

Immortal Realms Silverymoon

The blade of my long sword made a soft whistling sound as it sliced through the air. Connecting with its target wasn't nearly so musical. However, as the saying goes, "There Can Be Only One," and it wasn't going to be the late and unlamented Jonathon Simmons.

As the white mist closed in on me, I knelt down in exhaustion and vaguely hoped that the Quickening wouldn't be noticed in this disused warehouse district in New York City.

The pyrotechnics finally slowed and stopped a few minutes later. Taking several deep breaths, I pulled myself upwards and looked around for signs that someone had seen what had just happened and came face to chin with a man wearing some sort of flowing robes. He had his head tilted back (which was why I was looking at his chin instead of his face), and his arms were stretched above him, looking like he just finished some extravagant movement.

"Oh, shit," I muttered to myself.

That apparently got the guy's attention. His head snapped down and looked at me in shock. Glancing quickly around himself, his face settled into a deep scowl as he turned back to me. "Who are you, and why are you here?" he demanded.

I looked down at the bloody sword in my hand. How in God's name should I explain this one? Stretching for any excuse I could, I stammered out, "I just found this guy here, and . . ." I turned to point and trailed off as I looked at a bare patch of ground. Where had Simmons gone?

The man looked over my shoulder for a moment before waving one hand irritably. "Bah! Put that sword away, fool. I don't know how you did it, but you managed to ruin my spell."

Spell? I hurriedly tucked the sword into the sheath sewn into the lining of my coat. I was surprised that he hadn't gone running and screaming for the police by now. Bloody swords generally got a stronger reaction from people than what he'd shown.

He was still glaring at me. I decided that I'd better say something before he lost patience. "Uh, I'm sorry. If you don't mind, I'll just be going now, sir." Never hurts to call someone "sir". Especially those that think they're important.

He waved one hand dismissively, glaring at me all the while. I took his gesture as permission to leave, which I did.

I'd made it perhaps ten steps before my mind caught up with what my eyes were seeing, and I stopped dead in my tracks. This definitely wasn't New York City. It still looked like I was in a warehouse district, but the construction was much more crude. Mostly wood with some stone and mortar jobs. I could see what had to be a town a few blocks distant, but none of the buildings were more than two stories tall with one notable exception.

This place wasn't all that much taller (it was only three stories itself), but it was definitely more ornate. Studying it, the only way I could describe it was as a castle. Not one of those ugly impregnable fortress types of things you see in medieval movies, but more along the lines of a gorgeous castle that you might see in a picture calendar of "Castles of Europe" or maybe a Disney movie.

What the hell was going on?

"What, you've never seen a city before?" asked the man behind me sarcastically.

My jaw was probably down around my ankles, but I didn't bother to turn around. Instead, I figured I'd better get away from this guy. I started walking forward again as my mind started churning away.

None of this made sense. I was in New York, then I was here. Wherever HERE happened to be. Some small town in Europe somewhere? But that guy spoke English. Weird accent maybe but English nonetheless. Even the most isolated hamlet in England would have better construction than this. For sure nowhere in the United States would look like this. Maybe in the Outback of Australia? That still didn't explain how in the world I got here. Amnesia? Drugs? If so, then what was the gain? I still had my sword and my wallet right where they were supposed to be.

What was going on?

While my mind was running in tight circles I absently removed my sword, cleaned it, and replaced it. Taking care of one's sword was so ingrained into an Immortal that it became habit, no matter the circumstances. Meanwhile, my feet had taken me further forward, toward the populated portions of this place. As I closed in on the folks scurrying around, I realized that everyone was dressed in wildly differing styles. There was one guy standing on a corner apparently spouting poetry wearing a doublet and hose. Across the street a woman playing something that looked like a modified harp was wearing a long skirt and blouse in blazing white. The passersby were wearing a conglomeration of clothing, most of which would have looked normal on the set of a Robin Hood movie. Wearing a trench coat, casual shirt, and jeans, I felt horribly out of place, but nobody even gave me a second glance. One item that took several seconds to register on my overwhelmed consciousness was that the only sounds were of horses and people. No machinery or cars were in evidence.

With no idea where to go, I kept walking gradually toward the castle. Once I got close enough to a pair of men talking together, I noticed enough about their features that I stopped in my tracks again. They were both quite short at less than four feet, had beards down to their waists, large noses, and feet all out of proportion to their height. One of them finally noticed my stare and broke off his conversation to look at me. When I didn't turn away, he cocked an eyebrow at me and asked in a gravelly, Scottish accent, "What, haven't never seen a dwarf before or somethin'?"

Dwarf? Like a real dwarf, not a genetically short human? "Sorry, good sir," I stammered. "Where I come from, we don't have dwarves." True enough, but the whole situation was way outside of reality for me. We aren't in Kansas anymore, Toto.

He gave a deep chuckle and eyed me curiously. "From the South then?"

Hell, why not? Whatever would keep me from looking more like an idiot. "Yes, sir."

Nodding in apparent satisfaction, he turned back to his conversation with his companion.

I kept walking and started to look at the signs of the shops I was walking past. Bakery, meat shop, armorer, fletcher, smith, and apothecary. How in the hell did I get to medieval times? Also, how do I explain a real, live, honest-to-God dwarf?

"I can wake up anytime now. Come on, this nightmare has lasted long enough," I muttered to myself, hoping someone was listening.

One wild idea was starting to come into focus, but I needed time to stop and think. Okay, it was time to regroup. I looked up and down the street and spotted a sign for the "Storm Tales." Hoping it was a tavern or something equally benign, I crossed the street and pushed open the door. Giving a silent prayer of thanks that bars were the same no matter where you were, I took myself to a quiet corner, dropped into the chair, and laid my head down on my arms.

I spent perhaps five minutes running all the theories through my head. There were only two choices I could come up with. Either I was completely insane (which didn't bear much thinking about), or I was in a real life version of Dungeons and Dragons. I'd played a few games with mortal friends about three decades ago when it was so popular, and everything I'd seen so far fit in with the motif portrayed in the role playing game. I drug out all my rusty knowledge of that universe and quickly reviewed it. If I wanted to last here for any length of time, I'd better not goof up too badly. If I remembered correctly, then this world had almost zero technology, magic was abundant, religions were varied, multiple intelligent races, governments were mostly monarchies in city-states, and apprenticeships were used in place of formal education. It sounded barbaric to my American raised sensibilities, but on the other hand it sounded like it had an element of rustic charm to it.

My musings were interrupted by a plate being placed on the table in front of me. Jerking my head up, I saw a pretty young woman placing a goblet next to the plate and smiling at me. "I'm sorry," I said, "but I don't have anything you'd accept as money." Precious metals were the only currency accepted, as I recalled. My paper money certainly wouldn't impress anyone. Not to mention the credit cards.

One tapered eyebrow rose. "Where are you from and how did you get here without any money?"

"The South," I answered, figuring that was vague enough and remote enough to answer all sorts of questions. It seemed to work with that dwarf.

The other eyebrow came up. She really was quite pretty. "And how'd you get here?" Her voice was strangely melodic, too.

My face fell as I considered that. "I don't know," I answered honestly. "There was a flash of light and this man appeared in front of me. No, I appeared in front of him I guess," I amended.

She nodded and the eyebrows came down. "You were teleported."

I looked at her. "Teleported." Why not? Nothing else had made sense for the past hour.

She smiled slightly and brushed her hair back and hooked it over an ear in a charmingly familiar gesture. A pointed ear. I blinked. Okay, she was an elf. This world was going to take some getting used to. I tuned in to what she was saying again, ". . . is on the house. You're new to town so we'll give you a break." With another alluring smile, she turned and walked away.

I looked down at the plate and goblet. The plate contained what looked like some sort of stew. Peering closely at the contents of the goblet, I couldn't identify the dark brown liquid. Steeling myself, I took a cautious sip and nearly choked. So this is what ale tastes like, I thought around a choking cough that I tried desperately to muffle. I wasn't all that impressed. Well, don't look a gift horse in the mouth. Besides, it wouldn't poison me.

Mechanically eating the food without truly tasting it or paying attention, I considered what I would do next. Unless this teleport spontaneously reversed itself, I would need to either try to get myself back or learn to live here.

Okay, who could do a teleport? Mages, I answered my own question. Fine. How could I get a mage to teleport me home? Ask politely? Not likely. Pay 'em? That would probably work much better, but that assumed I or they knew where to teleport me TO. It would also mean I needed some money.

How to make money? What skills did I have? By United States standards, I was an expert swordsman, though I was pretty low on the Immortal scale. How did I stack up around here, where most everyone wore a weapon of some type? I was literate, as well. Most of this world's population probably wasn't. At least I hoped I was literate. My American was fine, of course, but there was no telling what reading and writing was like around here. If worst came to worst, I could do general labor, but I would most definitely prefer something else.

The waitress gracefully sank into a seat at the table with me, setting a small wineglass in front of herself. Propping her head in one hand, she studied me intently for a few moments before saying, "You're looking far too serious for the day, good sir. Pray tell what I can do to ease your mind."

Instead of answering immediately, I looked around the room and discovered I was nearly alone. The only other person in the room was the male elf bartender who keeping a loose eye on us while absently wiping down the tables. The lack of patrons explained why this pretty waitress was here talking with me instead of waiting tables. I turned back to the woman sitting beside me and discovered she was still looking to me with an expectant expression. Hell, why not?

"My name is Thian, good lady," I started, giving her the name I adopted for my main character, pronouncing the "I" as a long "E" as I preferred. "As I told you, I've been brought to this place against my will, and I do not even know where this is. Please, where am I?"

She laughed. "'Tis not often that the patrons don't even know where they are! You're in the city of Silverymoon, near the Trollmoors." Seeing my blank look, she continued, "North and east of Waterdeep."

Like that helped me any. Move on to something a little more practical, I chided myself. "I fear I'll need a place to stay and a job soon. I cannot expect you to continue to feed me this way."

Her eyes were still shining. "Come back tonight and we shall see what we can do about your supper." I opened my mouth to protest, but she held up a hand. "Do not argue, for it is not a problem. As for a job, there I cannot help you. What skills do you have?"

I shrugged. "In my own land I am an accomplished swordsman, but here?" I shrugged again in ignorance. "I also know how to read and write, but again that may not help here. I have no other skills that come to mind that may be useful here." I vaguely realized that my speech patterns were already altering to fit in.

A smile trying to work its way onto her face warned me that I was about to get zinged. "Why did you enter this building, then?"

I blinked in confusion. What in the world was she saying?

"I watched you come down the street, swordsman, and you entered none of the buildings save this one. Why?"

"The sign said 'Storm Tales'," I answered slowly. "I was hoping it was a bar or somewhere else I could quietly sit and think."

"You READ the sign over our door," she pointed out.

She nodded at me as my eyes grew wide in dawning comprehension. So I could read after all.

"As for your employment," she continued, "sell-swords are always useful to the merchant bands and the city guard. You can also go to the Sage's Hall to apply as a scribe if that grabs your fancy." She looked me up and down slowly. Grinning slightly, she continued, "Might I also suggest you find a change of clothing soon? Though those pants and shirt are flattering," she smiled at my blush, "they are not like anything else here. You may be targeted by every cutpurse simply because you appear to be wealthy."

Great, another thing to worry about: local muggers thinking I'm too rich for my own good, I grumbled to myself. Shaking off the depressing thought, I smiled at her. "Thank you for the suggestions. How may I call you?"

"I am called Carith, and that is my cousin Therth," she nodded toward the bartender.

Standing, I removed an imaginary hat from my head and dipped into a grand bow, holding my "hat" to my chest and my other arm out wide. "My pleasure to meet you, Lady Carith."

Giggling at my theatrics, she stood and dipped into a curtsy. Leaning on a table, Therth chuckled at the both of us. Smiling at the two of them, I said, "Thank you for the meal. I hope to repay you for your hospitality and advice, but I fear I may be back tonight to draw more heavily into your debt."

They both waved that off. "Tymora's Luck to you, Thian," called Therth as I made my way to the door.

Okay, now what? I needed a job and lodging immediately. A guard for a traveling merchant band, though it sounded fascinating, wasn't what I needed right now. Okay, so my next choice was the city guard. If that didn't work out, then I'd try to find work as a scribe.

For the moment heading toward the castle, I tried to keep an eye out for any of the city guard. I was rewarded almost immediately by seeing four men wearing identical blue and silver capes over their armor. Crossing the street and stopping in front of them, I greeted them, "Good day, sirs. Are you members of the Silverymoon city guard?"

The oldest of the four, wearing chain mail armor with a shield hanging off his left arm nodded. "We are members of the Knights in Silver, yes. I am Knight Karfom. How can I help you?"

Now for an abbreviated version of the truth. "I find myself in need of a job. Where I'm from, I'm something of an accomplished swordsman. I was wondering if I could join your ranks."

He nodded. "We're always looking for experienced men-at-arms. We're nearing the end of our patrol. Follow us back to our barracks, and I shall introduce you to Armsmaster Starkin. There, we'll see what we shall see."

Nodding my acceptance, I followed the four as they continued toward a complex of buildings near the castle. Passing through a market area, everyone we passed moved respectfully out of our path, giving a word of greeting as often as not. While everyone gave me a questioning look, they treated Karfom and his men with respect but not fear. The guard was well liked among the city, apparently.

Crossing between two guards with wickedly bladed, long spear-like weapons, the three other guardsmen headed off in one direction as Karfom

indicated that I should follow him. He led me off toward one low domed building. Stepping inside, it was immediately obvious that this was a training arena. "Star," my guide called to the man keeping an eye on a group of Knights engaged in sword practice.

The man turned and I saw his drooping mustache and wicked scar marring one cheek. He was wearing chain mail as well, with a long sword riding easily on one hip. "Karfom. How went your patrol?"

"Nothing to report, except this man," Karfom turned to me and waved me forward. "He stopped us and asked if he could join our ranks. Thian, this is Armsmaster Starkin."

Starkin gave me a curt nod and looked me over appraisingly. "Anything else, Karfom?" he asked. At Karfom's negative reply, Starkin waved him out the door and chased the other trainees out as well, ordering them to return three afternoons hence. Once the building was empty, he pulled off his cape and hung it on a peg near the door. He turned to me and looked me up and down again for a moment before saying, "Well, before we hire you, I have to determine how good you are. As Armsmaster, I'm in charge of training, so I need to also know how much further training you will require." Waving at the open space, he offered, "Spar?"

I nodded and took off my coat, hanging it on a peg near his cape. While I was doing that, he asked, "What sword do you prefer?"

Smiling, I drew my long sword out of the coat. One of his eyebrows came up. "Scabbard within your coat?" he asked.

I nodded. "Where I come from, nobody wears their weapons openly. My home is much different than Silverymoon."

Shrugging his acceptance of that information, he drew his weapon and moved into the center of the room slowly, eyeing my clothing. "You've no armor?"

I shook my head. "As I said, Silverymoon is very different from what I'm used to."

"Well, we've healing magic near at hand if it's needed," he commented. Settling himself into a defensive stance, he said, "Let's see how good you are, then."

"Rules of engagement?" I asked, closing to within ten feet.

"Check all hits and cuts, if you would. No sense in bothering the clerics if we can help it," he said.

I took that to mean he would avoid drawing blood or breaking bones if he could avoid it. I certainly planned on the same, seeing as how he was mortal, but figured I needed to ask first.

Saluting him quickly, I came at him with a lazy attack routine, trying to get some idea how my style and skill compared to his. Defeating all my attacks easily, he smiled and asked, "Is this all the better you can do? I may have to train you further than I thought."

Grinning at the implied challenge, I stepped up the tempo. Swords crashed into each other repeatedly as we both started fighting in earnest. "Enough," he called after a half-hour of fighting. We'd gotten the sense of the other's skills and respected each other for it. Each of us had landed "hits" on the other with kicks or our off fists and elbows, but neither had gotten a blade past the other's defenses. Leaning forward and breathing heavily, he admitted, "You're good."

Smiling but also breathing heavily, I bowed to him, "And you. Thank you for the exercise. So how did I do?"

"We can definitely use you," he answered as he slowly stood up and sheathed his sword. "What other weapons do you know?"

I shook my head. "None. When fights occur among my people, it's always single duels with swords or very occasionally axes."

He nodded. "You'll need some instruction for different weapons and group tactics, then, but you're already among the best in the city." He smiled modestly. "With few exceptions, I AM the best in Silverymoon, and you fought me to a standstill." He cocked his head at me and examined my clothing once again. "How came you to Silverymoon again?"

"I was teleported," I answered, moving over to my coat.

"Voluntarily?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I doubt it was malicious, seeing as how he was as surprised to see me as I was to see him, but no, it wasn't voluntary on my part."

His face clouded over. "You'll be needing to see the Lady Alustriel then. If there's a mage in town teleporting people against their will, she needs to know about it."

"Who?" I asked blankly. "As I said, I doubt it was intentional."

"Lady Alustriel," he repeated. "Ruler of this city."

I shrugged. "I'd be honored to meet her, then."

Nodding, he grabbed his cape from the hook and waved me along after him. Leading me back out of the guard complex, he headed toward the front gate of the castle.

Moving through the castle, he stopped in front of the guards at what I took to be the audience room. "Is Lady Alustriel in?" he asked directly.

One guard nodded. "She is, but is speaking with an emissary from Mithril Hall. If you'll wait a few minutes, sir, I'm sure you can go in when they're done."

Nodding his head, Starkin waved me over to a bench. "No telling how long they'll -" He cut himself off as the large wooden doors opened and out stepped two people.

One was a male dwarf. I turned to the woman who had exited with him, and I nearly stopped breathing. She was beautiful, no other word for it. Pale skin, lustrous hair, and regally poised, she was among the most enchanting visions I'd ever seen. As she was standing at nearly six feet tall, she was physically looking downward at her companion, but something about the stance didn't indicate she felt he was inferior for it.

Starkin discreetly pulled on my arm, indicating I should follow. Grinning slightly at my awed expression, he led me over to the pair. ". . . delighted to. Tell King Bruenor that an informal alliance is in everyone's best interest, and Silvermoon is always interested in defending goodly folk," she was saying.

The dwarf nodded. "Aye, me king'll be glad to hear it. Me thanks for the meeting, Lady Alustriel. If ye'll excuse me, I'll be off, then." What little of my mind that was functioning noted that all dwarves seemed to speak with what I would call a Scottish accent.

He turned to leave, but Alustriel said suddenly, "Do tell Drizzt to come for a visit."

The dwarf gave her a short nod and moved down the hallway.

She turned to us and smiled. "Armsmaster. How can I help you today?"

Starkin gave her a half bow and said, "Lady, I'm sorry to interrupt your day, but this man has some information that I believe you'll be wanting to hear."

Still almost too stunned to speak, I dumbly nodded.

She graced me with a small smile and waved the both of us back into her audience room. I numbly followed as she crossed a cozy room to sit at a deep chair sitting next to a fireplace. "Please," she said, indicating two chairs nearby. I took a seat, but Starkin stood behind the other in an "at ease" position. Smiling slightly at his stance, she turned her intense gaze onto me and said, "So, Starkin, what will this man tell me once he regains use of his tongue?" Knowing I was acting like a prize idiot, I tried to compose myself.

I could hear the humor in Starkin's voice as he replied, "He claims he was teleported into town against his will. One of my patrols brought him to me when he asked for a position among the Knights, claiming that he was a swordsman in his own homeland. I've tested him and found him to be a quite capable swordsman indeed. With a little seasoning, he'll be a valuable addition to our garrison. However, as you can see he's clearly not from around here. His clothing is like nothing I've even heard rumored. I had thought you'd at least want to ask him about the mage who teleported him and from where."

She nodded fractionally. "You are correct." She studied me a moment longer before flicking a glance at Starkin. "I would prefer to speak with him alone. Please be seated out in the hall, Armsmaster. We will be out presently."

He nodded and spun around, exiting through the door which he closed behind himself.

She continued to study me as I finally composed myself.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Thian, my Lady," I answered, still giving a fake name that would definitely fit in better than my real one.

Her head tilted. "Were you aware that I am a mage?" I shook my head silently, trying to fit her into my mental image of doddering old men wearing baggy robes. "I am," she continued calmly, "and there is a certain spell that allows me to learn the falsehood of anything spoken to me. I will try again. What is your name?"

A "detect lies" spell? Cool. "Theodore Lancroft," I answered honestly.

Nodding, she continued, "Where are you from?"

I grinned sadly, knowing my answer will mean nothing to her. "Most recently from New York City, New York, United States of America." I paused and added sarcastically, "Planet Earth."

One eyebrow comes up. "I have never heard of a planet Earth."

I sighed. "That's what I was afraid of. That means you cannot send me back to my home?"

She shook her head sadly. Damn, I was afraid of that answer. I suppose I was stuck here until further notice, then.

Seeing my expression, she quickly changed the subject. "How came you to be here?"

How the hell do I answer that? "I was standing in the middle of an electrical storm. When my eyes cleared, there was a man standing in front of me."

"That was among the warehouses not far from here."

She tilted her head slightly and asked, "Electrical storm?"

I have no idea why, but lying about it never even occurred to me. "A natural side effect of one of my kind dying. I had just killed him in self-defense."

Casually, she reached up and pressed a spot along the side of the mantle. Nothing appeared to happen. "You are a swordsman?" she continued.

I nodded. "I am."

"Do you have your weapon with you now?"

I nodded again.

She indicated the table. "Please."

Shrugging, I stood and silently drew my sword out, laying it on the table in front of her. Taking my seat again, I watched her study the sword without touching it.

With no warning, the door opened and a dwarf walked in. I frowned as something seemed just a little out of place but couldn't put my finger on it. "Fredegar Rockcrusher, this is Thian, a newcomer to our town," she introduced us, using my assumed name, I noticed. We politely nodded to each other as she continued, "Fret, what can you tell me about this weapon?"

Walking over, he examined it without touching it. "Long sword obviously, though I don't recognize any smith markings. Recently used, but generally well cared for." He looked up at me and asked, "Yours?"

I nodded silently.

Nodding in acknowledgement, he reached forward to lift it. Once his hand touched the bare blade, he stopped. Leaning forward and peering at the metal more intently, he murmured to himself for a moment before saying, "The finest smith in the world couldn't produce a weapon like this without enchantment." He glanced up at her, and she silently shook her head, her eyes never leaving what he was doing. Shaking his head, he muttered, "Didn't think so." After studying it for a few more moments, he turned to me and asked, "What is the metal?"

I shrugged. "A steel alloy. Iron, nickel, and various other metals."

He nodded and put the sword down again. Turning back to Alustriel, he stated calmly, "The metallurgy of Faerun could not have produced this weapon."

She turned to me, "Are you willing to part with the blade?"

I blinked in surprise. All this fuss over a sword? "Well, yes, but I need a sword." If this weapon marked me as out of place, then perhaps getting something more natural to the environment would help me blend in, I mused.

She smiled softly and said, "I will replace this one, never fear." She turned to the dwarf and asked, "Assuming you want it to study?"

He nodded solemnly but had an eyebrow raised. She nodded and waved toward the door. Without a word, Rockcrusher picked up the sword and headed out.

She turned back to me and said, "Forgive me, but that weapon is unlike anything I have ever seen. It would take a fine weapon smith and a powerful mage working together to produce such a weapon. Your sword is of high quality but apparently done without enchantments." She cocked her head and asked, "If I may ask, how was this done?"

I sighed in frustration. Very little of this was making sense. "By my world's standards, that metal is very common."

"Your technology level is well above ours, then," she deduced. "What of magic then?"

I nodded, agreeing with her first comment. "Magic simply does not exist on my world," I answered the second.

Nodding in acceptance of my answer, she waved at my attire and asked, "What of your clothing? Is that common as well?" At my nod, she said, "You could probably sell it to any of the weavers or tailors in town and they would provide you more than one complete outfit just to study the clothing you have now."

I smiled, embarrassed by the whole situation. I had no money, but everything I was carrying was worth something?

She leaned forward in her seat. "On to more practical matters," she said. "What of the mage who teleported you?"

I recounted for her what I could remember, including his accusation that I'd disrupted his spell.

"It was not intentional on his part, then," she concluded. "Your lightening storm interacted with his magic weave, producing an effect that he had not intended."

Yeah. Right. Whatever.

Seeing my blank expression, she smiled and shook her head. "Never mind." She stood and waved me toward the door. "Come along, Thian." She

headed out the door and waved to Starkin to follow once we spotted him on the bench. I felt slightly naked without a sword in my coat but fought the feeling down. I'd had no indication thus far that anyone wished me harm. She led the two of us down a couple of corridors before stopping alongside a blank wall. Turning to a panel that was seemingly just another part of the hallway, she waved her hand and muttered something under her breath that I didn't hear.

I nearly fell over from shock when part of the wall dissolved, forming a doorway into a small room. Alustriel entered without hesitation, Starkin waving me in with a small smile. The disappearing wall didn't surprise him at all. He must have known about it, then.

Gathering myself together, I entered and stepped into a small armory. A rack along one wall held several swords, a few axes, and some maces. The opposite wall held three suits of armor and a few shields. The wall in front of us held shelves containing a little bit of everything. Gauntlets, long bows, quivers, javelins, crossbows, rings, helmets, darts, and other items that I couldn't begin to describe. Soft blue light seemingly came out of nowhere, allowing no shadows.

Alustriel's voice drew me back from my slack-jawed perusal of the room, "Feel free to pick one of the swords."

Shaking my head to dispel this latest shock, I walked over to the swords and examined them. Based on the size and length of the scabbards, only two were long swords. I picked up the first, surprised at how light it was. Once I drew it out of its scabbard, the entire blade began glowing a bright red. Sheathing it and putting it down in shock, I gingerly picked up the other scabbard and hesitantly drew the sword it contained. I was greatly relieved when nothing appeared to happen. Once again noticing how light this weapon was, I gingerly tested the edge against my thumb.

"Careful!" cautioned Starkin.

Too late. Without even trying, the edge slid along the pad of my thumb, drawing blood immediately. Starkin's warning drew Alustriel's attention as well, so both of them were watching as my Quickening healed my thumb in seconds.

They both stared at me before turning to each other momentarily. Once again looking toward me, Starkin finally broke the incredulous silence, "What are you? How did you do that?" His hand kept inching toward his own sword, and he edged toward Alustriel in a clearly protective move.

I sighed. Busted. Gingerly putting the sword back where it had been resting, I answered, "We call ourselves Immortals. We'll heal from most any injury in minutes." I once again surprised myself with how easily I told Alustriel everything. Maybe she had a "trust me" spell going as well. The thought drew a slight smile out of me.

They both studied me again before Alustriel resumed her search along the shelves. "Immortal," she commented blandly. "So how old are you?"

Hell, why not? I was already in this neck deep, and I needed the help. "Nearly one hundred," I answered honestly.

She nodded calmly, but Starkin's jaw dropped. "One word of advice," said Alustriel. "If someone else notices you heal like that, you had best tell them that you have been blessed with quick healing by Helm, God of Guardians or perhaps have a Ring of Regenerative Healing. Explaining that you are Immortal and from another world will not work with most people."

Starkin's jaw dropped further. "Another world?!?"

"Yes," she commented casually. "That reminds me. You will provide him with a suit of armor that he is comfortable with as well as the other standard items he would receive as a member of the guard: cloak, boots, and so on." She turned to me and asked, "Assuming you would still be willing to become a Knight of Silver, Thian?"

Smiling slightly, I nodded.

She nodded back, turned back to the shelves, and continued, "If I could also suggest, take your clothing to Astemon the tailor. He will give you a fair trade value for those items and outfit you well." A moment more of searching before she said, "Ah! I knew he was here." Turning, she presented me with a dagger in a sheath.

Looking from the weapon to her, I asked, "He?"

Smiling slightly, she just held the dagger up a little higher, inviting me to take it.

Taking the sheath in one hand, I grasped the dagger handle in the other and got the latest shock in a day filled with them.

Greetings, Master. I am known as Flick.

Glancing around quickly, I asked, "Who was that?" It didn't sound like Starkin, but it was an undeniably male tone, with a voice that sounded a lot like the few recordings I'd heard of my own voice.

Starkin groaned and shook his head. "I don't want to know. I'll see you outside when you and the Lady are done speaking?" At my confused nod, he bolted from the room.

Alustriel laughed shortly. Composing herself, she said, "That," indicating the dagger in my hand, "is Flick."

"Flick?" I asked dubiously.

Yes?

I looked down at the dagger. It wasn't much, just a simple dagger. Not all that different in appearance from the two that my teacher carried. I looked

back up at Alustriel and asked incredulously, "The dagger is talking to me?"

Alustriel nodded with a gleam in her eye as I heard a soft sigh. *Nobody ever respects me.*

I looked back down again and asked, "Why wouldn't I respect you?"

You think I'm just a dagger.

"Hate to break it to you, but you ARE a dagger," I answered in amusement, wondering if I was totally insane for having a conversation with what after all WAS just a dagger.

I'm not JUST a dagger, came the annoyed response.

"Okay, you're an talkative dagger," I allowed.

"More true than you know," commented Alustriel. "As I said, that is Flick. I suppose you could think of him as a spirit trapped in a dagger's blade."

One eyebrow rose. "A spirit."

It isn't quite that easy, but that definition will suffice. Unfortunately, I can do no more than communicate with the person holding me.

"So Lady Alustriel can't hear you?"

She shook her head as he "said", *No. Think of it as telepathic communication if that makes it easier.*

"Can you hear my thoughts?" The whole situation was surreal, but no more than the rest of the day had been.

No. I can hear as well as you can, and can therefore hear what you say. I can only speak to the one holding me, though.

I look up at Alustriel. "Uh, thank you," I said, not knowing what else to say.

She nodded. "You are welcome." She turned to leave the room, tossing over her shoulder, "Do not forget your sword."

Pausing long enough to grab up the scabbard of the sword that DIDN'T glow, I scooted out the door. She repeated the hand wave in reverse, and the wall reformed. Reaching out gingerly, I felt the solid wall that my eyes were telling me was there. I shook my head in amusement. Magic, after all, was quite good at what it did.

Leading me back the way we'd come, Alustriel didn't say anything, so I asked, "I thank you for all that you're doing, but I must ask why you are doing it."

She gave me barely a glance, "I have a long history of helping people, Thian. You seem to be somebody who needs that help. Besides, I collect oddities and your sword certainly qualifies, being from a different world."

Another world?

"I'll tell you later, Flick," I answered.

I'll hold you to that.

Alustriel hardly raised an eyebrow at my talking to a dagger, but the guards we were passing quite definitely did a double take.

I just smiled. My whole world had just become completely insane, and I was adjusting to it amazingly well.

Alustriel paused at one intersection. Pointing further along the hall, she said, "This will take you back to the front entrance. Thank you for an amusing interlude to an otherwise dull week, Thian. I will leave you to settle in, and then I would enjoy speaking with you again, if that is acceptable to you."

Nodding in acceptance, I dipped into a bow. "At your service, Lady."

Smiling, she headed down a different corridor as I turned back toward the entrance.

I found Starkin just outside the main gates, standing with the other guards.

"Everything set?" he asked me. Okay, we'll pretend nothing weird happened. Fine by me.

I nodded, tucking Flick's sheath into my waistband. I'd already buckled my new sword's belt around my waist. Arranging my coat around the outside of the swinging scabbard, I decided that Alustriel was right. I needed a new set of clothes.

Leading me away from the castle and toward the guard complex, Starkin explained to me the position. Beginning guardsmen were given a cot in the barracks, meals provided, a standard set of clothing and armor, and two lions every week.

"Lions?" I asked.

He glanced at me and shook his head. "I keep forgetting you're not from here." He fished around in a small pouch tied to his belt and produced three coins. "Ten sparrows," he pointed to what looked like a copper piece with a rough imprint of a sparrow on it, "to a falcon." His finger shifted to

the silver coin with the appropriate symbol on it. "Ten falcons to a lion," he indicated the gold coin with a lion in full roar on it. Dropping the coins back into the pouch tied around his waist, he concluded, "And five lions to an eagle. They're made of platinum, though I don't have one to show you."

You'll never guess what's imprinted on an Eagle coin, commented Flick dryly.

Making it look casual, I slapped his sheath.

Was that supposed to hurt? he asked in all innocence.

"My duties?" I asked Starkin, trying to ignore Flick before I broke into laughter.

"Standing guard or patrol seven days out of ten. Assignments are announced for the following week at evening meal every tenth day."

With a start, I realized that I had no idea what the calendar was like here. "What's today?" I asked. I would have said it was Wednesday, but who knew, here?

"Seventh day."

Fine, so we don't give days a name, just number them. It was apparently a ten day week as well. "Okay, what about the rest of this week for me?"

"Training mostly, after I get you outfitted," he answered as he led me through the door of a barracks. One stint in the United States Army during World War II made the function of the room glaringly obvious. Based on the size of the city, this could only be one of several such buildings in the complex.

Nodding at a familiar scene, I asked, "Which one's mine?"

He led me halfway down the aisle and pointed at a bed. "Here. Lads," he called, catching the attention of all half dozen men in the room at the moment. "This is Thian. I've just hired him. He's new to Silvermoon, though."

I winced. Oh, I had just been set up for SO much hazing.

After a word with me to meet him in the morning after "dawnfry", he started to head off, but one big mustachioed guard lazily asked, "How good is he, Star?"

"Better'n you, Famkins," Starkin replied, to the amusement of the room. He stopped, "Oh, and thank you for volunteering to use your day off to help me train him further."

Everyone else in the room guffawed at Famkins's sour look as Starkin left.

Opening the chest at the foot of my bed, I poked through the assorted clothing, shooting glances at the casual attire of the guards around me, I picked out an outfit to change into for a quick trip back into town. I most definitely needed to learn my way around this city.

I'd finished changing and was threading my new sword belt through Flick's sheath when a young guard took a seat on the bed next to mine. He looked pleasant enough, though a bit young at nineteen or so. "Hi, I'm Chavim," he introduced himself to me.

I smiled shortly at him. "Thian."

"Starkin said you're not from here?" he asked. At my head shake, he asked, "Okay, where are you from, then?"

"A galaxy far, far away," I muttered.

"What?" he asked, apparently not having heard.

"Far from here," I answered in a louder voice.

"Don't want to talk about it, huh?" Chavim asked sympathetically.

Not really, and you wouldn't believe anything I said even if I DID answer, I silently replied. I just shook my head at him in answer. I slipped my wallet into a belt pouch and tied that to my belt. The wallet wasn't worth anything to anyone here, but I still wasn't convinced I wouldn't be "teleported" back home soon. Standing, I sheathed my new sword and asked, "I'm going to walk around the town some if that's okay. Care to join me?"

Chavim's expression brightened. "Sure," he chirped. Standing, he went two beds down and pulled his cape off a hook on the wall and grabbed his sword belt. I started to walk back out before he stopped me. Stepping to the hook beside my bed, he pulled down the blue and silver cape there and handed it to me. "We aren't supposed to leave the barracks without wearing these capes."

That made sense. Local law enforcement always wanted to be visible.

Working with it a moment, I finally got the clasp together and everything hanging down comfortably instead of trying to strangle me. Once I was arranged, he led me out of the complex and back into the city.

A pleasant gong-like tone woke me the next morning.

I looked around groggily, hoping to wake up in my apartment. It wasn't to be. I was still in Silverymoon, and this wasn't all a bizarre dream.

After breakfast, I met Armsmaster Starkin at the training arena as he'd asked me to. Instead of beginning my weapon training, he led me back out into the city and stopped beside a storefront with a plaque reading, "Shields, Helms, and Plates." We'd apparently arrived at an armorer.

Stepping through the front door, Starkin waited patiently in front of the counter as I perused the room. Lots of sizes of shields, helmets, and so on, plus every conceivable style of armor filled every available space. I saw plate mail, chain mail made of interlocking metal rings, scale mail with small flaps bolted into a heavy leather backing, padded armor that looked like nothing more than heavy clothing, and armors made of leather of various grades.

"Can I help?" asked a dwarf as he came out of a back room. His soot covered apron proclaimed him to be a smith. He spotted Starkin and his face immediately brightened. "Star! How's me favorite guardsman this fine day?"

Starkin smiled back. "I am well, Durak." He waved at me and said, "This is Thian, a new recruit. I need to outfit him."

The dwarf nodded and turned to me. "What do ye see that tickles yer fancy?"

I shrugged. "I've never worn armor before."

Durak was clearly surprised. He peered at me and asked, "Ye've never worn armor?" He turned to Starkin and asked, "Ye sure ye WANT him in the guard?"

I bristled at the implied insult, but Starkin laughed. "I've already tested him, Durak. He's good. He's just from a land that doesn't use armor."

Durak sniffed his nose disdainfully at THAT thought. "Well," he said, turning back to me, "what do ye need? A piece that'll stop blades, maces, or arrows? Light and flexible, or would ye be wanting sumthin heavier?"

"It cannot be heavy and slow me down," I started. "I've never worn armor, so my style is based on speed. The joints must be flexible for the same reasons."

The dwarf nodded and crossed over to the leather armors. Taking the right sleeve off one of the sets, he held it out to me wordlessly. I took it and slipped my arm through, bringing my wrist out at the other end when the shoulder was covered. I swung my arm around a time or two and bent it at the elbow. Shaking my head slowly, I said, "The weight is fine, but the elbow must be more flexible."

Durak nodded again. "Aye, I was afraid of that. That there is the heaviest leather armor me brother can make. Any lighter than that'll lose a lot of the protection that armor gives ye." He took the one sleeve back and replaced it in its display, pulling another out and handing it to me. I studied it for a moment, noticing that it seemed much more soft and flexible, but there were metal rivets all over the exterior.

This sleeve allowed a lot more movement, and the weight still wasn't a problem, even with the studs. We went back and forth, finally agreeing to a suit of the studded leather with a breast piece that I liked due to its raised collar. It was all still soft leather, so I had my flexibility, but I was gaining some protection along the way with the metal studs. Knowing that I used my left arm as a weapon as well, Starkin suggested that the elbow of that arm be reinforced slightly and spikes or scales added at that point, turning it into a more effective weapon. I vetoed the spikes, not wanting something that would catch on any objects that I might be walking past. I liked the idea of reinforcing the elbow, though. Durak nodded and then asked about my left hand, leading me the gauntlets when I said it was never covered. Still not wanting to lose any flexibility, I opted for an open fingered heavy leather glove with raised metal ridges along the back of the hand. It didn't quite qualify as "brass knuckles", but it would definitely add to the damage of a straight punch. When asked about helmets, I shook my head immediately. My hearing was too important to compromise in any way. Starkin nodded, mentioning that some of his guards refused helmets as well.

Once we'd picked out all the pieces, Durak wrote down all the requirements and said, "Go on next door to Astemon, and he'll get yer measurements. Come back next week, and me brother'll have the pieces made for ye, Guard Thian." He turned to Starkin and asked, "Send the bill as usual?" At Starkin's nod, he waved us out the door, "Off with ye both, then. I've a business to run!" His smile showed us he was teasing, though the voice was loud and gruff.

We stepped next door immediately. Once I closed the door behind us, a tall, cadaverously thin man stepped forward out of the back. "May I help you?" he asked in a deep voice.

Starkin nodded. "Durak asked that we come to you for measurements for Thian here," he waved at me without looking. "He's to be fitted for studded leather armor, so Garak will need those numbers."

Astemon's gaze never wavered once it made it to me. Walking past his counter, he picked up a marked tape from it and approached me. "Take off the cape and sword, please." Catching Starkin's reassuring nod, I removed the cape and hung it on a peg beside the door. Starkin took the sword belt from my hand once I'd unbuckled it. The actual measuring took only a few moments. As he was scribbling down the numbers, he asked, "Will there be anything else, gentlemen?"

