

the Hateful WARS

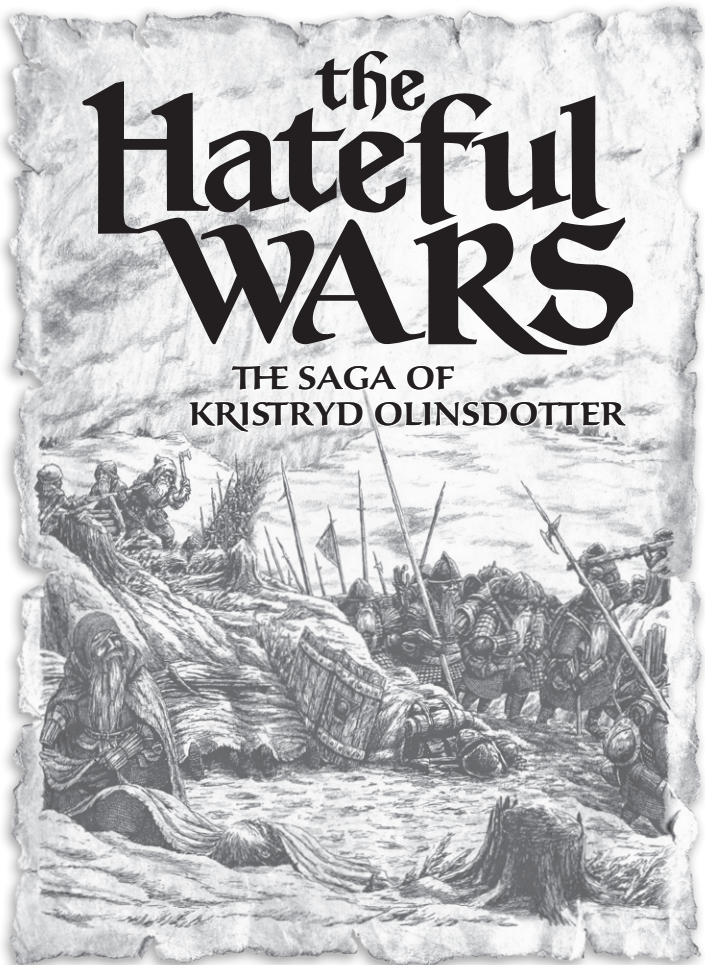
THE SAGA OF
KRISTRYD OLINSDOTTER



THOMAS KELLY

the Hateful WARS

THE SAGA OF
KRISTRYD OLINSDOTTER



THOMAS KELLY

THE HATEFUL WARS: THE SAGA OF KRISTRYD OLINSDOTTER

Copyright © 2022 by Greyhawkstories.com

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review or scholarly journal.

The Hateful Wars is unofficial Fan Content permitted under the Fan Content Policy. Not approved/endorsed by Wizards. Portions of the materials used are property of Wizards of the Coast. ©Wizards of the Coast LLC.

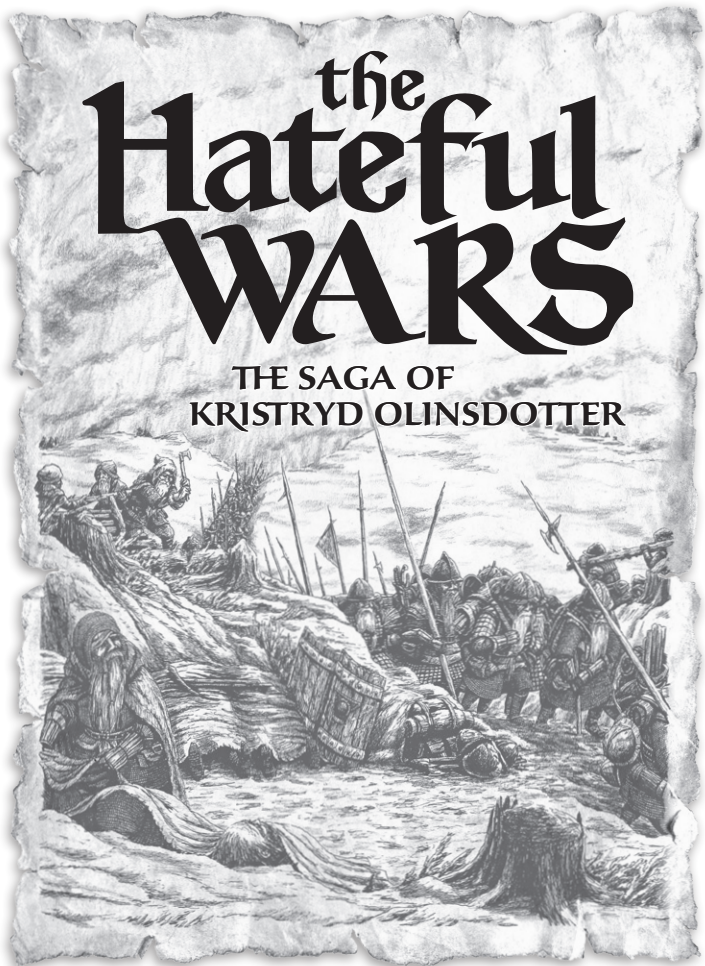
Names used in this work may be trademarks or intellectual property of Wizards of the Coast Inc. Such use should not be construed to challenge ownership of said trademarks or intellectual property in any way, nor is the work intended for profit or resale, but should be considered a work of fan fiction and falls under Wizards of the Coast's Fan Content Policy.

