

Meetings from a vision

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One rainy afternoon, a cloaked rider approached the gate of the small town called Little Hollow. As she approached, the rider took the hood of her cloak down, and showed her face. The guards nodded politely, and the rider entered the town. Frowning slightly, Mariel Morningsun rode on towards the main square of the village. At it should be the inn of the town, but as she entered the square she noticed it looked a bit different than she could recall. Instead of the inn, there was a tower, its entrance bustling with people making wide gestures and talking in hushed tones about magic. The inn was on the other side of the square, and she guided her horse that way. She hitched Para, the mare she had been given as a leaving gift from Sermon, to the hitching post, and entered the tavern.

The room was light, for a common room, and there were a few visitors. A lone dwarf was sitting at a table in the corner, but he ignored her as she approached the bar.

"Hello, miss." said the innkeeper politely. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm not sure, really. I am looking for some people, but I don't know if they'll be here. A halfling called Melvin, a human called Lorian, a half-orc called Uthar, a human called Sir Jean, and an elf called Thamior."

At the mention of the names the head of the dwarf jerked up, and he looked at her, she saw from the corner of her eye. She ignored him for the moment.

"Now, I don't know any of those, but Melvin. He's at the baker's shop most days. You might want to try and find him there. He's a cheerful chap, and most likely will help you along." Mariel thanked the innkeeper, and turned to look at the dwarf. It looked like he was drinking some ale. She walked over to his table.

They had walked in the dark for so many days, and at last there was light, bearded faces and gruff looks from the dwarves they encountered. Uthar was most assuredly not welcome, and Melvin had been thrown into prison. The dwarf that had taken him away was silent and chagrined. His red hair and beard had been braided and coarse, and Sir Jean had had a hard time persuading the dwarves to release Melvin again.

"It is you! I do apologize, but may I join you? I think I know you, and I know this is important."

The dwarf did not reply, nor did he move or take any notice of her. He seemed to stare straight through her, and quaffed some more of his ale.

"Commander Grimm! I have had a dream about you. I am Mariel Morningsun, a cleric of Ehlonna from Margden Woods." Mariel sat down opposite the dwarf. "I am sorry to barge in on you like this, but I know this is important. I have had a dream, a vision, in which a group of adventurers had a very important mission to stop a demon prince from becoming a god. You were in that dream too. It can't be a coincidence that I run into you here."

"Actually, it is. My chief sent me here to stop a couple of thieves that have been pestering this town. And it's general these days." the dwarf replied.

"I apologize, general Grimm. But you're trying to tell me you haven't had a dream?" Mariel asked.

"Yes I did, but if you think I'm willing to give up on my job because of some dream, you're mistaken missy." Grimm replied.

Mariel sat back and regarded the dwarf in front of her. "I know it's a far stretch, and it must be hard to believe, but I know that there is something else at work than coincidence. I believe that dream was a vision, because we elves do not often dream."

"And you believe that just because you had a dream it should send you on some quest that is most likely going to kill you?"

"I believe in signs. That is my job." Mariel replied.

Grimm harrumphed, and looked at his ale.

"If I can persuade you, I will;" she continued; "Can I prove my good intentions by helping you with these thieves?"

"If you want. Where are you staying? Here?"

"Actually, I've only just arrived, and I don't have any lodgings or money. I was thinking of finding a handy haystack for the night."

"If you want to help me with those thieves - if that was in your vision - I'll pay for a room."

"You are very kind." Mariel said. "I haven't seen any thieves in my vision, but I have seen some other people. Sir Jean, Thamior, Lorian, Melvin, and Uthar. You recognize some of those names?"

"Yeah." Grimm replied. "I dreamt about a pesky elf called Mariel, but she was a bit fatter and a lot younger than you. I also



know I threw this halfling friend of yours into the dungeon because he was insulting us."

"In that dream?" Mariel asked, and Grimm nodded. "Well, if I don't even look the same, how can you know he hasn't changed? Anyway, the innkeeper said he works at the bakery."

It was late in the afternoon when Mariel and Grimm arrived at the bakery. Mariel had stabled Para at the inn, and they had gone on foot. Too bad that when they arrived, the bakery was closed already.

"I remember the temple being here, or somewhere around here. Perhaps Sir Jean would be going there. I remember he was a paladin." Mariel said. Together they went into the temple, and a young man approached them and introduced himself as Ogdin.

