

The statue at the temple square

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The walls of the infirmary were solid rock, Grimm noted. Good. He would hate to have Granny escape. The Chief had locked Leona's grandmother up in one of the padded cells of the infirmary, and they were on their way for a short visit. Melvin had accompanied them, and the halfling was cheerful, Aethelinda flying next to him at shoulder-height. Leona looked very determined and she hadn't even protested when Grimm had pointed out she should wear her dragon scale armour.

There were two guards outside the door, both of them dwarves. They saluted sharply, and Grimm returned the salute. "We'll have a chat with her."

The elf woman had been seated on the floor of the cell, but she rose majestically to her feet as the three of them entered. She glanced at Grimm for a moment, a look of hatred on her face, and then she looked at Leona with a look of stern disapproval. Leona placed her hands on her hips and frowned at her grandmother. "You can look at me all you want, but it's your own fault you're in here you know!" the half-elf spat. "Now why did you cast that spell on Grimm at the dinner party? He didn't do anything to you!"

"He is breeding with you." Granny said disdainfully. "And here I was, thinking you were heartbroken over the death of your fiance, while in fact you were shacking up with his murderer!"

"HEY!" Grimm shouted. "Watch that tongue of yours or I might just feel compelled to remove it, along with your head."

"Grimm, don't." Leona sighed, turning to the dwarf and placing her hand on his breastplate. Grimm looked at her, but from the corner of his eye he saw Granny move. The elf placed her hands on Leona's back before he could act, and Leona fainted. Grimm could just catch her before she fell to the floor, but now he had his hands full and couldn't attack Granny any more. He shouted for the guards, looking at Melvin and seeing that he was out of action too. The guards entered but Granny cast two more spells before they could even assess the situation, and they were unconscious within seconds. The elf ran down the hall, and Grimm turned to his friends, calling for help.

"Leona? Leona, honey you gotta wake up." Grimm carefully placed Leona onto the floor, but the half-elf didn't wake up even when he softly slapped her face. Healers entered the room and bent over her, and Grimm stepped back to give them room to work. He turned to Melvin, trying to see what was going on with him. He hardly even recognized the halfling, he was so ugly, like his face had melted off his bones, the flesh sagged limply. Folds of flesh were hanging over the eyelids but Grimm could see a little bit of the halfling's eyes. He snapped his fingers in front of them, but Melvin didn't react. His mouth had opened slightly, and a little bit of spittle was gathering in the corner of his mouth, as if he was drooling. After nearly half a minute, Melvin reacted somewhat to the dwarf in front of him. "Huuu."

"That can't be good." Grimm replied, and bent over Leona again. She was slowly regaining consciousness, but the memory of the pain her grandmother had inflicted on her would stay with her for a long time.

When the guards were healed as well, Leona looked at Melvin, trying to discern what her grandmother had done to him. "I don't know what she's done!" she cried. "It's like he's retarded, as bad as that sounds. He can't even speak!"

"Can he walk?" Grimm asked. He had never seen Melvin in such a state, and he was very concerned. Even the healers didn't have a clue what to do with the situation.

"I guess. You want to take him home with you?" Leona asked.

"If anyone can help him, it's Mariel and Sir Jean, and they're both at my house." Grimm said.

In the end they hitched a ride with a friendly dwarf, who waited patiently as Grimm lifted Melvin into the cart. Aethelinda went to sit on Melvin's chest, keeping a close eye on the surroundings.

Grimm kicked open the door and was shouting for Mariel as he entered his house. Mariel sprang up from the comfortable chair she was in when they entered, startled at the ruckus. Grimm put the halfling on his feet, and Melvin stared at a point in space, not even acknowledging Mariel or the new surroundings.

"By the ferns, is that Melvin?" Mariel stared in shock. "What happened?!"

Sir Jean joined them, coming from the upstairs bedroom. They sat at the kitchen table for a moment, Melvin still standing staring blankly into space. Grimm related what had happened and how Granny had escaped. Sir Jean frowned throughout the tale, worried for his friends. He was thinking about the enchantments that would protect his mansion, protections that should work against evil beings. Perhaps Granny had not been evil when she entered his home, but by attacking her granddaughter and Melvin in such a way, she surely would be now.

Mariel took Melvin's hand and pulled him closer to the table. She sat in a chair, took both his hands in hers, and tried to focus her powers on his body and mind, feeling the effects of the spell and discerning what it had done to him. She had checked Melvin for injuries many times before, often feeling the searing redness of the wounds he had taken, and always there had been some form of intelligence allowing her to do her work, like the spirit of Melvin looking in on her, taking note of what she was doing. There was hardly anything there now, and it certainly wasn't very intelligent. There wasn't even a sense of being observed, there was just a feeble spirit, too unaware of what happened around him to even realise that she was doing something to him.