Published in serial online at Greyhawkstories.com, 2020–2021
eBook version 2022

Greyhawkstories.com

the Hateful WARS

THE SAGA OF
KRISTRYD OLINSDOTTER



THOMAS KELLY

greyhawkstories.com

**To the Greyhawk community—
until the Starbreak.**

**Editions change; Greyhawk endures;
Spit upon the Old One!**



CONTENTS

Acknowledgements . . . . .	.xi
PRELUDE Something Wicked	1
CHAPTER 1 Ehlonna's Blessing.	3
CHAPTER 2 Ways Fraught with Peril.	14
CHAPTER 3 The Stolen Anvil	24
CHAPTER 4 Her Fey Majesty.	33
CHAPTER 5 The Fey Mysteries.	40
CHAPTER 6 Lay of Larethian	48
CHAPTER 7 The Queen's Wrath	56
CHAPTER 8 The Suel Spell	65
CHAPTER 9 The Drawing of the Veil.	72
CHAPTER 10 A Voice in the Dark	78
CHAPTER 11 Way of Tears	86
CHAPTER 12 The Stirges' Nest	95
CHAPTER 13 Moonarch of Sehanine	103
CHAPTER 14 Under the Moonarch.	109
CHAPTER 15 Spells & Stratagems	120
CHAPTER 16 The Halfblood Prophecy	132
CHAPTER 17 Among the Tested	139
CHAPTER 18 Black Ichor.	146
CHAPTER 19 The Caging of Gretyll	153
CHAPTER 20 The Undermountain Queen	162
CHAPTER 21 Bagbag's Troubles	172

CHAPTER 22	Hammer and the Anvil . . . . .	.177
CHAPTER 23	Hedvyg's Reflection . . . . .	.187
CHAPTER 24	Ghosts of Velstar Keep . . . . .	.193
CHAPTER 25	The Scribbet on the Stone . . . . .	.199
CHAPTER 26	The Siege of Jurnre . . . . .	.207
CHAPTER 27	The Battle of Riechsvale . . . . .	.213
CHAPTER 28	Siege of Castle Hagthar . . . . .	.221
CHAPTER 29	Esmerin . . . . .	.225
CHAPTER 30	Back from the Dead . . . . .	.234
CHAPTER 31	Hail, Kristryd . . . . .	.244
CHAPTER 32	Comes the Trampling Host. . . . .	.255
CHAPTER 33	Siege of Hoch Dunglorin . . . . .	.261
CHAPTER 34	Ceremonies. . . . .	.268
CHAPTER 35	Into the Abyss . . . . .	.274
CHAPTER 36	End of War. . . . .	.284
CHAPTER 37	A Taste of the Lethe . . . . .	.289

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO THE original creators of the World of Greyhawk and all its contributors in its evolving canon: Dave Arneson, Darlene Diesel, E. Gary Gygax, the Gygax children, Gary Holian, Rob Kuntz, Leonard Lakofka, Erik Mona, Roger E. Moore, Sean K. Reynolds, Carl Sargent, James Ward, Frederick Weining—not necessarily in that order.

This work relies upon the creative contributions of the Greyhawk community culled from *Canonfire!*, *Dragon Magazine*, *Greyhawkery*, *Greytalk*, *Greyhawkonline*, *Oerth Journal*, various online forums, Facebook groups, and elsewhere on the internet where the story of the Hateful Wars received embellishment and the tales of Oerth took shape.

Special thanks to the great cartographer Anna B. Meyer, whose inspiring maps have kept the stage fresh and kept the actors engaged.

Thank you to the Living Greyhawk creators for fleshing out the world.

Thank you to my friends in the Greyhawk community, brothers and sisters in arms, and all those whose characters have fought and shed their fictitious blood for the freedom of the Flanaess. Special mention (for one reason or another) goes to Joe Bloch, Bryan Blumklotz, Mike Bridges, Casey Brown, Scott Casper, Allan T. Grohe, Dave Guererri, Paul Kidd, Βικτώρια Κανελλοπούλου, David Leonard, Carlos Lising, Andy Markham, Kristoph Nolen, Jay Scott, Anthony Thomas, Kirt Wackford, and Jason Zavoda. Thanks to Tulikoura for permission to use the cover artwork “Pyres and Great Labor.”

Finally, thanks to the scribe and historian Pluffet Smedger without whom this work would not be possible.



Prelude

SOMETHING WICKED

SOMETHING WICKED FLICKERED into view. It flashed and pulsed in bursts of flame, smoke, and light that leapt up from the burning coals in the scryer's pot. Gretyll, the eldest of the three sisters and most powerful of the three, cast another handful of smoke-raising herb onto the hot coals as Hedvyg, the youngest of the three sisters, completed the recitation of the incantation. Gunhyld, the middling sister and ever the excitable of the three, cackled and keaked, "I can see her! It's working! I see the face of a human woman!"