The town was under attack, and Ogdin was helping Mariel bind and heal the wounded. Sir Jean and Melvin were outside, trying to keep the undead at bay, and when Ogdin raised his holy symbol to the skies and called upon Heironeous, a lot of the undead just turned to dust. The elder man nodded to Mirodan, the paladin in plate mail, who raised his sword and charged the undead...

Mariel was taken aback somewhat. For a moment, she didn't even speak. Then, she recuperated, and apologized. "I am sorry, high priest, but I was expecting you to be older." she said.

"High priest? No, no, no, that's not me, you must be thinking of Mirodan. I'm just a paladin. Wait here, I'll get him for you."

Grimm and Mariel waited patiently, and indeed an elder man came to them a little while later and introduced himself as Mirodan, high priest of Heironeous. He took them to a small side chamber where they could talk in private, and after Mariel had introduced Grimm and herself, she started to talk about her vision.

"So you see, not everything is the same, but I think that the vision was meant to tell me something. To gather the friends from my vision and stop this demon prince from becoming a god."

Mirodan nodded gravely. "And you say that in your vision, Ogdin was high priest, and I was a paladin?"

"Yes. And Grimm here we only met briefly, after having been trapped in a dwarven mine accidentally. He didn't join our group, but I am sure that his being here is not an accident."

"So. What can I do for you, Mariel?" Mirodan sighed.

"So far I've only been able to find Grimm. Melvin works at the bakery, but it was closed. We're still looking for the others, and I thought that maybe Sir Jean might come here, he is a paladin of Heironeous after all. If he does, could you perhaps tell him I came looking for him?"

Mirodan promised he would, and stood up. "Unless there is anything else I can do for you, I should be returning to my other duties." he said, and showed them the door.

Another elf had arrived in town that day, which was noteworthy in itself. The innkeeper waved Mariel over to him the moment she entered the inn again, to tell her the news.

"I know you're looking for another elf. I didn't catch his name, but he's sitting over there." Mariel thanked the man, and walked over to the table.

Thamior had a book in one hand, and a spoon halfway to his face when Mariel returned from her morning prayers. He didn't move, but read with vigor.

The elf had a book next to his plate, and was reading intently while spooning his dinner into his mouth.

"Let's just leave them." Thamior spoke in Elvish. "You and me, we could make a great team. We could sneak away, and they'd never find us."

"You can not be serious. You have been acting strange, leaving and hiding, saying that you are fine while there is obviously something the matter. What about Uthar? Would you just leave him behind?"

When Mariel stood in front of the elf, she hesitated a moment. Then she pulled out a chair from the table and sat down in front of him. The elf did not react but, Mariel saw, apparently his plate had been empty for a while. The fluids had congealed already except where the spoon scraped the plate time and again.

"Thamior." she said.

The elf looked up, startled as if a fireball had gone off in his hands. At first he didn't answer, but then he nodded, slowly. "Why are you here?" he asked in Elvish.

"I had a vision. What about you?" Mariel replied, also in Elvish.

"I have come to teach at the mage tower. You must have seen it, it's right across the square."

"Where is Uthar?" she asked him.

"I don't know anyone called Uthar." Thamior dodged her question. He looked hostile, and Mariel did not feel like pressing him.

"I'll be staying here. In case you want to talk to me, or ask me something."

Thamior didn't reply, but buried his nose into his book again, and ignored her.

The conversation Mariel had with Melvin the next day didn't go so well either.

"You're the elf that left." Melvin accused her. "Because of you, I almost died. You were responsible for Lorian's death."

"But that was just a dream. I don't know where Lorian is now, he's not here." Mariel replied.

"You said it yourself. You believe in dreams. If you are so sure that was a vision of the future, why should it be different? I have no reason to leave my comfortable home. I'm happy here."

"But you do know what happens when that demon comes and becomes a god? And still you can say you do not care?" Mariel replied.

"What will come, will come. Right now, I have to worry about the bread that's in the oven, what I'll cook for Arlies tonight, and whether there is the pitter-patter of little halfling feet in the future. I have no place for prophecy, elves and dwarves."

Mariel threw her hands up in despair, and left the bakery. She went back to the inn, in the hope to try and talk to Thamior, but he was not in the common room. Then, she decided to visit the temple of Heironeous again, in the hope she might have more luck finding and persuading Sir Jean.

"You just missed him, Mariel. I am sorry." said Mirodan. "He didn't say when he would return, just that he would."

