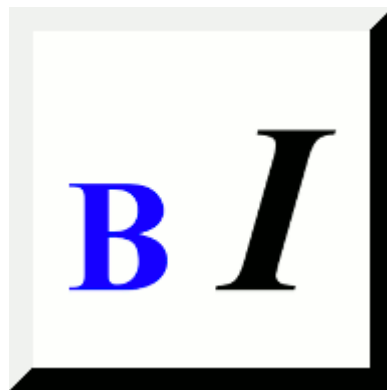


The Redcott Chronicles

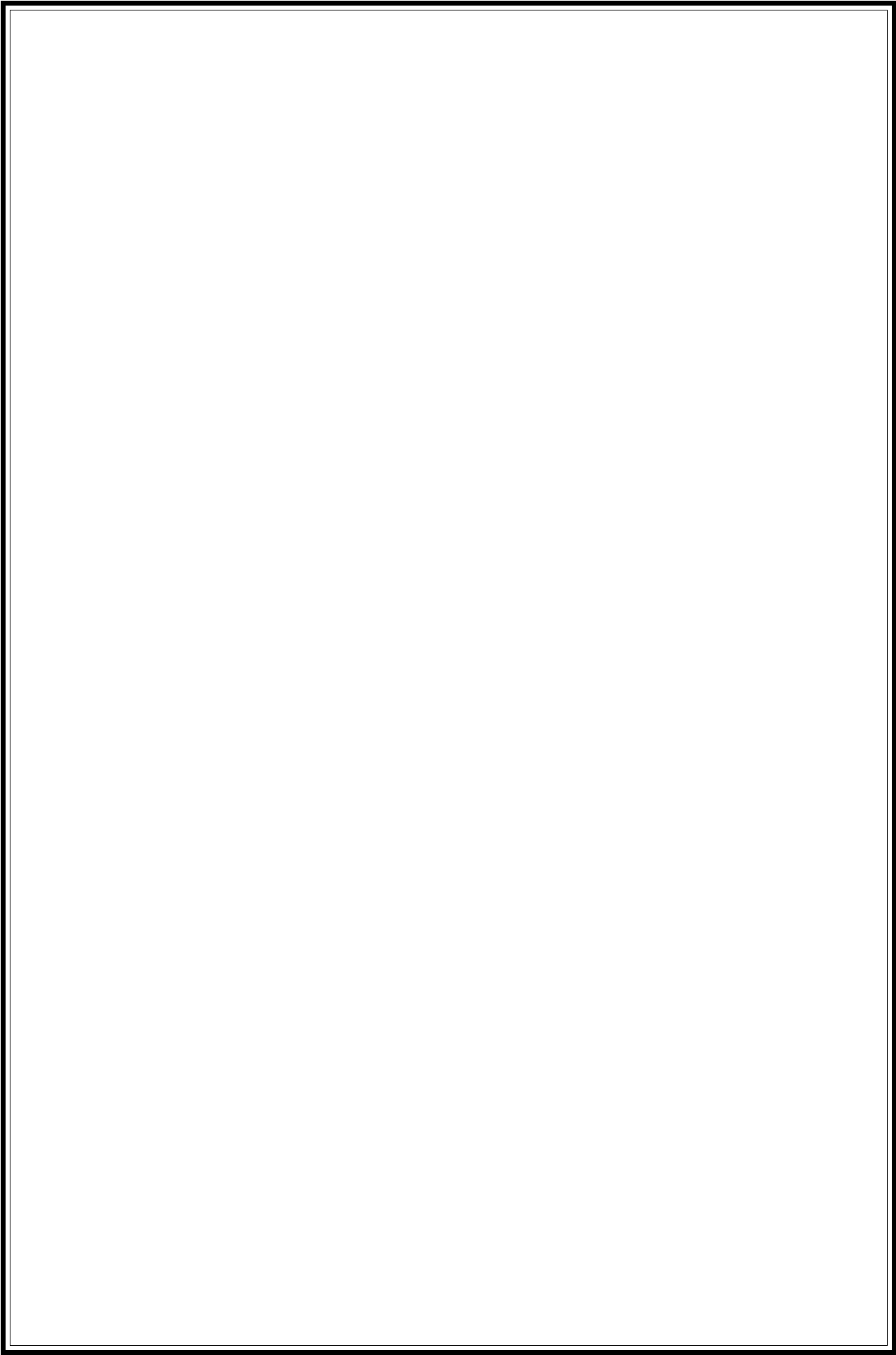
A novel about immortality and the disadvantages of attaining it,
inspired by Dungeons and Dragons.

Book One

"The Happy Kobold"



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Preface

This is the story of five characters who meet, apparently by chance, and begin a journey together in both a literal and a figurative sense.

One is a naïve and innocent priest who is eager to do the will of his goddess. By the end of this part of the story, though, he has become much more worldly wise and, through a bizarre twist of fortune, has become an immortal. For him, this tale is a personal journey from youth to maturity.

The second is a street-wise young woman with a murky past and links to the criminal underworld. She is crooked and devious and quite prepared to commit murder to get what she wants but she has no illusions about herself. She is who she is. For her, this is the story of her successes and failures in a bid for personal power and social importance in the world.

The third is an elf, once the leader of a band of outlaws in a distant forest, who has suffered from PTSD since he witnessed his wife and all their companions being killed in an ambush. He is destined to take revenge on the man responsible, be cured of his affliction, attain immortality and be reconciled with his estranged brother. For him, the story is one of spiritual healing.

The fourth is a military officer, the daughter of a general, who cross-trained as a wizard during her army service. She is brusque and forthright and expects to be deferred to, even by the gods. She acquires a tower by defeating the previous owner in a battle of spells, then acquires a husband with his own regiment to provide the manpower to renovate it. For her, the story is one of objectives successfully met in the quest for long-term security.

The fifth is an aristocratic dwarf who is very conscious of his own importance and is, frankly, lazy, but when roused to act can be devastating with a battleaxe. He somewhat resents the demands placed upon him by the gods but he gradually mellows and will become a respectable merchant. For him, the story is one of his struggle to break free of his upbringing and find his own place in the social order.

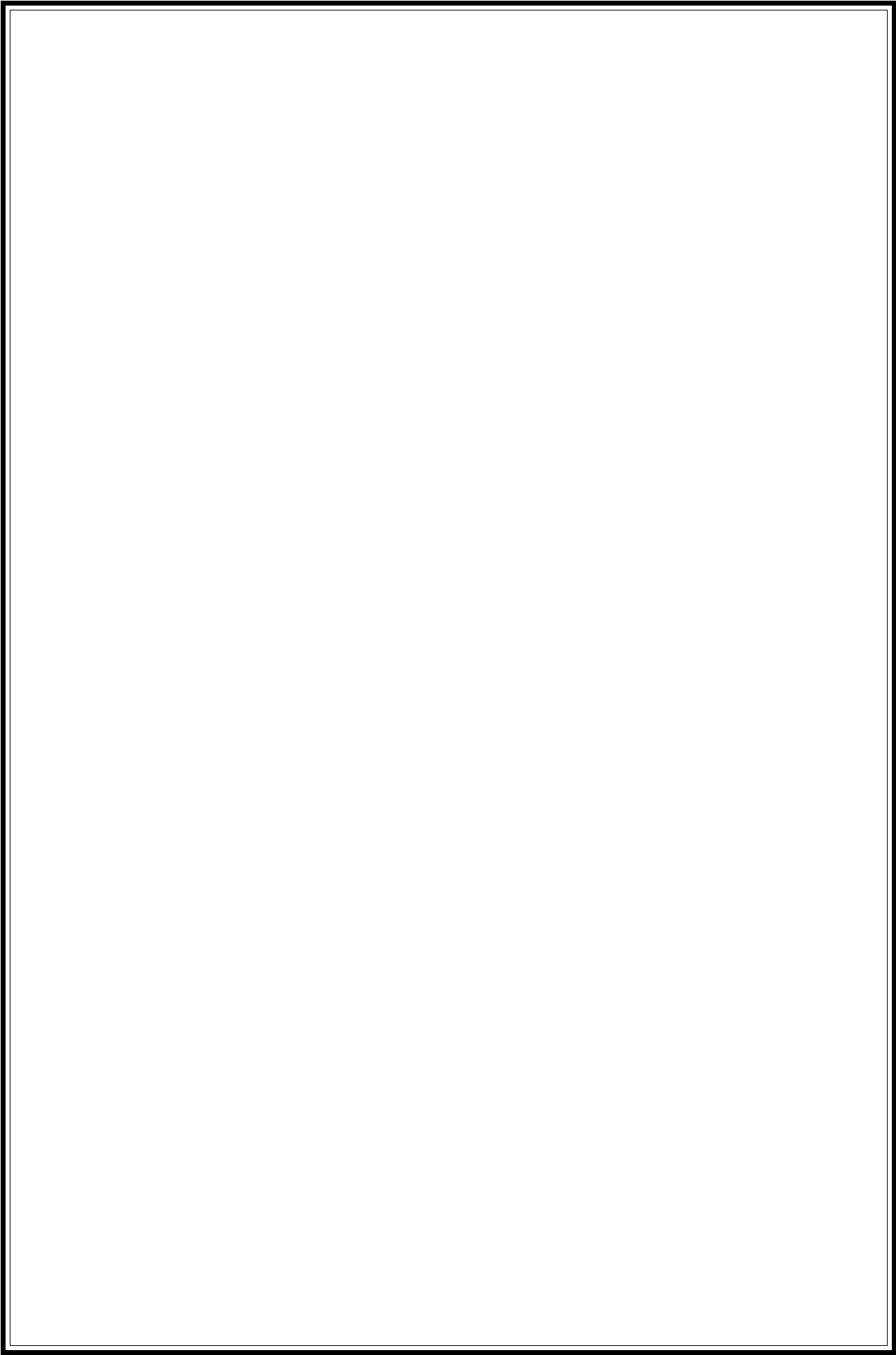
The elf's half-brother is the keeper of an artefact that is a source of the Elixir of Life – as known to medieval alchemists, not the Harry Potter version – that, if used correctly, can confer immortality. However, in this story, the gods have made a condition that only someone who has "died nobly that another may live" can benefit from it and be revived as an immortal. The ramifications of this are constantly in the minds of the protagonists, along with other drawbacks that they only learn about after it is too late.

Meanwhile, on a simpler level, the whole thing is just an adventure story with fantastical monsters, magic and mayhem, interfering gods and mysterious, shadowy enemies.

"Bold Italic"

England

November 2014



Chapter One

It was early evening and the light was beginning to fade. The town seemed as far away as ever as Ganhard trudged painfully on. His boots were hurting and nothing seemed to help. He wasn't used to all this walking. Why did towns have to be so far apart?

'Go to the town of Redcott', the High Priestess Anelia had said to him yesterday, '*and you will meet friends there who will help you.*' He wasn't quite sure how that was supposed to work but you didn't ask High Priestesses for explanations. Not unless you wanted to look like a fool. He assumed it meant that someone would greet him at the town gate. If not, he would ask the way to the Temple of Gyri and make himself known there. It couldn't be that difficult. Or perhaps it was. He really didn't know.

Ganhard was a priest, in the sense that he had passed all the academic tests and could recite the scriptures from memory, but in truth, he wasn't a very impressive priest. He was short, for a man, and skinny as a rake. He wore his hair in a top-knot to try to give himself a bit of extra height, and a thick woollen habit under the regulation linen one to give himself extra bulk, but it didn't really make any difference. He was the sort of disregarded young man who was always last to be picked when the best positions were being handed out. Except that, according to Anelia, he had been personally chosen by the Goddess Gyri herself for this important task. He ought to feel proud but he didn't. He assumed that, as usual, he had been given a task that no-one else wanted. Still, it was something to be chosen for anything and he thanked Blesséd Gyri for noticing him.

To cheer himself up, he sang the hymn of the Valiant Wayfarer. All nine verses. He sang it as loudly as he could but somehow it didn't quite sound right. He was used to singing in temples, where the acoustics helped the words to resonate. Here in the outdoors, the words fell flat. Why does the open air have to be so big?

A rabbit hopped out of the hedgerow to his left. It stopped and regarded him briefly, decided that he was harmless and hopped across to the other hedge. Ganhard gave it the blessing of Gyri. He recalled that the goddess herself had blessed a rabbit once, as recorded in the Teachings of Blander, Book IV, chapter 9, line 27. '*And lo, did Gyri address unto the rabbit aforesaid.*' Ganhard felt this was a good omen. If the rabbit had been sent to

test him, he had acted correctly and Gyri would be pleased. Of course, it might have just been an ordinary rabbit but you could never tell.

The lights of the town were beginning to twinkle in the distance and at least it would be downhill all the way now. His boots still hurt, though.

Ganhard had looked up Redcott in a gazetteer in the temple library before he left home, so he knew roughly what to expect.

Redcott is a market town, a hub for local artisans and traders, walled on three sides and bounded on the other by the River Redde. The Mayor's House is adjacent to the Market Square. The Grove Hotel is recommended. The Amber Gate, on the north side, is noteworthy for its twin bartizans. Travellers should keep to the wider thoroughfares and avoid the poorer districts.

As Ganhard was approaching from the south, he did not expect to meet any bartizans and was not entirely sure what they were. He imagined they were like gargoyles. In any case, the gateway he was approaching was quite plain and functional, just a big archway with big doors, really.

The gates were still open when he arrived, and he gave his name to the gate guard. 'Ganhard Healshrine of Upcross, come to Redcott on the orders of the High Priestess Anelia.'

'Very good, your reverence. Welcome to Redcott. Gate fee is one groat. The gates close at dusk.'

Ganhard handed over a copper coin, asking 'Am I not expected?'

'No-one said anything to us. But I expect you want the temple. Straight down there, on the right of the market square,' said the guard and, seeing Ganhard still looking confused, helpfully added 'Big stone building with the columns in front. You can't miss it.'

'Thank you, my man. Gyri's Blessings upon you.'

'And to you. Now move along, please, there's other people waiting to come through the gate.'

Ganhard looked around in surprise, for there was no-one else about, but said nothing and headed in what he hoped was the right direction. He was soon lost in what seemed like a maze of streets. He spied a young woman, humbly dressed, crossing the street in front of him and hailed her. 'My child, do you know the Way of the Temple?'

Poli had been watching her mark carefully. You didn't see many clergymen in this street in the daytime. Not in this street. This one was lost. You could tell. It was the way he kept looking left and right and stopping to gaze up at the sky. Small man, shorter than her, and skinny as a rake. Town-dweller, doesn't eat enough. Farm lads are better built. And limping slightly. New boots. Belt pouch on the left, about 20 coins by the weight of it. Pack on his back looks new and it's overfilled, so he's come from another town and isn't a seasoned traveller; hasn't learnt what to leave out.

She made a slight motion with her hand – *this one is mine* – and further down the street the three men who had been unobtrusively following her mark faded back into the afternoon shadows. She adjusted her body language subtly to 'you can talk to me' and moved across his path.

The man said: 'My child, do you know the Way of the Temple?'

Poli thought: Does he mean am I religious or is he asking for directions? Probably thinks there's a street called that. Or he's a missionary looking for converts. Cover both angles.

'Why yes, good sir,' she said brightly, and adopted the 'keep talking to me' posture.

'I have come to this town on a sacred mission. I am to meet friends,' he said, as self-importantly as he could manage, which wasn't very.

This girl seemed disturbingly ready to talk to him. He hoped she wasn't a fallen woman. He wasn't sure how to tell, really, but you heard stories. She was a bit taller than him, quite solidly-built, in a plain brown woollen dress like a peasant girl and with her hair done up in braids. And she had eyes. Deep brown eyes. Her eyes seemed to be talking to him in a way that eyes usually didn't. He tried to drop his gaze slightly and found himself staring at her nose.

'Can you tell me your friends' names? I might know where they live,' she asked innocently, and added 'I know lots of people in this town,' whilst moving slightly too close to unsettle him and make it easier to control the situation to her advantage.

'I don't actually know any names. Just, I will meet friends here who will help me.' He was beginning to feel even less sure of himself, now. He really

should have asked Anelia for clearer instructions. And he should have moved away as the girl leaned towards him but this girl was, well, she seemed to want to be friendly. 'It is written in the teachings of the Book of Gyri, Chapter 17, that *The hand of friendship is the hand of a friend*,' he intoned. He wasn't sure why he said that, it just sort of came out.

'Come on, then,' she said, taking his hand as one would a lost child, 'I'll take you to my uncle's house. My name's Poli. What's yours?'

'Ganhard Healshrine,' he said, taking refuge in formality. No-one had held his hand like that for a very long time.

'Do your friends at home call you Harry?'

'Um, no. That is, well, the truth is, ...'

I guessed that right, he doesn't have any friends at home, thought Poli. Lamb to the slaughter. Thank you Blesséd Abwen, for throwing me this one. He will do nicely. 'Do you mind if I call you Harry? As we're going to be friends?' she asked artlessly.

Ganhard gave in. He was too tired from the day's journey, he was in a strange town with nowhere to go, a young lady with brown eyes was holding his hand and chatting to him pleasantly and his feet still hurt. 'Yes, I'd like that,' said Harry.

'It's just round this corner,' said Poli, 'You can tell my uncle about your mission and we'll see what he suggests. He's the best jeweller in town, he knows all the important people. And my aunt will make you a poultice for your feet. Then tomorrow, we'll get something done about your boots.'

When they reached the right house, Poli was just about to lift the latch on the door when Ganhard, almost without thinking, said the **word** and the door opened by itself. Poli, her hand still half-raised, said, very slowly, 'Do you always do that?'

'Sorry, force of habit. It's just a cantrip. Saves all that bother of trying to lift door latches with your elbows when your hands are full. Very useful coming out of the scriptorium with your arms full of books.'

'Yes, I suppose it would, be' she said, thinking about the lengths that her friend Burglar Bones had to go to, to get doors open without leaving finger marks. 'Anyway, come on in,' and she led the way.

Poli's aunt and uncle made their unexpected guest welcome, it being something of an honour for their modest home to entertain a member of the clergy.

Uncle Bantrem was a portly, balding man in his forties wearing a brocaded house robe and slippers and he had the air of a prosperous merchant, which indeed is what he was.

As they shook hands, Ganhard noticed that he wore several gold rings set with green gemstones. Ganhard wasn't an expert, though, and didn't know they were emeralds.

Aunt Meg was a homely housewife, with brown hair done up under a cap and wearing a blue dress decorated with white lace at the sleeves. After greeting Ganhard, she bustled about in the kitchen next door, preparing a meal, while Uncle Bantrem made polite small talk and waited for Ganhard to start saying what he actually wanted.

'I have to find an elven priest called Annagól,' Ganhard began. 'I'm told that he has a valuable relic that he wishes to donate to my temple and I am to collect it and take it back. I was led to believe that someone in Redcott would know of his whereabouts.'

'Annagól? Hmm. Not a name that I know, though to be sure there are not many elves in Redcott at all,' said Uncle Bantrem.

'There's an elf lodging with my friend Mrs. Maggins in Open Street,' said Aunt Meg, coming through from the kitchen and wiping her hands on her apron, 'Sullen fellow, she says. A bit disreputable-looking, she says. You could ask him if he knows this Annagól but watch your step, I'd say.'

'Ah,' said Ganhard with satisfaction. 'Blesséd Gyri has indeed laid a path for me. It was she who arranged for Poli to meet me, so that Poli would bring me to you, who alone know of the whereabouts of Mrs. Maggins elf. You are indeed the friends that the High Priestess spoke of.'

'There we are, then,' said Aunt Meg. 'Poli, after supper, you won't mind showing your young man the way to Open Street, will you?' and she gave Poli a complicated sort of knowing look that Poli understood perfectly but of which Ganhard was sublimely unaware.

'Of course, aunt,' said Poli innocently, 'and I'll bring Harry straight back afterwards, I promise.'

'Good. Then I'll make up his bed while you're out.'

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Aromin was in a foul temper. He was safe enough here, in these cheap lodgings, and there were good sight-lines for crossbow fire from the windows and doorway in case of trouble. But he was on his own, an elf in a human town, and though he tried not to admit it to himself, he missed his old comrades. He missed his dead wife most of all and the dreams of her untimely death were bad every time he tranced. The bitterness he felt did not lessen.

There was a caravan leaving in a few day's time and there should have been work. He needed work, to occupy his mind. But the caravan master had been very off-hand and said he had enough guards, and to come back next week – meaning, of course, don't come back at all.

There were voices downstairs. A man, a woman and Mrs. Maggins. Then footsteps coming up the stairs. A floorboard squeaked; that was the one on the turn of the staircase. Three people. He sat on the bed with his sword close to hand but covered by a pillow. There was a knock on the door. Mrs Maggins. 'Mr. Aromin, sir? There's a priest here asking to see you, and young Poli Pursetaker is with him?' There was a disapproving sniff to her voice. That was normal. He relaxed marginally and stood up, but poised on the balls of his feet, alert. 'Enter !' he called.

The door opened and Ganhard came in, followed by Poli and Mrs. Maggins. He quickly sized up Ganhard as small, weak and harmless. The girl might have had a knife about her and looked able to handle herself but was keeping behind the priest and not posing immediate threat. 'Yes?' he said, non-committally. If these people wanted something, striking a deal might be profitable.

'Aromin, sir, my apologies for calling unannounced at your home. I am Ganhard Healshrine, of the Temple of Blesséd Gyri, in Upcross. I have travelled here to Redcott to meet an elf priest by the name of Annagól but know not his whereabouts.'

'They do say, if you seek an elf, ask another elf,' explained Poli helpfully, 'and you are the only elf we knew about so we came to you.'

This elf was going to be difficult to manipulate, Poli decided. He was tense, like a hunted beast, and there was hatred and anger not far below the surface. You had to be careful not to trigger anything with people like that.

'A elf priest called Annagól? As it happens, I might know something of him. Or one very like him. But you are not the first to ask and doubtless will not be the last. Why do you seek him?'

'He has undertaken to donate a holy relic to my temple. I am supposed to collect it and take it back,' said Ganhard.

'This .. relic. Can you describe it?'

'Only that it is called the Holy Glomb of Threy. I've never seen it myself, of course. I imagine it is in some sort of casket.'

This man is surely too naïve, thought Aromin. Everyone knows about the Glomb of Threy. The Elixir of Life? The secret of Immortality that anyone would die to possess? How can a supposed priest not know about it? This doesn't ring true. Either he is dissembling, or he really is innocent and someone has put him up to this. Aromin decided on a direct challenge. 'Who sent you?'

'The High Priestess Anelia. We are doing the will of Blesséd Gyri.'

'I see,' said Aromin, thinking: there is no guile, this man is just an underling. This high priestess, whoever she is, is clearly angling to seize the Glomb. But how to turn the situation to my own advantage? Maybe a deal can be struck. Let's try. 'Well, I can give you some information, but it may not be quite the information you seek and I shall expect a favour from you in return.'

Ganhard looked confused and Poli thought it was time to step in. 'My friend would need to know what kind of information you have and what you expect in return, before he can agree to a bargain. Don't you think that's reasonable?'

Aromin almost laughed. This girl had a head on her shoulders. He wondered where she came into the story. Was she playing the priest herself, like a fish on a line? What was her angle? Let's play another card. 'Very reasonable, Poli. I see you have a grasp of these things,' he said, putting a slight emphasis on the word *grasp*. He was rewarded with a flicker of an eyelid. So that was their way of it. He was dealing with a twosome. No point in beating about the bush.

'I do indeed know Annagól,' he began. 'As it happens, he is my half-brother, though we never really liked each other and have been strangers for centuries. What I do *not* know is where he might be now, though I may be able to help you search for him.'

'That would be extremely kind of you,' replied Ganhard. 'Gyri teaches us that it is holier to help than to be helped. Her blessings upon you, good sir.'

'There's something else, isn't there?' asked Poli shrewdly.

'There is indeed. It seems that my brother was chosen by Threy, one of the Old Gods, to be the custodian of the Glomb for all eternity. That being so, I think it unlikely that he would willingly offer to relinquish it to your temple, to which he owes no allegiance. You should know that I find that part of your story unconvincing. You also seem unaware that the Glomb is an unlimited source of the Elixir of Life that has the power to grant immortality to the recently dead. The possession of that is no doubt uppermost in Anelia's mind. It would certainly be on my mind, were I myself a high priest. I see from your expression that you were not made aware of that aspect of the Glomb. Am I correct?'

'I don't think that can be the same Glomb,' countered Ganhard. 'There must be two. I expect Annagól wants to give away the lesser one and concentrate on looking after the Elixir one himself. Anelia would have told me if my Glomb was that powerful. In case I dropped it, or something.'

'Well, if you are sure, we will leave this question until later.' He looked at Poli, briefly, and they had an understanding. Leave the fool to his folly. 'Now, to business. I have offered to help you find Annagól, though I do not promise success, but I have yet to name my price.'

'I have a little silver, for travelling expenses, but not a great deal. How much are you asking?'

'No, no, keep your coin. I may ask for it later but for now, I want you to use your influence. There is a caravan leaving town the day after tomorrow and we must join it and travel to Amberkeep if we are to start looking for my brother. But I would not feel comfortable riding as a passenger in a caravan. I want you to arrange with the caravan master for you to travel with it openly, to ensure the protection of the gods, and for me to be hired as a common guard. Can you do this?'

'I can certainly try. Where will I find this caravan master?'

'I can show you in the morning,' interjected Poli. 'Aromin has been very helpful, hasn't he?' and she nodded very slightly to induce Ganhard to agree with her.

At this point, Mrs Maggins, who had been listening for any signs of impropriety in the conversation, saw her opportunity. 'You'll be leaving, the day

after tomorrow, then? I shall expect payment for the room in the morning, Mr Aromin.'

'Yes, yes, you shall have it. Never fear, Mrs. Maggins.'

'Hmpph. Now, Poli, I have something in the kitchen for your aunt. We will leave Mr. Aromin to his *meditations*'

Something snapped inside Aromin. It was the insulting way she said *meditations*. And there were too many people between him and the door. He was feeling trapped. The sword was suddenly in his hand, point raised. 'ALL OF YOU, OUT! NOW!' he shouted.

Ganhard reacted first. '**RELAX!**' he commanded, as Poli started to push a shrieking Mrs Maggins out of the doorway (mainly because she was standing behind her, in Poli's way).

Aromin sagged, his sword arm dropped and he felt a sense of artificial calm wash over him. He knew what was happening, his anger struggled for a moment against it, but then it gave up and retreated into a black knot deep down inside him. He breathed raggedly and looked at Ganhard with a mixture of respect and loathing. 'My brother could do that,' he said, 'I hated him for it.'

'I'm sorry. I couldn't let you threaten defenceless women. Now put your sword away. We are not your enemies. And I think you owe Mrs Maggins an apology.'

'Yes. I'm sorry Mrs. Maggins. I will pay what I owe you and leave immediately.'

'I should think so, too!' said Mrs. Maggins, recovering her composure and straightening her pinafore. 'That's eight shillings you owe me, Mr. Elf. You can have five minutes to gather your things, then out!'

'Where will you go?' asked Poli, being practical. She was worried that, if the elf just disappeared, they would lose their only lead to Annagól and the Glomb. She had already decided that she was going to be part of Ganhard's adventures, so his quest was hers too.

'Come with us, we'll help you find a place to stay until the caravan leaves,' suggested Ganhard. He wasn't sure how, because he was even more of a stranger in this town than Aromin was, but he needed to defuse the situation and give the elf a dignified way out.

'Thank you. Give me a few minutes, and I'll be downstairs with my gear.'

Aromin was good to his word, and met them in the street a few minutes later. Ganhard was quite surprised by the array of belongings and general impedimenta that Aromin was now wearing about him. He looked as if he were a soldier equipped for battle. He was wearing lightweight armour of the kind that is made by boiling leather to make it tough, with helmet and boots to match but all partly concealed by a travelling cloak of an indistinct greyish-brown colour. There was a pack on his back, with a cross-bow strapped to it, and from a stout belt there hung a sword on one side, several pouches on the other and some implements that Ganhard did not recognise nor know the function of but guessed were used for fighting somehow.

'Here I am, my friends,' said Aromin, 'all geared up and ready to move.'

'Let's go to the market square,' suggested Poli. 'There are often soldiers and guards in the square, and you will be less conspicuous.'

'Lead on.'

It was a fine evening and the square was quite busy although most of the stall-holders has already packed up and gone home. Pie-sellers were hawking their wares to tavern-goers and respectable citizens were going about their business clad in fine cloaks and bonnets. Here and there, men were sweeping the square. Poli recognised them.

'I see the temple over there, across the square,' said Ganhard, 'I think I should call in to pay my respects and to pray for the success of our search.'

'Yes, of course you must, but you won't want us tagging along,' suggested Poli. 'How long will you be, about an hour or so?'

'Yes, it is nearly time for Sevens. Gyri bids us observe it daily. About an hour is usual.'

'You're very devout, Harry,' said Poli. 'You will say a prayer for me and Aromin too, won't you? We'd like that. Meanwhile, we must find somewhere for Aromin to stay. I know some people we could try.'

'Where should I meet you afterwards?'

'Over there, by that big house with the gables and the green door. That's the mayor's house.'

'Yes, I see it. Over there in about an hour, then,' said Ganhard and he walked off in the direction of the temple.

When he was out of earshot, Poli confided in Aromin. 'He's an innocent enough lad and good cover but we don't need him around right now, do we? I know some people who won't ask questions. Just a roof over your head for a couple of days. It won't be much, but safe enough.'

'Thanks. About that business back there ...'

'No need to explain. We all have things in the past. You have more past than me, that's all. Is it the black dreams? I get those too.' It was going to be difficult to work with this elf if he was going to fly off the handle at the slightest thing, but she had a brother like that and knew how to pacify him. She just hoped it worked on elves. This was the first one she had really met.

'You too? I won't ask. Sometime. Perhaps. Where are you taking me?' He was alert to the people moving around the square. Mostly unarmed civilians. Two guards patrolling. Side streets there and there. Upper floors. Possible ambush. No cover. Enfilade from that tower. His mind was assessing the town's defences. Not bad. A squad of militia could hold it.

'Two-fingers Mally. Works flop-house three doors down Back Alley. No fuss. Leave talking to me.' Aromin was aware that Poli's voice had changed in some subtle way. It seemed that she could adopt a different style of speech for dealing with the shadier kinds of people. A private lingo. No wonder she had to get Ganhard out of the way for a while. It wasn't for his ears. Good for her, he thought grimly.

The arrangements made, Poli and Aromin returned to the square to wait for Ganhard. Poli noticed the elf glancing at a pie-seller and guessed he hadn't eaten lately. She nodded imperceptibly to a street-sweeper, who moved over and began busily plying his broom around the pie-man's feet, loudly complaining about the pie crumbs that his customers had dropped, just as Poli and Aromin strolled past, arm in arm, chatting amiably. A few moments later, across the square and out of sight behind a market stall, Poli handed Aromin a hot pie. 'Nifely dum,' said Aromin, his mouth full of pie.

V

Val strode along the street, staff in hand, her cloak flapping behind her. People made way for her. She expected them to, and didn't even think about it. There was a caravan leaving tomorrow and she would be joining it. Merely a matter of finding the caravan master and telling him so. Job done.

That looked like the right man. 'You there! Are you the caravan master?'

'Yes, madam?' He was aware of a cloak, a wizard's staff and a lithe young woman with long fair hair and a purposeful air. He turned away from the underlings he had been admonishing and gave her his full attention. He suppressed an urge to salute. You didn't see wizards every day and even when you did, they were normally bearded old men with a air of absent-mindedness, which this one certainly wasn't, on at least four counts. Nor did they normally have that thousand-yard stare that marked out professional soldiers who had seen serious action in the field. This woman was *unusual*.

'Spell-Captain Pengazer,' she announced. 'What is your destination?'

'Northwards to Amberkeep. The Bythorpe road. Will you be travelling, Captain?' he asked hopefully, 'We leave tomorrow morning at daybreak.' It was always good to have a wizard along. They travelled for free but on the understanding that they would make themselves useful if the need arose. A wizard who was also an army captain could be doubly useful.

'Very good. What is your disposition? How many wagons, how many guards?'

'Five wagons, Captain, and six guards. We're not expecting trouble.' Somehow, even as he said that, he knew he shouldn't have. He was right.

'If we hadn't expected trouble from goblins, we wouldn't be standing here now. Standard issue is two guards per wagon and you need enough for three camp watches. How many more guards do you need?'

The man had to think. '5 .. 2 .. 10 .. 12 .. 6 .. 6 .. another six?'

'Correct.'

'I'm not sure I can recruit that many by tomorrow. Not reliable men. Can't take just anyone on. And they would need paying.' He was beginning to

feel uncomfortable with the way this conversation was going. Was a wizard, even this one, worth six soldiers' wages?

'Nonsense. I'll take two of your six guards and form a recruiting squad. Pipes and drums. Tour the taverns. Objective: sign up six more guards by sundown.'

The man felt he was losing the initiative in this conversation. 'There was an elf who was asking yesterday. Ex-soldier. Ugly fellow. Saw him in the square last evening with a clergyman and a local girl.'

'Names?'

'Arrowmint, something like that. The clergyman was a small man, dark skin, hair in a top-knot. Symbols of Gyri on his robe.'

'Should be easy enough to identify. Thank you for the information. Bring me the two guardsmen. Operation Six Man begins in five minutes.'

Exactly five minutes later, Val was crossing the square with two guards in tow when she spied Ganhard coming towards her with Poli and Aromin. Excellent, she thought. From a distance, she assessed Aromin as an irregular infantryman, just from the way he held himself and his general alertness. Poli had the makings of an archer and there was a certain strength of character there, that belied her generally demur demeanour. They were slightly behind Ganhard to either side. But they weren't following him, they were propelling him. A healing cleric was supposed to be worth two soldiers and most clerics had some combat training, but it was generally minimal and this one didn't look experienced. He was walking too softly and not looking where he was going.

Val strode up to the three. She addressed Ganhard first but her glance took in the other two. 'Spell-Captain Valerise Pengazer. Recruiting for the caravan.'

'We were on our way to see the caravan master,' said Ganhard. He was suddenly awestruck by Val's presence, his voice went a bit squeaky and his words came out in a rush. 'Ganhard Healshrine of the Upcross Temple. Gyri wills that I travel with the caravan tomorrow.' He took a deep breath and tried not to blush. Val was *looking at him*. 'This elf wishes to sign up as a caravan guard I can vouch for his character if need be.'

Val ignored the fool in front of her and looked directly at Aromin. 'Name, rank and unit, soldier?'

'Aromin Rainshield, Private 1st class, Gallitris Company, SAH!' responded Aromin as if it was an automatic reflex drilled into him, whereas in truth

he was completely making up the details. He had never been a regular soldier at all.

'You're hired. Report to me at daybreak with your equipment.' She turned to Poli. 'Can you handle a bow, girl?'

'Never learned. My folks use throwing knives mostly. I can hit a crow at thirty paces.'

'That will do. Goblins are bigger than crows, easier to hit. Sneaky little blighters but they can't flap their arms and fly away, either. Want to come with us, girl, see the world, help guard the caravan? Three shillings a day and all you can eat.' She had already noticed that Poli was of solid farming stock and thought the offer of food ought to clinch the deal.

'Yes!' said Poli, who had been wondering how to tell Ganhard that she was coming with him. Her aunt and uncle already knew, of course. It was all settled. When destiny calls, you just have to go with the flow.

