

Please forgive me

Mariel and Grimm sat at the breakfast table in Sir Jean's kitchen. Melvin was at the stove, flipping pancakes. Mariel held a cup of hot tea in her hands, staring over the brim of her cup, inhaling the scent of fresh tea and watching the gardens outside. She wasn't thinking of anything, but she savoured the feeling of peace and quiet. On the meadow, a large group of horses galloped behind Sir Jean on Silver Spirit. There were at least sixty horses in the herd, all well-bred horses with strong legs.

Melvin flipped a pancake and walked over to the patio doors, calling out to Sir Jean to ask if he wanted a pancake as well. The paladin drew rein and dismounted, slapped Silver Spirit on the hindquarters, and watched the herd take off again. He stepped inside, kissed Mariel's hair, and sat down at the kitchen table. Leona stepped into the kitchen as well, having just finished dressing. She sat down next to Grimm as Melvin served them all pancakes and joined them at the table.

"What are you up to today?" Sir Jean asked.

"Oh!" Melvin burst out excitedly. "I have this great idea about self-closing armour clasps. Instead of taking ten minutes to put on all your armour pieces, I want to enchant them so with one word, the snaps will close on their own. It'll totally cut down on the time it takes to get battle ready!"

Grimm barked a laugh, spraying bits of pancake into his beard.

"And then I've got to take Grimm halfway across the world." Melvin continued. "And there's this dragon egg in your basement. Can we use a potion on the egg to make the dragon well-behaved?" he asked. The halfling was bubbling with ideas, gesturing wildly with his pancake.

"Do you have any idea how thick the egg shell is?" Sir Jean asked. "It survived the crash of its mother, I doubt pouring a potion over the egg will work."

"What do you mean 'take me halfway across the world'?" Grimm asked Melvin. "I just need to go a couple of places."

"But I don't know where they are." Melvin pointed out, putting the honey pot back on the table. Leona pursed her lips at Grimm, but the dwarf didn't even notice. He rummaged around in one of his pouches and extracted a journal, filled with dwarven scribblings. "There's a legend about the axe of Moradin. There was a key to this legend, and parts of this key are buried in separate parts of the world. The first part is rumoured to be buried in an old mithril mine. The problem is that although all dwarves know of the axe of Moradin and the key to the axe, anyone who has gone looking for it went missing. None of them have returned. There's rumours about it being guarded by hydra's or a dragon, but nobody knows for sure." Grimm took another bite of his pancake. "The island the legend speaks of has been described, but nobody knows precisely which island it is."

Melvin thought about what Grimm had said. It still seemed like a wild goose chase to him, but that was alright. Suddenly, he remembered something. "I have something for you, Mariel." Melvin said, and took a scroll out of his scrollcase. The elf rolled the scroll open, and gawked at Melvin. "A scroll of True Resurrection! How did you know I wanted to visit the temple today?"

"I figured you would go there sooner or later. I was shopping for scrolls and when I saw this one, I thought of you." Melvin replied.

Grimm snorted. "How much money did you spend on scrolls, exactly?"

Melvin dodged the question. "I didn't actually hand over money, as such."

"Did you even pay for them?" Sir Jean asked in a stern tone.

"Yes, I did. I paid with a vial of dragon's blood." Melvin grinned. "I have several vials still left, we've encountered quite a lot of dragons. Bronze dragon, black dragon, red dragon. I've got almost two dozen vials of blood! Oh, that reminds me, I also wanted to do some research in how dragons are so resistant to magic."

Sir Jean put his hand over Mariel's hand. "You want to go see Para?" he asked softly, while Melvin rambled on about his research to Grimm. Mariel nodded, avoiding his eyes. "If you want, I shall accompany you." the paladin said softly.

In the end, Leona accompanied them as well, riding Flow. She wanted to visit her parents in the city. Sir Jean took one of the horses he was supposed to train, and helped Mariel mount Silver Spirit. They rode at a brisk pace and soon Leona took a left turn, waving a goodbye. Sir Jean and Mariel continued towards Andorhall, pulling rein in front of a small dwarven temple. They dismounted, and Mariel smoothed her white robe over her legs, suddenly nervous. A dwarf in deep blue robes showed them into a room in the back. There was straw on the floor, and a few lanterns lit the room. The dwarf stayed in the corridor and said that he'd be outside if they needed him.

Mariel kneeled next to her faithful mare, and stroked her flank. She looked over her shoulder at Sir Jean for a moment. "If what I am about to do is against your faith, then please tell me so now."

Sir Jean slowly shook his head. Mariel turned back to Para and cast a spell so she could speak with her, despite the fact that her mare had been dead for a while. She needed to ask only one thing: whether Para would return, for her own sake. Para replied to Mariel that she would, and Mariel then took a scroll from her pouch. It was an old scroll, one she had written in Little Hollow so long ago. The scroll Melvin had given her was more powerful, but with a pain in her heart she realised she should save that scroll for one of her companions, should they ever fall in battle.

There was a flash of light, and a soft whinney. Mariel stood up and hugged her horse, glad they were reunited. Tears streamed down her face, but they were happy tears.

Para had indicated she would be happy to roam without her rider for a moment, so Mariel had mounted behind Sir Jean on Salvator. Silver Spirit and Para pranced through the streets, frolicking like foals. Silver Spirit arched his neck gracefully, trying

to impress the mare, and they followed Salvator home, arriving at Sir Jean's estate very late in the evening. Melvin and Grimm were in the library, large piles of books around them. Melvin had his nose buried in a book about the properties of dragon's blood, and Grimm was flicking through the pages of another book, trying to find the illustrations. They had visited the library in Ironforge that day, but their research would take weeks, if not months.

The next morning, Melvin and Grimm discussed the books they had retrieved from the library. "It's going to take months to read that all." Grimm said. "And there's hardly any illustrations in it, it's just words. I checked. Isn't there an easier way to do this?"

Melvin pondered his question for a moment. "I suppose we could ask someone who knows a lot about dragons and their properties, but who would know?"

"I say we take a trip to Andorhall and ask the head mage." Grimm said. "Perhaps he can tell us more."

Melvin agreed, and he took hold of Grimm, teleporting them to Andorhall.

"In Ironforge?" the head mage had asked Melvin. "Nobody would know that. I guess the elves could tell you more, but they wouldn't be in Ironforge."

Melvin and Grimm had teleported to the edge of Margden Woods. They had entered the woods unchallenged, and walked for a few miles until Melvin stopped walking. "Something's wrong. We should have been stopped by a couple of rangers by now. Mariel spoke of them sometime, remember?"

Grimm stopped next to him, his axe on his shoulder. "So what do you suggest? Do you even know how to get to the village?"

"I can teleport there." Melvin shrugged. "But I don't know if it would be wise to take you along. They don't know you that well."

"I'll wait here." Grimm said, gesturing to Melvin that he should go on ahead.

Melvin teleported to the spot underneath the apple tree in the sanctuary of Ehlonna. The sanctuary itself was deserted, and there was no sign of Sermon. Melvin walked around the temple grounds for a bit, and then stepped into the village. The council clearing and the practicing fields were empty as well, there was not an elf in sight. He slowly ascended the steps of one of the great trees, and looked around the plateaus, trying to find a sign of life. There was no-one around, not one elf came to greet him. The entire village was deserted, men, women and children all missing.

