

THE HEART OF THE STAFF

Stone Heart

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a red and black outfit, stands in a dark, ornate setting. Her hands are glowing with a bright red light. The scene is framed by a decorative gold border with floral and scrollwork patterns.

Carol Marrs Phipps
& Tom Phipps

Stone Heart
the third book of
The Heart of the Staff

by

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and
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Cover art by Marija Vilotijevic

Our Websites:

<http://www.niarg.com>

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To John and Sue Gates

&

To the Old Man Tree and to Mom, Dad and Will wherever they be.

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PROLOGUE

“Please forgive the interruption, Sorceress,” said Budog, as he and the other guard hove their captive onto the slippery stone floor, “but he's back again.”

“You and Mazhev had better...” said Demonica, turning aside from her prisoner on the torture table, writhing in his irons. “This had better be important.” Her ageless face seethed with fury in the wavering torchlight.

“This thing says he has some real information for you, this time,” said Budog, nodding at his captive.

“Oh, yes, yes!” pleaded the captive, as he sat up on his haunches. “This time I do have. This time I truly have what you want to know, Demonica, my love.”

“Never address me in that manner again!” she shrieked, as she kicked him in the gut, doubling him over to lie straining, cheek down on the clammy floor.

“Forgive me, Mistress!” he shouted, heaving in his first breath with a gasp. “Please! I quite forgot myself! I meant no disrespect! I swear!”

“Very well, Yann-Ber!” she barked, as she lunged at his face and spat. “What do you think you have to tell me?” She stood back to study her saliva, glistening on the mass of boils swelling his face. “You'd do well to hope you aren't wasting my time, dearest.”

An agonized moan from the man on the table caught Yann-Ber's eye. He shuddered at the sight of him, envying the wretched fellow's nearness to death. “Soon he'll be free of this,” he thought, “and maybe I shall be free as well, if what I bring suffices...”

“Out with it, you vile kaoc'h ki du!” she screamed, flinging her knee into his face to crush his nose with a resounding pop.

Yann-Ber wailed out in pain and clapped his hands over his face, his eyes still bearing the strength to give his wife a look of hatred. “Your daughter is dead,” he sputtered from between his bloody hands. “And your granddaughter has ascended the throne of Goll...” He closed his eyes for a moment and reeled, coming to grips with his pain. “They say she's got her hands on the Great Staff, you know, the Staff of Power, though no one seems to think that she uses it.”

“Just how sure are you?”

“I wouldn't dare aggravate you with anything I was unsure of, Demonica.”

“So how do you know, Yann-kaoc'h?” she said, suddenly lifting her knee as though she were going to strike him again. He winced and fell sideways, catching himself on his elbow. She threw back her head and made the halls of the dungeon ring with her laughter. “You stinking pomander of pustules, just how is it that you manage to know this?”

“A few still deny that she has the Great Staff at all,” he said, pulling himself upright, “but she certainly had no staff of any kind when she came to the throne, and then she suddenly had one, right when her mother died. Too many reliable people have seen it. And you said...”

“This time you've actually learnt something, Yann-Ber,” she said, suddenly brandishing a high spirited gloat. “So. Back to Norz-meurzouar it is again.”

She turned to Budog and Mazhev. “And you two finish up this mess for me,” she said, waving her manicured hand at the man on the torture table. “I have far more important business waiting on the Northern Continent.” She swept past Yann-Ber without a glance, heading for the door.

“Wait! Demonica, please!” cried Yann-Ber, lunging after her on knees swollen huge from boils, only to tumble forward onto his hands from the pain.

Demonica stopped in the doorway. "I don't have time for this, Yann-Ber."

"The curse!" he shouted through the blood on his face, as he rocked back and forth, coming to grasp with the pain in his knees. "You promised me! You gave me your word that if I found out the whereabouts of the Staff, then you'd end this curse. And she does have it. You'll see. Please, Demonica! Have mercy! I'm your husband! You cared for me once. Please!"

"Are you certain you want that, Yann-Ber?" she said with a light in her eyes, as a ruby lipped smile spread across her face.

"What else could I want?" he rasped.

"So be it," she said, making several signs in the air before turning crisply and walking out of sight.

"Demonica!" he shouted. "Nothing has changed! I still live! What treachery is this?"

The stony echo of her footsteps halted, then began again and stopped as she came back into view. "On the contrary, Yann-Ber, your death has been irrevocably scheduled, in spite of how slow and agonizing you may think it." She threw her head back with a peal of laughter. "You see, dear heart, I always keep my promises."

"But, so do I."

"Ah! Ah! Ah! But not to me. Remember that it was your faithlessness to me that earned you your nightmare spell of boils. So, as I was saying, I do keep mine, and you will most assuredly be dead within the year, though it will seem such a long time to someone with your lack of patience," she said, glancing at the crimson toes of her shoes as she adjusted the pleats down the front of her gown.

"I'll kill myself."

"You can try, Yann-Ber," she said with a demure smile, "but unfortunately it will never work." At once she turned and strode into the hallway, here and there erupting into laughter as her reverberating footfalls passed beyond hearing.

"You witch!" he screamed as he tottered onto his feet, only to be seized by the hair and thrown flat onto the floor by Budog who pinned him mercilessly with both knees, yanking his arm around backward until it snapped, making him wail out in pain.

"Hurt your little armsie, stinkfish?" he hissed through his rotten teeth. "Too bad that's all I broke." He yanked Yann-Ber to his feet by the hair and pointed him toward the torture table. "Thing is, you stink so much, I can't concentrate on my work here." He shoved him flailing for balance towards the door. "Now. If Mazhev or I even see you again, we'll play with you awhile like that fellow on the table."

The hurried staccato of Demonica's footfalls silenced as she crossed from flagstone floor to carpet on her way to the dais of her audience chamber, where she kept her scrying crystal on a pedestal beside her seat. She whisked away the heavy red velvet covering and gazed at once into its translucent depths. A fiery glow whirled away its murkiness. Glimpses of other places took shape. At last she nodded with satisfaction.

"So, dearest Granddaughter," she said, raising her brows. "You have done right well, but not so very well that you wouldn't benefit enormously from having me as your new nanny for that fine young son of yours." She flung wide her arms and spun around once, suddenly riveting her stare back into the crystal. "I'm so sorry, dear, but your present nanny is about to have such a horrible accident." She paused, studying certain particular

details in the orb before scooping it into her robe. At once, she raised her staff, made some magic signs and vanished.

Chapter 1

“They're in the trees, aren't they?” said Queen Spitemorta, straining to see aloft as she drew her raven-black unicorn to a stop. “Easy, Nightshade.” She patted his withers and stroked his silver mane.

“Yes, that's supposed to be their habit, all right,” said the older woman, on a brindled grey unicorn in the deer path behind her. She lowered the hood of her cloak and looked about overhead before giving a shrug. “So?”

“So I don't like them watching us. I still say we should've used a traveling spell to come here. We'd be spending our morning back in Goll instead of here in the Chokewoods being spied on by cannibals.”

“You're as skittish as Nightshade, there,” said the elder with a calmness that Spitemorta found nettling. “I don't understand why you people up here waste your patience on cyflymder unicorns. Roudennegs like Gwenole, here, are as steady as the rock my keep is built on. I'm right glad you managed to find her for me. Now listen: I wouldn't worry so much if I were you. You look altogether like your mother did when she first arrived here, so I can't imagine the dorchadas being anything short of terrified by you. Besides, malicious parties can make good allies. You never know when they might be useful.”

“I am indeed out here in this place on the strength of what you've said, Demonica. But there are times when I can see that I'm being advised by my son's nanny. You seem to forget that I'm queen and that I have this...” she said, suddenly drawing forth the staff from across the tops of her panniers and shooting out a lavender flame from the end of it, sending a dorchadas plummeting to the ground in a ball of flame. The dorchadas kicked a time or two before the flame went out. Spitemorta rode forward and prodded his crumbling cinder with the staff.

“This is my forest! I am queen!” she called out, addressing the huts and the dangling skulls in the treetops. “Many of you must fancy yourselves brave. So if anyone amongst you wishes to contest this, come forth!”

The forest canopy was quite silent as scores of obsidian eyes stared out from the late summer leaves with indigo-black cat faces bearing lemon-yellow manes.

“Good!” cried Spitemorta. “Then you'll come to my service at my bidding, knowing that you will die if you refuse!” Joy surged through her. She could see their helplessness. She rode forward, head held high. They rode in silence along the deer path under the twisted boughs of the choke oaks until they seemed well beyond the outlying grounds of the dorchadas.

“Well done, dear. Everyone was quite impressed,” said Demonica at last, “but it was unwise for you to leave your back open to attack.”

“Oh come now, Grandmother,” she said, wheeling 'round to ride alongside her. “Just as you said, those heathens were terrified. They thought Ugleeuh had risen right up out of the Pit and returned to reclaim her perverted realm.”

“No doubt. But the dog most likely to bite you from behind is the one who's too afraid to come at you head-on.”

“You forget that I've been queen of two realms for better than five years. I've had no problems. What have you done to learn to command others besides be a governess?”

“Not much. I've only been the most powerful sorceress in the world for something just short of three centuries...”

“Well, as I said before,” said Spitemorta, interrupting to hide her faltering aplomb, “a traveling spell would have saved us from all this...this inconvenience.”

“You chose to ride the high-strung cyflymder, dear. As for traveling spells, those are another problem altogether. It seems that when my daughter gave you the staff, she must have led you to believe that they are appropriate for any sort of traveling.”

“She didn't give me the staff...”

“How'd you come by it?”

“...I took it.”

“Well. That's my granddaughter,” said Demonica, stopping Gwenole in the path and leaning aside to look squarely into Spitemorta's face. “By that, I gather that she showed you nothing at all about traveling spells, aye?”

“Yes she did. How else would I know how to cast them? Ugleeuh showed me weeks before I ever got my hands on the staff.”

Demonica's eyes shot open at this. “So, she was obviously with you when you first used a spell...”

“Well, sure...”

“And that, of course, was the only time you traveled before you got your hands on the staff...”

“Oh, no. I used a spell to go from Castle Goll to find her at her candied cottage, here in the Chokewoods. She wasn't there, so I used another spell to travel from the cottage to where she was on the beach with Gastro.”

Demonica dropped a rein. An apoplectic look came and went on her face. The unicorns sauntered on, side by side, erratically trading turns walking in the narrow path.

“Well?” said Spitemorta. “Weren't you asking me something?”

“I was about to say,” said Demonica, snapping to as if jostled out of a dream, “that even the most powerful and experienced use that mode of transportation only with the greatest care and restraint.”

“Pooh, Demonica. I've been using dear Mother's traveling spells for the past five years and have never had a problem. Perhaps you're not quite the sorceress you claim to be if you've had problems.”

Suddenly, Spitemorta found herself trapped in the hollow trunk of an enormous choke oak. She could not move her arms or her legs. She could move her head around easily and she could see out through a hole in the trunk well enough to peer down the outside of the tree to see one of her legs sticking out through another hole below. Demonica and the two unicorns were nowhere to be seen. She drew a breath to cry out to her grandmother only to give a wail of terror at the sight of the ground below as it became a swarming vermilion carpet of hundreds upon hundreds of smallies, surging forth to close around her tree. Now she could see their indigo eyes full of hunger. Hair rose on her neck and forearms. “They really do look like wee devils,” she gasped. “But how can they have mouths so very full of teeth? No wonder they eat their pray alive in moments.” Her heart hammered in her ears and pounded in her chest as the nearest smallie ran up to her deerskin riding boot. “Where are you, Demonica?” she screamed. “Demonica! I'm sorry!”

And there she was, sitting calmly astride Gwenole, holding Nightshade's reins, just as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, just as if she were merely out for a Sunday afternoon ride. The smallies were nowhere to be seen. Spitemorta felt faint, as Demonica

opened the tree as though its front were a door to a wardrobe and helped her onto Nightshade.

“Well then. You're learning, I see,” said Demonica, as Gwenole and Nightshade sauntered through the crisp, prematurely fallen leaves back onto the path. “Now, as I was about to explain before your rude remark, traveling spells are dangerous because the inexperienced might find himself landing inside a rock or a tree. One could end up out in the air beyond a cliff or under water. I can see Ugleeuh never told you any such thing. Right?”

“Well, no...” said Spitemorta, as she studied the gnarled and twisted trunks of the choke oaks, “but I can't imagine it being dangerous in the least to travel by spell if you'd been to the exact spot before. There'd be no way you'd end up inside something solid or any sort of disastrous spot.”

Demonica removed a glove and tugged at the bridge of her nose before leaning aside to intrude on Spitemorta's stare. “You still don't see, dear. Unless you had just been to a place moments earlier, you'd not be certain. What if a raging flood drowns the place where you intend to land? Suppose an earthquake opens up a chasm? What if someone with special powers anticipates your coming and arranges a trap for you? People do learn on their own, and none of this has occurred to you yet because you've scarcely used the traveling spell at all during your five years of 'experience.' Right?”

Spitemorta jogged on, sitting up quite straight on her saddle.

“Am I not right?” said Demonica, catching up alongside.

“Very well, Grandmother. Traveling that way made me so horribly nauseated and ill. Not the first time, not when Ugleeuh showed me, but every time thereafter, when I used the spell by myself. Even when I took the staff and used the spell to return to Goll, I got terribly sick. I only tried it once more, just to see, and it was awful then too. Maybe it wouldn't have been bad if you and I had used the spell together.”

“There is a great deal that I'm afraid that I need to show you. And as far as traveling spells go, just remember that when you try to go back into the past, you land in the future, and just how well you resolve that depends on skills that you have yet to develop.”

“You have made your point, Demonica,” she said, tightening her slender hands into white-knuckled fists on the reins as Nightshade turned his ears back and then forward again.

The sun was climbing in the east, but it only cast a somber light through the boughs of the choke oaks, even though they were already losing some leaves. The woods seemed haggard, resigned in their stillness, though from time to time one could hear distant ravens croaking. They wended their way in file most of the time, since the unicorns seemed to prefer the path to the brush on either side of it. Spitemorta followed her grandmother for a good while.

“Sorceress for nearly three hundred years. She doesn't look much older than me. She's gorgeous. I wonder just how old she really is?” she thought. “Demonica,” she said, riding alongside in a clear space. “You're absolutely certain that dear departed Uncle Razorbauch told you the right location of this crystal?”

“You try my patience, girl,” she snapped, making Spitemorta shudder with recollections of the insides of choke oaks. “You question my very judgment. And maybe not. And if not, what possible reason would I have for journeying to this vile forest with someone who not only doubts my motives, but even my knowledge, abilities and

judgment, except to retrieve what we came for?”

“Forgive me.”

“I’ll not bother with deciding whether or not that remark was sarcastic, my dear, but once we get the heart you will see. Rest assured.”

“Very well,” she said, reaching back to touch the staff where it was tied behind the cantle of her saddle. “I suppose my problem has been all along that I’m not altogether convinced I even need this crystal. The staff wields tremendous power as it is. Wait until you see all the strange things Ugleeuh created in her part of the forest. The water is chocolate and even insects can talk. The woman was crazy. Why didn’t she do something useful with all that magic? She didn’t even conjure a decent place to live in.”

“This matters to you?” said Demonica with a shrug. “Who can ever know the answer to such a question? Besides, people who live a long time in seclusion are known for growing eccentric and doing strange things. What does matter to us here is that what she changed happened to be all that she was able to change, and it didn’t amount to much since she did not have Kalon Bras, the crystal Heart of the Staff. When the staff is complete with the heart, the one who wields it has the very power of creation.”

“But Ugleeuh created her crazy peppermint forest without the crystal, Grandmother...”

“Oh, no,” said Demonica, holding up a finger. “Your mother changed things with the staff, but she created nothing.”

“Very well, but why didn’t all her magic vanish when she died? I watched her die and the only thing I saw was her ridiculous crow turn back into a parrot.”

“She must have changed the parrot to a crow without the staff. The moment she died, so did her magic. As I said before, the staff’s power greatly amplifies a person’s own magic. Things changed with the staff take much longer to return to their original state, but they do. Gradually they do, and they start the moment that person dies.”

“Then what about the Chokewoods and the smallies and the dorchadas? Didn’t Razzorbauch do all of that with the staff? What kind of time are we talking about here?”

Demonica sucked in a deep breath and let it go. “Razzorbauch used the heart, dear girl,” she said with a tinge of impatience. “His forest will not fade. Ugleeuh never had anything at her command beyond the staff, just like you. All she did has either returned to what it was or is on its way. If she’d had the heart in the staff, neither Razzmorten nor anyone else could possibly have kept her confined to Chokewoods.”

“Grandfather, you’re not kidding,” said Rose, wide eyed, as she shared looks with Lukus. “So the magic in the Peppermint Forest is really failing. But why would that be happening now, after all this time? Nearly everything was still exactly as Ugleeuh had left it when we visited there and got the unicorns, right after her death. You said back then that things she conjured by herself went right back to the way they were before, the moment she died, like Hubba Hubba did, and you said the things that didn’t were undoubtedly changed by her, using the staff.”

“I’m not completely sure I understand it either, but I know what I saw,” said Razzmorten, pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. “There are probably as many choke oaks in there now as there are peppermint trees. I don’t remember seeing a single choke oak back then. I saw Spark, and he’s getting worried about all his friends in

the forest. They're in danger of becoming ordinary woodland creatures, of course, but he's really worried about them being eaten by smallies and dorchadas.”

“Spitemorta,” said Rose, swatting the imaginary something which she had just drawn with her finger on Razzmorten's table. “She's got something to do with this. I knew that sooner or later she'd be up to no good with the Great Staff. I stood there and did nothing while I watched her grab Ugleeuh's broom and vanish.”

“Oh go on, Rose,” said Lukus. “We all stood by stupidly and watched her do that.”

“But what does she even care about the forest?” she said, going back to drawing imaginary pictures. “Nothing in it is going to come out and...Whoa!” She smacked the table and pivoted round on the bench to face Razzmorten. “Sukere. She wants the sukere the dragons have cultivated. In fact, she undoubtedly intends to get Razzorbauch's sukere plantation up and going again and wants to add the Peppermint Forest. But why in Niarg bother changing it back into more Chokewoods?”

“Maybe. Maybe. Maybe,” said Lukus. Razzmorten nodded. “You've thought of a good possibility, Rose,” he said, “but the changes in the forest may have nothing to do with Spitemorta. Possible but unlikely. You said it yourself: why change the Peppermint back into more Chokewoods, first?”

A sudden fluttering of wings caught their attention, as two parrots landed softly on the window sill. “So,” said the yellow headed one. “You're back, Wiz. What's the latest news from the sweetest place in the world? Did Spark and Lipperella's eggs finally hatch?”

“Not yet, Hubba Hubba,” said Razzmorten, “but I believe there's more to worry about in the Peppermint than dragon's eggs.”

“Hey, eggs are a big deal,” said Hubba Hubba, as he leant forward like a compass needle drawn to a nail. “So what's up? You went to visit Spark just to see about his eggs. Must be something thundering big.” He ran his beak down a flight feather and let it go with a snap.

“The magic in the Peppermint Forest is failing. That's what,” said Lukus. “Hey, what's everyone looking at me for? You all think that was indiscrete? Hubba Hubba and I go 'way back, at least far enough that we give it to each other straight. If I fiddled around trying to spare his feelings, he'd want to shake it out o' me.”

Hubba Hubba gaped at Lukus, then at Rose and Razzmorten. He came to when his red-headed mate gave him a light peck on the head. “Thanks, Pebbles,” he said, looking at her gratefully. Then he clamped shut his beak and stared resolutely back at the three. “So Wiz, when do we leave?” he said with a thorough shake of his feathers.

“What?”

“Well, you're obviously going back to the Peppermint, and you've obviously come back here to get volunteers and I'm volunteering.”

Pebbles pecked him on the head again, but this time she gave a bunch of his feathers a smart twist. “Not without me,” she said. “I've not been there.”

“She's got an empty nest,” said Hubba Hubba, jerking back his head. “Correction Wiz. We're going with you.”

“And so are we,” chorused Rose and Lukus with a nod.

“Good, good, then,” said Razzmorten. “I only hope it won't leave Hebraun and Minuet short handed with these troubled times for the kingdom of late.”

“Such times are more of Spitemorta's work,” said Rose. “How can she have

convinced so many people of her vile lies?”

“It does seem astounding that a woman who not long ago was a favorite mockery of gossips has managed to make the populace doubt your mother and father who have always been known as fair monarchs for the people,” said Razzmorten, standing up to circle the table with his hands behind his head. “The crop failures no doubt play some part. People fear famine this winter, and with this blight, it's a real fear. If the crown doesn't solve their problem, there'll be hysteria. It doesn't help that we have no idea what to do about it, yet.”

“I find it appalling that the people can hold the crown responsible for an act of nature...if that's what it is,” said Rose, rising to do some pacing of her own.

“Well there you go,” said Razzmorten. “If it is an act of nature, the crown is responsible for feeding everyone. If it is not an act of nature, someone is responsible. Desperate people are always lightning fast to find someone to blame, and the timing is perfect for Spitemorta to sew her seeds of discontent. You've heard the latest whispers that the crown is secretly involved in sukere trade, I suppose?”

“But Mother and Father have passed the laws they voted for which banned the stuff. How can they turn around and accuse them of trading in it?”

“Yea,” said Hubba Hubba. “They even banished a member of their own family because of it. Sort of.”

“Indeed, 'sort of!’” said Razzmorten from under hoary brows, as everyone turned to the bird. “As far as the public was concerned, yes.”

“That's what I meant, Wiz. Ugleeuh trying to poison the king and queen was hushed up, I knew that. I was talking about the part that they did know about and were wanting to lynch her for: the dragon slayer getting fried by the dragon because she was keeping him all sukered up. Hey, it's you humans who are always forgetting the details.”

“Right you are, Hubba Hubba,” said Razzmorten, “but get this: I've just found out that Spitemorta is using Ugleeuh's exile for sukere for her own ends. She has started saying that the whole affair was a ploy to point suspicion away from the crown. She says that the king and queen were secretly in the sukere trade with Ugleeuh and that they sent her to oversee their hidden sukere operations in the Chokewoods, pretending to oust her for her misdeeds. That's only half of it. She says that Ugleeuh was murdered by Hebraun and Minuet when she threatened to expose the entire enterprise if her name was not cleared so she could leave the forest and be shed of the whole affair.”

Rose thrust her fists straight down at her sides and stared out the window of her grandfather's tower at the late afternoon countryside below. “What I can't fathom is why she's doing this,” she said, suddenly wheeling round to face him, just as he had come up to the drapes to have a good stare out himself. “She has James, so she can't possibly still have designs on Lukus, and I'm certainly no threat to her. She and James have the rule of two countries and have amassed an astonishing amount of wealth in their five years together. They have even started a family of their own. Why is she so intent on destroying the House of Niarg?”

“Maybe just because she thinks she can, Rose,” said Lukus, as he stretched out along the length of the bench she had been sitting on. “Well think about it. What reason did she have for telling you Myrtlebell's little story that you were actually Ugleeuh's daughter and only adopted by our parents? She didn't make up the story and she wasn't doing you any favors by telling you. She just plain got a kick out of it because she could get away with

doing it.”

Rose opened her mouth and shut it.

“Point,” said Lukus with an exaggerated grin. “Evil needs no reason, Rose, it just is. Spitemorta’s sport. I also think she favors her dear mother, Auntie Ugleeuh, and it would be like her to think we owe her for who knows what. I’m right glad they didn’t arrange to marry her and me. I’d ‘ave fled the continent.”

“None of this is solving our problems, I’m afraid,” said Razzmorten. We need to tell your parents what we have in mind. The sooner we sail, the better.”

“Oh, Father?” came Queen Minuet’s voice from the vestibule, “I know you’re here somewhere. I don’t mean to intrude.” She rapped on the door she was already pushing open, smiling with brown eyes darting round to each person in the room. “I’m sorry...” she said, taken aback at the surprise on everyone’s face. “I just got word of your return, and since I had a few free moments I thought I’d save you the trouble of coming all the way down to the throne room to tell me how you found things in the Chokewoods. I can come back...” She turned aside as if to go.

“Hey Queen, it ain’t your birthday, so what else would we be plotting in secret?” said Hubba Hubba, taking flight to land neatly upon her shoulder. “You took us by surprise because we were on our way down to see you ones.”

Minuet looked up to see looks of confirmation from everyone while Hubba Hubba shamelessly thrust out the ruffled nape of his neck for a scratch.

“He’s like that,” said Pebbles.

“This is your job, then,” said Minuet returning Hubba Hubba to the window sill and giving both birds a scratch. “Very well, out with it, Father,” she said, turning round with her hands on her hips. “What sort of plot is this?”

“What sort of family do you think you have?”

“A right clever one,” she said, giving him a bracing hug to welcome him home. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way. So. Let’s all go down to the throne room.

Hebraun’s still there, listening to the last dissatisfied citizen before supper time.”

They found him, the very picture of exhaustion, staring off down the avenue of his concerns. Hebraun abruptly stirred, then eased at once at the sight of her taking her seat beside him. “Razzmorten,” he said, standing up to shake his hand. “How was it? Have the dragonets hatched?”

“They hadn’t yet when I was there, though they probably have by now. Needless to say Spark and Lipperella were both anxious. I expect that once the gaggle arrives, they’ll have their talons full enough that they might wish them back in their shells.”

“A truer statement never passed your lips, Wiz,” piped Hubba Hubba, as Pebbles pecked him on the head.

“Yes... Well, my trip was indeed disturbing,” said Razzmorten. “The magic in the Peppermint forest is quickly fading. At the rate things seem to be going, the Peppermint might cease to exist as anything but Chokewoods before the year’s out. Of course, that’s how it was before Ugleeuh was there, but we need to know for certain if her magic is dying away or if there is tampering afoot.”

“Not to mention,” said Lukus, “we have friends in the forest whose lives will be in jeopardy if the magic there vanishes.”

Chapter 2

“There, 'way yonder,” said Spitemorta, above the frying chorus of insects in the waning light, as she shifted about on her saddle to see. “None of this around here looks quite right to me, but that has to be it.”

“You've been saying that,” said Demonica. “Why's that?”

“Well, the air is quite minty here, but not at all like I remember it. It's about as woodsy as anything. I came to find Ugleeuh about this time of year, and the air was so strong with mint that it made my nostrils cold just to breathe in sharply. And these trees, better than half of them are oaks or something. I'd swear that every single tree had red stripes on its trunk, back then.”

They meandered on through the brush, dodging briars and bending aside willowy branches. “I'm certain, now,” she said. “That cabin is her old hovel, all right. Bad as it is, I suppose it would do for place to have a bite to eat and a chance to get off of these saddles for the night.”

As they drew near, they saw that the front door and one of the shutters were off their hinges. Three small raccoons stared furtively at them out of the doorway from the far side of the fallen door, while a much larger one stood up and glared at them from the chimney where it had been lounging as the others finished their raid. It dropped off the far side of the sagging roof, as the small ones humped away to the nearby trees.

“Kenavo warc'hoaz!” called out Demonica, throwing her leg over Gwenole's rump.

“What?”

“Oh, just good bye to the creatures...which, by the way, appeared ordinary enough to me. I do believe Ugleeuh's enchantments are indeed failing if you haven't exaggerated their extent.”

“Absolutely not,” said Spitemorta. “Nor was my account of how many Peppermint trees there were at the time I visited your wretched daughter. Too bad you didn't come to Goll sooner so you could've seen it all with your infallible eyes.”

“I'm surprised that you credit me, Rouanez Bras. After all, you scarcely find me trustworthy to take you to the Heart. But too bad I wasn't here sooner...”

“What's 'Rouanez' supposed to mean?”

“You dear. It means 'Big Queen.' They'd call you that in Pennvro if they knew who you were.”

“Yea? Well, no one here knows Head as 'Pennvro' either. In fact, unless they've got some schooling, they don't even use 'Head.' They just call everything down there 'Dark Continent.’” she said as she hitched Nightshade to the porch railing, then suddenly stood straight at the sight of one of the raccoons which had returned for a peep around the corner of the house. “Those 'coons could have been spies.”

Demonica followed her onto the sagging porch and into Ugleeuh's little cabin. She looked around quickly, her shrewd eyes missing nothing, even in the failing light. “I'd guess it unlikely that your mother ever entertained a small child, dwarf, or any other wee person,” she said as she picked up a little shirt and a pair of breeches, strewn across the floor. “I can't imagine it.”

“Then it looks like somebody was squatting in her house.”

“That,” she said, wagging her finger at Spitemorta, “does not mean that anyone has been here, including the raccoons, who was after anything other than a free place to be.”

Spitemorta gave an impotent glare. “Very well, Demonica, but just what if we are

being watched? What if someone guesses what we are after just when we are about to recover it? I told no one, including James. He thinks we're off to our summer palace on the coast to discuss trade agreements with some ambassadors from the Eastern Continent.”

Demonica shook her head and went out the door, pausing briefly to study the evening before walking unhurriedly to Gwenole to begin sorting through one of her panniers. “I never told you that this venture would be without risk, dear girl,” she said when she heard Spitemorta behind her. “If you've become too faint hearted, go back now. But if you do, you'll probably never amount to more than you do now because you'll throw away the one chance in your life to recover Kalon Bras, or the Stone Heart if you must.” She found her stirrup and mounted. “Better choose now, because I'm out of patience trying to impress upon you the power that you have near to hand.”

“The Staff is mine. I'm here for the Heart,” she said firmly. “But what about rest and food?”

“We can eat some of that dried fruit we brought with us as we ride. And you just had all the rest you're going to get until we reach the cave where Kalon Bras is hidden.”

“Let's find this powerful artifact then, if it still exists,” she spat, giving Nightshade a hateful smack with her reins before furiously digging in her heels, causing him to bolt forth at full speed.

Demonica shook her head and followed in earnest in the darkening woods. Soon Spitemorta slowed again to a walk, allowing them to travel side by side. An owl wailed and was answered by another far away through the timber.

“If we ride through the night we might reach the cave by sunrise,” said Demonica, pulling her cloak more tightly around herself.

“Smallies are supposed to hunt in force after dark, aren't they?” said Spitemorta. “Could we conjure a mage light? I've heard they fear fire and anything that appears to pass for it.”

Suddenly, a bright ball of light the size of an orange appeared above Spitemorta's head, lighting the path for twenty rods, staying with her as they rode. “There you be, dearie. Of course, if there are spies about, we certainly have set them a right fair beacon.”

“Better alive and watched than dead and forgotten.”

“Whee! You're loosening up,” cried Demonica, throwing her head back for a laugh. “Keenly profound. I don't reckon it dawned on you that being watched by the wrong person could also get us dead and forgotten? Only moments ago that was your main concern.”

A sudden rending and popping of timber off the path beyond the light caused both unicorns to rear up in fright. It was all they could do to keep them from bolting. “Let's go,” said Demonica. “I've got to see this.” At once the mage light winked out.

“I certainly can't see anything this way!”

“Just give it a minute, dear.”

“Over there,” said Spitemorta, “It sounds like a tree being pulled in two.” Before them in the blackness they could make out the motion of something huge.

“Let's go,” said Demonica, riding into the brush. At once the mage light came on away ahead in the trees where they had seen the motion. They rode up directly under the light.

“I don't see a thing but this oak, Demonica.”

“Choke oak. No, I don't either, but this is exactly where we saw the commotion.”

“Well, we both couldn't have imagined it.”

A rending creaking and popping like gargantuan new leather riveted their attention high up in the choke oak. The final pop, loudest of all, showered them with dozens of plummeting pieces of something large. Demonica dismounted in a frenzied whirl and pounced on the largest piece which she saw. It was clearly bark from high in the choke oak which they were standing under. She turned it over several times in her hands, then smelt it. “Here,” she said, tossing it to Spitemorta. Look at it, smell it and tell me what you think.”

“Why, this is peppermint bark, not choke oak. It's bright red and white and smells like mint.”

“Yea, and you saw as well as I where it fell from,” she said as the choke oak popped again, flinging more bits of bark. “This tree has just now lost the enchantment Ugleeuh put on it with the Staff and has twisted up and become a choke oak all over again. Now we know for sure that it is the failing of your mother's magic that explains the appearance of the choke oaks here.”

“But you already said that Ugleeuh's magic would fade.”

“Good. You're paying attention. And now we have absolute proof that it has begun.”

“Well, the sooner the better. This place is a disgrace to anyone with magical ability.”

“Don't worry, Spitemorta,” said Demonica with a smile, as she gracefully mounted Gwenole. “I doubt that a single soul would blame you for Ugleeuh's eccentric work. Only a tiny number of people even know this place exists.”

“It's those amongst that tiny number who bother me the most.”

“Oh, I know any number of ways to silence wagging tongues, my dear Rouanez,” said Demonica with a giddy grin as she urged Gwenole back onto the path. “You can certainly put your mind at ease on that count. Now come. Time's getting away from us.”

Soon they were making good time, guided by the mage light, since the path had widened in places enough to allow the unicorns to walk abreast. Here and there they heard owls of different kinds. They fell silent, listening to the leaves in the light breeze which began stirring after midnight.

“Do you still think we will reach this cave by sunrise?” said Spitemorta. “I'm exhausted.”

“Maybe not too long after that. And we can set up a few protective spells around the entrance and get some sleep before starting back.”

Spitemorta was relieved, but she could only manage a nod as she plodded along behind.

“Momma! Momma!” called the little tow-headed boy as he ran into the cave where Myrtlebell sat, mending a pair of his breeches.

She laid her sewing aside just as he ploughed into her, hugging her knees with all his might. She smiled as he looked up with clear blue eyes and giggled. “So, Edward. Is there a reason you rushed in here,” she said, ruffling his blond curls, “or did you just think I needed an emergency bear hug?”

Edward gave her an adoring look. “You always need emergency hugs,” he said as he continued giggling, “and even though we live with a bear, I'm the one who has to give

you all the hugs. But this time I'm here to tell you and Uncafuzz that the ratcoons are back and they're all excited.”

Myrtlebell glanced at Fuzz, sitting at the table, listening attentively as he whittled a toy sword for Edward's birthday, a few months away. “That's raccoons, sweetling, not ratcoons,” she said with a smile. “Now, do you know what they're so worked up about?”

“They wouldn't tell me,” he said, shaking his head solemnly as he looked from his mother to Fuzz, “but they said they had to talk to you or to Uncafuzz right now.”

Fuzz put down his whittling and calmly ambled on all fours to the mouth of the cave. “You stay in here with your mom, Edward,” he said, heading outside. “I'll see what this is all about.”

“Let's go have some of those strawberries we picked yesterday,” she said, putting her arm around Edward. “We'll put some of Uncle Fuzz's honey on them.”

Edward's eyes lit up and he dashed to the table, climbing up on the stool Fuzz had made for him to await his most favorite treat for now. They had just gotten a good start on their strawberries when Fuzz dashed back in and hoisted the startled little boy onto his shoulders.

“Myrtlebell, grab your wraps and follow me,” he said, wide eyed. “I'll explain as soon as I can.”

Myrtlebell was behind Fuzz and Edward with two cloaks before they had gotten outside. They dashed across the clearing in front of the cave and into the woods just as Fuzz heard the sound of hooves. Myrtlebell's gown caught on a thorn bush.

Fuzz looked apologetic as he grabbed her skirt and yanked it free. “It was much nicer as a lemon drop bush,” he said as he took her hand and ran until they were quite out of breath.

“There's the cave,” said Demonica, with sudden effervescence. “Just through the clearing.”

“Yea?” said Spitemorta sullenly. “How's it different than the last half dozen others we've seen since it got light?”

Demonica ignored her comment, urging Gwenole to speed ahead. They were out of the woods and across the clearing and had already dismounted by the time Spitemorta and Nightshade appeared in the open. Spitemorta quickly reached the cave and slipped off of Nightshade.

“Someone has been living in this cave,” cried Demonica in a panicked voice. “and the Heart is gone!”

Chapter 3

So, you're expecting to sail right back to the Chokewoods for a closer look, then, aye?" said Hebraun, exchanging glances with Minuet.

"Yes, actually," said Razzmorten, "but I will delay if you want me to start work at once trying to find a solution to the blight. However, I might add that it's possible that there is a connection between happenings in the Peppermint Forest and the blight here, particularly when it affects wheat, barley and rye instead of just one of them."

"Hey, King. You could do both," said Hubba Hubba with a dignified ruffling of his feathers. "Pebbles and I could go instead. We'd be with Rose and Lukus, and nobody in this room knows the Peppermint better than I do."

"That is truly a comfort, Hubba Hubba," said Hebraun, trying to glance at Minuet without grinning. "That's a right honorable gesture. No doubt that having the two of you patrolling the air will indeed make it much safer for Rose and Lukus."

"Yea. Don't worry about a thing. I'll make sure nothing harms them."

"That's one reason why we want you to go," said Hebraun. "You also should be indispensable in determining which things have changed since you were there..."

"Absolutely..."

"So, are you ready to determine what sort of magic is at work, causing the Peppermint Forest to change?"

"Uh..." said Hubba Hubba, suddenly preening under one wing.

"Well, that's why we want Razzmorten to be along," said Hebraun. "Perhaps what you all find there will indeed help figure out the blight when the five of you get back."

Spitemorta raced to Demonica's side, forgetting her complaints altogether. "What do you mean?" she said, casting about angrily. "We came all this way for nothing? But you certainly haven't searched everywhere in this pit."

"Didn't have to!" snapped Demonica, brushing aside a lock of black hair. "Razorbauch showed me exactly where he hid the Heart. See this cubby hole?" She pointed to a recess in the cave wall. "He carved out the compartment and then he fit this slab over it. See? Who would notice? How anyone would figure it out without prior knowledge, I can't fathom."

"Well, obviously someone did fathom," said Spitemorta, turning away at once to scour the cave for any sort of clue. "Maybe Razorbauch moved it and didn't tell you."

"No! He never would have done that. He was my... He and I were very close. He kept nothing from me."

"Yea? But truth to tell, Grandmother, the Heart's just plain not here."

Demonica went livid. "If Razorbauch did move the Heart, he would have told me, but was slain by that droug-penn King Hebraun before he'd the chance."

"Right," said Spitemorta with a shrug. "That must be it then. I think we ought to do a thorough search of this cave in case we get lucky, though I certainly doubt it."

Demonica flung her a scathing look, but began passionately rifling through everything, dumping out drawers and overturning boxes to meticulously comb through every inch of Fuzz's den.

"Myrtlebell!" shouted Spitemorta from one of the side passages, causing Demonica

to drop and shatter the vase she was shaking out. She furiously raced out with a small elegantly bound book that she shoved into Demonica's hand.

Demonica raised an eyebrow at Spitemorta.

“That wench has been hiding here all along!” screeched Spitemorta. “And she had the nerve, the unmitigated gall to give King Edmond another son. Not that it will get her, or that child anything, of course. After all James is the eldest, and therefore the rightful heir. Still, she's up to something, you can be sure of it.” She snatched the book out of Demonica's hand. “Perhaps she gives herself away in her diary. Ha! She never expected me to get my hands on it.”

“I don't know or care what you are going on about,” said Demonica, grabbing her by the shoulders, “but make no mistake Spitemorta, nothing, nothing is more important than finding the Stone Heart. If you want vengeance against this Myrtlebell, fine. However, it simply must wait until we have the Heart. Once Staff and Heart are one, the revenge you take on this wench will be exquisite. You have no idea at all what power you will wield.”

At once Spitemorta's took on a dreamy lustful gloat as she pictured herself with the power Demonica suggested. She would be a goddess. She would crush Niarg and the Elven Realm. She would rule the world.

“Hey Rouanez bras. Let's finish our search.”

Spitemorta snapped to, tucked away the diary in her belt pouch and eagerly resumed combing Fuzz's den. By noon, they were thoroughly convinced that the Heart was nowhere to be found in the cave. Spitemorta brushed away a hodgepodge of flotsam dumped out of drawers and stretched out on the sofa, while Demonica sank into Fuzz's deeply cushioned chair. “Suggestions or opinions?” she said.

“Firstly, I'd say by the looks of things that Myrtlebell and whoever else lived with her left the cave right before we got here.”

“Yea, strawberries and honey in bowels and not yet spoilt, a toy sword in a pile of fresh shavings and under my feet there's somebody's mending: a pair of little breeches. Also, everything was neat as a pin before we went to work...” said Demonica, flopping her arm across the arm of the chair as she rocked her head from side to side, studying the ceiling. “I agree, but so what?”

“So, if we find Myrtlebell, we'll find the Heart. That's what.”

“You just might have something there,” said Demonica, sitting straight upright to look right at Spitemorta. This Myrtlebell, has she magic?”

“Not a whit.”

“Then we track her down,” said Demonica with a snarl.

“Absolutely,” said Spitemorta as her eyes drooped shut. “Right after we get some sleep.”

Still carrying Edward on his shoulders, Fuzz led Myrtlebell as quickly as she could manage to the far end of a huge wooded dell, closed at both ends. In the middle of the dell was a long, narrow clearing filled with brush and sedges growing out of a dark spongy sod. Not a bit of wind stirred, and though the nights had been getting quite cool, the midday sun in the cloudless sky was uncomfortably hot for traveling out of breath. A sparrow with a black bib and a white crown called from high in a willow before dropping like a shot and winging away over the tops of the sedges. A chat scolded. Edward was

hard at work springing aside branches and twigs to help them see. Myrtlebell's flaxen hair was plastered to the sides of her face with her sweat. No one spoke. From time to time, Fuzz would stop to listen above Myrtlebell's breathing. In time they came back into timber. A cuckoo called. The land began to rise steeply as Fuzz led them straight up the slope. A parliament of crows far above finished a rattling debate amongst themselves, exploding into a flurry of caws as they took to the air.

Ahead rose a sheer rock prominence. Here he stopped climbing and led them aside through a thick stand of trees and candied heath to a completely hidden rock overhang with a cavity running back several rods. "Well it isn't home," he said, "but it'll keep the rain off and keep us from being spotted from below or from above."

"You think Spitemorta rides around on a broomstick the way you said her mother did?" said Myrtlebell as she found a place to sit.

"I have no way of knowing, of course," he said as he gently laid the soundly sleeping Master Edward across her lap, "but I do know that she took Ugleeuh's broom and vanished with it before anyone had the wits to stop her, and it would only be prudent of us to consider the possibility that she might."

"I quite agree. Spitemorta is truly a nasty piece of work, Fuzz. Even as a child she was endlessly doing hateful things to people. You could tell. She truly enjoyed watching the pain she inflicted on others." She paused to admire her sleeping son. "I had my faults, too. I was self-centered and snotty. Thought I was better than some..." she sighed, "better than a shameful lot of people. And I loved being in charge, even if I stepped on people to have it that way, but I never made a sport of causing pain like Spitemorta. I'm not sure she's entirely sane."

Fuzz sat down heavily. "I've heard Rose and Lukus say much the same things about her," he said, sighing as he stretched out his legs.

"As would anyone who knows her at all. Guess what she did at the tender age of twelve? She'd had a terrible row with her governess, I don't remember what about, but she decided she'd have some fun, making the old girl pay for yelling at her. She was the sweetest little old lady who had no family at all, just her cat. She talked to that cat just like it was a child and it meant more to her than anything. Anyway, Spitemorta caught the cat and killed it. Then for good measure, she dressed it and took it to one of the cooks in Castle Goll, telling her that it was a rabbit one of the guards had shot, and as he had no wife, she wanted it cooked for him. Well, the cook was as obliging as she was thick, so she actually cooked it. When the cat was cooked, Spitemorta took it to her governess and told her she had brought her a meal to make up for her awful behavior. The old lady was touched and ate as much of the 'rabbit' as she could.

"When she missed her cat and started searching, a little girl said she thought Spitemorta had been playing with a cat that morning. She pulled Spitemorta aside and asked her if she had seen her cat. Spitemorta went to laughing and called her an old witch for having just eaten it for supper. The governess vanished from the castle, certain enough, but there were all kinds of rumors about what else happened. Some say she fled the country. Some even say she killed herself. No matter what really happened to the old lady, Spitemorta was certainly evil for a twelve year old."

"Whew! That's a horrible tale, Myrtlebell," said Fuzz. "If you have any more like that, please, I don't want to hear them. And you know what? I grew up with Spitemorta's father. In fact, he was my best friend. Never could you find a better, kinder soul. I am

right grateful that he never had to know that he'd sired such an evil child.”

“You think Spitemorta and her companion are following us?” she said, as she carefully eased herself from under Edward and covered him with her cloak. She brushed aside a stray curl from his forehead, then looked up at Fuzz, who obviously had more to say.

“The last word I got from Razzmorten was that the combined governments of Goll and Loxmere had a reward out for your capture or information leading to your capture,” he said, rearing up onto his hind legs to begin pacing. “If Spitemorta is actually out after you and has gotten to the cave, there's easily enough evidence there to tell her that she's on the right track. However, I find it right odd that she would be out after you, rather than her soldiers.”

“That's not much comfort, Fuzz.”

“I know, and I'm sorry, but let's think about this for a minute. Why would Spitemorta, ruling queen of two countries, take the time to personally hunt down her missing mother-in-law who was being sought on the trumped-up charge of murdering her husband, the late King of Loxmere? You've been missing for five years, after all. You should be completely out of the picture. Unless James or Spitemorta were suddenly being accused of his murder, why go to the trouble?”

“But what other reason could she have for being here?” said Myrtlebell as she sat down and drew up her knees. “She showed up at Ugleeuh's cabin, where Edward and I were until you graciously took us in, and then at your den. I mean, it's not like you have something incredibly valuable hidden away that she could be after.”

“Maybe I have Myrtlebell,” he said, sitting up as if something had bitten him. “Or at least I did.”

“I've no idea what you could possibly be talking about, Fuzz. You do have a very comfortable den, but I can't imagine that any of your personal possessions are nearly valuable enough to bring her all the way here.”

“I'm talking about something I found several years back that someone like Spitemorta could put to very good use to the detriment of us all, if she ever got her hands on it.”

“You aren't making much sense, Fuzz. What exactly did you find that could make Spitemorta more dangerous than she already is?”

Fuzz shook his head. “Please understand that I trust you implicitly, Myrtlebell,” he said, “but it is truly best if you don't know.”

“I'm completely bewildered, but I do understand, Fuzz. What do we do now?”

“I think we need to go to the dragons. Spark may have a way to contact Razzmorten. It would be best to get you and Edward to a safer place for awhile.”

“All right, but what about you?”

“Hey. I'm just a fuzzy old bear with no hair. Spitemorta isn't likely to give me a second look.”

Demonica made some signs in the bright morning air, found her stirrup and settled herself comfortably astride Gwenole. She turned to see if Spitemorta were ready. She was, and they sauntered off, following the tracks of one human and one bear into the woods.

Chapter 4

“Grandfather!” shouted Lukus from the far end of the stalls. He left Starfire to eat his oats and hurried over to Razmorten, who was about heave his saddle onto Abracadabra's back. He sighed and had another go. Lukus waited politely in the fresh straw, impatiently fiddling with a braid of flax while his grandfather managed.

Razmorten quietly patted his unicorn before turning to Lukus. “So,” he said, “are you just trying to hurry me along, or did you have something you wanted to tell me?”

“Both,” he laughed. “Come see what's happened to Starfire since I last rode him.”

“Lead on.”

“There. Look at his horn and hooves,” he said, nodding at the wagging horn and alert ears of his prized cyflymder unicorn, snuffling and champing from the bottom of a deep feed box. “The candy stripes they picked up in the Peppermint Forest are almost completely faded out.”

“That's only half of it,” said Rose, coming up behind in boots and riding breeches. “Mystique's stripes are completely gone. At last, I say. But it's just more proof that the magic in the forest is failing, isn't it, Grandfather?”

Razmorten nodded. “It's a good thing we managed to bring your unicorns back from the Peppermint and get them free of their sukere habits when we did. Hard as it was on them, you can be sure that it was 'way easier then than it would be now, above five years later.”

“No kidding,” said Rose. “I know what it felt like to quit the stuff after having it in absolutely everything we ate and drank at Ugleeuh's. I craved it, even as it made me fat, hurt my teeth and took away all of my energy. Even now, in spite of its not tasting all that good, I get this awful craving for it. Fates! People will destroy their health, their free will, and turn into complete slaves of the stuff and still insist that it's harmless.”

“Ye got that right Rose,” said Hubba Hubba, fanning her hair with his wings as he lit on her shoulder and gave him self a shake. “I was the biggest slave there ever was. And in those days, I'd 'a' done anything to eat it. I'd stoop to things just so Ugleeuh would keep me well supplied. But thanks to the Wiz here, and my wonderful mate, I'm the healthy and free bird you see today.”

“Biggest crow, is what I'd heard,” said Pebbles with a whistle, as she settled on Razmorten's shoulder.

“Indeed you are,” said Rose with a laugh.

“So, this is a complement here, or what?” said Hubba Hubba.

Pebbles gave a piercing two note whistle, making Razmorten jerk his head aside.

“Both!” she cried, flapping her wings. “And you're the biggest hero in my life.”

“So you agree he deserves this scratch I'm giving him, aye Pebbles?” said Rose.

“Now, unless someone has forgotten something, I think Grandfather is ready to ride.”

Razmorten nodded and their journey began with the two parrots launching themselves into the air and proudly taking the lead to Port Niarg.

“How far is it to the dragon caves, Uncafuzz?” said Edward, with a bright-eyed bounce of anticipation in the cool dawn air of the rock cavity, as the calls of jays reached in from the trees, outside.

“Short as we can make it, Edward, lad errant,” said Fuzz, scratching the sparse velveteen of his temple, “We didn't bring a thing with us. Beyond that, I can't say yet. It depends on what we run into. Depends on a whole slew of things I haven't sorted through yet.”

“Like what?”

“Well, we need to make as straight for the caves as we can, but what or whom we run into could send us off on all sorts of crazy paths. Things like that.”

“Yea. And if we're being chastised by those womans,” he said with conviction, at which Myrtlebell and Fuzz shared a look. He hadn't been as sound asleep as they had thought.

“That's chased, Edward, not chastised,” said Myrtlebell, “and women, not womans. And you, young man, shouldn't eavesdrop on adults.”

“What's eavesdrop, Momma?”

“That's eavesdropping, sweetie,” she said as she took his hand, hurriedly following Fuzz out into the early light, “and it means listening when you shouldn't be.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, but you and Uncafuzz weren't whispering or anything. You were on each side of me, so I had to hear. Next time, I'll use my fingers,” he said, pulling out of her grasp to trot along beside, with a finger in each ear.

“Maybe you should whisper,” she said, gently grabbing hold of his wrist. “Your voice carries.”

“You mean so those womans...Ooooo, Momma!” he said jerking free to squat by the path in the moist leaves. “Here's a walking stick bug. But it doesn't have no...doesn't have any stripes.” He grabbed up the creature for a closer look.

Fuzz halted and came back to see. “Ask it if it has any messages for us, Edward,” he said, thinking of the plucky candy striped walking stick which the amorous raspberry bear, Rotundra, had set on him when he passed this way with Rose and Lukus, as they fled Ugleeuh long ago.

Edward whispered into his hands at the struggling insect. “It won't talk to me, Uncafuzz,” he said, holding it out. “Maybe it'll like you better and talk to you.”

“So,” said Fuzz to the walking stick. “Do you indeed have a message from a big raspberry bear?” He gave a pensive chuckle, remembering Rose and Lukus. The walking stick sprang out of his paws and scurried into the leaf litter. “Oh my. Just an ordinary ol' walking stick. Looks as if the magic is fading away in the insects. The plants have been changing back for some time. I'd bet other animals already have, too.”

“You're certainly right about that,” said a lovely woman dressed in white from head to toe, as she stepped into the path before them.

“Just who are you?” cried Fuzz with a wide-eyed and bristly woof, as he planted his feet, causing Myrtlebell and Edward to nearly collide with him. An icy wave of fear surged through him at the thought that she might be Spitemorta or the woman with her.

“Fear not Fuzz,” she said with calm urgency, “I came here in order to lead you to safety. No time to explain now. The women you flee aren't at all far behind. You must trust me.”

Myrtlebell nodded to Fuzz and he at once hoisted Edward up onto his back.

“Good,” said the woman in white, you're going to be reasonable. Follow me.”

She dove into a crouching scurry, zigzagging into the low thicket of candied heath that went down a steep slope at a right angle to the path they had been following, with

Fuzz and Myrtlebell scrambling to keep up. The heath hid them with a thick canopy of leaves, still quite dark green, but they could not stand upright, and often they found themselves on hip and elbow as they scuttled and stumped from coppice to coppice down the falling face of the hill. Jays gave ringing calls overhead. Suddenly Myrtlebell realized that some of the thudding she had been hearing was from unicorns arriving up where they had been only moments before.

Down, frantically down they went, twigs raking down arms and flicking by ears. At the foot of the hill the woman found a twisting path along a stream bottom amongst gnarled ironwoods and huge boulders thrust up out of the earth. She broke into a run, her white gown whipping and whirling in the somber light. Fuzz grabbed Myrtlebell's hand and towed her stumbling and flailing to keep up. Suddenly they plunged after her into a crystal clear stream, sending a heron into flight from the water's edge. She turned at once and began swiftly tramping upstream, stepping over the knee deep water with each stride. There was no choice about hiking their knees to their chins at each step, for Fuzz and Myrtlebell found at once that they couldn't possibly keep up with her while dragging their legs through the water against the current.

After twenty rods the woman made for the opposite bank, lunging from the water like a wadded bed sheet that went bouncing and dodging into a thicket of willow saplings. Myrtlebell ripped the length of her skirt on something, but she scarcely noticed, crashing through the willows with a fire in her chest. Presently the woman dropped her skirts as she turned and sped down a broad, bare path. Myrtlebell heard hoof beats immediately followed by splashes and paused to barely make out riders through the willows. A white-hot horror seized her and she turned back to see Fuzz disappearing up the path. She ran to catch him, with a fury of everything she had. "Fuzz! Unicorns!" she gasped as she reached him.

Fuzz wheeled round with Edward to see the path utterly vanishing behind them. At the sounds of crashing and wallowing in the heavy brush, they resumed their flight. The woman in white was no where to be seen, so they ran with all their might ahead of the path which continued closing in right behind them. Presently the path ahead began a gradual climb into open woods. As the thickets gave way to trees, they saw the woman waiting in the distance. A black and white woodpecker hammered a short staccato, then hopped out of sight round the far side of a tree trunk. Chickadees called. They ran on and soon caught up with her.

Instead of speaking, the woman turned and jogged on, leading them up over a long hogback and down the far side. Suddenly she turned aside from the path and loped downward through the deep leaves.

Before long, Fuzz felt a cool dank draught of air.

"Where are you taking us, lady?" he said, when he realized that they had not heard hooves for a good long time.

"To an underground cavern, my grotto," she said. "There you can rest unseen until it's safe to resume your flight. Come." She led them toward a leafy fold in the rock strewn hillside. Behind a small boulder she stooped to wiggle through a hanging mat of green briar and grape vines. They followed her, stooping and groping through a tight, dark passage which soon opened expansively, giving them an uncluttered path along a smooth wall. This they followed for a very long way in utter blackness until at last the woman startled them by suddenly setting alight with a wave of her hand dozens of torches in

sconces along the wall of a huge cavern.

She motioned for them to be seated upon a lovely floral printed snow white settee. Then she lowered the hood of her white cloak to reveal her flowing chestnut and nearly iridescent burgundy tresses in the torchlight.

“Thank you for saving us, gracious lady,” said Fuzz, feeling oddly self-conscious at being unable to keep his eyes off her. “Will you now tell us who you are, particularly since you already know my name?” He let Edward, sound asleep, to slide into Myrtlebell's arms.

“Yes, so I do,” said the woman with a warm smile. “I make it my business to know the names of all those who enter my realm, Fuzz. I'm Mary, the White Witch. And you do indeed know me as well in another form.”

“The only witch I've ever known was Ugleeuh, known to some as Bailitheoir Cailli, and it was not a pleasant experience.”

“Yes, I knew her, too,” said Mary with a sigh. “She was my very worst enemy, perhaps my only enemy. She trapped me in another form from which I've only just now escaped. Don't you know me Fuzz?” She turned to him with her long lashed eyes.

“Rotundra?” he said with a gulp of astonishment. “Can it really...?”

“That was me. That was indeed the name I bore in shame.”

“Shame? Bore, yes. But what could possibly have been your shame? We all bore Ugleeuh's curse.”

“Absolutely. And thank you, dear Fuzz. But I'm the powerful White Witch. I shouldn't have fallen prey to her, yet she took me by surprise with that broom of hers. What a way to discover the Great Staff. My shame was rooted in my vain complacency, secure with the idea that my magic was far stronger than hers. Look at how much suffering it caused.

“And Fuzz,” she added suddenly with narrowed eyes. “Whatever happened to that nice little supper by candle light we were to have after Rose and Lukus escaped from the forest?”

“Well... Ro...Mary,” he said with a dry swallow, “I've been right busy, don't you know. And my friends here...”

Mary threw her head back with warm laughter. “You dear soul, Fuzz! I'm so vicious. I'm just teasing. I quite understand. Please don't be offended, but my pursuit of you was just another part of the curse Ugleeuh put upon me. I find nothing wrong with you at all, but as you can see, I'm not a bear at all. And when the rest of her magic fades and you are an ordinary bear, you won't think twice about me.”

“But Fuzz isn't...” said Myrtlebell, as Fuzz stopped her with a strategically placed pleading expression.

“...I'm afraid Myrtlebell here refuses to think of me as the ordinary bear which I most assuredly am.”

“I quite understand her feelings,” she said. “Now, I would like for you to enjoy this.” With a grand curtsey and a sweep of her arm, she laid before them an entire feast. “Now, I'm off to see just where those two demon sorceresses have gotten to.”

“There's the *Sea Sprite*,” said Rose at the sight of their ship, as hovering gulls eyed them for handouts. “I really do love sailing and the fresh clean smell of salt air.”

“That's because you, dearest sister, don't spend the entire voyage in your cabin with your dainty chin in a bucket, wiping away your beard of puke, like the more unfortunate of us,” said Lukus with a shudder.

“Here's the dock, Lukus. Why go further? Grandfather and I will let you know how we found things.”

“No, no. I'll be fine. Maybe I've adjusted to sailing after the last trip. Let's go,” he said, urging Starfire up the vessel's ramp without hesitation.

Rose and Razzmorten dismounted and followed him on board, leading their unicorns.

Hubba Hubba and Pebbles flew at once to the top yard of the mainmast and settled in, obviously feeling quite at home, as a bevy of terns hovered briefly to look them over before swooping away to places low over the water. Pebbles gave herself a shake and sorted through some flight feathers as Hubba Hubba strutted back and forth, running his beak along the length of the yardarm.

A burly crewman came forward to see to the needs of the unicorns. Lukus dismounted and followed as the sailor led the mounts away to the stable in the hold and bedded them down. Soon they weighed anchor and set sail.

Within an hour, Lukus was sitting on a cot in his berth, bucket between his knees, wishing he had followed Rose's suggestion to stay in Niarg.

“How could we have lost the trail?” hissed Spitemorta, her eyes darting about as Nightshade sauntered through the brush.

“I'm not sure,” said Demonica. “There were clear tracks leading out of the creek. We saw them. Then not only did we find the path, but we could easily follow their tracks along it. Now we merely step off the path because we thought we heard them, and when we try to go right back onto it, we can't find the barest trace of it. That path is wide, and I do have some skills in the woods. We simply are not lost. Now, I know you said that this... Myrtlebell, is it...?”

Spitemorta nodded.

“...This Myrtlebell has no magic, but could you be mistaken?”

Spitemorta shook her head.

“Well, the path was clearly erased. Someone is using magic. Perhaps the bear is a wizard. Razzorbauch changed himself into a dragon. Maybe the bear is Razzmorten. Who knows? Just 'cause I've not seen him change himself, doesn't mean he can't.”

Spitemorta rolled her eyes. “Grandmother is ranting,” she thought. “She has moments when she must be having fits of lunacy. How about her calling me off the throne for a wild goose chase after an artifact that exists only in her mind?”

Fuzz pushed back from the White Witch's feast and patted his stomach. “It's been a good long time since I've sat before a spread like that. I suppose I get to be a stuffed bear after all.”

“Oh, go on,” said Myrtlebell. “But you are right, it was indeed sumptuous and wonderful.”

“Yea,” said Edward, piping up. “All 'cept for the spinach and the Brussels spouts.”

“Ah, but that's Brussels sprouts, my lad,” said Fuzz, “and you'll grow to love them in time.”

“No I won't,” he said decisively, as he wrinkled up his nose and shook his head from shoulder to shoulder.

Myrtlebell took his hand and led him off to a recess in the grotto where Mary had said they could wash up for bed. She was astounded to find water already in the onyx bath tub. “So isn't this a treat, Edward? And can you believe? It's exactly the temperature you like it, and she left well over an hour ago.”

Edward was already squatting down in the basin to splash around and pretend that his floating cake of soap was a sail boat. “I love baths in warm water,” he said, making the cave echo with his voice. “But how'd it get warm, Momma?”

She looked around the small cubicle and shook her head. “Must be her magic.”

“I like that White Lady Witch,” he said with a nod, “But I thought Witches were mean and dressed all dark-like.”

“Truth is, sweetling, so did I. So I reckon we both learnt something.” She smiled at his delight as she bathed him. At last she dried him with a towel fluffier than any she'd seen in any castle and hugged him before helping him back into his underclothing.

“I'm sleepy, Momma,” he yawned.

“Yes, I expect you are, young man. Go say goodnight to Uncle Fuzz and then off to bed with you.”

Directly she had him tucked into the little pallet the White Witch had fixed, and he was asleep at once. She stood and admired him, feeling most grateful that Mary appeared when she did. She shuddered at the thought of what might have happened to them by now if she hadn't. She gave herself a good stretch and found Fuzz on the settee staring into the empty fireplace.

“I'm pretending there's a fire, don't you know,” he said, looking up with a very serious expression. “It's not hard to do after a supper like that.”

She gave him an odd look as she sat on the braided oval rug before him.

Oh, we wouldn't dare light one,” he said. “Who knows who would smell the smoke.

“And by the way, Myrtlebell, I'm leaving in the morning.”

Chapter 5

Yann-Ber huddled miserably in the dank, rat infested hold of the cargo ship, *Fragan* and nursed his broken arm and nose. As bad as his injuries were, they were only a distraction from the endless pain he had lived with for the past seven years from the curse of boils Demonica had put on him. Merely her name caused him to tremble with a dark rage. He had risked much to bring her the very news about the Great Staff which she had long sought. Two of his men were executed as spies in Goll and he had narrowly escaped himself.

“Wife!” he cried with a groan of exhausted anguish. “Had you had acted like one, I'd not have needed to seek solace in the arms of another. I even felt horribly guilty. And it was just the one time.” He sank back against the stowage of creaking kegs lining the hull. “Demonica. You earn your 'cursed name.” He sat up with veins standing out on his neck and forehead. “You ugly, ugly queen of the demons. Alas! I can't even find a name rotten enough to fit you. There's nothing horrible enough to call you that even feels good coming out of my mouth.”

From the time he had set sail from Arabat Enez, after Demonica's trained marmouzien had thrown him out, he had come to realize that the one thing he wanted more than death was her fall. Her way of being merciful damned him to another year of suffering her boil curse without even the reprieve of suicide. His boils were now spreading to his internal organs, causing pain worse than anything he had endured so far.

“Ankou ki take you, Demonica!” he growled, kicking out at some boxes which in turn toppled onto his boil swollen leg, making him wail with pain. “Very well, witch. You force me through another year of this pit-born pain? I'll use it to see you get your due. Wizard Razzmorten will be most interested to hear what I have to say. Oh yes.” He closed his eyes and rocked back and forth with the pain. “Razzmorten is very likely to reward me for this information. He's the world's most powerful wizard of this age, after all. He might even lift your stinking curse. At the very least, he'll surely help me die.”

A large rat appeared from amongst the tumbled boxes and began tentatively sniffing at his leg. He kept his eyes on the rodent as he stealthily felt through the junk to his immediate right. “At least my putrid stench is good for something,” he thought. He smiled as his fingers closed about a three foot long wrought iron rod, for he was very hungry. At once he came down hard upon the creature's head, knocking out an eye. He grabbed it up quick, just as it began wriggling violently. He stared into its terrified good eye. “You should thank me, rat. I'll make your suffering brief and your ending quick.” Then he bit its head with a mighty champ as he squeezed it furiously with his trembling good hand.

With his stomach churning instead of gnawing, Yann-Ber realized how very exhausted he had become. He picked away rat hairs sticking to his lips. When had he last slept? He tried to count back the days, but it was useless. One day was much the same as the next in the hold of the *Fragan*, the only place the captain would allow him passage. Fury briefly surged through him, making him forget his exhaustion. He was seized with thoughts of revenge he might take on the man, but at once saw how it all was. He had been allowed on board, and if he actually did do something vengeful, he would only end up in chains. Then how would he get even with Demonica? No. Vengeance on the captain would not work.

He slumped back against the kegs, squeezing his eyes tight in order to push away the

feelings of disappointment. Despair was a luxury. It could keep him from completing his mission. His furious hatred, driven by his relentless pain would give him the strength and endurance he needed. He would not fail.

His smile made him yelp. "All the faintest pleasures condemned!" he wailed, as stinking green and yellow pus ran down his face from the ruptured boil, dripping onto his clothing. He clenched his teeth. He would ignore it. His clothes were already so saturated with the putrid discharges of his many pustules that one more hardly mattered. He resigned himself to the arduous voyage and at once was engulfed by the fatigue of one who has gone without sleep far beyond what is wise or normal. Perhaps this time he could sleep. His pain usually prevented it until he collapsed. He closed his eyes and knew no more for some time.

"Here Lukus," said Rose as she stepped into his berth, "I brought you some tea and some broth. Grandfather says you need to keep taking fluids so you won't get dehydrated while you're waiting for your sea legs to sprout."

"Thanks," he said, with a bleary eyed smile. "Tell Grandfather I appreciate it. Just set them down on the table there. I'll get to them when I can manage."

"Grandfather also made me promise to stay with you until I saw that you'd followed his orders," she said as she scooted her tray amongst the disarray on the table.

"Orders, aye? Does he think we're still children?"

"He just knows you."

"Oh my. Thanks."

"Well, I was about to give you something else that was sure to make you feel better, but I've half a mind to keep it until you've had your broth and tea."

"You aren't planning on popping me in the eye the way you did that morning in Ugleeh's cabin, are you?" he said, peering at her tightly fisted hand.

"That's an excellent idea, but I'm afraid that all I have here is an Elven message globe. It's almost scary. It flew right up to Grandfather when he was taking air up on deck and told him it was for you. Look at it." She opened her hand to reveal a globe of opal about the size of a grape. "It's enchanted. He says it will give you your message when you tell it to."

Lukus closed his eyes as the floor came to the bottom of a gentle descent and pitched up under his feet, riding the waves. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes to stare at the tiny sphere in her hand, then reached out for it. "I promise to take my fluids as soon as I try this, aye? You're surely as anxious to see what happens as I am."

She handed it to him at once. A gull gave a shrill cry as it swooped by, outside the door. The floor began sinking again, causing his head to reel. He hesitated. "It's 'way too early for the baby. I hope everything's all right. I sent my retainer back to Soraya with a letter to let her know where we were going. Perhaps she or some of the other Elves have some information about the fading magic in the Peppermint Forest."

"Fates, Lukus! You're killing me with suspense."

Lukus gave a greenish grin. "Please show me the message," he said, feeling strange to be addressing an orb the size of a hazelnut.

From the depths of its translucence, a glow enhanced its opalescent flashes, which vanished in a swirling haze that suddenly became the moving image of his beloved

Soraya. She smiled and fondly patted her burgeoning belly. "I got your letter, Lucas dear. As you can see, I've grown even since you last saw me. All is well. Great-Grandfather Neron says the baby will be a boy.

"He also says that you need to be very cautious in the Peppermint Forest this time, since even though the fading magic itself is in no way dangerous, he has reason to believe that there is treachery afoot. So do be careful, my love. I want you back in one piece. I truly wish I could be there with you, but," she glanced down at herself and looked up with a smile, making Lukus feel as though she were looking him right in the eyes, "it isn't possible just now. Remember that I love you. Give Rose and Grandfather Razzmorten my regards." As her image faded she added, "You need to set down the globe and stand back. Good bye."

Wide eyed, he parked it on the corner of his tea tray, and at once it rose up, hovering and shot off through the open window of his berth.

"Wow! What do you think about that?" he said.

"I've never even heard of message globes before, Lukus. I agree, they are quite amazing," she said, picking up the tray and tea things and pushing them at him.

Lukus shook his head as he obligingly took the tray. "Not the globe...of course it was the exact color of her eyes. No Rose, I'm having a son."

"It is difficult to believe," she said, "but I think it is absolutely wonderful, Lukus. I can't wait to see what he looks like. Do you think he'll look like an Elf?"

"You know, until you said, I hadn't given it a single thought, and I also have no idea, whatsoever. But truth to tell, it doesn't matter to me in the least. His looks will come from the love Soraya and I share. That's all that counts."

"Lukus. That's a beautiful sentiment. I'm really happy that you and Soraya found each other."

"And find each other we did. You know, Rose, you say how you think you're doomed to be an old maid after James went sour, but I'm certain that you're going to find the right fellow someday, and maybe right soon, and be just as happy as Soraya and I are."

Rose was taken by surprise. "Perhaps, brother dear," she said, quickly hiding behind a scowl, "but I'm not so certain I even want a husband." And before he had a chance to debate with her on that account, she had spun on her heel and was out the door.

"Oh, yes you do, big sister," he said after she had vanished. He sat down heavily on his cot and then realized that he had not felt like throwing up for a good several minutes.

"Well, Grandmother, what do we do now?" said Spitemorta, wheeling Nightshade around to stand restlessly in the leaves, snapping sticks under his hooves. "We've no trail to follow and no clue at all to where Myrtlebell, that bear or the Heart have gone. And I simply can't afford to spend endless amounts of time on a wild goose chase. After all, I do have two countries to run and a little boy who shouldn't be long without his mother."

"What of James then, my dear?" said Demonica as she snapped off a branch to get it out of her way. "Are you married to an incompetent? Is he merely decorative?"

"What my husband may happen to be is certainly not your concern," she said with a thrust of her chin, as Nightshade snorted and flapped his ears. "And had you bothered staying around to raise the child you bore, you might understand why a small child might

need his mother.”

“Come now, Spitemorta. How does letting a nanny take care of your child from sun to sun qualify you as a doting momma? Since I've been your son's nanny, I know for a fact that you haven't spent more than ten minutes with him on any given day, except for his birthday, when you gave him twenty minutes of the thirty which you scheduled for him.”

“That's certainly a lot more than you ever gave Ugleeuh,” said Spitemorta as a large flock of grackles wheeled in, clacking and rasping, to settle in the crown of a great oak nearby.

“I daresay you cared more for your mother than you are willing to admit. I find that right interesting, since she gave you away to strangers the very moment you were born. Even I didn't do that. Furthermore, when I left, Ugleeuh still had her Father. You told me that you never even knew who your father was, until the moment of his death.”

Spitemorta was furious, indeed she was positively red faced, but otherwise she was the very picture of composure, offering her grandmother the briefest nod of polite acknowledgement, as Nightshade stamped about and swished his tail. She was certainly not about to offer any sort of apology.

“Considering our line's weak maternal impulses, it's a wonder that we've not become extinct, aye?” said Demonica with a cackle.

“You speak for yourself then, Grandmother. My son is the most important thing in my life, regardless of what you think. I may not be able to spend a lot of time with him, due to my station, but I make sure that I do spend time with him every day, and when I do he receives my undivided attention. I have known...”

Demonica threw her head back and made the woods all around ring with her laughter. “So,” she said, straightening up suddenly with tears running down her cheeks. “Am I now to swallow that your offspring is more important to you than the power that can be yours from reuniting the Great Staff and the Stone Heart? You seemed right ready to come on this search, as I recall...”

“Of course my son has priority. However, the power I seek is for him as well as for myself.”

“Ah clarity,” said Demonica with a chuckle. “I was beginning to wonder, Rouanez Bras. Of course I notice you've left your handsome husband out of the picture. Was that by oversight or design?” She threw her leg over Gwenole's rump as she dismounted to stow away her cloak.

“You seem to be avoiding my original question, Grandmother: what do we do now? Have we run out of options?”

“We are not without resources,” she said with a smile as she found her stirrup. Securely astride Gwenole, she turned to a large, flat-topped boulder a few rods away through the brush. “Devi!” she called. “Alert the others and begin a thorough sweep of the forest. Let me know immediately if you find the woman or the bear.”

Spitemorta's knew at once that her grandmother was indeed a mad woman, after all. “I should have seen it in the first place and avoided all this,” she thought.

“As you command, Mistress,” called a voice from the boulder. In the next instant something shot past Spitemorta's ear, leaving her quite wide eyed with a ringing in her head. She stared stupidly at the boulder before she could manage to holler: “What was that thing?”

“That?” said Demonica, with a dismissive wave. “Just an ordinary boulder, dear.”

“But what flew out of it?”

“Oh, just a Cia...”

“I've certainly no idea at all what that is.”

“Oh, I don't doubt that in the least,” said Demonica, tapping her lower lip with her finger, “you would know them on this continent as 'Watchers,' if you're acquainted with them at all.”

“You mean demons? Where did it come from?”

“Demons? Oh, dear girl. I never took you to be one of those superstitious heretics. Come now. Cias are not demons. They're simply beings so ancient that they've attained a higher purpose. In fact, they are a race who have become pure elan, or if you must, pure spirit.”

“An entire race of people without form?” said Spitemorta suspiciously.

“Ah, exactly.”

“If these are the same 'Watchers' which I've learnt about, they're supposed to be locked within the boundaries of the Hanter Koadou, or what we'd probably call the Mid Woods, on the Dark Continent by a potent spell of protection cast by the combined efforts of the most powerful shamans of the last age, Merzin, if I remember right, and Hoel-Meriadeg.” said Spitemorta.

“You've had some formal lore, I see. That helps, but what your history lessons left out is that the protective spell was to keep people out, rather than Cias in,” she said as she carefully studied her face.

“How many of them did you bring with you?”

“Only three, I'm right sorry to say. They're very useful. Besides Devi, the one in the rock, there are Oana and Mael. In truth, they are more or less outcasts from their society. They've dared to make a habit of going outside to learn what life is like in the rest of the world. Their elders condemn them for it, since the Cias have withdrawn from mankind. My assistants may be rebels in exile, but they're most assuredly not demons.”

“I see. What do we do while your spies are out combing the woods? With only three of them, I'd think it will take some time before they get any leads. Why not return to Goll and wait for news of our escaped prey, Demonica?”

“The Watchers are very good. If your friend, Myrtlebell or her enchanted bear consort are in these woods, they will find them and quite promptly at that. We'd barely get started back to Goll before they'd have news for us. We'd do well to return to the cave where the Heart should have been. At least there are some piddling amenities there.”

“So be it!” hissed Spitemorta. “I'll humor you. But know this. If your Watchers don't report within a week, I wash my hands of this quest. And another thing, Grandmother. Myrtlebell is not my friend. Do not ever call her that again.”

“My,” said Demonica with a click of the tongue as she turned Gwenole about. “Of course, dear. My mistake.”

Spitemorta smacked Nightshade with his reins. She was furious at being so easily manipulated by her grandmother and she was determined not to let it happen again.

Chapter 6

“Fuzz,” said Myrtlebell, placing her hands imploringly on his knees, “please, take Edward and me with you.”

“Oh my,” he said, looking into her gaze with the slightest shake of his head. “You two will be far safer here with Mary. When the worst danger is past, she’ll take you to the dragons. I’ll be waiting there.”

“But, why must you go? If it isn’t safe for Edward and me, then it can’t possibly safe for you either.”

“There’s something I absolutely must do right now, while I still have time. I’m sorry, Myrtlebell. I realize that this must seem very mysterious, but you’ll just have to trust me as I can’t explain. Not yet, at any rate.”

“Of course I trust you Fuzz. You’ve been the best friend ever to both Edward and me,” she said with a sigh as she sat back on her heels and continued to search his face.

“Are we leaving to find the dragons, Uncafuzz?” said Edward, quietly appearing out of the dark of the cavern, looking anxious even in the dim torchlight.

Fuzz and Myrtlebell looked up suddenly. “Not yet, Edward,” said Fuzz, “it isn’t safe in the forest for you and your mother just now.”

“But where are you going?”

“Edward!” said Myrtlebell. “Remember what I said about eavesdropping?”

“I didn’t eavesdrop...eavesdrop, I was coming over here to listen.”

“You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“But where are you going, Uncafuzz?”

“I’ll have to tell you about it when I get back. You and your mother will have to stay here for a while.”

“Oh,” said Edward as he looked down to fiddle with one of his buttons. At once he looked up. “Then we can play castles. I don’t have the board you made me, but Mary said she could fix one.”

“That sounds like a grand idea, Edward, and you can help out by looking after your mother and Mary. What I have to do in the forest simply cannot wait. I hope you understand.”

“When will you be back, Uncafuz?”

“Well, your mother and I talked it over and we decided that it would be best if Mary took the two of you to the dragons, so I’ll meet you there. How does that sound?”

“I expect that would be all right, Uncafuzz, but I’m going to miss you.”

“I’m going to miss you, too, Edward. Looks like your mother’s ready to put you back to bed. I’ll probably be gone when you get up in the morning. Now, good night.”

“Good night Uncafuzz,” he said as Myrtlebell took his hand to lead him back to his pallet.

“Are you sure you want to go back to Myrtlebell’s cave?” said Spitemorta, as she urged Nightshade off the narrow deer path into the leaves and brush to walk alongside Demonica and Gwenole. “You know, we could stay in Ugleeuh’s cabin. It’s smaller, but it would be more comfortable than that drafty old cavern.”

“Yea?” said Demonica, as she studied the last orange light of dusk through the

silhouettes of the trees, while an owl called from some far off place in the timber. “You do see that it's dark, right? Ugleeuh's 'hovel,' as you called it when we were there, is a good bit further. I take it you don't mind smallies, now that you've seen them, aye? Besides, we're hardly setting up housekeeping or anything.”

“Fates forbid.”

“The Fates have nothing to do with it, my dear,” said Demonica as Nightshade snorted and stepped back onto the path behind her with a contrary shake of his head.

“Believe me, if there are any Fates, they've long since abandoned human kind,” she said, steering Gwenole into the weeds so that Spitemorta and Nightshade could come back alongside her in the path.

“So what makes you say a thing like that, Grandmother?”

Demonica studied her for a moment in the dark. The unicorns shuffled and plodded, trading turns in the path with tosses of their heads as their saddles creaked and rocked.

“Have you ever tortured anyone, dear?”

Spitemorta hesitated, surprised by the question. “Why, I've had lots of people tortured,” she said, flaunting her nonchalance, as an owl spoke up nearby. “It goes with being the ruler of two countries, after all. One of the chores. Why would you ask?”

“No, you misunderstand me, Rouanez Bras. What I want to know is if you have ever done it with your own hands...”

“The queen does not...”

“Ha! Didn't think so,” she said with a decisive nod. “Well let me tell you something, Granddaughter. Once you have the grit you need to soil your precious hands a time or two, you'll learn ever so much about the Fates.”

“Perhaps I shall in time,” she said, trying to hide her sudden fascination. “It sounds entertaining.”

“Oh, my dear!” barked Demonica with a throaty laugh. “You have no idea.”

Fuzz crawled through the wet vines covering the entrance to the White Witch's cavern and broke into a bounding descent down the slippery leaves of the hogback in the blackness of the driving rain. He was determined to keep up his pace long enough to do what he must. The only thing he was certain of was that the Heart of the Staff must not fall into Spitemorta's hands at any cost.

Lightning lit the woods with hues of pink and blue as he reached the bottom of the ravine outside the cave and began scrambling up the far slope. The accompanying thunder reverberated like a falling wall of boulders. His mind was racing every bit as fast as he was. Spitemorta and her companion were undoubtedly nearing his den. Mary had awakened him less than hour before his departure with the news that she had seen them heading back that way. “What are the chances,” he said between pants, “that they can return to my den and not find the Heart? If they missed it the first time it's a miracle.”

At the top of the hogback, he paused, rearing up on his hind legs. “And what if they did indeed find it the first time?” he gasped between heaves of his chest. “Face 'em then, if it must be the last thing I do! Whole world will pay if I don't get it back.” He dropped onto all fours and furiously dashed along the ridge. If only he could get there before the women. Lightning ripped the length of a tree trunk across the hollow, brightening the woods to a pink midday brilliance. He skidded to a stop at the sudden sight of a path that

crossed his way. "This has to be it," he said, as the tumble of thunder knocked loose extra rain in driving torrents. "That's what she said. Mary said take this for thirty rods to another path that veers left and it'll be a shortcut by several miles." He turned and took the new way with renewed fury. "Oh dear Fates, may this somehow get me there before they do."

Yann-Ber awoke with a jerk in the pile of straw where he'd eaten the rat. He wished he were still asleep but he knew that sleep would be entirely out of the question for hours upon endless hours to come, as the familiar agony of his curse seized him the way it always did, causing him to gasp with pain as he sat up. His eyes darted around the dimly lit hold and he wondered how long he had slept, not that it mattered in the least.

"Oh yes," he said, remembering his mission of vengeance. "It does matter, this time. It's been a while, and we could be getting close." He set about the struggle of rising to his feet. It was an ordeal anytime, but now he had but one arm to help him do it, thanks to Budog. He gazed at the porthole, a good rod aft of where he stood steadying himself, well up the hull above the pen for the old sow and her pigs. It would be a real struggle.

He tottered and winced and made his way to stand, steadying himself on the gate at the end of the sow's pen. She was investigating at once, snorting and uttering clipped grunts and running her snout along the space between the bottom boards of the gate. "I see you're right hungry," he said. "Fates forbid that I might slip and fall in with you from up there. You'd have me killed and eaten before I could ever climb out." His concern was indeed well founded, since he had made a routine of keeping her at bay with his iron rod while he fished out the meat scraps from her slop, each time she was fed. Bracing himself against the hull he slowly mounted the corner of her pen. From there, he grabbed the sill of the porthole as he climbed the cross timbers nailed to the hull for rungs. At last, he took his second look outside since his voyage had begun.

"Alas! Water, water!" he wailed. "All this pain and strain and risk just to see water and not one bloomin' thing else." He strained his eyes and tried to see beyond what they were capable of, but to no avail. He forced down his disappointment and went on looking out the little window distractedly, dreading the climb down, mindful of his poor footing above the baleful sow and her pigs.

He turned away to see a large rat managing to wedge itself under the door to the upper deck of the ship, hopelessly out of his reach. He looked down at the sow snuffing the air above in his direction. "Maybe I can't have that rat, sister," he snarled, "but since you'd like a taste of me, what if I just eat one of your young ones? Ah, you're safe, since the cheeky poop-ornament's counted your pigs."

He turned back for a final look outside just in time to see a squadron of three fishing pelicans swoop by, low over the water. "Aye, what's that?" he said. "Could it be? It is! And a seagull. And over there's another one. Won't be long now. Niarg!" He turned at once and scuttled down, keeping careful track of the sow and his footing and hobbled back to the straw where he'd slept. "Won't be long now, Razzmorten."

Fuzz's legs and lungs burnt in protest as he tore through brush and briar in the first broad light of morning. He refused to allow himself to slow down or pause, even if he

stumbled, though he was doing much more of that than before. Now he recognized his part of the woods. "Just over that rise," he thought, having long spent his energy for utterances. "Please let me be get there before those evil women."

Over the rise with his den in sight, he picked up his speed a bit. He ran through his garden instead of taking the path around. He was elated to see no unicorns tied anywhere nearby. He had arrived either before or after them. "Perish the thought that they've been and gone with the Heart," he panted through his leathery dry mouth.

Suddenly he was down hard on his chest with the wind knocked out of him. "Not now," he thought, frantically flinging himself back onto his feet. Somehow they weren't working right. He was stumbling dizzy, too, and his eyes were all out of focus. He was not stopping five rods away from his door. He shook his head and ran, feeling queer...light, as if he had left half his weight behind. At last he had his shoulder to the door as he flicked the latch. He burst inside, skidding to a stop on the rug. Everything was so dark. But of course, he had been out in the broad daylight and Myrtlebell was not there to open the shutters. His eyes would adjust. No matter, he could find his way straight to the bat cellar blindfolded if need be. He went through the passage to the place where his bats roosted on the ceiling. Another wave of dizziness overtook him and he steadied himself against the table underneath them. Several of them let go and flipped over in the air to land on the table next to him.

"You're back, Fuzz," squeaked the bat nearest to him.

"Hello Flit," said Fuzz. "No time to visit now. I need some of you to do something very, very important for me."

"Sure thing," said Flit. "What is it?"

"Here," he said, reaching with a lunge for a recess near the ceiling and grabbing out a drawstring pouch. "The stone in this is called the Heart, as you might remember. It's a lot of trouble, and it is most important. Do you suppose that a pair of you could take a string apiece and fly a good distance with it?" He laid the pouch on the table.

"Hey Hedfan," said Flit. "Grab a string. Let's try it." At once the two bats took a trial flight about the pantry and lit on the table. "No problem, Fuzz. We can do it."

"Splendid. I need you to take it as fast as you possibly can to the dragon caves and see that Spark and Lipperella hide it well until I arrive there. You'll be saving us all untold calamity."

"Consider it done, Fuzz," said Flit before cocking his head to study him for a moment. "You know, Fuzz, you don't look quite right."

"I expected as much, but there's no time to dwell on that now. We all need you fellows to get the Heart out of here immediately."

"Sure thing," said Flit. "Let's go Hedfan." The two of them yanked aloft the Heart in a silent flutter and disappeared out the door.

"Like bats out the Pit," said Fuzz as he gave a sigh of relief. At once his knees went weak and he passed out onto the cave floor.

Fuzz jerked awake to the sound of women's voices, and at once a wave of white-hot fear surged through him. He could see their silhouettes in front of the doorway as they talked excitedly. He looked around wildly for a place to hide that he already knew did not exist.

“Right strange how we missed this passage before, Demonica.”

“Had to have been something to do with the light at the time. Shadows could do it, I'd think. The light's different now.”

“Demonica!” thought Fuzz in utter horror. “This is far worse than I'd thought. At least the Heart is safe...for the moment.”

“You all keep quiet up here,” he scarcely whispered as he carefully rose to a stand “unless you see things get out of hand when those women get in here, that is. If it looks bad for me, you all get out of here as fast as you can. Go to the dragon caves, and stay there until you hear from me.”

One of the bats dropped onto his shoulder. “Fuzz, maybe it's already bad for you,” he said, with a squeak like a fist full of marbles. “You look...contorted.”

“In what way Taflu?”

“Well, your face is flat, your legs aren't right and you have on clothing.”

Fuzz felt his face, then looked at his feet. It was indeed as he was beginning to assume. He was no longer a bear. “My. These must have been what I was wearing when I came to find Gastro. Now that it's all certain, it probably will be harder to get past the sorceresses,” he murmured. “Oh well. For good or ill, here goes.” He started for the pantry door.

“Just who the blazes are you?” said Demonica as she thrust wide her arms in the doorway, stopping Fuzz in his tracks.

“I beg your pardon, ma'am,” he said with a bow. “I thought these premises were abandoned. Had I any idea that they were indeed occupied by two lovely ladies, I'd never have come in uninvited. The place having so many bats gave me the idea that no one had lived here for some time.” He pointed back into the pantry.

Demonica carefully peered into the pantry to find that the cave was indeed full of bats. With a look of disgust, she raised her hands to scorch the pantry with wizard's fire.

“Please, my lady!” said Fuzz in wide eyed alarm. “It might be rash. I see that you're gifted with magic, but there's a right sizable lot of lamp oil stored in there.”

“Take a look, Spitemorta!” barked Demonica.

Spitemorta looked resentful, but whisked past for a look. She returned at once.

“He has it right. There are even barrels of the stuff in there.”

“Anything else?”

“Bats. Lot's of those.”

Demonica gave Fuzz slit-eyed look and motioned him out of the pantry. Much relieved to have saved his pets, he did so willingly.

“Now,” she said, showing him to a seat at the table. “Who are you?”

“No one of consequence, ma'am. I'm a woodsman. My name is Thorn, Thorn Bushman. My cabin burnt to the ground last week, and since I'd come across this den when I passed through here not long ago, reckoning it to be abandoned, I thought of it at once, after the fire, don't you know. So, here I am. That's all. So now that I see how it all is, I'll just offer you my apologies and go on my way, then...”

“Your fine gentlemen's hunting attire is quite out of fashion, Mr. Bushman. It lacks codpiece and doublet,” said Demonica with a frosty hiss, as she traded looks with Spitemorta. “Now, who are you...really?”

Fuzz stood speechless.

“Are you deaf?” she shouted. “I just asked you who you really are!”

“But my lady, I've told you. I'm Thorn Bushman.”

“Thorn Bushman,” snorted Spitemorta, as Demonica studied his face. “What sort of name is that? Where are you from?”

Fuzz's mind raced. Dare he admit being from Niarg? Dare he say he wasn't? “I grew up in Niarg, but I left there over twenty years ago and haven't been back since.”

“He sounds like he actually could have been from Niarg, 'way back,” said Spitemorta.

“As if he's been gone from there a good a long time...”

“Yes.”

“All right, Thorn,” said Demonica almost kindly. “Tell us again why you were nosing around in this cave. What were you looking for?”

“I wasn't 'nosing around,' as you put it, my lady, and I wasn't looking for anything, except for a place out of the weather until I could rebuild my cabin, which as I said, burnt down last week. With winter on its way, I figured that I could hole up in this cave and be right snug until spring. But now that I see...”

“Rustics can't afford clothes like those, Mr. Bushman, and no one of substance would choose to dress so out of fashion,” said Demonica, “and there is one minor detail that makes your garments be no consequence at all.”

“What detail might that be, my lady?” said Fuzz.

“You're a right handsome man, Thorn,” said Demonica, studying him minutely as she slowly circled him where he stood, “surely people have told you that?”

Fuzz stared at her.

“Nothing to say?” she said through an ugly smile. “Well, no matter. You are much too attractive not to have been told so. I think your beauty even surpasses that of my nearly departed husband.”

“So what might your husband be nearly dead from?” said Fuzz as he noticed how terribly dry his mouth had become.

“Demonica threw back her head in a seizure of laughter that stopped as suddenly as if it had been dropped and shattered upon the floor. “I'll truly regret having to mar that beauty, Thorn. You don't want that, now do you?”

Fuzz shook his head.

Demonica looked delighted. “Splendid. You know, it rained last night. Perhaps you can explain to me why one fresh set of unmistakable bear tracks leads to the door of this cave, while none leads away. You must've been here all night, since there are no tracks that you could possibly have made. Funny you didn't see the bear come in. And Thorn, I have no patience at all, so I suggest you answer me now.”

Chapter 7

“Myrtlebell,” said Mary as she smiled at Edward, “I think It's time to take you to the Dragon Caves. If you would gather up your things and come with me as soon as you're done with breakfast, we could be there in a day or two.”

“I thought Fuzz said it would probably take four or five days from here,” said Myrtlebell.

“On foot it probably would, but our mounts are exceedingly swift runners.”

“A short time out would be a mercy with Spitemorta loose in these woods. But Mary, there are two of them. Are you sure it's safe to go so soon after Fuzz's departure?”

“Just now is actually the very best time we are likely to have,” she said with a reassuring smile. “I don't want to upset you unduly, but Fuzz is most able, and I know of several hopeless situations that he has been through where few others could have managed at all. However, I can't imagine his setting out to do what he has to do without attracting the notice of those she-devils.” She gave Myrtlebell a sympathetic look. “So while those two wicked sorceresses have their attention on him...”

“We escape,” said Myrtlebell in a flat voice.

“This is our moment,” said Mary. “I'm sure Fuzz would say the same thing.”

Myrtlebell's lips thinned as she pressed them together. She knew Mary was right, but she couldn't help feeling uneasy. She grabbed up their cloaks and took Edward's hand, and with a nod to Mary, followed her from the cavern.

Edward laughed in delight, the moment they stepped through the wet vines over the mouth of Mary's cave.

Myrtlebell's mouth and eyes dropped agape. “Mary!” she cried, shushing herself in wonder. “Those aren't unicorns, they're enormous birds. Are we flying on them?”

“Oh no,” said Mary. “Look at their tiny wings. These birds don't fly, but they do run, and far faster than you've ever ridden before.”

“What kind of bird can't fly?” said Myrtlebell.

“I assume you mean, 'What are they called?'”

“Why, yes.”

“These are diatrymas,” she said, as she reached up to stroke the neck of one of them. “Diatrymas are a sort of adar taranus. They are far more than just tame, they're my personal friends. They're exceedingly intelligent.”

“Adar taranus. Old Niarg for thunderbirds? I thought not a one of those survived the Greatest Burning.”

“None did.”

“I don't understand...”

“Have you ever heard of the terrible wizard, Razzorbauch?”

“Wasn't he the one who brought the dragons here? Fuzz was...”

“Well, we had best make haste, Myrtlebell. I'll tell you all about it once we're underway.” Mary turned at once to the birds. “Lladdwr, Ceidwad, kneel, if you would.”

The two ten foot tall fowl obligingly folded their thick scaly legs and waited patiently on their breastbones in the leaves to be mounted.

“It would probably be best if I took Edward, while you get used to riding,” said Mary, as she helped Myrtlebell onto the smaller of the two birds. “This is Ceidwad. Just keep your legs ahead of her wings. You can put your arms around her neck, but don't squeeze her windpipe.”

“Where are her reins?” said Myrtlebell, as her balance gave way and she sat suddenly onto the thickly padded saddle with a plump.

“She needs none,” she said, taking Edward onto her lap as she deftly swung round Lladdwr's neck to sit on his saddle. “She's too intelligent to need them. I've already discussed where we're going with Lladdwr and her.”

Once they were settled, the diatrymas rose together without being told to do so, and in a half dozen fluid strides, had sailed completely down the side of the tall hogback, with Edward waving happily at Myrtlebell as she hung on for dear life. Across the branch and effortlessly up the far side they went, until they reached the long ridge that they followed out of the timber to the thickets along the broad creek which they had crossed the day before, when they were fleeing Spitemorta and Demonica. Without the slightest hesitation, the giant birds ran straightaway into the water, stepping over its surface and plunging to the bottom with each stride, making astonishingly little splashing or disturbance. At once they were across, fluidly zigzagging through the brush. Soon the thickets opened into grassland which lay between them and the great marshlands of the Gobblers. Here the diatrymas sped up astoundingly, running abreast.

“So,” shouted Mary above the wind, “How are you doing?”

“This is indeed very much faster than I ever imagined possible.”

“Whee!” squealed Edward.

“Oh my, sweetheart,” said Mary, giving Edward a hug. “You mustn't kick Lladdwr in the crop.”

“This is not only fast as the very wind,” called Myrtlebell through the hair she was dragging out of her eyes, “but 'way more comfortable than galloping unicorns.”

They fell silent to the tireless pounding rustle of huge feathers as they sped out across the sea of grass which stretched before them to the horizon. Without endless obstacles for the diatrymas to leap, dodge and run around, Myrtlebell was able to relax and truly enjoy her fast ride for the first time. On they ran in a straight line without any letup or hesitation, under a cloudless blue sky.

By noon, the horizon was starting to change and Myrtlebell began to feel exhausted and looked across to see Edward's head nodding in Mary's lap. “Mary,” she called, “do you supposed it would wise to pause for a bite to eat?”

“I don't see why not. We're making good time and Edward's getting heavy. See that hillock yonder, rising out of the grass? Let's make for that.”

“Is that the marsh showing up on the horizon?”

“Certainly is.”

Soon they were sitting on the grassy bank of a tiny meandering stream, nestled up against a sheer rock overhang, eating nuts and dried fruit. The diatrymas poked about, investigating various places in the grass and weeds. Suddenly, Lladdwr dashed away for three or four springy bounds and snapped up a rabbit. He immediately shared it with Ceidwad, the pair pulling it in two with a twisting yank before tossing back their heads and swallowing it down whole. They both wiped their beaks in the grass and ruffled and shook their feathers.

Myrtlebell shuddered. “Mary, if Spitemorta and her companion are sure to be at Fuzz's den, what is it that we are keeping a lookout for?” she said as she smoothed away a stray lock from Edward's face. She looked up, startled to see that the diatrymas were studying her with keen interest as she spoke.

“You've not been to the marsh before?” she said, with a nod at the horizon.

Myrtlebell shook her head.

“Have you heard of Gobblers?”

“No, and they must not be very nice by the way you say their name.”

“Not at all nice,” said Mary, standing up to pace about. “A warrior race of tiny people. The Beaks. Back when they were known as the Beaks, they would raid everyone within a fortnight's march of the marsh. They were utterly ruthless. Then, Razzmorten's magical protections went up around the woods and contained them here. After that they settled for attacking anyone unfortunate enough to stumble into their territory. Ugleeuh turned them into Gobblers, just like she changed everything else in the forest, just like she turned me into a bear. They may be a farce compared with how they once were, but they're still quite vicious. We don't want them surprising us.”

“But Mary,” said Edward, “can't you protect us with your magic?”

“Maybe. If I have enough warning, Edward. That's why we must be very wary. I've been surprised before, and it could always happen again, particularly when I don't know if the Gobblers are free of Ugleeuh's spells yet or not. With all the changes going on all around, I don't know what to expect from the Gobblers.”

Suddenly Mary put a shushing finger to her lips as she touched Edward's arm.

Edward understood and went wide eyed. They shrank back against the overhang and looked in every direction with darting eyes.

Mary wheeled round and stared at the rock face with a look of shock. “Not possible!” she hissed. “What are you?”

Abruptly, several somethings, shot past them out of the rocks.

Mary blanched and shuddered. “Did the two of you feel what I just felt?”

“The presences?”

Mary nodded.

“Yes. What were they?”

“I don't know. The only things I know of at all like them are locked behind a magical wall of protection on the Dark Continent.”

“Could they have escaped?”

“Who knows? But we had best leave this spot immediately.”

Myrtlebell was grateful to see that the diatrymas had already settled onto their keels to allow them to mount. The diatrymas rose together and dashed away at once, speeding through the grass for the horizon. Soon, the vast brown grass was broken up by stands of cattails and sedges and patches of standing water, forcing them to slow considerably in order to pick out their way, but even so they were managing to cover ground much more quickly than any unicorns could. For the breadth of the afternoon they zigzagged, hopping from high place to high place as the terrain became wetter.

Mary, Edward and Myrtlebell grew weary staying seated with the endless energetic swaying.

“How much farther is it to the Dragon Caves from here, Mary?” said Edward, speaking up suddenly as the afternoon waned.

Mary gave her head a sudden shake and studied the land about. “I'd say, at this rate we could be there by dawn if we can manage to keep riding.”

“Then, let's,” he said gamely.

“That's a long time to hang on, Edward.”

“I want to see Uncafuzz and the dragons.”

Mary glanced aside at Myrtlebell on Ceidwad to see if she had been following the conversation to see that she had been indeed. “Then let's try for it!” she cried.

A moment later Mary saw something fall from the sky, a good twenty rods away. When she turned to look, all she saw were two bats, circling aimlessly about above the spot before flying off to disappear over the horizon. “Now just what do bats remind me of?” she murmured as they rode on.

“Well,” said Demonica hissing into Fuzz's face. “Have you still nothing to say for yourself, even when you understand the condition of my patience?”

“I have already answered your questions,” he said, trying not to pull away from her. “I'm certainly no bear. You've either misread the footprints, or you've walked on the ones you wish to see. If you haven't searched all the passages, perhaps your bear is actually inside here.”

Demonica bid Spitemorta check the passages with an impatient toss of her brows.

Fuzz followed her movements briefly and then turned back in time to be knocked momentarily boss-eyed with a merciless slap. As he struggled to steady his pain and his vision, Demonica began slapping him viciously over and over again, but he made no move whatsoever to stop her.

“Never attempt to tell me my business,” she said with angelic calmness unrelated to her fury, as she stopped suddenly. “Do you quite understand?”

He nodded.

“Oh, you'd better. You'd just be so very much better off.”

Spitemorta stepped back into view with a shake of her head.

“Didn't think so,” said Demonica like a grandmother sympathizing with birthday candles still lit. “So, dear. Didn't work. I'm so sorry. Your burden again. Time's up. This is your very last chance to tell me what I want to know before I do things to you that will make you beg to tell me.

“Enough, fool!” she exploded. “I see I've been shamefully lenient with you already!” She flung her hands at his face and a crackling white fire discharged from her fingertips, flinging him backwards across his kitchen table where he lay, shaking uncontrollably.

“Did that hurt?” She rushed up to gloat at him. “Soon you'll consider it a mere tickle.

“Bind his hands and feet to the table, Spitemorta,” she commanded as she wheeled aside to rattle around in the drawers of the kitchen cupboard. “Ah! These should do just fine.”

A white hot dread surged through Fuzz at the sight of her holding up two butcher knives and a meat cleaver.

“You are truly an exquisite specimen of male virility,” she cooed as she came to the table, “but that is only going to last for a few moments more. I want you to be keenly aware that when I'm finished with you, you will be neither handsome nor virile.”

She handed one of the knives to Spitemorta. “Help me cut away his clothing.”

Spitemorta gave a maniacal grin and set to work at once cutting at his shirt.

Demonica began hacking away above his knee at the buttoned cuff of his breeches.

Suddenly, Demonica whirled about and stared at the cupboard behind her. A voice came from inside it, causing all Fuzz's hair to stand on end in spite of his terror. “We've

found the woman and her son, mistress,” it said in a lilting voice.

“Where are they?” she demanded.

“They are just inside the marsh. We discovered them when they stopped to rest. They call the place 'Standing Rock.’”

“Where are they headed?”

“Uncertain.”

“How is that possible?” barked Demonica. “Didn't you look into the woman's mind?”

“No, mistress. We were unable to get past her shielding, but Standing Rock is easy to find.”

“What nonsense are you babbling? The woman has no magical abilities of any sort. She can't shield her mind with a spell.”

“No, Mistress, we feel it was done by the white witch who leads her.”

“A white witch?”

“Yes mistress, that's what we think.”

“Dal! Kenavo emberr, kaoc'h!” she spat, as she wheeled back to brandish her knife at Fuzz's throat. “It seems we'll have to continue our little sport later. For now, I think you'll keep nicely back in that bat passage we first found you in.” She cut the sinews binding his feet. “Now march. And, keep in mind that if you try the slightest anything, I'll make certain that your torture lasts for an eternity.”

Fuzz had no doubts about that. He also had no doubts that she would stretch out any torture as much as possible, regardless of his cooperation.

Demonica forced him to lie face-down on the cold stone floor under the bats. She pulled out a piece of leather whang from her cloak pocket and made a noose, which she slipped over his head. She bound his ankles together mercilessly and jerked up his legs, forcing them to bend backward at the knees. Then she threaded the loose end of the noose through the strip binding his feet.

“Now,” she said, sounding as if she had just tied Fuzz's Sunday tie. “If you lie there quietly like a good captive while we are gone, you might be alive when we return. However if you struggle, well you'll see.” She threw back her head with laughter that was deafening in the small space, as she turned and followed Spitemorta out of sight.

Fuzz shuddered on the cold floor and immediately felt the noose tighten around his throat. The rawhide gave no indication that it would release any tension put on it. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath to slow his ballooning frenzy. He would have to keep raised both his chin and his heels or he would strangle. His back was already starting to cramp. “I'll be long dead when those witches get back from the marsh,” he thought. “That's stupid. They're not coming back.”

Demonica stopped outside Fuzz's door and stared at Spitemorta's staff, still tied behind the cantle of her saddle. “Didn't you tell me that your mother used the Staff as a mount to ride in the air? She kept the Staff concealed as a handle of a broom and she rode it that way, right?”

“I did, but you're not suggesting...”

“I most certainly am!” snapped Demonica. “What better way have we of catching them before they reach the Dragon Caves?”

“How could you know that? The Cias didn't say that.”

“If they've headed into the marsh, where else do you think they could possibly go for

help? The Gobblers?"

"Good point," said Spitemorta. "So you know how you'd go about doing this?"

"I've never attempted anything of the kind. I don't like heights. I thought perhaps you'd tried it, since you took the Staff from Ugleeuh."

"Frightening my subjects by flying about on a stick is not my idea of wielding power."

Demonica chuckled through her nose, then pressed her lips tightly together as she looked at the Staff. "Well, none of your subjects is going to see you here. There's nothing for it. Myrtlebell will simply get away if you don't. Here. Take the Staff. I'll get astride right behind you."

Spitemorta rolled her eyes, but stepped over the Staff the way she had seen Ugleeuh do.

Demonica looked pallid but determined as she picked up her end, her knuckles squeezed quite white where they could be seen beyond the rumples of her robe. "Well?" she said.

"I suppose I can will it aloft as easily as I can will it to do anything..." said Spitemorta.

"Then by all means, please do, dear."

Spitemorta drew a breath and at once their toes no longer reached the ground.

"Very good, dear," said Demonica. "You have us up. The marsh is that way. Just have it take us there."

Spitemorta repositioned her already sweaty grip and cautiously leant toward the marsh. With a jolt that took Demonica quite by surprise, they shot away over the trees.

The ride held both of them altogether speechless for some time, as the countryside sped away beneath them, Spitemorta awed by the exhilaration and sense of power and Demonica coping with wave upon wave of gut knotting nausea.

"This isn't bad at all!" cheered Spitemorta. "It sure beats unicorns, even if it isn't immediate like a traveling spell."

"Oh, it's quite something all right," muttered Demonica between the curds of vomit dried to the corners of her mouth.

"We've come an astounding way. This grassland we're flying over, isn't it getting quite a bit wetter?"

Demonica was not answering.

Spitemorta glanced over her shoulder and saw to her satisfaction that her grandmother was not enjoying the ride. "Ha!" she thought. "Something else I seem to be better at than you, Grandmother dear." Suddenly she sat forward. "Grandmother!" she cried. "Look below. That must be them. Hey, what are those crazy huge birds they're riding?"

"Evned-kurun," said Demonica as she leant forward with enough interest to forget her nausea. "Get up ahead and land right in front of them."

"Evned-kurun?"

"Headlandish for thunderbirds. One of Razzorbauch's mistakes. He released them from the rocks when he made the fudge volcano."

Spitemorta dropped neatly into the path directly in front of Myrtlebell and Mary, bringing them to an immediate halt. "Hello, Myrtlebell," she called out in a honeyed voice, mocking the way Myrtlebell herself once spoke to those beneath her. "It's been

such a long time. I suggest you and your witch friend dismount very slowly and ever so carefully, if you value your little boy's health.”

Myrtlebell dismounted onto rubbery legs she hoped would not fold up, as she looked at Mary, who gave a curt nod and slid to the ground, pulling Edward protectively to her side.

“Very good,” said Spitemorta with a radiant smile. Now, tell me, dear Mother-in-law. Where is the Crystal Heart?”

“The what?” said Myrtlebell, looking dumbfounded.

With a face of loathing and rage, Spitemorta grabbed Myrtlebell by the hair.

Edward lunged to run to her side, but Mary held him back.

“What have you done with it?” screamed Spitemorta, jerking Myrtlebell's hair so hard that she went down to her knees.

“I don't...”

Mary stepped forth to help Myrtlebell, but Demonica raised her hands and smote her with a crackling white discharge of fire, causing her to stumble and sit down hard.

“Next time, White Witch,” she shouted, “You won't be able to get back onto your feet!”

