

Respite at Sir Jean's

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Despite Sir Jean's best efforts to remain humble, as soon as he and Mariel came to the fence surrounding his estates, it was clear to Mariel that the little house that he had told her about was not so little after all. From the entrance of the estate, the house itself was not even visible. A lush green lawn, and a path leading past flowerbeds and around trees was all that Mariel could see.

When they had ridden a little while longer, they came around a bend in the path, and there it was. It wasn't such a small house, but a huge mansion, three stories high, with the name of Sir Jean's family worked into the stone. Two large doors ornated the front of the house, and the flowerbeds surrounding it all emanated a tranquil feeling. Bees buzzed, the sun shone around the clouds, and immediately Mariel could feel at home.

"Come, the stables are around back." Sir Jean said, leading Silver Spirit around, over the lawn and leaving the path. It surprised Mariel that there was no paddock out with the stables, and she said so to Sir Jean as well.

"I like my horses to roam free." he explained. "They can move around the estate as they please, and I know they feel better because of it. Come, I'll show you the house, and your room."

Once inside, Mariel could not help but notice the luxurious surroundings.

"My father was a well-off merchant, and he made sure my mother was comfortable here." Sir Jean said, his explanation sounding more like an apology than anything.

He showed her around downstairs, a salon, a dining room, a sitting room, a huge kitchen with a merry cook already bustling to prepare dinner for the two of them, and of course a library.

"Everything is at your disposal, you can use any one of the two bathrooms. And this is your room. The servants can help you out if there is anything else you require." Sir Jean opened the door to a large room, with double bed, and more doors that probably led to a couple of huge closets.

That night, Melvin, Grimm and Aaron arrived as well. They also were shown to their rooms, where they fell into a deep sleep, tired from a long day in Andorhall and then the day's ride right afterwards.

In the morning, Sir Jean and Mariel mount their horses once more to travel to the temple district of Ironforge. The ride was pleasant, and they arrived swiftly at the temple square. Sir Jean entered the temple of Heironeous, and Mariel followed him. She looked around, trying to catch a glimpse of a familiar face, but besides Johan, the high priest, there were none that she knew.

"I will come and pick you up after I am done here." Sir Jean said.

"Very well. I will be at the temple of Ehlonna." Mariel turned around and walked across the street, Para contentedly following her. She let Para walk around the grounds freely, took off her shoes and left them at the archon hounds near the entrance. She ran into Regalia soon enough, and Mariel sank to one knee in front of her.

"Come child," Regalia chided her with a smile. "You know that is not necessary."

Regalia took Mariel's hand, and Mariel stood up again. In a gesture of affection, rare for elves, Regalia laid her other hand on top of Mariel's. "Now, tell me why you have come to see me. I have heard of your deeds in Andorhall and Dun Morgh."

"I wanted to talk to you about my path." Mariel began, and sat down with Regalia on the grass of the temple. "When I left Margden Woods over a year ago, I could not suspect that my path would lead me here, with these friends. That I would do such deeds, fight demons and dragons. I was, somewhat at least, unprepared for all of this. I have never regretted my decision to serve Ehlonna as a cleric;" she continued; "but I wished - and still do - that I could do more. To serve her in a different way. I wish to become a divine crusader for her cause."

Regalia nodded. "And how?"

"I have asked my friends to support me, to train me, and to help me in becoming this for Her. I've asked Ehlonna in my prayers to strengthen me, and to help me."

"And what are you prepared to do?"

"I know the path will be long, the road will not be easily traveled. And I have realized that I can't do this alone. But I am willing to go the distance, I am prepared to make the sacrifice it takes to become this so I can serve Ehlonna in this way."

"Then you have made the right decision. I am glad you realise it will not be easy." Regalia smoothed her temple robes and looked Mariel deep into her eyes, taking her hands once more between her own. "You will have to work so hard, and you will need to trust in your friends, you will need them very badly at times when you're tired, need nourishment or an arm to cry on when the pain gets too bad. First and foremost, this is between you and Ehlonna, and I am glad you took this decision. You also realise it will be hard, and you know that you will need your friends. This is very good, and you will need them to support you. I am sure they will."

"Will you bless me?" Mariel asked.

Regalia placed her hands on Mariel's head, and spoke the words of blessing.

They sat in silence for a while, and Mariel was once again awed by the serenity and peace the temple of Ehlonna radiated, even in a city. How much it reminded her of home, the trees rising high overhead, birds and wildlife prospering. She felt that, in her own way, Ehlonna showed herself in all that was honoured in her name. Her mantle was the cascade of leaves from the branches high overhead, the way the light filtered between them. Her serenity and peace radiated from every sprig, every twig.



Her song was in every call of the birds, and the stirring of the mice in the field.

At last, Mariel broke their silence.

"I would like to give Sir Jean a present, something to represent Ehlonna at his home. Would the temple allow me to plant a rosebush there?"

"Of course, child. That should not be a problem. Come, we will see what gifts we can bestow."

That night, after dinner, Mariel asked Sir Jean, Melvin and Grimm to accompany her. She picked up the canvas sack she used on campaign as well, and lead the way outside.

"I have thought long about this, and I wanted to give you and your household something to remember. These are for your household."

Carefully, Mariel took out three small plants, their roots still wrapped in the lush earth of Ehlonna's Temple. She had taken care to dig them out herself, her fingers carefully prying the earth around the roots, and wrapping the moist earth into scraps of canvas to protect the roots from hardship and travel. With care, she unwrapped the canvas from the roots, and set the plants into the soil near the kitchen entrance, where the flowerbeds were more sparse.

"This is basil, parsley, and mint. These are larger plants, so that you could use them right away. Take care to cut away only small amounts, and you will enjoy these for a long time. Melvin can tell you more about what to do with basil and parsley. As for mint, well, I personally have a fancy for mint tea. Just drop a few crushed leaves in a cup of hot water, and enjoy. Also very good when your nose is clogged, or to use in an ointment against chest pains."

Mariel picked a leaf off the plant, and crushed it between her fingers. She let Grimm and Sir Jean sniff the aroma's emanating from the leaf. Then she walked to the front of the house, where the path ended in a loop in front of the huge front doors. In the center of the loop was a large, empty flowerbed.

"I thought it was a shame to leave such a wonderful landmark, such an eyecatcher, unused."

Carefully, Mariel unpacked the last plant: a rosebush, with the roses budding. It was not too big yet, and would need care before the winter, but it would most likely survive. Especially if Mariel would tend it for a while.

The roses, still budding and tiny, showed promise though. Already they were fragrant, and the colour was visible beneath the green leaves. They were a beautiful bright fuchsia. The rest of Sir Jean's garden had mostly yellows, whites, and oranges as colour, and having a bright rosebush in front of his house would be a definite eyecatcher.

Mariel was kneeling next to the patch of ground, and took Sir Jean's hand, softly pulling him down.

"Please, help me plant this," she said. Carefully digging her fingers into the soft soil, she dug a hole. Then, she unwrapped the canvas and set the rose in its place, Sir Jean pushing the earth back over the roots and pressing it down, embedding the rosebush into his estate. Mariel motioned to Melvin, who used a Mage hand to sprinkle water over the rosebush. Not quite contented yet, Mariel moved her hands over the plant, softly touching and caressing its tender stems, the budding flowers, and even the thorny spikes. And after that final blessing, she sighed, a job well done.

The next day Mariel's training began.

The first day they only practiced manoeuvres, bareback, and Mariel worked at least as hard as Para to keep on going. After their little riding lesson, Mariel rubbed down Para, Grimm gave her a present. "I asked Sir Jean, and then I made you this. It's not very special, but it'll be good to start your training with."

Mariel unsheathed it, and admired the new shining longsword. "Thank you Grimm, I am sure it will come in most handy."

"Wanny try it out?"

Grimm stood ready on the grass, wearing full plate just like Mariel. He spread his hands invitingly, taunting her to try and hit him. Mariel tried to strike Grimm again and again, but he deftly deflected her blows until there was one where she managed to hit him. She raised her sword, stepped in, and the blow landed on Grimm's arm. In response, Grimm told Mariel to get ready, and hit her back. With his double-handed strike, Mariel was flung backwards from where he had hit her. Sir Jean wanted to run to the rescue, but she waved him away. "I can take a little bruise."

Again, Mariel tried to strike Grimm, and she swung low, getting in under his guard. The blow fell on his leg, and Grimm attacked her again. He stepped to the side, and swung his axe two-handed at her torso. The axe swung over her shoulder, and struck her from left shoulder to right hip. Mariel was thrown sideways and back, falling on the grass, and lay unmoving, bruised and bleeding on the grass.

