belong within the tent's fragile confinements, and his golden eyes burned. "Nothing has yet changed."

The black-robed diviner shook his gaunt head. "There will be enough death to satisfy. Ride on the wings of the chaos you bring. I have felt your power grow since the day I discovered you."

"Making promises of word to a god, wizard? You stand among the greatest of fools," Anchev spoke. Perorate allowed the threat to pass, and there was certainly reverence mixed in with the gaze he gave to Sarevok.

Semaj gave a nod to Edwin. "You s-spoke of my teleportation methods, I think..."

"Yes, yes, you solemnly oathed upon your magic to show me," Edwin said hastily, "now do so to keep your word."

"I d-don't think that I quite did that, you know," the infant-wizard said; he smiled emptily, twisting his damp, long-fingered hands across each other. There was that, somewhere about him—Edwin could feel a great number of Weave-threads gathering in the necromancer's tedious grey wake, and looked with more care at the source of the teleport spells. Something of a savant, his previous
assessment had been... "But when I t-take the three of us I don’t mind if you watch. I like it when people watch," Semaj said. He waved a hand, and suddenly the body of the bound man jerked forward to rest at his feet. Anchev stood impatiently ready; the diviner Perorate by his side...

Then Semaj seized at necromatic energies for the sake of his teleport, and Edwin saw clearly that it was a necromatic spell indeed and beyond him, beyond him by specialist school because conjuration was the king of all schools and also because he was apparently not that sort of savant...

He did not look away from it, still clinging to his idea that with the knowledge of the spell he might stand a better chance of living. The Fist was not a deserter or a traitor, simply a loyal man's death a spell component; and the silenced screams that Semaj used to fuel the teleport in place of a gem began first with skin shredded, and then to teeth and eyeballs still attached to the skull until they went dark and blood and slits and things of pure dark magery-black-shadows that ate piece by piece across bared nerves and tendons...

Edwin watched the three disappear, and stepped out of the tent and vomited on the grass.

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124. Defeat

The worst might have been the unending, drip, drip, drip, from the mouldy pipe in the upper right-hand corner of the ceiling that none of us could have reached in our chains.

And that we were alone in the dark and the cold and the endless damp and the disgusting mess, and it might well have already been an eternity of imprisonment down here...

It might as well have taken that time to lose our minds.

Imoen was in the corner far from me. Iron chained her hands behind her back and her breathing above the leather gag forced in her mouth was dreadful in its tortured struggles. At first I screamed for someone to come to save her from suffocation, but the metal above us was thick or none cared. She still seemed to breathe. She was hurt and I couldn't help her at all...

Viconia was beside her, gagged as well; but she had bitten through the thick leather enough to curse us all many times. She seemed to sleep, or to try to. She could not make the right gestures to call on any spell of Shar, and her holy symbol had been ripped from her neck, cutting her skin. She had complained that the wounds grew infected, and probably spoke the truth. She was in pain.

Shar-Teel was weighted down by as many chains as the three of us combined, as if she was feared like a wild tiger. Her hands behind her back and bolted to the floor; ankles to knees pulled down by heavy metal and iron balls; and a thick collar as if for an angry bull. She'd tried to break free by strength alone, and failed. I could reach her by the tip of my fingers, the chain cutting to my wrists; she shook me off when I dared to lay a hand on her, her muscles tense and twisted like iron themselves. But at least to reach out to her reminded that something besides us still existed.

I sat manacled to the wall of the lowest-tilting part of the cell. The chains were bolted to the wall, and turned tight enough to burn and chafe at the least movement. My wrists are smaller than most men's; in what state of starvation were the prisoners here meant to be kept? I had seen pale flashes that had perhaps been bone below green slime in the faint light when we had been lowered in; bone could be sharpened for rough dagger or crude and unlikely lockpick, but none were close enough for even that. Perhaps they were rat rather than human. There were sounds of rats. Then there were rats trying
to bite us.

*Please, get us out of this hell-hole.* I wasn't listening when the slaves of Cloakwood called that.

Mould grew in the damp across boots and clothes. It had to have been days, and we couldn't move. For as long as we lived we'd never be clean again. Twice in all the time the small cover of the cell had opened, and a cracked pitcher and rotting bread were lowered, by no human who seemed to be able to hear our cries. This was a cellar, a sewer, part of the drains. Water filled with who knew what flowed around our feet every so often, and though my throat was burning I still had stopped myself drinking from its stench... Soaked wet, our flesh swelled pale in the dark, and there was no way to be dry. Or clean. I'd go mad again.

Some...hours, perhaps—at the least hours ago, for sometimes unconsciousness less black than the cell took me and then more time that I did not know of passed, Imoen had used her fire spell even through the gag. She shone a single spark of light in the darkness, to show faces and the glinting of fire upon iron; and then the gases had exploded in her corner. Her hands must have been damaged, her chains heated and hurting, and not long after that an additional coldness had come down over the cell... The pain I felt must be nothing compared to her cries through the gag, and what had been done stopped me from that...sorcery. The chains rubbed against the wrist; and they had been forged rather than locked together, so we would stay here and we might as well be dead already than slowly rot and have toes and fingers fall off first followed by feet and legs and arms, a weeping head on a helpless body forever...

This was no cell; the Flaming Fist had prison reforms, years ago, and cells like this are not supposed to exist. It would be called an oubliette. If Faldorn and Ajantis and the group of those who sought to save the city had not come below the thick metal and the dark trapdoor by now, then they would never come. Shar-Teel and Viconia knew that well. It didn't matter how many hours it had been, because the number of hours to go would always be an eternity to go. In the storming of the prison in the Tethyrian capital during the civil war, some prisoners had been there for eight decades. I couldn't bear it for that long. I couldn't hear Imoen trying to breathe for that long.

Outside there was a war with Amn.

There was an uneasy dream amidst the sewer-stench, and in it Imoen's face. A crowd of Imoens who ran through the city streets, summoning beautiful butterflies and bearing gloriously transmuted swords of light and casually reaching into pockets and street-stalls. A sunny day under blue sky and no smogs. No signs of the war.

And in the midst of them was a monster who didn't speak in my voice no matter how I tried. An ogre smashing with its club. A kobold who deserved to be hunted down. A threatening gnoll with breath of rotten meat. An ettercap mother who gave birth to a thousand mutated children with twisted faces in eggshell-fluid. A spider clicking black mandibles together, its carapace green in venom-patterns that poisoned to death. A long-dead ghoul with shattered memories of the time before its soul was lost. A wolfwere howling to tear the flesh of a girl who owned a dolly. And a monster who killed children in the dark bottom of mines; and a doppelganger whose bones and flesh shifted to take the place of others.

*This...is not supposed to happen to me...*

The monster was hunted down in the city streets, fleeing from the innocent civilians. It was attacked with icy arrows and flares, and each time it sought brief succour in some dark corner it was chased away. Without shelter, without even one face turned in friendship toward it. Hated and searched for to kill, as every monster we'd hunted down in the course of this...
Imoen, please don't go away, please don't turn on me.

But the hunt continued. The doppelganger beat against its chains and sought to shift out from them. The monster recoiled from its own face in the mirror and the children who screamed in horror at the frightening visage. There was no escape.

The sewers gurgled, and fouled water across my face and in my mouth woke me. I spat and gagged, shaking. Imoen—

In the corner Imoen still struggled for each heavy breath, and Shar-Teel could be heard moving. We were still trapped down here. We would be so for a very long time. The bones in my wrists were weak and limp, but to pull on the chains again was hopeless.

But then that sense of coldness lifted from the air of the oubliette, and I could feel my hands once more. I was bending my hands further back than before, wrists slipping past the metal tearing at my skin. The blood had the surface of the fetters slippery, and then it twisted out with flexibility like Viconia’s—

There was the painfully loud metallic creak of the trapdoor opening, and a light that looked blinding in the dark. Then boots came down upon the abbreviated ladder, and then stepped down to the ground of the far end of the cell. My hand slipped to appear back in the fetter. The man who had come wore a red cloak more dashing than uniform, light armour on his chest and runed bracers at the edge of his wrists, and heavy necklaces and rings on chest and hands. From his greying red-copper hair I could recognise the Fist captain who had arrested us. His complexion was slightly sallow, olive-gold.

Shar-Teel flung herself forward in her chains as if she'd suddenly gone mad; she couldn't reach him. It didn't stop her from launching forward each time, then pulled back and restrained. I still couldn't have reached him; so I kept asking for Imoen, while Shar-Teel struggled; "—Please help her, please..."

The captain was completely silent. Shar-Teel, badly bruised, subsided; her eyes burned and her hands were curled into fists that cut her own skin with her nails. If she'd them anywhere near the Fist's neck then he would have died quickly.

He was looking at her. "I was curious for the motivation, Shar," he said with unnecessary familiarity. His boots made hardly a sound in the green slime as he shifted position; his form glowed, like a wizard's light emanating from him. Viconia cursed him in drow, though her voice had gone softly hoarse and cracking. "You were seen in the docks. I found the foster-daughter of Jhessen..."

She was fit to fling herself from her chains again; it seemed more miraculous that they held than that their width and weight kept her there.

"You have a daughter," the Fist continued, unmoved. Shar-Teel said nothing, only struggled against the bonds. "Tevanie." The name rung coldly from his thin lips. "She is in a place I control. You won't go against Anchev, and you'll keep your motley group from it."

Then Shar-Teel spoke: "—So you're Anchev's dog, now? I'm not surprised. Sniffing around him licking his turds—"

"You never did understand the principle of staying bought once you are," the Fist said. On his uniform, I saw, was not only a captain's badge but the symbol of command. So he must be Angelo Dosan: the one who'd handed all the Fist over to Sarevok. I'd heard of him in the past. "At last it seems you've found companions suited to you."
Then he pointed his hands at where Imoen hung from the walls; he chanted a spell, and I feared for her and tried to lunge. But the beam of light was pale, and instead it set open her shackles and set her free, collapsed to her knees and her hands in the light burned and blackened, claw-like—

Angelo spoke again. "Consequences if you fail to obey," he said, and pointed his hands next at Viconia. Freed, she stepped roughly forward, her hands trying to trace a black circle in the air itself. "Perhaps consequences to myself as well." Next, I was free; and Shar-Teel would have wanted a surprise attack of him, but perhaps he'd take her chains as well—

(But why free us even so?)

Then he aimed the spell a last time at her. He gave a brief nod as she rushed at him, as if he had expected nothing else. Shar-Teel hit something, but the captain still stood in place:

"I have business elsewhere."

Dosan's shape blinked out to disappear; not quite a teleportation, nor a door like Imoen's, some sort of magical duplicate. That the form could cast spells meant a good deal.

"Who—" Imoen began. "What..."

"Can you not tell it from her face, fool rivvil? That male is her sire. As a drow would mother," Viconia said.

The trapdoor was still open above us. I went to Imoen and cast, though I couldn't quite soothe the burns of her spell. Wizards need their hands; I looked to Viconia, but she was chanting over herself and then she spoke that she had used all she had without her symbol.

Shar-Teel was first to the ladder above; we followed her, unsteady on newly-unchained feet. The cell was hidden below a cellar that must have been long disused. A heavy door was locked at the end of it; instead of waiting to see it picked Shar-Teel flung herself at it, and managed to shoulder her way through. Splintered fragments cut us to cross behind her.

The Fist barracks seemed practically deserted. —What could have happened? Has Anchev killed— Then further up from the cellars was the movement of a sentry; Imoen begged Shar-Teel not to kill him. She hit him over the head from behind with a slat torn from the door; then took up his sword and shield for herself. We followed, awkwardly, because where she led didn't quite seem the way out of the complex...

Another sentry; he stared in shock at Viconia, and that gave Shar-Teel a chance to take him down as well. Then we were at another door buried in a narrow, twisting passage, its lock heavy and possibly even magicked; she kicked it open, and there inside were racks for weapons, most emptied. One that was not contained our own equipment, partly labelled for themselves.

She took up the sword that some called the World's End once more, and I felt the flame of the Burning Earth when its hilt found my hand. Viconia reached for the jet black of her holy symbol, and then prayed over Imoen's hands. She was skilful; Imoen flexed her fingers once more, picking up her tattered spellbook that had been kept below Viconia's cloak.

Then we were running out of the emptied Fist building, and outside in the night it was clear why so few had been left behind.

The city was on fire in the direction of the docks, ships flared in the harbour, and shouts could be heard everywhere.
"Let's go," I said. "If anything it's helping Sarevok, but we have to, let's go do what we can for the city—"

"I won't stop you for that alone," Shar-Teel said harshly; I looked up at her stony face. "I'll kill you for going against Angelo, you hear? I'll do nothing. It ends here."

She was going to desert us. I went into it without thinking:

"—You were horrible to her on the docks the day I saw you, why pretend to care about your daughter now? Mothers don't say those things to their children. Real mothers don't abandon them, ever— The entire city's in danger. At least be a decent Baldurian, Shar-Teel, because you're pathetic as a mother—"

Then there were bright yellow stars flashing in my head and I lay flat on the cobblestones. I blinked through tears to look up at her, framed against the night's dark and the flares and stars behind her.

Viconia stood at her side.

"I killed my own eldest daughter for becoming competent enough to believe she could plot against me," she said, "and I ought to have had the other two killed for sheer lack of it before they would have died for my exile. Two of my sons, also, for the blood of my third husband proved pathetic. These are the ways of drow society and those of our children who prove threat to us.

"The males who govern this city would burn me for the colour of my skin alone. The ilharess was the one who stepped forward to spare me from the fool who pursued me. And the two of you dare to ask us to defend this place of iblith?" Her voice was ice, formed into daggers sharp enough to pierce skin. We had helped Viconia too, we really had...

"Farewell," she said simply; she laid a light touch on Shar-Teel's arm. "Shar, bring us a sanctuary this night."

And then there was nothing Imoen or I could do to find them.

"—That was stupid, Skie," Imoen said, brushing some of the layers of dirt and mud from her robes and clothing. "Shouldn't have said that—so I guess she wants her kid alive, it's gonna be tough without her—"

"There isn't time for this," I said. The docks; the Amnians; we stumbled there...

125. Battle from the Sea

I couldn't count the number of ships massed before our harbour. In the lights of the burning flares their foreign build was plainly visible from the lines of mast and prow. Some of our ballistae were down, splintered; and there was a sulphuric, chemical smell that took me a moment to realise must be black powder, from Lantanese gonnies that can be used in place of catapults or crossbows. And breaking flames, as if potions of explosion were being flung, even amidst all the people here...

I saw a row of Fist archers atop one of the docks, and then by a chant from a figure upon the ships froze them in place. Arrows slammed into their bodies in turn, killing easily.

The Amnians had landed. I could see two of their ships in our docks, one of them wrecked and
ruined already. By their uniforms they fought their way through, and there was one cowled figure by them, a spellcaster protected by a glittering purple-blue shield like that of Davaeorn of the mines.

Imoen dropped to her knees, catching her breath. Flare-lights flickered across her pale, mud-stained face. We'd lost it; muscles seized up, desperate in thirst and hunger. I dropped down beside her. There was no Shar-Teel to yell at us and bring us to try.

"—Useless," she said. "No—I could get another fire one if I wanted—but if anyone comes close..."

In the chaos Scar and his group would be there: protecting the city. It would be good for Imoen for us to find them, even if they could offer little help—and had offered little help, while we'd been trapped in the very Fist compound, for days at least. The invasion—Gorion's supposed friends who wanted to see Imoen safe.

The ground below us shook; something exploded none too far in the distance. The roof above us shifted, stony tiles flying down like iron balls. I pulled her sharply to the right away from them before they smashed into the cobblestones.

She stood with me; we limped together. We were small enough, perhaps, that the invasion would not care. I heard the names of Helm and Tyr and Ilmater chanted by casters who sought to heal the wounded, and as I watched a wizard in dark purple robes sent a stream of pale blue light from his hands. A Fist commander raised his sword in the air to order archers to loose again. There were blue-robed Umberlant casters led by Jalantha Mistmyr's unmistakable fishnet-clad and pearl-ornamented figure, lit by streaks of lightning that shimmered around them, chanting for control over a storm in the distance. The Amnian gonnes went off with an ear-shattering explosion, and in horror I saw most of the Fist in that line falling, broken-bodied. A female mage's twisted body lay in a tangle of robes. Then the storm struck down upon one of the Amnian ships and the water boiled around it; Umberlee's ways of the treacherous seas.

*They deserve it, Amnian bastards. No— I thought better—in the end it's not their fault...*

A wizard's fireball bloomed on our docks. There were fewer shouts and screams—fewer deaths this time; but then I saw that it had hit a docked skyship. The Fist were calling for water; they would have been ordered to protect that even at the cost of human life— And a lightning bolt spat from the fingers of the shielded Amnian wizard, though I saw a platemailed caster had moved to engage him. There was another shaking below our feet, and bolts and flares of brilliant colour that hurt our heads and blinded us.

Imoen's grip tightened on my arm. "Look with the Umberlants!" she hissed in my ear. "That's *Faldorn!*"  

She was the second shortest within their circle; that must be Tenya beside her. And her patterns of gesture were slightly different to the priestesses around her, her leather armour brown rather than the blue-ornamented vestments of the Umberlants proper, and there was a small squirrel's shape by her feet rather than a sea snake or unusually large crab. We struggled forward; patterns of dangerous light gleamed from the armour of the men fighting in the harbour. Civilians must have left for safety, going deep into the city. One of the ballistae swung a burning cylinder through the air; it smashed on the decks of an Amnian ship, and our enemies ran in panicked abandon over burning planks and sails. Some fell to the waves; some wearing armour.

The docks shook. Another Amnian ship had rammed its way into our port. The Flaming Fist ran past us to fight them; this ship disgorged many armoured soldiers, glinting with clerical protections chanted by another man behind them. Imoen grimly pointed, and missiles whipped from her hands for a spell-disruption of him; then she pulled me back into hiding with her, below the dark shadows
of debris.

"There's so many of them," she said. "I really don't have the spells—"

Amn has a huge population. "Their own caster's responding," I said, and a Fist with a mage's sigil on her cloak began the fight with a cloud of stinking air across the heads of the invaders. We ran on across the splintered wood.

"Faldy!" Imoen called to her; she was barely six feet away from us, and her face took on a look of surprise.

"Idiot city-dwellers!" her mouth shaped, though her casting was not interrupted. She gestured with her wrists as if to sweep the winds, and a dark silhouette suddenly appeared on one of the Amnian ships. Below it, in the water, the shapes of women rose from the waves and gestured up at the vessel. "So you live! If truly—"

Imoen raised an arm and pointed to bruises; "Shifters wouldn't be hurt. Where's the others?"

The Umberlants had started to glance and glare; Faldorn returned to the chant.

"Ajantis south-east!" she mouthed to give help. Tenya raised her voice next to her in a shriek, and some of the harbour defences I'd only read about before activated. There was a gleaming pale shield across the full waters, shimmering now with only Amnian ships set in its arc; and it moved to crush them. A Cowled Wizard's bolts flew across and shook it; but it was still there, its glasslike substance closing in upon wood that splintered. More than the Umberlants chanted to preserve it; almost all the clerics of Baldur's Gate must have come to its aid, a gathering of Sunites and Tempusians and Helmites and Sharessans and Umberlants and Ilmatari as if no differences existed...

There was nothing we could do for that. We could find where Ajantis fought; we struggled down past the breaking docks. Then another cry rang out: Cowled Wizards who cast in a circle, floating in air; lightning bolts whirled past them, but they canted and the Lantanese gonnes fired. Ships had cracked and split in the harbour mage-defence, but four had slid through that shield. Two warships of our own were visible further out in the sea, fighting, seeking to board another Amnian craft. It was impossible to take it all in.

*My city. My beautiful city.*

A group of militia in rough civilians'-gear fought the Amnians that had spilled from a ship rammed into our piers. We could see Ajantis' form, striking with Varscona, his armour covered by a featureless black tabard. Lightning flashed; a cloaked man who fought with impressive motions of his blade raised his head, and we saw it was Scar. His movements were masterful, not by pure strength but careful speed and craft, letting the enemy he fought trip on loose fish and uneven planks and splinters.

Imoen drew Balduran's sword. "If'n we stay behind them..." she managed weakly. I stood in front of her, and the Burning Earth's glare lit up the darkness as if it were another magefire to threaten.

Then there were more cries to gods to come to aid, but the cries were to no god I knew of. These priests were hidden below dark robes, lined with yellow-gold cloth that glistened bright in this darkness; and they had just summoned a symbol to the air above them. It glowed fearsomely, stronger than moon or stars or flare: it was the shape of Sorrel's medallion. The golden skull surrounded by swordlike thorns, blazing like a sun.

People took *hope* from it, and Sarevok Anchev himself had come. Imoen and I dropped back, for
there was no need of us. A path was cleared before him and his heavy armour by—perhaps even by simple instinct instead of the true calculation that he would slay anything in his way, the same that made a human tense when a chill wind blew over their grave. His acolytes chanted a beam of gold down from the heavens, and one of the remaining Amnian ships split entirely from it. Men fell to the sea, and whatever lack of mercy the Umberlants requested.

Surely...they could not do that more than once. Surely...they were not quite as...

The cadence of their chanting did alter itself; then the lead of them pointed to Amnian soldiers of a landing-party, and most of them stilled in place, notwithstanding a caster who accompanied them. They died helplessly. I looked again to Sarevok—his sword whirled and not even Shar-Teel could have defeated him. His eyes glowed yellow and he caused death. Then I thought, he was vampire, he was ghoul; he could feel each departure of a soul in blood and fed upon that, he had become death—

People died and their screams were heard; people died in the sea, mouth and nose burning from their silent deaths, fingers on the clasps of heavy armour that would not part for them. They died in large numbers, and I fancied that I could feel it too as Varscona's distant blade slit a man's shoulders open and then stabbed coldly through the collarbone deep to the lungs, in Ajantis' hands below...

"I know him," Imoen said, her voice as cold as if transmuted to a blade itself. "Glowing, yellow eyes. He was the one who murdered my uncle Gorion, and I don't remember you telling me so."

At that time Sarevok Anchev was only a merchant's son. He had become much more. Imoen was gone then, leaping forward with revenge on her mind. I grabbed the sleeve of her mage's robe.

"Now-is-not-the-time-Imoen-please!" He'd kill her— She turned; gave a nod.

"But if we get closer—a fire under his heels—"

He was on the docks above the water, the docks damaged greatly from Amnian fire, and wore heavy armour. Even were the priests of Umberlee truly well-disposed to him... We had a plan.

But it was impossible to get too close to him, I kept reminding myself. Time spent all through the Cloakwood doing nothing but want to kill him, and that still rose inside me; I have to kill Sarevok Anchev. For everything.

If caught Shar-Teel's daughter will be killed. Imoen ought to think of that; she would think of that more quickly than me. She stalked him through the shadows of battle. I sheathed the Burning Earth to follow her quietly.

Shar-Teel could kill with single strokes and punch a wolfwere or ogre with one hand. Sarevok could kill by sweeping a spiked hand and break swords and armour alike. His yellow-glowing sword arced through three that dared attack—as it had once through Gorion, a long time ago—and they were too slow to defend from it. One raised a shield and the sword sheared through nonetheless; one lost his head; one was parted in two halves through the waist. The sword went forward again at inhuman speed; he was faster than Shar-Teel in armour than she was without. His very steps shook the docks as if the weight of his armour would have crushed ogres.

A young Amnian man fell close to Imoen; we smelt fresh blood, and then Sarevok Anchev had turned to the next soldier. It was relief that he was away; Imoen dropped to her knees over the Amnian, seeing the deep wound in the enemy's chest. He called for his mother.

"I'm here, kiddo," she said quietly, touching his forehead. "It's all right. You're not alone."
She closed his eyes when he stopped breathing, and looked up at Sarevok. Twenty, perhaps, had fallen to him alone already; and in the harbour another Amnian ship was lost and burned, and yet another boarded by our navy. The battle had come to us and the symbol of the skull was still brighter than before; like fireworks suspended in time. The acolytes of the golden skull chanted and pointed. An Amnian mast splintered, rotted, and fell over its own deck to drown men in its wide sails. I saw what remained of their forces turning to flee our shores.

The militia, the Fist patrols, the priests, Sarevok; they had beaten back the Amnians who had dared land in our city. Some ran back to their ship, seeking to flee; then smaller bolts of gold lanced down upon them, and a swarm of small bright meteors from some Baldurian caster. In the area Ajantis fought it seemed they had won, and his large shape was clear enough against sputtering flares and torches; he still lived. Sarevok advanced as if he would much rather the remnants fall to his blade than to seawater. Imoen and I managed to approach; and he stepped out onto a wide plank that stood alone, and perhaps could be burned in half to send him to the deep waters below, while one of the last of the Amnian invaders fell bleeding...

But that was when they came from the seas below, and scattered the Umberlant priestesses first. Six feet and more high; green-scaled; finned; trident-wielding; sharp-toothed; surrounded by deepwater sharks that churned in the waves around them. I had only heard of them in tales of past disaster. Sahuagin. They are called sea devils. One reared up by where Sarevok stood; and I would have sworn that even he was surprised, though his sword whirled in the air and cut it down. He stepped back to higher ground. Below Imoen’s feet something shook the docks, and then strong arms ripped open the wood to rise up by us. It opened a seaweed-stinking mouth, and its coral spear whirled along with the threads of its net—

I'd drawn the Burning Earth in time; the fire hurt it and cut through the strands of the water-net. Then Imoen and I ran back, although Sarevok had been caught by a group of the creatures and was still killing them all. Sahuagin would invade and eat humans; cause their priests to rain down desperate attacks and seek to force the whole city undersea...

It was no coincidence they attacked now; the Amnians made this happen.

Faldorn had been there; I couldn't see her any more. Ajantis would be safer—and that had to be Scar calling orders, fighting the sahuagin as he had done the Amnians. The burning blade itself helped to put off the sea-monsters; Imoen had the same idea as I did to go to Faldorn. I could hear the sahuagin battle-cries now: Sekolah, Sekolah, Sekolah, the name of the shark-deity they served, and sea-priestesses with necklaces strung by teeth chanted their evil spells. Sarevok's sword carved through still more of them; but their deaths were not the same, this hurt and frustrated him— Against sahuagin all were united.

"Faldorn!" Imoen cried out, and then the fire came from her hands into the neck of a sahuagin warrior. It screamed; I stabbed the Burning Earth through the scales, a downward blow to spare energy. We charged through it to where the Umberlants were attacked. Little Tenya— But she was alive by Jalantha Mistmyr's side, dark sea-fog erupting from her hands, blinding her enemies. Aquerna clung to the docks with small claws, escaping underfoot and warning of the direction of attacks as much as she could. Faldorn tried to fight with her club; the Burning Earth sweeping through the air made the sahuagin turn on us, and Imoen struck with Balduran's own sword. Perhaps it brought luck, to defeat those invaders that Baldur's Gate had fought against for many times Sarevok's lifetime.

"—We bear the sword of Balduran!" I called aloud, for the sake of the Umberlants—Sarevok would not know of that, surely; ought not to recognise or even hear where he fought. "In Balduran's name!"
"Baldurran," hissed a sahuagin as if he knew that name, and then fire scorched him. Faldorn had her chance to summon her flaming blade, and used it grimly against these creatures outweighing her by at least a hundred pounds. One of their priestesses chanted close to us. Some of the Umberlants had fallen already; one was dragged down in the sahuagin's net, and then in the water there were sharks' fins—I didn't look. The sea devils fled flame, and for a moment it made up for Imon's and my weakness.

Tenya chanted in the direction of the waters. It seemed nothing happened; Jalantha gestured with a bright sapphire ring on her right hand, and two of the sahuagin turned to thrust their tridents through the hide of their priest. Imon sliced awkwardly through a net in a sahuagin's right hand, then turned to avoid its spear now the wire strands were too broken to capture her. The Burning Earth's hilt was warm in my hands; a trident point struck my side. There would be blood below in the water and the sharks would churn through it. Faldorn had finished chants of her own and moved forward, bark-skinned and shielded, easily better than either of us while her prayers lasted. Her fire sizzled against a sahuagin's scales and clouds of steam rose in the air.

Tenya laughed in triumph, a frightening sound for all she was a child. The gigantic thing in the waters before her had—a sort of black beak, a maw amidst a slimy and formless pale head; long tentacles with darker suckers that clung to them; one single white eye that looked as if what it could see was only on the bottom of the sea—

It lashed out to take the scales of a sahuagin by a tentacle; then lowered it into that void space. A kind of squid—a jellyfish kraken—something that didn't belong in the harbour of Baldur's Gate—The sahuagin sharks tore at it in the waters, and their warriors attacked it as if they knew what it was and the deep seas it inhabited.

I could see one of those sahuagin they called malenti, the shape pink and like an elf, but with the same trident spear and weaponry as its fellows. Our soldiers fell to them, and they rose tall on our docks. They would raid human homes and kill what they could.

Down below a bright blue sphere spun around two robed wizards, conjured by the taller of the pair. I could recognise the slight figure of Emerie Jannath's apprentice as the second. Blue lightning flowed out of the sphere, though the sahuagin beating upon it with swords could not break within. The apprentice tried a fire arrow, much weaker than one of Imon's. A sahuagin priestess, decked with the shark-teeth and trident of their symbols, came from the waters and pointed a clawed hand at the mages. In our own battle we let as much fire spill as we could, Faldorn's blade and mine and Imon stabbing into the fish-scales.

The acolytes of the golden skull had finished a chant; and it felt as if the docks were suddenly as bright as day. A wall of fire seethed around them, and cut down as many sahuagin as Sarevok had done by himself. It continued to burn; it was devouring our own docks for fuel, and if they did not keep it contained then it would find the skyships—

I saw the mages' sphere brought down and the sahuagin rushing them. They'd die. I sliced the Burning Earth widely across those that tried to fight the Umberlants. Imon cried out:

"Water? But she's— Salt! That's really clever!" A wall of water summoned up from the seas had risen before the mages, which would not shield them from sea creatures; but it had whitened, then plastered itself to the gills of the enemy in the red-hot glow of the flames. The hands of the apprentice were those moving it.

Imon stepped back. "Out of fire spells—out of everything—if'n transmutation separation on a cantrip. C'mon..."
Her mage hand dipped water from the seas, made odd gestures to mix it, and then she forced that concentration of salt to the gills of two sahuagin at once. They paused in pain, and Faldorn took one to kill and an Umberlant by a sling bullet the other.

There was one sahuagin larger than the others, who glowed with the force of the prayers of his servants; some sort of chieftain, and he had torn through the militia and Fists alike. I'd lost sight of Ajantis; if he was dead or not... The cloaked Scar stood and fought. Not far from him Sarevok sought out the most powerful of those killing our city. The spear of the chieftain glimmered like blue bones below the sea, and when Sarevok raised his sword he actually blocked it. Anchev was huge but the sahuagin chief was still bigger; and for a moment they seemed to battle as equals.

(...if one kills the other...)

Scar stood his ground despite Sarevok’s presence; for the sahuagin had wanted to see Baldur’s Gate destroyed long before Sarevok’s existence. Invaded for years, a constant threat even if dormant under some periods. Anchev and the leader of those who opposed him fought almost side by side, now. Scar’s sword moved to disrupt the spells of a priestess even while the edge of his shield was enough to send down another sahuagin. I burned the scales of another of the creatures while Tenya chanted a spell. Faldorn gloated to kill another.

Jalantha Mistmyr gestured her charms to the sahuagin, and she and her remaining, battered Umberlants were left safe when the last two drove claws into each other’s throats. The wall of flames had grown below the skull in the night; it seared and made the sahuagin fall, but uncontrolled devoured our city. A Fist mage, injured by the blood on her shirt, conjured water up from the sea below to try to contain it. Her wall of water rose up by the skyships. The sahuagin chieftain and his guards had been cut off from the seas by a battered group of the Fists; they still killed people. The golden-eyed figure swung the yellow sword too quickly for eye to follow.

*Sarevok...fought like Shar-Teel, but far worse,* I couldn’t help see clearly. Stronger than her—all ferocity and power and supernaturally glowing eyes. He was as terrible as he had been the night he had killed Gorion; more so. Like everyone else, I could believe he was strong enough to defeat the sahuagin in the city. As if he deserved to be hero, saviour, saint.

"He killed Gorion," Imoen said again, and I kept a hand on her arm.

Scar had more skill, perhaps; more experience, at any rate. Even in the thick of fight he called orders to his militia. was careful, pragmatic, using anything at all around him to find weaknesses, one moment treading on a loose plank to overturn the enemy standing on it, the next taking up a coil of rope to loop around the neck. He was the true city's saviour, leader of those who stood against Sarevok's war; and because they fought together perhaps they would both live...

Then the sahuagin chieftain fell, spattered by blue-green blood, and did not rise again. His priestesses howled in despair. Then Sarevok spoke, and he made his voice somehow rise above the sounds of battle: low, deep, and so far removed from the rather tedious ballroom conversationalist who talked to me about the weather. (He...never trod on toes when he danced.)

"Traitor and rebel to the city," he spoke, "you are another who will fall this day."

Arrows thudded into the heads of the sahuagin who lived; Sarevok himself faced only Scar. And no —tricks; no clevernesses; nothing could stop his strength when he'd begun a blow; if I'd bow to hand I might have seen if arrowshaft could somehow pierce his armour, if Imoen had spells remaining she might have hurt him with ingenuity—

Missiles did whirl into Sarevok, from one of the Jannath mages. But then Imoen and I both saw they
harmed him not at all, as if he was shielded entirely. There was a shout as the—attack on the Grand Duke—was witnessed; there must have been pursuit of them from behind.

"The fool will allow himself to be killed," Faldorn said, her hands moving for a spell. I saw her fling seeds in the direction of the ground where Sarevok fought; vines grew at her will, but they were not against him. In fact she held Ajantis where he stood. Aquerna beside her seemed to nod in agreement. Because if he tried to fight Sarevok he would die; better he slip away as one of the defenders of Baldur's Gate, if it were possible...

Scar's blade had scraped several times against the armour Sarevok wore, and had even pierced it in a thin line. He had tried to send Sarevok down below into the waters, too, moving back to where the docks thinned. But it was over in seconds. Sarevok stabbed forward, it went through the dark cloak into Scar's side, then a Fist archer had fired a crossbow bolt into the head of one daring to attack the Grand Duke— Another shadowed figure had come to Sarevok's side, chanting prayers in an accent of Kara-Tur.

Scar was dead, and Imoen and I were moving forward, running from Faldorn before she could cast another spell. She leapt past growing vines with ease, Balduran's sword naked in her hand; I followed her without thinking. We would find him, do something, anything, try to kill him—

"No, my dear, I don't want you to do that. Take the arms of your good friend there. Good girls. Exactly right."

He was a tall red-haired man in the uniform of a captain of the Flaming Fist, and he was my new best friend. I held Imoen, and though she struggled I was strong enough to keep a grip on her upper arms.

"It's not that I care if anything should—happen—to you upon a short swim."

Shar-Teel's eyes were brown, as were her daughter's; his were grey and cold. The beautiful and kind man gestured, and I dived down from the edge of the docks and forced Imoen into the sea.

No—what have I—

Saltwater filled my nose and mouth; I was burning, drowning, Imoen's arms crushed in my fists. Then our heads broke the surface of the dashing seas below the splintered docks. Imoen gasped and spluttered:

"—Bufflehead! So cold—" I let go of her; she supported herself despite her robes, kicking in the waters. We'd been ready to kill—Shar-Teel's red-haired father—

Grey fins still cut through the waves. I wrenched out the Burning Earth to find that seawater still did it no harm; in fact it still shone brightly, and it stopped retreating sharks from chasing us. We could see the waves continue to be summoned up to the docks, the crackling and burning of the flames above. When we struggled to cling to barnacle-encrusted rocks by the shore we waited, shivering in weakness. There had always been nothing we could have done.

How many had died this night?

126. Aftershocks

25 Eleasias
The number was above two hundred. Many Flaming Fists; one of the acolyte-priests (may he rot in the Nine Hells); many innocents. Scar. Taros of Ilmater, who had escaped the doppelganger capture, using his own body to shield a group of others. Duchess Belt had opened her estate entire for the relief of suffering citizens, sheltering us also; Ajantis had managed to live through the aftermaths, irritated as he was at Faldorn for refusing to allow a suicidal charge against Anchev.

Iomn and I sat below a painting by Shiras of a girl carrying fresh cornflowers in Sauriram's private study, sipping weak tea.

"We've never had a duke who thought he was a god before. Mind you, there was the one who thought he was a small pot plant; but that was before your time, dear. Sometimes I wonder about the lifelong aspect of these things," the Duchess said. I didn't tell her that I'd heard of that one.

The presence of the medallions had multiplied in the city until they were openly and ubiquitously displayed, their meaning revealed to all; seemingly overnight, for Iomn and myself. We had been trapped for almost five days.

"There was news you were dead; executed by Captain Dosan himself," Sauriram said, gently comforting. "We thought they must be true, simply because it would have been so practical to see it immediately done, when that mad child troubles himself only with martial law these days."

A limited leverage, then, over Shar-Teel's father; for whatever that was worth. How much was the life of one girl worth, when yesterday far more than that number had been murdered in the city? I hated that I'd thought it.

"I cannot imagine your ordeal with that abomination calling itself your stepmother," Sauriram said. "The creature has not since dared to venture forth; your estate is heavily locked and guarded. Annaclair of Helm found and fought three of the creatures before the invasion, and for that at least the rumours have begun to fly."

If there is unmistakable proof that the monsters are linked to him; but he would not be stupid enough to travel with a doppelganger by his side. Perhaps their uses were over with him.

"I've got a magely idea of what to do next," Iomn said, already reaching a decision; her mobile features were set stiffly, her expression clear and focussed. "Who was that wizardess who thought up the salt trick on the sahuagin? I could work with her."

Sauriram nodded; her eyes in her wrinkled face were black and bright, as lively as if she'd been fifty years younger. "A good choice, my dear. Claudia Besancon is a distant cousin of the Jannaths; Emerie works her hard. If one can convince her to speak she is quite helpful."

I looked at Iomn, waiting for more; but she added no details of her wizard's plan. "I'd like to know more of Angelo Dosan," I said. "Especially information of the properties he owns." If I had to, I could break into the offices of the bureaucratic wing of the palace; they wouldn't be well-guarded in these times. But Sauriram's gossip would be more reliable.

The Duchess told her knowledge succinctly and thoroughly; I'd the urge to scribble down notes on spare parchment from Iomn's lately-restocked supplies. Iomn looked approvingly across, understanding it even as she did not give details of her own plan to non-mages. Perhaps we could not understand her magery; perhaps she was unsure of success.

Shar-Teel, we rescued your daughter on our own, you can come back now; because without you
we're not strong enough, I imagined saying boldly to her, having overcome things on my own exactly or even better than she would have done, since after all—(I was silly and incompetent and a failure at everything—) I was less emotionally tied to it. I'd have hidden someone I kidnapped in property I didn't own on paper; intermediaries, less of a trail, the sort of dishonesty my father ranted about at the rare times he dined with us. Angelo owned most of a supposed merchant house called the Withered Violet; its sigil was on a group of small, poor houses in the north-east, and what was by rumour something between a House Of Ill Repute (my dears, I am an old enough woman to be quite unshockable, Sauriram had expressed) and a den of black lotus.

Shar-Teel, do you remember that orange half-ogre in the bandit camp who beat—whom you really wanted to fight again? Well, he worked for Sarevok, of course, and then Sarevok had him killed just to substantiate a rumour of an Amnian attack. Since you can't fight him any more, wouldn't you like to try fighting the one who killed him? If she'd been here, perhaps saying that could have worked.

There was a smoky miasma that seemed to hang over the black-walled building, and a large half-orc stood outside the door reading a book clutched in his wide hands. Paradoxe—I read on the grimy title of it, and tipped him first a silver and then a gold to be allowed entrance. Eldoth would have known the first time, but everyone has to start somewhere.

Inside the grime was worse and the smell stronger. Greasy, blackened strips of cloth that might have once pretended to be tapestries hung across the walls and from the low, cracked ceiling, dividing the rough stools and benches into loose partitions. The bottles beside the blackened wood slab that served for a bar were streaked by liquid dirt; some of them were oddly shaped for wine, made from smoky glass of different colours. The man behind the slab wore a stained apron, some lines and splotches darker than others. He was almost bald with a crown of grizzled, brown-grey hair, and a face with pockmarks of some past disease. Low murmurings had gone silent as I had entered, and began again while my eyes grew more used to the place's darkness.

Be confident as if you belong. Ask for an ale first, and then of the environs. If a child was kept here; and the reasons for that would be very wrong.

Two women had stood, from two different corners of the dark room. They'd walk on, I thought; but instead they circled. One's shirt was as tight and low as some of Viconia's clothing; the other wore a filmy grey dress made from scraps of material that were, I realised, translucent. If they wanted to pickpocket, I'd notice—

Then a third woman approached me and spoke, dressed in ragged priest's robes with no visible insignia upon them.

"Some say gods can die," she said in a thin high voice, raising long pale-fingered hands as if she warded away something that only she could see. I could see no way to step around them. "Some say gods are an illusion we create for our own amusement. Some say gods are an illusion we create for our fear of living. Some say gods are an illusion we create for our fear of dying. Where is the other?"

She did not wait for a reply. "Some say gods can be born. If gods are an illusion then Leira is the one beacon of truth in a pantheon of lies, for Leira is the Lady of Mists and the Guardian of Deception and the Mother of Illusions and the Mistshadow. Some say that Leira died by Cyric's hand betrayed by Mask. Some say that Leira was born again. Shaella sees you in the mists of the lady and beside you Shaella sees the other. Elnaedra knows this Shaella not and sees once more through the mists."

Sarevok Anchev certainly thought gods could be born.

"She feels one with void," the first woman said; she wore a sword at her waist, and ugly gauntlets that seemed to be made out of a wrinkled green skin. "Your life means nothing to us. I am Desreta, my soul sister is Vay-ya. Shaella sees entropy."
"Charmed," I tried to say; I'd stiffened for an attack, but they had only spoken so far. The three women paced and twined themselves around me.

"Life has no meaning," the woman in the translucent dress said. "We know wondrous, sensuous entropy. It inside you like sweet ice scent. Let us show you entropic pleasure, mmm?"

Shaella had been perhaps slightly more understandable. "What does Leira want with me?"

The priestess shook her head. "Shaella is not here! Elnaedra walks in the Lady's mists. Elnaedra knows that gods can die and mysteries are to stay mysteries."

Desreta reached out to grab my arm; though I moved, her fingernails ran down my sleeve. "Feel pleasure of entropy. It delight you with icy touch."

"One with void," Vay-ya echoed, her grey silks rustling. "Come lie cold with us in eternal dance."

"...Please leave me alone." The barman was being very dedicated to minding his own business; I saw no sign of friendly aid offered from the shadowy figures about the room.

It was very easy to think of how Shar-Teel would handle this.

"You feel pain and a lack of answers. The mists of the Lady open to give your soul freedom," said the priestess of Leira.

"Life is empty and you endure pain no longer," Desreta said, and drew her sword in a sudden swift motion.

I flung myself to the ground between the other two. The sword went down and pierced the floor: the blackened wood shattered and splintered as if a giant had pummelled it. I brought the priestess tumbling down, then rolled behind her. She was a shield, and the next thing I knew was that blood soaked and stained me.

There was a vacant stool not far off, and I seized that for a makeshift shield for the next blow. Desreta's sword tore through the wood in a loud crack that hadn't seemed to summon any aid against her. Vay-ya was calling the words of a spell; I pirouetted and rushed her, drawing the shortsword.