When she was done, she let go of Melvin's hands, and they swayed at his side for a moment. She turned back to the others. Leona was as white as a sheet, biting her lower lip. Grimm held her hand in comfort. "I haven't got a clue what kind of spell could do this to poor Melvin." Mariel said. "He's still in there somewhere, but it's like a husk of what he was. Like somebody



took his wit, his charm, his intelligence and even his good looks away from him." She turned to Leona. "If it was a spell that did this to him, we can try to dispell it, but it will be dangerous and there's no guarantee it will work."

Mariel turned back to Melvin. Her Goddess had granted her the power to cancel a spell someone had done, to dispell it, but she didn't often use the spell and she needed to focus. Physical contact wasn't necessary for the spell to work, but Mariel thought it was better if she touched Melvin, to have a better connection with him. She took his hand again, and prepared herself to cast the spell. She felt the power of her spell work in Melvin, but something was wrong. It was like her spell wasn't strong enough, and before she knew what happened, all the power she had poured into her spell seemed to turn and twist around, and rush back into her.

Mariel blinked. She was still herself, inside her head, but she didn't look it. The chair she had been sitting on had been crushed beneath her hindquarters, and when she looked around, she could see parts of her body. She'd never had four hooves before, nor such a long tail. From what she saw she could conclude she now had the appearance of a donkey, but at least she was still aware of herself.

"Oh no!" Leona moaned. "Is this what she meant, that it's dangerous?"

Grimm shrugged. "Can't you help her?"

Leona wasn't sure. She concentrated on Mariel, trying to dispell the effects by using a spell. But what had happened to Mariel, happened in a similar way to Leona. The spell backfired, and Leona began to shrink into a small furry animal. Grimm grabbed the weasel before it could escape and hide in a cubbyhole and sighed. "I said help her, not mimick her!"

Sir Jean frowned. If he couldn't help them, they would need to travel to Ironforge to the temples of Ehlonna and Heironeous and ask Johan or Regalia for help. He wasn't sure if the effects would be any better. Dispelling a spell was hard, especially if it had already been cast, and the effects were in front of him. But perhaps there was another option. If he could help Melvin, perhaps the halfling could remove the effects of the failed spells from Mariel and Leona.

"As a paladin, I have the ability to cure a disease." Sir Jean said to Grimm. The donkey turned her head to look at him, and she seemed to listen as well, while the weasel was still struggling to get loose. "Perhaps this will help Melvin return to his old self."

Grimm shrugged. "It's worth a shot."

Sir Jean took Melvin to the couch, and helped him lie down. Then he placed his hands over the halfling's body. His palms started to glow, a golden light that seemed to spread over Melvin's body, enveloping him completely. Then the glow faded, retreated back into the paladin's hands. Melvin looked a lot better. The folds of flesh had disappeared and his blue eyes held an intensity that betrayed an intelligence, an awareness of what had happened to him and that someone was going to pay for what had happened.

When Melvin sat up of his own accord, Grimm clapped the halfling on the shoulder. "Glad to have you back! You had us worried there for a moment."

Melvin looked at Grimm, with the struggling weasel still in his hand, and then turned his gaze on Sir Jean. "Where are the others?"

Grimm held out the squirming creature to Melvin. "Yeah, this is Leona. Mariel is in the kitchen." But the kitchen was empty, and the door to the stables had been opened. They found Mariel standing next to Para in the stables, eating a bit of hay contentedly. She turned to look at them when they entered, and looked really silly when Melvin returned her to her usual form with a spell.

After Leona had been returned to her usual self as well, they grabbed their things and prepared to return to Sir Jean's mansion, to make plans to recapture Granny.

Melvin and Mariel spent most of their time brewing potions, while Sir Jean and Grimm trained with Leona. There was no sign of Granny any more, but this quiet would probably not last very long. One morning at breakfast, Sir Jean asked Leona to scry for her grandmother. "Mariel and Melvin are nearly done brewing their potions, and we should try and find your grandmother before she has traveled too far away or consolidated too much power."

Melvin lent Leona a hand, and together they scried for Granny. It wasn't very hard to find the elf, because Leona had a blood-bond with Granny. What they saw was rather disturbing. Granny looked different than what they knew of her, her skin pallid and dark circles under her eyes. She looked extremely thin, like she hadn't had a decent meal in years, and there was a mean look in her eye. Focusing, Melvin tried to see where the woman was. It looked like a large tower surrounded by meadows, a copse of trees at a few kilometers distance the only cover for several miles.

"We've found her." Melvin announced when he walked into the kitchen that afternoon. Mariel was putting crockery on the table, while Grimm cut the meat. Sir Jean was at the table and looked at Melvin when they sat down. "Looks like she withdrew into a tower of sorts. We took a look around, and I'm pretty sure I can teleport us there safely. There's one thing though, she looked a bit -- different."

"Different, how?" Mariel asked.

"Undead." Leona summarized. "Like a vampire."

Melvin turned to look at his pseudo-dragon. Aethelinda had placed her front legs on his knees and stood on her hind legs, catching his attention. "Aethelinda says Granny always looked like that to her. She looked like that when she was here for dinner a few days ago."

