

The aftermath of battle

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Back in Ironforge, Leona and Grimm had paid a visit to Leona's parents and grandmother. Much to Leona's surprise, there was another visitor in the room. Her ex-fiance Jean-Pierre had been visiting Leona's parents. It had been a long day for Grimm, and to be confronted with Leona's arrogant elf grandmother was not his idea of fun. Finding out that Jean-Pierre was, according to the guy anyway, still engaged to Leona, did not improve his mood.

There had been a big shouting match, and at some point Leona had burst out: "Grimm and I belong together, and we love each other. There is nothing any one of you can do about it!"

The discussion had finally, after what felt like a long time, come to an end. They had returned to Grimm's house in the city, built into the walls of one of the halls. Things had gone well then. Grimm had pulled Leona close and started to kiss her all over. He had taken off her clothes and she had fumbled with his armour. Finally they were naked. Grimm had taken Leona in his arms and lowered her down on top of him. Leona had not protested, but it had hurt her. It was her first time and Grimm's member was shaped awkwardly - very wide at the base and almost as wide as it was long.

When it was over and Grimm lay back, Leona ran out the door, pulling some clothes on as she left.

Puzzled at the behaviour of his girlfriend, Grimm took out his pipe, and went to sit in the door of his stone house, contemplating what had happened. Leona returned not long after and they had had a good long talk, followed by another try at affection. This time, Leona did not run away from him afterward and they dozed off contentedly.

There was a knock at the door.

Grimm wrapped a towel around him, holding it closed with one hand, and walked towards the front door. When he opened the door with a frown on his face, the first thing he noticed was that it was not, as he had suspected, a dwarf. It took him only a split second to realize it was Leona's grandmother at the door. In his surprise, he threw both hands in the air, letting his towel go, and greeted the elf woman exuberantly. "Grandma!!"

In a flash, the elf took a hold of his man part, and said "Oh...my...god. This is a big one."

Before Grimm could react, Leona's grandmother cast a spell. From Grimm's man part spread a most unpleasant sensation, a burning fire raged through his body and cooked his insides. The damage the spell did to him was extensive. Grimm slumped down, unconscious and hurt.

Leona had got up from the bed, and as soon as she heard Grimm call out "Grandma!!" she walked to the front door. She arrived there just in time to see Grimm fall down unconscious at her grandmother's feet. In a flash she was in front of her grandmother. Leona raised her hand, her eyes spitting fire, and she slapped her own grandmother in the face.

"You have disgraced your family." Granny said coldly. She struck Leona back, purple bruises forming on the half-elf's face. Before Leona could do anything else, Granny twirled a ring on one of her fingers and vanished without a trace.

Just as Leona was bent over Grimm trying to get him to wake up, Melvin, Mariel and Sir Jean and their mounts came walking around the corner. They had teleported to one of the larger squares near the dwarven halls and the dwarves had marched back to their barracks. Sir Jean and Mariel had decided to go to Grimm's house in Andorhall in the hope of finding him and Leona there. Melvin caught up with them later, after having returned the scrolls the head mage had borrowed him.

Melvin coughed politely but loudly, trying to get Leona's attention. She looked up from Grimm, and noticed the three of them on their mounts. Mariel looked at her with a look of great disdain, and Melvin had raised his eyebrow questioningly. Leona was as naked as Grimm was, and tried to cover herself with her arms.

"I did stuff like that too in the past, but I usually did it inside, not in front of the door where everyone could see me." Melvin said cheerfully.

With a squeak, Leona slipped inside, running to the bedroom to put on some clothes. When she returned, Mariel was bowing over Grimm.

"Melvin, can you get Grimm a beer please?" she asked and looked over her shoulder.

Melvin went inside and rummaged around in the kitchen for a beer while Mariel pulled a blanket off Para to cover up Grimm. Sir Jean dismounted too, and investigated Grimm's injuries as well. He moved the blanket aside and took a closer look at where the spell had started to work. He put his hands on Grimm, and cast a spell. Melvin poured some dwarven ale in Grimm's mouth - but to no avail. Instead of swallowing it, the liquid streamed out of his mouth. Grimm did not regain consciousness even though the spell Sir Jean had cast had healed him completely. When Sir Jean was done, he lifted Grimm up and carried him to the bedroom. He carefully put Grimm on the bed, and closed the door as he left.

After stabling the horses, the four of them sat at the kitchen table. Leona had quickly dressed in her druid's robes and was still blushing.

"What did you do to Grimm?" Melvin asked Leona.

"I didn't do anything!" Leona exclaimed. "But my grandmother came over and Grimm went to open the door, and when he saw her she did something to him."

All three of them were looking at Leona incredulously. This was hardly an eloquent explanation and did not explain that both of them were naked.

"Mariel, Melvin, it might be smart to leave Grimm alone. He is a bit hurt at the moment." Sir Jean said. He around his lower abdomen.

There were still some remains from the romantic dinner of the night previous around, burnt up candles stuck to the counter. Melvin opened the pantry, but it was almost empty, just some pieces of old cheese growing slowly attached to the shelves. Melvin went out to the greengrocer's to get some fresh supplies so he could cook dinner.

Sir Jean was less eager to let the matter lie. "Leona, what did you do?" he asked Leona. He looked sternly at the half-elf. "I didn't do anything!" she exclaimed.

"What happened?" Sir Jean asked again.

"We were in bed, and I heard something. And, um, I heard something at the door and I thought it was my grandmother." Leona said, "Grimm and I have had some problems in the past and Grimm said something like 'then I'll startle her' and he wrapped a towel around him, and um, he saw Granny at the door, and he threw his towel back inside and um, Grimm fell over and I went to check on him, I slapped my grandmother in the face and then she was gone."

When Leona stopped talking, the room was very quiet. Nobody spoke for a while, but Leona didn't alter her story.

"That is all?" Sir Jean asked.

"Yeah." Leona said, folding her arms over her breasts.

Sir Jean did not look too happy, but he did not say anything else. He did not approve of lies, and ever since his transformation he had the uncanny knack of knowing when someone was willfully lying to him. Leona had not been telling the truth, and refused to alter her story when he asked about it. He could not be certain what had happened though, and Grimm's health was now their main priority. Leona would tell the truth sooner or later.

Melvin returned with the groceries and started cooking. The smells of his cooking wafted through the dwarven house, penetrating even into the downstairs bedroom Grimm used. Mariel still sat on the side of his bed, staring blankly ahead and sometimes changing the washcloth on Grimm's forehead.

Sir Jean entered the room and put a hand on her shoulder. "You should eat something. Perhaps it is wise for you to go to bed afterwards."

Mariel put her hand on his and leaned her cheek against it. "Yes, you're right. Is there a room for us here?"

"Probably. I do not know." Sir Jean replied.

"There are two more bedrooms upstairs." Leona piped up, sticking her head around the door to check on Grimm.

Mariel got up, kissed Sir Jean on the cheek and walked over to the staircase, ready to go to bed. She was very weary from the fight they had had that very morning, and the stench of boiling blood, singed hair and entrails had made her sick to her stomach. Going to bed would be a very good idea.

Sir Jean followed her, and spoke sternly in Elvish. "I do not think you understood me. You should take care of yourself. Eat a little."

"I am not hungry." Mariel replied without turning around. She walked upstairs and took off her armour, only to enter reverie on top of the covers.

When Sir Jean walked in not long after, he put a blanket over her before he crawled into bed himself.

The next morning Mariel had only just woken up when she heard a scream from downstairs. It sounded like Grimm was in pain, and Mariel sprang up from the bed and ran downstairs. Grimm was still lying in bed, and Leona was sitting on top of him. She had been trying to climb over Grimm to the other side of the bed, but was a little clumsy and had hurt him.

"Leona, get off him!" Mariel shouted, wishing she had brought at least some weapon with her.

Grimm carefully picked up the half-elf and with a faint "Ow" put her on the side she was trying to reach.

"Grimm, are you okay?" Mariel asked.

"No." came his faint reply. It sounded like someone had kicked him in the nuts. Mariel put her hands on his head to check him for injuries.