The happy birdsong around him was a sharp contrast to the uncomfortable silence. Melvin ran down the steps again, going up another one of the great trees and entering one of the elf houses. The house was empty as well. He rummaged through the pantry and found some scraps of food, stale bread that looked to be a week old.

He sent Aethelinda to look around the village, and she too reported that it was deserted. The fires of the forge were extinguished, there were no horses in the stables, and no elves anywhere to be seen. Melvin cast one last worried frown over the deserted village, and teleported back to Grimm.

"There was no sign of undead either?" Grimm asked, after hearing Melvin's tale. "Nobody?"

"Nobody." Melvin answered morosely. "It was completely deserted. I wonder if Mariel knows where they went?"

The next morning Mariel went over to the stables to look for her horse. The mare was resting comfortably, and Mariel took her outside to look for long grass and sweet apples. Grimm found her at the front of the mansion, smiling contentedly while Para was rolling in the grass. The dwarf asked if she would join them for breakfast. Mariel went inside with the dwarf, but returned to Para with an apple from the pantry before joining the others at the table.

"So Mariel, where were all those elves when we visited Margden Woods yesterday?" Grimm asked her and Melvin explained what had happened the other day. Mariel listened quietly, and thought for a moment. "Don't worry. "Everything is alright." Mariel said.

Grimm shook his head. "So if I tell you that Ironforge is completely empty and there is nobody left, the food is still in the pantry and there is a week's worth of dust in their houses you wouldn't be worried?"

"I would believe you if you said everything was fine." Mariel replied pointedly. She took an apple from the pantry, and skipped the bacon and eggs Melvin served. "Elves are very private beings, Grimm." Mariel explained. "Let's just say that if you were visit someone, it is only polite to send a message that you will be stopping by. Perhaps I am mistaken, but I believe that this is so with halflings and dwarves as well."

Grimm ate the last bit of bacon from his plate. "There's not always time for that."

"I am sure the Chief knows how to contact the elves." Mariel replied drily. "And I'm sure they will be more welcoming if you announce your arrival."

"I think they were just scared to meet with us." Grimm dismissed her remark.

Mariel leaned forward. "Have I ever let you go into battle alone?" she asked him, knowing the answer. "Then how can you accuse my race of being scared?"

Grimm huffed and turned to Melvin. "So now what? We can read the books, but that will take months!"

"We could talk to Regalia." Melvin suggested. "Unless she also disappeared into thin air. Wait! Sir Jean, what do you know of enchanting items using dragon's blood?"

Mariel and Leona excused themselves from the table, before Sir Jean started talking. The paladin thought for a moment. "I know a story of a man who did a lot of research into artefacts created with dragon scales and dragon blood. He was a



researcher, not unlike you, Melvin, and his name was Viline. He created many artefacts, and wrote about his discoveries. If you are interested in enchanting items with dragon components, you should probably read his book."

"So if we read Viline's book, we don't have to read all these other books." Grimm concluded cheerfully.

"Possibly." Sir Jean said. "What I remember most vividly about this story is that Viline disappeared one day. Working with dragon artefacts is very tricky. The most important thing you should realise is that when you are working with dragon components, the enchanting you are about to do can go wrong in the blink of an eye. It can be anything that triggers the effect, and because it is so unpredictable, it is also very dangerous. Viline had a lot of luck in his research, and he managed to create many powerful things. Until one day when there was a large explosion in his workshop. They could not find a trace of his body, and the only thing that remained as a testimony for his work was his book, which was magical."

Melvin thought for a moment. "So if I were to try and enchant a ring with a Bull's Strength spell, using dragon's blood as one of my components, it could explode without warning?"

"Indeed." Sir Jean replied. "As I recall, it is even more tricky than that. Because the dragon components are so unpredictable, the explosion can also occur after the artefact is finished, killing its wearer."

Melvin looked at his tea, sulking. Grimm frowned. "Oh well;" the dwarf said; "you can still make me a new belt, or an enchanted ring if you like."

Sir Jean sat up straighter all of a sudden, as if he heard something. "Grimm, Melvin, could you come with me please?" The paladin got up from his chair and walked to the basement.

"Is that egg hatching?" Grimm asked.

"I do not know, but something is going on." Sir Jean replied. He descended the staircase into the basement, and ducked his head. A small flame flew over his head, and Grimm could hear something scuffling downstairs. There was a slight smell of sulphur and smoke, and Sir Jean stood in front of the red dragon that had hatched from the egg.

"Shall I try to become its friend?" Sir Jean asked.

"You said it wouldn't hatch for a long while!" Grimm exclaimed. The dragon cocked its head to the side and jumped up, settling on Sir Jean's left shoulder. "And I guess that means he likes you, right?" Grimm continued. Melvin could now also see the dragon, and exclaimed: "How cute!"

Sir Jean said something in a strange language, unlike any language they had ever heard before. The dragon seemed to listen to him, and jumped down from Sir Jean's shoulder. It walked over to Melvin, standing taller than the small halfling and pressing its nose to Aethelinda, who was perched on Melvin's shoulder.

"He seems to be very friendly." Sir Jean said. "For the moment."

While Leona went to visit her parents again, Mariel took Para for a ride that day. She returned to the manor early. The ride had been wonderful, she felt like Para was slowly forgiving her for the pain that had been inflicted upon her. Mariel took her time rubbing down the mare and brushing her coat. Finally she took some carrots from the pantry to feed to her.

She was thinking about the dinner arrangements she was about to make. There was a spell that could take care of the dinner, but she didn't know exactly when their guests would arrive. When she was done with her mare, she left Para to roam free around the estate. She noticed Sir Jean coming out of the house, and she took his hand and invited him to join her in the bathroom. When they turned to walk towards the bathroom, Mariel suddenly noticed the red dragon hatchling following Sir Jean. The paladin explained to her what had happened as they ascended the stairs.

"Where did the hatchling come from?" Mariel asked him. Then she realised the egg must have hatched. "Oh no..." she sighed, as she lowered herself into the bathtub. "Do you really think it's wise to have a red dragon around the house? Leona and I are both pregnant."

Sir Jean lowered himself into the waters behind her. He put his arms around her and held her close, nibbling her neck and making her worries disappear.

"What will you be cooking tonight?" Sir Jean asked softly.

"Nothing complicated." Mariel dodged the question. "I was thinking of casting Heroes Feast. We've had a rough time, and everyone's worked so hard. I really feel they have deserved this."

"It sounds nice." Sir Jean replied.

After Mariel had dried off, Sir Jean helped her with her dress. Mariel had chosen to wear the well-tailored blue velvet gown for the evening, and Sir Jean took his time buttoning her up, enjoying himself. Mariel slowly walked to the kitchen, not used to the long skirts impeding her movement. Outside, she saw Grimm training with the red dragon hatchling. The dwarf was not very tall, and the hatchling was taller than him, almost as large as Zack. The dragon hovered over the practicing field, and Grimm laughed at the dragon as it tried to burn the Minor Image he was training with. The fire breath of the dragon passed through the illusion, and he appeared to be very pleased with himself.