A satin sheath would be nice, came Flick's comment. He'd been so quiet that I'd nearly forgotten he was there.

As calmly as I could, I asked, "Will you be here this evening?"

He looked up at me and nodded his affirmation.

I nodded back. "Lady Alustriel suggested I come to you for some clothing. I've the clothes I wore when arriving in Silverymoon, and she assures me that you'd likely be interested in trade."

He didn't look all that excited about the idea but agreed to see what I had when I came back that evening.

On our way back to the guard barracks, I said, "Will someone teach me how to care for the armor?"

He nodded. "Ask Garak or Durak when you go to pick it up. They'll tell you what you need to know and give you some oil to use. Go ahead and charge it to the Knights. That sword is another matter," he continued. I was about to explain that I already knew how to care for a sword when he explained, "The enchantment on it prevents nicks, tarnish, and the like. Just wipe it off when it's dirty, and it'll last through your lifetime."

I smiled at the thought. Unless I was beheaded, my life could easily extend thousands of years.

We'd arrived back to the training arena by that time. Pulling open the door, he crossed over to the weapon rack and pulled down a bow. "Have you ever used a long bow?" he asked, turning to me after picking up a quiver of arrows.

I shook my head warily.

He smiled at me encouragingly. "You're already an expert in long sword, Thian. I only need to get you familiar with the rest of these. Long bow, two-handed sword, throwing daggers, mace, axe, hammer, and crossbow." As he listed them off, he pointed out examples of each.

I stared at him. "ONLY those?" I asked sarcastically.

He grinned back, matching my sarcasm with his tone. "Yes, Thian. ONLY these. If you lost your sword in the midst of a battle, you'd better be able to use any weapon near at hand."

Sighing at the necessity, I nodded my head. Well, at least it would teach me something.

By mid-day meal, Starkin was convinced that giving me a long bow again was just asking for friendly casualties. Once we'd eaten, he hesitantly encouraged me to try the crossbow. Fortunately, that was easier to use. By quitting time, I was getting decent with that weapon, though I doubted I would ever enjoy using it. After using a semi-automatic rifle in wartime, the idea of one shot per minute wasn't something that bore much thinking about for me.

Once he was comfortable with my skill, Starkin released me for the day, bidding me to return after morning meal tomorrow for more practice. Hurrying back to the barracks after a quick meal, I invited Chavim out again. We'd had a pleasant conversation the previous evening as we'd wandered the city, and I was anxious to make friends. Unfortunately, he was standing a late watch, so I headed out alone.

I made it back to Astemon's shop with no trouble. Once inside, I found him fitting a female halfling with a cloak. Paying me no attention, they haggled over the price before she paid him the agreed two lions. Smiling at me politely, she headed past me to the door.

"Welcome again, Knight Thian," greeted Astemon in his grave manner.

I nodded back. Placing my backpack on the counter, I opened it up and pulled out the pair of jeans that I'd been wearing. Handing it to him, I watched his reaction.

Both of his eyebrows immediately rose. Reaching out to gingerly touch the fabric, he ran his fingertips over it for a few moments before pulling it off the counter and shaking it out to its full length. Critically eyeing it, he said quietly, "Curious shade of blue. Tight weave, most likely very durable." He peered closely at one of the belt loops and finally nodded, apparently recognizing them for what they were. "Tight, even stitching," he added next, examining one of the front pockets. Turning it around, he noticed all four pockets, examining all the stitching he could find. Finally folding it back together, he placed it on the counter and turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "Lady Alustriel thought I would be interested in this item?"

I nodded.

He pursed his lips in thought and stared at the ceiling a few moments before he looked back down at me. "Do you have more of this material?"

I shook my head. "I was teleported to Silvermoon without any warning."

He nodded and looked down at the jeans again. "She was right," he said eventually. "This is a curious cloth. Do you know how it was done?"

"No. I was not a tailor nor weaver." True enough, but how the hell was I going to explain to a man who sews items by hand every day that I had gone to a store that sold hundreds of these things?

Flipping over the item, he pointed to the leather patch above one of the pockets. "What is this?"

"Maker's mark," I explain, figuring it was both true and the easiest explanation.

Staring downward, absently running his hand over the denim, his brow furrowed in concentration. Eventually, he said, "I'll give you two eagles and a lion for it."

Time for haggling. Opening bid on his side was supposed to be absurdly low, and going by the pattern, I should overshoot the mark in the other direction. Shaking my head with a heavy sigh I countered, "Four eagles, a pair of heavy wear breeches, and two shirts, also of heavy wear."

One eyebrow crept up a fraction and his lip twitched. "One eagle, breeches, and one shirt."

"Three eagles, breeches, two shirts," I countered.

"Two eagles, breeches, and two shirts."

Smiling, I nodded. "My size, of course," I added.

He laughed deeply and slowly. "Of course."

"Now if we can just agree about the breeches and two shirts, I'll show you what else I was wearing."

His slow smile was answer enough.

It took another hour, but I left with the promise of two pair of heavy wear pants, three heavy wear shirts, one pair of lighter but more decorative pants, two decorative shirts, a soft leather hat with a large plumed feather, and three eagles and four lions worth of assorted coinage for all three major pieces of clothing I'd been wearing the previous day. Counting out the money to give me immediately, he asked, "Come back in nine days with your garments and we can do the trade then." We'd already agreed that he could keep my jeans as my "earnest deposit" for the money.

I shook my head. He frowned at me momentarily before I explained, "I'll leave everything with you. You have the trust of Lady Alustriel, Armorer Durak, and Armsmaster Starkin. You will not steal from me, I trust."

He smiled and finished counting out the money. Dropping it into my coin purse, I asked, "Perhaps you could direct me to a boot maker. I have another trade to make, similar to this," I waved at the jeans, shirt, and trench coat. I grinned at him. "Hopefully that one will be as profitable as this one was."

My training the next morning was much easier on me.

The guard Famkins who had been "volunteered" to help in my training became my sparring opponent. After an hour it was clear that Starkin was using him since he needed at least as much training as I did. His preferred weapon was the mace, and he beat me soundly with it when we were both wielding maces, but my skill with the two-handed sword wiped the superior smirk from his face. By the evening, I'd learned how to not hurt myself with the larger sword, maces, axes, and war hammers. Famkins wasn't patronizing me anymore, either.

My third morning through the looking glass dealt with throwing daggers. I picked that up quickly, much to my surprise. Flick had a few choice comments about his dumber cousins but didn't want to join in the flights himself. Small unit combat tactics started that afternoon.

Since my armor wasn't done, Starkin didn't assign any patrols to me the following week. Instead, it was more dagger and sword practice. It took a few days, but I eventually noticed a problem in my offensive routines and patterns. I continually ignored potential light hits on my opponents. After a moment of thought, it made perfect sense to me. Immortals would hardly be slowed down by such minor wounds, but the mortals and monsters that I would potentially be fighting against now were vulnerable to such attacks. Once I realized that, I began getting better.

Also during this week, Lady Alustriel called me in for a meeting.

Stepping into her audience room, I smiled at her and gave a slight bow, my new hat to my chest. "Lady," I greeted.

She smiled back slightly. "Knight Thian. I was going to ask how you were fitting in, but I can see that you are going quite well."

I nodded. "You've told me that there is no easy way for me to return home, so," I shrugged slightly, "I may as well make the best of the situation."

She nodded and looked down at my waist, "I am glad of that. How is Flick?"

Finally, someone notices me!

I laughed. "He is well. He appreciates that you remember him."

"As well I should," she replied. "His flight from the hand of a friend saved my life once."

I raised my eyebrow, but she didn't divulge the story. Instead, she leaned back in her seat and said, "I have been thinking about how best to use you and your skills. You have told me that you are immortal and most wounds heal quickly. Does this mean you cannot die?"

Whoa, immortal? asked Flick.

"Yes, Flick, immortal. I thought you'd already heard that." I looked up at Alustriel and continued, "I'm afraid you misunderstood, Lady. I CAN die. Most mortal wounds will cause my body to die but be healed with ten minutes, err, a hundred breaths," I amended, remembering that short duration timekeeping was rudimentary at best in this world. "At that point, I will wake up, so to speak, without any wounds."

Wow, commented Flick, sounding awed.

"You said MOST mortal wounds," pointed out Alustriel.

I sighed. "I would not survive a fire hot enough to consume my body, nor any spells that did the same. There is another way to destroy me, but I would rather not divulge that, Lady."

She nodded, accepting that I had a secret I didn't want to reveal. "So you do not fear death?" she asked.

frowned slightly. "I dislike it. Wounds still hurt, but I know I will recover quickly."

She nodded, satisfied with my answers. "As I said, I have been giving thought as to how best to use you. You would make an excellent guard, but your skills would be wasted there. Armsmaster Starkin gives glowing reports on your skills, so I know that you are an accomplished swordsman." I was blushing at all the praise by this time. "So what I would like to suggest is that you get some seasoning as a guard first. Once you have some experience, I could use you as a personal bodyguard on those infrequent times that I leave the city and recommend you for the same to those visitors who ask."

I thought about it for a second before hesitantly asking, "What would be expected from me as your personal bodyguard?"

Get your mind out of the gutter. Flick sounded chastising but amused.

I smacked him. "That's not what I meant, Flick."

Alustriel colored slightly but steadily answered, "Stand near me when I am out and about in public. I may be protected by magic, but a ruffian with a dagger can still harm me. Anywhere I go, I'm likely to have a protective ring of guards. I am simply asking you to be one of them. The same rules for guarding for the occasional visitors who enter Silvermoon and ask for a personal guard."

I bowed deeply. "I'd be honored, my Lady."

She smiled. "Good, then. I will instruct Armsmaster Starkin to give you training as a personal guard."

I nodded. Thinking for a moment, I consider how to bring up the next topic.

"There is something else," Alustriel asked as a statement.

I nodded again. "Lady, if I should die in front of witnesses, and then wake up, I would have to leave. If I do not, I would be reviled as evil and hunted."

"Perhaps not," she answered. "This is a land of magic," she reminded me.

Lots of magic, added Flick pointedly. He was ample proof of that.

"True," I conceded. "However, I also do not age, though I appear human. How will everyone feel in twenty years if I haven't aged a day in that time?"

She frowned. "You have a point. I expect we will have time to worry about this later, but I will keep that in mind."

Don't age? asked Flick in a delayed reaction.

I looked down at his sheath. "Flick, I know you were in the room when Lady Alustriel and I were discussing this before."

He didn't say anything, but Alustriel said, "Yes, but neither of us was holding him when we discussed it."

I stared at her silently for a moment before starting, "But he said -" I broke off and addressed myself to Flick. "You said you could hear normally, but only speak to the one holding you."

I'm sorry, he said softly.

I sighed. "Sorry about what?"

"He apparently misled you, Thian," Alustriel answered. "He cannot hear in the traditional sense. His telepathic communication with you permits him to hear and see through your senses. More precisely he shares the senses of whoever is his current Master or Mistress."

I frowned slightly and asked calmly, "Why didn't you tell me this the first time, Flick?"

He still wasn't answering, so I looked up at Alustriel. She nodded and answered, "Many people cannot deal with the thought of someone else seeing and hearing through them. If he did not tell you, then you would not reject him."

Hell, the world was weird enough the way it was, why not this, too? "Flick?"

Yes? he asked in a small voice.

"What can and what can't you do? Tell me the truth this time, or I'll drop you in the River Rauvin and walk away," I threatened flatly.

He took it seriously. *What the Lady told you is correct. I can communicate up to five paces or so. Beyond that, I can't connect with them at all. Once my Master dies, the next person who picks me up and accepts me becomes my new Master.*

That explained why he didn't bond with Alustriel a couple days ago. She knew what he was but didn't allow it. "Can you hear my thoughts, or just what I hear?"

Both, but it has to be a loud thought before I can hear it.

"Why didn't you tell me this the first time?"

Would you have calmly accepted it? Too many people in the past have rejected the thought of another sentience in their mind.

I laughed out loud. "Remind me to tell you about a Quickenning sometime."

There was a quiet pause before, *So you're not rejecting me?*

"No."

Thank you. The phrase was simple, but the heartfelt gratitude was almost palpable.

I smiled. "You're welcome." I looked up at Alustriel, and she smiled as well when I didn't move to take Flick from his sheath.

"I am glad you two are getting along. I have worried about Flick these past few years. I am happy to see him in a partnership again. I was hoping for this when I gave him to you."

Hey, I'm not a simple item that you can just pass around like that!

"Easy, Flick. You know what she meant."

Well, she could have phrased it better, he huffed.

Smiling at Alustriel, I said, "Okay, YOU tell Lady Alustriel how insulted you were by what she said."

Her eyebrows went up. Pretending to become deep in thought, she said, "Now how did that polymorph spell go?"

Like anything you can do is WORSE than a dagger? he taunted.

"Yes, it could be worse, Flick. She could turn your blade bright pink."

His shout of outraged fear overlapped her laughter.

I'd overheard some casual conversations among the guards for several days about the various cloak clasps that everyone had. Though I already had one as part of my standard attire, it was a plain affair made of iron. Most everyone else enjoyed showing off their own personal ones.

"What's the big deal about these things?" I quietly asked Flick one evening as I was out walking around.

Pride, was the simple answer. *From what I've been able to gather about your world, jewelry is commonplace. These clasps are the only jewelry affordable to most of the guards.*

Hmm, that's true. "Other than the obvious, what else is a clasp good for?"

If it's made of the right materials, it can be a magical focus. My confusion must have gotten through, because he explained himself, *It can hold a continually acting spell. A light source for example.*

"Isn't that interesting?" I muttered to myself. "What materials would work?"

Gold is sufficient for the lowpower spells, but mithril is the best.

"Hmm," I hummed to myself in thought. I lightly fingered the wristwatch that was in my coin purse. I really had no other use for it here. I'd been in Silverymoon going on ten days, and prospects for getting home were non-existent. So why not try to trade it? "You know a good jeweler in town, Flick?"

Armsmaster Starkin has mentioned a halfling named Flanner that he goes to for his own purchases, why?

Instead of answering, I just headed toward where I remembered seeing a sign for "Flanner's Jewels" before. Entering the store and explaining to the halfling proprietress that I was from a far away land, I produced my wristwatch. Fortunately, it was one of the wind-up models instead of a battery powered. Explaining what it was didn't get the reaction from Flanner that I was hoping for. She found it an interesting item, but not worth anything in trade. Sighing in disappointment, I asked about the prices of new cloak clasps.

Her eyes lit right up. She walked me over to the displayed items and allowed me to browse. None of them caught my eye, particularly, so I asked about custom making one.

"No problem there," she assured me.

"Could you make design out of mithril?" I asked, hoping for the best.

Her expression didn't even twitch. "It's doable, but that will cost more."

"How much?" I asked with a sigh.

"Depends upon the design," she responded with a shrug.

I thought about it for a second before one particular symbol jumped out of my subconscious. Smiling, I asked for paper and something with which to draw. Using a piece of sketch paper and a coal writing stick, I quickly drew it.

Infinity? You have a wicked sense of humor, *Immortal*, Flick commented in amusement.

Flanner looked at it and shrugged her acceptance, apparently not recognizing the symbol for what it was. Staring off into space, she thought for a few seconds and said, "I can make it for you for ten eagles."

I nearly choked. Frantically pulling in my composure, I replied, "Four." Even then, I didn't have that much money. "It'll be some time before I can place the order," I added.

"Eight, and up to one moon until ordering is fine."

"Five eagles and two lions," I countered.

"Six and two."

"Six."

She thought on it for a moment and nodded her agreement. "When?"

I shrugged. "I'll let you know when to start it. Shouldn't be more than a few days." I hoped.

As I was stepping out of the store, Flick asked,

You should be ashamed of yourself, Flick commented just an hour later.

"Why's that?"

Taking advantage of that poor gnome's excitement like that.

I shrugged. "I had something he wanted, and he was willing to buy what is undoubtedly a unique item in this world. What's the problem?"

For ten eagles? You'd have been just as happy getting two or three.

"That's all I need for the moment, true. However, I just ran out of stuff from before coming to this world. I need this money if I'm going to live how I want here." I'd just come out of a gnomish inventor's store. He ran what I would have called a curiosity shop. A wristwatch certainly qualified.

Instead of heading straight back to Flanner's store (and raising her curiosity as to how I got so much money so quickly), I headed over to the "Storm Tales". I still hadn't visited them since that first night in town.

Stepping through the swinging doors, I scanned the crowded bar, looking for familiar faces. I spotted a few, two fellow guardsmen (both elves), as well as Carith and Therth. Once I was actually looking for it, I realized I was the only human in the room. Apparent human anyway.

I quietly slid into an empty table and watched everything going on around me. Therth was barely keeping up with the drink orders at the bar, Carith was waiting the tables with another younger looking female half-elf, and another elf came out of the back and dropped plates of food on the counter that Carith and the other waitress would then shuttle out to tables. All in all, it was clearly a busy night in the "Storm Tales".

It was several minutes before Carith noticed me, but once she did, she smiled immediately. Indicating that I should wait, she turned back to filling the order she was working on. It wasn't very long before she placed a flagon down in front of me. "Thian! Nice to see you again. After you didn't show up later that evening, I started to worry."

"You were worried about me?" I asked with a teasing smile.

Even her blushes were cute, I noticed. "I worry about everyone," she shot back.

My chuckle was echoed by Flick. "Now that I have a job," I waved at my cape, "I've come back to repay you for the generosity." I raised a hand to the impending argument I could see gathering on her face. "Now either you accept this or I'm going to tip you VERY well." I smiled at her. "Either way, you'll accept the money."

She frowned momentarily before nodding her agreement with a slight smile.

Nodding at her reaction, I asked, "Is my being here a problem?"

"How's that?" she asked with a frown.

I waved around the room. "I'm the only human in the place," I pointed out. "Just making sure that wasn't intentional."

"Not at all," she assured me quickly enough that my fears were laid to rest. "We're just one of the few non-human run taverns in Silvermoon. We get more non-human customers, but that's not by design." She glanced around the room quickly and turned back to me. "I have to go. You'll be here for a while?"

Sure, why not? I didn't have anywhere to be until late tomorrow.

Smiling at my nod of agreement, she turned and went back to her customers.

I spent the next hour just "people watching". I gradually came to the conclusion that the clientele didn't mind me being there. One or two gave me suspicious glares, but it could have just been the city guard colors I was wearing.

Flick and I kept a running dialogue going. I was practicing communicating with him without speaking out loud, since I figured that'd be a far safer way of talking with him.

Why does the phrase "cantina scene" keep showing up in your head? asked Flick out of the blue.

I nearly laughed out loud. How to explain a science fiction movie? [All the different races in the room reminded me of a scene from a movie I'd seen in my own world. A movie is something that is like a theatre play.] It was an incomplete answer, but it explained enough to him.

Now I'm curious. Try to remember one of these "movies", would you?

Why not? Concentrating as hard as I could, I replayed the movie in my head. It didn't take the usual two hours, of course, but it still took a while.

Once I was done, I let Flick sort through the whole thing while I took a deep breath and looked around. The place was emptier than the last time I'd looked around. Seeing my look, Carith came over with another flagon of ale to replace the empty one on my table. "I was going to come over to make sure you were still breathing," she remarked as she smoothly exchanged the empty mug for a full one.

I smiled at her. "I was thinking deep, profound thoughts."

"Star Wars" is profound? asked Flick in amusement.

[Sure is,] I shot back at him.

Carith looked at me skeptically.

I looked wounded. "What, you don't believe me because I'm human or because I'm male?"

"Male, of course," she returned through her laugh. Glancing around, she apparently saw that everything was under control, so she took a seat at my table. She looked at me appraisingly for a moment before saying, "Okay, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. What deep and profound thoughts were going through that head of yours, Thian?"

How to respond to that? Was that a come on or not? Better play it friendly without being pushy. "I was wondering if the head server of a certain tavern in Silvermoon would care for a friend."

Her face hardened fractionally. "I don't know what kind of taverns you've been in before, Knight Thian, but -"

I interrupted with a raised hand, "Just friend. I must admit the thought of more than that isn't unpleasant," I hurried through her scowl, "but I won't ask for more. I hardly know anyone here. You seem to be someone that I could become friends with." Not to mention that an elven life span meant I wasn't likely to lose her in a decade.

Her eyes continued to bore into mine. We were interrupted by a voice above us saying, "Is there a problem here, Carith?" I looked up to find the other waitress standing over us with a slight scowl on her face. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Therth watching us intently.

Carith slowly shook her head, never taking her eyes off of me. "No, no problem, Sherith." She stood abruptly and smiled at her waitress friend. "Sherith, I'd like to introduce you to my friend, Thian."

Since handshakes were exclusive signs of respect among warriors and nobles, I stood and bowed politely as I'd seen others do when being introduced. She smiled politely back and continued on her rounds. I turned a raised eyebrow on Carith. "Friend?"

She nodded. "Friend." She grabbed up her serving tray and twirled to the room, saying over her shoulder, "Now go away, friend! I have work to do." She stopped suddenly and flashed me a brilliant smile before bouncing off to see to her customers. Scattered chuckles from the tables near us followed her, telling me that we'd had an audience for at least part of that conversation.

Still standing, I dropped a falcon on the table to cover the drinks and her tip. Making a detour to the bar, I held out a lion to Therth and explained that it was as belated payment for my first night in town. He tried to wave it off, but I placed it down in front of him and walked out with a smile and wink to Carith.

The following weeks and months passed relatively quietly for me. My armor came in, and I started standing watches and going on walking patrols through town. I ordered and eventually picked up my clasp, though there were no spells in it yet.

Through it all, I spent at least two nights a week in "Storm Tales". Carith and I rapidly became friends and nothing more, much to Therth's relief. I'd brought Chavim in with me one evening, and he come in on his own more often after that. Privately, I suspected that it had to do more with his crush on Sherith than his friendship with me, but it didn't really matter.

For whatever reason, Chavim and I were sharing a table there one spring night. The patrons of the bar were the usual mix of regulars, visiting

merchants, and travelers of all sorts. Also as usual, Chavim and I were the only humans in the place.

Thian, Flick called softly, drawing my amused attention away from Chavim's attempts to flirt with Carith and Sherith. *Several people just came in that I think you need to pay attention to.*

Having Flick was great. Just because I wasn't paying attention to what my ears were hearing didn't mean he wasn't.

I looked up at the door and immediately saw what he was referring to. The customers' gasps must have alerted him. Five human men had come in, four with swords in hand, spread in a ring protecting the fifth. The one being protected looked to be a young mage, judging by the robe and arrogant smirk he displayed while surveying the suddenly silent room.

I rapidly surveyed the situation. Neither Chavim nor I were wearing our armor as we weren't on duty. Our capes were on, of course, but were hopefully far enough around our backs that the colors wouldn't be obvious. We were both armed, but to draw weapons right now would invite immediate battle in a room full of civilians. Chavim had sensed a problem the instant I tensed. He looked up and tensed as well but had the good sense to not move, apparently waiting for my orders. Though I technically didn't outrank him, my tactical sense had been noticed by most of the guards during our occasional skirmishes in town and the surrounding countryside.

The mage and apparent leader of this group of thugs smirked as he looked around at the sea of faces. "Sub-humans," he sneered. Everyone tensed even further.

Oh, shit, muttered Flick. He'd been picking up more phrases from my vocabulary, I noticed idly.

Nobody said anything in response to the mage, so he continued, "Since you sub-humans clearly don't understand your place in civilization, I'll have to teach you a lesson about economics and power." So saying, he marched toward the till behind the bar with his guards tensely following. Stopping before the till, he reached over the bar and flipped it open, grabbing all the money in it and dumping it into a bag he held.

[My kingdom for a Beretta,] I thought in disgust.

I was thinking of an Uzi, but I take your meaning, Flick replied.

Seeing the mage stealing money, Therth rushed over to stop him. A crashing backhand is all he got for his troubles. Sherith saw Therth fall behind the bar and rushed forward herself shouting his name. One of the guards struck her jaw with the pommel of his sword as she approached. She fell heavily to the floor, groaning through the blood dripping from the corner of her mouth.

Chavim and a gnome sitting on the other side of the room both moved at the same time. Chavim jumped up and drew his sword, charging at the man who'd just felled Sherith. The gnome started casting a spell.

Two guards turned with wide grins to engage Chavim.

The mage shouted, "NO!" and started a hasty spell of his own. The attacker's spell went off first, sending two glowing darts out of his hand and into the gnome who crashed into the table behind him from the impact.

The gnome's spell was disrupted, but the commotion had given me a chance to act. Ripping Flick out of his sheath, I threw it at the attacking mage when his attention was on his own spell. I mentally heard Flick's terrified screech but ignored it. Leaning forward, I drew my other two throwing daggers out of my boots and hurled them as quickly as possible, another at the mage, and one at one of the fighters facing Chavim. Out of daggers, I jumped up and drew my sword.

Flick and my second dagger both flew true and killed the mage before he knew what hit him.

My third dagger had wounded one of the guards in front of Chavim. The wounded guard was immediately attacked by an elven customer who drew a blade and jumped into the fray.

Chavim ferociously attacked the guard who was still standing over Sherith.

Another guard charged after the wounded gnome, only to be stopped in his tracks by a pair of dwarves wielding war hammers.

Panicked, the fourth guard was trying to make it to the door, but I intercepted him before he could make it. A quick series of parries on my part, then my left fist struck out suddenly to catch him on the temple. He crumpled.

I took another look around the room. The dwarves already had their opponent down. The elf had his foe kneeling down, clearly beaten. Chavim's opponent was still fighting, but Chavim ran his sword through the man's chest even as I moved to help. He was dead before hitting the floor.

That made all the opponents down. It was time to figure out who was hurt. Both dwarves were helping the gnome dig himself out of the splintered table. The elf looked fine, calmly holding his opponent immobile with a blade at his throat. Chavim was staring at the man he'd just killed. His sword lay forgotten on the floor, and he had a couple nasty cuts on his arm that were still bleeding. Carith was kneeling beside Sherith, quietly speaking with her as a halfling chanted quietly on Sherith's other side.

"Therth," I called. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he replied, pulling himself upright from behind the bar. He'd have a black eye in the morning but was otherwise okay.

"You have rope or something else to bind these guys up with?" I asked him.

He nodded and headed through the swinging doors back into the kitchen, gingerly holding a hand to his cheek.

Another elf had been speaking with the gnome and was now heading to Chavim. He took Chavim's arm and gently pulled him over to a chair. "Have a seat, and I'll see to your wounds, Guardsman," he said quietly. Chavim let himself be guided over and sat down, never taking his eyes from the slowly spreading pool of blood coming from the man he'd killed.

Seeing that Chavim and Sherith were being taken care of, at least for the moment, I turned back to the man I'd knocked unconscious. Grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, I dragged his unconscious body over to the man that the elven fighter still held at sword point. Therth came out from the back with a coil of rope at the same time that one of the dwarves pulled the last living (but unconscious) guard over to where I was keeping a watchful eye over the other two prisoners.

Therth tossed me the rope, but the dwarf immediately took it from my hand. "I'll tie 'em up, ye just keep yer sword handy," he said. Uncoiling a piece, he roughly pulled the conscious guard's hands behind his back and started tying him up.

"Well fought," greeted the elf cheerfully, sheathing his sword now that I had mine out and ready.

I chuckled at his attitude. "And you."

"Chavim!" shouted Sherith, apparently just waking up. Everyone spun to her. She stood and surveyed the room quickly. Spotting Chavim, she ran to him so quickly she almost flew and knocked into him so hard that he toppled out of the chair. When the two of them came to a tumbling halt, Sherith had her lips firmly locked upon his.

Everyone chuckled at the scene and turned back to what they'd been doing.

Carith made her way over to me with her eyes still on Sherith. "She'll be fine," she commented blandly. I turned a smile toward her, but she grasped the back of my head and pulled me forward into a mind-blowing kiss.

I came up for air and my mind started working again when I heard a commotion at the door.

Famkins came rushing in with mace out, followed by three more Knights. All four of them came to a screeching halt when they saw me with Carith's arms still twined around my back.

Quickly surveying the rest of the scene, Famkins dropped his mace back into the loop at his belt. Walking over to me he said dryly, "I see you have the situation well in hand, Thian."

I smiled broadly, and Carith buried a giggle in my chest. Most everyone else in the room smiled or chuckled, except for Chavim and Sherith, who still hadn't looked up.

Taking a longer look around the room, Famkins asked, "What happened?"

Both dwarves and Therth converged on him, explaining what had happened as the three other Knights took the three prisoners out of the bar. In the commotion Carith snuck another kiss to the underside of my jaw before joining the group around Famkins.

The halfling who had been tending Sherith shuffled over to the oblivious couple on the floor and loudly cleared his throat. Chavim's head, hair tousled wildly, shot up and surveyed the room. Blushing scarlet in embarrassment, he quickly tried to sit up, Sherith moaning in disappointment beside him.

"We'd best tend to your wounds now," the halfling commented in amusement. "You can get acquainted with each other later."

Chuckling in agreement, the elf who'd originally helped Chavim also came over, both clerics beginning more spells of healing.

The gnome who'd taken a magical hit had come up beside me and got my attention with a soft touch on my arm. "Thank you, good sir," he said softly, holding one hand across his stomach lightly.

I nodded. "It is my job, good gnome. I'm a member of the city guard. Guardsman Thian at your service." I bowed politely. I had the right to call myself a Knight, but that title held more nobility in my mind that I thought was appropriate. Besides, Guardsman was also correct.

He bowed back to me. "Illusionist Wik. It may be your job, but you saved my life by killing that mage. I owe you a debt of gratitude."

I shook my head. "We cannot take payment for our services," I replied, thinking that's where he was going.

He shook his head. "I owe you more than mere money can repay." He peered at me thoughtfully for a moment before saying, "Come back here tomorrow night." Smiling enigmatically, he turned on his heel and shuffled stiffly toward Famkins.

Ouch.

Grinning slightly, I crossed over to the dead mage and retrieved Flick. *Did you really have to do that? Do you have ANY idea howmuch it hurts to come to a crashing halt against someone's backbone?*

Wiping Flick's blade clean, I saw that he was correct. My throw had imbedded itself immediately next to the mage's spine, the blade angled in and just long enough to reach his heart. Damn, that was a better throw than I'd ever managed before.

Don't get an over-inflated ego, he snapped. I just happen to be a special flight dagger.

I blinked in amazement. [Just why didn't you tell me this before?] I silently asked.

'Cause I didn't want to take such a bruising flight, was the prompt reply. Besides, you never asked.

Despite my best intentions to leave "Storm Tales" alone the next evening, I had to return. I didn't want to run into Illusionist Wik again and he feel obligated to make some sort of restitution, but I had to return. In all the excitement of cleaning up, I'd forgotten my cape. At least I hoped it was there.

Immediately after my watch at the Moonbridge, I headed straight over there, not even stopping to remove my armor.

Walking in, half a dozen of the regulars greeted me with raised goblets, wineglasses, or flagons. Smiling sheepishly back, I made my way to Therth behind the bar. A cleric had healed him, I noticed idly. His cheek and eye didn't show the bruise I was expecting.

"Thian!" he greeted.

"Therth. Please tell me that I left my cape here last night. If it isn't here then I've lost it."

Laughing, he leaned down and came back up with my cape, neatly folded. Smiling my thanks, I shook it open to put it on but stopped when I realized my clasp was gone. Damn! Now I'll have to get it replaced.

Seeing my expression, Therth said, "Don't worry about your clasp. Wik has it," he nodded to the gnome at the replaced table.

Thanking Therth distractedly, I walked over to Wik and took a seat at his invitation. What would Wik be doing with my clasp? More importantly, how'd he get it?

What are you asking ME for? asked Flick irritably.

I was about to tell Flick that it was a rhetorical question when Wik interrupted softly, "Based on your expression, I'm sure you want to know why I may have this." His hand shifted slightly and my clasp slid along the table to come to a gentle stop at my hand. At my start of surprise, he laughed and said, "I AM an Illusionist, Knight Thian."

"Um, thank you," I said, scooping up my clasp and standing, trying to get out of the strange situation.

"Don't you even want to know what I've been doing with it?" Wik asked calmly.

I sat back down. "Okay," I started slowly, "what have you been doing with my clasp?"

Nodding toward the object in question, he said, "I'm sure you're aware that mithril is good as a spell focus for it is strong and already prepared for magic." At my hesitant nod, he continued, "So as repayment for your actions yesterday, I have put two spells into it."

I was afraid of that. Not that I didn't want spells placed into it (that's why I wanted it made of mithril in the first place, of course), but I really couldn't accept any payment for what I did yesterday. "I cannot take any form of payment -" I began again.

Oh, shut up and accept it, Flick said in exasperation. *It's why you got the thing, isn't it?*

"You can, and you will," stated Wik placidly. "Even if you didn't want it, it's too late. The enchantments are already complete."

Sighing in defeat, I nodded. "Then I thank you. What enchantments?"

Smiling at my agreement, Wik said, "First is a protection against all illusions, including attacks directed against your mind. You will still see the illusions, but they will be fuzzy and indistinct. How you react to them is up to you. This protection is continuous when you are wearing the clasp. The second enchantment is a light spell. I'm aware that humans cannot see in the dark, so I decided this would be useful to you. The command words 'brightness' and 'darkness' activate and deactivate it."

I stared at him in stunned silence. "This is entirely too much -" I started.

Wik waved a hand. "It cost me little to do, and it will be a useful item to you. As I said, I owed you a debt." Smiling calmly, he said, "Now try it. I want to make sure the enchantments work at your bidding."

I looked down at the clasp nestled in my hand. It didn't look any different, nor feel different. "Brightness," I said, not knowing how else to invoke it. The mithril infinity symbol immediately brightened to the intensity of a good light bulb. In the naturally light room, it wasn't noticed by anyone else, though. "Darkness," I said, smiling. It immediately went out, looking once again like a normal clasp.

Smiling delightedly, I looked up at Wik to find him nodding in satisfaction. "Put it on," he bade me.

Eager to discover what else it could do, I stood and hooked it back into place, settling the cloak about my shoulders. Taking my seat again, Wik was muttering quietly, his hands waving. Suddenly a four inch chipmunk popped into existence on the tabletop. Starting slightly, I studied it. I could see all the stripes along its back, looking like a chipmunk should, but it looked just hazy enough that I knew something was wrong with it.

The "chipmunk" sniffed around the table for a few seconds until it came to the wineglass at Wik's elbow. Taking one sniff of that, it immediately dunked its face in and drank deeply. Coming up for air eventually, it stumbled over toward me before keeling over in the middle of the table in a drunken stupor. I could swear it even had a grin plastered on its tiny face.

Anyone know chipmunk CPR? asked Flick in amusement.

Chuckling, the dwarf at the next table saluted Wik with his mug and said, "Nice spell, wizard."

Chuckling in agreement, I looked back down to discover the illusion had disintegrated, and Wik's wineglass was once again at its previous level. "Nice spell, wizard," I echoed with a smile.

Nodding in satisfaction, Wik stood, tossing a lion onto the table. "Thank you, Knight," he said. "Until we meet again." Bowing to me, he swept out of the room.

The months passed quietly and so became a year. My training had long since finished, and I slowly climbed the unofficial ranks of the Knights. My official rank and pay hadn't gone up, but the respect of my peers and superiors had given me a de facto promotion. My extra training to be a personal bodyguard at least provided the occasional week guarding some visiting dignitary. Though rougher on me, it did provide a diversion. I even was part of Alustriel's personal guard during her occasional visits to the surrounding communities.

Generally, though, time passed quietly. Despite my hopes after the fight and ensuing kiss at "Storm Tales", Carith and I never extended our relationship further. We simply remained very good friends.

I was standing guard at one of the city entrances one quiet summer day when two figures approached. Once they were close enough, I was astonished to see a drow elf and a huge panther traveling together.

"Well met, ranger," Chavim called from beside me, nodding to the dark elf.

The drow looked up and raised a hand in greeting to Chavim but never took his eyes off me. "I am Drizzt Do'Urden," he said quietly.

I nodded in recognition. I'd heard several stories about this renegade dark elf. "Well met, I am Guardsman Thian. The Lady Alustriel has spoken well of you, dark elf."

His smile and suddenly relaxed pose released the tension in the remaining two guards standing with us.

"And this," the drow indicated the panther patiently standing beside him, "is Guenhwyvar."

The panther let out a low growl, as if understanding what was occurring.

"Is the Lady Alustriel here?" Drizzt asked.

I nodded. The watch leaders had specific instructions regarding this visitor. Since I was the watch leader here . . . "Indeed she is. If you and your companion would like to come with me." I waved him past, and we fell into step, Guenhwyvar padding along silently on Do'Urden's other side.

"I thank you for the courtesy, but I need no guide," he said to me after twenty paces.

"It isn't solely for your benefit," I explain. "Unfortunately, dark elves have a reputation. If some of the townsfolk were to see a drow wandering freely without escort . . ." I trailed off.

He nodded with a heavy sigh. "I understand."

There's something about one of those scimitars, commented Flick as we neared the castle.

[What's that?] I asked.

I don't really know, was the hesitant reply. *It's almost alive, but not quite. It's just . . . Hungry.*

A hungry scimitar? Well, hell, why not? I had a talking dagger.

I heard that!

Smothering a chuckle at Flick's mock outrage, I silently led Do'Urden to the castle, nodding to the guards positioned there. Walking to the audience room, we found the door open, so we stepped straight through.

Lady Alustriel looked up from the desk where she was seated. Seeing my companions, her face broke into a smile. "Drizzt! Guen!" She stood and rushed over to Do'Urden and wrapped him into a hug after giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

One eyebrow rose in surprise. Well, that explained why watch leaders had such specific instructions concerning this dark elf. Deciding I had no reason to be here, I quietly said, "Master Do'Urden, Lady," bowing to each in turn. I spun on my heel, intending to return to my post.

"Thian," called Alustriel.

I turned back. "Lady?" She'd turned to me but hadn't released her dark elven friend.

"Stay. I have been wanting to speak to Drizzt about you for some time. Please stay so that we may have that discussion now."

Since I wasn't about to disobey a direct order from her, I took one of the seats she indicated as Do'Urden and the others. The panther flopped down in front of the fireplace after Alustriel had rubbed behind its ears.

Do'Urden was studying me intently. I calmly returned the scrutiny. He possessed the black skin that was the trademark of drow elves, white hair, and vibrant purple eyes on a slightly over five foot frame. Though he was hardly large in a purely physical sense, I didn't make the mistake of considering him to be a weak fighter. He was wearing a heavy traveling cloak over chain mail, a medallion depicting a unicorn resting against his chest. My warrior instincts had already taken in the scimitar that rode each hip. If one of them was nearly alive, I wondered about the other.

"Drizzt," Alustriel began, drawing our attention to her, "You have been places and heard rumors that I have no access to. I was wondering if you knew anything about where Thian is from, or anything about his people. He came to us a year ago through no action of his own, a victim of a misfired teleport."

Do'Urden nodded his head silently, accepting the information.

Alustriel took a breath and turned to me. "He is from a place called Earth. His people call themselves Immortals."

"Lady," I objected, beginning to rise in my seat.

She raised a hand, and I immediately stilled. "I trust Drizzt with my life," she calmly told me. "You can trust him with your secret for it will go no further than these walls." Getting my grudging nod of agreement as I settled back down, she turned back to Do'Urden and continued. "They call themselves Immortal and with good reason. I myself have seen him wounded, only to heal in moments. He claims to be a century in age, and I have no reason to doubt that claim."