"Fonkin! Be silent!" Gretyll scolded. She tossed on a third handful of smoke-raising herb and the figure formed more fully in the haze—a woman beautiful by any standard, even in the eyes of the dwarf sisters. The lovely form seemed to be made of smoke and flame, yet somehow, almost solid and corporeal. Flowing dark hair undulated and writhed as if alive in motion with the rising heat from the burning coals, and imperious lips hardened into a sneer. Those lips moved in concert with a voice that came as if from beyond Oerth, "Kneel."

The three sisters knelt.

"Why have you called me again?"

Speaking on behalf of her siblings, Gretyll plucked up courage and replied, "Majesty, we desire to know. Which one of us three shall reign for thee? And what shall become of our people, the steadfast dwur?"

"Our kingdoms will be one," the visage replied in a honeyed tone both sweet and fearsome, "We join hands across the gap between the peaks. The one who serves me best will reign over all the dwur-folk and teach them dignity."

"What shall become of the other two?" Gunhyld asked excitedly, still on her knees before the scryer's pot.

"Let them serve the one I love the most," the flickering phantasm promised.

Each sister thought herself the one the summoner would love the most, but Gretyll pressed for some useful tool with which to

prevail. "We seek a surety," Gretyll said. "And a weapon to wield against the sons of Gruumsh," she added.

"And against the bugging sons of Larethian," Gunhyld blurted tactlessly.

"You promised us your devilshine for Lortmil stones, but until now, you have given us nothing," said Hedvyg, the most practical minded of the three sisters.

The smoke began dissipating. The vision of the beautiful woman diffused and faded along with it, distorting itself into a wispy image of an old woman, stooped with age. The disembodied voice still spoke clearly enough, "So long as the gods of the goblinkind remain seated in their mountain, I am prevented! Behold. I send my daughter. She brings you a useful book."

Chapter 1

EHLONNA'S BLESSING

THERE WAS A dwarf named Olinstaad from the house of Corond, born in the city of GyraX on the Bay of Adirole. His father was Morgiz and his mother was called Anesia, and both of them were noble dwur of the old blood of Balnorhak. They kept an estate on the river that flows between Eastpass and Oakhollow where they had lived for so many centuries that the river took its name from them, and no one remembers if it had ever had a different name. In those days, the remote mountains belonged to the old dwur kingdoms, but the lowlands and the mountain passes belonged to the Lion Throne of Niolo Dra.

The blood of Olinstaad came from no insignificant place. The noble House Corond boasted close ties of kinship with the dwur of Irongate, and, in his youth, Olinstaad twice crossed the Azure Sea by way of sailing ship to visit those far-off lands. A noble and affluent dwarf, he made a name for himself as a roguish hero of great strength and prowess in battle, renowned for his brave exploits and adventures in the mountains, in the faraway lands of Yeomanry, and further abroad—even as far as the Barrier Peaks. When the proud young dwarf was ready to settle down for a respectable life and take a wife, he married Sjarrdys Dagberyl, the sister of Oldid Silverbeard and a daughter of a noble house of Ironhelm. With her dowry came the vestige honors of that ancient and no-more kingdom called Balnorhak, and Olinstaad received the crown and title to become Prince Olinstaad Corond of Ulek, Lord of the Peaks of Haven.

The Daughter of Sjarrdys

By his first wife, Sjarrdys, the Prince Olinstaad had a daughter called Kristryd, and after her, two sons. Some say she had been born under the boon of the Fey Queen Astaranthe, the queen of Celene. If the story is to be believed, Sjarrdys Dagberyl, the first wife of Prince Olinstaad, was barren, for her womb was like hard-stone soil where no seed could take root. In distress and despair

over her shame, the prince's wife made pilgrimage to the fey kingdom and begged a blessing from the elven queen. Astaranthe had mercy and granted the boon. She blessed the prince's wife in the name of the goddess Ehlenestra and bade the dwarf-woman drink deep a draught from her own goblet of green wine. Then with such blessings and enchantments as she could bestow, the elven queen sent the dwarfess back to her husband whence she did conceive at once and in due course gave birth to a daughter—and after that, to two sons. Needless to say, the royal court of Havenhill and Gyraax denies the story, but many remarked that the child had a fey look about her—more like an elf-child in appearance than a proper dwarven girl. The girl had her mother's thick and curling black hair, but she looked slight of frame for a dwarf and not so heavy faced as her kin. Instead, her visage seemed to bear the sharp keen edges of fey blood. The prince named the fairy-child Kristryd after his mother's mother. He showed no concern over his daughter's slightness of form, "She shall be a proper dwarfess and stout enough in good time."

Kristryd matured into a healthy dwur lass, dark-haired and dark-eyed, keen and quick-witted, but not exceptional in any other way except her petite frame and the fey features. Strong and sturdy as any other dwur girl, she quickly learned to swing the hammer and the axe, and she learned which end of the sword to hold and which to thrust.

Sons and daughters of dwarven nobles apprentice themselves—for short spells—under every profession practiced in the clan, so that they might obtain some knowledge of every trade over which they will one day lord. Kristryd learned the arts of mining, stonework, metallurgy, smithying, loom-work, warp of weft, husbandry, brewing, baking, bartering, and all craftsmanship practiced by her kin within the Principality. Moreover, she learned the art of mothering, for Kristryd doted over her two younger brothers as if they were her own sons. When her mother Sjarrdys died unexpectedly, young Kristryd took it upon herself all the more to nurture her brothers and smother them in her affections as if by her attentions she might compensate them for their loss. Her brothers Olin and Orin considered her more mother than sister, and they looked on her with fond affection. "Kristryd!" the Prince Olinstaad scolded her, "If you pamper them too much, you'll make them soft!"