"Watch where you put your knees next time." Grimm said to Leona who crossed her arms over her breasts and was looking at the wall. Mariel cast a healing spell on Grimm to relieve some of his pain. "Be nice!" she said and left the room again, closing the door behind her.

Mariel returned to the bedroom she shared with Sir Jean only to wait until he woke up. After he did, and had said "Good morning beautiful" she went downstairs to ask Grimm if she could use his bathroom so she could wash off the grime of battle. Melvin would take care of their splattered clothes with his spell of Prestidigitation, but she had to wrap a towel around her after her bath because she no longer had any clean clothes and Melvin did not have time yet to cast his spell. He was very busy cooking and threw out the contents of one of his failed cooking experiments just as Mariel entered the kitchen area.

"Melvin, these are the only clean things I have, but these are Grimm's towels." Mariel told Melvin.

"Alright, I'll get around to it in a minute. Have some breakfast while you wait! Everyone, throw your dirty clothes in the corner over there."

Melvin focused for a moment, waved his hands, and grinned broadly. "Alright, you can all get your clean clothes from the corner over there."

Sir Jean had been busy reading a bit of parchment and was discussing the contents with Grimm. The dwarf had finally awoken that morning when Melvin had started cooking. Before he joined them on their quest, Grimm had lived in the city as an officer of the city watch. Cooking was something that you did when you had time, and he had hardly ever had time. Unaccustomed to the smell of cooking in his house, he had been a bit disoriented when he had woken up, but scrambled eggs and bacon soon had



him fully awake.

"It's where my Father sent me, this is supposed to be how it is made." Grimm said. He pointed at a bit of parchment. "Can you help me with this?"

"Yes, I can, but I think we shall need Mariel's help with this." Sir Jean replied.

Mariel had a clean robe tucked under one arm, still holding her towel up, and was putting some bread into her mouth with her free hand. She slowly walked upstairs to pray in quiet, while Grimm opened up some cabinets and rummaged around between pieces of armour, holding some in front of Sir Jean to see if they would fit. Sir Jean would need new armour and Grimm had used the time he had in Ironforge well. Sir Jean walked upstairs with the half-finished armour to try it on, and Grimm followed him. When he opened the door, he saw Mariel sitting in a corner, praying. He stopped dead in his tracks as soon as he noticed what she was doing.

"Go on." Grimm said, putting a hand in the small of Jean's back and pushing him forward. Sir Jean tripped and fell. Mariel was disturbed by the ruckus, and snapped out of her prayers. She opened her eyes, focused on the men walking inside, and said but one word: "Out."

Grimm ignored her comment. "Shouldn't you be getting up?"

Sir Jean pulled Grimm aside. "Grimm, we have done something that we as faithful servants to a God do not like. We have disturbed the communication between Mariel and her Goddess. It would be like your Father not wanting to talk to you."

Mariel's voice quivered with anger. "You will leave me, now!"

Grimm focused on Mariel, looking angry. She looked back at him, equally angry, if not more.

"Please, Grimm, come with me. Do it for me, please." Sir Jean pleaded.

Grimm did not move.

Once Sir Jean noticed that Grimm would not be moving, he turned around and walked back downstairs. After a moment's eye contact, Mariel sighed once, calming her nerves. She closed her eyes and tried to get back to her prayers, apologizing to her Goddess for the interruption. Grimm snorted, turned around and stomped out of the room.

When Mariel was done praying, all her anger at Grimm returned. Her Goddess had not been insulted, luckily. But when she arrived downstairs, Grimm and Leona had gone out together, and there was no chance to talk about the incident. Instead, Mariel went to feed some apples to the horses, starting with Para and Silver Spirit. Melvin was baking apple pie.

When Mariel returned, Sir Jean said "I know what happened to Grimm."

"Oh?" she replied and sat down at the kitchen table. Melvin put a piece of warm apple pie in front of her.

"It was not very nice and had something to do with Sirc'al." Sir Jean continued.

"With...Sirc'al..." Mariel said thoughtfully, the apple pie momentarily forgotten.

"And Leona wanted to visit her parents, Melvin offered to get them for her, because he could come back real quickly." Sir Jean said. It was quiet for a little while as Mariel contemplated this. "Right, Melvin?" Sir Jean asked.

"Er, yes, teleporting." Melvin replied hastily.

"Can you teleport?" Mariel asked, distracted. "But...er...Sirc'al?"

"Yes." Sir Jean said. "Grimm will explain later, if he feels like it."

"He might not, after I had a little chat with him about disturbing me during my prayers." Mariel sighed. "I wonder if he will. Do you know I woke up this night and heard screaming from downstairs?" Mariel said. "When I went downstairs to check it out, I saw Leona sitting on top of Grimm, who was in a lot of pain. I don't know what happened exactly, but he lifted her off and I healed him and he cuddled up to her again. That's when I went back to bed again."

"Leona is a strange little bird." Sir Jean concluded thoughtfully.

It had been bothering Grimm that the mark that was on his chest, the fresh tattoo he had received and that he knew to be his family crest, was also emblazoned on a shield at the Chief's armoury. The Chief had greeted him cheerfully, a welcome distraction from the pile of paperwork in front of him. Grimm looked around the room, but did not see the shield Leona had mentioned, and they both sat down at the long table usually used for planning and strategy whenever it wasn't used to store the paperwork the Chief never seemed to get around to.

"So Grimm, what can I do for you today?" the Chief asked, pouring them each a big mug of dwarven ale.

Grimm told the Chief about the markings on his chest and how the tattoo had first appeared. "I am curious though," said Grimm, "because Leona said she had seen the image before on one of your shields. I wonder how you happened to have a shield that has my family crest on it."

The Chief sighed. "I shall be frank with you, Grimm. Leona has seen that image on my shield because it is my family crest also."

"But...that would make you a part of my family." Grimm said.

"That's right." the Chief replied, "Your father was my brother."

"That makes you my...uncle?" Grimm said. "Why did you never tell me?"

"I swore I would never tell you, unless you already knew the truth." the Chief shrugged. "Now you know."

Satisfied with the Chief's answer, their talk quickly turned to the scroll Grimm had received in that blinding flash of light, when he had killed the orc. They spoke briefly of its contents, and finally Grimm drank the last of his ale and hugged his newly found uncle. It would take some getting used to, but for the first time since his parents were murdered he had family!

He went to one of the blacksmiths of Andorhall, a dwarf he knew well and had worked with in the past. The blacksmith he would trust the most. He greeted the dwarf, and handed him the scroll. "I have a commission for you and I'd like to help you build this." Grimm said.

"What's this then?" the dwarf asked, and put on his reading glasses. He read the scroll and eyed Grimm over the rim of his glasses. "And you have all these materials? Which of these do you have?"

"I have the adamantinite, which is the hardest to get by. And most of the other materials." Grimm said. The dwarven smith turned back to the scroll.

"Can you enchant it?" he asked. "Can you make it holy?"

"I can't," said Grimm, "but I know some people who can. And I'll stick around and help you until it's done."

"And you trust these people?" the smith asked. "It is not a light task and their cooperation will have a great impact on the finished product."

"You know them." Grimm replied. "Sir Jean, Mariel and Melvin. They'll help."

Mariel was sitting at the kitchen table, writing a letter to Sermon. She was puzzling over the words, because even though she knew she now had a safe way to have the letter delivered, she did not want to burden Sermon with knowledge he might not want to have. In the end, she put her quill down and looked at Sir Jean.

"Jean," she asked, "If I get an invitation to go to Margden Woods, would you join me in going there?"

"Sure." Sir Jean replied. "Why do you want to go to Margden Woods?"

"Well, you know I was raised in the sanctuary of Ehlonna there. All this time I have been away I have not kept in touch with Sermon. He is like a father to me." Mariel said; "I was too afraid the information would fall into the wrong hands, but now we have a safe way to deliver it."

She paused for a moment, collecting her thoughts. "If you look at what has happened to Lorian, you see that being a friend of us can be dangerous. I would not willingly place him in danger, but rather have him choose whether he wants my friendship despite all it might bring." Mariel moved the letter over to Sir Jean so he could read it, though it was written in Elvish.

