

Ahriankhod sank back deeper into the shadows ringing the common room of the small inn, only her hand holding a ceramic mug revealed by the firelight, a small gold ring glinting on her forefinger. The room was filling slowly with the local farmers and those coming in off the road. Her hunt had led her here to this small crossroads community on the edge of the elven wood. The others had fallen to her hard-won skills and the last two would soon follow. Her latest quarry should be near. She sipped her steaming wine, drawing her hatred around her like a cloak.

She looked up at the gust of cool autumn air to see a man closing the tavern's door. Blonde warbraids hung in front of finely pointed ears. Safe enough here, though she had grown used to hiding her own, her crow black hair further hiding her heritage. The russet leather armor he wore was creased and burnished from long use.

Ahri's eyes narrowed, the newcomer was like the description she had been given of Meren's scout. She waited as he greeted a few of the men at the keg and leaned against the bar. The weapons he carried were well used, the polished hilt of a bastard sword rose above one shoulder, its shorter bladed mates hung from his belt. Ahri focused on his conversation with the barkeep.

"Haven't seen you around in a while, Jhered. What've you been up to?"

He pulled off his brigantine jack and weapon harness, dropping them alongside the bar. The light green shirt beneath them was wrinkled and worn. "You remember me?"

"Not many people order themselves the best ale in the house, much less for their dog." He sat a slopping bowl up on the bar.

The half elf smiled ruefully. "Alex is in the Deep Wilds now. He met his end keeping me alive during the wars."

"Ah, that's too bad. A dog like that is hard to find." The bartender pushed the ranger's coins back. "It's on the house, Jhered. In fond memory." Jhered grinned and picked up the bowl, drinking from it.

Ahri's eyes widened, she didn't expect to find him so soon. She forced herself to relax; her success did not depend on strength of arm but of cunning and deceit. The others had been quickly entrapped by their own desires and died under her envenomed blade. This Jhered looked to be a greater challenge, though. She inhaled in satisfaction, nose narrowing. All the better. She would need the edge to finish her revenge. Ahri covertly eyed a pair of northern mercenaries at a back table. With the appropriate words, she should be able to send both dwarf and human after the ranger to further assess his skills.

As she rose to approach them, the door opened again. A tangle haired young girl entered, pushing the door shut as if to keep something out, face full of fear. Ahri glanced over and seeing the wench taking the child in hand, moved on. She turned when she heard Jhered speaking to the girl, his hands on her shaking arms. Just as she came up, drawn dagger in hand, she heard him ask again "What's wrong?" as the door slammed back violently. The rough-hewn lintel framed a dark cloaked figure. The hood was pulled back to reveal a man's face, dark haired with a narrow mustache, face thin and pinched.

Ahriankhod stared, numbed by the presence of both of her quarry. Meren was standing there and other figures stood in the darkness. The girl shrieked in terror at the sight of them. Ahri did not hear what he said as he strode into the common room, flanked by two men-at-arms, only instinctively moved to kill the closer target in the unexpected confusion. Before she could take a step, Jhered thrust the girl into her arms. Ahri looked up into the azure eyes of her first quarry.

"Get her out of here. I'll distract him."

"I..."

"Go!" He turned to others nearby. Ahri recognized as the Northerner and the dwarf.

They must have sensed a fight. "We need to hold them. You," he nodded to the dwarf. "Go with her."

She half turned impelled by the command in his low voice. Behind her, she heard Jhered.

"Meren, you have no right here. Leave the girl alone."

The sharp hiss of drawn steel drowned Meren's reply. "... abandoned our quest to eliminate the demonic scourge."

As they spoke, she slipped behind them, girl in tow. A man knelt beside the girl. He looked up. "She's done no wrong."

"I know. Let me take her." He hesitated. "Now or he'll kill her too." He looked shocked and then moved.

Ahri produced a small dart and handed it to the girl who took it automatically. Her face, half shrouded in dark hair, showed nothing but fear and loss, making Ahri swallow hard in unfamiliar empathy. "Use it if you can." She turned to the short warrior. "Let's go" They left quickly, the dwarf now carrying the girl, Ahri leading the way. She worried that her unwanted partner was somehow a plant of Meren's, but he followed her willingly. They found the back door that she had seen earlier. Behind them she heard the clash of steel and then a flush of heat and wind. Magic. No matter, she had to get the girl out of there. They left the doorway and made for the shadows.

Ahri heard the thrum of a cross bow just before the pain hit. A bolt hung from the point of her shoulder. Blood quickly colored the white linen dark. The dagger dropped from her numbed hand.

"Damn, ambush." The dwarf cursed, a bolt marking him in the leg. They backed together, the girl between them. Meren's men came out of the shadows, crossbows down lest they strike the girl, and swords drawn. Ahri drew her short sword, determined not to let them have her charge no matter what the cost. She blocked the first attack, her return skittering off her opponent's armor. She was at a disadvantage and they both knew it. Her embroidered leather doublet would let blows through that would barely mark his plate and chain. But she could only see flames from long ago and she fought.

Painfully swinging with each move, the quarrel finally dropped away. A lucky strike sent her opponent's sword cartwheeling into the darkness, but he was replaced by another. Keeping an eye on the girl split her attention. She heard the shout, "Girl, behind you!" as she felt the hammer of mailed fists on her neck. She dropped to the ground, unconscious.

"Girl, You okay?" She blinked, agony in her head. The dwarf shook her again. The motion was too much. She rolled and retched, the pain tearing into everything. When she could control herself again, she could see, despite the daggers behind her eyes.

"Where are they? Where's the girl?" She gasped.

He shook his head, beard braids swinging. "They're gone. Got us both good."

Ahri got her feet beneath her, moving on sheer stubbornness. "Got to go after them."

A hand pushed her down. "You're not going anywhere." She snarled at him. "Listen, they nearly took you with them. Their boss decided you'd be too much baggage. Take it easy. He has to have a camp in the woods. They'll not move tonight."

"I've got to..."

"Nothin'. We're both no use to anyone the way we are. Got to see if anyone can bind us up. "He looked over her head. "Though, they might all be a bit busy now."

She noticed the flickering. Turning, she saw the inn ablaze. As her companion helped her stand, she noticed a wet gash along his side and blood trickling from over one ear. "You're hurt." Her head made it impossible to talk much or make much sense. He shrugged. "Had worse. Let's see what happened to Ekar and the elf." They both walked slowly to the front of the inn, each supporting the other. Ahri cursed herself for needing help.

"Ekar." The dwarf hailed a large figure, standing back from the blaze.

"Gordo. What the hell happened to you?" His voice was rough, like rocks tumbling together. He smelled of smoke and sulfur, a homespun tunic hanging in tatters around him.

"Ambushed. Seems they were trying kill everyone. Damn near succeeded." He looked over his companion. "You didn't get away untouched either."

Ekar grunted. "Magic. Flamed the place when we were winning."

"Where is the elf?"

"Rode off with Meren." Ahri grimaced, trying to keep from being sick again.

Ekar looked at her quizzically and shook his head. "Nah. Damn fool is still in there, getting people out."

At his words, Ahri saw Jhered leap from the inn's door, sheltering a woman under his cloak. The falling beams threw sparks behind him. Watching the shifting flames was too much, Ahri felt as if she would lose her stomach again. Giving into weakness, she sat upon the autumn-hard earth, eyes closed against the light. Her head throbbed. She reached back and found that her hair clasp was hanging loose. Pulling it out, she could tell it was covered in blood. She heard footsteps approach and the sound of someone shaking a cloak. Opening her eyes again, she saw a small rain of embers hitting the ground.

"Think I got everyone out. What happened? The girl..."

"As if you didn't know." She looked up slowly. He was looking at her, concern in his eyes. "Meren has her now. We were ambushed."

"I didn't know. You're both hurt..."

She ignored him. "You work with Meren. I know even if the others don't."

"I think you got the wrong man, girl. You don't try to kill one of your own."

"Oh and he just happened to be here. Just like Meren. Only tonight, Meren nearly got an entire inn instead of one old..." Ahri lurched to her feet again, feeling her vision narrow from the pain. She began walking toward the stable.

"Where are you going?" She heard Jhered's voice behind her.

Ahri looked back, her voice colorless from exhaustion and pain. "I won't let him have her." She turned away, stumbled.

She felt hands on her shoulders, carefully avoiding the wound. She spun away from him, staggered. "Get away from me!"

He steadied her. "You can't fight them like this. None of us can. We'll rest, then follow him."

"Why should I believe you? You're his man."

He looked her straight in the eyes, lighting blue meeting blazing green. "No. I'm. Not."

She dropped her angry gaze. He released her, stepping back. "I used to ride with him. But... he's turned. I heard about what he's been doing when I got back. I came here to find out where he might be." He looked down at the charred edges of his clothes, the bloody rent in his loosely hanging armor, placing a hand over that, wincing. "Almost can't believe it. Almost." Ahri saw the red of burns crossing his hands and face,.

"I ... Fine." Ahri saw the red of burns crossing his hands and face,.

"I ... Fine." She looked up into his eyes. "Tomorrow, when we catch them, Meren is mine."

Her cold, flat answer caused him to frown. "Why? What did he do to you?"

Ahri shook her head, shaking away the desire to tell someone. It had been so long... no. She grasped onto the pain; it cleared her head. "The stable seems intact." She headed for it. The others soon caught up to her, and found their respective horses sweated but calm now.

"Sorry, Nubbin. It's alright now." Ahri ran a curry brush over her roan gelding quickly and pulled a lump of molasses from a jar in her saddle bag. Soft whiskery lips gathered up the sweet and he nuzzled her as she removed her bed roll from her saddle on the half-wall. She emptied the jar, giving each horse a treat.

Ahri climbed slowly into the loft. Moonlight silvered the raw rafted ceiling. Ahri squinted and reached for one of the hanging bundles. Crushing the dried leaves to her nose, she sighed. Going to the ladder opening, she caught Gordo's eye. "Bring up some water. Hot if you can find it."

"Huh, how much?"

"A kettle. And if you got them, any bandages. There are healing herbs up here."

Jhered and Ekar joined her, bringing up a lantern and a bucket.

"You're sure you don't want to lie down? I can...."

She ignored him. He didn't press her, just sat back and peeled charred clothing off.

She had finished mixing the poultice and was smearing Ekar's and Jhered's wounds as Gordo came up. More herbs went in to brew a tea in the steaming kettle he brought. As it steeped, his wounds were dressed. The dwarf helped her tend to her own wounds, fashioning a sling for her arm. The cold, wet compress eased the pain of her head. Mugs of tea were passed around and they wrapped into the sweet-smelling hay. Ahri stared up at the roof, tormented by memories and distrust until the tea gentled her into sleep.

She awoke to the pearly grey of dawn and a dull ache behind her eyes. The tea had quelled some of the pain, for that she was grateful. Her wounds still hurt but not as fiercely. She sat up to see the others stretching out stiff muscles.

"Any more of that tea?" Gordo glanced over at her.

"The dregs. Why..?" He drank directly from the kettle, a stream of tea into his mouth.

Ahri grimaced. The stuff didn't taste that great when it was hot and only a tenth the strength.

"Better." He offered it to Ekar, who snorted and shook his head.

"How's your head?" Jhered spoke, voice muffled by the fresh gray tunic he was pulling on.

She looked over at him, warily. "I'll survive. The poultices helped?"

"Yeah, hate to think what we'd be feeling like without them. Ready after breakfast?"

Ahri wanted to ride now, but couldn't argue with the sense the ranger made. She nodded.

Swallowing the last of her porridge, Ahri looked around the small green in the village. Where had Jhered gone? She grabbed up a bag of the food the village provided and stalked out to the barn. The doors opened as she approached, revealing their horses, all saddled and packed, being led by Jhered.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Getting us on the road as soon as possible. You can check your horse out if you don't trust me."

She snatched the proffered reins out of his hand and ran a practiced eye over Nubbin. None of the tricks she knew were in evidence and the girth belt was cinched by

someone who had a lot of experience with horses. Putting the trail rations in her saddlebag, she reluctantly followed him back to the green.

Jhered led them on foot until the woods' edge, where a trail opened.

"They shouldn't have more than a few hours head start on us. Just having the girl should slow them."

"If she's still alive."

"He would have killed her last night, if that's what he wanted. They did a pretty good job on the rest of us." Ekar spoke, his fingers grating on his stubble.

Jhered frowned as he mounted his horse. "Don't mean to look a gift horse in the mouth, but why are you two coming? I need to find Meren and..." he stopped, turned to Ahri.

"Sorry, but what is your name?"

"Ahrianrhod. Ahri, if you'd like."

Ekar shifted in his saddle. "He made it personal when he flamed us. Don't like that." He hooked a thumb at the dwarf. "And he took Gordo away from his beer. That's enough for us."

"You two can't handle them alone. You need me and Ekar." The words from the dwarf brought a humorless smile to Ahri's face.

They followed the trail that Meren and his men left, the musty scent of broken branches and fallen colorful leaves marking the path. Jhered's tracking skills were not truly needed for their quarry did not seem to expect pursuers. Then, into the second day, the trail seemed to vanish.

"What's wrong?"

"It's like they've disappeared." Jhered dismounted. "I'm going to circle around to see if I can pick it up again."

"No." They looked at Ahri, as she also dismounted. "We don't need you going ahead to warn him."

"Warn him? Ahri, I want Meren brought to justice..."

"I want Meren dead." They stood, Ahri barely in control of herself, wanting to forget what she was here for. Her fury was interrupted by a cleared throat.

"Now miss, if you be wanting to kill blondie here, fine by me, but don't you think you should be bringing this to bear on the inquisitor?" Gordo rumbled from his seat.

Ahri's anger cooled somewhat. "I don't trust him."

"Hell, we don't even know each other but we got into this together. Let the ranger go ahead and..." Ekar's words were never finished as forms leapt from the trees with piercing cries. Ahri flipped from where she had stood, landing behind one of their attackers that had chosen her as a target. Two daggers came free into her hands. They found their target in its back. She tore them free as it screamed and fell. The beastmen seemed to only be carrying clubs and rough spears, but easily twice their number had her and the others surrounded. The men had their weapons in hand and were cutting into their opponents. Unwounded, they might have a chance. As it was, it looked bleak.

Ekar and Gordo stood back to back hacking at the seemingly crazed creatures. Jhered stood alone, his blade skill keeping him safe for the moment. Ahri threw the daggers that were in her hands, one hitting a leg, the other going wide. She heard Ekar behind her cursing. Risking a glance, she saw that a lucky blow had caught him in the face. He spat blood in the face of his attacker, following the spittle with steel. Jhered stood pulling his sword from another.

