

Mariel took care that the horses were comfortable and then looked around if she could heal more people. They would not have much time and would need to leave very soon. It would only be a matter of time until the dwarves would find the refugee camp, and they would have to get moving soon. Grimm started working on carts for the horses to pull.

It took Sir Jean ten minutes to get back to them, and he landed heavily on the ground, crouching to one knee to catch the blow. Mariel ran to him immediately and looked at him. He was bleeding thoroughly from gashes and cuts. The feathers of his wings were rather ruffled and when she checked him for injuries she knew he had barely made it out of there alive. Taking his face in her hands, she cast her most powerful healing spell, and continued with another, lighter healing spell to heal his remaining injuries.

"How do you feel?" Mariel asked softly.

"I feel fine." Sir Jean said, smiling. Any day he could smite evil and save his friends was a good day.

"You saved us, buddy." Grimm said, clamping his hand on Sir Jean's shoulder.

Sir Jean took his time greeting Mariel with an "I am glad we are still alive"-kiss, and spent a few minutes alone with Silver Spirit, but by that time the refugees were ready to go. Para and Beefsteak both had a cart hitched to them, and the wounded and children were loaded and ready to go. Melvin was exhausted and sat on Zack, and Leona took some toddlers and young children to ride Flow. Most of the refugees had to walk though, and their going would be slow. Mariel had her bow ready and walked next to Para, where her horse could see her. The losses were great; of the seventy archers a little over half survived, and though there were less dead amongst the fighters, the losses weighed heavily on everyone's mind. The town was literally wrenched from its foundations and the townsfolk didn't know if they could ever return to their homes to rebuild.

The first two hours were quiet. The people plodded on and Melvin had found a nice spot in one of the carts where he napped. Suddenly, Mariel noticed one of the soldiers in front of her fall over and die. There was little warning, but she knew that it could have only been a spell. "The enemy is upon us!" she shouted, trying to find the caster who was attacking them. Another soldier crumpled and died, but there was no sign of anyone.

Then Grimm's knees buckled. He fell too, his axe falling from his weakened arms, but he was not dead. Mariel checked him for injuries immediately, but he was merely paralyzed for a moment. The dwarf cursed and stumbled to his feet again.

A bolt of lightning struck in front of the caravan of refugees. The horses screamed in terror and reared, refraining from bolting only because of the presence of Sir Jean, Leona and Mariel. Again the party searched for the source, the spellcaster who was doing this to them, but not even Aethelinda could spot anyone.

Melvin cast a spell on himself, and from the corner of his eyes saw something flying off. "It looked like a cross-breed between a demon and a bat." he said, pointing after it, though his friends could not see it.

Mariel pondered. "Sounds familiar. I know it's bad news and casts spells but we knew that already. Its beak -- the wounds are deadly. I think it's a horned devil."

"Where is it and can I kill it?" Grimm asked.

Melvin pointed in the air. The devil was flying off, though it was still invisible to everyone else.

"Sissy." Grimm hissed between his mustaches. "What does it want with us? We didn't do squat! Alright, we killed some of his buddies, but other than that..."

"Does this thing have any immunity to electricity?" Melvin asked Mariel.

"No, I don't think so. It does have immunity to loads of other stuff. Spell resistance, too, I think. Why, can you still -- where is it?"

"It's over there, and flying away from us." Melvin said, pointing a finger and mumbling a spell under his breath. A thin green spark of energy leapt from his finger towards the unseen devil. It stopped at some point, where it must have impacted the devil, and there was a definite lack of sound.

Melvin grinned. "There. That takes care of him."

"They know where we are now." said Sir Jean.

Sir Jean kept riding alongside the column, while the rest of them rounded up the last people who muddled along on foot. There was one last persistent grandfather who beat Mariel with his stick for a moment, protesting that he was fine walking, but in the end everyone found a spot on horseback or in carts. Mariel too had climbed into one of the carts and took out her bow and her own arrows, carefully avoiding those of Melvin. Grimm had clambered onto Beefsteak, who was still pulling a cart. Leona sat on Flow, her bow in her hands.