Father,

Again winter has come to us and only now do I write. Fear not, all is well with my friends and myself. We met as planned and travelled to Ironforge not long after. As I understand it, we only just missed you there when events required my attention. I apologize for not writing sooner, more often than not I have been too busy to write. I only do so now because there is much to tell. I now have found a most trusted friend willing to relay a message.

Please father, do not underestimate the danger our friendship brings you; I have good reason for this dire warning. In the past, several of our friends have been assaulted and even been killed because of their connection with us. However, I do believe that our work is necessary so others can live free and in peace. I accept the consequences that my path brings me, though it pains me to find that my friends are in jeopardy because of it.

Father, I know you are not easily bullied, but should you decide for your safety, or that of the Sanctuary, or even of the town, to not contact me further, know that I shall understand. I will never hold it against you and will always most warmly think back on the time I spent under the great trees.

I would be most happy to receive a message back by the same messenger, to hear that you would welcome the opportunity to speak with me again, despite the risks. If so, I would like to come to the Sanctuary with my friends so I can tell you everything I dare not write down.

May Ehlonna shelter you,

Mariel Morningsun.

Sir Jean handed the letter back to her and nodded. Mariel sealed it, and handed it to Melvin who would deliver it the next day.

"Um, Mariel. Could you also write a letter of introduction so I can safely enter Margden Woods?" Melvin asked.

"Of course." she replied, and took a fresh sheet of parchment.

"Where is Thamior, anyway?" asked Grimm. He had returned and eaten two pieces of the apple pie before telling the rest about his uncle and the scroll.

"Thamior has left again, to do some research." Sir Jean replied. "He wanted to look into some new areas of expertise."

"It is strange," Mariel said, putting down her quill for a moment. "Thamior comes and joins us, leaves us, returns to us again, leaves in the middle of the festivities...then he builds an invisible sanctuary again for the battle and leaves again. He was not among the wounded."

Sir Jean shrugged.

"So, I'm guessing I'll be busy for three months on this new armour of mine." Grimm changed the subject not so subtly.

Mariel sighed, and returned to her letter of introduction. She sat staring at the ceiling for a while, puzzling over the wording in proper elvish. After a few minutes, she noticed someone was talking to her. Grimm finally noticed she had not been listening



and started anew.

"Mariel, we have to talk."

"Yes, we do have to talk." Mariel replied, and turned to look at him. Grimm immediately began his whole story again, about the scroll, the armour he would be going to forge with the help of one of the smiths of Andorhall, and the materials he would need. It was boring Mariel from the start, and what was worse was that it was not the thing she had been wanting to talk to him about.

"Melvin, is there still some tea left?" she said, looking into her empty mug.

Melvin poured her another mug, and Mariel stared straight ahead again, going back to puzzling over the wording of her letter. She didn't even notice Grimm had fallen silent.

"Perhaps it is time we went to bed." Sir Jean said diplomatically.

Mariel took her mug and writing supplies from the table and walked upstairs with Sir Jean. As soon as the door closed behind them, Mariel started ranting.

"Why must he always talk about things that are important to him? He didn't even notice there was something else I wanted to talk about! I think he has completely forgotten about what happened this morning, when he disrupted my prayers. He doesn't even believe he did anything wrong!"

Sir Jean made a soothing sound, not trusting his voice at the moment.

"I mean, does it ever get any easier, being around dwarves?" Mariel continued. "It's not just dwarves I have a problem with right now, but Grimm, he is exceptionally vexing! I can't even get him to listen to me!"

"Grimm has a difficult personality." Sir Jean conceded.

"Yes! And I'm having a hard time dealing with him. Especially when he talks about his armour like that, myth and legends! Like I know what that all means. Give me Gods and Goddesses and visions and prayers and I know what to do." Mariel sighed, and crawled into bed.

Downstairs, Grimm was ranting in the same manner to Leona. "Elves! Always have their nose stuck in the air! You're lucky you're just a half-elf, because I've had it up to here with elves!"

Leona looked distracted.

"Are you even listening to me?" Grimm demanded.

"Yes, but I just heard the voice of Sir Jean in my head." Leona said. "Sounds like Mariel isn't in such a good mood either."

"Ah, she's probably doing to him what I'm doing to you right now, huh? Elves. Nag, nag, nag. So, what did Sir Jean ask?" Grimm asked.

"If I had the same thing on my hands. I said yes." Leona answered. Grimm huffed, and mumbled something in his beard.

Upstairs, Mariel and Sir Jean were still talking. Mariel was not tired yet and neither was Sir Jean. After the days of travelling and the hard fights they had had in the past few days, a day of sleeping late and resting did not leave a person tired enough to go to sleep.

"I can't go to sleep yet, Jean, I am not at all tired yet." Mariel said, and glanced over at Sir Jean. His hand rested on her belly, and he was looking at her with his blue-golden eyes.

"So, what do you want to do?" he asked.

"I don't know. It's too late to visit the temple." Mariel said.

"There are many things that you can do at this hour." Sir Jean replied, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Shall we go for a walk?" Mariel asked, and sat up. Sir Jean had no objections. He threw on a simple tunic and his belt without his sword.

Mariel put on one of her white robes and left all her things in the bedroom. Quietly they went outside, and walked towards Ironforge and a lovely park on the outskirts of town.

Grimm and Leona could not sleep either. After the visit to Leona's parents, Jean-Pierre had treated Leona badly and he had beat her. Grimm had beaten him up in turn and had him tossed into the dungeon. They paid him a visit that night. Grimm stayed near the cell door, leaning against the wall with his axe ready. Leona approached Jean-Pierre. She had never really wanted the man, but her grandmother had insisted she had better start acting like a human, because the mingling of elven and human blood in her was a disgrace to all elves. Leona would be better off as a human, marrying a human, and giving birth to human children. Leona had been too impressed with the power of the woman to resist. In a way, she was also to blame for Jean-Pierre being locked up. She knelt down next to the cot the man was sitting on.

"Hey.." she said.

It happened in an instant. Jean-Pierre reached out to Leona, touched his hand to hers, and she slumped down to the floor, injured badly.

Another instant later, Grimm had dispensed his justice to Jean-Pierre, and the man was dead on the floor in a puddle of blood that spread slowly.

Carefully, Grimm lifted Leona from the floor, nudged the door open with his foot, and walked outside. He told the guard briefly what had happened, and walked to the inn he knew he would find the Chief at.

The Chief glanced over Leona's injuries, and said but one thing. "Get Sir Jean here, now."

Grimm ran home, up the stairs, throwing open all doors, but found the bed of Sir Jean and Mariel empty. Melvin woke up from the ruckus though, and stuck his sleepy head into the corridor.

"Melvin, where is Sir Jean?" Grimm took the halfling by his arm.

"I dunno. What's up?" Melvin yawned.

"Leona's been attacked. That's twice in two days. We'd better stay close together. Come with me, I'll take you to her and send some dwarves to look for Sir Jean."

Sir Jean had pulled Mariel into a warm embrace once they'd reached the fountain. Winter was in full swing, and it was freezing cold at night. Mariel had not thought of bringing a cloak, and was surprised at the low temperature. She was cold, but the embrace helped. Sir Jean's warm body behind her kept her from freezing her fingers off, if anything.

"Jean, what do you know about elves?" Mariel asked, and she turned around to face him.

"That they are more gracious than humans, and that they are immortal." Sir Jean answered after a moment's thought. "And that they hardly ever marry humans."

"Where I come from, where I was raised;" Mariel said; "Elves will only choose one mate for their entire lives. It is not a decision made lightly, but we tend to stick by our choices. It almost never happens that they choose another or a different mate."

"I see." Sir Jean said softly.

"That is part of the reason why I am so careful. We have all the time in the world, and I certainly don't want it to go too fast. And the other part is that I still have to practice, too."

Sir Jean smiled at her, but his face was red from blushing. He drew her close in a hug to hide his discomfort, and Mariel gladly stayed in his warm arms.

When she had finally worked up enough courage she whispered into his ear: "I would like to have your child."

Melvin had been pouring healing potions into Leona's mouth, but still the half-elf would not wake up. Melvin was about to uncork another when he felt the Chief's hand on his arm. "If this doesn't do it son, perhaps it's time to try something different."