At the sound of a melon-like whack, Demonica fell unconscious onto the ground, bleeding from a head wound. Mary shoved Edward behind a boulder just in time to be knocked senseless by a small warrior painted blue from head to toe and covered with strange tattoos. Spitemorta lunged for the Staff where it had dropped when she grabbed Myrtlebell. Another little blue warrior beat her to it, while yet a third knocked her senseless for her efforts. Myrtlebell found a heavy stick to swing and was being as big a problem for the little men as she could manage, when the largest one amongst them came at her with a spear.

“You can die if you wish, big woman,” he said, thrusting his spear at her face.

“Your companions can't help you and my men simply have you.”

Myrtlebell looked wildly about, then dropped her branch. “All right, you have me,” she said as she looked frantically about for Edward.

“You might have some sense, even if you are big,” he snarled before ordering his men to bind the captives very securely. “These women might all be sorceresses, so make certain their hands are right secure behind their backs.”

By the time they were all well bound and gagged, Mary, Spitemorta and Demonica had come to. The little warriors forced them to march at spear point, but they were not about to let them in on where to or why.

Chapter 8

Yann-Ber squinted painfully into the sunlight from the hatch of the hold of the *Fragan* as he listened to the cries of gulls. It was wonderful to breathe deeply of air that did not reek of the old sow he had spent the trip with. He peered out across the deck to the dock beyond. Pelicans settled onto pilings. This was indeed the Port of Niarg. Soon he would begin putting his plan into action. The last of the passengers and crewmen were just now departing down the gangplank. He stepped onto the deck and followed behind them at a distance. Finally he was on the dock. He had never been this far north. He had no idea where to find the wizard. He would have to ask someone, but that meant waiting until after dark. His appearance would cause too many problems in broad daylight. He gradually ambled inland from the piers and the bustle and the stacks of cargo.

Suddenly he stumbled into the shocked gaze of an attractive woman. She recoiled with a look of disgust and drew closer to her male companion. He steered her to his far side, and as they passed he hissed: "It would be considerate if you stayed further away from decent people as they passed." Then he spat with disgust and rushed on.

"When decent people actually do, coward," growled Yann-Ber, as he trembled with rage and despair. "I once was more than serious competition for the likes of you. And you don't even have enough of a mind to begin to imagine wearing my shoes, dimwit."

No, this was no surprise. It was routine, played out over and over by people who chanced to get a good look at him. It was daily life for Yann-Ber, and it had long ago ceased to be something he bore well. How he hated Demonica for it.

Yann-Ber awoke stiff and cold amongst a forest of rotted barrel staves beside the middenstead of a tavern. He was surprised that he had fallen asleep whiling away the afternoon. Moving around was arduous, so when he had felt that he was where it would be convenient to be after dark, he had sat down to spend his time until nightfall. It was now fully dark and the waning moon gave very little light, but that was to his liking. He struggled painfully to his feet and slowly found his way around to the front of the tavern where he hoped to find leads to the wizard. He stood in the shadows near enough to the street that he could make out the name, "Black Dragon" on the sign bearing a relief carving of a dragon that hung out over the street in front of the door. In a short time that seemed like a small eternity to him, one of the patrons staggered out into the street. There was no doubt that the man was quite drunk.

"Good sir!" called out Yann-Ber, as he limped out of the shadows. "I was wondering if you could tell me where I might be able find this fellow I'm a-looking for?"

The drunk stopped short and swayed as he squinted into the darkness. "Well, doggone it!" he called out, as he jerked at his own posture. "Who the ding-dong blazes is there? Show yourself and maybe I can." "Sir," said Yann-Ber, coming closer. "There's a fellow, maybe you could help me find..."

"Well, damn!" declared the drunk in a tone that sounded like recognition. "Damned if you don't sound like someone who just got off the boat from Head. Now Head! You don't say. So, you're from Head?"

"Actually I am. You're quite observant." Yann-Ber had started to hide his face with his hood, but now he could see that the fellow was in such a condition that he wouldn't be

having problems with appearances. "My name is John. John James. I'm right sorry to trouble..."

"Hey. Now tell me. Are you from Head?"

"Yes, as I said..."

"Really? You're from Head? Well damn."

"Yes, I just..."

"You got a funny name for a Headlander. John?" The drunk was now steadying himself with a fist full of Yann-Ber's sleeve. "Hunh! John James. Ought to be Padrig or Remont. Hey, how come you ain't Jakez?"

"Very well, you're right, I could be called Yann Jakez in Head, but right now I'm searching for a wizard by the name of Razzmorten..."

"Whoa! Now you don't fool around...Jakez. Now you just go right to the top."

"Well, I'd certainly like to. I understand Razzmorten lives in Niarg, but I have no idea where. Have you any idea, good sir?"

The drunk grabbed Yann-Ber's other sleeve as well. "Hain't nobody here 'bouts who don't know who Razzmorten be," he cackled through rotten teeth with breath that would have scared the old sow.

"Then," said Yann-Ber, when he dared breathe again, "you know where I might find him?"

"Ah! Well sir," said the drunk, reaching under his filthy shirt to scratch his sallow melon of a belly, "been having a hard time thinking straight without a dram or a pint, you know. Scarcely knew which way home was when I came out here..."

"That's not hard to imagine, Rotten Mouth," thought Yann-Ber. "So then," he said, speaking out grandly. "How would a pint inside suit your memory?" He glanced at the door of the Black Dragon and wondered if they could make it in to a dark corner without the clean and proper going crazy at the sight of them. Rotten Mouth was already happily staggering his way back into the tavern.

Rotten Mouth found a table in a far corner at once. Directly an obese tavern maid came by, squinting at them as though she'd prefer dealing with the pair of them at the end of a manure fork, but she took their order adroitly and returned right away with two pints of light dry mead. Rotten Mouth seized his and guzzled it half down before wiping his mouth on his sleeve and speaking: "Razzmorten is the king's father-in-law. He lives in the tallest tower of Castle Niarg."

Yann-Ber immediately slid his mead across the table to Rotten Mouth and stood up, carefully adjusting his hood before wending his way out.

Outside the doorway, the wind had picked up, rocking the tavern's sign. Dry leaves skittered along the street. He remembered seeing the castle due west in the daylight. He made straight for it in the darkness, determined not to let his tortured legs so much as pause until he got there.

"Lukus!" cried Hubba Hubba. You're up. How're ye feelin'? You don't look quite so much like me any more."

"So just how in Niarg have you managed to think that I have ever looked anything at all like you?" said Lukus with a woozy grin, as he steadied himself against the railing of the poop deck.

“Well...yellow head, green body,” said Hubba Hubba, as Rose and Razzmorten broke out laughing.

“You got me there,” said Lukus.

“Yea, but I wasn't kidding,” said Hubba Hubba, as Rose and Razzmorten threw back their heads for a further round of mirth.

Hubba Hubba found feathers under one wing that needed an immediate sorting through. “So,” he said, letting go of one of his flight feathers with a silky snap, “I hear that you and Soraya are going to have a son.”

Lukus brightened.

“Just don't be disappointed. Remember that it's a wonderful blessing. It really isn't unusual for the first clutch,” said Hubba Hubba, as Pebbles bobbed in wide eyed agreement.

“What the Pit are you talking about?” said Lukus.

“Having just one nestling.”

Rose let out a screeching giggle and caught it as Razzmorten discreetly turned her aside.

“What's wrong with Rose?” said Hubba Hubba. “I didn't say anything funny.”

Pebbles shook her head.

“Oh, don't pay any attention to her,” said Lukus. “You've forgotten that humans are like penguins and only have one nestling at a time. Oh, once in a while, maybe two...twins, don't you know.”

“Hey, that's great, Lukus. That means you're getting everything you could ever ask for.”

“You got that right, Hubba Hubba.”

Hubba Hubba gave a shrill two note whistle, flapped his wings and then leaped proudly into the air to circle first the poop deck and then the ship, landing grandly on the top yard of the main mast, where he shoved his beak back and forth along the length of the yard as he strutted until Pebbles perched beside him. “Hey Wiz!” he called out. “I see lots of white birds!” He gave forth another two note whistle. “And land, Wiz! I can just see a strip of that! What is it, Pirate Isle?”

“No!” he called out from under the flat of his hand, as he studied the horizon. “It should actually be Dragon's Port!”

“All we see down here is water, water, and more water!” hollered Lukus.

“Yea? Well climb up here with Pebbles and me!”

“Right. No thanks, Hubba Hubba! It's a long way to barf from up there!”

“Sorry, Lukus! I forgot! It's great up here for us!”

“No problem, Hubba Hubba. Hey! I think I see shoreline!”

“See you ashore, Lukus!” called Hubba Hubba, as he and Pebbles dove into the air.

Lukus carefully turned to ease himself to his cabin and met Rose and Razzmorten already bringing luggage onto the deck. “Stay where you are, Lukus,” said Rose.

“Grandfather and I will grab your things for you. We think you've suffered quite enough this trip.”

Fuzz tried once more to stretch his bound hands to reach his bound feet, even though he had already failed to do so several times. He failed exactly as he had failed

each time up until now. And just as it had insisted upon doing with each previous attempt, the rawhide garrot got tighter around his throat. It was becoming desperately uncomfortable. He could scarcely breathe and the muscles in his back were cramping fiercely, but he knew that the briefest moment of giving into frenzy would kill him. He carefully inhaled a labored breath. "What choices have I?" he said. "Damn few. Surely I'm overlooking something. If I remain completely still until Spitemorta and Demonica return, I'll be long dead when they return, regardless of when that is. Why do I keep bothering with this? They're not coming back, and I certainly don't want them to, anyway. Is there anything else I might try?"

"What do you keep going on about, Fuzz?" said a bat as it dropped to the floor next to his face.

"Taflu, is that you?"

"Yea. And what is this strange thing you're doing on the floor?"

"You can talk," said Fuzz.

"I've been talking to you every day for years, Fuzz. How could you possibly be surprised?"

"Well, I've been talking to you bats on and off for the whole time I've been tied up down here, and I've gotten no response from the ceiling except for twitters. When I first got here, Flit and Hedfan were talking and I sent them on an errand, but after Demomica and Spitemorta tied me up, I've gotten nothing. You bats seemed to have lost the ability of speech, Taflu. The magic in the forest is fading and everything is returning to what it was, including you bats."

"Huh!" said Taflu. "Well, maybe I'm just exceptional. I am a different species, after all."

"What?"

"Maybe I can talk without magic."

"Oh...well...maybe. Taflu. Do you think you could chew through these rawhide whangs that have me trussed up like some animal ready to go on the spit?"

"Sure. I wondered how you did that on purpose, 'till you said someone tied you." said Taflu as he set about gnawing.

Fuzz sighed with enormous relief. He would live a little longer after all. "How come you didn't answer when I was talking to you all a little while ago?"

"Well, I did the moment I heard you. I'm sorry. I was asleep after being out hunting until it got light."

"I'm certainly grateful for your help, now," said Fuzz, as his legs released with a snap. "After all, you are indeed saving my life."

Taflu nibbled industriously at the bindings around his wrists, and suddenly they began a most painful tingling. He gave a wincing grimace as he gingerly rubbed them, and before they had recovered much at all, his ankles gave way with a pop and the unholy tingling began with a vengeance in his feet.

"Thank you, thank you, Taflu," said Fuzz through gritted teeth. "The first chance I get, I'll get you a big jar full of donkey blood or sheep blood so you can take a night off from your hunting."

"Really? That would be a treat, Fuzz."

"Well, that certainly isn't much for saving a fellow's life. If there's ever anything else you'd like, just let me know and I'll see what I can do."

“That's nice Fuzz, but chewing you loose was nothing, and I'm a bat after all. All I need is food and a dark place to hang.” And with a snicker he flew back up to join his companions.

Edward lay still as a newborn fawn behind the granite rock where Mary had shoved him, until long after the only sounds to be heard were the leaves of grass stirring in the evening breeze. His stout little heart had shored up all it could manage and at last he gave way, crying out with whooping sobs through the sleeves of his sweater into roots of the grass in the pungent sod where he lay.

After a time, with the last his tears drying on his face, something gently tugged at his collar and he looked up at the giant bird who had been standing vigil over him. “Ceidwad! You stayed!”

“I expect your heart still wants to break,” said Ceidwad with a deep reedy rasp, as she delicately rattled her enormous beak along the length of a lock of his hair.

“You talk!”

“Only when we must. Edward, your mother needs your help. She needs you to be brave. Climb onto Lladdwr this minute. We must be off to the dragons.”

Lladdwr studied him with one eye for just a moment, then quickly stepped forth and settled onto his breastbone. Edward hurriedly clambered onto his saddle as best he could with legs too short for the stirrups.

“Let's go,” said Edward as he looked back to see Ceidwad ready to follow. “I sure hope this takes me to the dragons.”

“We're quite aware of the way,” said Lladdwr resonating in a voice like Ceidwad's only much deeper.

“Let's go fast!” cried Edward with startling exuberance, as he grabbed the cantle of his saddle and shook it back and forth.

“Say something if I frighten you.”

Edward hugged Lladdwr's thick, fluffy neck for his kindly tone, and at once the gigantic bird surged forward and kept gathering speed until Edward checked the ground to see if they had not actually taken to the air. He clung to the saddle for dear life but refused to let on. He'd never hurt his wonderful big bird's feelings.

It was bad enough that Myrtlebell and Mary found themselves bound and gagged, being shoved and prodded and made to stand before the thoroughly tattooed and nearly naked Gobbler king in his throne room by their captors, but it was much worse to have to submit to all of this while shackled to Spitemorta and Demonica at the same time.

“Your Majesty,” said the captain, who was also scantily clad and tattooed from head to toe, “these women were discovered trespassing on your lands.”

King Talorg stood up smartly from his throne and paced disdainfully about the women, staring at first one, then another of them, giving particular scrutiny to Spitemorta before returning to his seat. He sat for a moment tapping the arm of his throne. “Captain Girom,” he said at last, with a nod at Spitemorta, “loose the gag of that young dark haired runk and bring her here.”

Girom thumped his breast with his fist in an obedient salute and yanked the gag from

Spitemorta's mouth, jerking her head and clacking her teeth together painfully. She gave him a look of hatred for his efforts as he grabbed her by the hair and shoved her onto her knees before the king. She shared her hateful look with him as well.

“So, Ugleeuh,” said Talorg with a smile. “You defy the Pit Master and return.”

Spitemorta stared at him blankly.

“You deny this?” he asked.

“Of course, you fool, you idiot! I am not Ugleeuh! I'm...!” Suddenly she tasted blood. Her head throbbed and her vision was awry. As she tried to clear her mind, she realized that she'd been kicked in the mouth. She was too furious to put her thoughts in order. She saw him motion to the captain. The captain handed him her staff.

“Yes, yes,” said Talorg, gloating at her horrified expression. “I believe this is the source of most of your power, is it not?”

She stared at him.

“What? Nothing to say? Well,” he walked slowly over to where she kneeled, utterly speechless.

“I remember the Staff quite well, my dear, and what you did to us with it. 'Olc Slat' we called it, back when you were using it to demean us.” He suddenly pointed it at her and she jerked back, cringing. He roared with laughter, then turned abruptly and sat silently on his throne for a spell, stroking the Staff as he stared at her.

“Captain Girom,” he called suddenly.

The captain stepped to his king's side at once.

“Take these stinking runks and shackle them in the dungeon. Put them in separate cells. Keep them gagged and in the dark, until I tell you.”

Captain Girom thumped his breast and stepped smartly from the dais, setting to his task at once.

Chapter 9

Yann-Ber arrived at Castle Niarg to find the gates closed for the night, as he actually expected them to be, but the disappointment was still difficult for him to bear. He even considered climbing the castle wall, though he thought better of it immediately due to his physical condition and due to the awkward position it would put him in to be caught. He was wondering what he was going to do with himself until morning when the guard atop the gate called down to him: "Hoy there! The gate's closed! We drop the portcullis at eleven, most nights! Come back in the morning! Good night, good sir!"

"Could you possibly make an exception?" hollered Yann-Ber. "I have pressing business with Wizard Razzmorten and must set sail to return to my own country post-haste!"

"I'm right sorry, sir!" said the guard. "Your luck doesn't seem to be very good! Razzmorten has been at sea with his grandchildren for nearly a fortnight now! I've no idea when they're returning. If you come back tomorrow, I'm sure their majesties could tell you more!"

Yann-Ber turned away utterly crushed. Suddenly he turned round to face the gate. "Guard!" he cried. "Are you still within earshot? Could I bother you again?"

"What is it, good sir?" said the guard, returning to the embrasure overlooking the gate.

"Sir, I sense you to be right fair and kind. Therefore I wish to be completely honest with you! You see, I'm suffering from a horrible curse of boils put upon me by a mad sorceress, and unless I get help from Wizard Razzmorten, I'll be dead within a year!"

"That is indeed terrible, Sir!" said the guard. "You have my heart felt sympathy! I'm sorry that the best I can do is to tell you once more to come back in the morning and ask to see the king and queen!"

"I thank you sir, but I'm afraid that raises another problem! My condition is most loathsome to all who behold it. My sores are in a continual state of abscess and rupture. I can't keep the stinking pustules from fouling my clothes! How can I expect an audience with royalty with my person in such a revolting condition?"

"My word! I do see your point, sir! Perhaps I could speak with their majesties of your plight first thing in the morning, then meet with you here at some set time..."

"You'd go to all of that trouble for a complete stranger?" said Yann-Ber in disbelief.

"By all means! Here in Niarg being considerate and fair is a matter of honor! Would half-past eight, here, suit you?"

"Yes! And what is your name, should I need to ask?"

"I'm Captain Bernard."

"Captain Bernard, you truly may have just saved my life!"

"That looks like snow," said Rose, peering from under the flat of her hand, "That surely can't be snow. We may be headed into the fall of the year, but..."

"Limestone," said Razzmorten, glancing up from baggage he had brought onto the deck to tie into bundles. "Snow white limestone. Runs quite a way down the coast and a good long ways inland, too. Like a big layer of cheese, full of holes. The Dragon Caves are part of it. Those are absolutely incredible caves. There may be a system of caverns

running throughout that whole huge layer of limestone, league after league.”

“I sure don't see the port...”

“Hard to spot,” he said, standing up and coming slowly to the railing. “It's in a cove that goes 'way back in from the coast. In fact, the limestone bluffs nearly cut it off from the sea altogether. Two ships can't pass abreast, going in and out, when the tide's out. You can't pick out the opening from amongst the blinding white bluffs until you're right close. You have to sail along the coast.”

As they drew closer to land, Rose began to make out natural limestone towers and arches rising up out of the sea as tall as the cliffs of the shore. In places there seemed a veritable forest of white columns topped with the same coarse grass and scrubby trees as on the tops of the cliffs.

“Every single one of those trees is leaning inland as though it was blown that way by a hurricane,” said Rose.

“I don't think hurricanes do it. Prevailing winds might train the saplings, but I think hurricanes would leave them more helter-skelter,” said Razzmorten as he studied the shore. “It's right good that the sea is calm today, speaking of such things. If things were turbulent. we'd never get in. We'd just have to wait it out. That was always the drawback to this place.”

“What are you talking about?” said Rose.

“Well, drawback for them...”

“Who?”

“Oh, Razzorbauch and the sukre traders, back when this place was going strong. Easily protected, but a real bottleneck to shipping. You'll see. We should see it any time, now.” Razzmorten turned back to his packing in earnest.

Presently, the shore began drawing back from the coast line. The ship turned sharply inland, just as Rose saw a break in the bluffs. Close to land, the crew drew in the sails and cast anchor. There were shouts of “Ahoy!” and calling back and forth with someone ashore. Soon there were lines hitched to the ship, the anchor was weighed, and six huge dragons began towing it into the channel which opened into the lagoon ahead.

They shuffled along, next to the limestone walls, three single file on each side of the channel in paths just above the limp beds of kelp exposed by the tide. As the channel opened into the lagoon, the anchor was cast and the dragons unhitched. Then the sails were unfurled and the ship slid across the tiny waves of the lagoon for the dock.

“Dragonsport looks abandoned,” said Lukus, emerging from below with Mystique and Starfire by the reins to join Rose at the railing, “and I'm starting to feel better, too.”

“Actually, it mostly is,” said Razzmorten as he gave a final yank at Abracadabra's strap. “It's left over from the sukere days. The dragons have little need of the port...”

“I wondered, Lukus,” said Rose. “These waves are too small to make the ship lurch and heave. Sorry, Grandfather.”

“We'll be on the dock in a few minutes,” said Razzmorten, with a smile and wee shake of his head for Rose. “Let's have Lukus be the first down the plank. He's suffered the most.”

Lukus did not argue. Vowing never to sail on the ocean again also helped, though he knew he'd have to again to get home.

A small dragon stood on the dock, watching them disembark. When Razzmorten stepped onto the dock, he came forth. “I'm Gweltaz, as you might remember, though I

expect not, for you have no reason to,” he said, shaking Razzmorten's hand and then motioning for everyone to follow him. “Spark and Lipperella sent me to meet you, since the hatching of their first clutch has them, shall we say, overwhelmed.”

“Well, that answers that one,” said Lukus with newly found vigor, as he got comfortable on his saddle and urged Starfire into step. “Right time consuming, feeding and pampering new dragons, aye?”

“You have no idea, I'm sure,” said Gweltaz, swinging his head 'round to face Lukus. “Fresh hatched, they never stop. First clutch is seldom over nine or so, very rarely, maybe even fifteen. Gives the parents some experience before a regular clutch comes along.”

“Here's a yellow headed one that never stops,” said Lukus, as Hubba Hubba winged to a halt on his head, while Pebbles lit on Razzmorten's shoulder.

“What is a 'regular' clutch, then?” said Rose.

“Oh thirty, tops, Your Highness, though the absolute biggest one I ever heard tell of had fifty-seven. But Spark and Lipperella have just hatched exactly twenty-four, a real whopper for number one.”

“My!” said Rose.

They followed Gweltaz along a lane which ran a short way between decaying and collapsing warehouses and barns before rising up a gentle white slope to the scrubby tree covered plain atop the bluffs.

“What do you call these strange leaning trees?” said Rose.

“Those? We call them, 'derwen pwysaf,’” said Gweltaz. “Leaning oaks' might be more modern. They're green all year.”

“*Quercus recumbens*, if you must,” said Razzmorten.

The lane meandered between the trees as it crossed the flat. A half dozen jays scolded and lunged at a large iridescent snake wound around a branch nearby as cicadas accompanied everything with a pulsing buzz. Suddenly, the lane turned to broad white stairs going down into a circular hole, ten rods across, that formed a skylight for an enormous cavern. The calls of the cicadas were replaced by languid echoes as they descended into the cool cavern air. The stairs ended at a huge stone pool, fed by water gushing from the limestone waves of a statuary of cowering dragons being driven to the sea by a terrible wizard holding forth his staff. Gweltaz and Razzmorten paused while

Rose and Lukus stared, speechless. Pebbles and Hubba Hubba each went sleek and studied the work in one eyed silence.

“It's stunning, Gweltaz,” said Rose.

“It commemorates the Great Removal, when Razzorbauch captured us, robbed us of flight, drove us from the Mammvro and brought us across the Orrin Ocean to be slaves on the Great Plantation,” said Gweltaz. “An Daouarn is the sculptor. He's fabulous, isn't he? He still lives with us.”

“Scary artwork,” said Hubba Hubba with a resolute shake of his feathers.

“Actually it is. And it should be,” said Gweltaz, as he stood back and held out his arm before walking on. “Well, I'm sure you're anxious to see Spark and Lipperella. Here comes Kast. He'll stable your mounts and be along with your baggage directly.”

Lukus accidentally whistled as he began to grasp the size of the cavern, yanking a sudden frown from Rose. The chamber with the fountain was easily a hundred feet from floor to ceiling, and at once he saw that Gothic arches had been carved in the vault of living rock. The spaces between the arches opened into scores of grottos, passages and

tunnels. The grottos served as private residences for individual families. They entered a main passageway at the far end of the great cavern and followed it for some distance in awed silence as they walked by grotto after grotto occupied by dragons.

At last Gweltaz halted and ushered them into a spacious and well lit grotto, alive with the peeps and cheeps of two dozen ravenous dragonets straining forth to Lipperella and Spark as they frantically divvied out feed.

“The disadvantages of being unable to nurse...” said Lukus before jerking aside as Hubba Hubba bit him on the ear. “Hey!”

“Hey, yourself!” said Hubba Hubba. “This is a recent hatching. Have some respect.”

At once Razzmorten discreetly offered his wrist to Hubba Hubba, then turned grandly to address the dragons: “Congratulations, my friends. When did the young ones finally hatch?”

“It's been several days, hasn't it?” said Pebbles. “I see their flight feathers coming in.”

“Flight feathers?” said Rose.

“Two weeks to the day,” said Lipperella, as she and Spark stood up. “Takes feathers to know feathers, dear. I don't believe we've met...Hello, Rose. Wonderful to see you.”

“I'm Pebbles...Mrs. Hubba Hubba.” she said, as everyone broke out with greetings.

“But feathers,” said Rose.

“Absolutely, dear,” said Lipperella. “We flew before Razzorbauch grounded us for good with his staff. Our clutch are the first to hatch after his end, so of course they'll fly.”

“My, black feathers on their forearms...” said Rose, “and, cute. Darling crests of black feathers...and black fans on the ends of their tails.”

“The black will be deep iridescent green when they're grown...” said Lipperella.

“Except the boys will have flaming turquoise for their crests,” said Spark with fatherly admiration. “The girls will stay green.” He quickly unloaded the rest of his feed into the begging gullets of the three or four closest dragonets, dried his hands on a towel and turned to give Razzmorten and everyone his full attention. Rose hugged him and patted him sympathetically and then offered a hand at feeding to Lipperella.

“Let's step out for a bit, Razzmorten,” said Spark, as he came away from the nest and tossed aside his towel.

“Lukus, this will be a perfect opportunity for you to practice your parenting skills,” said Rose, speaking up at his heels, just as he started to follow. “Come. Pick out a dragon baby or three and help feed them. Here. Let Lipperella show you.”

“Good practice, I'm sure, what with mine on the way and all,” said Lukus, giving a longing glance at Spark and Razzmorten as they went out of sight.

Hubba Hubba and Pebbles launched themselves after Spark and Razzmorten, flying out into the light of a wide rocky balcony atop a sheer bluff, several hundred feet above a churning milky white river, to find them already well into their conversation. They settled onto Razzmorten's shoulders with a ruffling shake apiece, and sat preening as they listened.

“I assume that the forest is continuing to change, just as it was doing when I was here last?” said Razzmorten.

“Without a doubt,” said Spark. “We're out checking the forest daily, as you would imagine. We figure that only about a fourth of the Peppermint trees remain, and no one has seen a licorice vine for quite some time. They're all grape vines. And animals have

started changing back with a vengeance. I don't think there's a peppermint walking stick to be found.”

“So, you've not seen anyone strange in the forest, or anything of the kind?”

“No, no one yet, anyway.”

“Shortly after we set sail, Lukus received a message from his wife who is staying with the Jutwood Elves. She's King Neron's great granddaughter, by the way. Did you know?”

“Why, no. I knew they were married, but I didn't know that she was his.”

“Absolutely enchanting young lady. Anyway, she told him that Neron guesses that the changes are merely Ugleeuh's magic fading away after her death.”

“Yep, that's pretty much what we think.”

“Well, my friend,” said Razzmorten, “at least your volcano will remain, since it was my rascal brother who created it, don't you know.”

“Of course, but wouldn't you know it, the clan has decided to...” said Spark as he paused to heave a huge sigh and give Razzmorten a forlorn look, “give up chocolate.”

“I don't believe it!” choked out Hubba Hubba.

“If you gave up sukere, Hubba Hubba, we can surely give up chocolate.” He turned back to Razzmorten with a shrug. “We realized that chocolate was enslaving us as badly as sukere was humans and blubbery crows.”

“Yea? Chocolate's nothing,” said Hubba Hubba. “Sukere's the mean stuff. Takes some doin' to get off that, let me tell ye. I saw you feeding hunks o' sukere to your kiddies, so you haven't faced anything yet.”

“Sukere's our natural diet, Hubba Hubba. It doesn't affect us the way it does everyone else. It's most of what we eat, that and meat.”

“Uh, like birds and stuff?” said Hubba Hubba, going skinny.

“By all means. But don't worry, we don't eat anything that talks. Besides, you've gotten too small to bother with now that you've lost your ballast.”

“Ballast indeed. I seem to recall an obese dragon stringing drool as he deliriously galumphed after that volcano's new fudge...”

“Gweltaz, and Kast are here,” said Rose, suddenly appearing. “They have a little boy who says the Gobblers captured his mother and someone he calls the White Witch. They say he rode in on some kind of giant bird, with another one following him.”

They returned with her at once to find Lipperella and Lukus listening carefully to the small boy.

“...then these two bad womens flied right out of the sky on a stick and landed right in front of us,” he said, before looking up. “Hello. My name is Edward. What's your name?”

“Hello, Edward. I'm Razzmorten and this is Spark. Spark is the father of all these fine looking baby dragons.”

Edward was very impressed. “I like the little dragons,” he said with precocious poise.

“Yes,” said Razzmorten, “they're pretty amazing. Now Edward, I'd bet you're getting tired of telling the same thing over and over, but Spark and I don't want to miss out on anything you have to say. It will help us get your mother back. Do you understand?”

Edward nodded. “You will find her, won't you?” he said, choking back a sob as he drug his sleeve across his dirty face and sat up bravely with a shuddery sigh.

“Oh we will find her, Edward,” said Razzmorten solemnly. “But that's why we need

to know exactly everything you can tell us. So start at the beginning, if you will.”

Edward nodded the large nod of a little man and began: “Momma and I were living in Uncafuzz's den because he didn't think it was safe for us in our cabin anymore...”

“Where was that?”

“I don't know. But that was a long time ago. It had candy cane stripes on it all over...”

Razzmorten and Spark shared a wide-eyed look. “Sorry to interrupt. Please go on, if you would.”

“Well, just a few days ago, the ratcoons came and told Uncafuzz that there were two bad womens coming our way. Uncafuzz got real upset and said we had to

leave. We didn't even have time to pack. Then we ran and ran, but the womens came after us and nearly caught us, but then the White Witch, Mary, she took us to her hiding place, 'way, 'way up in the woods, in a cave behind the thick bushes and saved us.” He stopped and took a deep breath that still bore traces of shudder. “But Uncafuzz said he couldn't stay there because he had something to do and he left the next morning to go back to his den after making Mary promise to bring Momma and me here to the Dragon Caves as soon as she thought it was safe. Uncafuzz was going to meet us here.” He stopped again and looked up at Spark and Razzmorten. “He didn't get here, did he?”

“Not yet, Edward. I'm very sorry,” said Spark, shaking his head. “But I've been his friend for years and years, and you can believe that if he said he would meet you here, he will, if it is at all possible.”

“I know that,” said Edward, as his eyes brimmed with tears. “Uncafuzz always, always, always does what he says.” His face went red as he shook with a sob before dragging his sleeve across his face and resolutely beginning again.

“Mary, well, she seemed to think that the two bad womens were going to catch Uncafuzz and do something awful to him. See, she left right after Uncafuzz did, and when she came back she said we needed to come here right away while those womens were busy with Uncafuzz. My momma wasn't very happy about it, but she said yes.

“Mary took us on her two pets, Lladdwr and Ceidwad. They're dia... dia-somthin's...”

“Ahh!” said Razzmorten. “The giant birds you came on. Could they be diatrymas?”

“That's it!” cried Edward with an exuberance that startled and cheered everyone.

“Diatrymoms. They are. That's the kind of thunder clouds Mary said they were, all right.”

“Then it is true. He did indeed release them when he made the volcano. Never mind me, Edward. Please do go on.”

“Oh yea. Anyway, we rested and ate in the marsh but we didn't stay long because Mary said we had to watch out not to get seen by the Goblins...”

“Do you mean Gobblers?” said Rose, as she came and sat beside him.

“Yea, them. The ones that are turning their beaks... No, getting their beaks, or something...”

Razzmorten, Spark and Lipperella, Gweltaz and Kast all shared a very alarmed look at the sound of this. “Don't worry about us, Edward, just keep telling your story.” said Razzmorten.

“Well, we hadn't gone very far when those two awful womens just flew out of the sky on a stick and landed right in front of us. We had to stop and they wouldn't let us go around. The one mean one grabbed Momma by the hair and screamed at her.”

“Can you remember what she said, Edward?” said Spark.

Edward paused, straining with concentration. “Oh yea. I think she wanted to know what my momma had done with her heart. Momma has the biggest heart in the whole wide world,” he said, choking back another sob, “but my momma said she didn't know what the awful horrible mean woman was talking about.”

“Edward,” said Razzmorten, with a grave look, “do you remember what either of those bad women's names were?”

“The one that hurted Momma's hair and screamed at her was Sp...Spite...I don't know...”

“Spitemorta was that one,” said Kast. “The diatrymas told us. And the other one was called Demonica, and no mistake about it. Those birds don't make mistakes about things like that.”

Razzmorten sank back bonelessly for a moment, nibbling a knuckle as he stared into the distance in the silent room. He suddenly sat forth, put on his spectacles and addressed Edward's worried look with a warm smile. “Edward, this is wonderfully valuable information,” he said. “What happened next?”

“Oh yea. The Goblins, I mean the Gobblers came. Mary shoved me behind a big rock and told me not to move until either she or Momma came for me. But then it got to be really long, long, long. I got really, really scared and Ceidwad told me that Momma wanted me to come here. Did I do the right thing? Is Momma going to be all right?” Suddenly he lunged at Rose's bodice with great whooping sobs.

“Edward? Edward,” said Kast softly, as he swung his head near the boy. “You did the right thing, lad. Do you hear me?”

Edward nodded from Rose's ruffles.

“Edward, those giant birds are very wise and very kind. I know them well. If they said come here, that's what your momma would want you to do.”

“I'm really sleepy,” said Edward, looking up at Rose. “I was afraid to go asleep on the bird 'cause I might o' falled off.”

“That was very wise of you,” said Rose.

“Yes indeed,” said Razzmorten. “Just one last thing, Edward. Could you tell me what your momma and Mary look like?”

“Sure. Mary dresses all in white and she has funny colored hair. Kind o' purpledy berry brown, but it's right pretty. Momma has long, blonde hair. kind of like Rose, but more curly. She's about as big as Rose too, I think. Momma is very nice and very, very pretty.”

“What's her name, Edward?” said Rose.

“I call her Momma, but her name is Myrtlebell.”

Chapter 10

“Myrtlebell!” stammered Rose. “No, you can't mean... It can't be. I mean Fuzz just wouldn't... He knows how I feel about...well, I mean...he knows what she...”

“Rose,” said Razzmorten with quiet firmness, as he gave her a steely eyed look from beneath his hoary brows. “I think it would be best to see Edward off to bed. He's been through a great lot these past few days and he truly needs your kind support. I believe we have quite enough information to begin a search for his mother and Fuzz, don't you?”

Rose gave a blank look before suddenly seeing how it all was. Just before she had grasped exactly how horrible she should feel, Edward tugged at her skirts with wide eyes.

“I didn't know you knew my momma. Why don't you like her, Rose? Momma is the bestest person in the whole world.”

Razzmorten saw the frantically helpless expression on Rose's face. Satisfied that she appreciated the hole she had just dug herself, he came to her rescue. “Edward,” he said as he knelt down to look him in the eye, “you may not realize it, but there are many women in the world named Myrtlebell. I don't think the Myrtlebell Rose knows is your momma or you know she would like her.”

Edward knitted his brow as he considered, then he looked up at Rose.

“That's right, Edward,” she said, brightened with relief. “Why, the Myrtlebell I knew could never have a child as bright and sweet as you.” She knelt before him. “I'm sorry I upset you. Your mother couldn't be the Myrtlebell I knew.”

Edward nodded wisely. “I wonder how somebody named Momma's name could be bad,” he said, giving Rose a forgiving smile, “but somebody called Angel could be mean and awful.” Then with a huge yawn, he lunged for her with a hug. “I'm really, really tired now.”

“Right,” said Rose, as she turned to Spark and Lipperella, who had been keenly watching everything as they dropped endless chunks of sukere down dragonet gullets. “Is there some place where Edward could sleep?”

Lipperella nodded and surprised Razzmorten by handing him her dish of sukere as she passed.

“Gweltaz, could you do this for me?” he said. “I think it's urgent that I speak with the diatrymas. Kast, you say they refuse to come inside...?”

“They never do. They won't.”

“You know about them. You spoke with them, would you take me up there right now and introduce me to them?”

Kast was on his feet immediately, heading for a cramped passage, scarcely larger than the dragon himself, hurrying along so quickly that Razzmorten nearly had to jog to keep up. Presently they came to a spiral stair, carved out of the limestone of the cavern, that led directly overhead to where the diatrymas had bedded down, side by side in the leaves beneath the leaning oaks. At their approach, the diatrymas raised their heads high in unison, but remained resting on their keel bones.

Meanwhile, Lipperella lead Rose and Edward to a small passage opening into a grotto with several pallets. “Guest quarters for our human friends,” she said as she neatly lit a candle with a wee spurt of blue flame from between her lips, revealing the attractive suite.

“My!” said Rose in astonishment that at once made her feel awkward.

“I'll just leave you to tuck him in, then,” said Lipperella graciously, as she turned to

go back.

“Thank you,” called out Rose belatedly.

Edward wasted no time sliding into the most inviting strange bed he had ever seen. Rose found a basin and full pitcher and washed his face and hands. He gave Rose one last smile. He needed another hug.

Rose was simply too much like Myrtlebell not to

be his chosen nanny. He began to snore softly even before Rose pulled the coverlet over him. She smiled at him in wonder then silently left his side, returning to the nursery to find the company waiting for Razzmorten to return from his visit to the diatrymas.

After some time they returned. Razzmorten sat down at once, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“What did you find, Grandfather?” said Lukus.

“Stunning...absolutely stunning creatures, that's what.”

“Comes with the feathers, Wiz,” said Hubba Hubba, looking up suddenly from a serious preen.

“They could well be the most intelligent beings I've ever addressed. I truly believe they were making sure that I had all the information I needed to come to a decision, but they were exhausted from their long run, and once they saw that I had what I needed, they politely persuaded me to leave so they could sleep. They also plan on helping us.”

“In my dealings with them, I've not known them to forget even the very most minor detail of anything,” said Kast. “I daresay you'll be right thankful for their aid.”

“They are almost certainly the adar taranus which Razzorbauch released from the rocks when he created the fudge volcano,” said Razzmorten. “If they be, then they are the ones he is said to have regretted turning loose.”

“Certainly,” said Lipperella. “As Truth-Bearer, I've had several occasions when I sought them out in secret. Razzorbauch was never comfortable with the truth.

Unfortunately they keep to themselves, so that over the years I've seldom seen them.”

“Well, we seem to have no choice but to leave at once,” said Razzmorten.

“I hope Fuzz is safe,” said Lukus.

“I wish I could go with you,” said Spark, “but as you can see, I can't possibly manage this time, but I can sure send my older brother, Tors.”

“Torch?” said Lukus. “I hope he's not overly zealous.”

“He knows what he's doing,” said Spark with a strange light in his eyes, “but he has no love at all for Gobblers, let me tell you.”

“Beaks, you mean,” said Razzmorten. “Edward had it right, though he couldn't have understood what it meant. The diatrymas confirmed it. They recognized them the instant they saw them. Ugleuh's spell on them is all petered out.”

“Well Rose and I certainly didn't care for the Gobblers,” said Lukus with a snort.

“No one did,” said Spark. “But for sheer bad, the Beaks put the Gobblers to shame.”

“So, what do we plan on doing?” said Lukus. “Do we try to find Fuzz on the way to rescue Myrtlebell and this White Witch from the Beaks?”

“Essentially, yes,” said Razzmorten. “and try to fathom what sort of threat to the world a cauldron full of Beaks, Spitemorta, Demonica and the Great Staff amounts to.”

“Demonica in that mix scares me the most,” said Lipperella. “We've had dealings with her. For pure evil, she's got both Razzorbauch and Ugleuh beat.”

“Yes, I've had dealings myself,” said Razzmorten. “And I agree.”

“If Fuzz is still alive and coming here, shouldn't we wait for him?” said Rose.

“That gives up precious time,” said Razzmorten. “I think it best to make straight for his den on the assumption that he would be coming straight here...”

“It would be right easy to miss him doing that, I'd think,” said Lukus.

“Sure would, unless you had a couple of parrots to search the countryside from the air on either side of our path...”

“No problem, Wiz,” said Hubba Hubba.

“It takes somebody free as a bird to really see ahead,” said Lipperella from across her brood.

“What should we do about Edward?” said Rose. “Surely Spark and Lipperella don't need more work.”

“You're right, Rose,” said Lukus. “And you nearly ended up being the Gobbler queen, last time, so...”

“Yea? Well I really don't know how much I want to stay here and watch after Myrtlebell's son, regardless of how sweet he is. How 'bout you, Lukus? You need the experience.”

“You both should go,” said Lipperella. “The little prince will be no problem staying here with us.”

“But your hands are full,” said Rose.

“Oh indeed, but we don't mind at all. We understand the urgency of your journey. The 'cauldron' your grandfather refers to threatens us, too. Edward's just big enough that he could even help us from time to time. Besides it might be handy, years from now when he's grown, having him for an ally. Dragons can always use friends.”

“Hey, thanks. We're set, then” said Hubba Hubba. “And speaking o' that, this seems like a good time to ask. I understand why your chicks have feathers, having hatched without Razzorbauch around with his staff, but why aren't there any other dragons running around with feathers on? I mean, Razzorbauch's been dead since before Lukus was born.”

“Razzorbauch did a good job,” said Spark. “He not only took away our feathers, he made us sterile.”

“All but you, sweetheart,” said Lipperella with a giggle, as she batted her eyelashes.

“So how'd you get off scot-free, Spark?” said Hubba Hubba.

“Aw, he never figured, you know, Razzorbauch never figured any lady dragon would...”

“But I did. And I do,” said Lipperella.

“And it's a good thing, too,” said Razzmorten with a grin. “You and Lipperella have ensured the survival of your clan.”

“And we'd better think about our survival. It's getting quite late for the kind of an early start which we need, and we all should be getting some rest.”

“I'll show you all where you will be sleeping,” said Lipperella, standing up at once, “then you can wash up for supper. In the morning we'll give you a breakfast that will have you ready for whatever awaits you.”

Nods of agreement all around settled the matter.

Chapter 11

Demonica awoke with a start to a whirl of enraged bewilderment, pain, thirst and hunger. She was furiously angry beyond all else but she was far too confused to grasp just where she was at first, let alone do anything about it. Her blindfold was still so tightly tied that her head was numb in places. The bleeding splits on her chapped lips stung as she tried to keep her parched tongue from sticking to the fetid gag that it couldn't avoid touching.

Nothing interfered with her hearing, so she listened intently. She heard water dripping onto a stone surface, the regular gnawing of a rodent and the low moaning of a human in hopeless despair, somewhere nearby. The muscles of her frown tugged at her blindfold as she remembered belligerent little men, fit and nearly naked, painted blue and covered with bizarre designs from head to toe. She recollected three other women, two gigantic birds and sudden pain. She gasped and thrashed against her chains.

“They got Spitemorta and me just when we'd almost discovered...” she grunted unintelligibly around her gag. “They bound us and marched us here, where that runt kicked her in the mouth and locked us away.” She gave out a furious muffled wail. “So, King Half Pint actually thinks he can hold me in chains, does he?” she thought, as she coughed out a few chuckles around the rag in her mouth. Her magic was formidable, even with her hands chained to her thighs. She would make the painted heathen pay for this for the rest of his life. She set about concentrating on the magic to free her from her shackles, but to her horrified astonishment, her magic was simply not there. She thrashed and struggled and flailed, ending up with her wrists and ankles throbbing and bleeding anew. She managed at last to rein in her panic, telling herself that if she calmed down, she would easily call forth her magic and free herself from her shackles. Then her vengeance would be exquisite. She took several deep calming breaths and then confidently closed her eyes and got nothing.

Spitemorta caught a stab of pain in her jaw with a wincing groan. She thought that she might be able to move her jaw if she were not gagged, but moving her head just was not working. She kept trying to put her thoughts in order, but found it impossible to concentrate on anything beyond the pain in her face and neck, though she was belligerently determined to get control of herself. She breathed deeply to calm herself as she rigidly held her head. She could see nothing whatsoever, but she had just awakened, and was only now deciding that she had been blindfolded. Opening her eyes raked grit into them from the blindfold, causing her to wince and trigger a vicious pain from her neck. An irony taste of blood made her want to vomit, but the gag in her mouth made it impossible to spit. Swallowing only made her choke on the putrid cloth in her mouth. Tears of frustration soaked into her blindfold as she struggled to breathe and discovered that she would suffocate if she did not stop struggling. She sank back against her bonds in total despair.

Footfalls sounded in the echoing darkness, coming right up close to end with the heavy clank of a bolt being drawn and the sound of the iron door to her cell being swung wide.

“Ah! Comin' 'round, Caelis, what?”

“You're right. Looks it. Hey, Buthut, hand me the blow gun. I want to get her 'fore she has a chance to stir too much. No telling what kind o' spells she's capable of, even without her staff.” He took the long pipe and its quiver and pouch and stood, dressing the point of a dart out of a box of toxic grease. He stood back, raised the pipe and with a sharp puff, stuck the dart in Spitemorta's ribs, making her jerk with pain.

At once she choked on her gag while clearly seeing that she was being drugged.” I will get you!” she thought as she turned reeling dizzy and went limp.

“That'll keep na beiste,” said Buthut.

“Yea. Got 'er first,” said Caelis as he heaved the door closed with a clang. The pair went a couple of steps away and halted to draw back another clanking bolt, throwing wide its door with an irony squeal.

“This one's still out,” said Buthut, as he looked at Mary, held upright like a rag doll by her chains. “Suppose we ought to dose her anyway?”

“She might not wake up,” said Caelis, as he drummed his fingers on the empty blow gun. “I don't think the king would like us doin' in his new playthings just yet. We'd better check to see if she's truly dead to the world. Witches are witches, don't you know.”

Buthut jabbed Mary in the gut with the butt of his spear. “Huh. Sleepin' like a babe,” He smiled. “Ye know, I like the looks of this one, even if she is a witch. Look 'ee there at that berry colored hair. Even in this light. Never saw the like, 'ave you?”

“Mage Cinid called her the White Witch.”

“What does that old drip know?”

“Quite a bit, according to the king. He takes him serious enough.”

“Well, white or black,” said Buthut, as he turned to go, “a witch is a witch, ain't she?”

“True enough, and we'd best check on the last one or there'll be the Pitmaster to pay, sure enough.”

Mary's eyes popped open the moment her cell door closed. “Now look what I've done,” she said. “Did Ugleeuh's curse leave me daft, or what? What a stupid short cut. I should never have tried going through the marsh, particularly with the Gobbler spell likely gone from the Beaks. I must free myself and save poor Myrtlebell. And if anything's happened to little Edward, I'd not blame her if she never forgave me.”

Mary was still groggy from the drug she had been given. For some time she wanted to vomit on the filthy rag in her mouth. When she managed to steady herself, she called forth her magic to break her chains and found it altogether gone. It felt drained away. She fought back her flourish of panic. She knew she must keep her head in order to be of any use to Myrtlebell and Edward. She called on her magic once more, and again it forsook her.

“What kind of drug steals magic?” she said. She knew of no herb with that property. “If not that, then what else could do it?”

Myrtlebell looked up as the two guards opened her door. Waves of fear flooded her as they came in, spears held ready. They stopped well back and stared.

“So,” said Caelis, “this one's supposed to be non-magical?”

“Mage Cinid was right certain of it. That's why we don't have her drugged or blindfolded anymore,” said Buthut with a pearly grin against his dark beard.

“Cinid, aye? I wouldn't be so...”

“Well, look at her,” said Buthut. “She ain't likely to get away, now is she?” Both

men laughed.

Then to Myrtlebell's surprise, they began unshackling her ankles. "Don't be stupid, lady," said Buthut as he wagged his finger, "or you won't have this chance we're giving you. Understood?"

She nodded, and he continued undoing her restraints. When he was done, she felt of her wrists as she tried to stand and collapsed at once. She prodded impotently at the fiery tingling in her hands and feet. Caelis and Buthut, were inclined to be proud of the pain they inflicted, and mercilessly jerked her to her feet.

"King Talorg wishes to see you, sweetheart," said Caelis with a grin that stretched the animal painted on his cheek, giving him a eerie look as he thrust his bulging eyes at her face.

Myrtlebell shuddered. She was very suspicious of this 'chance' that she was being given.

They drug her slipping and stumbling through the excrement and rot in the fetid hallway, lit only by a torch at each end. "I see that this passage serves as a sewer as well as a hallway," she said between clenched teeth. "How very efficient."

Caelis eyed her, but tramped on.

Buthut's hand clamped tight on her arm as he drew her ear to his face with a merciless yank. "Unless you enjoy being gagged, you stinking runk, I suggest you hold your tongue."

Myrtlebell nodded, not trusting herself to give a civil reply.

They came to the end of the hallway where Buthut beat three times with the meat of his fist on the heavy wooden door to be let out.

Once they were outside, with the stink of the dungeon whirling into the air, Myrtlebell tried to keep track of where they were going, as Caelis and Buthut dragged her up several narrow flights of stone steps and down an odd winding corridor. At last they reached the throne room of King Talorg, where they tripped and threw her onto her knees before him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could just see a hooded figure, standing statue still, leaning on what appeared to be the odd stick which Demonica and Spitemorta were riding when they dropped from the air. Buthut grabbed her by the hair and pointed her face at Talorg. She gasped at the sight of the smug menace she saw there.

He looked quite pleased with her reaction. An unmistakable hint of a vain smile tugged at his face as his eyes lit with an inner fire. "Release the wench!" he thundered, making Caelis and Buthut jerk back away from her.

They stepped back smartly, thumped their breasts with their fists, and stood at attention.

Talorg studied Myrtlebell for a moment. "You are going to tell me why you have trespassed on my lands and why you have done so in the company of three powerful witches," he said, waving the cloaked figure closer.

Myrtlebell looked at the stooped person beneath the dark mantle, coming forth with the stick. She could just make out the gnarled features of one with great age.

Something told her that it was an old man. As she stared transfixed, Talorg again motioned him towards her. The figure propped the stick against a pillar, then produced a silver metal circlet from the depths of his cape. He paused to throw back his hood, revealing that he was indeed a wizened old man. He drew out of his collar his greasy

waist length white hair. His long beard was so sparse and discolored from his meals, that she had not noticed it before. She shuddered at the cruel set to his thin lips and his cold milk-blue eyes. He grasped the ring with both hands and pulled hard upon it, opening it at its hinge. It was much too large for a wrist or an ankle. Suddenly he stepped up and closed it about her neck with a solid click.

She jerked back in surprise as Caelis and Buthut stepped forth and grabbed her to keep her from resisting, but the collar was already fast. The old one stepped back with a look of gloating satisfaction as he waved the two back to their stations.

“Much better,” said Talorg as buoyantly as if he were ready to pour tea, as he clapped his hands together in front of his smile. “What you now wear around your lovely white neck is magical and very old. We've had it for countless generations. We still call it, 'Fainne Leis an Fhirinn Innseadh.' 'Ring to Tell the Truth' would be more modern. If you lie, it will know at once and tighten just a bit. If you keep lying, it will kill you.”

“And if I choose to remain silent, sire?” said Myrtlebell with a dry swallow.

“Then we kill you,” said Talorg, keeping his tone of voice, though his smile vanished at her question. “We don't mind tidying up. The dungeon is full, though we have all sorts of amusements open to us. My good Captain Girom has informed me that a small boy was with your company when you were taken, but that during the confusion of subduing you, he managed to vanish. And your guards tell me that you were quite distraught regarding the child's whereabouts.”

“I remember no such thing,” she said.

“No, you probably wouldn't, but then you were quite drugged and you said lots of things I doubt you would recall.”

Myrtlebell bit her lip.

“Ah, you might have some sense,” said Talorg as his smile returned. “Now, my soldiers are combing the marsh for the boy, even as we speak. I've just gotten word that they've picked up his trail. We certainly expect to have him by nightfall. If you've more spunk than sense, you could hold out until then, but we've never had any party ever continue to withhold while watching his kiddie being butchered. So, it's up to you. It's utterly impossible that he could elude my men. They know the marsh. He doesn't. Of course, we've already dressed and feasted on the mounts.”

“You have good reason to be lying...” said Myrtlebell, as she fell wide eyed and silent at the sight of Talorg picking up a diatryma feather to run between his fingers.

“Oh, my land, yes. I most certainly could be, don't you know. So it's up to you. Right?”

“Yes, but I could delay until nightfall and see if your soldiers actually do capture him...”

“And then let you decide? Mercy no. You decide now. By evening we'll be long out of patience,” he said calmly, as he strolled back and forth before her. “In fact I'm growing impatient...now!” he bellowed, smiting the floor with the heel of his scepter as he screamed out the very last word of his sentence into her face.

He turned away in the dead silence of the room and resumed his studious meander. “Well dear,” he said, as if he were offering to help her into her fair weather carriage, “I've pressing matters to attend to, as having been a monarch yourself, you surely understand. Let's get on with the interview, shall we?”

Myrtlebell could see that she had babbled a good deal about herself in her drugged

stupor. She was surprised that she hadn't told them the very things they wanted know. She really had nothing to hide from these Gobblers or Beaks, if that's what they were. She stood regally and met Talorg's gaze. "I'll tell you what I know, your Majesty. I have no secrets."

Talorg sat back on his throne in surprise, where he nodded to himself before speaking. "Very wise of you," he said, digging at the arm of his chair with his thumbnail. "Well then, why indeed did you and your witches trespass on my lands?"

"I was traveling only with my son and the White Witch, sire. The other two are our enemies who had just caught up with us and were holding us for their own purposes. We were trying to elude them for our safety. My son and I and the White Witch were making for the Dragon Caves in the swamp."

"Well. I see you've not been strangled yet," said Talorg. "Go on. Why were you running from them?"

"I'm wanted for the murder of my husband, the late King Edmond of Loxmere..."

"Fascinating," he said as his eyebrows shot up. "But what concern is that of Ugleeuh's?"

"Ugleeuh, sire?"

"Absolutely. The younger one. You mean to tell me that you were fleeing from those two na h-uile-bheistean, and didn't even know whom it was who pursued you?"

"Spitemorta is the only one I know, Your Majesty. Ugleeuh is dead. She was killed by the python, Shot 'n' Stop above five years ago. Spitemorta was her only child. I'm told she's the very picture of her mother when she was young. Spitemorta is married to my late husband's son by his first wife, Ruella."

"So this Spitemorta wants you for murdering her late father-in-law, aye?"

"I can't imagine that it could be for any other reason."

"But that makes no sense. Why would she come after you herself? Surely she would send soldiers or even hired assassins. By the way dear, did you do it? Kill your husband?"

"Absolutely not," she said with more fire than she'd intended. "And, as for why Spitemorta would hunt me herself, well you're right. It makes no sense at all, except that she and the other witch got the idea that I had in my possession something they wanted. Spitemorta called it 'the Heart,' I believe. Yes, I'm sure that's what she called it."

"So, what is this so called 'Heart?' Do you have it?"

"No, I don't and I've no idea what it is. I only know that she and her companion are mad to get their hands on it."

"So, I take it you have been hiding with the White Witch since your husband's murder?"

"Well, no. I've been hiding in the Peppermint Forest, though. First, my son and I stayed in Ugleeuh's abandoned cabin. Later, we stayed in a cave with an enchanted bear. When we heard that Spitemorta was afoot in the forest and coming our way, we fled. We stumbled across the White Witch in our flight and she hid us at first and then was trying to get us to the safety of the Dragon Caves when we were waylaid."

King Talorg studied Myrtlebell's face. He could plainly see that the Fainne Leis an Fhirinn Innseadh was resting dormant around her delicate neck. She had spoken true. With a deep sigh he relaxed onto his throne. He motioned the ancient one to him and they talked for a time in animated whispers.

At last the old man nodded, then turned and removed the ring from Myrtlebell's neck

and departed without a word.

“We appreciate your honesty, Your Majesty and it shall be rewarded,” said Talorg, speaking up from where he sat. “Although you've trespassed upon my lands and must therefore remain captive, you will be confined in more agreeable quarters to await your judgment.” He nodded at Caelis and Buthut and Myrtlebell found herself being whisked away before she had a chance to recover her wits and ask him what he meant by “awaiting her judgment.” She tried to turn to call back to him and tried to slow her steps, but Caelis and Buthut wouldn't have it and shoved her along mercilessly.

“Your audience is over, runk,” said Buthut, flinging her around straight by her elbow. “Keep moving.”

Myrtlebell resigned herself to following willingly. She would indeed find out what was meant by her “judgment,” though she doubted it was anything to look forward to. She was marched briskly back along the same twisting corridor and flights of steps, except that they stopped at least two levels above the dungeon. Here she was shoved into an airy, comfortable looking room.

She was astonished to find attractive furnishings, which included a feather bed, a writing desk and an upholstered chair by a cozy fireplace. “This is more of a guest room than a cell,” she said, as the heavy wooden door closed with a thud and a rattle of hardware and hasps on the outside, “That is, except for the locked door and the bars on the window.”

Suddenly finding herself exhausted, she sank onto the chair and stared forlornly into the small fire, wondering if the little king's men had captured Edward yet.

Chapter 12

Fuzz was finally able to stand up without pain, though he seemed to have a streak up each leg with no feeling at all. He was examining his shredded clothing as he rubbed the back of one of his legs when Flit and Hedfan fluttered by. They settled at once at their customary roosts overhead, amidst a stir of twitters without saying a single thing to him. Indeed they gave him no more notice than they would a mop leaning against a table.

“Hedfan! Flit!” he called. “You've returned from your mission much too quickly. What's the matter?”

There was no response, not even a rustle amongst them.

“Taflu?” he called, as he studied the mass of bats above.

Taflu dropped from his roost, flipped once in the air, and landed like a moth upon the nearby table.

“It appears, Taflu, that you are indeed the only bat left with the power of speech, though I don't quite grasp the reason. I need you to ask Hedfan and Flit what they've done with the Heart. They weren't gone nearly long enough to have delivered it to the dragons, and they did not return with it. It would be utter calamity for the sorceresses who just left here to get their evil hands on it.”

“Should I hunt them down for you, master?” said Taflu, his red eyes glowing with keen intensity.

“You mean the sorceresses? Fates! Whatever would you do if you caught up with them?”

“I am a vampire bat, after all,” said Taflu, as if that were an explanation. “That's probably also why I have retained my powers of speech and the others have not.”

“Right,” said Fuzz. “Something here escapes me altogether, Taflu. There are at least two dozen other vampire bats in this cave and they've all lost their speech.”

“Certainly,” said Taflu, “but they aren't as old as I am. They're Ugleeuh's work. Razzorbauch was the one who fixed me. And that means I know the power of the Great Staff when the Heart is in place. The entire world is at risk. Those evil ones must not be allowed to triumph. Going after the sorceresses might be risky but nothing like the risk we would all suffer with the Heart on the Staff in their hands. It's a risk I'm afraid not to take.”

“Then you know what I'm talking about when I mention the Heart?”

“I was a victim, fully aware years before you ever left Niarg.”

“Well,” said Fuzz with a nod of resolve, “let's find out what our mute friends on the ceiling did with the Heart before we go doing anything rash or dangerous. Perhaps it's simply a matter of retrieving it from wherever they dropped it. Could you speak with them in their tongue and find out what you can, while I go through some trunks and see if there are any clothes left that Myrtlebell didn't make over for Edward?”

“Go hunt your clothes,” said Taflu as he fluttered to the ceiling.

“Clothes,” said Fuzz. “Never thought the day would come when I'd see anything handy about being a bear.” He stepped out of the pantry passage and heaved a sigh of dismay at the wreckage Demonica and Spitemorta had made of his home. He had to search the floor around each of his overturned trunks until he came across a faded pair of breeches from his old uniform as Captain of the Guard of Niarg, flung across the legs of an overturned chair. “Never thought I'd ever wear these again. Good enough.” He put them on at once. “Now, if I can just find a shirt and a waist...and I really need my old

boots...”

There was no shirt to be found, making him appreciate more than ever his loss of fuzz, but directly he did find first one then the other of his boots. He jubilantly kissed the second boot and stamped into the pair of them and hurried back to the pantry to see what Taflu had found. On the way, he paused long enough to grab up Edward's plaid blanket out of the jumble. “Ha!” he exclaimed, snatching it up. He cut a hole in the middle so that it would fit over his head, then tied it down with a leather whang long enough to reach around his waist.

Satisfied that he'd finally managed to dress himself, he dashed to the passage to find Taflu anxiously pacing about on the table, waiting for him.

“Flit and Hedfan dropped the Heart in the marsh, Fuzz. From what I could gather, they suddenly had no idea what it was they were towing through the air or where they were going with it, so they just did the natural thing. They let it go.”

Fuzz blanched in horror. “Do you think they can remember where they dropped it well enough to show me? If the Gobblers find it there is no telling what trouble it will lead to.”

“Absolutely, Fuzz. But I'd bet Hedfan and Flit could show us where they dropped it without much difficulty. The marsh is their insect hunting ground, so they know it extremely well. Shall we go now?”

“The sooner the better.”

“Good,” said Taflu as he shot to the ceiling to hover under an agitation of chattering bats.

Directly, Fuzz and the three bats left his den and struck out for the marsh at what seemed to Fuzz to be a syrupy slow human's speed. “Something else I was better at as a bear,” he said to Taflu, who had just settled onto his shoulder. “What I really need is some kind of fast mount.”

“I know,” said Taflu. “I know where a diatryma was bedded last night. He knows me, too. If you want, I can fly ahead and see if I can talk him into bearing you.”

“Splendid, Taflu. But please tell Hedfan and Flit not to get out of my sight while you're gone, or I'm sure to lose them.”

Taflu launched himself from his master's shoulder and took flight, pausing in the air only long enough to pass on instructions to Flit and Hedfan before vanishing through the canopy.

Fuzz dared not stop and rest, even though Taflu had gone to fetch him the fastest mount he knew of. What if he couldn't find the diatryma? What if the diatryma refused?

In spite of winding himself over and over, trying to go at the bear's pace which he was used to, he'd have to keep going. Suddenly the hair on the back of his neck prickled and he froze where he was, sniffing the air in all directions. “Fates! Yet another ursine ability that I must rue.” He strained and looked, and at once clearly saw the movement of something not quite there in the brush a couple of rods ahead. “One of Demonica's demon spies!” he cried, as it vanished. He stared after it, hoping it was gone for good. If it found him with the Heart it would be no time until Demonica would be coming for him. He dashed ahead through the brush with more urgency than ever.

By noon, Fuzz was stumbling with exhaustion. He knew that he couldn't keep going much longer at all, even though he could clearly sense from time to time the presence of Demonica's formless spy pacing him in the shadows. It made him shudder, and he

wondered if there was anything that could harm it.

A sudden crashing of brush gave him a terrible start just in time to see an enormous flurry of green feathers, as a diatryma sprang out of the hazel thicket just ahead and came bounding directly up to him. The diatryma gazed calmly down at him with one huge black eye as Taflu fluttered from its back to alight on his shoulder.

“Well, I'm back Fuzz,” he gritted cheerily. “This is my old friend, Arwr. He has agreed to bear you (if you don't mind the expression) to the marsh, and I'd say from the looks of you, not any too soon.”

“I'm so very grateful to see that you've managed, Taflu,” said Fuzz with a weary shake of his head. “And Arwr,” he said with a totter, as he turned and bowed before the towering bird, “I am truly in your debt.”

Arwr swiftly dropped his head to address Fuzz at eye level, studying him with obsidian sincerity from both sides of his enormous ebony beak at once. “I'm right honored to serve such a noble cause,” he said in a deep, reedy boom. “We diatrymas accumulate our memories and the right vile Demonica is amongst our darkest. If she is here after the Heart, I know what it portends and I'm ready to work until she be stopped, whatever it takes.” And with that, he dropped to his keel and allowed Fuzz to mount, with Taflu still on his shoulder. “Hold tightly to my neck feathers, Fuzz,” he said, rising to his feet the moment they were seated. “You needn't be worried that you'll cause me discomfort, so long as you get a good handful. Just don't squeeze my windpipe. Very well, those two bats, then...aye, Taflu?” and with that he surged forth, zigzagging lightly through the trees at a dizzying speed.

It took all of Fuzz's concentration to just hang on and to adjust to the speed at first, but soon he could see that Arwr was far more agile than any unicorn, sprinting between the trees without coming close to a single one of them. Somehow Arwr managed to anticipate their trunks as they came, so that he and Taflu were not thrown from side to side. Soon he could plainly see that even though he had never traveled through the woods so fast in his life, it was quite safe to not hang on tight anymore. As he relaxed, he saw that he was not being whipped by the twigs and branches of the underbrush, as he would be if he were astride a unicorn. Instead of rocking endlessly above a pounding gallop, Arwr seemed to glide, disconnected from the ground, as he kept up a steady, pat...pat...pat...pat... pat...pat...pat...over the leaves on the forest floor. “For a bird confined to the ground, he sure knows how to fly,” he thought.

Bounding along creeks and ridges and over hogbacks, the woods flew quickly by. They were not far into the afternoon when Fuzz realized to his astonishment that they were passing through Mary's part of the woods. He wondered if she were still in her cavern with Myrtlebell and Edward, or if they had already started for the Dragon Caves. He was quite tempted to stop and see, but the need to reach the Heart before the Gobblers or Demonica's spies found it would have to come first. He said nothing as he studied the trees, watching the countryside pass by. Suddenly he recognized that they had entered the Chokewoods. “The change isn't so sudden anymore,” he thought. “In fact, there's hardly any change at all. This is Chokewood, because I know the lay of the land. I didn't even notice when we ran out of peppermint trees.” He gave a huge sigh, thinking of the changes taking place in the Peppermint. He doubted if there would be any difference at all between the Peppermint and Chokewood by the end of the year. In spite of all his years of despair from being held prisoner there, he felt a profound sadness.

Without warning, they were ringed by a chattering carpet of vermilion, pouring round them from the feet of the trees.

Taflu took flight.

“Smallies!” cried Fuzz at the very moment that Arwr came to a rigid halt.

“Ooo...ooo...oob!” boomed Arwr as he suddenly flashed the brilliant red and yellow which had been hidden in the flight feathers of his wings and tail.

The smallies froze.

“Oooooooff...voov...voob!” he boomed, snatching up the nearest smallie with his beak. With a furious swing, he dashed out its brains against the root of a choke oak, and with three violent gulps swallowed it whole as every one of his feathers stood out straight. With the sound of windy popping sheets, he flashed his fiery crimson wings as he lowered his head and glowered, snapping his beak.

For a moment, the smallies drew back and stood transfixed in utter silence. In short order, a rustling wave spread out through their numbers and the entire hoard surged toward them.

“Fates!” cried Fuzz. “This is it!”

Suddenly Fuzz and Arwr were blinded by a searing white light. As they frantically fought to see again, they beheld the crumbling, smoking cinders of the hoard of smallies.

As Fuzz gawked dumbfounded, Arwr wheeled beneath him, splaying his wings and holding up his fan of feathers on the end of his flexible tail to greet two other diatrymas, who stood in display not more than five rods away.

“Razzmorten!” shouted Fuzz at the sight of him, sitting astride the larger of the diatrymas, with Rose on the smaller one and Lukus on some dragon he didn't know. “My word! What are you all doing here?”

“Saving your tail, I'd say!” cried Rose. “Though I see we're too late for that.”

“Well, I am so very grateful for your saving the tail which I no longer have, believe me,” said Fuzz, as Arwr quickly closed the distance between them.

“We understand, Captain,” said Razzmorten grandly. “Excellent to see you. You've been sorely missed these livelong years.”

“I'd feel more at ease addressed as Fuzz, if you've no objection. It's been a very long time since I was a captain, sir.”

“Very well, Fuzz,” said Razzmorten. “I'm borne by the right honorable Lladdwr, here, and Rose by Ceidwad. And this is Spark's elder brother, Tors, carrying Lukus...”

“This is Arwr,” said Fuzz, “and...Taflu seems not to be here... And you can't imagine how I've longed to see Rose and Lukus.” He could see that Lukus was still Lukus, only older, but he was taken aback to find Rose avoiding his eyes. Whatever was bothering her, there was certainly no time for it at the moment.

“If you don't mind me asking,” he said, “how did you manage to appear here, just when I needed rescuing?”

“We were on our way to your den, actually,” said Razzmorten. “We thought, from what young Edward told us, that you might need a bit of rescuing, but we reckoned it would be from she-devils instead of wee devils!”

“Demonica and Spitemorta,” said Fuzz with a chuckle of exhausted recollection.

“Oh, I most certainly had an encounter with those two. After one of the most, shall we say, hateful conversations imaginable, they rushed off after Myrtlebell and left me to slowly strangle to death on the floor of my pantry. Fortunately, Taflu... I say! I wonder

where he's gotten to...?"

"Up here, Fuzz," called Hubba Hubba. He gave a piercing two note whistle as he and Pebbles made great sweeping circles around Taflu while he fluttered down out of the sky.

"Hey!" cried Fuzz, peering up from under the flat of his hand. "Well, Taflu, whom you're about to meet, gnawed my bonds and saved me, but I fear I may have bungled getting the Heart of the Staff to safety."

"The Heart?" said Razzmorten in wide eyed astonishment, ignoring Hubba Hubba, Pebbles and Taflu as they landed on Fuzz and him. "My word! You're 'way ahead of me on this, Fuzz. Wait a minute. Now it hits me. That must be Edward's reference to

Spitemorta wanting to know what Myrtlebell did with her 'heart.' So if she was after Myrtlebell, could that possibly mean that you've had the Heart all these years?"

"Righty-o, said Fuzz with a nod. "Hidden in my humble pantry. I found it in my parlour wall right after I began living there and moved it to my pantry. I figured the world would have no way of knowing."

"My, my," said Razzmorten with a whistle. "That sounds like Razzorbauch or Demonica herself put it there in the first place. And that must be precisely why she's here. So, if she and Spitemorta didn't find it in your den, they must have been blistering hot to find out what became of it. And poor Myrtlebell. She's likely to be under grave pressure to disclose its whereabouts." "Myrtlebell knows nothing of the Heart. I reckoned it best for all concerned if she remained altogether ignorant about it, but what's happened? How did Spitemorta come to be demanding that Myrtlebell tell her about it?"

"Demonica and she waylaid Myrtlebell, Edward and the White Witch as they made their way to the Dragon Caves."

"So, how did Mary and Myrtlebell escape those two vipers?"

"Only young Edward escaped, I'm afraid," said Razzmorten, shaking his head. "But get this: Spitemorta and Demonica were also taken prisoners."

Fuzz drew a breath.

Razzmorten held up the flat of his hand. "They were all in the marsh, don't you know."

"Gobblers!" cried Fuzz.

"Absolutely," said Razzmorten, "only worse..."

"Worse?"

"Edward described these 'Gobblers' as painted all over, and that all the women were knocked unconscious."

"Oh, of course they would be Beaks again, with all the Peppermint turning back," said Fuzz, looking stricken. "I do so hope they're alive. Poor little Edward. Where is he?"

"He's safe with the dragons. We thought it best if he stayed behind."

"Yes, of course."

"We planned to rescue you and then go to the Gobbler Castle after Myrtlebell and Mary," said Razzmorten. "Though how much hope there is of success certainly remains to be seen. Since I'm sure you remember the menace of the Beaks when you were Captain, you undoubtedly know what I'm saying."

"Uh, Wiz?" said Hubba Hubba, speaking up from Razzmorten's shoulder. "I hate to interrupt, but we've found Fuzz, and..."

"Indeed, I well remember numerous raids of theirs," said Fuzz. "They've not one shred of restraint or humanity. They're certainly not to be trifled with. However, as much

as I wish to join your quest, I fear my own preempts it at the moment.”

“More important than rescuing Myrtlebell?” said Rose.

Fuzz turned in astonishment to find her bearing a stony countenance, but felt circumstances too pressing to entertain her problem, but her look had grabbed his heart and taken him by surprise. He turned back at once to Razzmorten. “Surely you understand that I must find the Heart before all else. I sent it with two of my bats to take to the dragons, but they dropped it in the marsh. I'm praying that Taflu, Arwr and I find it before the Gobblers, or Beaks as they are now, or Fates forbid, Demonica. But now, when you tell me they've captured Spitemorta...”

“They have the Great Staff,” said Razzmorten as he glanced aside at Rose, Lukus and Tors. “Actually, Captain Fuzz, if you don't object, I think we'd emphatically like to join you. You're quite right. The recovery of the Heart must take precedence over rescuing Myrtlebell and Mary, as much as I do feel sorry for poor little Edward.”

“Taflu,” said Fuzz, checking to see if he were still on his shoulder. “What's become of Flit and Hedfan?”

“Circling right overhead,” gritted Taflu.

With a set to his jaw, Fuzz nodded and the diatrymas set out with their grim faced company for the marsh.

“Sorry, Hubba Hubba,” said Razzmorten.

“Hey, no problem.”

“So you're wanting to know what to do since we found Fuzz?”

“You got it, Wiz. But let me guess. Beaks and bats? Keep track of them?”

“That very well could save the day.”

“Say no more, Wiz,” said Hubba Hubba as he and Pebbles sprang into flight.

Fuzz glanced at Rose to find her staring straight ahead as Ceidwad bore her alongside Razzmorten. He forced himself to put aside these much stronger feelings than he could possibly have expected and concentrated on the task at hand.

They followed a long succession of hogbacks through the falling red and golden leaves of the choke oaks. Jays scolded overhead while far away, a parliament of crows broke out with a flurry of caws. The diatrymas jogged single file, stirring the pungent floor. Fuzz squirmed in spite of their making good time. He knew that they couldn't go faster than Tors, but his ride on Arwr earlier in the day had him spoilt and he was anxious to find the Heart before dark. The woods began giving way to low downs and soon, the marsh lay before them.

“It's really great to see you, Fuzz,” said Lukus, as Tors bore him alongside. “Maybe we can talk, now that we don't have to go single file. How long have you been changed back?” He realized that this might be an awkward question in the midst of asking it. “You've no idea how much Rose and I have missed you.”

“Actually,” said Fuzz as he stretched his neck, “my transformation is right recent and I'm not sure I've completely adjusted to the change. I was a bear for a lot of years, but I've no reason not to expect that things will all come back to me in time.” He nodded at Rose. “You know I'm finally beginning to question whether she's missed me or not. This change of mine still has me feeling awkward all over, but have I done something to offend her?”

“Don't you see?” said Lukus with an amused look.

“See what?”

“Rose is eaten up with jealousy.”

“Just how?” sputtered Fuzz. “Me? Surely not.”

“Absolutely,” said Lukus rocking forward with a chuckle.

“But my word. What could Rose possibly see in the likes of an old bear like me?”

“You're not a bear for one thing.”

“Well, I suppose not, but that is all she's known me as, Lukus, and I'm old enough to be her grandfather. She can't possibly think of me in any other way.”

“Ha! I don't remember a looking glass in your den, Fuzz, but if there is one, I'd lay great odds you've not peeped in it. You may be old as the hills in years, but you don't look much older than Rose. It looks like you stopped aging when Ugleuh turned you into a bear. Why, you're downright handsome.”

“Well, yes, I guess that's what they used to say,” said Fuzz, with an uncomfortable blush, “but I'd still think that would be unlikely quick for Rose to...”

“Wrong again,” said Lukus, bouncing with glee on Tors's back, as Tors swung a sympathetic look in Fuzz's direction. “Remember Spark's glamourie in the Grog Meadows?”

“Oh, you're right,” said Fuzz with very wide eyes. “She saw me as I was when I was still Captain of the Guard at Castle Niarg, when we were trying to deceive the Groggs.”

“Yea. And she's had a thing for you ever since that she refuses to admit...just like you've had for her. Ah...ah...ah, don't deny it. Don't you dare deny it, 'cause it was written all over your face back then, just as it is this very minute.”

“You seem to have turned into an Elf, Lukus, reading me like that.”

Lukus threw back his head with a vigorous laugh. “I'm married to one, actually.”

“My word. Could it possibly be the very one Rose would pester you about those years ago when we were fleeing together?” said Fuzz, as Taflu suddenly fluttered into the air, escaping his notice altogether.

“Indeed. She's my utter ecstasy. And we expect a son.”

“Oh, wonderful. I'm so very happy for you...”

“Yea, thank you. And you're dodging, Fuzz. I can't believe you didn't know Rose felt the same way about you.”

“I...”

“That's all right, Fuzz,” said Lukus with a merry smile. “I'm not trying to give you a hard time. Rose is doing that. And don't worry, she'll come right around as soon as you convince her that there's nothing between you and Myrtlebell.”

“Myrtlebell!” gasped Fuzz. “Of course there's nothing between Myrtlebell and me. She and Edward were in dire need and I took her in. I'm her friend, but only in a patronly sort of way, don't you know. Nothing more. Is that what she thinks, that Myrtlebell and I are lovers? Good word! I was beginning to think this was about Rotundra.”

Lukus threw back his head for another laugh as Fuzz peered at Rose in shock.

“That's what's got her all huffed up. But it'll work out, Fuzz. You'll see,” he said, on the verge of another eruption of laughter.

“I swear,” said Fuzz. “You've become more of an Elf than you may realize.”

“Up there!” said Tors, as he swung back to Fuzz, with a nod at the sky ahead. “Your bats are circling, yonder, maybe forty rod.”

“Good grief,” said Fuzz, peering from under the flat of this hand, as Arwr paused to wait for Lladdwr and Ceidwad. “I can't imagine having gotten this far into the marsh

without my noticing. There's Standing Rock. Looks like Flit and Hedfan...and Taflu too...

My! When did he take off? ...are half way between here and there."

"Arwr," said Fuzz, patting him on the wing, "you are without a doubt the fastest, most splendid mount I have ever ridden. You're as comfortable as a hammock, even over rough country, and you correctly anticipate every move I'd have you make."

"And you're easily the most gracious passenger I've yet to bear, Fuzz."

Presently Lladdwr and Ceidwad drew alongside.

"Is something wrong?" said Razzmorten.

"Hey!" cried Hubba Hubba, as he and Pebbles streaked by. "The bats have found something over here." Without a pause, they returned full speed to where the bats were circling.

"Do you get the impression that something's watching?" said Fuzz.

Razzmorten sat up and looked about. "Yes, actually," he said with an alarmed look. "I didn't notice until now. Do you know anything about it?"

"Demonica's demon spies."

"And what are they?"

"I have no idea," said Fuzz, "but you can't quite see them, if you follow me. You can see their movement, but you can't see them. It's more like you feel them watching you. Sometimes you look at a tree or a rock and it gives you the impression that it's about to make a sudden move, like a frightened dove or rabbit. It's most unsettling. Makes your hair stand on end, especially when they report everything they see to Demonica."

"Watchers? Cias?" said Razzmorten. "Now I take you at your word, of course, but I've never known of any connection between her and them, and they've been bound for centuries."

"I know of these beings," said Arwr, as he brought his head around to gaze at Fuzz. "They're not at all evil. Some are practically child-like. These must be renegades. I can't imagine a connection with Demonica, but they have no substance, so they can cause us no harm."

"Maybe not by springing on us," said Fuzz, "but they certainly can cause us grief by reporting back to Demonica about our recovery of the Heart. Do you know of any way to put the creatures to rout?"

"No, but are there tidings I've somehow missed? I understood that Demonica is being held by the Beaks."

"True enough, or at least as far as we know, Arwr," said Fuzz, as he shared a relieved look with Razzmorten. "However, Demonica being who she be, there certainly are no guarantees. For all we know, she could be on our trail this minute."

"We need to be moving, Fuzz," said Razzmorten. "Whatever doom is on its way, our best plan is haste."

At once, Arwr, Lladdwr and Ceidwad sprang away to where the bats hovered, fluttering in the sky, with Tors thundering furiously after.

The Heart was scarcely swinging in the breeze under the deepening blue of the evening sky, as it hung from the branch of a wayward choke oak seedling by one of the strings of Fuzz's pouch. The company watched in silence as Fuzz snatched it up, peeked inside and immediately gave it to Razzmorten, who at once slipped it inside the folds of his cloak, as everyone sighed with relief.

"This place is dangerous. I feel it," said Razzmorten, as Arwr spun aside and began

jogging south with Fuzz, toward the Gobbler castle, waiting for the others to catch up. They had barely picked up their pace as a group, when several Cias shot past them causing each of them to shudder.

“How many Cias did Demonica bring with her?” said Razzmorten, leaning aside from Lladdwr.

“So, that's what you think they are, then?” said Fuzz.

“Simplest explanation, but I can't imagine how she got them here. Any idea how many she brought with her?”

“I've only sensed the one back in my cave which Demonica herself was talking to, and then one that showed up a time or two, pacing me on the way here. Whether those two were the same one, I have no idea, but I got the distinct impression there were more. Oh yes. The one talking to Demonica referred to 'the others.' Sorry I don't know more.”

“It's something,” said Razzmorten. “The more we know, the better our chances.”

Fuzz turned aside to look straight into Rose's admiring gaze as she rode Ceidwad abreast of Arwr. She had quite obviously forgotten her anger at him for the moment, but saw her mistake at once and quickly looked away.

He knitted his brow. He would settle this thing between them right soon.

He turned back to Razzmorten to find Lukus there instead, having obviously caught the entire exchange with Rose. Lukus gave an encouraging nod and an exuberant thumbs up.

Fuzz sighed. This kind of thing was so very awkward. He wished he had half as much confidence as Lukus. Maybe Lukus was his confidence. After all, he was her brother and knew her right well, and maybe he had indeed picked up a thing or two from the Elves.

Chapter 13

“Good grief! That's disgusting, Captain,” said King Hebraun, setting his crown in his lap to rub his forehead as Queen Minuet gave a wide eyed nod. “So, you've arranged to meet this wretched soul this morning at half past eight?”

Minuet quietly rose from her seat to draw back the drapes, looking back frequently in order not to miss a bit of what was being said.

“Well, yes sire,” said Captain Bernard, “but I trust I wasn't overstepping my bounds.”

“Of course not. Now, you said you reckoned him to be from the Dark Continent?”

“Oh, without a doubt. In fact, I'd not only be confident that he came from Head, but I'd wager that he has peerage there.

Hebraun shared a look with Minuet as she returned to her seat, then smoothed back his hair and replaced his crown. “Very well Captain, have this...Yann-Ber, did you say?”

“That's how I understood it.”

“That's definitely a Headlander's name all right. Anyway, have him come round to the back gardens. I shall meet with him there.”

“We shall both meet him there,” said Minuet, putting her hand on Hebraun's arm as he smiled at her.

Bernard let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding, bowed to them and left quietly to meet Yann-Ber. “Somehow I'm always surprised by the affectionate regard they have for each other, even though I've never seen them without it,” he thought, as he galloped down the first flight of steps which he came to. “It certainly goes hand and glove with how they've reigned. And my, but that was easy. I guess I'm always just as surprised that they never question my judgment.”

He checked the sun as he neared the steps to the gatehouse and saw that it was already time. He wanted to help Yann-Ber, but now that things were in motion, he did not like wasting the throne's time, and he was quite ready for things to be resolved. He trotted right up the worn stone steps to the gatehouse and peered over the embrasure to find a stooped, hooded man already waiting with his back to the early traffic, coming and going. “Yann-Ber!” he called out.

The figure turned and looked up at once from the hood which he held closed with a sallow hand that appeared to belong to a bloated corpse.

“Well good sir, I'm right pleased to find you here, since the king and queen have consented to give you audience at this time,” said Bernard, as he marveled at how revolting Yann-Ber's hand looked, even from so far away. “Have I kept you waiting long?”

“Not at all! Though indeed I came early, not wishing to be late, Captain Bernard!” he said, with a quaver to his voice, fearing that it might accidentally be so.

“Just stay put! I'll be right down to see you to your audience!” said Bernard as he turned for the steps. He was outside almost at once, motioning for Yann-Ber to follow. He could see by Yann-Ber's tottering gait that he would have to lead the way slowly. Before they had quite crossed the base-court, he caught the looks of passers by and turned back to catch a gagging whiff, worse than that of a ballooned carcass, making him truly question the sanity of setting up this meeting. He led Yann-Ber straight to the most seldom used of the side passages to find their way through the castle proper to the back gardens.

They were well along the narrow, poorly lit hallway, when a scullery maid entered the passage far behind them with a stack of dishes and began gaining on them. "Great stinking banshees!" she cried. "What idiot bwgan hauled the rotten cow through here?"

Her hurried steps grew louder until she suddenly rounded the corner directly behind them and with an audible gag, dropped her stack of dishes and screamed at her calamity.

Bernard jumped in spite of his soldierly bearing and Yann-Ber tottered and nearly fell.

Bernard held his breath as he held open the door to the garden for Yann-Ber with a new resolve. He now had a much better appreciation for the poor fellow's plight, and he was more determined than ever to show him compassionate dignity. "Right this way, good sir," he said impeccably, as he denied each fiber of his body the urge to heave at the air that he had just drawn in. "King Hebraun and Queen Minuet will meet with you in the back gardens here, if you would be so good as to come this way."

They meandered over the crunching gravel of the path flanked with low privet hedges, as it wound between a menagerie of ornamental willows and heavily laden fruit trees, until Bernard looked up with a hushed, but horrified gasp to see Hebraun and Minuet already waiting, quite comfortably settled in seats at the worst possible part of the table. "The stench from the wind will kill them," he thought. He paused as frantic thoughts whirled through his mind. "If Your Majesties would forgive my unspeakable abruptness," he said, scurrying up to them and bowing before them with a covertly pleading roll of the eyes, "I would be most relieved to seat you each at the far end of the table."

The two of them sat blinking for a moment, utterly dumbfounded.

"Ah! Yes, yes," said Hebraun, sitting upright with a jerk. "Your Majesty, shall we sit at the other end?"

He helped Minuet to her feet and escorted her around the table to Bernard's boundless relief, just as Yann-Ber shuffled up behind him.

"This, your Majesties, is Yann-Ber," said Captain Bernard, as Yann-Ber bowed as best he could, "who has traveled here, all the way from Head, to seek an audience with Wizard Razzmorten." He couldn't bear to look directly into Hebraun and Minuet's faces at first. He felt like the lead clown in a theatrical farce, setting the king and queen up for this, then stumbling into their garden and shooing them to the far end of their very own table. And what if the wind changed? He stole a wee glance at first Hebraun and then Queen Minuet to see what they made of this pathetic man to find both of them bearing looks of compassion. He gave a sigh of relief and admiration, proudly straightened up and stepped back, waiting to be dismissed.

Yann-Ber held his hood closed beneath his eyes as he stared rigidly at the table in front of Hebraun and Minuet, waiting for the invitation to speak. "Now you've really gone and done it, Yann-Ber," he thought, as panic surged up within him. "Here I am, a desperate beggar, taking up their morning. Why would they have time for me? They're going to smell me. They'll resent my reminding them what they keep in their streets.

They'll order me locked in the dungeon. I'll rot my way to the death she arranged for me. What was I thinking? Oh, please let them throw me out..."

"Now good sir," said Hebraun, "please tell us your tale."

Yann-Ber kept his eyes on the table. He was beginning to tremble.

"Please, Yann-Ber, do tell us your tale. You needn't fear a thing, here. We shall listen

to your story and then help you, if it is indeed within our power.”

“I...” said Yann-Ber, speechless from disbelief.

“There's no hurry, Yann-Ber,” said Minuet, “we have all morning.”

“I...” said Yann-Ber, as he stood straighter and met her kind eyes. “I...” he said as he shook with a violent sob that turned loose a flood of tears to run down his face. He was going to live after all.

Much later that morning, Yann-Ber slowly rose to his feet and stepped out of the fragrant warm water of the medicinal soaking pool the servants had led him to and with the occasional help of his broken arm, ever so gingerly dried himself with the fluffy towel which had been left beside the pool with the fine new shirt, hose, doublet and soft leather shoes. He eagerly put these on. They were light and slightly loose to allow for his boils.

He had not been so clean nor dressed so grandly in an eternity. He felt wonderfully better, and now he even had hope.

“These Niarg people are nothing like Demonica painted them to be,” he said, as he gathered his shirt about his waist. How fitting that they, whom she held in such contempt, would aid in her downfall. He allowed himself a tiny gloating smile as he donned his new silk lined wool cloak and carefully raised it's hood to conceal his face. With a sigh of contentment, he rang the silver bell which was left beside the towel and clothing.

Two servants appeared right away, eyed him over with looks of satisfaction, and at once led him out to the garden where he'd had his audience with Hebraun and Minuet.

Captain Bernard was there instead, and so was a table laden with the most wonderful food he had ever seen. “Yes, indeed,” said Bernard grandly, as he drew a chair for him. “This is entirely for you, good sir. Sit. Eat your fill. Enjoy.”

Yann-Ber could scarcely believe it, but he didn't wait for another invitation. He sat at once and began hurriedly filling his plate.

“Captain Bernard,” he said, suddenly stopping and looking up. “I do beg your pardon. I've been so long without decent fare, that my manners abandon me altogether. Please do have some of this with me.”

“Thank you very much, but I've filled up not long ago, so I'll pass. But I'd enjoy watching you fill your empty places. Lovely morning isn't it...?”

“Please. Do have something.”

“Oh, I might pick at something from time to time...”

“I owe you my life Captain Bernard. If you are ever in need, please send word and I'll come serve you...”

“You're just hungry, good man,” said Bernard, as his dark eyes twinkled beneath their bushy brows. “Go on, eat.”

At this, Yann-Ber ravenously fell to and ate without let up, as Bernard leant back and closed his eyes into the sun while the sparrows called from amongst the rattling leaves and heavy fruit of the nearby trees. At last Yann-Ber sat back, wiping his mouth.

“Now Yann-Ber, let me show you to your guest quarters,” said Bernard with a resolute nod.

“I'm not sure I heard that right,” said Yann-Ber. “Could you...?”

“I said: let me show you to your quarters...”

“But...”

“There's no mistake,” said Bernard. “Their majesties wanted you to rest and regain your strength before you set sail to find Razzmorten. They feel it is the least they can do. I'm also to tell you that the queen is going to scry to find the wizard's exact whereabouts before you leave. You'll be accompanied by a proper assortment of service and nurses to tend to you throughout your journey...”

“This is unbelievable!” cried Yann-Ber. “Am I dreaming? Have I passed away?”

“No, no. This is quite real. They took you very seriously, and they've had dealings with Demonica in the past.”

“But such utter kindness from heads of state...”

“They can certainly surprise you with it, can't they? Hebraun is a good king. They are the best imaginable. Outside of this recent crop failure and other similar times on and off over the years, it's been nothing but prosperity since they came to the throne. We've never had a war, ever. And Hebraun promises to be the first to ride into battle if we ever do. No one dares attack us because the crown issues a longbow or a crossbow to each householder in the realm and by decree, every citizen practices at the butts on the first Sunday of each month. There have even been occasions when their majesties have called the citizens into the square with their arms to choose what course of action they think best for the state.”

“I've never heard of such a thing. Niarg is a lucky place, indeed.”

Captain Bernard led Yann-Ber along a corridor until he came to a sturdy wooden door. “Well, here we are,” he said, as he unlocked it and waved him inside. “This room is small, but I think you'll find it comfortable. This is a part of the servants' quarters, but their majesties felt you'd feel more comfortable here, away from idle and curious traffic. However, if you feel otherwise, I'm given leave to find you another...”

“This will be fine,” said Yann-Ber. “Perfect, in fact. Please convey my sincere gratitude to the king and queen. When I came here I never expected anything even remotely like the kindness and hospitality I've gotten. I'm simply overwhelmed and more grateful than you could ever imagine. I almost feel human again.”

“I shall convey your gratitude, sir,” said Bernard with a smile, as he backed out and closed the door behind him.

Yann-Ber looked about to see a featherbed and a wash basin and a fireplace with a nice bed of coals, as well as a writing desk and a chair. There were rugs and even a small window with a view of the garden. “If these be servant's quarters, I wonder what palace guests are treated to?” he thought, as he laid his cloak across the chair, slipped out of his hose and doublet and turned down the bedcovers. He wriggled between the sheets with a sigh of contentment. “If you could only see me now,” Demonica, he thought, then knew no more for some time.

Myrtlebell awoke with a gasp at the click of the lock of her door. As she sat up to discover that she had been sound asleep for a good long while in her chair, the heavy door came open quietly and went closed. At the sound of its closing, she looked up from stretching her neck into the eyes of a beautiful young woman. “I've brought your supper,” said the woman with a flicker of a smile. “Shall I set it on the hearth or perhaps at your desk?”

“The desk will be fine,” said Myrtlebell. “And if you don't mind my asking, who

might you be? You're certainly no servant.”

The woman set the tray on the desk and turned back to study Myrtlebell with her large dark brown eyes before replying. “You're quite correct. I brought you this in order to have a look at you. And now that I've done that, I find you to be every bit as beautiful as I'd heard.” She nodded at the tray. “You should eat before your food gets cold. 'Sheep in a hole' and 'speckled stew' are best piping hot. There's a wedge of cheese to go with your bread... Oh yes, here's this,” she said, handing over the soup spoon which she still held.

Myrtlebell looked at the tray as she stretched her back. The aroma of the food made her stomach rumble. “Thank you,” she said, as she sat at the desk. “I shall eat, if you don't mind, but please stay and talk for a while, if you would.”

The woman nodded, brushing aside a lock of her magnificent dark hair as she sat upon the bed. She said nothing as Myrtlebell ate, but considered Myrtlebell's features minutely, as if she were a specimen of some kind.

After a few minutes of this, Myrtlebell stopped eating and met the young woman's gaze. “Please forgive my bluntness, but why did you wish to see me? And just who, may I ask, are you?”

The young woman dropped her gaze to pick at the folds of her rich damask kirtle.

“My name is Tramae. Brude Talorg is my father. I just wanted to see what you looked like because they say you look just like her. I had to see for myself if it were true.”

“Who?” said Myrtlebell. “Who is this person I'm supposed to resemble? And who says so?”

“All who have seen you say it, lady,” said Tramae with a sigh, still fiddling with her gown. You are the very image of my mother. Rumors are spreading even now, that you actually are she, reincarnated and returned to us.”

Myrtlebell barked one note of a laugh. “Your father can't believe that or else he cared very little for your mother.”

“My father cared deeply for my mother,” said Tramae with a frown. “Even now, years after her awful death, he still grieves. You think he's treated you ill, but I can assure you that he could never have harmed you when you look the way you do. And there are other rumors, as well, which most believe to be more likely.”

“And what might those be?” said Myrtlebell, uncertain if she wanted to hear them.

Tramae rose and stood before the fireplace, staring into the flames, causing Myrtlebell to notice that she was taller than the Beaks. “Do you remember your mother, lady?” she said, turning away from the fire.

Myrtlebell's spoon slipped into her bowl with a splash. She sat back and whisked at her bodice with her napkin. “I remember that she was fair and very beautiful, but I was quite young when she passed away.”

“How young?”

“I was four. So?”

“I was ten when my mother died, and I remember her right well,” said Tramae, jabbing at the largest log, sending a swarm of sparks dashing up the flue. “You look like her identical twin.”

“Well,” said Myrtlebell, dumping a whole spoonful of speckled stew directly into the ruffles down her front. “That's quite a coincidence.” She pushed away her plate and

paused to dab and brush at herself with her napkin before meeting Tramae's intense gaze with one of her own. "And you can't seriously believe it to be anything more, surely?"

"On the contrary, lady," said Tramae as her chin came up, "as I stand here, I'm convinced that it's no coincidence in the least. Mother often told me of the fair haired four year old girl she bore and left behind in Bratin Brute. That is your homeland, is it not?"

Myrtlebell sat back wide eyed, feeling lightheaded as she worked her mouth in silence. "But that's impossible!" she blurted out at last. "My mother died! She loved me. That's what I remember. That's what I grew up being told. And my father. Their marriage might have been arranged, but they were in love. She never would have left us for a..."

"Heathen?" said Tramae, with a flash of her eyes. "Barbarian...?"

"Another man," said Myrtlebell, as a surge of fear shot through her. "Please, I did not say those things. Mother would not have taken up with another man."

Tramae softened as she studied her face before turning back to jab another log. "No," she said in a hoarse whisper. "It didn't happen that way. She was out for a ride on a new unicorn your father'd given her..."

"Yes!" said Myrtlebell with surprised conviction. "The unicorn came back without her. After weeks of search, they found her body in a ravine. They thought she'd been waylaid."

Tramae came and sat by her. "She was indeed set upon by a highwayman, but your father found someone else in the ditch. She'd gotten out beyond the good roads when the scoundrel surprised her. He pulled her off her mount and she knocked him boss-eyed with a rock, good enough for her to flee into the brush, but not good enough for her to regain her unicorn. She ran away from him until she was hopelessly lost, and then she wandered for days on end, until she nearly starved to death.

"She'd gotten to the point that she'd walk a spell and then swoon, then come to and walk some more, until she swooned again. After a long time of this, she came to, all bound tight, a-dangling from a pole being hauled on the shoulders of some dorchadas. They were taking her to their camp for to cook her, when Father's rangers came upon them and cut off their stinking heads.

"At the very time when she was being nursed back to health here at the Castle, Carlin Cruinnich, whom you might know as Ugleeuh, was banished to the Chokewoods, and from that moment on, the power of one evil spell after another kept us confined, so that Mother...our mother, lady, was trapped. And here she stayed until she died, giving birth to our little brother, Donnel."

"Yes," said Myrtlebell, shaking her head with wide eyes, "but there's no way..."

"Mother's name was Lira," said Tramae with a resolute sigh. "She was an only child. She had stunning blue eyes and a birth mark the size of a small currant on her left cheek. She also had a lovely singing voice and treasured the love poems your father wrote her when they were first married..."

"Then it is indeed true! You know far too many things. You verily must be my sister."

Yann-Ber awoke with a start to a loud knock at his door. He hesitated to marvel in awe at not waking in putrid rags, but was reminded at once of his disfiguring curse as he struggled painfully out of the warm feather bed onto the cold flagstone floor. Managing

his way to the door, he lifted the latch to find Captain Bernard.

“Breakfast has been laid for you in the garden, good sir,” said Bernard with a sympathetic look at the sight of Yann-Ber's pained efforts to stand straight, “and the queen bids me inform you that she's discovered that her father (the Wizard Razzmorten is her father, don't you know) is currently in the Gobbler Marsh. However, she has no idea whatsoever why he's there or where he might be headed next.”

“I see,” said Yann-Ber, as he thought this over. “Well, good Captain, could I trouble you to give me a moment to dress, so that I could follow you to the garden?”

“Most certainly, Sir.”

Yann-Ber quickly closed the door and dressed in such a frenzy that he returned to the door with a ruptured pustule seeping through his fine linen shirt, just below his collarbone. He stepped outside in the midst of a medley of calls from a mimic thrush, busily making declarations from the nearby pear tree, under a light grey sky. “What a fine morning, Captain,” he said. “Thank you for waiting. I've not yet had time to learn my way around.”

“My pleasure indeed,” said Bernard as he turned to lead the way.

“So Captain, I take it that the queen didn't expect the wizard to be in this...what did you call it, Gobbler Marsh?”

“No, she was right surprised. Razzmorten had set out with his grandchildren for the Dragon Caves on some mission having nothing to do with the marsh,” he said, slowing his initial pace so that Yann-Ber could keep up. “However I'm sorry to say sir, I've no details beyond that. If you wish, you'll have no problem asking the king and queen themselves when they take air in the garden, later.”

“I believe I shall indeed ask them, if that be acceptably discreet.”

“They are quite approachable, sir. Besides, I believe they were intending to speak with you after you'd finished with your breakfast, anyway,” said Bernard, stopping in the path with a crunch of gravel under his boots. “Speaking of which, here it is, spread out where you last ate. Have a seat. Enjoy.”

“Oh, I most certainly will,” said Yann-Ber, nodding appreciatively at the grand meal laid before him. “But, I couldn't possibly eat all of this. Won't you please join me?”

“Thank you, but I had breakfast less than an hour ago. I'd love to another time, perhaps.”

“Certainly,” said Yann-Ber, as he took his seat. “I'd be right honored.”

Bernard nodded with satisfaction and returned to his own duties at the gate, leaving Yann-Ber, a stranger and a foreigner, amazed to find himself trusted enough to be left to his own devices. “Mmm! Ar blijadur eo ganin. Digor eo ma c'halon,” he said through a mouthful of bread and ham to the fruit trees beyond the table. “I like this Niarg. I like it a lot.”

Chapter 14

Myrtlebell slept fitfully after going to bed with what she had learnt from Tramae. She was not at all rested when the red light of dawn woke her. Resentfully, she covered up with her pillow, but she was wide awake. With an exhausted sigh at thoughts of her newly discovered half sister, she flung back the covers and sat up to face the day. She washed, combed her hair, made her bed and then squatted on the hearth to scratch for coals in the ashes she had banked before retiring.

“Mercy,” she said, as she peeled splinters from a stick of kindling. “A half brother, a half sister and a full blown raging heathen for a stepfather. Jolly good, but all I want is Edward,” she dropped one knee to the bricks and covered her face with both hands, muffling her sob. She turned aside from the fireplace with a whoop of grief and sat, holding her sniffles against her face as she gave in at last to despair. At this very moment there came a knock.

“Yes!” she called out, as she quickly gave a waddling turn back to her feeble fire.

The door came open for Tramae and a young naked Beak soldier, tattooed from head to toe with writhing beasts, who paused at once at the sight of her struggling to regain her composure. Myrtlebell wiped at an eye with the heel of her hand as she hurried to tug at a stick from across her knees.

Tramae and the soldier gave her a moment to collect herself by resuming irrelevant talk. Presently, the soldier stepped forth to set logs on top of the growing flames.

“I wasn’t actually expecting anyone,” said Myrtlebell, as she rose to smile awkwardly at Tramae.

“I’m sorry if this is a bad time,” said Tramae, with a sympathetic look, “but my father sent Etharnan, here, and me for to fetch you to breakfast with him.”

Wide eyed surprise and refusal took hold of Myrtlebell, but before she could put her thoughts together sensibly, Tramae rushed on: “I understand how you might feel just now, but it would be very unwise to refuse. Father is not a cruel man, in spite of what you think, but he is Ru and is right commanding and does not tolerate rejection. Besides, I suspect he plans to offer you your freedom if you accept his terms.”

“Terms?”

“Well, there would always be some of those, of course. I’m certain it won’t be as bad as it sounds,” said Tramae, taking on a hurried tone. “I haven’t the slightest idea what such terms would be, and I don’t even truly know for sure that he is indeed turning you loose. And even if I did, he’d be furious if I discussed it with you. Just remember that he loved Mother very deeply, and if for no other reason than that, he’ll not harm you.”

Myrtlebell searched Tramae’s face, then turned away with a nod. “I’ll dress at once. I accept that my fate is in your father’s hands, though I don’t trust him one bit,” she said, intercepting Tramae’s sharp glance, with a determined look of her own. Tramae gave a sigh as she stepped outside to wait for her with Etharnan. Soon they were underway, through the meandering corridors and up the winding stone stairways to Talorg’s dining hall. Myrtlebell was keenly aware of Etharnan being on her heels the entire way. “Tramae mightn’t like my not trusting her father,” thought Myrtlebell, “but he certainly doesn’t trust me to come with her, so what kind of freedom could he possibly be about to offer?” She slowed to run her fingertips over the stylized relief of a wolf, one of many such carvings in the stone walls of the passageways, done in a style much like the paintings and tattoos on the Beak soldiers.

“Madadh-Allaidh Neartmhor,” said Tramae, turning back to see. “He's Father's protector. See this one in the wall, just ahead of me?”

“Uh...yes...” said Myrtlebell, knitting her brow at the stone carving.

“This is Eochaid,” said Tramae proudly. “He's Father's direct ancestor.”

“But that's a unicorn, isn't it?”

“Certainly. Father descends from Eochaid, the fastest luathas unicorn that ever lived,” she said as she turned and hurried on.

Myrtlebell's jaw dropped. She glanced aside to see by Etharnan's face that he was treating Tramae's claim with utter seriousness. “These people really are barbarians,” she thought as she hurried to keep up with Tramae.

The top of the last winding stairway opened at the end of a broad, straight hallway that lead directly to Talorg's dining hall. Its walls were completely covered with strange stylized relief carvings of beasts, fowl, fish and human figures as well as odd crescent shapes here and there. The dining hall was large and airy by anyone's reckoning, with stone columns supporting a high vaulted ceiling, and though Myrtlebell had been entertained in at least a score of palatial dining halls in her time, this one left her momentarily speechless. Instead of the typical heraldic tapestries and banners, the walls were hung with animal skins and skulls of all sorts along with a myriad of dented and punctured helms and armor of enemies, collected over generations of raids. Down the length of the room a huge polished board rested on trestles, flanked by benches.

At the far end, chairs replaced the benches, and there stood Talorg and a small entourage of tattooed soldiers, not yet seated. He looked up at the sight of Myrtlebell, Tramae and Etharnan and waved for them to be seated next to him on his left, as orderlies drew back his huge chair for him at the head of the table. He waited for her arrival with a warm smile, then bowed grandly in spite of his lack of clothes.

She was stunned by how changed he seemed from when she was brought before him as a bound captive. She curtsied and they sat.

Behind his chair on the wall was stretched the hide of an enormous buttox. To either side of it were huge relief carvings of Eochaid and Madadh-Allaidh Neartmhor, while centered high over the three was another one of the curious crescents, points down, superimposed over a huge cryptic vee and heart design. Tramae could undoubtedly explain it, but Myrtlebell was not entirely sure she wanted another explanation after the one about the unicorn. Suddenly she was captivated by the arrival of a young blond boy wearing a loose white tunic.

“This is Donnel, our younger brother,” said Tramae.

“Right pleased to meet you, Donnel,” stammered Myrtlebell, as she beheld his tattooed chin and his arms and legs stained a startling dark blue. “I'm Myrtlebell.” He was much bigger than Edward, though he could easily pass for an older version of him even with his pagan embellishments. A strong pang of longing for Edward swept over her, but she pushed it away. Donnel bowed, then immediately took his place directly to Talorg's right.

Once everyone was settled, Talorg gave Myrtlebell a grand smile.

“Thank you for inviting me to join you for breakfast, sire,” she said, feeling that she must say something.

He nodded and looked up at once at the arrival of servants with the first of the breakfast and then turned back to her, grandly spreading wide his arms, inviting her to

partake.

And what a bounty it was, replete with a mountain of sumptuous pears, egg-in-a-hole, poached goose eggs, pickled quail eggs, corned buttox from a brute Talorg had speared himself, and red-eyed gravy, spotted pudding and blistering hot brown barley bread, sweet butter and honey that tasted like the very flowers of clover in spring.

Myrtlebell had not tasted the like since she had fled Loxmere after Edmond's murder. It brought the first smile to her face since her strawberries with Edward, as she shook her head at the thought that once upon a time she actually used to turn up her nose at brown bread.

She was greatly relieved that Talorg did not attempt to carry on small talk with her while she ate. His wordless nods of generosity were quite enough. It was another matter when the meal drew to a close.

"I trust you enjoyed your meal?" he said.

Myrtlebell nodded as she put down her napkin. "It was right excellent, sire, and I thank you."

"Exactly what I desired," he said with a decisive nod. "Then would you honor me by going with me on a morning stroll?" He took her hand and rose with her. "I'd very much like to discuss your position here, and that of the three witches who were captured with you...in private." He glanced aside to catch the eyes of first Donnel and then Tramae.

