Shadows Over Nothross

For Love, for Justice, for Eternal Pain in the Neck

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Chapter 1

> "Trinsday, 2nd of Warmening, 630. I was arranging my bookshelves this morning as Facyr brought in these two elven nobles. They gave us pointers on something that could be about an old headache the archmages of Colemia thought was already way past us for good – or that's just my hunch, it could be just a plain ordinary crazy mage at work. Gosh, and here I thought this was all just so insignificant. We're now on the way to Furinel, and I'm writing this on a little bit leaky tent, which I hope to get mended when we stop at Walvalley in three days hence."
>
> —Gnedrnygr Adithebadoggr's journal

THE GUARD POSTED at the Small Gate watched the early morning traffic with a certain kind of eye for details. Trinvnil, the sun of Avarthrel, was rising, and painted the hill behind him and the valley across the road with reddish hues. On clear mornings like this, it was possible to see far away, all the way to the nearest islands in the distance across the seas. Staan Athiv drew a good breath and reflected on the view to the valley for a moment before returning to guard the traffic: it was comforting that at least the views here stayed the same every year in each season. He was a constable, and was in for a promotion next week, and he knew that traditionally, the last week before promotions were always the worst for city guards and most people who depended on the luck. People tended to get killed in interesting ways just as they knew something good was going to happen them, as if Nottomwah had put a bump in the big roulette wheel in the heavens. Of course, Staan liked to think that he didn't need to depend on luck, just skill, and besides, he wasn't exactly getting a *big* promotion either, so he believed he was quite safe. It was probably not quite as dangerous as the week before retirement, for example. Yet, he felt it was still best to stay sharp, just in case.

He had developed an eye to ignore certain details and focus on things that weren't normal, and right now, all things were pretty much all blur to him. Focusing on really important things was thus easy. He had a good seat, or rather a guard post, from which to see how this country worked.

Two wagons took typical city-manufactured junk to the countryside: One had racks full of these finely crafted tools the city was known for, another wagon carried several mysteriously robed monks, each assigned to deliver some priceless books in person to monasteries in the north. Staan chuckled at this; was the city exporting books, or monks? With some religious upheavals in recent memory, you couldn't tell.

Some wagons, on the other hand, brought things from the countryside that spread all around the city, and from other cities beyond: Barrels piled upon barrels, all full of fruits and wine. Staan was just a guard and didn't know much of the scheming of the merchants, yet he knew, just by looking at the traffic and letting his mind wander to kill the boredom, that the trade was running smoothly and the city was prosperous.

This boring yet thoughtful routine had been that way all morning – absolutely nothing interesting or complex that would need his immediate attention, at least what came to guarding things. It was clearly a good day for philosophizing in the duty.

Boredom and philosophizing did not mean he would be caught off guard. He straightened himself up, having sagged a bit while pondering things, and tried to show that he was at attention, as a pair of travellers appeared from behind the hill on horseback.

When they got closer, he could see they were two elves. You don't see elves too often in the big city, Staan thought – and these two look very serious. Staan looked them with an eye of a watchman, which meant he squinted at the pair menacingly and tried to tell whether or not the pair was going to be of trouble. He quickly discerned that the elven male and female, while being robed in those fine, yet suspiciously inconspicuous robes, were not of any threat. After all, while he had never seen elven robbers himself, he tended to guess they'd go for a bit more lethal look, even while veiling themselves. These were just ordinary elves.

The two stopped as they saw Staan. "Greetings of a fine morning to you, guard", the male said.

"Good morning, sir", Staan replied. And who would this fair couple be? Nobles, that's for sure – though you could never tell from the elves. This couple definitely looked regal, apart of the fact they were here with just a pair of rather miserable-looking horses and without lackeys and all. Staan found these things quite curious. But after a bit of pondering, he guessed that even the elves had their shoddy-looking commoners.

"Could you tell me where I could find... um... Realn, have you seen my

notebook?" the apparent elven lord said as he furiously tried to find the book in question from his pockets. "Never mind – what was the man's name?"

The female, who went by name Realn – Staan was sure the name rang bells deep in his memory, but couldn't tell for sure – chuckled lightly and turned to Staan. "We're looking for a specific group of adventurers for hire", she explained, not at all bothered by the man's behaviour. "We were recommended to contact someone called Jenyr Adatel. I believe he works for the City Guard."

"Oh, yes", Staan said. It started to make sense – a couple of elven nobles who need to find someone who stole their jewel-encrusted coach and mystical shiny magic steeds. "Captain's side business, heh heh. Well, I guess Captain hasn't got too far from his friends' home yet – that's on Wilhelmsroad, second street right from this street. He's usually there, or in the guard barracks, which is on Adelev the Great's Avenue, that's, oh, sixth street left. He usually stops by on either place, and in the evening you can probably find him from an inn called the Laughing Fox. That's in the harbour area."

"Thank you, my good guardsman. Goodbye, and may you have an interesting day", the male said. They both bowed a bit with their hands on their hearts, and smiled in a warm way.

"Have a good day, sir and madam", Staan said, smiled in turn to the busy-looking couple as they departed. He returned to watch the traffic and think of things. One day, he thought, he'd write a book about all of these things he had seen and thought about. Promotion meant a raise in pay, and maybe it would be wise to spend the first extra bits of money in one of those evening classes at the academy. To write a book, it might be useful to know how to read and write too...

IN THE CITY, on the lower half of Anchorfall, light mist was wrapping distant buildings in its embrace.

It was a bright morning, and two guards of the city were feeling chipper. They were Jenyr Adatel – a middle-aged, robust-looking, if a bit overweight, dark-haired fellow in a proper city guard attire – and Facyr Tann – a much younger, skinnier but equally battle-capable man with sandy-coloured hair. Jenyr was the kind of man you could easily tell to be a captain of the guard, even if he hadn't had his uniform. Facyr, meanwhile, wasn't in uniform, though he wore a chain mail, carried a sword, and had temporarily taken the kind of a baldric that was usually given to deputy and volunteer guards – but even when volunteers could be seen frequently patrolling the Upper City, few were armed that well, and even fewer carried a lieutenant's badge.

Few people they had met this morning were anything but cheerful today. After all, it was weekend and things went quietly in weekends in general; tomorrow was Dyesday and tonight, it was time for everyone to get partying again. They had still managed to run into a few grumpy people, undoubtedly still doing things

they were supposed to get done by midweek, and were just mad that this morning, they couldn't stay in bed for a longer time.

"Does this bring back memories?" Jenyr asked Facyr with a big smile. "Two guardsmen and a quiet street."

"Heh, too many of them", Facyr said. "Which is why I'm here right now. A moment to do old things for old times' sake."

"Yep, here we are, pacing down the streets, just like before the Revolution..."

"...and absolutely nothing interesting is going on."

"Precisely. You'd almost think that the bad old times were back, right?"

"Sure, though even when it's quiet, things sure aren't that boring any more."

The two grinned and turned around the corner. The city really was quite quiet today. Jenyr had had quite an effort to get things this way, especially after the preceding few somewhat chaotic years.

They saluted the other passing guardsmen, Jenyr in a proper military fashion – as much as such could be got from him – and Facyr in a more relaxed way, with a big smile. The guards greeted Jenyr with glee equal to his, and, some of the guards nodded even more cheerful greeting to Facyr. These few guards were of older generation who still remembered the time when Facyr had been Jenyr's second in command.

Two arguing people appeared from behind the next bend of the street. Jenyr grinned as he noted they were elves; he liked elves a lot and often wished to see them more. He also just sometimes hated that he felt so duty-bound to the city and guarding it. If the Regent ever felt Jenyr was too overworked and kicked him to a vacation for his own good, he would probably head to Furinel right away. His friends, of course, didn't question this at all – they just found it a bit funny: Jenyr, a manly man and among the toughest guards the city had seen, didn't seem like a type that constantly admired elven elegance.

"Oh, look, there's two elves who seem to be lost in our fine city", Jenyr said as the elves headed their way.

"Good morning, guards", the elf said. "...ah, captain." he smiled to them as the two guards nodded in friendly greeting and smiled. "Would you be of assistance? We're looking for Jenyr Adatel's mercenary company. We were told it would be close by."

Jenyr's face split to smile. "Well, you're in luck. I would be Jenyr Adatel. Glad to meet the fairer folk." He smiled heartily and shook the elven lord's hand – he guessed the two had been arguing about where to go and weren't just expecting to run into the people they were looking for. "What can we do for you? Oh – and this is one of my associates, Facyr Tann, who is usually the mastermind behind all of our company's great deeds. I am just the financier, really."

"Good morning, sir, madam", Facyr said with a smile and nodded to the pair of elves.

“I am Aleln Valntathalen ath Valntathalen”, the elf introduced himself, with a rather hushed voice. Jenyr and Facyr found the name a bit surprising. “And this is my wife Realn Valntathalen ath Elthosthalen.”

“You’re the Duke of Nothross? Forgive me, your grace”, Jenyr said, head bowed. “I should have recognized you earlier. I saw your grace during your visit to Anchorfall a couple of years ago—”

Aleln looked alarmed. “Quiet! Please, there’s no need for posturing”, Aleln said, with a hushed voice, “Right now, we’d really appreciate it if we could stay unrecognised. If everyone know I’d be here, they’d want me to attend formal meetings, and every formal meeting always has a number of spies. I’m not good at coming up with cover stories, I’m afraid.”

“Oh?” Jenyr went, surprise on his voice not masked very well, but he figured out that if the duke wanted to be here incognito for whatever reason, that was just fine with him. “Anyway, if you wish us to help you, your grace, we’re happy to help in whatever way you see necessary”, Jenyr said, with his ordinary, more relaxed voice that he used when addressing the Regent, with whom he was good friends with, but not quite friends enough to drop the titles. “we’d be happy to help the royalty of such a fine nation as Furinel. Now”, he said, relaxing a bit more, “I cannot do much about your problem personally, I’m afraid, but have no worry, my fine friends will be able to do wonders for you. Facyr?”

“Yep?” Facyr snapped half-heartedly, but almost convincingly, to attention.

“Could you take these fine folks to our fine house and listen to what they have to say? I’ll have to continue the patrols. We have here elven royalty who obviously want to get their castle back!” He glanced at the nobles, who just smiled, happy that the guard had guessed their intentions right. Jenyr, after all, kept up with the news from the elven lands, and was aware of the situation the nobles were in. “Terrifying adventures in the northern frontier! Look, Facyr, I trust you can do this job properly, okay?”

Chapter 2

THEY WERE "a completely forgettable adventuring party". Or maybe a "The nameless league of extraordinary adventurers". Maybe not, they sure weren't the only nameless group, and not into grandiose names anyway. Or maybe "yet another mercenary group." No, not that in million years. None of those.

Since Facyr Tann, Faira Ativel and Gnedrnygr Adithebadoggr loved to do adventurous and daring things together, and there was always some jobs for cunning and resourceful adventurers, Jenyr Adatel had helped his good friends to form an adventuring company. Anchorfall had always been the city where adventurers, mercenaries, and other people with the need to do daring things for fame and fortune had headquarters in. It had always been somewhat disorganised, save perhaps for Privateers of Varmhjelm. After the Revolution, the Regent had worked hard to establish some rules; city full of people with sharp swords and skills to use them needed some regulation.

The friends, as a whole, found the incorporation a Necessary Evil. Incorporation was mostly just a formality; the town was full of groups of mercenaries of varying levels of association anyway. The incorporation felt unnatural to them, they were, above all, friends and brothers in arms, not really mere business partners – there were plenty of groups in the city, after all, that did this sort of jobs just for money. But they didn't let the arrival of formality and finances to hamper their friendship, and that was all that mattered.

They were already bound in the way they did things; now they just had a legal name to their operation. Or, as it happened, lack of name, which clearly annoyed the filing clerk who rather hoped all mercenary bands had invented some business name for themselves, which made the life of filing clerks much easier in general. Jenyr never really came up with a name for the company, and the others weren't really good sources of suggestions, and preferred not to pick a name in any case. Everyone else called it "Jenyr's Company", which Jenyr himself resented – after all, he never participated in anything that happened outside of the city – that was

most of the cases – and secondly, and most importantly, he already had a pay job at the City Guard.

At least incorporation allowed them to advertise their services as "a crown-sanctioned swords-for-hire enterprise", which was better than the services who advertised themselves as "a bunch of ruffians who do anything messy for a few ducats". They never needed to really advertise their services or anything – Faira was certain that every time she poked her nose outside of the house, someone would be offering them a job. She even had, when going to the Laughing Fox to have lunch, the habit of saying "I'm sorry, people, our books are full for the next four months" before she slumped on her usual chair. That comment either made a number of people walk back to their seats disappointedly, or, very rarely made the other patrons to look around and wonder whom she was addressing.