Now, Sir Jean did run to the rescue. He stabilized her wounds by casting a Lay on Hands, and checked to see if she was alright. Softly he patted her cheek, taking care not to slap her too hard, until Mariel came to again. When he helped her up, they noticed that Grimm had started to practice with Aaron, who was deftly dodging his every move. After a few minutes of this, Grimm stopped being a little careful of the little chap, and hit him about as hard as he had Mariel, with the difference that Aaron was not wearing armour. Aaron got in under Grimm's arm, moved to his side, and backstabbed Grimm nicely with his dagger. After that, Mariel hurried to heal them, and the practice session was called off. Enough blood had been spilled.

After the day's hard work and a lovely dinner by Eugenie the cook, Melvin, Mariel, Grimm and Sir Jean retired to the salon to sit, chat, read a book and drink some ale and wine. Sir Jean and Grimm sat near the fire and drank some dwarven ale, and Mariel - cuddled up on a chaise longue with a book called 'Horseback Riding In Battle' in her lap - sipped her elven wine occasionally. The talk was relaxed and quiet, and Melvin just sat caressing his spoon in his lap, listening quietly to the others' talk.

"My father died of a disease unknown, and my mother just withered away after that." Sir Jean said. "There was nothing anyone could do, no priest could heal him, and he just - died."

"Oh Jean, that's just terrible." Mariel sympathised.

"After that, my mother left the house more and more often, and one day she didn't return. I haven't seen her since, and I think that if she is still alive, she still grieves for my father."

"My parents were murdered," Grimm said. "One day, there just was this mage, who came into our village. He laid the place to waste for no reason, and left again. I had hidden, knowing that there was nothing I could do. I didn't originally come from around here, you know. After this wizard killed my entire family I just wandered around the world, ended up on a ship some time or other, and ended up in Ironforge. The Chief took me in, and gave me a chance to learn this trade. He gave me my training, and my axe, and later, a command. I owe my entire life, what I have become, to him."

They fell silent for a little while, each thinking their own thoughts, Melvin absent-mindedly caressing the blunted edge of the wooden spoon. After a while, Grimm looked meaningfully at Mariel, and she took it as a cue.

"My mother had gotten pregnant with me, and when the day of my birth came, she journeyed to a sanctuary of Ehlonna to give birth. I was born there, in Margden Woods, and raised by the priests and priestesses. She left shortly after. Goat's milk, ewe's milk, I don't know what they fed me, but I was reared in the love and shelter of Ehlonna. I made my dedication there, decided to become a cleric, and didn't leave Margden Woods until I had a vision of Little Hollow. Actually, I've had a very loving life."

The sound of the crackling fire was all that could be heard for a little while, and Mariel closed the book and laid it on a side table. Grimm cleared his throat. "So, ahurmm. This feast at your mansion in a few days, Sir Jean, will there be any nice ladies?"

Sir Jean blushed somewhat, and replied: "I don't know what you like in a girl, Grimm. You never told us."

"Yes Grimm, do tell." Mariel grinned, while pouring herself some more wine.

"Actually, I don't fancy dwarf women. I'm more of an uncommon dwarf. I like slim girls, long hair. Elves, or humans, it doesn't really matter." He harrumphed in his beard, and turned his gaze to Sir Jean. "What about you, Jean?"

"I would never marry. I would not want to force my wife to be a widow if I were to die in the service of Heironeous."

"Elf or human?" Grimm bluntly asked, winking at Mariel.

"I do not have a preference. Elves are very nice, but humans too. I like long blonde hair."

"No dwarves, Jean?" Mariel asked. Melvin giggled, and fondled his spoon. Sir Jean did not reply.

"I am kind of nervous for the feast," Mariel admitted. "The tailor designed me a very nice dress with a train, but I am afraid that when I have to walk down the stairs I'll trip and fall flat on my face."

"Maybe Sir Jean would like to accompany you?" Grimm suggested, winking again.

"I think maybe Grimm would be better suited." Sir Jean replied in turn, not looking at Mariel.

"Aw, come on Jean, she is your type."

"Don't you want to accompany me down the stairs, Jean?" Mariel asked.

"Of course I do." he stumbled.

"Well then, it's settled." said Grimm.

"I wouldn't want to force you into doing something you wouldn't want to do. Are you sure you don't mind?" Mariel asked Sir Jean.

"No, I do not mind. I will accompany you."

The night continued and Grimm kept making remarks towards Sir Jean, winking at Mariel in turn, until she tired of this. The talk turned to horses, and as Grimm went outside to feed Beefsteak an apple, Mariel asked Sir Jean to join her in a moonlight walk.

Once outside and on the grass of the lawn, Mariel stepped out of the slippers she wore indoors, and walked towards a more private place in the garden, Sir Jean following her a trifle unsteadily.

The moon was almost half-full and had just risen above the treetops. The silver glow seemed to make everything soft and gentle, and even the breeze was silent and caressing. They admired the moon, and the way the light changed the way the trees looked, and walked around the mansion. Once Mariel was sure there was no-one around to listen in on their conversation, she turned the subject once more towards the things of a more personal nature. "I couldn't help noticing how Grimm was continually suggesting things."

"Indeed."

"I wonder what he meant by it."

"He is often a bit vague. He is a dwarf, after all." Sir Jean avoided the question.

"Too true. But I did notice there was a truth in his words, and I couldn't help seeing your reaction."

"Oh?"

"Is there something you want to tell me, Sir Jean?" Mariel asked.

"I don't know what you mean." he replied.

"I have to admit, I am a bit curious what you were really thinking." Mariel paused, and stopped walking, turning towards Sir Jean to face him. "You really don't mind escorting me to the feast?"

"No, I really don't mind." Sir Jean looked at Mariel, and she knew he could not lie, not to her or anyone, because of his oaths.

She shook her head, trying to clear it from the foggy wine-induced rush. She felt like she was walking in a fog, but a warm fog.



She was a little bit confused, and was trying to puzzle out what Grimm had been trying to tell her with his nudges and his winks. Clearly he felt there was something she should know, something so precarious that it couldn't be said out loud in front of the others.

"Foolish of me to ask. But I wouldn't force you to do anything against your will." Mariel paused again, but Sir Jean didn't make an attempt to speak. Mariel sat down on the lawn, and patted the grass, motioning for Sir Jean to sink down beside her, and she continued.

"I wonder if Grimm is trying to accomplish something. Do you know what he's about?"

"I have an inkling, yes." Sir Jean turned his head away from Mariel, and watched the moon again.

"Are you going to tell me?"

Sir Jean remained quiet, obviously pondering his reply. After a long silence, he spoke at last. "I do not know if it is wise to speak yet."

"I would like to know what is on your mind, Jean. It seemed to me," she changed the subject slightly, "that Grimm was implying I might be a match for you."

"Really?" Sir Jean sounded genuinely surprised.

"Blonde, blue eyes, elvish or human. To tell you the truth, I had no idea you fancied... women who look like me."

Sir Jean did not reply, but turned to look at her again. Mariel cast her eyes downward, suddenly shy by his stare, his eyes soft and serene. At last, Mariel spoke again. "Jean, do you have feelings for me?"

"Yes." came the reply, almost instantaneously. "I do."

"More than those of friendship?"

"Yes." he replied again. This time, it was Mariel who looked away. "I had no idea." she whispered.

"I did not think it was the right time to tell you yet." They sat in quiet for a while, and finally Mariel looked into Sir Jean's eyes, the unspoken question shining behind his eyes. Mariel looked away, not knowing what to answer to the quiet pleas.

"I fear to ask it, but I think I must." Sir Jean stumbled. "Whatever you will answer, I will accept it. I know you will not lie to me, so... do you love me as well?"

At first, Mariel did not reply, nor did she raise her eyes to meet his. She kept avoiding his gaze, and stood up. She walked over to the nearest shrub, and plucked a chrysanthemum flowering underneath it. Then she walked over to Sir Jean and at last looked him in his eyes. With a soft touch, she pressed the flower into his hands, and took his head in both hands. Bowing it towards her, she kissed his brow, and turned around, walking back to the mansion.

When Mariel arrived in her room, she closed the door behind her, and sat down on the bed carefully. She buried her face in her hands and then stood up again, walked over to the washbasin, and splashed some water into her face, trying to clear the alcohol from her system. When she looked in the mirror, she noticed the flash of gold from her left hand, and looked at it.

The ring from Lorian.

She still wore it, never took it off, afraid to do so. It was on her left hand and would stay there, until he would ask for it again. If she would ever see him again.

Mariel went back over to the bed, and lay down on the coverlet. Staring at the ceiling, she sighed deeply. No, Sir Jean's confession that he loved her was something she had not seen coming. She tried to think back, but couldn't really distinguish a point where she would say he displayed his feelings. He was protective of her, but then again, he was protective of Melvin too, since he was the most vulnerable one of the party.

What a mess she put herself in. Had she encouraged him? Shown him affection in any way, or flirted with him unintentionally? She couldn't remember. She knew she had flirted with Lorian, but then again he had flirted with her, being ever so sweet when she had poured her heart out. On one hand, she still felt for Lorian, a handsome elf and a priest just like her. But on the other hand, it had been over six months since she'd met him, and besides what she could recall from the vision she didn't know him at all.