Myrtlebell was utterly speechless as he took her by the elbow and steered her out of the dining hall, followed by two soldiers a discreet distance behind. He led her down one long twisting corridor after another until she was thoroughly turned around. He said not a word the whole way, which was a relief to her at first, but after a while his silence began to frighten her. As she struggled with a rising panic, he came to a door and ushered her onto a balcony overlooking a lovely garden. He seated her on a stone settee and sat beside her at a considerate conversational distance. A balmy breeze stirred her hair. She looked out at the rows upon rows of pear trees, all heavy with fruit, stretching away to the stone wall at the far end. Gratefully, she began to relax.

"I understand that my daughter has told you of your dear mother's relationship to her, and thereby to me," said Talorg, as he studied her face.

Myrtlebell nodded, scarcely hearing, hoping he was starting to tell her that she was no longer his prisoner.

"Good. Then you'll understand that since we are actually family, I feel I should tell you that the three witches who were captured with you are going to be executed in the morning."

Myrtlebell blanched, working her mouth. "But surely you don't mean Mary!" she blurted out at last. "She's a white witch. She does only good."

Talorg stood up and paced about the balcony in silence for a maddeningly long time before turning to face her. "I understand she was aiding you in your plight," he said coldly, "but she's long been an adversary of us Beaks. She's worked against every one of our attempts at expansion and exploration. Indeed, she's done everything in her power to keep us here in the marsh. She needs to die."

"Your daughter said you were not a cruel man, sire," cried Myrtlebell, springing to her feet. "But either she's blind to you or she has tried to deceive me." She wheeled about smartly to be stopped at the door by the two soldiers. She turned back to glare at Talorg, who calmly motioned for her to return to the settee. She did so at once, sitting stiffly and

staring straight ahead through the furious teardrops which spilt from her eyes, no matter how hard she had tried to prevent them.

"I respect your loyalty to your friends. It speaks well of what kind of person you are," said Talorg, as he carefully sat back beside her, "though I would be most surprised to find you otherwise considering who your mother was. She also had a fiercely loyal heart. So that's why I've decided to make an exception regarding the White Witch, even though by virtue of precedent, the woman has earned her death. However," he said, raising his hand at the sight of Myrtlebell drawing a breath, "there are indeed conditions that must be satisfied in order for me to go so far as to grant her freedom. Do you follow me?"

"Certainly," said Myrtlebell with a nod.

Talorg stood and studied her. "By law, the life of the condemned may be purchased by the life of another."

"You mean Mary's free if I die in her place?"

"That's one way, or you could offer your life to the crown in service."

"As your slave?"

"Certainly not, dear girl," said Talorg ebulliently, as he pulled her smartly to her feet. "I want you to be my wife."

"I'm right flattered, King Talorg, but you must understand that whatever happens, I must find my son," she said, turned frantic at her own words. "He's lost somewhere in your marsh and he has no idea where I am. He's only five years old. He may be hurt. He must be terrified. I refuse to abandon him for a new life the way my mother did me."

"Listen to me," said Talorg with a sudden raptor's gaze, as he took her firmly by the shoulders. "Your mother never abandoned you. She was trapped here, just as we all were. There was not a day, not a single moment that she didn't long for you and want to be with you. She simply had no choice in the matter."

"So, I'm trapped here, also by virtue of being your prisoner. Is that it?"

"No," sighed Talorg, "you're free to go this minute if you must."

Myrtlebell blinked. "I am? I can?"

Talorg nodded.

"And Mary?"

Talorg shook his head. "It is the law. The White Witch will die in the morning."

"Either way, I must find my son," she said, tears streaming down her face. "Who knows what's happened to him by now. He's just a helpless little boy."

"Your son is safe and being taken care of by the dragons."

"What?" cried Myrtlebell. "How do you know this? Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"My rangers tracked him and his diatrymas to the Dragon Caves."

"But, you said your men slaughtered the diatrymas."

"I lied."

"How do I know you aren't lying now?"

"I swear it on your sweet mother's memory."

Myrtlebell stared at him, then nodded at the truth she saw in his eyes. "All right, I believe you, but I want my son back, now. He's my life."

"You'll have your son, but you can still have the White Witch's freedom. If you truly trust her, we could set her free on the condition that she bring your son here to you in

payment for her freedom. In the meantime, of course, you become my queen. Once you have your son, she goes her own way, all debts paid.”

Myrtlebell bit her lip as she sat back down on the settee to vacantly watch a pair of servants as they came out below to address a pear tree with a ladder and a couple of baskets. She had so hoped that if she were to remarry, that it would be to someone whom she was madly in love with. She had cared for Edmond, but it was by no means the wild romantic kind of love she had come to long for. Perhaps it simply wasn't meant to be. At least if she accepted King Talorg's terms, Mary would live. “Yes, I trust Mary completely,” she said, nodding her assent. “If I ask her to bring Edward here, she will.”

“Then you're agreeing to be my wife?”

She nodded again, wondering if he would ever see her for herself, rather than his banrigh or as a mere substitute for her mother.

“Wonderful!” he said with an ebullient flourish. “We shall be married this very evening and then the White Witch will be set free.”

“I'd prefer Mary set free first, then we marry,” said Myrtlebell grimly.

A dark look swept across Talorg's eyes. “Ah!” he said with a jovial recovery. “How I love a lass who knows her own mind. It shall be exactly as you wish. Let's go to the White Witch this minute and set things in motion, shall we?” And with that, he offered Myrtlebell his arm.

“Yes,” said Myrtlebell, “Let's.”

They found Caelis and Buthut discussing something in low frantic tones just outside Mary's open cell door. At the sound of their footsteps, the pair wheeled 'round, panic stricken.

“So,” said Talorg. “Has the White Witch treated you to one of her 'good deeds? Or is she dead?”

The pair exchanged horrified looks and nodded.

“Well speak up! She dead or what?” said Talorg, taking on a fiery tone.

“Good, thought Myrtlebell. That cruel pair needs to tremble.”

“It's the White Witch, Your Majesty...” stammered Caelis with a cringing face of shame.

“We already had that figured out!” thundered Talorg. “What about her?”

Caelis worked his mouth a time or two with a sound like sticky clay. “Gone sire,” he finally managed, as he took a step backward and stared at the floor.

“Gone?” said Talorg softly.

“Yes...” squeaked Buthut.

“Fascinating,” said Talorg, “particularly with you two in charge.”

“We know sire,” said Buthut, “I mean we don't know! When last we looked she was quite unconscious, almost dead looking. We were going to dose her again, but she did not even respond when we jabbed her in the gut with the blunt ends of our spears. We were afraid that another dose would kill her, if we hadn't already, so we decided to check on her later...”

“Yes,” said Caelis, “When we came back, we found she'd somehow snapped her bonds and was clean gone. We'd just searched the entire dungeon when you arrived, sire.”

“Then widen and continue your search,” said Talorg, eyeing them like a hawk contemplating a pair of rabbits.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” they chorused, as they thumped their breasts with a fierce salute.

“You will find her,” he declared at their heels as they sped away.

Myrtlebell shuddered. She could tell by his tone that their lives were at stake, and she could see that he was a dangerous man. She was not at all certain that she wanted to be his queen.

Talorg quietly took her arm and began steering her back the way they had come.

“Sire,” she said, feeling powerless, “what’ll happen if your men don’t find her?”

Talorg slowed his pace. “Buthut and Caelis will take her place on the gallows,” he said without looking aside, “and you’ll be free to return to your own people.”

Myrtlebell gasped.

“Beaks,” he blurted out before checking himself with clenched teeth, “are not without honor, my lady.” Then he lunged on, nearly yanking her by the arm.

“I’m not sure I understand, Your Majesty,” she said, trying not to stumble as she kept up. “I would never imply otherwise, Your Majesty, but surely those two guards don’t deserve such severe punishment. They...”

“Cease!” roared Talorg, jerking her to a halt. “The law’s the law! It’s not yours to question. Be content that if the White Witch isn’t found by dawn you’ll be set free. Surely you don’t suddenly wish to marry me just to save the miserable lives of your jailers.”

“If Mary was to bring me Edward, what of their fates if I did?” said Myrtlebell, hardly believing that she was asking such a question.

Talorg stopped short and turned to face her. “You’re actually considering doing this, aren’t you? You’d marry me to save the lives of the two turnkeys who kept you captive, so long as you got your son back.”

“Weren’t they merely following orders? How were they responsible for Mary’s crimes, as if she could commit any. If I married you, how could I do less than rescue them from execution, if it be in my power?”

“You’re definitely your mother’s daughter,” he said, shaking his head with renewed awe. He studied her face minutely for a moment, gave a harrumph, then led her in silence the rest of the way back to her locked quarters where he left her to wait and wonder whether she was about to become the new Beak queen. She went straight to the hearth and stirred and fed the fire before collapsing into a chair to stare despondently into its flames.

Someone was gently shaking her shoulder and urgently whispering her name.

“What?” she said with a start, as she sat straight to find that she had been asleep.

“Hurry,” said the voice, as her cloak was thrown about her shoulders at the same time she was being pulled to her feet. Suddenly she saw that she was standing before not only Tramae, but also Mary. “What’s going on?” she said, as if they had all day to discuss it.

“We don’t have time,” said Mary, as she and Tramae shared a frantic look. “We have to move unless you really want to be the new Beak queen.”

“Of course I don’t,” said Myrtlebell, sounding more cross than she had meant. “But neither do I wish for anyone to die because I refuse to marry King Talorg. And why are you still here, Mary? You should be long gone by now. And Tramae. If your father finds

out you tried to set me free, what will keep you from being sent to the gallows along with those two guards?"

"You must not be awake yet," said Mary, as she and Tramae began pushing her toward the door. "Do you think either of those guards would do the same for you, girl?"

"But I can't let..."

"Shhhh!"

Out in the passageways they only saw two Beak soldiers but Mary and Tramae yanked Myrtlebell into the shadows of nearby doorways unseen as the soldiers hurried by. In short order they had crossed the drawbridge and were outside the castle walls.

"Now go quickly, my sister," said Tramae as she smiled and hugged Myrtlebell. "And remember me always with kindness." And before Myrtlebell could manage a reply, she had vanished into the shrubbery along the moat.

Mary grabbed Myrtlebell's hand with a yank and headed into the alleys of the vassalage. "Hurry," she said. "It would be a shame if your sister took such a dangerous risk for nothing." She walked as fast as possible, here and there breaking into a run when they saw no one about, as the alleys changed into lanes, reaching out between the orchards and fields into the marshy countryside. "And," she added, planting her feet and shaking a finger in Myrtlebell's face, "don't you dare go on about the lives of those poor misguided, and I might add, hideously cruel guards! If they hang, the Beaks did it. Not you. Not me, my dear. Now hike your skirts and run 'til we no longer can."

Myrtlebell nodded and did as she was told, boundlessly grateful that Mary was in charge.

Chapter 15

“Please Mistress, wake up,” whispered the dank air about Demonica's face. She jerked awake, struggling to open her swollen eyelids against the jailers' venom in her veins. Her Cias! “Good!” she thought, widening her sticky eyes to see a whirling world as she propped up on her arms. “Ohh!” she cried, catching her head before it fell to the floor. Her eyes burnt. Links of chain rattled in the straw as she shifted aside one of her hands.

“Good!” she squawked through her fetid gag with a simmering fury that startled the Cias to the far corners of her cell. Her Cias would free her. And how, oh how, the Beaks would pay!

Devi hovered close to her face, glancing back disdainfully at Oana and Mael, still floating amongst the cobwebs. He circled Demonica expectantly. He was ready for her to use her powers to free herself, and he wanted the choicest assignment. Minute after minute went by as her eyes glazed over and went closed, her ears propped upon her shoulders.

As he studied her, still trussed up like a pig on a spit, Oana and Mael moved close for a look.

Suddenly her eyes were open and aflame with rage, huffing and growling past the rag and bleeding splits in her mouth as she thrashed against her chains.

They darted back at once and he became convinced that something had happened to her magic.

Devi entered her mind, even though she had not given him leave to do so. To his astonishment, Oana and Mael followed him in, afraid that he would gain a higher place in her favor.

“No matter,” he thought, as he concentrated on finding out what she wanted them to do.

“Find a jailer and take over his body, you fools!” thought Demonica with a fury like heaving an anvil into a wagon.

“Impossible!” wailed Oana and Mael in a chorus that could be heard outside her tender skull. “It has always been forbidden for Cias to forcibly enter any corporeal being, particularly to force him to do something against his will. You know that,” they cried, suddenly making the dungeon echo as they fled her head and cowered amongst the spider webs.

“I'm on my way, mistress,” said Devi quietly, as he took leave of her. He flung a look of contempt at his companions and vanished. “Fools is right,” he thought. “Let them deal with her wrath.” Quick as an arrow, he flew the length of the dungeon corridor to find the turnkey addressing a prisoner through the bars of his door. He hovered for a moment, watching.

“Hey!” called the turnkey, as the prisoner within rose to his feet. “MeqqWirrp! Got something here from your wife, from Mistress MeqqWirrp. She baked you ones a cake...”

“Oh yes! Oh thank you...!” came the voice behind the trembling fingers reaching between the bars.

“Course for your safety and well being I've got to check it,” said the turnkey as he took a bite. “Might be poisoned, you know...or a file. You might hurt yourself on a file baked in it, don't you know.” He began wolfing down the rest of the cake, over the shouts of despair within which quickly turned to sobs. He wiped his bristly mouth and slapped

his knee in a seizure of laughter.

At this, Devi entered the turnkey and took control of him. He found it a heady experience. As he overpowered the last particle of the man's frantic resistance, he found he could feel the man's body around him as though it were his. It was quite unlike his fleeting invasion of Demonica. He had not attempted to control her in any way at all. He wondered why his race had ever given up physical form. For a moment he forgot all about Demonica as he walked up and down the corridor, stretching his arms and legs and feeling at himself. "Did the Cias realize too late what a mistake they'd made?" he said, as he ran his hands along the stones in the wall. "Does this have something to do with why taking possession of bodies is the one thing utterly forbidden by the Exalted Council of Thought? Are they afraid of us finding out what this is like?" his mind reeled at the possibilities. He needed time to consider. "Demonica," he said. "I'd better get back there."

He walked for a spell, lost in the sensations of the very act of walking. "You seem not to have the brains to even begin to appreciate what you're doing when you do this, you idiot Beak... Eternity. Hey. Not even Demonica's got that, for all her own magical longevity.

Cias do have eternity." A giddy sense of power surged through him as he steered his hapless turnkey toward Demonica's cell.

"This has such potential," thought Devi with a smile on the turnkey's face, as he unlocked Demonica's cell. "Of course she knows I'm inside this chump, but it could be right dangerous for me to let her in on what I'm discovering. In her state she's not likely to pay it any heed at all. She just wants free. I've got time to spare, after all. I'll just continue to follow along...for now." He flung a smug glance at Oana and Mael, still hovering horrified at his act of body possession, as he knelt beside Demonica. "Fools," he thought, as he gently peeled the tacky gag from Demonica's mouth and unlocked her shackles. "No matter. No time for their squeamish lot."

Demonica rolled forward in a boneless heap, as Devi kept her head from hitting the stone floor. "Help me up you oaf!" she hissed as her eyes came open. "We have to get out of here and find Spitemorta and the Staff before we're discovered."

"So I was right about her lack of magic," thought Devi with wide turnkey eyes as he scurried to his feet and helped her onto to hers. "So what happens if her powers don't return?"

"Well don't just stand there, fool," said Demonica, leaning on him as she reeled.

"Get this blue carcass of yours moving."

"As you command, mistress," said Devi, as he helped her out of her cell and down the foul corridor to find Spitemorta. After leading her for a piece, splashing through the bobbing excrement in the middle of the hallway, she shoved away from him in disgust and staggered along on her own where it was dryer next to the wall.

They found Spitemorta still blindfolded and trussed up, but they could tell that she was awake and expecting another dart of poison.

"Hurry," hissed Demonica. "Unshackle her while I undo that rag in her mouth."

Before long they were helping Spitemorta onto her feet as she massaged her face and hands.

"Don't be concerned about Blueboy, here," said Demonica. "He's on our side. I'll explain later. We need to get out of here and recover the Staff."

Spitemorta nodded as she found her way into a tottering stand.

“Search Blueboy's miserable mind, if he has one,” snapped Demonica as she turned to look for Devi within the turnkey's eyes, “and see if he knows what happened to Spitemorta's staff.”

“As you wish, mistress,” said Devi, feeling oddly violated. He didn't like the idea of her catching onto anything. “She probably hasn't,” he thought, as he set upon Blueboy's quailing consciousness.

“Bramm hep trouz na c'hwezh a zo labour difrouez, Kaoc'h ki glas,” he said. “It's pointless, Blueboy. I'm in charge as long as I'm in here. Wherever you go I've still got you. So, Knapdarloch, to use a Beak term for you, you fancy that I'm a demon from the Pit of Fire, aye? Well, you're right. And I'm here to kill you from the inside out if you don't let me see where you have everything you know about Spitemorta's Great Staff. So? Come on! Where's Spitemorta's staff?”

Blueboy froze up, seeing that Devi didn't already have access to what he knew.

Devi was entirely out of patience. He furiously denied Blueboy about a half dozen beats of his heart. Blueboy gave out an apoplectic gasp and staggered, grabbing at his chest. Just as Devi felt a wave of alarm at the thought that he might be doing in himself by throttling Blueboy, he suddenly found himself with everything that the turnkey knew about the Staff.

“The Old One has it in his tower!” cried Devi through Blueboy's mouth as he got hold of an image of the very room where it was and the way there from the dungeon. “Very well, Knapdarloch,” he said to Blueboy. “Right wise of you. You just might live through this after all, unless you so much as hesitate by closing off anything at all from me, ever again.”

“So who the blazes is 'the Old One?’” said Demonica with a pounce. “Where's the Staff?”

“It's the old Beak mage,” said Devi. “He has it in his tower. I know the way. I can take you right to it.” He saw Demonica's mouth go white with a twist of satisfied resolve. Spitemorta reminded him of a petard that had just sucked in its burning fuse in its final moment before explosion. “So,” he thought, as he diverted his eyes from her dangerous glances, “does one reckon she still has her powers?” He turned away from her at once to lead the way.

“Wait,” said Demonica. “You'd better bind our hands so that we look like your prisoners. We'll be stopped for certain if you don't.”

“Very well,” said Devi, casting about, “but all I see to use are one set of shackles for the wrists and that awful gag rag. Those leg irons are 'way too big for wrists. You'd have to work to keep them on and they just might not look right. I could dash back to your cell, mistress, for...”

“You'd better be the fastest that Blueboy's ever been.”

He thumped his chest, Beak fashion and closed their door. “That door will be blown off its hinges when I get back, by the look in Spitemorta's eyes. I swear she'd like to turn me into a toad or something worse while she's at it,” he thought as he dashed off down the corridor.

He was back in short order, rattling chains and jingling keys as he opened their door.

“Good,” said Demonica as she turned to Oana and Mael. “Now, you two can finally make yourselves useful and scout ahead. Devi, tell them the way.”

Devi nodded and relayed what Blueboy had in his head as he laid out the shackles on the floor to untangle their chains.

Oana and Mael sped off like shots, returning shortly.

"Mistress," said Mael, startling everyone, "the old one is asleep and most of the tower guards appear to be somewhere else."

"Odd," said Demonica, "but likely to our advantage." She nodded to Spitemorta and Devi. "Let's go."

"I trust you realize it'll be you who has to do in any Beak we run into who doubts us in the least, Devi," said Demonica, tugging on his sleeve.

Devi flashed a fierce grin. Oana and Mael hissed their disapproval and drew away.

"One would think you two are cowards," spat Demonica as she followed their receding ripples. "Go to the old mage's tower and wait for us so I don't have to see any more of that." She turned back to Devi and Spitemorta. "Let's go!" she barked as she stepped forth with Spitemorta at her side.

As Devi fell in close behind with his small rapier drawn for appearance's sake, it occurred to him that if both Demonica and Spitemorta had lost their powers, they were actually at his mercy. It was a heady thought, but such thoughts were premature and quite rash, particularly since their magic could return at any time. "Best be careful," he thought. "Best be patient. There's always later."

Round a corner they found themselves face to face with a small band of soldiers who halted immediately. "Kurun!" thought Devi. "They've got claymores longer than they're tall, and you, Blueboy, for all your sadistic bluster, are deathly afraid of swordfights. So, this one stepping forth is known to you as Captain Girom, and he commands you, aye?"

He ordered Demonica and Spitemorta to stand still as he came to a rigid halt and thumped his chest.

"Where are you taking these witches, Yeoman MeqqArccis? This is sudden. Is the execution to take place even though we've not yet recaptured the White Witch?"

"Not yet, Captain, sir," said Devi, seeing how it all was as relief flooded through him. "King Talorg himself commanded me to remove these she-devils to Mage Cinid's tower for safekeeping until the White Witch is retaken. He fears that she might divine an escape if they're left in the dungeon."

"You idiot, MeqqArccis," said the captain, throwing back his head for a laugh. "You do one poor impersonation of somebody from Head. You're funnier teasing prisoners. Very well. Carry on then, but don't forget that these stinking runks are dangerous. And on that note, I say better to increase the prison guard than to trust the likes of them to that crazy old fool in the tower."

"Agreed, Captain, but I was certainly in no position to question the king himself."

"Be on with it then," growled the captain as he turned aside with a murderous look and spat at Demonica and Spitemorta's feet before tramping away with his men.

"I swear I'll have that worm's head on a pike someday," hissed Spitemorta.

"Oh, absolutely, dear," said Demonica, "but first we will take a very long time showing him the error of his ways before his head comes loose." She glanced at Devi. "How much further to the tower, Blueboy?"

"The staircase to the top is right around that corner, down at the end, there."

"Good. Let's move it then."

In short order they were climbing the spiraling stairs. It was a very long climb and

Demonica and Spitemorta had to stop and rest often. Devi took great pains not to let his impatience show. Impatience would give away his new sense of independence. At long last they stood in front of Mage Cinid's door.

"Undo our shackles," said Demonica, "and be right quick about it."

Devi did as he was told.

Demonica rubbed her wrists and motioned for Spitemorta and him to keep quiet as she tried the door. It was locked. She shooed them back down the steps for a short way, keeping her finger to her lips. "Give me the sword," she said as she brought them to a halt.

Devi gave it to her.

"Now Devi, you must take leave of Blueboy," she said. "I need you to go into the mage's chamber and take control of him. Then get the Staff and come unlock the door. I'll take care of this piece of dung. Now go." And without hesitation she ran the rapier clean through Blueboy.

Devi saw the point coming and broke out, just as Blueboy doubled over. "Impatient witch!" he thought, as he hovered, getting hold of himself. "What if I hadn't got out? Would I be dead?" He shot up the stairs and through the door to find the old mage, Great Staff in hand, staring at Oana and Mael as if he saw them quite plainly while they trembled with fear in a corner. How had he never noticed what spineless imbeciles they were?

Oana and Mael sensed his presence and turned toward him, alerting the old mage.

The old man was lightning fast, but Devi was still faster. He slid into the old man's mind before he could use the Staff or utter a word. However, the old man's mind was a cunning and vital adversary, outfoxing Devi at every turn.

"I'm a demon from the Pit of Fire," said Devi. "I'll kill you if you don't bend to my will."

"In a pig's eye," said Mage. "You're a renegade Cia from the Dark Continent, just like your skulking chums in the corner. It is I who will kill you."

With Mage giving full attention to guarding his mind, Devi found his heart and stopped it.

"Ha!" said Mage. "I've lived through these! And if You kill me, you'll die too."

Suddenly Mage stumbled against a bench and fell, striking his head. At once Devi seized control of everything. When at last Mage stood up, Devi was piloting. He hurried to unlock the door for Demonica and Spitemorta.

As soon as were they inside, Spitemorta snatched the Staff from his hand.

Devi stifled a protest just in time to see her raise the Staff and point it at him. At once he exploded from Mage. Mage froze, glowing with a brilliant purple aura before collapsing into a pile of cinders at Spitemorta's feet.

"Screeching kiez!" thought Devi. "She could have killed me if I hadn't seen it coming. Not a word of warning. Boull c'hurun! I've done favors for her, even if I was serving Demonica when I did." He turned to Demonica expecting to see her scold Spitemorta for her recklessness, only to see her gloating with satisfaction while Spitemorta bounced with glee.

Devi fought down his anger since he knew he dare not let Demonica see it. "No, not today," he thought. "Later, perhaps. Yes, when I know more. I already know more than she. I was in the Heart when Razzmorten put it in his robe, so I know where it is. No one

but a Cia could ever go inside it, and I must be the only one who has. Could I be the only one who knows that it stores the First Wizard's knowledge? Is it possible that I'm the only one alive who knows that it is even more powerful than the Staff, all by itself? I must find out, but one thing's certain: she doesn't know any of this." And he was no longer about to tell her, for he had his own plans for the Heart.

Spitemorta ran her hand reverently along the Staff. "I say we go find that mochyn drewllyd, Brude Talorg," she snarled, turning aside to share the fire in her eyes with Demonica, "and teach him about abusing and imprisoning the powerful."

"I'd be delighted," said Demonica with a hateful sparkle in her eyes. "But just now finding the Heart takes priority over everything else. We need to get to the dungeon and find the goody-goody girl and make her beg to tell us where it is."

"You're right Grandmother," she said with a sudden radiant look. "Sometimes you're absolutely right. Having Myrtlebell by the hair really would beat cutting up Talorg. But I do want to get him, too."

"Oh, yes," said Demonica buoyantly, as she swept grandly into the staircase. "But do not despair, dear, for Talorg's time will come. Once we have the Heart we can devise at our leisure the perfect demise for him and all of his heathen brethren."

They passed the rest of the way to the dungeon in silence. The passageways were as oddly empty and silent as they had been when they found their way to the old mage's tower, save for two small bands of soldiers which Spitemorta incinerated with her staff.

There was not a trace of Myrtlebell or Mary in the dungeon. However, they did find Caelis and Buthut locked away together in the last cell which they peeked into.

"Hey!" said Demonica, in a tone reserved for long lost friends, throwing wide the door as she wiggled out the keys from the keyhole. "Kaoc'h Ki Du One and Kaoc'h Ki Du Two. This is wonderful finding you here. We've just been so busy, we've not had one bit of time to visit.

"So," she said, as her voice frosted over, stepping through the doorway with Spitemorta behind, "Where's the White Witch and the girl? You know, the Myrtlebell girl?"

Caelis and Buthut dropped their jaws with a gasp and scurried backwards into the wall on their hands. Spitemorta came fluidly forth like an adder, pointing her staff in their faces. They trembled spasmodically, but remained stoically silent. Demonica thrust out her chin and gave her a slight nod. With sudden fury, Spitemorta grimaced as purple fire shot from the Staff, frying Caelis's left eye with a deafening pop.

Caelis flopped over sideways, kicking and flailing and suddenly going still.

"Now, worm," hissed Demonica, as Spitemorta raised her staff and pointed it at Buthut's left eye, "I'll ask you just this once. Where are the White Witch and the blond tart?"

Buthut glanced wildly at Caelis's bulging good eye, staring through the straw from his corpse, and then back at the end of the Staff as he gave a whimper of despair. His trembling gradually became a shake of the head. "Why?" he thought he heard himself say. "Why tell you? After all... After all, I'm...I'm scheduled to die on the gallows at first light anyway..."

"Should 'ave got you first..." screeched Spitemorta.

"Wait!" shouted Demonica.

Spitemorta lowered the Staff and glared.

“So, you think you've chosen a quicker way to die, aye Beak?” said Demonica, squatting to stare him in the eye. “Idiot. There are many ways to die. Unless you tell us what we want, I'll fix you a death that will last for an age and cause you pain the like of which you've never imagined. You'll hover on the edge of madness and yet you'll not quite lose your wits, for I'll have you always aware of your agony. Neither your own hand nor any other's will be able to spare you your unremitting curse.” She began reciting the words of her spell.

“Wait!” cried Buthut, flinging up his hands with a rattle of chain. “Please! I'll tell you anything you want to know.”

“You see dear,” said Demonica, turning to Spitemorta, “he's quite easy to reason with, after all.”

Spitemorta lowered her staff.

“Now,” said Demonica in soothing tones, “All you have to do is tell us right where the White Witch and Myrtleart are.”

“The White Witch escaped,” he said with an anxious swallow. “She tricked us by pretending to be out cold with the poison when she wasn't at all. She then used her magic to break her bonds and escape.”

“How could her power return when ours hasn't even yet?” hissed Spitemorta as she brandished the Staff in his face.

“Caelis and I had the idea it was because she only got one dose of the poison, while you two got several apiece...”

Spitemorta jabbed the Staff in his face. He jerked back from the writhing maggots of flame on its tip. Demonica knocked aside the Staff in time for it to shatter a rock in the wall behind him, peppering everyone with its hot fragments. Spitemorta was not about to give up, swinging back the Staff for another try.

“Stop!” thundered Demonica, grabbing her arm with a shake. “He has more to tell.”

“You heard him,” huffed Spitemorta as she yanked her arm free. “They got us over and over. Who knows what happened to our powers? They may never return.”

“All the more reason to find out where Myrtlebell's gone. Anything awry can be set to rights with the Heart, dear girl.”

Spitemorta dubiously lowered the Staff.

“Now, Screw Worm,” said Demonica in a voice fit to comfort a child, “where's Myrtlebell?”

“Last I saw her, she was with our Ru. She's to marry Brude Talorg.”

“Marry? Has that little naer told your king where the Heart is?”

“I have no idea at all what you are talking about,” said Buthut, seized with a fresh wave of panic.

“Why would King Talorg marry some prisoner unless she'd promised him something of great value?” said Demonica as she carefully centered her thumbnails on each side of his Adam's apple before forcing him to stand.

“It's said by everyone that she's the very image of his deceased wife...”

This was not the right answer. Demonica flung him away from her with explosive fury. He stumbled, catching the back of his neck on the top of a short stone post as he fell flat. He tried to right himself, but his body would not respond.

“He's alive, but he must have a broken neck, Grandmother,” said Spitemorta with demure innocence.

“Oh Yes. We really ought to make him more comfortable, don't you think?” And with that, the two of them heaved him upright by the armpits and began violently shaking his head from side to side.

“How unfortunate,” gasped Spitemorta. “I'm afraid bu farw, Grandmother. That's what they used to say in Niarg when someone died.”

“I do indeed remember that old expression, dear,” said Demonica in tones of one bored with winning her fifth hand of cribbage. “I was often there in those days, you know. Oh, it's such a pity. His death could have been so much more enjoyable, but alas, we just lacked the time.”

“Let's find Myrtlebell and take the proper time with her.”

“Spread out and find that woman!” snarled Demonica, as she wheeled round to locate Devi, Oana and Mael. “She may be with the king if they've already wed.”

“If she's anywhere in the castle or on the grounds we will find her immediately, mistress,” said Devi.

“Absolutely at once,” said Demonica.

“Easily,” said Devi as he shot away with Oana and Mael.

He headed straight to the throne room where he was delighted to find Talorg pacing the plush red carpet crossing the dais to his chair, bearing an expression like a roiling thundercloud. “How's this?” thought Devi. “Did she slap him? Well, there's nothing for it and I'm getting good at this, so...” Ever so carefully, he slipped into Talorg's head, right behind his ear. To his delight, Talorg's thoughts were focused on exactly what he wanted to find out. Talorg was 'way too agitated to notice, and Devi was on his way back in no time. He found them just outside the throne room.

“Mistress!” he called. “I've got it!”

Demonica looked pleasantly surprised. He would tell her the good news first: “The king knows nothing of the Heart, mistress.”

“You're certain?”

“Completely. I was inside his head and he was so stirred up over the very things I sought that he didn't notice.”

“Good,” said Demonica. “And what about Myrtlebell? Have they married?”

“I doubt if they will.”

“What's happened?”

“Doesn't look like she wanted to be queen. She ran away.”

“What? How long ago?”

“Talorg had no idea, but he was with her no more than eight hours ago.”

“Find Oana and Mael and catch up with us,” said Demonica, motioning to Spitemorta as she turned on her heel. “Time to play catch the tart.”

“Right away, Mistress,” called Devi as he shot away.

Outside the castle walls they paused to ponder where Myrtlebell most likely went. Spitemorta paced about, pausing here and there to stare off in some direction as if she would figure it out by simply looking hard enough. Suddenly she looked up. “I'll bet she's looking for that brat of hers in the marsh. Not that there's any point, but at least it's nice to realize the little snot's probably dead.”

“I'm thrilled you've found something to be happy about, Spitemorta,” said Demonica,

“But I think it's nice we realize where she might be.” She glanced at the Staff. “Let's fly. It'll be faster and we may just get her before the sun rises.”

“Great idea, Grandmother. Try not to get sick this time,” said Spitemorta, as she held the Staff level, threw her leg over it and waited for Demonica to settle astride behind her. They shot off into the sky, making straight for Standing Rock.

Demonica could tell that her Cias were following close behind, but the only thing she really cared about at the moment was hanging onto the Staff and not vomiting all over Spitemorta's shoulders. And she was not about to let on.

Chapter 16

King Talorg stopped pacing at the sound of echoing footsteps nearing the throne room. He looked up to see Gart, captain of the palace guard, making a hurried entry. He could plainly see that he bore bad news. Gart came to a halt, bowed, and then rose with a solemn look.

“Since you're the one who conveyed my order that I not be disturbed, this must be a good one, Captain,” said Talorg, as he took to his great chair with a resigned plump, thrusting his chin at him.

“Majestic Ru,” said Gart smartly. “I regret reporting great treachery afoot in the castle...”

“Here I sit, all ears.”

“We found your turnkeys in their cell, sire,” said Gart with a nod, as he shifted from one foot to the other. “One was dead with a charred eye socket, while the other, Buthut I believe, appeared to have died of a broken neck.”

“Very well, so it saves us the bother of executing...”

“That's only the beginning, I'm afraid...”

Talorg gave a sigh, studying him closely.

“Yeoman MeqqArccis, who was on duty down there, has vanished without a trace, and I have a number of my other men at duties elsewhere who suddenly cannot be accounted for...”

“And?” said Talorg, rumbling below the surface.

“And the worst of it is, Your Majesty...” said the right stolid Captain Gart with a conspicuous wince, “and the very worst of it is that both of the dark witches have escaped clean away. My men have mounted a completely thorough search of the castle and grounds, but so far they have turned up absolutely nothing.”

Talorg sprang to his feet without a word and resumed pacing. “And you had no one guarding the witches other than MeqqArccis?”

“By your command sire, a substantial number are kept busy searching for the White Witch and your...the other missing young woman. Besides, outside of them we've not had an incident in the dungeon since well before Carlin Cruinnich.”

“Right you are, Captain. Of course,” said Talorg, pausing to rub his temples. “So, while we're at it, have you had any success with that search?”

“I'm afraid not, sire,” said Gart, “though my men are scouring the marsh and will search the surrounding territories if it comes to it. We'll not rest until we have these women, Your Majesty. You can count on that.”

“Yes, yes,” said Talorg, waving him to silence. “You say you've no idea when the dark witches escaped?”

“They could have escaped any time after the search for the White Witch began, sire,” said Gart, falling silent as Talorg looked him over.

“If that's so,” said Talorg, “how about at the same time? Could they have kidnapped Myrtlebell?”

“Well yes, actually sire,” said Gart with a wide eyed look, “I believe that could indeed be the case.”

“But, you don't think so, aye, Captain?”

“I didn't say that, Your Majesty. I just hadn't considered the matter, but I can see at once that it does makes sense.”

“Really? How, I may ask, does it make sense to you, Captain?”

“Having the Lady Myrtlebell as a hostage might keep them from being shot on sight as they flee, perhaps...”

“Absolutely,” said Talorg, thrusting forth a squint, “except for a wee detail that just occurred to me.”

“Was it: how would the witches have known that the Lady Myrtlebell was important to you?”

“They'd never have slowed themselves down with her unless they could have heard gossip on their way out of the castle.”

“That's quite possible, Your Majesty. Your upcoming wedding is...was being discussed by everyone.”

“Yes, I expect it was. However I'm not sure what I think about Demonica and Spitemorta pausing for gossip on their way out. Mage Cinid could scry and locate Myrtlebell. Captain, go to Mage Cinid's tower and fetch him here.”

“As you command, sire,” said Gart as he thumped his chest in salute before stepping off smartly to see to Talorg's bidding.

Talorg stepped up onto the dais and sat wearily upon his chair. In spite of how very tired he was, he would not rest until he settled a few things. He closed his eyes and massaged his forehead.

“Fa?” said Tramae, startling him upright with a jerk.

“Tramae, you are the very mistress of stealth!” he said, heart pounding, as he let go the hilt of his sword. “It would be 'way better to do that to an enemy than to me.”

“I'm sorry, Fa,” she said. “I couldn't tell if you were asleep or just resting your eyes. Forgive me.”

“Forgive? My dear girl, you're always forgiven.”

“Thank you, Fa.”

“Why are you here so early, dear?”

“I wanted to speak with you about Myrtlebell.”

“Myrtlebell?”

“Yes, Fa. Please don't be upset, but Donnel and I have talked about it a lot and we think it would be a big mistake for you to marry Myrtlebell.”

“Mistake?” said Talorg, sitting upright to study her face. “And why would the two of you think that?”

“You're still in love with Mother, Fa.”

“What are you looking at, dear?”

“I could almost see her sitting there beside you as she used to...”

Talorg squeezed shut his eyes. It was far too easy to remember. He'd had her chair removed before he could bear to sit again upon his throne. He gave himself a moment. “Of course I still love your mother, Tramae,” he said with a heavy sigh. “She was my very world. It nearly stopped my heart when she died. Without you and Donnel, I believe it surely would've. But what has this to do with Myrtlebell?”

“Don't you see?” she said, her chestnut eyes alive with sincerity as she searched the features of his face. “Myrtlebell may look like her, but no way can she ever really be Mother. Sooner or later you'd feel cheated. She'd only remind you of the love you'd lost. Both of you would be miserable. And Fa, doesn't Myrtlebell also deserve to be loved? You'd be in love with Mother instead of her.”

“I think I see what you're trying to say, and I think you just may be right,” said Talorg as he brushed aside a lock of hair from her face, “but you're worrying needlessly, dear girl.”

“Needlessly?”

“Myrtlebell's vanished. There's not going to be a wedding.”

“Fa, I...”

“There's nothing to be said. Myrtlebell's clean gone. So are all three witches. Looks like Mytlebell could've been abducted by the two dark ones for insurance.”

“But...”

“Here comes someone. I've sent for Cinid. You need to go back to your apartment.”

“As you say, Fa,” she said as she bit her lip. She curtsied and was gliding out as Captain Gart rushed in.

“Majestic Ru!” said Gart, catching his breath, “Mage Cinid has disappeared from his tower along with that staff which he took from the witch who looked like Carlin Cruinnich. We turned everything upside down. There's not a trace. All we found was an odd pile of ash in the middle of the floor. We did find MeqqArccis, on the way up, though. Somebody stuck him and he bled half way down the tower steps.”

Talorg calmly turned his back on the Captain and paced away, giving himself a moment before speaking. “Fool,” he thought. “Odd pile of ashes indeed. And just what does he fancy them to be other than Cinid's remains?” He wheeled 'round and strode right up to Gart, pinioning him with his gaze. “I'm hemmed in by fools and ditherers,” he said with a toothy smile to keep from exploding. “Madadh-Allaidh Neartmhor grows hungry. He's been neglected. Detail some of your men to build a wicker wolf, ten foot at the shoulders, Captain, and recapture those witches to fill it, or else you and your idiot soldiers will be the fuel.”

Gart hesitated for just the briefest moment, wide eyed and quite white. “It will be done, Sire,” he said with a sudden thump of his chest before hurrying from the throne room as if the Pitmaster himself were nipping his heels.

“I have to rest,” said Myrtlebell as she tugged at Mary's cape. “Just for a moment.” She stumbled aside to sit and catch her breath on a rock at the foot of a bluff, just inside the Peppermint Forest.

Mary nodded, taking a seat beside her. They sat winded for some time before either spoke. At last Myrtlebell squeezed Mary's arm. “Thank you for rescuing me, Mary,” she said, looking into her face, flushed and framed with strings of sweaty hair. “If it weren't for you and Tramae I'd be Talorg's queen by now. I only hope that what he told me about Edward's being safe with the dragons is true.”

“Oh, I expect it is...”

“Why?”

“Well, the Beaks either captured Edward or they didn't,” said Mary. “If they'd got him, you can be sure that they would have used his presence to manipulate you. If you didn't see him, you know they didn't have him. And if they didn't have him, he's safe beyond a shadow of a doubt because Lladdwr and Ceidwad would have taken him straightaway to the Dragon Caves. He'll be safe and sound when we get there. You'll see.”

“It cheers me to hear you say that, Mary,” said Myrtlebell with an anxious nibble of her lip, “but that's a good lot to ask of any mount, even the best unicorns.”

“My dear girl, there's a lot you have to learn about diatrymas.”

“I don't understand.”

“No. I don't see how you'd have any way to,” said Mary with a smile. “In the rush we were in, I had no way to acquaint you with my friends before we left my cavern. We're still in a rush, but I guess we have this moment while we catch our breath. The diatrymas are probably the most intelligent beings you will ever meet, including people.”

“But they're birds.”

“Well, so are the dragons actually, but you accept their intelligence,” said Mary as she stood up from the rock and brushed twigs and leaves off the back of her dress.

“Well yes,” said Myrtlebell, as she traipsed after her into the newly fallen leaves up the side of the hill flanking the bluff, “but the dragons can talk and...”

“Ah! So can the diatrymas, my dear. And not only that, but they remember everything they see and hear down to the tiniest detail. Not even the Elves can do that.”

“I had no idea. Neither of them uttered a thing when we rode them, Mary. Why didn't they?”

“That's diatrymas for you. They can stay quiet for an eternity. It's as though they have the opinion that you learn more by listening than by speaking.”

“Well, that's sensible enough.”

“They don't let a single solitary thing get by them,” said Mary as she paused in the leaves to look out over the countryside from under the flat of her hand. “The diatrymas are from the Age of Birds. I'm sure you already know that Mwyaf Fawr Llog...”

“The Greatest Burning? From Natural Philosophy?”

“Yes, and legends. The dragons have always told of the Greatest Burning. And I suppose you know that Mwyaf Fawr Llog ended the Age of Birds and it has been the Age of Beasts ever since?”

“Of course.”

“So the diatrymas lived aeons ago during the Age of Birds. You've heard of the vile wizard Razzorbauch?”

“Yes. But not too much,” said Myrtlebell as she peered with a bewildered look into the distance from under her hand.

“It was Razzorbauch who brought them back to life in this age by accident when he created the Fudge Volcano. He accidentally released the cocoahippus and a number of other long dead creatures, when he did.”

“My word. I never knew that. I mean, I never knew anything like that could be possible.”

“Oh, it most certainly was,” said Mary as she snapped off a choke oak twig and began pinching off its yellowed leaves. “This world is a far better place with that fiendish sorcerer gone. No telling what other calamities he had in store for us all if Brenin Hebraun hadn't got him.”

Myrtlebell looked at Mary as a hand full of jays made the woods ring with their cries.

“I see you've not heard about any of this either,” said Mary as she resumed climbing the face of the hill. “Well, we'd best keep moving, but I'll try to explain as we go.”

Rose pulled on one of her deerskin boots with a sigh in the early morning light. She looked up at Lukus as he overturned a basin of breakfast dishwater onto the coals of the campfire. "So how much farther do you reckon it is to the Gobbler castle from here, Lukus?" she said. "Shouldn't we be getting close to the marsh by now?"

"Oh, I'd think," he said as he threw dirt onto the wet coals. "I'll bet we see the marsh before noon."

She nodded and glanced aside to where Fuzz stood, talking quietly to Razzmorten. When she looked back, Lukus caught her eye with a smile and she dropped her gaze to her other boot which she pulled on with a jerk. She packed her things on Ceidwad and mounted her as Lukus climbed onto Tors and Fuzz and Razzmorten mounted Arwr and Lladdwr. Hubba Hubba and Pebbles settled on Razzmorten's shoulders as Taflu fluttered down from a nearby choke oak to land on his hat like a big moth.

As Razzmorten gave the nod to depart, the diatrymas froze. "Someone comes," rumbled Lladdwr softly as he craned his head around to address Razzmorten face to face.

"I hear it too," said Razzmorten. "Quick. Out of sight." At once the company ducked behind trees and boulders as Pebbles, Hubba Hubba and Taflu took to the crown of a choke oak overhead. At once they could hear women's voices amongst the snapping of twigs and the crash of wallowing through the brush.

"I never realized King Hebraun was so brave," said a voice

"Well, I'm not really surprised, my dear," said another. "Hebraun was never one to make a public show of himself. He has always ruled with restraint, but that by no means shows him to be ineffectual or timid."

"I see what you're saying. I guess when I was younger I was just too wrapped up in my own snobbery to learn anything significant about the surrounding kingdoms, I'm ashamed to say."

"Myrtlebell!" gasped Rose, clapping her hand over her mouth, just as Mary and Myrtlebell stepped into the clearing.

Mary and Myrtlebell halted, wide eyed. As Mary made ready to use her sorceress fire, she hesitated, seeing that the ground was covered with diatryma tracks.

"Mary!" cried Razzmorten as Lladdwr stood up out of the wahoo bushes which hid them. "Don't be alarmed! I'm Razzmorten with Fuzz and Lladdwr! We're all friends!"

And at this, everyone stepped forth out of hiding.

Mary and Myrtlebell stood transfixed in joyous astonishment as the company converged upon them. Mary opened her eyes as she hugged Ceidwad to see a dashing young man in ill fitting clothes smiling at her.

"Forgive me...I'm not sure..." she said.

"Who I am?" said the young man with merriment in his eyes. "Just an old bear who owes you supper."

"Fuzz!" she cried, bouncing like a school girl. "I see now that it's you, but I had no idea."

Rose stood aside and grabbed at Lukus's arm as he and Tors joined the merriment. "Lukus," she said with a wounded look. "I can't believe you're all ready to greet the very woman who was responsible for sending us to the Chokewoods to find Ugleeuh."

"Come on, Rose. Do you really think that now is the time for this? Besides, it's been a long time since all of that happened."

Rose rolled her eyes. "Well, I can see that you're taking Fuzz's side in all of this."

“What on earth do you mean, Rose? Have you gone completely daft? Very well then, if you must. Fuzz does indeed care every bit as much about Myrtlebell as you think he does...”

Rose went wide eyed.

“...But not at all like you think. Fuzz cares for Myrtlebell like a friend...almost like a grandfather. Most of all he cares for Edward. His heart is nearly breaking for that little boy who misses his momma, Rose. And he's been just as worried for Mary, who's another one of his friends. So, just you tell me, my dearest big ol' sister, how in Niarg can you, who are usually the most reasonable, compassionate person I've ever known, let jealousy eat you up like this?”

Rose drew a breath.

“Ah, ah, ah! I'm not through, Rose. I know you've got right good reason to loathe Myrtlebell, but she's just escaped from the Beaks. Think about her being separated from her little boy all this time. And guess what? Fuzz told me that she speaks often of the deep regret she has for the terrible things she did to you. So for now, don't you think you could set all this aside? It surely could be sorted out later.”

For a moment, Rose was knocked speechless. “Lukus, when did you get so smart?” she said at last. “I guess I've been embarrassing myself, but what on earth makes you think that I would be jealous of Myrtlebell over Fuzz?”

“Rose! I'm your brother. I know you better than anyone, better than even you at the moment, it seems. Anyway, don't bother to deny it because I've been watching this one since 'way back in the Grog Meadows. And as for Fuzz, he already knows.”

“What? You told him?”

“Hey! Don't get excited. He's stuck on you, too.”

“What? How could you know that, Lukus?”

“He told me, or I wouldn't.”

“Don't tease me, Lukus. Not about this.”

“I wouldn't, Rose. Not about this.” Rose stood thunderstruck.

“So, shall we speak to the ladies, Rose? I mean, no one's noticed us. We can just join right in.”

Rose nodded and stayed on the fringes of the joyous hubbub as she heard Fuzz reply wide eyed to Myrtlebell: “So, you mean to say that you actually have a half brother and half sister who are Beaks?”

A sizzling pop made everyone jump as Hubba Hubba, Pebbles, and Taflu dropped from the sky and landed upon Tors.

“Big time trouble Wiz!” screeched Hubba Hubba with a shake of his scorched feathers. “The witches are loose!”

“Take cover!” shouted Razzmorten as he squinted into the blinding sun, trying to locate Demonica and Spitemorta before discharging a bolt of fire from his fingers that missed them.

Everyone scattered. Mary fired her own blast and also missed, blinded by the sun. A choke oak next to Razzmorten exploded as though struck by lightning. Tors lunged and belched out flame as Hubba Hubba, Pebbles and Tafflu took flight. Lukus tossed his sword to Fuzz and pulled out his sling and a black Elven opal, while Rose raced for the bow and quiver on Ceidwad that she had been practicing with at the public butts in Niarg.

Demonica and Spitemorta swooped out of the sky with the sun at their backs, each

hurling fiery bolts at Razzmorten which he and Mary managed to deflect in unison. At the sight of him staggering from the effort on the ground below, they cackled and shrieked with laughter as they looped through the air for another pass. As they came again down between the trees for another go at Razzmorten, Lukus let fly his opal, hitting the Staff in front of Spitemorta's hands in an explosion of searing sparks, causing her to lose control.

As the Staff tumbled in the air, Rose loosed an arrow that passed clean through Spitemorta's shoulder. Spitemorta screamed in agony as she and Demonica swerved at Tors who bellowed out in fiery fury, igniting Demonica's robe. Demonica shrieked and ripped off her flaming clothes, casting them away to settle in the crown of a choke oak as Spitemorta regained control and hurtled back aloft.

Again Demonica and Spitemorta dove at them with the sun at their backs. In a blinding exchange, they fired at the same time as Razzmorten and Mary, leaving them sprawled upon the ground as they shot away once more into the air. Rose and Lukus screamed and rushed to Razzmorten's side as the diatrymas ran to Mary.

At this very moment, Demonica and Spitemorta landed before them. "Well Grandmother!" barked Spitemorta as she thrust out the Great Staff, drenched in the blood from her shoulder. "Isn't this a touching reunion?"

Chapter 17

Yann-Ber stood on the foredeck of *Their Majesties' Ship, The Selkie* as she was being moored, studying the abandoned buildings of Dragon's Port. He was not altogether anxious to disembark after his consummate voyage with his polite and attentive crew, service and nurses. How wonderful it had been to be treated like an honorable fellow instead of like a contemptuous beast. "I wonder how the dragons will take me?" he said, mumbling into the breeze. "Well, both the king and queen of Niarg reckoned I'd win them over at once merely by declaring myself an enemy of Demonica's. And besides, what would they care about my looks? At least we shall soon see."

He shuffled down the gang plank to be greeted by two dragons. "Good morning sir," said the smaller dragon. "Welcome to Dragon's Port. We certainly recognize your ship to be one of the royal fleet of Niarg, but neither of us seems to be able to place you, good sir."

"Good day to you both," said Yann-Ber, with as much of a bow as he could manage. "I am Yann-Ber of the House of Penn, Pennvro, known in this part of the world as Head, at your service. I bring to you and yours kind greetings from the right benevolent king and queen of Niarg."

At once he handed to the small dragon a letter bearing the royal seal of Niarg, addressed to Spark and Lipperella, that explained his mission.

"I am Gweltaz," said the smaller dragon, peeking at the seal and address, "and this is Kast. We will see you to Spark and Lipperella at once, good sir, if that be your wish."

And with a nod from Yann-Ber, both dragons bowed and gestured to the way.

"I am gratefully obliged," said Yann-Ber, "but, I'm sorry to say that I must beg you not to set out at too fast a pace, as I do suffer from a crippling curse of boils that greatly hampers my movement."

"Sir," said Kast as he flattened himself upon the ground, "I'd be honored to have you ride astride my back, if you please, and I'll have you at Spark and Lipperella's in no time."

"My good dragon," said Yann-Ber. "You're every bit as kind as the wonderful people of Niarg. So long as I be not an undue burden to you, I gratefully accept." He began straining to climb on as quickly as he could manage, quite mindful of Kast's infinite patience.

At last, Kast bid him hold tight, and he was whisked away past the collapsing barns and warehouses and up the white lane to the plateau covered with leaning oak trees. It was captivating scenery, but Kast did not slow for it in the least. Suddenly Kast was descending the broad flight of stairs so quickly that it left Yann-Ber's heart in his throat. At the bottom, Yann-Ber gasped at the sight of the gigantic fountain statuary of dragons fleeing a wizard and his staff.

"Is that the vile Razzorbauch?" he said.

"Ah!" said Kast without stopping. "Then you must realize that we too have connections with the Dark Continent."

On they went through the expansive cavern, past Gothic arches, passages and tunnels. At last they came to a spacious alcove, frantic with the activity of Spark, Lipperella and Edward dropping chunk after chunk of raw sukere down the gullets of two dozen demanding dragonets.

"We bring a visitor from Head, by way of Niarg, my friends," said Gweltaz as he

presented Yann-Ber, who was already straining to climb off of Kast.

Gweltaz handed the letter to Spark. "This is Spark and Lipperella, Yann-Ber. And all twenty-four of these fine dragonets belong to them."

Yann-Ber looked properly impressed. "I'm most pleased to make your acquaintance," he said as he put both feet on the ground beside Kast.

"How do you do, sir," said Edward with a bow before offering to shake his hand. "I'm Edward."

"Right honored to meet you, young man."

"I'm sorry to say Wizard Razzmorten is no longer here," said Spark, looking up from Yann-Ber's letter. "He left almost a fortnight ago and I'm uncertain where he's gotten to, though he was heading to the den of Fuzz the Bear on his way to the Beak castle in the marsh. Anything could have changed his plans along the way."

"I actually expected as much," said Yann-Ber. "Queen Minuet used her scrying crystal and found him in the marsh, but that was before I set sail. And I've certainly no way of knowing if she saw him going to this bear's den or leaving it. So he could be anywhere, now. And I'm puzzled. Could you set me straight?"

"I'll try, sir," said Spark with a nod. "If I've your answer, I'll certainly share it."

"Thank you. Well then, what puzzles me is why Razzmorten is off visiting bears and barbaric tribes, when according to the king and queen he merely came to see your dragonets and to see about certain changes in the Peppermint Forest."

"He went to rescue my momma," said Edward, piping up.

"That is indeed what he's doing," said Spark. "You see, his mother was kidnapped by the Beaks along with Mary the White Witch and two sorceresses, one of whom I believe must be the very Demonica referred to in the king and queen's letter, here."

"She's here? Why, I thought she was in Goll."

"Make no mistake, she's definitely here and after, a very valuable artifact, I'm afraid."

"Yea," said Edward. "Those sore sisses, those bad womans wanted Momma's heart. They were real mean and hurted momma, 'til the little blue mens came up and knocked 'em all in the head. That's why Razzmorten had to get Uncafuzz to help him get her back."

Spark gaped as Lipperella drew Edward aside and handed him feed for the dragonets.

"Yes. Well, Edward is quite a precocious young man as I'm sure you've noticed," said Spark.

"Indeed, he is," said Yann-Ber, "but he speaks the truth, does he not?"

"Unvarnished and full strength," said Spark, studying Yann-Ber to see if he caught Edward's reference to the Heart of the Staff.

"Would the other sorceress be her granddaughter, Spitemorta of Goll?"

"Absolutely. Goll's new queen."

"By some chance would you know if they have a wizard's staff with them?"

"You mean a wizard's staff that could be ridden on through the air?" said Spark.

"Could it?" said Yann-Ber, wide eyed. "I didn't know that about it. Did Razzorbauch ever use it that way? Demonica never mentioned it."

"I've no idea if Razzorbauch ever flew it, but Bailitheoir Cailli sure did. She had it disguised as a broom. In fact, until the very day she died, no one knew that she had

anything but an old broom that she flew by some assumed divination of hers.”

“Hidden in plain sight.”

“And now her daughter is running loose with it,” said Spark, sharing a look with Lipperella, “and to be honest, it's in far more dangerous hands than it has been since Razzorbauch wielded it, particularly with Demonica in the mix.”

“You can count on it. I doubt if there's ever been another sorceress even close to being as wicked as Demonica. She'd probably beat Razzorbauch for sheer evil.”

“King Hebraun's missive didn't mention your relationship to her, sir, but I get the impression it was close.”

“You could say that,” said Yann-Ber with a fleeting livid look, “She not only cast this terminal curse of boils upon me, she's my wife.”

Captain Gart reined his unicorn to a stand as he raised his spear, halting his troop. He dismounted and studied the ground in the feeble light of dawn. “Itis,” he said, looking up at his lieutenant. “What do you make of these tracks?”

Itis squatted next to Gart. He scratched his head, replaced his helm and rubbed his bristly chin. “Yesterday evening, I'd say. Diatryma tracks, and no mistake. Three pair, looks like, in big long strides.”

“Weren't two of the witches riding diatrymas when they were taken by Captain Girom?”

“Well, the White Witch and her friend,” said Itis. “That's two runks instead, but one was a witch...two of the ones which we're after now.”

“You're right. Reckon these are the same beasties?”

“Could well be, 'cause there aren't but a handful of diatrymas in the world.”

“Well, we need to find out if anyone was riding them,” said Gart. “Take a small patrol and see where those tracks go and who they belong to, Lieutenant. Pick out five. The rest of the men and I will wait here and set up camp.”

Itis thumped his breast and chose his men. They followed the tracks expertly and swiftly through the woods for a good two leagues. He dismounted to study the tracks where they were particularly hard to follow. Squatted on the ground, he heard voices far ahead. “Dismount,” he said softly. “Tie 'em up. We walk from here.”

Itis and his men moved forth quickly, as silent as any cat. After a couple of furlongs, the voices were quite plain. “If they turn out to be the runks we're after, Talorg will decorate me if I take them in,” he thought. “Knighthed, maybe, and then I'd be above Gart. I hope it looks good.” He cast about for his men. They each nodded to him in turn. They crept closer to the clearing, now down on their hands and knees, completely hidden by the thick vegetation of the understorey ringing the clearing.

Now he was close enough to begin seeing. “Sure enough. The diatrymas, all three witches and Talorg's intended, and one of them is out cold,” he thought as his heart raced, pounding in his ears. “And that fellow lying on the ground with her could be some kind of wizard... and we've certainly got the drop on them. The dark witches look like they've just captured the others.”

Just as he started to raise his arm to signal the attack, he shuddered with every hair on his neck standing on end. “It feels like something's watching,” he thought. “Probably just some trick of the witches. Mage Cinid's told about witches setting out invisible

devices around their camps. It must be that...probably harmless.”

Itis glanced about at his men once more, as they returned their alert and careful nods. “Good men,” he thought. “Well, here goes a promotion...” Once more he was stopped by a convulsive shudder before he could get his arm up, as Devi slipped into his head, right behind his ear. Devi was in control before he could possibly react. His consciousness shrank aside to cower in a far corner of his mind.

Devi grinned with Itis's lips, reveling in the feel of control. “Hey, I'm a demon from the Pit of Fire, Beaky Boy, and I'm getting good at this body possession,” he thought, making sure that Itis heard him, “and I truly enjoy trying on your carcass. I just might keep it for a while.”

Itis tried to lunge forward, in his horror, hoping to regain his mind, but Devi had total control.

“If you want to live, Beaky, you won't ever do that again,” he thought. Try it and I'll kill you and your worthless soul.”

“Now Beaky Boy,” said Devi, “I believe you were about to tell your men to attack. Let's just go ahead and do that.” At once he raised Itis's arm, giving the order. His men sprang to their feet in a chorus of battle cries.

Demonica was ready for this. She discharged a crackle of purple fire that turned first one then another soldier into crumbling cinders. Spitemorta thrust the Staff at a third, causing him to explode, plastering a fourth soldier with his entrails. As he wailed out in horror, Spitemorta blew him to smithereens as well. Soldier number five turned tail and ran from the clearing, charging right up to Devi, who ran him through with Itis's claymore.

Fuzz seized the moment and jumped to his feet. The diatrymas immediately understood and dropped onto their keels where Mary and Razzmorten lay. Lukus helped Fuzz onto Arwr with Razzmorten while Rose helped Myrtlebell onto Lladdwr with Mary. At once they sprang away into the brush as Rose and Lucas followed on Ceidwad and Tors while Hubba Hubba, Pebbles and Taflu took to the sky.

Spitemorta was still bouncing with glee at having blown apart her Beak soldiers when Demonica turned aside to find that their captives had vanished altogether. She wheeled 'round and set upon Itis. “Nice try, Beak,” she snarled as she raised her hands to scorch him. “But I've no use for a coward who tries to save his own skin by turning on his fellows.”

“Mistress! Wait!” cried Itis. “I'm Devi, your Cia, your servant!”

“What are you doing inside an attacking Beak soldier?”

“I saw these soldiers creeping up on the clearing and I thought I'd come to your aid, Mistress. There are others camped less than three leagues off, waiting for these ones to return and report. They mean to take you back to King Talorg and burn you in a wicker wolf. This one I'm in had a few delusions of glory about capturing you on his own, I'm afraid.”

“Did he now? And what might those have been?”

“Separating your head from your body and carrying it back to King Talorg on a pike while Spitemorta drug along your drawn and quartered body on a travois.”

“Well Devi, let this Beak know that I'm devising a death for him that I shall relish for years to come.”

Devi gave a look of disappointment on Itis's face.

“What?” snapped Demonica. “You have a problem with this?”

“No, Mistress, not entirely...”

“Not entirely? Either you do or you don't.”

“I had hoped to keep this body for awhile. It's quite enjoyable having substance and this one is exceptionally vital.”

“He won't be much longer, my dear Devi. Be glad I warned you of his death. I'm being generous, don't you know.”

“Mistress?”

“Very generous. And since you were involved in the attack which cost me my prisoners, I'm not so sure that you shouldn't share in the Beak's execution.”

“Mistress! You surely don't think I had anything to do with the attack, do you?”

“If I did, Devi, you'd be dead this minute. But you did fail me, by letting the White Witch and that simpering Myrtlebell escape. You do need to be taught a lesson.”

“I'll track them down and recapture them for you, Mistress! I vow it.”

“Oh, Devi, that's certain. And I think you'll be far more careful in the future. Wouldn't you agree, Spitemorta?” she said as she genially turned aside.

Spitemorta grinned, raising the Great Staff to point it at Devi.

Chapter 18

Arwr came to the bank of a broad creek and waited while Fuzz shifted to a new position on his back to get a better hold on Razzmorten, who was still unconscious.

Beyond lay the Gobbler Marsh, just visible through the trees. "So where are we?" said Myrtlebell as she arrived at his side on Lladdwr with Mary, who also remained in a coma.

"A few leagues north of the Beak castle," he said, rubbing his face along his arm to get his hair out of his eyes as Taflu fluttered out of the sky onto his shoulder. He paused, looking up to see everyone else arriving. He caught Rose's eye. "We have some choices, I think, maybe more than we want. We could chance crossing the marsh here, where it would be quickest, or we could go further north along the edge of the Peppermint before we try it." He eyed them each in turn. "Or, we could follow the Peppermint clear north until it becomes the Chokewoods and stay in the forest until we clear the marshlands." He rubbed his sweaty eye along his arm again. "Well? I'm open for suggestions."

"I'd take smallies and dorchadas over Beaks and Ugleuh's evil kin any day, Fuzz," said Hubba Hubba as he strutted up and down Rose's arm with his tail feathers splayed.

Pebbles nodded resolutely.

"I cast my vote with the featherheads," said Lukus, grinning at Hubba Hubba.

"Well finally," said Hubba Hubba "You're going along with the superior avian brain instead of making all your usual mistakes."

"Yea," said Lukus. "Arwr says that at least the smallies and dorchadas lack magic, even if they are nasty and vicious."

"Arwr says? I didn't hear Arwr say anything."

"Oh, that's probably 'cause you were too busy tooting your beak to hear him."

"Stop teasing him, Lukus," said Rose. "This is serious business. Who knows where Spitemorta and Demonica are now?"

"Sorry," said Lukus.

Hubba Hubba gave his feathers a resolute shake and assumed an aloof posture.

"I agree with Lukus and Hubba Hubba," said Rose. "Smallies and dorchadas are scary, but considering the alternative, I don't see how we could have another choice."

"Now, more than ever we must avoid a confrontation with the evil ones," said Arwr with a solemn boom. "Without Razzmorten and Mary's magic we'd not likely survive another encounter with them."

The company was unanimous. "Then it's agreed," said Fuzz. "Chokewoods it is."

Devi shrank away from Demonica in horror and disbelief. Surely she wouldn't harm him. But the fiery look in her gaze convinced him at once that she had every intention of causing him great harm. Suddenly he tried to flee Itis's body. To his horror, he found he was trapped. Spitemorta must have done something to him with the Staff.

Demonica smiled with delight at his panic and anger as he stumbled backwards. "Spitemorta," she said, as if she were offering a quick peek at her goldfish. "Come see this fool's face. And while you're over here, bind him with the Staff."

Spitemorta stepped up eagerly. "My," she said, before mumbling something unintelligible as she waved the dreadful rod at him.

Suddenly Devi could not move anything below Itis's neck. "Mistress!" he cried, as he saw that he could still plainly feel everything. "You lost your prisoners entirely because of the Beaks! How can you blame me when I was doing everything I could to come to your aid?"

"Come to my aid?" rasped Demonica. "Coming to my aid would have been getting here and warning me before the Beaks got here. You knew all about what they were plotting from their camp. Oh no. You were either suffering from unforgivable idiocy or you were serving your own purposes. Either way, I must give you your lesson.

"Now, my dear granddaughter," she said, taking on an oratorical tone, "please pay careful attention and I will give you some introductory instruction on the proper ministrations of torture. I'm sorry to say that due to our hectic itinerary, this will have to be just an introduction, just an enticement, after all."

"Certainly, Grandmother."

Demonica flicked a finger at Devi, flattening him across a large boulder. "I much prefer my subjects to be in a supine position in most cases," she said, turning aside briefly, as if from a blackboard, "for it's all the more convenient to reach their more sensitive body parts."

Spitemorta nodded attentively as Devi frantically struggled to flee Itis. "What are you fools staring at?" he cried noiselessly, throwing his thoughts at Oana and Mael who hovered overhead in horrified fascination. "She could get either one of you next. If you don't want to be next, you'd better find the escaped prisoners now."

Oana and Mael exchanged mortified yelps and sped away.

Demonica picked up Itis's hand and checked to see if she had Spitemorta's undivided attention. Then she neatly broke his little finger with a snap. Devi and Itis cried out in unified agony.

"Now Spitemorta, had we the time we need to do a proper job of this, I'd have snipped the phalangeal bone which I just broke, using side cutters instead. The panic they have at the sight of their spurting blood always seems to enhance the effect, and I do believe they experience every bit as much usable pain. Once again, we must make do with our vexing lack of time."

"Pity," said Spitemorta with bright eyes. "I would indeed enjoy an extended lesson."

Demonica heaved a sigh as she turned back and adroitly snapped another of Itis's fingers, triggering another wailing duet of agony. She gave a look of long-suffering and waited for the screams to subside. "Abbreviated and lacking as this session may be, my dear," she said, as though she had suggested mint julep, "I expect it will liven up when we skin him."

"Skin him? My, you led me to believe that this was going to be unforgivably dull. But, do you have a use for his awful blue hide once you've removed it?"

"Not at the moment, dear, but I'll think of something. That is of course, unless you want it."

"Well, yes, actually," said Spitemorta. "With all its tattoos, I was thinking what a charming vest and belt it would make for James."

"So. You do care for your handsome husband. I'd wondered. Say no more," said Demonica, raising a staying hand. "It's yours."

Devi was beyond endurance. He had never in his entire existence felt the tiniest discomfort and now he was being subjected to this agonizing torment. He fled to the far

recesses where Itis jerked and writhed in terror. Using his skills, he forced Itis's consciousness aside and took its place. Being tied down, he certainly didn't need to be pilot any longer. He'd still feel the awful pain, but at least now Itis would be first in line to receive it.

"I just don't have the tools. Tell me, dear, do you happen to have a knife?"

"Well no, since I've had the Great Staff I've not had much of a need. Wait. Let me use the Staff to shrink Devi's nice big claymore."

As Demonica waited, she caught a ripple in the air. Her other Cias. She had completely forgotten them.

"Mistress!" said Oana urgently. "You must come quickly. Your captives are at the marsh and they've decided to stay in the Peppermint and go to the Chokewood Forest."

Demonica suddenly went purple with rage. "Free him!" she snarled.

"What?" stammered Spitemorta. "But this is all his fault."

"I said, free him. We'll need him to enter the fool woman and discover what she's done with the Heart."

"But didn't you intend to kill him?"

"Are you daft?" barked Demonica. "I had no intention of killing Devi! He needed to be taught. I was going to have you release him just before the idiot Beak died. He's far too valuable to destroy. Don't be stupid. Without my Cias, we just might fail, no matter how powerful you think the Staff makes you. Anyway, there's no more time for lessons, so release Devi right now."

"As you say, Demonica," said Spitemorta through her teeth as she thought: "But once the Heart's on the Staff, you'd better mind your tongue, dear Grandmother, or I might just remove it." And with that, she raised the Staff and mumbled a thing or two, releasing Devi.

Devi shot from Itis's head in a dense shimmering fury to hover with Oana and Mael where he fought to get control of himself.

"I've no time to coddle you, Devi," said Demonica with strained patience. "You're lucky that I find you valuable enough not to alert the Exalted Council of Thought to your whereabouts. You've tempted me. They'll try you and erase you for all time."

Devi struggled with his rage. It was nearly impossible after what they'd just put him through. He wanted to strike them down, make them hurt, as they had him. "No," he thought. "They deserve to be dead. Had I only the power of... Wait! Yes! The Heart of the Staff could make them pay. Oh yes! The Heart of the Staff will make them pay...into little pieces and flecks of guts. And I know where it is. And he's probably weakened enough that I just might. Oh, I just will! Tenfold to you Demonica. I'll play your game for a little while and then I'll get you, get you, get you!"

"Mistress!" he called out. "Please forgive my deplorable stupidity. I humble myself before you and ask only that you allow me to do your bidding."

Demonica stared at Devi, tapping her finger on her cheek in a feigned pose of deep contemplation. "Very well!" she barked out suddenly. "I accept your apology. This time. But you have a great lot to make up for. And do not expect to be given another chance."

"No, Mistress," said Devi solemnly "I'd never expect that."

Demonica raised an eyebrow. "Good then," she said as if jostled out of a daydream. "Follow Mael and Oana to the Chokewoods and pick up the trail of those hoc'hed lous."

"As you say, Mistress, so it shall be," said Devi. And he shot off after Oana and

Mael.

Chapter 19

The day had chosen to be hot in spite of its being early fall, as the companions pressed urgently north through the Peppermint Forest. The land under the trees was growing increasingly rolling and in places where the canopy of leaves overhead thinned the sun shone through mercilessly. By now it was well past noon and they had spent the entire day traveling with scarcely a pause, expecting to be waylaid by Demonica and Spitemorta at any moment. Great crested flycatchers gave their ringing declarations from the treetops in the still air. Woodpeckers hammered.

Tors was exhausted, panting through his dry mouth, fueling the fire in his chest as he kept up with the diatrymas. In his weariness he had long since given up watching the ground, so that little surprises were causing him to stumble more and more. “Oh, my!

Sorry Lukus,” he said as he caught himself on his shoulder, skidding in the leaves. “Do you suppose you could holler at them? I’ve got to have a minute or two.”

“Hey up there!” shouted Lukus. “Dragon down!”

Directly Arwr came back, jogging to a halt with Fuzz and Razzmorten as Lladdwr and Ceidwad came back into view.

“Forgive me,” said Tors between pants, “I’m just a bit winded, but I’ll be on my feet again in two shakes.”

Arwr dropped to his keel as Fuzz rolled off into the leaves, dragging Razzmorten after him. “I think we need more than two shakes,” he said. “My legs have gone to sleep and I just now noticed that I have more than one arm.”

“I’m really worried about Grandfather and Mary,” said Rose with a quaver in her voice as Ceidwad plumped into the leaves beside Arwr, followed by Lladdwr settling beside her with Myrtlebell and Mary.

“I know, Rose,” said Fuzz as he stretched and flexed an arm. “I’m getting concerned, too. I’d ‘ave thought they’d be awake by now.”

“Still out?” said Hubba Hubba, as he, Pebbles and Taflu found heads to settle on.

“Lukus, Grandfather’s been teaching you some healing magicks, hasn’t he? And haven’t you been learning some from the Elves as well?”

“Well yes Rose, but I’ve only just started. I can only reliably manage little stuff like cuts and bruises.”

“Are you sure you couldn’t do something, Lukus?” she said with a quick glance about, as if she might be overlooking someone, “You’re the only one of us who has any healing abilities at all.”

“If they’re still out when we make camp, of course I’ll try, Rose,” he said, his face showing no sign of hope.

“I think we ought to try now,” said Fuzz.

“But this doesn’t seem like a safe place,” said Rose. “I mean, Demonica and Spitemorta...”

“Oh, it probably isn’t,” said Fuzz, “but, it’s at least as safe as any place we’ve been while we were running, and you don’t know how far off their guess about us is. But I’d say you’re right. Every minute does count. We really need to find a cave or something that will keep them from spotting us from the sky, then Lukus can see what he can do.”

“I guess that’s as good as anything,” said Lukus, looking at Rose, “but don’t count on too much.”

“I know,” she said, but we do need to see.”

“Good then,” said Fuzz, as if there was room for optimism. “Some of the branches of the Fairy River arise in this neck of the woods, somewhere. We ought to be seeing rock faces and bluffs before too long. That's where I'd look for a cave.”

“I know of several small caves right near here,” said Arwr. “Shall I take you?”

“Absolutely,” said Fuzz.

Tors looked up suddenly to see three pairs of diatryma eyes studying him keenly at eye level as though they were expecting him to hatch at any moment. “Oh! Yes, yes!” he said, snapping to. “I'm ready. I was just waiting on everyone.”

Without a word, Arwr, Lladdwr and Ceidwad sped away, pat, pat, patting over the leaves with Tors galloping furiously to keep up. Arwr lead them single file along the beginnings of a creek that was soon flanked with rock outcroppings which before long formed a deep hollow. Without the slightest hesitation to puzzle over landmarks, he took them directly to the foot of a huge sheer faced bluff of slate grey rocks which formed an overhang several rods long. At the back of the overhang a small cave ran in under the rock. In short order they had Razzmorten and Mary laid out on pallets of leaves.

Lukus knelt by Razzmorten and laid his hand on the old fellow's forehead. He closed his eyes and quickly set about calming himself as he had been taught in order to ready his magical energies to flow into his grandfather. He let these drain away until he began feeling the inevitable exhaustion which signaled where he must stop. He had no choice now but to rest before going any further. He opened his eyes and studied Razzmorten for any sign of success. He shook his head in weary dismay as he looked up at the hopeful faces gathered 'round him. “I see no change at all,” he said. “I'll have to eat and rest a bit, before I can try again.” He stood up on wobbly legs and clenched his teeth. “I can find nothing wrong with him at all. I wish I could read his mind. Then he could tell me what's wrong.”

“I can do that for you,” said Ceidwad, lowering her head to peer into the cave.

“You diatrymas read minds?” he said, suddenly thinking about what she was saying.

“Yes.”

“But why didn't you say so long before now?” he said before realizing that he just might sound as though he were making accusations.

“It wasn't possible with us fleeing for our lives,” she said solemnly. “Mind to mind contact with one who is unconscious is delicate business. It takes time and it's always best to see if the unconscious one will come around on his own.”

“Why? said Lukus. “Is it dangerous?”

“Not done right, no.”

“So you have a certain expertise?” he said, glancing at Rose.

“I'd not attempt such a thing without being confident. Of course, I'll only proceed if you wish.”

Lukus looked at Rose.

She turned aside to Fuzz and Myrtlbell who each nodded encouragingly.

“Please do, Ceidwad,” said Lukus. “We'll never know unless you do.”

“Then please carry him to the mouth of the cave,” she said, “we never go inside.”

As soon as they got him moved, she slowly settled onto her keel, fluffed her feathers and gently laid her huge ebony beak across his forehead. After shifting her head a little, this way and that, she blinked a couple of times and then closed her eyes.

Hubba Hubba leant so far forward on Rose's shoulder while watching that he

tumbled off and landed on the cave floor with a feathery plop. Pebbles flew down beside him as he picked himself up and gave a shake of his feathers. Taflu snickered, but sobered at once at a look from Fuzz.

“Do all diatrymas read minds, Lladdwr?” whispered Rose.

“Generally only the hens amongst us,” he said softly. “They listen in on the dreams of our eggs and thereafter they keep track of the chicks in dead silence in the face of danger and while they forage.”

“Then her mind reading won't heal?”

“I'm afraid it doesn't, at least nothing beyond the reassurance it gives. But Ceidwad will be able to tell you what ails them and find out what needs to be done.”

At last, Ceidwad stood up and turned to face everyone, singling out Rose and Lukus. “Your grandfather will survive and will indeed wake up in due time,” she said, “but I've no idea at all how long that will be. Those bolts from the sorceresses were much like lightening. If one is struck by lightening, he either dies right then and there or he's left in a coma for who knows how long. Could be just a few hours; could be days. They got big jolts. Your Grandfather believes that they are both very lucky to have survived. They should be dead. In fact, he wonders if Demonica and Spitemorta deliberately let them live for some reason. So there's no damage, but I'd allow that he'll be asleep for some time to come.”

“Oh thank you!” said Rose, as she hugged Ceidwad, muffling a sob in her fluffy neck feathers “You've spared us so much worry.”

Ceidwad rattled her beak through Rose's hair as Hubba Hubba hopped onto Razzmorten's chest and walked up his beard to point one eye at his face. He stood there for a moment, then trotted back down his beard and flew to Lukus's shoulder. “He doesn't look any different at all, Lukus.”

“I'm not worried now,” said Lukus as he scratched Hubba Hubba's head. “Two very wise birds have just told us he'll recover, so I know he will.”

“Righty-o!” he said with a proud flap of his wings and a whistle. He shook his feathers. “Now you're catching on.”

“Absolutely,” said Lukus.

Devi, Oana and Mael found Arwr, Lladdwr and Ceidwad sitting side by side in front of the mouth of the cave in the dwindling light. At once they shot to the treetops.

“The diatrymas will see us for sure,” said Devi as they hovered, looking down upon the birds.

“All three are facing out,” said Mael. “We can drop down behind them and go in if we stay close to the rocks.”

“Yea,” said Devi. “Real close. Their heads come within a couple of feet of touching the overhang. Someone needs to watch for Demonica and Spitemorta. You two go into the rocks up here and wait. I'll drop down and see what Myrtlebell has in her head about the Heart.”

The moment they took their places in the rock face, Devi dropped down behind the diatrymas and ducked into the cave, next to the ceiling. “The dragon in here sure makes it a tight fit,” he thought. “Dang that bat, hanging up here! He'll notice me for sure.”

Everyone lay on the floor talking as they shifted around trying to get comfortable

enough to go to sleep. Tors was already snoring soundly.

Devi seeped into the surface of the ceiling directly over Razzmorten, studying him. "He must have it. I've got to check." He dropped from the ceiling and sank through Razzmorten's robe. "Splendid," he thought as he shot back to the ceiling. "He has. And he's still out cold."

He would never get a better chance to take the Heart than he had this very moment. He could slip right into the head of the most powerful wizard of the age and take control without a fight. The Heart would be his. "When Demonica and Spitemorta get here it will be too late," he thought, tingling with glee. "I'll fix them easy. I'll even take the Staff. I'll not only have the Heart, but I'll also have Wizard Razzmorten's body and very power at my command to do it." He hovered for a moment to overcome his disbelief before dropping from the ceiling to right behind Razzmorten's ear.

He was inside in a trice, grabbing up everything. He opened Razzmorten's faded blue eyes and at once felt withered and utterly drained. This was alarming. Had Demonica injured the old boy so badly that he was dying? Was that why getting in and taking control was so easy? He closed Razzmorten's eyes and looked about for the old man's very being. "Ah!" It gave him a terrible start. There it was, watching him all the while with an intent, blue-eyed gaze. "Zounds!" He almost lost control to it. Razzmorten was clever, even if he was in bad shape.

Razzmorten's being came closer and studied Devi, quite unafraid. "Why, you're a Cia," he said as though he'd just seen someone in his old school's football shirt.

Devi jerked back. "How do you know this?" he said.

"Oh, I've known your people. I was on the council back when they were deciding to put up the Great Barrier."

"You helped them build it?" Devi was astonished.

"Only as an advisor."

"Why are you so weak? What's happened to your powers?"

"You saw what your mistress did. She neutralized my magic. It'll take time to recover from her attack. She's a very strong sorceress."

"But, you're stronger," said Devi. "Or were." "Maybe," said Razzmorten, "but, as you can see, I'm not right now. When Demonica and Spitemorta come, they'll finish me."

"You've the Heart, old man. They're still no match for that. You'll see," he said, and he refused to acknowledge Razzmorten any further. One slip and the old man would have him. He decided to have another go at opening his eyes.

"Grandfather! You're awake!" cried Rose, coming over on her knees at once and hugging him. "We didn't expect you to wake up for days or even weeks."

"It appears, my dear, that I'm tougher than anyone thought," he said with a feeble smile as he tried to sit up.

Rose and Lukus smiled grandly, helping him sit.

"Help me stand."

They patiently helped him to his feet, where he tottered, but finally managed to stand by himself.

"Hey Wiz, you got nothin' to worry about," said Hubba Hubba as he inspected Razzmorten from Lukus's shoulder. "We'll nurse you back to health. We'll have you fit as me 'fore ye know it."

Razzmorten hesitated, taken aback. "Well, that will be fine, then, I should think," he

said with a chuckle quite unlike his usual one.

“Righty-o,” said Hubba Hubba. “It’s an opportunity for me, since I figure I owe you for quite a few favors, don’t ye know.”

“Right,” said Razzmorten, obviously befuddled and just a bit irritated.

Hubba Hubba looked at Razzmorten with surprise, but reckoned that he was just not himself.

Razzmorten tottered over to the mouth of the cave to stare out at the sky before turning back to face everyone. “I assume you all have come up with a plan to retaliate against Demonica and Spitemorta while I’ve been out,” he said as a flicker of maniacal anticipation lit his eyes. “I still need to recuperate, but I want to assure you all that I’ll be doing my part when the time comes.”

“What are you talking about, Grandfather?” said Rose, looking astonished. “You said yourself that an encounter with Spitemorta and Demonica and the Staff was much too dangerous to consider. Have you forgotten?”

“Forgotten?” said Razzmorten, making shifty eyed glances at no one in particular. “By no means. Certainly not, dear girl. But...that was before they surprised us. If they get away with it, she’ll consider us weak. Easy prey, don’t you know. They’ve left us with no choice but to retaliate.”

Rose showed a horrified look to Fuzz, who bore a keenly serious look of his own.

“Razzmorten,” said Fuzz, “since you’ve just come around, you must not be aware that Mary is still quite unconscious. She’s not stirred in the least. You surely see at once how that puts us at a perilous disadvantage. We haven’t a prayer if we fight Spitemorta, who has the Staff, and Demonica without Mary’s help. I’m sure you’d be the first to agree that our recent encounter with them has amply proven that.”

Razzmorten wagged his finger and shook his head. “We’ve a secret weapon, my friend,” he said, as his eyes took on a malevolent glint.

“Secret weapon?” said Fuzz, who now had a bad feeling in his stomach to go with his astonishment. “And what might that be, if I may ask?”

“Razzmorten fumbled within his robe. “This, my good man. This!” he said with maniacal passion as he produced the Heart of the Staff and held it up reverently.

“Grandfather,” said Lukus. “That only works with the Great Staff...”

“No!” thundered Razzmorten, as he thrust a wild eyed look at Lukus. “That’s where you’re all wrong, boy. The Heart needs no Great Staff nor any other aid. It’s the most powerful artifact in existence today, and when Demonica and her vile granddaughter show up, I’ll show you.”

He tottered and gave an urgent look at Rose. She was at his side immediately as Lukus took his other arm. They helped him to his pallet of leaves at once.

“I guess I do need more rest.”

“You certainly do Grandfather,” said Rose. “You’re not at all yourself. Try to get some sleep while Myrtlebell and I find something to eat.”

Razzmorten gave a weary nod.

Rose patted his arm and stood with a sigh of relief. She caught Fuzz’s eye across the cave and went to join him, as he talked quietly with Myrtlebell and the diatrymas.

“Don’t worry, Grandfather,” said Lukus as he got to his feet, “we’ll get through this just fine.”

“You will let me know if Demonica and Spitemorta show up, won’t you, my boy?”

said Razzmorten with a fanatical look as he grabbed Lukus by the arm.

“You can count on it, Grandfather,” said Lukus, as he coolly removed Razzmorten's hand. “Now, get some rest. You'll want all your strength if they do find us.”

Razzmorten was asleep at once.

Lukus joined the others bearing a sober look. “I think that blast of sorceress fire cooked his head. He's like some entirely different person.”

Rose nodded, but before she could say anything Myrtlebell spoke up.

“Does it seem odd to any of you that Mary's not awake?” said Myrtlebell. “She's not stirred at all.”

“Actually, I was starting to wonder,” said Fuzz. “Ceidwad, perhaps if you read her mind as you did Razzmorten's, we'd get a better idea of what is going on.”

“Yea,” said Lukus. “Maybe Grandfather is acting weird because he came to before he'd recovered. If that's so, then all we have to do is use a few of the herbs he taught me about to keep him sleeping for awhile.”

“That's a thought, Lukus,” said Rose.

“I'd be happy to read Mary's mind, in fact I was about to suggest it,” said Ceidwad. “However, if the most pressing question is about Razzmorten, why don't I read his mind again, first? He made perfect sense to me when I read him before, but when he was on his feet I also found his behavior strange.”

Everyone emphatically agreed with this idea. Rose, Lukus and Fuzz set about at once, carefully moving Razzmorten back to the mouth of the cave and again

Ceidwad gently laid her beak across his forehead and closed her eyes. In short order her eyes came open and she raised her head, swallowed a couple of times as she stared off into the distance and then once more laid her beak across his head and closed her eyes. After a longer spell, she raised her head again. “I've not seen this before,” she said after a very long and thoughtful pause. “I got nothing. Not a thing. I suggest you try waking him to make sure nothing has happened to him.”

“Grandfather,” said Rose. “Are you all right? I know you need your sleep, but could you wake up and let us know that you are all right?”

“Yea?” he woofed as he switched from snoring. “Maybe I'd be all right if you'd get out of my face and let me sleep...”

Everyone drew wide eyed breaths at this.

“...So please!” he barked, before giving a couple of grunts and closing his eyes.”

Ceidwad looked thunderstricken. “I've never ever seen anything like this,” she said. “He's not in danger, but he has to be deliberately keeping me out.”

No one knew what to say.

“So...shall I go ahead with Mary?” she said as she opened, paused and then closed her feathers. “She may even have some ideas. She's a healer, don't you know. Why don't you bring her out next to Razzmorten?”

In short order they had Mary laid out before Ceidwad. She rattled her beak along a few strands of her hair, carefully putting them in place before laying her beak gently across her forehead and closing her eyes. There she remained for quite some time. At last she raised her head and gave her feathers a thorough shake. “Mary is well,” she declared before pausing to squeeze shut her eyes. “Excuse me. She is my best friend after Lladwr, and I was frantic. She is indeed well and sends you all her greetings and her wish to be amongst you all again soon. She's had far less shock than he, due to the

obvious fact that she took a less direct bolt of fire.”

“Did you find out what she makes of his strange behavior?” said Rose.

“She thought at first that he might have been damaged, but when she found out that he was perfectly reasonable and quite himself when I read his mind, she insisted that he must be fine. She thinks he's in the throes of a part of the trauma which he miraculously managed to not let in at first. His shutting me out may just have been him protecting himself from undue activity. If he keeps up his strange behavior, she thinks

Lukus should give him a sleeping potion. When she's up and around she'll watch over him. She's a powerful healer.” After quietly seeing how all of this was being taken, she rose and bedded down with Lladdwr and Arwr outside the cave.

“Well,” said Fuzz. “Here we are at least for the night.”

“Do you think it's safe, Fuzz?” said Rose. “Demonica and Spitemorta have surely figured that if we're not in the marsh, we must be in the woods.”

“Well, we're nearly impossible to spot in here. Anyway, what kind of choice do we have under these circumstances?”

Rose met his eyes and for a moment went speechless. She reached up and put her hand on his cheek. “It seems we never do, doesn't it?”

Fuzz brushed aside her hair as he lost himself in her clear blue eyes. “So it seems,” he whispered hoarsely.

Chapter 20

Spitemorta squatted in front of the big rock where she and Demonica had tortured Itis, impatiently snapping off pieces of twig and flinging them about. A pewee called from a shady place high up in a nearby tree. Blue and green tailed carrion flies buzzed around in the windless air and crawled on Itis's blood on the rock in the hot sun of early afternoon. She stood up with a pent up huff and cast aside the last piece of stick. She felt hateful. Another Beak to butcher wouldn't be half bad. There sat Demonica, lounging against a nearby choke oak. "How can you just sit there?" said Spitemorta. "We ought to be going after that ci hithau Myrtlebell ourselves instead of waiting here all day for your pet bogeys to find them."

Demonica lifted her chin and studied Spitemorta. "The Cias are hardly bogeys, dear," she said as an eyebrow came up. "They are most convenient. I need not do a thing but sit here and relax while they hunt down Myrtleart and company. They are simply the most efficient trackers I've ever worked with. Hounds and falcons aren't even close. Now, just sit down and rest. You'll have all the excitement you want soon enough."

"Pooh!"

"Pooh?"

"Yea, pooh! I don't trust them."

"And just why's that, dear?"

"You can sit on them up to a point, Demonica. Then you've either got to back off or kill them. Ride them too long and they'll turn on you. Look at Devi. First thing you know, they'll all turn on you. Maybe that's why they're not back right now."

"You're wrong, of course," said Demonica, "but since you simply must tire me with this, what do you suggest? Fly over the woods endlessly trying to get a glimpse of them through the tops of the trees? In case you haven't noticed by now, dear, there are very few places in either the Peppermint or in the Chokewoods where daylight finds its way to the forest floor in more than mere patches here and there."

"Very well, not from above, then," said Spitemorta, as she snapped off a sapling and yanked it away from its clinging strip of bark. "But we need to do something. We could go back to the bear's den and get Nightshade and Gwenole so we could track them on the ground."

"You're right. And by the time we caught up with them they'd have taken the Heart and sailed back to Niarg. And believe me, dear, the Heart will be far more difficult to get from the treasury in Niarg than from anybody out here. And don't forget I actually did that very thing, once."

"So you've told me with endless obsession, Grandmother," said Spitemorta thrusting a blistering sneer.

"Well sweetheart, perhaps it's a mistake, helping you get the Heart for the Staff. Maybe it's a bad idea, teaching you how to use the Staff or even your piddly skills. It just might be time for me to go home and let you do things your way."

"How dramatic. Your undeserving granddaughter fails to appreciate you deeply enough."

Demonica stood and brushed the leaves from the back of her dragon singed kirtle. She calmly straightened her skirts and withdrew her small scrying globe. She stared into its murky depths and made signs in the air.

Spitemorta instantly felt white hot panic. If Demonica left, she would never

command the power she had been picturing for herself. She might not even be able to find someone to teach her how to fully use her own powers, let alone the Great Staff. And she had secretly come to yearn passionately for the Heart, all the time she had continued her game of doubting her grandmother. The globe now swirled with color, and she knew her time had run out. "Grandmother!" she cried. "Wait!"

Demonica looked up with icy eyes, then returned to her globe as she began chanting a traveling spell.

"Oh please, Grandmother!" cried Spitemorta, as she rushed forth holding out her trembling arms. "I'm so sorry! I'm so very, very sorry!"

"You always are dear, until the next time. One shouldn't want to strangle her own granddaughter. I came offering you a chance to rule the world, but you treat me as though I have delusions. If you think I won't get fed up, it is you with the delusions." She turned back to reciting her traveling spell.

"Grandmother, please!" she wailed, dropping to her knees. "I know I have a sharp tongue and say things I shouldn't! I know I've never been a nice person! But I swear to you: I will try! Please, please don't leave!"

"I'll say! You're the ugliest little rip I've ever had stuck to the sole of my shoe. You're so stinking rotten that I thought for a moment you had what it took to rule the world." She slipped her scrying crystal back into her skirts, but her face stayed hard. "You take an idiotic risk, kicking at me. You know nothing about the extent of my toleration."

Spitemorta gaped at Demonica. What was tolerant about her? "All right," she thought, "she's baiting me. She's waiting for a cutting remark so she can get even." She nodded with all the respectful seriousness she could muster. "Yes, Grandmother," she said. "As you say."

"Good," said Demonica. "That could be a start. Now, let's use the Staff to dry and tan the Beak hide, shall we? The usual way takes days and days and the Cias could return at any time."

"Good idea, Grandmother," said Spitemorta. And she turned right to the task.

Devi awoke inside Razzmorten's head with a jolt of bewildered alarm. He searched frantically for the wizard's being only to discover it studying him with calm interest from its rightful location. "What have you done to me?" he said from a recess off to one side.

"Why, nothing," said Razzmorten. "You fell asleep and I merely resumed my rightful place. You are, after all, the intruder here."

"You lie, old man. Cias do not sleep. You ousted me with your wizardry."

"Believe what you wish," said Razzmorten. "It won't change the fact that you did indeed fall asleep. You are, after all, inside a human body that has been through a great trauma and is exhausted. If you're in control of it, you'll be exhausted as well and you'll need the sleep it needs. And you used up what little strength I'd managed to rebuild with that little stunt you pulled."

"What stunt?"

"Piloting me around, up on my feet, when I would otherwise have been asleep trying to regain my strength. The strength to run the comatose body of an old man has to come from somewhere. You are a Cia and have no body. You have no physical strength to run a body, either. That strength has to come from the body you take over. That's why you

die if the body you're in dies, or did you know that?"

"I think..."

"So, if you take over me and use up my strength, you get tired and you fall asleep."

Devi was dismayed. He had little choice but to believe Razzmorten's claims. "Looks like I only have two choices," he thought. "I could either take over again when he's asleep, or I could leave his body and take control of one in better shape."

"Grandfather," said Rose, as she gently shook his shoulder. "I've brought you some soup. It'll help you get your strength back."

"Grandfather?" she said, becoming alarmed as she shook him again.

"What's the matter, Rose?" said Fuzz.

"He seems to have slipped back into his coma, Fuzz. He's not responding at all."

"Well, he's out," said Fuzz. "but I've no idea at all what that means. Let's ask Ceidwad." They found her just outside, talking to Hubba Hubba and Pebbles.

"So, is the Wiz getting more like himself again?" said Hubba Hubba. "All right. I see it. You two are upset. What's wrong?"

"She can't wake Razzmorten," said Fuzz before turning to Ceidwad, "Is this a bad sign, do you think?"

"My! You give me more credit than I'm due," said Ceidwad, wide eyed. "As I've said, I'm no healer. I do remember what I've seen, but I've not been through this with a human before. Why don't I try to read his mind again? And remember, I can read Mary's again, too, and she is a knowledgeable healer. Of course, that's only with your leave."

"By all means do it now," said Rose as she looked at Fuzz. "If you think it best, then we'll bring Grandfather out here right now. I hope it works."

"Please fetch him," said Ceidwad. "I'm ready."

High up on the face of the bluff, Oana listened carefully to what was going on below. "Mael," she said, "what do you make of that?"

"Curious and unclear," he replied. "We'll need more information to understand. What I'd like to know is why Devi's not back. Shouldn't he have the mistress's information by now?"

"That's what I think. Should we go into the cave to find out?"

"No," said Mael. "Way too dangerous with the diatrymas, parrots and that nosey bat. If it were just the humans, we'd sneak right by, but with these others, I don't think so."

"Should we report to the mistress?"

"Maybe, but not yet, Oana. I'm not at all anxious to return empty handed. I don't think either one of us would enjoy an experience like Devi's, when he displeased the mistress."

"Well no, but how could she torture us? We haven't possessed bodies, after all."

"What if she cast us into a body against our will?"

"If she could," said Oana, "why hasn't she done so before? I'll bet she's wanted to. How about when we refused to enter someone's mind to get information? She was furious."

"True," said Mael, "but that was before she had Spitemorta and the Great Staff."

"But she's had them for a while and she still hasn't forced us to possess anyone."

"She hasn't needed to. She's had Devi. He was most willing, don't you know?"

"So let's watch a while longer," said Oana. "Perhaps Devi will come out soon and it will be his problem to deal with her."

“I'm certainly for that.”

“So, old man,” said Devi, “what's to keep me from taking control of you when you go to sleep, just as you did me?”

“Not a thing,” said Razzmorten, “except you'll have to figure out how to stay awake when I don't.”

“You managed it.”

“Well now, so I did,” said Razzmorten. “Of course I'm a wizard, don't you know.”

“He's toying with me, thought Devi. It would be better to get out and take the body of one of the others. It will be no trick then to take the Heart from him when he's asleep. Let him keep his wizard skills. I won't need them with the Heart, and even less after I have the Great Staff.” He made ready to go out the top of Razzmorten's skull, but the sound of voices stopped him short.

“I'm afraid so, Lukus,” said Rose. “and we think Ceidwad should read Grandfather's mind again.”

“I do too. Fuzz and I will bring him right out.”

Suddenly Razzmorten was moving.

“He's getting heavy,” said Lukus, trying to lighten the seriousness of the moment.

“Well, I suppose he is for someone who's all bones,” said Fuzz. “But if he stays asleep for days and days, he's going to get lighter.”

Devi was trapped. If he fled now, even the humans would see. It would ruin everything. And out in the open, Oana and Mael would see him leave and know he had disobeyed Demonica. On the other hand, he had no idea if he could block the mind reading with Razzmorten back in control, but it was his best chance of avoiding discovery. He had no choice. It was too late for anything else. “Oh no, here she is,” he thought as he brought all his power to bear on keeping her from entering Razzmorten's head. Suddenly he felt Ceidwad's awesome presence join with the wizard's consciousness.

He had failed. He would be discovered. “Will she drag me out with her when she leaves?” he thought, as he trembled at the prospect of it. “Oana and Mael will waste no time telling Demonica if she does. This time she'll really get me.”

Suddenly Ceidwad was gone.

“Hey, I'm still in here, he thought. Maybe this will still work, after all.” He looked at Razzmorten. Razzmorten looked quietly back. Devi's confidence wavered. “He ought to be upset that I'm still here,” he thought.

Razzmorten continued gazing calmly at Devi.

“You've lost, old man,” said Devi. “No one can help you now.”

Razzmorten just kept looking.

“That's your game, aye?” said Devi. “Fine. I can do that too. Sooner or later you'll tire, and then you're mine.”

“It might be best to leave him be for a while,” said Ceidwad. “We just keep moving him.”

“Certainly,” said Rose, with an uneasy look. “What did you find?”

“Very little, I'm afraid,” said Ceidwad with an odd look of urgency. “Just give me a moment, if you don't mind. I need to sit here and sort out some things.”

Everyone came and sat before her except for Tors, who still slept soundly away. At last she paused to look at each of them in turn before speaking. "Razzmorten is possessed," she said.

"Possessed!" cried Rose and Lukus at once.

"Yes, by something that calls itself Devi," she said. "Razzmorten tells me it's one of Demonica's Cias."

"That rotten witch!" cried Rose. "I should've known that Grandfather would never behave the way he did if something like that hadn't happened."

"The question is," said Fuzz, "what can we do about it?"

"Nothing," said Ceidwad, as a chorus of exclamations burst forth from everyone.

At the top of the bluff, a screech owl gave a tremulous wail from a choke oak overlooking the Peppermint Forest in the light of the waxing moon.

"This is an unexpected development," said Mael.

"It most certainly is!" said Oana. "Should we alert the mistress, now?"

"I don't like the idea, just yet."

"Why?"

"She will be so livid at Devi's errantry that She'll lash out at whomever's in reach."

"Us."

"Undoubtedly."

"So if we wait, don't you think that'll make it worse?"

"Sure, but that's only if she knows we're holding out with the news, which she has no way of knowing."

"Got ye."

Spitemorta rolled up her Beak hide and tied it to a strap that she slipped across her shoulder before turning to Demonica. "You know, Grandmother, I've grown right fond of Beakish woad blue. It would make a dandy pair of riding boots for me, or even a vest and belt for me instead of for James."

"Well then dear," said Demonica with disdainful squint, "since we appear to have time on our hands, maybe you'd like to go take out the rest of the Beak army that King Talorg sent after us? Imagine what you could do with all those skins. An entire new wardrobe, perhaps?"

"Don't be facetious, Grandmother."

"Is that what I'm being?" she said with a tight sweet smile.

"No, of course not," said Spitemorta as she thought better of the venomous remark she had ready. "No, it's just that sitting here, waiting for the Cias has me on edge."

"Yes actually, it does me, too. The Cias have been gone far longer than I ever expected," said Demonica as she stood and looked away into the woods where she had watched them go. "I can't imagine what's happened, but Razzmorten has always been full of unexpected surprises."

"So, what do we do, Grandmother?" she said, looking down at her feet to hide her gloat.

"Flying over the woods is probably futile. Have you enough control of the Staff by now to actually fly at speed through the forest, rather than over it?"

"Of course," said Spitemorta. "It will slow us down, but, it will be 'way faster than

they are. Just say the word, Grandmother.”

“If Razzmorten has harmed any of my Cias he will pay dearly,” said Demonica, drawing an eye closed without winking. “Of course, I've boundless numbers of things to settle with my once dear husband. Don't forget that you must not, under any circumstance, kill him. That's a pleasure I reserve for no one but myself.”

Chapter 21

Yann-Ber awoke in the guest room next to the one occupied by young Edward. As he stretched, he thought about all that had happened to him since he left Head. As he stopped to listen to the first sounds echoing hither and yon throughout the sprawling cavern, the dragonet rabble came to life with a sudden roil of cheeps and peeps, and he knew it was time to be up and about his business. He paused to give an appreciative pat to the most comfortable feather bed he had ever slept in, except for perhaps, the one at Castle Niarg. He had certainly not expected such luxuries from the dragons, particularly when they did not use beds themselves. "Dragons might be animals," he said, "but I sure know of a good lot of humans who are far less civilized than they."

He dressed as quickly as his enduring pustules would allow and tiptoed past Edward's alcove, down the dragon-sized passage and out into the huge grotto with the nursery to find Spark and Lipperella rushing about, trying to quiet the hungry brood with feed.

"You're finally up," said Edward with a grin as he popped from behind Spark and dropped a huge chunk of raw sukere into a gaping gullet. The dragonet clamped shut to swallow and at once sprang open to strain and beg as though he hadn't been fed before at all. "This takes a while, Yann-Ber," said Edward with shining enthusiasm, as he stood back with his hands on his hips.

Spark looked at Edward as he shook his head with a grin for Yann-Ber, while Lipperella gave a demure nod, but neither one paused at his task to do so.

"You, my fine young, Flame, are entirely too greedy," said Edward, as he wagged his fingers and rolled his eyes at his flapping fuzzy customer. "You'll just have to wait your turn or get your own." He vanished and reappeared with a huge chunk for a quieter baby he called Laora, cooing and making eyes at her as he dumped it in. She was his favorite.

Yann-Ber saw that there nothing for it but to grab sukere and join in.

"I hope you didn't think us rude for not stopping until now," said Spark, when at last all the greedy mouths were closed and the cheeps and peeps had become snoring round tummies. "But thank you ever so much for your..."

Yann-Ber already had both hands up. "No explanation is necessary my good dragons. The situation quite spoke for itself." He glanced aside and smiled around his pustules as the last dragonet closed her eyes and wiggled in snugly amongst her siblings.

"But now with this unexpected time on my hands, I'm at something of a loss at what to do. It has been a very long time since I've had any leisure at all."

"I'm sure. Just sitting and waiting for something to happen is a very difficult thing to do," said Spark, "but, as I said yesterday, if Razzmorten is already on his way back, it's best not to start, and if he's delayed, his circumstances are right likely to be too hazardous to walk into. It oughtn't to be terribly longer."

"Oh, I quite agree, Spark. It would indeed be altogether foolish to high off after him. What I'm trying to say is that since my condition is terminal, every moment I spend that is not productive seems wasteful. I mean, please, it would be a favor to me to do anything you need being done around here. I would be honored to serve you."

Spark was at a loss for words.

"That's quite understandable, Yann-Ber," said Lipperella. "I'm sure anyone in your position would feel the same."

“Come on,” said Edward, piping in with a yank on Yann-Ber's sleeve. “It's time for our breakfast. If we wait too long the babies will be awake again and everything will get cold while we feed them.”

“In that case, I'd say we'd better hurry,” said Yann-Ber merrily. He followed Spark to the table where breakfast had already been laid for him and young Edward. Spark showed him his chair. Edward dug in.

“What about the two of you?” said Yann-Ber, looking up at his hosts. “You've obviously been up hard at work since before dawn.”

“Which is why Lipperella and I already ate,” said Spark. “Again, I hope you don't think us ill-mannered...”

“Hardly. I think you're practical,” said Yann-Ber. He faltered as his eyes turned red, but recovered at once. “And the other favor I was trying to thank you for, which is far greater than you could possibly ever imagine, is giving me a few days to spend around a real family.”

“I can't believe there's nothing we can do to help Grandfather,” said Rose as she picked up her bedroll and walked outside the cave in the early light of morning.

“I understand your frustration, but this is your grandfather's request,” said Ceidwad, studying her with one keen eye. “He thinks it better to hold the Cia in his head than let it out to take over another one of us or to report back to Demonica.”

“If that was the Cia talking when Grandfather was up on his feet,” said Lukus, “didn't he want to use the Heart of the Staff against Demonica and Spitemorta?”

“That's what it sounded like,” said Ceidwad, “but that hardly means it's on our side. It might want to destroy Demonica, while feeling the need to report to her in the meantime if it thinks it has to. Who knows what it might do? As far as I know only renegade Cias, outlaws to their own kind, venture beyond their own Great Barrier. Any Cia controlled by Demonica may be deranged. Think about this. Cias are normally retiring and peaceful, and never have I heard of one taking over someone's head.” She gave her feathers a shake and turned to look at Razzmorten, still sleeping away just inside the cave. “Razzmorten is very old and wise and he has had experience with Cias. I'm sure he knows what he is doing.”

Rose chewed her lip and nodded in resignation.

“Good,” said Ceidwad. “Shouldn't we be moving on? If Demonica sent one Cia to seek us out, what would keep her from sending another if they wondered why it wasn't back?”

“You've got a point,” said Fuzz. “I was actually thinking it might not be a bad idea to hold up here for a while on the chance that Mary might wake up, but I hadn't thought about that possibility.”

“I'm already packing,” said Rose.

“And I am now,” said Myrtlebell.

“Looks like we get to clean up and break camp out here,” said Fuzz.

“As usual,” said Lukus as he doused the fire.

An agitation of crows cawed and stirred amongst themselves in the tops of two tall choke oaks standing before the bluff in the first broad light of day.

“Now what?” said Oana turning to Mael. “Do we follow them or report what we

have learnt so far to

Demonica? We've already been gone long enough that she's bound to know something's wrong. It would have been better to have gone back and told her what we found, the moment we discovered what Devi was up to. I don't know why I let you talk me into these things, Mael."