Mariel found Melvin in the library, completely immersed in one of his books on dragon components. Aethelinda was curled up in his lap, and she raised her head as Mariel entered. Melvin looked up a moment later.

"Melvin, could you help me pick an elven wine from the cellar?" Mariel asked. Melvin put the book away and accompanied her into the kitchen. When he opened the door, he stopped, seeing the counters as clean as he had left them that afternoon. There were no vegetables to be cut, no meat sizzling on the grill, and the oven looked cold. There were no scents of cooking wafting through the air -- it was very nearly blasphemy! Melvin turned to Mariel, and looked her up and down, noting the lovely blue

dress she was wearing, the absence of an apron.

Melvin sighed, and walked outside and down into the basement, motioning to Grimm to follow him. "The Chief will want some dwarven ale." Melvin pointed out one of the kegs with dwarven runes, turning to the wine bottles. He selected several bottles of an excellent vintage, and brought the bottles to Mariel. She was rummaging in the pantry for some cheese, while the red dragon hatchling sat next to the kitchen table.

"Mariel, you're going to serve cheese? Where is the rest of dinner?!" Melvin asked, panic in his voice.

When Mariel turned around, she noticed Leona in the doorway, her parents and grandmother next to her. Mariel walked over to greet them, and introduced herself formally to Leona's family. Leona's mother smiled warmly and even Leona's grandmother looked approvingly at Mariel. When Grimm entered, he elbowed Melvin to help him clean the sweat out of his clothes before going over to Leona's family.

Leona took her family over to the sitting room, and Mariel served wine and cheese before returning to the kitchen. Sparks were flying off the knives, Melvin was very near to exploding.

"Melvin, what is your problem!?" Mariel confronted the halfling.

"You're serving cheese? How many guests are we having?!" Melvin sputtered. "I can whip something up, but it will take several hours before I have a dinner ready and--"

"Melvin, don't you worry. I've taken care of it." Mariel said. "Will you just go upstairs and wash up? I promise you that everything will be fine."

Melvin threw his hands up in disgust, stomping up the stairs. Mariel returned to work. She set up tables on the patio, setting the table with crockery and flowers, and a separate buffet table for the food. She took care to light some candles, although it would be a few hours before the sun would set. Spring was turning to summer and the night air was warm.

When all the guests had arrived they took their places at the table. Johan had taken another paladin of Heironeous along, a man called Geoffrey, and they were both clad in pristine white robes. Regalia wore a long brown dress with bronze jewelry, her hair gathered in a loose ponytail. The Chief was in full battle dress, and he clapped Mariel's shoulder as she served him a tankard of dwarven ale. Leona's grandmother ignored the Chief, sticking her nose into the air, but the Chief returned the favour and they sat on opposite sides of the long table. While everyone took their seats, Mariel walked over to the buffet table and cast her spell. The Heroes Feast was a tricky spell, but it worked magnificently. The long buffet table was laden with food, and behind the buffet tables servants appeared. They were dressed in light blue doublets and white trousers, and stood ready to serve the guests.

Mariel took her place at the table and Sir Jean stood to help her with her seat. He took her hand and kissed it. From out of nowhere, he took a small plush toy, shaped like a horse. He handed the small gift to Mariel, whose smile was radiant. "You are truly beautiful." Sir Jean whispered to her.

The servants took the dishes of food, and circled around the table, serving the guests with grace. Melvin fed Aethelinda tablescraps, and even the red dragon hatchling sat at Sir Jean's side, begging for scraps. Leona's grandmother had blanched at the sight of the pseudodragon, and clenched her cutlery until her knuckles were white, clearly very uncomfortable around the larger dragon.

"Grill!" Grimm called to the hatchling. "Want a bite?"

"What kind of a name is that?" Leona piped up. "We've got Sparerib, Scales, and now Grill?"

"His name is BabyQ." Sir Jean explained to their guests. "Grimm likes to have nicknames for our animals. His horse is called Beefsteak."

The red dragon bounded to its feet and sprinted around to Grimm, brushing Leona's grandmother while he turned the corner. The elf fainted in fear, slumping down in her chair. Mariel seemed to be the only one that noticed, and pointed it out to Leona's mother, speaking in Elvish so the other guests would not immediately notice. Grimm heard her though, and shrugged. The dwarf held no love for Granny ever since the incident at his house.

When everyone was done eating and the servants were clearing away the plates, the talk turned to the apple pie Melvin had made with the apples from the sanctuary of Ehlonna. Mariel smiled warmly at Sir Jean, and whispered into his ear. Moments later, they both rose from the table. "If you will excuse us for a moment," Mariel said; "we will take a turn around the gardens." Grimm grinned widely. "Have fun you two. See you in the morning!"

They strolled to the pond where they once spent the night, and enjoyed the moonlight. Sir Jean ran into the house for a moment to grab a blanket, and spread it on the grass. Mariel tried to put a corner of the blanket around her shoulders.

"If I take off my clothes, I can warm you up." Sir Jean said. He was wearing white robes like Johan and Geoffrey.

"Aren't you warm enough with your clothes on?" Mariel asked, puzzled.

"Wait, I shall show you." Sir Jean said. He focused for a moment, and the white robes he had been wearing changed in front of her eyes to his usual mithril armour. "It is a special enchantment." Sir Jean explained. "I have been wearing my armour ever since we returned here, even though it did not seem that way."

"I think you are handsome enough, with or without your armour." Mariel said. Sir Jean took off most of his armour, and pulled Mariel into his embrace. She was no longer cold, now that his attention was on her, his arms wrapped around her. Under the light of the stars they made love, while the plush toy stood forlornly on a corner of the blanket.

Meanwhile, at the dinner table, Granny asked Leona about her health. "You look a bit peaky, dear." the elf had said.



Leona crossed her arms over her breast. "I'm fine!" she said.

"Didn't she tell you?" Grimm asked. "We're having a baby!"

Granny looked like she had been slapped. She paused for a few moments, and then recuperated. "How wonderful." Her voice was anything but enthusiastic, she sounded more like she was just told a family member had died.

Grimm grabbed his beer, and drank deeply. When he put the tankard down, he suddenly felt very sleepy. He sank down in his chair and closed his eyes, folding his hands over his full belly.

Leona was on her feet in an instant. She cursed and stepped over to her grandmother. The two were nearly nose-to-nose. Leona was shouting at her grandmother and within seconds it could turn into a fight. Luckily, Melvin had shaken Grimm, and the dwarf woke up again.

"Leona, what is the matter darling?" Grimm asked.

Leona turned on Grimm, her eyes ablaze. Before she could lash out to him, Melvin stepped in. "Give it a rest, guys. Have something to drink."

Leona looked ready to slap the halfling, but she turned on her heel and walked into the garden, muttering to herself. Grimm ran after her. "Honey, wait. What happened back there? Nobody wanted to tell me anything, everyone said I should ask you. You were ready to punch your grandmother!"

"Weren't you very sleepy just now?" Leona shouted. "Well, guess what. My darling grandmother cast a spell of Sleep on you!"