At Wilhelmsroad 20, a nice house with a nonchalant plaque at the door reading "Adventurers for hire", a conversation was taking place. Even when they were busy with a lot of projects, Faira was happy that Facyr brought the job right in the house, and introduced the two gentle elves to his two friends. They were discussing around the fireplace, with morning rain slapping the windows. Facyr was happy to have gotten home just in time; undoubtedly, Jenyr was now either getting wet or cursing under some eaves somewhere, trying futilely to get his pipe lit.

Facyr listened to the Valntathalen family's tale. He came to the conclusion that Valntathalens weren't particularly fond of all of the formality; the little bits he knew of elves seemed to say the fairer folk didn't care much of formalities, anyway, at least not the kind of formalities humans seemed to love. To them, it seemed, style and royal grace were in their natures, while the pomp around human royalty always seemed somehow constructed and artificial under the surface.

Even when Aleln Valntathalen was a distant relative to the reigning King of Furinel and was responsible for running things in one quarter of the kingdom, it was difficult to tell what made him so royal in first place. Aleln Valntathalen was more of an explorer. He was a lord of frontier lands. In the middle of the mountain woods with lots of monsters everywhere, practicalities went ahead of formalities. Facyr had seen the same thing in humans before, when dealing with frontier lords of his land of birth, Grycia. Facyr found Aleln to be a quite relaxed person, yet he showed tact, sensibility, manners and quite a bit of refinement. Aleln came across as a friendly, sensible fellow who could lead people if the occasion needed – somewhat unlike of his colourful, sometimes brash and vulgar human counterparts of office, who merely could lead the people because everyone saw they had been handed the biggest axes.

"I thought the northern frontier had no duke any more", Gnedrnygr Adithebadoggr said. He was an old man, but like most magicians of Colemian descent, his body was magically preserved and he looked not much different from middle-

aged people of Varmhjelm, apart of being slightly smaller stature and of more stockier build. His mind was still youthfully energetic and brilliant as ever. He sat by a window and listened to the discussion, putting half of his attention to that and the other half to reading a tome describing the history of the Duchy of Nothross. He puffed smoke from his pipe, and the smoke drifted off to the rain outside through a big crack in one of the window panes.

Aleln shoot his head. "I'm merely a duke in exile. City of Nothross was overrun by monsters mere two years ago – do you think everything we stood for fell with it? It takes a longer time than that to truly destroy something we spent centuries to build, don't you think? Over the two years we've taken considerable time and effort to reorganise things to mount a counterstrike. Can you imagine how hard it is to destroy the monsters of each and every significant location of the most treacherous and hostile quarters of our kingdom, especially during an economic recession? I've felt the chilly grip of poverty grabbing my shoulder."

"So you had to trade the golden forks to mere silver ones?" Facyr grinned weakly, and even when Aleln looked at him with a bit icy look, his grin calmed the elven lord enough to bring him to good humour once again.

"Worse than that, really, I had to sell most of the little other possessions we had. For a time I was lodged in the summer residence of Duke of Westholt, and, you know, he's known for collecting the most boring books ever written. I received a heavy blow to my senses every time I stepped in the library, which connected every room in that manor", the duke said, and everyone present chuckled. "In any case, war effort is now progressing well. We've made great progress over the past year, and the recent offensive solved almost all of our problems. All that is left to do is to destroy whatever monsters stand in our way in one fell swoop, reclaim my castle and destroy the usurper. It is these few last steps that have proved to be quite difficult."

"I'm just curious," Faira said. The black-clad, raven-haired lithe woman stretched and sat up in a bit more suitable position on her chair in the corner of the room. More suitable, in this case, meant that she finally got her legs off the table – that had clearly been an etiquette breach when there were nobles in the house, though she had long ago figured out they didn't mind. "How and why did you come to choose us for this mission? Isn't the world full of really nasty mercenaries anyway?"

"Ah", Aleln said with a smile. He looked at Faira, not sure if she just feigned ignorance, or was just honestly curious. "Two reasons, actually. Firstly, the Varmhjelmian diplomats recommended you. The King has the habit of discussing about really bad news that cannot be solved immediately over the supper. I was visiting the capital to explain the current situation in Nothross, we were discussing various people who had already failed in the task, and the Varmhjelmian ambassador recommended you. He holds you in high regard, saying he respects the

heroic deeds you did during the Varmhjelmian Revolution and the war that followed."

"Very kind of him to think so", Facyr said with a big smile. "I was already worried people would have forgotten us. Seems to me the memories of most folks don't stretch all the way back to three years ago!"

"Then there was another reason – Duke of Bluebrook holds you in high regard, having good... even cordial relationships with you", Aleln continued.

"Well, that is true", Facyr said with a smile. While he had not met Thalimve Lucien yet, Gnedrnygr had spent a lot of time in the vast libraries of Castle Bluebrook before the war, and despite all sensibility – love is blind, they say – it seemed the Duke and Faira were getting along rather well. Facyr pondered this for a few passing seconds, and then decided to skip to more pressing matters. "Can you tell us what exactly are we up against? I have only heard vague rumours about the state Nothross is right now. City in ruins, monsters everywhere?" he asked Aleln.

"Actually, it isn't quite as bad as it sounds. Late in Springbreak, I led three regiments of Mighty Lancers to the city, and it remains in our hands now. Half of the city is still desolate, uninhabitable battlefield. The other half is being rebuilt, and people are returning to their homes. Our real problem is the castle where the wizard plots and his monsters multiply."

"Can't you just lay siege on the castle?" Facyr wondered.

"It's pointless. The creatures don't seem to come out of there except when they're trying to raid the village. And they seem to be getting supplies somehow. Perhaps there's a tunnel we don't know of yet. They also seem to be getting supplies by air. Last month, we found from the woods a broken kite-like machine that seemed to be light enough for one of these creatures, perhaps able to carry a considerable load of supplies. We also shot one down merely two weeks ago, it was piloted by one of the small creatures, wearing some kind of a mask to allow them to breathe, and it was hard to shoot down since they were flying high near clouds."

"And here's probably the most crucial question I have: what creatures are we dealing with here?"

Aleln seemed troubled by the question. Gnedrnygr smiled and said, "Same things we've seen everywhere, Facyr. Goblinoids, if I'm guessing here." He glanced at Aleln, who seemed stung – only a little bit – by the names of creatures Gnedrnygr had uttered. He leaned closer to his friends, and whispered, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, "just know that the elves find goblins, goborcs and especially orcs so detestable they don't speak of these creatures by name, and I don't blame them."

"It is no problem at all to mention them", Aleln said, eyes closed and letting out a quiet, worried sigh. "In any case, several capable groups of warriors, and

even lone assassins, have tried to get into the castle and kill the wizard. All of them came back scarred, slashed, and often very dead. There are just too many of these creatures. They're alert, they have spies everywhere too."

"Which leads to the obvious question – what makes you think we will succeed in what others have failed at?" Faira asked.

Aleln thought. "I don't know. All I know is that you're, by reputation, great warriors. And there's one more thing in your reputation – you're also listeners. Most of the people we've sent so far have always been self-reliant, perhaps overly so. Perhaps it's time we send in mercenaries who are able to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors."

"Now, I'd like you to tell me more about this wizard", Gnedrnygr said and listened carefully while thumbing the pages of the book at hand. He was greatly intrigued by all of the things the nobles were talking of, and his fraction of attention to the book was mostly now focused on the pictures.

"He is called Jaxtomsyn", Realn said. The wind howled through the broken window, and a from a good distance came a crack of lightning. Faira and Facyr looked at each other, closed their eyes and sighed, the trick of nature bothering them both. "We know very little of him, aside of the fact that he's an Evoker from Colemian school, like you", Realn told Gnedrnygr. "He seems to be able to somehow… formulate… the creatures he uses against us. There seems to be an endless supply of them no matter how many fall to our lances and swords."

"Hmm, this is curious. In Colemia, we do have some spells to increase the breeding rate of orclings, but they are not particularly well known, or available to magicians at large." He scratched his head. "I have a suspicion, but I can't discuss it – suffice to say, for now, that keeping my suspicions secret doesn't harm the expedition in any way. Just a rather unpleasant part of the history of my old home country." Gnedrnygr grinned. "It's the same sort of thing as with you elves and mentioning the creatures you fight against. But as for the magic itself, it is, indeed, dangerous to handle." He leaned back and looked far too relaxed to talk such complex and difficult matters.

Faira slumped further, leaned back and grinned to herself, again getting her feet on the edge of the table. She had figured out that Gnedrnygr had somehow found oranges from the marketplace. When Gnedrnygr was overly cheerful when discussing dark matters such as these, it was a sure thing that he had been eating a lot of sweet things, and Gnedrnygr, being from the southern lands, just loved oranges.

"Still", Gnedrnygr continued, "even wielder of such powerful magics have fatal weaknesses. It may be that he has somehow found a powerful magic item or forbidden tomes of spells, but is not able to use too difficult magic himself."

Faira leaned back and crossed her arms across her chest. "What exactly do you propose we really should do once we get there?" she asked. "I suppose you

have tried everything else already. What seems to be the way that works best?" Faira was already thinking of all sorts of tricks on how to sneak in: Maybe over the wall in the shining pale moonlight... though that approach might not work too well.

"It is entirely possible for a smaller group to get in the castle courtyard, all that needs is some planning and a surprise attack. We are more afraid of staying alive once we get in", Aleln said.

"After all, that's where the creatures are staying, judging from all signals." Realn said. "And, judging from the show of lights the wizard has put forth every time we've sent someone there, he's never been idle himself either when someone invades the fortress... he often has some interesting spells to offer once he finds out what is afoot. I once witnessed that far away. Oh, those fireballs were quite mean."

Facyr grinned. "I wouldn't worry about that. We're not exactly rookies what comes to dodging fireballs, anyone can do that these days", he said.

Faira's grin seemed as cunning as Facyr's. "Correct you are, Facyr. I'd say this will definitely turn out interesting."

"I'd surmise you are accepting this task, then?" Aleln asked.

"Of course," Facyr said. "It's not like there's much else to do in Anchorfall these days either. I'll rather go teaching evil wizards a good lesson rather than patrol around in a city where absolutely nothing of interest is happening. Besides, this is supposed to be Jenyr's company, and as you heard, he was keen to help you even without hearing the details personally. So yes, we're going." He turned to his friends. "You'd better get packing!"

"Well, this is just as we hoped", Aleln said with a smile. "Uh, so Jenyr won't be coming himself?"

"No, he's got hands full with his duties with the City Guard." Facyr assumed an expression that could only be though of as bitter-sweet. "He's rarely of use to us as mercenaries, I'm afraid, but I suppose his greatest use is to unleash a horde of constables on unsuspecting crooks just at the moment we have found them and think there's nothing we can do to stop them from escaping. He has a lot of respect in the Guard, but I can't just imagine him going personally fight a huge band of orcs." He smiled.

"So, when are you ready to leave?"

"As soon as we're done packing, which is fairly soon, because knowing how much interesting little *trivial* things we have at hands here," Facyr said with a slight sigh, "we haven't yet got around unpacking the things from our last journey."

Chapter 3

THE JOURNEY HAD STARTED right that same afternoon without incidents, which was always reassuring. Aleln and Realn had prepared the journey back home in detail, and all the friends needed to do was to hoist their travel packs on the backs of their horses. They didn't need much travel gear, and the only person to really slow down their pace was the resident bookworm of the group, who didn't prefer to move too far without quite a few books.

Gnedrnygr spent most of the pauses in the journey studying his books, mostly ones concerning history of Colemia. He tried his best to keep others from reading the tomes in question. He even decided to specifically tell Faira to focus on her spell book rather than these fascinating tomes, knowing his trunk's lock had been picked before when he had specifically told her not to read something. And this time, he didn't even have a trunk to keep the books in.

The travellers proceeded along the eastern highway toward Bergluchia, then north toward Nothross as they passed the border and eventually reached River Furin. The road to Furinel was kept in good condition and was frequently watched over by Varmhjelmian and Furinelian patrols. The road was easy to travel, though the whole journey still took over three weeks – the distances in northern Furinel were astounding. But the weather was on their side; only in a few occasions they were bothered by light rain, but mostly, the skies kept clear and the warm summer weather only cheered them to go on. During the travel, Aleln and Realn led the way, and Facyr eyed around to keep the possible trouble from surprising them.

They camped along the road, and talked about mundane matters around the camp fire; Aleln and Realn were relaxed and friendly, and even when there was no longer the need to hush like in the city, they insisted the adventurers forgot the titles and call each other by first name, just like, as they explained, they did with all of their closest underlings anyway. This move was particularly welcomed by Facyr, who had, during his entire life, shown an unnerving tendency to descend to such friendly terms in any and all situations.

The night was falling once again upon the travellers. They set up their camp in one of the gorges by the road that passed through the hilly forests. Climbing on top of one of the hills, they could see, far in the distance, the mountains rising above the woods. The evening sun coloured the leaves of the woods with vibrant colours, with the wind bringing some nightly chill. It seemed that even when it was already definitely summer in Anchorfall, here north, the past winter was still trying to keep its feeble grip.