And then here was Sir Jean, a paladin of Heironeous. He had protected them and would give his very life to make sure that the group could get away if need be. She knew this, even if Sir Jean had not said so explicitly, she could feel his intentions. How could she have been so blind? He must have kept his feelings locked away very well, for her not to notice. What was it he had said again? "I did not think it was the right time to tell you yet." He might have waited forever to tell her.

She blinked, and sat up. As noble as Sir Jean was, he also was a human.

She remembered so well what she had said the night she met Lorian, and Aaron had sat at the campfire when she returned from talking to Lorian in private. "Who is the half-breed?". Somehow, those very words pierced her heart in fierce agony now. Knowing Sir Jean, how could she believe a human could be any less than an elf?

And then she saw again Sir Jean's pleading eyes, and she could see what lay behind them. He would give his very life for the group, and he would wait forever if need be. He would accept whatever she would say, and not raise a hand in protest.

Determined to push her thoughts away, Mariel undressed and crawled under her blankets. Perhaps with the light of day, she would know.

While Mariel went to bed, Sir Jean stayed behind at the clearing they had visited, and lay on the grass, staring at the stars. Only after Mariel passed him during her morning prayers did he get up, and go to bed himself.

That morning, Mariel arranged for Favrielle to bring Sir Jean his breakfast in his chambers, and joined Grimm and Melvin at the breakfast table after trying studiously to write a letter.

"Where's Sir Jean?" Grimm asked them. Melvin shrugged.

"I don't know." Mariel replied. "Perhaps he is ill."

"Yeah, where did you run off to after I went to see Beefsteak? When I returned you were all gone!"

"I mmm went to bed." Melvin replied with his mouth full.

"I went for a walk with Sir Jean, but he stayed behind after I went to bed. He was still there when I was praying this morning." Mariel replied.

"Weird. I'll have a little chat with him." Grimm said.

As Grimm got Sir Jean to come downstairs, Mariel went into his room, and put a neat, sealed envelope on Sir Jean's pillow. Then, she turned around and went outside to take care of the horses. The letter read:

"My dearest Jean,

Though it was only yesterday you confessed your feelings for me, it seems like a week has passed. I feel I must humbly apologize to you, and I beg you will allow me to explain why.

Though I cannot claim the wine had completely made me take leave of my sense, I do feel that I would normally not have forced such a confession from you on any subject, much less one as precarious as this one. For this, I beg your forgiveness.

To proclaim one's love and not get a proper response must be one of the most agonizing experiences there is. The truth is that I had not expected you to proclaim your feelings for me, I had no idea that you felt this way. However, it can not explain why I left you as I did, without an answer or even a response, but only a flower and a blessing to reward your courage and honesty. For this too, I beg your forgiveness.

Your absolute acceptance of who I am and what I say, though admirable, only complicated matters. I felt I could not give you an answer, not the answer you deserve, not right away, partially because of your immediate acceptance of whatever the answer would be, as the complete truth. My feelings are a whirlwind and I least of all can make up or down of them. In that respect, I feel I have wronged you greatly and unjustly in my silence. If anyone deserves my absolute devotion and open honesty, it is you. For a long time, I have experienced your honour, righteousness and grace, and I feel I repay you only with the opposite of what you deserve. For that too, I beg your forgiveness.

For the rest, I hope you can forgive my ignorance, and allow me the time to explore my own feelings further as we can get to know each other more than we already do, as we spend some time in your peaceful home.

Know that you will never have to explain that Heironeous will always come first, as I know I will not need to explain that Ehlonna will come first. This I know is one thing we truly understand about one another, and one more aspect I love in you.

The rest will come.

With love,

Mariel Morningsun"

After a while, when Mariel had long since taken care of the horses, Sir Jean approached her in the stables.

"Would you still like to go training today?" he asked Mariel.

"Yes, I would. The road is long, but I walk it willingly."

"I'll put Alexander in platemail for you, so you can get used to riding a horse that is geared up for battle."

When Mariel finally mounted the horse called Alexander with some difficulty, she found it was indeed a different feeling. Sir Jean mounted Silver Spirit, also completely battle-protected, and looked at Mariel.

"A round along the fence first?"

"Yes, let's start easy."

Mariel urged the horse to walk, but it didn't respond. She gave him a stronger nudge, and he moved, but only slightly. The horse's armour must have muffled the signals she gave him.

"It - does - take some getting used to." she apologized.

They continued the training, and when they had been around the estate one round Sir Jean motioned for Mariel to follow, allowing Silver Spirit to speed up to a gallop, giving him free rein. Mariel, with some difficulty, got Alexander to gallop as well, and followed Sir Jean through the quiet suburbs of Ironforge. When they arrived at a square, where more people walked around the streets, Sir Jean galloped on ahead as if nothing was the matter, but Mariel held back a bit, afraid to hit a pedestrian, or even a child.

Finally, they came to a large open field, and Mariel galloped on, urging Alexander to catch up with Silver Spirit. Then, Sir Jean drew his sword, holding it high up in the air. Mariel followed suit, struggling to keep riding, to keep her longsword high up in the air, struggling with the currents of wind flowing around it.

And suddenly, Sir Jean drew rein, forcing Silver Spirit to make an immediate stop. Mariel saw what he did, still holding his sword up in the air, and tried to copy him. Alexander, well used to the training and the ways of battle, obeyed instantly, but



Mariel wasn't ready for the abrupt stop, toppled over the side of Alexander, and landed on the grass, her longsword flying out of her hand and ending sharp-down in the meadow.

While riding back to the manor, they discussed the training.

"I was scared to hit someone, when you galloped over that square. What if there was a child, playing, who could not get out of the way any more?"

"I trust Silver Spirit implicitly," Sir Jean replied, "and know he would have jumped over the child, or avoided it in any other way. But it is good you were careful in stead of reckless. Especially since you still need training. Are you alright?"

"I'm just a bit bruised, nothing more. Picking up the sword from the back of a cantering horse was hard."

"And also a very essential part in your training. When disarmed, and mounted, on the field of battle, it is very important you can grab your sword, or any sword, without having to give up the advantage of being on horseback."

"I understand. It was a good training. Thank you."

When they arrived back at the manor, Grimm approached Sir Jean, and whispered something in his ear, before taking Mariel out for her training.

"Why don't you try and hit my weapon, strike it from my hands to disarm me." Grimm suggested.

Mariel made a move, and hit his weapon, but Grimm held onto it. She swung the longsword again, hitting Grimm's axe with a resounding blow and managing to strike it from his hands.

"Good!" Grimm said, and walked away to retrieve his axe. He came close to the place where Aaron and Melvin were training as well. Aaron dared Melvin to throw a fireball at him, so he could learn how to dodge them, and Aaron winked playfully at Grimm.

"Don't see you doing this." he taunted.

Grimm winked back, and walked back to where Mariel was standing. He kept looking at Aaron, who taunted him grinningly, and before Grimm knew it, Mariel had raised her sword again and struck the axe from his hands again. The axe flew through the air, and landed a few meters away. Before Grimm could really understand what was happening though, Mariel thundered into him, her shoulder hitting his breastplate and they crashed to the ground together. As soon as she realized she was on top of Grimm, Mariel rolled off him, and got up. She held out her arm for Grimm, but couldn't lift him from the ground, and he stood up on his own while she retrieved his axe for him.

"Hmmm. Very good. I wasn't paying attention, and you used that."

A third time Grimm invited Mariel to strike him, but this time she hooked her leg around his, and he fell over backwards, landing heavily on the soil.

"Are you alright Grimm?" Mariel asked, but before he could answer, there was another fireball, and a shriek of pain as Aaron could not dodge it fast enough.

Mariel turned to look, and saw that Melvin was pouring a potion into his mouth.

"I think that's enough training for you today." Grimm said, getting up.

"I'll go and soak in the tub then, for a little while. Jean had me working pretty hard too." Mariel sheathed her sword.

"After your bath, wear what I laid out for you."

Mariel raised an eyebrow, but Grimm did not explain any further. Shrugging, she went into the bathroom and took a long hot bath, before returning to her room, only to find a long red dress, embroidered with small roses, lying ready for her on the bed.

"Oh, Grimm..." she sighed, but she put on the dress nonetheless. Gathering her hair and pinning it on the back of her head, with one lock escaping the neat bun, and wearing only the holy symbol of Ehlonna as jewelry, she looked in the mirror. It was, she had to admit, a very pretty dress.

When she opened the door of her room, she found Grimm waiting outside, wearing a suit that was slightly too small for his well-trained arm muscles. He offered her an arm, and led her down the stairs, out back to the patio, where a table was set for two, roses, flowers and candles on the table.