Mariel sighed. "I really need to speak with him, but it looks like I'll be here a little longer than I expected. Please, if he returns, I would ask you to persuade him to talk to me. I've spoken with Thamior and Melvin, and though I can't seem to find Uthar and Lorian yet, I think Sir Jean has had the same dream as we."

Mirodan remained silent, and looked at her blankly.

"Anyway, I don't have overly much to do while I'm here, and I think I could help your temple a bit. I think there is always need for healing spells, scrolls?"

"Yes. What are you suggesting?"

"If you could take care of the supplies, I would be willing to write some powerful healing scrolls to donate for your temple. I would ask for nothing in return, but one scroll of Resurrection."

Mirodan pondered this for a moment, and extended his hand. "I accept the offer gladly. I will make sure the necessary supplies will be here tomorrow."

Not an hour earlier, Grimm had been sitting at a table, enjoying his dinner. Suddenly, Thamior appeared at his table.

"May I join you?" he asked Grimm. The dwarf, in his usual manner, did not reply. Thamior repeated his question, a little louder.

"No!" Grimm replied, without even looking at him, and continued eating. Quite huffed, Thamior left Grimm alone, and left the inn. A few minutes later, Mariel came in, and she noticed Grimm sitting there. Considering their first meeting in Little Hollow, she ordered a beer at the bar, and went over to Grimm with it. For the second time in half an hour, an elf asked Grimm if they could sit down. To Grimm, it didn't matter much who asked, and he didn't reply to Mariel's question either. Mariel, undisturbed, just sat down, and moved the beer to Grimm. "Here you go."

Grimm didn't reply. It had been such a nice and quiet dinner. Good food.

"I think I saw Sir Jean leaving the temple today." Mariel told Grimm; "I think he's avoiding me, so I wrote him a little note. Maybe it helps, maybe he'll be more willing to talk to me. How is your work coming along? I saw you working at the blacksmith's."

Grimm grunted. "I'm doing good."

"Still no sign of those thieves though, I think Mirodan would have told me if there had been any news."

"They're keeping quiet. News of my coming here has been passed on, and they're biding their time. Maybe they think if I don't hear anything I'll leave. Silly buggers." Grimm said.

"I don't think you'll give up just that easily." Mariel smiled.

Over the course of the next few weeks, nothing much happened. Mariel received a small note from Sir Jean, disclosing little, promising even less. Grimm returned to be his normal chagrined self and worked in the smithy, and Thamior moved out of the inn to quarters in the mage tower, where he taught the younger mages some spells. Melvin was as happy as a halfling, he baked bread and was at home in Little Hollow as he, presumably, had always been. There was no sign of Lorian or Uthar. As for getting in touch with Sir Jean, every time Mariel inquired after him, he had either just left or had not yet returned, and she grew more and more frustrated. She wrote some powerful scrolls to help the temple and made one scroll for herself, just in case it would work out and they would get together after all.

One such day she was working in the temple, and she heard hoofbeats. She was just finished with a healing scroll, and she laid down her writing gear and ran outside. She was just in time to see a grey horse leave the temple grounds, on its back a tall human rider. It must have been Sir Jean, because Mariel knew Ogdin and Mirodan were praying at the altar together.

"Oh not this time, you don't." she muttered under her breath, and ran after the horse. With a giant leap, given wings by her determination, she jumped through the air, landing neatly behind Sir Jean. She had to hold on to his armour to prevent falling off. The horse moved faster now, a canter going towards a gallop.

"No time to let you off." Sir Jean called over his shoulder. "I will have to take you along on this one."

"You have been avoiding me." Mariel said in his ear, but Sir Jean focused on the road ahead in stead of answering. They left Little Hollow, and the horse really galloped ahead now.



Meanwhile, Grimm had persuaded Melvin to take a walk with him. Obviously, it's very hard to say no to a gruff, hung-over dwarf with a war-axe on his shoulder when he asks you to take a stroll with him. They saw the horse of Sir Jean thunder past, and Grimm noticed Mariel on the back of the horse, holding on to Sir Jean for dear life.

"That was Mariel;" Grimm nudged Melvin. "Come on!" He started to run, and soon sped up even more when Melvin cast a Haste spell on both of them. They tried to keep up to the stallion, but in the small shrubs and patches of trees they soon lost sight of it.