In the Court of Nirole Dra

The prince sent young Kristryd to the Royal Military Academy

in Gyra, where Keoish instructors schooled officers of the Royal Army in languages, etiquette, mathematics, philosophy, and architecture, as well as military history, weapon proficiency, tactics, and strategy. Because she excelled in her studies, he sent her to be tutored in the court of King Tavish II at Niole Dra: "the center of all culture and scholarship," or so the prince believed. In that city of men, the dwarfish girl learned much of the world and all that is useful at court and in the world of politics, but she also felt ill at ease far away from home and removed from her own kind. The children of noblemen are cruel of tongue, and they teased the girl mercilessly all the years she remained at court, not less because she was pretty to their eyes, that is, until the hair of her face began to grow. Nonetheless, she learned what she might, made such friends as she could among the children of human aristocrats, and she braided her dark beard in the manner of a dwarf maid. Nor was she alone without a warder, for Prince Olinstaad entrusted her to his most-loyal, trueheaded advisor, the court wizard, Bagbag Silverstonecutter of Khundrakar. Bagbag proved loyal to the prince's daughter as he was to the prince himself, and he oversaw all aspects of Kristryd's education. Kristryd showed little interest in the types of studies to which a young princess should apply herself. Instead of arts and crafts, matters of court, poetry and literature, charms and potions, Kristryd learned the histories of men and elves, and she learned to master their languages. She studied the lore of the twin cataclysms and the great migrations. She read the tomes that recorded the history of the wars of Keoland and the Great Kingdom, paying special interest to those passages which concerned her land and her people. Moreover, she poured over maps of the Flanaess, learning what she could of all its lands, the roads, the trade routes, and the strategies of war. Bagbag Silverstonecutter was a loremaster himself, and he encouraged the young dwarfess to pursue such interests, always pointing her toward another book, another map, another scroll. "It is fitting for the daughter of the prince," he assured her, "to be conversant with all things that touch on the art of kings."

The Pretty Penny

With her studies completed and she, by then, entering her thirty-sixth year, Bagbag returned the girl to her father. Laying his eyes upon his now full-grown and rounded daughter, Prince Olinstaad remarked, "Tall as a mountain dwarf and as fair as an elf lass, you shall fetch me a pretty penny for a bride price." And so

she did. In the year 440 of the common reckoning, Prince Olinstaad Corond gave his daughter Kristryd in marriage to the Prince Grallwen Evrast of Dengar, son of the undermountain king, to cement a restoration of relationship and mutual goodwill between the Principality and Thane Evrast VII of Dengar. "If Keoland marches against us, we will need him," the Prince said. "Four and a half centuries should be time sufficient even for dwarves to forget old grudges."

The Wedding of Kristryd Olinsdotter

The Prince of Ulek bade his daughter farewell and set a tiara upon her dark curls. He kissed her forehead. Tears streaked down his cheeks and moistened his beard before he released her from his arms. Four stout lads lifted her on a litter which they carried all the distance to the Duchy of Ulek. All that way, old Bagbag paced alongside on foot.

Duke Gallowagn of Ulek, the high elf lord over those lands, welcomed Kristryd and her party to Tringlee and entertained the dwarves in grand style. Indeed, he bade them eat from his own table.

When they had set aside desire for food and drink, conversation turned to matters of politics and news of realms. "I am much amazed," Kristryd said to the duke, "That you, being an elf, have shown such grace to us." She spoke in the olven tongue, a mark of her learning in Keoland and old Bagbag's tutelage.

"Your warder can tell you that I am an old friend of your father," the wise elf lord replied in the dwur tongue. Then switching back to Olven, he declared, "In *Lothromenoron*, we are a broad-minded people, accepting the many peaceably and with mutual goodwill."

"*Lothromenoron*," Kristryd repeated thoughtfully in Olven. The name spoke of long-ago fairy-tale days. The new name of the territory, "The Duchy of Ulek," had little meaning to the ancient elf lord. "What of your neighbors in the mountains? Are you also broadminded toward the dwur in Dengar and Gilmorack?" Kristryd asked.

"Your highness, it is my fond hope," the duke replied, "That you yourself shall become an ambassador of good will between our peoples. We all hope that this marriage marks an end to the old blood feud which has far too long endured."

"Let the blessing of Berronar rest upon the bride and groom," trueheaded Bagbag said in toast, lifting his cup. All those at the duke's table lifted their own and assented, "Yes, so be it."

The Silver-Framed Mirror

A servant entered with a small parcel which he handed to the grey elf lord. "Now let me present her highness with a wedding gift fit for the soon-to-be queen of the Lortmil Mountains," the duke said. Kristryd blushed red as the tall elf bowed before her and placed the parcel into her hands. Her graceful fingers gently unwrapped a soft velvet cloth protecting a polished hand-mirror set in silver and mithril. Holding it up by its finely-crafted iron-wood handle, she gazed into the perfect reflection of her own face, framed by gleaming silver. Elven runes were etched along the circumference of the silver frame. She recognized the script as that of the ancient grey elves and translated the words in her head, "*Look into me and see what other eyes can see.*" Turning to the duke, she asked, "What does the riddle mean?"