"Well, distant part of the world we are in", Facyr said, and turned to his friends. "Has any one of you ever been here?"

Faira shook her head. "I've only been to the southern Furinel."

"My experience with Furinel is limited to a few longer visits to Moonbay and one week's stay in Furinia", Gnedrnygr said.

"I've been here a couple of times, working as a caravan guard. Oh, this reminds me of home", Facyr said. "Clean and fresh air. Do you get a lot of snow here? I've only been here in the late summer."

"Yes, lots and lots of snow. I've noted spring comes here only a week before Grycia, and the winter week after", Realn said.

"So this is kind of like Grycia – the summers are short, but luckily there's not much snow."

The discussion around the camp fire had been quite lively over the journey. The adventurers had learned a lot about Furinel's royal houses, their customs and how they differed from Varmhjelmian ways. The earlier night, Realn had talked at length about Furinel's economy, and Facyr found Realn's speaking skills fascinating. He was a person who believed any amount of money was "too little anyway", and couldn't understand a whole lot of how the world of the finance really worked. Yet, Realn's description on history of the Furinel's commerce had kept him awake the whole time, even deeply interested. He had even asked questions.

It was a cold clear evening, and there was a lot to talk about, and what was better place to talk than a warm camp fire deep in a calm, sheltered spot the middle of wilderness?

GNEDRNYGR HAD FOUND a like-minded person. He found Realn, all in all, a fascinating person to talk to, in a purely professional sense. He had once been a teacher of magic, and now tried to rekindle this profession by teaching Faira; yet, it had been a long time since he had last wobbled over to the Anchorfall's academy and debated with the fellow magicians. Over the journey, they had talked a lot, and he found himself spending a lot of time with her.

Now, after Realn's interesting financial presentation, Faira, Facyr and Aleln went to prepare their tents for the night, while Gnedrnygr and Realn debated about the nature of magic. It would become a frequent hobby over this journey, Gnedrnygr thought. Gnedrnygr had observed that while Realn was not a very

advanced magician – she had only recently taken the path of magical arts – she showed a lot of potential and knew a lot about the foundations and theoretical background of magic.

"Now, I'm sorry if this is a bit strange question", Gnedrnygr said, "but in Colemia, we had very little exposure or even knowledge of the elven ways of magic, and I can't say I got too much illumination on this mystery when I was in Bluebrook. Could you explain some of the underlying principles of it to me?"

Realn sighed. "The truth is, there's not much to explain. Our magic may look very different, but in fact, we're talking of the exact same magic. Magic is magic."

"Yes, yes, I know that fundamentally we're talking of the same forces, same procedures, same equations. But the way it's practised is different, is it not? And from what I've heard, elves are ahead on every field of magic…"

"Some scholars might disagree, though I'm rather reserved myself. We discussed this pretty throughout in the Academy of Arcane Arts. Some said elves are ahead and will always be, others argued the very existence of Infinite will prove that humans will eventually surpass us, as there's no practical limit on how the power can be derived from the Infinite."

"The Infinite?" Gnedrnygr thought. "Ah, you are referring to the Foundation of Magic?"

"I believe that's what the humans call it."

"But that's just a mere theoretical model. It says nothing about the individual's ability to use…"

"Precisely!" Realn interrupted. "So you are thinking exactly like the majority of magicians."

"And you aren't? You believe the Foundation of Magic will somehow make humans masters of the magical forces?"

"No. All I'm saying is that they have a very good point." She smiled. "Can you describe how you think the Infinite will affect people's work?"

"Well, truth to tell, the Foundation theory only appeared when I was already leaving Colemia, but, oh well…" Gnedrnygr scratched his head. "I'd postulate – excuse me, *guess* that the Foundation represents pure magical force, and individual's capabilities determine how and what kinds of powers they can use."

"Precisely. And what does that mean from the points of view of humans and elves?"

Gnedrnygr thought. "Humans and elves think differently and thus use different kinds of magic?"

"Good. Now, my point: You're thinking of humans and elves as distinct moulds that dictate what kinds of magic they can use. The All-Infinite theorists are saying these moulds are entirely artificial and will break eventually. I'm merely saying that… well, think of magic from the Infinite as rays of Trinvnil, our minds as rooms. and our ways of magical applications as windows through which light

comes in, and the pattern of light representing what each of us really knows of magic. Now, sorry to stereotype, but elves might just keep a small potted flower on a windowsill, while humans leave all sorts of junk on windowsills. Elves get a lot of light on room—not everything, mind you—and humans a little bit less. All-Infinite theorists say no one is keeping anything on a windowsill in near future."

"Ah, I see. And what you are saying is, humans may clean their windowsill from time to time, but being humans, they will accumulate more junk there in time?"

"Yes. And there's also great individual variance – a lot of people keep their junk in different places. But one of the big points of this big analogy is, our shadows are in different places."

"Shadows? Oh yes, you mean, things on the windowsills casting shadows at different places?"

"Yes – and, also, we know where our shadows are, as we do not move our plants that much, and we may even learn to sometimes move the plant just a little bit to peek behind it. Humans do that too on occasion, but they often can't find anything they left on their windowsill anyway."

"Ah, I see. You know", Gnedrnygr said, scratching his head and looking thoughtful, "One thing comes in mind from all this. I'm probably a much more experienced magician than you. Don't take this wrong, it's not meant to disparage, it's just a comment based on your level of practical experience. You're fresh out of the Academy, and by time you even started your mere 10-year course, I had been a practising magician for several decades. You are no match for me what comes to knowledge of spells, obviously, even given the elven predisposition toward magical crafts—"

"Well, I was not the most gifted student around, though I have no idea how we compare to other academies of magic..." Realn said modestly, slightly worried by Gnedrnygr's assessment.

"Don't be disappointed! I was just about to tell the good news. You amaze me – and I really mean it, you *truly* amaze me", Gnedrnygr said with his finger raised – "in how deep knowledge you have of the roots of the magic; you probably know a lot more of the Foundation than I do."

Realn raised her gaze from the ground, where it had fallen during Gnedrnygr's throughout analysis of her career so far, and smiled cheerfully. "It might be so; humans are practical, I've seen, and care about immediate results, while we study what makes things really work."

"Quite. And that alone tells me humans still have a lot to do to catch up with elves", Gnedrnygr said and smiled warmly.

"Anyway, to the point of all this - elves do think a little bit different, and as a result, our magic will do different. Your Abramm Thevlynson the Younger once said elves invent things that 'look the same in million different ways', and humans

invent million different things that all do the same thing."

"I don't quite follow that", Gnedrnygr said, scratching his head.

"Our magic tends to be mysterious in nature – at least from the point of view of those not directly involved with the magical forces in question. The end result is a lot of flashy and cute and nice things, and – there you go – a magical thingy appears out of nowhere. Same sort of magic, varied results, yet all similar in nature."

"Hah. I still remember one souvenir that Duke Lucien sent me a while ago. It was an Elven Artefact. It sure looked like an elven item of great craftsmanship, and certainly was most magical in nature. But let my nose be bloody if I ever figure out what the widget is supposed to be, or do. It's pretty, though. Lucien was dreadfully interested in finding out too, his court mage had produced that thing one day and left everyone there a bit puzzled."

Realn giggled. "Now, and for the comparison, human spells mostly apply the idea of turning the power of Infinite into something practical, using pretty much the same methodology in every case."

"Oh, yes, and cynics would probably say the practical things are the same as well – to kill people." Gnedrnygr sighed. "But we have a lot of spells that do good things too!"

"Anyway, as you see, elven spells are like one giant mother of all spells: one mysterious force that does everything. It's raw application of the power of the Infinite to tasks limited only by creativity, which happens to be applied in quite heavy quantities. While humans have methodical approach: take some power of the infinite, use bits and pieces of the same process, and end up with a formula of spell. The end result is same: magic swords are forged, fireballs are thrown."

"So really, in the end, it doesn't matter what short cut you take, you end up in the same place?" Gnedrnygr muttered halfheartedly, yet sounding happy enough to know that. "Gosh, I sound like Faira", he sighed. "Anyway, that is basically what I wanted to know. I already knew our methods of magic work the same way, but it's the things that we do with magic that makes us different. Maybe that's why it seems, to an outside observer, that elven magic is different from human magic, because rituals and applications of magic are different." He sighed again, pondering a bit. "By the way, hopping from a topic to another – I'd like to hear what books of magic you've been studying. I might be interested in learning some more of this interesting elven magic."

"Again, I think you have little to worry." Realn sighed. "I wish I had much things to share. Most of the things I was taught were in the lectures. But I did study one book – and only one book. As you know, we were almost completely broke when we were in Furinia. The only book I had was the first volume of Wlehm Archeyblaad's *Golden Principles of Spellcasting*."

Gnedrnygr raised his eyebrow. "Looks like I'm not lucky today with my

guesses or wishes – that's a tome I'm familiar with already, so it's not surprising me. Magic quite well understood by the humans, I think. First volume only?"

"That's right."

"And that's the only book you've been studying?"

"Cover to cover. I know, it did not answer all of my questions."

"Milady, you would be putting yourself in a grave risk, had not venerable Acheyblaad thoughtfully provided appendix B, Battle magic!" Gnedrnygr said, with a grin. "The tome has good selection of spells, I tell you that – Faira has, as far as I know, almost finished studying it and she's shown some interesting uses of those spells – but she's not exactly letting her life depend on them. I wouldn't, anyway. Are you sure you can't afford the second volume?"

"Well, now I can, but I couldn't find it anywhere. I don't think there's a copy of that book in Furinel anywhere but in the libraries."

"It's a very well known book in Varmhjelm, and I believe one can find a copy rather easily there. Unless I remember wrong, I have three copies, one of which I'll spare for Faira and I was thinking of selling the remaining one if I ever ran out of small copper coins. But once I get home, I'll try to find a way to get the tome to you. I have to give it to you as a gift. Let me put it this way – you're practically defenceless without those spells! I'll also try to find a copy of *Anthology of Cantrips*, I'm sure the mr. Bovinier could give me an extra copy if I ask him really nicely."

"Oh! You're a friend of Arthur Bovinier, then?"

"Yes, yes, of course! Who wouldn't know the Archmage of Anchorfall – he's probably the wisest and also funniest person in the whole city. Why, just the past week, would you believe, I was talking with him about his work on the second edition of *Thousand and One Secrets of Darkness,* when he proposed a fairly interesting solution to the old conundrum of the chicken and the egg…"

WHILE GNEDRNYGR AND REALN DEBATED, Faira had retired to her tent. After she had had the tent up, she had listened to Gnedrnygr and Realn for a while, and then decided to retire to read more of the famed Acheyblaad tome.

She full knew the dangers of a book; not that it was in any way dangerous to read as such, as some of the magic books quite incorrectly were described as, but in that reading one topic led to reading about another topic, and another, and so on. A lot of books seemed to have this effect on her and a lot of people she had known. She still remembered, a few years back, when the Encyclopædia Varmiana – the first encyclopædia edited in Varmhjelm – was first published, and Gnedrnygr, being a close friend of the editor-in-chief and Archmage of Anchorfall Arthur Bovinier, had shown her his copy. She had not been able to do much for the next few days, after being addicted to reading about random things, and that time, she had definitely lost the sense of time. This had, naturally, greatly annoyed Gne-

drnygr, who was very glad to have his book back eventually. Gnedrnygr hadn't won the contest over sleeping rhythm – Faira quite simply seemed to stay awake much longer than the older magician, so there was no chance Gnedrnygr could have taken the book while she was sleeping, and he had learned quickly there was simply no point trying to get the book while she was awake. The war of attrition was won when Gnedrnygr reminded her that he didn't approve of reading while eating – this was a valuable, new book, and breadcrumbs would ruin it. Soon, she simply was too hungry to keep going, and Gnedrnygr was able to get the book back. Then, Gnedrnygr had succumbed to the exact same malady that had gripped Faira over the preceding days, and was barely able to keep the thing away from the dinner table.

Now, Faira was reading the famed spell book, quite as spellbinding as the encyclopædia. Hours went by, and much much later, she was feeling a bit tired, and found herself with a big book on her lap, and a whole bunch of bookmarks in it – just that the bookmarks were, in fact, her fingers, which she tended to use when no suitable bits of paper were at hand. Usually for her, the time to quit was when she ran out of fingers to mark pages and turn the pages at the same time. She didn't dare to turn pages with her nose, but after seeing a few students with small smears of ink and paper cuts on tip of their noses – depending on if they had been reading really old or the newer books – at the Academy library at Anchorfall, she wasn't sure it was particularly frowned upon there...

She was lost in the thought as she suddenly heard Facyr's voice outside of the tent: "Faira?... May I come in?"

