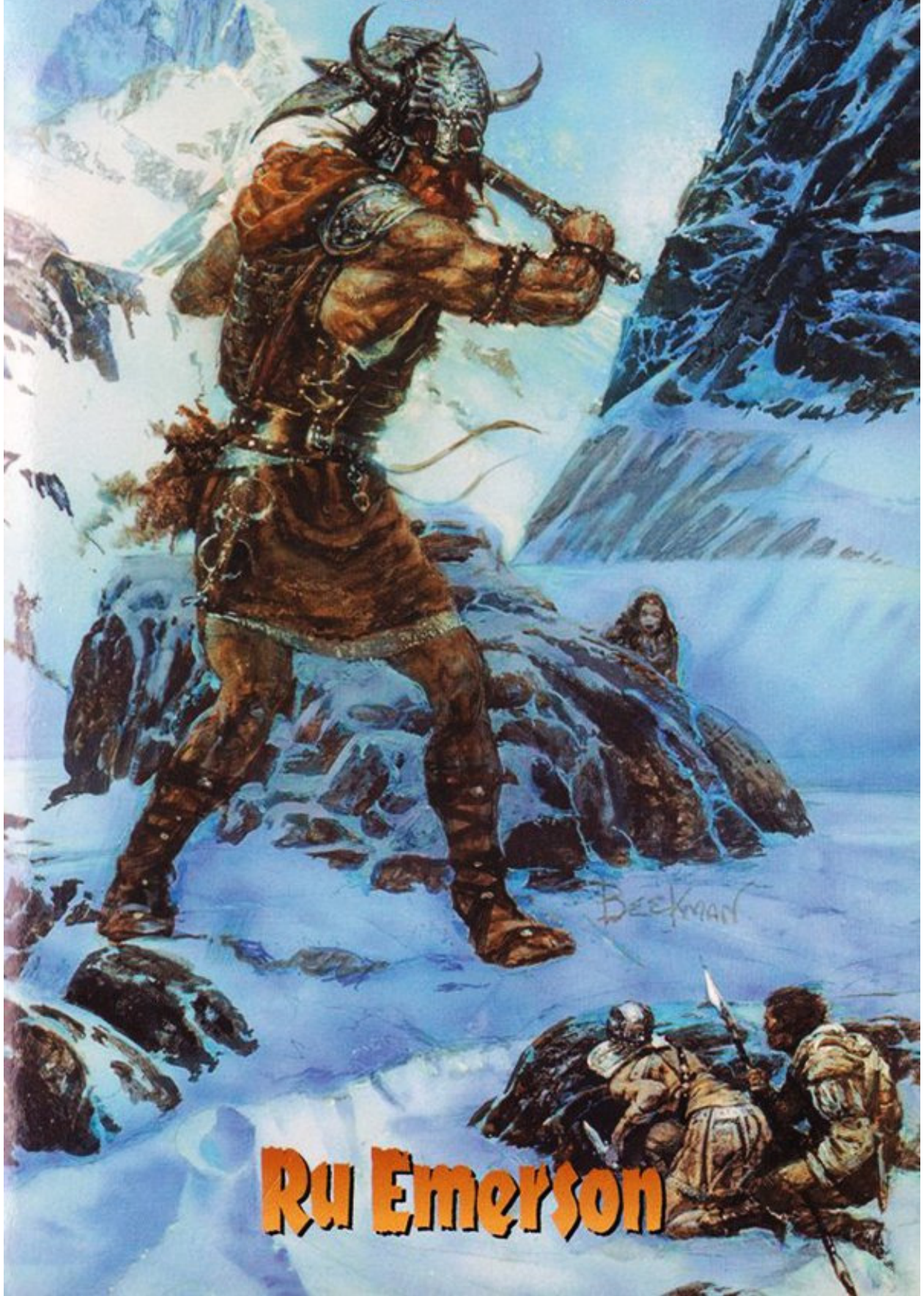


GREYHAWK

AGAINST the GIANTS



Ru Emerson

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Greyhawk - 01

Ru Emerson

(A Flandrel & Undead Scan v1.0)



Prologue

The morning of 14 Harvester dawned muggy and too warm in the remote Keoland hill village of Upper Haven. The newly risen sun cast a ruddy pall over a crossroad just beyond the last huts as Yerik, the sturdily built, gray-bearded village headman, emerged from the hut that he shared with his mother. They had shared the small dwelling ever since his father and young wife had died of fever twelve years earlier. His beloved Aleas had been heavy with their first child, and the grief over their loss had hit him so that he hadn't wed again, taking the village as his family instead.

So far, Upper Haven's year had not been a good one. The young baron had died of fever the preceding winter, leaving no heir. Since his death, there had been none of the usual hunting parties through the area. Baron Hilgenbran, who had paid in silver for all supplies needed at his lodge—from fowl and eggs for his table to wood for the enormous firepits—had been a stern but fair ruler. Without him, there had not been the usual drain on Upper Haven's limited resources, but there had been no coin either.

The village's chickens hadn't increased properly, thanks to the icy winter that had hung on well through Readying, and spring had been unusually cold and wet, lasting well into planting season—in mourning for the baron, some said. Whatever the cause, the grain hadn't sprouted until nearly mid-Wealsun, and some of it was still underground at summer's longest day. By this late date, the wheat and oats should have been threshed and stored in watertight clay jugs down in the communal root cellars where they would keep the winter.

Now, with the grain barely ripe, even the youngest farmer of Upper Haven could look at that ruddy eastern sky and predict heavy rain by nightfall.

"There'll be lightning," Yerik predicted gloomily, his eyes fixed on the ruddy sky where the sun would soon rise, "and fires down where we pasture the goats and horses. It was too wet all spring, and it's been too dry since."

His mother stepped on to the small porch just behind him, deftly working her long white hair into a thick plait. Gran seemingly had no other name—at least none that the villagers could remember. Old as she was, her memory was astonishingly sharp. She nodded. "Like the year—was it almost forty years ago?—year 546, yes. A bad one, everything on-end. It was too wet all summer, too dry in fall, and a poor harvest

because of it. What grain there was rotted when rain fell before we could reap.” She fastened the plait with a bit of faded blue ribbon. “At least the rain put out the fires that year. And it’s our good fortune that you were clever enough to call on High Haven to come in and stay last night, should the grain be ready today.”

She glanced toward the low stable, usually empty this time of year since the herds grazed out all year except snow season. At the moment, the stable threshing floor was packed with High Haveners—twenty men from the upper village, who would exchange labor now for flour and fodder come winter. Fifteen young women who had come down from the mountain with them had taken over the common house for the night.

Yerik sighed heavily. “The grain will *have* to be ready. We’ve no choice.”

“Yes. The crop is your business today, son. Remember that if we go hungry this winter, those who like placing blame will blame you. Worse still, we’ll lose Bregya, and she is a fine tanner.”

The headman nodded. “We’d also lose her father. Digos has not been well the entire year. A better b’lyka player we’ve never had.”

“True.” Gran flipped the braid over her shoulder and came down the step to stand beside him. “Organize everyone able to help in some way. The herders are a sturdy lot. They’ll give you good time, and old Haesk and his brother can help keep watch over the babes. Get little Adisa to help Bregya tend her small ones. Take blankets so they can sit under the trees and weave us wreaths from the stems for good fortune. Make a game of it for the youngest. The children are useful at finding all the loose wheat-heads, if you plan it right.”

Yerik nodded and smiled.

Gran patted his arm. “Yes. I see you remember the game I made of it, when you were a small boy. Leave me Mibya and her sister. I’ll need them to start pots of soup for everyone. We’ll eat together once the crop is safely inside.”

“Good.” He rubbed his hoary beard and nodded. “That will free up more of the women to help. The rain may hold off until middle night. It has that look. Still, we’ll get the crop in as quickly as we can. Remember Lharis and his son are out hunting. They should return with meat.”

“Should,” she agreed with a smile. “We won’t count on it, though.”

“No, but old Mikati swears he saw an entire herd of deer on the northeast plain two days ago. You know Lharis. If there’s a herd anywhere near, he’ll bring in at least one.”

“I will count deer only when I can touch them,” Gran replied. “I’d welcome meat, but if not, we’ll manage. We always do.” She gazed at the eastern sky with visible misgivings. “I wish I liked the look of this morning better.”

“You”—he eyed her sidelong—“*recall* a day like this?” he asked tentatively, emphasizing the word that also meant accessing the oral village history passed down to her, mother to daughter, wisewoman to apprentice, for all the years Upper Haven had been a village.

She shrugged. “No. I’m merely worried. We know the weather has been erratic all year, and it will play us foul if it can. Go, shoo.”

Yerik nodded absently. His eyes were fixed on the horizon, and she doubted he’d heard her. “Do you see an omen?” he whispered.

“None of that!” she hissed. “They’ll not take it well—our people *or* the highlanders—to hear you say ‘omen’! Keep everyone busy as you can. The other women and I will bring midday food to you. Why”—she laughed softly—“we’ll make a picnic of it, and then a holiday tonight, especially if young Lhors and his father bring us game. Offer your reapers a proper harvestfest, dancing and music and a feast, good barley and beet soup with honeyed flat bread Filling stuff, even if there isn’t venison. A chance for the young men of the highlands to properly meet our girls.”

“And the other way about.” Yerik smiled. His young wife had come from High Haven at just such a small harvestfest. He patted his mother’s cheek. “What will we do,” he murmured, “when you finally leave this world for a better?”

She clasped his hand. “I do nothing special. I’m simply a woman with long years and a good memory. The village does as much for me as I do for the village—just as we keep an old warrior like Lharis happy by making him huntsman for all of us and letting him teach his skills to our boys. I can still cook, and I can see patterns that repeat over time.”

“You make it sound so... so ordinary,” he protested.

“It is ordinary, thank all the gods at once,” she assured him. “Certain things occur, now and again—like a too-wet planting season.” She released his hand. “Get everyone out there. We’ll bring black bread, apples, and ale at midday.” Her gaze moved beyond him toward the sunrise, and she looked briefly troubled. Before her son could question her though, she shook off the mood and shooed him away.

Yerik straightened his tunic, settled the thick belt around his middle, then strode off into the midst of the village, rapping on one door and then another before he vanished into the stable to waken their visitors.

Gran watched him go, nodding approvingly. The harvest would be in and safely dry before the storm hit. Nothing else mattered, except keeping the morale of both villages high.

She drew a thread from the ragged hem of a sleeve and wound it around her finger so that she would remember to have the common room readied after the soup was simmering. There’d be no dancing in the open square *this* night—not for long, at least. The ache in her bones told her that this would be the kind of storm her long-dead husband had called a giant killer.

An interesting name, she thought. Why it was called that, however... She didn’t know for sure. Probably because it described a true fury of a storm, a storm that hit just short of midnight and pulverized the senses with forks of lightning and sent thunder to set the dogs howling and make the elders glad their ears no longer worked so well.

After a full day under that hot, muggy sky, most of the harvesters would be exhausted, only the young still willing to dance. With luck, the worst of the storm wouldn’t hit until the children were sound asleep.

She’d best remember to tell Yerik to make sure a few of the villagers had enough energy to patrol the fields. Lightning-fires could devastate what few grazing lands they had.

She shoved the braid over her shoulders. Storm weather was making her feel broody and old, but there was work to do. She glanced toward the sunrise one last

time before setting to her tasks. The sun had cleared the distant peaks and now seemed merely a little too bright. West, the mountains were still a dark mass, smothered in black towering cloud.

* * *

Out in the fields, the harvest went on as the sun rose to midday and fell toward the ever-thickening cloud in the west. Women and men, bent nearly in half, worked their way efficiently backward down the ranks of dry plants, grabbing a fat handful of stems and scything them right at the dirt before dropping them in place and moving on to the next handful. Behind them, others came to free a single stalk and use it as a binding cord around the rest. Boys and young women followed, gathering up the bundles and carrying them to the two handcarts, while children picked up whatever had fallen and tossed it into baskets.

Yerik allowed a decent break for midday meal, knowing people would be able to work harder and longer for food and a short nap. The weather still held off, but the late afternoon air was pale gold and utterly still, as if some god had distilled it.

The sun was still a full hand above the clouds when the last basket was picked up and the carts were hauled back under the stable's low roof for the night. Abandoning the carts and baskets, villagers and their guests went to remove the layers of dust and chaff-coated sweat before gathering in the village square where two black pots bubbled, spreading the soothing odor of a familiar soup.

Night came early, with a rising wind and heavy black clouds that blotted out the western mountains and even the near foothills. Thunder grumbled in the distance, and occasionally the western sky was briefly pale with lightning. But the air was cool and fresh for the first time in long hours, and the rain held off.

After everyone had eaten well, Dikos broke out his three-stringed b'lyka, while Mikati unpacked the four flat drums from their hide case, settling them on his broad lap. People cheered and clapped as the two consulted before finally breaking into the familiar jiggling tune they always played first. For some moments they played to an empty square while some of the older women clapped time. Then Emyas tugged her newly pledged Arkos to his feet, and got him dancing. Others joined them. A half dozen of the girls got up and formed a circle, dancing, giggling at the boys and at each other. Gran and the other cooks settled back, pleasantly tired, to watch and occasionally gossip about the dancers or those who sat close together, chuckling as they wagered on which would be the next pair to pledge.

Song followed song as evening deepened into night.

All at once, the air turned much cooler. Lightning forked across the southwestern hill country and thunder rumbled, louder and closer to the flash of light. The two players set aside their instruments as a gust of wind blew across the ground, sending a swirl of dust and cook-fire smoke high. At that moment, a dark, bulky man in leathers came into the open light, followed closely by a youth of perhaps seventeen years. The older man carried a strung bow in one hand and a drawn sword in the other—unusual in a peaceful village. His face, normally expressionless, was set and grim. Yerik wove between the suddenly stilled dancers, the old woman right on his heels.

“Lharis, Lhors, what is it?” the headman demanded in a low voice. Lharis held a finger against his mouth and made a warning glance at the gathered villagers. His son Lhors was pale to the lips. Lharis beckoned urgently, drawing Yerik and his mother under their porch.

“Giants,” he murmured. “We were crossing the fallow ridge at sunset to get help bringing in the kill, and we saw two giants, hulking brutes twice my height and breadth at least. I don’t think they saw us. They were angling away from here, north and west, but they seemed curious and interested in what they saw. We had to go to ground for some time until we were certain they’d left.”

Lhors swallowed. His two thrusting spears clattered together.

“We’d better ready for an attack,” the retired warrior added evenly.

“Ready? Attack? Against—?” Yerik’s voice broke.

The other man nodded firmly. “Hold together, man. It’s not impossible. We’ve a few who can use bow or spears. Find them, and warn them to move quietly but quickly to fetch their arms. Meanwhile, you get everyone else out of sight and kept quiet.” He glanced over at Gran. “See that those fires are put out. With luck, the creatures aren’t after this village, and they may not know exactly where it is.”

He didn’t believe that last, Gran realized, her own mouth dry. “If we tell people what the threat is, everyone will panic,” she said.

Lharis shook his head.

“No, don’t do that. Just say there’s a danger. Say it’s bandits. Get the women and children to the root cellars where they won’t be heard. Pick some of the older boys to douse all those torches and ready as many others as we have, once they’ve put out the cook fires. Put them down next to the oven and keep it lit. The flames won’t show, and the torches will be right there to light, when it’s time.” The aged warrior eyed the headman, who was trying to say something. “Cheer up, Yerik. Giants aren’t immortals. They can die as readily as men.”

Lightning flashed, and thunder boomed almost on its heels, shaking the ground. “No one should be out in this anyway. Get our people under cover because the storm’s setting up strong. I saw only the two, Yerik. Our men can deal with two giants.”

“Deal... with...” Yerik echoed blankly.

“Do what he says, my son. Go!” Gran gave him a shove. She waited to be sure he was moving in the right direction then turned back to the two hunters. “Your spears, Lhors, have you more of them?”

The boy stared at her, his eyes wild, then jumped convulsively as a small child screamed. The village flared with blue light, thunder cracking on top of it. Gran felt the hair stand up on her head and arms. She turned to see terrified people suddenly running in all directions, her son standing in the middle of the square staring up into the trees. And up. Darkness was followed in a blink by a brilliant blue-white flash that cast strange shadows.

“That isn’t one of our oaks,” Gran said to herself. Sudden dread seized her as lightning illuminated trees, roofs, and a huge snarling face looming above the roofs.

The heavily bearded giant was more than twice her size, and most of his head was covered in a metal cap. His body was clad in heavy-looking hides that bared massive arms, and several long spears dangled from one meaty hand.

Bellowing, part laugh and part battle cry, the giant strode forward into the square, hefting an enormous spear as he searched for a target. Panicked villagers streamed in every direction—all except for one. Lharis stood in the midst of the chaos, waving his sword and trying to direct the hysterical crowd. The giant spotted him and hurled its massive spear straight for him. The deadly missile sang through the air and slammed into the warrior.

Lharis choked. He was knocked off his feet a man's length or more before he went down. Blood—too much blood—ran down his chin. His hands clawed at the thick wooden haft that swayed above his belly and pinned him firmly to the ground.

“Father!” Lhors' voice cracked into treble. He threw himself at the older man. Lharis tried to speak, but no words came. His eyes found Gran. She nodded, caught Lhors by the shirt and dragged him back.

“Don't!” she shouted. “That's a killing blow. You can't help him. You'll only cause him more pain, and he knows it! Get all the children you can and get them to the cellars. *Go!*”

“I can't!”

“You can! Go!”

The boy glanced back at his father. Lharis lay still, his hands suddenly limp at his sides and his eyes staring sightlessly up. Lhors shuddered and turned away.

Gran paused to take stock. People were running in all directions, girls screaming shrilly, men bellowing and cursing. A hideous, deep laugh drowned them out. The giant who'd killed Lharis stepped into the square, overturning the empty soup pot as he shouted what must be an order, but she couldn't understand a word of it. Three more giants—huge-muscled, fur-and hide-clad brutes—immediately came from the trees to stride after the villagers fleeing into the stable. Somewhere beyond them, she could hear her son shouting, “No! Don't go in the buildings! Get out of the stable! Get to the stream or the cellars!”

She turned back to see what she could do. Across the square, much too near the still ruddy fires and the giant who'd killed Lharis, she could see Mibya and her nearest sister. They'd scooped up four of the little ones, and the sister bent her head over the two children she held, letting dark cloth hide her white hair as she edged cautiously sideways. With a sudden spurt of movement, the woman turned and ran between two huts and vanished into the night, but Mibya stared up, frozen in place.

The wisewoman yelled at her, but Mibya either didn't hear or was too terrified to move. The giant flung back a hide cloak, sheathed his sword, and bent down to shove a finger in the still nearly full pot of soup.

That's boiling, Gran thought, stunned. But if it burned him, he gave no sign. He licked broth from his finger, then smiled, baring yellowed teeth the size of shields, and moved with appalling speed, slapping Mibya aside with the back of his fist. With one swift bound and a snatch, the giant scooped up the children she'd been carrying and dropped them into the boiling soup. He clapped a round shield over the open top, holding it down with one huge hand.

Gran could hear Mibya shrieking. Her own legs wouldn't hold her. Mibya's voice died suddenly. Probably the woman had as well. Gran squared her shoulders and crawled to where Lhors still knelt and caught hold of his ear. She tugged. Finally, he crawled after her into the dark. She kept a pinch-hold on his ear. He whimpered and

flailed ineffectively at her. “Stop it!” she hissed. “There is no time! Stay out of the light and gather up as many of the women and children as you can *without being seen!*”

“But...” He couldn’t manage anything else.

Gran slewed around in front of him to pinch his other ear as well. “Listen to me!” she ordered in a furious whisper. “We will lose many of our dearest ones this night. It’s too late to stop that! All we can do now is rescue every single soul the gods permit us to save! Do you understand me?”

Silence.

The giant who hovered over the soup pot removed his makeshift lid and gazed down at the interior. Her stomach churned. Apparently satisfied, he dropped the lid back with a ringing clatter, then strode off to help his fellows. Several of them had fished brands from the fire and were thrusting them deep into the stable roof.

She could no longer hear Yerik, Gran realized bleakly. She forced herself to concentrate on the heaving boy who stared at her with wet, terrified eyes. “Get people into the cellars—*not* the new cellars, they’ll collapse! Or get down to the lower dell or the stream. Find anyone hiding beneath the floors of houses. They’ll die if they stay there. Do you understand me, boy?”

At first, she couldn’t be certain that he did. A glance over his shoulder as more lightning flashed gave her a new count of enemy. At least ten more leather-clad brutes were approaching from the north.

Lhors caught a shuddering breath, nodded sharply, then scabbled away from her on his hands and knees into the darkness.

Gran went flat and still as more giants stormed uphill from across the fields. If I’m stepped on, she prayed silently, let it kill me at once.

A woman’s scream topped even the thunder. The ground trembled all around her. For one brief moment, it was blessedly quiet. The stable went up with a crackling roar, and giants cheered. She clapped her hands over her ears and huddled next to dead Lharis as those trapped inside the building burned, while others fought free of the flames only to die on huge spears and swords.

Something was bruising her ribs, she realized—the dead warriors sword lay some distance away, but one of his daggers had fallen from its scabbard. Slowly, cautiously, she wrapped a hand around it and drew it from under her. The weight of the thing, the feel of the carefully wound leather wrappings around the hilt, gave her a little inner strength. At least she could choose her own death, if nothing else. She drew a deep breath and opened her eyes.

There were at least twenty giants out there, most surrounding the fiery stable while others torched houses or went looking for herd beasts or other fodder. They’d consider human bodies the same as game, fodder for the pot. She didn’t dare stay here.

May the gods bless you for your care of us, she silently offered Lharis, then eased cautiously away from his body and back into the dark.

The roaring fires of burning houses and barns cast an uncertain light. Shadows of running villagers and stalking giants flickered and danced in the flames’ cruel glow. Gran moved through the darkness, avoiding the light when she could and refusing to acknowledge the bloodied and broken corpses that littered her village.

In the end, she was only able to rescue two young girls who had hidden under the back of the common house. Now smoke filled the building, flame shot through the thatched roof, and the back wall was uncomfortably warm. She could hear giants laughing down by the burning stable. Another was close but seemed to be occupied with plundering the henhouse. She couldn't leave the two anyway, Gran realized bleakly. She'd delivered young Ilina herself, ten years earlier.

It took work and time to persuade the girls to leave the scrape they'd dug themselves, even though the boards were beginning to glow red. When a pocket of pine-resin popped, sending sparks showering in all directions, little Ilina fixed her eyes on Gran's eyes, clamped her fingers around weeping Nidy's wrist, and somehow got them both into the open just before the whole building collapsed. Gran gripped Ilina's fingers and felt hers gripped in reply. She fought them all away from the fire, dragging the girls across open ground and into the prickly brush.

Horrid laughter echoed all around them, punctuated by occasional screams or howls of pain.

The girls would have stopped at the brush, but the old woman was adamant. She tugged fiercely at them, now hissing an order against one young ear or another while dragging the two terrified girls downhill along a shallow gully. Numb from terror, they stumbled into the narrow-mouthed cavern where just hours earlier she'd emerged with a basket of barley and a freshly mixed bag of herbs for the soup. She got the two inside ahead of her and waited while they eased their way back into darkness.

The cries of her people tore at her. She clutched the dagger, but the urge was foolish—one old human woman against so many giants, the least of them twice her height. She'd die to no cause, and these two girls would surely die as well.

She gasped as booming laughter drowned everything, including thunder. The sky above her was blood red, then painfully blue-white. Thunder roared to deafen the very gods, but it couldn't quite drown a spiraling roar that shook her very bones. One of their enemies had just died up there. Rain suddenly poured down in sheets. She was soaked between one breath and another. All at once, the fires were diminished.

Wind soughed over her. Gran's nose twisted as she smelled burned hair and charred flesh. Thunder momentarily deafened her and drove her to her knees. When she could again hear, all she could hear was a deep, rumbling voice, bellowing orders that made no sense to her.

* * *

Just after dawn, Gran coaxed the girls from hiding and back up the hill. Lharis' dagger rested against her back the way she had seen him wear it. "In case," she whispered, but Ilina and Nidy didn't hear her. Both followed where she led, often stumbling. That was good. With luck, they'd never remember the previous night. With better luck, she'd have no need of that dagger. If she did, they were all three dead anyway.

She moved cautiously into the square, the girls behind her. The enemy was long gone, leaving behind the burned husks of buildings. The dead lay everywhere. Oddly, the village goats grazed on spilled grain just beyond the ashes of the stable. Gran

frowned. Why had the giants left goats and bodies behind? It wasn't like any of the tales she'd heard.

But she could see the answer right in the middle of the square. A dead giant sprawled across the open ground, his leather armor still smoldering and what skin she could see blackened as if by fire. She smiled grimly. A giant killer of a storm, yes. *Lightning seeks whatever is tallest: tree, stone; sword set upright at a crossroads*, or a giant in the midst of an otherwise barren square. The rest of his kind had fled rather than join him in death.

Behind her, a twig snapped and she whirled, dropping Ilina's wrist and fumbling awkwardly for the dagger. But it was only Lhors, weaponless, his face haggard and tears making muddy paths down a filthy face. The dark beard he'd begun to show this past year was burned in places, and one eyebrow was mostly gone.

The girls remained where she left them. Lhors blinked at her expressionlessly, but as her fingers dug into his arm, he winced. Not in shock like the girls, then, just hurting. But there was no time for mourning—not for either of them.

"Boy," she hissed.

"G-gran?" he stuttered. "They're dead. E-everyone. All of them." His hand fell limp against his leg. "I tried what you said. I tried!"

"Shhh. It's all right," she said quietly.

"No, it's not!" He pulled free of her grasp. "N-no one would listen to me. They ran, and then I had Bregya and her youngest boy, and she l-looked at me and she... she..." He swallowed, turned away. "They're all dead, except us," he said finally.

Gran patted his shoulder. There was nothing she could say that would mend this, and just now, she wanted to weep for her own son. But this boy... he kept things inside when he was upset. She didn't dare let him do it with this. "I'm sorry, Lhors. It's a dreadful thing. At least you and your father did what you could to avert it. Remember that."

The boy's eyes brimmed, and his lips twisted in anger. "Why remember?" he managed, his voice thick with tears. "Will it change anything?"

"Not now, but it will help you later."

He swore a soldier's oath that shocked her silent. "I don't care about later! My father—he had no chance! He fought for the king all his grown life! And then, only to be cast off like an aging horse because he was too old to fight! To send him out here to protect peasants!"

"And we were grateful to him. He gave us his skills, and he gave us you. Second-guessing a life is foolish, Lhors," Gran said flatly. "He died a hero. Remember that." She wrapped both arms around him briefly. "We can't stay here, Lhors. There's no time. The giants may return. Are you hurt?"

He shook his head.

"You're certain no one lives?"

He nodded.

"You've checked the cellars beneath the houses that aren't burned?"

"All of that. There's no one." He gazed helplessly at the twisted, blackened wreck of the stable.

Gran closed her eyes briefly. "Lhors, we've work to do, you and I."

He nodded faintly. "I'll fetch shovels—"

“No, there are too many, and there are other immediate needs. One of us must go to High Haven at once to see if they were also attacked. If not, they must be warned of the danger, as must every village around us. I will have one of the High Haveners ride down to New Market with the warning and have him bring back men to dig graves or build pyres.”

“But I can dig—”

She laid a finger across his lips, silencing him. “No. You have another, harder task. You must catch Old Margit or one of the other horses and take the road to Cryllor. You must request an audience with Lord Mebree and inform him of what has happened. At the very least, you must warn the guard company there that giants have done this.”

Lhors stared at her, his mouth slack. “Go to... Gran, why would they care? And I can’t ride worth a—”

“They’ll care,” the old woman replied bluntly. “About revenues at the very least. Dead villagers don’t pay taxes. But the guard will have to stop giants who are bold enough to openly attack the way those did. Remember that this is not a plea for our lowly selves. Remember that. Keep this in mind instead: taxes. The king will send an army to keep the money flowing.”

The boy swallowed, and his prominent throat-apple bounced. “Gran, you’re mad! You’d send me to convince a council? My father was only a captain of one of the hill companies, and that was over twenty years ago!”

“Yes, but that’s more than any of the rest of us ever were. You are the son of a soldier, and that’s more than anyone else can claim. *You* are the only one we can send, Lhors. There is no one else. Now, remember to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ often, especially to officers and nobles. That may open doors for you. Do not let them refuse to hear you, though.”

“I can try,” Lhors said doubtfully, “but I won’t leave you here alone. We’ll all go. If I can catch Margit, the girls can ride her to High Haven. Then I’ll go on, I promise you.”

To her dismay, Gran’s eyes filled with tears. She dashed them impatiently aside. “Good lad. Go find Margit. We’ll wait here.”



Old Margit was nowhere around. Lhors searched for the mare for nearly an hour before giving up. If the giants had not taken her, then she had fled too far away for him to find, so he returned to the husk of a village to fetch Gran and the girls.

Before the sun was much above the horizon, Lhors, Gran, and the two children were on their way to High Haven. The first hour or so, they did not trust the road, fearing another attack by hiding giants. Instead, they stumbled their way through trees, brush, and the occasional creek. Their progress was excruciatingly slow, and after a while, Lhors urged them onto the road so that they could find refuge all the quicker.

They reached the tiny herding village at midday. Gran and the girls remained there while the villages remaining able-bodied men readied their defenses and prepared to go back to Upper Haven to bury the dead. Lhors went on, carrying a flask of water, a few ripe apples, a bit of bread, and a clay jug of herbed oil to pour over it. Mostly, he ate and drank as he walked. Now and again, he ran when the road was smooth enough, though nightfall slowed him to a walk again.

He reached a small garrison outpost in the hills just short of daybreak the next day. Fortunately, his father had friends among the small company of scouts who patrolled the surrounding hill country. Lhors had no trouble passing on word of the destruction in the foothills. He had rather hoped to be sent back to High Haven, but the captain, a tall, bearded man named Edro, had other ideas.

“You’re young and trained by your pa, but no true soldier, lad. And you have cause to petition for a company to come and clean out these giants, if they’re still about. I’ll take some of my men and head to Upper Haven myself to make sure the folk are safe and all. You better travel on up to Cryllor and let Mebree know what’s happened out here. So happens, your pa served Mebree before he retired. You stand a better chance of getting the lord’s ear when someone like me might not.” He also ordered a horse, an old gelding with a rough gait and a hard mouth, for the youth. “I’ll tell you truth, lad. No one here wants to ride old Bruiser. But once he’s far enough away from his stable, he’ll cover the ground for you, faster’n you could do yourself.”

There wasn't much Lhors could do but agree to the added journey and take the horse—a raw-looking old white brute with long, brownish teeth and a pink nose that had been badly chewed on at some point. Bruiser was no better than Edro had promised, but the bone-jarring trot ate up distance.

Late on the third day out of High Haven, he rode up to Cryllor's double gate and gratefully handed the gelding's reins over to the guard.

Cryllor was an outpost, a fort that still resembled one, though these days it was the size of a small city. It was quite the biggest place Lhors had ever seen. Despite the grief that swaddled his mind and emotions and weighed on him like a stone, he couldn't help but pay heed to sights that ranged from the exotic to amazing.

The city was ancient and many-walled. As it had grown from a log-walled garrison to a minor fortress and finally to a city, it had expanded well beyond the original fortifications. Still, the lords of Cryllor had prudently maintained that innermost wall and made certain that new outer walls were built as needed. Some of the newer barriers had been razed as the city grew. The stone from the previous outer bastions was then used in the new ones or broken down to be remade into buildings or to pave new streets.

The oldest three sets of walls remained in place. The innermost still enclosed Lord Mebree's manor and served as a final defense against any enemy strong enough to win through the main battlements and the city itself. The other two rings were each four man-lengths across—but hollow. They still served as barricade, barracks, stables, butteries, and weaponries for the lords' armymen.

Since King Kimbertos had come to power, there had been no attacks anywhere around Cryllor. Lord Mebree's city, once a strong fortress and a prosperous market, was nearly as infamous for its many slums and the well-entrenched thieves' guild. Cutpurses and assassins were everywhere, as were the poor. The markets gave over vast sections where the needy could find stale bread, overripe fruit, soft tubers, and sacks of grain and flour beginning to mildew. Sour-smelling food stands alternated with tattered blankets piled next to used clothing, discarded boots, ill-tanned hides, or bits of fabric and leather too small to serve those who could pay for better. One or two stalls sold partially used charms and spells, while fortune-tellers with greasy packets of cards or poorly blown gazing-balls tried to sell their skills.

The wealthy and noble kept summer quarters high in the hills, well away from the heat and stench of the city. In winter, they lived in comfort behind locked gates, sending armed guards to accompany their servants on errands beyond the household walls.

But to a boy who'd only once a year gone to New Market with his father, Cryllor was shining and glorious. I should have come here with Father, like he wanted, not like this, Lhors thought, but there had never been enough free time. The village had depended too heavily on Lharis for his hunting skills.

Now Lhors gazed listlessly from paved streets and stone fountains to the carved doors on ancient dwellings and the gargoyles perched on the corners of flat roofs. The city was more impressive than he could have imagined from his father's tales—yet it mattered no more than the incredible variety of people crowding those streets. He stared briefly at two reed-slender elves, then at a girl in bright-colored skirts and scarves swaying on a small, raised platform. At her feet two boys sat cross-legged,

fiddling with their reed pipes while a third paced back and forth, adjusting the skin on his drum. None of this held Lhors' attention for long. None of it was important.

He gazed up at one of the inner lengths of wall—all that was left of what might have been an outer wall a long time before when the city had been much smaller. Now there was barely room for two guards to pace a few steps and keep watch over the people below.

"My father might have stood there once," Lhors said to himself. His throat closed. He drew breath through his nostrils then forced his attention elsewhere.

Some distance away, a man clad in mail and plate armor that shone like silver moved through the crowd. He was followed closely by a boy and a horse. The horse was a huge creature, blue-black with a well-brushed mane and tail that hung nearly to the paving. The steed's head rested on the knight's plate-clad shoulder as if he were an enormous pet.

That's a paladin! Lhors thought in amazement. To think! His father had told him wonderful tales about paladins, and this past winter he'd openly spoken of his hopes that Lhors might become equerry to such a man. I might have liked that, Lhors mused, if only because Father would have been proud, but the village could never have spared me. Even Lhors' hunting skills—nowhere near as good as his father's—were needed.

Lhors glanced after the paladin and the boy with renewed interest. Odd companions. The mail-clad man was an impressive figure, the boy a gawky creature of perhaps ten years with spiky brown hair and ragged clothing. Curious, Lhors thought. There must be some tale there, though he hadn't the wit to work one out.

Some distance on, a gray-bearded man juggled three lit torches. Lhors slowed but moved on almost at once. He had seen a boy moving among the awed crowd, using a slender-bladed knife to relieve people of their coin bags. Cutpurse. So that is where the word comes from, Lhors realized. He made certain of his own coins and kept going.

He paused now and again to repeat the gate guard's instructions to himself. Straight past the Shrine of Heironeous, which he would know by the huge stone hand clutching a lightning bolt. He tried not to think about the combination of huge hands and lightning. Who or what was a Heironeous? It must be a god to have a shrine, but who prayed to a god who called upon lightning?

Upper Haven had prayed to all the gods in general—one never knew which might be offended by being left out. Lhors knew little of such things himself. His father now and again invoked the name of Trithereon, though when things went wrong, Lharis bespoke one he named as Dread Hextor. "One who was a warrior and is now poor is doubly in the care of Hextor," was all his father would say.

"Straight past the shrine," he repeated to himself, "then turn south beyond the armorer's and south again at the wall. Follow the wall around to the gate."

All at once, he could see the shrine—a small stone building with a massive lightning bolt and fist of shining black stone. Lhors felt suddenly very peasantlike and out of place. He hurried on, passing through a sprawl of stone buildings, small huts, and a few open-sided tents. This must be the armory, he decided, though other goods were sold as well—furs, wrought metal jewelry, and a variety of armor. The noise was incredible here. A massive brute of a smith on his left was beating red-hot

metal, and just beyond him, two younger men were battering horseshoes and dipping the finished products into a vat of water.

He caught the familiar reek of a tanners—rotting hides soaking in salt brine—and stopped short. *Bregya*. His throat tightened. He'd helped her this past year with the scraping after she'd become too ill and weak to do the heavy work. Upper Havens master tanner had become something of a substitute mother to Lhors, instructing him in proper manners, helping him to understand girls, and knowing when he needed to talk about things that he couldn't tell his father. Lhors swallowed hard and moved on quickly.

Do not think about Bregya! To come this far, only to weep in the city streets or worse, before the guards! His father's shade would be horrified, and he himself would die of shame.

Lhors had rehearsed the tale often on the journey here. A boy of his class would be given little time for an audience with a lord, however important his message. The more he ran the words through his mind, the less the words themselves would hurt. *You must tell what happened as quickly and clearly as you can, and if the lord permits, you must ask his help.*

He ran through the words once again as he turned the corner. "They must be stopped. They destroyed our village and now are more confident. If they burn every village in the hills, then they will believe nothing can stop them. Then they will turn on the plain, perhaps even the king's city. Better to end their terror with Upper Haven." He stumbled over a badly angled cobble and glanced around furtively. No one was watching him, fortunately. "Upper Haven was small, but honest," he continued to himself. "We paid the king's tax every year, and we provided goods for the baron's hunting lodge. Perhaps the coin is small compared to that of a town like New Market, but join our tax to that of the other villages..." And there I pause, Lhors told himself. Let Lord Mebree see the answer himself, as my father would say.

He bore south at the wall, fingers trailing over its greened stones. The way was narrower here and the wall very tall and sturdy looking. On his right was a long row of joined buildings that might be houses, but they had few windows or doors, and there was no sign of people anywhere.

As the wall curved away to the left, he came upon a small baker's shop where the smell of fragrant bread filled the air. His stomach rumbled, and he fingered the twist of fabric that held a silver and three copper pieces in his right pocket. He'd left the hill garrison with three silver pieces the captain had pressed upon him—more money than he'd had for himself in all his life. It appalled him how quickly it had gone, frugal as he'd been and as little as he'd eaten. And there was still the return journey. But it would be foolish to come so far and faint from hunger at the king's feet. He eyed the display, finally choosing a plain roll for a single copper.

The baker's wife eyed him appraisingly as she took the coin, then split the roll and spread a generous dollop of runny cheese on it for him. "You're too thin, lad," she told him severely and waved him away when he tried to pay for the extra. "Most young 'uns as lean as you are would try to steal their bread. I appreciate honesty in a boy."

He thanked her as graciously as he knew how, suddenly grateful for Bregya's lessons. Odd, though, he thought as he walked away with his mouth full of soft bread and spicy cheese. It would never have occurred to him to *steal* food.

The tough little loaf would have been almost enough by itself. With the addition of the cheese, his stomach was properly full, and he felt alert for the first time in days.

He drank from a fountain where water poured from the mouths of oddly shaped stone fish. There were more guards here and the long row of houses gave way to a series of pens and stables. Two horsemen, helmets eased back off their faces, rode past him at a slow amble, heading in the direction he was going. Some paces on, they dismounted, handed their reins to a barefoot boy who led the horses into a fenced enclosure close by and began unsaddling them. The men vanished, and moments later, Lhors could see the broad opening that breached the innermost wall and beyond that, the high wall.

He hesitated at the intricately wrought metal gates that gave entry to the lord's courtyard. There were two armored and armed men flanking the opening. They looked at him sternly. To his surprise, once he'd stammered out his name and village, they'd conferred by hand signal, then simply passed him through.

Once inside, he slowed to look around, but there wasn't much to see. The grounds were raked dirt and gravel or sand—clean, plain, and utilitarian. A few plain benches of hardwood or stone were scattered here and there, but there was no other ornamentation.

The keep was smaller and much plainer than he'd have expected, but then this was not a king's palace. Still, it rose high above his head—four sets of windows, one above the other with a guard-walk above that. The walls went straight up, the stone dressed so smooth there were no visible handholds anywhere. Two mail-clad men paced back and forth on the roof above the parapet. The lower windows appeared to be set at random, but their sills were deep and the openings so narrow that he couldn't have squeezed through the entry. Structures such as this were for siege fighting, his father had told him. Archers could shoot from reasonable safety, and a small force could hold off an entire army.

But there had been no such siege warfare in Cryllor in long years and with the gods' blessing, there would not be again. Lhors smiled as his eye caught the large blue banner snapping in a suddenly brisk breeze. Lharis had worn that same patch of blue on the breast of his jerkin. He had been very proud of that bit of blue.

"I won't shame it or you, Father," Lhors whispered. "I swear it."

He could see a walkway along the wall he'd just come through, with enclosed towers on the corners where guards could shelter from harsh weather.

The grounds were busy. Someone was hauling a cart away from the near stable. A boy steadied a nervous ass tethered to a wagon that was piled high with dull green hay while two men in grubby leathers forked the feed into tubs for other boys to carry inside.

Half a dozen men paced between the gate and keep. Three were in full armor, but the rest appeared to be servants, clad alike in dark blue trousers and shirts.

Four men lounged on a bench, and just beyond them, two servants were working on a saddle. At their backs, a boy in roughspun clothes sat cross-legged near a pile of

stirrups. He was busily polishing one to a gleaming bronze and audibly groaned when a middle-aged fellow wearing only loose, greasy leather pants dropped another load of stirrups atop the pile. The older man laughed raucously, then pulled a polishing cloth from his pocket and settled down to help.

Other soldiers hovered at the buttery, drinking from leather cups. Lhors eyed them sidelong. Many of them were older, hard looking, and not all wore the blue patch. I wonder if any of them knew my father, Lhors thought wistfully. But he felt suddenly shy. He wouldn't know what to say to such men, and likely they'd ignore him.

There were two guards at the broad step leading to the main door—a massive, bronze reinforced slab of wood that stood open. Lhors swallowed past a very dry throat and walked up to them. The guards drew two swords each and stepped to block his way.

“Name, affiliation, and business,” one of them snapped.

“Affiliation—that means what village you're from,” the second added with an unpleasant grin.

“Be polite, Efoyan,” the first chided, but he was grinning, too.

Efoyan simpered. Lhors blinked. He hadn't expected their kind in the lord's employ—young men who were full of themselves and what little power their duties gave them. Well, the trick was to keep his irritation in check. If they couldn't get him angry, they'd give over.

“I am Lhors, son of Lharis,” he said, “of the village Upper Haven to the north. I bring the Lord Mebree word of danger.”

“Son of Lharis', indeed!” Efoyan smirked. “Imagine, Doneghal! Here's a peasant who believes he can name his sire!”

Lhors decided to let the insult pass. He would never receive an audience with the lord by quarreling with guards. He waited. Doneghal finally waved him to continue. “Some nights ago,” Lhors said, proud that his voice did not tremble at the memory, “Upper Haven fought giants—”

Both men broke into spluttering laughter, again silencing him. “Giants?” Doneghal jeered. “There are no giants in Keoland!”

“What? Did you attack the brutes with torches and scythes, or merely feed them bad village stew and ale?” Efoyan snickered.

Lhors set his jaw and grimly plunged on. “We did fight. My father was once a guard here in this very city, and he trained us boys.”

“Oh, it gets better. His father a Cryllor guard, yet! And he's trained himself!” Both men laughed harshly, then Efoyan drew himself upright. “Go away, boy. It's a clever tale but we've heard many better.”

“Giants indeed,” Doneghal snorted, narrowed eyes fixed on Lhors, who suddenly realized what a picture he must present after three days of hunting in the hills followed by Upper Haven's final, bloody night, and then days of journey on short rations with no time or place to properly bathe.

“You, boy,” Efoyan said, “I know what you are. You're a grubby little market thief trying to get in to steal something or catch a glimpse of the king and win a bet with your fellow grubby thieves, aren't you? Well, it won't work! Not while we're on guard!”

Lhors stared at him. “Steal?” he managed. The guards seemed to find this wildly funny.

Efoyan swallowed laughter. “Look, peasant. If there really *were* giants about, we’d know it, see? The Lord Mebree’s steward would’ve sent orders for us to pass anyone who could tell him about giants.”

“Yes, he would,” Doneghal added. “Because, if anyone was to be told, it would be us, d’ye see? Because we two are the ones who’d have to know it was all right for you to be inside, wouldn’t we?”

“But we haven’t been told one gods’ blessed word about giants. So you see what that means, don’t you? Means you’re lying to us, doesn’t it?”

“Lying!” Doneghal finished triumphantly. “So! Just you be off, right now! You aren’t getting into the keep, not today or any day soon! Not with a stupid tale like that!”

“Your pardon, sirs,” Lhors broke in sharply, “but Upper Haven is in the foothills well to the north of here—many days’ ride. Until our village was attacked, no one around there had seen giants, so I must warn the lord or get a message to him—”

“You grow boring,” Efoyan said flatly. He set his spear against the wall and gave Lhors a shove. Lhors fought for balance, managing to right himself as the guards stalked toward him.

“Boring,” Doneghal echoed and tossed his spear aside so he could grab Lhors’ shirt. Efoyan shoved him aside.

“Let me, friend,” he said flatly and slammed one open hand against Lhors’ chest, driving him back into the courtyard. He drew a long, braided leather whip from his belt. “I know how to teach a stupid peasant not to waste my time.” He snapped his wrist. Lhors jumped convulsively as the leather thong cracked just short of his ear.

Efoyan struck again. Lhors just managed to duck as it cracked over his head. Behind him, a deep man’s voice snarled, “Why don’t you pick on someone closer to your own size, Efoyan?” Lhors scuttled back as a dark, solidly built man caught hold of the tip of the lash and yanked. The guard yelped as the whip was torn from his grasp. The dark man slid the lash through his fingers, gripped the handle and slammed it into the guard’s brow. Efoyan sagged, went flat, and stayed there. Doneghal leaped across his companion, eyes narrowed as he went into fighting stance, but the newcomer simply grabbed him by the shoulders, spun him halfway around and kicked him, hard. Doneghal staggered and slammed into the palace wall, head first. He slid down, dazed or unconscious.

Lhors gazed blankly up at the bronze-skinned man who turned away from the fallen pair to give the youth a hand up and a smile. “Sorry about your reception, lad.”

Before Lhors could fathom a suitable reply, the man walked over and began to nudge the two guards, who were beginning to moan and look around, obviously still dazed.

“Up!” the man shouted. “Up, the both of you! Up I say! Now!”

The two guards reluctantly complied. Outrage and embarrassment played over their faces, though both of them had obviously lost all will to fight.

“Do you know who I am?” the man demanded. They both nodded dumbly. “Very well. You”—he jabbed at Efoyan with his finger—“will report to Sergeant Storrs and tell him what has taken place here. You will leave *nothing* out, and I will know if you

do. By the time your watch has ended, I'm sure the sergeant and I will have come up with a suitable punishment for the both of you."

Glowering, Efoyan turned to go.

"Stop! I have not dismissed you yet." The guard halted, and the man continued. "Both of you will apologize to this young man... and make it good, or you'll both be mucking stables till next season's snow melts."

Both guards stammered an apology. Though their words dripped sincerity, they looked at Lhors with pure hatred. When they had finished, the man let the silence hang until both guards began to eye one another nervously, obviously wondering if their apology had been accepted.

"Very well," the man said. "Efoyan, dismissed. Do as I have ordered you. Doneghal, resume your post."

The two of them complied, and the man turned his attention to Lhors. "So, you're Lharis' son, are you?"

"You... you knew my father?"

"I met him once or twice," the man replied. "But come. You have urgent news. Best we get you inside so Lord Mebree can hear it. I'm Vlandar by the way, captain of one of the hill companies."

Lhors stared. He could feel his face heating. "Captain? I'm sorry to be so much—"

The older man merely laughed, wrapped an arm around Lhors' shoulders, and drew him through the palace doors into a broad, high ceilinged hallway. "Trouble? You're no trouble, lad. And I'm merely a captain, not the lord's commander. My job is to ride the hills between here and the Yeomanry, making sure the villages are safe from bandits and the like. It's only fitting I should escort you to the lord's council chambers. He should be meeting with his council now, but if not, there'll be men to whom you can give a full report. I'll need to hear what you have to say in any event, if we've more to fight out there than bandits and river pirates."

As they walked through the passageways, Vlandar kept a hand on his arm, which Lhors suspected kept anyone from asking what business a grubby peasant had in such vast halls. And they were vast. Corridors branched all along the main hall. Now and again, he could see staircases spiraling up to upper levels of the keep. There were people, most in servants' garb, carrying trays or bundles of clothing, stocks of linens, and other things. The place was surprisingly plain. No statues or fine hangings graced the walls, and the floors were plain polished stone. Here and there, black wrought lamps hung from chains. What doors he could see were closed, and the view beyond the windows was all of dirt courtyards.

A few guards glanced at Vlandar but made no attempt to stop him. The warrior must be someone of importance, despite his modest remarks, Lhors thought. Father told me about men like that. The best fighters don't need to brag.

A boy came running up behind them, swerved around Lhors and his companion, then pelted down the hallway, a small leather pouch slapping against his back. Vlandar turned down yet another hall and stopped before massive double doors. Two more guards stood here, but these were older, grim-faced men who stood at attention with drawn blades before them.

Vlandar gripped Lhors' shoulder and murmured, "They know me, and I'll vouch for you." He spoke to the guards, and one of them nodded. They both stepped back and held the doors open.

The room itself was much smaller than Lhors would have imagined from the size of the doors. The ceiling was barely higher than the lintel, and a long table surrounded by a dozen high-backed chairs took up most of the chamber. Thick curtains in a muted green covered one wall. The opposite wall was almost completely taken up by an immense fireplace. High, small windows along the back wall let in light, but the room was still dim, warm, and almost stuffy.

Vlandar tugged at Lhors' hair and leaned close to murmur against his ear, "This is the lord's private audience chamber. Let me go first. When I beckon, you come forward, kneel, and bend your head. Do not rise or look up until the lord or I tell you to do so. Can you remember that?"

Lhors nodded again.

"You will speak when he tells you and answer his questions as briefly as you can. Good manners say you must address him as 'my lord' each time you speak." He smiled as Lhors swallowed hard. "Buck up, lad. It's not so awful as that. He's a busy man but not an unfair one. You'll do." He clapped the youth on the shoulder and went forward, easing to one knee as he came around the near end of the table.

Vlandar spoke to the men briefly, but Lhors was so caught up in studying those seated around the table that he didn't hear a word. Now that his eyes were adjusting, he could make out a wizened little being of uncertain sex, his or her robe and close-fitting cap nearly the same shade as the dark wood of the chair. Opposite, a dark-skinned man in black suddenly leaned forward, drew an open scroll across the table and began rolling it up.

Vlandar stood and beckoned to Lhors. The youth drew a deep breath and walked over to join him.

It was easy to kneel. He wasn't certain his legs would support him, and he was much too shy to look up. The third man—presumably Lord Mebree—spoke, his voice low and pleasantly resonant. "You are... Lhors, is it? From poor young Baron Hilgenbrand's holdings, Vlandar says. He tells me you have a tale for me. Come, lad, let me look at you."

Vlandar gripped Lhors' shoulder reassuringly and aided him to his feet. Lhors nodded then managed a shaky, "Yes, my lord. From Upper Haven near the baron's hunting lodge." He glanced up. Cryllor's lord was a small man, his hair a blue-black, wavy mass barely restrained by a narrow band of silver. His near-black eyes were warm though, and he was smiling. His hands moved constantly, fussing with papers or his dagger, moving them about the table.

To Lhors' surprise, Mebree chuckled quietly. "Go ahead and look at me, lad. I like to see a man's eyes when he talks. Tell me about these giants."

Lhors glanced at Vlandar. He and the two other men—councilors, perhaps—were smiling. Probably at my foolishness, he thought. But the words were kind, and so were the lord's eyes. He drew a deep breath and plunged into his story.

It *had* helped, rehearsing it so often. He was brief and to the point, and after so much repetition, it began to feel more like a tale he'd heard than something he'd seen or people he'd known. When he finished, Lord Mebree gestured, and Vlandar fetched

two stools from beside the hearth. Lhors sat with relief. He suddenly felt exhausted and light-headed. He scarcely paid attention as Lord Mebree dismissed the other two and turned to Vlandar.

“Well, my friend,” he said mildly. “This is your warning come to pass, isn’t it? Feel vindicated, do you?”

“No,” the older man replied. “Simply angry at so many senseless deaths. If we’d gone after the Steading in force when I first heard rumors about the giants—”

“If,” the lord broke in wearily. His hands seemed to have a life of their own, running up and down the silver chain he wore, folding it into one hand, shaking it loose again. “I am sorry for this young man’s people, Vlandar, but even you couldn’t have foreseen an attack like that. It’s simply never happened before. And you know the cost of sending an army out. I could never have justified it to King Kimbertos.” He dropped the chain and folded his hands. “However, this is no longer rumor, and with the king here to see how things are in the Good Hills... Well, it may be time to do something about the Steading after all, though I still cannot be certain the Steading is responsible. It’s unheard of for hill giants to do such a thing. Thus far, they’ve stolen a few cattle or some of their youth get drunk and raid a town. Their chief, Nosnra, isn’t a warrior. He’s a thug—a clever one I’m told, but still a thug.”

“I agree,” Vlandar said. “But the king will have little money or many men to spare if he agrees to an attack—even if the Yeomanry allows one to cross their lands. The king’s more concerned about the Scarlet Brotherhood, or so I hear. He’ll keep his best fighting men ready to defend against attack from across the Azure Sea.”

“I will speak with him when we meet after the feast tonight, but I agree we aren’t likely to get much armed help.” Mebree’s fingers drummed against the padded chair arms.

The king? King Kimbertos was actually here *in Cryllor*? Lhors had never actually seen a king. Before his mind could wander any further, he focused on the conversation at hand.

Vlandar got to his feet and began to pace. “A direct attack is out in any event. Cryllor wouldn’t dare funnel all its armed men into the mountains, leaving the city unprotected. And the Steading’s built to withstand any attack. On the other hand, we don’t need an army to discover if the hill clans are responsible for Upper Haven. Now a small but well-picked band of fighters would be able to get inside the Steading, find out what we need to know, *and* strike a counter-blow from inside the walls.”

“But Vlandar, how do you plan on finding out... ?” He let the thought hang.

“Nosnra isn’t that smart. He’s clever and cunning, but not intelligent. He would need written orders or advisers from whoever is behind the attacks. Maybe we wouldn’t learn *why*, but we’d know *who*.” Vlandar resumed pacing. “Remember, my lord, that I’m trained for that kind of fighting. I’m skilled at sneaking in somewhere, learning things, inflicting damage, and getting back out again. With the right sized band—fewer than ten, I think—it could be done.” He paused. Mebree gestured for him to go on. “We’d need a few good fighters, a magician or two. If it turns out the Steading’s alone in this, then maybe we can hurt old Nosnra and his folk so they’ll leave us alone. We’d need good support, of course. Food, horses or boats to get us into the mountains, maps, the best armor and arms.”

Lord Mebree nodded slowly. “To get the people *you* want, you’d have to offer more than arms and supplies, Vlandar. I know what kind of fee your average adventurer wants—in advance, no less!” He grimaced. “*If* you can find them around Cryllor. We aren’t exactly the king’s city.”

“No, but with the king in Cryllor just now, there will be those who’ve come with him or in his retinue. Now, you’re right about fees, but the Steading is said to hold any number of hidden troves and treasuries. Let us keep whatever valuables we find—tax free, of course.”

The lord laughed. “Tax free, the man says! Of course, I must present this to our king! But it could work. Return tomorrow at this hour, Vlandar. I’ll tell you what the king makes of all this. If he agrees, I’ll see to it that my steward has funds for you to draw upon for whatever you need. And don’t thank me!” he added sharply. “You may have just bought yourself an ugly death, my friend. If you come through... well, I will find a way to show my gratitude.”

Vlandar stood and inclined his head. His lips twitched. “But one needs so little: ‘a small corner of the new barracks, a fire of my own, perhaps a new skin of wine.’”

Lord Mebree got to his feet and clapped the warrior on the back. “Quote my grandfer’s words at me, will you? Ha! Off with you, you old rogue. I will see you tomorrow.”

“My lord.” Vlandar leaned down to whisper against Lhors’ ear. “You also bow when you leave.”

Lhors blushed a deep red as he went to his knees. Above him, the lord murmured a question, to which Vlandar replied, “I’ll take care of him, my lord. Come with me, Lhors.”

* * *

The corridors were even busier on their way out. To Lhors’ relief, two older men were on guard outside with no sign of the two who had given him such grief.