Before the duke could proffer an answer, old Bagbag sighed with approval, "Ahhh, 'tis an elven scrying mirror! That is a princely gift indeed! But she will need an elf to teach her to use it!" He winked knowingly at the duke and added, "We dwarves have little talent for magic."

"She will learn the use of it easily enough, I believe," the duke said confidently. "She may find the protocols of privacy the more difficult task to master."

Hoch Dungalorin

The Prince Grallwen of Dengar would not leave the mountains, not even to fetch his bride. Such is the manner of the mountain dwarves. Bagbag arranged a rendezvous at Hoch Dungalorin, an ancient dwarven fort that sat upon the steep-banked hill at the west of the Celene Pass.

"Now my lady, we leave the civilized lands and enter the wild mountains," Bagbag warned as their party began the ascent from the foothills. The mountain shoulders loomed before them, dominating the horizon. "We must beware the brood of Grot-Ugrat. That wicked city of the hobgoblin gods casts its shadow over all these lands." They had little cause for fear. Duke Gallowagn provided escort all the way to Dungalorin, for he would not find it easy to explain if some mishap befell the princess while she passed through his lands.

The dwarf prince, Grallwen of Dengar, awaited his bride's arrival. The fort called Hoch Dungalorin stood atop the steep slopes of a hillock that controlled the entrance to the pass, and as such,

it's looming shadow was visible for several miles of the approach. As the troop from Tringlee came in sight of the high ramparts, the trumpeters announced their arrival with fanfare, and the trumpeters of Dunglorin answered. From within her coach upon the litter, the princess leaned out the side and caught sight of a noble dwarf lord standing high up among the battlements. Sunlight glinted off his shining adamantine armor, and over his head the pendants of Dengar flapped in the wind next to the standard of the Three Arrows over Three Peaks for the Duchy.

"That, my lady, is your lord Grallwen," Bagbag informed her. Kristryd pinned up the braids of her chin and wrapped a veil over her face in the custom of dwarven brides.

Thane Bolor Blackaxe, lord over the Hoch, received the betrothed princess into his austere halls with as much pomp and formality as the old warrior could muster. He conducted Hoch Dunglorin as a military fort, not a palace. The heavy stone blocks of the fort needed little by way of ornament or adornment, for they were cut of the striated granite of the Lortmil quarries. The dwarves polished the stone to reveal its natural beauty, but they were reluctant to work the magnificent stone further or to conceal it behind cedar panels or woven tapestries.

Bolor Blackaxe's warriors slept in narrow bunks and on donge cots in crowded barracks, not on soft spacious beds suitable for a prince of Dengar or a princess of Ulek. The dwarf women of Hoch Dunglorin worked alongside their husbands, brothers, and fathers and shared equally in their labors and in the depravations of their austere accommodation. But when Kristryd and her retinue arrived, Thane Blackaxe declared a day of feast and celebration. He lifted many bowls to both the groom and the bride, and he drained them too. Handsome young Prince Grallwen sat at his right. Grey-bearded, sorcerous old Bagbag sat at his left. An escort of mountain dwarves from Dengar occupied seats of honor at the table with the nobility of Hoch Dunglorin and with Kristryd's retinue. Kristryd herself took a cushioned seat of honor at the women's table, two steps lower than the table set for the males. All the dwarf girls at her table giggled and sighed over her, admiring the pretty princess in their midst, but she ignored them, straining her ears to listen in on the conversations from the other table, where the dwarf-men spoke of things of interest to her.

Thane Bolor Blackaxe lifted another bowl in toast. "A daughter of the old blood of Balnorhak within the walls of Dunglorin!" he exclaimed with slur of merrygodown. "By the gods this is a blessed

day! A prince of Dengar at my table! By the gods! I am blessed today! May there be peace between the house of Dengar and the house of Balnorhak! May Berronar bless the union with sons!”

“Here! Here!” the assembly cheered. Kristryd risked a glance in Grallwen’s direction and, for a moment, their eyes locked. *He is a handsome one!* Kristryd thought to herself. She blushed beneath her veil and lowered her eyes submissively.

After the noise of the cheer subsided, Grallwen turned to his host and asked, “Is it true my lord thane, that Hoch Dungalorin has never fallen to a foe?” Grallwen knew it to be true. Everyone at the tables knew it to be true. But Grallwen deemed it a matter of civility to so honor his host by granting him the opportunity to boast over his holdings.

“True it is, and never shall it fall!” Thane Blackaxe boasted. Rising unsteadily to his feet, he lifted yet another bowl of the merrygodown and declared, “My great grandfather Thane Olbryn Hammerhowl raised these walls and towers seven centuries past, long before there ever was a duke! Clangeddin himself blessed the granite stones with which my great grandfather built these walls—a temple to the war god’s glory! Many have tried, but never have the walls of Hoch Dungalorin breached.” These words inspired an enthusiastic cheer all around. Grallwen and Bagbag both nodded their solemn assent.