"Milady;" Grimm held out one chair for her, and Mariel sat down, not knowing what to think of all this. Then Grimm disappeared, and she looked at the trees, with the moon rising between the branches. Only a few minutes later, there was a sound, and Mariel turned back to the house, where Sir Jean had exited the house. He was wearing a suit and a top hat, that was playfully crooked on his head. Slowly, Mariel stood up and nodded to him, waiting for him to greet her. Sir Jean, however, clumsily sat down on the other chair, and she sat down again.

"Your idea?" she asked, indicating the table with a sweep of her hand.

"Grimm's, I think."

In a flash and a sudden rushing of air, something brushed by the table, and a dark-clad shape set down two plates with hors d'oeuvres in front of them, vegetarian. In silence, they began to eat, until Mariel's eyes fell on a glass of elven wine next to her plate. In it was a rose. She picked it up and looked at it, not knowing what to say.

Inside the rose, hidden away between the red petals, there was a glitter of gold.

"What...?"

Carefully, she took the golden ring from between the petals. There was an inscription: "To Mariel, from Sir Jean". Mariel looked at it for a while, pondering, and then lay the ring on the table between them.

"I doubt you would inscribe a ring with "Sir Jean", so I'm guessing that was not your idea."

"It was not." Sir Jean admitted.

The hors d'oeuvres disappeared, and a plate containing the main course appeared in front of them. Again there was the idea of someone running past the table really fast, the wind of his passage marking the occasion.

"Are you not going to put it on?" Sir Jean asked her.

"Jean, if and when you give me a ring personally, I would gladly wear it. But not when a present is made for me without your consent, but in your name. It would just feel wrong. I would always know it wasn't your idea."

They ate in silence, oftentimes stealing glances or just looking at each other. After finishing the main course, Mariel stood up.

"Jean, will you walk with me, please?" She looked at him with pleading eyes, glancing hurriedly at the mansion where she knew Grimm, and maybe Melvin and Aaron too, might be listening to their every word.

Sir Jean stood up. "Of course."

Mariel left her slippers on the edge of the patio, and stepped into the garden barefoot again. With the hem of the red dress slightly stirring the grass, she and Sir Jean walked, arm in arm, towards a quiet corner of the garden, where they would most likely not be overheard.

"I am sorry, Jean, I just felt so uncomfortable there. Like the world was watching to see my every move."

"It is quite alright. I don't mind going here with you."

"That Grimm, I never knew he had such a romantic streak. Did you know he picked this dress for me to wear tonight?"

"It looks really nice on you." Sir Jean replied, and swallowed. "I received your letter."

Mariel nodded, but didn't say anything.

"You still did not answer my question, Mariel. Your letter was anything but conclusive on the subject."

Mariel turned away from Sir Jean, and instead sought out another shrub with flowers, a rose this time. Blessing the plant, she took one flower, and placed it carefully behind Sir Jean's ear. He followed suit, blessing the plant and picking another perfect flower, placing it carefully behind her pointed ear, and softly stroking her cheek before letting his hand fall back to his side.

"Do you feel love for me as well?" Sir Jean asked.

"Love..." Mariel began, and swallowed, "If love is a thousand chipmunks tapdancing in your stomach, to feel the moon shine on your face a thousand times over, to look upon the world through the prism of a rainbow, every colour magnified and enhanced; to float on the wind along with the butterflies; if that is love, then yes. Because that is what I feel."

Sir Jean exhaled, a smile broke out on his face, and he laid his hand against her cheek. In turn, Mariel placed her hand on his face, and softly kissed his lips, a gentle brush of lip-to-lip, before pulling back and taking his hand and walking on.

They happened upon the horses, frolicking outside their stables, and Silver Spirit and Para coming over to greet them. In stead of going straight towards Sir Jean, as Mariel had expected of him, Silver Spirit came over to Mariel and nudged her with his head so he could nibble her neck. With his lips he smeared some of his drool and remainders of fodder all down the side of her neck and shoulder. Mariel laughed delightedly.

"I guess that means he likes me." she laughed, and placed a hand on Silver Spirit's head, caressing the space between his eyes. She looked at Sir Jean through her lashes, her eyes set in a devious smile.

"I'm going to need another bath, Jean, will you join me and wash my back? I think he's got me there too."

Sir Jean nodded, and patted his horse on the neck before walking with Mariel to the bathroom. He drew the bath himself, not wanting to disturb the servants, and Mariel eased the gown over her shoulders, letting it drop on the floor before stepping carefully into the bath, her back turned towards Sir Jean. A smear of horse fodder and drool marked where Silver Spirit had nudged her, and bits of it still glistened wetly on her skin.

Sir Jean tried to undo his buttons, but grew impatient and just tore of the suit, before stepping into the bath and washing Mariel's neck and back carefully.

When they were done bathing, Mariel stepped out of the bath unashamedly again, drying off and wrapping a towel around herself.

"Will you join me in my room?" Sir Jean heard himself ask.

"I think I will sleep in my own room tonight." Mariel whispered, and softly kissed Sir Jean's cheek. "Goodnight" she whispered in his ear, and she went to her own room.

The next morning, Mariel went outside for her prayers again. She could not wear her old robes under her platemail, but they were perfect for prayer-robes, although a little restricting. She had already adapted the neckline, taking off the high collar and cutting out a nice round neckline that was perhaps a little lower than intended, but that was not a problem.

Meanwhile, Gilot, one of the servants, had taken care of finding a nice bleach that had enhanced the sun's bleaching powers, changing the colour of the robes from grey to white.

Clad only in this white robe, her blonde hair washing down her back unrestricted, she would pray each morning. The garden estate of Sir Jean was a marvellous place to pray indeed. Every morning she could find a different route between the trees, and get to know each aspect of each plant, each and every one different in their ways, their feel and their looks. She could talk to her Goddess in a place that reminded her a lot of her old home, the temple in Margden Woods, and that was worth a lot to her.

After the usual daily routines of training, with Sir Jean's worried looks whenever she should fall or hurt herself, they gathered at the evening's dinner.

"So, dwarfie, how's my dragon-scale armour coming along?" Aaron jested.

"You'll see. Meeanwhile, I've made you all this." Grimm grabbed five leather thongs from his pouch, and gave each one



necklace with a dragon's tooth dangling from it. Though it was a small tooth for a dragon, it was still quite big for Melvin, but he grinned happily.

"Tonight will be the feast in the city," Sir Jean said.

"Ah, yes, I'll need to clean my armour a bit, it's gotten quite muddy in some places with all that training." Mariel said, and grinned down at her breastplate, tapping one of the cleaner places on it.

"I'll do that, you just try out the new jacuzzi with Jean." Grimm winked at her.

The last few days Grimm had been very busy building new additions to Sir Jean's mansion. After first building a sort of trophy-room, with the remainders of his dragon-souvenirs, he also had added an extra building, seamlessly blended with the main building, with a swimming pool and a warm tub where well water was bubbling up in a pool. He called it a 'jacuzzi', which was probably a complicated dwarven word for "pool".

When Mariel was dressed and ready, with her new dragon fang necklace and her holy symbol around her neck, her shining mithril plate and her helmet tucked under her arm, she went outside to greet Para.

"Aaron, you can ride this horse, if you want." Sir Jean indicated one of his other horses.

"I was kinda hoping to walk." the half-elf replied.

"It is an hour's ride at least, do not be silly." Sir Jean said, and busied himself with saddling a horse for him.

Mariel asked Aaron if she could speak with him in private for a moment. They walked to the side.

"Go on." Aaron said, filling his new dragon tooth pipe with some halfling leaf and looking quite smugly at her.

"I wanted to apologise, I think we got off on the wrong foot."

"Ah?" Aaron held up one finger.

"Alright, I got off on the wrong foot. I said something nasty, and I wanted to ask if..."

"You fullbreed, always with your noses up in the air." Aaron broke in.

"I wanted to apologise. Now that I've got to know you a bit better, I realise I should not have judged you without knowing you."

"Damned right you shouldn't have." Aaron said. "Well, if that is all, we'd better go. Your Shawn is waiting with my ride."

Swallowing a remark Aaron would have deserved very well, Mariel went over to Para and decided to let it rest. She mounted, and lodged the banner of Ehlonna into her left stirrup, keeping her right hand free, and they set off. They rode like a parade, all shining armour and feathers on the horses and Sir Jean's helmet.

After an hour's ride they arrived at a town square, and they manouvred through the masses of people towards a stage that was built there. The Chief was there also, and waved them over.

The entire square was filled with people, from side to side. They were craning their necks to see the horses arrive, clear by the feathers and the banners of Heironeous and Ehlonna that these would be the heroes of Ironforge they'd been waiting for. The crowd started to buzz, human, halfling and elf discussing who these heroes were. The dwarf guards stationed around the square glanced in Grimm's direction from time to time, a look of admiration and pride on their faces beneath their helmets.