“Well,” Vlandar stopped just short of the gates and gave his companion a friendly smile, “you look like a boy who could use a good night’s sleep under a roof—and before that, a decent meal.”

Lhors slowed. “Um, I’ve a little coin, sir, but I have a long journey home yet.”

Vlandar was already shaking his head. “My treat. I trust your father told you to accept a free meal and cot any time they’re offered? Come on.”

Lhors smiled faintly and went with the warrior, who strode through a maze of narrow streets into a market area. The youth was lost within moments. The inn where they finally stopped was a pleasant little place behind a low hedge and a well-swept courtyard. The food itself smelled plain and familiar.

Lhors’ nose twitched, and his mouth began to water as Vlandar steered him to a bench in the corner where they could see the street. In the paddock across the street, two goats and a swaybacked horse jostled for place at a manger of hay and a pile of spotty cabbage leaves. He forgot about that as a gaunt young woman in shapeless brown roughspun came bustling over with two wooden bowls. A simple-looking hulk of a man came right behind her carrying a heavy black kettle. He held the steaming

pot while she ladled soup to the very tops of the bowls. Lhors sipped the broth gingerly, then sighed happily, picked up the bowl, and drank down the contents.

“Your friend has good taste,” the girl said as she refilled the bowl. This time she added an extra scoop of vegetables and barley from the bottom.

Vlandar gave her a copper coin for more bread before dipping his crust in the broth. He ate absently as the boy finished what he had, then took down another bowl of broth and two manchets of black bread. Finally, Lhors shoved the bowl aside and sighed. “Thank you, Vlandar. I was hunting with Father for days before—before the giants came. I barely recall my last true meal. If there is any use I can be to you to pay back your kindness, sir...”

“I didn’t feed you simply for that,” Vlandar said, “but yes, I do need to know everything you can tell me about those giants. If I could question you... ?” He let that hang.

Lhors nodded sharply. His face was pale. He was about to begin when a shadow crossed the table. The youth edged back nervously as Vlandar leaped his feet, but he relaxed when the warrior began laughing. Vlandar clasped a pale-haired fellow by his chain-mail-clad biceps and shouted, “Malowan! When did you get into Cryllor? And what are you doing *here*, of all places?”

Malowan’s voice was enormous, filling the room. “Vlandar, it really is you! Thought you’d be out riding around the hills like that last two times I came this way! I’m here because the king is—partly, at least.”

Lhors eyed the man curiously. He wasn’t much taller or broader than Lharis. A chain-mail coif covered all but the fringes of his straw-colored hair, and he wore heavy-looking scale mail girt with a wide belt that held two swords. Lhors’ eyes went wide as they fixed on the silver device hammered into the mail from the man’s left shoulder to mid-breast. It was a lightning bolt and fist, like the one on the shrine of Heironeous.

Vlandar settled on the bench and gestured for the newcomer to join them. “Malowan’s a friend of mine—and a paladin. Mal, meet Lhors. His father was once a captain here.”

“A captain!” The paladin smiled and held out a hand. “And now you’ve come to join?” But he shook his head. “No, you’re here because something amiss. I can see that much.”

Lhors simply stared at him, wide-eyed. Vlandar nodded. “Of course *you’d* sense it.”

“Any paladin past his first pledge would,” the other man said mildly.

“Lhors is from the hill country near the Yeomanry border. Giants razed his village, and he’s just about the only survivor.”

“Heironeous have mercy upon them all,” Malowan murmured. His eyes moved beyond the table, searching the street briefly. “I’m truly sorry, lad. But, Vlandar, giants attacking a village? That’s unheard of!”

“It was,” the warrior said grimly. “But—have you eaten? If not, sit anyway. I have a proposition for you.”

“Have you?”

Someone out in the street was shouting. The paladin's attention shifted briefly. He blinked and then settled on the end of the bench. "I'm waiting for someone, as it happens—but I can listen, meantime."

Vlandar made a concise story of it, but Malowan was already shaking his head before the warrior could finish. "I'm sorry, my friend. I've already taken on a matter that's—well, never mind the specifics, but it's a full-time occupation. I'll be glad to pass the word for you, though. Nemis is back in the vicinity—or was, last I heard."

"Nemis? You mean the mage? I heard he'd renounced the world and turned hermit."

Malowan came to his feet as a high-pitched argument broke out somewhere down the way. "Hmm? Oh, he told me he liked his own company less than that of a crowd. He's a good mage, and he speaks Giantish, I think."

Someone in the street uttered a piercing shriek. The paladin glanced outside, then hurriedly got up, offered a quick, "Uh, excuse me," and was out the door.

Vlandar got to his feet and looked out the window. Lhors followed his gaze. He could see the paladin sprinting toward the street, where a swirl of people was trying to move away from the vicinity of the yelling. He could just make out the tips of two blunted pikes pushing their way through the crowd.

"See those pikes?" Vlandar asked Lhors. "Those are market guards. Malowan may need my help. I'll return."

Lhors craned his neck, watching as both men vanished into the crowd. He couldn't make out a thing, but it was easy to see *where* the problem was. People ringed an area ten paces or so across, and all the yelling was coming from there. He could now make out guards in the melee, but not much else.

"If I stay away from the guards, I'll be all right," Lhors told himself as he edged off the bench and out the door. It was a moment's work to ease through the crowd. While there were plenty of curious types watching, hardly anyone wanted to be too close to the guards—those pikes were used to shove people around, after all.

Lhors slipped around a gray-haired woman in a faded blue kerchief and all at once he could see just fine. Vlandar had a hand on Malowan's arm and seemed to be trying to pull the paladin away from four market guards in the lord's blue. Two of the guards were keeping a watchful eye on the crowd. Malowan was arguing—but very politely—with the two other stone-faced guards who clutched a grubby little street-urchin between them—possibly the cutpurse Lhors had seen earlier, or another very like. The child looked no older than ten, but its vocabulary was shockingly adult. Lhors didn't understand half what the little creature screeched, but now and again one of the guards winced. The kerchiefed woman began muttering about ill-spawned children and what *she'd* like to do to this one in particular.

Vlandar finally seemed to gain control of the situation. He'd pulled another guard from the crowd—this one had a red officer's stripe on his sleeve—and after a short discussion the guard thrust the child at Malowan. The paladin gripped one dirty ear and silently pulled the little one through the crowd, which parted around them. Several older boys snickered as the two passed. The urchin lashed out with a stream of shrill curses and a kick. Malowan looked exasperated. He mumbled something, scooped the child up over his shoulder, and strode back toward the inn.

Vlandar was laughing and shaking his head as he came back across the avenue. “That, my young friend, is Malowan’s ‘other business’. He’s trying to reform a market thief. He has a ways to go, I’d say. Let’s go back inside. I could use a pot of ale.”

To Lhors’ surprise, Malowan seemed to be waiting for them, his skinny companion sulking on the bench next to him. “You hadn’t finished, Vlandar,” he said as the soldier gestured for service. “You were about to tell me why this expedition would be a useful part of Agya’s training.”

“To the nine hells with that *and* you!” Agya snapped shrilly.

“Language, child. We’re discussing your future.”

“You ought not to have come out there,” the child replied sulkily.

“You would have spent a night in the cells had I not. I warned you. The guards know who you are and where you operate.”

“Only ‘cause you told ‘em, then!”

“I did not, and you *know* I do not lie. Agya, you’re angry because you were caught, nothing more.”

Silence. The thief glowered at him and said nothing else as the inn-girl came over to set cups on the table.

Vlandar waited until the girl was gone again. “You’re considering it, then?”

Malowan nodded. “I’m thinking it’s easier to reform yourself if old temptations are out of reach.”

“Ere!” Agya demanded. “Just *what* d’you think you’re plotting? ‘Cause, just *maybe*, I’m not for it!”

Malowan smiled vaguely and set his elbows on the table. Vlandar leaned toward him, and the two began talking in very low tones—and in a language that wasn’t Flan—it sounded half snarls and throat clearing to Lhors. Agya muttered something vile-sounding, then fixed angry brown eyes on Lhors. “*You* tell me, then—if y’know, that is!”

Lhors swallowed. “It’s my village. Giants killed everyone. Vlandar’s going to put together a force to go after the giants.”

“Wait,” Agya demanded. “That’s... it’s... Paladin, you’re flat mad!”

Malowan shrugged, but Agya wasn’t finished. “None o’ that for me. I’ll chance it rather agin th’ market guard and Dappney’s lads in th’ Sink!”

“You haven’t heard the offer yet,” Vlandar said.

“Giants.” Agya licked her lips. “D’you know what they do to you? I’ve ‘eard tales.”

“I saw,” Lhors broke in harshly. “I could tell you what’s true, but I won’t.”

“Well, then!” the urchin tugged at Malowan’s belt. “Want me to grow up honest-like? Not much chance of it, if we go where I’ll get killed and *et*, is there?”

“But someone with your talents—” Vlandar began.

“Which *he* says I gotta give up!”

“But there are ways for a thief to earn honor as a thief,” Vlandar countered. Malowan looked none too happy about that reasoning.

“*If* the thief lives long enough,” Agya spat back.

“Long enough to return home with wealth untold, treasure beyond counting... ?” Vlandar paused. Agya was speechless. “Any treasure you find—*if* you help us—is

yours... to share with your comrades, of course. But there won't be more than ten of us."

Vlandar waited. Malowan touched his friend's arm and shook his head. Agya was lost in rapt contemplation.

"Treasure," the little thief breathed happily. "A giants' trove! Gems and gold, coins and jewels and amulets... a girl could set herself up proper with a store of that!"

Malowan and Vlandar exchanged amused glances. Lhors' jaw dropped and he stared. "A girl could... you're a *girl*?"

Agya grinned at Malowan. "Fooled one, anyway," she told the paladin, who cast up his eyes. "Tell me 'bout this treasure."



To Lhors' surprise, Vlandar and Malowan sent word about the city, not the lord or the king. The day after they were granted the king's blessing, the two men planned to interview candidates in Vlandar's barracks and the nearby practice yard. Fortunately, Malowan was as willing as Vlandar to explain things to a village youth out of his element.

"The task has been passed on to Vlandar. Besides, some of those Vlandar would like to recruit are the kind who won't want any part of an 'official' company. On a journey like this, you want the toughest, and they aren't always law-abiding."

Lhors had also assumed that by now he would be on his way back to High Haven, but when he had suggested as much, Vlandar waved it aside. "You have a right to be here to see us begin vengeance for your people."

When the first two men—rough-looking fellows armed with nets and pikes and clad in hardened leathers—came looking for the warrior, Vlandar had both Malowan and Lhors with him.

Vlandar talked to both men for some time—Sterich mercenaries, Malowan later confirmed. Lhors had seen such men once before but had never entertained the idea of working with them. After a short interview, Vlandar turned them down. Neither seemed particularly offended as they walked off.

Lhors shook his head. "They seemed very experienced to me."

Vlandar laughed. "Yes, but not the kind of experience we want. There's a rumor those two men killed a companion a year ago so that they wouldn't have to split a purse of gold with him."

"It's not rumor," Malowan put in quietly. "I *know* they killed him."

Vlandar shrugged. "We don't want swordsmen who can't be trusted, but Olmic isn't that good, anyway." He dropped the subject as someone else came in and hesitated in the doorway, eyes searching the room.

"Nemis!" The paladin held out his hands, and the newcomer took them between his own dark-skinned, long fingers. "I thought you weren't interested!"

"I have changed my mind." Dark brown eyes moved across the other two before fixing on Vlandar. One eyebrow went up.

Malowan smiled. "Vlandar's in charge here. You know of him, don't you? The young man is Lhors. The village was his. Lhors, Nemis is a mage."

Lhors studied the newcomer with interest. The mage was tall and lean, and Lhors would have placed him in his mid to late thirties. His hair was long and curled, and his thin, sun-darkened face sported a narrow mustache and neat little beard. He wore dark green trousers tucked into soft brown boots and a long green tunic, held at the waist by a sword belt and a curious-looking woven sash. A brooch of leather at his breast was carved with a pattern of three diamonds. The sword belt held a plain rapier, and a matching poniard was stuck in the sash. The mage casually leaned against a walking stick that looked as if it might be a fighting staff.

"You're a mage, so why carry those?" Vlandar's eyes fixed on the sword belt.

A corner of the dark man's mouth quirked. His voice was low and non-carrying. "I like blades, but only a fool depends on one strength."

"I can vouch for him. He knows which end of a sword goes in and which you hold," Malowan said with a sudden grin, "even if he's not much better than that with them."

Vlandar nodded. "I trust Mal, and I've heard of you, Nemis. But why did you change your mind? Mal said—"

The mage shrugged. "Malowan hadn't told me you were riding against the Steading, against the giants. If you do, you'll need me."

"Oh? Why?" the warrior returned sharply.

"I have battled giants before. I know spells that work against them. I'm good at what I do."

Before Vlandar could reply, Malowan tapped him on the arm and drew him into the far corner of the barracks room, where they talked quietly but intensely for some moments.

When they came back, Vlandar held out his hands, palm up. Nemis placed his hands on the warrior's, palm down.

"Mal's word is good for me, Nemis, but if there's anything you'd like to tell me before we leave Cryllor, I would appreciate it. An old warrior like me doesn't appreciate surprises, you know." He turned to Malowan. "Will we need another magician for healing spells, or can you manage that?"

"Malowan and I have worked together before," the mage said quietly, "and I will procure a few specialized charms before we leave."

"Find whatever you need. The king and the Lord Mebree are good for it. We'll leave here as soon as we can. Stay nearby, or let me know where you'll be tomorrow and the day after. If there's any special gear or other supplies you need, let me know."

The mage merely shook his head, turned, and left.

* * *

Over the next two days, Lhors watched in fascinated silence as Vlandar interviewed a number of would-be giant-slayers and heroes. Malowan was sometimes there but was often acting as go-between with the lord's steward. The paladin went back and forth—sometimes hourly as yet another list of necessary supplies was worked up.

Most of the time, Malowan's young companion was elsewhere, much to the relief of Lhors. Agya teased or mocked him incessantly when Malowan wasn't around. He still found it hard to believe when the girl admitted to fourteen years, but Malowan assured him she was at least that old. Even cleaned up and clad more like a girl, she still looked no more than a skinny ten or so to his eyes. Probably she had found her size and shape useful. Lhors couldn't imagine a girl thief surviving long in the bad parts of the city.

Vlandar and Malowan both were willing to explain to an untutored villager why they chose one applicant over another. A noble who had proven sword-skill and an impressive background against local road thieves was turned down.

"Hobric can't get beyond the fact he's noble, so he feels he must be in charge, even if he hasn't the skills of a leader," Vlandar told Lhors after the man had stormed out of the barracks. "Also, he goes nowhere without his personal servant. The creature's said to be part orc and nowhere near so well trained as *he* believes it to be."

"It has eaten men," Malowan said with distaste, "and it is not a servant. It is a slave, and even though it is a dreadful creature, no one should have the right to enslave another. If Hobric and that brute go with Vlandar, I do not."

"What is this?" Vlandar asked suddenly.

Two reed-slender young women clad in rusty browns and greens had entered just as Hobric stormed out. One clutched an unstrung longbow, while the other wore a bundle of short throwing spears over her right shoulder.

"Rangers," Vlandar murmured to Lhors.

The youth nodded, his eyes wide. Not just rangers by the look of them, but identical twins. As they came across the small room, he could see long, neat, very pointed ears rising from their thick dark hair. One of the women had her hair bundled back into a long plait, and her sister confined hers with a leather thong. Both wore small silver hair-brooches shaped like an oak and thistle above their right ears.

Try as he might, Lhors could only tell them apart by the hair and the different pattern of brown-on-brown checkered shirts they both wore over plain trousers that were almost baggy enough to be taken for skirts. Two pairs of incredible, slightly slanted, green eyes met his curiously, then moved on.

"Warrior, I am Rowan," the bow wielder said in a low, husky voice, "and this is my sister, Maera. We hear you're hoping to teach the Steading a lesson."

The other spoke in a slightly reedier voice. "We're rangers, as you've no doubt guessed already. I am told you knew our father, Anaerich of Ket?"

"I met Anaerich some years ago." Vlandar half-stood so he could bow. "I wasn't aware he was Kettish—or that there were elves or half-elves in Ket."

"There aren't many," Maera said. "Our father left Ket long years ago."

Rowan smiled faintly. "We want to help if you're going after the Steading. What those overgrown brutes did to our forest last spring is appalling. We've certain useful skills beyond tracking and woodcraft."

"Such as?" asked Vlandar.

"We will demonstrate, if you wish," Rowan replied with a mischievous smile. Motioning the others to follow, she and her sister strode back into the yard.

Lhors accompanied Vlandar and watched in fascination as Rowan strung her bow and slipped an arrow to the string. Lhors had scarcely looked up to the target on the far wall before Maera's javelin quivered squarely in the center of the tiny white patch. Rowan laughed, pulled the nocked arrow to her cheek, and loosed in one swift motion. Her arrow quivered in the center of the javelin's haft.

"We've been rangers for twenty-four years," Maera explained. "We know how to work with a team, warrior."

"Say no more," Vlandar said, grinning widely. "A man would be a fool to turn down rangers. We'll leave as soon as we can, so stay in touch. If you have any particular needs as far as gear or supplies, let Malowan here know. He'll see you get whatever you need."

"Elves?" Lhors asked after the twins had gone.

Vlandar nodded. "Half-elven, but any elf blood means you're an elf. And rangers... a thief like young Agya can move unnoted around a city or a slum, but those two could make her look clumsy. We'll be fortunate to have them." He grinned as Lhors nodded with enthusiasm. "For their talents, boy. They're *well* over twice your seventeen years, even if they don't look it."

Lhors blushed.

They both turned toward the door as someone yelled, "Get yourself out of my way, wench! I have business in here!"

Lhors heard Rowan snarl something that left a foppish young man red-faced and sputtering. The rangers bowed sarcastically, then left as the man stomped into the barracks and stared around with visible distaste.

"Mercy on us," Vlandar said to Lhors mildly, but his lips twitched. "It's a hero."

"He looks like one," Lhors replied, eyes wide as he studied the fellow.

"I am Arkon," the newcomer announced loudly. His voice was considerably deeper than it had been when he had yelled at the rangers. He wore silk—a brilliantly red shirt with bloused sleeves and sleek black trousers tucked into knee-high boots. Black leather gauntlets covered his arms halfway to the elbow. The pommels of his daggers and the basket hilts of his matched swords were gold-washed, as were the daggers thrust into his belt and his boots. "Arkon the Adamant is here to seek one Vlandar, who has need of my ser—" His voice cracked.

Vlandar bent down to adjust one of his boots and hide a grin, but a splutter of laughter escaped Malowan. The young man snarled a particularly filthy curse and whipped both swords out, revealing wavy *zhosh* blades.

Vlandar sighed heavily and got up to intercept him. "I am Vlandar," he said as he began to ease the young man back outside, "and captain of these barracks. This is no place to provoke a fight."

Malowan suddenly and quietly slipped onto the cot next to Lhors. "Aaaaugh," the paladin mumbled. "It was too much to hope the young fool wouldn't have heard about this."

Lhors blinked. "But all those blades," he whispered, "and a bow *and* javelins! He must really be good. Isn't that what you want?"

Malowan nodded. "If he was a tenth of what he appears to be, yes. He's not, though. Oh, he's good enough with the swords. You'd be impressed, if you saw him in a duel against a pack of drunken thugs. His mothers paid for his dueling masters

since he was a boy. She's the one who sees he has fancy clothes and expensive weapons, and she's noble. Few men of the noble or common rank would risk offending her by injuring her precious boy."

Lhors eyed Arkon the Adamant, who now stood arguing with Vlandar. Full sun fell on a face that might be considered handsome.

"If I were a swordsman," Lhors ventured cautiously, "I would not wear sleeves like that. My opponent's blade might catch in them."

"You remember what Vlandar's been telling you," Malowan said warmly. "Good lad. What else?"

"He looks very wealthy. That's foolish, unless you want to attract thieves." Lhors sighed. "And he was rude to the rangers. That wasn't necessary."

"He is wealthy, or his widowed mother is. She buys anything he asks for, and when he gets into trouble with his shiny toys, she blames his companions who must have led him astray. He picks his fights carefully and never fights anyone better than he."

"He's not a hero?" Lhors asked.

Malowan nodded. "He's a fraud and not even named Arkon. His real name is Plowys, after his mother's brother."

A sharp, angry curse brought the paladin around, hands out. The young noble had come back in, unnoticed by either Lhors or Malowan.

"Your pardon, young Arkon," the paladin said smoothly. "I was not aware you were eavesdropping."

"If you mean to imply that I was sneaking about, listening to your gossip..." the youth said angrily.

"I imply nothing," Malowan said evenly as Vlandar came back into the barracks, where he could step between them. "I merely wonder that your mother Plovenia would allow you to go twenty paces beyond the city gates in any company whatever. I doubt her purse strings or her apron strings stretch so far."

"You insult my lady mother?" Plowys demanded.

"No," Malowan replied evenly, "I insult you, and you know why, young Plowys. A young companion of my ward is dead because you challenged him. Remember Vesisk? He was a street lad, a boy with no weapons skill at all, and you challenged him to a battle and killed him. One day, your mother will no longer be able to buy your way out of such situations."

Plowys—or Arkon—swore under his breath and freed a dagger. Lhors gasped as the man stalked forward, but the paladin made no effort to defend himself. As the fancy-clad young man brought the blade up, it seemed to slam into an invisible barrier and bounce back. Plowys yelped as the dagger went flying.

"You should know better than to try to harm a paladin," Vlandar told him. "He has his own protection. Fortunately, he's not in the habit of attacking young men with bad manners."

"It's *not fair*," the would-be swashbuckler whimpered.

"Life is not fair," Malowan said evenly. "Most youths your age have learned it by now. Your mother cannot buy you a place in this company, and she would be appalled to learn you came here. Go home. We are looking for those who can work as a team—something you may learn one day. You would not like the world beyond

Cryllor. Giants, goblins, and other evil creatures do not know your mother and would not spare you because of her rank and wealth.”

“You’re afraid,” Plowys said, “afraid I’m better than you.”

“No,” Malowan replied simply.

Vlandar shook his head firmly. “You cannot pick your fights out there. Challenge the wrong foe, and you’re dead without even a chance to draw your blades.”

“You’ll be sorry,” Plowys snarled, but Lhors didn’t think his heart was in it anymore. The pouting young man resheathed the dagger and stalked off.

Malowan watched him leave then sighed after a moment. “I will spend my next two nights kneeling on a cold stone floor to implore the gods’ forgiveness for my treatment of that poor child. Heironeous sees into my heart and knows I still can feel such anger.”

“Phuff!” Vlandar spoke sharply, silencing him. “I wonder the ‘poor child’ is still alive after insulting so many.”

“He’s still alive,” Malowan replied, “because he only chooses fights against poor or drunk men. I wonder why the guard has not arrested him before now.”

“Because, as you say, his mother protects him, and because he’s only just finished his course of swordplay with Master Eggidos. He hasn’t been on Cryllor’s streets that long.” Vlandar still sounded angry. “Make your amends if you will, Malowan. If your god is the least fair, he’ll understand.”

“No.” Malowan smiled faintly. “In my anger and pride, I challenged the boy’s manhood, his sword skills, and ill-spoke his mother. He is untutored and ignorant, but I am not.” He rose to his feet. “I will return, Vlandar. If Agya comes this afternoon, remind her that I want to hear her recite the Acts of Clean Living tomorrow morning. I also want her to resume honing her skills at sniffing out things. It might prove itself useful on this journey.”

Vlandar clasped his friend’s arm. “I will. Mind you, don’t hold vigil the entire night. I have need of you tomorrow.”

Malowan smiled faintly. “I know. I will be here.”

He left, and Lhors watched him go.

Vlandar cleared his throat. “Any questions, lad?”

The youth rubbed his still-patchy beard. Arkon’s—Plowys’—had been both thick and neatly trimmed. I could envy him just the beard, let alone those blades, thought Lhors. He sighed and said, “I think I understand. Father said a man who fights only those he can beat is a bully. But out there against giants he couldn’t choose his fights.”

“Exactly. Now—” Vlandar broke off as a huge red-haired man came into the barracks and began looking around. The man was impressively built and armed. Tall and massive with broad shoulders, the man’s hands were huge and capable-looking. Lhors tried not to stare as the fellow stopped mid-room, but it was nearly impossible not to. A thick, braided sash held up heavy woolen trousers. A second sash held both an enormous warhammer and a spiked ball and chain. His armor was all padded and quilted, reinforced here and there with black hardened leather that was shiny with age. He was very pale-skinned, his hair pale golden-red and braided back with two narrow beaded strands hanging in front of his ears. His eyes were light winter-sky blue and intense.

“Who is *that*?” Lhors whispered.

“I’ve seen him round the city once or twice in the past few days. He’s Fist clan, I think.”

“Fist?”

“They inhabit the lands around the Grendep Bay in the far northeast, cold lands. He’s a barbarian, anyway. Why?”

“Just wondered. I’ve heard tales of the northerners.”

Vlandar smiled. “They can be arrogant and touchy, but they are excellent fighters.”

At Vlandar’s gesture, the barbarian strode over to the table and said, “I am Khlened.” His voice was deep, rough, and carried an accent that Lhors had never heard. “I’m seeking one named Vlandar. I hear he wants men to fight giants.”

Lhors edged over to settle on his bunk as the massive barbarian sat on the nearby bench. As Vlandar went over their mission, the newcomer sat and listened quietly, now and again eyeing the youth perched on his narrow cot.

“Well, then,” he said after Vlandar had finished. “I’m good in a fight—good even among my own people.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Vlandar said mildly, “but we also need men who can follow orders.”

Khlened’s eyes narrowed. “You saying I can’t?”

“No. I’m saying I’ve fought alongside northerners before. Where we’re going, we’ll have one person in charge, and that will be me. The strongest and bravest warriors no good to me if he ignores my orders or sets his own course. We’re a small company. With you, we’ll have eight so far. That means we all get along. No feuds or wounded feelings, and we share everything.”

The barbarian huffed and pushed partway to his feet, but then he hesitated and finally bared his teeth in a wild grin. He dropped back to the bench, rattling Lhors.

“All right, Vlandar. There’s sense in that. You have my word. Who else goes?”

The warrior turned down fingers as he went. “Myself, a paladin called Malowan, a young thief who’s his ward, two rangers, a mage named Nemis, and you.”

Khlened glanced at Lhors. “That’s seven. What of the lad, here?”

Lhors shook his head. His skin felt suddenly cold. “I’m not mean—”

“The village was his,” Vlandar replied and gazed thoughtfully at Lhors. “It’s his choice, if he wants to come with us.”

Lhors’ eyes went wide. “I.. but Vlandar, I can’t. I mean, I’m no fighter!”

Vlandar held up a hand. “I think you can. Your father began your training, Lhors. I’ve watched you these past days. You have skills that would be useful. You know your limits, you can follow orders, and you listen. We’ll be a small party, and we could use someone who won’t be worn out from constant travel, someone who can serve as extra eyes and ears and hands.”

Lhors had never considered this. Since coming to Cryllor, he had expected to be on his way after requesting the lord’s help. He had never dreamed of being asked to help against the giants. He had Gran to think of... but he knew that was a false excuse. As a village wisewoman, she wouldn’t lack for care.

He had no family to which he could return. He thought of his father and remembered the aging soldier impaled upon a giants spear. In his mind, he saw his

father's life leaking away as the man lay in a pool of his own blood. That faded but was replaced by the memory of screaming, terrified children, too young and helpless to defend themselves. Lhors saw again Bregya's three year old as the giant took him and...

Something cold stirred inside Lhors. Again he saw the giants laughing as they slaughtered women and children and burned his village to the ground. "I'll go."

Even the Fist barbarian looked taken aback at the sudden change in the youths voice and the stern set of his gaze.

"Good lad," replied Vlandar. "I'll see to it the king's steward finds someone to return that horse and have him take word to the old woman—Gran, was it? We'll have to fit you up with weapons and armor of some sort. Your father taught you to use javelins, right?"

Lhors nodded, afraid to trust his voice. The mention of his father brought back memories that he could cherish later, but now he needed them for other reasons. His fear was still there, but it had now been joined by something else: rage and a sudden thirst for vengeance.



The preparations for departure took even longer than choosing the company had. Lhors spent much of his daylight hours helping Malowan set up a staging area in the stables. They acquired horses and pack animals, tack, packs, and bags that could be fitted on saddles and racks. He and the paladin went over the food and drink, which then went into bags that would be checked a final time by Pferic, a stolid, middle-aged soldier who would serve them as horseman and cook. Lord Mebree provided a small company to travel with them by horse as far as Flen, where a flatboat was being readied to take them to Istivin.

“It’s our best choice,” Vlandar told the company on the second evening when they all gathered. “From Cryllor to Flen is a reasonably easy ride, two days without pushing the horses. The river Davish—”

“The river,” Rowan objected, “goes from its joining with the Javan River due west, and the last time I saw it, Vlandar, it was a fast-moving stream.”

“Then you saw it in the spring,” Vlandar replied. “This is late autumn. Not only is the water low and not nearly as swift, but this time of year the wind most often sets from east to west, flowing into the westernmost corner of Sterich where the Crystalmist Mountains and the Jotens meet up. Lord Mebree has ordered a flatboat for us with sails in case there is wind—and there should be. The south bank and the lands beyond rapidly move into the Jotens where the Steading is, but most of Sterich is flat and we will be able to see far in three directions most of the time. I need not remind you that there will be bandits, pirates, giants, and all manner of unpleasant folk watching the Davish?”

“Pirates?” Nemis murmured and rose to his feet. “Your pardon, Vlandar, but I fear I must decline this journey. You warned me of giants and other monsters and horrors, but you said nothing about pirates!”

Lhors simply stared at the mage, astonished—as did several of his companions. But this seemed to be Nemis’ idea of a joke. Malowan and Vlandar broke into laughter, and the mage grinned. “That is well though, Vlandar. Personally, I prefer a boat under my feet to a horse between my knees. But what if there is no wind?”

Vlandar shrugged. “We pole. This time of year, the water will be shallow and slow. It won’t be so bad.”

That evening was given over to readying for the chance that they might become separated. Bread and other rations were divided up and put in separate small packs that each of them would carry at all times. Individual tins of flint and tinder were also stowed.

The next morning, Lhors went with Vlandar, who had him fitted for thick trousers of brown boiled wool, a soft tunic to match, and a knee-length cloak and hood of waterproofed wool that could also serve as a blanket. The warrior then took him into the armory and acquired a leather harness and case for javelins, then had it cut down so it fit snugly. Seven short throwing javelins, each tipped with sharp steel, went into the case, which could be covered over and tied down so that he wouldn’t lose the weapons if the case tipped. To Lhors’ surprise, Vlandar also bought him two long-bladed daggers, a sling, and a bag of hurling stones.

“The blades are for defense and only as a last resort. The sling is as good at a distance as the javelins—possibly better since they work at greater distance with less effort. Mal is better at the sling than I. I’ll get him to show you.”

During those three days, Malowan and Vlandar also found the time to track down people who knew the land near the Steading. They even found one fellow who’d been taken prisoner by one of the hill giants but had managed to escape. None of them had any desire to return no matter how great the reward, but they talked freely and answered questions that Vlandar incorporated into his precious maps. He now had four. The first was a general map of the lands of southern Sterich and the Joten mountains. Another that he’d drawn himself was of the Steading and the lands around it for two leagues. A third, even rougher, showed the outside of the fortress-like building—what he’d been able to learn of entries, guard towers, and the like. The last, mostly blank, was an outline of the outer walls. Vlandar had roughly marked the location of the main entry and the doors leading into the rest of the building. His only source of information had escaped by hiding amid the cloaks and wrappings piled in the entry. With the chaos of so many coming in at once, he’d been temporarily forgotten.

The first meeting of the full group—again, after dark, since it gave the members of the company an opportunity to comb the market for things they would need for the journey—was less pleasant than Lhors had expected. Plowys returned, sullenly mouthing threats and trying to pick fights with everyone, including Lhors.

Khlened finally picked him up by the collar and tossed him into the night. Khlened himself was in an obnoxious mood, picking on everything he saw as poorly planned. He seemed both fascinated and repelled by the rangers and raised one objection after another over division of treasure. The rangers exchanged annoyed glances whenever he turned away.

The two rangers also spent some time helping Vlandar and the others in the company work out a rough series of hand-signs.

“Maera and I have our own,” Rowan explained, “but it’s complex—”

“—and private,” Maera interrupted. She didn’t look at all pleased, and Lhors wondered if they had quarreled about sharing their code.

Rowan glanced at her and moved her index finger and thumb sharply.

Maera nodded and added, “Mostly, it’s complicated—a twin thing.”

“But we think there might be times when it’s dangerous to speak aloud,” Rowan went on, “and so if we all had a set of signs for such things as ‘danger’, ‘monster’... Vlandar, you’re our captain, you’ll know best what we need besides what Maera and I have worked out.”

“Well thought,” the warrior admitted. “We’ll have a little more time here and some time on the road each night. I’ll think on it.”

* * *

The company rode out of the city at daybreak three days later. Vlandar took the lead, and the others strung out behind him. Bringing up the rear was a score of Lord Mebree’s best fighters and Pferic, who led two pack animals while his assistant, Zyb, a freckled boy of perhaps fourteen years, led the third.

For the most part, they rode in silence along the east bank of the Javan River, with an occasional word from Vlandar on direction or stops. The rangers had their own mode of silent communication and moved out ahead to scout once they left the farmsteads and pastures behind. Khlened seemed to be hung over or simply sulking about yet another imagined slight. Nemis’ lips moved now and again—perhaps going over spells that might prove useful. Agya had quarreled with the paladin over one of the last pranks she’d pulled in the lower markets the night before they left. Though she now and again spoke to Vlandar, she ignored Malowan. Lhors found himself riding most of the day next to the paladin, who pointed out an occasional landmark along the broad, smooth-flowing river that began high in the Barrier Peaks and ended in the Azure Sea.

There wasn’t much to see to the east and north but hills. Although Lhors had never been quite this far north, every tree and bush seemed to speak of home to him. It was all he could do not to turn and head south, but a small, despondent voice in the back of his mind whispered, *but you have no home now...*

The desire for revenge that had seized him the other night was still there, but it smoldered now, and he let it alone to do so. Better to concentrate on the task at hand.

Not very far to the west, Lhors could make out the feet of mountains, the Jotens. Somewhere among those peaks and valleys lay the Steading. Lhors swallowed, his throat suddenly dry, then stood in the stirrups to take the weight off his already stiff backside. Movement well to the rear caught his eye. Lhors stared hard, but the figure was much too distant for him to tell much.

“Malowan? I think there’s someone following us.”

“Yes,” Mal said without looking back. “I saw him earlier. Arkon the Adamant.” The paladin’s voice was dry, and the corners of his mouth twitched.

Khlened, who was riding just ahead of them, reined in so they could catch up to him. “Green whelp,” he growled. “Believe I’ll go back there and teach him the meaning of ‘no’!”

“Leave him be.” Vlandar had apparently been near enough to catch the whole exchange. “He’s not worth the trouble. Save your horse for the journey ahead. The boy will either grow up or he won’t. At this point, it’s his choice.” He kned his mount and went back to the head of the party.

Khlened moved back to where he'd been. Lhors could hear him mumbling under his breath but couldn't make out what he was saying.

They rode at a ground-devouring pace, though Pferic made certain they took frequent stops to rest the horses and donkeys. Khlened objected—mildly enough for him—but Vlandar backed the horseman. “We’ve at least two days to reach Flen and our boat. We’re between two prosperous cities and on a well-traveled river. This is still no place to be caught afoot. Others besides honest travelers and king’s men frequent this way.”

Still, they made a long day of it to make up for the lack of speed. Most of the afternoon had been a subtle climb—enough to prove a discomfort to a man riding who wasn't a horseman, Lhors decided wearily. He was ready to fall from the saddle when they finally stopped for the night just after sundown.

The few oak trees around their camp were heavily festooned with vining leather-leaf, a parasitic plant that only grew at higher elevations, and the evening air was cooler than it had been in the city.

Pferic set the boy Zyb to gathering firewood while he hobbled the horses for the night. The lord's soldiers had set guard around the camp already and apportioned watches. Lhors helped Pferic, giving a handful of grain to each animal before he accompanied Zyb to help collect kindling.

The next day was much like the previous, but just after midday, they rode into Flen. The boat turned out to be two flat-bottomed boats, each surprisingly small with a long rudder oar and two poles per side. There was a small cabin midships and a sturdy mast just before that. Lhors, who had never set foot on a boat in his life, stared wide-eyed at the arrangement and was slightly disappointed when Khlened and Nemis showed them how the sails were furled. It was a very simple operation, one even *he* could manage to help with.

Vlandar bid farewell to their escort and divided up the party right away. “I have given some thought to this, so if you dislike my choice, I suggest you try to live with it, since we all must function as a team from now on. Once you know which boat is yours, get your things aboard as quickly as possible and come back out to the dock. There’s a captain coming from the company that patrols the rivers. We’ll all need to know what he can tell us, and he’ll be sending four or so of his men with us to bring the boats back.”

Vlandar then sent Lhors and the rangers to the lead boat where he would be, leaving the second to Malowan, Agya, Khlened and Nemis. Lhors looked around in the brief silence that followed the announcement. He couldn't decide if anyone was displeased or not, but he was grateful not to be in close quarters with Agya.

“What of the horses?” Rowan asked.

Vlandar spread his hands. “What I said back in Cryllor still holds. Unless this Captain Holken tells us otherwise, I’ll want someone besides Pferic on horse to keep an eye on the lands along both banks, possibly someone afoot as well if the terrain calls for it. Last I heard, the middle reaches of the river are not well patrolled, and there are villains of every kind who prey on travelers. We won't need all of the horses, however. Likely we'll leave Zyb here with most of them.”

“Sounds as if we won't be coming back the same way we go,” Khlened mumbled.

“No, remember what I told you in the barracks,” the warrior said. “Maybe we’ll return as we went in—and in a hurry. If so, we’ll need the boats and the horses. But if we must go on to another place, Mal and Nemis are working on a way to let our outside party know to turn around and return here.”

“Since we don’t know what we’ll face or find,” Malowan added, “we are trying to provide for several possibilities.”

“Mmmm.” The barbarian nodded and went to unload the packs from his horse.

* * *

The sun was still well above the western hills when a gray-bearded bear of a man with a captain’s patch on his hardened leather armor strode up to the two boats with four men behind him.

“Vlandar, isn’t it?” he asked. “I’m Holken, and these are the men I’m sending with you. They’re experienced in the—ah—*trade* along the river between here and Istivin.” He grinned. “So’m I, but worse luck, I’m needed here and up the Javan to the north.”

Vlandar met his hand halfway and led them onto the deck of the first boat.

“Be that secret-like, or do we all listen in?” Agya asked.

Malowan shrugged. “We’ve still some loading and settling to do. Vlandar will let us know what we need to know.”

“P’raps,” the girl replied. She gazed back the way they’d come. “Wonder where that fool of a rich lad’s got ’isself to?”

“He’s waiting,” Khlened growled. “I can almost sense him m’self, waiting for us to be on the move and out of this walled town so’s he can follow once more.”

Malowan sighed and shook his head. “Unfortunately, Khlened, I fear you are probably right.”

Just then, Vlandar reemerged and called the company together while the local men were storing their own weapons and supplies. When everyone had gathered, he explained, “These men patrol the river between here and Istivin, and they know the dangers. For an old landsman like myself, they’ll prove good instructors at poling a boat and reading the river. We’ve only a few hours of daylight left, but the farther we get upriver tonight means one less hour tomorrow and the day after.”

Malowan looked at each of them in turn then nodded. “It’s a good plan. Let’s be off.”

* * *

Several hours later they stopped for the night against the northern bank of the Davish River where it was undercut by high spring flow. Here, they could not be seen from the south, were partly protected by rock face to east and west, and reasonably comfortable on a pebble-strewn shoreline. Even without a fire—the Flen guards had advised against one—they were fairly warm. With a nearly full moon, they could see each other well even in the shadow of the overhang.

Rowan and Maera spent an hour or so scouting the area. Upon their return, Rowan announced that their tagalong was still tagging along.

“The lad’s impatient. He may yet give up,” was all Vlandar would say.

“Well, better he’s out there than here,” Maera grumbled.

Lhors smiled but said nothing. Maera had already proven to be much sharper tongued than her sister. Rowan actually smiled and spoke to him on occasion.

Khlened mumbled something under his breath.

Rowan smiled at Lhors now, but her eyes were wicked. “Maera, I don’t believe the barbarian likes us. I wonder why.”

“Yes,” Maera said flatly. “Which is it, barbarian, that we’re rangers, female, or half-elf? Or is it just that we’re not Fist barbarian women?”

A tense silence followed. Lhors saw Malowan stand to arbitrate, but before he could speak, Khlened looked startled and possibly even embarrassed at being called on his rudeness. He finally mumbled, “All that, praps. Don’t know any elves—”

“Maera and I aren’t elves,” Rowan said mildly enough. “Our father is human, a warrior like yourself, northerner.”

“Oh.” The barbarian glanced at them. “Don’t know any half-elves or any rangers either. Just that... they’re odd, live in the woods, talk to the bears.”

“Bears make more sense than people sometimes,” Maera said, and for once she sounded almost friendly. “To us, you’re the odd one. Who’d want to live in snow and ice country?”

“Because the north is Fist country,” Khlened replied promptly. “Fist barbarians are born and reared there. Besides, better than to melt in the south.”

“We don’t like heat much ourselves,” Rowan said. Silence followed again, but it wasn’t quite as stiff a silence as it had been. Khlened settled back and rummaged through his pack for a stick of jerky as Vlandar apportioned the watches.

It clouded over and rained during the late hours, but only briefly. Vlandar took the last watch. At sunrise, he had them on their way once again, both boats moving slowly but steadily upstream while Rowan and Maera scouted along the south shore and the Flennish guards took the north.

Lhors felt useless. He could pole, but he wasn’t strong enough to keep up with Vlandar or Khlened. Vlandar put him to working the tiller because he could follow orders, but he couldn’t begin to understand how to read the river.

Vlandar seemed to have picked up river travel quickly. When the wind drove east to west for part of the afternoon and they were able to use the sails, the warrior brought Lhors up to the bow and began pointing out how to recognize shallow water, hidden rocks, swift currents, swirling currents, and other dangers. Shortly after, the winds died and Lhors went back to the tiller—still unable to work out their way by himself but easier with his role in steering the boat.

“There are hill giants prowling about,” Rowan reported at sunset when they picked her up along the southern shore, “but there is nowhere for them to cross. We’ll be safe enough along the northern shore.”

“That’s good to know,” Vlandar replied, “but we’ll still set a double guard tonight and light no fires. No use in tempting fate.”

* * *

Two more long days of hard work brought them to the Sterich capital of Istivin. Lhors thought it a distinct step down from Cryllor. The market was smaller, and there were few goods for sale except food and weaponry. The periphery walls were utilitarian, and everything close to them stank of the cauldrons of pitch kept over low-burning fires in case of sudden attack from bandits, pirates, giants from the Steading, or other enemies. Apparently Istivin had many of them.

Vlandar kept them in the city only long enough to check with the captain of the city guard for any information about the Steading and other perils in the vicinity. While he was gone, Lhors helped Pferic and Mal replenish the company's supply of bread, jerked meat, and other things that could be eaten without the need for fires.

Past Istivin, the Davish took an abrupt turn to the south and became narrower and more shallow. The current was slower, but sandbars and submerged rocks were more prevalent, so they could proceed no faster.

Two days beyond Istivin, they beached the boats on the innermost edge of a bend in the river and began distributing goods, extra maps, water bottles and various supplies in case anyone was separated from the group. The Flennish men turned the boats, then beached them again and brought out dun-colored nets to drape over nearby trees for cover. In the same way, they blocked the main opening of a cavern that could hold all the horses. Pferic and Zyb had the beasts inside and tethered to a line near a tiny stream that wound through the cave. Several paces upstream, there was a hole broken through the roof. Where sunlight came through the hole, grass grew next to the water. It wouldn't serve the horses for long, but Pferic had brought grain enough to last a while, and the Flennish guards knew places nearby where they could be grazed in relative safety.

Malowan spent some time reminding Pferic how to check the charm he and Nemis had concocted. With the tiny amulet, Pferic would know if he and Zyb should take the boats and horses and head back to Flen or if they should wait for the company to return.

Vlandar allowed the company one full day to rest up from the rigors of upriver travel, then set off with his band, afoot, going south across a narrow band of flat country that soon went into hills and then into mountainous country. The Steading, according to his maps, was three days away, no more.

It took all three days, partly because they needed to go to ground for some time the first day to avoid a large company of bandits, and again the next when three giants stopped to graze a flock of sheep—stolen, Lhors thought.

Just after midday on the third day, Vlandar stopped the company in a thick copse of trees and pointed south. "See the two-pronged peak that's covered in snow? The Steading is this side of it, just beyond that ridge."

"Can we see it from the ridge?" Lhors asked. His feet ached despite all his years of hunting with his father afoot, and he was cold, tired, and scared.

"No. The ridge is too high. I'm told there are caves nearby. With luck, we'll be able to store our provisions and rest the night."

"Caves," Maera growled. "This near the Steading, the giants will know them, too."

“Yes,” Vlandar said, “but if the reports are true, there are many that are more human-sized. Young giants might play in such caves if the Steading were not a fortress, but babes from that fort are not allowed to play outside.”

Khlened shook his head. “We’ve caves in the north. I dislike ’em. Bears and worse make them their home.”

“Bears?” Agya said and shuddered.

“We’ll make sure any cave we use has a small entry and no back door,” Malowan assured her.

Rowan, who was peering out of the concealing branches to the north, suddenly interrupted their conversation. “Vlandar, come have a look.”

Vlandar and the others came to where she crouched and saw what had caught her attention. A lone figure was approaching them. Squinting to try to make out the details, Vlandar finally said, “It’s Plowys.”

Agya spat. “Hoped maybe a bear’d eaten *him*.”

“No such luck,” Maera replied flatly.

Vlandar sighed. “We may as well wait here. We can’t evade him, and we can’t send him back. He’ll simply refuse to go, and we can’t tie him up and leave him, tempting as it is. Evade him, and he might ride up to the Steading gates and demand to join his company.” He gave the barbarian a hard look. “And no, it’s no answer to let him do just that. He’d give us away as soon as he opened his mouth—or they’d torture him and learn of us anyway. I prefer to keep our presence secret for a while. We might learn more that way. Besides, this way we may be able to keep control of him.”

Khlened grumbled. “Hah. Well, if we’re waiting, I’ll wait on my backside.” He settled on a nearby rock, and Nemis sat down next to him.

Minutes passed as Plowys came on. Apparently, he didn’t know where their company had gone, but he was making his way to the very copse of trees where they lay hid.

“Let me handle this,” Vlandar said as he stepped out of the trees, waved to the young man, and then resumed his hiding place.

Plowys saw him and spurred his horse forward. Crashing through the trees with no attempt at stealth, he vaulted from the saddle. He was still smirking, but before he could say anything, Vlandar pounced, hauling him off his feet by his shirt and throwing him to the ground.

Maera and Rowan grabbed his winded horse and did their best to quiet the beast.

“I *chose* not to bring you on this journey, boy!” Vlandar hissed. “You were not wanted, and you are still not wanted!”

Plowys stared at him, slack-jawed. “I-I—”

“Silence! I am on the king’s mission. If I chose, I could kill you now for ignoring my orders.”

The boy paled. “You wouldn’t dare!” he managed as he got to his feet and began to dust himself off. “My mother would—”

“She is not here,” Nemis said grimly as he came to stand over the fallen youth. “We are, and your precious mother has no hold over *me*, boy.”

Plowys licked his lips. “You won’t do it.” But he wouldn’t meet Vlandar’s eyes or the mage’s. He glanced at the circle of grim faces, then fixed on the paladin. “*You* won’t,” he told Malowan, “and you won’t let them, will you?”

Vlandar and Malowan exchanged tired looks, and the paladin sighed. “I dare not, if I would remain a paladin. But neither does that mean I openly welcome you. My order strives for purity, but few of us are truly free of petty emotions.”

“It is not petty,” Vlandar growled. He strode forward, leveling a finger at Plowys’ nose. The boy eyed it warily. “You will give me your solemn oath here and now that you will behave as a fighter. You will cooperate with everyone here. *Everyone.*” he added as he named the company in turn. “Your life may depend on how good a thief Agya is, or how good a job Lhors can do watching our backs for enemies. You are no better than anyone else here.

“*And* you are a common member of a company where *I* am captain. You will obey my orders or the orders of whomever I put in charge of you. Should you do otherwise, I will order you tied and left on the spot. Do you understand?”

Plowys nodded almost meekly.

“Young idiot,” Nemis muttered as the youth went to tend his horse.

Khlened scowled. “Don’t trust the snotty little beast so far’s I could spit him.”

Vlandar’s mouth twitched. “I know. Why do you think you’re keeping an eye on him for me?”

Khlened smiled, but Lhors did not envy Plowys his newfound protector.



While the rest of the company hid in a small valley sheltered by trees and huge boulders, Lhors joined Maera and Rowan in scouting for a suitable base camp. For once, Lhors finally proved himself useful. Aside from the rangers and Vlandar, he was the only member of the company experienced in hunting in the open without being seen. Although the trio saw no giants, there were signs of danger everywhere: huge footprints, here and there a tree that had obviously been felled by a massive blow, and the crude scrawlings of orcs and other creatures.

Despite what Vlandar had been told, there were precious few suitable caves in the area. The few they had found were either too small or were in plain sight of the giants' hold. There were also a few caverns too narrow or too low for even Agya to enter.

After several hours of fruitless searching, they finally found a suitable site. Lhors went through the small chamber, making certain it had no other holes that could let in bears, snakes, or even nastier things. After the company moved in, Vlandar set the rangers to watching for enemy and gathering firewood in case it was possible to have a fire. While the rest of the party was busy settling in, Vlandar sent Nemis to see what he could learn of the giants' fortress.

Lhors pronounced the cave as a good safety, but he was grateful that Khlened, who'd come in with an armful of wood, also checked the dark corners and agreed with him. "No places for anything bigger'n a bug to get in. And I found a chimney—bit of a hole going west with the wind blowing that way, as well. We could have a fire for hot tea or soup, and the smoke won't blow toward the Steading. Shouldn't come out anywhere about at all, in fact."

"I'm still not sure about fire," Vlandar said, "but perhaps Nemis or Mal can keep it from unfriendly noses. I admit I'd welcome a hot meal or at least a warm drink."

Not long after full dark, Nemis and Malowan were hard at work on a fire. Mal constructed a pile of very dry sticks while Nemis muttered a spell over the chimney hole. The air around it sparkled briefly, and smoke that began a pale gray just above the pile of kindling turned clear as it swirled through the mage's fingers. Suddenly, Lhors couldn't smell it either.

Maera, to Lhors' surprise, began preparing a soup from the dry packets they all carried, and to his mind it was as good smelling as anything Gran had made.

Gran, he thought sadly. I wonder where she is tonight. At the moment, she seemed very far away, almost like someone from another life. That was good. He would mourn his people properly later, once he'd done his best to avenge them.

"All right," Vlandar announced to everyone as the last of his company settled down. "Remember that we need to change our regular patterns. Hill giants are active at night, mostly. By daybreak, all but a few servants or guards will be sleeping or passed out. Remember that we are infiltrating to learn what we can and wreak any damage we can. We need information. Remember that this"—he held up his interior map—"is blank beyond the entry and the guard tower. We know nothing about how the Steading is set up inside. There may be traps, and there will certainly be guards. We need to know what's beyond the entry, so I'm sending Mal and Agya in first."

"What?" Plowys blurted. "Why?"

"Mal's a paladin and has protection we don't: he can sense evil. And Agya is a thief."

"Was a thief," Malowan interjected mildly.

Agya wrinkled her nose but said nothing.

Vlandar shrugged. "She has talent, and she uses it for our benefit. I tested her myself. She has a phenomenal memory, and she can penetrate a maze and map it in detail afterward."

"'Tis no talent. Was needed, back in th' city," the girl mumbled with a sidelong glance at her mentor.

"She'll fill in the map for me, and I will draw it out for the rest of us," Vlandar said.

"And if Malowan and Agya are caught?" Maera demanded sharply.

"It is a risk," the warrior conceded, "but not so much as all of us going into an unfamiliar place. What if one of us opens the wrong door and walks into the barracks just as a company is arming to go plunder?" Vlandar eyed them all. "If we have to fight, we are no longer gathering information, and it is vital we learn why the Steading giants are attacking and razing villages and if they intend to go against cities next. Remember that we're allowed to keep treasure only if we find out what's going on and why."

Nemis stepped forward, his hands loosely clasped before him. "I can tell you this much," he said quietly, "I have heard rumors that there is another force that uses the giants for its own ends."

Malowan eyed him keenly. "And you know this... how?"

Nemis shrugged. "Several weeks ago, I saw raiders coming back from up near the Stark Mounds, and they were a mixed company, which is unusual. Hill giants are unmistakable by their bulk, as cloud giants are by their height and fire giants by their coal-black skin. I was nearer than I would have liked to be—close enough that I could hear some of their speech. One hill giant was laughing about orders—some sort of in-joke probably, and one of the fire giants told him to be still, that 'the Masters' would have them all killed for such a slip."

“There was more than one kind of giant in my village, I think,” Lhors said. “Some were much taller than others. There were many kinds of armor and weapons, but I saw none who were very dark-skinned.”

“Well,” Malowan said, “before coming in, Nemis and I went out to view the fort, and I can tell you what we have here. The Steading is set low in one of those nasty, damp depressions. All the hills may be dry, but there will be rain in the hollow. Fog is a near constant. That is to our advantage, since the guards won’t be able to see us, and if we’re quiet...”

Nemis nodded. “I used a simple reveal spell on the fort, and it is a formidable structure. The walls are as thick as I am tall, the logs immense and very damp. An army couldn’t break into it, and fire cannot destroy it. I could sense many within—hill giants, possibly other giants, orcs, trolls and other slaves who serve the giants. I cannot tell you how many of each kind, only that there are many who are armed. Oh, and a cave bear, at least one.”

Agya licked her lips. “A bear?”

“Restrained,” Nemis assured her, “on a chain, perhaps. I sensed metal, anyway.”

“Bears ain’t safe, mage! There was a juggling bear for years in lower market, and old Yoryos kept *it* chained! Well, it got free during a show and *ate* ’im!” She shivered.

“I know, Agya.” Malowan laid a hand on her shoulder, “but I sensed the restraints, and I can detect it before it sees or smells us. So, as long as you do not go off on your own...?”

The little thief’s lips twisted. “Now I won’t.”

“I agree that this place is possibly as near a haven as we will find,” Maera said as she sighted down an arrow to check it for straightness. “It isn’t likely giants will come this way, but our father used to say, ‘If I had a silver penny for every time the completely unexpected happened, I’d have retired to a palace and not a village hut.’” She glanced to Nemis. “This is, after all, an open cave, and it is not that far from the Steading. Think of coming so far only to die because some oversized brute saw light or heard voices.”

“The lady is right,” Nemis said. “I can build an illusionary wall, suitably matched to the local stone, of course.”

Lhors cleared his throat. “Um, but this *is* their land. If someone made a wall where I knew a cave was, even if I never used it, I would notice.”

Nemis smiled. “Just so. But I have my own version of the wall, and it includes a non-detection spell. Once set around a person or place, those who pass simply won’t notice it.”

Agya laughed. “Oooh, just gimme a spell like *that*...” She grinned as the paladin cleared his throat ominously. “For certain, I don’t want it *now*; but to have ’ad it when I was still a-lifting purses...”

Vlandar nudged the paladin. “Changing her are you, Mal?”

“I am,” the paladin replied grimly, “but I’m no miracle-worker.”

Agya seemed to take offense at this and glared at Lhors when he chuckled.

* * *

The air inside the cave stayed constant all night—not quite warm enough for comfort and a little stuffy as the hours passed. By contrast, the predawn air outside was damp and chill.

Malowan tugged the dark hood over his helm and wrapped wool around his arms, pulling the thick cloth around his hands.

Agya matched his actions, then looked up at him. “We on it or no?” she demanded quietly.

“Waiting for Nemis,” he reminded her. He sniffed cautiously, then held up a hand. “No wind—good. We’ll need to be quiet, but the fog should be thick enough to hide us.”