Do'Urden's eyes were slightly wider as they turned back to me. "Human and a century old? Are you some sort of mage?"

I shook my head. "No, not a mage. Nor am I quite human, either. I appear to be human, though I am not. I am Immortal."

"Fascinating," he murmured. Shaking his head, he turned back to Alustriel and said, "I've never heard of such a people, nor of a place called Earth." Turning to me again, he asked, "Your wounds heal?"

Sighing in resignation, I drew Flick.

Sure, use ME, he muttered.

I ignored him and instead slashed across my palm, allowing the dark elf to watch it as it healed seconds later. Pulling a cloth out of my pocket, I cleaned Flick's blade and then my hand. Tucking everything away, I looked up again to find Do'Urden's stare boring into me.

"A human who is older than I am," he mused after a time.

Alustriel smiled slightly. "I am human, and **I** am older than you are, Drizzt."

He smiled and tilted his head to her in silent apology. "True, but you're an enchantress. Thian claims no magical ability."

I shrugged. "Magic does not exist on Earth."

His eyebrows rose. "Not at all? What of the gods?"

I smiled slightly. "What gods? There are many religions, but most of them believe in a single God who is actually little changed from one religion to the next. Also, priests in my world have no special powers as do the clerics here on Faerun."

Do'Urden continued to silently regard me for a few more seconds before Alustriel said, "I just wanted to ask you about Thian's people, Drizzt." She turned to me. "Knight Thian, do you have any further questions?"

I shook my head and stood at the obvious cue. "Good day, Lady, sir."

One more avenue of information that'd never heard of Earth. I was despairing of ever returning home.

This place did have several redeeming features however, I consoled myself with a thought toward that evening.

As a member of the Knights in Silver, I was required to attend the occasional formal party in Silverymoon. Most of it was petty posturing by self-important local merchants mixed with minor politics. I was only required to attend every fourth such event, at any rate. Besides, it was always a good meal followed by dancing.

We were all encouraged to bring "dates" to these parties, but this was the first one that I'd mustered the nerve to actually ask Carith to attend with me. I was greatly relieved when she agreed. She was known in town as a server at one of the better taverns, of course, but she didn't have the same type of reputation that many of the other tavern wenches had. Attending this party together wouldn't hurt either of our social standings.

As we agreed, I met her at "Storm Tales" before the party was due to begin that same evening. As a member of the guard, I was permitted to retain my weapons, so I had most of them on me, though I wasn't wearing my armor. Instead, I wore one of my slightly oversized deep green shirts and a pair of black breeches that Astemon had made for me a year ago. My feet were clad in the high sided, fir lined boots that I had gotten in trade for my Reeboks. I was feeling rather dashing this evening, but one look at Carith stole that smug feeling.

She was wearing an emerald green dress, a sash of red velvet hooked from left shoulder to right hip. Her hair was pulled back from her face with a

fragile looking hair clasp, clearly revealing her elven features.

She smiled demurely while I stopped drooling and got my voice under control. "You look lovely, lady," I finally stammered out.

Her head dipped slightly, and she replied, "And you, lord."

Voice and emotions finally under control, I smiled and held out an arm. "Shall we?"

Gracefully hooking her arm through mine, she let me lead her away.

Hubba, hubba, commented Flick, followed by his best approximation of panting sounds.

[Shut up, or I'll leave you at the door all night. You may be able to see what I do, but you DON'T have to comment, Flick.]

Aye, aye, sir! he snapped back, clearly teasing. *Shutting up now, sir.*

[Arrogant little pipsqueak.]

Hey!

Through all my conversation with Flick, I'd silently led Carith to the banquet hall in the castle. Giving our names to the doorman (though he and I knew each other through the Knights), we were permitted entry. We stepped forward and into the main party hall in the city. Two dozen tables were set up for the night, seating a total of almost a hundred and fifty guests. As one of the few mixed race couples in the room, we caused several raised eyebrows as we circulated and danced, but no comments came our way.

As a member of the guard, I wasn't expected to sit with any of the merchants or minor nobility, for which I was eternally thankful. Instead, Carith and I spent the meal sharing a table with two other Knights and their wives. Once the meal was finished, I quietly told Carith, "If you grow weary, do not hesitate to tell me, and I will walk you back."

She laughed. "You will do no such thing! This is the most fun I've had in years, Thian. You're not about to drag me out of here so soon. Besides, I'm used to working all evening, remember?"

I smiled and stood. "In that case, may I have another dance?"

It turned into three dances before we made it off the dance floor. Laughing arm in arm, we headed back to our table, only to be intercepted by Armsmaster Starkin. "Thian," he greeted with a smile. "It is good to see you here."

"Armsmaster," I nodded back. "Permit me to introduce you to Carith. Carith, this is Armsmaster Starkin of the Knights."

She dipped into a graceful curtsy, and he nodded politely. Turning to me again, he said, "Thian, please join Lady Alustriel and me. We have something to discuss with you."

Now what could that be? Nodding my agreement, I held my arm out to Carith to escort her, but she held back. "Maybe I should leave," she said, unsure of what she should do.

Starkin shook his head. "'Tis not bad news, nor confidential. You are welcome at the table as well, Carith." He shot me a quick smile before turning back to her. "I daresay that Thian here will have more to celebrate once he hears what we have to say." He waved over at the table at the head of the hall. "Come. The Lady isn't as intimidating as you may fear."

Slowly taking my arm, she nodded agreement and all three of us started heading toward the table. Leaning toward Carith slightly, I whispered, "You have nothing to fear, Car. Lady Alustriel is nothing but kind."

Carith nodded slightly but whispered back, "But will I remember all my manners? I do not want to disgrace my clan."

I patted the hand nestled into the crook of my elbow. "You'll do fine," I soothed.

Upon arriving at the front table, I wasn't terribly surprised to find Drizzt Do'Urden seated beside Lady Alustriel, though he looked ill at ease in the banquet hall. Nodding to him and bowing to Alustriel, I said, "Lady Alustriel, Master Do'Urden, may I present my friend Carith. Carith, this is Lady Alustriel, ruler of Silvermoon, and the Ranger Drizzt Do'Urden of Mithril Hall."

Alustriel nodded and smiled at Carith's hasty curtsy. Since arriving within sight of the table, Carith hadn't taken her frightened gaze from the dark elven ranger. Seeing her nervousness, Do'Urden said quietly, "Perhaps I should leave."

"No!" Carith said too quickly and slightly too loudly. Blushing, her gaze fell to the floor for a moment while she composed herself. Looking back up at him calmly, she continued, "No, pray do not leave, good ranger. I'm afraid it was just the shock of seeing a dark elf here. I've never met one of your kind, you see, and . . ."

He nodded solemnly as she trailed off. "I understand. The drow cause fear just through rumors. If I DO make you uncomfortable, I can leave."

She shook her head. "Do not. You are a guest of Lady Alustriel. I have no right to force you from here." Seeing that she was apparently calming down, I held a chair out for her and she seated herself gracefully. Taking a deep breath, she took a hold of my hand under the table as I sat down next to her, Starkin taking a place between her and Alustriel.

"Thian," started Starkin, "are you happy here with your place among the Knights?"

I'd told Carith an abbreviated version of where I was from, so I wasn't hesitant to answer honestly in front of her. "Yes," I said. "It is beginning to seem as though I cannot go back to my home world, and this is as good a place as any to be." I smiled at Carith and squeezed her hand slightly. "And better than some," I added.

She blushed slightly, eyes on the tabletop.

Starkin and Do'Urden chuckled, and Alustriel smiled.

"I am glad to hear that," Alustriel said. She gestured at Starkin slightly and continued, "Armsmaster Starkin and I have discussed you recently, and I agree with his recommendation to promote you a grade."

I blinked in astonishment. Finding my voice, I said, "I am honored, Lady, but forgive my confusion. I was expecting it to be some years before I could be promoted."

"That is usually true," Starkin nodded. "However, you've proven your worth several times over. Your guarding of visitors has brought nothing but glowing comments, and then there's the incident at 'Storm Tales' some months back," he nodded at Carith slightly. "You have stood all your watches, done all the patrols, and acted honorably in all respects. In addition, you're probably the best swordsman in town, now. With the possible exception of Ranger Do'Urden, of course," he hastily added, shooting a glance at the drow. For his part, the ranger just shrugged modestly. Starkin continued, "You passed me by some months ago in sword skills."

Alustriel picked up the thread, "Montogram, the head of the Knights in Silver, is retiring soon. I will be promoting Armsmaster Starkin to that position." She fixed her gray eyes on me and finished, "He recommended you for the position of Armsmaster in his place."

My jaw started to collect splinters. Turning an unblinking stare from Alustriel to Starkin, I stammered out, "That's years ahead of where I am. What if some of my friends in the guard resent me for it?"

Starkin shook his head. "You do honor to your friendships by thinking of that first. To answer the question: it shouldn't matter. But to ease your mind, even that loud oaf Famkins admits you're better than he is. This job is training, administrative, and diplomatic. Though we'd have to find someone else to train the lads with the bow," he added with a sly grin. I smiled nervously back as he continued, "Nobody else can do this job, Thian." He shot a quick glance at Carith before continuing, "You'd be interested to know that the position entitles you to a significant increase in pay as well as a private residence."

Carith blushed scarlet again and dropped her gaze to her lap. I opened my mouth to refute what he was implying, but shut it just as quickly. Why bother trying to correct him?

"You have given me a great deal to think about," I said slowly instead. "Pray give me a few days to think it over?"

Alustriel and Starkin both nodded. The Armsmaster stood and bowed politely to the table. "If you will excuse me, it is getting late. I'd best retire. Ladies, ranger," he said, nodding to the three of them. "See you tomorrow, Thian?"

At my shocked nod, he thumped me on the shoulder and moved off through the thinning crowd.

Carith leaned over to me and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. "What is your hesitancy, Thi? This is quite the step up for you." I looked over at her but didn't say anything. She didn't know about my Immortality, so she didn't understand all the ramifications to me. She stood and shook a finger sternly at me. "I'll be right back, and then I'm going to talk you into accepting this position!"

Chuckling helplessly at her attitude, I watched her walk off toward the restrooms.

"She's right," Do'Urden calmly said into the resulting silence. "This is a step up for you. What are you afraid of?"

Oh, where to start? I stood and began pacing back and forth off of the end of the table near where Do'Urden and I had been sitting. As an Immortal, I couldn't take any position that was too high profile. I'd hidden my nature entirely too long to change that basic fact of life now. It was safer, easier to hide among the average workers wherever I happened to find myself. As always, I would eventually have to move on, otherwise the fact that I wasn't aging would become obvious.

The room had only thirty people left in it by this time, so the slight sound I heard from the door behind me was clearly audible. Since I was turned away from it at that moment, I saw Do'Urden's quizzical expression turned toward the door before I turned around myself. Finally facing the door, I found one of the worst nightmares of the Knights in Silver. Four forms stood just inside the doorway, three with crossbows coming up into firing position, and the fourth's hands were waving soundlessly, clearly in the midst of a spell. All four were nearly translucent and had the wavering lines I'd learned to associate with illusions. Which meant nobody else even knew there was danger.

Reacting purely on instinct, I pulled Flick from his sheath and hurled him at the mage. Not even waiting to see how the throw came out, I turned and barreled through Drizzt Do'Urden, knocking him backwards off the chair he'd been casually reclining in. I ran at Lady Alustriel, intending to knock her down and out of the line of fire.

Four things happened simultaneously. I heard Flick's shriek as he flew through the air. I heard the three crossbows click. I heard one male voice scream in pain. A bright flash of light obscured everything.

Just as quick as that, everything winked out.

I woke up with a gasp and immediately wished I'd die again. At least that way my back wouldn't hurt so much.

"Lie still, I'll get a cleric," a voice said in my ear.

Balling my fists in pain, I ground out through clenched teeth, "No clerics!"

"The crossbow bolts in your back -" objected the voice that I was beginning to recognize as Do'Urden's.

"Pull them out," I hissed in pain, interrupting him. No wonder my back still felt like hell.

"What?!" he asked in amazement.

"Do it," stated Alustriel's voice. "Thian knows his body's healing better than we do. If he wants you to remove them, then remove them, Drizzt."

I heard a soft sigh then slight rustling. He placed a hand on my back on one of the few places that was NOT on fire. "Brace yourself. This will hurt," he said. Still trying to keep from screaming, I simply nodded.

The first bolt was jerked from my back, and I howled in agony. Quickly, he jerked the two remaining bolts out of my back, throwing them to the side.

Oh, quit crying, you sissy, said Flick.

He was probably just trying to get my mind off the fact that my back had just been put through a meat grinder, but I wasn't in the mood. "Shut the hell up, Flick," I ground out, pain sweat running off my forehead and into my eyes.

"What?" asked Do'Urden, still kneeling beside me.

"His dagger," explained Alustriel. "It is sentient, and he is talking to it."

"Yeah, like that scimitar on your hip," I added, trying desperately to keep my mind on some topic other than my back until it finished healing.

"What are you talking about?"

"Flick called it semi-sentient and described it as 'hungry'," I explained, slowly uncoiling every muscle in my body as the pain ebbed down to merely torturous.

"Yes, I suppose that is correct," he said reflectively. "From what I understand of it, it was forged with a cold enchantment, specifically designed to banish demons."

"Drizzt Do'Urden the Demon Slayer," I quipped. "Woulda made a hell of a television show. Just hope Buffy doesn't sue your ass off for copyright infringement," I babbled on.

"NOW what are you talking about?" he asked, clearly exasperated with my shifting focus.

"Never mind," I muttered, slowly putting my arms under my body and heaving myself upright. By the time I made it to a sitting position, I realized I was in one of the small anterooms near the banquet hall. Alustriel stepped forward and handed me Flick. Quietly thanking her, I pulled myself upward with a hand braced firmly on a table. Standing as well as I could, I replaced Flick in his sheath and asked, "What happened?"

I got the mage, Flick told me quietly.

Do'Urden was speaking at the same time. "Your dagger killed the mage at the same time that his lightning bolt and the three crossbow quarrels hit you."

"Thank you," Lady Alustriel quietly said. "That may have destroyed me if you hadn't been there."

"And me," added Do'Urden. "I was in the line of fire as well."

Still leaning forward, braced on one arm, I looked over and smiled grimly. "That's my job, Lady." I coughed into a hand and then asked, "What happened to the three crossbowmen?"

Alustriel snorted inelegantly. "It was a toss-up whether Drizzt or I would have killed them first. Fortunately, my dark elven friend here just knocked them out instead."

Now that I could stand without toppling, I removed my cape. Unsurprised to find a massive bloodstain on the back, I removed the clasp from it and dropped the cape onto the floor and the clasp to the table. Pulling my shirt over my head, I looked at the back critically. "This was my favorite shirt, too," I lamented with a sigh, studying the sodden fabric.

The door came crashing inward, and Carith ran in. She made it less than five feet before she came to an abrupt halt, staring at me with wide eyes. Starkin came in behind her and closed the door quietly, standing in a guard position in front of the door.

Carith's eyes never left me. "How . . . What are you?" she whispered.

There I was, holding my bloody shirt, standing over my equally bloody cape, and to top it off, my back was probably in even worse shape. No point in trying to deny anything. Without moving and perhaps spooking her, I said, "I'm Immortal, Carith. I will survive most any wound, including crossbow

quarrels and lightning bolts."

Her mouth opened once or twice, but nothing came out. She slowly shook her head, still staring at me.

Alustriel crossed the room and gently took Carith's arm, pulling her off to the side and starting a quiet conversation.

Do'Urden was still eyeing me. "You okay?"

I nodded absently, "Yeah, I'm fine." Looking over at the drow, I held up the shirt and said facetiously, "They ruined my shirt! Now I'm angry."

He stared at me incredulously before breaking into laughter. Even Starkin chuckled. Do'Urden shook his head and said, "You're impossible."

I've been saying that for months, interjected Flick.

Do'Urden was still talking, "You were just killed and you're complaining about your shirt?"

I shrugged at the dark elf's comment. "I'm alive now, so there's no sense in commenting on it. Besides, this WAS one of my favorites."

Do'Urden threw his hands up in exasperation. Starkin just chuckled again.

Alustriel called out from the corner where she was standing with Carith still, "Armsmaster, please go out and explain to the remaining guests and Knights that Knight Thian survived."

"No," I objected immediately, drawing curious looks from Do'Urden and Alustriel. Starkin merely looked shocked that I'd disagree with Lady Alustriel. I explained, "I died very publicly out there. I can not appear in town again."

Alustriel frowned slightly. "Why not? I told you that this is a land of magic. Just say that you were blessed by Helm with rapid healing."

I shook my head. "What happens when it becomes obvious that I'm not aging? No, I will have to leave Silverymoon eventually, and this is as good a time as any." I sighed and looked to Carith who was still looking at me, though it was with less fear now. "I just wish I could have spent more time with you, Car." I smiled sadly and continued, "I'm beginning to fall in love with you, but that wouldn't be fair to either of us. I can't stay, and I can't ask you to leave, either."

"Why can't you stay?" she asked in a quiet, choked voice.

Surprisingly, Do'Urden answered the question. "When his survival here becomes public knowledge, he will be under scrutiny from many directions. Once it's obvious he isn't aging, one of two things will happen. Either he'll be hunted down for having made a pact with some evil greater power, or some mage or another will kidnap him to learn his secret for perpetual health and youth."

I nodded sadly. "Elves and dwarves won't bat an eye at it, but what of humans and the other shorter lived races? I do not want to become a test subject for some mad human mage who wants to live forever."

Alustriel nodded with a soft sigh. Do'Urden just looked sad for me. Carith walked slowly over to me and laid her head against my chest, her arms snaking around my back. I felt her tears against my bare chest moments later.

"You are determined to leave, then?" asked Alustriel quietly.

"I have to," I answered tonelessly, holding Carith and keeping my eyes closed in a futile attempt to stop the tears. "Though I regret having to give up the position of Armsmaster that I was just offered," I added in wry amusement.

Strained chuckles greeted my comment.

"Armsmaster Starkin," said Alustriel in an official tone laced with regret. "Please go out and explain that Knight Thian died of his wounds. We shall have a ceremony for him tomorrow, full honors. He left word with you that he stated his preference of no resurrection, correct?"

I gave a crooked smile and looked at her in admiration as she built a plausible series of events that covered everything nicely.

"As you wish, Lady," whispered Starkin before he quietly exited.

"Carith Stormbow," said Alustriel.

Her head jerked up. Sniffing back a tear, she turned to Alustriel, "Yes, Lady?" She frowned. "How did you know my clan name?"

[Stormbow?] I wondered.

Alustriel smiled slightly. "I know your sister Kith and cousin Survan. Are they in town?"

"Not now. They're expected in two months," she answered, still looking surprised.

She nodded in thought. "That will be just about right," she commented to herself. Heading to the door, Alustriel said to me, "I will return for you here once the hall is clear. Drizt, might I have a word?" Do'Urden nodded to me shortly and followed the ruler of Silverymoon out the door.

Once we were alone, Carith laid her head on my chest again and sniffed.

"Stormbow?" I asked.

She chuckled. "My clan name. The Stormbows are minor nobles, but we're mostly cursed with wanderlust. Few of us live in elven communities, preferring instead to be traveling merchants, adventurers, or living in human cities."

She was calming down from all the shocks of the day, but I could still hear the underlying note of sadness. With a gentle finger under her chin, I pulled her face up to look at me. "You do understand why I can't stay here, don't you?"

Closing her eyes and biting her lower lip slightly, she gave a slight nod. Tilting her head forward to rest her forehead on my chest again, she whispered, "I understand, but that does not mean that I have to like it."

My mouth quirking into a sad smile, I whispered, "I know. Me neither."

Taking a deep breath, she stepped back and turned away from me. She suddenly looked down and chuckled slightly. Turning back to me and showing me the blood on her hands and arms, she said, "Now look what you did."

I smiled. "I'd offer to share a bath with you, seeing as how my back no doubt needs cleaning, but I don't think that'd be appropriate."

Giving a hiccupping laugh, she said, "No, I do not think that would be very appropriate, Thi. It's hard enough letting you leave now, let alone after such an evening as you're describing."

Not allowing myself to step forward and hug her again as I desperately wanted, I said softly, "I'm sorry that we didn't have the chance to become closer, but as I said, it wouldn't be fair to either of us."

She nodded slowly and took a deep breath. "I know." She cocked her head slightly and asked, "Will you ever be back?"

"Don't even think of waiting for me," I responded immediately. I'd been stung by that particular problem in the past. "It may very well be decades before I return to Silverymoon. You deserve to be happy here, not waiting on me. When I DO return, I expect to find you happily married with lots of little Stormbows running around, terrorizing Therth and providing amusement to all the patrons of 'Storm Tales'."

She laughed at the picture I was painting. "You as well," she returned. "I want to meet your fine, strong sons when you return."

I smiled sadly but didn't dispute her comment.

She saw through it anyway. "What's wrong? You don't want any sons?" she asked in amused disbelief.

What a horrifying concept, said Flick. *Lots of little lancrofts running around Faerun, swinging their little swords.*

I snorted in amusement at the both of them. "I can't have children. It's a natural condition of my people," I explained.

A slight grin formed as she retorted, "With humans in YOUR world, perhaps. Here, who knows? Besides, you don't know about elves, do you?"

That was an interesting point, though the twinkle in her eye demanded some comment. "Your sister's name is Kith?" I asked in all innocence.

She laughed, as I intended. "Yes, and I'll warn her about you first thing after I see her," she returned.

A light tap preceded Lady Alustriel poking her head in the door by a few seconds. Seeing both Carith and I standing calmly, she smiled and entered fully. She handed me the pack she was carrying and said, "Starkin brought the remainder of your clothing."

I took the pack and nodded in thanks. Picking up my ruined shirt, I tried to clean up my back as much as possible.

"I'll be off, then," Carith announced. She bowed toward Alustriel and said, "'Twas a pleasure meeting you, Lady. Come and see me when you can, Thi?"

I stopped what I was doing and cupped her cheek in one hand. "When I can," I promised, followed by a soft kiss on her other cheek.

Sniffing back a tear, Carith headed out the door quickly.

Still looking at the door, Alustriel asked, "Is she okay with your decision?"

I sighed and went back to trying to clean my back. "She understands it but doesn't like it any more than I do. We've come to an agreement, though."

"Here, let me," said Alustriel, taking the shirt from my hand.

"Lady!" I protest. Was she really planning on cleaning blood off my back?

She clucked at my tone and turned me around with a firm hand on my shoulder. "I was an adventurer before coming to Silverymoon. The sight of a little blood does not bother me as much as you may think, Knight Thian," she said as she began quickly wiping at my back.

"Thank you, Lady. Though I doubt I'm still a Knight, really."

Her hands stopped momentarily before resuming their work. "You will be welcome in Silverymoon as long as I rule here, Thian."

Finishing with one last flourishing swipe, she declared, "Done! Now if you would care to put something on, I can take you to one of the guest rooms

for the night. We can decide what you will do on the morrow. It is too late now to be making any serious decisions."

Nodding my agreement, I pulled one of my other shirts out of the bag she'd brought in and quickly donned it. Scooping my magical clasp into the bag, I picked up the bag and scabbard that had been removed at some point. Wadding my destroyed shirt and cape in one fist, I followed Alustriel out the door.

Leading me through conspicuously empty hallways, Alustriel asked, "One thing I do not understand. How did you see the attackers?"

"My cloak clasp," I answered. "It's been enchanted to allow me to see the truth behind illusions."

She nodded. "Since invisibility is an illusion, you could see them," she concluded. "That is a valuable item, and I am glad for it."

I'm sure she is, Flick commented wryly, *seeing as how it just saved her neck.*

[Behave,] I chastised him. [She IS the elected ruler of this city.]

Don't wanna behave, he replied childishly.

[Will you EVER grow up?] I asked in mock exasperation.

Doubt it. I'm a great deal older than you are, kid, and I'm still like this.

I chuckled quietly. [I'm thankful for that. You'll probably keep me sane over the centuries, assuming we're together that long.]

No reason we shouldn't be. Besides, I just got you broke in.

I chuckled again as Alustriel stopped beside one door and opened it to reveal a luxuriously appointed bedroom, complete with steaming bath and private bathroom.

"I will send for you in the morning to discuss your future plans. In the meantime, good night, Thian."

"Thank you for everything, Lady," I replied, bowing to her.

She shook her head with a small smile. "No, thank YOU." Nodding to me, she pulled the door closed behind herself.

After a long bath that nearly put me to sleep, I collapsed into bed, asleep nearly the instant I got horizontal.

Thian.

"Humph. Go 'way," I mumbled into my pillow.

Thian, wake up.

"Why?" I answered groggily, not bothering to open my eyes.

"Because it is time for dawnfry," answered Alustriel.

My head shot up at her voice. She was standing, regal as ever, at the foot of my bed beside a covered tray. "Um, good morning, Lady," I said, hastily checking that I was at least covered.

Gracefully taking a seat in a chair next to the tray, she asked, "Would you care to break your fast with me and discuss your future plans?"

"Uh, I would be honored, Lady, but if you could excuse me for a moment . . ." I trailed off, gesturing at my pack over next to the door to the bathroom.

She smiled, but there was a touch of malicious amusement to it. "Do not let me stop you, then." When I didn't immediately get up, she continued, "I doubt you have anything I have not seen before, Thian. I AM over a hundred winters old, after all."

Really? Funny, she didn't look much over thirty. "That may be, Lady, but . . ."

Sighing in exasperation, she turned her head politely to the side and said, "Oh, very well."

I bolted for the bathroom, snagging the strap of the pack on my way past.

Once dressed, I re-entered the room and took a seat across from Alustriel. She'd uncovered the tray and was working on her own breakfast. I sat down and started working on my eggs and venison patties.

"I must admit that I peeked," commented Alustriel calmly. Her gaze lifted slightly to catch my eye as I looked up quickly. "I was right, you do not have anything I have not seen before."

I nearly choked on my food as Flick howled with laughter.

"Lady," I said again, mortified.

"Oh, do lighten up, Theodore. I was only teasing." She sighed slightly before continuing, "I have precious few friends that I can tease. Now that you are no longer one of my Knights, I can treat you as the friend that I hope you are."

Chuckling helplessly, I nodded my agreement. "If you insist on not calling me Thian, then at least call me Ted. It is what my friends called me on Earth."

Nodding happily, she said, "I am Ali to my friends."

Smiling, I said, "I doubt that I could ever call you anything other than Lady Alustriel."

"Try," she ordered with a twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, if I must," I said in false exasperation.

Giggling (Lady Alustriel giggles!), she returned to her meal. We ate in silence for a few minutes before she said, "Have you given any thought to where you will go from here?"

I sighed and shook my head. "Not really. Perhaps to Waterdeep."

She nodded thoughtfully, placing her fork down. "That is one possibility, certainly. Though if you are willing to take a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"Join a merchant band as guard. You possess all the skills needed, and you would constantly be on the move, providing you some protection from anyone learning your secret outside the merchants themselves."

Nodding thoughtfully, I said, "Good suggestion, thank you."

Seeing that I was done, she leaned back in her chair and studied me intently for a few moments. By the time I started fidgeting, she said, "I owe you a debt of gratitude that I cannot hope to repay, Ted." I opened my mouth to argue the point, but she raised a hand. "Do not bother to argue. I owe you a debt for saving my life. There are two things I would like to do for you as the beginning of that repayment." I started to argue again, but she shook her head at me. "I WILL do this for you, Ted. Do not argue with me." She gave a sudden grin. "Has no one ever told you that it was a bad idea to argue with a mage?"

Smiling, I said, "Obviously a serious lack in my education."

Her lip twisted into a smile as I signaled for her to continue.

Getting my acceptance, she nodded. "First, let us meet with Drizzt, for he is a part of my plan." Standing, she waved me along.

Confused, I followed her out the door and toward her audience room.

I sense a conspiracy afoot.

[You and me both,] I answered.

Once again traveling through the obviously empty hallways, we entered the audience room to find Do'Urden sitting in one of the chairs facing the fire. The panther was lying on its side at his feet.

Seeing us enter, he stood and smiled at Alustriel.

"Please," she said, waving at the chairs.

We all seated ourselves quietly, Do'Urden retaking his seat, my taking one near him, and Alustriel sitting at her desk.

"As I was saying," Alustriel said, "I would like to thank you for saving my life, Knight Thian, so I would like you to go with Drizzt back to Mithril Hall, where a suit of mail will be made for you. When you return, I will see about finding you a position with a merchant band."

My jaw was hanging open. "Lady -" I protested. Again.

She held up a hand, and Do'Urden laughed. "She does this to everyone, Thian. Just accept the gift. Besides, I owe you my life as well."

I shook my head. "Neither of you know that."

"True," he conceded, "but why are you arguing the point? Just accept what we are offering to you."

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. "You two hardly know me. Since I've been here, Lady, you've given me a sword, a job, and Flick."

Hey!

"You know what I mean, Flick," I said without breaking eye contact with Alustriel.

She nodded. "True, I have been generous with you. Do you not believe you deserve it?"

I shook my head.

She and Do'Urden smiled. "That proves you DO deserve it," she said.

I sighed. What convoluted logic was this?

"If it eases your mind," she continued, "then rest assured that it will cost me little in monetary terms. At this level it is merely a small favor for me to ask King Bruenor to do this."

"Myself as well," added Do'Urden.

I gave up on that one. "Okay, so why is it so important for me to go to Mithril Hall to get this mail?"

"It will be made there, of course," Do'Urden answered. "No armorer in Silverymoon knows how to work with mithril. Buster Bracer does."

I stared at him. "Mithril armor?"

He nodded calmly.

Little dollar signs started spinning in my head. How much would such a thing cost?

He must have read my expression because he said, "As Ali said, it is merely a small favor. Most of the dwarves living there have mithril armor. It will not cost so much to make as you may be concerned about."

I didn't believe that for a second, but who am I to argue? Nodding slowly, I stuttered, "I . . . Thank you, Master Do'Urden, Lady."

He smiled. "Drizzt," he corrected.

"Drizzt," I echoed with a small smile.

Both he and Alustriel nodded in satisfaction.

"What of the attackers from last night?" I asked, changing the subject.

She frowned distastefully. "Assassins sent after me by one of my numerous enemies." She paused and added thoughtfully, "I must determine how they breached my magical defenses." She brightened suddenly, "Oh, before I forget, you are entitled to what was found on the mage."

I stared at her. "You're kidding."

She shook her head. "No. The victor gets spoils from the vanquished in battle. Usually it goes to the owner of the building where it took place as in the case of the fight in 'Storm Tales', but in this case, there was little damage."

Nodding at the practicality of that thought, I asked, "As a mage, was he carrying anything I could really use?" City guards and mages didn't typically carry the same kinds of items on them, after all.

"Not for the most part," she admitted. "You could use one or two of his spell ingredients as spices if you wish. Though I wouldn't recommend using the snake intestines," she added wryly.

Drizzt grimaced and I laughed. "I'll keep that in mind, thank you. Tell you what, I'll trade his spell ingredients to you for this armor you're determined to give me and everything else in my locker at the barracks."

She raised an eyebrow. "I was going to give those items to you anyway."

"I wasn't expecting anything from that mage, either. We're both coming out ahead here."

Nodding, she pulled open a drawer of the desk and pulled out a coin purse, placing it on her desk near me. "This is yours as well."

Opening it, I found a substantial amount in coinage and several gems. I looked up at her and rolled my eyes. "Great, I'm rich. Now what?" I asked dryly.

She laughed.

I'd suggest you buy the items you'll need when on the road.

"Hmm, good point, Flick."

"Adventurer's gear?" Alustriel asked in amusement.

I grunted in affirmation. "I guess I need to go shopping."

She nodded. "I will place an illusion over you for the rest of the day, since you have stated that you do not want to be recognized in town."

"Thank you for everything." Smiling ruefully, I asked, "Could you recommend a good shop, Ali?"

Most of the remainder of the day passed in a whirlwind shopping spree. After input from Drizzt, Flick had an excellent mental list, though some of the items on it surprised me. Why would I want fifty feet of rope, anyway? By that evening I was carrying around a heavy pack, filled with everything I could think of and then some. At Flick's urging, I only used the coins, never letting anyone else see the gems. He explained that they were easier to carry than an equivalent in coins.

Only MOST of the rest of the day was taken up with shopping. What was left was taken up with my funeral.

I was certainly concerned about being discovered, but I just HAD to go to my own funeral. In addition to the illusion still disguising my features, I wore my new plain cloak with a plain clasp, and I'd switched my sword to the other hip and moved Flick's sheath far around the hip to be hidden completely by the cloak. I was as disguised as I could be, but I was still nervous about it.

Still, I HAD to go to my funeral.

Arriving at the courtyard in front of the castle in plenty of time, I selected an inconspicuous spot and watched everyone else filter in. A goodly portion of the Knights turned out, of course, including all of them that I would call friends. Several merchants showed up as well, but several that I knew of only through the occasional social event came expressing more grief than was warranted. Damn politics anyway.

When Carith finally showed up, I fought the urge to join her. I couldn't run the risk of someone seeing me with her.

The service was opened by a priest of Helm of the Unsleeping Eyes, god of guardians, chanting a prayer. Once that was finished, Lady Alustriel came to the front of the gathering carrying an urn, supposedly holding my ashes. Placing the urn nearby, she started the eulogy, speaking of my unselfish devotion to the Knights in Silver and how I'd come to town suddenly, not knowing the city's ways, but still tried to fit in and make friends among the people of the city. Through the whole thing, I noticed that she kept gesturing to the urn but never directly said it contained my ashes. I almost smiled as I realized that she wanted to convey that it did indeed contain my ashes, but she was skillfully avoiding telling an outright lie.

When she was done, a cleric of Tyr the Even-Handed, god of justice, intoned a prayer and then opened the floor for anyone else to speak. I was surprised to see several people indicate that they wanted to do so. Armsmaster Starkin came forward first, talking about my early days in the city and how good a soldier I was from the very beginning. Famkins came forward and told how I would tell unusual tales to wile away the dull hours while standing watch. Chavim, the poor kid, barely got through his story of my befriending him. One of the regulars from "Storm Tales" told of how I helped thwart the robbery, and how I was a friend to nearly everyone I met.

When Carith stepped toward the front, my heart nearly stopped.

Do not move, commanded Flick, though the thought hadn't even occurred to me.

"I was a friend of Knight Thian," started Carith in the standard opening. She smiled sadly for a second then continued, "Almost a year ago now a man came stumbling into 'Storm Tales' wearing the most unusual clothing." I peripherally noticed that Astemon smiled at that. Carith was still speaking, "He was hopelessly lost, he said. He had no idea where he was, nor how to get home. Still, instead of demanding answers or becoming rude, he was charming to me. Over the following months, he and I became friends. He never demanded anything of me, only gave of his time and friendship." She stopped and looked down. Swallowing hard, she continued in a quieter voice, "I never did thank him for that. For being a true friend. Wherever he is, I hope he knows that he's left behind friends." She looked down at the urn through tear rimmed eyes and said, "Goodbye, Thi. I'm going to miss you."

When nobody else stepped forward, a priest of Torm the True, god of duty and loyalty, began one last prayer. Once he finished, Therth began chanting something in Elven, which was immediately picked up by all the other elves in the crowd. Once the last syllable faded away, the crowd slowly dispersed.

I just stood there, stunned. I'd attended more than one of my own funerals over the previous century, but this one had more impact on me than all the others combined.

Per our agreement, Drizzt and I met in the audience room the next morning just after dawnfry. He was quietly checking the contents of my backpack when Starkin entered. "Ready to go?" the armsmaster asked.

Drizzt nodded calmly, but I did so with less enthusiasm. I knew that I was expected back into the city in two months time, but that didn't mean it was any easier to leave now.

Alustriel came in to see us off. She first handed a scroll to Drizzt and then wrapped him into a hug, whispering into his ear for a time before giving him a peck on the cheek. Pulling out of his embrace with obvious reluctance, she turned to me and also gave me a hug. "You take care of yourself, Ted," she whispered, "and come back in two month's time, you hear me?" she finished, pulling back but keeping hold of my shoulders.

I smiled sadly. "As you wish, Lady. Two months."

Nodding, she quietly began casting a spell. Recognizing that she was simply refreshing the illusion over my features, I waited quietly. When she finished, all three of them peered at me and nodded in satisfaction that the illusion had worked.

She stepped to the door but paused with her hand on the handle. "Fare thee well, Drizzt and Ted."

"Thank you, Lady," I whispered, my breath nearly hitching in my throat.

With a final sigh, she exited the room.

I stared after her for a moment before I composed myself. When I turned back to the two men standing with me, both of them had solemn expressions on their faces, recognizing how tough this was on me and apparently Alustriel as well. Instead of dwelling on it, Drizzt held up the straps of my backpack so I could slip it on. Jiggling it back and forth for a moment and then adjusting one of the straps, I made it as comfortable as possible. Starkin had helped Drizzt with his pack while I was working on mine. Once we were both settled, Starkin waved us along with him. Heading out of the castle, he led us quietly through town and to the guard post near the Moonbridge over the River Rauvin.

"Fare well, ranger," Starkin commented when we arrived. "Oh," he added as an afterthought, "the Lady Alustriel asked me to remind you that you're welcome whenever you wish."

Drizzt raised a hand to him in salute with a slight smile. Nodding pleasantly at the guards, he exited the city with me following closely on his heels.

We started walking to the west, following the River Rauvin. After silently traveling for two hours, Drizzt broke the silence, "Ted?"

"Yes?" I answered absently, my mind wandering.

"I thought your name was Thian."

I smiled slightly. "Either, really. Ted was what I was called in my world. Thian is another name that I'm comfortable with, and it fits in here in Faerun much better."

He nodded, his legs never slowing their distance devouring stride. "Ali didn't tell me much about you," he commented. It was an open invitation to talk but only if I wanted to do so.

I shrugged. "You already know the important points. I was teleported here unexpectedly a year ago. I'm Immortal. Nothing much more to tell."

"What did you do on Earth?"

I chuckled. "The job doesn't exist here, and it would be impossible to explain." Under the circumstances, how would I describe computer tech support? "Let's just say that I'm used to a MUCH higher level of technology. My job dealt with that technology. I don't want to insult you, but telling you would be pointless."

He nodded easily. "If there's no equivalent here, then the answer wouldn't mean anything. No offense taken. What CAN you tell me about Earth?"

"As I said, much higher technological level. Almost the entire planet has been settled. Cities with a half million inhabitants are becoming common. Humans are the only sentient race, probably, though there is debate on the subject of dolphins. Governments are dictatorships or democracies, depending on the country."

He raised an eyebrow at me as I was rattling everything off. Once I stopped, he returned his attention to the trail and said, "A vastly different world indeed. Am I correct in assuming that your wilderness survival skills are weak?"

I chuckled. "No, not weak. They're almost non-existent. I knew some useful skills almost a hundred years ago, but I haven't practiced them since then."

He nodded. "Then while your armor is being made, I'll teach you what I can."

"Thank you."

He shook his head. "No, thank YOU. You saved my life, remember?"

Back to that? "We don't know that," I disagreed with a tired sigh.

"No, not really," he agreed, "but I want to thank you at any rate. This is an easy way for Alustriel and I to do so. Allow us this small token, Thian." He grinned slightly. "You don't want to insult the Lady of Silvermoon or one of the dreaded drow elves, do you?"

I chuckled. "Oh, was I supposed to dread you? I must remember to run, screaming in terror, at the first opportunity."

He smiled sadly. "Why didn't you?" he asked.