The Chief ushered them onto the stage, and the crowd fell silent. In the front rows there were chairs, and Mariel noticed the Elf council sitting there. The Chief signalled to the side, and cleared his throat. The sound was amplified, and his voice rang out over the square so everyone could hear what he said.

"People of Ironforge! I, Grombeard the Strong present to you the persons who defended the gates at Andorhall and rode out to meet the enemy. These are the folks who killed the black dragon who wanted us dead. I present to you General Grimm Ironforge, Mariel Morningsun, Melvin Greatfoot, Sir Jean Bourgouix-Novieux Bourgueville, and Aaron. Welcome, all of you. You have been summoned here to be rewarded by the city, and here are your rewards. Grimm, may this axe be as sharp as your skills, may you swing this axe with all the power it possesses, and let this axe strike fear in all your enemies, let this axe be heard!"

The Chief handed Grimm a Dwarven waraxe, of unknown metal. Grimm admired it shortly, and raised to the sky in a cheer, urging the crowd to cheer as well. When the cheers died out, the Chief continued. "Mariel, may this wand help you further and keep your friends protected."

He handed Mariel a wand, carved from wood and very ornate. Puzzled, she looked at it, but before she can really think about it, the Chief gave her a small note, and winked.

"Melvin, come here. Your present is not as huge as the rest, but I think you will find it suitable." He continued.

A piece of cloth that was draped over a bulky thing was pulled away, and in the evening light a gleaming new cooking set appeared. Lying next to it were two wands.

"May you cook many meals with it. And Aaron! May this bag contain a lot of tricks you may need. Here you go son."

Aaron received a small bag, and nodded his thanks. He looked as though he were about to throw up.

"Sir Jean, finally. Accept this sword, an old relic from Heironeous. May you use this sword to defend all who need your aid and go in battle with this holy symbol of the mighty Heironeous. Use it with valour and courage, use it wisely!"

"Phah!" Aaron spat, and jumped off the stage, clutching the bag. "Such heroes." He turned from the stage and wound through the crowd, not looking back. A murmur went up, but as soon as Sir Jean stepped forward, it was quiet again. The people in the square ignored the leaving half-elf, all their attention now focused on Sir Jean, who cleared his throat.

"I, sir Jean Bourgouix-Nouvieux Bourgueville, a Paladin who serves the Mighty Heironeous, want to use this moment to express my gratitude to the following people." said Sir Jean, pulling out a small piece of paper from his armour, and folding it open so that he might forget no-one.

"The dwarves who have defended the gates. Who willingly hold their ground no matter what the enemy threw at them. For that you have my gratitude. The elves who had the knowledge and the skill to reduce the enemy numbers without hesitation, without complaints. For that you earn my deepest respect. The humans, for keeping the men up and fighting, cleaning the wounds and to be everywhere they were needed. For that, my admiration. And the halflings I admire the most, for their skill in cooking and keeping the fighting men well fed and motivated. For that you have earned my deepest respect. And for all the cavalry who followed me wherever I went, against all odds, and against hordes of enemies, they rode firm. Even when wounds were taken and death was near, they kept on fighting with honour and valour. For that my deepest respect and utmost trust you have earned."

There were cheers from the crowd, from all parties. There were many there that had fought to keep Ironforge safe, and they were glad to be remembered by a man as Sir Jean, in his shining platemail a beacon and example to all.

"And then, not least, my friends." Sir Jean continued. "Melvin, for being a friend to be proud at. And you, Grimm, for being a dwarf with enough courage for a whole army. And so you stand, like an army. And you, my dearest Mariel, you who possess the power to move someone's heart and spirit, and are always there to help a hand. And even you, Aaron, who I distrusted at first, but now you have gained my trust and my respect. For that, I owe all of you my life."

Sir Jean gazed over the crowd, to the edge of the square, where Aaron had stopped walking for a moment when he heard his name called. But then he shrugged, and walked on, leaving the celebration. Sir Jean continued.

"And by ending this speech, I want to take this opportunity to remember the fallen and pay the respect they earned in combat. May Heironeous guide them home. People of Ironforge, show your respect and feast as you have never feasted before. Let the enemy hear we have not been defeated, we did not give up Ironforge. Let thou be heard!! For Heironeous, and Ironforge!!"

All the people in the square cheered, even the dwarves who stood to keep the peace. The elf council in the front row stood from their seats to show homage to the city. The Chief raised his waraxe high, and cheered along.

And then there was feasting.

As Mariel was searching through the crowd, she suddenly saw a familiar face. It was Lorian. For months on end she had hoped to run into him again, and when she finally had given up hope of seeing him, she had fallen in love with Sir Jean, knowing that since the last time she had seen Lorian's face she had changed. And here he was, still as handsome as when she had thought him lost from a vision, and found him again on the fields.

"Mariel, you look well." Lorian said, looking her into her eyes. Mariel blinked, and smiled.

"I had not expected to see you. What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you and your friends at the celebrations today. You did well."

"Everyone did." Mariel said. "We were not the only ones that fought. Still, we are all still alive, and that alone merits a celebration."

They fell silent for a little while, and then Lorian spoke again. "So, did you get my letter?"

"A letter? No, I'm sorry, I did not. Where did you send it?"

"I left a message at the Temple of Ehlonna in Margden Woods." said Lorian. "I had hoped you had read it."

"No, we travelled a different road to Ironforge. I have not seen my home in too long." Mariel sighed. "And much has happened. I should tell you, that I am not the elf I was when we last met. I do not know what impression you have of me, but a lot of things have changed since then." Mariel broke eye contact, and laid the wand she received as a gift in the crook of her arm, buying herself some time before she had to tell Lorian what she knew she must tell him. It would be very unfair to leave Lorian thinking she was still in love with him, and she could not bear the thought of deceiving him. He deserved more than that, and she would have to find the courage to tell him. Mariel sighed again, and then looked Lorian in the eye again. "The group has grown more together, and recently, very recently, Sir Jean and I have become a couple." Mariel said. "It has taken me as a surprise too, but I am happy." she sighed, and shifted her helmet in the other arm. "We were on a mission far apart, and..." she paused, made a helpless gesture; "...life went on. I know you deserve a better answer, but all I can give you right now is the truth. I have made a choice."

Lorian just looked at her in amazement, as if waiting for her to say it had all been a cruel joke, she would never choose a human over him. But the words did not come, and finally he realised that this was the truth. He blinked in surprise, recuperated.

"I hope you are not mad with me." Mariel said. "I did not mean to lead you astray. If I implied any promise to you in any way, I am sorry. But as I said, life went on. Please tell me you are not angry."

"I am not." Lorian finally said. He sounded sad, though.

"If you ...well, you did give me the ring, and I never took it off. I can understand if you want it back." Mariel said. "I never did find out what it does, exactly."

"It protects you." said Lorian. "And it was a gift. You must keep it." Lorian took her hand in his, and laid his other hand over it. His ring, still on Mariel's left hand, suddenly felt warm, and there was a tingling sensation spreading from it.

They stood like that for only a few moments, yet Grimm had timed it perfectly. He came walking by, and noticed Lorian holding Mariel's hand.

"Hey, what's going on guys?" he said.

Lorian let go of Mariel's hand, and nodded at her.

"Thank you." Mariel said. "I know Sir Jean has invited you to the party at his manor. Will you still come there?"

Lorian did not reply, but looked at Grimm for a moment, and then back at her.



"Please, come to the party." Mariel pleaded. "If only to show that you are not angry with me and we can still be friends."

"I think I will come." Lorian said. "If circumstances allow. Please, your friend is waiting for you, and I musn't keep you from him."

Mariel gestured her thanks, and walked away with Grimm, not daring to cast a look over her shoulder, afraid to see the hurt in Lorian's eyes. Ah, but it hurt to her too. He was still as handsome as ever, and this conversation only proved he had thought about her as well, and in what way she could only imagine.

Oh, she had made up her mind, and given the key to her heart to Sir Jean, but that didn't mean she didn't care about Lorian any more. And if he could not be her loved one - that road they would never take - she still thought of him as a dear friend. She would hate to lose him, and she would go to great lengths to save him from grief. Yet now she was the one to cause that grief - and though she had thought long about this choice, she knew she could not save both man and elf from the grief of not being with her. Even if he never spoke about his feelings, Mariel feared she had crushed Lorian's heart that night, and knew it had been inevitable. She could no more lie to him as hurt him, and yet she had been forced to do either.

Her mind was soon taken from the delicate subject by the feast, and a little situation Grimm took her along to.

"Thamior is here." he said. "I thought it only fair if you were there, he wants to say something to me."

"Well, he can start by apologizing." Mariel said and scowled. "He has broken so many rules of etiquette I can't even start by counting them."

"Anyway, he's in here." Grimm opened the door to a small building that bordered the square. When he closed the door behind them, the sounds of party were shut out as well, and they could talk. Thamior sat on a chair facing the door, and cleared his throat when they entered. Mariel crossed her arms over her breastplate, shifting her helmet and wand to keep them from falling on the floor.