'Are you sure, Poli?' asked Ganhard somewhat taken aback, '*Gyri tells us Bid the maiden, go not forth upon the morrow.*'

'Oh yes. Besides, my cousin lives in Amberkeep. I haven't seen her in ages.'

'Good,' said Val, 'Now, brother Ganhard, what combat training have they given you? Ever worked in chain mail, used a shield?'

Ganhard jumped. *She was talking to him again.* 'Er, no, not as such. We are a healing order, mostly.'

'You can't heal my soldiers with an arrow in your chest and yours arms cut to ribbons. We'll start you in scale armour. It's lighter and easier to get used to,' said Val and she turned to one of the two soldiers behind her. 'Think we can find the holy brother some equipment? Size five scale, some sort of practice shield?'

'Yes, ma'am. We'll him find something in the armoury.'

'Good man. Three signed up, three more to find. Let's try that tavern over there.' She strode off followed by her two soldiers and Ganhard watched her go.

'She's not very nice, is she dear?' said Poli quietly, taking Ganhard's arm.

'Now, now, Poli,' he said, '*To command is to obey* as the holy book of Jon-drell tells us. Someone has to do it.'

So that's it, thought Aromin, he's attracted to dominant women. That explains his deference to the High Priestess. Poli will have her work cut out

with this one. He touched Poli lightly on the arm and nodded, She caught his eye and nodded back. They both understood.

vi

The next day dawned fine and clear as Ganhard and Poli bad farewell to Aunt Meg and Uncle Bantrem and set off to collect Aromin. He was already waiting for them in Back Alley. 'That armour suits you,' he told Ganhard, 'We'll make a battle-cleric of you yet.'

'I dont know why they made me carry all these javelins', Ganhard complained, 'a good cantrip like Sacred Flame is a lot easier. As Gyri tells us in the Teachings of Arimust, *Bring down Fire upon Thine Enemies and they shall Succumb.*'

'Can you do that?' asked Poli admiringly, 'You are clever, Harry.'

In the market square, there was already a bustle of activity as the caravan was being assembled. Men were hitching horses to wagons, other men were loading crates and barrels, foremen were shouting at their underlings, bystanders and small children were gawping generally and dogs were running about barking happily.

Val spotted them and strode over. 'Ah, there you are. Good. I'm assigning you three to guard the first wagon. Work as a team. You will have a Very Important Dwarf aboard. Name of Grimfund. Somebody's grandson. Go and make yourself known to him. Any questions?' She paused for a moment and, when no-one spoke up, turned smartly on her heel and marched off.

'Are all wizards like that?' asked Poli.

'No, most of them have beards,' replied Aromin. 'Well, we'd better see what our short, fat, ugly VID wants. I wonder what's in our wagon? If I'm going to guard it, I want to know if it's something worth guarding or not.'

They went over to look in the wagon. 'Looks like just crates and barrels. Could be anything,' said Ganhard.

'That's odd, some of these crates have special markings,' said Poli. 'They are labelled as woollen blankets but marked 'Fragile', 'This Way Up'. Blankets aren't fragile. Maybe there's something precious inside, wrapped up in the blankets?'

'I don't think we should pry too closely,' said Ganhard. '*Beware, lest thee become over-knowing*, as Felton The Elder tells us in his Dialectics.'

Aromin wasn't sure he agreed with Felton The Elder, whoever he was. In his book, it was what you *didn't* know about that stabbed you in the back.

The Very Important Dwarf called Grimfund was covered head to toe in the finest dwarven mail, over which he wore an oxhide travelling cloak and iron-shod Grodzh boots. Strapped to his back was his shield – one of those round wooden ones that dwarves favour – and his prized battle axe, a gift from his grandfather.

He stood calmly while people busied themselves around him. The wizard-woman seemed to have things organised. To establish his authority over her, he had ordered some fur rugs for his bench in the wagon and she had gone off to find some. People liked being given little jobs to do – it gave them a sense of worth. Now, three other people seemed to be approaching; a cleric of some sort, a soldier and a woman. The woman was well-built but too tall for a dwarf. The cleric was impossibly thin. The soldier was an elf. None of them was in any way aristocratic. He ignored them briefly. If they waited respectfully for a minute or two, he would allow them to speak.

He stroked his beard. He did that, sometimes, to give an air of thoughtfulness and it kept people waiting because they naturally assumed he was about to say something momentous. He was quite young, for a dwarf, still in his forties, but he was always conscious of being his grandfather's grandson and his grandfather, being the Warden of Black Keep, was very important indeed.

'Do you wish to address me?' he said to Ganhard after a suitable interval. He chose Ganhard as the most insignificant-looking of the three, so that the other two wouldn't feel as important. To keep them in their places.

'The spell-captain has assigned us to your wagon as extra guards. We were instructed to make ourselves known to you,' said Ganhard, unsure of just how important this dwarf actually was. He was certainly acting like someone who was accustomed to being treated as someone important, but that could all be put on.

'I see. Yes, quite correct,' said the dwarf. 'These are my bags. You may stow them on the wagon. Be careful with the two chests. You will guard them at all times.'

Ganhard and Aromin exchanged glances. 'I'll fetch one of the porters,' said Poli, and made some complicated hand-signals to a group of men loitering

nearby. One came forward and lifted the bags and chests expertly onto the wagon. Poli watched how he placed his hands. Fingers held just so. That meant that the chests were locked but the locks were of the simplex type that would be no great trouble to pick, that the contents were evenly distributed but no heavier than a full chest of clothes would normally be, and that there was no sound of any metal objects such as weapons or coinage inside. The man resumed his loitering, unnoticed by the dwarf.

Val returned, accompanied by a porter with an armful of furs. Grimfund inspected them briefly and nodded his approval. The porter climbed onto the wagon and carefully arranged them on the bench. To re-affirm her place in the pecking order, below Grimfund but above everyone else, Val turned to the other three and said 'Don't just stand there! Toss your packs in the wagon and get in. We're moving out shortly.' This reassured Ganhard, who had been afraid he would be expected to walk alongside the wagons all the way to Amberkeep.

Aromin jumped up into the wagon and made a show of courteously helping Poli climb aboard. She didn't really need his help, being as nimble as mouse in a drainpipe when she chose to be, but she accepted his hand graciously. 'Ooh, Aromin, you do know how to treat a lady!' she said, then she turned round and lifted Ganhard bodily up behind her like a bundle of old clothes. He wished she hadn't done that. He felt very small.

It was time to go. With a command from the caravan master and much shouting and cracking of whips from the wagon drivers, the line of wagons set off, moving along cobbled streets to the Amber Gate, which the gate guards had already opened wide to let them pass through.

Ganhard looked around as they came out the gateway, wondering if he would see any bartizans flying around. He did see two little round towers with arrow-slits in them, jutting out just above the gate, and he thought perhaps the bartizans were nesting in them but he couldn't see any movement. It was quite disappointing, really.

vii

They soon left the town of Redcott behind and hauled slowly along the open road, past out-lying farmlands, through wooded hillsides and climbing up steadily towards open moorland. Occasionally they saw herds of deer or flocks of sheep and, once, a skein of geese flew overhead, honking

loudly to one another. Ganhard counted forty-seven geese and tried to remember if that was an auspicious number or not. He consulted a book that he had in his pack and discovered that it meant either a storm at sea or the death of the fifth son of a monarch, neither of which seemed very relevant in the present circumstances. Perhaps they were just geese, he decided.

After a while, Grimfund asked Val about her military experience. He wanted to get a measure of how useful she might be, as a retainer, after they reached Amberkeep. She talked at great length about goblins and how to fight them, while Grimfund grunted occasionally to encourage her to continue. She talked about the battles her company had fought in, the men who had been lost and the camaraderie of those who survived. But he wasn't satisfied; this was too specific. He wanted to know about other things before he made up his mind. She was clearly an effective officer but he wasn't really planning on recruiting an army to fight goblins, so that didn't necessarily count for much. Where did her loyalties lie, he wondered? To broaden the conversation, he drew in the others. 'I forget your name, brother?' he said, turning to Ganhard.

'Ganhard Healshrine, sir, of the Temple of Gyri at Upcross.'

'Tell me, Ganhard Healshrine, what brought you to Redcott and onwards to Amberkeep?'

So Ganhard told Grimfund about his mission to find Annagól and to collect the Glomb of Threy, to take it back to the Temple.

'Hmm. I have heard this myth too,' said Grimfund dismissively, 'about the one-eyed elf who achieved immortality with a bucket of magical water. A fairy tale. I don't wish to be unkind, but I think you have been sent on a wild-goose chase.'

'I am chosen by Blesséd Gyri herself for this task,' said Ganhard rather defensively, and Poli, sensing his discomfort, nudged Aromin to speak up in his support.

'It is no myth, sir dwarf. Annagól exists and is indeed the keeper of the Glomb. I know him. He is my half-brother.'

Grimfund looked astonished. 'My pardon, good elf. Your guise as a common soldier had me competely taken in!' and he signed courteously for Aromin to speak further. He was placing the elf above the others in status, now, as near-kin to a legend.

Aromin continued, speaking as if he were reciting a tale like the bards do, for in truth he had told the story many times.

*The parts of the Glomb are three.
Recovered by Radgard, peerless paladin.
Threy commanded it, he of the Old Gods the chief.
Annagól Rainshield, elven mage, the friend of Radgard,
Yndaréllia Gílli, Hilda Half-Elven, the friend of Annagól.*

*A fearsome serpent did they face undaunted.
By that serpent was Annagól slain and devoured,
He who stood firm in its path.
Hilda Half-Elven stood vigil o'er his lifeless corpse.
Yet still the Glomb was won.*

*Noble Radgard brought forth the Elixir,
Pouring out from the Glomb of Threy.
Anointed the corpse of Annagól did he,
Calling upon Threy.
Annagól revived, immortal guardian.*

'There are more verses, but that is the gist of it,' said Aromin. 'I know this to be true, though my brother and I have long been estranged.'

Grimfund nodded. 'So. Remarkable. And now the Temple of Upcross seeks to retrieve the Glomb from Annagól. It makes perfect sense. The mere possession of such a legendary artefact would confer great renown and doubtless attract many pilgrims to make donations. Now, were a dwarf to obtain such a thing, he would present to the King. The honour of his family would be greatly enhanced by the giving of such a gift.' His face became quite animated as he said this.

Val spoke up. 'If I had it, I would gather an army and become the greatest wizard-general of all time. I would give the Elixir to my most trusted guards. An elite force of un-killable soldiers could impose peace upon the world. And clearly, the military are best placed to protect the Glomb from thieves and goblins.'

'It is a holy thing,' protested Ganhard. 'A gift from the god Threy. It is not meant as a totem for kings and generals to gain worldly power. It should be kept in a temple and protected from unbelievers. *Keep Holy that which is Holy*, as Pompus The Novate wrote in his Nonalogues.'

'Not so. It was given to an elf and belongs to the elves,' said Aromin. 'Only elves, who are much longer-lived than men and dwarves, know how to approach immortality. And, paradoxically, Annagól is the only creature on earth who does not need the Glomb for himself. Thus, he has been chosen to keep it for all eternity until the world is unmade. It is his doom.'

'You seem quite pleased about that,' said Poli shrewdly.

'We never did get on,' said Aromin, 'He went his way and I went mine.' A wave of anger crossed his face as he said that.

'How does the Glomb make you immortal?' asked Poli, tactfully steering Aromin away from what was clearly a painful topic, 'I don't understand?'

'The Glomb itself is like a well in a box,' explained Aromin. 'But it's not a hole in the ground like a normal well, the hole is inside the box so you can carry it around. It's magic. And, instead of drawing water from this well, you can draw quantities of the Elixir of Life, using a special magic bucket on a special magic rope. The box, the rope and the bucket are the three parts that make up the whole Glomb.'

'And if you drink this Elixir, it makes you immortal?'

'Not quite. You have to be dead first. And you have to have died saving another person's life. Obviously, you can't drink it if you are dead, so the person whose life you saved has to anoint your corpse with the Elixir and pray to Threy very sincerely. If Threy wishes it, the corpse will revive and be thereafter immortal.'

'And that's what happened to your brother?'

'Apparently.'

'Then I want the Glomb too. For myself,' decided Poli, 'I don't think I want to be immortal and I certainly wouldn't want to die for anyone else first, that might be rather painful, but if I owned the Glomb people would beat a path to my door and I could sell them bottles of the Elixir and make a fortune.'

'It seems that we all have our different reasons for wanting the Glomb,' said Val, who was a bit disdainful of Poli's mercenary way of thinking, 'But we would first need to find Annagól. Meanwhile, since Aromin is our only lead, I propose that we should join forces to protect him at all costs. Let us form an impromptu body-guard.'

Grimfund, Poli and Ganhard all assented to that. It suited everyone's purpose to co-operate for a while. Grimfund said to Aromin, rather formally, 'My axe is your axe. My shield is your shield. Until the Glomb is ours.'

'Right,' said Val in a practical tone, 'if we are to form Aromin's bodyguard, we need to train together and develop tactics. Fighting formations. How and when to use cantrips and spells. Medical arrangements. Chain of Command. Signals. Night fighting. Standing Orders.'

'We are in your hands, there, Captain.' said Grimfund. Ganhard thought he would quite like to be in Val's hands, but he didn't dare say so.

That evening, when the caravan halted for the night, they practised some manoeuvres, then Aromin took first watch while the others got some sleep. In the morning, before they set off, Val spoke privately to Poli. 'If it comes to fighting, stay close to me. You watch my back and I'll watch yours. Girls together, Yes?' she said and Poli nodded, a little uncertainly.

Chapter Two

The sky was growing dark and ominous, and grey-black clouds were rolling up from the east. The air was growing colder. Aromin stood up and wrapped his cloak around him. 'Looks like rain,' he remarked as he cinched his sword-belt and pulled the hood of his cloak over his helm. 'Are there any covers we can put up, over this wagon?'

'Faith withstands all weathers,' intoned Ganhard piously, without looking up from the book that he was reading, 'And rain is but the tears of the angels.'

'I prefer oilskins,' said Aromin decidedly, 'My elven name isn't Rainshield for nothing.'

'There is a sort of leather sheet rolled up in this corner,' said Poli from the opposite bench, 'but I don't know how big it is. Perhaps we could make a sort of cave out of all these crates and use it for a roof?' It was a good suggestion but, alas, the leather sheet proved too small to provide much protection to more than one or two people so they would have to think of something else.

'A real cave would be preferable,' was Grimfund's opinion. 'In the halls of my father's father, no-one is troubled by weather far above. But up here in the open it is wild, and the rain gods make sport of travellers on the road.' He stood up, bracing his legs against the bumping of the wagon and looked over the side at the eastern sky. 'This bodes ill,' he declared, 'If there is one thing that I really cannot abide, it is sitting around in wet armour.'

Val wasn't paying much attention. She had been studying her spell-books and memorising a few spells, in case they met some goblins. She was secretly quite hoping they would. After all, what use is magic, without goblins to fight? But she put her books carefully away in her pack now and drew out a neatly-folded raincoat in cornflower blue with silver buckles. 'It's obvious,' she announced as she put it on, 'If necessary, we stop the caravan and take shelter underneath the wagon.'

'Caravan master won't agree to that,' said the wagon driver from his bench at the front. 'People's asked him afore. He allus says no.'

'I think he will listen to us,' said Val haughtily. She had decided what she was going to do and didn't expect to be gainsaid. Changing her mind would be tantamount to admitting to having been wrong the first time, and she would rather eat her own hair boiled in gravy than admit that. She swept her hair back impatiently as she said it, and fastened it elegantly with a blue ribbon that matched her coat.

'Have it your own way,' said the driver, 'But there's hoops and a tarpaulin strapped to the sides in case he don't. Feel free to start putting them up.'

The wagons rumbled on, ponderously climbing a track between two rocky escarpments, following a rocky defile that had perhaps been a riverbed in an earlier age of the world. Grimfund declared knowledgeably that the rocks hereabouts were sedimentary molitorite, with igneous inclusions. Everyone else took his word for it.

The sound of the horses' hooves, the jingling of their traces and the squeaking of the wheels on their axles, all echoed strangely between the cliffs and make the scene seem unreal, as if the natural silence of the place resented the intrusion. Poli's eyes grew heavy and she lay down on her bench and started to doze.

ii

A great storm hit them. It came suddenly. Claps of thunder bounced off the rocks. Lashing rain and dramatic flashes of lightning unsettled the horses. The drivers had trouble controlling them.

The wagon gave a great lurch and tipped up at a crazy angle, throwing passengers and cargo about in a muddled heap. A wheel had broken free of its axle. The driver cursed and got down to steady the horses and assess the damage. 'All hands on deck,' he called. 'Wheel-changing time.' The following wagons halted too and men started to come forward to help. They had seen it all before. It was an occupational hazard with caravans.

'Val, would you be so good as to ask the man how long this will take?' asked Grimfund, fastening the hood of his cloak before clambering down, out of the wagon. One could have asked the man oneself, of course, but when one is a Very Important Dwarf, it is important to maintain a certain air of aloofness.

'If you all pitch in and help,' said the wagon driver pointedly, 'no more 'n an hour.'

'Then I think it would be appropriate for us to take shelter in yonder cave,' said Grimfund. 'I'm sure the men know their jobs. We would only be an encumbrance.' And with that, he led the way to the mouth of a convenient-looking cave, no more than about fifty or sixty paces away up a rocky slope to the left of the trail. 'Good strata around here,' he remarked to Aromin. 'Do you see, how the old layers of rock are folded and then eroded by the action of water? Ancient watercourses make good caves. It wouldn't surprise me if this one had been inhabited in the distant past. We might see some signs of it. Most interesting.'

'It might be inhabited now,' cautioned Aromin, loosening his sword in its scabbard. 'Your axe may see some action before this storm blows out.' He little knew just how prophetic his words would soon turn out to be.

'It's dark and spooky in there,' said Poli, holding back nervously as they reached the mouth of the cave, despite the torrential rain that was soaking her boots. 'Should we light some torches? We can't all see in the dark like you can, Grimfund.' She was nervous of the thunder outside but not as nervous as she was of imaginary cave-dwellers inside.

'I'll make us some divine light,' offered Ganhard, 'We'll never get ordinary torches alight in this weather.' And with that he said a short prayer and made one of his javelins give off a comforting yellow glow, quite bright enough to see by inside the cave.

It was a fairly ordinary cave where they could shelter safely from the storm and watch the progress of the men clustering around the wagons on the trail below. Despite Aromin's fears, it was not occupied though no-one stopped to wonder why. Perhaps they should have done.

With Poli's help, Ganhard fixed his shining javelin in a suitable crack in the rock and he tried not to notice the way she jumped and grabbed his arm every time there was a peal of thunder outside, or sometimes even when there wasn't. 'According to Fieldsmith the Bald,' he reassured her, '*When you hear the thunder clap, the lightning bolt has already missed you.*'

'Really? So if I don't hear one, like right now, I'm already dead?'

'Er, no, it means if you were struck by lightning, you wouldn't hear the thunder.'

'Because I'd already be dead? Thanks, Ganhard, you're really good to know sometimes.'

Poli wandered off to talk to Aromin, who was honing his sword with an oil-stone. It made a swishing sound that was somehow much better, Poli thought, than the noise of the rain pouring down outside.

‘Val, my dear,’ said Grimfund, ‘would you be so kind as to secure the rear? There is an opening at the back of this cave that could well be a tunnel of some kind. Could run for miles. Any chance it could be full of goblins, do you think?’

Val fumbled inside her pouch, stared fixedly at the back of the cave and frowned in concentration. Four little globes of light appeared and revealed that there was indeed a tunnel there. ‘Poli, come with me,’ she ordered. ‘The rest of you, wait here. If we’re not back in ten minutes, send a search party.’ With that, she moved cautiously down the tunnel with the little lights bobbing along in front of her and Poli nervously walking alongside.

‘Are you armed?’ Val asked quietly. Her voice was little above a whisper but it carried clearly in the confined space.

‘Just two throwing daggers under my cloak. Do you think there is any danger?’ asked Poli.

‘There’s always danger. Keep them ready, one in each hand. Don’t be afraid to use them.’

The tunnel ran for only a short way, no more than about twenty paces, before it opened out into a wider space – it was another cave, but this one was smaller than the first, only about ten yards across, with a high roof like a natural dome. They stood warily at the entrance and Val manoeuvred her lights with little hand gestures, to get a better view. It was very quiet. Nothing stirred. Water had been dripping from a crack in the roof and formed a pool in the centre. Around it, the floor was littered with the bones of small animals – something or someone had obviously been there, eating them, but was not there now. On the far side, some larger stones seemed to have tumbled down and there was a glint of metal between them but it was not obvious what it was. There were lots of cobwebs up in the roof but it was impossible to tell if there were any spiders in them. They were big, thick cobwebs, though.

‘We need to see what’s behind those cobwebs,’ said Val. ‘I’m going to try something.’ And with that, she made a complicated twisting movement with her hands. Poli was amazed. It was as if Val’s hands were leaving her arms and floating up to the roof of the cave. ‘Uh, that’s weird,’ she said.

Val tried to tug at the strands with her magic hands. She couldn't pull the strands of web away, they were too strong, but she evidently disturbed something because suddenly a great bloated shape darted out of hiding and tried to attack one of the hands. Val instantly pulled them away and ended the magic spell that had created them. 'Well, that answers that question,' she said.

'What is it? It can't be a spider. Not that big. Let's go back,' said Poli.

'Back out slowly,' ordered Val. 'Get a torch out of your pack and light it. Can you do that while I watch the roof?'

'All right, yes, I can do that,' said Poli, as she slipped the pack off her shoulders and unstrapped a bundle of torches. She soon had one alight, although her hands were shaking and she could hardly hold the tinderbox steady. She held the burning torch out to Val.

'Good. Now I'm going to make the magic hand again and I want you to give the torch to it. Don't worry, it can't hurt you. With a bit of luck I can lift the torch up to the webs and set fire to them.'

The stratagem worked. The webs up in the roof started smouldering and small flames ran from one strand to another as the torch did its work. Soon, a bloated, monstrous black creature started to climb out of the burning webs and down the wall of the cave. It seemed to have a lot of legs.

Val had seen enough. 'Grab your pack and step back slowly about four paces. I'm coming too,' she said quietly. She moved not a moment too soon, for the monster spat a sticky blob of something that fell just short of where she had been standing. 'So that's the way of it,' she declared and, raising one hand, spoke a spell that shot three brilliant blue darts at the creature. Alas, they had little effect other than to enrage it. Val was quite surprised. 'Well, that works on goblins,' she said ruefully.

'Keep backing away. If it comes after us up the tunnel, use your daggers. I'll try to hold it with spells,' said Val as the creature came running towards her, skittering on legs like stilts, mandibles working feverishly.

It lunged at Val and sank its poisonous fangs deep into her body. She gasped and fell, virulent poison coursing through her veins. Poli was horrified. Without thinking, she attacked the creature, stabbing and stabbing with her blades but to little effect. She screamed at the top of her voice. This couldn't be happening!

The scream echoed down the tunnel and alerted the others, waiting in the outer cave. They started to run, not knowing what was afoot. Aromin arrived first, quickly saw the situation and started stabbing at the monster furiously with his blade. He wounded the creature severely and black blood oozed from it but still it stood. It tried to bite him too, but was thwarted by his chain mail.

Grimfund came up next. "Stand back, there's work for axes here!" he cried and with a mighty chop of his battleaxe killed it outright. Black ichor sprayed from the body and stained the blade of his axe in some peculiar way that it never again needed sharpening and that was a matter of wonder, but right now, there were more urgent concerns. 'Cleric!', he yelled as Ganhard caught up with them, 'Val is down and looking pretty ghastly.'

Ganhard knelt beside Val and felt for a pulse, 'She lives, but barely,' he declared, 'But I cannot treat her here. Grimfund, you are the strongest, can you carry her out?'

'Lift her gently,' urged Poli. 'She said she could use her spells but it was too quick for her I stabbed it and stabbed it but it was no good it bit her she burnt the webs in the roof but it came down I stabbed and stabbed it what is it?' she babbled. She was close to hysteria.

While Grimfund carried Val out down the tunnel, Ganhard held Poli in his arms to calm her down. She buried her head in his shoulder and sobbed. He made what he hoped were soothing noises and patted her back. He felt vaguely at a loss. He didn't know much about holding girls. It wasn't in the books.

Aromin, meanwhile, went to check on the cave. The webs in the roof had burnt out and there were no more monsters hiding up there. The thing, whatever it was, had been solitary. His eye caught the gleam of metal that Val and Poli had noticed earlier and he crossed the cave to investigate. It turned out to be the shrivelled body of a halfling, still clad in metal armour. It was an antique kind of mail, perhaps hundreds of years old, but in surprisingly good condition. He stripped the corpse without compunction. The mail should fetch a hundred ducats from the right buyer. He also found a healing potion in the hapless halfling's pouch, which he kept. Satisfied, he rejoined the others.

Back in the outer cave they made a pile of their cloaks, turned inside out because they were still wet from the rain, and laid Val gently down on them. Ganhard set to work. He cast a healing spell and some colour returned to her cheeks. She opened her eyes and stared wildly but seemed unable to move. 'Val, it's me, Ganhard,' he said, bending over her so that

she could see his face. 'You've been poisoned and you won't be able to move until the poison wears off. But don't worry, you're in safe hands. Grimfund killed the monster and everyone else is safe.'

He wasn't sure if she understood or not. He looked close into her eyes for any sign of recognition but all he could think of was what delightful eyebrows she had. And the wonderful way that they didn't quite meet in the middle. And how he wanted to lick her nose, like a puppy. And how he ought to feel guilty for thinking such things only he did and he didn't.

'Ganhard, will she be all right?' asked Poli, a little louder than was perhaps quite necessary.

'Yes, Gyri has smiled upon her. It may take some hours for the poison to relax its grip and she will be weak and sore for a few days but she will recover. She is in no danger now,' Ganhard reassured her.

'If you hadn't come, I don't know what would have happened,' said Poli laying a hand on his arm and giving him a squeeze. 'It was so sudden. I couldn't do anything.'

'You did the right thing. You screamed and we heard your scream. If you hadn't been there, if Val had been on her own, she would have been dead by now. It's thanks to you, Poli, that she is still alive and will recover.'

'Thank you, Harry, you made me feel better,' said Poli and gave him a brave smile. 'I don't really like Val, she's too haughty, but I didn't want anything like this to happen to her. Not this.'

'I think Val already knows that but when she recovers, you should tell her so plainly. In cases like this, the patient is sometimes so shaken up by the experience that she doesn't know how other people feel about her any more. We can help Val best by being open and honest about it.'

'Are you going to tell her how you feel about her too?' asked Poli. 'I've seen the way you look at her when you think I'm not looking.'

'Is it that obvious?' asked Ganhard, blushing furiously. 'I, that is, she's, well, I ...'

'You are an idiot, Harry,' said Poli, and kissed him on the cheek.

iii

Looking out from the cave and down towards the road, Aromin saw that the storm had abated and the rain had stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The men below were just finishing up mending the wagon wheel, so they carried Val down and laid her in the wagon, making her as comfortable as they could with Grimfund's fur rugs.

The caravan set off again and made its way slowly through the landscape. There were clumps of trees here and there, and scrubby bushes beneath them, but not a sign of habitation. Far in the distance an eagle circled, watching a small flock of goats below. One of the goats looked up occasionally. It was watching the eagle.

Val had plenty of time to think. She couldn't do much else, stretched out rigid, unable to move a muscle. Her shoulder itched furiously and she was being bumped about like a sack of vegetables by the movement of the wagon but she couldn't do a thing about it. She tried to move her eyebrows first. She willed and willed them to move but nothing happened. It was like having cramp all over. She couldn't even relax. And the worst of it was, she couldn't open her mouth to complain.

She had heard the conversation between Ganhard and Poli. It was a bit odd, hearing what people were saying about you as if you weren't there but she was glad they did. It helped her to feel more comfortable in herself. Was she haughty? Well, probably. As the daughter of a general, she had been brought up that way. And trained to be forthright and lead from the front. Someone had to be in command. Plenty of girls had had a crush on her at school. She had rather enjoyed the attention. No matter if Poli didn't, there were plenty more fish in the sea. But Ganhard? What was this all about? He was a man. Men weren't supposed to have crushes on her. They were supposed to be, well, distant. Obedient, but in a matter-of-fact sort of way. Not emotionally involved. Men didn't do that. It wasn't natural. She would have to put him right about that. Or perhaps tell Poli to do it. Get the matter cleared up, anyway. Useful having a cleric around, as long as he knew his place.

Val let her mind wander and tried to sleep but she was too uncomfortable. After about an hour, though, the poison started to wear off and she found that she could start to move her arms a little and open her mouth enough to mumble. By the time the wagons reached Bythorpe, where they were to

spend the night, she was able to move and talk properly, though she was still weak and ached all over.

She thanked Ganhard for healing her and asked, fairly directly, if he had anything to say to her.

'You have the most delightful eyebrows,' he said. 'I find myself staring at them. Sorry.'

'Well, as long as it's only my eyebrows, we won't have a problem with it, will we? Stare all you like. You've earned the privilege. In recognition of your healing ministrations, I award you the noble order of the eyebrow.'

Ganhard laughed, pleased that Val had taken it in good sport. 'Both eyebrows?' he asked, 'And maybe a little piece of nose?'

'Now you go too far, sir. Both eyebrows you may admire freely, but my nose is my own.'

'Your modesty does you credit, madam,' said Ganhard gallantly. He didn't know he was capable of talking like that. He should try it more often.

iv

Bythorpe is a small village, just a coaching inn, a blacksmith's forge and a few scattered farmhouses. The inn is called "The Happy Kobold" and it is run by a halfling with red hair and a short temper, called Hellfire Hillcarter.

The inn was quite full when they arrived but Grimfund, as a Very Important Dwarf, had the very best room to himself. It was oak-panelled and pleasantly furnished, with a small window overlooking the front courtyard. A stable-hand brought up his luggage and put it away in a closet; Grimfund tipped him a half-shilling and told him he should send up a housemaid to turn down the bed. After the man had gone, Grimfund reassured himself that everything was in order. The candlesticks had fresh candles in them, the log fire blazing in the grate gave off a good warmth, the four-poster bed was well-upholstered, not too soft, not too hard, and the counterpane was clean and neat. There was a painting hanging over the fireplace, depicting two hunting dogs on a fallen tree-trunk. It was signed 'Caltegili'. Grimfund didn't know the artist, but he knew enough about art to know that it was a good painting and, possibly, reasonably

valuable. Ah, yes, this room would definitely do. He would compliment Hillcarter in the morning and give an extra half-ducat 'for the staff'.

Meanwhile the others had moved into a rather shabbier room that they would be sharing with two lady druids who were travelling the other way, back towards Redcott, and a merchant called Overdew who dealt in exotic foodstuffs. Poli told the druids that, if they needed a room for the night in Redcott, they should ask for Mrs. Maggins in Open Street and they thanked her but said they had already made arrangements to stay at the Grove Hotel in Wood End. Evidently they were fairly well-off druids because the Grove Hotel is quite luxurious. Poli didn't mention her uncle because it is well-known that druids, even lady druids, are not much interested in jewellery unless it grows on trees.

Ganhard was worried about Val's condition and thought that she needed a few day's complete rest. He talked it over with the others after dinner and they all agreed to wait there in Bythorpe until another caravan came through. The innkeeper was more than happy for them to stay on. The caravan master pretended to be disappointed, but only for the sake of politeness; in point of fact they were costing him more than they seemed to be worth and he thought that he could quite well make Amberkeep without them. It was an arrangement that suited everyone.

Next morning, at breakfast, another dwarf sat at their table and Grimfund got into conversation with him. He was a called Drakmund Stone-Breaker and it turned out that he was a very learned wizard. Drakmund was working on a scheme for improving the safety of dwarven mining operations, which he was happy to talk about at great length.

"The weakness of wooden pit-props is responsible for 23% of cave-ins,' he explained, 'and it is this factor that we must address. Of the four methods that have been proposed, the petrification method is preferred by most authorities. The wooden pit-props, once erected satisfactorily, are transformed by arcane means into stone columns of great strength. There is no universal agreement, however, as to the manner by which this is to be achieved.'

'Do go on,' said Grimfund, 'We are quite fascinated. I take it that you have a proposal of your own?'

'I do indeed,' said the wizard, 'and it is this: let every fourth miner be equipped with a cockatrice that is trained to bite where directed. A small animal, perhaps a mouse, is dangled against the pit-prop on a thread, the cockatrice is instructed to bite the mouse but the operator pulls the

thread at the last moment and the cockatrice bites the wood behind it, thus transforming the pit-prop into stone.'

'It seems awfully complicated,' thought Poli, 'suppose the thread breaks?'

'Then the mouse is petrified but this is of no consequence since mice are plentiful.'

'Is it easy to train a cockatrice?' wondered Ganhard, 'I'd have thought it was quite risky. *Make not to train the beast lest it biteth*, to quote Einbard Threefingers the Elder.'

'There is a well-established technique, described in the literature The operator must be present at the moment of hatching from the egg. The cockatrice will imprint on the operator and believe him to be its mother. Training then proceeds by rewarding with food. There is no risk in the early stages, when the creature's teeth and jaw muscles are undeveloped.'

'And in the later stages?'

'Research indicates that 19% of operators have, historically, been unable to complete the training. The use of thicker gloves has been recommended.'

'Well,' said Grimfund, 'And how is the supply of cockatrice eggs these days?'

'They are extremely rare. It has been suggested that a farm be set up where they can be harvested in the same manner as the eggs of chickens. But with a roof over the farmyard, naturally.'

'One would need one or more beasts to start up such a farm, no doubt?' asked Aromin.

'Indeed. That is why I am here. My calculations show that tonight, at the instant of the full moon, the areal density of cockatrices will reach a peak of one per square yard at a point $5\frac{1}{4}$ miles in a direction of north-by-northeast from this village. I shall be there waiting, suitably equipped to capture one or more cockatrices and their eggs.'

'What kind of equipment?' wondered Poli.

'Plaiser's Tongs. I instructed the village blacksmith to make me a set yesterday. They are to be ready in the morning. They will enable me to grasp the animal firmly from a distance of up to 12 feet away. I shall then, by means of a simple spell, manoeuvre a thick sack over the beast's head, rendering it harmless.'

'I saw Val use a spell like that yesterday,' offered Poli. 'She used it to lift my torch up to some thick cobwebs in the roof of a cave and set fire to them.' She shuddered. 'Then a thing came out of them and bit her. It was horrid.'

'Yes, Mage Hands have a multitude of uses,' agreed Drakmund. 'They may provoke but cannot restrain one's enemies. For that, one needs other means. Your companion has recovered, I trust?'

'Just about. She is resting upstairs.'

'I should very much like to meet her, when she is quite well. We might have some small matters in common.'

'Would you like us to go with you, on your expedition tonight?' offered Poli. She wasn't quite sure why she said that, but it seemed to say itself, somehow.

'By all means, my dear. You might find it quite educational. Have you seen a cockatrice in the wild?'

'No. I've never seen one anywhere. Is it true they have big leathery wings like a bat?'

'Yes, that's the one. Clumsy fliers, though. Their power-to-weight ratio is all wrong and the specific down-thrust is insufficient. The $\Delta \gamma$ is negative.'

'Quite so, quite so,' said Grimfund, who had no idea what Drakmund was talking about. 'Let us all go together. It will, as you say, be educational.'