Ahri looked behind him, another was crouched ready to attack. Time slowed as her

mind raced. Turn away and let her vengeance be nearly done, only Meren to find? And she saw in her mind's eye Jhered leaping from the inn, his cloak over the wench. She brought up another dagger as he looked up and cast it. He didn't move, allowed the dagger to fly by into the throat of her target. He spun, his sword coming up and under the ribs of the now falling creature. As she watched, she caught a flicker of motion. It saved her from taking the full brunt of the leaping creature, though she found herself pinned to the ground, her head in agony from the new impact. The nearly human face leered above her, small horns poking through unkempt hair. "Pretty woman, we not kill you." Words barely recognizable as Common fanned her face with fetid breath. She tried to bring up a knee to dissuade its intentions. The blow, blunted by the bad angle and a thick mat of fur, only caused it to grunt and grip her arms tighter, fingers sinking into her shoulder wound.

"Ahri!" Jhered spared her a glance before his attentions were required elsewhere. A scarlet stain marked his leg where a spear point had eluded the armor. She could see Ekar, beset with more of the things. Another had Gordo and was grappling with the dwarf. Ahri's attention was taken from the desperate battle by a movement under her. And then another. With a ripple, Ahri found herself and the creature encased in a snarl of vines, small grapes still hanging from them. Apparently from their cries, the others were also.

"What goes on here?" She heard a woman's voice call out.

"We were attacked, my lady." Jhered spoke. "Satyrs don't usually but things are not right here."

Ahri could see her now. A tall young woman with red-blond hair, simply dressed in a brown woolen shift, surveyed the scene, a roughly carved staff in her hands. She spoke again. "And what say you, satyrs?"

The one above Ahri spoke. "Human kindred told us to attack any who come here. Said he was our friend."

"Who was it?"

"Don't know. Never saw him before."

"But he was your friend?" The woman looked perplexed.

"Yes."

"Charmed." Ekar spoke, and spat. "Meren made 'em think he was their buddy."

Their rescuer considered. "Will you leave and let these people alone if I release you.?"

"Sure. Get back to drinking then."

She shook her head at the thought. "Satyrs." She spoke odd words and the vines relented, releasing their captives. The satyrs ran off into the woods, leaving their dead behind.

Ekar got to his feet. "I oughta..."

"C'mon Ekar. Let's see if Ahri has any of those herbs left."

The woman looked up at the dwarf's words. "Herbs? If you'd allow me, I can do some healing magics. I am of the druidic circle of Hollyvale."

"Please." Jhered joined her. "I'm Jhered, this is Ekar, Gordo and Ahri. Owe you for coming along when you did."

"I am glad I found you, if something is twisting what lives in the forest. I'm Cabhri." She examined Jhered's wounds as he stripped his armor. "You've been hurt recently. At least whoever did these poultices was of some skill."

"Ahri..."

The young woman retreated. "I'll see if I can find the horses."

Soon a small fire was crackling, throwing light over the weary travelers. The young

druid, Cabhri, had tended them quickly and efficiently, her prayers knitting together wounds. Even Ekar had sat still. Ahri sat sipping willow tea as Jhered told their tale to their rescuer.

"And now we've lost the trail. Only explanation is magic. Braeme never was a spell caster before. I can't even guess what's happened."

At the ranger's words, Ekar threw a stone into the fire sending up sparks. "Could be anywhere."

All were quiet, dismayed at the apparent end to their quest. Cabhri looked at them, considering. "I may be able to do something about that. But in the morning. I am also looking for someone. My father has gone missing and I've been led this way in my search. May the gods grant we both find what we are looking for."

The night passed uneventfully. As Ahri sat on watch, she found she couldn't put away her thoughts and perhaps did not want to. It had been years since anyone had shown any concern for her. And now strangers, and one thought a blood enemy, had done so. She pushed the thoughts away. It was easier to see it as a debt she owed them, him. It would be repaid and things would be as before.

Ahri woke to the sun slightly over the horizon. Only a twinge was left of her concussion. A quick, and cold, wash and she joined the others. Cabhri was apart from them, staring raptly at the gently swaying trees, their colors brilliant in the early light.

Gordo handed her a cup of fragrant tea. "Morning. Sleep well?"

She nodded. "Enough. Cabhri is trying to find Meren?"

"Talking to the trees or something."

"She said she could get a general idea." Ekar tore off chunk of bread and offered it over.

"Cheese is on the rock. If it works. You'd think she could find her father. Just sayin' "

Cabhri soon returned to them, laying her staff down. "He is heading that way, where the river meets the sea." She motioned toward the rising sun. "I was told nothing else."

"What is in that direction?" Ahri looked at Jhered, still gauging and testing. She knew exactly what was there.

He thought a moment, then shook his head. "Scardale. I should have known. Not a nice place. Hopefully, someone has seen them pass."

They rode along the rough road that followed the river, the water covered in a feathery layer of steam thanks to the chill late autumn air. The few people they met had seen nothing of their quarry. Another cold night and they headed out again.

"If I remember right, we're coming up on Feather Falls. Then we'll be in the Scar proper. I don't know how far guards come out of the town itself."

"From what I've heard, they have enough problems there to deal with. Meren picked a good one."

The rumble of the falls could be heard some miles away and eventually they saw the plume of mist that gave the cataract its name. A switchbacked trail led down along the falls, well used since anything traveling up the Ashaba had to be portaged. A recommendation of a large inn at the village at the base of the falls had them staying there for the night, and gave a chance to speak to more people.

After stabling their horses, they entered the inn. It was a large place, timber and stone, to take care of the traffic. A small table was open under a window.

"Ale all around?" A smiling woman called from where she was serving other customers.

"And keep them coming!" Gordo shouted to a chorus of laughter.

Jhered stood at the table briefly. "Don't see any town guards. I'll see what the locals know."

“Dark haired. looked like someone pissed in his beer? Yeah, I saw that one and his bully boys. They were a day’s ride southeast of here, killed a couple of people, err, a witch and her demon.” He shifted on the bench uncomfortably.

“But you’re not sure they were.” Jhered drank, looking over his mug’s edge to gauge the man’s reaction.

“We’ve had some real troubles here with demons, mages and suchlike. What do I know about such things? People like this Meren fella, he’s from the town. I’m guessing he knows what he’s doing. He got the swords anyway.”

“They were friends of yours.”

“No....well, yes.... Philo the miller and his wife. their girl.....” He rubbed his face with his hands as if to wear away the memories. “Gods, if I could change it I would.”

“The girl’s still alive. You want to help, you’ll tell me everything you know.”

“A mill?” Cabhi frowned.

“If we stop there to see what happened, maybe we can figure out why Meren kept this girl.” Jhered speared a last piece of cheese.

“And if we find she was some demon thing?” Cabhri held up her hands at Ahrianrhod’s scowl. “I’m sorry Ahri, but it is a possibility.”

“Then we deal with that when we come to it.” He turned to Ahrianrhod. “Ahri, I think you’re more personally involved with this problem than the rest of us. We can go, see what happened...”

She shook her head. “No.” She halted, unused to speaking to others in anything but a threat or a command. “I...appreciate your concern, Jhered. And I know that it’s a possibility, Cabhri, and I have the experience on how to deal with that. I need to be there.”

Ekar snorted in derision. “You’ve fought demons.”

“Yes.” She held his gaze until he found his cup more interesting. “But that’s not what I mean. I know what to look for, if this miller and his wife were trafficking with such things. And if we do find anything that doesn’t want us there, if you don’t know what you are doing, you’ll just get in the way.”

“In the way?” Ekar looked up from picking his nails with a dagger.

Gordo spoke up. “Neither one of us has any magics, and not even good dwarven steel can hurt a demon without the blessings of the gods on it. So, you got weapons that can?” He looked at Ahri doubtfully.

“Cold iron and true silver can harm them. I’ve a long knife of that. Jhered’s sword will do.” The ranger’s brows went up at her remark. “And if you have the right spells, Cabhri.”

“Then Cabhri and I will check the village out and we all go to the mill. Agreed?”

Ahri nodded. Best she stayed away from any villages. For their sake.

The mill was a tall stone building alongside a tributary to the Ashaba. A wheel turned in the small icy channel of diverted water. It sat off some distance from the rest of the village thanks to the constant thump and creak. Ahri waited with Ekar and Gordo in a small but dense strip of woods with the village between them and the mill while Jhered and Cabhri rode ahead, ostensibly to pick up some supplies but to also see what had transpired.

Gordo handed her back her long dagger, the twists of silver and black iron reflecting the dappled reddening sunlight. “A fine piece of work. From the old kingdoms?”

She sheathed it as she replied. “Yes. Their gods and devils had a preference for being right in the thick of things so they had reason to get good with this work. Still seems that

way if you ever find your way there.”

“They pay well for mercs down there?” Ekar spoke from across the small shielded fire. Ahri nodded. “They do, but they don’t much like strangers. You’ll be the shock troops, less of their own to be killed. And you do not want to be captured by the other side.”

“Undead?”

“If you’re lucky.”

“Hate that magic shit. ’Course except for the healing. How do you know so much about it?”

“I do. You should leave it at that.”

He shrugged. “Got it. Here’s dinner.”

Jhered and Cabhri picked their way to the small clearing, bearing a small bag of supplies.

“So?”

“They were very happy to get rid of us. Meren has some men stationed there. We went beyond it and circled back.”

“And the accuracy of the story?”

“We didn’t get much of a chance to ask. But there had been a pyre.” Cabhri handed around the rolls and sausages. “Apples are in the sack.”

“How many men?”

“Nine, none that I recognized. They were staying in the mill but it seems it’s... haunted.” Jhered rubbed his eyes. Ahri noted that they were nearly the same glowing color as the first night, not the sea blue she had grown used to. Something very much bothered him about this. “If it’s really some kind of undead...and not their consciences, I might be able to take care of it. Sword is magical focused against them and I have experience. But it could be strong if it’s one or both the slain parents.”

“Just gets better and better.” Ekar crunched into an apple for emphasis.

“Into the mill tonight?”

“Before anyone gets any ideas. We can be done and gone hopefully before the guards notice anything.”

The night was dark, a blanket of clouds refused to even let the waning moon light through except as a pale willowisp high in the sky. Ahri found the mill’s locked door no match for her picks. Not even a match for a dagger blade. She shook the snow out of her hair as she entered the mill. Barely able to see the inside of the room, she found a table on its side with her shin. Righting it, she set her small hooded lantern down, opening it a crack. Hopefully, the villagers were shut up in their cottages and any light they saw would keep them that way. Soon she heard the others coming up the small wooden gangway over the creaking wheel.

This room appeared to be the living quarters, and the mill itself off beyond a door that had dusty footprints around it. It showed the signs of being ransacked.

Ahri lit several candle stubs from her lantern, placing them in broken bits of pottery.

“Any ideas?” Jhered came up beside her, looking over the destruction.

“What do soldiers look for?”

“Gold, anything that makes life easier.”

“That probably wouldn’t have told us much anyway. I’ll take the loft.” Cabhri mounted the stairs carefully, one of Ahri’s temporary lanterns in hand.

“Starting at the top of the mill and working down should work well enough.” Gordo opened the door out of the living area. The sweet scent of grains entered, along with a sour smell.

“Eh, rats. Don’t take them long.”

Ahri shuddered. Her lantern cast a narrow beam across beams covered with flour and

dust, movement just beyond it. A huge cogwheel sat off center in the room, the drive shaft going through a hole in the ceiling, the millstones under it. One cog turned slowly. Everything else was still.

“What makes this all work?”

Ekar walked into the room, poking at burlap bags with his sword, sending rats skittering. “There’ll be a lever somewhere that drops the driving cog onto the rest.” He turned to Jhered. “What the hell are we looking for anyway? Some big demon summoning circle?” “Just look for anything damn strange in a mill.”

Ahri watched the two men head up the steps. Gordo moved a few bags around, more rats ran. “Looks like there might be a cellar to this.” He pointed at a metal ring in the floor.

She glanced briefly at the spot, not wanting to think what was probably under it.

“Perhaps we should wait until they return.”

“Scared of rats?” A grin split his beard.

“I could do without them.”

“Hate them myself.”

Cabhri joined them. “There are herbs hanging in the loft. Standard herbwife stuff. Some had been tagged, seems like they had some trade with people in Scardale, Chandler, a boarding house and an apothecary. I found a small note to a woman at the boarding house. Hers were all of the sweet scented herbs. All of them have some little magical uses for them as far as I know but she was no “witch” as far as I can tell.” She held out something Ahri couldn’t quite make out in the darkness. “I found this too.” What looked like a bundle of fabric resolved itself into a doll. Madder red yarn made the hair, a small scrap of patterned fabric made a dress.

Ahri stalked away to a window. “You can give it to her when we get her back.”

“Ahhhh! Ahri....”

She whirled to see a glowing fog seeping out of the doll, now on the floor, rising and forming into the shape of a woman. A scent of smoke, awful smoke, filled the air. Ahri wanted to do nothing more than run but she stood her ground, dagger drawn.

“Lost...lost...my girl.... stars fall and all will be lost....” The specter’s eyes were dark pits, looking toward the village. “earth and sky riven.... no hand lifted...help us...help” Then she looked at the three in the room. “Lifted against you.” A transparent hand waved toward the window.

Ahri stared out into the darkness. And saw torches in the distance. “We have to leave, the villagers seems to found some courage or maybe paid Meren’s men enough to come out here.”

Gordo bellowed into the mill. “Time to go!”

The shouting, clatter and crashing from above startled everyone. Boot steps stomped at run across the ceiling above, shaking dust down in a thick shower. A cry of pain rang out and thumping of bodies continued. Gordo started up the stairs only to be bowled over by a misshapen form draped with burlap hurtling down it, closely followed by Ekar. The warrior’s sword was out and red.

“Get it!”

Ahri drew another dagger, advancing at the cornered scabbling creature. And watched mystified as the ghost moved to and through the creature, which calmed down. Ekar moved to swing at it. The apparition raised a hand and his sword dropped as if his arm was paralyzed. He swore a blue streak but backed away. Jhered looked from the mill stairs, sword out and what looked to Ahri like a terrible grief on his face.

“No...no...no....help us.” The ghostly voice swirled around them.

The creature raised its head, the burlap covering dropping back and revealing scales

across the shoulders and arms of a human looking man. Desperate eyes looked at them. "Help us. Please."

"Philo?" Cabhri knelt by him.

He nodded his head.

"But isn't he supposed to be dead?"

The man shook as if with a seizure but then a crazy laugh bubbled out. "I...I GOT BETTER!"

"He might be one of the byblows of the problems people have had with demons here. We still have people coming." Ahri looked out the window again. They were close, far too close. Then she saw a lit quarrel arcing toward the mill, and a seldom felt rush of fear ran through her. "They're going to try to burn the place down."

"We'll help you but we got to get out of here."

"You will help Anna?"

Cabhri took his hand. "She'll be fine."