Grimm replied in a sing-song voice: "Be right back." He turned around and marched back towards the dinnertable. The Chief approached him as soon as he saw the mood Grimm was in. He grabbed his nephew by the shoulders, and warned him. "Grimm, don't. Let me take care of this."

Grimm nodded, still fuming. The Chief turned around, and in a flash punched Granny in the face. Leona's grandmother slumped down, knocked out by the blow.

"Why did you do that?" Grimm asked, pointing to the Chief's axe, still next to the dwarf's chair, as if to say the Chief should have just ended it for the elf woman.

"Because I don't want to spoil this lovely party. I'll handle this tomorrow. Now go to Leona, she probably needs some comforting."

Grimm apologised to Leona's parents before he walked back to Leona. Regalia slowly sat down again. She had been surprised at the Chief's prompt reaction. The mood at the table was subdued, and one by one the guests took their leave.

When Mariel woke up, she was still outside, but she wasn't in the same place as before. She saw Sir Jean sitting next to her, BabyQ's head in his lap. Her blue dress hung from a tree branch nearby, but at the same time she had the feeling that she was inside a small hut. "Where are we?"

Sir Jean explained. This was the place he would often retreat to, his very own resting hut. The hut was roofless, and thick moss covered the floor. Mariel snuggled up to him, placing her head in his lap. BabyQ got up, making space for Mariel. He took off, walking through the wall of the hut as if it were no more than an illusion.

Sir Jean stroked her hair, twining a lock around his finger, and sighing contentedly. After a while, he said it was time to get up. Mariel stretched, and got up lazily. When she turned around she saw Sir Jean walking through the wall as well. Puzzled, she followed him. The wall didn't feel solid at all, and when she was on the other side she noticed they were in Sir Jean's bedroom.

"Jean, where were we just now?" Mariel asked.

"We were -- up there." Sir Jean pointed towards the ceiling. "But not completely there. If you know what I mean."

"I think I do." Mariel replied. It was like a sanctuary, a small piece of heaven on earth. She had read about those places, but had never known anyone who could enter such a place. "You can go there whenever you want?" she asked.

"Who says you cannot?" Sir Jean asked her gaily. "Have you ever tried?"

"No, I haven't." Mariel replied, taking one of her white robes and holding it up to see if it was clean. She folded the robe and put it on the bed. "I don't think I will do so today." She smiled, and took the other robe from the floor, pulling it over her head. "I'll go outside for my prayers." she kissed his cheek before stepping outside.

After her prayers, Mariel walked into the kitchen to prepare some tea. She ran into Leona there. "Morning, Mariel." the half-elf said. "Listen, I wanted to apologize for any embarrassment my family might have caused last night."

"I thought they were absolutely charming." Mariel replied. "There's no need to apologize."

"Um, do you perhaps know if the Chief slept here?" Leona asked as Grimm entered the kitchen. Mariel handed the half-elf a mug of hot water with a few sprigs of mint in it. Grimm looked at the mug for a few seconds, shrugged, and sat down at the table.

"No, I haven't got a clue. All I know is that I slept outside, and er -- upstairs. With Sir Jean." The experience still puzzled Mariel.

"Weird." Grimm shrugged. "Is there breakfast?"

"I'll check to see if my parents are awake." Leona said, drinking the last of her tea. Mariel placed a fresh mug of mint tea in front of Grimm.

"This is not breakfast." Grimm said. "Where's the meat?"

Mariel took the bread Melvin had baked earlier that morning and placed it in front of Grimm. "Enjoy."

Disgruntled, Grimm had gone outside to train. He whistled BabyQ over to him, and asked the hatchling if he wanted to help

him train. BabyQ had seemed to be enthusiastic, bouncing up and down playfully. As soon as Grimm tried some attack manoeuvres on him, the dragon started to dodge and weave around Grimm, using his fiery breath to keep the dwarf on his toes. Grimm followed the dragon's every move, and when he judged the moment right, he jumped at BabyQ to throw the dragon onto the ground. BabyQ reared, throwing its front legs over Grimm's shoulders, keeping the axe away from him. They locked in a struggle, both growling under their breath. Grimm felt something near his greave, and the dragon tripped him with one of its hind legs.

"Good one, Grill!" Grimm laughed when he got up. He looked around, but the dragon was gone. He turned around, expecting to see it charging at him from behind, but there was nothing there. A soft whistling sound reached his ears. It sounded like something plummeting in a dive. He waited until the moment was right, and dove behind his shield, holding both arms behind the shield in an attempt to keep BabyQ off of him.

The hatchling thudded onto the shield and managed to wrench it from Grimm's grasp by the sheer force of the impact. The shield flew a few meters, and landed in a tree, the sharp edge of the shield biting into the trunk and sticking there. Grimm went to retrieve it, and looked around again, only to hear again the whistling sound of a diving dragon from above him. This time, he held kept his axe at the ready, waiting for the perfect moment to strike at the dragon. When he thought BabyQ was almost upon him, he started to whirl around his axis, the axe in his hand a fearsome weapon spinning so fast it would be nearly impossible to stop. But the impact never came, and when Grimm stopped his whirlwind attack, he was sprayed with lumps of soil. The axe had deflected some of the lumps, and the nearby trees were splattered in wet earth. His armour, before it cleaned itself, was also sprayed in mud. BabyQ sat not two meters away, a long track of earth upturned as skidmarks from where the dragon had frantically tried to stop its approach at seeing the whirling axe. He looked rather sad at not being able to pounce on Grimm like before, but perked up when he noticed the dwarf looking at him.

When BabyQ took off again, he disturbed a red robin that was flying over the garden. The robin soared and righted herself again, and landed lightly on Grimm's shoulder pauldron. The pauldron was very slippery, and though one of her feet was slipping, she was fine for the moment.

From the corner of his eye, Grimm saw something red land on his shoulder. Absentmindedly he flicked his hand at the small bird. The red robin soared through the air and thudded into the trunk of a tree and stuck there. It was the tree where Grimm's shield had struck, and the resin on the bark stuck to the small bird's feathers. The bird struggled for a moment, and then the shape started to change. The red robin disappeared, morphing into a half-elf. Now Leona was stuck with her druid's robes to the trunk of the tree, the fabric ripping at the shoulder seam. It wasn't much of an improvement, so she focused once more, changing her shape again.

Grimm heard a loud crash behind him, and turned to face the sound. He saw a rhinoceros standing in the clearing, on its back an uprooted tree. The rhino snorted disdainfully at him, and glared with its small eyes like he'd done something wrong.

He knew that stare.

Grimm started laughing, trying to muffle the sound with his gauntleted hand. The rhino started to shake, dislodging the tree. She glared at Grimm again, but the dwarf was still laughing at her. She turned around, running towards the house and changing back to her usual shape halfway. She stomped up the stairs and went to the room she and Grimm shared. Her lovely ballgown she wore at dinner was slumped on the floor where she had left it, and she picked it up, smoothing the creases of the silk. She took off her druid garb and frowned at the tear in the shoulder. Part of the sleeve was coming loose as well, and she would have to repair it later.

She decided against wearing the ballgown, and wrapped a blanket from the bed around herself, tying a knot so it wouldn't fall down. When she descended the stairs, she tripped over the long blanket and flailed for the railing. Luckily, she could keep herself from falling down the stairs.