Mariel and Sir Jean arrived at a clearing in the small copse of trees, somewhere outside Little Hollow. From out of nowhere, an arrow appeared, and Sir Jean hefted his shield just in time to deflect it. He nudged Mariel down from the horse, and he drew his sword. From all sides, there was a war-cheer, and some small humanoids came out of the bushes. They circled around the two, and probably would have overcome them if Grimm and Melvin had not arrived that very moment, attracted by the sounds of battle. When they saw that Sir Jean and Mariel were being attacked, they didn't hesitate and jumped into the fray. Not long after, the ambushers were either dead, or running for their lives.

They say that friends in battle become friends for life. This was slightly different. Melvin had cast See Invisibility, and noticed a small invisible chest standing at the edge of the clearing. Surreptitiously going over to it, he looked inside. Grimm saw what he was doing, and just as Melvin was trying to be inconspicuous elsewhere, he walked over to the small, invisible chest, felt where it was, and carefully picked it up.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Melvin called.

"What? Is this yours?" Grimm asked, looking murderous at Melvin.

"I know it's not yours!"

"What are you going to do about it?" Grimm shouted back, and started to walk back towards Little Hollow.

Mariel had finished patching up Sir Jean, and decided not to interfere. They followed the two, walking back to Little Hollow and talking quietly along the way. Sir Jean looked uncomfortable around her, and Mariel didn't really know how to soothe his nerves.

That afternoon, as Grimm had returned to the inn, a guardsman came looking for him. "Grimm? You are to follow me, now."

"What is the matter?"

"Excuse me, but may I inquire what this is all about?" Mariel asked, her nose in the air like a true elf. The guardsman groaned, but she didn't notice.

"You are being accused of stealing a chest with a lot of gold. It's best if you follow quietly." the guardsman looked at the axe nervously. Mariel stood up from the table she had been sitting at, talking quietly with Sir Jean about her vision.

"I want to accompany you." she told the guardsman.

"You can accompany me all you want, lady, as long as the dwarf comes quietly."

Grimm stood up, and followed the guardsman sedately. Mariel and Sir Jean followed suit. When they arrived at the town guard's barracks, they saw Melvin standing next to the captain of the guard.

During the second watch, Uthar heard something from upstairs. He shook the rest awake. A dark shape came down the stairs. When the shadow entered the small ring of torchlight, they could see it was Melvin. He first stood glaring up at Uthar, and told him to get out of the way. Then, he stood in front of Mariel, pointed a finger accusingly at her chest and started to shout, his eyes spitting fire. "How dare you! You left us! You let us go inside alone, and now Lorian is dead. He is dead because you left us here to die!"

"That's him." Melvin pointed at Grimm. "He's the one that stole it."

The captain cleared his throat, picked up a piece of parchment, and read the charges. "At noon today, Melvin Greatfoot, respected member of the Little Hollow community, came in to report a theft. According to Melvin, an invisible chest filled with numerous gold pieces was stolen from him by Grimm, a dwarf and visitor to this town."

He put down the parchment. "You are Grimm?"

"I am general Grimm Ironforge, sent to this lousy little town do defend your ass from a couple of thieves." Grimm spat.

"Did you or did you not steal the chest with gold from Melvin here?" the captain asked.

"It wasn't even his money to begin with! When I was doing my job this afternoon and I was killing off a couple of thieves that ambushed Sir Jean and Mariel here, we came upon this chest. I took it along."

The captain pinched the bridge of his nose, and sighed. "What you're telling me is that you're a general, sent to take care of some thieves, and you find the money, probably stolen, take it along. The money that was probably property of a lot of law-abiding citizens here?"

"You didn't even ask me if I intended to keep it." Grimm scowled. "You just sent your pretty longlegs to pick me up, based on the word of one halfling. The least you can do is verify my part of the story by getting your mayor to identify me, and ask those nice little people that came along with me what really happened."

At a sign from the captain, one of the guardsmen went to get the mayor. Looking drawn and tired, the mayor listened patiently to both sides of the story. "What was in the chest?" he asked. "Very well, each of you will get half of what was in there. I do not wish to start a war over a small thing such as this. The culprits have been apprehended, so that is a good thing. I don't want any

more quarrels today."

Grimm and Mariel walked back to the inn, Grimm's pouch filled with gold coins. He was still muttering angrily under his breath, and sometimes Mariel caught a word here or there, and it was none of it good. They ordered some dinner, and sat down to eat. There was some commotion at the bar, and a young chap put a pamphlet on their table. "Come to the party tonight!" he said; "Everyone's invited!"