Ahri could see the ghost envelope the half-demon then fade away.

"Any other way out of here?"

"Door, windows."

"How many can you see, Ahri?" Jhered snapped, command back in his voice.

"At least your nine. Grab some of the charcoal from the fireplace, smear your faces."

The smell of smoke reached them. Ekar growled. "We gotta get out. Mills go up quick."

"Quickly, join hands. You too Philo." The young druidess beseeched her gods.

"Chauntea lady of the grain, Silvanus, lord of the woods, bless and protect these people as they fight against the evil of this world." The druid smiled grimly. "Now let us go to them." She grasped her staff, prayed quietly. Each end grew spiky with new growth.

"Ready."

Jhered spoke quickly. "Ekar, you and Gordo out the door. Philo and Ahri out the window in the other room. Cabhri with me out the window here. Get to the woods on the other side of the trail when you can."

Philo smashed the window out with a chair at Ahri's behest. She pulled him back as crossbow bolts struck the frame, one ablaze sailing into the room. "Close as you can so they can't use their bows. Now!" He picked up his grain shovel and vaulted the window frame. She followed directly behind, using him as cover to get in as close as possible. She was intent on not being taken down again before she even had a chance. The guards were armed much like the others at the inn back in Blackfeather had been, chain, leather, shields and common weapons. As they approached the guards, Ahri ran passed them, allowing Philo to engage them and engage he did, roaring in his rage, laying about him with the heavy grain shovel. She stopped as soon as she saw she was not being followed, waited a moment in the darkness.

The snow and the crazed light from the burning mill made everything hard to see. The others were also fighting. Cabhri had evidently cast the entangling spell she had used before, two guards were hung up in something binding them and the druid was now laying about their head and shoulders with her staff. Jhered was in what looked like an even match with another, the ranger's quickness and skill up against raw power. And raw power was what Ekar was bringing to bear on another mercenary, heavy broadswords clashing. She couldn't find Gordo for a moment and then saw him pulling an ax out of the head of one of their foes just outside of the light cast by the now fiery mill. With still no movement from the village, she set to find a back to sink her blades into.

Ahri padded along in the whitened grass as she caught sight of movement off to her left, heading toward Ekar. Some of their foe weren't completely stupid after all. She crouched low, a swiftly moving shadow amongst the pelting snow. The warrior's back was wide in front of her, covered by leather but not chain. Not tall enough to pull him back onto her blade, she took advantage of his crouched position and leapt onto his back, driving the narrow dagger deep along the center of his spine, using the bones to guide her straight to the heart. He writhed under her as she sprung off, staggering until the blood filled his chest and he dropped like a stone. Unfortunately, he had staggered them both into the light. And at that, three other guards came out of the shadows, evidently giving up their cover in the fear of their backs being unprotected.

Ekar saw the eyes of the guard flick behind him and took the moment to smash his hilt into the man's face, feeling bones crack. Letting him drop, Ekar spun to face whatever foe was behind him, only to see Ahri jumping off the back of one of the mercenaries, blood trailing off her blade. Three more of Meren's men entered the light cast by the mill, now fully engulfed in flame. He laughed, clapping his sword to his shield. "Come on you fuckers! One girl can get you?"

Jhered sent the mace of his opponent skittering to the side off his blades. The man's shield smashed into his forearm, extended in the parry. His arm numbed by the impact, Jhered let the momentum throw him away, rolling and coming up low to take the man's charge. His short sword slid up and under the shield and leather skirting, gashing a thigh.

Cabhri watched the vines as the enveloped two of Meren's men. The slender tendrils, even dragged from their winter sleep, writhed and snapped around the men, invading armor and tangling weapons. A sharp blow from her staff onto each helm made short work of those opponents. Now what to do? The others were engaged but there were still more men and it would be folly to try to fight a man in armor with the staff, even as blessed as it was. She caught a glimpse of a rat, one of many escaping the burning mill. That would do and give the poor things some justice of their own. "Powers, we need their help. Give the little ones your word." She could feel the power ripple in the earth, and then the rats came, flowing around her hem in a sleek black mass.

"What the hell?" Gordo narrowed his eyes at his opponent. Little red eyes looked over the warrior's shoulder back at him. Then another set joined it. And another on top of the helm, which resolved into a fat rat that promptly scabbled down the dome and into the faceplate. Sword dropped and totally forgotten, the man shrieked wildly, clawing at the straps to release his helmet. Other rats poured over his shoulders, nipping at his throat. Gordo stepped in and swung his ax. "Probably better than you deserved."

Jhered heard the screaming but couldn't quite make out what was going on other than he was sure that it wasn't one of the others. He glared down at the man who lay before him, desperately trying to wrap a sash around the spurting wound in his thigh. "If you have any sense, get back to the village and get that wrapped. Come after us again and I'll make sure you join the rest of these murderers."

"No problem, no problem!"

"Tell me what Meren has planned."

"I don't know! He's down in the city, cleaning up demons in the scar for Sembia. He wanted the mill for them, so we were left here"

"The garrison?"

“Yeah, yeah. He’s captain. Just let me go, no more of this for me.”
“Get out of here.”

Ekar was in his element. It had been a few months since the last good fight he was in, just after he had met Gordo. The girl, Ahri was fighting near him, keeping one of the guards occupied enough to keep him off Ekar’s back. The other two were pressing him, both sword and shield men. Less experienced than him but there being two made them a challenge. He beat back the parry of one, stomped on the foot of the other to limited effect. Off balance for a moment, the sword of the one slid behind his guard and raked across his side, slashing open the light leather there, cutting into skin. Ekar growled and kicked the extended knee of his opponent, his sword spitting the man as he sharply bent forward out of reflex.

The other fighter advanced on him. A throwing ax seemed to appear out of his shield. “Damn early snow.” The dwarf advanced out of the darkness with battle ax and buckler. Ekar grunted. “I got this one. You want to help Ahri with her dance partner?” “Don’t think I need to.” Gordo could see a shadow moving along the ground, then surrounding the man Ahri was dodging. He could see her back off quickly, knives pointed down at the shadow.

Ahri darted around the guardsman. She had little chance of getting within his reach and no time to throw accurately, so she settled for distracting him until the others could get away. Her mind tried to distract her, why fight? What was she waiting for? Each moment she stayed put Anna at greater risk; Meren farther from the justice of her blades. Her thoughts were brought back to the present painfully as her opponent’s blade cut through her sleeve opening a gash on her forearm, just above the bracer. She managed to maintain her grasp on the dagger though barely. Emboldened, the guard prodded at her with his sword.. “Not so cocky now, are you, girl?”

She did not respond, wary eyes watching the man. The pain in her arm pulsed with each breath, droplets of blood spattering the snow-custed grass. No distractions now, just the pain and the man in front of her. She could still hear sounds of combat but cared little how the battle went. All of this was costing time. It was a simple choice now, do whatever was necessary.

Ahri focused, drawing upon the rituals, eyes closed. Then opened them with a start at the scratching of many little claws on her boots. Rats, hundreds of them were around her feet. She leapt out of the seething pool of fur, not really caring where she landed, knives out to fend them off. They ignored her, focusing on the man. He yelled, dropping his sword to grab and throw rats away from him. One caught Ahri completely by surprise, thudding into her chest, then scrabbling up and over her hair loosed from its braid. Clenching her teeth around a scream, she grabbed it and dropped the squirming little beast on the ground, where it ran back to its brethren. More rats came from the shadows, leaving a trail of blood stained tracks.

The guardsman staggered and stumbled under the weight of the rodents as they crawled over him. They were thick on his legs, savaging the unprotected backs of his knees.

Ahri watched dispassionately. The man soon writhed on the ground.
“Cabhri, call the rats off!” Jhered’s voice came from behind her.

The creatures soon dispersed to the shadows. Ahri checked her last foe, lips curling in a

grimace. Not dead yet, but dying. The rats had done their work on him thoroughly. A thrust from her dagger ended it.

"Is it done?" Gordo asked as he came up.

"No. Not yet."

"Oh. Philo."

The miller lay on the snowy ground, the flakes starting to gather upon him. A swirl of mist and light spun against the wind nearby. Two guards lay near him, armor well dented by the grain shovel. A quick check showed they were dead. Philo's lack of armor doomed him, though he didn't seem to mind. His eyes were open, looking at his ghostly wife.

"Philo?"

He didn't look around. "They are dead?"

"They're done." Jhered look at the miller with sympathy and regret.

"You'll get our Anna?"

"My word on it."

"Then I'll go now." His body went slack. A faint mist rose and joined the waiting spirit.

Ahri watched until they were lost to sight in the snow and flame.

Jhered surveyed the battleground. "Gordo and I will take care of the bodies. Wounded will be left to the villagers if there are any. I'll see if Cabhri can bless the dead."

Ahri noticed Cabhri standing at the body of Ahri's last foe. Jhered joined her. Ahri could see him place a hand on her shoulder. She turned, going to clean her blades on the cloak of a guard.

Ekar stopped her. "I can use that. Here's a cleaning kit." He tossed her a pouch from another guard. He stumbled with the effort, and suddenly dropped to one knee. "Could use a little healing here I guess."

Ahri whistled sharply, waving the others back.

"Ahri, if you and Cabhri can help Ekar back to the encampment?" Ahri nodded. As they left the light of the fire, she could see the half-elf and the dwarf moving the bodies toward it.

"First time you killed someone, priestess?" Even hurting, Ekar couldn't resist the comment.

"I didn't..." Cabhri stopped, and took a deep breath. "Yes, it's the first time. I know what rats can do and I chose to call them."

"What about you, Ahri, how many have you killed?"

She ignored him.

After making their way back to their hidden encampment in the forest, they set about tending each other wounds. Lacking her lantern, Ahri placed a handful of dry twigs into the banked coals of the small fire. They burst into flame. Just let anyone else come for them. Ekar pulled off his breastplate and gambeson with some help to reveal a ragged slash. Blood still ran in runnels from it.

"That doesn't look right..." Cabhri squinted at it.

Ekar reached around and ran his fingers along the wound, bringing them before his nose. He sniffed. "Shit. Woundbane."

Jhered and Gordo joined them. "So you've used it?"

He sneered. "Don't need it. But it's useful when hitting orc raiders. Even if they run away, takes their shaman out of action to deal with it."

"Cabhri can you do anything?"

Cabhri was distracted, extracting bandages from her shoulder bag, still occasionally looking back toward the carnage. "I don't know. I think I can at least slow it down. Maybe the apothecary could do more?"

“And that’d give us a reason to ask him about the girl. Good idea.”

She brightened a little at that, moving on to Ekar, laying a hand on his brow and praying softly. Jhered helped Ahri with binding her arm.

“Let’s ride out as soon as we’re ready. Better moving than trying to sleep out in this.”

“Think the villagers will try to warn Meren?” Ekar spoke from where Cabhri was wrapping bandages around his torso.

Jhered shook his head. “Doubt it. I’m guessing they’ll try to forget any of this happened. Probably bad luck for the wounded to be left with them but that’s the best answer out of a lot of bad ones.”

To make better time, Cabhri rode double with Ahri. She could feel Cabhri’s intake of breath.

“Ahri?”

She grunted an acknowledgement.

“*Have* you killed a lot of people?”

“Yes.”

Cabhri was quiet and Ahri hoped that was it. It wasn’t. “How many?”

“I haven’t kept count.”

“Does it bother you when you... do it?”

“No.” She sighed, best to make this short. “Cabhri, those men killed Philo and Maryam. They’ll probably kill Anna or worse. Do they need to die? Take your rats” She could feel Cabhri stiffen at the mention of those. “They’ll kill what hurts them if they get the chance. So will I.”

“What if they give up?”

“I prefer to be certain.”

“So you would have killed the wounded.”

“Yes. They made their choice.” Ahri stopped, considering and then continued. “Cabhri, do you want to go down this path? Can you do whatever’s necessary to help Anna? You do not want to get in my way. No one does.”

“I want to think I can. If I can’t, then who will? Well, you and Jhered and the others but I know this is wrong. If I turn away and have the power to help...” She signed deeply. “It was a lot easier before. Ahri, once this is done, would you... would you help me find my father? I don’t know what I’m doing out here. You seem familiar with all of this...”

“You’d be better helped by Jhered.” She felt Cabhri slump a little. “But I will do what I can.” It mattered little; she would likely be dead by the end of this anyway.

She was surprised by the hug.

Ahri had been in Scardale once before and it looked worse now than it did then, if that were possible. Scardale was the shattered remains of a town that had the misfortune of being in the middle of a war and the worse misfortune of being ruled by committee afterward. The companions saw, even in the flickering torchlight from the town, that its walls were in bad shape, each gate flying a different flag. “The allies couldn’t agree on who would run the place so they all took part.” Jhered motioned to the pale banner over one gate. “It’ll be rough no matter what, but I’d suggest going in at the Cormyrian gate. Might get lucky and find someone I know.”

“Hell, is there an intact inn anywhere in that mess?”

“Maybe the boarding house that the miller’s wife was selling sweet herbs to. We can find out at the apothecary’s. After that, got to get to the docks to see if they’ve seen Meren or his men. Same with the garrisons.”

Ekar scratched his jaw. “I’ll take Hillsfar. None of your pretty faces will get you far there.”

“I don’t know how many Dalers are still around. From what I’ve heard, all of the worst

between Zhentil Keep and Sembia has washed up here.”

“Where’s Meren from?”

“Sembia. What’s worse is one of his men said he’s in charge of the garrison. Leave them til last.”

“We go in as a group?”

“What’s the chance that Meren would think he’s being followed?”

“If he has magic, he may know. He may not care. Cabhri, he most likely doesn’t know about you.”

She smiled. “What’s one more peasant? I should be able to beg a ride on a cart or just walk in.”

“Ekar and Gordo can head for the apothecary. I’ll follow. Cabhri can catch up with you there.” Jhered frowned. “Ahri, do you think he knows you’re hunting him? He knows what you look like from what Gordo said, at least just from his men wanting you as a prize.”

“As you said, unless he has magics, he should have no more idea of who I am than someone who failed helping the girl.”

Ekar looked back from his careful inspection of the town. “So why *doesn’t* he know that you’re hunting him? Seems like you’ve been at this a while and picking off those he rode with. Would you have snuffed elf boy here if Meren hadn’t walked in?”

She looked at Ekar levelly. “Yes, I would have. Meren does not know I am hunting him because I have not allowed him to know.”

“You should thank Meren for the favor when you see him, elfboy.”

“What did he do to you?” Cabhri asked her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Ahri shrugged it off. “He killed my only family, my grandmother, by burning her alive on the claims of the village headman that she was consorting with demons. I saw her at the stake.”

Even Ekar kept quiet at that. Jhered broke the silence. “I know it won’t help but I’m sorry, Ahri.”