Grimm set the pace riding at the front, pushing the horses hard. Sir Jean covered the rear, falling back to keep the enemy off their tail.

Night had fallen, and it would take them at least until the next evening to reach Ironforge.

The next morning Leona woke in the cart she had crawled into to get some rest. She had not slept for more than three hours, but felt awake enough to seclude herself for her morning prayers. As soon as she jumped onto Flow and wanted to ride into the forest, Grimm called her back.

"Where do you think you're going? We have a lot of hungry mouths to feed and you can't sneak off on your own." he said.



"I have to pray, Grimm!" Leona said indignantly, crossing her arms over her breast. "Mariel probably does too."

"That's all fine, but first things first. We can't spare the people to stand guard while you pray, especially if they haven't had a full stomach in many hours."

Sir Jean caught up with them as Leona was helping Melvin set up his magic cooking set. Melvin was pointing out what to put where and Leona and Mariel helped him, as well as some of the refugees.

Sir Jean landed next to Grimm. "There you are!" the latter exclaimed, brushing his mustaches off with his hand. "Where were you, man?"

"I have been guarding our backs." Sir Jean said. "I kept the pursuers busy all night."

"More devils?" Grimm asked.

"No, more dwarves, actually." Sir Jean said, and frowned. "If we rest now and leave in four hours, we might still reach Ironforge safely."

Grimm called the others over to join the conversation. "If we take a few hours rest, how will the horses be?"

"They will be rested enough to take us the rest of the way." Mariel asked. "But if we are chased so hard, I am afraid what is waiting for us ahead. They might just be setting up a trap."

"There are two thousand dwarves behind us, but I do not think they are chasing us into a trap. We should take this time to rest and replenish." Sir Jean said gravely.

"I can cast a Heroes Feast, or Create Food and Water. That is an easy way to feed these people. I shall have to sleep and pray first though." Mariel said.

Everyone nodded, and Mariel rolled into her blanket to catch a few hours of reverie.

"We'll post sentries in view of each other and the camp." Grimm said. "Leona, you and Flow take care of the hunting. Bring back a dire bear or whatever you can bring back."

Melvin raised a finger. "A deer or boar would be preferred. Bears are not so very tasty. Perhaps Flow can do the hunting, and Leona can find edible roots and herbs."

By the time Mariel awoke, the horses had been unhitched and taken care of. Grimm had taken care to check the carts to see if none would break down any time soon. Flow had gone hunting and had returned with three boars, a rhinosceros, and four deer. Melvin had taken the beasts from Flow - who had been exhausted by the time she had returned from the last hunt - and taken the roots and carrots Leona and her helpers had gathered. Melvin was busy trying to make an acceptable stew for the four hundred hungry refugees, baking the meat in small portions so it would remain crispy.

When Mariel awoke, the first thing she saw was a bit of bread in the spot where Sir Jean had been sleeping next to her a few hours earlier. The smells of a well-cooked Melvin meal still wavered in the air, and everyone was busy. Leona and Sir Jean were nowhere to be seen, so Mariel looked for a quiet spot near the camp in the woods, and sat down to pray.

Normally she needed an hour for her prayers, but this day she felt Ehlonna conveyed a sense of duty on her. A sense of duty well-done, but also of duty to come. After half an hour of prayer Mariel felt refreshed and content.

Sir Jean was still nowhere to be seen, but the carts were hitched, the people were loaded, and they continued on their way. In the distance they could hear the horn of Sir Jean sounding. It was perhaps half an hour behind them, and Ironforge two hours ahead.

Suddenly Grimm toppled off his horse. Beefsteak was pulling a cart and by sheer luck Grimm fell to the side of the road so the cart didn't run him over, though his armour would be strong enough to protect him. Mariel steered Para to the head of the column, and waited while Leona and some of the men lifted Grimm into the cart. When the dwarf was secured, the caravan continued.

Melvin clambered near Grimm's head, and took off his helmet. He had a steaming container of his magic cooking set in his hand. Carefully, Melvin tipped some of his strong brew into Grimm's mouth. Out of reflex, the dwarf swallowed. Within seconds, Grimm was awake and gagging on the brown liquid. The cart was swaying dangerously, and Grimm could only barely keep himself from vomiting. At least he was awake.