Melvin put the bottle away. "I'll teleport over to Grimm's house and scry for Sir Jean there." In a flash, he was gone, and Grimm bent over his girlfriend.

Mariel and Sir Jean had been kissing softly when suddenly he drew back. His hands stopped their caresses, and he looked at some shrubs nearby. Someone coughed behind them.

"Who goes there?" Sir Jean asked, stepping away from Mariel and towards the shrubs.

"It's Melvin." Melvin said. "Are you decent?" He had been scrying for them moments earlier, and had seen that the two lovebirds were quite busy. However, Leona's condition couldn't wait.

"Yes." Sir Jean called back.

Melvin stepped out of the shrubs that, for him, were higher than his head. "Sir Jean, you're needed. Leona's been hurt and though we've used a lot of potions, she isn't getting any better. The Chief and Grimm ask for you."

"I shall fly over to her." Sir Jean said, and unfolded his wings. He hesitated a moment. "Um, where is she?"

"She's in the bar. Shall I take Mariel back to Grimm's place?" Melvin asked, motioning with his free hand at Mariel, who now stood next to Sir Jean.

Sir Jean paused for a moment and contemplated Melvin's suggestion. "Grimm said we should stay together." Melvin added.

"Well, follow me to the bar, I shall meet you there." Sir Jean kissed Mariel fleetingly and took off.

Melvin took a hold of Mariel and teleported her to the tavern. The experience was different than anything she had ever experienced before, and she couldn't make up her mind whether it was unsettling or nauseating. Before her stomach could even start to protest against the unexpected manoeuvre, they had arrived.

Mariel sank down next to Leona and poised her hands on the sides of Leona's face. She focused for a moment, and her powers softly probed what was wrong with the half-elf in front of her. She was amazed at what she found, especially because she could not help to alleviate any of the symptoms. She had left all her stuff at Grimm's house and had not prayed for any of the spells that could help. She sighed, and straightened up again. Then she turned to Grimm. He was covered in blood, but his eyes were on his girlfriend. When Mariel stood in front of him, he looked up.

"Grimm, it's pretty bad. She's blind, deaf and poisoned. The worst part of it is that I do not have the powers to cure her right now. I could heal her wounds, but because she is poisoned it would have little or no effect. The poison must be removed first." Absently, she tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "To be honest, I can heal her once I have said my prayers, but I would have to do it in a quiet room where I can not be disturbed." she emphasized that last bit. "It will take time, but perhaps Sir Jean can help her. He should be on his way here."

A few minutes later Sir Jean arrived, and Mariel told him what was wrong with Leona.

"I shall need some room please." Sir Jean said, spreading his arms wide and pushing people back. He sank down to his knees and held his hands hovering inches above her face. He moved them towards her chest, and softly pressed down. His hands glowed a pale green, his face screwed up in concentration. The glow spread out through Leona, until her entire body glowed green. Then, a golden glow was added right as the green glow retreated back into Sir Jean's hands. As the golden glow had enveloped Leona, it too shot back into Sir Jean's hands.

Sir Jean slumped down but Mariel caught him before he hit the floor. Carefully, she moved underneath him, to support his head in her lap until he would recover. Slowly, Leona blinked once, twice, and focused on Grimm. Grimm was stroking her hair, and



as he saw she was awake, he smiled at her.

Sir Jean reached for a jug of the dwarven ale and rinsed out his mouth, spitting out the liquid onto the sawdust on the floor. The Chief looked sternly at Sir Jean, but the paladin did not notice. He gulped down the rest of the jug, putting it down next to him. Helped by Grimm, he got up from the floor.

"I need to sleep." Sir Jean said, glancing at Leona thoughtfully.

"Where shall we sleep?" Grimm asked, helping Leona up too; "Sir Jean's house or mine?"

"Isn't Sir Jean's mansion a long way?" Melvin asked.

"Well, yes, but he's got a forge so I can work on my armour there as well." Grimm said.

"The horses would have more space there;" Mariel said; "but I don't think it is wise to travel all the way to Sir Jean's house tonight. Let's go tomorrow."

The next morning at breakfast, Mariel finished the letter of introduction for Melvin. It was simple, but she thought it would suffice.

The bearer of this document, a halfling called Melvin Greatfoot, bears a message to Sermon, the high priest of the sanctuary of Ehlonna.

To ensure this pass does not fall into the wrong hands, please destroy this parchment upon his departure from Margden Woods, for all our safety.

I personally vouch for the trustworthiness of Melvin and ask you allow him to deliver his message.

May Ehlonna keep you,

Mariel Morningsun

"This is the letter of introduction. Please stay until Sermon gives you a message back, or until he tells you there will not be a letter for me. Explicitly."

"Alright." Melvin pocketed the letter.

"Melvin," Sir Jean said; "We shall travel to my house today. If you cannot find us here, look for us there. Tell Grimm and Leona, when they get up, that we shall make a detour by the temple district and we shall see them later today."

Melvin nodded. Sir Jean and Mariel gathered their things, saddled the horses and rode off.

The ride to the temple district was quiet. It was still early in the morning and their breath was visible on the crisp morning air. Silver Spirit was prancing, mirroring the excitement Sir Jean must be feeling. It was a fine morning to be out riding, with clear skies above. They both dismounted in front of the temple of Heironeous. Sir Jean nodded at Mariel, but was surprised when she didn't walk to the temple of Ehlonna at the other side of the temple square. "I thought you wanted to visit the temple of Ehlonna?" he asked.

"Yes, but I wanted to see the look on Johan's face when he sees you again." Mariel smiled. Sir Jean smiled too, and offered her his arm.

In the back of the temple and clearly visible through the middle aisle, Sir Jean sank down on one knee. Mariel mimicked him, showing her respect to the God who had protected Sir Jean and the party. The temple was full, packed to the brim as a mass was in progress. Johan stood at the altar, and everyone that was present in the temple had turned around to look at the two of them entering. A heavy silence fell in the church as the choir stopped singing. There was not a stir.

At the front of the church the paladins occupied the front rows, but Sir Jean walked nonchalantly to the back row and sat down on the bench. Mariel joined him there, not wanting to leave so abruptly yet. Johan, all the way in the front of the temple, motioned to Sir Jean, asking him to come forward. Sir Jean stood up again, and walked down the aisle alone, his armoured boots ringing on the marble stones. When Sir Jean arrived at the altar, it was Johan who sank down on his knees in front of Sir Jean. The paladins all rose to their feet, awed by Sir Jean. As one they shouted Heironeous' name. Sir Jean turned to face them, and nodded his thanks. Then the clerics stood up, the paladins rushing to gather around Sir Jean, who turned to face the congregation. Everyone sank down on one knee and Sir Jean placed his hand on each of the paladin's shoulders, Blessing them one by one.

Behind the temple of Heironeous was a practicing field Sir Jean knew well. The paladins, clerics and Johan took Sir Jean out back. They formed a circle around him. Mariel had followed them outside, but stuck to the side, keeping her distance. She was not a part of the congregation, and it was clear to her that this was Sir Jean's moment. She would not get in his way. Sir Jean unfolded his wings carefully now that there was space for them. Mariel saw for the first time how it was possible for him to retract his wings, because she now saw them grow anew from under his skin. If he could reverse the movement, the wings could not be seen and the skin would be smooth. They reached an amazing span, larger than any bird she had ever seen.

The others that were watching gasped as they first saw the wings. Some of the clerics stood gaping open-mouthed at Sir Jean. His skin glowed golden and even his eyes had lost their normal hue, only to be replaced by the gold. Suddenly, Sir Jean shone like the sun, beaming with daylight that seemed to come from deep within him. If they had not already been amazed, they sure were now. Even Johan was staring at Sir Jean, a look of admiration mingled with a pleased approval.

The blue skies overhead were clear, but a clear ray of sunshine seemed to come down from the heavens, lighting up Sir Jean even more. Something above them descended down the beam of light. As it came closer, and the people in the courtyard began to notice, they all sank to their knees. Only Sir Jean remained standing, but only until the angel stood before him and they could look eye to eye, then he too sank to one knee. The angel turned to the congregation, who still sat with their heads bowed.