"What? How?" Leona asked.

"Dragons have an ability called True Seeing. They can see through disguises." Sir Jean explained. "If Aethelinda saw Granny as a vampire, that was who Granny truly was. She fooled us all."

"Aethelinda just never realised that it was a bad thing. She only thought about it when we said she looked different." Melvin said. He lifted Aethelinda in his lap and cuddled her, feeding her half of his sandwich.

"So Granny is an undead. That explains a lot!" Grimm said. He stacked several slices of meat onto his sandwich and added some cheese as well. "Now for a battle plan. We've got a lot of gear to take along. Leona's got Quinga, and her quarterstaff, as well as all those potions you two brewed. It's a lot of stuff to carry, and perhaps it's not a good idea to bring the horses along. Maybe we can take a cart, let Silver Spirit and Para pull it. We'll be fast, we'll be mobile, and we can take all our stuff along. I don't want to underestimate your dear grandmother again."

"I can arrange for a carriage." Sir Jean said. "It will be as good a disguise as any, and perhaps we can even approach the tower because Granny is expecting someone."

"Unless she recognises Silver Spirit. And you are a shining beacon of light compared to Granny, she's bound to notice." Mariel pointed out.

Grimm waved his sandwich dismissively. "Aah. She won't know what hit her!"

"I can't teleport anything that big. Not with the horses and you guys in it." Melvin looked up from Aethelinda to his friends.

"We'll just have to use a Circle of Teleportation. I think I've got a scroll here somewhere."

The next morning, Sir Jean showed them the carriage. It was a sleek old-fashioned black carriage, but inconspicuous enough. It could hold six people comfortably, and there was room for two to four horses. "We shall have Silver Spirit and Para in their armour, pulling the carriage." Sir Jean said.

Grimm pushed Leona towards the carriage and handed her the things he wanted to take along. Flow was next, and Aethelinda and Melvin climbed on top of the carriage.

"Everyone ready?" Melvin asked once everyone was inside the carriage. "Here we go!"

The Circle of Teleportation transported them to the copse of trees. All was quiet for the moment, but Sir Jean drew his sword.

"Mariel, step outside please." he asked.

"What's wrong, buddy? Do I need to hit something?" Grimm asked, leaning out of the window.

Mariel pointed towards the edge of the copse. "I see several of them. Wraiths."

She took up position next to Sir Jean, reaching for the holy symbol of Ehlonna she wore around her neck. The wraith drifted towards them, attracted by the obvious aura of good that surrounded Sir Jean. Before they could even reach them, Mariel had cast a Turn Undead, and the wraith recoiled from the holy symbol she raised towards the skies. Sir Jean finished them off quickly enough.

"You never leave any for me!" Grimm groaned, and banged the door of the carriage with his gauntleted fist.

"Do not worry, Grimm, there will be plenty for you later. There is a vast mass of undead between us and the tower, and we can be pretty sure we have been noticed." Sir Jean said, and mounted the carriage again, picking up the reins. Mariel climbed up next to him. "Ready?"

They rode into view and indeed there were many undead on the meadow between the copse of trees and the tower. The ranks of undead were not ready for them yet, and at first they rode through undisturbed. Silver Spirit managed to kick a few of the smaller undead if they came too close to him, and Mariel was glad that the horses were wearing armour, because Sir Jean rode the undead down as if they were no more corporeal than those wraith. At first the undead were very harmless, as it were; mere skeletons and hobgoblins that had been raised from the dead. But Mariel saved her strength, for in the distance she saw larger shapes loom over the masses of undead. When they came closer, Mariel recognised bugbears, orcs and even gnolls, all of them undead. It was a very varied mass, but that would not help them. Mariel and Sir Jean kept the undead at bay by using their powers to destroy and disrupt them, leaving a clear path and a large layer of dust in their wake.

Finally, they came to the tower. Leona, Grimm and Flow exited the carriage and Melvin jumped down. The doors of the tower were enormous, more than eight meters high and towering over them. Sir Jean and Mariel inspected them, and Melvin looked around, but there was no other obvious way to enter the tower.

Suddenly, Leona heard a noise. She was standing with Grimm and Flow near the carriage, and the others were a little further away. She looked up to see where the noise was coming from, and way up high, up on the tower's roof, she saw four hill giants. They were manoeuvring a large slab of marble, and as she watched, they let go. The block of marble plummeted towards her, and she had just enough time to warn Grimm. The dwarf jumped aside, rolled when he hit the grass and came to his feet brandishing his axe. Flow had also leapt, but she was less lucky. Her right paw was severed at the joint and she was in a lot of pain. There was no trace from Leona.