Sir Jean came out of the kitchen and sighed when he saw her. He walked up to her and told her to follow him. He walked to his bedroom, and Leona couldn't help but notice that the white robe Mariel wore around the mansion was folded on the bed. The room was pristine, no clothes scattered around the floor, no parchment on the bed. Sir Jean opened the doors at the back of the room and grabbed one of his long white tunics from the wardrobe. He held it out to Leona. "You may borrow this for the time being." Sir Jean said. He walked past her, leaving her alone in his bedroom.

Leona returned to her room, took off the blanket and pulled the tunic over her head. Sir Jean was very tall, and the tunic nearly fell to her ankles. Leona belted the thing together so it wouldn't bother her, and turned around when she heard Quinga's voice in her head. "Leona, I need you for a moment."

As soon as the half-elf touched the wood of the longbow, a spark of electricity leapt to her arm. The spark multiplied, dancing over her skin and through her flesh. "That was for uprooting a tree." Quinga said.

"I'm sorry Quinga, I wanted to plant a new tree, but I was still pondering on how to go about it!" Leona replied loudly.

"You're a druid." Quinga replied drily. "You can grow trees."

"But I--" Leona sputtered.

"Plant a new tree!" Quinga shouted. "Now!"

Leona grabbed a small pouch with acorns and chestnuts from her rucksack, and stomped down the stairs. When she returned to her room she carefully grabbed her longbow again. Quinga cast a healing spell, healing the burns the electricity had inflicted on her. "Well done."

Leona went to lie on the bed. This was not her best day ever.



Mariel spent the day out riding with Para. At night they returned, Para's flanks darkened with the sweat. Mariel's hair was windblown, and her robe had sweaty marks under the arms as well. She rubbed Para down and set her loose in the gardens, thanking her for the lovely day's ride.

When she stepped into the kitchen, Sir Jean was at the counters. He was making dinner, clearly not used to the task. "Mariel, there you are. Could you ask everyone to come for dinner? Oh, Melvin will not be joining us."

"Where is he?" Mariel replied.

"I shall tell you during dinner, so the others will know as well. This is really stressful, I do not know how Melvin manages!" Sir Jean said, and returned to his cooking.

Mariel walked the gardens for a while, looking for Grimm. In the end, she asked a tiny mouse to go looking for him, and to ask him if he could join them for dinner. When she stepped into the kitchen, Sir Jean told her Leona was probably in her room, resting.

Mariel knocked on Leona's door, and stuck her head inside. "Leona, dinner will be done soon."

Leona yawned and got up from the bed. Her skin was a mass of purple bruises and welts. Mariel frowned, and stepped inside, taking Leona's head in her hands and checking her for injuries. "I shall get you a potion for those bruises." she said, and left Leona to get dressed.

Grimm entered the kitchen at the same time as Mariel, summoned by a voice in his head. The dwarf was covered in grime, like he had spent the afternoon in the forge. When Leona entered, wearing Sir Jean's tunic, the half-elf ignored the potion on the table and kissed Grimm, taking a seat next to him. Mariel stood, grabbed the potion, and pointedly set it down in front of Leona. Sir Jean served the food. It looked terrible. The vegetables looked like green blob, the potatoes had brown spots, and the meat refused to come loose from the grill. The bread looked like it was a stone that had fallen from the sky. However, it tasted delicious.

"So where is Melvin?" Grimm asked. "Haven't seen him all day!"

Sir Jean shrugged. "Last I saw him, he was in the library."

Grimm stood from the table to check the library, but returned soon enough. "There's nothing there but books. Looks like he has been studying there for a while, but he's not there."

The talk turned to the accident of earlier that day. Leona explained how she had accidentally uprooted the tree. Grimm barked a laugh, and Sir Jean couldn't hide his smile either. Mariel was not so amused, but she offered to help Leona the next day in blessing the sapling she had planted to replace the old tree.

Earlier that day, Melvin had entered the library, his head swimming with a bunch of creative ideas. He was a bit sad that his thoughts on how to use dragon components for enchanted items would prove too dangerous to the wearer, but he wasn't going to give up on other wonderful ideas. There was still that book on combining the arcane and divine branches of magic, and there were so many wonderful things he could do.

He sat down in a comfortable armchair near the window and opened the book at the bookmark. So far, the book had highlighted the differences between the two kinds of magic. Where divine magic was granted by a God or Goddess, arcane magic seemed to come from a natural talent within a sorcerer or mage. People using arcane magic need only study and do research to gain new powers and learn new spells, while practitioners of divine magic would be granted those things by their God or Goddess when they were deemed ready. And there was more: clerics and paladins needed to keep in contact with their God, appease their deity, and atone for their sins. Of course Melvin himself took care to show respect to the Gods, but he only worshipped Yondalla, Goddess of halflings, and She probably would not take away his powers if he committed a sin or two.

After reading for several hours, he saw Sir Jean walking by, and called out to him. The paladin stepped inside and Melvin explained exactly what he was researching. "I need your help, Jean. I would like to ask permission of Yondalla. Can you help me?"

And here he was: Heaven, or some sort of heaven. Although he could not clearly see a sun, there was a soft light that made the floor shine with a golden sheen -- but he couldn't discern what kind of material the floor was made of. It mostly looked like a kind of marble, but it was warm and soft to the touch, like clouds and wood combined. There were no other decorations, no walls. It was an endless stretch of emptiness and soft light. He took a moment to get his bearings, and looked around. Then a sort of dais appeared in front of him, and in a flash of bright light, four beings appeared. To the left was a dwarf, dressed in golden-hued platemail and scalemail. A large helmet was on his head, and he was clutching a tall shield and a large warhammer. Next to him was a tall human, with copper-coloured skin and auburn hair. He wore a robe of flowing cloth that looked like chainmail, and there was a long sword belted at his waist. To the right were two women, an elf with long flowing blonde hair and blue eyes, and his own Goddess, Yondalla: a strong halfling with golden red hair.

Melvin bowed deeply from the waist, and straightened slowly. He realised that he was in the presence of not only his own Goddess, but of the Gods and Goddess of his friends as well. They were all smiling warmly at him, and Melvin took some time to take in their appearances.

It was Yondalla that spoke. "You wanted to ask us something, Melvin?"

"Yes my Lady, I did." Melvin replied. He cleared his throat. "The road my friends and I walk is dangerous, and we encounter many foes. We all have our parts to play in the battles we fight. Grimm is a great warrior, and Sir Jean tries to protect us all. We

each have our strengths and our weaknesses."

"You have fought with valour." Heironeous spoke. Ehlonna smiled at Heironeous for a moment, before looking at Melvin again.

"There is this spell I learned, an empowerment. It makes certain spells stronger." Melvin continued. He wondered how he should explain what the spell did, exactly, and how it worked. The components and gestures necessary for casting it? Or perhaps just how exactly one spell could enhance another spell?

"We know of it." Moradin spoke.