"I am a herald of the God Heironeous." he spoke in a melodious voice that carried to the edge where Mariel stood. Its voice had a lilting accent that made it all the more entrancing to listen to. "Hear ye, all and one." the angel continued. "Let it be known to the world that Sir Jean is now a champion of Heironeous. He has given all and held nothing back for his God, and is awarded accordingly. Let him be a shelter to all who seek safety, let him be a shield against the storm. May he light your paths in the name of Heironeous."

When the angel fell silent and smiled at Sir Jean, the paladins raised their swords to the heavens and the crowd shouted: "Sir Jean! Heironeous!"

Sir Jean bowed again, once to the herald and once to the crowd. The herald stepped into the single ray of light again, and ascended back to the heavens.

Sir Jean helped Johan up, and many followed his example.

"I shall endeavor to live up to your expectations;" Sir Jean addressed the crowd; "I shall be forever faithful to Heironeous, and I will use the strength and power that I have been given to protect those in need." Sir Jean smiled in Mariel's direction, holding out his hand to her, calling her over in one gesture. Mariel smiled and went to him, a little afraid but happy to be a part of this as well.

"That was nice." Mariel smiled, as the both of them walked to the Temple of Ehlonna. They left their shoes with the archon hounds near the entrance, and walked barefoot on the cold earth. Regalia smiled as she noticed them approaching, her smile fading only a little when Mariel sank to one knee in front of her.

"Come now, child. There is no need for that, and you know it." Regalia put her hands on Mariel's head for a moment, and then clasped her arms to indicate she should get up. Mariel shifted her helmet under her arm. "It is my way of showing respect to you." she said.

"I should be showing mine to you, I think." Regalia said, a twinkle in her eyes. "Congratulations are in order. I am very proud of you, Mariel." Regalia smiled. Mariel sank to her knees again, and this time Regalia smiled in earnest, speaking the words of blessing.

"Mother, what does it mean to be a divine crusader to Her cause?" Mariel asked Regalia. Sir Jean was playing with the archon hounds, but the noise was in the background, unobtrusive. For a moment, Regalia eyed Mariel.

"I have an inkling what She asks of me, and I have tried very hard to live up to Her expectations." Mariel continued, but her thoughts refused to become coherent.

"Something is troubling you." Regalia stated.

"Yes. Recently, a friend of Sir Jean's has been targeted because of their friendship. They got to him before we were onto them, and they were able to make him turn his back on his God and his friends. Sir Jean was forced to kill him. I do not question my chosen path in the slightest." Mariel said; "But there is something that worries me. If Ehlonna were to bless me with a child, I would fear this child would never be safe, and always be hunted because of who we are.

"I would welcome a child, I would be honoured if Ehlonna were to bless me, to bless us so. But I do fear for its safety."

Regalia sighed for a moment. "I can not tell you what the future will bring, no one can. But despite everything you have been through you have always had your faith. It is the one thing you can always count on. And I not believe that Ehlonna would bless you with a child and not look after you both. If you look into your heart, you will find the answer you seek."

Mariel walked besides the elf for a moment. "I understand. If Ehlonna would bless us with a child, Her blessing would truly be on us all. Her protection would be on the child as well."

Regalia nodded. "Have you told Her what is in your heart?"

"I have." Mariel said. "And it was wrong for me to doubt."

"It is not wrong to doubt;" Regalia answered. "It is what makes us who we are." She paused. "And you are sincere in your wishes?"

"Yes!" Mariel replied. "We are. Sir Jean has said he would be very happy if I were to be pregnant."

Melvin started out by scrying for the Sanctuary of Ehlonna in Margden Woods. He had never been there, and though Mariel had described it to him, he would not simply blindly teleport into an unknown forest. It was hard at first, although he could easily find the forest itself. Focusing his search was a little harder. When he found the place, he saw a typical elven village, hidden by the branches of large trees that surrounded the place. The houses were built in the trees; the elves would live in perfect harmony with the forest and built their homes accordingly.

Finally, he could make out a building that was different from the others: it was an area of luscious plants and in the midst stood a small hut. It was surrounded by lush undergrowth. When Melvin focused even more, he saw that the shrubs surrounding the hut was a building itself, with the great trees growing in the midst.

Melvin checked if he had the letters and then teleported himself to the place he had just seen. It took him a moment to steady himself as teleporting was still new to him and he landed on top of the trunk of a fallen tree. He fell off and landed flat on his behind.

The first thing he heard was the soft creak of a bow. Not one, or two, but maybe ten or more bows were pulled taut immediately, the arrows pointed at his heart. Melvin had landed in a spot anyone else would not want to land. One did not barge into Margden Woods unannounced. Especially if one was to land immediately into the clearing that was normally reserved for the council of elves. The elves had reacted accordingly, seeing him as a threat.



Still sitting, Melvin slowly beckoned to one of the elves he could see had an arrow pointed at him. The elf looked incredulously at him, but didn't react in any other way. Melvin then wiggled the letter in the air, cocking his head as if to say "I have a letter to deliver, you know."

From behind him, a hand reached past Melvin and took the letter. Melvin didn't move, and it was silent for a little while. Then some of the elves pointed their arrows at the ground, although the two in front of Melvin were still as alert as ever and their arrows were still pointing at Melvin's body.

Another hand appeared next to Melvin, trying to take the other letter from Melvin as well. But Melvin was less inclined to let this letter go. Mariel had asked for him to wait until he would get an answer, and he clutched the letter to his heart.

A few minutes later, an elf appeared on the clearing. Melvin had been admiring the woods, even though he didn't have a particular appreciation for the woodlands. The trees were tall and the moss on the ground soft, and he could understand why the sanctuary of Ehlonna would be built here. It was, he had to admit, a nice place for a picnic.

The elf had light brown hair and was regal in his attitude. His clothes were clean and though simple in cut and style, spoke of a design and a purpose.

"I am Sermon," the elf said. "I hear you have something for me."

"Yes, I have a letter from Mariel for you," Melvin replied. "Am I inside the sanctuary of Ehlonna?"

"No, the sanctuary is just down there," Sermon pointed. In between the plants Melvin could discern the doorways of the building he had seen from his scrying. Even though it was winter and most of the undergrowth had lost its foliage, the building blended with its surroundings so well that it was hardly noticeable between the trees. It did not obstruct the view, it enhanced it.

"It is not always safe here, and you landed right in our midst," Sermon made a small gesture and the archers drew back, their arrows pointing at the ground in earnest. Sermon stepped forward so that Melvin could hand him the letter. Sermon broke the seal and slowly unrolled the parchment. He was silent for a while as he read the letter. When he was done, he rolled the parchment back up and motioned for Melvin to follow him.

Sermon walked into the sanctuary, and for the first time Melvin noticed the elf walked barefoot. The pine needles and pinecones that had fallen on the forest floor did not seem to trouble him. Instead, Sermon seemed to almost unconsciously tread around them, careful not to disturb the seeds of new trees.

"Would you like something to drink, Melvin?" Sermon asked. "We have fresh fruit juice, if you would like to try some."

"Oooh, thanks!" Melvin took a sip of the juice - it was most delicious.

Sermon walked into a side room for a moment, leaving Melvin in the central area beneath the great trees. He returned bearing parchment, ink and quill, and selected a place beneath a tree with a mossy patch to sit down and write his reply.

Melvin at first sat down under another of the trees, but after a while got up to look around. Sermon was still busy writing a reply.

"Can I ask you for a favour?" Melvin interrupted his train of thought. "Can I take some fruit home for Mariel? I'm sure she would enjoy that."

"Of course. I shall pick the very fruits for her," Sermon said, and disappeared into a storage room. "You are lucky that the summer harvest has just been. We do not store much, but Ehlonna has blessed us with much and we can share it with those who would ask for Her fruits."

Melvin looked inside the grass basket Sermon handed him. Inside were some of the largest apples he had ever seen, and cherries the size of walnuts! There were berries inside, and some nuts too. Melvin popped one of the berries into his mouth and was overwhelmed with the lovely, rich taste. Enjoying it to the fullest, Melvin sank back down onto the moss and savoured it for as long as it lasted.

When Sermon was done writing an hour later and he handed Melvin the letter, the latter was still musing on the wonderful taste of the berries. He had eaten a few, but he thought a lot of care had gone into these fruits. "This fruit is lovely. I am sure Mariel will enjoy them, although she doesn't eat very much."