"Yeah, come on in", she said, still lost thinking of the issues. Facyr came to the tent, and she didn't raise her gaze until he was inside, and was a little bit startled to see how he looked – quite grim and depressed. In Faira's opinion, Facyr generally didn't show great many sorts of emotions, but even with those, he could give the impression of not being a boring person. She knew one thing, though: Facyr most certainly didn't ever look grim and depressed. In his worst days, he seemed to sulk quietly, with the look as if he was already figuring out what to do to remedy the awful situation. Thus, seeing Facyr in such an unusual state made her drop her curious and joyful mood, and got her alarmed. "Uh, what's the matter?" she said.

Facyr brushed his clothes a bit and sat down besides Faira. "We're friends, right?" he asked, biting his lip and with his voice trembling with awkwardness, but, as Faira felt, no concern about anything that might threaten their friendship at all.

"Yep", Faira said with a reassuring smile. "Of course we are friends!"

With a deep breath, Facyr began to speak. "Look, I just can't hold all of this in me any more. I want to talk to you because you're the only one who I think I can speak to about this." He looked quite troubled. "Gnedrnygr and the rest are sleeping by now, sorry I had to wait so long."

"I was reading late, no problem with that. What's the matter?"

Facyr sighed heavily. Faira's easy manner made this quite a lot more difficult than it already was. He composed himself to ask the dreadful question. "Do you think I'm leading this group well enough? I know it's been a bit of a lull lately…"

Faira thought a bit, relieved it was an answer she could answer at least a little bit better than something more personal. "Well, based on what kind of fascinating trouble you have got us so far, and how well you have got us out of there, I'd say you're leading us pretty well, I guess. You make good decisions on who should do what, yet you let us do our things our way."

Facyr sighed. "I don't know. I think I'm a terrible leader."

"Why is that?"

"Well, Gnedrnygr knows a lot more about the places we go into than I do. He's like a walking library or something. I would have no idea what to do about most things if he wasn't around to tell me what's going on. And…" Facyr closed his eyes, and took a big breath, then said, nervous and voice trembling, "you're the one who knows how to get things done at all. I bet you'd make a better leader – all I know is how to swing a sword a little bit, and you know much more about how to do all of the practical things." He gasped and opened his eyes, now looking Faira deep in her eyes for the first time in long time – probably first time ever, if Faira's memory served her right. "I'm right, don't you think? I'm worthless, right? I think you'd make a lot better leader than I am. You're… respectable in all ways."

Facyr had problems saying that all to her. Which was all more stranger, because that was his way of clearing up the troubles from his head.

He had the pressing need to tell *somebody* how much he admired her. He needed to do that.

When he had been in the order of Brave Blades, he had always had the chance of confessing his feelings and secrets to a priest of Gapus. He was accustomed to that. But Gapus had had no priests in Anchorfall for many years.

He needed to confess. He knew that the second best option at the time were his friends, and Faira was who he trusted most in this matter. What really made it much harder was that this confession also concerned her. And he didn't, really didn't, want this thing to sound like a proposition or anything. He admired Faira, but it was not really love, just strong friendship and professional admiration.

He tried to imagine what priests of Gapus would have said. They might have told him to be bold and tell this thing to her personally. He knew he would also be of honour to Gapus by being brave even in such mundane matters. He knew he had to face this situation eventually.

And now, he had had to dash to the fight. He had had the need to compliment her once again, and this time, do it really properly, not holding back. Words barely could do justice to all of the things he felt.

Now it all felt a bit silly – after all, he had given her quite a few nice words before, how this could be so hard?

But saying all this, being really kind, and actually meaning every word, was quite a lot harder than he thought it was. He was shaking as he said the things, and now, done with the most difficult thing to face bravely in recent memory, he just broke into tears.

Unlike this confession, crying was one of those things that he could do bravely when occasion demanded it. Of course, he rarely had the need, but now, crying was all he could do.

"Calm down, calm down…" Faira said. She put the book away, rose up and gave the shaken warrior a light hug. She held distraught Facyr in her embrace for a while, the warrior's tears dropping to her shoulder.

Facyr eventually composed himself, gently but sternly broke off of Faira's hug, and sat down on the floor, blushing and wiping his face dry.

Faira was a bit surprised to hear this confession, but at least liked the fact that Facyr had brought such things up before it turned something really taxing. Leaders, she thought, worked better with no weight in their minds. Of course, while getting things off the chest was good, she didn't quite think that getting whatever people got off their chest was automatically true.

"Well, look, let me put it this way…" she said slowly, and thought for a while, and meanwhile put some of her things in order. Then, she finally spoke. "Well, I think a soldier would know this: think of yourself as a lieutenant and me as a soldier – or a sergeant, if you think I am more worthy than I think I am, honestly. You're worried you aren't good at the soldierly tasks. But lieutenants don't do soldierly tasks at all, right? Soldiers do." She spun cattily around, and lied down, getting ready to sleep. She didn't notice right away how Facyr reacted to this, but rather kept talking. "You're good at planning, strategy and commanding. We do our things, so you don't need to worry about that at all." Faira noted that she had been babbling for a long time, and now looked at Facyr a little bit closer. But his expression caused her to get a bit worried. "Uh, what's the matter now?"

Facyr couldn't get a voice out of him for a while. In the dim glow of her study lantern, Faira noted he was blushing even more severely than a moment ago after the hug. "Um… I was on your way… sorry to bump in you…" he finally said, weakly and voice trembling.

Faira wondered for a while, and then realized Facyr was referring to the moment before when she had turned around, and brushed him a bit with her rear. "Oh, hm." She smiled a bit to how silly that sounded, then her smile widened to a more kinder variety. "No, it was my fault, sorry for that. Friends can bump together in tents they paid together. Besides, this tent is a bit too small for two. No, *don't* leave, I didn't mean it that way", she quickly added with the same breath, as the confused warrior was already opening the flap of the tent. "Look, you're obviously shocked and tired and all that. I think we'd better talk of all things now that we've got going, right? This is still a big enough tent for two people to talk in!"

Facyr said nothing for a second or two, then just nodded. "All right, all right."

"We're friends. Now tell me everything that bothers you."

"Do you think that... blushing to that... thing before was silly?"

"Well, no, but I've noted you've been really shy around women when, uh, anyone even touches you. You're actually pretty shy, aren't you? You'll get over it if you try, it's not easy at first, but can be done." She smiled.

"Could you... help me with that? Not the... uh... romantic side but... well, I think I could need someone to cheer me on and... things like that."

Faira smiled. "I'll gladly help you. And I know just the cure to get it started."

"What is it?"

Faira's smile turned into a mischievous grin. "Now, promise not to fight when I do this."

"Uh, okay, I promise." Facyr wasn't sure what to expect, but knew what Faira had done had very often ended up being good.

Facyr just wasn't good with women.

As long as they stayed at least a hand's width away, he could talk to them just fine, but he winced and blushed if they even as much as touched him. The hug just moment ago had really tried his nerves.

Of course Faira knew, he thought. She knew how he reacted when she got close. She had been close to him often. She must know.

But she also always knows what to do, right? Didn't I just tell her that? Making good decisions?

And now Faira got along with this new plan of hers he didn't know anything about. Understandably, Facyr had an urge to push Faira off when she did what she did, but somehow managed to control himself.

His head started to spin as Faira first hugged him – really more forcefully than previously. This was a proper hug, not a simple thing that she did a bit ago. He didn't know what made him so dizzy right now, but that was just how he felt.

Then, as he was already passing out, he found himself lying on top of her, with his head on her bosom.

By the seven elders of the Blades, Facyr thought, my head's actually touching her—

Then it was time for him to panic. But he contained it well under the circumstances.

"But, but… but… You've got Lord Lucien waiting for you in Moonbay. Uh, won't he be mad if he finds out?" Facyr blurted out weakly. His face, fire red after Faira's sudden move, was quickly returning to more normal colour.

Faira giggled. Facyr had been her friend long enough to know there wasn't a shred of mockery in the giggle – it was just quiet laughter of someone who found new sides from their friends, or learned more of the old sides. "That I'm here offering hugs and comfort to my friends who desperately need it?" Faira said. "I think he'd find it a good idea. You managed it quite well, don't you think? Look, your blush is going away too!" The hour was late and Faira was feeling quite sleepy – she couldn't prevent the giggle from turning into a cheerful laughter.

"Yeah", Facyr said. This seemed to work for him. What was previously unthinkable and scary had now happened and he was still here intact. "Can I… could I… uh, can I sleep by your side? I've never slept with a woman. I mean… in any sense of that expression. I… I didn't mean to say that…"

"Oh, I'm happy if you sleep with me, any way you want." She grinned and noted Facyr's blush had reappeared and reached completely unseen levels. "…just joshing you! I suppose it's just more convenient and definitely more appropriate if we just, uh, sleep together. That was really all I wanted to do with you right now, never be worried. I've always hoped to give a night's shelter for some scared little creature, even if it happens the creature is really a mighty wolf", Faira said, taking a hold of the silver chain hanging in Facyr's neck and pulling Facyr's pendant to sight, silvery wolf head glimmering in the lantern light. She looked at it for a while, then saw Facyr was growing more relaxed, his blush fading again. "Besides, I think you'll sleep more comfortably because the the nights are, as you can guess, pretty cold here." She grinned. "And I'm always happy to hold friends close, especially some dear friends like you, and even more especially people who desperately need a big hug." As she closed Facyr to her embrace, he wept some more, stunned by how things progressed. "Come on now", Faira said, "talk to me. Tell me everything that's bothering you, my friend."

"Mostly about the leading thing again. You said soldiers do a lot of stuff and officers don't, and that's true. But again, louts who know nothing about anything seem to move up in rank, or that's how it seems to me."

"Don't get depressed about that. I think you're doing just fine all of the other things you are good at, and you're above the average rising-star idiot. Were your officers in Grycia incompetent at everything else but pushing people around? Did you have nothing but seriously awful commanders?"

"Tes."

"Hm?"

"Sorry, just remembered people from long time ago. Ancyr Tes. Lieutenant of the second infantry company. Much more competent man than Elstryn Velln, our lieutenant. It's funny, sometimes I remember the idiots better, sometimes I remember just the nice people." Facyr sighed.

"Well", Faira said, "I can't say I know either of these people, but I'm happy you've found one way of looking it. There's another thing you'd probably want to know."

"What's that?"

"I think what you're trying to do is that you're trying to make up your own definition of what it means to lead. As far as everyone else is concerned, you're a good leader. You only *think* you need to be some sort of super-leader. You don't need to do that. It's good to demand a lot of oneself, but you're clearly overdoing it."

Facyr smiled. "If you say so. It's hard to try not to, though."

"It's always hard to let go of principles. Just remember that if you set your demands too high, you will reach them much slower. It's hard to jump across a stream if you haven't mastered stepping over a ditch without getting wet, as my father used to say, and your problem is that you're trying to jump over streams, oh, say, cross mighty rivers when all everyone ever asks you is stepping over the ditches. And that is what you already do pretty well, if I say so." She smiled.

"You're right, you're right", Facyr said weakly, but more confidently.

"There's something I need to ask you though", Faira said. "And don't get me wrong, I can't blame you for that, we are, after all, adventurers. But you really haven't ever slept with a woman? I'm not pushing you to, it's just that it seems to me ladies of Anchorfall are queuing to get you."

"Uh, well", Facyr began, "I joined the order of Brave Blades when I was twelve, and in the second day of my novicehood, we were gathered to the courtyard of the monastery to attend hanging of a novice who had been caught pants down with the inn wench the previous day. The novice was just fifteen summers old." He thought. "That sort of experiences tend to make people consider consequences very carefully."

"Isn't that a bit strange thing to be worried of? I mean, it was not because he was with the wench, it was because he was a novice, right?"

He sighed. "I suppose it's kind of strange to be so scared of that. Yeah, nobody would have complained if he had not been a novice. My younger brother

went married when he was at that same age – and he was discharged from the service year earlier due to completely wrecking his left knee."

"Well, you aren't member of the order any more. Why did you go adventuring, anyway, when every sane person – no, just kidding – would have just settled down, get married, and rested on their laurels?"

"Uh, well, I suppose we were forgotten fast. I'm not important. I bet no one wants to marry a complete nobody."

"Women marry nobodies all the time, and most of time, they both stay very happy with each other. And you absolutely shouldn't worry, Even without thinking I can list dozen women from Anchorfall who are determined to marry you one day."

"Like who?"

"Ummm... well, Theylma Athrusdotter for one..."

Facyr's eyes widened. "Daughter of Athrus Timonsson, lord of the Brinefalls manor! I would have never guessed – no wonder she's been trying to be so nice to me."

"Strictly confidential information known only to everyone who has ever visited the Rolling Winebarrel and talked for a while with the bartender. And don't forget that's just the beginning of the long long list." Faira adjusted the knapsack she was using as her pillow. Her plan of packing the clothes on the other side and hard things on the other had only been successful partly in producing a comfortable thing to sleep upon. "We probably should sleep now, or I'll only babble incomprehensible things anyway."