The youngster left, and Mariel studied the pamphlet. "The mage tower is holding a small celebration for Thamior. Everyone's invited indeed, it looks like they're going all out on this one." She thought for a moment. "It might be a good idea to go, try and get Thamior to talk with us again."

"Let's go together then. Bunch of mages, you never know what they might be up to." Grimm still sounded chagrined, but that might just be his default tone.

After dinner, Mariel put on a clean robe that was not so ink-stained, and went with Grimm to the party. It was in a tent on the town square, and the moment they entered, Grimm offered her his arm. Surprised, Mariel took it. They walked inside, and only a few moments after entering the tent, Mariel felt some tingling. She looked at her arm, and saw that Grimm's arm was sprouting long, black hairs. His nails were growing, and his joints looked like they were disfiguring inside his body. When she looked at his face again, she saw that his eyebrows and beard were growing too, and that his forehead was protruding more than usual; his ears grew tufts of black hair too, his eyes had changed colour, and there were boils breaking out on his skin.

Quickly, she cast Dispel Magic, having a sneaking suspicion that someone was casting a nasty spell on Grimm. It only took care of some of the effects of the spells. The hair and long fingernails disappeared, but the colour of Grimm's skin started to change now, and she could not do anything else to help him. "Oh, Grimm, I tried to counter the spells, but I only could do so much. I'm sorry." Grimm looked at his arms, and let go of Mariel's arm. He carefully prodded his face, and felt the boils.

With his axe still on his shoulder, Grimm walked over to the stage, where the head mage, a half-elf, was overlooking the crowd. He looked, as elves are prone to do, quite satisfied. Grimm climbed up on the stage, extended his arm, and grabbed the half-elf by the throat. Mariel started to move forward through the crowd, pushing her way past students and townsfolk alike. When she was almost there, she saw another change pass over Grimm. It happened very quickly, but before she knew it, Grimm started to shrink, sprout whiskers, and hair all over his body. The hair turned white, and within seconds there was nothing left of Grimm but a tiny white mouse.

The mouse climbed into the pants of the head mage, and started to move upwards, towards his groin. Before Grimm the mouse could arrive there, though, a ghostly hand intercepted him, and lifted him out of the pants. Thamior climbed on the stage, and the hand moved towards him. Mariel came to the stage as well, and jumped on too.

"Stop it! What are you doing to him?!" she cried, and Thamior and the half-elf turned to face her.

"He was attacking my master." Thamior said, anger shining through in his voice, and his eyes spitting fire.

"How can you say that? Did you see what they did to him?" Mariel replied.

"They were fooling around." the head mage said dismissively.

"They were picking on him; is this your idea of a party? Let's all pick on the dwarf, because he's different? That's speciesism!"

"It still does not explain how he could come up here and attack the head mage, grabbing him by the throat like that!" Thamior spat at her.

"Do you have any idea what kind of a day he's had? He's been accused of stealing, almost been thrown into jail by the very people he's sent here to protect. And just when he thinks he can relax, there's a bunch of mages casting spells on him. He's a fighter, he has no idea what that means, what it does, and whether the effects are temporary! Please, change him back." Mariel pleaded.

Thamior leaned back, folded his arms across his chest and slowly shook his head.

"Please, Thamior. He's done nothing to you. He didn't even take his axe from his shoulder. If you really think that his intentions were hostile, I don't think you'd want to see him fight. All he knew was that he stepped into a party, and all sorts of strange things were happening. I would step up here too, to demand an explanation. You didn't even give him a chance to explain his actions." Thamior didn't reply, but his eyes were burning with rage. For a fellow elf to protect a dwarf was almost unthinkable, especially when considering that the opposing side was his own kind. Mariel, however, felt her responsibilities lay elsewhere. For weeks on end she'd been trying very hard to get the friends together, trying to make sure they would form the alliance that could stop that demon prince from becoming a god, and so far she'd failed in bringing them closer together – the only person who was slightly receptive was now a mouse, and she'd brooked no further progress with Sir Jean either.

"I feel a guest at my party has assaulted me." the head mage began, and raised a finger, to stop Mariel from speaking. "I will not stand for that, I will brook no aggression here now. And I will not speak on this matter any further tonight. If you wish to plead his case, you may present yourself at my office in the mage tower tomorrow morning."