Sermon smiled mysteriously. "No, I can imagine she does not."

He tucked the letter into the basket, but Melvin put it safely into his bag of holding.

Sermon touched Melvin's shoulder briefly, and a warm glow spread through his body. It felt faintly familiar, Mariel often did something similar.

"It is well that you have come. Will you be bringing Mariel when she visits?" Sermon asked.

"Uhm, about that," Melvin said. "Where shall we appear next time? I don't want to startle you like this again"

Sermon smiled and pointed above them. "Beneath the branches of this tree."

"Maybe you should protect this place from teleportation," Melvin mused.

"Not if Mariel Morningsun will come," Sermon smiled. "Goodbye Melvin, and I hope you return soon."

Melvin had tried to teleport into Sir Jean's kitchen, but there was a bouncing sensation. When he opened his eyes he saw that he was standing 200 meters in front of the gates of Sir Jean's mansion. He sighed. It would take a while to walk to the house proper. And the basket of fruit was quite heavy and cumbersome. But something told him that teleporting inside the grounds would not work.

Melvin looked around inside the mansion, but all he found was Sir Jean, who told him Mariel was outside. Finally, Melvin went outside again and found the person he was looking for.

"Mariel, I have a letter for you." he announced his presence, and she straightened up from the roses she had been tending to. It was not the right time for pruning or picking, but it was always the right time for a blessing.

"Wonderful." she replied, wiping her hands on her robes. "How did it go?"

"Um, well, when I appeared in the village, there were a dozen or more elves who wanted to make a pincushion out of me." Melvin whined.

"I do not find that surprising." Mariel said. "Normal visitors approach through the woods, and the elves have fair warning before they enter. If you have appeared in the council clearing in front of the sanctuary, I do not find it surprising they were ready with their bows and arrows."

"You don't find it strange that they were in the middle of the village?" Melvin said incredulously.

"I do not. It is for their own protection, after all." Mariel dismissed his worries.

"I have two things for you." Melvin said. "First off is the letter. And secondly, Sermon was kind enough to give me some of the sanctuary's fruits for you."

Mariel's eyes widened at the basket, and very carefully she took it from Melvin, her mouth watering at the prospect. She had not had fruits blessed by Ehlonna and Her most devoted servants in a long time. "Let us share it with the others tonight." she said, taking her eyes off her favorite foods; "I could eat it all, but that would be very selfish of me. Perhaps you can use the apples for another apple pie. Everyone seemed to enjoy it the last time."

"So you're really going to Margden Woods?" Melvin asked.

"It is only temporary." Mariel replied. "After all, I can't sit around twiddling my thumbs while Grimm is forging that armour of his."

Grimm knocked on the door of Sir Jean's study and entered. Sir Jean looked up at him.

"Did you hear what Leona's planning?" Grimm asked. "She is planning to leave." Sir Jean's face lost all happiness, and he frowned. "Can you talk to her?" Grimm asked.

"Leave it to me." Sir Jean stood from his desk and walked up the stairs to his bedroom, where Mariel was at that moment. She had sat down in the windowsill and looked at the gardens before breaking the seal on the parchment.

Dear Mariel Morningsun,

Your presence in the sanctuary has been missed. I read you are doing well. I would like it if you were to visit. I would like to hear how you let Ehlonna lead your life. The sanctuary is doing well. It would be nice to have you visit, by yourself, so that we can talk in private. Margden Woods is doing fine as well. We shall see you shortly.

May Ehlonna light your path,

Sermon.

When she was done reading, she stared outside for a moment. Sir Jean entering their room disturbed her ponderments. He started to gather the garments that were spread around the room.

"Leona wants to leave." Sir Jean said, picking up one of his shirts and carefully smelling it to see if it needed cleaning.

"Oh." Mariel replied, now putting the letter down in earnest.

"I am not happy with that. Neither is Grimm. Can you not talk with her, elf to...elf?" There was a slight hesitation, but Mariel noticed it. She did not look too pleased at him. Sir Jean did not seem to be joking, and his blue eyes seemed to look through her.

"I hardly know her." Mariel replied. "How did Grimm take the news?"

"You don't need to know a person to talk to them." Sir Jean said; "Grimm was not happy with the prospect of Leona leaving. He came to me."

"But you would let her go?" Mariel asked.

"No." Sir Jean said; "I would not let her go alone. That is why I ask you for help."

"What would you have me do, Jean?"

"Talk to her. You know perfectly well the risk she would be taking." Sir Jean said. He looked tired. "You know what happens to people who know us. Not to mention somebody who has a relationship with one of us. I think she needs to realize that. I would appreciate it if you were to talk to her."

"How do you see her?" Mariel asked.

"She seems to be at odds with herself, but she has a good heart. She said some things that were untrue, but they were not harmful lies."

"And you would rather have her stay here. Because of Grimm, or because of her as a person?" Mariel asked.

"Both."

Mariel knocked on Leona's door and stuck her head inside. "Oh hi, Mariel." Leona was lying on the bed and writing on a pile of parchment so her quill would not tear the top sheet. She looked up briefly to see who was coming inside, but returned to her writing straight away.

"Can I come in?" Mariel asked. She closed the door behind her when the half-elf shrugged.

Mariel was momentarily distracted when she heard a voice in her head. It sounded like Sir Jean wishing her good luck. She



focused on the task at hand, and would ask him about it later.

Mariel sat down on the chair that was next to the small desk that held a washbasin and pitcher. Leona noticed that Mariel was sitting very straight in her chair, and she was reminded of her dear grandmother once more. Though she didn't know Mariel very well, she was reminded of the disapproving frown of her grandmother because the two had many mannerisms in common. "What are you doing here anyway?" Leona asked.

"I came to talk to you." Mariel said, her voice light and unconcerned. "What are you up to?"

"I'm just writing a few letters before I leave for Ank'mar. It's the city of druids. It's a few days' travel south-east from here."

"Why are you leaving?" Mariel asked. Leona sighed.

"I think it is smart to have some time apart. I don't think Grimm realizes that I can manage very well without him; he thinks I need him to protect me."

Mariel eyed Leona. The half-elf on the bed wore pretty much the standard druid-garb of greens and browns, their clothes blending in with nature as well as their behaviour. Her soft deerskin boots were off, and there was a hole in one of her brown socks. "Maybe he is just trying to protect you." Mariel suggested.

"I can understand that he is worried about me." Leona burst out. "But right now I need a little more space! He's choking me slowly, and I can't take it much longer. I don't want him to protect me. I want to be free. So, that's why. If need be I'll fly to Ank'mar."

"I think that you need to realize one thing." Mariel said.

"What?" Leona said, looking up at the elf.

"That maybe you can no longer be without his protection."

Leona looked away, her jaw set in an expression of determination.

"We have made many enemies in the last two years, and they will attack you when they know you are connected to us. They will use you to get to Grimm."

"You sound so sure of yourself." Leona said, facing Mariel again and sitting up.

"Sir Jean had a friend from his childhood. They were together in the service of Heironeous. I met him too. He was a paladin, just like Sir Jean, blessed by his God and happy with his life. They got to him, they poisoned his mind. They made him forsake his God and turn his back on Sir Jean. He was determined to kill us. And now he is dead."

"Well, I haven't been with you for very long." Leona said. "I don't think they will know I am on your side."

"Think about it." Mariel said, and she stood up. "Grimm will be broken-hearted if something were to happen to you. Don't let yourself become a target by leaving."

Leona had not taken it so well. She had stormed into the kitchen, shouted at Grimm, and stormed back up to the room she shared with him. She knew now what to do. Grabbing her quill and ink, she dropped to the bed and started to write in a furious manner.

Melvin had taken the apples Sermon had given him, and made another apple pie. Undisturbed by Leona's absence or the discussions that floated through the house, he took his time to knead the dough, make tea for Mariel, started the beersauce boiling for Grimm and selected meat for the grill. He took his sweet time preparing the apple pie and started on the meat only as the apple pie was in the oven. When the meat was on the grill and the beersauce was softly cooking, he started on the salad.