“Fog,” Agya mumbled. “Who’d’a thunk I’d be glad of fog?”

“You won’t be in it for long,” Malowan said. He turned as Nemis came out, two leather thongs clutched in his hand. Malowan took them, touched the smoothed, pale blue stones that had been threaded onto the soft leather, then gave one to Agya. “Put it on,” he said. “Nemis will know where we are by these.”

“And in what condition—” the mage began.

Malowan gestured sharply, silencing him, then sent his eyes flicking toward his ward. Agya was studying the charm and apparently hadn’t heard him.

“Agya,” Malowan said, “please go tell Vlandar that we are ready to depart.”

“But y’just tol’ ’im yourself!” she protested.

“Agya...” the paladin replied with a warning look.

“Oh, all right,” she hissed and disappeared inside the cave.

“I didn’t want her hearing this, Nemis, but you will know if we are taken or dead?”

The mage nodded.

“What if we are taken and they search us?”

“My beneath-notice spell is on the charms,” Nemis replied. “It may only affect the charm and not the wearer, but tell her of it if she still worries about the bear.” He looked skyward. “We had better go now.”

Malowan repositioned the small pack under his cloak and finished just as Agya reemerged. They followed the mage away from the caves, out of the ravine, and up a low, brushy slope.

Near the top, Nemis eased onto his hands and knees. Malowan shoved his cloak aside and crawled after him. Agya, much shorter than either man, went into a low crouch and brought up the rear, keeping a wary eye all around them, though there was little to see and it was still too dark to see very far.

Once they reached the crest, Nemis went flat and tugged Malowan’s ear close. “Can you make it out?” he breathed.

Malowan gazed out and down, then finally nodded.

“Good. Straight down the slope you’ll find a boulder and some thorny scree. Don’t speak once you move from here—it’s near enough the tower that the guards will hear us.”

The paladin nodded again, then drew his ward close. She tensed, then leaned against him briefly.

“Ready?” he asked softly. She gave him Rowan’s sign for *We go now*. Malowan replied in like fashion, then eyed Nemis. “Lead, we’ll follow.”

Nemis moved out, low on hands and knees.

This side of the hill was steeper than the way they'd come up. The mage reversed himself and eased down feet-first, turned sideways with one hand out to catch at the tough brush so he wouldn't slide to the bottom. What grass there was here was slick with dew and slippery as ice underfoot. Fortunately, most of the slope was dirt and rock.

Nemis finally stopped and drew them down with him into a shallow depression between a fat boulder and thick brush. Malowan edged forward and gazed down for some moments, then eased silently back, gripped the mage's shoulder and without further ado, moved to his right and began working his way down into the dell. Agya followed.



The air had been icy cold outside the fort, particularly for Agya who'd had to rub her hands together several times before they were warm enough to manage her metal lockpicks. Mal stood ready with his sword as his ward worked at the massive locks. After several minutes, there was an all-too-loud *clack* as she freed the innermost tumbler. The door swung open.

Inside, it was cold but not as damp, and the air was stuffy. Malowan smelled unwashed bodies and sweaty furs, but there was no one in sight. Agya stepped away from him, eyes moving nonstop while his were still adjusting to the gloom. It seemed to be a cloakroom, just as Vlandar's information had indicated. Huge outer garments hung from pegs. The wall to his right held doors, a double doorway flanked by a single door to each side. At least, Malowan thought, there was room for both of them to hide in here.

Chill air rolled down from above—the guard tower, clearly. Someone up there was snoring.

I forgot how huge everything would be, he thought. Agya must be terrified.

Surprisingly, his ward seemed only interested. She eyed him sidelong as he silently moved across the floor to listen at the entry to the tower passage. Malowan signed that there was only one guard and he was sleeping.

Agya turned to check out the rest of the entry-chamber, and he came over to help.

An overturned ale keg contributed to the sour smell, but damp furs and wet wool seemed to account for most of the stench. Agya eyed the various sacks flung down beneath the rack of pegs and shook her head. Nothing worth searching.

He tapped her arm to get her attention, then signed, *This way first*. He set his shoulder against one of the main doors, created a space just large enough for her to slip through, then followed, easing it silently shut behind them.

A long, broad corridor led to a vast hall with a high ceiling, thick wooden pillars, and a low-burning fire. He could see chairs, benches, piles of cushions, and a huge table on the other side of the fire, but there was no sign or sound of occupants.

Agya jumped as someone to her left beyond another set of double doors snored one bellowing snort. The doors remained closed, and the noise wasn't repeated.

Deciding that they were safe for the moment, Malowan set his shoulder against the opposite wall and eased down the long passage. Agya sighed quietly and drew a dagger as she followed.

The chamber—a feasting hall, clearly—was huge. Fire burned merrily in a pit at the room’s center, illuminating some things and casting odd shadows over others. Doors on either side of the room were closed, and there was no sound to indicate what might be beyond them.

Malowan glanced both ways, then ran light-footed to the west doors and listened. Agya started toward him, but he shook his head and signed, *Food place. Servants.* Agya nodded and laid a hand over her lips, indicating she’d be quiet. The paladin smiled, then moved across the chamber to test the east doors. *Safe,* he finally indicated. Agya clapped both hands over her mouth and he grinned. “Safe” wasn’t really likely anywhere in the Steading.

He eased one of the doors open so they could slip through. A somewhat narrower, dark hallway led straight on. Malowan could hear at least two giants snoring—sleeping off too much bad wine, no doubt. Moments later, they came to a cross-point. He eased into the open and listened intently, then moved past a door left partly open. Fire burned sullenly halfway down a long, narrow chamber that he thought must be part of the outer walls—here the logs were as thick as he was tall. There was a door at the far end, and he thought he could sense the cave bear beyond it. Between them and that door, the room was a jumble of tables, chairs, and benches. All of them were littered with cups, dirty plates, and platters. Broached kegs were everywhere. The room reeked of sour wood-fire smoke, unwashed bodies, wet leather, ale, and vomit. Badly preserved trophy heads lined the wall above the fireplace—he could only hope Agya hadn’t seen that one of the heads was human. He touched her hand to get her attention and led the way back into the hall, crossing to check out the door on the opposite wall.

These were heavily barred. Malowan mouthed a reveal spell, then led Agya to the left. The hallway bent west here, another pair of doors at the end. He eased them open, revealing another fireplace—the fire here nearly burned out—and an almost normal-sized chamber that looked surprisingly neat and almost businesslike. The table was long and narrow. A chief’s chair sat empty at one end, smaller chairs flanking it. Shelves near the fireplace held odd items, and opposite the hearth, a huge hide was stretched on the wall. Malowan gazed at this, then nodded in satisfaction. *Map,* he signed and moved to study it.

Agya tugged at his sleeve and held out both hands, making writing motions. He handed over the blank map hide and charcoal stick and left her to copy the map while he checked the rest of the chamber.

Hides and rugs covered the floor, and tapestries hid most of the walls. Along the west wall, there was a heavy, stiff skin covering a vast area. Oddly, the bottom edge was moving as if air currents from behind were at work. Very odd, since the chamber was rather stuffy. He shoved the hide to one side, sensitive fingers questing until he found a door. It wasn’t really very well hidden, except by the hide. Once inside the tiny hidden chamber, he cast a spell, and the rack of firewood along the far wall lit up like a candle to his eyes.

Agya came up behind him. Malowan, aware by his last spell that no one was nearby, tugged at her boy-cut hair and murmured, “We are safe enough for now. The wood conceals something of value. Help me shift it.”

Agya merely nodded and knelt to begin shifting balks of firewood. The pile was nearly gone when Malowan’s fingers closed around several tubes.

“Scroll cases,” he whispered.

She nodded, inclining her head again when he indicated she should guard both the doors while he checked the tubes for safety.

Eventually he chose two, shoved them into his pack, then carefully restacked the firewood. “These must be valuable,” he whispered. “Time for us to hide or get back outside before the next guard change.”

Malowan waved her back into the room to watch and listen while he resettled the huge hide. “Be very quiet. There are wolves, remember,” he reminded her.

She nodded, her face pale, and led the way.

But before they had gone two paces, heavy footsteps echoed through the hall, and a deep bass voice rumbled in counterpart to at least three yipping wolves. Mal waited, holding his breath. The sounds passed by, and a door slammed, cutting off all noise.

Malowan gave a white-faced Agya thumbs up and went on. She drew a dagger and followed.

They retraced their steps and only once had to hide—Malowan under a pile of sacks, boots, and other rubble on the floor of the cloakroom, while Agya buried herself under a fur cloak that almost reached the floor. Two giants came rumbling and cursing down from the tower, one clutching his head while another grumbled, seemingly cross at having his sleep interrupted for guard duty in full fog.

Malowan waited an extra three tens of breaths after they had left, then rolled from under the sacks and drew Agya toward the doors. He eased one open as quietly as possible and pulled her outside.

Somewhere high above the Steading, day had broken. Down here, the fog was merely a brighter shade of gray but no less thick. The sides of the road were barely visible as an occasional tuft of dead grass.

Agya retrieved her tools. Malowan gestured a reminder for utter silence. She nodded, wide-eyed, and there was only the faintest *snip* as the lock slid into place.

They set out as quickly as they could walk. In this much haze, they’d be invisible to anyone approaching, and they’d hear anyone long before they saw them.

A short distance down the road, Malowan drew the girl onto the scrubby turf and back the way they’d come. To his surprise, Nemis was still waiting in the tiny dell.

The mage smiled very briefly then led back to the cave.



The rest of the party was awake and finishing a plain breakfast of corn gruel when the three returned. Nemis sought the packet of dry herb he sprinkled on everything he ate before filling his shallow bowl. Malowan settled down next to Vlandar and sent his ward to get breakfast for both of them while he helped fill in parts of the map.

Lhors was eager to hear what they had discovered, so he sat himself a few paces away, trying to remain as unobtrusive as possible while he kept his ears open.

“I would suggest we start an hour earlier tomorrow,” Malowan said. “There is a guard change at about first hour, and the servants had already begun work in the kitchens. Still, we discovered a fair amount about the place.”

The paladin had just begun to sketch on the map when Agya returned with his breakfast. He drank down the rather gluey mixture from its two-handled bowl while it was still hot.

Agya only sipped at hers and fell asleep before it was half gone. Malowan caught the wooden bowl as it slipped from her fingers and eased her down next to him, tucking the woolen cloak around her. He smiled down at her and then turned back to the map.

Vlandar and the paladin spent the next several minutes going over various details and debating tomorrow’s plans. Lhors tried to pay attention, but Mal’s details of twists and turns and doors and this and that soon began to jumble together in his head. He was beginning to doze off himself when something piqued his interest.

“...but this chamber,” Malowan was saying, “is where I saw the map.”

Vlandar drew a blank hide from his pile of mapskins and handed it over. Malowan closed his eyes briefly then began to sketch in such details as he recalled.

“It may be a council chamber, and I think the map showed sites they plan to raid. I do not read their script, unfortunately.” He closed his eyes again and scribbled several more lines of runic script at the bottom of the hide. “There. That is everything I remember—for now, at least. With a little sleep, I might recall more.”

“Go sleep, then,” Vlandar said. “Well done, my friend.”

Malowan shook his head. “There is more, though. Wait.” He patted his pack. “We also found several scroll cases deeply hidden among the balks of wood.”

“Scroll cases?” Vlandar said. “Have you looked at them yet?”

“I did not take the time in there, but if they are messages in Giantish, it would have done me little good. I can speak some Giantish, but I read none of it. I believe Nemis does, though.”

“He said so, back when he and I first spoke.” Vlandar thought a moment. “Let’s look at them now, you and I. If we need Nemis to translate for us, that can wait until after you’ve slept a while.”

Lhors stood and gazed over Vlandar’s shoulder. The two men either didn’t care or didn’t notice that he was so blatantly eavesdropping.

The scrolls were written in well-formed, large letters, but neither man could understand a word of what was written there, not even the glyphs at the bottom that must be the mark of the sender. “Or Nosnra’s glyph, of course,” Malowan said gloomily.

“They could be anything,” Vlandar agreed as he furled the last scroll and slid it into its tube. “Keep them, Mal. We’ll get Nemis’ help after you both wake up. Meantime, I’ll finish out the individual maps as best I can. Likely, I’ll take your advice and we’ll enter the fort an hour earlier tomorrow. I want to avoid a melee, especially if there’s a chance to get back into that chamber and learn something about why Nosnra and his underlings are attacking Keoland.”

“We won’t learn that by launching an open attack,” the paladin agreed. “I trust if you plan on stealth that you have put the fear of the gods into young Plowys?”

“As best I could, Mal. Still, I may need your aid in restraining our young hero.”

“There is,” the paladin said severely, “not enough sleep in all the world to prepare me for *that*.” He tugged his cloak around himself snugly and worked off his boots, settling down where he was.

* * *

Malowan woke some hours later to find Agya awake and replaiting one of the straps on his pack.

“They’re at it.” She grumbled and indicated the group around Vlandar with a minute jerk of her head. “Your warrior friend’s picked ’is teams, and no one wants to be with anyone else.” She drew a dagger and cut a slit on the side of the pack, threaded the braided strap through, and began working the ends in so it would hold. “Thought it were bad enough in th’ city when our master chose which ’prentice thieves to send out with which journey-lads. No one ever wanted who they got, journey *or* ’prentice.”

Agya finished her task neatly and shoved the bag his way. “You left it out in th’ open where anyone could’ve taken those things we found,” she said severely. “I don’t trust half ’em, specially that boy.”

“Boy?” the paladin asked his ward in the sudden quiet. “I know Lhors is ill-trained—”

“Nah, th’other: Lord Pretty Prince of the Heavens.” Agya scowled at Plowys, who was pacing by himself and occasionally spinning on one heel to half-draw a blade. “Th’ rangers’ve asked him to give over before he cuts one of us, playing with

his shiny toys in here. Ask me, let 'im play—if luck be with us, he'll trip and skewer 'imself."

"Harsh," Malowan said mildly.

His ward gave him a hard-eyed look. "Nah. Harsh is what I'll do to 'im if 'e does something to get *you* hurt." She shoved the bag aside and leveled a finger at his face. "I know you. You'll give someone like that tries and tries again and get yourself hurt trying to keep 'im safe."

"Just as I did recently with a young market thief, a skinny girl masquerading as a boy and nearly old enough to be caught in that deception by the city guard—or her fellow thieves?"

Agya blushed and turned her back on him.

"We're all flawed, Agya."

"You know how th' thieves guild uses girls," she muttered, "or what happens to girl thieves tossed in th' cells. But even if I weren't ready to leave off thieving, I'd've done nothin' to get you hurt." Her chin came up. "And I never stole but enough to keep m'self fed."

Malowan laid a hand on her shoulder. "I know, and now you shame me for reminding you. But *you* have changed. Perhaps Plowys can, especially this far from his mother."

"P'raps," the girl replied dubiously.

Malowan gripped her arm briefly then got to his feet to find out what plans had been set for the coming night.

Khlened snarled something. Vlandar leaped to his feet, but before he could utter a word, Maera cut him off. "Lower your voice, fool of a barbarian! The fake wall our mage put up to block the entry is to trick eyes not ears! They could have heard you down along the river, just now!"

Khlened grumbled under his breath, but Vlandar cleared his throat and chopped a hand for silence.

Vlandar was visibly holding onto a formidable temper at the moment. When Plowys and Khlened both began talking at the same time, the warrior snarled a curse that silenced both and left Rowan blinking in surprise.

"I was put in charge of this sortie," Vlandar said evenly, "and all of you knew that from the first—including you." He scowled at Plowys until the young man's mouth twitched. "Now. I will often ask for opinions, particularly from those of you who have fought giants or can speak or read Giantish, or who have skills other and better than mine. I may even follow such advice if it seems sensible, but I am captain here. The responsibility for all of us—and to the king and Lord Mebree—is *mine*. I made my choices for tonight for my own reasons, and I am not called on to explain them. Do what you must to get ready, because we move out two hours before first light." And with that, he turned away, beckoned for Malowan to follow him, and settled in the narrow corner where he'd spread his blankets.

"It was a poor choice putting me in charge of *this* bunch," he growled.

Malowan smiled. "You manage well enough. How did you divide us up?"

Vlandar sighed heavily. "Khlened and the rangers are going to learn what they can about the door where the wolves and their keeper went. The northerner is upset to be put with females, and they in turn are offended by him. I put Nemis with you and

Agya. You need to learn where that downstairs goes, and he needs to either copy that map or take it.”

“You plan on all of us getting inside unnoted by the residents?” Malowan asked.

Vlandar shrugged. “I do not believe the Steading is ultimately responsible for the attacks. Nosnra is a brutish oaf, cunning but not a planner. If he does report to someone else, I want to learn who and if there is a way to find that someone. We may decide to do as much damage to the Steading as we can before going after Nosnra’s superiors then. Likely not, though. If Nosnra learns what we’re up to, he’ll warn his superior, if he *is* taking orders. Better if we can avoid walking into a trap, don’t you think?”

“Of course.”

“I will take Lhors and Plowys to see what else we can learn from the feasting hall, then join you in the council room. I don’t want any of us wandering off. Our goal should be to get in and get back out with that map and anything else useful.” Vlandar sighed again. Now he sounded merely tired. “I need your help, Mal. We can’t go into that fort in this mood.”

“I agree,” Malowan said. “We act as a team or die as individuals. I’ll talk to Khlened and the rangers. Young Plowys—he won’t listen to me. You’ll have to do your best with him.”

* * *

But as it turned out, there was no need for anyone to search for information on the Steading’s arrangement. When Nemis went through the scrolls Malowan had brought back, he found a detailed map of the main floor.

“I see the steps you found, Mal,” the mage said and pointed them out, “and another set here, just off the kitchens. But there are no plans for the lower level.”

“This is still useful,” Vlandar said. “It tells us there *is* a lower level—though I was certain of that anyway. Besides, there appears to be no reason for us to go anywhere but that council chamber.”

Khlened stirred. “Then this will be no sneak raid?”

“Yes,” Vlandar said flatly. “The council room is here”—he pointed out the small chamber not far from the north wall—“so if there are guards in the corridors, we avoid them. If we cannot, of course, then we kill them as quickly and quietly as we can.”

He glanced at Nemis, who was gazing at the scroll. The mage’s expression turned suddenly grim, but Vlandar didn’t think anyone else had seen this. “Everyone eat something and make certain your gear is ready. We leave shortly.”

He waited until everyone but Nemis and Malowan had moved off, then touched the mage’s arm to get his attention. “What is it? What does it say?”

Nemis tapped the scroll. “It is a set of orders on where and when to raid certain villages in southern Keoland—the dark of the next moon. I cannot tell where it was written.”

Malowan spread the scroll out. “But it is signed, isn’t it? That certainly looks like a signature to me.”

“It is signed,” the mage replied grimly, “by one ‘Eclavdra’.”

“Eclavdra?” Vlandar asked. “Is that a place or a person? Can you tell?”

“I can tell.” Nemis swallowed. He looked tense. “I had hoped I would not need to tell anyone this, but I see no way past it. Eclavdra is a drow, a dark elf.”

Malowan shook his head. “I thought there were no drow left anywhere in the Flanaess!”

“Not *in*, but *under*,” Nemis said. “They left the surface ages ago. They live in deep caverns and when they do attack, it is in secret, and they leave no survivors.”

“Well,” Vlandar said dubiously, “then how do *you* know about them?”

“Because the man who was my master in my apprentice days sought out the drow and pledged himself to their service in exchange for whatever magic they could teach him. They do have some like my old master who serve as their ears and eyes above-ground. Daylight is painful to them. Furthermore, they are so unlike any other race that they would be known for what they are. They are small and delicate to look upon, very black-skinned, with silvery hair. They are dire fighters and dread sorcerers. My master was bound to serve Eclavdra.” Nemis licked his lips. “When he died, I found a way to escape the drow.”

“You said nothing of this back in Cryllor,” Vlandar said. “Why, I wonder?”

Nemis gave him a bitter smile. “Because I knew you would look at me the way you are now. ‘He dwelt with drow. Perhaps he served them. Perhaps he is their spy.’ I could think of nothing I might say to persuade you that I am not. I still cannot.”

“You forget that I can tell if a being serves good or evil,” Malowan said mildly. “Give me your hands.” He gripped them gently then shook his head. “You are no servant of evil, Nemis, though I had no doubt of that before now.”

“That is good enough for me then,” Vlandar said.

“Thank you,” the mage said simply. “I see nothing else useful in this, and no way to tell where Eclavdra is. If she remains in the great underground city where I left her, there is nothing we can do about her.”

“Then we will do what we can to render her servants less useful to her,” Vlandar said. He waited until the mage went off to his spellbook, then eyed the paladin sidelong. “You are certain of him, Mal?”

“I am.”

“You had better be,” the warrior replied. “Meantime, you and I need to go over this map. I want no dithering once we are inside.”

* * *

It was still very dark when the party crouched in a close huddle near the top of the hill so that Malowan could orient them. The air was cool and damp, and a misty rain fell now and again. By the time they were ready to move on, Lhors’ hair was plastered to his skull where his hood had developed a hole. In the still, pre-dawn air, the party could clearly hear two deep-voices growling curses or insults at each other from the fortress.

Nemis translated in a soft whisper. “That is the tower guard—two young ones who are wet, cold, and out of ale. They have a long hour before the relief guards come, and it is so foggy that they can’t see anything anyway.”

“Not really watching, then,” Khlened whispered.

Plowys scowled at his hands. At the moment, he wasn't speaking to anyone. Just as well, Lhors thought, since he had a carrying voice and a whisper sharper than Khlened's.

As Lhors triple-checked his quiver of javelins, Vlandar gripped Malowan's fingers and nodded. The paladin started down the slope with Agya on his heels and Nemis bringing up the rear. The others waited. It remained quiet except for the distant conversation of the two guards.

"Rowan, go," Vlandar breathed.

The ranger eased out of sight, Maera close behind her. Khlened stayed behind only long enough to sheathe the spear he carried. Smart of him, Lhors decided. A man could stab himself, if he slipped on his way down. Lhors checked his own blades for the fourth time to be certain nothing was likely to come loose.

A few more moments passed, then Vlandar tapped Plowys on the shoulder and started down the slope, gesturing for the others to follow. Lhors remembered to take a slow count of two before following. As he reached the shelter of the boulder and brush, he could just make out the sound of a dislodged stone some distance below. Fortunately, one of the tower guards began coughing as if he'd choked on something. His companion broke into raucous laughter.

Vlandar set off once again, Plowys ahead of him and Lhors coming last. The ground beneath his feet was crumbly, but it leveled out before very long.

The fog was thicker down here, and the early morning was still very dark. Lhors could see little except for Vlandar's reassuring form just ahead of him, but as they reached the main doors, he could make out Agya doing something to the doors. Picking the lock, he assumed.

A moment later, she stepped back as Malowan and Nemis leaned into one of the huge slabs of wood. The door moved quietly back, just enough to admit them. The mage pointed to the opening and shook his head, signaling that there was no one on the other side of the door. To Lhors, the sight of that vast door three times his height and thicker than his arm brought home that they were about to enter a mighty hall, full of the dreadful creatures that had destroyed his home. He bit his lip.

Vlandar was going in first, sword in one hand and a heavy-bladed javelin in the other. Plowys was right on his heels. The rangers followed. Khlened trailed after, then Malowan and his ward. Nemis gave Lhors a smile probably meant to encourage him and gestured for him to go next. Lhors' fingers moved across his dagger hilt—much good that would be against even a half-grown giant! He pulled three javelins from his pack, gripped one in his throwing hand, and drew a deep breath as he crossed the threshold. Nemis eased the door shut behind him.

There was little light except for a flickering torch partway down the passage that led to the guard tower. The place reeked of mold, rotting food, and other things—he didn't want to think about what they might be. Vlandar turned to smile, then gestured for him to follow.

Rowan and Maera, listening intently, flanked the double doors leading into the great hall. Khlened stepped forward to try the doors, but the rangers gestured a firm *no*.

Overhead, one of the tower guards was still coughing, and his companion snarled something. The coughing subsided, there was a sudden *thump*, then Nemis grabbed

Vlandar's arm. "Everyone out of sight!" he hissed urgently. "One's coming down for wine!"

Vlandar signed, *enemy coming!* Rowan, Maera, and Khlened were already out of sight. Lhors ran for the rack of cloaks, and as he hesitated, Rowan leaned out to gesture for him to join her. Lhors did, but he moved the cloak just enough so that he could still see.

Massive feet clomped down the wooden steps. The others seemed well hidden. Lhors could see none of them except for Nemis, whose lips moved silently—casting a spell perhaps. A keg near the tower hall briefly glowed a dull red as the wizard's magic set in. Some sort of revealing spell, perhaps? Lhors wondered. The mage moved the other way, clambered over a long bench along the west wall, and dropped out of sight.

Lhors' attention was drawn away from the passage as he saw movement in the center of the room. Someone stepped out from behind a stack of kegs. Lhors could scarcely believe his eyes. Before anyone could catch him, Plowys had thrown himself back into the open and begun brushing frantically at his hair. Bugs from the cloak, Lhors thought. They must have a nasty sting.

Vlandar leaped back into sight, grabbed the would-be hero's arm, and began to try to haul him past the cloak rack. It wasn't much shelter, and Vlandar was checking to make sure the corridor beyond was empty when Plowys caught his breath.

Light from a torch down the passage shone full on his face. Vlandar clutched at Plowys' arm to pull him back but missed. The youth ran forward, drawing his sword as the door creaked open and a hill giant stepped into the room. The gigantic wretch was as tall and dirty looking as those who'd attacked Upper Haven, but he was obviously very drunk. The stench of foul ale and cheap wine overpowered even the smell of the chamber. His eyes were bloodshot and teary, and he held his spear in a wobbly, loose grip.

The giant stared at the youth, visibly puzzled as to how the young man had come to be here. Plowys stiffened in shock at the sight of the creature. The giant was more than twice his height and obviously more of a foe than the youth had ever faced. The point of Plowys' sword wobbled, and he took a hesitant step back.

The tower guard took two quick steps forward and with one swift motion, skewered Plowys on the end of his spear. Plowys' sword rattled to the floor as blood and bile gushed from his mouth and nose. Lhors leaned back against the wall and bit his lip, praying he wouldn't be sick.

Just then, Nemis spoke—another spell, perhaps. Lhors forced himself to move, hands tight around his javelins. Vlandar came up next to him, swords at the ready, but the young giant stared at them blankly. The spear fell from his hands, and Plowys collapsed lifeless to the floor.

"Leave him be," Nemis said very quietly. "I put a spell of forgetfulness on the guard. He will come out of this shortly, fetch that cask, and go back the way he came. We will avenge our companion at a more opportune time."

True to the mage's word, the ensorcelled guard lumbered over to the wine cask, his spear and the corpse completely forgotten. He hefted the barrel, wobbled uncertainly, then proceeded back up the stair.

Malowan came into the open and gazed down at Plowys, his face expressionless. “Thank the gods it was swift and that he didn’t bleed much.” He glanced at Vlandar. “We cannot leave him here.”

Vlandar was tight-lipped and pale. Grief and rage played across his features. “No,” he rasped. “We’ll go, all of us. We can take the body back to the camp and bury him. Khlened, you and the rangers go now to make certain there’s no one outside. We’ll gather Plowys and follow.”

“We’re leaving?” the barbarian asked. “Because of—”

“I don’t want us splitting up, and we can’t leave him here to be found. We’ll try again tomorrow. Do as I say, Khlened. *Now.*”

Khlened mumbled under his breath, but he turned and helped the rangers drag the door open. After a brief glance out into the fog, he followed Rowan out.

Malowan gathered up Plowys and gestured for Agya to go. Once the girl was out the door, Vlandar grabbed the spear and pulled. There was a sickening scrape as the haft ran against bone, and another gush of blood splattered onto the floor.

Lhors winced and clamped his jaw shut. I will *not* be sick! he thought.

Plowys’ dead face, his eyes wide and staring, gazed up at the ceiling. It had obviously been a painful death, but a quick one. He had not suffered long.

“Gods,” Vlandar gasped. “Curse the young idiot for his foolishness! I should have been watching him more closely.”

Malowan put a hand on his friend’s shoulder and said, “You did what you could. It’s too late to assign blame to anyone. What’s done is done.”

Vlandar nodded. His jaw tightened as he turned away from the corpse. He leaned the guard’s spear in the corner and mopped up the worst of the blood with a cloak. After bundling the sodden fabric, the three of them hefted the corpse and left the chamber.

* * *

It was nearly light by the time they’d placed the last rocks on the grave—a deep, narrow cut in one of the shallower caverns. Vlandar gazed at the down at the rubble. “Fool of a boy. His mother will tear her heart out. She deserved better.”

“She had what she created,” Malowan said quietly. “A pity, all the same. If we return to the king’s city, I’ll give her a tale to make her proud of the boy. It’s the least I can do for my dislike of him.”

Shortly thereafter, the others went back to the cave, but Lhors and Vlandar stayed behind.

“I should feel something,” Lhors said finally. “Even if he wasn’t very nice, he was alive and now he’s dead.”

“It was sudden,” Vlandar said quietly. “Sometimes a man doesn’t feel much when it happens like that.” He sighed. “I feel angry with the youth and angry with myself for not having a better grip on him.”

“My father told me that when things like that happen, you can’t change it, so there’s no point to being angry or upset. I did not like him, but his mother cared, and he might have changed if he had lived.”

“Your father sounds like he was a wise man.” Vlandar squatted down to sort through the slain youth’s weapons. He set aside the swords, serviceable daggers, the case of javelins, the bow, and one small dagger—a jeweled belt-toy Plowys probably used to clean his nails. Vlandar slipped the lock of hair he’d cut from the youth’s head into the sheath and put the dagger back. “This I will return to his mother, if I can. As for the rest of these, I hope your father warned you that a sensible man never leaves behind weapons that might be found and turned against him.” He handed the bundle of javelins to Lhors. “You are next to Maera at skill with these, and the daggers may come in useful.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lhors stuttered. “I’ll try not to let you down.”

Vlandar got back to his feet, wrapped an arm around the boy’s shoulders, and led him back to their cave. “I am not much worried that you will, Lhors. Maybe though, if there’s a little time today, you and I will get together, and I can show you a few tricks with those blades.”

“I’d like that.”



The next morning, the party again settled in clutches near the fortress door while Nemis used a spell to be certain no guards were immediately inside. Lhors stayed back on the road with Rowan, though he thought it unlikely giants would see them in the dense fog. He doubted that such massive creatures could sneak up on them either—until he remembered they had done just that at Upper Haven. But there had been music and thunder that night. Dancing. Singing. Joyous faces that he would never see again. Here it was very quiet, and all faces were solemn.

Somewhere in the distance, an owl called out. Up in the tower Lhors could hear the deep, rumbling voice of at least one guard. He drew his javelins as Malowan leaned against one door, holding it ajar for the others.

There was still very little light. Vlandar headed for the doorway into the banqueting hall while the rangers checked the other door. Both gestured a negative, but Vlandar backed quietly away from the main doors, a finger to his lips.

A good five paces away, Lhors could hear it: a distant noise of laughter, singing, and the loud clash of metal. A battle? he wondered. Vlandar got them all close together and whispered, “They are still feasting in there. Rowan, what of the right door?”

“Quiet back there,” she replied softly.

“Everyone go right, then and up to the council chamber. Remember, watch and listen—” He broke off and looked up as heavy, slow footsteps came down the stairs from the tower.

“This grows boring,” Khlened mumbled and drew his sword. Vlandar eyed his people, cast a quick glance at the main doors, and nodded sharply.

“We kill him quick before anyone else hears,” he ordered softly and pulled out his own sword. “One way to learn to fight as a team,” Lhors heard him mutter. Lhors’ own hands felt cold as he bunched his spare javelins and readied one to throw. For my father, he thought, and that seemed to steady him.

The giant who came down the passage was young, but solidly built and more awake than last night’s guard had been. He stopped when he saw Khlened and smiled

unpleasantly before hauling a heavy club from his belt. “Thieves, be it?” His common was guttural. “Be a move up fer Fhrunk do I kill ye, red-hair.”

“Try,” Khlened said and bared his teeth as he threw himself forward.

He barely came to the monster’s belt, and the stab that might have gutted a man his size went into Fhrunk’s calf, angling up to the knee. The brute drew breath to yell in pain, but Rowan fired three arrows in rapid succession. The first bit deep into his neck, silencing his scream. The next bounced off his hardened leather cap, and the third just missed taking out his eye. Maera’s throw was more accurate. Her javelin plunged deeply below the brute’s sternum. The choking giant pawed at the javelin and slid to the floor. Khlened and Vlandar ran up and plunged their swords into the back of his neck, and the giant went limp.

Rowan was already at the east door. Nemis spoke in a low voice, then signed for her to come back. “There are no others in the tower and none nearby—no closer than that feast yonder.”

“Help us drag him out of the way,” Vlandar whispered urgently. “There’s blood, but no help for that.”

“Toss one of the cloaks over it,” Maera said. “It’s such a mess here, that might go unnoticed until he’s missed.”

It took all four men to drag the dead giant. Nemis and Rowan kept watch while Agya and Lhors hastily piled two rugs and a cloak atop the brute. “Good enough,” Vlandar said. “Let’s go.”

They could hear at least one more guard snoring up in the tower. Rowan eased an arrow into place, slung her cloak off the left shoulder so she could access more bolts, then nodded once. Maera stepped aside so Khlened could ease the door open. Rowan backed up with the heavy slab of wood, then took one long stride, spun halfway around and backed along the other side. A scant breath later, those still outside heard the zip of an arrow slicing the air, a faint, “Uhhh!” followed by a nasty, deep cough, then the sound of something large sliding to the floor.

Rowan backed into view and met her sister’s eyes, making a complex gesture with her free hand before hauling another arrow to the string. Maera pelted past her as the rest of the company came into the chamber to find a guttering torch, a spilled cup of mead, and one very dead giant. Rowan’s arrow was buried deep in one of the creature’s eyes.

Maera was nowhere in sight, but just then the ceiling groaned with the weight of another falling body. The ranger came back into sight moments later. She met Vlandar’s eyes and held up a finger before drawing her hand across her throat. One giant there. Dead.

The right-hand door opened onto a relatively narrow hall—still so wide that Agya and Nemis, holding hands, could just barely have touched both walls. The air reeked of sour bodies, ill-washed clothing, and stale beer. So far, Lhors thought, it resembled the map Vlandar had shown him. A passage went a few paces west before turning north. A longer passage went east. The lighting was poor—only a few torches at odd intervals.

Vlandar led the way, putting Lhors behind him and letting the others follow. Rowan brought up the rear, walking sideways with her bow strung and ready to shoot should anyone come up on their rear.

Someone was snoring behind them. The wall to their left seemed to tremble, and they could clearly hear shouting and sounds of battle. Malowan leaned forward to murmur against Lhors' ear. "Nemis says it's the long room on the map—it must be a sleeping chamber. He says there are at least ten young male giants wagering on two others who are wrestling, and they're all very drunk." The paladin eased past him long enough to tell Vlandar the same thing. Both men flinched as something massive slammed into the other side of the wall.

Vlandar was making his way to that long chamber on the west wall that Malowan had spoken of, the one with the nasty trophy heads. He sincerely hoped the warrior did not plan to invade the chamber with the cave bear. At the bend the warrior turned left and moved close to the left wall, hesitating at the first door there. Lhors eased up against the wall next to him and tried to loosen his grip on the shaft in his right hand.

This north-facing passage was shorter than the previous one, the door at its far end ajar. That must be the one that would open into another corridor and connect with the feasting hall. It did seem he could hear drunken laughter coming from that direction, though it was hard to tell with so much noise still coming out of that dorm.

Vlandar edged past the door. The noise began to fade a little. By the time they reached the next door to the left, Lhors could be certain the other shouting came from beyond the partly opened door. Vlandar hesitated, then beckoned Malowan to join him. The paladin listened intently, nodded, and held up four fingers. He frowned and wagged one—he wasn't certain if there were three or four inside, Lhors thought.

Lhors jumped as a high-pitched scream came from inside the room.

"Serving giantesses, I think," Malowan whispered. "Someone is being beaten," he added grimly and set his hand on the latch.

Agya glanced back the way they'd come and rasped, "Where's Khlened?"

Malowan and Vlandar swung around, swords at the ready. Lhors skin prickled and he clutched the spear close. Beyond the rangers, the hall was empty. The barbarian was gone.

Vlandar cursed, but before he could pass along more instructions, Khlened slipped through a door at the south end of the hall and tugged it closed behind him. Malowan sighed heavily, and Vlandar glared as the barbarian came up, a rough hide pouch in his hand. "Coin—and plenty of it," the man whispered.

Vlandar leveled a finger at his nose and whispered, "Go off alone like that again and you'll pay. I gave orders that we all stay together!"

Khlened's mouth twisted, but he nodded and handed over the purse. Vlandar shoved it into his pack and turned away. "Mal?"

"Someone is in dire pain in there," the paladin replied softly as another agonized scream came from the other side of the door. "I cannot walk away from this," he added, but he waited for Vlandar's nod before he eased the door latch aside, and threw himself into the room.

Lhors stared in open astonishment at the massive bedchamber and the four female giants to whom it must belong. All were clad in loose, plain garments like a villager's winter sleeping shirt. Three looked youthful to him, dark-haired, olive-skinned, and rather handsome. The fourth was a creature out of nightmare. Taller than the other three by at least a head, gaunt and wrinkled, her eyes were mere slits in pasty white skin. Two old, purple scars ran down the left side of her face, and she wore a gold

ring through the corner of her mouth. She loomed over the smallest of the maids, a whip upraised to strike a back bared by ripped fabric. The other two cowered in the corner behind a bed, one holding another, who was bleeding from an ugly weal across her bare shoulder.

“You horrid creature,” Malowan said in a deep, stern voice as he drew his sword. “What have these children done to deserve such scars? If you will strike someone, dare to battle me instead!”

The matron might not have understood his words, but she surely caught his meaning. Her eyes narrowed as she took in the armed humans. She dropped the whip and hauled a long dagger from a sheath strapped to her leg. It was nearly as long as the paladins sword.

Malowan stepped away from his companions, and the young giantess scrambled out of the way, trying to hold her ripped garb together. She really is a child! Lhors thought. She looked no older than Agya, and he was surprised to feel sorry for her pain. The young giantess cast them a terrified glance and then crawled into the corner with her companions.

“That’s good, lad, keep an eye on them,” Vlandar said quietly as the aged horror advanced on Malowan. “Mal may need my help. The young ones look helpless, but they may choose to aid the old one.”

Lhors nodded and cast a quick look at Malowan. The matron was an arm’s length taller than her adversary. When Lhors looked back at the corner, the three young ones were crouched behind the bed, only their hair visible.

“Mal!” Agya sounded afraid.

“Do not distract him,” Vlandar said sharply. “You know he must let her strike the first blow. His code requires it.”

“I know what you are,” Malowan said flatly.

Lhors risked a glance, but the combatants were motionless—sizing each other up, perhaps.

“You enjoy hurting children. What harm could they do to deserve your wrath?” He had swung his sword to ready. The aged female sneered and countered his move but still did not strike. “Your masters have taught you well, but you shall answer to me!”

Lhors moved to where he could keep an eye on the three serving maids and see the paladin fight. The matron might have understood some of what Malowan said after all. She glared at him, teeth clenched and muscles bunched under her sagging skin as she brought her weapon up two-handed. The aged giantess snarled, “Enemy of Nosnra! I kill you! Kill all! Scar them as I please! You do not stop old Jhuka!” She brought the blade down in a slashing overhand. Malowan sidestepped the move and ducked as she brought the blade around in a sweeping arc from the other side. The paladin evaded with what looked like ease to Lhors.

“*Gea nukh!*” she swore in Giantish. She clutched the hilt two-handed, high above her head, and plunged it down.

Malowan finally acted. He sidestepped her attack and stabbed up into her belly, twisting his sword almost all the way around. The giantess cried out, but a sudden gush of blood muted her scream into a gurgling choke. Malowan jumped back, hauling his sword with him. The giantess’ dagger rattled onto the floorboards. She

took one staggering step back, righted herself, and came back at him, her eyes glittering with hate. Three strides from the paladin, her gaze went blank, her knees wobbled, and she fell.

Lhors made certain the maids had not moved, then he dared a glance at the paladin. Agya was already beside Malowan, one of her short daggers in hand as she tested the giantess' throat for a pulse. The serving maids slowly came to their feet, peering at their fallen elder.

Vlandar had moved over to ease the door open a little. After a quick glance, he pressed it shut and came over to Malowan. "It is still quiet out there. Rather, there is no one in the corridor except our people. Are you done here, Mal?"

"Nearly," he said. "I need Nemis to translate for me."

Malowan and the mage approached the serving maids. Nemis asked them something in a low, guttural language. Lhors listened but could not understand a word. One of the three maids—the only one who looked uninjured—got to her feet and answered him.

"What's it about, then?" Agya asked quietly.

Malowan shrugged and said, "I asked Nemis to ask if they would help us in exchange for me healing their injuries."

"You'd heal 'em anyhow," the thief said sourly.

"Of course. It may help cleanse me of that creature's death—necessary as it was."

"What makes them better then?"

"They may not be," the paladin replied, "but they deserve the chance, do they not?"

"Huh," Agya said shortly. "Not if they warn others we're here."

"That will not happen," Vlandar said mildly. "We can see to that, if we must. Nemis?"

"The aged one was the matron of all the serving girls," Nemis said. "This one is called M'na'vra, which is 'butterfly' in their speech, though among her folk it is not a complimentary title. She tells me to thank the armored one who saved them from the rages of Jhuka. She tells me she and her two companions came here from their own land to the north. They have no family to protect them, and they swear to keep quiet about our presence here if you will only let them live. All they want is to leave this place and return to their homeland where there is always snow, but at least there is sun and blue sky, and maidens—even the orphaned and impoverished—are treated with some respect.

"They also offer—if you do not trust them—a bribe. Old Jhuka has a collection of potions in a case in her closet. There are also coins," he added. "M'na'vra asks if they might keep the coins in exchange for the bottles and powders. They are young and pure, but even the young and pure need coin for dowry if they wish to wed." The mage was watching Khlened.

Lhors glanced at the barbarian and to his surprise, Khlened seemed to accept this.

"Some sense in that," Khlened allowed. "Who'd want a lass with no coin to bring to the marriage?"

Agya glared at him. "Not *you*, for certain," she growled, "but these creatures—why let 'em loose to breed more of their kind? Kill 'em all, I say!"

The paladin gripped her shoulder and gave it a brisk shake. “When there is time, I will explain better. For now, accept that they have had enough of violence. They may well choose mates who are less warlike, and they may raise offspring who aren’t monsters like that”—his eyes flicked toward the dead matron—“or like those brutes in the next chamber.”

Agya’s lips twitched, but she said nothing further.

Malowan moved to the mage’s side and smiled at M’na’vra, who cautiously smiled back. “Tell her,” he told Nemis, “that we agree to this bargain, and furthermore that I will heal their wounds before we go. Tell them to show us the potions and keep the coin.”

“And tell *me*, Nemis,” Vlandar said, “that you can use that spell of forgetfulness on them. Otherwise, we will need to bind them. Khlened, you and I need to get that body out of sight in case someone looks in here. Under the nearest bed will be good enough.”

“I have a spell that will serve,” the mage said. He translated Malowan’s brief acceptance of terms. The maids broke into nervous but happy laughter. The smallest—Ilowig, which Nemis said meant “swan”—was the only one daring enough to dig through the matrons pockets for her keys and unlock the closet where her valuables were hidden. Nemis took possession of the rough-hewn box and rummaged through it quickly, choosing several bottles and setting the others aside. Several went back into the box, which he shoved back in the closet.

Vlandar stayed close to the door as Malowan healed the giants’ bleeding cuts. Lhors watched, fascinated as the three went blank-eyed. Their eyes closed, and they fell back on the bed. “They will waken normally, and they will remember nothing.”

“Take the matron’s blade,” Vlandar said, “so none of them are blamed when the creature’s body is found.”

Vlandar put Lhors in front of him as he and Khlened got the door open. He led the way north, stopping just short of the partly open door. They waited while Nemis and Malowan consulted.

The paladin shook his head and beckoned for them to move away from the opening. “There are servants and a guard with wolves out in that hallway. If the feast is ending, we could wait here, but if there are bedchambers down here for any of the feasters...”

“Yes,” Vlandar said. “The other way might work better.”

“The passage between kitchens and banquet hall will be even busier once the masters have left the table and the servants are sent to clear,” Maera said.

Vlandar held up a hand. “Nemis, get back to that door and—never mind,” he added as the paladin tensed and gestured urgently toward the opening, then exerted his strength to pull the heavy slab quietly closed.

“There are at least twenty giants coming this way,” he murmured. “I suggest we go back that way. *Now*.”

They moved quickly back around the turn, but Vlandar stopped there and sent the rangers a few paces back to keep guard while Nemis cast another of the reveal spells he had memorized for the night. “I would like to take that map, especially if it shows where future raids may happen. I would also like to get down those stairs since it

should lead to a treasury. Not necessarily gold and jewels,” he added as Khlened grinned, “but other documents like the one Mal found.”

“Why would the trove be below?” Lhors wanted to know.

“Underground for more safety,” Vlandar replied.

Maera gestured urgently the way they’d just come. “There’s a giant just opened the door up yonder, and he’s got wolves with him. Whatever’s in the chamber down here that snored isn’t snoring anymore.”

Vlandar nodded sharply and gestured with his head back toward the entry. Nemis took up rear guard as the company walked quickly the other way. Khlened and Lhors got the door open once Malowan tested to be certain no one was waiting in the entry.

They eased through the door into a poorly lit hallway. There was a door directly ahead, snoring from the left wall, and dead silence on the right. When they reached a left turn in the hall, they could just make out a short passage that ended in another door. Nemis tested this, then swung it aside to reveal yet another hallway with doors on both sides. Maera ran light-footed along this and came back to inform them that there seemed to be a barracks or other sleeping chamber to the south and two long, narrow rooms to the north that were divided by a hall that ended in another door. “I could already hear the clatter of crockery and a giantess screeching for someone to hurry up and finish cutting tubers for the broth or go into the broth himself.”

“Wonderful,” Khlened grumbled. “Stopped no matter which way we go.”

“Maybe not,” Maera hissed back. “From what I heard, it sounds as if they’re piling things up and getting ready to bank the fire and go to bed. Isn’t there a change of guard due?”

Malowan answered, “If these things are constant from day to day, then yes. But in that case, the guard will be another green youth who will likely assume the one he replaces has left early for reasons of his own. It isn’t likely he’ll put out an alarm or search the entry.”

“You reassure me,” Maera replied sarcastically and went back up to keep an eye on the passage that led to the kitchens.

Vlandar looked at Malowan. “What do you think? Do we wait here and try the other hall again shortly, or do we wait for the servants to leave the kitchen and go back through the feast hall? You have walked here before, whereas I have only looked at the map.”

“I am of your mind,” Malowan said. “We want that map, and we must search for other scrolls. Judging from Nemis’ translation of the first scrolls, I would assume that there are other sets of orders somewhere. Other scrolls could give us locations of the Steading’s allies—other giants perhaps or enclaves of dark elves.”

Nemis shuddered. “Pray there are no drow here. We are too few to resist them.” He turned aside to look north, and his lips moved. “It is a little quieter up there, I think. The ranger may be right. The cooks have set their stews to simmer and are leaving the dirty crockery for the slaves to scour later.”

Vlandar nodded. “Nemis, if you have a spell to use on the east passage, use it. If it’s clear, we go that way into the council chamber. Otherwise, we wait here.” He glanced at Lhors then and laid a hand on the youths arm. “You’ve done well, so far,” he murmured as the mage moved off. “You haven’t given in to fear any more than you’ve ignored danger. I knew I was right to bring you.”

Lhors nodded in thanks, then quietly asked, “The kitchens. We go that way.”

“We may, yes,” Vlandar replied. “You heard what Maera and Nemis said about the kitchens. Remember that the servants and slaves are busy making certain their masters have food when they waken. They won’t be looking around.”

The rangers came back. “No sound from the entry except someone tromping up into that tower,” Maera said quietly. “Whatever it was—likely another young giant—it went to its place and stayed there.”

“The passage between kitchen and feast hall is still busy,” Rowan added, “but not as busy as it was. Mostly I saw hairy ogres and brutish orcs shambling back and forth and carrying piles of filthy dishes into the kitchen. Whoever was bellowing orders in the kitchen no longer is.” She eyed Vlandar steadily. “She may still be there, of course,” the ranger added. “I saw at least two armed guards moving along the north passage beyond the kitchens.”

“Were there any wolves?” Lhors asked.

“No,” Rowan replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, Malowan said that he’d sensed wolves somewhere in the Steading. If they actually patrol with the creatures, they’re sure to scent the blood from the giants we’ve slain.”

“Good man,” Vlandar said, nodding approvingly. “All right, people, we’ll test both ways. I still prefer to go straight into the council room and down through there, but we do what we must. Stay alert. We’ll move out as soon as we dare.”



Shortly after, Nemis indicated the north way was mostly clear, but three handlers and at least a dozen dire wolves now occupied the east hallway. Fortunately, they hadn't gone into the entry.

"A wolf's keen nose would immediately find that guard's body," Nemis said. "They seem more interested in the wrestlers, however—the handlers do, at least."

Vlandar merely nodded and moved out ahead, gesturing for his company to stay close and alert. He stopped halfway up the west wall of the hall near its end. It was fairly dark here, though light from the kitchens flooded the opposite wall. Two creatures scurried past, unaware of the company lurking in the lower hall. They were half Lhors' height and looked more like dogs or lizards than people. Empty platters dangled from the creatures' hands, and they seemed utterly cowed.

"Kobolds," Rowan breathed against his ear. "Cowardly, unless they can attack in great numbers. We are safe from *them*."

Lhors gave her a brief, abashed smile of thanks. He jumped as someone in the kitchen screeched. He couldn't understand the words, but the hate and fury behind them was all too evident.

Lhors started as someone brushed his arm. Malowan wrapped an arm around the youth's shoulders. "Be easy," he said quietly. "Vlandar would never put you into battle unprepared. Remember the bargain you and he made. You serve as eyes to guard our backs, and in return, we protect you." He gripped the boy's shoulder and moved past him, Agya right on his heels. She glanced at Lhors, fighting knives clutched in both hands and her face expressionless. *She* didn't look afraid.

Remember what she is, Lhors told himself. She stole and fought simply to stay alive. She knows how to be brave. Your father taught you to hunt animals, not kill men or monsters. He remembered how Rowan had guarded in that other hall and turned sideways to set his back against the wall so that he could keep up with the others while keeping an eye on the way they'd come.

Vlandar's hand shot up in warning as he and Rowan backed away from the opening. Lhors could suddenly hear drunken laughter ahead and to his right, as if a

door had opened. A weeping young giantess ran past, scrubbing bits of meat and steaming juices from her face.

I thought the giants were done feasting, Lhors thought. The door banged closed, and the sound lessened. Malowan looked at Vlandar, who shrugged and led them back the other way.

“This won’t do, Vlandar,” the paladin whispered, once Nemis had muttered a spell he claimed would build a wall of silence around them. “There are still giants in the feast hall, and the kitchen is full of all kinds of creatures. The longer we wait here...” He paused significantly.

Vlandar sighed and nodded. “I know. I had hoped to get in, grab that map, and get out unnoticed, but if it isn’t possible...”

“I’m ready for a fight,” Khlened said, “and I’ve battled dire wolves before. They’re not immortal.”

“If your concern is for Lhors and Agya—” the paladin began.

“No,” Vlandar cut him off. “I would not have brought them if they were a hindrance, Mal. But we know these giants take orders from elsewhere. You and I assumed that before we got here. If we attack and are all killed, we’ve accomplished nothing.” Vlandar was still for a moment, his gaze distant. “All right. We’ll take the other passage, kill whatever gets in our way, get into that room, and get the map. Then we leave as quickly as we can.”

Nemis dissolved the spell as Vlandar got to his feet and waved Lhors to join him. Maera was already listening by the door. As Vlandar caught up to her, she indicated the chamber beyond with her eyes and shook her head. Lhors hoped she meant that no one was in there.

It was still quiet in the entry, though they could hear someone bellowing beyond the double doors. As Malowan and Khlened hauled the west door closed behind them, the east one opened. Three whining wolves on chains lunged into the chamber, half-dragging a gray-haired giant clad only in filthy breeches and boots. He hauled the beasts back on their haunches and snarled, “*Gezhk!*”

But the wolves had seen them, and now the giant did too. He hefted a spiked club. His mouth twisted into an evil grin, and he let go the chains.

Vlandar thrust Lhors behind him. “Guard Nemis while he spells for us!” He and Malowan set themselves shoulder to shoulder, swords raised.

Stepping to the side, Rowan shot three arrows into the lead wolf. The creature snarled in pain and fury but stopped its advance to nip at the arrows biting into its side.

Maera took down the second with a spear through the throat. The third, its fur hackled, ran around Vlandar and the paladin and leaped straight for Lhors. The youth went to one knee and gripped his spear with two hands, thrusting sharply up and out as the brute slammed into him. The spearpoint plunged deep, but the sheer force of the impact ripped the shaft from the youth’s hands. The wounded creature’s massive paws pinned his shoulders as Lhors fought to get his arms across his throat. The beast lunged, jaws wide, but in that instant Rowan knocked the wolf off him, and Maera jammed a spear into its eye. Lhors rolled away as the wolf scratched and beat the floor in its death throes.

Khlened and Vlandar were fighting the wolves' keeper, who was already bleeding from a deep gash above his left knee. The giant brought his club around in a blur toward the barbarian, but Khlened ducked, the spikes missing his scalp by a space no larger than his knuckle. Before the giant could swing it the other way, Khlened darted forward and slammed his sword into the giant's belly, angling up for the heart. The blade was ripped from his hands as the giant dropped his own weapon, fell to his knees, and gripped the blade in a futile attempt to limp away. Vlandar hauled Khlened back.

In the instant that the two humans were out of the way, Malowan threw a long dagger. The blade buried itself to the hilt in the giant's throat. The guard fell, still alive but unable to cry out and too wounded to fight. He beat the floor with his fists, desperately fighting for air. Lhors winced at the sound of bones shattering. After a few seconds, the giant stopped.

"Fast and quiet—how I like 'em," Khlened said. His face was smeared with blood, but he was grinning.

"Not quiet enough, I'm afraid," Nemis said. "We should leave here immediately."

Rowan handed Lhors his spear that she had retrieved from the wolf's corpse. "Bravely done," she told him quietly.

"I didn't kill it," he said. He clutched the spear and hoped she couldn't see how his hands trembled.

"You distracted it. That was just as valuable. It gave me a clean shot." She patted his arm and went to help her sister.

Malowan looked at the mess and shook his head. "There's too much blood here. Anyone who comes in here will know there's been a fight, even if we hide them."

"Leave them," Vlandar panted. "There's no time. Someone was sure to have heard the fight. Nemis, search for others nearby. Rowan, you and Maera make sure we left nothing—not even a broken arrow. Khlened, stay close to those main doors in case someone comes from outside."

Nemis came over from the east door. "The wrestlers are still at it, but there's no one in that corridor."

"Good," Vlandar said. "Let's go."

They could clearly hear drunken laughter beyond the north door, but there was less of it. Lhors thought the voices were more slurred—as if the revelers were half asleep or passed out. If anyone in there had heard the fight, there was no indication of it.

Nemis eased into the open, then nodded and moved aside so the rangers could move across the corridor. Maera went on into near darkness while Rowan turned and beckoned. Lhors looked to his left. The passage was very dark—barely enough light for them to see. That might be good, he decided. Giants would have trouble seeing *them*.

* * *

Moving as quickly and quietly as they could, the party managed to make their way to the giants' council chamber. Luckily, no one was in the room. There was no fire in the hearth, only two torches burning steadily near the head of a long table.

Nemis crossed to the map, ran his hands over it as if he was checking for spells, then yanked it from the wall, rolled it tightly, and stuffed it into his pack. Malowan was back at the woodpile beyond the leather curtain while the rest of the party waited just outside.

Nemis approached them and shook his head. He drew aside the curtain and whispered, “Nothing there. I can tell. Below, however—” He gripped the paladin’s arm and dragged him back into the council room. “Someone is down there—at least ten—and they are coming this way.” His lips moved silently and his eyes glazed over as he worked some spell. After a moment, he continued, “Seven giants—I think a cloud giant or something else truly huge, and there are hobgoblin guards.”