And so it was agreed. They spent the day preparing, as best they could, for the evening's expedition. Ganhard and Poli checked that Val was recovering satisfactorily and told her about Drakmund. 'Sounds crazy to me,' she said, 'The bite of a cockatrice only turns flesh to stone, it wouldn't work on wooden pit-props. But off you go on your adventure, and bring me back a cockatrice egg. Do try not to get turned to stone, though. If you do, I can't help you.'

'I think she is back to her usual self', remarked Poli a little later.

V

Aromin went for a stroll, alone. He needed to think. There was a ruined barn not far outside the village and he sat inside on some moss-covered flagstones, sheltered from the elements but still able to see the sky through the broken roof.

He took a crystal out of his pouch and cradled it in his hands. It was his most precious possession, a gift from his wife Anabarié. He grieved for her, still. He remembered the happy times, when they roamed free together. He remembered her death, the light fading from her eyes, as he could only watch helplessly. 'Go! Go!' she had cried. They were her last words. He had fled. He could not save her but he could save the precious memory of her, so she was not entirely gone from this world. He leaned against the wall of the old barn and sobbed for a while, railing against the cruelty of the gods who had taken her away.

His mind cleared and he became lucid again. High above, the clouds parted for a moment and a ray of sunlight fell upon him, lighting up his face so that he seemed to glow with an inner light. A great certainty came upon him. He knew at that instant what he had to do. The gods must die. The gods who had slain his beloved. They would die by his hand. He would do this.

With that, he knew peace and, after a while, with a spring in his step, he returned to the inn, the oddly-named Happy Kobold, to find the others.

vi

With everyone ready, they set out across open country, with Drakmund leading the way. He paused occasionally to consult his magic staff, which seemed to be able to point the way to wherever he wanted to go. The location it led them to, turned out to be a small lake with a waterfall cascading down from a rocky cliff. They arrived there just before sunset, with plenty of time to get organised.

'Where exactly do you expect the cockatrice to appear?' asked Aromin, who had his doubts about the whole affair but went along with the others because, well, because he wanted to.

'Behind the waterfall. There will be a cave of some sort,' replied Drakmund. 'No doubt there will be petrified mice and so on, at the entrance.'

'Speaking of mice, I've often wondered, what do cockatrices eat? They can't prey on other animals because their food would turn to stone as soon as they tried to bite it. Or do they eat stones?'

'There are two schools of thought on that question,' said Drakmund severely, sensing that Aromin was being flippant, as elves were wont to

be. 'Some say that they scratch up roots and seeds from the ground, in the manner of hens, whilst others have observed that they can kill rodents with their talons so that, once their prey is dead meat, so to speak, the bite of their jaws does not petrify it.'

'Most interesting,' said Grimfund joining in, 'Will you be able to find out the truth of it, when a specimen is caught with your apparatus?'

'There will need to be feeding arrangements, yes, if it is to be kept alive to lay eggs.'

'Quite. Quite. You seem to have thought of everything.'

It was the sort of remark that a Very Important Dwarf might make but which everyone knows means the opposite of what it says. There was an awkward silence for a few moments before Poli rescued the situation by asking 'What will you want us to do, Drakmund?'

'Well, my girl, do you think you could manipulate these Plaiser's Tongs? It takes two hands, do you see, and I shall need a hand free to manipulate the holding sack over the target.'

'I can try. Let me practice a bit first. I'll try to grab that rock over there,' said Poli. The tongs were like nothing she had seen before but she soon had the way of closing the jaws with the handles. 'I can do it, but the weight makes them awkward to swing about and aim.'

'Try withdrawing the grab and aiming first, then shooting them at the target.'

'Oh, yes, that works. As long as the cockatrice keeps very still. Do you think it will?'

'Can you sneak up on it and catch it by surprise?' suggested Aromin.

'You might be able to, but I can't see in the dark like elves. It might notice if we go in with torches.'

'We could lure it out into the daylight and grab it when it comes out of the cave.'

'If it's in there. We don't know where it is, yet.'

'I have conceived of a plan,' announced Drakmund. 'I will approach quietly without lights and grab the beast with the tongs unawares. Once it is secure, one of you will enter and hold the tongs fast, releasing me to operate the sack which another will meanwhile bring.'

'I will take over the tongs,' volunteered Aromin.

'I will follow you in and bring the sack,' offered Ganhard.

'This seems an excellent plan,' remarked Grimfund, who didn't have to do anything.

'What if there are two cockatrices in the cave?' wondered Poli.

'In that case, you will be there to deal with the second.'

'Well, you seems to have thought of everything,' said Grimfund, 'Shall we begin?'

Drakmund stepped through the waterfall and into the cave and waited for a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. The first thing he saw was a bear that had been turned to stone right at the entrance. It still had a look of surprise on its muzzle and one paw raised as if to swat something. He congratulated himself. There must surely be a cockatrice in here.

Something moved at the back of the cave. Leathery wings were raised and a ghastly creature hissed a threat. Drakmund operated the handles and suddenly the jaws of the tongs shot forward and grasped it firmly around the body. It hissed and screamed and wriggled, lashing its tail in fury but it was held firm and could not escape the iron grip. 'I have it securely!' he shouted, 'Someone bring the bag!'

What happened next has never been satisfactorily explained. Somehow, in a moment of confusion during the hand-over, the tongs were dropped, the beast got free and it flew in a rage at Drakmund, biting him deeply on the arm. Ganhard quickly called down divine fire upon it but it took the combined onslaught of Aromin's blade and Grimfund's axe to kill it.

Poli reached Drakmund first. 'Are you hurt?' she asked, seeing the dwarf swaying on his feet. He groaned and jerked something from under his robe. 'Take this,' he said thickly, 'It must not fall into the hands of the Followers of Shokrad.'

Poli looked at the thing but, in the gloom could not make it out. It seemed to be a book wrapped in some sort of cloth. 'What is it?' she asked, 'I don't understand.' But there was no answer. Before her horrified gaze, Drakmund went rigid and took on the colour of granite. She reached out to touch him but he was as cold and hard as stone.

'So that's what a dead cockatrice looks like,' said Aromin. 'I wonder if it had any eggs?' He went to look at the back of the cave.

'And this is what a petrified dwarf looks like,' said Poli. 'He just had time to give me this.'

'Let me see?' said Ganhard. 'It's some sort of book.' He unwrapped it from its cloth and read the title printed in gold leaf on the cover. 'It's in a very strange script, but I think it's called *The Blog of Imflas*' he said doubtfully. 'Val might know more about it. We can ask her when we go back.'

'He said "It must not fall into the hands of the Followers of Shokrad."' explained Poli. 'Who are they, do you suppose? And why mustn't they have it?'

'I know who Shokrad is,' put in Grimfund, 'A demon worshipped by a cult of lower-caste dwarves in the far south. The cult is proscribed and membership is a capital offence. But we believe it still exists.'

'Well, we will know to avoid them.'

'Hmm. Quite so,' said Grimfund. 'Meanwhile, there is the small problem of Drakmund. No doubt you will be able to restore him to life, Ganhard, with a suitable incantation?'

'No, not I, it is beyond my humble powers. The High Priestess Anelia could undoubtedly do it in a trice, though possibly at great expense. But she is not here, nor likely to travel. Could we transport him to her? It is a fair way back to Upcross.'

'Can we even move him?' asked Aromin, who wasn't sure he really wanted to. It seemed a lot of trouble to go to, for a foolish dwarf.

True enough, they soon discovered that Drakmund was now as heavy as a life-sized stone statue (which he had indeed become, to all intents and purposes) and even pushing and heaving all together they could not move him an inch.

'What can we do? We can't just leave him here,' said Poli.

'It would take a team of dwarves with suitable equipment to bring him out this cave, let alone to get him back to civilization,' was Grimfund's judgement. 'Perhaps that could be arranged. But not tonight. No, he will be safe enough here.'

'Then let us give him a moments blessing,' said Ganhard, 'to girdle his spirit wherever it now resides. The pursuit of ones ideals is never without price and we honour him for his dedication. He needs no tombstone; never has it been truer to say, in the words of Pontract of Threbes: *A Righteous Man Is His Own Monument*.'

'It was a high price to pay, but we have achieved his wish, at least in part,' said Aromin, 'I have found the cockatrice's egg at the back of the cave.' He showed it to the others. It was larger than a hen's egg, perhaps the size of

a goose egg, but dark grey and mottled, like stone, and slightly soft to the touch.

‘Keep it warm, next to your skin,’ said Poli, ‘That’s what we did with hens’ eggs on the farm. If it hatches, you will be its mother.’ She gave a little giggle as she said that, for there was something faintly ludicrous about the thought of Aromin, a gloomy and angry elf with rage inside his soul, tenderly mothering a baby serpent.

Aromin looked uncomfortable. ‘I think it’s time we all went home,’ he said gruffly.

So they set off back to the inn at Bythorpe. It was nearly dark by then and, as they walked together companionably two-by two, Ganhard made his boots shine with a warm yellow light so that he and Poli could see where they were treading.

vii

Val was up and about when they got back, and looking much healthier than when they last saw her. They told her about the events of the evening, showed her the cockatrice egg and the mysterious Blog and related what had befallen Drakmund. She took the book, with its gold leaf title and its fiery-red binding of some unknown hide, and began to turn the pages carefully. She motioned for silence and bent forward over it. She grew thoughtful. Then, as she studied it more, page after page, she grew wide-eyed with alarm and slammed the book shut. It was a moment before she could speak.

‘This book is very dangerous,’ she said in a low voice, as if afraid to be overheard. ‘It is a book of necromantic magic but the spells are almost too awful to contemplate. No sane wizard would speak them.’

‘That’s horrible. Let’s tear it up and burn it,’ said Poli.

‘No, we cannot destroy the book. If we tried, the spells would be freed to find other homes. There is no knowing who might get hold of them,’ said Val. ‘We need a strategy of containment.’

‘So. What is your recommendation, Captain?’ asked Grimfund, playing the Superior Officer.

That triggered Val’s military persona and her voice changed subtly. ‘Objective: to safeguard the Blog, to keep its existence hidden and to prevent

it being used for evil. Resources: a small but permanently established task force of hand-picked and reliable personnel charged with achieving the objectives.'

'Does that mean us?'

'Correct.'

'We need to talk about this,' said Aromin. He was wary of being railroaded.

'Then let us repair to my room,' suggested Grimfund, 'We can speak more privately there.'

They went upstairs and sat on Grimfund's bed. 'This is nice,' said Poli, stretching herself out luxuriantly and wriggling into the quilted counterpane, 'Much better than our room.'

'Grimfund is a Very Important Dwarf, Poli,' said Ganhard, 'He's entitled to the best. Now sit up and be polite.'

Poli sat up and made a face at Ganhard, who pretended not to notice.

Grimfund stood up four-square and stuck his thumbs in his belt. 'We have had a few adventures and we know each other pretty well now,' he began, 'but events have taken a surprising turn, have they not? We must decide how to proceed. But first, I think that Val has something to tell us.'

'Yes, I suppose I do,' said Val, hugging her knees. 'First of all, I owe you all a debt of gratitude for saving my life yesterday. You could have left me behind, as you were forced to do today with Drakmund, but you didn't. And a special thanks to you dear,' and she touched Ganhard on the arm as she said this, 'for healing me and caring for me when I was helpless. I want you all to know that I appreciate it and to say that you can count on my loyalty to each and every one of you, whatever befalls. As you know, I have been in the military and my unit saw action in the goblin wars. Loyalty to one's fellow soldiers is a very strong tradition with us. You four are my battle-friends now.'

'Nobly said,' offered Grimfund with a courteous bow, and the others murmured assent.

'We have already agreed to help each other find Aromin's brother,' Val continued, 'although what happens after that, if we do gain the Glomb of They from him, is something we haven't really decided. I do hope that it doesn't cause any dispute between us, for I should hate to have to take sides. I think this would be a good time to clear the air, so that we can go on together as one mind.'

There was an uncomfortable silence at that, because in truth, everyone privately did intend to compete for the gift of immortality, each in their own way and for their own reasons, but obviously didn't want to talk about it and had hoped the subject wouldn't come up.

When it was clear that no-one else was ready to come clean about their intentions right now, Val went on. 'But now, we have a new factor. I mean the Blog of Imflas that Poli has been given for safe keeping. You all need to understand that it is too important to ignore, or to leave out of our plans.'

Poli became the centre of attention now and the others turned in her direction. 'Don't look at me, I was just the nearest,' she said defensively.

'Don't underestimate yourself, dear, you were chosen for a reason. A book such as this one, a book of great and terrible power, it tied to its owner. You share its fate now and it shares yours until such time as you hand it on to another keeper, when your life draws to a close. It contains spells of terrifying power, far too powerful for a simple spell-captain like me or, indeed, for any other wizard that I know, to handle safely. But you are safe, because you cannot read it. You are the perfect guardian.'

Poli felt a blush of shame mixed with a kind of naughty excitement, as Val said this. How awful to be chosen just because she was a simple unlettered peasant, incapable of misusing the book. That made her feel really inferior. But at the same time, merely by becoming the owner of a book of power, she had become someone important in the world. She was Poliver Blog-Warden, the successor to Drakmund and Imflas, the equal to anyone. She would be like of the heroes of legend. That felt good. Owning something important made you important, even if you didn't use it. This was a new experience for Poli, who had never in her life owned so much as a gold ducat that she hadn't stolen.

Aromin had a sudden idea but it was a devious idea and he tried to sound casual. 'Val, do you see any connection between the Glomb of Threy and the Blog of Imflas?' he asked carefully, 'Or is it just coincidence that we have gained one whilst seeking the other?'

'That's a very good question, Aromin,' said Val looking suddenly weary and wringing her hands as if reluctant to speak, 'and the answer is yes, there is. In some ways, they are enemies. The Glomb conveys the gift of immortality upon those judged worthy by Threy and, though the acquisition of it may be contended, the effect of its power is, on the whole, good and holy. But, by contrast, at least one of the spells in the Blog takes immortality away. It could be used to destroy demons, or even held against them as a threat to force them into servitude, and doubtless that is why a

cult of evil would want to gain possession of it. But it goes beyond even that. The ...' and here Val could hardly speak, '... the gods themselves would succumb if it were used against them. And where would the world be, if the gods were destroyed, or even threatened with destruction? It is pure evil.' At that, she looked sadly at Poli again. 'I'm sorry, Poli, but you have to understand why it must be safeguarded and never used.'

'Holy Gyri!' cried Ganhard in alarm. 'Save us from this!' and he looked aghast at Poli as if she were a demon already.

'Steady on,' said Poli, 'I'm on your side, remember?'

'This means,' said Aromin treading carefully, for his mind was thinking thoughts he did not want to expose, 'that even if we could all use the Glomb to become immortal, someone could use the Blog to undo that? Quite apart from being able to destroy the gods, which, saving your presence Ganhard, I would cheerfully go along with, he could destroy me, personally, and every one of us?'

'Yes,' said Val, 'In a nutshell, yes. What we hold is the very antithesis of what we seek. The god of irony must surely be laughing.'

'Or quaking in his boots, like all the other gods, right now.'

'Please, *Speak Not Irreverence in Jest*,' said Ganhard. 'But Aromin, this is important, would you really see the gods destroyed? I had not thought you were so inclined. We are friends and I would aid you in anything else but in that I would feel obliged to oppose you.'

So Aromin stood up and paced about the room, telling the tale of the death of his wife, of his moment of insight in the old barn earlier in the day and his sudden resolve to take vengeance on the gods. Silence reigned as his words ended. Then Poli went over and took Aromin's head in her hands and kissed him. 'You loved her. No woman, elf or human, could ask for more,' she said simply. 'But I must be true to Ganhard. We cannot let you do this awful thing.'

'Would not the gods make fine statues In their own temples?' cried Aromin defiantly, 'I might seize the Blog from you and use it to make the gods mortal, then petrify them with a cockatrice, as we saw happen to Drakmund only this evening. That would be a fitting thing would it not?' The flocks of deluded believers could worship at the statues knowing that they were in truth worshipping the gods themselves! There is true irony!'

Val quickly interrupted, before Ganhard could jump up in fury. 'It would avail you nothing, Aromin, to seize the Blog. Have I not said that only the

true owner can use the magic, and then only a great wizard could work the spells? Unless Poli gives up the book of her own free will, you cannot own it, no more than could I. Your plan is flawed from the outset and I for one am heartily glad to say so. I am sorry for the loss of your wife but seeking vengeance on the gods is not in your power.'

'Poli, promise me, you will never give anyone else the book!' cried Ganhard wildly, leaping up from the bed and gripping her by the shoulders, 'I will protect you. Blessed Gyri will protect you. You must never let anyone misuse it, friend or foe!'

'Don't be such a bully,' said Poli. 'I'll make up my own mind, thank you very much. And let go, you're hurting me.'

The situation was getting out of hand. 'Friends, friends!' said Grimfund loudly, 'Do you not see the Blog is working its evil, dividing us one from another? We must be as resolute as rock, and resist its baleful influence, if we are to succeed.'

'I shall succeed,' declared Aromin angrily. 'With or without aid.'

Suddenly, before the quarrel could boil over, there came a knock at the door and an elf walked in. He wore a stained travelling cloak with the hood drawn back and had a bandage over one eye. His hair was silver and he had a bearing of great dignity. 'Greetings, Aromin,' he said in the high elven speech, 'It is many long years since we parted.'

Chapter Three

‘Greetings, my brother,’ said Aromin with a stiff bow. ‘Your arrival is timely, for a quarrel was near to breaking out in this room.’ He turned to Ganhard and the others. ‘This is Annagól, the one you have been seeking,’ he said. ‘I undertook to bring you to him, and this I have done.’

‘Then allow me to offer hospitality to all,’ said the newcomer, briskly. ‘Quarrels fade with comfort.’ So saying, he strode over to the fireplace, touched for a moment the painting hanging above it, and said a word that sounded like *pomegranate* but wasn’t. There was a creak and a section of the panelling beside the fireplace became a door, which he opened and passed through, beckoning everyone to follow.

Grimfund was affronted and said so. ‘I *had* thought that this was *my* room,’ he began stiffly, ‘but you seem very much at home all unbidden, mister elf.’

Annagól laughed. ‘That is indeed your room for this night, for you have hired it, but now we are entering mine. I have been residing here, on and off, for some weeks, awaiting your arrival. The landlord is an understanding fellow and knows which side his gammon is salted. But come, do not dally, come on through.’

One by one, they went through the door. Beyond was a large, brightly-lit dining hall with a high, vaulted roof. The roof beams were oak and the plaster between them was lime-washed. The walls were panelled with wood, darkened with age and there were several other doors out of the hall. It belonged in some baronial castle, not a humble coaching inn, but Val, at least, recognised that there was magic involved.

In the middle of the hall was an oak table, already laid for a meal. There were places for six, with silver platters and crystal goblets at each place, and there were dishes of food in the centre flanked by two silver candelabra.

‘You will all have many questions, and I promise that I will answer them in due course, to the best of my ability,’ said Annagól, ‘But first, let us break bread together.’ So saying, he motioned Grimfund to sit at the head of the table, with Poli and Ganhard on one side, Aromin and Val opposite them, and he himself sat at the foot. Thus was protocol carefully observed. When all were seated, he intoned a brief elvish chant of blessing and then, with a nod, signed that Ganhard, too, should bless the meal, which he did.

They each broke bread and took a bowl of steaming hot soup from a silver tureen in the middle of the table, each serving the one to their left in the old way.

‘This soup is excellent,’ remarked Val, ‘but I do not recognise the flavour. What is it?’

‘What would you like it to be?’ asked Annagól.

Val was nonplussed for a moment. Then she laughed delightedly. ‘The flavour of magic?’ she asked with a twinkle in her eye, to which Annagól merely smiled. She was beginning to like Annagól. This elf had *style*.

‘You will observe,’ said Annagól, that on each side of this hall there are three doors. They lead to private chambers, six in all, so we can have one each. You may wish to occupy them during your stay here; they are more comfortably furnished than the common rooms of this inn.’

‘That is very generous of you,’ said Val and looked round for general approbation. The others (with the exception of Aromin, perhaps) murmured their thanks too. Poli secretly hoped that her chamber would have a bed like the one in Grimfund’s room behind them. She liked the idea of a four-poster bed to herself, with a quilted counterpane and soft pillows.

‘Thank you. But now, for some more serious matters,’ Annagól continued. ‘We are not all here, together at this table, by accident. The gods willed it. Or at least, five of them did. The Group of Five – Gyri, Abwen, Berkadin, Spaldor and Threy – met and determined that the Blog of Imflas, were it to be misused, posed such a threat to the world that one guardian for it would no longer be enough; they conceived a dedicated band of wardens who would work together to safeguard the world from it.’

‘They agreed that each would contribute one champion from amongst their worldly followers and another would be chosen who owned allegiance to none of the gods but would follow his own conscience.’ At this point, Annagól paused to let the implications of what he had said, sink in.

‘There were once six guardians,’ said Val frowning. ‘Was Ðrakmund the last? What became of the other five? Did they all perish as he did? If so, then six was not enough. The plan was under-resourced.’

‘No, Val,’ relied Annagól patiently, and spread his arms to encompass the room. ‘We, the six of us here at this table, are the chosen six. You yourself are Spaldor’s champion as I am Threy’s, though you may not have known it until now. Poor, misguided Ðrakmund was not one of six, he was *the one who was not enough*.’

Val was stunned. She looked around at the others, staring wildly into their faces. These were champions of the gods? But they looked so ordinary! Shouldn't their eyes be flashing with lightning?

'I always felt that Abwen had some purpose for me,' said Poli timidly, 'But it was just a feeling.'

'To be noticed by the gods is to be handed one's doom,' quoted Grimfund. 'Do I take it that Berkadin volunteered me for this job? I hope it's not too time-consuming. I have things to do at home.'

'I think you are going to find, Grimfund, that it is a full-time occupation for all eternity, like my brother Annagól's guardianship of the Glomb of Threy,' said Aromin. 'Whilst I, at least, have the luxury of choice, your path is laid down for you. If it is any consolation, and I say this in all sincerity, I think Berkadin has chosen wisely. You are worthy of his trust.'

'It's all right for Annagól,' retorted Grimfund, 'He has immortality and all the time in the world. I only get one lifetime and it's mine to waste how I please.'

'Well,' said Annagól, 'as to that, my part in the plan is clear. I can grant each of you the gift of immortality too, although not immediately. You shall have a thousand, thousand lifetimes. And who knows, perhaps you will be allowed a holiday, now and then?' and he laughed as he said this.

Grimfund was silent. This put a very different complexion on things.

Ganhard spoke up. 'If Blessed Gyri has chosen me for this task, then I submit to my fate. Her will is my will,' he intoned piously, touching the emblem that hung round his neck. 'But Brother Annagól, is it not so, that to be granted immortality by the Elixir, the beneficiary must first be dead? Is there not a ... difficulty ... here?'

'You are right, Brother Ganhard. But there is a plan. In your chambers, you will each find a silver flask that contains one draught of the Elixir of Life. Take the flask as a gift, and keep it on your person at all times henceforth. You must all take a solemn oath that, if any is slain nobly in battle, another will anoint his or her corpse with one of these draughts, calling upon Threy. The slain one will revive and thereafter be immortal.'

'So, eventually, there will be an immortal guardianship of six. Yes, I see the plan,' said Ganhard.

'I would give my life for my comrades,' said Val, who was sitting directly across the table from Ganhard, 'for they saved mine not two days ago. I am not so sure I would give it gladly just to safeguard a book, however

powerful, but if that death were not to be death, but merely a passing pain, then I would do my duty nonetheless.' She stood up and drew herself to attention like the soldier she was, and declared 'I will take the oath.'

'If my friends were killed and I had the means to revive them, of course I would do it,' said Polly, 'and if someone will promise to do the same for me, then that is what friends are for. We don't really need oaths, but if you want to make it formal and heroic, I'll join in with you.' So Poli too, stood up and declared 'I will take your oath.'

Ganhard considered inwardly for a moment, then stood up suddenly, looked straight ahead and intoned 'I will take the oath.'

Grimfund was not to be outdone. He rose to his feet at the head of the table, cleared his throat, stuck his thumbs in his belt as he was wont to do when he was being especially forthright and announced in a loud voice 'Grimfund of Black Keep will swear the oath.'

Aromin was silent for a moment. He would not be pressured into following the herd, just because the other four were already on their feet. Did he want immortality? It would not bring his wife back. Could he face an eternity without her, with no hope of death? The prospect seemed bleak. But there was another side to it. To preserve her memory in his heart for all time, now that was an opportunity to take with outstretched arms. The choice was evenly balanced. He vacillated for a moment longer, then he too stood up. 'I will take the oath, but for reasons of my own,' he declared.

And so the oath was sworn, and goblets of thick ruby-red wine were drunk as was the custom on such occasions in those days.

ii

Poli was not disappointed with her chamber. It was oak-panelled with a plaster ceiling moulded in the shapes of cherubs and all around the walls were tapestries embroidered with scenes of noblemen and ladies hunting stags with greyhounds. There were two latticed windows that looked over a walled rose garden, a roomy closet for her belongings, a side table of walnut that served no particular purpose but spoke of luxury, two stools and a wash-stand. Best of all was the bed. What a bed! A huge four-poster with velvet curtains, a mattress that smelt like the fields of fresh hay in August, spotless bedlinen and, yes, a quilted counterpane! She squealed and bounced on the bed like a little girl.

There was a knock on the door and Annagól entered, to enquire if she needed anything before retiring for the night. 'We must have a serious talk in the morning,' he said, 'but I wanted to make sure you were happy with the outcome of our dinner party. You have your flask of the Elixir? Good, keep it close, you never know when you might need it. I can draw an endless number from the Glomb, so if used or lost it can always be replaced, but not instantly.'

'It's like a deam,' said Poli, hugging herself. 'Ganhard talked so much about finding you and Aromin told us so much about the Glomb and how you came to be immortal, that it all seemed like a fable, just a legend. But here you are and here I am, right now. If it is a legend, I am part of it like the ladies in those tapestries on the walls.'

'Yes, it will feel like that. But it will be a legend that you, yourself, create, by your own actions. You have the Blog? No, I do not want to see it,' Annagól said quickly, as Poli made to draw the cloth-wrapped book from under her dress, 'just to know that it is safe in your charge. You bear the greatest burden of the six of us, for you have been chosen by the goddess Abwen to be its prime warden.'

'I'm just a simple peasant girl,' she said defensively, 'What if I'm not up to the task?'

'My child, you must address that question to Abwen, not to me. Speak to her, in the quiet of your soul, and she will answer you. Now I must let you get to bed. It is late, and we have much to do on the morrow.' So saying, he bowed and went out.

Poli undressed, climbed into bed and snuffed the candles. She snuggled into the deep, soft, goose-feather pillows and fell into a deep sleep, tired out by the events of the last few days. As she slept, Abwen spoke to her in a dream but the words were in a tongue that Poli could not understand and afterwards she could not remember them.

iii

'My brother Aromin departed during the night and Grimfund with him as his oath-brother,' announced Annagól to the others over a simple breakfast of bread, meats and cheese served on wooden platters. 'They will be away for some time, but they will be back. Aromin grieves still for his wife and it is clouding his mind. I have given him an extra flask of Elixir. He will

travel to where his wife is entombed and use it to revive her. This will not be easy for him, for he has forsworn the gods and, unless he is willing to relent and call upon Threy, the Elixir will not work. But he knows this. When he returns, we must be understanding.'

'I think I know what his choice will be,' said Poli. 'He loved his wife more than he hated the gods for taking her away. That is why he was troubled.'

'You have given him the means of his own salvation,' suggested Ganhard, 'you are truly his brother.'

Annagól inclined his head and thanked Ganhard.

Val smiled at Annagól and looked almost girlish for a moment. 'Last night, in my chamber, Annagól and I concocted a scheme,' she announced, 'to create a false book to distract attention from the real one. It will be some simple spells and some utter rubbish, all encrypted in a military-strength cipher, so that if anyone were to get hold of it, and successfully wasted their time decoding it, they would believe that some great meaning were still hidden there and focus all their attention on breaking it. It will be called the *Codex Valerium*, or *Book of Farewells*. Just our little joke.'

'Val will carry it about and pretend to keep it secret and we will all pretend that it is this Codex that we have come together to protect,' explained Annagól. 'Henceforth, none of us must ever speak of the Blog. Its very existence must be unsuspected, let alone that we are the ones who possess it. If you need to refer to it outside of these walls, speak only of "The Codex" and then only guardedly.'

'Forgive me bringing this up,' began Ganhard, 'but what of the Glomb of Threy? I am supposed to collect it and take it back to my temple. How does that fit in?'

'There was never any intention on my part to donate the Glomb to your temple,' said Annagól. 'Your high priestess Anelia sent you to me at Gyri's command and with the best of intentions, but it was a pretext. It had to be so, for she, Anelia, was not aware of the greater plan that was then still unfolding.'

Ganhard looked crestfallen and wrung his hands. 'I don't think the high priestess will be very pleased,' he said. 'She will blame me, somehow, and I shall be in disgrace.'

'I think not. I will give you a casket of a dozen flasks of the Elixir for you to deliver to her, as a gift from me. She may then let it be known that her temple is in possession of them, and pilgrims will come from far and wide

hoping to be the lucky recipients. That is her desire and I see no reason to thwart it.'

'That will mollify her, but not for long. She will want more,' observed Val shrewdly, helping himself to another piece of soft cheese. 'I would.'

'Indeed. And that is the bait. Ganhard must suggest to her that she should travel here to Bythorpe in person, to meet me and to negotiate to greater advantage. Gyri will doubtless push her a little in my direction too. It is important that she comes and that Ganhard brings her.'

'Why is it so important?' wondered Poli. She didn't like to see Ganhard looking like a scolded puppy. She patted him to cheer him up and he quite liked that. He wasn't good at allowing human contact but it didn't mean he didn't crave it. He squeezed her hand, which, for him, was quite a bold thing to do.

'Firstly, she needs to be persuaded to release Ganhard from temple service,' began Annagól. 'She is more likely to agree to that here, than in Upcross where she is secure in her own territory and need not agree to any such thing. Secondly, she might at our behest go to the cockatrice cave and restore poor Drakmund to life. He served as sole guardian of ... *The Codex* ... for many years and it is only right that he should have his earthly reward. Thirdly, but not least, we will need the temples to begin acting on our behalf. It is a complex thing that needs to be set up and I can more easily explain it to her, here.'

'I think Ganhard is a bit out of his depth,' remarked Val. 'Someone should go with him. Poli, dear, do you think it would be safe for the two of you to travel together, to Upcross and back?'

Poli looked at Ganhard and Ganhard looked back at Poli. 'I'm not sure about *safe*,' they both said at the same instant. And then they laughed.

'It seems to me,' said Annagól with mock-solemnity, 'that it would draw less attention if they travelled as man and wife.'

'You're in trouble now,' said Poli to her new 'husband'. 'Anelia is as nothing compared to a determined wife.'

'Beshrew me, woman, and get about your sewing,' said Ganhard with a raised eyebrow. He was beginning to get into the swing of this game. It was quite fun.

'Come on, *husband*, you can help me pack my things for the journey,' said Poli happily and Ganhard followed her sheepishly back to her chamber. There she found a long, thin package lying on the walnut table, wrapped

in a stout canvas cloth and tied with a leather strap. There a note beside it, a single piece of paper neatly folded over. She handed Ganhard the note and asked him to read it out while she undid the strap to see what was inside. 'It's from Aromin,' he said with some surprise, 'He says: *Take these and use them well. Your life, and the life of your companions, may depend on them. Farewell, until we meet again* and it's signed with his name in Elvish.'

'It's something heavy, whatever it is,' said Poli as she deftly opened the wrappings. 'Goodness! It's a pair of swords!' Inside was indeed a pair of short swords with jewelled pommels and leather scabbards of green leather tooled with gold, attached by little buckles to a strong but elegant belt. Poli drew one out of its scabbard and Ganhard winced a little. 'Oh, yes, I like these,' said Poli, 'See how keen the point is? And it feels wonderfully balanced. Aromin is such a dear, but he's gone off before I could thank him. I do hope he finds his wife, don't you?'

'Yes, I hope so too. Grief is a terrible thing.'

'I must try on the belt. Can you just hold it round me while I do it up?'

'Like this?'

'Mm. You can touch me, I won't break.'

'Sorry.'

'Look, if we're supposed to be married, you'll have to get used to this.'

'But we're not *really* married, are we? It feels ... rude.'

'I'll stab you with one of these swords in a minute.'

'Sorry.'

iv

After Ganhard and Poli had departed, Val went to her chamber and put her hair up in combs. She opened her closet and looked through her gowns, frowning slightly. She was expecting to be scribing for most of the day and didn't want to wear anything with cuffs that might get ink-stained. She quickly decided on a lilac gown with a high collar and short puffed sleeves. This one was right. It was obvious. Problem solved. She got changed, stood sideways to the mirror to check that all the side seams

were exactly straight and, satisfied that she would pass officer's inspection, turned her attention to other matters.

She opened her chest and took out her books and writing set. She checked the ink bottle. It was a little over half full. A quick mental calculation told her that it would be sufficient for the day. Three quills. Two had good nibs, one needed sharpening. She took out a small silver penknife and corrected that situation. She replaced the penknife in its sheath. All equipment was now present and in good order.

Val went out into the hall, sat on a stool at the table, arranged her equipment in an orderly fashion and counted to eight. On the count of eight, Annagól came out of his own chamber and remarked "Ah, good. You are here already. You are very efficient, my dear. May I?" and after a polite pause for Val to signal permission, he sat down beside her.

Annagól showed her a book that he was carrying. It was a handsome-looking book with a blue oxbide cover and brass corners, unused and in pristine condition with a goodly number of blank vellum pages. As Val looked on with interest as he opened it and wrote "Codex Valerium" on the title page in a fine script with plenty of flourishes.

'So. We begin,' he announced, 'Now, how do we made the cipher? Am I permitted to know military secrets?'

Val gazed thoughtfully into the distance as if she were rehearsing something in her mind, which, indeed, she was. 'By the power vested in me by royal warrant, you are hereby recruited as temporary lieutenant first class, with full security clearance and 437 year's seniority,' she declared with mock-formality. 'As my newest recruit, it is my duty to give you appropriate training.'

Annagól grinned and made a very bad and un-military attempt at a salute.

'To make the cipher, we need to choose a word or a group of words to use as a key,' Val explained. 'Something hard for an enemy to guess, but easy for a friend to remember.'

'How about the word *Valerium* itself? Or is that too obvious?'

Val considered. 'An enemy who guessed it would think we had been stupid to write the keyword on the title page. Yes, I like it.' She clapped her hands with glee. 'Also, it has eight letters, all different, and that is especially good for the cipher we are going to use.' She took a sheet of parchment, wrote the word VALERIUM across it, and wrote more letters in several rows un-

derneath to make a square. 'This is our code sheet,' she explained. We will burn it when we have finished.'

Annagól nodded. He had seen something like this done before. 'Let us begin with a simple spell,' he suggested. 'Are you familiar with *Firefly*?'

Val looked slightly embarrassed. 'No, but if you recite the method, I will turn your words into code one by one and you can write them down in the *Codex*.'

Annagól cleared his throat and began: 'In the proportions ...'

'VZTAL MNOPY ULERON ...' replied Val, and Annagól write it down carefully. They continued like this for some time until several pages were filled with neat rows of characters that had every appearance of being utterly important.