Mariel and Sir Jean ran over to them and started to rummage in the debris. The block had been five meters wide and ten meters long and at least a meter thick. The marble had crumbled, but there was debris everywhere and Leona seemed to be completely buried beneath the stone. Everyone started to dig after Melvin cast two Walls of Force over their heads to prevent more falling rocks to disturb them. Aethelinda was helping out by flying over the debris and moving the rocks with her legs. BabyQ was frantically digging down, and Grimm moved like a madman. He found Flow's severed paw in the debris first, and kept on digging. It was a little while before they found Leona's body. The poor half-elf had been crushed by the slab, and many of her bones were crushed, if not all of them. Because she had been standing when the rock hit her, there was no telling what part of anatomy was what, although Mariel could find the remains of the poor half-elf's skull. It was clear to her that no amount of



healing could help Leona now, and she took off her helmet for a moment, placing her cool gauntlet on her forehead.

Grimm was fuming, he had taken his axe and started to attack the doors like a madman. Sir Jean carefully pulled the dwarf back, holding his shoulders until he would calm down.

"Grimm." Mariel said softly. She was at his side, a scroll in her hand. "I can still help her -- ask her to come back to you, but you need to decide something. Do you think she would come back?"

Grimm started to answer, but Mariel held up a hand and kept talking until the dwarf was quiet and listened to her. "I don't want to know if she would come back for you, or for any of her friends. I need to know if she would want to come back for her own sake. Normally, I would ask this of her, but I have been granted different spells, and we can't waste the time. I need to know, because I wouldn't want to bring her back against her wishes, even if I could."

Grimm thought for a moment, letting Mariel's words sink in. Then he nodded. "She would want to take care of her grandmother so she couldn't hurt anyone else. After everything Granny has done to her, I think Leona would want to see this through."

"Very well." Mariel said. She unrolled the scroll, looking at Sir Jean for a moment before she concentrated on the remains of Leona's body. The spell was horribly complicated, and the repercussions of doing something wrong or bringing someone back from the dead against their wishes would be devastating. But she wouldn't focus on those eventualities now; instead she poured every ounce of concentration into the scroll. Slowly, as she read, pieces of the parchment crumbled away from her fingers, until finally the spell was done and the parchment was gone. Leona's remains seemed to melt and rearrange themselves. Then there was a flash of light, and a soft breeze stirred Leona's hair. She opened her eyes, looking around for Grimm and Flow. Grimm hugged her tight, her cheek against his armour, and she pulled Flow into their embrace.

"Thank you Mariel." Leona said, her voice thick with tears. Mariel inclined her head, acknowledging the thanks. Then she gestured to the tiger. "You should see to Flow."

Suddenly, there was an ominous clang from the doors. Sir Jean stood protectively in front of the rest, his wings unfolded and his swords in his hands. The doors of the tower slowly opened, and in the doorway stood none other than Leona's grandmother.

Without turning around, Sir Jean spoke. "Melvin, Grimm, Leona, take the carriage and go. Mariel and I will cover you and follow shortly." Before Grimm could protest, Melvin was shoving him inside the carriage, helped by Aethelinda. Flow limped, Leona held her hand on the tiger's back and soon the carriage took off at full speed, Melvin at the reins.

Granny stood in front of the doors now, a few meters from Sir Jean and Mariel, her arms crossed over her breast and smiling at them. The elf looked unafraid, even though the light Sir Jean was giving off must have hurt her eyes. She looked very different than a few days previous at dinner. Her skin was nearly ghostly white, and her red-rimmed eyes had a feral look to them. While she had once worn druid garb like Leona, now she was dressed in long robes that pooled on the ground, and her hair looked unbrushed, the locks falling in greasy ringlets around her face.

Granny did not seem to move, yet somehow a Fireball blossomed in front of Sir Jean and Mariel. Although Sir Jean could more easily stand the heat and some of the damage was absorbed by his armour, Mariel had no such advantages. She threw one arm up to protect her face, and had to take a step back to regain her balance.

Now the vampire was casting a spell, and she wasn't aiming at Mariel, but rather at Sir Jean. The paladin realised what was happening, but he could do nothing to stop it. He turned his head to Mariel, speaking but one word: "Run!"

Mariel hesitated for a moment, torn between saving herself or staying with her love, but then she noticed the effects of the spell, its magic taking hold of Sir Jean. He was slowly turning to stone from the ground up, and though he raised his weapons to attack the vampire, there was just no more time.

Granny turned to Mariel, but she just finished casting her Sanctuary spell, followed by a spell that would make her invisible from any undead. Mariel started running as fast as she could. Every second she was gone from Sir Jean's side was a second Granny could use to kill him. If the stone would crumble, it would seriously hurt Sir Jean, and with Mariel running away as well, there was nobody there to heal him any more.

Mariel wracked her brain over the fact that she left Sir Jean behind, but she had little time to think about it. Undead were still shambling around, although nearly every one that had been on this side of the tower had been killed. She wasn't used to running for long periods of time in her armour, but thanks to the many hours of horseback riding she could manage well enough. It was several minutes before she reached the copse of trees. She looked around and soon found traces of her friends. A large Wall of Force stood in the clearing where they had teleported, and around it were strewn logs of freshly-felled trees. She looked up at the top of the Wall of Force at a sound, and saw Aethelinda hovering there. The pseudo-dragon must have told Melvin she had arrived, for the Wall of Force was removed and Grimm walked briskly towards her.