“This is no fight for us, then,” Vlandar said. “We have the map. Let’s go back the way we came. Quickly and quietly!”

He sent the rangers out first, put Lhors ahead of him, and set Khlened and the paladin to bring up the rear. Their luck was not holding well. Even Lhors could see into the south corridor from the end of this one. The wrestlers had moved out into the hallway and were battering each other before a crowd of other young giants. They might be drunk, the youth thought, but they seemed alert for all that.

“No good,” Vlandar said. “There are too many of them, and all that noise may rouse others. Nemis, we’ll have to go through the feasting hall and out the main doors. Can you put a sleep spell on anyone still in there?”

The mage eyed the distant drinkers and shook his head. “Not from here. Get me closer to the entrance, and I can.”

Lhors held his breath as he followed the mage, Vlandar right on his heels. Rowan had gone ahead, arrow ready to fire, while Maera brought up the rear so she could keep an eye on their backs.

Once they reached the entry, Vlandar drew Lhors with him against the wall where it was fairly dark, but Nemis went on. There were three giants awake that they could see, two waiting while the third shook a keg, threw it aside with an oath, and caught up another. The mage’s sleep spell caught him just then, and he slumped to the floor. The empty keg rolled away from him, and the other two giants fell across the table an instant later.

Nemis stood very still for a long moment, then beckoned urgently as he strode across the vast chamber toward another broad corridor that went south. Near the entrance, he froze, then slowly backed away.

“What?” Vlandar demanded as he came up.

“I just used a reveal spell. There are guards on the other side of those doors, giants and more hobgoblins—or worse, norkers.”

“Norkers,” Vlandar muttered. “Hobgoblins are dangerous enough fighters, but norkers are vicious—worse than a pack of dire wolves.” An echoing yell brought him around, and Rowan came running.

“Let’s get out of here. Those young ones are coming this way!”

“Too late,” Maera said as she hefted a spear. Someone was bellowing back the way they’d come. “They’ve seen us!”

“West door!” Vlandar ordered, “There’s another way out up there.”

Maera and her sister ran for the doors, then took up positions next to them. Khlened was right on their heels. He dragged at the door and nearly fell when it

opened more easily than he'd expected. Vlandar sent Malowan in first. Agya as usual stuck close to him, and Khlened followed. There was kitchen noise, but not as much, Lhors thought. He went next, followed by Nemis, who was already working some kind of spell. Vlandar and the rangers joined them, and the warrior dragged the door shut as the rest of them moved up the hall far enough that they wouldn't be immediately seen by anyone in the kitchen.

Lhors caught a glimpse of two of the little lizardlike creatures—kobolds, he remembered—who were facing an enormous fireplace in the west wall, stacking greasy bowls and platters on a table. Someone else in the room was screaming at them, but Lhors didn't take the time to investigate.

Vlandar drew them farther up the hall and whispered, "They didn't see us. One of their elders was cursing them for interrupting his sleep, and they were arguing with him. Let's go."

Just then, a bald hill giant came out of the kitchen, yawning and stretching. His eye lit on the party, and he ducked back the way he'd come, yelling a warning. Khlened and Malowan ran after him, the rest following. Vlandar tapped Lhors on the shoulder as they ran. "Stay with me. Rowan, you and Maera keep an eye on the way we just came!"

The smells in the kitchen were dreadful. Three spits hung empty over a fading fire in the back wall. The two kobolds stared at the bald giant fearfully as he snagged one of the spits and brandished it like a sword. They backed against the near wall, obviously afraid that the giant was about to strike them. Then they saw the armed humans and fled, scurrying past the giant and around the corner. The giant ignored them. With a grin that bared rotting teeth, he bellowed in Giantish. Half a dozen tall, gangly brutes poured into the chamber from the north, bearing kitchen knives and a few long pikes for weapons.

"Ogres," Vlandar told Lhors. "They're stupid but dangerous, and they eat people. Stay close!"

Rowan came up beside them, arrow drawn. "Mal, stay back!"

The paladin nodded to indicate he'd heard, but there was no time. The ogres were upon them. Malowan slashed at the first that came near him, then ran past the brute, leaving him for someone else to finish.

Lhors launched one of his spears at the lead ogre. It quivered in the creature's gut for an instant before Maera's own spear brought him down. Rowan killed two more while Khlened fought another.

The ogres *must* be stupid, Lhors thought. They seemed to have no plan other than to rush in and kill. When the last one fell with Vlandar's spear in its belly, Khlened brought his sword down two-handed across the back of its neck. Malowan threw himself at the giant, who stood dumbfounded that the party had dealt with the slaves so quickly.

The fat giant never had a chance, even with his longer reach. Malowan gave him first thrust, leaped aside, and then swung his blade with both hands. It sliced through the creature's pants, cutting deeply into his leg just below the knee. Malowan came back around, this time stabbing deeply into the side of the brute's leg and severing at least one tendon. The giant went down heavily on his side, the spit clattering free.

Before the giant could react, Malowan drove his blade deep into the brute's eye, killing him.

In the momentary silence, Rowan hissed a warning. "Someone coming!"

A leather and sheep-skin-clad giant came wandering into sight from the south passage, yawning cavernously. He blinked, enormous hands kneading the small of his back as he turned toward the kitchen.

Vlandar gestured urgently for his people to retreat past the fireplace, but it was too late. The monster blinked at the dead ogres, bristling with spears and long-shafted arrows, then at the fallen giant. He looked uncomprehendingly straight at Lhors, then his eyes flashed and he drew a single-edged axe.

"*Deke n'thull?*" he demanded. It sounded to Lhors more like spitting than words.

Malowan stepped forward, blades at the ready, and countered, "*Emrischgu'vrugnikh, zhegna!*"

Lhors stared as the two slowly paced toward each other. "What did they say?" he asked Vlandar, but Vlandar was already moving to Malowan's side and gesturing for Khlened to get behind the creature.

Agya growled. "Means, 'Your fate, dead and damned one!'"

The youth gave her a look of disbelief.

She shrugged. "'Tis the only Giantish I know, and that 'cause I asked what he'd say if he went against any of 'em." She sighed heavily. "Get 'imself killed, saying bits like that."

Nemis stood nearby, speaking to himself, and the doorway briefly glowed a faint blue. "Good," the mage said. "There won't be anyone else to hear this. Maybe."

The giant threw himself at Vlandar. Malowan stabbed at the back of the creature's knee, but the blade hit something—armor, Lhors assumed—and the paladin nearly fell. Agya took a step forward then stopped.

"Get 'im killed, girl, you go to help," she mumbled under her breath.

Malowan recovered his balance and tried again, lower this time, and Vlandar slashed up at the same time. Both blows connected, spraying blood over the combatants. The giant abandoned his axe and pulled a dagger nearly the size of the paladin's sword. Malowan parried as Khlened got behind the massive brute and cut low. The armor didn't reach his ankles. The barbarian's sword cut deep through the tendon, the giant went down. Giving him no chance to recover, Vlandar stabbed him through the throat.

Lhors grabbed Agya's arm and hauled her back nearly to the entry as blood sprayed everywhere, coating the stack of platters and hissing into the fire. Malowan, who'd managed to avoid the arc of blood by some fast footwork, leaned against the fireplace stones, gasping for air. Agya pulled free and ran to Malowan.

"Not hurt, are you?" she demanded.

He shook his head, too winded to speak.

She glared up at him. "Lucky you're not dead," she snapped, turning on her heel, and stalking back over to Lhors.

"All right," Vlandar announced quietly. "Mal, catch your breath. Rowan, can you see anyone else out there? What happened to those young ones who spied us? Khlened, you and Maera go where those kobolds went and the ogres came from. See what's there."

“Quietly,” Maera warned the barbarian.

“Huh,” he growled as he wiped his sword and hands on the dead giant’s sheepskin vest. “Like we were just now?”

“I’ve blocked the sound,” Nemis said impatiently.

Khlened cast up his eyes but followed Maera. The two were back in a matter of moments.

“There’s a bigger room—empty now—and an alcove, two doors. One smells like it might be a pantry. The other doesn’t close tight. It comes out on that hallway. No one’s in sight, including those kobolds.”

“If they went for help—” Khlened began.

“They’d be back by now,” Malowan said flatly. He still sounded short of breath and was shaking his hands out.

“Can we go before more come?” Agya asked.

Vlandar got everyone into the large room north of the kitchen. It was empty except for a cold fireplace and a large table. He and Khlened shifted the one door, and Vlandar went in. He returned at once. “As I thought. There is a pantry, but the second set of stairs is just beyond the cabbages.”

The other door was ajar enough for Rowan or Maera to slip through, but Vlandar looked at Nemis, then Malowan.

“It’s dark out there and quiet for the moment. According to the map that Mal found, we aren’t far from the back way out. We’ll need to go through the barracks to reach it, though. That means more wolves.”

“We can manage wolves,” Rowan said steadily, “but not a company of ogres or hobgoblins.”

“We have the map and the scroll Mal found,” Vlandar said. “We should go now before the guards in the entry decide to come looking for us.”

“I will not leave,” Khlened said flatly. “We have found little treasure, and this *is* a giants’ holding. There must be something to make the journey thus far worthwhile.”

“You,” Vlandar said, “will follow orders. I will not remind you again who is captain, Khlened. You would not last long in this place alone!”

The barbarian glared at him. After a moment, he nodded. “Sorry, sir,” he said, though he didn’t sound it. “Forgot myself. I swore an oath to you, I won’t shame my kind by breaking it.”

“Fair enough,” Vlandar said. “Let us go.”

He and Malowan dragged at the door, making enough room for the larger of them to get through, but he was back at once. He and the paladin leaned into the heavy slab of wood, forcing it shut. “Those wretched youths have one of the doors to the great hall wide and they are still arguing about where we went. They’ll see us if we move out, but they’ll likely discover the mess in the kitchen any moment.”

Nemis took the warrior’s place against the door, a sleek stone in his hand. “Market charm,” he murmured. “I haven’t many more reveal spells memorized. This should work almost as well, though. There’s something else—a party of creatures, I think—coming this way from the south. They’re moving fast.”

Malowan spoke under his breath, and his eyes went wide. “Norkers—a pack of them. I fear the search is on, Vlandar.”

“We cannot battle a hoard of norkers,” Rowan said.

“Aye,” Malowan agreed. “We leave—now or never.”

Vlandar backed away from the hall door and grabbed hold of the other. “Down,” he ordered.

“No, not yet,” Malowan said. “Only if they come looking for us here. Get that door partway open now. Nemis, be ready with that beneath notice spell of yours. We can wait here, let them think we went on up the hall seeking a way out. Once they’ve passed, we’ll have a chance at the entry.”

“Better than cutting ourselves off,” Khlened agreed softly.

“Shhh,” Maera hissed, then went silent herself as they heard someone shouting nearby. The voices of several giants came from the hallway, and they were growing louder. They were speaking a heavily accented Common as they approached, but Lhors could pick out a few words here and there.

“Quick!” Vlandar hissed. “In the pantry!”

Everyone edged into the smelly pantry, and Vlandar eased the door shut, leaving it open just enough to see out. Lhors, standing just behind Vlandar, could see over the warrior’s shoulder.

Several heavy-footed brutes stormed into the large room. All of them were armed and looked determined to shed blood. The giants looked around, but none seemed to see anything.

Lhors clamped his jaw tight and refused to breathe.

“Door to the hall is open!” the lead giant bellowed. “You, you, you”—he pointed as he spoke—“go after! Check pens and warn keeper to guard door! You”—he motioned to the last giant—“come with me!”

“They’re searching the room,” Vlandar hissed. “Nemis, quick! Use your beneath notice spell.”

Lhors heard the mage whisper a brief incantation. With all of the noise they were making, surely they hadn’t heard Vlandar. Please, Lhors prayed, please don’t let them have heard him! Everyone in the party was tired. Even fresh, there was no way they could defeat so many giants. Trapped in the pantry as they were, they would have the advantage of surprise for only an instant before the slaughter would begin.

Three of the giants ambled off as their chief shook the door latch. “Locked. Guard killers not be this way. You and you, go into slave pens and look for outsiders hiding! You and you, go search sword rooms! Rest come with me!”

The giants stormed out. Soon, the sound of their footsteps faded.

“It worked,” Vlandar sighed. “They overlooked the pantry. Praise all the gods at once.”

“What next?” Malowan asked. “I can’t tolerate this stench much longer.”

“The large room is empty,” Nemis offered.

“Move out, then,” Vlandar said. “Rowan, you lead. Nemis stay close to her. Into the hall and start for the entry. Most of that party went the other way, so we should be safe for the moment. The door through the barracks is barred against us. It’s the main way or none.”

They made it safely past the doors, but partway into the south passage, Rowan backed against the wall, dragging Nemis over with her.

“Guards coming!” Rowan hissed.

Vlandar pulled Lhors close. He touched Malowan's arm then and drew a hand across his throat.

The paladin nodded and tightened his grip on his sword.



The party made it back into the hall before the guards could see them. Everyone fanned out around the door, which the paladin shut, leaving just enough of a crack to see through.

The hallway was broad enough for the two giants to come on side by side—barely. One of them was grumbling under his breath, and Lhors caught the word “orders” but nothing else. The two stopped where they were, effectively blocking the passage.

“Blast Ukruz and his orders!” the first giant snarled loudly.

The other mumbled something in response. He sounded more bored than upset.

“You saw ’em out there, Jinag! Old Furks and his brutes and stupid little Hookin. Ask me, Hookin was drunk and said the wrong words to Furks. Furks hated ’im anyway.”

“Furks hated everyone but his wolves,” Jinag said. “Ukruz’ll skin us or feed us them nasty norkers if we don’t get back to—” He turned to look down the passage. “What’s that?”

The other giant peered into the gloom of the passage behind them. Rowan eased down onto one knee and drew her bowstring back, but before she could fire, the two went back the way they’d come and disappeared down the hallway to the right.

“They won’t stay there long,” Nemis said. “I made a voice spell down there, but it’s only good for a few words.”

“We don’t dare alert the guards searching for us,” Malowan said, “and there are norkers in the entry.”

“Not anymore, there aren’t,” Rowan hissed. “Look!”

Lhors couldn’t make out much in the gloom, but he could clearly make out the sound of scuffling feet and the occasional clink of armor.

Vlandar gripped Lhors’ shoulder and pushed him toward the pantry. “Back, everyone! Back into the pantry! Quickly! We’ll let them pass and try for the entry again.”

“If they pass,” Maera muttered, but she was on her way, stopping just short of the kitchen to be certain it was empty before easing out of sight.

Lhors followed, but as he reached the kitchen he glanced over his shoulder, caught his boot on a raised stone and nearly went headlong. Malowan hauled him up, but Agya glared at him.

“Pick up y’r feet, y’ oaf,” she hissed.

The youth bit back a retort and followed her into the next room, his thoughts furious. Agya was still mumbling to herself until both Malowan and Maera gestured sharply for her to be still. The little thief glared at Lhors, as if the reprimand was his fault. He glared back defiantly. He thought, my father would never have put me on a quest with such an arrogant, full of herself, spoiled rotten, lousy little flat-chested wretch of a thief!

It wasn’t necessarily all true, but the outburst—even in his own head—made him feel a little better.

Malowan had the pantry door open as everyone filed in, pulled it shut behind them, then laid his hands against the easternmost wall. After several long, unnerving moments, he nodded. “They’ve passed,” he murmured softly, “small, foul creatures and at least two giants or ogre guards. They went through a door, I think. My sense of them diminished all at once, and I am certain I just heard a door shut.”

“What about th’ others?” Khlened asked softly.

Nemis touched a finger to the barbarian’s lips. “They’re near. Shhh.”

Silence. Lhors could hear nothing but the beating of his own heart.

“Do you sense something?” Vlandar asked the mage quietly.

Nemis replied, “I cannot be certain it was the same two guards we just saw, but someone came from down south and went toward the feast hall.”

“Well then,” Vlandar said, “the feast hall seems to be becoming too popular for our purpose. We’ll head down the hall and into the armory. They’ve searched that, and it’s open at both ends, if I read the map right.”

“Let’s be at it then,” Malowan said as he pulled the door toward him. He stepped out first, sword at the ready, but the room was deathly quiet.

“Fast and quiet, lad,” Vlandar said as Lhors edged through the opening. “We’ll get out safe.”

The youth merely nodded. He wasn’t certain he could trust his voice, and he really disliked that musty little chamber with the steps leading down into utter darkness.

The kitchen was deserted except for the bodies. Lhors wondered why no one had removed them, then realized they hadn’t been dead that long—and the only ones who knew about the bodies were the guards who were busy searching for the killers. He swallowed.

It was quiet across the way as well. The doors into the feast hall were closed. Vlandar nodded then drew Lhors into the hall. They stayed hard against the right-hand wall as the others came out, and Vlandar began to edge south away from the light.

Lhors fought a sudden urge to run. Vlandar would keep him safe, he reminded himself, *if Vlandar wasn’t killed*. Most of the creatures in this place were at least half again the warrior’s height, and the smaller ones—those norkers—must make up for lack of size in fierceness.

Nemis edged past them. “No one down there,” he whispered.

Vlandar nodded.

Suddenly Rowan, who brought up the rear, hissed a warning. The latch on the feast hall door moved, and the door slammed open. Two obviously drunken giants staggered into the corridor and fetched up hard against the opposite wall. One swung a massive fist at the other. The blow connected, but only slightly. The second giant fell back a pace and grabbed for his blade. The first drew himself up straight with a sottish arrogance and slapped the second open-handed, sending him reeling to the floor. The brute shook his head to clear it and fought his way onto hands and knees. Halfway up, he flailed for balance, sat hard, and his massive, red-rimmed eyes glared straight at Lhors.

Lhors froze.

The giant froze for an instant as comprehension slowly dawned in his eyes, then he bellowed a warning in Giantish. His companion turned, drawing a long-bladed dagger from his belt. The other staggered to his feet and reeled back across the hall as he fumbled for his weapon. He hauled a club from his belt, but the heavy weapon cost him his balance and he fell again. The dagger-wielding brute snarled at him, then squared his shoulders and lurched at Lhors, blade raised to skewer him.

Vlandar grabbed Lhors and pulled him back against the wall. “Take them down! Quick!”

The mage was already working. He fell back next to Vlandar and said, “Quiet—it’s my last, though!”

Rowan fired an arrow at the dagger-wielder, but it skipped off his scalp, leaving only a slight gash. She swore and tried again. The second went into his shoulder, but not deeply enough. The brute snarled a curse, then yanked it loose and threw it aside. Blood ran down his face, but he ignored it.

Maera and Malowan dealt with the other brute, who managed a drunken swing at the paladin. His own momentum threw him off-balance, and Maera drove her spear into his ear. He yanked his head around, bellowing in pain, and the ranger was thrown hard against the wall. Malowan came up behind him and thrust his sword into the brute’s eye, killing him instantly.

Khlened and Vlandar were trying to finish off the other giant. Vlandar got behind him finally and slashed at the exposed backs of the monster’s knees. The giant fell, screaming.

Lhors yelped as both doors to the feast hall were thrust open. Two of the young giants and a very aged one stood there—none armed or armored, though they looked deadly enough to him. They could break me in half, he thought.

“Back, Lhors!” Vlandar yelled. “Ready your spears! Khlened, finish him! Rest of you, behind me and down the hall, now!”

But Rowan ignored him and ran to help her dazed sister to her feet. Khlened fell back, his sword ripped out of his hands, as the giant rolled away with the barbarian blade still planted firmly in his leg.

“Damn all!” the barbarian snarled. He scooped up the club and swung it two-handed, bringing it down on the drunks head. The giant collapsed.

“Leave the blade!” Vlandar ordered. “We’ve company, you fool!”

Khlened spun around just as the old male drew back, urgently tugging at the giant-youths.

“They’re afraid!” the barbarian laughed harshly.

But as he made another grab for his sword, someone beyond the feast hall roared out an order. Four heavily armed giants came charging across the chamber, clubs out. The floor shook with their advance. Lhors could hear another voice—female and very angry, shouting in Giantish at someone inside the chamber.

“Hells!” Nemis said flatly. “That’s Nosnra himself I put to sleep, and she’s waking him!”

“Back!” Vlandar ordered. “The south passage is narrow enough they’ll have to come at us one at a time. Move!”

Vlandar, Malowan and Khlened covered their backs as the company sprinted for the passageway. Maera turned just before leaving the room and launched a spear. It sailed into the foremost giant, impaling him just below the sternum. Roaring in pain and fury, the giant fell.

The paladin shook his head as he entered the hallway with his sword raised. “Too many, Vlandar,” he said.

Rowan edged past him to draw her bow. One of her arrows buried itself to the fletchings in a giant’s throat, and he fell, bleeding heavily. The younger giants looked down at him, at each other, then turned and ran.

“Nemis,” Vlandar ordered, “do what you can! We can’t fight them all!”

“*Kenesthris!*” the mage shouted and waved his hands in a complex gesture. As he spoke, one of the doors swung around on its own and slammed shut. “I can’t control both, and even that may not hold long!”

Before any of the guards could attack, someone inside the chamber shouted an order and shoved his way into the hall. He was enormous, taller than his guards by a head, and hugely fat. His eyes were bleary, but if he was drunk he didn’t move like it. The brute ducked back into the chamber and shouted another order. One of the club-wielders came out, followed by two more. The fourth was apparently beating on the other door to get it open.

Rowan shot several arrows in quick order. One of the giants fell, a shaft through his mouth and another in his eye. Another two sidestepped him and came on, clubs upraised.

Nemis sent a crackling fireball at them. The lead giant could not evade in time and took it head-on. He began screaming and beating his clothes as the deadly flames engulfed him. His own comrades cut him down, probably not so much out of mercy as to get him out of the way. The other giants hesitated at such resistance and backed into the feast hall, brushing sparks from their clothing.

“Back!” Vlandar shouted and pointed his blade toward the kitchen.

Nemis turned and ran, stopping just inside to ready another spell. Agya and Lhors went next, followed by Rowan, who was still supporting Maera. The warriors came next, and Vlandar grabbed Nemis’ arm as the mage began another spell.

“Save it!” he ordered. “There’s no time.”

“They’ll know which way we went!” Khlened shouted. He swore as a flaming arrow zipped past him. The arrow quivered in the door frame as the giant moved out of sight, but Lhors could hear him in there, shouting orders. The female was screaming something, but he could make no sense of it.

“Move, all of you!” Vlandar ordered. “The whole Steading’ll be roused against us before much longer. Rowan, grab that torch on the hearth and light it!”

“Down?” Nemis asked as he backed away.

“No choice,” the warrior replied steadily, but Lhors didn’t think he looked very happy about it.

Vlandar picked Maera up and ran with her. Rowan scooped up the torch, plunged it into the fire until it caught, then followed. Everyone else filed in behind her. Malowan brought up the rear, backing around the corner just as loud voices reached them and the bespelled door slammed back into the wall.

“That cost me a good blade,” Khlened mumbled as he leaned into the pantry door to shut it.

“Better than your life,” Rowan snapped breathlessly.

“Silence, all of you!” Vlandar hissed. “Nemis, what can you do with stone?”

“Enough, I think,” the mage said. He was peering down the stairs. “There is no one anywhere nearby down there, but if there is a way out, I cannot sense it from here.”

“We’ll find one,” Vlandar said grimly. “We’ve no choice now. Go! All of you! Down! We’ll follow.”

Maera, finally beginning to shake off her daze, edged past them. “My eyes are better in dark, and I don’t trust anyone but me or Rowan with our only light. I’ll go first.”

She went down a long, straight flight. Lhors went next, with the barbarian right behind him. Some distance down, the youth thought he saw light ahead beside Maera’s flickering torch, and when they reached the last step, he could clearly see the ranger and the chamber beyond. Two torches were shoved in niches on the far wall—but it wasn’t far enough for Lhors. It looked like a short corridor, but it was closed off at both ends, and there were no doors or openings of any kind that he could see.

Maera turned in place, staring thoughtfully at the walls while her sister laid her ear against one. “It’s not a trap,” she assured Lhors.

“How can y’tell?” Khlened asked. He looked very pale in the ruddy light.

Agya came up behind him, sling in one hand and a stone for it in the other, then set herself to watch the stairs, only relaxing when Malowan came down. Nemis came last, some moments behind Vlandar.

“It’s still quiet up there,” he said, “but I would move as far from the stairs as you can.”

“Aye,” Khlened said. “The giants’ll know we’ve come here by now. Won’t be much for ’em to take us, will it?”

“This is *not* a trap,” Maera repeated, this time loud enough for everyone to hear. She tugged at Lhors’ sleeve and brought him back from the door that led to the stairs. “The giants have no reason to build a stair down to a dead end. The doors are hidden, but they are here.”

“The giants will not come down those stairs immediately,” Nemis said, “not after the fight we just gave them. They will take time to regroup and better prepare themselves. But in a moment, those stairs will collapse. I set a device partway down that is dissolving the bonds between the stones.”

Khlened caught his breath sharply as the little chamber rumbled and shook. Shards of stone and a puff of dust sifted down from the chamber.

"I suggest we move away," Nemis said with forced calm.

The party quickly shuffled into the rear of the chamber as fast as they could. They had gathered in a tight huddle when the entire staircase fell with an ear-shattering rumble. Everyone spent several moments coughing and sneezing away the dust and grit.

"There," the mage said after a while. He looked pleased. "The way is blocked from bottom to top, and Mal used a spell to seal the upper door. It's as good as any locking spell I have, but I had learned none for today."

"Just as well," Malowan said. "We had more need of your protective spells."

"Look," Maera said. "See? The dust is going. There's a hole or two in this place."

"Holes," Khlened whispered. The barbarian was sweating, his eyes fixed on the blocked entry. "What if there's no bigger opening?"

"There is," Nemis said firmly, "and I will find it, but I would like a few minutes to rest and catch my breath first."

"Huh," Agya snorted. "If there's a door from this place, I'll find it right now."

"No," Malowan said. "Nemis is right. Sit and catch your breath. He and I need to be certain there's no great danger for us out there."

The mage smiled tiredly. "Danger? What? In the dungeons of the Steading?" His lips moved briefly, soundlessly. "There are creatures near, but not very near. They are not coming any closer. We'll do here, for the moment."

"We'd been better above," Khlened said, possibly to himself.

Malowan shook his head. "Four giants and a hobgoblin guarding the way out, and at least four giant guards with clubs and their chief in the feast hall. We managed by luck and skill to injure or kill some, but that luck would not have lasted."

"It would not," Nemis said, his eyes closed. "Nosnra was bellowing orders for one of them to loose his cave bear."

"Bear?" Agya whispered, her eyes suddenly huge.

"It cannot come this way," Malowan reminded her. "Besides all of that, Nosnra's lady was bellowing for aid. We could never have held out against a dozen or more giants."

The barbarian grunted.

"So, that *was* Yk'nea?" Rowan asked. "I thought it might be, the way she was shouting orders—especially at the last. Did you hear her? She sounded genuinely afraid."

"She was," Nemis said. "She was shouting at Nosnra—something about 'they do not accept failure' or some such."

Malowan moved away from the wall where he had been listening. "Nemis, there is more than one stair to the dungeon level, you know."

"I know, but there is nothing to be done for it now. We seem to have thrown off pursuit for the time being. I think we are safe for a while at least."

"Safe?" Khlened inquired dryly. "How can we be safe when y' just cut off our only way out?"

“It was not our *only* exit,” Nemis replied, “but it will cut off our pursuers for now. Returning to the fortress is no longer an option with the whole place roused against us. We must find another way.”

Khlened growled something that Lhors couldn’t make out and stomped away.

“We must take a short while to rest,” Vlandar said, “then move on. We’ll set watches two at a time so no one falls asleep. Nemis, would you rather have another watch than the first?”

Nemis shrugged. “I’m no more tired than you or anyone else. I’ll take first with Agya. She wants to find doors, and I would like to test what I can of the space around this chamber.”

Vlandar nodded and moved into the far corner, pulled his hood low over his eyes, and stretched out on the stone floor. Khlened was already down, eyes closed, and as Lhors looked for a place that might somehow be more comfortable, he saw the rangers settle with their backs against the wall and lean into each other to rest sitting up. Rowan’s strung bow lay by her leg, two arrows set close to the string where she could readily lay hands on them. Maera had two spears leaning against the wall near her shoulder.

Lhors feared that despite what they knew from the scrolls, the giants had other ways to the lower levels. He didn’t want to think about such a thing. He’d be too afraid to sleep, and he desperately needed to rest. He pulled two boar spears from his case and settled down against the wall partway between Vlandar and Rowan. The warrior seemed to be asleep.

As Lhors settled his small pack under his head and lay down, he caught Rowan looking at him. The ranger glanced at his spears, smiled at him, and nodded approvingly. She then closed her eyes. Lhors sighed very faintly and closed his own.



Lhors woke some time later, too warm and disoriented from a deep but inadequate sleep. After his share of the watch, he sought his corner again. It was utterly quiet all around them, leaving him to wonder if there was anyone alive on this level except his party. Don't think that or you won't sleep, he ordered himself. Oddly, no one seemed to be trying to dig down through the rubble of the broken stairway.

Lhors soon fell into a doze, vaguely aware of the others and the hard stone beneath his hip. He woke some time later to find Nemis prowling the little chamber, now and again mumbling under his breath or leaning against the wall and listening intently. He held open the large book that Lhors already knew was the mage's tome of spells. Memorizing spells, Lhors realized. Vlandar had said both mage and paladin needed to learn anew each spell they might want to use each time. Malowan sat nearby, helping Vlandar out of his armor.

"I do apologize if this hurts," the paladin said as the warrior hissed in pain, "but the healing touch works faster if I can lay my hands on the wound itself."

The warrior grunted. "Just not so quickly, Mal! A man of my years gets mightily stiff after sleeping on hard stone. Ah, better." He met Lhors' eyes and smiled.

"I didn't know you were hurt up there, sir," the youth said, and his heart sank.

Malowan glanced at him. "It's not so bad, a bit worse than a scratch. Most paladins can heal scratches, and I can heal far worse."

Vlandar winced as he raised his arm to look down at his ribs. The skin was very pale except for a massive bruise running from armpit to his hip. "This'll teach me to be faster on my feet," he said, forcing a pained smile. "No blood running down my side. Must not hurt me, as my old father used to say."

Lhors managed a smile in reply, but he didn't feel much better. Vlandar is a good man, a friend, a little like Father. Suddenly, Lhors couldn't bear to think that Vlandar might die here. He looked up to see the warrior's steady gaze on him. The man often seemed to sense what the village youth was thinking.

"Fortunately, I'm fast enough on my feet and reasonably skilled with my blades."

“And smart enough to back off when the opposition is unbeatable,” Malowan added. He laid his hands lightly on the warrior’s side. Vlandar set his jaw, but a moment later, the warrior smiled and flexed his shoulder.

Lhors stared in amazement. Where there had been an ugly blue-black bruise, there was now no sign of injury except for a very old scar, much like one of his father’s.

“And smart enough to bring a paladin with me in case I do get hurt,” Vlandar added and drew his thick blue jerkin down over his head.

“Khlened,” Malowan said as he rose, “I swear you were cut up there.”

“Nothing so bad,” the barbarian grumbled.

Lhors could see a little dried blood on the man’s hand. He was stripping off the few bits of wicker armor he wore on his forearms and tossing them aside. “All the coin I paid that yellow-eyed southerner for this fancy stuff, man’d think it’d take a blow or two.”

“Your southerner probably never planned on fighting giants,” Malowan said. He got up and resettled next to the barbarian. “I am surprised it worked as well as it did. Here, sit still a moment. Let me.”

Eyes apprehensive, Khlened edged away as the paladin held out his hands.

“You needn’t strip off your shirt for me, man. Or for Rowan and Maera.”

To Lhors’ surprise, the northerner blushed a furious red.

“Just tell me where you’re hurt and I can manage.”

“Two places,” Khlened mumbled, eyes fixed on his hands. His color was still high. “One on th’ left shoulder under all that broken wicker. It’s more a bruise than a cut, I think, but it stings bad. I think a small bone in my right forearm is broke. Something grinds in there when I move it.”

“Don’t move it then,” the paladin replied, exasperated, “and hold still!”

He laid hands on the barbarian’s shoulder, and the man flinched away from him with a hiss of pain.

“Don’t dig into m’ flesh like that, then,” Khlened snarled, but he set his jaw and closed his eyes.

Malowan ran two fingers lightly over the soft leather under-armor.

“Bruise and possibly a cut, is it?” he inquired sarcastically.

“No bruise?” Khlened gritted between his teeth.

Malowan snorted. “Oh, no. Try one the size of my palm and a cut as long as my fingers! You’re lucky to be alive, friend. Another knuckle’s worth down and you’d have bled to death in moments.” Light suddenly puddled around the paladin’s fingertips. “Lucky for you, I’ve the strength for this now. Another time I might be out cold with my own injuries.”

Khlened caught his breath, then let it out in a relieved sigh. Malowan now cupped his hands around the forearm, not quite touching it. “Before you ask, the bone is broken but not all the way through. You punched someone up there with your fist or that sword, didn’t you?”

“P’raps. I don’t remember.” Khlened flexed his fingers cautiously as the paladin sat back.

“Easiest way for a fighter to break a bone like this is to slam his arm or leg too hard into something even harder. Next time you might have to heal on your own!”

“As I have from childhood, paladin,” the barbarian replied. “And men from my country don’t pull back from battle for fear o’ bruising themselves.” He glanced at Nemis, who was again prowling the room. “We’ve been here too long. Th’ giants could be sneaking—”

Malowan shook his head. “I would know if they were so close. Nemis, reassure our northern friend. No one nearby?”

“No one,” the mage said readily. He closed the book on his hand, marking his spot. “This seems to be a hundred paces or so from any life at all, unless you count a stray rat or a few spiders. There are large and unpleasant creatures some distance away to the west, and some sort of beasts eastward. The latter are moving about, but the others seem to be caged and in a fury because of it. I can tell there are giants and others above us on the main floor. The stairs came down so well that they are having difficulty getting the first stones moved. Among the giants, there is uncertainty and a little fear as well.”

“Fear?” Lhors asked in surprise.

“Fear,” Nemis agreed. “Look at us. Smaller than they, fewer than they, and yet we have challenged them in their very halls.” His sardonic smile faded. “And we have killed some of them and some of their servants.”

“’Tis fine,” Khlened grumbled, “but what next? I still see no way from this place. Do we simply sit here until they come to take us?”

“No,” Vlandar said. He was lacing his mail shirt close to his body. “There are two ways out of this chamber, besides the one Nemis destroyed. Agya and Nemis found them while the rest of us were resting. But you are right. We dare not stay here much longer. We have much to accomplish yet.”

“I agree,” the barbarian said. He scowled at the ruined wicker. “All the fighting we’ve done so far and for what? One skinny purse. Most of the coin we’ve found so far—and it wasn’t much—went to those hulking giant lasses.”

Vlandar sighed. “If we win through with the information the king seeks, he’ll see us rewarded handsomely. Particularly if we spend so much time doing his work that we’ve spared none seeking out treasure.”

The barbarian snorted in obvious disbelief.

“I agree,” Vlandar continued. “He might not take *your* word for such a thing, but I have served him and his father before him. He knows I would not lie—not over a trifling matter like coin.”

This silenced Khlened.

Vlandar looked around the room and got to his feet. “All right, people. You know I wanted to get in, get that map and any other useful information, then quietly leave. Well, at least we have the map. Mal, have you and Nemis examined it?”

The paladin shook his head. “I wanted you awake so we could go over it together. I would also like to compare it with the scroll—”

“Scroll?” Maera demanded. “What scroll?”

Malowan stirred. “There was no time to share the information before. Also, I wanted to be certain of its contents.”

Nemis’ lips twitched. “You did not trust *me*, you mean. I cannot blame you—”

“Save that,” Vlandar broke in briskly. “Maera, I chose to keep that matter to myself. Now I intend to share it. That is my right as commander, is it not?”

She nodded and settled back against the wall.

“From now on, our main goal is to escape this place. Best would be a forgotten doorway to the surface, but I doubt we will find one. There may be ways guarded by spells or beasts, and even if we do make our way back to the surface, we may have a long journey back to our horses.”

“There may be other ways to leave, Vlandar,” Malowan said mildly. “Ever since I first heard Lhors’ tale, I thought these giants must have a spell or some magic device to get them from here to Keoland. Upper Haven is many days’ journey from here, even for giants. I find it odd that they have not been seen more often. The land is not *that* underpopulated.”

“True,” Vlandar said. “And we may find such devices or magic items on this level. I have led enough raids against bandits and robbers to know that those who have a permanent hiding place keep their most valuable things apart—often in a secret space beneath the chief’s personal quarters.”

“I agree,” Malowan said. “I still believe the scroll cases I found in that woodpile were temporarily hidden—set where they would not be seen by everyone, but near enough that they could be retrieved quickly. Once the orders written there are carried out, I believe the scroll would be put with previous orders in a locked chamber close by. Perhaps down the nearby stairs?”

Vlandar nodded. “I agree with you, Mal. I hope to find another way into that passage from down here. The two staircases cannot be very far apart. We shall see. So far, Nosnra and his crew seem not to have warned any guards down here where we are and what we have done.”

“How do you know that?” Lhors asked.

“Because there is no company of giants breaking in either of the doors, and... Nemis?”

The mage murmured a spell—probably the reveal danger one that Lhors knew he used often. Nemis shook his head no.

Vlandar went on. “We are alone. Nemis would sense anyone nearby. Either this level is largely deserted, which I doubt, or no one down here knows what happened up there, which I also doubt. If there are dungeons and housing for slaves and such down here, as I think likely, the giants are involved in their normal routines. Still, we dare not stay here much longer. We have all rested some. All of you, eat something and drink a little. Nemis, I think it’s time to explain.”

“As you choose,” the mage said and set his book aside with a faint sigh.

“Me first, then you,” Vlandar replied.

Nemis merely nodded.

Lhors thought he looked resigned, but it was hard to tell. The mage’s face didn’t reveal much.

Vlandar went on, “The scroll Mal found is written in Giantish. The scroll Mal found gives us written proof that these giants were *ordered* to attack villages. We do not know why, but we do know *who*. I can assure you that if we come away with nothing but this one scroll, we will have accomplished part of our task. When we find a way out, I may choose to divide our force and send some of you to take that scroll back to Cryllor. The Lord Mebree’s sorcerers can easily transport it to wherever the king presently is.”

“But if our boats and the horses are already gone... ?” Maera asked.

A muted grumbling rippled through the party.

“They will not be,” Malowan replied. “I left the mate this charm.”—he fished a little device from his belt. “At least once a day, I let him know that we still live. He waits for another signal from me if we need help, and by yet another to tell the Flennish to set sail back east while he and the lad return the horses to Cryllor.”

“Now,” Vlandar went on, “I see most of you are dissatisfied, but there is more to all this than you know.” He gave Nemis a steady look.

The mage sighed, but came away from the wall. He looked resigned, Lhors thought. Like the day you had to admit to old headman Yerik that you sneaked into the onion fields and ate bulbs, he mused. The headman had been really angry until Gran broke into her cackly laugh and reminded the headman of his own forays into that same patch.

Nemis now wore the same look on his face that Yerik had.

“All right,” the mage said. “I have something to tell all of you, and I... well...” He settled cross-legged on the floor and drew a deep breath. “The scroll was written by a being called Eclavdra, a dread sorceress of the dark elves, the drow.”

Rowan caught her breath sharply, and Maera sat up straight.

Nemis eyed the rangers. “Yes, I see that you know of drow. For you others, drow are elves, but unlike Rowan or Maera, they are black skinned, silver or white-haired, and they live beneath the ground. Unlike our rangers, they despise growing things. They are selfish, cold-minded, and cruel. Long ago, they fought the other elves for control of the surface lands and lost. They were driven underground where they have since made their home. They do not want to return to the surface, unless they have greatly changed. They prefer the dark depths of the earth, but they hate other elves, half-elves, and all who dwell under the sun.”

“It is an ancient hatred,” Rowan said. She sounded shaken, and Maera’s face was pale. “Of course we know of drow, but no one has seen them in many of our lives. We hoped they were all dead.”

“They are not,” Nemis said evenly. “I *have* seen them. My master was a skilled mage who made a study of the drow. What he learned drove him to fear them, and I think his fears made him a little mad, for not long after I was bound to him, he sought the drow, and they found him. Before that year’s end, my master and I were housed in a chamber far below ground in the midst of a vast city of drow. He had pledged himself as apprentice to one of their most dire sorceresses, Eclavdra. As his apprentice, I was also bound to her.”

Rowan looked at Maera, who was honing the points of her spears on a whetstone. Maera shrugged.

“I have never heard that name,” Rowan said.

“Few have,” Nemis admitted. To Lhors, his eyes looked haunted—like Gran’s eyes the morning after the giants’ attack. “She is many things: sorceress, dour warrior, a black cleric, and”—he swallowed—“extremely charismatic. She draws people of all kinds to her service. My master went to her from fear. I for other reasons.” He stared at his hands. “She wanted me for her own... *personal*... reasons. Because I pleased her, I was given training in the drow magic. Eventually, I learned enough that I was able to strike down my master and escape.” He looked at Rowan.

“Yes, that could be a lie to hide that Eclavdra trained me and sent me onto the surface to spy for her or do worse things. I can only swear to you that I am no spy for the drow.”

“I know that,” Malowan told him. “You others, remember that as a paladin, I can discern when someone lies. Nemis is not lying.”

“In that case,” Maera said, “we have a problem.”

* * *

“Mal!” Agya hissed urgently. She was exploring the east wall as the rest of the party prepared to set out. “Mal, come ’ere! There’s a loose bit just ’ere.”

Malowan came over to see, and Vlandar followed. Lhors, closest to the girl, could make out the fingertip-sized circle that slid aside as she pressed on it. “Lookit,” she breathed. “I can see out there!”

She stepped back as the paladin crouched to set his eye to the opening. Malowan nodded cautiously and gestured for Vlandar to look, then signed Agya to ease the cover back into place. “There is no one out there just now, but someone might come and hear our voices,” Malowan said quietly.

“What is it?” Lhors asked.

“A very large, dark chamber,” the paladin replied, “apparently empty for now.”

“We’ve been quiet enough,” Maera replied. “Besides, if something had been that close, either you or the mage would have detected it, wouldn’t you?”

“Probably,” Malowan conceded reluctantly, “but our magic is not infinite. Someone *could* have crept in and away again without us noticing, though it is unlikely.”

“Well,” Agya interrupted, “tell you what, just before I opened that spy-bit, there *was* somethin out there—not in th’ open, more like clear across. First off, I caught an echo, then p’raps whatever it was went behind some door, ’cause was not so loud and no echo. But I did catch someone speakin’ what sounded like Giantish, like it was bellowin’ orders. But th’ other din’t have words.”

“What exactly *did* you hear?” Malowan asked.

“Ah, wait,” Agya said and shut her eyes to concentrate. “*Goorzh, nigheye! Zharhoye!*”

To Lhors’ surprise, it sounded like the guttural, spitting sound of Giantish. “’Tis all I could catch aright.”

“How’d you know that,” Lhors asked, “if you don’t understand giant-talk?”

“I don’t *understand* it,” the girl retorted.

Malowan cleared his throat, defusing a potential spat. “Agya doesn’t read. Like many who don’t, she has excellent recall of sounds—even words whose meaning she doesn’t know.”

Agya waved that aside. “So? It means—well, *what?*”

“It is an order,” Nemis said. “‘Stay put, you brute, and guard!’ As if the giant spoke to a pet.” He looked to Malowan, who was pressed against the east wall, eyes closed.

“I sense incredible evil, despair, pain, and anger. I think the giant may be a cell guard, and there is a beast to aid him in that task.”

“Beast?” Agya looked unhappy. “Like Jufas’ monkey? *It* weren’t no pet. It bit people, nasty creature, gave ’em awful fever. Jufas nearly got kilt when th’ brute jumped ’im wi’ no warnin’ at all.”

Rowan nodded. “That is the worst of wild beasts being kept in fetters. Bears and apes will usually leave you alone in the wild. Kept prisoner and tormented—well, they act no worse than any of us would in their place.”

“P’raps,” Agya said. Lhors didn’t think she sounded convinced at all. “But any kept ’ere won’t be yer wild, free things as leaves us alone, will they?”

“Agya,” Malowan murmured and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Unfortunately, you are right. Beasts here will be pent and angry or trained to attack. And Vlandar, there are three or four other pent-up brutes to the west—I am nearly certain they are manticores, and it will do us no good to go after *them*. Remember where we are in the northwestern corner of the Steading. The west door may not lead anywhere but to a trap.”

“I agree,” Vlandar said. “Better to avoid manticores altogether. The sting from their tails is said to be bad.”

Nemis laughed, but his eyes weren’t amused. “Call it lethal.”

Vlandar nodded. “Yes, I know. We go the other way, then.”

When he turned to pick up his armor, Agya cleared her throat. “Wait. If y’ask me, we better learn ’xactly what’s there. I mean, what’s yon sounded mad to me and prob’ly not fussy if its dinner’s still alive. Seems sense to me if someone takes a look proper-like.”

“We have Nemis—” Vlandar began.

The girl shook her head. “Aye, and we have Mal—both of ’em for magic. But sir, we need a real search. ’Tis no time to be trustin’ only to magic.” She eyed Malowan sidelong. “Member when you looked in th’ thieves guildhall for Mobwef and nearly got skewered?”

“I did *not*,” the paladin replied with dignity, “nearly get skewered. I merely—”

“E had a noble’s spellstone e’d stolt,” the girl reminded him sharply, “and it was good enough that you wasn’t aware of ’im. Someone might ’ave a thing like that ’ere.”

“And you *would* see him?” Nemis asked mildly.

Lhors thought the mage was holding back temper—but only just from the way his eyes looked.

“No,” she replied, “but I might smell ’im. Back in th’ city, Mobwef and ’is crew weren’t much for baths. Things ’ere ain’t either. I smelt Mobwef and warned Mal. Any of us go search out there first, it’s me.” Her face was a study in frustration. Probably, Lhors thought, she didn’t have use words as persuasion very often. “Master thief Mobwef, ’e had a rule back in th’ city. Job gets tricky so’s you maybe lose a thief or so, don’t risk th’ good ones *or* your green ’prentices neither, or them’s as don’t have experience in th’ kind of place they’re robbing. Pick so th’ loss won’t hurt yer guild, but still use one who knows ’is job.”

“She’s saying,” Malowan added tiredly, “that she and Lhors are the most expendable of us all, but that Lhors wasn’t raised in a city and she was. She won’t be fazed by stone mazes.”

“That’s it,” Agya replied then settled back on her heels. She spared a glance at Lhors, but then divided her attention between Malowan and Vlandar.

Like I’m of no account, thought Lhors, like what *she* says matters—not what Vlandar decides! His face felt hot, and he hoped his sudden anger didn’t show. Oh, for a chance to see her out in hill country where she can feel as lost and useless as I do, he raged internally. I’ll show the skinny little—

He knelt and busied himself rearranging things in his pack. It wouldn’t be so bad if she wasn’t at least three years younger, so set on herself, and so gods-blasted self-sufficient.

Agya’s voice tightened the back of his neck. “Stone and dark by themselves don’t scare me. I’m little, a thief, and good at it too. If not, I’d be dead by now. And ’member you tested me back in city. I can go ’bout a place I ain’t been afore and give you a proper map of it.”

“I’m persuaded,” Vlandar said as she paused for breath. “I know you can help me map this place, but Mal will go with you.” He held up a hand when she would have protested. “Do not argue with your commander. Remember that Mal has weapons and other skills that you may want if that beast attacks you.”

Lhors turned back as Agya nodded. She seemed pale and momentarily beyond speech. Vlandar, the youth thought with some satisfaction, must have done that on purpose. Wisely, too. It would do no good if any of them went out there so overconfident that he or she died. His father had warned him against overconfidence on the hunt.

Malowan and Nemis were already pressing aside a panel on the north wall that the mage had found earlier. The panel slid aside, revealing a heavy iron wheel. Khlened and Vlandar had to work hard to get it moving. Lhors gaped as the east wall of the little chamber slowly lifted into the ceiling. The whole system must have been recently oiled, because everything moved smoothly and in silence.

The chamber beyond the door stretched for some distance north and east. The south wall and most of the cavelike ceiling were lost in gloom.

Malowan gazed around for a long moment, then touched Agya’s arm. “There is a door almost straight across. Do you see it?”

“A bit of light,” the girl agreed in a low voice, “and there”—she pointed just north of the light—“maybe another passage.”

The paladin met Vlandar’s eyes. “Let the door down behind us. Nemis will know when we need it raised again.”

The warrior nodded and clasped his arm. “Trithereon’s cloak cover you.”

The two slipped from the little chamber. Vlandar waited long enough to be sure that some guard hadn’t spotted them, then he and Khlened lowered the door.



Faced with nothing better to do in the quiet dark, Lhors sat and watched Nemis go through his supplies. The mage's hands were steady and his mien thoughtful as he brought out the bottles he'd taken in the maids' quarters. He seemed to be testing them, though he never removed any of the stoppers. Lhors wanted to ask how he did that, but he felt a little foolish around the self-contained Nemis. The man's story about dark elves had made little sense to him, but it sounded frightening and the tale had certainly upset the rangers.

He couldn't ask the mage anything now anyway. Nemis had just murmured a spell of some kind and looked as if he were in a trance, eyes closed but lips still moving.

Lhors glanced at the watch-vial Vlandar had pulled from his pack: a sand-shifter that marked time, much like the one Lharis had owned. The warrior only turned the thing over once before Agya and Malowan returned.

Vlandar settled them down near the closed door and handed them water.

Malowan passed the water bottle to his ward. "The main room is joined by passages, north and east. They're as narrow as this one but longer and unlit. They seem deserted—no one lives in either, and they are seldom used. There is an apartment about this size just across from here, and the giant Agya heard lives there with his two apes. All three are inside and sleeping. To the south, a long passage ends in a cross-corridor. We did not check further, but I sensed guards: bugbears or possibly orcs."

"Bears?" Agya's voice rose sharply. "You dint say nothin 'bout bears! Bears *and* apes?"

"*Bugbears*," Nemis replied. "Bears are animals. These are different. They're intelligent as half-witted humans and good fighters, much like ogres, very strong and evil. They hate our kind."

"Don't care," the thief replied flatly. "Long's they ain't bears. Nasty things, bears. One used to juggle in th' market and *et* 'is master. I know, 'cause I saw 'im do it. Filthy way to die. These... bugbears, is it? Let 'em hate. I'll hate 'em right back."

Malowan gave her a distressed look but went on. “At the far end of the south corridor, I could see a door. There are prisoners kept there. Somewhere beyond that is a smithy. The whole area was quiet, oddly so, to my mind. Still, it is daylight up there. Nosnra and his followers may believe that we are trapped and that they can sleep the day away as they normally would, then seek us out at their leisure.”

“Perhaps,” Nemis said. “I just completed my own search. It is very quiet out there—except for the manticores to the west. I also sensed a smithy southward and prison cells here and there.”

“Very good,” Vlandar agreed. “We won’t trust to our being alone here, but it is reassuring. I think we *can* trust to this, however. Nosnra and his fellows have no magical communication with those down here, or else we would have had company waiting when we opened that door.”

“Maybe they wanted to lure us into the open instead?” Maera suggested.

“Why,” Vlandar asked, “if they could surround this passage and take us without a fight? Sensible of you to suspect such a trap,” he added with a smile, but Maera did not smile back, “but there’s no sense in our anticipating traps within traps. If hill giants were good at tactics, I would never have come against them with so few companions.”

Khlened laughed. Maera gave the barbarian a dark look but let it drop.

Nemis smiled briefly. “I found more. I am not sure what all of it means, but I can also help you map this place. One of my own spells is a variant on one the drow taught me: how to let the *shape* of a maze come to you.”

Malowan puffed up at this. “That would have been nice to know before I risked my life and Agya’s—twice now!—in scouting out this place.”

“Forgive me,” Nemis said, “but the magic works only to determine the layout of caves and buildings. It would not help in finding guards and such, which is what you and your ward were searching for.”

The paladin nodded, but still looked very unsatisfied to Lhors.

“What’s done is done,” Vlandar said. “What have you found, Nemis?”

“Two ways out, but neither is useful to us. One is at the end of a long, black passage that leads to a pool. To reach the outside, we would have to swim below a wall deep inside the pool. Beyond that, if you survive the depths, is a way out.”

“I’m not one for swimmin’, way out or not,” Khlened said.

“Peace, Khlened!” Vlandar said. “All of you! Let the man finish.”

Nemis nodded thanks to Vlandar, then continued, “The other way out follows an underground stream, but the way soon narrows such that I fear we would soon be forced to swim again.”

“Then it’s swim or fight our way out?” Lhors asked. He couldn’t decide which would be a worse way to die.

“No,” the mage replied, “I think not. There is a vast complex of caverns south and east of here, and I think they are cells and slave-pens, which will surely be filled with those who have no love for the giants and their allies.”

“But that does not make them *our* allies,” Vlandar said.

“Of course,” the mage said as a mischievous smile spread across his face, “but if we do not find those who would be willing to aid us, we might at the least free them

and loose enough chaos that the giants will have more to worry about than finding us.”

Malowan stirred. “The plan has merit. If for no other reason than it is the lesser of three evils.”

“Yes,” Vlandar said in resignation. “Well then, let’s be—”

“Shh!” Rowan broke in. “Do you hear that?”

Lhors sat still, not even breathing. Everyone else did the same. At first, there was utter silence, then ever so faintly, he caught the distant echo of picks and faint voices.

“Can you hear that?” Rowan said. “Unless I am very mistaken, Nosnra or his underlings are digging their way down through the rubble of the staircase.”

“All the more reason to be off,” Vlandar said. “This passage is no longer a haven for us—if it ever was.”



“Wait.” Malowan laid a hand on Vlandar’s arm as the warrior reached for the door wheel. “A moment, my friend. About prisoners the giants are holding down here. If there are humans...” He shook his head. “You know I cannot leave them behind.”

“Are you mad?” Khlened demanded.

“No,” Malowan replied steadily. “Merely a man trying to achieve what purity of heart I can. I cannot neglect my duty any more than Rowan or Maera would ignore an elf or a half-elf if they knew one was here.”

The barbarian sighed heavily. “What then? You’ll crawl through all th’ pens down here? Didn’t Nemis just say there’s more’n one? And there’ll be guards—d’ye chance us all gettin’ killed by whatever brutes are guarding ’em?”

Nemis cleared his throat. “It will not be necessary to go into the cells. Either Mal or I can search other ways. But Mal, I trust you do not plan to free everything down here? The orcs and trolls you save may not thank you.”

“A bargain,” Vlandar put in. “Mal won’t put us all in danger to save one human captive. That would go against your code also, wouldn’t it?”

The paladin didn’t look very happy about it, but he nodded. “In exchange, Khlened, you and everyone else, keep this in mind. Someone who’s been a prisoner here may know his way around this level.”

“Huh,” Khlened replied shortly. “Know ’is way from where ’e came in to ’is cell.”

“Possibly,” Rowan said, “but the giants often use prisoners for laborers, and prisoners share information when they can. If I were penned down here, I would learn all I could about the place. Wouldn’t you?”

“And think of this,” Vlandar added. “The person we rescue might be the one who saves your life down here.”

“Now *you* sound like a paladin,” Khlened grumbled, but he sighed faintly and shrugged. “Something to that, I s’pose.” He brightened then. “Could be ’e’d know where treasure’s hid too.”

“Just so,” Vlandar said, his face expressionless, then stepped aside so the barbarian could help him raise the door.

The outer chamber was vaster than it had seemed when Lhors had seen it through the spy hole. The roof was vaulted, its upper reaches hidden in gloom.

“No wonder the staircase was so long,” Rowan murmured.

Vlandar gestured for silence, listened intently, then led them along the west wall where there was little or no light from the one dim torch burning between a north passage and a rough door. Agya touched the warrior’s hand, pointed toward the door and signed, *Giant. Beast*. The warrior worked this out and nodded. After a moment’s consideration, he indicated first the dark opening straight across from them, then the ill-lit door just south of that.

Passage? He signed then pointed toward the opening.

Malowan nodded then pointed at the door and signed back, *Prison*.

The prison door rattled slightly, and someone behind it cursed in a hoarse, thick voice. Vlandar looked around, then stabbed a finger toward the far side of the chamber. Malowan touched Agya’s arm to get her attention, then sprinted across the vast stone floor to vanish in the darkness of the hallway, the girl right on his heels. Vlandar put Lhors in front of him. Khlened came behind and the rangers, and Nemis brought up the rear.