'This is going to take some time,' said Annagól, 'And my throat is getting dry. Shall we pause for refreshments?'

As Val sat up gratefully and massaged her back, which was beginning to ache from constantly bending over the code sheet on the table, Annagól made a flourish with his hands and two goblets of fruit cordial appeared before them.

'You must teach me that spell,' she said. 'I'm rather partial to fruit cordial. I can do cakes, though.' And so saying, she make a flourish of her own and created a plate of ginger cakes, still warm, which she offered to Annagól.

'Ah, you will catch a fine husband with such cakes,' joked Annagól.

'If I take a husband, I will expect him to do more than eat cakes. If he defeats three armies by lunchtime and five dragons before dinner, then I might allow him one ginger cake as a treat.'

'Hmm. I think you might find that there are two schools of thought on that. Yours and his.'

A sudden insight struck Val. 'Is it lonely, being immortal?'

Annagól looked thoughtful. Several times he started to speak, then stopped again. 'That is hard to answer,' he said finally. 'I have good friends from the time of my youth. It is sad to think that they will one day perish and be no more, for the friends of one's youth are irreplaceable.'

'You could offer them immortality?'

'Strangely enough, or perhaps not so strangely, not one of my friends seems to want it. It is the necessity to die nobly that seems to be the deterrent.'

'Yet you have given me the promise of immortality and I have not refused.'

Annagól laid a gentle hand on Val's bare arm and there was warmth between them. 'Perhaps we shall one day count each other as friends,' he said.

Val responded, laying a hand upon his. 'I should like that,' she said.

'I do have one friend, to whom I am especially indebted. It was she who kept vigil over my corpse when I was swallowed by a serpent. I like to think there is a certain fondness between us.'

'Is she pretty?'

'She makes no effort to be. She is a druidess.'

'What is her name?'

'Hilda, though her elven name is Yndaréllia. Her mother was a wood-elf, you see.'

'What colour are her eyes?' asked Val archly.

'A kind of green, the colour of witch-hazel leaves.'

'You are still in love with her,' said Val. It was not a question.

'Perhaps I am.'

'Did you never tell her so?'

'We both had things to do, that would take us apart. Sometimes it is better to keep silent.'

'Sometimes, immortal elves are remarkably dense,' replied Val, though not unkindly.

Annagól smiled, a little sadly, and finished his glass of cordial. 'Now, young lady, see what your cakes have done?' he said briskly, 'Ginger is too strong for elves. It makes them sentimental.'

'I shall remember that,' said Val, 'It might come in useful one day.'

It was late in the day when the Codex was finished and Val retired to her chamber, tired out. She loosened her gown, kicked off her shoes, lay flat out on the bed, closed her eyes and let her mind go completely blank for ten minutes. Then she sat up, quite refreshed. It was something she had learned to do in the army, snatching rest whenever there was a momentary lull in the fighting.

She got up, washed, changed into an evening gown and brushed out her hair until it shone. She opened her jewellery box and picked out a simple

onyx bracelet to wear on her left wrist. Satisfied that her appearance was smart but not gaudy, she went out into the hall.

Annagól was not there yet and she felt a little at a loss what to do, so she busied herself trimming some candles and arranging them all to be the same height in their candlesticks. It was a game she used to play as a little girl. Her mother's voice came to her suddenly out of her childhood: "Erisa, stop playing with the candles and come to the table with your brothers." Val almost looked round, half expecting for a moment to see her mother behind her, looking impatient. 'Yes, mother,' she whispered.

'Ah, there you are my dear,' said Annagól brightly as he came into the hall. 'Are you ready to conjure up some dinner? Or shall I play host? I do a passable roast venison pie?'

'That sounds splendid,' she said, 'To be honest, I'm a little tired from our work this afternoon and I'm not sure I could equal you.'

'Venison pie it is, then. And a bottle of Riverdown '54, I think. You must tell me about your time in the military. Would you want to go back to that life, if you could?'

Val gazed into the distance, as if seeing far off places, and several emotions played across her face in quick succession. 'They were brutal times, fighting the goblin,' she said quietly, 'but I do miss the comradeship. We fought for each other, as much as for the king, watching each other's backs, supporting each other and sharing the peril. We honoured those who fell at our side, knowing that it might be our turn next. Yes, I would give much to see my old company together again, but the war has been won and there is no more need for armies.'

'Do you think your comrades feel the same? If the call came, would they rally to a new cause?'

'Not for a cause, however noble, not just for its own sake. But for each other, yes. If my friends were ever in mortal danger, I would stand with them and they with me. It is ... hard to explain to civilians.'

'You have explained it very well. It is an admirable thing. But now I must ask you something difficult and you need not answer straight away.'

'I had a feeling you were leading up to something. May I take some more pie? It is quite delicious.'

'Of course. Let me pour you another glass of wine.'

Val smiled and took a sip. 'Well, what is this difficult question?'

'It is this: would you still fight for each other in the same way if death were but a momentary inconvenience? If dying heroically for your comrades were but an empty gesture because you could bounce up again the next moment, none the worse? In short, if you were assured of immortality?'

Val put down her goblet and stroked the stem thoughtfully with her fingertips. She took several breaths before she spoke. 'I see why you have asked the question. You alone, Annagól, of everyone on this earth, have the means to do this, and you are asking me if you *should*?' She glanced at him for a moment and saw, from the way he dropped his gaze, that she was right.

'Yes, I suppose I am. I want to know if immortal soldiers would fight better or worse.'

'Every battle would be like a training exercise with no real purpose. If the enemy were immortal too, the battle would just go on forever or until a truce were called. There is no glory in that. And if the enemy were not, victory would be automatic, just a matter of time. There is no honour in defeating an enemy who cannot win. Either way, you would rob the soldiers of their self-respect.'

Annagól hung his head and Val looked at him in concern for she saw that he was serious. 'Do not do this thing,' she pleaded. 'You would destroy courage and bravery and all that is good, to make a mindless killing machine worse than a horde of goblin.'

'Surely, every soldier hopes to survive battle. Would you not wear impervious armour if it were offered? Is this any different?'

'As a training aid, that would be of inestimable value. Injuries are all too frequent during training bouts. But show me a soldier wearing it in battle and I will show you a coward.'

Annagól looked up and inclined his head gracefully to accept defeat. 'You have beaten me soundly,' he admitted, 'I surrender.'

'To the victor the spoils,' said Val, and seized the wine bottle, placing it before her like a trophy.

Annagól made a movement of his fingers and the wine bottle slid back towards him, seemingly of its own accord. 'Not so fast,' he said, 'I have another play to make yet.'

'Go on.'

'Imagine a small, elite army of immortals dedicated to defending a position. You may be the general, if you wish. Any mortal foolish enough to attack you would deserve to die, so, knowing that, very few would choose to do so. Madmen apart, your position would not be assailed and you would have very little to do, so long as you simply remained there. Which you could do, for all eternity, for even a siege against you would ultimately fail when the besiegers died of old age. It would be tedious, I grant you, but the position would be defended and you would be successful in your allotted task.'

'Well, yes, theoretically that would succeed, I grant you, but unless the soldiers are chained down they will soon get bored and go home to put up their feet and enjoy an eternity of good harvests on their farms. I might be able to establish a rota. Each man to serve one century in ten. But they would expect to be paid.'

'Is there nothing they would stand to defend?'

'The tombs of fallen comrades, perhaps, but in your scenario, there wouldn't be any.'

Annagól nodded. 'It all seemed so simple, yesterday,' he said, 'but I was thinking like an elf. I'm glad we have had this talk. You have argued the human condition most eloquently. For you, it is death that gives life its colour. For us, life takes its colour from the natural world around us. But come, we are too serious.' He made a flourish, and sweet music filled the air. 'Shall we dance?'

V

As Val lay in bed that night, she reflected dreamily on the events of the evening. Dancing with an elf was certainly an experience to be treasured. She *liked* Annagól but his way of thinking was alien, and that was a little unnerving. She wondered if she should stay, or resume her journey towards her parents' home at Highcourt. She was oath-bound to the others, to Ganhard and Poli, to Aromin and Grimfund, but they were all off on their journeys and did not seem to need her, at least for the present.

She fell asleep and Spaldor appeared to her in a dream. One minute she was dancing with him, the next minute he was like a terrible presence towering in wrath. He handed her a book that was like the Codex but wasn't and seemed insistent that she read it. But a lieutenant took it away

and gave it to her mother. Far off, there was a tower that she needed to reach but it was overgrown with ivy and she couldn't find the door. She dreamed of falling asleep.

When she awoke, she found she had already decided to go home to Highcourt, stay a few weeks and then come back. Annagól did not seem to be at all surprised when she told him over breakfast and she promised to return 'at the time of the next full moon'. There was nothing mystical about this, she explained, it was so that, if she were delayed at all en route, she could double-march and travel by moonlight to make up time.

Her plan was, that she would walk first to Amberkeep, buy a horse there, and ride the rest of the way. She would travel light, taking only such belongings as would comfortably fit in a backpack, leaving most of her clothes behind in the closet in her chamber. She would be back soon enough. She mentally made a detailed list of everything she would take and visualised how it would all fit into her pack. Then she packed it that way, and, of course, it all went in perfectly first time. She knew it would; she had done this before.

Saying a fond farewell to Annagól, she set out. The weather was fair and she soon fell into a steady marching pace that became quite mechanical, mile after mile, leaving her mind free to study the scenery. In places, the forest had been cleared and she mentally drew up battle-lines for imaginary armies. Here was a slope that would favour defenders, there was a hill where archers could rain down arrows upon their enemies. Here was a gully where skirmishers might infiltrate, there was a stretch of boggy ground that would hamper cavalry. It came naturally to her, to think in those terms. Terrain was for using.

She met a traveller with a pack mule, laden with bags, and stepped aside to let the mule take the best of the roadway. She exchanged a simple greeting with the traveller who appeared to be a merchant of some kind but she did not enquire as to the nature of the goods he was transporting. She needed nothing from him and conversation would have been superfluous. The mule merely eyed her without interest and plodded wearily on beside its master.

Cresting a rise, she spied two figures in the distance, who did not appear to be moving. At first sight she took them for a parent and child, but it soon became apparent, as she marched towards them, that it was a man and a halfling. They were both shabbily dressed and generally unkempt and they seemed to be just loitering on the road, watching her approach.

Val was suspicious of the pair. She halted about five paces short of them and stood quite still, four-square in the road with her staff in her right hand and her left hand concealed under her travelling cloak. 'Good morrow,' she said and calmly waited for them to make the first move, whether hostile or not. She rocked slightly forward onto her toes so that they would sense that she was not unawares.

'Well now, Keg, if it isn't a fine young lady,' said the taller, who held a cudgel loose in one hand. 'Come to give us aid in our hour of need.'

'That it is, Bushel, that it is,' agreed Keg the halfling, 'just as we was nearly giving up.'

'I think you are mistaken,' said Val levelly, staring the man in the face while watching the halfling out of the corner of her eye.

'Oh no, no mistake, missy, said Keg. 'See, we has a little problem with coins. We don't seem to have any. But we thinks maybe we soon will. Very soon, like,' and with that he produced a dagger with a flourish.

Val did not move. She spoke only two words.

Chapter Four

'Behold Sevenbridge,' Aromin announced.

Grimfund beheld Sevenbridge but with little enthusiasm. It was easy to see where the town got its name – strategically placed at the confluence of three rivers, it was built on islands connected by wooden bridges that could be raised to allow the passage of sailing barges or to hamper invaders in case of attack. That in itself seemed a sound enough scheme to the dwarf; but the buildings were predominantly timber with almost nothing of good solid stone. This was a town that was vulnerable to a quick end by fire or a slow end by rot and decay of its fabric. He was unimpressed. 'Too much wood,' was his terse comment.

'True. For the people of Sevenbridge, wood is abundant and stone hard to obtain,' explained Aromin with a sweep of the hand that encompassed the surrounding landscape. 'This is the Elk Forest. Within its secret ways I dwelt for many years with my band of comrades and it is within this very forest that my dearest Anabarié lies entombed.'

"Her death troubles you still,' said Grimfund.

'Her death, and the manner of it, *angers* me still,' said Aromin with a scowl. 'It was so pointless. The waste of a beautiful life. We were happy together, there with our friends hiding in this great forest. We troubled no-one but for the travellers whom we held up and robbed.'

'What went wrong?'

'We were betrayed. Betrayed! One of our number, a wretch called Banrik, colluded with Morshall's men to lead us unwitting into an ambush. We were slain! Slain! Anabarié was the last to fall, defending me - I see her eyes still, as the light faded from them. Anabarié! You did not have to die! It was Morshall's work! Morshall is evil!' cried Aromin, his face contorted with rage, grief, anger and hatred.

'Who is Morshall?' asked Grimfund evenly.

'The bastard son of the Earl of Sevenbridge. This town, and the surrounding farmlands and forests for hundreds of miles, belong to the Earl but are ruled by Morshall in his name. He keeps the people oppressed with punitive taxes to support his licentious lifestyle and maintains a network of

spies and informers to turn the people of the town against each other. He is cunning and thoroughly evil.'

'And of Banrik? A grudge of some sort? The jingle of coin?'

'I know not. He was a miserable cur, fled into the forest to escape some crime of which he would never speak. Perhaps he was simply a spy and we were taken in by his story. Or it may have been for money; we all had bounties on our heads. Indeed, I still do.'

'You are a wanted man?'

'You could collect twenty ducats for my head in Sevenbridge, if you were so minded.'

'Your head is safe with me,' growled Grimfund. 'I am no treacherous renegade. Are you certain it was Banrik? If so, he deserves to die by your hand.'

'I know only that, when I returned secretly to the scene of slaughter to bury the bodies of my fallen comrades, his was the only corpse that was missing. It could only have been him.'

'Convincing. In the seat of judgement in my grandfather's halls, many a villain has been condemned on less evidence. But in this town, justice may be less reliable. Let us pass by and avoid the town altogether.'

'No, we must enter it in any case, to cross the rivers, for there are no other bridges for many miles. There is no way around that. But there are ways to enter secretly and I have friends who will hide us from Morshall's spies. His victims are many and their families have little love for his agents.'

'A good inn is out of the question, then?'

'My friend, you will soon experience squalor in this town such as you cannot imagine. Morshall's taxes keep the townspeople in poverty and their poverty forces them to crime. The criminals band together for protection from each other and Morshall contrives to pit band against band so that none can become powerful enough to oppose him. Everyone knows that if Morshall were deposed, the result would be anarchy and open warfare between bands, which would be worse than if he were allowed to continue. He knows this and has cunningly contrived it thus. The misery of the town is of his making. Evil prospers in Sevenbridge. That is why so many fled into the forest and swelled the ranks of my outlaws. And even then, he hated us for being free of him.'

'It is a bad ruler who oppresses the people thus. My grandfather in his halls lives well enough, but his subjects do not starve in burrows.'

'It would not be prudent to be heard saying that, in Sevenbridge.'

'Point taken.'

'Then let us go down. Under the piers of the westernmost bridge there is a broken gate that leads to the alleys of the Furchin district. Even Morshall's men fear to tread there. You must stay close to me and pass yourself off as a renegade, a soldier who fled from battle, a deserter from some far-off army. Keep the lie simple and say little if asked. To be tight-lipped is to be credible in the Furchins.'

'Lead on,' said Grimfund, 'I have the feeling I am about to be educated.'

ii

Grimfund was indeed appalled by what he saw in the alleyways of Sevenbridge. The houses were ramshackle, their timbers rotting, and the wattle-and-daub walls crumbling unheeded. To the stink of sewage in the gutters was added the pungent odour of mould, of blight, of disease and death. The rats didn't seem to care. One ran over his boot and met the blade of his axe. Two others pounced on its still-twitching corpse and began to feed. An old woman stared at Aromin. Her eyes were gaunt with sickness and hunger. She turned aside, clutching her shawl, and faded silently into a doorway.

Aromin led Grimfund into a filthy alley between two derelict houses. With a quick glance over his shoulder, he knocked swiftly on a boarded-up door, three times and again twice. A face appeared for an instant at an upstairs window and was gone. There was a sound from within.

The door opened and a man's voice spoke. 'Inside, quickly!'

Grimfund followed Aromin through the door into a dark, smoke-filled room. A ragged man was regarding them with a look of surprise mixed with apprehension. Across the room, a woman was propelling some small children up a stairway. The man looked quickly out into the alleyway, then closed the door and barred it securely.

'Aromin? We all thought you were dead. Have you returned? And who is this? A dwarf is a strange henchman for an elf.'

'Ask him not,' said Aromin. 'It is good to see you again old friend. My band in the Elk Forest were indeed slain, and I the only survivor. We were betrayed by Banrik. He led us into Morshall's trap.'

'Banrik? Aye, he came back. He claimed that he was the only survivor and that you, yourself were the traitor. Few believed him. He is a marked man now, a known informer. No doubt he believes you dead and feels safe from your vengeance.'

'So. Banrik lies to cover his own iniquity. I am only passing briefly through this town but I will have it out with him. He shall confess his treachery and die.' There was rage in Aromin's countenance as he said this.

'Make your way to the guild chamber,' said the ragged man, 'but hood your face lest you be recognised. Someone will entice Banrik there and you must confront him. There will be some present glad to see his downfall.'

So it was, that the traitor Banrik was brought to answer for his treachery. At first, he knew not who the hooded stranger was – he did not recognise Aromin nor the dwarf who stood at his right hand. When questioned, he tried to proclaim that Aromin had foolishly led the band into an ambush and that only he, Banrik, had escaped alive. There was murmuring in the chamber.

But then Aromin threw back his hood and cried in wrath 'You lie, son of the mother of a dog! It is I, Aromin, who say that you sold out to Morshall. Was it for coin? How much did he pay you for so many lives?'

Banrik was stunned. 'No! They promised that all would be slain!' he cried, 'None left alive to tell the tale! They promised I would be safe!'

'So. You admit your treachery,' said Grimfund, who up until now had remained silent.

'I had to do it! Morshall held my sister hostage and would have sold her into slavery! I did it for her sake!' Banrik was babbling, now, as he sought to justify his actions. But in the words of the old saying: *A man who confesses to treachery finds no friends on either side.* There was a sharp intake of breath from several of the audience.

'He lies.' This came from a richly-dressed woman who had been sitting quietly at the side of the room surrounded by attendants. She stood up and threw back her veil. There was a murmur among the onlookers as she was recognised. She was known in the town as Mildine, the mistress of Morshall and mother of his favourite son. And she was feared. To cross

Mildine was to cross Morshall and to cross Morshall was a death warrant. 'Do you not recognise your own sister, Banrik? Do I look like a slave? But yes, I would have been, if you had your way, after you murdered your own father and fled into the forest, leaving me destitute and your mother heartbroken with grief!'

'No!'

'Yes.'

Grimfund spoke again and his voice had the weight of stone. 'Guilty.'

'Banrik dies,' snarled Aromin. He drew his sword and, holding the hilt in both hands struck downwards with the force of a killing blow. The blade entered Banrik's neck and plunged down into his chest, bursting the heart. It was all over in a moment.

There was silence in the room, save for Banrik's death rattle and the sound of his limbs beating spasmodically on the floor.

Mildine spoke again. 'Leave quickly, elf, and do not return to this town. There is still a price on your head. You are fortunate that *I was not here and have not seen you.*' Then she turned and left by a side door, and several people from the audience, who afterwards *had not been there either*, slipped away with her.

iii

'The forest here is delightful, is it not, Grimfund?' remarked Aromin joyfully. He was feeling at home here, where the sunlight fell in dappled shadows amongst the undergrowth and woodland flowers reached up for its golden rays. It was good to be back. He felt almost normal again.

Stone! Trapped in stone! For time unknown the spirit had paced to and fro, up and down, seeking a way out and not finding it. Everywhere was stone. Why? Why was there no release?

'I'm glad you are in a good mood,' said Grimfund, 'I feel almost talkative myself. This is certainly an improvement on that awful town. Frankly, I was glad to leave it. By the way, what was that brightly-coloured bird that flew across just now?'

'A popinjay. They nest in the oak trees and feed mostly on acorns. I think they are proud of their bright plumage and try to outdo their rivals in gaudiness, like the noblemen of Mumbria.'

'The squirrels don't seem to like them.'

'They, too, nest in oak trees and feed on acorns. There is constant warfare between the squirrels and the popinjays over who can store up the greatest cache of acorns and who can steal it from them.'

'The wars of dwarf against dwarf are distressingly similar.'

'You fight over acorns?' asked Aromin with a laugh.

'No, gold and gemstones. But it is much the same principle,' admitted the dwarf.

'If you say so. Now, come, we must follow this dancing rivulet upstream for a short distance.'

'Lead on.'

The continued together, working their way along the side of the stream to its source.

'We called this spot *Ménocillátria* which means "The Pool Below The Little Waterfall". Not exactly original but everyone understood what we meant,' said Aromin. 'Now, look at the rocky shelf, above and to the left. What do you see?'

A shelf of igneous rock, possibly kammerite, eroded by water, overhung by trees of some kind.'

Stone! Everywhere stone! Why? Why? Alone and cold! Cold and alone! Why?

'Good. I'll take your word for it on the geology. They are wanderberry trees, by the way. Their fruits are sweet and refreshing but mildly intoxicating. But look more closely. This was a lookout post. It was supposed to be hard to see, though it availed us little, in the end, for the danger came from another direction.'

'Yes, I see it now. It is indeed well concealed. Is there a way up?'

Just to the right, there is a cleft that we can scramble up. But the thorn bushes have overgrown the cleft as you can see, so there will be work for your axe.'

'Suits me. It's odd, but since I used this axe on that horror that Val disturbed, it seems that nothing can blunt its keenness. There must have

been something in its poisonous blood that reacted with the steel of the blade.'

'Interesting. Your smiths might be able to imitate it, if the secret could be unravelled.'

'If. But we still don't know what that thing was and may never know. By the way, what did you find at the back of its cave? Not a cockatrice egg, I'll be bound.'

'Ah,' said Aromin with a knowing look, 'I see I was not unobserved. You are correct. I found the long-dead bones of a halfling, still clad in antique mail. I took the armour. He had no need of it and it may be of some value to us. It is in my chamber in the Happy Kobold back at Bythorpe. He also had a healing potion that I thought might come useful one day. I have that here in my pouch,' and he showed Grimfund a small flask of base metal with a brass stopper. He removed the stopper carefully and Grimfund took a sniff at the contents, grunted and approved.

Alone and cold! No escape! Cold and alone! The spirit paced to and fro, to and fro, trapped in stone.

'Very prudent,' said Grimfund, 'But don't get it mixed up with the Elixir!' Then he hefted his axe and eyed the thorn bushes. 'Come axe, let's get to work,' he said and, after some effort, he cleared a way through and they continued on their way through the forest.

As they entered a clearing, the air grew suddenly chill and a white mist descended. Out of the mist, a ghostly band of men and women came in silence. Aromin recognised his erstwhile followers and cried out but they heard him not, nor did they see him. At their lead was a younger, straighter vision of himself with visage unmarked by the care-worn lines of his later years and at his side a handsome elfin woman clad in green raiment and armed for hunting. Thus, he beheld Anabarié once more and his heart leapt within his chest. He tried to warn them, to sound an alarm, to plead with them to turn back, but they saw him not nor did they hear his cries, though the shade of Anabarié seemed to glance in his direction for a moment and a puzzled frown crossed her brow. He redoubled his efforts, shouting and imploring them to heed his warning but it was in vain.

Grimfund saw a man at the rear of the band look round furtively and draw a hunting horn from beneath his cloak. He recognised the shade of Banrik. He, too, was powerless to intervene as Banrik raised the horn to his ghostly lips. No sound did Grimfund hear, but he saw the import of the

deed. The trap was sprung and the ghost of Banrik turned and fled silently between the trees.

All around Aromin, men fell to ghostly arrows and as they fell, they vanished. Some nocked arrows themselves and fired into the trees but it availed them not and they, too, fell. Others drew swords and rushed away seeking their foes but were cut down by the ghosts of soldiers in palid hauberks who were all around the margins of the clearing.

The shade of Anabarié was the last to fall. She lingered for a moment, pierced by many arrows, and Aromin heard again in his mind her fatal words beseeching him to flee. He saw his own ghost vanish into the trees as he remembered doing on that fateful day.

He collapsed on the ground, sobbing and crying out *Anabarié! Anabarié!*, over and over again.

The spirit screeched in its stone tomb. He was calling! He was calling her! She must escape! There was no escape! The stone! The stone! She must reach Him! She could not reach Him! Call Him! Call Him!

Aromin got unsteadily to his feet and started stumbling towards where he knew Anabarié's tomb lay in the forest. His legs seemed not to belong to him and he had difficulty moving in a straight line. He kept seeing Anabarié's eyes as she gazed at him in sorrow and alarm, knowing she was dying. Tree-roots caught at his feet and branches lashed his face but he kept going, almost blindly. Grimfund followed but there was little he could do to intervene, nor did he feel that he should.

They reached the place where stood a stone mausoleum, covered in turf and partly overgrown with creepers. White flowers had taken root around the slab that sealed the entrance. A raven flapped away, its vigil done. Aromin sank down at the slab and feebly tried to move it, to open the tomb. His hands did not work properly but he persisted. The feeling of despair and grief that he had felt when Anabarié died, returned with the force of a hammer-blow and he moaned.

The spirit whirled around and around frantically. He is come! The stone! Why the stone? Why?

Grimfund took a crowbar from his pack and gauged the width, the thickness, the weight and the balance of the slab. He inserted the iron tool at a place where the masonry had crumbled slightly, and heaved expertly. The slab moved and fell aside.

Open! The stone is open! Out! Out! The endless sky beckons!

As Aromin crawled into the tomb, Grimfund saw only a hideous shape moving towards him, shrieking like death, with ghostly arms outstretched as if reaching for his very soul. He flung aside his crowbar and raised his axe, acting with the instinct of a warrior and calling upon Berkadin and all the gods to aid him. Time slowed down. He swung his axe with a mighty stroke.

'No!' cried Aromin, jerking around, 'It is Anabarié! My beloved!' and he tried desperately to interpose himself to stop the blow.

But the blow fell where it must. To Grimfund's horror, Aromin was slain instantly.

Out! Out! He has come! Two are one! The sky! We go to the sky! The sky! And two elven spirits rose joyously into the heavens, intertwined, diffused, and were gone like an autumn mist in the noonday sun.

Grimfund dropped to his knees and begged the gods for forgiveness. The words of his oath came back to him. He knew what he must do. He fumbled in his pouch and drew out his silver flask of the Elixir. He called upon Threy to witness. 'Holy Threy, this elf, Aromin died for love. He was slain defending the shade of his wife. Grant him immortality and let my oath be fulfilled.' So saying, he anointed Aromin's corpse.

Aromin jerked and thrashed as his body returned to life, still horribly wounded by the axe blow. His muscles were in spasm and his face was a mask of horror, eyes staring. Grimfund dug into Aromin's pouch and drew out the brass-stoppered flask of healing potion. He hoped it would work. He pulled Aromin's head up and poured the liquid down his throat, but carefully so as not to choke him. Aromin gagged and swallowed, then gradually began to relax as the potion took effect and his wound closed.

Grimfund carried Aromin out and laid him down comfortably on a patch of mossy grass that grew nearby. The rays of the sun fell upon his face and for a moment he seemed to glow with a golden light. He awoke and looked around, confused. 'Wha habbnd?' he asked thickly and Grimfund explained.

'Feel ztrange.'

'Rest awhile. I'll get a fire going and heat us up some food. Expect you're hungry?'

'Yez. H'ngry. Iz gone. Blacknezz gone.'

'Blackness? There was darkness in the tomb. Is that what you mean?'

'No. Blacknezz in side. In here,' mumbled Aromin, putting a hand to his head.

'There was blackness inside your head, and now it's gone?'

'Yes. Blacknezz gone. Feelz good. Like zunzhine inside.'

'That will be the effect of the potion. It must have been quite powerful.'

'No. Effect of dyingg. Blacknezz stayed behind, zomewhere elze.'

'I don't really understand, but if you say you feel better, that's good enough for me.'

'Thankz.'

Aromin dozed peacefully while Grimfund made a camp fire and cooked up some broth. A songbird alighted in a nearby tree and sang a joyful tune, seemingly ever-varied. In the far distance another bird answered and they seemed to carry on a lengthy conversation about something. The dwarf had no knowledge of birdsong and did not know what it was about but it didn't seem to matter, somehow.

After a while, Aromin awoke and seemed much better. They shared a bowl of broth and some dry bread. 'That was good, thank you,' said Aromin.

'You do understand that I used the Elixir to bring you back?'

'Yes, I understand. You have certainly fulfilled your oath. And of course, I forgive you for killing me. It was an accident. No hard feelings. Actually, I feel better for having been briefly dead so you have done me a favour.' Aromin grinned as he said that. 'Not many people get to say "thank you for killing me", do they?'

Grimfund saw the funny side of that and gave a guffaw. 'Becoming immortal does seem to improve the sense of humour. Maybe I should try it sometime myself. We dwarves are not known for levity.'

'Levity! Hah! That was almost a joke. There is hope for you yet.'

'Do you still plan to destroy all the gods? They did revive you when I called upon Threy.'

'No, the anger is quite gone. I feel quite benevolent towards them, now.'

'So you will side with us to protect the ... Codex?'

'Yes, of course. I shall need something to occupy the time for all eternity. It could get quite dull eventually, I suppose. I must ask Annagól how he plans to cope with that. I expect he's had time to think it through.'

'I thought you didn't like him. Was there not some estrangement between you?'

'Yes. But that's gone too. He's a bit pompous and he used to torment me when we were children but I'm not a child now. That is all in the past. He is my brother and we are fellow immortals.'

'You really have changed.'

'Not really. Just stopped being angry. Dying does that. I recommend it as a cure for anger.'

'Hmm. For most people, dying is a cure for quite a lot of things.'

'There we are, then. I don't see the problem.'

'Most people worry about what happens afterwards. But this conversation is getting out of hand.'

'Then let us talk about practical matters,' said Aromin, putting on a serious face. 'We should make plans to return to Bythorpe and tell Annagól and the others of our adventures. But we cannot go back through Sevenbridge, even if we wanted to. We shall have to make a long detour far to the north, to where the rivers can be forded.'

'Have you travelled that route in the past? Is it an easy route?'

'Well, yes and no. Yes, I have travelled that way and crossed the fords, but only once. And no, it will not be easy. There are no towns or villages on that road. We will not be able to buy provisions and will have to live off the land as best we can. But we shall come through well enough.'

'Then lead the way, O Immortal One.'

iv

They travelled together for many days, through forest and moorland, following the western bank of the great river that rushed and foamed in the valleys below. They saw no-one and talked little, save for mundane matters about the journey. Aromin was more cheerful than Grimfund had ever known him and his good humour was infectious but each was wrapped in his own thoughts.

'This place looks inhabited,' remarked Aromin one morning as they came upon a clearing in some pine woods where, close to a neat wooden hut

there was a vegetable patch that someone had cultivated. He called out. 'Anyone at home?'

A ragged old man emerged from the hut, saw them and shook his fist. 'I came here for solitude. Be off and stop pestering me!' he shouted.

'Forgive us, venerable one,' replied Aromin with civility. 'We are journeying through these woods and beyond, to where the fords of Eloin cross the great river. We came upon your dwelling only by happenstance and not with any intention to cause you distress. We will leave you to your solitude.'

'Oh, now you are here, you might as well come in. My mood of contemplation is ruined anyway.'

'What is it you contemplate, all alone out here in the pine woods?' asked Aromin, intrigued.

'Life, death and the nature of eternity.'

'I see, that is most interesting. Have you thought about immortality at all? It is an interest of mine, you could say,' asked Aromin as he and Grimfund followed the philosopher into his hut.

They seated themselves cross-legged on a mat in the manner of children. The hut was simply furnished and had an orderly air, as if everything knew its place in this microcosm that the man inhabited. There was a stack of firewood beside the hearth and a woodcutter's axe hung on the wall nearby. A small collection of books were neatly arranged on a table with pen, ink and a sheaf of writing paper beside them. Everything was in fine juxtaposition with everything else. The philosopher sat on a stool and assumed a suitably thoughtful pose.

'Immortality? A pipe-dream. Something yearned for by weak minds too afraid to admit that their own lives are of no consequence and vainly hoping that indefinitely prolonging them will somehow give them more meaning.'

'There are two schools of thought on that,' said Aromin, making himself comfortable. He was going to enjoy this. He hadn't had a good polemical argument for ages.

'State your proposition.'

'I am immortal,' said Aromin carefully, in the manner of one making an opening move in a game of chess.

'A bold claim. What evidence can you adduce to support that contention?'

'I was slain. My friend here anointed me with the Elixir of Life and called upon the god Threy. By his will, I returned to life as an immortal.'

'If, for the sake of argument, I accept your account of events then it does not prove that you are immortal. To die and to be resurrected once does not, in itself, make you immune to dying again.'

'The same thing happened to my brother. He was slain and anointed with the Elixir. He lives, as my friend can attest, and he too is immortal.'

'How do you know that he is immortal? Has anyone tried to kill him and failed?'

'Not that I am aware of, but why would he lie?'

'I do not suggest that your brother is lying, but rather that he is mistaken. In the same way, you yourself are mistaken. The two mistakes do not cancel each other out to make a truth.'

'Go on.'

'You experience rebirth once and imagine that it is sufficient to last an eternity? A simple fallacy. You tell yourself: *I survived once, therefore I will survive always*. A dice-player who wins once, imagines that he cannot lose despite the possibly overwhelming evidence of his steadily-mounting losses.'

'I have known many dice-players like that,' admitted Grimfund.

'Nevertheless, I believe that I am immortal.'

'And how is this manifest? Can you fly through the air? Can you walk through walls?'

'No, neither of those things. I am but alive. That is itself proof of the efficacy of the Elixir.'

'Suppose I accept that your Elixir restores life and in that sense prolongs it. That is a far cry from claiming that the prolongation is of indefinite extent. On the contrary, since you have been slain once, then by the same fallacious line of reasoning it follows that you will be slain infinitely many more times and are therefore not immortal in the slightest. Indeed, you are almost unique. You are demonstrably death-prone whereas I and your dwarven friend here, having never died, are not proven to be so.'

'If I were to cut off your head, would it not prove that you are mortal?'

'Possibly, but you would fail to win the point since I would not be in a position to concede defeat. You cannot win a logical argument by slaying your opponent. We philosophers regard such things as downright unsporting.

But this is irrelevant. Even if you were to prove that I am mortal, that would not prove that you yourself are not. The two are unconnected.'

'I concede that point. But assuming that I am immortal, how would I prove it to you? What evidence would you accept?'

'You must allow me to chop off your own head. If you are right, I will fail in some unaccountable way; if not, you will pay the ultimate price for being wrong. Are you willing to try the experiment?'

'I think I must decline your generous offer,' said Aromin laughing. 'I prefer to continue in my foolish belief and not risk putting it to the test. But thank you for your insight. You have shown me that I cannot reasonably claim to be immortal with any certainty that admits of philosophical proof. I am glad we chanced to meet you. And now we will leave you to your solitude.'

'I thank you for the visit. I do not get many opportunities to defeat the immortals in argument. You are not gods in disguise are you? Come to tease an old man? If so, I have some complaints about the way the world is arranged.'