Mariel sighed, and held out her hand. "Can I at least take him back with me, to make sure he's as comfortable as he can get?"

The head mage nodded at Thamior, and the ghostly hand, still holding the struggling mouse by its tail, deposited the animal in Mariel's hands. She turned around, carefully holding Grimm in her hands, and left the party. Many eyes were focused on her, but not one dared raise his hand to cast a spell any more. She put Grimm on the table in her quarters in the inn, and put some old chunks of bread by him, just in case he was hungry. She put her stained robe on the chair nearby, and fell down on the bed, waiting for reverie to come. Things would surely look better in the morning.



If only it were morning when she woke - it was still very dark, and an alarm bell had woken her up. It toled urgently, waking up the town. Mariel grabbed the mouse from the table - he was already awake too - and carefully put it in her pocket. Grabbing her quarterstaff, she left her room, and went outside to see what the fuss was all about. One of the hurrying guards led her to a familiar building: the bakery. She told the guards that she could give healing where needed, and they admitted her, pointing her to a back room, where Melvin sat on a stool next to the bed. The sheets were blood-stained, and they covered a small, limp body. Carefully, Mariel pulled a corner of the sheet away, and looked at the face of a pretty halfling female. Her eyes stared unseeing at the ceiling, and her throat was slashed. The sheets covering her chest were also dripping with blood, indicating more wounds there. Mariel covered her up again, careful not to get any blood on herself. Then she went over to Melvin.

"Melvin, I am sorry. There's no healing powerful enough to heal death."

Laying her hands on his head, she checked him for injuries, but there were none. He was in perfect health. "There is one option we could try though. I have the power to bring people back from the dead, if they have tasks unfinished here. I wouldn't normally offer this, but I am willing to ask her if she wants to come back."

"You would speak with the dead?" came a voice from the corner of the room.

Mariel turned around and looked at a familiar person. Thamior, who was looking out of the window there, his back still turned towards her.

"Yes, I would." Mariel replied. "If my Goddess allows me, and the dead are willing to talk to the living."

"Such dark practices are not for elves." Thamior said dismissively. Mariel ignored him, and focused again on Melvin, who was nodding soundlessly in agreement to her earlier offer.

"I will have to go somewhere quiet to pray, to ask my Goddess if I may do this for you." Mariel said; "I think it might be best if you went along to the inn. You can't stay here for the rest of the night, even if you can't sleep."

Like a child, Melvin let himself be guided to the inn, where he sat down on Mariel's bed and stared blankly at the wall. He was completely catatonic, but sometimes a tear rolled down his face. Mariel sat down carefully in a corner of the room, and focused on her prayers.

When they returned little over an hour later, Thamior had left, but Ogdin and Mirodan were now present. They had cleaned the body of Arlies, and were just getting rid of the water. She curtly told Mirodan what she intended to do. He made a face when she suggested her course of action, but he promised not to interfere. Softly, he whispered to Mariel exactly what the murderer had done to Arlies, making sure Melvin could not overhear. Mariel blanched when she heard the extent of the damage, but thanked Mirodan for telling her. She kneeled next to the bed and called Melvin over.

"This will look very strange to you, and I must warn you that it will come as a shock. She might not even want to come and talk, and if she does, all she can reply to are simple questions. Yes or no questions."

"I only need to know one thing." said Melvin; "If she'd come back."

Mariel looked at the maimed body of Arlies, now washed so the blood did not cake her hair anymore. The wounds were very clear now, they stood out as angry red stripes on the soft white halfling skin. "I shall begin now." Mariel said, and she focused. She didn't need to know the victim to be able to communicate with her, ask her to answer a few questions she could answer from her otherwise lifeless body. A shudder went through her as she cast the spell that would allow her to talk with Arlies - working with the dead always made her feel cold and deserted. As a sign that she was ready, she touched Melvins arm softly, and asked Arlies the first question. "Arlies, I need to know, do you want to come back to life?" The question was simple, and the answer that came from the lips of the body of Arlies was even simpler. "No."

Melvin drew a shuddering breath, and when Mariel turned to look at him, she saw tears streaming from his eyes.

"Tell her I'm here, and waiting for her!" he urged Mariel; "ask her if she would come back for me!" Mariel turned once more to the lifeless body.

"Arlies, Melvin is here, and he is heartbroken. He says he loves you very much, and wants to know if you would come back for him."

