

Gathering

a free magazine of dragonlance fiction



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Cover art

Draconian

Colin Scott McDonald

Scott hails from Ontario, Canada and lives in Broward County, Florida. He can sometimes be spotted at local clubs not talking to strangers. Although too shy to initiate such a conversation, he will happily respond when approached.

Art is his hobby; by day he answers technical support queries for a computer software company. He has no real formal training in art, but enjoys drawing and working with 3D applications.

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Editorial

Samuel Marshall

Welcome to the third and final issue of 'Gathering'.

Five stories, and a varied mix of characters, await your attention. In the first, Dana Surrey tells of a village girl's strength and courage. Then Craig J. Ries looks at a soldier's memories – years later – of one pivotal event. Todd Wolfe describes mages of all three colours on a combined quest. Scott Richter's story has a lovestruck couple into a disturbing situation. And my own story features two minstrels who can barely get along with each other.

I hope you'll enjoy reading all these tales. The authors have put their best efforts into writing them, and then they've worked with me to polish the stories to the highest standard possible.

I also hope you appreciate Colin Scott McDonald's excellent cover art, which I'm very grateful for. If you print this magazine out, be sure to use good paper for that striking cover. I have just one disclaimer – in order to make it fit the available space, I extended the picture at the edges. So, if you see any – er – rough edges, it's my fault.

I said above this was the final issue of *Gathering*. It's been fun, but it is also a great deal of work, and three seems a good number on which to end.

Almost the hardest part of producing this magazine is actually getting people to submit stories. It is a real struggle to get enough submissions in order that I can make a selection. My thanks go to everybody who submitted their stories, even those which weren't used, and especially to Matt (Paladin) from the excellent dragonlance.com Web site. Without his help in providing publicity and free advertising, this issue couldn't have happened.

After stories are chosen, I work on several rounds of detailed line-by-line editing, then magazine layout. It's a *lot* of effort and I've many other interests.

I'm not leaving fiction entirely, of course. I'll be setting up a new Web site, leafdigital.com/story, to feature my own work on a regular basis.

Finally, I'd like to thank all the writers and artists who have contributed to the three *Gathering* issues – and everybody, *everybody* who read them. I hope you all got something from it. Be well. --sam

Dead of Winter

by Dana Surrey

Sixteen-year-old Merrana swore as she slipped yet again on the icy street and landed hard on her rear end. Clothes from the basket spilled out onto the muddy street and she swore again. She scrambled to her feet, struggling to keep her balance against the twin menace of slippery footing and the strong wind that howled through the tiny, isolated village of Komei. What a miserable Yuletide this was turning out to be.

The summer's heat had been stronger than anyone could remember, withering the crops in the gardens and leaving people with meager food here in the middle of winter. The vicious, terrible sickness that a trader had brought in the autumn had claimed the healer among its first victims, leaving no one to tend to others. Nearly one out of every four villagers had succumbed to the disease – including many of the strongest hunters who, if they had been alive, could now be out trying to find game.

Momentary tears brimmed at the corner of her eyes as Merrana thought briefly of her handsome older brother Rejek, lying in a bed with all strength and beauty gone. His death had left her the oldest of four remaining siblings, trying desperately to help her mother with the housework and any jobs that could be found – while her father sat in front of the fire and stared dimly at the flames.

Biting her lower lip, Merrana forced back the tears of self-pity that threatened, picked up the garments, and continued making her way stubbornly down the street to their home.

Merrana wasn't sure whether it was the loss of his son or simply age that had left her father this way, but she knew that it wasn't fair. Not fair that she and her mother should work their fingers to the bone, scrounging to feed the others – while he did nothing. The only time her father acted like he used to these days was after supper; when the smaller children would gather around him at the fire and listen to him tell stories of when he had been 'young and a soldier.'

Well, stories weren't going to get them out of this, she thought fiercely, then paused, taken aback by her own bitterness. Perhaps part of her anger stemmed from the fact that when she was younger she had believed all the stories, had loved them with all her heart and mind – especially his tales of the War of the Lance and its brave heroes. She had sat wide-eyed with her brother, thrilling at the daring courage of Tanis Half-Elven, laughing at the exploits of the kender Tasslehoff

Burrfoot, shivering deliciously when her father spoke of the great, mad wizard Raistlin, crying at the tragic tale of the doomed love of Sturm the Knight for the great elven lady, and cheering all the while for Laurana the Golden General – her favorite. Her father had seen the elfmaiden once, at the head of the army, and she wasn't sure how many times she had made him recount the story.

She would have given anything back then to stay up one more half-hour and hear one more story. She would have given anything to meet Laurana. She would have given anything to *be* Laurana, to be a hero... and here she was, no hero, but a dirty village girl carrying other people's torn clothes home for the few coins that mending them would bring – and knowing that the stories were just that. Fables. No such thing as dragons or Golden Generals or cursed mages. No such thing as heroes... Just lots of work. Mending and cooking and cleaning and watching the twins and her little sister. Sometimes she simply hated her life.

As she approached home, however, she swallowed her ire. Mother had enough problems on her mind. The least Merrana could do was help out cheerfully and willingly. Sighing, she struggled to handle the basket of clothes and open the door at the same time, somehow succeeding.

Inside was light and warmth and noise, and the cold inner ball of ice thawed a bit. Tomie, the littlest of them all, toddled up to her and threw little-girl arms around her big sister's legs. Smiling, Merrana set the basket of clothes down and gently disentangled the little girl, lifting her up onto her shoulders. Things weren't so awful, after all. There had been bad winters before and would be again. They would survive, together.

The next day dawned cold – nothing new. Merrana arose before any of the family, even her mother, to start the fire so that the house would be warm for the others. With disgruntled misery, she noted that there was barely enough wood to get the fire started. She pulled on boots and the parka made from snow rabbits, taking up the hatchet from its place beside the door, and made her way outside to the woodbox. At least I'll be warm splitting logs, she thought sardonically to herself.

She opened the lid and couldn't hold back a moan of keen frustration. Empty! Her lazy brothers were

responsible for keeping the woodbox full, and Abyss take them, they had forgotten again! She felt like screaming at the top of her lungs, or storming in and angrily kicking her brothers out of bed onto the cold floor. But she didn't want to wake up Mother. There wasn't really any alternative – she'd have to go cut some wood from the forest. Grumbling under her breath, Merrana adjusted her fur coat's hood and stomped furiously into the snowy woods.

Half an hour later, she realized she was well away from the village. Fueled by her own anger, she had paid no attention to where she was going, and was now in an area of the forest she had only been to with her brother – nearer to the mountains, the real mountains. Already the hills were becoming steeper, becoming cliffs that seemed to crowd in ominously over her head.

Well, it wasn't a big deal. While she didn't know this part of the woods as well as other parts, and the snow was deeper here, it was simple enough to follow her own tracks back to the village. Merrana had just turned around and taken the first step back when she heard the voices.

Harsh and sibilant in the still morning air, the words were unintelligible gibberish but sounded distinctly unfriendly. She froze with the utter stillness her brother had taught her, when a much younger version of herself had begged to accompany him hunting.

She stood still for an unknown period of time, ears straining to hear the noises again. The cold seeped into her bones, but she remained still as the voices continued.

The words were unintelligible for the most part – whether this was due to the speakers' low tones, their muttering, or whether the words were simply in another language, she couldn't tell.

Slowly exhaling, her breath steaming silver into the morning air, she moved forward. Torturous inches. Like sneaking up on a stag and touching him before he knew you were there. No noise and no time.

Step by step, she moved closer to the noises.

They were speaking Common, but several of the voices were so thickly accented she had trouble understanding at first. One, however, she understood and recognized perfectly, and her guts twisted in fear and a strange feeling of dread. Thak.

Thak's voice was brash and loud as he spoke to the owners of the sibilant, low voices. 'I'm telling you, the village is all but undefended! You can sweep down like dragons, take whatever – and whoever – you want. Ever had some of our southern girls, scalefaces?'

'Sss... we are not... interested, human. In girlsss. You say there iss meat?'

'Oh yeah, yeah. Elk, deer, all sort of fowl... we store food months in advance, to prepare for the winters down here. If you–'

She listened with half her mind, the other half pulling up an image of lanky, fair-headed, shifty-eyed Thak. Four or five winters older than her, he had been banished from the village the last spring – for theft. Among her people, who eked out a hard living in the region between mountains and plains, the only worse crime was murder – though his thieving was only the latest offense in a long string of problems.

He had cheated at dice, lied to the village elders, broken every rule, brawled, and pushed the village beyond tolerance. They had banished him, warning him never to return on pain of death. He had left, swearing revenge on them all.

With a sickening chill, Merrana realized his oath could soon be fulfilled.

As quietly as possible, she dropped to her stomach in the snow and resumed her slow inching forward. She *had* to see who he was talking to.

There. A garish cloak... but the hand that protruded from the sleeve was Thak's – she recognized the long scar one of the boys had left on his hand in a fight. Closer still, trying not to breathe... Just a little closer, peering through the branches...

And then she did stop breathing. Above a dark, dark red cloak was a face from her childhood nightmares. A lizard... a man... a dragon-man.

Draconian, the crystal morning breathed at her.

Draconian, the terrifying stories of her childhood screamed through every fiber of her being.

Real. They were real. Her father's tales of their butchery and horror, that had so frightened Rejek and herself, were true. Her blue eyes traveled down the not-quite-right body to rest on the wicked curved sword at the draconian's waist. She swallowed convulsively as she imagined little Tomie dead on such a blade. Trembling violently, she buried her face in the cold snow, the chill granular wetness of it bringing her back to reality.

This was no time for weakness. Grimly, she scanned the group that crowded around Thak. Eight... nine... no, eleven of the dragonmen stood next to the traitor, watching him as he sketched a map of the village in the snow. They were thin and ill-dressed for the snows, and she found herself wondering what they were doing in this place.

They probably had had nowhere else to go after the wars, she realized. If all the stories had been true, then Laurana and the others had scattered the evil armies. Small remnant bands such as this had probably survived in many of the wilder parts of Krynn.

The village had to be warned. As she crawled

backwards in the snow, unwilling to stand until she was well out of view of the creatures, she was struck by a sudden and horrible thought.

There weren't enough able-bodied men in the village to defend it. The people of Komei were not a war-like folk. Her father was the only man who had ever truly held a sword or shield for war. There were some who could use knives and bows, of course, for hunting, and set effective snares, but the plague had taken the best and strongest of them...

Perhaps three men were left in the village who would be of any use in a battle. The village brawls were one thing – facing these hardened, desperate dragon-warriors was quite another. As her eyes returned hopelessly to the draconians, she even noticed one was wearing robes – the black robes of a magic user!

They couldn't stand against such a force. A bitter and choking despair welled up in her throat as she bit her lower lip to keep from making any sound. She might be able to get back to the village in time to warn people... but what good would it do?

Dismayed, she slumped down into the slush beneath her, feeling her breath steam over her face. The fine hairs of the fringe on her parka hood trembled with her breathing. The snow beneath was cold, the frost seeping up into her body, but she didn't care. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore... thought and emotions were numbed by the cold, and what escaped that steamed off into the icy air, to freeze and shatter.

For the second time that day, she felt like screaming but again refrained. After all, it was never good to scream in the mountains, you could cause an avalanche... and then there were the dragonmen. She shuddered again. If they saw her...

Her elbow was getting wet, and she moved it automatically. It didn't help much though, as every part of her was getting wet. Maybe she'd just drown here in the snow and end all her problems.

Actually, she mused, it'd be better if the dragonmen drowned.

The idea hit her like a thunderbolt. Well, why not? No doubt the creatures would chase her if they saw her... Again hardly daring to breathe, she shifted position slightly in the snow, the tentative beginnings of a plan in her mind, like a seed beneath the frost.

They were talking again, and she refocused on what they were saying, her hands moving in the snow in gestures very, very familiar to her childhood. Gathering and shaping. Packing firmly. Rounding.

'... We will.... take this village, human. Yess. You sshow uss... and we spare you, yess?'

'That's the idea, friends. So, when do you want me to lead you to it?'

'We sharpen our weapons. When we are ready, you take uss then.'

'No problem, gents. No problem at all. So I can go until then, right, and–'

'Ssss! No! No, human. You ssstaay, hss! You have no chanssse to tell thisss village!'

'Ah, right, right. Sorry, just a suggestion–'

'No more ssuggestionsss. Sshut up.'

'Ah. Right,' said Thak in a small voice, and for a second she even bothered feeling sorry for him. It passed quickly.

Her blue eyes narrowed in renewed determination as she watched the draconians from her place of concealment, some ten yards away. The horrible dragon-men were sharpening their swords on rocks or something, the grating noise filling her mind. She closed her eyes once, perhaps in prayer, perhaps just to order her thoughts, and then there was no more time for doubt. She had to succeed.

There was Thak in his ugly cloak, sullenly slouched against one of the trees as he watched the draconians stand, armed and ready.

'Now, human. Lead uss to the village. And no tricksss!' their leader hissed, looking expectantly at the surly human.