I frowned over at him. "I told you. Lady Alustriel had told me a few tales of the ranger Drizzt Do'Urden."

"And you didn't care that he is a drow?" he asked in mild disbelief.

I shrugged. "Recall where I grew up, ranger. Why should I care that you are drow?"

"Drow are evil," he stated flatly.

"Then should I cut you down where you stand?" I returned.

"You know what I mean," he muttered with a frown.

"You're asking why I don't treat you with prejudice? That's pretty cynical of you."

For good reason," he answered in a low voice. "I've been met with open hatred more often than not."

I huffed out a breath in aggravation. "Look, you've browbeat me into accepting your and Ali's help. You just deal with my acceptance of you, okay?"

He laughed suddenly. "Why are we arguing about this?"

"You tell me, dreaded drow elf," I teased.

He rolled his eyes. "Okay, I'll drop it."

"Good. Now maybe you could explain to me what happened to your panther."

He smiled slightly and answered, "She's not 'mine'. To answer the question: she's at home in the Astral plane."

Going back and forth with questions and answers, the time passed quickly.

Through the entire fourteen day journey, we talked, and I learned all I could of Faerun and wilderness survival skills. He told me of the various racial etiquette, how to identify the major races, how to forage for food, how to start a fire . . . The list went on.

In turn, I told him of the history of Earth and our culture.

By the time we were camping the fourteenth night, we were at least both comfortable with each other, if not truly friends. I guessed that Drizzt Do'Urden had very few friends in life. If I was not to be counted among them, then so be it, but I could at least do everything possible to help him as much as I could.

Instead of continuing our trek the next morning, he asked me to stay here for the day. He explained that the exact location of Mithril Hall was a secret, and therefore didn't want to take me in. He seemed almost apologetic about it, but I assured him that I understood the value of secrets and wasn't insulted.

Nodding at my assurance, he promised to be back in a few hours.

Making myself comfortable, I watched the day pass for a time before growing bored. Instead of going crazy from inactivity, I talked with Flick, idly passing the time.

"Who are ye talking with?" asked a gruff voice, interrupting a point I was trying to make with Flick.

I looked up to find Drizzt walk back into our little campsite with two dwarves in tow.

"His dagger," answered Drizzt with a grin.

I don't get no respect, muttered Flick in disgust.

Both dwarves seemed to accept that answer, for some reason. "Thian, I would like to introduce you to King Bruenor Battlehammer, eighth king of Mithril Hall," Drizzt said, indicating the dwarf wearing armor, carrying a shield with a foaming mug crest, and a double bladed battle axe that looked like it'd been through hell and back. Drizzt gestured to the other dwarf and continued, "And this is Buster Bracer, Master Armorer of Clan Battlehammer." This dwarf was wearing a smith's apron instead of something more appropriate to the environment.

I stood and bowed politely to the both of them. Bracer seemed rather pleased by my action, but Battlehammer waved one hand. "Bah! Don't give me none of that."

Okay, so this dwarf didn't like the pomp and circumstance surrounding his royal status. Fine.

I turned to Bracer and said, "Well met, Armorer. How fare you this fine day?"

He smiled and chuckled. "Well enough. I'm to produce a chain mail suit for ye?"

I looked to Drizzt for guidance. At his nod, I answered, "I suppose so. Lady Alustriel just told me that she would ask for mail to be produced for me. She did not tell me what type."

He nodded and pulled a marked tape out of one of his pockets.

Before he began measuring me, I interrupted, "Forgive me, good dwarf, but I fear I may not be able to wear chain mail. I can not wear anything too heavy, for my fighting style is based on speed."

"That's nay a problem," he assured me. "Mithril chain weighs less than that suit of stubby leather ye're wearing now."

Stubby leather? asked Flick with a snicker.

Without another word, Bracer began measuring me for the chain mail.

While I was standing patiently, Battlehammer asked, "Drizzt tells me that ye saved his life as well as Lady Alustriel's?"

frowned at Drizzt. "That is a matter of debate, King Bruenor."

"I told ye to not be so formal," he pointed out.

"You are the king," I answered with a shrug. "Shouldn't I treat you with respect?"

"Respect, yes. Obsequience, no," answered Drizzt.

"I can speak for meself, elf," said Battlehammer with a glance to Drizzt.

Drizzt smiled and bowed.

Battlehammer's look turned to a glare, which only made Drizzt's smile wider. Working with his tape measure, I could see Bracer fighting a grin.

Battlehammer waved one hand at Drizzt with a growled, "Bah!" Turning to me, he asked, "How did ye save this elf's skin?"

"I got in the way of an assassination attempt," I answered ruefully.

Bracer looked up. "Oh?"

"Long story," Drizzt said easily. "Suffice it to say that Thian saved Lady Alustriel and myself from death or at least serious harm. Therefore she asked that he be given a suit of mithril chain."

Battlehammer and Bracer both nodded, the latter returning to his task.

"No shield?" asked Battlehammer next, apparently having looked over my equipment.

I shook my head. "I use my left arm as a weapon. A shield would just slow me down."

"Drizzt said he explained why we cannae invite ye into the Hall," Battlehammer continued in a change of topic.

I nodded. "I understand the need for secrecy. If you don't want me into your Hall, then I won't enter."

"I will stay out here with him," Drizzt offered.

"You don't have to do that," I said quickly.

He shrugged. "I don't have to, but I wish to. I prefer sleeping out of doors when the weather permits."

There was that. It was the middle of the spring, and the weather was absolutely gorgeous.

"Well," said Bracer as he stepped back, "I can have the mail done in two weeks."

"Thank you," I replied, unsure of what else to say.

"Don't ye be getting yerself lost, elf," Battlehammer threw over his shoulder as the two dwarves left.

"Colorful character," I said with a grin.

Drizzt laughed. "That he is, but a truer friend you could not find."

The two week wait passed quickly. We talked, told stories, and taught each other games. Running out of other ideas, he also sparred with me.

The first time, it took him all of five seconds to beat me.

He was a patient teacher. Over time, he helped me close the holes in my defense. He also taught me several new offensive patterns and routines. Unfortunately, I had little to show him in return. When I mentioned this, he waved it off, explaining that teaching was a reward unto itself.

The wait for the armor was well worth it, though. Once I put on my new armor for the first time, I absolutely fell in love with it. Being mithril, it was hardly heavier than a thick shirt, but being chain mail, it provided a great deal more protection than the studded leather did.

Praising Master Armorer Bracer, I moved around, checking for my mobility. Finding no problems, I smiled at Bracer again.

He chuckled and waved one soot covered hand. "Aye, I know ye like it. Everyone does."

"I can imagine," I said. "How do I care for such a suit?"

"Keep it clean," he shrugged. "Mithril will withstand most anything. 'Twill not rust, but do nay allow it to remain in salt water overlong. The underpadding can be replaced easy enough, but the mithril itself needs little care. It'll likely last beyond yer grandson's grandson's grandson's time," he added with a smile.

Not quite, but I took his meaning. "Thank you." I pulled on the rest of my gear, leaving the studded leather armor in a neat pile. "Any suggestions?" I

asked the dwarf, waving at the armor.

"The stuffy leather?" he asked with a snort.

[Stuffy leather? Do you get the impression he isn't fond of leather armor?]

Flick's howling laughter answered my question readily enough.

"I'll take care of it," volunteered Drizzt, seeing Bracer's expression.

"Well enough," the dwarf said. "Oh," he said, digging around in the bag that he'd brought along. "Me king asked me to bring something else for ye." He came up with two throwing daggers and handed them to me.

More gifts? Testing the weight and balance of the daggers, I found them to be excellent weapons, probably mithril themselves based on their weight. "Why?" I ask with a tired sigh.

"That," he said pointing to the chain mail, "is a gift from Drizzt and Lady Alustriel fer saving their lives. Those," his finger shifted to the daggers, "are from King Bruenor fer saving them."

Hell, at this rate I just need to save important people's lives a few more times and it'd set me up for centuries.

Leaning down, I replace the throwing daggers in my boots with the two new ones. Slipping the two old blades into sheathes on the outside of my backpack, I stood and turned to the dwarf. "Thank you again. Please express my appreciation to King Bruenor."

He nodded. Turning to Drizzt, he asked, "Ye coming back in, then?"

Drizzt turned to me. "That all depends on Thian."

I shook my head. "Go home. I can make it back to Silverymoon on my own. South to the river, follow it east until I hit the city. Take two weeks on my own?"

He nodded. "About that." Stepping up to he, he offered me his arm, which I clasped near the elbow as he did mine. "Fare you well, Thian."

"And you, Ranger Do'Urden. If you've ever need of another ally, know that I'll come to your call."

He nodded again and turned to gather his items, packing up the campsite quickly. I gathered my pack and helped him clear the camp. Once done, I raised one hand in farewell and then turned to the mountain pass to our south-east and headed back to Silverymoon.

Immortal Realms Stormbow Merchants

It took me twenty-one days to make the trip from just outside Mithril Hall to Silvermoon on my own since I had to take a slightly indirect route to keep from getting lost.

Once the city walls came into sight, I stopped and worked on changing my appearance. I'd grown a mustache and beard over the previous couple months, so that altered the lines of my face. Changing my cloak clasp to the plain one, I removed that easily identifiable accessory. Pulling a baggy shirt over my armor and moving my sword around to the other hip, I completed my "disguise".

The guards at the gate I approached didn't bat an eye at me. "Name and reason for entering Silvermoon?" asked the bored watch leader.

"Hale," I answered, giving the name of one of the other characters I'd played so long ago. "I'm here for supplies before moving on."

He nodded without paying much attention, waving me through.

[That was easy.]

What, you WANTED them to recognize you? Flick asked.

[No, of course not.]

Then why are you disappointed?

I thought about it before answering, [I guess I'm disappointed that they didn't recognize me.]

You and your ego, he grumbled as I headed toward the castle.

I had made it to the guard post in front of the castle during my conversation with my sentient dagger. "Can I help you?" asked the slightly more alert guard.

"Is Lady Alustriel here?" I asked.

He nodded hesitantly, leaning casually on his halberd.

"I would like an audience then, please."

He took in my dusty and slightly unkempt appearance before asking with slight contempt, "Name?"

"Theodore," I answered calmly.

"Reason for requested audience?"

I shook my head. "She'll know my name."

His face fell into a slight frown. "I can't be interrupting her Ladyship for anyone showing up on her doorstep demanding to see her," he said tightly.

Looking at him condescendingly, I said, "Look, just ask her if she would like an audience with Theodore. I'll abide by her decision without question. If you don't go along and do that, I'll take the matter up with Armsmaster Starkin. Your choice."

His eyes narrowed at the implied threat. "Stay here," he answered grudgingly before disappearing inside.

He was back in less than a minute. "Go right in, sir," he said without looking at me.

"Thank you," I said politely before I walked past him. No sense beating on some poor guard that was just trying a little too hard to do his job. The additional guard at the door to the audience room just nodded to me as I walked past.

"Ted!" greeted Alustriel as I entered the room. She hugged me shortly before waving me to a chair. She spoke with the guard outside for a moment before pulling the door shut. "Welcome back," she said, crossing the space between us. "That beard looks particularly rakish on you; I like it. Did you have a nice trip?"

I blushed and laughed at her rapid fire questions and comments as I seated myself. "It's nice to be back. Thank you for the compliment, Lady, though I grew it to disguise myself instead of becoming 'rakish,' as you put it."

"Either way, it does," she stated with a smile as she sat down near me.

I blushed a little more before moving on. "Yes, I had a good trip. Armorer Bracer produced a suit of mithril chain for me, as you apparently requested."

She smiled and nodded. "It was the least I could do."

I refused to get into that argument with her again. "Thank you. It is a wonderful suit of armor." I leaned back and laced my fingers. "You asked that I come back?"

She nodded again. "Yes. Kith Stormbow is in town. I wish to talk with her about you."

I frowned in confusion. "Why?"

"In order to get you a job," she answered.

I sighed. "Thank you again, but you don't need to do that."

She waved it off. "It is no trouble. I do a great deal of business with the Stormbow Merchants."

The door opened quietly and Armsmaster Starkin entered. He closed the door behind himself before coming to a loose 'attention' stance. He studied me for a moment before nodding. "Welcome back, Knight Thian," he greeted.

I groaned. "I thought my disguise was better than that."

He smiled slightly. "I knew you would be back into town about now. When I was summoned, I suspected you'd be here."

Mollified, I nodded. "How've you been, Armsmaster?"

"Well enough," he shrugged. A slight grin appeared before he added, "Though I wish I HAD been promoted two months ago as planned. Now I have to find someone else to become Armsmaster before I can."

"Hey, blame those assassins, not me," I objected with a grin.

Alustriel interrupted our banter. "Armsmaster, please arrange a meeting with Kith and Survan Stormbow. Early tomorrow if this even is not convenient. You will be able to contact them through 'Storm Tales', of course."

"Carith as well if she wishes to come," I added.

At Alustriel's confirming nod, he spun on his heel and left.

Alustriel stood and waved me along. "Let us get a room for you, Thian. Might I suggest a bath?" she asked delicately.

I laughed. "A little dusty, am I?" I asked with a grin.

"Among other things," she acknowledged, opening the door. Addressing the guard, she said, "Please take Theodore to one of the guest rooms." Turning back to me, she said, "I will call for you when I know the time of the meeting. Make yourself comfortable until then."

A guard led me to the audience room the next morning. I found five people sitting there. Carith was sitting with two other elves, and Fredegar Rockcrusher was seated beside the desk that Alustriel was sitting behind.

Approaching, I smiled timidly at Carith. "Hi, Car," I said.

Standing, she studied me before she smiled back. "Thi," she sighed, pulling me into a tight hug.

"Thi?" asked the male elf. "This is the Knight Thian that you told us about, Carith? I thought he died protecting Lady Alustriel months ago."

Alustriel waved at the female then male elves. "Thian, I would like to introduce you to Kith and Survan Stormbow, sister and cousin respectively to Carith. You remember Fret, of course," she continued, indicating the dwarf.

I nodded to the tidy dwarf before taking the remaining seat next to Carith, who only released me from the hug but kept one of my hands. I studied the other two elves. Survan had the typical elven features of fine brown hair and thin frame hidden in a robe. Kith was slightly taller at five foot three or so, jet black hair, and unusually dusky skin. Her facial features were similar to Carith's, proving the family connection. Her outfit was close to something one of the Knights would wear, including excellent chain mail with a green tint, bracers, a saber on one hip, dagger on the other, and a long bow propped against her chair.

"You died?" repeated Survan, still staring at me.

"Obviously not," replied Kith dryly. Even with the sarcasm lacing it, the voice was still the typically melodic elven accent that I so loved to listen to.

Alustriel shook her head. "No, Survan is correct. Thian died two months ago, just not permanently. He is from another world, and his people call themselves Immortal."

I sighed. More people who knew my secret. Well, no helping it now. Besides, I doubted elves would be a problem. They lived centuries naturally anyway.

"Immortal?" asked Survan in continuing astonishment. Kith merely raised an eyebrow.

Taking a deep breath, Alustriel launched into an explanation of who and what I was. By the time she wound down, I was the uncomfortable focus of four sets of intense scrutiny. Carith was hearing the whole story for the first time, and even Rockcrusher was surprised by a great deal of it.

"Immortal," said Kith in a thoughtful frown.

I nodded calmly.

"Forgive me, but why are you telling us this?" asked Survan of Alustriel without tearing his gaze from me.

"You are under no obligation from me, but I would suggest that he join your group as a man-at-arms."

Kith's eyebrows shot up. Staring at Alustriel for a few moments before returning her gaze to me, she asked, "What are your qualifications?"

Alustriel continued answering, "He had been a Knight in Silver for a year. Before the attack, I offered him the position of Armsmaster." Rockcrusher's and Survan's eyebrows rose at that. "I have several letters of recommendation from visiting dignitaries whom he guarded while in town," Alustriel continued as Rockcrusher gathered a few pages from the desktop and handed them to Kith.

As she read and passed them over to Survan one at a time, I turned to Alustriel. "Letters of recommendation? I didn't even LIKE some of them."

She laughed, a high, musical sound. "You do not have to like them, Thian, just guard them adequately and be diplomatic with them." She turned back to Kith and added, "Finally, he saved my life the night of the attack, as you apparently heard."

After finishing with the letters, Kith studied me silently for a few more moments before saying, "My sister Carith told me about that night in 'Storm Tales' as well. What equipment would we need to provide for you?"

"Nothing but a mount," I answered her. Turning to Survan, I held out my hand and asked, "May I read those?"

One of Kith's eyebrows went back up. "You can read?"

I nodded absently. "My world believes in a great deal of formal education," I mumbled as I began reading. I found letters from almost half the people I recalled guarding over the past year. Most of the letters were pleasantly flattering, and one or two were downright embarrassing in their praise.

After I handed the letters back to Rockcrusher, I turned to Kith to find her nodding slowly. "Very well. I offer you a temporary position as guard for us. We will provide you the mount, meals, lodging when in town, and two lions per week, payable upon request. In six months, we'll see how it is working out. We leave Silvermoon in the morning. We're staying at 'Storm Tales', of course. Meet us there. Any questions?"

I nodded. "What kind of merchants are you?" I kept my gaze focused on Kith. Elven clans were matriarchies, so she was probably senior to Survan.

"Supplies to the family taverns and inns, mostly. Some small contract items for mages such as Lady Alustriel and transport of the same as well."

Oh, "Storm Tales" and Stormbow. I should have seen that connection a lot earlier. "How about you two? What positions do you hold?"

"I am an archer, chief of our guard, and holder of the Stormbow," she answered, tapping the long bow at her side lightly. "Survan is a mage and merchant. He does most of the financial dealings, and I keep his foolish head alive," she smiled fondly at her cousin, eliciting a blush of embarrassment.

There was a story there, I was sure. "Other guards or members of your group?" I asked instead of pursuing that line of questioning.

"Two to four more guards, always temporary. Mostly we bring along sell-swords who want to be moving to the city where we are stopping next anyway."

"Then why are you accepting me as a potential permanent guard?" I asked in curiosity.

She frowned slightly in thought before answering, "I've noticed a potential problem in our defense when we are attacked by raiders, goblin tribes, and the like. I'm much more useful as an archer, but I need someone to stand by me as guard while I use the Stormbow, else I have to defend myself with my saber. With a guard dedicated to me and Survan, we can hopefully emerge from attacks much less painfully and with fewer losses among our guards."

That made sense. If I stayed and defended her from the up close and personal attacks, she could use her bow for a lot longer. "You have called that," I said, waving at her bow, "the Stormbow. Is that not your clan name?"

Kith smiled slightly while Survan shifted nervously. "Yes," Kith answered. "We are named clan Stormbow after this weapon. It is a family heirloom of sorts. If I have cause to use it, you will see what I mean."

Another intriguing story there, I was sure. "Do I need to wear your colors?" I asked, indicating her deep purple with gold trim cloak held together by a clasp featuring a stylized bow.

She nodded. "These are our colors, so I will have one at 'Storm Tales' for you."

"It has been quite a while since I've ridden, so I may be a little rusty. Will that be a problem?" I was understating the case. It'd been seventy years.

Survan grinned wolfishly. "Our wagon moves slowly enough that this isn't a particular problem, but be prepared for some sores the first few weeks."

I smiled slightly. My Immortal physiology would take care of that easy enough. [What do you think?] I asked Flick.

Why are you asking me?

[I have no right to make decisions that affect both of us. If I go, will you want to come with me or stay here in Silvermoon? Or do you have other suggestions?]

Thank you for asking my opinion, but it makes little difference to me where we are. We are bonded, so to speak. I go where you go.

[But you'd tell me if I was making a bad decision?] I queried.

I always have before, he said in amusement. *I'm not about to stop telling you howmuch smarter I am than you are.*

[Oh, very funny.] To Kith, I said, "I accept, then. In the morn?"

Nodding, Kith stood and bowed to Lady Alustriel before picking up the Stormbow and looping it over her shoulder. I still hadn't noticed a quiver of arrows and began to wonder why she carried a bow but no arrows. To prevent the theft of the weapon from her room, maybe?

Alustriel interjected, "Perhaps he should stay at 'Storm Tales' tonight. It would be easier for all concerned."

Nodding her head in agreement, Kith strode out with Survan hastily bowing and leaving behind her.

Carith stood and touched my arm. "Come over soon?" she asked timidly.

"If I can," I promised, standing to see her out the door.

Giving me a quick peck on the cheek, she hurried after her sister. When I turned back to Lady Alustriel, I noticed that Rockcrusher had quietly slipped out as well.

"Thank you again, Lady," I said, taking a seat nearer to her.

She nodded, steeping her fingers. "I must admit that I have an ulterior motive," she said.

Here it comes, moaned Flick.

"What might that be?" I asked as calmly as I could.

"Have you heard of the Harpers?" she asked.

"Only vaguely," I answered with a frown. "Nobody knows much about them besides their secrecy. Though they're generally regarded as 'good', nobody can point to one specific action of theirs and say with certainty that it was a Harper who did it."

Alustriel gave a half smile and nodded. "That is intentional. We move quietly."

My gaze focused in on her. "We?" I queried.

Her smile grew a fraction. "We," she agreed.

"Okay, you're a Harper." Whatever that means. "Why are you telling me this?" I asked curiously.

"If you travel with Kith and Survan, you will always be traveling among the largest cities in this portion of Faerun. The Harpers are a vast network of individuals, Thian. I need a trusted emissary to communicate with all of them." She paused and tilted her head, staring at me intently. "Are you willing?"

"I would be honored to serve you in any way I can, Lady," I answered with a frown, "but what would be expected of me?"

"Hand carry messages, for the most part. Some small actions as well. Occasionally, you will be required to memorize a message instead of carrying it, but that is uncommon. As a Harper agent, you would be expected to help fellow Harpers without question."

"What do the Harpers DO?" I asked in confusion. So far I hadn't heard anything about their goals.

"Our primary focus is preservation of history and knowledge. Secondly, we're opposed to peoples who would corrupt nature or the truth."

No problems there. I certainly believed in those goals. "How do I recognize a Harper?"

"A harp or crescent moon on a blue background usually. Most bards and rangers are Harpers."

I nodded slowly. "Is Drizzt a Harper then?"

She smiled. "Not officially, no. I offered him admittance, but he realizes that he would face prejudice even among our ranks. Though he is not a Harper, his actions mark him as one of us."

It didn't take long to make my decision. "Based on what you've told me, Lady, I would be honored to become a Harper."

She nodded, pulling something out of one of the desk drawers. When she tossed it to me, I caught it reflexively and studied it. A belt buckle stared up at me. It was mostly iron, but there were a series of sapphires arranged in such a way as to create a deep blue crescent on the buckle.

"Have you noticed that I keep getting expensive gifts from you?" I asked her with a smile.

She shrugged and smiled as she leaned back in her chair.

I put the buckle into a pocket and asked, "My orders, Lady?"

She chuckled. "None for the moment. The Stormbows come through Silverymoon twice a year. By the time you return, I may have an assignment for you. Until then, I shall let you settle into place with Kith and Survan."

"I thank you for the honor, Lady." I got up from my chair and knelt on one knee in front of her, bowing my head forward. "I am at your service."

One hand came up under my chin and pulled my face back up to meet her gaze. "Do not kneel before me, Thian. I do not deserve that."

"And I do not believe I deserve everything you've done for me," I returned.

"You do, but I understand what you are saying."

Once done speaking with Alustriel, I wandered the city for hours, stopping and remembering scenes from some of the oddest places. That intersection held the memory of an encounter with a drunken mage who insisted that his "Staff of Power" was longer than any man's and did you want to see it? That bar over there was where I'd drunk Famkins under the table one long night (and thank God for an Immortal liver). There was the fountain where I'd fished two halfling children out of the foot deep water as their hysterical mother watched, convinced that her children would drown. That bench was where Carith and I sat one spring afternoon while a street musician played us an elven love song. The city was filled with memories.

I eventually got done saying goodbye to the city and headed over to "Storm Tales". Walking in, I spotted all the regulars, though nobody recognized me. Seated at my usual table, I saw Chavim nursing a drink. I suppressed the urge to sit with him. Instead, I took a seat with Kith and Survan.

They both looked at me and nodded at me in acknowledgement. "Well met," said Survan.

I smiled slightly at him. "Well met. I decided I'd better sit with you rather than my friend." I indicated Chavim with a minor tilt of my head.

"Wise," Survan commented.

Kith nodded agreement. "I'll get your cloak from upstairs."

While she was off getting my cloak, I idly asked Survan, "You are a merchant?" At his nod, I asked, "Can you tell me the value of gems?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, that is one skill that I've never had any aptitude in. Most any dwarf can, or jeweler, but you would have to trust them."

I nodded at him. It would have been nice, but it wasn't a big deal.

Carith approached our table with a plate of stew and a flagon for me. Placing it in front of me, she said, "Well met, stranger."

I gave her a sour look as Survan stifled a snicker. "Call me Ted," I told her. "It is my real name, after all."

Kith came back to the table, shaking out a cloak with the same colors as hers. Transferring the plain iron clasp from my brown cloak to the purple and gold one, I swung it over my shoulders and hooked it.

Kith nodded in satisfaction. "There, you're a member of Stormbow's Merchant Band." She took her seat and smiled at her sister. "What do you think of our newest guard?"

Carith grinned mischievously. "I think he'd look better without the beard." So saying, she turned on her heel and circulated around the room.

"Ouch," I winced as I sat back down.

Survan and Kith chuckled.

Oh, I like her, said Flick maliciously.

"She has a wicked sense of humor," I commented.

"No," Kith said in blatantly fake shock.

"Remember that those two grew up together," Survan said, grinning at me with a head tilt toward Kith.

I have GOT to separate you two before you pick on me too much," I said to her.

Kith grinned widely. "Never happen. I pick on everyone. Besides, Carith and I are inseparable when I'm in town. I'm sure I'll learn ALL about you before we leave."

I groaned. Looking over at Survan, I pleaded, "Help."

He laughed. "No way. Kith has someone else to pick on, now. I'm not about to interfere in my good luck."

I didn't say much else to anyone that night, instead spending most of the evening staring morosely into my drink.

The next morning at dawn, when there were fewer people in the tavern, Carith and I talked. More than once I forcefully kept myself from pulling her into a hug and kiss. I knew I was teetering on the edge of falling in love with her, and I couldn't afford to do that. For all sorts of reasons.

Finally extracting a promise from Carith to not tell Chavim that I was still alive, I leaned over and held her cheek in one hand. She rubbed her cheek on my palm for a moment, not even trying to hide the tears. I finally stood and dropped a quick kiss onto her cheek. "Fare thee well, Lady Carith of the clan Stormbow," I whispered.

Turning, I quickly left the building before I broke down into a sobbing mess.

Survan was standing just outside the door to walk with me to where the merchant wagon was waiting. He took one look at my face and nodded, silently leading me toward the warehouse district. "Will she ever forgive me?" I quietly asked him once we approached a mule drawn wagon and Kith standing by a saddled horse.

"She understands what you're doing and why you're doing it, though it pains her."

"Me too."

He nodded and continued his previous thought, "And so she has already forgiven you. Just remember to look in on her whenever we're in town."

"Not a problem," I replied. "I already intended to."

"Are you okay?" asked Kith, standing next to a chestnut mare.

I nodded as Survan answered, "He's trying to hold his heart in, Kith. Let's give him a day." He turned to me and said, "Hop in the back. We've got a ferry to catch."

I climbed into the back of the wagon and then held on for dear life as the wagon jostled and bounced its way to the ferry landing. "Oh, you want to avoid most everything back there," Survan called. "Some of that can explode in your face if you're not careful."

My hand jerked back away from the bag it'd been creeping toward. "Thanks for the warning," I called back.

However, we only traveled a short distance before we got to the ferry landing where we boarded a ship on the River Rauvin. "Ten days on the river before we get off at Yartar," Kith said in resignation.

And so it was a full ten days of boredom.

It wasn't totally a loss, though. I spent hours in conversation with Kith and Survan, learning what I could of them personally and elves in general.

I told them about Immortals and Earth. They were just as entertained by some of my stories as I was by theirs.

During this time I also met Midnight.

When I first met him, I made a mistake. I mean, when you spot a black cat sleeping on Survan's bedroll, what are you SUPPOSED to do? Thinking it was a stray or pet of one of the other passengers, I gently tried to push it off Survan's bed. I'd never seen the cat before in the wagon or in Silverymoon, so I didn't even think it might be Survan's.

The cat woke just enough from my jostling to give me an evil glare and then laid its head down again, totally ignoring me.

I tried pushing a little harder. I didn't want to hurt this animal, but I had no idea what Survan's reaction would be to cat hair. Some people are allergic, after all.

This time, the cat woke and gave me a nice set of four parallel claw marks down the back of my hand. Quickly removing my wounded appendage from the line of fire, I stood back and considered my options. For his part, the cat just looked at me warily and growled low in its throat.

Survan burst into the room, looking around in concern. "What's going on?" he asked in confusion.

"This cat is on your bed," I answered. "I was trying to get him off, and the little minx clawed me."

He laughed. Sitting down on the bed and allowing the cat to curl up on his lap, he petted it absently. "This is Midnight. Midnight, meet Thian."

"You have a pet cat?" I asked, wondering at how formally he was treating it.

"He's not a pet," Survan answered. "Do you understand the term 'familiar' as it applies to mages?"

Ah, that explains a great deal. I nodded and answered the question. "Yes, I am. Empathic but not quite telepathic link to an animal that becomes your companion." At his nod, I asked, "How do I treat him?"

He shrugged. "Like a feline friend. Have you ever had a cat as a pet?"

I nodded. I liked cats much more than I did dogs, and I'd had them as pets on and off for decades.

"Like that, then," he answered. "Just remember he's much smarter than the average cat, and you'll get along with him fine."

Squatting down, I held my healed hand down for his inspection, back facing toward him. He studied it for a moment before giving a delicate sniff and licking the blood off. After that, he allowed me to rub behind his ears.

After our initial disagreement, we got along handsomely.

As promised, the morning of the tenth day we pulled up at a ferry landing and everyone stepped ashore. While Survan stayed with the wagon and Kith's mare Baram, Kith led me to town and the local stables. I needed a mount.

On the way into town, we discussed what I needed. As I doubted that I'd ever be able to fight from horseback very well, she decided that a riding horse would work just fine.

I stood outside of the stable master's office and watched the world go by for the hour or so it took before Kith came out and handed me the reins to a gorgeous black stallion with a silver blaze and white socks. I was relieved to find him already outfitted with a saddle I figured that I could deal with.

Studying the animal and petting it absently, I asked Kith, "What's this fine fellow's name?"

She shrugged. "Harak didn't mention, though he's clearly a well trained animal. You name him."

Running one hand along his neck, I muttered to him, "How about Shadow, fella? How's that sound?"

He neighed quietly and flipped his head. Kith laughed. "Shadow it is, then. Come along, Thian. We're burning daylight."

Kith and I walked back to Survan before we all got ready to go. After settling my new saddlebag across Shadow's back, I cautiously climbed up into the saddle. Shadow followed behind Kith and Survan easily. He was indeed a well trained mount.

I was profoundly thankful for that fact over the next week. It took us ten days to reach Triboar. During that time, I relearned the art of horseback riding. Kith was a decent teacher, though, and Shadow was forgiving enough that neither he nor I ended up hurting the other. As we'd been traveling with part of a larger caravan, nothing of note happened during this week long trip. By the time we rode into sight of Triboar, I was at least an adequate rider.

After hiring two guards to accompany us for the ten day ride to Longsaddle, we headed out again quickly. That ride too passed without incident.

After two days in Longsaddle where Survan spent most of his time talking to the Harpell family of wizards who made Longsaddle their home, we headed north again. Heading out of town on the Long Road, we quickly approached three men standing near horses. Since they didn't react to our approach, nor did Kith seem surprised by their presence, I assumed they were the other three guards.

She stopped near them and nodded. "Gentlemen," she greeted them. Without turning around, she tilted her head back at Survan and I and said, "Survan is on the wagon, and Thian is our other guard. You'll each get your promised six lions upon reaching Luskan. I'm head of the guard, so if you'll just follow my orders and behave, we'll get along just fine."

The younger looking of the two humans asked, "If you get killed, who do we obey then, Lady Kith?"

"Survan then Thian," was her reply.

All three of them looked at me. "Why him?" asked the older human in a deep, gruff voice.

"Because I know him," Kith answered calmly. "The four of you can determine a pecking order tonight once we camp, but for now, he's third." Turning to Survan and me, she said, "Meet Jak, Fontan, and Murag," she indicated the younger human, older human, and dwarf in turn. The three of them nodded and then climbed onto their mounts. Jak was outfitted in studded leather, long sword, and a small shield. Fontan wore chain mail and had a crossbow across his back and a mace at his hip. Murag had a battle axe and shield in addition to his scale mail. I rode to the right of the wagon, Jak took the other flanking position, and that left Murag and Fontan to bring up the rear.

The rest of the day passed quietly. Survan engaged Jak in light conversation, and I joined in. We learned that Jak was the son of two adventurers who'd retired years before. He was new to adventuring, wisely starting off doing guard duty while he got some seasoning before doing anything more reckless.

Once we'd stopped for the night at a frequented campsite, Fontan insisted that the four of us determine who's the better. I sighed at the foolishness but agreed. Jak bowed out, and Murag waved one hand and said, "Bah! I've no use for such shenanigans. Beat each other up if ye must, but don't be including me in it."

Removing my cloak and dropping it next to the saddle I'd just removed from Shadow, I asked, "How far do you want to take this?"

"How far do YOU want to take it?" he asked in return.

Brother, what a blowhard. "I'd rather not draw blood on you unless I have to," I answered calmly.

He tensed. "If you can," he growled.

Drawing my sword, I stepped into an open space and waited for him to approach. Discarding his cloak and crossbow, he drew his mace and shield before stalking in. He swung at me, but I parried it cleanly. He paused, clearly expecting me to counter, but I just waited for his next move. Once again, he swung, and once again I parried, throwing his mace arm out wide. Quickly, I feinted an overhead chop with my sword. Because his mace was out too far, he brought his shield up.

Right in front of his face. Instead of bringing the sword down, my right foot snaked forward to clip him behind his left knee. He fell to one knee, instinctively bringing both hands down for balance. My sword immediately came to rest on his shoulder.

He froze in place for a moment before looking up at me slowly. "I yield," he said calmly. Nodding agreement, I sheathed my sword and walked away.

Kith nodded in satisfaction. Murag chuckled in appreciation. Survan called out, "Well done, Thian."

Kith said, "Now that that is taken care of, can any of you cook or hunt?"

"Aye, I can cook a bit," rumbled Murag.

"My crossbow is more for battles than hunting," said Fontan, apparently not at all bothered by his defeat.

"I can do a field dress, but I'm no good with a bow," said Jak.

I just shook my head. Drizt had taught me several useful skills, but hunting and cooking were not among them.

"Okay, rations tonight and tomorrow morn," said Kith. "I'll bring down some game if I see any tomorrow. Meanwhile, Thian and Fontan, get a fire going."

"I'll gather if you start it," I offered him. At his agreement, I went off to find dry kindling.

The next few weeks passed quietly. I watched everyone around me to learn as much as possible. From Jak's field dressing the deer that Kith brought down with her bow, to Murag's preparing some of it immediately and slow smoking the rest for storage and travel.

Oh, yes, that bow. I was on the wrong side of the wagon at the time, so I didn't see how she did it, but I heard the twang of the bowstring and came around the wagon just in time to see a deer fall over a hundred yards ahead. Jak and I rode up to it only to find a scorch and puncture mark over its heart but no arrow.

I asked Kith about it later. She just smiled.

It wasn't until the twenty-fifth day near dusk that I finally saw her using the bow.

We'd bypassed Mirabar days before, deciding that we didn't need to stop since we were bound for Luskan anyway. Once again on the right flank of the wagon, I heard shouts along the other side before Survan suddenly brought the wagon to a halt. Urging Shadow around the front of the wagon quickly, I saw Jak, Fontan, and Murag head straight at a group of thirty or so charging figures. Their large upturned noses, sloping foreheads, and grunted yells marked them as orcs.

Survan was already standing with his arms waving. I looked at Kith and saw an amazing sight. She'd taken the Stormbow in hand as usual, but she didn't have an arrow notched. Instead, when she pulled back on the string a flame shaped arrow materialized in place. She released the string, and the fiery "arrow" went rocketing straight into the chest of one of the charging humanoid attackers, dropping him instantly. Not even slowing down, she continued to fire, the bow creating an arrow every time she drew back the bowstring.

Tearing my gaze away from Kith, I saw how everyone else was doing. After felling one orc with his crossbow, Fontan had mowed over two more with his charge and was now continuing into the woods behind our attackers. Murag had pulled up short of the orcs and was now on foot, wading into the charging horde and singing in Dwarven at the top of his lungs. Jak stayed mounted, staying at the fringe of the group and picking off one orc at a time in brushing attacks.

I stayed in front of Kith and Survan, knowing I was to guard them from immediate attack.

After cutting down another handful of the charging monsters with her magical arrows, Kith rode around the charging horde and off into Fontan's wake, shouting for me to stay with Survan. His spell had already gone off, producing four glowing darts of magical energy that sped toward two orcs, felling both.

Murag had finished off three by this time and was happily hacking at two more.

Considering the over fifty percent losses on their part, I was amazed that the orcs were still moving forward.

Climbing down from Shadow quickly, I pulled Flick out and threw him at the nearest of the charging monsters. Ignoring his screeching flight, I drew

my two other flight daggers and hurled them at the other orcs as well before drawing my sword and walking forward to give me some space to work with.

Just before the nearest charging orc reached me, I heard Survan finish his second spell. An orc in the second wave back from the front runner suddenly had a hazy outline of a dwarf dropped over him. Seeing an apparent dwarf in their midst, two of the orcs flanking the illusion immediately attacked him.

Laughing at the clever use of such an illusion, I blocked the first attack by the orc that was just reaching me. Holding my sword to keep the mace at bay, I brought my left fist into the orc's stomach and then my elbow came whipping around to crash into his temple. He dropped like a felled tree. Giving his head another quick kick to make sure he was down, I turned to the next orc in line, only to find that there were actually two. Quickly parrying both swinging short swords, I kicked at the stomach of the one on my left. When he hunched over with the force, I stepped around him quickly to place him between me and the other orc, bashing him on the back of the head with the pommel of my sword as I moved. Awkwardly trying to hop over his fallen comrade, the other orc swung at me weakly. Easily parrying that, I slashed straight across his stomach. His rotting leather armor had no hope of stopping my blade.

Turning from the kill, I only found one last orc facing me. Murag was finishing off his last opponent, Fontan and Kith were still hidden in the copse of trees, and Jak was on his way to join them.

Since one of my throwing daggers was still sticking out of my opponent's shoulder, a quick parry and thrust was all it took before the last standing orc was no longer standing. Looking quickly over at Survan, he nodded to me and said, "Go to the trees. I'll check all of them."

Nodding, I quickly sheathed my sword and hopped up on Shadow who was pawing nervously at the ground near the two mules yoked to the wagon. Guiding him around the field littered with orcsen bodies, I charged him toward the trees only to allow him to slow to a gradual stop when Fontan calmly walked out leading his horse, followed by Kith and Jak who were still mounted.

Stopping and waiting for them to approach, I took a quick inventory. Fontan's horse had a few scratches on its chest, and Murag was idly poking at his bleeding shoulder. I turned back to the wagon to find Survan leaning forward with a dagger to finish off one of the orcs I'd just stunned earlier. Thirty or so orcs dead for a price of two minor wounds. Hurray for the good guys.