“You weren’t there.” That could have been an accusation but was stated as a simple fact. “I’ll join you at the apothecary’s. I’m going in while it’s still dark.”

The night sky was clearing but still marked with clouds. When one scudded over Selune’s face, Ahri scaled a mostly intact bit of wall. There was less chance in running into casual smugglers, trysting couples, and inconvenient creatures there than in the rubble, and no guards could be seen. Before she had left the others, she slipped into a set of non-descript homespun, leaving the non-irreplaceable gear on her horse.

Scardale had a scattering of torches she could see along the streets, mostly for drunkards to find their way. She rubbed some of the soot darkening her face away, leaving only minor grime and dropped into the ruined town.

Ahri had a few hours to pass before seeing the others who would come into the town with the usual traffic in the morning. Padding along the streets avoiding patrols, she wondered what it would take to be assigned to such a pest hole. The Cormyreans probably had some great ideal in mind but the other occupying forces, it’d was the worst they had. She came upon a tall house, the sign indicating it was the one the herbs were coming to. It was boarded up. She shook her head in frustration. Nothing was simple with this entire situation. Best to just find Meren. But she continued on, finding a convenient stable that had a hay door overlooking a junction where Sembia’s and Cormyr’s sectors met. Sneaking in past a pair of mules, giving each a good scratch, she sat in the shadows watching the few people come and go until her eyes grew heavy. She curled up in a far corner, pulled straw across herself and fell asleep. She woke to the creaking of wagons in the early morning. Making sure no one was observing her, she

shook herself off and dropped lightly into the stable's courtyard.

"Cousin!"

Cabhri glanced at the young man standing in front of her. "I beg your pardon but.." stopping in surprise when she was hugged.

"No more gawking, Cabhri." Ahri hissed. "This isn't Elventrees or Essembra."

"Ahr..."

Ahri squeezed her tighter to cut off that word. "Yes, it's Aron, dear cousin. Let me show you around." Ahri looked around for anyone untowardly interested in them. Seeing no one, she propelled Cabhri along. "The inn we were going to meet at is boarded up. Now we have to find another. First we need to find that apothecary. You got directions from the guard?"

Cabhri looked closely at her companion. Ahri had artfully smeared her features into that of a young man, giving herself the heavier eyebrows, making her sharp cheekbones recede. The homespun covered any curves.

"Yes, I did. His name is Antoni Necabum. It's down this street straight until we come to a broken fountain and then down the street to the left. I would have never known it was you, "Aron". Can you show me how to do that?"

"It's more than the face, Cabhri. Walk, manners, no one would buy it if it was just what I looked like."

"Well, maybe someday."

"Perhaps you'll be lucky enough never to need to do it." Ahri started walking.

Cabhri nodded reluctantly. "I'd still like to know so I could help more. Arr.., I was thinking while I was walking... that girl you're looking for, how did she get where she was alone?"

"I don't know." The details didn't matter....

"I'm sorry to bother you about it. It just doesn't make any sense."

"No, it doesn't. And you are right." Ahri said grudgingly. "I...we need to know what's going on at the root of things." She thought a moment, tearing her thoughts away from revenge. "Most likely she was with them and then got away from them. Anything else needs her to be alone in the middle of nowhere, and the only other thing that could make sense is that she "appeared" there and they "appeared" right after her."

"They did vanish in the woods."

Ahri nodded. "And that kind of magic is very difficult. They either have a pet mage or some scroll or item. If it's a mage of that power, they could already be gone...."

"No, I'm sure they're still here. Nothing has changed."

"Then they can't vanish again and have to rely on a ship, or need to be here for some reason." Ahri wanted to rub her eyes with weariness but that would only serve to remove her disguise.

They found the apothecary's, with the usual red and white pole out front to advertise a chiurgeon's services in addition to the herbal remedies within. Ekar and Gordo were just entering the shop, their horses out front and Ahri noted that Jhered was coming up the street behind them. He must have found someone to watch her horse and his. Off-key bells jangled as they opened the door and entered. The shop smelled like a meadow in late summer and was warm from a small hearth in the corner. Behind a small counter was a wall of drawers and ceramic jars. Bunches of herbs hung from the heavy beamed ceiling. A graying, slight man with a hawkish nose was speaking to the two warriors. Ekar lifted his tunic for Necabum's inspection. He drew his glasses down on his nose, pulling away the sodden bandage and looking intently at the wound through rheumy eyes. "Oh yes, woundbane. Nasty stuff. Well, right back here to my treatment room, sir. I'll have you fixed up in no time. Have some tea, Master Dwarf." He noticed Ahri and

Cabrhi. "I'll be right with you, ladies. Have some tea, freshly brewed and my own recipe. Just the thing for this raw day." He replaced his glasses, brushed back a lock of graying hair to cover his balding pate and led Ekar to the back. Cabrhi went to pour tea into a set of earthenware cups as Jhered entered. She handed one to Ahri, who was distractedly poking around in various jars and drawers. Something was off but what. She raised the cup to her lips and sniffed out of habit. The smell put everything into sharp focus. He had called Cabrhi and her "ladies". She took her cup and sent it flying, taking out Gordo's cup as he just took a drink. Cabrhi looked at her confused, her own cup in her hand yet to be lifted.

"Poison." She vaulted the counter as Jhered was coming around it. They found three doors, a closet, one windowed out onto a garden and one locked. Jhered put his shoulder to that, two blows splintering the door. Ahri slipped inside under Jhered's arm, finding Ekar lashed to a chair tilted on its frame. She could see the fury in his eyes but he was unable to move.

Necabum stood there, a slightly bemused look on his face until he looked at her closer. "I knew you were trouble but.... heh, he was right. Next time, you little bitch." He pulled a small lever near the chair and dropped abruptly into the floor. Jhered threw a dagger but missed. "Get him out of that. I got this one." Jhered shouted down the small hall. "Coming out of the cellar somewhere, garden in the back." Ahri could hear Gordo's heavy tread down the hall.

"Be.. careful."

Jhered nodded and dropped into the hole. Ahri removed the gag.

"Asshole took care of the poison then paralyzed me. Some *thing* in that box over there. He was going to put it....in me." He actually looked bothered by that. "Those things, said they would make me obey. Said you were all poisoned."

"He must have been in a hurry to be so damn careless." She opened the opalescent box, found a squirming grayish mass in it, all needle thin tentacles and eyes. She took a vial from the small table and used it as a pestle to crush the creature then turned to unstrap the warrior. Turning her attention back to the table, she grabbed one of the small flasks, clear and showing a familiar scarlet liquid glinting with a metallic sheen. She uncorked it and poured it between Ekar's lips. "Should be fine in a minute." She plunged through the trap door.

The cellar was deeper than she expected, and she hit the floor in a spread stance. Likely for smuggling. Which meant there was trouble if he had any other exits. Barely lit by luminescent mosses, a set of bags fixed to a door hung ajar revealed such a passage. She could hear footsteps back up it, soon to reveal Jhered. "I lost him. He probably knows them well enough to do it blind."

"At least you aren't so stupid to follow him where you can't see."

"Thanks, I think. Anything down here we can use?"

A chest sat against one wall. "Get a light."

Jhered climbed back up into the shop. Ekar was on his feet. "Take Ahri a light down below."

He met Gordo coming in from the back., ax bloody. "He had a dog." They entered the front of the shop. Cabrhi was watching out the front.

"Close this place up. We lost him, and he's either gone or went to get the guard."

She locked the door, pulled curtains and blew out every lamp but one.

"Take anything you think you'll need. And then we're out of here."

Cabrhi went around the room, grabbing a fat pomander of ointment, a packet of herbs and a pair of small fine scissors.

"This is no rock." Gordo held up a strange greenish gray stone, smoothly polished.
"A bezoar! It cures poisoning. Take it."
Gordo shrugged and put it in a pouch.

Ekar lay there feeling the spread of the antidote through this system. He heard a dog's barking and growl, then a dwarven curse and a thump from the hall.

"Difficult not to be in the middle of it." A deep, silken voice whispered in his ear.

"Huh?" He tried to look around. No one was there. "Come here you invisible fuck."

"Necabum's gone. I'm not invisible. Just watching. Not fun to be the weak one, eh? Less use than the women. Would you like some help?"

Ekar fought to move his body, it was responding but not quickly enough. "I'll show you who's weak..."

"Ah, so no help yet. A gift then. Woundbane will no longer be a problem for you, nor will other minor poisons. Ekar, when you do decide you need a friend, just call. Just let me know what you want. I'll be listening."

He felt a strange chill go through his body and lurched out of the chair, fists balled.

"You'll be listening. Where are you?" Every thing was quiet. Jhered climbed out of the trapdoor, looked at him briefly on his way through. "Get Ahri a light."

Ekar stared after him, then grabbed a lamp from the wall, his sword and took the ladder into the cellar.

She poked at the lock. "Trapped. And I can't get it. We want what's in there, it gets smashed open."

"Let me at it."

With a crack of splintering wood, Ekar tore the top of the chest away, leaving the frame behind. One bottle within was shattered, the potion within soaking several scrolls. Three were good to go, along with a bag that seemed to have coins in it, and a pair of vials.

Ahri shoved the bag and vials in a belt pouch; the bottles and scrolls tucked in her shirt for the climb back up. Under it all, were things that Ahri frowned at. A breakdown blowgun, a needled glove. and one plain felt hat with a bright green feather on its band. Assassin's weapons and the hat had the tingle of magic about it. Putting the hat on, she kicked the weapons into the shadows. Evidence against him or things she would gather later.

Back up in the shop, they headed for the back door. A large dog lay beside the door, very dead. Jhered looked at it with regret. "Poor guy. Ahri, you're at the inn?"

"It's boarded up. The Guardian Oak is another, a hole that no one should ask questions in."

"Good enough, we'll meet there."

"There's the inn." The Guardian Oak looked as if it were once a respectable inn, and only its origins as a well-made building kept it intact. A stone first story supported a timber second, weathered gray by the usual storms from the sea. An oak did stand near it, but the tree was long dead, skeletal branches clawing up at an absurdly blue sky. A man urinated against it, ignoring the outhouses some distance away.

"They killed the tree by peeing on it?" Cabhri was aghast.

Ahri shrugged. "Things die."

The inn smelled of smoke, cheap tabac, fish oil, and unbathed bodies. The few windows were open to allow the wind to air the place out, making hard shadows just beyond the shafts of light. Ahri made her way deeper into the inn, motioning Cabhri to a table as she found the innkeeper.

"Help you young sir?"

"Gotta room?"

"That we do. But this ain't the quietest inn for your lady friend there."

"Time she be getting use to that then since she wanted off the farm."

The innkeeper guffawed. "Well, she's pretty enough in that fresh from the dales way, I guess. You ah, her keeper?"

Ahri smiled slyly. "Just her cousin showing her the world. And keep your mouth shut."

The smile fell from her face, replaced by the flat look of a killer; she slid him a pair of silvers.

"No problems." He got her an iron key. "up the stairs, first to the right. Anything to drink?"

Ahri placed a brimming mug of cider in front of Cabhri and sat with her own ale. She leaned close to Cabhri. "By the way, you're the innocent cousin soon to be sold into a life of prostitution."

Cabhri spluttered into her cup. "That's what you came up with?"

"Be happy with it. You'll be left alone for the most part." Ahri took a long drink from her mug. "Drink that and we'll check out the room we have, then wait for the others to come."

"It's a straw tick at least."

"I think ticks are pretty likely. And no one can actually hit the chamber pot. Do we have to stay here?"

Ahri looked at her companion, wondering if this was the first time Cabhri had been out of the woods. "If we find another inn while we get our bearings, it should be no problem. If not, then it's here or some ruin. Or," She took a moment to step on a roach. "We could break into the boarded up one. It at least looked better. Maybe the owner decided to finally leave this pest hole."

"Maybe we won't be here long." Cabhri gingerly sat on the bed. "Did you do something to your face again? The disguise before was good but now, I don't think I could tell at all..." She looked at Ahri curiously. "I don't think the cider was that strong..."

Ahri frowned, then it dawned on her. "Am I wearing a hat, Cabhri?"

"A hat? No. Where did you get the greenbeak's feather?"

Ahri removed the hat.

"Oh, now there's one in your hand. What is it?"

"Enchanted for disguise. I wanted to look like Aron the young man and its magic took that desire and made it even more real. Necabum will truly miss this. And we can put it to good use."

They returned to the inn's common room to wait for the others. Cabhri looked around, uncomfortable with Ahri's silence.

"If you need to talk, go ahead. No one's listening."

"Ah, okay. Where are you from?"

"Archendale." At Cabhri's surprised look and frown, Ahri nodded. "Nothing more exotic than that and yes, it's as you have heard."

"I'm from north of here. My father was the elder of our small circle and the village, Hollyvale."

"Tell me what led up to you realizing he was missing." If she had to sit here, she may as well do some little thing in helping the druid.

"There was some disagreement on how to train new people between my father and the rest of the circle. I tried to stay out of it. He left to commune with the gods in the deep woods. It's been weeks."

"And the disagreement was?"

"Should we intervene in what are natural events to help people or remain still and not interfere. My father was of the opinion that we intervene since we are part of nature. Some of the others said we shouldn't." She sighed. "Including my mother. She wasn't a druid but she believed that there was a natural time and order. When she got sick, she wouldn't allow him to try to heal her. She died about 8 months ago. He never was the same after that."

Ahri could see that neither was Cabhri. "What do you believe?"

"I healed you, didn't I?"

"Thank you for that. And there isn't anything more natural than one mortal hurting another. Your gods told you to look other than in the deep woods?"

She saw Jhered enter and caught his eye, indicating she'd meet him at the bar. "Back in a moment."

"An ale for my good friend here. Name is Aron." The barkeep set a tankard on the stained scarred surface. She faced Jhered, her back to the bar. "You're a customer." He smiled, nodding. "Sure. Back to the table?" As they walked "And what did Cabrhi have to say about *that* story?"

"Blew her cider about."

He smiled at that.

They sat at the table. "Any uproar?"

He shook his head. "Not sure if that's a good thing or bad."

"He's an assassin, from the things I found, experienced. He'll be more trouble than guards."

"Maybe he left since we know about him?"

"Could be but don't bet on it. "Aron" he did say "next time" to you?"

She shrugged. "No idea. Could be that we had stupid bad luck and found someone who just likes to kill people. Or he works for Meren and Meren told him something about me but makes no sense to be just me with you right there."

"Been to Sembia before?"

"Yes, but I've no idea who he might be. If he works for Meren, then why hasn't Meren raised the alarm by now? I'd have nailed us with assaulting the apothecary."

"Unless he doesn't want anyone to know."

"Does that mean we can go to the other garrisons for help?" Cabhri asked.

Ahri shook her head almost in unison with Jhered. "We don't know enough. We need information on Meren and what he's been doing. Anything at all. Our allies depend on what we find."