The hard ball of snow and ice left her hand and flew to its target as sure as any magician's missile. It hit Thak square in the face just as he was about to speak. The second hard-packed orb of debris, slush, and ice collided with the side of the leader's reptilian snout.

She had their attention.

'Grraar! What iss thiss?!' their leader shouted, shaking his head to clear the sting of the snowball. One of them picked her out, pointing with the long curved blade to her place behind the branches. As one, they drew their blades and charged.

Merrana turned and ran for her life. Oddly enough, as the eleven draconians chased her through the snow, she felt for the first time a real, solid glimmer of hope. These lizard-men were surprisingly slow – though when she thought about it, it made sense. Their clawed feet were made for plains or cities, not for the snow. Their dense bodies were heavy, too; and the combination made them flounder through the snow. She was keeping ahead of them easily.

'Ssstop her! She musst not be allowed to esscape and warn the humans!' the leader bellowed behind her. A faint smile appeared on her face. The village was the last place she was headed.

The hope she was feeling quickly died to the accompanying noise of words spoken in spidery, crawling language. The magic-user...! Without conscious

thought, she turned and flung the last ball of snow, clutched in her fist. It hit, yet another testament of skill honed from long snow battles with her brothers.

His curses and hissed oaths followed her through the woods as she kept up her pace – fast enough to be well out of reach, slow enough so that she didn't leave them behind. She just hoped she could remember which way her destination lay...

A snowy clearing lay before her, oddly flat. She would have exhaled in relief if she hadn't been using all her oxygen to keep moving. It had seemed like forever: running through the snowy woods, jumping over fallen logs and wading through drifts as she had to work harder and harder to stay ahead of them.

She had speed; they had stamina. She had a knowledge of these woods, of how to move in the snow. They had strength. She had a destination. They had numbers.

She had the lives of her people and family to drive her forward. They had hunger.

But now Merrana had reached her goal. It was up to the gods now, to see if this crazy plan would work. Stumbling slightly, she made her way out into the center of this smooth white space in the forest.

They followed, their hisses and cries becoming more triumphant as they watched their quarry falter.

Her legs wouldn't carry her any farther. She collapsed onto the cold surface below her, hidden only by a thin dusting of snow. She managed to crawl a few paces more before she stopped and looked back.

They were out of the trees now, into the 'clearing,' their blades out and gleaming. They no longer had to run and instead advanced slowly as a group, catching their ragged breaths and grinning. Their eyes gleamed like coals. Only twenty paces away now.

Fifteen paces.

Ten.

Oh gods, let this work, she prayed, knowing there was now no other hope.

And the gods heard. Their answer was the faintest of cracks.

The draconians paused, for the first time realizing something was wrong. Underneath their clawed feet, ground which was not ground at all groaned and cracked again. And again.

Crack crack creak crack –

With a noise like a dragon's roar, the thin ice of the pond's center gave way beneath the draconians, splintering in great sheets. The dragon-men screamed, a remarkably human sound, as the ice broke revealing the dark water below. A few tried to run back to the

safety of the shore, but it was too late. Their talons scrabbled helplessly on the shifting, crumbling surface, then gravity took over. The waters claimed them as well.

Merrana learned a thing of great interest then: draconians were not meant for swimming. They flailed briefly, but their dense reptilian bodies sank quickly, swallowed by the chill waters.

She lay on her part of the ice, still intact, for long minutes after it was all over, catching her breath and listening as silence returned to the forest.

Thak had turned and ran from his draconian captors the second their attention had been diverted, and she didn't really care. Her hatred for him had dimmed to an impersonal disgust now. The village could deal with him once she told them how he would have betrayed them all.

Finally ready to move on, she carefully left the ice on all fours, distributing her body weight as evenly as possible. Back on the snowy bank, she stood and brushed off her clothing, a business-like expression on her face.

After all, there was still wood to gather for the fire.

Dana Surrey is a high school senior in California with a comic-book fetish and an overloaded schedule. She writes fan fiction way too much but can never remember where she left most of the stories...

*She is webmistress for several sites, including <http://www.geocities.com/visitspace/> (for geeks) and <http://www.geocities.com/theshade00/etrigan.html> (devoted to the DC Comics character Etrigan). She is also list mommy for the really cool group *AcolytesOfRaistlin*.*

She draws and daydreams and hates to drive, which is one of the reasons she will someday move to London where they have that spiffy little invention, the Underground.

She can be reached for just about any reason, regardless of inanity, at dcmercury@colleageclub.com. One day the computer gods will teleport in from the tenth dimension and appoint her manager of the universe, and then you'll all be sorry for the snide comments you made.

Remembrance

by Craig J. Ries

The plain was nearly barren; it had been so for many a year. A lone man stood in the middle of what seemed an endless field of dirt, small brush, and the occasional patch of grass. Off in the distance, a road could be seen. The man's eyes followed it carefully, tracing it along the horizon until it ended at a great stone construct off in the distance. Long ago, a battle had been fought here. He remembered it well...

Doubt...

Night was upon them as they walked the battlements of the great stone fortress. Winter had forced them to hold their ground, to make a stand against the armies that were amassed outside those walls. The snow fell lightly, its cold biting each of them as they tried to go about their work. Rations were low and none would be forthcoming until the spring – if a supply line could even be established then. They knew the attack would come soon. Their enemy would not wait much longer. The soldiers knew that they had to fight valiantly, sacrifice their lives if need be, in order to protect the keep.

Already, one of their leaders had ridden forth to attack with his followers, to strike first instead of waiting behind the sanctity of the stone walls. But they had been defeated and none who rode forth had survived. The remaining soldiers awaited their own fate.

The man thought of his loneliness when he was sitting atop those battlements, of his loss of hope as he watched soldier after soldier fall beneath the hordes that camped outside those castle walls. He stood as close as possible to where those soldiers had given their lives to a leader without a sense of purpose. A leader misguided in his faith, lost to his honor.

It was a sight he had never hoped to see again. After all these years, the details were not lost to him. Everything he saw had played over and over in his mind, in his dreams and nightmares. The neigh of the horses, the clash of swords and shields, the bloodshed, the maimed bodies that fell and never moved again, the screams of the dying, the roaring cheers of the enemy spread out across the field, the agony within himself to have witnessed it, yet, unable to do anything but watch.

Hope...

Few slept that night. It did not matter whether it was the cold, the hunger, or the thought of their impending doom. It was as though a presence loomed over them. Very little mattered to them anymore. Many were already beginning to question their faith. Some wondered if they would be driven insane by the conditions they were forced to endure.

One soldier stood out amongst the crowd. He was a young one, from a family thought lost. Yet, he rallied the remaining soldiers. He gave them hope and restored their faith. He prepared them with a unique weapon long thought to be a myth. He told them of another magical artifact which could be used against their opponents. They were given tasks, which they gladly set about doing to replace the monotony of waiting. Soon, they were armed with a weapon, a strategy, and again with their hope.

That day passed relatively quickly, he recalled. The horrors of the previous day receded from his mind as he was given task after task to complete. Standing watch on the battlements, cleaning his armor and that of others, preparing the day's meals, retraining and practicing with a weapon that swordsmen did not know well. All was to be prepared as quickly and as efficiently as possible. No time was to be wasted that day.

The men worked with a fervor unmatched. Even those who could call themselves veterans worked alongside their younger counterparts, alongside their leader. Even the woman present, as small as she appeared beside the soldiers in their armor, took it upon herself to join in their cause and dress for battle.

Faith...

Night fell around them again as they each finished their tasks. The air became quiet and still as winter's chill set in once again. Rations were handed out in an orderly fashion. The men became restless, even as they realized how tired they had become from the day's work. Tomorrow, they knew, would be a day of battle.

This night, however, was not one of relaxation. Each soldier took his turn stalking the battlements. Each soldier was permitted a few hours of sleep – for many it was a time of pondering, a time of prayer. Others took a fitful rest as the visions from the previous day filled their thoughts.

The voices echoed in his mind as he fell to his knees, the memories overtaking him. His breathing became more relaxed as he lost himself in the past, in the shadows of what once was. The soldier could recall so much that had been going on around him, so many things at once that at times like this his mind shut out everything in his surroundings but those shadows.

The shadows lit up in front of his eyes. He could feel the cold surrounding him, hear his stomach rumble at the lack of rations. The sounds of his companions muttering nearby along those battlements seemed close, yet distant. And amongst the sights and sounds, the dull clamor of metal on metal, the continued agony of those that had fallen. Even death, he feared, would not allow him to escape those nightmares.

Fear...

All preparations were in order. Weapons were drawn. The men stood at their positions, awaiting orders from the lone soldier. Few stood atop the battlements. Rumor was that great beasts had been spotted along the horizon. The veterans scoffed at such a notion, for the beasts were creatures of myth. It did not take long to change their minds: three of the magnificent wyrms approached.

Shouts arose as each man took his place in the fortress. The old stood beside the young in preparation, none able to withstand their fear, their anticipation. Shrieks filled their ears. The air grew still. They waited.

Still lost in the past, the man remembered how he kept his eyes on their leader as much as possible. All were ordered from the tower walls and to take up guard below. Their leader took to the battlements with a tall weapon in hand. He stood, and he awaited the approach of the creatures of the skies.

A roar erupted as the three beasts swept over the walls of the fortress. At a glance, dragonfear crept deep into the very heart of all present. Some cowered in fear, others thought only of hiding in the deepest recesses of the stone structure to their backs.

The soldier was one of the few who would not be a direct part of their strategy. There were just too few of the special weapons to go around. Pure terror overtook his mind as two of the beasts swept over the walls in those shadows of the past and into the courtyard. He was so close, he could recall, that he thought he could reach out and touch the blue hide, an opportunity he had shied away from all those years before.

The creature flew on, not even noticing him, heading straight beyond the gates and portcullis, heading for the heart of the central building. Another followed suit. He recalled the gleaming metal points which appeared from crevices and hallways only after the beasts realized they had become victims of a cunning trap, the magical artifact holding them in its grasp. Unconsciously, he brought his sword from his sheath, tempted to run forth and strike the squirming silhouette of his past.

Sadness...

Two of the three creatures were dead, pierced and slashed by scores of wounds. The rider of the third cursed loudly while the mount screeched in dismay at the fate of its companions. Angered, the creature dove at the defiant leader atop the battlements. Few were able to watch the ensuing battle, but those who did watched in astonishment, for it was one man against a creature born of death and destruction and its rider, the leader of the encamped enemy. Their lone leader scored a small wound against the mount, enraging the creature even further, but he was no match. In the blink of an eye, the battle was over. The image of their leader impaled by the rider's lance was forever etched in the minds of all present.

His eyes misted at the recollection. The body slid from the lance to lie hidden from view. The creature landed upon the battlements, allowing its rider to dismount. The rider grabbed the magical weapon of their slain leader as the woman approached. They recognized each other, he noticed, although the words spoken between them were lost. The dragon took off with its rider, but turned around quickly to face the woman. The weapon was tossed back down with scorn, as if the rider pitied the attempts of the man who wielded it moments before. 'You'll need it,' the soldier had heard the rider say aloud, a challenge given to all present.

The soldier smiled briefly as those words tumbled inside his head. Those weapons, those special weapons that helped decide the outcome of that war. He noted the names of many a friend who had given their lives valiantly in battle. He mumbled the oath of honor he had taken upon himself all those years ago, and thought about how it was still bound to his purpose in life.

Peace...

It was a burial fitting for kings, with an honor guard comprising all the warriors who had fought at their leader's side. He was placed in a tomb at the heart of the fortress. His arms were folded, hands clasping the pommel of his ancient sword. A peculiar talisman was left upon his chest, a symbol to something now lost to time. Through the sacrifice of one man, they were shown their lack of faith and honor.

The sacrifice had a great impact upon every soldier. It affected each in a different way. The soldier knew it was a defining moment in the lives of all present. He withdrew his sword and planted the blade deep into the earth, keeping both his hands upon the hilt. He relived that ceremony. The stance, the prayer, the salute. But as he performed the actions with his hands, his mind still raced in the memories. Quietly, he broke from his reverie. Standing, he softly spoke another prayer, a prayer that the dead might safely be guided into the arms of their god. All that had gone before him, he knew, had received their god's blessing. His time would come soon as well.

As he walked away, he knew that his pilgrimage would end the years of nightmares that had tormented him. Yet he would be unable to forget. The sword was his last relic of that battle from the past. But he still had his honor and faith... his memories. All these years, he realized, all these years in remembrance. He would never forget the sacrifices made, the hope given, the honor restored. He knew he would finally be at peace.

Craig Ries is a starving computer programmer currently residing in Denver, Colorado. He may be found wandering aimlessly on both the Official Dragonlance Mailing List and alt.fan.dragonlance.

This is not his first foray into writing Dragonlance fan fiction and will not be his last. He hopes some day to be published by WotC and to create his own fantasy world to play with.

His other fan fiction may be found (eventually) at his website, www.angelfire.com/ia/TheWildChild/. He can also be contacted at cries@yifan.net.