The mage’s lips and fingers were moving in his personal beneath notice spell as he gained the east passage. The man spun around and knelt just behind the opening, one hand fumbling at his belt as everyone else crowded close behind him. Lhors could see a little box, but before he could study it further, an enormous, shaggy creature stumbled into the open, backlit by torches in the cell area. The sudden light hurt the youth’s eyes, and he shrank against the wall, blinking furiously. Vlandar’s hand closed reassuringly over his forearm—the warrior had his sword in the other.

“It’s a bugbear,” he whispered against Lhors’ ear. “We’re protected by Nemis’ spell.”

The brute snarled an oath at someone in the pens and gestured furiously. The door slammed behind him. Nemis seemed half-blinded by the light as well. He worked the lid from the box by feel, then froze as Malowan touched his shoulder.

“It’s only me,” the paladin breathed against his ear, his voice prudently low even with the beneath notice spell in place. “What have you there?”

Nemis held the box out. “Illusionary wall.”

“Not a good idea. The creature sees a wall where there should not be one and he’ll raise an alarm. Save your box. I know how long it takes to prepare that powder.”

“What would *you* use?” Nemis whispered.

The paladin grinned, his teeth ruddy in the faint light. “Fear.”

The mage shook his head. “That takes as long as the wall to prepare!”

Vlandar tapped both hard on the shoulders and drew a meaningful hand across his throat.

Nemis eyed him sidelong and nodded. “Won’t do, Mal. He senses fear, he’ll raise an alarm or run yelling for help. Wait.” He leaned forward, keeping a close eye on the massive brute. It was mumbling to itself in a nasty-sounding guttural voice. The creature shambled off straight south. A little dim light leaked into the chamber as the south door opened, but it cut off as the door slammed. “Save your spell. We are clear for the moment.”

Vlandar eased around mage and paladin. He froze as the door into the prison slammed open again. Lhors swallowed dryly. Someone in there was wailing in a high, broken voice and two guards were bellowing furiously at each other.

How can Vlandar bear that? he thought. The warrior showed no emotion whatever as he looked a question at Nemis, who nodded. I hope that means his spell is still working, Lhors thought.

Another door—the one set in the south wall perhaps—banged into stone, the sound echoing briefly through the chamber before it was swallowed by a blare of arguing, shouting, and fighting. Someone stomped into the open and bellowed what sounded like an order. The prison door slammed shut, and a moment later, the second door cracked into its frame. Utter silence followed.

Vlandar sighed and eased back on his heels. “All right,” he whispered. “Unless the guard and his ape came out unheard during all that, we have the space to ourselves. I suggest we make use of it and get ourselves down that long hall before someone else comes.”

“No one else is out there,” Malowan said. “I would know. Get going, Vlandar, and I will catch up in a moment. My business is against the north wall. If there are giants close by, I may be able to learn what they plan.”

The mage eyed him. “If—”

“If I can, then we may have useful information. If not, we will not have lost anything. Either way, I will join you at once. I do not seek a martyr’s death here, my friend.”

Agya stirred.

“No,” he added. “You stay with them. I am safer alone.”

To Lhors’ surprise, the girl nodded and slid back into shadow while the paladin edged along the east wall, heading north. He gave the doorway around the guards’ room a wide berth, skirted the north opening, then settled against the middle of the north wall, listening intently.

Vlandar got to his feet and led the party straight across the open, the shortest distance between east passage and south corridor.

There was light in the vast open area, most of it leaking around the door leading to the prison cells. Once they plunged into the corridor, however, the darkness was daunting. There were no openings of any kind along either wall, and it seemed to go on forever.

Halfway down the corridor, Malowan caught up to them.

“Anything?” Vlandar asked softly.

The paladin nodded. “Not now.” He sounded short of breath.

Near the end of the long passage, Vlandar stopped and drew the company around him, then gestured for Lhors and Rowan to check the cross-passage. The youth nodded and moved out along the west wall, glancing now and again at the ranger, who had set her back to the east wall and moved in utter silence. He hoped he didn’t look as afraid as he felt.

Rowan reached the corner and dropped to one knee, then went flat, listening for a long moment before she edged the top of her head into the open. She looked behind her first, then turned her head slowly so she could look over the west tunnel. She made no sudden moves, Lhors realized, and she moved the way his father had taught

him when they hunted deer. Silent, slow, steady, cautious moves were unlikely to be noticed by those who called an area home. He suddenly felt more confident than he had in all their journey. This is something I know, something I'm good at, he thought. Sliding down the wall, he slipped quietly into the open to check the east corridor.

There wasn't much of it. Seven or eight long strides on, enormous boulders blocked the way as if there had been a slide. He could see this clearly, he suddenly realized, because of an opening to his left, halfway between him and the stones, where a torch was burning. The sputtering flame cast an uncertain light on the shaggy bugbear guard who sat bolt upright just inside the doorway, its back against the nearest side of the opening, its attention fixed on that boulder-pile—or possibly something beyond it.

Lhors brought his head slowly back around. There was a door just beyond the guard on the other side of the hall. There was a door opposite Rowan also, and a dreadful smell came from the hand's width of space between floor and ill-fitting slab of wood. Possibly a prison, Lhors thought. The door didn't seem to fit well enough into its stone sill even to latch, but there was a thick iron bar on the outside, holding it shut.

Somewhere to his right, he could hear the distant but unmistakable rhythmic clang of a hammer on an anvil. There was a smithy down here.

He looked over at Rowan, who was waiting for him. She sent her eyes sideways, back the way they'd come, then slowly began easing away from the opening. He did the same, only getting to his feet after she did. With one last look toward the cross-hall, the ranger came over and wrapped an arm around Lhors' shoulders, briefly hugging him.

"Well done," she murmured against his ear.

Lhors nodded. His face felt hot, and he was too embarrassed by the unexpected praise to know what to say. Besides, it was hard for him to remember that she was at least as old as his mother would have been. She was warm and sleek-bodied, like a very young woman. Her hair was soft. He forced his mind back to more serious matters—such as how to briefly let Vlandar know what he'd seen down there.

Vlandar drew him back a little farther up the broad passageway where he squatted near the wall close to Malowan. Agya crouched by his feet, eyes moving constantly. The paladin's eyes were closed, his hands outstretched, and his lips moving soundlessly. As soon as the two passed Malowan's fingertips, Vlandar nodded and spoke in a low voice. "You can talk here. Malowan has worked a spell to keep sound within the tube of space formed around his arms." A faint smile turned his lips. "Had he longer arms, everyone could hear at the same time."

"I'll pass on to my sister anything she needs to know," Rowan said. She glanced up the hall where Khlened and the Maera stood.

Lhors gave a brief account of what he had seen. Once he was done, Rowan took up the narrative.

"There is a long passage, half the width of this, and a chamber at the end with no door. There are two giants asleep on a mat near a fire, and there may be others. I know there are more fires. I could see the light of at least three. It must be a torture chamber. I am sure I saw a rack and a spiked crown of pain hanging from a chain.

There is a door straight down from here flanked by matching doors. Both are barred. Farther west, an opening seems to angle southwest. There may also be another passage going north. I could just make out shadow but nothing else.”

Vlandar nodded, then fixed his gaze on the opposite wall as he decided on a course of action.

Lhors studied the rest of the group while he waited for Vlandar’s decision. Maera seemed to be talking to Khlened. As Lhors watched, the ranger drew the man into the middle of the corridor away from the wall. What Lhors could see of the barbarian’s face was unnerving. He was dead white and sweating freely. His eyes were screwed shut, and he was chewing on a corner of his moustache.

“He fears caves,” Rowan murmured against his ear, “any dark and enclosed place. He admitted that last night when Maera and I pressed him about it. Do not let him know you know it. It shames him to be afraid of anything, but he cannot control it.”

“Two of the women in my village had such fear,” Lhors said. He eyed Khlened for a long moment. “It must be hard for such a brave man to learn he can fear something.”

“Yes. He can learn to bear it, if he will listen to Maera.”

Vlandar nodded sharply and dismissed them, beckoning for Nemis, Khlened, and Maera to join him. Lhors watched from nearby. He could see Vlandar’s lips moving, then Maera’s and Khlened’s. Nemis merely folded his arms and listened, but Lhors could hear nothing of what was said.

Several moments passed before Nemis beckoned. Rowan gripped Lhors’ shoulder and drew him back over to the rest of the group. The mage caught hold of Mal’s hand and stretched his own arms as far as they would go.

Making a bigger tube, Lhors realized.

Vlandar gestured for all of them to come close. The air inside the tube felt as if a storm was coming—Nemis’ contribution, perhaps. Lhors swallowed dread and tried not to think about the last time his hair had stood on end.

Vlandar cleared his throat. “We can’t stay like this for long. Anyone or anything down here sensitive to magic will sense the tube and surely know we aren’t their kind. If you must say something, it better be important.” The warrior quickly laid out his plan. “We won’t go east. Nemis says the region beyond the rockslide leads to the caverns he sensed earlier—with the way out through water and the other through dread creatures. Besides, there is one bugbear just visible, and it seems to have orders to keep constant watch on the ruined passage. There are others inside the chamber, and they are ready to fight.”

“Why?” Lhors asked. “What enemy could they have back there?”

“Mal thinks they are orcs—a good many of them. From what we saw of the way these giants treat their servants and slaves, I believe there may have been rebellion down here. The bugbear on guard down there feels anxious, Mal said, and his companions are very alert.”

“Bugbear guards... afraid of *orcs*?” Khlened demanded.

“Orcs are as big and as bloodthirsty as bugbears. If they were enslaved and are now armed and spoiling for revenge... well, they would be a dangerous enemy even if there were only a few of them.”

Several of them nodded agreement, then Vlandar continued, “So that is no way for us, even if we chose to face the pool or chance the other portal. Noslra is also *our* enemy, but that would not make the orcs our allies. The three chambers across that hall are orc housing, but Mal does not think they are prisoners—servants or trusted slaves perhaps.”

“Trusted?” Rowan protested. “They are barred from the outside!”

“A loyal slave is still a slave,” Vlandar reminded her, “but they are not our business. Now, down the right-hand corridor where Lhors heard what could be a smithy, Nemis sensed... you tell them, Nemis.”

“I was aware of several sources of strong emotion: fear and hate mixed, and in some a sense of hopelessness—also extreme heat and at least two giants. Besides the giants, there are slaves—possibly human, perhaps elf or dwarf—I cannot be sure, but they are not orcs or the like. That I can tell.”

Malowan’s eyes fixed on Vlandar, but he said nothing.

Vlandar looked at the paladin and nodded. “Yes, Mal, we will go there. Nemis, have you another of your beneath notice spells?”

“Better to save those for special need,” the mage replied. “I can create invisibility, though we will need to be as quiet as possible to pass unnoticed by the two giants in that torture chamber. You do not want to attack the bugbear?”

“No,” the warrior said, “not unless we are seen or heard by that guard. Their hearing is not keen, and he is concentrating on his task anyway. I’ve fought them before. The noise would alert every giant in the vicinity. No, we deal with those in the torture chamber and the smithy, and *then* take on the bugbears if we must. We aren’t enough to battle enemy from both sides. So, the west passage.”

Nemis nodded. “And move with care around here.”

“I plan on it,” Maera said flatly.

“More than usual,” the mage replied. “These walls—all this down here—it was not built by giants, you know.” He smiled, but it wasn’t a pleasant expression. “Something older and darker...”

“Set me at it with m’ sword, and I’ll gut it!” Khlened snarled, but he’d gone very pale again.

“The gods grant you the opportunity and the strength should such a chance come,” Nemis replied.

“My arms are growing tired,” Malowan added, “and we have stayed here long enough.”

“Agreed,” Vlandar said.

Vlandar led the way, waiting at the end of the north-south corridor while Nemis cast his spell of invisibility. He then divided his company, placing himself at the fore with Lhors and Maera, then Nemis who wanted to be central should he need to reinforce his spell or create a new one. Khlened came next, then Agya and Malowan with Rowan moving silently behind, a drawn bow in her hands and her eyes fixed on the bugbear guard.

Things went well for some moments. They could hear a faint noise from down the east passage, as if someone were dragging stones away from the other side of the barrier. The guard was halfway off his stool, a morning star clutched in one hand and his whole attention fixed on the boulder wall and beyond.

Suddenly he yelled what might have been an order, his voice a hellish roar that echoed in the relatively narrow space.

Vlandar gestured furiously for everyone to back up against the north wall and stay still. Before they could obey, half a dozen bugbears, all heavily armed, poured into the hall, most of them pelting straight for the boulder wall. Unfortunately, the last of the lot stumbled on loose rock, caught the guards stool to right himself, and wound up on his knees, staring straight into Rowan's eyes. His jaw dropped and he sucked in a loud breath to yell.

Rowan loosed her arrow, which slammed into his throat. The cry became a shrill howl of pain. The other bugbears stopped dead and turned.

"That's torn it," Rowan said grimly, and went to one knee, hauling the arrow case over her shoulder and bracing it against her thigh where she could rapidly draw shafts. Maera came up to take a place behind her, loosing a javelin as the other bugbears came pelting toward them, swords, morning stars, and axes ready to strike.

Vlandar edged around the rangers, bringing Malowan and Nemis with him. The three ran straight for the bugbears, holding to the south wall of the passage to give the rangers and Lhors, who found himself between the two, a clear line on their targets.

"Save your javelins until they're nearer!" Maera told him.

Lhors merely nodded. His mouth was very dry.

Malowan and Vlandar engaged the first of the hairy creatures, Vlandar blocking the morning star on his sword. Malowan dodged the swing of a bugbear's axe, then swung around reversing his sword and digging in his heels as he thrust the blade back through thick fur. The bugbear staggered back, clutching its belly and squalling in agony. Vlandar swung his own weapon in a full circle before bringing it crashing down on the back of the brute's head. The creature fell with a crash.

Another set on them at once, and then more. Khlened came running up, snarling. He brandished a sword in each hand, and he clenched a thick, nasty-looking dagger between his teeth.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lhors could see the rangers firing into the crowd of monsters.

The startled bugbears fell back a few paces, a few falling to the rangers' arrows and javelins. Lhors saved his own spears in case any of the creatures managed to break past the three warriors. Rowan finally let Maera drag her and Lhors back out of the way. Nemis came running up, stopping just behind the three men who were barely keeping the creatures at bay.

"Vlandar!" he yelled. "Help me! Get them in a line!"

"What kind of a—? Are you mad?" the warrior yelled back as he swung his sword at the nearest bugbear. Blood splurged from a deep gash on the brute's forearm, and its morning star fell from its hand. "Will you set them dancing?"

"Get them in a clutch then! I have a spell readied, but it won't work on them all otherwise!"

"We'll get them bunched for you!" Vlandar said as he parried a strike. "Khlened, to that side! Mal, ease back this way with me!"

The three men formed an arc with Vlandar at the center. The bugbears ignored Nemis—the mage wasn't wielding a blade like the other three, Lhors realized—and

threw themselves forward. The air crackled, and a thick, bluish fog wrapped around the shaggy creatures. When it faded, the bugbears were simply gone.

Nemis heaved a sigh. “Apparently they weren’t fluent in anything but their own nasty language—if that. Stupid brutes.”

“Giants might be,” Vlandar said evenly. “Keep that in mind if we need to make plans on the spot, will you? Mal, you and Khlened—”

But the paladin had already moved in the direction they’d been heading and stood motionless in the corridor. He came back, shaking his head.

“There is at least one enormous blaze going in that chamber. The two giants I sense may be lying in wait to catch us by surprise, but I believe they are asleep or unconscious.”

Maera smiled grimly. She was coming back with all the javelins she could salvage, running the shafts between her hands to test them before stuffing them back into the case. Rowan was doing the same with her arrows. “Better if we know for certain. That would be work for rangers, I think. Come, sister.”

Lhors stared at the spear he held. He hadn’t even thrown one, he realized. The creatures hadn’t come close enough for him to have been of use. He hoped no one else had seen the panic he’d felt when those monsters came charging.

Rowan touched his shoulder. “We’re going to make certain the giants up there”—she gestured toward the doorless chamber and the glow of fire—“somehow did not hear all that just now. Come help, will you?”

“I... help? Me?” He blinked then nodded. “If I can.”

“You’ll do, lad,” Maera allowed. She melted into deeper shadow along the north wall, edging sideways toward the distant firelight. As the rest of the party sought a hiding place away from the scene of battle, Lhors and Rowan went after Maera.



As they neared the open doorway, Maera gestured for Lhors to ease over to the south wall with her while Rowan kept to the north. She fit an arrow to the string as she vanished into the dark opening that went straight north. Maera signed for Lhors to stay where he was and watch while she slipped partway down the angled passage.

It wasn't quite as dark that way—enough that Lhors could tell the passage branched again farther on. Ruddy light stained the walls down there, and he could hear the distant sound of a hammer battering metal into shape and, when that ceased, the loud huff of a bellows. I was right about the smithy, he thought. He felt a little better. Maybe he had contributed something after all.

Maera was back almost at once, and Rowan came back a moment later. The rangers exchanged rapid and complex sign Lhors couldn't follow, then Maera moved light-footed toward the opening straight ahead. Lhors tightened his grip on the spear and was glad the rangers couldn't hear his wildly beating heart.

The chamber was a horror of bloodstained flooring, instruments that left him sick and weak at the knees. Some had obvious uses. Others he couldn't begin to imagine their exact purpose. High-burning fires licked at metal clamps or turned huge twisted branding irons a glowing red. In the midst of all this, two giants slept heavily, back to back on a filthy mat. The one facing out was smiling, as if in the midst of a pleasant dream.

Maera edged forward, gesturing for her sister to come with her, but Rowan shook her head fiercely, then beckoned, drawing her sister and Lhors back up the hall and into the shadow of the angled hallway.

“You want to kill them, Maera? Why?”

Maera sighed, clearly exasperated. “Can you even ask? They are torturers. They deserve to die!”

“Yes,” Rowan replied sourly. “So what do we do then, murder them while they sleep or let them waken first and *then* kill them?”

“Why let them waken?” Maera demanded. “Go in, kill them, and be done with it! It is not sporting, but this is not sport, sister. This is *survival*.”

“Do not lecture *me*, sister,” Rowan retorted. “Whatever they are, whatever they have done, that does not justify acting in the same fashion. Leave them. I doubt they will waken while we are here. If they do, then death is their fate, but I will not dishonor myself with their blood, nor allow you to do so.”

“Arrogant,” Maera hissed. “Is it not arrogant of *you* to assume we will be able to kill them if they waken?”

“If, was, could have been,” Rowan replied evenly. “It does not matter, Maera. I will not aid you in this.”

Maera’s lips twisted, but she finally sighed and gestured assent. “You would better serve Heironeous than Ehlonna,” she said acidly.

Before Rowan could reply, her twin was gone, moving at a swift pace to rejoin the others.

Rowan laid a hand on Lhors’ shoulder. “I am sorry you had to be party to that,” she said quietly. “My sister is a good person, but she has a special grudge against giants.”

“I hate giants,” Lhors said after a moment’s thought “My father... my village... But I could not have killed those two while they slept. However evil they must be to work in such a horrid place, it does not make it right for me to act the way they do.”

“You speak for me,” Rowan said as she eased back into the main corridor, “but I would not share such opinions with Maera were I you.”

Maera had apparently failed to convince Vlandar either. She and Malowan had drawn aside and were arguing in fierce whispers as Rowan and Lhors rejoined the company. Rowan went over to Vlandar and briefly explained what the three of them had seen.

“South up there is the passage leading to the smithy. North are slave pens or prison cells with bugbear guards. And there is”—she hesitated—“a trail of blood, fresh and old both, that goes between the north passage and the torture chamber.”

“There are prisoners that way,” Nemis said softly. “No humans, no elves—orcs and trolls. I pity them, but I will not risk my life to free them.”

Vlandar nodded. “Even Mal agrees we dare not try to help them. Most of them would not thank us and might even try to kill us to win favor from Nosnra.”

“Let us go before any other guards come out of that barracks,” Malowan said. “There are more bugbears in the farther rooms—behind closed doors, fortunately for us. But they are not the only enemy that might come through here.”

Vlandar nodded and took up the lead, the rest following as they had before, but this time Rowan moved sideways so she could both watch where she walked and keep an eye on their back trail.

Once inside the southwest passage and out of the light from the torture chamber, Vlandar halted again and beckoned Malowan up with him. The two exchanged a few brief signs. Lhors could follow some of it, including “search,” and “caution,” but some of it must have been personal sign between the two. Vlandar held the rest of the company back with him while Malowan and Agya stole quietly forward, stopping at the barely visible bend in the hallway. They were back almost at once.

“It is very loud in there, so no one will hear us,” Malowan whispered softly. “There are dwarves in there. The ones I could see are chained, but there were others that I could sense but not see.”

Vlandar frowned at the opposite wall. “Some are prisoners, but some might not be. Some of them might be allies of the giants, especially if they are not all from the same tribe. You could not tell, Mal?”

“I would have to get closer to use such a spell.”

“Hmmm.” Vlandar considered this briefly. “Some are prisoners at least. How many giants?”

“Two,” Agya whispered. Lhors thought her eyes seemed huge. Whatever was in that room had scared *her*, it seemed. “And they’re bigger’n those rotters up above and blacker’n a cook pot.”

“Fire giants,” the paladin said evenly. “We will need to hit them hard and fast.”

“I know,” Vlandar replied tiredly. “No Mal, I’m not arguing. I’m of your mind. A warrior who won’t help the broken and downtrodden is nothing but a thug with free room and board from his king. I just—”

“Consider this,” Malowan broke in. “The guard-change off that big chamber happened just as we came out. Have you ever known a lair where guard-changes were not all done at the same time? So the guard on that rockslide likely just changed also.”

“You’d trust to that?” Maera demanded.

“No,” Malowan said, “I call it likely. But stay ready for the unlikely all the same. It is *likely* that any dwarves imprisoned down here are not used only in the smithy. Once the fires here are banked, they would be put to work elsewhere. If that is so, at least some of them will know their way around down here. Freed, they could be strong allies.”

“Damn you for a logical man anyway,” Vlandar said with a faint smile. “I wish I could find fault in your argument, but I can’t.” He tapped Nemis on the shoulder.

The mage, who had been keeping an eye on the corridor, turned and asked acerbically, “Can we leave this place before we are discovered dithering out here?”

“At once,” the paladin assured him. “One question. Do you have a spell to make a wall of silence across the entry to the smithy, should we need one?”

Nemis shrugged. “I memorized a number of them, knowing we would need them.”

“As soon as we’re ready,” said Vlandar, “put it up so that the noise doesn’t travel.”

Agya started and shivered as the distant roar of a great ape suddenly echoed down passage.

“Yes, we are getting away from that,” Vlandar assured her.

“Aye. To go after brutes in a room wi’ more swords’n I can count. You’re certain on this?” she demanded of the paladin.

“Certain I must try,” he said with an unapologetic shrug.

“Get yourself killed yet,” she said tiredly, “but if you’re on, so’m I.”

Khlened licked his lips. “I’ve fought with dwarves before. They’re not all so bad, though it’s a job o’ work to make ’em divide treasure up.”

Maera stirred, but Rowan gave her an urgent and complex sign. Maera cast her eyes up and shrugged when Vlandar glanced at her, clearly awaiting her response.

“It wouldn’t be my choice,” she said brusquely, “but I’ve no say. Go on.”

“Thank you,” Malowan replied simply. He led the way down-hall and then down the angled passage toward firelight and an increasingly loud din of hammers and harsh voices that sang a guttural song to match the rhythm of the hammer strikes.

Vlandar eased to the fore, stopping just short of the ruddy light, and waited for Nemis to create his wall of silence. The mage knelt and drew a square of red cloth from his pack. The man was grinning, Lhors realized in astonishment. His black eyes glittered as he got back to his feet and moved up next to Vlandar. The warrior eyed him curiously, then shrugged and moved to the other side of the hallway so he could see more of the chamber. He beckoned for Lhors to join him.

The smithy was an odd-shaped room, almost a corridor that ended abruptly. One branch seemed to go around a corner north, the other east. Storage, perhaps. Lhors could see two dwarves, bound with enormous chains around their throats and one wrist, carrying pikes and swords in the direction of a—

No wonder Agya looked scared, Lhors thought. The brute he could see was much taller than the hill giants he had seen, and his skin was a glistening black. He wore only thick hide pants and a buckler that held a hammer so huge that even he must need two hands to use it. The only other giant in view, his skin also a deep black that seemed almost blue in the firelight, was the smith. Slightly shorter but much more muscular than his companion, he wore pants, a leather apron, and a close-fitting cap.

Malowan said there were only two, Lhors reminded himself. The paladin had ways of knowing these things. *Only* two. Vlandar seemed aware of his thoughts, or maybe his fear was showing on his face, because the warrior gripped his shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile. Lhors managed a smile in reply, then turned back to study what he could see of the chamber.

The hammer wielder waited just at the edge of sight while his two captive dwarves trudged out of sight along the southern wall. They returned empty handed some moments later. As they passed the giant, he reached down and yanked at the loose chain snaking across the floor, then burst into harsh laughter as the two fell.

The smith turned and snarled something at him. He had to bellow to be heard above the racket of hammers. Five other dwarves were chained at anvils, two working bellows while two others beat spear blades. A fifth sorted through a pile of spears, separating heads from broken shafts and apparently choosing which weapons were capable of being mended and which would need to be melted down and reforged.

Vlandar eased back a pace and cautiously pointed out to his young companion the several piles of weaponry between them and the forge. There were stacks of pikes and spears, another pile of shields and warhammers, a double handful of maces leaning against a wobbly-looking metal rack. Lhors nodded his understanding. *Don't trip on anything.*

Across the hallway, the rest of the company was eyeing the room and the obstacle course. Malowan gestured an assent. Better if they don't know we're here until we want them to, Lhors thought. He wasn't sure he wanted those two giants to know he was anywhere about, but when Vlandar stealthily eased his sword free and raised a hand, Lhors drew a boar-spear and nodded. He eased back to his usual place with the rangers while Malowan moved back into shadow to draw his blades. Khlened came forward to join him. Agya, to Lhors' surprise, also came back to join the rangers—

either Malowan had convinced her or sight of those two monsters had. A thief whose best weapons were knives had no business in there. Nemis eased over to a place between Vlandar and the paladin.

Vlandar looked at his people, nodded, then brought his hand down.

Lhors and the rangers ran into the open, Rowan flanked by her sister and the youth. Maera threw two javelins in quick order, Lhors one that just missed its target. Maera's were foiled by the smith's apron and bounced away. Rowan's arrow caught the second giant high in the shoulder, but her next struck the hammer and spun high, lodging in the ceiling.

The two giants bellowed in fury, and all the dwarves fell to the ground and covered their ears. The one giant drew his hammer and strode forward, bringing his weapon up to strike while the smith was howling for aid.

"That spell of Nemis' had better work!" Khlened yelled.

Vlandar ran past him. "Rangers! Lhors! Get back! Pick your shots and don't waste any! Khlened, Mal, to me!"

The three men fanned out, forming a human shield as the two giants came at them.

Agya shrieked, then clapped her hands over her mouth so as not to distract the paladin. Even against such enormous brutes, Malowan still gave the smith first strike.

The hammer arced down, roaring through the air. Malowan leaped aside, and the huge weapon splintered stone as it struck the floor. Lhors swallowed. Anyone struck with that would not get up again.

Malowan brought his sword around in a blurring sweep. The tip pierced the giant's thick pants. The monster roared with pain and fell back just enough to rip the sword from the paladin's hand. One of Rowan's arrows buried itself just above the giant's waist, and the creature retreated in pain. Malowan threw himself forward, snatched his sword off the ground and eased into line with the other two.

Khlened held his heavy slashing sword in his left hand, and with his right swung one of the bugbear's morning stars. The second giant swung his hammer, intercepting the chain, and ripped the thing from the barbarian's hand. Khlened howled a berserker oath, reversed his sword and plunged straight up, but the giant was more agile than he'd expected and was already out of reach.

"Damn ye!" Khlened roared. "Stand and fight!"

Vlandar shouted suddenly, mixed surprise and pain. The smith's weapon had bounced off a hanging chain and recoiled into the warrior's shoulder. A direct blow would probably have taken the arm, Lhors realized. As it was, Vlandar's armor was dented and his arm hung limp. Without Malowan braced against him, he would have fallen.

The giant brought his weapon back to finish Vlandar. In that instant, the smoldering fire that had been building in Lhors suddenly blazed. Between one heartbeat and the next, he saw his father impaled on a giant's spear, saw the blood gush from his father's mouth, saw women and children wailing in terror as they were cut down or trampled, saw little Aryn as the life departed his eyes.

"Noooo!" In one swift, fluid motion, Lhors hefted his spear, stepped, and threw.

The spear sailed through the air and plunged through the startled giant's throat. The massive hammer fell to the floor as the monster tried to scream and pull the shaft

from his throat. Malowan dragged Vlandar away and deposited him next to Rowan. The smith finally managed to grab hold of the spear and yanked. The javelin came out, followed by a gush of blood that pumped with the beat of his heart. He stared for a moment as his knees gave way, then his eyelids sagged and he slumped to the floor. He did not move again.

There was roaring in Lhors' ears, his heart was racing, and he was having trouble seeing. He took a deep breath, and the room slowly solidified about him.

"Khlened! Get back!" he heard Nemis shout.

The barbarian swore furiously but began slowly backing away. The giant came after him, howling what Lhors thought must be curses or threats in his own language. Nemis yelled again, more urgently.

"Damn it all, I'm doing it!" Khlened snarled. "Tell *him!*"

"Not like that! Turn and run!"

"You're mad!" The barbarian clearly had his hands full and then some. As far as Lhors could tell, the giant either hadn't understood the exchange or was making too much noise to hear them.

Malowan came running, his reclaimed sword a dark red.

"Do it!" he bellowed. "One, two, *go!*"

Khlened bellowed, turned on his heel, and sprinted back toward the corridor. He leaped over a pile of spears, but one shaft caught his foot and he stumbled, sending poles spilling in all directions. He managed to keep his feet and gasping for air, shot past Nemis, who was muttering into his scrap of red cloth. Once past Lhors and the rangers, the barbarian turned back, sword at the ready.

The giant was coming toward them, licking his lips and shifting the hammer from hand to hand. Suddenly, he stopped dead, stumbled back a pace, and dropped the hammer as a cloud of enormous bees arrowed straight for him. He yelped in surprise and then in pain. Swinging his arms wildly, he suddenly bolted forward in a panic, but his foot caught on his fallen hammer. He tripped and went sprawling.

Maera was ready. She took three quick strides and threw her javelin. It pierced the vulnerable skin between neck and shoulder. Nemis came right behind her and ripped a torch from the wall. At his order, Rowan and Lhors also grabbed torches and the three moved to contain the maddened swarm and try to drive it away.

The thick swarm buzzed in a black cloud about the giant, but the smoke of the smithy combined with the nearby torches was too much for the bees. Before long, they had all dissipated into the hall and were gone.

The giant was a dreadful sight. Bleeding freely from the neck, his face puffy, his hands already too swollen to even try to pluck the shaft from his shoulder, he wheezed fearfully. Possibly, Lhors thought, he'd been stung in the mouth. He almost felt sorry for the creature, but Khlened swore a vicious sounding oath and ran forward, sword high over his head. He had to bring it down across the back of the giant's neck twice before the brute lay still.

Malowan eased past the two dead giants and contemplated the dwarves. They gazed back at him, quiet for the moment. Most looked wary, but one fellow—shorter than his fellows, his brown hair shot with gray, and his beard and moustache a mix of brown, gray, and red—gave the paladin back the same measuring, thoughtful look.

Malowan broke the silence. He tried two different languages before the dwarves seemed to understand him. The ruddy-bearded one answered him at some length.

Suddenly, Khlened came across to stare closely at him. “Bleryn?” he asked. “Is that you?”

“Fist?” the dwarf replied in guttural common. He grinned suddenly and would have come forward to embrace the barbarian, but his chain caught. “My old friend Khlened, the fool of a Fist?”

Khlened swore, happily this time, and closed the space between them, pounding the dwarf on the back. “Ye great idiot, which of us is fool now? Knew ye’d wind up some place like this someday.”

“Hah,” the dwarf retorted as he freed himself from the rough embrace and gripped Khlened’s forearms. “Much help *you* would have been! Some surprise to me that you’re alive at all.”

“I’m not the one wi’ silver in m’ beard,” the barbarian growled then turned to grin at Malowan. “This ’un you can trust beyond all doubt. I know him, I fought with him, and I’ve reason to owe him.”

“Ah, that,” the dwarf said easily, “was nothing. Happened to be where I could be of use when I was needed.”

“Saved my mother and sister from certain torture at the hands of frost giants up in the Griff Mountains,” Khlened said flatly. “Wasn’t for him and his helping us in battle, well...”

Back near the entry, Agya stirred and mumbled something under her breath. Lhors eyed her curiously. “What was that?”

Her lips twitched. “Ain’t it a good finding someone he trusts? Makes *me* want ’im for companion.”

“You don’t think... ?”

“Wager we gained us a dwarf—one at least,” the girl replied sourly. She suddenly spun partway around, throwing dagger in one hand. Lhors brought his own spear to the ready, but they both relaxed when a familiar form emerged from the gloom.

A half-breath later, the mage—who must have slipped back up the hall after containing his bee spell—came walking into the light.

“How do you *do* that?” Lhors asked the girl. She shrugged, clearly not understanding, and he continued, “Your reflexes, how can you be that fast? And how did you know he was there? Did Malowan teach you his magic or something?”

“Me?” the girl snorted, but she was grinning now. “Learn paladin magic? There’s a good ’un. Takes all kinds of purity to do what ’e can, and not just body purity—if it was only that, then p’raps I could.” Her grin widened as Lhors felt himself blush. “Nah. ’Tis where and how I lived, and how I kept alive.”

“You mean stealing?”

“Nah, not so much that as...” She frowned at the dagger, returned it to the sheath in the side of her boot and considered this. “City, especially th’ poor parts, is a trap like ’ere. You want t’ eat, it means y’ steal food or steal that as lets y’ buy it. And that’s th’ simple bit. Then ya need th’ right allies to ’elp ya avoid enemies.” She shrugged.

Lhors merely nodded. So far as he could recall, this was the first time she had actually spoken to him without being rude or sarcastic. His eyes sought out Vlandar.

The warrior leaned back against the wall not far away, but as the youth took a step that way, Malowan caught his eyes and shook his head. Lhors swallowed and tried to fight dread.

Agya looked up as Malowan came over. “What’s t’ do?”

“Vlandar will be all right.” The man smiled faintly, turning to Lhors. “He’s one of those who can’t bear being fussed over when he’s hurt or ill. But I told him you were worried, and he said for you to come. Both of you need to come listen, anyway. Khlened’s old ally knows the dungeon level well, and he’s willing to share the information if we take him with us and give him an equal chance at battle and at treasure.”

Agya glanced at Lhors. Her eyes seemed mocking again. “Tol’ you, didn’t I?”

Malowan merely gestured for Agya and Lhors to follow him, and together they went back to Vlandar. The warrior was leaning against Rowan, his teeth tightly clenched. The back of his hand and his fingernails were bloody.

“All right, everything’s under control, Vlandar,” the paladin said. “It’s safe for me to take the time to heal that—and no, I will not insist on removing your armor.”

“It won’t do you any good,” the warrior gritted between his teeth. “I will not let you, and if you even think of touching that...”

“Lhors is here to help me,” Malowan said evenly.

Vlandar swallowed, then managed a faint smile. “So he is. Hullo, Lhors.”

“Sir,” the youth managed.

Malowan patted his shoulder. “He’ll be fine. It’s not much more than a scratch, is it, my friend?” He moved his hands just above the warrior’s armored shoulder.

“Aye,” Vlandar smiled, but Lhors could tell it was forced. “But it would have been much worse for me if not for you, Lhors. Rowan told me what you did. I owe you my life.”

Lhors tried a smile of his own, but he could feel the heat rising into his cheeks and forehead.

“That was *you*?” Agya gasped incredulously. “I thought it was Maera!”

“Not Maera,” Rowan answered. “I saw it myself. Lhors felled a fire giant in one shot.” She gave Lhors a nodding salute.

“Ha!” Agya said as she eyed Lhors up and down. “Well, well. Seems ya might not be so useless after all, Lhors *Giant Killer*.”

“Is someone besides Nemis keeping watch, I hope?” the paladin added, mercifully drawing attention away from Lhors.

Rowan nodded, and she eased Vlandar into a more comfortable position against her. She brushed damp hair from his brow. “Maera is. And I’ve been paying attention to what’s going on here. Khlened is working on his friend Bleryn’s chains.”

As if on cue, the dwarf’s fetters clattered to the floor. The other dwarves were still chained and looking restless, but Khlened brought Bleryn over and squatted next to Malowan.

“Tell ’em,” he ordered the dwarf.

The dwarf’s voice was very deep—not giant-deep, but deeper than any human voice Lhors had ever heard. “This Fist say I can trust you, you warrior and yer folk. These others are dwarves like me, but they aren’t family. I’d not trust ’em, though. All they want’s to flee. They know this underground better’n me, been here longer.

I'd be glad of it if y' could free 'em where they won't run into guards and give us away. Selfish, aye, but there it be."

"Sensible, rather," Khlened growled. "'E tells me th' others are from th' south, and so far's 'e can tell, they've all been 'ere since they got caught. Bleryn knows a little more of th' place. Tell 'em."

"Wait," Malowan said and murmured under his breath.

Vlandar drew a deep, shuddering breath and let it out in a gust as he cautiously moved his arm.

"There," the paladin said grimly. "Thank me by not doing that again."

"I would just as soon," Vlandar agreed and gripped Lhors' hand. "There, good as new, my young friend."

Lhors managed a smile for him, but he felt sick. This was twice now. Hadn't his father said three times paid for all?

"Go ahead," the warrior added with a nod to Bleryn, "finish your tale, but quickly. We dare not stay here much longer."

"I speak Common, but them"—he sent his eyes toward the still-bound dwarves—"don't. As this Fist says, most of 'em hasn't been beyond this room and th' far corner where we sleep. Me, I got talent at buildin', makin' bridges and such, so when I got took, it seemed only sense to me to act like I'd cooperate with 'em."

"Sensible," Khlened agreed. "You cooperate, they trust you, you escape. I'd've done the same."

"Worked—all but th' last part," the dwarf admitted. "Still, I know this level. Up there is the torture chamber. There's a temple back down the long way and over the barrier, but it's not a good place. And the caverns beyond where stone is piled—forget 'em."

"We know about the barrier and the orcs beyond it," Malowan said. "What about the prisoners kept across the main passage?"

The dwarf pursed his lips. "Spent time there myself and wished I hadn't. Nasty place, lots o' little reeking chambers with bugbear guards. Hate 'em."

"Y' speak for me," Khlened growled. "What about th' other dwarves, though? Leave 'em and th' next giant as comes in..."

"Yes, they might think the dwarves helped kill these two. We cannot leave them chained. Bleryn, tell me this. If we simply free them, what will they do?"

"Run," the dwarf replied simply. "We all know of the passage beyond the rockfall, and there is also one with a way out through water. It's above the main prison where the 'masters' come down from the main level or send servants with orders."

Malowan eyed Vlandar then Nemis, who nodded. "The passage just north of the prison cells ends in a well, as I told you. It is a way out, if you fear water less than you fear this place. I say loose them. They can arm themselves here and be no worse off than we."

"If they alert guards—" Vlandar began.

Nemis shook his head. "They stand as good a chance as we. I have read their hearts and doubt they would stand with us. They will be no worse off if they go down fighting the giants or their guards than if they stayed here."

“They are not our responsibility,” Malowan said to Lhors’ surprise. “Let them go, and let us go. Khlened, if you vouch for Bleryn, that is good enough for me, but your oaths bind him as well. He follows orders same as everyone else.”

“Aye,” the barbarian said with a sudden grin. “And y’ve tested ’im in yer own way, ’aven’t ye?”

“Pay no heed at yon Fist,” the dwarf said and held out both hands to grasp Vlandar’s. “He told a little of what y’ plan to do here. Maybe I can help some. Said y’ need a way from ’ere, and somethin’ ’bout treasure. Was a chamber I could show you, if I can trace back th’ way from here. Small place, wit’ ten giants guardin’ me and a pair of orcs. We was stuck buildin’ a pit that guards the way between a door and a small room wit’ but an odd chest or so in it. Odd, they’d guard us so well if there was nothing of value in there.”

“Odd,” Khlened replied, grinning fiercely.

“It’s a plan,” Vlandar said. “Let’s get going on it and get out of here.” He eyed the still-chained dwarves. They looked back at him, mostly expressionless. “Let us free these fellows and then be gone. We have business to finish here.”



Vlandar led the way back toward the main east-west passage, but as they neared it, Malowan drew him back.

“You were wounded back there.”

“And you healed that,” the warrior replied.

The paladin shook his head. “You and I both know you don’t get over the shock of such a blow right away, even healed. Be a sensible leader and delegate.”

Vlandar sighed faintly but nodded agreement.

“Nemis,” the paladin added, “if you have a spell of heavy sleep that you can use from here, put it on those two.” He indicated the torture chamber with a nod of his head.

“Get me to the end of this passage, and I can,” the mage replied softly.

“Maera and I will look first,” Rowan said, “to be certain nothing is waiting for us.”

Malowan laid a hand on her shoulder before she could leave.

“Nothing is,” he said. “I searched.”

Agya came up to join him, but he sent her back with Lhors and Maera. When she was about to argue, a finger against his lips and a stern look silenced her.

“You are not here as a fighter,” Malowan said, the words barely reaching Lhors.

“And a good ward don’t argue with ’er protector,” Agya mumbled under her breath. “Yessir.”

The girl turned away, her lips twisted in frustration.

Malowan gestured for Bleryn to join him—probably learning where things were, Lhors thought. He couldn’t hear any of that, but the dwarf seemed to be glancing at him—or maybe Agya or Rowan who were also close by—as he talked. The youth leaned against the rough stone wall, then settled on his heels to wait.

Vlandar came over to crouch next to Lhors. His hand was dark with dried blood, but as he caught the younger man’s troubled look, he pulled a cloth and his water bottle out and scrubbed the mess away.

“It wasn’t half as bad as it looked,” the warrior assured him, “and it’s completely healed now. I’m fine.”

Yes, Lhors thought, this time. He had precious few people left in the world whom he could call friends, and he didn't want to lose any of them.

"We're just waiting for Nemis to deal with those giants you saw sleeping earlier," said Vlandar.

"But aren't they already asleep?" Lhors asked.

"A sleep spell will keep them asleep until someone comes to waken them. With no doors on that chamber they may not wake for hours. With a little luck, we will be able to get to where Khlened's friend the dwarf knows the way into another passage."

"You think we'll find a way out from there?" Lhors asked. To himself he said, maybe we will never find a way out. Maybe there is no way out except back up through a hoard of giants and others who are waiting to kill us all. Not a good thought, especially in this gloomy passage.

Vlandar shrugged and smiled. "Their chief must come down here sometimes. He wouldn't do that if he couldn't get out, would he? Even hill giants aren't stupid enough to build only one way out of a place."

Lhors looked up as Nemis came back to join them. The mage closed his eyes briefly and made a pillow of his hands, his mouth sagging open, pantomiming sleep. Vlandar got to his feet and held out a hand to help the youth to his feet. Lhors felt a little less worried. They might not be strong as giants or as big, but they had a company with experience and skills.

Malowan beckoned everyone close. "The two giants in that chamber won't waken now unless someone shakes or kicks them. But remember there are other guards about. We must go quickly and quietly, but Bleryn has just told me something." He eyed the rangers.

"It's the ears," the dwarf rumbled. "When giants first took me, they brung me down some stairs and into th' cells 'cross the main room yonder. They kept us separate, but I could see others when they was took out. Your ears reminded me there's an elf down here."

Maera shook her head. "An elf? Malowan, we can't—"

"I know we cannot ignore such a prisoner," the paladin broke in, "but there are barracks near the cells. We must be quick and quiet."

"Fine," Maera said evenly. "Get us there, and we will."

Malowan merely nodded, gestured for Khlened to bring up the rear, and took the dwarf with him as he led the way into the east-west hall.

They eased into the long passage and waited against the south wall while Agya flitted across to listen at the end of the north passage. Vlandar and Lhors watched that way. Malowan and the others kept a close eye on the east passage. The girl shook her head and gestured, *None close*, then glanced into the torture chamber and quickly away. But as she looked down the hall the way they were about to go, she clapped both hands over her mouth and froze. Lhors heard Rowan draw a startled breath. The hair on his neck stood up, and it was an effort to turn and see what frightened them so.

A hideous hill giant and a long-armed hairy brute shambling on all fours came out of the north passage to the main chamber. The keeper and his ape.

The keeper was a crook-backed creature. When he turned to glare through the open barracks door, Lhors could see that one of the giant's eye sockets was empty

and a portion of his nose was missing. A thinning shock of filthy hair stuck straight up from his head like rotting corn stalks in a winter field. The one ear Lhors could see was torn and bleeding. Light glinted on a grubby rag of a jerkin that exposed more than it hid of a chain-mail shirt. He snarled something, baring a few misshapen teeth, perhaps calling for the guards who should be in that chamber.

Lhors glanced back. Agya hadn't moved. The giant seemed preoccupied with the missing bugbear guard, but the ape rose to its hind feet, head moving as if testing the air. Maybe it smelled fresh blood, Lhors thought.

The party hadn't been seen yet, but they soon would be, Lhors knew. If they moved, that ape would be aware of them. Possibly it could smell them from where it was; the distance wasn't that great, but enough light poured into the passage from the torture chamber that the guard and his ape would see them as soon as they turned this way.

The ape tugged at its chain. *It* knew where those guards were. Lhors was certain of it. The guard snarled what might have been a name or a curse, then dragged the ape back and cuffed it. The creature fell back, but still sniffed the air suspiciously.

The giant turned to look down the long end of the passage. At first, he stared at them blankly. When his one eye took in what it saw, he hauled a two-edged battle-axe from his belt and yanked hard on the ape's chain, dragging the creature off its feet and sending it sprawling. The beast opened its mouth to scream, but he yanked on the chain again.

Agya shrieked—a faint little cry that Lhors barely heard—but the ape was suddenly aware of them as well. It rolled onto all fours and bared its teeth, snarling.

"That's done it," Rowan muttered. She ran across the hall to grab the girl and haul her back to the relative safety of the company. Nemis began mumbling under his breath as Rowan drew the girl close and began talking to her in a low voice. "It won't get you, child. We will keep it away from you." Agya nodded and drew a steadying breath as Malowan, Khlened, and the dwarf pelted down the hall straight at the two monsters. The keeper stared at them, then smiled unpleasantly and freed the ape.

The beast shambled toward them on all fours. It looked awkward but moved at astonishing speed. Malowan brought up his sword to slash at it. Khlened and Bleryn braced, back to back, the barbarian with his morning star and the dwarf with a massive axe in one hand and a thick-shafted pike in the other.

Lhors drew a spear, but both enemies were out of range. He'd never get enough arc to his throw.

"Clear the center!" Rowan shouted. "Arrow, mid-hall!"

"You two, hug that wall!" Malowan gestured with his sword for the pair of fighters to go south. He leaped for the north wall just as the ranger's arrows zinged between them. Two hit the ape. It yammered in pain, then swiped the shafts free. An instant later, Maera ran forward and threw a javelin deep into the creature's shoulder.

The ape charged once more, eyes red with hate and pain, its mouth wide and foamy slaver dripping from horrid fangs.

"Lhors, you and Agya behind me!" Rowan said as she steadied another arrow on her string.

"Watch that giant!" Malowan ordered Khlened as he turned back.

“We’ve got it!” Vlandar said. “Stay there!” He drew Lhors with him, putting Rowan and Maera behind a second line of defense. Agya came behind them close to Nemis.

Lhors clutched a boar spear with two hands. He could hear the brute panting, slowing now and looking surprised at the number of them—or deciding which of them to kill first. He could hear Nemis behind him, talking in chant that meant a spell. The stones seemed to shift slightly beneath his feet. Khlened shouted a wordless warning as the giant came toward them, swinging his axe. Lhors saw Bleryn and Khlened jump back as the weapon bit into the stone floor, then brought his attention back to the ape.

“Bleryn!” the paladin shouted. “Does the creature speak Common?”

“Not as I know, why?” the dwarf responded.

“Good!” Malowan shouted back. “You two get as far along his blind side as you can. He can’t judge distance with only one eye!”

“He’s got enough reach, ’e don’t *need* to see so good!” the barbarian gritted.

Rowan shot another arrow, and Maera threw one of her spears. The ape yelled and plucked both free, then backed away from them—perhaps to flee or in response to whatever his keeper was shouting.

Lhors glanced at Malowan, who had his back against the wall so he could keep an eye on both giant and ape.

Khlened was now mid-passage, swinging the morning star furiously over his head. He suddenly released it, staggering back into the south wall as the spiked ball slammed into the giant’s chest and stuck there. The monster wailed much like the ape had and pawed at the weapon to no effect. Blood stained the mail—but not enough of it to cause him lasting damage.

“Damn all! Most of it was took by ’is mail!” Khlened shook out his numbed arm.

The dwarf snarled and ran forward, pike back and ready to strike.

“Get his other eye!” Khlened called out. The giant left off trying to pull the morning star free and swatted at the pike. More by luck or skill than good vision, he succeeded. The point bounced off the wall, and Bleryn went down. Khlened ran to help him up, and Malowan came after. The ape snarled low in its throat, then to Lhors’ astonishment, seemed to freeze in place.

“He will not come after us now.” Nemis’ voice reached Lhors. A moment later, the mage came around him, his hands moving. “Mal, Khlened! Down flat, all three of you! I’ve spelled the brute! The jailer is now his monster!”

“Are ye mad?” Khlened demanded. He’d hauled Bleryn out of the giant’s reach and had drawn another blade.

Malowan slashed at the giant, who was trying to free the morning star with one hand and swiping at the paladin with the other. The man’s blade slammed into the giant’s leg, bounced off bone or hidden armor, and flew behind him to hit the north wall. The creature clamped his teeth together and gripped the spiked ball with both hands.

Malowan backed away to scoop up his blade. “I know what he’s done, Khlened! Both of you, over here, now!”

The barbarian swore but grabbed Bleryn and hauled him over as the paladin threw himself flat. Lhors stared as the ape suddenly came to life and shook itself. Khlened

dragged the dwarf down under him moments before the ape thundered past them. The giant stared dumbfounded as the ape threw itself on him. Both went down.

Before Malowan could get back to his feet, the rangers darted past him, weapons ready to take on the survivor. When Lhors would have followed, Vlandar held him back.

“There may be guards back that way,” he said. “Watch for them.”

“There are, but they heard nothing,” Nemis said. “I blocked the corridor on all ends with a spell of silence before I bespelled that ape.”

“Watch anyway,” Vlandar ordered the youth. “The rangers and Mal have matters in hand up there.”

Lhors glanced that way briefly as the giant grappled with his ape. The creature was much smaller, but it seemed far stronger. With a final, hellish shriek, the giant went limp and blood poured over the stone floor. The ape rose high on his legs, beating his chest, hissing and grinning before he crouched to feed. The youth turned away again and bit his lower lip.

“He won’t notice us,” Nemis reassured them. “That spell will hold him as long as—”

Maera snorted. “What? Until he runs out of meat? I’m not leaving that thing alive, mage.”

“Nor I,” Rowan said grimly.

“Kill it now,” Vlandar ordered.

Lhors stole a glance at him, then down the hall—carefully not looking at the ape. Rowan approached the creature cautiously, bow fully drawn. She took careful aim and launched an arrow deep into the creature’s back, then backed quickly away, dragging Maera with her. The creature spun to search for the source of the arrow, and Khlened brought his sword down across the ape’s neck.

“Good,” Vlandar said.

Lhors looked, but all he could see now was the motionless ape sprawled across the body of its master.

Malowan stole down the hall to peer up into the north passage that led back to the destroyed stairs. Agya came up behind Lhors and swore under her breath as the paladin vanished that way, but he was back almost at once, signing that the passage and the vast chamber beyond were quiet.

In a few heartbeats, the party was moving again. Fires still burned high in the torture chamber. Lhors thought he could hear snoring but nothing else. He wondered if the dwarves had made it beyond the rock wall.

No one emerged from the prison hallway. If there were prisoners and guards that way, they wouldn’t come out unless it was time for a change of guard or if a prisoner was being moved.

“No one outside this corridor can hear anything,” Nemis said.

“But someone might come out and see us,” said Vlandar. “We need to go. The giants were digging down through that stairwell when we left, and that was some time ago.”

He sent Agya ahead to join Malowan and Bleryn, put Khlened and Nemis at the rear, and stayed in the middle between the rangers and Lhors.

“Sir,” Lhors asked as they skirted the dead giant and his fallen ape, “are we just leaving them? Is that wise?”

“Rowan took her arrows, and Khlened has that oversized morning star back. We shouldn’t waste the time moving them, even though this seems to be an hour when not much moves around down here. We don’t need another fight just now. But look at them, lad. Wouldn’t it seem to you that the two fought, the ape killed his master, then died of his own wounds? Keep things simple, when you can.”

* * *

They made it up the broad passage and into the open room without seeing or hearing anything. Once up against the south wall of the chamber, Lhors could hear someone quarreling on the other side—but at a distance, as if another closed door or another wall was between him and the fighters.

Malowan laid his hands lightly on the wall, then whispered, “Bugbears. None near. Many asleep.”

The door to the cells was slightly ajar. Light leaked around it and through a narrow peephole. None of the party were tall enough to see anything but the ceiling through it. Maera whispered something to Khlened, who knelt and made a cup of his hands for her foot then hoisted her up. She gazed through the slit for some moments, then leaped lightly down.

One guard, she signed. Four, maybe five cells. Some prisoners, one human for certain.

Guard where? Malowan signed.

Close, the ranger replied, then gestured for silence.

Lhors suddenly heard the bugbear stomping toward the outer door, muttering under his breath. Malowan signed for the rangers to move to the hinge-side of the door and for Khlened and Bleryn to take up position on the other side. He braced himself directly in front of it, sword in one hand and a long poniard in the other.

Silence again, broken this time by someone inside giggling in a pain-thinned voice. The guard had begun to draw the door open, and Lhors could make out a bugbear’s shadow on the wall. The creature turned away to snarl something. Malowan nodded once sharply, then ran forward, half-turned, and slammed his foot into the heavy door. The splintered wood swung into the bugbear, sending him flailing for balance down a short passage. He caught himself on the thick bars of a cell, swung back and felt for his morning star. Too late. Malowan was on him, sword point under his hairy chin. The rangers stood between the guard and his weapon, and Khlened and Bleryn now held the north wall. The dwarf snapped something that sounded like an order, but Lhors couldn’t understand a word of it. It sounded more like the bugbear’s language, all spitting and snarling. Whatever he said, it took the fight out of the guard.

“What’d you say?” Agya demanded.

The dwarf shrugged and grinned broadly.

“Told him that ol’ One Eye’s gone and ’is ape’s dead. Told him the wizard there”—he pointed at Nemis—“controls th’ other ape and *he* be its lunch.” The dwarf chuckled. “Not too happy ’bout being et, is he?”

The bugbear was sliding slowly down the bars, huddling in on himself.

Malowan sighed. "I cannot kill the brute like this!"

"I can," Bleryn said, all trace of humor gone. His eyes glinted, and he said something else in the other language.

The bugbear whimpered and curled up like a bug.

"No," the paladin said firmly. "You and Khlened guard it. Do otherwise and you'll answer to me."

"Lhors, Agya," Vlandar added, "find fetters for him."

"Unnecessary," Nemis said and spoke under his breath.

The bugbear went limp.

"He's asleep, paladin," said the mage. "Find your prisoners. I will keep watch to make sure we are not surprised."

Malowan found a bunch of keys hanging from the wall and opened the first cell. The mad giggle began again, weaker this time, though the door was now open.

"Get me a light," the paladin said. "I can see nothing."

Agya clambered onto the guard's bench to pull a torch from its niche and held it up for him. Her eyes fixed on something inside and she gasped.

Malowan took the torch from her and gave her a little shove. "Don't look. Just go."

Lhors froze where he stood. He could clearly make out a wraith of a man who rocked back and forth on a filthy bench. Black, gaping holes gazed where his eyes had once been. One arm ended in a bloody stump, and both his feet were missing.