"Oh go on, Oana. You know we didn't go back because she'd have blamed us for not staying with Devi every moment. She'd say that if we'd stayed he'd not have been able to pull a stunt like enter Razzmorten instead of Myrtlebell. Don't you get it? We're in as much trouble with her as Devi is."

"Then what do we do?" said Oana as she wavered anxiously in the bluff face.

"First," said Mael sternly, "you need to stay calm and stop shimmering around. We'll be seen if you don't stop, especially since that diatryma just pointed out the possibility that there could be more of us about than Devi."

"Oh, sorry," said Oana, as she blended into the bluff face at once.

"Much better," said Mael. You know, we've had a bad life with Demonica..."

"And?"

"All right. We could go back to her right now and tell her all we know, which includes that we don't know where they're going 'cause we didn't wait to find out. That ought to irk her almost as much as finding out about Devi and Razzmorten.

"Or?"

"We could stay here until we find out where they are going, but that may be a while, unless we just report the direction they take when they leave. Of course either one of these choices will..."

"Will displease Demonica," said Oana.

"No other way."

"So what do we do? We're always in trouble, no matter what."

"Exactly. So, why don't we just leave?"

"What? What did you just say, Mael?"

"Leave. We could go far away from here. How would Demonica find us? Besides, she's so wrapped up in getting her claws on the Heart that she hasn't the time to track us down. Think about it, Oana. This is the perfect time. It may be our only time for years to come. We could be free of her and her evil. We could go where we want. We could do the things we'd planned when we left home. You haven't forgotten why we left home, have you?"

"No, of course not, but that was before Demonica. She'll never just up and let us go," said Oana, as she began shimmering again. "And if she can't find us, she'll report us to the Exalted Council of Thought. They'll kill us for our escape, Mael."

"You have to stay calm."

"I know. I'm trying," she said. "Have we no other options?"

"We could return home and go to the Council, Oana. They might think we could be rehabilitated if we show up on our own."

"Do you really think so?"

"I think it's possible."

"I want to go home Mael. I've wanted to almost since we left. I miss everyone. The outside world is not a nice place for Cias. The Council was right to build the Great barrier."

“We might die...” said Mael in a flat voice.

“I know. It terrifies me, but being Demonica's slave is worse than death, I think.”

“We could still just leave. Even if Demonica really reports us to the Council, they may not think us worth tracking down. I mean, why haven't they done it before now?”

“They didn't know where to find us, perhaps?”

“Well, maybe. But if she doesn't know where we've gone, the Council won't either.”

“You have a point there, but I'd still rather go home, Mael. I'm not nearly as certain as you are that Demonica won't track us down in time. She has her scrying crystal for one thing. And when she does...”

“Not when, if.”

“Very well, if Demonica tracks us down, her wrath would be worse than the wrath of the Council. At least the Exalted Ones will grant us a merciful and quick death.”

“True enough. Then, I suppose we should head for the Barrier the moment Razzmorten's party moves on, which they are starting to do this very minute.”

“Shall we go, then?”

“If you are certain this is what you wish, there's no reason to stay.”

“I'm certain.”

“Home it is,” said Mael as they sprang from the bluff face and shot out of sight.

“How far do you think they could have gotten, Demonica?” said Spitemorta as she flung up her hand to deflect a choke oak branch.

“Too far. Or else we'd have them this minute,” said Demonica. “And it looks like you've lost their trail, again.”

“Yea, because you insisted on pressing on, last time we lost them, instead of taking time to pick up where they went on. Are those diatryma tracks down there? Never mind. I can see they're not,” she said, glancing back.

She turned forward just in time to fly into a huge python as it dropped from a choke oak. With a scream of terror she plummeted to the ground and rolled, bouncing through a thicket of briars, wound tight in the coils of the snake, spilling Demonica and the Staff as she went, belching out one lungful of gravelly scream after another as she fought to breathe. Ugleuh's death flashed in her mind as the snake grappled to reposition its coils around her throat.

After hitting her head against the ground three times hard enough to see stars, Demonica ended up on her feet, flailing her arms to a halt. Right in front of her was the Staff, sticking out of a gooseberry bush. She grabbed it up at once. At that very instant, the snake let go of Spitemorta and whipped out of sight into the leaves.

Spitemorta sat on the ground, heaving and whimpering from her trauma.

“You lost your stick, dear heart,” said Demonica, holding out the Staff. That was right odd, wasn't it?”

“The vile thing could have killed me,” shrieked Spitemorta, “and all you can say is that is was odd?”

“Now, are you dead or what? You're lucky. The snake cushioned your fall. Bet you don't have nearly the knots on your head that I have. Anyway, you needn't be so ruffled. I was getting ready to kill it.”

“After it broke how many of my bones?”

“Not many, I'm sure, but I'd have healed you as soon as the thing was dead...if you hadn't become overly disrespectful by then.”

Spitemorta rolled her eyes as she struggled to her feet, but she could see how it all was and grew quiet.

“Odd, odd, odd!” said Demonica.

“We were going awfully fast for a snake...”

“No, not that. It seemed to know what I was doing when I picked up the Staff.”

“What's so strange about that?” said Spitemorta. “The Peppermint Forest hasn't completely turned back to Chokewoods, so that could have been one of Ugleeuh's enchanted creatures who remembered the Staff.”

“I suppose you could be right, but if you are, there are an awful lot of ifs that just manage to work out.”

“How long do you think it will take to get back to the Dragon Caves from here, Fuzz?” said Myrtlebell, hanging onto Mary, as she and Lladder trotted alongside him.

“A good long day or two short ones.”

“I see.”

“Look, Myrtlebell,” said Fuzz, “I know you're anxious about Edward, but as Lladdwr and Ceidwad said, he couldn't be safer than he is with the dragons.”

“I know, Fuzz. I just miss him terribly, and in spite of the fact that I know he is safe, sometimes I get the awful feeling I'll never see him again.”

“It's just all you've been through, Myrtlebell. Now that the end of all this is in sight, I expect you're just having a hard time believing it.”

“Do you really think we've lost Demonica and Spitemorta, Fuzz?”

“It's been quiet for a long time, so maybe.”

She gave him a feeble smile and then fell back to ride beside Rose for awhile.

Rose waited for her to speak first.

“Rose, I'm not sure how to say this,” she said, as Lladdwr and Ceidwad took turns shaking their feathers. “I know we've never been anything like friends. In fact, I know that in the past I've treated you like...well, rather like, whole ass droppings.”

Rose nodded cautiously and waited.

“I just want you to know that I've come to realize how awful I was to you then. Oh, Fates! I was rotten to a lot of people, I'm sorry to say.” She bit her lip and looked at Rose. “I guess about the worst thing I ever did was make up all that about you being adopted.”

Rose looked away.

“Fates, Rose! I never meant it to go so far. I just wanted to split up you and James. I envied you so much.”

“You envied me?” said Rose with astonishment.

“You've no idea, Rose. I mean, you had James and I was so in love with him. He looked right through me. And when he talked about you, it's as though you were the perfect woman, created just for him and he was the luckiest person in the world. I couldn't understand it. Most people told me I was...” She looked away, flushing deeply.

“Prettier?” said Rose.

“Well my friends... Well, those who told me they were my friends told me, and of course I believed them. It made no sense to me. I was too young to know that a beautiful

face didn't mean that the world would fall at my feet, nor did I see how shallow and hateful my 'friends' happened to be. They were just like me.” She met Rose's startled eyes. “Well, I just wanted you to know that. I realize you can probably never forgive me, but I needed you to know how sorry I am.”

Rose stared at Myrtlebell, letting her words sink in. Directly, she reached out and put her hand on Myrtlebell's arm. “I appreciate your telling me all of that,” she said. “It was brave admitting all those things. And by the way, you were awful. And you're right, we were nothing like friends. And since we are being honest, I didn't like you or any of your crowd one bit.”

Myrtlebell dropped agape.

“I don't know if we'll ever be friends, but I do forgive you, and I would like to try to be. After all, if it hadn't been for you I'd never have met Fuzz.”

“Do you really mean that?” said Myrtlebell, brightening. “You'd be my friend?”

Rose nodded. “Fuzz and Lukus are right. You have changed. You're like a completely different person. I should've realized that when I met your little boy. No one as nasty as you used to be could have raised such a fine young fellow.”

Myrtlebell's eyes lit with adoration at the mention of Edward and Rose knew without a doubt that she'd not been false. Rose smiled at her and turned back to look at the path with a much lighter heart than she'd had for a very long time.

Chapter 22

“Now that we've gone for a tumble with your snake, we're really behind Razzmorten,” said Demonica between her teeth, as she picked the last of the leaves and twigs from her hair and felt of the knots on her head.

“I hardly volunteered, as you well know,” growled Spitemorta, as she gave up with a huff and yanked a stick out of her locks. “Besides, I don't see the problem. All we have to do is get on and go again. Bad as we spilt, we still haven't lost much time.”

“Every moment we waste is one too many at this point, particularly when Razzmorten has such a head start.”

“Who gave him the head start, Grandmother? Had we not wasted all that time waiting for your Cias...” She clamped shut at once thinking better of it. “Fates! She thought. It's impossible to stay civil with this woman.” At once she adjusted her delivery: “If the Cias had returned in a timely manner, we wouldn't be having this problem.”

“Yes,” said Demonica with a nod, “You know good and well that Razzmorten did something to keep them from coming back when they should have.” She looked at their surroundings, a large opening in the trees, and studied how they had tumbled to the ground in the brush which had grown up in the clearing. A woodpecker hammered a dead limb up in the trees, as a gentle heave of breeze rattled leaves all about. “Hold out the Staff and let's get going. Fly over the cursed bushes and get back under the trees.”

“As you say,” said Spitemorta, as she stepped over the Staff and paused for Demonica. “But why don't we just stay above the tops of the trees after we clear the briars and bushes? We could cover some ground quickly before we have to start looking again.”

“Actually, that's a good idea for just a little while. They've certainly been going steadily north-east, but we'll have to watch our business and keep checking the ground, even so.”

“They have been, but how do we know? It's been a good long while since we've seen anything. In fact, how do you know they're really ahead of us? Maybe they're not even going to the Dragon Caves.”

Demonica went silent.

“For once I've got her,” thought Spitemorta.

“As much as it pains me to say it, Spitemorta, you may actually be right, this time. Perhaps we should go back to Goll and figure out just how we are going to remove the Heart from the Niarg Treasury.”

“Yes. After all Grandmother, if you did it once, why not again? I'd think it might be easier the second time.”

“That, dear, is because you've never done it. Still, I do expect we can find a way.”

“Then, you've no objection if I fly straight for Goll?” she said, brightening at once.

“I suppose not, but I still have my hunch, so I want to fly the rest of the way to the Dragon Caves, just to see what we're going to see.”

Spitemorta rolled her eyes.

“No sign of the witches anywhere, Fuzz,” said Hubba Hubba as he and Pebbles landed on Arwr's head, bringing him to a jogging halt. “It's really beginning to look like

we've lost 'em at last.”

“You could be right, Hubba Hubba,” said Fuzz as Tors came puffing up with Ceidwad and Lladdwr. “That would really be something if the only way they had of catching us was that one Cia which Razzmorten's got bottled up in his head. Well, if he can just hang onto him until we get near the Dragon Caves, we'll make it.”

“That sounds too good to be true,” said Rose as she shifted her seat on Ceidwad. “But if you really think we've slipped away from Spitemorta and Demonica, do you think we could stop and rest and maybe fix a bite to eat? Besides, I think Grandfather and Mary could use a little time not being carried around like two old sacks of flour. I guess I'm asking to make camp early if it's not foolish.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Fuzz. “We'll scratch our heads as we keep our eyes open.”

“I know of a hollow with a big shale overhang a good piece up ahead,” said Tors. “The way the big rocks are strewn about would be just dandy for our purposes.”

“Show us the way,” said Fuzz, after trading looks all round.

At once they were under way, following Tors and Lukus, crunching and rustling through golden choke oak leaves that were now starting to fall in earnest, leaving oblique beams of bright afternoon sun to splotch and speckle the trunks of the trees. Here and there a frenzy of jays made the woods ring with their cries. After a time they followed the length of a long low hogback for a good distance before angling down the face of it to travel along beside another branch of the Fairy Creek. Above the treetops, a pair of crows traded caws as they winged across the hollow. Rock bluff faces reared up, forming a wall along one side of the creek bottom.

Suddenly Tors started sprinting.

“We're here!” hollered Lukus over his shoulder as he waved both arms.

In short order they all gathered beneath the black shale ledge that thrust out above a tumble of boulders.

Myrtlebell gave a sigh of deliverance as she dismounted and began unloading Mary before Lladdwr had quite settled onto his keel. “I have no feeling at all in my leg,” she said, dancing where she stood. “Mary's been lying across it since we started this morning.”

“Ouch,” said Lukus in sympathy, as Tors gave her a hand with Mary.

“Every single minute,” said Myrtlebell.

Lukus helped Fuzz get Razzmorten off Arwr while Rose rushed to make a comfortable place for him and Mary back against the rocks. Myrtlebell came limping to help. Once they had them laid out, they set about gathering wood and water for supper. Due to peculiar air currents, they decided to put their supper fire beyond some large boulders, so that Razzmorten and Mary wouldn't have to breathe the whirling smoke.

By the time the shadows were growing long, they had feasted on a stew of the very last of the potatoes and corned buttox which they had been carrying since they left the Dragon Caves.

Fuzz sat back against a rock and looked at the sky. “This is a great place to camp, even if it does mean a longer day tomorrow,” he said.

“I've spent the night here different times,” said Tors. “It'll even keep you dry in a rain, unless the wind's in the south.”

“Speaking of longer day,” said Lukus, “how much farther is it to the Dragon Caves?”

“We ought to get there by this time tomorrow, at least,” said Tors.

“Good,” said Rose. “I’m going to see to Grandfather.”

“And I’m going to look at Mary,” said Myrtlebell.

“Do you reckon that we are to look at the dishes?” said Fuzz to Lukus and Tors.

Lukus rolled his eyes and turned aside to Tors. “He’s kind o’ slow, isn’t he?” he said with grin.

“Must not have quite adjusted to his change from a grumpy old bear,” said Tors.

“Grumpy?” said Fuzz. “Why, I was a very easy going bear.”

Lukus rose with a laugh and began scraping plates as Tors went to the creek for water.

“I guess that’s all I can do for you right now, Grandfather,” said Rose, as she stood and turned to Myrtlebell to see if she needed help with Mary.

Myrtlebell smiled at Rose. “I guess I’ve done all I can for Mary, too,” she said as she tucked a lock of hair behind Mary’s ear. “I feel so helpless.”

“Me too.”

Devi listened keenly. He was desperate to hear of any sign of pursuit from Demonica or of Oana and Mael. He fervently hoped not. Razzmorten’s being had fallen into deep sleep right away after the last mind reading by Ceidwad, but not knowing what was going on outside kept Devi from leaving, even so. “If I just knew where Mael and Oana were, I’d switch bodies, grab the Heart and be long gone,” he thought. “Then once I had it, I’d hunt down Demonica and Spitemorta. At least I’m safe in here for now.” He continued straining to hear Rose and Myrtlebell’s conversation.

“Well,” said Myrtlebell, “I guess we should join the others.”

“Yea, I suppose,” said Rose with a chuckle. “Do you think they’ve finished the dishes yet?”

“Well then. Perhaps we should give them a little more time.”

“I’ve an even better idea,” said Rose with dancing eyes. “Do you suppose the creek’s deep enough for a swim? I’d love to wash off this sweat before bed.”

“I don’t expect it’s more than just deep enough for a good wade, Rose. Maybe we could find a place or two deep enough to sit or even lie down in it.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Let’s,” said Myrtlebell.

“I’ll ask Hubba Hubba and Pebbles to come along so they can keep a lookout for us.”

“Good idea. Is there anything you want me to do while you’re at it, Rose?”

“Oh, maybe grab some towels from my panniers, right beside Grandfather, and the bar of soap, too, if you don’t mind.” Rose strode to the top of the swell that lay beyond the overhang. There she saw Hubba Hubba and Pebbles perched in a small ironwood tree, carrying on a lively conversation with Fuzz, Tors and Lukus, who each sat out of sight beyond a great boulder. She caught their eye and nodded, then turned away to go back.

“Hey Rose,” called out Hubba Hubba, causing her to pivot back again. “You look like you...” Suddenly he and Pebbles exploded wide eyed from the tree and flew madly along the ground to vanish into the brush.

Rose looked up in stunned horror to see Spitemorta and Demonica swooping through the hollow on the Great Staff. Everyone was on his feet, running in all directions. White

hot fire shot through her as she furiously sprinted for Razzmorten and Myrtlebell.

Tors dove aside, knocking Lukus out of the way of a crackling lavender bolt of fire from Demonica's fingertips. Ceidwad, Lladdwr and Arwr bounded zigzagging to the overhang to protect Mary and Razzmorten.

Spitemorta made a great loop through the air and swooped back for another pass, aiming the Staff at Rose.

Demonica discharged bolt after bolt into bursts of flying rocks and dirt as she failed to hit Fuzz, who now ran beside Rose.

Lukus furiously let fly a rock with his sling as he leaped onto Tors's back. His stone beamed Spitemorta's forehead, knocking awry her bolt of fire enough to barely graze

Rose's shoulder. Rose screamed and stumbled. Fuzz grabbed her hand yanking her along. "Don't stop!" he cried.

Tors roared, belching out a fiery blast as Spitemorta and Demonica climbed straight up into the air, beyond the reach of his flames. They flipped backwards and dropped with a sweeping plunge toward the overhang. Myrtlebell screamed, dropping the soap and towels the moment she turned to see them plummeting from the sky.

Devi threw open Razzmorten's eyes at the sound of the pandemonium. "I've run out of time!" he cried, flinging himself out into the air. Myrtlebell was standing right there. He shot behind her eye, right into her head. She put up no struggle at all. Her being still blinked in dazzled confusion from the fringes of her head as he reached inside Razzmorten's robe and snatched the Heart. He picked up her skirts and ran. He would not likely have a choice. He would have to make do with the smattering he had learnt when he had been in the Heart for that fleeting moment.

Rose and Fuzz saw that he had the Heart and came for him.

"Myrtlebell!" shouted Fuzz as he sprang toward her. "What in all Fates' name are you doing?"

Devi looked up to see that Demonica and Spitemorta were nearly upon him. He could see their smug faces now. He held out the Heart to blast them and tripped on a choke oak root. The blood red jewel glowed with mad brilliance, vibrating as it prepared to release its terrible energies, lighting up Devi's look of wonder on Myrtlebell's face as he tumbled forward.

Panic grabbed Demonica and Spitemorta as they felt the throbbing power building in the Heart. "Up! Pull up!" screamed Demonica.

Spitemorta jerked aside the Staff and swept them into a dead vertical climb. The Heart belched out a ruby bolt that missed them, as an ear-ringing concussion turned the sky red, flinging them end over end for a good league into the heavens. The moment she came to at a dead fall, drool whipping from her chin with Demonica still hanging on behind her, she shot back to the hollow in a furious rage along the very path they had been thrown, going straight for Myrtlebell. She was back over the hollow in moments, bearing right down on Myrtlebell who was just picking herself up from the ground. "You've had this coming your whole life!" she shrieked as she came straight at her with the Staff.

Myrtlebell's head exploded like a petard, pounding out a concussion that echoed away through the hollow, as the rest of her slumped into a pile of tinkling ash. The Heart hit the earth with a porcelain clink and rolled to a stop under the very root that had tripped her.

“No!” screamed Rose and Fuzz together. Fuzz froze in horrified disbelief as Rose dashed to her cinders.

Tors sprang into their midst from under the cliff. “Now! Now, Lukus!” he cried. “Get off and get Fuzz to help with Mary and Razzmorten! I’ll get Rose!”

“Now!” shouted Lukus, as he leaped off Tors and grabbed Fuzz by the arm.

“They’re on their way back to finish us!”

“Rose!” cried Fuzz.

“Tors got her! Let’s go!”

Fuzz suddenly snapped awake and dashed after Lukus to where Arwr, Lladdwr and Ceidwad waited on their keels by Razzmorten and Mary.

“Get on!” said Tors.

Rose looked up at him, then turned away to Myrtlebell’s ashes.

“Get on, Rose!” He swung his head eye to eye with her. “There’s nothing you can do for her now Rose, but there is something you can do for Razzmorten,” he said softly.

“Now!” he barked, bouncing with his front legs.

“Take me!” she suddenly squealed, throwing her leg over his back.

“Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!” screamed Demonica, as Spitemorta steered the Staff into another sweeping climb as she got ready to take out someone else. “You’ve destroyed the Heart! You’ve destroyed Kalon Bras!”

“Better it than us, Grandmother!” spat Spitemorta. “I still have the Staff and I’m going to use it to destroy every last one of those cachu ci.” And with that she swept down, pointing the Staff at Rose and Tors. “I’ve got you now, you perfect little twit...!” she laughed out, until she suddenly choked with a seizure of strangulation.

“Stop your attack this second!” growled Demonica. “Or you’ve had the last breath you ever will!”

Spitemorta worked her mouth like a frantic fish but refused to change her course.

“Now!” roared Demonica.

Finally, Spitemorta pulled up on the Staff and sent them hurtling towards the clouds, gasping in great breaths of air as they rose. “I am going to kill her,” she thought. “First chance I get.”

“I told you before, Razzmorten is mine!”

“Razzmorten!” cried Spitemorta. “Pooh on Razzmorten! I had the trollop of Niarg in sight and you made me lose her! Why didn’t you kill that damned wizard when you were married to him and been done with it?”

“Would you enjoy watching your tongue fall to the ground before your very eyes, dearest Granddaughter?”

“Fine, Grandmother! What then, are your plans? Now that we have them at our mercy, are we flying straightaway to Goll just because the Heart slipped through your fingers?”

“My fingers, dear?” said Demonica incredulously. “Razzmorten’s mine! Do whatever you like with the rest!”

Spitemorta sat up with a grin and pointed the Staff to plunge for the overhang once more. Rose and Tors were nowhere to be seen. “Of course!” she hissed. “They’re all hiding under the rocks! Ha! Fools!” She flew by the rocks.

“Do you see them anywhere?” said Demonica, as she strained to see into the rocks.

“No, nowhere!”

“They couldn't have gone far! Slow down!” said Demonica as she studied the ground. “It can't be!” she screeched.

“What?” said Spitemorta.

“Turn around!” shouted Demonica, bouncing on the Staff.

“What do you mean?”

“Do it now!”

Spitemorta made a tight circle, low over the ground.

“There! Land there!” cried Demonica, bouncing with glee as she pointed to the ground. At once she sprang from the Staff, running to squat by a gnarled root. She hesitated before grabbing up something in trembling hands. She whirled to her feet with a look of triumphant madness as she held aloft the Heart of the Staff, pulsing with blood-red light.

Spitemorta could not touch it at first. She stared in thunderstricken awe. Oh, she most certainly desired it, but as she beheld it she wondered: “Can one truly control such a thing, or does it control the one who wields it?”

Arwr, Lladdwr and Ceidwad ran full speed, leaving Tors in their wake. They each knew the way, and if Demonica and Spitemorta caught them they would be dead.

Tors could smell the swamp. He paused from time to time, listening for any sound of pursuit, relief flooding him each time he heard none. “Sorry I'm slow!” he panted. “You should've gone on with the others. If they get anyone, it'll be us.”

“I doubt it,” said Lukus. “The light's neigh gone and the diatrymas are going to be moving at a crawl. They'd roost right where they stand if we weren't fleeing for our lives.”

“I'm roosty myself, Lukus. Just how are they going to manage in the dark? They'll be stumbling all over the place at least, and I'm not sure if they're even able stay awake at night.”

“Fear and need,” said Lukus. “They won't stop until we're all in the swamp. Bet ye, even if it's pitch black and they do hate it in there.”

“I can take over in there. We can hide there for a very long time and never be found.”

“I know that for a fact, Tors. Spark showed us that. But I'm hoping we don't have to hide for long.”

“Hopefully we can just go on across to the Dragon Caves. Too bad you all and the diatrymas can't hold your breath as we do.”

“Yea. I remember Spark swimming underwater for an incredible length of time.”

“Right.” said Tors. “Hey! I think that must be Rose and Fuzz.”

“Didn't I tell you?”

Shortly Tors had caught up with everyone.

“How much further, Tors?” said Hubba Hubba from atop Razzmorten. “We need to roost, here.”

“Very close. Right up yonder,” said Tors.

“You think there's a place for us to bed down for the night in all that muck?” said Lladdwr.

“Absolutely,” said Tors. “Your feathers will even be dry by sunrise.”

“I am boundlessly comforted,” said Lladdwr.

“Well, if that doesn't suit you, at least we escaped the witches.”

“Now that,” rumbled Lladdwr, “suits me. We may just survive this journey.”
“We just may,” said Tors.

Chapter 23

“So, Grandmother,” said Spitemorta. “What do we do now? Go to Goll or finish off those gwrteithiau?”

“Oh my dear,” said Demonica lightly, as she fondled the Heart. “I do believe we've already finished them off. They simply haven't realized it yet.”

“Like unto a snake with his head chopped off, wiggling all day until sunset, aye?”

“Exactly so,” said Demonica, surprising Spitemorta with a rare look of approval.

“Then,” said Spitemorta, stepping astride the Staff, “we're off to Goll.”

Demonica paused for a last glimpse of the Heart, wrapped it tenderly in a silk scarf and slipped it inside her robe. “We mustn't be rash, even if we do have this,” she said as she threw her leg across the Staff. “Returning to Goll is one thing, flying in on the Staff is quite another.”

“Then, we just make certain that we fly in after dark.”

“Won't do,” said Demonica shaking her head. “We'd not be seen by whole crowds of people, that way, but rest assured that lots of people would still spot us and know just exactly who we were. You said yourself that flying about in front of your subjects was a bad idea, and we both know that I remember right.”

“But I want to go home.”

“And you will. But first, we need return to Bushman the Bear's cave for our mounts, so that we can return just the way we left. And you look sullen, dear. You mean you don't mind if your subjects suddenly begin comparing you to your crazy mother? They will. If we fly in it's certain.”

“All right, Demonica. You've made your point. To the bear's den it is.”

“Ah, good. You're going to be reasonable.”

Spitemorta set her jaw and launched the Staff into the night. “It's quite dark,” she said, “are you sure we can find it?”

“Of course. You have the Staff.”

“The Staff? Are you suggesting that I just tell it where I want it to take us? Is that it?”

“Why yes, dear,” said Demonica airily. “Why don't you try that?”

“Ugleeuh never did that. That's why.”

Demonica shook her head. “All that your formidable mother knew about the Staff she learnt on her own by trial and error.”

“Very well. Then Staff, take us to the bear's den, where Nightshade and Gwenole await, as fast as you can,” she commanded.

The Staff responded immediately, shooting off on a new course without hesitation. “It worked!” gasped Spitemorta.

“Fancy that,” said Demonica as she leant forward to keep out of the wind, concentrating on not getting sick. The ground was going by much faster than she had imagined possible.

Spitemorta found the speed of the Staff exhilarating. “Had I known this thing was this fast, we might have finished this Heart business and been back in Goll long ago,” she thought. “Demonica's too quiet. I'd better talk to her before she thinks of something else to delay us. Ha! She's probably so terrified of this wild ride that she can't think at all.”

She glanced back at her. “You've certainly been quiet, Grandmother,” she said.

“Yes,” said Demonica, sounding altogether calm. I've much to think about.”

“That's all you're going to say?” said Spitemorta irritably.

“Yes...for now.”

Spitemorta stopped short. She refused to be baited into asking more, in spite of her burning curiosity.

“It's gettin' 'way too dark to see anything,” said Hubba Hubba. “How much further to where we can get out of this stinking brown soup and roost, Tors?”

“What's your complaint?” said Tors “You're perfectly snug and dry up there on Fuzz's shoulder.”

“Yea? Well, I'm concerned for our companions, ye know. I don't just think of myself. And they're not only soaked, they're about to drop, in case you haven't noticed.”

“You think I caused this?” said Tors.

“I think...!” squawked Hubba Hubba, growing quite loud.

“Enough!” said Lukus, catching himself with a splash as he felt through the muck beneath the water. “Bickering makes it worse.”

“Shhh!” said Fuzz. “He's right. And Demonica and Spitemorta could swoop down on us again and we'd never hear them. If they do, we're dead.”

“Sorry,” said Hubba Hubba. “I get irritable when I don't roost on time.”

“Oh, feathers are supposed to be like that,” said Fuzz. “But I think each one of us is pretty much on edge, right now.”

“Except for me,” gritted Taflu jubilantly, as he crawled out from beneath Razzmorten's robe, where he had been fast asleep. “Night's my time o' day. I'm getting right hungry, though. Wouldn't mind filling up on some nice half ass blood.”

“Well, we haven't seen or heard anything from the witches,” said Fuzz with a scratch of his head. “If you don't mind waiting until we reach our campsite, you could go hunt then. In the meantime, could you put us at ease and scout around a bit and let us know if you see any signs of them?”

“Sure thing, Fuzz. If I don't see them, do you want me to go back to where they ambushed us and see if they're still there?”

“No point in that. It wouldn't make any difference if they were. It's whether or not they're on their way here that we're worried about. That's a long way, and you've done more than enough for us. You deserve to be about your own affairs.”

“What ever you think, Fuzz, feel free to let me know. If it truly looks like the old harridans are gone for good, I'd like to return to the cave. I miss the others, even if they're no longer enchanted. Besides, I'd like to make sure Hedfan and Flit made it. They're not too bright anymore, ye know.”

Fuzz smiled. “Yea, Taflu. That sounds like a fine idea to me, too.”

“There!” called Tors, at the sight of a small jut of land in the feeble moonlight. That's our campsite!”

“Thank the Fates,” said Rose, as Lladdwr quickened his plunging steps.

Soon they were collapsing onto the dry sandy beach at the mouth of a small, babbling creek. A barred owl boomed nearby, answering the calls of others far away.

“Well, I wouldn't want to set up housekeeping here,” said Lukus, “but it certainly appears to be all Tors said it was. And with there being enough leaves overhead yet to keep out the moonlight this way, they won't find us if we don't have a fire.”

“Oh, it's warm enough we don't need one,” said Fuzz.

Everyone seemed spiritless to Lukus. Myrtlebell's horrible death haunted them. Even in the dark, he was sure he could see pain in Fuzz's eyes. “How will he ever explain her death to poor little Edward?” he thought. He knew it was on everyone's mind, even though no one spoke of it.

“Well, I'll scout around, then,” chirped Taflu. “Don't you dare light a fire.”

“Don't worry, Taflu,” said Fuzz. “The ambush will keep me not feeling safe enough for a fire until we've been in the Dragon Caves for a good long while.”

“Good,” said Taflu as he vanished into the air.

They nibbled at dried fruit and cheese, though, no one had much of an appetite. Tors took the first watch and one by one they fell asleep.

“I see the bear's den,” said Spitemorta just before dawn. “And look 'ee there. Nightshade and Gwenole are grazing as calmly as if we'd stayed with them this whole time.”

“As I expected. Just land far enough away from them to keep from spooking them.”

“I'm not stupid, you know.”

“Oh I know that dear, though you are customarily thoughtless.”

Spitemorta held back her retort and landed so that Demonica took the brunt of it.

Demonica however, hopped off as if she had noticed nothing at all. She pulled out the Heart and reverently unwrapped it. She laid it on the ground and stood back with a nod. “Blast it with the Staff,” she commanded.

“What?” said Spitemorta, certain she had heard wrong. “You thick o' hearing, girl? I said blast it with the Staff...like you wanted to smash it.”

“But it'll be destroyed!”

“Maybe...”

“But...”

“Blast it!” thundered Demonica.

Blast it she did. The Staff thoroughly pelted them with dirt and stones, knocking them down and blowing out a hole big enough for the two of them to bathe in together. When the debris stopped raining down through the trees all around, they cautiously peered into the hole to find the Heart resting on the bottom, glowing with blinding red brilliance.

“Ha!” shouted Demonica. “It is indestructible! It is Kalon Bras!”

“So what?” said Spitemorta, eyeing her warily.

“One must test these things to be certain, dear. It survived. It is indeed the real Heart of the Staff.” She tapped her cheek. “And especially since it did, then I suppose the rest of the stories are also true...”

“The rest of the stories?” said Spitemorta with alarm. “I think, Grandmother, once we've fished the Heart out of the hole, we need to have a discussion.”

“Oh, I couldn't agree more,” said Demonica buoyantly, as she scooted down into the crater. She carefully rewrapped the Heart and clambered out, motioning for Spitemorta to follow her inside Fuzz's den. She turned upright Fuzz's upholstered chair and made herself comfortable in it, motioning for Spitemorta to sit nearby. “According to accounts that I now feel I can take seriously, the Heart is vulnerable only to the unique magic of a

kind of wizard who is half Elf and half Human. It was such a wizard who created the Stone Heart, and only such a wizard can destroy it.

“As you may know, Elves and Humans have not married one another for several ages. In fact, such marriages were outlawed after it was discovered that the first's wizard's incredible magical power was made possible by the union itself. That union, in fact, gave rise to all wizards and sorceresses in the first place.”

“Then the Heart's indestructible,” said Spitemorta. “I can rule the entire world with it! I'll be unstoppable!”

“Yes, with my help of course,” said Demonica as her eyes narrowed. “That is unless someone like Razzmorten, perhaps, knows the stories as well as I do.”

“Razzmorten again. If you think I'm going on a wild goose chase to catch your estranged husband after all this, think again. I'm going home.”

“Let's hear it for the rouanez bras!” cheered Demonica, clapping her hands before her voice suddenly frosted over. “You need a keener grasp of just how things are, dear. It is most unwise of you to start telling me what you will and will not do. I still have the Heart in my possession after all and as we both have seen, the Heart needs no staff to be employed. However,” she said, holding up a hand to head off Spitemorta's certain outburst, “I quite agree. Razzmorten and company are no doubt completely inconvenient at the moment, even with the incredible speeds which we now know the Staff is capable of.”

“You've made your point, Grandmother, but you're still getting at something. “What is it?”

“We must be certain that mating and marriage between the Elves and Humans remains forbidden, of course.”

“I'm afraid we're a bit too late.”

“Speak plainly.”

“Prince Lukus of Niarg wed an Elven princess, the granddaughter to King Neron, himself, a little over a year ago.”

“Why did you not tell me this before?” hissed Demonica.

“I thought you knew. You seem privy to everything. Besides, how was I to know it had any importance? It isn't as though you'd told me any of this.”

“Then we shall just have to see to it that they produce no offspring,” she said as her face darkened with fury. “In fact, it may be best to eliminate Elves altogether.” She looked at Spitemorta with the expression of a flattened eared cat. “Is it not true that the Elves are currently confined to some small area on the continent?”

“Well, small territory but not exactly 'confined,' Grandmother. “They live in the Jutwoods of their own free will. They seldom leave, but again that's because it's what they choose.”

“Who cares about their own free will, Spitemorta? It suits us that they're all collected in one spot. The smaller the territory, the more easily exterminated.”

“This is beginning to sound like fun, Grandmother,” she said with a bounce.

“I rather thought you'd get into the spirit of things, dear. But I think we'd best move on. We've plans to lay and I'm sure your handsome husband and darling little one are becoming most anxious over your protracted absence.”

Taflu waited in the choke oak tree where he had perched when he heard voices coming from inside Fuzz's den. Once Demonica and Spitemorta had sauntered out of

sight on their unicorns, he flung himself into the light of day and fluttered furiously on his way to find Fuzz. He fervently hoped that Razzmorten and Mary had awakened by the time he got there.

Mary opened her eyes to the whistles and nasal babble of some geese feeding and dabbling in the water a few rods away in the faint light before sunrise. Beyond the points of her toes, draped with dew covered wool, a soft shelled turtle followed another one the length of a log, off into the water. Jays traded calls like rusty swings in a school yard. There were Ceidwad and Lladdwr huddled beside her. And was this Arwr? She had not seen him for a very long time. She sat up slowly, looking all about. Razzmorten lay sleeping deeply nearby. Fuzz was snoring softly next to Lukus and Tors, and Rose was staring quietly out across the swamp. Myrtlebell was nowhere to be seen. Mary rose to her knees and then tried standing up.

“You're awake,” said Rose quietly as she sprang to her feet and scurried softly across the sand to help Mary onto her wobbly legs.

Mary was already alert enough to catch Rose's flicker of disappointment crossing her face as she glanced aside at Razzmorten, who was still out cold. She helped Mary to a large rock where she sank gratefully and caught her breath.

“How long have I been out?” said Mary.

“An eternity,” said Rose with a pained hint of a smile. “But it's not even been a week.” Her blue eyes were dark with a look of haunted exhaustion.

“What has happened?”

Rose looked at the ground and drew in a deep breath that remembered sobs. “Myrtlebell is dead,” she said as she looked Mary in the eye. “And the Heart is destroyed.”

Mary gasped, but saw at once that Rose was not yet able to cope with the horrid details. Ceidwad and Lladdwr would give her an exact report. She put her arm around her and they sat silently staring into the swamp as the sun and the rest of the company arose.

Razzmorten did not awaken. After a short reunion with the rest of the companions and a meager breakfast of cheese and dried fruit, they set out for the final leg of their journey to the Dragon Caves. Mary rode on Ceidwad a discrete distance behind the others, listening to her detailed accounts of Myrtlebell's death and of everything else that had happened to them while she had been asleep.

Conversation amongst the others was scant and strained as they rode, consisting of little else but complaints at having to wade through water and muck again. Great white egrets lunged into the air from a cypress and pumped into the distance. Yellow choke oak leaves swirled and bobbed on the glassy water like swarms of wee bucking gondolas as ripples spread out from everyone's splashing steps.

“Fuzz,” said Rose, “how are you ever going to tell Edward?”

Fuzz looked away from her at once and was quiet for a good while as Lladdwr and Arwr kept up their steady tiptoeing strides through the water.

Everyone was listening.

“I don't know,” he said at last before falling silent. No one spoke again for a long time. The climbing sun turned the swamp into a steam bath.

“Think it's time for us to scout around a bit, Fuzz?” said Hubba Hubba.

“Might be a good idea,” said Fuzz with a nod, “but don't go too far.”

“Right,” said Hubba Hubba, as he and Pebbles leaped into the air. They returned in short order, landing on Tors's head..

“No news on the witches, Fuzz,” said Hubba Hubba. “The skies are clear of everything except your everyday avian life. And guess what?”

“I'm too spent to even imagine...”

“We're here!”

“Boy, don't I know.”

“No, Fuzz. We're here at the Dragon Caves. Look through the trees.”

“Look!” cried Lukus. “Up ahead. We made it!”

“Well, so we have,” said Fuzz.

By the time the weary travelers entered Spark and Lipperella's noisy alcove, every dragon within sight had been alerted to their coming.

It was no surprise then when hopeful little Edward drug a jovially protesting Spark to the entrance to meet them. Edward's bounding joy turned wide eyed as he frantically looked over the returning party. Suddenly he lunged into Spark's arms and sobbed his heart out.

Chapter 24

Inney carefully put away the birthday gifts which she had received for her seventh naming day (ninety-ninth birthday) in the small shed which she would call home for the next several years. Most of her presents would not be used for some time except for the hamper, where her downy eyas would sleep and grow into the shawk spooch or strike falcon who would be her companion for the rest of her life.

Of course, she would at once fasten the jesses and bells to his legs in preparation for the day she would use the swivel and leash. She would have to get him used to wearing the rufter hood right away as well, or at least as soon as he would allow her to touch him without shying away, since it was one of the most important training tools an Elven astringa had.

She studied her eyas as he in turn watched every single movement of hers with keen orange eyes from the straw of his hamper by her bed. "Sizing me up, are you, Sheshey?" she said. "I hope you approve of what you see because you've got me for good." She washed her hands in the small basin as she was told to do before handling him.

"Well, time to get acquainted." She picked up the special feather from Tramman's shawk spooch, Jeelys and approached, talking reassuringly to him. Slowly she touched him with it for the first time.

He trembled just enough to notice, but did not jerk away as she knew many new ones do. Thus encouraged, she stroked him generously. He was quite wary at first, but he never jumped or pulled away. With a smile of delight, she put away the feather for the time being.

A knock on the door announced that Tramman had arrived with feed. He was a master astringa who had been assigned her mentor. He and his shawk spooch, Jeelys, had been together for ten years already.

"Come in Tramman!" she called out.

The door opened vigorously as the youthful Elf entered, smiling as he handed her a pail of freshly cubed lean beef.

She gave the whistle she had decided upon as she took a piece of the meat and passed it by Sheshey's face.

"Well you'll never be called Ooree again," said Tramman. "So now that you're Inney forever, what'll you call him?"

"He will be Sheshey, I think," said Inney as she began feeding the eyas piece after piece of meat. "Don't you think it suits him?"

"Your mate, aye?" said Tramman with a sincere nod. "It seems right appropriate."

Inney nodded and then froze to listen with a look of horror as screams suddenly broke out all around outside the eyas shed.

"Hide," ordered Tramman, as he rushed to fling aside the throw rug and lift the trapdoor to the cellar made for this very purpose.

Inney did not have to be told twice. She snatched up Sheshey in his box and flew down the steps and into the cellar. She lit the oil lamp and turned to see if Tramman had come down, just as the trapdoor closed. He stayed above. She listened to him dragging her bed across the floor to better hide the way to where she was. Somehow she knew he would join the battle. She prayed the Fates would spare him and Jeelys. They were the best team of their clan and were both her friends. She sat on the cot that would be her bed tonight if the battle went long and pulled Sheshey's box close to her.

Inney felt a wave of fear and pain as she remembered a particular raid that the Marooderyn Imshee or Elf Killers, a kind of troll, had made on her clan when she was seventy-one (five for an Elf). They took many women and children including her, along with her own mother and baby brother. She had been one of the few lucky ones to be rescued by the clan's austringas and strike falcons, but not before she'd had the horror of watching her mother and brother cooked alive and then eaten. She knew she would always live with the nightmare. She wondered who would die this time.

With his sword drawn, Tramman threw open the door of the eyas shed just in time for Jeelys to knock down and rip open one of the Marooderyn Imshee right in the doorway.

Jeelys spun around and pounced on another troll. The one in the doorway staggered up onto a knee, intestines hanging, as he drew back his spear to hurl at Jeelys.

Tramman ran him through at the shoulder blades with his claymore, then had to draw back and run to jump across his huge carcass to get outside.

By now Jeelys had thoroughly ripped apart the second troll and with a rasping shriek had just knocked down a third.

Tramman looked around wildly and dashed off after a Marooderyn Imshee who had just snatched up a little girl. With furious rage he leaped and planted a foot in the small of the troll's back and cleaved his head with a ringing two handed swing of his claymore. The child tore away screaming, drenched in the brute's blood.

Tramman immediately wheeled aside to help his master Olloo, who was bleeding badly from his shoulder while being set upon by a particularly huge Marooderyn Imshee.

With a decisive roar, the troll knocked the sword from Olloo's hand and drew back his mace to make his kill.

Tramman sliced off the troll's arm just above the elbow.

The troll swung 'round, his eyes ablaze with fury, blood pumping from his stump, as he thrust forth with a spear in his remaining hand, taking Tramman by surprise.

He stumbled, catching himself on his elbows, losing his sword as he fell.

As the troll drew back the spear to finish him, Olloo slashed the brute deeply across his back. At once Jeelys slammed into him feet first, knocking him down and disemboweling him, then ripping open his throat with his beak.

Tramman rose on wobbly legs and stood beside Olloo. They studied the grizzly remains of their attackers as Jeelys gave the last troll a final shake for good measure and turned his bloody beak to snap up a stray piece of Elf Killer meat clinging to Tramman's hair. Satisfied that Tramman was indeed unharmed, he stood on the troll's remains and set to work, preening the ichor of battle from his feathers.

Tramman let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He noticed how eerily still things had become and glanced about warily to see if the enemy was entirely gone. "I can't believe that they attacked with this much daylight," he said. "Have you seen them do this before?"

"Not since the one time when I was younger than you," said Olloo as he clapped his arm around Tramman's shoulders. "This gives us the opportunity of a lifetime. Obbee saw the Big Butcher amongst the first wave of them. Come. We must gather the austringas and the regular army and find their stinking cave."

"But it's going to be dark right soon. The strike falcons won't come and the light will be entirely gone, long before we reach the mountains."

“We won't need the falcons, and all we need is to see just how they entered Maidenhair Woods to figure out their cave. Besides, there's going to be a full moon. We've had this strategy waiting for months. Just get moving.”

Tramman knew he was lucky to get this much out of Olloo. He immediately took Jeelys to the mews and hurried to the council house where he found Olloo and the other astringas and some of the regular army. At once the astringas were on the trail of the Elf Killers. The regular army, known to them as Yn Armee Hassooagh, followed slowly in their wake, quietly hauling along a disassembled siege engine. They covered almost two leagues, running over the table-flat Strah, through the ten foot tall big blue stem grass before the light failed. Nearly a league remained between them and the woods and mountains, but by the looks of things the trolls had done all of the furtive switching of directions that they were going to during their first league out from Balley Cheerey, and now their trail was heading for the woods in a straight line. They would search for the nearest cave straight into the woods. Yn Armee Hassooagh would wait for them outside the woods in the edge of the Strah.

Beyond a narrow border of briar and rose thicket, the Maidenhair Woods reared up abruptly at the feet of the Eternal Mountains or Sleityn Beayn. Here, Olloo, Trammen and Obbree left the other astringas to wait for Yn Armee while they entered the woods to scout for the Marooderyn Imshee encampment. They had to be most cautious for fear of being spotted by the trolls, who could see far better in the dark than any Elves. They were in luck, for before long Tramman spotted a light high up on a slope that rose out of a clearing, which turned out to a cooking fire at the mouth of a large cavern occupied by trolls. Tramman was sent ahead to investigate. He crept his way up the slope to some bushes to behold in horror the trolls gathered around the fire, feasting on the roasted carcasses of the three children they had stolen away from the village well in Balley Cheerey. He crawled away as quick and as far as he could so that he would not be heard. “Cursed drogh spyrrdyn!” he said, coughing on his vomit. “Rotten devils!”

Tramman found Olloo and Obbree and they returned with his news to a most grim-faced group of astringas at the edge of the Strah.

“I hope we kill every one of those oainjeragh,” said Daaney, a gnarly faced Elf with coal black hair. His heated pronouncement was met with a round of hearty agreement, but they all lapsed into silence. No one really wanted to talk about it.

“Children!” thought Tramman as he gave a convulsive shudder, trying to control his fury. “Children! Those monsters are eating innocent children.” He glanced aside at Olloo and saw by the tear tracks on his master's grimy cheeks that he had been having his own reactions to this atrocity. He clenched his fists and pounded the dirt where he squatted, silently vowing to make every one of the foul beasts suffer and die that he could. And how he hoped the Fates would grant that it would be a good many of them.

“We needed to be afoot to track, but no unicorns was an oversight,” said Olloo. “Three leagues is a long run this night to be back by sunrise with our shawkyn spoothey. Let's go.”

When the astringas arrived back at Balley Cheerey it felt as though it had an air of morbid expectancy about it. “Of course,” thought Tramman grimly. “None of them ever believed we'd get back with the little tykes. They've only waited for affirmation so they can get on with mourning.” He felt a hot shot of anger surge through him.

“Olloo,” said Tramman quietly, as if he were speaking out at a funeral, which he

practically was.

“Yes?”

“Should I release Inney from her cellar, or wait?”

“Tell her to stay until we return again. The Marooderyn Imshee might follow us back to here once we've done our deed. She'd better stay put.”

Tramman nodded as he and Obbree headed for the eyas shed to look in on Inney on their way to the mews.

In less than an hour the astringas, clad in black spiked leather with their claymores across their backs, assembled in the square astride their short legged Doolish unicorns, holding onto leashes fastened to the jesses on the legs of their restless shawkyn spooghey. “We go this morrow to feed our bond-mates troll flesh!” cried Olloo, as he drew forth his claymore with a ring. At once the entire squad bolted away into the dark with the red glow of dawn at their backs.

Through the Great Strah they charged, big blue stem grass waving above their heads in the growing light, Dooleys at full gallop with the giant black crested white falcons impatiently idling along at their sides, keenly anxious for the big kill ahead. Flushed larks tinkled, soaring high into the sky from the ground here and there along the way.

By broad daylight, the Maidenhair Woods rose up ahead once again. The astringas dismounted their lathered and winded Dooleys and left them with jockeys as they hurried into the woods on foot with their strike falcons. Through the timber they went, softening the falcons' movements with shushed encouragements.

At the edge of the clearing below the cave they found Yn Armee in the broad daylight, sitting dead silent in the maidenhair ferns on either side of their assembled trebuchet, its gigantic boom drawn back with a huge petard in its sling and fastened with a trip. In the ferns nestled two more petards, ready if needed. The astringas and their strike falcons began carefully taking positions.

Tramman and Jeelys took up a position safely to one side of the mouth of the cave while Obbree and his falcon, Aalid took the other side. Olloo and Baase found a position between the Cave and the trebuchet, with the remaining bond-mates scattered between. When they were settled, Olloo gave the signal and Yn Armee Hassooagh lit their petard and launched it at the mouth of the cave.

Right in! A bone-jarring explosion inside the cave thumped the ground all over the hillside. After a second's hesitation, muffled screams and shouts could be heard within, boiling over to echo through the woods as Elf Killers came running and stumbling out of the cave mouth, covered with bleeding cuts, led by Fnanar, the big male known to them as the Big Butcher, who had snatched the first child from Balley Cheerey. Jeelys and Aalid jumped him together, disemboweling him before he hit the ground. In less than a minute they had him thoroughly shredded. Jeelys gobbled down a piece of his windpipe and with a flutter of his stubby wings, knocked down another troll who was running by.

Tramman and Obbree charged amongst the fleeing Marooderyn Imshee, cleaving head after head with furious two handed swings of their claymores as all the rest of the astringas, strike falcons and Yn Armee Hassooagh jumped into the fray.

Baase had just started making a kill as Olloo yanked back his claymore from a killing thrust he had just made. “Tramman!” he hollered as he turned to see Fnanar's brother Gnophn running for the brush at the edge of the clearing. “That one! Get him!”

Tramman turned and concentrated on Gnophn disappearing into the brush as he

whistled for Jeelys, who streaked right to place in the brush where Gnophn had vanished and crashed out of sight. Tramman charged after, claymore in hand. In a few minutes, he and Jeelys returned to find the attack over.

“Did you manage to get him?” said Olloo, still catching his breath as he pulled out a rag to clean his blade.

“He got clean away,” said Tramman.

“Did you recognize him?”

“Isn't he the other really big one who always turned up alongside Big Butcher?”

“I'm certain of it,” he said as he started his sword into its scabbard. “Next time they attack, even if it's years from now, I'd lay odds he'll be the one leading them. Now I'm not taking you to task, Tramman. If anyone would have got him it would've been you or Jeelys, but it's right ill news all the same, him getting away.”

Tramman drug his filthy blood spattered arm across his sweaty brow and looked out across the quiet carnage. To his elation, scores of the Marooderyn Imshee had fallen. At least this was some vengeance for the three children, and felling Fnanar first thing had certainly done away with their nightmarish might for the time being. However, he quickly saw others who wrenched his heart. They too, had lost many men, astringas and army alike. And they had lost the only two strike falcons he had seen killed in his entire ten years as an astringa. He hoped it had been worth the cost.

That evening, after an eternity of twenty four hours, Inney heard sudden pounding footsteps and her bed being dragged aside overhead. She jerked upright, breathing in tight little gasps as her heart pounded in her ears. It was either over or this was her death coming. Suddenly the trapdoor was thrown back and light flooded into the cellar, blinding her to the silhouette who had just stepped into the light. She flung her arm across her face to shade her eyes, still unable to see.

“It is safe to come out now, Inney!” called Tramman as he came down a step. “They're gone and won't be coming back any time soon.” He was elated, but he also had a strange tone to his voice.

“How can you be so sure?” said Inney, with the skepticism of one who has seen far too much evil.

Tramman tossed her short silver hair and said: “Fetch your eyes out of the cellar and I'll tell you everything.”

Inney nodded and followed him out at once. She carefully set Sheshey on the shelf by her bed and sat down on it beside Tramman and waited with large solemn eyes for him to tell his tale.

“It was amazing, Inney,” he said. “It went almost exactly as Olloo had planned. Since the stinkers raided while it was still light, we were finally able to track them into the Maidenhair Woods to their huge cave that runs back into the first slope of the Sleityn Beayn. We had only to return with our strike falcons and Yn Armee Hassooagh used their trebuchet to throw a petard into the mouth of it. They must've thought the mountain was falling on them. When they came frothing from the mouth of the cave, their Big Butcher, the one Olloo's certain has been leading their raids, was right in the lead. He was a true coward when his own hide was in danger, like most bullies.”

“So, then what happened?”

“Obbree and Aalid were positioned on one side of the cave and Jeelys and I were on the other. Both falcons pounced on him at once. They gave him exactly what he had coming, and right smart. Then they went to work on other trolls, one after another. Of course Obbree and I were busy cleaving heads, alongside the regular army. So it was an easy victory.”

“Easy?” said Inney looking at him with haunted eyes.

“Yes. Our quick dispatch of their Big Butcher knocked them boss-eyed.”

“Good,” said Inney. “And, then you rescued the captives?”

Tramman's face fell as he looked away. “None survived.”

“Dear Fates,” said Inney with a dry swallow, as she bravely kept her proper posture in spite of the fact that she was seven years old and badly needed a hug. “Dear, dear Fates.” A tear raced down her cheek. She had played with those kids.

Chapter 25

“He doesn't even know who I am,” said Fuzz, as he watched Edward shake with sobs in Spark's arms, “so how can I be any comfort when I'm probably just going to make it worse for him?”

“Don't worry Fuzz,” said Rose in hushed tones, as she squeezed his hand. “He'll get things sorted out. It was Uncafuzz this and Uncafuzz that, every two minutes from the time I saw him. You're all he has left. He'll feel a whole world better when he knows you're here for him.”

“Maybe Rose, but I failed the little man,” he said with a hard swallow. “I promised I'd bring back his mother.”

“You did everything you could, Fuzz. We all did,” she said as she choked on a sob that came sooner than she had expected. She looked up to see Lipperella appear beside Spark with a strange man disfigured with horrible pustules.

“Excuse me,” said Lipperella, speaking more quietly as she began taking in what was going on, “I'd like to introduce you all to Yann-Ber from Head. He's here on the advice of King Hebraun and Queen Minuet in search of Razzmorten...” She paused as she gave a puzzled glance about. “Has he not returned with you?”

Tors stepped before them from the back of the group bearing Razzmorten.

“Is he...?” gasped Lipperella as she and Spark went wide eyed together. “Oh no, thank the Fates,” said Tors. “But he's in a coma. It's a long story.” He nodded at Edward.

“Oh,” said Lipperella.

“Would it help if I took Edward into the nursery?” said Yann-Ber. “I could give him my undivided attention until you all have discussed things.”

“We certainly do appreciate your kind suggestion, Yann-Ber,” said Fuzz. “but I feel that Edward's big enough and has a right to hear the tale first hand to know how his mother died. And while we're at it, since you have an interest in Razzmorten, sir, I expect you might also like to sit in on this as well.”

“Thank you,” said Yann-Ber, “I would indeed.”

“Well,” said Lipperella, “why don't we all go to the parlour?”

With nods all around they followed her at once, though Tors stepped aside from the others to find a bed for Razzmorten in one of the guest rooms on the way. He caught up as everyone took seats on the large cushions which the dragons used instead of chairs.

“Mary stood up, seeing that Edward's sobs were dying away to whimpers. “I think without Razzmorten, Fuzz should tell the tale,” she said. “At least he was conscious for all of it.”

Edward sat up at this and gave a bewildered look about the room with his very red and swollen eyes before finally turning back to Spark with a shuddering sigh.

Spark was dumbfounded for a few moments. “Ah!” he said suddenly. “You never knew Fuzz to be anything other than an enchanted old bear. With all the Peppermint turning back into ordinary creatures, I'll bet you thought if he turned into anything, it would be just a plain old bear. Look,” he said, pointing to Fuzz. “That's your Uncle Fuzz, Edward. He wasn't really a bear after all, you see?”

Edward looked at this man doubtfully. He wasn't even old. He pulled away from Spark and came up to Fuzz to study him critically. He looked into Fuzz's eyes. Fuzz nodded. “It's true, Edward,” he said. “I'm Fuzz.”

At the sound of Fuzz's voice, he flung himself into his arms. “I thought the sore

sisseys had killed you, too!” he said with a sob.

“Nay! An old bear like me wasn't worth their time,” said Fuzz, faltering at trying to make light of things.

“But you're not an old bear, anymore,” said Edward.

“In here I am, Edward,” said Fuzz, pointing to himself as he gave him an extra squeeze. “Always remember that no matter what I look like, I'll always be your Uncle Fuzz.”

Edward almost smiled. For a moment he saw Fuzz as he'd always been.

The dragonets took that moment to boil into a ravenous hunger. Spark and Lipperella slipped quietly out, followed by Yann-Ber who bowed as he passed. Mary. Rose and Lukus shared a look and joined them, leaving Fuzz and Edward alone.

Fuzz found himself telling Edward the entire story from the rainy morning when he left Mary's grotto in the dark to his arrival at the Dragon Caves. Edward shed many, many more tears. Fuzz shed quite a few himself. At last he put Edward to bed and fell asleep beside him.

Everyone decided to wait to have Fuzz tell the tale. It turned out to be a few days. Rose and Lipperella thought it would be best for Edward to have a wake for Myrtlebell. The day after that, Razzmorten awoke and everyone thought it best to give him a little time to regain his strength before discussing the details of the journey. After three days everyone gathered in the parlour and the tale unfolded at last.

“So,” said Fuzz, as he concluded his telling of the story, “even though Demonica and Spitemorta escaped with the Staff, we can thank the Fates the Heart was destroyed...”

“No!” squeaked Taflu as he flew into the room to flutter in circles beneath the ceiling before flitting to land like a moth on Rose's knee. “No! Sorry Fuzz. That's not right.” He paused to catch his breath. “The Heart was not destroyed, Fuzz.”

“How do you know?” said Fuzz, looking mortified.

“Just when I got back, Demonica and Spitemorta showed up at our den to get the mounts which they left there, and Demonica had it on her,” he gritted, pausing for another half dozen pants, “and she ordered Spitemorta to blast the Heart with the Staff to make sure it was the real thing. She said only the real thing could take it, and by the size of the hole they blasted in the ground, I can sure see why. Anyway, they plan on taking over the entire world with it. They said that, Fuzz. I heard 'em. That's what I came to tell you. Maybe Razzmorten and Mary can still do something.” He looked about the room with earnest red eyes, still panting.

With a glance at Mary, Fuzz sank into a velveteen cushion as if he'd had his air let out of him. “I don't see how even Razzmorten and Mary together could possibly match Demonica and Spitemorta with both Staff and Heart.”

Mary shared a stunned look with Razzmorten. “We just might be cooked,” she said.

“At last. I'm home,” said Spitemorta, as she glared covertly across at Demonica. “And I could've been here days earlier if you hadn't insisted we come on these stupid unicorns,” she thought as she clenched her teeth and slid off Nightshade's back. She shoved her reins at her grandmother, adjusted her black leather gloves and stepped smartly up the stone walk to her castle in spite of her exhaustion, riding crop under her arm. She wanted to see her son.

Demonica was keenly aware of Spitemorta's rush into the castle, though she refused to look in her direction. "Hunh," she said, squeezing the twinge of a smile from her face. "Maybe the little tart does have some sort of motherly feeling for her little abominable one after all," she thought. "Might be right useful to remember sometime, mightn't it?" She threw her leg over Gwenole's rump and handed both sets of reins to the groom who appeared to stable the unicorns. She hesitated to give a thoughtful stare after Spitemorta before following her inside. Once inside, she turned and went straight up the stairs to her apartment in the tower. She cared nothing for Spitemorta's pathetic reunion with her brat and her decidedly handsome, but dull husband. She wanted nothing more presently than a good long soak in a hot bath, and the privacy would give her a chance to consider her next move.

"Darling," said James, pecking her on the cheek as if that were some kind of enthusiastic welcome. "You've returned at last." His tone deliberately showed displeasure at his being neglected.

"I'm in no mood for your childish tone, James," said Spitemorta with a dangerous glint in her eye. "If you must blame someone, blame Grandmother. Had it been up to me, I'd 'ave been back weeks ago. Now, where's my son?"

"The last I knew, dearest, he was my son, too."

"Why yes, you did have a rather inept involvement with his conception, didn't you..."

"Momma! Momma! You're here!" whooped her little boy, as he burst into the room and flung himself into her arms.

"Abaddon!" she cried, scooping him up.

After a moment, James clamped shut his mouth and charged after her as she swept away to Abaddon's nursery. He caught up to her on the stairwell. "What has gotten into you?" he snarled.

"I'll thank you to not use that tone in front of Abaddon," she said between her teeth and continued on up the stairs.

James followed, determined not to let go of it until she explained herself.

"Is it too much to ask, she thought, to be allowed a private moment with my son after my long absence before being forced to deal with his slow wit?" She took in an exasperated deep breath at the door of the nursery and wheeled round to face him after closing Abaddon into his room.

"James," she said, putting on a coquettish pout. "I'm so sorry. You can't imagine what I've just been through, these past few weeks." She slipped down the shoulder of her dress far enough to show an angry sore. "Including," she spat with a sudden furious look, "being shot with an arrow by your beloved Rose."

James went wide eyed. "Why would she do that?"

"Well maybe little miss wonderful isn't quite the angelic bit of fluff you imagine her to be, James."

"What are you talking about, Spitemorta? You know very well that Rose and I have been over for a very long time. Why must you persist in this vindictive jealousy? She means nothing to me and she should mean even less to you."

"Truly, James?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes, truly."

“So just why is it, sweetheart, that you call out her name in your sleep and not mine?”

“You're making that up.”

“Am I?” she scoffed as she stepped behind Abaddon's door and slammed it in his face, sealing it with some signs in the air. She smiled and turned to face Abaddon who was studying her with keen interest.

Demonica slid into her fragrant hot bath with a contented sigh. She had plans to lay. She had the Heart of the Staff, after all. “So, could I actually allow Spitemorta to have it?” she thought. “She's the most irascibly selfish and short-sighted thing I've ever seen. Maybe it will work better to let her think that I'll turn over the Heart to her once she's sufficiently trained to wield it. I'm certain of it. The girl is treacherous. The moment she thinks she can use the Heart without my help she'll turn on me. That's what I'd do in her place.” She pursed her lips. She would have to play this very carefully. She still needed Spitemorta to set things into motion. “She's the queen of two countries and she has the political power which I need. There's nothing for it but to keep her believing she'll eventually be given the Heart while carefully getting her to do what I need. Once I have her where I need her, I'll eliminate the vicious kiez and have the Staff at the same time. For the time being, though, I'll need to figure out how to make life exceedingly difficult for Razzmorten and his precious Niarg, and I'll also have to decide on the best way to rid the world of Elfkind.” She closed her eyes and cleared her mind so she could truly enjoy her bath for a few moments.

At last she stepped out, toweled off and slipped into her silk gown. She decided to sleep on it. Tomorrow would be soon enough to begin conquering the world.

“Let me get this straight, Grandmother,” said Spitemorta, eyeing her coolly as she rose from her gilded and jeweled throne to pace about on the dais. “You want me to hire vagrants to burn all the kingdom's sukere crops? Are you insane? Have you any idea how much those crops will bring into the treasury?”

“Must you always be so short-sighted?” said Demonica, with a dismissive wave. “We're suggesting a minor loss now for a huge gain later. Goll and Loxmere together haven't even a tenth of Niarg's wealth. You could have it all and more, but not if you sit on your throne waiting for it all to fall into your lap because you happen to have the Great Staff in your hand, which I might add, you've not mastered, let alone the Heart.”

Spitemorta made a face and plopped onto her throne. “All right. Suppose I agree to this lunatic scheme and hire these dregs to sneak onto each of the kingdom's sukere plantations and set them alight. Then I point my finger and scream, 'Dragons! A Niargian plot!' and then the bums get good and drunk and start spilling my beans all over Goll?”

“Oh, but that's the beauty of hiring such low lives in the first place. They won't be missed when you hire a second set of such losers to kill them. It's foolproof.”

“Yea?” said Spitemorta. “If the second set of fools don't botch their job.”

“Good grief. Kill them yourself. Have them come in here for their pay and toast 'em with the Staff. Don't you have a whisk broom and dustpan?”

“As long as I'm not the one who sweeps them up. Very good Grandmother, your idea

might not be half bad. The citizens will certainly hate Niarg and the dragons for the loss of the crop. It will be a great hardship for them.”

“Well, you need something like starvation this winter to make them want to go get King Hebraun, dear. After all, without the money from those crops how many are likely to make it?”

“Not many. At least not many without the gracious help of the crown.”

“There you go.”

“Yea? But they're not likely to thank me for making them fight a war to get that help.”

Demonica shrugged. “Do you want admiration or do you want power?”

Spitemorta smiled.

“That's what I thought,” said Demonica. “Besides, most of your citizens will be so outraged by the dastardly burning that they'll demand retaliation, even if they are none too keen on being drafted into doing the retaliating themselves. Our biggest problem may be your charming spouse.”

“He's not a factor at all.”

“You're quite certain of that?”

“Quite,” said Spitemorta with a nod.

“Then,” said Demonica, with a brilliant smile, “I'll leave it in your capable hands.”

“Ah,” said Spitemorta. “And what will you be doing?”

“Why being your son's nanny, of course.”

“Of course.”

Spitemorta drummed her fingernails on the arm of her throne after Demonica left. “She's too clever,” she thought. “She's getting her ducks in a row, and if this plot comes down around anyone's ears, it won't be hers. Her eyes narrowed. Very well then, I'll just have to make certain it doesn't fail.”

She strode to the entrance of the throne room and called in one of the guards she had dismissed when Demonica came. He trailed behind her warily and waited in uncomfortable attention while she seated herself. She enjoyed his fear. She was starting to

be regarded around the palace as dangerous. It made them all anxious to do her bidding without mistakes or delays.

“I have an errand for you...Morgi, isn't it?”

The guard went wide eyed. She was playing a game of some sort and it was scaring him. She had known his name since she was a little girl, and when she played games, people paid dearly. He wasn't about to displease her. “Right you are, your Majesty,” he said with a deep bow.

“I want you to go into the streets, out and about, and find me a dozen vagrants,” she said, drumming her nails on the arm of her chair. “Make certain they're the lowest possible. Then bring them here. Quietly. No one must know. Understood?”

“Absolutely,” he said, bowing low again. “It shall be exactly as you say, your Majesty.”

“Good,” she said, “then go.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” he said, turning smartly away.

“Sad,” she mused, tapping her chin as she watched him scurry out. “I always found Morgi to be the least objectionable guard my idiot parents ever had, but I see no way

around eliminating him, too. Too risky if I don't. Oh well. A queen must do what a queen must do.”

Demonica put little Abaddon down for his nap and tiptoed out to the parlour across from his room, leaving the door ajar so she would hear him if he awoke. She brought along the pitcher and basin from his night stand. She put the basin on the tea table, filled it and sat down to scry with the water. “Who is the Elves' most dreaded enemy?” she murmured. After a good long while, images appeared on the water's surface. Trolls battled Elves who used some giant predatory bird to defeat them by killing their leader. She smiled. “Yes. The trolls of the Eastern Continent. They like nothing better than to eat tender Elf flesh. It looks as though the Elves who stayed on the Eastern Continent found a way to deal with them, but the Jutland Elves fled to the Jut of Niarg instead. Splendid. The Jutland Elves don't know that any Elves survived on the Eastern Continent. This could work. The trolls just might enjoy hunting a prey that can't fight back.”

She poured the water back into the pitcher and took it back to Abaddon's room. He was still sound asleep. Good. A few signs in the air and his door was sealed. He would stay put until she returned. She headed for the throne room. She must get Spitemorta ready to sail at once to the Eastern Continent. The days of the Jutland Elves were numbered.

Chapter 26

"I don't suppose those hags said anything useful about their plans," said Fuzz as he looked at Taflu, "like where they were going or how they planned to use the Heart and Staff to take over the world?"

Taflu sat quietly for a moment, then shook his head. "No. Nothing, Fuzz," he said. "I'm truly sorry. They just talked about taking over the world. Well, they did talk about returning to Goll."

"It would certainly be nice if we had a few Cia spies ourselves, right now," said Razzmorten, stroking his beard.

"Would it be possible to actually hire some?" said Rose.

"Not at all," said Razzmorten. "That's one of the reasons they sealed themselves away from the rest of the world when they took their ethereal forms. They realized that others would try to exploit them for purposes such as spying."

"You could scry them, Grandfather," said Lukus. "You know where they are so it should be easy."

"I could scry them, of course," said Razzmorten, but I'd only see and not hear them. Besides, since they're both sorceresses, they'd very likely feel my magic and know I was spying on them, and there are ways of making things perilous for a person who is scrying you. I don't believe I'm up to a magical encounter with either one of them just yet."

"I guess if they can do that, you wouldn't be, Grandfather. Mary was saying no one alive is, but could there be a way of combining power with a number of other wizards against them?"

Razzmorten raised his eyebrows and shared a look with Mary who almost nodded.

"You may have hit upon a possibility, Lukus," he said. "But it would be awfully dangerous. However at the moment, it's the only possibility we have. You of course, will have to finish your own training immediately. And rather than sail straight back to Niarg, I think we need to stop off and see the Elves." He looked at Lukus. "You were planning on that anyway, weren't you?"

Lukus grinned at the thought of Soraya about to bear their son. "If I don't," he said with a laugh, "Soraya will probably send her brothers after me."

"Lukus!" said Rose.

"Oh go on, Rose. You know how much I want to see her. I hope I get there before the baby is born. I want be with her when it happens."

"Your moral support will mean a lot, Lukus."

"Yea, if the midwife doesn't think I'm in her way and run me out."

"I can't imagine that you won't be," said Rose. "It's just what ever the poor woman manages to tolerate." She grabbed him for a quick one armed hug.

"Thanks, Rose. I needed that." He turned to Razzmorten. "So when do we sail?"

"How would first thing in the morning suit you?"

"Might as well get it over with," he said, thinking of the slop bucket between his knees, last time.

Razzmorten turned to Rose who nodded, though she looked oddly less enthused about the voyage than Lukus.

"I'd be obliged to go with you, Wizard Razzmorten, if you don't mind," said Yann-Ber.

"Even though my attempts to release you from Demonica's curse have all failed?"

“My good wizard, I would like to most emphatically. If I'm doomed to live out this horror the kiez has cast upon me, at least I'll spend the last of my days fighting alongside my dear wife's enemies. Besides, you said yourself that your weakened condition gave you little hope of helping me. Perhaps when you are stronger, you'd consent to try one more time, aye?”

“Absolutely. I'll gladly try often,” said Razzmorten. “And for that matter, the Elves have many strong healing magicks. Who knows what might be done?”

Yann-Ber bowed. Razzmorten was impressed with the man and his bravery.

“I would go with you too, if I may,” said Fuzz, causing Rose to go wide eyed with a look of joyous surprise.

Razzmorten rose from his cushion and studied everyone. “You're all welcome to come on this voyage, but you should realize that I don't know what peril awaits us or where we might end up next. Now, are the diatrymas still here?”

“They've been staying up on top until they saw that you were going to be all right,” said Mary.

“I'd like to have a word with them before we leave,” said Razzmorten. “However I'm still quite spent from my ordeal. Could I ride up on someone?”

“I need some air,” said Spark. “I'll take you.”

Mary and Pebbles slipped into the nursery with Lipperella to check on the dragonets and get their feed prepared for their next ravenous awakening, while Lukus, Tors, Hubba Hubba and Taflu went with Razzmorten and Spark in search of the diatrymas to fill them in on the latest bit of news, leaving Fuzz and Rose alone in the parlour.

Rose turned to Fuzz the minute everyone had filed out. “Fuzz, are you certain you want to do this? I know how much you love the forest, and I know how much you love that old den of yours...”

“I do indeed love that den, Rose,” said Fuzz, putting a shushing finger on her lips, “but I've come to realize that I love you very much more. So if I don't go with you, how can I possibly ask your father for permission to marry you?”

Rose's jaw dropped. “You want to marry me?”

“Well certainly. Of course, that is if you'll have me. So, will you marry me Rose? That is, if your father approves and all. He might not, don't you know, with me not being a prince or anything like that. In fact, I'm not much of anything but a has-been captain, I mean I'm a bear with no hair, who isn't even really fuzzy am I...?”

“Stop that right now, Fuzz,” said Rose with a serious look on her face. “Don't you dare start running down the only man I've ever been in love with and whom I'll most certainly be marrying.”

“Oh my,” said Fuzz, as a happy grin spread across his face. “You will? I mean with Hebraun's consent, of course.”

“Fiddlesticks!” she said with a merry giggle. “With it or without it.” When she saw his shocked look, she took his hand. “Oh, my dear, dear, Fuzz. I can absolutely promise you that Father will approve wholeheartedly.”

“But how could you possibly be so certain?”

“Because, my love, after the fiasco over James, my parents and I came to an understanding. They granted me the right to choose my own husband. In fact, they will let me choose whether I marry at all. So mark me, we will be married.”

Fuzz squeezed her hand joyously. “Even so,” he said, “King Hebraun and Queen

Minuet deserve being asked for your hand as is respectful and proper.”

“Certainly,” said Rose.

“There is one other matter, Rose,” said Fuzz, going sober.

“Oh?”

“Edward.”

Compassion filled Rose's eyes. “You want to finish raising him?”

“Yes, if he so wishes. Would that make a difference in your acceptance of me?”

“No. I would merely have one more person to love and to share my life with.”

“You're wonderful. Then since we sail in the morning, would you mind if we go find him and ask him, now?”

“Of course I don't mind. And, I'll bet he's in the nursery. I hear the dragonets, awake and carrying on, and Edward loves to be in amongst them.

“To the nursery then,” said Fuzz, as he rose and pulled her to her feet.

Edward was indeed in the nursery, enthusiastically feeding the hungry brood.

They watched him go about his task with the utmost care. He gave particular attention to the little hen called Laora, to whom he talked at length as he fed her. She seemed to follow everything he had to say and made frequent babbling replies as she flapped her pin feathered wings and stretched out to him, while he in turn treated each of her utterances with earnest importance.

“Laora is Edward's favorite of all my darlings,” said Lipperella as she finished feeding boisterous Flame and looked up, drying her hands. “You know, on more than a few occasions I have gotten up for the morning feeding to find him curled up with Laora and both of them sound asleep. I can't say for certain, but I suspect she's bonded to him.”

“But if that's true and he leaves here,” said Fuzz, “your little Laora will be crushed.”

Lipperella nodded gravely. “A mother never wants to give up any of her brood, but if they truly have bonded, it would be best for them both to remain together, whether they both stay or both go.”

A look passed between Rose and Fuzz as they realized that they had just agreed to adopt one more. Lipperella saw the exchange and nodded with approval before going to find Spark.

“Uncafuzz. Rose,” said Edward, making his way over to them. “If you came to help feed the babes you're too late.”

“So I see,” said Fuzz, as he hugged him soundly. “Perhaps later then?”

“Oh, sure. They'll be hollerin' their lungs out for more before you know it.”

They ushered Edward into the parlour.

“Well first of all,” said Fuzz, studying Edward's face the moment they were all seated, “Rose and I wanted you to know that she and I plan to be married.”

“I kind o' thought you liked each other a lot,” he said with a solemn nod. “Are you going to live here in the Dragon Caves? Spark and Lipperella say there's lots of room.”

“I really don't know where we'll live, Edward. Rose and I haven't quite gotten around to discussing it yet. However we did discuss you.”

“Me?” said Edward looking back and forth from Fuzz to Rose.

“Certainly, you,” said Fuzz. “We want you to come live with us, wherever we decide to.”

“You want to be my parents?”

“Well yes, if you'd like that.”

“Sure, I would,” he said, throwing his arms around Fuzz's neck.

“Good,” said Fuzz. “That's settled. So, I guess you'd better get packed and talk to Lipperella to see if there's anything more you need know about taking care of Laora.”

Edward gave an odd stare.

“We sail for Niarg in the morning, with a stop off in the Jutlands to see the Elves,” said Fuzz.

Edward's face fell. “But Uncafuzz. Laora can't go with us. She's still a baby.”

“Well yes, we know, but Lipperella said that you could take her with you.”

“Well couldn't we just stay here a while longer, Uncafuzz? You know, just until Laora fledged? Lipperella told me that when the dragonets fledged they could do things on their own and wouldn't need to be fed all the time and stuff. Dragon babies grow up lots faster than people babies do, don't you know.”

Fuzz glanced aside to find Rose at as much of a loss as he.

Edward was already shaking his head. “I can't do that to Laora, Uncafuzz. It's awful to lose your mother. Laora should stay with hers for as long as she can, 'cause you never know when something unspeckdid will happen, and then she'd never get to be with her again.”

“That is very noble of you Edward,” said Fuzz as he knelt beside him. “I'm sure you understand that since dragons are birds, they have a different way of going about some things. Lipperella thinks that little Laora has bonded with you. Do you know what she means by that?”

Edward shook his head, wide eyed.

“Well, it means that Laora has come to depend on your being there for her. We might actually harm her by separating you two. So, if you leave here, Lipperella wants you to take Laora with you. See what I'm getting at?”

Edward nodded gravely. “I love you Uncafuzz, but I can't take Laora away from her momma. I just can't, not until she's fledged,” he said, looking right into his eyes.

“I understand, Edward, but you do realize that you'll have to stay with her if she stays, don't you?”

Edward nodded bravely. “If you still want to be my parents after Laora has fledged, then you can come back for us,” he said, just managing to keep his voice from trembling.

“I'll always want you, Edward,” said Fuzz as he gave him a sound hug.

Rose wrapped her arms around them both. “And so shall I,” she said.

“Edward, Rose and I have to leave with Razzmorten in the morning, and we have no idea when we will be able to return for you and Laora, but do not forget this: I promise that we will return for both of you. Do you understand?”

Edward nodded. “It's because of those bad sore sissies, isn't it, Uncafuzz?”

“That's right.”

Edward stood straight and gave Fuzz a broad smile. His eyes seemed too old for his young face. “Laora and I will be ready when you come to get us, Uncafuzz.”

“Impossible,” hissed Spitemorta. “I just got here, Demonica. I'm not about to go running off to the Eastern Continent to enlist some Pit-awful trolls to come here just because you say they could rid us of the Elves more easily than our own troops. I happen to have faith in my army, Grandmother.”

“Yea?” said Demonica. “Well dear, Elves happen to wield a fair amount of magic, or we wouldn't be worrying about them, and ordinary soldiers, no matter how skilled, just are no match for them. The Marooderyn Imshee, on the other hand, are quite immune to Elven magic. The Elves haven't a prayer of withstanding them.”

“If these beasts are impervious to magic, Grandmother, how do you suggest getting them to leave their own lands, where they already have Elves to hunt, to come here and wipe out the Jutlanders?”

“You just plain weren't listening,” said Demonica with a sigh. “The Gwaelic Elves on the Eastern Continent have learnt to use strike falcons, which are giant birds, to keep the trolls at bay. If the Elf Killers are offered a chance to hunt Elves who have no idea that these birds exist, why wouldn't they want to?”

“What would keep the Elves here from finding out about strike falcons?”

“They think all the Elves left behind in Gwael, your old name for the Eastern Continent...”

“I've had history, Grandmother!”

“They think all the Elves left behind were wiped out by the trolls. They're not going to try to ask, dear.”

“How do you know, Demonica, maybe they like the challenge of Elves who can fight back. Sport, you know.”

“You know, I just doubt that. But we can easily make our offer irresistible.”

“How?”

“You have available the Staff and Heart, Spitemorta. Can't you use your imagination?”

“You just got through telling me that these Elf Killers were completely immune to magic, Grandmother, so what good does it do us to have all this magical might?”

“The Marooderyn Imshee, which by the way is the Gwaelic name for them, are a right thick witted bunch, dear. Maybe you can't force them, but you could surely fool them. Let's suppose you appeared before them out of the sky as some almighty troll goddess and command them to follow you to the Northern Continent to eat Elves...”

Spitemorta gawped at Demonica. “That's idiotic!” she sputtered.

“You sound insulted. I take it that the idea of casting a glamourie upon yourself to appear raw boned, beetle browed and radiantly stupendous offends your image of yourself.”

“Of course not,” snapped Spitemorta. “Just give me some time to get used to the idea.” She launched herself from her throne to pace about on the dais.

“Perhaps it would be best to delay for short while,” said Demonica with a thin smile, “though only until you have things in place here, because we can't afford to let this get by us. The Elves could undo us. Once you have things straightened away, we sail for the Eastern Continent. That is, unless you've changed your mind about ruling the world?”

“Absolutely not,” she snapped. “If we have to employ these monsters, then we will. But in the meantime, Grandmother, I'd like you to find a way for me to keep a grip on the people here and in Loxmere. They're going to be most upset when the sukere fields go up in smoke, whether or not that's really occurred to you. I know these people. The first thing they do is blame the crown for failing to protect them and their interests. You're dreaming if you think they're going to fight for a government they feel has failed them.”

“I truly detest politics,” said Demonica, making a face. “But I do have a way of

seeing to your concerns, Spitemorta. I'll need to return to Head for a short time. You'll have to find a temporary nanny for little Abaddon. I'll be off at once, but don't worry dear, I'll be back by the time you've done your part here."

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me just what it is that you're off to Head to do?"

"Well no, dear. It would just be another delay, after all." she said with a smile. "Try not to do things I'll need to straighten out when I get back." And with a smirk she whisked away, leaving Spitemorta on the throne to wonder and fume.

Once in her tower apartment she fetched her scrying globe from her wardrobe and the Heart of the Staff from its locked compartment in her desk. She slid the Heart into the folds of her kirtle and stared briefly into the globe before making traveling signs in the air as she mouthed an incantation. Instantly she found herself looking about in the audience chamber of her castle on her island keep, just off the coast of Head.

She carefully set her scrying crystal on its stand on the dais and took a deep breath. It was very good to be home, even if for only for a short time. She stepped off the carpet, her determined footfalls echoing into the hallway. She wondered what Budog and Mazhev had been up to in her absence. They tended toward strong drink when she was gone. They would pay if they were not sober enough to help her.

Spitemorta eyed the hodgepodge of ruffians and beggars Morgi had just brought before her. "I see no reason to trust a one of them," she thought as she gave a grim smile. She rose to her feet. "You are sworn to absolute secrecy regarding this mission," she said as she paced regally about. "If I so much as suspect you've been talking, you will die. Do I make myself clear?"

Each man nodded, wide-eyed.

She studied their faces utterly unconvinced of their loyalty to anything beyond their drunken habits. "Good," she said. "Now, I have something you need to see." She smiled at their cowering postures. "Morgi," she said, calling forth her loyal guard.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said, stepping forward and bowing deeply.

"You will please hand me your sword," she said, as a wave of apprehension passed through her enlistees.

Morgi handed it over without question.

Spitemorta held it before her and carefully ran her fingers along the blade. "Good blade," she said. She smiled. "Kneel before me Morgi."

"Your Majesty?" he said, tremulously.

"Kneel."

He lowered himself on trembling legs.

"Thank you," she said in a soft voice. "I certainly wouldn't expect something difficult in front of your volunteers."

Morgi took a deep breath. He had misjudged her intentions, after all. Of course she meant no harm to him. He had always done her bidding. Perhaps she meant to knight him. "Odd time though..." he thought as he looked up with trust in his eyes. With a crisp metallic ping, his very own sword sent his head rolling away to stare back at his body.

Chapter 27

They looked very sober-faced, saying their farewells on the quay beside *Their Majesties' Ship, the Sea Sprite*, as snow white gulls cried, hovering in the breeze beyond the pelicans perched on the piles at the end of the pier. Spark and Lipperella made their heartfelt good-byes mercifully short, feeling the need to get back to their brood.

The diatrymas were particularly brief as well, with only Ceidwad actually speaking to anyone. She conferred with Razzmorten for a few minutes before pausing to look down at Rose and then bringing her head down to eye level to wordlessly study her face. She gently rattled her beak along a strand of her hair before speaking. "Your life now begins, dear," she said, before turning away to stand quiet as a tree beside Mary.

"I simply must return to my part of the forest for a time," said Mary as Razzmorten took her hand. "If needs press, as I know they well might, have the Elves contact me and I can be there in just a few days with the diatrymas." She left a tincture for pain with Yann-Ber and took Lukus aside to give him two small packets and a reassuring smile.

Edward had Laora by the hand, out of the nest for the first time. He carefully ushered her to stand by Spark and Lipperella, then turned to lunge at Fuzz, flinging himself into his outstretched arms.

At last they cast off. Hubba Hubba and Pebbles flew proudly to the top yard of the main mast as Lukus went below deck, followed by Razzmorten and Yann-Ber.

Rose and Fuzz stayed above and watched Edward and the shoreline until they had crossed the bay and both were too small to make out. "Do you suppose I've done the right thing, Rose?" said Fuzz, as they watched behind. "Leaving Edward, I mean. I feel terrible."

"Oh Fuzz, I'm right certain of it," she said, tenderly brushing his cheek with the palm of her hand. "Didn't you see how Laora and he clung to each other? Lipperella has to be right about the bond she spoke of. They simply can't be separated and Edward would've had a terrible time knowing that he was keeping Laora from Lipperella. Besides, I think he'll be safer with the dragons than he would be with us."

"Why would you think that, Rose?"

"It's something Myrtlebell told me, actually, Fuzz. She said that Spitemorta made a hateful remark, as they were being taken to the Beak castle, about Myrtlebell 'daring' to give King Edmond another son and possible heir to the throne of Loxmere. She had the definite impression that Spitemorta wanted little Edward dead. Anyway, Spitemorta might expect us to take him with us if she thinks he could've survived the marsh after his mother was captured by the Beaks."

"I see what you're getting at," said Fuzz with a nod. "In fact, if he returned with us, then he survived. If he didn't, then she might think that he died in the marsh and so, forget about him."

Rose nodded.

"I think you're right," he said as he took her hand in his and leant against the railing and stared thoughtfully at the deep. "I wonder how long it takes for a dragonet to become fully fledged? I forgot to ask in all the rush to set sail."

"I didn't think to ask either, but I'll bet Grandfather knows. He knows everything."

"Taflu!" cried Fuzz, the moment Taflu fluttered out of the sky to stick to his back. "Where have you been? I looked all over for you. I gave up, thinking you went home."

“Well, I wanted to go back, Fuzz, but I remembered something. I think it would have helped when you were asking me, back at the Dragon Caves...”

“What?”

“Anyway, I think it might be important enough that I sure don't want you to be upset with me...”

“What...?”

“Besides, you're probably in a lot of danger now, and you'll need me to...”

“Well what, Taflu? What did you just remember?”

“Oh,” gritted Taflu, going silent for a moment. “Oh yea. Spitemorta and Demonica think Razzmorten is in the way. And...oh yea. Because of Lukus marrying an Elf, Demonica wants to make sure all Elves are destroyed. I mean I didn't think anything of it at first because it didn't make sense, but isn't that dangerous?”

“We need to go below this minute,” said Fuzz sharing a horrified look with Rose. “Come on.”

They met Razzmorten coming up. He turned around and gathered them all before him at his bunk. “I don't think it has anything directly to do with Lukus and Soraya, but Demonica knows that the First Wizard was half Man and half Elf. Any wizard or sorcerer with such a bloodline would be far more powerful than she is...”

“And it means Soraya is in peril,” said Lukus.

“And so are we all,” said Razzmorten

“Indeed,” said Yann-Ber “I've never known that vile witch to fail to go through with any threat that she ever made. And her retaliation is always much greater than any affront to her.”

“I'm really sorry, Razzmorten...” chirped Taflu.

“Don't be,” said Razzmorten. “You've brought us vital news, and it's possible it will save our lives. And nothing's lost, either. We're already sailing in the right direction.”

“Well,” said Lukus, as he examined the two packets of herb powder Mary had given him, “I suppose it's time to find out if this stuff's going to work.” He found his water skin amongst his luggage. He sprinkled in herbs from each packet, recapped it, shook it vigorously and heated it with some of his magical power. “There. Tea time.” He drank every last drop, gagging from time to time as it went down. “Gaugh! The reason it works is because it makes you so nauseated, you forget you're seasick.”

He looked up at a knock. “Come in,” he said. “Grandfather. Did Rose send you with a bucket for me to puke in?”

“Actually, no, my boy,” said Razzmorten, as he found a chair. “Your sister seems to be too wrapped up in her own affairs of late to notice her relatives.”

“It's great, isn't it?”

“It's been a very long time since I've seen Rose so happy. I'm only sorry that it was so long in coming and that it's happened in what probably will be the most dire times our world has ever seen.”

“You really think Demonica and Spitemorta will make good on their plans to take over the world?”

“Starting with the Elves I'm sorry to say,” said Razzmorten with complete conviction.

“I'm worried about Soraya.”

“So am I. That's why we must use every minute. So, tell me, how's Mary's seasick medicine working?”

“You know about that?”

“Of course, dear boy. Who do you reckon asked her if she had such a cure in the first place?”

“Oh. Well, I just took the vile stuff. I guess it works if I live. Say. The floor doesn't seem to be making my stomach churn. Maybe it's goin'o work.”

“She's good, you know, so I expect it will,” he said, as he found his spectacles. “Makes me sorry I didn't spend more time at herbal lore when I was an apprentice. Keep that in mind, Lukus. When the opportunity arises, you may want to learn about herbs yourself.”

“I'll give it some thought, but this isn't what you came to see me about, is it? What did you want?”

“I want to use this minute. And now that your seasickness seems gone, we can use this minute to go on with your training.”

“Sounds good to me, Grandfather, and it'll keep my mind off other things.”

Yann-Ber sat gingerly on his cot below deck. Lately his pain had been much worse, something he'd not anticipated. He pulled out the small silver flask from his doublet and studied it skeptically. Mary had called it the most potent painkiller which she knew of, though she had no idea if it would give him any relief at all, since his condition was so severe. He poured out a half glass of water from his pitcher and carefully added the five drops she had advised, remembering her caution not to exceed that amount. He swirled the cloudy mixture and stared at it for a moment before tossing it down. He waited. She had said it wouldn't take more than five minutes.

After what seemed a ridiculously long time, he sat back with a sigh of despair. “Another waste of time,” he groaned. “She meant well.” He closed his eyes. He was so tired. He wished he could just drift off to sleep and never have to awaken. “Ha!” he said, sitting up suddenly. “If I'm not to go over five drops, it must be poisonous at doses above that. Demonica said suicide wouldn't work, but since I've not tried it, maybe she lied.” He studied the flask again. “Well, here goes,” he said, as he tipped the bottle, drinking it down. He lay down on his cot and drifted off into blessed oblivion.

Demonica found Budog and Mazhev having a most enjoyable time tormenting the prisoners in her dungeon with a feast laid out beyond their shackled reach. They sat at a table and gorged themselves, washing down their meal from a large flagon of one of her rarest years. She watched in the shadows, waiting for the sneaking wine stealing pigs to notice her. The prisoners saw her at once but said nothing.

Budog waved a greasy piece of roast at them from the point of his knife as gravy ran down his chin to spread out amongst the bristles on his neck. He bounced with a gleeful open mouthed chew, flaunting his gluttony. Suddenly he stopped short at the sight of their interest in something on the far side of him. He turned his head to see and dropped his jaw and the piece of hog he had hanging out of it.

At the sight of meat plunking into Budog's wine, Mazhev stuck out his foody tongue through his half chewed cud. "That's disgusting," he spat. "Are you sitting on your rump feeding your face or are you sitting on your face feeding your rump? And your dirty belches stink rotten..." Suddenly he looked from Budog's horrified face to see Demonica, glaring murderously at the pair of them.

She came to the table, suddenly bearing a demeanor of genial sweetness as she approached. Wordlessly she picked up the flagon of wine and studied its label. "My," she said as she set the wine back on the table. "You two have truly developed a taste for the finer things in life. I'm altogether stunned at the sacrifices you made to purchase this particular vintage. The ones in my cellar each cost nigh on to a half a year's wage for either of you. Have you sly dogs been gambling with fools from the mainland again?"

Budog and Mazhev exchanged a desperate look. Could she have just provided their explanation for the pilfered wine? Or had she set them up to compound their guilt?

"Looks like we've been found out, Mazhev," said Budog, floundering desperately at playing for enough time to see just what Demonica's game was.

"Uh, yea..." said Mazhev, with a cringing grin, "looks like..."

Demonica was amused at their pathetic attempt to deceive her. She would most definitely have a lesson for them. It would have to wait. For now, she needed the stinking chwiled-du to do something for her. "So, clean up this mess and report to me in my throne room in ten minutes," she said, neatly grabbing up the wine as she turned on her heel and glided out.

Budog and Mazhev let go of pent up breath as they rolled relieved eyeballs and set about whisking away the remains of their gluttonous frolic. Demonica could be terrifying. They had been perilously lucky this time.

They found her impatiently pacing the throne room. Recognizing this as a bad sign, they bowed low immediately.

"We're right ready to do your bidding, Demonica," said Budog.

"Rise," she commanded. "I need you to go to the mainland. Go see Smole at my catoptrolite mine. I'll need a large number of small scrying globes made up from the prophet crystal. At least a hundred to start, I should think. And I want five thousand of them to follow as soon as humanly possible. And get him ready to make a great deal more, upon my word. We will need a huge number in time. Understand?"

"Of course, mistress. But..." said Mazhev.

"But what?" she said, with a dangerous tone to her voice.

"Just that Smole takes forever with things. I can't imagine him cooperating with making a hundred anything, let alone thousands."

"That's easy. Tell him that if the job is beyond him, he'll be replaced."

"It shall be so, mistress," they chorused, as they thumped their chests.

"Indeed," she said, watching them go.

The heavy heeled footfalls of riding boots suddenly dropped their echoes as Brutus, Captain of the Guard tramped into the throne room. "Your Majesties," he boomed, dispensing with formalities altogether, beginning with his delivery before coming to a

rigid halt before them. “We've a calamity upon us, an outright affront to the honor of Loxmere-Goll. Every single one of the largest sukere plantations from which we've had tidings in this short space of time, in fact, every single sukere farm we've checked in any way at all has been turned to smoking ash overnight. I have witnesses who say they saw dragons breathing great gouts of flame on the fields and then fleeing towards Niarg.”

“Where are these witnesses, Captain?” said James, leaning forward from his throne. “These are right serious charges.”

“Indeed,” said Brutus, cracking a nod. “I shall bring forth the peasants who saw the beasts, sire.” He thumped his breast and pivoted on his heel.

“This is unbelievable,” said James in his wake. “If this is even partly true it implicates Niarg in a plot to start a war. King Hebraun is the most peaceable king ever to sit on the throne of Niarg. What could have caused him to do such a thing?”

Spitemorta knitted her brow. It was a mistake marrying James. He was too weak to rule. If he'd had any idea that it was she who did in his idiot father, he probably would have gone running back to his precious Rose. Now here he was defending the tart's father when he should be furious over Goll's destroyed sukere crops. “Are you suggesting I had something to do with this, James?” she hissed. “I wasn't, but did you?” he said with a gimlet eyed look. “You never did explain why Rose shot you with an arrow, or for that matter, what you were doing that even had you anywhere near her, when you were supposed to be on the coast discussing trade agreements with the ambassadors from the Eastern Continent.”

“You seriously imagine that I must answer to you, James?”

“Absolutely! You're my wife.”

She threw her head back for a throaty laugh. “But not your property,” she said, suddenly icing over. “You're in dangerous territory, love.”

He stared at her as if he had just noticed her horns.

Captain Brutus chose that moment to reappear with a dozen ragged peasants that Spitemorta recognized as the vagrants she had hired to torch the fields. She sat back on her throne and eyed them with cool interest as though she had never seen them before.

James went on studying her face for a moment, then looked up at them as though she had no connection with the emergency.

The vagrants began going prostrate until he told them to rise. They did so at once, but continued to cower. James glanced at Spitemorta as he rose to pace before them.

“What's your name?” he said, stopping before one of them.

“Sidney, sire!” he barked.

“You can relax, you're not in the military. Just tell me what you saw, Sidney.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I was tending my sheep up in the pasture when...”

“Your master's sheep...”

“No, mine...”

“Really. Very well, go on.”

“Well, I was tending my sheep when this awful dragon rushed past me. Scared the water out of me, if you know what I mean. Anyway I followed it, and when I caught up to it, it opened up and blasted out flames all over, setting the sukere field afire just right now. It was all burnt and gone 'fore I could find anyone to help put it out.”

“Thank you, Sydney. That will be all,” said James, as he stepped before the next witness. Each of them had nearly the same tale to tell. He listened patiently to each one

before sending him on his way on the condition that he remain available for further questioning.

“Didn't they seem a bit nervous to you, Brutus?” he said, glancing at Spitemorta.

“They're lowly ones, sire. I'd guess an audience with both Your Majesties at once was a lot for them.”

“Yes, I suppose that's possible,” he said, as he took his seat and scratched his jaw. “You're dismissed then, Captain. I'll let you know if I need anything further.”

“Very good, sire,” he said. He thumped his chest and left.

Spitemorta was seething inside. James had outlived his usefulness. She had so hoped to keep him around until he produced another son for her. It would be such a bother to have to find another husband to do the job.

“That's correct,” said Razzmorten. “Signs and spells are merely magical directions. They direct the power that's already at hand. Wizard's fire, however must be called forth from your surroundings. You call it forth in order to direct it with your will.”

Lukus nodded thoughtfully.

“Good. Then I think that's enough for today. Practice what you've learnt, but take care not to overdo it. The power to summon comes from within, and you can be seriously taxed before you realize. Best to rest and eat in between.”

“I will, Grandfather, though if it's all the same to you, I'll wait a while first. I'd like to go above for some fresh air. I've not gotten much opportunity for that in previous voyages.”

“That's a fact,” said Razzmorten. “And I could use some fresh air myself.”

Yann-Ber opened his eyes, surprised to not only find himself alive but truly rested and in far less pain than he had been before he passed out. “Yes. I am indeed alive.” he said as he strained to sit up. “The pain's not gone, but nearly so. Now I wish I hadn't drunk the whole bloomin' thing.” He sighed. He might as well go topside and see what everyone else was doing. “I sure hope it's time to eat.”

Once on deck he saw Fuzz and Rose off to themselves, chatting. He smiled at their good fortune. He had always wanted love, himself. “Demonica. Boy, that sure wasn't,” he murmured with a shudder. She had destroyed all that was good about him and made him hate his very life. He steadied himself against the mast, taking care not to stumble on the coil of rope on the deck. He looked again at the happy lovers. “Somehow, somehow,” he prayed between clenched teeth as he smacked his fist against the mast, “some way I'll get her before she destroys those two and their whole world.”

Chapter 28

Spitemorta called in Samuel, her new guard whom she had chosen to replace Morgi. She knew that he was ambitious. His sense of fair play consisted of doing whatever it took to benefit him personally. He also had minor magical abilities, like those of a hedge wizard, she thought. What she liked best about him was his complete lack of morals. He was the sixth son of one of the chamber maids and was always about the castle when she was growing up. She came to expect to see him hauled out by his ear for another beating, anytime she heard shrieks and cursing. It was nearly always his doing. As his voice changed, his pranks became diabolical and he was often accused of mutilating pets, though by this time he was too sly to catch. Had anyone bothered to ask Spitemorta, she would have known. No one ever did though, for she was far too sly herself for anyone to have considered asking. She watched from hiding with rapt fascination as he tortured to death pet after pet in the most delightfully inventive ways.

One day, he saw her watching. He was furious and frightened until she convinced him that his little secret was safe. In time they became friends, or rather accomplices (friendship being beyond either one of them), and she learnt that he had great hopes of becoming a powerful sorcerer. In pursuit of them, he went to the trouble to cultivate dubious connections who convinced him that blood sacrifices would give him access to the very Pitmaster, himself. To her knowledge, none of that went anywhere. "How sad," she thought, "but he'll be perfect."

"I want you to round up those twelve men who were brought here several days ago by the Captain of the Guard," she said, clicking her nails on the arm of her throne. "I'm sure he can tell you where to find them, but don't tell him why you want them. Should he ask, merely say that you were told to keep track of them for the crown and let it go at that. If Captain Brutus presses you for more information, tell him you're not at liberty to give him details."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I'll see to it at once"

"Please do," said Spitemorta with a smile "And Samuel?"

"Yes, Majesty?"

"I trust I don't need to tell you to forget this entire incident? It will certainly be in your best interest, if you do."

"No problem. I already assumed that's the way it was. Why wouldn't it be the way it's always been?"

"Good. Of course, I'm queen now. Bears checking, don't you know. You've just one day to do this, so I suggest you get to it immediately."

"I'm leaving now, Majesty," he said, bowing minimally before hurrying away.

Spitemorta leant back, looking satisfied. "Very good," she said softly. "James won't be back from Loxmere for above three days. I'll have plenty of time to get the mess all cleaned up before he returns. I might even have time to play with a few of them. I might even allow Samuel to watch."

"Did Smole give you any problems, Budog?" said Demonica as she studied the unloading of two panniers full of freshly ground scrying globes which he and Mazhev had returned with after several days on the continent.

“Oh, he thought he would,” said Budog with a laugh. “But when he thought better of it, he figured he'd rather be able to father a few more children.”

“I'm not surprised,” she said. “But I wonder if his wife wouldn't prefer it otherwise? He's one stinking ugly hoch.”

Budog and Mazhev had a nice knee-slapping laugh.

“So since you took care of his inclination to drag his feet, where are the other seventy-five crystals?”

“They're coming,” chorused Budog and Mazhev, suddenly quite wide eyed.

“Coming?” she said. “Your job was to have them here.”

“He and his four hired hands worked non-stop for a week on these,” stammered Budog. “We saw to that...”

“We left 'em still hard at it,” said Mazhev, “so in three weeks...”

“Three weeks?”

“Well, that's what we hadn't had the chance to tell you yet,” said Budog, “that Smole said without a doubt he could turn out what you want, but you'd have to agree to pay the additional hands he'd have to hire...”

Demonica sighed and stared off into the distance, thumping a tooth.

“He figures one hand can turn out five in a week,” said Mazhev.

“That's what it looked like to us, too, from what we saw,” said Budog. “He said he'll need you to pay for him to hire a hundred people to turn out a thousand of 'em in a fortnight. So with a hundred people, five thousand should take ten weeks...”

Demonica, continued staring for a moment. “Very well,” she said suddenly. “Go immediately and tell him. I'll pay for his hundred new hands. In fact I'll send the money with you. And tell him I'm going to expect no less than a thousand a fortnight for the next fifteen fortnights.”

Budog and Mazhev thumped their breasts and turned to go, but Demonica had other ideas.

“There is, however, a little matter I need the two of you to attend to in the dungeon before you return to the mainland,” she said. “Follow me there now and you can see to it.”

Budog and Mazhev shared an anxious look as they followed her to the very place in the dungeon where she had caught them with her wine. Not only that, there was a feast laid out, but this one was much grander than the one they had been enjoying at the time.

Budog winked at Mazhev. They were obviously being rewarded for their good work and this was her way of apologizing for ruining their fun earlier. They grandly took their seats. But then, something was not quite right about that. She never apologized to anyone for anything, unless it was one of her traps. Suddenly their eyes met in panic.

Demonica watched the exchange with grim amusement.

“Is something upsetting you, gentlemen?” she said in the tone of a waitress whose guests had not tasted their soup. “Ah, of course. How clumsy of me. Your wine.” She hurriedly set a large flagon on the table and stood back, clasping her hands. “This time the food will be better. It's from my personal larders.”

They bobbed their heads in wide-eyed politeness as they each wordlessly picked up bread and knife.

She smiled as she turned to go. “Oh,” she said, stopping short. “I forgot to mention that the prisoners haven't been fed for the entire time you've been gone.”

They looked toward the cells where the inmates stared back with ravenous eyes. They grinned hugely at this. This was even better. "Thank you, mistress," they said in unison.

Demonica smiled primly and went out the dungeon door. It clanked heavily, followed by a jingling of keys and an audible click.

"She locked the dor choarier koukou!" cried Budog.

"What's she up to, Budog?" croaked Mazhev. "Do you suppose she poisoned the food?"

"I'm not about to try any of it to find out," he said, warily eyeing the feast before nodding at the prisoners. "They can test it."

"Right. If they drop dead, we won't eat it. If they don't, we have a great banquet.

But what does she mean by locking the door, Budog?"

"Probably just to unnerve us a bit for pilfering her stinkin' wine. If anything's poisoned, that's probably it."

Mazhev tilted the flagon and looked doubtfully at the label. "You really think she'd do that to her best stuff, just to get even with us?"

"Do you have any brains at all? That bottle might look like her best stuff, but you can bet your wages for a year that she's filled it with cheap stuff."

"Well, sure. That's what I was saying, Budog."

"Right. Well, let's test out the food on those worms."

"Righty-o," said Mazhev as he sliced off a couple of pieces of roast and poured out a bit of wine before turning to the first cell.

"Whoa," said Budog. "This is right odd. How could these stinkers go better than a week and not be locked in?"

"What's that?"

"This cell isn't even locked. Check the others."

"Right," said Mazhev as he yanked on the next door and found it unlocked.

"Kurun! Look."

"Kurun c'hoarier koukou! Lock them quick!" shouted Budog as he yanked at his keys.

The prisoners were already out their doors, converging on them.

"They'll kill us, sure!" cried Mazhev as he ducked the swing of one of them and jumped behind a cell door, locking himself in. He stepped back from the door, out of their reach as they turned on Budog.

Budog scattered the emaciated men with a bloodcurdling yell as he charged them head on. He fled to Mazhev's cell door and implored him to unlock it.

Mazhev shook his head at the sight of the crazed mob closing in again.

Budog jerked at the door in frenzied desperation.

Mazhev relented but his hands were trembling so badly that he dropped the keys.

Budog grabbed them up just in time to lose them again as he was pulled over on his back. At once he was securely pinned.

"Fetch me that wine, fellows!" cried the prisoner sitting on his chest. They rammed the bottle into his mouth violently enough to take out two teeth, and he either had to swallow or drown, so swallow he did along with his teeth.

In a chorus of scuffling and laughter, the prisoners flung Budog into a cell across the room.

“Come on, boys,” cried the man with the flagon. “Time to eat. We've got entertainment, too. We can watch that one whimper, while this one dies from the poisoned wine.”

“Sounds good to me, Bernez,” said a gnarly one.

“Herri!” shouted another as he champed his mouthful of the roast hog. “This banquet's from paradise.”

Budog clutched at his throat as he gagged and retched and bled at the mouth.

“Yer right, Denez,” said Herri, wolfing down brown bread still warm from the oven.

“Try this, Remont,” said another.

“Hey,” said Mazhev, speaking out from his cell. “How would you know if the wine was poisoned or not?”

“Because, half-wit, the witch said so,” snapped Bernez, as he flung a hateful look at him.

Budog sat up from his pile of vomit with a whimper of despair as he overheard this. He was already feeling panicky from his short breath and his heart was pounding in his ears. He staggered about on his knees in the filthy straw, holding his head and wondering how much longer it would take for him to die.

From his cell, Mazhev could see the prisoners immersed in their gluttonous revelry, while across the room he could see Budog through the bars as he toppled onto his cheek to writhe in convulsions before lying still. “I'll get you stinking kaochioù ki du!” he shouted.