Puppet's Quest

by Todd Wolfe

Rocks shifted and cracked slightly as Garnier's hand stuck solidly against them. The man grimaced slightly, for the cliffside, uneven, scraped into his palm as he smashed it home. What pain there was passed almost instantly, the damage caused by striking a rough surface with an open palm being substantially less than had he used a balled fist.

He stared helplessly at a large blot of darkness sitting seventy feet above him upon the sheer cliff's face. The darkness was deceptive: it could be a trick of the light, a mere section of wall which the fading sunlight failed to touch, or it could be the entrance to a deep cavern, the cavern which he had traveled the last four weeks to find.

He studied the jagged cliffside for at least the fourth time, vainly searching for a series of ledges, or an abandoned footpath... anything that could get him to, or even near, the shadow. To no great surprise, no such footpath had appeared in the last few minutes. He was forced to grudgingly admit he would have to trace the cliff southward, to find an area with a more gradual grade so he could climb the cliff. From there, he could investigate what lay within the shadow. He looked up at it again and frowned, his fist clenching once more. From this angle he couldn't even verify whether or not it even *was* a cave, much less the cave he was searching for, and he disliked the idea of wasting an entire day to discover a meaningless shadow.

'This is what happens when we let you plot the course?' came a soft, hissing voice from just behind him. He unconsciously tensed, the sensation of a thousand chilled pins moving swiftly up his spine. He turned towards the voice tensely and met the unwavering smirk of Selini, one of his two traveling companions. Her garb only enhanced the threat of hidden danger projected by her voice. She wore hip-height boots, crafted from the skins of some exotic animal Garnier had never been able to identify, and a long, onyx colored dress. The dress was slit up either side to create an alarming contrast with the girl's pale skin. Her skin was not the white of ivory, nor pearl, nor even that of alabaster. Garnier could not bring himself to describe the color as anything that might be found even remotely appealing. Instead, he could only describe her as the shade of a comatose. Her skin served as evidence of her childhood, spent protected from the harsh sun and actual labor.

Selini seemed passively aggressive by nature, a trait that showed itself in her muted, death-like voice,

and eagerness to berate and denigrate anyone around her for every mistake they might make. Given this, Garnier realized that the girl likely didn't wear the dress out of ignorance of her skin's effect on people. Indeed, it would not be entirely unlike her to wear the dresses she did *because* of the unsettling effect it had on other people, enjoying making those around her uncomfortable.

'Well, you weren't leading, and we're down here. Your complaining won't do a lot to change that now will it?' asked a sagely voice from behind her. The voice was Bernard's, a second traveling companion. Like Selini, his voice was a poor match for his body, but while hers brought forth images of a coiled serpent, his made one expect an aged grandfather. In truth, Bernard had seen a mere thirty-five years, his hair the color of pepper with but a fistful of cinnamon tossed in. His hair was rarely seen anymore, for he tended to keep his cloak close when outdoors, the hood pulled tight against his face each time the cruel west wind blew. The cloak itself had once been a brilliant white, the color Selini's skin should have been. Long days of travel had gradually darkened its sheen to the point that, if viewed for the first time, it would likely be considered brown instead. A gnarled staff graced his right hand, created from pure ironoak and topped with a silver headpiece. The headpiece looked like a spear, consisting of three prongs that jutted forward from the staff to meet in a metal point, creating a hollow triangle.

Bernard leaned slightly on his staff as he walked, clearly favoring one leg over the other. He blamed the injury on a sporting accident from his childhood, speaking of the time with such a wistful voice that it only aided his grandfatherly image.

Selini slowly turned her head, making just enough effort to be able to see the man from the corner of her eye. 'When you find that incompetents are in command, it is your duty to replace them,' she answered, her icy tone meshing dangerously with her half-narrowed eye.

Garnier shivered slightly, even knowing the threat was hollow. He took one last glance up the cliff, mentally cursing it and whatever god had created it, before turning towards his two companions. 'There's a cave of some sort up there, but we have to scale the cliff to get to it. As I recall, the terrain levels off somewhat to the south...'

Without another word, or any recognition to Selini's attempts to undermine him, he turned and casually started walking, the setting sun throwing his

shadow onto the towering rocks.

The afternoon passed relatively quietly, Garnier withdrawing into his thoughts, not really caring to carry on a conversation with either of his two colleagues. As for Selini and Bernard, the two of them talked as little as possible, as every time they spoke an argument seemed to erupt. After the tedious days of travel and the persistent, sweltering sun, no one was in any mood to argue.

It was hardly surprising that Selini and Bernard's views differed so regularly; their choice of wearing white or black symbolized the stark contrast between their schools, while Garnier's red represented the third, somewhere in between. The three were Magi, each from a different school, each with a different philosophy of how best to apply The Art.

Bernard was of the White Robes, serving his patron god Solinari, who believed that magic was a special gift delivered unto deserving people, that those granted the ability to use sorcery should use it for the good of those who lack the talent. The white robes believed that commoners despised mages not out of jealousy for their seemingly super-natural abilities, but rather as a reaction to the unknown. If the mages could help out the commoners and teach them the rudimentary rules of magic, then the force would be better understood and less frightening, thus encouraging a higher level of trust and reduced fear and hatred.

Selini, by contrast, favored the Black Robes of Nuitari, the dark god of magic. The black robes believed that the populace were naught but simple-minded cattle; the reason they didn't understand magic was not that they lacked one of the Gods' blessings, but instead that they were simply too daft to comprehend the art. The Black Robes were appalled that a mage should become enslaved to serving the masses when his only crime was the talent to rise above their lot. They believed the purpose of magic was to better the lives of anyone who could master it, that using it to help those that failed its mastery would go against the very nature of magic itself.

The Red Robes, which Garnier traditionally wore, held the position that magic was magic, and only that. Its use was in those who used it and there was no correct or incorrect way to use it, except those which would threaten the continued existence of magic itself.

In ages long since forgotten, the three orders had banded together. Much of the populace viewed their gift as the mark of demonic possession or mental instability, bringing the commoners against the mages. Against such a challenge, it had become increasingly obvious that magic would not and could not survive divided, and so the three schools of magic united to form the

Conclave, established to protect and preserve the existence of magic. The Conclave heads, the leaders of each of the three orders of magic, had simultaneously learned of a powerful and chaotic magical item known as the Greygem, an item which seemed to have a will of its own. It desired to avoid capture, particularly capture by those magically competent. In a time-honored ritual as old as the Conclave itself, each of the orders chose a representative to investigate. The presence of all three orders was hardly a sign of how well the orders worked together, but was instead evidence that none of the orders trusted the others to honestly report their findings.

Two hours later, Garnier finally found what looked to be a foot-trail to the top of the cliff. It was the third such trail he had found, but the first had involved footwork too complex for Bernard, with his bad knee, and the second was too steep for Selini, who lacked any sort of endurance. He waited for the two of them to catch up, wondering if it might be easier to just go check the cave himself instead of waiting for them every leg of the climb. The black robe came first, her pride forcing her to outdo at least one person. Closely behind came Bernard, his face having taken on a bit of a flush as even his hearty-looking body proved itself no better than the woman's at extended exercise.

Garnier smiled at them, leaning casually against the wall of the cliff next to the footpath and utterly ignoring the sharp rocks that bore into his back; at this moment the fact that he looked commanding and in charge far outweighed the slight discomfort afforded.

Selini cast him a bitter glance and shook her head, muttering, 'I always thought mages cast spells to avoid this type of trouble. Why couldn't the Conclave have sent a more experienced mage that could have simply flown up to the cave and gotten the damn jewel...'

Garnier laughed a bit. 'Sel,' he began, earning him a menacing glare, the same glare he received every time he shortened her name, 'if things were easy to do, why would we waste time doing them?'

'Garnier, don't you think we ought to catch our breath before we go and check that cave? If the Greygem really is in there, then you can bet there's someone else *keeping* it there...' Bernard interrupted, glancing quickly left and right as if whatever was guarding the Greygem might appear simply because it was talked about. His face was bathed in beads of sweat, his complexion having gained a red tinge from the steep switchback trail they had taken up the side of the cliff. His breath came in ragged gasps and, though Garnier didn't say anything, he knew full well that fear

of the Greygem's guardian wasn't the reason the White Robe requested a halt. Garnier put a hand to his chin, scratching slightly at the beard that had been shaven off daily for over a year. He glanced at Selini for a moment only to receive a slight scoff of impatience, but having traveled these weeks with her, he had learned to read her well enough to know she also favored stopping. If she was ever against something, she didn't wait to be acknowledged before making it known.

He nodded slowly and sighed. 'Very well, but we can't stay the night here... unless you two snuck it by me you haven't cast a spell all day, and if the Greygem is as powerful as we've heard, then it likely can already feel the magic pouring off us... it may already be taking steps to escape.' Selini glanced at him, upper lip curling back slightly in a sneer. 'You actually believe those old tales about the Greygem being sentient? What next, are we going to quest for a singing sword?'

She shook her head and sighed, 'I swear, you're worse than that innkeep I sold the fountain in Town Square to for a round of drinks... tubby old fool was too embarrassed to say a word... or he still thinks he owns it.' Selini shrugged lightly, as if she considered anything that happened that didn't directly involve her to be irrelevant.

Bernard looked at the black robe and sighed deeply, shaking his head and muttering, 'I don't know how you live with yourself...'

Selini glanced back at the man and shrugged innocently. 'Never really tried living as anyone else.'

The cave, for that's what it proved to be, was dark and foreboding. The area was utterly devoid of animal life, the only sound a ghostly cry of wind which issued forth every couple of minutes, just scattered enough that it seemed too inconsistent for a natural process. Looking into the darkness, Garnier cursed his incompetence for not bringing a torch or learning a substitute. Clearing his throat, he glanced to his two companions and tried to ask casually, 'So, anyone bring a torch?'

Selini looked at him and then glanced to Bernard, her lack of complaint evidence that she likewise failed to predict the darkness of the cave. It was not an entirely unforgivable offence. Nearly every tale that involved the mystical Greygem spoke of the odd light that seemed to spill from within its depths; when searching for something that puts out its own light, few would consider bringing a torch.

Bernard sighed slightly and nodded, lowering his staff so the triangled end faced into the cave. Closing his eyes, he ran a hand down the shaft, muttering words and phrases too faint even for the sharp-eared

magies to pick up. Slowly, the prongs of the triangle headpiece began to glow, beginning from the tip and moving slowly back towards the massive silver headpiece. All at once, the White Robe thrust his hand forward and said one word that, unlike the others, stayed within the minds of his listeners, a very common magical word that instantly betrayed its intended effect: *Shirak*, Light. A bright burst erupted from the base of the older man's staff, channeling up through the rune-marked wood and pouring out of the tip. The light stayed focused in a narrow beam as it launched itself within the cavern, not revealing too much at a time, but nevertheless making the magi feel much safer than the alternative.

Within the cave, a stifling silence hung over the group. No steady dripping sounds of deep caves greeted them here, only their footsteps sounding entirely too loud as they crept into the massive cavern. From what Bernard's lightbeam was able to show, the tunnel was progressing steadily deeper into the cliff, widening slightly and not showing any kind of side tunnels or alternate routes.

'Bernard, douse that light! I think I see something!' Selini hissed, drawing a baleful glare from Bernard who muttered something about his staff not being a torch and the light itself being rather complicated to extinguish. Rather than press the issue, he simply flipped the staff upwards and planted the butt against the ground so the beam shone harmlessly towards the ceiling.

Selini's eyes had been sharp indeed, for the moment Bernard's lightbeam was diverted from the hallway a pale, rippling glow could be made out from the midst of a large room located at the far end of the tunnel. The room looked large enough to easily house a dragon, though none of the three magi felt comfortable acknowledging that fact, fearing that naming a possibility might increase its probability.

Slowly, steadily, the pulsating light grew nearer, flickering over them as if the Greygem were immersed in a liquid and the ripples that encircled it defused its light into a pleasant, shifting glow. Stepping into the room, Selini and Garnier saw danger immediately. No sooner had they emerged from the tunnel that a cloaked figure, standing at the far end of the room, gestured violently at them. With a single word, a gout of flame launched from the man's fingertips and streaked across the room.

Selini acted instantly, her eyes seeing the Black Robes of the stranger and all but knowing what was about to transpire. She broke into a run towards the unknown figure, knowing that if she could cover enough ground she'd be safe; no mage in his right mind

would unleash a spell that could damage him in its recoil.

Garnier didn't realize the danger until the fire was airborne, but having grown up on a farm he knew all too well that when a bull charged, it didn't pay to stand about gawking at it. Seeing Selini rushing the wizard and knowing the girl's thirst for rampant destruction, the Red Robe leapt to the side of the cavern. He crawled into a small wedge within the cave side, knowing that the spell would erupt as soon as it struck the ground, sending shards of molten rock into whatever was left exposed.

Bernard, third into the room, had no time to react. He barely even realized the danger before the fireball crashed against the wall by his head, sending him to the ground screaming as his world became engulfed in flaming rock and ash.