"Then we need to get some sleep and out looking as soon as possible. I'll get a room if they have any and Cabrhi can accompany me to play out this story you've concocted." Cabhri blushed furiously. "Ekar and Gordo should be here soon. If they haven't seen anything, tell them to get a room and get yourself some sleep."

Ahri woke abruptly. Light from the lowering sun streamed through the cracks in the shutters. The tick crinkled as she shifted to scratch the inevitable bug bite. Time to go out and see what the denizens of the city knew. She checked her small mirror. "Aron" was still serviceable, though perhaps later she would see if tongues were looser for a pretty face. She gave a brief knock on the other two rooms and headed out.

She made her way down the street to a sequence of taverns into the Dale quarter. Sailors, tradesmen and off-duty guards populated them in various mixes. From what she could hear, tensions were up between the garrisons, though she would doubt that they ever were lacking completely.

She found a conversation that allowed a question. "What's that about Sembia?"

“Keeping their gate fees for themselves and not helping rebuild the city.”

“Spiteful bastards are they?”

He snorted. “At least the Zents and Hillsfarars are honest enough to admit that they are stabbing everyone in the back.”

“So the garrison commander isn’t one to deal with honestly?”

“Couldn’t rightly say since hardly anyone ever sees him, just his bully boys.”

“Pity, I have something that Semban types usually like.”

“Well, maybe I can get you to him.”

“Not now, friend. Maybe later.”

As she walked down the street, Ahri found herself wondering if the hat’s magic was strong enough to disguise Ekar as Cabhri and cause strife that way. She fought with a smile that seemed intent on creeping onto her lips. She drove it away. There was no good reason to make plans that included any of them.

She did note that she was being followed. Any mention of something worthwhile always brought out those that thought they could take it. Lose them or kill them? Engagement always meant a risk and she was too close now to lose Meren to some thief’s good luck.

Ducking down an alley, she jogged towards the exit. A shadow crossed her path. She sighed. It was always annoying when they thought they were clever. A larger shadow appeared behind the first. Soon the first crumpled up in a heap.

She continued slowly. As she approached she saw the coal of a cheroot wax and wane, accompanied by a chuckle.

“Thought that was you.”

She glared up at Ekar. “I do not need your help.”

“Didn’t say you did. Gave me an excuse. Hate fucking thieves.”

“Then we at least have something in common.”

“We could have more than that if you want. Care for a tumble?”

She shook her head. “I don’t. No reflection on you.”

“Eh, no problem. You’re a pretty girl, I’ll ask.. Want an ale? A couple of taverns haven’t been checked yet.”

She was pleased that he didn’t push the subject. “That sounds like a good idea.”

“Him?” Ekar nudged the body with his boot.

“Let him lay. His friends can spread the caution.”

Several taverns later Ahri’s feet were wet from all of the ale she “spilled” and the information was all the same. The Sembian garrison was run by Meren, no one saw him much and soldiers who staffed the garrison were thugs, though nicely dressed ones. Word was that they’d pay well for comforts.

“That’s not going to work at all.” Jhered chuckled. Ekar sat on the edge of the bed. The glamour of the hat simply could not hide his size or the rugged features of his face. The gown and long blond hair only made matters more ridiculous.

“Told you.” Ekar threw the hat back to Ahri. “Only one that would be worse is Gordo since human women don’t have beards.”

The dwarf snorted. “And neither do dwarven ones. Some of you not being able figure out that the “women” they saw were just dance partners at a mine and now the rest believe such nonsense.”

“I still say let me go. I can do it.” Cabhri spoke from her seat on the one cot.

“It’d be damn dangerous.”

“And unnecessary. I only need the guards distracted, not necessarily killed, though that would only be of benefit. Are you up to causing a riot?”

“When?”

"Tomorrow night."

Cabhri spoke into silence while the others nodded in amusement. "I did find that there is another inn. Better than this, in the Cormyrean sector. Can we please go to it?"

"Better than this isn't much of a selling point."

"I could do without sharing my bunk with so many bugs."

"We'll see you there."

The Blue Mermaid looked to have once been a manor house, all stone and a sagging tile roof. It didn't immediately stink outside, the jakes evidently off to the back. A few men stood out in what had been gardens, smoking and laughing. Two entered, Cabhri and Gordo. No ruckus was raised, only a few idly curious looks. Ahri, Jhered and Ardor joined Gordo at a table. Cabhri was at the bar talking to one of the tenders.

Cabhri returned, looked happy with her efforts. "Got a pair of rooms, small she said but they should do, if it doesn't rain too much."

Jhered looked around the room, seeing a few Cormyrean guards there off-duty, some merchants, a ship captain or two. "The kitchen smells better than the last, anyway." The innkeeper was large worn looking woman, graying sandy hair held back in a tangled bun. The two barkeeps appeared to be her sons, considering the family resemblance. Both looked liked brawlers, expected if they grew up in Scardale. Two large cudgels hung above the bar.

"Should be quieter too if the boys behind the bar know how to swing them clubs. Down your ales everyone and we can get some shut-eye and a meal later before tonight"

"And Comet kicked straight back . Took a long time for the blood to come out of his tail."

Jhered picked a last slice of roast from the platter.

"So, Ahri, your horse is named Nubbin? Why?"

"He's a gelding with worse luck than most."

"Poor thing."

Gordo laughed at Cabhri's sympathetic comment.

"What's your horse's name, Ekar."

"Number 8."

A loud crash followed by screams came from the kitchen. Someone was in desperate pain. Cabhri ran toward the door to the back, despite Ahri's attempt to grab her.

Following, she found the druidess crouched over a writhing girl, little older than the one they were seeking. The girl had a blazing red mark up and over her face, and her dress was half coated in water or oil. Her hand was already blistering.

"Water, cold water!" The innkeeper was cutting away the dress to remove the burning substance. It came away revealing more burns under it. A splash of cold water did little except cause more screams.

Cabhri grasped the hand of the girl, touched her forehead. The blisters faded and the red receded. More praying and it receded again and again. The girl sat up, half-naked now, but looking at her hand in wonder and touching her face. The older woman looked at Cabhri with shock. Ahri moved to grab her, get the others and run but stopped. The woman had grabbed Cabhri's hands in hers, kneeling in front of her. "Oh blessed of Chauntea, to have been here, here in Scardale when this happened! To save my granddaughter! I can never, can never repay you. Any thing I have is yours."

Cabhri looked like she was going to run herself. "I only did what was needed. I, I should..."

Ahri came up "We could use a safe place to stay, Mistress Innkeep."

“Anything. And my boys will enjoy rattling some teeth if anyone gives you grief in these walls and perhaps outside them too.”

“Mistress Alisoun said that she and her family had come here after a bad harvest to make a better life. That was before Lashan. Her husband died in the fighting but they stayed after the peace was declared.” Cabhri used the wash basin to wipe her face clean before coming back to her cot. “I think we should ask her if she’s seen anything going on.”

“We’re running out of options. Ask her when you see her next.”

“Things are going to go as planned?”

“Yes. Either she’s being held at the garrison or perhaps there are some clues about what’s going on. We’ll discuss what I find.”

“And the chandler?”

“Go to her when the others start me my riot.”

Cabhri took a deep breath and knocked at the stout wooden door. It opened, a series of small chains crossing the small lit crack. “Yes?”

“I’m Cabhri, I have need to speak with the chandler please.”

“We’re closed.”

“I am not here to buy anything. I would like to talk to him about Maryam the miller’s wife.” The door closed with a jangle of metal. Cabhri stood there uncertain. If this didn’t work, then what would she do? The door opened again. “Quick, come in.”

She slipped in. A thin blond woman stood there, dressed in trous and a shirt, a stained apron covering her front. “Cabhri, is it? I’m the chandler, Raelle. What do you know about Maryam? I’ve heard ill things.”

“And I can’t tell you better. I’m sorry.”

“Where are you from? And how do you know what happened?” She waved Cabhri down a warm hallway. “To the kitchen, I can at least offer you some tea.”

After relating the tale, Cabhri wiped her eyes. “So, we’re here trying to find out what has happened to Anna.”

“Those evil bastards. I’ll do whatever I can. What are your friends doing?”

“Ah…” Cabhri wasn’t sure how much of the plan to let Raelle know. “They’re getting more information on Meren and the garrison.”

“Sneaking in?”

“Partly.” She gave up. “The rest are causing a riot to get the guards attention.”

Raelle laughed through her tears. “Well, that shouldn’t be hard. You’ll tell me what you find? Then we can work from that.”

“As soon as I can.”

After a quiet moment, Raelle thumped her hands on the table. “By the horns! Cabhri, do you want to join the riot?”

“Well, yes The others, well, they think they are protecting me.”

“Then let’s go. I feel the need for some righteous violence.”

It was the right place at the right time, but how someplace could be worse than the Oak Jhered wasn’t completely sure, his nose wrinkling as he entered the tavern. With his hair out of the warbraids and his ears hid, he blended in with the crowd, except for the quality of his weapons. Getting a tankard of ale, he found a seat near the center of the room and waited for the rest of the players in the charade to show up.

Gordo and Ekar had finally arrived and found their places. Cabhri would join them later at the Blue Mermaid after meeting with the chandler. He caught Ekar’s eye. A

disconcerting grin split the stubble and he nodded.

They were half way down the street now, each punch, each windmilling stagger leading the crowd and the guards farther away from the Sembian compound. Ekar could see Gordo doing a brisk trade in bets where he stood behind Jhered. They circled each other, swinging like drunkards, and staggered into each other. In the clinch, they took a moment to breathe. "About time to get the mob involved?"

"Yeah, tired of getting hit."

"A Red Plume suit you?"

"Always."

"Behind you to your left."

They circled again. Jhered pushed Ekar several paces backward into the knot of people with the Hillsfarian guard in it. They broke apart, with Jhered punching where Ekar's jaw should have been and where the guard's was. Ekar ducked from between them and grabbed a longshoreman deep in his cups, swinging him into the crowd and mowing another handful of people down.

Gordo saw the move by the two warriors, ready for the ensuing chaos. He shoved the shrieking whore next to him into a knot of men with full jacks in their hands. Ale went splashing over everyone and the fight was joined, the woman spitting and scratching. A handful of coins thrown into the last open space between the crowd and the original fighters closed that up quick with drunk combatants. The dwarf made his way through the crowd on bull force, making a path toward a pair of Sembian guards. Unseen for a moment under the chaos, he punched both in the side of a knee, sending them down into the sea of flailing bodies.

Ahri scaled the low wall around the garrison and made her way to the main tower, keeping to the shadows near the stables and storage sheds, her dark leathers blending in. The guards had left their posts to find the source of the commotion that the others were ably causing. The arched door stood closed with two torches flanking it and a brazier stood off the side for the guards to warm themselves. She climbed the wall again, using it to scale the side of one of those sheds. Its roof gave alarmingly, but she got to a small shuttered window, guessing it was on a staircase being at an odd height on the wall. She used a slim dagger to lift the latches, then lifted herself over the damp stone sill. She found herself on a staircase that followed the outside wall of the small keep. Below her was a common room, a small fire in a hearth and a pair of lanterns illuminating a large table, whetstones, goblets and gaming pieces covering it.

Making her way up the steps, she kept an ear out for anyone still there. The second floor was open, perhaps a sparring court when the weather was less than favorable. A door to the rear opened out onto the addition to the tower she had seen. A pair of smaller rooms were there, evidently rooms of the officers.

She headed up again. A locked door briefly barred her path then she pushed it slowly inward. The room had worn tapestries on every wall, keeping out the constant drafts and damp cold. It was dimly lit by another pair of lanterns. A wide bed with twisted covers was at one side, a large roll top desk at the other, a large fireplace between them. An unusually large painting hung over the hearth, showing an attractive brown-haired woman, in Sembian garb of some years back. It was so tall that the upper edge was nearly lost in the shadows of the ceiling. Feeling as if the woman portrayed was looking at her, Ahri moved to search the desk. Checking for any traps, she rolled back the top, finding another portrait of the same woman in a small case. That went into a pouch to show Jhered later. She opened drawers rapidly, finding an ornate tome. That

she placed in her knapsack, knowing a grimoire when she saw one. Another book caught her eye, what appeared to be a journal. She opened the rear cover paging back to find the last entry. Meren's florid writing was difficult to read. She could pick out a few words in the dim light, N, Ordulin and something about a lighthouse. She flipped it shut and placed it into the sack. Pulling it over her shoulder, she moved to leave the room and froze when she heard steps coming up the staircase. The door slammed open, revealing one of the younger officers of the guard.

"I knew it. Some damn thief would take advantage of the riot. This should be worth a promotion."

Ahri smiled at him, adjusting her stance for the best effect. "I can make it worth more if you let me go."

He looked at her appraisingly and then frowned in recognition. "Hey, you're the girl back at the inn. Meren wouldn't let us..."

Ahri plunged her other arm through a knapsack strap and drew a dagger. There was only one way out, so getting him out of the way was paramount. She darted away from him toward the single window, him hot on her heels. He stabbed with his sword, his reach letting the blade pierce her light leather doublet and scoring her side deeply. She gritted her teeth and grabbed the tapestry over the window pulling hard and allowing her body weight to bring the drapery and pole down on her opponent's head. She ran up over him, slung one of the lanterns onto the fabric and ran.

Ahri raced down the stairs, each footstep painful as it jarred her wound. It seemed he was the only guard to have returned. She could hear him roaring above her. At her grasp, she found the main door locked with a key. Having no time, she found two doors behind her. One had to lead to the addition. She opened it, leaving it swing. The latch lifted easily on the other and she found a stairway descending. Having no better idea and hoping for a cellar similar to the assassin's, she grabbed a pole arm from the rack and descended the stairs, jamming the door with the weapon.

Ahri crept down the hallway. It seemed that she had lost him for now in the labyrinth of corridors under the keep. It was a wonder that it hadn't sunk into this nest of smuggler's tunnels. She knelt in the shadows, willing away the pain. She took a moment to tuck a cloth into the rent in the leather, attempting to staunch the wound. To have any chance, she had to ambush him down here. The garrison had taken over this old keep, who knew what was in the base of it? She stood, making for the next guttering lamp. They were plenty to let a half-elf see, she hoped a human couldn't.

Ahri passed a door, looked back. It was barred. None of the others were. Keeping something in? She peered into the window grating. The light revealed a man chained to the wall, arms above his head. Streaked white hair curtained his face. The head raised a little at her eclipsing the weak light. Slightly glowing eyes peered through the strands of hair.

"Well, this is a more interesting fever dream." A harsh voice rasped. "You're quite lovely."

Ahri started, not expecting him to speak. "Shh." She lifted the bar, gasping a little at the strain on the fresh wound, and slipped in, dropping the bar inside.