The inmates erupted into a chorus of hoots and jeers at the sound of him as they gobbled down the last of what was on the table. In the next moment, they had unlocked the dungeon door and fled, leaving him to stare at Budog's corpse and to wait for Demonica to return. “I'd like to fix her, too!” he wailed. “Maybe Yann-Ber had it right about her all along,” he thought. “She's the Pitmaster's own.”

Demonica nodded and smiled coolly at Remont's account of what happened in the dungeon after she had locked the door. “I'd love to have seen it,” she said, “but when one is pressed for time he must do without a pleasure or two.”

She held out her hand for the keys. “You're all free to go, but if I ever see any of you again you'll be seized and executed. If either of the guards in the dungeon sees you again, you won't get that much consideration, I'm sure. Therefore, get off this island now if you value your pitiful lives.”

The prisoners bowed low then scrambled to rise and flee.

Demonica sighed. “Budog and Mazhev's antics have wasted all kinds of time I don't have right now, and it had better not happen again,” she muttered. “They were loyal and obedient until they got into my wine. It's a lot of work and trouble finding thugs mean enough to do what I want without them turning on me.” She could not let them think she was lax or stupid. They had to be punished and shown that there could not be a next time. With a resolute sigh she headed for the dungeon. She wanted to be there when Budog discovered that he wasn't dead.

“As you can see Samuel, this is 'way better than cats or puppies,” said Spitemorta as

she yanked out the rapier from the bound man at her feet.

Samuel smiled in reply as he looked her over.

“Well, I'll leave it in your capable hands to dispose of all this trash,” she said with an airy wave at the corpses of her arsons, as she turned to whisk away.

Samuel grabbed her by the arm, swinging her to a halt. “What, exactly am I getting out of this, besides the thrills?” he said.

“Big mistake Samuel. I won't tell you again.”

“A thousand apologies, Your Majesty,” he said, letting go as if she were a smoldering stick.

“He was always a bad one. Maybe he won't do,” she thought as she cocked her head. “I need a trusted chief aide-de-camp, Samuel,” she said, “but perhaps I misjudged you. Perhaps you aren't up to it.”

Samuel continued looking her over, just as he had been before he grabbed her. “I'm your man,” he said resolutely. “I'm definitely your man.”

“Good,” she said with a nod at the bodies in the room. “Then, be about your business.”

He turned to do her bidding as she went to her bower to bathe.

Once she was as clean and fresh as a newborn babe, she dressed for supper and turned her bloodied gown to ash with a wee flash of sorceress fire before sallying forth to the dining hall. “That went right well, actually,” she thought as she was seated at the great table.

She sipped at the wine after her taster nodded that it was safe. “I wonder how long it will be before the citizens begin clamoring for retribution?”

Demonica swept into the dungeon and looked about. “You idiots!” she shrieked. “See what you've done? I thought I could trust the two of you, and the moment my back was turned you stole from me. Then you let all my prisoners escape. I ought to behead you or send you to one of the mines as slaves.”

“If it pleases you, mistress, Budog's already dead,” said Mazhev, as he rolled his eyes up from where he held his head in his hands.

“Fool,” she scoffed, making a few signs in the air. At once Budog groaned and heaved himself up onto his hands.

“I have to return to Goll at once with the scrying globes, though I don't see how I can possibly leave you two fools in charge when I'm gone. I think you should both remain in these cells until I return.”

“Yes mistress,” said Mazhev, humbly, “but you wanted us to take money and a reply to Smole and to make sure your orders were carried out.”

“So I did,” she said as she waved her hand, releasing them from their cells. “So see to it. But get this: you've made the only mistake I'll ever allow. Is that clear?”

They both nodded solemnly.

“Good. I'll see you when I get back,” she said as she stepped out the door and was gone.

Demonica unwrapped the Heart and studied it. How she wished Razzorbauch had

trusted her enough to teach her what he knew about it. It wasn't until Myrtlebell had tried to blast her out of the sky that she even knew that it could be used alone. "Very good that

Spitemorta knows none of this," she said, standing up to pace about on the carpet of the dais. "I'll have to make certain that she goes on thinking that I know everything there is to know about using the Heart and the Staff. And there's nothing for it, I'll just have to learn as I go, so here goes." She knelt on her carpet and struggled to heave a pannier full of scrying globes over each shoulder. She held forth the Heart and made signs in the air as she chanted her traveling spell.

The next thing she knew she was tottering under the weight of twenty five scrying globes in the middle of her apartment in Castle Goll. She let the panniers slide off her shoulders at once as she caught her balance. She let out a triumphant breath of relief, carefully rewrapped the Heart and slid it inside her kirtle.

The guard at the throne room told her that Spitemorta was having supper and had given orders that she was not to be disturbed. She went straight to the dining hall. When the guards at the door tried to bar her from going in, she flung her fingers at each of them at once, turning them to cinders as two columns of purple smoke roiled to the ceiling.

Spitemorta stood up indignantly as she burst into the room. "Must you mess up the doorway when I'm trying to enjoy my meal, Grandmother?" she said as she sat back down, glaring.

"I've something to show you," said Demonica, with a trifling shrug.

"Now?"

"Oh, absolutely."

"All right," said Spitemorta agreeably. "Let's see it."

"My room," she said, turning on her heel and speeding out.

"Grandmother! I'm eating!" shouted Spitemorta, flinging her bread and smacking her knife onto the table as she sprang to her feet to follow.

Spitemorta stared at the bed full of catoptrolite scrying globes and then at her grandmother. "What are they?"

"Skinweleriou. You wanted a way to control the citizenry. This is it."

"You're going to have to explain."

"Oh you'll see, Spitemorta," said Demonica with a Cheshire smile. "This and much more."

Chapter 29

Hebraun collapsed onto the goose down settee beside Minuet in their private parlour. "I thought you'd already knitted a blanket, sweater, cap and booties for the baby," he said, glancing aside at her.

"You've been paying attention," said Minuet. "And I certainly did, but they were all blue."

"So, you suddenly don't like blue?"

"Oh Hebraun. You know that blue is for newborn boys. What if it turns out to be a girl?"

"Well, she'll no doubt look cute as a button in blue."

"Certainly, but the best dressed newborn baby girls wear pink."

"Do they? Who says so?"

"Well everybody."

"So, if you give Lukus and Soraya gifts that are blue and they have a girl, whom everyone must see in pink, then they won't let us be grandparents?"

"Stop teasing me," giggled Minuet.

"I'd never tease you, darling," he said with twinkling eyes amidst his dead serious face.

She knew, of course. "I guess it does seem silly, but, this is our very first grandchild," she said as she put aside her knitting. "It doesn't seem possible. Just yesterday I was knitting for Lukus, Hebraun. And the day before that, Rose. I certainly don't feel like a grandmother."

"Nor do you look it my sweet," he said, with admiration in his eyes, before looking away with a sigh. "On the other hand, I'm not only beginning to feel it, I'm beginning to look it. Grandfather that is. Old."

"I've never heard you say such a thing before," she said with wide eyes as she brushed back a strand of hair from his cheek. She knew that the talk flying 'round the kingdom was getting much worse, particularly since it was now fall and no cure had been found for the blight affecting the kingdom's crops. She bit her lip. "Surely everyone knows that if it comes to it, the grain in the crown's bins will be distributed to them to see them through the winter, right?"

"That was today's discovery," he said with a haunted look. "It's all tainted. It has some kind of strange powdery mildew growing on it, every bushel of it."

"That evil, evil woman!" she cried, springing to her feet. "Even Ugleeuh was never so vile."

Hebraun rose and put his arm around her. "We've no proof that Spitemorta has done anything, Minuet. You know that."

"And we're not going to get any, either. Not for magic. There'll be no physical traces at all. She'd had to have been caught in the act. This is a very dry year. There's no way that any granaries could possibly spoil on their own. They checked the wheat?"

"Yes, right after the barley..."

"And the rye?"

"Yes..."

"Millet?"

"Yes. And the bean stores are the worst of all."

"So, it's been done."

“It looks that way, said Hebraun. “The only option left to us is to purchase enough grain from our allies to survive the winter, it seems.”

“And hope that Spitemorta doesn't get wind of it.”

“Well, someone with magical abilities could keep watch over the new stuff, now that we know.” He sank back onto the settee. “I hope your father returns soon, Minuet. I'm beginning to think Niarg won't survive without his help.”

Minuet rubbed his shoulders. “You'll manage, love, you always do. Everyone's upset right now, but when it comes to it, they'll remember how you've always stood by them and seen to their needs even above your own. You'll see.” Minuet always made him feel better.

“You know,” he said, with a new twinkle in his eye, “you'd make some lucky fellow a mighty fine wife, my lady. Would you marry me?”

“Oh I would, sir,” she said with a laugh, “except that I'm already married to the finest man I've ever known.”

“Well, he's a lucky fellow.”

“Yes, and I'm a lucky woman,” she said pulling him onto his feet. “Now, I think it's time you got some rest, love.”

Hebraun did not argue. He followed her, certain that if left to his own devices he could sleep for a week.

“Won't be long now,” said Lukus, as he stood on the forecastle of the *T.M.S. Sea Sprite* with Rose and Fuzz, watching as they were drawn alongside the quay on the Jutland side of Oyster Cove. “We merely have to cross the Jutland Mountains and we're there.”

“Merely is a good two days, Lukus,” said Rose, as a bevy of terns hovered beyond the gunwale, checking to see if one of them might toss out a bucket of slop.

“Yea, pity there's no magical underground river here, aye Rose?”

“Don't worry, little brother,” she said, putting her arm around him, “we'll get you there before the baby's born.”

“And if you don't, are you going to explain it to Soraya?”

“Of course not,” said Rose as she let go of him to slip under Fuzz's arm.

“So much for family support,” said Lukus.

Razzmorten appeared from below, leading the unicorns. “I think it would be best if we bought another unicorn or two here in Oyster Cove before we try to cross the mountains,” he said, as he handed *Mystique* and *Starfire*'s reins to Rose and Lukus. “We're bound to make much better time if we do.”

Everyone was in certain agreement with this, and they set off at once to inquire around about unicorns as soon as they were on the pier. Before they had decided how to split up to do this, Razzmorten spied a lanky golden haired Elf who shook his head when he asked him about purchasing unicorns, but pointed to a small fishing village down the coast.

“Galor, back there, said that no one on the cove breeds unicorns, since everyone is a fisherman,” said Razzmorten, dragging his fingers through his hair before replacing his hat. He was careful not to disturb Tafflu, who was sleeping inside. “However, he said that an old *pysgotwr* (to use the old term) down the coast a league in Fen by the name of Kie

sometimes has unicorns to sell.”

“That's going to take a while, but I don't see that we have a choice,” said Lukus.

“You want Pebbles and me to fly ahead and see if this Kie fellow has any for sale?” said Hubba Hubba. “We could be back in a quarter of an hour. These folks are Elves. They're approachable. It would save time.”

“Good idea,” said Razzmorten as he watched a boy and girl going from person to person with pails of steamed shrimp for sale. “Perhaps we'll just have a bite to eat while you're at it.”

“Yea Wiz. Save Pebbles and me some if ye do.”

“It's a deal.”

“Speaking of victuals,” said Taflu, peeking from under Razzmorten's hat, “let me know if you spot any whole asses anywhere, or even half asses would do.”

“You got it, Taflu,” said Hubba Hubba as he and Pebbles sprang into the air.

“I don't really see any difference between this skinweler globe and the one you had with you before,” said Spitemorta as she picked up one of the orbs on her grandmother's bed.

“Oh, they look identical,” said Demonica, “but their abilities are very different. Skinwelerioù are made of prophet crystal, catoptrolite if you must, which comes from only one deposit in the world, and I happen to own it. Ordinary scrying balls are made of rock crystal. Prophet crystal has magic of its own. When under the influence of a sorceress, these globes can show any ordinary person anything the sorceress wishes him to see.”

“Let me get this straight, Grandmother. You're telling me that if I were to give one of these crystals to James, and I wanted him to see his old lover laughing it up over jilting him at the altar, he would actually see it?”

“My,” said Demonica, eyeing her for a moment. “Well yes he would. Though, you'd need to do a few things first...”

“Such as?”

“Firstly, you need to ready each globe by having it taste your magic...”

“Taste my magic?”

“Indeed. You simply take up a globe in your hands and allow a trickle of your own power to go into it. From then on, it responds to your control. Of course, you actually need two crystals to communicate with another person. But if you've prepared your pair of crystals, you can send whatever you wish to the other person, and so on.”

“And so on?”

“Sure. You can distribute as many globes you like and each one of them will show what you tell it to show. Doesn't matter, you could have several thousand. Are you beginning to see a few of the possibilities, dear?”

“Maybe...”

“Well, how about this? You can see and hear everything that's going on in the place where you plant it, any time you choose. Let's go back to your darling husband. You give him a crystal when you must be away. You'll then be able to let him see where you are and what you're doing, or you can show yourself dutifully sitting on the throne while you're actually anywhere else you want to be. He, on the other hand, will not be able to

keep you from seeing exactly what he's doing and saying anytime you want to look in on him, even if he gets wise and tries to close up the crystal in a box or something.”

“So?” she said, with an impatient toss of her head, “These are quite something, but I don't really see...”

“I should say you don't, Spitemorta. I thought you were worried about your unruly populace, dear. All the skinwelerioù answer to your power. You can tell the people what crown is doing in their interest. You can even show Niarg doing anything against them that you have the imagination to dream up. Meanwhile, you'll be able to see who's talking behind your back.”

Suddenly Spitemorta's face was alight with a dreamy gloat. “Is there any way to get more of these?”

“Actually, I've taken the liberty of having another fifteen thousand made up in one of my shops. How would that do?”

“It should do quite nicely,” she said with a giddy bounce of glee. “I know exactly what I'm going to do. The army's going to distribute these at once.”

“That's correct, Captain Boar,” said Spitemorta, as she stood up from her throne to pace amongst the skinwelerioù displayed on red velvet cushions lined up on the dais. “Each skinweler should be placed in the hands of the most prominent citizen in each of the twenty-one most important hamlets throughout Loxmere-Goll. One for Loxa, one for Sweetpea and one for Gollsburgh... Oh. Don't forget Gollsport, even if it is outside the country. Just keep delivering to the next smallest hamlet, until you've used up your twenty-one...”

“I'm certain that I understand what you want. You want me to distribute these to the twenty one largest settlements. You started mentioning the largest except for Loxmere's capitol, Loxham...”

“Thank you. You're on your toes. All but Loxham. All the largest places except for Loxham. See that it's done within seven days. Are you up to the task, Captain?”

“Absolutely,” said Boar. “I assure you, my queen, it will be done forthrightly.”

“It needs to be,” said Spitemorta, as she handed him papers that she had printed with a wave of the Staff. “You'll give out these instructions with each crystal.

“This is wonderful,” said Spitemorta, as the last ball was carried out.

“It is,” said Demonica, “but don't forget it's also a calculated risk, letting your subjects know you use magic. However, if you do it right, as we have planned, it'll work out quite nicely.”

“When they can see me hard at work, they'll think they're in control, no matter what I do. I'll be able to use the Staff and the Heart and they won't have a clue.”

“We'll see what we see. However, I'm right pleased to see that you're finally beginning to appreciate my efforts on your behalf, dear. Now tell me. What do you plan to do when your handsome husband returns from Loxmere? You can't keep him in the dark forever.”

“I know you tried Wiz, but this is disgusting,” said Hubba Hubba, jerking back with a drool-flinging shake of his beak and ruffled feathers. “What are you eating, giant

stinking sow bugs or what?"

"That's shrimp, Hubba Hubba," said Razzmorten.

"It's out of the sea, you silly bird, not out from under some old rotting board in a barn lot," said Lukus with a laugh, as everyone else broke out with titters.

"All right, all right," said Hubba Hubba, as Pebbles stepped back from hers with watery eyes and wiped her beak. "Dogs gobble up much worse, and they don't know any better than to offer you ones the same rot they eat. I'm sorry Wiz, you've just got me gagging, here."

"What did you find?" said Razzmorten quickly to spare Hubba Hubba's feelings.

"That old Elf has four unicorns in a large paddock near the wharf where his fishing boat is docked. He'd just come in with his catch and was at the fence giving them a scratch, when we lit and asked him if he was Kie. He answered to it, but we sure gave him a start. It might have been dangerous to do but it was quick. Anyway, he does have unicorns to sell and he'll be there if we don't fool around."

"Very good, you two," said Razzmorten, as he gave them each a scratch.

In short order they were on their way to Fen, on a sand swept lane meandering along the coast just inland from the furthest reaches of the high tide. Rose and Fuzz rode Mystique through the saw grass to follow along on the beach for a spell. Sandpipers trotted ahead. Crabs scuttled sideways into holes. Rose rested her head against Fuzz's shoulders and gave him a squeeze. Soon they were dismounting in front of a cottage that smelt vaguely of rotting fish, where Hubba Hubba and Pebbles circled overhead. They found the Elf feeding his unicorns. "Hoy there, Kie!" called Razzmorten. We are travelers on our way to see King Neron, and we'd like very much to purchase two of your unicorns to speed us over the mountains, if you've any for sale."

"How is it that you and your green birds know my name and I know not yours?" said Kie, pushing back his floppy hat with a squint as he spit across the fence.

"A young fellow by the name of Galor told us about you, sir," said Fuzz.

"Good lad," said Kie, shifting his chew into his other cheek as he put his foot on the fence. "Well folks, I really hadn't planned on selling these unicorns. You know they're my pets, I'm afraid. I've had these here since they were colts."

"Oh she's darling," said Rose as she scratched a short-legged one who had just come to investigate. "We'll take good care of them, sir."

Soon they were underway for Oyster Cove with a large white cyflymder gelding and the little chestnut Dúlish mare who had come up to Rose.

"Whee-oo!" said Razzmorten, when they were well out of earshot. "Even Elves can drive a hard bargain. I guess we were in need and that's that."

Before long they found the path which wound into the mountains. It began at once to climb steeply up from the rolling sand dunes which lay just inland of Oyster Cove, wending up the face of a sheer black shale wall, covered with flocks of all manner of nesting sea birds, coming and going. It soon seemed like a very long way to fall to Rose, who tensely watched the cormorants waddling and jostling along the guano streaked ledges, rather than look out to sea. After a long shuffle up the lip of an especially steep and narrow ledge, the path came out onto a prominence covered with pines, a broad wooded shelf which ran along below the face of another sheer wall that rose to the peaks

of the jagged ridge, far above. They followed the shelf for some miles, as it gradually rose.

By early evening they had found a small cave in the rock face beside a tinkling stream cascading from the peaks. The air was chilly up that high in the waning sun, and it grew quite cold as soon as it fell dark. Even with a good fire, they had difficulty staying warm throughout the night as they huddled under their blankets in the springy mulch of pine needles at the mouth of the cave, listening to the hiss of wind in the pines and the shuddering wails of little owls.

At the first light of dawn, everyone but Yann-Ber was up shivering, breathing frosty breath as they gathered up their things with trembling hands. Soon he was out of his pallet as well, bravely facing another day of painful jostling on the back of Starfire.

Rose looked at him with pity, and she was careful to avoid letting him see. She truly hoped that either Razzmorten or the Elves would be able to help him. She looked up to see Fuzz watching her as if he read her very thoughts. Fuzz squeezed her hand at the sight of the sadness in her eyes. He pitied Yann-Ber, too.

No one wanted to stand around shivering, waiting for a fire when they had nothing to cook. They got underway at once, breakfasting on dried fruit and cheese as they rode.

"If we ride hard, we might get there before dark," said Lukus, "though I've never been this way before."

"Too bad you humans can't fly," said Hubba Hubba.

"Oh, I'll stay on the ground, Hubba Hubba," said Lukus. "I still remember that wild ride on Ugleeuh's broomstick, and I didn't like it at all."

"I forgot all about that," said Hubba Hubba. "Of course she flew that way just because you were aboard, don't you know?"

"Yea, I pretty much figured that out by the time I was done barfing."

Everyone laughed, even Lukus. They all needed the light moment. It didn't seem that there would be too many more of those ahead.

Chapter 30

Spark found Lipperella knitting in the parlour. "There's certainly disturbing talk going on in the Council," he said with a look of dread as he took his seat. "They're seriously discussing evacuating the Dragon Caves."

"What?" she said with a gasp. "Have they all gone insane? We've held these caves since our arrival here on the Northern Continent, Spark. Most of us have never even been beyond the Chokewood Forest. Where do they imagine we could go?"

"They say the Black Desert, maybe," said Spark with a sigh, "or possibly even the Great Wilderlands."

"The Council doesn't even know if Spitemorta and Demonica will bother with the dragon clans. Since we're not human, why should they?"

"The Council feels that they'll either attempt to destroy us outright or try to enslave us again, as Razzorbauch did."

"So, they've not even considered the possibility that the witches will just ignore us?"

"They don't think so. They say that the witches will at least consider us allies of Razzmorten and Niarg, and I'm afraid I have to agree with that one. Believe me, I've no more desire to leave the Dragon Caves than you, but staying here really could be suicide."

"If it were just us, Spark, and we didn't have the dragonets and Edward to consider, I'd never agree to leave here."

"And I'd stay here with you."

"I know, and I love you even more for it," she said as she took his hand. "Did they say when this evacuation would begin?"

"They want to send out a scouting party to see what we'll be getting into, first."

"At least they're being cautious," she said. "Too bad none of us has the power of flight. It'd be no trick at all, then."

"Well, if they put it off long enough, flight might help move the dragonets."

Lipperella nodded thoughtfully. "If we must go, Spark, I cast my vote for the desert. It'll be good and warm there, unlike these caves. Also, I'd expect there would be convenient thermals much more often, when they do fly."

"Actually those things were mentioned. I'd guess that unless they find something truly horrible there or that it has no water or life at all, the desert's exactly where we'll go."

"Well, you never know," she said, "Razzmorten and the Elves might have thought up some way to stop the witches and recover the Heart and the Staff by now."

"Miracles are not completely unheard of, dearest," he said with a smile. "After all I have you for a mate and we have all these wonderful dragonets."

"Speaking of which," she said as she rolled off her big green cushion onto her haunches, "come on you charmer, it's feeding time."

"Again?"

They had scarcely finished feeding and settling in their brood for their naps when Kast appeared. "I hope I've not interrupted anything important," he said, glancing at the dragonets.

"No," said Spark. "The little ones are all asleep for at least fifteen minutes."

"That often?" said Kast. "How do you ever rest?"

"We just realize that it will only be a few years until we can," said Spark, catching

Lipperella's wink. "Is this just a visit, or is something up?"

"I wish it was just a social call, Spark," said Kast, with an apologetic look. "I've brought some folks who wish to have an audience with you."

"You say it as though we should be dreading something," said Spark. "Who is it?"

"Beaks, Spark."

"Beaks? You're joking. I guess you're not. So why have they even been let inside? Has everyone here gone completely mad?"

"They came with a white flag, believe it or not, and asked to see the Council. The Council told me to bring them to talk to you. That's all I know."

"Well, see them in, but I'd appreciate it if you stayed until they leave."

Kast nodded and scurried out. He returned directly with three blue, naked and tattooed Beak soldiers.

Spark eyed the trio, waiting for them to speak.

"I'm Captain Girom," said one of them, "and this is Erp and Drest. We've come on behalf of His Majesty, King Talorg."

"In regards to?" said Spark.

"He seeks information regarding his betrothed, the Lady Myrtlebell. She went missing right prior to their wedding date and has not been seen since."

Spark sat back on his cushion, wide eyed before being able to reply. "She's not here, nor did she make it here from the marsh," he said with a grave shake of his head. "I'm most sorry to say that she was brutally murdered by the sorceresses Spitemorta and Demonica on her way here."

"You're certain of this?" said Girom with a look of distress.

"I'm afraid so. Several very reliable friends of mine saw it happen. She was reduced to ashes on the spot by the most evil witches the world has ever known."

"Thank you," said Girom with a nod. "I'll be on my way then, and convey these ill tidings to King Talorg." He thumped his breast respectfully, turned to leave and came face to face with Edward.

Edward stood with poise, staring at Girom, as Spark exchanged a look of dismay with Lipperella at the thought of the horrible memories which were sure to be running through the poor little fellow's mind. Edward knitted his brow and raised his chin.

"You're Beaks," he declared.

"And you're the Lady Myrtlebell's son," said Girom with immediate certainty.

"I am," said Edward, with a cool nod. "I'd be obliged if you told my Aunt Tramae and my Uncle Donnel that their nephew Edward should like to meet them some day."

"I'll certainly do that," said Captain Girom, obviously taken aback by Edward.

Edward nodded and headed for the nursery.

Captain Girom looked up with raised eyebrows at Spark and Lipperella. "That little fellow looks exactly like the king's son, Donnel, only Donnel's bigger and older."

Spark and Lipperella nodded mutely, watching Girom leave with his men.

"I think I'd better go make certain he's all right," said Lipperella, rising to her feet.

"Probably wise," said Spark. "I think Kast and I are going to see what the Council makes of all this, while you do that."

They had not been riding for terribly long when the shelf the path was on rose out of

the trees to open into a broad alpine meadow that climbed gently for a good two leagues, until it came to a pass called the Saddle. The rising sun set to work at once melting away the snow which had powdered the peaks in the night, as it warmed the air just enough that everyone stopped shivering. Ground squirrels watched them from atop scattered rocks before darting out of sight. Wrens called from time to time, like wee ringing hammers.

“Well, it's all downhill from here,” said Razzmorten, when they reached the pass.

“Mercy,” said Rose. “There's a lot of snow on this side.”

“Yea, all the way down to the trees, looks like,” said Fuzz.

Everyone fell silent again while the unicorns jogged down the path as it meandered to a stand of naked aspens flanked by pines. By the time they reached the trees, the sun had followed them across the divide to warm the slopes, melting free rushing rivulets of water to swell the bottom of a gorge near the path to a tumbling torrent. At the sight of a queue of small flat topped boulders running along the lip of the gorge above some large caves, they decided to stop to rest and have a bite to eat.

Fuzz studied the bank of the gorge below as he chewed on his dried apples. “It looks like those caves could go back a considerable way into the rocks down there,” he said. “I wouldn't be surprised if they all joined up into a common tunnel, and they undoubtedly have occupants.”

“Bats, Fuzz?” said Taflu, peeping out from under Razzmorten's hat.

“I wouldn't be surprised Taflu. But I can tell by all those large animal bones which I see now, that something large lives in that one or that one, or at least did not long ago.”

“It will surely be a little while before we leave. Why don't I fly down and check? I wouldn't mind saying hello to some other bats.”

“Sure. Why not?” said Fuzz as he rubbed his bristly chin. “It's always a good idea to know about a cave, particularly if we ever need to spend the night up here.”

“Right,” gritted Taflu as he dropped from Razzmorten's hat and fluttered down the steep rock wall of the gorge, ducking into the largest cave. He flitted out of a different opening a moment later.

“You're right on both counts, Fuzz,” he said as he landed back on Razzmorten's hat. “They're all one big cave for one thing, and I didn't see any bats at all. And, oh yea. I think everyone needs to whisper and be real quiet as long as we're here...”

“Why?” said Fuzz.

“Well, I could hear your voices from up here, just inside the cave. And there's a huge filthy old sow troll nursing a pair of noisy kids, so I don't think she can hear us yet.”

Everyone hushed, wide eyed at this.

“Jutish trolls,” whispered Razzmorten, “*Homo neanderthalensis jutlandii*, also called solitary trolls. They're quite dangerous. They've the very bad habit of pulling apart Humans and Elves with their bare hands and eating them raw. I think we should indeed leave as quietly as possible.”

They were mounted at once, jogging down the path in the wet snow into the pines. Ravens croaked and made clicking noises far above. Soon they were far enough down the mountain side to be out of the snow, and after a particularly long and steep decent, they crossed a broad and rolling stand of birch trees, naked and white. An enormous great grey owl dropped out of the pines and swooped low, vanishing far ahead of them. Evening began to reach out with its shadows.

When Razzmorten moved his hat to scratch his head, Taflu came out onto the bottom

side of the brim and yawned. "Evening, Razzmorten," he gritted. "Hey Fuzz!" he squeaked out, making Razzmorten wince. "I need to hunt."

"Do we camp another night or push on to the Elf village?" said Fuzz to Razzmorten.

"If we keep going, we ought to reach Oilean Gairdin not too long after it gets dark, so that would probably be best. And from the look on Lukus's face, he agrees. Does anyone disagree?" He turned to look at everyone from his saddle. No one objected. "Well then Taflu, we'll just be following this path."

Without a word, Taflu fluttered off to hunt for fresh whole ass blood.

Well after dark, he returned and crawled under Razzmorten's hat, just in time for Yann-Ber to point to a faint light through the trees. Soon they found themselves riding wearily into the dazzling crystal village of the Elves. "This is the same way Lukus and I came, back when we were led here, Fuzz," said Rose.

"And here come Danneth and Strom, two of the very ones who led us," said Lukus, speaking out. "I see you two were expecting us."

"We were," said Strom, merrily. "Do you read minds?"

"Great-Grandfather and Jarund would be here too, but they're with Soraya," said Danneth leveling his gaze at Lukus.

"I'm too late!" cried Lukus, wide-eyed.

"Oh, no, dear brother-in-law," said Danneth with a toothy grin and a shake of his head. "Not yet, I'm sure. Her labors have only just begun. Follow me."

Lukus lunged into great eager strides at Danneth's side, headed for the palace at Oilean Giardin, as the rest of the company followed behind with Strom. They found Soraya, attended by a host of mid-wives while King Neron and Jarund took turns pacing vigilantly outside her door. They greeted Lukus and his party with jubilant smiles and handshakes. Lukus dropped formalities at once and hurried to follow his heart and mind through the door with his body.

Soraya was draped in a sheet on the bed, as each bead of sweat on her brow was daubed up at once by a midwife. The serene concentration on her lovely flushed face gave way to smiles the instant she saw Lukus. "I knew you'd come," she said as he rushed to her, taking up her dainty hand.

"As promised," he said, trading glares with the mid-wives.

Soraya saw the looks and squeezed his hand. "Stay with me," she gasped as a contraction grabbed her.

"I will," he said fiercely.

Outside the door, Neron kissed Rose's hand and smiled at Razzmorten. "And who are your companions, my old friend?" he said with a smile for Yann-Ber and Fuzz.

"This is Rose's future husband, Captain Strong, who goes by Fuzz these days, and Yann-Ber, our friend from Head," said Razzmorten. "And we have urgent need for a long talk, once the baby has arrived."

"I'd thought something was in the wind," said Neron. "But as you say, after the birth... You've not dangerously minimized the urgency, have you?"

"It'll wait."

"Well, we should savor this part of this very special day."

"Yes indeed," said Razzmorten. "I'm about to lose my position as the greatest wizard of the age, and I'm looking forward to it."

A midwife burst forth from Soraya's room. "King Neron, your great-great grandson

is born,” she crowed before rushing back inside.

“Well now,” said Razzmorten. “You'd think she'd 'ave at least let us peek at the little fellow.”

“They've probably not got him cleaned up yet.”

“I'm just champin' at the bit.”

“Whoa! She's back with the bundle of joy,” said Neron grandly, as the door swung wide.

“Lukus!” cried Rose, as he stepped out behind the midwife with another tiny bundle.

“My word!” boomed Neron. “Bundle of joy number two.”

“Twins, Lukus,” said Rose with a bounce before peering for the wee red face.

Lukus handed over his new daughter for her to cuddle. “Have you ever seen anything more beautiful in your life?” he said.

“Never,” she squealed softly. “How's Soraya?”

“Exhausted, but ecstatic. She didn't know that she was carrying twins when she sent me the message globe. When she found out, she didn't know where I was, so she couldn't let me know about it. Isn't it wonderful, Rose?”

“Absolutely.”

Minuet looked up with a start from her knitting as Hebraun burst into their parlour with a small globe and a huge grin. He held out the tiny orb.

“Here! Talk to it,” he said, parking it in her outstretched palm. “Ask it to play your message.”

Minuet hesitated, having not actually seen such a thing before. “Please deliver your message,” she said.

The ball lit from within and directly Lukus appeared with a huge grin.

“Congratulations,” he declared. “You are the grandparents of a fine healthy grandson. Soraya and I have named him Daniel. You are also the very fortunate grandparents of the most beautiful baby girl that has ever been born. We have named her Ariel.” He stepped aside for them to see Soraya sitting up in bed, radiantly holding forth first one baby then the other so they could have a good look. Lukus stepped back into view. “Grandfather and

Rose will be home before long. They've much news to bring you. Soraya and I will not be returning to Niarg for a bit yet. We'll let you know when we do. In the meantime, I'll say that you have yet another happy surprise coming, though I'm not at liberty to tell you what it is. We love you and miss you. And you must set down this globe so that it can fly back to King Neron. Goodbye.”

The image in the globe vanished. Its glow faded out and Minuet set it down, still astonished by it, as it rose and flew like a shot out the window.

“Twins Hebraun! A boy and a girl!”

Hebraun smiled and put his arm around her. “Guess you'll be needing both the pink and the blue layettes after all, dearest.”

“Of course,” she said as she spun 'round to look up into his face. “What do you reckon Lukus meant by, 'at least one more happy surprise?’”

“Can't imagine,” said Hebraun. “But at least it's going to be pleasant, and we can use all the joy we can rake in. I think it may be a good long time before we have much more.”

“I know,” she said. “We've got bad times ahead.”

“We knew this was coming,” he said, squeezing her hand.

“Yes, but I kept hoping that somehow the Elves were wrong, for once.”

“I'd hoped it, too,” said Hebraun, hugging her as they stood at the window, gazing into the starlit night as the newborn hope for their world slept in their mother's arms across the miles in the Jutwoods.

Chapter 31

“King James's retainer has given me this message for you, Your Majesty,” said Captain Brutus as he handed Spitemorta a letter bearing the old Loxmere seal.

Spitemorta made a face as she ran her thumb under the seal. Her eyes darted over the letter, deepening her look of contempt.

“So, what are you still standing there for, Captain?” she said, as if he were being inexcusably thoughtless by standing politely at her disposal with his eyes averted out of respect for her privacy.

“Forgive me Your Majesty, but His Majesty's retainer specifically asked that I wait for your reply.”

“Then get out of my sight and send him in, Captain.”

Captain Brutus thumped his breast and hurried out, as the retainer came before her and bowed.

“Stand up Lance,” said Spitemorta with bored irritation.

“Has Your Majesty a letter for my king?” said Lance politely, ignoring her self-indulgent disrespect.

“No,” said Spitemorta, as if he had just used obscene language to demand her age and weight. “However, you may tell him to take all the time he needs. I can handle things quite well here on my own.” She smiled with a sudden sweet veneer.

“I shall tell him, my Queen,” he said, anxious to leave in spite of his even bow.

“Dismissed,” she sniffed.

Demonica glided in the moment he was gone, looking about expectantly. “That's right odd,” she said. “I'd the impression your darling husband was back when I ran into his retainer outside.”

“Did you wish to speak to James about something, Grandmother?”

“Fates forbid that I ever should. I leave him all to you my dear, no matter how pleasant he may be to look at.”

“Well, I shan't be looking at him for a day or two. He's been detained in Loxmere for as much as a fortnight.”

“Really?” said Demonica. “What's so important in Loxmere?”

“I've no idea,” said Spitemorta, making a face. “He didn't say.”

“Truly? Too bad he doesn't have one of my skinwelerioù with him, isn't it?”

“Pooh Demonica,” said Spitemorta with a laugh, “I could care less about what's keeping James. He's probably moping around, imagining he's the sole ruler of the separate country of Loxmere.”

“My,” said Demonica with merriment in her eyes. “For someone who doesn't care, you're certainly dripping with venom, dear.” She turned back for the door. “I think I'd better go see if my charge is awake yet.”

Spitemorta sat back on her throne with a sullen sigh.

James set the wreath of flowers against his mother's tombstone and stood, gazing at her resting place with moist eyes. He glanced at his father's stone just as a movement across the royal cemetery caught his eye. It was merely his retainer, back from Goll, waiting just inside the fence, talking to his two guards. He sighed. He missed his parents,

especially his mother. He wished she were here to advise him about Spitemorta's recent behavior. He turned to his father's stone. He had not been able to talk to him much. He had even blamed him for his mother's death, though now he knew better. "I'm so sorry Father," he murmured.

He turned away and walked directly across the graveyard to see his retainer. At least he still had Lance. The young man had been his loyal steward for the past fifteen years and had become his most trusted friend, perhaps his only friend.

"Your Majesty," said Lance, bowing as James approached.

"Lance," said James with a broad smile, not knowing just how to release Lance from his formalities for this particular occasion. "What news have you from Spitemorta?"

Lance glanced aside at the guards.

"I see," said James with a nod. "Let's go inside and have something sent up, shall we? You must be done in from your trip. You can tell me everything once you're refreshed."

Lance looked relieved and fell in beside James as they made their way to the palace along the manicured stone path in the skittering leaves, discussing nothing beyond the weather and irrelevant pleasantries until the guards were outside closed doors.

"So, what's up with Spitemorta?"

Lance hesitated.

"You're worried about my feelings, aren't you," said James patiently. "I hope that by now you know me well enough to be comfortable with being direct. Just remember what I told you 'way back when, after that business with Rose."

"I well remember your asking me to always 'give it to you straight,' as you put it, but I just think you've already born enough pain..."

"From her?"

"I should say. She refused to send any sort of written reply, James, and she bade me let you know that you should take all the time you need here since she could do just fine own her own..."

"And what was probably the worst of this was the way she said it, aye?" said James, rising to pace.

"She was...haughty and scathing to put it mildly, sire."

"I do appreciate your being less brutal than my dear wife, Lance. But you've got more to tell, haven't you? I can see in your face."

"Yea," said Lance, with a haunted look. "I've been right busy. I found Margaret..."

"Margaret? I don't know who...Oh! Mom and Dad's chambermaid? You found her?"

"Yes. I followed a lead and found her at a small inn in Ellsmore, where she's waiting tables. Poor thing thought she'd seen a ghost, by the look of her when she saw me. She tried to run away. I actually had to give chase and run her down, but she yielded when I had her by the wrists. I had to take the liberty of promising her that she'd never have to give public testimony and that we'd set her up incognito somewhere entirely outside of Loxmere-Goll."

"Go on," said James, "Let's hear it."

"She said that your father was murdered."

"Then, Myrtlebell really did..." he said, quite wide eyed.

"Not at all, said Lance with a shake his head. "Margaret insisted that Myrtlebell was just a convenient scapegoat for the real murderess."

“Murder-ess? Spitemorta?”

Lance looked stricken, but nodded. “Margaret swears it,” he said. “She said she was bringing your father his nightly sleeping dram when Spitemorta appeared and demanded that she turn it over to her. Spitemorta said that she would give it to him, instead. She said that she feared foul play in her very bones, but only being a chamber maid, she couldn't begin to stand up to royalty. She felt very responsible and guilty, turning it over, so she decided to at least make sure it got to King Edmond, and so she followed Spitemorta at a distance. She watched Spitemorta go into her own chamber with the dram and come back out with it before she gave it to the king...”

“Well, that's suspicious all right,” said James with a shrug, “but it's a long way from proof of foul play on Spitemorta's part.”

“You're absolutely right sire, but there's more. Margaret followed Spitemorta to the king's room and watched through the keyhole as your father drank the dram and went directly into convulsions and died. She said that Spitemorta stayed with your father until he was quite dead, and what's more, your father realized that he'd been poisoned and begged Spitemorta to go for his physician, but she just threw back her head and laughed and told him that the poison she'd put in his drink had no antidote.”

“So is Margaret telling the truth, do you think?” said James as he sat down and rubbed his temples.

“Oh, without a doubt, I'm afraid,” said Lance, sitting forward straight. “The woman didn't want to talk to me, if you'll remember. She's been in hiding since your father's death. She's terrified of Spitemorta and wants nothing to do with testifying publicly. She's afraid that Spitemorta will have her murdered.”

“She told you that?”

“Yes.”

“Does she know of any other witnesses?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“Could she be lying?”

“Why would she be so terrified, sire? She's not faking her terror.”

“Oh I doubt that she is, but what if she and Myrtlebell were in on this thing and planned to point their fingers at Spitemorta? And then, things went wrong and Myrtlebell fled, leaving Margaret to fend for herself. Not wanting to take the blame, Margaret also flees and hides until you come along and find her and she has no choice but to tell the tale she and Myrtlebell hatched before the crime.”

“I guess it could have happened that way, sire,” said Lance with a stunned look. “Am I to see to Margaret's arrest, then?”

“No, that will hardly be necessary, Lance. I sincerely doubt that either Margaret or Myrtlebell had anything to do with my father's death...”

“Then...?”

“I'm learning how Spitemorta's mind works, Lance. The possibility which I just laid out for you is almost certain to be what she'd throw at me if I should confront her with Margaret's story, which, mind you, I have no intention of doing. We shall keep your promise to the dear lady.”

Lance looked relieved and sympathetic.

“I think that for now, we should keep this matter just between us, Lance. You follow me?”

“Yes, completely.”

James sat astride his cyflymder in the newly fallen leaves, staring at the castle of Niarg. It had been a very long time since he had been here and the memory of his last visit was not pleasant. “I was certainly a fool, through and through,” he thought. “I wonder if King Hebraun will even see me.” He shrugged. He certainly would understand why if he refused. “Well, this is it.” he said, looking aside at Lance.

Lance nodded. “You're still certain you wish to go through with this, sire?”

“Yes, I'm quite certain.”

“Then,” said Lance, “I'll return directly.” And with a nod and an informal salute, he rode through the open gates and up the lane to the castle.

Hubba Hubba and Pebbles waddled uphill and down dale over pillow and blanket, giving each sleeping twin a thorough one-eyed inspection before flying to the window sill, adjusting a flight feather or two and giving a resolute shake apiece as they turned to address Soraya and Lukus. “Don't worry,” said Hubba Hubba, “Pebbles and I will let you know the instant either one of 'em so much as peeps. Now go, you two. You need a little time off. Your nestlings are in good...” he paused to look at his feet, “...feet.”

“Thanks you two,” said Lukus with a laugh, as he took Soraya's hand and pulled her towards the door. “We really appreciate it.”

“Hey, no problem, Lukus,” said Hubba Hubba. “Now you ones leave or your nestlings are goin' 'o be hollerin' before you're out the door.”

“We're on our way,” whispered Lukus, as he and Soraya went out and carefully closed the door. “Bet you never thought you'd have two parrots for nannies, did you?” he said, offering her his arm.

“Hardly,” she said with a melodic giggle. “You're certain they can handle it?”

“Oh yea. If one of our wee babes even peeps, Pebbles will stay and Hubba Hubba will track us down.” He led her down the polished hallway and out into the garden under the window of the babies' room, to a marble bench littered with golden leaves.

“I'm really going to miss your family, Lukus,” said Soraya as she swept aside leaves to have a seat. “I wish they could stay longer.”

“Me too,” said Lukus, sitting on top of the leaves beside her, “but Grandfather feels that he must return to Niarg immediately, with things as they are.”

“I know. Great-Grandfather agrees with him. I wish that if this had to happen, it would've waited a few years. It's not fair that our joy has to be tainted like this.”

“Yea, like a few hundred years or so.”

“There you are,” said Rose, out of breath. “I stopped by your apartment and Hubba Hubba was put out with me. He thought I would wake the babies. I didn't, by the way. But I swear he would've bitten me if I hadn't backed out into the hall...”

Lukus and Soraya broke out with laughter.

“Anyway, once he had me out there, he got friendly again and said you were already on your way to see us off.”

“We were early, so we were enjoying it out here, said Lukus. “So where's Fuzz? I didn't think the two of you got out of each other's sight these days, except when your eyes

are closed.”

“He's helping Yann-Ber saddle the unicorns,” she said. “Yann-Ber is such a good fellow and volunteered, but of course it's 'way beyond him, so Fuzz went with him. And before you ask, Grandfather's having a last minute talk with King Neron.”

Lukus waved at Fuzz and Yann-Ber who had just appeared 'round the corner, leading four unicorns.

“Lukus! Soraya!” hollered Fuzz. “I do wish you were coming with us.”

“We'll be there in time for the wedding,” said Lukus. “Don't worry about that.”

The party strolled to the front of the palace as Razzmorten and King Neron stepped outside from the Council Chamber and Danneth, Strom and Jerund came out through the front door.

“What's this tree?” said Fuzz as he waded into it's freshly fallen golden leaves and stared up its gigantic spike of a trunk. “That's the sacred maidenhair,” said Neron with a serene look, as he picked up a leaf to twirl in his fingers. This very tree came with us a thousand years ago, when all of Elfkind were driven from Lobadh (or Gwael, as you once called the Eastern Continent) by the Marfora Siofra.”

“Old tree,” said Fuzz with awe.

“*Ginko biloba*, if you must, said Razzmorten.

“Each year, it sheds every last leaf in a single afternoon,” said Neron. “That happened yesterday, by the way, laying last year to rest.”

They made their farewells brief and were on their way before the sun had cleared the trees. Razzmorten wanted to at least get past the troll caves before they had to camp for the night. Yann-Ber rode the little chestnut Dulish, which he learnt was an Elven breed. He was very impressed with her for she was intelligent and very easy to ride.

“Ar mel is a very good name for you,” he said, as he gave her a pat. He was actually having an easier time of it in the saddle than he'd had for a very long time. The Elves had not been able to cure him, but they had concocted a kind of poultice that drained his pustules whenever he applied it, relieving his pain. Unfortunately they had come up with nothing to help him with his internal boils. He wished for the thousandth time that he had more of the White Witch's concoction. Whatever it was, the Elves had no idea about it. Razzmorten had tried again unsuccessfully to lift Demonica's curse, but he promised to keep trying. He still did not have his strength back, so Yann-Ber continued to hope.

“Grandfather?” said Rose.

“Yes?”

“Do you and King Neron think war is unavoidable?”

Razzmorten sighed and looked at her with a grave face. “Without a miracle, yes indeed,” he answered.

“Thank you for being straight with me, Grandfather,” she said as she cast a worried look at Fuzz. “We'd feared it would be so, but we were hoping that, you know, with the Elves being Elves...”

“Sure. You'd hoped they'd have some magical and quick solution.”

“Yes.”

“Rose, I'm afraid that even though the solution will indeed be magical, it will not be at all quick.”

“Grandfather! It sounds as if you know how to stop this war.”

“Yes I do, Rose, but it is neither in my power nor that of the Elves.”

“Then, who can possibly do it?” she said, as Mystique traded places walking in the path with Abracadabra.

“Oh, Daniel or possibly Ariel, or perhaps both of them together...”

“But they're babies!” she said with a gasp. “It'll be years before they're old enough to do such a thing. What'll be left of the world?”

“Not much as we now know it, I fear,” he said, bearing the most haunted look she had ever seen come from his kindly and steadfastly optimistic old eyes, “not much at all.”

King Hebraun looked at Lance and then back at the letter he had given him from James. “All right,” he sighed. “Tell your king I'll grant him a brief audience at sundown.”

Lance bowed and left without another word.

James was pacing back and forth beside his mount, getting odd looks from the passersby which he patently ignored. At last, he saw Lance trotting up. “I take it King Hebraun granted me an audience, but did so grudgingly?”

Lance nodded.

“Well, I can't say as I blame him, after all that happened between Rose and me,” said James with a shrug as he found his stirrup. “Did you see her, by the way?”

“Rose, you mean?” said Lance, sounding surprised. “Well no, actually. I didn't even see the queen. Hebraun looks drawn and weary. He may have been more drawn and weary than grudging, actually. Something is very wrong, I think.”

James gave a grim chuckle. “I don't doubt that with Spitemorta trying to poison his well.”

“Well, King Hebraun said he'd meet with you at sunset, after he is through receiving his citizens.”

“Looks like we've a bit of time to pass,” said James with a nod, “so let's go stable the unicorns and find an early supper, shall we?”

“Excellent suggestion, sire...James.”

James and Lance rode into to Castle Niarg after a hearty supper of stew and brown bread at the Jug and Whistle, a tavern catering to clerks and the most minor of dignitaries, operated by the same family who ran the stables.

King Hebraun did indeed look weary as he sat back in his great chair. Queen Minuet looked at James and quietly took up Hebraun's hand. James felt a pang of regret and envy at the sight of this, for it was very likely what he had squandered for himself by his ill treatment of their daughter. A gust of wind stirred the banners on the wall as it raced through the castle.

“What is it you wish to discuss, King James?” said Hebraun, as soon as James had been brought a chair.

“I came to warn you, sire.”

“Warn me?” said Hebraun, leaning forward. “About what, exactly?”

“Spitemorta,” he said, meeting Hebraun's eyes as he searched for his words. “All our sukere crops have been burnt to ash. Spitemorta has produced a dozen witnesses who swear that they saw the deed being done by dragons.”

“Dragons?” said Hebraun with a burgeoning rumble. “There's not a single dragon on

the continent today who'd be involved in such foul play.”

“No. Of course there's not,” said James, as a shudder ran through him. This was a very bad start. “Please sire, I never meant to say that the dragons actually did such a deed.

In fact, after interviewing Spitemorta's witnesses, I'm convinced that they were put up to making their accusations.”

“I'm not sure what you're trying to tell me, King James,” said Hebraun as he studied him keenly.

“I know, sire, and I do apologize. I'm being very clumsy with this, I'm afraid. You see, I truly came here to warn you. I'm certain that Spitemorta is trying to get the people of Goll to go war against Niarg. Why she is doing this treachery, I do not know. Actually, there's a great lot about the woman I don't seem to know, anymore. Nevertheless, the sukere fields have all been burnt, and she has seen to it that the citizens accuse the dragons and are furious with Niarg for sending them. I fear war is on its way. I thought you should know.” He stood at once, turning to leave.

“Thank you for coming here and telling us, James,” said King Hebraun, without a trace of a smile. “It took a lot of courage. If Spitemorta were to find out, I can't believe she'd be very pleased.”

“Oh, no. She'll most likely plan to murder me as she did my father, if she hasn't done so, by now.”

Minuet gasped as Hebraun went wide eyed.

“Indeed it might save my neck if you didn't let out this little piece of information just now,” he said with a shrug and a dry lipped twitch for a smile. “Your Majesties, I've lived to regret ruining my betrothal to Rose. I hope that someday you'll both forgive me. I also hope she finds someone who truly appreciates her. She deserves that.” James hurriedly bowed and turned away from their astonished looks, knowing full well that even if they believed him, it would never stop Spitemorta.

Chapter 32

“Your Majesty,” said Captain Brutus, “the crowds are beginning to overflow the courtyard.”

Spitemorta glanced at Demonica, who raised her eyebrows as she studied the backs of her hands in the light of the window.

“You've put the three skinweleriou where I told you?” said Spitemorta to Brutus. “One in the courtyard, one in the base-court and one in the square of Gollsburgh proper?”

“Exactly, exactly. And each of the other twenty-two are in place as well, my Queen.”

“Perfect. Then, give the command to have the crowds watch the crystals, and I shall speak to them all directly.”

“Very good Your Majesty. I'm on my way.”

“You're absolutely certain that all the people will be able to hear, as well as see me in the skinweleriou?” said Spitemorta, turning to Demonica. “I'm going to look very bad before my people if all they get are images of me with my mouth moving.”

“Oh I agree. You would look like a fool, I'm afraid. But the skinweleriou are altogether flawless. You'll see.” She nodded at the balcony. “Now, I believe Captain Brutus has just given the word, dear. So, go see for yourself.” Demonica took pure pleasure in Spitemorta's frightened look as she glided out onto the balcony, where a fourth skinweler was set up regally in an ornately filigreed silver stand atop a marble table. The crowd hushed as Spitemorta stepped before them and raised her arms for silence. She said not a word as she touched the skinweler briefly with both hands. Bright swirls roiled within all twenty-five balls across the countryside until her very image flashed into view in the ones displayed before the crowds, while at the same time she could see in her own ball alternating flashes of each of the twenty four crowds assembled throughout Loxmere-Goll. A gasp surged through the crowds at the sight of her standing in the balls. Her ruby lips curved into a rapacious smile as her eyes lit with the power she had at her elegant fingertips.

“We want to thank you all for taking out valuable time for your kingdom and for your queen,” she said, creating another stir of gasps and murmurs, followed by the most absolute silence she had ever witnessed in a multitude. She hesitated for the briefest moment, reining in her ballooning euphoria. “I have spent the spring and summer admiring your skillful toil, as you nurtured and brought from the earth a marvelous sukere crop, a crop so good that it was sure to make this kingdom wealthier next season than we've been for many, many years, a crop worthy of the admiration of the rest of the world. I certainly admired it. And so did others. In fact certain others outside of Loxmere-Goll admired our crop so much that they envied us. They envied us so much that they had to strike us down...”

The crowd erupted into a furious roar as Spitemorta dropped her arms and bowed her head. Slowly she looked up and raised her fist like a hammer. The crowd fell silent.

“We all have suffered a terrible blow with the loss of our sukere crops right before harvest!” she cried, coming down with her fist. “We know what a disaster this has been for you. I feel this disaster. Know that when you go to sleep tonight, the crown will be doing everything in its power to see you through the long winter ahead.”

Demonica squinted at Spitemorta as she reveled in the roaring adoration of her people.

Spitemorta raised her arms again, silencing the multitude. “We have it on good

authority that Niarg was behind this odious deed. High and mighty Niarg has been the wealthy land. Our sukere makes us evermore prosperous of late, and high and mighty Niarg won't have it! The sources of our information are beyond reproach. We have learnt that high and mighty Niarg suffers from a blight that has ruined all of this year's crops. King Hebraun and Queen Minuet blame us to cover up their loss of prosperity. They blame us for their own failure to save their crops. They blame us for having no corn for bread to go through the winter. They got the Elves to help, and you saw for yourselves how the dragons helped them. You should be angry!" she cried. "I'm angry! I resent this act of cowardice against the citizens of Loxmere-Goll! It will not be tolerated!" She banged her fist on the marble table top. "This is one time it is righteous to be angry! It is righteous to be furious! Loxmere-Goll needs your anger! Loxmere-Goll needs your fury!"

Again the crowd roared. Again Spitemorta raised her hands. "Loxmere-Goll needs her brave, her honorable, her strong to come to her aid. I beseech you, bring your anger, bring your fury and come to her defense!" Once more she silenced them, waiting until it was eerily silent before resuming in a low voice: "Niarg's attacks upon our lands must be utterly crushed or else we shall become their mere fodder. It is time to take up arms!" she cried. "To arms!"

It was now all thundering pandemonium down below. Spitemorta triumphantly picked up her skinweler and stepped inside, directing Captain Brutus to close the balcony doors and draw the drapes. She crossed the room forcing down the whirling and prancing she had bubbling in her feet and collapsed upon her throne with a look of smug satisfaction. She eyed Brutus. "See to your recruiting then, Captain," she said as though she were bored with having this kind of profound effect upon her subjects. "I should say you'll have no problem getting all the volunteers you need, now."

Brutus left immediately to follow her command.

Demonica looked up from her chair when he was beyond hearing. "That went right well Rouanez Bras, but beware. King Hebraun may have a reputation as a benevolent and benign ruler, but unless he's changed drastically since I was there, he also has teeth."

"And just what's that supposed to mean, Grandmother?"

"It means dear," she said with obligatory patience, "that the good king has kept his country loyal and free for so long without war with anyone by very cleverly standing with the citizens under every circumstance. If Niarg goes to war, he will lead them to it himself. And the entire adult population is thoroughly armed with their own weapons and are quite practiced, from the lowliest peasant, to the commander of the military. Not only that, but all the people of Niarg are given at least some voice in most major decisions by their crown."

"So?" scoffed Spitemorta. "Did I not just inspire my people to fight for their lands, Grandmother? Didn't you see them?"

"Oh, but there's a huge difference, Spitemorta. You just now managed to do so. You rallied farmers and butchers and bakers and goat herders. You let these people own shovels and axes and hay forks. Your sheriff takes away any swords or bows or pikes he and his men happen to spy amongst them and puts the poor owner in the pillory. Your subjects will be slaughtered by the superior forces Hebraun can bring to bear against them."

Spitemorta sat forward on her throne. "Why didn't you say something before now,

Demonica? What sort of game do you think you're playing?"

"No game at all, dear. And I did say so before. You just don't listen well. Why do you think I urge you to sail to the Eastern Continent to employ the Marooderyn Imshee?"

"Goll has always fought her own battles in the past," said Spitemorta between her teeth. "I see no reason for this time to be any different."

"No reason at all dear, if you don't mind losing."

"I have no intention of losing."

"Oh? Do you intend to go forth and strike down King Hebraun and his queen with the Great Staff, dear? I'll admit that by now your people must realize that you have magical gifts, but if you use them in ways that look evil to them, do you reckon they'll keep on cheering you and fighting for you? But if these things truly don't matter to you, I say: by all means carry on. Of course, even the most powerful sorceress is still a mere mortal..."

"What in the deep dark pit is that supposed to mean, Demonica?"

"It means that if you're cut, you'll bleed just like anybody else. History will show you, if you bother to consult it. Powerful leaders who are considered to be evil by their subjects tend to meet the most gruesome ends." Demonica smiled and swept out of Spitemorta's throne room without another word, leaving her to stew on her parting words for quite some time.

Captain Bernard bowed before Hebraun and Minuet. "Visitors from afar to see Your Majesties," he said, finding it terribly difficult to keep from smiling. They exchanged a hopeful look and in spite of himself, Captain Bernard could no longer hide his grin.

"Well," said Hebraun, "send them in at once, Captain."

"Very good, Your Majesty," said Bernard, scurrying out.

When Razzmorten, Yann-Ber, Fuzz and Rose entered the throne room, Rose rushed forth and threw her arms around Minuet and then Hebraun.

"Oh, Rose!" cried Minuet joyously. "We've missed you so. And look at you. You're simply glowing. I must say traveling has done you a world of good."

Razzmorten stepped up with a hug for Minuet. "Indeed it has," he said, as he motioned forth Fuzz to stand between Rose and him. "Though I daresay this fine fellow is actually the reason for Rose's radiant appearance."

Rose blushed, but Minuet and Hebraun saw at once the sparkle in her eyes as she looked aside at this "fine fellow."

"It simply cannot be," said Hebraun springing to his feet with a look of astonishment. "Karlton? Is it you? Karlton Strong?"

"That's my name," said Fuzz, surprised to find himself recognized, "though, I haven't gone by it for above twenty year."

"But you're far too young," stammered Hebraun. "I don't see how this is possible."

"Father," said Rose, "Captain Strong has been under Ugleeuh's curse since he vanished from Niarg. He went to the Chokewoods looking for Gastro and she turned him into a fuzzy old bear. He's the very Fuzz who hid us from her and helped us escape from the Peppermint Forest. When the curse left him, he went back to the very way he was when he left Niarg."

"That's astounding," said Hebraun. "Welcome home. I'm right sorry to say that we've

a long-standing Captain of the Guard in your stead, Captain Bernard. He was the one who announced you, actually. We thought you'd fallen victim to foul play, and it seems you did."

"Well I certainly felt played foul, and I had no choice but to bear it," said Fuzz, as everyone laughed. "But sire, I never imagined I'd simply walk in here and resume my old life."

"No, of course you wouldn't. But we're certainly happy to have you back, and it'll be no trouble at all, finding a position for you."

"I'm right honored sire, but, the only reason I came back to Niarg at all is because of your daughter."

Hebraun's eyes went wide as he looked at Rose, then Fuzz and then at her firm grip on Fuzz's hand. He looked at Minuet, who was smiling broadly. "Oh, I do see. Sometimes I'm a bit slow at picking up these things."

"I came so that I might ask Your Majesties' permission to wed your daughter," he blurted out.

Hebraun sat back down. "Yes, yes," he said with the grandest grin Minuet had seen on his face in some time. "I had just started grasping that, I believe. Well! This is wonderful. This has to be the surprise which Lukus was talking about when he sent his message globe."

"It is," said Rose. "I take it Father, that Fuzz and I do have your permission?"

"Well my word yes," said Hebraun with a frown as he glanced at Minuet.

"Absolutely. Both of our permissions. And both our blessings. And surely you remember our deciding long ago that you would simply marry the man of your own choosing?"

"Well, Fuzz wouldn't have it any other way than to ask you."

"Well, that's only to be expected from Captain Strong, Rose. He's a man of impeccable honor, and he's from a generation where anything less is unheard of, you understand."

"Oh if you must," said Rose, rolling her eyes. "But I certainly don't think of him as out of the past. He's the man I love and want to spend my life with."

"I certainly see, Rose. And you couldn't possibly have picked a better man."

"Of course I agree," said Minuet happily. "Say. How about Spark and Lipperella, Father? How many little dragonets did they finally have?"

"A complete two dozen," said Razzmorten with a smile at the thought of them and their pin feathered wings. "And they will fly, don't you know."

"Oh yes," said Minuet. "I guess that's right. Razzorbauch put a permanent spell on the ones who were alive when he took them as slaves on the Dark Continent by taking away their feathers, didn't he?"

"Yes," said Razzmorten, "and only Spark and Lipperella escaped being made sterile."

"And you, good sir?" she said, noticing that Yann-Ber looked better but not cured. "Here you are, standing by politely, being rudely ignored. How was your journey?"

Yann-Ber bowed and smiled as much as he could. "Quite good, Your Majesty. I've met and made many new friends and learnt a great deal. I've been examined and treated by the Elves and by a White Witch of the Chokewoods, known to us as Mary, and I'm greatly relieved by, and ever so grateful to you for having been."

"For reasons which we shall all explain in due time, my powers have been

diminished,” said Razzmorten, “and I've been unable to help Yann-Ber at all. However, I do have hopes that in time I shall be able to do so. In the meantime, he does seem more comfortable than when you sent him out to find me.”

“There are evil times on the horizon, Father,” said Minuet as a shadow came over her eyes, “and I fear that all of your news will not be joyous.”

“Yes, and I can see by your eyes that not all of your tidings are good. What happened while we were gone?”

“Enough that we need time to discuss it all,” she said. “Why not have everyone enjoy a nice bath and a hot Niargian meal, and then we all can delve into what bodes?”

“I daresay that would suit, Minuet,” he said with a sigh. “In fact if you don't mind, I'll just go up and get started on that bath.”

“Go right ahead, Father,” she said as she watched him go. “Oh, wait just a minute.”

“Yes?” said Razzmorten from the doorway.

“Where are my birds? Nothing's happened to Hubba Hubba or Pebbles, has it?”

“Hardly, my girl,” he said with a chuckle. “They're simply right busy with your new grandchildren. After their brood, they're compulsive parents, I'm afraid. Now after all the baby dragons and twins, I'd lay odds that they'll lay a fresh clutch when they get back.”

“I see...”

“Of course,” he said, reaching into his hat, “if you simply must have us returning with something to fly about the castle, Taflu here will be doing that in a few more hours.”

Minuet's eyes widened as she studied the fuzzy creature with its hideously wrinkled face, stretching and yawning with its shiny white fangs. “A bat?” she said.

“Vampire bat actually. *Desmodus rotundus*, not to put too fine a point on it, and he's already saved Captain Strong's life, and maybe the rest of us as well, but we'll talk about this after supper.”

“What did you get me up for, Razz?” gritted Taflu with puzzled red eyes. “It's a good two hours till dark.”

“I just wanted to introduce you to my daughter, Queen Minuet and her husband, King Hebraun.”

“Hey,” squeaked Taflu as he fluttered over to land on Minuet's wrist. “I'm Taflu, at your service. Right pleased to meet you. You're Rose and Lukus's mother and father, ain't you?”

“Why yes,” said Minuet, wide eyed at finding herself conversing with a bat.

“I'm Fuzz's pet,” he said as he flew to Hebraun's knee, bobbed once and flew back to vanish within Razzmorten's hat.

“Well, you know, it isn't his best time of day,” said Razzmorten with a shrug as he turned to go to his tower.

Minuet rested her head on Hebraun's shoulder as servants arrived to show Fuzz and Yann-Ber to their rooms. Rose had already set off for a reunion with Jamali.

James entered the throne room of Castle Goll to find Spitemorta scowling into a skinweler. “I can see that you are ecstatic at my return, darling,” he said, giving her a start.

“James!” she croaked. “I didn't think anyone was there.”

“That's obvious,” he said. “So, what's this that you're doing?”

She glanced at the skinweler in front of her as though she were surprised to see it sitting there, momentarily at a complete loss for words. “Well,” she said, getting her bearings, “I’m scrying, James.”

“My word! Spitemorta, that implies that you are some kind of witch, or I should say: sorceress?”

“Very good, James. You’ve managed to be right on two counts. I would need powers to be scrying, firstly. And secondly I am indeed a sorceress and not a witch.”

James felt pole-axed as he took his seat beside her. This was so obvious. Why had he never any inkling? “Since this is undoubtedly true,” he thought, as he sank back into the cushions, “I’ll have to be careful day and night to keep from being murdered like Father. How could I have been so idiotically naive? Her real mother was an evil witch, after all. And even though she forbids discussing him, Razzmorton’s her grandfather.”

The very thought made the nape of his neck bristle. “So, just how long have you known this?” he said, hoping she had just found out, as he turned aside to her.

“Since I was sixteen,” she said as if she were merely discussing the development of breasts, “though I suspected years before that.”

Chapter 33

“The council has relented, Lipperella,” said Spark as he plopped onto the huge feather cushion in the parlour. “They've agreed to send three envoys to Niarg to consult with Razzmorten and King Hebraun before doing anything so rash as evacuating the Dragon Caves.”

“That's wonderful news, Spark,” she said, taking him by the hand. “If anyone knows the danger posed to the clan by a war, it will be Razzmorten. I hope it turns out that we're worrying needlessly.”

“Perhaps,” he said, putting his arm around her and staring through the doorway into the nursery. “It would be wonderful if our young ones could grow up and live in these caves without fear and slavery.” His eyes narrowed with memories of Razzorbauch. “I'd rather that they had to survive the smallies and the dorchadas in the Chokewoods than to have them live in slavery,” he said fiercely.

Lipperella sat upright and studied his vehement look. “I understand,” she said as she leant against him and joined him, staring into the nursery at the first clutch of dragonets born in the caves the clan had lived in for nearly three hundred years.

Presently Laora blinked her big eyes and stretched, then sat up flapping her wings. At once Edward rushed into the nursery and up to her side. He patted and whispered to her, but neither Lipperella nor Spark could tell what he said, not that it mattered. Laora calmed at once, meeping contentedly as Edward gave her chunks of sukere while he patted and scratched her. In short order Laora was asleep again as Edward slipped out of the nursery without disturbing any of the other dragonets.

“That was amazing,” said Lipperella. “Edward and Laora are so bonded now that he seems aware of what state she's in from any other part of the Dragon Caves.”

“Right unusual, isn't it?” said Spark.

“I've never heard of such a bond between one of us and a Human. Perhaps some of the elders have, though. When I get the chance, I certainly intend to ask them.”

“What have you asked Edward?”

“He told me that he gets a certain feeling inside and he knows that Laora wants him to come.”

“That's certainly how it looks,” said Spark.

“I wonder if they'll actually be able to communicate with just their minds when Laora starts talking?”

“They are already, dear. Laora's got it behind her...”

“Oh?”

“Absolutely, dearest Truth-Bearer. And if Edward has even a dash of your skills, then they're going 'o be. And Lipperella, I just saw you stirring even before I caught sight of Flame, Brand and Blaise starting to move, and I was watching all of you the whole time. I see this happen every day.”

Lipperella smiled a secret smile as she ambled into the nursery and turned around to hand Spark an arm load of raw sukere bundles. “Don't despair, love,” she said. “They're feathered out. We could take them flying tomorrow, I'll bet.”

“Lipperella! Have you forgotten we can't fly? Who's going to keep an eye on them in the air?”

“We're just going to have to trust them, aren't we?” she said as she patted his arm.

James paced about his apartment trying to sort out all he had learnt lately about Spitemorta. He could see that he had never had any real idea of what he had married, and his failure to grasp had simply fallen squarely on him. As the years went by, he had come to face that he had been arrogant and selfish in his dealings with the ladies. Had it blinded him? "What was that old word which Rose was supposed to have called me?" he said as he pulled at the hair on the nape of his neck. "Oh yea, asyn. Old Niarg for ass."

He kicked the legs out from under a stool, sending it skittering to halt in front of the hearth. "Very well, ass then. That's one thing, but just plain blind? Blind isn't even a luxury in this case, it's simply perilous. Ha! And the joke's definitely on me. If Rose was one to be amused by just deserts, she'd like my fix." He shook his head. What was he doing, thinking of Rose? He had indeed not quite forgotten her, these past five years since he and Spitemorta had been married, but he had certainly not dwelt on her either, until Spitemorta accused him of calling out for her in his sleep. And he had no idea at all if he had. There was only Spitemorta's word on it.

He walked over to the balcony and gazed out at the naked trees in the garden below, standing in a crisp yellow carpet of their freshly fallen leaves. He'd had his shock. Now he must decide at once how to deal with this dilemma. Spitemorta was unmistakably a sorceress and a right powerful and perversely evil one at that. If she even suspected him of going to Niarg, she would arrange for his immediate death. "I'd say that my plans of accusing her of Father's murder are altogether out," he murmured with an awed chuckle, "and if I plan to stay alive, I've no choice but to play along with her game..."

"James?" said Spitemorta, giving him a start as she pushed by the door with a rustle of satin. "Grandmother and I are sailing to the Eastern Continent on business. We're leaving as soon as I say goodbye to Abaddon and finish arranging things with his new nanny. Her name's Gina Barnhut in case you wish to be personable. So you'll stay put and keep an eye on things until I return, won't you?" She pecked him on the cheek as if that would make it all worth while.

"Of course, love," he said faintly, "but it would have made it quite a bit easier for me, had you given me a just little more warning about your trip."

"Please don't go moody on me, James," she said with a sigh. "You're the one who's been away all this time, don't you know, and I just didn't think to discuss it with you last night, with you just getting back and all." She smiled. "Besides, I wouldn't have anyway, since it would have spoilt your homecoming."

He smiled back, at once feeling conspicuously artificial for doing so. "She's too busy with her own deceits to even notice," he thought, "as he massaged his forehead, It's certainly safest for all when mad dogs are simply shot outright."

Without warning she put her hand tenderly upon his cheek. "I was going to surprise you with this when I got back," she said with a gush, "but I just can't keep it from you, James."

"Well, you're doing a right fair job of it, Spitemorta," he said, looking lost.

"We're going to have another child, James," she said with a wide eyed bounce. "Isn't it wonderful?"

James worked his speechless mouth as surges of guilt and paralyzing fear made him doubt his sanity.

"James?" she said, sounding practically alarmed. "It is wonderful, isn't it?"

“Of course,” he stammered, smiling with dry white lips. “I’m just stunned. Here I was thinking that we’d not likely have another...and...this is...this is unexpected news. Joyous, unexpected news.”

Spitemorta beamed and again pecked him on the cheek before turning on her heel and heading for the door. “I’ve got to rush, now,” she bubbled. “Remember to check in with Mistress Barnhut, now and again. I hope I don’t get seasick in my delicate condition.”

Ripples coursed lazily across the faces of the banners hanging from the trusses above the great table in the dining hall, while crickets called from every corner in the waning light. The evening air was beguilingly warm for this late in the year. Everyone had managed to carry the sumptuous supper well passed midway on small talk alone, but now the table was falling silent.

“I don’t suppose a one of you could possibly guess who came calling on me within the last couple of days,” said King Hebraun, as though what he had to say was every bit as light as the chatter had been up until now. He drew in a breath between his teeth. “Young King James, would you all believe.”

A baleful attentiveness took hold of the quiet room as he began telling about James’s visit and about the ominous developments in the kingdom while everyone had been away. Servants began at the table, lighting candles throughout the hall. Hebraun went quiet as he looked down his front to find a stray piece of meat before licking his knife and taking a bite of bread.

Razzmorten scooted back from the table to knit his brow in such a way that he had everyone’s attention, as he studied the fat burnished pear in his hands. “Well, as you have already gathered, we’ve been out having adventures of our own,” he said as he began a complete account of events from the time he’d set sail for the Dragon Caves with Rose and Lukus to their arrival back in Niarg. He took a big bite of his pear. A gust of cold air rushed across the room from the far windows, snuffing candles and making the shadows lurch and dance in the far corners of the hall.

Hebraun stood up to pace about as the windows were closed and coals were brought to each of the four fireplaces. “So after all these years, Demonica shows up and manages to get her clutches on both the Staff and the Heart,” he said with a resigned shake of his head. He sat back down. “It’s been a year for it, Razzmorten. I swear, every time I think I see something really bad coming, it turns out far worse. So how’s Niarg, or any other country for that matter, to survive this one? I mean, we don’t have anything at all, unless there’s something you’ve left out. I know you said that the Elves are certain that the twins really do have the power to defeat Demonica, Spitemorta, Heart and Staff, but that will be a gamble at best when the time comes. And ‘when the time comes’ is even worse. What will be left to defend, save or even restore ‘when the time comes?’” Hebraun rubbed his face and looked up. “This kind of thing makes me swear I’m not fit to be king.”

“Hebraun!” cried Minuet. “You can’t...!”

“No Minuet. I’m not deriding myself. I’m just ‘way too naive to run a country in these times...”

“Hebraun! You’re the best...”

“No, dear. The problem is that I am indeed naive. I'm forever being thrown off by the motivation of evil people. I know she's bad; I can see what she's doing, but what has me paralyzed is why she would ever want to. I understand how ruthlessly cold-blooded the striving for power is, but why does she always choose to be so utterly harmful?”

“Your despair is right familiar to me since I raised the mother of one and was married to the other, but we mustn't give into it,” said Razzmorten as he rose and put his hand on Hebraun's shoulder. “We do have one thing on our side, after all. Both Spitemorta and Demonica are as mortal as we are. Therefore they can be stopped.”

“Kill them, you're saying?” said Minuet, wide eyed.

“Absolutely,” said Razzmorten riveting his gaze into hers. “By all means. Family ties are of no consequence when they threaten the lives of everyone. But what kind of ties are they? I might have been married to Demonica, but we're divorced. And she was your sister's mother, not yours. What do you think about Demonica, Yann-Ber?”

“Kill her!” growled Yann-Ber through his clenched teeth. “Oh please, do kill her by all means. It would save us all, and as I'm reminded every waking minute, it would free me at last of my curse.”

“And he's her husband, Minuet,” said Razzmorten, turning back to her. “And Spitemorta? She may be your half-niece, but all the blood in her veins which dooms her to evil, she got from Demonica. And the pair of them are after the world. And you're absolutely right Hebraun, they have far more evil than is required to do the job.”

“What about James, then?” said Minuet, as she shared a wide eyed look with Hebraun.

“That got by me,” said Razzmorten.

“Perhaps he'd help us.”

“Perhaps, but that's risky, risky,” said Razzmorten, leaning back to stare out into the shadows. “Even if all that James told you is accurate, as it very well might be, it hardly means that he wishes to help do in his wife and mother of his own child.”

“Oh indeed,” said Yann-Ber. “Pardon my interruption, but I was loyal to Demonica for a shamefully long time after I was convinced that she was a villain. I rue this of course, and I still live with it on my conscience, but it took her putting her curse on me before I came to my senses. Pushed to it, James might even try to protect her.”

“Yes,” said Razzmorten. “He may have wanted to warn you because he still has some sense of loyalty and duty to the old alliance Loxmere once shared with Niarg. It's possible he feels guilty over what happened between him and Rose, in spite of the predictable face saving that went on at the time.” He paused to lean forward, giving an apologetic look to Rose and Fuzz. “Could be anything. He may even have been lying about the whole thing. Spitemorta might have sent him. We just don't know. No, I think involving James could be a fatal mistake.”

“What about the Elves?” said Hebraun. “I don't remember much being said about them beyond the birth of the twins and their conviction about their future power. Is there anything they can do to help?”

“They are our allies, as they have always been and live within our borders, as we sometimes are inclined to overlook, and will without question fight at our side, but beyond that, they've no solution for the Heart and the Staff. Neron has a suggestion that I agree with, however. He urges devising an alliance of all those known to have magical ability and attempting to bring their collective powers to bear on Demonica and

Spitemorta to at least come to an impasse.”

“What good would a stalemate do us, Grandfather?” said Rose.

“Buy time, Rose. The longer we can keep them from taking over the world, the better off we'll be. Surviving a wait for the twins, if we must, will definitely require a stalemate.”

“Would it truly be possible to hold them at bay until Lukus and Soraya's babies are old enough?” said Rose.

“Probably not,” said Razzmorten, “but we must exercise what choices we have.”

“Grandfather, do you think Demonica and Spitemorta know about the babies?”

“There's no way to know if they do,” said Razzmorten as his face fell, “but given time, they almost certainly will...”

“But do they know that a marriage of an Elf to a Human could beget someone able to defeat the Great Staff and the Heart together?”

“Oh, Demonica probably knows that, Rose. I'd say she certainly knows there's a possibility.”

“Possibility?” said Minuet. “There's a chance they'd fail?”

“Of course, Minuet. The twins have the best chance of defeating Demonica and Spitemorta, but you never know. There's always risk, but I'm afraid it will become evermore clear as time goes by that our choices are few, very few.”

“What kind of peril are the grandchildren in?” said Hebraun.

“As remote as I think possible at the moment,” said Razzmorten. “The Elves are right well aware of the dangers, and you can rest assured that they're being keenly vigilant on those two babes' behalf. They're probably safer in the Jutwoods than anywhere.”

“It will be every bit as much of a challenge keeping Daniel and Ariel safe as it will be keeping Demonica and Spitemorta at bay,” said Hebraun. “I'll speak to Captain Bernard first thing in the morning about readying a force, though I'm at a terrible loss as to how I should advise him.”

“Tell him right after supper,” said Razzmorten. “It would not be at all wise to wait. There's no telling when Spitemorta and Demonica will decide to strike.”

“Yes, but with the Heart and the Staff, what conceivable preparations can I suggest?”

Razzmorten twisted the end of his beard into a spike for a moment, knitting his brow. “Where's the First Wizard's old diary?” he said, suddenly sitting upright with a lunge. “I know we have it somewhere.”

“Why, it's been years and years,” said Hebraun. “It's probably locked away in the strong room off the library...”

“Good. Why don't you wait on seeing Spearsy until I peruse that dusty old artifact. It's time I did some studying.”

“You sound almost chipper,” said Hebraun.

“Do I, now? Well, don't get your hopes up. I just need to see if something's there I think I just remembered.”

“Thank you, but something just lightened your step,” said Hebraun, “so could you be so kind as to let us in on what you think you may discover?”

“All right, very well, very well. If I'm not clean mistaken, the summoning of the greater powers of the Heart or of the Great Staff or of their combination requires more than just pointing and commanding them.”

“Spitemorta and Demonica must know certain spells to make them work?” said Minuet, sitting forward with keen eyes.

“Oh, it seems like it,” said Razzmorten. “But please, let me study the diary before I say more.”

Minuet and Hebraun shared a hopeful nod. However, Yann-Ber began fidgeting anxiously.

“You have something to add, my friend?” said Razzmorten, turning to him.

Yann-Ber nodded and rose slowly from his seat like a schoolboy about to fail at an important recitation. He looked around at each of his companions who were waiting for him to speak. “I know for certain that Demonica has no knowledge of such spells for using the Heart and Staff. If your memory indeed serves you correctly, it will buy us all valuable time while she figures it all out.”

“This sounds like heartening news, Yann-Ber,” said Razzmorten, “but why are you certain that she has no such knowledge?”

“She's been searching for the Great Staff and the Heart for as long as I've known her,” he said, before pausing to stare at the floor to regain his composure. “There is another thing I must tell you all. Everyone here has been so kind and gracious, that I'm dismayed that I've withheld my guilt.” He looked about, taking a deep breath with a shudder. “Every bit of this is my fault. It was I who told Demonica that Spitemorta had come by the Great Staff...” He squeezed shut his mouth and eyes as tears ran to his chin.

“I was too weak to see beyond my own needs. When she put this curse on me, she promised that she would free me by letting me die if I were to find out where either the Great Staff or the Heart were. After seven horrible years I heard tidings of the death of her daughter, Ugleuh. It was said by some that Spitemorta had taken the Staff from Ugleuh's dying hands. I spent enough time in Goll to be satisfied that the rumors were true. I rushed to tell her at once. She was thrilled at my news, right enough. She was so very delighted that she kept her promise of releasing me from my suffering by granting me my death fully one year after that time, and by adding the impossibility of my death by any means including suicide or murder during that time. Meanwhile my boils must have spread inside me, for I have terrible pains.” He shook his head and bit his lip as he fought to regain his composure. “I'm so very, very sorry that I have brought this horror upon the world, my friends. Now it seems that I've committed the very act which earns the pain and punishment of her curse.” He covered his face with his hands and collapsed back onto his chair, quaking with sobs.

Razzmorten stood and quickly shared a look of urgent compassion with everyone as he put his hand on Yann-Ber's shoulder. “No man deserves what Demonica did to you, Yann-Ber,” he said. “No one in this room condemns you for what she forced you to do.

She is dangerously clever and incredibly wealthy. She has many more sources of information than just you. Had you not told her, she would certainly have gotten word of Spitemorta and the Staff from someone else eventually. Surely, you can see this?”

“Thank you. You're being very kind to me, but it was I who did indeed tell her. I did it. Does this not make a difference to any of you?” he said, daring to look up at everyone to be dumbfounded at their having compassion instead of wrath in their eyes.

“Mark me right well Yann-Ber: you sit amongst your friends,” said Razzmorten.

“I reckon I'm at such a loss since before you all, I hadn't rightly known any. I'm out

of a world of power. You spoke of her wealth. It was mine that became a fair part of hers. I was heir to substantial holdings in mines and arms. I of course, am penniless at the present, thanks to her.

“And power, that's all she is, except where she exceeds it with her sheer wanton evil. She was ever talking about the Great Staff and the Heart. She was obsessed, in fact, and spared no expense in trying to discover their whereabouts. When she wasn't going on about finding them, she was lamenting the fact that Razzorbauch died without giving her all the information she needed to wield them. She seemed to have some limited working knowledge of the Staff due, I suppose, to her parasitic affair with him, but the Heart was another matter altogether. Kalon Bras she called it. That's Headlandish for 'Great Heart.' She stole it for him once, and she has resented him mightily ever since

for dying instead of sharing one whit about how to use it.”

“Thank you, right honorable friend, for telling us this,” said Razzmorten, straightening up with a hopeful look as he patted Yann-Ber on the shoulder. “This is the most promising information we've had to go on since Spitemorta and Demonica set their claws upon the Heart. If the grimoire in First Wizard's diary has what I remember it to have, we may just survive a while longer.” With a look and a nod for everyone in the room, he strode out for the library.

“Has word been sent to the dragons to warn them about Spitemorta's sukere crop accusations?” said Fuzz in the midst of everyone's silence.

“Absolutely,” said Hebraun. “A messenger was sent to King Neron right after James was here, asking that he relay the tidings with one of his message globes. It was the fastest way I could think of.”

“They should know directly then,” said Fuzz, as he showed a relieved look to Rose. Hebraun nodded.

Minuet squeezed his hand. “I suggest we call a halt to this discussion for this evening,” she said roundly. “We obviously can't solve this in one night and you've all just journeyed hard and should have your rest.”

Fuzz and Yann-Ber bid everyone goodnight and filed out at once.

“Perhaps tomorrow, between bouts of saving the world, we can find a little time to talk about our wedding,” said Rose as she hugged Minuet and Hebraun.

Minuet and Hebraun bubbled with smiles and nods.

“Come love,” said Hebraun as he pulled Minuet to his side. “I expect we need the rest as badly as our guests do.”

Minuet had never known him to be so weighed down by the throne. It alarmed her, but perhaps Razzmorten could relieve some of his burden.

Demonica paced about the arcade of the east hall, pausing here and there to give a distracted eye to certain portraits amongst King Brutlee and Queen Bee's collection of the Northern Continent's famous personages. She looked up impatiently at the sounds of footsteps. “You certainly took your time,” she said as Spitemorta approached. “Did you remember the skinweler?”

“Of course,” said Spitemorta, raising one of her bags to reveal its heft in one corner, “though, I can't imagine why you'd think it's necessary. James doesn't have one yet, so I won't be keeping in touch with him while we're away. I wish I had one for little Abaddon,

though. He misses me terribly when I'm away.”

“I'm surprised that you wouldn't already be anticipating numerous uses,” said Demonica as she gave a look of disbelief. “I'll explain on the ship. We really mustn't delay any longer, dear. Captain Jockford needs to set sail on time in order to rendezvous at a certain point, just beyond the horizon with the other six privateers I've hired. Besides, he's one who becomes inconvenient when he's put off.”

Spitemorta picked up her bags with a yank and sullenly followed her to the coach which was just being loaded with the last of their luggage. “I still don't see what reason you had for hiring seven privateers for this voyage rather than just taking Goll's own vessels,” she said as she took her seat in the coach. “We do have a most impressive fleet, Grandmother, even if Gollsport is only leased to us from Cyclopsia.”

“I am boundlessly aware of that, dear, along with your plans to appropriate the entire realm of Cyclopsia in the near future,” said Demonica. “Honestly! You really do need to start thinking things through on your own, Rouanez Bras. So then, my dearest Queen of two countries, just why would we hire private ships instead of taking royal vessels?”

“I don't feel like guessing games, Demonica.”

Demonica looked at her placidly, but did not budge.

“Oh, all right. I can only imagine that you hired private ships to avoid notice, since I would be expected to be on a royal vessel.”

“Wonderful,” said Demonica, as she clapped her hands. “It's most encouraging that you got one of the reasons. You need to be thinking right along as we go, particularly with what we have ahead of us on the Eastern Continent.”

“I already knew all of that before I saw you, this morning.”

“You're being even more irritable over petty things than you usually are, dear.” said Demonica, cocking her head as she studied her. “Did you and your handsome man have a falling out over your leaving again so soon, even though he runs off at the slightest provocation, or what?”

“You don't know what you're talking about,” said Spitemorta with a huff, as she crossed her arms and thrust out her chin to watch the hedges go by.

“Perhaps you're right,” said Demonica as her eyebrows went up. “So why don't you fill me in and have done, dear?”

“I have an objection, if you care to hear it.”

“Here I sit, listening.”

“Good! I would very much prefer the comforts aboard one of my own vessels.”

“Yea? Well so would I. But then you never know, some of these private ships aren't too bad.”

“Right,” said Spitemorta as she slouched in her seat to stare out at the distant flashes of lightning. “Great!” she thought, “Storms just as I'm about to set sail.”

Razzmorten unlocked the library store room, slipped inside and lit several candles on the table and wall. He began at once whisking aside the cobwebs and thick dust as he perused the disorderly shelves and stacks of scrolls, books and reams of printed paper, tied up with twine and ribbons. He thought he remembered the looks of the First Wizard's ponderous leather-bound book, but everything he picked up turned out to be something else for the longest time. Just as he was beginning to despair he pulled it out

from under a filthy stack of wholly unrelated tomes.

He drew up to the table and began carefully turning its pages. This was most assuredly it, but it was oddly larger than he had remembered and its entries were made in extremely small print. He could see that he was in for a long evening. He removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes before pulling a candle out of its stick and replacing it with his glowing wand. He knitted his brow and bent over the entries like some hoary old ant eater picking up termites in the gloom.

“Yes,” he said at long last, as he sprang to his feet to circle the table once and sit down again. “Yes, yes! This is very good! Both the Staff and the Heart are incredibly labyrinthine. Particularly the Heart.” He pored over the pages for a spell longer. He banged the table with his fist. “Thank the very Glories of the world,” he said, closing the book and standing up to put it away exactly where he had found it. “One most certainly needs spell upon spell and profusions of dark rituals to call forth any but the most trivial of the powers of either the Heart or the Staff. And we're going to have to find the most secure place in the kingdom for this grimoire. If Demonica or Spitemorta ever gets hold of it, the whole world might just as well invite them to start ruling everywhere and save themselves all the horrible cost in lives and time to resist.”

He made his way to the top of his tower and sank fully clothed upon his bed with a grateful sigh. He was just closing his eyes when he heard the gritting of Taflu just back from a night's hunt. “My word! It must be late,” said Razzmorten as he looked up to see Taflu's red eyes. “Was it a good night out?”

“The best,” chirped Tafflu. “Did you know that there are at least two dozen whole asses right here on the castle grounds?”

“My,” said Razzmorten, “weren't they kind of little?”

“Yea, actually.”

“*Equus asinus*, Taflu. Just plain asses. These asses don't have a whole. They belong to the crown, but I won't say anything.”

“They're sure delicious. I think I'm really going to enjoy my stay here. No wonder Yann-Ber's so fond of this place.”

“Because it's full of asses?”

“Course not. It has whatever a weary traveler needs.”

“Oh. Well let's hope we can keep it free, so it can go on being a haven for folks and asses with good blood,” said Razzmorten amidst a huge yawn.

“I'm for that,” said Taflu. And he flitted into the rafters to begin snoring with Razzmorten.

Spark and Lipperella stood back to back in the middle the kite field, a broad depression ringed with leaning oaks on the plateau above the Dragon Caves, watching Flame, Brand, Blaise and Scorch gliding down in sweeping circles to land, skidding, tumbling and tottering in the white dust all about them. “Bravo!” they cheered as they applauded the fledgling aeronauts.

“All right!” cried Spark. “Flash! Toast! Cinder! Cinderella! Come line up! Let's get you in the air!”

Immediately four gangling dragonets, spiky with new feathers, scuttled forth to stand abreast, holding wide their trembling wings as they leant anxiously forward, ready for

their very first launches.

“Ready Flash?” said Spark, grabbing hold of him. “Let's go!”

At once he charged forward, boosting and speeding the dragonet's stumbling run. The moment Flash picked up both feet together, Spark gave him an extra shove into the air.

“Go Flash, go!”

“Yahoo!” cried Flash, winging stiffly aloft.

“Bravo!” cried Lipperella with a bounce as she clapped her hands. “Here we go Toast. Let's catch him, sweetheart. Let's not have the boys outdo us.” She grabbed little Toast and began running with her.

Just as Toast began climbing aloft, Spark spied Edward and Laora scampering onto the kite field, leading Kast and Gweltaz who appeared to be in a big hurry.

“Hey!” called Spark, with a proud two armed wave. “Couldn't resist seeing what it's like for dragons to fly after all these years, aye? Watch this!” He turned to Cinder. “Come on Cinder, let's show 'em how...”

“Uh...wait...Spark...” said Kast, looking wide eyed.

“We didn't come for this...” said Gweltaz as he shared a guilty look with Kast. “I mean we would have, right enough, but...”

“There may be ominous tidings,” said Kast. “Whee!” he said as he ducked a low sweeping pass from above by Flash. “We were sent by the council to fetch you at once...”

Lipperella gave him a steely-eyed look.

“Why? What's happened?” said Spark.

“All we know is that a message globe arrived a short while ago from the Jutland Elves and the council is in a great hubbub over it,” said Gweltaz. “They're waiting for all the representatives to arrive before having it deliver.”

Spark drew a breath and let his shoulders droop as he looked at his brood and then at Lipperella. He had so wanted to enjoy this moment.

“Go ahead, we'll be fine,” said Lipperella.

“Yea,” said Edward exuberantly. “Laora and I will stay and help.”

Spark saw that Kast and Gweltaz were taken aback by the Edward's boastfulness as he quickly knelt to hug the pair of them, before setting off for the Council chambers.

“Edward's right good with the little ones,” said Spark, once they had gotten a dozen rods into the leaning oaks. “He's already encouraged Laora enough that she's taken several short flights near the caves. And until this morning, she was the only one to fly, so far.”

“That's remarkable,” said Kast. “Isn't she the smallest of the clutch?”

“Yea,” said Spark. “But size hasn't held her back with him there to cheer her on.”

“He's really been a help to you and Lipperella, hasn't he?” said Gweltaz.

“Yes. And more so by leaps and bounds each day, though sometimes I feel like it's been a horrible sacrifice for him to have stayed behind when Fuzz and Rose wanted him to go with them and be a part of their new family.”

“There's still time for that,” said Kast.

“I hope you're right,” said Spark, groping for furnishings to steady himself in the dark, as they stepped into the Council Chambers.

“Good!” boomed Lord Chancellor Padrig, as he stood. “Now we are all here. Representatives: silence please, while we summon this message from the Jutland Elves.”

He addressed the message globe. It glowed as colors within it swirled to form the face of Prince Lukus of Niarg, standing next to Soraya and King Neron.

“Hail dragon friends and allies,” said Lukus. “I regret bringing ill tidings, but Wizard Razzmorten, their Majesties of Niarg and King Neron all agree that it is vital that I do so. The Dragon Clan is in danger. Spitemorta of Goll and her grandmother, Demonica of Head are blaming the clan and Niarg for the destruction of all of Goll's sukere fields. Goll's citizenry is furious and clamoring for vengeance. War is imminent, but we have no idea how the witches are setting things into motion. We will contact you at once the moment we know more. We regret bearing such news as this, but we know that you must be alerted.”

Lukus paused to look aside at Soraya and then Neron before continuing: “Please forgive the insertion of a personal message, but... Spark: Soraya and I want you and Lipperella to know that she has given birth to a fine healthy set of twins. We have a son and a daughter.” He grinned grandly and then gave instructions for the return of the globe before bidding them farewell.

As the globe sped away, the council began talking all at once. The discussions were still going on when Spark dragged his drooping tail into his grotto to find Lipperella fast asleep on the cushions in the parlour, where she had been waiting for his return.

Spark sank down beside her and kissed her forehead.

“Spark, you're finally back,” she said, opening her groggy eyes. “What did you hear?”

“The worst. Spitemorta and Demonica blame Niarg and the dragon clan for their sukere crops being burnt to ash,” he said as he collapsed onto the cushion beside her. “And Razzmorten, Hebraun, Minuet and the Elves think that they are about to declare war on us. Of course the council is back into the debate of whether or not to abandon the Dragon Caves and if so, whether to go to the Black Desert or the Wilderlands.”

“Dear Fates,” whispered Lipperella, as she leant against him.

“There is a tiny bit of good news... Well, not really tiny, just very far into the future, if you're charmed by Elven Lore...”

“What are you talking about?” she said with a yawn.

“Lukus and Soraya are parents. They had a son and a daughter.”

“Wonderful. But what has that to do with the future and so forth?”

“Now you got me yawning. Well, did you do know that the First Wizard was the child of an Elf and a Human?”

“Seems like I did.”

“You also know that the Great Staff and the Heart of the Staff were created by the First Wizard?”

“Yea. We got that figured out when Razzmorten was here.”

“Well, he had all the power to do that because he was begotten by an Elf and a Human. And only a wizard from such a union will have the power to defeat and destroy the Heart and Staff and the person who wields them...”

“Whoa,” said Lipperella, sitting bolt upright. “You're saying that the only ones who would have the power to stop Demonica and Spitemorta outright would be Lukus and Soraya's twins?”

“If you hold with Elven Lore.”

Chapter 34

Rose awoke to the calls of a mourning dove in the juniper outside her window, in the bed she had slept in since she was three years old. She lay there listening as it replied to other doves far and wee. The sunshine reached across her room and lit her bedposts with an amber light. She sat up as a brilliant vermilion cardinal landed above the dove and took up a melodious delivery to the world. At once, Mali pounced on her, ragged purr leaking from her nose as she began kneading the comforter. Her room had its familiar beauty for each month of the year.

Suddenly it was all spoilt. Here they were, on the brink of war. "Spitemorta!" she cried. "How could any one person be so evil?" She gave Mali a final silky stroke and slid out of bed. She made short work of dressing and combing her hair, being keenly interested in getting down to breakfast to find out what Razzmorten had learnt from the First Wizard's diary. She had made a decision that she hoped Fuzz and her family would understand. When she entered the dining hall she was disappointed to see that Razzmorten was not in his chair. Yann-Ber was in Lukus's seat and Fuzz had not yet arrived, either.

Hebraun and Minuet smiled cheerily at her.

"It would have to be the very last day of the world for them not to do that," she thought.

"Good morning," she found herself saying in spite of her doubts, as she took her seat. Everyone around the table babbled the same greeting.

Fuzz appeared and Rose found herself cheered by his arrival, but Razzmorten's chair stayed empty. "Has no one seen Grandfather yet, this morning?" she said, as the meal began.

Hebraun and Minuet both shook their heads as Fuzz and Yann-Ber looked up from their eating to see their reply.

"It was no doubt quite late when he went to bed, Rose," said Hebraun. "The First Wizard's Diary is entirely in Old Niarg Standard as I remember. I looked at it when your grandfather was trying to find something in it, years ago when Razorback was on the rampage, seems like. That's not all though. Old Number One had the tiniest, most cramped handwriting I believe I have ever seen, and it was full of strange abbreviations and all sorts of peculiarities."

"I can certainly believe that," said Rose, "but, Grandfather's spent his life wading through that kind of thing..."

"Yeap. Up to his knees," said Hebraun with a healthy nod. "But Razzmorten's a perfectionist. He doesn't like making mistakes on trivial things, let alone making them with this much at stake. You saw how hard it was to get him to put his hunch into words yestereve. He took his time with the diary, last night. You can mark that."

"I'm sure you're quite right, Father," she said. "Grandfather's always been that way. I guess we'll just have to love him anyway."

"Well now, I'm right comforted to hear you say that, Rose," said Razzmorten with a puckish grin as he passed behind her unnoticed to draw back his chair.

Rose turned scarlet but quickly recovered as the room fell dead silent, watching him lace his porridge with honey. He added a dollop of heavy cream, then stopped to peer round the room over his spectacles. "I daresay," he said, setting down his spoon. "This must be how it is for the bugs in my collection. I see I'd better report my late night's

research so that I can eat in peace.”

“Please eat, Father,” said Minuet with a chorus of murmuring agreement by everyone at the table. “We’re burning with curiosity, of course, but all of us would be right pleased to wait while you eat.”

“Well, I know it seems terrible of me, but please, if you all don’t mind very much,” he said. “It was hunger that actually woke me this morning.”

“Rose,” said Minuet, “tell us your plans for your wedding.”

“Well, Mother,” she said with a smile for Fuzz, “we were hoping that you’d help us with all of that.”

“By all means dear, but surely you’ve some ideas?”

“Well, I do have a few thoughts, I suppose...”

“Sounds like a start,” said Minuet.

“We’re sailing across an entire ocean on that?” screeched Spitemorta at the sight of the *Sea Jewel*, “We’ll sink.”

“How dramatic, Spitemorta,” said Demonica. “The *Sea Jewel*’s one of the most sea worthy ships afloat today, in spite of how it strikes you.”

“Really. And just how could you know such a thing?”

“I’ve had years of dealings with Jockford and his ship, Spitemorta. Just get on board, will you?”

“Not likely,” she said, turning square about and heading back to the coach. “You’re on your own, Demonica.”

Demonica grabbed Spitemorta by the arm, yanking her around to face her. “I’ll tell you this once, Granddaughter:” she snarled, “you insult me by forgetting that I know well my business. The *Sea Jewel* looks as she does for her protection. She’s a specialized vessel. She’s stealth afloat. Even pirates pass her by, but because of her deceptive draught, she’ll stand up to weather that would have any of your miserable royal firkins on the bottom. Now I’m boarding and you can either follow me or go whimpering home to your handsome king of two insignificant countries.” And with that, she marched up the gangplank.

Spitemorta clamped her teeth and headed for the coach. She put her foot on the treadle and stopped. She could still feel where Demonica had had her by the arm. She furiously wrenched away from the assistance of the wide eyed footman to glare at the ship which her Grandmother had just boarded. “Unghh!” she growled, as she stamped back to the ship with a white knuckled grip on the Staff. She tramped up the plank and glowered at Demonica. “I reckon I can keep this trough off the bottom with magic, then!” she said with a snarl, as she smacked the deck with the heel of the Staff.

Demonica threw back her head and roared with laughter, bracing herself on her knees as the tears ran down her cheeks. Without warning, she snapped shut her mouth and paused, staring gimlet eyed at Spitemorta. “Follow me,” she said abruptly as she glided away, down the companionway.

Spitemorta managed to get below just as Demonica’s skirts disappeared into one of the cabins at the stern. When she reached its door, she found it closed and locked. She knitted her brow and pounded.

Demonica jerked open the door. “Oh, it’s you. You’re next door,” she said, as if she

were expecting someone else entirely and Spitemorta had merely confused the cabin numbers.

“Stop playing games, Grandmother!”

“I will when you're ready to, Spitemorta. Quite frankly, I wonder what's gotten into you. But I can tell you this: we've absolutely no time for any of it. Where's your skinweler?”

Spitemorta sullenly lifted her bag.

“You need to start showing your good citizens how you're hard at work on their behalf...at Castle Goll. And you need to keep them convinced of it every day until we return,” said Demonica as she nodded at the bulge in the bag. “It won't do at all to let any of them believe anything less. The more they see their faithful queen not only working for them, but allowing them to watch her doing it, the more they'll trust and believe in you

without question. And a trusting, loyal populace will fight for you without complaints, Spitemorta. By the time we return, your people will all be clamoring for their very own skinwelerioù, particularly if you charge enough.”

“Charge enough? Why not just hand them out?”

“And miss out on the sly tax? It's an opportunity. It'll help pay for a war. And the more they have to pay, the more they'll believe what they see. Charge them half a year's wage. They'll be standing in line. Once every household has its own skinweler, you'll be able to watch for anything disloyal and eliminate the traitors before they can spread dissent. Absolute, total control, that's what you'll have.”

By now Spitemorta had fished out her skinweler to admire.

“Now, go next door to your cabin and look around for a spell and come back and tell me if you truly think there's a single berth on any of your ships that even comes close to the sheer opulence of your quarters. Make yourself comfortable, then send your vision to your people. Once you've done all of that, meet me aloft for our midday repast.”

Without warning, Demonica closed her door firmly with a click.

Spitemorta stared angrily at the door that had just been abruptly closed in her face. It occurred to her that she could easily blast it in with the Staff. “Of course I can't,” she mumbled between clenched teeth as she resentfully thought better of it. Actually, Demonica had just freed her of having to spend the rest of the morning with her. “Very well then,” she said, stepping into her cabin. She looked about and quickly spied a place to sit with her skinweler to address her people.

“Wizards. You're joking,” said Lukus as he stared in disbelief across the table at King Neron. “Daniel and Ariel are just babies.”

“At the moment, they are not yet wizards,” said Neron, “for as you say, they are babies. But as they grow up, they will indeed become wizards. When they're older, they'll come into their magic, and it's absolutely vital that they begin learning to use and control it the moment you realize it has appeared. They will be more powerful than anyone has ever been before, even more powerful than the First Wizard.”

“Because there are two of them?”

“No, because you aren't an ordinary Human, Lukus. You're becoming a strong wizard in your own right, even if you've only begun your training. All Human wizards

descend from the First Wizard, as you know. Your having children by an Elf, particularly one with a lineage as exceptionally endowed with magical ability as Soraya's, means that those children cannot help but be the most magically gifted beings who've ever been born. They will be a favorable match for the evil that has recently been loosed upon the Continent."

"But, Spitemorta and Demonica have the Great Staff and the Heart," said Lukus.

"Yes," said Neron, "right powerful objects indeed, created by the First Wizard, who was the most powerful until now..."

"You knew this," said Lukus. "You knew this back when Rose and I first came to these woods. Danneth said something back then that stayed with me. He said: 'then it is time.' This is what he was talking about, isn't it? Does Soraya know this, too? Is that why she married me, so that we could breed wizards for this evil age?"

Neron's eyes flashed. "I see why you say this, Lukus," he said, at once letting go of what had just flared as he sagged with a heavy sigh. "Would I do that to my own kin? I make mistakes, but have you truly seen me do things that would lead you to such an accusation? Things have come to pass due entirely to the Fates and to circumstance. We saw it coming, Lukus. That much is true, but we manipulated nothing. We had nothing, absolutely nothing to do with you and Soraya meeting and forming a heart bond. This I swear unto you: she loves you freely and unconditionally. Please, never mistake that. It is true that when the bond between you was certain, we knew that things which could not be changed had been set into motion on this path, but knowing it is not the same as causing it. You must understand that. I'm only telling you this now because you have to be told. Would you have had me tell you early on and risk injuring the love which was unfolding between you and Soraya?"

"I'm sorry," said Lukus, slumping back against his chair. "I am indeed very sorry. Please do forgive me. You've been nothing but fair and wonderful the entire time I've known you. I'd not have had you do anything different than what you've done. It's what you have to say that scares me. I fear for my children. They're in danger, aren't they?"

"From the moment they were conceived," said Neron. "Until the evil ones and the Heart and the Staff are destroyed, Daniel and Ariel will live in the shadow of peril. Our single most important mission of all is to keep them safe."

"Well," said Razzmorten as he set his spoon in his empty bowl and pulled his napkin from his collar. "A little suspense now and then builds character."

"He's like that, you know," said Hebraun, leaning aside to Yann-Ber.

Razzmorten looked up and down the table over the top of his spectacles. "I'm right pleased to announce that we are not without hope," he said rhetorically, as he straightened in his chair and pushed back from the table. "There are indeed things that Demonica and Spitemorta must know and do in order to make any substantial use of the Staff and the Heart, lots of things, actually..."

Everyone began talking excitedly at once.

"Regardless..." he said, speaking out as he held up his hand, "Being the right powerful sorceresses which they happen to be, that tiny fraction of the power of the Staff and of the Heart available to them still allows them to be the most formidable and dangerous witches who have ever lived. We're in a most precarious position. We might

be able to combine power with a good number of others to hold them off for a time, but we should expect that they'll anticipate this.”

“And if they do?” said Fuzz.

“They'll most likely seek out each wizard and sorceress and destroy them one by one.”

“What exactly are these things which Spitemorta and Demonica 'must know and do' in order to use the power of the Staff and Heart?” said Rose.

“By themselves or particularly if they are together, the Staff and Heart are capable of almost unimaginable destructive power,” said Razzmorten. “However, as with all magic, the energy to produce it must come from somewhere. The Staff is used to store up huge amounts of power that can add to its wielder's powers when he commands. The Heart also stores enormous amounts of power, even more than the Staff. If the Heart and the Staff are combined and used to their limit, the pair is easily ten thousand times as potent as either one alone, assuming that the one wielding them knows all the proper spells and incantations required to release and direct the powers from each one.

“Blood magic,” he said in a hoarse whisper, as he paused to look around at the anxious faces. “Blood magic is how the Heart was created in the first place, you see.”

“And the Staff?” said Fuzz.

“No, no,” said Razzmorten, “the Staff was just a straightforward storage container for the First Wizard's excess magical power. It builds up if it isn't used, don't you know. Most wizards find it convenient to have a wand or a staff, sometimes several for just such a purpose. They store their extra power in them to draw on when big tasks arise. The Great Staff is no more than the most potent version known of one of those...”

“So that's why wizards always drag staves and wands about with them.”

Razzmorten smiled.

“And this blood magic?” said Fuzz, “Didn't mean to interrupt. What's that?”

“Well, I'm glad to see you on the edge of your seat,” said Razzmorten. “Diabolical stuff, that's what. You see, the First Wizard was the only Human (half Elf though he was) to have magical abilities until he had children and grandchildren who'd inherited some of his abilities. Now, he was also quite selfish and would never settle down with one woman, if you know what I mean, so he had children all over the place, and it wasn't long until there were a goodly number of Human wizards and sorceresses.

“As is typical of those who are both powerful and irresponsible, and vain man that he was, he decided to put a stop to this spread of wizardish powers by taking it out on others rather than by controlling himself, so he began stealing power from the other wizards for himself. “Now, don't forget, his powers were twice as great or better than the other wizards because the most powerful of them only had half his blood.