Facyr, quite weakly, tried to make himself rest a bit more comfortably. "One thing though."

"What?"

Facyr drew a deep breath. "I guess you were just joking when you said you'd sleep with me", he blushed a bit, voice quivering, "you know, in that other sense?"

Faira grinned. "I guess I was." She grinned mischievously, just enough to make Facyr doubt a bit.

Facyr thought for a while, coming to a conclusion that she didn't really think he was that desperate, which was probably better. He listened to the few drops of cold rain, dropping on the roof of the tent, and could not expect, at all, an interesting riposte from his friend.

"...but I *am* going to undress you, dear friend," Faira said, with a semi-seductive purr. As Facyr seemed to blush in deepest red so far that night, Faira continued a bit more playfully, "Look, there's no way you're going to lie on top of me all night with your overcoat and cloak on, camping life is clumsy enough as it is already." She laughed again tiredly.

"Still, if I may say... this really is the most erotic moment of my life, as sad it may seem," Facyr said as he shed his coat with Faira's help.

"It isn't sad at all. Who cares what other people think. And I bet you find yourself in the embrace of your true love soon, even if you may have no idea who that person is right now. Meanwhile, I'm more than happy to just serve as someone who deeply cares about you, no matter what." She wondered for a while. "All right, I guess I don't know what's the difference between those two things practically, really. I'm happy to be your friend."

"I really just have to say that I'm extremely honoured to be friends forever with you. And, also, Lord Lucien is terribly lucky to have you, Faira."

"Oh, thank you. As the folk of Treglin say, 'We're friends, and friends we'll stay, to the day ground burns and the world splits in half', which is a pretty grimly poetic thing from a bunch of fishermen. And completely untrue too, because I don't want a simple thing like end of the world to end our friendship." Faira grinned. "And I'll say whoever catches you will be the luckiest girl in the world, too. And now I'm not a lucky girl, I'm a stone tired one. Good night, Facyr."

"Good night, Faira."

Chapter 4

A BIT OVER TWO WEEKS after they had left Anchorfall, the city of Nothross had finally emerged from behind a turn of a road around a small hill. The journey had been rather uneventful and they had not been troubled by any of the usual hazards, mostly thanks to the fact that number of army troops patrolling Furinian roads had only increased the closer they got their destination.

The sparse city spread across the forested valley, a large number of small cottages under the trees. The sky was cloudy, and sun shone through them, clouds casting dark shadows where the sun wasn't painting the ground with interesting colours.

At the bottom of the valley, with less trees, were the bigger buildings, and a large town square. The major roads split the valley in three. Right past the town square, an old, yet quite well-maintained, stone wall could be seen. According to Aleln's explanation, the wall split the town in two, the older part where the fortress was on the north side and the newer part, which they had conquered back, on the south side. The only gap in the wall was where the old gate once stood, in the northern side of the town square, and a barricade was set up there. A group of Mighty Lancers stood at guard there, and some could be seen patrolling on the battlements; the soldiers wore plate mails, deep blue coats, carrying a shield on their back and being armed with their famous lances, as well as short bows and swords. The old town was razed to the ground and devoid of any trees, giving the defenders of the town an advantage in seeing where the enemy was coming, though at the same time giving the denizens of the town a rather worrying sight: The desolate half of the town not only looked awful, but also was a reminder of the constant dangers of living in the far north, especially the constant dangers of having a mad wizard in their neighbourhood.

Right across the valley, behind the small hill, rose an ominous-looking fortress. Gnedrnygr regarded that sight with some worries that could easily be read from his face. "That is the castle we're going to? Now, friends, heed my words—"

Gnedrnygr said, the theatrical expression seemingly only half humorous – "I usually don't say this lightly, but that place really does look *scary*." He let the idea sink in to the heads of the adventurers, then said, in a lighter tone, "...in a purely academic sense of the word, of course. You could call that," Gnedrnygr pointed at the castle, "A schoolbook example of scariness."

"Well," Faira said, grinning, "It probably used to have twittering birds and flowers all around and sun shone constantly when you got near it, and now it's all evil and there's always dark clouds above it and trees have withered?" She was only half serious – the latter part of the description might have been fairly accurate. The woods around the fortress were indeed gnarled; all around them, rose torn and destroyed shelters, rude huts, crude dwellings built out of logs and some stones, crudely painted signs; undoubtedly former lodgings of quite a few orclings, now deserted. The goblins, goborcs and orcs who had not been destroyed by the Lancers as they swept across the valley were undoubtedly hiding in the castle – and making their last stand with a good show of defiance.

Realn grinned. "Well, it's not quite that, Faira. The gnarled trees were there originally – the woods around it are quite old. And the castle merely was a... normal castle. I have no idea why Jaxtomsyn's like wants to bring dark clouds above their castles by magic means."

Gnedrnygr regarded the storm clouds gathered around the castle region. "I wonder how they do that. Weather magic is fairly well understood, though, so apparently, this wizard just likes to show off what he knows. It is just... unbelievable how the nasty people just move in and it starts raining all the time all of sudden. If the wizard won't try to kill us immediately, I have to try to ask."

As they rode toward the city, it began to rain. The rain was still somewhat warm, the last warmth they could possibly expect this night of danger and despair.

THE BIGGEST INN IN NOTHROSS was colourfully crowded. The Bolt and Tower had been rebuilt and redecorated after the city was taken back. It had opened for business only a month earlier. The owner had apparently found the castle overlooking the town an inspiring motif, even when the name had drawn some complaints in regards to how eerie it seemed. The three-storey inn was built of big logs, and inside, the adventurers were surprised how it differed from log houses built by humans: While human log houses tended to be cosy and cottage-like, the common room of the inn, which took most of the first floor, was airy and also full of light, thanks to big windows and intricately constructed braziers. You couldn't smell smoke, saw dust and pine sap here, nor could you exactly imagine hunting trophies to decorate the walls. But, knowing many humans were often lodged in there, the inn owner had helpfully hung a couple of elk heads on the wall nevertheless, just to give a little bit of familiar atmosphere. Facyr was particularly pleased when he saw the dart board.

Most of the tables in the common room were occupied by all sorts of travellers. Aleln and Realn found the inn, under the circumstances, a rather good place to get information from – though for the adventurers, an inn anywhere would always be a good place to get the latest news from. Facyr took the news from the inn rather gladly; Faira, however, gave them just a little less credence, especially when the town didn't have a fish market where the unfounded rumours could be segregated. This didn't mean the news were uninteresting.

After the news of the town's recapture had reached Grycia and northern Varmhjelm, some traders were already passing through, at least through the eastern roads – the wizard and monsters clearly still held the northern road. Only a few traders yet used the roads, though, in fears that monsters might ambush them on the way. The protection from the Mighty Lancers was invaluable, but monsters still claimed their prey at times. Still, having the direct road open from northern Varmhjelm was invaluable in getting things to Furinia's market and onward to the southern elven towns – paying some extra for a few mercenaries as caravan guards was cheaper and faster than shipping everything to Anchorfall via the twisty, badly maintained, treacherous western routes, and to the port towns by sea.

Faira turned and looked at something that had vaguely been bothering her. In the corner table, a bald man dressed in black was sitting quietly, leaning on the table, tired eyes observing every movement in the room. Faira looked at the man, quite surprised. The fellow clearly seemed familiar; it took some time for her to place a name on him. "Do I know you?" she asked, knowing his reply, whatever it was, would tell her for sure.

The man slowly raised his hand, then slowly wiped the side of his nose with his thumb. The gesture spoke volumes to Faira: it was a gesture that showed determination and diligence, utter dedication and training. It was as if he had dedicated every moment of his existence to train for that single act of nose-wiping. "No, you don't know me", he said.

Faira smiled knowingly. "Actually, I do know you – I mean, in the circles I've been in, who *wouldn't* know you. I just wonder what a high-paid assassin is doing in this place. Let me guess – shifting loyalties?"

The man sighed. "Very disappointing ones at that."

"You do everything for money, right?"

"Always."

"And if I guess correctly, you're annoyed because you got paid to *not* to do something?"

The man thought. "The situations is quite more complicated than that."

Faira thought for a while. "Now, what I've heard is that you've always succeeded in doing what the contract says. Would you reconsider fulfilling the original contract if you failed with this one?"

The man thought again, a little bit longer. Faira hoped he thought harder as

well – one could not tell from outside. Finally he said, slowly, "Like I said, it is all very complicated, but I suppose that is correct."

"I've got no idea who the heck you're after here", Faira said, "or who you were originally after, and I assure you, I don't know for sure. I can only guess. And you don't kill nosy people who just guess, am I right?"

"No, I won't", the man said with a bit more resolve.

"Good." Faira smiled coldly to the man, and departed.

She went upstairs to join the others, was happy to escape that situation alive, and also know that this fellow could, indeed, be useful at times. She was just a bit worried on whether or not the thing would develop – he was not the kind of person who liked discussing his private enterprises. She knew the man was a famed assassin from Anchorfall, and not a person to be trifled with.

Faira climbed up the stairs. It was a narrow spiral staircase, with a ridiculous number of small-game trophies hanging on the walls – she hoped that some other human travellers had as good sense of humour as she had, as she saw some heads of particularly big rats – and walked down the narrow corridor with a bit rickety floorboards to what now passed as the ducal palace of Nothross. Half of the second floor was reserved for the court officials, and Aleln and Realn had the royal suite – if it could be called that – for his own use.

As Faira stepped in, Aleln was already formulating a plan, and the adventurers discussed various ways of attack until well after nightfall.

"FAIRA, WAKE UP!"

Faira sat up the moment Facyr called her name, waking from light slumber.

Rain was pelting the window of her inn room, and the midnight gloom was often lit by bolts of thunder. She yawned a bit, but got back to track at an admirable pace. "Uh, let me guess, the monsters are coming?" she said, with only a hint of tiredness in her voice.

"Hah, you just can't guess wrong, can you!" Facyr shouted with a chuckle as he ran down the narrow corridor. "Looks like the evil wizard is being really, really predictable." He shook his head. "Let's teach him a lesson or two. Come along as fast as you can! Meet me at the barricades on the other side of the marketplace. Gnedrnygr, you too – wake up!", he said as he ran down the stairs, taking two steps at a time. The magician was already stirring in his room in the floor below.

Facyr emerged from the door to the heavy rain. As he got out of the door to the marketplace, he saw Faira already gone halfway to the barricade, and wished weakly that he had the guts to jump out of second-floor windows routinely, knowing that a rogue's life wasn't really made for him. He ran after her, glad that the monsters had not yet reached the place – he didn't want to miss the fun. Gnedrnygr followed them a moment later, and Aleln and Realn were already waiting

them.

"Did you hurt yourself falling, Faira?" Facyr looked at Faira's face, which had a slight scratch, even when there was no sign of monsters yet.

"Oh, just ran into some unpleasant characters in the hallway. I think they were mistaken about the room."

"What? Assassins? Here?" Facyr said, disbelief clearly in his face.

"Yep, though I convinced him to not mess with us – I knew him, and he's good, but not good enough to be of trouble to us."

Facyr grinned. "All right then, let's not worry about that now – there's monsters heading this way! So what's really coming up?" Facyr asked Aleln.

"It looks like a rather typical raiding party of a couple of dozen *glartaror*."

Facyr sighed. "Well, I hope you dared to be a bit more specific, but an orcling is an orcling and when we start killing them, it doesn't matter what kind."

"We could handle this, sir", the sergeant in command of the squad of Lancers on the barricade said to Aleln. "It is nothing really out of ordinary, sir."

"Don't you worry about us", Facyr said to the sergeant. "Just be prepared to stop any of these that might slip past us."

The goborcs emerged from the bend of the road, heading directly toward the barricade. Facyr worried a little bit about whatever cunning strategy the creatures were planning right now; the fact that the creatures were advancing carrying quite a few torches and making loud noises made him worry that the wizard had given the creatures some helpful advice on how to attack the place. But then again, this was a typical goblinoid strategy in general: either they attacked head on, or attacked head on with some cunning twist to the pattern. Facyr hoped this was purely a case of the former possibility.

"All right then, there they come – get ready, folks", Facyr shouted as the enemy got closer. "Praise to Gapus!" he screamed, and went on to unceremoniously start the battle by leaping down from the barricade and running through the goborc on point.

Rather quickly, it became apparent to Facyr that his fears on any cunning strategy from the part of the enemy had been completely unfounded. The goborcs had often hoped that the defenders were afraid to see them coming, as the sight of an advancing goborc horde generally tended to worry people with no fighting skills at all and even the normal men at arms.

But over the past few weeks, they had been facing something more fearsome than that. Furinel's Mighty Lancers were no strangers to dealing with goblinoids. And now, they also faced Facyr – he, likewise, had fought the goblinoids most of his life, and knew that a few of them couldn't possibly stop him.