Mariel had taken the opportunity to talk to Grimm as Melvin was cooking. Sir Jean slipped upstairs to tell Leona dinner was almost ready and to give them some privacy. Mariel talked with Grimm about her conversation with Leona, and finally she turned the conversation to the incident of the other day.

"Grimm, I wanted to ask you to never disturb my prayers again, unless there is an attack or I am needed to heal the dying or sick. When I am praying, I talk to my Goddess. To be stopped, to sever the connection unless it is for a very good reason is unacceptable. What you did the other day could well have -- I could have been in disgrace for it."

"Well, whatever. I'll try and keep it in mind."

At that point Melvin started to put the dishes he cooked on the table. Sir Jean had returned from upstairs and put some things on a plate.

"I promised Leona to bring her some food upstairs." Sir Jean said, and waited as Mariel put a pear and some cherries on the plate as well.

Dinner was delicious and no less tasteful for Leona's absence. Mariel ate only a little bit of the vegetables, and skipped the grilled meat altogether. The fruit was delicious, better than she remembered. She was not sorry she skipped most of the vegetables. Sir Jean pushed his plate towards her. He had taken a pear and was eating it with a smile on his face, obviously savouring the taste. Mariel knew he did not need to eat because of his Ring of Sustenance, but she did not eat all the fruit from his plate.

As dessert, Melvin took out the apple pie. The scent alone was overpowering. The apple pie smelled so good that their mouths began to water at the mere sight of it. The sweet apples, grown with the love of Ehlonna, mingled their scent with the cinnamon and sugar. Sir Jean cut the pie in five pieces, giving each of them a piece and saving one piece for Leona. Melvin took his piece and leaned back in his chair, enjoying his skills before taking his first bite. Grimm immediately dug in, biting off a large chunk while Mariel took her fork and cut off a tiny piece, savouring the pie for all it was worth. Even Sir Jean was enjoying the apple pie with a look of bliss on his face. Before he took a second bite, he remembered to take the last piece upstairs to Leona, and

returned quickly to finish his apple pie.

Mariel held out a cherry to him, the stem between her fingers and a devious smile on her face. She had a little bit of apple pie left. Grimm had finished his piece of apple pie and was staring at his axe with a look of rapture and love on his face. When both Mariel and Sir Jean had finished their pieces of apple pie, Mariel proposed to take a walk, and they stepped outside. Both of them left their shoes at the edge of the terrace, feeling the cold grass between their toes.

They walked to the edge of a large pond, and Mariel twined her fingers in Sir Jean's hair, kissing him passionately. It took Sir Jean by surprise, but he recovered soon enough, answering her kiss with an equal amount of passion. The apple pie had a peculiar effect on Mariel; she felt rather funny. She was glad Sir Jean was wearing regular pants and a shirt, not his usual armour. That would complicate matters to no end.

Her nimble fingers moved down Sir Jean's body, one hand still stroking the nape of his neck, the other hand took off the belt he was wearing in one fluid motion. Then both her hands moved on his waist, sliding beneath his shirt and up to his shoulderblades.

Sir Jean was taken aback somewhat and pulled back from their kiss, but he was happy to see the look in Mariel's eyes. She looked like she was enjoying herself tremendously, and her eyes spoke of more surprising things to come. Before he could collect his thoughts and react, her fingers stroked his skin silkily, stroking the skin on his back with only the lightest of touches. She tilted her head upwards again, kissing him lightly, her hands still caressing his back.

Sir Jean put his arms around her then, carefully wrapping his arms around her body. It was slender but soft and round, her form hardly hidden by the thin white robe she wore. His hands moved on her back, and moved forward to remove her belt. He was not so deft as she had been, but the belt soon dropped to the grass. His hands moved under her hair, supporting her head and stroking her neck. She moved closer into his embrace, pressing her body to his. Her hand moved to his waist, pulling him tight to her. His left hand moved lower on her back, his right hand cupped her neck, brushing with his fingertips the skin under her pointed ear. A soft sigh escaped her. Slowly, he pulled her dress upwards, sliding his hand underneath the thin fabric. His hand was warm on her thigh, and his mouth moved to the side of her neck. For a moment, Mariel could not think, but then she pulled back from him and took his hands. Without breaking eye contact, she moved his hands and arms, raising them over his head. She pulled his shirt up, and he obliged her, helping the shirt over his head because she could not reach so high. Forgotten, the shirt fell to the grass. Sir Jean mimicked her action, putting her hands over her head with one hand, pulling her body close to his with the other. Slowly, he pulled the dress up so the hem was around her thighs, finally pulling the dress over her head so she stood naked before him. He had seen her naked before, but in the light of the stars her skin seemed to shine. Though it was obvious she was used to hardship and muscles moved beneath her skin, her body still retained a roundness, a softness that was very sensual.

When he moved his hands on the side of her body again, she took his hands and placed them around her breasts. Her smile was radiant and there was not a doubt that this was exactly what she wanted. Despite her forwardness, Sir Jean paused for a moment, unsure what to do next.

Then her hands moved on the buttons of his trousers. When they dropped around his ankles, he stepped out of them, wearing only his loincloth. He took her hands and they sank down to the grass. Mariel rolled into his arms automatically, Sir Jean leaning on one elbow above her. His hand was still beneath her, and his leg was wrapped over hers. He seemed to be a bit lost, unsure of what to do next. Mariel put her hands on either side of his face tenderly, pulling him down to kiss her again. Her hand found his somewhere between their bodies, their fingers intertwined. For a moment, they stayed like that, and then she moved her hand on his body, once more stroking his back with only the lightest of touches.

His hand moved down her tummy and softly, carefully down between her legs, finding her ready and willing.

He paused for a moment, pulling back from their kiss and looking into her eyes. She smiled reassuringly at him. She was glad he was so careful with her, but it was only to be expected after their conversation near the fountain. He knew it was her first time, and it was not in his nature to be anything but careful with her. When he took off his loincloth, she didn't react at all, nor did she pull back from him. He put the loincloth aside and turned back to face her, seeing in her eyes no fear. She was absolutely still, lying in the cold wet grass awaiting him with love in her heart.

Very carefully he spread her legs and lay between them. He kissed her softly, and then looked at her again. There were no words, but in his heart he knew that she wanted him to go on as much as he did. Her eyes were begging for him to go on, and so he did, very carefully. She shifted a little bit beneath him as he entered her. It was not very painful, only slight feeling of discomfort inside her. She moved her legs a bit, making it easier for him and more comfortable for herself, and pulled him close. Slowly and carefully they moved together, their love for each other now acknowledged in the joining of their bodies. He was very careful with her, aware that Mariel was of a smaller build and that it was her first time as well.

After he had spent himself inside her, he carefully withdrew and lay down on the grass next to her. She curled up in the crook of his arm, lying so close to him there was no space left between them. She sighed and smiled up at him, and there was a great happiness in her eyes.

Leona dressed carefully the next morning, taking care not to wake Grimm. She left him a note saying she loved him, and that he should not worry because this was her decision. Once outside, she transformed into a bird and flew up into the air, towards Ank'mar. When Mariel awoke that morning it was still dark. Sir Jean was no longer in bed with her. They had bathed together and as soon as she was in bed, she had fallen into reverie. There was a small note on the bedstand, scribbled in haste by the



looks of it.

Shall be back soon. I love you. Kiss, Jean.

Leona had been flying for a few hours when she heard the flapping of wings. It sounded like a large bird, possibly a predator. At first she didn't worry about it. She had transformed into an eagle, and very few winged creatures would attack an eagle out in the open. But the sound stayed with her for the next hour, and whoever was following her was gaining on her. After three hours of flying, they had gained so much on her that she panicked and sped up. It was too late, whoever had been chasing her was onto her and a blow of a wing slapped her off course. Losing control for a moment she plummeted towards the earth, only to spread her wings and slow her fall at the last moment. She even managed to turn her fall into a soaring flight again. Then she heard a voice in her head. "What are you doing?"

Panicking even more, she made a run for a nearby copse, sure that Sirc'al had found her, or perhaps another enemy of Grimm. Suddenly she saw something flying next to her. It was a large white horse. And it was flying.