Aromin laughed. 'If we were truly gods, I fancy we would be better prepared. But you would make a worthy opponent nonetheless. I wish you well.' On a sudden insight, he rummaged in his pouch and drew out one of his silver flasks. 'Allow me to present you with this gift,' he continued, 'It is a single draught of the Elixir of Life, drawn from the Glomb of Threy by Annagól One-Eye himself. Use it as you will and with my blessing.'

The philosopher accepted the gift in the spirit in which it was given, then elf and dwarf took their leave and continued on their journey.

'You did not win the argument,' remarked Grimfund after a time.

'No, indeed. Because the old man was right. To know that one is immortal, it is not enough to *not die*. Anyone can, with good fortune, *not die* quite often. You yourself have *not died* on at least two occasions that I have witnessed, have you not? I see that you agree. No, to be reckoned immortal, one has to *not die for a very long time*. If I am still alive in ten thousand years, then perhaps I will be entitled to make the claim.'

'And in the meantime?'

'In the meantime, I'm not going to worry about it.'

Grimfund had no answer to that. Or, rather, he could think of a great many answers but all of them seemed petty so he said nothing.

V

Their way led them high into the mountains. The air was cold and the going was rough but Grimfund was in his element and cheered on his companion with a dwarven marching song. It had many verses that spoke of hardship and the stout-heartedness of dwarves withstanding adversity. Although Aromin only half-understood the words, that were in a vernacular dialect of the dwarvish language he was unfamiliar with, he appreciated the rhymes and rhythms of the song and asked Grimfund to teach him the chorus so that he could join in too.

It began to snow and the snow began to drift. As they were climbing a steep gully, Aromin remarked on a hawk flying high overhead, carrying something in its talons. As they watched, an eagle rose from a crag and assailed the hawk which dropped its burden and fled screaming. Something fell with a soft thud into a snow bank near to Grimfund. It was a hare that had evidently been the hawk's prey. It was still alive, but barely, and was plainly in great pain. Grimfund took pity on it and wrung its neck to put it out of its misery. Then he tied its back feet together and hung it from his belt for the pot.

The snow was falling more thickly and it was getting difficult to see the way. 'Alas, I have led us ill,' said Aromin, pulling his cloak more closely around him. His hood kept slipping off; there was something wrong with the drawstring but he couldn't fix it now, it would have to wait until they found somewhere out of the weather to make camp. 'We should find shelter if we can,' he added.

'These rocks are strangely distorted,' said Grimfund, 'there may be a place where the folds are undercut, just up yonder.' And he led the way up a steep rocky slope to where an overhang had recently fallen, leaving a space beneath that was free of snow and large enough to provide a makeshift refuge. They heaved some boulders aside to clear a larger space and used them to wall up one end against the wind.

'I can make us some light, but there is no prospect of gathering firewood for a blaze. It will be a cold sojourn,' said Aromin unfastening his pack. He used elven magic, the little that he knew, to cause one of the boulders to shine with a comforting yellow light that made their refuge seem less bleak.

‘We have enough fuel for a cooking pot,’ said Grimfund, ‘and this hare will be our supper. There is no shortage of snow to melt and I have some turnips for a stew.’ He took off his helmet and went outside to collect enough snow to fill it.

Aromin busied himself fixing the drawstring of his hood. After a while, when Grimfund had not returned, he became slightly concerned, donned his cloak and went outside to see what had become of him. There was no sign of the dwarf but a line of his footprints, rapidly filling with snow, seemed to lead away down the slope. Aromin called but there was no answer. He returned to the refuge, gathered up his belongings and used the magic again to make a beacon of his sword, which he held aloft. Then he set off to follow the trail of footprints before they became obliterated by the still-falling snow.

Chapter Five

'You might want to keep those swords near to hand, O faithful and loyal wife of mine,' said Ganhard quietly to Poli.

They had left Bythorpe and were walking back towards Redcott along a dusty road through wooded hillsides. There had been very few other travellers on the road that morning but now they could see a stranger in the distance who seemed to be loitering and from his general posture seemed suspicious. Under her travelling cloak, Poli was wearing the sword belt that Aromin had given her. She unfastened the front of her cloak so that the swords could be drawn at need and loosened them in their scabbards.

'If he turns nasty, dear, keep him distracted while I stab him in the back,' Poli said. 'He may not be expecting that.' She was feeling comfortable with Ganhard beside her. It seemed right for them to be a couple. It was hard to find a good husband these days and she had decided that this man was going to be hers. She just had to keep working on him until he thought it was his idea. And the subterfuge of posing as a married couple was working to her advantage; if they kept it up long enough, he might just slide into matrimony without even noticing. Not that anything had been said, of course.

'Let's do this the easy way,' said the loiterer to Ganhard as they drew near, 'hand over your coin and your wife doesn't get hurt.' A knife slid easily from his rough woollen sleeve into his hand. Poli recognised the method and wasn't impressed. A knife was useless against mail and, if the robber was any good at his profession, he would have noticed that Ganhard, although cloaked, was walking as one wearing armour.

In answer, Ganhard held his hands before him, locked them together in a slightly unusual way and in a loud clear voice enunciated the words of a spell: **GORBORAX ENTUSIX!** Poli didn't know what the spell would do, but she slid around behind the robber and drew her swords in one fluid motion.

'I fancy this gentleman's belt is loose,' said Ganhard with a knowing wink to Poli, 'but, alas, he is quite unable to move a muscle to attend to it. Would you remove it for him, so that I can helpfully examine it for a broken buckle?'

Poli took the hint and sliced through the man's belt, so that his trousers fell down around his ankles, then reached around and relieved him of the knife in his hand, the other knife in his other sleeve and the two more tucked into his boots. She also relieved him of a lady's purse that he had stolen that morning and had tucked inside his shirt. About seventeen coins, Poli guessed from the weight. 'Lordy, Lordy, husband,' she squealed, 'this villain has dropped his trousers! What is the world coming to? A lady is not safe!'

By the time the spell wore off and the would-be robber had re-adjusted his clothing, the pair had run away over the next hill laughing merrily. They never knew what he called after them, but it probably wasn't very nice.

ii

It was market day in Redcott when they arrived and there was a queue at the Amber Gate of people waiting to be checked through by the guards. Ganhard was half-hoping to see the bartizans flapping in and out of the arrow slits in their two little turrets over the gate but he was disappointed again. He mentioned it to Poli but she didn't really know about them. She thought perhaps a bartizan was some kind of flying buttress, but she wasn't sure.

There was some confusion when Ganhard and Poli identified themselves as husband and wife and the captain of the guard was called.

He questioned Ganhard first. His story rang true in itself – he was a cleric from a distant temple, travelling home with a casket of potions, and it was quite normal for such clerics to go about armed and armoured as he was, especially if he was a courier carrying something of value. So far, so good.

He turned his attention to Poli and asked her a few general questions about where she grew up. She spoke with the accent of a local farm girl and she seemed to know the district south of the town so he was prepared to believe that. Was there anyone in Redcott who could vouch for her? She named Uncle Bantrem so the captain followed procedures and detained the two while the jeweller was sent for.

The captain wanted to know about the pair of swords Poli was wearing. He examined them and saw that they were of remarkable craftsmanship, better than anything he himself was ever likely to own. The question in

his mind was this: how did a simple farm girl come to be in possession of them, other than dishonestly? Poli explained that they were a gift from an elf called Aromin, the brother of the legendary Annagól One-Eye. Had she proof, asked the captain? Poli was stumped by that and looked pleadingly at Ganhard. Fortunately, Ganhard had kept Aromin's note and was able to produce it. He pointed out the elvish signature and the captain was impressed. It might be a forgery, but if so it was a convincing one and he was disposed to be convinced.

That left the question of these two being married. Where and when was the wedding? How long had they known each other? How did they first meet?

'Captain,' said Ganhard, 'I will be honest with you. You are right to question us. We are not truly married and we met here in Redcott less than a month ago. We are couriers, each working for the same party but on separate errands. That is why my companion is armed as she is. We were advised to travel together for mutual protection but to pretend to be a married couple to avoid attracting attention. But this has had the opposite effect and you have seen through our subterfuge. Bantrem the jeweller can vouch that we each are who we say we are, but he knows nothing of our missions.'

The captain reflected. 'It would have helped if you had told me this earlier,' he said, looking sternly at both of them. 'If the jeweller recognises you, I will be satisfied. However,' and here he paused, 'it might help your disguise if you actually wore wedding rings. It is the little things that give you away.'

Bantrem arrived and was pleased to see them and hear all that had befallen them since they left Redcott with the caravan. He laughed when Poli told him what the captain had said about the missing wedding rings and said 'Well, we can soon remedy that, come to my workshop and we'll soon have you fitted up. These will only be on loan, mind, until you stop pretending to be married.' So that was done and then they all went together to surprise Aunt Meg.

Later that day, Poli and Ganhard went for a stroll together. Poli was happy. She was glad to be back in Redcott - it was like coming home and, now that she had a man on her arm, and a clergyman no less, she felt the equal of any. It didn't matter that so far they were only pretending to be married, no-one they passed in the street would know, would they? She led Ganhard proudly through the town square, nodding to acquaintances, showing him off.

They stopped at a market stall where Poli examined some ribbons, waiting for Ganhard to take the hint and buy her some. There was a bit of a scene nearby when a prosperous-looking merchant who was parading his latest mistress bumped into his wife who was out shopping with a gaggle of her lady friends. The local cats, who had been hanging around a fish-monger's stall, wisely fled.

"Well, he got what he deserved," said Poli a little later after the excitement was over and the crowds had drifted away. "That girl on his arm was nothing but a washerwoman's daughter from Barrow Street."

"I though she was quite pretty," said Ganhard, "Prettier than his wife, anyway. Can't blame a man for finding pleasure where he can. Ow! That hurt!"

"You're supposed to be pretending to be my husband," hissed Poli crossly, having just smacked Ganhard on the ear, "I hope you're not going to pretend to be an *unfaithful* husband, because if you are, I might just pretend to be very annoyed and you wouldn't like that."

"Yes, dear," said Ganhard.

"All right then, as long as that's understood. Which do you like best, these red ribbons or the pink?"

"Er, the red ones."

"You're hopeless. With this dress? We'll take the pink ones. Pay the man and let's be getting back."

Back at home, Aunt Meg had a quiet word with Bantrem and they decided that Ganhard and Poli should be bedded together. Poli grinned like a cat with two ears but Ganhard was embarrassed when they told him. He tried to protest but Meg said sternly "What, you expect a bed each, like the king and queen? It's share and share alike in this household, young man!" Bantrem clapped him on the back and said "Go to it lad, might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, what?"

In bed, after praying devoutly, Ganhard tried to explain to Poli that when he joined the temple originally he had been required to take a vow of chastity that he could not and would not break; that clerics were only allowed to marry within the order, and then it was only the most senior ones and even this was rare; that this marriage between the two of them could only ever be a pretence. He hoped that Poli understood that and he hoped that her uncle and aunt understood that, because he got the impression that in their minds it was a foregone conclusion. "Don't worry about it," replied Poli, "I'm not trying to trap you into doing anything you

don't want to do.' Then she put her head on his shoulder and went to sleep with her hair tickling his cheek.

iii

A week later they were in Upcross and Poli was sitting quietly beside Ganhard as he reported to Anelia. She had time to look around her at the sumptuous furnishings of Anelia's audience chamber; the gilded statues and richly-embroidered hangings, the ornately carved furniture and the frescos on the walls. It was all calculated to create an impression of wealth and power, to intimidate visitors. Except that this particular visitor wasn't susceptible to such displays and was mentally calculating how a thief might steal everything portable and what price it would fetch if offered to the right discerning collector.

Poli didn't like Anelia. Her robes were over-elaborate and had too many embroidered symbols to be taken seriously. It was as if Anelia wasn't as devout as she might like to appear and was over-compensating. If a woman were truly devout, thought Poli, it would show in her bearing, her expression of face and her general demeanour. Anelia showed none of those signs. Rather, in her pinched face, sharp tongue and tightly-scraped-back bun of hair, she had the look of a devious and scheming woman who kept her position by guile and stratagem. Poli could see how easily Anelia was able to manipulate Ganhard and resented her for it. Even as Ganhard spoke, and tried to give an honest account of his mission, Anelia was putting words into his mouth that slanted things her way.

Ganhard presented Anelia with the casket of Elixirs and explained Annagól's offer to talk if she would travel to Bythorpe and meet him at the Happy Kobold. Poli could almost see the wheels turning in Anelia's head. For her to go to Annagól would be a sign of submission and she was unwilling to give anyone that pleasure, but to decline the offer would gain her nothing. She will temporise, thought Poli, and think up some way to turn the situation to her advantage.

When Ganhard spoke of the five gods and the six champions, Poli could see Anelia bristle. Poli knew what the priestess was thinking. If the gods were going to go around intervening in the world like that, they should be operating through the temples and not doing things how they pleased. In Anelia's view, gods were to be manipulated by the temples not the other

way around. If Gyri were going to make pronouncements, it would be Anelia who did the pronouncing.

Anelia rounded on Poli. 'So, child, you are the champion of Abwen? You will be able to quote the Nine Hidden Foundations, I take it?'

Poli knew this was a direct attack intended to diminish her as a threat to Anelia's authority, but Poli was made of tougher stuff than that. *It didn't matter what Anelia said.* 'Abwen has chosen me to carry a burden for her,' she replied. 'It is enough that I carry it for her. The quoting of books is not part of my appointed duties. Abwen has priests to do that on her behalf, as Gyri has you to speak for her.'

Poli could see that Anelia was not pleased with that answer. It gave her nothing to drive a wedge into and she was not accustomed to being resisted. 'And what is this burden?' she demanded, 'It cannot be so great if a mere county girl is fitted to carry it. Can you even read, child? Are you even literate?'

'Almost any reasonably healthy girl could have been chosen. I just happened to be around,' said Poli quietly and then, acting on a sudden impulse, folded her hands upon her belly as if she were talking about the burden of being pregnant. It was a move calculated to throw Anelia completely off the scent and it worked superbly.

Anelia looked shocked and stared at Ganhard in disbelief. 'Am I hearing this, Ganhard Healshrine? Is it true?'

Poor Ganhard, who had no inkling of what was being alluded to, answered with straightforward honesty to the question that he heard. 'Poli is telling the truth,' he said simply, but, feeling nervous because he didn't quite understand what was going on, he started to fiddle with the ring on his finger. He hadn't really got used to wearing it and still felt self-conscious about it. He should have taken it off before entering the temple, but he had forgotten.

Her attention drawn to the ring, Anelia suddenly saw its significance. Or thought she did. And Poli was wearing an identical one. Wedding rings? But her priests were forbidden to marry! In Anelia's mind something utterly impossible had taken place. One of her priests, Ganhard, had been trusted to conduct a delicate mission at which he had succeeded perhaps better than she might have hoped but while out doing so, he had ... no, she couldn't even think about it. Ganhard has utterly betrayed his vows. It was unprecedented. But she knew what she must do. Protocol must be observed. History must show that she, Anelia, was blameless.

Anelia rang a small hand-bell beside her chair. It rang more violently than she had intended and she dropped it again with a clang. After a moment, a young acolyte entered in response. She wore a plain blue robe with a white cord around her waist and had shoulder-length fair hair. Ganhard was captivated. She looked just like Val, only shorter, meeker and softer and somehow more lovely. Poli noticed his interest and resented it immediately. There would be slapped ears tonight.

‘Cambrina,’ said Anelia carefully to the girl, ‘You are to write down faithfully every word you hear in this room until I tell you to stop. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, madam,’ she said and sat down at a side table where there were papers and writing pens already laid out. She looked round expectantly for someone to speak and caught Ganhard’s eye. He was still gazing at her, thinking how delightfully she moved when she sat down. She gave him a shy little smile. Poli thought daggers.

‘Ganhard Healshrine,’ began Anelia in a sonorous voice, ‘you have, by your own admission, broken your vows of chastity and obedience. You are dismissed from the order with the utmost ignominy and are stripped of all rights and powers of the priesthood. You will leave this temple immediately.’

There was a shocked silence. Neither Ganhard nor Poli could take in what Anelia had just pronounced. Some things are so unexpected that the mind simply does not register them. What had Anelia just said? The words made no sense?

The silence was broken by a crash as Cambrina stood up suddenly, sending the writing table flying. Her eyes pulsed with a golden radiance that was unbearably bright and she started speaking with a voice that was not her own. A voice that carried ultimate authority. The voice of Gyri herself.

**Ganhard is my champion and named thus,
Henceforth accountable to me and to me only.
In token of my esteem, I grant him this handmaiden.
Cambrina is released from this temple and assigned to Ganhard.**

Anelia threw herself to the ground. Never before, in all the annals of her temple, had the goddess appeared and spoken. And she, Anelia, had been present! ‘Holy Gyri,’ she whimpered, ‘look upon your most humble and devout servant.’

Anelia will travel to Bythorpe to comply with Annagól’s wishes.

'Yes! Yes! O blessed Gyri!' babbled Anelia, 'you have but to order me and it shall be so! Speak on, and your most devout servant Anelia will hear you!' But Gyri had departed and Cambrina had collapsed on the floor in a dead faint.

That was impressive, thought Poli. Her first reaction was glee. Anelia had her comeuppance (good!) and Ganhard was freed from those silly vows that stopped him getting married. She would have him now! Just let him try to wriggle out of this, she thought grimly. So the little girl in the blue dress had caught his eye? Handmaiden, eh? Well, that's one way of describing it. No matter, Poli would soon have little miss Cambrina under her thumb. Let him have his way with her, if he was even capable of it. It would stop him straying and she could make him feel guilty about it. Oh yes, it was all going her way.

Ganhard was the first to move. He stepped past Anelia, who was still hugging the floor, and gently picked up Cambrina, holding her tenderly in his arms like a beloved child. She must be light as a feather, though Poli, he's not even straining. 'Wake up, Cambrina,' said Ganhard gently and kissed her on the forehead.

Cambrina stirred. She gazed adoringly into Ganhard's eyes, cast an arm around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. She said something that Poli didn't quite catch, but it was probably something like 'Yours to command'.

Ganhard carried Cambrina over to where Poli was still sitting and said 'Come, wife, we should go. Our task here is done and we must travel again.'

I see, thought Poli, so it's *wife* now, all of a sudden, is it? He thinks he can just order me about now, does he? Lord and master of all he surveys? You've got another think coming, Ganhard Healshrine, if you think this woman is going to throw herself at your feet like that flibbertigibbet you've got your hands on.

'You can put *her* down, for a start. She's quite capable of walking,' Poli retorted. 'And let's get one thing straight. I'm not your wife and you don't make the rules.'

Ganhard was visibly surprised. 'I do apologise, Poli, I thought we were still keeping up the pretence. But I see that we are not. I beg your pardon.' He gently set Cambrina down on her feet and said to her, 'This lady is Poli. We are oath-bound travelling companions and she is my friend. We have been

pretending to be a married couple as a disguise but, as Poli herself has rightly pointed out, that is but a fiction.'

'Yes, madam,' said Cambrina, 'I am bound to serve Ganhard,' and here she glanced at him for reassurance, 'and if it pleases him, I shall serve you too.'

'Then we shall get along just fine,' said Poli, somewhat mollified. 'Just remember your place, girl.'

'Cambrina,' said Ganhard, laying a gentle hand upon her arm, 'Do you have a short name? Something easy for us to call you by?'

She frowned and looked thoughtful for a moment. 'My sisters called me Tammy,' she said timidly, 'I will answer to that, if it pleases you more.'

'Then I shall call you Tammy,' said Ganhard. 'Now, Tammy, we have along journey ahead of us. We shall be walking for many days. Do you have suitable travelling clothes and stout boots?'

Tammy lifted her skirt to show that she wore only house-slippers on her feet. 'Only these?'

'Hmm,' said Ganhard, 'That will hardly do. Poli, what do you think?'

What Poli actually *thought* was: Oh, yes, you can flaunt your pretty ankles, you little minx, but this one's mine, holy voices or no holy voices. What she *said* was 'Useless. She can't walk two steps in those. You'll have to leave her behind.'

'There is a boot-maker here in Upcross,' said Ganhard, 'Let's see what he can do. And no,' he added, seeing Tammy looking scared by what Poli had so unkindly said, 'no-one is getting left behind.' and he put one finger on Tammy's nose, as if to say: you are mine, and you are coming with me. He was rewarded with a pretty smile, which said it all.

As Ganhard was now no longer officially attached to the temple, he visited his old quarters to clear out his belongings. There wasn't much. A few holy books that he owned, some letters from his family, pens and paper, and a chest of spare clothes that he decided was too cumbersome to take on a long journey and he would instead donate to the poor. He found a satchel for the books and letters and handed it to Tammy, saying 'As the first of your duties as my handmaiden, Tammy, you are to be the keeper of my books and papers.' She accepted the task gratefully, pleased to be allowed to serve her master. Poli was growing increasingly irritated by all this mutual devotion. It was like watching a child with a new puppy. Someone needed a good kicking.

The three of them repaired to a local inn for the night. The plan was, to spend a day in the town of Upcross buying provisions for the journey and getting Tammy suitably clad, then to set out on the following morning on the journey back to Bythorpe. Ganhard debated whether or not they should offer to escort Anelia to meet Annagól but Poli dissuaded him. 'Anelia is quite capable of making the journey without our help,' she said, 'and we will travel all the better without her.' Ganhard had to admit that Poli was right.

After dinner, Poli, pretending that she had a task for Tammy, took her to her own chamber meaning to play an unkind trick on the girl. She played the experienced woman to Tammy's naïve innocent and told her that Ganhard was a man who had 'needs' and that, as his handmaiden, Tammy would be expected to fulfil them; she should go to Ganhard's bed and lie with him, and offer up her maidenhood as proof of her devotion to him; and that this was what Gyri intended when she 'granted' her to Ganhard. Poli schemed that Ganhard would reject Tammy and that would drive a wedge of coldness between them, to her own advantage.

Tammy looked grave. 'It is kind of you to tell me this,' she began, 'for I believe that you yourself, for all your saying to the contrary, have the prior claim on Ganhard's affections. But he is wary of you, is he not? And you must blow hot and cold, playing him like an angler playing a fish. No,' she raised a hand as Poli seemed about to object, 'I am a woman, like yourself, and we all know how things are, do we not?'

'You have a strange way of showing un-interest,' retorted Poli, 'You have done nothing but fawn over him, and he you, since the moment you clapped eyes on each other. Know this: I have been known to throttle grown men in their sleep for less than this. My knife across that pretty throat would be as swift.'

'We are not enemies nor rivals, madam,' replied Tammy quietly. 'It is not my place to thwart you in your ambition. I am a gift to Ganhard from Blessed Gyri. A treat, like a toffee-apple to a child, to be savoured and devoured with a rare enjoyment. Do you deny him that pleasure? Would you take the toffee-apple from the child? My maidenhood, and everything I have and everything I am, is his to take, as a right. It was for that, that I was made and I keep myself for no other man but him. But if he takes me not, whether from caution or distaste, he is not lessened and neither is the gift.'

Poli was beside herself. 'How can you be so submissive? What kind of woman are you? Are you but a child's doll, with no will of its own? Are you

even human at all? Men are made for our convenience, not the other way around!’

‘For every woman who agrees with you, there are as many men who do not. Who is to say who is right? Every person, man or woman, is born with free will, to bestow their love upon whom they choose. Ask yourself this: do you love Ganhard? Or do you merely love the thought of displaying him like a trophy?’

Poli was enraged, for the truth of what the girl was saying struck deep. Her only answer was to reach out and slap Tammy hard across the face.

iv

During the night, Poli heard screaming from Ganhard’s room. So, she thought with grim satisfaction, the lion devours the sacrificial lamb; and she turned over to go back to sleep. But Tammy came bursting into the chamber crying ‘He’s dead! Ganhard’s dead! Help me! I don’t know what to do!’

Poli roused herself and put on a suitable coat over her nightgown. ‘What have you done to him, you foolish girl?’ she demanded as she followed the near-hysterical Tammy to Ganhard’s room. No need to ask what Tammy had been doing in there, in the first place.

Ganhard was lying in bed, naked, his body contorted, his face a grimace and his eyes staring into nothingness. A quick check for the absence of breathing revealed that he was indeed dead. Poli sat on the bed and closed Ganhard’s eyes. ‘Tell me what happened,’ she said with icy calm.

Unsteadily, and between sobs, Tammy did so. The gist of it was, that she had come to him and, after taking what she offered, Ganhard had blessed her and fallen asleep. She had her head on his shoulder and was listening to his breathing growing slower and slower when he suddenly gave a great shudder and cried out a word she did not understand. Then he stopped breathing and did not move again. Tammy had tried to rouse him but he did not respond and she was terrified.

‘Well,’ said Poli, ‘It is plain to see. You have killed him with lust. You overreached his capacity and he suffered a seizure. Men are weak!’

‘Gyri will never forgive me,’ sobbed Tammy, ‘I sought only to do her will and please poor Ganhard. I have ruined everything!’

Poli thought of her oath and of the Elixir. She grasped Tammy roughly by the shoulders to stop her shaking and said 'Listen to me, child, this is very important. Ganhard is dead. You are released from your duty to obey him. You are free of Gyri's command. Do you understand?'

'What use is that? What use is freedom, if I cannot serve? O Gyri, take my life, not his!'

'Listen, Cambrina, listen! Earlier this evening, you asked me if I truly loved Ganhard and it made me angry, for in truth I do not but did not want to confess it. I am sorry for being angry, and I am sorry for the slap, but I was angry with myself and not with you. But that is not important just now. It is your feelings, not mine, that must be known. Remembering that you are free to choose for yourself, tell me, and tell me truthfully, for your life too depends on it, do you love Ganhard?'

Cambrina looked sorrowful, then serious, then sorrowful again. 'Yes,' she said, 'Though it is useless and he is beyond the reach of both of us and I can do nothing for him, yet do I love him still.'

'Good enough,' said Poli. Now, search among Ganhard's belongings for a pouch containing a silver flask. Shall I help you look?'

'I .. I think I know which one you mean,' said Cambrina. 'Is it poison? Should I kill myself to be with him in the hereafter? I would drink it gladly.'

'No, it is not poison, and you need not kill yourself. It is quite the opposite. The flask contains a draught of the Elixir of Life. We need to anoint his body with it as we call upon the gods, yours and mine and especially Threy, to revive Ganhard and restore him to life.'

'The Elixir of Life?' Cambrina's eyes were round. 'But that is from the myths, the essence that confers immortality! Ganhard could not possibly have been carrying something like that around?'

'Indeed he was. And so, too, am I and more besides. Yes, if we revive him, he will become not only alive but one of the immortals. Are you prepared for that? Though he was fond of you before, he may be changed and not want to know you nor me nor any mortal woman. Can you accept that? How badly do you want him back?'

'You asked me if I love him, and I do. I would restore him to life if that is possible, for his sake, but not for mine. If he is restored and loves me not, I may be dismayed and wish it were otherwise, but I will be content. Do you not feel the same, Poli?'

'Sadly, no. I wanted him to love me and he might have done, in a way. That is gone. But I must tell you that Ganhard, and I, and three other friends, swore a solemn oath that if any died, another would use the Elixir to revive them. I am bound by that oath. And, though it is utterly selfish of me, perhaps if I revive him, he will be so grateful to me that he will love me after all. You see, Cambrina, I am not a very nice person. I don't like to lose.'

'Ganhard is fortunate to have such a determined friend. I do not agree with your sentiments but they have great force within you. But speaking of force, would you mind letting go of my shoulders? I am only in my shift and your hands are quite strong.'

Poli released her grip and Cambrina crossed her arms to rub her shoulders. She could feel bruises coming. 'I will find the silver flask,' she said, 'It will be in Ganhard's pouch under the bed, here,' and she reached down to get it. 'Do we need to say any special prayers?' she asked, 'I haven't learnt any for something like this.'

'We must call upon Threy,' replied Poli, 'but I don't think the form of words is important. Only someone who died for love of another can be revived. I'm not certain this circumstance qualifies, but we must try. Would you like to do the anointing? I think you just have to rub the Elixir over him.'

Cambrina tenderly anointed Ganhard's naked corpse, willing him to revive, while Poli intoned what she hoped were appropriate words in a prayer to Threy, beseeching him to bestow life and immortality.

For a moment, nothing happened. 'I'm sorry, I don't think this is going to work,' said Poli. 'I don't think Ganhard died nobly enough.'

Cambrina knelt and wept and prayed fervently, more fervently than she had ever done before, beseeching Gyri to intervene with Threy to save her own champion. 'If I have served him badly, and loved him to death, strike me down and let my life pay for his. I am content.' Then her voice changed and Gyri spoke again through her.

Peace, child. You have done my bidding.

Threy has agreed to an exception, in exchange for a promise.

**Ganhard shall be revived and join the immortals as my eternal champion,
If and only if one woman will undertake freely to love and serve him for eternity.
That is Threy's condition.**

Cambrina and Poli looked at each other. Poli dropped her gaze and sighed, almost on the verge of tears. 'You win,' she said raggedly. 'I will not serve any man willingly, not for all eternity nor even for a moment, not even to save his life. Take Ganhard for yourself, if you choose, and he is yours. My will is broken.'

'Oh Poli, I'm so sorry,' said Cambrina. 'You know that I will willingly love and serve him for all the days of my life but I am not immortal and one day I must leave him. How can I promise to serve him for all eternity? It is not within my power to do this. We have both lost.'

'You have but to make the choice, Cambrina. For pity's sake, girl, don't you see?' cried Poli. 'If you make the promise, we can get him back! It's their problem if you drop dead next minute!'

Cambrina was shocked. 'No, Poli, that's a dreadful way to think. You can't trick the gods! I will gladly make the promise but to do so knowing I cannot keep it would be a falsehood. Must I tell a lie to the gods? Do you think they would not know?'

Poli snapped. 'All right. Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to throttle you with my own bare hands and you're going to let me. Got that? You're going to die willingly because it will save the man you love. When you are dead, I will use another draught of the Elixir, which I just happen to have, to revive *you* and that will work because you died to save Ganhard. Got that? Then you will be immortal and you can make the promise in good faith and we can get him back.'

Cambrina thought this through. It seemed devious but she could see no flaw in it. She knelt down beside Poli, put up her hair, crossed her hands over her heart and said 'Do it. I will not resist.'

Poli put two hands around Cambrina's throat and all the fury and jealousy she felt towards this girl erupted. This girl had stolen Ganhard from her! This girl who had killed the man that she, Poli, had spent so long trying to snare and practically owned! And she was prettier than her! This was her moment of revenge. Oh, she would throttle Cambrina all right. Stupid girl, to fall for a trick like that. 'You're stupid, aren't you!' she shouted, as Cambrina gagged and her eyes started to bulge. 'You think I'm going to revive you, you little minx! If I can't have him, nobody will!'

In her last moment of consciousness, Cambrina touched a fingertip to her lips, then flung her arm round and touched Ganhard's lifeless corpse in a last moment of affectionate farewell.

Ganhard jerked, sat upright and opened his eyes. He saw Poli throttling Tammy. His beloved Tammy! He shouted the first spell that came to mind. **Desist!** Poli released her hands and fell back. Cambrina slumped to the floor and Ganhard was at her side in a trice. He touched her neck tenderly and brought forth healing powers he didn't know he possessed, calling on Gyri for help.

Cambrina began to breathe again, raggedly at first, then more calmly. She put her hands to her neck and gazed mutely at Ganhard. She burst into tears. She tried to speak, but her voice was but a croak. 'Forgive her,' she whispered, 'we did it for you. Love you.'

Ganhard kissed her tenderly and laid her gently on the bed. 'Rest, now, my love. It's all right,' he murmured.

Realising he was still naked and that Poli was present, albeit slumped against the bed like a broken doll, Ganhard pulled on his nightshirt. He didn't know what had been going on, but he felt good. He remembered making love to Tammy but didn't remember anything else. He presumed he had been asleep, that Poli had come in, found them together and tried to kill Tammy in a fit of jealous rage.

His eye fell on the discarded silver flask. The Elixir? He was confused. Nobody was dead, he had stopped Poli just in time. So who had thrown away his Elixir? And why? Then he felt a sudden stab of fear. Did Poli still have the Blog? Had Cambrina tried to steal it from her? Why would she? She didn't even know it existed? Did she? He sat down on the bed beside Tammy. She was watching him adoringly but there was deep sadness in her eyes.

'My love, don't try to speak yet, just nod,' he said and Tammy nodded. She made a motion with her hand, as if writing something. Ganhard understood and got pen, ink and paper from the satchel. She wrote down all that had just happened, and Ganhard read with astonishment. He read it again. Then he kissed Tammy and said, 'Don't be sad, my love. You have done more for me than I can ever repay. We will find a better way for you to become immortal, so that we can always be together.'

Her eyes spoke for her.

Poli stirred, and looked at Ganhard in terror. He was alive, presumably immortal, and seemingly possessed of great powers. She had been caught red-handed trying to murder his, his, *handmaiden* in a fit of jealousy and now she had lost him forever. She wanted to crawl away and die. Why had she done it? Why?

Ganhard spoke quietly to Poli, 'Thank you for trying to save me. What you did was a terrible thing but I think you know that.' Poli could only nod. 'We have, all three of us, been tested,' he continued with sudden insight, 'Our gods needed to know how we would react in an extreme situation. They needed to know who we each truly are. And now they know, and we ourselves know, too. You have not failed, Poli, you have become your true self, free of self-deceit, as have we all. Let us rejoice in that new-found knowledge.'

'I am a killer,' admitted Poli, speaking in a low voice. 'But I already knew that, though I had not told you. And, yes, I was trying to trap you into marriage, as you guessed. It was not for love but for selfish pride. And I did want to murder Cambrina, out of jealousy and spite. The madness has passed but I do not like her any the better for having won your heart where I could not. What will you do with me?'

'I need to pray for guidance,' said Ganhard, 'and Tammy needs to rest and recover. Go back to your chamber, sleep for a while, and ask Abwen what is her will for you. You are her servant, not mine, and it is not for me to pass judgement upon you. Perhaps this night has been like a storm that comes before a new, clear, dawn. Think of it in those terms. Go, now, and we will talk in the morning about how to proceed from here. We still have our mission and we share a heavy burden, you more than any of us.'

Poli was surprised by the wisdom in what Ganhard had said. She had expected him to be wrathful and take vengeance. She would have deserved it. She got up from the floor and crept back to her own chamber where she fell into a deep sleep.

V

Next morning, no-one felt like eating much breakfast. Tammy wore a scarf around her neck, to cover the unsightly bruising, and could only sip a little water anyway. She sat close to Ganhard for comfort and he was glad of her presence. Poli sat across the table from them and avoided their gaze.

'I have received guidance, of a kind, and I have tried to divine the future but it is clouded with doubt,' Ganhard began. 'We have choices to make, and until we decide our next actions, the world hangs in the balance. This is a turning point and after today, there will be no going back for any of us.'

Poli replied. 'Abwen has spoken to me. She needed a ruthless killer for her champion and she chose me. It's what I am. I deceive people and murder people. It's what I do. I'm even prepared to murder you, and we were supposed to be friends. There's no possible doubt, I'm just what she wants. For me, there is already no going back.'

'Ganhard nodded. 'Abwen has chosen wisely, more wisely than we could have guessed,' he said. 'We may ourselves, in defending *that which we defend*, face foes against whose deceits and murders your own would pale into insignificance. It is as well to be forearmed. Abwen has chosen to fight fire with fire.'