"You okay, Thian?" asked Kith as she and Jak approached.

I nodded. "I'm fine. Not even a scratch."

Kith nodded and turned away quickly. Not before I saw a slight smile and heard a quiet sigh, though.

"What did you find?" I queried Fontan as he finally approached the three of us.

"Just one leader," he remarked casually. "This must have been a raiding party."

"You sound disappointed," I noted.

He shrugged. "I only got four."

Jak chuckled, but Kith and I frowned. "We aren't trying to keep score here, Fontan," remarked Kith in disgust.

He shrugged again. Deciding I'd better change the subject, I asked Jak, "You and your mount okay?"

He nodded and ran a hand along the horse's neck. "She's just tired. We're fine."

"Fontan, can you see to your mount?" I asked.

At his short nod, I turned and trotted Shadow over to Murag. "You okay?" I asked when I got close enough to him.

He looked up at me and gave a half shrug, favoring his bloodied shoulder. "If ye can help me clean and bandage this scratch, I'll be good as new."

While Kith chased down Murag's mule that had bolted during the fight, I helped Murag with his shoulder, and Fontan did the same for his horse. Jak and Survan dragged the orcs near the road further into the field and then started removing all their weaponry, armor, and assorted valuables.

The pile of armor only produced one usable mismatched set (taken off of the leader). Poking through the weapons, I found several swords that could be cleaned up and resold. The wooden spears and maces turned into our campfire for the evening once we'd moved a couple miles further.

After setting up camp, I spent a few hours with my whetstone and oil, repairing those few swords that could actually be fixed. Jak was watching me closely, so I explained what I was doing as I was doing it to him.

"If ye'd let me, I coulda made ye all some fine orc steaks," Murag muttered again.

He'd been saying that on and off since we'd prevented him from cutting off choice portions of the orcs we'd killed. Kith finally chuckled at his comments. "You and Ork would have gotten along handsomely."

Murag glared at her dangerously. "Me and a stinkin' orc get along? Never!"

She shook her head. "Not an orc. I was referring to a human I once knew named Ork."

A human named Ork," I commented disbelievingly.

She nodded. "Swear by Silvanus. A human named Ork Deathbringer."

"With that name, I like 'im already," remarked Murag.

We all chuckled as Kith continued, "He'd been a slave to an orc tribe since he was a kid. After he was rescued, he joined an adventurer's band that I was in at the time. Fiercely strong, but he was simple as a child outside of battle. He'd sworn a blood oath against orcs, and he had a dozen recipes for various bits of orc."

"Sounds disgusting," Fontan commented.

Murag commented, "Bah! Yer innards just ain't strong enough to deal with it."

"I'll freely admit that," said Kith with a slight shudder. "I tried his orc stew once. Made me sick for a week."

The thought of eating another sentient species sounded close to cannibalism, but nobody here seemed to be treating Murag like a barbarian in that respect, just that the taste wouldn't be pleasant. Besides, my curiosity was getting the better of me. "I'll make a deal with you, Murag." His eyes shifted to me, eyebrows raised in query. "You and I'll go back and cut some of those orc steaks. You show me how to prepare it, and I'll try one. Deal?"

His eyes brightened. Jumping up and moving to his mule, he said, "Well, what're ye waitin' fer? Come on!"

Chuckling at his enthusiasm, I pulled one of the mostly destroyed swords out of the pile and handed it to Jak. "You want to try?"

He nodded and reached for the whetstone as I stood and moved to saddle Shadow.

It turned out that the orc steak had been too tough for me to eat, but Murag assured me it would make jerky just fine.

Oh, and orc tastes just like chicken.

Arriving at Luskan five days later without further incident, Survan led the wagon to a warehouse where he produced a key and entered. Pulling a pouch off his belt, he counted out an eagle and a lion each to Jak, Fontan, and Murag before bidding them a friendly goodbye.

As they walked their mounts back toward town, I helped Survan lead the wagon's mules into the warehouse and then release them from the yoke. Holding the two sets of reins, he bid me to pick up the three bags with the assorted weapons and armor from the orcs. The bags over my shoulder, Kith and Survan led two animals each to a local stable where they were apparently known. Leaving the horses and mules in the stableman's hands, we split the bags that were about to tear my arms from their sockets.

Keeping half an eye on following Kith, I looked around in curiosity. On the surface the city of Luskan was almost identical to Silverymoon, just a little smaller.

Kith led us into a shop where a human was standing behind the counter, looking over long tallies of numbers. He looked up and smiled, "Stormbow! Welcome back to town. What can I do for you?"

"What's the going rate for scrap metal?" Kith asked, dropping her bag (that held the repaired swords) to the floor.

"Two sparrows to the pound," the human answered, looking at the bag at her feet.

"Oh, good," I commented, dropping the larger sack with the ruined swords onto the countertop. "With this ten thousand pounds, we're rich."

Kith smiled slightly while the smith chuckled. "Ten thousand pounds is it? You're stronger than the barbarians from the north then." He smiled to me. "Janan the smith at your service," he introduced himself.

"Thian the sell-sword," I answered, stretching out my shoulder.

"Well met."

I nodded back while Kith said, "Three sparrows to the pound, and we've some decent short swords to sell you as well."

His face fell. "The last time you tried to sell me swords . . . Ah, let's just say they weren't in good condition."

Survan snickered, but Kith didn't even bat an eye. "Okay, but these are in better shape." She squatted down and gingerly retrieved one of the swords, holding it out to Janan for inspection. He looked it over for a few moments, peering closely at the edge.

He finally looked up and nodded. "Much better. Three lions for each if they're in as good a shape."

Leaving them to do their bartering, I wandered around the shop. Seeing a display of knives, I asked permission before hefting them and checking their edges. Finding them to be in good condition, I placed them down and continued browsing. By the time I got back to the front, both bags of swords were on the floor by Janan's feet and he was counting out coins.

Once he was done and Kith turned to go with a cheerful farewell, I asked Janan, "How much for the knives?"

He glanced over at them and said, "Five lions each."

I thought it over for a second, also calculating what else I needed. "One of those knives, a scabbard for it, a pot of blade oil, and a new whetstone for two eagles."

"I've no scabbards in stock," he replied.

"Okay, minus the scabbard for one eagle."

"Two eagles," he countered.

"One eagle, two lions."

"Done," he agreed.

I walked back over to the knives and selected one, and then walked back to the counter. He'd placed a whetstone and small jar of oil on the counter when I hadn't been looking.

Dipping into my coin pouch, I withdrew an eagle and two lions and dropped them onto the counter. He nodded and pushed the oil jar and whetstone to me.

Gingerly tucking the bare blade into my belt, I grabbed the oil jar and stone before following Kith and Survan out the door.

Our next stop was an armorer where we unloaded the remaining bag of mismatched armor. I also got a leather belt sheath for the knife.

Strapping the knife in place further around behind Flick, he commented, *Just don't mistake one for the other of us.*

Suppressing the smile, I replied, [Don't worry about that. I'm sure this thing can't fly worth crap. It's just for meals, unless you really WANT to continue being a steak knife for me.]

He gave a wordless growl. He'd made his disgust obvious when I'd used him trying to eat the orc steak a few days previously.

With no more bags to slow us down, Kith and Survan casually led me further along the street, pointing out various items of interest before pushing open the door of a place called "Winter Storms". Another of the family chain, no doubt.

My assumption was proven correct when I was introduced to the proprietress Verith Stormbow. She was just over five feet tall, had straight brown hair, and pretty blue eyes. After introducing us, Kith said something in Elven to which both Verith and Survan smiled widely.

Flick broke into hysterical laughter but refused to explain when I asked about it.

I cocked an eyebrow at Kith after bowing to Verith. "You going to translate whatever it was you just said?" She shook her head, and Verith and Survan both broke into smiles again. Sighing dramatically, I changed the subject. "You're going to have to explain your clan to me sometime. I'm losing track of all the Stormbows running around."

Survan laughed and explained. "Verith is sister to Therth, whom you met in Silvermoon."

Nodding, I smiled pleasantly at her as she led us up to three rooms above the bar.

Two days later found Verith, Kith, and I sharing a midday meal and conversation as we had done the previous day. Also as usual, Survan was off doing whatever it was he did in the course of business.

"So Ork was standing on one side of the door, Shantal on the other side, and I was in front of it with my bow. Shantal was going to open the door, and I was going to start firing arrows as fast as I could. Once the orcs made it through the door, Ork and Shantal were going to engage them, so I could keep firing as long as possible. Well, when Shantal opened the door, everything started going wrong all at once. None of the orcs were where I could see them immediately, so I couldn't fire. To top that off, an invisible, magical wall sprang up between Ork and us, so he was cut off where he couldn't help us. However, he could see the orcs from his angle. As usual when it came to Ork Deathbringer facing orcs, he went crazy. Apparently knowing he couldn't get through the invisible wall, he pulled out his only ranged weapon. Unfortunately, it was a Wand of Wonders."

"Uh, oh," I commented to Kith's story with a huge smile. Those things had a horrible reputation for random effects, as often producing more problems than they solved. Verith giggled and waited for the story to continue, eyes shining in mirth.

Kith took a sip of her wine and continued her story of one of her adventures. "His first discharge of his wand filled the whole area with thousands of butterflies."

Verith and I started laughing. I could just picture it. In a stone corridor, eight foot ceilings, thousands of butterflies trying frantically to escape.

"I was blind, of course," continued Kith with a smile. "What good is a blinded archer? So I backed off. Ork, meanwhile, got frustrated with his first attempt to kill the orcs. So he fired his Wand again."

"Oh, dear. What happened this time?" asked Verith with a huge smile.

The wand spat lightning bolts, killing every orc in the room. The one member of our party who COULDN'T reach the orcs managed to kill all of them! Not to mention who knows how many butterflies."

I started laughing so hard that my stomach hurt. Leaning forward with one arm wrapped around my middle, I wiped the tears streaming down my eyes with the other hand.

Gasping for breath, I looked up to a sight that was very much out of place.

A human wearing a cloak was stalking through the room, hunched over and looking this way and that in suspicion. The problem was that he was hazy. He was also heading directly for the till containing the money collected so far today.

Recognizing the invisibility effect for what it was, I turned back to Kith and Verith and said, "Ladies, please excuse me for a moment."

Standing, I walked toward the restroom, which was fortunately nearly on a direct line to where this guy was currently standing.

What are you doing? Flick wanted to know.

[Just watch.]

Seeing me coming, the guy jumped out of the way. I forced myself to keep my eyes focused on the restroom door, hopefully convincing him that that was my destination. I peripherally noticed that he'd made no noise when he'd jumped. Inaudible as well as invisible? Nice effect.

The instant I got as close to the guy as I could, I quickly drew Flick and pointed him at the intruder's face. Stalking straight at him, I looked into his eyes and smiled evilly. For his part, the guy shifted sideways a little at first. When I started tracking his movements and still advancing, he began backing up with a frightened expression on his face. I backed him up until his back bumped into the bar top. Flick advanced toward his neck until it came to stop hovering over the guy's jugular. He'd already bent over backwards, trying to stay away from the blade.

"Hi," I said, conversationally. "Might I ask you what you're doing here?"

"What are you doing, Thian?" called Kith.

I suddenly became aware of the utter silence in the room. I twisted my head to look around.

LOOK OUT! shouted Flick.

My reflexes took over. His left hand had grabbed my dagger hand, hauling it away from his vulnerable neck. His right suddenly had a dagger of his own in it, streaking toward my chest. My left arm chopped sideways to hit his forearm, stopping the blade from hitting me. My right knee also came up between his legs.

Letting out a high-pitched screech, the man suddenly dropped his dagger, released my arm, brought his hands down to cup the injured area, and dropped like a stone. He was completely visible by this point.

I winced in sympathy. My action had been automatic, making the easiest disabling attack available to me at the time. 'Course, it was hard to explain that to a man whose voice had just gone up three octaves.

Well, his inaudibility had been dispelled. After that initial shriek, his moans came with no decrease in volume.

I tried to flip him over with a toe, but he was curled up rigidly. Instead of forcing him to unfold, I kneeled down, pinning him in place with a leg across his arm and side. Placing Flick's blade along his neck, I said over his low groans, "Don't move now." Looking up at Kith's and Verith's open-mouthed stares, I calmly remarked, "Verith, you may want to get the city guard. I believe I found a thief."

She waved curtly at one of the gaping waitresses, who immediately bolted out the front door.

Kith walked over and expertly searched him, dropping another dagger, a coin purse, and a large empty bag on the floor next to his dropped dagger. She started to stand, but then pinned one of his hands to the floor with a booted foot. Once his hand stopped moving, I could see the silver ring he wore. Kith tugged it off without too much effort. After checking the other hand, she stood and waited calmly, subtly checking my over.

I was about to ask her why she was looking at me like that when the missing waitress returned, followed by three guards wearing identical uniforms. Quickly taking in the scene, the apparent leader approached me and asked, "What happened?"

Without releasing the man beneath me, I explained as another of the guards interviewed Kith and the last did the same with Verith.

Nodding at the end of my explanation, the leader asked, "You could see him?"

"My cloak clasp allows me to see through invisibility, yes."

He looked down at the man on the floor. "What do you have to say about this?"

Coughing once or twice, he began, "I was just approaching the bar to get a drink when this guy attacked me."

"Completely invisible?" asked Kith in sarcastic amusement.

"Hey, I wasn't invisible! How could I do that? I'm no mage."

"That ring," I nodded to the ring around the small pile near him. "I'm willing to bet it's a Ring of Invisibility and perhaps inaudibility as well, since you didn't make a sound until you . . . um, cried out in pain."

Verith snickered. Three male customers and the guard leader winced.

"Hey, you attacked me!" the guy objected, still looking a little pale.

"Can I point out that you drew a dagger?"

"You drew first!"

"To prevent a crime," I answered in a bored voice.

Two men came walking in the door. One was clearly another guard and the other was wearing the same colors, but in a robe instead of armor. The robed man asked, "Okay, why was I brought here?"

So I had to repeat everything again. At my suspicion that the ring in question was magical, he quietly cast a spell and studied the ring intently.

"Quite right, sir," he finally announced. He turned to the guard leader and said, "I believe this man has just caught your Invisible Thief that's been giving you fits for the past three months."

The guard leader nodded shortly and called out, "What have you got, lads?" to the other three guards who had been quietly circulating through the room during the conversation.

All three converged. "Everyone I talked to substantiates his story," one said, nodding at me. The other two guards nodded and murmured their agreement.

Nodding, the leader looked down at me. "You can let him up now, sir." He waved his hand to two of his guards, and I cautiously handed him over to the guards.

As they drug him out of the room, the leader gingerly placed all of the thief's items into an empty bag he was carrying. He and the mage conversed for a moment before the mage gave a sharp nod and left with the bag of evidence in the wake of the prisoner. The leader turned back to me and asked, "Do you work here?"

"Indirectly," answered Verith. "He works for the Stormbow family, and this inn is owned by the same family."

"You are the owner of this building then?" he asked of her.

She nodded.

"If you two will come to the Hall of Justice in two days at highsun, lady and sir, we can conduct the trial then. You can claim his possessions as is your right at that time." His eyes had included me in the "sir", so I knew I was required to attend as well.

She nodded back. "Two days, highsun. My thanks, Guard."

He nodded politely to her before giving me a polite bow and word of thanks. Once done, he spun on his heel and waved the remaining guard out the door with him. The excitement over, the customers slowly drifted back to their tables. I heard variations of the story start up in four different locations, varying in size and race of the thief as well as the viciousness of the fight.

Shaking my head at the notorious unreliability of eyewitnesses, I reseated myself and leaned back with a sigh.

Well, wasn't that fun? asked Flick idly.

[What, catching some idiot thief who had a good thing going before he ran into someone who could spot him?]

Something like that, he agreed.

"You could see him," stated Kith as she slowly sank back into her seat.

I nodded. "Like I told the guard, this clasp allows me to see invisible people and objects."

"So that's why you're so attached to it," she nodded.

"And how I prevented that assassination you heard about in Silverymoon," I added softly.

"What are you talking about?" asked Verith.

"Long story," answered Kith. "I'll tell you about it later without so many ears around if you're still interested."

Verith nodded slowly. "I think I will be." She smiled over at me. "Looks like we have a date in two days."

I brought my hand up to my face in mock shock. "I don't have a THING to wear," I exclaimed.

Kith just rolled her eyes and poked me in the shoulder.

She left her hand resting on my forearm for the rest of the night. I decided that it was for her to reassure herself that I was okay. Not that I was complaining, of course.

Being part of that trial was an interesting experience. I didn't have to attend the trial after the attempted robbery at "Storm Tales", but as a civilian witness to this one, I did. Without lawyers, everyone spoke on their own behalf, the presiding judge doing the questioning.

A priest of Tyr standing nearby with a "Detect Falsehood" spell going definitely simplified life. At the thief's attempts to explain that he was simply trying to buy a drink, the priest chuckled and shook his head.

Me, Verith, the guard mage, and guard leader all were questioned quickly. Since all the evidence pointed in the same direction, it didn't take long for the judge (another, higher ranking priest of Tyr) to reach the verdict of guilt. The dejected thief was sentenced to five years imprisonment and the next case was brought forward.

The guard leader intercepted Verith and me on our way out of the building. He handed the bag containing all the thief's useful items to Verith and then turned to me. "I want to thank you again," he said quietly. "That fellow's been stealing for months, and we never could catch him. You have my thanks, sir." He gave me another bow before offering a arm clasp, a high honor for an established city guard to offer to someone he doesn't know.

Smiling, I clasped his arm and replied, "I was hired to guard for the Stormbow clan. I was just doing my duty as Helm and Torm require of me."

Nodding in agreement, he said, "Fare you well, then." Smiling politely at Verith, he turned and strode off down the street.

Verith and I turned back toward "Winter Storms". She poked through the bag as we walked.

"Anything interesting?" I asked idly.

"Goodly amount of money," she answered. "You already saw the daggers and ring. Nothing else of note." She fished the ring out of the bag and presented it to me, closing the bag by its drawstring with a quick jerk of her other hand.

"What's this?" I ask, indicating the ring she was offering me.

"It's a silver ring," she said dryly. "Rumor has it that it's a Ring of Invisibility and Inaudibility."

[No shit, Sherlock.]

You asked, bozo, shot back Flick.

I rolled my eyes at her. "I know that. I was wondering why you are offering it to me."

She shrugged. "I've no use for it, and I wanted to thank you for what you did. This seems to be the easiest way. It's officially owned by the Stormbow clan, and I'll inform Survan of that, but it makes sense for you to wear it."

I took the ring hesitantly and studied it. It was silver, lightly scratched, and utterly featureless otherwise.

"How do you use it?" I asked hesitantly.

Put it on your finger, wiggle your eyebrows, and say, "Abracadabra."

[Very funny. I'm serious.]

She shrugged. "Ask Survan. He's more likely to understand such items."

I did ask him about it that evening. After some thought, he gingerly heated the ring over a candle and revealed glowing blue letters spelling out, "Aberlith".

It took several days of experimentation and consultation with Flick and Survan, but I eventually concluded that I could use the item once a day to become completely invisible and silent by uttering that word.

Voluntarily speaking again negated the silence, and attacking or a desire to become visible again negated the invisibility. I had to be wearing the ring, of course, but I could immediately see the use of such an item.

It was quite the chore to avoid using it for pranks, but I decided that I'd better only use it in cases of need. If I only used it during such times, it would multiply its effectiveness.

Due to the trial, we left on the fifth morning, two days later than we originally planned. Winter was approaching and Survan and Kith both wanted to head south before that happened.

The next two months passed relatively quietly (except that quick skirmish against the goblin party that thought we didn't look too tough).

Stopping in Neverwinter and Leilon only long enough to replenish supplies and change guards, we made decent speed toward Waterdeep,

following the road south along the Sword Coast.

I was still learning a great deal from the other guards traveling with us. One of the humans was something of a chef, so I learned as much from him as possible. Likewise, I taught two of them how to care for bladed weapons. Most everyone had basic understanding of the proper care of their swords or axes, but very few seemed to know how to work out a nick or blemish.

We all also taught each other fighting techniques. My long sword style was pretty standard, but I was a good sparring partner because I could point out flaws in others. I also used my left arm as a weapon, instead of holding a shield with it. That was more uncommon than I had first appreciated. I learned how to fight against axes, warhammers, and maces held by some very good fighters. There was even one guy who used a spear with deadly efficiency.

We arrived at Waterdeep, City of Splendors fifty-nine days after leaving Luskan. After Survan produced another key to yet another warehouse, I began to wonder how many warehouses the Stormbrows owned in how many cities.

The horses were safely stabled at another corral that recognized my employers on sight. Upon arriving at "Storming Knights", I was introduced to the proprietress Canth, who was sister to Survan. They shared a quick hug before Canth politely greeted Kith. Kith again introduced me, finishing with another spat of Elven that went by too quickly for my fledgling Elven skills to keep up with.

Canth broke into giggles and looked at me appraisingly while Flick began chuckling.

"You aren't going to explain this, are you?" I asked Kith in resignation.

She shook her head with a grin. I turned to Survan with a raised eyebrow, but he held up his hands. "Don't even think about asking me, Thian. Kith would kill me if I translated for you."

[What about you?] I asked Flick.

Muffling down his laughter, he replied, *Nope. I'm not telling.*

Since it was still relatively early, Kith, Survan, and I seated ourselves at a table. One of the barmaids, a lovely young half-elf named Saran, took our orders and returned with our drinks and plates of venison stew. Canth joined us and the four of us spent a pleasant evening listening to a bard tell her tales two tables down.

When the bard retired for the evening, my three table mates started discussing the family news while I divided my time between staring at the fire and light flirting with Saran.

Yawning over dawnfry the next morning, I asked Canth if there was a good jeweler nearby. She replied that there was and gave me directions. After she finished, she casually mentioned that if I waited a few hours, Saran would be up and no doubt would be willing to be a local guide. I was momentarily concerned, because I remembered Kith's unusually short temper with Saran the previous evening after I started flirting with her. Hell with it, I thought. If Saran agreed, why not?

Sure enough, Saran was quite willing to guide me around, provided I didn't mind making a few stops with her.

Holding my arm out with a charming smile, I said, "I have no problem with that. Just don't ask me to stay in a women's clothing store. Some shopping I just refuse to be subjected to."

She giggled as her hand slipped into the crook of my elbow. "Fear not, good sir, I shall not subject you to such horrible peril."

Canth's laughter followed us out the door.

Saran first led us to a butcher, explaining that she was the purchaser for "Storming Knights". After the butcher was a baker and then a cheese maker. All the store owners seemed to know her, and all also expressed surprise to see her come in with me.

Walking out of the cheese store, I asked her about it.

She was silent for a few paces and then answered, "My husband died autumn before last. Everyone's surprised to see me with another man, assuming that we're together in that way."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable -" I started.

She waved it off. "You didn't. Besides, you're off limits."

Flick groaned.

I frowned in puzzlement. "I am?"

She stopped and looked at me in surprise. "What do you mean? You don't know?"

"Know what?" I asked in exasperation. Flick groaned again.

"Never mind," she said quickly before starting off walking again suddenly.

"No, NOT never mind," I said, stepping rapidly to catch up. "What did you mean, Saran?"

"It was not my place to say anything," was her only reply, refusing to explain further when I pressed. Hoping to distract me, Saran promised the jeweler next. I grudgingly let her off the hook when I realized how much the conversation was bothering her.

I was surprised when Saran led me into a store called "Flanner's Jewels", remembering a store by the same name in Silvermoon was where I'd gotten my infinity clasp made. I vaguely wondered if Flanner would be there and recognize me. I'd long since grown a mustache and beard in an attempt to disguise myself to some degree, but it was still possible that someone who knew Knight Thian could recognize me even after all these months and miles.

I was relieved when a different female halfling came out of the back in response to Saran and I ringing the bell.

"Saran!" she greeted. "How are you this fine day, lass?"

"I am well, Banner. I just brought Thian here so he could do some business with you."

"Ah, and here I thought that you'd introduce him as your boyfriend," Banner said in a teasing tone.

Saran giggled. "Nay, he's already spoken for."

Banner nodded and turned to me. "What can I do for you, sir?"

I was spoken for? That would explain the "off limits" comment, but I STILL didn't know what was going on. "Can you appraise gems?" I asked the halfling, shaking off the mystery.

"For one sparrow per three gems appraised, aye, I can. If you'll permit me to buy one at my stated price, I'll waive the appraisal fee."

Nodding agreement, I removed the gem pouch from my belt and handed it over. They'd sat there since leaving Silvermoon so long ago, and I was finally going to do something with them.

Banner had rolled up her sleeves by this point. Taking the pouch, she gingerly opened it and peeked inside. Cautiously dumping the gems onto a felt cloth she'd spread on the counter, she began poking through the eleven exposed gems.

Seeing how much care she was showing with my gems, I quietly pulled four sparrows out of my coin purse to show my willingness to pay her for the appraisal.

She quickly swept six of the smaller gems aside. Each was a different stone, but every one was barely bigger than a chip. "These six aren't large enough to be anything but decorative," she explained. "I'd pay you perhaps two lions each for them, but you'd do better turning them into ornaments, perhaps for that fine clasp you're wearing. Now let's see about these other five." She studied each intently for several minutes, including pulling a jeweler's eyeglass (called a "loupe" I later learned) from behind the counter for a closer look. Finally satisfied, she leaned back and said, "The small diamond is worth fifty lions. The ruby, emerald, and larger diamond are one hundred lions each. This lovely sapphire is worth five hundred."

Nodding, I placed the sapphire and small diamond back into the gem pouch but didn't pick the rest of them up. I stared down at the remaining nine gems and drummed my fingers in thought.

"What are you thinking, Thian?" asked Saran in curiosity.

You're assuming he IS thinking, interjected Flick.

Completely ignoring Flick, I glanced at Saran for a moment before turning back to Banner. "Do you have a purple, yellow, and orange stone of roughly that size?" I ask, waving a hand at the pile of small stones.

She blinked and looked down. "Yes," she answered slowly. "I've an amethyst, topaz, and citrine of about that size. The amethyst is dark purple, the topaz is deep yellow, and the citrine is actually light yellow, but looks almost orange. Why do you ask?"

"What do you think of this?" I ask, rearranging the stones into a rough circle, leaving three open spaces. I started at the top and pointed, moving clockwise as I named off the stones. "Clear diamond, white opal, red ruby, orange citrine, yellow topaz, green emerald, blue sapphire, purple amethyst, and black onyx around the edge of my clasp."

Banner looked from the arrayed stones to my clasp and back again. "Rainbow in order, plus white, black, and clear," she murmured, frowning in thought. Nodding, she looked up at me and said, "One suggestion?"

"What's that?"

She pointed to the space between the opal and ruby. "That color shift is a little much. How about a pink garnet in between?"

Saran smiled. "Sounds good."

I nodded in agreement. "It does. How much would it cost, and how long would it take?"

"Two lions and a falcon each on four gems and mounting of all ten," she muttered to herself. She looked up and said, "Call it three eagles and I can have it done in two days."

chewed my lip in thought, peering at the larger ruby, emerald, and diamond still lying on the counter. Each was about an eighth of an inch. Decently sized, but not gaudy.

I can hear the gears turning, said Flick. *What are you thinking?*

[I thought you didn't admit that I DID think,] I teased before my attention returned to the gems. [I've always liked emeralds and rubies,] I continued absently.

"Three eagles?" asked Banner again, not knowing why I'd fallen silent.

"Keep that in mind," I answered. "How much to turn the diamond, ruby, and emerald into earrings?"

She blinked again at the rapidly changing conversation. "What kind?" she asked after a moment.

"Three individual earrings. Studs, not dangling."

"Would you be wanting them to be holding spells as that clasp can?" she asked.

Saran gasped softly, but I smiled at Banner. She'd recognized the clasp as mithril and not silver, then. "No, not magical foci. They'd have to be sturdy, though. Non- corroding, so iron won't work."

She sniffed disdainfully. "As if I would USE iron in jewelry."

I bowed slightly. "Forgive me for suggesting that, but I was just using iron as an example of a material that cannot survive indefinitely."

She nodded, mollified by my explanation. "How hard does it have to be?"

I shrugged. "Not particularly, just hold itself together. It can't bend at a casual contact. Things like that."

"Okay, a gold alloy would work, then." She stared off into space for a moment and said, "One eagle each to make them as studs, or two eagles each to enspell them so they'll never fall off."

"I can remove one and replace it with another of the three, can't I?" I asked. I didn't want one of them to become a permanent earring. All three on a rotation was what I was after.

She nodded. "It IS for you, then. Aye, a command word to attach, and another to detach each."

"How soon?" I asked.

She looked down and chewed on her lip a moment. "You thinking of the clasp AND the earrings?"

I nodded.

"Four days," she answered. "And that's three eagles for the clasp, plus two each for the earrings, for a total of nine eagles."

Damn. Survan had mentioned that we would be leaving town the fifth morning we were here, assuming Kith could find guards that fast. Which would mean that we were leaving the morning of the day these things would be done. "It is now second day morning," I said. "If you can have it all done by evening of fifth day, AND you have a way to pierce my ear, then I'll give you the other diamond as exchange." Doing the math, I was actually overpaying her by an eagle, but then I'd also pushed up the timetable.

Banner smiled. "Your ear need not be pierced for the magical clips."

I breathed a sigh of relief. That solved several problems, not the least of which was my rapid healing would make an earring problematic. "Good. Offer stands IF it can be done by evening of fifth day. Oh, and I'd like to see the amethyst, topaz, garnet, and citrine before I go."

She nodded. "Done." She began to pull out several small drawers of loose gems, searching for the four small items to show me. "You know, I like that idea of the ten gems around the edge of the clasp," she said, pulling out the stones and placing them in position. "I may start making clasps like that just for my show room."

I smiled. "What, I don't get a commission for the idea?" I teased.

"Thian," Saran hissed at me.

Banner just laughed. Pushing the four sparrows I'd placed on the counter a while ago back to me, she said, "Here's your commission, Jeweler Thian."

I laughed with her, appreciative that she recognized my teasing.

Tying my lighter gem bag back to my belt, I removed the cloak and detached the clasp. Laying the clasp inside the circle of smaller stones, I made sure it was oriented correctly for what I wanted.

"You can borrow one of my other clasps until you return for this one," offered Banner, still searching for the garnet.

As I'd given my plain one away some time ago, I needed another one. Nodding, I walked over to her clasp display and perused the selection. I saw

the holy symbols of several of the common gods, a couple relatively plain ones, and one that caught my attention. "This one of a unicorn," I said. "I've seen that symbol on a medallion worn by a ranger. Do you know if it means something more?"

Saran answered, "It is the symbol of Mielikki, Lady of the Forest, patron god of rangers."

I nodded, not surprised. "Okay, then can I borrow the clasp with the amethyst?" I asked Banner. The deep purple nearly matched my cloak with Stormbow colors, so it wouldn't look out of place.

"Surely," she answered. Having finally found the garnet, she gingerly placed it in its location then came over to the clasp display and pulled out the object in question, offering it to me. I wasn't terribly surprised she'd offered me a "loaner" so to speak. I was leaving gems worth much more than this clasp, so it was in my best interest to return.

Hooking the clasp back onto the cloak, I followed her back over to the counter. "Oh, and there ARE spells in that clasp. Mounting those stones won't be a problem, will it?"

"Not so long as it isn't a fireball or some such spell," answered Banner hesitantly.

I laughed lightly. "No, nothing nearly so drastic. One spell of protection and a light spell."

She nodded. "No problems, then. Couple last questions before I forget. Will you be wanting the gems along the outer edge of the clasp, partway in, or just outside the symbol?"

"Halfway, maybe shaded toward the outer edge. Evenly spaced around the oval, of course," I added.

"Of course," she agreed. She waved at it where it was sitting in the circle of small gems. "This orientation?"

I nodded, doing a quick inspection of the four new gems. Dark purple amethyst, deep yellow topaz, light pink garnet, and nearly orange citrine.

"And the earrings? Pointed side forward, or flat top forward?"

"Flat," I answered.

"Well enough, then," she answered. "Come back before dusk on fifth day with that diamond, and I'll have all this done for you."

I nodded. "I'll be staying at 'Storming Knights' if you need to get in touch."

She looked at Saran and grinned. "Of course. See you in three days."

Saran spent the rest of that morning showing me around Waterdeep, occasionally stopping in front of a women's clothing store just to laugh at my exaggerated shudder.

We finally came back to "Storming Knights" well after the midday meal, arm in arm and laughing at a joke that Saran had just finished.

Saran's laughter faded out the moment she noticed that Kith was sitting at a table, staring at her. I was surprised to see Kith's expression hovering close to anger for some reason. Survan and Canth were also at the table but didn't make a move. Midnight was lying on the mantle, watching intently. The room was empty otherwise.

Saran quickly rattled something off in Elven, disengaging her arm from mine and dropping her head in submission. Kith answered in a cold voice. Flinching and swallowing hard, Saran kept her eyes down and quickly headed behind the bar.

I'd watched the whole thing in mounting anger, not understanding anything said. I spun on Kith and snarled, "What's your problem?"

"You and Saran," she answered flatly.

"What'd we do? If you're mad at one of us, tell us why so we can avoid getting in trouble again." Her jaw tensed, but she didn't say anything. Seething, I shouted, "WHAT'D WE DO?!" Kith's anger made no sense, and that was driving me crazy.

Kith continued to stare at me, emotions flickering across her face too fast to identify. Without a word, she stood and headed out the door, slamming it behind her.

I nearly followed her, determined to hash out the problem immediately, whatever the problem actually was.

Drop it, Thian, Flick's suggestion stopped me before I moved to pursue Kith.

"WHY?" I roared, tired of all the dancing around.

Because she loves you. "Because she loves you," Flick and Survan's answers overlapped. Canth just nodded.

THAT stopped me in my tracks. "Loves me?" I finally choked out in something that probably sounded suspiciously close to a squeak.

Canth propped her head in one hand and calmly said, "Yes, she loves you."

HOW? No, WHY?

"Kith's been terribly lonely for most of her life," said Survan, reading my expression with uncanny accuracy. "Growing up with Carith she was fine, but once it became obvious that she was becoming an archer and warrior, she drifted away from most of her friends. In loneliness she fled her home in a quest to find the Stormbow, which had been lost centuries earlier. She found it and several adventurer friends along the way. They've all eventually died or moved on by now. Once I became old enough to take over my brother's trade route, she joined me. We've been traveling for YEARS now, Thian. She has family, but no friends." He sighed and continued, "Humans are intimidated by an elf, for the most part. Elven men are intimidated by a female elven fighter, especially one as good as she is. Only in an adventuring band can she find friends, but they die so easily. In a merchant caravan life expectancy is at least much higher. But then we get back to having few friends." He paused, studying my shocked reaction to the entire conversation before going on. "Humans are always wary of befriending elves. Vice versa applies, I suppose. Elves can live centuries, easily. Humans are lucky to make it much beyond fifty years. You are already one hundred, Thian." We both ignored Canth's gasp. "And you can potentially outlive ANY elf," Survan continued. "Therefore, you're someone who is not intimidated by an elf. You've also always treated her as an equal, something most human men do not do with women."

"Men and women are finally being treated as equals in my homeland," I muttered, my mind fixated on the revelations. "Besides, female fighters demand respect or else they'll stick a dagger in you when you're not expecting it."

He nodded and continued, "We've watched how you treat everyone, Thian. You don't prejudge. You give freely of your friendship. You teach and learn what you can. She's also told me that you remind her of a human ranger she knew years ago. His strength and gentleness were qualities she admired, but your sense of humor brings you further in her estimation."

I stared at the tabletop. Over the months I'd been traveling with them, Survan had never steered me wrong before, so I had no reason to not believe what he was saying. Also during that time, Kith and I had grown close as friends. What if there was more there? "Her reaction to Saran was jealousy?" I asked eventually.

"For two reasons," Survan agreed. "Saran's half-elven, so Kith was worried that she would be more to your liking. Secondly, Kith has always been convinced that she doesn't look as . . ." he searched for a word before finishing with, "enticing to men as many women do."

I snorted in amusement. "You must know that by and large elves look better than humans, if you're asking about physical beauty. That's one of the reasons I fell for Carith so quickly."

Survan nodded, not surprised. Canth's eyebrows were lost in her hairline. Survan said, "I know, but you need to convince her, not me."

"Secondly," I said, ignoring Survan's interruption, "I don't care if someone's elf, dwarf, halfling, drow, or ogre. As long as their heart's in the right place, I don't care about the race when choosing friends. I'll admit that I'm more likely to allow myself to fall in love with an elf for the simple reason that elves live longer, but when picking friends, it DOES NOT MATTER."

"The heart rarely listens to the mind," commented Canth in amusement.

I snorted. "I've had lots of practice."

"What does your heart say about her?" pressed Canth.

I frowned. "I don't know."

"Why not?"

I thought about it for a moment before answering, "I never allowed myself to think about it before, I guess. She's my employer. You don't get involved with your employer if you want to stay happy at your job."

"Are you happy at your job?" asked Canth, staring hard into my eyes.

I nodded immediately. "Very. Given enough time, I could do just about anything, I suppose, but I'm HAPPY where I am, doing what I am."

"Then TELL HER THAT," Survan stressed. "She's afraid to love you, worried that you'll leave when your six months is up. Also, don't worry about her being your employer. She isn't. Officially, I am," he smiled.

"You know what I mean," I groused. "If you're in a relationship with someone that you work with and it sours, then the working relationship can become a problem."

"Then quit," Survan shrugged. "Your skills would mean that you'd be welcomed into any city guard or merchant band."

"You're suggesting I quit?" I ask him in surprise.

"NO," he answered in exasperation. "I'm suggesting you decide if you want a relationship with Kith. As the bards say, 'The joys are endless if the love is deep enough to survive the storms.' Find out if there's any there, Thian, then decide how deep it is."

Saran found me two hours later.

I was sitting on one of the piers jutting out into Waterdeep's harbor. The gentle sound created by the small waves lapping against the pier pilings had allowed me to think.

"Sparrow for your thoughts," Saran quietly said from behind me.

I chuckled without turning. "They worth that much?" I asked sardonically.

She dropped down beside me, crossing her legs and facing straight out to sea just like I was. "Could be," she answered.

"How come I keep screwing up?" I eventually asked in resignation.

Her head tilted toward me slightly. "Why do you think you keep screwing up as you so eloquently put it?"

"First I damn near fall in love with Carith, even though it wouldn't have been fair to either of us if I had. Then I get here to Waterdeep, and what's the first thing I do? I start flirting with you. Don't get me wrong, that in itself isn't a mistake. What WAS a mistake was flirting with you even though I had someone right there in front of me that not only wanted me to flirt with her, but who my heart had already fallen for." Even as I said it, I was surprised to find it the truth. My heart HAD fallen for Kith.

"I'm still waiting for the part where you screwed up," Saran said into my silence.

"I was blind as a bat," I respond.

"How?"

"How?! How could I have NOT seen Kith's reaction? How could I have ignored my own emotions?"

"You are arrogant, aren't you?" Saran asked in amusement.

My head snapped over to stare at her incredulously. "Excuse me?"

"Arrogant," she repeated. "You're assuming that you know Kith well enough to read her reactions? You've known her for all of . . . four months now?" She continued at my nod, "You already can read her well enough to know when she's hiding something from you specifically? Arrogant," she said again with a slight smile.

I frowned at that, moving my gaze back to the sea. "Okay, if she was trying to hide it from me, that does make sense."