"Melvin, you have to go back." Mariel said. "You have to get him out of there." She clutched her side, though it did little to relieve her pain as her breastplate was in the way. "Hurry!"

"Mariel, what happened. Where is Sir Jean?" Grimm asked, noting Mariel's obvious distress. "WHERE IS HE?"

"He is still at the tower, but he is defenseless. He --" she swallowed, noted that Melvin was standing ready to teleport; "He's been turned into a statue."

Melvin teleported, and returned several moments later with the statue of Sir Jean, still completely intact. Mariel took off her helmet, letting it drop to the ground. She placed her head in her hands, bending over so she wouldn't have to look at Grimm.

"He told me to run. He saved me."

"Alright. You did fine." Grimm said. "Melvin, can you do anything to help him?"

Mariel straightened again. "No. We must return to Ironforge, find someone who can cast -- or a scroll of Stone to Flesh."

Melvin nodded. Leona helped him get the horses closer around Sir Jean, and made sure everything they would need was near them. Only then did Melvin take out another scroll of Circle of Teleportation.

It had been a silent afternoon in Ironforge, and because it was not a holy day the temple square was rather quiet. Only a few people crossed the square, but they were startled when suddenly a group of people, accompanied by a large statue and a carriage, teleported into the center of the square. Mariel donned her helmet, but left the visor up. "Leona, I need you to go into the temple of Heironeous and get all the paladins you can find to form an honour guard around Sir Jean. I don't want anything happening to him while he's transformed into stone."

"I'll go to the barracks and get a regiment of dwarves out here." Grimm said. "I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Mariel and Melvin kept a close eye out until paladins started trickling from the doors of the temple of Heironeous. They gathered around Sir Jean, keeping a respectable distance. Mariel stepped towards them. "Which of you is the highest in rank?" she asked. One man stepped forward. It was a human, a little older than Sir Jean, with grey eyes. "Sir Gerard Devoir." he introduced himself.

"I am Mariel Morningsun. I shall get right to the point: Sir Jean has been transformed into a statue, as you can see. We will need to return him to his normal self, but I fear that someone will try and harm him. I need your help in keeping him safe. I want the paladins around Sir Jean in a circle, facing outwards. No-one enters the circle without my permission. More guards are coming, but for the time being it's just us."

Sir Gerard saluted, and started to give orders. The paladins took up station around Sir Jean, forming a circle as she had asked. There were nearly fifty paladins in the square, but it was a very large square and there was room between the paladins. Inside the circle, there was still enough space to walk around, and Melvin was pacing around Sir Jean, keeping an eye on the nearby rooftops and holding a wand at the ready. Leona had asked one of the temple acolytes to take the carriage away and care for the horses.

Now that the first line of defense was in place, Mariel could try talking to Sir Jean. She knew that he would not be able to speak, but perhaps he could still talk with her telepathically. But when she tried, there was no answer, and she was truly alone.

She noticed that Leona was standing next to Johan, and she walked over to them. Leona was telling Johan what had happened, and the high priest looked shocked. When Mariel walked up to them, Leona said: "Mariel was there, perhaps it's better if she tells you what happened."

Mariel took them inside the circle with her, so that Melvin could join their conversation, and asked Sir Gerard to join them. They spoke in hushed tones, trying hard not to disturb or distract the paladins around them. "He told me to run, and so I did. He saved my life." Mariel said. "But what happened to him in the time that it took me to reach Melvin -- I feared that Granny would just kill him, but now I fear she is using the situation to get to us."

"I'll have to focus to see if she's cast any spells on him. It's going to be hard to concentrate, with all of these magical items around." Melvin said.

"Try. We shall keep our distance, perhaps that will help." Mariel said. "Until we know what has happened to him, I will not risk it to bring him back. But when that time comes, we will need someone who can cast Stone to Flesh, or a scroll that can do that."

Johan nodded. "I'll see to it that you'll get it. Let me know if there's anything else you need."

"Food, water, and a resting place for the paladins." Mariel replied. "In due time they will get tired, and they need to eat. I'll assign rotating shifts. Grimm has gone to get dwarf guards, but it will be several hours until he's back here."

Melvin asked them to step back, and sat down in front of the statue of Sir Jean. After he cast his spell of Detect Magic, he would need to concentrate really hard to filter out all of the other magical items in the square. He himself wore a robe of the archmage and a bag of holding, and he had several wands in his pockets and a scrollcase bristling with magical parchment; others around him would also have their share of magical items. In order to see the spells that had been cast on Sir Jean, he would need to see past all of these magical items. It would probably give him a headache, but he had to try.