Her skin was stoned over. The blade scraped harmlessly along it, and then Desreta had caught up. Her strike in the air was high; I moved under it. The mage's words had faltered for that moment. If it was possible to get under Desreta's range and to some of the bare skin she showed...

A light tenor voice spoke up, somewhere behind. "Damsel in distress! I see signs of adventure call always."

Then he was striding into the fray, a tall elf with a garishly painted face and carrying a longsword that he seemed to know how to use. "Down, Desreta! I wonder now if I should have accepted your noble-spirited offer."

The swordswoman turned with a flashing strike that ought to have bisected the elf, but somehow he leaped up and away in time, faster even than Shar-Teel or Viconia. "Foolish elf, you reject pleasures of entropy. Feel them now."

"'Twas a subtler pleasure I envisioned," the elf said, duelling her in flashes of shining steel that reminded me more of an exhibition scene than true fighting. "A bed, your sister, the concept of the delights of disorder of the universe—is't not true upon the Planes there are those who believe that decline is in the merry chaos of life itself? Alas for cruel responsibilities!"
I used the pommel of the shortsword to hit the caster's jaw. Blunt force worked even through stone-shielding; she fell to the ground in her tangle of silks, somewhat indecently exposed. The priestess bled badly on the ground, a deep and gory cut through breasts and stomach, and no other came to her aid. I wouldn't.

The duel between the elf and the swordswoman continued; she seemed not to notice that her friends were fallen. The elf leapt from stool to bench like a frog, using anything that came to hand; pulling down a curtain and throwing it into her face, mocking her in words. I flanked her from behind.

"The dance starts to grow unfair, beautiful ladies—" the elf said; and then broke off in pain as Desreta's sword tore into his shoulder, ripping through the leather jerkin he wore. Her blade whipped around to me; I stepped aside, and that time she tore through one of the wooden slats that stretched between floor and ceiling.

"Ye owe me five," a man's voice said, a cloaked figure dressed almost as if he deliberately wanted to look shady; followed by a murmur in reply, "No—yer bet was on new-girl alone, not fool elf—" I turned back, still unable to break through Desreta's defences.

"Structural damage is strictly forbidden," boomed the half-orc from the doorway, the book secured in his belt; and as he lumbered in Desreta tried to fight on. He carried a club that seemed less a proper club than simply a plank of wood with rusty nails driven through it by a none-too-accurate hand, and I stepped out of his way as best I could.

Then he hit the woman in the back of the skull with it, and she fell with the back of her head bleeding and misshapen. The elf looked sickened.

"—Fair maid, I beg you to excuse me to one no less fair," he said; his voice was a smooth tenor, and he sheathed his blade as part of an elaborate bow. Then he leapt back over the dirty furnishings. In his dark corner was a baby swaddled in grey cloth and a neatly stitched child's dress that seemed out of place for this setting.

"Er, she's lovely," I said. "Do they usually keep children here?"

"Oh, that she is," he said, "you see how strongly she flails her arms? How she follows your movements with a preternaturally focused look? ...How much milk she manages to drink to fuel her growth," he added with a sigh, feeding her from a pewter bottle with a narrow neck. "I am Coran: archer, blade, adventurer—and now parent to this little lady Namara." Then he cooed over her in an almost disturbingly childish manner.

"...Call me Edwitha." Rather an awful name. The child was half-elven, by her looks; she seemed to have her father's blue eyes, and a small amount of hair the colour of straw over slightly pointed ears. "Where do you come from, Coran?"

He spread one arm expansively, holding his daughter with the other. "The forests of Tethir," he said;
from where the navigator Dradeel had also come. "Green beauty that stretches further than eye can see, than eagle's eye above flying from one end to the other in a year and a day; merrily rushing waterfalls with the charm of bells and a hundred maidenly flowers of pink and yellow and white flowing across the delicate fronds by the water's clear spray; secret groves with the smell of fresh pine needles and soft darkness to welcome sleep; noble deer and graceful fawns that fear not the approach of two legs in wandering and grazing with wide eyes; the pale wings of moths at dusk and powder of their wings spiralling up to clear skies and glimmering stars and constellations; leaves in the season of fire scarlet and golden while tongues of flame race through the undergrowth; trees evergreen in the midst of winter below pure snowflakes, the white flowers of snowdrops rising from harsh cold; spring suns gently melting as a kiss; summer rains cool amidst bright blue-glaring skies. And it is deathly boring."

He laughed; he was amusing. "Too pale and pretty a flower should not grow here," the elf said; in another gallant gesture he had my hand, and raised it to his face for a ghost of a kiss. "What further tribute do you seek here, fair and new-ripened damsel?"

"Knowledge of one of those who own this place," I said softly. "I can pay—"

My purse was missing; and on the smallest finger of the elf's left hand was a filigreed ring glittering with a small emerald fragment.

He slid the pouch back across the table. "You likewise take an interest in these arts and devices, I take it? I would deprive beauty of only a small memento." Inside the purse, the ring was in fact all that was missing; I kept a hand carefully on it.

"If relative cleanliness is beauty, then I am. Do you know anything useful? Does he keep...anyone here?"

The elf frowned; some of his mood seemed transmitted to the baby, who began a low whine. He tipped the end of his tankard toward her before realising a mistake, and instead fed her from the narrow-necked bottle.

"The one who would easily make Namara twice an orphan, for his friends? Hanali save all fair innocents; Tymora favours the daring," Coran said. "Of course that one, I see, elegant Edwitha. The name I give is Safana, unless the saucy wench has escaped the city already; perchance haunting the Undercellars still. You do not know of where they open? Why, even the Ilmatari frequent it upon missions charitable. There now, and a further hint that the gauntlets of the skin of our doorguard's kin are of value—"

He threw a dagger into the body that lay there, where a man who openly carried the veil-like symbol of Mask had bent over the corpse.

"And so Coran pays for a small tale; and ends the richer for a short-lasting memory. May the Lady of Luck show a fairer face to thou than she has done my daughter; for in eyes and slender grace there should be time's loss indeed..."

I tried to leave quietly, listening to him no longer; it seemed that hostile eyes burned to the back of my cloak at each step.

—

At least she wasn't shivering and shaking in her own boots and jumping at her own shadow like it'd suddenly turned to a drow come to get you, Imoen thought. Ramazith's tower was bigger 'n it looked
close-up; certainly imposing; but they didn't even have anything against him. That Mistress Claudia was a bit of a skeerdy-cat but she knew her way 'round the magic in town; and if it didn't work out—well, Imoen'd just have to think of something else. Claudia's grey outer robe tossed every which way about her sticklike frame in the wind, and her sparse, mouse-brown hair was a tangled mess. She looked timorously down at the ground, and it was Imoen who stepped forward and dared to knock. Her own dress'd belonged to one of the nice ol' Dowager's married nieces, rich and thick and well-made even if it was mostly a boring brown that wouldn't catch too many looks in the street, and the skin below it was a perfect sparkling clean from the Duchess' baths despite the horrors of the dungeon only a day ago. A pink silk petticoat she liked better swished merrily around her bare calves above her boots, her hands healed and fresh below lilac calfskin gloves soft enough to cast with. Clothes making the woman and all, a womanly archmagess in a pink silk petticoat couldn't help but be smart and ready.

The door opened slowly, but with nothing behind it.

"Y' can do that on just wires," Imoen whispered as cheerily as possible. "Don't even need magic. Kid stuff, really."

"There's a w-ward in the air," Claudia pointed out softly.

"Master bids... Master bids you wait for him to finish his experiments!"

Shar's puckered black winkle! Imoen blasphemed. She'd not seen the imp come out of thin air, flapping ink-coloured wings in a cloud of brimstone, she thought; fair enough, that was pretty impressive magic. It didn't matter, because this one they weren't going to do nothing interesting to. The imp gestured with its pointed tail down a long corridor, seeming to be longer than the circular tower was wide around its diameter. Imoen saw a lamp that looked as if it was made of spiderwebs spin above their head, shedding golden light; and on the walls ran runic patterns that melted into the distance as soon as she dared to look at them. A magical design, no doubt worth much gold if he hadn't done it himself. The colours were bright and made her head hurt: Ramazith the abjurer's taste seemed to run to the vivid, confusing, and maybe outright pornographic if you squinted or were the mage himself. Imoen was sure that was a naked buttock somewhere between the moving paints, fleeing her eyes, and a pair of large bosoms tossing and turning in a bold green veil between the runes that the Weave let her see of its enchantment.

"—Will you tell him it's about Ragefast? Nasty mean toady mutton-mongering Ragefast?" Imoen improvised, since her companion was being as quiet as a mouse. She glanced back uneasily to the door they had entered, which was still there. She could almost feel Ramazith's abjuration fields pressing in on them.

What passed for a waiting-room contained two backless chairs made from a dark substance that could have been either painted metal or stone; a blank grey table that looked as if it had been carved all from the same lump of featureless stone; plain walls; and a door. Imoen leaned against its open hinges in a way that she tried to make it not look like leaning, and Claudia stayed standing as well. Y' never knew what to trust about some wizards, the mean ones who weren't as nice as her anyway. Like grumpy ol' Ulraunt.

The imp flashed red pointed teeth at her in a way that made Imoen think it knew exactly what she was doing, and then it vanished in smoke that forced Claudia to cough. Imoen let herself relax. More little miss Besancon's plan than hers, anyway—or was she Lady Besancon or Miss Besancon Her Grace or the Honourable Mistress Besancon? It didn't matter, she didn't stand on titles and Imoen wasn't one to give a time of day to those idiots who did.

Claudia stood quietly with her arms wrapped around herself, as if she was frozen cold. Still, she
didn't stand as if she was cringing away or running away, and that was something, Imoen supposed.

"Ramazith's tower is so beautiful," Imoen said; 'cause it never hurt to butter up the mark first, and the thought flashed through her mind whether and how many things Ramazith had worth nicking, and if she dared to go look for them and try, and if maybe that was real gold spread on his roof and maybe some daring thief could make off with it in the night. "He must be very busy at wizarding." She'd almost said: *He is such a great and powerful and magnificent wizard! He may spend a month before seeing us lowly worms, and quite right too—* But she wouldn't grovel to anyone, and she'd a feeling that maybe it would have gone far enough to have them diagnosed with deliberate and intentional overbluffery.

"Well," Claudia said, "I s-suppose it is good company to wait with. Have you read *The Ilmater School for Shocking*?"

Then the girl began whispering at great length about the words to some play that Imoen figured after a little bit wasn't a secret code after all. Maybe it'd have been a funny story if she'd watched; she wasn't. Right, yeah, pick a distraction to talk about so's he won't know all the secrets— Fair enough, she'd brought the other mage along to be an extra set of mage hands.

Then at last the tower's abjurer himself strode in the door, wiping a smoke-darkened hand on the front of his once-white robes. Above them was a mage's suit in a red-and-green astronomical pattern, belted tightly around his waist. He was white-haired and white-bearded, but looked younger than most with hair of the same colour. Thick-bodied without being fat, as if he worked manually as well as practised magic. Imoen had some idea of how powerful he was; and of course—being, after all, Lady Imoen the Great and Terrible Pink Transmuter Wizardess—kept her confidence and composure.

"Good mornin'; thanks for seeing us," she said. "We've picked up a bit of a grudge against Ragefast, and they say you're the wizard to see."

An easy story; apparently it worked.

"A disgruntled female apprentice," Ramazith muttered; "I see. But I'm afraid I am not sure if you are what I want. After all, Ragefast is only my rival in the art; a sophisticated man cares nothing for the private enemies made by those he very impersonally dislikes and trusts to continue in long life."

Imoen's mouth wavered. "Gee...I wasn't quite suggesting that." And she really wasn't; wouldn't do anything really wrong. "I'm more of a...relocator and removalist in my spare time. Not about the hurting people. And I've got friends who like relocating and removing too."

The wizard's thick red lips, like slabs of raw steak between the white beard, quirked into a grin that struck Imoen as almost savage. "So lacking in subtlety! Is it gambling debts of the inferior branch of the Jannaths that drive you to affiliated associations; a crude bluff; or simple insanity?"

Some of this conversation Imoen wasn't sure she was actually having. "We're just looking to get advice," she said. "Sometimes you get to wondering what shiny things certain conjurers like to keep around. Y'...know?"

Well, if even half the stories about Ramazith and Ragefast and the things they did to each other and the collateral damage of folk in the way were true, it wasn't as if he'd the moral high ground to stand on. Imoen tried to keep her cool.

Ramazith quirked an eyebrow, and Imoen gulped. He'd an odd trick of pulling the threads close on himself, inside the patterned shield around his own body; made it tricky to read. But she didn't even
care about the abjurer in the end.

"But, my dear, the Flaming Fist have already played the part of burglars come to take all the city requires from our wizard's stores; from the dregs of feuding necromancers in the eastern shacks to this very tower," Ramazith said; more elliptical words that completely danced around the point. And yet it had to be the best plan she had.

Claudia gave a short nod, her face sculpted still and peaceful as if she knew exactly what was going on. It was a good bluff for a girl who acted 'fraid of her own shadow. "We ask for no help," she said, not quite stuttering, "only any words that would not inconvenience you to offer. I understand if apprehension of Ragefast or other retaliation is..."

"I will give you words, girl, make no mistake of that," Ramazith said. "Ragefast is a hedge-wizard distracted! —My experiments progress, so I shall come to a point, though I expect little from incompetent fools. Surely you know of his new toy? The outrage of a sapient creature?"

Claudia claimed she had; Imoen imitated her.

"Then I suggest you to investigate the truth of this rumour; free the poor thing and bring her to me."

The elderly wizard rubbed his hands together; Imoen thought she saw something distinctly wolfish in his grimace. "Anything else is at your discretion, for I am a generous man and his arts have ever been the inferior. You swear that you know specialists of arts other than magic?"

"Know a girl who can find her way through a lock or trap faster 'n lightning bolt through grease," Imoen boasted, "a swordfighter who's real strong against evil wizards; a nice divine priestess who'll heal you up quicksticks..."

"Precisely what I have hoped to find amidst the vultures feeding from the present turmoil," Ramazith said, and this time Imoen decided that she definitely did not like his smile. Then he raised both hands, and cast too quickly and powerfully for them to do anything for it. Not in his own tower.

Imoen looked down at the lilac-covered backs of her hands; he'd not turned them into toads.

"I see you," he said simply.

"—No, you did more than s-scrying. You added a c-condition of harming if we do not, within...I will find it..." Claudia stuttered. Imoen felt the Weave-threads banding her chest, a settled braid that hung just at the topmost join of her ribcage. Perhaps if it tightened she would fall. Claudia was right; a connection to the other mage that meant he'd be spying. (Should she not undress or bathe for the next few days, Imoen thought, the consequences of that flying up inside her head? Ick! She wanted to backstab him.)

"In three days; I am generous to pretty apprentices," he said; though it was meant to be mocking to Claudia, who blushed red in humiliation.

"—We want details," Imoen said. "You hire us, you spy on us—let out all the wards you know about."

"In brief," Ramazith said, with a smirk that made her want to slap him silly, feeling dirty with his Weave-braid nestled—not far at all from her breasts; that Ragefast mutton-monger conjurer just better have what she needed to make it all worth it—
The voice was dripping honey, but ragged and breathlessly consumed in darkness whilst she spoke on.

"In the lands in which I was born children are taught to tell a story long before they are taught to write in cold black ink or to figure in bare numbers. This way is most likely the right way, for far fewer wish to read dead words and figures when they could listen to a living voice alluring them through paths that are tuned to resonate with the soul of those who hear. Across the years I have seen a thousand shores of sand and have told ten thousand stories, each more cunningly spun than the next. For men may be so easy to manipulate caught in the silken trails of a net of charming narrative. So let this be my price, for in your eyes I see topaz stones, and on your once-soft hands I read a story not unlike my own.

"I come from far across the seas and to the south, where the sun burns a brighter and stronger gold than in the north, in a great city where the sands meet sea, where to the north lies wild desert and to the south lies the ocean, equally untamed; where djinni walk through streets, ebony-skinned slaves of Chult carry burdens, sirens cry their haunting song while they roam the waves below, glittering snakes of the desert hiss tunes in the cool evening, and where in the homes of the wealthy gold and jewels the size of roc's eggs flow like water between the hands of their owners.

"To such a bejeweled cradle I was born, daughter to the vizier of a pasha and to the first among his concubines. The holy words of the lords of the sun and the sea were the first whispered to my ear. The juice of a ripe date from the finest of the three orchards belonging to my father was rubbed along my gums, and in the story told by one of my nurses I smiled and reached out a hand to grasp the shredded fruit to taste its pleasure on the first day of my life below the sun. The love of my father for my mother was greater than that for any of his other wives or concubines, for her wit and her beauty and perhaps above all for her voice. It was whispered that she was a siren of the sea that one of his fishermen had captured by net, or that she was the daughter of such a sea-nymph and a lowly fisherman who had stolen a bride from the waves. A sevenday after my birth, when it is known among my people that a child is likely to live, my head was shaven and a necklace of green peridots placed about my neck at the will of my father, and ninety-seven goats were slain and shared both in feasting and to the poor for the sake of good fortune.

"My earliest memories are the songs and sweetmeats of my mother. She favoured green and blue silks of all the different shades of the inside of a rainbow in her dress within the closed quarters of the zenana, where only the voices of women and children and eunuchs were permitted; and of course my father. She spread kohl upon her eyes and persimmon-scented myrrh upon her body, and took up the stringed al-ʻūd to play and to sing each day. Some said my voice was like hers, though in truth none could be her equal. She sung like no other, with a voice seeming hoarse and yet exactly the harmony wanted to the melody, and in an instant she could also turn it to liquid silver. She sung songs which had no words, and yet could be about nothing other than the dance of waves and bittersweet longings for love and adventure. I learned when I was very young that I could sit by her side and to quiet me she would easily give sweetmeats; or become lost in her music so that she did not notice when I reached for riches. Do you know of ḥalqūm, rosewater-honey? It is a sweet the colour of the pink of early dawn. The best kind uses a delicate sprig of mint to only touch it, just so, and careful tiny slivers of hazelnuts, and ought to be drowned in sweet-smelling rosepetal-drenched water and covered in powdered sugar-grains taken from cane-fields. Some call it delight: the pursuit of delight.

"There were jewelled baubles and chains for me, and even when sons came to my father I was favoured among his children. I could speak well and quickly in three languages, that of my land and the older tongue of that land where the greatest poetry is written, and the strange language taught by
my mother; and unknown to him I forced the eunuchs to instruct in the homely common tongue for a
fourth. Anything I asked for, I was given; and when I boldly slipped a loop of pearls from his waist,
or tricked a ring from his fingers, I was praised for amusing him.

"And yet one yearns to escape the bars of a golden cage. I bribed a eunuch to take me to the city,
down to the sea at the port. Raised upon black onyx and brilliant-cut rubies, pink pearls the size of
pigeon's eggs and golden sapphires, polished sardonyx and gleaming chalcedony, beryl and lapis
lazuli, turquoise and carnelian: shining fragments of mica and sandspar become the most precious of
stones; delicate-whorled shells held more valuable than the finest star-sapphire cabochon. The
markets awake at dawn with criers of all the gods calling their names and singing to bells, and then
they are crammed with people; far more than this small northern town entire, for my city was a rich
and wealthy one. The women of good family are veiled in black, the women of wealthier family
carried in jewelled palanquins and entirely unseen, the women of better family still never present at
all, only secluded and expecting merchants to attend upon them. It is much more tedious that way.
Lamb is spit-roasted and shaved for the selling, juicy and spiced thickly with tumeric and cassia and
nutmeg and ras el hanout; sorbets flavoured with pomegranate and figs and made with ice brought
into being through enchanted cantrips; honeydew melons sliced and sold to passers-by. The air is full
of smoke and perfumes and the smell of horses and mules and seasalt and people: there is life and
excitement.

"The eunuch guard taught me more than he knew himself of how to escape free: and I threatened
that I would tell my father of his first dereliction of duty if he did not overlook my other journeys.
The only way to escape blackmail is to care not a fig for the words and the censure of others,
provided that you yourself have what you want: and I wanted to climb the rocks and see the glitter of
shells by the oceans, to plait seaweed into my hair and watch the bronzed bare-chested fishers dance
by their catches. In plain abaya I escaped view; and indeed discovered some charmingly disreputable
urchin-companions. I never did see siren-kin by the shores, no matter how long I searched.

"But girls are prone to flower and grow old and become used as bargain-pieces; no matter how
pampered or beloved we may be. Perhaps my father had vast debts to pay; perhaps he truly thought
to give me away; perhaps he cared not, for what is a girl but a tool unless she can use her abilities for
her own self? A bird in a golden cage yearns for freedom; and later misses the bars of the cage. My
father would have traded me to the first among the caliph's viziers: sixty if he was a day, fat and bald
and syphilitic and wealthier than the wildest dreams of most.

"My other lover was the first mate of a ship called Exzesus. I remember his blue eyes were exotic to
me, for he was fathered by a northerner. His ship was in port for three days: I fled with him on the
third. I wore, of course, my dowry and anything I could carry that had not been nailed down; I went
to my love in gold and silver and pearls and satins, the coin-lined headdress of the bride, the peridots
of my birth month, for an adventurous passion. Then, of course, I learned that they were pirates.

"The seas are a rough and dangerous enterprise. But when faced with two evils, the one untried is
always so much more fun. I sailed across seven-and-seventy seas with the salt in my hair and the
skies fresh and clear and free. In the south I felt Chult's damp forest air and thieved weird cats'-
eyes from a stone idol set alone in sand miles from any other construction, evaded the pursuit of
angry tribesmen. In the north I have worn the fine white coats of the polar bear and the poorest
sealskin; starved on freedom and grown to seek a lady's comforts—yet even the cleverest find it hard,
at times. But I have seen more than most in my adventures; I could tell you tales of royalties and their
habits— In Thay I have been feted for beauty by Red Wizards; in Halruaa seen skyships fly above
the poor craft; thieved the map to stolen pirate treasure from a sleeping man in an Amnian port;
discovered a new city and a new lover. Sometimes a girl simply attracts too much attention; or is
captured in indiscretion...
"Adventurers meet in odd places; I met the silly elf hunting wyverns from a safe distance. I would rather, I told him, make love to an owlbear in heat. Then he would drag me to his cast-off's betrayed husband; a screaming baby. In the woods when I saw him his thin tunic was drenched and translucent with sweat; slim musculature, fine-boned hands, and a wide grin below his clownish warpaints...

"He is a silly elf. My...greatest profit of simple thievery was Dosan's warehouse of black lotus, neglected in all of his recent business. We seized, as I thought, the swag, sold easily and quickly; and yet the man is a mage. I cannot escape this. Haggard and ugly as his cursed spell has done to me, I should not...wish to. Tell the elf none of this. If I had left when he had asked; if I had seen the forests of Tethir; if we had stayed; if the world permits the asking of what might have been. I have seized my date-juice from life. If I am what you might be, do this last for me.

"The way to strike Angelo Dosan the mage is through his precious granddaughter. The—Street of Vesiham. A small quiet estate far from his Fist's quarters. The girl is the one way, I would think, by which you can have your wish to harm him. I have seen him with her, a red-headed lump of a girl: ugly, passive, everything I despise, never a rogue—and withal, the beloved granddaughter of Sarevok Anchev's captain. This is the knowledge you seek. Avenge me.

"So ends this part of your story and mine."

—

"Right," Imoen said, "nice work, kiddo."

No Faldy here; she'd blow her top at nymphy business. No 'Jantis, he'd cut up holy wooden-headed about the same thing, still holy or not. Could've done with Shar-Teel and Vic, but there were three of them, so that was just fine, Imoen thought. Get it done quick—real quick. She grinned, wondering if her teeth might look wide and white as a skull's evil grimace for someone who saw it through scrying. Claudia's skin sparkled beside her with the protection she'd chosen to cast over her skin; glittery, but rock-solid. Imoen fantasised for a moment about learning the fireshield spell that protected you with a gleaming pretty circle of dancing flame; but then walked in behind the other two since Skie'd opened the thick door with a quiet click.

Winthrop'd given her buttocks hell if the Candlekeep Inn's corridors'd looked anything like this, Imoen thought. There was no lights on in the wall-sconces, only an improvised thieves'-lamp Skie'd lit for them to see by; spiders lurked on the ceiling obviously having had plenty of time to build up webs nice and thick; dust was everywhere and creeping up her nostrils. She wanted to sneeze. She kicked the door shut behind them, so that from the outside it at least looked like there wasn't necessarily an armed burglary going on here.

There didn't look to be magic traps in the wide entryway, and Skie's hands said that the way was clear. Their footprints left marks in the dust; there were fainter signs of other prints, too, Imoen noticed. Booted prints that had gone both ways, bigger than any of their own footsteps. Other than that, looked like nobody'd stirred in this part of the house for months. The walls were wood rather than Ramazith's paintings, done in marquetry that grew more elaborate as they walked further in. These were dirty, neglected scenes that had to be different lands, different planes: places that a conjurer could summon from, Imoen guessed. There were beasts she hadn't seen before combined with beasts she thought were mythical combined with beasts that she knew could be summoned, and figures that looked human until you started to look closer. In Skie's halflight it was creepy to spare that closer glance and then see arms that didn't bend like arms, or hidden fangs or shell-like ears or hooves in place of feet, or eyes that were nothing like any human ought to have. Between them were foreign plants expensively picked out in the wooden figures, trees with roots like elm or oak that then
grew into far stranger foliage. Imoen thought she saw a bush that burned with tongues of flame shaped like human fingers, and a tree upside down growing from a strange sky where the flowers floated beside it in the winds, and then a stylised tree where the image of the roots began in the floor below their feet before it branched itself to cover the ceiling. Seemed Ragefast liked veneered wood more than mage-paint in his decorations; they'd come to the end of the passageway. Skie hand-signalled to stop; Claudia got the message after Imoen pulled her back, and listening carefully there was a sound somewhere in this house. It sounded to Imoen like wind whistling through high-pitched silver chimes.

Ramazith'd given some handy tips on bringing down the mage protections the conjurer was likely to have. There wasn't much, really. The booted footprints were along mostly the same way as them: and the doors they managed to open along the way seemed to be unimportant. There were bare shelves and open, empty cupboards and dry-as-dust alembics and alchemy equipment; some mage books scattered hereabouts, some of the wax and the summoning chalk and the string and the dried hoof bits you used for a lot of conjurings still lying around. Imoen looked a bit through them; maybe it was better to search first before finding the mage himself. Or perhaps better to go straight to where he'd locked himself up in this dusty old house and knock him out instead of letting him get the drop on 'em—that was what every good rogue'd say. Had to prepare herself and lead the way, for Claudia acted like she couldn't say boo to a goose and this was mage stuff.

Then they came closer, and the high voice was stronger. Through one door in particular; Imoen pressed her ear to the gold-coloured keyhole set in the middle of a door starred by geometric parquetry, with the same veneer of dust.

"Please, release me. I fade even now," the sweet female voice said, in pleading that struck Imoen just below where Ramazith's magic had hit her. She was strong enough to ignore it.

"But we are made to be together; whether ye know it or no. Abela, in the grove you loved me and you are beautiful still." The other voice was whiny as Edwin, Imoen thought, seeking some ordinary comparison.

"Don't move!" Claudia whispered fiercely. Imoen blinked, and then managed to see the layer of braid around the keyhole: a whirling, red-gold explosive spell fit to burst around her not-quite-so-red head.

"I can't see how to untangle it!" she answered, suddenly afraid of a crimson mass above her neck and bone fragments flying to those marquetry walls.

Claudia studied it. "Ice c-chips," the girl said, stuttering slightly. "Could I...could I try to bind the fire-sprites up?"

"Quickly," Imoen answered, impatient—this was more rude comedy than heroic expedition, the sort of thing for belly-laughs out of Puffguts, not that that was difficult to make—and inside there was the voice of the nymph:

"In the grove it was true below the stars. I will die of what you call love. Only you would still call me beautiful. Please, take this collar from me."

"And that I cannot do. Together we will be, forever."

Claudia's spell was cast under her breath; Imoen saw the necklace of blue-white ice beads forming a few inches off her hands. A cantrip; manipulated like she'd seen happen with the salt, the reason why she'd picked the scared-rabbit mage for her team in the first place— The ice shards bound themselves to the fiery parts of the Weave-braid, and then it all fizzled into harmless steam. Imoen shook her
head. "Pretty good," she said, and forced more than picked open the lock on the door herself, with Winthrop's tools; and then she came blazing into the room with an Agannazar's Scorcher flaring in her hand. Skie's sword was drawn; Claudia glittered in the pair of lights—and held a simple crossbow, for speedy disruptions.

"Surrender the nymph, and ya don't have to get hurt!"

"Who dares—who?" the mage returned, with a loud, girly, and Edwinesque shriek. He stood in front of the woman and splayed his scrawny arms wide, as if he wanted to protect her. His robes were black and embroidered with dark green in the design of leaves, and dirty and dusty as if they had not been cleaned for weeks. He was middle-aged, with greying dark hair and an angular face, his dark eyes glazed over like the honey top of a sweetbread. "You mean harm to Abela, my love and my life?"

The woman was a nymph: supernaturally beautiful, with knee-length raven-black hair of a blue sheen and shimmer, her face and bare arms the colour of dark smooth wood, and her eyes an unrelieved bright green. Around her neck was a blue-gemmed necklace too coarse to be anything other than human-manufactured. She sat still, traces of crystal tears by her eyes. Below the beauty was a deep sadness and she needed them to help her, because she was so beautiful and the most wondrous thing in the world, a sister who had to be aided at all costs—

_Nymph! Enchanting enchant-y mind-messing stuff?_ Imoen's brain reminded herself. A cobweb-like string wound from the pendant that tipped the necklace between Abela's small breasts, held in the male mage's right hand.

"All right," Imoen said, "how about we just hold her for a moment?" About the room—much more important—she'd seen more books here, astrolabes and tools; maybe they could plunder it— "Who came here last?" The booted prints in the dust.

The mage simply stared. Off his head like any other crazy mage. The others were still ready; Skie'd woven forward, standing in front of them to protect.

"The Flaming Fist have come, and found my Abela not," Ragefast said. "Speak for who sent you! For what designs you have upon her!"

"You're aff...affected by her natural magic," Claudia said softly, her face still glittering with that stony protection. "Perhaps we could...help you both. If I could touch your skin, p-perhaps my dispelling could..."

"You would help me," Abela begged softly. "I am dying; Ragefast, do let her, please..." Then the nymph drew in air in a quick hiss, and glared, her perfect white teeth bared at them.

Ragefast reacted spiky-quick just like them: he made mirror images for himself, and then—quicker than Imoen'd been able to think—he did the circle of fireshield for himself. Eight wizards with eight blue-burning pools around them.

"Ramazith sent you! I feel his magic," the wizard said; and then his throat hoarsened while his skin hardened into bark like a druid, as if he took some of the power of the nymph behind him.

Abela whispered: "That one wishes to cut me to pieces! _No...not that torture..."

And, Imoen concluded, this was absolutely the moment they found themselves hip-deep in the proverbial. Head downwards.

She whipped her set of missiles out with one hand and the instantlike Agannazar's with the other,
because she'd figured she could do that. She closed her eyes; seven out of those eight images were illusions, and the illusions didn't have real flames— The missiles went for one and the fires for another, and she felt only a little bit singed. Couldn't afford to stop in pain. Claudia'd launched off the crossbow bolt, five to go. But by then Ragefast'd chanted his summoning spell, like any other conjurer: and it was an elemental. Watery-prety, just like Faldy's nereid; dangerous like Faldy's Sirine-Queen. Her body was like Abela's but on a much larger scale, almost as tall as the ceiling, and the living water that made her body had started to flow into ice spears in either hand; then she became a flood.

Imoen felt herself drown.

_Claudia's got the dispel_, was her first thought; clerics could cast it better to stop arcanists, so she'd not bothered to seek it out...something she'd fix, if'n she got out. Skie was doing okay against water, the sword creating hissing steam. She couldn't see Claudia; the waves blinded her eyes and clogged mouth and throat. She put her hands over her face to try to clear some air; if she couldn't breathe, she thought wildly, they were done for.

Steam continued to fizzle, and then she gulped air again; it all but burned her throat, but it was good. Water to steam, stonelike Claudia managing the transmutation. "Keep it up!" she yelled to the other two; water-to-air, water-to-air, that clearing a space meant...

Imoen Winthrop didn't think slow in an adventure, especially after all that'd been forced on them. She'd taken care to get her good area-effects back, rotten egg from a dark corner of Sauriram's kitchens ready in her pouch; she sped the casting all she could, words and runes and gestures, aimed—then cast with all the water she could range for a spell component without hitting Skie.

It only made people unconscious, so Abela the nymph dropped quickly; and while she could hear the nasty wizard casting, Imoen also heard his voice change, hurt. Skie stabbed at an ice-spear reaching from the green water-mists, cutting it in two.

"Grease!" Imoen called, starting the hand movements for a flame arrow herself. _Let him roast in his barkskin_. Claudia figured out her plans, and got the grease under the feet of all the mirror images. Then just before Imoen could get her arrow down, three howling monsters came to Ragefast's summon.

_Wolfweres_, Imoen thought; but these fought like they were far better than the ones on the island...

She couldn't let herself get distracted, and Skie was in front of her; a shield in human form. Imoen's fire leapt from her hands and the grease puddle burst for each image of the wizard. She heard him scream.

_Or...should've sighted for the real instead, mebbe, shouldn't have thought of burning blood_— Skie fought the wolfweres, and it looked like she'd done something; she moved faster than she ought to be able to, had her bones bend too far and inhumanly flexible. It worked; one of the wolfweres fell. _Beat the wizard and it's three down nil to go_, Imoen thought.

She began the gestures for another fire arrow, and while she was doing it yelled: "D'you want this to go to your nymph?"

It worked as a threat; the poor thing was hurt enough from _him_ that a flaming shock to the system'd have killed her. Of course she wouldn't really have done it, Imoen thought. Ragefast's response, though, wasn't to surrender but to draw a protection bubble around himself and the nymph. Imoen'd seen where the nymph lay on the floor: _so that was the right mirror image_. She pointed and called Claudia to dispel. That thing Skie was doing'd stopped, the kid was fighting more like normal, and
one of the monsters raked claws across her stomach— Imoen, breathing hard, sent a row of magic missiles into the head of one while she couldn't do anything to the wizard himself. As long as the pair o' them were too busy to go for the spellcasters; the one she'd hit turned crimson eyes on her, but Skie got it in the back with her shortsword. Too bad wolfweres healed fast.

Claudia's dispel hit the Weave in separated-out blazing white unravellings, and she got it. The shield came down. Imoen, smiling grimly for vengeance, began that fire arrow over again. Definitely the last she'd have in her head; Claudia was the same way, slow-reaching into her magic. But Claudia's last spell was slightly faster, and the loud noise of a thunderclap hit the room. Ragefast collapsed to the floor; the wolfweres disappeared; and Imoen shook her head, noting somewhat-deafened ears. Claudia gestured frantically at her to stop the flame arrow, and even though it was a waste she did at the last moment.

Skie sat down, nursing the deep cuts over her chest; she passed a hand over them for that odd healing skill, though it didn't quite finish the job. Imoen bent down over ol' Ragefast and found that he wasn't dead after all.

"You were r-right," Claudia was saying now they could hear again, "we did not have to kill him; he will be saner without the nymph..."

Imoen nodded. "It was the shiny things we did this for," she said. "Load her into that cart in the back and cover her over, Claudia, Lu, I'll do the first search." She looked down at the nymph's unconscious body, trying to control her tones. "Ramazith don't want a dead nymph, so I guess we'd better be fast to drag her back." Her hands signalled to Skie as she spoke. "Me and Claud can pull the cart, we'll give you your share later." She bent down and began the search of the conjurer's equipment.

At last! Success—partway— She clutched the precious scroll to herself, and took a few other things that weren't nailed down for cover-over.

—

"By my scrying, you performed...adequately," Ramazith said. Imoen was suddenly conscious of dripping water from their clothes across his erotic-painted flooring. But the mage's attention was on the nymph's body, daring to run his wide and sweaty hands over her. "Components of nymph. Splendid."

"You g-gave your own word in your own tower to remove this," Claudia said. "Please d-do so."

The mage gestured impatiently. Imoen could feel his power; she and Claud were both about burned out. They'd no choice but to exit, of course, and leave Abela to Ramazith. He took off the necklace from her and laid it aside; and then started a holding spell for her. Imoen saw a knife come to his hand. The imp flew behind them, nagging them to leave.

And then, of course, from the earth below him erupted a druid, a young bear who could turn into a druid, and a Harper fighter; and from the shadows a bandaged thief.

When Jaheira and Faldorn had finished with the mage who wanted to cut up nymphs, Imoen sat down in the ruined tower, between two static-rendered pictures of acts she thought were illegal in several countries. Faldorn was bent over Skie's rough bandages now, with the other druid venturing criticism at each point of healing; Skie'd be all right, then. About time to tell Claudia what I really wanted, Imoen thought, looking across at the other mage.

—
128. Crimmor

Warning: war crimes.

—

Edwin: 26 Eleasias

There were explicit, methodical, and fairly detailed orders to follow. Whether Anchev chose to make a personal appearance or not did not affect him; to begin to think of the man's vulnerabilities (if any) gave him a headache and a sick stomach. These orders were not to be the common property of the men below until the very moment. Brute beasts could continue excitements.

Crimmor was an Amnian—called a city, far smaller than Eltabbar. Obviously. A town. He'd hardly had cause to care for the geography of barbarian lands; he'd not known of its existence previous to this. From strategic discussions overheard, a caravan hub largely protected by humans. Already they had defeated the Amnian forces expected to prevent them from so much as reaching the town. Quite low-walled. Natural defence in the form of a river by its outer defences blocking the way in, the bridge to it updrawn. Attempts would have been made to prepare its food supplies for a siege; that made it useful to seize. The noise of construction outside disturbed him, sawing and subdued commands of haste; trees had been cut down to repair and improvise war-machinery. Edwin shifted uncomfortably in the bedroll on rough ground, in the tent that at least he had for solely himself; it was still dark, and the attack was set for but a few hours hence. His invaluable mind needed a certain amount of rest to properly call upon his powerful magics. Yet again a rock on the ground dug into his back. He moved, his thoughts not fully coherent. The truth was that he was quite tired, and he would hardly be less so once it was over.

There was a soft cough in the air. Suddenly, he opened his eyes: and faint moonlight glittered off a knife's point that shone not far from his throat.

"Contingencies— he groped; Stoneskin and a scream to summon aid and the assassin would be—unless he killed him first—"

"Put your eyes back in your head, Red Wizard," a female voice said. "It wouldn't be clever of you to scream."

In the dark—he'd an infravision spell, uncast—he could make out little of her. On the tall side; perhaps rather scraggily in build; hair down to her shoulders and seeming to be armoured in leather. The knife's point touched the soft skin of his neck.

"Do you remember me, Edwin?"

"(For expediency I temporarily yield—)" he babbled. "Of course not; I can hardly see you—" She'd used his first name rather than his last as he preferred here.

"We met in Nashkel," the woman replied softly. In recent days? Then it is revengeful assassination she seeks— Edwin deduced. Probably slow and painful at that— "In the company of that little girl," she finished. She went on rapidly, and he remembered: the assassins of Nashkel, the gaggle of four females. He couldn't remember doing anything to her specifically, nor whether it was she who had hit him with that vile blood-draining dart.

"Red Wizard," she said. "You went from that girl to the Throne. Your story is not so unknown as you think, Red Wizard of Nashkel." Again he did not ask if she referred to recent events or no; the foolish peasants who hadn't even the sense to run from fireballs and were therefore deserving of an
overlord above them. "You aided her and did not kill her. Whatever you may have told Sarevok, he
will know that as a betrayal of himself."

That was true; as eminently illustrated by the fate of Philias. At least the uncouth barwhore with the
knife didn't seem to know all that could damage him. Hardly a situation alone with a woman in his
quarters that he would have asked for. (It could have been worse—the Witch!)

"Then come to the point," Edwin said, with as much cold presence as he could summon to his voice.
"(Pun not intended.) What do you want, and what gives you the impression that I could provide it for
you?"

"I travelled with Cyricists," the woman said reminiscently, in a way that gave Edwin few hopes for
her sanity. Help! I am imprisoned with a dangerous madwoman who will be lying if she says
anything before we kill her! Perhaps that would work, though her knife was still too close for him to
dare to begin a spell or to scream. "You could say that I am one," she said. "I know what the godling
is capable of. I failed him once. Bring me to the leaders here and say that I have true knowledge to
defeat Crimmor. For I know it will fall, one way or another; for your preservation from his wrath as
well as mine. I am Maneira."

"And do you have such knowledge?" Edwin said, suspicious. (Perhaps an acid arrow in her back
when she wasn't looking! —But with the ease she had crept up on him, perhaps she would be
unamenable to cooperation in that sort of thing...)

"Where do you think I've come from?" she said, almost sweetly.

—

Crimmor, a battle-plan.

You could go back within the town and spread fear and terror and running away, Edwin would
have wanted to say to the filthy blackmailing thief. Even better, you could be conveyed by way of a
trebuchet. She knew the location of the water supplies, where the natural river was directed up into
Crimmor's main wells, caves and sewers to tramp through. That small group of Anchev's suicidal
fanatics took her with them, and would slit her throat if she had lied.

Then archers and mages kept a steady attack against the walls while shielded clerics sought to build
across the river; to bring down the bridge once they were across. The defending archers gave a
steady fight; Edwin noted they were relatively numerous, aiming through murder-holes and
crenellations, men falling as they had done on the Witch's Teat. Most of the arrows were ordinary
rather than enchanted, the casualty rate low as if some misaimed on purpose— Not all of the flashes
of defenders on the walls he could see were uniformed. His own magic ought to be preserved a little
longer. Here in the back he was protected by others' bodies. Battlefields were not alike to ordinary
fights of adventuring; one must be cautious, hawk-eyed, ever aware for the tides of fortune. If he
repeated that the likes of those who had fallen did so from their own stupidity, it lent confidence.

The bridge grew as if black ants massed together, its materials dark-coloured, forming below the
given protections. Lumps of stone were catapulted high, shaking the walls and making small archers
scatter. The Flaming Fist managed to be disciplined, regular about it; more so than the defenders.

Any plan of battle must and will go wrong.

There was a signal: Edwin and his backup—five mages left with the main force, counting himself,
this made them precious commodities to be given their deserved share of bodyguards—aimed
missiles in unison against a group of archers who had been giving trouble. It was difficult to see
adequately at this distance; but Edwin thought he saw his bright red flares land upon skin to blister. The bridge was halfway across now. A builder fell flat upon it; they pushed him from it into the waiting waters. He must have been dead already. Ruthless as any Red Wizard's personal armsmen. Their own war machinery and arrows loosed in perfect rhythm. Edwin watched the battle with care. Crimmor was undisciplined and under-defended by men. Then to echo their desperation, mage-arrows began to come. Fires burst down, smoke erupted in the open. Edwin could smell all the horror that resulted: they bore shields, the defenders' aim was flawed, he himself was in a relatively safe position—

A fire arrow burst a bare twenty feet from him, burning soldiers and causing the few healers that remained back to rush to their aid. He stepped further back, still further on edge than before. There was a safe stoneskin around his body.