Thamior started to say something, in a guttural language Mariel had only heard muttered in curses in the corridors of Andorhall and Dun Morgh, when she had been binding a particularly nasty wound caused by a shard of stone that had splintered off the great walls of Andorhall and she had hurt the dwarf in question while doing so. He had been very articulate in that very language, and she had been glad not to understand one word he said.

Grimm interrupted Thamior. "Speak Common, so that Mariel will understand too."

"If you wish." Thamior said, undisturbed. His face did not change, and Mariel found his cool exterior appalling. He either must have suspected Grimm would say that, or would really not care who heard his words. She wondered what it was he had said.

"I wanted to apologize." Thamior said. "To you, Grimm, for all the grief I have caused you. I acted too rashly, too ill-advised, and should never have done what I did."

"Apology accepted." said Grimm. "Now did you come all this way here to tell me that?"

"No." said Thamior. "I have information as well. About Lorian, and where he is now, and how he came to lose his arm."

"You are mistaken." said Mariel. "I just spoke to Lorian, and I am quite sure he still has both arms."

"Is it the same Lorian then?" Thamior asked her, his head slightly crooked to one side, his eyes narrowed slightly. Then he turned to Grimm again. "Anyway, I thought you should know."

"Well, we will have to talk about this later. A party is no time to talk about things like this. Too many ears to hear what you say." said Grimm. "Besides, my Chief wants to celebrate with me, again, that we're still alive. Let's go see Sir Jean, perhaps he can spare a bed for you."

The party was mostly over for them by that time, and Melvin packed up the cooking gear after gawking at it for so long, and the went back to the manor. Thamior had quarters assigned, and been left in them. When they had ascended the stairs to their rooms, Mariel had offered to accompany Sir Jean to his room, an offer he gladly took. They had merely slept, his strong arms around her, and her face on his shoulder, but it was enough. Mariel awoke from her reverie, and noticed Sir Jean was, predictably, already awake and looking at her. He wished her a good morning, and pulled her even closer.

Mariel sighed contentedly, and snuggled up to him, but after a little while she sat up.

"What is it?" Sir Jean asked her.

"I spoke with Lorian yesterday." Mariel said. "He came to the celebration to see us. I am afraid I hurt him."

She rolled on her belly, and put her chin in her hands. "I couldn't bear to see him in pain, but I felt I had to tell him about us. I am afraid he would keep hoping... and now I am afraid I hurt him. I asked him if he was angry with me, and he said he was not. But he said he doesn't know if he will come to the party."

"Would you blame him?" Sir Jean asked.

"No, I wouldn't. But there is nothing I would wish to change. Life just went on."

Sir Jean pulled her down again, and took her in his arms.

"I have known Lorian for a long time, for as long as he's been a cleric of Heironeous." he comforted her. "And I think he will be there. Do not worry about it, you did the right thing."

They lay like that for a long time, and when the sun rose and the first rays of light started to illuminate the room, Mariel sighed, and sat up on one elbow.

"I am worried, Jean." she said. "What if Ehlonna blesses us and I get pregnant? I am afraid that Z.A. or whoever is after us will know, and try to get to us by hurting our child. He got at Melvin through Arlies, after all. I am very afraid our child would be in grave danger, and I will not put a child into such jeopardy."

"Hush, my dear." Sir Jean said, stroking her hair. "Have faith in your Goddess. I think it will be fine, if you were to get

pregnant. Our child will certainly be well-cared for."

Mariel smiled. "I can see Grimm trying to teach a child of ours how to use that waraxe...that thing the Chief gave him is huge!" "Yes, but I do not think Grimm would let it out of his reach for more than a second." Sir Jean said. "And it would not be such a bad thing to have Grimm as a godfather."

"Or Melvin." Mariel smiled. "Yes, I think you are right. I should not worry so much. Speaking of gifts, did Regalia say anything about that wand I have been given?"

"She did not." Sir Jean said.

"I shall go to the temple today, then, and ask her. Will you come along?"

"I cannot." Sir Jean sighed. "Because of Thamior. We do not know him that well yet."

Mariel said she understood, and laid down in Sir Jean's arms for a little while longer, before going outside for her morning prayers. She was always quite open to Ehlonna, but now she really poured out her heart, and told her Goddess how happy she was, and what was troubling her still.

When she returned from the Sanctuary of Ehlonna, the Chief had only just arrived. He greeted Mariel just as he had greeted Grimm and Sir Jean. Clapping her on the shoulder and grinning like mad.

"So, Grimm," said the Chief, "what is it you wanted to see me about?"

Mariel sat down at the kitchen table, where Eugenie was just serving lunch. The Chief took a piece of bread and dipped it into the juice of his steak. It was a heavy dwarf lunch for him and Grimm, and Melvin didn't seem to mind that there was more food on the table than normal. Thamior was his usual aloof self. He had a book next to his plate, but didn't read in it for a change. Perhaps he thought it worthwhile to take note of the conversation.

"I just wanted to thank you again, in person, for the gift." Grimm toasted with his tankard of ale. "It's a mighty fine axe you gave me, and I'm very happy that you did."

The Chief waved his thanks away with a wide gesture from his hand, which was still holding the molested, dripping bread. "It was the least we could do after you saved the city. We're all very grateful."

They ate in silence for a while. Then the Chief poked Grimm in the chest. "How about we try it out in a little bit? Slap each other around for fun?"

"Sounds like fun." said Grimm. Sir Jean nodded agreement.

"Want to join in as well, Mariel?" asked Grimm. She thought about it for a moment, and then nodded. "Why not, I have to train anyway."

"That's the spirit!" cheered the Chief.

Only half an hour later, Mariel awoke on the sofa in the hallway. Her armour was poking into various sensitive parts of her body, and when she moved she could feel fluids - blood or sweat perhaps - move around inside her breastplate. She appeared to be lying in a puddle of it that had gathered inside her armour. She also had a splitting headache and her back felt like it was burning. When she tried to sit up, flames spread out over her back, her skin feeling like it would rip apart at the seams, or at least the new seam that must have been gouged into her skin there. Various bumps and bruises indicated that she had indeed done her best and failed at keeping the Chief's axe at bay. Slowly but surely she could recall the fight they had had. Of course it was only a mock battle, but in the first blow Grimm had tried to plant on the Chief, the latter had handily deflected the axe. In reply to Grimm's attack, the Chief had struck at Grimm from an odd angle, and the axe had struck Grimm across the chest, gouging his armour and bruising, cutting, tearing what flesh it found. Grimm had been thrown back, unconscious and bleeding heavily.

Mariel groaned and sat up. The next bit wasn't much fun to remember. Seeing Grimm being tossed backwards, she had turned her back on the Chief, trying to rush for Grimm to heal him as soon as possible. Before she could have walked away even two paces, the Chief had taken the opportunity she had presented him, and hit her squarely in the back. The sheer force and magnitude of the blow had knocked her unconscious right after landing flat on her face.

Apparently, Sir Jean had stood his own, and carried her inside. There was no sign of him now, but she was sure that the Chief would not have put her on the comfortable sofa and left her again to regain consciousness. The metallic taste on her tongue - not blood, but sweeter - indicated that he had probably even fed her a healing potion to stabilize her. And left her to her wounds, to learn from her mistake.

Grudgingly she went back outside. On the grass was a huge bloodstain, and the indentation of a heavy object like a fully armoured dwarf landing on the soil. Grimm was sitting in one of the patio chairs with a tankard of dwarven ale in his hand. He looked absolutely terrible, with his wounds no longer bleeding badly, but still the occasional drip of it falling on the tiles. The Chief and Sir Jean were talking about some battle of the past. Only when she had sat down herself did they look at her.

"I hope you learned from that." said the Chief, toasting his tankard of dwarven ale at her.

Mariel was afraid he'd mention it. It was very, very foolish to turn your back to an enemy like that in a battle, and she knew it. But the thing was that she had to learn from her mistakes, to learn very hard and very fast. In a real battle, she'd been dead, more likely than not, and all because of her mistake.

"I did." she said. "I shouldn't have turned my back towards my enemy in the middle of a fight like that. I have learned my lesson well, I assure you."

The Chief drank deeply, and Sir Jean looked at her. He didn't look worried at all, he too knew all too well what she was capable



of, but she may have surprised him a bit to acknowledge her mistake like that.

Mariel knew it was only a part of her transformation, into her new chosen path. That she should learn from her mistakes, and be humbled into reciting them was all a part of her lessons.

And then the day dawned of the party. Sir Jean had been busy, beside the horseback riding lessons and the visit of the Chief, to arrange things. When Mariel woke up, with aching muscles of the sparring adventure, Sir Jean was already out of bed. It was very early in the morning, the sun not yet up.