Mariel waited behind Melvin, far enough away so that the halfling wouldn't be disturbed by her presence or the magical items she was carrying. She was fingering the holy symbol of Ehlonna she wore around her neck, lost in thoughts, replaying what had happened over and over. In the end she had to conclude that there was nothing she could have done differently.

When Melvin thought he had finished, he scrambled to his feet. Night had fallen, and the lanterns around the temple square were lit, spreading a soft, even glow over the features of Sir Jean.

"You were right." he said to Mariel. "She's cast a number of spells on him, and it's not good. The only good news I have is that the spell of Permanency she tried has failed."

"Oh thank goodness." Leona sighed. "That's good news."

"The reason he can't hear us is twofold. She's cast Blindness, Deafness, and Sleep on him. The best part about this is that he won't be aware of what is happening to him. And if we do something wrong, he won't know what has happened to us, so he can't blame himself either."

"Wrong? What do you mean, wrong?" Leona asked.

"For instance;" Melvin continued; "there's several spells that will go off in time, or perhaps when we try and dispell things from him. The worst of these are Cloud Kill, Incindiary Cloud and Delayed Blast Fireball. The last one is the least harmful. The other two -- it could kill many people, including these paladins and a lot of citizens if it goes off here."

Mariel nodded solemnly. "We had but little choice. Go on, I can see there's more."



"Yes." Melvin replied. He's been hurt rather badly, so once we do get him out of there, we should have healers nearby. Inflict, Desecrate and Harm were three of the spells I found, but I don't know if there are more. She also used a Limited Wish on him, but that has ended and I don't know what it did to him. I'm more worried about dispelling all of these spells. There's two more spells that have been cast on him, and these will make our job of getting him back a lot harder. They're Protection from Good and Protection from Spells."

"Still, we will have to try. These last two must be the first ones to go. If our spells are bouncing off him we can't expect the trickier work, like dispelling that Cloud Kill, to succeed." Mariel said. "We can dispel these with a Greater Dispelling, correct?"

"Yes." Melvin replied. "It will be tricky, and we need to concentrate. Once we've got those protective spells off, our job will be a lot easier. I can still try several Greater Dispell spells tonight."

"I can do them in the morning, after I've slept." Leona said. She looked haggard and drawn, her own experiences still weighing heavily on her mind.

"And I." Mariel said. "We shall have to take turns, so we don't get exhausted and make fatal mistakes. I shall wait until Grimm has returned before trying to catch some sleep."

Mariel and Leona walked to one side of the square. Leona tried to comfort Mariel, but the words didn't come. Instead, she just put her hand on the elf's shoulder.

"After all this is over, I can see if I can help Flow with her paw. But right now, I need to focus on getting Sir Jean back." Mariel said.

"Of course, I understand." Leona replied. "If there's anything else I can do for you--"

"If you can keep watch with me for now, I can send Melvin to bed. He's probably exhausted and we need him well-rested come morning." Mariel said.

Grimm had arrived at the barracks after a long march, and he had raised all hell to get his dwarves up and running. It took them an hour to prepare, which Grimm thought was ridiculous. The march back was stressful. He'd been gone for several hours, and who knew what he'd find when he got back to the temple square? Perhaps his friends had been killed, the statue of Sir Jean smashed into tiny pieces. It was after midnight when he arrived back at the temple square. Mariel had heard the army approach, their regular footsteps drumming in the distance and getting closer. She stood next to Sir Gerard and nodded to him that these were indeed the reinforcements she had expected.

Grimm ordered his dwarves to take up station with the paladins, six dwarves to a paladin, and the circle was now truly closed. Mariel introduced the Grimm to Sir Gerard, who saluted. Grimm returned the salute wearily. "Any news?"

"All quiet general." Sir Gerard replied.

"Melvin is sleeping for now. He found out that Granny cast a lot of spells on Sir Jean, to make it harder for us to get him back. Leona's awake, keeping watch from the rooftops at the other side of the square."

"Why don't you get some sleep as well, Mariel." Grimm suggested.

Mariel slept very badly, even though she was close to Sir Jean. She had wrapped herself in her blanket, taking only her helmet off so her head would lie easier. She didn't take her armour off, sure that an attack could come at any moment now that they were so vulnerable.

There was an absence. She hadn't really noticed the feeling until it was gone, but now that it was she felt very empty. Her feelings for Jean had not changed and her love for him was tangled around her heart, strangling her because she wasn't sure she would get him back. But a coldness had settled in it as well. It was the absence of something that she couldn't quite put her finger on. And it was not just in her heart, but elsewhere as well.

Mariel had been delighted to hear that she was pregnant, and she had been even more blessed to hear that it was not just one child. It was still too early in her pregnancy to make a distinction between the children, but she could feel their life force, the joy and love.

It was missing now.

She woke up when it was still dark, rested but crying. The cold feeling that was inside her had overpowered her during her reverie. She lay still for a while, tears slowly running down her cheeks and to her ears. She looked up at the stone statue above her, the swords glinting in the light of the lanterns that were set around the temple square. She wiped the tears away, and got up. It would be a long day, and there was much to do.