Gods, how could anyone do that? Lhors thought. How can he still be alive? Lhors suddenly couldn't remember how to breathe, and he scarcely felt Vlandar's hands on his shoulders, turning him away from the opening.

Behind him, the laughter faded. He could hear pained, harsh breathing, then Malowan's voice. The paladin sounded as if he were weeping. "I cannot heal you. If I could, I could not restore your wit or cleanse the horrors from your mind. I can only release you and let Holy Rao restore your spirit to grace and peace."

There was the faint sound of metal against metal. Malowan had drawn a blade.

"You will feel no pain," the paladin rasped. "I swear it."

The paladin drew a shuddering breath, and Lhors turned back just as Malowan plunged his dagger into one of the wretch's empty eye sockets.

Lhors swallowed past a tight throat.

Malowan turned away, knife hanging loose, tears spilling over his eyes. The paladin fought for control, then drew a deep breath and turned back, blotting his eyes. "Dread Heironeous," he said huskily, "see into my heart and show me the way to cleanse this blood from my hands, for you know me, and you know that I acted out of pity and gave him what mercy I could." He turned then and left the cell, gently closing the door behind him.

Agya was very pale. She took the dagger from his fingers and shoved it back into its sheath. Malowan gave her a watery smile.

The rangers were already at the next cell and had it open. A tall man emerged, and Lhors blinked. He had very dark, bronzed skin, and hair as black as coal. He smiled, revealing very white teeth. "Dare a man hope this is a rescue? Not much I

wouldn't do for that." He looked around at the company. "Must be a tale here, so many warriors in old Nosnra's cellars."

"There is," Vlandar said, "and if we get back out of Nosnra's cellars, you'll hear it. I'm Vlandar out of western Keoland."

"I am Gerikh," the man said with a slight bow, "from Istivin on the Davish River, and unfortunately, no swordsman."

"We won't leave you here," Vlandar assured him.

"Good. I've been here with two others since maybe a moon-phase ago. We were working on a bridge near Flen. I'm an engineer. Giants set upon our party. By the time we got here, I was the only one alive."

Malowan was already at the next cell, hands resting on the lock. "I've found your elf," he announced.

Rowan bounded over, peeked in the cell, and immediately set to work on the lock with her dagger. After several moments of mumbled cursing, she drew back in frustration. "Damn all dwarven steel! Bleryn, can you get this lock open?"

Taking Khlened's thick sword, the dwarf walked over to the cell, and with one sharp *crack* from the sword's pommel, the lock fell to the floor.

"Trouble's with yer method," the dwarf said with a crooked smile, "not our 'damned dwarven steel'."

Maera went in as her sister got the door open. Rowan set her jaw, then followed.

The paladin and the rangers were back out moments later, a tall, slender fellow held up between them. A grayish rag encrusted with old blood hid one eye, but Maera tugged it loose, and Lhors saw with relief that it had covered a nasty scrape. He'd imagined much worse.

The rangers got the fellow over to the guard's bench and let him down. Rowan shoved his long, filthy hair back. He seemed only half-conscious. She tugged at one of his pointed ears and quietly said, "We have come to rescue you."

No response. She said something in another language. His eyes opened warily, and he looked at her and then at Maera for some moments, then replied in what might have been the same language.

"He's Florimund, a half-elf" Maera said as Rowan continued talking to him. "He remembers very little. Woods and giants, and then pain. Rowan, we need to get him out of here."

"I agree," Rowan replied. She and Maera got Florimund to his feet and brought him up by the door where Nemis was keeping watch.

Malowan came away from the last cell, its door unopened. "It's a trap. Leave it be." Then he too left the room.

"We have what we came for," Vlandar said. "Let us go before the guard changes. This is no place for us."

The paladin drew his sword. "Nemis, same sleep spell on this guard?"

"He won't waken on his own," the mage said.

"Good. We'll shove him in that cell and lock him in." Malowan waited while Khlened and Bleryn moved the unconscious guard, then turned the key in the door and tossed the ring in the other cell.

"Mal, you stay back with Agya," Vlandar said. "Bleryn, stay with me. Which way?"

Bleryn pointed back in the general direction of the fallen staircase. “The treasure room’s through there.”

“Small room off by itself?” the engineer asked. “I know it. They had me working on the locks not long ago. Couple of the guards were talking about the things supposed to be inside.”

“Let’s get there first,” said Vlandar.

Nemis gestured that the main chamber was clear. Some moments later, Lhors found himself back in the small chamber where they’d slept earlier. The torches were guttering. Once Khlened and Bleryn lowered the door, it felt almost safe here, but he could still hear the distant thud of workers above them.

“We can’t stay long,” Vlandar said. “Bleryn or Gerikh, do you know of any guards nearby?”

“At least one guard, a giant,” the engineer said, “assigned to guard the treasure room. But I overheard the prison guards saying that Nosnra had caught him pilfering and had him torn apart. I don’t know if he’s been replaced.”

“Heard about ’im,” Bleryn said. “Figured between that and all the guards on us when we repaired the traps, there must be wealth in there.”

“It isn’t so much wealth, I heard,” Gerikh said. “That chief of theirs comes down now and again, and he comes back with a scroll—orders, one of ’em said his captain told him. And sometimes he comes down here after those orders come, and he goes in—but he isn’t in there. Way their captain got it from his boss, the chief has some magic thing that takes him to other giants, and he *has* to go when they say.”

“We’ll go now,” Vlandar said.

Maera, who was blotting Florimund’s face with a wet cloth, looked up, her mouth set.

Vlandar saw her look and said, “Tell our companion we will tend his wounds properly once we’re free of this place.”

Rowan whispered something to her sister. Maera nodded, but she still looked angry.

Agya had the panel moved away from another wheel that, when turned, revealed a chamber nearly the size of the main one, but more dimly lit. Vlandar put Bleryn and Gerikh with him to help guide the way. The rest came close behind, Nemis last.

A wild howling and shrieking suddenly shattered the silence. Agya jumped closer to Malowan, and Lhors tightened his grip on his boar spear. Everyone turned frantically, but they could see nothing in the dim light.

Silence once again.

Lhors could just hear Bleryn whisper. “Manticores. They’re penned.” They moved out, hugging the wall, and stopped short of the entry to a passage heading east. In the silence, they could hear giants’ voices, but they sounded distant.

The dwarf pointed. “Stairs back that way down a side passage. Chief comes that way, I think.”

Malowan asked softly. “Nemis, what are they saying?”

The mage leaned against the wall. “Nosnra is there, and someone else wants to put down another ladder. Nosnra says no, his sub-chief has already been killed in the stair’s collapse, and they will break through to the rubble on the other stairs by middle night. The other argues that is too long.” He listened a few moments more.

“They don’t know where we are, and it seems our assumption was correct. Some orc workers revolted and have killed two giants.”

“Where are the orcs now?” Khlened asked. “Are they still roamin’ down ’ere?”

“They did not say,” the mage replied, “though I would surmise that the orcs have been dealt with, since Nosnra’s main concern seems to be with us.”

Vlandar said, “We need light. I cannot see a thing down there!”

Nemis fished a small object from his belt and threw it down the passage. A bail of light rose from the floor partway down the short passage, illuminating walls of finely dressed stone. A dark opening yawned to their right. Lhors thought the distant voices were that way.

“Straight,” Bleryn said. “Main trap’s just beyond the door. I can point it out.”

“We can manage a trap,” Nemis said mildly.

Once Gerikh located the lever to shift the door, it required him, Khlened, and Vlandar to move it. Lhors tried not to listen to the angry voices echoing from above. Gerikh went through first, closely followed by Khlened and Bleryn. Agya jumped as something heavy and metal squawked in protest at being moved. Something else rumbled briefly, then all was silent.

“It’s fine,” Malowan assured her quietly. “Nemis has the sound blocked for us again. Let’s go.”

He put his ward and Lhors ahead of him. Nemis came last, the ball of light following him like a pet firefly. Once the chamber was sealed, Vlandar beckoned everyone close. “Mal, you and Nemis will know what we want from here. Find it quickly. We haven’t much time. The rest of you look around. Khlened, remember there are things we need more than gold. Lhors, help Rowan. Look for scrolls, written messages, maps. None of us except Mal and Nemis are to open anything—there will likely be traps.”

Lhors eyed the jumble resignedly. He could see one large chest, a metal box close by, some smaller chests, and a pile of wooden rubble against the opposite wall. Another wall was thick with a dampish looking yellow growth that smelled like moldy bread.

Maera had braced Florimund in a corner. She, Rowan, and Lhors waited until Nemis used a reveal spell on the chests and boxes. Agya came behind him with her lock picks, but Bleryn had already broken the lock on the iron box with his knife. There were coins—more than Lhors could ever have imagined in one place. The thief gasped, then grinned broadly and plunged both hands into the pile.

“Treasure,” Rowan said. “Remember you may have to carry whatever you take here for some time.”

“Thought we were going back to th’ river,” Agya said as she looked up from the chest.

“That depends on what we find here to get us out of here,” Malowan said. He’d come quietly up behind her. “Take a purse’s worth of coin. You’ve have earned it.” He turned to one of the rangers. “Rowan, look there.”

Lhors turned as he heard the ranger gasp. He was almost afraid to look. The smelly yellow stuff had vanished, revealing swords, spears and other weapons. Rowan crossed the chamber and took down a quiver of long arrows. She drew one. The fletching-feathers shimmered.

“These will do nicely,” she said admiringly. “Besides, I have only two of my own arrows left.”

“Magic arrows?” Lhors asked as the ranger fastened the quiver to her shoulder.

“They are from the Valley of the Mage,” Maera said as she came up. “Is this safe, Rowan?”

“They are not evil, as some tales say,” Rowan replied. “Touch that spear, and tell me what you feel.”

Maera eyed her mistrustfully but laid a hand on the shaft. She smiled then, took the weapon down and ran loving hands over the shaft.

“They were made for good and will serve you well,” Malowan said as he came over. He turned back just as Agya reached for one of the swords. “Do not—”

But he was too late. The girl wrapped her hand around a hilt then cried out in pain. Malowan pulled her away from it and cupped the hand gently. Blisters covered her palm and ran up her thumb and fingers. “Easy, child.” He murmured under his breath and ran gentle fingers across the back of her hand and, when it relaxed, across her palm and fingers. Agya eyed it fearfully, then in wide-eyed astonishment. There was no sign of injury.

“Touch nothing else unless I tell you it is safe,” the paladin warned her, then took both swords down. Agya stared up at him, and he smiled. “For me, these are safe. I will take one. Nemis?”

“I am not pure enough to wield the thing,” the mage said from across the chamber, “even if I could use one—or needed it. Mal, come here. You brought that red powder, didn’t you?”

The paladin settled one sword against his back, reluctantly put the other back on the wall, and fished a tiny box from a pouch at his belt. He handed it to the mage, who sprinkled some of it over the shattered wood that might have been a barrel at one time. There was a faint explosion and a bloom of ruddy smoke that cleared to reveal a solidly built cask. Another pinch of the red powder, and this too burst open.

Agya came around Malowan to peer at the contents with them. “Just a map!” she said dismissively.

Nemis had the thing spread across his knees. Lhors could not make out any of the writing on the hardened sheet of skin, but Nemis and Malowan seemed to be making sense of it.

The mage held up a black oblong box. “This was under the map Vlandar, and the map is a plan of the frost giants’ hold—Nosnra’s guide, from what is written here. And here”—he pointed—“are instructions for the device that takes him to the Rift.”

“Rift?” Agya asked warily. “Frost giants?”

“The Rift is a place of ice and cold, such as frost giants like” the paladin explained. “I doubt we will care for it, but Nemis”—the paladin glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice—“will the drow be there?”

“I doubt it,” Nemis said quietly. “Those I knew prefer heat to cold, and they would not trust Nosnra with anything that took him straight to them. They may travel to the Rift to meet with him, or he may go beyond the Rift.”

“We’ll learn when we get there,” Malowan said as he opened the oblong box.

Lhors hoped the man felt as confident as he sounded. Lhors merely felt ready to be done with fighting and headed back home.

But you have no home anymore, the back of his mind whispered. Lhors pushed the thought away. It was true enough, but that was a matter to deal with once he was far away from giants and bugbears and orcs.

The box held a chain, a hide scroll, and another black chain that reflected the dim light. Nemis took the black chain. “Don’t touch it, Mal,” he warned as he unfurled it. “You won’t like it.” He looked down to read from the scroll again. “Instructions for the chain, from ‘the Jarl, Chief of the Rift.’ He addresses Nosnra as if the brute were his slave.” He glanced up. “Mal, you’re monitoring them up there?”

“As best I can,” the paladin said. “There are no giants in the passage out there, no one nearby except those manticores.”

“That won’t last much longer,” Vlandar said. “I fear our time is almost gone. Tell me how this chain works.”

Nemis read down the scroll, set it aside to scrub his hands vigorously on his pants, then spread the chain out across the floor. It was longer than it had looked in the chest.

“I won’t loop it properly until we are ready,” the mage said.

Vlandar got everyone together. “We’re leaving here soon, by the magic in that chain. We have no choice at this point. It is this or fight our way out against impossible odds. It will be very cold where we’re going, so whatever warm things you have in your packs, put them on now. And be ready to fight. There may well be guards where we emerge, frost giants. Khlened, you said you’ve fought them before.”

The barbarian’s eyes narrowed, and he grinned fiercely. “Aye. Tough brutes, and far more cunning than these hill giants, but they bleed same as you’n me.”

“Pardon me, Vlandar,” Lhors spoke up hesitantly, “but how can we be sure that this chain won’t drop us into a frost giant’s cook pot or in the middle of a dragon’s nest?”

Vlandar looked grim, but before he could answer, Nemis jumped in. “It is a possibility. I won’t deny it. But things of this nature are seldom that precise. Nosnra is a thickheaded brute, but even he would want to travel safely, and the frost giants wouldn’t want others dropping in at any time. That would be dangerous should the device fall into the wrong hands.”

“Like *ours*, y’mean,” Bleryn said.

“Precisely.” The mage smiled. “In all likelihood, we will emerge some distance from the frost giants’ hold, well out of any ‘danger zone’.”

“True enough,” the paladin conceded, “but Lhors does have a point. Wherever we emerge, it will likely be watched. You don’t leave a magic door to your stronghold and not guard it.”

Vlandar sighed. “All you say is true, but the point remains: we have no choice. We can’t swim out of here on the river. One set of stairs is collapsed and being cleared by who knows how many giants, and the other exits are surely heavily guarded. It’s this way or no way, but I advise everyone to go with weapons at the ready.”

Everyone nodded reluctantly. Not one of them seemed pleased.

Lhors watched as the mage felt the links, then picked three in a row and drew the outer two together, touching the new join with his fingers. When he let it go, the two

stayed together and the third locked between them. He twisted the chain into a double loop, then squatted to hold the upper off the lower.

“Half of you stand in one loop, half in the other,” Nemis instructed.

Vlandar divided them into two groups. Khlened, Bleryn, the rangers, and their injured comrade composed one. Nemis, Malowan, Agya, Lhors, and Gerikh made up the other. Everyone who had a weapon held it ready. Nemis looked them over, then glanced behind him.

Lhors could suddenly hear giants—many of them. The mage got to his feet and dropped the chain. It hit the floor with a muted clank.

The treasure room flared a brilliant blue-white and vanished. Lhors clutched Vlandar’s arm, scared and dizzy both, but the sensation of being nowhere was gone as quickly as it had come. In its place came snow, ice, and a hellish wind that cut through every layer they wore.

Khlened spat. His moustache was already stiff with ice.

“Frost giants,” he snarled. “I *hate* frost giants.”



Icy wind shrilled, blowing snow and ice crystals around them. The sky seemed to be night-dark, but it was hard to tell with so much wind and snow. Agya huddled in on herself, teeth chattering. Lhors, who had enjoyed snowfalls in his village as a boy, stared in horror at the blizzard. His face felt frozen in just the few moments they'd been here. He dragged the thick woolen scarf up over his nose and mouth and peered at a tree maybe four paces away—the only thing he could see besides blowing white. The branches were so laden that he could barely make out that it *was* a tree.

Khlened tapped his shoulder. “Stay clear of trees!” he shouted in order to be heard over the gale. “Tree like that hides pockets under th’ branches. Means you step in the wrong place, you could fall far enough to break your neck!”

The barbarian turned to Vlandar. “We can’t stay out in this! Even a Fist won’t stay in th’ open, and the rest of ye—you’ll freeze in no time!” He peered around, then walked past the warrior and eased down between two ice-coated boulders. He was back in moments. “’Tis no true shelter, but there’s next to no wind back there. Get close t’ each other. Me’n Bleryn’ll find some place better.”

“If not, we can dig snow tunnel,” the dwarf said. Agya stared at him in horror and Bleryn chuckled. “Surprising, how warm it is in a snow tunnel. No wind.”

“Go,” Vlandar ordered tersely.

“Do not go down,” Nemis said. “The giants’ hold is down. And be careful.”

“Careful, huh?” Khlened snorted. “Man can’t spend treasure if ’e’s dead, eh?”

With that, he was gone, following Bleryn. They were lost to sight before they’d gone ten paces, and their footprints were already filling in.

Vlandar led the way down between the boulders and back as far as he could. Lhors sighed faintly. The wind dropped away almost entirely in this rough shelter, and while the snow beyond the stones was deep, it only came to his ankles here.

Rowan left her sister to keep their wounded companion close under her cloak, while she and Lhors helped Malowan compact a high ridge of snow on three sides to block what little wind still came at them.

“Everyone, get as close together as you can,” the paladin ordered. “Watch each other. None of us must fall asleep here.” He settled down next to Agya, and the girl gratefully burrowed into his fur-lined cloak.

After making sure everyone was settled, Vlandar asked, “Nemis, where are we?”

“Near the entrance to the Rift, a major hold of frost giants,” the mage replied. His teeth chattered. “I shortened that chain by a link so we would not appear inside the Rift itself.”

“Well thought, but we’ll talk later,” Vlandar said. “Listen and watch, for now.”

Even bundled close between Rowan and Vlandar, Lhors felt half-frozen, and the noise of the storm frightened him. Anyone could be out there, and they wouldn’t know until too late. But would giants be out in such a storm as this? He doubted it, but then again, he had no experience with frost giants. They were *used* to weather such as this.

Fortunately, Khlened was back while the youth could still feel his fingers and toes.

“Found a cave,” he announced, visibly pleased with himself. “Slopes uphill, low entry, high ceiling inside. Better, some beast ’r ’nother packed in trees, p’raps to make a nest. Bleryn stayed t’build a fire.”

“Beast?” Agya demanded. All Lhors could see of her was her eyes peering out from Malowan’s cloak. They were wide and scared.

“Is it safe for fire?” Vlandar asked.

“No creature of late, we checked. Wood’s dry enough t’won’t smoke, and th’ ceiling will keep it off us and still inside. But no fire’s more deadly in such a storm than th’ chance beasts or giants’ll smell th’ smoke where none should be.” The barbarian shrugged. “Way th’ winds are, who could tell *where* it came from anyway?”

“If yon fella says fire, can we go to it now?” Agya demanded. “P-p-please?”

“Lass is right,” Khlened told Vlandar.

Vlandar nodded. “Of course. Lead, we’ll follow.”

“Stay alert, best you can,” Malowan warned. “I also know cold. It would be easy for one of us to fall by the way and be lost. Watch out for each other. Do not worry about guards. I made a search just now, and I can assure you that there are none outside the Rift in this storm—certainly none up on this ledge.”

“Are you always so cheerful?” Maera demanded waspishly.

“Call him sensible,” Rowan suggested. “Let us go.”

To Lhors’ surprise, she laid a gloved hand on Vlandar’s shoulder. “You were wounded earlier. I know how magic healing works. You crave sleep after. Maera, if you can manage Florimund, I will stay with Vlandar.”

They toiled back into the open and followed Khlened. Lhors gasped and his eyes teared as the wind sliced through his cloak and makeshift face mask. He freed a hand to drag his hood down to his nose before yanking the cloak back snug around him and squeezing his hands into his armpits where they might thaw.

Moments later, his feet scraped on bare stone, and the wind was gone again, replaced by flickering ruddy light. He blinked and shoved the hood back. Khlened’s cave was bigger than their last haven. The youth moved inside, making room so Rowan could come in with Vlandar. The entry was a low, only slightly taller than

Lhors and no wider than he could reach. Wolves might use such a den, but giants couldn't. Mal or Nemis could keep wolves out, he was certain. But he forgot all that as his eyes touched on the fire.

The dwarf sat cross-legged on a ledge of yellowish stone, his axe embedded in a thick branch just behind him. Fire, Lhors thought with longing and moved toward it.

"We had the luck," Bleryn was saying as the youth came near. "Ledge is riddled with caves, but we found this and all this wood on our fourth try."

"Luck indeed," Vlandar said. Rowan was getting the warrior settled on a blanket where he could get warm, his back against the rock wall. The man looked tired and old at the moment, but the ranger caught Lhors attention, sent her eyes sidelong, and nodded. He is just tired because he was hurt, she means. Lhors hoped, but he couldn't ask while Rowan was hovering over Vlandar.

"No beast tracks in this cave, no gnawed bones, no scat—fresh or dry."

"Scat?" Agya asked. She sounded even more tired than Vlandar. She leaned gratefully forward to warm her hands at the fire. Malowan wrapped his spare blanket around her.

Rowan laughed. "Food goes in, scat comes out." The girl managed a faint grin in response. "Speaking of food, I can make a passable soup or stew."

Lhors sighed. "Hot food. It sounds wonderful." He dragged his pack from under his cloak. "Take anything you need. I can't remember when I last ate."

"Still growing, are you?" Rowan replied cheerfully. She was sorting through her own bag and hauled out an odd-looking bit of metal. "One of you fill this with snow for me to melt for soup water. It will take several trips, I fear."

Khlened took the thing and shook it. To Lhors' surprise, the flat piece opened into a tin pail made of overlapping segments, complete with handle. "My task," the barbarian said. "Done this most of m' life."

Maera eased Florimund down flat and covered him with her spare blanket, then dug a similar item from her own pack: a small pot of blackened metal, the base forged to a low tripod. Rowan extended it with a snap of her wrists, then began rummaging through the pile of food the others had set out for her. She separated things, putting aside packets of cracker-bread and dried fruit, then rummaged through two bags of dried beans. She took the canvas bag Vlandar gave her and scooped out several handfuls of dried vegetables, then pulled a bundle of herb-packets from a side pocket on her pack. She plucked a fat brown onion from the braid of them that Khlened carried and tossed two sticks of jerky into the pot. Over all, she poured the first batch of melted snow.

The stew took some time to cook, but the apple and spiced hot water that Rowan prepared kept Lhors comfortable. Gran had known that trick, and so had his father. The flavor of fruit seemed to soothe his mind as well. He turned to Vlandar to see if the man needed another cup, but the warrior had fallen asleep.

By now, the cave was almost warm. Even Agya was moving around and had shed the spare blanket. Vlandar was awake again by the time Rowan pulled the pot from the ashes, and Gerikh had fed more logs onto the fire twice. They all felt like friends, Lhors thought, but a snowstorm and an unexpected hot meal could do that for people.

Even Maera seemed to feel it—or maybe she was very hungry herself. "We'll want real bread with that, sister. The cracker-stuff we may need later." She broke out

a packet of flour and leavening, swept leaves from a flat rock, then began working water into the dry stuff. Lhors watched as the half-elf kneaded the brownish mess, tore it into strips and deftly braided and shaped it into a round loaf that she shoved it into the ashes.

Rowan tested the soup and nodded. “Cups or bowls, everyone,” she announced, then dipped them into the pot and handed them around. Maera brushed ash from her crusty loaf and broke it into equal shares.

Lhors blew on his soup to cool it, sipped cautiously, then stared at Rowan over the rim. “You said passable! It’s—” He couldn’t find the proper word and contented himself instead with draining his cup, then swabbing the last drops up with Maera’s bread.

Rowan laughed and refilled the cup, then handed him part of her bread. “No, take it,” she assured him. “Such praise deserves reward, and a near-grown man needs his food.”

Florimund still slept, but Lhors thought seemed Vlandar almost normal thanks to the warm meal. “All right,” the warrior said mildly. “I feared we might somehow wind up here, even before we left Cryllor. The frost giants have raided the Yeomanry before now, and Keoland too.”

Maera snorted. “The rangers of Keoland have long suspected an alliance between frost and hill giants.”

Vlandar shrugged. “Now we are certain of it. You may have overheard me talking to Nemis and Mal back in that locked chamber. We found proof that Nosnra is now under *orders* to attack Keoland hill villages. We found a written command from the chief of the frost giants along with the chain that brought us here. Who knows how long Nosnra has used that chain to come here to report his successes or failures and receive new orders?”

“Wait,” Khlened said. “*Frost* giants are behind all this? They haven’t the brains for it!”

“They are not in charge,” Nemis said quietly. It was the first time he’d spoken in hours. “They are also under orders... from elsewhere.”

“Oh? And where’d that be?” the barbarian demanded.

The mage shrugged gloomily.

“I hope to learn that information here in the Rift,” Vlandar said, “And that is *all* I think we can hope to learn here. Mal, have you that scroll?”

The paladin fished out the clear tube he’d found in the woodpile and held it up. At Vlandar’s gesture, he handed it to the mage. “Nemis speaks and reads many languages, including Giantish. That is written in Giantish, though not by a giant. Nemis tells me the one who penned the scroll is unlikely to be here and I believe him. In short, I see the Rift as a passage to another place, not a destination in itself. We must all listen to Nemis and Malowan—and Mal, I hope you both will prepare for tomorrow by choosing spells that help us remain unseen and unheard, but just as importantly, spells that will locate devices like that chain.”

Khlened said, “So we look beyond th’ Rift ’cause it isn’t a frost giant in charge? Suits me fine. I left Fist-lands ’cause cold like this is nasty. No sane man’d stand it, if ’e didn’t have to.”

Bleryn put in. “I dislike cold. Never want to see a white bear again.”

“Bear?” That, predictably, was Agya. “How’d y’see ’em through all this white stuff?”

“I can sense them,” Malowan assured her, “but Khlened is right—and so is Bleryn. We’re here because the alternative was dying in the Steading’s dungeons, but this is not much better because the cold will kill us if the frost giants and their allies do not.”

Vlandar nodded as he got to his feet. “Nosra knows by know that we were in his secret room and that we stole his chain. If he has any other such device to transport messages or himself, the Rift may already be preparing for us.”

“If deer had wings, the wolves would starve,” Maera replied sarcastically.

“And if the rangers stay alert, no tree will fall,” Vlandar retorted—almost as sharply, to Lhors’ surprise. He smiled suddenly. “Apologies, ranger. Stay alert, but I know you all will. Do not be led astray. We seek a quick way from these frozen heights, either back to Keoland or on to find the master who ordered the attacks on Keoland.”

Lhors started as the name bit into his mind.

Vlandar’s hand gripped his shoulder. “Yes, we can return to Keoland with what we know, and I am certain the king will reward us. But what matters wealth if we see the chance to wipe out a dire enemy—and we hesitate?”

“If the conditions and the numbers are against us...” Maera countered. “But I agree, warrior. Turn your back on such an enemy, allow her to grow stronger—”

“Her?” Nemis said sharply.

The ranger smiled at him, but the smile did not reach her eyes. “He, they, us, you, them, another, whichever. If there is a chance to defeat such a one—yes, I am of your mind, Vlandar.”

Khlened spat. “More sneaking? Never met a frost giant as deserved t’live! Kill ’em and be done!”

“I side with the Fist,” Bleryn said flatly. “Happens my folk—their shades’ll curse me forever, did I not kill every bastard son of ’em I could.”

Silence. Vlandar and Malowan waited. Khlened and Bleryn stared back challengingly.

“Remember who leads this party,” Vlandar finally said. “Remember I may know things you do not, about this place and about our goal. Still, I will not stop you from killing giants—but only if you will swear to me that you will not act recklessly. You will not draw attention to us, you will not get us killed, and”—he added sharply as dwarf and barbarian grinned at each other—“you will both pledge to keep a close eye on the less winter-hardy of us. We do no good if we die here of cold, and frozen heroes cannot spend treasure. Also, ten of us have a better chance of winning through than two crazed fighters who have no one to back them.”

“A point,” Bleryn said promptly, and drew Khlened aside so they could talk.

Vlandar turned to the rest of the company. “I will set watches by twos tonight. We dare not let the fire go out.”

In the end, he chose himself and Malowan for the first, Maera and Gerikh for the second, Lhors and Rowan for the third, Bleryn and Nemis after, leaving Khlened as most winter-wise of them all to build up the fire and set a pot of hot gruel to soaking.

“What of me then?” Agya demanded sharply.

“Sleep and plenty of it,” the warrior replied. “We will need you alert tomorrow.”

Lhors wondered when she didn’t argue. Perhaps the cold had sapped her temper. One good thing about this place then, he thought as he wrapped up in his cloak across the fire from her.

Rowan settled close enough to the youth, he could have touched her. “Maera?” she said quietly. “Florimund ate and he’s sleeping, but he is restless.”

“Do you wonder at that?” Maera asked sourly.

Lhors eased his eyes open a little. The sour twin—as he had come to think of her—managed a thin smile. “Rowan, I told you I will stay with him and wake him from his bad dreams. I said he would be my task.”

“Of course,” Rowan murmured.

Maera got up and left, leaving the cave silent.

“Lhors?” Rowan asked quietly.

He hadn’t been asleep, and of course, she knew that. His face felt hot. “Yes?”

Rowan laughed, deep in her throat. “When we share watch later, pay attention to my sister and her charge, will you? She’ll know if I do, and it will make her angry.”

“Whatever you ask,” he said.

Rowan laughed again and patted his stubbly cheek. “Don’t promise such a thing. It’s dangerous.” Her face suddenly turned more serious. “I do not trust Florimund. I can’t say why. Maera does, but she chooses her martyrs with her heart. I do not.”

Lhors frowned. “I think I see. She believes whatever he has told her, but you are afraid there may be something, um, behind the words?”

“Just so,” Rowan replied gravely.

“But he was a prisoner of the giants, and they—”

“Tortured him?” Rowan finished for him. “Yes. Still, I have learned by hard experience to trust *my* distrust, if you see what I mean. Thank you, Lhors.” She gained her feet gracefully and went to shake out her blankets.

Lhors sighed faintly, then eased onto one elbow and looked around. Khlened and Bleryn seemed to be asleep—at least one of them was snoring. Gerikh huddled almost on top of the firepit, while Agya was only visible as a tuft of ruddy hair poking out of a pile of blankets. The paladin lay close by, wrapped only in his cloak. Nemis bent over his spellbook. The last vision Lhors had before he fell asleep was of the mage, a blanket draped casually over his shoulders, his lips moving soundlessly as he turned the pages.

* * *

Watch followed watch, and outside the sky grew slowly light—briefly very bright indeed as the sun speared through heavy cloud. But gloom returned at once. The wind died down, but never for long. The shriek of harsh air storming the stones outside made sleep hard to come by, but the fire kept the immediate stone floor warm, and each of the watches brought in pots of snow to keep two pots steaming, one of plain water, the other one of Maera’s teas. During the last watch, Nemis stirred up a large pot of gruel, then sought his blankets while Khlened kept the fire going.

By the time Vlandar was awake, Khlened was pacing, eager to be off. “We need t’find entry—”

“Already found,” Nemis said. He sounded half-asleep and seemed to be having trouble getting his gruel from his clay cup to his mouth. “I have the map of the Rift—both levels—that was hidden in Nosnra’s secret room with the chain.”

To Lhors’ surprise—and Nemis’ visible displeasure—Vlandar sent Khlened and Bleryn out to scout the area. Vlandar must have been aware of the mage’s mood. After the two had vanished in the still-swirling snow, he said, “Nemis, this is not mistrust. I know you have the map, and you have searched as far as your magic can reach. But those two are used to action. Give them a little now, and they may be easier to control later. Who knows? They may actually find something your spell did not.”

Nemis actually smiled. “Now you throw young Agya’s words at me, but you are right, of course. They know this kind of country, and I do not.” He settled next to the fire and opened his book. “This also gives me a little time to find more useful spells.”

“Both of us,” Malowan said as he sought a quiet corner to commune with his god.

“Thank you,” Vlandar said. “Nemis, if I may have the map—and Rowan, I know rangers are usually good at maps. Come help me with this one, will you?”

Lhors hesitated, empty mug in hand, but both ranger and warrior beckoned for him to join them over the map. I know nothing of such things, the youth thought. He sighed quietly. But I suppose I can learn.

* * *

He didn’t feel so confident some time later after the scouts came back. The writing on the map was nothing but oddly shaped marks to his eyes, and all he was certain of was that this Rift was vast, cold, and consisted of two levels with guards everywhere.

Bleryn muttered into his beard as he settled close to the fire. “Fell,” he said briefly.

“No surprise t’me,” Khlened retorted. “’Tis hellish slick everywhere.” He turned to talk to Vlandar. “We saw a path into th’ Rift. There was ruttled ice from huge prints, nasty place. No guards outside as we could see.”

Bleryn snorted. “Tell ’em about yeti,” he said.

Khlened rolled his eyes. “Y’ didn’t expect ’em, place like this? Was two going that way.” He pointed where Lhors thought north might be. “Yeti tracks all over up here. Nasty creatures love it here. We also say one roamin frost giant wi’ two wolves on his heels. Mind now, wolves ain’t bugbears! Th’ wolves can hear and smell all too well, and a pack of ’em is bad news. And yeti. Even the Fists avoid yeti.”

“I can agree with that,” Malowan said mildly. He looked over at Agya, who was drawing on thick, oversized mitts Lhors thought must be the paladins. “Agya,” the man said, “remember that I can keep you safe from them.”

“Yessir, I know it,” she replied and managed a smile, but Lhors could see her eyes were worried, and the hands under the mitts trembled.

“We will leave as soon as we can,” Vlandar said. “But all of you, make sure you are clad as best you can be and that your weapons are to hand. There will be guards at or near this entry. Our goal is to get through this place before cold can kill any of

us, and we first and foremost seek the key—whatever it is—that will guide us beyond the Rift. Leave the fire to die out. We’ll want the warmth to the very last.”

He turned as Maera touched his arm. She was holding up a very pale Florimund. “Warrior, he recalls something I thought you should know.”

“Tell him, yes,” Florimund whispered. “Such cold, the screech of wind. This—I think I was—was first brought here when I was—was taken, you know. I recall giants wrapped to the eyes in thick furs and a white-furred brute like a hairy man. Tunnels of ice and such cold...” He licked pale lips, and his eyes kindled. “I was not afraid, only angry they dared lay hands on me!” He glanced sidelong at Maera, who patted his shoulder. “Still, they eat our kind. Frost giants. But there was another, a giant called Nosnra. They gave me to him, and Nosnra’s guards hauled me over to a double circle of chain. I do not remember anything after that—except dark and pain.” He choked and buried his face in long-fingered hands.

Maera she stroked his hair. “You are safe, cousin,” she murmured. “Rowan and I will protect you until you are strong enough to do battle again.”

“Battle. Yes.” Florimund stirred under her hands. “Yes I will. I will wreak death among these... oh gods, cousin, I am so very weak! And the cold wakens each wound the torturers inflicted. No, I will not speak of it!”

Maera spoke urgently against his ear, then drew him away.

Vlandar glanced at Lhors, who frowned at his hands. He came over to sit beside him and whispered, “Lhors?”

“Sir?”

“I know Rowan spoke to you after some tiff with her sister last night—over Florimund. What did you think of all that, just now?”

His father had asked such questions this last year, over game trails, Lhors remembered. “Sir, the fellow was locked in that cell, but who could have known we would be down there?”

“Yes,” Vlandar said gravely. “He truly was a prisoner. Still... ?” He looked a question.

Lhors shrugged. “Rowan worries. She told me so—because Maera trusts him too much. I understand they are kin, if only because they are half-elves, but my own cousin from New Market was not my friend, and I would never have trusted him.”

“I agree,” the warrior said. “Sensible youth.” He looked up as Gerikh and the dwarf came over.

“Uh, sir? This Rift...” the engineer began apologetically.

“Thing is,” Bleryn added, “We know it. Him ’cause of ’is trade, and I’m from cold near as bad as this. Both of us should be able t’ spot traps before they get any of us.”

Vlandar nodded. “Good point. One of you up front and one at the rear. Your choice.”

The paladin broke in. “But whoever goes ahead with Malowan must accept Agya.”

“Agya—the girl-child?” the dwarf asked.

“She’s Mal’s ward, once a street-thief. Ask Khlened. She can smell things most of us wouldn’t.”

“That keeper and his ape,” the barbarian agreed.

Vlandar nodded again. "A spell might hide wolves or yeti. Agya's nose will warn us anyway."

"Like it," the dwarf said. "Me for the front."

"Done," Vlandar said and swung his pack over his shoulder.



The sky was a pale gray, proof the sun had risen, but there was no hint of where it might be under the thick mass. The wind had lessened but still gusted strongly. To Lhors it seemed even colder outside. Khlened, who had taken last watch, told them it wasn't much past daybreak. "An hour when the chiefs will be sleeping, if they're like frost giants I've battled."

"Good," Vlandar replied. "But the guards may not be asleep."

Vlandar and Nemis spent a few more moments with the map of the Rift while the others finished getting ready, then the warrior put Bleryn ahead of him and the mage, Lhors just behind, with Khlened to bring up the rear.

Agya was just behind Lhors and quietly grumbling as she toiled on. The youth heard Malowan, who was on the girl's heels. The man's voice sounded soothing, though Lhors couldn't make out the words. Agya sighed as if she was annoyed but soon fell silent. Lhors glanced at Mal. Unlike his ward, the paladin seemed unaware of the cold, though he did wear thick mitts.

Nemis walked easily up ahead. Despite the deep snow and slick spots, he held an oiled rag that he had dipped in some silvery powder—to test for invisible enemy, he'd told Vlandar. Lhors looked to both sides. With all this wind and snow, *any* enemy might be invisible! he thought. Wonder if that herb Malowan gave him to add to the rag really can find evil. But anything *here* would probably be evil.

A steep-sided ravine cut across their path. They followed the side of this for a little ways, and then Nemis pointed out something below to Vlandar. The warrior nodded in response, and the mage turned to grip the side and scabble for footing. He dropped down gradually and finally vanished below. Vlandar followed. When it was his turn, Lhors realized there was a trail down there, and a few rough steps were cut into the side—or maybe the wind had carved them, since they didn't seem large enough for giants' feet. The trail was clear of snow, but it looked icy. Nemis and Vlandar waited a few paces on for the others to catch up.

"The entrance to the Rift is just down there, according to our map," Vlandar said quietly. "Remember that there are wolves and yeti about, and there may be giants along this path. But there is no other way in that Nemis and I could find."

“We should be aware of them before we see them, Nemis and I,” Malowan agreed. He glanced at his ward “Agya?”

The girl scowled. “Nose still works good, but th’ wind ain’t ’elping.”

“It gets steeper from here,” Nemis said. “Watch where you step. It is slick and steep. One wrong step and you won’t get a second.” He set his feet carefully and walked sideways, Lhors noticed, like his father’d taught him. Lhors turned sideways and followed.

The ice was chipped into rough steps, but for legs much longer than their own. The surface of the ice had been cross-hatched and in places covered in ash, so footing was reasonable. The wind was an unpleasant constant at their backs, but it kept the ice clear at least.

Vlandar drew them off to one side when they reached the bottom where the path forked. Lhors stared aghast at the steep drop-off just beyond. They might have been alone in the entire world. The silence was absolute, except for the high-pitched wail of the wind high above and the stealthy hiss of it down here.

“That deep defile,” Vlandar said, “is the Rift itself, not our path. The main entry is ahead. If our map is correct, there are two levels to this hold, but unlike the Steading, the upper is for storage and guards and the like, while the chief lives below. His kitchens are there, and the best guest quarters.”

“Just beyond the entry,” Nemis said and pointed down the left-hand path, “there are marks on the map to indicate guards, but the marks were not made by the originator of the map. I believe Nosnra noted the places he would be challenged when he was forced to come here.”

Lhors shook his head. None of it made sense to him. “If that chain could bring him anywhere, then why not set him down in the throne room or the council room? I mean—” He fumbled for words. “He could fall out here, break his neck, or be caught by something like his own cave bear.”

Vlandar smiled grimly. “But if the chief here meant to shame him? To walk even from the entry just below there would remind him each time that he is a servant here. Think. The great chief of the Steading must walk the entire way to the throne room and answer each guard’s challenge. It may not be so, but it seems likely to me. We will be able to test my theory, if the guards match the marks on this map. Let us go.”

Vlandar and Nemis led the way down the left path and into a high-vaulted ice tunnel.

It was still dreadfully cold, but the wind lessened even more. Enough greenish light came through the thick ice that they could make out the path heading south on the east side of a steep dropoff. Perhaps twenty paces ahead, a tunnel branched right.

Nemis and Vlandar slowed at branch passages heading north and south, and the warrior signed a halt. “Dead end ahead,” he said. “Guard quarters south, no door. North, a guarded passage, and the way to the living quarters is beyond them.”

Bleryn drew his axe and went over to join Khlened. Vlandar put Nemis at the rear to keep an eye and a sense on the guard chamber to the south. He then brought Agya and the paladin to the fore, gestured for Lhors to join him, and signed for silence. Agya licked her lips and glanced at Malowan, who nodded and smiled as if to say, “You can do it.” The girl cast her eyes up but moved out, swiftly and silently working her way up the crooked passage, pausing now and again to listen intently. At

the innermost point of a right-hand bend, she stopped cold, gestured urgently for silence, and held a hand to her ear.

Listen, she must mean, Lhors thought. He could hear giants, their harsh laughter echoing up ahead. The chamber must open out. He found himself wishing he understood maps better and promised himself he'd seek out Vlandar or Nemis for a good look at the map the next time they stopped for a rest. *If* I survive the next few minutes, a corner of his mind added. He made Gran's sign for averting disaster and ill thoughts, then pulled a boar spear from his sheath.

At the point where they could almost see into the chamber, Agya stopped, pressed back against the wall, and tested the air once again. Malowan came up behind her, hands moving in a reveal spell. He held up three fingers. Vlandar nodded, then beckoned for Bleryn and Khlened to join him in the lead. Lhors glanced back. Nemis was back against the frozen wall watching their back trail.

Lhors could see little ahead. Still, the youth was aware of a large space just ahead. The ceiling arched into a vault, and from where he stood he couldn't make out east or west walls.

Vlandar gestured urgently and faded back against the right-hand wall. Dwarf, barbarian, and paladin joined him, and for one brief moment Lhors could make out what was in there.

The space ahead was an ice cave, longer than it was tall. The floor littered with cast off bits of old clothing and broken weaponry. The only properly clear path through it was a rut as wide as the youths arms could stretch. It eventually bent right out of his line of sight.

Greenish light made the three fur-clad giants look unwell, but they stood out clearly against the surrounded ice. Only one was armed at the moment, and even he wasn't paying much heed to the passage. He leaned against a massive pike, egging on his companions who were wrestling. The din was awful.

Vlandar gestured with his drawn sword and ran forward, Khlened and Bleryn on his heels. The fellow with the pike came slowly around as he sensed movement or heard their feet pounding the filthy ice floor. He stared blankly then bellowed a warning—likely to the wrestlers, though Lhors thought he might be trying to alert the guards back in the barracks to the south. Not a good time to think about that.

Nemis passed Lhors, his lips and hands already working his wall of silence spell. Lhors hoped he wasn't too late. Khlened had freed his morning star and threw himself away from his companions so he could swing the massive weapon. He hurled it with a pained grunt, then chuckled grimly as it wrapped around the pike-holder's throat, trapping the weapon against the brute's ear. The giant fell, and the blade sliced into his unhelmed scalp. He came unsteadily to his feet, blood soaking into his fur cloak, as he fought to unwrap the chain. But his hands were trapped, and the spiked ball had caught on his armor. Injured, bleeding, and disoriented, he fell again and this time stayed down, thrashing feebly.

Khlened hefted a large rock from a pile nearby—the giants must use them as weapons, Lhors realized. The barbarian held the stone high above giant's head. He was grinning madly as he let go. The brute grunted and lay still, breathing heavily.

It had all happened so quickly that the two wrestlers had time to do no more than separate and sit up, dumbfounded. They stared blankly. One ran for his pike, but

Vlandar and Bleryn were there first. The dwarf staggered under the weight of the massive pikestaff as he swung it away from the wall. He managed to brace the pole against the floor just in time, letting the giant's weight do the rest. The monster stared in shock at the length of shaft sticking from his belly. He fell to his knees, gasping in pain and fumbling for the broad knife in his belt. Bleryn was behind him by then, bringing his sword down two-handed across the unmailed neck. His first stroke bounced off thick skin or bone, but the second reached its mark. The giant toppled slowly onto his side and lay still.

The third yelled a clear warning down the passage, trying to be heard by the other guards down that passage, Lhors was sure of it. The brute began edging away from them along the wall, easing toward the east.

"Stop him!" Vlandar shouted. "He's after reinforcements!"

But Nemis was already halfway across the room, pelting the creature one-handed with small objects. In his right hand, he was waving a feather.

"Man's gone mad!" Khlened said, aghast, and hurled himself at the giant. To his astonishment, the massive brute turned and eyed him glassily, then snickered. The laughter welled, tears rolled down the giant's cheeks, and he clutched his sides. As Khlened stared blankly, the giant gasped for air, still laughing hysterically, then sagged into the wall and slid down it.

Lhors gaped at the giggling, fur-clad mass of giant, then eyed Nemis sidelong.

The mage grinned at him. "One of my favorite spells. He'll laugh until he passes out from lack of wind. By the time he recovers, we shall be long gone."

"But he'll raise the alarm," Lhors said.

Nemis shook his head and held up a pinch of powder. "With this under his nose he won't recall a thing that's happened this entire day." The mage had to raise his voice to be heard over the crazed laughter.

The giant tangled in the morning star was beginning to show signs of consciousness. Bleryn came up behind him and drove his sword deep into the creature's throat, then backed away as blood arced across the chamber and ran down the far wall. The dwarf turned away, teeth set in a mirthless grin. "So should all've 'em die," he snarled.

"Not all," Malowan said evenly.

The dwarf glared at him. Khlened tugged at Bleryn's sleeve and led him aside, talking rapidly in a low voice. Probably explaining about paladins—at least this particular paladin, Lhors thought. The dwarf looked skeptical but finally shrugged.

The insane giggling had been fading and suddenly ceased. The giant lay limp against the wall, eyes closed and mouth open. Nemis mumbled to himself a moment, then nodded in satisfaction and smeared the powder under the creature's nostrils. He was vigorously scrubbing his finger down his cloak as he stepped back.

"Let us go," Vlandar said. He led the way into a passage in the east wall that immediately bent south. A short distance on, Malowan, Gerikh, and Agya edged around him. Nemis again brought up the rear.

Like the previous passages and chamber, the ice let in a greenish light so that they could see a goodly distance both ways. The floor was solid ice, but so tracked with hair from hides, mud, dirt and bits of crushed stone that it might as well have been

stone. They stopped halfway down to rest, then went on around the bend, heading toward the Rift ledge once again.

They emerged from the tunnel to a bone-chilling wind. At Vlandar's gesture, Agya and Malowan crept close to the edge while the rest of the company waited in the shelter of the tunnel. Florimund, who leaned heavily on Maera, whispered something against her ear. She nodded and led him over to where he could sit with his back against the wall. Malowan and Agya returned swiftly, and the paladin signed something to Vlandar that Lhors couldn't follow. The warrior brought them back up the passage and took out the map from the Steadings trove. He set Nemis to keep watch while Malowan did the same to the rear.

"Our way is out there," he told them quietly. "Left though. See here"—he pointed at an area on the map—"where another tunnel heads east then bends south from a three-way join? The center tunnel opens into a cavern where there are hiding places with guards behind them. We shall see."

Florimund whispered something to Maera. The ranger, who'd settled herself and Florimund several paces back, murmured something to her sister, who cast up her eyes but came over to speak to Vlandar.

"Warrior," she said softly. "Florimund remembers this place. He *thinks*. He recalls cold and three tunnels branching. He says his guards went by the lowest one. He remembers little from there except for a vast chamber and a throne. He says his guards were afraid of the middle way."

"Afraid?" Vlandar asked. "Why?"

She shrugged, but Maera came over then, her lips set. "He does not speak Giantish, Vlandar. Oh, certain words as any prisoner might learn. But like most of our kind, he is sensitive to atmosphere, even if not as sensitive as a true elf. He sensed the fear in his guards' speech the same as I would."

Rowan grimaced. She looked apologetic. Likely because Maera is always angry, Lhors thought. It seemed a foolish point for anger. Vlandar was right to wonder what the ex-prisoner knew and how, since he seems to remember so little otherwise. Maera was already deep in some discussion with Florimund, their heads close together.

"We will not take the south passage," Vlandar said quickly and very quietly, as if he did not want the rangers or Florimund to overhear him. "There is a mark on the map—Nosnra's, if Nemis is right—and it cuts across the south passage. Nemis or Mal can check for us, but by this map, Nosnra saw the left passage as a dead end but the other as deadly. This leaves the middle passage or the Rift itself."

"Was up t' me," Agya broke in firmly, "th' Rift is dead last. Somethin' down there smells worse'n anything I ever found in city, even in th' Sink. I'd wager somethin' nasty down there kills things but eats only bits and leaves th' rest to stink."

"I agree," Malowan said. He'd come back to join them. He cupped a small charm in his hands, and his eyes were still fixed on their backtrail. "Pure evil dwells in those depths, but the descent would kill us before we encountered it. The walls are steep and iced, and the wind is dire. There is nothing close behind or aware of us back there. We had better go."

Vlandar nodded and put Lhors next to him as they set out again. Nemis lead the way, and Malowan brought up the rear.

They paused briefly at the three-way branch when Agya gestured urgently. The little thief clutched Malowan's free hand as she slid into the left-hand passage, her nose twitching. Her hands moved in sign, too rapid for Lhors to follow, and the two retreated quickly.

"Ogres," Malowan whispered, "and no moving air. It's a dead end."

Florimund seemed to be arguing with Maera and Rowan and gesturing feebly toward the southwest branch. Lhors thought Maera looked angry with her sister, but the two rangers came quietly, holding up their fellow as Vlandar started down the center passage. He slowed as the passage narrowed, tested the air himself, listened intently, then sent Nemis and Malowan both ahead, keeping everyone else back.

"Giants, or somethin like," Agya whispered. She was right at Lhors' elbow and cross because Malowan hadn't taken her with him. "No wolves, though—I don't think."

Khlened and Bleryn argued briefly with Vlandar. Of course they'd want to bellow and charge in, letting surprise give them an advantage. Vlandar simply shook his head and shifted the grip on his sword as he settled against the wall to wait.

Malowan was back almost at once. He held up eight fingers, then the sign for "giants." Nemis returned some moments later and beckoned everyone close.

"I used my beneath notice spell and got into the chamber itself. There's a giant at the entrance to a fairly large cave, here"—he drew a knife and scratched lines in the ice wall. "They cannot all be seen from the entry, and they can watch each other. They're an elite bunch, not like the last ones. One hidden south of the entry and four back behind a ledge that divides the cavern." The mage waited until everyone had a chance to look at his sketched map, then used a spell to melt a little of the ice, erasing it. "There's one that's different, though. The rest were all business, but he was laughing, gossiping, or just nattering from the sound of it."

Seven elite guards and one elder. It didn't sound to Lhors as though it made better odds for them. Vlandar seemed to think the same way. His face was very grim. "Weapons?" he asked.

"Pikes and spears, plus some boulders to throw. There's too many for a straight-on attack, and the ones behind that ledge are ready to ambush anyone who attacks the others. We need a plan before we go in."

Vlandar squatted on his heels and brought out the map. Nemis indicated where the ledge was and where he'd seen or sensed guards. "Eight of them, ten of us, but *we* aren't all fighters."

"And they're at least twice our size and in familiar territory," Malowan added.

"Two of us have magic," Khlened put in, "plus a thief, and th' rangers and Lhors with spears and bow."

Lhors was surprised. The berserker might actually be learning that not every battle had to be a melee. Dead berserkers cannot spend treasure, the youth thought.

Vlandar nodded. "Good thinking. The way the chamber is, it won't be easy getting Lhors and the rangers in good position. Still..." He was quiet for another long moment, then sat back on his heels and began to talk quickly and quietly, outlining his plan.

Only Florimund objected. "This is not the way," he whispered fretfully. "I have been here, and the chamber beyond this one—" He shuddered then broke into tears.

Nemis hastily spoke one of his silence spells, and Khlened turned away, embarrassed. Maera glared at the Fist's back, then gathered the half-elf close, speaking quietly against his ear. Rowan watched them both, her face expressionless. Finally, she came over to squat next to Vlandar and Nemis, her eyes moving from one face to the other.

"How certain are you of the way, mage?" she asked softly. Nemis stiffened, but Rowan laid a hand on his forearm and shook her head. "No, I mean no insult. I must know if you are truly sure of our way."

The mage nodded, but his eyes were still angry. "You were there when we found the map. Do you think I am a spy?"

Rowan shook her head firmly.

"I am not," he said, and Lhors thought he looked much less angry. "Perhaps you will trust no oath of mine. Believe this, if you can. I am fond of my life such as it is, but I will never again serve the dark elves, even if it costs me my life."

Rowan gazed into his eyes for a long moment, then nodded. "I believe you." She sent her eyes back toward her sister, who was trying to get Florimund to his feet. The male clung to her weakly. "This is not easy for me," she said reluctantly. "Maera does not trust non-elves very much, as you must know by now. I am not so certain as she that he is cousin, and I am less..." She gazed blankly at the wall, then met the paladins sympathetic eyes. "I do not trust him, but she does. I pray you keep an eye to Florimund, sir."

Malowan gripped her fingers. "I will. Indeed, I have since he makes me... *uneasy*, let us say."

Rowan inclined her head and got to her feet. She went over to help her sister with Florimund, and Maera managed a faint smile at whatever Rowan said. Florimund seemed to get hold of himself, enough that Rowan left the injured half-elf in her sister's care so she could crouch herself at Lhors' side.

"Caution, my young friend," she murmured. "You and I will have a hard role to play here. Mind you don't let me down!"

"I—" He gaped at her. "But Rowan, I would..." He leaned back, the corners of his mouth twitching. "It's another of your jokes, isn't it? So I don't get too scared to help?"

"You'll do fine," she assured him. "I'd do the same for Maera or Malowan—or even Vlandar. Relaxed and ready, that's what's best for you."

Vlandar gestured *ready*, and Nemis eased around him. Agya caught at his sleeve. "No wolves?" she whispered.

He smiled faintly and shook his head.

Malowan pressed past her, a gesture reminding her to stick close to Maera. Bleryn and Khlened followed paladin and mage, all hugging the south wall.

Lhors swallowed hard as he got his first look at the entry guard: a brute of a giant with some sort of patch—possibly a captain's rank—roughly slapped onto his fur jacket. The fellow had a good view of the corridor all the way up to the narrows, but at the moment he'd turned away and was shouting something at another somewhere deep in the chamber. By the sound of the other voice, it must be a giant with too little sleep, too much ale, too many years, or altogether too few brains. Possibly all of

them at once. The captain swore an oath that set the corridor ringing and turned back to his post.

Too late. Khlened and Bleryn were already in place, and while the dwarf brought his axe down across the brute's calf, Khlened launched the blood-darkened morning star at the monster's neck. It sank into the mail coif around the fellow's neck, tangling in it. The giant swore savagely as he fell, dropping his pike so that he could use both hands to free the weapon. Khlened caught up the pike, staggered back under its weight, and then ran forward to plunge the sharp end deep into the captain's throat. Blood arced across the chamber, and in two heartbeats the giant was quite dead.

Vlandar shoved past the barbarian as two other giants came running up. One was a graybeard who came from Nemis' marked post in the south end of the cavern. He settled into place, blocking an ill-lit greenish passage. The other stood with his back to the shining black rock ledge, brandishing a manic grin and two long swords.

"*Ynk-knecht*—Ogre-Gutter," Khlened said. He'd stopped cold at sight of the giant and his weapons. Lhors shuddered, but the barbarian was smiling happily, his eyes dreamy. "Look at 'em," he sighed. "Kord 'imself would risk all for a blade like that!"

"The god Kord is mad," Bleryn said flatly. "Do I have to watch yer back so's ya can steal that monster's blades? If so—well, I'm not that wild to die, Fist!"