“He discovered that certain exceptional single stones and crystals can enhance magical powers, and he came across a uniquely potent and perfectly clear crystal stone in the shape of a heart that he added to the end of the Staff. Then, he set about hunting down the other wizards to drain them of their power, which he stored in the stone heart...”

“What happened when they fought back?” said Fuzz. “Surely they did.”

“Oh, by all means,” said Razzmorten. “They each did, I suppose, but none managed. None were a match for his power, so he took away every bit of theirs, growing stronger wizard by wizard. Of course, the drained wizards died in the process.”

“And, he kept up this morbid practice until he'd drained every other wizard and

sorceress of power?" said Rose. "He mustn't have managed entirely, or there'd be none today."

"He kept it up as long as he lived. The remaining wizards and sorceresses soon went into hiding, which mainly meant their not practicing magic. Wielding magic would have alerted the First Wizard.

"The First Wizard was still mortal, after all, and he'd not bothered to learn anything about the healing magicks. The plague struck the Northern Continent, hard. He fled, but he was already ill. He died on the Dark Continent after he brought the plague to a whole string of villages. The Dark Continent was hit so badly that even today their numbers are not back to what they were."

"That's an awful story, Father," said Minuet.

"Especially since it's true," said Razzmorten. "You, of course, realize the meaning of it for Demonica and Spitemorta, don't you?"

"I suppose it means that they must take power from a wizard or sorceress to use the Heart to its full capacity..."

"Well yes, if they want its power to grow, which of course they would," said Razzmorten, "but remember that there's already a great deal of power in the Staff and the Heart which they have no access to because, as we are guessing, they know nothing of the words and spells which unlock the greater part of the power of either one."

"Demonica is frighteningly powerful and clever," said Yann-Ber, turning to Razzmorten. "Give her time and she'll have it all figured out. And she'll begin by seeking out any she thinks might hold the key to this knowledge."

"I'm quite sure you are right, Yann-Ber," said Razzmorten with a grim nod. "Quite sure."

Chapter 35

Demonica knocked again on Spitemorta's cabin door and waited for her to answer. "Her childish revenge for my having shut my the door in her face," she thought. She knocked again. "Honestly, Spitemorta!" she called through the door. "I actually had the opinion that you were a little more grown up than this!"

"Go away!" cried Spitemorta, with a retching woof from above the vomit in the bottom of the bucket between her knees.

"Kleñved-mor!" said Demonica, as she wrinkled her nose. "Look, you should've told me you get seasick. If you let me in, I can help you with that."

Spitemorta gave a resonant bucket bottom gag and a few groans. After a dead silence, she threw open the door. She stood reeling and glowering from under the hair pasted with vomit to her cheeks and forehead.

"My," said Demonica, taking a step back. "You're having a nasty time of it, aren't you? Leave your door open to let it air out and go sit down. I'll go fetch some herbs that'll have you over this in no time." She turned and left to return in a few moments, herbs in hand. She found Spitemorta sprawled across a brocaded chair, her head resting against the wall behind.

Spitemorta watched Demonica with slit-eyed doubt.

Demonica ignored her, filling a teacup with water from the night stand. She passed the flat of her hand over the top of the cup, setting the water in it to a furious boil, which it obligingly continued to do while she bustled about with herbs, saucers and a mortar and pestle. She set a strainer atop the cup and dumped in the herbs. She sighed, paced around in a circle once, then lifted out the strainer and handed the cup to Spitemorta. "Drink it right down," she said.

Spitemorta made a terrible face as she took it, trying to keep from slopping it on herself. When she got it to her lips it wasn't scalding, so she gulped it right down.

"Ungh!" she said.

Demonica knitted her brow and stepped up for a close look at Spitemorta's face, just in time for her to spew forth a shaft of vomit, right into the snow white ruffles of her bodice. "Aaaah!" she shrieked, as she turned and fled.

"Aangh! Ingaaff!" declared Spitemorta, swaying on the edge of her brocaded seat. "Got you, ci hithau!"

With Demonica gone, she picked up the Staff from where it lay across her bunk. All it took was getting hold of it and having well in mind the image of things cleaned up and the mess vanished. She stared at where Demonica had disappeared out the door and smiled broadly in spite of her nausea. She dropped her smile at once at the sight of her, breezing back in as though she had just stepped out for a breath of fresh air.

"That was rude, dear, but not at all out of character," said Demonica.

"And you can't handle direct affronts..." said Spitemorta sitting on the bunk with a wince and a puckering swallow as she squeezed shut her eyes.

"You should've told me you were with child rather than seasick. The treatment's altogether different. You deserve to just sit there and puke, dear."

"You came in with all the assumptions, Grandmother."

Demonica drew a breath for a reply and held it. "So I did," she said with a sigh. "My mistake, then."

"You do that all the time, Grandmother. I'm not nearly as shallow and helpless as

you insist. So what did you come here for in the first place?" She was starting to feel noticeably better, even if Demonica's remedy was for the wrong affliction.

"You hadn't come topside, and I wanted to see how you were getting on with your skinweler and to suggest that we scry the Marooderyn Imshee, actually."

"I sent out to all the other skinwelleriò the visions which you suggested, showing me hard at work at the palace, looking out for the interests of my people," she said, noticing that her nausea was altogether gone. "I also composed and sent out another vision. I showed King Hebraun and Queen Minuet in Castle Niarg, plotting with the dragons and Elves to destroy more of our country's commerce."

"Splendid. Including the Elves, I mean," said Demonica.

"So, you thought I did something right?"

"Oh absolutely. Destruction of the Elves is going to have to come from as many directions as possible. And letting everyone see the enemy hard at work will have the whole kingdom frantically grappling with one another for a peek into the skinwelerioù."

"Why do you want to scry the Elf Killers, anyway?" said Spitemorta, taken aback by her sincere enthusiasm.

"We need to learn as much about them as we can before we get there, dear," she said, pulling up a chair and sitting directly in front of her. "The more we know, the easier it'll be for you to be their great goddess."

"What?"

"By all means. I have my reasons. You'll see."

"Very well, but what if they have no idea what a 'great goddess' is? Then what?"

"That's my point. That's why we need to scry them as much as we can in the time we have at sea. And you'll need my help, since you've not been there. Trolls may not be human, but they strike me as having much in common with the savages of our kind..."

"So?"

"So, if you act commanding enough they'll cower, particularly if you find out what scares them worse than anything else."

Spitemorta took her skinweler from its gilded stand on the chest at the foot of her bunk and gave a look of resigned dubiousness before staring into its depths. Soon she saw an unfamiliar shoreline. She heard the cries of a gull as it soared over the waves breaking along the beach. Sandpipers scurried about after wee mollusks vanishing into the sand.

"That's it," said Demonica, hovering over her shoulder. "I recognize that part of the coast of the Eastern Continent, but you won't find them there. They'll be inland, up into the mountains in the Great Maidenhair Woods, undoubtedly in some of the caves, this time o' day."

Spitemorta looked up at her with a knitted brow.

"They won't be out. They only hunt after dark. They hole up when it's daylight. Hunt for the mouths of big caves."

Spitemorta was now searching for caves along the feet of bluffs and rocky prominences rearing up above the coastal piedmont of the Eternal Mountains.

"Whoa," said Demonica. "Right there. Go back a bit. That's a cave. Get up close. I swear I saw a flicker of light."

Spitemorta complied, and at once they saw trolls sitting around a fire inside the cave.

"I did. Go right inside. They won't see anything."

At once they saw everything as well as if they were standing just inside the cave. It

was an enormous cavern, and right before them were seated and sprawled around a fire, several score ponderous Elf Killers, scantily clad in furs and skins. Husky naked children cavorted and pranced about in their midst. Off to one side, a throng of troll children smeared with red clay made the entire cave ring with peals of deep guttural laughter at their antics, as they riotously jabbed sticks at a pair of screaming Elf children tethered to the wall.

Demonica broke out with a peal of rattling laughter, causing Spitemorta to look up wide-eyed from the skinweler to see her beady eyes of glee. For a moment she would have sworn that Ugleeuh was standing there. She dropped the skinweler into her lap and covered it with the folds of her robe. "You're disgusting, Grandmother. You saw that, didn't you? You think that's fun? They were getting ready to roast and eat those children."

"What's the matter with you, Rouanez Bras? When did you become squeamish? I clearly remember your delight at the screams of the Beak when you helped skin him alive. Why's this any different? You weren't even helping the troll cubs do it."

"You know very well I'm not squeamish, Grandmother. But I want no part of turning loose monsters to put my own son, my own children, in danger. I certainly don't mind watching the Elven spawn squeak and bawl."

"Well, you certainly had me worried for a moment, dearest heir of my ways," said Demonica. "It's Elves the Marooderyn Imshee have a taste for, dear. Humans have been on the Eastern Continent alongside those trolls for aeons without being bothered in the least by them."

"But I've heard of trolls in Niarg's Jutwoods killing people..."

"Altogether different kind of troll. The ones in the Jut of Niarg live alone and attack anything big that is stupid enough to wander by their caves, including Humans. The Gwaelic trolls on the Eastern Continent live in clans, and as far as I know have never attacked a Human."

"You swear?"

"What is this, Spitemorta? You think I'm telling windy stories or what? Do you think I want to turn loose these beasts to rule the land? How would that serve our purposes?"

"Very well then," she said as she uncovered the skinweler from the folds of her dress and found the cave again. The Marooderyn Imshee were indeed cooking the Elven children, turning their quarters on spits arranged side-by-side across the coals of the fire.

By now everyone was streaked and daubed with red mud. Those around the fire who were not tending the spits were taking part in an odd shuffling dance, chanting, jumping and flinging about their strands of beads and amulets and the red mud balls which dangled from locks of their hair. Periodically they dropped onto their knees and pressed their cheeks to the cavern floor, before springing up with their hands and faces to the ceiling, as if giving supplication to some sort of deity. "That," she said, glancing up. "Wait a minute... There, that. See that? Could that mean...?"

"Oh, I think it probably might," said Demonica with a smooth nod. "I've been seeing it. In fact it's exactly why I'm convinced you should appear to them as a goddess. Anyway, we've seen enough for now, don't you think? Shall we go topside and get a bite to eat?"

"Yes. Suddenly I'm absolutely ravenous."

"Oh I know how that is, dear. I find myself that way just every once in a while."

Rose stood stiffly on the stool as a pair of seamstresses pinned the hem of Minuet's wedding gown. Minuet stood watching, radiant with happiness at her decision to wed as well as at her decision to wear her gown.

"I'm more certain than ever that Mother and Father never expected me to marry," thought Rose with a smile. "Mother," she said, "I suppose you understand that Fuzz and I want to wait for Lukus and Soraya to arrive before we have the wedding?"

"That's what your father and I assumed," said Minuet as she stooped to examine just how her hem was pinned in a certain place, "but Lukus and his family should be arriving in a few short weeks, which really only gives us scarcely enough time for all the arrangements."

"We have plenty of time if we keep it small enough, Mother," said Rose with a smile.

Minuet opened her mouth to protest, but closed it with a grin. "It is your wedding, Rose. And I suppose you're right, all things considered."

"Yes," said Rose, as she thought: "After calling off the extravagant affair with James, who knows how it would go? Besides, these are bad times upon us." She stepped off the stool and out of the gown as the seamstresses carried it away for alterations.

"Mother," she said, picking up her robe from across a chair. "I've come to a decision. I want you to do something for me, if you will."

"My word. Is something wrong?"

"Very wrong, actually. But to put you at ease, this has nothing to do with the wedding."

"By all means dear, if I possibly can. What is it?"

"Could you teach me to use my powers?"

"Why, I thought you'd decided that you wanted nothing to do with becoming a sorceress, Rose," she said with an astonished look.

"No, by no means. I never did. But I suppose I was doing little more than following in your footsteps, all these years. I think that under the current circumstances it would be irresponsible to have such an ability and not use it for the good of all."

Minuet's eyes flashed.

"Oh, my! I didn't mean it to sound that way. I was only referring to me. Our circumstances are altogether different. I'm not queen of anywhere. Fuzz is a military man and will undoubtedly be in the thick of what's coming, and I've every intention of being right beside him, so will you teach me?"

"Have you discussed this with Fuzz, dear? It would not be right to keep something like this to yourself."

"Not yet," said Rose with a sigh, "but rest assured, he'll abide by whatever I..."

"Of course Rose, I'd not expect otherwise. But it would put me at ease, knowing that you'd discussed it with him."

"You're so provincial, Mother."

"'Considerate' is what we once called it, I believe."

"I'll go speak with him this minute, but I suggest you go dig out your wand."

"All right," said Minuet, as a strange light kindled in her eye. "You've a bargain."

Captain Girom thumped his chest and stood at attention with his lieutenants, Drest

and Erp before King Talorg.

“Report, Captain,” said Talorg, sitting forward on his throne to rest his elbows on his knees.

“Your Majesty, I regret that I must return with tidings such as these,” said Girom as he nervously shifted his stance. “Your betrothed is dead, murdered by those right foul and odious demonesses, Spitemorta and Demonica.”

“You're surely mistaken,” cried Talorg, springing to his feet.

“I wish I were, sire. But as you said when I left, you sent me because you consider me reliable...”

“Then how came you by this news?” said Talorg as he chucked himself back onto his seat and covered his face with his hand.

“When we reached the dragons we were sent to one amongst them, known as Spark, the husband of the dragons' Truth Teller. I deemed him to be of right sincere countenance. I'm convinced that he knew well of the Lady Myrtlebell's death. Not only did he swear it to be so, he told of a number of most reliable persons, including the wizard Razzmorten, who saw her die.

“Her son is staying with the dragons, sire. He appeared as we were speaking, and he did not contest any of Spark's claims. He was impressively poised. The little fellow requested that I should tell his Aunt Tramae and Uncle Donnel that he would like to meet them sometime. He looks just like a younger Donnel, sire.”

“Lucky for Buthut and Caelis that they're already dead,” said Talorg as he looked up. “Captain, you are to announce that we are at war with Spitemorta and Demonica and their respective countries. If either of them appears within our boundaries, or anywhere within your sight, you are to kill them on sight or die trying. The only way they are to be brought before me is as severed heads and skinned quarters. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly, Majesty,” chorused Girom, Drest and Erp as they thumped their chests in unison.

“Good. Dismissed.”

“Your mistress is a slave driver, Budog,” said Smole, pushing away from his lapidary wheel. “I need more hands.”

“Here's an extra hand, you rodent,” said Budog as he stepped forth and smacked him sprawling onto the floor. You have your hundred men already. Your mistress saw to that. You're only lagging 'cause you're a slacker. The mistress has no patience at all for such ilk. How old do you want to live to, aye? Hey! How old?”

Smole backed away like a crayfish, dragging his clay spattered apron.

“If it's any older at all, razh-raz, you'll get back on your stool before I come over there and pick you up on the point of this knife.”

Smole rolled onto his knees, his flacid jowls aquiver as he stood up with indignation burning in his wee black eyes. “I miscalculated,” he said with a squeal. “A hundred will never do. I'll work later into the night to meet her demands, but I can't imagine that'll do it.”

“Then I suggest you work all night, razh-raz,” said Budog, as Mazhev came round the corner to break into a smile at the sight of Smole. “Or would you rather we replace you? Course, we cut up those we replace. I mean, we have to have 'em bite sized for the

hogs.” “That won't be necessary,” said Smole as he poured water into the tank of his lapidary wheel with trembling hands and began pumping its treadle. “What if the crystal runs out before Demonica's demands are met? I heard talk about that possibility several days ago. Who'll take the blame for that?”

“You like your gossip, don't ye little runt?” said Mazhev. “The miners got into a new vein of the crystal this very morning, so you can put your teensy mind at ease and keep grindin' away.”

Smole shifted a hateful look from Mazhev to Budog from under his lowered brow as he picked up the crystal he had been working on.

“That'n there, he's a-workin' on,” said Mazhev with a nod at Smole, “that's number nine hundred and ninety. Another ten and we'll have the rest of Demonica's first thousand, plus the seventy-five which we didn't get to her from the first hundred. We're due a bit of a break, don't you reckon?”

“Ya da,” said Budog with a nod. “Besides, we got these worms too scared to slack off, even if we ain't here every minute to watch 'em.”

“I hear down in Yar-Vor there's a sweet little tavern called the Backroom and it's got lovely barmaids who'll do what you want.”

“Let's go, Mazhev. We surely get a break after all this time, putting up with this pit. Even Demonica would think so.”

Smole glared at Mazhev and Budog with his piggy eyes, but quickly turned to his grinding, as if he had been working all the while.

“Did you see that, Budog?” said Mazhev, drawing him aside. “I don't like Smole. He's a rat of some kind.”

“I don't like him either, but Demonica says he's the finest globe grinder on the continent. It might be a mistake if anything happens to him.”

“I don't mean kill him exactly, but we are in charge, if ye know what I mean, and if he keeps acting up, he ought to get a lesson or two on work habits and etiquette, maybe.”

“That is something to think about,” said Budog. “Let's chew on it while we eat supper at your tavern.”

Mazhev stuck out his chin at Smole, startling him back to working furiously at his lapidary wheel.

Rose found Fuzz and Razzmorten deep in conversation at a table in the castle library. “Didn't mean to bother,” she said, turning to leave. “I'll come back...”

“Pooh, Rose,” said Fuzz, standing at once. “Here's a chair.”

“Mercy, Rose,” said Razzmorten. “How would Fuzz and I have secrets? We were just discussing how much time we might have before Demonica and Spitemorta make their next move.”

“Razzmorten thinks it might be time to place spies in Spitemorta's court,” said Fuzz.

“Niarg's never done that sort of thing, Grandfather,” said Rose as she rubbed Fuzz's shoulder and then took the chair beside him. “However, we've certainly had our share of spies turning up here. It's a shock to think about. It's not at all like Niarg, and maybe that would help us. We've got a lot at stake, so maybe it's time we did.”

“Glad you agree,” said Razzmorten, as he rose to begin pacing. “And you're right. It's not at all like us to use spies. Perhaps you won't mind helping me convince your

parents that we should, then?"

"I'm willing to try," she said, "though I never knew that I was anywhere near as influential as you on any sort of matter like this."

"Good. I can't ask for more," he said, turning for the door. "I'm on my way to find Yann-Ber."

"Fuzz," said Rose, the moment Razzmorten had gone, "I've decided to learn to use my magical powers."

Fuzz went silent for a good long spell. At last he nodded as though he were giving his thoughts a full stop, before turning to face her. "I was almost expecting this, Rose. You've been feeling helpless about everything. And if you're telling me this because you want to know what I think, then I'll tell you: I think it's a very sound idea. It'll allow you to fight back, and you just might save the life of either one of us. If all the good people with magic have to join forces to hold off Spitemorta and Demonica, then you're also one more amongst their number."

"I knew you'd agree with me love, but would you mind telling that to Mother?"

"Your mother?"

"Yes. She's agreed to teach me to use my powers, but only if you allow it."

"My. She makes me feel as though I'm your keeper."

"She's old fashioned," said Rose with a laugh.

"Remember I had to ask your parents for your hand, aye? And I'm actually older than your mother, not to put too fine a point on it..."

"I'm outnumbered," said Rose with a laugh as she threw up her hands. "I hope Lukus and Soraya get here soon."

Chapter 36

“What on Earth?” said James, as he stepped onto the balcony of the throne room to find a crowd gathering excitedly about a scrying ball on a pedestal in the courtyard below. “I can't imagine her leaving it down there. This is crazy. They look as though they're actually watching something in it. And more and more people are coming. I don't see how any of them could possibly be wizards.” He stepped inside quite perplexed and at once sent for Captain Brutus.

Brutus soon appeared and hurried to the throne to stand at rigid attention before him.

“By all means please relax, Captain,” said James.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Brutus, looking warily at him as he set his feet apart with one step and put his hands behind his back.

“No, no. That's 'parade rest.' She's got you rigid as a board, Captain. I'd offer you a chair, but I want to show you something from the balcony.

“Thank you sire,” he said, as he followed James through the double doors.

“Down there,” said James, nodding at the crowd which had grown respectably large in the few minutes it had taken Brutus to arrive. “Have you any idea under the shining sun why Queen Spitemorta would have left a scrying ball on a pedestal in the courtyard? And what about all the people down there...?”

“I can only assume...” said Brutus, looking startled. “Pardon me. I'm confused, sire. Have I neglected something?”

“I'm apparently far more confused than you, Captain. Do, you know anything at all about that scrying ball?”

“So you're indeed not put out with me, and you're not testing me in some way, then?”

“Good grief, no.”

“So you in fact know nothing whatsoever about the ball, sire?”

“Not one thing. I've been in Loxmere...”

“She...Queen Spitemorta placed the crystal ball down there so the citizenry could see things she chooses for them to see, sire.”

“So, she's given orders that the public be let into the inner courtyard without someone addressing them from the balcony?”

“Why, yes...”

“And how can she choose for them to see anything at all? Only the magically gifted can see things in a scrying globe.”

“That one's different.”

“How's it different?”

“Forgive me sire, but you are indeed not upbraiding me in some way that I've yet to grasp?”

“Fates forbid. No. Absolutely not. You're most apprehensive. Please, just have a seat.”

“Thank you,” said Brutus, as he sat on the very edge of the closest chair next to the double doors. “I suppose I must seem excessive. It's just that being in the queen's service can be very trying.”

“She scares you, does she?”

“I...”

“Never mind. A question like that probably does, too. So what's different about that scrying globe, down there?”

“Well sire, anyone can see things in it.”

“Anyone?”

“As far as I know, one needs no special powers at all, so long as someone with powers provides him with things to see. So as I've said, she's commenced using it to show the people things what she wants them to see.”

“Such as?”

“Well the first thing she did was to allow herself to be seen across both kingdoms, making her speech about the dragons setting fire to the sukere fields...”

“What on earth do you mean by, 'across two kingdoms?' I must not have heard you right. How could the entire populace of two countries...? Did she summon people en masse from the far reaches?”

“Why no. She's had globes placed in towns all over. She's employing five and twenty skinweleriou. People can see her in each of them all at once, wherever she has them. And she has a right good number more of them on the way, as I understand.

“Wait. What did you just call them?”

“Skinweleriou? Skinweler is what each one is called. Skinweleriou is plural.”

“What's that? Headlandish?”

“Sounds like it, sire.”

James sat down with a sigh in the chair beside Brutus and rubbed his face. “So that's what's going on right now, is it? She's addressing them?”

“Yes, but I only got a glimpse of it before you summoned me. It looks like she was with the council, seeing to the interests of all citizens over some matter...”

“Well Captain,” said James, keenly aware that Brutus was as much Spitemorta's captain of the guard as Lance was his retainer, “I'm unbelievably embarrassed. I thought she was joking. Can you do me a favor and keep my ignorance about this in your strictest confidence?”

“Oh I quite understand, sire. Giving two kingdoms the ability to scry our great queen is nothing short of miraculous. Not believing your eyes is most human.”

“You may carry on Captain. I'm much obliged for your time.”

“My privilege and pleasure Your Majesty,” said Captain Brutus, as he thumped his chest, bowed and departed.

“Kast, Tors and Gweltaz have been picked to undertake an expedition to explore the Black Desert to see if the clan could live there,” said Spark, stepping into the nursery as he returned late from another council session.

“What happens if we can't live there?” said Lipperella, as she paused from her feeding of Flame, as Edward and Laora grew quiet to listen.

“Then they'd explore the Wilderlands. And if they aren't fit, then I suppose the council will scratch their heads.”

“The Homeland?” said Lipperella, as she handed aside her big chunk of sukere to Edward. “Has there been talk of anything like that?”

“Some. Nobody's enthused. You think it would be a bad idea?”

“The Dark Continent's full of memories, and the most recent ones are awful.”

“Razzorbauch's been dead a long time...”

“You mean they've even bothered discussing him?”

“Well, his name's come up each time the Homeland is mentioned.”

“Fates! Feeble old mossbacks. First of all he's dead, Spark, as you so aptly put it. Besides, he was from Niarg, which is here on this continent. He only went to the Dark Continent because of his witch woman, Demonica. Even back then she controlled most of the commerce there. And it was she who talked him into enslaving us for the sukere trade in the first place.

“I didn't know that,” said Spark. “Why didn't I know that?”

“Oh, I think I know. I believe that came to light when you were in exile. Everyone else should be aware enough of it to be talking about Demonica, first thing, not about him. Here we are, all ready to flee the Dragon Caves because of her, and now she controls most of the commerce of Tywyllwch (to use Niarg's old word), including that of the Homeland.” she said, shaking her head with an apologetic look. “I'm sorry I brought up your awful exile.”

“Hey,” said Spark softly as he reached out to take her hand. “I know you love me. You can talk about it. Besides, if I held it against anyone, it certainly wouldn't be you.” He turned aside to look at Edward, standing wide eyed, holding the sukere which Lipperella had handed him. “Ah! Easedropping are we? Look at poor old Flame, craning and drooling.”

“That's eavesdrop, Uncaspark,” said Edward, chucking in the sukere like a football. “You should know better.” He turned tail at once and trotted out, side by side with Laora.

Spark whistled at the doorway. “Whoa, Edward!” he hollered. “Come back here!”

Edward and Laora appeared in the doorway with worried looks.

“You're not in trouble,” said Spark with a chuckle.

Edward and Laora scurried up to sit on the floor in front of Lipperella and him.

“I figured I'd better explain it”

“I didn't mean to ease...eavesdrop, Uncaspark,” said Edward.

“I know that,” said Spark, before clearing his throat and taking on a rhetorical tone. “There was indeed a time when the dragon clan cast me out. They were under the control of the evil wizard Razzorbauch, and they thought I was a disgrace because I couldn't blow fire out my mouth and nose like the rest of them, so they forced me to go live alone in the Peppermint Forest...” He paused to see Edward and Laora staring wide eyed at Lipperella.

“Oh, my. Lipperella wasn't one of them. She tried everything to stop them, but no one would listen to her.”

Their smiles returned at once as they each wiggled where they sat to get comfortable. They loved tales.

“She was overruled by the council, which was controlled by the terrible dragon Razorback...”

“Razorback? What part of the Dragon Caves does he live in now, Uncaspark?”

“He doesn't live anywhere, Edward. He was killed by King Hebraun of Niarg.”

“Rose and Lukus's father?” he said in awe.

“He most certainly did, but Razorback was evil. And not only that, he wasn't even a real dragon.”

“He wasn't? What was he?”

“He was actually the right evil wizard Razzorbauch in disguise.”

“So after the bad dragon was killed by the King Hebraun, your brothers went to the

Peppermint Forest and brought you back home.”

“Well...” said Spark, with a look at Lipperella. “No, it was Lipperella who came for me. It's kind of a long story, Edward.”

“I understand,” he said with a nod, as he sprang to his feet.

“I'll explain it all...”

“I know. Now, may Laora and I go out to the kite field? We promised to help Avel, Cook and Fornigell with their flying.”

“Certainly.” said Spark, releasing their mad dash for the door.

“I really like Edward,” said Spark as soon as they were gone.

“He's really spurring on the mob with all of his egging on Laora and giving her endless encouragements.” said Lipperella with a nod. “One would swear that he has proper aerial instincts, but there's not a feather on him. Sometimes I get this strange feeling about him, as though he were our very own.”

“Me too, but I try to ignore it. It's going to be hard enough when Rose and Fuzz come to get him.”

“And by the way, I think that once he has them all flying as well as Laora, we should start weaning them.”

“No argument from me,” said Spark. “So what do we do at feeding time?”

“Set the table and tell stories afterward,” said Lipperella. She cocked her head, pausing thoughtfully. “You want to go with them, don't you?” she said, suddenly looking him squarely in the eyes.

“Into the air?”

“Not the dragonets. I'm talking about Kast, Tors and Gweltaz.”

“I want to be with you, love.”

“I know you do Spark, but you still want to go with Tors and them to see if the Black Desert will suit your family. Now don't deny it.”

“Am I that transparent?”

“By all means,” said Lipperella with a smile and a wince, as she removed a tick from his scalp with a yank and bit down on it with a snap before swallowing it. “To me, I'm afraid you are.”

“Well,” he said as he rubbed his scalp, “I keep worrying that they're going to pick out a place that won't suit our youngsters in the least. Maybe if I'm along, I can prevent that. Maybe it's gone to my head, but aren't we the very ones who are raising the next generation? Don't we get a say?”

“Well, what will you do if it's no good and the others all think it's perfectly acceptable?”

“I'll just have to change their little minds.”

“Now why is that no surprise?” she said with a grin.

King Talorg sat stretching the tattoo on his face as he massaged his temple. “That's all I know,” he said, dropping his hand to pick at the arm of his throne with his thumb nail. “I'm afraid it's my doing. Had it not been for my delay in executing the witches, Myrtlebell would be alive today.”

Tramae and Donnel shared a look. “You're mistaken, Fa,” said Tramae, dropping her gaze to look at her hands. “It's my fault. It was my meddling that killed her.”

“What in the name of Madadh-Allaidh Neartmhor do you think you're saying, girl...?” said Talorg, sitting bolt upright.

“No it wasn't!” said Donnel hotly, stepping forward. “I was the one. I did it...”

“What is the matter with the two of you?” said Talorg, springing to his feet to begin pacing. “Didn't you hear me say that reliable witnesses saw her murdered by Spitemorta?”

“We heard everything, Fa,” said Tramae.

“Then what are the two of you talking about?” said Talorg, sitting right back down on his great chair.

“Don't you remember me coming in here and telling you that Donnel and I thought you shouldn't marry Myrtlebell?”

“In spite of everything, it did make an impression. You thought it would force her to fail at living your mother's life and make me unhappy in the process. It was not your decision to make, but I thought it was a pretty grown up way for you to look at things. What does that have to do with anything?”

“A lot Fa,” she said, bravely facing his gaze. “She had every intention of going through with your marriage until I insisted that she flee.”

Talorg sat thunderstricken, squinting at her as though he were staring into the evening sun. A barn owl swooped forth from her pair of fuzzy young between the crucks under the ridge pole and settled for a moment on a timber overhead before vanishing noiselessly out the window.

Donnel stepped in front of Tramae. “It wasn't her idea, Fa,” he said, “'twas mine. I saw the White Witch skulking about after she got loose from the dungeon. She was trying to find a way to get to Myrtlebell and run away with her. I told Tramae and we decided to help her with Myrtlebell's escape.”

“All in my best interest, aye?”

“Yes. We thought so, Fa,” said Tramae, taking a turn to step in front of Donnel.

“We still do. And we certainly didn't want anything bad happening to Myrtlebell, but we were the ones who killed her, not you.”

“In spite of what I might make of your restraint, I'm right proud of the sense of honor of the two of you.” He paused, keenly studying each of them. “Myrtlebell's spirit is with Lira's, now. And how could Lira fail to see that my not executing the witches killed her daughter? Eochaid watches. Madadh-Allaidh Neartmhor watches. We Beaks owe a blood debt to Bratin Brute and to your mother's kin, particularly to your nephew Edward. Henceforth we shall never raise arms against Bratin Brute. And should they seek our aid, the Beak Nation is honor bound to answer. I shall send out an official decree to that effect this very day.”

“The Captain says if the wind keeps up, we should arrive on the Eastern Continent sometime after noon tomorrow, Grandmother,” said Spitemorta, turning her face into the wind as she joined Demonica at the railing. “In fact, he said he'd wager it, so I guess we just might. He keeps calling it Gwael instead of Eastern Continent.”

“That's Old Niarg Standard, dear, Gwaremm it was to us in Pennvro. It meant wasteland in Headlandish. I think the Niarg word just meant rot,” said Demonica from the midst of a flying whirl of jet black hair. She turned her chin back into the wind and

gave a decisive nod. "Excellent, then. So stand on the other side of me and tell me again how you are going to deal with the Marooderyn Imshee when we arrive, dear."

"I was already right well aware of the meaning of Gwael," said Spitemorta as she shoved away from the railing to stand upwind of her.

"Good. Now how indeed are you going to deal with the Marooderyn Imshee when we get there?"

"We keep going over this. I could do it in my sleep."

"Well good. So do it on the forecastle."

Spitemorta gathered her hair behind her head and held it with one hand in order to fling her a scorched look before contemptuously launching into their lengthy strategy, which fairly bristled with alternative maneuvers.

"Very well dear, but losing patience could get you killed. One slip could start your death. Staying well rehearsed is your survival strategy, since the Elf Killers are not affected by magic."

"So what? You said yourself that they only have a taste for Elven flesh."

"Do you want to eat everything you kill? They just might think that we are trying to use them or to trick them in some way, and we most certainly are."

"How would they have the wits to figure us out?"

"He who doesn't respect his enemy dies by his sword, dear. Your respect needs to keep up with your contempt, or you don't have control. Ask the Elves what they think of the trolls."

"You make me wonder if this is a good idea at all, Demonica."

"It's a perfectly good idea if you have what it takes do your part as we've planned. Without the Elf Killer's aid, we are very likely to fail, in spite of having the Staff and the Heart."

"I've come all this way with you and I still can't believe you're serious," said Spitemorta with a scoff, as she turned her face into the wind to study the other six ships of their flotilla, listing in the strong wind.

"I'm absolutely serious," hissed Demonica. "Don't forget that the First Wizard created Staff and Heart and yet he failed to rule the world."

"He died from the plague, Grandmother."

"Certainly. And so could you."

"Are you saying he died from a curse?"

"Why not?" said Demonica slowly. "No one knows for sure. Struggles for power take on certain extremes, Rouanez Bras. Do you want to take that chance?"

"No. Shouldn't we be protecting ourselves from such a thing?"

"What do you think this voyage is about, then? The Elves must be eliminated. They must not be allowed to sire another half Elf like the First Wizard. They know about the Heart. They know enough to do it."

"What if they've done it already?" said Spitemorta, suddenly seeing how it all was.

"Then if we do our part, the Marooderyn Imshee will find him and eat him."

"You're sure it isn't too soon for you and the twins to travel?" said Lukus, pausing from helping Soraya pack to look her over as he had a seat.

"You're being overly protective," she said, reaching out to take his hand, "but I love

you for it. We're Elves. No offence, but we're tougher than Humans.” She sat on the silken quilts of the bed with a light bounce.

“They're half-Human...” he said, nodding at the pair of sleeping bundles nestled at the bolster.

“A wizard and a sorceress born,” she said with a serene smile. “The likes of which the world hasn't seen in an age, Lukus. Fear not, all will be well. Besides, we'll have all three of my brothers and Great Grandfather. We'll be slán sábháilte as if we stayed right here.”

“Hey!” squawked Hubba Hubba from his branch just outside their window. “What kind o' credit are we getting here? See how far you ones could get without our protection from the air. And look at how we take care of you ones. You won't get out o' here without us overhead.”

“Right you are, Hubba Hubba,” said Soraya. “Forgive me.”

“See?” she said, turning to Lukus. “Perfectly safe.”

“Right,” said Hubba Hubba.

“What can I say?” said Lukus. “I'm out numbered. There's nothing for it but to go see if everyone else is ready to go.”

“No need,” said Hubba Hubba, “We're already a-lookin' out for ye! I can see from here that they're all standing around, waiting. So just make your grand exit.”

“Very well,” said Lukus, picking up Ariel as Soraya picked up Daniel. In short order they found King Neron sitting in the coach, studying the backs of his hands.

“Mind if I hold one of my Great-Great Grandchildren?” he said, suddenly looking up.

“Here you are,” said Soraya, handing over little Daniel as soon as she was settled beside him.

Neron looked at the wee lad and smiled. “Looks like we're off, then,” he said, looking up at the shaking of the coach from the loading of Soraya and Lukus's baggage. I'll be riding my unicorn, so I'd best climb down.”

Soraya nodded and took Daniel back into her arms.

“Sire,” said Lukus, “I should ride with you.”

“Why thank you, but I've Danneth, Strom and Jarund to look after me. You just enjoy your family.”

“Well thank you then, if you're certain.”

“Quite,” said Neron with a smile and a nod of his knitted brow at the open door of the coach.

“We'll talk to you when we stop,” called out Lukus before closing the door.

Neron nodded and charged away in a clatter of hooves.

“I'm looking forward to seeing Rose and Fuzz get married,” said Lukus, getting settled with Ariel in his lap.

“Me too,” said Soraya. “You never doubted that she would though, did you?”

“Nay.”

“I'm wondering if you've a bit of foresight, yourself.”

“Have you been checking to see if I've developed Elven ears?”

“Why yes, not to put too fine a point on it on it,” she said as she beamed at her son. “But now I see what you'd look like if you had.”

Chapter 37

“Today's my birthday,” said Edward as he dropped onto his knees under a leaning oak at the edge of the kite field and began drawing with his finger in the white dirt. “Uncafuzz was carving me a wooden sword. It was really nice. It looked kind o' like this. But we left it when the bad womans who killed Momma came.” A wistful look took hold of him.

“What does 'birthday' mean, Edward?” said Laora carefully, as she studied the drawn look of grief on his face.

“Oh,” he said, pulling in a single snuffle with a shudder as he drug his sleeve under his nose. “I reckon you wouldn't know since you were hatched and not borned.”

“What's the difference? Aren't they the same?”

“Well, I'm still only six, you know, so I mightn't esplane it just right,” he said, as he quickly turned away to hide his brimming eyes. “Maybe we should go ask your momma. The one thing I can tell you for sure is that you came out of an egg when you were brand new and I didn't.”

“You didn't just appear out of the air, did you?”

“I told you I was borned. I came out of my momma's tummy and you hatched out of an egg.”

“You did not.”

“I sure did!”

“Then, how'd you get in there in the first place and how'd you get out? She didn't crack into pieces to let you out. How'd she get put back together?”

“I bet your momma knows,” said Edward, on his feet at once. “She's really, really smart.”

“Let's go ast her, then. She just came out. She's right yonder.”

As they started running across the kite field, Laora lunged into the air and was aloft at once, quickly outdistancing Edward. She made a broad circle, just above the grass, winging up behind him as he ran furiously, straight for Lipperella.

“No Flame, I already told you,” said Lipperella, ignoring Laora as she swooped in to skid to a stumbling halt alongside Edward in a cloud of white dust. “We'll not have you flying outside the kite field, and that's the last I'll hear of it! Do you understand?”

“Yes, Momma,” said Flame, dragging his feet for a few steps before taking a scampering lunge into the air, followed by Scorch and Blaise.

“Honestly!” said Lipperella with a shake of her head. “I thought it was going to get easier once they'd fledged, but they just keep giving me new problems.”

“Momma?” said Laora, glancing aside at Edward.

“Yes?” said Lipperella. “If you're about to ask to fly outside the training field, then you can forget it, 'cause I'm not making exceptions.”

“Oh no, Momma,” said Laora. “Nothin' like that.”

“What then?”

“Well, you see today is Edward's birthday and...”

“Oh my,” said Lipperella. “Happy birthday, Edward. Why didn't you tell us before and we could have planned a little party for you? Humans do that just like we have pipdays, don't they?”

“I didn't think you'd know that,” said Edward with a fleeting blush, “and I wouldn't esspect you to go to any trouble for me anyway.”

“Oh Edward, you've never been any trouble for Spark and me,” she said, giving him a hug. “In fact, you've never been anything but a huge help. Of course I'd 'ave given you a party if I'd known. In fact, I will. You must be...six years old today, right?”

“Thank you Aunt Lippy, but we just wanted to ask you a question.”

“Oh? And what would that be, sweetheart?”

Edward let out a sigh. “We want to know the difference 'tween being hatched and being borned.” he said solemnly.

“Yea,” said Laora. “Edward thinks he was hatched out of his momma's tummy. I don't see how. But if he did, how'd he get there in the first place and how'd he get back out?”

“Why, that's quite simple,” said Lipperella. “Edward's momma laid him, just like I laid you, only Edward didn't have a shell on...”

“So being borned just means being laid without having to hatch out of an egg?”

“That's 'born,' dear, and that's exactly right.”

“But how'd he get in there?”

“Well, Edward's daddy put half of teensy-weensy Edward in his momma when he bred her, just like your papa gave me half of teensy-weensy you when he bred me...”

“Wow, Aunt Lippy! That makes sense. So that's why I look somethin' like King Edmond, or 'sposed to (I don't member him) and somethin' like Momma. Momma acted funny when I asked her, and I couldn't essactly follow what she was stumbling around about. Maybe she just didn't know, Aunt Lippy, but she was the best momma...” Edward gave a sudden unexpected sob and Lipperella scooped him up at once, hugging and rocking him.

“Well,” said Lipperella, as she squeezed him. “Humans really haven't got it straight, yet. Most of them fancy that the whole teensy-weensy child comes from the father, as though the mother is just a place for the teensy-weensy child to stay for a spell...”

“Well they ought to be eshamed of such a notion, momma,” said Laora.

“That may be why they have a hard time talking about it, sweetheart. The hardest thing for any creature is to face it's own nonsense.”

“Thank you for explaining to me, Aunt Lippy,” said Edward, pulling away from her arms. “Can Laora and I go out there with them now?”

“You certainly may, Edward.”

“Thank you, Aunt Lippy!” he cried as he grabbed Laora by the hand and towed her into the kite field.

She planted her feet for a moment. “Let's just walk,” she said, swinging his hand.

“All right,” he said, giving a little jump as he shook her arm as though it were a skipping rope.

“You're my very, very, very bestest friend, Edward. Did you know that?”

“And you're my bestest, too. You're really my bestest. Actually you're the only friend I've ever had, 'cept Momma and Uncafuzz.”

Laora's eyes went wide at this. She so hoped he wouldn't cry. “Well, I want you to have the very bestest birthday in the whole world,” she said quickly, “so I've got 'o think 'o something quick to make sure it's the bestest ever and ever. Then we can keep you happy all day.”

He gave her an abrupt little hug and went prancing in circles around her, ending up in the grass on his elbows.

She sat down beside him, shook herself and sorted through some flight feathers. Suddenly she spied something in the grass right in front of her. "Got you," she said between her teeth as she snapped up a vole. "Edward, you want half? They're really good."

"No thanks. I don't care so much for raw voles."

"You sure? I could let you have the front half. It's still squeakin', and it's your birthday."

"I really 'preciate it, but remember? I had a really hard time getting the last one down. They kind o' stink bad."

"Momma..." she said, swallowing the rodent in one gulp, "Momma says they're real good for your feathers, but I guess all your feathers are just hair." She shook herself again, gave each wing a snap and rested her head on his shoulder as they watched Flame and Blaise soaring, diving and chasing one another in the air. "They're still kind of awful, but they're sure getting better," she said, giggling at the sight of them colliding.

"Yea, but you're 'way better than they are. And you're 'way better than every single one of your other brothers and sisters. You fly better'n the whole mob put together."

"Thanks," she said, lifting her head to study him for a moment. "Hey! I know. Edward?"

"Yea?" he said, unable to take his eyes off the soaring dragonets long enough to look at her.

"I'll bet you'd like to fly too, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, that would be wonderful. Right now, I wish I'd hatched instead o' borned. I'd even eat a vole if I could go up there with you."

"I thought so. Let's go, Edward," she said jubilantly, springing to her feet. "That's what I could do so you could have a happy day."

"What are you talking about, Laora? How could I ever do that? You said it yourself. All I've got is hair for feathers."

"You don't have to, silly," she said, nodding at the others. "Hurry up. Get on my back."

"You can't carry me piggyback like a unicorn in the air. How would you get off the ground?"

"I may be the littlest, but I'm already bigger'n you. And look at my chest. I've got more muscle than any of the rest of the mob, and my pulley bone's the biggest. I swear I can get you off the ground at least, and if I can't fly far with you today, I promise I will right soon. Momma told me I'm goin' 'o be as big as she is, within the year," she said, squatting to offer her back. "Come on. Let's try it. What's the matter, Edward?"

"I really want to, but..." he said, looking bewildered.

"It's my birthday present for your pipday," she said, gesturing with little lunges.

Edward bit his lip, thinking things over. "All right, let's try it," he said with a decisive nod. "But if I'm too heavy, you stay on the ground. Promise?"

"I know what I'm doing, Edward," she said, sounding almost offended. "And if you're as brave as I've always thought, you'll get on this minute."

Edward threw his leg over her back and grabbed her by the neck with both arms.

"Too tight, Edward. Loosen up so I can breathe. As soon as we're up, just get a handful of my neck feathers on each side."

"Won't that hurt?"

“Not if you get enough feathers in each fist. You ready?”

“Am I too heavy?”

“No, I told you I know what I'm doing,” she said, as she gave a sheet-popping flap that flattened the grass on either side of her.

“Wow,” he cried, watching the grass spring back up. “You are strong...”

She answered by lunging into the air.

It gave him a good scare. And for a moment, he cast about frantically trying to find a secure hold without cutting off her wind. He could not look down at first, so he looked up at the brilliant crisp blue of the cloudless fall sky. Now, he was no longer quite sure which way down was and it made his head reel, so he clamped shut his eyes.

“How is it, Edward?” said Laora, gliding for a moment. “Are you having fun?”

“Oh yes,” he said, trying not to vomit nor sound terrified as he kept his eyes squeezed tight. “This is wonderful, Laora. I could fly like this forever. Are you getting tired? I mean, does your back hurt? Do you think we can land without getting hurt?”

“You sure worry a lot!” she giggled. “You're very light and I must be much stronger than you can imagine, 'cause this is nothing. This is 'way easier than carrying you on my back on the ground.” She resumed flapping and climbed steeply.

When she leveled off and began gliding, Edward dared to open his eyes. “Great Bells of Bratin Brute! This is terrific! Laora! Thank you, thank you! This is the best birthday ever in the whole, whole, whole world!”

“Oh, oh,” she said, as she looked down to see Spark and Lipperella far below, hurrying to the middle of the kite field to stare up at them. “Are we are in trouble?”

“Bet we are,” said Edward as his voice fell. “We'd better land.”

“Yea, I guess so,” said Laora, falling silent as she started a slow spiraling descent.

There had been delays in addition to their late departure from Oilean Gairdin. Neron had forgotten to take into account the heavy rains during the week before, and after a couple of hours' travel in the Jutwoods, the bed of the dirt road changed from sandstone to waterlogged clay, miring them down. Over and again, they had to get out and walk in order for the team to manage pulling the coach. Once it was so bad that they had to tie their baggage to the backs of the team and rig up a makeshift fan hitch from the end of the tongue, so that the three mounts could help the team pull. As if that were not enough, just as they were getting to the end of their last half mile long mire, they found a five foot thick gum tree, forty foot from the roots to the first limb and woodpecker hole, blown down across the way. This would not have been any great problem, except that being at the end of the last of the clay, the road wound into a fissure in a shale bluff face, turning the tree into a substantial barricade. There was nothing for it but to cut the trunk in two.

Lucus wished they had gone by ship. Neron wished he had remembered. Hubba Hubba chastised them all for not having wings. By the time Lukus, Neron, Strom, Danneth, Jerund and the driver all had severe blisters, it was pitch black. The team and all of the mounts had to be hitched to a log chain to pull the tree aside.

“Good job we brought that stuff!” declared the driver, as he climbed to his seat and gathered up his reins. “Neron might 'ave forgot, but he only half forgot. I wouldn't 'ave brought a trunk full 'o axes and chain.”

At last Lukus fell to a deep enough sleep that the pitching of the coach had ceased to

wake him. A sharp pop woke everyone bolt upright. Soraya had to shift about, stoppering the whimpers of first Daniel and then Ariel with a teat apiece.

“What the Pitmaster?” said Lukus. “Did they just...?” Another ear-wincing pop sounded. “Werebeasts. That's it, isn't it?”

“Well, here we are, and it's after dark,” said Soraya with the sleepy softness of a considerate mother, having just been awakened.

“My,” he said, running his hands through his hair. He flexed his hands about their blistered palms. “That takes me 'way back. Are you done with Ariel? You want me to take her?”

Soraya slid a cloth down her bodice and carefully raised her shoulder, offering Ariel to him.

He sat back slowly with his warm bundle as the lurching coach smacked him in the head. He ignored it altogether. With her in his arms, he could brush aside all kinds of things. “Wow!” he said at the sound of another pop. “That's the third werebeast they've fried. It might have been Danneth who got that one. I saw the flash out yonder. I think that's him. Are you frightened?”

“Why should I be?”

“Well 'way back, your brothers convinced me that werebeasts are right dangerous. Aren't they?”

“Certainly, but no more so than that many adders or vipers out there would be. I'd be scared out of my wits if I looked up to find a werepossum sitting where you are, but that's not going to happen. I hope werebeasts are the only things we have to deal with, if you want to know.”

“So you prefer them to the trolls?”

“By all means.”

“Why?”

“Well, nearly all of the werebeasts in the Jutwoods are too small to rip you apart and eat you alive. Werebears have been known to exist, but most werecreatures are things like squirrels, opossums and rabbits.”

“Well,” he said with a chuckle, “I'll be on my toes next time I take up with a rabbit, I can tell ye.”

“You're in the habit of taking up with rabbits?” said Soraya with an odd look.

“Sometimes I'm not sure just what parts of the things you say are indeed serious, Lukus.”

“I actually did once, and that's no joke. 'Twas 'way back when Rose and I went to the Peppermint Forest to find Ugleeuh. Spring was his name. He was one of Ugleeuh's enchanted thralls. He was a nice rabbit...”

“There must be quite a story to go along with him. So what became of this Spring, did you call him? Did he go back to being an ordinary rabbit when Ugleeuh's magic faded?”

“Ugleeuh murdered him for helping Rose and me.”

“I can tell by the tone of your voice that you took him seriously, that you liked him...”

“Well yea. He probably saved our lives. At the very least, he helped us escape.”

“So, I suppose he'd just be an ordinary rabbit today if she hadn't killed him, aye?”

“Hard to say. Ugleeuh's enchanted creatures were indeed forest animals sometimes, but just as often they were Elves or Humans trapped as talking animals. They

were like people in animal suits. Whatever Spring was, he was a very good friend and he gave his life to save Rose and me.”

Laora trotted to a tottering halt in the grass a dozen rods from Spark, Lipperella and a wide-eyed gathering of the rest of the dragonet mob.

“Look,” said Edward as he slid off her back, “just let me take the blame, all right?”

“No,” said Laora. “It was my idea and if anyone's going to get hollered at, then it should be me.”

“Yea, but it's my birthday and I might not get scolded.”

“That was a pretty impressive stunt!” said Spark, calling out as they approached. “You certainly got everyone's attention. Do you have any idea at all how dangerous it was? Had Edward fallen, could anyone have caught him? Would you want to be the one to break the news to Rose and Fuzz?”

“It was my present to Edward for his birthday,” said Laora, as she stood up proudly, “and, it was wonderful. It was lots an' lots an' lots better than doing it alone. Edward flied real good. Did ye see him, Papa?” By now she was fairly bouncing with excitement.

“We certainly did,” said Spark, letting out a huge sigh as he turned to Lipperella. “You scared us half to death is what, honey child. We couldn't bear to have anything happen to Edward. What sort of whim got you up there?”

“We're a team,” she declared. “We belong together on the ground or in the air.”

“Yes, perhaps you are, but it would have been better had you said something to one of us first.”

“You'd 'ave said no. Then we couldn't have showed you. Can't you see? We have to be together.”

“Yes, that's plainer day by day. Still,” he said, shaking a finger, “you have to tell us. We must be where we can watch your first flights together.”

Laora's eyes went quite wide. “You said, 'first flights together,'” she said with a bounce as she threw her arms around his neck. “You're the bestest papa in the whole world.”

“Come on you two,” said Lipperella as she took Edward by the hand, “it's time to go in and eat.”

Laora and Spark followed them inside amongst the swirl and jostle of the mob of dragonets determined to be there first. “Surprise!” shouted most of the dragonets, the moment they reached the kitchen, as others cried, “Birthday!” and, “Happy pipday!”

Edward spied the cake at once, the first he'd seen since Myrtlebell had baked one for him the year before, and his eyes brimmed with tears. And even though he'd not yet learnt to read, the moment he saw: “Happy Birthday Edward!” he knew what it said. And as the tears spilt down his cheeks, he bounced and grinned and clapped his hands.

As eager fingers streaked the platter, chasing after crumbs, Tors, Kast and Gweltaz ambled into the kitchen with nods all 'round, just back from the Black Desert.

“Hey Edward,” said Tors. “Did ye spare us a piece o' that cake?”

Edward looked forlornly at the platter of chocolate crumbs. “I didn't know you were coming,” he said.

“I heard you flew today,” said Tors.

“Yea,” said Edward with a bounce. “It was wonderful.”

“Ah! I can imagine it was,” he said, a hungry light flickering in his eyes. “Well, happy pipday, Edward. And may ye have many, many more. Now you'll have to excuse me. I must have a word with those older and less airborne in the next room.”

“So what did you find?” said Spark as he plopped into the center of a huge cushion. “Is the Black Desert going to do for us?”

Tors looked at Kast and Gweltaz. “It should serve right well indeed, Spark,” he said with a decisive nod. There's nothing but hot black sand for miles and miles. We'd even decided to go just a bit further and turn around. Then suddenly we stumbled onto the ultimate haven. Underneath that coal black sand there's a limestone cave system that simply puts this one to shame. Who knows? It could be ten times as extensive as this one, and outside of the cave crickets and blind salamanders, nothing at all lives there.”

“What about water?” said Lipperella.

Gweltaz slapped his knee. “There's a river down in those caves that beats anything you ever saw. Water will not be a problem...”

“It's deeper, wider, faster and colder than anything any of us ever saw,” said Kast. “And pure. Tastes like rainwater.”

“Do you reckon things will grow there?” said Spark.

“Any place water gets to the surface, things are growing,” said Tors. “I'd think we could easily irrigate.”

“And what about wildlife?” said Lipperella, finding a cushion. “The dragonets will have a much greater need to hunt than the rest of us. If not, have we reached a point where we're willing to imprison the animals we eat?”

“There are all kinds of things in the ravines and oases,” said Kast, enthusiastically taking to his feet. “Things with incredibly big ears: long eared asses, long eared aurochs, a bison of some kind, and these huge long eared hares, all over. It looks like all the hunting we'd need.”

“What do they find to live on in such a place?” said Lipperella.

“Oh, there are indeed lots of strange plants,” said Kast, “stubby, rubbery green trees with no leaves, for instance. The asses were feeding on them. We climbed a cinder cone and found lush grass growing in the crater. You have to see this place. It's as nigh to ideal for dragons as I've ever seen.”

Spark squeezed Lipperella's hand. “I'm going to the Council with them, love,” he said. “I'll probably be back late.”

“I'll talk to the mob and Edward. I'll be waiting up for you.”

She gave him a kiss as they stood up to leave and watched him walk out with Tors, Kast and Gweltaz.

Chapter 38

“So what's all the stir about, Grandmother?” said Spitemorta as she emerged from below to find Demonica at the starboard rail, staring out to sea from under the flat of her hand.

“Couldn't you hear the poop-ornament from down below?” said Demonica.

“I heard the shout, but not what he said. I just came up here to find everyone in a big stir,” she said, having an uncertain look out over the waves herself. “So what...?”

“Land, dear. You can't see anything yet from down here, but the ensign sure did from the top yard.”

“How does he know?”

“I'm sure he does, dear. Besides, not a half an hour ago, Captain Jockford predicted landfall on the Eastern Continent before evening.”

“After three weeks it'll be good to get off this stinking ship,” said Spitemorta as she gave the rail a shake.

“By all means. Keep your eyes open for white birds if you simply must have reassurances. And if you've not enough patience for that, there's the rigging. It shouldn't take you long to make it to the top yard. However, we really have better uses for our time, dear. Above all, we need duck out of sight to go over our plan one more time before we land and have to do it for real.”

“You're joking, of course.”

“What kind of joke have you ever heard me tell, Spitemorta?” said Demonica as she took her by the arm and ushered her below. When at last they stepped inside Spitemorta's berth, Demonica closed the door behind them. “Well come on then. Let's see it.”

“See it?”

“Absolutely. And if it's 'not joking' that we're discussing, I've not once heard of humor in trolls, so you can expect them to take your arrival quite seriously regardless of whether you were too ruffled to prepare or not, Rouanez Bras. Dress rehearsals are simply de rigueur amongst all those who succeed in theatre.”

“Aren't you overdoing it, Demonica?”

“Not when it's imperative. Are you trying to tell me that troll goddess is second nature to you, dear? I've been wondering.”

“It's a waste of time and a needless squandering of my power. It's also insulting.”

“So you withhold your efforts, since you really can't face your pregnancy, and have chosen a slow and dramatic suicide, aye?”

“Damn you, Demonica!” shrieked Spitemorta, flinging an arc of water as she yanked her half full pitcher off the night stand and smashed it upon the floor at her feet.

“Well dear,” said Demonica quietly, not noticing the tantrum, “if they think your act stinks, they won't mind using you for the prop in a rehearsal for an Elf butchering... But I mind!” she barked, lunging to press a furious stare into Spitemorta's face. “I mind because you'll have me along, sweetheart!”

Spitemorta gave a shudder with clenched teeth as she wheeled aside. “Have it your way then, Demonica!” she hissed. She picked up the Staff from the sopping wet bedspread on the bunk.

Demonica raised her eyebrows and stood back.

At once Spitemorta reared up to the ceiling to stand, hunched over as a blond eight

foot tall troll woman. “Nyrp-fonin-yrfi-nirfna Fnadir-ry-aphny?” she rumbled balefully in the very nasal and guttural trollish speech.

“No,” said Demonica, crossing her arms. “That won't do at all.”

Spitemorta shrank back to size at once. “And just what possible objection could you have?” she said.

“Something I overlooked, and it's a good thing we've caught it now...”

“Well what, may I ask?”

“The trolls aren't affected by magic, as we both well remember. That's how come they manage to be Elf Killers, and that's why magical illusions won't work on them.”

“That's nice. So now, are you going to tell me that I have to dress up in a costume to do this? They'll butcher both of us.”

“Of course, because a costume would be even less real, but I've a trick that'll make you far more real than you were a moment ago.”

“By doing what, Grandmother?”

“By actually turning you into one.”

“What? You mean actually turn me into a giant blond troll?”

“It's the only way.”

“No!”

“You don't like blond?” said Demonica with a glint in her eye like a waft of air across a hot coal. “Well, pick any hair color you fancy, Rouanez Bras, but flesh and blood troll you'll be, or I'm done with you from this very moment on.”

Spitemorta was furious, but she immediately saw how it all was. “I'm sorry Grandmother...”

Demonica held up the Heart of the Staff as though she hadn't heard her. An eerie red glow came to life within its depths.

“Grandmother!” stammered Spitemorta, taking a faltering step backward. “I apologize, Grandmother. You're right! I knew it all along. I'm just...pregnant.”

Demonica kept the Heart held high as she glowered furiously into Spitemorta's eyes. The Heart rang with the sound of a shrill tuning fork, as its light waxed brilliant before abruptly winking out, leaving Spitemorta ghostly pallid from head to toe, as weak as if she'd just been lifted out of a pickling jar. Demonica smiled wickedly and slipped the Heart inside her kirtle. “Now,” she said, as if announcing the next verse for the ladies, “show me just how we'll change you into a giant troll goddess. Any color hair you like. Just concentrate a moment. It should come directly.”

Spitemorta stood there reeling, opening and closing her silent mouth. The somber light below decks was blinding. Her mind raced, but she could not quite form her thoughts. Surely there was some other way, but the only thing that would clearly come to mind were images of trolls. She looked at Demonica for reassurance and found stone. She took a step back and began her transformation. She collapsed to the floor in convulsions of agonizing pain as her body writhed, twisted, stretched and bulged. Her excruciations glazed over her eyes and locked open her mouth, too big to come out as screams. At last, she lay there in a mound for some time, heaving breaths. When her breathing steadied, she stood up with her shoulders against the ceiling, towering malevolently over Demonica.

At the sight of Spitemorta's jet black hair, she roared with laughter. “Oh, help,” she said as she dabbed at her eyes over the heaves of her dying laughter. “Rouanez Bras. Oh,

my dear. Here you are, fixing to rule the world and you don't have the nerve to try a new hair color. But I daresay you'll do, this time. Tomorrow the trolls will be our servants. Go ahead, let's change back."

"Duda-fay-yrfn-yophn," said Spitemorta with a disdainful rumble that rattled the planks of the deck overhead.

"Oh," said Demonica, as she whipped out the Heart and gave it a single shake at Spitemorta. "There. Spell of tongues. Now anyone will be able to understand. So what were you saying?"

"I said: no way. I'm not about to go through another change until the need for a troll goddess is completely passed. And if you don't like that, how about trading places?"

"You suddenly like being troll goddess? You won't fit your bunk, but I suppose we could have the orderlies fix a pallet on the floor..."

"Pain, Grandmother," said Spitemorta as she shifted about on her feet in agitation, hitting her head on a timber hard enough to cry out as she sat down on the floor.

"Pain? Interesting."

"The pain was not interesting, Demonica!" she said, nearly shouting. "It was unbearable. I've never had pain so bad in my life, not even giving birth to Abaddon, and he felt like he was thirteen pounds with horns. I do not want to go through it ever again, but I guess there's no escaping it at least once to change back."

"I see," she said with a quizzical nod. "Well, let's just hope no Elf Killers are in sight when we dock."

"What difference would that make?"

"Why would a goddess need to sail to the Eastern Continent on a ship?"

"I see your point, but this is how I stay until the deal is done," said Spitemorta as she rubbed her head. "So just what will you be doing while I'm role playing, Grandmother? You've yet to be clear about it."

"Why, I'll be your angelic companion, of course," she said with an indignant gasp.

"You're enjoying this."

"Of course," said Demonica, looking about distractedly, tapping at a tooth. "And I think dear that under the circumstances, it would be best to fly ashore on the Staff. Do you think you can still sit astride it?"

"For once, I really agree with you, Grandmother. In fact, wouldn't it be best to stay in the air until we actually do see trolls? I mean, airborne would always be more goddess-like, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I must agree with you, too," said Demonica with a peeved sigh. "I'll just go brief the good Captain and we can be off."

Spark found the grotto dark when he returned. "Ah," he thought with a smile. "She must've fallen asleep, completely worn out after dealing with the mob and Edward's surprise party." He decided to tiptoe to the bedroom and get a blanket to throw over her. She sat up at once from her cushion as he walked by. "Whatever are you doing sneaking around, Spark?"

"I was on my way to fetch you a blanket and I woke you."

"I was already awake, but had I been asleep, I wanted you to wake me as soon as you came in. You weren't going to, were you?"

“You've been suffering for sleep the whole time since the dragonets hatched,” said Spark as he knelt beside her. “You know how I've hated disturbing you when you finally get some sleep.”

“Precisely why I stayed awake, dear heart. Now tell me, what have they decided?”

“The council unanimously agreed that we should evacuate to the Black Desert, except...”

“You mean there are some dissenters?” she said, reaching across her cushion to light a candle with a wee blue flame from her lips.

“No. By 'except' I meant that certain members think we should wait until we hear from Niarg before we give up the Dragon Caves.”

“Certain members?” she said, looking askance. “That means you and who else?”

“Yea...?”

“Oh, come on. Don't make me ask you.”

“You're not getting rusty are you, Truth Teller?” said Spark with a smile.

“All right, if you just must, meanie. It would have been you and Kast and Gweltaz, aye?”

Spark nodded.

“That's my dragon,” she said, fondly.

“Yea. And your dragon is really dragging, love.”

“Me too. Let's talk in the morning.”

“It's already morning.”

“When we wake up, then.”

“Yea.”

Edward lay in his bed listening to water dripping here and there, far off in the cavern as he looked up at the stars through the skylight and wondered what it would be like to soar through the sky at night. He glanced aside at Laora where she lay asleep on her cushion beside his bed. He was grateful that she had been allowed to move in with him. He no longer felt as horribly alone as he had for the longest time after Myrtlebell was killed. He still ached with longing for her, but Laora was helping him get by. “Someday Momma, I'll make those rotten sore sissies pay hard for what they did to you,” he murmured with a sniffle as his eyes brimmed with tears. “They should not get away with going around killing good people.” He sat up and rubbed his eyes with a wad of bed sheet.

Laora stirred, sitting up on her cushion. “Is it morning yet?” she asked, rubbing her big orange eyes.

“Yea, but it's too early to get up. Uncaspark just got back from the council meeting, so he and Aunt Lippy just got to bed. They won't be happy if we get up and everyone else wakes up.”

“I guess you're right,” said Laora with a frown, “but I'm wide awake. I'll never be able to go back to sleep.”

Edward sighed. “I know. Me either. Maybe we could tiptoe really, really, really quiet out to the kite field and you could practice your night flying.”

“Good idea,” she said out loud as she sprang from her cushion. “Let's go practice night flying.”

“Shhhh, Laora. You're loud. If everybody wakes up it won't be fun,” said Edward as he threw back his sheet and put his feet on the floor. “No, just you. I'll go with you but your folks would get really, really mad if we flew together again without telling them. And they really, really, really would get mad if we did that in the dark when no one else is up.”

“Why should that matter?”

“Because if something went wrong,” he said more patiently than he felt, “no one would be around to help us.”

“Nothing's going to go wrong.”

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “But they don't, and if they catch us they'll think we're so bad that we're just plain dangerous all over the place. They'll want to watch us every minute. But if we don't fly without asking, sooner or later they'll say: aw, look how big they're getting and give in right on the spot and let us fly together whenever we want, for ever and ever. You'll see.”

“I guess you're right, Edward,” she said, studying him minutely, “and I hope it's right soon. It's so much better when you're with me.”

“It's better for me too, Laora. 'Way, 'way better.”

The coach came to a rocking halt. Lukus opened his bewildered eyes and grabbed at the top of the door as he sat up, upsetting Hubba Hubba where he was sleeping, perched beside Pebbles. Hubba Hubba bit him soundly on the finger.

“Ow!” yelped Lukus as he dropped back into his seat, holding his hand. He sat up at once. “Hey, beak! What the ding dong blazes! You drew blood!”

“Yea?” said Hubba Hubba with a resolute shake of feathers. “And goosing is not a proper way to wake a parrot! Not proper road etiquette. Not in the least. In front of Pebbles and everything...”

“I didn't realize I'd gone back to sleep,” said Lukus, turning aside to Soraya, as she stirred and began at once attending to the twins. “Why do you suppose we've stopped? Do you have any idea where we are?”

“We're still in the Jutwoods, Lukus,” she said, glancing out the window. We've probably stopped for a bite to eat, early though it be. It's not horribly long 'till breakfast time.”

“I'll say,” he said as his stomach rumbled. He leant forward and unlatched the door, jostling Hubba Hubba and Pebbles. They each gave a shake and shuffled to the hinged side of the door.

“Well, why don't you just give me a moment to see that's what's going on?” he said as he stepped out. “I'll be right back.” He slammed the door, causing both birds to tumble into the air in a frenzy of feathers.

“Hey! Watch it snot!” squawked Hubba Hubba as he and Pebbles realighted on the door.

Lukus thought it felt good to unbend and stand up. He stretched from heel to shoulder blade. It was getting light in the east. A pair of owls hooted at each other across the timber.

“Just thought we'd best fix some breakfast before we go any farther,” said Danneth, speaking out as he sidled up to the coach astride his unicorn. “We're about into troll

territory and it would be foolish to dally there.”

“So we won't be camping or putting up at an inn or anything until we get to Loxmere, aye?” said Lukus.

“That was our thought,” he said, patting his mount. “We daren't waste time, even in this part of the Jutwoods. Trolls sometimes wander, don't you know.”

“Well, I'll get Soraya and the babies and join you all, directly.”

Danneth nodded and clucked, steering his unicorn between saplings on the way to where King Neron, Jerund, and Strom were busy building a fire.

Lukus tramped away from the coach for a good piece through the leaves, pausing to listen to the owls. He turned to look back. “That...was big,” he said as the back of his neck prickled. “And it's still there.” He carefully drew out his rapier and squatted in the leaves, listening. Right at first, he swore he heard whatever it was breathing, but he managed to hear nothing but the Elves at work on their fire, away behind him, once he got still. The prickly feeling along his neck did not go away. “It's still watching, I can feel it.” As he carefully stood up to go back to the coach, he glanced back to see that Danneth was already dismounted and looking straight his way as he nocked an arrow into his bow and drew. Lukus wheeled back to face the coach the instant Danneth loosed his arrow.

Soraya was just stepping out with the babies. A huge naked man brandishing a club staggered into the open with Danneth's arrow in his shoulder, howling with pain.

“Soraya!” screamed Lukus. “Troll!” He gave a furious run for the beast, which was headed right for the twins and her.

Soraya looked up to see the troll coming straight at her. She wheeled and dove into the coach, rolling Ariel and Daniel onto the floor and throwing herself on top of them as she slammed the door.

The team lurched and bucked in terror, violently rocking the coach. At once the troll was at the door. With a wail of fury he shook the coach. He lunged and reached inside to rip away the sleeve from Soraya's robe in time for Lukus to slice away a long strip of flesh from his groping arm.

The moment the troll wheeled about to face him, the terrified team broke loose to charge away through the timber with Soraya and the twins. Screaming white hot fury, Lukus plunged his rapier clean to the hilt in the troll's ribs in time for it to knock him flat on the ground. Before they had gone ten rods, the team ran between two trees, wedging the coach solid. Soraya flew out the door with her bow, parking her babes in the bushes as she ran to Lukus's aid. Stringing bloody froth and drool, the bellowing troll now had Lukus like a sack of flour, shaking him senseless. Danneth could not get a safe shot from where he stood, but Soraya could. She ran right up and planted three arrows in the beast as he bounced Lukus off the ground like a ball.

With Lukus out of the way, Danneth also let fly arrow after arrow. At last the troll collapsed in a bleeding heap. With a look of leonine fury, Soraya neatly planted one last arrow in the beast's eye socket before running to Lukus's side.

Danneth was right there, followed by Neron, Jarund, and Strom. “Where are the twins?” he said.

“Safe for the moment,” said Soraya, irritated at the distraction from Lukus. “They're fast in their baskets in the bushes, yonder, guarded by two fierce parrots who started out the day in a bad mood.”

“What think ye, Grandfather?” chorused Soraya and Danneth as Neron looked up

from Lukus's side.

“We can't move on until we've healed some of his injuries. He's at least four broken ribs that I can tell, his wrist could be broken, and he's got more knots on his head than eyes on a tater. And that cut on his leg...” He looked up to see Soraya already holding out the strip of sleeve from her gown for a tourniquet. “And you get that around his leg above the cut and tie it. Jerund? Cut me a stick about yea long, hear?”

“We'll make up a pallet for him,” said Danneth, as he and Strom stood up.

“Here's your stick,” said Jerund. “I'll get your herbs and ointments unless you've got something better for me to do, Grandfather.”

Soraya wasn't satisfied with the sleeve. She was already busy, ripping her skirts into strips.

Lukus awoke to a chorus of crickets. He slowly rolled his aching head aside to where a shooting pain stopped him, with the brightly burning campfire in the corner of his eye. He listened to the voices of his entire family by marriage visiting quietly with his beloved Soraya. He knew what she was doing, though he couldn't turn his head that far: she was managing to hold and rock both twins at once. He could make out Hubba Hubba and Pebbles perched overhead on a low branch.

“Hey!” he croaked, as he winced at the pain in his head. “I'm alive over here, after all!”

Everyone was on his feet, bringing relieved smiles over close.

“We never doubted it for a moment,” said Soraya, as she handed one baby to Danneth and another to Strom and hurried to kneel by his side.

Lukus managed a feeble ear to ear grin as she took up his hand. “I've decided that I agree with you, love,” he said.

“Soraya knitted her brow at the idea that his remark was delirious. “Agree with me about what?” she said, gently touching his forehead.

“About the trolls, of course,” he said with conviction. “They're much worse than any werebeast.”

“Oh my land yes, Lukus,” she said as she glanced up at everyone before her voice went oddly distant “They've always been that.”

Chapter 39

“Can you scoot forward?” said Demonica as she flattened herself against Spitemorta's ponderous troll goddess back in a struggle to stay on the Staff as they hurtled up through the air, skirts flapping and popping.

“If I move forward any,” said Spitemorta, “I'll not have a thing to hang onto.”

“Your ascent into the blue is nothing short of hair raising with no more than I have to hang onto. You can't move any?”

“No!”

“Well, if your buttocks are any where near as muscular as they are immense, you couldn't possibly need hands. Out of consideration you should have at least lengthened the Staff before we got astride it.”

“Do I detect apprehension in your abrasive reptilian demeanor, Grandmother?”

“No. But if I wiggle, I'll fall.”

“We both know you've enough room. Besides, I'm frankly shocked that you would even suggest some risky alteration of the Great Staff.”

Demonica clenched her teeth. She wasn't so sure that she liked Spitemorta's wee flourish of cleverness. “Land,” she declared, straightening up. “I've been looking at it ever since we got aloft, Grandmother. And we'll be beyond the beach in two shakes.”

“Brrr! Well good!” she shouted from amidst a whirl of wild hair. “You certainly break the wind, but it's still right cold. So since you're seeing things so quick, have you seen any sign of Marooderyn Imshee?”

“None. Since it's daylight, shouldn't we look for some caves, instead?”

“Well that probably is indeed the best idea, dear. I can't imagine any of them being out with it this light.”

“So you agree that we should hunt for their lair?”

“Yea. Try to remember what the place looked like in the skinweler when we scryed them.”

“Very well, out this way maybe, since the shore looks about right,” said Spitemorta, veering aside to follow a colossal colonnade of strange salmon colored limestone bluff faces capped with coal black basalt at the feet of the Eternal Mountains.

“There. Isn't that it? Are we that lucky? I mean, in the skinweler, isn't that the very one we saw?”

“Looks like it could well be. At least it's a perfect reason to slow down right smart. I don't know about you, but I'm freezing to death. Yes, it does look awfully familiar,” she said, as Spitemorta turned abruptly toward the cave in the limestone bluff face. “In fact, let's land far enough to one side of the mouth not to be seen by what ever is inside. There. Land down there on that limestone ledge which slopes down to the cave and we'll soon know what we have.”

In short order they found themselves standing on the ledge, hidden by scrubby pines and junipers, ten rods south and a bit above the mouth of the huge cave. “Thank the Fates,” said Demonica as she whisked at the seat of her skirt as though she had been sitting on dirt instead of the Staff. “What a relief to be on the ground. How do you endure it?”

“It's not half bad,” said Spitemorta as she rolled her eyes before peering at the cave through the boughs of the junipers. “I got used to it within just a few minutes, the first time we ever flew. How come you haven't managed yet? And what are you thanking the

Fates for when you don't believe in them?"

"Never did. I'm just trying out my role. How do I look?" she said as she pulled a mirror out of the air to study herself.

"Look?" said Spitemorta as she stopped still with a puzzled look before turning 'round to see. "Winged harbinger of the Fates," she said with wide eyed astonishment. "No wonder you were afraid of falling."

"Askelloù an neñvoù is what we call them in Head, though of course no one has seen one."

"Yea? And maybe no troll has ever thought of one, either."

"You truly don't believe that these are impressive?" said Demonica as she ran her fingers the length of the snow white primaries of one of her wings. "Well, how about this...?" She suddenly clamped her teeth and squeezed shut her eyes with a wince, sending out a brilliant iridescent aura from the crown of her head.

Spitemorta shook her head and turned back to peer between the branches of the juniper again. "My," she thought. "There are moments when she can sure act childish for a three hundred and some year old." She studied the bluff face as a waft of breeze sighed in the pines. A raven croaked out resounding declarations from somewhere near the top of the bluff overhead before being answered by another nearby. "Well," she said, "one thing's certain: that cave's easily big enough for some huge extended family of trolls, or a whole clan."

"Yea?" said Demonica with a nod, "And I suppose you see that two of those fires are still smoldering, so they're home all right. In fact, look out across there. It looks like the entire mountainside has a whole string of caves right about this far up. See? If all of them are occupied, we've just found our army of Elf Killers."

"Shall we go find us some trolls, then?" said Spitemorta, before hesitating at the sudden recognition that the material which formed the huge talus pile cascading from the cave mouth to the foot of the bluff was entirely animal bones. "My. They've either been here a long time or they sure eat a lot. Do you see that?"

"Yes I see. But no, we'd better wait until dark, when they come out. I think our plan of making a big show by dropping out of the sky is still the best. I'd be surprised if they've seen anyone fly before. But showing up in their cave on foot just might not convince them, which could be 'way more dangerous than we could handle. I'd rather have them cowering before we walk amongst them."

"I suppose you're right, Grandmother, but it's going to be a very long day on this ledge waiting for it to get dark. And we still don't know for sure that trolls even live here."

"What about the fires? What about the bones you pointed out yourself? I can see them spilling out of each of the other caves, too. Where've you been just now?"

"Sure, fire and bones. Of course someone's there, but we don't know if they're trolls."

"Very well, I'll just go down there and have a look. I'll even peep in if I have to. But if I do, I want you to follow behind me close enough with the Staff that we can make a getaway if I accidentally stir them up."

"I'm right behind you," said Spitemorta with a sigh as Demonica turned and began picking her way along the ledge to the cascade of raucous croaks from the ravens gathering overhead.

Lukus sat up carefully in his blankets and took the steaming stew Soraya had brought him. The naked branches overhead waved in the cold wind. A woodpecker hammered before galloping away through the air. She stayed quietly by his side as he ate, while Hubba Hubba and Pebbles sat together with closed eyes in a ruffled ball of feathers on the door of the coach. When he finished, he gave her a grateful smile and squeezed her hand, then drew it up, kissed it and held it to his cheek for a moment with his eyes closed. Neron had nearly healed his wounds with his astonishing powers but he still felt very weak and incredibly lucky. "I think you've gotten me well enough to travel today," he said roundly as he stood up and steadied himself against the wheel of the coach. He looked at

Neron. "We've been here neigh on to a week and I'd feel better if things weren't jeopardized on my behalf. Besides I'm not so keen on being here when another troll stumbles through." He drew back his quilt and threw it around his legs again.

"If you're up to shaking and pounding all day, we're ready to go," said Neron with a willing nod as he stood up and stretched. "And the wind's coming in from the north-west and there won't be a fire..."

"I'm right ready," said Lukus, looking about, as the party quickly gathered up their things, "though I won't be much help."

Presently they were underway for Niarg. Jerund rode up alongside the bouncing coach and leant from his saddle, holding out a small dark twist of leaves. "Great-Grandfather said chew this and don't spit it out," he said, handing it through the window.

"Tell him thanks," said Lukus as he sat back in the seat and tentatively nibbled at the twist. "Wow! This is so bitter, it puckers me up like a knot on a post."

"*Aquilaria*, most likely," said Soraya as she shifted and adjusted blankets and babies. "Sláinte ollmhór. We'll see."

"I sure hope we stop at the inn in Sweet Pea tonight," he said, nodding with a thoughtful chew.

"Why?" she said with amused curiosity. "What's so special about it?"

"I remember it as having the most heavenly food anywhere. Rose and I ate there just before you and I met. We didn't spend the night, though, because we were afraid of being recognized if we dallied." He looked up with a smile into her gorgeous opal eyes.

"It's jolly good, too. Had we stayed, we'd not 'ave been waylaid by your brothers, and I might never have met you."

"Oh, we were fated to meet love, so we would have anyway."

"I'm more glad than anything that we did, but I don't know about 'fated.'"

"I do."

"Yes, I 'spose you do..."

"Now, tell me about this glorious food. Do you mean to tell me it's better than our Elven fare in Oilean Gairdin?"

"Well, keep in mind that I knew nothing of Elves back when I decided this," he said with a passing sheepish look.

"Sounds inviting, or fun at least, and Sweet Pea's probably about as far as we'll want to travel today. So I expect you'll get your wish, love."

"Ha!" thought Lukus as he gave a nod and a bounce in his seat. "Now that Soraya knows, it'll happen."

A sudden sizzling pop and a deep yowl made them jump in time to hear something

heavy crash and wallow off into the brush.

“Werebear!” hollered the driver from above. “And broad daylight in the bargain!” Two more crackling reports echoed away through the timber. “He’s down! They got ‘im good!”

The coach came to a stop as Neron, Danneth, Strom and Jerund rode through the thicket to converge on the downed bear.

“Maybe I should ride Starfire and help out there,” said Lukus, straining out the window to see what was going on.

“You most certainly will not,” said Soraya sharply. “I was afraid of that. The *Aquilaria*’s got you all wound up. Great-Grandfather wants you to feel better, but I’m sure he doesn’t expect the sláinte ollmhór to have ye healed already. Now you’ll stay put and spare your strength or I’ll have to spank ye myself. Do you think I want to raise these two babai alone?”

“I’ll be sitting right here, then,” he said with wide eyes.

“Do you feel well enough to step out, Lukus?” said Neron, peering in.

“Why yes...” he said, throwing a bewildered glance at Soraya before stepping out.

“Soraya’s right, Lukus,” said Neron, “You do need to stay in the coach. But you just reminded me. This is troll country, as you’re right well aware...”

Lukus laughed. He could see the old king’s eyes dancing.

“...And since you need a proper claymore for trolls, and since you broke your wee rapier in the ribs o’ the last one, I want you to have this...”

Lukus’s jaw dropped as he accepted the stunning blade with wide eyes. He knelt at once. “You honor me beyond words, sire.”

“I’m merely looking after my granddaughter. You need the right tools to protect her, besides you’re one of us now. This is Gearr Téigh Síós. I’ve had it with me since the days when we were driven out of Lobhadh by a far worse kind of troll. It’s cleaved a few of their stinking heads. I’ll tell you about it sometime, but right now you need to get back on board so we can be on our way.”

“I won’t be doing anything foolish, love,” he said at the sight of her as he got back inside and took his seat. “Unless we come under attack and have no choice, I’ll stay right here by your side.”

“Well, you just earned your pointed ears, husband,” she said as her look softened.

“That claymore is the Sword. He’s had it for a thousand year and he’d never give it to anyone but an Elf.”

Easing herself stealthily through the salmon colored dust, Demonica got another whiff of the overpowering reek wafting from the mouth of the cavern. “My word!” she thought as she wrinkled her nose and stopped, “I hope this is not what they’ll be like on board ship.” She turned to see by Spitemorta’s clabbered look that she was also smelling it. She studied the ground carefully before going on. She had nearly reached the mouth, and the ledge had become quite broad. There were footprints everywhere in the dust. Every place that was level was thoroughly tramped, particularly around the rings of stones enclosing the fires, where the dust had turned grey from mixing with ashes. “How many fireplaces?” she thought. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... eight, nine...” she nodded around with silent wide eyes, “eighteen. Eighteen places to cook simultaneously.

That's a lot of trolls inside.”

How it stank. There were raw, cooked and rotten joints, ribs and vertebrae strewn everywhere. “What's that noise?” she thought as she tiptoed up to the edge of the mouth. “Snoring. That has to be what it is. They sound like bison.” She turned aside and tiptoed back to Spitemorta, holding her finger across her lips and shaking her head as she went. She motioned for Spitemorta to come look at the track she was pointing to.

Spitemorta came, looked at it and shrugged. They quickly made their way back along the ledge to the far side of the junipers. “Well, what did you make of the track I pointed out, back there?” said Demonica, the moment they were hidden from the cave.

“What was I supposed to make of it?”

“Well, have you ever in your life seen a human with a foot broad enough to fit it?”

“No, but I haven't just studied people's feet.”

“Oh, go on,” said Demonica, grabbing herself by the hair and dancing 'round once in exasperation. “That was without a shadow of a doubt a troll footprint. That cave is full of trolls. And so are all the caves along the cliffs here. Humans do not have such broad feet. Humans don't go snoring in bedded-down herds enclosed in putrid stench in the middle of rotting filth in the middle of the bloomin' daytime!” At the sight of Spitemorta's alarmed look, she saw she had grown loud enough to overdo it and snapped shut her mouth as her voice echoed away over the rocks.

“Very good, Grandmother. You've convinced me. They're trolls. Now all we have to do is enjoy ourselves out here on this Fates forsaken ledge while the sun reaches its zenith and then spends all afternoon taking its sweet time until it sets, west of those rocks. Then if we're really good and lucky, we'll be able to convince the monsters that we should be worshipped rather than eaten.” She sat down on a rock with a sigh. “I still wonder if these stinking trolls are really worth any of our trouble,” she said, flinging a piece of juniper twig. “Tell me, how could we really need them if we have the Staff and the Heart? There's surely some easier way of doing all of this with the right magic.”

Demonica stared at her as if she had grown another head. “You are the most singularly obstinate blockhead, dear!” She shouted with a hiss of a whisper. “You haven't paid attention to anything I've told you for the past month, have you? You might as well write your will and plan your funeral if you start brandishing the Staff and Heart at every whim. You most certainly do have a great deal of power at your fingertips, but consider how many there are in the rest of the world, even just in Loxmere-Goll. You step out in the open with the Heart and the Staff and you'll become a target. Somebody will get you. Even if you can flick your fingers and make multitudes fall, somebody will get you. But even if you could get away with it, who would you have left to rule?”

“All those who didn't oppose me, Demonica,” she said, making a face.

“You can't be serious. Who would that be, Rouanez Bras? Do you really think enough people would be left to even manage ordinary affairs? Who'd raise your food? Who'd make your clothes, clean up after you or collect your taxes? Who'd pay them? It's the ordinary little people who don't have any better imagination than to work hard for you, and it's those same little ordinary people who fear the black arts. You let them see you use magic to strike down an enemy, and they'll be convinced it's the black arts which you're using and they'll kill you out of fear, even if you had them convinced at first that it was their enemy which you struck down. They'll do it. Mark me, they'll find a way. Now be realistic. We've come this far and you'd throw away everything we've worked for

because this last little effort is messy?"

"Of course not, Grandmother," said Spitemorta as she sprang to her feet to begin pacing. She thrust her face at Demonica. "I'm just fed up with your ordering me about all the time as if I were some backward nobody without a lick o' sense."

"Then quit acting the part, sweetheart. It's your act that has me convinced," she said as she put her hands on her hips and studied her. "You know, you really do need to calm down. Do you suppose letting your emotions run away at every trifle is good for you in your condition? You know, it's bad timing for you to be pregnant, but whatever you've done, you need to get complete control of yourself before you even have a prayer of controlling the entire world."

Spitemorta drew a furious breath.

Demonica shushed her with a shake of her head and a raised finger. "How long ago was it that you came to me for help in controlling your own subjects? Think about what I arranged for you. You need to think. Maybe I'm working in your best interests. Maybe you need to think before you say something regrettable."

"All right Grandmother," she said with a contemptuous sigh, "I'll accept that you have my best interests at heart for the time being."

"Good," said Demonica without a trace of a smile. "I suggest we take the Staff back to the ship for a bite to eat and a rest. Otherwise, it will be a long afternoon up here."

As the ravens traded croaks and clicks far above, Spitemorta held out the Staff, threw her leg over it and waited for Demonica to settle herself behind her.

"I'm on. Let's go eat, Rouanez Bras."

Hubba Hubba gave a shrill two note whistle as he and Pebbles sprang into flight from the top of the coach door, waking Lukus with a start.

"What...is going on?" he said, sitting forward to rub his head. "Wow. It's getting to be evening."

"Yea," said Soraya, "You've been asleep all afternoon."

"Didn't I hear Hubba Hubba?"

"He and Pebbles have gone to take a look at Sweet Pea before it gets too dark."

"We're that close? What are we stopping for?"

"We're at the rocks at the edge of the Jutwoods. We've stopped to clean up at the spring before crossing the fields to town."

"Oh," he said, twisting around in his seat to unlatch the door, "but couldn't that wait until we got to the inn?"

"Great-Grandfather thought we should clean up a bit so we'd be more presentable when we got to town. You know how particular we Elves are about our appearance, especially when we're so seldom seen by Humans these days."

"Well, this Human is here to say that the rest of his race has no idea what a loss it has suffered by shunning Elvenkind," he said with a decisive nod. "And I vow to do my part to put an end to such idiotic behavior."

"I know you speak the truth love," said Soraya with a smile, as she reached for his hand, "but keep in mind that a good lot of your people don't agree with you. You'll have to be patient then, and perhaps one day they will."

"You're expecting problems when we get to the inn in Sweet Pea?"

“Nothing we can't handle, I'm sure,” she said, giving his hand a squeeze.

“There'd better not be.”

“It'll be fine. Please don't get upset.”

“I shan't,” said Lukus, “unless upset is due.” He stepped out of the coach, stretched and then helped her out. A great horned owl traded booming hoots with a couple of others off through the trees. “They're early. It's still a while before dark.”

“It's overcast,” she said, taking his arm. “They're always early when there'll be no stars nor moon.”

“Wow!”

“What?”

“This is the exact spot where your brothers waylaid Rose and me and took us to meet you,” he said, giving her a hug as they walked. “I didn't know anything at all about this spring though.”

Soon they had washed up and were under way again, lurching and swaying in and out of ruts and over rocks. “Well, I'll have to admit that none of your family seems worried,” said Lukus.

“That's because there's nothing to get worried about. It's simply prudent to make certain that no one finds fault with us.”

“Having to do that is what bugs me,” he said with a gravelly mumble.

“I know,” she said with a smile, “and I love you all the more for it, but it's just the way things are.”

“It's getting dark, dear,” said Demonica as she stepped into Spitemorta's berth.

Spitemorta glanced up expressionless from her skinweler and went right back to projecting her final image of herself, hard at work for the citizens of Loxmere-Goll. At last she set it down with a smile and picked up the Staff, as though Demonica were not standing right there.

“Well,” said Demonica, “You certainly look smug for a troll goddess with a skinweler.”

“Do I now?” said Spitemorta. “I may feel smug, but I certainly didn't let my good subjects see me as a troll.”

“That's comforting, Rouanez Pouezus.”

“I've just been having a most satisfying session with the skinweler.”

“Have you? By all means tell me about it.”

“Pouezus?”

“Why, that's Headlandish for heavy, 'Heavy Queen' in this case.”

“That's hateful.”

“But temporary.”

“You're a mean grandmother, Demonica.”

“And curious. I still would like to know how your 'satisfying session' went.”

“All right, I suppose a heavy queen does have certain obligations to spiteful parties. I just got to thinking that my subjects needed to see how bad the Elves should be, particularly since we are planning on annihilating them. I mean, it should be helpful having the people hate them.”

“By all means. You're starting to think. Good. So what did you show the people,

exactly?"

"I showed how Elves live in self-indulgent grandeur and leisure, how they have more riches than even the crown and yet grasp about for more, and how they are wantonly wasteful with their plenty. I also showed them conspiring to destroy the sukere crops with the dragons and Niarg, and I showed them having a riotous celebration when the deed was done. Finally, I showed them plotting to conquer Loxmere-Goll."

Demonica threw back her head and laughed. "My, you were having a time of it, weren't you?" she said. "I wish you'd invited me to sit in. I'd have enjoyed that."

"Really? Well next time, then."

"Yes, perhaps," she said. "But right now we need to get back to the troll caverns. We need to show up just as they're coming out. Whoa! Something just hit me."

"What?"

"The spell of tongues won't work on them."

"So? Now what?"

"Well, that means that I've got to learn how they say 'follow me' in their speech." said Demonica as she paused to rub her chin. "So, I'm going to wave aside for a moment the spell of tongues which I've cast on you, and you are going to say, 'Follow me,' until I have it right. Go." And with that, she mumbled something as she stirred the air in front of Spitemorta.

Spitemorta looked Demonica up and down with a knitted and heavily ridged brow. "Phnyr-sifn-dyri-ja," she rumbled.

"Phnyr-sniff...agh!" said Demonica.

"Phnyr-sifn-dyri-ja!" boomed Spitemorta.

"Phnyr-sniff-dyri-ja?"

"Duda!" thundered Spitemorta. "Phnyr-sifn-dyri-ja. Phnyr-sifn-dyri-ja."

"Yes, yes," said Demonica, nearly rattled. Spitemorta was indeed commanding as a seven foot troll. "Phnyr-sifn-dyri-ja."

"A-oofn!" barked Spitemorta, clapping her beefy hands. "A-oofn, a-oofn! Phnyr-sifn-dyri-ja."

"Phnyr-sifn-dyri-ja...phnyr-sifn-dyri-ja...phnyr-sifn-dyri-ja. Got it!"

"A-oofn."

Demonica quickly stirred the air again. "Got it," she said. "Let's get topside right now. We need to get going."

Spitemorta nodded and bounded up the steps, anxious to be done with her persona as the great troll goddess, Fnadi-yaphn. The sooner she could be herself, the better she would like it. She was astride the Staff at once, standing as obligingly as she could, with as much Staff sticking out behind as she could manage by the time Demonica caught up, dressed in a heavy robe with a bodhran tied across her back.

Since their ship had weighed anchor in the middle of the afternoon, they didn't have far to fly, and it seemed that they had scarcely gotten aloft before they spied the giant colonnade of bluffs.

"Looks like we timed it well," said Spitemorta, pointing to the startling multitudes of trolls milling about in front of the cave mouths, far below.

"Perfect," said Demonica, "Now we need to get their attention."

"How?"

"Drop down and fly really low until they all see us, then shoot clear back up here. In

fact, do that two or three times. Then we'll land. That ought to have 'em good and awed by us for a moment or two.”

“That gives me boundless confidence, Grandmother,” said Spitemorta as she pointed the Staff down and without warning dropped into a heart stopping plunge that made Demonica shriek and grab onto her. She leveled off and hurtled along the ground in front of the trolls before shooting skyward.

Demonica wailed and dug in her nails. “Are you wanting me to vomit or what?” she cried.

Spitemorta slowed at her apogee without a word before heading back down. She flew by the trolls again before shooting into the sky and plummeting down one last time to settle before the awed attention of every single one of them standing outside the cave.

Demonica immediately stepped off the Staff, struggling to keep from stumbling, as the trolls stared at her agape.

Spitemorta stood tall with a fierce scowl and planted the Staff with a thud as she studied her people with blazing red eyes. The entire beetle-browed multitude stood in open-mouthed paralysis. “I am your Great Goddess, Fnadi-yaphn!” she thundered.

With a stir of urgent murmurs, the trolls carefully backed away from her.

“Good. I've got them,” she thought as she glared at them. “Where is Nafnarr-fafyr?” she thundered.

The trolls gasped and shrank back. A gnarled and ancient white haired one came forth from amongst them, pausing here and there to chant and shake a small drum rattle, stretched with Elf hide. Spitemorta was startled at the sight of his loin cloth made of Elf scalps, but forced herself to ignore it.

The old troll shuffled to a halt directly in front of her. “I be Dyrjin-yryy,” he said. “Nafnarr-fafyr nobe here. I speak for him nohere.”

Spitemorta took a step toward him. “You withhold the whole truth, old shaman!” she thundered as she smacked the ground with the heel of her staff. “Nafnarr-fafyr watches our every move from the Land of the Dead!”

The old troll threw himself face down on the ground before her. “Truly, Great One,” he said, as his voice cracked. “You truth-speaking. Nafnarr-fafyr does see us from Land-of-the-dead. Please see that I be your-servant. Why have you good-graced us with your big-to-look-at?”

“Rise!” barked Spitemorta as she folded her arms.

The old one tottered quickly to his feet and met her red eyes with his dark fearful ones.

“I've spoken with Nafnarr-fafyr in the Land of the Dead!” she thundered. “He's not pleased. I'm not pleased, either. You've run away from the Elves. You're afraid of your quarry. Your quarry kills your king, your very brother and scores of Dyrney. And what do you do? Do you make the Dyrney proud? Do you hit the Elves in their sleep? Do you have a victorious vengeance feast of Elf flesh? No! You flee across the Eternal Mountains and cower on this side, only eating Elves that foolishly stray far up the slopes.”

“True! True!” wailed the shaman as he fell back onto his face, trembling. “But the Elves findy-grab our hole-in-hill and some giant thump-jerk threw in a horror-fire, killing, killing, killing, crush-ripping us to pieces! And when we run-fly hole-in-hill, they jump-bite us with their gut-rip-birds and bloody-rip us limb from limb. They would have

kill-chewed all Dyrney.”

Spitemorta looked aside to see a very large troll in his prime with a jagged scar from his temple to his waist, tramping straight for her through the crowd. He came to a proud halt well out of her reach. He too wore a loincloth of Elf scalps.

“I be Gnophn, Thunder-man. And you-be wrong. Nafnarr-fafyr is my brother. Now tell us why you've come or hump-scramble.”

Spitemorta paused to raise an eyebrow, and without warning thrust forth the Staff, blowing out of the ground a deep pit with a deafening concussion, knocking Gnophin flat on his back and flinging stones far into the air to come rattling down the bluff face.

Scores of the nearby trolls were thrown flat with Gnophin. Scores more fled in all directions, but most stood paralyzed with fear, watching as Spitemorta walked calmly around the crater to plant her knee with all her weight on Gnophin's chest as she grabbed his windpipe and squeezed mercilessly. “You will never speak to me in that way again!” she rumbled. She stood up, watching him cough and gasp.

He sat up, heaving.

“Of course, you now can plainly see that I'm your great goddess who rules all Dyrney, and of course you'll bow down to me...” she said quietly as he stood up. “...or I'll blow your stinking pieces all over the hillside!” she roared.

Gnophin threw himself face down at her feet at once, where he groveled, whimpering his apology and his pledge to serve her for eternity.

“Then rise,” she commanded. “Stand amongst the rest of the Dyrney while I address all of you at once.”

Gnophn scrambled to his feet and scurried to get amongst his fellows who were beginning to stand as they dug dirt out of their eyes and brushed sand out of their hair. All fell to a hushed silence.

“Dyrney of the Eastern Continent!” she rumbled rhetorically. “Hear me well! You have been cowards and have shamed your fallen ken. You have shamed your ancestors. You have been condemned to wander in the Dead-world of the bright mists, where all are alone, hungry and fearful for eternity.” She got quite wide eyed at the sight of the entire multitude of trolls falling onto their faces, moaning in terrified dread. This was fun. She went on: “I have come to offer you this, only this one time. I offer this one chance to escape this endless doom. Hear me well!” She paused, savoring the sight of them. “You must avenge the deaths of Nafnarr-fafyr and all those Dyrney who fell with him. You must live once again on Elf meat. Long ago there were Elves who ran away from the Dyrney and crossed the sea. Your ancestors were shamed by their escape. These Elves live there now without the horror fire and gutrip birds of the ones who killed Nafnarr-fafyr. If you eat them, you will erase the Dyrney's first shame. And if you eat every last one of them, you will end the shame of not avenging Nafnarr-fafyr. Only then will you be spared eternity in the bright mists.”

“How are we to cross the endless eye-sting-water?” said Dyrjin-yryy, stepping forth.

“I have great ships to bear you across the sea,” she rumbled, “but you must come with me now, this very night, with no hesitation whatsoever. If you refuse you are doomed. But it is your choice. If you are willing to end your shame, follow my servant.”

She paused and waved a hand at Demonica. “To the ships of your salvation!” she thundered, as she stepped across the Staff and sprang aloft. “I will watch over you all from the sky!”

“Phnyr-sifn-dyrija!” cried Demonica, turning all eyes her way as Spitemorta hovered. She took her bodhran off her back, and with a flourish began beating out a marching rhythm on it with her two-headed drumstick as she stood in place and tramped in time with her feet. “Phny-r-si-fn...dy-ri-ja! Phny-r-si-fn...dy-ri-ja! Phny-r-si-fn...dy-ri-ja!” she cried.

The beetle-browed multitude began tramping in place at once. “Phny-r-si-fn...dy-ri-ja! Phny-r-si-fn...dy-ri-ja!” When Demonica began to march, the entire hillside of trolls fell in step behind her, taking up the chant.

For a long time, Spitemorta hovered above, watching, as the great grey owls wailed in the timber below. The moment that she was satisfied that all were indeed underway, she sped away to the ships like a shot.

Chapter 40

The sun was just beginning to set as Lukus helped Soraya out of the coach with Ariel and Daniel before the driver pulled away with it, leading the mounts. Lukus stood with Hubba Hubba and Pebbles on his shoulders and his Elven family all about him as they beheld the sod roofed three storey brick and timber building with the neatly painted sign above the door. "Suds and Steer," he said with a shrug. "I don't remember that. But I don't remember what name it did have, for that matter. Well if it's changed hands, I sure hope the cook's still the same."

"We'll know soon enough," said Soraya as she raised her hood.

Lukus frowned at this, particularly when King Neron and all three of Soraya's brothers did the same. He drew a breath, but Soraya caught his eye.

"Just remember," she said, "these people have rarely seen Elves for at least a human generation."

"Yea?" he said, hiking his brow. "I can understand curiosity, but if they treat you poorly because you look different, I'm afraid that makes them idiots."

"Man, I remember how it was as a crow," said Hubba Hubba.

Soraya slipped her arm around Lukus's waist and gave him a squeeze as she caught knowing looks from Danneth and Jerund. "Well, Let's go see what kind of reception we get," she said with a deep breath, as if they weren't already on their way.

Lukus followed her inside as Neron, Strom, Danneth and Jerund came behind.

"Hey," he said at the sight of the dour innkeeper. "He's the very same fellow, except his fiery red hair's all gone white." He walked right up to the man. "Good evening, sir," he said with a buoyant grin. "My kin and I'd like very much to have a good meal and a room for the night."

"You'll 'ave t' get rid o' them two things, first," said the innkeeper, nodding with cold grey eyes at Hubba Hubba and Pebbles sitting quietly on Lukus's shoulder.

Hubba Hubba and Pebbles craned their necks, looking for something objectionable on Lukus's shoulders.

Lukus wasn't certain that he heard right.

"This is a clean inn," said the innkeeper, "and we intend fr t' keep it that a-way."

"Yea? Then you'd do well to get your stinkin' carcass out of the doorway so ye won't scare off decent customers!" squawked Hubba Hubba. "Come on Pebbles. Let's roost in better quarters in the coach." With a flurry of furious feathers, they dropped off

Lukus and streaked out just above the floor.

"That bird's got a bad mouth," said the innkeeper, squinting up and down Lukus as shamelessly as a tailor making tucks. "You've been here before, ain't ye?"

"My word," said Lukus with a grin. "I most certainly have sir, but that was six years ago and I wasn't quite grown then. You have an incredible memory."

"Aye, I've 'n eye fr faces right enough. It pays t' know y'r customers in this business," he said as he gave a squint eyed glance about Lukus's party. "I don't 'member none of your companions, though. Now, you was a-travelin' with a handsome blonde lass when you were here, weren't ye?"

"Yes indeed. That was my sister. Your memory is nothing short of amazing."

"Not really. It's kind 'o hard to forget King James 'is se'f, when 'e was still Prince, bargain' in right after you'ns left, all worked up a-huntin' fr yer."

Lukus went wide eyed at this this. He turned aside at once and drew forth Soraya to

stand beside him. "This is my wife and our two newborns," he said. "And these are my kin by marriage."

"Wee babes, aye?" said the innkeeper. "More'n one? What kind o' racket d' they make?"

Lukus was stunned at this. "Why, practically none, good sir," he said, "Actually, we think they must be that way because there are two of them."

The innkeeper had a blank look.

"They keep each other comforted, you see, since they're always together and always have been together..."

"I'd think twice the racket or better, myself, an' I got payin' customers t' think of."

"Could be true of some, but not these two," said Lukus with a shake of his head.

The innkeeper paused to squint and thrust out his chin as he bit at something teensy between his teeth. "Here," he said with a sigh as he shoved the register, quill and ink bottle at Lukus. "And, that'll cost ye one full sovereign for each room. So how many rooms do ye want? Two? Three?"

"Three," said Lukus, handing over the amount without hesitation, as his eyes went wide at the price. He had plenty of money, but even a couple of shillings a room would have been difficult for most people.

The innkeeper shuffled away with the money as though he had been charging such amounts all day long, leaving Lukus to sign in. He returned just as Lukus set down his pen, followed by a withered old hunchback, wearing a filthy white apron. "Stamson here'll see t' y'r baggage an' show ye t' y'r rooms," he said, almost friendly. "I 'spect ye c'n find the dining room. The house special's still our famous stew."

"Exactly what I wanted to hear," said Lukus roundly. He took Soraya's arm and was following the old hired man down the dark narrow hall, when the innkeeper hollered after them: "Now mind ye, if them young'n's of you'n's gets to carryin' on and disturbin' the other patrons, you'ns'll 'ave t' leave right now! And if ye break the rules o' th' Suds an' Steer, we keep y'r rent!"

Lukus drew in an angry breath to set him straight as Soraya pinched his arm and shook her head. "Let's go see our room, Lukus."

"If it weren't for being absolutely famished," he said under his breath, "I'd say hang this place and leave."

Soraya nodded, squeezed his hand and gave it a shake for him to be still as they followed the shuffling Stamson, brushing his shoulders against first one wall then the other, as he maneuvered his stiff hips step by step, up the cramped flight of stairs.

Their tiny room was clean, but had nothing more than a narrow bed with a straw mattress, an austere straight backed chair, a pitcher and basin on a rickety stand and scarcely enough room to turn around in without hitting things. The crooked little window faced the street (had they known), but its sash was sealed with layer upon layer of lacquer and its four panes were blown from thick purple glass, full of bubbles and ripples.

Stamson had vanished to show Neron, Danneth, Strom and Jerund to their rooms when Soraya turned back to tell him that the room would do.

"Well, at least I can assure you that the food's good enough to make up for most of this," said Lukus, smiling at her.

"It had better be," she growled, earning a look of shocked surprise from him. She broke out with a gale of laughter.

Before long, Neron, Danneth, Strom and Jerund had come for them.

“Are you sure it's still necessary for you all to hide behind your cloaks?” whispered Lukus to Soraya as they came down the stairs. “I mean off the street's one thing, but coming from our rooms, won't that look odd?”

“I don't know,” she said with a shrug, “but I think we want to feel out the mood in the dining room, first.”

“If you say so.”

Lukus was delighted to find everything as he remembered it. Under the dining room's low ceilings were tables spread with faded green and white checkered cloths and fat lumpy candles. Throw rugs gave splashes of bright color to the room, much as he remembered and the bear rug before the hearth must have been the very one he remembered, though more than half of its fur was trod away. And as before, the inn was full of diners. “Isn't it great?” he said, turning to Soraya.

“It does smell inviting, Lukus.”

“Just wait 'til you taste it,” he said as they were all seated. “Ha! She's still here.”

Here came the immense waitress, heaving herself between the tables. Her greasy grey hair was no longer the black that Lukus remembered, and her skin was sagging with dimpled checkers of jiggling wrinkles, but if anything she was heavier by a hundredweight and she had a sour smell about her.

“Whew,” he thought as he got a whiff, “No wonder the innkeeper's hair's turned white.” To his astonishment, she gave them the exact delivery she had given Rose and him those years ago, right down to warning them about the scorched pea soup.

“Do they even fix pea soup?” he thought. “All they need to make is the stew.” It seemed strange ordering the stew when there might have been no other choice.

Lukus was disappointed that the waitress did not recognize him in the least, though he clearly knew better. It merely made her like nearly everyone else on earth.

Soon she was back, huffing and shuffling and sidling between tables as she brought forth the stew. She labored to breathe as she strained to set out the steaming bowls beyond the reaches of her girth without tottering. As she straightened up, Soraya lowered her hood and unbuttoned her cloak in order to eat.

The elephantine serving woman stopped wide eyed and rigid, jowls a-jiggle. As a look of hatred swept across her lardy face, she furiously snapped up both bowls at once, slinging stew onto both Soraya and Lukus. “We don't serve y'r stinkin' kind in here!” she screeched as she wheeled away to the kitchen with their meal.

Lukus sprang up, knocking his chair flat as he started after her.

“Hey,” said Danneth, intercepting him. “Perhaps it would be wise if we just left quietly.”

“No,” said Lukus between his teeth. “Not until that sow gives me a better reason than she just did.”

“I'd say there's a very good chance she'll not,” said Danneth with a sigh as he stepped aside.