Sir Jean came flying back to them, sending Silver Spirit to gallop alongside the column. He asked for a better longbow, and when Leona handed him Quinga, he kissed the longbow. Before Mariel had any time to comment, Melvin was at his side. The halfling held out a few of his special arrows to the paladin. "Only shoot at extreme range. Promise me Jean!"

"Alright, I promise." Sir Jean said, tucking the arrows into his quiver. "Mariel, should I not return, take care. I love you." The paladin left, flying over the column and disappearing in the distance.

A few minutes later, there was the distinct absence of sound, and then a long, all-enveloping woomph of a huge explosion. Behind them a huge mushroom-shaped cloud rose above the treetops.

Sir Jean himself returned to them some ten minutes later. The feathers of his wings looked ruffled, and there were scorch marks and blood on his armour. When he took off his helmet, his eyes looked tired and drawn. When he spoke, his voice sounded as weary as he looked. "I am truly sorry about the forest, Mariel, Leona, but they will not be following us any time soon."

Mariel pursed her lips, and walked towards the paladin. She laid her hands on him to see how wounded he was, and Leona touched him lightly with her staff, to heal him as well. Sir Jean carefully returned Quinga to Leona and relaxed for a moment as the healing knitted his wounds and returned his bruised skin to its normal hue. When Mariel had finished casting her spells, he turned Silver Spirit towards Ironforge and headed out, leading the column.

The gates of Dun Morgh, gateway to Ironforge, towered over them, and the refugees in the caravan sighed relief. Leona gaped at the huge gates, the polished smooth rock face of the gates, the names of her friends and the holy symbols of Hieroneous and Ehlonna. Sir Jean turned aside, letting the caravan pass, and the others joined him. Mariel helped the refugees unload while Grimm dispatched one of the dwarves to the Chief with a message they had returned and that an army was on the way.

Melvin clutched a cup of his brew, and the Chief had wanted a cup of his own. Melvin had added copious amounts of sugar to the murky brown liquid, and stirred it slowly with a spoon. The Chief hesitated to drink, curious what Melvin wanted to ask him.

"Who are the mages you trust with the future of Ironforge?" Melvin finally asked. He sipped his cup, making a face at the taste, but still watching the dwarf over the rim of his cup.

"A tough question." the Chief replied. "Do you want their names? I can tell you there are several I trust completely, and I count you among them."

"Thank you. No, I don't need to know their names." Melvin said. "I've made a discovery that can defend Ironforge in dire times, but if this falls into the wrong hands, it could mean the end of this great city. A discovery that is so dangerous, a weapon that is so destructive...you need to be really careful in whose hands the knowlegde is safe."

The Chief took a big sip of his cup. His eyes widened in shock at the taste of the foul dark brew.

"I'm sorry, it's a drink you should sip if you're really very tired." Melvin said. "It's not something to be drunk lightly."

"I see." The Chief rubbed a hand through his beard. "A weapon you say?"

"Yes, I shall need to have a look at your ballista's." Melvin said. "It's a ranged weapon that can really make a crater, or dent a city's defenses. I've used it with a crossbow before. The walls of Dun Morgh would be no match for this weapon, hence my caution."

The Chief looked at the cup, and decided against taking another sip, putting the cup on the table. "I'll see to it that you have every means at your disposal."

Mariel kissed Sir Jean tenderly. "How long have you known I am pregnant?"

"Two days." Sir Jean replied.

"Since I returned from Margden Woods." Mariel said. She continued in Elvish. "I'm scared. But I am also very happy."

"Me too. But I am unsure: what do we do now?" Sir Jean looked deep into her eyes. He looked scared, and very young.

"We just go on as we always have." Mariel smiled. "But we will have to watch out for more than just Leona and Grimm and Melvin."

Carefully bending down to reach his small girlfriend, Sir Jean wrapped his arms around Mariel and they hugged. Despite the full-plate armour they both wore, the embrace was warm and loving, a very special moment for the both of them. When Sir Jean pulled back, he softly asked Mariel to open her eyes. The city had disappeared, instead a soft golden light was surrounding them, a lovely forest with tall trees, leaves rustling in a soft breeze. Between the trees stood a small wooden temple. It blended with the woods around it, the walls seemed to have grown where they stood.