The bridge-building approached completion, having passed the centre point. By now the defenders on the walls must be quite desperate; they had returned to usual arrows, customary and inferior warfare. Two-thirds, Edwin adjudged it. He wondered what had passed in regard to the other half of the plan. Things will go wrong. He licked dry lips that were still alive and attached to a face.

Anchev chose that dramatic moment to cross. No doubt intimidating to the defenders; some of their arrows sputtered, falling far short. He was flanked by the wizards Perorate and Semaj; a bravely-fired arrow they did not deflect flew from Crimmor's walls into the opening of his spiked helm that shone gold.

Sarevok plucked that out of his face. Edwin would have guessed the arrowhead to be still intact and all skin unbroken. He walked onward across the bridge. The pet wizards wove their spells—simple incantations defended against arrows, but by a man who was not a mage it was something more. The Son of Murder frightened those of Crimmor and the bridge grew more quickly; acolytes gained strength from his presence. Wildly Edwin thought that it would look foolish if he stood and waited at the edge of it; or indeed if he accidentally stepped from the edge. Perorate waved his hands ahead and a line of force grew in the air. The gates of the city shook. Anchev broke through them with his sword.

"Drawbridge down!" came the cry for advancement. They rushed forward; Anchev was the only one for whom mundane arrows meant no threat. Edwin stayed within the crowd of other men. Words of his most powerful spells ricocheted inside his head: I am powerful, I shall live through this one also. I will it! He loathed running. Formations of their own men threatened to flow past him.

Inside the city gates there were screams. Some monkey with a sword saw fit to rush at him, seeing a caster; he conjured an Agannazar's from his hands. Another few heartbeats: another dead by his magic. A sling bullet hit the ground near to him. An armoured figure—less so than Anchev—was perhaps responsible. An acid arrow, to the face, expecting it to cause great pain...

Gold dust flared in the air about Anchev's position, Edwin saw in the air; some godstouch. He must think later of significance. A captain cut through the torso of a peasant woman who had carried a bow. The stench of Crimmor's desperation was thick with blood and still less pleasant reminders of human mortality. In the forefront of the battle Anchev held and rallied others to him. Rising high within the walls Edwin could see now the goal of the Lord's Tower, that where the power in this town rested. Through the streets he could imagine none of what the town must have once been in peacetime. Narrow streets invited ambushes, and the commanding Fist officer barked orders to keep his magic with them. Child, youth, female who dared object to their passage down their streets, any who looked as if they might raise blade— A Thayvian must ever be wary of any who could damage; in slave revolts even the seemingly harmless could inflict some inconvenience to the noble. Another mage's arrow flew unerringly from Edwin's hands to its target; and then a holding spell for rebels to
be cut down while they watched.

Perhaps an hour from their entry into the city a cry was raised of victory. At a distance Anchev had charge of the one called Lord Aldon, his very tower turned to a prison by the small group who had come through Crimmor's supply of waters. Regrettably he thought that he saw the thief who had betrayed the town yet living, failing to be executed for treachery, as if she had played some crucial role of the conquest. The town had a gallows, a square for executions; Anchev performed his own conquering. He was not at all ashamed to get blood on his armour, Edwin thought wildly, adapting the saying. A surrender.

"Orders," Anchev began to his blood-soaked followers; Edwin could not tell if the voice of command was enhanced by magic or a product of the man's own godhood. "All citizens are to be present at the field. There are to be none who deny this. To guard there, the first company, the arcanists; to the north-east of the city to enforce this, the second company; the third—"

Edwin awaited the accountings. There was smoke behind him; some would burn their own dwellings rather than allow them conquered. Some would also betray their town rather than surrender their lives. It was still orderly, here, held in leash by Sarevok Anchev's sheer force of personality. Men of able body offered recruitment as slaves to fill the ranks once more; others lined up and waiting. In peaceful times Crimmor was apparently a trading stop for caravans; sensible travellers had fled already and the wide space was sufficient for guarded civilians. Some tried to flee into the wilderness beyond; some perhaps even escaped. Their guards aimed crossbows after them to kill.

There was still waiting, for Crimmor's traitors to accept service with the Grand Duke. Edwin mopped his brow and found ordinary skin, sweating. The stoneskin had worn off. Beside him a male mage of the Fist sent a small bolt of electricity into the ground before a group of querulous halfling citizens, keeping them in line. A red-haired halfling girl sat on the ground, weeping weakly. Edwin waited.

Semaj had strolled up behind him and he had not even noticed; Edwin jumped slightly. Curse the startlement! Did none care for what he wished? "Greetings again," he mumbled icily, and again the young savant stuttered in his return speech.

"We can w-work together once more," Semaj said, smiling, and apropos as it was for Edwin to be reminded of a sheep by that and the woolly shape of the boy-mage's small beard he still glanced away. He moved his hands, exercising the fingerjoints below his prized gauntlets. It seemed that now there was scarcely a male of fighting age who had not been interrogated amongst the gathering. The herd of peasants was still gathered in their surrender, still surrounded below guard. All the people of Crimmor. Edwin looked across at Anchev's glowing eyes, and looked away again.

"Crimmor was defiant," Sarevok said. "It must serve as a lesson for all of Amn. Let the tale be told by far more than words."

A cheer, in all likelihood carefully orchestrated, rose up for the Lord of Murder. The priest-acolytes took power into their hands. Maneira the traitor stood quietly not far from Anchev's rough dais. Semaj gestured at Edwin, watching him carefully from cold eyes; and so Edwin cast a cloud of unconsciousness across those quick enough to already deduce their fate and foolishly attempt to run. In his own turn the mage cast forth a brown skull that drew moisture from bodies; crossbow bolts were aimed without discrimination.

Any plan of battle will go wrong. Very wrong.

They would say that murder had come to Crimmor.
129. Imoen's Circle

"—Yeah, I needed a teleport spell," Imoen explained at last, sitting in the ruins of Ramazith's house. Faldorn's healing chant finished; Jaheira bent over me as if to check her work. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate being sure of it, or that I wouldn't turn into a wolfwere. Never mind that. Jaheira straightened up with a nod.

"'Cause Mr G. getting murdered—by Anchev—was really what started this thing," Imoen said, "and I should've been home in Candlekeep, not that I'm sorry I did things, so that'd be the best and fastest way to get back there and go through the stuff he left me. Paperwise I'm his ward, next of kin, for all Winthrop's my name—and it's not just that I'm missing ol' Puffguts, I thought it'd be best way to find out quickly without being away too long when I could be helping here. When, well, lots of other people are getting killed," she said baldly. "Er.

"I got the spell from Ragefast's collection right here, like I guessed 'cause it's conjuration, but it says I need the rogue-stone component to go with it. Anyone got a spare piece of incredibly expensive pretty shiny rock?" she asked. "Two spare pieces of incredibly expensive pretty shiny rock? I knew I should've been more careful about what I left behind in the Tower—"

Claudia Besancon spoke up. "The F-flaming Fist would have consfiscated rogue stones. They're on the list and they say...no, their mages are good at casting finding spells. But my aunt has one." Imoen seemed to think a lot of Claudia as a wizard; I hadn't known her from before, though she'd known me. "Isn't it...a very d-difficult spell? You are more powerful but I know I could not..."

"Not a problem, I've read it before from this elven mage even if I didn't get to learn it and I got dimension door," Imoen said. "Lookin' at it now I know I can get it. But hey," she said, turning to Jaheira and Khalid. "Maybe it's easy after all! With you being the old friends and all, did he let you in on what the kid here was important for?"

They shook their heads. Jaheira stepped forward. "For the rescue of this creature of the forest I was willing," she said. "But so much as attempt to drag us once more into mad personal schemes when we have so many other duties, Imoen, and I will turn you over my knee as I am sure your foster father long wished to do and make you regret sitting for a tenday." Imoen grinned nervously.

"Well, let's flee the coop, right?" she said in thieves' cant. "Don't want too many curious face poking in the mage's tower now the explosions and hordes of wild wolves and bears've stopped." Faldorn gave a self-congratulatory smirk.

"C-come to my aunt's," Claudia said to Imoen; Jaheira and Faldorn began a heated debate over which of them was best qualified to resettle the nymph in her appropriate environment.

"Faldorn, let Jaheira do it," I said; and the odd thing was that she listened and came with us.

Emerie's secure place was below a store operated by a woman known as Silence. No sound of voices was heard in the building, but there was a constant susurrus that might mask other sounds: wind-chimes with the metal of them wrapped lined the ceiling, always rubbing against each other in a neverending noise of cloth rather than bell-like ringing. It wasn't the way we had come to meet with the League the first time, from that noise; Emerie Jannath possessed a cellar below. The place seemed deserted, though Claudia said that there were strong enchantments to detect theft. Some of the daggers seemed well-crafted, a few engraved with runic symbols that showed a magical
enhancement, and Imoen briefly eyed a potion of a violent violet colour.

"Should we rescue Tevanie first before we go back, Imoen?" I said. It might be better...

"No, this's important," she said, though she scowled; "I hate making these decisions. But you shut up and listen to little ol' Imoen."

Emerie wasn't there; Claudia opened a door with a whispered password. It was a mage's laboratory in here, festooned with bright cushions and books, spell components and potions. Her niece looked worried.

"She ought to be h-here at this time," she said. "There m-might be—"

She cast a spell on a chest of drawers, then and there, clearly the lockpicking spell; it was impressive. Imoen and I exchanged a brief wink. Then she slid open the second drawer and seemed to open some sort of secret compartment there; and in Imoen's hands she placed a box lined with cotton wool, carrying inside the gem for the spell. Rogue stones are beautiful, all sorts of different flashing colours and very bright; but mostly it is only mages who use them for their own sake, though once I had a dress ornamented with subtle fragments of a rogue stone stitched into the hems and sleeves. Imoen looked satisfied, and sat down on some of the cushions she pulled together.

"Nice place here," she said, pulling out the scroll, "if'n only Dradeel hadn't showed up when he did I'd've already—well. Poor bloke," she said, and settled down to her study. Claudia fluttered around to look over her shoulders, offering her small cakes and elderflower wine. I paced; time was running out. The Grand Duke was entrenched, his wars ever continued, down at the port we'd already been defeated and if even Imoen couldn't turn the tide...

But we'd get Tevanie back, and then Shar-Teel could fight anything. Everyone needed some sort of hope to cling to. Faldorn sat on the bare floor and meditated, scornfully. Imoen's lips moved silently and her finger touched the lines of text of Ragefast's scroll.

She looked up. "Yeah, I've at least halfway got it—but want it for more 'n one..." she said, and lowered her head once more, Claudia still lurking behind her. I paced further; twenty-one circuits of the small room, back and forth. Imoen absently signalled me to stop it, and turned back to the scroll. My left-hand ring finger nail had become ragged, I thought, feeling it lie restlessly on a swordhilt for the moment.

Then they came through the door after us. There was no warning; complete silence, Imoen continuing to read, and then the door was shattered and an armoured man of the Fist stood with a large crossbow in his hands. There were more behind him.

"Under arrest," he spat, "and most likely execution for rebel scum like—"

The dreadwolf leaped up and tore the weapon from his hands with its teeth. Faldorn stood up and cast, and I rushed forward with the sword. In the doorway at least one did not have to fight all at once—

A slash across my shoulder and arm; Claudia screamed, then released a spell past me, a fan of rainbow light spilling from her hands. Faldorn chanted an entanglement in a loud voice. My right arm slowed; I was tired. Swords arced toward me.

"Go," Claudia called to Imoen, her voice suddenly definite. "Cast it—on Skie Silvershield!" She flung a potion; gas filled the air between the soldiers, and I saw her drinking from another flask. Imoen chanted. There were too many, even a mage among them, a priest reaching for his own spells.
The rogue stone was in her hands. I heard the desperation in her voice—

She reached out for my shoulder, and then the world warped and changed around us. The rogue stone's powder crumbled from her hands. We looked up at the walls of Candlekeep, grass below our feet.

"I meant all four," she said, half incoherent, on her hands and knees and exhausted. "It's not fair—left them—Faldy—"

Sixteen...come Midwinter.

"How long before we teleport back and rescue them?" I said. She reached inside her robes.

"Too long, but thanks for trying," she said grimly, and brought out one of the Ulcaster tomes from her robe, her pink bookmark three-quarters of the way through. "This'll do it."

Candlekeep. Imoen's home: I ought to have remembered how it looked, having come before, she said. One of the guards called a greeting to both of us, once we were inside and looking for Imoen's First Reader. It was a tall grey towered castle, secure and safe, with wide green gardens and the sound of voices raised in chants. I'd read a little of Alaundo before, of course; and the chimelike sound reverberated around us both. Imoen raised her head to catch the silver voices, singing their prophecy of doom:

And the Lord of Murder shall

Perish

And in his doom

He shall spawn a score

Of mortal progeny

Chaos shall be sown from

Their

Passage

So sayeth the wise...

Alaundo—!

"—If ol' Tethtoril manages to forgive me for borrowing his wand of magic missiles. That I just haven't remembered to return yet. Technically and feasibly defunct and dropped somewhere in the woods though it might or might not be," Imoen said. "Don't'cha remember me telling about it, Skie?"

I shook my head, staring at the castle's grounds. Some of the flowerbeds bloomed in red and yellow blossoms growing late. We walked between them; pools of clear water were tranquil and settled inside marble baths. If one stayed in this place it would be difficult to remember that there was a war outside its quiet confines. By us was a garden of roses, heavily fenced by tall wood palings interlaced with thorns and even shards of broken glass embedded into a dried clay mixture at their top. Beauty and close passionate care strangely combined with a level of security unexpected for a garden in Candlekeep's peace. Through the slats I could see that the roses grew in rare shades of purple and truescarlet by one of the keep's walls, some distance below a narrow window. Multiple thick
padlocks in silver, gold, and iron hung across the single gate. The harmonious perfume of the fine
blooms hung freshly in the air, and a single perfect petal in a pure indigo shade had fallen to the
ground outside the fences.

"—And that! Ulraunt's roses, Skie, remember holding my ankles while we nicked 'em for
Greengrass?" Imoen said; but the truth was I could not. "Then you're going crazy again, kiddo, and I
don't have the time for it," she said abruptly. "Follow along and don't do anything stupid, all right?"

The main doors of the keep were open though guarded; they welcomed Imoen home, and she
answered back happily. "Off to Gorion's old room," she said, "hasn't been that long, so still—"

The library shelves stretched in every direction, Toril's greatest collection of books. Our boots almost
slipped on the polished stairs, going further and further upwards.

"—Get at Mr G.'s old stuff, scribble a note to Puffguts saying I'll come visit again, get to Tethtoril
and ask nicely for a stone..." Imoen muttered. There were dark circles below her eyes; I wondered if
she was strong enough to cast without resting. She leaned on my shoulder, suddenly, and looked
down at the scroll she had studied. She swore.

"Cyric's sheeppoking stick—Nine Hells—" I could see that the writing was smudged; she bent
hastily down over it. "It was in my mind a second ago! I've got to remember—I can remember—"

She took out a quill from her pack and began to obsessively scribble over it. "This way—that way—
every which way. Single mistake and you're scattered in the planes. Teleport; hard version of
dimension door." She sat down firmly next to a shelf, her head bent closely to the paper to read it. I
didn't know if it was good for her or not. "Teleport-two'-stead-of-one. Conjuration, transmutation,
transmuters can do it too. Left or right? Up and down? Someone's killing everyone! Can't be tired
and stupid when you're doing everything. Claudia! You know boring stuff about magic, right? Come
on, remember!" She burst into weird laughter. "Teleport, teleport all over Toril! Lift people more
times a day than there're seconds in it! Three-quarter somatic turn or two-thirds? Swift concluding of
twenty-first half-syllable or long? Is there a twenty-first half-syllable at all? Think, because they're
dying right now! I can't..."

She was so tired. I took her right hand away from the paper, and placed my other hand over her eyes.
"I don't think you can cast in this state, Imoen. Sit still. You've got to rest sometime."

I could call for help; one of the monk-readers, ask them to fetch...Imoen's adopted father was called
Winthrop. Or Tethtoril, indeed. You just had to speak to people as if you were an aristocrat.

"Inform the First Reader that this mage and I must speak immediately to him; and Winthrop of the
Candlekeep Inn."

Imoen was on a cot in the room used by Gorion, asleep; collapsed not long after Tethtoril had come.

"Only the greatest mages could have cast us all the way from Baldur's Gate to Candlekeep, Imoen," I
said, though she didn't hear. "It's all right. You should be resting. You've got to..."

Tethtoril had left us alone until she was in a fit state to speak to him; he had said that Gorion's legacy
was intended for her. Alone in a room with Gorion's locked chest.

A cloak that seemed to be enchanted like Viconia's; gold; a sealed scroll with Imoen's name. I laid
them out beside her. We could get back to Baldur's Gate. Tethtoril would help us, help her. He'd said
to stay calm and stay here. Mages needed rest. I sat down beside Imoen, leaning against the wall. I
thought I ought to close my own eyes, as much as crawling worry would keep me awake; and then
the world was black and nothing moved for some time.

"—You buffleheaded sleepyhead."

Imoen shook me, trying to gloat. There were still shadows below her eyes, though she didn't look so wild and disturbed as before. "Aww, come on, you gilt-cracking rum-dubber," she canted, a light layer of levity below what we were doing here. "Have to both open up the fair maiden's chest, right?" she said, and giggled for the slang.

"It's your letter."

She cracked the seal open quickly; and scanned the pages in spidery writing I assumed was the sage Gorion's. Imoen always had read fast. In a few moments she held it out to me.

"I do trust you, Skie," she said, pale-faced.

I think we clung to each other, reaching out a hand each to grip; half-sisters, if Gorion was trusted and it explained, and Sarevok the true Lord of Murder—

The door slid open once more; instead of Tethtoril there was a shorter man wearing the cold grey-black robes of a mage, Mystra's and Oghma's symbols both around his neck. Behind him stood two of the guardians of Candlekeep, armoured. I blinked slowly.

"Imoen Winthrop," he said, "and girl who is quite likely not Skie Silvershield: by my authority you are under arrest within Candlekeep..."

—

The letter lay open on the floor.

Hello Imoen,

I suppose if you are reading this, it means I have met an untimely death. I would tell you and Daniel not to grieve for me, but I feel much better thinking that you would. There are things that not telling you would have kept you far safer, that I would have liked to save at least until your fortieth year, other than the talk referencing that you should stay away from young gentlemen until then. And yet you have grown by now into an intelligent, generous young woman. Dan Winthrop and I are both proud of you. Never doubt that.

Twenty years ago, Imoen, Dan and I fought against cults of the god Bhaal, the Lord of Murder, forced into a mortal shell and killed during the Time of Troubles. As Alaundo's prophecy states, he foresaw his death and took steps to prevent his end. For reasons unknown to me, he sought out women of every race and forced himself upon or seduced them. Your adoptive father and I found evidence of children he bore, and sought them out upon the orders of the Harpers. Many were sacrificed at birth for ends we know not.

When we found you, Imoen, you were divined and sought by us as much as you chose to seek out the gold chain of Dan's pocket watch—of which, by the way, he laughs over your dextrous precocity still! Of your birth mother we know no more than you have been told. The blood of that dead god runs through your veins, though suppressed; you are one of such children. You have given no signs of it, and it was the hope of us both that you continue free of such knowledge. Your cheerful innocence has been your shield, and under other circumstances I would advise that you remain within Winthrop's inn as long as you can.

And yet Alaundo's prophecies say that the children of Bhaal can have no such fate. Of late, Imoen, I
discovered the existence of another within the area of Candlekeep. The Duke's daughter has such signs; I have divined and know that she is the same as you, Imoen. Her mother died for the birth of such a child. Whether you trust her to know this or no I leave to your choosing. Continue your friendship with her, for you are an influence to the good. If you can, protect her; protect others. Ensure she does not become the murderer that other children of Bhaal have become. Sarevok Anchev is the worst danger. He is, like you and Skie, a child of Bhaal. I am already his enemy for inquiring too deeply into his affairs, and I know that his agents have discovered that I have found a child. You must remain hidden as long as possible, Imoen. Sarevok has overlooked you.

Imoen, I leave you with the message that I believe you have some of the skills needed in such times. Your daring agility, your nascent talent for magic—yes, despite your lack of patience, I believe you have the power to become a wizard, even an archmage someday. Live through this time. Live happily; live by your native innocence and goodness. Trust those who harp to aid you.

With my love,

Gorion.

—

130. Catacomb Escape

...The murderer that other children of Bhaal have become...

...The murderer that children who aren't the children of their fathers become...

...The war that would be their fault...

"...Are you a murderer?" the Keeper of the Tomes simply said in interrogation upon the Baldur's Gate warrant of arrest, and below the truth spell the truth had to be spoken.

We waited in Candlekeep's dungeon.

Imoen sniffled. '"S not fair," she said. "We'd stop the war. Sarevok couldn't invade Candlekeep on our behalf anyways. We deserve to be out of here."

...Well, maybe one of us did not, but we had to do it. They'd taken her spellbook, all of our tools. She sat miserably, her arms around her knees; if she'd come alone they would have perhaps set her free. The bars seemed uncompromising, the locks certainly too well-enchanted to try to pick with a fingernail.

Or bite off a finger, take the bone and sharpen and shape it to be right...

Any plan involving that was not a good plan. Imoen looked up.

"Maybe Tethoril'll help us after all," she said, "at least this joint's heaps nicer than the last time we saw behind bars. If'n Ulraucous lets him even know." The faint smile she'd cracked faded. "And I never got to see Puffguts too. And—"

We were both, probably, worrying for Faldorn and Claudia. Maybe this time Sauriram would mount a prison rescue, if they had indeed ended up there. Faldorn was hardly one to ever give up.

"—And we're both getting to be real connoisseurs of thiefly accomodations, aren't we?" she said,
trying for lightness.

"Right you are. Sister."

"...With a really bratty big brother we're gonna get," Imoen said.

Then she stood, suddenly beaming. An older, fat man had come in, with Tethtoril from before. I saw the first man reach inside his apron pocket for tools, and then in a few seconds—incredibly enough—the lock was open and he was hugging Imoen. Above her head he flung me a brief, angry look.

"Ol' Puffguts!" she cried, clinging to him; "Tell me a story 'bout trollops and plugtails like old times?"

"There is little enough time," Tethtoril said. "I will open a way down to the catacombs below. Your equipment is in the next room; Imoen, take this scroll I have copied for you."

Once more we retrieved possessions in a hurry; Imoen draped the hood of Gorion's cloak above her head and tightened her belt around her mage's robe. She gave a quick glance to the scroll Tethtoril had given.

"That's great," she said, "but I need another rogue stone. I couldn't get hold of two in the city. 'M sorry."

"You always did come underprepared for magic lessons," the Reader answered. "Ours, alas, would be noticed if gone. But still I can tell you that it would be a bad idea to visit the tomb in white marble to the north-west on the second left-hand passage that shows the symbol of a scroll encircled by gold that may or may not have certain gems buried by one who no longer has a use for it. Naturally, such a blasphemy of all that lies under Candlekeep would be most unwise." A more serious look swept across his face. "It is the tomb of a demigod largely forgotten by history, Imoen. For even gods are mortal."

"Thanks," she said. Tethtoril turned, and with some gestures and chanting opened up a section of the stone that turned out to be set over a metal grille in the wall. I would not have noticed that secret hidden; he unlocked it by spell, and Imoen and I scrambled within to damp steps that smelt of mildew.

"I'll be back," she added to Puffguts, "I'll stop Sarevok for what he did to Gorion—don't ever doubt that. Should've told it me, though." She stuck out her tongue; then she held up her right hand, and inside it were two of the tools that he had used to open our cell. He mock-cursed her, and slid back the door to hide the catacombs once more from Candlekeep's guards. "'Till then!" she called at the last.

A pink magelight snapped from her fingertips in the darkness. She clung tightly to Tethtoril's scroll.

Down these passages it was dark and quiet; we were going roughly westwards, I thought, which ought to be toward the coast and the sea. Rough tiling gave way to an earth floor that crunched below our feet. Below Candlekeep, an older part of the fortress; neither Imoen nor I had known there were other secrets below. It made sense, I supposed; forgotten crypts that had been later built over.

There were sounds ahead of us of something that dragged upon the ground. We paused, listening; then the smell of carrion hit us, and the ghoul shambled into view. No speaking haunt, it raised clawlike hands and simply attacked. Imoen raised her hands, and paused;

"—The instantlike fire spell came after dreaming of blood," she said. "Best not to use that stuff..."
Missiles ripped into its dead skin; the Burning Earth slid through it. There was only one of it upon this path, thank goodness; we walked past the truly dead corpse. In our flickering light we could see silver spiderwebs now, clinging to the low ceiling and underfoot as well. I doubted Shar-Teel could have walked fully upright in here, or Sarevok.

"I think I'll fireball any spider nests," Imoen said cheerfully. She rubbed at her eyes with both fists. "No, spell's not fixed in my memory right now. Think you could fight without using any weird powers, Skie?"

"Shar-Teel would be able to. I'll do my best." The dirt on the ground looked as if it had been raked by some hand of the past, forming complicated and roughly triangular interlocking patterns that our feet scuffed; that other things had also scuffed over the years. Perhaps it had been done by magic rather than many hours of painstaking care. There was a frozen feel to the ground here, as if it was early winter frost in this underworld.

Imoen turned left; the second passage. It proved to be long; on the floor we saw a tripwire laid at the height of a human chest. Traps indicated we came closer; the chittering of spiders meant we came closer to having to fight.

They were the ones that could teleport. You had to listen for them; you had to think, *where would they go next*, usually behind; dance away from the fangs; Imoen sent the same fan I'd seen from Claudia straight from her hands, when one dared to go behind to attack her. Then we were through, coated with spider blood and hairy limbs that stuck to cloth, and the walls of the tomb Tethtoril described. Rich, dusty marble encircled a sarcophagus-box in the centre, marked by the scroll in gold; and an inscription. Old Chondathan, a dialect I wasn't quite sure of.

"*Here lie,*" I read, holding the Burning Earth close to it, "the earthly...properties? Possessions? Of the one whose dust dissipated to air... No, that's probably too literal. *Not all wish to live beyond death and not all wish to live in memory.*"

Imoen pointed to its lock in a rather businesslike fashion. There was the glimmering rogue stone, waiting to be found in the desecrated tomb; a coronet made from thin strands of golden wire and decorated by delicately cut rubies; a pair of books again in Old Chondathan, one a text on strategy and the other on improving the body, curiously undamaged; a diamond necklace; indiscernible scraps of fabric, decayed; and a simple bronze ring, engraved. *Dum spiro spero*: while I breathe I hope. A combination of sentiment and honouring. It was grim by the tomb, but we had dealt with the spiders here.

"Can you cast the spell now?" I said.

She frowned. "Not 'till we get out of here, Skie, weren't you told before that Candlekeep's got a field against direct transport magic?"

"Then sit down and get back some of your spells," I brushed a part of spider leg from my calf. There was a shallow cut through the leathers, fortunately not infected; I'd heal it. When we got out of here there might be a chance to bathe. "Candlekeep's big. We'll probably have to fight again." No point in hurrying if the next battle would kill her; Imoen, family, best friend.

"Already wasted enough time." But she lifted out her spellbook; the coronet rested on her tangled red hair, the diamonds glittering above her mage robe despite how bedraggled we both were. Her magelight strengthened to a steady glow, and I read myself. *Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum*; for peace prepare to war, the book of strategic advice began, and it was strangely easy to read.
We could spend the time thinking about—disquieting revelations; or grasping on to anything we need to save the city; my father is dead... *Victoria belli non est positus ex moras*, and I could remember the first tutor who had taught me that language.

"Fireballs fetched," Imoen said at last, brushing back her hair and standing. We closed the tomb behind us, though it was still clear we had taken from it.

At first, it was her the voices whispered to in the darkness.

"Imoen..." It could have been the wind whistling underground, or spiders chittering. "Imoen..." it whispered once more. "Imoen, give me back my book you stole!"

"—Phyl!" Imoen cried out; a middle-aged woman in mage's robes threw herself at us, her long fingers stretching out like claws. I'd the sword up almost before I knew what I was doing, and it went through her. Imoen had stumbled back in horror; "Stop it! Stop! Don't kill—" she began.

"Die, primatesss," it hissed, and Imoen sent an acid arrow into its face. When it died, it was a doppelganger.

"—So Sarevok guessed we'd come back here after all," Imoen said, her voice shaking a little. "It's really not fair. I live here, and he finds the secret passage first and sends monsters into it.

"I think I've still got one of Phyl's books in my room, if Puffguts hasn't found the secret hiding place under the mattress," she added. *The Princess Rogue and the Pirates of Passion*. I used to think she only read boring histories." We walked on.

"—Histories are not boring."

The second voice was for me: Eddard. "Skie! Skie, you have betrayed me, you are everything against me—" But I had seen him as a doppelganger before. The catacombs suddenly widened before us, showing a wide hall tiled once more in dark red and pale orange. We could faintly smell saltwater; this way must come close to where it broke to the sea. In the centre of the room stood a small army of stilled skeletons, a forest of bones that rose from the tiles.

"...They're probably triggered by stepping on the wrong ones," I tried to reassure both of us. "Like that red one there, it's raised a bit above the others..."

"Then we're stepping far, far away from them," Imoen said, holding spell components in her hands. "No—too many to take out with one fireball, worse luck."

Cautiously we stepped into the wide hall; the skeletons did not move. But then voices came for us.

"Defilers of nature! You left me to die, and I thought of you as friends! I hate you forever—"

"You brought me, Imoen, and I am dead already to defend you—"

Images of Faldorn and Claudia came to kill us for what we had done, and these did not quickly return to their true shapes. After death they became what they truly were. I wiped my shortsword's blade on an unbroken section of grey skin.

"Imoen, they couldn't have known, they found it in our minds..."

"Yeah, I know. Can't do anything about it now." She turned away from the one that had been Claudia. "Hope they give a good chance for a giant fireball safely far away from us next time—"
"Imoen! You must awake before it is too late! For there has been too much innocent blood shed this night. Child, wake from the illusions before you! Your mind has been controlled by Sarevok's monsters all this night," a grey-robed old man said, stepping out from the opposing doorway. His face was familiar to me, and his eyes were sad. Behind him stood Tethtoril and Imoen's adoptive father, waiting for her.

"You're doppelgangers."

"No, Imoen! I was under a spell," the grey-robed man said; Gorion. "Sarevok stabbed me with a poisoned dagger; it was not true death, but only a seeming death. I lay paralysed in that field for a tenday and above, tormented by spiders and vermin. Tethtoril and Dan brought me out; not willing to break your heart once more, child, they could not tell you." He leaned on his long staff as if he had been very ill. "But I had to come here. Phylida came to offer you a mother's loving embrace, but she lies murdered! Unaware of their true selves, you have killed Shistal and old Theodon."

"Shistal," Imoen said, "I remember picking greengage with him last spring. You're alive? Mr G.?

"And you must remember playing checkers with old Theodon," Gorion continued. "We know you are none to blame; come to us, Imoen."

"Then I'll tell you all the stories you want, poor lass," Winthrop said. "Why, it's the dirtiest of all dirty tricks done to you and all of us." He took a pace forward.

"If you're alive after all," Imoen said, staring at the one she called her uncle, "then I can see that everything'd come all right..."

"And there is still a chance for that," Tethtoril said, and raised his red-sleeved hands. "Let us dispel this illusion."

Imoen, do it now, please, said my hands, but her eyes were still on her family.

"Come," Gorion said, his arms spread wide to embrace her. Tethtoril's hands were moving; too quickly.

Then the fireball burst over the three of them.

Grey flesh raced from the ashes of it; Imoen cast a simpler flame arrow into the eyes of the one who had been Gorion. These were fast, hasted; their shaped claws hurt. We stood in their ashes.

"Got to cast," I said numbly; the blue pulsed below my hands in a way it had not done before, almost twisting and shaping veins and muscles within. You couldn't expect the gifts of a god of death to be at all friendly. Imoen shuddered at the healing.

"Race you to the end of the caves," she said, "more'n past time we were gone." She waved her hands and chanted: her spell of haste settled over us both.

Past tangled stone tunnels, trying not to crash into walls while navigating them all; setting dry spiderweb to shrivel and fall apart with a touch of flame; past the threatening gaze of a basilisk, ducking in and amongst chillingly worn stone statues and diving into the reflective shelter of dark, salty seawater. We swam under and out to reach the beach, salt stiffening our hair.

Imoen sat up on a rock, opening her sealed scrollcase and bringing out her materials. "Keep your hands and arms inside the interplanar cart at all times," she said, "we're headed straightaway back."
"—Faldy!" Imoen burst out of the teleport, panting, destined for one of Sauriram's attics; and here old friends had lived through it after all.

"My aunt spellsignalled for aid at her own capture; it came for us," Claudia said gravely; there were tear-tracks on her thin cheeks. Imoen reached for a scroll and cast, relatively unobtrusively, white light gathering around her eyes; and nodded. "I believe you," she said. "Sorry about your aunt," she added awkwardly. I gave the same mechanical condolence. From the window the ducal palace's shining white walls were visible in the glimmer of lights lit in the dusk of—morning or evening? We'd dozed and then travelled underground. Ramazith's tower still rose high in the distance. The full moon was low in the sky; it had been hours only. My head spun.

Imoen yawned. "We should talk about..." she said.

"Oh, it's a long story," I said. "Turns out I'm a bastard after all, and Imoen's...a very powerful mage."

Imoen squeezed my hand.

Claudia looked shocked. "The Dowager Duchess would tell you not to let that out, then," she said. "She's been demanding you the whole day. Lady Silvershield."

"There's an idiot harp-player and a witch who says she respects natural spirits," Faldorn said, and Imoen and I raced down hand in hand like schoolgirls suddenly freed from tutoring.

Garrick seemed...thinner, more weathered, talking to the Dowager and trying to amuse her, as if pretending to be able to bring us out of darker days by his sweet voice. Dynaheir had not changed: tall, graceful, straight-backed in elegant, neat robes. She ever had the look of unshakeable ethics and thoughtful sensibility, necessarily confident in herself, I'd always thought to see her; but this time I was wrong.

Garrick came to us, beaming. There was time for a reunion; to see the bard we'd thought we might never see again, Imoen and the witch who taught her on the road. But their tale was more of loss than success, giving a list of names that stretched into endless darkness. Yeslick had perished by Rieltar Anchev's hand, though at least some of those he and Garrick had brought out of the Cloakwood were safe hiding in the Friendly Arm's fortress; Dynaheir had saved Garrick and hidden him. Minsc and Branwen cut down by Sarevok himself; and as she spoke this Dynaheir bowed her head and claimed a fault for it. Kivan the elf, following his revenge. Edwin, not dead, nor in any kind of trouble for being Thayvian, but rather working for Sarevok: a traitor, perhaps the one who had helped to draw the notice of bounty. They had heard nothing of Eldoth, and I did not realise that they had failed to mention him until far later.

"Mine order sent me here," Dynaheir said, "to examine the truths of the prophecies of Alaundo. I searched for the spawn of Bhaal. Skie..."

"We know," Imoen chorused wearily with me. Dynaheir looked taken aback.

"I owe thee and all of thy city great apology for all that has happened since then. Had I accompanied thee, perchance I would have been able to thwart the betrayal of the Red Wizard; had I ensured thou
should reach the city in safety, much would have been altered. Perhaps even the ceasing of Sarevok Anchev's war entire, before its start. Dynaheir held her hands intertwined before her body, as if she answered to a tribunal. "I have caused much evil by inaction and foolish action alike, and would the repayment of my debt."

"The fault's mine. I didn't want to face you because I... Will discuss that matter in private, upon the dethronement of Sarevok Anchev from his pretense of a god's and Grand Duke's throne, which is surely the immediate business required of us," I said, in formal phrases that imitated Dynaheir. I could see slight surprise upon Sauriram's face.

"A worthy spirit, Skie," the Dowager said. "And 'tis one the League must depend upon. You are the daughter of Entar; you have learned to carry a sword; you must take a place in your father's seat and in doing so topple Sarevok from his. Take up the sword of our city's founder for the sake of winning hearts to our cause. As you attempted with the doppelgangers: the League's orders are to give you to the city. Whether, I am afraid, you would prefer it or not."

She was an old, frail lady in black mourning, calmly sipping a thin porcelain cup of some pale tisane at an exquisitely inlaid wooden table; and yet at the same time in a contest of will between the Dowager Duchess and a flight of full-grown dragons I should have placed all I owned upon her ability to stare them down to an unreserved surrender. Beyond Belt she was a power in herself.

"Was there information you learned from your stunts that alters this?" she inquired delicately.

"That Sarevok's truly Bhaal's son," Imoen said. "That we could both challenge him on that one," she confirmed frankly. "Like Dynaheir seems to know...wish she'd told us before," she muttered quietly.

The witch, however, seemed surprised. "Imoen? Thou art also? I had seen signs only for..."

"Yes, well, I am. Lady Imoen, transmuter mage and allegedly demigoddess-in-training!" She placed her hands on her hips. "Sorry I'm a little upset at finding out from old Mr G. today an interplanar teleport and about an eightday travel away, I don't like the idea that I've got the nice legacy of a death god in my bloodstream and maybe I'll go off one day wanting to drown in blood and murder people just like that creepy voice in dreams says. Or like Sarevok. Not very fair, right?"

Indeed it wasn't. I'd known she was special, a mysterious orphan; and she would have better deserved to be Mystra's incarnation or Sun's child or Tymora's daughter. Garrick simply looked stunned; Sauriram controlled her expression carefully. Dynaheir spoke proofs established of the...fairy tale.

"That particular insult to your mother we will...suppress unless necessary, Skie," Sauriram said. She laid her delicate cup upon her matched saucer as if it were a greatsword striking a shield. "The hour grew long whilst I waited for you, and you are both clearly exhausted. Rest the night; we all must meditate upon such events. When the sun shines there will be as much to do."

Imoen carefully pulled shut the neck of a nightdress decorated with many pink ribbons, tracing its design as if she relished the contrast between that and the garb a daughter of murder ought to wear; and she lay back in the darkness.

"Blow the candle out for me, will you?" Her eyes were already closed. Sleep came quickly for both of us, but it did not come well.

The woman had her back turned, and her black hair floated about her as sleek and lustrous as if she
was underwater. Her dress was rich and green, her room elaborate and vaguely familiar somehow; a sound at the door caused her to turn, and her beautiful face grew into a smile. I saw her, fully and in light, radiant as a false portrait. Slender cheekbones, soft eyelashes blinking in welcome, small arched eyebrows and a finely shaped chin; her mouth was kind, and her bright charisma sufficient to illuminate the room.

"Husband, you have returned sooner than you said. I am so glad." Warm as spring she approached him, arms outstretched for the welcomed embrace. He was a younger Entar, hazel-eyed and with some fair hair remaining among the grey, but an expression cold as winter. He gave no affection or return in greeting. Eilma his wife paused in surprise.

"Entar? Is there something the matter, love?"

His stony face was no proper response. "Wife." There was no warmth or kindness in the grow that passed for his voice. He was not the same; he was nothing human.

The man grabbed the woman; the green dress tore. She cried out in shock and pain, but he held the shape of her husband. This none should witness, this none should wish to witness...

I have no memory of my mother.

The dream shifted. The woman was within the night, a midnight cloak flowing freely across her dress; she stepped through wet puddles on badly-cobbled roads, and faded into the shadows on purpose, to secretly meet with her lover. It was familiar, though the buildings were brighter, newer to the eyes. She walked within the doors of a tavern with her hood across her face, the cloak drawn to cover over the expensive dress, a small smile upon her face. She mounted the steps to an upper room, ignoring the raucous noise; and there was a hazel-eyed man waiting for her, as young as she and handsome.

"He shall not notice my absence for hours at least," she whispered to him, and their illicit embrace melted together like running wax from the plain candle by the bedside. They held each other and did not let go. For very proscription the excitement of it was the stronger; —and perhaps, like daughter like mother...

I always wondered if'n my mum had red hair or a snub nose like me, or if she'd freckles and what she put on them in springtime, or if she was a queen or princess or head of a thieves' guild or amazingly beautiful sorceress, or if someday she'd come back to find me. Even when I was with Puffguts I'd still wonder about it, what she was and what she did and why she left a baby on the side of the road; if she wanted me or not, and if neither she nor the travellingfolk wanted me maybe there wasn't much to want. I never knew I'd family, and it's not a good sort of family for all I left home to have adventures with my best friend—the murderer. 'S not all our fault. Maybe I know now my mother wanted to give up her baby after all, didn't want me because the god of murder hurt her on purpose—

Imoen dreamed, and flickers of water and and light came past her. In a fountain in her reflection behind her was a crow in the sky, and though in the water at first her face was dirty it changed to a grown woman, hair flame-red and glorious, the face older and beautiful and powerful and searching for her lost daughter stolen from her—

The crow came ever closer to her. It opened its mouth to caw, but made no sound. Its claws were vicious and nail-like; and its black beak looked like a knife. It swooped.

Then Winthrop ran out, a broom in hand, clubbing it away from her; and he patted Imoen on the head and walked with her to his inn. I looked into the fountain myself, and saw only black stars of
"Imoen, wait!" I called, and suddenly I was seven once more, the strange whispered news from my father and the servants that I hardly understood of gods who walked the earth and killed each other. I chased after her and her father who cared for her, not wanting to be left alone.

My mother died because of me.

A third vision opened for the stepping in. The dark-haired woman slipped over her face a black silken mask, cloaked once more; and then she stood in a dark room lit by sconces on the wall where the fire was a strange colour and incense drowned the air. The sound of chanting filled the room: low-pitched, and begging. Below her feet was a drawn circle, and inside it she called for the god of murder to come to her, his priestess by night, gain his favour by a child—

You know nothing and you will always know nothing, thundered a deep voice. Imoen was swept up by a wind, a typhoon, and again we reached out a hand for each other until the air tore us away.

At the last moment our fingertips touched for a hair's breadth of time.

afraid of Sarevok Anchev though I shouldn't, of him cutting into me, I need defence, you need defence, reflections of me and nothing of you, let's take the gift together—

I stood in a stone box walled on three-quarters of it, and it was part of a tower. All was white and grey bar Imoen within the alcove across, though I had not yet looked down. Some alcoves were bare, or contained only a broken plinth and pale dust; in others stood statues. I could see elves, humans, halflings, gnomes, werewolves, even dragons. One human was sculpted in heavy, spiked armour and helmet, and behind his back was slung the hilt of a greatsword. It was Sarevok, waiting. I saw the statue of another human crumble to dust in a sudden explosion. The dust slipped from the floor of the alcove, wafting and fading away, downward.

At the base of the white tower was the golden face of a skull. It glinted as if it had a consciousness of its own: animated, far more than one of Viconia's undead risen. It gleamed and grinned and waited. Before my eyes it changed to golden smoke, and that smoke covered my city. Baldur's Gate writhed in its death throes. From above I saw armies marching like ants to consume it, ships from the sea sending bursts of fire to raze it, sahuagin arising to salt the remains. The mage's tower and the Dukes' palace lay in ruins. The streets were the colour of old, black blood; houses were splintered stone.

I was diving through the air, arms and legs arcing into a swallow's-tail that divided the press of waters. Through Baldur's Gate; to what of it had inspired the Lord of Murder; I did not land in the city itself but dove through it. In the earth I was insubstantial, intangible, and passing ever and ever down. It was dark and barren and a grave. I screamed.

The small bedroom was the grey-blue of morning before sunrise, and the sheets were dampened by sweat. I sat up, clutching them tightly, the ends of my fingernails driving into my palms. A small trickle of blood flowed from the base of my left hand. It was very quiet, the air of the closed room still and almost stifling. Nothing happened. I hadn't been heard.