"Survan told you she was. As for your inability to see your own reaction: you've said that you've had practice ignoring your heart. Why should this be any different?"

I looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "You were eavesdropping, you little sneak."

She smiled brightly. "Guilty as charged," she agreed without a trace of regret. Her gaze sobered, and she frowned at me slightly. "One hundred years old?"

Here it goes again. "Yes. Ninety-eight, actually. I'm from another world, brought here against my will by a teleport. My race calls themselves Immortal. There're rumors of Immortals living for five thousand years, so one hundred is actually quite young."

"So says an apparent human," Saran chuckled.

I shrugged.

We stared at the busy port in companionable silence for a few minutes before Saran broke the silence. "So have you decided anything?"

"I don't know," I whispered, hedging around the real answer. "How would the clan react to her if we were together, or even married?"

I could see the shrug out of the corner of my eye. "This generation of Stormbows are all away from their homeland. Very few have children. As an elven noble clan, Stormbow will probably cease to exist within a couple centuries, so what her family thinks is pretty irrelevant. Besides, few of them go home anymore. The only ones that matter are the ones you've met."

"I already know nearly a half dozen Stormbows in various cities. Those I've met like me as far as I know."

"Yep," she agreed. "Though Carith DID fall in love with you. Give her at least a year before you see her again. She'll forgive you by then."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You're a Stormbow, aren't you?"

She nodded. "Canth is my mother. She fell in love with a human guard of Waterdeep when she was a guard for her brother's merchant band. She stayed here when the caravan moved on. With the family's help, they opened 'Storming Knights', and so the chain of inns started. Uncle Survan has since taken over the merchant responsibilities."

"What happened to your father?" I asked in curiosity.

"He died of old age fifteen years ago," she answered with a faraway stare.

"I'm sorry," I responded quietly. "I didn't mean to bring up painful memories."

She smiled slightly. "They aren't painful. He and my mother loved each other and me." Shaking off the memories, she added, "To answer the last

part of your earlier question: marriage to Kith isn't necessary in this day and age."

I shrugged. Call it what you want, being together indefinitely is close enough to marriage.

Now just to decide what to do.

I got back to "Storming Knights" after dark that evening. I stepped through the door and looked around the busy floor, looking for a few familiar faces. Saran smiled at me on her way past with a full tray. Survan nodded to me and then tilted his head over toward the hearth.

That's where I did find Kith at a table by herself, absently stroking Midnight's fur, a full wineglass sitting in front of her. Her gaze never left the flickering flames even after I took a seat. "I want to be left alone."

"Too bad," I answered simply.

She sighed. "What do you want, Thian?"

"To talk, for starters. We'll see where it goes from there."

She finally did turn her gaze over to me, and I held her blue eyed gaze steadily. "Okay, so talk," she finally relented.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked directly.

She grunted and turned back to the fire. "Tell you what? That I was falling in love with you?"

"Yes."

"Because it won't work out," she said in a resigned sigh.

"Why not?"

She turned to stare at me again. Saran came by and placed a flagon in front of me. I absently thanked her, but it'd distracted Kith from the conversation.

"What happened to your clasp?" she asked.

"I'm getting it buffed up all nice and shiny. Now don't change the subject."

"What subject is that?" she asked in all innocence.

"Why you think we can't fall in love with each other," I answered patiently.

"Because it just won't work!" she exploded in sudden anger.

"Why not?" I calmly asked again.

"You're human, you'll find someone else, one of us will get killed. Take your pick."

"I'm not human," I remind her. Her lip twisted into a grimace, but she nodded in recognition of that fact. Having won that point, I continued, "As for the second item, I don't go looking for someone else when I'm in a relationship."

She made a rude noise of disbelief. "You don't have to go looking, Thian. They find you. How could you pick someone like me when someone like Saran is chasing after you?"

"You're actually that self-conscious," I marveled, realizing the truth of it even as I said so out loud. Shaking it off, I leaned forward and spoke intently. "Let me tell you something about this woman sitting in front of me. She is physically beautiful from the glossy, jet black hair, to unusual blue eyes, to dusky skin, to lithe grace. Even more important than that, though, is her spirit. She stands by her friends in the midst of battle, even leaving a position of protection just to chase after a comrade who may or may not even be in peril. Her sense of humor is sharp enough to slice through anything, even the depression of a close friend. She cares enough for her family to run away from their security to chase after a family weapon that may or may not even have still existed. She's the best friend that anyone can ask for." I leaned back and waved my hand as if presenting her. "What isn't there to love?"

Her eyes were wide, staring at me. "You . . . Me . . . I . . ."

"Try a coherent sentence, Kith. Elven will do if you can't handle Common," I teased with a slight grin.

Her eyes narrowed slightly before she said something in Elven. I'd caught, "You are a (something) human."

[What was that adjective?] I asked Flick, knowing his Elven skills were far in excess of mine.

Infuriating, he answered in amusement.

"Thank you," I smiled at Kith.

Her eyes narrowed further. "It wasn't a compliment."

I nodded, taking a sip of my drink. "I know. I just don't accept insults from friends when I don't think they mean them."

She grunted in amusement. "Oh, I meant it. You are infuriating."

"Okay, and that's supposed to be insulting somehow?"

She glared at me for a moment before it melted into a slight smile. "You're impossible."

"I aim to please," I fired back with a smile.

Her smile widened for a moment before she looked back over at the fire. Taking a deep sigh, she asked, "Okay, now what do we do?"

I pretended to think on it, leaning back in my chair and running a thumb along my jaw. "We could sit here, get drunk, and get to know each other better," I suggested.

One eyebrow went up. "I can't keep up with your drinking. You know that."

I grinned roguishly. "Well, then I'll get you drunk and take advantage of a beautiful elven maiden."

The other eyebrow came up. "Where, pray tell, will you find this beautiful elven maiden to take advantage of?"

I sighed. Back to that? "There's one at this table," I said. "Whether you believe me or not, I do find you to be beautiful, Kith."

She smiled and placed one slender hand on my wrist. "I was teasing, Thian."

Smiling in relief, I pulled her hand up to my mouth, dropping a kiss into her palm.

With a mischievous glint in her eye, she leaned over and whispered into my ear, "Why don't we skip the getting me drunk part and just go straight to the taking advantage of me part?"

I pulled back slightly and looked at her with a small smile. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

"Why should I?" she asked with a grin.

Hmm, good point.

As I was mulling this over, she stood up and walked over toward the stairs leading up to the rooms. Three steps up, she stopped with one leg a step higher than the other. Looking back over her shoulder, she stared at me with a seductive smile and pointed a finger at me. When she motioned for me to come along, tilting her head forward so she was looking through the hair falling over her forehead and the smile widening, three wolf whistles sounded around the room.

Startled out of our semi-trance, Kith whirled to look around the room, flushing scarlet. Taking a breath to bring my heart rate under control, I looked around as well. Survan and Saran were among those who wore huge grins. Canth was one of those who'd just whistled.

"Get going!" Canth called to both of us in Elven, waving an arm in a dismissive gesture.

That was the best idea I'd heard all day. Jumping to my feet, I charged at Kith who was still standing on the stairs. Seeing me coming, she darted up the stairs ahead of me, giggling all the way. I caught up with her at the head of the stairs as she turned the corner to the rooms. Scooping her up on my way past, I carried her into my room, kicking the door closed behind us on the cheers and laughter below.

I came stumbling back downstairs the next morning and fell into a stool by the bar.

"Good morn," greeted Canth in amusement. "Sleep well?"

I pried open one of my eyes and grinned at her. "Oh, was that the point of going to bed? I must remember that."

She burst into giggles, but quickly slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle herself. Composing herself eventually, she asked, "How about some dawnfry?"

Yawning, I nodded. "That's the second best suggestion I've heard all morning."

"Second?" she queried.

My wide grin and waggling eyebrows gave her the answer.

She sighed in exasperation and rolled her eyes. "Men!"

I laughed, and so did Saran who was just walking in from the back room, tying her apron on.

"Good morning, Mother, Thian," she greeted.

I was halfway through my breakfast when Kith called from the balcony, "There you are."

I turned and smiled up at her as she came down the stairs. "I thought you were asleep. Sorry."

"I was," she nodded, her charmingly tousled hair falling over her eyes, "but the bed became strangely cold. That woke me."

"By Selune, I thought HE was sappy," groaned Canth.

Kith and I grinned. Saran giggled from where she was cleaning the tables in preparation for a new day of business.

Kith turned toward Saran and called, "Saran, I owe you an apology. My jealousy got the better of me when I saw the two of you come in yesterday. Forgive me?" she asked.

Saran just looked at her and smiled. "One condition. You let me pry him away from you tomorrow for more shopping and sightseeing."

Kith turned to me and raised her eyebrows in thought. "I suppose I can let him out of my sight for a few hours."

"Hey, don't I get a say in this?" I protested.

"No," all three women chorused, followed by two laughs and a giggle.

Two months later I entered Silverymoon as a guard to Stormbow's Merchant Caravan. I hoped that very few would recognize me. Those who knew I was Immortal probably would, but everyone else would just see me as another nameless sell-sword. Between the mustache, beard, amethyst clasp (which I'd ended up buying from Banner), emerald earring, and purple cloak, I figured my disguise was as good as it was going to get short of magical illusions.

The guards didn't bat an eye at us, and Survan, Kith, and I went off to our respective errands. Survan went to the market to sell the few general wares we'd brought, Kith went to buy new provisions, and I hand carried three letters.

I headed straight toward the castle, stopping at the first guard station and politely asking for an audience with Lady Alustriel, identifying myself simply as a representative of the Stormbow Merchants.

The guard nodded and escorted me to the audience hall. I stood quietly while he announced me. Stepping into the room, I found Alustriel leaning over her table, writing something. Given a moment to study her, I did so, noting that she'd hardly aged at all in the intervening six months. Without looking up, she said, "Welcome back, Survan. How is the merchant business this season?"

"Is that any way to greet an old friend, Ali?" I asked in a teasing tone.

Her head shot up and took in my appearance. Her face lit up. "Ted!" She stood and walked over to me, wrapping me into a hug which I warmly returned. "How have you been? It has been a while since I have heard word of you."

"I've been well. You?"

She rolled her eyes. "The usual headaches of running a city. You are still with Kith and Survan?" She waved me to a chair by the fireplace and took one for herself.

"I am. Though it's closer to a four way partnership than anything, now."

One eyebrow went up. "Four way? Dare I ask?"

"Survan will marry Andras, a cleric of Waukeen later this year. She's joined us on the road."

She nodded, accepting that news. "And you?" she queried with a twinkle in her eye.

Deliberately misunderstanding her, I said, "No, I'm not engaged to be married to any clerics of the patron god of merchants."

She smacked my shoulder playfully. "You know what I mean," she chided.

I smiled and answered, "Kith and I exchanged vows last month."

Her smile lit up the room. "Good for the two of you."

I tilted my head a fraction and asked, "And you?"

She blushed. "No, I have not married, Ted."

I quietly studied her for a moment before adding, "Despite your hopes."

Her lip twitched, but she didn't say anything.

"He will eventually return to you," I predicted quietly.

She sighed but didn't comment.

"To business, then," I said, reaching into a pocket to retrieve two letters. "Malchor Harpell and Khelben Arunsun send you greetings and these letters." I handed them over, and she broke the seals, reading them quickly. Standing, she walked over to her desk and pulled a small Kings and Queens board from under a stack of paper. Comparing something in one of the letters I'd given her with the board, she delicately moved a black jouster and then studied the board again.

"You're playing Kings and Queens by courier?" I asked incredulously. That HAD to take forever.

She looked up at me and smiled mischievously before returning her attention to the board. "What more important communication is to be done than a friendly game between two mages such as Khelben and I?"

I laughed. "If you'd like, I can play you a game this evening."

She looked up from the board again. "You play?"

I nodded. "Certainly. Survan and I have to do SOMETHING when our significant others are shopping, after all." She laughed, and I added, "After you beat me, I can teach you the game of Chess that I learned in my world."

She continued to smile, but said, "I fear I do not have that much time to spare this even. Perhaps next time you are in town." She looked down at her board and moved a white castle. Leaning over the letter she'd been working on when I entered, she jotted down one last item and then rolled it. Muttering a few words over it to magically seal the letter, she handed it and another similar letter to me. "Please deliver these as indicated."

Taking them in hand, I stood and bowed before heading toward the door.

"Come by for evening meal with your troupe. It has been far too long since I shared a casual meal with friends. Besides, I must meet this Andras and discuss your assignment, Harper."

I smiled. "Until this even, then, Lady."

It was a ten minute walk, but it had seemed to pass by in the blink of an eye.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the door and entered "Storm Tales". Looking around, no one among the customers recognized me. Carith and Sherith were both working.

Trying to remain inconspicuous, I walked to the bar and took a seat, placing the letter of family news and business down in front of me. Carith was tending the bar this evening, but she was too busy to notice me immediately.

When she finally did break free long enough to turn to me, she immediately smiled at me. She picked up the letter and placed it under the counter, apparently to read later. "How fares my kin, Ted?" she asked calmly.

A smile tried to force its way onto my face. She didn't know. "We are well," I answered softly.

THAT answer stopped her in her tracks. Peering at me closely, her face shifted from confusion to growing comprehension. "We?" she asked significantly.

At my slight smile, she squealed in delight, dashing around the end of the bar to come barreling into me as I stood to receive her hug.

"You'd better have a good reason for hugging my husband like that, little sister," called Kith in amusement from where she was just entering the room.

Refusing to release me, she turned to Kith and said, "You didn't."

Kith smiled, pointed to my emerald earring, then to her own matching diamond one.

"Oh!" Carith huffed at Kith and smacked her in the arm with the dishrag in her hand. "Leave it to you to take the best looking guy around," she moaned. Theatrics over with, she smiled and enveloped her sister into a warm hug.

When they parted, I scooped Carith's hands into mine and quietly asked, "You're not angry at me for leaving you like I did, are you?"

She shook her head. "I understand why you did what you did, Thi." She smiled suddenly and added, "At least if I couldn't have you, my sister can." She shook a finger in my face and added, "Just so you come back and visit." She smiled suddenly. "Now that you're my brother-in-law, you'll have to visit more often!"

"Yes, ma'am," I responded humbly.

Laughing at my meek act, Carith waved at a side table, promising midday meal. Kith and I seated ourselves, content to quietly watch the world go by for a time.

One sight caught my eye during our meal. As we were talking and laughing, I noticed Chavim come in the door and quietly take what used to be my regular table. Sherith eventually noticed him and threw him a coy smile. Scooping up a plate of food and a flagon, she deposited them in front of

Chavim before leaning in for a deep kiss.

I smiled at the cute little domestic scene, finally tearing my gaze away as Survan came walking in, arm in arm with Andras. Spotting Kith and myself, they made their way over and joined us.

"How'd the shopping go, Kith?" asked Survan.

"Well as can be," she answered with a sigh after a sip from her wineglass. "Trail rations are a sparrow more expensive than I recall."

Survan sighed. "Ain't inflation great," I commented, to which Andras smiled.

Survan smiled at his soon to be wife before turning to me. "And you? How did your meeting with Lady Alustriel go?"

I nodded. "Good. I've letters to take back to Harpell and Arunsun. Also . . ." I trailed off with a grin.

Kith smacked my shoulder. "Don't make us wait for it."

I pouted for a moment until Kith mock growled at me. Smiling, I finished, "She's invited the four of us to even meal with her."

"What's the occasion?" asked Andras with a frown.

I shook my head. "No occasion. She's a friend to the three of us, and she wants to meet you."

Survan and I laughed as she went into minor hysterics, claiming she didn't have anything at ALL to wear, and how should she act, and . . .

Immortal Realms Time of Troubles

Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun stared at the game board for long minutes before he moved his King forward. Making a note of his move, he sealed the scroll up with a whispered command word.

Instead of handing me the parchment, though, he frowned back down at the board and slowly shook his head.

"Is she beating you?" I asked in amusement.

The powerful mage looked up from the board and turned his piercing stare onto me. One thick eyebrow rose as he contemplated his answer. Finally, a chagrined smile appeared. "Yes, she is," he admitted, returning his attention to the board before heaving a tired sigh and handing me the scroll.

I tucked it away into the pack I had over my shoulder. "How long have you two been doing this, anyway?"

He waved one hand dismissively as he seated himself behind his huge desk. "Since well before you were born, Harper."

I smiled to myself. That was not likely, seeing as how I was a century old.

"This particular game is about twenty years old, I believe," he went on, oblivious to my inner amusement. He leaned forward and steepled his fingers. "To business. I have an assignment for you. Two young folk were sent here from Shadowdale by Storm Silverhand. They are to be escorted to Silverymoon and Ali."

"They're under Harper protection?" I asked in mounting curiosity. I knew the name of Storm Silverhand. She was actually Lady Alustriel's sister, currently a bard in Shadowdale, Knight of Myth Drannor, and one of the unofficial leaders of the Harpers.

Blackstaff nodded. "They are. The young lady has made some powerful enemies and wants only to live in peace. They are on their way to Ali for her council."

"We don't typically take passengers in our caravan," I said, slightly concerned. In point of fact, we NEVER had anyone with us who did not act as a guard.

"I understand. He is a mage, and she has a few special skills herself. You need not worry for them during a fight."

I was still frowning. Explaining this to Survan, Kith, and Andras was going to be quite a trick. However, if they could stand as guards and we didn't have to pay them . . . That was an angle I could use, if they agreed to it.

I grudgingly nodded to Blackstaff. "Very well. I will have to clear it with everyone else, of course, but if my troupe doesn't object, they can come with us."

Blackstaff waved one hand in some intricate gesture and then leaned back in his chair. Apparently talking to the ceiling, he said, "Leolin, please escort Narm and Shandrill to my office."

"Aye, Master," a young male voice answered.

"You're presuming I can convince my family to take them with us," I said mildly once the mage turned his attention to me.

"I hold faith in your persuasive abilities, Harper Thian," he answered with a hint of a smile.

While I was still shaking my head in amusement, a peculiar buzzing sound filled my ears. It was a feeling I hadn't had in close to five years. The last time had occurred in New York City, just before a freak accident teleported me to this world. I had not stumbled upon any Immortals in Faerun in all the time I'd been here and had come to the conclusion that I was the only one of my race anywhere nearby. Perhaps even the only one on the planet.

A light tapping on the door preceded the entrance of two apparent humans. The apprentice who had let them in closed the door softly behind them once they'd both crossed the threshold. The newly arrived man was in his mid-twenties, of medium height and build without any distinguishing features. His robe and multiple pouches hanging from his belt marked him as a mage. The lady he escorted was in her early twenties, slightly shorter than he, and wearing traveling clothing without any real clue as to her profession. She was also visibly pregnant, four of five months along at a guess. Neither had any blade bigger than a dagger visible.

Arunsun was making introductions. "Narm and Shandrill, this is Thian, a man-at-arms in the merchant band that will take you to Silverymoon. Thian, I present to you the conjurer Narm and his lady Shandrill."

gave each a sketchy half-bow. "Mage, lady," I greeted them politely, not taking my eyes off of him. She was pregnant, so she COULDN'T be immortal. Therefore, he was. Until I found out his intentions, I couldn't afford to run the risk of turning my back on him.

Narm nodded politely back to me. Shandril flicked her eyes over my attire before they came to rest on my belt buckle. To those who recognized it, the crescent moon made of sapphires marked me as a Harper agent.

She recognized it. "You are a Harper, then?" she asked softly.

I nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

"And we are to travel with you and your troupe?"

Again, I nodded. "We don't usually take anyone with us except guards. If you're willing to stand watches, that would greatly ease matters."

"Certainly," Narm agreed immediately.

I turned back to Shandril and glanced to her distended stomach for a moment before bringing my eyes up to her face again. "I'm afraid we have little in the way of comforts for you. You can ride in the wagon, but I'm afraid it's not padded, nor is there space for you to lie down." I turned to Blackstaff, still keeping Narm within my line of sight. "We could get a second wagon, but you can imagine Survan's reaction to that."

Shandril raised one hand to stop me. "Fear not about me, Harper. I can yet ride a horse."

I frowned at her slightly. "I can't guarantee your safety. There is at least an even chance that we will be attacked by a goblin or orcen raiding party before we reach Silverymoon."

"Do not fear for me," she repeated steadily.

I sighed and turned to her husband. "I don't think you two understand –"

Blackstaff cut me off. "She is more than capable in a battle, Thian. I vouch for her in that regard if it eases your mind."

"And I will see to her comfort, Harper," Narm put in.

I nodded in acceptance. I still didn't like it, but I was being overridden. Fine, then. "Narm, may I speak with you privately on another matter?" I asked.

"If you wish," he answered with a slight frown, "but I have no secrets from Shandril. Speak."

"Very well," I said, hooking my right thumb in my belt in easy reach of the pommel of my sword, and staring at him directly. "How do I know you won't Challenge me? Fairly or not?"

Narm cocked his head in confusion, and his hand drifted into his robes. Shandril's eyes narrowed and so did Blackstaff's. "Challenge you?" Narm asked cautiously.

Glancing at Blackstaff and Shandril, I slightly altered what I had initially planned on saying. "I felt one of my own kind approach just before you entered the room." I tilted my head at Shandril slightly. "She's pregnant, so it can't be her."

Shandril and Narm were both frowning at me in confusion. "What are you saying?" Narm finally asked.

Blackstaff held up a hand. "I believe I understand the problem. Thian, I know a little of your history, but not all of the particulars. Answer me this, please: you are saying that your people can sense each other?"

"Yes," I answered, not knowing where the archmage was going with the explanation.

He turned to Shandril. "Thian originally hails from . . . somewhere else," he finished tactfully. "His people have an innate magic to them. I find myself wondering if he is sensing the energy you have within you."

Narm and Shandril relaxed slightly. I grew more confused. "What?" Magic within her? What on Earth (or Toril) could that mean?

Still looking at Shandril, Blackstaff said to me, "Shandril has a peculiar kind of magic. I believe that is what you are sensing."

"Peculiar magic?" I asked, looking back and forth between them.

Sighing in resignation, Shandril held up her right hand. A ball of flame abruptly appeared, hovering just above her hand. She tossed it upward gently, and it rose and fell into her other hand, where it vanished.

I stared at her in slack-jawed amazement. "I . . . What was that?" I asked dumbly. When the flame had appeared and then when it disappeared again, her Buzz had done something strange. It still felt like a Buzz, but it felt . . . strange.

She shrugged easily. "Merely a little magic."

She's an incantrix, Flick whispered in awe.

[A what?] I asked my intelligent dagger.

Incantrix. She can absorb spells and then release the rawenergy in what's called "spellfire".

"Blast, I was hoping you would not know that, Flick," Blackstaff mumbled.

I jerked my head over to the archmage. Narm cocked his head. "What?"

Blackstaff waved at me vaguely. "Flick knows what spellfire is."

I continued to stare at Blackstaff in amazement. Narm glanced at me before turning to our host again. "I thought you said his name was Thian."

"I was not speaking of Thian. It was Flick, his dagger."

My eyes narrowed slightly. "How did you hear that?" I also wished he would stop throwing all my secrets out onto the table, but what was I going to do to an archmage?

Arunsun smiled at me softly. "I know Flick. Within the walls of my Tower, I could hear your conversation." Turning to Narm and Shandril, he explained, "His dagger is sentient and speaks telepathically. I was hoping that Flick did not recognize the spellfire for what it was."

As they were absorbing the facts about Flick, I was thinking about her. "So it was this 'spellfire' that I sensed?" I asked the room at large.

"Apparently," Blackstaff agreed.

"One thing I fear that I do not understand," Narm began.

ONE thing? Flick muttered.

Oblivious, Narm continued, "You thought that I was one of your kind. You are not human then?"

"Not really," I answered calmly now that things had become more clear. "I came to Faerun against my will from either another world or another plane. I've never been sure which."

He nodded, accepting that answer. "And you were worried that I would challenge you?"

I winced. "When two of my kind meet, the result is often . . . violent. I was worried for my safety. Now that I know what it was that I really sensed, I pray that you will accept my apology for the misunderstanding."

Narm nodded, but Shandril was still thinking. "Because I am with child, I could not be one of your kind?"

Gods, I hoped I was not going to have to dump the whole Immortality spiel on them. "No, we are not capable of having children. And before you ask, we do not know where we come from."

"Mayhaps Mystra or one of the other gods created you?" offered Narm.

"Perhaps," I allowed, dropping the topic.

After a few more seconds of silence, Blackstaff clapped his hands and asked, "Is all settled, then?"

Exchanging looks with Narm and Shandril, I turned and nodded to the archmage.

"If there is nothing else to discuss, I shall see you in six months, Thian?"

Nodding at the obvious dismissal, I bowed to Blackstaff and waved my two new charges out the door. Once outside, I started heading back toward the tavern at a casual pace. "Most of the rest of my group don't know that I'm a Harper," I told them. "I may have a difficult time explaining you to them." When neither of them commented on that, I continued. "Do you have mounts?"

"Aye, we have all the equipment we need, save food, for a journey all the way to Silverymoon," Narm answered.

"Don't worry about the food. Is there anything else we need to bring for you?" I asked as I glanced at Shandril's stomach again.

"Nay, the child is not due for another four months. We were told the journey should take two?"

"Thereabouts," I nodded. I was glad she was not due anytime soon. I had absolutely NO experience with pregnant women. I didn't fancy the thought of trying to survive a delivery, even though I probably would have little to do with it if the situation came about.

"As to convincing your troupe to accept us, we are willing to help out in whatever way we might during the journey. We can stand watches for instance. As long as I am not forced to use too many spell components, I do not even really expect to get paid," Narm offered.

I nodded and smiled appreciatively. That certainly helped.

Shandril added, "Nor I. And I can do the cooking and cleaning."

I chuckled. "Careful, or we may want you to join us. We don't have a decent cook among the four of us."

"Oh, 'tis not really all that hard," Shandril tried to downplay her part.

"Yes, it is," I gently corrected. "I do most of the cooking right now, and I know exactly what it takes. If you're a good cook, you'll definitely be welcome."

Blushing slightly in embarrassment, Shandril dropped her head but didn't pursue the discussion any further.

Arriving at the tavern, I indicated to Shandril and Narm to hang back for a minute while I spoke with my family. As I made my way to the table where Survan and Andras were sitting, I peripherally noticed Narm leading his wife to a small side table.

"Survan, Andras," I greeted my partners.

"Thian," Andras smiled back. "How went your meeting with Blackstaff?"

"Pretty well. I have a letter to take to Lady Alustriel. But that isn't the main item of note. He's asked us to escort two people to Silvermoon." I held my hand up to Survan's gathering frown. "I've met them. They have all the equipment they need and are willing to stand watches. He's a mage, as well, so he can help in the case of a raid. She has offered to cook and clean. And," I saved the best for last, "they don't really expect to get paid unless he uses spell components."

Andras perked up at that last one. "That would certainly help."

"Indeed," Survan agreed.

"What would help?" Kith asked, swinging into the remaining seat at the table.

"Two people Blackstaff wishes us to escort to Silvermoon. He is a mage, she will cook, they will both stand night watches, and they do not expect to get paid," Andras answered.

Kith frowned slightly. I knew exactly what she was thinking and so headed off the objection. "I know you're concerned about having fewer blades. So'm I, to some degree. But you and I both know that the Waterdeep to Silvermoon leg of our trip is typically the safest. Even when we're attacked, the raiding parties are smaller here than they are in the north. If you want to hire another guard, that's fine. But I don't think they'll be needed." I grinned and added, "Hell, the four of us alone are dangerous enough."

Kith thought about it for a few more seconds before grudgingly nodding. Giving her a quick peck on the cheek for accepting my opinion, I stood and stepped toward Narm and Shandril. I arrived at their table just as Saran arrived from the bar with their drinks. "Saran, these two will be joining us," I whispered to the half-elven waitress.

One tapered eyebrow rose in surprise, but she nodded and stepped over toward our table.

I waved a hand to Narm and Shandril in invitation. We made it back to the table just as Survan and Saran finished dragging another two chairs over for the newest guests. "Everyone, this is Narm, a mage, and his lady Shandril. Narm, Shandril, starting on the left is my wife, Kith Stormbow. She's our archer. Next to her is her cousin, Survan Stormbow. He's the main merchant of the group and also a mage. Next to him is his wife, Andras Silvertree, follower of Waukeen."

Narm smiled politely at the elves as he held a seat out for his lady.

Shandril was studying Andras and Kith discreetly as she sat.

"What is it?" Kith asked her with a smile. "Have we suddenly grown spots?"

Shandril blushed. "Forgive me. 'Tis not often that I meet female warriors."

"I am not a warrior," Andras corrected.

"But you are an adventurer," Shandril countered.

"Not so. Adventurers go running about, poking their noses into danger. We four follow our trade route and try to avoid it."

"Danger finds us easily enough," I commented with a slight grin at Andras.

She chuckled ruefully.

"You are a mage?" Survan asked Narm.

"I try," he answered with a slight grin.

"If battle does erupt around us, stay near the wagons. Cast spells if you feel the need, but do not fear for our safety. Especially Thian's," Kith added, throwing a smirk in my direction.

"Why should we not?" Shandril asked. "If needs be, I can heal him."

"You are a cleric then?" Andras asked.

"Nay." She frowned at the tabletop for a moment before going on, "'Tis difficult to explain."

Legend has it that spellfire can be used to heal as well as harm, Flick commented. That's probably what she means.

Hoping to head off my family's curiosity for the sake of Shandril's secret, I said to her, "As for why you don't need to be concerned for my safety: Blackstaff told you that my people have an innate magic. Part of that is that I will heal very quickly."

"How quickly?" Narm asked with a raised eyebrow.

I shrugged. "Depends on the wound. Moments for most."

Narm sat up straighter. "Truly? How is this accomplished?"

"He knows not, and we would appreciate you not telling others of this," Kith interrupted smoothly.

Narm got the message. "Very well, lady," he bowed to her slightly. "I apologize if I offended with my questions," he addressed to me.

"No harm done," I answered.

"Where are you staying?" Kith asked next.

"In Blackstaff Tower."

Survan stood and headed toward the bar. "I shall arrange for you to stay here for the night," he tossed over his shoulder.

"Pray, do not go to that trouble," Shandril objected to his retreating back.

Andras laid one hand upon her wrist. "'Tis no trouble. The Stormbow clan owns this inn. This way it shall be easier for us to all leave together on the morrow."

Andras's clear voice floated back from the front of the wagon. She was trying to teach Shandril an Elven hunting song, much to Survan's amusement. As always, Kith was riding point. Narm and I had been relegated to the rearguard, and Survan was riding alongside the wagon. That left Andras and Shandril in the wagon.

They were loving every minute of it.

Their friendship developed shortly after we had left Waterdeep, now two months behind us. Within three weeks, Shandril's pregnancy made it uncomfortable for her to ride her horse all day long. Though she still felt fine, it was becoming clear to her that she couldn't keep up her previous level of activity, so she and Survan traded positions.

Ever since, the two women had been chatting incessantly. The weather, the different gods, the latest fashions in women's adventure wear, the topic made little difference.

Halfway through Andras's third patient repetition, Kith called from the front, "Silvermoon's walls are in sight, all. We are almost there."

I heard Narm sigh from beside me. "Thank Mystra," he muttered.

"Tired of our company?" I asked him with a slight smile.

He shook his head immediately. "Nay, 'tis not that. I shall just feel safer within a city's walls."

I shrugged in answer. "Perhaps you're also interested in a good night's sleep. And privacy with your bride," I commented with a straight face.

He chuckled, not looking the least bit embarrassed. "There is that, as well," he agreed. "No slight upon thee or thy family, but I would think that Lady Alustriel of the Harpers can protect us better than four traveling merchants."

"No offense taken," I said dryly. "It's true that she can protect you better with magic, but being away from everyone on the open road seemed to be protection enough for the past two months," I pointed out. Indeed, other than a few folks traveling in the other direction upon the trail we were following, we hadn't seen anyone or anything dangerous for sixty gloriously calm days.

"Aye," he agreed, "but with our child on the way, would it not be better for us to be within a city?"

"True," I granted. "She is due in two months?" I asked, changing the topic slightly as we approached a guard post along the city walls.

"Aye," he confirmed.

"Good luck to you both, then," I offered.

Kith had ridden ahead and announced us to the guards as Narm and I were talking. Once the wagon arrived at the gates, they waved us all on through with friendly salutes. I idly noticed that the watch leader was my old friend, Chavim. He did not recognize me, however. It had been years since Knight Thian had left Silvermoon, and my appearance was sufficiently different that he only saw me as another nameless man-at-arms.

Once inside the city, Kith led us to a stable where we all wearily climbed down from wagon and horse. Gathering the few items we had brought to hand deliver to Lady Alustriel, I gave Narm and Shandril time to collect their belongings and say goodbye to Andras, Survan, and Kith. Arranging to

meet the elves later at Storm Tales, I waved Narm and Shandril along with me toward the castle.

Going slowly in deference to Shandril's gravid state, we eventually made it to the guards at the castle gates.

"State your business," challenged the senior guard.

"Theodore of the Stormbow Merchants and two guests wishing an audience with Lady Alustriel," I answered calmly, coming to a halt and gazing at the guard steadily.

"Their names?" he asked me, glancing back and forth among the three of us.

"Lureene and Gorstag," Narm answered. I nearly looked at him questioningly but caught myself at the last second. After a moment of thought, giving false names made perfect sense. If these two had as many enemies as Blackstaff indicated, then using their real names may not be a good idea.

"A moment," the guard said, ducking inside.

Standing outside with the other stone-faced guards, Shandril looked around at the cheerful bustle of the thriving city. "You were born here, my lord?" she asked.

"Aye," Narm answered. "I was mere days old when my parents moved on, so I have no memories of this place, however."

"It's a nice city," I offered. "I hope you'll enjoy your stay."

"That is my hope so as well," Narm answered as the guard returned.

"The Lady Alustriel has granted ye an immediate audience," he said.

"Thank you," I answered, waving Narm and Shandril ahead.

The further into the castle we traveled, the more nervous they appeared to become. To combat this, I chatted idly with them, telling them of this landmark or that good restaurant in Silverymoon.

Alustriel's audience room door was open, so we stepped right in. When she heard us come in, she looked up from the papers strewn about her desk and graced us with a dazzling smile. "Ted!" she exclaimed, standing and moving toward me.

"Ali," I answered with a smile of my own. Giving her a quick hug in greeting, I turned her to the young couple I had escorted in. "Ali, may I present to you the mage Narm and his lady Shandril. Narm, Shandril, this is Lady Alustriel, ruler of Silverymoon." I turned back to her and said, "Blackstaff asked me to escort them here."

Narm and Shandril had stood in silent amazement as Ali and I talked. Finally, Narm asked, "Ted? I thought your name was Thian?"

"It is," I said, as Alustriel gestured all of us to seats. "Thian is the common name that I use in this world. Ted was my name from before I came to Faerun."

"You failed to tell us that you knew the Lady Alustriel," Shandril accused me.

"The topic never came up?" I offered.

Alustriel huffed out a breath in amusement. "Yes, this irrepressible warrior and I know each other. He was once a member of my Knights in Silver."

Narm looked at me in continuing astonishment. "The city guard?" I nodded. "Pray tell why did you leave their ranks to join a merchant band?" he asked next.

"I was 'killed' defending Alustriel," I answered wryly.

"They know of your people?" Alustriel asked.

"Enough."

Nodding at the information, Ali turned to the two. "Why was it that you came to me?"

"To speak it directly, we need protection," Narm stated. "The Sage Elminster and Bard Storm Silverhand both counseled we come to you for advice. We would be left alone, but Shan's spellfire will not permit that. And so we ask the Harpers for protection and advice."

"Well enough," Alustriel agreed. "I can protect you here for a time, but in truth I do not know why my teacher or my sister thought you needed to come to Silverymoon."

"We joined the Harpers before leaving Shadowdale. They told us to come," Narm answered, shrugging slightly.

"And here you stay. For a time, at least," Alustriel said, gesturing at Shandril's protruding stomach.

"Indeed," Shandril said, resting one hand over her child.

"For the moment, I shall give you a room. We can discuss your future plans in more depth later." She stood and headed toward the door. "Ted, stay

a moment. We have more to discuss," she told me as I stood to go.

I sat myself back down and waited patiently as she talked with a guard outside the door and then gestured to Shandrill and Narm. They stood and I quietly wished them well as they exited.

Once they had gone, Alustriel crossed back over to the seating area and settled herself down in a chair across from me. Before she had a chance to speak, I asked, "Has our mutual dark friend come to his senses yet?"

Her lip twisted into a sad little smile, and her eyes fell to the hands she had folded into her lap. She knew I was referring to her attraction to the drow elven ranger, Drizzt Do'Urden.

"Apparently not," I answered my own question, seeing her reaction. "He will. Eventually," I tried to comfort her.

"It is not that discussion that I wished to have with you, Ted, though Drizzt is still at the heart of it. What do you know of the dark elves?"

I shrugged. "Not much. Rumors say that they are unparalleled fighters, live deep underground, command magics that are unusual, and worship Lloth, Lady of Chaos."

She nodded. "There are known to be several drow cities. One of the nearest is Menzoberranzan, which is where Drizzt was born and lived the first decades of his life. Several events in the recent past have convinced me that the drow will shortly mount an army and attack Mithril Hall."

My heart dropped. "What possible reason could they have to do that?"

Ali shrugged. "With drow elves, anything is possible. Recall your own words. They worship the goddess of chaos. Perhaps they are attacking simply for the sake of attacking."

I grunted at the answer. "And the dwarves? What will they do?" While evacuation in the face of such an incredible threat made sense to me, this was their home. Besides, dwarves had a well deserved reputation of being stubborn.

"They are defending their homeland and have put out a call for allies. I plan on sending three hundred of my Knights."

Why was she telling me this? Oh, yes. I promised to be an ally to both Drizzt and Ali if they ever needed one. I wasn't quite expecting THIS level of fight, but a promise was a promise. "I will speak with Survan," I volunteered, "and tell him I won't be going with him on his next circuit."

"You will stay and fight with us?" she asked, sounding not the least bit surprised.

I smiled at her. "I promised both you and Drizzt my aid if you ever needed it. It sounds to me like you do."

Are you sure you want to do that? Flick asked.

[Hell, no, I don't WANT to do it.] Out loud, I continued, "I need to, Flick. I promised them help. If I back out now, what would that say about me?"

You have a well-developed sense of survival?

"I can't abandon them, Flick," I growled. "I owe the two of them entirely too much, especially Lady Alustriel. If you want me to, I can leave you here."

No, that's not it, he denied. *I'm just trying to make sure you don't get yourself killed.*

"It's hard to kill me, Flick," I reminded him.

"These are drow we are talking about," Ali reminded me. "Do NOT underestimate them."

I smiled grimly. "I'm immortal. They'd better not underestimate ME." Not that I wasn't scared out of my mind, of course. Then something that she had said earlier penetrated. "You're sending Knights?"

She nodded.

"Into Mithril Hall?" I asked. From what few rumors I'd heard about it, it was a typical dwarven community in that it was primarily underground.

"No. It is believed by all the commanders that the drow will send part of their force outside and attack the Hall from without. My Knights and several other groups will fight them out there."

That made sense. Fully armored humans would find tunnels built to dwarven height a little claustrophobic.

"I would much prefer to stay with them, then. Fighting underground is NOT my idea of a good time."

"Indeed," she said with a slight grin. "Enough of this talk of war. Tell me how you have been, Ted."

"You promised what?" Kith asked in a dangerously quiet voice.