The Halls of Dengar

After three days within the smooth polished stones of Hoch Dungalorin, Kristryd said farewells to her host and to the young dwarves of Gyraax that had carried her thus far. She and Bagbag and the half-dozen servants she retained from her father’s house departed in the company of Grallwen and his mountain warriors. By secret ways, over and around hills and through hidden valleys, alongside splashing streams, behind waterfalls, across swaying bridges, and by tunnels and caverns of the Low Road under the Oerth, Grallwen and his escort of warriors brought Kristryd and all her party at last to the Vale of Dengar. Then he did take his bride beneath those halls.

The folk of Dengar were not so isolated as many of their remoter kin, but they scarcely kept contact with the world outside their delvings and deep caverns. Mountains dwarves, as a rule, are suspicious of outsiders. The dwarves of Dengar trafficked with their gnomish neighbors, but they did not allow others to enter their vale without leave.

Above the ground, the kingdom of Dengar appeared of little account. Two small mountain lakes sat in a bowl surrounded by steep cliffs. Here and there along their shores stood a few villages populated by dwarves and gnomes; a scattering of small farms took advantage of the rich mountain soil. Strongholds and keeps kept watch and made the villages secure from the kobold raids and from bands of gnolls that made their home in nearby caves. Beneath the ground, however, the hallowed and hidden halls of Dengar spread out in a maze of broad intersecting streets and stairways, arched and vaulting halls, colonnaded courts, and glittering palaces. Solemn statues of the dwarven gods glowered from pedestals in the temples, and priests chanted through litanies of devotions. The bearded folk of the underground city worked at every type of craft and trade. Below the city, miners continually chiseled away at precious veins of stone to bring up ore from the lower mines. Hot refinery fires smelted it on coal-fired flames day and night. The finest of these metals they beat into weapons and arms on the high anvil, the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains.

Kristryd's escort entered the undercity with fanfare, trumpets, and shouts. From her place upon the palanquin she looked out upon the polished stone, gem-studded fixtures, and gilded ceilings in awe. Her keen eyes quickly turned to gaze on the faces of the mountain dwarves, a people who seemed to her both at once familiar and strange. *Will they accept me? Or will I forever be a stranger in their midst?* Kristryd wondered.

The Wedding

To celebrate the marriage of his son, the undermountain king, Thane Evrast VII, made a great feast. He invited to table all the peoples of vale. One thousand lamps they lit the night of the wedding to set the halls gleaming. Kristryd they clothed in a tabard woven through with mithril thread and set with glistening gems, and Grallwen wore the apron of a master craftsman. To the veiled bride and the splendid groom the gnomes presented handsome gifts, most clever and wondrous. The chieftains of every clan of Dengar bestowed some precious treasure upon them. Even the undermountain king of Gilmorack, Thane Redmod Buddoken, attended the first three days of the wedding feast—and this was considered to be an auspicious and unexpected honor. The old loremaster of Balnorhak, Bagbag Silverstonecutter, entertained the wedding guests with tales of long ago.

While Bagbag spoke of times long past, and Grallwen drank himself merry, Kristryd espied a certain scowling face among the revelers, fixing her with an evil eye. "Who is that old dwarfess who stares at me so?" Kristryd asked her new husband. Grallwen waved the concern away, "You inquire of the old vecke of Dengar. She is no one. Just an old fleak who doesn't know it's past time to lay her bones to dust."

That night, sequestered in the wedding chamber with her noble husband, Kristryd shaved away the braids of her chin, for the dwarven wives of the nobility do so on their wedding night and remain bare-faced ever after. When the whiskered mask fell away from her face, Grallwen cared not for his new bride's fey features. His heart turned cold. Though she bore him three sons, never did she know a kind word from the prince of Dengar. She felt her heart harden like stone.

Grallwen considered the foreign woman in his home polluted by worldly books and too much exposure to the other races. He distrusted the spellcaster that remained ever hovering at her side and, like most dwarves, he feared magic. Kristryd found she disliked the uncouth manner of the Dengar dwarves. Their long isolation from the world left them ignorant of the other races and ignorant of much learning too. Grallwen and his people spoke ignominiously of other peoples (and of other clans of dwarves), but they reserved their harshest and cruelest vitriol for the despised and treacherous elves.

Kristryd learned through bitter lessons to endure Grallwen in silence. Confiding in her trueheaded mentor, she protested, "I cannot love one so bigoted and filled with hatred."

"Love is not required of a wife," Bagbag consoled her. "Only obedience."

It should be said that dwarfish brides are rare among the dwur folk; daughters are few. Dwarves who enter marriage tend toward exceeding jealousy over their wives, sequestering them away like private treasures hidden away in a locked vault. Grallwen acted just so toward his wife, but he cared not much for her company, nor she for his.

After four decades, a miracle happened: Grallwen fell in a skirmish on the Low Road, leaving behind his wife and three sons. It was said that he died by the sword, slain in a battle with hobgoblins. The dwarves carried his body back to Dengar and burned him upon a solemn pyre to return his soul to Moradin. They laid his bones and ashes in the tomb of his fathers with lamentation and

keening, but Kristryd shed no tears. When the tomb had been closed and the days of mourning completed, she rose from the mausoleum and donned her eyethurl's garb. Her three sons, Grallsonn, Dwalyn, and Pegli came around her and offered her their tears.