The dwarves and paladins were still in place around the temple square, but it didn't look like many were resting. She walked over to Sir Gerard and asked him about it.

"Ten paladins are resting for four hours." Sir Gerard said.

"Switch to a different schedule in two hours." Mariel said. "We will need to stay alert, and if we don't resolve the situation soon, everyone will need adequate rest. Change to five men at a time. Have them sleep and eat within the eight hours. Send in the next batch after four hours. This will leave the guard we have now intact and have everyone well rested. I do not want their attention to slack."

The paladin saluted, and Mariel went to pray. When she entered the temple of Heironeous afterwards she found Leona there as well, grabbing some breakfast from a long table in one of the antechambers.

"Did you even sleep, Mariel? You look terrible." Leona said.

"I need you to prepare the Greater Dispelling. What else do you have that is useful?" Mariel ignored her question.

"Healing." Leona said. "I also have a Wall of Air, if that is helpful?"

Mariel thought for a moment. "Yes, I think so. And anything along the lines of blessings and aiding. I shall ask Melvin to do the same." She paused for a moment and frowned. "We will have to work close together in order to succeed."

They took their breakfast outside, and saw Melvin sitting inside the circle of paladins and dwarves, munching several sandwiches. Grimm marched up to Mariel before they could reach Melvin. "Did you change the schedule for resting?" he barked.

"Yes I did, Grimm. You can't expect them to stay alert for such long periods of time. They need their rest, and so do you." Mariel replied pointedly. She was not about to be ordered around by Grimm, just because he was a general.

"Stop giving my men conflicting orders!" Grimm said.

"For heaven's sake Grimm, it's Jean. I need to do this." Mariel replied. "If I can't do this for him, if I can't help him, then what else is there for me? I cannot sit idly by while he is like this. I need to know I did everything I could to save him, and that includes commanding the guard around him."

Grimm puffed his mustaches. "I see. But these men need to know who is in charge here, they can't have two commanding officers and they can't have their generals argue in front of them. You need to stop countermanding my orders."

"I will do whatever I think is best in this situation. And that includes ordering you to sleep. Melvin, Leona and I are awake now. You're no good to your friend unless you're rested." Mariel said. She took a sip of milk from the mug she was holding, and when Grimm didn't reply, she continued towards Melvin. Behind her, she could hear Leona plead her case, but Grimm marched away, muttering to himself in dwarvish. Some of the dwarves near him glanced at Mariel worriedly, but she didn't notice. She was already focusing on what they were going to do next.

"Morning, Mariel." Melvin said. He had an arm around Aethelinda. "I heard BabyQ didn't move from that spot all night."

Mariel glanced at the red dragon hatchling. He was curled around Sir Jean's feet, glaring in all directions. She had slept next to him, curled in her blanket, but the dragon hadn't disturbed her. "He is worried too, I think." Mariel said. "We need to discuss how we're going about getting those spells dispelled."

"I can do quite a few Greater Dispelling, and a few regular Dispel Magic spells." Melvin said.

"That could be a problem as well as a blessing. To cast these spells you need to concentrate, and if your concentration wavers for a moment, anything could happen. I'd like to prevent that Cloud Kill spell from triggering." Mariel said. "Leona and I can also cast Greater Dispelling, so we can switch turns. You do one or two, then one of us takes over. A rotating shift, to make sure we don't lose our concentration."

"Sounds good." Leona said.

"Now, there are other spells that can help us out as well. I would like to ask Ehlonna for Her blessing on all of us before we start, and I want to cast Aid on all three of us, to help us when we work." Mariel looked at each of them in turn, and then continued. "Another thing. Melvin, I need you to stand by with a spell that can contain that Cloud Kill spell, and that Incendiary Cloud spell should they go off. That means that either Leona or I should try to dispell those, but we can't be sure if they're seperate from either Protection spell."

Melvin nodded. It sounded like a good contingency plan, but he wasn't sure it would work.

Mariel ordered Sir Gerard to widen the circle, so the paladins and dwarves would be farther away from the statue. Should the Delayed Blast Fireball spell go off accidentally, they would not be harmed, and it gave them more room to work undisturbed.

The small halfling had finished his breakfast and they returned the mugs inside before starting. After Mariel cast her spells on all three of them, Melvin stood in front of the statue, and Mariel and Leona stepped several meters back to give him some room. Melvin concentrated, singled out the two protection spells, and focused his Greater Dispelling on the Protection from Spells. Speaking his incantation and weaving his hands, he tried to dispel it. It was very hard, it was like the spell seemed to hide from him at times, and when he had finished casting, he knew he had failed. The spell was still intact. He tried again, and this time it worked. He turned around and shared the news with Leona and Mariel.