'Darksister!' the stranger yelled to Selini, who had been the only one fast enough to escape the fireball unscathed. 'Aid me in finishing these two! We will have the Greygem for ourselves, think of the power it promises if we can unlock its secrets!'

The man didn't wait for a response, but instead began his next spell, looking at Garnier with cool confidence as power and magic coursed through his body and crackled about his fingertips. Before he could unleash the spell, however, the Red Robe completed a spell of his own, sending a trail of blazing darts screaming from his hand and striking all about the unknown mage's body, breaking his concentration.

Garnier smirked in relief, knowing that if his luck held and he could continue delivering weak spells before the other mage managed to cast, by disrupting every attempt he would eventually wear the man down. Even as he made his plans, he realized that his opponent was no fool and would likely be using his own fast but weak spells as well. To make matters even worse, he could see Selini, standing just to the left of the unknown Black Robe, begin her own spell casting while turning to look at her former leader.

'You shall suffer for your betrayal!' Bernard roared, having regained his feet after the fireball. He bled openly from a multitude of wounds, most specifically a rough gash across his forehead, and obviously favored one leg strongly over the other. Bernard's robes were coated with soot and ash, burned entirely away in some places, though his similarly coated and charred skin made it impossible to tell where the robes ended and the skin began. Though Garnier hardly had time to truly look at the White Robe, he had the strong impression that Selini's actions were the only thing fueling his will to fight, that if he was able to kill the girl, his rage would die and he would collapse with it.

The Black Robe launched into his magic first. As Garnier had figured, he was using a very small spell, actually the same one Garnier had just used on him, sending a multitude of gleaming darts flying across the battlefield. One of them shot into the Red Robe, for no other reason than to ruin his own preparations, while the remainder of the mage's power flew unerringly into Bernard, finishing the job the fireball had begun and sending the white robe back to the scorched ground.

Garnier shook his head, trying not to focus on the charred flesh smell that was now beginning to fill his nostrils and trying even harder not to think about the smell's origin. To his horror, before he could even begin the preparations for a third spell, he saw Selini go into the finishing gestures of her own. She extended her hands before her, cupping them slightly and calling forth a surge of electricity into her palm, holding it in a compact ball as she continued pouring the magic in, increasing both its size and intensity.

The Black Robe closed his eyes and began going into another complex chant, apparently intending to finish off Garnier in the event Selini's attack failed or somehow missed. With his head bowed he never saw Selini turn, extending her hands towards him and releasing the mass of energy in one great streaking lightning bolt that surged across the short distance between them. The Black Robe likely never quite understood what happened, only became suddenly aware of his lost spell and a long, frantic scream that he might have recognized as his own.

Garnier looked at Selini, stunned, only to be answered by a cynical laugh, 'You expected less? The master of the Black Robes has promised me rewards if I can finally capture the Greygem, so what possible use do I have for unlocking the artifact instead? I could slave for months and hopefully gain power, or return with it now and gain power! Always take the guarantee.'

Without warning the Greygem, freed from its magical prison by the death of its warden, slowly floated in a circle at the edge of the room.

'Stop it!' moaned Selini, knowing as well as Garnier that it was impossible to stop. In an effort to ensure nobody killed anyone else during the journey, the Masters of the Conclave had split the enslavement spell which would confine the Greygem into three parts and taught a third of the spell to each initiate. With Bernard having fallen in the battle, they were powerless to stop the sentient artifact.

The Greygem paused for a second, a bit of light twinkling within reminding Garnier of a rich wine, and then it flew with incredible speed out of the cave, dropping from history for several hundred years.

Garnier turned quickly and rushed over to Bernard, feeling suddenly guilty for assuming him dead, and an awful certainty that his assumption had not been misplaced. When he reached the corpse he saw, with an impulsive shudder, that he had been correct on both points. The skin had a plastered look about it, as if it had melted and then resealed itself around the man's eyes. Multiple cuts had torn through the once-fine robes while the skin around them had burned an angry red. The man's hair and eyebrows were, quite simply, gone. The iron oak staff had survived the blast and lay unscathed near him, triangle tip still shining forth light as if nothing had changed.

'Garnier! Look!' Selini called, her tone making the words sound as an order. Garnier tore his face from the man he'd almost known well enough to consider a friend and stared at the Black Robe, who was already rifling through a desk she had found in a nook at one side of the cave. 'Bring that light too,' she continued, 'I think I found some papers but can't read them.'

At the mention of the light, Garnier realized that he could see the desk, and Selini, even though the staff shined another way. Looking at the center of the room, he saw the water still sparkled with the rippling gray light he had once attributed to the Greygem. Shaking his head and wondering if he'd ever understand the complexities of magic and nature, or discover the boundaries of their overlap, he grabbed the staff and walked with it over to Selini, holding it above him so she could read the various papers.

'These must have been written by that Black Robe I killed...' Selini mumbled, more to herself than to him. Her eyes were wide in fascination reminiscent of a baby watching her fingers move, 'And they are all addressed to Varis, head of the Black Robes... He must have been trying to cast a transcript spell, to have a pen in Varis' office copy his so she would get his message...'

Garnier nodded, having heard of that particular magic, then looked down. 'But... this is dated over two months ago... why were we sent out here if a Black Robe already had custody of the Greygem?' He silently added, 'And why was the Black Robe allowed access to a spell he could cast by himself to enslave it?'

Selini read the flowing script easily, 'Let's see... well, here he's talking about how he isn't sure why he keeps writing, as lack of response is making him believe that the Greygem is blocking his attempts at communication... and he said earlier that he had it 'rooted', whatever that means, but lacked the power to transport it safely... and...' Selini grew strangely quiet, reading a couple of lines, then reading them again, her excited features slowly melting into confusion. Finally, apparently remembering she had company standing at

the other end of a staff who couldn't make out the words, she read aloud, 'This is dated nine days ago... "Today a city boy stumbled upon the cave, saying that he had seen the gem in a dream. I dared not kill the lad, for the last thing I need is an angry mob creating chaos and giving the Greygem a chance to escape, so I was forced to scare the child away. Nevertheless, this concerns me, if the Greygem is implanting images of itself in the minds of others, it is only a matter of time before the Red and White Robes catch wind of it."'

Selini bit her lip and looked confused, speaking aloud again, 'So... it... it wanted us to come?'

Garnier nodded grimly, seeing from her expression that she hadn't fully understood, sighed deeply and looked at the exit, where he had last seen the Greygem. 'You read what the mage said... if the villagers attacked, the Greygem might be able to escape in the chaos of that fight. Magical battles are much more chaotic, and much more likely to weaken the holds on whatever he had rooting the Greygem down. I think it knew that if it brought in more mages, it would allow itself free...'

Seeing her doubtful expression he smiled hollowly, walking over to collect the rest of Bernard's things and prepare the body for burial. 'Think about it... it was preventing the mage from communicating with Varis, but did nothing to stop his or our spells during the battle. It planted its image in the minds of the populace, ensuring we would eventually come. That artifact was sentient, Sel, and its strategy even outwitted the Heads of the Conclave.'

Selini blinked, wrestling with the complex notion, and turned to stare at the exits, absentmindedly collecting the mage's papers into a small stack. So busy was her mind with the ramifications of this, that she failed to notice Garnier had shortened her name. ☾

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Tobias's Illusions

by Scott Richter

A soft breeze was blowing in the early morning, much like it did every morning in Tobias. The sun glistened off the water, like an infinity of diamonds scattered upon the surface. Birds, now stirred by the warmth of the sun's rays, began to sing in the most beautiful harmonies, rivaling the forest songs of Elven kingdoms.

No, not much was different today, except maybe the city itself. There were no markets outside the gates, no guards upon the high marble walls, nor any in the square hauling kender to and fro with items falling from their charges' bright-colored pouches. There were no children playing on the crushed stone streets, no young men courting maidens with flowers and words so soft a baby unicorn's hide might be jealous. About a mile south, two robed figures stood atop a small cliff and gazed at the city, curious as to its quiet state and magnificent beauty. The one on the left, broader and taller than its companion, carried a large and well-worn brown leather pack. The cloak was thick and padded, possibly to hide what lay beneath. The shorter, more graceful figure wore a similar robe; heavy and long. Both wore hoods that were drawn low to conceal their faces. Yet neither appeared to be affected by the increasing heat as it radiated from the climbing sun, which rose higher and higher into the bright azure sky.

The traveler to the right held a staff of smooth and soft brown wood in thin fingers. The staff had something about it, something... mysterious. A greenish blue light shone from it, but the sun was hiding it from all who could not see within the planes of magic. As this figure turned and looked at the one to the left, a lock of golden brown hair spilled from the hood, curled slightly. Soon more locks fell, and the slender hand not holding the staff lifted to the hood and pulled it back revealing an entire head of curls, bouncing and gleaming in the late morning sun. Her face radiated a light of its own from almond eyes of purest amethyst, almost purple but much more elegant. A small nose, turned up slightly at the end, gave a slightly childish appearance. Her lips were thin and drawn into a pleasant smile. Her hair flowed about her face in a round arc broken only by her ears that seemed almost mouse-like. This only added to the charm of the young maiden. She had a presence about her that brought the birds to sing louder, other animals creeping nearer to her being. Even the grass and flowers seemed to stretch and stand tall, trying to touch her. And then, as if the heavens had opened up releasing all of the blessings one could

imagine, this enchanting girl spoke. 'Don't you think the birds are lovely, Diomedan?'

Her companion turned and smiled; her voice was so sweet he could not help it. Even so, her beauty captivated him beyond the point of blushing, and he looked down. Before he could lift his head to reply, her delicate fingers had pulled his hood back revealing the charcoal-black hair cut so short that it was merely a layer of down fuzz covering his scalp. He was not the most attractive man, with a crooked nose from starting too many fights he could not finish. His mouth was a bit lopsided and awkward with a smile on it, while his beard was sparse, short, and filtered with a sand-like red. However, if one feature made him desirable, it was his eyes. The light blue took on the color of things around him, and as he looked upon her, they twinkled with that certain majestic purple. His voice rang out with a harmonious note to hers, a bit lower but soft and timid.

'Indeed, Adrianna, the birds are wonderful.' His face sobered a little as he turned towards the city of Tobias, a scowl coming over him and darkening his already-tanned skin. 'What do you make of the stillness?'

She also turned her face, the graceful motion moving like a wave through her neck muscles. The pleasant expression did not fade entirely but straightened into a look of contemplation and deep thought. It was some time before she spoke again, an almost sad tone in her voice. 'I am not sure, but we should proceed with caution, my friend.'

She paused a moment and set off towards the road which would take them into Tobias. Diomedan noticed her tone, but did not question for he was used to her foreshadowing. She had always been able to make some assumption that, in every occasion, turned out to be true. He took one last glance at the beautiful city in all its tranquility and followed after her as his thoughts drifted over her words that made his heart sink, 'my friend'.

As the two figures upon the cliff slowly sank down onto the trail that wound around out of sight, a set of eyes, scrutinous and well trained, blinked and turned to watch over the opened gates and arches leading into the marvelous streets of Tobias. That same soft breeze blew into the hood of the creature. Turning sharply, the mysterious one moved away from the wall

and into a series of alleys. It slipped into the shadows and disappeared to tell of the new visitors.

Adrianna and Diomedan walked in silence down the cliff side. For Adrianna it was awkward; she had been around Diomedan a long time and still did not know very much about him or his thought process. She was always coming up with questions to ask him and planned situations to ask them but she never could quite bring herself to do so. This bothered her increasingly. 'Soon', she swore to herself, 'soon'.

Diomedan, on the other hand, welcomed the quiet. He knew his own dark thoughts, a shadow hanging over the hope of his life. Despair ran very deep into his soul and he always did his best to hide it, especially from Adrianna. Why, he could not know; Adrianna was the one bright spot in his life and probably the only person who could help him. She had so much impact upon his emotions that he felt almost subservient. All he had to do was look at her and be lifted of his cares; she was the only person he knew, the only one he cared to know, and the only person he wished that he could make himself known to.

The sun continued to rise as they descended the path around the cliff that became the wide and inviting road into Tobias. Both of the travelers were weary, but the enchanting walls of the buildings, now only a few hundred yards away, began to lift their spirits. Adrianna giggled and began to walk with a bounce in her step, stooping near the road to gather specimens of the many varieties of beautiful wild flowers. Diomedan watched her with interest, his thoughts shifted from the unbearable burden of silence to quiet admiration and compassion for the young girl. He began to remember what he had been told before the journey began, before he really knew her and it became lost in infatuation.

'You are her guardian,' he could hear his father saying in that cold and calm voice, 'do not get involved, you know that she is betrothed.' Shrugging to himself, he decided that perhaps his father was wrong, even though he couldn't remember the last time that had happened. Just then he stopped and realized Adrianna was staring at him intently, her purple irises penetrating him to the very soul. He lowered his head in order to hide the rosy color that rose up in his cheeks.

Suddenly aware that she had stirred him from some thought and possibly upset him, she tried to apologize. 'I-I'm sorry Diomedan, I didn't mean to-', but he cut her off with a quick smile that temporarily hid his unrest.