Across the room, Imoen seemed to be sleeping peacefully, by all appearance. Hearing her voice there — She had tired herself enough; perhaps it was better not to wake her. Or if, in waking unnaturally, things would pursue one to the waking world due to their incompleteness.

I walked to the shuttered window and opened its slats. The cool calming air of the morning blew across my face; I started to think of what I knew of the history of Bhaal-worship in my city. We should tell Sauriram the complete truth. Parchment, notes, plans of attack; anything that came from night.
one's own mind and knowledge. The dawn was just enough light to make out the text of the history of the three.

*Imoen dreamed still, trapped; in the blowing winds she had caught at Skie's hand, but then Skie had disappeared away from her. The one who killed Gorion—the one who made doppelgangers pretend to be him as a cruel joke, the cruellest kind of prank she would never, ever play—lay below her upon the skull-face, becoming the golden skull of the tower's base. She saw him rise and raise his sword; then she was divided, reflected, and it swept only through imitations of her. Then she cast magic at him, and suddenly it was she who wore the spiked armour and gazed at the world through bright golden eyes. She strode through the landscape as a brutal god, laying waste to cities with a gesture of her hands and her great and terrible magic. But she was not that, she said to herself, she would never want that, never in the lifetime of anything breathing—*

*Sarevok Anchev's laughter sounded low and deep around her, and it was exactly as the night where he had murdered her uncle. Her brother was here and waiting for her. Imoen woke.*

—

*Saioji Tamoko performed her western religious rites. She did this at night after moonrise, because the time of it was a trivial matter; she did it close to dawn and running the risk that her completion would be a second or two past the sunrise, because she could be as petty as any.*

*She drew a dark circle about herself on which to kneel. In black night came order, certainty, merciless precision. Before the time gods had died and in the first of her days in the western lands she had chosen to worship the disciplined force of the cycle of death; after the time gods had died she had followed the portfolio of the undisciplined and maniacal rabble that was godhood in the persona of Cyric. Tamoko understood that the mad deity found her defiance amusing, and that if he were to continue to hold to the portfolio he must accept the existence of her principles.*

"*There is no door through which it does not pass," she spoke a creed, using the language of her home. "Nor guardian who may withstand." She thought of the castings she wished to gain: *Honoo no sutoraiiku*, the strike of heavenly flames. *Kami no tsuyo-sa de*, the strength of the god. *Gai*, to cause grievous harm by touch. She felt a vague flicker of approval at her choices of destruction.*

*She was misfit and outsider in these lands, *ronin* and outcast in her own country. She had no regrets for the path she had taken; she was guided by honour in her own way.*

"*The life of man is ever full of strife. The life of man must come to an end.*"

*Divine power pulsed through her veins and arteries, dark and solid. She believed in the honour of killing in battle; she had acted as mercenary of the western lands. There was no shame in death.*

"*There is a promise that men must die. Therefore, oaths must be kept.*"

*It was true that broken oaths separated her from Kozakura and the spirits of her native land. It was no longer true that she lacked a daimyo.*

"*There must be honesty, for one knows the truth of all endings. There must be loyalty."

*Aishiteru wa, senshi watashi no*. He belonged to her; they had belonged to each other. Six years younger than she when they had met, a boy, but so impressive a boy and a man in experiences. She loved his strength, intelligence, ambition, the whole of his self. He was taken from her. That ambition rose too high: he exulted himself and lost himself, and she could not reclaim him.*

"*Patience, for the grave opens to beggars and to kings alike in due time.*"
Immortality was of no worth if it consumed all of the man she knew. The one she loved was lost to her. She knew well that her god did not wish a rival; and their purposes combined in this matter. Sarevok would be lost.

_The grave opens equally to gods_, she thought, and Cyric's power within her veins twitched.

"Discipline. A servant of death must show as few weaknesses as her master." Lathander's dawn approached, and though her voice remained steady she hastened through the remainder of her devotions.

"Respect. Rectitude," Tamoko named virtues she had taken from her homeland. She despised traitors and cowards. "Wisdom." That which her deity did not possess.

She bent her head while darkness lasted, speaking the final syllables of what she prayed for.
"Death."

A purple glow spread through the circle she had marked out, a sign of the power she called upon. She returned her amulet of the dark sun to its place upon her armour. She erased the circle with all due respect, scrubbing away the marks of charcoal upon wood, and walked to the window's light. Tamoko began her exercises in her armour, muscles flexing, her flail spinning. She could remember her lover's bare brown skin shining with sweat, her hands across his back after his own exercises. She could remember matches upon their sparring mat and the deep embraces that had followed, when he was her man and not her god. Now she was sure Sarevok sweated no longer. She had seen that his body could no longer be pierced by mundane weapons, that no physical act could tire him. He tried to become inhuman; she could not prevent the mindless death he caused. He no longer knew of moderation, temperance, care. She would lose him. She noticed with distaste a weakness in her arms while she continued her forms of the flail.

There existed none with the power to stop him.

—

**132. Correspondence and Conversions**

_Edwin: 28 Eleasias_

Edwin sought, truly and honestly, to write it sensibly and circumspectly. Two drafts, before casting a necromancy spell upon a recently-killed bird to serve as the bearer.

(Cythandria, O She Who Has Perfect Complexion All The Way D... No.)

Dear Lady Cythandria.

(Not 'my dear' Cythandria. You don't care about my feelings at all, do you? You're very likely indulging in witchlike cackling at this very moment.) (Yes, 'my dear' Cythandria. Why not? We do not have nothing in common not least mutual lust for power and knowledge...)

By other sources of information you will have heard news of the war. We are still present in the ashes of Crimmor while the commanders seek to train the new slaves for our army. Numbers and discipline cannot be magically procured out of thin air... Well, the necromancers among us _do_ have a certain number of less than hygienic zombies, but that cannot be said to be out of thin air.

(And they drape the damned undead things in curtains so the slaves don't throw fits at Great Aunt
Enid's body used as a zombie servant. I don't quite see why, I always hated my great aunt Enid. She's Liss' grandmother, which perhaps explains it. You told me a little of your family, once—)

In any case, it is magic upon which I am uniquely qualified to inform you. In the course of several practical applications I have gained results deserving of your experiment log, and it is a shame I cannot discuss these more fully in the limitations of parchment. I know the praxis of the unexplored regions of theoretical experiments will be of great interest to you.

(Yes, magical experiments, Cythandria. See how I resort to bribing you with those, when I could also bribe you with my body? Speaking of unexplored regions, I think we should...)

In short, I could make myself useful in the city also. I have learned much: do you know by now that one of the Cyricist gang of four that you mentioned to me, an Amnian by birth, lived and helped to find a way through Crimmor? I'm sure the Grand Duke, the Deity, or however he would wish me to refer to him, will be rewarding her trustworthy behaviour accordingly even now.

(Actually, she knows things about me which would get me killed. There are other things that would get us both killed. You don't want the master of the erotic onslaught to die, obviously, Cythandria.)

Conjurations cannot divine, but they can help to bind many things of use to gods. I'm sure my circle-casting power has improved. We should work together to raise the Lord of Murder.

(He forgot to place in, 'do not seduce my mistresses' in that which makes me work for him. But he will ascend, and then... By the way, 'mistresses' is only plural in theory, my dear.)

The space of the parchment, alas, will not allow me to reveal magical secrets in full. Your influence in such matters is much deserved.

(And I ought to have gained ascension in it through said erotic onslaught.)

Sincerely,

(Yours, at least until the next concubine appeals to my loins, which may be far sooner than you might think if you fail to return my favours to you!) Edvin Odesseiron of Thay.

(Please remove me from this place.)

—

He had no need to flaunt women, Cythandria thought, tired. She passed a hand over one of the expensive, enchanted rings on her fingers, rubbing the smooth cut of its bright ruby. Certainly more along the Tamoko line than her own, she uncharitably concluded, the thief-Cyricist tall and rangy and scarred, bony, her hair dry and elf-knotted in a simple tail behind her head, her leather-armoured and apparently weaponless shape no doubt calculated for the effect of causing a watcher's concern for concealed equipment. A failure and a traitor once no matter any achievement in Crimmor, and she had not needed Odesseiron's correspondence to tell her so. Maneira stood quietly by the throne, impassive as a honour guard. In additional insult Tamoko waited against the eastern wall, her flail hanging still and toward the ground. Perorate leaned by a pillar several feet away from her, his arms folded and an attempted expression of contemplation upon his face. Sarevok sat upon Bhaal's throne in a way that might have been described as slumping, or indeed sulking, for anyone who was not a demigod. His armoured chin rested upon a spiked gauntlet, and he glared across the space of Bhaal's temple with golden eyes.
"I have caused the death of a city," he said. "And yet, Winski, your full prophecies have not been fulfilled."

_You are powerful enough, my lord_, Cythandria considered saying. She had been among the first to notice his new, great powers: that neither mundane weapons nor her own fingernails could scrape his skin, his incredible endurance, the great sum of men he had killed. If only he paid sufficient attention that she would not have sought... diversion elsewhere. Perhaps she would arrange something of aid.

"You must conquer," Winski said simply. He stepped forward, and shook out his long, dark sleeves. "Shall I call for you the farseeing of the toasting of Athkatla port?"

_Divinational fallacies of fools_, Cythandria thought, with her usual scorn of the false art.

"Show to me what my ships have wrought," Sarevok said. From one of the hidden trap-points of the temple, there arose a wide bowl of water; no doubt Perorate had planned it deliberately. Cythandria knew she must watch, learn; Amn's naval power was weak in its own right, its ports providing trading services for foreign merchant fleets and producing grain and metals to sell. If Sarevok was defeated in war, then he would no longer be Grand Duke, no matter the deaths he had caused; when Sarevok ascended, then he would be no longer Grand Duke for a more impressive reason. It would be becoming if Perorate at last expedited the latter.

Perorate pronounced the divinatory words, reaching into the Weave, stirring the water. Cythandria watched the Art herself with indifference; only the results of it should matter, if indeed were they reliable. Tamoko appeared to show indifference to the thing entire, though her eyes were wide as if she wished to weep. A moping fool.

The clear water changed, first to a gleaming pearl-white in colour, and then the salt blue of seawater. Ships sailed like black dots upon the waves; the hum of men's voices sounded, confused and jangling. _Loose the sails—hard to port—tighten jib—prepare hooks—_

These were the ships of Baldur's Gate: some commandeered from the estates of the former Dukes and merchants, others the property of the city itself. Under military law Sarevok had stripped trade. They flowed within the summoned vision, and for a moment Cythandria smelt salt, felt wind against her face and whipping loose her golden hair, and forgot to question whether it was merely an imagined divination or true event of attack.

In the harbour depicted—to the right, in the temple's cold reality; to the east, in true geography—rose buildings of Amn, some glorious and others dirty. She had never travelled further south than Beregost. It was as what she had witnessed from a distance in the harbour, but mirrored: the sailors were Baldurian, and the defenders Amnian.

More numbers of Cowled Wizards rose against the invaders than had been recorded to come to the city. And there were clerical and arcane forces aboard Sarevok's fleet to compete. Cythandria could see the flashes of red and green and golden powers striking each other, like small fireflies in the distance of the divination; partial views of the magical combat in place.

Sarevok showed more interest in the battles between men. It was not an invasion: simple destruction. Grappling-hooks brought vessels into collision; if larger against smaller then sometimes the latter splintered, and its men left to drown like ants in a puddle. Rough, jagged lines of swords formed between two opposed decks, close-quarter battling. Large crossbows were hitched to the bulwarks, aiming repeated bolts into Athkatla itself, and some burst into flames upon impact. Cythandria noticed a Cowled Wizard casting a spell intended to be the grave wilting of Abi-Dalzim, one of Semaj's spells; the aim was off, a ships'-caster counteracting by a wind-wall that sent the spell's focus plunging to the water below. The ship shook as the spell visibly took water from the sea itself.
From the leading ship and the cleric Sarevok had ordered in command came the golden, thorn-surrounded skull to rise and glow in the sky. It ought to spread some fear; Cythandria could not measure its effect from the perspective, though she thought that something in the set of Sarevok’s lips had turned to a grim satisfaction. A Cowled Wizard was felled by a strike of lightning.

"Turn it faster," Sarevok commanded. "Show me how they met their deaths."

Amnians swarmed one of his ships, spilling almost more guardsmen than a vessel could be expected to hold, fixing it in grapple; Amn was famed for its ridiculous population. The Baldurians of that had clearly perished, the ship itself seized. And from the port Amnian ballistics bit hold in the sides of the ships. Below explosions of magic, below frantic waves, lay human screaming. It accelerated. Their own ships fought against the defenders.

There was a pattern to the invasion, Cythandria noticed; perhaps the leader of it ought to be congratulated. There was a smoke-blackened hemicycled perimeter within the Amnian port marked by oversized ballistics and the remains of spells. It covered several buildings within its lines. The fleet reformed itself into a ragged chain on the waters, and then two of their largest ships dared to land. Men rushed forward; ships and the men aboard them did, after all, require to capture simple food. They investigated the Amnian circumstances, coordinated aiming from the ships giving them cover. An adjunct to the scene that involved less direct slaughter; she was sure that if she were there, she would smell blood and smell of it and far less pleasant substances.

Cowled Wizards in a circle aimed some particularly effective group-casting. A veritable: giant red thing, its body alight with fire, away from them and upon one of the strongest Baldurian ships. She had an obligation to admire anyone who found an exception to the three infallible rules of winning a battle through demon summoning—

(\textit{one; allow your opponent to summon a demon; two, strip them of all their magical protections one by one; three, relax and enjoy an alcoholic drink with a little umbrella in it whilst the demon brutally dismembers your opponent and swallows their soul whole. The optional fourth rule is to run ironically like the Nine Hells while you still can.})

Whips of flame scourged the deck; weapons only of steel could not injure the thing summoned. Divine and arcane magic rained upon it with little effect. Some jumped into the seas simply to be free of it. Then the ship went down like a child’s toy drowned in a bathtub, the fiery creature with it: doused, vulnerable to dismissal. A lesser one, apparently. Sarevok looked to approve of the deaths.

Chaotic fire and a battering of projectiles burst in reprisal against the circle of cowled ones, Cythandria saw; they split apart, distracted. The plunderers had done their work, hastening back to their ships. She saw another small-scale ship with Amnian markings lost to the sea. And there she could feel tendrils, hear the soft susurrus of chanters devoted to Sarevok, a faint golden sense of lives lost to murder. But it was not as strong as she would imagine. \textit{The spawn of the Beast are fated to seize their inheritance through bloodshed; the strongest is to inherit the legacy of the father.} And who could that be other than the instigator of such messy chaos? She drew in a breath, straining the tight fastenings of her gown and the bones of the corset that dug into her skin, against her will edging slightly away from Sarevok’s golden eyes fixed to the battle.

The raid sailed from the devastated port; bodies of men still tossed and turned in the waves. Smaller coast towns they would have more power over; strike fear into Athkatla and pursue piracy, and then the skyships should turn the tide in their favour. Perorate lowered his hands, lines of exhaustion written upon his old, haggard face. The water was simple and ordinary once more.

Sarevok stepped back. "Relay orders for them to do once more what was done in Crimmor," he said, "completely and utterly."
"Upon the town of Ghoshan, perhaps, would be advisable," Perorate advised dryly. "For Athkatla itself, await the skyships..."

The logic was fairly ineluctable, Cythandria could not help but think. Success was not his goal for the war, simply ascension, for divine power would change all; and if the former became impossible and they were those held accountable...

She was shocked from it by the smash of stone. Sarevok's fist had met the pillar above the diviner's head; she had barely seen his movement, so unnaturally fast. The stone cracked. Perorate had not shifted in his place at all, Cythandria noted, envying his calmness if not circumstances. The blow would have as easily pierced his skull.

Then the Lord of Murder raised his hand again; gold passed along the pillar of Bhaal's temple, and it was as if nothing had been disturbed. "I lose patience in you, Winski. You never encouraged that virtue within me."

"There are other Children to the east," Perorate said. "None who have caused so much murder as you."

"Then I will hunt them," Sarevok said. He strode back to his seat of honour, watching them all. Cythandria felt the power and force of such an inhuman gaze, and still tried to keep her composure. Her lord spoke again: "I have summoned Angelo here."

Dosan of the Flaming Fist came forward; never quite with the spit-and-polish stiff poise of other guard captains Cythandria had seen, always something of wild cunning about him. A mage not untalented, clever enough to be moderately entertaining in company. Something of an occasional poor reputation with low courtesans. He made his regular salute before the figure of the demigod upon the throne, his face stoic.

"Angelo," Sarevok said, softly for him, almost calmly. As if a sword slowly tested the surface of a tower of glass, to be pulled back and reduce it to shards by the single, following blow. "Do you know the charges I have called you here to answer?"

—What mad fool would Angelo be if he has done something to anger Sarevok? Cythandria thought, still watching and waiting. Her hands were pressed against the smooth folds of her skirts. —Perhaps simply a test of him—

"I suspect that'd be my lie concerning the execution, your grace," Angelo replied. In the silence a single basilisk scale could have been heard to drop.

"You allowed my sister to live in this city," Sarevok said. Cythandria wondered distantly if the blood would stain her expensive robes, and if her lazy servants would be capable of removing it this time. Angelo was but an acquaintance; she could feel no more than faint disgust for him and his evident stupidity. Would that she was once more within her mage's study. "Permit me a curiosity as to why."

The explosion was still, as yet, to fall.

"Because your sister travelled with my daughter, your grace," Angelo said, with notable simplicity and equanimity.

Sarevok's anger did not yet burst into its final thunder. He leaned forward upon the throne, staring at his captain.

"You had sons when last I heard. Two—or was it three?—all dead, now. One sacrificed to me in Nashkel," Sarevok said.
"Bherel, indeed. The risks of a soldier," Angelo said. "It was three, once."

"I see," Sarevok said, thin-lipped. "And how did you regard your daughter, Angelo?"

"We've been strongly estranged these past fourteen years, your grace. I'm much against women fighting wars. Infinitely more trouble than they're worth. Deserve to be executed for it, really."

Not one of the present company responded to that comment; Cythandria's hands slid slightly down her skirt. Not all women ought to be obliged to fight personally.

"And yet you should choose to betray me above her?" Sarevok said. The softer, bass-toned voice reverberated with no effort at all across wall and pillar, as if a single shake from it could trigger an earthquake.

"She is family, your grace."

And to that both men barked a laugh of irony.

"Amuse me," Sarevok rumbled. "Is your daughter the same kind of treacherous weasel as yourself?"

"Sadly," Angelo replied, "no. I failed to bring her up right and I'm afraid she turned out more like you, your grace." He continued, shockingly. "An affection for oversized swords. An addiction for brutality. An unfortunate tendency to keep her word and kill you honestly."

"Is there a reason why I should not kill you...honestly?" It was coming, Cythandria thought; suspense dragged out. Tamoko did not try to plead for Sarevok not to give in to his impulses to murder a traitor.

"Simply that I'm your man until death, your grace. Stayed here in your city, didn't I? It seems my daughter's lost her tastes for killing after all, and that miscalculation's mine to own. I held her daughter, and hoped that should stop her group from messing with you. Kill me, and think that I held my neck out for it," Angelo said.

The Lord of Murder chuckled. "You're a brave man, Angelo. Brazen-faced for betraying me."

"...Could your sister even now stop you in any way?" Tamoko spoke, suddenly, hesitantly, her accent strong. It was a suspicious question, and perhaps Sarevok too recognised that.

"Could she cause even a tenth of the slaughter I have caused?" he asked rhetorically, his mighty arm sweeping through the air. "Her essence is weak. Yet it is the principle. A rival must die; I am a god."

"I am a god," he repeated. "Do you know why I brought the hero by my side?" he asked, another magnificent gesture pointing to the silent Maneira. "This woman all but conquered Crimmor in my name. She betrayed the city; she led a small group within the walls; she captured Lord Aldon herself. For she understood how powerful I am."

A small, and slightly relieved, smile crept over the thief's face. Cythandria folded her arms.

"Yet she also failed me," Sarevok said; the smile was instantly lost. He rose, slowly, from his throne. "People have failed me. I have lost Tazok; Diyab; Sakul; assorted doppelgangers."

"Gods have servants other than mortal," he continued, and then the gauntleted hand reached out to seize the thief by the shoulder. His spikes made her bleed, and she tried at the last to escape him.

"This one failed the first time to slay the girl. I wonder, would a different kind of servant fail?"
He was killing the woman slowly, from loss of blood, Cythandria thought. She might have expected that Sarevok would not truly forgive betrayal. The woman still struggled faintly.

"You told me of three, once, Winski," Sarevok said. It was impossible to take one's eyes from him, no matter what next he should do. "The Slayer; the Ravager; and Kazgoroth the deceased. Three avatars of the god.

"I am not greedy. One will do for now," he said. "Bring forth your mage's spells and your books. Turn this raw material into something far more...faithful."

Angelo was the first to quickly nod. His reprieve; Winski's direction of their magery. There was the form of a failed servant of Sarevok within the circle of the golden skull, between complex runes; there was the alteration and transformation of power. Cythandria saw the warped giant grow from the woman's pained, living body, a thing stretched to inhumanity. It was glorious and powerful and horned, and stretched to the height of the temple; sinews snapped and tensed across its form, and red blood pulsed to flush its skin and pump visibly down the giant flesh. It was part Fire Giant, part orc by shards of vague resemblance, part divine, part unholy. Its eyes were a vast scarlet red, and within them lurked a golden glow in echo of its master's power. The Ravager stood raised by its master, grown from the body of the traitor Maneira, and waited upon its orders to fight.

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133. Histories

Baldur's Gate grew from a fishing village supported greatly by the explorer Balduran's gold: our founder. But what is oft overlooked is that before that fishing village was a ruin to build upon. Whether the past occupants evacuated by migration, natural disaster or war is lost to the ages; in practice the Undercity is myth, unreachable, hidden. (And very distinct from the far more recent place, if equally mythical to Dukes' daughters, known as the Undercellar.) In day-to-day life we do not talk about its existence. But histories show that it is no fable, though the archaeology is lost to the ages. I had read superstitions about ghosts in it that murdered people to prevent its rediscovery, but I'd thought of that as fairy tales. Down by the shrine to Ilmater sunken into the ground are some old foundations that are supposed to date back to that time; I visited them several times in the past. I therefore know the Undercity of Baldur's Gate as much as it can be thought to be known.

It was not enough, and Dynaheir's magelight bobbed dimly around us while we examined the library of the ducal palace, in an extremely secret operation indeed. If Sarevok was sleeping within this building at that moment we should never have dared: but the chambers a Grand Duke could use were vacant tonight. Sauriram had been against the risk, for reasons that vague mysticism was not worth the danger. Bhaal died; before that his worship was unheard of in Baldur's Gate. But Sarevok had chosen this city and there must be some reason for it.

Books and records are ill-guarded in times of war. We turned through Baldur's Gate's oldest histories; in glass cases and below preservation spells were those few remaining parchments of Balduran himself, in the same writing as the logbook from the ship. Balduran had voiced little or nothing on religion in his known lifetime, but one of the early elected Dukes had been fanatically devoted to Amaunator. Cohrvale was his name, and I knew he was primarily famous for banning gods and temples he considered unsavoury from the city. After him a climate of religious tolerance took the city; Umberlee never could be banned from a seaport, and as many temples had gold and no inclinations for human sacrifice were welcomed to build and help Baldur's Gate to expand. Imoen searched Cohrvale's own collected writings for mentions of those religions he banned; Dynaheir
traced through older religious texts; and I looked back through architectural maps of the city.

"Bhaal's on a list here," Imoen said, throwing her volume to a small group of those we would take away. The hope that Sarevok would fly into irrational rage at the audacity of the theft from his palace bore some resemblance to strategy. "*Gods I Hate*, by Cohrvale the Censorious Cowpat: or else, entitled *Everything In The World But Me."

I stifled a giggle; Dynaheir gave a librarian's stern glare above her own dusty volume. It wasn't as if Imoen didn't read as quickly as her. I traced over the early city plan, this one for the walls of fifty years after Balduran's disappearance. Though farmland and the early docks were mapped as the homes of the small population of the time, the northern walls had been chosen to be placed about where they stood today; city expansions had been largely eastwards. That implied, then, that they had used the foundations of the older city, and that the Undercity had a similar northern wall; it was almost impossible to extend any further north because of harsh, cragged rock that should have changed little over the centuries. Curved lines marked a structure within the city not too far south of that border, and I bent close to read small lettering.

*Stream of Tears.* There wasn't a stream in that place any more; not under any other name, though no doubt there were several wells that drew from groundwater. *Lacrima, lacrimosa, dakryma, taehher* were expected variants of a name like that. I turned forward to a more recent map of the ground in the northern part of the city; the elevations made it look as if there could have been an older bed. That was the area where Gist kept his strange estate, where I'd heard gossip that he liked to keep a lot of humanlike statues in a ballroom permanently kept cold as ice. Then if that had been a water source for the Undercity of old, no wonder they could have built older walls by it.

Dynaheir spoke. "It is written here by this Tyrran of old that the former peoples were guilty of great abominations and murders in their heresies, and therefore their city was razed to only a bare rock and a place upon which to spread fish nets."

"A biased text," I grumbled; people like to invent tales that natural disasters were caused by impious behaviour, mostly to make themselves feel less worried that the same would happen to them, and one always finds that overblown rhetoric about some defunct historical location. But still: murders. "Make sure you try the Umberlant works. That might be the oldest religion here."

"Oh. Creepy," Imoen mused. "Umberlee's icky. Bet she and Bhaal'd've gotten on real well." She paused. "Ooh. This one's good."

"*Inne ye viewe of dragonnes and grate beastes unknown,*" she read, trying to pronounce the archaic lettering and spelling, "*ye scente of deth did walk unto ye waters and didst fly at will.* One of those funny-looking fs, it is. *These were smitten with justice ytsel an twere for best we did build wall above ye fronghold of deth. I write no more lest foolish minds become fmitten to inquiere of power...*"

Walls; old water sources by them; Felonius Gist's manor in the city's north. "...Walking," I muttered, and traced back through the lines of the old map with its stream. We'd faced enough walking dead abominations. We'd faced... Today it had all gone according to Sauriram's plan. Simple confidence-tricking, pretending authority to remove the rye stored to a different location; add to it by a false messenger rushing to the Iron Throne guards instructing them to catch up to the thieves at a specified location; and have the battle at the place of our choosing. Playing with gold and flaming swords. *I am the Duke's daughter; a bearer of Balduran's sword; but most importantly the friend of Imoen the Pink...* Could never lose sight of the goal. Sarevok knew now that we lived.

Dynaheir tensed, and signalled for quiet. Then we were out of time; the architectural tome, Imoen's book, an archive of the Flaming Fists, the selection already gathered fumbled into our packs. Footsteps could be clearly heard now. From the layout of the corridors, the matcher must have
already glimpsed the light— "Leave it!" I whispered to Dynaheir. As the sounds drew closer, it was time to bluff.

"Hello? Gosh, you scared me!" I said, poking my head out of the door to see a pair of palace guards. "Guillaim wanted an answer to a question about precedent by tomorrow, about the 1097 skirmish with Alaric, and I'm afraid I let it get the better of me..." Guillaim was still the Dukes' archivist; stand-offish, but good at what he did. He'd several apprentices I'd met before; two of them scorning me as a rank amateur, the other two nicer. "Everything is all right, isn't it, officers?"

They came closer. "Who're you? It's well after curfew," the first said. I didn't recognise them as palace guards; but palace guards blended into each other in their uniforms. Trimmings can change a face considerably.

"I'm still rather new here; I'm afraid I don't know who you are, either. Could you come closer, sir?"

They carried their own dark lantern, which sent unclear flickers of light across their faces.

"You'll have to come with us," the same guard said. "Guillaim or not, you must know the rules."

They were close enough; I pulled the door suddenly inward; Dynaheir flung sleep-sand in the air and uttered an incantation with a curiously dark voice, and I brought the hilt of Balduran's sword against the temple of the first while he wavered against her spell. 

Definitely past time to go. We dragged the soldiers to the deepest part of the bookshelves, closing the door and darkening all lights. Outside, Garrick had watched invisible in case of a distraction; we left quickly through the quietened streets.

"Follow me hither," Dynaheir said; she raised her right hand for a cantrip, and it was a sewer grate she lifted for us. She descended into the grime and stench without even seeming to mind. It's useful that Baldur's Gate has a plumbing system; but does that mean one has to explore it? Below the rusty iron walls of the wide pipe lay a constant flow of green slime that soaked our boots and the ends of breeches and robes. Touching the steps of the ladder was bad enough, walking amidst the stench and the...substances was still worse; I wrapped my cloak to cover my nose and mouth, for all the good that would do. There was the classic dilemma whether to breathe through one's mouth to lessen the stench but feel as if one swallowed it with each breath, or through one's nose for the full benefit of the sense of smell. Further conversations with Dynaheir were to be...put off, whilst I tramped miserably onward.

"Thou should pay heed to the surroundings," Dynaheir cautioned dourly. "All manner of footpads and cutpurses have sought succour here of late; they are discerned through habit of attempting to kill all who approach. Furthermore there are other creatures." Her eyes glowed faintly with what was likely an infravision spell; she led, stepping with apparent unconcern through the disgusting waste water. Very little light from the city passed through the sewer gratings and to me she was a dim shadow to follow, the iron walls discernible by the occasional fleck of silver that reflected from the gratings above and the footing a careful job. Any thief's supposed to be able to walk in darkness. Likely we'd come below the markets in the city centre, then I thought there'd been a left turn.

"Other creatures, indeed," Garrick echoed.

"—So, what other creatures?" Imoen asked; but Dynaheir came to a sudden stop, ordering silence.

"Many legs," she said, her voice level, "'tis but one." She must have cast some spell for keenness of hearing as well as magesight. "Hold..."

Then the carrion crawler came into view, shamefully pale in the darkness, the giant white worm with
the horrifying wet mouth at one end. I drew blade, hoping that the fight wouldn't splash too much slime upon us; but then Dynaheir cast her spell. Six red missiles flew gracefully from her hands, each hitting heavily to the creature's head; it perished. We gingerly picked our way around its body.

"—Nice, Dyna," Imoen said. "You can help me with my magic, right? It'll be just like old times!"

"As it lies in me to do so," Dynaheir said. "Thou hast advanced greatly since the last, Imoen. Few students of magery indeed should have achieved so much within so short a time; the student may have become the teacher." There was the sound of water rushing; we had to step to the sides of the sewer, for the volume of water rose and managed to soak us further. It ran above the sides of my boots and into them.

"You were the only real tutor I had since I was a kid," Imoen said, "and aside from that—it's the Bhaal thing, it's got to be." Her voice took on the same hysterical hinge as in my mind when I tried to think of dead gods and consequences. "I'm more powerful because the god of murder's magic's backing me up. I got new abilities to kill people." Her boots splashed in the mud; but I stood close to her anyway.

"...Calm thyself," Dynaheir said gently. "By my observations, Imoen, thou art intelligent and most quick to grasp concept. By thine own history, thou sought instruction and to master the spells of others of thy own initiative. Do not be so fast to lay aside thy credit."

Imoen gave a jerky nod. "And you think I have to use all the powers I've got against Sarevok. The...lesser evil."

"Neither of you are evil," Garrick interjected; it was kind of him. Confessing Tevanie's existence to Sauriram had been easy; confessing murder to Dynaheir would be dreadful.

"Hold thy peace, Imoen." Dynaheir signalled for another halt; we had stepped far from where we had entered, and I was not sure if I could have repeated all our turns amidst the grimy tunnels from memory. "I hear...many."

I could hear moist, sucking noises; something like wind whistling through the bones of a corpse; incoherent howls as if of zombies; bubblings and spewings of acid.

"Remain back," Dynaheir said. This time her casting took longer, in which the strange noises came ineluctably closer toward us; she finished, and a sweet wind swept through the air and cleansed the scent from us. It smelt as if we stood in a lady's boudoir rather than the grim sewers, and I wondered why she hadn't troubled to do it before. "I cast it upon both sides, Imoen, for the noxious gases in here are a dreadful danger of far greater effect than expected."

Then she began to move her hands in the pattern of the fireball I recognised from Imoen and Edwin, and the world in front of us exploded in a searing red inferno. Dynaheir the invoker was grimly satisfied.

The iron walls had been seared and blackened by the force of the fireball combined with gases; buckled, even, for a range between the two walls of sweet wind she had erected. On the suddenly-dried ground were a number of shadowed remains in ash: I saw the shape of another carrion crawler, the black outline of a very large corpse scorched into the pipe's floor, several round and burned shapes like the remains of slimes we had killed in the past, ashed shadows of things that had likely already died.

"They ought not to have come so close to our refuge," Dynaheir said. "I thought that I had dealt with such things sufficiently. Come."
Further ahead, the pipes changed to stone, and there was a small alcove reached by another ladder. It appeared long locked and sealed, a useless door to some forgotten machinery; but I could tell that some sort of illusion lay over it by the subtle inconsistencies of overlap at the edges. Dynaheir stepped forward; but behind us came a voice. It creaked like the hinges of a gate drowned below foul water.

"It has been a search...and you have slain my sewerkin."

Dynaheir turned, fire in her hands; I was surprised to see that Garrick had summoned something of the same power to hold in reserve. "Show thyself, creature, and explain thy presence. Thy kin were foul enough!"

The shape...reared from the sludge; slowly forming to the shape of a rough, squat golem; dripping.

"I am Schlumpsha, King of the Sewer," it spoke, blackness opening somewhere not where a face would normally be. "Schlumpsha is the leftover creature of a wizard long dead...and I sniff out the scent of fate."

"Then thou may leave this place before I shall ensure that the fate of thy kin is repeated on thee," Dynaheir said. Imoen stood beside her, ready with an incantation.

"I do not talk to thee, witch," the creature addressed. I'd want to kill it on general principles: slime, talking, constantly reforming itself, smelling like the middle of a paralysing cloud. But...it was not right to kill on general principles. "Here in these stony hallways where the drip of water mingles with the gurgling of the dead: a name has been whispered in the ears of assassins. There is a death foretold."

"Everyone dies, sewer-scum," Imoen pointed out.

"Can you die...if you are the slime itself?" The creature was suddenly closer, far closer. It could swim and dissolve into the sewer water without any sign of what it was; it could reform itself all too quickly. "Long enough living and the threads of fate become visible to the naked eye. You are a child of books. The other sweet-fleshed girl is a child of histories. Your deaths are so... tempting."

Garrick sang missiles into its body. Nothing happened; Imoen and I drew back from the wicked slime, which still spoke.

"From whence were you born?" I demanded. "Is there death foretold in the Undercity?"

"There is a city of the dead in the waters that lie even below this place, murderer. Unreachable for me...and either way the death is planned by the gods themselves. But I can no longer restrain my own hungers..."

It launched itself upon Imoen. She cried out, her skin reddening; I flung myself to her and felt the acid on my skin. Missiles flew from Dynaheir's hands and Garrick's voice; they were absorbed within it as if this creature was a demon like Aec'Lete. Dynaheir began a different chant; the sewer-stuff lingered on my hands, and its substance turned toward me.

Balduran's sword, Imoen had said, was useful against shapeshifters; the Burning Earth might have set the sewer vapours on fire. Schlumpsha hissed; that at least caused him pain. The liquid reared up from the water around me in incomprehensible shapes, changing each moment the sword struck. Imoen was safe, back now. "Make 'em vulnerable," she said, beginning the long spell. In her turn Dynaheir chanted something I didn't know.

First white shielding erupted around pieces of the slime, and it seemed part of it was imprisoned, for
it foamed and boiled in the base of a pale sphere. Next Imoen's spell finished, and that yellow beam flowed into the sewerkin's slime. Garrick saw the magic she'd cast and aimed his own spell: this time, the slime sizzled.

From its slime-voice came further noise. "Balduran...once..." Missiles from all three casters bit into it. The sword broke the liquid to shreds that began to fall once more into the liquid miasma still in our boots. Dynaheir raised her hands and gestured; her sphere closed upon what it contained, transmuting it to smaller and smaller and finally collapsing as inert substance.

"Does this happen a lot?" Imoen said pointedly.

"Thou shouldst have seen the ogre-mage and his pets," Dynaheir said. At last she gestured above, and we followed her to the space she indicated. It was a small room, stone-walled, with remains of metal tools and devices about it and neatly stacked in a corner. There was weaponry too heavy for Garrick to wield resting in a corner; sacks and blankets spread out as clean mats; a pair of magical books and a box of spell components; two bedrolls on opposing sides of the alcove. It was far cleaner than one would have expected of the location; Dynaheir had been here some time. She'd come with Minsc and Branwen. A hamster squeaked, turning alone in an endless wheel.

Dynaheir spoke again; "This underground is a haunt of malefactors; but that one sought thee in particular. Thy very presence promotes seekers."

"Can he sense it?" Imoen asked. "No—I know he can. If he's close. Gotta keep renewing the scrying protections." Golden-eyed Sarevok—

"Tis best we properly consolidate the knowledge from these tomes," Dynaheir said. She slipped off her soaked boots and sat, cross-legged, on a thick red blanket; the three of us followed her example.

Bhaal-worship by the waters, the stench of death and a slayer walking the city; the Stream of Tears— In the history of the Dead Three it explains the symbol, that for each murder a tear is shed and that is why there were golden tears about the grinning skull. City plans; a ghost city; Flaming Fist rumours and accounts of undead vanquished in their earliest days. We laid out our stolen books for that which we needed—

"Chaos will be sown in their passage," Imoen recited. Dynaheir watched us, quietly, cautiously.

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134. Call for the Drow Courtesan

29 Eleasias

"For the sake of the girl herself, if not her mother," Sauriram had agreed, sending Sorrel as a Flaming Fist to retrieve Shar-Teel's daughter from her grandfather's estate; we'd only seen her briefly, but she'd been saved from Angelo.

"If I were Viconia, I've thought out now where a good place to hide would be, or at least it's a good place to start," I said to Ajantis. "You just have to say the words without stopping, stuttering, or blushing."

Imoen giggled; Faldorn looked confused.

"I..." Ajantis began. "want a...drow courte...I can't..." he gasped. "By Helm! Am I to portray a
recklessly depraved, carnally immoral, dishonourable dilettante?"

"You're the only one of us who can pretend to have a convincing reason for asking."

Iomé snorted in laughter again. "Well, not necessarily, 'ccording to some things I've heard...but it's not like we've got Shar-Teel..." But women don't ask about that sort of thing; why would they?

"It is ridiculous, conspired, and morally degenerate to try to belabour me into such an offensive inquiry," Ajantis thundered. "The temples of Helm in the city ought to join forces to stamp out such vile dens of profligacy and obscenity!"

I'd already been there by Coran's instruction; the dying woman in her small stone room. Should have asked then. It wasn't that bad. "You're going to ask for a drow courtesan from their vile den of profligacy and obscenity, Lord Ilvastarr." Aquerna placed a paw across her mouth, shaking her head in suppressed amusement.

The Undercellars are hidden in the centre of the city, below the back alleys of the marketplace and Ilmater's temple. Worn in stone, there's a certain dampness to them, with occasional moss growing on the lower parts of the walls, where there aren't tapestries hung. We descended stairs to reach its lowest point.

"Is this that far from where we walked last night?" Iomé said below her breath, looking up at an ornately embroidered tapestry that featured two of Sune's handmaidens taking a bath together, or so I guessed might be the mythological symbolism.

"Interesting. Possibly, but why bother?" I returned. Stone walls; built higher than the sewers, which are in turn for obvious reasons considerably younger than the city before Balduran. Ajantis fiddled nervously with his gloved hands; always he seemed uneasy without armour, as if he'd sleep in it if he could. On his face he wore a dark grey mask that covered more of his features than that most other male nobles here affected, though he'd worried if the very wearing of it crossed Helm's dictates. Iomé and I hung on one of his arms apiece, surrounding him in skirts and masks of our own.

He donated gold drawn from our own dangerously low-dipping funds; Iomé winked at me at the sight of a nobleman with the strings of a purse visible from his robes, perhaps one of the Bevins below his brief red mask.

"Good evening, sir." The amount had been sufficient to draw perfunctory attention from one of the Undercellar's facilitators; a slightly plump man, wearing dark robes with a pale silk lining, dead white paint upon his face. "Might I offer you direction?"

Iomé leaned against Ajantis' broad shoulder and gave an artificially high giggle. Ajantis whispered his line while looking at the floor; there was scorn lettered on the administrator's face.

"Forgive me, I'm afraid I heard it not," he said; in sophisticated tones, like those of an advanced bard. "From which of the endless pleasures of the Undercellar do you wish to draw tonight?"

Iomé leaned against Ajantis' broad shoulder and gave an artificially high giggle. Ajantis whispered his line while looking at the floor; there was scorn lettered on the administrator's face.

"I search for a drow courtesan!" Ajantis said. He'd always been good at battlecries. There might have been some people on the very far end of the place who hadn't heard him clearly. Eyes turned to his indelicately raised voice; a beautiful woman dressed in a shimmering dark cloak, carrying a tray of wine-glasses; the Bevin noble; a group of five scantily clad people, two masked, smoking a scent that wafted over to us as Black Lotus; armed female guards with outlandishly coloured armour and long spears. Ajantis' face turned to the ground once more. "...ifyoudon'tmind..."

There was a wanted drow criminal; a drow courtesan would, I thought, be Viconia's way of hiding a
needle in a pincushion crafted for it.

"Ah. The...lady in question...is known to be of a somewhat capricious nature," drawled the Undercity's man. "Shall I give her your calling card?"

Ajantis gave a ring we had found in Durlag's tower, that she would recognise as dwarven craftwork; and a note that simply scribed banal praises of her beauty quoted directly from the standard bardic pieces, signed by the name Sky Tev'nie. Others had rescued the girl, Flaming Fist passing through to Dosan's estate on Sauriram's orders.

"I must return with the verdict. Please, feel free to indulge yourself in what refreshments you desire."

Wine; dancing women; Black Lotus; even one or two dancing men. We sat by ourselves on a brocaded divan; we couldn't afford to lose our senses. At least some nobles here must surely serve Sarevok, innocently or no. Smiling, I reached up to Ajantis' neck and whispered in his ear, to tell him to get them to bring wine for the appearance of vivacity. Imoen and I feigned light chatter around him; the woman in the fine cloak offered us some really rather charming Berduskan red vintage. A red-and-yellow fire crackled not far from us.

"...never so humiliated...Helm..." Ajantis muttered, his shoulders slumped. Briefly his glance fell upwards upon a woman with near-bared breasts shimmying to music played by a lutenist, and he quickly stared down at the carpet once more. Imoen unobtrusively kicked him; I tugged at the neckline of my dress as a woman of easy virtue. A drunken man staggered toward us: Eldran Jhasso, below a canary-yellow mask that didn't conceal enough of his jowls. We'd met. I hid my face in Ajantis' shoulders.

"Evenin'!" he talked to us. "Haven't seen yer masks before!" Imoen raised her flame-red vizard to him. "But your face...your face, something, m'lady." He had intended address to me; Imoen took over.

"Let's see," she said, "I know you know how to party, m'lord! Reckon I'd know you—but no names here, naughty man!"

He peered bleary-eyed at her. "Not you. Not you. Redheads, Yknowwhattheysayboutredheads—I'd like to know you—"

"The young lady is accompanied and desires none of your presence," Ajantis said. It worked, forceful enough; Eldran simply staggered a few steps away, leaning on the arm of a dark-haired woman. This was too risky. I could feel Ajantis' tension and discomfort lodged in his muscles.