I sighed. This was hardly the first time she'd asked the question in the past hour. "To go fight for Drizzt and Mithril Hall," I answered. Again.

"Why?"

"Because I owe him and Ali a great deal."

Survan had been watching the back and forth silently for the past few rounds. "Will you be well here by yourself until the army gathers?" he asked.

"Oh, my crazy husband will not be here alone," Kith disagreed in a lightning change of mood, still eyeing me.

"I won't?" I asked.

"He will not?" Andras asked.

Survan sighed and nodded, leaning back in his chair. "You mean to stay with him, then?"

I blinked in astonishment and turned to my wife.

She was nodding. "Of course."

"Why?" I asked her, echoing her question of me.

"Because you shall be staying here."

I frowned. That wasn't an answer.

"My place is by your side, Thi. If you are determined to fight for the dwarves, then I shall go with you."

Oh, hell. This was likely to become VERY bloody. I would recover from almost anything the drow threw at me, but my wife was very much mortal. I didn't want her to go.

Better not tell HER that, Flick warned.

[No kidding. I like all my body parts attached and in full working order, thank you.]

As he had done on more than one occasion, Survan read my mind. "I dare say your husband does not want you to do so, Cousin," he remarked to Kith conversationally.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

Glaring at Survan, I answered, "But I have the wisdom to not say so out loud." Turning to her, I continued, "I would see you safe, that's all."

Her glare softened. "And I, you. Would you not be safer with me there?"

"Probably," I conceded, "but you would be safer with Survan than with me."

"I care not," she returned, visibly getting mildly upset. "My place is with you."

I certainly appreciated the loyalty. "Thank you, then." I turned to Survan. "Can you spare the both of us on this circuit, then?"

He nodded. "I will need to hire a few more guards, but I understand your obligation, Thian. Pray make sure you both are here when we return six months hence."

Ninety-nine tankards of ale on the wall, ninety-nine tankards of ale. Take one down, pass it around, ninety-eight tankards of ale on the wall.

Flick's voice woke me out of a sound sleep. Unused to being awakened in such a way, it took me several seconds to orient myself.

Ninety-eight tankards of ale on the wall, ninety-eight tankards of ale. Take one down, pass it around, ninety-seven tankards of ale on the wall.

Silverymoon, Storm Tales, in bed with Kith. The brightness of the window announced it was early morning. Several days yet before the Knights in Silver marched to the defense of Mithril Hall. Survan and Andras had left two days previously.

Ninety-seven tankards of ale on the wall, ninety-seven tankards of ale. Take one down, pass it around, ninety-six tankards of ale on the wall.

[Flick, there'd better be a VERY good reason for this,] I mentally growled at the dagger.

He completely ignored me. *Ninety-six tankards of ale on the wall, ninety-six tankards of ale. Take one down, pass it around, ninety-five tankards of ale on the wall.*

[Shut up.]

Ninety-five tankards of ale on the wall, ninety-five tankards of ale.

"Shut up," I growled out loud, since mental communication didn't seem to be phasing him in the least.

Take one down, pass it around, ninety-four tankards of ale on the wall.

"What?" Kith asked me fuzzily.

Grumbling incoherently, I rolled out of bed.

Ninety-four tankards of ale on the wall, ninety-four tankards of ale.

Pulling Flick out of the sheath in my sword belt, I hurled him at the door to the room. His blade buried itself an inch into the already blade-scarred surface.

Take one down, pass it around, ninety-three tankards of ale on the wall.

THAT caused me concern. Every time I'd ever thrown Flick, he'd screamed. He didn't like flying, despite being a flight dagger. The fact that he didn't scream was worrying.

Ninety-three tankards of ale on the wall, ninety-three tankards of ale.

"Thian, what are you doing?" Kith asked, sitting up in bed and looking at me in concern.

Ignoring the still singing dagger, I answered her, "Flick. He's singing the most annoying song imaginable, and he won't shut up."

She frowned in sleepy confusion. "Why would he do that?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe I'll take him to Ali later and see if she can talk some sense into him."

"Fine. Come back to bed," she ordered dropping prone again and burrowing back under the covers.

"Back in a sec," I mumbled. Crossing the room, I pulled Flick from the door and stalked downstairs.

Carith was tidying up the main taproom in preparation for the coming day. She looked up at me as I came down the stairs. Her smile of greeting shifted to wide-eyed amusement. I couldn't really blame her. Hair sleep-tousled, wearing only what could charitably be called boxer shorts, and with a dagger clenched in one hand, I probably didn't appear completely normal. With that song running through my head, I probably didn't appear completely sane, either.

"Good day, Thi," she greeted pleasantly. "Sleep well?"

"Can you hear this?" I asked, waving Flick and trying to ignore the fate of the eighty-seventh tankard of ale.

"No . . ." she trailed off with a frown, studying me closely.

"Good." I walked over to the bar and dropped him behind the bottle of Elvish Moon Wine.

As I shuffled back up the steps, I heard her behind me muttering in Elven, "Humans will NEVER make sense."

Flick's lament over the demise of the eighty-second tankard of ale faded out halfway down the hall. Making it back to our room, I dropped back into bed, curled myself around my wife, and fell back to sleep.

Kith and I made it downstairs a couple hours later. The dawnfry crowd was in full swing, I noticed, as we walked down the stairs. The instant I got close enough, I heard Flick singing again. Fortunately, I didn't understand a single word he was saying, so it was relatively easy to block him out.

As we took our usual seat next to the fireplace, I finally guessed what kind of song Flick was singing, though I still didn't recognize the words.

Kith must have heard my snicker. "Pray tell me what you find to be so amusing?" she asked.

"Flick. He's singing what I think is a nursery rhyme," I guessed, based on the cadence, "though I don't know the language."

"Aye, what happened with him? You climbed out of bed this morning for what?"

"He woke me up with singing."

"You mentioned something regarding an annoying song?"

I started singing "99 tankards of ale" to her quietly. By the third verse, she was glaring at me. "Told you it was annoying," I said, dropping the song.

"Fair morn," Sherith greeted us as she dropped two plates of food onto the table. "Have you heard?"

"Heard what?" Kith asked the half-elf.

"Magic is not working. Every time someone tries to cast a spell, something goes wrong." She pointed to an empty table with a char mark in the middle. "A cleric of Tempus attempted to warm his breakfast a short time ago. His hands spat lightning instead and set fire to the plate. It gave us all a fright."

"Magic is mis-firing?" I asked, beginning to wonder if what was happening to Flick wasn't an isolated incident after all.

"Aye," Sherith agreed. "If you have any such items, I suggest you not use them for a time. The sages and clerics in town are telling everyone not to panic, that this is a temporary thing." She rolled her eyes. "As if there is anything we can do about it, in any event."

Flick finished his song and shifted to another one. I guessed it was a dwarven drinking song. He was starting to give me a headache.

"Thanks," I said to Sherith distractedly. Magic not working meant several things to Kith and myself immediately.

"The Stormbow," Kith said quietly with a panicked look in her eyes. The clan's longbow was definitely magical, seeing as how it created an arrow every time the string was drawn.

I nodded agreement. "That's one. Survan's spells and the bags of holding. Andras's spells. Flick. Most of our swords," I ticked off the list of magical items the group of us had. One final thought hit me with a feeling of dread. What did this mean to my Immortality? Drawing my knife from its sheath next to the one Flick normally occupied, I drew the blade across the back of my left arm, drawing blood but not too badly. I was relieved to watch it heal in seconds.

"At least one thing is still normal," Kith said, having watched the whole thing.

"Aye," I agreed in relief. Becoming mortal was something out of my nightmares. Magic failing was bad enough, but I didn't know if I could cope with losing my Immortality.

"I wonder how Midnight is doing," Kith pondered, referring to Survan's feline familiar.

I shrugged as I slipped the knife back into its sheath. "He's a normal cat, isn't he? If it's only magic that's going crazy, then he should be fine." I hoped.

Kith and I quietly ate our dawnfry. She was worried about her cousin. I was fighting a rising headache. Flick's singing wasn't helping matters any. He was singing in dwarven again. Something rousing and powerful. A call to war, maybe.

I finally stopped eating and just held my head in my hands. This headache was getting to monstrous proportions. What was wrong with me? Immortals don't get headaches without cause.

"Are you okay?" Kith asked in concern, laying one hand on my arm.

"Headache," I replied, keeping my eyes closed.

"Let us get you upstairs and in bed. If you do not feel better soon, I shall find a cleric." She stood and slowly pulled me up.

Once upright, she helped me toward the stairs. With every passing moment, the headache got just a little bit worse.

"No cleric," I mumbled. "Remember what's happening with magic."

"But you NEVER get sick, Thi," Kith said in concern. She was supporting part of my weight by this time.

"Is he okay?" Carith asked in Elven.

"No," I answered in a whisper. Any louder and I was afraid my head would explode. Is this what a migraine felt like? I was leaning on the rail and Kith harder with every step. What was wrong? This CAN'T be happening to me.

"We shall let you know," Kith answered her sister, struggling to keep me upright.

Fifteen seconds later we were behind the door to our room. When Kith kicked the door closed, I collapsed straight down, moaning. She knelt down next to me in a flash. "Come along. Let us get you into bed."

"Is that an offer?" I asked weakly with an attempt at a lecherous grin.

She grunted in amusement. "You can not be feeling too badly. Your sense of humor, warped as it is, is still intact." She pulled me up by brute force and steered me toward the bed before letting me fall to the mattress. Once I was down, she pulled my boots off and then undid my cloak clasp to continue getting me undressed.

And just as quick as that, my headache disappeared. Blinking in surprise, I slowly sat up. Not realizing that I was feeling fine again, Kith removed my cloak and started to pull my shirt off.

I waved her off. "It's gone."

"Your headache is gone? That quickly?" she asked in disbelief.

"Apparently," I said with a frown. The clasp caused me a headache? Had to be, since the headache disappeared the instant the clasp was removed.

"How?" she asked.

"Don't know," I answered slowly. "There are a couple spells in the clasp," I mentioned, picking through the logic as I spoke it out loud. "Maybe one of them caused the headache? Probably the protection from illusions since that is the only continually acting spell."

She shrugged. "It could be. You would have to ask a sage. I am just an archer."

"Yeah," I agreed absently. "But the mages and clerics are having an even worse day than we are, I'll bet."

"Most likely," she agreed in grim humor, seating herself on the bed next to me. She studied my face carefully for a few seconds before asking, "Are you sure that you are again feeling well?"

I nodded. "I feel fine, now." It took several minutes to become a problem the first time around, so . . .

I leaned over the side of the bed and pulled the cloak back up. "How about a quick experiment?" I asked, fastening it around my neck again. She opened her mouth to argue, but I raised a hand. "If and when it starts to affect me again, I'll take it off. Until then, this does not bode well for our other magical equipment."

She sighed and nodded in agreement, eyeing the Stormbow propped in a corner with concern. "I know. I find myself almost afraid to use it if magic is as unstable as it appears."

"It could be fine," I suggested.

"Or it could explode in my hands," she returned. "No telling which is the true prediction until it is far too late, and I certainly do not wish to tempt the fates by trying."

"I can't argue that," I agreed. My head was slowly starting to ache, so I pulled the clasp off again. As predicted, the headache instantly disappeared. I nodded and undid the clasp from the cloak. "That has to be it," I told Kith. Dropping the apparently dangerous clasp onto the table, I rooted around through my travel bag for the spare clasp.

Hooking the clasp to my robe, I noticed Kith was holding my other one. "Would you mind if I try it?" she asked.

I raised an eyebrow. "That thing effectively knocked me on my butt in ten minutes. No offense, but it's harder to knock me down than it is you."

"Yes," she agreed. "Your . . . Quickening, you called it?" At my nod, she continued. "Your Quickening heals you, but I find myself wondering if that is the cause of the problem. If someone who is mortal wears it, would the same thing happen?"

Interesting point. "Okay," I said slowly. "Try it if you want, but please be careful."

"As always," she assured me with an impish smile.

Like I believed that.

While she switched her clasp for the infinity one that had been causing the problems, I slipped my boots back on. While she carefully hooked the cloak about her neck, I stood there in tense watchfulness. No telling what would happen.

For thirty seconds, nothing did.

Then she giggled.

Starting slightly, I tried to relax. "What?" I asked her with a smile.

"You," she responded in Elven. "My handsome protector is standing over me, ready to protect me from . . . a cloak clasp," she finished after a dramatic pause.

I chuckled and answered her in the same language. "Ah, but it is the most mundane of objects than can be the most dangerous."

"Yes," she said dryly. "I shall remain on guard against my boots and especially from doors and water flagons."

"You're feeling all right?" I asked her in Common.

She nodded. "No ill effects. Mayhaps it WAS your Quickening interacting with the magic?"

I shrugged in ignorance. "No telling. Next time I have a moment to chat with a sage of magic, I'll be sure to ask."

"You do that," she agreed with a smile. "In the meantime," she said, standing, "let us go back downstairs. At the very least, we need to check in with Besnell to see if the Knights are still going to Mithril Hall," she said, referring to the ranking Knight who was going. Lady Alustriel had told us that he was in charge of the army, and that we would basically be under his command if we still wanted to join the fight.

Agreeing with Kith's suggestion, we walked arm in arm back down to the taproom. Carith smiled up at us. "Feeling better, Ted?" she asked in Elven.

"Aye," I agreed in the same language. "My clasp was causing me a headache, but it seems not to affect my beloved."

. . . *the fifth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me: five stolen rings, four falling birds, three drenched hens, two fertile doves, and a cartridge in a bare tree. On the sixth day of Christmas, my –*

I tried to interrupt him, [Flick, kindly shut up.]

. . . *four bawling curds, three hench-men, . . .*

I tuned him out again. "Flick is still singing," I informed my wife as we made our way out the door. "He's mangling a Christmas carol."

"Christmas?" she stumbled over the word.

"A midwinter holy day for the dominant religion in the area I lived in," I answered as we made it outside and headed toward the castle.

The remainder of the day wasn't terribly productive. We got to Besnell, but he was as confused by the situation as everyone else. He suggested coming back the next day to discover if the Knights were still going to Mithril Hall or if they were going to remain in Silverymoon.

I briefly considered trying to talk with Ali, but one look at the crowd of nervous citizens around the castle convinced me of the futility of that.

Instead, Kith and I spent the day helping out in Storm Tales. Considering the fact that I had NO experience at an inn, Carith put me in the kitchen, assisting the Storm Tale's regular cook. She (rightly) concluded I could do the least harm there.

Flick continued his monologue. I suffered through Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" and Edgar Allen Poe's "Nevermore" before I gave up and took him upstairs, out of my hearing.

Business was brisk, but everyone was subdued. Rumors abounded on all sorts of subjects. An army of trolls was on the march from the Trollmoors and was expected to arrive in three days. The gods had abandoned the goodly races because we hadn't fought the orc and goblin tribes enough. The gods had abandoned the goodly races because we had fought them too much. The gods were doing this to us for amusement. A terrible war was occurring among the gods and the lack of reliable magic was the result.

I had lived long enough to survive several mass hysteria situations. I was used to the kinds of rumors that started up in the wake of an event that nobody understood. I knew that the truth was the only reliable defense, but nobody had the truth (or at least any proof of THEIR truth) to provide.

Over the next few days the situation became clearer but no less concerning.

Messengers from the surrounding communities had arrived, proving that this problem wasn't limited to Silverymoon. It seemed that the gods had stopped responding to the prayers and spells of clerics for no discernible reason. Similarly, mages had stopped trying to cast spells altogether. After a few days of spectacular misfires, the surviving mages decided to leave well enough alone.

Rumors and speculation continued to fly, but everyone was growing immune to the fantastic tales, which was why neither Kith nor I reacted to the rumor of a flight of a hundred dragons spotted west of the city. It was simply one wild rumor among many.

I finally got in to see Ali on the fourth day. She expressed her concern over Flick but couldn't offer any kind of suggestion as to what I should do. When I mentioned the clasp, she frowned for some time before offering a theory.

She hypothesized that my Quickening was another manifestation of the energy that magic drew upon. Based on the basically electrical nature of this energy, she further assumed that the Quickening was primarily aligned with the Evocation school of magic. In addition to a light spell in the clasp, it also held a protection from illusions spell. Illusion school spells (of which protection from illusions was one) were not diametrically opposed to Evocations, but were nearly so. She ventured the theory that this time of mixed up magic altered either the clasp or my own Quickening enough so that they were in conflict with one another. Hence the headache.

That all sounded plausible enough to me, but it delved much further into magical theory than my painfully limited knowledge allowed me to keep up with.

Ten days after magic went haywire, Survan entered Storm Tales. Shocked to see him (he SHOULD have been past Yartar by now, on his way to Longsaddle), I joined him at a table as he slumped into it.

"Survan," I greeted him in concern. "What happened? Why are you here?"

"It attacked us and took Andras," he mumbled quietly in Elven. "Killed almost everyone else. Destroyed the wagon."

"Slow down," I soothed him. Waving frantically to Carith, I indicated Survan to her with another wave of my hand. After a blink of surprise, she started fixing a plate of food for him. He looked like he needed it. He didn't seem to be hurt, but he DID look like he was in shock. "Slowly, Survan. What happened?" I said, returning my attention to the mage.

He answered in a monotone, staring at the fire. "Two days out of Silverymoon. We were on the river. Dragon, blue, I believe, came at us. My spells all mis-fired. Andras's spells just would not work. Spat lightning at the ferry. Blew a hole in it and set fire to the wagon. Dragon came down and grabbed Andras. Took off to the southeast." He took a breath and continued, still in the same, flat voice. "The ferry sank. I swam to shore with a few other survivors. A few of the items from the ferry washed ashore. One of our bags, some of the other passengers' belongings. We lost everything else: my spell books, all of the trading items, Midnight." He continued looking down at the table, but I could see tears running down the side of his face. Carith arrived with a plate of food and a glass of wine for him, placing it down silently. Reassuringly gripping his shoulder for a moment, she then left without having said a word.

Taking a moment to gather himself, he continued, "All of the survivors walked back here, carrying all that was left. Once in the city, I came straight

here."

My heart ached for him. His world had crashed down around his ears in a matter of minutes. His wife was kidnapped, apparently by a blue dragon, his familiar was lost, and his entire business burned down.

"Are you okay?" I asked him quietly.

Staring through his food, he gave a hiccupping little cough before shaking his head.

"I mean physically," I told him.

He smiled grimly, finally looking up at me. "Not a scratch. How is that for Tymora's favor?" Now that he was looking up at me, I wondered if he'd slept since the attack. His eyes had deep bags under them, and his complexion was even more pale than usual. Even more disturbing, his usually neat appearance was disheveled to the point of looking sloppy.

Kith came into the taproom at just short of a run, followed by Sherith. Carith had apparently sent the waitress to get Kith from the marketplace, and I was glad for her presence, though her timing was bad. Holding up my hand to Kith in a clear command to stay away, I said to Survan, "Sit here and eat, Survan. Kith and I will talk and then all three of us can decide what to do."

He absently nodded his assent and began to mechanically eat what was in front of him. I seriously doubted that he was tasting anything, though.

I stood and walked over to join Kith and Carith at the bar. Quickly and quietly, I brought both of them up to date with the information I had gotten out of Survan. I continued to use Elven in an effort to keep from panicking too many of the other patrons. "We have to do two things," I told them after relating what I knew. "One, tell Lady Alustriel. Two, track down this thing and get Andras back."

"This is a DRAGON, Thi," Carith quietly reminded me. "Be careful you do not take on more than you can deal with."

"It should worry about US," Kith growled in response.

Smiling at my wife's fiery attitude, I crossed back over to Survan who had finished his plate and was staring blankly into the fire. I seated myself and Kith did the same. Survan hardly blinked.

"Survan," Kith quietly called, touching his hand.

He swiveled his head and stared at her, not making a sound.

His silence seemed to startle her, so I jumped in. "Survan, why don't you go to bed? I'm going to talk with Lady Alustriel, and then the three of us can decide what to do tomorrow morning."

He slowly frowned as what I was saying sunk in. "But Andras - -"

"Is most likely just fine," Kith reassured him.

"How can you be sure of that?" he asked, a note of hysteria creeping into his voice.

"Think on it," she gently bid him. "The monster took her. It did not take anyone else. It was powerful enough that there was nothing any of you could have done, therefore it did precisely what it desired. It could have destroyed all of you, but it refrained from doing so. It simply took her. Therefore, it wanted her for some reason." There was a great deal of repetition in her answer, but based on his condition, it made sense for her to do so.

He slowly relaxed as her logic worked its way into his mind. "What shall we do now?" he asked eventually.

"You go to bed," Kith ordered. "Thian will speak with Alustriel. We shall decide what to do in the morn."

"Fair morn," he greeted us the following morning.

Putting down my spoon, I studied my cousin by marriage. The bags under his eyes had almost completely disappeared, and his posture looked almost normal again. His eyes still reflected his stress, but more than a full night of sleep had done wonders for him physically. "Fair morn," I returned after my examination.

"Fair morn," Kith echoed after she completed her own assessment.

"Pray tell, do I pass?" Survan asked us in amusement as Saran placed a plate in front of him.

"Yes," I answered with an echoing smile.

"Did Alustriel tell you anything of use?" he asked without preamble.

I considered pointing out how impolitely that was phrased but decided to let it slide. He was under enough stress. "Yes," I answered. "Several things, actually. First off, she's having one of the local mage scribes create a new spell book for you."

I watched in amusement as his mouth fell open. "She . . . That is . . ."

"She's a very nice person. That's wonderful," I helpfully finished his sentences with a smile.

Finally regaining the use of his tongue, he said, "That is wonderful. What will I owe her for this?"

I shrugged. "Talk to her about it. She was refusing to hear about it from me. Maybe you'll have better luck. Either way, I strongly recommend we don't charge her for courier fees ever again."

"Depending on how good the book is," Kith temporized.

"Of course," I agreed. I wasn't the least bit concerned. She had never stinted on gifts before, and I couldn't imagine she would start now. "At any rate, that book will be done in three days. I also have from her the name of a sage in town. We should go talk to him soon so we know what direction to go from here."

"What manner of sage?" Kith asked.

"Item identification mostly, but she heard that he's also something of an expert on dragon lore."

"His name?" Survan asked in curiosity.

"Staal. She told me where to find him. She sent word, and he's expecting us sometime this morn."

He nodded and continued working on his breakfast.

"What will he expect from us?" Kith asked hesitantly.

"I asked that myself." I didn't have to mention the sages typically charge astronomical prices before dispensing their dubious wisdom. "Ali assured me that he would only charge us an eagle for the initial information. If he has to look something up, then that could go up rapidly, of course."

"I care not," Survan answered flatly.

"I know," I answered soothingly. "I'm just telling you what I found out. He has Ali's recommendation, so it's unlikely that he's going to turn out to be a charlatan."

Survan settled down, and the rest of the short meal passed in silence.

Presently, I led the two to the location that Ali had given me the previous day. We found a small home built of sturdy stone in one of the more upscale parts of town. The man who answered the door was an average looking human with a youthful face belied by his steel gray hair. "How may I help you?" he asked us cheerfully.

"Lady Alustriel recommended we contact you," I answered. "We have some questions that we hope you can answer."

Smiling even wider at us, he threw open the door and gestured us in. "Come in, come in. Yes, the High Lady of Silverymoon warned me that you would be here today. Please, have a seat," he offered, leading us to a comfortably appointed study. Survan seated himself in a chair in front of the desk. Kith propped the Stormbow against the arm of the couch and sat down near it. I took a seat beside her and casually threw an arm onto the couch back behind her.

Our host seated himself comfortably behind the desk and gave us all a cursory examination. His wandering eyes stopped at Kith's and my casual intimacy. "You two are mated?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Aye," Kith answered warily. "Thian and I exchanged wedding vows over three years ago."

"An elf married to a human," he muttered to himself, staring off into space. "That is fascinating." Shaking himself back to the here and now, he said to us, "I am called Staal. Ali recommended you see me?"

"Survan Stormbow at your service," Survan said. "My cousin Kith and her husband Thian," he waved back at us. "A ferry I was riding in upon the River Rauvin was attacked by a blue dragon a week past. It sank the ferry, killed only a few of the passengers, and kidnapped my wife. We are hoping you can provide us information on where to find this beast."

"If I can," he answered solemnly. "When did this occur, and where exactly where you?"

"Eleven days ago, two days west of Silverymoon on the river. The ferry left third day morning shortly after first light, and we were attacked at just past highsun on fifth day."

"Describe the beast."

"It was a dragon," Survan answered with a shrug. "Head to tail, I would guess at nearly two hundred feet long, though truthfully it was difficult to tell. The wingspan was roughly similar. It was a deep blue, though it was not dark enough to be black. One thing I do remember about it. It banked above us once, and I saw a long, white line tracing from its left wing shoulder to right hindquarter."

Staal nodded. "How did it sink the ferry?"

"It spat lightning during its first pass, blowing a hole in the bottom."

"Did it cast spells?"

"No."

"Did you not try to defend yourselves?"

Survan nodded. "Aye, but no spells worked. Neither mine nor Andras's."

"She is a mage, too?"

"No, she is a cleric of Waukeen."

"You said it kidnapped your wife?"

"Swooped down and snatched her off of the sinking ferry."

"And it let you live."

Survan slumped down in his seat.

Staal raised a hand. "Forgive me, I did not mean for that to sound like an accusation. I was just pointing out that it knowingly left you alive. For whatever reason, it decided not to kill you. How many others on the ferry?"

"A score or so left Silvermoon on the ferry. An even dozen survived to walk back."

Staal nodded and leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling with a slight frown. After nearly a minute of silence, he said, "I know of the dragon you describe. He goes by the name of Razarenkarth. That white line you saw is actually a scar, given to him by a red dragon, or so the rumor goes." He turned to the bookcase behind his desk and pulled down a large book with a heavy cover. I first thought that it was leather, but revised my opinion when I saw a scale pattern on the surface. Flipping through the book for a few moments, he stopped at one page and browsed it for a few moments before reading it aloud. "Ancient blue wrym, makes its lair on the outskirts of Anauroch. There is even a map," he added with a small smile. "Not known to venture far from home often. The last known time was to attack a younger red near his lair. The red dragon chased him off, giving him the scar you saw." He closed the book and replaced it onto the shelf before looking back up at us. "That is really all I know of that particular wrym. Blue dragons in general have lightning as a breath weapon, a relatively small spell repertoire, but they make up for it in raw size and strength."

"You said there was a map to the dragon's lair in your tome?" Survan asked, barely keeping his impatience in check.

"There is."

"May we have a copy?"

He stared at Survan before shifting his attention back to Kith and myself. I gazed back at him calmly. "You three are going after him," Staal stated.

I nodded as Kith said, "We are. It kidnapped one of our own."

Staal sighed and pulled the book back down. Also pulling a blank sheet of vellum from the desk, he flipped back to the appropriate page and started copying the map. Without looking up, he said, "If you all are so determined to commit this particularly messy form of suicide, then the least I can do is try to help you. The older blue dragons are known to have the ability to create illusions upon the terrain, and they set traps and ambushes. In addition to its lightning breath, it can attack by claw, bite, or tail. Arrows tend not to work terribly well, though magical means work to some degree. Sword or axe are the most efficient if you can get through the dragon's hide, but that subjects the wielder to all the dragon's attacks." He stopped copying the map for a minute and looked each of us in the eye. "When humanoid try to attack old dragons, they usually employ an archmage and an army. Even then, most of the army does not return. Are you sure you want to do this?"

I grinned, but the humor didn't reach my eyes. "We're tougher than we may appear."

He snorted in disbelief. Still staring at me, he slowly cocked his head and continued to study me.

"What?" I asked, becoming uncomfortable under such scrutiny.

Waving me to silence, he stood and slowly approached me, stopping a couple of feet away. Finally done staring into my face, his gaze slowly drifted over my belongings, pausing slightly at my ring and sword. Once done with me, he studied Survan and his belongings only momentarily but lingered for some time studying my clasp that Kith was wearing, the Stormbow, her bracers, and the plain copper ring she wore. Once he was done, he nodded sharply and went back to his desk.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

Hardly glancing up from the map he was once again copying, he asked, "You are aware that in addition to being knowledgeable in the topic of dragon lore, I am also a sage? Particularly in item identification?"

I nodded. "Lady Alustriel mentioned that, yes."

"I was studying your items," he finished.

"You were studying ME as well as our items," I retorted.

"You have an interesting face."

"Thank you," I said in wry amusement.

"You are most very welcome," he said in the same tone, finally letting a smile twitch at the corners of his mouth.

Kith huffed out a breath in amusement. Even Survan smiled.

"By the by, what are you planning on doing with everything in the dragon's hoard after you kill it?" Staal asked.

"You suddenly seem a great deal more optimistic," Survan observed dryly.

Staal shrugged without saying anything.

"I'm sure you can supply us with a few suggestions," I said in amusement.

"As it turns out, I can."

"Big surprise," muttered Survan in Elven.

Staal glanced up at him from the map before looking back down to what his hands were doing. "Sarcasm aside, are you aware that magical items can be cursed?"

"Yes," Kith answered. "They can have harmful effects. Is that what you mean?"

"Mostly," Staal confirmed. "Also, there is the minor point that a cursed item cannot be removed once it is worn."

Ouch.

"So you will generously let us know which items are cursed if we bring back the lot to you, correct?" Kith asked calmly.

"For a small fee," Staal corrected.

"Big surprise," Survan again muttered in Elven.

"Would you care to continue the conversation in this language?" Staal asked him in Elven.

Survan had the good grace to not appear embarrassed. "Either Elven or Common would be fine."

Staal looked at me. I shrugged. "I'll try to keep up," I said in Elven.

Nodding his acceptance, he turned back to Survan, and we continued the conversation in Elven. "Yes, I am interested in Razarenkarth's hoard. Anybody in their right mind would be. Yes, I will charge you to run identifications on anything you bring back. I must. That is how I make my living as a sage."

"And what if you're wrong on something?" I asked him pointedly.

"Then I shall apologize profusely."

"Then you will pay for the damages to persons and property the curse causes," Survan corrected.

Staal cocked his head slightly and thought it over. "Then I will pay for any damages," he agreed.

Well, that definitely simplified the aftermath. If everything worked out.

"What will you charge?" Kith asked.

"An eagle per item. If it turns out that I am incorrect on any one item, then I will refund all your money. If one is cursed and I do not inform you of that, I will pay for any and all damages. Do we have a deal?" He looked back and forth among the three of us.

Survan glanced back at Kith and me with a raised eyebrow. I shrugged. I didn't have any other suggestions.

Apparently getting agreement from Kith as well, Survan turned back to Staal. "Agreed. Depending on how much we get, we may not ask you to identify everything."

"Understandable," Staal said, laying the map aside to dry. He closed the book back up and replaced it onto the shelf. "I would also recommend you start thinking about how to transport what could potentially be thousands of coins. Though Razarenkarth did not have a great deal of coinage the last time I heard, that could have changed."

"The last time you heard?" Survan asked with a raised eyebrow.

Staal shrugged and smiled cryptically.

Yo, ho, yo, ho, it's a pirate's life for me.

I replaced Flick into Kith's saddlebag and walked back over to my mount. I was the only one who could hear him, so Kith was carrying him outside of my hearing range until he "got better".

I'd checked him every morning since his apparent insanity started, some three weeks past. Every day, he was singing or reciting poems. It was really beginning to get on my nerves.

Magic was still unstable, and Flick was still nuts. I hoped that they'd both calm down soon.

Two days after meeting with the Sage Staal, Survan, Kith, and I headed east on the road to Sundabar. After a day in the predominantly dwarven city, we headed south and east through the Nether Mountains, finally emerging on the northern area of the lands controlled by Hellgate Keep. Skirting past the keep itself, we continued south and east and were now in the Far Woods. According to the map Staal had provided for us, Razarenkarth's lair was somewhere just east of the woods which was also the western edge of the desert called Anauroch.

We just had to find him before he found us.

"Ready?" Kith asked as she swung up upon her mare.

"Lead on," Survan bade his cousin, climbing up onto his own mount.

Kith was always our scout and since my clasp protected the wearer from illusions, she was wearing it. Staal warned us the dragon was likely to use illusions against us. We didn't want to stumble into anything REALLY ugly.

It took only another hour's riding before the forest began to thin. I stopped at the brush line that marked the end of the forest and stared to the east.

"Pray tell, what is the matter?" Survan asked from beside me as he pulled his horse to a stop.

I waved ahead of us. The land changed from forest to sandy desert in the span of something like a mile. I couldn't conceive of a weather pattern that would produce such a thing. "THAT. How are forest and desert so close together?"

He shrugged easily. "This edge of Anauroch has been this way since long before I was born. I have never questioned it."

"It's just . . . weird, I guess."

Since Razarenkarth's lair was reportedly within sight of the Far Woods, we'd angled our way slightly more north of the south easterly direction we guessed we'd need to travel to go straight to his lair. Therefore, we'd come upon the desert north of where we hoped to find his lair.

Just ahead of us, Kith turned south and started paralleling the forest, keeping most of her attention on the desert. We traveled this way for another two hours before she stopped. When we pulled up beside her, she pointed out across the desert. "What do you see out there?"

I peered closely before shrugging. "Sandy desert."

"I, too," Survan said.

"You do not see the dark rock outcropping, then," she stated with a smile.

Surprised, I looked again. Nope, nothing but desert.

"I shall take your word for it," Survan said, swinging off his horse. "Much as I want to go to Andras now, I would suggest we camp here for the night. Dark will fall quickly enough, and I do not fancy walking out there after nightfall. We can go at first light."

"Two points," I said, climbing down off Shadow. "One, let's camp out of sight of the desert. If we can see his lair from here, he can see us from there. Secondly, WE won't be going out there tomorrow. I will."

Survan's eyebrows came up. Kith turned to glare at me. "How did you come to that conclusion, husband of mine?"

"With magic run amok, how much do you two honestly think you can do against a dragon? Survan, casting magic could very well kill you right now. Kith, forgive me for saying so, but without the Stormbow, you're only a mediocre fighter. A dragon as old as Razarenkarth is reputed to be will chew you both up without even trying."

"I suppose you have convinced yourself that you can do better?" she asked, though her expression was a great deal less angry.

I wordlessly held up the hand where I was wearing a ring of invisibility and inaudibility.

"You are assuming that will work properly," Survan commented.

"Yes," I agreed. "Even if it doesn't, almost anything it does won't hurt me. Remember that I heal quickly. For the same reason, I'm more likely to survive the fight than you are."

Both elves frowned at me, but neither said a word until the camp was set.

"I can not say that I like the thought of you going off to fight the dragon by yourself," Kith began, "but I do not find flaw with your reasoning."

"Despite trying," I teased her.

She grunted agreement but smiled slightly.

"I do wish that I could help," Survan said, piling some brush to start a fire, "but I concede to your superior logic."

I grinned. Trying to reduce the stress, I said, "Quick! Write that down and sign it."

He gave me a sour look in return.

For the fifth time that morning, I fastened my cloak with the infinity clasp and looked before me. As had happened each of the previous times, the rolling sand dunes became hazy, revealing a dark brown rock outcropping that rose like a cliff on the west-north-west side and the back sloped downward until it was lost under the ocean of sand.

Studying the layout of the cliff that I was approaching from slightly south of straight on, I began to see some features that had been lost to the distance before. Toward the slightly nearer south corner, there were several smaller openings, easily man-sized. About a quarter of the way in from the north corner was a much larger opening, probably the one the dragon himself used. Above and to the south of the large opening was a ledge. Starting at about noon and until sunset, the entire cliff face would have full sunlight.

Before the headache got to me, I removed the clasp and put the plain one back onto the cloak. It was a pain to keep switching back and forth like this, but I needed the ability to see through the illusions.

When I looked up again, I saw that the cliff was in plain view. I grinned. As Survan had once explained to me, knowing it was an illusion was at least half the battle of seeing through it. Now that I KNEW there was an illusion there and I was close enough, the illusion lost its power over me. Or maybe the chaotic nature of magic was finally catching up with the dragon.

I hoped it was the latter.

Crouching down in the shadow of the cliff, I tried to look into the large opening. I ignored the other openings in the cliff. Blue dragons were known for laying traps and ambushes, and I was sure all of those entrances would be rigged with traps. The dragon himself would never need to use them, so there was no reason for him not to make as nasty a trap as possible. I might survive a rock fall, but I didn't fancy being stuck in one for a couple hundred years.

Not seeing or hearing anything in the yawning entrance I was studying, I slowly crept forward until I was just outside. Standing, I took a deep breath and whispered, "Aberlith".

The plan was for the ring to make me invisible and inaudible, sneak in past the (hopefully) sleeping dragon if he was even there, locate Andras, free her, and both of us sneak out again.

That was the plan. Too bad it didn't work that way.

The time of chaotic magic had affected the ring.

Instead of invisible and inaudible, the ring was now acting like a strobe light and giving off an ear-piercing screech. Definitely NOT according to plan.

Wincing in pain, I jerked the ring off my hand and let it drop in the sand. The light and sound faded the instant I got the ring off of my finger.

My reprieve was short lived, though. What felt like a human-sized sledgehammer hit me in the back, catapulting me into the dragon's lair. I hit ground again after twenty feet and stopped rolling ten feet further along. Groaning, I forced myself to get up and moving again. I'd probably broken a couple ribs in that tumble, but that wouldn't stop me from moving. And if the dragon had just attacked me outside its lair, then it knew exactly where I was.

Looking up, I discovered that I was right. The huge blue monster landed lithely on the ground in front of the entrance from the direction of the upper ledge I'd seen earlier. Spotting me immediately, it let out a huge bellow of what I took to be challenge.

Sometimes I hate being right.

Drawing my sword, I pushed away the mind-numbing fear I suddenly felt. I certainly had reason to fear this dragon, but try to face a sword-wielding maniac in an alley at midnight in Harlem sometime. Fear really is something that can be ignored with practice.

I quickly scanned the area available to me. The first ten feet in from the entrance were a rough tunnel, and then it opened into a huge, irregular cavern inside the cliff. Based on the way it sloped downward toward the back, I expected that at least some of the lair was underground.

I heard the dragon take in a deep breath, and I bolted to the side without looking. Sure enough, a blast of lightening sizzled through where I'd just been standing. I had enough other problems by that point, though. Because of the speed of my reaction, I hadn't looked where I was going. I landed among hundreds of bones. They were all in a shallow pit, stacked without care.

With a grimace of distaste, I hoped they were from camels or something else similarly suited to being called a meal. I didn't have time to check,

though. Stumbling through as quickly as I could, I exited the graveyard out the back, deeper into the lair. I regained my feet and my bearings just in time to hear the dragon bellow another challenge. I turned to look at it and brought up my sword just in time to intercept the foreleg streaking at me. I had the momentary pleasure of watching my sword score deeply into the "palm" of the dragon before I realized that wasn't stopping him. Now coming at me, this time with several hundred pounds of force (not to mention a dragon's paw) behind it, I tried to twist my sword so the flat side would hit me instead of the edge. Under the circumstances, I had no doubt it was perfectly capable of cutting me in half.

I was successful, but only to a certain extent. My sword crashed into my left shoulder breaking my collar bone with a sharp snap before the dragon's clawed hand reached me. Another one of those huge sledgehammers got me fully across the face and chest, launching me into the air again. I vaguely felt myself flying, hitting a wall, and then falling. I thought I was falling further than I should for where the floor should have been, but it wouldn't have surprised me to learn that my sense of distance was just a little off by this point.