He resumed walking, caught hold of her arm, and spun her around with a grace all his own. Now the pair walked arm in arm towards the grand arches of Tobias. Adrianna was about to speak, but instead silently smiled and walked along at his pace, folding her other hand almost regally atop his arm. She felt odd walking with him like this but as she closed her eyes an image of flowers, white and shimmering in the sun's setting rays, flowed over her. Her clothes weren't the traveling boots and heavy cloak, but a dress, flowing and silken.

As she turned her face towards the one escorting her, she felt a hand pushing her down and away. Blinking away the vision she saw Diomedan shrugging her into a row of bushes and rolling into the middle of the road. He crouched low, his right hand across his body clinging to the hilt of his sword, hood up and face forward, although no one could see him. A whisper while Adrianna was daydreaming, *ghom kahdesh ghom kahdesh Adrianna shlih vstoltf*, had made him invisible to all things except her. Adrianna, now aware of someone coming, peeked through the viney branches of her hiding place and saw a small hooded figure which stared right at her, not even looking at Diomedan. It began to move, as if floating, but there was something clumsily familiar about this being. A few more steps and it stopped, smelling something. The hood turned to scour the road but looked cleanly over the crouching warrior, whose eyes were burning as he slowly rose. The resident gazed once more towards Adrianna and lifted his hand towards her in an almost wave.

Diomedan spoke a few more words in the language of magick, the hooded figure looking around startled and then... not moving at all. Smiling, Diomedan took a few steps and whispered, '*shlih vstoltf*.' The frozen being's eyes moved to the side as it saw Diomedan revealed, a little frustration showing as well as fear.

Adrianna slowly walked from behind the bushes to Diomedan, a calm and curious expression on her face. She slid her arm around her escort's and together they started towards the magically bound person, if it was a person at all. Diomedan, however, held a different expression. His face was a bit redder than normal and he was breathing somewhat heavily as the ecstasy of the magic slowly left his body.

'Speak of your intentions and I might allow you freedom to move,' Diomedan thundered.

'Oh stop,' chimed Adrianna as she gently swatted his arm, 'this man is harmless.' She then turned her gaze towards the hooded one and smiled in her most innocent and charming way. 'I am sorry for all of this; he's a bit over-protective.'

Diomedan rolled his eyes and walked with her, a soft mutter escaping his lips that allowed the mysterious figure to move. Diomedan's face was somewhat gray as the spell casting began to wear on him.

'No need to apologize,' a voice like the scraping of rocks and bones broke through the warm air with an eerie chill. 'The roads are filled with much danger these days, your friend has a right to be protective... especially of such an enchanting maiden.'

Adrianna normally loved compliments, but this was different to say the least. She flushed and clung tighter to Diomedan, who narrowed his eyes studying this... thing. Even as they drew nearer, the wondrous city inspiring a feeling of awe, Diomedan's free hand instinctively clung to the hilt of his sword; something was not right.

Stopping just a few short paces from the hooded figure, the couple looked past him into the city, still marveling over its architecture and craftsmanship. Seeing this as an opportunity to leave, the mysterious one turned towards Tobias's gates and began to walk. He got about three steps away before the ever-curious Adrianna broke from Diomedan's grasp and ran to the small, and hunched over figure.

'Sir...Can you tell us why there is no one in the city?' Her voice was soft and she rested her small delicate hand upon his shoulder. Somewhat of a shock ran through her fingertips, although she did not seem to notice.

Diomedan was a bit slow to react, feeling sluggish and weird somehow as they drew nearer to the gates. He ran up behind Adrianna and stood a breath behind her, his eyes piercing the growing darkness ahead as it began to consume the sky and land in one long, slow yawn. He was growing edgy, not liking this person at all, nor enjoying the view any longer. His stare went to Adrianna; he wanted to get her away from here, but knew that it was a lost cause. She was too interested in this city, in this thing, to leave.

Suddenly, the hood turned its aperture to Diomedan, a flash of red eyes sending a chill through the young warrior. The figure began to move, as if floating towards the gates of grand Tobias. It spoke with a raspy voice, almost grunting. 'Come strangers, let me tell you a story about the city of Tobias...' It was strange how such a wonderful city, beautiful in every aspect, could pull a feeling of dread from their apprehensions.

Nonetheless, Diomedan and Adrianna followed their 'guide' into the city. The courtyards and cobblestone streets made it seem even more breathtaking, even more frightening. They followed the anonymous creature until they came to a building, comforting and

inviting with a sign above the door, Diomedan read it as Adrianna said it aloud, 'The Inn of Everpeace...'

It was almost too much. Another chill shot up Diomedan's spine, and from the way Adrianna was clinging to his arm, he figured that she was feeling similar emotions.

'Here is where it starts, the beginning of the end of Tobias,' the being started. His voice was much deeper, guttural sounds and grunts being more predominant than before. But before Diomedan could say anything, the door was being held open for them and for some reason, Adrianna and himself entered, the beast's words falling from his ears and leaving no trace of their presence until, in the darkness of the room, Diomedan heard the thing: 'Dragons.'

Turning swiftly to see the door slammed shut, he saw what looked to be rubble, ruins of the great city. Everything in that split second was gray, decimated, and oppressed. He twisted around, realizing Adrianna was no longer by him, panic racing in his very core. He then saw her beside the last ray of bleak sunlight, shining through a high window. She was reading something.

Diomedan walked over to her and put his arm around her. She looked pale, yet at peace; he was beginning to feel better being beside her again, but then his eyes saw she was staring at something still. Following her gaze, he felt his soul shrivel into nothingness. There, on a small table sat a skull, and in perfect Common was a small inscription that read, 'O Pilgrim, take a good look at me, for I was once as you were, and soon you will be as I am.'

Outside of the Inn stands the hooded one, his head down as the screams slowly began to die into whimpers, gasps, and then nothing... silence has once again fallen in Tobias. He turns now, red eyes glowing under the hood, and seems to peer straight ahead, searching for a soul, for another victim. Amidst the rubble, the fallen and charred remains of the once great Tobias; it seemed almost sacred how the quiet fell. Just before the sun fell behind the horizon, a shadow passed over the city... large and low. It was the shadow of a dragon.

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Harp and Cittern

by Samuel Marshall

Nobody had been put off by vague rumours of war. The market-place bustled with people, crowds shoving and squeezing their way around each other in as good-natured a manner as could ever be hoped. Festival days were like this everywhere, Cirris knew, but Palanthas did it in *style*. Bright summer sunlight shone over a mass of colour – even the lowliest traders stood behind their stalls resplendent in the brightest, boldest hues that dyes could achieve. And as for the clothiers... the women serving there wore so many complex layers they looked like flowers in full bloom.

Cirris glanced at his own outfit; even his performing clothes were drab by comparison. He wore gray-blue pants (to match his eyes) and a pale yellow top, accentuated by the black of his boots, belt, and hair. The jet-black hair cascaded lushly around his face, cut short at around shoulder-height. It was thick enough to cover, usually, the points of his ears which marked him out as part-elven. Though he was lightly built, nothing else gave a definite impression of his race; his face was human enough to pass, a fact which frequently proved useful. Half-elves weren't especially popular, among humans as well as elves.

He looked up again, assessing the spot. Sounds, too, saturated the square. Hawkers called their wares, friends shouted greetings, animals grunted and squawked. But there was no music, in this corner at least, and the noise was not so loud that a vigorously-played harp couldn't pierce it. The buildings which edged the square here were city offices of some sort, closed for the three-day festival, so traffic was relatively light.

With a quick shove he boosted himself onto a window-ledge, settling back onto it. It wasn't especially comfortable, but better than the cobbles beneath. He shuffled around a little to get the best position, so that the small harp rested neatly in his lap, held in place by the crook of one arm. Experimentally, he picked out a scale, adjusting the tuning slightly. Good enough. He would begin with an instrumental, just enough to get people's attention, then sing as soon as one or two were listening. A fast tune would be best, a happy one, nobody wanted their mood dragged down on a day like this.

His mind made up, he took a deep breath, concentrated, and plucked the first three notes –

'Get lost.'

Concentration broke. He looked up to see a short,

wiry man, clothed head to toe in fierce red, and with an expression to match. 'What?'

'I said, this is my spot, point-ears. Get.'

Another musician, to judge by the cittern slung over the man's shoulder. The string instrument had a long neck and pear-shaped sounding box. Its smooth, seamless joints suggested a good make, and it was well-polished. More than you could say for its owner's manners.

The half-elf sighed, running a hand through his hair to settle it back over the betraying ear. He knew how this would end, had been in the same situation several times before. 'I was here first...'

'And? It's my spot. Always has been, always will be. Unless you want to make something of it...' The belligerent man raised a hand, balled it into a fist. Scars showed clearly that it saw regular use beyond strumming a cittern.

'Okay, okay,' Cirris began, ready to give in. He hated to draw the wrong kind of attention, even if it *was* a prime position he'd found for himself, even if he *did* need the plentiful coins that it might have provided. 'Forget it. I'm–'

'Gentlemen?'

The voice fairly dripped with sarcasm. Its owner wore a sneer to match, one that looked a little out of place on such a young face. He wore an immaculate uniform, house colours of some lord perhaps, and brown hair cut short.

'What's a Solamnic doing here?' Cirris's antagonist retorted, matching the sneer. 'A Solamnic *squire*, at that.'

The squire ignored him. 'I am Anthar Holdstrom, squire to Lord Bartur himself. He has a task in mind. Are you two musicians, or street brawlers?'

'I'm a musician. The name's Rafe. This fellow's just on his way.' The antagonist – Rafe – didn't bother to change his tone, apparently unimpressed by the squire.

'My name's Cirris,' the half-elf said quickly, not willing to be shoved out of what might be lucrative employment.

'Well, then.' Anthar drew a breath. 'Lord Bartur would like it to be known that, to honour the wedding festivities of his beloved daughter, two of the best minstrels of Palanthas will be picked to provide musical accompaniment. Those interested should come to the Lord's city residence tonight, where a contest will be held. Appropriate remuneration will be offered to the winners.'

Cirris nodded, taking it in. Rafe merely shrugged.

'To clarify,' Anthar said, 'I should point out that "the best minstrels in Palanthis" actually means "the best minstrels my estimable Lord Bartur can obtain at a day's notice without having to pay through the nose". Even so, he is most definitely looking for minstrels, and not for a pair of tavern rowdies.'

The squire laughed at his cleverness and turned, disappearing into the crowds. Presumably he was off looking for other musicians.

'Thinking of trying that?' Rafe asked.

'I might.' Cirris didn't mention that he was completely penniless and needed any employment that might be forthcoming.

'Hah! Don't waste your time. You're not a patch on me.'

The half-elf shouldered his pack. 'A great judgement, from three notes.'

He moved away, leaving that as his final retort, but couldn't resist loitering by a food stall long enough to hear Rafe play and sing the first few verses of a bawdy dance song. The minstrel's technique was impeccable, and his grasp of rhythm perfect, with tiny pauses inserted at just the right moments to emphasise the song's noisy chorus. His voice was deep and clear.

Damn it, Cirris couldn't help thinking. He's right.

Yet one more note echoed through the hall, piercingly flat. Cirris winced, and wished the current performer – a piper, that fact alone a cause for concern among reasonable-thinking people – would hurry up and get off the stage. He clearly wasn't going to be chosen, unless the lord was entirely tone-deaf.

With that thought, Cirris glanced over. Bartur sat in a large, ornately carved chair at one end of the small hall, his expression revealing an appropriate level of distaste. The man's face had worn some kind of frown all evening, relieved only briefly during Rafe's set, in which the ill-tempered performer had given an absolutely stunning rendition of a heart-warming ballad. Rafe would definitely be picked, Cirris thought, but that still left one vacant slot, and that one *could* be his, if he did well. Most of the other musicians Squire Anthar had managed to round up seemed less like Palanthis's finest and more like scrapings from the bottom of a particularly wretched barrel.

The piper finished – blessed relief – and made his bow, then returned to the small cluster of contestants. They were gathered opposite the lord, standing in a small and mostly unfriendly group in the light and shadow of flickering torches. Nobody spoke to each other; they were rivals meeting for the first time, since

most had come to Palanthis only for the festival. Cirris had counted ten contestants, eight of whom had already given what passed for their best.

Squire Anthar stood by his lord's side, watching each performance with a critical eye. His sharp tongue had been stilled in the presence of his superior, except perhaps when he leant over to whisper some comment in Bartur's ear. Now he ran a finger down a scrap of parchment, stopping at a name. He called it clearly: 'Cirris, harpist.'

With beating heart, the half-elf stepped forward. He'd brushed his rebellious hair carefully in advance, making sure it wouldn't reveal those pointed ears in front of an audience, but it was still an effort not to reach up and check. There were other things he didn't want to project, too; don't look desperate, he reminded himself.

He bowed politely to the lord and sat carefully on the rickety wooden chair. Resting the small harp in position on his lap, he brushed a hand over the strings, using that polite little flourish to verify that they were still in tune. Then, without further ado, he began the first verse of his set piece, a humorous and slightly off-colour ditty about a kender and a village girl.