"Oh, brave Star!" Imoen giggled, flapping a large ornamental fan she'd transmuted out of a small stick. I joined her laughter, kicking below my skirts.

At last the man returned; we'd sipped only the beginning of our wine. "The lady...wishes to see you," he said. "Permit me to escort you to her private room whilst her patience lasts. All of our quarters in this section, I assure you, are sealed in case of unfortunate accident."

An outer chamber, somewhat ornamented by plaster busts and walls somewhat crudely painted in the Calishite style; a blue door was closed for an inner sanctum. I stepped to open it, and they were in the bedroom.

Viconia hadn't troubled to put on more than some slightly dishevelled lacy underclothing, sitting on the wide bed and—feigning to?—read a book; Shar-Teel was upright pacing the navy-cream Cormyrian carpet, carrying her sword, sweating as if she'd been practising recently. Ajantis closed the door behind himself and folded his arms, as if trying to recapture some of his lost dignity.
"Sarevok was the one who owned Tazok. Who do you want to kill next?" I said. Shar-Teel's pawn was behind the castle on our side; on the chessboard she was king.

"Angelo," she said.

—I

"I suppose one might say I have suffered from boredom of late," Viconia said. A veil covered her face as if she were some wealthy widow, stricken ill; we'd escaped into the alleyways of the less legitimate marketplaces, where once Eldoth had taken me. "Remove me from the sun and I suppose I may...offer the services of Shar in your pitiful problems." She almost began one of those disorienting poses directed at Ajantis, but reconsidered.

"We know you're all heart, Viccy," Imoen said. "Rrrah! Skie'n me are bigger 'n badder than you'll know 'till we reach headquarters!"

"The Imoen is my sister thought was far better than related to Sarevok or related to that murderous entity. Sauriram hadn't told others; who knew how Ajantis would react to bad blood? There seemed no people about on this street. It was very quiet; I almost congratulated myself for leading them here.

"Bigger? No," Shar-Teel said, looking down on all four of us. Viconia raised her head to stand by her shoulders, admittedly at least three inches above Imoen for all she was elvish.

"Beware!" Viconia whispered. I blinked, and there was a black-clad man standing behind her wreathed in shadow. He held a pale sword. I shouted out; and then she lay on the streets bleeding through her stomach. The man turned and ran, and then a cloud of yellow vapours erupted around us to steal our breath. It burned skin and seared through lungs in instants. Ajantis was on his knees and falling; and a series of intangible Imoens raced past me. The cobblestones and Viconia's blood flew toward me.

Too many times we'd been attacked.

Then the air smelled clean. Imoen had cast Dynaheir's spell for that and a set of mirror images protected her. A thing of black tentacles lashed one by one at the pictures of her. There were gastears in my eyes, my vision half gone; I bent over Viconia and tried to stop the flow of blood.

"Crude, wael," she snapped viciously, laying hands over herself; Ajantis was flat on the ground, Shar-Teel turning to fight the summoned creature. The man—he'd come to us again, if I were he I'd try for the caster first targeted, Imoen was occupied, I knew how a murderer thought—

Balduran's sword came from below my skirts; it arrested the pale blade. I could see the man. He was ill-shaped, muscular, a damaged and nigh-monstrous face. He walked in night-grey armour as if the shadows were part of him, and his short sword held against Balduran's magic. He brought it down in a low spring, and while I rolled to my feet tried to push me out of the way by his bulk. Viconia chanted as softly as she could and Imoen's voice was raised.

"Wasn't very smart to go there, missy," he said; he'd eaten onions lately, the wild thought came from the smell almost as pungent as the casting. I fought through tearstains; path of his sword, path of his body in the shadows—I stepped into the streetlights. "There's a sweet girl, m' wife Krystin; making mincemeat of your mage-caster; all invisible so's I don't be jealous of her—"

He talked because he was winning. He fought as if he wanted something from me, some interest. Balduran's sword had range, but the man was strong enough to force it far aside, at least as good as Ajantis.
"Stupid to flee to our haunt," he said. "Odd—y' ain't as good's I were coming to expect. Probably scream like them Dukes in their time."

A slashing cut sliced past shoulder to waist; shallow, painful. It didn't stop bleeding. *I won't scream for you.*

Parry; sidestep; try not to fall on the cobblestones. Imoen's voice was still raised, I thought by the sounds of it the spell of grease—

*She hadn't spoken aloud to cast the mirror images. As she could cast that fire spell; sorcery. Imoen had the cleverness and courage and strength; reflections for me and nothing of you.* I knew what dream-Imoen had meant: the assassin's sword went through my stomach and up at the right angle to find the heart. I stepped through him, untouchable.

He moved; he stepped away quickly. I had lost where the ground was, boots below stone. That was obvious trap and consequence. I lunged with the intangible sword and it became material in his neck. The blade tore down his skin as my stance dropped an inch or so from above the ground, and I turned it into a stab that perhaps Shar-Teel would have at last approved. There was a woman's shriek.

The black monster was dead; Shar-Teel used her sword against a mage-shield that covered a form I could barely see. She stood on grease; *marking an invisible position*, I realised quickly; Imoen was amazingly clever.

"Slythie! Ye slew my—"

A bright-glowing orb from Imoen's hands bounced from the shield, weakening it. Shar-Teel struck coldly again. Viconia had sat up, raising her hands:

"Why, yes. Your male is slain, *iblith.*"

And then in the gesture of Viconia's hands the mage's husband rose and walked to attack his wife on command. The grease had me slow; at last I reached the mage's blue sphere. She was still a blur inside it, protected by other spells of obscuring. But it was unlikely that she would escape alive. Her husband's dead feet slid across the smooth black grease.

The woman screamed again. "Slythie! Slythie-baby! You can't attack me, it's not right, it's not right, don't'cha know your Krystin?" The zombie's sword seemed quite effective against the shield; with Shar-Teel it raised cracks in its blue. "Gotta save you! Gotta save all—!" Then the mage turned her high scream to a shrieked spell, her hands flying. A pale glow too bright to look at was between her fingers like a small sun—

"—That's a Fireball," Imoen cried, "too strong—Viccy you idiot!—*Get the shield down*—"

At last there was a small crack in the sphere. Imoen spoke quickly, like a chipmunk's high voice. Shar-Teel and I both left a clear line of sight for her for that gap. An acid arrow flew from her hand and toward Krystin's throat. The mage tried several further times for her spell, but Imoen's casting continued to burn her. Then she was dead in the streets.

We rifled their pockets; had Viconia bring Ajantis to consciousness; escaped quickly. The mage had kept one or two spellbooks, and old correspondence crumpled into the depths of her materials.

—*Krystin, dear, Sarevok advises that you and your husband are to be quite credited in the disposal of the Grand Dukes, and by my judgment I concur. Shall we agree to meet for tea down in that little Kara-Turan place in the Twin Songs on the eighth or so, when perhaps things shall be a little*
calmer?

Most sincerely,

Cythandria.

—

135. Nor Fastened Portal Bar

30 Eleasias

There was a chance. Tamoko prayed for the divination with gravedust taken from the temple, with dried tea-leaves she had preserved and taken from her own country long years ago, with her own blood from a cut scored at her breastbone. She lit four joss-sticks to fill the room with heavy incense and smoke to sear her eyes. There were two boons she would ask through the corpse's dust: that she gain sure knowledge of the half-sister of Sarevok, and that none other should be granted the same. Among all god-servants within his service, especially those that claimed to serve directly the son of the Lord of Murder, she was the highest. Divine blood protected when it did not annihilate.

"I pray to the four cardinal points: kita, minami, higashi, nishi." This was of her homeland; it represented ineffable ordering, and a circle that bounded what she cast. To the north; the south; east; west.

Dosan, traitor, despicable, a shard of hope despite yourself.

"I pray to the changing seasons: natsu; aki; fuyu; haru. Time runs and ever guides to mortal fate." Summer; autumn; winter; spring. It was still summer in these lands, not even yet the time for blood-red and burnished gold leaves to fall. In her homeland a time of warmth and green growth, wet air and bright festivals, chrysanthemum-beaming stars by night and shining sun by day. With Sarevok, summers had been long comfortable nights outdoors in a drier heat, sparring together, plucking wheat-grains raw in golden fields, wandering as if they had no concerns. False friends wanted to see the end of that boy. In pretty western words they concealed their cruel ambition, as crow's claws tore flesh to eat.

The vile mortal father; the taint; I swear that death is not the first way to rid of it.

"I pray to the dead that rest elsewhere and below: that this request is to disturb the sleep of but one, and they lie in their places still." There were bodies buried in so many of the estate-spaces controlled by Sarevok; bodies buried, and fragments of golden dust in the wind for those others he had destroyed. Tamoko needed one strong enough for him.

The most poisonous influences have been those who still live.

She drew a tantō dagger, covering the blade with dark, moist earth from the shore of the Lake of Tears. She cut the shape of the answer she craved between the dust of the grave, the last remains of one of the faithful of that old, dead god; the kanji of her homeland rather than western letters she had never felt entirely comfortable with. Divine powers read the intent of the mind above form. Black lines marked over pale, yellowish dust.

Mortals choose their winding journey if not its end.

A shape of a skull rose and floated into the air. Dust gathered for the shape it formed. Empty sockets
of eyes and nose; dull, ragged cheekbones; a jaw opened. Tamoko held the ritual prayers in her mind.

"Speak," she ordered.

—

No, the girl was an empty-headed, spoiled fool. But she had lived this time so long, and would wish to live a human's span of days. Tamoko's hope was, fragile or no, that the same could be true for Sarevok; to break him nigh to death but not beyond, to go quietly at night to him when none but her would remain to truly care for him, and take him far elsewhere to live the span of a mortal life and true friendships. His sibling included two warriors among her companions, Dosan's daughter strong if lacking in discipline, the other more sober and with the exotic pale blue eyes she thought so unnatural on humans. A red-haired mage with a distant look in her brown eyes; a drow; a young druid with tangled hair.

"Kill me, and you will be found by the very people I have kept from seeking you out; promise me, or I will reveal nothing," Tamoko said. "I care for Sarevok."

"Who could?" burst out the western child, almost petulantly; "After everything he's done—"

"Promise to spare him if you can," Tamoko said. She let the power she had asked gather around her; she was stronger than the drow, and her domain of death was directly opposed to that of the druid. It cowed the spoilt pair of girls well enough. "If he becomes human once more, I have the power to take him far away. I wish him to remain human."

"You were there when the Grand Dukes were murdered, weren't you?" she said. "His mistress—"

"No," Tamoko said grimly, "but I can tell you of that one. She has papers in her possession that will give you knowledge; I can tell you the routine of guards posted by her laboratory."

"Traitor," sneered Dosan's daughter, the red-haired warrior; it was true enough. There were other slurs she had endured.

"Well, you were there that other time," the girl said. She looked to the mage as if to defer to her; her only strength was that the light of madness did not shine from her eyes. "Imoen."

The mage hesitated, and then strangely enough seemed to lead. "All right. Tell us what you wish," she said; in her bearing was some semblance of strength, and Tamoko judged her at least honourable. Of other mages Semaj was madly sadistic, Perorate devoured by his visions, Cythandria unutterably corrupt, Angelo as much a betrayer—as Tamoko herself, though for different reasons. But the barbarian warrior would have given her word and as swiftly and easily broken it, Tamoko thought; the blood of the father told. As for the girl who had thought herself born to a noble family, she would weakly shatter any oaths at convenience while lying to herself that she had reason; the druid was silent as if she would never have given her oath in the first place; and as for the boy, eyes that shade of pale blue were in her sight featureless and impossible to read behind. The wizard spoke her word as if she meant it.

"You know of your heritage," Tamoko said, and that brought a scowl from the boy.

"Evil; corrupt; and Anchev has made choices to fester that corruption. I fight that. But I... I accept that you could care for him." He carried an animal tucked within his cloak and glanced at it; yet he did not seem to be a servant of nature or a wizard.

"I know of my heritage," Sarevok's half-sister repeated foolishly. The red-haired girl nodded slightly
"Fear of death is strength. Love is strength. Family is strength. A family that loves death is strong indeed. Can you feel him?" Tamoko said. "You must know he hates you."

"He hates everything," the girl said, "he wants to ruin everything. I'll do what Imoen says, but I don't have to love him for what he's done."

"You knew nothing of it," Tamoko told the child; she was young and soft despite the recent calluses that marked her skin. "Sarevok came from the streets of Sembia. Before Rieltar he had no one, and Rieltar was a monster without even the excuse of the taint in his ear. Can you see why he came to draw strength from hatred? His divine blood hungers for it. He serves another, but he does not know it." She fingered the dark sun at her waist.

"Voices and whispers," the girl said. "It is true I would not have been better, only less strong. But I know Imoen. And my friends." She held the mage's hand as if for support.

"The...woman of the Iron Throne. She holds much power in this matter," Tamoko said. Her encouragement; a lover's push sending him to madness, flung from a high cliff to jagged rocks below and the feast of crows.

"We need to know of the Undercity," the girl said, all but witless. No—it was a question with reason. Tamoko conquered her tatters of pride.

"Understand him first," she said. "Whether I tell you true; whether you have the honour of keeping your promise."

You must trust me, for by standing with you without murdering you or dying myself, my life is forfeit; and you are the last chance before there is nothing behind Sarevok's eyes but gold.

"We spare people if we can because it's right," the mage said. Dosan's daughter and the drow glanced at one another in dark amusement that Tamoko understood well. Tamoko looked at the grime of the inn's walls; the dark dust on the stones was almost the colour of old blood.

Old dark blood dripping from the walls, Tamoko thought she glimpsed through chounouryouku, other-sight; but the single thing she was not was mad.

For Sarevok, though he comprehends it not.

"Cythandria," the girl repeated. "Does she have another name? Not Cythandria Swandon?"

Imoen loved. She hadn't been able to love the folk she vaguely remembered for bringing her up, Auntie—not her aunt—Gamarie with her polka-dot scarf over her hair and porridge-boiling cauldron; Likki-Bell who taught how to get at pockets from his suit all bells; Saavi-Nicker the boy who liked to push her into the mud and laugh. She couldn't even remember their faces any more. But Puffguts was next-best to family, Phyl, Shistal, Dreppin with the cows, Mr G., Tethtoril—not much children like her, but she'd grown up thinking she was normal and wanting friends her age, wanting to love and be loved—it didn't have to be that way, just best friends or sisters and that love was as wonderful and unbreakable as any other. Family. Protecting her with a sword, jumping in front of her to help; letting her cast her magic spells. Even if she'd gone crazy enough not to remember it all she was looking out for her and Imoen was looking back.

Adventuring with them. She'd wanted it, fun and travel and dashing rogues in a world so much
bigger than Candlekeep, and what she'd wanted hadn't ever been murder even though she'd found it
easier than some, but because of knowing the truth now she'd had to go back and think over if she'd
started falling wrong—

But in the end she fought not to kill but for all the people she loved; and while Sarevok didn't
deserve any more mercy than his slaver guards or his bandits or that he'd given people, people like
Imoen's own uncle—

She could accept that the Kara-Turan woman loved, and not killing him didn't mean they couldn't
lock him up in some hellhole to think about what he'd done for the rest of his life, or just put it to the
hands of the Flaming Fist, or let the woman be alone with him and without his essence for good. Mr
G., I do know you and Puffguts raised me to be kind and with mercy—

Most of Imoen's family stood by her side. Shar-Teel looked down at Skie with almost maternal pride
at how well she was killing things now; that assassin's sword shone in Skie's right hand, the Burning
Earth in her left. There were large hobgoblins summoned, two giant ogres. Ajantis raised the shield
strapped to his left hand and winced at the strike of a hobgoblin's sword; then swung Varscona to
easily pierce its neck. Faldorn hissed at one of the ogres, growing vines from the polished wooden
surfaces of the building to hold the creature in place, destroying floors and walls. As for Viconia the
Selunite-killer, commanding down a hobgoblin—Viccy, who might be on Shar-Teel's side even if
she wasn't on any other of their sides. The conjurer-woman reached in one of her lab drawers for a
series of small, spherical objects. Imoen recognised them.

She reached in the Weave-threads to bind a flame-arrow together; the quicker to finish this the better,
for sooner or later there'd be more guards to come. Bright red, yellow, gold braided together, sent
perfect-aimed to the woman who played with basilisk eyes. But the conjurer-mage'd seen what she
was doing to the Weave; instead of summoning-stuff she reached to the nasty liquid in the backs of
eyes, vitreous humours like liquid and like shield. Imoen'd no choice but to release the flame arrow
anyway, hoping it was strong enough. It passed into the silver and dissolved. There were more of the
eyes in the conjurer's plans; Imoen knew she didn't even have the spell to protect, not even potion.
She plucked a flask of water from her robes. What kind of transmuter couldn't—

"Don't look at the basilisks!" she shrieked as the conjurer called them from thin air. She'd already
begun her transmutation: water, thickening, finesse desperately needed—what else was a rogue for?
One of those ogres was coming too close to her; her mirror-images wavered. Viconia was in the
middle of crying out some other clerical invocation to Shar. Imoen kept her concentration; water
thickened to pea-soup glue, delicately sticking atop the eyelids of all four of the evil basilisks—and
she'd done it, Imoen thought, nobody would be turned to stone even though despite her mirror
images the ogre was too close to her, its heavy spiked club coming brutally through the air.

Skie jumped up in some crazy acrobatic trick Imoen'd probably taught her in the first place and got
both swords in the ogre's neck, ten feet up off the ground; then scraped them down, falling herself.
The ogre roared and turned on her. Imoen stepped away, trusting Skie to protect her, seeing the
conjurer on another spell—

Viconia's voice stopped and she toppled backward. Her skin was suddenly grey instead of black: a
stone statue of a drow. Basilisk teeth lashed out at all of them, but because the eyes were still blocked
the spell'd come from the woman. Not bad, Imoen thought, and then on the Weave a white wave
washed toward her and all her pretty mirror images she'd summoned instanlike with the dark-dream-
power—Cythandria dismantled those by a neat quick thought like a whip's careful angle. Precise.
Imoen couldn't stand that in an enemy. She saw Skie drop between the ogre's legs, moving forward
under its wide tree-trunk legs—and then stab upward into the groin. Made sense for the relative
heights; Shar-Teel'd approve of that one. Imoen aimed off a chroma-orb that she'd barely had to think
about, simple and quick to keep Miss Cythie occupied with it. 'Jantis was coming closer to her, fending off basilisks and hobgoblins, maybe to take mage-protecting duties from Skie— Faldorn's fire-sword burned a basilisk's scales. Skie was moving forward, trying to get the caster, dancing through basilisk teeth.

Then the world in front of Imoen's eyes went black. She screamed in her first terror like she'd gone blind; she couldn't even see the Weave any more even though she'd just been using it— No, that meant it was mage-darkness, that was all. She heard Shar-Teel swearing. *Infravision spell*, Imoen thought, reaching through her memories; *craft it and pierce the darkness—*

She got it up, just before a basilisk bit her leg. "Fireball!" Imoen screamed at the others to duck; she somersaulted under it herself, her leg hurting. The light bloomed around them in horrifying power. *That'd sure grab heaps of attention—* They'd made their own escape route first: a sewer passage Dyna'd set up, not Madam Tamoko, for the sake of common sense.

She could hear Ajantis' scream; he'd gone below a basilisk to shelter him, but in that armour he must be cooking— Shar-Teel and Faldorn simply yelled out battlecries. Faldy's wolf howled. Imoen cast the spell again on Skie, ahead, intangible in that weird dream-ability she'd gotten, intangible to fire but not intangible to magic itself; and Skie looked back with her hands signalling that Imoen'd made it. The conjurer's missiles whirred into Skie; but then she was close enough to threaten her with blade at her throat. The magical darkness disappeared with Cythandria's scream. Shar-Teel could see well enough to cut a hobgoblin in two, and push her blade deep into the second ogre's chest.

*Cythandria Swandon, I used to know her!* Skie'd explained; *Almost Eddard's age. Then her father lost all his money through speculations or something like that and she was poor and disappeared. We used to call her Sissy-Cyth because everything frightened her, even I could run the lip of the fountain without falling in and I was much younger... That was really cruel of us, wasn't it?* 

*Yeah, well, Imoen answered her, if'n everyone who'd got an evil childish nickname grew up to kill Grand Dukes and set up doppelgangers and encourage their boyfriends to start wars to become a god there wouldn't be many dukes left. Or boyfriends. Depended on how much you believed Tamoko.*

"Remember me, Cythie? Did you put those doppelgangers on my family?" Skie said coldly; the conjuress crumpled.

Imoen recognised the woman too, to her own surprise; you never saw the enemies properly until after the battle was done. She was blonde-snobby-lady, there at Candlekeep a couple months before Skie'd turned up. With a scholar called Koveras, silly as that alias was. She'd been terribly rude, and kept complaining about the frogs and spiders and snails that mysteriously appeared in her bed in a strange sort of cycle related to how rude she was to the innkeeper's girl about it. Well, wasn't worth contemplating now; meant there wasn't a mistake on what she was. Imoen threw a set of missiles to make sure a fallen hobgoblin wouldn't get up.

"Please! Do not kill me... As if what you were born was not enough, you have that power." Imoen judged that hatred in the woman's voice. "Tamoko...it was that treacherous whore who put you onto this, didn't she?" Skie kept up the threatening. "I...I will tell you where to find my lord if you do not kill me." Shar-Teel stood in a sea of odd basilisk parts, blood-soaked.

"Give us your documents," Skie said calmly. Faldorn examined Viconia's charred statue, muttering to herself about whether she should shape the stone to heal the wounds before dispelling the magic.

From Cythandria's robes came papers and a book; Imoen stepped up to check them. Spell scrolls, notes giving instructions, the book in handwriting in a language she didn't know, perhaps in a cipher
of some sort. Understand him first, Tamoko had said; and because Imoen was a mage she could see
that point. She flipped through it; her eye caught a roughly drawn map, across from a sketched skull-
symbol, bones drawn and by swords flashing in the air. She nodded to Skie.

"Thank you," Skie said. "If I was a diviner or something I guess I could have an idea of what you've
actually done, Cythie."

"—My life is forfeit anyway." The woman cringed away from Skie's blades. "He will kill me for my
lack of courage."

"But we won't," Skie said; and used the hilt to knock her out through her jawbone. Shar-Teel
scowled. And the career of Sarevok's blonde gifted mage-mistress who was mean to servants in
Candlekeep Inn was over, just like that.

—

And so to understand what shaped him.

I wasn't him; tall, ambitious, gifted. I wasn't him; isolated in a wealthy home wasn't growing up
abandoned. If we fail to learn history and to understand the reasons for the present, the future will
destroy us. You learned to feel for the history of Sarevok through deciphering the Sembian code of
his journal after I broke the lock; and you learned about what he learned from the prophecies.

I hear voices in my dreams that tell me I have the power. That I can punish Father, punish Brunos,
punish everyone who ever dared slight me or try to starve me. I am stronger than any other boy and
I can fight them. I can fight to kill. It impresses Winski even if not Father, but I know that my fighting
is why Father has me for his son. Winski knows I am meant for something powerful.

They say gods are dying and dead. I took a fever and spent days in bed; Father and Winski were
both angry at me. The Weave was disrupted for them by the gods' wars and for some time they were
powerless. With my strength I will never be made powerless. I do not remember the illness at all. In
the old days Mother would have spent time over me. But I must not brood. I know what he did to her
and I will not forget.

Tamoko. I cannot speak her tongue, but I can speak her name. She's a warrior like me. One of
Father's bodyguards but she could be so much more. She's not a shrieking Cyricist like that
maniacle female Zeela; she worships death—and honour. Even if the world is not honourable; even
if we fail ourselves at times. The strong can kill the weak in a fight. The weak are so because they do
not work hard enough. Everything dies, but she is so strong that I think it will be a long time for both
of us. I would spend more time with her...

My Deathbringer training is nearly finished. I blame Tamoko for some of it; techniques from her
land gave me an edge. I killed Flavias in sparring, but my tutors only praised me for it. They are
dark men who understand power. I enjoyed watching his life end. I think the first time I killed was
upon the streets; an old beggar had filched coin that day and had bread in his robe as well as the
alcohol he had already drunken to send him into a stupor. I drove a piece of splintered wood
through his throat. There was more blood than I had expected him to hold, and then I ran away and
ate that day.

I want more; I cannot wait and passively accept fate. Tamoko is a fatalist in that way: she is strong
but refuses to go beyond what she sees as natural. As if she were some foolish tree-hugger! She
could become more than what she is, but if she will not support my ambition I will have to show her.
Winski has been researching my power and my resistances to magic, and though he does not yet
know why he has taught me to use it. I have abilities that none other has. I will not show Father, one
needs to keep something in reserve. He taught me as much as he intended about the act of a clever bargain. Why will not Tamoko support me? She is the only one I...

I have carried out further researches in Silverymoon of what I am like. There is a girl there; Tamoko is far from the only woman in the world. A scholarship student; she has had some struggles in life like me, she understands envy and ambition. Her mind is brilliant as Winski's and her hair is almost the colour of the gold in those dreams of power. Softer. Prettier. She will come to me once she exits the academy; Father will make her an offer simply based on ability. Winski tells me he has found more information of interest. He sees already that I am powerful enough to succeed Father and improve upon what he has done. My new sword and armour are to be made for me alone. I wield power; Tamoko and Winski both can divine something of what it is truly like. I wanted to be powerful enough to hurt those who hurt me, but now I am mature enough to know that goals can be stronger than that.

A child of Bhaal. Cythandria is thrilled, though Tamoko saddened. For what reason? She ought to be happy that I am a demigod. Perhaps Cythandria craves my power to increase her own, but she blushes at strange moments when I am near and calls my name in her sleep. Her demigod. Perhaps more, in time. I will find more about the prophecies and I will make it so before time, because patience can be weakness. Wars are never won by long delays. Winski will show me the grand destiny I am truly meant for, I am sure of it.

The deaths the children bring shall awaken the father, the prophecies of Candlekeep say. The deaths the children bring shall awaken them to become the father. Every time I kill I feel stronger. Cythandria agrees when she is not carping of the insolence of the inn's servant-girl. I begin to see what I must do. Death. Enough to cover the land. Enough to make a god.

The monk Gorion troubles me and I feel he suspects. I have listened to him and heard of his links with various secret movements; he may be my enemy. I must have him removed.

I dreamed last night of my mother, Rieltar's cord about her neck. Her face bloated and discoloured and turned into Tamoko's. I did nothing to stop her death. After such dreams of death I find myself stronger when I spar. I must return to the city sooner or later lest my mortal father grow impatient before his time.

Bhaal was worshipped in this city before it was built and at last Winski has uncovered it for me. My temple. A place to take those acolytes loyal to me. I lay a hand upon the throne and it is warm and pulsing below me—as if it was living, but it is a tool of death. I took Cythandria there with me and had her atop the throne itself. She sees the power that lies behind the rubble. I was not wrong that my blood called to me here. The father shall be awakened in the person of the son. A god is a high enough ambition.

I have eliminated all siblings in my path bar for this one. Gorion's whelp was all I first knew of her, but the Red Wizards tell me otherwise. That one. I was utterly indifferent to the girl those few times we have met in public; they say she maintained a secret life of associating with the underworld and folk of ill reputation. Perhaps that is her gift: hiding from me. It is scarcely a gift enough to win: I could fit one hand about her neck, snap her in two with a bare-handed blow. She's barely the height of my chest. Small, spoiled, brat.

The other Red Wizard I would have killed, but Tamoko requested I stay my hand. I think I will give him to Cythandria as an assistant, if she finds him competent; he is less powerful than her. Treacherous and ambitious and cowardly: by the second part he might remind me of myself, were I such a weak traitor. But since I will be a god there is none I could betray but my own self and ambition.
I can see for myself that the Throne of the Undercity grows in power and pulses with each new death. It grows for my force of acolytes too: they have divine power to draw upon, my divine power. They believe in me alone. I will have far more followers than these when I become a god, but they fill most of the highest echelons of the Iron Throne even now. My mortal father will perish before he can end my plans. A garrotte will be suitable.

She lives, my foolish small sister; had she perished somewhere distant I think that I would know from what I have felt in dreams. She danced with a brown howling wolf and drew a flaming sword—incomparable to my own blade of chaos, I am sure. Waves toss her back to me and to her final death. If she is an important flagstone in my temple—as if her skull must needs fit underfoot to form the pattern of the floor—she will come to our destiny sooner or later. My people are incompetents and I will punish them for this.

My dream last night was of three: three tall and strong avatars, as unlike the girl as werewolf from mouse. I know them well from my research: the corpse of the Slayer, the horned shapeshifter of Kazgoroth, the giant of the Ravager. I see the last as the most powerful, and as a god I shall have it.

I spent today once more in my temple in the Undercity. Bhaal's symbol glows in the floor; I have remade my own. I will have Winski take up the stones to replace it with the deathshead of Sarevok the Lord of Murder. The death of the father only helps the son. I will be a god. I am a god.

I cannot remember what my mortal mother's face was like. I made love to Tamoko in rooms behind the temple last night and it was better than when I was still human. She doesn't understand it but she says that she loves me. Love itself is for mortals; strength is more than that. I wanted her for her strength in the first place. Power can be an infinitely more vivid rush through one's blood and veins. Fear of death is not strength, death of others is strength. Gods do not have to die. Those who lack faith in them will.

—

Imoen traced a finger across the pages. "Can see how he didn't have Puffguts bringing him up," she said, "can also see he went out to lunch and never wanted to come back."

"Good at hiding," I repeated. Why not? Even better: good at hiding Imoen, for he knew her not. Sarevok's map of the Undercity showed two entrances to his temple: one from an estate he owned and used for that purpose, and the second through a disused maze that the Thieves' Guild used as a distraction. Not his temple: Bhaal's temple by the Stream of Tears. Sarevok was...there, and waiting. His mother died; my mother died. "Let's go, Imoen."

—

136. Ravager's Weeping

Ravagekillmurderavagekill...

No human mind monster mind, human not built for power forced inside. At the call of Master of course, shard of power of Lord of Murder forced inside like thorn in red inflamed paw that couldn't dig it out. Giant horned clawed inhuman hands like anvils.

A name, a hope of living, Crimmor, when he was coming and there wasn't anything but to join him. Might as well to be hanged.
The pain was like being burned, licking fires inside veins and blood, things pushing out from the inside. Bones stretched and bent and the pain as if rack-stretched. Pitiless wizards, foul wizards, vile wizards like any Amnian knew. Worse than Cyricists. The golden eyes that made them do it: the Master. Skull-helmed, glowing, bound to him. Gone to his bed in the wreckage of the city, not entirely willingly, taken and thought it was for that alone. Death came. He had no fear of bringing it to others. Ravaging.

*Name, name was once Man...*

*Blood, blood-family and trapped...*

Tears would burn to steam against a head of red fire. Only anger and longing to kill. Master was the anger in inferno. The temple crushed and confined the horned giant. Summoned from there, yelled for the blood-scent. LordLady of Murder. Smell the rivals down. But a smell of darkness hid them. The creature called the Ravager sought to soothe its pain by its name.

---

Cythandria fled through the smugglers’ dark tunnels, already ill and in pain. As Odesseiron an oath, a demigod’s fury inside her body that she could not have removed from her. Inside she burned and froze by turns. Her insides twisted; colour fell from her face and skin. Already she felt ten years older. She had told perfect truth: forfeit for betrayal.

*That traitorous whore Tamoko would be satisfied at last.*

Distance affected. Anyone wished to prolong their own lives; it was only natural. She had no choice. North where war had not yet struck, if she lived that long; Waterdeep, any metropolis with mages who could mitigate her pain. The rough black stone below her feet gave way; her shoes were fine and dainty and utterly impractical. Her knee was skinned as in childhood, and unlike childhood it was rare if any that she had to see her own blood, to know that part of her skin was ripped away and inside her was pumping out. She picked herself up once more. A coward ran from those pursuing her. She’d have hated Skie to kill her by the sword, even now, but the agonies began to make her wish for a faster death. Like Odesseiron traitor to that which she belonged; only Sarevok could have saved her and he would not. She paused a moment against the wall, but the pause would mean death. Someone would seek to show her the components a betrayer was made of. She flung herself forward once more.

She stopped when she heard the sound behind her. She spoke, slowly for the pain:

"I would not have expected you, Sherdis. Do you desire to gloat that the master pleads to the servant?"

The doppelganger’s form changed from a nondescript human man of brown eyes and hair, and retreated to its own self in a stance of magical casting.

"Lady Cythandria, your master pursues the sibling with the giant since he discovered what you allowed her to achieve. I offered this simply because I thought that you would be easier."

She reached for her spell components, breathing harshly; she raised her shield first, a pale cylinder about herself. How long she could cause it to last was very much a matter of degree.

"Sherdis, I taught you, I instructed you; and you trouble to speak of it before you attack me. They are right in what they say of you. You are no true doppelganger," she said. She expected it to cast with what it knew rather than a physical attack; she reached for the magic of scrolls and potions that she...
had left to her. "Wouldbe primate."

The missiles, iceberg-blue-tinged at their edges, redounded against the edges of her mage-shield. She took from the scroll the words to improve her barrier. Burning fire lashed into her and reddened her skin, hot as if boiling water was poured. She had not taught the doppelganger to master that spell. Magelight, it had mastered, magelight pale blue...

It appeared from Sherdis' hands as if the creature sought to show her. She thought for a moment of complacence and salvation. But then against the existing agonies of her mind an enchantment beat to allow entry. She was weaker; her mind-shield not nearly so strong. She raised her head and smiled in its face as if she had only now found her courage, and then reeled, grasping her stomach as her toils sent further pain through her body.

It flung missiles once more. The shield did not give. "I am a conjurer," she hissed, "whatever parlour tricks you have learned besides those I taught must fail..."

"Those I learned from a primate with a brighter glow of power than you," the doppelganger said, superior, casting its missiles again. Cythandria could feel their impact though they caused no extra pain. She remembered the red-haired mage invading her laboratory, though in her state she could not say why; a vaguely familiar face, raining down spells against her creatures. The six pitiless faces that she could not escape from. She stood and glared within her shell of white. Sherdis must surely come close to exhausting its repertoire of magic; another charm spell was tried against her with no result. She raised her hands in abjuration's gesture.

"Try all you like to enspell me," she said. "You fail..."

Sherdis shook its grey head. "Mages learn more each day," it said. "You taught me that. And yet, of course, you have failed to take all into account, Lady Cythandria."

It charged, almost lazily. She swayed on her feet. This was panic and fear; when the golem chased, her broken ankle, her frightened distress and inability to act when it was truly desperate.

Then Cythandria reached her dagger from the folds of her skirt and struck with the spell of strength she had managed to finish casting. Sherdis knew more of fighting than she; it was only that it was unexpected. She had pierced hard through parts of the grey frame that felt like ribs, and the silver blood soaked her robes. She ripped the dagger downward, marvelling at the temporary strength of a —of a godlike man. But it gave her nothing that could outlast pain.

The doppelganger lay bleeding on the ground. Another spasm of her disobedience to the demigod shook her. It hurt all the more for fighting against her fate. She did not stop to finish it off; she drew her cloak to try to hide the blood that defiled her, and lurched on in the dark passageway.

—

"Tiax would speak with ye, and there is no right for ye to deny it."

The speaker was a gnome, staring up at the two of us; we'd walked in the shadows of the darkening light, invisible to most on the streets. Searching, for other outlaws. It seemed the gnome was such a one. He stood with us in the shadows.

"Go ahead, shortling," Imoen said. Tiax was a foot-and-a-half or so below her, bearded, carrying a long pipe marked with very dark smoke in its bowl; he wore dirty black edged with dark purple, a sheathed dagger and a small spiked morningstar in his belt. He looked up at me, paying little attention to her.
"This much is owed by ye; for once you said that all were to hail His mighty name, taking it in vain. Tiax has seen this in divine vision."

He was crazy, or something. I shook my head. "We have no time for this, sirrah. We must be elsewhere."

"The great Tiax will protect ye." He waved a hand to the wall of a nearby house, and it opened to show darkness inside. Was this one of the passages that led to the ghouls of the Undercity? The thieves, Sarevok wrote, used the Undercity maze as a decoy getaway and his man there ensured they did not poke about too closely, for after all there were many formidable undead and jellies there.

"Are you a thief?" Imoen asked him directly.

"Time and time I have done such and such for them," Tiax said. He almost sung; he must be mad and nothing else. "I know why you ask; Tiax says that the way through is mazed for ye, but it is not something that adventurers such as you shall not be able to slip through like a few quiet ducks through a net."

Leave us, I wanted to say; you are no help, and I know better now than to listen to any madman crossing our path.

He raised a callused hand and pointed at my face. "It was within the mines below the Cloakwood," he said, "that you swore your fidelity to Cyric. Now shall ye hearken to what Tiax has to say, or must he force your heresy through the god's power?"

The dreadful memory came to taunt me; I hated to think on what I had done then. I wasn't myself, half-possessed, giving into the taint and not thinking about anything it might cost me when I told the guard that Cyric was to be hailed and we belonged to the dark god, but still I'd chosen to do it—

"We don't truck with such as him," Imoen said.

"Daughter of Bhaal, Cyric trucks with you over the family business," Tiax said. I'd thought his eyes were a pale mad violet before; I was wrong and they were a dark black fire. Compulsion or charm, forcing us to follow. We found ourselves behind the closing wall, lost and listening to him, dizzy as if we'd been out of the world for some time.

Tiax rubbed his hands together. "'Tis some time since Tiax had congregation to preach to of the truth of Cyric! Fear not, children of Bhaal, for ye shall not be harmed this day, for Cyric promises it so. Ye shall not even be found, for the Prince of Lies has promised that to another. But now ye are held to listen, for Tiax will tell of the truth of the glory of the Dark Sun and of Tiax himself!

"It began when Tiax was a young gnome, before Tiax knew that one day Tiax the Mighty should come to his destiny to rule the world. And on that day Tiax was suffering, for the boots of Tiax were one size too short to fit the broad feet of Tiax that on the day Tiax rules the world shall trample all the jewelled thrones of Toril below Tiax's thick tall boots...

—

The crimson giant was not so tall as Ramazith's tower, or the ducal palace, or the Iron Throne, or indeed the Gist or the Jannath mansions. It was tall enough that it was visible from a long distance away through the streets, above the height of many houses, and beat through wood and stone as a ranger running through wide plains might clear tall grasses in his way. It was horned and unholy and scarlet-eyed, and none but a few could recognise the terrifying tales from which it had come. In the stories Bhaal's Ravager had been still higher and fiercer and a full avatar of a god; this one was near
as formidable by practical terms.

Dynaheir, dajemma-wychlaran of Rashemen, was one of few who had done her reading. The sums was clear for all of good intent. Innocents had been harmed throughout this; she did not hesitate to run to fight in whatever fashion that she could.

Even for her the giant was too large and monstrous to view. She saw yellow fire-hair burning behind the horned, scaled head; she saw a trace of human feature in the distorted face, as in a half-ogre's uncomfortable blend of human with other. She saw black teeth like needles in the too-wide mouth; she saw long and foam-tipped slits in place of nostrils that moved and sniffed; she saw the fists like giant bricks tipped by sharp edges; she saw smooth movement that should have been impossible for one so large. Innocents ran from it.

The Grand Duke walked by it, dwarfed, completely unafraid of it. But without exception his other followers stayed as far from it as they could. From Anchev's booming voice the intention of the Ravager's release was known: that his torment of the city would end the moment the girl Skie was to be turned over to him.

And amidst the cries of those victimised by it were men and women who sought to stand against the monster, Grand Duke or Lord of Murder or no.

He was mad, Dynaheir thought. Missiles flew from her hand the moment she was near enough to range. The young bard was by her. "For Yeslick—" Garrick managed, and followed her example. His song was equally ineffective against the creature's hide. He had grown stronger; Dynaheir had not known him well before, but in the city he was a close ally.

*Spells of weakening*, Dynaheir thought; one she had learned from Imoen, the student becoming the teacher—

There were others coming. Garrick sung upon them instead, and Dynaheir felt her feet flying like leaves in the wind. His song called others; let those who would defend do so against even this. In this foreign land a bard had stronger power to call others than a wychlaran could call on the earth and the Three. In the air the weave of the Hidden One awaited Dynaheir for thought.

The red-haired officer in rebellion led: Vai. "Fight against this monster!" she called, and there were warriors rallied to her side; Dynaheir and Garrick joined in casting upon them, that they might fight to greater extent.

—*And last longer... Minsc.*

She could not afford distractions.

"FOOLS," the god's voice came, "FOOLS TO DARE TO STAND IN THE PATH OF MURDER, I AM YOUR DUKE AND I AM YOUR GOD—"

Terrifying madness, far more so than that necromancer.

"BRING HER OR FACE DEATH."

The stones about the monstrous creature cracked open. Druids worked to cast on not the creature itself but upon environs; the cobblestones ate the giant's clawed feet, spiked stalagmites sought to stab its hide and slow it. Dynaheir saw the red-haired warrior of Skie's company, taller and broader than Vai, stab a giant red leg; first that blow pierced the thick hide in a yellow-bleeding slash, and then the claw of the hand snapped about to fend her away. A sword in the hand of a slimmer male warrior did nothing against those scales. The red scales began to knit themselves together in but a
Dynaheir had but one casting possible of Imoen's spell to weaken against resistances to magic. It hurt her to first cast shielding spells, protecting herself when citizens and rebels lay dead already in the streets; and yet she needed all the concentration that was in her. The creature's scarlet eyes with their golden glint seemed to affix her for a moment. It smelt the air as if it could feel her contact with the sibling of the god it represented. Ilmater's name was cried at a distance far too close. Priests there approached at a far nearer range than those of the Grand Duke's own men, grasping the wounded and those who sought to run; and some died. Garrick sung for swiftness in escaping the monster; and escaping the—other monster.

Dynaheir reached for the threads to bind together. In the sight of the Weave the monster was blood and roiling lava and yellow bile, bright as a shooting star. She gathered the power in spears dull compared to the inferno of the creature, sharpened and able to pierce scale. She took as long as she dared to bind them together in all the strength she could give; and then the idea for a focus struck her, and she threw them all into the giant's right leg.

The Ravager did not fall or even notice, but to magesight the vulnerabilities lay open. Imoen herself was yet not here, and were she it would likely smell her out— She sharply gave Garrick instruction to tell it to others: the right leg. And were any attacks successful, in her mind she formed another plan —

She turned her spellcasting to aid others as best she could. Three renegades fought the Grand Duke, a druid protected by a body of brown bark and a male warrior and a priestess calling the name of Helm, and all they could do was to keep him from killing them. The other druid chanted her spells to change the earth, and a cloud of what looked like nails was summoned by another wizard upon their side. *Evocations that affected space around the ones against whom magic failed. Hastes and strengths for escape and lives saved.*

"Right leg—" Garrick's voice gave the signal. Dynaheir conjured her missiles once more, and this time they left true traces in the scales. The monster pounded forward, beyond stone the druid had conjured. It was close. Dynaheir refused to run.

*Duty; wisdom.* "Garrick, back—" she ordered him briefly, "spread thy song—"

But he did not retreat. Dynaheir saw a ragdoll flung through the air, distorted: the shape of a person landed cracked open on the ground. She did not recognise the face of the innocent. The Ravager raised its giant fists once more. Dynaheir felt for her spells, her focus and purpose undimmed. There was another slash opened in the leg of the beast, vulnerable this time; and were the crack widened a little more, a little more...