When Sir Jean led her to the door, Mariel took off her boots, leaving her helmet and shoes at the entrance. She shook her hair loose, the blonde locks tumbling down in disarray. Sliding her hand into Sir Jean's, they walked into the Sanctuary. Inside was a dais, a radiant woman seated on the throne there.

When Mariel realised she was in the presence of her Goddess, she sank to her knees, and bowed her head reverently. A calm and peaceful feeling settled over her. Ehlonna spoke in a language Mariel didn't know, but she understood the meaning flawlessly. "Take good care of her, Sir Jean."

The next morning, Sir Jean traveled around the seperate rooms to wake everyone up. They gathered in a meeting room, where Mariel introduced herself formally to Aethelinda, Melvin's bronze pseudodragon. There was another mage present, as well as several captains and the Chief. Melvin spoke to an aide about breakfast, at length, and when the aide returned he brought bread, fruit, tea, eggs and even some meat.

They brought Mariel up to speed on what had happened since she left for Margden Woods, and then continued to tell the Chief what had happened in Southshire. After they had finished talking, everyone was silent for a moment.

The Chief turned to the captains. "Are any of your men missing?" he asked.

The dwarves didn't answer, and they avoided the Chief's penetrating gaze. "ARE ANY OF YOUR MEN MISSING!?" The Chief bellowed, slamming a fist into the table.

When one of them nodded, Leona threw her hands up in disgust. "You'd think they'd report something like that!" she sneered.

"How many?" the Chief asked, drumming his fingers on the table.

"Three...three quarters of my standing guard." the captain quavered.

"And when were you going to report this?"

"I did report it!" the dwarf barked.

Sir Jean stood up so quickly, his chair toppled over backwards. He drew his sword and held it at the dwarf's throat. "No." Sir Jean said quietly.

The dwarf looked panicked. "Alright! I wanted to send a messenger, but I was too ashamed to report it. Two thousand of my



men."

Grimm placed a hand on Sir Jean's arm. "He's not going anywhere, buddy. Why don't you sit down."

Sir Jean sheathed his sword and righted his chair again. Only then did he notice that four of the guards were holding the Chief back. "Why don't you sit down." Grimm repeated.

The Chief sat down, and Grimm focused on the dwarf captain. "What should we do with you now?"

"You are relieved of your command." the Chief said. "You will be placed under house arrest for the time being. Take him away!"

After the dwarf captain was removed from the meeting, Grimm asked: "Did our mission succeed?"

"It was not in vain." replied the Chief.

"How many citizen casualties were there?" Mariel asked.

"That is not known yet." The Chief replied. "Some might have escaped before the army got there."

"The main question is: who sent those dwarves?" Grimm said.

"And who sent the undead?" Mariel mused. "Perhaps it is time we finish this."

"But every time we try, something happens to distract us!" Grimm said.

A knock on the door disturbed them. A messenger entered, and whispered in the Chief's ear urgently. "Some...thing is waiting at our gates." the Chief said. "I don't know what it is, but it's large and has wings. Its skin is red, and it's got horns."

"I think I know what it might be." Sir Jean said. "How large is it? Like a horse?" And after a nod from the messenger; "A balor." Sir Jean whispered.

They exited the meeting room and instantly saw how agitated the dwarves were. There was a busy flutter in the halls beneath them, and the causeways were filled with dwarves transporting axes and pieces of armour. Mages reviewed their scrolls, nearly bumping into the busy people around them.

When they reached the ground level again, Mariel noticed that their horses had been saddled already. Silver Spirit and Para were wearing their armour, and Beefsteak was rolling his eyes because of the business around him. Grimm motioned to one of the dwarf attendants to take his horse away. "I'll be better on the ground. Just make sure you drag me out of there if things go very badly."

After they had mounted, the Chief nodded to them to wish them luck. He would be commanding the dwarven army that would be standing by just in case. Sir Jean and Mariel were far better equipped to take on this foe, but if the situation called for it, the dwarves would march out. It was not a prospect the Chief enjoyed.