The verse went well, with no mistakes in his playing (it was an easy melody) or singing (it relied more on the right expression of voice than pure virtuosity), but that was the easy part. Now came the chorus, which he intended to make the most of.

He stretched the last word of the verse long enough that, still singing, he could get to his feet and place the harp neatly on the chair. Then, as he drew breath for the chorus, he snatched three juggling balls from the pockets of his robe. In time with the beat of the unaccompanied lyrics, he threw a complicated pattern.

'He stole her steel and stole a kiss and stole a little mo-ore.' A wink, and a flourish that sent brightly-painted balls flying high into the air at the same time. 'A kender lad done clean ran off with the lass from right next do-or!'

The balls seemed to explode in all directions, miraculously snatched back into his hands and then his pockets, *quickly* because he was already grabbing at the harp, plucking the first few notes that bridged into the verse, and seating himself precipitously on the chair.

It went on like that for the remaining two verses, and he finished with a final chorus in which two more balls mysteriously appeared in his hands and he juggled all five in an impressive swirl of colour.

Sweating from the exertion and relief – thank the *gods* he hadn't dropped anything, or broken that

ramshackle chair – he bowed carefully. Resisting the urge to say anything else – *don't look desperate* – he moved back to the group of performers.

'You juggle a lot better than you sing,' Rafe muttered in his direction, clearly a double-edged compliment or – if you wanted to look on the bright side – a double-edged insult. Well, it was probably true, and that song didn't exactly reach great heights of musical artistry. But the manic performance was designed to gain attention, and it seemed to have been successful. The lord had, if not laughed out loud, at least made odd snorting noises a few times.

And even the limited singing and harping he'd managed to demonstrate in that maelstrom had been, Cirris honestly thought, better than all the other contestants save Rafe. He leaned back against the cold wall, feeling quietly confident about that second place and wondering just what the full details of this employment would be. Frankly, in his current situation, any payment at all would do if meals and lodging were provided. And, too, he might catch the eye of some other noble among the guests at this wedding party. Perhaps a permanent position...

That pretty dream was cut short by Squire Anthar, who'd finished consulting with his lord. He called the final name. 'Rosalynd Gentry, fiddler.'

And a young woman stepped from the shadows among the group, moving into the centre of the hall. She was small and pale, with very long black hair tied neatly behind her head, and impeccably dressed in a slightly shimmering material of darkest blue. A sole silver ring adorned one finger. The fiddle she carried was of some very dark wood, polished so that it shone like obsidian.

Rich, Cirris thought. Hope she didn't get that way as a musician, or...

His hopes were dashed a brief moment later, as she began to play with an intensity, sweetness, and technical perfection that almost stunned him, except he'd heard its like before. Elf-trained, he knew. *Properly* elf-trained, not like him, elf-trained-until-he-ran-off (which would be their version of events) or elf-trained-until-he-was-driven-out (which was his version of events). With that thought, he could almost *see* his foster mother insisting against protest that he attend yet another music lesson. She would be speaking politely and calmly, masking the undertone that he should get out from under their feet or, on worse days, remove his offensive presence from their sight.

He found his fist clenched and forced himself to relax. Lost in bitter memory, he'd missed most of the fiddler's tune, found her drawing out the last note to reach a perfect silence. A shame; since he clearly wasn't

going to be chosen, he might as well have retrieved some enjoyment from the evening.

Rosalyn made her bow and returned silently to the group, ignoring no few envious stares. She must be half-elven herself, Cirris thought; it wasn't obvious to see, but nor was it obvious in him. And her ears, too, were hidden beneath that carefully tied hair. He resisted an urge to reach up and check his own, though it hardly mattered now if the Lord Bartur bore a prejudice against the nonhuman.

It didn't take long for the squire and his lord to confer; in a moment, Anthar called out, 'Rosalynd Gentry, and Rafe, this way please. The rest of you may leave if you wish, but should either of the chosen two decline, we'll select one of those remaining.'

The selected pair walked across. Nobody else moved. They must all be as desperate as me, Cirris thought glumly, to wait through this humiliation.

But, after a moment's quiet discussion, the fiddler Rosalyn turned on her heel and walked forcefully back towards the group and the door. She paused briefly by the other musicians. 'Don't bother staying,' she recommended, an angry tone to her voice. 'He's offering a rate better suited to kitchen staff.'

With that she was gone, leaving a wry smile on Cirris's face; firstly because she had gone and he was now in with an unexpected chance, and secondly because the others didn't heed her advice either. A poor bunch, indeed.

Then Anthar called Cirris's name, filling him with blessed relief. He had to stop himself from running forward – it was *especially* important not to look desperate when discussing pay. Instead, he walked up with measured steps.

The squire muttered another comment, just loud enough to hear as Cirris passed. 'Gods, don't any of you people have family names?'

A closer barb than Anthar probably realised; but the half-elf was well past caring about the niceties of his birth. No, right now he cared about the details of this job. Unless Lord Bartur was even tighter than Rosalyn had suggested, one of those details would be an advance payment. Payment which, at the very least, should secure Cirris a bed tonight. Option two – some rat-infested alley – had come a touch too close for comfort.

Cirris watched the road go by from the covered wagon, sitting at the rear with his legs dangling lazily over its base. Every jolt and shudder of the heavily-loaded vehicle jarred his body; he'd had to hold tight more than once, or risk falling off completely. It was almost

as tiring as walking, really, but – he glanced at the churned-up ground in their wake – a lot less muddy.

He looked up for one last glance at the city behind. The tall stone structures that made up its jagged profile were fading rapidly into the grey dawn mist. Unseasonably cold, this day, but the sun would soon burn it off.

Up front, out of sight, the driver cursed yet again at his pair of oxen. The beasts were, Cirris thought, doing a pretty good job, maintaining a slow walking pace despite their load. Grain sacks filled most of the small wagon's interior, leaving only a little space for the two minstrels to bed down come nightfall.

Rafe, however, was there right now. The ill-tempered musician had staggered into Bartur's courtyard at the appointed time, nursing what was clearly an impressive hangover. On finding the appropriate wagon he had immediately collapsed onto its wooden slats. Cirris had found a blanket from the man's pack and rolled him onto it, fearing that the minstrel's foul mood would be worsened by bruises and splinters. Other than that, he'd left the man to sleep it off.

Voices echoed through the air: the wagon drivers calling to each other, still slightly muffled by the remaining mist. It didn't seem to be anything of consequence. Cirris leaned perilously around the wagon's sidewall, risking a glance forward; the other two vehicles in this little caravan remained just ahead, bumping and jouncing one by one along the rutted road. Dirt splashed from the large iron-rimmed wheels and heavy oxen hooves alike, as they traversed small puddles from last night's rain. A labourer, busily rooting out weeds in a field bordering their route, waved a greeting which Cirris returned precariously.

Once, after the morning had grown bright and warm, they passed straight through a village. Its small wooden homes clustered by the road, smoke rising from their cooking-fires. Chickens waddled hurriedly out of their path, squawking annoyance at the giant oxen. A pair of curious children paced behind the caravan for a few moments; they would have followed longer, especially when Cirris began to juggle for them from his perch, but a call from their anxious mother put a stop to that. Did he look *that* dangerous?

They stopped to rest the animals at noon, beside a small stream. One of the guards tore portions from large loaves of bread, and cut a block of cheese; Cirris took his helping gratefully enough, along with the small cup of ale that was offered. The bread, presumably baked early that morning, was delicious. Tiny grains remained throughout, giving an interesting texture and additional flavour.

Four of the guards rode ahead again and the

caravan set off with a creaking of wood, a jingle of metal, and a few bellows of complaint from the oxen. The stop had been relatively short. Bartur's guard captain, responsible for planning the trip, had said they should arrive at the lord's country residence by nightfall on the second day. Clearly that was a tight schedule.

Rafe still slept; if he could maintain that through the wagon's jarring bounce, a little music wasn't going to wake him. Cirris sat a little further from the wagon's rear, harp in his lap, and practiced quietly while the countryside rolled away.

After he finished the basic scales and exercises, he took a break and watched the world go by. The land hereabouts was mostly flat, though hills and distant mountains lay on the horizon. Sometimes they passed plots of cultivated lands or fields fenced for pasture, sometimes grassy plains studded with clusters of thorn bushes and the occasional stand of trees. A side trail led away around one such copse; he followed it with his eye, spotting another village, a messy cluster of huts just visible in the distance.

Returning his concentration to the instrument, he then played through his 'easy' repertoire, the songs he knew very well. He practiced sections which could be a bit more lively, where his timing was poor, determined to do the best job he could when he had a more prestigious audience than a few rabbits and squirrels. They were passing through woodland now, a forest that extended several miles. He had competition from above; birds sang or cawed or – what bird was *that?* – croaked.

Together with breaks it had taken half of the afternoon, but he'd practiced most of the songs he intended to play, to the extent of boredom. He glanced back to check on Rafe; still sound asleep, snoring lightly and dribbling a little on the blanket, beside the piled grain sacks.

There was nothing else to do. Once more he took up his harp, and this time worked on some more difficult tunes, those which might be requested and where he might fumble a note or forget a passage. It was a challenge, but it came with a sense of accomplishment, when he eventually managed to play something through more or less correctly.

In a few hours he had tired of that too, and his fingers were becoming sore despite frequent rests. The road had left the forest and they were now following the curves of a wide river, not overfull in this season; its deeply-gouged bank showed that the spring thaw had brought a far more forceful current. On either side of the river, meadowland spread outwards for some distance, and beyond that the slopes of the valley rose upward. The village after lunch had been the last; it

was wilder country now, and beautiful for it. Willow trees clung to the riverbanks, and wild flowers made bright specks of colour all over the late-afternoon landscape, in among the nettles and huge old bramble clumps.

There was one last thing he wanted to try, Cirris realised. He flexed his aching wrists and thought back, several years back. One tune he remembered from his time with an elven master, the equal of Rosalyn's performance last night. He'd even been able to play a simplified version...

Time passed, darkness approached, and he stubbornly refused to give in. Oh, he'd managed to repeat the weak student's performance from years past, but when he tried for anything more, when he added even some of the little touches he remembered and could at least recognise, his fingers failed him. He glared at the instrument, tried one small flourish, and actually missed a string entirely.

'Will you stop twanging that cursed thing!'

Rafe had finally emerged, stumbling into the pool of twilight that shone from the wagon's open rear. He didn't look much better than he had that morning, but at least this time he swayed from the wagon's jolting motion, rather than of his own accord.

He swigged water from his bottle, which Cirris had filled for him at lunchtime. 'Where in the Abyss have we got to?'

Cirris shrugged. 'We're still by the river.'

'No, *really?*' Rafe peered outside, where the river – narrower now – rushed by audibly on their left. 'Next time I want that much detail, I'll ask a damn kender to draw me a map.'

'I don't know any more than you do.' Somehow, the obnoxious human wasn't bothering Cirris – partly because the half-elf wasn't going to give him that satisfaction, and partly because it was at least a distraction from his musical inadequacies.

'Come to that, you *are* half elf, right? Not half kender?' Rafe scowled. 'I know you went through my pack.'

'For your blanket.'

Rafe shrugged, not looking remotely grateful. 'So you say.'

Cirris smiled peacefully, not showing the slightest irritation, which ended that conversation.

Almost immediately a cry rang out ahead, nothing urgent, just the drivers calling amongst each other. The wagon lurched around, turned a sharp corner, and stopped. Cautiously, the half-elf leaned out around the sidewall again, staring forward in the dim light.

'We've come to a ford,' he announced. 'I think they mean to cross now.'

The river was wide and shallow here as it turned a loose corner. Water only a few inches deep hissed fiercely across stones and gravel. Across it, twenty yards away, the four lead horsemen waited on the other bank, standing beside their mounts. There was a large, grassy space, broken only by a few enormous boulders.

'Perhaps we might make camp.' Cirris gestured at the plain.

Rafe leaned out on the other side and peered in that direction, just as the wagon jerked into motion. Caught off-balance, he flailed about and nearly toppled off, only just managing to grab a firm handhold. He stared angrily at Cirris. 'Thanks a bunch, point-ears.'

The wagon bumped and jounced down a slope, stones grinding noisily under its wheels. It rattled loudly and uncomfortably over the dry edges of the riverbed... then the oxen bellowed in complaint, hooves splashed, spray crashed noisily from the front wheels, and finally the rear wheels too threw white foam, the shallow river bursting angrily between their spokes. The water only reached about halfway to the wagon base, so inside it remained dry. Cirris, leaning out again to watch forward, received a few facefuls of spray on the strengthening wind.

With a sickening jar, the wheels lurched onto dry land, and almost immediately the wagon rolled up a gently-sloping bank. At the top, guardsmen shouted directions to the driver, who somehow coerced his animals accordingly. They swung round in a tight corner and then stopped, the wagon resting neatly in its assigned place.

'Half way,' Cirris said.

Rafe sneered dismissively. 'To your humiliation.'