"Where is she?" called a voice that only wished for aid; "Silvershield's daughter, promised to save us —"

"Swarm of shapeshifters she had Balduran's sword against them—" another rumour voiced; Dynaheir understood that to be closer to work done by a Helmite priestess. Garrick turned his head; and then retreated as Dynaheir had ordered at last. She used spells to invoke ice against the stone for the giant to slip upon; missiles once more to widen that wound. Skie's two warrior companions fought by each other's side, against that leg, and a hooded caster that must have been the drow joined with dark bolts that made direct hits to the vulnerability opened.

Then Duke Silvershield's daughter and the golden sword of Balduran came running to join the melee, and neither the Grand Duke nor the Ravager seemed to notice. The bard—an illusion—
Yet a gain in fighting spirit to those without the power to see through the illusion, Dynaheir thought. She could not allow lives to be lost. The red-haired warrior then made her strongest attack, through path left by the drow. Dynaheir saw the white flash of unnatural bone, and chanted an invocation that was forbidden to cast upon the native lands of Rashemen.

It was fast, even as the wounds of the Ravager closed by its monstrous form; it was powerful; and it needed to be controlled. The air hardened at her will into a mass of metallic darts, each too heavy for human to lift, and these forced themselves through the vulnerability to magic into the joints of the knee. Then Dynaheir secured them to stay. They were poison to earth and flesh alike; far heavier for their size than iron; and they disrupted the weight of a creature too large to support itself without magic. They were Netheril poison that could turn countries to wasteland if exploded in knowledge lost to the ages. They stuck in the joint of the knee of the creature. Then a dispelment drawn from her own bone and blood, resting in the metal pins too heavily rooted to be dissolved. Unweave some of the natural magics that held muscle to broken bone, the giant's magic to walk upright; and then—

The Ravager fell to its side, crippled. The yellow blood gushed from it and it screamed its pain to the air. And then swords could reach to slice through the bared red neck; it could not rise. In the end it was but a human attempt of a true avatar...

The Grand Duke, to whom illusions were nothing, screamed out that Skie was indeed a coward, for she did not dare to show her face while people died. He pointed to the Ravager's fallen form. The creature did not die so much as disappear, roiling and dissolving to something far smaller in a cloud of red thorns. The greatsword pierced through the armoured belly of the priestess, drawn out in heavy blood. Dynaheir saw the golden eyes resting on her for the defeat of its creature. She gathered herself to stand upright; her protections had been long forced out of her by the magic she had wielded.

Then let it be so. Her last missiles clashed uselessly against his armour; by her back was a stone wall and she could not run. One could not defy a god and live. Let others escape him.

Black dust gathered in the air as a small cloud the size of a large man's fist. Garrick, still behind the illusion of Skie, sang out a spell against stone dust and water. A dense mask of mud rose to cover the space before the spiked helm and the unearthly golden eyes. Dynaheir heard the man's scream of blindness, and like others took opportunity to run while they could.

Sarevok Anchev's shouts followed them. They were pursued by a madman, Dynaheir told herself. His gauntlets whirled through the air trying to cut himself though the dust ought to have been simple to remove. He was no human, and screamed like a beast denied.

She and Garrick took stock of the dark refuge and went to see who had to be healed.

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137. Confiteri

2 Eleint

People, asking for help against the god who brought monsters to them. The Low Lantern was a ship owned by smugglers, moored and linked to hidden caves below the docks; many of those in the underworld had been the first to fear Sarevok. Dowager Duchesses allying to pirates, lotus-smugglers to former soldiers.
Imoen and I had been returned by Tiax, too late beyond the attack. There was the Helmite called Annaclair, wounded horribly deep to her belly though clinging to life; the Harper couple seated by each other, his arm around her shoulders and her skin marked by saplike blood. Ilmatari, a woman called Laola Axehand, ordinary citizens, dead. Shar-Teel almost invigorated by the battle, accusing us of missing the fun. Until there was nothing we could do, Imoen and I tried to help where we could.

"Tiax, get to it," she ordered the gnome kidnapper.

"It does not conflict with the eventual rule of Cyric." The healing spell he cast over Vai was genuine enough; Imoen scowled, and sighed in relief. Water to boil and fetch, bandages to hold, work even for the far untrained. We could see that wounds had festered, demon's claws and the scars of terrible divine magics. I used that gift on a young man lying feverish, still unconscious after I had cast.

A long night. It wasn't over quickly as with a sword; long, drawn-out worries that suffering would turn to death, Faldorn having to adjudge to whom she would best grant her healing... Imoen and I were not as exhausted as those who had fought, but I could see her grow tired.

"Enough," Faldorn said, "your lack of gift for it is no longer needed. Even slackers like you two may need some rest."

"Tiax owns that he abducted these two and prevented their escape, for they would both have been killed, and that would not accord with the master of Tiax," the gnome said.

"Tiax is a mad evil Cyricist," Imoen snapped. The phrase Tiax will rule all had rooted itself inside my head; Tiax will smite thee, Cyric is the one true god over all galley-flogged short-knickers, When Tiax rules breeches will not ride up all wedge-like, Tiax appoints you whipper of the slaves and faithless when he rules... His sermons counted beyond abduction and into torture.

Dynaheir pointed to a quiet corner. "That which is done cannot be untangled from the threads of fate; rest before thy final chance. Cyricist, thou will be watched carefully indeed."

Before her strong look he even quailed; that was why Imoen and I had much to learn from her. "Yes, yes, the all-seeing Tiax thinks his continuing to quietly heal would be best."

Imoen and I shared our cloaks as if they were blankets, at the edge of grey rocks lightly sanded. It was cold and in the darkness there were still groans of the wounded. Garrick came to sit with us; it had been so long since the three of us had talked, especially about things that were not the battles we had to try to solve.

"I made sure you were there, Skie," he said; "though it has been years since I played a lady on the stage. Many years, even." He looked into the air before him; I remembered he had told us of theatrical performances, carefree stages and fights with only trick blades. "It's a...responsibility and another world to be nobleborn, isn't it? They looked to you as if a legend. Did you really pull Balduran's sword from a mermaid rock in the centre of the Trackless Sea?"

"Someone close to me helped me find it. You know, Baldur's Gate isn't supposed to be a hereditary aristocracy. I didn't know what value my father gave to his name. And since he's dead I can't ask him for forgiveness for using it.

"What'll you do when this is over, Garrick?" Imoen said.

He shook his head; as if calculating the odds. "Sing, if I still have a voice. I am not made like Dynaheir; I'll travel once more. Funeral ballads to finish composing; maybe someday even songs as
if it were spring again. We were friends once," he said to both of us. "My friendship is still yours."

"Thanks," Imoen said.

"'Till the defeat of Sarevok," I said, and Dynaheir echoed it. She sat tiredly down herself, her robes stained and dusty; neatly arranged as always, but her own signs of wear.

"Defeated an avatar," Imoen said to her, "that's up one from me."

She shook her head. "I fear not in fullness. That must be remedied." She watched us as if she believed Imoen and I could achieve it; she didn't know.

"Sarevok's mad," I said, "but he's not the only murderer. Dynaheir, would you really—"

Because there was no point to replace Sarevok with another the same, and because this was the last chance to say it.

"I murdered a child named Stephan Capetri down in the lowest depths of the Cloakwood mines," I said, and waited for the judgement of the righteous witch. On Garrick's face there was pain; but it was as well that he should know the truth of it.

"And what," Dynaheir said coldly, "would thou expect me to do about this at the present time?"

My jaw dropped. "You believe in doing right! You're given responsibility by the spirits of your land; you pass justice in your own country. Everything about you is that you don't condone murderers, Dynaheir! You have to—"

"Then after, Skie! Afterward find the family of the child and ask of them what should be justice in their view. The price of saving the city—equivocation though it is."

"You condone a murderer to stop another murderer? I didn't think you—" I said.

"I cannot be responsible to stand to judge," Dynaheir said. For the first time I looked at the wychlaran and saw a young woman upon her dajemma, rather than unassailable fortress of good whose dignity had not even been troubled by long imprisonment by gnolls. Ragged; weary; saddened; and as far from all-seeing as any other human. "I cannot be whatever image thou hast conjured of righteousness without error. I am not. I tell clearly that my hand cast the excuse Anchev required for the invasion of Amn; by my hand the blood of my guardian and my comrades; by my failure of wisdom these very troubles. On grand scale I have done the same, and with unclean hands seek to end—and end it, and then seek accounting! Only the purely fanatical cannot seek one's own reasons," she said, and in speaking of Minsc a sob had crept to her throat.

Perhaps—likely—there would be no afterward at all. I could feel Imoen's shape beside me.

"Judge thine own self by thy standards—for one can only do that!" Dynaheir said. "A grave responsibility, and yet oddly freeing. Take that image and ask thyself what is righteous. I can tell no further truth.

"The breaking of dawn is not far."

*The breaking of...all sorts of things.*

Sarevok sat within the Grand Duke's palace, for the seat of temporal power in the city.
"This is...not what I expected should result," Tamoko confessed to the captain of the Flaming Fist who stood beside her at the gates, the dishonourable Angelo. She disliked Dosan and he earnestly returned the favour; crude and cunning and mercenary, and a despiser of women.

Cythandria had betrayed her lover as a coward; his sister held the story of how he had become a god; and his avatar had been defeated by mortal hand. He ought to have...changed, removed from one influence of poison. Instead he had become hated by the city once worshipping him as saviour. To release a monster to city streets was cruel and dishonourable and murderous, and those who followed him still did so from fear.

"Some mighty storms ahead, shouldn't doubt," Angelo returned, impassive as ambivalent.

The Grand Duke waited for a surrender through those white marble doors; of one called Sauriram, suspected of quiet support of the rebellions against him. Tamoko had seen the wife of the old Duke in her meek place in the past when she had guarded for the Iron Throne. Perhaps it was only paranoia that made Sarevok regard her as enemy, though Perorate had not objected to the suspicion. The dowager was ill and mourning, only now coming to give formal allegiance as a noble to the Duke. Perhaps the widow feared him and would fear him still more when he attacked her in his madness for news of his sister. Perhaps Perorate was correct.

_I love Sarevok, and would share his company until the end_, Tamoko thought: for good or for ill. For death or life. Her thread to him could not be so easily snapped and turned to ash.

Should those golden eyes meet her own, what knowledge of her own role in betrayal should come to him?

"Feel like a drink, Koza bitch?" Dosan said; Tamoko knew the man's corruption went deep to the trade of outlawed drugs and other illicit merchantry that went with his many filthy habits. His hand shook slightly as he searched his uniform, and his eyes were wide as if he had already taken something. Few had been strong enough to be close to the sight of the Ravager in unrestrained fury.

"If you insist, Koryan dog." It was only by grandfather he inherited the surname, and his grasp of any culture they shared was atrocious. Between their lands of Kara-Tur was antipathy.

Dosan's hand shook once more, and a silver vial fell from his cloak; likewise did a crude miniature. Tamoko stooped for both and saw the face of a thickset child, the portrait unfinished in brown sepia.

"Who is she?" Tamoko asked, seeing the man's hand reach to take it from her grasp. The face was not his barbarian daughter.

"Granddaughter," Dosan said curtly, snatching his property back from her. The vial went to his lips and then he offered it to her. "She's a good girl. Thirteen. I could have known of her for years, done better with her than her blasted mother."

Tamoko took her own sip of the liquid. Once she and Sarevok had sampled _morimatra_, the black wine of the drow elves that burned throats as if spiked cantrips in the mouth; this was similar in strength and gave an edge of merciful bleakness to her mind. "I have never wanted child," she said. A quiet, serene house by grey sea and shore; books in kanji and practice-space for the warrior's path; a simple place to rest between travels and battles with the one she cared for.

"You're a a clever one," Dosan said. Again he drunk. "She ran from me twice. First to join the foreign branch of the Fist when she knew I wouldn't want it, second time when she left that and a trail of bodies behind her. Maybe whatever fool of a man fathered Tevanie, who knows? She's a good kid no matter what her folk are. Loved her old grandfather for the first decent care she ever
Tamoko took the silver flask once more herself. "Once I had a smaller brother," she said. "He was weak and weedy and I protected him in our youth. I do not know if I caused him to be outcast or no, for I left my clan quickly on a ship. I hope that he was saved."

"Don't," Angelo said, "don't think of it. They die on you and they leave you and they say they want your head on a pike."

"Because you, I understand, held that granddaughter as hostage. In some ways I almost wish that your stratagem had worked, treacherous dog and eater of dogs."

She returned the bottle to Angelo; in a simple orison she could restore herself from this state of confession. For Skie had driven Sarevok mad by his failure to find her; for the traitor Cythandria had driven Sarevok mad by revealing her cowardice; for Riel, curses be on his dead name, had driven Sarevok mad by cruel upbringing; for Bhaal and the Ravager had driven Sarevok mad by their hatred unleashed upon Baldur's Gate.

For Sarevok was mad.

"Wouldn't have hurt her, you cursed witch," Angelo said. "Know her mother won't have her hurt either, for all the good that'll do. I could have brought her up like any noble's child, magic lessons and horse-riding and all that I didn't think to give to my own kids."

"I do not think so," Tamoko said. "People are ever prone to repeat their mistakes."

"Eh. Game of checkers on the gods' board," Angelo said. "Move where you're told to; move where you're made. Can't do anything else with being what you are."

"Blood tells," said Tamoko, cold in the morning wind. "Blood gives no choice."

And yet some had made different choice to Sarevok.

"Can't live with family; can't live without them. Not often they come to kill you in person, granted," Angelo Dosan said, while they waited for the last storm to break.

—

138. He Who Would Be Grand Duke

For even gods are mortal, Tethtoril said; and in the tomb of one such was the device to reach once more this place.

The Dowager Duchess, relict of Belt, came with entourage to surrender; she wore black dress solid of mourning, and a heavy collar of white lace across her throat and neck. She came later than she had promised, almost insultingly so; but enough protocol remained to allow a Grand Duke's widow her entrance.

Her escorts were a young man, well-dressed, bearing a crest and ring of a Waterdhavian noble family; a tall and muscular red-haired woman; and a young girl. Anchev sat slumped, disrespectfully, in the single seat he had left from the four chairs of the Dukes on the dais of the hall, as if he purposefully showed himself powerful above all forces of mortal precedent. Guards of the Flaming Fist in gleaming armour and a few noble and merchant representatives lined his hall in support; and
not far from his side stood the dark-robed, grey-haired diviner Winski Perorate, and the grey-robed, dark-haired necromancer Semaj el Farsi. Sauriram's ebony, silver-tipped walking stick tapped heavily on the ground at each slow step she walked. At her side her male escort appeared to help to hold her upright.

She inclined her head slightly in the middle of the hall, standing above the tiled image of the mast of the ship's bright emblem.

"Sarevok Anchev," she said, with a tone of voice that might as well have been Young man, "I come with my greetings. And my prayers to Helm for your soul. Religion has been one of my few solaces since the death of my husband."

He stood lazily. "The old and mere human, the dowager Belt," he said, bitter venom in his tongue. Then he stood, panther-like grace in an orc-sized form of rippling muscle. He saw the faces of her escorts: the light-haired, soft-faced boy, who was not the knight who had fought his Ravager; the broad red-haired woman, who had not the face of Angelo Dosan; and the young brown-haired girl with deep-set eyes and a green dress that did not quite fit her shape. He ignored them.

Sarevok crossed the tesserae of the beautiful mosaic without heed to its blue and jaunty brown tiles. "Tell me," he said, and reached a mighty gauntlet to enwrap the old woman's throat. "Where are you hiding my sister?"

She struggled feebly, held a foot above the ground; her escorts charged to rescue her, but the Grand Duke flung them aside with a single sweep of his left hand.

"I...do not know..." Sauriram said softly.

"Then you are of no use, old woman." The golden eyes glowed; the fist was powerful enough to snap the neck of a human in moments. The spiked hand tightened. Then a metallic flare of light shone from Sauriram's neck, and she fell backward to the ground. Fragments of her lace collar hung from the armour of the giant. Revealed below the widow of Belt's clothing was a thick gorget piece glittering with magic, and she raised the staff and began to speak words of prayer. Then Garrick raised his voice for song-magic; Vai of the Flaming Fist ripped from her dress the blade once gifted to her upon a promotion; and Faldorn in bear's form drove forward to Sarevok.

Then from the servants' entrance approached the other band of attackers by the simple expedient of having fought the small numbers in their way. A powerful spell of divination lit the hall, cast by Annaclair of Helm, who had mastered the art of seeking a doppelganger. It proved that Sarevok's guards were largely not human; humans feared him and few beside his monsters remained to feign the retinue of a Duke. The doppelgangers hissed for the attack.

Angelo Dosan chased the newcomers, and his daughter moved in with her sword drawn. The gnome Tiax shimmered out of the thin air of shadows conjured by both his god and his rogue's arts, and called words of a dark spell. From the air came a floating, glowing skull in darkness, as if the mad lord himself fought against one who would succeed him. As if it were a necromancer's skull trap it mesmerised. Viconia cast a spell of weakness on the young wizard, as if she thought him an easy target; and he turned on her to cast in return. Jaheira the Harper conjured wide entanglements and dispelments, standing by her husband to fight against recent-minted acolytes who conjured with the golden skull in thorns. Sauriram's chant finished, and from the staff came a guardian in the full polished armour approved by Helm, shining brilliant as a holy spirit summoned to aid against the diviner Perorate. I saw Sarevok's golden sword drawn against Faldorn; and I called his name.

The slash he left in Faldorn's fur was narrow by the distraction, and she lurched backward and placed paws across the wound. He turned. Huge, golden-eyed Sarevok came running. I led him out
The armour was impassable and his speed horrible. I used abilities given, exactly as he did: calling flexibility to limbs to work faster, contorting away from the vicious blows.

"You deny me—" he said. "It lasts no longer, family; when you are dead I will be the Lord of Murder once and for all, it must be that. At last you show your face; I cannot be defied.

"I should have strangled you bare-handed when last we met upon this floor."

His speed and grace was all for the fight, not the dance, and the last time we had met I had been blind to it. He flowed like tongues of fire; and when his blade hit the wall of the palace it sunk a foot deep, cut along the section of wood, and did not even slow. Below it I went aside and did not even seek to cut him in return.

"Live and...surrender it. Live with someone who cares for you..." All but impossible to talk. A hastening spell from Garrick hit and spared my life. Sarevok's own speed matched it easily. In the distance I saw Tamoko's face.

The words were of Imoen's covenant with her and not my own. Killed her uncle; tried to kill my city. But the three of us shared an understanding of the voices below. For the history...

"Forget Rietlar. Forget Cythandria. Forget the Ravager. You've lost yourself, I know—"

My voice squeaked and failed to hold Imoen's words. He continued to fight.

"She is so strong that I think it will be a long time for both of us. I would spend more time with her."

His own words. "The people...that matter..."

No; he wouldn't turn.

He spoke coldly, and more strongly, than me. "The Lord of Murder's power is mine. As for your death, it is inevitable."

The sword struck in a dazzling pattern that I could not avoid; I drew on the gift to turn to untouchable. Something golden seethed inside, anger and hatred and the same kill everything trapped weak nothing. Using that power had it turn, just as Sarevok's own strength was fixed on this; and to embrace it meant this. Explosions of magecraft and priest's will shook the halls. Sarevok shouted, and walls and floors cracked.

The golden greatsword danced, and in my mind I made it what I loved.

By the fire Durlyle's broad hands were gentle at my waist, and with Imoen and Jorin dancing behind, Ajantis and Baldorn and Viconia graceful in the night, Shar-Teel amazing in some duelling practice, purple-tinged sword mercurial lightning in the air, I danced and spun in intricate steps without a single slip...

And on the ground Angelo Dosan lay dead. Almost too slowly, Shar-Teel stepped away from the lump of separated flesh and turned her sights to Sarevok.

I stepped successfully aside. Their blades met, near-equal, strength against strength; he sought to turn back to me but for that moment Shar-Teel kept him purely to her own skill. Tiax the gnome cast over fallen doppelgangers and of our own, raising ghouls to walk and seize...

The Lord of Murder gave a brief glance to the undead at his back and the eyes of the dead glowed to
echo his power. They went forward for Shar-Teel and surrounded me, and the Burning Earth tried to parry their claws. Tiax swore, and raised his holy symbol again, the Helmite priestess echoing him; dissolving the dead once more. Viconia patted her arms to free herself of acid and fires sent to her by the young wizard, and frantically sought to command him down. Faldorn came to her aid.

Sarevok's sword spun through the air, and this time it hit Shar-Teel; it ripped through her armour as if it were paper. She leaned back from the blow, unhurt. He pressed her forward, pushed her back; she spat in his face. Then he was fighting both of us at the same time, I low and avoiding and Shar-Teel high and attacking, every time she had taught me showing where the next move would come. But sooner or later he would defeat and kill—

"No man beats me," Shar-Teel hissed, and then she was flying across the ruined tiles of the floor, blood flying from an open stomach. I saw Garrick's clothes on the ground, his body red; this was caused by Sarevok and I tried to see nothing else beside Bhaal's son.

"—No further distraction," Sarevok said, everywhere at once, the Burning Earth easily fended away—

And then Gorion's gambit was fulfilled. For a moment Sarevok Anchev stopped and stared. Ten Imoens stood upon the floor of the palace of the Grand Dukes, each raising their arms in a caster's stance. The edges of her pink robes were stained by silver blood and the fluid of undead ghouls of the Undercity; blue ethereal shadows tinged the shape of her mirror images; her hands rested in the unseen throne of Sarevok's power; and her eyes held the golden light that ought to have belonged to the Grand Duke.

I faded back from him; he knew another sister when he saw the one truly hidden from him. His amber eyes dulled; blood rushed to his face.

"People of Baldur's Gate!" Imoen's voice rang out like silver bells, and if I knew her it would be to the city entire, each reflection of her moving in unison. "I stand as your new demigoddess. The war will end; the monsters will end; but pray to me! Pray as long as you can and I'll heal as many as I can; the goddess Imoen, pink as summer and strong as flowers—"

A dispel of some sort was chanted by the mage Semaj; two of the Imoens blinked from existence, but the others remained. One laid a hand on Shar-Teel.

"Heal you all—ask me—pray to my name and the false god Sarevok no longer keeps his throne!" Shar-Teel's wound vanished; Imoen multiplied herself once more. "Imoen!"

—

139. The Grand Demigoddess

I didn't recognise the name Sarevok chose to first howl.

"Winski!" he shouted, and turned toward the back of his older wizard; and plunged the sword into his own follower. The grey-haired wizard slid slowly forward, dying, turning his head to Sarevok at the last. Dark red gurgled from mouth and gaping hole in his chest. "You promised me—this is not what you divined—liar!"

There was wide space cleared by instinct around Sarevok; still he moved so quickly that none dared approach.
"For...the Grand Duke's architect..." Winski Perorate groaned. Wetly he fell to the ground. Soon his limbs stopped their thin twitching.

"Semaj! Tamoko! To me!" Sarevok called. Slowly Tamoko came, weaving through the crowded scene, a dark shield summoned about her body and her heavy black armour; Semaj hesitated.

"You've just killed your other wizard—I don't know that I—" the necromancer began.

"Take me to the throne!" Sarevok howled, and his wizard began to obediently cast. Then we dashed to fight him. Semaj's magic pulled a dying doppelganger from the crowd, tore it to pieces in a storm that ripped around and shielded the three figures from attack; he cast mage-words in soft complicated whispers of his own tongue. Tamoko's dark eyes stared at nothing I could tell. Then they were gone from sight.

"Crap," one Imoen said, separating from the others, "I'm starting to get the hang of the goddess thing—cute little girl down in Bloomridge who got knocked on the head when the Ravager attacked—old man wounded in the port battle asking for infection cleared—

"Sarevok's here, coming, beating on the temple walls with his friends," she said, "Dyna and Claud're going through summon scrolls like they're the Almanac in a mass dysentery attack, place's filled with goblins and kobolds and hobboss below the throne, 'Jantis's hiding out in the back with me—Shut up, Ajantis, no backtalk to demigoddesses! You've gotta get down here, I can't teleport you—" The image shook.

"Gorion's killer," Imoen added, her eyes widening as though in shock, as if on the opposite end of a long black room the double stone doors marked by the skull and tears had been forced open... I had never seen the place. "If'n you think I'm gonna let you win you're wrong, wrong, wrong—" The glow in her eyes stood more strongly. "Flowers, healing, grant me the power! Gonna point you right, just get here quick—"

"Go," Vai of the Flaming Fist ordered; she stood, pale-faced, wounded; doppelgangers still twitched around her and not all ought to have pursued him; on the ground Sauriram gave a nod, her holy guardian dissolving into nothingness.

Imoen's first mirror image raised a finger to point the way outside the palace doors, shimmering and spinning as it imitated its original, and then on the outside in the streets stood more Imoens. They gestured the way to run, and beside me Shar-Teel kept pace in her heavy plate. They pointed to Bloomridge, across the Wyrmgate Bridge and down through Cohrvale Street—the Censorious Cowpat, a memory of Imoen describing burst forth. A brief smile there as I ran at her direction.

Then Felonius Gist's manor rose before us; and there beside it was a second mansion, where blazoned on the doors was a scratched and ruined symbol of the Iron Throne. The image of Imoen outside it pointed a hand to the weighty door, and Shar-Teel shoulder ed it to burst through; when it did not budge the first time Faldorn flung seeds against it and conjured vines to grow through it, crumbling the stone. Another blue-tinged Imoen materialised on the staircase pointing down to the cellars, between a pair of doppelganger bodies seared by spellfire. We ran through her transparent shape; then another to the secret door concealed indeed below layers of defence. We rushed down dark stairs that showed signs of being used. Tiax briefly cried to stop us:

"A trap in your way; hark at the great Tiax—" He bent to remove it, and there we continued to the shores of the Undercity. The passage showed signs of recent-building, excavation for Sarevok through rubble and the ghostly remains of the old dead city—

Pale grey waters lapped at a shore of old sand, and atop this was a tall wall that guarded a black-
roofed temple; the doors were open. A brown skull hovered above a gathered tribe of goblins, hissing some smoke that stunk at a great distance, killing many of them in only a moment. Spellfire flared around the mage's shape; dark shields rose to meet it. Semaj el Farsi smiled. The godson by him charged—

A flood of golden magic surrounded Sarevok. It was Imoen's incantation to make vulnerable, and then the next moment Faldorn's vines sprang up below his feet and her wolf appeared before him. In moments he cut it down, but my sister had caused spells to pierce him. Viconia's dark ribbon settled on his shoulders, and the casting showed effect of cracks in his pauldrons. He yelled an incoherent battlecry and turned.

A confused rush; a flash of blade and Semaj's magic; running below Sarevok's sword with Tiax upon the other side, swinging shallowly against his armour, and then I could see Shar-Teel and Faldorn far behind and frozen in place, Viconia bleeding out on the floor, her hammer flung far from her hand. Goblins swarmed Sarevok for the moment—

I stopped by Viconia; she called Shar's name to heal herself. Semaj stood by his master, his mage-shield whirling and holding against Dynaheir's brilliant fires. He reached out his hands and seemed to take something, dark patterns swirling from the open doors, from inert bones that lined the walls and floor of the temple. Then I saw a pale finger, pointing, and everything inside me was gone—

I lay on the ground unable to so much as twitch. The mage laughed. "Master, I have that which the girl could not use; and lend me some of your own—" Then he cried out in pain; but the next moment the brilliant lights of the mage-battle grew stronger.

"Ravager," Sarevok called, "to you also I gave in blood and pain, I summon here!" I heard the crackle of lightning whistle above my head. Viconia, by me, whispered still to beg of Shar. Shar-Teel's grunt could be heard, as if she still lived, but there were no sounds of her moving from that hold.

Imoen's voice replied. "Oh, that lady? I fixed her. She's sleeping in a couple rooms on. One of the first I did. Y'know, there's something that's just not right about twisting real people to evil shapes to serve your evil ends—"

She gave a squeak as if something had managed to pain her. I found the fragment of strength to raise my head at last, and saw that some spell had left a black stain on her robes and cracked the golden pillar that flowed behind her. She glared at Semaj. On the dais the demigoddess Imoen stood in three mirror images, the central strongest in outline, her right hand resting on a throne; behind her was a glasslike pillar through which bright gold flowed. It was the same colour as filled her eyes. Light flowed from her and her robes glittered below their stains; she seemed far larger than her own shape, tall and strong and remote from humanity. Grimly determined, she pointed a hand at the other mage and seemed to strip his shielding. He snapped his fingers in return and once more protections built around him.

"Dyna, Claud—get the wizard," Imoen ordered; they already tried. "'M busy towards—too many mirror-image avatars, got healing-for-prayer to do." Ajantis, standing in front of her, tensed; he held his shield and sword as a statue of one of Helm's guardians by the front of their temple. "Not yet, 'Jantis. He's too strong for you to jump in." Imoen's last line of defence: that had been the plan.

The cleric Tiax cried to the sky, and black fire fell directly to Sarevok's head. There was a smell of flesh searing, for Imoen had made magic to hurt him. The Grand Duke cried out like a beast.

"Duke of manure, Tiax commands your death!" Tiax began another spell; Sarevok's wizard conjured a pale shield by each arm and used it to collect a volley of mage-arrows and glowing missiles of
Claudia and Dynaheir. I could still only watch them, limbs not moving no matter how I tried; surely the spell should pass soon even as the necromancer used what he had taken to fuel his powerful spells—

"Tamoko, kill him!" Sarevok screamed, and the clerical woman placed a hand simply on his forehead. A healing casting—which side was she on—

"You are human," she begged him. "Surrender, beloved, and rema..."

The metal gauntlet hit her face. Her skull had hit heavily against the opposite wall, and I saw a bloodied mess below her cowl before she fell still to the ground. The wizard waved a hand in Tiax' direction, and then I heard him scream. As if he was boneless Tiax fell to the ground.

Sarevok turned. "Death upon all of you," he grated. I'd have—killed the people trying to stop me, first, then the demigoddess, because they were in the way—if I could move, and if I were him. And then Faldorn's small shape was in front of him, and Shar-Teel was still trying and failing to fight her way out of the hold upon her.

Ajantis ran and shouted out, his sword pointed ahead, the squirrel on his pauldrons. He wasn't going to make it. My knuckles scraped against the stone. I dragged myself forward but not enough, never enough. Faldorn, Shar-Teel, not you—

An explosion as if a trap. Purple light blinded all; smoke filled the temple. Ajantis stood in tunic and trousers, a fairy dragon in Aquerna's place on his shoulders, a pool of molten metal at his feet. Patches of purple gathered on the floor; they entangled Sarevok within them, and a moment later he was moved to the other part of its squares. Another wave shifted over Ajantis himself, and then a small green toad dropped heavily to the ground.

In the confusion Semaj himself had lost control of what he saw, and Dynaheir and Claudia were beside him and armed. He reached for his spells, but Dynaheir's staff kept reaching for him as she stood smoke-blackened and proud; and Claudia stabbed across Semaj's throat like a frightened rabbit trying to kill. Shar-Teel had taken up her sword.

Her blade met Sarevok's, and this time he could not ignore her for another. I saw him reach to his belt and take a potion, moving quickly; and Shar-Teel kept up against every stroke. They sheared wide circles through the air too quickly to understand or anticipate. Faldorn lurched toward Sarevok's back, and then Shar-Teel's blade flowed above her head. A hank of Faldorn's hair fell to the ground; she dropped in her place. They stepped above her. Shar-Teel drew a dagger from her arm and slashed at Sarevok's throat. He blocked it with his own wrist and sent it skimming across the floor. The fairy dragon snatched up the toad in her claws and flew to the rooftop's refuge.

Two humans duelled. This time Shar-Teel matched him in everything. No man beats me. Viconia's healing at last finished on herself, and she slowly dragged me to stand beside her. It wasn't a long match; swordmasters' duels are supposed to last only until the first mistake. Steel flashed as if a globe of endless blades covered the pair of warriors. Nobody could have stepped into that and lived.

Faldorn stood and stared and watched; the clerics of the Black Sun lay still on the ground; the demigoddess of Imoen crackled and shone with gold. Viconia's lips parted and her stare to the fight was wide and hungry. The mage Semaj was dead on the ground; Dynaheir leaned heavily on her staff, sheltered with Claudia by a pillar. Shar-Teel fought as I'd never seen her before; as if in a dance, she'd finally found a partner to equal her. In helms and armour and almost of a height the difference between them vanished. The sickly yellow sword danced and did not shatter Shar-Teel's purple blade, until the colours too blurred into one. Then Sarevok's gauntlet hit Shar-Teel's face, and ripped the helm from her head.
"...Like your father," I heard Sarevok say, and for the first time he panted as he spoke.

"Nothing like, fool of a male," Shar-Teel answered, her red hair flying like a bloodied flag. And then they stopped.

The golden blade ran through Shar-Teel's ribs. The purple was buried deep in Sarevok's chest, and his blood ran red-tinged gold already at the more jagged cut. Only...a few instants...

Sarevok stepped away from her; and laughed as if he knew that none other dared come to him even now. He laid hands to the sword in his chest; he pulled it from himself; and bleeding, he ran to Imoen —

Faldorn formed a thin wooden spear from thin air and threw it; I sought to run for him. She cut through his back, but already Imoen was ducked down and rolling from the god's throne. And she was not his target.

The glassy pillar cracked from side to side with Sarevok's final blow. Gold, almost tangible, flowed below his feet by the throne and across the temple's flagstones; it seeped into the gaps of the floor and lapped at my feet. The eyes of the skull of the centre glowed by it. I could feel it, and it returned some of what Semaj had stolen; Imoen could feel it; he could feel it.

—*was in the village that I strangled those thieves, wasn't fair I had to be killed*

—*I'd have shown him others, let me not die, I don't have to be murder*

—*Daddy? Mummy? Please help me!*

—*So that is why I've sorcery, murderer, killer, I liked it*

—*I foresee that the children of Bhaal shall kill each other in a bloody massacre*

A single shape of Imoen lay on the ground, fallen. She stared above at the remains of her power.

"—You do not win, usurper," Sarevok said, and laughed once more. The wound in his chest did not heal; blood escaped from it, flowing thickly and reuniting with the scattered powers below his feet. Viconia had already placed hands on Shar-Teel to begin a chant. He looked down at the owner of the sword he held. "The Abyss, woman. You feel it. It calls for us both. Can you not taste its warm hot..."

Then from within it took him. Golden sparks bled from his chest, the wound widening of itself, suffusing his shape. When he died he dissolved into a thousand atoms of dust, bleeding only into the gold; and piece by piece the empty armour fell. The gold shivered and fell into the darkness between the flagstones. The eyes of Bhaal's skull darkened to mundane stone.

Imoen stood, dusting down her robes, less demigoddess than girl. By then I had crossed the room, and in each other's arms I felt her human-solid warmth.

"Depends on your definition of winning, ugly," Imoen said. "Mine? It *counts*. It just doesn't leave us much time, is all."

We stepped out of the temple—
The golden sword of Balduran touched me once, twice on either shoulder.

"By right of conquest I proclaim Skie Silvershield Grand Duchess of Baldur's Gate."

Officer Vai's armour was dented and cracked; her face bandaged and burned; her red hair loose to the winds. I stood; she offered me the sword; and knelt herself.

"I induct Fylla Vai as commander-in-chief of the Flaming Fist and as military authority of Baldur's Gate. Commander, prepare the holding cells as instructed."

There is a coronation ceremony that begins with the ratification of the votes in the Dukes' palace, and lasts for three days in the city with carnival and fishers' parade and naval celebration; Sarevok forwent such a thing in his time. This was further abbreviated. A ragged shout from the folk by the dais in the marketplace, beggars and merchants and fishers alike standing in curiosity; and then they parted before me as if Balduran's sword had the power to make me above them, or as if they feared all of the late events of the city.

Imoen and Claudia and Dynaheir were ready by the skyships, interrogating their guards and men with a group chosen by Vai. The leftward one, they said, was closest to completion; we set to preparing it as if a real ship. The triple sails flared out to catch the high winds; the arcane controls of the lower deck buzzed ready for a mage's touch; the runed metal plates for an armoured hull shone clean; the glass portholes shone dark as a starry night.

"Say what ya like about Sarevok's Cyth woman, she took good notes," Imoen said, flinging one of Cythandria's notebooks to Claudia. "My goddessy self's scanned it and marked up the complicated bits on skyships, I've got the main points of the flight-start sequence. Dyna can just set up a mental link, you read up the finer controls, and I'll give the demigoddess power boosts while it lasts. C'mon, Hon'bull-duchess-lady!"

Imoen was too tall, far closer now to Sarevok's height than to mine; her size had changed though her body was the same, the way a gnomish eyeglass magnifies a picture without altering its proportion. Her eyes were still golden and sparks flew from her hand when she ran it through her hair. While it lasted we had a demigoddess on our side.

And then we were flying. Instead of a ship pushing west from the docks the ship rose directly up through the sky, first as if it was upon the swell of a vast wave and then as if it was like nothing but itself. The wind of the bright day blew the sails to full mast and below the ground fell away as if the city of Baldur's Gate were a toy miniature of itself, damaged by war as if a careless foot had trod on it. Imoen had taken chief role in the battle with the man who murdered her uncle. This was my part of the fight to mend.

"Steer south-east-east, and bring the sails to portside breeze!" They caught the winds, though winds alone could not support a ship; transferred it as if an air elemental and gave direction. We followed where the maps led us; we had no time. Tellarian would never have expected what he'd taught to be used here—

A shadow to the north that might have been Ulgoth's Beard, Wenric's farm. The Cloakwood from above, a wild tangle of wood and spiky cliff and seas beating against the valley of spiders; the dark clearing of the flooded Throne seen joined to the lake, easily visible from the sky. Had the Dukes been able to spy from above they should have seen it, ended the troubles before it began. The wind
ran through my hair like a salt breeze, ruffling and taking. The currents of the air moved like waves below the hull. A flock of gulls flew beside us rather than far above, birds with outstretched wings on their way to the ocean. The sea's in the blood of a Baldurian; we must take easily to ships of the sky.

The ship drew directly from mages and demigoddess, though they'd had no rest; power of the Weave to mount it and bring it to take back the city's renegades. The narrow, line-like path of the dusty Coast Way spooled below us like stray thread, the forests of Peldvale and Larswood to the east. We sailed on the road to Nashkel in hardly any time at all, from the air hours what took caravans days.

"Bring her to levitation-hold! Lower to twenty; bring down the ladders!"

Nashkel was dark and damaged. From above we saw smoke-blackened rooftops and houses trampled as if giants had stepped over them; descending, we saw the temple of Helm ruined and taken apart, the graveyard violated and with a horrible stench rising from a crude-dug pit in its corner, the road to the garrison marked by soldiers in the Fist's colours who stopped and stared. I climbed down the lowered, silken ladders; and jumped from the end in a way that wouldn't have been advisable in the skirt of a duchess. My hair was dirty and tangled, blown around my face; my clothing the same leathers in which I'd faced Sarevok.

But in old histories of cities with still-longer histories torn by more warfare than ours, the first Dukes are always shown in ragged armour blackened by battles; for the title's true meaning is warrior and leader of wars...

"Lieutenant!" I snapped. Behind me Sorrel dropped to the ground, drawing a longbow that carried an arrow of detonation. "Bring out your captain. Sarevok Anchev is deceased; the skyship above you contains enough spellfire to raze the garrison to the ground; and I am the Duchess Silvershield."

He stopped, and stared, and obeyed. The captain came, with other men who watched the skyship hover above. Imoen leaned over the deckside and gave a cheerful wave; her eyes still glowed a gold visible at a far distance, and they did not find it of reassurance.

"You killed the Son of Murder?" the man rasped; in his uniform he was slightly unkempt, his hair longer than regulation and grey-streaked between black. His face carried a wild, haunted look. Sorrel whispered the name of Captain Saavis.

"Your pretender to the ducal throne is dead. There is this as proof." Around his neck Sarevok had worn a medallion marked with the symbol of Bhaal; I would ensure it disposed of once this thing was done, for it gave pain—and tempting—to hold. And to those who sought to place divine faith in Sarevok, they should know already. "Note also his sword. Order all your men assembled here, Saavis. No, My men. And all the people of Nashkel you can muster within..." I looked up at Imoen. "Half an hour's space of time. Use no force on any civilian."

There was a struggle to obey in him, I could see that; whether he ought to seek to kill me and have the skyship strafe from above, but in the end I had told the truth that his master was dead. Or perhaps he saw something too close to Sarevok in Imoen far above, or in me. He departed to give the necessary orders.

The temple of Helm—Nalin. An old farmer had shuffled up to assemble. I spoke to him.

"Traitor Nalin? Rebels in the woods, with murderer Brage. Milady, we've cooperated—mine and some here; we've not given cause against the soldiers. We'll not be punished?"

"No, you won't be. Stand and wait." Saavis made easy collaborators, then; we could hardly kill
more. There were words also about how many had died in the taking of the town, mage's fireballs
that had killed only children, soldiers murdering the Amnian garrison and the village men who dared
to stand against them. And Sarevok himself had not even been present to lead the Nashkel invasion.

Saavis gave a slow, cold salute. "Your Grace. We stand obeying orders," he said. His men formed
two thick lines of soldiers, Fist uniforms in varying degrees of neatness, as if their rule in Nashkel
had lowered standards. Most of the villagers they had brought to stand witness looked at them with
fear, and some bore signs of past wounds though we had ordered against hurting them to bring here.
A woman held her small, fair-haired boy tightly at her skirts, trying to stop his crying.

I signalled above to Imoen. "Then fear not at what you witness here, for none today will be harmed."
Saavis gave a start; above Imoen cast; and then the soldiers' bodies melted in their grouped line. The
scuffed dirt under their footsteps was empty.

Make the voice carry so they will not run in confusion. A spell of Imoen's augmented my throat; this
time I could make a voice carry. Sauriram had briefly instructed me of some of the words. "These
were men of the former Grand Duke and they have not been killed, only transported to face justice in
the city of the Gate. I stand here to emancipate Nashkel; fetch Nalin of Helm and allow him
leadership." I could see Emerson, the master of the mines, sitting on the ground empty-eyed, his
hands bound by chains; he had been a prisoner in the garrison. Were the priest turned rebel he could
do the task for the time being. I remembered Nalin's black eyes and compelling voice. "Sarevok
Anchev's war has ended."

Sorrel and I clambered back to the ladders; they were drawn upward. Imoen waited for us in the
skyship, and then we flew to seek out the Cloudpeaks Pass. The mountains were green-yellow and
white at their tips with early snow; there was the single pass between harsh rocks and the road past it,
further south than the hills we had travelled in search of the gnoll fortress. Imoen stood and watched;
Claudia and Dynaheir took the skyship's mage-controls.

I reached out to touch her shoulder; looking up at her, she seemed slightly shorter now, closer to
Edwin's height than Shar-Teel's. "How are you?"

"Still got the power," Imoen said. "This is good, y'know? Pretty much what I wanted, except I've got
to do what you want first."

"All right." I looked quickly down at the land below, coordinating with the maps; "—Adjust course
a little north-east. Thanks, Claudia—"

We saw it, rivers flowing on the lowlands below the Cloudpeaks, the roads that led to trading and
spaces for caravans, where a city of a trading hub should have stood bold on the landscape protected
by waters and walls and host to hundreds of caravans at once, some say every caravan of the Sword
Coast at different times. In the right place there was a black blot on the landscape, and by the map
that blot was called Crimmor—

Sarevok's military dispatches were of a success.