"Now that your husband has fallen," Bagbag warned the princess, "With him has fallen your bid to the throne of Evrast. Nor shall it pass easily to one of your three sons, for your husband had a younger brother. The throne of the undermountain king will likely go to that one and his sons. But as for me, daughter, I shall remain loyal by your side. In your veins runs the old blood of Balnorhak, and you shall ever be as a queen to me."

"Queen to you alone," Kristryd replied bitterly. "Always I am less than others: less than my father, less than my brothers, less than my husband, less than my sons, and now less than my husband's brother, and less than his sons." So she spoke from her bitter heart, and Berronar heard her plaint.

The Sacred Heart

Once a year, the kingdom of Dengar held a festival to Berronar and Moradin. In those days, a high priestess, the Sacred Heart Gilvgola by name, came to the festival to conduct solemnities and sanctities. She served as high priestess at Dorob Kiltlduum, but her reputation far exceeded that modest holding of the Kron Hills, for she bore the Braid of Berronar. All the dwarves of the Lortmil Mountains revered her as the oracle of their high goddess, and they received her in all their halls. Everywhere she went, her hosts welcomed her with lavish days of feasting in honor of the gods, and as a result, Gilvgola was neither small nor slight of frame. Her sacred duties required her to eat of the sacred portions and to drink the holy ales, a solemn duty she did not neglect. She had once been a fair dwarf lass, but the face of that fair lass had long ago disappeared into the smiling jowls and cascading double chins of the revered high priestess. Her corpulence only augmented the weighty sense of her prestigious presence, and no one jested about it, not to her face nor behind her back.

(Once it happened that as Gilvgola went between the Kron Hills and Gilmorack, some haughty young dwarf lads came out from a village and jeered at her, "Make way for the Sacred Porknell of Berronar lest she tread upon you." She scowled at them and uttered a curse against sacrilege. A cave bear descended from the mountain and mauled twenty-four people of that village.)

In the year that Grallwen died, Gilvgola came to Dengar and officiated over the annual sacrifice, as was her custom. When the royal family gathered at table to eat of their portions, the Sacred Heart inquired of the Thane Evrast, "Where is Grallwen's widow, the Lady Olinsdotter?"

"She has not come to table, for it is not fit for her to revel in the year of her husband's death," Thane Evrast, the undermountain king spake gravely. "But I shall summon her if you desire it."

"I desire it," the priestess replied.

Kristryd entered the banqueting hall yet clothed in her eyethurl's garb. Her three sons stood beside her: Grallsonn, Dwalyn, and Pegli.

The Sacred Heart Gilvgola rose to greet the bereaved princess, kissed her on both cheeks, and blessed each of her sons. "How fine your sons have grown. I see your father's image in their faces."

"Their own father is no more," Kristryd replied stoically.

Gilvgola nodded sympathetically. "I know, daughter. I know. The blood of every dwur is precious in Berronar's eyes. The soul of even the most common dwarf is more precious than gems or gold. How much more so the firstborn son of your noble father-in-law, Thane Evrast?"

Kristryd nodded, but her face remained impassive. The priestess continued, "I have brought a message for you from our sacred mother. Hear the words of Moradin's bride. 'I have seen your tears and your affliction. I stand beside you to bless you; I have not forgotten your noble house. Only remember this: take your oaths in my name, and I will watch over you to see that you fulfill them.'"

"Blessed are the words of the gods. Blessed are the lips that speak them. I thank you mother," Kristryd replied with the perfunctory liturgical formula and a stiff bow.

"There is one more word," the heavy priestess whispered confidentially. Pulling Kristryd close in a smothering embrace, she spoke into her ear, "Upon your head she sets a crown."

"A strange augury. I know not what it might mean," Kristryd replied struggling for breath.

"Time will reveal it," Gilvgola replied cheerfully as she released Kristryd from near suffocation.

Chapter 2

WAYS FRAUGHT WITH PERIL

AFTER THE WINTER rains ceased, the old wizard announced that he would make yet another trip back to the court at Gyrax and on to his home at Khundrakar. Kristryd declared, "This time I shall come with you, for half a century has passed since I have seen my father and my brothers or looked upon the halls of my childhood."

During Bagbag's frequent absences, Kristryd pined for conversation with her mentor, tutor, ward, and trueheaded friend. She kept herself busy enough with matters of court, overseeing the education of her three sons, and conducting herself according to the pleasantries and protocols of dwarven aristocracy, but in Bagbag's absence, she felt alone among the thick-headed mountain dwarves. She often wished she had never left her father's halls in Ulek.

Bagbag shook his head emphatically, "Nay my lady. Unless Thane Evrast grants an escort. The roads are safe no longer, and all the ways through the mountains fraught with peril."

"I know the perils well," Kristryd rejoined. "I need no escort." In truth, she knew that Thane Evrast would not provide her an escort, for she had often begged it of him, but the old king guarded over his widowed daughter-in-law jealously.

Absence of the Lion

"The ways are not safe as they were when you first came here as a young bride-to-be," Bagbag countered. "Our clans have lost the ways to sons of Gruumsh and the wretched hobgoblins of Grot-Ugrat."

"My father is not to blame," Kristryd's eyes flashed with anger. Several decades after she arrived in Dengar to become the bride of Grallwen Evrastson, her father Prince Olinstaad entered an alliance with the fair folk of Celene, with Duke Gallowagn, and with the people of Jurnre. "Come, let us drive the lion from our lands," they said, and they banded together to oust the soldiers of Keoland from all their domains. These things transpired during

Kristryd's absence, and she liked it not. "Had I been there, I would have advised my father to follow a different vein," she said. "Not that he would hear the words of a dwarf daughter."