"Yes." came the reply. When Mariel released the spell, she hugged herself, trying to get warm again. She stood up, and walked around the room for a bit. Melvin was still staring at his dead girlfriend, her body now again non-responsive. Not one word would come over her lips until Mariel would cast the spell again, and even then, he knew he would not be able to talk to her himself, would not be able to ask what was on his mind. Mariel stopped pacing, and lay a hand on his shoulder.

"Melvin, there's no rush in deciding. It can wait for a few more days, you have time yet to think this over. Ultimately, it now comes down to what you say. But I want you to know some things. Right now, Arlies is with Yondalla. She will not know any more suffering or pain at Her side." Melvin closed his eyes.

"She said she would come back for you, and that means she loves you still." Mariel continued. "But you must consider what you would be doing to her. You would take her away from the side of her Goddess, and put her back into a body that is broken. The attackers severed her arm, and I don't know any cleric or priest who could heal that. She'd never be able to knead dough, and would lead the life of an invalid."

Mariel excused herself after that, and went to the mage tower in the town square. Melvin had taken a room in the inn, where he could be alone, and could return there if he wished. She could not make the decision for him, and would not, so there was other business to attend to. Carefully, she took the wriggling mouse from her pocket, and excused herself for taking so long. The sun had only just gone up, but she suspected the head mage was in his office already.

The discussion didn't go much better this time. Her arguments had not changed, but somehow the half-elf nodded at the end of

their talk. "Very well. I will ask Thamior to change the dwarf back, but I can not command him to do it. Last night we were all a bit worked up, and I hope we can talk about it as gentlemen today."

"Thank you." Mariel said honestly. "I will stay at the inn today, in case Melvin will need me. Thamior can find me there."

"I heard the news, and I am sorry for his loss. Now, I have other duties, so please..."

Mariel took it as the mage intended, and stood up, nodded politely and left the room.

When she had just fed the mouse some breadcrumbs that were left over from her lunch, there was a knock on the door of her room. "Come."

Thamior opened the door, and closed it behind him. Then he turned to face Mariel, who had stood up, and picked the mouse up in her hands protectively.

"Can I take him?" Thamior held out his hands.

"What are your intentions?" Mariel asked.

"I promise you will see him again. You will just have to trust me."

Mariel thought for a moment, and let the mouse decide. Grimm clambered awkwardly over her fingers into Thamior's hands, and looked back, twitching his whiskers.

"Very well. I will be here for the time being." Mariel said.

Thamior didn't wait for polite goodbyes, and did not offer any either, but just left, holding the mouse carefully in his hands. He walked outside the town, and found a nice patch of trees where they would not easily be seen. He set Grimm down on the ground, and spoke to him. "Grimm, I know you can hear me. Although I am convinced you would have done the same or worse, had I acted towards your chieftain in such a way, I do need to apologize. I could have solved this in a different way." Thamior fell silent, and focused on a spell, weaving a complicated form with his hands. The whiskers disappeared, the tail too, and the white hair slowly turned back to red. Within moments, Grimm was back, fully dressed and with his axe, just the way he was when the spell was cast on him. "I will go now," said Thamior, "to see if I can change some things from our 'dream'. Good luck."

Grimm narrowed his eyes at Thamior, and without a word, he turned around and walked back to the town.

It was much later that day that a small halfling was building an altar in a clearing not far from there. From his pockets came pieces of food, some fresh milk, and an apple. Melvin carefully laid out all the bits he needed for his prayers, but after building the altar the sun had set and he was tired. Snuggling up in the cosy cubbyhole he had found, he decided to take a nap first. In the middle of the night, he woke up, because a huge bear had come home and found its nest inhabited. Melvin ran for his life, and finally made it to the gates of the town, panting and half-crazed. The next day, he took Grimm along to protect him from any other bears that might interrupt his prayers or naps.

When there was a knock on Mariel's door, she jumped up from the bed, where she had been thinking. The group was more or less together now, even Sir Jean, reluctant as he had been at first, was now committed to their cause because of the tragic death of Arlies. Thamior, however, as much as she had known him in her vision, was probably never going to join them now. Grimm, she thought, would not trust him again, and she was very reluctant herself to give him the benefit of the doubt in this case. Elf to elf, you'd never shout, and he had done just that. She opened the door, and let Melvin into the room. She sat down on the bed again, so he could sit in the only chair the room had.

"I've had a good long talk with my Goddess." Melvin said. "And then I arranged for a burial. I believe that Arlies is happy where she is, and I shouldn't bring her back. But I also know that I will not rest until I have the murderer in my hands."