"No signs of movement!" one of Vai's Fists called, looking down through a long spyglass. "They
were—call them monsters, what they've—"

"Fly on!" I ordered; had to stop them where they marched; we flew to the south-west, where before
Athkatla itself there were other cities in the path, Salemancé and Vascarra and Zaragois and if we
should find another city that wasn't there any more—

Imoen stood, only taller and bigger than Viconia now; hours of travel. It wore on her.
They'd...military history; by the flow of the river and supplies they'd probably march to Zaragois for its seasonable harvest, an army marches upon its digestion...

"Course—adjust to south-south-west, five degrees—"

And there Claudia gave a cry that our army had marched. We hung down from the ship's ladders, and called to give orders and proofs that Anchev was dead and no longer their Grand Duke. There were Fists leading; and there were men not in uniform, men forced and whipped by others; there were wizards in robes, but I was too far to see the faces. They marched low in a valley; enough of them to be visible from the air, dragging war-machines on their route.

Imoen gathered her power; flung it down; they had stopped to give the skyship ear and eye and though some seemed willing to fight she did not grant them a chance—

The teleport magic was golden over them, even a few shapes who seemed to fight the disappearance, and then I knew they would be in the large cells Vai had appropriated and prepared. Sarevok to Amn to Crimmor; I could almost dream of it, that he’d wanted to kill a city for—

"Out of teleports," Imoen said, desperate to stay practical; her eyes glowed still though she was close to her usual height. "Getting back to human! One stop to go, right?"

"One stop to go. I don't think they split their military significantly." And the navy—but they were accustomed to passenger-birds. Exhaustion showed with good reason in Dynaheir and Claudia as well, but we must fly to end the war and return to the protection of the city for the skyship itself.

"To Athkatla—steer seven degrees to the west for now, sails to catch the northerly—"

We stared at the giant metropolis from above; they stared back. The document had been drafted, quickly, a list of offers dictated to a scribe taken on board the skyship for simply that reason. He was an Ilmatari priest, dark-skinned and ashen below it, ill through the voyage—and yet strong enough to write the words.

In merchantry, you allow for negotiation. And here that negotiation must serve Baldur's Gate, for as many crimes as the city committed it will not do good if it is impoverished forever in penalty; such things only breed more strife in history—

We announced the death of Sarevok the Pretender; the Amnians would view that as political instability, and so we needed skyships and Imoen to prove our strengths remained. We announced withdrawal of troops from Nashkel and the River Road. There was no offer of compensations placed in it, only that we should reassign our soldiers involved in the invasion and return coerced Amnians accidentally abstracted. We raised the matter of the betrayal to the sahuagin. For negotiation purposes, they ought to send between six and ten nobles aboard our skyship.

Imoen magicked the scroll down in an elaborate levitation spell, before the very Council House—about which I had only read. Athkatla's not really lined with gold, Tellarian said; some of the streets were pale and clean and others seemed dirty and dark almost beyond belief. In the centre was Waukeen's Promenade, white-walled at the very edges and otherwise filled by the bright stripes of stalls. Almost four times as big as the marketplace in Baldur's Gate.

The skyship floated high and steadily above the city.

"Claudia, what aggressive measures would we have, if we had to?"

"Enough stored energy to...to hurt a lot of people here, not that we want to," Claudia said, determined though tired. "Hurt a lot of buildings, perhaps. We've used a fifth part of the existing
energy to arrive here; we'll require at least half of the remaining to return. Dynaheir?"

"Invocations," the witch said. "Ice; fire; detonation; gas clouds. They were stored partly in liquid form, partly enspelled into the hull." Her eyes were closed. "On direction. This ship is designed to depend on a group."

"Defensive ability?" The skyship could protect its hull with a shield, and extend it to sails and deck as well; but it was finite.

"An hour's space for full shield," Claudia said. "That should have been first in our view."

"Yeah, well, ice storms from skyships are just plain fun. In theory," Imoen said. "No, sorry, Claud, you're right. Let's try to do better."

It was subtle, but it became clear that Athkatlan soldiers were arranging weaponry, moving it, pointing cannon at the skyship; of course. If they brought it down they could study—

"Raise it fifty feet higher—and show them the shield for a few seconds!" They still had a diplomatic excuse—we still had a diplomatic excuse. We waited.

In Sorrel's spyglass a messenger held up a scroll in the square, dressed in the colours of the Council. Innocents had abandoned the Promenade. Imoen cast to raise it up, showing her power; the golden glow rose like a star.

"They announce themselves willing to accept the surrender of Baldur's Gate," the Ilmatari said.

Surely that was exaggeration. They were besieged on other fronts; we'd seen damage to their port that I didn't want to think about...

"Compensation of a thousand gold pieces for every slain or missing citizen; confirmation of the death penalty administered for all soldiers who fought against Amn; the plans for skyship-building and piloting; rebuilding of Crimmor, Nashkel, and naval damage at expense solely borne by Baldur's Gate; the Duchess Silvershield as a hostage while negotiations progress," the Ilmatari said.

We could shout down that people must leave the Promenade, that within an hour we shall unleash the ice storm and knock down buildings and show what we can do with one single skyship while Imoen casts herself...

No.

"They began negotiation. That's a good thing. Compensation not in the form of gold but in labourers paid by the city and sent to work in Amn to rebuild, six months of man's hours for each noncombatant victim." In order to show both that we are human, that away from Sarevok we can change— "Send all commanding officers identified by Amnians to Amn on the condition that Amn fairly try them for their exact parts in the invasion. The skyships—" Halruaa will object, I had to think; if their objection is divided against Amn; but if Baldur's Gate does not recover there may well be another attempt at war..." The skyships will be open for negotiation in ten years' time. Rebuilding at the expense described. The Duchess Silvershield...exchanged for a single hostage of Athkatla. For—the time it takes to draft a preliminary treaty. Then once more we will exchange, and our ambassadors can find the details..." Often the demon of merchantry is in the details...but I have never had a mind for them. "The Duchess Silvershield and her scribe, if he is willing."

—

A pair of strips of pink cloth hastily wrapped around our wrists would both show Imoen of any
harm; and then they would act.

The government in Amn has been established since 1333 as the creation of the Council of Six, six anonymous rulers drawn from the noblest houses of the city, and while identities are hidden as the Masked Lords of Waterdeep there is likely at least one Jysstev and Colwyvvv contained among them. From lowest to highest they rank Dahaunarch, Pim—somethingarch, Iltarch, Namarch, Tessarch, Meisarch...

Inside the Council of Six building they wore heavy masks and robes, seated in a balcony that set them high above any petitioner who came; guards lined the halls that led to them, and on the ground were traces of magical triggers that could no doubt explode in magic. One looked far up at them; it gave the meaning intended, I was able to tell myself; perhaps that could be overcome inside if known. The priest had nothing to do with any of the war.

"The man who started this is dead," I began. "I'm responsible for killing him, along with a demigoddess waiting in the skyship. Have his sword to hang in the promenade if you wish. Let the Duke's signet ring he stole rest on an agreement."

Imoen performed; she sent out golden pigeons with jewelled eyes that flew like bullets to search for the ships and order their ceasing. She summoned a bronze mirror the size of a small lake from the sky above, and showed scenes of Sarevok's empty ruined armour, of the Fist soldiers guilty of obeying Sarevok's orders taken captive in the city. We should try them ourselves of crimes; we would have to kill those who had murdered in his name.

Crimmor would be enough to make any man hate. They fear the skyships and Imoen and Sythilis in the south, and agree to this...for reason enough. Perhaps someday Amnians shan't despise us.

They chose to draft rather than kill; the war was done. The moment the ship turned to carry us home, Imoen dropped into a dead faint.

—

Tangles and pink ribbons and sinking into blissed blissful sleepatlast.

Like a story about the princess in a bower in her balcony, one of those who could make plants grow by touching them and loved all the creatures of nature as if Eldath had kissed their porcelain eyelids when they were born; then the princess sank into the vines that softly grew around her and protected her to sleep.

Imoen liked pink ribbons better, pink edged with gold, good proper real gold, and as if she'd stolen an entire cartload all at once she sank deep into them. She'd done what she wanted; become what she wanted; and now she was going to have a good long rest in a place rocking her gently to sleep.

"Go away," Imoen murmured cheerfully, "I'm sleeping. I'll be awake in...a couple tendays, maybe. Or...bouncing off the walls tomorrow if Skie brings me those nice sugar cakes, depending. Anyway, I earned the right to sleep once in a while." The pink ribbons were a soft nest she'd made for herself; she smiled to herself in her sleep.

"Imoen."

Beautiful voice, pretty and majestic like a hundred singers all singing two notes at once, odd but lovely harmony.

"Y' just wait there or I'll chuck my boot at you," Imoen said in her sleep. Yep, pink ribbons hadn't gone away; she felt like she was getting some real proper sleepytme at last, so she could be nice
about the silly interrupter.

"Imoen Winthrop."

"Meow! This isn't Imoen, it's your pet cat just going for a walk. I'm not mean and scratchy-clawed at all." Imoen gave a deep sighing breath; someone'd given her a cushion under her real head, she could tell, nice soft blankets and probably Skie looking out for her. As long as she looked okay, didn't make the kid sister freak or anything. Hopefully there were nice roses in her non-goddess-thank-you-very-much cheeks now and all that.

"Imoen daughter of Bhaal!"

Imoen sat up in her bower. "—I didn't steal it and if I did you can't prove it!"

She was a woman, taller than Shar-Teel, shaped weird as if she wasn't human or elven or anything; but the weirdest thing about her was the shining blue skin like a cross between the sea and the moon, the tall yellow wings, and the unrelenting blind eyes without iris or pupil. "...Hey. Who are you, and why'm I dreaming about you?" She pinched herself and even scratched herself with her fingernails. "No, it's not a blood-dream and doesn't feel like one. So what in the planes are you, and why're you stopping a demigoddess' beauty sleep?"

No, she didn't want to be a goddess or a demigoddess or anything, she knew that for sure beyond certain double-pinky-caterpillar-pie. She'd just felt like getting annoyed at the shameless interrupter of sleep who didn't look remotely real.

It almost repeated her thoughts—and she was calling it an it and not a she, because she felt like it.

"You are no demigoddess, Imoen, no longer. Sarevok's throne was shattered and you exhausted the powers within you. You have what you wanted."

Imoen raised her head. "Yeah, and don't you forget it. Me and Skie're rogues; when we don't get what we want we know how to nick it. Unless it's nastyevilwrong, of course."

"I...know, Imoen. Your cheerfulness and innocence are your shield."

Now that...echoed, even more than the strange voice did. "Hey! Did you steal Mr G.'s letter from me or what?"

"I am a solar, Imoen. It is my duty to know."

She knew about solars, she read books. Plane spirits, s'posed to be nice ones but still scary, because absolute good could be scary just like absolute evil if it couldn't bend and be nice to people and have a dance and a drink and a silly rude song or two— "All right, solar lady. What is it?"

"Do you think you and Sarevok could try to seize the power of your father and not have it echo through all the planes? He is gone to where you cannot follow now, but you took it and lived. There are others, Imoen, you held only a portion of murder. They mass and they hunt, and sooner or later they will come after you. Sooner, for your glowing like a bright star."

Imoen thought about it. "Then if they get me instead of Skie—then that's okay. She did the same thing for me before she knew she was doing it."

The solar shook her head. "It will not be so simple, Imoen."

Islanne, Imoen remembered, magical lady dwarf; different entity completely, same ghostly-abstract-
stuff, when what she really wanted was a nice handwritten list on how to cast the make-'em-
vulnerable-where-it-counts spell. "So what've you got that I need to know? Look, I'm sorry I was
nasty to you, solar lady, I'm just tired. Maybe we'd like each other a lot if we met someplace else.
Just tell me something that'll help me protect Skie and everyone else, Vic and Shar-Teel as well as
Claud and Dyna and Faldy and Ajantis and the squirrel and Lady Sauriram and her niece Lizabeth
who used to own the nice petticoat and...whoever."

Because Puffguts and Mr G. brought me up right in the end; because when things get tough I know
what I've got to do. Imoen's clothing was her pink mage robe, now, glowing like the dawn between
her shifting ribbons as she stood with it falling nicely around her.

The solar almost...laughed, in bellchimes-from-heavenly-planes-like-flutes-and-nothing-like-
Kirinhale, and Imoen congratulated herself that she'd even make a solar quit takin' herself seriouslike
all the time.

"Then learn more of the planes, Imoen, for your fate will call for you. Know that once more you will
have the choice of an even greater power. And on that day, may you choose rightly..."

Then the solar was a blue blur slipping away from her and she was drowning dark brown in normal
sleep, falling back into something warm and soft and safe so she didn't mind it, sleeping a long time
and not bothering to get up until she was really sure Skie meant it.
Chapter 5

141. Settlement

On the tenth of Eleint a final treaty and compromise. A quill pen that had belonged to my father filled the space on the parchment with a peacock-coloured signature in loops. Sauriram gave a nod. The Amnian ambassador took it back across the table, well-dressed in patterned cream below a foppish golden waistcoat, a large green plume in his velvet coin-tipped hat.

"With the approval of the Tessarch, this shall be signed."

"A pleasure, Ambassador. I look forward to our tea in the blue dining room."

Below the window of the Grand Duke's study, the city moved. Labourers rebuilt our docks, worked on skyships in our fleet, bought and sold and wandered free from curfew. They say there are fortunes to be made in rebuilding as much as in war; the ducal coffers stood dangerously low. But if as many as possible in the city worked to repair Sarevok's damages, recruits returning the Flaming Fist under Vai to what it had been, foreign trade arriving no longer afraid of the Duke to stimulate the economy... What I wanted was the city's healing; let it take what it wished of Skie Silvershield. I tried to walk through the streets and talk with as many as possible; much to learn and to make them believe in an accessible Duchess who truly cared. I was tired enough that those days all came to me in hard-worked fragments.

Never a repeat of Crimmor. Never again. Two years of a man's labour for every dead Amnian civilian in the final settlement; the city to be rebuilt some distance from the old Crimmor, continuing down the stream. Every year henceforth, a proclamation that ten of the families of the Grand Dukes, ten of the Flaming Fist, and ten of the ordinary citizens of the town, chosen by lottery, shall travel south to that black stain upon the landscape; shall see what was wrought there by our city; and and shall know that it must not happen again.

Were I in the place of a soldier for Sarevok should I have followed orders? Yes, probably. Imoen wouldn't have; she was defiant for all the right reasons. Shar-Teel wouldn't have wanted to obey a man. Vai and Scar and Sorrel and Laola Axehand and all those who chose to join them: hadn't, in that exact place.

The next parchment on the table was an account of a doppelganger quelling by Annaclair and other Helmites. A nest of the creatures was found in the Iron Throne's cellars; all gatherings of nobles and merchants carefully tested for presence of the creatures. A false face caused terror and fright. Claudia Besancon had suggested that oversights were needed for the merchants selling amulets supposed to protect against the creatures, and in reward for her sins she'd been that figure above magical goods in trade.

And volumes of elaborately written correspondence from Halruaa to deal with, regularly dispatched by complex magics to force themselves to attention. It was far; they would have difficulty declaring open war; should skyship battle result in skyships fallen to hostile territory their secret would be further spread. The Grand Duke who had illicitly obtained their plans and murdered their ambassador was dead already; no further penalties could be reasonably invoked. Then if we sold to Amn after all in the end, the threat should at least be disseminated. We had to make careful plans; the fight was more complex than I'd expected, but had to be done.

Imoen was probably in the temple of Mystra once more with the priests, seeking gods to deal with becoming one; being forced to become one. The told tale was that she had given up the power to
stop herself from becoming a monster as Sarevok, that she had made the noble choice. But her name was still called in prayer. In the streets people in sickness pulled on her robe and begged as she passed by, and she could do nothing for them. She had dreamed of what she had done.

A meeting with the merchant's council before the Amnian ambassador's tea. Sashenstar held a grudge over that theft from him; but he was the ablest who had not been replaced by doppelganger. It was good to have merchants who challenged ducal presumptions; for the more ideas the better ones. I walked with Sauriram, who still recovered from her own fight.

"For brave deeds to save the city above and beyond any duty. Commander Vai and I acknowledge the heroism of the fallen souls, first." Scar, casualties of the Ravager, deaths of soldiers and priests and innocents and vigilantes at Sarevok's hands. Almost all wore mourning's black at the ceremony ten days after Sarevok's defeat.

"Imoen Winthrop, for seizing the Pretender's power; for returning it to live humbly as a human. To Annaclair of Helm, for courage and farsight beyond the course of duty." Polite or not, she deserved her acknowledgements. "To Viconia DeVir, that she may be recognised as a citizen of Baldur's Gate and to walk openly here at will. To Tiax, for his injuries suffered in Sarevok's temple.

"To the exile Shar-Teel, a full ducal pardon." She was still confined to bed, and would not have wanted to be present at such a ceremony in any case; Viconia took the document on her behalf. I had looked up the events surrounding her outlawing in the protected records of the Fist; knew how many bodies...

"Ajantis Ilvastarr of Waterdeep; Faldorn of Silvanus." She had turned him back to human the day after the battle; and Aquerna in the shape of a squirrel once more, for the moment on Imoen's shoulders. "Dynaheir of Rashemen and Claudia Besancon. Garrick; Sorrel..."

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned after the war was how to speak from the bottom of the lungs to sound as if you knew what you were doing. "Heroes who risked and lost their lives against the Pretender. Because they saw what was wrong; and instead of choosing to run away sought to end it..."

—

The Harpers had already left the city in their quiet, secretive way; spending a final conversation with Imoen in memory of Gorion.

"G-gorion would have been proud of your actions, Imoen."

"In the end they were motivated well," Jaheira said. "That you chose to surrender such power and that you do not seek it; he would praise that in you."

"Mmm. Thanks. You're probably as right as you think you are."

"Call on us if ever you need us," Jaheira said firmly. "Which you failed to do the first time, I must add."

"Sure. Friends?" Imoen said, and stuck out a hand; Jaheira looked thoughtfully down at it.

"One who has been called a demigoddess can no longer be called ward or child, Imoen," she said; and clasped her hand as an equal. "And fare you well, Skie," she added as an afterthought, with the phrase Led Our Imoen Astray perhaps on the edge of her tongue. Imoen slipped an arm through mine.
“Harpers are a bit of old stick-in-the-muds,” she said to Khalid’s and Jaheira’s retreating backs, "but in the end they weren't so bad..."

"Who knows? Perhaps we'll see them again," I said. "But I have to be at the Merchants' League at the next half-hour; then the Fist compound; then to christen the second skyship at the docks..."

"And I'm...not doing anything to blacken our reputations by nicking anything, though it's a grave sacrifice," Imoen said. "Heh, it'd be pretty funny if a demigoddess and duchess turned up on the Baldur's Gate thieves' guild doorstep asking to join, wouldn't it? So much for your promise, kiddo."

"I don't know, Imoen. We could always officially incorporate the thieves' guild into the ducal government and formally oversee them," I said. "They get to make merchants of a certain income level pay insurance against thievery, and their job is to refrain from robbing those paying them off and then drive off all the unlicensed thieves... No. That'd never work."

Imoen had seen the thieves' guild, breaking in to the stone staircase to the Undercity Sarevok knew about, descending below in her small, invisible group. In Cythandria's record the guild seemed like small fry, uninvolved with most of Sarevok's plans; but cleaning that nest was somewhere on Commander Vai's list of tasks.

A small child ran in the streets; for a moment Imoen's hood flared in the wind, her red hair flying free. It was enough. "Lady Imoen!" the child called, loudly enough to capture attention; there was a Flaming Fist on the corner, turning to see. Technically Imoen and I had escaped our escort for the moment, but this one saw.

"It's my momma, Lady Imoen, I prayed all night as you said but she's still gone! Please, help me find her—"

"Bread, Lady Imoen, for the children, no food left in the house, please—"

"Heal my brother's leg, Lady Imoen, you healed my hand, I pray you to help once more—"

"Go to Dowager Saurirarm, go to Ilmater, go to Helm, go to Gond; I'm not a goddess only a girl—"

"Imoen, let me touch your sandal, only your sandal as you pass—"

"Imoen, a piece of your holy robes, please, help me—"

"Imoen, your hand for only a moment—"

We escaped; the Fist scattered people for us, or else it would have been a mob hurting her. But instead it was the child pushed away, still calling for the help she needed.

—

My father's estate was cold and empty when I found the time to return to it. Searched for doppelgangers by the Fist; left deserted, and then plundered by opportunistic thieves. Rightly, it belonged to my second cousin from Waterdeep I couldn't remember meeting once when I was a child. A merchant in his own right. One of Brilla's heavy glass vases lay broken across the vestibule. She bought them from an artist in the temple district, a Lathanderian, all bright colours of glass in swirling patterns like storms at dawn. The glass chips and splinters lay scattered across the floor, some of them above the body of a tiny, slain dog. Paintings were ruined, scratched out of their frames; even the wooden panelling taken and stripped from the walls. It wouldn't have been right to make guards protect this place when there was so much else the city needed. There was still doppelganger's blood on the floor, silvery, in some places mixed with red.
But there were cellars and doors kept as a merchant's secure space; for my father, it was largely old port that to me tasted like ashes mixed with dry sticks, instead of the secrets less scrupulous businessmen would have kept there. They'd recovered no bodies, when it was true that Brilla and my father had to be dead; I went alone down the stairs. Someone, or something, had oiled the hinges of the concealed door.

*Should have brought someone... No. My responsibility, Father.* Besides, it seemed most of them were already dead. Down into the old rooms, a lamp casting ghastly shadows on uncleaned walls. They'd smashed much of the containers of wine, barrels splintered and bottles broken. Then if my father wasn't already dead naturally he would be so of an apoplexy, for this... It wasn't at all funny.

Then the small booted foot, lying at the edge of the light, below the stairs. Silver-buckled. Blue stockings. A fair-haired older woman with bloodied wrists, skin flaccid and hanging over the body as if out of weight recently lost, clawlike fingers damaged and scratched, an old light blue dress ripped and ruined and soiled, a gag shoved into the mouth.

It was Brilla, and from Viconia's words, from bodies we left behind in our wake and sometimes travelled back to, I didn't think that she had been dead more than five days or so.

An old man's body, unchained. The skin more decayed than the woman's; blood blackened and pooled and a horrifying stench. Bloodstains on the front of his shirt, dark-brown-black. Beyond him bodies in familiar clothing, familiar features—Dora the chaperone and Halme the butler and Kioun the head valet and Diayla my stepmother's maid. Nothing breathed or rose.

I sat down. "Brilla? I'm sorry I didn't come earlier. I did know it wasn't really you when I threatened to kill that doppelganger. I thought you were dead. Please forgive me. I don't know what you'd have wanted and I guess you can't tell me. You were always nice to me even though I wasn't yours, and you were nice to Eddard no matter what he said to you. I'm sorry they killed you. They're probably dead now themselves. You deserved better."

Then I looked away from her.

"Father, I tried talking to you before, but you weren't listening then. Not that you're listening now. I hope you're happy in Tyr's realm with Eddard. Gorion was right about me, he told you the truth, and I don't know whether it's still true that I've got your eyes. I'll deal fairly with the estate and make sure that cousin Evander has what you'd have wanted. He was meant to be after Eddard anyway.

"I wish you'd managed to live through this. You could have gotten better and been a duke again. You'd know how to put things in order after Sarevok. You'd be used to knowing everything a duke has to do. I'm sorry I kept thinking that you didn't care because you ignored me. I know how busy you were now. And I'm sorry that I didn't try to stop Sarevok before he killed you. That part's my fault. The influence's existence wasn't my fault.

"I'm trying to fix things. More importantly, people want them fixed and help me. I suppose I'm Sauriram's figurehead, but that'll change. I know now what the Harbormaster does all day and how to decode the Merchantry Overseers' tables, how to search the records of inter-temple disputes and distribute the city clerical services, how to run a fleet of ships out of a harbour that only ports fifty at a time, how to rebuild it and manage it for more than the ordinary ships. How we're going to coordinate our flying skyships to transport goods faster than anyone else, and it's not just because we were first to steal from Halruaa—there's some designs in the skyships from Cythandria Swandon, and some from someone called Sakul, and Claudia redesigning the spells in the hull from the bottom upwards, and Imoen and Dynaheir on the evocation weaponry. In the end they'll spread like almost all inventions. That's not a bad thing, just a temporary advantage. We don't hate mages, so we can commercially beat Amn and earn back more than enough to compensate them.
"You'd have liked to fly on a skyship, I know. You liked your ships. And you'd have wanted to know that Balduran didn't sail off the end of the world after all, although he was a slaver as well as an explorer. Maybe you'd have agreed with me that Durlyle was kind and thoughtful. I think you'd have liked Imoen, and Ajantis, and maybe even Shar-Teel, because she's a warrior. But you'd have hated to see what Sarevok did to the city.

"I can't be you, Father, but I'm trying to be more like you at the moment. Please try to forgive me trading on your name."

Nothing answered back except for water dripping from the walls.

Shar-Teel was in Umberlee's temple; Viconia treated her in one of the upper rooms. She wouldn't die; she'd soon be agitating to swing a sword again. All that healing could do for the one who'd struck the deathblow on Sarevok.

Tenya called a greeting of surfacer-fool who failed to worship the Bitch Queen; Jalantha Mistmyr asked for the raising of Umberlee's tributes once more. It would be best to be very tactful and respectful, and not to raise the point that skyships would be more likely governed by Shaundakul or Valkur.

"How is she, Tenya?"

"Always complaining that she knows better how to be a dark priestess! She's mean and she knows much less about entangling people with seaweed or darkness than she pretends to know," Tenya said. "I think she's a kindred spirit... Oh, the warrior? She keeps making me bring her beer."

The Umberlants keep drier rooms above the water that lines the bottom of their temple; for the few invalids they allow to be treated and for storage of the less sacred things. I could recognise the red hair of Sheelae, the cook's daughter who wanted to be a priestess—her mother was nice, and left our house long before the doppelgangers. She was a full-fledged Waveservant now, like Jalantha Mistmyr wearing the regalia of blue fishnets, green foam-edged cloak, and ropes of shells and pearls across her body. And the skeletal hand of a drowning victim at her neck. My city; people I know. I knew where they were; I'd seen Shar-Teel settled here while she still lacked consciousness, the sheets soaked with her blood.

Behind the door there were two women's voices, and I didn't trouble to knock.

Viconia was—supposed to be healing her from Sarevok's blade.

"Mrimmd'ssinss—xut morfeth uns'aai ni'fuer—" the hoarse drow language cried out. "Vith'usstan, Shar-Teel!—"

Shar-Teel's less articulate grunt followed.

You don't have to strip to cast healing spells— came the first thought.

—And why is that possible, I didn't think that was possible—

—and really didn't think I should be watching—

Mrimmd'ssinss - my female lover
142. Counting Over

"The votes have been tallied. The new Dukes have been drawn by the voices of all landowners,” I said.

Had Sarevok heard a speech like this on his Shieldmeet coronation? In a sensational novel I should have seen the shade of his tall armoured form standing here across from me, a gauntleted hand outstretched impatiently to receive his letter patent. But the floor was empty, and repaired as if he had never ordered it damaged.

The outcomes were as predictable as they had been for him, if better protected against tampering. The Dukes' hall was repaired enough for this, and this time the ceremonies were watched by truesight.

"Sauriram Belt."

The greatest number of votes; I remembered Sarevok's grip on her neck the last time she had stood in this hall, and her changing of the battle. She walked quietly with that walking stick tipped by Helm's symbol; and wore the Guardian's emblem on her chest as a necklace, the same holy symbol I had seen on her husband a thousand times.

"When my husband came to serve you as Duke thirty years ago, he promised to guard this city under the auspices of the Vigilant One. I watched him serve this city until his death. I can do nothing else but stand in his seat. Against the young ones who go to make up your new Dukes, three who shed blood for the city—I have a long memory of the past and the old standards of honour. These must be united as we seek to repair what has been done.

"I bear some of the guilt for failing to notice the Pretender's rapacious ambition before he seized his place in blood. The city shares the guilt, as it must also share what we have to step forward. Regardless of what I myself live to see, I hope for a future that guards from its past," Sauriram said.

For a moment her symbol of Helm flared a brilliant white, as if the Watcher himself chose her as the clerical voice of Baldur's Gate. She sat calmly as if she had taken no notice of it through the cheers for her, her cane firmly planted to the ground.

"Fylla Vai."

Another easy choice; the commander of the Flaming Fist always has a seat on the Grand Dukes. She didn't have Eltan's stiff walk, and her armour was more battle-ready than his formal polish; but she shone in her own way, her red hair bare and bright.

"I'm a plain fighter," she said, "a plain speaker; and I was a plain Captain before this, and if my commander were still alive I'd be cheering him for Duke. But I'm here because the men and women in my command turned down Dosan's brute murdering squad, and I went to lead them to something like the Fist as it was meant to be. We fight for pay, but we fight with honour. We don't wage war against those who can't fight back. We don't shove citizens away behind curfews. We don't lock people up for saying a few words against the Dukes or the temples or anything you like. We won't even lock people up for words against me. You speak up to us when there's something wrong, and
we'll earn your trust by our actions responding to it." She joined Sauriram, standing, squaring her shoulders to face her people.

"And the third largest tally of votes was to Claudia Besancon."

That was what being a mage and accustomed to Baldur's Gate gave you. Claudia's win was narrow above Fierran Jhasso; among the four Dukes should be at least one mage. Patient, hardworking, and clever as Imoen. She blushed fiercely to mount the dais.

"Good...afternoon," she began, softly at first; and then Imoen moved her hands from behind the dais and winked at me. Claudia's quiet voice magnified itself. "I thank you for putting your faith in me. I will repay that trust with all that I am able to do. I began the fight with a host of others who believed and showed me that Sarevok...was a murderer. His might could not make such a thing right. There are those worthier who cannot b-be here—" she hesitated on that—"because they are dead. I am a mage, and I have served by untangling enchantments connected to Sarevok's monsters, and by building new enchantments. I want to encourage other mages to take part in the city. To use arcane power in the service of right, instead of to fall into the trap that power justifies any atrocity one can think of.

"And, we four...I also think it worth celebrating that there have been thirty-two past Councils where only men sat. This is the first of four women. I am a mage and I am a Baldurian and I am a person as well, as the other Duchesses are many other things. It is not that we must not encourage men, but we want...our daughters to have the same ambitions as sons, for whatever they may choose to become. I want my seat on the Council to be seen as in the interests of your daughters."

The inevitable heckling that women must have voted for her was muttered; but mixed with that a fair share of cheers. That was—interesting, I thought; and I saw Imoen whoop in impressed jubilation.

For three days the full celebration, as improvised as we could make it: a carnival of glittering fish scales instead of flung sweetmeats, parades and dances across the reconstructions of the docks, balancing on long beams above lapping waves, and one skyship flown briefly for the sake of fireworks invoked by Dynaheir and the fourth Grand Duchess. A busy time; an easier time before what would shortly begin under a quorum of four. I searched for an unconnected man to find something else I cared to know.

—

We swore trials of the crimes of war to the Amnians. They gave us the expense and took the oversight; they wished any killer of civilians to pay the price. We'd pleaded for the lives of the common recruits, who would be sentenced to labour if they had not the brutality of others. As for the higher of rank who had ordered or committed burnings of Nashkel innocents, Crimmor, other raids—in Helm's justice there was no escape for murderers, said a suddenly iron-faced Sauriram, and I looked to the ground.

Four travellers from Nashkel had come, protected by an older man with salt-and-pepper hair and a straight military stance. His face seemed familiar, though the forceful glance in his stern dark eyes was surely not; and then he seemed to recognise me.

"Girl in the temple," he said. "By the one who answered death. Pardon me, young woman. I was not myself then."

Captain Brage; the one who'd killed his family and gone mad into the woods before Dynaheir had brought him back. He'd been in Nalin's temple, a broken man consumed by remorse of his madness. But now he looked like the military man he must have once been, clean and armoured and
disciplined. It had been said that he and Nalin and others hid in the woods and fought the invaders of Nashkel.

"I have no right to plead my own case, but I escort these witnesses," Brage said simply. "Nalin sends his regards." And in keeping with his statement he stood in the back of the court and said not a word, though the Nashkel four seemed to gain comfort from his presence. A young girl, a woman, and two men; their faces were vaguely familiar, but in our times in Nashkel we had never spoken to them. When they told their tales of what Sarevok had ordered to be done—

"Anthonias Saavis, your former men Jarvik and Thanillan accuse you of giving the order on the sixteenth of Eleasias to fire the store of an innocent shoemaker, while containing his son and daughter of age twelve and seventeen respectively. Taylan and Domilla of Nashkel, Amnian citizens, accuse of..."

"Havemercy Fullveig, you stand accused of firing crossbow bolts into the purge of Crimmor by the survivor Rafe Fenwick and recruit Catrin Smithson."

"Ghoan Arravan, as lieutenant under Angelo Dosan you stand accused of illicit imprisonment and torture of the political prisoners Calviran Jannath, Vaela Faldrian, Eagus Coopmaker."

"Edwin Odesseiron, citizen of Thay, Fallis of Nashkel is direct witness for your murder of Elma Shireal, Jom Ironmonger, and Lalvan Ollasson by fireball. And in addition of partaking in the massacre of Crimmor by your magic; that maliciously you committed what you knew to be crime even in the context of war..."

I'd expected Edwin; Sarevok had briefly described him in his own journals, and Imoen and I had found records that he was among the prisoners she'd taken on the march to Zaragois. On paper they had made him officer, a mage. He was scarcely recognisable: unkempt, wild-eyed, his beard grown and his hair greasy, almost hysterical while the guards sought to fasten him to a chair in case of his use of magic.

"Simians! You have no right to judge me, peasants, slaves. You know not who I am!" Red-faced, he strained against the iron bonds; and fell back as if in an apoplexy, silenced.

"I would ask to have no voice in this matter," I said. "I have met this man in the past and it would be wrong to bias the trial." The Council of Four were not the formal judges, rather a Fist-appointed man of the law; but had power to directly oversee and to adjust sentences.

"Duly noted, Duchess Silvershield. A fair trial before we hang the foreign scum."

"—And that kind of language is also not acceptable."

A mutter of: wouldn't think so if she'd read what he'd done. Witnesses; records; of course he was entitled to a hearing.

"Prisoner, to the charges against you, do you claim any defence?"

Again Edwin's wild look searched the court; he would have read no sympathy in the eyes of the watchers, nor judge nor witnesses. He saw my face.

"—Wretched weeping brat! All your fault! Crying all night! Not even sewing a simple seam correctly! I—" His voice hoarsened, and his stare changed to something of his past sharp look through his dark eyes. "I have vital information to you, child. I know the truth of what you are! I know truths of your lover you will pay to hear! You must release me, you have no choice!"
"You speak as a madman. My lover is the city of Baldur's Gate, and there is nothing I care to hear
from your mouth about it. Certainly not to turn aside the course of fair trial."

And the truth was that the city needed him fairly judged, and that was far more important than
anything that he could tell about Eldoth. Imoen, in the audience of nobles, gave a quick approving
gesture to the speech-making.

The girl from Nashkel gave her evidence slowly. "That he cast the fire that killed them. His head was
turned toward Elma, I saw him take up materials in his hands and make his gestures, and the moment
later it all—it all burst into flames. He knew she was there and she'd never harmed nobody. She—
burned—"

"If foolish peasants cannot think to get out of the way of a simple fireball spell then it is not the
wizard's fault!"

Imoen made the universal thumbs-down gesture, though her face was anything but to jest of it, cold
and drawn. It was as if the Edwin we knew had been driven mad. He seemed to have done
everything accused of. Sometimes he sat in silence at the testimonies; sometimes he raged and
gibbered of a geas Sarevok had supposedly held him under, but at the same time he would blame the
fools for not escaping his path and boast about his power as a wizard. Had he chosen Sarevok? I
knew he'd left of his own will.

"Edwin Odesseiron, by the evidence before me it is now my duty to pass upon you the sentence of
the law of Baldur's Gate, which is that you be taken from here to the place from which you came,
and then to be carried to a place of execution and hanged by the neck until you are dead. May Helm
have mercy upon your soul. Bring the next!"

They dragged him from the courtroom, his dirty robes falling loose behind him. "A farce of a trial!"
Edwin shouted. I remained carefully still while he wrenched a cuffed hand to point at me; I could see
flecks of spit sprayed to the air in front of his face. "Don't you fools know that she was the one? The
son of Bhaal, the daughter of Bhaal—the same! You fools to take her in his place—"

"—Gah! Take your paws off me, simians, pawns, lying chimps all—" His rantings followed him
while he was taken back to the cells, echoing loud against the walls. The next of Sarevok's men was
escorted to trial—

"Diyab Faaris, you are accused as one of the so-called acolytes and priests of the Pretender and were
discovered in his company in the palace of the Grand Dukes. The crimes you are hereby tried for
are..."

—

"You're not really going to have Edwin executed, are you?" Imoen said. "He's—one we knew, and you
looked so calm when they sentenced him to be hanged— But I know he did those things, admitted
to it. Back when he betrayed you I knew he betrayed you even though I didn't want him
dead for leaving and you'd have forgiven him, but then he went out with Sarevok and he helped with
murdering people... It's someone you know, so's then it's kind of horrible to think of sitting here
waiting for a few days and then a cart dragging you out to the gallows, then the rope and the drop
and the death out of the snapping vertebrae—damn it, I don't care to know. That's god of death
stuff."

"Don't be silly, Imoen," I said. "Of course we won't execute him. He's the nephew of the Tharchion
of Surthay. We legitimately sentenced him to death, and we're selling him back to the Tharchion because foreign citizens ought to have their punishments carried out by their homelands. So far, they've offered five hundred gold."

*And they don't execute nephews of Tharchions.* Imoen saw the point and nodded.

We walked through the prison's corridors, guarded. Men's hands reached for us past the bars of overcrowded cells.

"The court did the justice the city needs in giving a fair sentence, but it's also the truth that the ransom serves the city slightly better," I said, in case of gossip from our escorts. "And we need to maintain relations with Thay in case of Halruaa."

Edwin sat in a narrow cell to himself; sigils scratched on its walls and ceiling shielded it from magic, and his hands were manacled together. He threw himself toward the bars to see us, half-hunched with his staring face pressed against the metal.

"Weeping brat—apprenticing brat! You come... You come to free me at last? How many times over do you owe me your lives? I demand you release me immediately and I will be merciful!"

"We cannot intervene in the city's course of justice, Edwin," I said. "Only to talk—briefly, because I don't have a lot of time to spare. Speaking or not will neither cost nor gain you anything. Stand away and leave us for the moment," I ordered the Fists. "The Lady Imoen can more than take care of him."

His hands gripped the bars tightly enough that his knuckles stood out on his fists like walnuts; his eyes held a glittering, feverish madness, and the skin of his face seemed to slackly droop.

"Oh, there are so many things I could tell you, little girl," he said in a harsh whisper. "Come closer to Uncle Edwin! Retrieve those lockpicks from wherever you have them in that dress of yours...not in the embroidery of the bosom, are they? Not that you ever had much in the way of that—" He leered like a dockyard sailor.

"You owe me three days of your time, Edwin," I said. "Do you remember that promise? Not as the Grand Duchess; as Skie. And for that I'll only ask some questions."

"Bindings..." Edwin said, and laughed low and long. "The older that I laid on myself, like a fool. I'd forgotten; for a few days it slightly diminished my magic but afterward I recovered; I forgot *you*, crying child. You are very forgettable. But ask if you must. Debts are paid in Thay, in my home where I was the master I deserved to be. Yet do not send me there—they will punish—"

And I'd not have him owing me anything any more than he would owe me. "What happened to Eldoth?" I said, though asking itself was a risk. Men could have as many lovers and rumoured lovers as they wished, but Eldoth had to remain scurrilous gossip of the Duchess. The maddened gleam in his eyes seemed to subside; Edwin drew himself up slightly to answer, his hands still thick across the bars. I saw his nails had been bitten or torn to the quick; before he had kept himself manicured and clean. His greasy hair was in his face and his beard crude and untrimmed.

"Your lover, of course, was a foul and repulsive traitor that not even a slime mould should wish to be related to in the same conversation," Edwin said, articulating his words almost as he had done in the old days. "Eldoth Kron wished to betray you to Sarevok for coin, and should have done so in an instant had I not prevented him. And boasted of your very poor tastes to my hearing. Then promptly decamped with my coin and yours at the moment we reached the city. There! He was far more of a traitor to you than I ever was, you surely must reward me for the gratis knowledge now. Take heed of the betrayer that Kron was and—"
"But Eldoth didn't betray me to Sarevok. You did," I said slowly.

"A minor detail!" Edwin shook against the bars. "You...knew me, Skie. (How it hurts the pride to beg before the brat!) Mended the seam of my robes—these very robes!" He shook his dark red skirts; but he lied. It wasn't the same colour or fabric. "Cried in my arms all night. (Most concubines only cry in ecstasy.) Get me out of here and I'll—"

"And you don't know what happened to Eldoth after that?"

"(Does the empty-headed twit have ears to listen with? There, I answer my own question. In one, out the other betwixt that vacant airy maze.)" Edwin sounded slightly more like the self he'd shown to travel with us. "Nothing. He was of no concern to anyone and I heard none of hide or hair of him. Given that he called himself a bard, as an attention-seeking pest that they are—departed the city; performing not, escaping for his own sordid reasons—though I am sure he was a fool with no knowledge of what he spared himself from. Your pathetic pretend romance is done with—E commedia é finitas, if we must be theatrical!" he said, ungrammatically; but you couldn't expect his Chondathan to match his Common. He'd answered what I had wanted to know.

"Did Sarevok really geas you?" Imoen said. "I couldn't see it on the Weave, but of course since he's dead that would've made it vanish."

"More—solidly and substantially than what gave me to you," Edwin said. "You see, he was far more powerful; stronger; anyone would have predicted his Bhaalspawn victory! (As a god, as one subverted to join Thay...my plan should have worked. Only cruel fates—) And subvert him I did, in my way." His mouth twisted and he cackled. "Supplanted him without his knowledge. I bedded his mistress; Cythandria told me herself that I was the mightier man, if you know what I mean... (Not necessarily in so many words.) For I am a powerful wizard..." He slumped against the cell's bars.

"Hey," Imoen said slowly, "did you really? With Cythandria? Not lying about that? Perfect!" She turned to me and giggled. "Sarevok always did wear those big curly horns on his helmet. So's now we know why—because he wore the other sorts of horns the whole time! Sarevok the cuckold! Too good. Big brother Sarevok wears the horns, girlfriend cheating on him the whole time. I bet we can make the whole city laugh at that. He's got piles of spikes and big swords and ravagers to make up for a tiny—Cuckolded! Cythie and Eddie bouncing on a tree! Horns! Poor little wannabe Lord of Murder! Hang up the helmet by his front doorposts! Teeheehee! Let me think up some really good puns!"

Imoen was right, making the enemy ridiculous; I grinned back at her.

"It's not as if I have any power to make you respect my dignity." Edwin took his hands down from the cell bars; folded his arms across his chest; and turned away.

"That's all, Edwin," I said.

Domestic disputes welcomed us back at the estate, cleaned and refurbished. Tiax had moved in along with the others, at least until its rightful owner arrived for his inheritance; he'd no doubt be able to drive away the Cyricist gnome, I thought spitefully; but of course he had helped us—and there was guilt waiting of what I had claimed in the Cloakwood.