The balor was waiting for them just outside of range from the archers and the city's siege weapons. Flames licked over his red skin, and his feet stood firmly planted on the ground, the long nails biting into the rock face. His arms were relaxed, his weapons nearly on the ground. The flaming whip lay coiled in his left hand, and in the right hand was a fierce longsword that looked to be made of a blueish metal. It looked extremely sharp. The balor's head was gruesome. He held it low, the chin nearly to his chest. The long horns on either side of its face curved back towards the chin, and a mane of coarse brown hair stood up over his skull. Its nose was broad, like an ox nose, and small puffs of smoke tickled the nostrils. Over his head towered two large leathery wings, folded back.

As soon as Sir Jean, at the head of the group, rode into view, the balor snorted. It waited, standing absolutely still. The flames licking over its skin looked very surreal, the only moving things except for the muscled chest heaving with each breath.

When the balor finally moved, it was extremely quick. Before they knew what happened, the balor cast a spell. Dustmotes gathered around Sir Jean, closing in on him wildly. The rushing sound of air filling the vacuum, and then the effects disappeared. The paladin moved with the impact of the Implosion, he swayed in the saddle, but kept to his horse.

Melvin opened his scroll case, wasting no time. When he read the spell from the scroll, time seemed to slow down around him, until it stopped. Everyone was frozen in place, everyone but him. The spell would last all but twenty heartbeats, and he wasted no time. He focused his spells on the weapons of the balor, but it took him several tries until he finally managed to disintegrate first the vorpal longsword, and then the flaming whip. When the whip crumbled to dust, his friends seemed to start moving slowly again. Sir Jean and Mariel set their heels to their horses and rode to meet the balor. Grimm sprinted after them, brandishing his axe.

The balor, now weaponless, unfolded its wings. If it were to fly over their heads, it would be nigh impossible to hit it with any weapon, and because of the tough skin and the nature of the beast, spells would have a hard time penetrating as well. Before it could take off, Sir Jean and Mariel reached the monster. Sir Jean cried to the heavens, his skin glowing softly, and managed to hurt the balor badly, once, twice. Before Grimm could even come close, or before Leona could even react to anything that was happening, the balor bellowed out a hoarse cry. It seemed to slowly topple over backwards, but before it could hit the ground a large, red-hot explosion ripped the being apart. In its death-throes the beast showered Sir Jean and Mariel in fire, throwing them from their horses with an enormous shockwave. Grimm rolled when he hit the ground, holding on to his axe. He scrambled to his feet, looking around him in the silence that followed. Everything seemed to happen in slow-motion, as he was still a bit dazed from the shock. Behind him, the gates of Dun Morgh were slowly opening, dwarven faces peering out and the Chief coming out, shouting orders at healers. Leona, her face white with shock, ran towards him, mouthing a question.

Grimm turned around, saw the bodies of his friends like crumpled heaps of armour on the ground. Silver Spirit was gone and Sir Jean wasn't moving. A few feet from him lay the bleeding body of Para, Mariel's horse. The flanks of the horse weren't moving, and the mare looked very bad. Mariel was a few feet further away, and she looked like she had been thrown from her

horse and run over by several carts. There was blood beneath her, where it escaped from her armour.

Grimm shook his head to clear his vision, and saw the healers from the city rushing towards them. Leona was already shouting orders, kneeling next to Sir Jean. Melvin uncorked a potion bottle and poured it into Mariel's mouth, the visor of her helmet tilted up to allow access. The Chief was suddenly next to him, a hand on his shoulder. "We'll get them back on their feet." the Chief said comfortingly.

Leona was in tears. "He won't wake up;" she said to Grimm. "I've healed him, and healed him, but he won't wake up."

"Can he be moved?" Grimm asked.

"I think so. There's nothing wrong with him that I can see." she replied.

Grimm turned to the Chief. "We'll need a cart to transport them. They can stay in my house, they'll be more comfortable there than in the infirmary."

Melvin appeared next to them. "Grimm, what shall we do with Para? The mare is dead."