Absolutely flabbergasted, she paused for a moment, soaring on the currents. Then the horse started to maneuver closer to her. It forced her to land, landing just next to her. It was close enough to trample her, but she was too scared to transform back into herself, afraid of whoever had forced her to land.

Again, she heard a voice in her head. "Why are you being so stubborn?"

The horse moved closer to her, and she decided to return to her half-elf form. In the shadow between the trees she saw a shape of a human coming closer to her. Before she could see the person's face, the horse started to shine, like daylight radiating off its hide. The figure was still moving closer.

For the third time, she heard a voice in her head. "Mount the horse."

"How do I know I can trust you?" Leona spat.

"The choice is yours." the voice said in her head.

"I would like some proof anyway. Perhaps you're just toying with me."

"Why would I do that?" the voice said in her head.

She fumed. She was so sick and tired of people trying to influence her! She scrambled onto the horse, which spread its wings and took off in the direction they came from. Within an hour and a half they were back over Ironforge, and the horse descended back to earth, to a luscious estate on the outskirts of Ironforge. It landed in the back yard, quite close to the patio where Melvin was just serving breakfast for Mariel (who was looking covetously at the last of the fruit from the Sanctuary) and Grimm.

Silver Spirit retracted his wings and walked onto the tiles, stopping next to the table where two empty chairs were next to Grimm and Mariel. When Leona dismounted, Mariel held out the last apple from the sanctuary to Silver Spirit, who ate it and whinnied softly. Leona sank into a chair, not noticing that Melvin rolled his eyes at her arrival, and started crying softly.

Mariel had donned her armour after breakfast and had gone down to the stables, where she found Sir Jean tending to their horses. She kissed Sir Jean softly, and then stepped over to Para, who nuzzled her hand in turn.

"I would like to visit Sermon today, if that is alright with you." Mariel said.

"As long as you are back here by tonight, it is." Sir Jean said, putting his arms around her. He seemed very cheerful that morning, despite the fact that he had to bring Leona back by force. Mariel could understand his sentiment - she was happy too, although she wasn't entirely sure what had come over her the night previous. They had made love in the garden, and that was all good and right. It was also quite un-elvish to rush things like that. But Mariel blamed the apple pie and when she realized that her Goddess had had some influence in the events, she had stopped worrying. She had made her choice and would stand by it forever.

She spent the day in the sanctuary of Ehlonna, walking with Sermon under the great trees. "Your presence has been missed." Sermon had said to her, and she had told him everything that had happened since she left. It was hard, telling him about a year and more of her life that he and the sanctuary she grew up in had no place in. But it was good to be back there. She had changed from the elf she was when she left, and she made no effort to hide it. For many years she had learned and worked in the Sanctuary, reveling in the love for nature and the love of her Goddess, only to be sent out into the world. Bad things had happened to her, she had been attacked and hurt. She had met new friends and had lost them too.

And her faith had changed. She spoke of her admiration for Grimm and Sir Jean to Sermon, told him how it had changed her. How she had wanted to become a divine crusader for her Goddess, and how she had worked to achieve it.

When Melvin had come back to get her at nightfall, her tale was told. There was but one thing left to say. She had spoken of faith and teamwork, but she had not yet spoken of her love for Sir Jean.

"Father, there is something I must tell you before I go. I have chosen a partner." Mariel said. They had stopped walking and stood facing each other beneath the great trees, Melvin keeping a respectable distance.

"Oh?" Sermon said.

"I would like for him to meet you, but he is not here." Mariel smiled.

"Then he will be welcome if he chooses to come with you, next time you are here." Sermon said. "I hope you will not be away for long."

Back at Sir Jean's house, she and Melvin had walked the lane to the manor house and Mariel had made some mint tea for

herself to settle her nerves. Melvin had forgotten he could not teleport directly into the kitchen at Sir Jean's house, and it had cost her the contents of her stomach. Sir Jean had joined her at the kitchen table and she had made him a cup of tea too. Boiling water and a few twigs of the mint plant she had planted in his garden made for excellent tea in her eyes.

She told him about her day at the sanctuary while Sir Jean sipped his tea. "Sermon invited me back whenever I wanted, and with Grimm working on his new armour now is a good a time as any. I would like for you to meet Sermon too. Have you ever been to Margden Woods?"

"Not in the town itself."

"I could visit the sanctuary there and work on some scrolls and potions. We're bound to need some if we're on the road again." Mariel said. "If I can be in the sanctuary and help them out as well, it would be a nice combination. I believe Sermon would not object to my being there for a week or two. If I am not needed here."

"We will manage without you. But I will miss you." He had frowned then, staring into his tea. "You are my weak spot Mariel, just like Leona is Grimm's weak spot. We will not readily admit it, but that is the truth. I know that you will always stand at my side. But I do not know if that is the case with Leona and Grimm. Leona had left for Ank'mar this morning and I have brought her back here because Grimm asked me to, and because it is just not safe for her to be on her own."

"So how is her being away on her own different than my being away on my own?" Mariel asked.

"I know that you can hold out for a while when you are attacked. She cannot." Sir Jean said with conviction. "And by her dying - or worse - Grimm will be a victim as well."

They were both silent for a little while, thinking about the consequences of one of the women being attacked.

"We should talk about this with the others." Mariel finally said, and Sir Jean nodded.

The next day was too full to actually talk with each other until dinnertime. Sir Jean and Mariel were training with their horses, and Melvin had taken a book on dragons to read and was sitting in the library, completely immersed. Grimm was still working on his armour and Leona passed the time in the garden by training her archery skills. At noon, a package had arrived for Sir Jean but even that was momentarily forgotten while they had dinner. Melvin had managed to tear himself away from his book - but it was still next to his plate.

"Jean, would you like to discuss it now, or later?" Mariel asked.

"Discuss what, that you might be pregnant?" Sir Jean replied. Melvin gawked openly at Mariel, and Grimm's spoon paused between his plate and his mouth.

"Do you know something I don't?" Mariel asked, but Sir Jean shook his head.

"I just know what can happen. But I believe you wanted to talk about the fact that you are my weakness and Leona is Grimm's."

Grimm scowled. "So? There will always be a safe place for them here, right?"

"That was the reason I wanted to go to Ank'mar!" Leona burst out.

"You still think that is a wise decision?" Mariel asked the half-elf incredulously. "Do you really think you would be safer there than with Grimm?"

As soon as Leona started the discussion again, Sir Jean stood up and left the room. Leona shut up immediately.

Mariel stood up and pointed at Leona's closed mouth. "You should have done that a long time ago." She walked after Sir Jean to the horses' stable. He put his hand on Silver Spirit's neck. In her head, Mariel heard his voice, softly saying sorry. She was surprised at hearing his voice in her head without him speaking. She tried to talk back to him in the same way. "I just want to be here for you."

Obviously, it had worked, because she heard his reply in her head as well. "You always are. I love you."

Outside, Grimm shouted out to them. "Jean! We want to talk about it! As adults!"

The two of them stepped outside to meet them.

"Mariel, that remark about Ank'mar was uncalled for. I apologize. I should have said it differently." Leona said. Mariel nodded.

Melvin walked up to them as well, called by a voice in his head.

"Sermon has invited me to visit him in Margden Woods for a longer time. Perhaps Leona would like to join me? Margden Woods is a lot safer than Ank'mar, and we would be together." Mariel said.

Leona eyed Mariel nervously. "I would like to discuss that with Grimm first."

"I would like to take Sermon up on his offer regardless" Mariel said.

"I would object less to Margden Woods than Ank'mar;" Sir Jean said; "Margden Woods is one day of flying away. For Silver Spirit."

"Plus, it is well-defended." Mariel said. "And we can be reasonably sure it is safe there right now."

Grimm joined in. "And we know exactly where it is."

Everyone pondered this for a moment, but Leona refused to answer the question right away. She looked at Grimm, who nudged her to speak.

"Sir Jean, this may be a very stupid question, but can you see if someone is pregnant?" Leona asked.

"Yes." Sir Jean said, turning to face Leona, who blushed. "Am I to understand that you might be having a child with Grimm?"

Leona nodded.

"I don't have the proper things with me right now, but you could also ask Mariel." Sir Jean continued. "However, she will be leaving shortly and I can imagine she has other things on her mind."