"Lady Imoen!" Tevanie's eyes brimmed with tears as she stumbled down the steps. She wore a dark blue overdress in heavy, warm merino, tailored to her. Imoen had managed to become her friend; had the time to do so, and to gain her trust. "I'm sorry. I can't sit and talk to my grandfather's murderer
"Come here, kid. It'll be all right. Viccy's not that bad—well, she and Shar-Teel sort of are—but she doesn't hate you. And your mum doesn't either." Imoen took her to one of the plump blue sofas that had come from Brilla's taste.

"She boasts she killed Grandfather!"

"Your mother threatened to kill us for endangering you," I said. "She, er, meant it. When she thought you were in danger we couldn't have stopped her."

"She meant it," Tevanie said, "against Grandfather. He never harmed me. And she murdered him!"

In the short time she'd spent with Angelo her accents had changed from the girl in the docks to something closer to the granddaughter of the Fist's commander, despite Angelo's brief tenure. Tears came to her eyes and Imoen patted her back.

"It was a fair fight," I volunteered awkwardly. Imoen glared and Shar-Teel's daughter burst into stronger tears.

"And he...I lived with him and we had cake when I wanted, and he was going to teach me riding and magic, and treated me like a real family—" Tevanie said.

"All right. You'll be sent to a tutor and then to a good school," I said. Her grandfather had offered her a chance to learn magic; we ought to do the same.

"For the Abyss' sake, brat—" Shar-Teel strode down the stairs; her nailed boots left marks on the varnished wood. Viconia came behind her. "He's dead. Time you learned some sense. Bastard."

Her daughter cringed back from her and cried.

Imoen sighed. "Look, Shar-Teel, you're obviously not what Tevanie needs right now, so why don't you and Vic go out for some fresh air. Or upstairs for getting on with typical unnatural tribadistic practices. Not that I mean to be prejudiced about it. Happy for you two, really, if not for the terrified general populace."

Viconia smiled at me, stretching. "You made me a hero of the war, Duchess," she said, "and all I was granted was the right to walk streets unmolested? When I have done nothing in this city? At least a shrine to Shar would be...fitting. Sacrifices could be scheduled every ten days. It would be a just reward."

"I don't think it'd be good for the city," I said.

"Then I may think of private candidates." She posed again. "The stench of the clogged surfacers and their disgusting ways troubles me. Perhaps I shall discover other plans." She shook the hood of her cloak to her neck, preparing to walk openly in the day. "Or our ilharess, ussta mrimmd'ssinss? A mere pardon for her deeds?" She ran a possessive hand over Shar-Teel's shoulders.

"...Because I know how many bodies she buried to leave the Fist?" Behind me, Tevanie gave a cry; I'd forgotten how much she ought to know.

"Was one of them my father?" Tevanie said.

"—Your father's dead, girl," Shar-Teel said. "I've never lied to you."

"So did you kill him?" Imoen burst out, and then backed down in her seat, having spoken too
quickly. Anyone would have asked the same thing, knowing Shar-Teel—
"Never got the chance," she said stonily. "He was nobody's loss."

Tevanie looked up at her with her eyes still brimming wet, and then down again. "Fine! Murderer. I wish you hadn't won!"

"Then the city would still be at war and Sarevok might have become a god of murder...and I guess your granddad would've been alive," Imoen said, perhaps unhelpfully. Tevanie's response was inaudible.

"I'll spar with you," I offered Shar-Teel. "Down by the oaks, ten minutes?"

"This city is a waste of time." She scowled at the house's furnishings. "Try for some bloodshed."

—

A/N: Not that you don't already know, but horns and a man being cheated upon is traditional symbolism. :)

143. Windblown Pages

20 Eleint

The first wizard was tall; the second short; and the third was a halfling. All wore robes in the national colours of gold and green, blazoned by wizard's stars.

"Halruaa," the second said, "is gravely displeased. An ambassador murdered; formal congress with a treacherous exile and outlaw from our country; the theft of our property; the blatant, open usage of that property."

All Sarevok's fault except for the last, but that wasn't the point in their minds.

"The perpetrator of most of that is dead," I reminded of that even so. "We cannot resurrect him and execute him a second time for your satisfaction."

"He left no body behind," the halfling said, looking up with small, dark eyes.

"Because he was half-god," Imoen said. "Me too, but don't get any ideas about testing that out. I'm the good one, I healed people—and I'm not any more. ...Just a very powerful mage." She flung back her head with deliberate pride.

"Let us not dance around the facts. Halruaa has unequivocal demands," the short one said.

"Does Halruaa own the idea of a ship that flies?" Claudia said. "Agannazar never claimed to own the concept of...fire from hands."

The tall wizard bent over the lamp on the wide table, fidgeting with its wick. The golden light in the room grew. The Oak Room off the ducal palace's library; old, expensive books lined the walls, and rich tapestries hung from the eaves. It was suitable as a place to hear the Halruaans as strong priority while offering no insult in the choice of environs, but there was only one window and I felt the stuffiness of it. Evening approached outside.

"Do you know what happened in the fall of ancient Netheril, mage?" the halfling said. "Mortals
grew fools and raised upturned mountains to build cities, floating in large numbers through the skies. Please prove that you are intelligent enough to be a mage by explaining the reason why I make this analogy."

Imoen scowled. "Cause if the Weave gets tangled again the ships'll crash. But if you think of all the disasters that could possibly happen you end up by not doing anything at all; Claud's got some safety-measure ideas with the sideways design...that we'll protect as much as you want to keep your secrets. What if there's a fire in the palace? What if there's a storm on ordinary ships? What if I trip down the stairs and break my ankle? What if Skie slips deadly nightshade into the tea by mistake? And you think you'll be fine if the Weave goes belly-up?"

"Because Halruaa knows far more than you of how to protect against such disasters," the short mage said; his name was Kurtulnick. "Skyships are not permitted outside our territory for reasons besides keeping our protection. The very first time you lose one above hostile skies..."

"The Gondsmen are aware of the trenchant point that knowledge and rumour have an equal habit of spreading." Sauriram said.

"Not by outright theft," snapped the tall one, Halmzah. "Will you burn all your ships, return all plans to us, and sign an accord that you shall use no further magical devices without the consent of Halruaa that they have not been stolen? If not—Halruaa promises penalty."

"We do not yield to threats," Vai answered.

The halfling raised a hand. "Then we are at an impasse. Allow us to try the approach of incentive." I looked across at the burning lamp; the wick swung, red-hot and dancing. The window was glass-paned and closed, the air heavy but warm. Logs were laid in a fireplace below a chimney; the short wizard had warmed his hands by it when he had entered. "Kerltumi, ma’ah ramalan." My chair was comfortable, soft; I could afford to drowse. The dancing wick, wax-dipped, bent to and fro in the lamp and on the air I could almost see grey dust forming.

That was...unusual...

Sauriram gasped. "Cease this sorcery!" she pleaded weakly. "I cannot..."

"All be calm," the short one said. "Begin the unravelling."

—

The wind in my hair the fresh air and the sweep of birds spooling in flight by our sides instead of far above, so that almost we could have reached hands out to grasp them, as if we too had wings, and on the deck I shifted balance by instinct as it moved. Then in place of wind my hair was still; in place of the birds was blank grey; the ground perfectly still. There had been mast and high crow’s nest, flapping sailbirds and prow cutting through air, wheel of turning and mages; but it had all been a dream; hadn't it?

Vai sat stock-still from her neck downward, shook her head, and moaned. Claudia clutched her head in her hands as if she had a migraine. Imoen's eyes were wide and glassily frozen. Sauriram's face turned slowly grey and she moved not at all, and slowly I began to worry for her heart. The grey particles rising from lamp and fire were like glass drops, where inside it time itself ran too slowly. Reflections tilted against water, mirrors, transparent panes.

"You will forget," Thurstwick the halfling said. "You will all forget your experience. Draw and spin the knowledge from your minds." He flicked his fingers as if he wove and spun thread; but instead of
drawing it from a spindle he seemed to drag it from places rooted to each of our heads. "They never existed for you."

_I went to the City of Coin and stood suspended in the air..._

_I went to the City of Coin and I don't have to remember the details of how._

Then the wizards all stood in a circle, holding hands above blue-glowing lines sketched in chalk. They chanted, in a susurrus so low it was impossible to tell where one voice ended and the other began. False winds blew slowly between the drops of grey glass in the air, in mouths and noses and throats. *Lethe*, was whispered, _to untangle from city itself; if the blood of the ruler is the lifeblood of the loci then the memory too may be ended..._

Inked scrolls reversed their writing, scrubbing blank with the bottom of the text first, erased pristine. Artefacts shimmered from shelves as if they had never been. I was in Claudia's personal study in the palace, book-lined, alchemic-embraced, and the statuette of a maiden with bird's feathered wings ready to fly on one of her shelves was struck and exploded to nothing. No, in that dust pile had never stood anything at all. The circles flared and spread. Baldur's Gate itself was laid out below, as if a bird saw it from the sky, something that had never happened. The half-moon of the docks, the worn central wall, the grassy estates to the north-west and the bustle of covered markets to the centre and the east, roofs and palaces and high red towers from above with the signs of magic that flew over them. Crossing, growing circles flew across it in blood-red light, changing where they touched, locking with each other and covering all in time.

"Open a vein in the old Duke's daughter," a man's voice said, "she is young and healthy enough, and the blood of the city would tell the strongest." There was soft pressure at the upper part of my right arm; a white bandage pulled tightly around it as if Viconia had relented on me for getting hurt in some battle. Then there was a short thin-bladed copper knife in the air. Below on the city the red circles danced.

_That's awf'ly convenient,_ Imoen's voice whispered. She smiled. _Maybe I've got a bit of the old charm going just under their web, point them right._

_And you want them to take my blood?_ I thought slowly.

_Nifty exceptions. They don't know how much we can work together. Can't you hear their circle casting?_

She made me listen. I followed her;

_Now don't let them touch you!_

The knife passed through empty air.

"—What does she do, Thurstwick? I don't-"

"Imoen, Claudia, wake!"

To tangibility once more; take a statuette of Lathander and hit the back of the short one's skull with it — The first mage fell, smudging the lines of the red circle he had drawn. Then strange bolts crackled, someone screaming—

"Fool, you've ruined it—"

And a pair of spells to stun from Imoen and Claudia, awakened.
"Repair the circles!" Claudia screamed. A gust of wind blew in the open window; the table shook as if something broke apart from the inside; the air was thick as if just before a lightning storm hit the air. Claudia drew a dagger from the tall one's belt; across her own wrist red stuff spilled. She cried in pain, then bent to the floor and drew. Something flared a colour I did not know the name of and for a moment dazzling fire burst in the air as if it were an illusion. Then shields came into being, translucent as what Imoen had crafted from Ajantis' old shield in the Tower. Sauriram lay outside, grey-faced.

"Claud, can't we just end the spell?" Imoen said. "Kill the gullynappers! —No, don't necessarily kill them. But—"

"Yes, let's kill the ambassadors and start a war with Halruaa—no. Of course not. Sorry, Imoen. Think what would keep them from doing that, or wanting to do something like this again," I said.

"Soon, please," said Claudia, her arm dripping red. I winced.

"We—you—have a contingency plan for Thay," I said. "Can you make them believe that if anything the least untoward happens to us, the plans are set to appear in the zulkirs' palace in Eltabbar? Not that we'd really do it, because the Thayvians are slavers—but if that was true..." Thay was far closer to Halruaa. "That we've been negotiating with them for various reasons." They'd paid a generous sum in Edwin's ransom. "Charm them, quickly. Sign a trade accord. Implant it in their minds..."

Imoen nodded. "No time like the present." She raised her hands and chanted within the circle, Claudia echoing her. They must have meant to aim only at the Halruaans; but there we stood atop a tall tower in the shape of a woodcut I had seen of the summer palace of the Thayvian zulkirs...

"It worries me how easily you merge," Claudia whispered, half lost in the bustle of the foreign city.

Eltabbar, busy, bustling, where Edwin had studied magic, though he came from the poorest province of Surthay. And skyships rose from its high towers.

"This is the fate that will come to Halruaa as our contingency," I said, as if truly a duchess;

"—Tell that to the King, Thay a worse risk, then the barbarians must keep secure, a disaster—"

Cleared away the magical supplies as if nothing had happened; then on the table was something neat and ink-signed. Sauriram rose from her rest and sent a prayer for Helm as a healing spell for herself.

"The storm season is none too far," she said, "the weather unpredictable on the constitution."

"Ah, but you should see Halruaa's control of its climate," the tall one answered, his face slightly dazed. "We have the necessities completed, I see."

24 Eleint

"Evander Silvershield. I'm pleased to meet you at last, Duchess. I am sorry for your and the family's losses. I came as soon as I could, Lady Silvershield."

His name was not Silvershield; it was Brauming, it was only that he was supposed to adopt the name of an heir.

"Cousin, please. I'm Skie." Almost middle-aged; a streak of grey in his dark brown hair, light-eyed, and tanned as if he'd done his share of labour in his time. He walked like a fit man though not a
fighter. "You've heard much of the substance of recent events?" That was too shallow a way of putting it. "Things won't be in full order, I'm afraid, but I've done the best I could. You must rest after your journey first. I hope you don't mind the others in the estate—my ward young Tevanie, and a few of those who helped save the city. We..."

"Hearing much of recent events tells of you as a hero, cousin. I'll be honoured to meet all of you." He spoke too formally, but at least his smile seemed to reach his eyes.

We'd hired maid and cook and houseboy; and pretended to have a meal as if we were all family indeed. Tiax told painful anecdotes on Cyric; Shar-Teel talked about the best way to make sure someone was dead in a single blow; Viconia explained about older male human slaves in the Underdark; Faldorn heard his goods included iron and lectured on the avoidance of metals. While eating with her fingers. Ajantis and Dynaheir said little.

"...Perhaps we could retire to my study, Evan. I'm sorry most of my friends aren't sociable at the best of times."

"Growing a spine at last." Shar-Teel leaned too far back in her chair and drank her wine.

"Fallen knight," Viconia taunted, "play a tune on the surfacer instrument?"

Faldorn looked up at him. "Catgut strings and wood," she said, "I think a druid could wield such an instrument if they had any interest in it. Mostly in the groves it is only pipes and drumming on animal skins."

"I am assuredly no mater of the lute," Ajantis said. It was an old instrument, one of few intact items of expense; rosewood inlaid with mother-of-pearl made by the master Tharis, somewhat inexpertly played by our squire.

"No, play, Ajantis, please, for a lady asks it," I said. "Let's go up, cousin."

"We should formally go through this if you have no objection," Evander said, showing the stack of papers, placing reading glasses on his nose. "Will it be—painful for you?"

"No, cousin, I've had my time to mourn. Please get on with it." I turned the lamp in the study to a brighter, paler flame; my father always liked it too dark and close for my tastes when it was he who sat in the heavy oak chair where he refused Brilla's taste in plush cushions.

Evander paused and adjusted his small, triangular spectacles before beginning. "Following the death of your brother, I was the residuary legatee in the last will of your father formally sealed and deposited at the notary of Gond. Leaving aside the minor bequests to servants and mementos to his old friends, both you and your stepmother were provided for by trusts. For you, the interest only and access to the principal upon your thirty-fifth birthday; for your stepmother, the interest only until the principal should revert to the estate. Are you familiar with this already, Skie?"

"Roughly. Please continue."

"From your stepmother's estate, you are her heir; for her personal properties, and to...such she was entitled to for as long as she lived. I would not quibble on this point in the least," he said; gossip must have informed him enough to be sensitive for that. "All her furnishings and jewels, they are rightfully yours. Nor any need to dispute on gold; the full amount of the interest until the moment it is returned to the Silvershield estate."

"And this house itself is yours," I said.
"I'd not throw my young cousin from her home," Evander said. "Without your friends here in—chaperone—"

The idea of Shar-Teel in that role brought a faint smile to my face.

"—it should appear improper; but thankfully that is not the case. We shall have to inspect the properties within the city to find an arrangement that you favour. You are a Grand Duchess; your choices are far from those a Waterdhavian merchant can think of."

"Yes, cousin. I am still...working on my plans."

He next took up a detailed ledger; I'd struggled to update it after the last entries about the date of my father's death.

"You're welcome to read that. I wasn't able to do it in full."

He studied it; "No, you have a fair instinct for it," he said. "Simply use the debit and credit columns like so; remember it by the red; transfer across and see how the figures come together."

Suddenly the corrections came clear across the page, a few simple penstrokes that transformed it into something my father would have approved of. He was genuinely good at this, better than me; useful.

"What has happened to the estate thanks to Sarevok? I know there is much less than there should have been, but you're the heir and I haven't been able to touch most of it." I could have committed burglary—but that would have been wrong.

"Your father's ships were commandeered by the city by the previous administration, and the current ratified it. That's the primary; he stored his asset moneys in a variety of stable investments. I have some experience directing ships. There are trade opportunities for the very rebuilding, and from Waterdeep I'd choose to send ships north for whale oil, to the soapmakers of Luskan; then south, where the Cimairra enjoy perfume. Or fine prices for fir in Sembia at present, where I know your father carried a certain amount of business... When the Grand Dukes rescind their order, of course."

He watched me rather pointedly.

"Oh, I ratified that order," I said; Sauriram's advice to maintain the ships to the city. I suppose in the first place it was not my father but one of Sarevok's creatures to give them over— "But you can purchase them back from the Council of Four. We intend to release the merchant vessels to businessmen who covenant to keep their business here. At a reasonable price, of course."

"I can realise some of my Waterdhavian properties to add to the investment," he said, looking sharply through his spectacles, "if it is a worthy one. What of upkeep?"

"All ships are being repaired regularly. It's a source of employment in the docks," I said. "The price, of course, reflects that..."

Cousin Evan smiled. "Negotiations should prove interesting," he said amiably. He looked further down my pages of accounts. "These payments here," he said. "An odd pattern of debt?"

"A single payment," I said; the way I'd noted it so elliptically probably made it seem worse than it was. "I found recently from an agent I hired that a person who...adventured with us...left the city and various debts behind. I paid them."

Eldoth seemed to have abandoned Baldur's Gate for bills to three tailors, Sorcerous Sundries, a gnomish seller of hair oils, and the Undercellar, mostly for gambling. If he'd told me that sum when we'd been together, it would have seemed little. But he didn't tell the truth. He was helpful in the
"Nobody important," I said. Evan turned over the last of the papers. "I think we've done a good night's work, haven't we, cousin?"

He sorted them carefully back to drawers and pigeonholes, his hands moving smoothly over them.

"Now you're here," I continued. "I am grateful to have a man to look after and instruct me in these things."

Shar-Teel, I thought, would slap me for that. Sauriram and Claudia and Vai were better than me at this sort of thing.

"I'm grateful for your welcome," Evan said, and in an oddly old-fashioned gesture bent over my hand.

—

30 Eleint

"—Have we lost them, Ajantis?"

"Yes, my lady. I may qualify as your escort." He tried to banter, but his face looked as blanched and pale as I felt. Without his armour and dressed in a simple shirt and jacket, he seemed almost soft and vulnerable; his symbol of Helm was below his clothing, and though the layered cambric was tailored over his muscles he moved awkwardly. He wore a plain iron sword at his side and occasionally clutched at its hilt.

"For eleven generations there has been no magic in the blood of the Ilvastarrs—anything that could be called sorcery in particular!" he had explained, after his restoration to human by Faldorn's casting. "It is uncontrolled, it is wrong, and it is not at all proper for one of us. On either the side of my father or of my mother! It does not...belong. Any signs of it would have been far from an Ilvastarr—"

"So you were a sorcerer as a kid, but then you prayed a lot and got to be a paladin instead and lost it, but Aquerna slipped through anyway when your holy steed plan didn't work out." Imoen stroked the jewelled head of the prettily scaled fairy dragon, who purred in a vaguely squirrelish way. "Then your wild magic broke through again to help us."

"It is—not right for an Ilvastarr!" he protested. "I would have been too different, from all the generations of my family..."

"So your mum was skipping out with the milk-seller or whatever," Imoen said idly.

Ajantis set his jaw firmly. "—If you were a man I should challenge you to a duel for that insult."

"Sorry, was that over the line?" Imoen said cheerily, now stroking one of Aquerna's ruby-coloured wingstruts between delicate, blue-green membranes of flight.

Faldorn folded her arms. "Pack is pack and it is not right to bind someone who does not wish to be bound."

"Line was seven-and-twenty leagues back, Imoen," I said. "It's not a nice thing to say about anyone's mother, especially not from a good family—"
"Oh, I beg the pardon of your Lord and Ladyship for Faldy and me not being born to nobs like you, I mean, what with us being philistine peasants and all," Imoen said. "It's hard for the likes of our sort to understand that at least someone here had a mother—"

"My lady, I beg you to accept my apologies," Ajantis pleaded to her.

"Sorry, Im..."

"—Worth it," Imoen said. She patted the fairy dragon's head. "S'pose I couldn't convince you to come be my familiar? You're sparkly and pretty and magical, and it's not like we don't get on..."

"I have been a squirrel since I first knew my boy," Aquerna said in a dragonlike squeak. She flapped her wings thoughtfully; she blinked her eyes, and illusions of different colours swept along her exquisite scales, iridescent blue and rose pink and shining silver. "It is the body to which I am accustomed—my body—and I would prefer to return to it."

"I'll do the casting to make you a forest creature again," Faldorn said; and waved her hands to make the same chant to Silvanus that had transformed Ajantis back from a toad. Aquerna the squirrel returned to Ajantis' bare shoulders above his sheet of improvised clothing; he still carried the dark scars on his twisted left arm.

"I would return to Helm. I would complete my duty," he said, a hand on her fur.

He laid a fist to the Capetri knocker, alone with me.

The house itself was in the poorer end of the merchants' quarter, fairly small; ivy crawled up the walls and a garden held a straggling, uncared-for olive tree amidst tangled weeds and dirty paths. The steps were reddish clay, cracked in thin spidering lines between their high, slightly irregular rise. A maidservant in a stained dress let us in after a long wait.

Their rooms were bare and half-stripped as if they planned to leave their dwelling at any moment. Above a fireplace a blank shelf; a floor mapped with a threadbare, singed rug; an old, scratched table. A man and a woman standing before chairs; a younger woman; an old woman seated by the fire; and a young man Ajantis' age or so by the wall. He was brown-haired, fair-skinned, quite smooth-faced and weak-chinned; but I could not tell whether his face was the boy I had murdered. Stephan Capetri's tear-stained expression was almost blank in my mind. A dark damp wall, a cold steel sword, a boy's voice pleading for his life.

"Hello," I said, inadequately. Ajantis echoed a rough greeting.

"I am...a Waterdhavian adventurer," he said. "My name is Ilvastarr and I come to bear ill news..."

The man stopped the speech. "The Duchess!" he cried out, pointing at me; and the family stepped back, worried. "We didn't know nothing of what the Iron Throne was up to; weren't with that Sarevok; that Davaeorn just wanted our Stephan and we let... Please, my lady, let me know..."

"We came to offer you blood price," I said.

Afterward find the family of the child and ask of them what should be justice. I gathered courage, as Dynaheir or Imoen would do. "Your son Stephan is dead." It seemed they knew that already; the women wore mourning-black. "I murdered him in the Cloakwood; I've come to you. To place myself at..."

"You murdered my brother." A shimmer of silver swept through the air. The young man drew blade. Then it was a blur, a thick needle, thrust to my heart—
Then a clang of metal meeting metal Ajantis blocked it, gently, moving the blade of Stephan's brother aside. He stood in front of me.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I must—defend her— The order to kill him was mine. I was a paladin once, and Helm judged me for the sake of your son. The young deserve protection—"

"Guido, stand a moment," said the middle-aged woman, her voice like a harsh wind through far hills. "Son. My living son. You slew Davaeorn, and you slew his apprentice?"

"Yes," I said. Ajantis held Guido Capetri's blade entrapped; I was still. Both swords rested inches from my head.

"You've given us the present of certainty, my lady," said Stephan's father, in cold sarcasm. "Others didn't know so much. Is his grave that flooded mine place we've heard so much of?"

"It is," I said.

"Then the truth is we are more at your mercy." Stephan's father stared pointedly at Ajantis; he walked slowly to his other son and placed a hand on his shoulders. "What would happen to us were she—the two of them—to be found dead here?"

"Stephan was my brother," Guido said. "He loved magic."

"He was taken by Sarevok's mage," his mother said. "I gave him a new robe—all over with stars, a constellation he asked of me."

"Helm cared for him, my lady," Ajantis said. "The Watcher protects all children. The Watcher spoke that Stephan's death was wrong. If your son is within Helm's halls, then he is not uncomforted..."

"Never said a prayer to Helm in his life," his grandmother said sharply. "Will your vigilant one trouble to find him? I think not. The truth is that my grandson himself would have had no truck with it. We served the Iron Throne; and what price is his blood to you? Will you give his family freedom?" She raised a thin long-nailed hand as if it were a wolfwere's claw slashing down, or a mage's spell to do harm.

"The Capetris are not going to be taken in for support of the Pretender," I said.

"Our freedom on his blood." The old, veiled lady stood. "Promise us gold for Bestanza's son." The woman beside her wailed once, high and lost.

"—All the gold that is mine," I said.

"But no gold could be worth his blood. Promise yourselves," she continued in her old, ancient voice.

"If there is any service we could perform for you," Ajantis said desperately.

"But why would we want to look on the faces once more of those who murdered Guido's brother?" Her eyes behind a sunken sea of wrinkles burned; more than anything else I wanted to look away, but did not. We had no answer.

"Or promise justice, and it will never bring him back, murderers! Stand down, Guido. Pray their deed will gnaw on them for a long and painful life."

"I planned to—I will—return to the Order of the Radiant Heart," Ajantis said. "They are paladins; they will judge me on my sin. To my teacher Lord Firecam. I will accept their justice." It seemed all
that he could offer the family, and they stared at him with cold eyes.

"I will not be a duchess forever," I said. Sauriram knew perfectly well that I was the same as Imoen, and I should have known all along that she would act for the good of the city. "And then..."

"Get out," Stephan Capetri's father said, tired.

—

Faldorn waited for us as if she'd been listening on purpose, standing by a straggling young ash tree in the city streets and paying no attention to the dirt and dust that stained her long leather tunic.

"I am leaving the city and returning to my master Corsone of the Shadow Druids," she said without preamble, stepping toward Ajantis and looking up at his face. "I have passed my rites by this quest. I will be a full-fledged Shadow Druid and a woman after I find him and he teaches me our ritual of adulthood. He was working on a venture to protect nature by breeding intelligent ettercaps to hurt those who hurt the forest, but I suppose it has failed to work. There will be other plans to protect nature against the likes of you."

Shar-Teel once set a lair of talking ettercaps on fire. "Go with the Oak Father, Faldorn," I said.

"Boy-squire?" she said, glaring at Ajantis. Aquerna slowly came down from the rooftop behind her, saying nothing to her boy as far as I could tell. He laid an absent hand on Faldorn's shoulder.

"Fare well, Faldorn. Aquerna will miss you very much, my lady. I return to Lord Keldorn..." We walked through the reconstruction of the streets damaged by the Ravager's storming; atop a distant platform Dynaheir stood straight and steady to cast spells as part of the rebuilding. Behind her the sun set in a western horizon transmuted red as blood, promising fair winds and weather for the ships in the morning.

The world turned and tomorrow the skies would be clear.

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144. Epilogue: Tamoko

The spiked gauntlet came down on her face and before her eyes and everywhere was a crimson spinning redness that took her sight as her consciousness, and she did not wake until after they had murdered him.

*Aishiteru wa, senshi watashi no. Sarevok, I promised first in the wooden eaves of a western cottage where the two of us sought shelter from a storm that I loved you, my beautiful boy...*

The red-haired betrayer broke her promise. It was not a fair thing to say; Sarevok would have tried to slay her with all his might. The red-haired falsehood-teller had concealed the truth from her; and that was also not fair to say, for in her place Tamoko should have done much the same.

*Your sisters, my beloved, saw you dead and hating me.*

At his empty, crumbling armour seen through the blood across her eyes she had dared hope for an instant that the man was not within; but the son of Bhaal was dead beyond any hope for resurrection. She knew healing rituals that could return a soul to a body not long dead. She had dreamed of bringing him away, no matter how he hated her, teaching him to be human.
Her skull was fractured; she could see out of only one eye and that patterned through crimson blood; she could have prayed to heal herself but they had taken her in chains to a cell where that was barred her. Her holy symbol of that undisciplined and pathetic god lay cold and quiescent by her skin, and that was exactly as she wanted it. She needed nothing from the Mad Lord.

_It is death I serve, Sarevok, and death is where you have come. You will shape no competition for the Lord of Strife._

She had heard the guards outside her cell speaking vaguely of an end to Sarevok's war, of the girl and the betraying goddess and the end of all. _Uragirimono_: a traitor to their own. She had seen that in the face of the pitiful Red Wizard, Angelo Dosan, Cythandria Swandon; and if she looked into a mirror she should have seen it in her own.

The cell was damp, and in a corner of it lay a puddle of water dripping from a cracked pottery jug left for her. For a moment Tamoko bent over it, seeing her damaged, scarred face, one-eyed. She bled still, red droplets spreading one by one across the stone like a faint shower of rain.

_Ronin, Tamoko, traitor in your homeland and to your beloved._

Tamoko flexed her warrior's hands, as strong as ever, chained in front of her by a weighted length of iron. She was cold. Her arms and armour had been stripped from her and she wore only thin cotton. There was nothing left; a honourable death would have been the stab to the stomach by wakizashi, then her head cut off when she could no longer bear the pain without shaming herself. She would not shame herself.

_Three things are strength. Fear of death is strength. Love is strength. Family is strength._

She wrapped the chain twice about her neck, and held her wide, thick hands ready. Her strength would last for this, human, alone. There was none living to whom she owed anything. Saioji Tamoko brought her hands together. Chains and flesh pulled her windpipe close and she willed her grip to hold.

_Dead is strength._

She felt the collapse of windpipe and lungs and the loosening of bowels in all of the indignities of death, and to the end she gripped the chain about her throat.

As her vision burst red beyond endurance Tamoko thought that she saw a tall broad figure standing before her in the prison cell, the shape as if her lover greeted her in the afterworld; and then she saw instead a tall blue-skinned woman with yellow wings and glowing eyes, watching her without expression as she died.

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145. Epilogue: Sssr'dss

"Hurry with the waterskins, Lennem!"

Sssr'dss bent dusty-trousered legs over the sides of the caravan and leisurely walked to hoist the liquids from the primates' supplies. The _supplies_, it corrected itself. Its grouping and pods and sibs all lay dead; it was itself, alone, and it had begun to convince itself that it was better this way.

"Here, Gart." The tan-dappled pair of horses drew up their forelegs, tossed their heads, and snorted
in fear at Sssr'dss' walk by them. It was ever an irritant that the most advanced tricks somehow failed to deceive brute beasts, but at least they had started to learn that Sssr'dss meant them no harm. For the time being, Horsemeat was not so tasty as primate flesh, but it made a meal better than the strips of dried jerky and bread stored for the road. Their driver poured down its throat the water and Sssr'dss moved to the next who wished a drink.

"Lennem, thank you," Syrria said, and moved its mouth to a smile. The nourishing primate was of middle years by their standards, its hair greying and curling and its material skirts always long and thick. Sssr'dss had designed its form to be nondescript, tedious, able to turn glances away: a generating-primate with light brown complexion, a face lined but not strongly scarred, and hair and eyes a shade or two darker than the colour of the flesh. Syrria gave glances as if it wished to mate even though older primates were supposed to be past nourishing or generative years. They wore so quickly.

"And three days until we reach Lagreme! It's been a warm autumn. A strange summer, all told," Syrria said, sweating from its pink primate flesh. "You always look so calm, Len."

Sssr'dss feigned tiredness and mopped a sleeve across its forehead. The cloth of the shirt was true as the trousers, and both were truly encrusted with dry light brown dirt. "All an illusion. I am as impatient at long days as you." It had spent time in caravans in the service of the one who was not the Golden One's true parent, and was used to adjusting flesh to the constant jerking motion of horses and wooden planks; but it still preferred journeying on foot.

"Before I married Merteyn and had the children, I'd done this run a hundred times, or so it felt," Syrria said; its primate mate had died six seasons' turning before and it carried merchant goods in its stead. "Then he took it over while I watched the business at home, and I grew unused to it; but things ever move on. Have you lost someone, Len?"

"I have lost my siblings," Sssr'dss said flatly. It was the closest it could come to the loss in a primate's analogy. "But they died because they made foolish mistakes."

Syrria shook its head and pursed its lips together. "That's no way to think of it, you silly man! You lost them, but that's no reason to lay the blame all on them. I understand why you'd say it that way, but it won't help you—simply continue on's the better way. Look to what's coming and know they'd have wanted you to have it."

"They might not have," Sssr'dss said simply, imitating a primate's baring of teeth.

Syrria hesitated. "Got themselves into trouble, then? Bad lots? Well, you're a type to mind your own business, I see, and I'll not help by poking my long nose where I see it's not wanted. Better get on with those skins."

"I will, Syrria," Sssr'dss promised, and walked on. It would talk with Syrria later when the stop came for the night, when they lit fire where the primate caravan-driver and its scouts gave the signal. Sometimes Sssr'dss cautiously read spells in the light, where it could concentrate while on the still ground; to revise the lessons of the Lady Cythandria.

Sssr'dss returned to its caravan and laid itself down on the planking, its hands below its heads to make a pillow. Its fellow primate passenger dozed and snored like an ape, another generative primate with little to nothing to say for itself.

Three things were true, Sssr'dss thought: the Golden One was destroyed, the Lady Cythandria was craven, and the primate-face and the phoenix-primate had alike won the day and slain all of Sssr'dss' podsibs and kin. For Sssr'dss could credit the primate-face for it; that the primate-face had lain hidden
and the phoenix-primate with magic had lain hidden and in the end they had been stronger than the Golden One who had slain the old Red Master.

It considered once more, the wood moving and jerking below its flesh while the primates' horses jogged slowly forward. It had been angry at the Lady Cythandria on its awakening, wounded and stranded in cold tunnels; but then it had gone upward and found that the Golden One was dead, the Noble People were known by all to have infested the city, and as far as it knew it was the only doppelganger to have escaped. It supposed it could have tracked the Lady Cythandria, but there was no point. The primate-face and phoenix-primate had defeated it already; and it had won against Sssr'dss by a clever trick, but it would not be prey. It was no longer powerful enough to be worthy of attention. Besides, the Lady Cythandria had instructed Sssr'dss in precious magic, and it did not even have to be considered an enemy.

No. Sssr'dss would achieve Greatness through the primate-face. It had planned the phoenix-primate to masquerade as a Golden One, but Sssr'dss was one of few who had seen its darkened mind. It was of the same substance as the Golden One no matter what it wished others to believe. But to defeat it needed more than mere shapeshifting tricks...

Secretly, Sssr'dss stroked the engraved covers of its book of spells. The Lady Cythandria had been right. Arcane magic was the route to true power. Gods had whims and hands failed but if the mind went then so too did all the person. Sssr'dss would find wizard primates who would teach all they knew, and then Sssr'dss would seize the power that primate-face refused to use.

The beginnings of spells danced in Sssr'dss' brains while the turning of the caravan's wheels lulled it to quiescence. It had important plans to seek.

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**146. Epilogue: Cythandria**

The maid hadn't lit the fire in the room and it was all but winter already. Slack-twisted. Western servitors were pathetic and Edwin Odesseiron would have happily told them so in as many lengthy words as they deserved were he not firmly bound and gagged. He sat grimly in the darkness on one of the two beds and listened with dismay to the libidinous, lamentable attempts at lechery next door. His pair of Red Wizard captors had a whore with them; Edwin heard the enthusiastic feminine squeaks between the grotesque, pitiful gruntings of the pair of them. If only they'd learn to shut up and allow him rest. They mocked him endlessly while they travelled back to Thay in daylight hours.

His empty, queasy stomach turned again; a worse pain than his stiffened limbs. He'd every reason to feel concerned about Thay, even as Homen Odesseiron's nephew. He'd missed a chance, he'd been sent far away when the Bhaalspawn was killed, he was officially responsible for the murder of another Red Wizard in a way that wasn't subtle enough that his name would be left out of it. It was an acceptable promotion strategy, Edwin told himself. He deserved Philias' rank and a hero's welcome home...but he'd hardly get it. (Philias too deserved his death! Just as those pathetic lauding peasants in Nashkel.)

They are...going to insert a fish hook below my navel and slowly twine out my guts piece by piece. His captors—of far less illustrious family name than Odesseiron—had enjoyed offering up various fates to him.

Or boil me in a cauldron of oil. Head first, to be lucky.
Or unravel my magic from me and transmute me into a low demon or beast forevermore.

Or hang me up by the...by the town square. Which that whining brat was planning to do anyway. He'd seen the row of corpses on his way out of the city.

One of his captors groaned in pleasure in the next room, probably Goiorias the Oleaginiously Fat rather than Pettr the Mincingly Goat-Faced, according to his current nicknames for the mismatched oafish pair. Edwin rocked back and forth on the bed in the hope that the sounds would disguise their simian mating noises. (Did he sound like that? No, he was dignified, he told himself.)

It was desperate indeed when Edwin Odesseiron could not manage the necessary spells to free himself. He was not even sure if the simians had taken up his spellbook at all, and it had been many days now since he'd studied.

(He couldn't remember if he'd studied much following that Amnian town in the middle of nowhere where they'd all deserved what happened to them and to their city. It had felt as if it slipped his mind somewhat.)

He hummed to himself. His captors had their charming little ways of silencing him every so often. It was difficult to concentrate on any one thing at a time, sometimes; his mind would seize at some other detail and fly onwards, at his ever-growing pace of thought that outstripped any who dared compete with Edwin Odessseiron in the matter of intelligence. No simian could ever possibly understand. Edwin banged his head against the wall several times simply because he could. His mind spun with the brief distraction, and then he heard a voice through the quiet. It was all dark in here.

"Odessseiron."

There were hands behind his back on the leather thongs that restrained him. A magery-lock held the threads tightly in place, but the hands were still unpicking them. And then the gag came off, and then a candle was lit; and Cythandria had come for him after all.

"Can you walk?" she demanded of him in the flickering, faint light. She rose slowly herself as if she needed to limp. Edwin followed her and fell flat on his face at his first steps. Feeling sharply returned to his limbs and by degrees he got up again. "Follow me. We must leave quietly." She draped a black cloak over him. Edwin clutched at the thick edges that hid his Red Wizard's colouring of a prisoner. Almost all of Cythandria's right leg showed bare from her tatters of robes, her clothing to be charitably called skimpy.

"You were the whore," he burst out, with the powers of his deductions. "...Concubine."

"Yes. I managed to weave a sleep spell on the two of them, eventually. Men are so easily distracted." A light coating of sweat gleamed on Cythandria's pale leg. In the quiet inn they walked into the moonlight, where waited the Red Wizards' horse-drawn caravan, small for two of them and a prisoner.

"Steal it and be far from here while they still sleep," Edwin ordered.

"No. It will make them thoroughly pursue; we'll travel by other means," Cythandria said, shaking out her long fair hair below her shoulders. It had grown, though the ends of it were shaggy and ill-kempt; and her face was haggard and old.

"Very well. I suppose I have little choice," Edwin agreed. "Did you at least retrieve my spellbook as well?"

Cythandria glared back at him. "Go find it yourself."
The Red Wizards had secured their possessions with various wards Edwin felt simply too exhausted to bother to untangle. He ignored her vicious barb.

"You've grown rather ugly," he said. "Your clothing is of the lowest harlot, your grooming is disgraceful, you have just come from two fools of Red Wizards, and your face is ruined." Far too gaunt, dark-circled below her eyes, marked and shadowed; even in the moonlight he could see Cythandria's degeneration. Women never looked after themselves properly for long; some said after twenty or twenty-five they all became grotesque for their age.

"I could say you have never been handsome yourself," Cythandria said icily, "you smell disgusting, and if you did not have an excuse of inexperience for your ineptness in bed it would have been unforgiveable. I was cursed by Sarevok for betrayal and if not for his death... Well. He was slain and I am free."

She drew her own cloak across her thinned body and began to walk on a path away from the town, into narrow deep woods that Edwin knew marked a byway to yet another small and poor barbaric western town.

"Slow down," he complained. He could hear the sounds of animals moving in the distance, and hastened to catch up with her. Once they'd committed carnal fornications aplenty in that spare room in the Iron Throne that would have seen them both murdered by Sarevok—Edwin knew, had always known well, fearing golden eyes and a hungry tearing blade even after he was dead; his godhood and rage and terrifying force and bindings—Many more times they had worked together on magic while he had desired her once-fine body; and many crimes they had committed they both took fair share in. "Come with me, Cythandria."

In the end, they had only each other to depend upon here.

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147. Epilogue: Skie

3 Marpenoth

One's thoughts should be set in order with pen and paper; and here I am to fill the pages with everything that's changed. It's been a long time since I sat and wrote my histories. Imoen's my sister and I'm a Grand Duchess and all the family I thought I knew are dead. It's an anniversary today, which is a good time to start resolutions: I'm eighteen, and that means Imoen is too.

Viconia left today. She took gold and jewels to purchase farmland in Beregost, as if she would something that doesn't involve killing. She kissed Shar-Teel before she went, and taunted her that she was an elf and would outlive we mortals by centuries; and then invited her to visit. I don't understand them at all.

Shar-Teel stays with us. She's a horrible mother; and yet she trained me, and she has her moments... I remember her fighting before me, vivid as flame. We don't seem to be able to get rid of Tiax.

Ajantis left with a letter from Duchess Sauriram in hand, sealed; to his paladin's order, with Aquerna. Faldorn disappears to her groves. Breeding ettercaps, indeed; but it's very hard to tell Faldorn what to do. Tevanie's as obstinate in her own way; if she can pass examination after tutoring, she will go to the Gondar Academy for Young Ladies.
My father's old accountant—Chalio—suggested a marriage with Cousin Evan, as if my father would have willed it. He's old, my second cousin; he's kind; I'm sure I don't and couldn't love him like that, and most likely he doesn't love me. But it would give me a legitimate claim to a Silvershield inheritance, it would give him a duchess, and some would say it was sensible. There's been a man I fell out of love with, who wasn't nearly as important to me as I used to want him to be; a man who gave himself to werewolves to save me; and poor Garrick, who I don't think any more thought he was in love with Imoen—and since my sister didn't like him back in that way, that bastard didn't break her heart. I don't know. I've ridden on skyships with Evan Brauming, overseeing his goods. He took my hand in his standing at the prow, and in the sky with the wind in our hair anyone would say yes...

Sauriram knows, and she's decided to send us from the city, at least for a time. There are outlaws taking advantage of the disarray on the northern caravan routes where there's no guards to spare, bandits, and so Shar-Teel will lead us again. It doesn't do any good to have a former demigoddess here, either; people still pray to Imoen, and while she works her magic to try to help rebuild she doesn't have Dynaeir's control. Imoen, me, Shar-Teel, and Tiax for our healer, a small group on the roads once again.

There are histories I have to tell: the tragedies of dead dwarves and the Balduran who enslaved a peaceful people, and someday even the true story of Sarevok, the man who would be god and Grand Duke. Perhaps I will find more histories; of the runic language of the sword's hilt afire in my hand and the carved stone pillar that rose on the warm beach. Of Stephan Capetri.

There are skyships flying above, skyships of Baldur's Gate—if I have done nothing else worthwhile at least I have helped to give my city something that takes to the air. Look up, and there they'll be.

- Skie, of Baldur's Gate.

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