The half-elf flashed a sweet smile and leapt down from the wagon, landing neatly on the grass beneath. A privilege it was, he thought, to travel with such a delightful companion. A privilege indeed.

'Go on,' Lord Bartur said. 'Play something together.'

Cirris opened his mouth, then shut it again. He was sitting on the back of another wagon, set near the large fire that had heated everyone's stew and now kept them warm in the darkness of night. Rafe stood close by, cittern in his hand and a scowl on his face. At the lord's request, they'd given a small performance for everybody: the lord himself, his squire, the six guards, and the drivers. They had been playing in turn. But now...

'Well, what song?' the half-elf muttered sideways.

'I'm not playing with the likes of you, point-ears,' Rafe hissed.

'You heard what he said...'

'I did. Put down that gods-cursed harp. I'll play, you can juggle.'

'We haven't worked out a routine—' Cirris objected, but Rafe was already turning to the audience, poised to begin. Hurriedly, Cirris placed his harp aside and hopped to the ground, pulling the juggling balls from his pocket.

He threw an easy pattern as Rafe began a jaunty travelling song, no doubt chosen specifically because its rhythm was complicated and variable. Even so, juggling in time was not a particular challenge, and he was able to shift the pattern, swapping to a different variation when the music changed, throwing a ball high to match particular high points of the song. In the chorus, he sang too, no doubt irritating the touchy human who stood above.

Their audience seemed to appreciate the routine, watching his pattern of colour intently. A few of the drivers even gasped when he threw some of the more daring tricks, making a ball jump high out from the pattern, and when the act came to a smooth conclusion there was a light scattering of applause.

'Decent enough,' Bartur passed judgement, 'might even impress some of the guests.' The heavy man got to his feet, scowling. 'Get to sleep, those who aren't on guard; it's another dawn start.'

Cirris was glad to comply, leading the way back to their wagon. He leapt up nimbly and fumbled with the cover ties as Rafe climbed in. Eventually he solved the knot, and hauled the heavy fabric into place so that it covered the wagon's open back, tying it carefully at the other side.

With the light of moon, stars, and the fire now hidden, it was intensely dark inside the confined space. He could see Rafe – the small man lay sprawled beside a shadowy bulk of grain sacks – but little else.

By touch, he fumbled inside his pack and pulled out his own blanket, setting it out on the small patch of floor he'd been left. Though the night was relatively warm, a chill breeze occasionally gusted through the loose corners of the back cover, so he wanted all the warmth he could get. He loosened his boots and shrugged them off, then lay carefully on the blanket, rolling over to wrap it snugly around himself.

That had worked pretty well, all in all, he thought sleepily. Maybe, if they worked together, they could indeed impress some of Lord Bartur's wealthy guests. And surely Rafe would be happy to aim towards that. Surely...

As if demanding payment for the heady rush performance had brought, exhaustion quickly claimed him.

'Goblin attack!' the merman shouted in alarm, twanging one string of his giant cittern with an agitated fin.

'What? Where?' Cirris mumbled, but the sea turtle who floated nearby didn't seem to know either. There was a loud crash, and—

—and he woke up with a start, in time to hear a pained scream, and the sickening squelch which followed it. The whooping calls of goblin war-cries echoed outside, matched by the clash of steel and a confusion of charging footsteps.

Hurriedly, he lifted one flap a fraction and peeked through the back of the wagon. It was still night, but a moon's glow cast everything in shades of blue. Nearby, a large and well-armoured goblinoid creature stood beside one of the boulders that dotted this field. A caravan guard slumped forward against the stone, his head a mass of blood. The body slid slowly downwards, leaving a dark, messy trail on the rock's surface, and crumpled on the ground. Grunting in satisfaction, the hobgoblin gave the corpse a final kick.

A smaller goblin sprinted suddenly into view, frighteningly close on Cirris's right. Luckily, it was in no position to notice the half-elf. It panted with exertion and droplets of blood scattered from its several wounds; another guardsman, the squad captain, pounded along behind it in fierce pursuit. Ten yards away, the hobgoblin began to turn—

Cirris dropped the flap in a hurry, else he be seen by *that* thing. He crawled further into the wagon and grabbed Rafe's shoulder, shaking him awake – the man had slept most of yesterday but still seemed capable of snoring through a pitched battle. 'Goblins!' he hissed, as the sound of metal on metal rang out behind the wagon. A moment after that, somebody screamed, and it didn't sound like a hobgoblin. The half-elf's voice trembled. 'We need to get out of here.'

Rafe cursed muddily, struggling to sit up. 'I can't see a damn thing.'

'Get ready. When it's clear, we'll run.'

Cirris turned again and pulled at the flap, this time making only the tiniest of cracks to see through. A few yards away, the guard captain lay sprawled across the ground, liquid welling from a deep gash where the hobgoblin's axe had eaten into his stomach. His head lay sideways, more blood seeping from cuts in his neck and dribbling from his mouth. If he wasn't dead yet, it was a matter of seconds. Beside him, the goblin who'd been running before lay face down in a mess of dark-stained grass.

The hobgoblin stood nearby, hefting his battle-axe and watching the rest of the scene, which was

beyond Cirris's view. Forward of the wagon, the sounds of fighting continued, the clashing of weapons punctuated by screams, gasps, and the sickening sound of bodies hitting the ground. Periodically, the hobgoblin would call instructions; he must be the leader, not anxious to join the fight unless absolutely necessary.

'Kill him, damn it!' the large creature screamed then, an expression for which even the half-elf's rusty grasp of the goblin tongue sufficed. Shaking his axe in irritation or threat, the hobgoblin stalked forward, out of sight.

Cirris took a deep breath. The prospect wasn't going to get any clearer than this; the only creatures in view were dead. He grabbed reflexively for his harp and glanced back at Rafe. 'Now!'

Immediately he shoved aside the loose edge of fabric and slipped down through the gap, landing on the grass beneath and squirming out of the restricting covers. The cold ground beneath felt lumpy and he suddenly realised he had forgotten his boots; too late now, Rafe was already following.

They stood with the wagon at their backs, quickly scanning the unchanged scene. The half-elf crouched to begin his run—

—and heavy footsteps crunched along the grass on the vehicle's right side, coming forward towards them. The hobgoblin.

Barely thinking, Cirris changed his move: span round, grabbed at Rafe, and pulled both of them into an off-balance dive beneath the wagon's base. They hit the ground together with an all-too-audible thud.

His face pressed into the muddy grass, Cirris could barely breathe, and didn't try. He froze, remaining absolutely silent. Behind him, behind the wagon... he flung all his strength into listening... the hobgoblin's heavy steps continued unabated.

But they were barely safe here, he knew. A goblin's sensitive eyesight would reveal them immediately any chose to look this way, and it would only require a glance down. The wagon's high wheelbase left clear views underneath. Except...

He lifted his head, looking out ahead of the wagon. Corpses, mostly human, were scattered across the ground. To one side, the campfire embers glowed red. And near that, a confusion of goblin legs, over a dozen of the creatures milling about mere yards away. Steel echoed briefly on steel, and a human voice cried vainly for help — then there was a gasp, a wracking cough, and a dull thud as one more body toppled to the earth. Silence.

Cirris turned aside, wincing internally, and looked at Rafe. There wasn't much time, now that the goblins had run out of enemies.

'Climb the axle,' he hissed. Leaving his harp on the ground — why *had* he grabbed at that? — he stretched up to the thick pole a few feet above, and reached both hands around the rough wood. He pulled his upper body upwards, then jumped his legs to wedge his feet around the axle too. The slight noise caused them both to pause, but outside the goblins were having a loud debate, something about the humans who'd escaped. It sounded like two had made it away; Lord Bartur and his squire, to judge by the descriptions. Not a surprise there, Cirris thought cynically. Knights or no, those two weren't exactly the sort to stand and fight to the death.

After a little shuffling about under the cover of goblin voices, the half-elf had managed to cross his legs over the axle, wedging himself in place more firmly. Though uncomfortable, it was a position he could hold for some time. It was well shielded from a casual goblin glance, both by the wagon base close above, and by the triangular axle-support that came down below it at the edges.

He had bunched up a bit so that Rafe could fit on the other half, but it was tight; the tops of their heads touched and bumped against each other whenever either one shifted position.

'We're hung here like *meat*,' Rafe whispered harshly. 'Now what?'

'Wait.'

The argument outside came to a close. From what Cirris could make out, they had decided that a group would be sent out to track the two who'd been seen to escape. There was a new discussion about whether to use the wagons or not — Cirris's heart was in his mouth until the hobgoblin's deep voice cut across the other voices. 'No wagons, no trail. We take what we carry. Orders.'

Cirris breathed easily once more.

The hobgoblin paused, considering. 'Get the valuables. Burn the rest.'

Then he nearly choked. Gods.

'What's happening?' Rafe hissed.

'Just look for a chance to get out,' Cirris whispered fervently in return. He peered at his own limited view. The hobgoblin who captained this band was easily spotted, having thicker legs — all that Cirris could see — than his goblin soldiers. He stood about ten yards off, facing the wagon. No escape that way, then.

Goblins were milling around, moving to search for worthwhile pickings. Some bent down to check corpses — don't look this way, Cirris prayed as he caught a glimpse of one creature's oddly-flat face, please don't look this way. His urging seemed to work: the goblin merely stood again, lifting a pouch and a dagger from

its fallen victim. The weapon glinted in the moonlight, revealing dark stains.

A pair of goblins jumped up into their wagon. Their light step clattered like an ogre's in Cirris's panicked hearing, his ears only inches below the wagon floor. He winced at every step.

'Nothing of value,' one of the pair called out, receiving a grunt of acknowledgement from their hobgoblin leader. A pretty good assessment of Cirris's left-behind belongings, he thought, fighting a hysterical urge to laugh. The two goblins jumped down, but he didn't feel any more relaxed for it, and his arms and legs *ached*. He wriggled into a slightly different position. It didn't help.

A cheer went out; the goblins had found something worth looting. Wedding presents, possibly, or more likely Bartur had been carrying home the profits from some city business. That might be the real reason for the sizeable guard. It also might be the intention of the raid. Goblins and even hobgoblins weren't usually this well-organised... perhaps the rumours of war weren't just rumours, and this was part of a larger force. Or it was just a particularly coherent group of bandits.

By now, a pair of goblins had discovered the barrels of drink in one wagon, but following a discussion that Cirris couldn't quite understand, the leader wasn't going to let them indulge. Instead they would make some other use of one barrel.

He found that out a few moments later. There was a sudden *fwoosh* sound, it was momentarily bright outside, and all at once an intense fire crackled fiercely. It had taken only seconds, and one of the wagons must be completely alight; firelight flickered strongly on the ground in that direction, and he could just see the base of flames that lapped over the wagon. Clearly they had thrown strong spirits over it, to save time starting the fire. He sincerely hoped they didn't have more than one barrel of the stuff.

'They're burning the wagons!' Rafe was aghast.

'So I see,' Cirris muttered dryly. 'Look for an opportunity out there...'

'Damn it, point-ears, I *am*.'

Woodsmoke drifted through the air, filling Cirris with apprehension. Maybe, he wondered hopefully, maybe this was enough of a distraction, the fire dazzling sensitive goblin eyes. Maybe they could escape now, if they left from Rafe's side.

He was still pondering maybes when he saw a pair of goblin legs moving rapidly closer. We've been seen! he thought – but then noticed the orange light that flickered around the runner. Just in time to think: oh, gods–

–as the goblin shoved his burden underneath their wagon, mere feet from Cirris. A broken plank fallen or hacked from the burning wagon, half-charred, a strong flame licking over it.

The fierce heat radiated out to his hiding place; the wood was burning firmly. Smoke played around it, spread in the confined space, reached the half-elf. He turned his head, trying hard not to breathe. A bead of moisture dribbled across his forehead.

'We've *got* to–'

'Not now!' Rafe hissed. 'One of the bastards is two feet away. Just a little longer...'

Through the thickening smoke, Cirris caught sight of more figures approaching them on his side. There was an ominous glow... and in a moment, two more burning planks were shoved under the wagon, one coming perilously close to the half-elf. The growing fire crackled fiercely, flames reaching nearly a foot high. Cirris's arms and legs, clutching painfully to the axle, were damp with sweat from the intense heat. He could barely see through the smoke, never mind breathe.

And so he gave in, to the growing ache of his arms and legs and to the need for air. He let go, dropping clumsily to the ground – just as Rafe choked out some call that might have been 'Now!' if it hadn't turned into a coughing fit.

Renewed hope shot through him. Twisting around, he grabbed for his harp – inches from the flames – and scrambled out from under the wagon with Rafe. Out of the confined space, he stretched tall as they began to run, exhaling deeply to clear his lungs. He staggered a little at first, legs sore from their earlier mistreatment, but quickly regained his balance in the face of desperate need.

There were no goblins ahead, as Rafe's call had indicated. A single pair remained near on the left, ten yards away and heading in the opposite direction, easily passed. The minstrels ran in a straight line, directly away from their captors and – by pure chance – towards the river.