"Oh. Of course You do. Well, I was thinking. When we fight, we fight together, as a team. I help Grimm out by making him stronger, Mariel can enhance the er -- glory of Sir Jean, and Leona summons beasts to help us. What if I were to use that empowerment spell to help them out? I mean, the spell is meant for one mage to help another, but I'm the only sorcerer around!" Melvin glanced at the Gods' faces. They were all listening in rapt attention. "I've been reading this book, a book on how to combine arcane and divine magic. I could use this empowerment spell to help their spells become stronger. For example, if Mariel were to cast a Flame Strike, I could try and make it more powerful so that it will effect a greater area or does more damage. Or if Leona tries to make the forest grow stronger, I could maybe make the spell work better, so that even more plants will grow. So as You can see, it can be very powerful. I just wanted to ask my Goddess if She would allow this. I didn't expect all of You to show up."

"But here We are." Ehlonna smiled.

"I think it is wonderful that you want to help your friends, Melvin." Moradin said. Hieroneous and Ehlonna nodded in unison.

"As you see, you have Our approval, Melvin Greatfeet." Yondalla said. "By all means, help your friends as best you can."

Melvin bowed, thanking the Gods profusely.

"And now I have a gift for you." Yondalla continued. "There is someone who would very much like to see you." She extended her hand, and a pretty halfling female appeared. Melvin's eyes widened, and tears rolled down his cheeks. He ran forward to hug his girlfriend, and held her tight. He then held her at arm's length and looked her over. She wore a red dress with a white apron, and her light brown hair was just long enough to brush her shoulders. Her brown eyes had tears in them and her heart-shaped face was the same as he remembered it, freckles on her nose and dimples in her cheeks.

Melvin turned to thank his Goddess, but She spoke first. "Spend some time with her here."

Melvin bowed to the Gods, and when he righted himself they were gone, he stood on the green of a small village. Arlies took his hand and drew him with her to one of the small houses. "But my friends..." Melvin hesitated.

"I will know if they need you. For now, please stay with me for a while. You may knead some dough for me, if you want." She smiled sadly, and held up her right arm. Her right hand was missing, severed by the people who had attacked her just before she had died. Melvin hugged her again, and went into the kitchen to do as Arlies had asked of him.

A week later he was sitting in the front yard of the house, tending to some of the herbs that grew there. The other people in the village avoided him, but Melvin knew that was probably only wise of them. He would have to leave again, and go back to his life.

Arlies stepped out of the house and pulled him to his feet. They had spent a wonderful week together, but there was an urgency in her gestures that suggested their happiness would be ending soon. "Your friends are in trouble." she said. "You need to go back now. I have enjoyed our time together, Melvin. Know that I love you."

Melvin kissed her tenderly. "I love you too. I am sorry I have to go, but I must help them."

A bright flash passed in front of his eyes, and suddenly he found himself in the library again. It looked different, someone had cleared away the library books but there was no sign of anyone. He heard something from outside, and when he looked through the window he saw something fly over the garden.

Melvin ran through the kitchen into the gardens, checking his belt to see if his scrollcases were in the right place. Sir Jean, Grimm, Leona and Mariel all stood on the grass. Above their heads was a dark shadow, riding a gryphon. Grimm looked like he was ready to sprout wings and attack the shadowed creature, and Mariel frowned at the gryphon. The creature looked decidedly evil. It wasn't so much the red rimmed eyes as the ruffled-looking feathers. Its claws were ragged, like they had been torn, but they looked razor-sharp.

Sir Jean had been talking to the dark shadow, but now he unfolded his wings and flew up to attack the creature. Melvin couldn't very well see what happened, but within seconds, the paladin tumbled down again, hitting the ground with a bone-crunching thud.

It was half an hour later, and Sir Jean slowly opened his eyes. Next to the bed sat Mariel, her head bowed over her hands that were folded around his left hand. Grimm was next to the door, one foot propped up on a chair, his elbow on his knee and his axe in his hand. When Sir Jean sat up, his head whipped around to face the paladin.

"You had us really worried there buddy." Grimm said, and walked over to the bed. He clapped his free hand on Sir Jean's shoulder and grinned. "Melvin will be right up with some tea, I'm sure."

Grimm nodded to Mariel and walked outside, announcing to someone in the hallway that Sir Jean was awake. "Oh thank goodness." Sir Jean heard Leona say before the door closed.

He turned to Mariel, and softly took her face in his hands. "Thank you." he whispered and kissed her lightly.

Mariel rose, tears in her eyes. "I am sorry I wasn't there for you sooner." she said. She extended her hand and carefully stroked



his chest. It tingled a bit, and Sir Jean looked down to see what was wrong. Etched into his skin was a kind of tattoo, a barbed arrow pointing downwards. He closed his eyes for a moment, stood, and walked over to the windowsill to sit down. He stared outside, thinking about the mark on his chest. After a moment he noticed that something was different with the view. Next to the patio, where one of the practicing fields had been, now stood a graveyard with tombstones. From up in the bedroom he couldn't make out what was written on them, but he wasn't sure he would want to know.

Mariel laid her hand on his arm as she stood behind him. "Is that what I think it is, on your chest?" she asked.

"It is part of the mark of Hextor." Sir Jean swallowed. His failure to protect his friends would have weighed more heavily on his mind had it not been for Mariel's Atonement spell, but it still troubled him. The fact that he was now marked by Hextor said a lot about what had happened. If the God of Tyranny had marked him, he had indeed failed his own God. But now he was forgiven, and he was no longer wracking his brain over nearly dying.

Mariel turned his face towards her. "Don't worry about it." she said softly. "I still believe in you."

The next morning Sir Jean felt a lot better, despite the mark on his chest that would be a reminder to him for the rest of his life. Melvin had served breakfast and had stared in amazement at Leona's new armour. Grimm had spent a few days in the forge, creating a lovely red dragon scale armour for the half-elf.

During breakfast Melvin had suggested they would go visit Ironforge for the day. He had spoken to them about what had happened, and although for the rest of the group time had passed less quickly than for Melvin, they had agreed that an offering to their Gods would be in order.

They rode into Ironforge and Melvin stopped at a greengrocer's to buy fresh vegetables, his friends waiting for him in the streets. Sir Jean sat Silver Spirit in quiet, the banner of Heironeous in his left stirrup. Small boys stopped to stare at him, and ran to get their friends. Grimm had grinned at the boys, who ran away laughing gaily.

Melvin had prepared an enormous feast at the temple of Yondalla, kneeling in front of the altar that was covered in sumptuous dishes to pray for a long time. The food had disappeared, just like it did at the temple of Moradin and the temple of Pelor where they had gone next.

When they exited the temple of Moradin, Melvin had turned towards the temple of Ehlonna. In the temple square people stood and gawked at them. Sir Jean was leading Silver Spirit on foot, taking his bridle at the entrance to the temple grounds. Mariel followed suit with Para, unsaddling the mare so she could enjoy the peace of the temple grounds without hindrance. They left their shoes with the archon hounds, and while Melvin went to seek out Regalia, Mariel and Leona looked for a quiet place. In the end, Leona chose one of the great trees, and she climbed to the highest branches, Mariel following close behind. Up in the higher branches was a small plateau, built around the branches in the manner of elven architecture, and Leona sat crosslegged in the middle of the plateau. Mariel sat opposite her, and when Leona started praying, Mariel tried to help her. Leona still had to do penance for the tree she had demolished on the estate, and she had chosen to ask forgiveness in this manner. It was a long time before she felt that she was forgiven, and when she opened her eyes, they stood in a small forest clearing beneath a clear sky. Underneath the branches was a small temple, and Mariel smiled warmly, recognising the scenery.