"Hmm, you're actually coming in. Not going to taunt me like the others?"

"Quiet. I don't need him to find me." She approached him cautiously.

"You're real." He whispered, surprise coloring his voice.

"Real enough. Meren put you here?"

He snorted at the name. "Yes. I" he paused, "made a mistake. So much for the people of

the land having any wisdom at all."

"A spellcaster?"

He nodded, the chains rattling slightly. "Good enough for me." Ahri reached up to get the manacles. The simple but quite effective locks came loose. She heard him smother a cry of pain as his one arm came free. The other locked opened and she caught him as he collapsed. They both ended up on the floor.

"Sorry.. Meren is rather efficient." He looked at her, narrowing red eyes as he looked at her side and his hand. "Blood. You're wounded."

She nodded, unable to speak for a moment. "The bastard who did it is down here somewhere following me, looking to finish the job."

"Well, the least I can do for my fair rescuer." He arranged himself, brushing off his tattered doublet and shirt, and Ahri heard what she thought was a prayer. He touched her head and side. Cool energy flowed over the gash, easing the pain.

"A priest." She smiled mirthlessly. "Thank you."

He did the same for himself. "Damn gestures needed for spells. Couldn't do anything while hanging there. Need to have a talk with Mystra about that."

"We need to get out of here. Better to fight him in the hallway." she looked over from the door. "Do you have any more spells?"

"A magic missile. A chance it won't kill him."

Ahri frowned but thought a moment. "If I hide, can you taunt him then cast it?"

A feral smile answered her. "I like the way you think, woman. Of course."

"It's Ahri."

"Azra Loquis, faithful of Mystra." He half bowed, straightening with some pain. "Shall we?"

The warrior slowly made his way through the shadowy dungeon. The thief was hurt but she could still cause trouble. He rounded a corner to see Meren's prisoner lounging against the wall, spinning a length of chain in his hand.

"About time, lummo. Or did you forget about me."

"You. Meren should have killed you."

"Oh now, he would have missed his fun. Not that he doesn't get enough from you." His lazy, arrogant drawl enraged the man. He began to charge. Bolts of light flew from Azra's hands. The warrior lurched but didn't stop.

"Oh shit." The priest backed away on unsteady legs. As the warrior passed an alcove, a shadow detached and leapt, daggers bared. The blades sank in severing the spine and driving up under the rib cage. They slid to a halt at Azra's feet.

"Cut that a bit close, didn't you?" he leaned his forehead against the cool stone.

She eyed him and then tugged the blades free. "Took a moment to arrange the kill."

"Are there others here or are you happy to take on a small army alone?"

"The others were my distraction. They'll be gone by now. Is there a way out down here?" She searched the man. Nothing interesting but a curious dagger, and a few coins.

"Yours?"

He nodded, as he accepted it. "Given to me by High Magus Myranae at the temple. I'm glad not to have lost it. Meren has his men come in and out down here when they seem to go off into the scar. I'd guess it lets out somewhere beyond the wall. What if we meet more of them?"

"We hope we don't." She retrieved her knapsack, opened it. "I'm guessing this is yours too." She handed him the grimoire she found above.

He smiled widely, bowing only slightly in sarcasm. "Thank you, my lady."

They made found the entrance to a passageway leading off from the old cellars. It was raw earth, with roots entwined to support it. They continued along it.

"How...?"

"Mmmm. This would figure. When I was captured, Meren had a spell caster. I've heard his men call him an "evil druid". Crazy as a shithouse rat as far as I could tell. All about some falling star and how he was going to resurrect Meren's wife with some sacrifice."

Ahri stopped him, hand on his chest. "Sacrifice? Do you know when?"

He shook his head. "What do you know about this? Actually who *are* you?"

"That he has a little girl and now things make more sense. Any significant dates coming up? And I'm someone who's going to kill Meren." She picked up her pace.

Azra hurried to keep up. "I've been a bit out of touch, this is??"

"The 23 of Maril"

"The dark of the moon is in two days." He grimaced. "Always good for a sacrifice. So you're going to kill him, hmmm? I can agree with that."

The passage opened into a natural cave. A few weapons were hanging on the wall, along with a handful of non-descript tunics and cloaks. Azra took one of each down and put them on over his ragged clothes, and wrapped his book in a tunic to sling across his chest. Ahri took a torch from a pile and lit it off the small lantern she had from the cellar. She let it catch fully while grabbing a cloak of her own.

"There's supposedly something guarding the exit."

Ahri glared at him, but there was really no reason to have needed to know that earlier.

"Can you do anything about animals or plants?"

"Depends on what we find. No more spells, I'm afraid."

"Then let's find it."

The cave's exit was draped in vines and roots, thickly enough to cover it even without leaves. The dangers of those were clear in Ahri's mind from watching Cabhri. She threw a rock at them. Nothing moved strangely. She advanced on them, still nothing and then they parted from the other side. What looked like masses of half-dried seaweed tottered in on rough approximations of legs. Arm-like bundles reached out.

"What are they?"

"No idea."

Ahri threw the lamp at the first, splashing oil over it. She then stabbed out with the lit end of the torch, quick enough to touch off the oil and avoid the grasp of the monster. It crackled, a thin scream coming from it. Azra took a tunic, caught it on fire and threw it over the other one.

"Try to get around them."

Flames fed on the creatures as they tried to grab the pair. One finally fell over. It lay there sizzling, human bones showing under the charring vegetation. A sharp snap and a small soft thing struck the floor from the other as it collapsed, crawling weakly. Ahri frowned, it was one of those strange multi-tentacled creatures she saw in the assassin's room. Ahri crushed it into the floor of the cave. The two ran around the pyre and out into the night. The air was crisp and fresh, a slice of waning moon showing.

"Was that more evil druidry, making people into plants?" Ahri ground out the torch.

Azra shrugged. "I'm not up on evil, despite my looks."

She finally took a moment to look at him closely. His skin was a dark grey and hair white streaked with a dark red, features as sharp as razors. "Well. Even for Scardale, you're notable."

"The priests who found me guess me to be the result of a drow raid. They happily did not judge."

"As long as you want to help deal with Meren, you can be purple for all I care." She surveyed the surroundings. "I can just see the wall. Assuming you are coming along, we

can meet the others at the Blue Mermaid inn.”

“They’ll have no problem?”

“They’re hunting Meren too. At this point, allies are allies. No matter how strange...”

She turned and started the climb back into the city.

Azra looked after her. “How strange? Wonderful.”

It was late and the inn relatively quiet, the remaining patrons either too drunk to move or at least appearing so. Ahri dropped her hood, spoke to Mistress Alisoun and made her way to a table in the shadowed back, Azra following.

“Ahri!”

“We were about to go looking for you. Who’s your friend?”

“I was forced to detour. This is Azra Loquis, priest of Mystra and former “guest” of Meren’s.”

Azra pulled back his hood, to the curious looks from the others. He looked around at all of them. “Well, you were right in the strange allies part.”

The innkeep came up with two full goblets and a platter full of toasted cheese bread.

Ahri took a piece of the bread, pushed the rest of it to Azra who fell upon it hungrily.

“One of the guards tagged me. I found Azra in a cell. He healed me, and we left by a passageway from the bottom of the keep to a cave outside the walls. He overheard things, none of which are good.” She ran down the details.

“An evil druid?” Cabhri frowned. “That’s not possible.”

“Oh it seems to be, milady.” Azra spoke around a mouthful, taking a drink of wine to clear it. “I haven’t met many of your woodland fraternity but enough to know that only a druid can get plants to do what I’ve seen. The hermit types can be particularly peculiar but this one is baying at the moon.”

Ekar yawned widely. “Well, if that’s it, I’m going to get some shut-eye. Wake me up when you’ve figured something out.”

“We can all think better after some sleep.”

“There’s more space in our room, so Azra can sleep there. We’ll be up when we’re done.”

“And you can keep an eye on me.”

“She’s just being nice so you don’t have to hear the snoring.”

“Oh, that comes through the wall just fine.” Cabhri rolled her eyes.

The others left, leaving only Ahri and Jhered with their new acquaintance. “You’re half-drow?”

“Yes. And you’re half elven. Any more demonstrations of the obvious?”

Jhered narrowed his eyes and then smiled at the priest’s attitude. “No. You’ll do.” He turned to Ahri. “Any ideas?”

“I have Meren’s journal though it’s nearly illegible. I need to read that to see what is possible. Perhaps we can get the other garrisons to give Meren something else to think about.”

“You might have more problems than you think.” Azra was looking where the others had gone.

Jhered sighed. “Really. Well?”

“Ahri told me basically who you all were and why you were here. Cabhri is looking for her father, right?”

“Right. Oh.”

“There’s a strong family resemblance.” The priest gazed into his mug. “Sorry, not what I wanted to have to say first off. Not a very nice thanks for the wine and food.”

“Great. Sorry, Cabhri, your father is insane.” Jhered sat up in his chair. “Any chance you could be wrong? I know how pain can change what a man sees...”

"I don't think I am. With some rest, I can ask my goddess to clarify things."

"She has to know. I can tell her."

"Gently please, Ahri?"

"As gentle as a tale like this can be."

"What if she runs off to find him?"

"And warns Meren."

Ahri sipped her wine. "I don't think she would. She's naïve, not stupid."

"I hope you are right. If I may, I shall head to sleep myself."

"If you'd show him the room, Jhered? Take the cot. This needs read."

"I'm not stupid enough to refuse."

Just having got to sleep, Ahri woke to Azra moving about. "Desperately need a bath. I shall return."

"Don't and you'll meet your goddess in person."

"I know." He closed the door quietly.

Ahri lay still staring at the door. Why did that sound more important than it must have been? Know what? No matter. She moved to the cot and allowed herself to fall asleep again. She woke to Cabhri rising and the splash of water in the basin. The druidess looked like she had slept badly.

Seeing no good in waiting, Ahri spoke. "Cabhri, there is something you need to know."

Cabhri's eyes were red when she looked back at Ahri. "It's my father isn't it?"

Ahri was surprised that Cabhri had figured it out. "It seems so. What will you do now?"

"I...I don't know. If I could just talk to him ... but ...we still have to get the girl." Cabhri sniffed, the tears running down again. "Ahri, I don't want to have to kill him." Her voice broke and she sat down hard on the cot, head in her hands.

"I'll do my best to see that doesn't happen." Ahri gingerly placed her hand on Cabhri's shoulder. "We need to get downstairs. Meren's journal had some things in it that might help."

"How did you get anything out of this? Jhered paged through the book. "It gets worse as time goes on."

Ahri pulled a stitched pad of parchment scraps from her pouch. It was marked with writing. "Some I have no idea what it says. Some I could make out. But... Cabhri, do you want to tell Ekar and Gordo?"

"Tell us what?"

"It's, it's my father that's helping Meren."

Ekar whistled softly. Gordo shook his head. "Sorry to hear that. You dealing with it?"

She spread her hands on the table. "I have to."

"We'll try to get him back for you, Cabhri."

Ahri read from her notes. "The druid came to Meren with pieces of some kind of fallen star rock thing. Said it would work powerful magics. Including resurrection. Meren's wife died some time back."

"About 12 years."

Ahri slid the case with the portrait in it. "Is this her?"

"I couldn't tell you. I was with him after she passed on. But it seems a good guess."

"There was a huge painting of her on the wall in his room. For the magic it seems that they needed someone who wasn't entirely of this plane of existence to be a "vessel". I'm guessing that's where Anna comes in. And one of the last entries, has that Meren sent "N" to Sembia with a fragment of the stone."

"That little bastard."

"Likely."

"Anything else?"

"Probably the most disturbing parts. There's a list of people that were to be arrested for witchcraft. Including a Raelle the chandleress."

"That's who I saw last night. She's on our side and will do what she can."

Azra sat down at the table, looking much the better. "She should leave as soon as possible. Meren may be looking for a replacement for me."

"Two more things. He mentions the lighthouse and a believer there as well as "taking care" of another witch, the owner of the Snug Harbor rooming house but saying that they did not find "it", whatever it is."

"So, there and the lighthouse for the next places to look?"

"Seems so."

"I'm going to Raelle now." Cabhri gathered up her staff.

Jhered stood also. "Not alone. Gordo, you up for a walk? And maybe we can ask some more questions."

"And the rest of us can head for the docks."

The docks were in bad shape, just like the town. Half the piers had toppled to the sea. Ekar encouraged a longshoreman to lead him to the harbormaster's office, while the other two waited.

"The lighthouse? Well, most keepers are a little odd, if you catch my drift. Old man Callan and his wife live out there with their daughter." The harbormaster sent a stream into a spittoon.

"Have you seen them recently?"

"They don't come ashore much and only the women. I think Callan makes believe he's still on a ship. He lost an arm some years back."

The warrior smiled. "I'm an old shipmate of his. I need someone to get me out there."

He shrugged "Not my problem. You should be able to find someone willing along the docks." He went back to aimlessly whittling.

Ekar left this man's office. He was met by a young man as he walked. "You looking for a ship?" Ahri and Azra stepped from an ally and followed.

"No. Got a boat that can take us over to the lighthouse?"

"I ain't got one but my friend does. What'll you pay?"

"I won't break your..." Ekar snarled, until Ahri tapped him on the arm.

"Five silver. There *and* back."

"Tch, couldn't do it for less than a gold."

"As you wish." Ahri kept walking.

"Okay, miss, okay. Five it is."

The boat was surprisingly well cared for. Sprigg and Tom laid to the oars and had the trio over to the small island in less than a bell.

Ahri handed them 2 of the silvers. "Wait here. We should only be an hour at most. Be ready to ship off when we return."

"And don't get any bright ideas of leaving us here. Priest here will turn you into fish."

Azra helpfully leered at the two, getting a reaction that satisfied him.

They climbed a steep set of steps toward the lighthouse. It sat on what little flat area was on the rocky island, a squat truncated cone of stonework. A few shuttered windows showed it was probably at least three stories inside.

Ekar thumped on the heavy wooden door. "Callan, you in there?"

"Callan! Mistress Callan!" Ahri called out in case the inhabitants were somewhere on the island or on the top of the tower.

Several minutes passed. Ekar tried the door. "It's open. Guess not much need for a lock out here." He stepped in, followed by the others. The first floor of the lighthouse was

one open room, a small fireplace on one side barely glowing.

"Anyone here?"

They heard a scrabbling above. The floor to the second story had a hole in it that appeared to lead through to the top of the tower. Ekar drew his sword.

"Oh yes, oh yes, here." Tittering laughter came from the next floor.

"Wonderful. Someone's gone crazy."

"Should we leave, then?"

"It has to be that they just went crazy or the city would be having troubles with the lighthouse. That may mean they aren't completely gone. I'd rather try to see if we can get anything out of them."

"But may be with a few more swords?"