Khlened shook himself. "Course not!" But before anyone else could say a word, he'd howled out a challenge and launched himself across the chamber.

"Deliver me from berserkers!" Vlandar swore, and Lhors was ready to agree with him, but to his surprise, Khlened stopped short of the giant, waited for him to raise both his swords, then shifted grip from hilt to point, and threw his sword. At that distance, he couldn't miss. The blade buried itself in the giant's throat, and the Yrik-knecht hit the floor with a clang. The giant landed on them half a breath later.

Khlened swore in obvious frustration, but before he could seize either sword, a bulky giant with a massive stone in each hand came from an alcove in the west wall and headed straight for him. Rowan shot arrow after arrow at him, but they bounced off his armor or stuck in the fur he wore. Lhors and Maera's spears fared no better.

Nemis pressed her aside to launch a barrage of fireballs from his fingers. The giant was unaware of him until his fur jacket and hair caught fire. He dropped the stones and ran, arms flapping wildly as he tried to put himself out. Another giant came from behind the wall to help him. Both went down together, the burned one clutching his companion as both of them shrieked in agony. Agya clutched her hands over her ears and retreated behind Malowan, eyes tightly closed.

Nemis shifted his angle, hurling more fireballs as another giant came around the north side of the ledge, but the giant brought up a broad-bladed axe and parried them. Finally, one hit the floor by his feet. Nemis grinned hugely.

"Khlened, stay *back!*" the mage roared as the barbarian started toward the axewielder. "Floor's slick where that fireball hit!"

The barbarian raised his just-retrieved morning star in salute and braced his feet wide so he could swing the weapon as the giant glared at him and raised the axe. As the fur-clad brute tried to close the distance between them, his feet went from under him and his chin cracked on the icy floor. Vlandar ran up and plunged his sword through the dazed brute's eye.

He swore. The blade wouldn't come back out. "Someone guard my back while I free this!" he shouted, but Lhors and Rowan were already inside the chamber.

The ranger turned with a cry of warning and began firing a deadly stream of arrows toward the south end of the ledge. Lhors turned to see two giants charging from around the stone barrier.

"Beware, Khlened! Two are behind you!" Vlandar bellowed.

"See 'em!" the Fist shouted back. He threw himself across the giant he'd killed and dropped the morning star to tug furiously at the hilt of one of the swords, only letting it go at the last moment to catch up the ball and chain. He swung it furiously and let it fly. The giant ducked, then went to pick it up.

"Ah, frozen hells!" With a massive effort, Khlened dragged one of the enormous swords free, wrapped both hands around the hilt, and began to swing it. The second giant, who'd just come around the ledge, retreated promptly, but the first had just retrieved the morning star and was in the process of turning back to kill his enemy with his enemy's own weapon.

Khlened roared out a challenge in his own language and let the sword's weight carry him around. He dug in his heels at the last moment and let the blade do the rest. It sliced through thick fur and whatever hardened leather the giant wore beneath. Blood sprayed everywhere. The barbarian was momentarily blinded, but even as Malowan leaped forward to protect him, the giant went down.

Khlened tottered back, bringing the weapon up again with an effort that corded the tendons in his throat. As he turned, Nemis had just finished off the last of them with some spell that left the monster swollen, blue-faced, and very dead.

"Do not ask," he said crisply.

"Wouldn't of" the Fist replied flatly and knelt to wipe his new sword on the giant's fur before going back to retrieve his own sword.

Nemis went to help Khlened retrieve his blade. The Fist finally dragged it free and wiped it on his dead enemy's trousers.

"We go quickly," Vlandar said as he gathered his company close.

Nemis spoke. "Our way leads to the lower level through that passage there." He pointed to the south where Lhors could just make out a dimly lit opening. "The master's throne will be there—and his personal chambers. There is no indication of a stronghold on the map for this level, but I think it unlikely anything like the chain that brought us here from the Steading is up here. It will be where the master can lay his hands on it."

"Why'd we want t' go someplace else, eh?" Agya wanted to know.

The mage shrugged. "Because I know the drow. The dark elves control the Steading giants. You and Malowan found the letter of orders from drow to Nosnra. Because the drow are cautious and devious, they would never hide in a place once removed from the hill giants. Likely their safety is another spell or charm away from this place. Their mistress may well be beyond that." He shrugged again and managed a faint smile for the girl. "I know them. Drow dislike such cold as this even more than you or I do."

"Sensible of 'em," the little thief allowed.

"Fought 'em once, that's enough," Khlened agreed. He looked cheerful though, as he shoved the blood-blackened morning star into his belt and mounted the scabbard

for the two-handed sword on his back. Lhors tried not to stare. The effort of drawing it corded the barbarian's muscles, and the blade and hilt together were nearly as tall as Khlened himself.

Bleryn snorted. "You'll break your arms, swinging that thing."

Khlened laughed. "Yer just jealous that you didn't think of it first."

"Th' thing's overlong for me," the dwarf said with some dignity. "Jealous of a blade," he muttered under his breath as they started out once more.

Agya and Malowan led the way through the cavern and out into a passage that turned south for a short distance, then went sharply west. A ways on, a branch went south and steeply down.

Agya sniffed cautiously but shrugged. Nothing near, Lhors hoped it meant.

Malowan murmured a spell—another reveal one, perhaps. He pointed west and shook his head almost at once, indicated the south way and nodded firmly. Vlandar stepped aside to let Nemis ease partway down the south passage. Whatever spell *he* used caused a very tiny puff of smoke. The mage looked at Vlandar and gestured, *Giants. Others.*

"Beings—many of them—well down the west tunnel," Malowan muttered, "but none close by. The passage stays level for a long ways and goes around the Rift. That"—he nodded toward the south passage—"is our way."

"Mmm," Vlandar murmured agreement. "Remember," he added to all of them, "we get in and get what we need. We do nothing else here, unless I say!"

Lhors saw Khlened and Bleryn exchange exasperated looks, but neither said anything. Gerikh merely nodded and clutched his spear. Nemis was already partway down the south passage.

"We keep quiet," Vlandar cautioned. "Mal or Nemis will go in front, and the other at the rear to keep us as undetected as possible. My nose," he added with a scowl, "is frozen and so are my ears. I want out of here before the rest of me turns to ice."



Greenish light still leaked through the ice, but it was not as bright now that they were going deeper into the hold. They could still see each other and ahead for at least four long strides, but beyond that was only emerald dimness.

They reached level ground and emerged into a long, high-vaulted cavern. Passages vanished into gloom south and east. It was very quiet here, and neither Malowan nor Nemis could find any sign of guards down the passages. The mage froze, hands moving in some spell and eyes fixed on an enormous boulder leaning against the east wall.

“There is a dragon beyond that,” he breathed.

“Dragon?” Khlened demanded softly. His eyes gleamed, but before he could move, Vlandar gripped his shoulder and shook his head. The barbarian cast his eyes up but turned away.

“Remember what I said above!” the warrior ordered quietly. “We are not in this place for treasure or to kill dragons!”

“Aye, sir.” Khlened cast one last wistful look at the blocked entry. “Which way’s ours, then? Yon?” He pointed at the south passages.

Malowan shook his head.

“Giants?” asked Rowan.

“Something unpleasant,” Malowan whispered. “To the west, giants. Our way.”

Nemis was already across the chamber, hands flat on a massive slab of stone. Malowan went over to join him while Vlandar beckoned the others close. “There are guards in the chamber beyond,” he whispered. “They will be warned someone is here when that stone is moved. It won’t be quiet. If we can lure them into this area...”

Lhors swallowed dread. Was Vlandar asking him to volunteer?

But the warrior had already turned to Agya. “You’ll go into their sight, hesitate only long enough to draw them, then run.”

The little thief was very pale. She bit her lip and nodded.

“Good lass. Everyone else, along the west wall where no one inside will see you. Go.”

Vlandar drew Lhors with him to the north. Khlened and Bleryn joined them, while the rangers, Gerikh, and Florimund went south. Agya raised her chin, shoved the hood from her short red hair, and found a place nearly mid-cavern to stand where she'd be seen.

Nemis motioned for Malowan to get back then raised his hands. The boulder vibrated and emitted a clear, deep tone, like an enormous bell. In the silence that followed, they could hear two or more guards mumbling just beyond as the stone silently moved toward them. At Nemis' gesture, it glided to the side and came to rest against the south wall. Lhors could just make out Rowan kneeling behind it, an arrow at the ready. Malowan blocked his view south. The youth turned his head so he could watch Agya.

The little thief's eyes were huge, but she held her ground as two leather-clad brutes, one clutching a huge chunk of ice, emerged cautiously and stared at the girl. Her lips twitched in a nervous grin. "N-nice t'see it's only *two* 'f ya in there!" She turned and sprinted toward the upper level, and the guards casually went after her. One was chuckling, and the brute with the ice tossed it over his shoulder. Easy prey, they clearly thought.

Malowan stood so near Lhors, he could hear the paladin quietly praying. "Heironeous, see my need and judge of my worth: I ask of you a hammer." It made no sense to Lhors, but suddenly a ruddy light formed above the man's head, elongating and shifting to resemble a warhammer. The paladin gazed at the giants who were nearly upon his ward and whispered, "Go!" The hammer flew across the chamber, slamming into one enormous head and then the other. The first giant went to his knees, clutching his skull. The second fell flat and did not move.

Before Malowan could use the weapon again, Khlened, Bleryn, and Vlandar were across the room, weapons drawn, and the guards were dispatched without a fight—and with scarcely any sound other than the bell-like sound Nemis' spell on the stone had made.

The two dead guards were dragged partway up the tunnel near the entry passage, which Nemis had already checked. "It goes nowhere, and nothing lives there," he assured Vlandar.

Rowan got Lhors' attention and drew him into the next chamber with her, leaving Maera to manage Florimund. The youth glanced back, caught Vlandar's nod, and went, a spear ready to throw in one hand and three bunched in the other.

This new chamber was long and relatively narrow—a true cavern instead of an ice cave. Other caves branched off here and there, and outcroppings of rock blocked their view ahead. He could only tell *that* much because there was light somewhere beyond them.

Plenty of places to hide, Rowan signed as the others came up. Malowan nodded. Agya leaned against him, eyes still huge. Guess she really was scared, Lhors thought. She didn't seem to like letting the paladin hold her very often. Beyond the pair, Lhors could just make out Nemis, resettling the great stone against the entry.

It was very quiet here, and though the wind at their backs died away as the rock settled into place, it was still dreadfully cold. Lhors' fingertips were going to ice prickles through the thick mitts.

Malowan drew them to a halt midway down the cavern where it suddenly narrowed. A broad opening went south into darkness. Agya hesitated here, sniffing gingerly. Her nose wrinkled. Something unpleasant there, Lhors was certain. As they passed the entry, even he could smell the unlovely mix of unwashed bodies, rotting bits of meat, and foul blankets.

The cavern widened again, and there seemed to be rock walls everywhere, making lighting from the west uncertain. Lhors thought he could see another boulder to their north—perhaps another doorway. He shifted his grip on the spears so he had one ready to throw and hoped they weren't going to go there—or into a lot of unpleasant dead-ends and near-traps, as they had in the Steading. Vlandar won't let us, he reminded himself. Indeed, Vlandar glanced that way and as Khlened eyed it curiously, Vlandar tapped the barbarian on the arm and firmly shook his head. The Fist shrugged, then nodded, and turned his attention back to the main way.

Vlandar sent Rowan and Lhors out ahead, getting Malowan to test north and west while Nemis used yet another of what Lhors thought must be an endless supply of reveal danger spells on the south cave. At least you do not need to understand magic for it to protect you, he told himself as he followed Rowan along the south wall.

The ranger stopped abruptly and held up a hand for silence. Lhors listened. He could hear nothing out of the ordinary. There was just enough whine of moving wind through openings in the stone high above to make everything sound like a stealthy enemy to him. The ranger drew him close and sent her eyes into the passage where it bulged wide and turned south.

He could see them all at once. Guards surrounded three giantesses.

Rowan signed urgently, and Lhors backed away. As soon as they were out of sight, they both turned and ran. *Guards!* Lhors signed to the others. It was all he could recall at the moment.

It was enough. Vlandar got everyone around the back of a tall ledge and into gloom just as three fur-clad giantesses sauntered up the hall. Several ogre servants and a pair of armed giant guards loped just behind them.

The company held their breath, except Florimund, who seemed to be fighting a sneeze. Nemis dove into his belt for something and moved his hands. The wounded half-elf's jaw went slack and his eyes shut as he sagged at the knees. Maera clutched him in dismay as the giantesses and their servants wandered by. They turned right at the bend and kept going out into the entry. Lhors could hear the stone shift gratingly, and then they were gone.

"What is wrong with Florimund?" Maera breathed.

"I sent him to sleep," the mage replied, "in a way. If he'd sneezed just now—"

"What do you mean, *in a way?*" the ranger demanded.

"He'll follow where you lead him, but he won't be aware," Nemis replied. "He won't speak or cry out—and he won't feel pain, as he clearly has all the way here."

Maera gave him a scorching look before she turned away to help the blank-faced Florimund to his feet.

Vlandar looked around. "We should—Mal, what is it?"

He broke off as the paladin came up to him. In the faint light, the man's face was grim. "There is another ledge to our west, and a prisoner is locked away beyond it. I sense fear and hatred of frost giants, and pain."

“An ally?” Vlandar murmured as he tugged his cloak closer. He gave Maera and Florimund a glance. “Or just another...?” He let the statement go unfinished.

“I cannot say. If not an ally, we can bespell it and leave. If an ally, though...” The paladin let the thought hang.

Vlandar nodded—reluctantly, Lhors thought. He gestured for Malowan to lead on.

“I will wait here with my cousin,” Maera said stiffly. “To keep watch.”

“Watch south,” Rowan told her. “I will tend to the east.”

Malowan was already gone the way he’d come, Agya on his heels.

Nemis met Vlandar’s eyes. “I will stay as well,” he said quietly. “There may be things here we cannot see.”

The warrior gestured assent and put Lhors in front of him. He motioned for the others to follow. Lhors glanced back at Maera, who knelt next to her sleeping companion. Why does Vlandar not seem to trust her, all of a sudden? he wondered. He had seen the same lack of trust in his father toward certain village boys who’d once hunted with them—but they weren’t just after meat for a village here. If Vlandar really was worried about Florimund or Maera, wouldn’t he just get Nemis to send them away? Perhaps Nemis couldn’t do that, or maybe something else was going on.

Another massive boulder blocked part of the west wall. It took Khlened, Bleryn, and Vlandar to shift it far enough for them to enter the chamber beyond. Vlandar left Bleryn and Gerikh at the opening and let Malowan lead the way in.

The chamber was poorly lit and sparsely furnished. A huge pallet with massive chains was bolted to the wall at head and foot, and a giant three times Malowan’s size lay fettered to the bed. Just out of the giant’s reach, a low table held an ewer and some bits of bread and bone. Malowan was already next to the bed, speaking quickly and urgently to the prisoner in Giantish. Agya was glaring at the little table, and Lhors’ nose wrinkled as he came close enough for his own chilled nose to work. The pitcher held swampy-smelling water. The bread crust was white and the rest pale greenish. The bone was huge but bare of meat, and he could see where it had been gnawed.

He blinked as the prisoner answered Malowan. The voice was deep, but not masculine-deep. What could one of their females do to deserve this? Lhors wondered. He backed away. The pallet smelled dreadful, and the sheer size of the creature frightened him, even bound as she was.

He turned away to find Khlened staring open-mouthed at another table. Two massive chairs flanked a table covered in fine cloth and golden plates. The food there looked and even smelled as if a proper cook had prepared it. Two goblets with stems as thick as his spear held dark wine. A few gems and coins spilled from a leather bag, and Lhors assumed this was what the Fist stared at so avidly.

“Smells good,” the barbarian muttered.

“Don’t eat *any* meat you find in a frost giant’s hold!” Vlandar hissed.

Lhors backed away hastily, and Khlened looked slightly sick.

“Yes,” Vlandar added with a faint smile. “It smells good to me, too. It may be no more than what it seems: stolen beef roasted plain over a fire.”

Malowan gestured then, drawing them close so he could translate. Lhors listened from where he was, eyes searching the chamber and glancing out into darkness, now and again. "She is Nghora, a storm giantess from a distant hold. The Jarl took her prisoner some time ago, believing she would willingly become his mistress. She refused the 'honor', and so he had her put here. Now and again he has her beaten, but mostly he leaves her like this: cold, hungry, and unable to reach proper food and drink, though she can see all that will be hers, if she submits to him. She loathes the Jarl, but I can tell she is distrustful of all males."

"Why?" Khlened scowled. "Humans didn't put 'er here, nor dwarves."

"Her father is a drunkard, and because of that his household guards are lax. The Jarl knew it and took advantage of that when he took her prisoner," Malowan explained. "He had asked for her first, but she had already taken vows as a virgin priestess. The Jarl is grotesque, she says, but even if he had been handsome and kindly and not already wed, she wanted no mate, nothing but the right to serve her goddess."

Agya nodded. "Weird t'me too, barbarian, but a thief I knew went t'serve... Zodal. Had somethin' t'do with peace and hope or some such-like. She tol' me she 'ad to swear not t'let any man touch 'er or look at 'er face, an' she was 'appy t'do it too."

The girl seemed baffled by this, Lhors thought. On reflection, he wasn't sure if *he* could make sense of such a thing.

"These things happen to some people," Malowan said dryly. "Nghora says she has been a guest here, now and again since childhood. I think I can persuade her to guide us."

Vlandar nodded. "Could be. But what of all this show of wealth here?"

"To be hers, if she submits. She wants none of it and says it is ours if we will free her."

"I say aye, then." The barbarian turned away and began to sort through the goods on the table, setting aside loose gems and coin and ignoring the heavier plate. Agya came over to help him. Lhors moved nearer the doorway as Malowan bent over the bound giantess and loosed her fetters with some spell.

The giantess said something, her voice husky. As she stood, Lhors noticed for the first time that her skin had a greenish tint to it. Tall as the paladin was, his head barely came past her knee. Lhors swallowed past a dry throat and looked away.

"She does not know any of the things we're seeking," Malowan told them. "She does know where the Jarl's most valued possessions are stored, however. And we need to go now. There are guards, two giants who patrol with a chained yeti, who come here once a day to check on her, and they are due before much longer. She also says the Jarl keeps wolves in the room where he and his lady sleep. It is some distance from here, and there are several guard-posts between. She will point them out in exchange for her freedom."

"Done," Vlandar said tersely. "All of you stay alert."

He led the way back into the main passage, collected Nemis, the rangers, and dazed-looking Florimund, then eased along the west wall that bowed into a deep bay. Lhors could no longer see down the vast south chamber, but that also meant no guards down there could see him.

Agya had moved stealthily ahead, and she suddenly held up a hand for the others to wait, then turned to beckon Nemis to her side. The mage murmured a spell and held up four fingers. Khlened started to draw his newly won sword, but Vlandar shook his head and drew Nemis aside so the two could talk. The mage brought Maera and Rowan over and ran an odd-shaped piece of metal up and down the shafts of several arrows and three of Maera's javelins. The rangers took them back and slipped around the point.

Lhors held his breath, listening intently, but almost at once the two were back. Maera went straight back to Florimund, but Rowan hesitated with Vlandar long enough to hold up four fingers before slashing them across her throat. The warrior nodded grimly.

The youth's eyebrows went up. Four dead, and he hadn't heard a thing.

Malowan had left the giantess with Agya—oddly, to Lhors' thinking, the two seemed fairly comfortable with each other, though the huge female drew back even from him. The paladin, who had moved across the chamber, now came back, his face pale.

"Vlandar, the kitchens are there, and there are prisoners—*human* ones."

"Hah," Khlened snarled under his breath. "Lunch, more like. Poor brutes."

"No," the paladin said flatly. "I will not leave them there to die like a peasant's lamb. I dare not. Vlandar, leave me Agya. We will do what we must and catch up with you."

"We stay together," the warrior said tersely. He held up a hand for silence as Nghora came up.

She didn't seem as tottery as she had earlier, Lhors thought, but neither Vlandar nor Mal looked worried. Vlandar asked the paladin to talk to her.

"The chamber beyond this is open, with the Jarl's throne at the south end. She says there are guards under cover of the dais, always on alert, and halfway down we will be able to see guards on the ledges above the main floor. However, not far from the entrance, there are stairs along either side leading up these ledges."

"Then we need a diversion," Vlandar said. "Khlened. You and Bleryn, how'd you like to strut down there like you owned the place? I'll send Nemis or Mal to shield you. You distract the guards, and while they're watching you, we'll be able to dispatch them without alerting the guards behind the dais."

"The kitchen is making a racket," Malowan said, "that will help us."

"Good. Rowan, Maera, you'll be the best at getting up the stairways unnoticed. Agya and Lhors, you're backup, one to each of the rangers. Nemis, do you have enough of your beneath notice spells to use one here, if I send you ahead with Khlened?"

The mage merely nodded.

"Gerikh, you'll stick with me and lead Florimund for Maera. And, Mal, if Nghora...?"

The paladin had been talking to the giantess quietly for some moments, Lhors realized.

"She wants to go instead, Khlened," Malowan said, and he sounded surprised. "She says, tell the red man if she walks out there, the guards will see nothing else."

“Yer mad and so’s she,” the barbarian said, a wary eye on the female who towered above him. She seemed to shrink back as he met her eyes. He sighed. “Ah, could be she’s right. Let’s be at it.”

“Right.” Vlandar nodded. “Khlened, you and Bleryn stand watch here and be ready to come to our aid if the guards under the dais come up behind us.”

The two companions looked none too happy about being left out of the immediate action, but they both readied their weapons and obeyed.

As they entered the room, Rowan pointed out the stone stairs—a native-looking flow of rock down each wall and high on each side. At the end of each stair was a rocky ledge tall enough to hide a guard.

Some distance ahead, Nghora strutted down the length of the fall. She might never have been a terrified, weak prisoner, Lhors thought. He glanced at Agya, who seemed to have the same uncomfortable thought.

The massive female squared her shoulders and tossed a thick mass of hair over her shoulder as she strode forward. Nemis’ hands were moving rapidly as he worked some spell or other. The giantess walked on, unchallenged.

Near the entrance, the rangers separated so they could work up both ledges. Malowan pressed hard against the west wall, his lips moving soundlessly, though with the clatter and shouting that echoed from the opening to the kitchen just behind them, he could have spoken his spell aloud and not been heard.

Agya had gone to join Malowan, and they were behind Maera. Lhors was grateful when Vlandar beckoned him to the east wall, even though the stairs were uncomfortably near the kitchen. He felt more comfortable around Rowan.

He froze as he heard the twang of a massive bowstring above the kitchen noise. That couldn’t have been Rowan’s bow.

He felt more than heard something fall to the floor. Looking to the middle of the chamber, he saw Nghora stagger to her knees. As Lhors and the others watched helplessly, she collapsed facedown, a gigantic spear protruding from her back. Lhors clapped both hands across his mouth and stared. Vlandar tugged at his shirt and drew him quickly up the stairs.

The rangers were nearly out of sight on both sides, Malowan right behind Rowan and Vlandar on Maera’s heels. Lhors tried not to be ill as he followed. His knees ached from the steep climb, but as he emerged onto the level, things were mostly under control.

The guard did not seem very bright, and the space was too small for him to maneuver well. He was struggling to reload his ballista when Vlandar leaped on his back and pulled him off-balance. The giant threw him aside, but Rowan was set. She launched an arrow that plunged deep into the guard’s eye and into his brain.

Lhors stared across the cavern. The ledge was bigger over there, he thought, but Malowan had drawn the flaming sword he’d taken from the Steading’s treasury. Blinded, the guard stumbled away from him. Maera finished him with one of her new spears, and the guard sagged out of sight.

Vlandar led them back down the stairs and into the hall, sending Khlened and Bleryn ahead to make certain the dais guards hadn’t been alerted of their companions’ demise. He then sent the rangers back to be certain no one came out of the kitchens and caught them. The rest of the party, except for Mal and Nemis,

retreated against the east wall where an alcove under the stairs put them out of the immediate line of sight.

Agya sniffled. Lhors glanced at her and was surprised to see her eyes were wet as she gazed after the dead giantess.

“Don’t seem fair,” she whispered and met the youth’s gaze defiantly. “Poor creature didn’t ask for this.”

“I know,” Lhors replied quietly. “None of us did, nor would we have wished such a fate on her.”

The young thief merely shook her head in disbelief and went to join Malowan.

“You’ve a head on your shoulders, m’lad.”

Lhors jumped. To his embarrassment, Vlandar had come up behind him and probably heard most of that.

“You’ll do,” the warrior added mildly. He glanced up as Malowan came back, Agya at his side.

“Nemis is keeping an eye on the dais. There *are* guards behind it. Both of us sensed them. They are alert and tense, but they don’t seem to be about to leave their post. The kitchens next?”

Vlandar nodded. “We’ll take them now. How many in there?”

“Three giantesses and four ogres,” Malowan replied. “No guards.”

“Hmm.” Vlandar suddenly smiled. “Khlened, it’s time for a genuine berserker attack, I think. The noise won’t matter, and it may scare the cooks into surrendering their prisoners. If not, Mal can be there to free them.”

The barbarian grinned fiercely. “Good idea. Give me Bleryn, though. He and I fight good t’gether, and more’d be in th’ way.”

“Agreed,” Vlandar said. “We’ll wait out here to grab any that escape you.”

“Won’t be any,” the barbarian assured him, and with an unholy gleam in his eyes, he drew the two-handed sword and strode into the kitchen. Bleryn was right on his heels, battle-axe in one hand and sword in the other.

Vlandar and Malowan drew their own swords and eased around a rock that partially blocked the entry. Lhors and Agya followed on their heels.

Khlened stopped partway into the room to bellow what sounded like vicious curses in his own language. The dwarf simply roared and charged straight at the cook, who shrieked, tripped and fell, then turned to scramble away on her hands and knees, but only as far as a rack of knives. Bleryn beat her to it, and brought his axe down on her arm. She howled in agony, collapsing on the floor in a huddle. The other two giantesses turned to flee into the hall, saw swordsmen there, and hesitated.

Malowan’s sword burst into flame. The giantesses shrieked in terror and turned to flee into the dark to the north. Bleryn charged after the two, but Khlened swung the sword like a madman, sending steaming pots flying and sweeping piles of things onto the floor. At some point, he’d downed two of the ogres, and one was most definitely dead while the other crawled toward the door, bleeding freely and apparently unaware of Vlandar or Malowan. The paladin brought his sword up and drove it into the ogre’s neck.

It was suddenly, blessedly quiet in the kitchen. In the distance, they could hear whimpering and Bleryn’s roar, muted by a some turn in the passage. Khlened looked around then strode off that way. Malowan began murmuring—praying, Lhors

thought—under his breath. The whimpering ceased abruptly, and moments later the dwarf came back, Khlened right behind him. His eyes were dull now, and he seemed barely to have the strength to get his sword back into the sheath, but no one would have dared to offer him help.

Agya tugged at Malowan's sleeve and the two sprinted across the kitchen to open cages and free the four imprisoned men. They all moved stiffly, but they didn't seem harmed otherwise, and they were warmly clad. One, a tall, black-haired fellow with a grizzled beard, spoke briefly to Malowan, then came over to grip Vlandar's arm.

"I'm Jebis, out of Furyondy," he said. "Member of the Lake Guard. These three men"—his gesture took in older men who seemed dazed by the sudden turn of events—"are from the high country around the barrens north of that. Frost giants caught me as I was riding back to my barracks. Mobry here says he and his two mates were hunting when they were taken. All four of us got hauled in here two or three days ago. We owe you service, but why are you here? It's no safe place unless you've got an army."

Vlandar explained, giving them a very brief version of their mission.

Jebis considered this. "Sounds mad to me," he said finally, "but service I said, and I'm King's Guard. I'll help if I can."

"Do you know this place?" Malowan asked. "We could use a guide, frankly."

Jebis shrugged. "Not so well. There's a throne in the big cave and a passage to the left of it, but a big rock blocks the end. There's a big room past that with all manner of junk in it: weapons and trophies and such. Up from that, there's another enormous cave with all kinds of giants. Looked like families to me, young ones and all. Guess whoever our guards wanted wasn't there, so they hauled us back out to that throne and the chief came out—"

"Came out from where?" Vlandar asked.

"The same tunnel I mentioned, I suppose, but I don't think he came from that big room. There was a heavy drape over the far end of that junk room, and this Jarl had a look about him that reminded me of my captain when he's called out from his private quarters. I can't be sure of that, of course."

"Anything else you saw then?" Malowan asked. "Guards coming from any of the other tunnels, perhaps guests? Anything, however trivial, anything odd?"

"Odd..." Jebis echoed, then shook himself. "Was one thing, not so odd perhaps, though it struck me at the time. When the Jarl came out, there was someone behind him—human-sized and all wrapped in a cloak. A servant I thought then, or maybe a slave. But the way it stood... it looked arrogant. Even though I couldn't see any weapon on the creature, the Jarl kept glancing back as if it scared him. And the creature just looked at him. I mean," he added with a forced smile, "I've been here all of a few days, and I learned right off who's in charge *here*."

"What else could you make out?" Vlandar asked.

"Not sure it wasn't just the light," the man said. He frowned at his hands, apparently trying to recall something. "But even when the creature's head was tipped back, what was under the hood was uncommonly dark—black, even."

Malowan and Vlandar eyed each other briefly, before the paladin spoke. "It's possible that may prove useful. We'll bear it in mind."

"Whether it is or no," Vlandar assured him, "we'll try to get you safe from here."

“Give me a sword or a pike, and I’ll help you best I can,” Jebis replied.

Bleryn handed over two of his pikes. Jebis hefted them, tested the balance, and nodded his thanks.

“All right,” Vlandar said. “Our way is south, then left past the throne. Everyone alert, and Nemis, stay up front with me. Mal, keep an eye and a spell on our back trail.”

Maera stepped in front of him, Florimund’s hand in hers. “Paladin, your sort preach kindness. You cannot leave my cousin in this state! You saw his condition when we found him, and I know well that he fears to sleep because his dreams put him back in that cell or the torturer’s—” She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. “He has done nothing wrong! Weak as he is, he has done his best to help you, and for that, our fine mage has forced him to sleep.”

“A dreamless sleep,” Nemis began.

But Maera waved him off. “So he says, Paladin, but I have been with my cousin this hour, and your mage has not. I can keep him quiet and I swear to you I will, if you but lift the spell.”

Malowan glanced at Nemis, then fixed his eyes on Maera, who met his gaze steadily. Her voice was hoarse, as if she fought tears. “How can you allow an innocent to be so cruelly used, Malowan?” she whispered.

Lhors glanced at Rowan. The ranger’s eyes were fixed on the distant throne, her lips set.

Malowan looked at Vlandar, who gazed back at him without any sign Lhors could make out. “The innocent must not suffer,” Malowan said, very softly. “And so, what dare I, except to grant your plea?” He laid his hands upon the half-elf’s face, and at his touch, Florimund awoke.

If he cries out, Lhors thought, we’re all doomed. But the paladin had done something to soothe the fellow, or perhaps Nemis’ earlier sleep spell had. The half-elf merely gazed around, then allowed Maera to draw him aside so they could speak.

“You know why I cast that spell,” Nemis said. He looked angry.

Malowan shook his head. “Yes, and I agreed with what you did. But would it not be better not to distance Maera from us—or her sister? We know to watch him, after all. And you and I have ways of watching that use more than eyes.”



As the party gathered for a brief rest, Nemis went off with Rowan to guard his back. He was sure that he could get close enough to cast a spell on the two guards beneath the dais. They were gone no more than a few moments.

“Sleeping like little lambs,” the mage announced with a smile.

“Well done,” Vlandar said. “Take a few moments to rest, then we’re off again.”

Maera drew the injured half-elf back into the kitchens with her, talking to him the whole time. She looked tense, Lhors thought. Florimund gave Nemis and Malowan a baffled look but finally shrugged listlessly, as though nothing mattered much. He still seemed unsteady on his feet and winced as the ranger laid a hand on his arm.

“Odd,” Nemis remarked softly to Vlandar after the half-elf was out of earshot. “When I heal someone no worse hurt than he was, the healing takes. He was in pain, yes, but mostly cut and bruised—nowhere nearly as bad as some I’ve helped.”

“I agree it seems odd,” Vlandar said. “You didn’t take his memories away, did you?”

The mage shrugged. “I did what I could to ease his mind, you know. But whatever aid I’ve offered him since, Maera refuses for him. And he does not seem eager for that healing.”

“I’ll tell you that ’e’s fakin,” Agya murmured. She had come silently up behind them. “Not my business, listenin’ to wizard-talk, but yon Florimund? I don’t trust ’im so far’s I could spit ’im.”

Malowan came up behind her. He sighed. “Agya, I know, but not all are used to violence. Merely being taken prisoner would be enough to terrify a gentle fellow. But I *had* to waken him. Maera will not listen to any word against Florimund and besides, I have no proof against him. He is not evil, that I can tell.”

Agya merely cast up her eyes.

“Let us be done with this,” Vlandar urged. “Mal, Florimund is your watch—and Maera as well.”

The paladin nodded.

“We’re ready to go, then?” Vlandar added. “I know most of us needed a short rest here, but we have little time to spare. We don’t know when the guard change occurs, but we do know what the incoming guards will find—a trail of bodies.”

“I agree,” Malowan said. “And we have yet to find the Jarl’s private chambers.”

“Or his treasuries, though I would like it better if we found another scroll like the last one you and Agya found.” Vlandar beckoned the rest of his company close. “All right, people,” he began, “we’ve crossed much of the Rift, but there is still danger. Nemis has neutralized the two guards behind the dais, but there may be others, or servants wandering the halls. None of us know what we will find once we get to the Jarl’s chambers, but we must be utterly quiet. You four”—he looked at the rescued prisoners—“stay in our midst. We’ve given you what weapons we can, and if things come to a fight, we’ll welcome your help. But we have a goal that lies beyond this place, and our best way to get there—and to get you free of the Rift—is to use stealth. We are spies, not an army.”

“We’re no army, either,” Jebis said quietly. “And we’ll do what you ask, so long’s we’ve a chance to escape alive.” He glanced at his companions. Two of the hunters nodded cautiously. The third stared at the dagger he now held, his lips moving soundlessly. He looked a bit touched to Lhors, who couldn’t blame the man.

“Good,” Vlandar said. “Watch our two magic-users”—he indicated Malowan and Nemis—“They are testing our path and our backtrail for enemy, traps, pitfalls and other dangers. If either signs for you to stop or to be still, do so.”

“We shall,” the hunter said. “Not many orders I won’t follow to get out of here.”

“Sensible,” Malowan murmured. “Now, if you must speak for any reason, get my attention or Nemis’ or Vlandar’s and do this”—he held up a hand, first finger extended. “If it is safe to talk, the response is this”—he held up an open hand, all fingers pressed together—“and if not, this”—he drew a slashing hand across his throat.

“Simple enough,” Jebis said. He rapidly ran through all three signs, tersely naming each.

Vlandar nodded. “Good. Now, you can make out the throne down there? There are two guards behind it, but Nemis has bespelled them. All the same, be swift and quiet.”

They crossed the great cave and passed the dais without challenge. Vlandar gestured urgently, and they covered the distance eastward quickly, entered a narrowing passage blocked at its inner end with one of the slabs of rock used as doors. Nemis spelled it to one side while Malowan tested the passages beyond for immediate danger. The paladin shook his head, then he and Nemis led the way in, leaving Khlened, Vlandar, and Bleryn to shift the stone back into place.

The chamber beyond was cool but not unbearably so after the drafty great cave. This room might have been a private audience hall for the Jarl’s important guests. Tables and chairs dotted the area, and on one Lhors could see scrolls. A few weapons hung from the wall. Pelts covered the floor and the icy stone walls. Another passage went north into darkness, and the east end of this long, skinny room was blocked by hides from ceiling to floor.

Vlandar set Maera to watch north and west, Rowan to keep an eye on the east curtains, then let Malowan perform a reveal danger spell on the chamber itself while

Nemis did something similar over near the east wall. Everyone else waited close to the doorway they'd just come through until the two magicians nodded and gestured that the chamber was free of traps.

Vlandar divided the party and set them to various tasks, leaving the rangers where they were and getting Khlened, Bleryn, and Gerikh to search the chamber for anything useful.

Agya and Lhors were left with Florimund.

The thief's nose wrinkled, and she touched Lhors' hand. *Animal smell*. She pointed toward the leather-draped east wall. The youth shrugged, but when Rowan glanced his way, he caught her attention and signed. Rowan nodded, slacked her bowstring long enough to sign, *Yes. Beasts in there*, then turned back to keep watch.

Lhors glanced at his companions. Agya swallowed hard as she interpreted the rangers sign, then turned as Florimund began to sway, his eyes half closed. Thief and villager caught the half-elf before he could fall over. The pile of ivory tusks he would have landed on would have made a hellish clatter. Lhors and Agya eased the fellow down, exchanging exasperated looks over him. Nemis, who must have been watching the half-elf, padded quickly across the chamber and clamped a hand over Florimund's mouth as he and hauled the half-elf up and off his feet. Florimund struggled feebly, but Nemis was already at Maera's side, where he set the fellow down with some remark to the ranger that Lhors couldn't hear. She scowled at the mage but patted her kinsman's hand and let him crouch next to her.

Everyone froze as a deep giant voice asked a question from the next room. A resonant female voice replied, and something that sounded like a large dog whined eagerly. Vlandar gestured for Nemis to join Rowan, then drew the others just into the hallway leading up to the gentry's quarters. "There is nothing for us in here. There is at least one chamber behind those hides where Rowan keeps watch, and beyond it, two giants and two wolves."

Jebis made the safe to talk sign, even though Vlandar had been speaking, if very quietly.

Malowan held up a hand for yes and nodded. "Beg pardon, sir, but that voice we just heard? That was their leader, I'm sure of it."

"I believe you may be right," Malowan said. "By the location, if nothing else, and I sense power in there. If so, the other may be his lady, and the wolves both pets and guards. Back north is a vast cavern, with many giants. Families, I think. If the Jarl is here, they may be his nobles."

"It seems likely," Vlandar said. "We've a pocket of silence here, thanks to Nemis' spell. I'd like one of his sleep spells to deal with what's in there. I don't want to start a fight here. Those nobles or whatever they are would not hear, thanks to Nemis, but others might be drawn from passages or guard points eastward." Vlandar considered this briefly. He then waved to catch Nemis' eye and broadly pantomimed sleep.

The mage smiled grimly, nodded, and turned away. A few moments later, he turned back to nod once more.

* * *

Vlandar led them back into the main room. Nemis, who had been walking with Rowan, approached the warrior. The ranger looked very unhappy about something, Lhors thought.

As Rowan marched over to begin speaking in urgent tones with the paladin, Nemis stepped close to Vlandar and said, “Listen, please. We dare not leave the Jarl and his lady alive.”

Vlandar gave him a puzzled look.

“They sleep now. Execute them while they sleep—call it justice for the deaths they’ve caused. They will feel no pain. Leave those two alive, and they’ll spill more innocent blood.”

Vlandar nodded sharply. “I agree. Still, to kill anyone asleep like that...”

“You need have no part,” Nemis urged. “Mal certainly must not be part of it or even know what we do until it’s done. Rowan will distract him once we’re in there, but—”

“Too late,” Malowan said. He’d come up unnoticed. Behind him, Rowan cast Nemis a tired glance and shrugged. “Nemis, you cannot do this, not while I am here, and I will not leave.”

“I’ll send *you* to sleep then!” The mage hissed in annoyance.

The paladin shook his head. “No. If we were attacked, you would need me.” Malowan looked at Vlandar. “Tell me you have not countenanced this.”

“Not here and now,” Vlandar broke in grimly. “Get inside that chamber, and we’ll talk.”

Malowan set his jaw, beckoned his ward close, and went.

“Sorry,” Rowan muttered as she passed Nemis. “I did all I could, but he became suspicious.”

“A plague on the pure-hearted,” Nemis growled and followed her up the two steps and around the leather drape. Vlandar waited until everyone else was out of sight, then gestured for Lhors to go ahead of him.

It was nearly warm inside the Jarl’s private chamber—and that was what it must be, Lhors decided. The furnishings were too fine for any but the ruler and his lady. He glanced around. The chamber was large but so cluttered that Lhors wondered if frost giant nobles even knew the concept of cleaning maids.

Vlandar got everyone close together again to get everyone searching the chamber, but Malowan, his face pale and his mouth set, interrupted. “We are blocked from behind by Nemis’ spell of silence, and there is nothing and no one to the east. I tested. Vlandar, you cannot let him do this.”

“I can,” the warrior replied steadily, “and if it seems the best course to me, I will. Mal, be sensible. Take Agya and go out of sight. What bloodshed these two have caused—”

“That is between them and the gods,” Malowan said flatly. “They are living beings, and unlikely as it seems to any of us, they may one day become good.”

Khlened snorted in disbelief.

Malowan fixed him with a flat look, and the barbarian subsided. “Even if they do not, their fellow mortals are not given the right to judge. I will not risk the path I have taken for so many years, simply because this mage—”

“*This mage*, is it?” Nemis said stiffly. “Your Heironeous won’t take your powers from you because of *my* choices, my friend, and you and I both know it.”

“I will not let you do this,” Malowan gritted.

“You cannot stop me,” Nemis replied.

“Mal, listen at ’im,” Agya urged in the uncomfortable silence that followed. “C’mon, you an me, we’ll just go that way, y’won’t see a thing.”

She shrank back as Malowan transferred the glare to her. He must be upset or very angry, Lhors thought. As far as *he* could tell, the mage didn’t even notice his ward’s reaction, though normally he was careful not to upset her.

“I have not decided yet,” Vlandar began.

Malowan shook his head, silencing the warrior. “Yes, you have. Don’t think me a fool because of my calling, Vlandar.”

“I don’t—”

“Then don’t pretend you haven’t seen them dead in your mind and felt good because of it!” the paladin snapped.

“I have seen them dead, and I’d be glad for it,” Vlandar said evenly. “My friend, we’re wasting time we do not have. Search the chamber for the things you know we need, and I’ll study the problem while you do.”

“Oh?” Malowan swung around to face him. “And what of *their* time?”

“Give it up, Mal,” Vlandar demanded harshly. “Take Agya and go past that drape to the east. I’ll see to it they don’t suffer.”

“And if I won’t go?”

Vlandar’s jaw clenched. Even Lhors could tell that the warrior was swiftly becoming angry himself. “You will go, even if I have to get Khlened and Bleryn to drag you. I’d rather not, but Mal, I will if you leave me no other choice. I ask this out of our friendship, but remember that you swore to follow my orders along with everyone else.”

Silence. Lhors noticed the four kitchen prisoners had moved back away from the verbal sparring. He couldn’t blame them. It made him uncomfortable to hear Malowan, Nemis, and Vlandar arguing.

Lhors jumped as someone touched his arm. It was Nemis, who was very red in the face, particularly for one normally so pale.

“What say you, lad?” the mage asked quietly. He used his eyes to gesture behind him at the sleeping giants.

The two had been at table drinking wine. On the far side of the great slab of wood, a massive, silver-haired giantess slept awkwardly in a chair, her face pressed into the table, arms dangling. Lhors could just make out the two wolves sprawled by her feet. Nearer to him, the Jarl lay in a heap on thick fur rugs. The giant was snoring faintly.

“What do you mean?” the youth whispered.

Nemis smiled grimly. “I know these two by repute. They have personally killed hundreds of humans and elves. By their orders, many hundreds more have died—just as your family and all those in your village died, or as Jebis and the hunters would have.”

Lhors stared at the sleeping giants, vaguely aware of Vlandar and Malowan still arguing behind him.

“Imagine being held in a cage,” the mage whispered, “with giants all about to tease you that very soon you would be cut into pieces and eaten, or bound alive over a spit...” He hesitated as Lhors cringed away from him, eyes tightly closed and a hand over his mouth.

Do not think about the babes and that soup pot! At the moment, it was all he could see. Then in a flash the image of his father eclipsed everything—his father pinned to the ground, writhing with a spear the size of a young tree trunk through his gut.

Nemis touched his shoulder and gasped, then laid both hands on the youths face, pulling him around. “I am sorry, lad. I didn’t know, though I should have suspected. I did not mean to cause you such pain.”

Lhors nodded, eyes still tightly closed. He couldn’t speak.

Nemis let go of him. “But if these two, the Jarl and his lady, were part of the command that set Nosnra’s giants against your village, if you could avenge your father and your village now would you?”

Lhors drew a deep breath and opened his eyes. To his astonishment, the mage held out a long dagger.

“There is no burden on you to do this. Any of the four men held prisoner in that kitchen yonder might be willing, but they faced only loss of life, however dreadful it might have been. You lost your family, your village, and your father—everything you knew. It is your choice. If you strike, you grant them a cleaner death than your father had. While another may become Jarl here, at least this one will order no more deaths.”

Lhors gazed longingly at the hilt. Father, I swore I would avenge you, and here within my reach...

But he wouldn’t even reach for the blade. “I know you are right, Nemis—about them and all giants. But no, not like this. My father—it cannot change that he is dead, and it would not avenge anything. Not for me.”

Nemis eyed him gravely then shoved the dagger back into its sheath. “As you choose,” was all he said as he turned away.

Lhors drew a deep, shuddering breath, blotted his eyes on his sleeve, and realized Vlandar and Malowan were still arguing fiercely. The whole exchange with Nemis had taken next to no time at all.

Khlened had come up unnoticed. “Done right, boy,” he muttered and patted the youths shoulder awkwardly. “I’m no headsman either. There’s no glory in butcherin’ a sleepin’ foe.”

Bleryn snorted. “Listen at ’em, arguing whether such killers deserve to live. Small wonder dwarves don’t go for being paladins. We got more sense’n that. This is execution flat out, not murder. Such brutes don’t deserve an honorable death.”

Behind them, Malowan’s voice rose. Nemis swore angrily and began muttering a spell. Khlened ran over to help Vlandar wrestle the paladin down. It took Gerikh’s help to get it done, and as Nemis stepped back, the paladin’s angry, weeping voice was abruptly silenced, though the man clearly was still bellowing at Vlandar and the others to let him go.

Vlandar, who had Mal’s feet, leaned away from the man and met Bleryn’s eyes. “We can’t hold him long! One of you, get it done and that’s an order!”

Bleryn nodded and turned away, shielding his blade before beckoning Jebis over. "I was prisoner in the Steading's smithy, and I owe giants, but no one offered t' make me into food. So you've a right, too."

Jebis declined, but one of the hunters came to his side with a dagger clenched in his hand.

"We owe 'em," the man said. He glanced at his dazed companion. "Poor Gorbis there, he may never be the same. Kill one, dwarf. I'll see to the other."

"Good," the dwarf replied. "Y'know how to give a stag a clean, quick death. Do as much here."

Nemis came over to stand next to Lhors.

"Stay there, lad," he said. "Close your eyes if you choose, but help me keep Mal from seeing anything."

He hadn't meant to watch, but Lhors found himself unable to look away. The dwarf's eyes were locked on the hunter's. "We'll kill the wolves first."

The hunter nodded. "Make it as bloodless as you can. Feller'd freeze around here in blood-soaked clothes."

The two dispatched the wolves by bringing a heavy blade down across the neck of each, severing the spine. The hunter then picked up a short spear leaning against the table, brought it over his head in a two-handed grip, and plunged it down through the giantess' eye. She jerked once, then the breath went out of her in a faint sigh. Bleryn gave the Jarl the same, looked down at him for a long moment, and then backed away, taking the hunter with him.

Lhors swallowed and turned away. So easy to kill... He was suddenly sick of death, the threat of death, and all the horrid forms death could take.

Behind him, Vlandar had let Malowan up and seemed to be trying to say something to the paladin. Malowan ignored him and brushed past Lhors to gaze down at the dead giants and their pets, then bowed his head in prayer. Tears etched paths down the man's face, and he looked sickened.

How can he be so... so... ? Lhors couldn't think of a word to describe a man who could forgive even giants. Lhors could not have done the deed himself, and he wasn't sure he entirely agreed with Vlandar's order, but he certainly felt no remorse for the two giants. He backed away and went over to join Vlandar, who looked very unhappy indeed as he gazed after Malowan. As the youth came up to him, Vlandar shook himself and turned to get his people working.

Nemis was checking the contents of the cavern for traps, using a charm of some sort. As he finished each pile or chest, he nodded, and Vlandar put one of them to work, searching.

Khlened found gems in one box and set them aside so he could finish searching to the bottom. Agya brought out two bags of coin and set them with Khlened's jewels. Vlandar scooped them up and shoved them to the bottom of his pack, then went to work on another coffer.

"That one's safe," Nemis said, pointing to a round-topped chest, "but leave the other. It's a trap and deadly at that." He got to his feet and went around the curtain where Rowan and Maera had taken Florimund.

The mage was back at once. "Bedchamber there. There's a spell buried in a trunk in there."

“I’ll come,” Vlandar said. “Send Rowan back for Mal, will you?”

“I’m here,” the paladin said as he came over to help out.

Lhors wondered what he would say to Nemis, but the man simply passed the mage, a worried Agya on his heels.

“Khlened,” Vlandar said as he watched the paladin worriedly, “you, Bleryn, and Gerikh stay here to finish up. If you don’t recall if Nemis said a thing was safe, leave it. Jebis, you and your companions come with us.”

Lhors followed on Vlandar’s heels.

Nemis was already kneeling before a massive trunk, his hands on the lock. With a faint puff of bluish smoke, the lock snapped, and he forced the lid back.

Lhors peered over the mage’s shoulder, but he could see only furs and other clothing. Nemis didn’t seem interested in the contents. The mage fiddled with the lid and suddenly a piece of wood slid aside, revealing a hidden cache. The mage chuckled softly and drew out several scroll cases. He shoved two of them back inside at once, then ran his charm over the others. “Check that one, Vlandar. These are spell scrolls.”

“It’s a map,” Vlandar said as he unfurled the scroll. Lhors helped him hold it open. “But not much use unless we travel overland to the place. And it may have no bearing on our journey. Nemis, you read Giantish. Tell me what it says here.”

Nemis gazed at the map for some moments, then licked his lips. “This,” he said, “is Muspelheim, home to the fire giants. You are right. It would be a dreadful journey on foot.”

“Yes,” Vlandar said, “but is it our goal? Can you tell that?”

“There is nothing here to tell me that,” the mage said tersely, “and if I were you, Vlandar, I would pray to my gods that it isn’t. This is no place for us.”

“How’d y’know that?” Agya asked.

The mage eyed her gravely as he rerolled the map and shoved it into its tube. “Because I have been there.”

Agya’s eyes narrowed. Maybe she suspected the mage would lead them into a trap.

Vlandar nodded and took the map. “Then if it *is* our way, you can guide us.” He turned. “Mal, is there anything else useful here?”

The paladin shook his head, still refusing to speak.

“A moment, Vlandar,” the mage broke in. “I thought our goal was to be gone from here and report back to your king. Seeking out this dread place would only take us farther from that.”

“Our goal,” the warrior reminded him, “is to find proof of what is going on with the giants and Keoland. We have connected the Steading to the Jarl and dispatched with him, but there is obviously someone yet higher up the chain. I cannot return to my king with mere speculation.”

“You’ll send us all to our deaths.”

“We’ve done well so far, better than any of us could have expected on the outset. Either the gods are smiling upon us or we did well in hitting the giants quickly and quietly. I care not which, but I will *not* give up now.”

“So be it,” the mage said in resignation. “I do not agree, but I swore to follow you, and I am not one for forsaking comrades in their hour of need.”

“Good,” said Vlandar, “then let’s be about it. Lhors, go fetch everyone from the other room.”

By the time the youth was back with Khlened, Bleryn, and Gerikh, Vlandar was talking to Jebis and the hunters. “I am glad we found you. If you’re certain you can find your way to your own lands once you’re outside...?”

Jebis nodded firmly. “Their village is a matter of a few days east of here, in the Yeomanry. I’ll go with ’em.”

“We haven’t much to spare,” Vlandar said apologetically, “but here is a map. Our rangers say there’s a passage beyond this chamber that leads down and outside. Once you’re out, you’ll want a place to rest up before you go on.” He squatted down, Jebis with him, and the two went over the map, which Vlandar handed over. “The cave is too small for giants to use, and we left dry wood behind.” He held out a cloth bag. “There’s enough stuff here to make a hot soup for the four of you.”

“Giants took nothing from us but our weapons,” Jebis replied. “I still have my pot and the makings for a couple days’ worth of stew. I guess the giants figured they’d rather we eat our food than theirs. If you’ve any messages to pass on...?”

“No,” Vlandar said at once. “If you’re caught again...”

“We understand,” the older hunter said quickly.

Vlandar led the way past the leather drape. Lhors found himself in a small bulge of a cave with chill air flowing over him from a narrow passage to the east.

“That’s our way, then?” the Jebis asked. When Vlandar nodded, he led his fellow hunters out of sight. Jebis hesitated, then held out a hand, which Vlandar clasped.

“I wish you good luck in your quest, Captain,” he said, “and I hope to hear the end of this story one day.”

“I hope to be able to tell it,” Vlandar said with a faint smile.

With that, Jebis and his hunters left and were soon out of sight.

Nemis came from a small area up by the passage. “Nothing there but a box that smells of trouble to me. Except for an iron bar protruding from the wall, I cannot reach it. There is power on it, though.”

“Make light for me,” Malowan said. “I need to see the thing and touch it myself.”

Nemis eyed the paladin sidelong, expecting the man to still be angry with him, Lhors assumed. But Malowan seemed to have dealt with the deaths back there—or at least put his anger and distress aside to do the job at hand.

“Is that wise?” Maera asked rather anxiously as the two moved off. The ranger gripped a spear in one hand and seemed to be holding Florimund to his feet by the other around his waist. The half-elf’s eyes were closed, and his face was utterly bloodless. “My cousin says—”

“Later, please,” Vlandar said tersely. “We need to get free of this place before someone finds the Jarl and his lady.”

Maera drew Florimund over to the wall, and Rowan slowly followed. Vlandar and Lhors watched as Nemis made light. Malowan stretched up an arm but apparently fell short also. Nemis then made a sling with his hands for the paladin to step into. Mal was still for some moments, then he nodded and jumped down, beckoning Vlandar over.

The warrior cleared his throat to get everyone’s attention and led them across the little alcove. “What have you found?” he asked.

“A transport, much like the Steading chain,” Malowan said. “With a specific goal. We pull down on the bar, and whoever is in this partly enclosed area will go there—wherever ‘there’ is. We need something I can stand on.”

Khlened and Bleryn ran back into the Jarl’s bedchamber, came out with a sturdy-looking flat chest, and set it against the cavern wall.

“All right,” Vlandar said. “We’ll go half at a time. I want Nemis, Rowan, Bleryn, Khlened, and Gerikh in the first party, weapons drawn. And Nemis, be ready to bespell any guards. The rest of us will be right behind you.”

The mage nodded and climbed onto the trunk while Malowan drew the rest of them back against the curtain into the bedchamber.

The mage reached up to the lever and pulled down smoothly. Lhors blinked in surprise. The mage and the others simply vanished!

And then it was his turn.

Vlandar’s arm was reassuringly solid against his shoulder. The youth gripped his spear.

“Deep breath, my young friend,” the warrior told him. “You’ve done well so far.”

Once everyone was in place, the paladin drew down on the bar. The chamber faded. Icy cold whirled away, and as the ground solidified under their feet, a hellish blast of heat wrapped around them.

Lhors blinked furiously, but for a moment, he could see nothing but blackness. Then, as his vision began to clear, he could make out a steep, black wall blocking their view ahead. To their right and left was nothing but smoke and distant fires.

Nemis was dragging off his cloak and hood as Vlandar came up. “Fire giants,” the mage said unhappily. “I knew it would be fire giants.”



What they could see was dire.

The night sky was thick with clouds painted blood red by fires and volcanic eruptions. Smoke was everywhere, and the addled-egg smell of reeking steam issued from nearby vents. Thick, ashy clouds billowed from a nearby volcano that shot flame and boulders high into the roiling sky. Not far away, the unmistakable form of a great hall topped a mass of shining, solidified lava, stone, and slag.

Where they stood was separated from the hall and the road leading to it by a low rock wall—to keep anyone from walking over it when the magic was being used, Lhors thought.

“Let us go,” the mage said. “There should be a guard here, and there are guards just inside the palace.”