As he and his friends charged into the fray and slashed creatures down left and right, he still kept wondering what Jaxtomsyn hoped to accomplish with this hopeless raid: Surely, by now, he was aware that he no longer had any chance of

taking the village? Maybe he did have some cunning strategy, or maybe this was just an act of desperation. Maybe the reason for this courageous goborc attack was just that the goborcs were not blessed with much intellect and only knew Jaxtomsyn didn't want them back if the assault was a failure. Not that it mattered much, in the adventurers' hands, the creatures were dead soon. He idly pondered the motives as he easily slashed through two goborcs.

Aleln descended from the wall, joining the fray, fighting the things with much more style and taking more time, but clearly not letting the weapons of the vile creatures closer than an inch to himself.

The rain poured on them as they fought the things, without much worries in their hearts on how the fight was looking. Facyr and Aleln kept hacking at the monsters in the glow of the torches on the barricade – the goborc torch-bearers had been quickly slain, and some of their torches were still sputtering on the ground. A dim yellow-green glow was lit upon the battlefield. It was Realn's spell, hopefully dim enough to not help the creatures much but bright enough for her adventurous friends to see by.

At first, Faira had shot the advancing monsters with her crossbow. She shot one, then quickly reloaded, and shot another. Meanwhile, Gnedrnygr was done incanting a spell. Faira showed some disappointment as Gnedrnygr shot a fireball to the rear end of the advancing orcling horde – after all, he knew a lot more flashier spells than this, but on the other hand, it didn't matter much how interesting the spells were academically, as long as they killed stuff. She was actually more disappointed to see only three goblinoids fry to crisp.

The bulk of the goborcs had moved close enough. Faira dropped her crossbow on top of the barricade and leapt down to join Facyr the fray, and Gnedrnygr followed her, brandishing his staff.

Below, Aleln was turning more lethal; he was fighting what he perceived to be the leader of the creatures; a rather ugly orc with many scars and attire made of bits of bone and patched leather. The creature was also the only one with some real armour; under the leather coat, Aleln spied what seemed to be a chain shirt. The creature was also quite competent with the weapons. The creature shouted curses in orcish language, which Aleln didn't really know much about, and occasional broken fragment of threats in Elvish or Varmian.

Faira rushed toward the closest goborc, who was surprised to see an unarmed opponent advancing. It grinned, and prepared to slash Faira, but as she was close, she dodged by doing a sudden roll, grabbing her daggers from her belt while doing that, and thrusting both of them into the creature's chest as she finished the roll.

Gnedrnygr, meanwhile, had paced to the battle with considerably slower pace. He muttered formula for a spell, and a bolt of green lightning from the tip of his staff fried the goborc who was thinking the magician would be easy prey. The creature's companion came forth with shriek of rage, hoping Gnedrnygr would

be ill prepared after casting a spell, but the mage spun around and mashed the creature on the side of the head with his staff, making it flip over full before hitting the mud.

Mud wasn't bothering Faira much, aside of the general inconvenience – the rain, if a bit chilly, was washing it all off. She drew the daggers from the creature's chest and ran toward another pair of creatures, easily stabbing two other creatures to sides while advancing. She easily dodged the one right in front of her while running crouched, tried to brake and slipped in mud between the creatures, almost running through the monster in front of her as she plunged her dagger to its chest, tackling the creature. As the creature toppled over and cushioned her landing, she, without any need to even look, threw the other dagger behind her – right through the first creature's throat. She noted another creature come from left, and without skipping a beat, pulled the dagger from the chest of the creature in front of her and thrust backward at the advancing creature – a goblin, this time – with it, killing the thing just as easily as the other two.

She rose up, took her dagger, and jumped to the other creature to take her other blade. Then she heard a shriek right behind her; luckily, Facyr had not missed what she had, and picked one of the darts that the goborcs seemed to carry on their belts and thrown it at the goblin that had been trying to kill Faira.

She smiled to Facyr and saw more trouble coming toward him – six goborcs, circling her friend.

Faira leapt to the ring and leaned on Facyr, ready to face the creatures back against each other's back. She guessed this was a situation where Facyr wasn't prone to go blushing and locking up, and was luckily quite correct. They deflected the axe swings of the creatures, and stabbed and slashed them furiously but determinedly.

Soon, nine goborcs in total lay on their feet, and they had time to look at each other. Faira was happy that at least this time, Facyr was smiling rather than blushing, though in the dim light, it was difficult to tell. They didn't have much time for this, so they both leapt up and ran to kill more of the things. Luckily, it seemed most of the creatures were dead already.

Meanwhile, Gnedrnygr had been busy incanting. The battlefield was lit brightly for a while when he did one of his favourite spells that he had taught Faira as among the first things. A giant beam of light seared through three goborcs and two goblins, practically leaving only their smouldering boots behind.

After a few moments, the battle was over. Faira was wet, had sand in her clothes from the muddy ground, but she knew none of the monsters had had no chance to even as much as scratch her. She looked around warily and and saw none of the disgusting monsters alive. "Everyone all right?"

"Phew," Facyr breathed out, panting. "Not a scratch here, not a scratch", he continued, wiping whatever little sweat he had on the brow, holding a nice pile

of goborc helmets, handing them to one of the Lancers to decorate the wall with. "This was an incompetent lot, if you ask me."

Aleln eyed his kill with pure hatred in his eyes, and as everyone gathered around him to admire it, he slowly crouched down and pulled his sword from the creature. While Facyr and Faira had been fighting the creatures together, Aleln had finally killed the leader of the raiding party, running his blade through the creature's side. It had taken several moments for it to die, and in his heart, Aleln was happy for each eye blink the creature had shrieked in agony. Without word, he raised his sword, coldly looking at the blood on its blade. He then sheathed it, and turned to his friends. "It seems to me that Jaxtomsyn is slowly losing the best of the fighters he has – this ugly one here", Aleln said, pointing to the leader's carcass, "was one of the troublemakers I've seen before already, and probably one of our biggest headaches in recent memory. It may be the bands don't have any more capable leaders after this thing is dead. Or", he eyed at the adventurers, "it could be that he is keeping them at the keep, and has some more capable tacticians in his sleeve."

"What capable tacticians?" Faira said. "This wasn't exactly a tactical strike." She grinned widely.

"Yeah, true, I was just thinking the same thing. I don't think we need to worry much about orc tacticians", Facyr said.

Aleln thought for a moment. "Either way, let us retire to the inn. I suggest we finish our plan of the fortress assault right away."

"Right away?" Facyr said. "You mean you want to attack the castle tomorrow already?"

"Yes – what better time, really? We'll attack at the first light."

"Oh dear, this is going to be one busy night", Faira said.

Chapter 5

THE ADVENTURERS HID IN THE BUSHES, and regarded the castle in front of them with interest. There were a few moments left before their plan would be put to the action. While everyone was tense with the upcoming battle, the sight in front of them still inspired them.

"What's the matter, Facyr? Never seen an elven fortress before?" Faira grinned and looked at the fortress that rose from middle of the woods. She wondered silently what kind of interesting secrets the castle held now – after all, it probably was a lot more interesting place than how Aleln and Realn left it when they fled the castle.

Facyr smiled to Faira and said, "I have, it's just so... ordinary."

It was early dawn, two days from the nightly attack, after which nothing really remarkable happened. It was a misty. Just like the morning in Anchorfall we got to this mess, Facyr thought, and he was right: the light fog in distance reminded him of home, though right here, instead of buildings there were trees. They had slept well, the sun of was just rising, and they were looking at the castle just beyond the edge of the woods.

The creatures in the fortress had lowered the drawbridge a moment earlier, and sent some scouts out; little did the wizard know in the castle that the scouts would likely not return, and would likely be already found and killed by the Lancers who were once again laying siege on the castle, this time a bit more covertly. The Lancers kept their distance from the castle, and had made good effort camouflaging themselves so that the flying contraptions could not see them.

They had his worries, however: the fact that the wizard kept leaving the drawbridge down for most of the time, leaving the castle a little bit vulnerable, seemed fairly odd. But on the other hand, the goblinoids had seemed fairly alert: As soon as the lancers showed up near the castle, the drawbridge always went up and a lot of noise could be heard inside. Perhaps, an elaborate ruse wasn't going on. But it was still enough to keep them on toes.

They had decided not to attack right away after the previous night's assault

after all. The night had proven to be surprisingly tiring, and Aleln had agreed that they shouldn't try things too hard. Mornings, they had found, were rather delicate times. They were also afraid of spies who might have worked among them and listened to their plans.

The *real* reason to delay, however, was that Aleln woke up the following day at midday, and the adventurers fared no better. Sometimes, even best assault plans seemed to go wrong when such things happen.

But a delay of a couple of days simply meant they could prepare for things a bit better. Aleln and Realn organised a siege ring around the castle, and more people looking for possible tunnels in the area near the castle. Gnedrnygr and Facyr spent the time getting their equipment in order, and Faira did her best to make further sense of the castle. She studied the plans, went scouting around the castle, and even climbed to the wall and took a peek beyond – she couldn't risk going to the courtyard, but a good look at the courtyard told her more than enough.

"This, my friends", Gnedrnygr said, "is a typical elven frontier fortress. You see, at some point, it was, shall we say, fashionable for elves to build fortresses that in no way were different from human-built ones; in other words, this one here strives for practicality instead of the usual mighty and refined looks."

"Well, this still seems like a mighty fortress all right", Faira said, peering upward to the ridges of the outer wall. Not a single orc was in sight yet; that was a good sign.

"I could not put the description better myself, Gnedrnygr", Aleln said. "Though I have to remind you that we aren't quite as hidebound as humans often think – it was no problem for us to build this place, as we don't really *insist* on beauty. When we settled the area, Furinel was in middle of very difficult times. We had to adapt, and leave the refinement back when it did not make sense. My grandfather was enraged when he finally moved in from Furinia and saw this castle", Aleln said with a smile, "though, but even he accepted it soon. If I remember right, I was just proposing renovations that might have added some more traditional looks to the castle around the time when the wizard took the castle."

"Well, it's not as pleasant sight as the Duke of Moonbay's palace, but a whole lot of stones will keep the enemy away in either case." Faira smiled and turned to Aleln and Realn. "Happy to be back at home?"

Realn smiled. "Yes, though I have my suspicions that the welcome is not very warm", she said and sighed.

A rough scream made them look at the top of the outer wall. Some goborcs had seen them, and now two of them screamed and jeered at them incomprehensibly and waved their spears, while two ran inside.

"Well, jeepers, this is what we came here for", Faira said.

"Hurry! Over the drawbridge before they raise it! Charge!" Facyr shouted.

They ran toward the drawbridge. Facyr and Faira were the only one to make it

to the drawbridge as the goborcs began raising it. Unluckily to the creatures, the two knew exactly what to do, unlike so many other invaders they had managed to repel. The two winches used to raise the drawbridge were placed so that the walls covered it, but were quite vulnerable if the enemy had already reached the courtyard.

As they ran over to the courtyard side, they saw the deplorable condition the courtyard was in. The sturdy walls, made of light grey stone from the mountains, was still standing firm and rather smooth, but the amount of garbage everywhere on the ground made it evident that the goblinoids had stayed here for quite a while. Even the walls had been violated – the battlements seemed to have been likewise neglected by the goblinoids, and were now in disarray. The only thing that was in any good condition was the keep in the middle of the courtyard, undoubtedly now serving as the wizard's hiding place. The goblins probably lived in the rude huts on the back of the courtyard, where they seemed to be awakening after this morning's alert.

Before the goborcs could react, Facyr took a crossbow, killed the creature operating the other winch, while Faira shot the other.

"My, they make this too easy", Faira said, as she leapt on the ladder leading to the wall, quietly muttering a spell formula. Apparently, the goblins had grown tired of using the easily-defended, narrow stairway at the far end of the wall, and put a crude ladder next to the main gate, making it more convenient for them to climb up. Of course, the goborcs weren't complete idiots; As soon as the nearest goborc on the wall released the portcullis, it ran to the ladder and tried to push it down. Much to its surprise, the ladder didn't budge. A crude wooden ladder obviously didn't weigh that much, even with a human climbing it; the rogue grinned that the spell had worked and made the ladder thousandfold more heavy.

"Good going, Faira!" Facyr shouted as the portcullis guard fell from the wall and crashed down by the gate. He noted the creature was largely unharmed and probably died when it hit the ground after the great fall; he hadn't seen what happened up on the wall, but he guessed the creature had just stared at Faira, that ugly big mouth open with disbelief, as she climbed the ladder – and then she had just pushed the thing off the wall. But now, he fought the creatures, swings of his swords mowing down the advancing goblins, and grinned as the portcullis rose again, just high enough that Gnedrnygr, Aleln and Realn could join the fray.