"We should be able to handle two women and a one-armed man."

"Come down here. We want to talk to you." Ahri walked over to the steps.

"Ahri, this might not be the best idea. Look ." Azra stood near what appeared to be the common table. He had prodded the fire into a flame and that light revealed a corpse, dismembered. It appeared to be of an older woman but it was hard to be sure.

"Poor mother. I tried to heal her but she rejected my blessing. We can heal you too.

We'll make everyone better. The light will shine across the land..."

Ekar looked up from his post near the door, searching for any sign of movement across the boards. "Let's get out of here. The city can burn her out."

Ahri nodded. The thin voice from above continued in its insane litany.

As Ekar turned, the doorway darkened. A misshapen form was silhouetted there, vaguely man-shaped but no man had ever had a tentacle thrashing from his shoulder. Ekar backed up avoiding the tentacle as it entered. "I hate this magical shit!"

The fire's light revealed a man. Rags of a tunic and pants hung on him. Part of the face was recognizably human, the majority fleshy, a huge lidless eye gazing at them, smaller tentacles flailing aimlessly. A wordless wavering cry came from its distorted mouth.

"I think I should have declined joining you, Ahri."

"Less talk, more spells."

"Mystra, bless us against this...thing and its mistress." A small burst of indigo light filled the room. It elicited a screech from above.

"No, no no! You will die!" A figure plummeted through the center opening, only held back from an impact by a wreath of tentacles around her head. The lightkeeper's daughter hung there like a mad marionette.

"HE took it, but I am still loved!" A stream of purple shot from her mouth, easily avoided by Ahri. The vomitus sizzled and smoked on the flagstone floor.

"Now what?"

Azra, keeping a wary eye on the hanging harridan, kicked a chair over to the fireplace and stood on it. "Ahri, get Callahan's attention."

She shouted at it and got its attention for a moment. Azra heaved the harpoon he noticed over the fireplace to Ekar who grabbed it and slung it in one smooth motion. It skewered the woman in the center of the room. Her tentacles slacked and released, dropping her body to the floor. The tentacles writhed.

"You'll die die dieee!" She scrabbled to her feet, the butt of the harpoon scraping the flagstone floor.

Azra shouted magic and three bolts of light flew from his hands sinking into her. She dropped.

The creature Ahri was fighting, she assumed Callan, howled. It rushed her and she stepped out of its way. She took the opportunity to stab it in the back, ending its misery. All jumped as the tentacles from the woman erupted to life again.

Ekar took the woman's head off and things were finally quiet. "Tempus' balls! What kind of magic shit is this?"

"No good idea. It's evil and it's transmutive, that's all I can tell now."

"Do you think there are any more of these things?"

"Could be. If so, we'd best get back to our boat."

"Why don't we send them back to get someone in charge? They'll need to get someone here to man the light and we need them to sign off on our good deed here. We can use the time to look for any thing else that can tell us what's going on."

"Agreed."

Ahri left at a jog to give the young men their instructions. Sending them on their way, she returned. Azra and Ekar had left the bodies lay but had lit every lamp they could find. The fire roared, driving out the damp chill.

"I'll keep guard." Ekar pulled a chair over to the doorway, pushing the door mostly closed to keep the warmth in.

"Before we ascend, what story do we have to tell the powers that be to explain why we came out here?"

Ekar looked pleased with himself. "Already took care of that with the harbormaster. I'm an old shipmate of Callan's. He ain't going to be telling them any different."

"Good enough."

Ahri and Azra ventured into the upper levels. Sleeping areas were on the second floor. All of the blankets and sheets were in a large pile. Azra used a broom to poke at it. Nothing was hiding. A quick look through a chest also revealed nothing.

"Looks like they had something tied up." Azra picked up a length of slender rope that was tied around a bed leg, the other end kinked as if had been tied.

Ahri pulled it around her wrist, letting it curl as it wanted. "Would fit a child's wrists or ankles."

They continued up to the roof of the tower. A large mirror sat on a rotating frame that moved around a large fire pit. A gear and weight system allowed it to be set to move for hours.

"What's this for?" Ahri was looking at a wooden framework that curled around the mirror's frame. Two branches hung over the mirror's top, a small net bag held between them in what looked to be the mirror's focus.

"No idea, but I'd bet my next bath that the wood has been formed by magic. It didn't do anything good for the balance of this thing." Azra shoved at the mirror which only moved grudgingly.

Ahri looked over the island, all rough rocks, and stunted trees. She half-wished there was more of the monsters to relieve her frustration on. "Can your goddess tell you if the girl is hidden somewhere here? It's not big but there will be a thousand places to hide in this pile."

Azra sat on the stones of the roof, hands clasped around the holy symbol around his neck. While she waited, she could see a pair of small boats coming toward the island from the docks.

"I only get that this island is important. Evil is strong here which interferes with how much my lady can tell me, but it is too soon to know if it's just an echo from the things downstairs or if it's still here."

"Thank you for trying. We'd best get down. The town folks are nearly here."

Azra's appearance wasn't much help, but between Ekar's scowl and Ahri's calculated smile, they had the incident sorted out and they were free to go. The harbormaster wasn't happy that they wouldn't agree to stay at the lighthouse until he could convince

someone else to take the job but he wasn't willing to push the point with the northern warrior. They made sure the bodies were well on their way to being burned to ash and headed back to town.

"Raelle will be leaving town, tonight if she can. In any case, she's staying out of sight." Cabhri fiddled with the candle on the table. "I hated to tell her to leave her home."

"Hopefully she can come back to it once this is over, though why anyone would want to live here is beyond me."

"She probably does a good business, dark as it is here. Ekar, you had your kit out. Something at that lighthouse?"

The big warrior snorted. "Tentacles."

"Something changed the keeper's daughter and him into tentacled things. No idea what but seems like the druid was there and most likely the girl."

"But no one is there now?"

"City will replace the keeper but no one we're looking for seems to be on the island. Communing with my lady got that the island is important but nothing else. I'd say something powerful is working against us finding out."

"It's a pile of stones and brush. Probably a hundred hiding places, if anyone is there at all."

"So the boarding house is it?"

"Or we grab Meren and make him tell us what's going on."

"I'd do that but no one's seen him. The Sembian garrison is shut up. I talked to some of the guards from Cormyr. The sergeant and I share some acquaintances and she had no idea what's going on there. She's just pissed that it's become her job to guard their sector."

"Since they'll be spread thin, should we go deal with the boarding house now?"

"We're running out of time. If we find nothing there, then my best guess is out to the island."

The lowering sun cast shadows into the alley way. Gordo ripped away a board from the rear of the abandoned inn and reached in, releasing the latch. Jhered, Ahri and Cabhri watched the alley, while Azra stepped gingerly in.

"Well, there's death here even if there are no undead."

"How could people not notice?"

"If the local constabulary says it's not a problem, then it's not for a lot of people."

"As well for us that the cold kept the smell down."

They all entered, Gordo replacing the board loosely. The sickly sweet sent of rotting carrion hung in the cold air of the building. Cabhri found a pair of candle lanterns and lit them. The light revealed a kitchen, a pot of stew was mouldering on the hearth. Jhered rubbed a finger across a dark stain across the door.

"Blood. Ahri, you and Gordo want to go first? The rest of us can see and cast over you."

Ahri entered the next room, the light from behind her illuminating a small dining area. She could see boot soles just caught by the light.

"At least one body. Bring the light closer." An older man lay half under a table. A gaping wound in his neck showed how he died.

"Another one over here."

"You think Meren did this?"

"Seems like it. How could I have been so wrong about..."

"Someone you knew?" Cabhri laughed weakly. "Tell me about it."

"We got three floors and the cellar. Pair up?"

“And we still have no idea what “it” was that Meren couldn’t find?”

“Not a clue.”

“Lovely.”

Ahri and Gordo finished the first floor while the others went up. More bodies but little else. The entrance to the cellar was open, and they went down the rough steps cautiously. Boxes and bales were scattered or torn open.

“Whatever they were looking for must not have been here to start.”

Ekar came down the creaking steps. “I don’t know. I’ve tossed a place or two and this has no sense to it. Seems they were in a hurry.”

“Almost strange that this cellar doesn’t have a smuggler’s passage out of it too.”

“Well, it might.”

They both looked over at Gordo who was running his hands over the wall off in a corner.

“I smell wet earth. But I’ll be damned if I can find any kind of an opening here.”

“Magic?” Ahri concentrated on the wall, but even knowing that there might be magic involved didn’t allow her to see through the spell.

“Could be. Azra, get down here.”

The priest looked closely at the wall. “I’m guessing a high-level illusion. Let’s see if this works.” He touched the wall with fingertips and gestured with the other hand, repeating the odd silky words of magic. And in an instant the wall had vanished, revealing a narrow passage.

Gordo looked closely at the dirt floor. “Been people moving across this though hard to tell how long ago. From what I can see, I’m guessing that this goes out under the harbor.”

“So, do we follow it?”

Jhered and Cabhri joined them. More lantern light did little to reveal anything down the passage. “Not much choice, all we found upstairs were more bodies. If this isn’t it, then I have no idea where to try next.”

“And if we find anything, it’ll need all of us to deal with it. Just how it goes. So, who’s first?”

“Who do you think?” Gordo pulled another ax from his belt. “Mage behind me, in case we need real light. Jhered, you or Ahri at the back so we don’t lose the humans.”

The passage sloped downward, supported occasionally by damp timbers. Ahri could hear trickles of water, which only served to remind her that they were further and further under the bay. At least rats seemed to have enough sense to not be here. She and Jhered kept the rearguard, her at the very back so she could flatten and allow his attack if it should be needed. She stumbled up against his back as they came to a halt. “Light up ahead.”

The passage opened up onto an open cavern fitfully lit by several braziers. The ceiling was covered in stalactites, some could be seen broken on the floor among stalagmites. “Over there.” Azra whispered, tapping the dwarf on the left shoulder. Gordo could now see movement near what looked like a fabric pavilion, barrels and stacks of crates nearby. He also saw another dark spot along the far wall, perhaps another entrance.

They retreated into the tunnel.

“Is it Meren?”

“If it were, then he wasn’t looking for the passage.”

“Probably just a smuggler. We can take him if he’s alone.”

Ahri snuck through the cave floor, using the flowstone formations as cover. Gordo did the same while the others remained where they were. Ahri got within a few strides of the pavilion. She could see a young man, in tattered robes scurrying around. A circle had been drawn on the floor. The man was bringing out an armful of items, held in a gathered cloth. He dumped them in the circle and threw the cloth over them. Ahri frowned. The cloth had a large symbol on it. One of the gods, but she couldn't recall which, definitely not one of the popular ones. He then stood outside the circle, and began muttering, eyes closed. Ahri looked around. She saw Jhered coming up, silently running. He vaulted over a ridge of flowstone and took the man unawares, both men slewing into the ground. Jhered leapt to his feet, pulling the man up by his collar. Then Ahri could see his necklace, a symbol to Talos swinging from it.

"Anything one of you bastards want to destroy is worth saving. What is this?"

The priest struggled against the ranger's grasp. "You will die!"

Jhered sighed. "Yeah, that's what everyone says. Ahri, can you tie him up?"

She made herself busy while Azra looked over the circle and its contents and the rest joined them. He made a couple of scratches across the symbol, and gingerly stepped in. "Not exactly where I'd expect to find an altar set for a priest of Siamarche." He held up the cloth. "

"You will all die. That bitch wasn't here but Talos will strike her down no matter where she hides! She will regret taking those that belong to Talos!"

"Who is 'she'?" Ahri gripped one of the man's fingers and bent.

He shrieked. "You will all die! Talos!"

At his cry the cave shook. A rumble and each tunnel entrance spewed a cloud of debris. Ahri grabbed a rock and struck the priest hard. He fell to the side.

"Aw fuck."

"See if tunnels are completely closed."

"I don't think it will matter." Gordo was looking at the ceiling. A crack was widening.

"I should have stayed in that cell."

"Gordo, how thick do you think the roof is?"

"Not very. The bay is coming in and no help for it."

"Can everyone swim?"

Gordo snorted.

"And what does swimming in a cave-in accomplish."

"It's the only chance we've got."

"But what about Gordo?"

"We can help him."

"No. If you can survive at all, you don't need me holding you back."

"Wait. Ekar, get one of those barrels, the biggest one you can."

The warrior rolled one over. "So?"

"We're going to jug a dwarf."

There was a suction back into the collapsing cave, swirling barrels, crates and mud. Something hard careened off her shoulder, causing her to lose a mouthful of air. The maelstrom stopped and Ahri fought her way to the surface. The sky was mostly dark as she came up, a few stars out and lightning running on the eastern horizon. The white caps of waves showed silver, cresting at least a foot. She looked around for the others. To her amazement, a boat was not more than 50 feet from her. She could see Cabhri being drawn aboard, Jhered and Ekar hanging on to the gunwales. Where the barrel was that held Gordo, she couldn't see. Ahri swam over catching Azra as he surfaced and grabbing the the boat beside Ekar.

"What's going on?"

"Hell if I know. Get up there." He half threw her into the boat. She rolled the rest of the way in, and made for the other side to act as ballast as the others climbed in. She finally saw that the boat had Beltan and his brother Mord in it, along with Raelle.

Raelle passed Jhered a bottle and yelled into the wind. "Thought you folk would need some help."

"How could you have possibly known....?"

"Let's just say you've built up some good will."

"We've got to get to the lighthouse island." Jhered took a long draw from the flask. His eyes widened as he coughed hard and passed it along.

"Anyone seen Gordo's barrel?" Ekar was looking hard over the roiled bay.

"No, sorry. But tide's going out and the current is running toward the island, hopefully he'll beat us there."

Ahri shared a thick woolen blanket with Ekar. The harsh brandy in the flask helped, but the wind was growing and the cold bit to her bones. The storm ran on the heels of the boat.

With the two brothers rowing hard, they soon fetched up against the rocky shore of the small island bearing the lighthouse.

Ekar got out, made it a few steps up the craggy beach. "A barrel. Looks like he must have gone ahead."

The rest disembarked. Ahri looked ruefully at the blanket she was leaving behind.

"There should be set of rough stairs about a hundred yards down the coast."

"Where will they be, Cabhri, Azra?"

"Outside. Probably as high as he can get."

Mord pointed. "The northeast side of the island. About opposite from here."

"Will you come with us? At least to get the girl out?"

"That's what we're here for. We can't take out the druid, Meren and whatever monsters they have. You can."

They climbed the icy stone steps, rain and spray whipping at them. At the top, they could see the sparse wind-twisted trees mixed with broken rock. Lightning struck down out of the sky at a spot among the rocks. They could hear a cry under the roar of the thunder.

"Gordo! What's the plan, elf?"