It was only a few seconds before my body started to respond to commands again, and I immediately opened my eyes. I discovered two pieces of good news. One was that my sword was still gripped in my right hand. The other was that Andras was staring at me in astonishment. We seemed to be in a small pit, something like five feet deep in a rough oval ten by seven feet across. A glowing chain was attached to the wall and Andras's ankle, giving her enough room to move about the pit, but not much further. She appeared otherwise unhurt.

Coughing to get my lungs into working order, I croaked out, "Fear not, fair maiden, I am here to rescue you."

Another bellow from the dragon stole some of the force of my words.

Ignoring the dragon and my comment, she asked, "Did Survan survive?"

I nodded and rolled to my feet, looking for a way out. There, the rock formed a natural ramp back up to the cavern's floor. "He walked back to Silvermoon and told us about what happened. Are you okay?"

We both heard sibilant hissing, as if the dragon was casting a spell. I ducked down behind the wall to keep me out of the line of sight of the dragon. A blast of flame tore into the ceiling. The dragon roared again, this time in apparent anger.

Her face showing open relief at my news of her husband, Andras nodded. "I am as well as can be. My spells are not working, but other than that, nothing seems to be amiss. The dragon appears to be trying to take care of me, bringing me food and the like."

"I hate to break this short, but I'm kinda busy." I chucked a thumb in the general direction of the dragon. "Andras, we WILL be back for you."

She frowned in worry but merely nodded tightly. "Tymora's Luck to you."

I was already most of the way back up to ground level. Spotting an opening in the wall, I ducked into it, hoping it led to one of the smaller exits. I knew I was in for something ugly if my suspicions of traps held true, but it was preferable to working my way past the dragon.

Before I made it three steps down the tunnel, I heard another huge breath followed by a bright flash. I was suddenly flying through the air again. My face and shoulder were the first pieces of my battered anatomy that collided with the wall when the tunnel turned to the right. Landing on the floor, I rolled as quickly as I could to the right, out of the dragon's line of sight.

I felt a spot on my arm tingle as I rolled, heard a pop, and a puff of smoke drifted up. I froze and tensed, bracing myself for whatever I'd triggered. Nothing happened. Breathing a quick prayer of thanksgiving that the trap, whatever it'd been, had failed, I rolled to my feet and bolted out into the desert.

Fortunately, the dragon didn't follow.

"What do you mean, you left her there?" Survan all but shouted.

I was halfway tempted to respond with, "Which word didn't you understand?" but decided that I'd better not do that. With a rag I'd wetted, I continued to clean my face of the blood from when I went face first into the tunnel wall. "I found her, she's alright, and I told her we'd be back. I had to leave or the dragon would've probably killed both of us." Dropping the wet and now bloody rag down on my lap, I rotated my shoulder, loosening it up. Just because my Quickening had long since healed it, didn't mean it didn't hurt.

"I was under the impression that you could not be killed," Survan snarled at me, pacing back and forth.

My patience finally reached its end. I opened my mouth to shout back at him, but Kith beat me to it. She'd been rubbing a hand across my back ever since I'd made it back to camp, reassuring both of us. Now, she pressed that hand down on my near shoulder and said calmly, "Yes, he CAN be killed, cousin. Even if the dragon does not know how to do so, it still IS a dragon. It might simply tear his head off by brute strength without aiming to do so."

Survan still looked ready to spit fire for a few moments before abruptly deflating. Sitting near the fire pit, he hung his head and mumbled, "Forgive me. I am just worried for her."

Abandoning me, Kith knelt down next to Survan and said softly, "We all are. But nothing can be done about it right now. You heard Thian's account of the fight. No one person can take down this wyrm."

"So we'll just have to wait until you two can join me before we try again," I finished.

Kith looked over at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Once magic returns, we'll try again. That way, all three of us can use our strengths against this thing simultaneously. It'll have a lot tougher time dealing with all three of us." I didn't want my wife to get anywhere near this thing but having the Stormbow working against it was too large an advantage to give up easily.

I just hoped we all survived this plan.

Since we all agreed that camping at the foot of the dragon wasn't such a bright idea, we decided to backtrack for a couple of days and stay in a small village at the edge of the Far Woods. Upon arriving, we arranged to stable our mounts indefinitely and took out a couple of rooms at the only inn in town. Being so near the High Forest, the villagers weren't at all surprised to find traveling elves. A human in the company of those elves was the cause of a few raised eyebrows, but no comments came our way.

We had a vague plan in mind to wait until the chaotic magic repaired itself, but after three days of doing absolutely nothing, I began to be concerned that it may take quite some time before that would happen.

That same afternoon, I visited the town armorer. Something had occurred to me on my way back to Kith and Survan from the dragon's lair. I had never used a shield before because I used my left arm as a weapon. I didn't hold a blade with it, but I would punch with my left fist, for instance. The problem was when I was up against a dragon or other large creature; my left arm as a weapon was worthless under those circumstances.

So I went to the armorer to find a reasonably light shield to use on my left arm when facing such large creatures.

With the dwarven armorer's assistance, I chose a medium sized wooden shield. It was big enough to provide some protection for me, but light enough that it didn't affect my maneuverability on the battlefield. The armorer would have preferred that I use a metal shield due to its better defensive possibilities (not to mention the price difference), but I refused to carry something that would slow me down.

Early in the morning of the fifth day we'd been staying in the hamlet of Farthingsworth, I became aware of a curious silence. It took a few minutes for my sleep-befuddled mind to pin down exactly why silence would wake me up.

It finally came to me: Flick wasn't chattering incessantly.

"Flick?" I asked.

Yes? he asked in a subdued tone.

"What about him?" Kith mumbled into her pillow.

"He's not singing. Flick, are you okay?"

I heard him sigh. *Yes, I'm fine. Now I don't know what happened. I'm sorry about all that.*

[Magic went on the fritz all over.]

Fritz? Is that a technical term? he asked in a teasing tone.

[Yeah. I remember an archmage using it once . . . Anyway, I'll eventually forgive you for singing for the past couple months.]

Really, I AM sorry, he said apologetically. *It's not like I had a whole lot of choice.*

[It's all right. I especially liked the dwarven drinking songs. You'll have to teach them to me, sometime.]

Ha, ha.

Later that morning, after everyone was actually up for the day, Kith and I told Survan about Flick. He was immediately excited to be able to go back after his wife, but I pointed out that this didn't necessarily mean that ALL magic was stable again. We discussed how to test whether magic was working. Understandably, Survan didn't want to risk casting any spells, nor did Kith want to try to fire the Stormbow.

"It has to be something small," I murmured, casting my eyes around the taproom. They came to rest on my infinity clasp that Kith was wearing again. Smiling, I pointed to it. "There we go. If I can wear that without getting a headache, then that would be a good indicator, wouldn't it?"

Both elves nodded with brightening expressions. Kith swung her cloak off and rapidly removed my clasp while I was doing the same. Taking my clasp back, I hooked it to the cloak and put it back on.

Everyone stared at each other for a few minutes before I slowly began to smile. "All better."

They both visibly relaxed.

"You realize you both have to try before we leave, don't you?" I cautioned them.

They both deflated a little. Nodding, Survan took a deep breath and started mumbling his way through a spell. Seeing what was going on, some of the other patrons cautiously stood up from their tables and backed away. The barkeep watched us warily but didn't do anything to interfere.

On the table in front of us, a hazy, three inch tall replica of Survan popped into existence. He gave his larger image a stiff bow and said, "If you can see and hear this illusion, then magic is working." The little Survan repeated his bow to Kith with a, "Milady," and me with a, "Milord," before dissolving.

The room breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Kith stood and hurried up to our room. She came back down the stairs moments later with the Stormbow in hand and headed out the front door. I quickly followed to find her standing just outside the door, looking around. "Better aim at something that's not flammable," I suggested, smiling with relief now that magic appeared to be back to normal.

Now that I was looking around, most everything around here WAS flammable. I finally spied a rock wall and pointed it out to my increasingly antsy wife. Nodding at what I was pointing to, she swung around and drew the bowstring. A flaming arrow appeared just like it should, and she released it. It sped away and lodged between two rocks in the wall. It continued burning for a few seconds before evaporating back into the magical weave of the multiverse. The only thing remaining was the scorch mark.

Perfectly normal.

Grinning widely, Kith pulled back on the bowstring multiple times in rapid succession, leaving three tightly grouped scorch marks around the original one thirty seconds later.

Having watched everything from the doorway of the inn, Survan breathed, "Finally. Now let us go and retrieve my wife."

Three mornings later found us again staring across the expanse of sand toward the dragon's lair. I was wearing my infinity clasp, so I saw through the illusion, though my two companions were seeing endless tracts of sand dunes.

"How do you want to do this?" I asked, looking for movement. Just because I apparently almost snuck into the lair last time didn't mean I had any hope of making it that far this time.

"Kick the door in and shove a fireball up his ass," Survan answered flatly, staring in the general direction of the lair.

I blinked and turned to stare at my elven cousin in amazement. I understood he was upset over his wife being kidnapped, but the last couple days had been out of character for him even given the circumstances. He'd even used an Americanism that he'd no doubt picked up from me somewhere along the line.

"Cousin, are you well?" Kith asked hesitantly, peering at him closely.

"I feel well enough," he smiled with a feral gleam in his eye. "Let us just get this over with."

"Okay," I answered after a few moments of studying him. "One vote for a full frontal attack. Kith, how about you?"

She shrugged. "Other than hiding behind you or a convenient rock, I just planned on putting arrows into the dragon as fast as I am able to pull the bowstring. How we get there matters little to me."

I'd already described the layout of the caves to them as well as I could, so I didn't need to do that part. "Survan, can you cast invisibility over us?"

He shook his head. "I do not have that spell available to me. Even if I did, I do not believe it would work." He waved toward the lair and continued, "The plain fact that the dragon can hide an entire CLIFF indicates that he is an illusionist of no small power. Most any illusion that I could perform may not work against him."

I sighed. So much for sneaking in and sneaking out. Walking back over to Shadow, I pulled my shield down from where it was hooked to the back of the saddle and said, "Well, let's go, then. No sense in prolonging this."

Survan stood and immediately headed toward the desert, hardly waiting for Kith and me. Kith followed a bit more reluctantly, but with determination.

Since I could actually see where we were going, I sped up until I was slightly ahead of Survan. Speaking quietly (why take anymore chances than we absolutely had to?) I asked, "Let me know when you two can see the cliff, okay? Last time, the illusion failed once I got close enough."

We trudged through the featureless tracts for several minutes before Kith whispered, "I see it."

We'd only gone another two feet when Survan whispered, "Me as well."

We continued sneaking forward as quietly as possible until we were kneeling in the shadows of the cliff. "Now what?" Survan quietly queried.

"I thought you were the one all gung-ho to charge in and rescue your fair damsel?" I asked him in grim humor. We were about to do something monumentally stupid, and I had to look for humor anyplace I could find it. That, or run screaming back for Silvermoon.

He grunted at my comment. "I am. I just do not fancy becoming the morning snack for an oversized lizard."

Kith snickered. Survan's sense of humor came out at the strangest times.

I turned to study the entrance again just as an overwhelming wave of dizziness and fatigue gripped me. I leaned against the rock wall and started sliding downward. Maybe a nap wouldn't be such a bad idea.

No, NO! Don't do this! WAKE UP! Flick was yelling at me, but I didn't have the energy to tell him to shut up.

Survan grabbed my shoulder before I made it down to the desert floor. Pulling me back upright, he leaned me against the rock wall and backhanded me sharply.

The fatigue vanished instantly. I found myself staring at him with my sword in hand before I realized I'd moved. Combat reflexes are wonderful.

Seeing I was standing under my own power and coherent again, he turned and started looking around quickly. "Sleep spell," he explained to me. "Elves are naturally resistant. I had to do something to snap you out of it. Are you okay?"

Finally piecing together what had just happened, I nodded, even though Survan wasn't looking at me. "Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks."

"Since he hit us with a spell, he can see us," Kith said from my other side, also peering around quickly with the Stormbow drawn.

Remembering how he'd ambushed me previously, I looked up toward the ledge above the main entrance. Sure enough, I saw the dragon's head peer down on us. Seeing he'd been spotted, the dragon drew a breath. I had just a moment to shout, "Up!" before the dragon released a breath of lightning at us.

Desperately trying to protect Survan and Kith, I lunged forward and raised my sword. The dragon was too far away to actually reach of course, but that wasn't the reason for raising the sword. I was hoping to use the sword and my body to act as a lightning rod to absorb the entire bolt so that my two companions wouldn't be affected.

It worked. The full force of the lightning slammed into me and sent me sprawling back in a shower of sand.

Jumping to my feet and shaking my head to clear the cobwebs and ringing, I ran back forward just as the dragon jumped down from the ledge to the sand in front of us. Survan was in the midst of a spell as Kith fired her second arrow into the chest of the monster. I got back into my position as a defensive wall with my shield in front as Survan finished his spell. A jet of flame narrowly missed my head and barreled full-on into the chest of the dragon just as Kith put her fourth arrow into him, this time aiming for the a joint.

The dragon bellowed and swung its right foreleg toward me, clearly in an attempt to smash me into the wall. Instead of bringing my sword across the paw's line of attack as I had the previous time, I tried something different. Bracing my right leg, I knelt down slightly, covered myself with the shield as much as possible, and stuck the sword straight out toward the descending paw. My wild idea worked. My sword sunk straight into the claw. Not slowed in the least, it swung across where my chest and head had been. But I was slightly below that. Instead of hitting me solidly and smashing me against the wall, the dragon's paw skipped across the rounded surface of my shield and continued its course over my head. Desperately holding onto the pommel of my sword, I pulled it back out of the palm as the dragon's swing pulled it out of line. I didn't need to withdraw the sword so much as hang on as the paw pulled away from me, but the pierced side was no longer facing me. Based on the grinding sound I heard and the wrenching my shoulder and wrist got, I expected the dragon's paw had gotten torn up pretty good as the sword came out at a different angle than that which it had entered. Continuing its arc, the paw smashed into the cliff face. I got one more hit on the back of the wrist before the dragon pulled it back with a scream of what I hoped was pain. Based on the blood smear left on the wall, I was willing to place money on it.

Survan started another spell as the dragon reared back on its hind legs. Keeping its balance with its left hand on the cliff wall and the right wing extended, it started hissing out the words of a spell.

Kith continued battering it with arrows, now aiming at the throat and head.

Seeing an opportunity, I dropped my sword and ripped Flick free of his sheath. Throwing him, I bent to retrieve my sword as quickly as I could. Flick shrieked through his short flight. Usually when throwing daggers, I would aim for the chest or head. This time, I aimed for the thin surface of the extended right wing.

My aim was true, even with the gently moving target. At the bottom of the wing's arc, Flick's blade easily tore through the nearly translucent membrane. The cross guard, not being the least bit sharp, caught the nearly flat surface it was trying to go through and stopped the dagger's flight. Tipping forward and through, the handle widened the hole in the tightly stretched wing. Hanging for a moment on one side of the cross guard, the dagger eventually fell down to the sandy desert floor.

Between the dagger tearing a hole in the delicate wing and the continuing barrage of arrows, the dragon's spell was disrupted. While it was again screaming, Survan's spell finished. The dragon's eyes immediately began glowing brightly.

I grinned. Survan had mentioned he might try this. The light spell itself wouldn't hurt the dragon, but it did effectively blind him.

As planned, I immediately sprinted forward and both Survan and Kith drifted away from where they'd been standing. Without sight, the dragon's ability to aim was severely hampered. The best it could do was to aim in the direction it felt hits coming from. As long as he stayed quieter than the dragon, Survan was safe as spells generally couldn't be tracked backward with any reliability. As long as Kith kept moving, the dragon similarly couldn't try to harm her. The best it could now do would be to charge one or the other and blindly try to hit them with physical attacks.

And that's why I was charging forward like an insane bull against a matador 100 feet tall. So long as I could keep its attention with physical attacks, it would concentrate on me and leave the archer and mage free to continue dealing damage.

At least that was the idea.

Reaching the hind legs of the still upright dragon, I deliberately chose not to try a standard slice. Remembering the damage my sword had done to the dragon's paw in its earlier swipe, I took a moment to locate the ankle joint and plunged my sword point first into that juncture before leaning on the pommel, sweeping the blade sideways while still buried in the monster's ankle. It came to an abrupt halt after about thirty degrees of movement.

Predictably, the dragon screamed again and kicked sideways. Expecting the attack, I held onto the sword pommel and let my own momentum pull it out of the dragon's ankle.

Once I came to a rolling stop on my back, I noticed that my flailing sword had apparently managed a swipe through the already wounded wing as I was flying away from the kick. Grinning wildly, I charged forward again, this time content to make a basic slice at the base of the dragon's tail. Shifting its weight to its good foot, the dragon kicked backwards at me with its wounded foot.

But his aim was off. Holding the shield over my head to keep the ever-increasing rain of blood from blinding me, I stepped aside and swept my sword along the extending leg, opening it almost to the bone from ankle to knee.

Hopping up, using his still good leg and mostly intact tail for the initial push, the dragon tried to fly a short distance directly away from the cliff to get me out from almost completely under it. But it hadn't taken into account that one wing was torn. After an abbreviated flight, it made a bad landing due to the bad wing and two nearly destroyed legs all on the same side of its body. It recovered its balance just in time for Survan's latest spell, a fireball, to erupt just around its head. Whipping its head from one side to another, it spat lightning again at where I had been standing when it hopped away.

But the bad landing and fireball had given me a chance to move. The lightning missed me cleanly. Just as the last of the lightning left its maw, I arrived at his feet again and swung at his previously unhurt forepaw, drawing a bright line of blood.

Having a good angle on me and knowing just where I was standing, the blinded dragon tried to bring its muzzle down and bite at me. Based on our relative sizes, it would either bite me in half or swallow me whole. Fortunately, I jumped aside just in time. When the dragon buried its own open mouth into the sand, I took as hard a swing against its jaw as I could.

Four things happened nearly simultaneously. I heard a splintering crack from the dragon's jaw. My arm rebounded so hard from the strike that my teeth rattled. The dragon again screamed, this time showering me in blood. It also jerked its head sideways, effectively using its muzzle to body check me so hard that I landed ten feet away.

Due to a bad angle with my left leg, I momentarily pinned my shield down under me as I tumbled. Since the shield was strapped to my arm, my arm and the shield straps essentially tried to bring me to an abrupt stop against my own flying momentum that had been augmented by an enraged, blood-crazed dragon.

Needless to say, I did NOT stop. My arm lost the fight against the straps, breaking in at least two places in the forearm before the straps tore completely free and I continued my uncontrolled tumble.

Finally coming to a stop, I unsteadily rolled to my feet, angling the sword defensively. My left arm hung uselessly, though I could already feel my Quickening at work.

Because of how dizzy I was, the dragon had a more or less clear shot at me, and I knew it.

But the dragon had apparently had enough. By the time my eyes focused on it, it was in the air, trying to fly away to the south-east. With one wing cut in two places, it was having a very difficult time staying in the air. Even as I watched, Kith's tempo incredibly picked up a little more speed, this time aiming at the undamaged wing joint. Survan shouted out the last syllables of his latest spell and three glowing darts of magic leapt from his hand and traveled to the dragon in a heartbeat, impacting against its belly.

The accumulated damage was finally too much for the dragon. It heeled over and fell to the ground, landing on its left wing and shoulder. We all heard the wing splintering just before the dragon let loose another bellow. I broke into a staggered run toward the fallen behemoth, knowing that on the ground it was more dangerous than in the air. I still had to protect Kith and Survan.

But Survan had other ideas. He ran forward himself, drawing his dagger as he did so.

"Survan, no!" Kith called, still firing arrows.

Survan ignored her, heading for the monster's head.

The dragon struggled to stand up.

I gritted my teeth and forced my battered body to speed up.

Kith stopped moving forward and took her time lining up a shot. I had no idea what she had in mind, but if we let Survan get near that thing's head, he'd get himself killed. It looked to be mortally wounded, but it was still more than capable of killing an unarmored, unprotected elf.

Just as I was reaching the near edge of the out flung wing, Kith released the shot she'd been lining up. From my angle, I had a perfect view of what she was doing. Her flaming arrow entered the monster's near eye. Due to the angle at which the dragon's head was lying, the arrow lanced upward and into the area where I expected the dragon's brain to be. The entire body gave one massive convulsion before collapsing and lying completely still. I could even see a faint wisp of smoke curl out of one of the dragon's ears.

Seeing that the dragon was finally dead, Survan slowed his run in a skidding shower of sand. I also slowed down from my run, sheathed my sword, and leaned against the monster's flank, resting and letting my Quickening start to catch up with all the damage I'd been taking.

I heard Kith walk up, but I didn't take my eyes from Survan's unmoving form. "Are you well?" Kith asked quietly.

Her voice apparently pulled Survan from whatever trance state he seemed to be in. His attention jerked to Kith and me. Seeing both of us upright and under our own power, he turned and jogged toward the main entrance of the lair, calling Andras's name.

I smiled at his retreating back for a few moments before I turned to look at Kith, drawing a startled gasp from her. I grunted in grim humor. I'm sure that I looked like a mess, literally drenched in blood, my arm broken, and the gods knew how many bruises and scratches. As she was cataloguing my injuries, I looked her over. Other than breathing heavily from the running, she appeared to be just fine.

"Far too much blood to entirely be your own," Kith observed after a cursory examination.

I nodded. "I think I broke its jaw right at the end. It screamed, spraying me with its own blood. Really, the only problem is my arm." I looked down at the arm in question and then back up at her. "If you could set the bone, it would speed up the healing process." I winced as the Quickening tried to start moving things together. "And hurt less," I added once my breath allowed speech.

"Come along," she took me by my uninjured hand and started pulling me toward the lair. "I know not how to set bones, but I do not doubt that Andras does."

"And you think we can interrupt them?" I asked in genuine amusement. It'd been something over a month since the lady had seen her husband, after all.

"I will not be anything we have not seen before," she commented with a wry smile.

As we entered the short tunnel to the lair, I called out, "Stay decent, you two. You have visitors."

Kith lightly slapped my good shoulder, smearing blood all over her hand. "Be nice."

"I was being nice," I objected. "You'd rather find those two in some state of undress?"

"Your point is taken," she acknowledged with a wide smile. Her good mood vanished as another spasm of pain flashed over my face. "Come along. I would like Andras to look at that arm. I know that given time you will heal, but there is no point in being in pain in the meantime."

I led Kith over to the pit where I'd first found Andras and looked in. She and Survan were gripping each other tightly, rocking back and forth. They both appeared to be crying.

Kith smiled softly at the scene for a few seconds before she cleared her throat. Survan didn't react, but Andras looked up at us and smiled through her tears. Her smile vanished as she saw my arm twisted in a strange shape. Gently maneuvering Survan to the side, she ordered, "Get yourself down here and let me have a look at that arm of yours."

Already walking around to the ramp, I chuckled. "Yes, ma'am."

Survan, finally seeing what was going on, composed himself before he bent to study the chain keeping Andras in the pit. It was no longer glowing, but other than that, it was the same as I remembered it. Once I was close enough, Andras ran gentle hands over the multiple angles of my forearm, slowly shaking her head. "As many times as I may see it, your people's ability to absorb punishment continues to amaze me," she mumbled. As Kith came down into the pit, Andras pointed at my arm with a quick jerk of her chin. "Hold his elbow and try to keep it still. I shall try to reset this. With a bit of Tymora's luck, that will speed up the healing."

Kith wrapped both hands around my upper arm and elbow as I grabbed a convenient rock with my other hand. "How does she know this about you when I do not?" Kith asked me conversationally.

I knew she was trying to distract me, and I let her. This was not going to be fun. "She's as close to a family doctor as I have. She knows more about my body's healing than you do."

"She is merely a cousin by marriage. Twice, at that. I am your wife. Do I not deserve to know?"

"Of course, but you usually don't have to help when someone's been - AAH!" The rest of my answer to Kith's question ended in a scream as Andras pulled on my wrist and reset the bone with a few well-placed twists and shoves. My right hand went white as I squeezed the rock hard enough to squeeze the blood out of my hand. I kept my head down as my forehead broke out in pain-sweat. After a few seconds it was down to merely excruciating, and a few more seconds brought it down to a dull ache as the Quickening started repairing the now minor fractures.

"By the by, what is a doctor?" Andras asked calmly.

"Non-magical healer on my world," I answered as my breathing returned to normal.

She nodded and asked Kith if she was hurt. When my wife shook her head from where she was studying the chain with Survan, she turned her attention back to me, wrinkling her nose slightly. "There is an underground spring in the back. Might I suggest you use it?"

I looked down at myself and studied the blood slowly crusting in my chain mail armor. "Yeah, I think I could use a bath. I'm going to check the perimeter of this room first, though. I don't want anyone stumbling into another trap."

"What about you?" Kith asked, looking up.

"Worse comes to worst, you can dig me out. I'll survive."

Andras smiled and Survan grunted in what I took to be amusement. Kith just rolled her eyes and bent back to her task.

Starting back at the tunnel entrance, I carefully checked along the walls and floors for any traps or triggers around the edge of the entire room. I didn't find any, but I did find several other items of interest. Paying a little more attention to the "graveyard", I spotted several skulls in the pile of bones that were definitely not humanoid. That made me feel a little better. I found the natural spring easily enough, but continued my search of the room. In the corner opposite the graveyard, I found a relatively large open area with a lot of loose sand. Based on the indentations, I guessed that this was the dragon's "bed" and that he liked to sleep curled around the small mountain of coins in the center. Sifting quickly through it, they all looked to be copper sparrows. Along the wall in a small niche, I found the rest of the dragon's horde all neatly lined up. I counted fifteen potions of various colors, twelve gems of multiple sizes and stones, three rings, a pair of boots, a maroon robe, a book of some type, and the oddest item was a brass horn. Keeping in mind Staal's warning about cursed items, I left everything where I found it with the exception of the plain, scratched ring that I recognized as my ring of invisibility and inaudibility. The dragon had apparently collected it after my last attempt to free Andras. I slipped it on and whispered, "Aberlith". The ring started glowing faintly. The glow faded over the next ten seconds, though. Sighing at the loss of the item, I removed it and dropped it back in its spot with the other rings. Checking the rest of the cavern quickly, I didn't find anything more of interest. Calling out to the elves that this cavern was safe but that the tunnels were not, I headed back to the spring to clean the worst of the blood off.

Shivering slightly due to the water still on my body and due to the fact that I was only wearing the local equivalent of boxers, I left the dragon's lair to see what my family was up to.

Kith was leading the horses toward the lair. They were having a hard time traveling over the loose sand, but they were all managing. She'd apparently already been to the forest and back, and was now walking away from the dragon corpse, having left some tools, jars, and containers for Survan and Andras. They'd removed Andras's shackle, and she was now standing with Survan, pointing to various parts of the dragon and discussing something with him. Based on the saws, pliers, and knives next to the large assortment of jars and sacks, I expected them to begin a partial dissection of our vanquished foe at any time.

Looking around and trying to remember exactly where the dragon had been, I walked away from the tunnel entrance for a bit and started looking around on the ground. "Flick, you around here somewhere?"

Of course. What, did you expect me to sprout wings and fly off? he asked sarcastically.

[Smartass. I was just making sure you were close, otherwise I'd have to search until you could hear me, THEN I'd be close to finding you.] Even as I was speaking with him, my eyes were searching. I found him quickly enough, lying on the desert sand, blade only partially covered. Picking him up and brushing him off, I asked, [Everything okay?]

I'm fine. I can see everyone else is okay, too. After a short pause, he asked, *Do you want to talk about it?*

I sighed. [Not really. Razarenkarth's dead. We're alive. Nothing more to say.]

There was a pause as I headed over to where Kith was leading the horses. *I suppose,* Flick finally said.

My wife was having a hard time convincing the animals to enter the lair. As happy as they were to walk away from the dead dragon moments ago, they were uneasy walking into that same dragon's lair. I couldn't really blame them. I'm sure their instincts were all still screaming that this was a very dangerous place. It'd probably be years before this cave was inhabited by any of the local wildlife again.

Between Kith and myself, we eventually convinced the horses to enter and led them all the way into the back to the spring. Pulling my pack off of Shadow's back, I pulled out one of my spare shirts and a pair of trousers and slipped them on. I checked my drying clothing and armor as Kith commented, "Do not feel the need to get dressed on my account."

I smiled at her. "Don't want anything to get cold and fall off."

She just smiled and shook her head at my juvenile humor.

Oh, brother, Flick muttered from where I'd left him beside my sword.

"What are Andras and Survan up to?" I asked.

"Various parts of dragons are quite valuable as spell components, apparently, but only if they are harvested quickly. Some other parts can be made into weapons. My cousin and his wife are collecting what they think we can sell or use."

I raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

"The blood is used in some spells, horns and longer teeth may be turned into weapons, the bones and claws may be powdered and used in some other spells. Several things."

Thinking about my destroyed shield, I asked, "Can the skin be used to make shields?"

She nodded. "And armor, however it requires a master armorer to produce a full sized suit. Your mithril armor may well be better protection and is most definitely easier to take care of in an case."

I shook my head. "I'm just worried about a shield for me. Your elven chain mail is almost as good as my mithril, and you never use a shield. Survan and Andras can't use either armor or shield."

Kith shrugged. "Ask Survan. The worst he may do is say no."

I gave her a quick kiss. "Anything you need from out there?"

She shook her head. "I will just set up camp here by the stream. We will be here a day or so while they work on that carcass. We may as well be comfortable while they work on it."

Nodding absently, I headed out to speak with Survan. He was stripped down to his shorts, as was Andras. They were both already spattered with blood. Andras was systematically skinning the entire dragon with something that looked like a small sword, while Survan was working on prying one of the horns out of the skull. The other horn lay in the sand next to several large jars of what appeared to be blood. As I was surveying the systematic disassembly, Survan noticed me. "Ah, Thian. Would you take the bag of holding inside the cave? Put the blood in it first, if you would. Much of the rest of this stays out so that it may dry first."

"Sure," I answered as I put the jars into the innocuous looking bag. The large jars fit easily as I knew they would. Ah, the joys of having a bag of holding. "Survan, do you think I could get a new shield made out of the skin?"

He shrugged. "That should not pose a problem. I shall be getting several spell components out of it. Andras and Kith were offered as well, but they cannot think of anything that they need that can be manufactured of dragon bits. Did you find anything of interest in the lair?"

I nodded, watching Andras work. "Small mountain of coins, but it all looks to be sparrows. Fifteen potions, but I don't even want to guess what they might be. Twelve gems of various sizes. Couple miscellaneous other things. A robe, some boots, couple rings, like that. I'm all in favor of letting Staal take a shot at it all except the ring I had. I know that one is dead."

Andras spoke up. "That is unfortunate. That one was useful."

I nodded agreement. "When it was working, yes. Now, it's just a silver ring. At any rate, I'll take this inside," I indicated the bag of holding, "and you two give a shout if you need help with something."

Survan nodded without looking up from leaning against the scorched horn, still trying to pry it up. "We shall."

It took another day and a half before we left Razarenkarth's lair and his gutted corpse. We started slowly heading back toward Silverymoon, retracing the route Kith, Survan, and I took to get to the lair.

During the trip, Andras became increasingly anxious. When pressed for a reason, she finally admitted that she was having trouble communing with her god Waukeen.

Nobody quite knew what to make of that. She resolved to discuss the issue with other members of her sect in Silverymoon when we got there.

It took a little over another month to make it back to Silverymoon. Once we were back in the city, we immediately heard the story of the Battle of Mithril Hall and the fact that Lady Alustriel had been hurt severely. She had been healed by one of the dwarven priestesses and was now back in Silverymoon.

On a personal level, I was glad that the battle had worked out. I'd felt guilty about leaving Ali and Drizzt in order to chase off after Andras, and I was glad that it turned out that the fight had come to a satisfactory conclusion, though the number of rumored casualties was frightening.

After checking in at Storm Tales, we each went our separate directions. Survan took most of the "dragon bits" to the marketplace to see what he could get for them from the various apothecaries. Andras took the gems to the jewelry maker for sale. Kith took the hopefully magical items to Staal for identification. I took the majority of the intact hide to Durak the armorer.

I'd tried to convince Survan that going to Waterdeep with all of these items (especially the "bits" and the hide) would work out better, but he seemed convinced that Silverymoon was more than sufficient for our needs. I only hoped he was right.

Fortunately, Durak didn't seem to recognize me when I entered his shop. Once I pulled out the dragon hide, his eyes literally bugged out. Composing himself quickly, he sent an apprentice to rouse his brother Garak. Once the second dwarf was there, Garak and I got down to business while Durak went back to the work area of the shop.

After nearly an hour of haggling, Garak agreed to produce a medium shield for me from the hide and buy less than a quarter of the remaining hide as well, paying us the gem equivalent of four hundred eagles. After carefully measuring and cutting his portion, he immediately set to work on my shield, clearly excited about the opportunity to work on such an unusual and rare material.

After a short visit with Alustriel, I went back to Storm Tales to await the rest of my family. Andras returned first, reporting success selling the gems with the exception of a sapphire, an amethyst, and a diamond. Those she was having turned into matching rings for her and Survan.

Kith returned next, carrying nearly all of the items still. She deferred explaining until Survan arrived, instead sipping on the water she had asked for and appearing to be lost in thought.

Survan arrived nearly an hour later, still carrying most of the items he'd started out with. He explained that while the apothecaries and enchanters around town were happy to buy some of what he had, there weren't enough people willing to buy sufficient quantities to take even a quarter of everything off of his hands.

Once Survan finished his report, I pointed out to them that I only got less than a quarter of the hide sold as well. Though I didn't say it, Survan still clearly heard my, "I told you so," regarding taking the items to Waterdeep instead of Silvermoon. With no argument, Andras suggested that we needed to start up our trade caravan again and at least make it to Waterdeep to hopefully sell off the remainder of our items. The good news was that the incredible rarity of what we had sold meant that we were now flush with cash. Even after buying a brand new wagon and team, we were now in better financial shape than we had ever been.

Once that conversation was concluded, Andras explained what she had learned about what had happened to magic. Apparently the "leader" of the gods, Ao, discovered one of the gods had stolen the Tablets of Fate. As punishment, he cast them out of their plane of existence until the guilty party surrendered them. That's why clerics and mages couldn't work their magic. Nearly all of the gods took avatars. The problem with this was that the avatars were more or less mortal. Several of the gods had been destroyed (THAT concept took some time to sink in), but several mortals had been elevated to replace the lost gods. The pantheon was once again more or less intact. With the exception of Waukeen. He'd disappeared. Nobody knew exactly what had happened to him, but the goddess Lliira had taken Waukeen's followers under her wing. What, precisely, this meant in the long run nobody quite knew. For the moment, Andras's spells and abilities were not affected, so that was some relief for us all. After we all expressed concern and sympathy for her, she promised to keep us up to date as she learned more.

Kith started explaining what she had learned. Staal had determined that three of the potions were cursed, one of the new rings was, and the robe was as well. Instead of trying to keep everything straight, she asked him how to dispose of the cursed items. He offered to do so with her watching to prove to her that he really was destroying them. When she accepted, he dumped the potions together into a cauldron and put it over a magical fire, burning it all away. The robe was dropped onto the same fire and then immediately enclosed behind a wall of force just in case destroying the magical item resulted in something seriously unpleasant. Though Survan nodded at the wisdom of this precaution, it proved to be overkill. The robe burned as cloth should, without any unexpected effects. The ring proved to be trickier. Staal first put it into a crucible made for metal smiths. He let it sit over the fire until it had reached the maximum temperature that the fire was capable of producing. Then he quietly chanted a spell and let a slow fire spring from his hands and envelope the ring. After nearly a minute of both fires working on it, the ring finally deformed and melted into a little puddle of metal, utterly destroying it.

Kith then went on to list the non-cursed items she had. A ring of protection; boots of levitation; a tome that would teach the reader how to increase his or her strength, nimbleness, or hardiness; and the brass horn that would summon fighters to the aid of the person who blew the horn. The potions had been labeled as to what they were. I paid little attention to them since my Quickening might very well negate any effects they may have. The horn sounded interesting, but it wasn't useable by me or Kith. Something about only responding to wizards and clerics. The ring and boots had definite possibilities, though, as did the tome.

After a great deal of discussion, we agreed that Kith should wear the boots and I would get the ring. The horn would stay on Andras, but she would only use it as needed to protect us. Survan kept most of the potions with him.

It took us even longer to decide what to do with the tome. As Kith explained, Staal had no way of knowing which of the three effects it had, but he had assured her that it was indeed one of them instead of something harmful. Kith's first suggestion was for me to use it. As the primary melee fighter in the group, any one of the effects would benefit me. That sounded good to me, but I pointed out that we didn't know if the book would work on my Immortal physiology.

Survan and Andras didn't have the patience or the time to devote to it that Staal explained that getting any use out of such a book would require, so they politely declined. Kith stared at it for nearly a minute before slowly shaking her head. "No, I do not believe I wish to devote that much time to it."

Andras and Survan nodded in acceptance. Survan quietly slipped the book into the bag, but I was still looking at Kith. Something was bothering her, and for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what it was.

Shaking my head, I asked the table at large, "What does everyone think of offering some of this stuff to Lady Alustriel? I'm sure she can use a lot of it."

"SELLING some of it to Lady Alustriel makes sense," Andras countered. She didn't have quite the level of personal loyalty to her that I and now Survan did. Me for the first year after appearing in this world, and Survan for his new spell book. Both of us frowned a little but nodded. We may be indebted to her, but the Stormbow Merchant Caravan still had to conduct business.

"However, I will give a few of these potions to Lady Alustriel in exchange for my spell book," Survan said.

"So we're offering to sell the tome and any of the other dragon items to her?" I concluded.

Survan and Andras nodded, but Kith's frown deepened. Andras glanced over at her with a concerned look.

"Meanwhile," I continued, "we'll need a new wagon and mule team. If our caravan is going to begin its route again, we a setup like what we had previously."

Kith abruptly turned to Andras and asked, "Pray would you take a walk with me? We need to speak."

Baffled, I watched Andras nod agreeably. The two women stood and walked out the door. I turned to Survan, but he merely shrugged in ignorance.

It was early evening when Andras and Kith came back. Survan was out pricing wagons and mules, and I was sipping an ale and people watching.

Andras firmly steered Kith to my table and sat her down. Leaving without a word to me, she walked over to where Carith was standing at the bar and whispered to her for a few moments before heading upstairs to her room. Moments later, Carith placed a flagon of water down in front of Kith and leaned over for a quick hug and a whispered comment. Kith blushed slightly and smiled. Carith smiled wider and left after a quick smile to me.

I had watched all this in growing confusion. Finally, I asked, "Okay, are you going to explain what's going on?"

Kith toyed with the flagon for a few seconds before saying, "Do you recall that shortly after magic stabilized, I attempted to wear my old clasp for a time?"

I nodded. "You felt sick. Andras thought that the magical chaos had damaged your clasp because you said there were a few protective spells in it. Not that she'd ever told me what those spells were, but I'd never worried about it.

She nodded and took a sip of her drink. "Yes. Protection from diseases and poisons. I had thought they would be useful."

"No doubt they are," I offered, not knowing where this conversation was going.

"They have been," she acknowledged. "However, there is another enchantment within in the clasp that I had almost forgotten about these past few years."

"And what is it?" I asked when she didn't seem likely to continue.

"Anti-fertility," she said quietly.

I blinked in confusion. Huh?

"That was what was making me ill. When I had it ensorcelled, I was not interested in having children. When I was wearing your clasp, I did not have that protection. Now my body is fighting the enchantment." She took a deep breath and looked up at me for the first time since coming back into the tavern. "Because I am pregnant," she finished.