'Ganhard, you are the opposite of me,' said Poli. 'You are honest and virtuous and care about other people. And Tammy, child, you have the innocence that I have given up. We are too different. My oath is fulfilled and it would be better if we go our separate ways.'

Tammy reached out, clasped Poli's hand and shook her head mutely.

Ganhard shook his head too, in exact synchrony with Tammy. 'No, Poli, though your oath is fulfilled, mine is not. We must travel together and I must fight at your side, for as long as you bear the burden that you carry. I cannot risk letting you go on alone. The five gods know that no single champion, however strong, will be enough. We must find a way to make strengths from our differences, just as light and darkness, though they be antagonised, create together the beauty of the dawn and the mellowness of evening.'

Poli looked thoughtful. 'You make good speeches, Ganhard. Let's travel together, then, at least back to Bythorpe. I can't murder you now, no-one can, but I might go for Tammy again if I get into another jealous rage. I'll give you my flask of the Elixir. You must swear that if I murder Tammy you will use my Elixir to revive her, leaving none for me. Knowing this will make me stop. I am too selfish to let that happen.'

Ganhard was surprised. 'That is a stratagem I would not have conceived. You are using your own cunning to thwart your own cunning. Remarkable! Very well, I will take the Elixir as surety and with that settled, we can be easy between ourselves.'

Tammy beamed at Ganhard and at Poli. The night and the day had indeed brought forth the dawn.

On the way back from Upcross to Redcott, they passed near the to the farm where Poli has spent her childhood and Ganhard asked if she wanted to make a short detour to see her family.

Poli hesitated. She drew a deep breath and said 'There's a secret I haven't told you. A few years ago, a band of mercenary soldiers, little more than thugs, came to our farm demanding supplies. They would have taken everything, leaving us to starve through the winter. Someone had to do something. I gave them ale laced with rat poison and, while they were asleep, garotted them one by one. Throttled them. You know what I can do. My brothers dumped the corpses in a bog. They're probably still there. My family were pleased enough because I'd protected them, but there was always an atmosphere afterwards. I suppose they were afraid of me. So I left and went to live with my uncle and aunt in Redcott. They took me in because I was family, but they don't know what I did or why I had to leave home.'

Ganhard was thoughtful. 'Thank you, Poli, for telling us. I always thought there was a shadow in your past and wondered what it was. I ought to be shocked, but we are still friends, and, as they say, *true friends do not judge*. Perhaps this is what that drew you to Abwen's attention so that, when the five gods were casting around for champions, she thought of you.'

'Why do you have to be so wretchedly understanding, Ganhard?' cried Poli, 'What would I have to do, to shock you? Eat a few children? Burn down a few temples? I've just confessed to a dozen or more cold-blooded murders! And all you can say is, thank you for telling me?'

'Would you rather I put you over my knee and spanked you?'

'Well, that might be an improvement.' said Poli and she burst out laughing.

'I think Tammy might get a little jealous,' said Ganhard with a grin.

Tammy wriggled her behind and said playfully, 'If you want to spank anyone, you have to spank me.'

'Only if you are very, very good.'

vi

There was no trouble at the gates of Redcott this time, and they were waved straight through. They had already agreed that Ganhard and Tammy would not come to uncle Bantrem's house and Poli took them to an inn where she believed they would be comfortable and well-looked after. Ganhard was blissfully unaware of the way Poli exchanged silent signals with the innkeeper, who was known to her. Signals that meant

'Friends. Do not overcharge.' and 'Best room.' and other things in that vein.

'I will leave you two alone now and go to my uncle's,' said Poli. Meet me by the Amber Gate in the morning. That's the gate where we were questioned last time by the Gate Captain. Do you think you can find it?

'If not, I will be able to find you anyway,' said Ganhard. 'There is a spell for finding people. Will you give me something of yours, a snip of your hair, perhaps, for the magic to work on?'

Poli was a little unnerved at the thought that she could be tracked wherever she went, for she had it in mind to talk to some people later that evening who made it their business not to be found unless they wanted to be; but she could see the sense of what Ganhard was suggesting. She took out a sharp knife and cut off a thumb's width of the end of one of her braids and handed it to him. He put it away carefully in his pouch and as he did so, the fastening of the pouch caught against the ring on his finger and reminded him that he was still wearing it.

'Poli,' he said, 'I think you should return this ring to your uncle. It was only a loan, was it not? But I want you to take it from my finger yourself. Will you do that? As a symbolic gesture?'

Poli did so. 'We are un-wedded,' she said solemnly and she kissed him on the cheek.

Poli called briefly on her uncle and aunt, explained that she and Ganhard were no longer even pretending to be married and returned the two rings to her uncle. Aunt Meg was concerned and assumed that Ganhard had proved false and deserted her but Poli reassured her that it was not the case, that they were still intending to travel together for the foreseeable future and it was she, Poli, who had released Ganhard. Poli made eye signals to the effect that Ganhard had failed as a lover, which was partly true after all and it would make sense to her aunt. She didn't mention Tammy nor that the gods had spoken nor that Ganhard was now immortal. You didn't say things like that to Aunt Meg. It would unsettle her for one thing, and it would be all over town within two minutes for another. Poli had no compunction about impugning Ganhard's virility, though; she was still jealous of Tammy and didn't regret trying to throttle her. She only regretted failing.

Poli said farewell and revisited some of her old haunts. At one shadowy doorway in a street frequented by people *who were not there*, she said, to no-one in particular, 'The man wants to see me.'

A door opened and she walked up a flight of stairs. In a dingy room, a fat, balding, man sat behind a heavy desk writing in a ledger. 'Take a seat, Poli,' he said, 'I believe I wanted to see you?' There was a keyhole with a silver escutcheon plate on her side of the desk but Poli knew that there was no lock behind it. Unless you counted a crossbow mechanism as a lock. This man had a decisive way with visitors who disagreed with him. She wasn't planning to,

'Something big going on,' she began. 'Can't say much but I need a favour. Might have something for you. Not definite.'

The man put down his pen. 'Go on.'

'Temple in Upcross. Priestess there, scrawny woman, about as holy as I am. She might be coming through in the next day or two.' Poli made a gesture, a sweep of the hand, palm upwards, meaning *she might be useful to me*. 'I wouldn't want anything to happened to her.'

The man's stony expression said: *give me a reason to care*.

'She is noted for her generosity to the poor,' said Poli, phrasing her words carefully, 'Hand-outs of large amounts of silver are not unknown.'

'The poor are always with us,' agreed the man. 'You arrived here today, did you not?'

Poli nodded. No need to wonder how he knew.

'Then you will not be aware that a certain holy woman came through yesterday, having apparently ridden through the night in her carriage. She stopped only for fresh horses before leaving by the Amber Gate.'

Poli was surprised. She hadn't expected Anelia to move so quickly. 'They say that the price of horses was exceptionally high yesterday,' she offered.

'Supply and demand, supply and demand.'

'Her temple has many treasures. I was amazed to see them,' said Poli meaningfully.

'To rob such a temple would be sacrilege.'

'And it is guarded. By as many as two guards in the daytime.'

'No doubt these treasures are heavy and difficult for the cleaners to move.'

'It would take as many as three wagons.'

The man made a small note in his ledger. 'Well now, we are busy people, was there something else I wanted to see you about, Poli?'

He called me by name, that means he is satisfied with the trade, thought Poli. She chose her next words with care. 'I may need to disappear for a while. If anyone should come to this town asking about me or anyone resembling me, or about the priest I have been travelling with, the innkeeper at Bythorpe might like to be informed.'

The man nodded. 'They do say that innkeepers are especially astute at knowing what occurs in distant towns. Who can say how the news comes to them? They also say that red-bearded halflings are especially good at this. But tell me, how is Ganhard and his pretty little maidservant?'

Poli was careful not to give too much away. She told the man what she guessed he already knew. 'Ganhard is exceptionally well. The girl he calls Tammy suffered a brutal attack and still bears the bruises but she has forgiven her assailant.' She held her fingers in a circle as she said this, and tensed the muscles to signify: *I nearly strangled her.*

'A young girl's beauty quickly fades. A woman's strength is in her hands,' quoted the man diplomatically. 'It is all a matter of position.' He rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully as he said this.

Poli understood. He was suggesting she tried again, with better technique. Well, that was as close as she needed to go, as a story. The trade of information had been satisfactory on both sides and it was time to get out. 'Now, if you will excuse me,' she said, 'I have to make some arrangements.'

The man nodded. 'I believe mother Maggins has a bed free.'

vii

Ganhard was getting quite good at finding his way around in Redcott, without using magic at all. He felt proud of leading Tammy safely through the town to the Amber Gate, where they found Poli waiting for them.

'Ah, there you are,' said Poli. 'We can be on our way. One piece of news: apparently, Anelia came through two days ago, in a great hurry.'

'Really? Well, I hope Annagól gets some sense out of her. She was looking fairly rattled when we left her. I think you scared her quite badly, Tammy, when you suddenly turned into the voice of Gyri.'

'It wasn't me, I was just the mouthpiece. I was scared too, I didn't know what was happening.'

Ganhard put his arm around Tammy and kissed her. He wasn't sure why, but it felt good anyway.

'Do you think she will do it again? Is that why she wanted me to be near you, so she could send you orders?' wondered Tammy.

'Well, if she did, I don't mind a bit,' said Ganhard, 'She knew what she was doing when she picked you to give to me. I would have done what she wanted anyway, but I'm not complaining.'

'When you two have quite finished,' said Poli, getting annoyed, 'We have a long way to walk and we need to get moving.'

After a few miles, they sat down on a wall beside the road for a rest and some refreshments. Tammy was eating better now and, with Ganhard using some healing spells, her throat was almost back to normal with just two yellow blotches where the bruises had been.

As they were just getting their packs back on to continue their journey, there came the sound of hooves and a coach rattled past, going fast in the other direction. A woman leaned out of the window and shouted at them to get out of the way. It was Anelia.

'She must have been to see Annagól already,' thought Poli. 'She didn't look too pleased. I hope this isn't a bad sign. Did Annagól tell you what he wanted with her?'

'No,' said Ganhard, 'he wasn't very forthcoming. He wanted to set up some scheme involving the temples but he didn't say much about it.'

'Tell me more about Annagól,' said Tammy. 'He sounds nice.'

viii

They reached Bythorpe without further incident and there was Annagól waiting for them. 'Anelia was here,' he said, 'and it did not go well. We may have to rethink our plans a little. But this must be Cambrina,' he said and greeted her with a warm smile. 'My word, you are even prettier than I imagined. Ganhard is *very* favoured of Gyri. I'm quite jealous. I may be the champion of Threy but all he has ever given me is eternal life and enough problems to fill it!'

'Call me Tammy,' she said, 'and I shall call you Grandpa Elf.'

'What happened to your neck? Has Ganhard been mistreating you? If he has, I shall be quite angry.'

'No, Ganhard has been wonderfully kind to me. It's nothing. But guess what? Ganhard is immortal too, just like you.'

Annagól looked astonished. 'So soon? Well, my lad, this changes everything. You had better tell me all about it over dinner. And you Poli, are you well? You seem less happy than when you left.'

'A lot has happened,' said Poli simply.

After the travellers had rested from their journey, they changed their clothes and Tammy put on her blue habit with the white cord belt so she looked just as she did when Ganhard first set eyes on her. Poli chose a plain satin gown with a lace collar that she found in her closet, though she didn't remember having left it there and wondered whose it was. It fitted her perfectly, though, and she meant to ask Annagól whence it came but later she forgot. She did remember her four-poster bed, though, and slept quite soundly for about half an hour, but so much had happened since she was last there that she could not quite recapture the feeling that it had given her before.

At dinner, Tammy served while the other three talked at great length. Poli did not garnish the truth when it came to accounting for her murderous attempt on Tammy's life and Annagól looked grave. 'Abwen makes great demands on her followers,' he said. 'It is ironic, is it not, that the champion who bears the greatest burden and is destined to defeat the greatest evil, is herself a ruthless killer. This is hard to hear, not only for your sake, Poli, but for all of us. But it is well that you are strong of purpose. The time may come when that killer instinct is all that stands between us and doom.'

'Is anything to be done about Anelia?' wondered Ganhard, as Tammy set a plate of fruit pie before him, topped with cream and cinnamon. Tammy wasn't sure where all this food was coming from, but it tasted good and she wasn't complaining.

'Anelia was not disposed to be helpful,' admitted Annagól. 'She came post-haste but only because Gyri had ordered her to, and she resented the imposition. She does not believe that the temples should serve the gods, but that the gods should conform to the convenience of the temple. Meaning herself, of course. It is not a view that the gods share, however. She gave a scandalous account of your visit and suggested that,' and here he chortled quietly and there was a twinkle in his eye, 'she suggested that you, Gan-

hard, had gotten Poli with child and taken her to wife. Whatever gave her that idea, I wonder?’

‘I did,’ said Poli, ‘I wanted to knock her off her pulpit. I’m sorry Ganhard, I didn’t have time to warn you. Are you all right?’

Ganhard was choking on a mouthful of pie and Tammy was patting him on the back.

‘No wonder she tried to dismiss Ganhard, said Tammy, massaging Ganhard vigorously, ‘I wondered why she called me in and made that astonishing pronouncement, just before Gyri intervened. But it’s not true is it? You were only pretending to be married, weren’t you?’ She looked suddenly doubtful.

Poli reassured her. And Ganhard. ‘No, I have no claim on your man, Tammy, he’s all yours. But it was worth it, just to see the look on Madam Anelia’s dried up face. I told you I can be deceitful.’

Ganhard had stopped choking and looked up. ‘Lucky I’m immortal,’ he said, ‘I could have been dead of pie and cream just then. You really mustn’t do things like that to a man at his dinner table, Poli.’

Tammy took away Ganhard’s pie and went to fetch him something else. Suddenly, she stiffened and dropped the plate with a crash. *Here we go again*, thought Poli.

**Ganhard, attend.
Grimfund is in danger.
You will come to his immediate aid.**

As she spoke those fateful words, there was a thunderclap and Ganhard vanished.

Chapter Six

The halfling picked himself out of the ditch and counted his hands and feet. 'Were that a wizard, Bushel?' he asked through a mouthful of mud.

'Nah,' said Bushel, 'Wizards is old men with long white beards. That weren't a wizard. Some sort of demoness in mortal guise I expect. You should 'ave warned me, Keg.'

'How was I supposed to know?'

Val strode over and pointed her staff meaningfully at the two would-be robbers. 'On your feet, you two, you've got some marching to do.' She was in no mood to be generous.

'Where are we going? I've got bad feet, see, I'm excused walking,' said Keg.

'That's right, miss, he's excused walking.'

'Either he walks or you carry him,' said Val sharply. 'It's all the same to me. I'm taking you in, to Amberkeep.'

'But it's miles! We just come from there'

'On account of a misunderstanding.'

'Yeah, a misunderstanding. We're not allowed back, see.'

'Can't go to Amberkeep.'

Val was unmoved. She knew how to deal with common soldiers and these two were not even soldiers. 'You just came from there, but you can't walk? Fly like chickens, did you? Are you a chicken?'

'No miss.'

'Would you like me to be turn you into a chicken?' she asked, moving the tip of her staff meaningfully in a small circle around Bushel's nose.

'No, miss.'

'Then start walking.'

'Yes, miss.'

Val deposited the two robbers at the town gaol and, having identified herself, made a deposition concerning their attempt to rob her a knife-point. 'Thank you, Spell-Captain, that should be quite sufficient,' said the officer of the guard. 'I wonder if we might have your advice? We have a drunken ex-soldier in the cells here and we're not sure what to do about him.'

Val went to see the other prisoner. He was filthy and unshaven but he did have some of the look of a soldier about him. He looked blearily into her face and something stirred in his drink-fuddled mind. He tried to stand up and salute, but he fell over. 'Corporal Ernhelm! What's all this?' demanded Val. She turned to the officer and said 'I know this man. He served under me in the Oxenfield Company. Two medals for bravery and never a whiff of drink did he take. And now he is reduced to this!'

'It's a sad case, ma'am. I don't think he's ever come to terms with life as a civilian. We would give him a job in the town guard, but not as a drunkard.'

'I can't leave him like this. Old comrades and so on. I'll pay his bail and find him a job.'

'That's very noble of you ma'am. Solves our problem, anyway.'

Val left ex-corporal Ernhelm to sober up where he was, while she went to arrange lodgings for herself in the town. It was not a large town, smaller than Redcott, and there was really only one hostelry that was at all respectable, so she went there. It was called the Wyvern and Mermaid Inn. She was given a room on the top floor that was a bit small, she could hear mice behind the wainscot and the roof obviously leaked, but it would do for the night as long as it didn't rain heavily. There was a small window looking out over the town square where she could watch the comings and goings of the populace and she noticed that there seemed to be one or two groups of soldiers strolling about in crimson uniforms. She didn't recognise the regiment but they looked more like raw recruits than grizzled veterans and most of them were too young to have seen action. She wondered who they were.

Val's dress was dusty from the journey and one of the buttons was coming loose. She was particular about her appearance and dressed straightforwardly to please herself and not, as some women did, all frills and fancies

for others to admire or envy. She wondered if there was a dressmaker in town, but having decided to travel light she wasn't going to start buying more clothes. No, she would just spruce up what she had. She secured the door to her chamber, took off her dress and started to brush it carefully.

There was a sudden chill in the air, perhaps not surprising since she was now wearing little but a pair of stockings, but Val had the strangest premonition that she was being watched. She had experienced this feeling before, usually in time of battle, but it had never been so strong as it was now.

'By Spaldor,' she announced to the air, pulling her dress back on, grabbing her wizard's staff and calling on her personal deity, 'if there are spirits in this place, make yourselves known.'

Two rows of glowing blue letters appeared in the air in front of her. This was some kind of conjuration magic but not any spell that she knew.

**THOU SHALT O'ERCOME NINE MORTAL ENEMIES
ERE THOU COMEST TO THIS PLACE AGAIN.**

'Pardon? Who are you?' she demanded, then added, for good measure, 'If you are a demon from the nether hells, I will have no truck with your evil. Avaunt!' It wasn't much of a threat, but she was more intrigued than frightened and wanted the spirit, whoever it was, to give itself away. She wondered about the "shalt"; it was archaic and it was more of a command than a prophesy and she didn't take kindly to commands unless given by a superior officer.

**I AM SPALDOR. ALL QUAIL BEFORE ME.
THOU ART MY CHAMPION. I COMMAND THEE.**

'Oh, you *are* Spaldor? Sorry, should I bow down or something?' she asked. She was unsure how to handle a conversation with a god. There was never a priest about when you needed one, she reflected. 'Spaldor,' she continued politely, in case it really was him and not some demon playing a practical joke, 'Concerning the overcoming of enemies, does this relate to protecting the Codex? Only I'm travelling alone right now, on my way home to Highcourt, and I wasn't expecting trouble.'

**NINE MORTAL ENEMIES SHALT THOU SLAY.
THOU NEEDEST 350XP TO LEVEL UP.**

'Oh.' This was getting even more confusing, she thought. Clarification was essential. 'Is XP what we call combat pay? Would that be 350 in gold ducats? Fair enough, but what sort of enemies? I would need to know, if I

am to be properly prepared for slaying. And why do I have to slay them for you? I will need a proper briefing if I'm going into action.'

ALL SHALL BECOME CLEAR.

THOU GETTEST COOL SPELLS LIKE FIREBALL AND FLY AT LEVEL 5.

VERILY.

'I'm sorry, but I don't know anywhere called Level 5. Is it a floor in a wizard's tower somewhere? Do I have to go there to find a mentor to teach me those spells? They do sound useful, thank you. Do I need them to slay your enemies?' Val was getting a bit rattled now, and probably talking too much. She often did that, when she got nervous. It was a kind of safety valve.

GTG

MOTHER'S COMING :(

/BYE

The magic letters blinked out and Val was left with no satisfactory answer. The odd feeling of being watched had gone, so she knew that Spaldor was no longer there and she reflected on what had transpired. It made some sense, but not a lot. Did all gods talk gibberish? She might ask Annagól about it, but anyone else would probably think she was insane. As far as she could work out, Spaldor wanted her to fight nine of his enemies and she might get 350 ducats and learn some new spells. Well, it didn't sound too bad, considering. At least she had a bit of warning, She went back to mending her dress.

At dinner that evening, she noticed a bewhiskered colonel wearing a scarlet tunic with a lot of gold braid and an impressive row of campaign medals. She introduced herself as Spell-Captain Pengazer and it turned out that he knew her father. His name was Colonel Ravenbald and it was his regiment that was in town. Val and the colonel liked each other immediately and reminiscing with him about the goblin wars made her feel much more normal after the strangely unsettling conversation with Spaldor upstairs in her chamber. She almost persuaded herself that it had never happened and she had imagined it.

The colonel was intending to conduct training exercises for his troops outside town next day and invited Val to come along. She put on her old arm-band with her Spell-Captain's insignia on it and spent the day throwing pyrotechnic spells over the heads of two companies of troops, one defending a dummy fort and the other trying to capture it. The sergeants were testing their men to see which ones were fearless and which ones

would break. Val made sure they had plenty of flashes and bangs to contend with.

Val enjoyed being back with soldiers again, even if it was only in mock battles. Only one soldier really broke down in terror and he was summarily dismissed from the regiment. That left the colonel one man short, and Val thought of Corporal Ernhelm. She mentioned him to the Colonel, saying that he had been a good soldier, steady in battle, but was not thriving as a civilian and had let himself go. She suggested that rejoining the colours would be the best thing for him. The Colonel was interested and agreed to see the man, back in Amberkeep.

Val sought out the corporal, who had sobered up considerably. She paid for a barber to shave him and trim his hair then took him to the Colonel who, after going through the man's record, took him on and promoted him to sergeant. It was a happy arrangement; the soldier would be back in a regiment in an environment that he was comfortable in, and the colonel got a veteran soldier who could help to train his recruits. Val was pleased to have been able to help an old comrade. It was how things were done.

She borrowed a horse from the colonel's regiment, saying that she would be riding to Highcourt to see her parents and would return the horse when she came back through Amberkeep. Colonel Ravenbald sent his regards to her father and they chatted briefly before she saluted him with a flourish of her staff, in the special way that military wizards do, and rode off in high spirits.

iii

There was a stone tower on a hilltop about half a mile back from the road. Val looked at it as she rode along, wondering why it looked so out of place. It was as if someone had borrowed it from somewhere else and just put it down there on a whim. The tower itself looked normal enough - circular, three floors high, with crosslet loopholes around the walls and crenellations around a flat roof - and the hilltop was a fairly ordinary hilltop, with some lush grass interspersed with patches of low, scrubby vegetation and a few boulders here and there; but it just wasn't the right hilltop to build the tower on. The defensive sight-lines were all wrong, there was too much cover for potential attackers to exploit and there was a much better hill only a short distance away.

Her curiosity piqued, Val decided to ride up to the tower to see who, if anyone, occupied it. There was a bronze door-knocker in the shape of a dragon's head and she gave it a good rattle. The door was opened almost immediately by an old man with a long white beard who was wearing a rather grubby robe that had once been decorated with mystic symbols. Meaningless ones, Val noted.

'Ah, come in, come in, I've been expecting you,' quavered the old man. 'I am Wagforth The Clueless and you must be Miss Valerise Pengazer. Don't look so surprised, I have high skill in divination.'

'I was just passing and noticed your tower,' said Val rather lamely. It was all a bit disconcerting. How could he have known she was coming, if she didn't know herself?

'Yes, yes, of course. Come in, come in. Don't worry about your horse, it is still there in the morning.'

'I wasn't thinking of staying until morning,' said Val firmly as she went in through the door and glanced around. The interior of the tower, on the ground floor, at least, was a very untidy room that was dimly-lit by the high, narrow, slit windows. She was quite glad she couldn't see too much in the semi-darkness because what she could see, hadn't been cleaned for years. 'I see you live here alone,' she added. By the looks of it, she was probably the first woman to enter the place for decades, at least.

'Oh yes, quite alone, never fear. I have all the books you need, laid out in my little library on the top floor. It's warmer up there. Do you want to hang up your cloak? You'll be keeping your pack with you of course. No need to ask what you have hidden in it, is there?' he said with a knowing wink.

'At the risk of seeming rude, why am I here?'

'Oh dear me, yes, of course, you haven't read the scrolls yet. What am I thinking of? You must forgive an old man, I get so forgetful, you see. Now, where was I?'

'You were about to tell me why I am here.'

'Quite, quite. You've come to kill me. We are going to have a little spell fight and you are going to win. I expect you will be using magic arrows and things like that, won't you? Divination is all very well, but it's not much good against those sorts of spells. So of course you will win and that will be that.'

'I'm supposed to kill you? Any particular reason?'

'Well that's up to you really. I'm sure we can think of something. I could stamp on your toe, if you like. Or insult your grandmother. Anyway, there's plenty of time for that, it doesn't happen until midnight.'

'You know I'm going to kill you at midnight, for no obvious reason, and you invited me in anyway?'

'Well, yes, you could hardly do it from outside, could you? Now do come upstairs, mind the steps, they're a bit slippery,' said Wagforth leading the way up a spiral staircase that wound around and up, inside the walls of the tower.

The top floor was a well-equipped library with several cases of leather-bound tomes, an ornate scroll cabinet, a writing desk with an assortment of quills and, under each window, a wooden chest that doubled as a rather uncomfortable-looking seat. There were some divinatory charts around the walls that were yellowed with age and could only be used, Val noted, to predict events that had already happened centuries ago. In the middle of the room a large candelabrum shed a warm yellow light over a lectern on which a book lay open at a page marked with a strip of red leather. Off to one side, opposite the stairway they came up by, there was a ladder leading up to a trapdoor in the roof. Access to the battlements, obviously.

'Here we are, here we are, I expect you will want to get started,' said Wagforth cheerfully.

'Yes, thank you, you are most thoughtful,' said Val, completely at a loss.

Wagforth went back downstairs, whistling tunelessly, and Val was left alone. She looked at the titles of the books in the bookcases, recognising some and knowing that others were quite rare. She pulled out a few scrolls and found a goodly assortment of spells, some quite powerful, though most of them were incomprehensible at first sight. It all seemed genuine enough and she could learn quite a lot here, if she had time. It might take years, though.

Unsure where to start, Val started idly reading the book on the lectern, turning the pages to see what, if anything, it signified. That was obviously a trigger because almost immediately the *feeling* returned that meant Spaldor was present.

BEHOLD THY NEW ABODE.

Val thought, *attack is the best form of defence* and launched into a tirade. 'My new abode? You mean I have to live in this place? Have you seen the state of it? It's filthy! And while we're about it, why am I going to kill Wagforth? He's just a harmless old buffer!'

**THOU SHALT DEFEAT HIM IN MORTAL COMBAT
AND CLAIM THIS TOWER AND ALL THEREIN AS THINE OWN.**

'This is compulsory, is it? Don't I get any choice? If I'm supposed to live here, I might want him to stay on as caretaker, or something!' As she said this, Val reflected that Wagforth would be fairly useless as a caretaker, to judge from the way he had neglected the place generally, but as her mother was fond of saying, it was hard to get good staff these days.

IT IS HIS DESTINY.

HE HAS READ THY COMING IN THE STARS AND ACCEPTS HIS DEATH.

'All right, if I must, but I still don't feel very honourable about this. There had better be a very good reason and I think you are going to tell me that reason right now, Spaldor.' Val was in her element now; she was treating this god like an underling which is perhaps a little unusual but did display a certain panache.

IT'S 5TH EDITION RULES. YOU ONLY GET XP FOR KILLING MONSTERS.

'Pardon? You mean you're paying me to assassinate him? I think you might have the wrong person. I'm a professional soldier, we don't go around killing people for money. Except goblins. And they're not people.'

THE HAND OF FATE IS UPON THEE.

THOU ART CHOSEN FOR THIS.

Val realised that she had pushed him as far as he would go and backed off. She had probed his defences and that was sufficient for this little skirmish. There would be other occasions, she felt sure. *Lose the battle, but win the war*, as her father was wont to tell her. 'That seems unarguable,' she said diplomatically. 'But what happens if Wagforth defeats me?'

AN THOU ART SLAIN, I WILL RELOAD THE LAST AUTOSAVE.

With that, Spaldor was gone and Val was once more alone. She hadn't understood his last reply at all but this was becoming normal. She sighed and turned back to the tome on the lectern. It seemed to be an illustrated catalogue of impossible objects. It described a portable box with a bottomless pit inside it, an upside-down bucket that could only be emptied but never filled, a length of rope with only one end, an endless scroll with only one side, a giant pillow stuffed with elephants' feathers and an underwater water-jug. None of this seemed of the slightest use to Val and she turned the pages with increasing impatience.

She moved on to the books in the bookcases but even after several hours, she found nothing that was of immediate use. There was a lot of know-

ledge there, all of it relevant to *something* but none of it relevant to anything in particular. She decided it was time to talk to Wagforth again. If, as he claimed, he knew why she was here and knew what she needed, perhaps it was time to demand more explanation because she herself certainly didn't know.

Descending the stairs quietly to the floor below, Val found Wagforth assembling a folding camp bed. He was obviously having difficulty and kept consulting a piece of paper that had arcane diagrams on it. 'The legs fold outwards,' she said. 'Here, let me.'

'Thank you,' he replied looking relieved, 'I knew I should leave it to someone practical. Did you find what you wanted in the library?'

'I don't know. I found a lot of things I didn't think I wanted but I didn't find a lot of things I did think I wanted. I don't know what I'm looking for.'

Wagforth considered that for a moment. 'Once you find what you are looking for, you will know what it was you wanted to find. Serendipity is a flighty mistress.'

'I'm tired of all this. It's getting dark outside, I haven't eaten for hours and this has all been a complete waste of time.' As she said this, something snapped in Val's mind. *Wagforth had enchanted her! This was a trap!* She suddenly saw him in a different light, no longer an amiable and bumbling old man but a cunning, devious and crafty creature with evil intentions. Her mind flashed back to the time in the cave when that bloated monstrosity had sunk its venomous fangs into her. Not this time!

Spell after spell poured from her fingers as she burned him down. He resisted feebly with wards and counters but she was too powerful. The tower boomed with thunder and crackled with lightning. Dust that had lain for decades on the furniture rose up into the air and ignited in a ball of fire. It was all over in less than a minute. Wagforth's lifeless body glowed briefly, faded and was gone.

Val was suddenly weary. She lay down on the camp bed that Wagforth had so thoughtfully provided for her and slept soundly until morning.

She explored the tower from top to bottom, tut-tutting at the filth and neglect, but assessed it as a solid structure that would make a defensible refuge if the need arose. And it was apparently hers. She had it in mind to discuss with Annagól the possibility of housing the Codex in here. It would need cleaning up first, though. If she ever came back, she decided, she would look through all the scrolls upstairs and see if there was a

cleaning spell of any kind amongst them. Or a spell for summoning servants, perhaps.

Meanwhile, she had to get on with her journey. She went outside and, sure enough, her horse was still there and was contentedly grazing. She secured the tower door, mounted up, and rode on to Highcourt.

iv

When Val got home, her parents were delighted to see her. Apparently no letters had arrived and they had not known she was coming but that didn't matter now. There was a great deal of news to catch up on. Her brother Arinald, who had gone into merchant banking, had married a wealthy banker's daughter and Val now had a baby niece called Iribel Tasmen. Her other brother *was not mentioned*. Various cousins had established promising careers, got married, or both. Val's mother kept dropping hints that it was time Val did the same. Val was used to that and took no notice.

Val related her adventures and told her parents all about Ganhard and Poli, Aromin and Grimfund, Annagól and the Elixir of Life. She displayed the silver phial that she was carrying with her and explained about the oath the five of them had taken, though without mentioning the Codex or, much less, the Blog.

'Immortality eh? Not sure about that,' commented her father. 'Do you want to live forever? Not sure I do. This Annagól fellow, is he on the level? How d'you know this stuff works?'

'We don't, really. Unless one of us dies and *doesn't* come back to life. Then we know it doesn't.'

'Hmmp,' said Val's father.

Val told him about meeting Colonel Ravenbald, who sent his regards. 'Old Ginger? Bless my soul, didn't know he was still around,' said her father. 'He's a widower now,' said her mother meaningfully, 'You'd do well as a colonel's wife, Val.'

'Oh mother, stop it. He's very nice and I like him a lot but I'm not looking for a husband just yet. Besides, if I'm going to be immortal, there'll be plenty of time to pick and choose. I might decide to marry a god or something.'

'Don't leave it too long, dear, I want to see my grandchildren before I die.'

'Well I seem to have acquired a wizard's tower, anyway. Not far away, between here and Amberkeep. I think I might clean it up and live in it.'

'That would be nice, dear. We can come and visit you both.'

'Both?'

'You and the colonel.'

'Mother!'

Val slept in her childhood bedroom that night, with her favourite dolls, her rocking horse and her toy soldiers, and recent years seemed to roll away like a dream. After a few happy days, she set off back towards Amberkeep. It was a whole week before the full moon and she would be able ride at a leisurely pace and still be back in Bythorpe in time to keep her promise.

V

On a road passing through a forest, a pack of wolves circled her, looking for an opening to attack. Strangely, they each had a circle of red light, about five feet across, attached to them. Some kind of magic, obviously, thought Val, but she didn't know what it signified. It did make it easy for Val to count them and watch their tactics, though. There were eight of them; four formed a block in front of her, snarling and drawing attention to themselves, while the others moved stealthily around to left and right to try to outflank her.

Val dismounted and quieted her horse, which, though it was an army horse and well-trained, was growing increasingly nervous. Then she did something that she afterwards couldn't account for. She went down on one knee and held her staff horizontally over her head in a very unnatural and uncomfortable pose that felt quite ridiculous and nearly dislocated her shoulder. Pointing at each wolf in turn, she fired a bolt of lightning from the end of her staff. She didn't know her staff did that. And to think she had been carrying it about all this time like a walking stick! As each wolf was struck by lightning, the red ring around it flashed and went out and the wolf fell over, dead. She almost felt sorry for them. They were only wolves being wolves. But then, she was only a wizard being a wizard so that made it a fair fight, in a way.

Val got up and mounted her horse again, with some difficulty because her shoulder was hurting like crazy. Fortunately, soldiers are trained to ride with the reins in their left hands to keep their sword-arms free, so she was able to ride on with gritted teeth while willing the pain to subside. As she did so, the now-familiar blue letters lit up. It was Spaldor again.

**THOU HAST SLAIN NINE ENEMIES, AS I COMMANDED.
THOU ART VALERISE PENGAZER, EVOKER-5/SOLDIER.**

‘Thank you. I think. Can you do anything about this shoulder? I think I’ve broken something.’

YEA, VERILY.

There was a click inside her shoulder and she screeched, startling her horse. A blinding white pain hit her for a moment and then was gone, leaving a memory of itself like the after-image of a flash of lightning in a thunderstorm. It was replaced by a dull ache. Her stomach heaved and she spent the next few minutes leaning over in her saddle being rather un-ladylike. Fortunately, there was no-one about. She rinsed her mouth out with water from her water-bottle and felt better. ‘Sorry, horse,’ she said, and gave it a reassuring pat. It was remarkably well-trained, she thought.

‘Don’t mention it.’

SEEK THOU A CLERIC IN THE TEMPLE AND SPEAK THEREUNTO.