Faira leapt down from the wall with a somersault, and landed gracefully on her feet next to her companions.

Realn, while lacking in knowledge of sieges and other castle warfare, had seen a few people drop down from the walls of castles and not really survive all that well, so Faira's safe, light landing seemed to defy his experience of everyday physics, and also most of the logic. But she could easily see there was some other explanation for this. "You're a feather-light rogue, aren't you?" she said with a

grin. “How did you do that?”

Faira just smiled. “Well, this was just thanks to a magic pendant given to me by an old friend long ago.”

“We don’t have ample time to chat here, folks! If we kept talking about all of Faira’s magic trinkets, we’d be stuck for a while, and then Gnedrnygr would want to ramble about his even bigger collection,” Facyr said. “Anyway – let’s get moving! You all remember what to do, right?”

“Yes, I understood nicely and clearly, Facyr”, Gnedrnygr said, and hummed a tune as he, with much less hurry and with much more calm determination, climbed the ladder to the wall, frying the big guard goborcs emerging from the towers with greenish lightning bolts.

A swarm of goblinoids was still occupying the large courtyard, but that didn’t worry the elven lord. Aleln blew a horn he was carrying. From the forests emerged a company of Mighty Lancers, who ran over the drawbridge and joined the fray, slashing and spearing the goblins. Aleln grinned with dark joy as he witnessed what happened: In one eye blink, it seemed there were a lot of green- and grey-skinned ugly creatures all over the courtyard in those rude shelters and huts they had disgracefully built everywhere, and in another eye blink, it seemed that for each and every creature there was one tall blue-clad elvish soldier, running it through. He stayed on the courtyard with his wife, fighting off the swarm of goblins, joyful that things worked just as well as they had planned.

In mere moments, the fight in the courtyard was almost over. The adventurers regrouped near the entrance to the keep. Facyr and Faira pushed open the big doors, which opened quite easily – Faira admired the elven craftsmanship, especially these clever counterweights hidden in the walls. They fought the last remaining goborcs that held their positions just inside the keep.

THE KEEP WAS QUITE WELL-TENDED compared to the outside. The adventurers looked around, and saw all sorts of graceful elven decorations – beautiful tapestries and paintings with perfectly harmonious colours, and craftily weaved carpets with extravagantly complex designs – though, as Facyr and Faira learned later, and as Gnedrnygr guessed, the latter were just presents from Colemian diplomats.

It was obvious that the wizard never let his creatures anywhere past the guard post right by the front door. Two filthy goborcs posted as guards had been of little resistance to three adventurers and two diplomatically enraged elven nobles, all armed to teeth.

The lower floor was quiet, and not a soul could be found there. Valntathalens noted that the halls had, fortunately, been mostly left to their original state.

“I know you’re fairly certain the evil wizard didn’t previously try to see us by magic means, but perhaps you could you use your magic sight to locate the

wizard?" Aleln asked Gnedrnygr.

"I don't see the point, right now, really – previously, I hesitated to that because such scrying was dangerous, especially considering that Jaxtomsyn is not a mere amateur magician. We might find out what he's doing, but he might find out, at the same time, that we find out what he's doing, and it might be just a little bit hard for us to find out that he found out that we found out what he did…"

"…All right, let's not try that", Facyr cut off the rambling magician. "I guess Gnedrnygr's point is that magic sights would have been useful for seeing this place from the city, but now that we're here, all we have to do is… well, let's go upstairs, that's where he's probably hiding!"

"Right – that's where our library was, quite a lot of interesting books there," Realn said.

They went up the stairs to the library. Quite predictably, the big desk in the library had been filled with magical apparatuses of all kind, magical reagents, and mysterious-looking books. Large glass windows let light in. The day was getting bright, and the clouds that had covered the castle over the whole day so far were passing now.

And, by the tables stood a robed figure, quite surprised to see the adventurers at all.

The adventurers stared at the wizard silently, not quite sure what to say. On Gnedrnygr's face, Faira saw contempt and condemnation mixed with curiosity. Facyr looked alert and ready but not quite ready to rush in first and get fried by the magician's spells – as he had noticed so many times before, wizards tended to keep some annoying spells up their sleeves. Realn looked curious but stayed behind Aleln's back; Aleln himself apparently shared Facyr's ideas.

The morning light poured in from the windows, the adventurers standing in a patch of light on the red carpet. The wizard, first hidden in the shadows, turned, and slowly walked to the light. Light glimmered from the knob of his staff; Facyr's first thought was something nasty was afoot, but the staff, while clearly magical in nature, seemed not to really be the kind one used to toss fireballs at people at whim – he couldn't be sure, of course. The wizard looked at the adventurers, eyeing them with a look on his face that could only be explained by lack of sleep, and made no smile or frown. It was hard to read the wizard's expression; he did, however, show some curiosity.

"Adventurers." Jaxtomsyn said, with a raspy voice of an old man. "Welcome."

"Why is he…?" Facyr began to whisper to Gnedrnygr, but couldn't find words.

"He's quite strange, is he not?" Gnedrnygr whispered. "I presume his Preservation was botched."

"The Preservation?" Aleln asked.

"The spell Colemian Evokers use to attain their famed longevity", Gnedrnygr

explained. “You probably wouldn’t guess, for example, that I’m over 70 years old already,” he continued, and grinned to Aleln, who could have sworn, a moment ago, that Gnedrnygr didn’t look a day older than forty.

“And how old do you think Jaxtomsyn is?” Aleln whispered.

“Well that’s the strange part. Usually, when we age, we age kind of... normally. You don’t see a fellow who looks like a forty-year-old and sounds like a 120-year-old...” Gnedrnygr told Aleln, and wondered in his mind what mysterious things could turn Jaxtomsyn like this. Probably touching things mortals were not meant to touch.

Jaxtomsyn, meanwhile, had slowly come forward. The adventurers stared at the wizard, looking at him and wondering what kind of person he was. “Well, well. I’d like to especially welcome Duke Valntathalen, it is quite a time since we last saw each other. I have no idea how you really got here though”, the wizard continued. “Few people manage to get past my creatures. But, ah, bringing an Evoker surely could help that, if only a bit.” The wizard smiled kindly, the first true emotion that could be seen from him, and also one that they had not quite prepared for. “Please speak.” He eyed the adventurers, smiling some more, then turned a bit more stern. “If you try to threaten me with the silence, it is not working, and that whispering is useless, because I can hear you just well.”

“Why, pay no attention to me”, Gnedrnygr began. “Most of the thanks for getting this far I give to my companions.”

“Hah!” the evil wizard cackled. “I know you’ve come here for exactly same reason I am here, Evoker. Undoubtedly you have recruited these warriors to aid your cause to acquire the most desired magical item of all time!” He held forth the staff, the gem at its end glimmering in Trinvnil’s morning rays.

“What is that?” Aleln whispered. “I’ve never seen that thing.”

Jaxtomsyn chuckled. “The dearest treasure of Valntathalen family, and you have no idea what this is? Surely you are just pulling my leg, your grace. Or maybe your father was never told really how valuable this staff is.”

The Valntathalens looked at each other, both confused about the thing. Facyr and Faira, on the other hand, looked at Gnedrnygr, wondering if their friend had something to hide, after all. Gnedrnygr was unfazed, but it was clear to the other adventurers that he was barely holding himself as calm as he could. Jaxtomsyn had clearly provoked him. “This”, he said, pointing to the staff, “is... the unnamed staff.”

“Yeciv’y’d’tolp, Staff of Demon Lord Nyffu’gcam!” Jaxtomsyn snapped. Gnedrnygr flinched against all of his might, relaxing a bit immediately when the castle didn’t collapse on top of them. “Yes! Handed to safekeeping to Verron Valntathalen three hundred years ago. We had no idea it was here, and it took some pains to find it.”

Faira could see some hints of rage at Gnedrnygr’s face. “’We’? As I feared.

You're the last of the Unrepentants?" he said, voice quivering. "Your Grace, I congratulate your family for keeping this dangerous item from the hands of traitors to Colemia," Gnedrnygr said to Aleln.

Aleln wondered for a moment. "I did know that there are – or were, as it now seems – a lot of things in my family's vaults. Now, I find myself wondering if it had paid to find out what most of them really were", Aleln said.

"Feel not worried for me saying the demon lord's name, Evoker, for I destroyed him, with his own staff!" Jaxtomsyn shouted with a wide, evil grin. "It took some good *boring* time finding out where the staff *wasn't,* but all possible alternatives exhausted…" he left the thought to hang in the air. "And now, need I even to say that you have come here in vain, Evoker. You will not get this staff from me."

Gnedrnygr composed himself, and thought for a while. Jaxtomsyn grinned, and clearly waited for an answer; Gnedrnygr decided to give him one, though it was probably not something the wizard expected. "Well, first of all, I could only guess that there was something powerful hidden here, why else would a wizard raid a castle with an army? I had absolutely no idea what it really was. I regrettably had completely forgotten about the Unrepentants and their silly quests."

"Silly? How dare you!" Jaxtomsyn didn't seem particularly amused, his voice trembling. He shook the wand angrily at Gnedrnygr, who now seemed to take that much more calmly, unlike his companions.

"Anyway, I can assure you I only came here with my friends to depose you. I don't have any axe to grind against Unrepentants either, though I found them a slight nuisance in my novice years. I don't even find any powerful artefacts so alluring that I'd need to grab them from left and right whenever I have a chance. And why should I be interested of the staff right now, anyway? It's useless, after all."

"I beg your pardon?" Jaxtomsyn said.

"Well", Gnedrnygr said with sarcasm dripping from his voice. "You destroyed the demon lord, though I have my doubts – those things are very difficult to kill throughout." Gnedrnygr raised his hands. "No, wait! I guess you know how to dispose a demon, after all, the Unrepentants probably have to deal with demons regularly. Where was I? Oh yes, you have a big, easily defended fortress. You have a whole lot of orclings who keep the nearby area nice and clean and you have a lot of breathing room. Then what?"

Jaxtomsyn looked at Gnedrnygr with derision. He snorted like arrogant wizards may do, in case someone asks a particularly stupid, self-evident question that really serves no purpose, while at the same forgetting entirely *why* the question was asked in the first place, because the other person could clearly not ask some stupid questions just to make a good point. Unluckily for Jaxtomsyn, Gnedrnygr was making a good point, but he clearly wouldn't bother his mind with such

things. “Then what, you ask? With this staff’s powers, I shall rule the world!” Jaxtomsyn let out yet another snort of contempt. “You fool! You of the Citadel never understood. You threw us out. You hunted us down. You mocked us by sending away your prized magical items, and just smiled when we came to take it by force.” Jaxtomsyn drew some breath. “Getting Yeciv’y’d’tolp was our destiny and our right. We had to have it, because it belonged to us by every right imaginable.”

“Of course, ignoring a couple of laws of Furinel, such as ones holding the property of Kingdom inviolable, to say nothing of private property in general – it seems to me the Unrepentants were on a bit shaky ground here, always thinking it was their right to destroy other people’s private property – and, you also violated a number of quite normal diplomatic procedures”, Aleln muttered. “You could have used at least some cleverness, like posing yourself as a Colemian diplomat who thinks that there is something that belongs to Colemia in our vaults, or something along those lines.” Aleln looked disgusted. “Army of these… creatures. That *alone* was your condemnation that has forever ruined your chances of any moderate, civilized justice. Know this, wizard: The Crown of Furinel has decreed masters and slavers of the unspeakable creatures as a folk even worse and vile than they are. You’re forever a traitor in these lands.” He sighed. “And even if you ignore that fact, I have to say using these tactics shows that you have absolutely no… refinement, or even good style and decency, at all.”

“Yes, yes”, Jaxtomsyn said, trying to drown Aleln’s mumbling. “Diplomacy was never my strongest area, I fear.”

“And all you managed to do with these brutish tactics was drive us mad. Was that what you wanted?” Aleln said. The wizard remained silent, somewhat stung by Aleln’s words.

Gnedrnygr sighed, and stepped a few steps forward. “I volunteer for a little bit of a test, then. The Rite of *Ksstnge dyn Eldkullr.* You know the *Eldkullr*, do you?”

Jaxtomsyn was unfazed. “Very funny, Evoker”, he said with a small chuckle. “I shall have my orcs scrape your remains from the walls shortly, for I like my palace neat and clean.” He raised the staff, and pointed it directly at Gnedrnygr, then hinted at the rest of the adventurers that it might be a good idea to get very far from their Evoker friend. The adventurers dispersed, hoping Gnedrnygr had the necessary skills to handle the situation.

Jaxtomsyn took some magical reagents from his belt pouches, drew breath, then intoned in a bit clearer voice than before, “*Knna-hv-l’tl’n-mrr-dratsum-eht-dloh!*” the gem at the end of the staff glowed, and the reagents formed a small ball of light, which shot at Gnedrnygr. Just as it was about to hit him, Gnedrnygr swiftly ducked. The spark flew through the door behind the wizard, and a great ball of fire exploded in the corridor, luckily, as Aleln observed, in a location with no flammable things in sight.