Mariel nodded. "I will help you, and Grimm and Sir Jean also, I think, if you were to ask them."

"I hope you'll be there, at the funeral." Melvin stood up. "It's going to be tomorrow. Don't worry, Mirodan will do the honours, I asked him already. But you offered to help out where he would not, and I wanted you to be there." He left the room, and Mariel returned to her ponderings.

The next day there was a small ceremony. Mirodan spoke a few words, and Melvin said his goodbyes as well. There were a lot of villagers there; Arlies had been well-loved in the community, and her death had shocked it to its core. Almost everyone in the village would go to buy their bread at her bakery, and she would be sorely missed.

Grimm stood in gleaming dwarven platemail next to Sir Jean, also dressed in shining armour. When everyone left, they, Mariel and Melvin were the last ones there. Mariel laid a hand on Melvin's shoulder. "Melvin, if it's alright with you, I'd like to Hallow this place so nobody can bring her back against her wishes, and her soul can stay with Yondalla forever." Melvin nodded, and Mariel said her blessings and hallowed the ground around Arlies' grave. The four of them walked back to the inn when Melvin was ready, and shared a silent dinner.

When Grimm awoke the next morning, he saw the window was open, which was odd. He always slept with the windows closed, and he was quite sure it had been bolted shut when he had gone to sleep the night before. Then his eye fell on a small note, pinned to the door of his quarters with a knife. He took the knife from the wood, and opened the note, which exploded in his face. "Ow! Fuckers!"

He went to Mariel's door, and knocked. She had just finished her prayers and was just about ready to go downstairs to have breakfast. She had not even noticed the note on the door, and when she opened her door, she was surprised to see Grimm there.



"Did you get one of these too?"

"One of what?" Her eyes fell on a knife in the door. "Oh, that."

"Gimme that." Before she could open it, Grimm took it from her hands and opened it. This one too, exploded in his face. He ignored the small burns and the smouldering beard hairs, and read the note, before handing it to Mariel. "Let's check on Melvin."

Together, they went to Melvin's door, and knocked. It took longer for Melvin to open the door, and Grimm said through the door that if there was a note in his room, he shouldn't open it. When the door opened, Melvin was just opening the note, after making a complicated gesture at it with his free hand. Nothing happened, no explosions, at least until he read the contents. His hands started to shake, and Melvin started to convulsively rip at the note. Grimm saved it from his grasp, and read it aloud to Mariel. "It says 'Do you miss her yet?' It's signed 'Z.A.'" Mariel's mouth opened in disbelief.

"I will cut out his heart. With a spoon! I will have his head for this!"

When Mariel had finally gotten Melvin to calm down again, Grimm had picked up Sir Jean at the temple, who had also received a disparaging note like the rest of them. They discussed strategy during breakfast.

"I have permission to take whatever steps necessary to catch the thieves that have been bothering this town. Now we've got another mission. I say we go to Ironforge, talk to my Chief, and bring enough mithril here to make any thief greedy. Set a trap for them."

"I agree that we have to catch whoever did this to Arlies," said Mariel. "How can we be sure the mithril will work?"

It was Sir Jean that replied. "Mithril is a valuable substance, and we know that whoever killed Arlies is most likely allied with these thieves. They did not go after Melvin's family until after he helped me defeat those thieves I found. We know we had a vision, warning us of the future. Maybe our opponent also had a vision."

"If that is the case, we are all in danger." Mariel pondered.

"All the more reason to get that mithril. I can probably convince the dwarf smith here to help me build an armour out of it, maybe we can even get enough for two. If we go after these murderers, we need good gear. You," Grimm pointed at Mariel, "will need armour too."

Mariel laughed. "I do not. I'm a healer."

"Which is why they will be trying to get you first." Sir Jean pointed out. "You are the one that can put us all back on our feet, and that makes you dangerous to them."

"Allright." Melvin cut in. "We get the mithril, Grimm makes armour, and then we go after this Z.A."

Grimm arranged a pony for Melvin and a horse for himself, and the same day they set out. They traveled past Margden Woods, and the trees in the distance remembered Mariel of the fact that she would be going farther from her home than she had ever been - without knowing when she would be back there. But she knew it was for a good reason they went, and whenever she looked at her companions, she could hardly believe that they had finally come together, and what price they had ultimately paid for it.