Lukus zigzagged between the tables, catching up to the waitress just as she put her shoulder to the swinging door to the kitchen. “Please excuse my abruptness ma'am,” he said as polite as he could manage, “but I'd truly like to know why you refused to serve my wife and me the meal we just ordered. Our money's as good as anyone's.”

“I'm s'prised you'ns even 'ave the nerve t' come in here a-flauntin' y'selves amongst

decent folks,” she huffed in a thin falsetto, as her eyes turned to hot slits in her red face. “Ye think we don't know what you're all about? Ha! The queen told us 'erse'f, she did.”

“She what? So just what did the queen say about the Elves?”

“You ain't no Elf!” she screeched.

“No, I'm not. Now, will you please be kind enough to answer my question? Just what on earth did Spitemorta say about the Elves?”

She looked across the room at Soraya. “Why are ye traveling with an Elf?” she said defiantly. “Don't y' know they're dangerous?”

“What makes them dangerous, then?”

“They're after our land. They're out t' kill us all for it, too,” she said with wild piggy eyes. “Y' best get shed o' that Elf right now! She'll sooner slit y'r throat as look at ye, young fool!” And with that, she shoved past him through the door with a shriek and a yank of her tray, sending the bowls skittering across the kitchen floor on the other side.

Lukus looked up from his shocked disbelief to find the entire room astir like a kicked hive, every single eye on him. Across the room Soraya and her kin bore emphatically urgent looks. Things were well on their way to getting ugly and they needed to get out.

Lukus tramped across the dining room, put the bail of one traveling basket in the crook of his arm and the other one in his left hand as he grabbed Soraya with his right, pulling her to her feet and heading for the hall to the stairs, surrounded by Neron, Danneth, Strom and Jerund.

“Just get our belongings and go?” he said, bounding up the steps.

“You mean there's a choice?” said Neron.

“Is there a way out up here?” said Danneth.

“Everyone grab up your things!” cried Jerund as he hurried ahead. “Good job no one unpacked. I'll go see.” As everyone raced to his respective door, Jerund reached the window at the end of the hall. “Cac! Léan air! A leithéid de chac!” he cried. Suddenly he broke out the glass and waved out the window. “Hey! Get the coach and the unicorns around front! Now!” He dashed back, by the rooms as everyone came out. “No way out!

We got 'o go back the way we came in! If we're lucky the coach will be somewhere...!”

Lukus fumbled with buckles, strapping the claymore to his back for the first time. He grabbed up the twins, put his arm around Soraya and was ready. “It's a mercy no one chased up here after us,” he said. Down they went, plunging into the dining room full of glares, angry jeers and shaking fists. They shoved their way through the jostling and spitting, but miraculously got to the front door. Soraya, Strom and the twins got shoved outside, stumbling onto the steps before the door got slammed painfully on Danneth's arm.

“Get 'em, Homer!” came cries all around, as a hateful face stepped forth and ran a rapier through Jerund's shoulder.

Lukus instantly went white hot, lunging forward with a furious two handed swing. Gearr Téigh Síós rang with a sharp ping and Homer's head rolled away across the plates on the floor with a bloody bounce under dancing feet as the crowd gasped, taken by surprise. Suddenly a rotten toothed man with a tar tail charged up with a cutlass to be impaled by Neron, who yanked out his claymore from the fellow and neatly cleaved two heads, while Lukus took off another's arm. When the crowd hesitated, Danneth pulled Jerund outside, as Neron and Lukus backed out and slammed the door.

“Hey!” screeched Hubba Hubba. “Don't stop! Here's the coach! Get away from the door!”

As Danneth and Neron helped Jerund to the coach, the coachman heaved a bucket of lamp oil at the inn, followed by a flaming twist of tow, to send fire up the door with a whoosh, the instant it swung open. Danneth and Strom got Jerund into the coach with Soraya and King Neron, then sprang out with their claymores to clamber up on top with Lukus as the coachman gave the reins a furious shake and drove them out of Sweet Pea as fast as the team could go. He didn't slow down until he had gotten a good mile or so beyond town, where he stopped long enough for Danneth and Strom to switch to their mounts.

Lukus climbed down with them to have a look at Jerund, afraid of what he might find inside. He took a deep breath and shared looks with Danneth and Strom before slowly opening the door. Soraya's face was drawn and white.

Neron looked up and met their eyes. “He'll live,” he said gravely. “And I'd expect he would, since he's the orneriest of the lot of ye. He's asleep, just like you were, Lukus, but his wound is a bit worse than yours was. He's right weak from losing his blood. He'll be fine.”

Everyone shared relieved looks. Lukus kissed Soraya and started to shut the door.

“Hey Lukus,” said Neron. “Ye acquitted yourself right well back there. Makes me glad I chose you for to be Gearr Téigh Síós's new master.”

“I'm right honored, sire,” he said.

After another good four furlongs, they pulled off the road and Soraya set right to work, fixing a long overdue meal for them all. Lukus, Danneth and Strom joined in the preparations while keeping a wary eye out for what might appear along the road. Before long they were enjoying a hearty stew and flat bread.

“The stew is truly delicious, Soraya,” said Lukus.

“At least we can eat it in peace,” she said. “Do we dare camp here Grandfather?”

“All things considered I'd say we've probably pushed our luck as far as we dare by stopping to prepare a meal while still within the Loxmere-Goll borders,” he said, rubbing his chin. “I think we should push on until we're well across the border.”

Lukus climbed into the coach with Soraya, the twins and Jerund and fell fast asleep at once, not to awaken until they were nearly to the border of Far and Niarg. As he sat up, he felt a profound sense that he was nearly home, but an uneasiness kept reminding him that sweeping changes were on their way for Niarg, and they were not at all changes for the better.

Chapter 41

“Look!” cried Edward, as he pointed to the ground from astride Laora's back. “Fly lower.”

“Why?” said Laora, as she stopped flapping and looked at him with one curious eye. “What's so special about a pair of big ground runners?”

“They're diatymas.”

“So what?” she said as she started gliding down in great sweeping spirals.

“They're my friends, that's what. They brought me to the Dragon Caves after the Beaks captured my momma and the White Witch and those bad sore sissies.”

“Oh,” she said as she began studying them minutely. “Why do you think they're coming back here?”

“I don't know, but I hope it's nothing bad.”

“Me, too,” she said. “Well here goes.” She swooped in for a sidling trot down the path as she came to a halt a good ten rods ahead of the diatrymas, to allow them stopping distance.

The diatrymas bobbed their heads in unison and jogged to a springy stop. “Good day to you, Master Edward,” said one of the giant birds.

“Oh, Ceidwad!” he cried, running up and hugging her. “I missed you!”

“And we missed you,” she said, rattling her beak along a strand of his hair.

“Who's your lovely young friend?”

Laora's eyes widened at this and she self-consciously found some flight feathers that needed an immediate sorting through.

Edward trotted back to her and threw his arms around her. “This is Laora and she's my very most bestest friend in the whole world.”

Ceidwad nodded, and turned to Laora with a dignified bow. “I'm Ceidwad, my dear,” she said, “and I'm delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“As I am as well, my fair feathered young one,” said Lladdwr in his deep reedy boom as he bowed low.

Laora gave her feathers a good shake and sleeked down. “If you're good friends of Edward's, then you're good friends of mine,” she said with a nod of her own.

Formalities aside, Ceidwad turned quickly to Edward. “We've been sent in haste to the Dragon Caves to speak with your elders,” she said. “Would you fly ahead and tell them of our arrival?”

“Certainly,” said Edward and Laora in chorus.

“Thank you,” said Ceidwad. “Then we shall see you directly.”

“We're on our way!” cried Edward as he and Laora dashed off at a trot. He skipped in the dust and threw his leg across her back as she made a lunge, flapping aloft.

“How long do you think the three of you will be gone?” said Lipperella, looking sadly at Spark as she stepped out onto the balcony overlooking the tumbling milky river, several hundred feet below. She offered pickled voles, rolled in sukere crystals, from her hors d'oeuvres tray to Tors and Kast before turning to him.

Spark took a vole and squeezed the pimentos out of its eye sockets and licked his fingers thoughtfully before biting off the head with a yank. “No more than a month.

Probably less. I sure hope a lot less,” he said, looking at her with doleful eyes.

“I wish we knew the secret of the Elves' message globes,” she said wistfully.

“So do I. Tell me to stay and I will. Maybe Gweltaz has settled down with Loeiz enough to reconsider going with Tors and Kast.”

“You know better'n that, Spark. They've only been mated for a fortnight. How 'bout us? It's been six years and we don't feel like being apart.”

“I don't see why Kast and I couldn't go by ourselves, Spark,” said Tors. “We're grown up. We can ask directions. And surely with two of us, any humans too stupid to see that we mean well would most likely be afraid of us. We'll get to Castle Niarg.”

“I really don't know, Tors,” said Spark, as he knitted his brow and reached for another pickled vole. “King Hebraun and Queen Minuet are one thing, the general populace is quite another. Razorback was the last dragon in Niarg, as far as anyone knows, and he was out to burn all their crops. There were a number of people he burnt to death while he was at it, too.”

“I've heard all this,” said Tors, glancing at Lipperella with an appreciative smile before snatching up his third vole, “but I don't see how three dragons showing up instead of two would help much. The more of us, the more terrorized they'll be, I'd think.”

“That's right,” said Spark with a nod, “and that's exactly what the Council is counting on to keep us alive on our journey.”

“I suppose,” said Tors after a long pause, while he considered his brother's words, “I see their point, but it still seems as if two dragons...”

“Papa! Papa!” shouted Laora, as she and Edward ran echoing through the grotto. “Momma?” Her voice trailed off, as their pelting footfalls grew louder. The moment they burst forth onto the balcony, Lipperella grabbed them with a look of disapproval and steered them right back inside, stepping in behind them.

“Sorry,” said Spark, offering around the last of the voles. “They're energetic to the point of thoughtlessness, sometimes.”

“She makes these better than anyone,” said Kast, as he popped a vole into his mouth and closed his eyes.

“Oh fiddlesticks, Spark,” said Tors with a chuckle. “They're just kids. They'll get over it.”

“No kidding, Kast,” said Spark, “but they're nothing compared to the vole in a hole she used to make before we all gave up chocolate... Of course you're right, Tors. No doubt they saw something from the air that amazed them so much, they plumb forgot their manners trying to share it.”

“Undoubtedly...” said Tors.

“Look, we're not offended by them in the least,” said Kast, “What if they saw something that scared them? You know best of course, but if it were me, I'd check.”

Spark stopped chewing for a moment as he knitted his brow. “You know, you are right,” he said. “I'm going to go find out. I'll be right back.”

“By all means,” said Kast.

Spark found them in Edward and Laora's room.

“...So Ceidwad and Lladdwr should be here any minute, since they can run really fast...” said Edward, as Laora nodded with sincere enthusiasm.

“Ceidwad and Lladdwr?” said Spark.

Lipperella looked up at him, wide-eyed, then sank back on her haunches and studied

Laora and Edward. “Yes, I see, but it was still rude of you two to come crashing right into the middle of an adult conversation without waiting to be invited to speak.”

“We're sorry,” said Laora, “but we thought it was really, really, really important for you to know about the diatrymas, and we didn't know Unca Tors and Kast were here.”

“Did they say why they were here?” said Spark as he took a seat beside Lipperella.

“They just said it was something important,” said Edward, “and asked us to fly ahead and tell you they were on their way.”

“Then, thank you both for making sure we found out,” said Spark.

“We did the right thing, then?” said Laora.

“The hurryin' right here part was great,” he said, looking very seriously at the pair of them. “But the burstin' in part needs some work, yet. It's just like your mamma said.”

“Yes Papa.”

“Yes Uncaspark.”

“Good. Then hurry and find the diatrymas and tell them we'll meet them up on top in the leaning oaks by the main cave entrance.”

“Let's go!” cried Laora.

Hubba Hubba swooped in through the tower window, giving Razzmorten's childhood dog Fifi a terrible start. She charged out from under the table barking furiously and lost her balance on a throw rug that slipped out from under her, dropping her onto the floor with a bounce.

Razzmorten jerked up wide eyed from the grimorie he had open before him on the table and smiled grandly. “Hey! Wonderful. You're here,” he said, as

Hubba Hubba lit on the table, fanning the pages of the grimorie well enough to lose his place. He didn't see Pebbles, but just as he heard her wings beating to a halt overhead, she bent down the brim of his hat and stepped off onto his shoulder.

“Yea!” cried Hubba Hubba with a vigorous flap of his wings. “And Lukus and Soraya and Ariel and Daniel and Neron and her three brothers are coming behind us, and one of 'em, Jerund is still hurt pretty bad. We had a rough trip, let me tell ye.”

“Really? Well, tell me about it. I've got all morning for something like this. I'll just have a seat over here in this chair...” he said with a grunt as he sat down. So, are you about to tell me, or do you have other places you're off to?”

Hubba Hubba quickly ran his beak the length of the two biggest primaries in each wing and gave his feathers a resolute shake, flinging out dander to whirl about in the light from the window. “Well, I reckon I can give you ones the short version and ye can dig the details out of the party when they get here.”

Razzmorten settled himself thoroughly, slid his spectacles back up the bridge of his nose, raised his eyebrows and lifted his chin, “I can spare you all morning, my friend,” he said.

“I say...” said Pebbles, “if you two will excuse me, I'd like to find Minuet and let her know that we've come.” And with nods all 'round, she vanished out the window.

“It's perfect, isn't it Mother?” said Rose as she whirled around once in her wedding dress for Minuet to see.

“Oh Rose, it is. Wait 'til Fuzz sees you. You'll have him speechless.”

“Well, I hope not for long. I so enjoy the things he says...”

“My!” said Minuet, as Pebbles suddenly flew in and landed on Rose's dress form.

Pebbles gave a shrill two note whistle. “Hubba Hubba's with Razzmorten,” she said with a shake of her feathers, “and Lukus and Soraya and her family should be here any time now.”

“That's wonderful news,” said Minuet, putting out her hand at once for Pebbles to step on to.

Pebbles stepped on and thrust out the ruffled crown of her head for a scratch.

“I'll tell Father and Fuzz,” said Rose as she swept to the door.

“In your snow white gown?” said Minuet. “You want Fuzz to see?”

Rose froze wide eyed. “I guess I'm coming undone without unbuttoning first,” she said with a giggle, as she spun 'round and presented her back. “So could you help me unfasten these twenty-one, Mother?”

“My dear, you've gone giddy. You'll about have to stop bouncing.”

“Oh! Sorry. I'm just so excited.”

“I know. So am I.”

They found Hebraun, Fuzz and Yann-Ber still sitting at the breakfast table, discussing Razzmorten's revelations about the First Wizard, the Heart, the Staff and what all of it might mean for Niarg and the rest of the world.

“This is splendid!” cried Hebraun, springing to his feet to take Minuet's hand with a look of joy on his haggard face. “Lukus and Soraya are here at last.”

“And then this beast, ugly like a human, came...”

“Why thanks, Hubba Hubba,” said Razzmorten.

“Well it was. You got 'o face things, Wiz. Humans just plain missed out on beautiful. It was ugly in exactly the same way a human is. You know: up on it's hind legs, no wings, no feathers. It was actually worse, 'cause it was as tall as the tallest human and might even 'ave weighed three times as much...”

“Troll, aye?”

“Yea,” said Hubba Hubba, pausing with a very serious look. “That's exactly what they called it. And it was ugly, in spite of what you say. It was so ugly, it didn't even know it had to hide itself with clothes the way humans know they have to. Anyway, doggone it. I'm a-tryin' to get to this, Wiz: it got Lukus. Lukus was a-tryin' to protect Soraya and the kids, and it grabbed him up and threw him down hard enough for to pop his bones. It was awful and I thought to my stars he was a gonner.

“That's when Soraya and Danneth up and got the stinker. They turned 'im into a proper pin cushion, right now, they did. Now, Danneth's got quite a reputation as an archer, amongst the Elves anyway, but you ought to 'ave seen Soraya. I've never seen fury like that. She's good. She never missed a lick. She emptied out her whole quiver, and she put her last two darts, right square into an eye socket apiece. And what's worse is I'm starvin' here, Wiz. I know you wouldn't want that, so bring me some of that blueberry cobbler of yours, right now if you don't mind. Then I'd have the strength to finish my story, and you wouldn't have to wait.”

“Am I being addressed by an overweight crow, here?”

“Hey...!”

“Well I'll admit you're sitting in the light, but I hadn't noticed that your feathers were black...”

“Now don't you dare go thinkin' I'm back to my old habits! I'm talkin' about blueberry cobbler without sukere.”

Razzmorten smiled behind his hand as he raised a serious eyebrow.

“Hey Wiz, this is vital information, here. You owe me some allowances,” he said with a huff, giving his feathers a thorough shake before leveling himself at

Razzmorten. “Look. We just flew here all the way from the Jutwoods. You should've seen the stuff we've had to eat lately. I just figured for old time's sake, I mean I had it pictured that when I told you, you'd just up and...but I guess...I'm sorry, Wiz.”

“For old time's sake. Absolutely,” said Razzmorten, launching himself from his chair. “Here comes some blueberry cobbler. Won't take me too long. You can visit with Fifi while I'm at it.”

Hubba Hubba waddled to the edge of the table and peered over. “And you can have a jolly cobbler of troll dung, Tooth Face,” he said sincerely. “I mean you have the slobbers to handle it, and you certainly have the disposition for it.”

“Fifi wagged her tail hard enough to make her hips shake as she lowered one eye and raised the other.

“And the sheer intelligence,” said Hubba Hubba. “You've definitely got that.”

“Vuff!” said Fifi, rearing up with a lunge to put her drool-matted paws upon the table's edge.

“Man! Do you stink! Troll dung really would make you smell better. I'll be having my cobbler in the middle of the table, thank you,” said Hubba Hubba as he backed up with a hurried pigeon-toed two step in time for Fifi to say: “Vark!” and fling a string of drool across his eyes before dropping to the floor.

Hubba Hubba was frantically wiping his beak on the edge of the table when Razzmorten came through the door with the cobbler. He looked up to see three sparrows perched on his shoulders. “Chirp. Squeak. Tweet,” he said, brightening up. “I didn't see nests or any traces of you ones in here. I was wondering.”

“We're in the stables,” squeaked Chirp. “All three of us had nests in that oak just outside the window. When it turned cold, we took our second clutches to roost at night by the granary in the stables.”

“No kidding. Wait 'til I tell Pebbles. I know she'll be anxious to visit and talk about eggs. Even since it turned cold, all she wants to talk about is eggs.”

“Really?” tweeted Squeak as he took a peck at Razzmorten's cobbler. “I'd 'ave thought that going off on your adventures would have her forget all about eggs.”

“Yea, but she ended up helping to take care of two dozen freshly hatched dragonet eggs and then Lukus and Soraya needed help with their two.”

“Well,” squeaked Chirp. “When she sees our broods, she may have you cleaning out your old nest hole, even if winter is coming on.”

“We don't in winter any more than sparrows,” said Hubba Hubba, swallowing a blueberry, “but this winter'd be especially crazy if we did! There's no way we could feed a brood. I hate to tell ye, but your broods are going to have it rough.”

“What are you talking about?” chirped Tweet. “People always have tons of food going to waste here.”

Hubba Hubba looked up to see Razzmorten shake his head. "I wouldn't count too much on the people's help this winter, fellows," he said, backing away from the cobbler.

Chirp, Tweet and Squeak stopped eating at once. "What do you know that we don't?" squeaked Chirp.

"You've been here all the while and you don't know?"

Three little brown heads shook in unison.

"Each one of Niarg's grain crops is no good this year, and all the stored grain has gone bad," said Hubba Hubba. "Everyone's going to have a very bad winter."

Chirp, Tweet and Squeak looked at Razzmorten.

Razzmorten nodded sadly.

"But you're a wizard," tweeted Squeak. "Can't you fix it?"

"I've been trying, but I'm just not up to what I once was. The blight which got each of the separate crops was caused by magic and none of my counter-spells works at all. Unless the one who cast the spell counters it herself..."

"Herself?" squeaked Chirp. "You know who did it?"

"No."

"The heck you don't, Wiz," said Hubba Hubba, pattering around in an exasperated circle on the table top. "Come off it. You know jolly well it was the work of Spitemorta and Demonica."

"I know in my heart you're right," he said with a heavy sigh as he plumped back into his chair, "particularly since I've never ever seen any blight or smut or rust of any sort at all infect more than one particular kind of crop before, but I've not seen one shred of anything that connects it with them."

"Maybe it's time to go back to the Peppermint Forest," chirped Tweet.

"What Peppermint Forest?" said Hubba Hubba.

"What do you mean by that?" tweeted Squeak.

"It's been steadily losing its magic since Ugleeuh died. When we left, everyone figured it would all be Chokewoods by winter. Well, it's winter."

"But it's all smallies and dorchadas in the Chokewoods," squeaked Chirp.

"And Chokeberries!" chirped Tweet.

"You're trying to tell me something?" said Hubba Hubba. "I was just there, remember?"

"Your Majesties," said Captain Bernard with smile and a dignified bow. "Prince Lukus and his family have arrived with King Neron."

Hebraun and Minuet traded looks of delight with Rose, Fuzz, and Yann-Ber. "Too bad it's too cold to receive them in the garden," said Hebraun. "Bring them here then."

"By all means, sire," said Bernard as he turned to leave.

In a few moments, Lukus and Soraya strolled into the throne room with a travel basket apiece, followed by King Neron and Danneth and Strom, helping to steady Jerund, who looked very white and weak. Minuet and Hebraun rose from their seats to greet them and have their first look at their new grandchildren while Rose, Fuzz and Yann-Ber stood aside politely.

"They're perfect!" cried Minuet, as Hebraun nodded and beamed.

"You expected less?" said Lukus.

“Certainly not,” said Minuet, hugging first Soraya then Lukus.

By now everyone was talking at once, though they soon found seats and settled into a wonderful afternoon-long visit. They spoke only of pleasant events and developments in each other's lives, defiantly turning their backs on the spectre of international politics.

Pebbles flew off Minuet's shoulder to hover over Ariel and Daniel's baskets.

“What's she doing?” said Minuet.

“She and Hubba Hubba have been the twins' guardians, and they are most protective,” said Lukus.

“That's an understatement,” said Neron. “At first, they even growled at me and refused to let me in the room when the babes were asleep. I'd have to return later.”

“So Rose,” said Lukus, “when are you and Fuzz going to tie the knot?”

“Would next week be soon enough for you?” said Rose, radiantly.

Suddenly Hubba Hubba flew in with Squeak, Chirp and Tweet as Razzmorten appeared in the doorway. “Hey Lukus!” he cried, “Is it all right if I show them the twins?”

“If Pebbles will allow it, Soraya and I are all for it.”

Chirp, Squeak and Tweet chattered amongst themselves as they studied the sleeping babes then turned to Lukus and announced: “We agree that the wee lady is the angelic image of her beautiful mother and the wee man is your exact likeness, once again, plus...”

“Plus...?” said Lukus.

“Plus elegant ears,” chirped Tweet.

“Yes, yes,” said Lukus.

As Razzmorten greeted everyone and was peering at Ariel and Daniel, Captain Bernard appeared suddenly, wending through the gathering to find Hebraun. “I apologize for the intrusion, sire, but King James's retainer has just arrived and is asking for an immediate audience with you and Queen Minuet.”

“Show him to the great hall and see that he has refreshments,” said Hebraun. “We shall be there directly.” He and Minuet excused themselves at once.

“What in Niarg does James's retainer want here?” said Lukus, turning to Rose.

“Why look at me?” she said. “I know less than you, Lukus.”

“Possibly, except you've been here while I've been in Oilean Gairdin.”

“The last we heard from James, he told Mother and Father that Spitemorta is blaming the dragons, the Elves and Niarg for the destruction of their sukere crops,” she said. “Of course this sounds likely but we've no way of knowing if he's telling the truth or not. I mean, she could've put him up to it.”

“I see that you indeed know less than I do,” said Lukus, as he met Neron's eyes with a nod. “James is definitely telling the truth, Rose. We can vouch for that. On our way here we had what you might call the misfortune to pass through Sweet Pea...”

Razzmorten, Fuzz and Yann-Ber converged on this at once.

“Sweet Pea,” said Rose. “Oh, Lukus, did you eat at the Inn?”

“I guess you didn't hear me say: 'misfortune.' We did stop, but their service has gotten so bad that we had to sever a few heads. Thanks to the very tales James warned of Spitemorta spreading, Elves are no longer welcome in Sweet Pea. That's why Jerund is wearing bandages.”

“Then it's true that she's trying to start a war.”

“It's inescapable, Rose. And if she does, it's a war we can't possibly win, yet.”

Lance bowed and heaved a sigh. "I understand that your son has just returned from afar and that I've interrupted your reunion with him for which I must beg your pardon," he said, looking uncomfortably at first Hebraun and then Minuet.

"Please, have a seat Lance, and tell us what this is all about."

Lance tugged at the drawstrings of a leather bag and dumped out a skinweler into his lap. "King James asked that I bring this to Your Majesties."

"A scrying crystal?" said Minuet. "My word! What for?"

"He said to tell you that it is one of many more just like it, and that they each belong to Spitemorta. She's placed them in the largest towns and hamlets throughout both Loxmere and Goll..." He paused as Minuet and Hebraun traded scowls. "...And he said to tell you that this crystal is by no means an ordinary one. This one, and the others like it, allow those with no magical ability whatsoever to see into it and view what is there. He also said that Spitemorta is addressing the people in the places where she has distributed them, spreading her lies, showing herself as the benevolent queen working selflessly to stem Niargian, Elven and dragon treachery. He warns that Spitemorta may be able to see who is looking into the crystals, but he doesn't know for certain if that is indeed the case."

"Please put the crystal back inside the bag and take it home and convey our sincere gratitude to James," said Minuet, blanching. "Even the slightest chance that

Spitemorta can see who peers into her crystal puts us in peril. Your tidings are invaluable though, and we are grateful that you came."

"I have no magical abilities," said Hebraun, "but I concur with Queen Minuet and I wish to convey our sincere thanks and gratitude for your information."

Lance nodded and returned the scrying ball to the bag. He stood and bowed. "Thank you for your time," he said as he yanked tight the strings. "I hope our next meeting is under happier circumstances. I will carry your words to my king."

When Lance had gone, Hebraun took up Minuet's hand with a squeeze. "Time's growing short, love," he said.

"Yes," she said, drawing a breath as she closed her eyes, "very short indeed."

Chapter 42

Spitemorta had to bend nearly double to enter her berth without hitting her head. Once inside, she still had to stoop and be wary of the timbers above. She went straight to her skinweler, giddy with anticipation. She carefully set it upon the table fastened to the hull and sat on her bed, since she no longer fit the chair. "First I'll contact Captain Brutus, then I'll give an address to my subjects. I've certainly got the time," she said with a thick booming laugh. "It'll be hours before Demonica gets here with her hoard of beasts. Maybe I'll get lucky and they'll eat her," She threw back her head and laughed again until tears ran down her cheeks. "That would be great. With her out of the way I could even go home without those awful trolls. How could I possibly need them? Goll's army can wipe out Niarg and the Elves without any problem. I simply have too much power and too much control for any army under my command to fail. Besides, where it might falter, I could certainly use the Staff and the Heart and finish the job."

She gave a final sigh as she dried an eye on the back of her hand.

She hesitated for a moment as she felt of her protruding eyebrow ridges with her fingertips. "Well, I suppose that does make me look like them. It's a mercy I haven't seen myself in a looking glass," she rumbled quietly, as she adjusted herself where she sat and scooped up the skinweler into her hands. "Well. It's time to remember myself as the raven haired siren which I actually am," she said. "The sight of me as my face just felt would give my subjects quite a bit to recover from." She closed her eyes for a moment and with a clench of her teeth and a shake of her head, she summoned her captain of the guard. It took far longer than she expected, but before long his brooding face appeared out of the swirling mists within her globe.

"Report to me, Captain Brutus," she said.

"Yes, Majesty!" he barked. "The army has grown in number since last we spoke, and they are shaping up quite nicely. I'm right confident that they'll be in top fighting shape within only a very few months."

"You're proud of this?" she said over the misty miles between the skinwelerioù.

"I certainly had been until this minute, Majesty."

"A very few days, is what I have in mind, Captain."

"As you say my queen, so shall it be," he said without the slightest hesitation, though his eyes betrayed his fear.

"I knew it was too early for your death, Captain," she said with a coquettish smile. "Be assured that a substantial promotion comes with your success at what's ahead. The world awaits what you are preparing to deliver. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Crystal clear," said Brutus, his face turned unreadable. "Absolutely, crystal clear."

"Good. You will be long remembered if you manage. Now, how are my subjects doing with the skinwelerioù? Are they still faithfully viewing my addresses?"

"The vast majority form mobs, scrambling and fighting for the chance to get even a single glimpse of you. In fact, it would be a vast relief for the constabulary if we were to appropriate some very large number of them to ease the crowds. At the very least, seeing you in the skinwelerioù is now a national passion. And nearly every one of them believes every single word you say."

"Just what do you mean by, 'nearly every one of them?' I caught the look on your face. What's going on?"

"There are a few citizens, a very few, who find your newly disclosed magical

abilities disturbing, frightening in fact. Some of these traitors suggest that you are too dangerous to stay on the throne. A handful openly call for your execution.”

“Executions by all means,” she hissed, “but not mine. Who are these traitors, Captain? Silence them now. I’ll not have them poisoning the minds of my loyal subjects.”

“I anticipated this, my Queen,” he said with an acquiescent nod, “and they are being rounded up even as we speak. Shall I have them held in the dungeon until your return or...?”

“As much as I would love dealing with them myself Captain, I’m afraid I’ve not the time. Have them vanish without a trace. Execute them in utter secrecy and make certain that their deaths can not be traced back to the crown. Understood?”

“Absolutely Majesty.”

“Good. Is there anything else I should know before I speak to my clambering multitudes today?... Well, Captain?” she snapped irritably at his hesitation.

“I regret to say that it concerns King James...”

“James? Has something happened to him?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. He discovered the skinweler in the courtyard and asked me why it was there and why people were gathered around it as if they could see something in it...”

“So?” she barked out with a short laugh. “Is that all? I fully expected him to. You needn’t bother with it any further. I’m quite prepared to deal with it when I get back.”

“Yes Majesty, but there’s more to it...”

“Well, out with it, then.”

“Certainly. I hope you don’t take my actions amiss Your Majesty, but with the king’s ignorance of the skinweler, I decided to have him watched for a few days, just to make sure that the crystal stayed put so that the citizens wouldn’t miss any of your addresses. I’m right glad I did, if you don’t mind my saying, since the skinweler in the courtyard did indeed vanish.”

“And James took it, aye?”

Brutus nodded.

“And I suppose he returned it after a spell?”

Brutus shook his head. “Not yet.”

“My poor husband is a pure child, Captain. After he rolls the ball around enough and sees me in it a few times he’ll get quite bored.”

“Begging your pardon, Majesty, but I fear there’s still more to it than that.”

“Really? Then I suggest you get to telling me Captain.”

“Certainly. At the same time that the skinweler vanished, King James sent for Lance. Immediately after that Lance left the king’s solar with a leather bag that probably had the skinweler in it. Of course, my yeoman followed him, but after a time Lance realized he was being tailed...”

“And got away.”

“I’m afraid so.”

For a moment Spitemorta wanted to strike him down through the skinweler. “I trust your yeoman has been taught that failure at one’s duty is not allowed?” she said, recovering at once.

“He’s in the dungeon this minute, awaiting your return, Majesty. Should I execute him now?”

“No, I want to make an example of him when I get back. Just see that he does not become comfortable.”

“Understood.”

“So where do you suppose Lance took the skinweler?”

“He was heading north before he got away.”

“Does that mean towards Niarg?”

“It's a possibility, Majesty. I have regulars patrolling the border even as we speak. Rest assured that if he did, the moment he crosses back in, we'll have him. Then we'll know what he did with the skinweler. Make no mistake about that.”

“I don't share your confidence. Lance has been James's lifelong friend as well as his retainer, Captain. He'll choose to die before he betrays his king.”

“What then is your wish regarding this matter?”

“Oh, try torture by all means, Captain. Damage him as much as you enjoy, but take care that he remains alive. Just don't fail to get your hands on him.”

“I will not fail, Majesty. I will see to this personally.”

“Excellent. See that you do.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

Spitemorta silenced the skinweler and sat on the bed tapping her lips with her forefinger as she stared off into the reaches of her contemplations.

Spark and Lipperella had a quick word with Tors and Kast and set out at once for the main entrance. Reaching the top of the broad white stairway, they paused to catch their breath as they looked for signs of the diatrymas in the leaning oaks, still green with their leaves in spite of the frosts.

“I can see a long way into the derwen pwysaf, and not a trace of Ceidwad and Lladdwr,” said Lipperella as she stared from under the flat of her hand.

“Hey, look off yonder, above the trees,” said Spark. “That's Laora and Edward, isn't it?”

“Yea. Ceidwad and Lladdwr must be right below them.”

“And here they come.”

Laora and Edward made a hurried landing and came running as Ceidwad and Lladdwr trotted into view amongst the oaks.

“Good day to you, Spark and Lipperella,” said Ceidwad as she and Lladdwr jogged to a fluid halt and made a bow. “We have tidings from Mary.”

“Welcome back to the Dragon Caves,” said Spark. “Would you like some refreshments?”

“We could get you...” cried Laora, with a bounce before going wide eyed. “Oh. Sorry.”

“Thank you... And thank you too, sweetheart,” said Ceidwad, glancing aside at Laora. “But we had just snapped up a nice fat rabbit apiece when Laora and Edward came back to find us, so at the moment it just might waste time.”

“Well, we could fetch up just about anything if you change your minds,” said Spark. “In the meantime, how would this nice grassy spot over here do as a place to sit down and talk?”

“Again, thank you,” said Ceidwad as she and Lladdwr settled down where he

showed them, under an especially large leaning oak. "I'll get right to the point. I'm afraid that circumstances dictate that I must. Mary wants you to know that the Peppermint Forest now seems to have faded away entirely. And worse than that, the smallies are swarming in in such huge numbers that even the dorchadas are staying out.

"So how are you all managing?" said Lipperella, sharing a wide eyed look with Spark. "What has Mary been able do about it?"

"The smallies are simply overwhelming," said Ceidwad, shaking her head. "She's spent the last days of the Peppermint pouring her own magic into saving as many of the enchanted creatures there as she could, before they changed back to ordinary animals."

"But why?" said Spark. "How can they survive that way in the Chokewoods?"

"You see the problem then?"

"Not at all," said Spark. "What's she doing besides keeping them enchanted? How's that helping them out?"

"The smallies would indeed eat them outright. Mary is hiding in her cavern all the enchanted ones which she can possibly manage. She's been feeding and caring for them ever since she got back there from here."

"Well she's got a right big cave..."

"For her," said Lladdwr, "but by no means big enough for the scores upon scores she's trying to save. She's run out of space and she's exhausted her magic. She started putting her magic into the enchanted ones to save their intelligence, at least the ones who were frantic at the prospect of losing what they had. At first there was no problem, but then the mint owls, whose main prey was smallies, all suddenly changed back to being great grey owls, who are fierce enough as owls go, but have absolutely no appetite whatsoever for smallies. The moment that happened, the smallies came flooding in from the Chokewoods, mercilessly setting upon anything that walked or crawled. They were frantic for refuge in Mary's cave. So now with all her magic tied up, she can't keep up with the demands for feed, and the smallies are relentless at trying to get in. Sooner or later they will. For our part, Ceidwad and I narrowly escaped the cave with our lives when we came here. We can safely say that without help, Mary is doomed..."

"Which will happen before we get back if there are too many delays," said Ceidwad. For a moment, no one spoke. The chilly ocean breeze chased through the grass and rattled the small glossy leaves of the leaning oaks. "She needs your help. She thinks that enough dragons spitting fire might hold open a path long enough for her to escape the Chokewoods with her menagerie. She's hoping that the Elves will give them refuge in Jutwoods."

"Why not have all of us go in there and toast the whole lot? Smallies have meant nothing but fear, death and anguish since Razzorbauch turned them loose."

Ceidwad gave a sigh and shifted herself before fluffing her feathers and giving each wing a snap. "There's something fundamental about Nature here that seems to escape everyone but diatrymas," she said. "I do not mean to sound arrogant, but the other intelligent species, particularly humans, have no grasp. It is not possible to eradicate another numerous species. One with utterly no morals can alter them perhaps, particularly with magic, and even change them forever, but all efforts to completely take out a numerous species will be nothing but a bad joke in the firmament of Nature's workings. There are an awful lot of smallies."

"But aren't there whole kinds who no longer walk the face of the earth? How about

Mwyaf Fawr Llosg, you know, the Greatest Burning?”

“I think this is what you don't grasp,” she said with polite patience. “Most of nature is profoundly logical without consciousness. Just being conscious does not make one profound. All of dragondom is not big enough. Now, I hate to be rude but Mary is in peril. Have we discussed this enough that...?”

“Absolutely,” said Spark, springing to his feet. “I'm off to the council. I'm guessing that they'll agree at once to Mary's request. Meanwhile, please feel free to enjoy our hospitality and make yourselves at home. I'll be back immediately as soon as I know.”

Ceidwad and Lladwr gave dignified nods as he dashed away, leaving them with sitting with Lipperella. At once Laora and Edward scurried forth and plopped down directly in front of them. Lipperella looked at Laora and raised an eyebrow. Laora looked at the grass. Bit by bit she began studying Ceidwad with rapt admiration. It was quite something to be recognized as 'pretty' by such a large and important bird. She saw something in the grass. “Got 'im!” she said, snapping up a vole. “Would you like half, Ceidwad? I'll split 'im with you.”

“Oh, thank you sweetheart. Don't mind if I do.” she said, neatly snipping off and swallowing the squeaking end. “They're delicious.”

“Edward doesn't like them, so I guess I get to share one with somebody.”

“Well, he wouldn't dear. Humans like things like this cooked...don't you, Edward?”

Edward looked up from his piece of stick with a wary nod.

“And you're very lucky, since you're able to do things I couldn't possibly manage...”

“Like what?” said Laora with astonishment.

“Well, you have hands on the wrists of your wings for one thing,” said Ceidwad. “so that means you could cook Edward a nice, fat vole...with your momma's help, of course. And not only that, you're going to be coming into your flame soon, and then you can toast 'em on the spot.”

“Your...” hollered Spark, as he lunged into view, out of the cavern entrance, “Your request has been granted!” Everyone looked up as he hurried over to the grassy spot.

“However, the council feels that it can spare none other than Tors and Kast and me, and that's only two thirds as good as you might think, since I can't spout fire!”

“We're certainly most grateful for all the help we can get,” said Ceidwad, “but why are so few of you able to come?”

“The clan's preparing to move us to the Black Desert and since our survival seems to be at stake, they're afraid to let go of very many,” he said, pulling a grass stem to chew on.

“But you've been here above three hundred year,” said Ceidwad with wide eyes.

“What has caused this?”

“I reckon you and the White Witch haven't heard from Elves nor Niarg since your return, aye?”

“Oh, oh!” said Ceidwad. “This has to do with Demonica in some way, doesn't it?”

“Well, Spitemorta, to be exact...”

“Actually,” said Lladwr, “Mary had hoped you'd 'ave heard from the Elves, since the only safe place she could think to flee to with her enchanted ones was Jutwood Forest.”

“I see,” said Spark. “Well, according to the Elves, Spitemorta and Demonica have

convinced the people of Loxmere-Goll that we dragons carried out plans laid by Niarg and the Elves to set fire to all their sukere fields. Right now they're preparing for war with Niarg and the Elves. When you showed up, Tors, Kast and I were getting ready to leave for Niarg to see if taking the entire clan to the Black Desert is warranted. Meanwhile, the whole clan is being made ready for an immediate flight the moment we return. So, the council is sending the three of us to your aid before we go to Niarg, provided we set out immediately."

"Things are deteriorating far faster than we'd expected," said Ceidwad.

"They only approve if we can be gone within the hour," said Spark. "Are you two right ready for a return journey?"

Ceidwad and Lladdwr nodded in unison. "Let's go," said Ceidwad as they sprang to their feet and gave their feathers a thorough shake.

Spark drew aside for a farewell with Lipperella, Laora and Edward and the Mob that they knew would end the moment Tors and Kast appeared up the stairs. They had scarcely had hugs all 'round when the pair came bounding out into the open with bags and gear. Spark gave Lipperella an extra squeeze and started off.

"Wait!" cried Edward, running with Laora to catch up. "We want to come with you!"

Spark turned back as Lipperella met his eyes with a nod. "It will be very dangerous," he said, as he looked up to see her nod once again.

Edward and Laora stood solemnly in front of him with big-eyed nods. "We know, Uncaspark," said Edward, "but we'll be real careful and do just what you tell us to. I want to see Unacafuzz. I really, really miss him."

Spark drew in a deep breath between his teeth. "You'll both do exactly as I say, every single time, even if I tell you to fly back home at once?"

Edward and Laora squeezed hands as they exchanged a look, then nodded together.

"All right," said Spark. "This is by far the most serious thing we've ever done together. I'll hold the pair of you to your word."

"Thank you, Uncaspark!" cried Edward. He suddenly dashed back to Lipperella and threw his arms around her neck. "I love you, Aunt Lippy."

Laora immediately did the same, and they were ready. Spark blew a kiss to Lipperella and turned away with the party for the Chokewood Forest.

"How do I look, Mother?" said Rose as she anxiously peered again at her reflection in the great oval mirror.

"Absolutely, stunningly beautiful dear. You couldn't possibly be more gorgeous," said Minuet with a smile of wistful joy. "I think it's almost time. Why don't I just pop out into the garden and see if they are ready for you yet? And isn't it wonderful that we had this one warm, sunny day come along so it could actually be out there as you used to wish when you were little."

Rose nodded gratefully and heaved a tight-buttoned sigh as Minuet stepped out of sight. "Well yes," she thought, as the handmaiden came at her train to whisk and fluff and straighten, "except that there are no roses, and that this has grown into a full-blown wedding. The citizens of Niarg had other ideas, but at least they're not making me marry Pea Slinger Pig Boy. But I do get Fuzz. I just wish this would be over."

She looked up at the sound of determined footfalls in the corridor. A wail of

bagpipes sounded, three steps before Minuet appeared round the corner. Minuet smiled radiantly and motioned in grand rhythm with the wedding march for her to come. She took a deep trembling breath, stepped through the doorway, took Hebraun's strong arm and floated down the crunching path to join Fuzz at the great white trellis, laced with naked vines, where he waited with Lukus, Razzmorten, Yann-Ber and Hubba Hubba, who stood at parade attention on Razzmorten's shoulder with her wedding ring clamped tightly in his beak.

Hebraun carefully parked her beside Soraya, Violet and Pebbles and stepped back with watery eyes. The ceremony swept over her like a dream and before she quite grasped it all, she and Fuzz were man and wife and immersed in a pandemonium of well-wishers. She met the joy and sadness in her mother's tearful eyes and felt oddly calmed. She turned to her husband and felt herself ignite with a glow of euphoric joy. This is truly what she had always wanted.

"Edward," cried Mary from amidst the cavern crowded with strange animals. She rushed forth and scooped him up in her arms for a twirling hug. "I didn't expect you to be with the dragons on such a dangerous mission." She caught Spark's eye with a dubious look.

"Uncaspark isn't very happy about it Mary, but he and Aunt Lippy know how much I been missing Uncafuzz. We're on our way there. And I wanted to see you, too. This is Laora," he said, pulling her forth. "She's Uncaspark and Aunt Lippy's baby girl. I mean she's as grown up as I am, but she's not even a year old. And they let us come along because we promised and promised to do exactly what he said, especially when we saw smallies..."

"Pleased to meet you, Laora," said Mary, throwing another doubtful look at Spark.

"And you sure were right," said Edward. "The woods is really, really full of those little red devils. They're really scary with their awful yellow eyes and their big mouths of snapping teeth."

Mary sat down, listening, with a smile for Edward and yet another skeptical glance at Spark.

"They were all over the place. Unca Tors and Kast kept burning 'em real good, over and over. Every time they'd come running at us, Uncaspark made us stay in the air until it was over..."

"Air?" said Mary, glancing at Laora. "So you flew on Laora's back?"

"Yea. We watched it all. When the smoke came up from the smallies, they stank like burnt spit and scorched hair. An' Uncaspark was great. He didn't blow out big flames, but he got down on his knees and cutted off hundreds of their heads with his claymore. He was real good. I didn't know he could do that. I wondered why he had it. And Ceidwad and Lladdwr kept picking 'em up and smashing 'em against trees and rocks..."

"You watched all this from the air?"

"Yea, I just said. You wouldn't believe how wonderful it is to fly, Mary. I helped raise Laora, so she was already my best, best, best friend in the world, but after she took me into the air, I've got 'o fly with her forever."

"I want to hear more Edward, and I'm really glad you're safe," said Mary, giving him another sound hug. "But now I need to speak with your Uncle Spark and the other

dragons for a bit.”

“I’ll just show Laora around your cavern and see if there are any animals here I know,” he said with a nod.

“Great idea,” said Mary before quickly turning to Spark, Tors and Kast. “Forgive me, Spark,” she said the moment Edward and Laora were out of hearing. “I was bewildered there for a moment. In spite of the short time I’ve known him, he’s kind of the little man in my life.”

“Oh, I figured you’d get it worked out,” said Spark. “But I do know what you mean. He’s quite the beguiling lad. There are moments when he seems like he’s ours, too.”

“Hey Spark!” hollered a voice from the floor.

“Shot ‘n’ Stop!” cried Spark. “Hero and friend. I had no idea that I’d ever see you again.”

“It’ss been a long time for ssure,” said Shot ‘n’ Stop, fluidly rising out of his coil from the floor.

“No kidding. Fuzz’ll sure be glad to know you’ve made it.”

“That’ss wonderful. He wass ssimply the besst. How’d he make it? I mean he’ss scertainly not here. Who fixsed hiss sspell? Where iss he?”

“He thinks either Demonica or Spitemorta.”

“Never heard of them.”

“One’s Ugleeuh’s mother, the other one’s her daughter.”

“Then I’ve sseen ‘em both. I even dropped in on them. But I have my regretsses. You know how awkward it iss ssometimes when you drop in on people and can’t sstrangle them. They flew under me on Ugleeuh’ss broom handle and I dropped onto the one who lookss jusst like her. You know, the one who took it from her when I wass popping her sstinking eyesses out. Anyway, we all fell out of the air and the other one pointed the handle at me. Well, I ssaw how it all wass and had to sslither away. Sso I failed. It’ss sstill one down and two to go.”

“Well that is unfortunate, but you’re still my all time hero. And you’re not the only one who’s failed to rid the world of ‘er so don’t feel bad.”

“Well, I scertainly promisse never to sstop trying.”

“I’ve been having visions of this upcoming war and we don’t appear to be the victors, Spark,” said Mary, seeing her moment. “Ceidwad tells me that you’re on your way to Niarg, so I wish to travel there with you and find out for myself what is going on, and along the way I wish to see this cavern full of imperiled souls to the Jutwood Elves.”

Spark nodded gravely. “That’s pretty much why we are going to Niarg ourselves. We need to find out if the dragon clan should go through with its exodus to the Black Desert. Though, as far as I know, our only hope still remains tied to the two newborn babes.”

“What two newborn babes?”

“Oh. You wouldn’t know. Lukus and Soraya’s two. They had twins.”

“Ah yes. That would make them like the first wizard. But that also means a terribly long time for the world to wait. Let’s hope we survive until they’re grown.”

Spark shrank with a sigh. “What other choice have we?”

Chapter 43

Spitemorta jerked awake and sat up before she even remembered that she was a troll. She was rolling her head around above her shoulders when she realized that someone was pounding on the door.

“How dare you go flying off, leaving me with all those trolls!” screeched Demonica, flinging the blinding light of the wee hours of morning into the room with a whack of the door against the inside wall. “I ought 'o just plain get rid of you!” She stepped in with a livid face, chest heaving.

“My,” whispered Spitemorta with a wince, as she rolled to the edge of the bed like a rumpled flannel elephant. “You...ah, need to calm down, I think...” She pulled a fat tongued swallow into her dry throat and dropped her meaty feet to the floor. “Now Grandmother. I guess you must've had quite a time of it, but I can't imagine doing anything other than what I did. I mean...aren't I supposed to be a goddess? Would a goddess do the herding? Or did you fancy they'd have gotten here on their own if you flew back here with me?”

Demonica was thrown off for a moment by her apparent reasonableness.

“You could've at least discussed it before you vanished!”

“Yea? Well I thought about that one, but wouldn't making plans in front of the trolls would look un-goddess like and make you furious? There was nothing for it but to come straight back. If you needed to take charge of everything, you should've been goddess instead of me.”

Demonica wheeled and stormed out.

“That went well,” said Spitemorta. “Just woke up and stepped right into it. Feels quite good.” She yawned, stretched, slapped her thighs and rose quickly to don her goddess robe of polar bear and ermine furs before going topside into the light of dawn to view her trollish faithful.

She was stunned by what she saw. Demonica had indeed been busy. Trolls crowded to overflowing each of the seven ships of the flotilla. Every beetle-browed pair of eyes was aimed right at her from between cupped hands in the growing light, as she stepped onto the deck. When she raised her arms, all that could be heard in the awed silence were the cries of terns, the lapping of calm water and the languid creaking of rigging.

“I, Fnadi-yaphn welcome you my brave people!” she boomed, as her voice echoed on the cliffs of the bay. “On these boats in the water, you shall go to a new land of plenty to eat! Make yourselves comfortable and know that my winged servant, Demonica, will stay with you until you are eating your fill of Elf flesh! Ntadu va nyr-nifn gnyr-jan ntu afa-joy nyr-fi foro!”

A thundering roar of guttural cheers erupted from the ships as the trolls began stamping the decks. Spitemorta smiled and waved to her multitude. She glanced through the rigging to see Demonica glaring at her. She turned back to her trolls with a shrug and basked in their pounding adoration as she daydreamed of her victorious defeat of Niarg and her destruction of Elves and the dragons.

Spark, Lladdwr and Mary astride Ceidwad walked out of the darkness of the Chokewoods onto the rolling grassy downs of Cyclopsia under a light evening sky,

leading a procession of enchanted creatures, as Laora swooped down with Edward to join them on the ground.

“You two have stayed aloft a long time since the last smallies,” said Spark, pausing to adjust the position of the claymore strapped to his back.

“That's because we kept looking out over the downs from the woods to see what we could see,” said Laora. “I'm getting awful tired, though.”

“Well, what did you see?”

“Oh, just grass and hills like this,” said Edward.

“Well, did you see any low place with trees? It's clear, so it's going to be cold and we'll want fires, but I doubt if we really want to stay near the Chokewoods for fuel.”

“I think maybe, 'way off...” said Edward.

“Yea,” said Laora, I know there was. But it is 'way off.”

“Let's just wait here until everyone catches up,” said Spark, as he paused for a moment before sitting down with a plump. “Tors is coming out now.”

“Oh, I see Kast,” said Mary on Ceidwad, “so that must be about everyone... Oh!”

“Voof!” boomed Ceidwad, bolting away toward the woods, nearly losing her.

“Voomph!” added Lladdwr as he wheeled and followed.

“What on earth?” cried Spark.

“There's another diatryma!” shouted Laora.

“I think that's Arwr!” cried Edward. “Let's go see!” Laora was already running.

Edward sprinted to her side, hopped on and at once they were airborne.

Ceidwad and Laddwr flashed the red patches in their wings as they ran below. The diatryma coming toward them did the same.

“It is Arwr!” cried Edward with a whoop.

With a couple more wing flashes apiece, Ceidwad, Lladdwr and Arwr finally drew to a halt before one another and began taking dozens of deep and solemn bows. At last the diatrymas sat together preening each other beside Mary, Spark, Tors, Edward and Laora as the procession of the enchanted creatures swarmed all about and sat.

“Why do you three keep stopping and bowing your heads at each other, Ceidwad?” said Laora as she came and sat beside her.

“This is very emotional for us, sweetheart,” said Ciedwad. “Arwr is our son and we had become convinced that the smallies had eaten him.”

“But why...?”

“We revere certain emotions too deeply for words. At least we don't say them, we gesture them. I should think that each bow would be roughly equivalent to your saying: 'I love you beyond words,' combined with, 'you are irreplaceable to me.'”

“Why on earth didn't you say something to me, Ceidwad?” said Mary, reaching over to smooth her feathers.

“Why should we? Had we said something, he would already have been eaten, and then you would be sad, and we still couldn't bring him back.”

Mary scooted over close and hugged her.

“Pardon me for disturbing things,” said Spark, sitting upright. “but that sun's going down. We're going to need fires. Are we to attempt to go to someplace 'way up ahead to where there might be trees or brush, or do we make fires within sight of the Chokewoods?”

“Why not here?” said Kast.

“Do you reckon smallies ever get out here?” said Spark.

“Hard to say,” said Tors, “but we can keep watch. We'd have to anyway.”

And with that it was decided to move half way to the woods and then have everyone who could fetch wood from the edge of the trees. At last they made a ring of twelve small fires.

Spark sat near one of the fires next to Tors and stared back into the brooding tangle of woods. He shuddered as he thought of how the day had been. “Wheoo,” he murmured. “Endless, endless close calls. Well, we're out of this peril.”

“Yes, this particular peril,” said Mary, huddled with Ceidwad, Lladdwr and Arwr next to the nearby fire.

“Ssay Torss,” said Shot 'n' Stop from Tors's bag, “thiss ssack iss comfy but it'ss chilly. I'm getting sstiff. Could you be a pal and sset me between Sceidwad and Lladdwr? You've got a marvelouss flame, busster, but they're alwaysss sso verry toasty.”

Spark looked at poor little Laora, already sleeping soundly, holding fast to Edward's hand. He pulled out a blanket and spread it over the two of them. “She had to fly more often than walk,” he thought, “and she's not used to spending that amount of time in the air, particularly with Edward. Every time I thought about sending them home, there came another swarm.”

Mary caught his eye. “Good thing we're spending the night here so Laora can regain her strength, aye?” she said, as though she could read his mind. Maybe she could. It did seem like it once in a while. He'd have to ask. He lay back, listening to the far flung and scarcely chirping crickets and the wind in the grass and in the fire, as he studied the Big Dragon and the Little Dragon by the North Star. “Now what do they call those in

Niarg? Ploughs? Dippers?” He gave a cavernous yawn. Within moments, only the diatrymas remained calmly, stolidly on watch.

Larks tinkled far overhead. Spark caught the sun in his eye with a wince as he noticed frost all up and down the fuzz on his blanket. When a soaring hawk sailed into view overhead, he sat up with a lunge, amazed that he had slept so long. He was equally amazed that, except for Mary, he was the only one awake.

“Good morning, Spark,” she said quietly as she straightened the quilt across her legs.

“Have you been on watch long?” he said with a nod, as he squatted beside her.

“Only since there was a glow in the east. I actually slept all night. The poor diatrymas sat up all night so the rest of us could have a good sleep. I'm grateful of course, but I worry about them.”

“They've always demanded far more of themselves than of anyone else,” he said, stretching with an eye watering yawn.

A red and white striped walking stick scuttled out of Tors's bag onto Shot 'n' Stop's head. “You sscurilouss sscampering nuissansce, Sstripess,” said Shot 'n' Stop thickly. “Here I can sscarscely move yet and you're blithely sscratching and sstamping in my fasce with your offenssive sspidery legsses. I'd ssneeze you to Kingdom Come, but sslow motion ssort of underminess everything.”

Mary looked at Stripes and smiled, remembering flicking him onto Fuzz's ear those years ago. Presently Edward and Laora appeared at Spark's side like a pair of little phantoms, waiting for hugs. Tors and Kast sat up at nearly the same time as the whole

camp began stirring. Within an hour everyone was up and fed, ready to be on his way. It was bright and still, quite warm for winter.

Spark took one last look at the Chokewoods before leading the procession off to the Valley of Illusions and the Cyclops Plateaus. "Especially since you're helping me lead, you two need to know that you might see anything in the Valley of Illusions, from ordinary things to crazy things and even terribly scary things, but most of the scary stuff is no more real than your dreams," he said, as Laora and Edward came scampering alongside.

"But I thought some dreams were true visions, Papa," said Laora, taking his hand and squeezing it.

"Well, occasionally they are and once in a while something frightening in the Valley of Illusions turns out to be real," said Spark. "You've got to be careful in a couple of ways, I'd say. You need to remember not to be frightened and you need to be wary in case something scary doesn't go away."

"You just mean that we'll probably see lots 'o things that aren't real," she said, swinging his arm as she skipped along.

"Exactly, but remember I've never been there."

"Where do the unreal things come from?" said Edward.

"I have no idea. I'm not sure anyone has. Mary might."

"Well Mary, did you hear that?" said Edward, speaking out.

"What?" she said, picking her way between tussocks of grass. "Are you asking if I know what causes the illusions?"

"Yeap."

"Spark knows every bit as much as I do on that one," she said. "Nobody knows what causes them. All that's known is that the valley is enchanted. When it was made that way or by whom remains a mystery. People do know what it's like to go through there. It seems to some that the things a person is thinking about have something to do with what he sees, though that doesn't explain why several people might see the same thing at once."

"I know," said Edward. "Maybe the magic in the valley is an answer to the person whose thoughts are the strongest at that time."

"You know Edward," said Mary, as she traded wide eyed looks with Spark, "you just might have figured out something."

"Maybe. Maybe not," he said with a shrug.

The procession shuffled along in silence for a good while as the sun climbed overhead and the downs became more hilly. Eventually the path meandered between a pair of especially prominent hills, the beginnings of two great ridges. The party traipsed on, wending between them, eyeing the heights on either side, but not saying much.

A fog began to gather as the sun faded in a murky haze. As the fog thickened, Myrtlebell, dressed in a ghostly white gown, stepped into the path before them.

"Momma?" croaked Edward. "Is that really you? I thought you were dead!" He bolted forth, arms outstretched as she kneeled to scoop him into her embrace.

"Edward!" cried Laora, leaping into the air.

"Momma!" cried Edward as he threw his arms around Myrtlebell, who collapsed and tumbled to the ground in a clatter of bones as her vacant-eyed skull rolled to a stop.

"Momma!" he screamed out in a horror of despair, as her bones collapsed into powder.

At once Laora was on the ground, holding and rocking him as he wailed and shook with sobs, calling out to Myrtlebell over and over.

Spark and Mary were there at once. Mary put her arms around the pair of them and held on while Edward slowly calmed to sniffles and shuddering sighs.

“Let Arwr bear the pair of them,” said Ceidwad quietly as she carefully came and began delicately preening at Edward's hair.

“Damned Valley of Losin's!” said Edward, speaking out with a shudder that grew to a furious shout. “I'll not let you get away with that! You're rotten, rotten, rotten! An' we're going to march right through you! You hear?”

Arwr knelt and soon Edward and Laora were fast asleep on his back.

“Sstrong young man,” said Shot 'n' Stop, as he slithered alongside Spark. He had swallowed a fair sized chunk of sukere in the bottom of Tors's bag and now felt up to travel on the ground. “And that wass a rotten trick to play on him. What happened to hiss mother, anyway?”

“Spitemorta got her with the Great Staff.”

“The younger Ugleeuh?”

“That's right. She blasted her head off. The poor little fellow's an orphan. And you know? It was also Spitemorta who murdered his father before he was born.”

“Thiss young Ugleeuh ssoundss worsse than the old one.”

“Oh, I do believe she is.”

“Then, I'm verry ssorry that I didn't get her sstrangled. I'll make scertain I get her nexst time.”

Suddenly they were startled by Mary's shriek of alarm at the sight of Ugleeuh taking diving passes at them on her broom.

“I thought you strangled her, Shot 'n' Stop!” hollered Kast.

“Thiss iss another apparistion, Kasst,” hissed Shot 'n' Stop, as Ugleeuh swooped by, just overhead.

“And you're undeniably certain that she's dead?”

“Absolutely. And sso iss the apparistion, kiddo,” said Shot 'n' Stop as Ugleeuh winked out in the midst of a pass.

Suddenly everyone looked up at the pounding of a huge galloping dragon, hurtling down the grassy slope of the nearby ridge, headed right for the rocky outcrop directly above them. With a chorus of screams and squeals everyone scattered.

“Razorback!” cried Tors as he turned tail and fled, leaving Kast standing paralyzed at the sight of the hideous brute bearing down on him. At the top of the outcrop, the huge dragon leaped. Kast stumbled and rolled, as the dragon hit the ground on the far side of him and vanished with a thundering boom. Kast tried to stand at once, but his legs gave way, giving him another tumble.

“Are you all right?” cried Tors, running up to him with Spark.

“I guess so,” he said between gasps, “if I can keep my heart from jumping out of my throat and running away. That was a vision with clout. I wish these things were a little more nightmare-like and less real.”

“You know what's really strange about that?” said Tors. “This big rock that Razorback knocked loose to come all the way down hill is real.”

“Well, I'm glad he didn't land on me then, even if he did disappear into thin air.” said Kast, as he peered at the ridge while finally managing to get to his feet. “Look 'way

yonder. Who do you suppose that is?"

"That's strange," said Spark, as he studied a man in rags, struggling to roll a huge rock up the slope. "He's looks like he's a good furlong farther away than where we first saw Razorback, out in plain sight, yet this is the first time I've noticed him."

"You notice where we are," said Tors.

"Yea, but an illusion so far away," said Kast. "Why on earth would he be up there trying to roll a stone uphill?"

"We're headed past the bottom of the slope where he is," said Spark, "why don't we all just start walking again and see what we see as we go by?"

It wasn't long until everyone was nearly below the man with the stone. Suddenly near the top of the ridge, the man lost control of the big rock and it came bounding down the slope, clean to the bottom. Everyone gathered near the rock and waited as the man in rags loped and scrambled downhill.

"Well, it's a real rock, all right," said Tors, as he picked up a small stone and pecked on it.

Presently the man in rags came jogging up. "Ah! My damned rock," he said, otherwise ignoring everyone as he came around behind it and prepared to put his shoulder to it. "Again and again and again."

"What are you doing, kind sir?" said Tors.

"Why I'm getting ready to roll this rock up to the top," said the man, heaving a huge sigh. "It's my job. The only problem is that each time I'm right near the top, it gets away from me and I have to come clear down and start all over again. You can't imagine how weary I am."

"Pardon me sir," said Tors, "I don't mean to sound at all impertinent, but could you please tell me: are you real or are you an illusion?"

"Oh, I'm quite real. It's only my goal that's an illusion."

The procession stood in stunned silence, watching the man start the laborious business of rolling his rock uphill once again.

After a time, Tors broke the silence. "How much further do you reckon we have to go to get out of here?" he said.

"I've no idea at all," said Spark. "I've always gone around each time. Mary might know."

Mary looked up then studied the lay of the land for a moment. "I'd say we should be fairly well out of the illusions in anywhere from half a league to ten leagues..."

"What?" said Tors, "Am I hearing you right?"

"Well, what I mean is there's no way to know," she said, "I know that we're going the right way, but the illusions interfere so much that one simply can't know how long it takes."

"You mean it could take days and days?"

"No, strange as it sounds, I stand by what I just said. But anyway, the valley simply runs on for a piece and then we come out on the Cyclops Plateaus."

"Good," said Kast. "Maybe if we're lucky we won't have endure more than another illusion or two."

"And," said Spark, "if I'm not mistaken, here it comes."

Everyone looked ahead to where the path dropped out of sight beyond a high place in the valley floor, where woods and meadows began. They could hear galloping hooves

and see dust rising into the light breeze. Presently, a one-eyed boy riding a young centaur came up over the rise and halted a few rods in front of them, conspicuously frightened.

“Well that's a switch,” said Spark. “They don't know whether we're an illusion or not. Fates! They're going 'o run off if we don't do something.”

“I will,” cried Laora, as she sprang into the air without asking. She flew over them, causing the centaur to rear, and landed in the path just beyond them. “Hello,” she said politely as she began walking toward them. “Please don't be afraid and run away. My name's Laora and I want to be friends.”

“But you're a dragon!” cried the young centaur “And everyone knows that dragons eat Cyclopes and centaurs.”

“We do not,” she said with a frown. “Who's the everyone who told you that lie?”

“I don't know,” he said, casting an uncertain glance at the Cyclops astride his back. “It's just what everyone says.”

“Well, it's ignorant and it's a big, fat lie!” she said angrily. “We never eat intelligent beings.”

By now the procession had eased up close and were gathering around the Cyclops and the centaur.

“I'm Mary the White,” said Mary with a warm smile. “These are my friends and I assure you, not one of them means you harm.”

“I'm Spike,” said the centaur, before giving his head a toss at the boy on his back, and this is Ownlee. We aren't supposed to play in the Valley of Illusions. We thought you were illusions, but...” he gave a big eyed shudder as he looked at Spark, Tors, Kast and Shot 'n' Stop.

“We'd never harm you, I promise,” said Mary with all the kindness of a sunny May day. “Surely you realize that you seem right strange to us? You frightened us at first, too.”

“I heard that exact thing from some two eyed people once before,” said Ownlee with a laugh. “They were a brother and sister from Niarg and I was real little and I was where I wasn't supposed to be then, too.”

“That's quite a coincidence. The dragons and I are on our way to Niarg.”

“I guess that's a two eyed place.”

“Well, do you remember who this brother and sister were, Ownlee?”

“Oh, I'd never forget them. But I guess they forgot me, 'cause they promised to come back and see me, but they never did...”

“But do you remember their names?”

“Rose and Lukus.”

Everyone went wide eyed at this. “You know Rose and Lukus?” said Spark.

Ownlee nodded. “They rescued me from a cave and returned me to my parents,” he said. “So you know them, too?”

“We know them well,” said Spark. “They're good friends to all of us, and I can't imagine that they've really forgotten you.”

“Well then, Spike and I bid you welcome to the Cyclops Plateaus,” he said, doffing his hat. Spike then followed suit with a polite nod.

“Thank you,” said Spark, but we're still in the Valley of Illusions, aren't we?”

“See that table topped hill right yonder?”

“Yes...'way yonder...”

“That's the beginning of the plateaus and the beginning of the south eighteen acres of our place. We farm.”

“I say Spike,” said, Tors. “You keep looking us dragons over as though something disturbs you. Is there a problem, lad?”

“Oh, my,” said Spike, blushing at once. “I'm very sorry. I mean, I'm right curious, sir. I've heard all sorts of stories about dragons, but you all are the very first which I've ever met. So may I ask, begging your pardon of course, why has the little girl dragon wings and feathers, while you and the other two adults do not? I thought all dragons were able to fly.”

“You've been right all along,” said Tors with a huge sigh. “All dragons do have the ability to fly, unless they've been deformed by an evil wizard, as was our entire clan except for my nieces and nephews.”

“Oh,” said Spike, blushing even more scarlet than before. “I'm sorry.”

“Well,” said Ownlee, “we're going to be in big trouble if we don't get back on top, so please, won't you all follow along for a visit? I'm quite certain Mater and Pater and my little brother would love to meet all of you and hear news of Rose and Lukus. Actually they'd be very disappointed if they didn't get to.”

“Well then,” said Spark. “I believe everyone's ready.”

“Yahoo!” cried Ownlee, flushing a vast flock of passenger pigeons from the trees round about. “Follow us!” And with that, Spike wheeled 'round and pranced forth, leading the enchanted procession out of the Valley of Illusions.

Chapter 44

Each troll morning (as Demonica and Spitemorta began calling nightfall), Spitemorta would fly from ship to ship and address the trolls who would all have just awakened by this time.

“Phnyr-fn-dyrney!” roared Spitemorta, as she thrust her fist at the starless sky.

Hoots, guttural cheers and stamping broke out on the crowded decks of the *Sea Jewel* to fall silent at once as she raised her arms. These trolls were especially exuberant, since they had the privilege of sharing the particular ship of their exalted goddess.

“When the moon is full again, we will reach the shores of Gnyr-jan ntu Afajoy!” she rumbled. “And we will indeed be in the land of Plenty to Eat...!”

Cheers erupted.

Again she raised her arms. “Gnyr-jan ntu Afajoy is the land of the very Elves who shamed your ancestors!

There you shall set upon them with the stealth which makes you proud and again you will joyously feast on Elf flesh...!”

The trolls went wild, cheering, stamping and dancing about.

Spitemorta had to wait for some time for them to calm down enough for her to continue. As she was waiting, she glanced across the deck at Demonica, who glared back at her with an insistent nod. “Yes, yes, Grandmother,” she muttered with a sullen sigh as she looked away. “There's no need, but I will, just to shut you up about it.”

The trolls had finally quieted enough to fall silent when Spitemorta raised her arms. “I must warn you that there is a possibility that we will have to deal with a small threat...”

A rumble of alarm coursed through the multitude, but she raised her arms commandingly and silenced it. “Fear not Phnyr-fn-dyrney! It would be a small threat, if you have it at all. If you have to bother with it, it will trouble you no more.

“In the north of Plenty to Eat live weakling Humans who are allies of the Elves. They may come to protect the Elves when you begin to hunt them. As goddess, I amuse myself in my leisure by being queen to Humans who live south of the Elves. If the northern Humans move to protect the Elves, I will send forth my southern army. They should manage everything, but if they do not, you will need to help them clean up the northern mess. Then you will be free to feast on Elves forever...”

The trolls thundered with cheers as they held out worshipful arms to her.

“Now, what's the matter with her?” she said as looked across at Demonica. “Can't she take all of this adoration of me? Well, she'll just have to get used to it. The Humans of Loxmere-Goll are on the verge of doing this, too.”

After a time she held up her arms. “I've had a feast prepared for you, Phnyr-fn-dyrney. The cooks have spared no pains to prepare a feast of roasted hogs to remind you of Elf flesh. Go! Eat! Enjoy! I will speak with you again, soon.”

And with that, she mounted the Staff with Demonica and flew to the next ship.

After spending the night in a pair of Cyclops barns with Ownlee and Spike, the procession of enchanted creatures found themselves wending their way out of the Cyclops Plateaus into the gorgeous broad valley which lay between the plateaus and Bratin Brute. It was overcast but still and quite mild for a winter day.

“Right yonder lies the border, according to what the Cyclopes were saying, Spark,” said Tors, pointing to the carpet of forest at the far end of the valley.

“Must be...”

“Well, what about King Theran? He's Edward's grandfather, right?”

“Yea...?” said Spark, seeing that more was coming.

“Do you reckon he knows anything about Myrtlebell's death? In fact, do you suppose he even knows anything about Edward? What if he does? I mean, what if he does and tries to make Edward stay there or something?”

Mary caught this and angled her way over at once to walk alongside them.

Spark gave a whistle and stared off into the distance. “Boy! You know, we just might be right in the middle of a ticklish situation,” he said. “And to begin with, this hit me completely off guard. King Edmond's dead, Myrtlebell's dead and Edward's an orphan, and beyond that I never gave it a single thought. It never occurred to me to figure back a generation. Good grief! Does that make him the direct heir to the throne of Bratin Brute as well as second in line to Loxmere's?”

“You figured it out pretty quick, seems to me,” said Mary.

“Whew!” said Spark, running his hand over his head. “For a shortcut to the Jutwoods, this sounds like a lot of complications, dear brother.”

“Well let me add mine, if you don't mind,” said Mary with an ironic chuckle.

“By all means,” said Spark. “We need all the help we can get.”

“Well...” she said, with a careful step between a couple of thistles she had not seen, “I think Edward would be in serious danger just now if he ends up in the care of King Theran. I'm not saying he's dangerous. He might not be, but who knows? However, with Spitemorta and Demonica running around with both the Staff and the Heart, Edward should not be out in the open. Myrtlebell made it quite plain to me that Spitemorta was determined to see him dead, as if his mere existence somehow threatened her husband's claim to the throne of Loxmere, which of course, it does not. Now, think about Myrtlebell fleeing to the Chokewoods, rather than seeking asylum in Bratin Brute with her father. If she chose the Chokewoods, I'd say that made Bratin Brute clearly unsafe. So I don't know what that says about King Theran, but at least Myrtlebell didn't think much of the haven he would have provided her. Therefore, if we're going to see to Edward's safety, we must assume that Bratin Brute is altogether dangerous for him.” With this, they found themselves standing, looking at each other.

“Well, that all makes sense to me,” said Spark. “I see no other choice but to keep Edward's relationship to Theran a secret. I say that we merely allow anyone who sees us to assume that he's your son or nephew, Mary. When we get to Niarg we can tell Rose and Fuzz and let them decide what they want to do about it, though I expect they'll agree with what we've done. As long as Spitemorta and Demonica are on the rampage, Edward's in danger. And,” he sighed, “so is Laora, since they've bonded.”

Mary and Tors had just agreed with this when they began to make out a wall and gates through the trees in the distance.

“Well that's Bratin Brute,” said Spark, as he studied the sight from under the flat of his hand. “But I was under the impression that they always had their gates open.”

“This bodes ill,” said Ceidwad, as Lladwr nodded in solemn agreement.

“Undoubtedly,” said Spark, “but what do you suppose it means?”

“It ssimply meanss they're afraid of ssomebody,” said Shot 'n' Stop from atop Tors's

bag.

“It could mean a number of things,” said Mary. “There's nothing for it but to go on and find out, unless you all would like to go back and try to cross Goll instead.”

“It's a good league yet,” said Spark, “and another league's just that much closer to where we're going, so let's go.”

“Edward and I could fly ahead and ask,” said Laora, as she bounced to catch up.

“You'll walk right along with the rest of us,” said Spark with a look of alarm. “And it's jolly good you asked this time, instead of flying off the way you did when we met Spike and Ownlee! You've no idea what kind of trouble you'd find yourselves in, up there.”

The entire procession fell silent as they resumed making their way to the gate. All that could be heard for some time was the scuffling of feet and the creak and jingle of packs and baggage. Just ahead, a parliament of crows rose in a flurry of caws from the crown of a naked oak and made for distant places.

“Boy, they sure don't have much traffic into Cyclopsia,” said Tors.

“How do you know?” said Kast.

“Well, we're close enough to the gate that I'm starting to see people up on the wall, and yet this road we're on, if you want to call it that, is nothin' beyond three little ol' paths, almost too narrow to walk in, for one thing. And then, we've not met a soul.”

“Aren't very many people want to go through the Valley of Illusions, and that just leaves the produce going into Bratin Brute from a handful of Cyclops farms.”

“So what are they afraid of, wagon loads o' 'taters?”

“Yea. That would be nice. 'Course you never know about 'taters from foreign places.”

“Why would that matter?”

“Well, everyone of 'em's got eyes.”

Now they could clearly see that the people on the massive stone wall were guards, slowly ambling along the embrasures of the parapets.

“It looks like they've been adding to the wall,” said Spark. “You've been through here, Mary. Have they?”

“I'd say they have. I'd also say that they've spotted us,” she said, nodding at the guards who were each coming to a halt in front of an embrasure.

After going on for less than a furlong, they halted a respectful and cautious distance from the gate and gazed up at the guards on the wall. “Why, they're all fitted out in armor to shame a lobster,” said Kast.

“And I guess you see that each one of 'em has a crossbow aimed at us!” said Tors, as Spark glanced about nervously, taking a quick account of everyone with him.

“State your name and your business!” bellowed a guard over the top of his leveled crossbow.

Mary stepped forward. “Stay put!” she whispered sharply to Spark. “I am Mary the White!” she hollered. She gave a curtsy before continuing: “We are but poor and weary travelers, entertainers my good sir, on our way to the Jut of Niarg at the invitation of King Neron, himself.”

“Really?” cried the guard as he removed the bolt from his crossbow and set it down. “And just what would the Elven king be wanting with such a group of oddities?” He threw back his bristly jowls with a hearty guffaw as he flung a riotous look over first one

shoulder then the other.

Mary curtsied again pretending she had not noticed the man's rudeness. "Odd we be, sir, but that's quite by design. Curiosity is entertainment! You see, this is my troupe. We present ourselves to the public as Mary's Menagerie. People travel far and wide for the chance to see us. We have performed before countless crowned heads. And, we have been sought out and invited by King Neron himself to entertain and to amaze his host at Oilean Gairdin."

"Well my dear," said the guard as he leant out the embrasure, "We require verification. And besides, my men are owed a bit of entertainment from time to time in return for their civic sacrifice."

"Our eloquent guard wants to see some sort of stunts or jugglery," said Mary in hushed tones as she rolled her eyes with a grimace of urgency.

At once Laora and Edward rushed forth and bowed together. Edward had leadbeater cockatoos perched all over his shoulders with Stripes the peppermint walking stick clinging to his head. Laora had Shot 'n' Stop coiled around her neck and three talking raccoons on her back. At a nod and a wave from the guard, some of the soldiers came down from the wall with him.

"Ladies and gentlemen! I am Stripes, the Amazing, Insectile Master Fool!" cried Stripes in his piercing tinny voice, the moment he saw them gathered 'round. "Have any of you heard the one about the beetle and the rat? Ah! I see by your blank looks that you have not! Good! You see there was once an old beetle with two missing legs. One day he decided..."

Suddenly, a leadbeater dropped to the ground with a feathery plop.

Stripes thrust his first pair of legs upon his hips and glared furiously at the leadbeater, who was rolling about with hysterical laughter. "Cedwick!" he screeched. "You idiot! That's not the punchline! Be silent!"

Cedwick clapped shut his beak and stood up with a sheepish shake of his feathers and went to stand by Laora.

Stripes cast a look of long-suffering to the sky and once again began telling his joke. He got no further than before, when another leadbeater collapsed with laughter and hit the ground with a plop. "You're supposed to do that at the punch line, you idiot!" he shrieked as he hysterically jumped up and down. He dropped to the ground screaming unintelligibly as he ran at the leadbeaters, heaving pebbles.

The soldiers were quite won over and laughed and slapped their knees. "Well now," said the guard. "That's a funny little skit. If the rest of you ones do as well, I expect King Neron will enjoy your performance. So now, my men will escort you to the palace and you may beg King Theran's leave to travel through our land."

"Escort?" said everyone in wide-eyed murmurs, as the gates were opened to allow their passage. Once inside they waited while twelve mounted soldiers arrived to see them on their way.

They set off, speaking to one another only in hushed tones as they plodded along through rolling meadows and scattered woods. After marching well into the afternoon, they came to another stone wall and gate. This one had a broad moat in front of it, making it necessary to cross a drawbridge before going through. On the other side was a crowded village, with hogs, children and chickens scampering through the slop heaved from the open windows. The villagers dropped what they were doing to stare at them in

astonishment as they passed.

Suddenly, there was yet another moat and towering stone wall. Here they had to wait for the drawbridge to be lowered and the portcullis to be raised before they could pass through to the inner courtyard. As they filed through, gawking at the towering castle proper, a boss-eyed old woman with a bald head passed by, cackling at the sight of them.

Laora squinted and stuck out her tongue. A gaggle of children scampered by and stopped cold to stare wide eyed. When she grinned and winked at them, they stumbled over each other in a mad scramble to flee. She gave Edward a smug nod in their wake as he grinned and rolled his eyes.

They did indeed make a sight, escorted by the soldiers: Mary with her strangely beautiful purply auburn hair, leading Laora and Edward, still covered with leadbeaters and 'coons, flurries of plump yellow and plaid butterflies (in winter, no less!), peppermint striped walking sticks, a family of epicurean anteaters and scores of strangely enchanted creatures, including talking wood rabbits and skunks with pink stripes, a palsied cow with brown, red, blue and yellow teats and of course Spark, Kast and Tors with Shot 'n' Stop hanging out of his bag, followed by Ceidwad, Lladdwr and Arwr, looking dignified and fierce, the likes of which no one on the castle grounds had ever even heard of in the tallest of tall tales.

At last they were shown into the castle proper by a half dozen dour faced men of the Royal Guard and taken directly to the throne room where King Theran sat upon a jeweled and velvet upholstered chair, drumming his fingers. They knelt before him in hushed rows down the brilliant red carpet runner which mounted the dais and ran to the foot of his throne. Laora giggled. Edward shushed her and patted her silky feathers. He studied each one of them with careful but resigned interest. His face was haggard and drawn as though his days had been taken up with suffering. Indeed he bore the face of defeat.

“Did Myrtlebell ever tell Edward of his grandfather?” thought Mary as she searched Spark's anxious face from the side, while fighting down the churning butterflies in her stomach. “We certainly never managed to pull aside Edward before we ended up here in front of Theran.” She glanced back at Edward. “Oh merciful fates!” she thought as her heart began pounding at the sight of the rapt look on his face as he watched the King, “He knows! And what will his grandfather do with a party who comes before him under false pretenses, trying to keep his only living relative and heir to the throne hidden from him?”

Laora nudged Edward. “What?” he whispered.

“Be careful,” she hissed. “Remember what you told me.”

Edward scowled as he nodded.

“I take it you are the head of this exhibit?” said the king as his gaze fell upon Mary.

“Yes, your Majesty,” she said with a nod and a clear voice in spite of her fear. “We are Mary's Menagerie. Our enterprise is amusing others. Some of us perform, others of us are for marveling at, as you might say. As I told your guards, we only wish to pass through your borders on our way to the Jut of Niarg where we've been engaged by King Neron. We have no political inclinations, whatsoever. We bear scant arms, as you can see sire, and we mean no harm to anyone. I can see that in these troubled times, all strangers pose a threat until proven harmless. I do pray you deem us harmless indeed.”

“There are rumors about, implicating dragons and Elves in heinous misdeeds. Are you aware of these?” said Theran, looking askance at Tors, Kast and Spark.

“I am sire, though I've not been able to take them seriously. I'm also aware that at

least until quite recently, Bratin Brute was Niarg's ally, and thus an ally to Elves and dragons, also. Has that changed, then?"

King Theran deflated some, appearing even more haggard. "No, it has not," he said. "though, I don't doubt that the alliance will see us in our graves before all is said and done."

Mary raised her eyes at this and glanced at Spark.

"You have my permission to pass through to the Jutwoods," said Theran wearily.

"Be gone with ye before I change my mind."

There was no thanking him, for the guards were already firmly ushering everyone out into the courtyard where they were given gruff orders to be gone before sunset.

"We will comply sir, do rest assured," said Spark as the last guard turned to leave. "Please express our gratitude to your king." His stomach rumbled. "Let's see if there's a way for us to have a sup or a bite to eat on the way out," he said, looking about at his companions.

"Hawkers and peddlers," said Mary. "I remember seeing them with meat pies and loaves of bread just inside the outer curtain. With it neigh supper time, I'll bet we'll find some."

"Let's go," said Spark, drooling at the aromas beginning to waft from windows.

Soon they were on their way with drumsticks and fists full of meat pies, following the road north, heading for the Jutwoods and hopefully, a sanctuary at last for the enchanted creatures of the lost Peppermint.

Chapter 45

“So, the king and queen refused my gift?” said James.

Lance nodded as he adjusted himself in his chair. “However, I'm right certain they were completely sincere about their reason,” he said. “If you think about it, I'd allow you'll see why they'd think that.”

“Yes of course,” said James as he rubbed his tired eyes. “I'm sure they're absolutely right. I should've been thinking. She undoubtedly can see through her globe as well as put visions into it from afar. I just hope I've not put Niarg in any more danger than it's already in. It seems that I just keep making rotten decisions these days, Lance. Sometimes, it seems as if that's all I've done since the fiasco with Rose. Had I married her, I wouldn't have spent all my days paralyzed with the bad luck I've had since marrying Spitemorta.” He stood up and stretched his neck before going to the window to stare out at the skinweler, back once again where Spitemorta had it, on its pedestal in the inner courtyard. “I wish like fire there was something I could do to stop the evil that she and Demonica are brewing up.”

Lance whistled. “What could you possibly do, James?” he said, propping his elbows on his knees. They're both sorceresses, and Demonica in particular is frightening, even if she has been Abaddon's nanny. She has enormous power and influence on the Dark Continent. You don't stand a chance if you try to oppose them. They'll arrange some kind of horrible death for you if you do. And what about your children? Do you want to leave Spitemorta before the new baby comes? Things might change some by that time.”

“Oh yea, who knows?” said James, as he parted the curtains again to stare glumly at the skinweler in the courtyard. “Did you see her latest presentation? She actually showed the Elves plotting with the dragons and Niarg to take over Loxmere-Goll. The Elves, Lance! The most peaceful beings on the continent. And what's worse is that people are swallowing her lies whole, simply because they've seen it on that...that device, down there.” He turned away from the window with a sigh. “It's more tempting than you might imagine to take Abaddon and vanish before she gets back.”

“Oh, I do well imagine. So if you do decide to do that, I'm with you. You know that.”

“Yes, and I'm grateful. Your friendship and loyalty have sustained me more often than you know. And you're right. The new baby. What chance would it have with only Spitemorta to raise it?”

Lance made no reply, following James with his eyes.

“None,” said James. “Absolutely none.”

That evening, James tiptoed into Abaddon's nursery and put a light kiss upon his forehead. Abaddon stirred under his blanket but neither opened his eyes nor changed his breathing. James smiled, assured that he was safe and at peace, in spite of his mother's long absence. He turned and tiptoed back out, gently drawing closed the door.

Abaddon's eyes flew open the moment the door shut. He clambered from his bed and went to the window where he peeped out at the skinweler in the courtyard. “Momma's goin' 'o be very mad at you Daddy, when I tell her what you've been doing while she's been gone,” he said with an eerie red glow in his eyes in the moonlight. “Oh yes. She's

goin' 'o be real mad.”

“Edward,” said Mary, as she fell into step beside Laora and him. “You can't imagine how relieved Spark and I are that you didn't reveal who you were to King

Theran. We think it would have been very dangerous for both you and Laora, but whatever kept you quiet about it?”

Edward turned a startlingly solemn look her way. “Momma told me a long time ago, that when she was expecting me and had to run away from Loxmere to be safe, that she asked King Theran to let her stay in Bratin Brute,” he said, shaking his head. “He said no. He told her that she'd made her bed and had to lie in it. I think that's mean talk for, 'you deserve what you get, since you caused it.' Anyway, Momma said that someday she hoped she could take me to meet him, but she didn't know if it would ever be safe enough for her to do it. And then she said he wasn't very strong and couldn't protect us from anything.”

“That is what that means, Edward. How long ago did she tell you?”

“Oh, a long, long time ago, like maybe not quite a year ago,” he said with a shrug.

“I think he's sorry he didn't let Momma stay with him, don't you Mary? I'll bet he doesn't even know she's dead, either.”

“Oh, I'm sure you are right, but what made you think that?”

“I think King Theran looked all faded out, like somebody who's lost everything that matters. I've felt like that before, Mary, so I think I know what it would look like in an old man.”

“My, Edward,” she said, going wide eyed “I do believe you are the most astute young man I've ever met. But, please try not to grow up too fast.”

“Well, it's pretty easy to know how feelings like that are when you have them,” he said, dropping his gaze to watch his toes as he walked. “But then...” he said, suddenly stepping sideways to throw his arms around Laora's neck, “whenever I feel that way, my best friend in the whole world helps me. I'm very lucky.”

“Indeed, you are,” said Mary as she stopped the pair of them to hug them both.

“Thank you for telling me all of that, Edward. I'm sure it wasn't easy for you.”

“It wasn't, but it made me feel better.”

“I'm glad,” she said, ruffling his hair as she stood up. “And you know what?”

Edward shook his head.

“I feel better too.”

“That's because you're wonderful, Aunt Mary.”

They arrived in the Jutwoods two days later and in Oilean Gairdin the morning of the day after that. The Elves were gracious and most accommodating. Even though Neron was away in Niarg, they enthusiastically devised a permanent preserve for the Peppermint refugees on a generous piece of land. It was an altogether lovely place, but Mary couldn't shake the feeling that it was artificial. The Elves hastened to lay out a small sukere plantation for the refugees, so that it would not require quite so much magic to maintain them. With a steady supply of sukere cana, they would feel more comfortable and could be eased into their new life.

“Of course,” said Neron's cousin, Tristan, “in due time they'll simply have to be weaned off the stuff. It is terribly unhealthy for anyone but dragons, you know, even if they were altered just to eat it.”

A week later, Mary, Spark, Edward and Laora, Tors and Kast bid the Elves and the Peppermint refugees farewell and continued their journey north for Niarg. After four hard days of travel and coping with innumerable werebeasts, a trio of trolls and obnoxious behavior from people in various hamlets, particularly throughout Loxmere where people were either wary or hostile, they came at last to the grounds of Castle Niarg.

Hubba Hubba spotted them as they passed through the orchard. “Hey Spark,” he squawked as he dropped out of an utterly bare apple tree onto Spark's back. “What're you doin' here, you bloated old lizard?”

“Hey, you green seed buzzard. I'm just as warm blooded as you.”

“Really,” said Hubba Hubba as he hopped over to Mary's shoulder to better address Spark. “How've ye been? Ye didn't have any run-ins with the old witches on your way here, did ye?”

“No, but we had trouble with just about everyone else.”

“Really? Sounds interesting. I can't wait for the details.”

Spark nodded. “Same old Hubba Hubba. You still love gossip, don't you?”

“Hey!” cried Hubba Hubba with a wounded tone. “It's my civic duty to get the news. I have nothing to do with gossip.”

“Glad you cleared that up for us. “So how is everyone?”

“You should 'ave been here a couple weeks ago for Fuzz and Rose's wedding. It was quite somethin'.”

“I'm sure it was,” said Spark with a glance at Edward, who was listening carefully.

“So what else is new?”

“Well, Lukus is here with his new family, but they're about ready to go back to the Jutwoods. Yann-Ber still has boils all over, and Razzmorten doesn't have his strength back. I think he's getting the idea that he's lost some of his powers for good, just between you, me and the bed post.”

“Are you serious?” said Spark, looking alarmed. “Did he actually tell you that?”

“Yea, he really sort o' said so, you know, like it was a trivial matter or somethin', like porridge down 'is front, maybe.”

Spark puckered up silently, as though he'd just cut himself and looked at Mary.

“Any bigger news than that?” he said, getting his bearings.

“Maybe. At least there's lots more of it, anyway,” he said as he checked each wing and gave himself a thorough shake. “Well. Since the Wiz is runnin' out of power, maybe it's kindest to let him be the one to fill you ones in, if ye know what I mean.”

“He's never been that vain, Hubba Hubba,” said Spark, looking puckishly askance. “You're just struggling to control your over-active beak.”

“Hey thanks, lizard-lips. Got 'o go warn 'em,” he said, springing into flight. “See ye directly.”

The party traded looks and sighs before resuming their way along the lane into the castle gardens. The late morning sun came out briefly, kindling mutterings of wee whistles from the white crowned sparrows and juncos scratching and fluttering amongst the crisp brown windrow of leaves along the hedge. The sun faded away into the wooly grey morning as Mary, Spark, Edward and Laora, Tors and Kast crunched and scuffled

their way around the hedge to see Lukus and Razzmzrten waiting at the castle.

“Hoy, Spark!” called Lukus. “We didn't expect to see you so soon! What's going on?”

“Something big, Lukus,” said Spark with a greeting nod before he had quite come to a stop, “and we reckoned we'd better come here and find out what it was.” He turned to Razzmzrten. “How are you?”

“I'm still standin' without crutches.”

“Well I'm afraid your message globe and no further news has the clan fairly roiled up. And from the reception we've had from folks all the way here, I'd say our fears are right well placed.”

“Bad to worse,” said Lukus with a nod and no trace of a smile. “And overnight, it seems. But please, please. We're delighted that you came. Come right in. There's meat and drink aplenty. After you've recovered from your long walk, we'll have all kinds of time for woes.”

And with that, everyone went inside.

“And that's what we think we know,” said Razzmzrten, busily picking up the steaming pickled cabbage from the cavity of the roast duck on his platter with his brown bread and knife. “War with Loxmere-Goll, plain and simple. It's only a matter of when.”

“Yea...” said Spark with a thoughtful chew. “And you've heard nothing more from James since his retainer tried to give you the odd crystal?”

“No,” said Minuet, shaking her head. “And actually, we'd just as soon it stayed that way. There's just no way to tell if he's telling us the truth, or if he's baiting us for Spitemorta. Either way, it scares us, having anything at all to do with him.”

“You're right, of course,” said Mary. “Even if he's square and true, it would only be a matter of time until Demonica and Spitemorta caught on and things got very ugly.”

“Still,” said Tors as he knitted his brow and swirled his cider, “it seems like it might be useful to have eyes and ears in Goll.”

“We've never before stooped to spying,” said Hebraun as his eyes narrowed, “but the way things are, we're considering it. It's a matter of survival. We just haven't worked out the details.”

“Well then, here it is,” said Spark, following the contours of his platter with his bread. “Our most urgent concern, the very thing that got me sent here by the council is: do you think it would be safe for us to remain at the Dragon Caves?”

Hebraun exchanged a look with Neron, then slowly shook his head. “No, I don't. The caves have been your home for a long time, but they're going to come get you. We have no clue as to why, but they've spent 'way too much time setting you up, not to. There really isn't any escape out of there except the front entrance, is there?”

“Actually there are several other exits,” said Kast, “but you're completely correct if you're saying that we'd be trapped if some big army showed up.”

“Then you have no choice but to get out of there immediately,” said Hebraun with a huge sigh. “Do you have a place to go?”

“We're thinking about the Black Desert,” said Spark. “There's a much larger cave system there, and it would be altogether easier to defend...”

“Demonica and Spitemorta have all of Loxmere-Goll screaming for vengeance,

Spark,” said Hebraun. “I’d get out until all of this has blown over.”

“I guess we were just hoping we were wrong, you know,” said Spark, plumping against the back of his chair with a sigh. “How long do you reckon it will take for things to blow over?”

“If you believe in prophesy, quite a while,” said Lukus.

“And what if I don’t?”

“Then, with things as they are, a damned long while.”

Hubba Hubba flew in through the window and landed on the Razzmorten’s hat, hopped onto his shoulder, flew around Minuet’s head close enough to make her close her eyes, then landed on Lukus’s knee to immediately spring back into flight to land once again on Razzmorten, where he preened and flitted restlessly as he pretended to be interested in the conversation.

“Very well, Hubba Hubba,” said Minuet spearing him with her shrewd brown eyes. “You have our attention, even though our conversation was extremely important. What is it?”

“No,” said Hubba Hubba. “Really. It can wait until y’all ‘ave finished discussing the end of the world as we know it and the eventual reign of evil. Really.”

“All right,” she said, sternly. “Then by all means excuse yourself and leave until we’re finished. Go.”

“Well...” said Hubba Hubba looking crushed, “I reckon I’ll be going then. I’ll just fly on out then and stuff.”

“Oh, Hubba Hubba. What is it? I’m sorry, but you asked for it. This is a grave discussion, and you’re usually a good contributor in such things.”

“Hey. Now you got me feelin’ guilty all over the place about sharing the beauty and excitement in my very life, like my personal joys are too trifling to be worked into the...”

“What is it?”

“Hey, I’m feeling rejected here...”

“Hubba Hubba. We’re all sitting here listening, bird brain,” said Lukus.

“Hey snot, you were pretty worked up when Soraya finished layin’ your clutch of two. Pebbles just got through layin’ her ninth and final egg.”

“That’s marvelous,” said Lukus.

“No kidding,” said Hubba Hubba. Then he suddenly drooped. “But what if they aren’t fledged by the time the witches make their move against Niarg?”

“I know what you mean, my bird. I know just what you mean.”

“I wish you didn’t have to leave so soon,” said Minuet as she hugged Soraya and Lukus as they carefully fit themselves and Ariel and Daniel’s travel baskets into the coach.

“So do we,” said Lukus, “but we’ll be back soon, and you can always come and see us.”

Rose looked on from the side. She knew he was keeping the farewell light, but what else could he say? Minuet knew. Everyone knew. “Cruel how it is,” she thought. “Every one of us can hate something, and yet we all hang our heads and go through it anyway

because none of us have the wits to come up with anything else.” She glanced at Fuzz as he squeezed her hand with a sad look. And before any of them were quite ready the coach pulled away with a jolt. Hebraun took Minuet into his arms.

Fuzz lead Rose back to the castle. “Too many goodbyes,” she thought. “Yesterday it was Edward, Mary and the dragons. Even Taflu flew back to Fuzz' den.” She studied Fuzz and wondered if he regretted returning to Niarg with her. She knew how much he loved that old cave of his. “I 'spose you must miss your den...” she said.

“What ever are you talking about?” he said as he put his arm around her. “I could never be happy there now without you. Is that what you want to know? Someday let's visit there. For now, let's be happy with what we have.”

“Yes. Enjoy it while we have it, I reckon. Everything seems to be passing away.”

“That's morose, dear. Let's just call it a time of upheaval and change.”

“Is there a difference?”

Fuzz shrugged. “I suppose only in point of view, but sometimes that's all you have. Sometimes it's what it takes.”

Chapter 46

“You seem uncertain to me, Captain,” said Spitemorta as she studied Brutus's image, standing in her skinweler, “or do I misread you?”

“I'm not sure that I understand, Majesty,” he said, shifting to the other foot.

“You merely needed to give me a simple yes or no, Captain. So let's try it again. Are your troops ready to engage the enemy or not?”

Brutus swallowed. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he said, snapping to rigid attention.

“Yes what, Captain?” she said, making a face. “Do you mean, 'yes, you finally understand what I'm saying,' or, 'yes, your troops are battle ready?’”

“Yes to both, actually, Your Majesty.”

Spitemorta studied him with a moment's silent contempt. “Then you'll move out with your army at first light, tomorrow,” she said with a resolute nod. “Take them north along the west side of the Loxmere River until you come to the mouth of the Gold River. Divide your troops there. Send half of them up the west bank of the Gold until they are adjacent to Ash Fork. Take the other half and cross the Gold just west of its mouth and go straight across country to just north-east of Ash Fork. Then, the first half should cross the Gold and attack Ash Fork from the south-west, while your second half comes in and attacks from the north-east. Burn it to the ground, Captain. Leave no one alive. Considering its name, that's a most appropriate fate, wouldn't you agree?”

Brutus nodded, but appeared to avoid her eyes.

“If you have a problem with your assignment, I'm sure Captain Boar would be delighted to take over your duties and lead the army to glory.”

“No, your Majesty,” he said, suddenly wide-eyed. “I've had no objection to anything you've requested. I will execute everything you want to the absolute letter.”

“Good. See that you do, but remember one thing, Captain.”

“Anything.”

“I don't make requests, I give orders.”

“Absolutely. It was only intended as a polite reference...”

“Do not forget that I'm your queen and that I require more respect than that.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Now Captain, our main objective in destroying Ash Fork is to send a challenge to King Hebraun that he will respond to himself. He has promised his citizens for years that if Niarg were ever to go to war, he would personally lead them into battle. You must make certain that he is indeed the one who leads the troops which respond to your attack on Ash Fork.

“How?”

“I don't care how. That's your job. Just don't fail to get Hebraun himself to lead his troops to Ash Fork so that you can smash him. And Captain, make certain that you take your skinweler with you and keep it handy at all times. I want to stay in constant touch. I will be bringing a small mercenary flotilla up the Loxmere River to Ash Lake. We'll rendezvous with you in due time.”

“Shall I wait somewhere for you?”

“No. That's one of the reasons for the skinweler. I'll find you when the time is right. Until then, you have your orders.”

“You will not be disappointed, Majesty,” said Brutus as he thumped his chest and took a bow.

“I expect you not to, Captain,” she said as her image quickly faded out. She blew away a stray lock of hair as she set aside the skinweler. How glad she would be to stop having to be a troll. “I can't wait to see Abaddon and tell him that he'll soon have a sibling to play with,” she said with a smile as she rose from her bed and stepped out to rejoin Demonica and to address her trolls once more. “At least it will be Loxmere-Gollians instead of trolls as soon as we vanquish Niarg and the Elves and enslave the dragons.”

Yann-Ber took the chair which was brought for him and sat beside Razzmorten, facing Hebraun and Minuet. He studied the backs of his hands as he waited for a maid to position a foot warmer full of fresh coals from the one of the throne room's fireplaces under Minuet's feet. Rose and Fuzz appeared and quietly took seats nearby. Presently Minuet was settled and looked up with a smile.

“Your Majesties,” said Yann-Ber, “I'm here to announce that I will be sailing for my home in Head in the morning.”

Minuet gasped as she and Hebraun gave looks of surprise. “Razzmorten and I have discussed this at length,” he said, raising his hand, “and he says that the more time that goes by without his powers returning, the less likely they are to return.” He paused at the look of alarm in Minuet's eyes, but quickly continued: “As you well know, unless the good wizard regains his accustomed powers to their former extent, it will remain beyond his ability to remove my curse. In the meantime, I shall merely languish and grow weaker. Indeed it now appears that I must accept the inevitable and make the most of what little time I have left.

“I appreciate everything that you all have done for me, and I especially appreciate the things which you all tried to do for me that were beyond what is possible. The kindness you've given me exceeds any I've experienced in my life. However on my voyage to your fair land, I vowed to see to Demonica's fall before my own, and I can't do that if I remain here, waiting for something that stands a good chance of never happening.”

“We do understand, Yann-Ber,” said Hebraun, sitting forward earnestly, “but, surely you could be persuaded to wait just a bit longer? I'm not at all satisfied that Razzmorten's had enough time back from his journey to catch up on his rest, let alone his powers. After all, he's been up until the wee hours practically every night since his return. And if he were to remove your horrid curse, you'd fare far better, taking on Demonica, wouldn't you?”

“That indeed has been our topic of discussion for some time,” said Yann-Ber with a faint smile. Razzmorten and I finally agreed that if I stay and wait for the return of his powers, I'll probably only waste what time I have left and delude myself with false hope, thereby dying before having any real chance of eliminating her.” Hebraun looked at Razzmorten.

Razzmorten raised his eyebrows and nodded. “If you just think about it, don't you reckon that if I thought there was a fair chance that my powers were coming back, that I'd talk him out of his journey? We've been discussing this since we were at the Dragon Caves. I took a very substantial swat from the Heart, pretty much equivalent to being struck by lightning. It's a miracle that I'm alive at all. And it's equally astounding that I

retain even the smallest shred of magical ability. I've finally accepted my fate, just as Yann-Ber has accepted his. Now, he has a plan to rid the world of Demonica that I'd allow has a fair chance of success, and it's not wise for us to keep him from trying on the very slim chance that my powers will return."

"But, isn't even a very slim chance to have your life back worth something?" said Minuet.

"Rest assured that that is beyond any shadow of a doubt, Your Majesty," but compared with what Demonica could do to the world, what good would it be? You know, I've spent my whole life being safe. If I'm ever to live up to my honor, I'm going to have to get started. Besides, now for the first time in my life, I have friends worth dying for. I truly want for my life to mean something, and if I manage what I'm setting out to do,

Demonica will no longer threaten the world and I'll also have my life back."

Minuet leant back against her great chair with a sigh. "We see your point, actually," she said as she took Hebraun's hand. "Having gotten to know you sir, we're not the least surprised that this would be your decision."

"I thank you for the praise, Your Majesty," said Yann-Ber, bowing his head to her.

"Now you have seriously aggravated my curiosity," said Minuet. "Just how do you plan to get rid of the world's most powerful sorceress in your condition, without any magical ability of your own?"

"I intend to exploit the only weakness of hers which I happen to be aware of that would make her vulnerable."

"Which is...?" said Hebraun.

"Demonica has quite a weakness for handsome young men with money and power," said Yann-Ber. "That's how I got involved with her, though that might be hard to imagine since I've not had any of those since you've known me. You see, when she met me, I was heir to the Dark Empire. I was born into the House of Dark..."

"I'm sorry Yann-Ber, but you've confused me," said Minuet.

"I've been disowned, you see," he said, pausing with a sigh. "I'm Emperor Azenor's eldest son. He cast me out when I married Demonica. That's why I give my mother's house, the House of Penn, if the occasion should ever arise.

"We had no idea!" she said with a gasp.

"Well now, it's hardly appropriate for a destitute man to call attention to his lineage of wealth and power, is it? In fact, I don't recall ever even mentioning House of Penn since I've been here. Oh, maybe I did when I was getting off your ship and was obliged to make an introduction at the Dragon Caves.

"Demonica is a source of both shame and means to the House of Dark, I'm afraid. It has been her arms, ships, minerals and precious metals that have enabled my great-grandfather, grandfather and my father to establish the Dark Empire. There have even been occasions when they have made use of her mercenaries and her strategical acumen. She is shrewdly astute where war and politics are concerned, make no mistake about it. The world would not call it the Dark Continent today if it weren't for her. And over the years, the House of Dark has taken great pains to publicly minimize connections with her. My father in particular has not wanted the world to see that our power and military accomplishments have depended from the beginning upon a fearfully ruthless sorceress with no peerage whatsoever. You can imagine how he reacted to my marrying her.

"To my ever growing shame, I must confess that I truly loved that demon woman

when I defied my family and married her. I knew my father was adamant about all this but I never really thought he'd go so far as to disown me, since we'd been unusually close. He gave me lots of warning. He made himself quite clear, but I was young and wildly in love. In fact, I probably would've married her even if I had expected to be outcast...that is, if she still would have married me. Now that I can see how it all is, I know that she would

have dropped me immediately. Oh, she was certainly lustful, but she has not the slightest idea of the meaning of love, and of course what she was shamelessly after was marrying into the wealth and power of the House of Dark. I was disowned the day after we tied the knot. And from that moment on, I lived as though I were chained to the ankle of the Pitmaster himself.

"Demonica desires above all to rule the Dark Continent," he said as he painfully stood up to shuffle about while he talked. "Marrying into the House of Dark would practically be a decisive final step for her. So. Where I'm going with all of this is that I'm not my father's only son..."

"But Yann-Ber," said Minuet. "What's to prevent your father from disowning another son? Surely he'd not mean more to him than..."

"You're quite right," said Yann-Ber with a deep and studious nod as he took another step forward. "That would undo everything, wouldn't it? But if I begin with

Father, it's possible everything would work. Once he has a thorough grasp of the political situation here in Norz-Meurzouar he'll be reasonable. If there is one thing the great Emperor Azenor does not want it is for Demonica to gain control of the Dark Continent."

"I must've missed something, Yann-Ber," said Hebraun with a scowl, as he shook his head. "I don't see how a marriage between one of your brothers and Demonica will keep her from getting control of your homeland."

"You're quite right, sire. I haven't gotten that far yet. Part of what is behind my father's dismay is a keen awareness that Demonica's share of the power wielded by the House of Dark has grown steadily throughout the three generations we've been dependant on her. He knows that at the rate she's gone, sooner or later she'll have us. He fears the day. So, once he sees how it all is with Demonica, Spitemorta, Heart and Staff, once he sees that this will indeed be where he loses the Empire unless he does something, I'm betting that he'll be right willing to help with my plan.

"Now, you agreed with Tors when he said that it would be wise to have eyes and ears within Castle Goll. My plan allows for that as one possibility..."

"You plan to set up the next heir to the Dark Empire as a spy for Niarg!" said Minuet with a gasp of astonishment.

"Interestingly, I haven't heard my idea put into quite those terms, Your Majesty," said Yann-Ber with a laugh that ruptured a pustule on his face, causing him to wince with the pain. He paused to blot at it with his handkerchief. "Of course my goal beyond all else is to get someone into position to kill the witch outright. But meanwhile, there is still Spitemorta, so we must take into account all possibilities. I plan for my brother's mission to be both spy and assassin, if we have the time. I hate to be selfish, but I do want her dead before my year is up."

"You seem right certain that she'll go along with this proposed union," said Hebraun.

"Oh, she's already tried it herself," said Yann-Ber, putting his handkerchief to his

cheek so he could grin. “The minute I was disinherited after our wedding, she tried to use her wiles on Karl-Veur. That's my brother's name. Her efforts failed of course, but she enjoyed being cruel, even so. When I refused to notice, she told me over and again that she'd always found him far more attractive than me, and had I not been heir at the time, she'd not even have bothered with me.”