"Good job, take a break now. Leona?" Mariel said. Leona and Melvin switched places, and now it was Leona who stood in front of the statue. The half-elf focused on the other protection spell. She had a hard time concentrating on it, the spell itself seemed to move from her spell, and when she was done casting, she reported that it had failed. Mariel did no better, but when Melvin tried it again he had it. "Next one's going to be a lot easier." he announced. "I'll try and dispell the Incindiary Cloud next."

Mariel glanced around worriedly at the paladins and dwarves around the temple square. If the Incindiary Cloud spell triggered, they would probably all be dead. But she had little time to think about it, because Melvin announced that it had worked. The spell was dispelled, and would not kill all those innocent men.

Leona switched with Melvin again, and came back to them excitedly. "That was the Fireball." She was growing more confident, more elated, the more spells they managed to dispel. Mariel felt her heart leap every time a spell was dispelled, but she didn't allow herself to grow over-confident, or happy. Maybe the hardest part was over, but they had been extremely lucky so far.

Lucky, or blessed.

Mariel stepped forward. The Cloud Kill was next. By unspoken agreement they focused their attention on the most deadly spells first, taking them out of the equation. She was nervous, scared to make a mistake. She took a calming breath, recalled the silence of Margden Woods, and started to weave her spell. It was easier this time around, the spell wasn't slipping away from her or hiding, like before. When she released the power of her spell, she realised it had worked, and the Cloud Kill was also



dispelled.

Grimm joined them, eating a sandwich and very obviously not taking any rest, so they paused their work for a moment. Melvin brought Grimm up to speed. Grimm had not yet been apprised of what kind of spells had been cast on the statue of Sir Jean, but he was happy to hear so many had already been removed. "He'll be back before you know it." he winked. "I'll stay out of your hair so you can work your magic." He ruffled Aethelinda on the head, and walked back to the temple entrance, his axe still resting comfortably on his shoulder.

"What's next?" Melvin asked Mariel.

"The Desecrate spell needs to go. It worries me." Mariel replied. "And then the Sleep. If that's dispelled, maybe I can talk to him."

Melvin nodded and set to work. After casting his two spells, he turned around, both thumbs up and a wide grin on his face. Mariel put a hand to her chest, her heart seemed to jump like it wanted to escape her chest. She was more nervous now than ever before. "Jean, please stay calm." she tried to speak to Sir Jean telepathically.

"What happened?" his voice sounded in her head. Mariel smiled through her tears at hearing his voice. It was the most wonderful sound she had ever heard, even if it was just a voice in her head.

"You have been transformed into a statue, and Granny cast a lot of spells on you. Melvin, Leona and I are dispelling them one by one. The reason you can't see or hear anything is because she's cast Blindness and Deafness on you. If you stay calm, we will get you out of there very soon." Mariel said telepathically.

After the Blindness and Deafness were dispelled, Melvin took a scroll out of his scrollcase. "Ready?" he asked. He walked around the statue, so that he stood behind the paladin. Sir Jean's arms were still raised, the longsword and extremely sharp scimitar in his hands, poised for an attack. Grimm stood by at the paladin's shoulder, ready to hold him back should he attack, ready to catch him should he fall.

When Melvin read the scroll and cast the Stone to Flesh spell that was on the magical parchment, the stone seemed to crack, melt, disappear. Slowly Sir Jean returned to his usual self, and he leaned on Grimm at his side. Mariel rushed over, remembering the other harmful spells that had been cast on him. She placed her healing hands on either side of his face, taking away some of the pain, and continued with another powerful healing spell. Leona stepped in also, placing her quarterstaff on the paladin, and using the Heal spell she stored in the staff on the paladin. Only then did the colour return to Sir Jean's face, and he straightened. Sir Jean held his head high, looking around the square, taking in every detail. The paladins and dwarves were still standing guard in a circle around them. Johan stood just outside the circle, looking relieved. BabyQ was jumping up and down excitedly, landing with a crash each time. When he was sure there was no threat around him, he folded his wings, retracted them so no trace of them remained, and he sheathed his swords. He nodded to Leona, to Melvin, and to Grimm. "Thank you, my friends."

"It's good to have you back, buddy." Grimm said.

Sir Jean slowly turned to Mariel. There were tears in her eyes, and she bit her lip, trying very hard not to cry. Now that he was back, all the emotions she had pent up inside her came tumbling down, and she felt like she was drowning in his eyes. Sir Jean very carefully hugged Mariel, whispering in her ear.

After Sir Jean had hugged her, Mariel called Sir Gerard over to them. "Sir Gerard, I am most grateful for your help. Words cannot express my gratitude."

Sir Gerard saluted them, and ordered his paladins to stand down. Slowly they dispersed, walking back into the temple of Heironeous.

"Yeah." Grimm harrumphed. "I'll march the dwarves back to their barracks. I guess I'll spend the night in Andorhall, and join you at the mansion tomorrow. Take Leona with you."

Leona crossed her arms over her breast, tapping her foot but refraining from commenting. Grimm kissed her cheek, and started to bark orders. The dwarves formed up and marched out, back towards their barracks.