‘Yes, I think I should do that. There’s one in Amberkeep. Do you mind if it’s not one of yours?’ A mischievous thought stuck her, which showed how much better she was feeling. ‘Should I tell them you sent me?’

NAY, SPEAK NOT THUS, LEST THE PRIESTS FREAKETH OUT AND CRY WITCHCRAFT!

‘Point taken.’ Then Val’s brain caught up and she stared down at the horse. ‘Did you just talk?’

‘Neigh.’

‘Yes you did, I heard you. You can talk.’

‘Sorry, ma’am. Just being polite. I won’t make a habit of it,’ said the horse.

Val closed her eyes. Talking to gods was one thing. Lots of people did that. And gods sometimes talked back, if you were a cleric, or mad. Talking to horses was acceptable, too. Lots of people talked to their horses. But when the horses talked back, that ruled out cleric. So, I’m mad, she decided. Actually, that was a relief in some ways. If you are mad, you can do what you like and get away with it. It might have its advantages.

‘Spaldor, are you still there? Can I ask you something?’

THE GODS ARE EVER PRESENT.

‘Is this really happening? Or have I gone crazy?’

IF I SAID I DIDN’T EXIST, WOULD YOU BELIEVE ME?

‘He’s got you there,’ said the horse. ‘Nice paradox.’

Val gave up. ‘Can you get me to the tower?’ she asked the horse. ‘It was down the road, somewhere, on the right. Grassy hillside? Good for horses?’

‘I though you’d never ask.’

vi

The tower was as she left it. It still looked out of place but she was getting used to that. She dismounted and unsaddled the horse, and it wandered off to graze without a backward glance.

She walked once around the outside, making an inspection. The stonework was in good order and would last for years, nothing to worry about there. At least, not for a while, she corrected herself. The walls were pierced with crosslet loopholes, eight on each floor, three floors, staggered fifteen degrees clockwise. Yes, a handful of crossbowmen could hold this for as long as their supplies lasted. Crenellations around the roof would allow longbowmen to cover the hillside in relative safety, or direct fire downwards through the embrasures at attackers close to the walls. Val nodded. It was well-designed as a military fort. She approved. There was a patch of ivy growing up the western side that was getting close to one of the loopholes and would need to be cut down, but that was a simple enough job for a man with an axe.

The only door was solid oak, nine inches thick and iron-studded. It would withstand a prolonged battering if barred from the inside and there were murder-holes above it to deter assailants. Val opened it and went in, giving the dragon’s-head door-knocker a friendly pat. It needed polishing.

The ground floor was already familiar from her earlier visit. It was just a single round chamber with a wooden floor and ceiling. To the left was a spiral stairway built within the walls; down to the basement and up to the bedroom and library floors. To the right was the fireplace. She decided to start here on the ground floor and make an inventory.

Around the walls, between the loophole windows, were woven hangings. At first sight they looked of good quality but on closer inspection she found that they were moth-eaten and pieces of them crumbled and fell away in her hands. It was a shame, but they would all have to be replaced eventually. She would need six of them, three ells wide and twice as high. She made a mental note.

There were narrow, glazed shutters that could be closed to cover each loophole window against the wind and these were all in good order. Val went systematically around the room, opening and closing each one to check that the hinges and fastenings were sound and not rusted. Immediately below each window was a sturdy wooden box that a defender could stand on to fire through the open loophole. The boxes had hinged lids with storage space below and loose cushions on top to make seats. It was a neat and practical arrangement. Val approved of neat and practical arrangements. Some of the boxes contained commonplace items such as pewter plates and tankards, brass candlesticks and so on. She didn't bother counting them. They would all need cleaning anyway. She was beginning to think she might need a domestic servant. It dawned on her that she hadn't just acquired a fort; she had acquired a home, a home meant a household and a household meant servants.

The fireplace was unremarkable apart from the stone overmantle that was carved with a repeated rose pattern. The ashes of old fires lay neglected in the hearth. Another job for the servants. The chimney looked clear and there was a good draught coming down it but there were no logs around so she didn't attempt to light a fire.

In the middle of the chamber there was a circular oak table with six stools around it. They were all serviceable except that the table was cluttered with the mouldy remains of half-eaten food, which she threw out immediately, and it needed rubbing down and waxing. More servant's work. The floor needed sweeping and scrubbing too.

The basement next, she decided. There might at least be a broom down there. Lacking a lamp, or even any candles, Val cast a spell to create some globes of light, enough to see by, and went downstairs. The basement was divided up into the main kitchen area and three storerooms. It was quite dry and habitable although it smelt of mould. The storerooms were empty, apart from cobwebs, but needed cleaning out and the walls scrubbing down before it would be safe to store food down there. In the kitchen there was a fireplace, with hooks and irons for cooking and an assortment of iron pots that all needed a good scrub; a central oak table with a bench,

ditto; and a covered well. She drew some water from the well and tasted it cautiously. It was clean and wholesome and quite refreshing and she refilled her water-bottle from it. That perhaps explained why the tower had been built on this particular hilltop; it might be the best source of water for miles around.

Back upstairs, Val decided to make a meal from the provisions in her pack and she sat at the round table, thinking about her new home. She would need servants, that was obvious, at least a cook and a housemaid, and a number of guards if she planned to keep the Codex hidden here. Then there would need to be some arrangement for obtaining supplies. Firewood could be had from the forest and hunting for game might be possible; but that would mean employing an outdoorsman. The cost of running a household was beginning to become apparent. It had all been so much simpler in the army.

Working her way upwards, Val started on the sleeping quarters. This floor had been divided up with wooden partitions into separate bedchambers. The partitions themselves were not very sound and the wood was in poor condition so it might be expedient to pull them all out and use them for firewood. It depended how Val intended to use the tower – who else would be living there with her. She wasn't sure, yet. If she wanted partitions, it might be better to employ a carpenter for a few weeks to build new ones. The shuttered loophole windows, with their boxes beneath, were similar to the ones downstairs and they were all serviceable, except that on this floor, one of the eight loopholes was in the spiral stairway and needed no box. There were seven beds that were usable but the straw pallasses on them were in disgusting condition, mouldy and certainly infested with ticks, and should be burnt as soon as possible.

The top floor was the library. This was going to take some time. The furnishings were satisfactory although the charts on the walls might be replaced with something more pleasant but that could wait. Val spend an hour going through all the scrolls again and this time, she did find something useful.

Along with a horn of magical ink that was a treasure in itself, she found a spell for summoning a magical servant, one that could be used, for example, to lock a chest or the outer door of the tower so that only she could open it, a powerful spell for casting an exploding fireball and, wonder of wonders, two copies of a spell that would enable her to fly. Val knew that it would take her many hours, perhaps days, to master these spells and

scribe them into her spellbook and she debated whether to stay here and do it now, or to do it elsewhere in more comfort.

The day was wearing on, and Val decided to take the scrolls with her and ride on to Amberkeep. Before she did, though, she climbed up through the trapdoor to the roof and used one of the flying scrolls. Carefully, so as not to risk accidents, she lifted off her feet and floated around just above the roof. She seemed to be able to move around in the air just by willing it, and this was a strangely exciting feeling. She drifted out across the battlements, looked down and saw her horse grazing below her. She rose upwards and noticed that the copper roof of the tower caught the sunlight and made a landmark that could be seen for miles from the air. Then a flock of crows started to mob her and that was less pleasant, so she returned to the roof and went down the ladder, securing the trapdoor after her. The crows flew off, apparently satisfied with their victory.

As she rode away, thinking through in her mind what needed to be done to make her tower homely, she was aware that her shoulder still ached. Perhaps the flying had made it worse. She sighed. There was never a cleric around when you needed one. She thought of Ganhard and wondered how he was getting on with Poli. She almost wished he was there. He might have fixed her shoulder.

The horse said nothing.

vii

Val stopped off at colonel's camp to return the horse, which gave her a wink as she patted it goodbye, then walked the rest of the way into Amberkeep. After establishing herself back at the Wyvern and Mermaid, where she negotiated a rather better room with fewer mice and less damp, she paid a visit to the local temple to get her shoulder attended to. A muscular young priest massaged her back and that was very relaxing and rather enjoyable. He definitely knew what he was doing and Val like that in a man. When he finished and she got up to do up her robe, she felt quite flushed. She was tempted to confide in him about her conversations with Spaldor but there was something inscrutable about his deep blue eyes that made her think twice and she said nothing about it.

When she got back to the inn, the colonel was there waiting for her. 'Ah, Val, my dear,' he said, embracing her fondly and giving her a kiss on the

cheek as a man might his favourite niece, 'I was hoping I would see you again soon. Are you well, after your travels? Is your father in good spirits?'

'Yes, thank you. Father called you Ginger. Is that because of this?' she asked, playfully tweaking his moustache.

'Haha! And you shall call me Ginger too, my little poppet. You know, you could make an old man very happy,' he said with a twinkle in his eye. 'You'd make a fine colonel's lady. How about it?'

'Mother told me I should marry you.'

'And are you going to?'

Val laughed. 'Not so fast,' she said, 'You're very sweet and I might be tempted but there are things I have to do before I settle down and turn into my mother.'

'Tell me more. My regiment is at your disposal. I've been wondering what to do with it.'

'I might take you up on that. Amongst other things, I've acquired a tower that I would quite like to make my home but it is sorely in need of refurbishment.'

'A tower, eh? Any good for a command post? A regiment needs a rallying point.'

'Well, yes, you know, I think it would be. You could have the ground floor. My library is at the top, under the battlements. If you had your men clear the surrounding woods and erect stockades, it would be quite a strongly defensible position. But the tower is in a terrible mess. The old wizard who lived there really let it go. It needs manpower and I don't have any.'

'Ahah! Then we are well suited. Marry me and you shall have all the manpower you need.'

'You're very kind, Ginger. I will think about it and let you know soon. I need a few days to sort out some things, then I must travel to Bythorpe to see some friends. But then I will come back and we can talk about it again.'

'I could offer you a mounted escort to Bythorpe.'

'Thank you, but I think I might be flying.'

The colonel looked impressed. 'Flying, eh? That's the spirit. I like a women with a bit of spunk,' and he patted her on the rump.

'Ginger! We are in public!'

Val spent a few days in Amberkeep working on her new spells and trying them out. The magical servant would be useful for little tasks around the home like sweeping the stairs or sewing on buttons but a big task like renovating the whole tower wouldn't be feasible for it. The idea of having a regiment of men camped outside with nothing better to do was certainly growing on her. And Ginger was, well, very forthright.

She experimented with the magical lock spell and liked it. She had a local craftsman make a casket for the Codex and used the spell to lock it inside. She chose "Valerium" again as the magic password because if some nefarious person were to try to steal it, she didn't want to make it too difficult. That wasn't the point. It just had to *look* important.

She experimented with flying but cautiously, away from the town so as not to be seen, and launched a fireball from the air against a clump of trees. She was impressed with the results although the range was not great, so against a troop of enemy bowmen, for example, getting close enough to burn them down would be risky without aerial cover. It had definite possibilities, though,

She also discovered that flying has a drawback that no-one ever talks about, but which is a problem for any female wearing skirts. They blow about in the wind and reveal that which a lady does not wish to reveal. She solved the problem by keeping her staff between her legs, riding it like a hobby-horse, to hold her skirts down. She suddenly realised why witches in children's storybooks are shown riding broomsticks through the air. It wasn't that they had magical broomsticks – they could fly perfectly well without them – it was that they just needed something to keep their skirts from blowing about. As mundane as that.

The moon was waxing and nearly full. She finished her business in Amberkeep and set off for Bythorpe in the late evening, after sunset. She made a fine sight, riding her staff across the sky with her cloak billowing behind her. Coming near to Bythorpe, she spied three travellers crossing a lonely heath and even from above, here was something familiar about the way they walked. She flew down.

Chapter Seven

Grimfund cursed. He had slipped on a patch of snow, gone over the edge and slid down into a gully between two rock faces. He reflected that iron-shod dwarf boots, especially high-quality Grodzh ones, for all that they were the epitome of solid and hard-wearing gentleman's boots, were not made for snow. But then, to be fair, they weren't supposed to be; it didn't snow much, underground.

What was worse, he had lost his helmet.

He needed to find a way back up, to the refuge where Aromin was encamped. He could either try to climb the rock face, which seemed like awfully hard work, or to follow the gully to see if there was an easier way. He would follow the gully. As a bonus, he would be sheltered from the blizzard even if falling snow was still finding its way down there and making visibility difficult.

Some figures were approaching. They looked like dwarves, which was somewhat surprising as he hadn't known that any of the clans lived in these mountains, but it was fortuitous as he could command their assistance. They evidently saw him too, for they stopped and shouted a challenge in dwarvish, demanding that he identify himself. 'Grimfund of Black Keep,' he replied confidently, with the right amount of *hauteur* to indicate that he was of the nobility.

Evidently they misheard him, for they attacked without warning and Grimfund was wounded by a spear. With an oath, he readied his battle axe and defended himself. There were just three of them, lightly armoured scouts he supposed, and he slew them all, one after another, without compunction. He was quite shocked at being so inconvenienced. Who were these impertinent dwarves?

Well, he thought to himself, if they can get into this place, I can get out. He followed the trail of their footprints and eventually came to the where the gully ended at an overhang with a cave mouth below it. Peering through the snow-filled air, he thought he could see two more dwarves guarding the cave and he was more wary this time. He called out a challenge of his own and one replied 'The Followers of Shokrad'.

He was even more surprised at this, for the cult of Shokrad was proscribed throughout the dwarven kingdoms and the penalty for declaring

allegiance to it was death. He shrugged and appointed himself executioner. One, he killed instantly with a single sweep of his axe. The other actually tried to knock him down with the butt of his spear. Such insolence! He paid with his life.

Grimfund felt he needed to investigate the cave. It might be habitable, possibly a better refuge than the one that he and Aromin had improvised, but there might also be more cultists lurking in there. It seemed quite likely that there would be, since no-one posts guards and sends out scouts to defend an empty hole. He would take care.

The cave was high and quite narrow, going back a long way into the ground. The rock was mainly limestone with some strata of red shale. Grimfund supposed that it had been carved out by water in the distant past, but it looked as if it had also been worked in places to enlarge it quite recently. As he walked cautiously down into the cave, glad to be out of the weather, he found a place where a door had been let into the rock on the right hand side, partly hidden behind a natural wall.

It was a stout door, iron-studded oak, such as dwarves anywhere might have made and it looked to have been recently used. The door handle was clean and there were no cobwebs around the doorway. Grimfund readied his axe, turned the handle and kicked the door open suddenly.

He found himself in what was evidently a guardroom. There were three dwarves sitting down playing dice, presumably associates of the cult followers he had just slain. There was no challenge this time, no social niceties, he just went straight into the attack. He killed them all, but not before taking a nasty head wound. He regretted, even more, the loss of his helmet.

Grimfund needed a rest. He barred the door shut, sat down on a stool, bandaged his head and took a drink from his water-bottle. Casting around, he found an old helmet that would not offer much protection from axes but it fitted snugly on his scalp and would keep his bandages in place. As he carefully put it on, he noticed graffiti on one wall that seemed to depict a demon slaying a helmetted dwarven hero. He guessed the demon was Shokrad. He hoped the hero wasn't him.

At this point, he really should have gone out and tried to find a way back up to where Aromin would doubtless be waiting but the bang on the head had unsettled him and he did the opposite of what common sense would have dictated. He left the safety of the guardroom and went deeper into the cave.

He emerged onto a gallery overlooking a large cavern that seemed to be furnished as a mess hall. On each side of the gallery there were ramps down to the floor of the hall where long dining tables were set out that would have accommodated thirty or forty at least. He could see six dwarves, all dressed in the same style the guards he had been fighting, walking about amongst the tables apparently counting places. One looked up in his direction and shouted to warn the others: 'There's a spy up in the gallery! A spy!'

Grimfund ran down one of the ramps and waded in, with his axe whirling and whistling around his head. But they were ready for him and counter-charged. This fight didn't go so well for Grimfund and, although he killed three of them, eventually the rest took him down by sheer weight of numbers. He was unconscious when they dragged him away..

After a few hours, Grimfund woke up to find himself locked in a prison cell. He was lying on a wooden pallet in a stone cell barely big enough to walk about in. Really, he was entitled to better accommodation than this. He would find someone to complain to. He tried the door but it was locked on the outside. He tried banging on it but no-one seemed to take any notice. This was quite un-forgiveable. The service here was terrible. On the floor beside the door there was a flagon of water, which he took and drank. His head still hurt abominably but at least they had left the helmet on his head that was keeping his bandages secure.

Grimfund sat down on the pallet, which was the only furniture, and spoke in his mind to Berkadin. He didn't often do that, but this seemed as good a time as any. 'Beg to report, lord, eleven enemies slain and one champion out of action. Accomodation poor, service bad.'

As if in answer, some runes appeared on the wall. He was sure they hadn't been there just now.

××IMFYND ΔF B†A<X H‡‡‡
Grimfund of Black Keep

ΣΔY ØAV‡ FΔY‡‡T nΔ‡†Y IN MY <AY>‡
You have fought nobly in my cause.

ΣΔY AX‡ Q‡‡TIn‡Q TΔ ‡‡<ΔM‡ TØ‡ ‡‡AQ‡X
You are destined to become the leader

ΔF TØ‡ >IM YØΔ 9XΔT‡<T
of the six who protect.

‡‡‡9AIX nΔTQ R‡‡<Y‡ I> Δn IT> YAYQ
Despair not. Rescue is on its way.

Grimfund read these runes and understood. 'Thank you, lord,' he said, and meant it. He wasn't given to being very religious but maybe he would have to reconsider that, he thought.

His head still hurt, though, so he settled down to sleep as best he could. As he drifted out of consciousness, he wondered what had happened to his axe. He might have been able to chop his way through the door with that. Then he relaxed completely and slept. It was quite good, really, being a prisoner, it meant he didn't have to do anything.

ii

Aromin looked around and saw a figure approaching through the snow. It was too tall to be Grimfund, so he called out 'Ho there, have you seen a dwarf about?'

'Aromin? It's me, Ganhard. I've been sent to help. Grimfund is in trouble.'

'He's wandered off somewhere,' said Aromin, 'and his footprints disappear over this edge. Why are you dressed like that? And why are you armed with a pudding spoon?'

'We were in the middle of dinner. No time to grab anything.'

'You'd better take my cloak. Don't worry, I won't catch cold, I'm immortal now.'

'Thank you, most noble of you,' said Ganhard, gratefully pulling the cloak around him. 'Actually, I'm immortal too,' he added, 'Long story. Tell you later.'

'Any idea where he's gone?'

'Not yet. I can do a finding spell, I think.'

Ganhard took the Symbol of Gyri from around his neck, held it carefully between his fingers and intoned a special chant. 'That's odd,' he said, 'It's pointing straight down. He must be underground somewhere.'

'Another cave, perhaps? Could he have fallen through the ground into a pit?'

'Don't know. Can we climb down over this edge? Have you got any ropes?'

'Yes, in my pack, but no great length.'

'I'm lightest, lower me down as far as you can,' said Ganhard.

The rope was sufficient for Ganhard to see down into the cleft that Grimfund had tumbled into, and he shouted back up from near the bottom 'I can see a dead dwarf. Was Grimfund wearing his armour?'

'Yes, but he might have taken his helmet off.'

'Good. It's not him. He must have killed this one and gone looking for a way out.'

'Jump. I'll come down,' called Aromin, and he slithered down the rope to where Ganhard was now standing. He pointed along the cleft and said 'There are two more corpses along there.'

'Are there? I can't see a thing in this snow.'

'Follow me and watch out for dwarves who aren't Grimfund. Looks like he's made some enemies'

Aromin led the way along the cleft, cautiously following a trail of footprints in the snow and with his crossbow loaded, ready for trouble. Coming to the cave mouth, he spotted two sentries on guard and held up his hand for Ganhard to stop. He made a hand signal meaning "two" and another meaning "ahead". A soldier would have understood. Ganhard wasn't a soldier but he guessed what it meant anyway. Aromin dropped to one knee, sighted his crossbow and shot one sentry dead. The other sentry was quick to hurl a spear but Ganhard was equally quick to dodge out of its way and to reply with a dramatic gesture of his own. He **spoke**, and a bolt of pure energy sprang from his hand and zipped back along the path through the air that the spear had taken. The hapless spear-thrower took the full force of it and was smeared over the rockface in a gory mess of blood, bones and scorched, twitching flesh. 'Nice one,' said Aromin, thoroughly impressed, 'He won't do that again, in a hurry.'

'He that throweth a spear at a priest armed with a pudding spoon deserveth verily all that which he getteth,' intoned Ganhard.

'Is that one of your quotations?'

'No, I just made it up.'

'Fair enough.'

'Grimfund is somewhere in that cave,' said Ganhard, becoming serious again.

They went through the cave, ignoring the guardroom where, had they but known it, Grimfund had once been, and took a side passage that led down a narrow, winding stairway to another room where three more dwarves

were guarding a row of cells. They killed the three guards; one fell immediately to Aromin's crossbow and another to his sword, while another spectacular spell from Ganhard finished the third. Aromin had taken a sword cut himself in the exchange and Ganhard healed him. 'That wound actually hurt,' observed Aromin, 'Being immortal evidently doesn't make us invulnerable. I was assuming it did.'

'Your brother didn't mention that when he explained about the Elixir,' said Ganhard thoughtfully. 'It's as well we found this out now, before doing anything reckless we might have regretted.'

'True,' agreed Aromin.

'He's in there,' said Ganhard, pointing at the middle of three cell doors. 'There should be some keys around somewhere. I'll search the gaolers, if you have a look round generally.'

Aromin obliged and, around a corner that would have been out of sight from the door they entered by, he found a bunch of iron keys hanging from a hook and a battleaxe propped up against the wall. 'Found some keys, and I think this is Grimfund's axe,' he called out.

They soon had the cell door open and Grimfund was pleased to see them. 'Ah, there you are, Aromin, I wondered when you would get here,' he said as if nothing untoward had happened, 'But who is this? Ganhard? What are you doing here? Berkadin mentioned he was organising my rescue, but he didn't say he was sending the entire priesthood!'

'I was having dinner, back at Bythorpe,' said Ganhard, holding up his pudding spoon as evidence, 'Gyri seemed to think it was urgent.'

'And you just arrived here, just like that?' said Grimfund in astonishment, 'Aromin, why have we been marching for days through mountains and blizzards, doing it the hard way?'

'Don't exaggerate, Grimfund, it's only been one day of mountains and an hour of blizzard,' chided Aromin. 'Now, who are all these dwarves we've been slaughtering?'

'Cult of Shokrad. Bad. Very bad. Don't know what they're doing hiding out here but don't I think we stumbled over them by accident. Our gods must have wanted us to find them and eliminate them.'

'How many?' asked Aromin, being practical.

'Well, I took out about a dozen but I think there are probably two or three dozen more at least.'

'Hmm,' said Aromin, 'I might take out one dozen with this crossbow, then I'd be out of ammo unless I can find some more. I don't think these dwarves use crossbows, so they probably don't have any boxes of bolts lying around.'

'I might manage half a dozen with attack spells, but I'd have nothing in reserve for healing,' offered Ganhard. 'That's a bit risky, as we've now discovered that we are just as vulnerable to getting hurt as anyone else.'

'No, no, Aromin is immortal,' said Grimfund.

'Doesn't make any difference. I'm immortal too,' explained Ganhard, 'but we can still get hurt, we just won't die of it. If anything, it's worse.'

Grimfund was surprised. 'What's the use of that? All this fuss about being immortal and where does it get you? Get your head chopped off and it's eternal neck-ache? No thanks.'

'Healing still works, that's why I'm here,' said Ganhard.

'Hmmpf,' said Grimfund. 'Well, Aromin, looks like you and I need to take out a dozen each with swords and axes. Think you can do it?'

'Divide and rule,' said Aromin. 'We need to take them on in small groups, not all at once.'

'Then let's get going.'

The three scouted through the chambers, passages and stairways of the cultists' hideout, killing the few that they chanced to meet, until they came to a huge, arched doorway at the end of a tunnel decorated with weird carvings. Grimfund glanced at the carvings and didn't like them. They showed demons doing painful things to other demons. It was a double door and one half was slightly ajar. The sound of chanting came from within, an unholy chant that sent shivers up Ganhard's spine. 'I think we found them,' whispered Grimfund.

'If I can open this door silently, Aromin could start shooting from here,' suggested Ganhard.

'Good plan,' said Grimfund, 'Do it.'

So Ganhard moved back about ten paces, wove a magical silence over the doors and the two friends standing near them and said a **word** that caused the doors to open themselves.

Grimfund looked through the doorway and saw a large chamber with a cross-vaulted roof and two rows of columns running down it, like a temple. Several dozen dwarves in rather tasteless lime green robes were

kneeling on the stone floor. They had their backs to him and would be easy targets for Aromin's crossbow if they all kept very still. At the far end of the chamber there was a hideous statue of a demon, possibly Shokrad, he thought, and in front of that, a priest of some kind was doing something at an altar. The priest also had his back to Grimfund, so it wasn't obvious quite what he was doing, but it looked like some kind of sacrificial rite. Grimfund gave a hand signal to Aromin, pointing at the priest, pointing at Aromin's crossbow and giving a guesture that meant 'kill'. But Aromin shook his head and signalled Grimfund to back away to where Ganhard was waiting.

'What's the problem?' asked Grimfund, 'it's a clear shot.'

'He's a priest, like Ganhard here. I've seen what Ganhard can do and he can probably do the same. One crossbow bolt in the back might drop a common dwarf but it would take about three in succession to take out the priest. Meanwhile, he can fry us with spells.'

'Then what is your plan?' demanded Grimfund.

'We must induce him to waste spells on imaginary attackers then, when he is defenceless, we can take him down easily.'

'I know what to do,' said Ganhard. Get back to the doorway and be ready to attack the commoners. But when you get there, keep still until I join you. I'll have to cancel the magical silence.'

When they were all back in position, Ganhard whispered a spell that caused a shimmering warhammer to appear in the air just above the evil priest's head. He chose a warhammer because he thought it would have more impact on the dwarves. In both senses of the word. He held it there a moment and the assembled congregation of robed dwarves noticed it and started staring open-mouthed and pointing at it. The priest, with his back to them, didn't know and hadn't seen it yet. Then Ganhard brought the mace down hard and started bludgeoning the priest's bare head, trying to knock him senseless before he could react. He didn't quite succeed and the priest was quick to defend himself, calling upon Shokrad and shaking off the hurt that the mace had done him but Ganhard tried again and this time, he got the technique right and the priest was felled to the ground.

There was pandemonium in the temple. Some dwarves prostrated themselves where they were, some ran towards the priest to try to help him and others tried to escape, out through the main door where Grimfund and Aromin were waiting for them. Aromin put many to the sword in the

doorway before those following realised what was happening and fell back. Grimfund then did something remarkable. There was a battle tactic that dwarves had once used to great effect against hordes of goblins and it was still much talked about. He had never used it in anger but now was the time. He held his battleaxe out horizontally, waist-high, at arms' length and started spinning on his heels very fast. The iron heels of his boots struck sparks from the stone floor and the whooming noise of his spinning axe became a loud roar. Then he started moving slowly through the doorway, still spinning like a death machine, and he scythed through the packed, green-robed cultists like a farmer through a cornfield at harvest time.

It was a grim harvest indeed. A few managed to climb pillars to escape the whirling blade but Aromin picked them off with crossbow fire. A few fled behind the demonic statue and clung to it for protection, but Ganhard knocked them down with the shimmering mace that still hung in the air above them. Some, bewildered by the turn of events, threw up their hands and begged for mercy. Grimfund granted none. 'To follow Shokrad is to incur a death sentence,' he pronounced. 'There is no appeal for clemency.'

'What should we do about the altar and the statue?' asked Aromin a few minutes later. 'Can we destroy them?'

'You're the expert, Ganhard, what do you recommend?' asked Grimfund in turn.

'I can de-consecrate the altar but the statue is just a statue, it has no power. We should look under the altar, though, in case there are demonic relics hidden inside. There usually would be, for an altar to be effective for worship.'

Grimfund checked the stonework of the altar and, sure enough, it was as Ganhard had said; there was a hidden compartment inside. He found no obvious relics, just a small book and a handful of large amethysts. He showed them to Ganhard, wondering. The amethysts would be of considerable value as gemstones in themselves but had they any demonic or magical properties?

Ganhard examined them and decided not. They might perhaps be the material of some powerful spell of which he knew nothing, but otherwise they were simply valuable as gemstones. 'Keep them,' he advised Grimfund, 'as compensation for your unlawful imprisonment.' So Grimfund did.

Ganhard himself was more interested in the book that Grimfund had found and he turned the pages carefully. It was essentially a diatribe calling upon Shokrad to defeat the dwarf god Berkadin and for the loyal followers of Shokrad to be rewarded with lands and property that would be seized from the dwarven kingdoms that Berkadin was protecting. 'It is as we suspected,' he declared, 'the followers of Shokrad seek to overthrow the dwarven kingdoms.'

'Today's work is well done,' declared Grimfund, 'although if this hideout could remain hidden until now, as indeed it has, there are doubtless others elsewhere. They must all be rooted out. But that is for another day.'

'Then let us leave this unhappy place. I like it not to be so far under the ground. And we still need to find a way out of these mountains,' Aromin reminded him.

'I will take the lead,' declared Grimfund and the other two were happy to allow him to. Though he was still but a mortal, as a prince among dwarves and the chosen of Birkadin he was the equal of any.

iii

A few days later, cold, tired and hungry, the three came down from the mountains and chanced upon a halfling village called Merrywood, where they are entertained as honoured guests. Grimfund presented himself to the mayor, who was called Greencoat, as a dwarf prince so important that he even had two immortals as retainers. The halflings were very impressed.

A lavish dinner was held in their honour and was attended by the entire village, even the children. They were entertained by a halfling bard called Mead Littlefellow who told many wonderful tales of legend, some as old as the hills and others as old as, well, several minutes at least.

He told the tale of Anderon and Berrienne who were immortals. They met one day in the forest and fell instantly in love. In due course they married and were very happy together but they didn't know that the gods had ordained, at the beginning of time, that all immortals, save the gods themselves, must be childless for fear that the world would rapidly get too full. To the halflings in the audience this tale was a tragedy, for they love children, and there was hardly a dry eye amongst them. It was also news to Aromin and Ganhard - something else to ask Annagól about.

Another of Mead's tales was of a terrible monster that dwelt in a cave nearby and prowled around the village at night looking for naughty halfling children to eat. He often went hungry, for of course all of the children in the village were very, very well behaved, weren't they? The children clapped their hands at this, and recited 'Well Behaved! Well Behaved!' in a well-practised chorus. The tale continued, that one day, an elf, a dwarf and a human would come down from the mountains, defeat the terrible monster and vanish into thin air. Mead paused and caught Grimfund's eye, inviting him to join in the entertainment.

'Oh yes,' declared Grimfund, getting to his feet and looking princely and important, which he was very good at, 'We cannot have children being carried off and eaten, never to be seen again. The three of us have come down from our homes in the mountain to defeat this terrible monster so that you can all sleep safe in your beds.' There was great applause and banging of tankards at this, because although everyone knew this was just one of Mead's stories, made up for the occasion, joining in the spirit of the entertainment was the very best thing that guests could possibly do.

Next morning, as they were ready to depart, the village children mobbed them and cried "Uncle Grim, Uncle Grim, we'll show you the way to the monster's cave!" So, rather than disappoint their audience, the three allowed themselves to be led up the hillside overlooking the village to a spooky-looking hole in the ground, possibly a disused mineshaft. Grimfund made a great play of preparing to go into the hole and the other two backed him up. Aromin brandished his sword, carefully, so as not to cause any accidents, and the children squealed in delight. Ganhard raised his arms and called out in a thunderous voice MONSTERS BEGONE! so that the children clapped their hands over their ears and looked suitably awestruck. There was nothing for it, they would have to go down into the hole, make a lot of noise pretending to fight a monster, and emerge "victorious".

That was the last the halfling children ever saw of them.

iv

'I'm sure we came down this tunnel just now,' said Ganhard. We must be going in circles.'

'These intersections are all alike. Shouldn't we turn left then right?' wondered Aromin.

'Trust me, as long as we keep turning left, we'll find a way out.'

'This left or that left?'

'Did anyone bring a ball of string?'

'That door wasn't there a moment ago.'

'It must have been.'

'Well, it wasn't.'

'Wonder where it goes?'

'Only one way to find out.'

'After you.'

Grimfund pushed the door open. A voice boomed out suddenly, saying

WELCOME TO KNOSSOS.
MORTALS TO THE LEFT, IMMORTALS TO THE RIGHT.
PLEASE HAVE YOUR IDENTITY CLAY TABLETS READY.

'Did you understand that?' asked Aromin. 'No,' said Ganhard.

'Don't worry about the voice, it always does that,' said the minotaur.

Grimfund looked up and saw a pair of horny knees. He looked up further and saw, and saw, and hastily looked up a bit further and saw a muscular chest leading to some impressive shoulders. Higher still, was the head of a bull with a puzzled expression on its face.

'Shouldn't you be mythical?' asked the minotaur.

'I could ask the same question,' said Grimfund. 'I am Grimfund of Black Keep. This is the Immortal Aromin and this is the Immortal Ganhard. We are quite real, and not in the least mythical.'

The minotaur shook his head, as if in disbelief. 'I've read about you three, in the Epic of Meshgagil. You slay the Priests of Ishtar and run off with a wooden horse called Helen in seven ships across the wine-dark sea. Can I have your autographs?'

'Of course, of course,' said Grimfund, thinking *either I'm dreaming this or I've gone mad*.

‘Er, we were hoping to find a way out,’ ventured Ganhard. ‘We have to get back, you see.’

‘So soon? It’s been millenia since I had visitors,’ said the minotaur. ‘Last one was a man called Dissertation. No, wait, that doesn’t sound right. Thesis, that was it, said his name was Thesis. Don’t know what became of him. That’s the thing about mortals, here today, gone tomorrow. Present company excepted, of course.’

‘We’d love to stop and chat,’ said Ganhard, trying to get the measure of the beast, ‘but there’s a pretty little handmaiden waiting for me at home. You know how it is.’

‘Moo. Just the one? You should get a whole herd,’ said the minotaur with a meaningful leer.

‘I won’t have any at all, if we don’t get home soon.’

‘Hrmph. All right, I suppose I will have to let you go. Down the passage, first left, second right, cross the bridge, straight on through five archways then look for a secret trapdoor in the ceiling. It’s got a blue cross painted on it, you can’t miss it.’

‘Thank you very much. If we’re passing this way again, we’ll be sure to look you up.’

‘Have a nice day,’ said the minotaur and trotted off.

‘Right,’ said Grimfund, and led the way.

‘It’s not much of a secret trapdoor, with that blue cross painted on it,’ observed Aromin.

‘Never mind that, Ganhard, you’re the lightest, I’ll give you a leg up,’ said Grimfund.

V

They climbed up through the trapdoor and found themselves inside a square stone tower. The tower was built of light-coloured sandstone blocks – probably vannerite quarried locally, though Grimfund – with a wooden stairway winding up and around, inside the walls. There was daylight streaming down from windows high above. Climbing the stairs, they reached a gallery under a domed roof that had archways all around leading to an open-air viewing platform. It was daytime, the sun was shin-

ing in a clear blue sky and, looking down, they could see a bustling town with a busy harbour nearby. None of them recognised this place at all. Even the architecture, with its flat-roofed square stone buildings, was strange and the streets seemed unnaturally straight.