“Howd y’know that?” Khlened asked. He eyed the mage warily.

Vlandar held up a hand for silence. “Ask later. We need to get out of sight now.”

Nemis nodded. “Unless the landscapes changed much in the past years, I know of one such place.” He glanced around. “Watch where I step and follow me closely. There are sinkholes and hot pools that will kill you in an instant.”

Florimund gasped.

The mage gave Maera a chill look. “Keep him quiet, please.”

The ranger turned away from him to soothe the half-elf.

Nemis turned his back to the palace and walked rapidly, angling away from the nearest volcano. The others followed, Malowan bringing up the rear.

It took longer than Vlandar would have liked, but in the end Nemis found his sanctuary: a black-walled, roughly circular tunnel, blocked at the inner end. The chamber was long and possessed two sharp bends that would keep in any light they made. It was surprisingly cool in here—compared to the outside at least. The company hastily removed their winter garb once they were well in, and Malowan made a light for them.

“What kind of cave is this?” Lhors asked.

The walls were almost glassy, oddly rough-shaped but smooth to the touch.

“Never mind that. What’s this *place*?” Agya demanded.

“It is a place south of the Yeomanry,” Nemis told her. “The fiery mountains are volcanoes, and the smoke and steam they make can be deadly to breathe. This cave was once a passage for such fire, but it has been blocked off for long years, and it is now too small for giants to bother about.”

“And how,” Khlened demanded pointedly, “do you know *that*, I wonder? You’re a secretive man, mage!”

“Food first,” Vlandar said. “I know it’s hot here, but we’ll do better for a warm soup. I’ll take on the cooking. Lhors, Khlened, there were some broken bushes near where we came in. See if you can find them. We’ll want a fire for light and soup both. But be careful and *stay out of sight*. There may be guards about.”

* * *

An hour or so later, they’d eaten and the fire was dying down to embers. Malowan had constructed two tightly wrapped torches from brushwood and found places to mount them high in the walls so they would have some light. He and Agya were wrapping more torches for the rest of the night and the morrow.

After their meager meal, Nemis told the tale of his apprenticeship among the drow, his journey to this place, and how he had killed his former master and escaped that life.

Khlened, to Lhors’ surprise, heard Nemis out.

“Could happen t’any of us,” the barbarian said finally. “Guess I can see why y’told Vlandar and Mal before th’ rest of us.”

“There was no point in telling everyone,” Malowan said. “For all we knew, we might never have come this far.”

“Aye, well,” the barbarian said. “What’s to do here, then? Y’t think this Eclavdra—drow witch or whatever she is—is here?”

“She came here now and again as the guest of the fire giant king, old Snurre,” Nemis replied. He seemed to have difficulty speaking, as if unwilling to say what he had so long kept quiet. “She has her own dwelling deep underground—a deadly place far from here. She has—or had—a scroll she kept in her chambers here that takes her back to that dwelling. I traveled here with her sometimes.”

“Could you locate those chambers?” Vlandar asked.

Nemis shrugged. “The only time I was allowed to carry a message to King Snurre—it was years ago, and I am not certain I remember the ways of the first floor. It was dark, and there were guards everywhere....” His voice faded, and he stared at the far wall. After a long silence, he roused himself with visible effort. “I know the level below that well. Often I went with her to council meetings with other drow. Below that, it is all caves and horrible creatures and darkness.”

“I know how good your memory is,” Malowan told the mage. “If you went there once, however long ago, you will remember it. A man who can memorize as many spells as you—”

Nemis smiled crookedly. “Yes, but I *want* to remember my spells. I have tried to forget many of my experiences here, you know.”

“Well, we can doubtless get inside,” Vlandar said, “and Nemis may well be able to guide us through. The question is, do we want to do that?”

Everyone's eyes were on him except for Florimund, who was curled up on the floor, his eyes only partway open. The half-elf seemed to have given up, Lhors thought—the way Gran's husband had when the fever took him.

"Why not?" Khlened asked. "We've done well so far. Lost no one yet, have we? I've wealth to keep me in comfort for at least a year or two and tales to tell..."

"And we've done some damage to both the Steading and the Rift," Vlandar put in. "We've learned who's made an alliance with the giants to attack our lands. Now we're in a place that may kill us before we can get word to my king. If that happens, we've accomplished little indeed."

"Speak plain, sir," Bleryn put in.

Vlandar nodded. "Nemis can tell you better than I about the dark elves. I know only from tales and legend that they are deadly fighters and dire magicians with no love for any who live under the sun. Fire giants themselves—remember the two in the Steading's smithy? They are powerful and smarter than most giants. Beyond that, this land is deadly. The fumes from the fires will make you giddy, the smoke will make you cough, and the heat will sap the water from your body and leave you weak and brain-mazed. If we decide to continue on, we must be swift and keep good watch on each other for signs of water-lack or Rime-sickness. For my own part, I would like to return to my king with word that we found this drow witch and destroyed her. If not, I would at least like evidence of her hiding place below ground so that the king can assemble magicians powerful enough to deal with her and her underlings."

"There is something else," Nemis said quietly. "Eclavdra's scroll. If we can find it, I can use it to get us out of here in an instant. A brief incantation, and we can all be sitting at an inn in Cryllor."

"You mean we could go then—poof, gone like with that bar?"

Nemis nodded.

"Then," the barbarian said slowly as if reasoning it out for himself, "I say we go in, find this nasty she-wizard, and finish all this. I'll kill a few more ogres or even take on a giant or two t'be out o' this place."

"Aye," Bleryn said, "he speaks for me as well."

The rangers nodded in unison. Gerikh shrugged and managed a smile.

"Quit now?" Malowan shook his head firmly. "I think not."

"I go where 'e goes," Agya added defiantly, and Malowan patted her shoulder.

"Lhors?" Vlandar turned to him. "What do you say?"

Lhors was none too happy about trying to sneak through a fortress of larger and smarter giants, but the thought of being out of here once and for all...

"I'm with you, sir. To the end."

"Good," Vlandar said. His eyes were warm as he looked around the company. "Sleep then, people. You'll need all you can get tonight."

* * *

During the last watch, Nemis had worked up what maps he could for the party, using blank sheets from his spellbook.

"This I can tell you," the mage had said as he passed around maps, "no one who is not mad would enter that hall. Snurre is held by the drow to be a dolt, but a

cunning one. We should kill him if we can. Some of his guards will still fight, but most of the others will flee. Not all serve him willingly.”

“If we can do that without wasting time by seeking him out,” Vlandar said, “then so be it, but our first priority is to find proof of drow involvement and where they might be found.”

They all stood in the cavern. Everyone was ready, but everyone also seemed hesitant to begin. The next few hours would either see the accomplishment of their mission or the end of their lives.

Suddenly Nemis drew the fire sword Malowan had garnered in the Steadings treasury and held it high. “May Pelor, god of healing and light, see us through the reek and the walls and know our hearts and guide us through this hellish place.”

“And may Heironeous,” Malowan added, “he of honor and justice, strengthen our hearts, knowing our cause is just and right.”

“Kord, you who give strength and courage, smile on us,” said Khlened.

Bleryn grinned at him fiercely. “May Ulaa, god of mountains and gemstones, grant us all courage in dark places... and great trove.”

Agya brought her chin up. “Rudd who guards thieves, make luck ours in there.”

“Trithereon,” Lhors murmured, “for my father, who truly served him.”

“I ask the blessing of Kelanen, god of swords,” Vlandar said, “that my blade protect us all and bring us all safely away.”

“Dalt, father of locks and keys, remember your servant,” Gerikh prayed, “and let me aid these who rescued me.”

The rangers eyed each other. Rowan gripped her sister’s arm and said, “Let Lydia, goddess of music and daylight, hear me. When we walk in the dark, let us remember why we do this: so that ordinary folk may be allowed to live happily and freely under the sun. Let us remember such good, simple things lest the darkness swallow us, body and soul.”

Maera merely bowed her head and said nothing.

* * *

It was the hour just after dawn when the party emerged, but they could barely tell by the sky. There was perhaps a bit more light in the east, though that might have been another volcano. The fire giants seemed to keep the same pattern as the hill and frost giants. There were no outside guards posted and no one was in sight as they neared the pile of hardened lava and slag. Still, everyone kept under cover as best as they could, flitting from boulder to boulder and sprinting when in the open.

Nemis led the way right up to the main entrance, with Khlened and Bleryn bringing up the rear. Once they reached the heavy-looking metal door, the mage gave Malowan a small nod as if to say, “Do what we discussed.”

The mage used a spell to charm the door open. It swung in soundlessly, revealing a corridor lit by well-spaced torches. The hall was made of the same black rock as the outer walls, though here tapestries broke the surface instead of vents. No one was in sight.

Malowan fixed his eyes on the dark opening, whispering urgently. When the paladin was done, Nemis touched Khlened’s arm to get the barbarian’s attention and

sent his eyes toward the nearest tapestry. They could see it moving in and out slightly, as if someone sat behind it, breathing heavily.

Guard, the mage signed grimly.

Khlened's eyes flicked from the mage to Bleryn. The dwarf nodded, and the two moved as one, running forward silently to throw themselves at the drape. They vanished behind it, and someone with a very deep voice made a startled grunt. The only other sound was the unpleasant crunch of the barbarian's morning star crashing down on something—perhaps an unhelmed skull.

Bleryn leaned out to draw a hand across his throat. Khlened hung back long enough to rub his spiked ball on the tapestry, then stepped aside so Nemis could again lead the way.

The passage widened abruptly, turning into a vast hall that went at an angle east to west. Lhors, not far behind the dwarf, thought he could make out a broad hallway going north partway down and another going south. At the far end of the long, dimly lit chamber, Lhors thought he could see steps going up to a dais and an empty throne. The youth caught his breath as Malowan pressed past him and Agya and gestured for them to stay back.

Perhaps twenty long paces away, two odd-looking creatures stood, swinging black morning stars casually.

They have two heads each! Lhors realized.

Agya tapped his arm sharply to sign the same information a breath later.

The creatures were huge, built rather like men. Atop their massive, black-skinned shoulders, were two heads, and each head faced a different direction. There would be no sneaking past two such guards.

Malowan edged forward to join Nemis, who stood in shadow watching the guards. The two men conversed in cautious sign. As Vlandar came over to join them, Nemis signed, *Wait here*.

Before the warrior could find out what the mage wanted to do, Nemis strode into the dim torchlight. Vlandar gave the paladin an astonished look, and Malowan gestured, *Wait*.

The creatures might have been fearsome in appearance, but they didn't seem too bright. Perhaps one brain was divided among two heads.

The creatures both saw the mage at the same moment and simply stared at him. Nemis moved out into the hall and turned partway around. Lhors could see him give the creatures a toothy smile as he said, "Well, if it isn't my old friends, Meghos and Zogry."

One head each stared at him still, but the other two shifted back to keep watch over the vast chamber and its passages. Vlandar froze as one head seemed to linger on the shadow where they hid. When it moved on without raising a cry, he drew back into deeper darkness, bringing his company with him. Malowan whispered something against his ear. Vlandar nodded and gestured with his free hand for Lhors to stay where he was. A moment later, Vlandar eased along the shadows of the wall and began to move slowly but purposefully toward Nemis and the guards.

Malowan touched Lhors' arm. "There are spears," he whispered. "See them?"

Lhors looked where the paladin pointed. The ettins had long weapons leaning against the wall. Lhors nodded carefully.

“Rowan and Vlandar will create a diversion while Nemis keeps the noise contained. You get one of the spears and kill one of those creatures. Can you?”

Lhors swallowed dread and nodded again.

“How tha’ little man know us?” one creature said, diverting the youth’s attention. It spoke Common, but with a thick accent made worse because it seemed to be missing most of its front teeth. Its other head came around to stare at Nemis.

“What, Meghos? You don’t remember the boy you used to stalk through the lowest caverns? The mage’s ’prentice you ’ad so much fun terrifying, down there?”

“Cannot be,” the second replied promptly. “’E’s got a beard an’ ’e’s lots bigger.”

“*Much* bigger,” Nemis corrected him gravely, “and you’ve come up in Snurre’s graces.”

“Uh?” both asked blankly.

“You guard Snurre,” Nemis said with another flash of teeth. “How sad,” he added incisively, the smile vanishing on the moment, “that you will not be able to enjoy the task any longer.”

“’Ere!” The first snorted indignantly. “You insulting us?”

Nemis shrugged and smiled.

Vlandar had come up right behind the creatures in utter silence, unnoticed by either. He ran forward with two swords drawn, and before the awkwardly shaped ettin was properly aware of its danger, Vlandar was inside his reach, both blades stabbing up into the creature’s back. The creature howled in pain, but the sound was somehow flat and muffled.

Nemis is shielding sound, Lhors reminded himself as he slid along the wall. He watched as Vlandar let go his blades and leaped back just as Rowan drew her bow. The ranger ran into the open and began loosing arrows at the heads of the second creature.

Now or never! Lhors ran along the wall to snatch up one of the long spears. The first ettin fell to the floor, but the second must have seen Lhors moving, for it turned and charged with a vicious roar. So terrified that he couldn’t even scream, Lhors planted the spear’s base against the wall and lowered the point. The ettin tried to stop at the last moment, but one of Rowan’s arrows plunged into its groin, causing the brute to fall. The point of Lhors’ spear went in beneath one of the ettin’s jaws, angling up into its skull. The spearhead must have slammed into the back of the giant’s skull, because the shaft suddenly bent and broke with a massive *snap!*

The youth dropped the broken shaft as the creature fell. Breathing heavily, he leaned against the wall with the dead ettin only inches from his feet. Above the nasty stench that was everywhere in this land, he could smell the rough cast-iron reek of the blood pooling on the floor.

Rowan came over and wrapped an arm around his shoulder, drawing him away.

Lhors glanced back over his shoulder: Vlandar gazed expressionlessly at the dead ettins. He’d already retrieved his blades. Vlandar and Nemis joined them moments later.

“My silence spell still holds. The king’s throne is there.” Nemis pointed out the dais at the opposite end of the long hall. “Obviously, he is elsewhere. There is a hiding place he has behind the throne somewhere in that wall. The rest I do not know,

except that there are guards on all the passages.” He turned north and was quiet a moment. “The stairway down is that way.”

“Where’s the king, d’you think?” Khlened asked. He’d drawn his berserker sword.

“Uncertain,” Nemis said. “He could be anywhere. Unlike Nosnra, he does not keep regular hours, and he often prowls his halls alone or with a guard or two.”

“Fine,” Agya said angrily. “I feel mighty safe *now*.”

“You’ve no business feeling safe here,” Malowan reminded her. “What next, Vlandar? Do we—?”

He never finished the sentence. Nemis murmured a hasty spell that extinguished the ettins’ torches as loud footsteps echoed and the creak of armor suddenly filled the hall. Somewhere to the east, a door slammed.

“Remember what I said,” Nemis rasped to Vlandar. “Safest thing is to kill Snurre.”

“I agree,” Vlandar whispered. “But let’s see who and what guards him before we attack.”

He led the company back to where the ettins lay and settled behind the nearest, sword drawn. The rest of the company found what hiding they could as four torch-carrying guards came into sight at the hall’s far end.

Lhors swallowed dryly. The shortest of them was over twice his height. All were ebony-black and looked very professional.

In their midst, walked a very odd figure indeed. He was shorter than his guards, but powerfully muscled and clad in black armor. Tusk-like teeth gleamed in the torchlight, and his moustache and beard were nearly the same unpleasant orange-moss shade as his teeth.

Agya stiffened as two enormous dogs paced along with him, sniffing the air suspiciously. Both hounds had very deep red hides, and their eyes glowed with a hellish light. Malowan laid a reassuring hand on her arm and carefully indicated Nemis—the mage was using his *beneath notice* spell on the party.

The tusked giant flipped a white, leathery cloak aside so he could sit, then adjusted his black iron crown and drew a massive, thick-bladed sword. He settled the sword upright on the dais before him and rested his forearms on the crosspiece. The hounds dropped to the floor by his feet and closed their eyes, but they seemed no less alert.

“Snurre?” Vlandar whispered despite Nemis’ silence spell.

The mage nodded grimly.

One of the guards moved off to light torches placed in the back wall, throwing the throne room in a ruddy orange light. An ornately carved flaming skull decorated the wall immediately behind the throne, and the other walls were carved in various battle scenes.

Khlened tightened his grip on his morning star and began to move forward, but Nemis tugged at the barbarian’s hair. “Wait until he takes off that cloak. It’s dragon-hide, and he’s less of a threat if it isn’t on him!”

The barbarian nodded agreement.

The mage waited for some moments, then glanced at Vlandar and nodded. Vlandar drew a hand across his throat, and Khlened grinned cheerfully. The dwarf

loosed his axe, and Rowan knelt quietly to arrange arrows onto the floor by her knee. Maera pressed a listless Florimund behind her as she freed her javelins.

When everyone was ready, Nemis stepped toward the dais, and the rest of the party charged. One of the hounds growled a warning—the only advance notice Snurre and his guards had of the attack. The second dog went down before it could properly get to its feet as Maera's spear plunged into its chest.

Snurre stared down at his pet in shock, then shouted an order. Like other sounds, it sounded flat to Lhors, as if it didn't carry very far. The guards could certainly see the invaders, though. They came around the throne, weapons at the ready, and the other dog surged to its feet. It whined faintly when its master snarled out an order and abruptly retreated behind the throne, dragging at a lever on the wall. Part of the wall swung into an utter blackness into which Snurre leaped. The hound spun around and loped after Snurre. The two vanished into darkness, and the wall clicked shut behind them.

There were three guards still left, but one was foolish enough to turn away—making sure his king was safe, Lhors thought. Bracing himself for impact, Lhors shoved his spear deep into the monster's leg, just below the knee and angling up. The giant went down hard as Lhors leaped away.

Vlandar ran forward and brought his sword down two-handed across the brute's neck. The guard did not move again, but another was fast upon them. The giant came at them, hammer held high. But it never came down. Maera's spear and Rowan's arrows brought the creature down, and Bleryn finished the fellow off with his own hammer.

Beyond them, Khlened was engaged in a mismatched battle of morning stars—his own, though bugbear in size and heft, was still smaller than the fire giant's. The Fist was using strategy, planning his own swings so the giant's weapon wouldn't rip his from his fingers. Before he could settle the match though, the giant snatched up a fallen sword and lunged. Khlened howled with pain and collapsed as the blade stabbed through his shoulder.

Vlandar threw himself forward and dragged the barbarian aside as Agya stabbed both her long knives into the back of the guards knee. The guard yelped in surprise when the leg simply collapsed under him. Agya barely managed to get out of the way in time.

The fallen guard lunged after the little thief, but Lhors charged forward with his spear, stabbing the fallen brute through the eye. Lhors turned, seeking the last guard, but he lay still, his armor red-hot and his hair smoking unpleasantly. Malowan's fire-sword pinned him to the wall.

"Easy, people," Vlandar ordered. "Agya, you and Lhors keep watch. Bleryn, watch back the way Snurre came and make sure no one sneaks up on us. Malowan, see to Khlened's wound."

The barbarian leaned against the wall. He was still standing, but blood coursed freely from his shoulder and he was obviously in agony. The paladin ran to him and began to lay hands upon the wound. Malowan's hands glowed for the briefest instant, and the barbarian gasped in surprise. As the paladin stepped back, Khlened smiled and waved the healed arm freely. "Thank you, paladin," he said. "I'm in your debt."

“Gerikh,” Vlandar continued, “if you can, find a way to disable the door Snurre went through so he can’t come after us with an army.”

“He’s won’t,” Nemis replied evenly. “He’s gone to ground. That’s both a treasure cave and hiding place with no other way out.”

Khlened looked up, his eyes bright at the mention of his favorite word.

The mage sighed. “Forget it. The whole place is guarded by something snakelike, huge and nearly impossible to kill.”

“No time,” Vlandar said tersely.

“We need to go, now,” the mage whispered as he came back. “My beneath notice spell won’t hold much longer.”

“No time like the present,” Vlandar said. “Which way though?”

“Back where we came and up the north hall,” the mage replied promptly. “Remember, we’ve little time to waste here, even with Snurre in hiding.” He looked at Gerikh.

Gerikh nodded. “I found the doorway and braced one of those long spears across it. It won’t hold against a brute like that for long though.”

“Let’s go, then,” Vlandar urged. He let Nemis take the lead.

They headed back through the darkened hall, avoiding the dead ettins, and took the passage heading roughly north. This finally went straight north—a fairly long corridor lit at odd intervals by lanterns. The unmistakable, if distant, clatter of a kitchen came from the left, and the wall down a west-branching passage was lit brilliant red from some enormous fire.

By now, Nemis was well up the hallway, his back against the east wall and two fingers across his lips. *Guards there*, he signed and sent his eyes sideways to where they could just make out a break in the black stone. The mage held up two fingers and drew a meaningful hand across his throat.

Vlandar nodded grimly and brought up his sword, but Nemis pressed past him and stepped into the open, turning to face the opening as he brought his hands up, fists clenched.

“Kill,” he rasped softly. Utter silence followed, then the muted clang of swords hitting the floor and two massive bodies falling onto them. The mage nodded in satisfaction and pointed up the hall.

Lhors glanced anxiously at Malowan. The paladins lips were moving, probably in prayer for the dead guards, but he was quiet about it.

The hall was still quiet. They stepped over dead guards and went on north, following Nemis.

“The stairs down are just there,” the mage murmured. “There *were* no guards between here and the stairs the last time I was here, but that was years ago.”

They made it down the long flight without incident. At the base of the stairs, they paused to rest. Lhors took a long drink from his bottle, and let the warm water sit on his tongue for some time before swallowing. He felt dry all the way through, and his lips were cracked.

“This level I know,” Nemis said finally. “The passage east”—he pointed—“is a dead end. There’s a temple, guest quarters, and trolls that way—or were. I doubt anything’s changed. It had not in all the years Eclavdra had come here, and they were

many more than all of my years. Still, unexpected guards do patrol at intervals in case someone is mad enough to break into this place. Walk warily.”

“Trolls or somethin’ comin’ this way right now!” Khlened whispered tensely. “And we’re in the open. Back up the stairs?”

“No,” Vlandar said as he scrambled to his feet. “Straight across into the passage.”

They ran for it. Moments later a party of a dozen or more armed creatures clomped by and vanished around the bend, heading east.

“The prison cells are nearby,” Nemis said after the din of heavy footsteps had faded. “Mal, I hope you will not—”

“I have Agya to protect here, before anyone else,” the paladin broke in.

“Good,” the mage said gravely. “Remember that.” His lips moved silently. “I’ve just set a silence and reveal enemy spell both. We should rest here a little. The drow guest chamber is not far away, and we need all our strength against them.”



It was very dark in the lower level of the palace—dark, dry and hot. The place they hid was so dark that Lhors couldn't tell whether it was a chamber, a passage, or a niche cut in the wall. There seemed to be dead air behind them, and a faint but unpleasant odor like things long dead. Lhors shuddered and forced his attentions elsewhere.

Test your spears. You can do that by feel. Make certain the wood is not cracked or the points loose. He'd learned the trick from his father years earlier, how to do that in full dark and not lose a finger. The spears—he had only two left—were still in good shape. So were the expensive daggers that he'd nearly forgotten about. It took him a moment to remember Plowys' name. After all that had happened since the fellow had died on their first foray into the Steading, Lhors was surprised he could remember that much at all. He was astonished when he counted up the long daytime rests that counted as their nights. Plowys had died only six days earlier, but it seemed like a distant memory. Lhors' life had become little more than running, hiding, killing, and more hiding. In between were times of restless sleep that brought only bad dreams.

He thought Rowan and Maera were also checking their weaponry. Malowan and Nemis sat close together, talking very quietly. The two men were probably going over some magic they would use together. Whatever grievance the paladin might still have toward Nemis, he had set it aside for now.

Lhors sighed and took another sip of tepid water. *Drink small amounts, but often when you've little to see you through,* his father had always told him. The bottle might get him through one full day, but not two. Water in this place...

I'd never trust it, Lhors told himself. Malowan or Nemis could find water and possibly even cleanse it if there was time. If we dared to go looking for water. *Nemis was right,* the voice in the back of his mind whispered. *This is no place for any of us. We're all going to die here in the dark.*

Lhors pushed the gloomy voice away and wondered how much longer before they would move on and how much longer before they would battle these drow. They sound very dangerous. Perhaps, he thought, we really will all die in here—or all of us

except Nemis. Suddenly, Lhors could understand why Khlened and some of the others didn't fully trust the mage, especially since Nemis didn't often explain himself unless Vlandar insisted.

He gazed into the dimly lit hallway that ran south to north and across it to the stairway they'd come down. It was blessedly quiet up there. He couldn't imagine that would last for long. Even if that horrid fat giant king can't free himself from the place he hid, he mused. Some guard will come looking for him. They'll see Gerikh's bar across the way in and then...

Lhors drew back as two brutish trolls suddenly stomped down the hall, hesitating at the staircase. His heart sank, and he feared discovery when the two turned to look his way. But Nemis' protective spells were as good as the mage claimed. The two monsters tromped on south, hesitated a moment at the bend in the passage, then trod back north, their footsteps echoing and growing fainter until they ceased entirely.

Vlandar sat next to him, back propped against the stone wall and legs stretched in front of him. He seemed fairly relaxed, content to let Malowan and Nemis work out their plans while he rested. Lhors reminded himself that so far, Vlandar and the others had kept them safe.

And you've helped. You've killed giants. Father'd be proud, had he lived to see that. *Lhors Giant Killer* Agya had called him. He smiled to himself. True, others had helped in the killing, but twice now, Lhors had dealt the killing blow—once in pure rage and once in sheer panic, but both creatures were equally dead.

Seems ya might not be so useless after all. The words echoed in his head.

Lhors settled his shoulders next to Vlandar's. He was still afraid, but that was sensible in a place like this. Fear would help to keep him alive. He'd manage.

Some moments later, Vlandar stirred. "Everyone caught their breath? Legs rested? Weapons checked?" There were a few quiet murmurs of assent. "Good. Nemis, how much farther and what can we expect when we get there besides a brutal fight?"

Nemis slid over next to Vlandar. "Not much farther—as long as we can go straight up this hall and then east. Once we're there, things will get interesting. Complicated. There is one main entry blocked by a dreadful trap—a tentacle wall. It looks like an ordinary part of the wall until you get close, then the tentacles grab you. I have some spells to use against it, but I doubt they will entirely neutralize it. And if only the tentacles are destroyed, there are other things on the wall—beaks to bite you."

"What about my arrows from the Steading trove?" Rowan asked.

"They might harm it, but if you touch the wall, it warns those inside. An arrow—or any weapon for that matter—might have the same effect. The only other way in is through a secret door inside the cells. I suggest we not go that way."

"Why fight 'em at all?" Agya demanded softly. "Why don't you and Mal go close by, make a spell t'learn who's in there, then get away, or put sleep on 'em and search in there?"

"I think it unlikely a sleep spell would work on every drow in there. I am certain it will not work on Eclavdra. But we must get in. If only servants or clerics are there, we can kill or disable them and then search for further proof against Eclavdra—other allies she has, perhaps even more maps. If she returns here to find her sanctuary

violated, it won't stop her, but it may make her wary for a while. If she *is* here..." He drew a deep breath and expelled it in a rush. "Then we must kill her."

"If we can." Vlandar nodded. "We must go before someone finds our handiwork above."

"Remember," Nemis told them as he got to his feet, "the drow do not expect open attack here. The rooms are guest chambers and placed in the very midst of this palace. King Snurre's guards patrol frequently, but the drow take normal precautions only. Also," he added with an almost cheerful grin, "it is daylight out there. Drow live deep in the ground, but even so, many of them choose to sleep when the sun lights the lands above them and wake when the sky is black. If there is a chance for us to surprise them, this is the hour."

"Besides," Malowan put in, "the scroll is in there, and we need it. I don't relish the idea of walking all the way back to Keoland."

Vlandar nodded with a smile, then eased over to peer into the hall. He drew back suddenly.

"Guards," he rasped, "three of 'em at the far end of the hall. They're standing there talking. Sure your spell's holding, Nemis? Mal?"

Both men nodded.

"We won't go yet, then. Nemis, tell us what to expect inside."

Lhors doubted the warrior had forgotten anything. He was keeping them all from worrying about things or getting restless—and making sure everyone else remembered.

Nemis shrugged.

"If nothing has changed since I was here years ago, it's about twice the size of the cave we were in last night. It is divided into two rooms by a curtain. The far chamber is her bedchamber. It is all dimly lit. One or two clerics have the outer chamber, and that's where we will come in. They'll be competent magicians, but Mal or I will do what we can to neutralize them so that you fighters can take them on. If any of the drow has a thing like a lash with several snaky ends, don't let it touch you. It will sap your strength. Eclavdra—if she's here—Mal and I will take her. Agya, Lhors, Gerikh, and Florimund, you can serve us best by staying out of the way and guarding our backs. Rowan, Maera, whatever arrows and spears you have left from the Steading trove, save them for her." He thought a moment. "Ah, I nearly forgot. She and any of her drow who come here use a spell scroll. There is another such scroll here to take them back. If any drow tries to get to it, do all you can to stop him."

"Why?" Agya asked warily.

"So we don't all get transported underground," Nemis said evenly. "And the king's wizards may be able to use it. Vlandar, are your guards still up there?"

"Still there," the warrior reported, "but wait. One's gone on north. The other two are heading this way."

He eased back against the wall, and the party fell silent. Some moments later, two trolls strode past and went down the hall and around the bend. Rowan edged around Vlandar and pressed against the south wall of their hiding place, listening intently.

She finally nodded. "Truly gone."

"Good. Let us go then," the mage said and stepped into the open.

Lhors sighed faintly as he moved back into the hall. Look upon me, Father. Help me be brave.

* * *

Nemis drew them to a halt just short of a smithy. The din here was strong and echoed into the hallway. Dark ruddy light from several fires lay across the stones. The mage nodded and led them up the hall.

Another few paces brought them to another broad hallway, this one heading east. It was gloomy that way despite a few torches stuck into the wall. Most of those burned fitfully, and all but one was at the far end of the passage. To the north, Lhors thought he could hear voices, echoing eerily as if the speakers stood in a huge chamber.

Nemis gestured for them to follow him and moved swiftly into the east passage. Some paces on, he stopped and drew everyone close against the north wall. Lhors was aware of a wide passage that dropped down just past where they stood and a vast, drafty space that way. Nemis pointed the other direction at a rough section of the wall across the passage from them.

The mage gestured for complete silence, then stepped back to let Malowan take his place. The paladin gazed at the wall for some moments. Then, with a glance at his companions, he pressed his palms together. His lips moved for some moments. He eyed Nemis, nodded, and walked steadily across the hall.

To Lhors' astonishment, the paladin's hands seemed to go into the wall as if it were water. Malowan withdrew one hand and beckoned for the others to join him. Khlened and Bleryn exchanged wary looks but moved out, the rangers right behind them. All four had weapons at the ready as they went into the wall and out of sight. Florimund stayed quietly where he was until Agya took hold of his arm and drew him across the passage. The half-elf willingly went with her.

He's given up, Lhors thought. He went next, followed by Gerikh and Vlandar. Nemis brought up the rear. The wall felt flaccid against his skin and seemed to cling to him, but he was through it and next to Agya in an instant.

The chamber was hung with purple and black drapes and was thickly carpeted. A black candle burned in a deep holder on a table partway across the room, another deep in a wall-niche.

Khlened and Bleryn were already partway across the room, advancing on a couch near the west wall and the black-skinned fellow who blinked at them sleepily.

He's so small! Lhors thought.

Lhors' eyes shifted briefly as Vlandar stepped away from him and threw one of his daggers. A second drow had come from behind one of the drapes, his lips moving in a spell. The dark elf ducked the dagger, and Vlandar reached for another. Rowan's arrow sang past Lhors' ear and caught the drow between shoulder and throat. The fellow's eyes went wide with pain but his lips were still moving. Maera ran him through with her spear.

"Well done! Get back now!" That was Nemis.

Maera freed her spear, but Rowan only had time to grab one of her arrows before the mage pulled her back.

On the other side of the chamber, Lhors could see Khlened towering over his adversary. The barbarian grinned fiercely and brought up his sword, but the drow rolled from the couch and under it, emerging on the other side as the barbarian brought the weapon down in a slashing blow that cut deeply into finely carved wood. Before he could free it, the drow snatched up a long rod from the floor and lashed out. Writhing tentacles smacked into Khlened's arm. The barbarian sagged against the wall, gasping for air. Even with two hands, he couldn't seem to lift his sword.

The drow chuckled and raised the weapon for another blow.

Bleryn jumped back just in time, then brought his javelin down savagely across the cleric's slender wrist.

Lhors winced as he heard the unmistakable crack of bone. Bleryn shoved the fallen weapon aside with the tip of his spear and took a step forward. The drow reeled back a pace, his lips moving. Bleryn froze, weapon upraised. Khlened wasn't moving either.

"Spell," Nemis hissed. "Mal, watch the drape!"

The mage took a pace into the open, catching the drow's attention. The fellow cradled his broken arm against his breast, but his lips continued to move. Nemis murmured something, then held up his hands as the cleric bared his teeth. The drow stayed that way, as if suddenly turned to stone.

"Sent the magic back at him," the mage explained. "Leave them, Vlandar," he added softly as the warrior started toward Khlened. "There is nothing you can do now except fight to protect them until we are done."

The mage moved across the room, stopping several paces from the brightly colored drape that covered most of the east wall.

Lhors tightened his grip on the daggers he'd drawn and swallowed past a dry throat. Why hadn't this Eclavdra attacked them yet? Were they alone? He suddenly realized he'd been holding his breath since he'd first seen movement on that couch. The entire attack against the two drow had taken no time at all.

Nemis, Malowan, and Vlandar stood in the middle of the room facing the drape. Rowan had taken up a position near the corner and knelt to fit an arrow to the string. Maera was so near Lhors, the youth could have taken a step and touched her.

She looked at him, thought for a moment, then finally spoke. "Keep Florimund safe for me."

He didn't quite know what to say.

"We'll keep 'im," said Agya from behind Lhors.

Nemis moved to the very center of the room, gesturing for his two companions to move away from him, then he took a deep breath.

"I know you are there, Eclavdra," he said, making no attempt at silence. "Come forth or we will set fire to the chamber."

Silence answered them.

"We control the palace of the fire giants, Priestess. This is no longer a haven for you."

"You do not."

Lhors started as a resonant, low female voice wafted through the room. He hadn't seen any movement of the drape, but she was suddenly *there*.

The clerics had seemed small to the youth, but Eclavdra—if this was truly she—was smaller than Agya. Unlike the little thief, the drow was almost fragile-looking. She wore a flowing black robe barely touched with silver. Sheer fabric slid smoothly over high breasts and a flat belly. Long silver hair rippled from beneath a cap the color of her skin. Tendrils of her hair slipped across her wrists and shoulders as she shook her locks back from sharp ears.

Lhors caught his breath.

Faint as the sound was, the delicately boned face turned his way and large, dark eyes met his very briefly. Her lips turned in amusement.

The youth could feel himself blushing, but Eclavdra's attention was again fixed on Nemis.

"You do not control the palace," she said again. "I would know." She laughed throatily. "But it is good to see you again, Nemis. I expected you to return to me, but scarcely like this." She gestured. "A handful of would-be heroes to... what? Take your vengeance against one who cared for you? I did, you know. Why else did I put up with your sulks and your angers, your loathing for your uncle, and your kind touch on my—"

"Save that," Nemis said flatly. "This is justice, not vengeance—"

Whatever else he would have said went unheard. Eclavdra's peals of laughter stopped him.

"I see. You will take vengeance against me for the sake of grubby peasants and ignorant herders, is that it?"

Agya gripped Lhors' arm when the enraged youth surged forward.

"Stay put!" the little thief hissed. "Can't y'tell? She wants us angered! She wants t'get Mal and Nemis so mad as they can't think proper, then she c'n kill us all." She kept hold of him until he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was right, of course.

Lhors had missed something in listening to Agya. The sorceress had apparently said something to upset Malowan. His mouth was grim as he took a step toward her. "What can you hope to get from this? All the fields and cities of Oerth? They are no use to you!"

"No? We could live again on the surface, if we chose—if it were *ours*. In the meantime, it will be a source of wealth, worked for us by slaves with giants to oversee the harvests, collect the cattle and sheep, even dwarves to mine for us. Of course," she added with a tight-eyed smile in Rowan's direction, "we will do away with aberrations such as *that* at once."

The ranger merely raised her chin and sighted down her arrow.

"Do not bother with that toy," Eclavdra added with a nasty laugh. "I can turn it against you—or better, turn it against your *sister*."

The drow's hands moved sharply.

"Mal!" Nemis shouted a warning as, with a faint cry of protest and pain, Rowan turned away from the drow and aimed it at her sister. She struggled against the magic, but it was of no use. She let go the arrow, and it shot through the air straight into Maera's throat. The ranger fell, one flawless end of the arrow protruding from under her chin, the bloodied point emerging from the back of her neck.

Lhors dropped his daggers and ran to take the half-elf's weight in his arms. She weighed less than he would have thought. He scooped her up as gently as he could and backed away. Agya was at his side, holding his daggers and ready to throw. Lhors eased Maera back close to the wall. He set her down gently on the floor, careful not to jar the arrow. The ranger was shuddering slightly but seemed to have passed out from the shock. Lhors could just hear a faint rasping. She was still breathing!

"Don't touch the arrow," rasped Gerikh, who had come over to help. "She'll bleed more, and it might kill her. As long as she's breathing, the paladin can still save her."

Lhors couldn't see Rowan, but he could hear her frantic weeping, then even that was lost under Eclavdra's wild laughter. The rest of the party had been stunned into inaction at the attack upon their comrade. Even Vlandar and Malowan stood stunned, eyes wide. In that instant, the sorceress darted forward to touch Vlandar's arm then threw herself back against the drape, Vlandar screamed and staggered, his arm bleeding from shoulder to elbow.

"Get back!" Nemis bellowed.

Lhors half-expected some taunt from Eclavdra, but the drow seemed too intent on her spells to bother. As her lips moved this time, Malowan threw himself to one side and began a spell of his own.

The colorful drape behind the sorceress suddenly sprouted thorns. Eclavdra jumped, and when she stepped away from the wicked points, there was blood in her hair.

Not enough to slow her, Lhors realized unhappily. He glanced back at Maera. Dreadful as the ranger's wound was, it was scarcely bleeding, and she was still breathing in ragged, shallow breaths. Maybe the paladin *could* heal her, if any of them managed to get out alive....

Lhors swallowed and turned away. Agya handed him his daggers and drew her own, shoving the dazed-looking Florimund behind her.

A swarm of lights darted around Nemis' head—some spell of *hers*, no doubt. But the lights didn't seem to bother the mage. As Eclavdra began another spell, Nemis began one of his own.

Rowan, still sobbing, ran out to grab Vlandar from the melee and drag him back behind one of the couches. Her eyes were puffy and red, and tears ran two pale tracks down her dusty cheeks.

Movement along the wall caught Lhors' eye. Bleryn had Khlened upright and was trying to get him out of the open. Eclavdra shouted something and a searing flame tore across the room. The fire slammed into Bleryn, throwing him into the wall with a bone-shattering *crunch*, and the dwarf went up like a torch. He didn't move as the flames consumed him.

Khlened, who had fallen heavily when the dwarf let him go, dragged himself onto his hands and knees. He tried to escape the hellish heat, but he was too near to get away. The barbarian's cloak began to smolder, his hair steamed, and then he too was enveloped in flames.

Lhors clapped his hands over his ears to try to shut out the barbarians' howls of agony, vaguely aware of Agya huddled tight against him. The agonized cries

suddenly ceased, and the only sound from the far end of the chamber was the cruel crackle of flames.

Malowan turned briefly to speak in that direction, his eyes dark with pain. Whatever he did, the fire stayed where it was, and even the smoke didn't seem to get any thicker.

"We end this now!" roared Nemis.

The drow laughed wildly. "*You* end this? I think not."

She lashed out with a spell, and Malowan stumbled and clutched his eyes. Lhors tackled Agya before the girl could run to the paladin. A sidelong glance from Eclavdra told him the sorceress had wanted that.

Ignoring Lhors and Agya for the moment, Eclavdra caught hold of a mace and took a cautious step toward the paladin.

"Mal!" Nemis shouted. "Metal weapon!"

"Can't see!" Malowan said. He sounded furious.

Eclavdra laughed again, and Malowan turned toward the sound, his hands moving. The handle of her mace suddenly turned a dull red and the drow's laughter rose to a shriek of pain. She dropped the weapon, and it fell with a dull thump, the carpet beneath it beginning to smolder.

Malowan's lips curved in a grim smile.

"Paladin!" Rowan's voice was low, but it cut through Eclavdra's wailing and the crackling flames.

Malowan began backing toward her, moving his feet cautiously across the carpet so that he wouldn't trip over anything.

Eclavdra held up her hands, and Lhors could see that her palms were red and badly blistered.

"You have only one spell to neutralize whatever I use against you," Nemis said grimly. "I know you, Eclavdra—and that was your greatest mistake. When I woke today, I made sure I would have several such spells. Go ahead and try to blind me. You'll be the one who cannot see. You wasted your fire on two who couldn't have fought you anyway. Now you cannot touch me."

The sorceress' lips began to move, her black eyes fixed on his, but before she could complete the spell, an arrow sang past Nemis' ear and plunged deep into the hollow between the draw's throat and shoulder. She cried out, staggered, and almost managed to catch herself before she reeled back into the thorns. Blood soaked into her tattered robe as she tried to pull away from the clinging barbs.

Nemis gazed into her eyes for a long moment.

The sorceress drew a deep breath and began another spell. "*Ignisthre navlanim,*" he said quietly and pointed at her. A spear of fire erupted from his fingers and enveloped her. Eclavdra fell back full force into the thorns and hung there. A faint moan escaped her, and then she hung limp and lifeless.

"Water!" Nemis shouted urgently.

Lhors stared as the blackened horror curled in on itself, still burning. Agya caught up her water bottle and ran across the room. Nemis stopped her from throwing it on the burning drow.

"No! For Mal. Go."

The mage did something that smothered the flames and stopped the smoke.

“Rowan, leave Mal to Agya and help Vlandar. He is cut badly. Lhors and Gerikh, help me find Eclavdra’s chest. We need to get out of here, but I won’t leave without proof if it is here!”

“What of Maera?” Rowan sobbed.

“She’ll die with the rest of us if we don’t leave here soon,” Nemis said. “The silence spell did not hold. We will all be killed in a few minutes if we don’t find that scroll!”

“But—”

“If there is anything to be done for her, we can heal her in Cryllor! Now obey me!” The mage’s was grim as he looked across the room where Khlened and Bleryn’s remains lay smoldering. His gaze hesitated on Maera, then he turned away. “We owe it to them.”

Nemis did something that reversed the spell on Malowan’s eyes. The paladin joined in the search for evidence then. His reveal spell found a chest deep in a cupboard where the clerics’ spare clothing was stored. He freed the box and handed it to Nemis. The mage made a quick check for traps, then began rummaging through the chest.

“Here!” He shouted in triumph as he withdrew a scroll.

Malowan handed the chest to Gerikh as the mage began perusing the scroll.

“It’s your only responsibility,” said the paladin. “Keep it safe.” He moved across the room, pausing to pray briefly over both dead clerics and the sorceress. He walked slowly over to look down at what was left of the barbarian and dwarf. Agya joined him.

The paladin knelt to pray, but Agya stood very still, her head tipped to one side as she listened. “Mal, Nemis! There’s someone coming this way!”

“I know,” Nemis replied. “Almost ready.”

A white-faced Vlandar stood behind them, his sleeve torn and stiff with blood. Lhors ran to help him. The warrior managed a faint smile for him, but his eyes were dark with pain.

“All of you, over here!” The mage commanded sharply. “Now!”

Agya helped Lhors get Florimund to his feet. Rowan stared down at her sister and refused to move when Vlandar tried to draw her away. Nemis came over then, scooped the ranger up in gentle arms, and handed her to Malowan.

“Everyone, get as close together as you can,” the mage said sharply.

Lhors could hear deep voices out there now, and someone began slamming something heavy against the wall.

“They can’t get in... can they?” Agya asked nervously.

“It doesn’t matter,” Nemis said simply, then he voiced his spell.

The smoke and heat and carnage were suddenly gone, and so was the chamber. The world twisted and turned, blurring in and out of existence. Before Lhors could draw breath, he found himself sitting on wiry, coarse grass and cold ground. A cool wind ruffled his air, bringing the smell of road dust and horses. He blinked at the familiar walled city he’d seen only days before.

Cryllor, he thought dazedly. They weren’t more than two hundred paces from the main gates. He could see people on the walls—guards and soldiers—staring at them.

Two farmers riding a cart piled high with hay had drawn their bony horse to a halt so they could stare.

Vlandar crouched next to him. He was very pale and obviously still in a great deal of pain, but seemed in very high spirits. Gerikh set the chest down at Vlandar's side and tugged a blanket from his pack to cover the warrior.

Most of the onlookers had fled in fright, but a few alarmed guards with shields up and spears raised were beginning to approach tentatively. Ignoring their surroundings, Malowan let Agya spread another blanket so he could lay Maera on that. Rowan knelt there, silently weeping.

"It will be all right," Malowan told her. "We're safe. She still lives. When I draw the arrow out, there likely will be a great deal of blood, but she should be fine. Gerikh and Lhors, you should hold her down in case she wakes."

As gently as he could manage, Lhors sat across the wounded ranger's knees and pinned her wrists to the ground while Gerikh leaned heavily upon her shoulders. The paladin knelt, snapped off the bloody point of the arrow, and with one slow, smooth motion, he pulled it out. There was a horrific gush of dark blood. Maera shuddered violently and whimpered but did not wake.

Whispering an almost silent prayer, Malowan laid his hands over the wound. Blood seeped between his callused fingers, and still the ranger did not wake. After a moment the paladin removed his grip and sat back with a sigh. Maera's wound was completely gone.

"A moment's rest, Vlandar," the paladin said tiredly, "and I will see to you."

Vlandar nodded. With a painful wince, he got to his feet and waved at the cautiously approaching guards. "It's Vlandar of the outer guard!" he shouted. "Send someone to let the lord know we've returned and get men out here to help us!"

Lhors felt light-headed, all at once. He watched, bemused, as men came running to clap Vlandar on the back. Everyone was suddenly talking at once, but the youth couldn't understand a word of it. There was a strange throbbing pulse in his ears, and a sudden exhaustion threatened to overwhelm him. He moved obediently when a healed Vlandar wrapped an arm around his shoulders and drew him into the city. He followed dreamlike through the streets and through the arched gate leading into the ruling lord's courtyard. All the while, their party was surrounded by astonished soldiers and gawking townspeople.

Later, he could remember very little of those following hours. After a very quick washing and change of clothes, Vlandar addressed the lord and his council. The entire party accompanied him, but no one else except Nemis and Malowan spoke. Somewhere in all that, Lhors must have fallen asleep, because when he opened his eyes, he'd been rolled into a blanket. It took him a moment to recognize the rough wood wall as Vlandar's barracks and the prickly mattress as the one he'd slept on before.

The room was quiet and dark except for a low-burning candle that had been shuttered next to his bedside. Malowan and Vlandar sat at the small table talking in hushed tones, but as the youth rolled over and edged onto his elbow, Vlandar looked at him and smiled. "It's all right, lad. We're all here, and you're safe."

"I know," Lhors said, and lay back down.



Late the next afternoon, Vlandar held a brief meeting in the barracks courtyard. Excepting the slain Khlened and Bleryn, everyone from their party was there. Lhors thought Maera looked pale, and her face seemed even thinner than usual, but otherwise she was none the worse after her near-fatal wound.

“The Lord Mebree is readying a delegation to go to the king,” Vlandar told them. “There have been more raids in Keoland since our departure, and the king will need our information. The chief magician here has a spell that will transport as many as fifteen to the palace in Nirole Dra. The lord asks that I go, and Nemis and Malowan. The rest of you need not if you would rather remain here or go your own way, but I think you all have the right.”

“I agree,” Malowan said. “Each of you performed deeds worthy of a king’s praise.”

“Or a king’s ransom,” Gerikh put in. He smiled, but his eyes were dark. “Khlened would have said as much, or Bleryn, and I think I may speak for them.”

“No.” A faint voice broke in. Florimund got to his feet, and when Maera—a subdued, almost docile Maera—would have protested, he put his fingers on her lips to silence her, then turned to look Nemis in the eye. “I did nothing to deserve praise or thanks.”

“Nothing,” Nemis agreed, “but it was the right sort of nothing.”

Agya scowled questioningly at Malowan, who merely shrugged in response.

Florimund sighed faintly. “Yes, Nemis. I knew all along that you mistrusted me.”

“I was aware you were not merely a prisoner taken, tortured, and left to rot in a cell,” Nemis replied. “I suspected there was more to you, but who could have known that the drow and their giant allies tried to turn you into a spy against your own kind? I admit, it seemed likely they would attempt this, but if they had succeeded with you, you would not have still been in that cell where we found you.”

“You did not do what they wanted,” Maera offered.

Rowan’s mouth twisted with distaste.

“He didn’t, Rowan!”

“I know,” Rowan replied softly. “Just as I know he never *meant* to make a wall between us, sister.”

Florimund shook his head. “Not that, ever. Still, when you made your way into the Rift, I was so afraid that I began to think that... I thought if I could somehow—”

“Y’ meant t’ make noise all along th’ way t’ get us caught,” Agya snarled.

Malowan murmured something in her ear and she subsided, but the half-elf nodded.

“I tried to warn the frost giants, hoping they would... I don’t know what I hoped. No more pain, of course. You didn’t know how bad fire giants’ hold was, and when I heard your plans to go there, and the drow... I ...” He swallowed and turned away. “I could not face that.”

“No one who had been to either place could blame you,” Nemis said quietly. “I know. I *have* been there.”

Florimund eyed the mage warily.

Nemis managed a faint, wry smile. “I say you have as much right as I to come with us.”

Florimund bowed his head in grateful acquiescence. “Then how dare I say no? I have long wished to see the king’s city.”

“And I,” Gerikh said. “There may be jobs about for an engineer like me.”

“I am reminded, speaking of jobs,” Vlandar said. He was smiling broadly. “We have coin and gems to divide among us. Even a small share of that will keep you in comfort for some time to come, Gerikh.”

“Little as I did to help you,” the man said.

“You helped,” the warrior replied. “You held your own and didn’t shrink back when the time came to fight.”

Vlandar went into the barracks and came back with a cloth-wrapped packet that seemed heavy for its size. “The chest you carried out of the drow’s quarters. Lord Mebree’s wizards kept the scroll and the box, but the lord gave me back what else was in there. Look.” He whipped the cover aside to reveal three bars of black metal. “That’s adamantine, or so they tell me. Each of them is worth about three thousand gold pieces each, and they’re ours.”

“Not so bad,” the engineer allowed with a grin, though his eyes were wide. The smile faded. “Too bad Khlened and Bleryn aren’t here to share. I took to them, you know. I’d like to see the look on that red-bearded madman’s face when he saw those.” A momentary silence followed, which he broke. “I’ll come with you, Vlandar. There may be a few things I can tell your king about what the giants were up to when I was taken.”

“I will go,” Maera said steadily. “I—” she glanced up at her sister—“I want to be certain they know what the drow are capable of.”

“If Mal’s in, then so’m I,” Agya added.

“You most certainly are,” the paladin told her. “This is no place for a young woman alone, especially when her only acquaintances are thieves and the like.”

“No more thievin’ for me, I told y’so!” the girl protested. “B’lieve I’ll take my share of th’ bounty and use it t’ be a fine lady in a palace.”

“You,” Malowan said evenly, “will give at least a few coins to the thieves’ god Rudd for answering your prayer back in that lava tube! But if you choose to stay with me, there will certainly be no palace in *your* future!”

Agya grumbled under her breath, sighed heavily, but finally grinned up at him. “Knew it,” she said cheerfully. “Knew y’ needed me! Well, I s’pose th’ world needs someone like you t’ keep things safe. My luck.”

“Your luck and my fate,” replied the paladin and tugged at her hair.

It was an odd relationship, Lhors thought. In Upper Haven, that kind of teasing between boy and girl or woman and man meant there’d be a marriage soon. But Malowan wouldn’t make such a vow, and certainly not with a girl less than half his age. Agya would likely be horrified if someone suggested she wanted Mal that way.

Things seemed to be much more complicated than he’d thought them when he was growing up in a small hill village. There his life had been structured by the seasons, by the ways things had always been, patterns as familiar as the shadow cast by a grain rick across the village square every midsummer at midday, or the way squashes came ripe when the shadow of a certain oak lay across the hill where the first vines were planted, even Gran and her formidable memory for the past—and that had come down from wisewomen before her, so that even the unexpected could be traced back to a larger pattern.

There hadn’t been a pattern that warned her against the giants, Lhors thought. But even if there had been, there couldn’t have been one that would have told her about the drow or saved them from Eclavdra’s years of scheming.

He blinked and came back to the moment as Rowan smiled and took one of Nemis’ hands between both of hers. “I will go—if only because you do.”

Nemis tugged his hand free. “You owe me nothing,” he said stiffly.

“Owe. That word has no meaning between you and me, mage,” Rowan replied, as stiffly. She smiled. “You think yourself hardened by your past, but I know better. We will talk of this later—in private.”

“If you like,” Nemis said, but he brought her hands up and brushed them with his lips.

“Lhors?”

“Huh?” Lhors looked up to see Vlandar’s eyes on him.

“The king’s city, Lhors. You’ll come with us, of course?”

The question warmed him. *Of course*. Vlandar could never replace his father, but he was a good man and kind, as well as a skilled warrior. Lhors knew that Lharis would be pleased to see his son apprenticed to such a warrior. Still...

Giants had destroyed Upper Haven. High Haven and New Market were possibly gone as well. The king might not care so much for a few distant villagers trying to recover from such loss, but Lhors did. More importantly, he had his father’s hunting skills and he could plant, weed, shear sheep, help birth calves...

He could keep the people—*his* people fed. Of course, if the giants came again, he doubted he’d be able to lead them into battle. But thanks to Vlandar and the others, he could find a way to fight with few against many. He knew his duty. Still, it was hard to get the words out.

“Sir... Vlandar.” He swallowed hard. “I would like very much to see the king’s city, but I know Gran must be worried. I should go home, at least to see if she’s all right.”

Vlandar shook his head. “I knew you would say that. Your father would be proud. But no, the Lord Mebree has already made certain the Havens are safe. He has a small company of guards quartered in a new garrison based in New Market, and there are more guards on the way—with one of my old lieutenants who knows how to keep proper watch on country like yours. Your Gran is there in New Market with the children you and she rescued. And she sends word to you, Lhors.” The warrior paused to recollect the exact words. “We manage as we always do... and will. Carry word for us, boy. Tell the king what you saw and remember to remind him of the taxes—lose enough villages and you lose more than a pair of coppers, you lose all.”

“Pair of coppers...” Lhors echoed. He turned away, a lump in his throat and his eyes damp. Gran, would it surprise you to know I have more wealth than our village ever paid the king in taxes, just because Vlandar thought I’d be a good rear guard? Well, he’d offer a few coins to his father’s gods, but more to the New Market and Havens villages. Enough to be certain his father had a proper burial, and that Gran and the two girls they’d saved wouldn’t want for anything.

Beyond that—he didn’t know. Too many possibilities.

One word caught his ear, all at once. *Safe*. Gran was, then. The girls were. That was good, he was sure of that.

But safe—it wasn’t what *he* wanted. *Lhors Giant Killer...* the words echoed in his mind. Hearing that had felt good. It eased the pain of his slain village, if only just a little.

Vlandar seemed to read his thoughts. “If we are to put a stop to these raids, the king will need experienced men, especially those who have fought giants.”

The boy I was, Lhors thought, maybe giants would have killed him as easily as they had killed Father. He had survived that night more by luck or the favor of the gods. Nothings sure, but just perhaps, knowing what I know now, I could have saved him or Headman Yerik, who had his own store of knowledge, or laughing Bregya, who’d taught him so much.... Once again, the rage began to smolder within him. He held out both hands. “Sir... Vlandar, I’m with you. To the end.”

The warrior smiled and gripped Lhors’ shoulders hard.

“I hoped you would.” He raised his voice. “We all go, and that’s as it should be. All right, people! Let’s get cleaned up. Meet back here just after sundown! And I warn you, if you think giants are a dire foe, you haven’t met the king’s court yet!”

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