She noticed there were boxes of ornaments stacked around the halls and into corners where they would not be in the way, and she suspected that there would be plenty of people working very hard to make everything ready for the party. Ignoring this for the moment, she walked to a secluded corner of the estate where she could pray in quiet.

After her prayers she ran into the horses, Para and Alexander immediately coming over to her, affectionately nuzzling her. They were bored, she could tell, and decided to mount Para, something she achieved without a saddle in only two tries.

Para set off at a trot around the estate, clearly happy and eager to be out of the normal day's proceedings. Alexander followed them obediently, even though Mariel didn't ask or tell him to do so. He was quite contentedly running alongside Para, and she could tell he too was happy with the exercise of it. When they came closer to the manor, Mariel could hear the racket of hammering. There was clearly some construction going on, and she was curious as to what it was. She steered Para closer still, and thought of grabbing a slice of bread for breakfast too.

Near the patio on the grass was a skeleton of wood, a building to be of some kind and a lot of dwarves lugging more wood, hammering nails or sawing planks. Mariel could see Grimm overlooking the other dwarves, some sketches on parchment in his hands. Mariel dismounted, and came up to him. "Will you look at this!" Grimm grumbled, and shoved the parchment into her hands, pointing out various mistakes that to his eyes were obvious, but to Mariel's they didn't mean anything. "Here, and here! I'm going to have to redo these plans."

"It looks like you're quite busy." Mariel smiled. "How far along are you? Do you have time for breakfast?"

"Almost done." said Grimm. "It's not like it's really that complicated, we'll be finished in a jiffy. But I have to redraw some of this."

Mariel let him to it, and walked inside. From the clattering sounds, it was very busy in the kitchen, and she opened the door carefully. The kitchen was filled with people, who were all twirling spoons, baking and frying stuff, and some halflings with their arms to the elbow in flour, all kneading some kind of dough. In the middle of it all, Melvin was examining some hors d'oeuvres, and he didn't even notice her until she called out to him, to ask if he had some breakfast. "Here. Take some slices of this. Finest whole wheat bread, you'll love it."

Mariel thanked him, took two slices of the huge bread, and rejoined Grimm outside, who was still grumbling. He'd been scratching corrections on the parchment, and was just pointing out to the other dwarves what he'd changed.

"Here, have some breakfast." said Mariel, and she gave him one of the slices. "Have you seen Jean?"

"Nope, but my guess is that he's busy organising people to decorate and build and whatnot."

"Anything I can do to help?" Mariel asked.

"Can you redraw building plans?" Grimm asked.

"No, I can't. Besides, this looks like a language I can't read. Sorry."

"Then I wouldn't know." Grimm said.

"I'll take Para and Alexander for a quick stroll, they seem to be aching for some exercise. I will not go too far, and I will not be long."

Grimm waved his hand at her, while focusing on the building plans again. He was clearly back in his little world of timber and nails. Mariel mounted Para again, still with some difficulty. Para still wasn't saddled, and she was still wearing what she now called her prayer-gown, the bleached robe. When sitting a horse, the robe exposed her legs to the knee, but it really didn't matter that much to her. She checked to see if Alexander was following her, and they rode off the estate.

At the sound of hoofbeats, Grimm looked up from his work. There had been an unfortunate mixup with his breakfast and a mouthful of nails earlier, but other than that, work was now progressing much faster, now that the plans had been altered. He saw Sir Jean riding Silver Spirit, followed by a cart of timber and a couple of dwarves. There were also some very feminine looking elves, that were probably men.

Grimm blinked. Amongst the elves was one dwarf, and he - yes definitely a 'he' - had ribbons tied in his beard. It was not uncommon for a dwarf to braid his beard, and the more rich and vain a dwarf was, the more flashy the ornaments. It had been quite the rage a few years back to have brass beads with runes on them at the tips of the braids. Not for soldiers of course, there were all sorts of nasty places those beads could end up in. Grimm took great comfort from the thought that he could use those ornaments that way, especially since the rich and vain usually were a pain in the rear.

Beads were one thing, but ribbons were quite another. And they were pink.

When the dwarf - if you could call it that really, it was a disgrace to the species, according to Grimm - turned around and saw Grimm looking at him, the latter quickly turned away. He busied himself with rummaging around in a toolbox, and shouting orders at the other dwarves, who themselves seemed shocked at the pink ribbons as well. Grimm shifted the way his axe hung

on his hip, and twisted his belt so the blade of the axe covered most off his ass. Only then did he turn his back on the dwarf. You could never be too careful, after all.

When Mariel returned, Grimm tried to get her to lure the ribboned dwarf away from his vicinity, but Mariel just said she really didn't need the dwarf's help, and rubbed the horses down herself. She glanced at Grimm, who was still 'almost done' but still working very hard indeed. He was also very obviously ignoring the dwarf with the ribbons in his beard. He was hanging up ribboned decorations, and chattering in Common with the elf designers.

When Mariel entered the mansion, she ran into Sir Jean for the first time that day. "There you are." she smiled warmly at him. They sat down in a couple of chairs that were located near the window.

"There you are." Sir Jean replied, the emphasis quite obvious in his voice.

"You've been busy today, I heard." Mariel replied.

"Yes, and I'm not done by far. A lot of things need taking care of, and the elves are only half way with decorating the place. I hope the extra kegs of dwarven ale will be delivered before the guests arrive, because as soon as the Chief arrives here we will have run out for sure." Sir Jean sighed. "And what have you been up to?"

Mariel smiled. "After my prayers I ran into some very bouncy horses who were clearly in need of some exercise. I came back here, but it didn't look like I could help Grimm or Melvin, and you were not to be found. So I took them out for a little stroll. Para was happy to have me 'natural' on her back again, and Alexander didn't mind running alongside her."

"I totally forgot about them in the hubbub." Sir Jean confessed.

"They made it abundantly clear they required my attentions." Mariel smiled. "So all is well."

"Did you try on your gown yet? The tailor arrived a little over an hour ago."

"No! Oh dear, he's arrived already?" Mariel blanched. After the so enjoyable horseback riding, she smelled of sweat, but mostly of horses. "I'd better freshen up a bit."

"I'll let him know you're coming, and that you need to wash up. Good luck." Sir Jean kissed her cheek, and stood up from the chair. He walked out of the room and found a servant that was running around to do it for him, and then attended to other matters. There was still a lot of work to be done before the party.

There was a knock on the door. Without moving too much, Mariel called out that whoever it was, they could come in. The tailor had had to make some minor adjustments, and she'd taken a long, hot bath, taking care to wash and rinse her hair out as well. Then, with the help of the tailor, she'd put on the gown, and now there was a dwarf with pink ribbons in his beard making an excellent masterpiece of her hair. He'd commented on the softness and sheen of her hair, and had sounded a bit jealous. But for the rest, the dwarf had been remarkably silent.

To be completely honest, Mariel had felt a bit guilty that she'd adapted so well to being pampered like this. After being on the road for so long, and spending most of her life inside the sober rooms and earthy smell of Ehlonna's sanctuary, this was quite a novelty. She could sleep on the raw earth, with only a blanket to keep her warm, she could bathe in mountain waters, but a feather bed and warm bath were luxuries she'd not before enjoyed. And enjoy them she did, she had to confess. Before she had met Grimm, she'd never even considered wearing plate mail, and before she came to Sir Jean's mansion, she'd never even wondered whether she even had a taste in clothing. She'd always worn her grey robes, and she had never had a ballgown designed to her tastes. And here she was, wearing a sky-blue velvet gown with bluebells embroidered on the neckline, her hair half being pinned up, and the other half a waterfall of blonde locks down her back.

"How are you coming along?" asked Grimm, and he stepped inside. He frowned at the dwarf, but focused on Mariel again quickly enough, so that the dwarf might not even have noticed. Grimm was wearing some very well-tailored clothes, and suddenly Mariel could feel that there was no more work being done on her hair. Apparently, she was not the only one that was impressed. Grimm's outfit was a tight top, with a mandarin collar. His well-developed muscles tensed the fabric, but because it was so well-tailored Mariel suspected this was the intention. His beard, though rugged, was shining and clean. It was braided anew, and quite a contrast with the tight top. He was also wearing something that would be best described as a man's skirt, an ankle-length kilt that flared wide, also a contrast with his tight top. He wasn't even armed, unless he had a knife propped in his boots somewhere under the kilt.

"I think I'm almost done." Mariel replied. "I need to put on my gloves when my hair is done. They reach up to here." she pointed to her biceps, which had grown since they had started training. "How's Melvin doing?"

"Good." replied Grimm. "I think he's ready to go as well. And Sir Jean?"

"I have no idea." Mariel confessed.

Sir Jean was ready and came to pick up Mariel. He smiled warmly at her as he put her gloved hand in the crook of his arm, patting it with his other hand. As they arrived at the top of the staircase, the band struck up, and all the guests looked up at their host and the tall blonde elf he led downwards, closely followed by Grimm and Melvin. Sir Jean climbed up onto the stage Grimm had built that afternoon, and motioned for silence.