"I don't care;" Grimm replied; "We should get Sir Jean and Mariel back first. That's my priority right now."

"Para meant a lot to Mariel." Leona piped up. "You can't just leave her here!"

"I'll have my men take care of it, don't you worry." the Chief said comfortingly. "You go along with Sir Jean and Mariel now. I'll have them take Para to the temple in Andorhall."

Sir Jean and Mariel were placed in the upstairs bedroom they had occupied before, and Leona tucked them in after their armour had been removed. Melvin was busy downstairs making some tea, but the mood was sombre as the three of them sat at the kitchen table.

"Now what?" Leona asked.

"Let's recap what happened." Grimm said. "Sir Jean was hit with some spell first. Then he attacked the balor, and when the beast died it sort of exploded. That shockwave knocked us all over, but somehow they are unconscious and not waking up."

"They were pretty badly beaten up." Leona said. "I don't think they would have made it if we had waited a second longer. Poor Para died, and she was wearing armour."

"So why aren't they waking up?" Melvin asked. He tipped off their cups of tea and sat down again.

"I don't know!" Leona cried. "I've tried everything. They're completely healthy, as far as my powers tell me."

They sipped their tea in silence, and then Melvin stood up and started pacing around the table. Aethelinda jumped onto his chair because the kitchen was so small. "I'm not giving up on them." Melvin said. "I'll go to Margden Woods and get Sermon here. We should also notify the head priest of Hieroneous, Johan I think he's called. And the temple of Ehlonna here in Ironforge should know about Mariel's condition as well."

"Can you travel to Margden Woods tonight?" Grimm asked. "Then I can go to the temples in Ironforge while Leona stays here in case one of them needs her."

Melvin nodded. "I can go right now, and be back before midnight. Good luck."

When Grimm entered his home that night with Johan and Regalia in tow, he found Melvin in the kitchen, stirring a large bubbling cauldron. "Sermon is upstairs. Leona is with him for now, but she feels pretty useless. Perhaps you should talk to her." Melvin said, wiping his hands on a linen dishcloth. He turned to greet Regalia and Johan. "You've probably skipped dinner. Stew will be done in half an hour. I'll bring some up when it's done."

Grimm showed them upstairs and ushered Leona to the kitchen. The three High Priests stood on the upstairs landing for a little while, talking in hushed tones. Leona and Grimm sat down at the table, and were joined by Sermon not long after. "Regalia and Johan are with them for now."

"How are they?" Grimm asked.

"Not good." Sermon replied, rubbing his eyes. "I fear for their lives, but I can do little to help them. Can you tell me again what happened?"

Grimm told him of the encounter with the balor. "I'm sure Melvin has told you all of this already."

"He has, but it is good to hear your view of things." Sermon replied. "I'm sure Leona would tell the story differently, because she noticed different details."

Sermon turned to Leona and looked her in the eye. "You've done everything you can, and no-one can ask for more than that."

Leona nodded, and looked away. It would take time for her to realise that she was not to blame for Sir Jean's and Mariel's condition, but she would accept the fact in time.

For three days Johan, Sermon and Regalia took turns praying at the bedside of Mariel and Sir Jean. The chants became a background music that soothed the fraying nerves of Leona, who helped when she could. Melvin took care to keep the high priests well fed, and sent Grimm out on errands before long. The dwarf was pacing the rooms of his house, and was going insane with the tedium. He visited the Chief, who reported that the countryside around Ironforge was quiet, and that no further armies were forthcoming. The Chief in turn took Grimm to a practicing field so they could spar, and this helped Grimm relax somewhat. But as soon as he returned home, he was confronted again with Johan dozing off in a chair on the upstairs landing, or Melvin instructing Leona to bring hot soup upstairs.

On the night of the third day, Regalia, Johan and Sermon were all three at Mariel's bedside. Sermon was holding her hand while Johan chanted and Regalia spoke to Mariel in a soft tone. Slowly, Mariel began to show signs of consciousness. Some of the



small muscles in her face and hands twitched, but she was still not waking up.