Sound and light covered their escape. The first wagon still burned fiercely, sending flames leaping high into the air beneath an ominous column of thick black smoke. There was a constant rumble of fire, punctuated by loud pops and crashes as parts of the structure fell in. Goblins laughed and called to each other, hurrying around the campsite to carry burning debris beneath the other two wagons. They stepped around the fallen corpses without pause, even for the few of their own kin. It seemed almost a celebration.

Cirris looked back one more time, two hundred yards distant, to see renewed flames leaping from the

wagon they'd hid under. With goblin help, that fire would soon equal the original spirit-fuelled blaze. The conflagration shone across the landscape, driving out moonlight and lighting everything with strange, sharp shadows.

They've *got* to be dazzled by that, the half-elf thought. Sharp goblin eyesight or no, we're safe.

No sooner had he thought it than a distant cry went out, a high-pitched goblin shriek. Figures pointed in their direction, calls echoed and repeated. Then a loud, lower note echoed across the landscape: the hobgoblin's bellow of challenge.

Rafe swore loudly, cursing the absent gods. With that sentiment, Cirris was inclined to agree.

The icy water chilled Cirris's feet and ankles, shoving them fiercely sideways at the same time. He nearly lost his balance, but struggled on. Forging the river was a lot more difficult than it had looked, on foot. Though its water only reached knee-height, the strong current and slippery rocks beneath made every yard of progress an effort.

'Hurry!' Rafe snapped. The human was a short way ahead, out of the water and scrambling up the steep bank, holding his cittern out in one hand to balance.

Cirris redoubled his efforts and caught up a few moments later. They ran together along the side of the rutted track, retracing the wagon's earlier route. A quick glance back showed the goblins just about to cross the river, their weapons drawn and gleaming in moonlight. Seeing their faces, the hobgoblin, almost towering above his goblin troops, roared in challenge and raised his axe higher still. Its blade glittered orange in light from the still-burning fire, a threatening omen.

'They're faster than us,' Cirris gasped as he ran, breathing hard. The creatures had indeed gained ground, despite their smaller stature. It wasn't really a surprise: the half-elf considered himself reasonably fit, but he wasn't a trained soldier.

'Got a weapon?' Rafe demanded between breaths.

'A small dagger.' Its sheath hung from his belt.

'Huh. Nothing here.'

The half-elf trod on a stone and winced, again feeling the lack of his boots. They'd settled into a slower pace now, but thankfully so had the goblins, moving as a group and held to the rate of their slowest. He checked behind; the creatures were no longer gaining on them. That meant this race would be decided on stamina. Stamina, when his leg ached with every pace, his chest stabbed pain, and he could hardly breathe any faster.

They ran beside the road, staying by it to avoid the clumps of twisted brambles, nettle patches, and tall

grasses that grew across the surrounding meadow, almost to the riverbank. High in the sky, the white moon shone benignly on everything, its faint eerie light lining the grasses and rippling from the river. Its red cousin had just barely risen in the east, though that provided little light. More of a warning, Cirris thought darkly, of blood spilt and blood to come.

Ahead, the river curved tightly to the right. The hills that edged the valley drew close on this side of the turn, as if forcing the river outward, and the road rose slightly onto their flanks. With the hills came woodland, a forest that blanketed the slopes in green. It spilled over the track, cleared only for that brief space.

'There,' Cirris gasped, gesturing ahead. 'Get deeper in forest. Hide.'

Rafe was clearly flagging, also. He merely grunted in acquiescence.

The goblins had dropped back a little, almost as if playing with the pair, but were still only a few hundred yards distant. Cirris glanced back; tiny points of light glittered from their sharp teeth. It wasn't a reassuring sight.

Into the trees they hurried, and briefly out of goblin vision. Immediately the two minstrels turned aside, leaving the muddy road and heading upslope into the forest. They picked their way quickly among the towering trunks, following animal tracks and whichever route looked easiest. Though the tree canopy overhead was not dense, there was much less light here and Rafe could barely find his way; Cirris led, remembering belatedly that goblins had the advantage of excellent night vision.

Below them, a cacophony of coarse, high-pitched voices warned that the goblins had noticed their departure. The hobgoblin shouted orders in his deeper tones which Cirris just barely made out; something about splitting into groups.

Cirris chose their route almost at random as they moved along the slope, trying to take the less obvious path a few times in the hope that this might confuse pursuit. Within the forest they had been forced to slow their pace, but the uphill scramble was gruelling enough. He breathed desperately and both feet were sore, insufficiently protected from hard-edged stones.

Goblin war-cries echoed a short distance below; perhaps some trace of their passing had been spotted. They forged on with a renewed sense of urgency, shoving their way between thorny bushes because there was no chance of turning back and picking a different route. Cirris had to hold the harp protectively close.

Ahead, a trickling of water barely made itself heard over their ragged breathing and raised heartbeats. They reached it quickly, a slim cascade of white-

frothed water that fell from hills over a narrow bed worn down to rock and gravel.

Rafe threw him a querying glance and he nodded, stepping into the stream. Water splashed over his feet, further drenching his stockings. An icy chill spread through; but at least it numbed the cuts and scratches that were becoming a constant irritant. The damp air soothed his harsh breathing.

He climbed hurriedly upwards in the small current. Only inches wide, it nonetheless cut a swathe through the undergrowth and made their progress much faster. At points the water skittered down in steep rocky cascades, but none so steep they could not climb on hands and knees. (Or hand and knees; Cirris's left hand was precariously holding his small harp out of danger.)

After several minutes the stream became impassable and they left it to continue among the trees. Away from that slight gap in the forest canopy, it became darker now, deeper in the woods. Thick trunks, younger saplings, thorn bushes, protruding roots alike merged into a confused pattern of black on gloom.

'I can... barely... see you...' Rafe panted from behind.

'Maybe-' Cirris began.

A deep-voiced call echoed from below, the hobgoblin. He seemed much closer than either of them would have liked. Maybe we've lost them, Cirris had been about to say. His heart sank again. Brief whooping responses echoed from two directions, groups of goblins both some way distant, but even if only the hobgoblin found them...

They redoubled their efforts, no longer trying to talk. Cirris picked his way into a small depression, leading towards the other side—

—when he trod firmly on a tough, aged bramble stem. The large thorns pierced deep into his foot, and he yelped with pain, yanking it back. He lost his balance and fell to one side, landing heavily on his bottom.

'What-' Rafe hissed, a few paces back, abandoning the exclamation abruptly when he found himself treading on air. The human stumbled and collapsed sideways, rolling half over as he hit the ground. He lay at the edge of the depression, against the edge of roots which banked the surrounding earth almost a foot higher. Clearly he had simply missed the step down.

Rafe didn't even curse. Human and half-elf alike remained still, the only sound their ragged breathing. Neither had the strength to stand.

That was when they heard the hobgoblin.

Its heavy footsteps crunched small twigs, and its breath came in rhythmic, controlled gasps. The sound

came from close by, no more than a few yards, back the way they'd come. Cirris stared into the darkness, sitting firmly on the ground and still unable to move. A single moonbeam filtered through the leaves above, a shaft of pale light that shone through a light haze of dampness.

Then it vanished, cut off more than six feet above the ground. Some part of the light glinted from yellow eyes and teeth. The hobgoblin had arrived.

It grinned, showing more of those fierce teeth, and looked silently at Cirris. The half-elf stared back, helpless. Fear flooded his senses so that he could barely think. With his right hand, he reached for the dagger at his belt, drew it from the sheath.

The hobgoblin merely laughed, brandishing a huge double-headed axe. It licked its lips slowly, deliberately, enjoying the half-elf's terrified expression. The creature flexed its muscles, its bulk towering seven feet above Cirris's trembling form as it stood just a few yards away atop the ridge.

Slowly, deliberately, it raised a foot, beginning to step down. It watched Cirris's reaction intently; he whimpered. The hobgoblin grinned, settled that foot in the dip, and began to move the other down. It planned to play with him further.

But it reckoned without Rafe. The human still lay tight against the roots, hidden from view above. He quickly, firmly reached his arms out and yanked at the hobgoblin's ankle.

The creature lost its balance and tripped, toppling forwards. To Cirris its approach seemed slow, like something from a dream. Its face clenched in a sudden snarl of surprise; its arms jerked, trying to grab at something and releasing the axe which spun harmlessly aside; its huge torso came rushing down... towards him.

Desperately, the half-elf clasped both hands around his small dagger and thrust it forward, bracing as best as he could. Then of a sudden his vision sped up again and the hobgoblin crashed down on him, bellowing in pain as the dagger pierced armour and flesh. Instantly, with a scream of mindless revenge, the creature clawed fiercely at him and drew blood, ripping a chunk of flesh from his cheek and another from one arm.

He reached inside for his last reserves of strength and scrambled free of the hobgoblin's restraining weight, clear of its flailing arms. Without his support its body slumped deeper towards the ground and it screamed again, a choking, coughing scream. Gathering itself on both arms, the creature managed to lift itself — then it fell back down, collapsed half sideways, and was still.

Silence covered the air like a blanket, and there was a long pause. Eventually a night-bird called

overhead, a long plaintive tone like a signal. The goblin bands evidently thought so, too; one gave a high, whooping call, somewhere distant in the forest. The other responded, further off still. They weren't going to get a reply from their leader.

'Get up. We're not out of this yet,' Rafe demanded, rolling carefully to his feet. He winced.

Cirris tried, but found that his entire body was weak and shaking. He laughed stupidly. 'I can't move.'

Rafe looked down on the half-elf, who lay untidily on his side. 'You damn well can. There's nothing wrong with you.'

'There is too!' Cirris objected. 'My legs feel like... like... like butter!' He giggled and coughed at the same time, half choking himself.

'It's *nerves*, point-ears.' Rafe stood over him still. 'Damn half-elves... oh, the Abyss for it all, just take my hand, okay?'

Cirris took the offered hand and pulled himself up, swaying only slightly on his feet.

'Stand there and calm down,' Rafe said, moving aside. 'I'll get your dagger.'

He watched as the small man struggled with the dead hobgoblin, reaching under the corpse and eventually managing to roll it heavily onto its back. The dagger was buried deep in the creature's heart, almost to the length of the hilt; it was a struggle for Rafe to retrieve it from the messy wound.

The human found a patch of moss nearby, used it to wipe off his blood-soaked hands and then the weapon. He handed the dagger back to Cirris. 'You okay now?'

'Yes,' the half-elf confirmed, sheathing his weapon. 'Much steadier. Thank you.'

'Yeah.' Rafe went back to the corpse, checked at its belt. He loosened a pouch, reached inside. 'Ho, he had a little steel.'

'We share it,' Cirris said firmly, having regained his mental acuity. Almost everything he had owned was lost now, burnt in that wagon. He would need coin to replace it, and possibly to repair the harp – the harp! He scanned the gloom, eventually found it hanging on a growth of brambles; it must have fallen from his hand when he first trod on the thorn. The finish was scratched, and a few strings were broken, but otherwise it looked fine.

They set off, aiming downslope at an angle that should eventually rejoin the road. Cirris glanced back at their enemy's corpse a final time; it seemed strange, that he'd killed somebody, but he didn't feel any guilt, or elation, or anything at all really. It was done.

Several hours later, it was nearing sunrise and pale pre-dawn light filled the sky. It was still gloomy, because the road had left the riverside and was passing through forest again. The trees to either side of the cleared track seemed grey in the dimness, and the birds had not yet woken. But it was an expectant kind of stillness, one which promised better things to come.

There had been no sign of the goblins. The race wasn't known for its bravery; perhaps, realising the death of the hobgoblin who kept them in check, they'd simply turned back. Even so, and though they were tired, neither of the minstrels felt safe to stop. They intended to reach one of the villages and beg a place to sleep; it should only be a few more miles, if Cirris remembered rightly.

He'd plucked the thorns from his feet, removed the grit bound up in his stockings. The cuts and scrapes still hurt with each step, but it was a bearable pain. He'd bound the other wounds, those inflicted by the hobgoblin, with strips cut from his ragged tunic. With the state of his clothing, it was a good thing they still had summer's warmth.

Pain stabbed from his toe and he nearly fell forward; he'd stubbed it against a stone in the track. He threw his arms behind him to balance, using the harp's slight weight in his favour.

Rafe looked at him sidelong, scorn on his face. 'You held on to that harp, through all this.'

Cirris shrugged, nodded.

'Pretty damn stupid,' the human pronounced, adjusting the strap that held his own cittern. He paused. 'Maybe there's hope for you yet.'

'If we make it back tomorrow,' Cirris said, 'the festival's still on.'

'So?'

'We could perform together. It went pretty well—'

Rafe spluttered, incredulous. 'Like I'd work with *you!*'

Cirris smiled patiently. 'I *did* save your life.'

'Yeah, and the other way around,' the human muttered. He paused for a moment, considering, then shrugged. 'Ah, to the Abyss with it. Have it your way.'

The half-elf nodded, sensing the beginnings of a change in attitude. 'We'll split the takings fifty-fifty, right?'

'Sixty-forty, point-ears.'

Ah, well. It was a start. ☾

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