"But… how can it be?" Jaxtomsyn said.

Gnedrnygr sighed, then smiled kindly – Facyr, as he got back to his feet, noted a subtle distinction between Gnedrnygr's genuinely kind smile that showed humour, and Jaxtomsyn's earlier smile that had shown merely comfort that the threat wasn't going to be big enough to harm them any more than an ant can topple a house. But now, judging from Jaxtomsyn's face, the house had suddenly turned into a fir needle. The adventurers were still wary – needles can be prickly.

"The staff has absolutely no effect." Gnedrnygr lectured. "That is the great big secret of the staff. None can possibly fathom the minds of the demon lords. Nyffu'gcam, in all likelihood, just got the staff because the gem at its tip can be possessed. Have you never examined it? The staff is merely a conduit, like all magician's staffs, and the magical container gem is just that. The staff was possessed by the demon lord – that was the only reason why the Venerable Archmage wanted it locked up somewhere safe."

Jaxtomsyn looked downtrodden. He realised that the true power of the staff had been the link between the demon lord and the staff, and how he had used it to summon it in first place; with proper rituals, the staff might have been dangerous to the Evokers. So now, there was truly no reason to fear the staff any more. Jaxtomsyn pondered this with calm rationality, which he found quite surprising. It is, after all, not every day when you hear you practically managed to destroy what you was supposed to use to dominate the known universe. Jaxtomsyn wasn't known for uncontrollable fits of anger; instead, he vented his anger by ranting. And now, he was trying to think of something to say.

"I'm very sorry," Gnedrnygr said. "I don't know why and how the Unrepentants got the idea that the staff might have some unusual properties. I will let you in a little bit of a secret – conduit and container items are, these days, at easy reach of all law-abiding Colemians, but not traitors like you. You have revealed yourself, Unrepentant. If I don't kill you, it may be that someone from Colemia with much more grudge than me will come to handle this personally, and that is not going to be very pleasant." Gnedrnygr sighed. "It is really a shame how much trouble can people get into over some ordinary magical staff."

"Very well. Allow me to make a modest proposal." The wizard turned, and took a paper from the desk. "I will submit to your will, and will personally come to Colemia to be teleported to the deepest trench at the bottom of the sea, or whatever uncreative methods of capital punishment you have these days, on the condition that the story of the Unrepentants shall be published throughout the land. My version, of course. The story of the systematic flaws, the errors in the judgement of the Archmages… everything. It is right here on the paper, and I have in my library a book that expands on the matter considerably, as well."

Gnedrnygr smiled. "Firstly, the punishment of treason is an instantaneous bodily disintegration these days, or, as we say, 'The Beam Man blows the bad guys

to the Ether'. Yes, the executioner is none other than Arthur Bovinier, Archmage of Anchorfall. Secondly, during the past years, you wouldn't believe how much material from the very hands of the Unrepentants have surfaced. I doubt I can find any new Unrepentant arguments against Colemia from those notes of yours."

"Look, this is confusing", Facyr interjected. "I know you're busy debating, but I'm sure we'd like to know what's going on, as well. Who are these Unrepentants anyway? You may know a lot about them, but I suppose we don't."

"Oh yes," Gnedrnygr said with a smile. "The fun little problem in Colemia back in the day. Basically, there was a big loud-mouthed group of magicians who disagreed with everything the Archmages were doing, mostly on principle, and if not on principle, with some of the most ridiculous arguments I've heard."

"Far from ridiculous!" Jaxtomsyn interrupted. "And you know that just as well as I do!"

"Oh *please*", Gnedrnygr said. "even I remember one funny detail. Your glorious leader, Wlachm Schybleyng, claimed he was aware of dark conspiracies that were plotted among the Archmages, and said he knew them because he had been member of the cabal himself for several years." He grinned. "The truth is, he emigrated from Tachur to Colemia the preceding spring! And how could he possibly be a former member of the Archmage cabal, anyway? He died while he was, according to the witnesses, throwing a really, really puny fireball at a sea serpent." Gnedrnygr shook his head slowly.

Jaxtomsyn said nothing for a few moments. "But you can't stop us from getting our viewpoint known by the public!"

"Believe me," Gnedrnygr continued with a smile, "at this point, *everyone* knows the supposed 'viewpoint' of yours. It was not very hard to figure out, really. You don't even need to wrap it around biting sarcasm any more – the Venerable Archmage himself knows he's a daft old man, and you know what?" He smiled kindly. "He thinks it's very funny, really. The wonders of cultural exchange with Tharkaia, where philosophers *know* random passer-bys are right when they say they're daft old men, and know that that sets them free to do whatever their mind can still do!"

"That wasn't quite what I had in mind", Jaxtomsyn said, unwavering but quite obviously confused. "I'm afraid this means that I have to—"

Jaxtomsyn never quite got to say exactly what he intended to do. With a clockwork-like precision, a thing that appeared to be a person swung through the window from the roof and knocked him down on his face. As Jaxtomsyn went down, hopelessly losing when fighting against the laws of physics this time, the adventurers saw a dagger that was placed neatly between the subtle wizard's shoulder blades. The wizard just lied there, and didn't manage to make his death scene much more dramatic or anything; it seemed that today, he had been humiliated far enough with Gnedrnygr's news, and he let his assassin get all of the

glory.

The assassin, in turn, had landed perfectly on his feet. He rose, and walked to the light, removing his magical dagger from the wound. Without word, he looked at the adventurers. The adventurers regarded him with some concern, but quickly judged that there was no danger – at least for now.

"Mister d'Breygin", Faira said. "I suppose I was not entirely wrong about my hunch?"

"You are right. I am tired of running between two quarries." he smiled humourlessly, and pulled out a sheaf of paper from his pocket. "Let me see…" he went through many slips of paper. "Yes. A contract for the last remaining Unrepentant, identity unknown. Not so unknown any more." he then regarded the adventurers with a big, grim smile. "The contracts I were operating under were highly conflicting to say the least."

Faira wondered a bit. "So you were given orders to…"

"Kill Jaxtomsyn, that's right. But at the same time Jaxtomsyn ordered me to protect the keep and kill all potential intruders – and he paid a lot more. But now that you showed him to be the last remaining Unrepentant, I suppose there's no question what orders take precedence."

"And what about us?"

"My orders to defend Jaxtomsyn are moot once the wizard is dead, don't you think?"

"So it is all cleared then."

"Not quite." The assassin stepped in front of Faira, looking her in the eyes. "Why do you think I attacked you first in the inn?"

Faira looked d'Breygin in turn with icy gaze, but grinning nevertheless, with the joy of figuring things out. "Let me guess, someone has put price on my head too? And who might that be?"

The assassin took the contract in question from his pocket, slowly regarded it, then looked Faira in the eyes again. "That would be telling, as you full well know."

Faira shrugged. "That I do. So which one of us will leave this room alive?"

The assassin grinned, then quickly ripped the contract in shreds, throwing them out of the window – only to have the shreds blown back to the room by a gust of wind. He regarded the sight with some disappointment, then turned again to Faira. "I suppose that just in this case, we both might. In the inn, you proved yourself to be a far too big of a headache to be bothered with right now. Besides, even if I rip this contract, the remaining contracts, which I wont discuss either, still make my head spin."

Faira smiled, and the rest of the adventurers dared to breathe again. "Thank you. Justice has been done." Faira smiled. "And, no matter his affiliation, he was a nasty wizard. He's better off dead, I suppose."

"I do not care about justice", the assassin said, drawing a hood over his head. "I just want to get the hell out of this backwater. It is freezing in here, even if it's summer." He turned to Faira, gave her yet another of those dark smiles as a goodbye, grabbed the rope he had used to swing in, and swung out of the window, sliding down the rope to the ground and disappeared among the goblinoid huts in the courtyard.

"The Citadel employing assassin?" Gnedrnygr looked confused. "I genuinely thought we laughed out the Unrepentant these days, and only wanted to fairly try them for crimes and all that. I'm surprised anyone in Colemia would be bothered to send assassins after them. After all, it's not like they could do much more damage…"

"Ah, no", Faira said. "the assassins never tell who they were sent by – and they probably often don't even know. Mr. d'Breygin just doesn't care to find out, he just kills. I suppose the Citadel didn't care enough to get these people killed, but someone did. I hope we find out." She paused. "No, wait, I don't *really* want to know."

Chapter 6

"So now what?"

Facyr looked slightly downtrodden. Two days after the assault on the fortresses, they were in a fairly ordinary situation – sitting by a table on the porch of an inn, sipping a little bit of beer just for show, waiting for some helpless poor man offer them a nice little map that shows exactly where all the adventure and excitement was.

The problem was, of course, that it wasn't happening all that often these days. Certainly not in a smallish elven town that had, in a single morning, turned from a frontier town to a protected part of the elven kingdom once again, having lost a major source of frequent monster raids. Aleln and Realn and a handful of other nobles were now keeping the fortress firmly in their hands and getting the realm back in the proper shape. Aleln Valntathalen, First Duke of Nothross, was now wielding his ducal power with pride, joy and especially the money – luckily, apart of grabbing the staff, Jaxtomsyn hadn't touched the riches of the vault. The town was recovering around them, and they could almost see it with their own very eyes.

Facyr thought they were getting lazy. As far has him was concerned, he was ready to pack things up. and return to Anchorfall. He sighed. "Nobody needs us."

"Come on", Faira said. "maybe nobody is offering us anything interesting to do, but that doesn't mean we're useless." She smiled. "You seriously need to relax. When was the last time you really sat down and didn't think of going out killing monsters?"

Facyr thought for a while. "I don't know." He realized something and gasped. "Yeah, I may be thinking too much of this stuff. I've not had a good vacation in years. Just endless fighting just to get myself fed."

"Yet if I look at the bank, I think we could stay in the most luxurious restaurant in Anchorfall every day for the whole next year before our money runs out. Or before the tax man takes his share." Faira smiled, then landed a bag full of coins

on the table. “After our expenses our deducted, this is our profit from this journey – twenty-eight hundred thintain, and that doesn’t even include the eternal gratitude of an elven duke. Let’s, for once, just spend the money – we’re not really in any hurry to get back to Anchorfall just yet, and I guess we still have a lot to chat about with our royal friends here. And Gnedrnygr is having fun with this new magic staff of his, and all of that strange and wonderful gear the magician left behind.”

“I told Jenyr we’d be back after at most two weeks stay here.”

Faira smiled mischievously. “Actually, four, as I recall telling him a few moments after you had explained him your plan.”

Facyr scratched his head, and gave Faira a smile that began as merely a smile of discovery, and ended up as a smile reserved purely for “by saying that, you’ve made yourself a lifelong friend of mine” kind of situations. “You planned this from the beginning, huh?”

“Well, I figured out that it would be extremely wise to stay a while, knowing how busy we’d soon get in Anchorfall with new adventure opportunities dropping from each direction – none of which quite as good as what you can find here. And now that we’re in elven country, I’d like to introduce to you a quaint elven custom.”

“What’s that?”

“*Flyal mellellur*, or the ’grove of care’.”

Facyr blushed. “You mean—”

“It’s a place where you will find plenty of people who know how to cure a shy soul.”

“But it’s that, you know, an elven—” Facyr croaked, his face turning deep red again.

“It’s nothing like that!” Faira said. “It’s a place where you can babble about your miserable novicehood to your heart’s content, and people will show you how much they feel for you. I guess you can find people with similar experiences there and learn how to cope with this. It’s also a place to brush up your speaking skills and shed your shyness.”

“But what if they—”

“You don’t have to. Seriously. But I think in your case they *can,* if you really want to.”

“Oh.”

“And how about in a few days, how about we ride to Faroakhill and see the big museum there. Look, this country is full of really fascinating places.”

“So it seems.” Facyr smiled. “And isn’t there that big chariot race in Furinia in a week? The one with those funny decorated chariots and all? I remember hearing about it in one of the inns when we were coming this way.”

"Oh yes, there's that. Wonderful event, I was there an year ago. And I'm definitely going to enter the air lute championship festival in Bluebrook the week after!"

"Air lute championships? You're kidding, right? No, wait, we're in Furinia and not in real world," Facyr said with a grin.

"Sure, that's a real festival, and I believe this year's festival will be particularly popular, when a lot of real bards will show up It will be a thrill of the lifetime! Did you know that I got to the semifinals last year?!" Faira said proudly but joyfully, and smiled.

Facyr laughed. The two sagged down in their chairs and smiled at each other – and Facyr was slowly learning the art of sagging in chairs from Faira. The holiday plans were kind of hazy at the moment, but the possibilities seemed endless now, so the details could wait. Soon, they'd be having great fun every day. And only then would they need to what they normally considered great fun. Home in Anchorfall was a long way off.

THE END