"Mariel, you have to wake up." Regalia spoke. Her voice was soft but strong. "Who will take care of your child if you do not?" Mariel's eyelids fluttered for a moment, opening slightly. A tear rolled down her face, and then another. She sat up, flinging her free arm around Regalia in a strong embrace.

It was a while before Mariel's tears dried. Slowly she retreated from the embrace with Regalia. Her sobs had subsided and she wiped her face. Regalia, Johan and Sermon looked relieved.

Slowly, Mariel became aware that she was in a bedroom, and she was sitting up in a bed. Next to her was a large human. Blond tufts of hair drew her attention, and she turned around to look at Sir Jean.

He was lying remarkably still, his eyes moving under closed eyelids. Mariel placed her hand on his chest, but he did not respond to her touch, not even when she spoke his name.

Willing her powers into action, she checked him for injuries. On the outside he looked fine, except for a sheen of sweat on his brow. Inside, he was a mess. Internal injuries and a fire like a battle raged in him.

Mariel turned to him in earnest now, the three high priests in the room momentarily forgotten. The terrible realisation dawned on her that while she had stood at the brink of death, Sir Jean had also.

And he was still struggling.

'No..' she thought desperately, 'let not my failure cost him his life. Please, don't leave me.'

She placed a second hand on his chest, and closed her eyes and summoned her healing powers. The energy rushed into him like a river, healing inside what had not been healed before. But there was more, a struggle of the mind. Willing her powers into action once more, Mariel cast Atonement, granting the troubled mind of Sir Jean peace at last. When it was done she collapsed on his chest, refusing to let him go.

It was many hours later that she awoke, and still she clung to him, lying on his chest with one arm sprawled over his shoulder. She had been crying again, and Sir Jean's shirt had a wet mark where Mariel's face was.

His hand moved up and stroked her hair gently. He went into the bathroom, and after he relieved himself he returned to stroke Mariel's back. She responded to his touch, and turned over to face him. Her eyes were lined with grief.

Mariel was making tea as breakfast Melvin came down the stairs and practically bullied her away from the counter. Mariel had been surprised that the priests had gone, but was too distracted to think more on the subject. She sat down at the kitchen table, clasping Sir Jean's hands, when the sound of a horn penetrated the rock walls of the dwarven home.

Moments later, a dwarf knocked on their door. "Didn't you hear the horn?" he said, frowning at Aethelinda that had opened the door.

"We shall be right there." Sir Jean said, and turned to Mariel. "You saddle the horses, and I shall see if Grimm is awake."

Mariel walked into the stable, and stopped. Beefsteak, Zack and even Silver Spirit were looking at her curiously, but Para was not there. She called to Sir Jean, asked him where Para was.

"Just a moment, I shall ask Grimm." he replied. When he returned, Mariel had finished saddling Silver Spirit and walked with him towards Sir Jean.

"Mariel, I have to tell you something." Sir Jean awkwardly began.

"Yes?" she replied.

"Para is not well. She is not here." Sir Jean tried. He was very clearly not at ease.

"Is there anything I can do for her? Where is she?" Mariel replied. Her face was set in worry, and there were lines of grief still etched near the corners of her eyes.

"No, you can no longer help her. I am afraid she has died."

For a moment there was nothing Mariel could say. The full shock of her own near-death experience had not yet passed, and now she was confronted with the loss of a close friend. Para had been there since she left her home, she had grown along with Mariel and had been there even when the odds were against them.

"I can't deal with this, not now." Mariel choked, and brushed passed Sir Jean before he could stop her. She ran upstairs and sank down once more on the cold tiles, her back against the bed. Tears were streaming from her eyes.

There was a soft knock on the door. When she didn't reply, Melvin opened it and stepped inside.

"Do you want to talk about it? I know how it feels to lose a loved one." he said to her. Mariel did not reply, her buried face in her arms.

"Will you at least get up from the cold floor? It can't be good for the babies." he pleaded.

"Please leave me alone." Mariel said in a small voice.

"No, Mariel, I can't." Melvin replied. "You've been out cold for three days, and you chose to come back to us. Now we need your help. I'll take you to Para - she's at the temple of Ehlonna - so you can say goodbye, but now we need you, and you need to take care of yourself and the babies! Now get up, or I will get Sir Jean and he will be very angry with you for jeopardising his children."