"Where are we?" Leona asked.

"Come, She is waiting for us." Mariel replied. She petted each of the archon hounds at the entrance of the temple. They licked her face, putting their paws on her shoulders. Mariel led Leona inside, kneeling in front of the dais in the central chamber with her helmet under her arm. The half-elf was over-awed, but she kneeled just like Mariel, lowering her gaze. In front of them on the throne sat their Goddess, Ehlonna. She was wearing long green robes of a flowing design, and her long blonde hair was tumbling down her back. Mariel, like the last time she was in the presence of her Goddess, dared not raise her eyes and look at her Goddess; and though Leona was impressed as well, she was less hesitant and looked at Ehlonna, drinking in the sight.

Ehlonna told them to rise, and when they stood before Her, She handed them a gnarled stick. "This is Abgraga, an old tree-ent. It is my wish that he stays with you and guides you. You must protect him at all times, and care for him."

"Of course!" Leona stammered. She reverently took the gnarled stick, at a gesture from Mariel.

"We shall take great care to protect him." Mariel said.

Ehlonna turned to Mariel. "You must help Leona when she has need for your aid, for she is still very young. You did well, but do not forget that this also is the duty of a cleric and a divine crusader."

Leona glanced at Mariel, who bowed her head to her Goddess. "Of course."

Ehlonna smiled at them, and stretched out her arm, motioning for them to go. Leona still held the gnarled stick in her arms when they returned to the archon hounds at the entrance. "Here, let me help you." Mariel said, and she devised an easy way to carry the stick on Leona's back so she would have her hands free.

"Why did you say I should carry this -- him?" Leona asked her when they had returned to the plateau.

"Because I am often in the front line, with Grimm and Sir Jean. You are almost always in the back, and protected by the three of us. It will be safer for him there."

They clambered down the tree, and ran into Melvin, who had just finished his prayers at the altar. "Sir Jean's saddled the horses again. We'll visit the temple of Heironeous now."

The temple square was bustling with activity, and people turned to stare at the five of them, though they hardly noticed. Melvin untied a quiver from Zack's saddlebags, and carried it with him inside. Johan came to greet them, and Melvin explained exactly what he came to do. The high priest led them to the altar, while Sir Jean went into an alcove to pray in quiet, not wanting to

disturb Melvin.

After his prayer of thanks, Melvin showed a note to Johan. It was tied to the quiver, written in several tongues. "As an offering to Heironeous, I would like to present this quiver. These are very special arrows." Melvin warned the high priest. "Do not use them at close range!"

After Sir Jean had joined them again, they walked outside. There was a murmur from outside, and when they stepped out of the temple, a silence fell over the square. Masses of people had gathered, and every one of them was looking at them in rapt attention.

"Er--" Melvin said, unsure what to make of this.

Several people from the mob started to shout like fans. "We want Sir Jean!" "Grimm! Grimm!" They were calling out each of their names in turn, trying to catch a glimpse of their heroes.

Grimm stepped outside. "Do you want Sir Jean?" he shouted over the din. "He's inside." The dwarf stepped aside and strolled around the mob, who suddenly surged forward towards the temple entrance. Melvin reacted nearly as quick as Mariel. The elf cast a Sanctuary spell over herself, but the people wouldn't even be able to reach her as Melvin's Wall of Force kept the fans from entering the temple. They started to cheer again, but they stopped trying to get into the temple.

"People of Ironforge." Mariel shouted. "We have come here only to pay homage to our Gods. Please let us do so in peace. If it is your wish, I shall pray with you, but you must remain calm."

For a moment the mob was silent and then they started to call out again. Mariel held up one hand. "This is a house of worship! Pay your respect to the Gods." She was annoyed at the lack of respect, but the people were still ecstatic and wouldn't listen. In the end she stopped trying to reason with them, and turned her back on the Wall of Force and the people behind it. Sir Jean looked a little uncomfortable. "You should take the back way out, while I talk to them. I will meet you at the Temple of Yondalla, and I have called Grimm there as well."

One of the acolytes showed them to a storage room where a hidden door opened smoothly. There was a staircase down into a cellar, and from there was a hidden tunnel that had soft glowing walls. They walked quickly, single file, and found a hatch at the end of the tunnel. The hatch opened into a small storage shed at the other end of the temple square. It was half-hidden behind some bushes next to the temple of Yondalla. Carefully, Mariel peered outside.

Grimm wasn't far off; he was standing behind the mob, close to the temple of Ehlonna. At the entrance to the temple of Heironeous, suddenly the people took a step back. Some people started cheering. Sir Jean had mounted Silver Spirit and rode out of the temple, shouting loudly. "In the name of Heironeous, stand aside! Make room!"

The mob slowly stepped back, making room for their hero, but now they had spotted Grimm. "It's Grimm!" some people shouted, running towards the dwarf. He was soon surrounded by over fifty people who started to paw at his lovely armour. They wouldn't listen to him to leave him alone and Grimm started to get more and more agitated. When the people didn't listen he lifted his shield and slammed it into the man closest to him. There was an awful crunching sound, and the man slumped down, unconscious. The crowd around Grimm stepped back.

"Finally!" Grimm sighed, and he bent to pick up the man he had just attacked. He lifted the poor fellow into his arms, and started making his way towards Sir Jean, who had joined Leona, Mariel and Melvin next to the shed.

When Mariel saw that Grimm held a wounded person, she rushed over to the dwarf. The man's nose was swelling up very fast, and his face would soon be black and blue all over. "Oh Grimm..." she sighed, and set to work to heal the man. The crowd closed in on them again, taking care to leave some space around the dwarf, but trying to get as close to them as they could.

Silver Spirit's hooves rang on the cobbles as the stallion pranced around the square. "ENOUGH!" Sir Jean bellowed. "Look at what you have done! Has there not been enough grief here already? I am very disappointed in you. You are citizens of this proud city and should know better! You shall return to your homes in quiet, and tomorrow you will go to temple to confess the sins you have committed so that you may be forgiven." Sir Jean gazed around, singling out some people in the crowd and glaring at them with golden eyes. The crowd cringed under his gaze, and slowly the mob dispersed.

Grimm strolled into the room. The Chief sat at his desk, paperwork piled in front of him. "Grimm my boy!" the Chief said cheerfully, glad at the distraction. He stood from his chair, hugging Grimm tight in a clang of armour against armour. The Chief clapped each of the others on the shoulder and called for refreshments. Sir Jean took a spot at one of the walls, leaning his back against the rocks and folding his arms over his chest.

Grimm looked solemnly at his uncle and started to explain what had happened in Sir Jean's gardens and he spoke of the graveyard that had appeared. "There were several names we recognised on the tombstones. There was one for me, and there was one for you as well. The tombstone with your name on it, also had a date of death. But the weird thing was;" Grimm gestured wildly and started pacing; "that this date of death disappeared, like it faded away."

"All that was left was a three." Leona remarked.