“Are you certain she wasn't just saying those awful things to...” said Minuet.

“Oh! Sorry to interrupt, but there are things I'm right certain of here. Firstly, cruelty is in Demonica's every single breath and heartbeat. Secondly, there is nothing that she would stop at to have total control of the Dark Continent, particularly by way of the House of Dark. And thirdly, she most certainly does lust after Karl-Veur.

“So what of Karl-Veur, then?” said Hebraun. “Perhaps he'll have a say in this scheme, even if your father agrees to it.”

“That'll be the hardest part of all, I fear,” said Yann-ber with a sigh. “Karl-Veur is revolted by Demonica, so that part works. He also told me that he thought that she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, but I don't know how that works at all. It's asking quite a bit of anyone to ask them to marry someone and then to turn on them and kill them. And of course he considers spying to be villainy in the same way that you do, sire. However, he's fiercely loyal to the Dark Empire. Particularly if I convince him of her dire threat to the Empire, he'll want to see her dead. Whether he wants to put himself through all this is quite another matter.”

“I'm sure you know what you're saying,” said Minuet, “but if ruling the Dark Continent is already within Demonica's grasp why should she bother marrying your brother?”

“Well, perhaps there is a need, Your Majesty,” said Yann-Ber. “She is a keen manipulator. For all her ruthlessness, she is incredibly restrained and calculating. She likes power, she likes vengeance, but she also likes the shadows. She likes getting her way by manipulating forces already in place, and she always prefers to kill two birds with one stone. Firstly, make no mistake about her fierce desire for Karl-Veur. His shunning her advances only aggravates her desire. She may even vainly enjoy the idea that it still torments me. Who knows? Be this as it may, what we can be absolutely certain of is that she keenly understands politics. She knows that if she slips into the seat of power peacefully, the populace will accept her and even embrace her, whereas if she were to take over by force, toppling the power which has ruled for generations, they'll have to be kept from rising up against her.”

“Please don't be offended by this, Yann-Ber,” said Minuet, “but when Demonica has a substantial foothold here on the Northern Continent, why should she still want control of the Dark Continent? The Northern Continent is altogether more well developed and prosperous.”

“I take no offense in the least. That is indeed how it has been over the years. However, there have been major mineral discoveries made there in recent years which in the long run will probably change that. Unfortunately though, Demonica has controlling interest in most of it.

“Are you speaking of those odd scrying globes?” said Hebraun.

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” said Yann-Ber with a frown.

“The last time King James's retainer was here, he brought us a scrying globe that ordinary people could see images in...”

“Oh yea. I remember the discussion. You all felt quite wary of his appearing with it, and of course I would be too. But I'm lost. What's the connection here?”

“It was speculated that it was taken from one of Demonica's mines on the Dark Continent.”

“I'm not surprised, but I know nothing of it,” said Yann-Ber carefully sitting on his chair again.

“Well, we certainly hope your plans work,” said Minuet. “You'd be able to recover and we'd be left with only Spitemorta to deal with, though she'd be quite evil enough by herself.”

“Yes, especially after being tutored by Demonica,” said Yann-Ber. “However, if Demonica's out of the way, you have a better chance of surviving until the twins are old enough.”

“Well, perhaps we should all freshen up for supper,” said Minuet, patting Hebraun on the arm and standing up.

“Mother,” said Rose, “you're too quick. Fuzz and I were going to announce something.”

“Oh?” she said as she and Hebraun sat back down.

“Fuzz and I will be going to the Dark Continent with Yann-Ber.”

Minuet grabbed Hebraun's hand. “Somehow, I had a feeling that was coming,” she said. “And you, Father?”

“No,” said Razzmorten, shaking his head, “not this time, Minuet. I think it's time for this old wizard to stay by the fire for awhile.”

Minuet gave him a look of heartfelt gratitude. Razzmorten grinned.

“I expect we can continue with this over supper then,” said Hebraun as he escorted Minuet along the carpet down the center of the dais.

Spitemorta stepped out onto the deck with the Staff and shivered in the raw wind under the solid ceiling of snowy grey clouds as she drew her polar bear skin more tightly around her. A small bevy of gulls hovered for a moment beyond the rigging before vanishing. The sinking sun made the entire west flare brilliant orange, pink and blood red before slipping out of sight, leaving isolated cobblestones of cloud overhead tinged with failing pink.

“Sailor's delight,” she thought with a shudder from the wind, as she watched the first of her Marooderyn Imshee appearing on deck to take their customary places, staring at her with beetle-browed adoration. More appeared. Now they were covering the deck in the failing light to stare at her in reverent silence.

“Fools,” she muttered with a heady smile as goose-flesh prickled her arms. There were moments when she dearly loved being Fnadi-yaphn. She raised her arms. “My glorious Dyrney!” she boomed. “Some of you came on deck in time to see the white birds. Land is just out of sight, yonder. Before very long, perhaps by the time I'm finished speaking, land will appear. We are just beyond the mouth of the River Loxmere. We will sail into the river, and a few score of the strongest of you will take ropes and tow the ships upriver. In three or four days, you shall have your first feast of Elf flesh.”

The trolls stamped and cheered.

She waited for quite a while before raising her arms. “It is very likely that as we sail

the length of the Loxmere, you will get glimpses of Elves on the southern bank. You must stay silent and make not the slightest movement. Alerting them would be a mistake. I will lead you to a village where you will be able to take the choicest Elves. Wait for my word and you shall feast.”

The trolls erupted into thundering merriment as Spitemorta stepped astride her staff to make her delivery to each of the other six ships. On the last ship a cry arose as land was sighted. She quickly flew back to the first ship and addressed the trolls again.

“Now my people,” she cried, “we must have hushed silence as we sail into the mouth of the River Loxmere! Well into the mouth of the Loxmere we will dock and we will choose from amongst you those who will tread the path along the bank, towing the ship. You must remain silent while we do the choosing. You may have to be silent for four or five days, but remember that when we get upriver, you will hunt and feast.”

The Marooderyn Imshee knelt in reverent silence. Spitemorta glanced aside with a smirk at Demonica where she stood with a look of disgust as she leant against the railing.

“Just what's your problem, Grandmother?” she said, stepping close enough to hiss and murmur. “This was all your idea, remember. Had it been left up to me, I'd be enjoying my life in Goll while my army destroyed Niarg and the Elves. Then, after I'd enslaved the dragons, I'd use the Heart and the Staff to take over the rest of the world.”

“The problem is, dear, that this keeps coming up,” said Demonica with a piercing squint. “And you brought it up. But it's related. Absolutely, because I was watching how utterly inebriated you become with just the merest bit of power. Makes you dangerously blind, sweetheart. These trolls are daft. If you swaggered around in front of so many human beings, sooner or later one of 'em would step up and stick you in the ribs. And then to top it off, you come right up to me with the very thing I've been warning you about for months and try to stick it in my face. It takes alert and shrewd planning to wield an army. You have to see where you're going. And the minute you go tramping out across the world in plain sight with the Staff and the Heart, you'll be a target. There'll be someone who won't mind chancing death, just to rid the world of you and take his place in some bard's tale. I am dismayed, furious... I don't know what I am...to have a granddaughter who has learnt no more than this after all this time.”

“So just give me the Heart and return to your little rock off Head. I'm sick of your know-all attitude, Demonica. I'm queen. Maybe it's time for us to part ways.”

Demonica threw back her head with a two note bark of laughter, then siezed Spitemorta's eyes with a steely fix. “I will decide when I go home,” she said with a chorus of voices like a basket snakes dropped on the floor. “And I will give the Heart to you only when wise and prudent to do so. And with behavior like this, Rouanez Bras, it won't be anytime in the near future.”

“You keep the Heart, then. You keep the Heart and go home. I have the Staff. It's not a bad trade. And I'll have you out of my hair.”

“Your outrageous vanity blinds you Spitemorta. You don't know who you are and you don't know who I am. I've worked very hard to set you up for the very thing you crave, yet you're willing to stand on the brink and throw it away so you can go scurrying back to your safe little world in Goll where you can pretend that you have power and control. Ironic it is that you turned up your nose at what your mother did in the Chokewoods. At least she did the most she could do with what she had to work with. You wouldn't be half as inventive in the same spot.”

“You always said Ugleeuh was an impotent fool, Grandmother.”

“Oh I stand by that. She merely deserves more credit for what she did than you deserve for what you do. She had very little knowledge and even less opportunity. However you are defiantly managing to turn your back on both. Ugleeuh would never have been that blind.” She turned on her heel then paused before going below. “So dear, when I leave, just what are you going to do about being a troll?”

Minuet hugged Rose one more time and ran the back of her hand along one eye. It seemed to her that her life had become nothing but one goodbye after another and she was not bearing it well.

“Don't worry Mother,” said Rose, as she caught a glimpse of herself doing practically as Lukus had, “we'll be back before you know it and we'll bring the future Emperor with us. Just think of our little journey as a mission to bring back hope for our world. That should make you feel better.”

“Yes of course,” said Minuet, trying to smile through her tears. “It's not that I don't have faith in you and Fuzz.”

“I know Mother,” said Rose as she hugged her again. I'll miss you and Father terribly. I know these are frightening times, but I promise we'll be back.”

Minuet smiled and nodded as Fuzz took Rose's hand and followed Yann-Ber aboard the *Sea Sprite*.

Rose, Fuzz and Yann-Ber stood at the railing and waved until Hebraun and Minuet were mere specks that vanished with the horizon.

“You've no idea how grateful I am to have the two of you with me,” said Yann-Ber, speaking first. “I wasn't sure how much chance of success there would be with me alone. I'm actually starting to think that this might work.”

“It's a privilege to help you, Yann-Ber,” said Fuzz. “We're prepared to have you advise us non-stop if needs be, in order to be convincing enough to pull it off. You're the one who knows your family.”

“Yes,” said Yann-Ber with a weary nod. “And now, if you all don't mind, I really need to go below and find my bunk. Besides, the pair of you haven't had a shred of a chance for a nuptial holiday, or what we call a gouel priedel in Head. Perhaps this voyage will suffice for a time, aye?”

Rose went scarlet but smiled appreciatively at Yann-Ber. When at last he went below, Rose leant her head against Fuzz in the biting breeze and studied the grey blanket of clouds. “It's winter Fuzz, and it really looks it. Those clouds look like snow clouds.”

“Isn't it early?” he said, looking up.

“Not at all. You've just turned into a southerner, down south all these years.”

“I s'pose you're right. I hope Edward, Mary and the dragons get back to the caves before it snows. Edward's scarcely seen more than a light dusting.”

“You worry. And I love you, Fuzz.”

“I think he's grown quite a bit since summer, don't you?”

“Yes,” said Rose with a laugh. “It was wonderful seeing him, and we'll soon see him again, too. Now be glad he's in such good hands and let's do what Yann-Ber suggests, shall we?”

“Excellent idea, my dear.”

“I have my northern division on Ashmore in sight of the Ash Mountains,” said Captain Brutus as Spitemorta studied his image in her skinweler, “and I’ve just now been reached by a messenger from my southern division with word that they are in position across the Gold River from Ash Fork.”

“Good. Report to me when you’ve implemented our plans. Make certain that it is Hebraun who responds.”

“Yes my queen,” said Brutus as he thumped his chest. “You can count on me.”

“Glad to hear it Captain,” she said as she let the skinweler go blank. She sat for a moment, staring wistfully at the skinweler, wishing she had left one of the globes with Abaddon. “This journey would’ve been so much easier had I been able to speak with him,” she murmured. “How I miss him.” She ran her hand across her bulging belly as she thought about the new life within it. “How could I love another child as I do Abaddon? Yet how could I not?”

She shook the thoughts from her head. They were nearly to the west end of Lake Loxmere. She had to be ready when they disembarked and made their way through the Jutwoods to the serene Elven village of

Dúradán Deannaigh. And serene it would be, too, for they had not seen a single Elf the entire way upriver. “At last,” she said, surging up the stair with a new energy lightning her steps. “Something’s finally happening. Maybe now we’ll get to the end of all this.”

Demonica was already topside, her wings and robe standing out stark white against the looming silhouettes of the trees of the Jutwoods. The trolls were busy hauling the ships up against the quays at the west end of the lake, near the mouth of the upper Loxmere River. Spitemorta gave her quite a surprise by smiling at her with fierce enthusiasm.

“Your Marooderyn Imshee await your order to disembark the vessels, which we can do any time now Fnadi-yaphn,” said Demonica, as a tinge of amusement replaced her surprise.

“Do you think I should lead them or follow them?”

Demonica tapped her pursed lips and considered. “Lead them to just outside of Dúradán Deannaigh, I’d think, then send them in to do what they do best.”

“What they do best, Demonica?”

“Certainly. Slaughter Elves, Fnadi-yaphn Bras. But don’t take my word for it. Let’s go see for ourselves.”

Down went the gangplank.

Spitemorta held her hands high as a signal to the trolls before tramping off the ship behind Demonica. “Yes,” she said quietly to Demonica’s wings, “I’m looking forward to it. I may even join in the fray.”

“My dear!” barked Demonica with a hoarse laugh. “The way you enjoy blood and mayhem, I seriously doubt if you’ll be able to keep yourself from it.”

Quietly, long lines of trolls filed off of each of the seven ships, to muffle along the path in the moonlight behind them without a single utterance. Owls boomed and hooted through the timber hither and yon. It was a long walk, a good five leagues at least, but every single troll kept silent. When they reached the mouth of the Gold River, Spitemorta and Demonica halted and waited for their six hundred and eighty-one trolls to gather

around. Spitemorta addressed them in hushed tones, telling them that Dúradán Deannaigh lay up the Loxmere another two leagues or so, a good half mile away from the river. From here on she and her winged servant would follow.

Spitemorta was delighted to see that stealth was going to be no problem at all. In spite of how clumsy and brutish the trolls had seemed aboard ship, they now slipped away from the path and through the woods as silently as cats. The Elves were not going to know what hit them.

The white moon busily sliced through cloud after cloud, indifferent to the conflagration below, as owls echoed in the woods. Every single building in Ash Fork was ablaze, hissing and popping as sparks dashed aloft in the roiling columns of smoke and flame.

Captain Brutus stood proudly, studying his accomplishment as children whimpered and bawled and soldiers jerked wailing women away from the corpses of their husbands. He roared with laughter at the sight of a tottering old woman in her nightgown when she was knocked unconscious by a soldier who struck her from behind with the hilt of his cutlass as she tried to scoop up a terrified little naked boy in her blanket. As he looked on, bouncing on his heels from time to time, with his hands clasped behind his back, his men lined up every surviving citizen of Ash Fork in front of the burning tavern. There they huddled in wide eyed horror, watching everything that was familiar being consumed by the fire, as a little sergeant walked up and down their ranks whacking them here and there with his riding crop. He smacked a young woman across the face with it in time for a straw haired youth to step out of line and yank it away from him. At this, another soldier lunged forth and ran the young man through.

Brutus walked slowly up and down the lines. A freckle faced boy of about thirteen with fiery red hair lunged at him and spat on his shiny plate hauberk. Brutus stopped short and pulled out a cloth and ran it over his armor as two of his sergeants grabbed the boy and yanked him back. The boy was not cowed in the least and squirmed with fury against their grasp.

“Now I like a boy with courage,” said Brutus, beckoning with his fingers for the little sergeant's riding crop, as the roof of the tavern behind them collapsed into the flames. “But I don't much care for a boy who's just plain stupid.” And with that, he took the crop and struck the boy so hard that he knocked out a couple of teeth.

A woman cried out from the lines and a younger red haired boy burst into the open and ran at Brutus, managing to plant a kick that doubled him over. “Stinking bully!” screamed the boy.

Several soldiers broke into howls of laughter until Brutus silenced them with a murderous look.

“Hey, little cachu ci!” he snarled, seizing the boy by the arms like a lobster. “There's a lesson you'll be learning before you face eternity! You've made a big mistake this day, whelp!” He him shook soundly and flung him into the arms of his men. “All right! Put the other one right here!” he barked, pointing to the ground at his feet.

They obliged by tripping and flinging the boy face down.

“So!” said Brutus as he kicked the boy in the temple. The boy grabbed his face in time for Brutus to kicked him soundly in the ribs, knocking him onto his back. “I suppose

you think you're a big man, aye?"

The boy thrust out his chin and stared at him with silent bug-eyed rage.

"Good," said Brutus with a quick nod. "I see you have some brains. And since you have, I have an important job for you."

The boy's look of hatred softened with a tinge of surprise but he said nothing.

"So, what's your name, boy?"

"Herio."

"Well Herio," said Brutus as he glanced away for a moment at the woman who had cried out, who was now struggling with a couple of soldiers. "Must be their mother," he thought, turning back to Herio. "So you know that skinny boy yonder who just kicked me, aye?"

Herio nodded warily as he dared to get up onto an elbow.

"Well, I'm a soldier, Herio. I can hardly allow my prisoners to just up and attack me whenever they want to, wouldn't you agree?"

Herio glanced at the soldiers holding the other boy with white hot alarm.

"What's that you say, Herio?" said Brutus balefully. "I didn't quite hear you."

"I wasn't trying to say anything!"

"Well Herio, as I was saying, I can't abide such behavior from the enemy. Now, I'm going 'o send you to King Hebraun so you can tell him what's going on down here. Understand?"

"But I can't go, 'cause I've never been anywhere 'cept Ash Fork," he said, sitting up wide eyed. "I don't know how to get there."

Brutus smiled as he suddenly raised his armored boot and with a lunge tramped Herio flat onto the ground again with all his weight. "Don't worry, my young man," he said, grinding his heel into Herio's chest until it tore his shirt. "One of my men will be going with you to see you there. Of course you'll want to be certain to take advantage of his service the whole way, because I'm only givin' you a week to get there and back. And meanwhile, I intend for to hang one of these fine Ash Forkers each day you're gone."

"So if I didn't get back in a week, you'd start hanging people?" said Herio with white-lipped horror.

"Of course not, you snot faced little idiot," said Brutus with a smile as he scraped his heel across Herio's collarbone hard enough to make him bleed. "We start today. You might even get back sooner than a week." He threw back his head with a volley of laughter. He suddenly sobered. "Oh don't you worry, pen cachu! I'll be right impartial about it. I'll pick villagers randomly without regard to age or gender. Ye can't expect me to get much fairer than that."

By now, Herio was allowed to get up onto an elbow in his terror, but his arm felt like aspic.

"Hey!" shouted Brutus as he haled a soldier. "Sergeant Dunvel, come over here! Your job is to see this little curse to Castle Niarg!"

The ugly flat faced man gave a nod and a toothy grin and came directly over.

"But first," said Brutus, raising his hand, "the boy needs to know I mean business, so we're going to have him watch the first hanging!" He turned to the soldiers who still held the boy who kicked him. "You men!" he barked. "Hang the little bastard!"

"No!" screamed Herio with every fiber in him, as he wrenched free of Dunvel's grasp, only to be grabbed and thrown furiously to the ground. At once, Dunvel had him

pinned with a knee on each arm, plastering his face with his fetid spit as he smacked his head from side to side with his beefy fists.

“No! Please! Not my baby!” screamed the woman as she wrenched free to flail at Brutus with her fists.

Brutus knocked her to the ground with decisive fury. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he bellowed. “I gave you an order! Hang the brat!”

Chapter 47

Herio awoke to the sound of busy wee toenails scuffling along a corky ridge of bark overhead as a tiny chickadee searched for hibernating grubs. The cloudless dawn sky above was already turning blue. At the sound of a metallic clink from a link of his shackles, the bird chipped and flitted away. He jerked, giving a furious scratch at the fleas which infested the tattered unicorn blanket which Sergeant Dunvel had resentfully shoved at him. It was still far too cold to do without it. Jays called.

“Wake up cachu ci!” barked Dunvel as he kicked him in the ribs hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

He cried out in pain as he struggled to get his breath. He sat up, drawing his shackles tight around the trunk of the small maple he had straddled all night.

At once, Dunvel had a knife at his throat. “There, cachu ci,” he said, tossing the keys into the leaves by his shackles. “Undo 'em. And if ye do anything quick at all, I'll haul your stinkin' red head to Niarg in a bag.”

Herio stretched out his arms, mindful of the blade at his Adam's apple. He had to try several times to unlock the shackles, since his hands were trembling convulsively and Dunvel simply refused to let him lean forward. The blade stank fiercely of raw egg and foul spit. Wave after wave of white-hot fear surged through him as he fumbled. He could picture his own throat being cut. He could picture himself somehow grappling away the knife and running Dunvel through. Somehow he would manage to stay alive because someday he would get Dunvel for this, after he got Brutus for killing his little brother.

At last he was astride his unicorn, a small dappled cyflymder-Dúlsh cross. The thought of spurring it and dashing away through the timber had died the moment he saw how both mounts were already tethered together. He watched Dunvel champing open-mouthed at the last of the travel rations like some kind of dog. His stomach gnawed and he looked away.

“Hey cachu ci!” barked Dunvel. “Want some? Hey! Don't you look away! Do you want some?”

Herio looked but made no reply.

“You'd better answer me 'fore I come over there an' make you. Are you hungry?”

“Herio nodded ever so slightly.

“Well, ye ain't gettin' any 'cause this is the last, last little bit,” he said with beady-eyed merriment as he came up close to chew. He wiped his hands first on his breeches and then in the leaves, as he belched loud enough for it to echo amongst the trees. He began untying reins. “We'll reach Castle Niarg in less than an hour, I'd reckon,” he said with a grunt, as he threw his leg over his ponderous ceffyl arfog unicorn. “Now, ye'd best be rememberin' what the captain said, or else a lot more of your stinkin' Ash Forkers are goin' 'o swing.” He roared with laughter and smacked Herio's unicorn on the rump, making it rear and roll its eyes before spurring his own mount off through the leaves.

Herio stared straight ahead, tears streaming down his cheeks, watching his unicorn's ears turn this way and that, as Dunvel went to great lengths to describe how his little red-haired brother had kicked and kicked and turned blue as he died. At last the castle loomed before them, ending the ordeal.

Dunvel smoothed and straightened his black sash with its embroidered blood red hourglass and grinned a toothy grin as they rode up to the gate. “You remember why you're here, cachu ci,” he said.

Herio kept his eyes forward and gave a curt nod only to show that he had heard.

“Halt, right there!” hollered the guard from the embrasure above the portcullis.

“Ha,” thought Herio at the sight of the look which flickered across Dunvel's face, though not a twitch of expression managed to surface on his own.

“What business has one bearing an escutcheon such as yours doing here, sir?” echoed the guard.

“We have an urgent message for your king!” hollered Dunvel.

“Urgent? And who might this urgent message be from?”

“Are you blind, man?” cried Dunvel. “It ought to be obvious!”

“We are right well credited by this tottering sack of hog dung, wearing the black sash and red hourglass of sorcery and treachery, if by the mere sight of him he fancies that we can read his mind!” called out Captain Bernard as he stepped beside the guard.

“Unfortunately, since he's so frightfully ugly that it would be impossible to read his mind, we must assume that his bloated head merely makes him forget his place in a country not his own! So be it! I'll let His Majesty know at once! In the meantime, though, you'd best stay exactly where you are, since I've ordered a score of long bowmen to loose arrows if they see you move at all!”

“Pennau Cachu,” snarled Dunvel as he huffed a sigh and sat back against the cantle of his saddle to stay exactly where he was. Suddenly they were surrounded by two dozen pikemen who escorted them inside the castle walls where they were ordered to dismount and were seen to the throne room where Hebraun and Minuet beheld them with icy curiosity.

Hebraun studied Dunvel and Herio. “I'm told you claim to have an urgent message for me,” he said. “You're in here now, so what is it?”

Dunvel gave a haughty nod at Herio, catching his eye with a menacing look as he did so.

Herio stood proud and straight as he met Hebraun's eyes. He could see at once that he stood before a kind and just monarch. “Sire,” he said, his voice thick with the pain he had endured, “I'm Herio, son of Ymladd of Ash Fork. Goll has invaded Niarg and has burnt Ash Fork, to the ground.” He paused to steady himself. “I've been forced to come here to tell you that all the people are being held on pain of their lives and will only be released when you come in person to Ash Fork.”

Hebraun and Minuet shared raised eyebrows. “I see,” he said as he resumed studying them. “So just what happens after I've made my appearance?”

“I'm afraid I'm merely a lowly sergeant, sire,” said Dunvel with shrug of contrived innocence. “I'm not privy to that information.”

“Yea? Well, I'll bet you can tell me exactly what will happen to the people of Ash Fork if I don't come.”

Dunvel gave Herio a poke in the back.

“I'm being forced to tell you that even as we speak, they are hanging people,” said Herio as he took a defiant step away from Dunvel. “Captain Brutus of the Army of Goll is hanging one poor soul a day until Sergeant Dunvel and I return with you. He's not foolin' around, sire. He began with my little brother.” And in spite of his brave posture, he choked on a sob as tears raced down his freckles to his chin.

Dunvel stared at Hebraun with a face of arrogant challenge.

Minuet was on her feet at once, holding Herio as he dropped to his knees and gave

great whooping sobs into her bodice. She looked up at Hebraun with eyes of fire. "We're going to Lukus's room until he's able to bear up," she said as she helped Herio to his feet.

Dunvel swaggered into her path. "I'm afraid I can't allow you to do that, Your Majesty," he said. "I've my orders to return post-haste with the boy and the king. Any delays will just cause more deaths in Ash Fork."

"Within these walls, we allow you, and unless you prefer to spend the next six months in our custody, Sergeant, this child will be allowed to rest," she said as she swept past. "Then we'll see if he returns to Ash Fork or not."

"Your queen has just caused some poor soul his life," said Dunvel, wheeling back to face Hebraun.

"Your outrageous stupidity in the presence of monarchs I find right amusing, Sergeant," said Hebraun as he rose to tower above Dunvel, "but that's all I find amusing. Everything else about you I find intensely putrid. You shall address my queen with utmost respect. And as for jeopardizing lives in Ash Fork, it's you and your army who are doing that, for which you shall all pay dearly!"

"I didn't come here to be pushed around, sire! Am I to understand that you're sending me back alone to convey your threat?"

"Hardly, Sergeant," said Hebraun with a smile, as he sat down again on his throne. "I fully intend to go to Ash Fork. Whether the boy goes or not remains to be seen. Meanwhile, why don't you just tell me everything the boy was supposed to tell me. There was more, wasn't there? I'm sure it will save time, and you being so concerned with the lives of those in Ash Fork, you'll jump at the chance, right?"

"Uh, yes," said Dunvel, with a sigh at the chore. Nevertheless, he spewed forth an elaborated version of the same things which Herio had told.

Hebraun merely nodded as if it all was exactly what he had expected to hear.

"Begging your pardon, sire," said Dunvel as he shifted from foot to foot, "but shouldn't we be on our way?"

"Polite all at once are we?" said Hebraun without bothering to look at him.

Presently Minuet swept back into the room with Herio, who was now completely composed and wearing some of Lukus's old clothes. She took her seat immediately as she guided Herio to stand right beside her. She took up Hebraun's hand and squeezed it. They held each other's eyes for several heartbeats of understanding and then turned as one to look at Dunvel.

Hebraun rose from his throne without a word and drew Minuet up to stand beside him. He nodded ever so slightly at his guards before fixing his eyes on Dunvel.

"See him to the courtyard and wait for me there," he said as they stepped up to surround Dunvel.

Dunvel shamelessly flung a conceited look at Herio as he turned to go.

Hebraun spared a kindly glance at Herio and then took both of Minuet's hands and looked into her eyes. "I love you more than words can tell," he said.

"And I love you," she said as they squeezed hands.

Hebraun stepped smartly from the dais with her, as Herio scrambled to follow, out into the courtyard where the guards waited with Dunvel. He paused by Vindicator, his huge white march streiciwr brenhinol stallion unicorn and kissed Minuet farewell. He quickly found his stirrup, threw his leg over his mount and looked down at Herio. "I need you to stay here to protect the queen."

Herio drew himself up and nodded fiercely as Minuet drew him to her side.

“Besides,” said Hebraun as he gave a beady-eyed nod at Dunvel, “You might want to testify when that thing has its trial.”

Herio's eyes flashed as he nodded and stood proudly beside his queen.

Hebraun shared one last gaze with Minuet then urged his great white unicorn to the gate and vanished. Herio turned aside to see Minuet's eyes brimming with tears as she stood tall and proud, making her way back to her duties. He trailed along beside her after pausing to see Dunvel being led away to some place fitting.

Herio's face firmed in resolve. That goblin would share his brother's fate if he had any say in the matter.

Soldiers and citizens took up their longbows and swarmed out to join King Hebraun the moment he rode through the castle gates. By the time he made camp in the Ash Mountains under thick grey skies two days later, he had an army ten thousand strong which he had sorted into two divisions of forty-five hundred apiece and a third of his one thousand fastest riders. He paced between his campfire and his tent, pausing here and there to study the horizon to the south. Suddenly there came three riders, one of them an Elf.

“Captain Bernard,” he said as Bernard dismounted from the first unicorn. “I was beginning to worry.”

“We made it almost to the south end of the Ash Mountains, almost to where you'll undoubtedly make camp tomorrow,” said Bernard. “I can't for the life of me imagine what they're doing. I was convinced when we left Castle Niarg that we'd 'ave seen signs of something before we got as far as we did, but we saw nothing. Nothing at all. Not even any sign that they had once been where we were.”

Herbaun wrinkled his brow as he studied the stone he was rolling around with the toe of his boot.

“So if they're a-fixin' to set up an ambush in the valley,” said Bernard, “they've either done so less than a league beyond where we got to, clean to the absolute south end, or else they're counting on us being slow and have yet to come up the valley with troops to lay it.”

“So we're safe for the night at least, you think?” said Hebraun.

“Oh I'd reckon so, if everyone's mounted by the first light. So should we turn right around after we change mounts and have a sup, or do ye reckon we can sleep for a couple of hours first?”

“You've been most of the way. You tell me. I want to come as near to doing this as I can without losing a single man. And I mean a single man. Each one of these fellows has a wife or kids or somebody. So that means we must see the enemy first, and that's on you. Also, I want to know as much I possibly can along the way, especially how many. And you know, I've not kept up with their small arms. What do most of 'em have? That stinker who brought the kid had a crossbow. Any of you three have an idea?”

“Just hearsay,” said the Elf, known as Súlacha, a skilled tracker and woodsman sent by Neron to aid Niarg in case of emergency, “but I don't think they've caught onto the longbow...”

“Well, I want you to find out if you can.”

“I think we can manage on two hours' sleep,” said Bernard, “and if we don't get to sleep, we'll just take off.”

By the evening of the next day, Hebraun had assigned his two large divisions positions along each side of the valley. The small division he would take with him the rest of the way to Ash Fork. He brought them to a halt between two peaks near the end of the valley that ran the southern length of the Ash Mountain Range, a good two leagues beyond sight of Ash Fork. Bernard and his scouts returned with the astonishing report that there was no sign of the enemy anywhere outside the immediate vicinity of Ash Fork.

However, they reckoned the enemy to number above thirteen thousand.

The following morning, on a low prominence, he turned his great unicorn to face his men as the icy wind whipped through his hair and cape. He searched the faces of his soldiers for a long while before he spoke.

“Now you must await my return! I will take my Lightning Division with me to engage the enemy and lure them back here, where we will dispense with them easily, teaching them what it means to burn down Niarg villages! Keep your campfires small, smokeless and completely hidden (if you need them at all) while I'm gone! Keep sentries posted up the slopes on both sides to watch for our return, so that you will be absolutely certain to be in your positions well before we get here!” He looked up at the sky. Flakes of snow were flying. He took Captain Bernard and the Lightning Division and rode hard until they reached a low ridge overlooking the remains of Ash Fork. There they waited as they sent forth two score riders with a white flag of truce, to demand that the Gollians withdraw in peace. About an hour before noon, one riderless unicorn returned, the white flag of truce tied to its saddle, soaked with blood.

“Well, that's their answer,” said Hebraun grimly as he examined the unicorn. He squeezed shut his eyes and turned away.

“I still can't figure out what they're doing,” said Bernard. “But it seems obvious that they're determined to have us attack them straight on right where they are.”

“They want us coming at them in a blind fury to hit them head on,” said Hebraun. “That's why they massacred our party. One would think that they would have some strategy for outflanking us, but the terrain doesn't look right for that. If they've any plans to flank us at all, they'll most likely plan to wait until after we've engaged them.”

“If ye don't mind my butting in,” said Súlacha, “I say they're convinced that we don't have the numbers.”

“You have to be right,” said Hebraun.

Hebraun gathered his troops and made ready to attack Ash Fork. They mounted and lined up in ranks, waiting quietly as he took his place smartly before them on his great white unicorn. He paused before he spoke as he studied their faces. “Gentlemen!” he said, calling out. “Our sortie is going to be made up of maneuvers we do during our first Sunday of the month games! We will ride in formation until I give the order to spread ranks. Then, we will engage the enemy by halting when I order, a good furlong or two short of them, and by doing the volley-and-fly! So pair up and decide who holds reins and who will loose the three arrows! That ought to inspire the whole lot of them to come back to the valley with us...!”

Cheers, laughter and applause broke out with a roar through the ranks. Spirits were high. They had become a nation of expert archers during his reign and they knew it.

Hebraun nodded and grinned and waited for them to fall silent. "I will not deceive you," he said, seeking out face after face throughout their numbers, "for we ride to war this day, a war we neither started nor wanted, but a war which came uninvited, right in through our back door here in Ash Fork! We have been attacked and innocent women and children have been deliberately and cruelly put to death because of the lies of the evil queen who seeks to destroy and rule us! But she will not manage, not this day nor any other, for we ride forth to kick her royal butt! We ride forth for our very freedom!"

"Sire!" said Bernard, nodding at Ash Fork. "Look yonder at the dust rising! They're on their way!"

"Well, the volley-and-fly still seems right," said Hebraun as he studied the dust clouds. "You and the scouts stay abreast of me. Help me watch." He turned smartly aside in his saddle and waved. "They come!" he hollered. "Follow me! For Niarg!"

They sallied forth at a canter on his heels, rank upon rank into the open grassland to meet the Gollians as they swelled out from the land about Ash Fork in a colossal wave, steel glinting in the billowing dust.

Niarg began spreading out to meet them. Suddenly, Hebraun wheeled and raised his arms, and his entire division came to a precipitous halt. Half of his men leaped forth to kneel abreast with longbows drawn, aimed aloft at thirty degrees, while the others each readied a pair of unicorns for the return sprint. Hebraun raised his arm. "Loose!" he bellowed as his arm came down. Five hundred arrows went aloft, then another and yet another five hundred. Gollian unicorns fell to their knees and rolled as scores of Gollian soldiers tumbled to the ground. In a blink of an eye, Hebraun's men were mounted and flying back to the mountains with the Gollians in furious pursuit.

After a breathless pounding ride back across the grassland of Ashmore, Hebraun raced into the mouth of the great valley of the Ash Mountains, as his Lightning Division pummeled the ground behind him for a good half mile. The first of the enemy bore down on them from behind no more than a furlong away and the rest of their vast number stretched behind that for nearly a league. He searched the basin and flanks of the hills 'round about for signs of his other divisions. He was relieved that they were nowhere to be seen. At last, as he neared a great cottonwood tree that he had picked as a marker to measure one league in from the mouth, he drew forth his horn and gave out a ringing blast. Niarg longbowmen stepped forth from hiding everywhere up and down both sides of that measured league of valley to loose a decisive rain of arrows upon the Gollians, turning them into a rearing, roiling pandemonium of terror, caught completely without cover. He halted his men and commanded them to attack the stumbling Gollian vanguard behind them.

Without warning Vindicator threw Hebraun as he stumbled and fell to his knees with a crossbow quarrel in his brisket, rolling to a stop across his withers.

"No!" cried Hebraun, springing to his feet. Vindicator raised his head from the ground to let it fall.

Suddenly Hebraun realized that the waft which he had just felt prickling one ear was a blade. There stood Brutus with his sword, trying to kill him.

With a sweeping ring he drew the very claymore he had used to kill Razorback as he ducked and dodged Brutus's swings. It no longer bore Razzmorten's enchantment, but he

felt sure of himself for he had always been an expert swordsman. Suddenly he could see that it had been a very long time. His swings were alarmingly slow and clumsy compared to Brutus's.

Brutus lunged forward with a furious swing, nicking Hebraun's breastplate as Hebraun ducked aside and stumbled. Brutus swung again, accidentally striking the dead limb of a fallen elm, glancing recklessly wide.

"One for Herio!" roared Hebraun, finding his balance, as he came down on Brutus's neck with a decisive swing, sending his head bouncing away into the weeds.

Hebraun wheeled this way and that to be ready for his next assailant only to discover that the battle was already over. There lay Spitemorta's army in a blood spattered disarray of swords, pikes and crossbows, with arrows sticking out all over. He knelt by Vindicator and patted his neck. He had been his giant companion ever since he had married Minuet. He removed a gauntlet and wiped an eye as he stood up and turned away. Wet snow was sweeping in faster and sticking to everything.

"Oh Fates! You've lost Vindicator!" said Bernard as he came up, taking careful steps around the dead. "I'm so sorry, sire!"

"How many have we lost?"

"I've really no idea yet, but I only know of seven so far from the Lightning Division, and I've not heard of a single death amongst either of the big divisions. This is more stunning than any victory I've ever heard tell of. Everyone seems to be in a state of jubilant disbelief..."

"No one's seen Ash Fork yet, Captain," said Hebraun. "We need to set up an overnight encampment at once. It could get very cold."

As the first red light lit the snow, Hebraun was on his feet, listening to owls in the timber up the slopes. He wandered out amongst the bodies of men and unicorns, pausing here and there to study the sky.

"Good morning, sire," said Bernard as he hurried to catch up, wending his way with Súlacha. "What's on your mind this morning?"

"Trying to find the words for what I think of Spitemorta..." he said, shaking his head.

"Difficult, aye?"

"I just don't have the vocabulary."

For a moment, the three of them fell silent, looking about.

"So Captain," said Hebraun. "Is there a tally?"

"Two score and seven of ours, we think..."

"That's four score and seven, counting those I sent to their deaths in Ash Fork..." he said, biting his lip as a tear raced down his cheek to the bristles on his chin. "That's a lot o' poor little kids."

"But sire, there's never been a victory such as this."

"Maybe. But when I came to the throne I promised that no one would die."

"Forgive me sire, I know you have a heavy heart because you are the kindest and greatest king who's ever lived, but I can't help but have a little joy in my step when we took such an evil army and swatted them clean flat."

"So how many did we flatten?" said Hebraun. "Do you know?"

"It's still just guesses, twelve or thirteen thousand..."

“Shall we search for survivors, Your Majesty?” said a young officer, making his way toward them.

“Yes, but leave none alive, Lieutenant,” he said, standing straight, “and dispatch any suffering beasts, too. In fact we need to get everyone doing this. We don't have time to waste.”

“Understood, Your Majesty. Should we form details to bury the dead?”

“Only ours,” said Hebraun with a shake of his head. “We have to get to Ash Fork with all haste. Following a harpy for a queen earns vultures, I reckon. Lightning Division and I will leave at once for Ash Fork. The other divisions are to follow immediately upon the burial of our soldiers and the collection of arms and arrows.”

As the lieutenant and his party hurried away, Bernard gave Hebraun an understanding pat on the back.

They could see that every building had been burnt to the ground as they rode into Ash Fork, straining to see if anyone remained alive. At last they were close enough to make out people, but they were the headless corpses of the men Hebraun had sent in with the flag of truce. There was utterly no livestock to be seen, but here and there a dog barked. Wending a short way in between the ashes of buildings they came to a stop, stunned to behold a long mound of bodies piled down the center of the street in front of where the tavern had been.

A dog was busy feeding on the corpse of a woman. Súlacha dropped it with a keen eyed twang of his Elven bow before it had scarcely looked up.

“That must be everyone who lived here, except for Herio,” said Bernard.

With a wave of his arm, Hebraun motioned for his men to dismount. They set to work to bury everyone, murmuring in hushed voices amongst the scuffle and ring of shovels and spades.

Spitemorta smiled with satisfaction at the wreckage the trolls had made of Dúradán Deannaigh. The air was alive with the scent of roasting flesh which she found enticing. “Must be what comes with looking like a troll,” she said with a chuckle, as she set out to find a quiet place where she could take out her skinweler in order to contact Captain Brutus.

Soon she found a nice stump next to a clothes line at the edge of the woods and sat down, laying the Great Staff in front of her. She took out her skinweler and ran her hands lovingly over its polished form as she thought of how near she must be to her first goal. She concentrated on Captain Brutus. His face took shape after a spell, but something was very wrong. His fogged-over eyes stared up from his frozen face in the weeds. He had no body. She threw the skinweler away from her into a thicket of briars as though it were a pit viper in her lap, jerking her hands to her face as she gave a wail of horror.

At once she was on her hands and knees going after it. “Where's my army?” she cried. “My army!” She reached out for the ball through the thorny canes, tugging at it with her fingertips until it rolled into her grasp. She reached for a briar that had her by the hair and yanked, painfully ripping at her scalp and hand. She gave a furious squeal as she stood up, jerking back away from the briars.

She sat back onto the stump at once, gripping the skinweler, shaking it in frustration as though that would make her soldiers come more quickly into view. At last they did, littered all across the valley in the southern Ash Mountains. The only soldiers standing were soldiers of Niarg, picking over the corpses. With a grating screech of fury she heaved the skinweler away from her like a shot-put, bouncing it off the trunk of a maple to go bounding away into the briars. She sprang up and down with two fisted rage as the ball rolled out of sight.

She grabbed the Staff and flew over the spot and gingerly let herself down to retrieve it. She picked it up, flew out of the briars and tramped away to find Demonica.

She found her sitting primly on an intricate white wrought iron settee being entertained by the spectacle of the carousing Marooderyn Imshee, riotously scampering about a good dozen large cooking fires, grease running down their chins and bare bellies.

"They get so very enthused," said Demonica, looking up at Spitemorta with a dancing sparkle in her eyes as though she had been standing there all evening.

Spitemorta stepped in front of her, deliberately blocking her view.

"So what's your problem now?" said Demonica disdainfully, as she tried to peer around her.

Spitemorta squatted and plunged into a complete account of what she had just seen in the skinweler.

"You know I told you so, dear," said Demonica, shifting on her seat to look her in the eye. "I told you about how it was with Hebraun and his people practicing every month. But you just rolled your eyes like some long-suffering child spiting the grown-ups and went right about sending out your army without consulting with me."

"They're my army, Grandmother."

"No, they were your army, dear."

"Then just what do you advise?"

"I'm not sure that you can be. I mean, haven't I been trying to advise you all along?"

"What do we do now, Grandmother?" she said through her teeth. "What do we do this minute?"

Demonica calmly stood and brushed off the skirts of her kirtle, as if the small amount of ash on them mattered. "Why do you reckon I kept telling you to prepare your trolls to go get Hebraun in case your puny army failed?" she said sweetly, as she fixed a one eyed gaze on her.

"Well fine," said Spitemorta with a rumble as she stood up. "Send forth the beasts then, Demonica. And make sure that they utterly annihilate the Niarg army."

"My dear Fnadi-yaphn," said Demonica with a laugh. "You're troll goddess, not me. You lead them. I'm merely your lowly winged servant, remember?"

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Oh, my land yes," said Demonica with dancing eyes. "Quite a bit, actually. With the ugly expressions you bear, dear, you've the most emphatic need for abrasive things to be rubbed in your face."

"Wonderful! Now how am I to get their attention? Well look at them!"

"Well, obviously you'll have to wait until they've finished their supper," said Demonica, hiking her eyebrows. "After all, you've been promising them a feast of Elf flesh the entire voyage here. You'll simply have to be patient. Besides, with all your troops dead, what's the hurry? Hebraun and company will be picking over their bodies

and burying the dead for quite some time yet.”

Spitemorta stamped away, wishing she could throttle Demonica. She growled between her teeth as she thought of how badly she still needed her. At last she plopped down onto the same stump which she'd sat on earlier.

The feast did not wind down until just before dawn when the trolls were ready to find a place out of the sunlight to sleep. Spitemorta called them together in the ruined square of Dúradán Deannaigh to address them before they found places to sleep in the empty buildings.

“My loyal and deserving people!” she boomed with a smile. “You have enjoyed the very first of endless great feasts here in your new land! And now you know that Fnadi-yaphyn does indeed keep her promises to you!”

The trolls clapped and stamped and hooted, patting their distended bellies.

Spitemorta smiled benevolently as they quieted. “I have just learnt that the Humans who deny your right to this paradise are indeed nearby and will do what they can to stop you!”

A rumbling murmur broke out.

Spitemorta raised her arms and quieted them. “Fear not, my people! We will not allow these Humans to interfere! We will show them our wrath! We will not merely throttle them, my people, we will wipe out their whole army!”

The trolls clapped, whistled and stamped in furious agreement. She waited for them get quiet. “Go rest! When you awake, we will seek out these Humans and destroy every one of them, so that they will never again trouble us as we enjoy our new land of Gnyr-jan ntu Afajoy!”

The trolls cheered again and fell quiet as they wandered off to seek the shadows as the east grew light.

The full moon rose cold yellow in the east, closing like an angry eye, as it vanished for the night behind the thick snow clouds. Spitemorta rallied her Marooderyn Imshee about the cold ashes of the fires of the feast in Dúradán Deannaigh. She was only taking two hundred trolls to attack Hebraun and his army, since Demonica forbade her taking all of them.

She chose Gnophn as her captain. She would fly into the Niarg camp and take out Hebraun, and Gnophn would lead a charge into the resulting confusion. They marched for the ford of the Loxmere River. As they crossed, Spitemorta took to the air on the Staff and led them to the ford of the Gold River, where she saw them across. From here they made straight across country to Ash Fork.

Near midnight, Spitemorta could see campfires on the ground ahead. “Good. They're still here,” she said. She swooped below at once to alert Gnophn before shooting aloft again to fly over the camp.

“Only four guards on duty, otherwise the entire camp is fast asleep,” she said as she flew overhead unseen, straining her eyes for some sign of Hebraun. Again and again she flew by without seeing him. “Isn't he here?” she thought. She was beginning to consider the possibility that he was in the Ash Mountains where her army met its doom, when she

thought she might have seen him. She circled and passed by closer to the ground. “Yes. That’s him.”

There he lay, sleeping the sleep of a truly exhausted man. She shot far up into the heavens to hover for a moment. “This won’t do at all,” she hissed. “If I just toast him, he’ll never know who did it. He needs to pay. He needs to know that I’m getting even. He needs to cower and beg.”

Quickly she cast a glamour upon herself to appear as Spitemorta instead of Fnadi-yaphn. “Still won’t do,” she said. “But this will.” And she lit herself with a brilliant aura. “Now it’s time for you to die, King Hebraun.” She swooped down and shot a lavender bolt from the Staff, blowing a bushel of dirt out of the ground, right by his hip.

He flew from his blankets, drawing his claymore at the sight of her looping back through the cold black air. “I love you Minuet!” he said as he stood calmly ready for battle.

Spitemorta sent out a blast that blew him apart with a concussion that resounded across the countryside for miles, but the sight of his serene face at the last instant sent her on her way in a livid fury of disappointment as she raced to send in her trolls on her way back to Dúradán Deannaigh.

Minuet gasped and jerked upright in bed. “Hebraun,” she said in a strangled whisper as tears streamed down her cheeks. There was a horrible void in her breast and in its emptiness she knew: he was gone.

She stumbled out of her sheets onto the floor and ran sobbing barefoot through the big lazy flakes of snow to Razzmorten’s tower. At the top of the steps she quietly opened his door and rushed inside. She had no strength for pounding on doors.

“Hey Queen,” said Hubba Hubba, snapping to from his perch just outside the nest box full of baby parrots and Pebbles. “What ye sneakin’ for? Somethin’ wrong?”

Minuet nodded and sniffled as she went by. “Father!” she wailed as she collapsed with great whooping sobs at the side of his bed.

“Oh dear! Oh dear me!” he said as he rolled to the floor beside the bed and scooped her into his arms. He knew.

The Marooderyn Imshee suddenly appeared like silent phantoms in the camp at Ash Fork brandishing their clubs. What they hadn’t counted on was that Spitemorta’s aerial display and explosion had awakened the entire Niargian camp. A few were even awake in time to see their beloved king blown to bits.

Captain Bernard was stunned with grief and despair, but when the first troll raised his club and bellowed, he had every man ready with his claymore. The moon peeped through the clouds in time to see the entire camp rise up with the glint of furiously swinging blades. By the time it slipped back behind the clouds, not a troll was left alive.

The soldiers finished the somber burial in the flying snow without their king. Since Hebraun had insisted that each soldier and villager have a decent burial and could not

have one himself, they carved a tall menhir stone with his name and set it in the ground on the spot where he vanished, ringed by a circle of twenty-one stone posts.

Appendix

Dramatis Personæ

Aalid - Obbree's shawk spoogh (strike falcon)

Abaddon - Spitemorta's devil child

Abbey - Abaddon

Abracadabra - Razmorten's stud cyflymder unicorn

An Daouarn - dragon sculptor who made the Great Fountain of the Dragon Caves

Ariel - twin, child of Soraya and Lukus

Arrdseyphnyrma - reference to Fnadiyaphn (Spitemorta as troll Goddess) as the first mother of creation

Arwr - diatryma, son of Ceidwad and Lladdwr

Ash - dragonet

Avel - (Wind in Headlandish) feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, Laora's sister

Azenor - of the House of Dark, Emperor of Head (Pennvro) and the Dark Continent, Yann-Ber's father

Baase - Olloo's shawk spoogh (strike falcon)

Bailitheoir Cailli (Jutish Elven) - Ugleeuh

Barnhut, Gina - Abaddon's substitute nanny in Demonica's absence

Bee - queen of Goll, stepmother of Spitemorta and poisoned by her

Bernard - captain of Niarg's Royal Guard

Bernez - gnarly prisoner in Demonica's keep

Big Butcher - Gwaelic Elven reference to Fnalar, a Marooderyn Imshee (troll) leader, killed by shawk spooghy (strike falcons) Jeelys and Aalid

Blaise - feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, sister of Laora

Blueboy - Demonica's sarcastic name for MeqqArccis

Boar - captain in Spitemorta's service who distributed the first of the skinweleriou

Brand - feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, brother of Laora

Brutus - Spitemorta's Captain of Royal Guard of Goll

Budog - one of Demonica's guards

Bushman, Thorn - Fuzz's name for himself while being interrogated by Demonica and Spitemorta

Butcher - Nafnarrfafyr (which see), trollish King before Fnanar (Big Butcher)

Buthut - dungeon guard in the Beak castle

Butterbutt - butterscotch butterfly, called Lukus "Stinky Breath"

Caelis - dungeon guard in the Beak castle

Carlin Cruinnich (Goblish-Beakish) - Ugleeuh

Ceidwad - diatryma, wife of Lladdwr, mother of Arwr

Cedwick - a leadbeater cockatoo with Mary's exodus

Chirp - slave sparrow (squeaks)

Cinder - feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, brother of Laora

Cinderella - feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, sister of Laora

Cinid - mage (the Old One) in the Beak castle

coachman - an Elf who hurled flaming oil onto the front of Suds and Steer

Cook - feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, brother of Laora

Cuchulainn, Danneth - Jutish Elf, Soraya's Brother

Daaney - Gwaelic Elven austringa

Danneth - (Danneth Cuchulainn) Jutish Elf, Soraya's brother

Daniel - twin, child of Soraya and Lukus

Dee, Miss Joan - Powder Face, Lukus's tutor

Demonica - Ugleeuh's mother, Spitemorta's grandmother, sorceress and behind the scenes power figure on the Dark Continent

Denez - prisoner in Demonica's keep

Devi - the Cia (or Watcher) in Demonica's service who took up body possession

Dewin - (wizard in Old Niarg) wizard Razmorten's last name, and Ugleeuh and Minuet's maden name as well

Donnel - King (Brude) Talorg's son and half brother of Myrtlebell

Dorchadas - Ugleeuh's reference to a particular Dorchadas

Drest - Beak lieutenant with Captain Girom at the Dragon Caves

Dunvel - sadistic sergeant who saw Herio to Castle Niarg

Dyrjinyryy - old troll shaman, with the trolls on both continents

Edmond - king of Loxmere, James's father, married Myrtlebell after Queen Ruella died

Edward - Myrtlebell's son

Eflamm (Breton) - prisoner in Demonica's keep

Eochaid - The Great Unicorn, a god and spiritual progenitor of King (Brude) Talorg. Talorg claimed that Eochaid was his direct ancestor.

Erp - Beak lieutenant with Captain Girom at the Dragon Caves

Etharnan - young Beak soldier who accompanied Tramae

Fa - Tramae's name for her father, Brude Talorg

Fire - dragonet

Fifi - Razzmorten's dog, his life-long companion due to enchantment

First Wizard - created the Heart and the Great Staff

Flame - feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, brother of Laora

Flash - feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, brother of Laora

Flit - a bat in Fuzz's den who helped haul away the Heart

Fnadiyahphn - Spitmorta's troll persona, the Great troll Goddess

Fnanar - Big Butcher (which see), twin brother of Nafnarrfafyr (Butcher)

Fornigell - (Cooker in Headlandish) feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, sister of Laora

Fritet (Breton) - Fried, dragonet

Fry - dragonet

Fuzz - Karlton Strong, known as Karlton to some and as Fuzz to others (Sir Karlton Strong)

Galor - an Elf in Oyster Cove who directed Razzmorten to find Unicorns in Fen

Gart - Captain of the Palace Guard of the Beaks

Gastro - son of Gastron, was an apprentice to wizard Razzmorten, married Ugleeuh and was turned into a sea serpent by her

Gearr Anuas - (Cut Down) Neron's other sword, a claymore

Gearr Téigh Síós - (Cut Down) Neron's first sword, a claymore which he gave to Lukus

Girom - Beak captain who captured Mary, Myrtlebell, Demonica and Spitemorta and visited the Dragon Caves

Gnophn - Worm, King of the Marooderyn Imshee (troll) after the death of his brother, Fnanar, and brother of Nafnarrfafyr. He is slain at Ash Fork attacking the Hebraun's army.

Gourmet - epicurean ant eater, offered Rose and Lukus chocolate covered ants

Graham, Talamh Coille - court herbalist and apothecarist at Oilean Gairdin, murdered by Ugleeuh

Grandma Bethan - see Bethan. Princess Rose's reference to Bethan

Great troll Goddess - see Fnadiyaphn

Greenwood - see Meri Greenwood

Guardians of the Woods - three old Fairies: Celeste, Nacea and Alvita

Gweltaz - small naked dragon dignitary who met Razzmorten, Rose, Lukus, Hubba Hubba and Pebbles at the pier in Dragonsport

Gwenole - Demonica's mount, a roudeneg unicorn

Gwir (Breton) - Truth, dragonet

Hebraun - King (Brenin) of Niarg, Rose's father

Hedfan - bat in Fuzz's den who helped haul away the Heart

Herio - plucky youth from Ash Fork, was charged by King Hebraun with protecting Queen Minuet

Herri - a prisoner in Demonica's keep

Hoël-Meriadeg - one of the two most powerful shamans of the last age on the Dark Continent who helped to lock the Cias within the Hanter Koadou

Homer - assailant in the Suds and Steer at Sweet Pea who stabbed Jerund's shoulder with a sword

Hot - dragonet

Hubba Hubba - Minuet's double yellow headed Amazon parrot, stolen and turned into a

crow by Ugleuh

Inney - Gwaelic Elven austringa (strike falconer) of Sheshey the shawk spooch (strike falcon)

innkeeper at the Suds and Steer in Sweetpea - reedy and red haired at first, white haired six years later

innkeeper's wife at the Suds and Steer in Sweetpea - obese and might have bathed with a bottle brush

Itis - a Beak lieutenant under Captain Gart, possessed by Devi

Jamali - Rose's owl-eyed cat

James - King of Loxmere-Goll, son of Edmond and Ruella, Spitemorta's Husband. He was betrothed to marry Rose.

Jarund - Elf, brother of Soraya, Danneth and Strom

Jeelys - shawk spooch (strike falcon) of Tramman, Inney's friend

Jockford - mercenary captain of the privateer fleet of ships hired by Demonica to haul trolls to the Northern Continent

Karlton - Biggand Karlton Strong, known as "Fuzz," former Captain Strong (Sir Karlton Strong) of the Niarg Royal Guard

Karl-Veur - Yann-Ber's brother, second in line by birth to the Throne of Pennvro (Head)

Karr-nij - Aeroplane, dragonet

Kast - naked dragon who met Yann-Ber at Dragonsport with Gweltaz

Kie - old pysgotwr (fisherman) Elf in Fen who raised Unicorns

Krazenn - Toast, dragonet

Lance - King James's retainer since he was boy and his best friend

Laora - dragonet, feathered daughter of Spark and Lipperella. Formed a bond with Edward.

Light - dragonet

Lipperella - naked dragon, Truth-Bearer (Truth-Teller) for dragons, Spark's wife

Lira - King (Brude) Talorg's wife, mother of Myrtlebell (by King Theran of Bratin Brute), Tramae and Donnel

Liri - Queen

Lladdwr - diatryma, husband of Ceidwad, Arwr's father

Loeiz - Gweltaz's wife

Lukus - Rose's brother, King Hebraun and Queen Minuet's son

Madadh-Allaidh Neartmhor - Mighty Wolf, deity, protector of King (Brude) Talorg

Mael - a Cia in demonica's service

Mali - short for Jamali, Rose's cat

man in rags - rolled his stone uphill endlessly in the Valley of Illusions

Margaret - chamber maid of King James's parents who witnessed Spitemorta murder his father, King Edmond

Mary - the White Witch, was held in enchantment as Rotundra the raspberry bear

Mazhev - one of Demonica's guards

MeqqArccis - Beak yeoman turnkey in the dungeon of the Beak castle, possessed by Devi

MeqqWirrp - a Beak prisoner tormented by turnkey MeqqArccis

Merzin - one of the two most powerful shamans of the last age on the Dark Continent who helped to lock the Cias within the Hanter Kodou

Milowe - a Cyclops, husband of Tillie, father of Ownlee

Minuet - queen (Brenhines) of Niarg, wife of Hebraun, mother of Rose and Lukus, called "Min-Min" and "Minny-Min" by her sister, Ugleeuh.

Miss Dee - See "Powder Face."

Mob, the - collective reference to the dragonets, Laora's siblings

Morgi - one of Spitemorta's guards, who began his service with her step-parents. Spitemorta thanked him for his service by beheading him with his own sword.

Mwg - Smoke, dragonet

Myrtlebell - daughter of King Theran and Queen Lira of Bratin Brute, antagonist at Rose's 16th birthday party, queen of Loxmere, James's stepmother,

Edward's mother

Mystique - Rose's cyflymder unicorn

Nafnarrfafyr - a deceased troll King, also called Butcher, who was killed by the Gwaelic Elves before Inney's time, who watches from the Land of the Dead, and a twin brother of trollish King Fnanar (Big Butcher), who succeeded him and was also killed by the Elves, and the brother of Gnophin, killed at Ash Fork

Neron - ri (king) of the Jutland Elves, husband of Nessa, father of Oisín, Illiam and Orry, great-grandfather of Soraya, Danneth, Strom and Jarund

Nightshade - Spitemorta's black cyflymder unicorn

Nijerez - Aeroplane, dragonet

Oana - a Cia in Demonica's service

Obbree - Gwaelic Elven austringa

Old Number One - King Hebraun's reference to the First Wizard

Olloo - Professor, Gwaelic Elven master austringa, who, as a teenager fled across the Eternal Mountains as he helped lead a party of children to safety from the trolls in the Great Strah

Onnen *f.* - Ash, dragonet

Ooree - Inney's name before coming of age

Ownlee - Cyclops child, son of Milowe and Tillie, discovered in a cave in the Enchanted Lands by Rose and Lukus

Padrig - lord chancellor of the dragons, naked dragon

Pebbles - Minuet's green cheeked Amazon parrot, Hubba Hubba's mate

Peoc'h - Peace, dragonet

Pep Tra - Everything, dragonet

Pitmaster - equivalent of the Devil

Powder Face - Miss Joan Dee, Lukus's tutor

Razorback - a naked dragon that Razzorbauch divined from himself to control the sukere slave dragons (later referred to as the dragon clan). He was also accidentally divined from himself and kept that way, when he attempted to cast a spell on his brother Razzmorten. Razorback led the Dragon Clan and was killed by King Hebraun.

Razz - Taflu's nickname for Razzmorten

Razzmorten - Razzmorten Dewin, a good wizard, father of Queen Minuet, brother of Razzorbauch

Razzorbauch - an evil wizard, twin brother of Razzmorten, murdered Gastron, created the Chokewoods and the Fudge Volcano and while burning Niarg's crops was killed by King Hebraun

Remont - a prisoner in Demonica's keep

Rose - Princess (Tywysoges) of Niarg, daughter of Hebraun and Minuet

Rotten Mouth - the drunk who told Yann-Ber where to find Razzmorten

Rotundra - raspberry bear form (enchanted by Ugleeuh) of Mary the White Witch

Rouanez Bras (Breton) (Headlandish) - Big Queen, one of Demonica's sarcastic names for Spitemorta

Rouanez Pouezus (Headlandish) - Heavy Queen, one of Demonica's sarcastic names for Spitemorta

Ruella - queen of Loxmere, wife of Edmond, mother of James

Samuel - the guard Spitemorta replaced Morgi with. Samuel was Spitemorta's childhood friend.

Scorch - feathered dragonet of Spark and Liperella, brother of Laora

Sea Jewel - the privateer owned and captained by Jockford and commissioned by Demonica to sail with Spitemorta and her and six other ships to the Eastern Continent to get 681 trolls.

Shaker - Ugleeuh's divined and palsied cow with rainbow teats

Sheshey - Inney's male shawk spoogh (strike falcon)

Shot 'n' Stop - enchanted python, helped lead Rose and Lukus to Fuzz's den, killed Ugleeuh

Sidney - one of the riffraff enlisted by Spitemorta to burn Goll's sukere crop

Skedus (Breton) - Light, dragonet

Smoke - dragonet

Smole - Demonica's skinweler grinder at her catoprolite mine

Soraya - Elf, Lukus's wife, mother of Ariel and Daniel

Spark - naked, fireless dragon, addicted to fudge, later the husband of Lipperella and the father of Laora

Spear - lieutenant under Captain Bernard in the Royal Army of Niarg

Spearsy - Razzmorten's reference to Lieutenant Spear

Spike - centaur, friend of Ownlee

Spink - one of the guards at the big door of Castle Goll proper

Spitemorta - Mad Reaper Witch, daughter of Ugleeuh, granddaughter of Demonica

Spring - enchanted wood rabbit, helped lead Rose and Lukus to Fuzz's den

Squeak - slave sparrow (tweets)

Stamson - hunchbacked bellman at the Suds and Steer, Sweet Pea

Starfire - Lukus's cyflymder unicorn

Stripes - peppermint walking stick

Strom - Elf, brother of Soraya, Danneth and Jarund

Strong, Biggand - Fuzz's name as Captain of the Royal Guard of Niarg, along with Karlton (Sir Karlton Strong)

Súlacha - (Eyes in Jutish Elven) paramilitary tracker Elf sent by Neron to help Hebraun and Niarg, scouted for Neron at the battle of Ash Fork

Sweetcheeks - enchanted, saccharine skunk, helped lead Rose and Lukus to Fuzz's den

Taflu - Fuzz's pet vampire bat

Talorg - Beak king (ru or brude) or king of Mar (was Greedigut), Gobbler king when enchanted by Ugleeuh)

Tan - Fire, dragonet

Theran - king of Bratin Brute, Myrtlebell's father

Tillie - a Cyclops, wife of Milowe, mother of Ownlee

TMS the Sea Sprite - the ship which took Razzmorten, Rose, Lukus, Hubba Hubba and Pebbles to the Peppermint Forest to see if the magic was failing

Toast - feathered dragonet of Spark and Lipperella, sister of Laora

Tomm - Hot, dragonet

Tors - Torch, naked dragon, Spark's elder brother

Tramae - King (Brude) Talorg's daughter, Myrtlebell's half-sister

Tramman - Inney's friend, Gwaelic Elven master astringa of Jeelys the shawk spooch (strike falcon)

Tristan - King Neron's cousin

Truth - dragonet

Truth-Bearer - Lipperella's official position in the Dragon Clan

Truth-Teller - Lipperella's official position in the Dragon Clan

Tweet - slave sparrow (chirps)

Ugleeuh - the Collector Witch, Bailitheoir Cailli, Carlin Cruinnich, Demonica's daughter, Spitemorta's mother, Minuet's half sister

Vindicator - King Hebraun's white stallion march streiciwr brenhinol unicorn

Virtue - Queen Minuet's mare march streiciwr brenhinol unicorn, twin to Vindicator

Wind - dragonet

Wiz - Hubba Hubba's name for Wizard Razzmorten

Yann-Ber - of the House of Dark (House of Penn is that of his mother), Demonica's husband, son of Emperor Azenor, disowned heir to the throne of Pennvro (Head) and the Dark Empire, brother of Karl-Veur

Ymladd of Ash Fork - father of Herio

Gazetteer

Arabat Enez - Forbidden Island, Demonica's keep

Ash Fork - village in Niarg, burnt to the ground by Brutus of Goll, just north of the Gold River and just south of southern tip of the Ash Mountains

Ash Lake - a lake east of Ash Fork on the Loxmere River, just west of the confluence of the Gold and Loxmere rivers

Ashmore - a flat scrubland used for grazing, north and north-west of Ash Fork, Where Hebraun first engaged the Golls

Ash Mountains - a small mountain chain running north and south along the border between Niarg and Loxmere

Balley Cheerey - (Country Town) (Baile Tuath in earlier times) village of Gwaelic Elves in the Great Strah

Beak Castle - see Caisteal-Beak and Caistealbeak

Beakmoor, the - see Beakmore

Beakmore - an extensive region of fens surrounding Caistealbeak, known as the Gobbler Marshes during the Peppermint Forest days

Black Desert - vast black sand desert, west of the Chokewood Forest and north of the Dread Sea

Bratin Brute - small kingdom north of Cyclopsia and south of the Jut of Niarg

Castle Goll - located in north central Goll, due south of where Dúradán Deannaigh lies in the Jut of Niarg

Castle Niarg - north of the Port of Niarg

Chocolate Volcano - the preferred dragon reference to the Fudge Volcano

Chokewood Forest - (Chokewoods) south of Goll and Cyclopsia. Was created by the wizard Razzorbauch when he used the Heart and the Great Staff to permanently change all of the forest's black and red oaks (*Quercus*) to chokeoaks (*Pseudoquercus horridus* R.)

Chokewoods - see Chokewood Forest

Cyclopsia - realm of the Cyclopes between Chokewoods, Braten Brute and Goll

Cyclops Plateaus - where Ownlee and Spike live, next to the Valley of Illusions, in Cyclopsia

Dark Continent - Tywyllwch (Old Niarg Standard), Dorchadas (Jutish Elven), Brastyr Tewl (Gwaelic), Mooar-Rheynn Dorragey (Gwaelic Elven), Douar-Noz (Headlandish),

Mòr-Thìr Dorch (Goblish-Beakish)

Dragon Caves - a limestone cavern system claimed by the Dragon Clan, inland from Dragonsport on the Orin Ocean, immediately south of Pirate Isle, saddling a break in the Dragon Mountain chain, interrupting the folding and faulting of the mountain chain proper with a landscape of sinks and collapsed caverns, also referred to as mountains.

Dragon Mountains - the name of the mountains on the Northern Continent which run north into the Orin ocean, forming the Pirate Isle Archipelago. During the last ice age of 14,000 to 10,000 years ago, known as the Loxmere Glaciation, the sea level dropped, receding from the Gulf of Orin, leaving a vast Alpine basin that connected the mountains of the archipelago to the mainland.

Dragonsport - abandoned sukere shipping port on the Orin Ocean, south of Pirate Isle and south of the Gulf of Orin, adjacent to the Dragon Caves

Dúradán Deannaigh - Jutish Elven village massacred by the Marooderyn Imshee, one half mile south of the Loxmere River, two leagues upriver from the mouth of the Gold River

Eastern Continent - Lobhadh (Jutish Elven), Gwael (Old Niarg Standard), Gwaremm (Headlandish), Yn Cheer My Hiar (Gwaelic Elven), Brastyr Howldrehevel (Gwaelic), Fearann Ear (Goblish- Beakish), Fafnafaf (trollish)

Ellsmore - small kingdom landlocked by Far on the north and by Loxmere on the west, south and east except for shipping access to the Port of Niarg and

Niarg Bay by way of the Shallow Sand River

Eternal Mountains - Sleityn Beayn, western mountains of the Eastern Continent

Fen - Elven village, one league down the coast from Oyster Cove

Forbidden Island - Arabat Enez, Demonica's keep

Fudge Volcano - (Chocolate Volcano, so called by the dragons) a volcano in the Peppermint Forest portion of the Chokewoods

Gobbler Castle - in the midst of the Gobbler Marsh (see Caisteal-Beak)

Gobbler Marsh - (Marshmallow Marsh) extensive fens surrounding the Gobbler Castle from the Peppermint Forest (Chokewoods) to the Chocolate Swamp, known as Beakmore (or the Beakmoor) to the Beaks, making up the outer reaches of their Kingdom of Marr

Gold Lake - a lake on the crater of an extinct volcano at the southern end of the Pitmaster's Kettles, origin of the Gold River

Gold River - connects Gold Lake and Loxmere River

Goll - bordered by the Great Barrier Mountains and the Great Wilderlands on the west, the Jut of Niarg on the north, the Enchanted Mountains and Cyclopsia on the south-east, Bratin Brute on the north-east and the Chokewood Forest on the south

Gollsburgh - a town in Goll

Gollsport - Goll's seaport outside it's borders, leased from Cyclopsia

Great Maidenhair Woods - see Maidenhair woods

Great Wilderlands - see Wilderlands

Gwael - see Eastern Continent

Gwaremm - see Eastern Continent

Hanter Koadou - territory to which the Cias are confined

Head - Pennvro

Headland - Pennvro

Homeland, the - (the Mammvro) the dragons' reference to their place of origin on the Dark Continent

Illusion Mountains - a small chain of mountains running north and south, just east of the Valley of Illusions.

Jutland - see Jut of Niarg

Jutland Lake - surrounds the island castle of Oilean Gairdin

Jut of Niarg - Jutland, southern arm of Niarg, lying between Goll on the south, Bratin Brute on the south-east and Loxmere on the north

Jutwoods - the vast woods covering most of the Jut of Niarg

Lake Jutland - the lake surrounding the island of Oilean Gairdin

Lobhadh - see Eastern Continent

Loxa - a town in Loxmere

Loxham - capitol of Loxmere

Loxmere - a country on the Northern Continent, land locked by the kingdom of Niarg on the north, south and west and with the Gulf of Orin and the Orin Ocean on the east

Loxmere-Goll - the combined kingdoms of Loxmere and Goll, joined after the marriage of James and Spitemorta

Loxmere River - originates in western Goll, flows through Ash Lake in the Jut of Niarg and empties into Oyster Cove on the Gulf of Orin

Maidenhair Woods - major forest of the Eternal Mountains with a climax canopy dominated by the blue maidenhair, *Ginkgo cyanophyllum R.*, the maidenhair, *Ginkgo biloba ingentissima R.* and the red maidenhair, *Ginkgo erythrofolium R.* trees. The

fringed maidenhair, *Ginkgo fimbriiflabella* R., though not a part of the climax canopy, is a related tree which is one of the first woody invaders after a fire. Interestingly, the shady slopes of north facing ravines are thick with the maidenhair fern, *Adiantum capillus-veneris* R. as well.

Mammvro (the) - (the Homeland) the primaeval home of the dragons on the Dark Continent, also known as the Red Lands or the Red Desert.

Marr, the Kingdom of - the kingdom of the Beaks, made up of an extensive region of fens called Beakmore or the Beakmoor, that were known as the Gobbler Marshes (Marshmallow Marshes) during the Peppermint Forest days, which surround a raised pastoral part of the Kingdom known as Caistealbeak, which includes the village of Caistealbeak which surrounds the Beak Castle, known as Caisteal-Beak

Marshmallow Marshes - see Gobbler Marshes

Midwoods - the Hanter Koadu on the Dark Continent

Niarg - a country that extends indefinitely north into the Great Boreal Reaches in the east, with Lardshire and Boneshire forming its northern borders in the west. In the west it extends to the Great Barrier Mountains at the eastern edge of the Great Wilderlands. It extends to Goll in the south, Bratin Brute in the south-east and to the Orin Ocean on the north and the Gulf of Orin on the south of its coast in the east. It land locks the kingdoms of Loxmere, Far and Ellsmore on their north west and south

Niarg - the town surrounding Niarg Castle, occasionally referred to as Niarg Proper

Niarg Castle - north of the Port of Niarg

Northern Continent - Brastyr Cleth (Gwaelic), Deatalamh (Jutish Elven), Glan Da (Old Niarg Standard), Gnyrjan ntu Afajoy (Plenty to Eat) (Trollish), Mooar-Rheyenn Twoaie (Gwaelic Elven), Norz-Douar-Bras (North Big Land) (Headlandish), Norz-Meurzouar (Headlandish), Mòr-Thir Tuathach (Goblish-Beakish)

Norz-Meurzouar - see Northern Continent

Oilean Gairdin - crystal village of the Jutland Elves on the shore of Lake Jutland plus Oilean Gairdin proper in Lake Jutland

Oilean Gairdin (proper) - garden isle of the royal castle of the Jutland Elves in the midst of Lake Jutland

Orin Ocean - the Ocean lying between the Northern Continent and the Eastern Continent

Oyster Cove - an inlet of the Gulf of Orin fed by the Loxmere River and shared by Loxmere on the north and the Jut of Niarg on the south

Pennvro - Head, Headland

Peppermint Forest - a portion of the Chokewoods enchanted for a time by Ugleeuh

Plenty to Eat - Gnyrjan ntu Afajoy, the Northern Continent

Port of Niarg - south of Castle Niarg on the east end of Niarg Bay at the mouth of the Shallow Sand River

Saddle, the - a high pass over the divide of the Jutland Mountains

Sleityn Beayn - see Eternal Mountains

Standing Rock - a huge isolated rock on the far west edge of Beakmore (Gobbler Marsh)

Sweetpea - village in Loxmere, next to the Jutwoods

Tywyllwch - see Dark Continent

Valley of Illusions - south of the Cyclops Plateaus in Cyclopsia

Wilderlands - (Dúiche Fhiáin) extensive unexplored lands in the western interior of the Northern Continent

Yar-Vor - (John Dory) a village next to Demonica's catoptrolite mine on the Dark Continent

Glossary

Foreign or Archaic Words into Niarg Standard Words

aalid *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - wild beauty

adar taranus *n.* (Old Niarg Standard) - thunderbirds

A leithéid de chac! - What a load of shit! (Jutish Elven)

an daouarn *n.* (Headlandish) - hands (a specific pair)

Ankou (Headlandish) - Spirit of Death

aoofn (trollish) - yes

arabat *a.* (Headlandish) - forbidden

Ar blijadur eo ganin. (Headlandish) - The pleasure is mine.

ar mel *n.* (Headlandish) - honey

arwr *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard) - hero

askelloù an neñvoù (Headlandish) - wings of the heavens, winged harbinger of the Fates - the equivalent of an angel

asyn *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard) - donkey

avel *n.* (Headlandish) - wind

baase *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - death

babái *n. pl.* (Jutish Elvin) - babies

Bailitheoir Cailli (Jutish Elven) - Collector Witch

balley cheerey *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - country town

banrigh *n. f.* (Goblish-Beakish) - queen

bodhrán *n. m.* (Jutish Elven) - an open backed, shallow drum with a 16"-18" head, played with a short double-headed stick

Boull c'hurun! (Headlandish) - Thunderation!

Bramm hep trouz na c'hwezh a zo labour difrouez, Kaoc'h ki glas! (Headlandish) - Flatulence without noise or force is pointless, you excrement of a blue

dog!

bras *a.* (Headlandish) - big

brenin *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard) - king

brude *n.* (Goblish-Beakish) - king

bu farw (Old Niarg Standard) - he died

bwgan *n.* (Old Niarg Standard) - hobgoblin

cac *n.* (Jutish Elven) - shit

cachu ci (Old Niarg Standard) - dog shit

Carlin Cruinnich (Goblish-Beakish) - Collector Witch

ceffyl arfog (Old Niarg Standard) - armed horse, a breed of unicorn, stout enough to bear armor

ceidwad *n. n.* (Old Niarg Standard) - keeper

c'hwiled-du *n.* (Headlandish) - cockroaches

Cia *n.* (Headlandish) - Watchers

ci hithau (Old Niarg Standard) - she dog (bitch)

crwydriaid wedi pydru (Old Niarg Standard) - rotten tramps

cyflymder *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard) - speed, a breed of fast unicorn

Dal! *advb.* (Headlandish) - Well!

derwen pwysaf *n.* (Old Niarg Standard) - leaning oaks, *Quercus recumbens R.*, a scrubby, evergreen oak, living in alkaline soils along warm coastal uplands where they grow, bending away from the prevailing winds.

Digor eo ma c'halon. (Headlandish) - I have a good appetite.

Doolish (Gwaelic Elven) - Douglas, a short legged Gwaelic Elven unicorn sharing a common ancestor with the Jutish Elven Dúlìsh unicorn.

Dorchadas *n. m.* (Jutish Elven) - lyoths given human form by an enchantment of the wizard Razzorbauch

dor c'hoarier koukou (Headlandish) - flippin' door

drewllyd *a.* (Old Niarg Standard) - stinking

droug-penn *n.* (Headlandish) - headache

drogh spyrrdyn *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - demons

duda (trollish) - no

Dudafayyrfnyophn! (trollish) - No way!

Dúlìsh (Jutish Elven and Old Gwaelic Elven) - Douglas, a short legged breed of Jutish Elven unicorn, sharing a common ancestor with the Gwaelic Elven Doolish unicorn.

dúradán deannaigh (Jutish Elven) - speck of dust

-dyr (trollish) - great; large

dyrija (trollish) - you are coming

dyrjinyryy (trollish) - the one who is a wizard

dyrney *n.* (trollish) - being; man; person

Dyrney (trollish) - the People

enez (Headlandish) - island

Eochaid *n.* (Goblish-Beakish) - Great Unicorn

evn *n. m.*, evned *n. m. pl.* (Headlandish) - bird, birds

evned-kurun *n.* (Headlandish) - thunderbirds

fainne leis an fhirinn innseadh (Gobblish-Beakish) - truth collar (ring to tell the truth)

fnadiyaphn (trollish) - witchcraft; enchantment; to perform magic; to bewitch

fnanar *n.* (trollish) - discord; enmity; eye; seed; war

fornigel *n.* (Headlandish) - cooker

garr anuas (Jutish Elven) - cut down

garr téigh síós (Jutish Elven and Old Gwaelic Elven) - cut down

glamourie *n.* (Northern English) - magical enchantment (in our usage of the term)

gnoff *n.* (Middle English) (Niarg Standard) (Archaic Modern Niarg) - lout, churl, boor

Gnyrjan ntu Afajoy (trollish) - Plenty to Eat (Northern Continent)

gouel priedel (Headlandish) - conjugal holiday

grimoire (French) - compendium of black magic spells and conjurations

gwael *a.* (Old Niarg Standard) - poor, miserable, sick, vile

gwaremm *n. f.* (Headlandish) - piece of waste land, heath

gwrteithiau *n.* (Old Niarg Standard) - manures

hanter *a.* (Headlandish) - mid, half

hedfan *vn.* (Old Niarg Standard) - to fly

herio *v.* (Old Niarg Standard) - to defy

hoc'h *n.* (Headlandish) - hog

hoc'hed lous (Headlandish) - dirty hogs

inney *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - bond maiden

jeelys *a.* (Gwaelic Elven) - devoted

Kalon-Bras (Headlandish) - Heart of the Staff

kaoc'h *n.* (Headlandish) - excrement, shit

kaoc'hioù *n. pl.* (Headlandish) - excrements

kaoc'h ki (Headlandish) - dog shit

Kaoc'h ki du! (Headlandish) - Excrement of a black dog!

Kaoc'h ki glas! (Headlandish) - Excrement of a blue dog!

Kenavo emberr! (Headlandish) - Until next time!

Kenavo warc'hoaz! (Headlandish) - Until tomorrow!

ki *n. m.* (Headlandish) - dog

kiez *n. f.* (Headlandish) - bitch

kiez bihan (Headlandish) - little bitch

kiez diskiant (Headlandish) - crazy bitch

kleñved-mor (Headlandish) - seasickness

knapdarloch *n.* (Beakish) - dung-matted hair or hide on the hind-quarters of cattle or sheep

koadou *n. m.* (Headlandish) - woods

kurun *n.* (Headlandish) - thunder

Kurun! (Headlandish) - Tarnation!

Kurun c'hoarier koukou! (Headlandish) - Flippin' tarnation!

léan air! (Jutish Elven) - shit!

lladdwr *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard) - killer

lladdwyr *n. m. pl.* (Old Niarg Standard) - killers

Lladdwyr Trachwantus *n. pl.* (Old Niarg Standard) - Greedy Killers (Elf Killers) - see Elf Killers, below

Lobhadh (Jutish Elven) - Eastern Continent

lobhadh *n. m.* (Jutish Elven) - rot

luathas *a.* (Goblish-Beakish) - speed

Madadh-Allaidh Neartmhor *n.* (Goblish-Beakish) - Mighty Wolf

marc'h *n.* (Headlandish) - horse

march streiciwr brenhinol (Old Niarg Standard) - royal striker horse, a breed of heavy battle horse bred by the House of Niarg

marfoir *n.* (Jutish Elven) - killer

marfora *n. pl.* (Jutish Elven) - killers

Marfora Siofra *n. pl.* (Jutish Elven) - Elf Killers - see Elf Killers, below

Marooderyn Imshee (Gwaelic Elven) - Elf Killer(s)

Marooderyn Imsheeyn (Gwaelic Elven) - Elf Killers

marmouzien *n. m. pl.* (Headlandish) - monkeys

menhir *n.* (Headlandish) - stone post monument

mochyn *n.* (Old Niarg Standard) - pig

Mwyaf Fawr Llosg *n.* (Old Niarg Standard) - the Greatest Burning

na beiste *n. f.* (Goblish-Beakish) - the beasts

naer *n. f.* (Headlandish) - snake

na h-uile-bheistean *n. f.* (Goblish-Beakish) - monsters

nafnarrfafyr *n.* (trollish) - butcher

Ntadu va nyrnifn gnyrjan ntu afajoy nyrfi foro! (trollish) - Don't worry, we have plenty of food!

nyr *n.* (trollish) - you

Nyrpfoninyrfinirfna Fnadirryaphny? (trollish) - Good enough, Demonica (Witch)?

obbree *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - workman

olloo *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - professor

ooree *v. n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - sweeten

pen cachu (Old Niarg Standard) - shit head

pennau cachu (Old Niarg Standard) - shit heads

phnyrfn (trollish) - my; mine

phnyrfindyrney (trollish) - my people

phnyrsifn *n. adv.* (trollish) - my tracks, behind me

phnyrsifndyrija (trollish) - follow me

pouezus *a.* (Headlandish) - heavy

pysgotwr *n.* (Old Niarg Standard) - fisherman

razh-raz (Headlandish) - lime rat

rouanez *n.* (Headlandish) - queen

roudeneg *n. m.* (Headlandish) - zebra, a placid breed of riding unicorn

ru *n.* (Goblish-Beakish) - king

runk *n.* (Goblish-Beakish) - whore

shawk spoogh (Gwaelic Elven) - strike falcon - see strike falcon, below

shawkyn spooqhey (Gwaelic Elven) - strike falcons - see strike falcon, below

sheshey *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - mate

skinweler *n. m.*; skinwelerioù *pl.* (Headlandish) - television set; a special type of scrying globe that can be used by those who do not have magical powers to receive broadcasts from and to talk to the magically skilled who control the globes. Skinwelerioù cannot be used by the magically endowed to find those who have not been previously introduced to the ball being used. (see scrying globe, below)

sláinte ollmhór *n.* (Juttish Elven) - giant wellness plant or Elven ginseng, *Aquilaria peloroicosum* *N.* (see Elven ginseng)

slán sábháilte (Jutish Elven) - safe and sound

strah *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - plain (geographical)

Strink Euzhus (Headlandish) - Horrifying Crystal, Heart of the Staff

sukee *n.* (Niarg Standard) - a fermented drink made from sukere that chemically alters the brain, causing one to be much less inhibited and to become highly suggestible. It is particularly insidious since inebriation is not followed by a hangover, and high concentrations of its unique alcohol are not toxic to its fermenting yeast, allowing extremely potent brews to develop without the need for distillation.

sukere *n. & a.* (Niarg Standard) - original meaning: sugar - very similar to sugar in appearance, taste and use, though its effects on one who eats it are more extreme. Its addiction, at once subtle and powerful, begins immediately.

sulacha *n.* (Jutish Elven) - eyes

taflu *v.* (Old Niarg Standard) - fling

taran *n. f.* (Old Niarg Standard) - thunder

tors *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard) - torch

trachwantus *a.* (Old Niarg Standard) - greedy

tramman *n.* (Gwaelic Elven) - elder

Ya da! (Headlandish) - Oh yes!

Yar-Vor (Headlandish) - John Dory

ymladd *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard) - fight

yn armee hasooagh (Gwaelic Elven) - the regular army

Niarg Standard Words into Foreign or Archaic Words

(& Technical Terms Defined)

abcess - hesked *n. m.*; heskidi *pl.* (Headlandish)

Age of Beasts, the - the era after the Greatest Burning (Mwyaf Fawr Llog)

Age of Birds, the - the era before the Greatest Burning (Mwyaf Fawr Llog)

armed horse, a breed of unicorn, stout enough to bear armor - ceffyl arfog (Old Niarg Standard)

astringa - keeper of goshawks, used here to mean: strike falcon trainer

babies - babái *n. pl.* (Jutish Elven)

bastards - oainjeragh *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

beasts, the - na beiste *n. f.* (Goblish-Beakish)

behind me, my tracks - phnyrsifn *adv. n.* (trollish)

being - dyrney *n.* (trollish)

bewitch - fnadiyaphn *v.* (trollish)

big - bras *a.* (Headlandish)

bird, birds - evn *n. m.*, evned *n. m. pl.* (Headlandish)

bitch (she dog) - ci hithau (Old Niarg Standard)

bitch - kiez *n. f.* (Headlandish)

bond maiden - inney *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

bond mate - the reference to either an astringa bonded to a strike falcon, or to a strike falcon bonded to an astringa

butcher - nafnarrfafyr *n.* (trollish)

butto - *Bos steatopygus R.*, very large wild cattle, males six feet high at the shoulders and females five and a half feet high. The species is particularly

characterized by both sexes having expansively developed gluteal tissues, producing gigantic buttocks. Both sexes are covered with dark shaggy chocolate brown hair, except on their snow-white rumps. They graze exclusively upon the grasses and sedges found in marshes bordering swamps. A unique strain of cellulose digesting bacteria in their guts produces astounding quantities of methane which the animals pass audibly in loud anal grunts with each step as they walk, causing the herd to superficially sound at short distances like a lowing multitude of wildebeaste. They are native to the wetlands of the Dark Continent. Introduced to the Northern Continent by the wizard Razzorbauch as a source of flammable gas to burn off the foliage of sukre canna being harvested before he discovered the utility of dragons for the same purpose.

catoptromancy *n.* - divination by means of a mirror (English from Greek)

catoptrolite - a variety of quartz (silicon dioxide) with trace amounts of diodite, only known to occur in one location on the Dark Continent. Discovered by

lens grinder Smole while hunting for a supply of blemish free rock crystal.

choke oak - *Pseudoquercus horridus R.*

Chokewood Forest - also called Chokewoods - originally an oak forest. Magically altered by the evil wizard Razzorbauch by using the Heart and the Great Staff to permanently change red oaks and black oaks (*Quercus*) to choke oaks (*Pseudoquercus horridus R.*) to serve as a vast plantation for enslaved dragons from the Dark Continent.

claymore - two handed sword

cocoahippus - *Cocoahippus monoceros R.*, terrier sized perissodactylids with five toes on each foot, thought to be the direct ancestors of modern unicorns, which became extinct nearly fifty million years ago. They were accidentally revived from fine Eocene cocoa shales by the wizard Razzorbauch when he penetrated the Earth's crust while forming the magma chamber for the Fudge Volcano. They feed on grasses, sedges and

other marshy habitat monocots found where the Gobbler Marsh meets the Chocolate Swamp.

cock roaches - c'hwiled-du *n.* (Headlandish)

Collector Witch - Bailitheor Cailli (Jutish Elven)

Collector Witch - Carlin Cruinnich (Goblish-Beakish)

compendium of black magic spells and conjurations - grimoire (French)

conjugal holiday - gouel priedel (Headlandish)

cooker - fornigell (Headlandish)

country town - balley cheerey *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

cut down - gearr anuas (Jutish Elven)

cut down - gearr téigh síós (Jutish Elven)

death - baase *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

defy - herio *v.* (Old Niarg Standard)

demons - drogh spyrrdyn *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

devoted - jeelys *a.* (Gwaelic Elven)

diatryma - *Diatryma gigantia R.*, ten foot tall, flightless birds, members of the

Thunderbird (Adar Taranus) Dynasty which originally escaped extinction by the Mwyaf Fawr Llog or Greatest Burning, when the rest of the Dynasty was exterminated, only to mysteriously become extinct a few million years later. They were accidentally revived from fine Eocene shales by the wizard Razzorbauch when he penetrated the Earth's crust while forming the magma chamber for the Fudge Volcano. They are omnivorous, opportunistic feeders that are capable of downing and dismembering small ungulates. They are covered with deep iridescent green plumage. Their tail feathers and primary flight feathers have brilliant red and yellow patches on each feather's trailing blade that remain completely hidden unless the bird is displaying. Their bony tails are not entirely fused into a pygostyle as in modern birds, but rather consist of a pygostylic terminus at the end of ten un-fused vertebrae, giving the birds a fan of feathers that can be waved about on the end of a flexible tail. There is nearly no sexual dimorphism, though males tend to be a few percent heavier and have deeper voices than the females. They are exceptionally intelligent, having a brain cavity of about 650cc, or roughly half the volume of modern Humans. However, being far less fatty than a mammalian brain, this is a very respectable computer. Possibly due to natural selection pressures favoring the keeping track of stashes of food morsels, diatrymas seem to have little or no barrier between the conscious and subconscious minds and have instantaneous recall of all the details that they once observed during any previous experience.

dirty hogs - hoc'hed lous (Headlandish)

dog - ki *n. m.* (Headlandish)

dog shit - cachu ci (Old Niarg Standard)

dog shit - kaoc'h ki (Headlandish)

donkey - asyn *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard)

Don't worry, we have plenty of food! - Ntadu va nyrrnifn gnyrjan ntu afajoy nyrfi foro! (trollish)

Douglas - Doolish (Gwaelic Elven), a breed of short legged unicorn sharing common ancestry with the Jutish Elven Dúlìsh.

Douglas - Dúlìsh (Jutish Elven and Old Gwaelic Elven), a breed of short legged unicorn sharing common ancestry with the Gwaelic Elven Doolish.

dragon - *Harpi tyrannus. R.*, a relative of *Archaeopteryx* and *Deinonychus*, which survived the Mwyaf Fawr Llog or Greatest Burning, traditionally classified as an Adar Drwg ("bad bird" in Old Niarg Standard) by such Niarg naturalists as Razzmorten Dewin. An eight to twenty foot long (six to thirteen foot tall) feathered flying Jurassic bird with teeth, fingered claws on the wrists of its wings and a long un-fused (non-pygostylic) bony tail, which developed the ability to produce, store and ignite large volumes of methane gas that enabled it to toast and make palatable the naturally occurring sukere cana in its original habitat on the Dark Continent. Dragons were rendered featherless when they were captured and taken to the Northern Continent by Razzorbauch and Demonica.

drum, shallow, open backed with a 16"-18" head, played with a double-headed stick - bodhrán *n. m.* (Jutish Elven)

dung-matted hair or hide on the hind-quarters of cattle or sheep - knapdarloch *n.* (Beakish)

elder - tramman *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

Elf - siofra *n.* (Jutish Elven and Old Gwaelic Elven)

Elf Killers - Marfora Siofra *n. pl.* (Jutish Elven and Old Gwaelic Elven) - Gwaelic or social trolls, *Homo neanderthalensis gwaelii R.*, heavy bodied hominids, indigenous to the Eastern Continent. They have a vastly expanded visual cortex, giving them a large occipital bun at the base of their skull. They hunt in groups, exclusively at night. They are quite adept at making crude wooden hafted and shafted stone tools such as knives, mauls and spears. They do not make, nor have they been seen to make use of such devices as bows and atlatls or fluid holding vessels. They have life-long pair bonds and share in the rearing of their young in a human-like manner, unlike their cousins, the Jutish trolls, *Homo neanderthalensis jutlandii R.* Though they frequently make temporary shelters of animal skins, they prefer large caverns and rocky recesses able to shelter extended family groups. They possess true language, though the only language of theirs which is known lacks some of the discrete parts of speech common to most human languages. It is far more sonorous and nasal sounding than any known human language.

Elf Killer(s) - Marooderyn Imshee (Gwaelic Elven) - *Homo neanderthalensis gwaelii R.* (see above)

Elf Killers - Marooderyn Imsheeyn (Manx) (Gwaelic Elven) - *Homo neanderthalensis gwaelii R.* (see above)

Elven ginseng - slainte ollmhor or giant wellness plant (dyrgnyfngnyrr to the trolls), *Aquilaria peloroicosum N.* discovered by the Elven king, Neron on the Eastern Continent and used where dramatic recoveries are imperative.

Elven maturation rate - 240 Elven years (*Soraya's age @fall of Oilean G.*) divided by 17 Human years (*Soraya's Human equivalent maturity @fall of Oilean G.*) times the age of the Human in question equals his maturity in Elven years

Elven naming day = 14.1 birthdays (years)

Elven seventh naming day = 99 birthdays (years)

Elves - *Homo sapiens ginkgoliberiensis R.*, a race of humans indigenous to the Maidenhair Woods of the Eternal Mountains of the Eastern Continent, characterized by ivory colored skin, eyes with various colors of irises highlighted with opalescent flashes and sparkles, pointed ears and hair which is either silky absolute black, absolute black with varying degrees of iridescence or metallic shades of silvery grey, gold or copper or an almost phosphorescent matte rust red. They are highly intuitive and are attuned to their natural surroundings and are predisposed to magical skills.

They have life spans scores of times as long as those of the rest of mankind.

enchantment - fnadiyaphn *n.* (trollish)

enmity - fnanar *n.* (trollish)

excrement, shit - kaoc'h *n.* (Headlandish)

excrements - kaoc'hioù *n. pl.* (Headlandish)

Excrement of a black dog! - Kaoc'h ki du! (Headlandish)

Excrement of a blue dog! - Kaoc'h ki glas! (Headlandish)

eyas - a hawk which has been freshly brought from the nest

eye - fnanar *n.* (trollish)

eyes - sùlacha *n.* (Jutish Elven)

fight - ymladd *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard)

Flatulence without noise or force is pointless, you excrement of a blue dog!- Bramm hep trouz na c'hwezh a zo labour difrouez, Kaoc'h ki glas!

(Headlandish)

fling - taflu *v.* (Old Niarg Standard)

flippin' door - dor c'hoarier koukou (Headlandish)

Flippin' tarnation! - Kurun c'hoarier koukou! (Headlandish)

fly - hedfan *vn.* (Old Niarg Standard)

follow me - phnyrsifndyrija (trollish)

forbidden - arabat *a.* (Headlandish)

forest - koadeg *n. f.* (Headlandish)

furlong - 220 yards, 1/8th mile

glamourie - a spell that changes the appearance of the one upon whom the spell is cast

glow lichen - *Cladonia antrolucidus R.*, a close relative of the reindeer lichen (reindeer moss) and lives in moist underground caverns. Its fungal symbiont takes up nutrients saprophytically from the moist cave walls and emits a strong bioluminescence which allows its plant symbiont to photosynthesize in turn, releasing sugars to the saprophyte. Glow lichen is common throughout lava tubes in the Pitmaster's Kettles and in deep cavern systems throughout the southern half of the Northern Continent. Luxuriant growths can light up caverns with their greenish yellow ambience at least as bright as artificially lighted rooms.

Good enough, Demonica (Witch)? - Nyrpfoninyrfinirfna Fnadirryaphny? (trollish)

good heavens! - chê! (Headlandish)

Great Unicorn - Eochaid *n.* (Goblish-Beakish)

greedy - trachwantus *a.* (Old Niarg Standard)

Greedy Killers - Lladdwyr Trachwantus *n. pl.* (Old Niarg Standard) - see Elf Killers, above

half ass - *Semiequus asinus R.* For reasons altogether unknown, the wizard Razzorbauch altered a population of whole asses so that their front quarters became so reduced in size that they no longer reached the ground. At the same time, he enlarged their tails to create a heavy cantilever balance. The result is a true breeding feral population of the only known saltatorial perissodactyls. They live in small harem groups of up to a half dozen, browsing in the thickets of edge of the Chocolate Swamp.

headache - droug-penn *n.* (Headlandish)

Heart of the Staff - Kalon-Bras (Headlandish)

Heart of the Staff - Strink Euzhus (Headlandish), Horrifying Crystal

heavy - pouezus *a.* (Headlandish)

he died - bu farw (Old Niarg Standard)

hero - arwr *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard)

hobgoblin - bwgan *n.* (Old Niarg Standard)

hog - hoc'h *n.* (Headlandish)

honey - ar mel *n.* (Headlandish)

Horrifying Crystal - Strink Euzhus (Headlandish), Heart of the Staff

Human - *Homo sapiens sapiens R.*, in our usage is a race and therefore is capitalized, just as one would Indian or White. Here, human, which means *Homo sapiens R.*, includes such races as Human and Elf and Fairy.

I have a good appetite. - Digor eo ma c'halon. (Headlandish)

island - enez (Headlandish)

jesses - strips of light but very tough leather, 12" long which always remain on each leg of a strike falcon

John Dory - Yar-Vor (Headlandish)

Jutish trolls - also known as solitary trolls, *Homo neanderthalensis jutlandii R.*, are

indigenous to the heavy deciduous forests of the Jut of Niarg. Like

their cousins of the Eastern Continent, the Gwaelic or social trolls, *Homo neanderthalensis gwaelii* R. (see Elf Killers), these hominids are very heavy bodied and have a greatly expanded visual cortex, giving them a large occipital bun on their cranium. They are exclusively nocturnal and solitary and do not form pair bonds. Their sexual behavior resembles that of the orangutan, and the young are reared exclusively by the female. It is not known whether or not they possess true language, though accounts given by the rare individuals who have survived their assaults suggest that they might have. They do not build shelters but live permanently in rocky recesses, from which they range only short distances. Their tools consist only of rudimentarily trimmed sticks and stones. They have not been known to use fire. They are omnivorous, but show a distinct preference for the raw flesh of large animals that stray near their dens. Accidental encounters with them are considered very dangerous by Elves and other

humans who live within their range.

killer - lladdwr *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard)

killer - marfoir *n.* (Jutish Elven)

killers - lladdwyr *n. m. pl.* (Old Niarg Standard)

killers - marfora *n. pl.* (Jutish Elven)

king - brenin *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard)

king - brude *n.* (Goblish-Beakish)

king - righ *n.* (Goblish-Beakish)

king - ru *n.* (Goblish-Beakish)

large - -dyr (trollish)

league - two miles by Niarg reckoning (*Oxford Concise* gives three miles)

leaning oaks - derwen pwysaf *n.* (Old Niarg Standard), *Quercus recumbens* R., a scrubby evergreen oak, living in alkaline soils along warm costal uplands, where they grow bending away from the prevailing winds.

lime rat - razh-raz (Headlandish)

magick - archaic spelling used here to mean specifically: a healing spell or conjuration

magicks - archaic spelling used here to mean specifically: an assemblage of healing spells or conjurations

maidenhair tree - *Ginkgo biloba ingentissima* R. (The Sacred Maidenhair of Oilean Gairdin is a *G. biloba ingentissima*) are broad leaved deciduous gymnosperms. These are the tallest living trees on earth with mature specimens towering from 375 to over 400

feet. The largest individual known, living near the bottom of the slopes of the Pitmaster Gorge in the Maidenhair Woods, measures 427 feet and is estimated to be well over 7000 years old. They are indigenous to the Maidenhair Woods of the western Eastern Continent where they are the dominant tree, forming the canopies in the deep valleys and steep slopes of the Eternal Mountains up to about 6500 feet. They are amongst the oldest living things on earth with some trees having nearly 10,000 annual rings, though the record for age is held by the very much smaller blue maidenhair, *Ginkgo cyanophyllum* R., of the mountain tops and tree line.

man - dyrney *n.* (trollish)

manure - gwrtaitn *n.* (Old Niarg Standard)

manures - gwrteithiau *n.* (Old Niarg Standard)

mate - sheshey *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

mid, half - hanter *a.* (Headlandish)

Mighty Wolf - Madadh-Allaidh Neartmhor *n.* (Goblish- Beakish)

mine - phnyrfn (trollish)

monkeys - marmouzien *n. m. pl.* (Headlandish)

monsters - na h-uile-bheistean *n. f.* (Goblish-Beakish)

my - phnyrfn (trollish)

my people - phnyrfindyrney (trollish)

my tracks, behind me - phnyrsifn *n. adv.* (trollish)

naming day - see Elven naming day

no - duda (trollish)

No way! - Dudafayrnyophn! (trollish)

Oh yes! - Ya da! (Headlandish)

peppermint trees - *Mentha lignumpiperita* R.

person - dyrney *n.* (trollish)

Phororhacos longissimus R. - see 'strike falcon'

pig - mochyn *n.* (Old Niarg Standard)

pitkins - (the) Devil

Pitmaster - (the) Devil

plain (geographical) - strah (Gwaelic Elven)

poop-ornament - a ship's apprentice

professor - olloo *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

queen - banrigh *n. f.* (Goblish-Beakish)

queen - rouanez *n.* (Headlandish)

real; true; net - gwir *a.* (Old Niarg Standard)

rod - (perch, pole) 5 1/2yds. (16 1/2 ft.)

rotten tramps - crwydriaid wedi pydru (Old Niarg Standard)

royal striker horse - march streiciwr brenhinol (Old Niarg Standard)

rufter hood - hood used for training strike falcons

safe and sound - slán sábháilte (Jutish Elven)

scrying ball - scrying globe, scrying crystal (essentially a crystal ball); a ball usable only by the magically gifted to view people or places at distances whose locations are already known (see skinweler, above)

seasickness - kleñved-mor (Headlandish)

seed - fnanar *n.* (trollish)

seventh naming day - see Elven seventh naming day

she dog (bitch) - ci hithau (Old Niarg Standard)

shit - cac *n.* (Jutish Elven)

shit! - léan air! (Jutish Elven)

shit head - pen cachu (Old Niarg Standard)

shit heads - pennau cachu (Old Niarg Standard)

snake - naer *n. f.* (Headlandish)

speck of dust - dúradán deannaigh (Jutish Elven)

speed, a breed of fast unicorn - cyflymder *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard)

speed - luathas *n.* (Goblish-Beakish)

Spirit of Death - Ankou (Headlandish)

stinking - drewllyd *a.* (Old Niarg Standard)

Stone Heart - Heart of the Staff

stone post monument - menhir *n.* (Headlandish)

strike falcon - shawk spooch (Gwaelic Elven), *Phororhacos longissimus R.*, an 8-9 foot tall, flightless gruiform raptor, a member of the True Bird (Adar Gwir) Dynasty, indigenous to the open tall grass strah of the Eastern Continent, where it was the top predator of the biome, a strict carnivore capable of bringing down mammals weighing up to 450 pounds or more. Though it usually hunted singly or in pairs, it was known to form into formidable foraging packs on rare occasions. Human habitation and livestock grazing remained utterly impossible on the Great Strah until all strike falcons were exterminated in the wild, only three Elven generations ago (1000 yrs.). Today all known strike falcons live symbiotically with the Gwaelic Elves, where each bird is assigned upon hatching to its personal, life-long Elven trainer called an *astringa*. The falcon must be placed at hatching with the astringa within mere hours of the astringa's seventh naming day (99th birthday), and they remain in perpetual contact with one another until the death of one of them. Strike falcon and astringa form a deadly military assault unit for the defence of the Gwaelic Elves, particularly from the ravages of the Elf Killers,

Homo neanderthalinsis gwaelii R., also known as Social trolls.

strike falcons - shawkyn spoochey (Gwaelic Elven)

sweeten - ooree *v.n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

Tarnation! - Kurun! (Headlandish)

television set - skinweler *n. m.*; skinweleriou *pl.* (Headlandish) (see skinweler; also see scrying ball)

the one who is a wizard - dyrjinyryy (trollish)

the People - Dyrney (trollish)

The pleasure is mine. - Ar blijadur eo ganin. (Headlandish)

the regular army - yn armee hassooagh (Gwaelic Elven)

thunder - kurun *n.* (Headlandish)

thunder - taran *n. f.* (Old Niarg Standard)

Thunderation! - Boull c'hurun! (Headlandish)

thunderbirds - adar taranus *n.* (Old Niarg Standard)

thunderbirds - evned-kurun *n.* (Headlandish)

torch - tors *n. m.* (Old Niarg Standard)

to watch TV - sellout ouzh ar skinwel (Headlandish)

troll - trollag *n.* trollagyn *n. pl.* (Gwaelic Elven)

trolls - see Jutish trolls

truth collar (ring to tell the truth) - fainne leis an fhirinn innseadh (Goblish-Beakish)

Until next time! - Kenavo emberr! (Headlandish)

vampire bat - *Desmodus rotundus*

waist - derivative abbreviation of early 16th to middle 17th century use of 'waistcoat,' a light jacket with or without sleeves

Watchers - Cia *n.* (Headlandish)

Well! - Dal! *advb.* (Headlandish)

whang - 16th century Borderland word for thong, still in use in Appalachia

What a load of shit! - A leithéid de chac! (Jutish Elven)

whole ass - *Equus holoasinus R.* large horse sized wild asses, 14-15 hands high (5 feet) at the shoulders, that live in mutualism with buttoxen. When alarmed, like all cattle, buttoxen rise first on their hindquarters, allowing them to keep an eye on predators from beneath branches of trees. This puts them at a disadvantage in tall forage away from trees. However, whole asses rise with their front quarters first, as do all horses, allowing them to see predators immediately over the tops of grass. In this way, traveling with whole asses allows the buttoxen to range safely out into the open. Fully on their feet, buttoxen form defensive circles to keep large predators at bay, protecting not only their own calves but also their mutualist sentry whole asses.

whore - runk *n.* (Goblish-Beakish)

wild beauty - aalid *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

wind - avel (Headlandish)

winged harbinger of the Fates - askelloù an neñvoù (Headlandish), wings of the heavens

wings of the heavens - askelloù an neñvoù (Headlandish), winged harbinger of the Fates

witchcraft - fnadiyaphn *n.* (trollish)

woods - koadou *n. m.* (Headlandish)

workman - obbree *n.* (Gwaelic Elven)

yes - aofn (trollish)

you - nyr *n.* (trollish)

you are coming - dyrija (trollish)

zebra, a placid breed of riding unicorn - roudeneg *n. m.* (Headlanish)

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