Grudgingly, Mariel had to accept that Melvin was right. She rubbed the tears from her face and scrambled to her feet. "I'll put on my armour, and I'll be right there."

"It's a red dragon." the Chief said solemnly, as the group arrived at the hall behind the gates. "It's just sitting there, for now, but

I think he's waiting for you. He showed up about half an hour ago."

"Has it asked for us specifically?" Sir Jean inquired.

"Not as such," the Chief said. "We'll be marching out shortly."

The Chief nodded to Grimm and Sir Jean, and returned to his preparations. Grimm was looking eagerly at the gates, and was the first one outside when they opened. He'd been locked up in his home for far too long. Sir Jean rode Silver Spirit, and Mariel and Leona took up positions next to Grimm. It felt strange to Mariel to be on foot again, and she glanced behind her at Melvin. Beyond him, she could see the Chief leading his army of dwarves. Melvin winked at her, and then focused his attention on the dragon again.

The red dragon was fiercesome, towering over them. The horns on its head curled back towards its wings, and smoke trickled from one of the nostrils. The air was heavy with the scent of sulphur.

"I am sent by Bachtor." The red dragon spoke. Its voice was gravelly and hoarse, but the tone was disdainful. No sooner had it spoken, or it blew a Fireball at the group. Luckily, Melvin had already thrown up a Wall of Force in front of them, and the Fireball raged on the other side of it. The dragon snorted, the sound echoing from the walls. Grimm started running, dodging around the Wall of Force, and striking at the dragon. Sir Jean too was charging the monster. The dragon's hide was very tough, and Grimm's axe bounced off the scales.

Mariel was still behind the Wall of Force when it happened. The dragon cast a spell at Melvin, aiming around the wall that protected them. Mariel saw something whizz past her, but she didn't see the effects. Melvin crumpled to the ground, a soft sigh escaping his lips. She kneeled down next to Melvin, checking his injuries. Leona was busy shooting her bow at the dragon, so Mariel cast a healing spell on the small halfling. She softly slapped Melvin's face, trying to wake him up.

Behind her, the dragon was still casting fireballs, but most of them bounced off the Wall of Force harmlessly. The dwarves were still marching towards the dragon, but for now they were mostly behind the Wall of Force and the fire hardly reached them. Smoke rose over the battle, and the eerie sounds of Grimm's axe and Sir Jean's swords on the dragon clattered off the tall walls of Dun Morgh.

The dragon was moving its head to bite at the paladin, and Sir Jean attacked again. His strong right arm raised above him, the vorpal scimitar slicing through the dragon's neck almost effortlessly. With a nudge from his knee, Silver Spirit sidestepped. The dragon's head crashed to the ground next to the stallion, and the body slumped down, warm blood gushing from neck.

Some of the dwarves cheered.

When they were sure there would not be another attack, the dwarves returned back to their barracks. Grimm was busy pulling on the scales of the dragon. "Tough stuff, this!" he shouted down at Sir Jean. The paladin stood next to the corpse, cleaning his scimitar on a rag. "I wonder if I can make something out of it." Grimm continued. "Say, I think this is a female!"

Grimm clambered down at the rear end of the dragon, and took a closer look. He fumbled around a bit, and finally put his axe down so he could use both hands. A little while later, he emerged again, carrying a large rock. When they looked a little bit closer, they could see it was an egg. It was red, but there was soot and grime all over it, making it hard to see what colour it really was. Melvin thought he could discern a scale-like texture under the soot. "What're you going to do with it, Grimm?" he asked. The halfling corked a small vial of the dragon's blood he had collected.

"I dunno!" Grimm replied. "Maybe it'll hatch."

"I doubt it'll make a good playmate for your child, Grimm." Mariel said, frowning at the egg. "Aren't red dragons extremely difficult to control? How can you raise something that will not listen?"

"Aw, my parents managed." Grimm smiled through his mustaches.

Sir Jean smiled at Grimm. "We can take it along to my estate. I have it on good authority that my cellar is very nearly fireproof."