"My friends and dear guests. Welcome here tonight. Let us all celebrate that we are alive and well, and rejoice in the company of each other. Also," Sir Jean smiled at Mariel, "I wish to introduce to you all my dear close friend and my love, Mariel Morningsun."

He extended his hand, and Mariel climbed up on the stage. The band started to play, and they opened the ball by dancing on the stage. Sir Jean was not a bad dancer, and thanks to a secret agreement Mariel had made with Melvin and his handy spell called



Cat's Grace, Mariel was not bothered by her dress or the long train.

Grimm, meanwhile, had bumped into Lorian and roughly shaken him. Lorian had fallen over, not knowing what hit him, and got up just as Sir Jean got down from the stage.

Mariel joined them just as Lorian was back on his feet.

"Lorian, thank you so much for coming." she smiled warmly at him.

"It is my pleasure." Lorian said, bowing carefully over her hand, and brushing the soft glove with his lips. He looked decidedly awkward, but still tried his best to be courteous.

"It's official." Lorian sighed in the end. He looked from Sir Jean to Mariel.

"Yes." Mariel whispered.

"I thought it best to announce it. People will talk anyway." Sir Jean said. "And I do not care either way."

"I hope you are not wroth with us." Mariel sighed. "And I did consider your feelings in all this."

"Yes." Lorian swallowed. "I do remember that you came to me as one of the first to tell about your relationship."

Lorian looked like he was going to be sick. Sir Jean extended his hand to the elf. After a moment's thought, Lorian clasped it, arm on forearm. They looked into each other's eyes, and then released.

Lorian turned to Mariel again, bowed stiffly, and turned around, walking briskly towards the bar area near the mansion.

"I can't help but feel sad." Mariel said, as Lorian moved through the crowd, away from them. "It feels like losing a friend."

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Grimm asked a couple of tall men he had overheard talking. "I thought I heard you say a familiar name."

"I can't imagine what that might have been." sniffed one of the men. He turned to his friends. "It's a miracle he speaks our tongue."

"It's just that I thought I heard you say the name Sirc'al. I happen to know him. Send him my best, will you? Tell him Grimm said hi." Grimm sneered.

The humans looked down their noses, and then turned their backs on Grimm. He walked away briskly, and clamped Melvin on the shoulder. "Hey Melv, could you keep an eye on those tall chaps over there? I think they might not be up to any good."

But the humans were gone when Melvin looked in the direction Grimm was pointing at. Grimm himself had gone upstairs to change into his platemail, and afterwards clasped the Chief on the shoulder.

"Chief, I gotta take care of some stuff. I thought I heard the name Sirc'al in here and if I did, I am endangering my friends. Watch out for them, alright? I'll be out in Ironforge tonight."

Sir Jean clambered onto the stage not half an hour later.

"Excuse me!" he shouted, and the music died away. "I am sorry everyone, but the party is over. Something has come up and I must attend to it. Please return to your homes. Will Mariel, Melvin and the Chief please join me in the library?" He jumped down from the stage before anyone could react, and was already halfway to the library when the gossip started. The place was abuzz, and he ignored it all.

Melvin walked into the library closely followed by Mariel, her long skirts making an angry swish-swish as she marched into the room. The Chief sat on the edge of the desk there, and Sir Jean was digging around in a large chest that by the sound of it was filled with armour.

"What's up?" Melvin asked. Mariel fidgeted with the elbow-long gloves.

"Grimm is gone." Sir Jean said, dropping a gauntlet back into the chest and straightening up.

"What?!" chorused Melvin and Mariel. "Why?" Mariel asked.

"Grimm heard someone mention the name Sirc'al. He thought that his presence here would endanger you, and therefore he left." The Chief answered. Mariel threw her hands up and sighed. "If there's anything we should have learned from that vision is that if we stick together we're strong, whilst when we are separated we are at our most vulnerable. He should not have left!"

"In any case, we should go after him." Sir Jean said. "We will leave in five minutes, I have asked Gilot to saddle our horses and Zack. Can you make that?" he asked Mariel with a look on her dress.

"I can if you help me with my armour." she sighed.

They were galloping towards the city soon enough. Silver Spirit edging onward, and Sir Jean holding him back so that Melvin on his pony would not be left behind. The Chief was riding a war chariot with four of his bodyguards and keeping pace well enough. At some point, Mariel saw arrows lying broken on the cobblestones. Chances were that Grimm was attacked already.

Grimm had been walking along peacefully until the ting of an arrow bouncing off his armour made him look up. He had taunted the darkness, invited them to come straight at him, but to no avail. When he heard the sound of hoofbeats he was just waiting behind a shed at the edge of Ironforge, waiting for the next attack.

"Any sign of him?" asked a man. He thought he recognized Sir Jean's voice.

A sign of movement in the bushes to his right made him act. There was somebody there, and they were aiming a weapon at his friends! It was the very thing he'd been trying to avoid, and now because the fools came after him they had jeopardised themselves. With a roaring cry Grimm launched himself at the poor sod who was attacking his friends. His blow landed not in the man, but through him into the tree behind him, the keen edge of the axe burying so deep into flesh and wood that even the

tree split right down the middle.

And then, Grimm sat down and cried.

Mariel dismounted and ran over to him. She lay her hands on his helmeted head and tried to check him for injuries. She barely even noticed the flurry of movement as the Chief sent his bodyguards to take up positions around them. When her skin began to tingle, she looked up. The dwarf right in front of her suddenly appeared to become a white outline, and then his shape crumbled into a small pile of dust, leaving nothing of the dwarf but a memory.

The fight was short and heavy. Sir Jean galloped to catch the sorcerer that had cast the Disintegrate spell on the dwarf, and Grimm and Mariel tried to keep up with him, while Melvin and The Chief went off into different directions.

Sir Jean rounded a corner ahead of them, and Grimm and Mariel could hear him say "Oh...dear." If Sir Jean could have cursed, he would have, but his vows as a paladin prohibited it. They tried to get at him, but it would take precious seconds. Silver Spirit was prancing excitedly, maybe even nervously.

When they too rounded the corner, Mariel could see what had disturbed Sir Jean. In front of him were three persons, all of them wearing black plate mail. One of them was shorter, perhaps a dwarf, and the other two were tall as humans. Just as Sir Jean charged, Melvin had assessed the situation, and placed a Wall of Force around the dwarf, placing him securely so he could not get out. As Sir Jean fought a battle with the middle Black Guard, Melvin cast another Wall of Force, captivating the Black Guard on the right. Sir Jean dispensed of the middle Guard. He had taken quite some hits, but he was still standing, bleeding and panting.

The Chief had now also arrived, and seeing the dwarf in Black Guard attire, took up station outside the Wall of Force with Grimm, ready to dispense swift justice. Sir Jean stood ready next to the other one.

When it was over, and Sir Jean had been patched up sufficiently, he walked over to the Black Guards, putting up their visors and looking at the faces beneath. He mumbled something, and cut off the head of one of the Black Guards. The Chief returned with the dust that had once been his trusted bodyguard. They rode back in silence. Not back to the mansion, but to a small dwarven apartment in the rock walls of Ironforge. There was a stable for the horses, and even a few bunk beds where they could sleep, and a table with some chairs. Grimm sat on one of the chairs, and Melvin started to fuss about making tea.

Mariel went to help Sir Jean with the horses. She was rubbing down Para, who was quietly nuzzling her hair, when Sir Jean came to stand next to her.

Mariel dropped the straw she had been using to rub Para down, and softly stroked the nose of her horse. They had been training a lot, and getting closer all the time. It was not nearly the bond Sir Jean seemed to have with Silver Spirit, but it was definitely special, she thought.

"Did you say a prayer for that one?" she asked, indicating the bulging saddlebag where Sir Jean had put the head of the one Black Knight.

"Mariel, we have to talk." Sir Jean took her hand. "The one whose head I took along, it was Lorian."

Mariel laughed nervously, but then realized that Sir Jean could not lie, and would not lie to her.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "But how, when did he turn?"

"I do not know. But whoever got to him is going to pay, and I will hunt them down until I have brought Heironeous' justice to them."

Mariel bowed her head, and a tear ran down her cheek. "Will none of our friends ever be safe? They got to Lorian, to get to us, and who will be next?"

Sir Jean sighed.

"What if I get with child, Jean? How can we raise a child when our enemies will try to get at anyone who is dear to us?"

"I do not know. But have faith in your Goddess and my God. They will hold us close and protect us."

Carefully, Mariel moved closer to Sir Jean, into his embrace. She lay her head on his shoulder and sighed.

"I will send word to Johan." Sir Jean said. "Lorian has ever been faithful to Heironeous, and Johan will want to say goodbye."

"I wonder what made him turn his back on Heironeous." Mariel said.

I wonder if it was me or you, she thought.