"Ahri with me. Cabrhi, you and Azra go with Ekar. See what you can do for Gordo, then find your best way to deal with any threats. The rest of you follow as you can. If you can find the girl, get her and run. Try to let everyone know but get her out of here."

Ahri was going to protest then held her tongue. No need to let him know she would not be under his eye.

"Come on, Ahri. Let's move."

They moved among the weather shattered rock, making for high ground. Jhered picked out the way, Ahri being the better climber leading and giving a hand up. More than once she was tempted to leave the ranger behind to find his own path but he could still be useful. Once they found Meren, then all agreements were off.

"Good guess that we'll find more of the same or worse."

Ahri wiped the rain from her eyes. "I've never seen some of these things. Not demonic, not undead. This is what twisted druids can do?"

"I think it's something else. The gods wouldn't still be granting Hrentel their powers. He's getting it from something else." He held up a hand. "Something ahead. I think waiting for us. Trail's too narrow to avoid it."

Ahri peered into the darkness, seeing nothing. "Give me a hand up and get its attention." She stepped into Jhered's hands and climbed above him. He continued on,

shadowed by the young woman.

Ahri crept along, keeping rock between herself and anything that might see her, though she was convinced she was cold enough not to be seen by anything with infravision.

She watched the ranger continue down the path, sword out and ready.

She continued, watching carefully in the driving rain, cursing the time this was taking. Thinking she caught a foot in a crevasse, she moved to loosen it and came face to face with a horror. Only just recognizable as once a man by the half-misshapen head and armor, it had her foot trapped in a crablike claw. Only the leather of her boot protected her ankle from the tooth-like projections. It swung a sword at her, grasped in a hand that seemed far too flexible. "Jhered!" Having little choice, she threw herself backward, tumbling down the rock face with it, trusting in her skill to blunt the force of the fall.

He heard Ahri's cry as rocks came down followed by the two bodies. They rolled to a halt. Ahri lay still, her foot its grasp as the creature rose. Jhered struck at the chitinous limb, a blow shattering the shell and releasing her. Its sword came around, a human arm never able to twist like that, and glanced off his brigantine. Jhered slashed at the arm, missing as it writhed again. Another limb appeared over its shoulder, a true tentacle lashing out. It grabbed his upper arm, pulling him in. Taking advantage of its ill-considered action, Jhered drove his short sword into its armpit. A gout of warm fluid gushed out and the thing went limp.

Jhered let it drop turning to find Ahri sitting up. He could see dark blood mixing with the rain as it ran down her cheek. "You okay?"

"More rocks came loose than I hoped." She gingerly got to her feet. "It hurt you?"

"No, good thing those monsters are dumb. You can walk?"

She nodded curtly. "Let's go."

As they climbed, he could hear her breath hiss when her foot betrayed her, but she kept up with him over the uneven ground.

Finally, there were no more rocks above them. The island leveled out, more tangles of stunted trees, and in the distance they could see a fire near the cliff edge. A strange amaranthine light came from it, illuminating moving figures.

"Can you see the others?"

"No. We've got to go."

"Meren is mine. Do not try to stop me."

"But Anna..."

She turned away. "You will get her out. You are a good man, Jhered. May you tread an easy path." With that she ran quietly toward the light, taking a wide course to keep to the shadows.

"Ahri!" He hissed. "Damn it." Having little choice, he took the opposite path.

As Ahri got closer, she could see a large flat stone, the fire at its lower end. The girl was tied to it and looked to be mercifully unconscious. A large glowing purple stone the size of a doubled fist sat on a rough tripod in the center of the flames. Five more of those things stood guard at the perimeter. Probably the remains of the Sembian guard.

Hrentel was gesticulating and howling at the sky and she could see Meren standing off to the side of the fire, arms crossed and staring intently. There was no cover to be had, only the dark and the rain, fickle allies at best. She could run the gauntlet, but there was a risk, all too clearly known from her tumble earlier. This had to be over tonight; she had to be sure. She looked along the edge of the plateau and saw nothing. She figured Jhered was circling around opposite of her. The others she saw no sign.

“Hey, over here you cowards!”

Ahri flinched as Gordo’s voice boomed over the landscape. She saw the dwarf cresting the hill, with Ekar right behind him. Azra and Cabhri were not in evidence, though she knew that priests could be hid by their gods. Behind them, she could see the brothers. Meren stirred from his reverie. “Stop them! Stop them!”

Ahri moved toward the frantic man. Gordo and Ekar closed with the monsters. Raelle and one of the brothers were in a dead run toward the rock. A strike of lightening near the fire blinded everyone, the crash of thunder echoing across the sea. Ahri’s eyes cleared. She now saw Cabhri near the fire, and Jhered in combat with Meren. She growled at that but a more pressing problem was the monster in front of her. The things were faced away so they weren’t nearly as affected by the blast of light. For all of its mangled bulk, the thing was quick, quicker than she was with a bruised foot. Its fist smashed into the ground, missing her as she jumped away. She drew the short knife from the scabbard at the nape of her neck. It was meant for Meren but if she didn’t get to him it was a waste. She feinted and drew the blade across the thing’s upper arm. The thing quickly staggered in its pursuit of her. The poison on the blade was working. She left it screaming.

Cabhri screamed into the wind. “Father! Stop this! Father!”

The druid looked around confused. The wind tore at his robes. Cabhri cast down her staff and ran to him, grasping his shoulders .

“No, you cannot do this! It is against everything you taught me! Father, stop this!”

The winds howled around them, circling. Lightning crashed again, wildly without control and closer.

“Cabhri? Why are you here?” His face broke into a mad smile. “You have joined me in worship! We can bring back your mother together!”

“No, Father! You can’t sacrifice someone to bring her back. She would hate you for it. Come with me. I can help you. We can stop this together.”

He shook his head, gray hair lit crimson by the strange fire. “No, no! The stone speaks to me. It has given me the power of the gods! No one will stop me. It said everyone would betray me. Even my own daughter!” His staff burst into flame as he swung it at her.

She stumbled back, then picked up her staff. “Father, please don’t make me do this. The gods have abandoned you.”

“You’re trying to delay me. Against me. The sacrifice must be completed!” A blast of scarlet fire blew between them. He turned from her, back to the plinth. “The girl, where is the girl?”

“We’ve got her!” She could barely hear the basso profundo of Mord over the winds. Azra’s voice was behind her. “Cabhri, can you control this? I think we’re about to all die.” The wind accelerated, howling like a banshee. Cabhri could barely stand. “I don’t know.” She raised her hands, the wind and rain nearly obscuring her. “Help me rid this corruption from the world. Gods, help me against my father!” She screamed into the night.

Where were the others? Jhered listened as he circled just beyond the light, watching for the monsters. Ahri was going to get herself killed. And maybe that’s what she wanted. He knew how it was to have only thoughts of revenge. Tiantha was the only thing that kept him anchored and Ahri seemed not to have anyone like that. Somehow, she learned to be a killer and that was all her life had been. Everything for this day. And unless she had some help, she’d fail. He’d be damned if he let Meren finish the job. Gordo’s bellow came just in time. As Meren shouted and the monsters moved, he

charged through, blades slashing only to distract. He slid to a stop in front of the inquisitor. His sword was only stopped at the last moment by Meren's blade.

"You! You should be dead."

Jhered didn't reply. He exchanged blows with his opponent. Lightning blasted down again, a shock rippling through the earth. He now could see Cabhri. Her father looked even more insane. They exchanged words that he could not hear. More clashing of blades and the girl was gone from the plinth. The gods were with them, at least Mystra. A cry of "we got her" went up. That's all that was needed. Now to finish this.

"You've lost, Meren. Stop this!"

"Never. You took one demonic brat, there are more. There are always more! Hreltren! Kill them all!"

The weather went mad. Lightning bolts seemed to go sideways, the wind picked up until it was nearly impossible to stand. The rain felt like sling bullets but the strange fire still remained lit. Jhered and Meren traded blows, Meren the better swordsman but no longer fighting with any skill, just a frenzy. A strike from another bolt of lightning caused Jhered to jump aside instinctively, and he lost his footing on the mud. Flat on his back, he gasped for breath. Meren was on him in an instant.

"Byron!" a voice cried out over the shrieking storm. Meren stopped his swing at the fallen ranger. There stood a woman. One he never thought to see again. She stood, dress whipped by the winds, arms outstretched. "Byron! Please, don't. It brought me back. For you."

"Angelina? You're alive?" He stood wavering, having completely forgotten his foe.

"Yes, Byron. It's been so long." The apparition held out her arms, running to him. He met her.

"So long."

"Murderer!" Her dagger, unseen until now, sank deep into his chest. The illusion fell, revealing a young woman with eyes of lambent green.

"You! Angelina?" He staggered back. Neither had realized how close they were to the cliff's edge. The earth churned and slipped away. He lost his balance and fell. Ahri lunged after him, only Jhered's grasp preventing her from following. She stared into the lashing waves, saw the tentacle of some sea beast take her prey. "No! He was mine! He was mine!" She shrieked into the wind.

"Ahri, he's dead. Come on." He gently guided her from the cliff.

She stopped and turned back. Her face was empty, lost. He could just hear her in the weakening tempest. "It's finished. And I have nothing."

The tempest seemed to be slowing. Jhered saw Cabhri sitting on the ground, Azra beside her. Of her father there was no sign. The priest left Raelle with Cabhri. Anna was wrapped in a cloak, evidently still unconscious.

"What happened?"

"The storm tore him apart at her command. Or maybe the gods' command. She's dazed but should be alright. Got the girl thanks to Mystra's cloak. The rest were killing those things. You and Ahri?"

Jhered looked back at her. She stood alone still looking out over the cliff. "Meren's dead. Not at her hand."

Azra shook his head. "That is too bad. I had hoped she would get her chance. Or I would have." He looked back at the young woman. "You don't think she might jump?"

"No, at least not now. If anything, she'll want to make sure Anna is okay."

"As far as I can tell, she is. Hopefully she was out for all of this. Our biggest problem is what the hell to do with that thing." He pointed to the faintly glowing purple stone, now

on the ground. "Ekar knocked the tripod over with a rock. Heat looks to have crazed it, but it still magical and not in a way I like."

"So we can't just chuck it in the sea." Ekar came up.

"Ah, *no*."

"Wrap it in a blanket. Then we'll take it to your temple or something."

"I'd prefer not to be near it."

Jhered signed. "Ekar, Gordo and I, plus the brothers I should keep our hands free in case we find any more of those things. If it's bad for spell-slingers to be near, ask Ahri to carry it."

After some prodding with sticks, the stone was wrapped tightly in several layers of blankets. The sky had turned brilliantly clear. The east was just turning pale as they pulled up to the dock.

They returned to the inn. The desperate battle of the past night had exhausted them but none could sleep. Ahri sat at a table, staring into a mug of warmed cider. Jhered joined her. She looked up briefly.

"You doing alright, Ahri?"

She sighed, tired to the core. "It's done, Jhered. You are not the man I thought. He is dead and I have no reason to be here. I am leav...." Her words were interrupted by the entrance of a group of men. She almost didn't care but looked at them from habit. A slender blond man dressed in claret colored silks, Sembian-style, flanked by two guards, also Sembian, stood in the entranceway. They looked as if they were searching for someone. The leader's eyes focused on the small group. He approached with some caution. "You are the people that "dealt" with Inquisitor Meren?" His voice was soft and oh-so cultured.

"What of it?" Ekar rumbled from his position by the fire. Azra watched the nervousness of the Sembians with evident amusement.

Jhered rolled his eyes at Ahri and stood. "We are, sir. What do you want with us?"

The man surveyed the group and recognizing their apprehension, his hands attempted to wave it away. "Oh, nothing like that. We aren't here to arrest you. Actually, quite the opposite. I, excuse me, I'm Tobias Hawksworth; I was sent by our council to investigate reports of Meren's abuses of his position. When I arrived, I found that you had eliminated the problem. I wish to reward you. And," he looked at them, considering. "Perhaps offer you employment."

"Employment?" Gordo snorted. "For what?"

"Well, perhaps that shouldn't be discussed in such a public place."

"Forget the hiring. What's the reward?"

"Oh. 10 gold for each of you. There are six, correct?"

"20 gold. Sound good?" Ekar glanced at the group, smiled nastily at Hawkwood. Ahri shrugged. The others seemed to find no problem.

The Sembian smiled and nodded. "Of course, of course. Then, if you are interested, we may find somewhere to talk?"

They found themselves in a private room at one of the nicer inns, in the Sembian section of course. They all were somewhat nervous. Their host sat at the head of the table.

"Now then, there is a bit of a problem in Ordulin."

Ahri frowned. "I suspect that is an understatement."

"Well, that might be, but I can't give out details to just anyone. Are you interested?"

Jhered looked at Ahri. "Up for it? It's something to do and Ordulin is a lot warmer than Scardale. Rest of you?"

"We all seem to be at a loss for what to do now." Cabhri glanced around. "Why not?"

"Mister Hawksworth must be a gambler, betting on such a dark horse as we."

"Good, good. Does your group have a name?"

"A what?"

"A name for your company. It does seem to be customary."

"Hadn't really thought about it."

"Maybe what Azra said."

"What did I say?"

"Dark horse, Azra. What about the Company of the Dark Horse?"

"Where is everyone?" Cabhri walked across the mostly empty public room to where Gord was sitting in front of the fireplace, smoking a fragrant pipe. He motioned her to the other chair, noting that despite her long sleep, the druid still looked drained. "Around. We got us some work. Sembian who was sent up to check on Meren gave us some gold for doing his work, and offered job down in Ordulin. Jhered and Azra are working out the details with him at the sembian post. I think Ekar's out spending some of that gold. Ahri is out but no good idea where."

The innkeeper interrupted him as she came out with a steaming mug. "Strong broth for you, lady."

"Are Mord and Beltren alright??"

"Doing just fine. You drink up now and if you need someone to talk to, you are more than welcome."

Cabhri watched her leave. "She knows?"

Gord shifted uncomfortably. "Well, ah, Beltren and Mord heard you call Hrentel your father. Drink." As she did so, he continued. "What do you remember?"

"Little. I know I killed him and we got Anna back. I called and the power came...." Her voice trailed off and she took another swallow.

"That's the important parts. Ahri got a blade in Meren but the cliff gave away and she would have went into the sea with him if not for Jhered. Raelle is taking care of Anna."

At her questioning look, he grinned. "She's the priest to Siamarche."

"I should have known when we found a chandler out on a boat in a storm."

He cleared his throat, and fiddled with his pipe. "Thanks for the healing, Cabhri. That's about as bad as I've ever had it. You take donations?"

She smiled slightly. "Not from friends."

"Then I'll take some extra pride in taking out orcs when they're cutting down trees or burning fields."

"That's payment enough. You know, I've never seen an orc."

"Well let me tell you about them. Me and Ekar...."

To be continued....