‘Well,’ said Grimfund.

‘Where are we?’ asked Aromin.

‘Let’s go down and ask,’ suggested Ganhard.

There was a stone stairway on the outside of the tower that led them down to street level. They tried to speak to a passer-by but understood not a word of his reply. He pointed towards the docks, shrugged his shoulders and walked off. ‘Typical,’ said Grimfund, ‘ask the way in a strange town, and the first person you meet turns out to be a foreigner.’

There were some nautical-looking dwarves operating a winch on the dockside and Grimfund approached them. They seemed surprised at his appearance but when he spoke in formal dwarvish they understood and bowed respectfully. There followed a brief conversation, of which neither Ganhard nor Aromin understood a word.

‘This town is called Netherport Windbridge,’ reported Grimfund. ‘There is a dwarven delegation in town to negotiate a trade treaty. I think I need to make contact with them. This is actually the reason I set out from home – to make trading arrangements on behalf of my grandfather. Dwarf business.’

‘Yes, of course. Seems like a good opportunity,’ said Ganhard.

‘If we have to split up, let’s make that tower we came up through, our rendezvous point,’ suggested Aromin, ‘It’s a good landmark.’

‘Good idea,’ agreed Grimfund. ‘Look, I’ll go and try to make contact with the delegation, you two scout around and see how we can possibly get home from here.’

Grimfund was successful in negotiating a trade arrangement between Black Keep and the King of the Turquoise Mountains. As a down-payment, he used the amethysts that he had found under the altar in the cult temple. It all worked out quite well and he was pleased with himself. It also meant that he had fulfilled his obligations to his grandfather and was free to act as he pleased, from now on.

Meanwhile, Ganhard and Aromin wandered around the town. In a square there were some market stalls and one was offering herbs, spices and various potions and concoctions. There were some flasks on display la-

belled "Elixir of Life". They didn't smell anything at all like the real ones and Aromin muttered 'fake' under his breath.

'This trader is a charlatan. Should we expose him?' wondered Ganhard.

'No-one would thank us for it. Besides, if there are fake Elixirs around, it distracts attention from the real ones. And anyway, if you challenged him, how would you prove they were fakes?'

'Good point. Let's move on.'

After asking various people and revisiting the docks, they established that barges regularly went upriver from Netherport carrying cargoes to a town not too far from Bythorpe and passage might be bought for a modest sum of money. They met up with Grimfund, who explained how successful his day had been, and they all went together to arrange to travel onwards.

Afterwards, they found a hostelry near the docks that catered for occasional travellers and took a cheap room for the three of them. It wasn't what Grimfund was accustomed to, but Aromin persuaded him that, as strangers in a strange town, it was best not to seem too wealthy.

That evening, they dined on some rather greasy roast mutton and turnip pies that seemed a far cry from the food the halflings had provided for them, only the night before. 'How quickly things change,' thought Ganhard, as he blessed the pie-seller.

He little knew how powerful his blessing had been. The pie-seller walked under a ladder on his way home and tripped on a carelessly-discarded gold ingot. He picked it up and traded it next day in the market for a hundred sheep. He had meant to slaughter them for meat for his pie business but the sheep begged for mercy and said that, if he let them go back to their meadows, they would show him the entrance to a lost diamond mine. After filling his pockets with huge diamonds, he visited the royal palace meaning to present the caliph with a diamond in exchange for the meat pie contract for the palace. He didn't get the contract but the caliph's favourite daughter fell in love with him at first sight, they got married and he lived happily ever after. His name was بائع فطائر اللحم

The journey upriver by barge was uneventful and, the pace being slow, it made a welcome change from the hectic few weeks just past. They slept a good deal, talked a little and played games to pass the time. Aromin always won at cards, Grimfund always won at dice, and Ganhard always lost at everything. 'Never mind,' said Aromin, 'You know what they say: unlucky at cards, lucky in love.' Not for the first time, Ganhard wished he was back with Tammy.

'I've been thinking,' said Grimfund, apropos of nothing at all, 'I've been talking to the bargees. There's profit to be made in river traffic. Keep this to yourselves, but there's a new trade deal between Black Keep and the Turquoise Mountains. Struck it myself in Netherport, on behalf of my grandfather. Gemstones one way, gold ore the other. Needs a depot somewhere half way. Redcott would be ideal. Any thoughts?'

'Poli's uncle lives in Redcott,' said Ganhard, 'He's a jeweller. Nice chap, I stayed at his house. Is that any help?'

'Maybe.'

'High-value cargo is easy to transport but easy to steal,' said Aromin. 'You'll need to think about employing guards. Reliable ones.'

'True.'

'You need to talk to Poli. She knows people in Redcott.'

'Good idea. Let's say no more about it. Leave it until we get back.'

Ganhard went up on deck and watched the landscape slip slowly past. There were meadows along the riverbank and a few farmhouses here and there. Ducks swam in the river and took flight, protesting loudly, when the barge came too close. It was peaceful.

Some days later they were walking across an open heath on the last few miles of their journey home. It was late evening and clouds were scudding across the moon that was nearly full. Suddenly, Aromin called a halt and pointed up into the sky. A giant bird was angling straight down towards them with flapping wings like a huge eagle. He readied his crossbow. This boded ill.

'Beware the eagle on the night before the full moon,' intoned Ganhard, 'As Finebringer the Fourth writes in his Omenopedia Avia, Branch 7, Leaf 9.'

'Thanks,' said Grimfund, loosening his axe. 'We really needed to know that.'

Then Ganhard yelled.

Chapter Eight

'Hello boys, it's me,' said Val, descending in graceful swoops and stepping nimbly from her staff.

'We though you were an eagle,' said Aromin, unloading his crossbow, 'It's lucky Ganhard yelled like that, I was just about to shoot you.'

'I knew it was you,' said Ganhard. 'I'd know those eyebrows anywhere.'

Val gave him a hug. 'You've changed,' she said, 'What's happened to you? And how's Poli?' Without waiting for an answer, she turned to Aromin. 'Did you find your wife, Aromin? Oh, there's so much to talk about!'

There was indeed much to talk about and it took up the whole of their trek back to Bythorpe for each the four of them to tell the story of what had befallen them since they were last together.

When they got back upstairs in the Happy Kobold, Tammy was the first to greet them. She threw herself at Ganhard, crying 'Where have you been? I was so worried!'

'I just had to go and rescue Grimfund from some wicked dwarves,' he reassured her, as he smothered her in kisses. 'And we met some halflings and that was fun. And guess what, we met the minotaur and he's really friendly. Then we got the boat home and it was a bit slow, but we got here.'

Annagól appeared and greeted Val warmly. 'Val! It's good to have you back and you've brought the others with you! This calls for a celebration!'

'There's so much to tell, we've all had a quite adventurous time,' said Val. 'I've acquired a tower, and possibly a regiment of soldiers and I've learnt how to fly and I've ridden a talking horse all the way from Amberkeep to Highcourt and back and I know where to keep the Codex and I'm on speaking terms with Spaldor, though he doesn't make a lot of sense, you might have to help me on that, and I'm going to marry a colonel but I haven't told him yet.' It all came out like that in a breathless rush of words, so you could tell she was excited to be back.

While this was going on, Poli came in and greeted Grimfund and Aromin, who were standing a little awkwardly on one side. 'You look different,' she said to Aromin, 'Did you find your wife all right? Didn't you bring her back with you?'

'Yes, I did find her, but I didn't bring her back. She had gone mad and only wanted release. Her spirit had gone to a better place in the afterlife. I nearly joined her, didn't I Grimfund?' he said with a chuckle.

'Er, hmm,' said Grimfund, 'There was a slight accident. Aromin is now somewhat immortal but apparently we won't know for sure for about ten thousand years or so. Thereabouts. Approximately.'

'Goodness,' said Poli. 'Oh. By the way, Aromin, I must thank you for the pair of swords. They're really beautiful.'

'What swords?'

'The swords you left in my room, wrapped up in a bundle, with a note?'

'Not me. Perhaps it was Annagól. It's the sort of thing he would do.'

'Oh. How strange.'

'What did the note say?'

'I don't know. Ganhard read it out for me.'

'Ah.'

'Oh.'

'Poli,' asked Aromin tactfully, 'How is it with you and Ganhard, now? He seems to be a bit taken up with Tammy. Never stopped talking about her all the way home on the boat.'

'She's welcome to him. I've gone off men.'

'Just men? How about Elves and Dwarves? Are you still on speaking terms with us? Or are we all in the rubbish heap?'

'No, you two are all right.'

'That's a relief. What will you do now? Go back home to Redcott?'

'Yes. But I don't want to go on my own. A couple of bodyguards would be welcome. An Elf and a Dwarf, for example.'

'This sounds interesting,' said Aromin. 'We need to talk. But not now.'

'Meet in my room, later,' said Grimfund.

Ganhard mused. It was pleasant, being back in the Happy Kobold after the bewildering events of Grimfund's rescue and the journey home. He thanked Gyri that they had all returned safely.

For this was his home, here in Annagól's hideaway, or as close to anything that he could call home, now that he was disconnected from the temple at Upcross. He could scarcely have imagined, when he set out from there at Anelia's behest, what fate had in store for him but here he was here now, bound to Gyri's service, her immortal champion for all eternity. In a way, it was an awe-inspiring prospect and yet he was oddly comfortable with the rôle. It was safe to assume that a Goddess Omniscient knew what she was doing and if she had chosen him, well, that was how things were to be. It was Gyri's will, and that was enough.

He glanced around his chamber. Afternoon sunshine was streaming through the window and the room was pleasantly warm. His books and papers were neatly stacked on a side table where Tammy had arranged them for him and he knew without looking that his clothes would be clean and neatly hung in the closet. He was truly pampered by Tammy, his handmaiden, his concubine and lover, a gift from Blesséd Gyri. Ganhard couldn't imagine a more delightful gift, but then Gyri was a goddess so of course she could look into his soul and know what he wanted better than he did himself. He gave a silent *gratias* to the little statuette of Gyri that Tammy had brought with her from the temple and had placed on the wall-shelf beside their bed.

Tammy was next door with Val but her perfume still lingered faintly in the air and mingled with the scent of the flowers she had arranged in a pottery vase on the window ledge. Ganhard was delighted by the aroma, almost without knowing why.

He could hear feminine chatter through the adjoining wall and he new that Tammy was happy with Val. He guessed they were brushing each other's hair and trying on each other's dresses; that seemed to be what women did together, in his limited experience. He reflected how strange it was that two women could be such very different people and yet get on so well together.

He tried to compare them, to decide what made one so easy for him to love and the other so intimidating. On the surface, they looked so much alike they could be mistaken for sisters; they even had the same way of arranging their hair and similar mannerisms when they talked. He found them both equally attractive on that, superficial, level. But it was something else. Where Tammy was soft and yielding, Val was forthright and assertive. There was certainly a difference there. If he was honest with himself, he quite admired forthright and assertive but that was admiration, not love. It was a different thing. Where Tammy was uncritically warm and adoring, Val was friendly, co-operative and concerned for his welfare, but almost out of politeness; not because she had any special regard for him beyond friendship. In truth, the difference was that one loved him and the other didn't. Perhaps it was as simple as that. Perhaps that was all it took.

He was glad that Val had found a man she liked well enough to marry. Ganhard hadn't met the colonel yet but from Val's description of him, she was obviously quite taken with him. Ganhard spoke a silent blessing on them both. Val was Spaldor's champion, just as he was Gyri's, and obviously Spaldor operated differently but, just as Gyri had seen what Ganhard truly desired, so Spaldor had for Val. She was a soldier at heart and she was just made to be a colonel's wife. Really, that was who she had always been – a colonel's wife waiting for her colonel to come along. Ganhard reflected that, on a pragmatic level, it was really quite reassuring to know that the gods knew what they were doing - it made them more believable and that made his job as a priest easier.

On the subject of priestly duties, he wondered if he should offer to perform the wedding ceremony, when the time came. Not yet, of course, the colonel didn't even know himself yet that he was getting married until Val went back to Amberkeep to tell him, but it was surely a foregone conclusion. Ganhard was officially a priest without a temple and that might be a problem, but he would make the offer to Val anyway, as a symbolic gesture, so that she knew he wasn't uncomfortable with the situation.

He wondered about Val's new tower. A gift from the gods, certainly, just as Tammy had been his own gift. Val's report of her conversations with Spaldor had made little sense, though, and that was strange. Usually gods made their meaning abundantly clear and direct; people often didn't like what the gods told them to do and tried to wriggle out of it, so the gods specialised in making succinct but unambiguous commandments that left little room for manoeuvre. He had difficulty knowing how to advise Val

but perhaps, after all, it was a matter for Spaldor and Val to resolve without his intervention.

He tried to imagine what the tower might look like. Val's description had been pragmatic; it was defensible as a military fort and the interior needed refurbishment. A logical assessment. But what did it feel like? This was important to him, because Val had proposed that, when the tower was fit to live in, Ganhard and Tammy should live there permanently with her and the colonel. He was unsure.

Tammy would have feminine company and, to judge from the voices coming from next door, she would be happy to share a home with Val. That was a strong point in its favour. There needed to be one of the oath-takers permanently resident to watch over Val, to administer the Elixir to her if the need arose, and Ganhard could certainly do that. He could also act as medical officer and pastoral advisor to the colonel's regiment if they needed one. Yes, it all looked right from that point of view.

Val and Annagól had created the Codex as a subterfuge, a ruse to distract attention from the Blog itself. Val's plan - and presumably also the gods' plan - was to house the Codex in her tower and surround it with a regiment of soldiers, there to remain indefinitely to draw the covetous attention of would-be enemies like bees to a pot of honey. To serve the purpose it would need to endure for as long as the Blog itself needed protecting and that was potentially forever. Ganhard himself was immortal and Val would one day be so. The colonel would not be, nor would the soldiers in his regiment, but as long as replacements could be recruited from time to time, the arrangement could be made to endure. Yes, it all looked right from a strategic point of view.

But still Ganhard hesitated. He could not really decide unless he saw the tower for himself. He needed to know what aura it projected. Was it welcoming or foreboding? Was it lucky or unlucky? If he and Tammy were to live there for the rest of eternity, it was quite important for it to be the right place. He had tried to use the power of divination to help him see his way forward but the answers were unclear and he had difficulty interpreting them. There seemed to be references to Val and to Tammy and some sort of conflict between them. He was uncomfortable about that. There were references to the end and beginning of life; perhaps that related to Val dying and becoming immortal but it might have been something else. There seemed to be references to a concubine (obviously Tammy) becoming a rival to a man's wife (presumably Val) and this didn't seem too good.

Perhaps he was worrying too much. Sometimes, he thought, you have to just go with what you believe is right and, if problems arise in the future, deal with them as best you can. Ultimately, he was Gyri's servant and if Gyri wanted him to live in Val's tower, then that is where he would live. If she had other plans for him, she would have to tell him so.

He and Tammy must go with Val to Amberkeep, to meet the colonel, visit the tower and talk it over between the four of them. They would have to tell the colonel what was going on and he would then have the right to countermand the arrangements if they didn't suit him. Ganhard was aware that, at the back of his mind, there was a nagging hope that the colonel actually would do so. This was a sure sign that Ganhard wasn't wholeheartedly in favour of the plan himself. Logic said that it was a good plan, for it was Val's plan and she was logical, but his intuition didn't agree. There was something wrong but he couldn't say what it was.

It occurred to him that he had never offered Tammy immortality for herself. The question had arisen during that awful episode that ended up with Poli trying to throttle her but otherwise he hadn't mentioned it. He would certainly like to have her around forever. Was she hoping he would say so? He should really ask her. He would bring up the subject tonight. He was sure Annagól would provide him with an extra flask of the Elixir if he asked him. He was oath-bound to revive Val or Poli or Grimfund if the need arose but it didn't mean he couldn't revive Tammy as well.

Not for the first time, he reflected on his own immortality. It was strange, but it didn't feel any different, or if it did, he couldn't remember what it had been like before. Since Gyri had spoken, he was aware of being more sure of himself now that he knew his own place in the cosmic scheme of things and less worried about finding a purpose in life. But that was before he even became immortal so that wasn't the nub of it. He recalled Aromin's tale of the philosopher who argued that you couldn't tell the difference until thousands of years had gone by and you found yourself unexpectedly still alive. 'Not dying for a very long time' as Aromin had expressed it. Ganhard had to admit that it was a strangely compelling argument and Aromin himself certainly seemed convinced by it.

Aromin had changed while he was away; the gloominess and the outbursts of anger that had beset him when Ganhard first knew him, had gone and been replaced by a much more carefree and light-hearted personality. It was something to do with the release of the spirit of his dead wife from her tomb, Ganhard was sure. Such was the bond between Aromin and Anabarié, he supposed, that her anguish had been communic-

ating itself to him and oppressing him without him ever being aware of the reason for it. When he opened the tomb and released her, he released himself too. It was seemly. The gods had been merciful to Aromin, and though he professed not to acknowledge them, they had nonetheless shown magnanimity towards him. There was a lesson for all in that, he thought; magnanimity was something that everyone should aspire to, even if few achieved it.

In myths and legends, the attainment of immortality was generally thought of as something to be devoutly desired and eagerly sought for; the stuff of heroic tales and sagas. That was a straightforward enough thing for a priest such as Ganhard to understand; the spectre of death was ever-present and people wished for some way to escape it. And yet the reality seemed somewhat different. For one thing, as Aromin had already discovered, to be immortal is not to be immune to injury. It simply guaranteed that injuries, however severe, would not prove fatal; but that didn't stop them *hurting* and needing healing. Grimfund's remark about eternal neck-ache, though flippant, was right on the mark. As far as Ganhard could recall, none of the old myths and legends mentioned that aspect of immortality at all. Perhaps they needed to be re-written. A thought occurred to him, that perhaps he could undertake that himself; to write a new book of all the collected myths and legends relating to immortality, but revised to be more accurate. He rather liked that idea. It would take a long time, it was true, but then a long time was precisely what he did, indeed, have. He had visions of spending hours in Val's library, she working on her spells and he on his book of legends, sharing a companionable silence as the years rolled by.

Then there was the slight doubt about immortals being doomed to be childless. It was only a suggestion from the tales of the halfling bard but it did have a ring of truth about it. Did it matter? Ganhard hadn't really thought about having children himself and Tammy hadn't spoken about it. Should he broach the subject, or wait for her to tell him? He knew what she would say if he asked: that she would gladly bear his children if he was sure that was what he wanted; so he owed it to her to decide what he *did* want before raising the matter. He imagined living in Val's tower surrounded by small children who would dress up as soldiers and wizards and play games of make-believe. He found that rather appealing and was quite surprised at himself for thinking so. Perhaps it wasn't so hard to decide after all.

Ganhard ceased his daydreaming and went out of his chamber to find Anagól. It was time for daily prayers.

iii

Poli lay stretched out on her bed, worrying. Her leg itched and she scratched at it thoughtfully. She hoped it wasn't fleas again. She had a bath only last year and didn't enjoy it. She patted the Blog that she always had concealed, sewn into the lining of her dress, and was reassured by its solidity.

The Blog was important. It was only a book, full of words she couldn't read, but it was what the words said mattered. Apparently, terrible things would happen if anybody bad read the book and the gods had given it her for safe-keeping. That made her important, herself, and she liked that feeling. She couldn't exactly go around boasting about it to all and sundry because the Blog was a dreadful secret. But she didn't have to. If you know you are important, deep down inside, people sense that and treat you as important even without knowing why. That's how tyrants and princes keep their positions of power. People defer to them because they are important and they are important because people defer to them. A bit of deference goes a long way. Poli didn't exactly see herself as a tyrannical queen but she did like getting her own way.

She wondered if she should learn to read, just so that she could take a peek into the Blog and see what all the fuss was about. It would have to be done in secret, though. She recalled that there was a priest in Redcott, Brother Stitchbrey, who was as bent as a corkscrew and she knew quite a lot about his little vices. Probably more than he realised. He could certainly be persuaded to teach her to read and keep quiet about it, if he knew what was good for him. She filed that thought away in her mind, for future reference.

Redcott was where she was going to be based for the foreseeable future, along with Grimfund and Aromin. The three of them would be working in close partnership. It was all arranged, and she was pleased about that. Redcott was her home, she had family there and she knew her way around. She had good contacts with the criminal underworld in the town and she knew who to talk to when things needed to happen. Or to not happen, as the case may be. Knowing people who know people is how things are done. If any bad people showed up looking for the Blog, her friends would alert her and then she would decide what to do about it. Murdering the bad people before they got too close to the secret would be

a last resort but one she was quite capable of carrying out. That's why Abwen had chosen her - Poli had proven that she could be quite ruthless.

Grimfund would be there, and that was good. They were bonded by the oath and would revive each other with the Elixir if the need arose. Aromin, too, though he was already immortal so he wouldn't need it for himself. He would be there in reserve. It was comforting to know that. Also, Grimfund and Aromin had proved themselves quite capable of the merciless slaughter of a whole nest of cultists between them. That was reassuring, too.

Grimfund had some sort of trade deal arranged between northern dwarves and southern dwarves. He hadn't been very forthcoming when she asked him about it, he had just said it was 'dwarven business' whatever that meant. As far as she could work out, he was going to set up in Redcott as a trader in gemstones, routing the north-south trade through himself and creaming off a slice of the profits. Well, that made sense to Poli. Her uncle had lots of contacts in the jewellery trade and she could help Grimfund get established in the merchant community in Redcott. Poli herself knew enough about gemstones to tell a fake from a real one, so she might be able to make herself useful in that way too. She would also be talking to *The Man* and arranging 'protection' for the business but she hadn't told Grimfund about that. He didn't need to know.

It made a good cover story, a legitimate trading business. If it prospered it would provide the three of them with a useful income. Also, by building up a network of trading contacts up and down the kingdoms, Grimfund would be well-placed to get early warning of any hostile movements. Yes, this arrangement had a lot going for it.

Aromin would, on the surface, be organising the guards for Grimfund's cargoes but, quietly, would be creating gangs of thugs to keep things going their way in the town. He had, after all, been the leader of a band of outlaws in the Elk Forest, so he should know what he was doing. The gangs would be deployed to form an extra line of defence if it should ever come to irregular warfare. They would need to square it with the town guard, so they didn't tread on each other's territory, but Poli had some ideas about that. She would also need to square it with *The Man* and that might be more of a challenge. He would have to be persuaded that the scheme was working to his own advantage. There might have to be some give and take on that.

It was all falling into place quite nicely, she decided.

She wasn't sure what Annagól would be doing. He had his own rôle as guardian of the Glomb and he seemed to be a floating element in the grand scheme of things. That Val women would go off and play soldiers in her new tower and good luck to her. Poli didn't like her much, so the further away the better. And as for that faithless rat Ganhard – how she hated him – how dare he just drop her when that shameless bit of skirt threw herself at him - well, he could get lost too. Her fingers clenched involuntarily as if she were throttling Tammy all over again. She wouldn't fail, next time. Next time.

iv

Poli was unsettled, now, and needed to get up and walk about a bit. She went to look for Grimfund and Aromin and found them downstairs, in a secluded corner of the tavern, quaffing ale with two strangers. They were healthy-looking men in full plate armour and surcoats with a sunburst emblem on them. They looked official. What's going on, Poli wondered?

Aromin noticed Poli and smiled and waved and called her over to join them. 'Gentlemen, this is Poli, Champion of Abwen and one of our fellow oath-takers. Don't be taken in by her girlish ways, she would throttle you in your beds with her bare hands before you woke up. She's a tough little wench, aren't you Poli?'

'Why, Aromin, you mustn't give away all my secrets!' she laughed.

The man on the left, the senior one, Poli guessed, rose, extended his hand and introduced himself as 'Helmnoth of Rutleigh, Knight Paladin of the Order of The Shining Light.' His eyes were deep blue and steady as a rock. He was an honest man. Not just honest, Poli thought, but unnaturally honest and impossible to outwit or deceive. You can't deceive a man who doesn't first deceive himself and Helmnoth had no such weakness.

'Charmed,' she responded.

'My companion is Sir Algist Augthram of Stayside,' he continued with an expansive gesture, and the other paladin likewise rose and extended his hand.

'Sir Algist, my pleasure,' said Poli. This man is so upright, she thought, that you could plant him in the ground and grow beans up him.

'I hope I wasn't interrupting anything,' she said artlessly, 'What were you boys talking about?'

Aromin spoke up. 'Helmnoth and Algist are on a holy quest to track down cultists. We were telling them about our little adventure in the mountains.'

'Indeed,' put in Helmnoth, 'It is most interesting. We were discussing the possibility of returning to the site to hunt for clues as to the possible location of others. But I gather it is somewhat inaccessible.'

'Need a guide. Never find it otherwise,' grunted Grimfund.

'Why don't we send Ganhard?' suggested Poli brightly. 'He's an immortal, he's holy, and he knows where it is. When he got the call, he vanished in the middle of dinner and just turned up right outside the cultists' hideout apparently. And he's got some sort of book he found in the cultists' temple. You ought to look at that. It might be important. Shall I fetch him?'

'Whoa, not so fast, Poli, I think Ganhard might have other plans,' said Aromin. 'Ganhard is a great friend and I would back him to the hilt. I've seen him smear a cultist across a wall with a flick of the hand and it was mighty impressive, I can tell you. But he's not an outdoors man. He wouldn't last five minutes in those mountains on his own. You know, he just turned up in a blizzard without even a cloak? I had to lend him mine.'

'He sounds interesting, your friend Ganhard,' offered Helmnoth, 'Would it be possible to meet him? You mentioned a book belonging to the cult? I should very much like to see it.'

'Why not come upstairs and meet him now?' Poli offered. 'Well, not this minute, I think he's at prayers with Annagól. But when you've finished your drinks. I'm sure he would like to meet you both.'

'Thank you,' said Helmnoth, 'You are most hospitable, Poli. But who is Annagól? There seem to be so many of you, I'm quite losing track.'

'Annagól is my half-brother,' said Aromin 'He is the first among us. Annagól One-Eye, The Immortal Champion of Threy, Keeper of the Glomb, Guardian of the Elixir of Life.'

'Bless my soul,' said Sir Algist, who up to now had let his companion do the talking, 'You say that Annagól is here? Upstairs in this very inn? And that you are his brother? This is astonishing.'

'Yes, do you know him?'

'I know of him. My grandfather tells tales of my great grandfather's and great grandmother's adventures with Annagól, how they recovered the three parts of the Glomb together and how Annagól attained immortality. It is the stuff of legends and an inspiration to all of us. He was present at my grandparents' wedding, you know. He's almost family.'

'That's him,' declared Grimfund, banging his empty tankard on the table, 'As nice a bloke as you'd wish to meet. Drink up, we'll go upstairs.'

V

The two paladins, Helmnoth and Algist, were introduced to Annagól and he looked quite astonished when Algist explained who he was.

'You are Radgard's great-grandson? Remarkable. Yes, I see a likeness, the same features, the same bearing. Bless me, young man, you could be Radgard himself, standing there before me, large as life. And there is something of your great-grandmother Brenith in you, too, I fancy. Do you get your red hair from her?'

'Yes, that may indeed be so. I never knew them, they died before I was born, but I have seen their likenesses in pictures. Yours too, sir, though yours did not do you justice. You are taller than I always imagined.'

'Haha! It is always well to be more impressive in the flesh than one's portraits. Otherwise, one will be forever meeting people who look faintly disappointed with the reality and that would be depressing, would it not?'

'Well, that is certainly an interesting way of looking at it, sir. I'm not sure that most portrait painters would agree, though.'

'I fancy most portrait painters try to flatter their subjects,' suggested Helmnoth, 'Or, at least, they hope that their subjects will pay for flattery.' He looked disapproving as he said this.

'True, true,' replied Annagól. 'The subjects are buying a form of immortality, albeit a rather flat one. They hope their paintings will outlast them and that those who come after will take the fiction for the truth. But we immortals have no such need, you see. The portrait of me that Algist has seen, might, with proper management, last for many centuries but the difference is, that I will outlast it.'

‘There is food for thought in that,’ said Algist. ‘I begin to see how it must be different, to be immortal. You have my respect, sir, your great age has brought you great wisdom.’

‘Thank you, Sir Algist, but wisdom does come from age alone. It is not like wrinkles in the brow. Greater age provides greater time to make more mistakes in life. If we learn from our mistakes, then, with that experience, comes the wisdom but not otherwise. But come, before we grow too philosophical, you must tell me, what brings you and your colleague to Bythorpe?’

‘We have been sent on a quest by our Grandmaster to track down cultists of evil, and the Followers of Shokrad in particular. We were merely stopping here overnight, on our way to Netherport, but it is fortunate that we did, for I understand that some of your friends have encountered cultists in the mountains and have recently returned from there.’

‘Indeed. It is good to hear that your Grandmaster takes the threat as seriously as I do myself. The Followers of Shokrad are far more dangerous than many realise. But this is surely too timely to be a co-incidence. It cannot be mere chance that we have met. I have a notion that the gods intended it. Perhaps they have determined that we should join forces?’

‘We would be honoured, would we not, Helmnoth?’

‘Indeed,’ replied Helmnoth, ‘It would seem most suitable.’

‘Then I shall travel with you,’ said Annagól with sudden decisiveness. Let us make merry tonight and set out together, the three of us, for Netherport in the morning. I have some ideas that we can discuss along the way.

vi

Annagól threw a banquet that evening, to which the two paladins were invited, and made an announcement that everyone was half-expecting.

‘Tomorrow, I shall be closing down these rooms. As I am sure you will all agree, we have been very comfortable here in the Happy Kobold and the landlord will be handsomely rewarded. But all good things come to an end and we are all heading for other destinations, are we not?’

Val spoke up. ‘Yes, Ganhard and Tammy are coming with me to Amberkeep. We will be lodging at the Wyvern and Mermaid. I want them to meet Colonel Ravenbald and to take a look at my new tower, to see if we can

make it habitable, turn it into a defensive stronghold and situate the *Codex* there.'

Poli spoke next. 'Grimfund and Aromin are coming with me to Redcott. We'll be setting up a trading business there. Don't ask us for details.'

'And I, myself, will be travelling abroad with these two paladins for a long time, possibly years,' said Annagól. 'So, my friends, we have come to a parting of the ways. Let us drink a toast to one another's success.'

At that, with a flourish, Annagól conjured up goblets of brandy and they all drank a toast 'To Success!'

Aromin was thoughtful. 'After tonight, we may not see each other again for some time but we still need to co-ordinate our activities and pass on warnings about our common enemies. We need lines of communication between Val in her tower and us in Redcott, and with Annagól, wherever he might be, travelling the kingdoms. But we need secrecy. Are there messengers that can be trusted?'

'People go between Redcott and Amberkeep, all the time' suggested Poli. 'They can carry letters. But it's not very secret.'

'We can write in code,' Val pointed out, 'Normal military practice, just the same as I showed Annagól when we wrote the *Codex*. I can teach Aromin or Grimfund, it only takes a few minutes to learn. But we can't write to Annagól without knowing his whereabouts.'

'It is a perennial problem for our order,' observed Helmnoth, 'We rely on acting on our own initiative in the field, and reporting back, perhaps years later. But our circumstances are different from yours.'

'I have magical means, albeit limited,' said Annagól, 'There is a spell that would allow me to communicate by thought alone with any of you, over any distance. Only brief messages, it is true, but it will have to serve.'

'That sounds useful,' said Val, 'I would very much like to know how to do that. It could revolutionise warfare.'

'Of course. Come to my chamber tonight, my dear, and I will teach you the spell. In the meantime, let us have a demonstration. Tammy, my dear, would you put that jug down and go into your chamber and shut the door? I will speak into your mind and you will be able to answer. But just think the words, do not say them aloud. Then you must come back and tell us what was said. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Annagól, I think so,' said Tammy and, glancing at Ganhard for approval, she went outside.

Annagól took a filament of copper from his pouch and asked Aromin to find a pack of cards, draw one card at random and lay it silently on the table. Aromin did so. It was the Three of Wands. Then Annagól stroked the copper filament carefully between his fingers and whispered the name of the card, before signalling Aromin to replace it in the pack.

Tammy came back. 'You said "The Three of Wands" as clearly as anything,' she declared, 'Was that right?'

'Yes, that was quite right,' said Annagól. 'Well done, Tammy, you are a good subject. And you answered "The Temple of Gyri", did you not?'

'Yes!' cried Tammy, clapping her hands. 'What a clever spell. Oh, Ganhard, can you do that spell on me?'

'I wish I could, but I don't think I can do wizard spells like Annagól and Val. We just have to get by with talking to each other.'

'Annagól,' said Tammy thoughtfully, 'when you talked in my mind, it was as if I could feel everything you were thinking. Not just the words. It was like being inside your head. I tried not to see any secrets but, well, there was something. I'll whisper it to you.' And she bent down and whispered something in Annagól's ear.

'Haha! You're quite right. I often think of Hilda. You are very perceptive, Tammy. I think there must be a special empathy between us, because I caught a little of your mind too. But no secrets. I don't believe you have any, do you? Your mind is soft and gentle and unworried by such things. But let's not talk about it any more, or we will embarrass the others.'

'Well! I'm convinced,' said Val.

'Sounds dangerous to me,' said Poli. 'I wouldn't want people reading all my secrets. They might get more than they bargained for.'

'Oh, I'm willing to do it with Annagól,' offered Val. 'We have shared secrets anyway, don't we, dear?'

'Hah! Yes, we do. But not shameful ones, I hope?' he said with a twinkle in his eye.

'Then I will be the Redcott contact,' volunteered Aromin, 'I can't work the spell myself but if you teach it to Val, brother, we could have an arrangement that she would talk to me every day from her tower at sunset, say, and I could reply, just as Tammy did to you. That way, any important matters could be shared between Redcott and The Tower in less time than the fastest rider could make the journey.'

Val nodded. 'A good plan. We can try it out tomorrow at sunset. What do you think, Annagól? Do we need a fixed time every day between us, too?'

'No, I don't think so, Val. Let's keep it simple. Once you have the spell, you can talk to me or I can talk to you or to Aromin at any time, if there is anything new to tell. Bear in mind though, both of you, that the spell is only of brief duration. Choose your words carefully.'

Aromin nodded. 'There is one more matter, before we get back to the festivities. Do we have sufficient flasks of the Elixir for all foreseeable eventualities? I have one for Grimfund and Poli has her own, so there will be two at Redcott. What of the Tower?'

'I still have mine,' said Val.

'I do have one more with me, as a spare in case of mishap,' said Annagól. 'It would be wise for you to hold it, Ganhard. Then there will be two at each place. For safety.'

Ganhard nodded, and glanced at Tammy. Annagól noticed the glance and took its meaning. He was content.

That business settled, the dinner continued convivially far into the night and on the morrow, they all departed in friendship and went their various ways.

The last to leave, Annagól took down the painting of the two hunting dogs from above the fireplace in the outer room. It had been painted by Hilda's sister Caltémolliá Gílli, who was a famous artist in her day, and it had once been in the collection of the first Viscount Augthram, Radgard's grandfather. Annagól kept few possessions but this had always been of his most treasured, given to him by Radgard at their last parting.

As he took the painting down from the wall, the magical door beside the fireplace disappeared and with that the vaulted hall, the great oak table and the six bedchambers with their four-poster beds, all vanished as if they had never been.

**So Ended
The First Book
of
The Chronicles of Redcott**