The Chief frowned. "I must admit Grimm, I don't know what to make of it."

"That makes two of us then. Just keep an eye out, and watch your back." Grimm replied.

"I wonder how such a person could enter Ironforge. It is well-protected by the Halls." Mariel mused.

Melvin snapped his fingers. "Teleporation is an option. And he was riding that gryphon, so perhaps it just flew here."

"I did notice something odd this morning." Mariel said. "When I was praying in the gardens, I felt a disturbance, something that wasn't right in Ironforge. Something that was aimed at us."



"I'll double the guard at the gates and recall the troops on leave." The Chief said. "It will show we are ready for action, perhaps discourage them a bit."

They sipped their drinks in quiet for a moment, and then the Chief glanced at his paperwork. "But it's good of you to stop by! Takes my mind off things."

"Actually, there was something else." Leona said carefully. She wrung her hands nervously. "I wanted to resign from the army." Mariel glanced at Sir Jean and cocked her head towards the door. Grimm started to shout at Leona. Melvin followed Mariel and Sir Jean outside while Grimm, Leona and the Chief continued their debate.

"You can't resign from the army!" Grimm shouted. "It's a job for life. You were trained for the army, you live in the army, you die in the army."

The Chief turned to Leona. "There's a form you can fill out to resign, but make sure to fill out all fields. My clerks need to know why you wish to resign."

"I can tell you why I want to resign. I'm pregnant." Leona turned to face Grimm. "And if you read all the regulations you'd know that I have the right to resign until my children have come of age!"

"Or you could stay in the army, and I will raise the children." Grimm said. "I'd be a wonderful father."

"No, that is not how it's going to happen!" Leona shouted.

"Hey you guys, be nice." the Chief interjected. He put his hands on their shoulders. "You will raise your children together and make me very proud. You two take care of eachother."

"That sounds like a goodbye." Grimm said sadly. "We're not going to let that happen! We'll get those bastards that are after you, Chief. We will, just you see."

They spent the night in Grimm's house in Andorhall because the day was growing late and it was a long ride back to Sir Jean's mansion. The next morning, Sir Jean and Melvin went out to the Chief with several special ballista arrows Melvin had enchanted. In one of the towers of Andorhall they took up station next to a gleaming wooden ballista, its springs well-kept. Melvin explained to the Chief what he had done to the crossbow bolts and how he had now enchanted the ballista arrows. The Chief's reaction to the Fireball was more subdued than Grimm's reaction, but he was visibly excited.

"Melvin, let me try something." Sir Jean said, taking up station at the ballista. The paladin murmured an incantation and fired the ballista, the arrow soaring through the sky. When it impacted, there was an enormous explosion, a shockwave of blistering hot air spiralling outwards. The ground shook so violently, that the people in Ironforge thought it was an earthquake.

Mariel had been meditating in Grimm's house, but her composure was lost and an immediate headache settled behind her eyes when the earthquake shook her from her trance. Crockery fell from the shelves, and a keg of dwarven ale in the cellar burst. Grimm walked outside and saw that people were agitated, some already sweeping up shards of pottery, others mumbling about the earthquake. Minutes later, Melvin arrived without Aethelinda and covered in scrapes and bruises. Leona healed him, but Melvin still had a headache and stated he would go upstairs to have a lie-down. Grimm was rather impressed that the small halfling had brought about such a big earthquake, but Melvin clearly didn't want to talk about it.

"See! I told you I smelled apple pie!" Leona poked Grimm as they walked into the kitchen later that day. Melvin was at the stove, using his magic cooking set to prepare a luxurious meal.

"There were fresh vegetables in the kitchen, so I decided to make a big dinner. There's quiche in the oven, and I'm still cooking some vegetables." Melvin hummed contentedly.

"Say, where's BabyQ?" Mariel looked around. "He always begs at the table."

"Where is Scales?" Grimm asked pointedly, looking at Melvin. The halfling seemed far too cheerful with the absence of his familiar. Melvin turned as white as a sheet and dropped the spoon he was holding.

"Scales? Oh, right, Aethelinda." Mariel translated. She looked worriedly at Melvin.

"BabyQ is with Aethelinda." Sir Jean announced. "I was just with them."

"She was probably knocked out around the same time I was." Melvin sat down, heartbroken. "And I forgot about her..."

"What?!" Leona exclaimed. "What did you do?"

Sir Jean started explaining, keeping an eye on Melvin. The explosion had knocked Melvin off his feet, but they had tried several different things, and Melvin had lost consciousness three times. "Melvin teleported away without thinking of Aethelinda. I was kind enough to heal her and take her along. She's in the stable."

Melvin took the fresh apple pie from the counter and divided it into several pieces. He also grabbed some of the meat and a large piece of the quiche. Carrying a tray with all these goodies, he carefully entered the stables. He had no idea what Aethelinda or BabyQ would do to him if they saw him again, and he was sure Aethelinda was very upset. But the sparks he had been expecting never came. Aethelinda was lying in the straw of the stable, curled up into a ball. He almost couldn't see her, because BabyQ was curled protectively around her. The larger dragon raised its head as Melvin entered with the food, and treated him to an unblinking stare.

Melvin set the tray down on a mounting block, and sat down as close to Aethelinda as he could, trying not to disturb BabyQ. He took one of the plates and set it next to her. "I made you this." he tried. The pseudodragon didn't move. Aethelinda was definitely ignoring him, and BabyQ was glaring at him now, ignoring the food though Melvin could hear his stomach rumble. "I know I did something wrong." Melvin tried again. "I shouldn't have left you there. I should have known better! You are just a small thing, smaller than I am, even. And I should take better care of you. I apologise for what I did, Linda, please don't be

mad."

Aethelinda seemed to shrug, but she resettled instead. She turned away from where Melvin sat and rested her head on her front paws. BabyQ looked at the smaller dragon for a moment, before looking at Melvin again. The halfling ignored him for now. "We were trying out those enchanted arrows, and I thought you'd hate to be left behind. But now I know it would have been wiser if I had left you somewhere safe. Or protected you in a better way." He fumbled for words. "The shockwave must have knocked you unconscious just like me, but I didn't see you again after I came to, and I had this splitting headache." He paused for a moment. "You probably had a headache too. I'm sorry, I should have been there when you awoke, I should have been the one to heal you. I'm glad Sir Jean did, but well, I just..."

Aethelinda raised her head, and looked over her shoulder at Melvin as if to say: "And don't you forget it." She was still not moving, nor did she display any signs that she had forgiven him. Perhaps she just wanted him to go on. So Melvin spoke again. "I had such a headache, I couldn't think straight. And I know that's no reason to forget about you, it doesn't make it right. I wish I could turn back time and change what I did, but I can't. All I can do is come to you and try and make amends. I do love you, you know."

At those words, Aethelinda stood up. She stretched, yawning and flashing her fangs, and then turned to look at Melvin in earnest. BabyQ stood up as well, and nudged the food Melvin had brought, but he didn't eat yet. He seemed to wait for the pseudodragon to decide if she would accept Melvin's peace-offering. Only when Melvin stood up to leave, did Aethelinda speak to him. "If you can show me you really do care about me, I am willing to stay for now. But you'd better work hard because I am very disappointed in you."