"Your father had no stomach for the matter either. He had little choice. But what is done is done."

In times gone past, when the orcs and goblins of the Lortmils emerged from their holes to raid villages or lay ambush in the mountain passes, the soldiers of the Lion Throne quickly drove them back and thinned their numbers, keeping the mountain passes safe for commerce and travel. The newly organized Ulek states lacked the centralized power to police the Lortmil Mountain passes and defend the numerous and remote mountain villages as the Keolandians had done for so long. In the decades since the Lion Throne withdrew their troops and abandoned their garrisons, the goblins had grown bold indeed. Ambushes had become increasingly frequent with each passing year, threatening safe travel through the mountains and hampering trade. Hobgoblins had entrenched themselves at strategic points along the mountain passes, forcing travelers to pay ransoms for their lives.

"It's no fault of your father's nor anyone's fault," Bagbag agreed. "But your father must be persuaded to act against the growing menace before he loses the Principality to the goblins as happened in Perrenland. The villages in the foothills now suffer raids. Greater numbers of hordes spill forth from the mountains every spring. Indeed, Gruumsh has blessed them with astonishing fecundity, and now they look to expand into the lands about them lest they starve. Their raiders have even entered into the field lands of Gran March and Veluna."

"If the roads to the west are so unsafe, we will travel through the east. The gnomefolk come and go freely as they please," Kristryd insisted.

Bagbag shrugged to indicate that her argument failed to persuade him. He countered, "Last spring, raiders descended from the mountains and found their way into the Kron Hills. They carried away crops, livestock, whole flocks, and even the shepherds. Pillagers descended last autumn into the fields of Veluna and stole away harvests and livestock before the Knights of the Hart could muster.

"Likewise, on the east, orc tribes in the Suss forge treaties with their mountain cousins. Tales say that twice they have sacked the fords of Celene, twice driven back by spear, shaft, and sword, but at the cost of no small spilling of the fairy blood."

“Wise friend. I thank you for your council and the news of the lands,” Kristryd said evenly. “But I will accompany you just the same, and I go without any escort of Dengar dwarves. We go, just the two of us.”

The Perilous Road

The widowed princess kissed her three sons farewell and promised to return before the winter rains. Her regrets lingered over young Pegli, for she was enamored of him—his shy smile and his curling locks, and he only entering now the third decade of life had not yet shown whiskers on his face.

With only a baggage mule to walk alongside them, Kristryd and Bagbag set off on the daunting journey, despite the protests and angry condemnations of Thane Evrast. For all his bluster, her jealous father-in-law did not dare prevent her lest it be said in Ulek that he held the prince’s daughter against her will.

Kristryd, Bagbag, and a single donkey loaded with their things, passed through the great underground gates that seal up the kingdom of Dengar, crossed over the long arching bridge which spans Durin’s chasm, and then stopped and waited for the gatekeepers to open the portal by which they could pass through the barbican. After a time, the dwarves at the post gave the order, and the door swung open. Kristryd felt her heart hammering away inside, and an unanticipated thrill rushed through her body. *I feel like a prisoner about to be released from the dungeon!* she thought to herself.

The two travelers stepped out onto the subterranean thoroughfare called the Low Road, a network of intersecting tunnels, natural caverns, carved chambers, and snaking watercourses originally cut to connect the undermountain kingdoms of Balnorhak and Gilmorack. The first many leagues of their way led through guarded tunnels and winding caverns kept safe by regular patrols and garrison stations. Dwarves of Dengar and feisty gnomes protected those main routes, but the travelers had not journeyed many days when the watchmen told them, “No passage beyond this point. The snowmelt and spring rain has flooded the lower tunnels and driven the goblins up from below, and all the tunnels beyond here crawl with them.”

“As I feared,” Bagbag sighed. “We would be wise to turn back.”

“Foolish or wise, we will persist,” Kristryd insisted.

“Your majesty. We have no choice then but to turn aside and make our way overland,” Bagbag lamented. They did so, and after

a day's journey, they emerged from the mountains by a wide cave. They had need to backtrack several miles before starting their way upon a narrow path atop a frightening cliff that looked down into a steep ravine. Dozens of caves dotted the opposite side of the ravine, and from more than a few of those dark holes tell-tale wisps of smoke rose. "The mountains are pregnant with orcs and about to burst," Bagbag shuddered.

Kristryd looked across the ravine at the sinister-looking hovels and wondered if she had not been a fonkin to ignore her trueheaded companion's counsel. *Surely the orcs are watching us, even now, and they will fall upon us as soon as darkness comes.* She gripped the haft of her spear tightly and looked about as they walked. *Berronar watch over us,* she prayed.

The attack came after the sun had dipped beneath the western hills, just as the travelers began a steep descent to the floor of the boulder-strewn ravine. An arrow struck Bagbag square in the back and dropped him to the stony ground. Another arrow pierced the rump of the donkey, sending it bucking and rearing and tumbling to its death. Kristryd dropped to a crouch and raised her shield just in time to block another arrow.

An orcish war scream froze her blood. It echoed off the canyon walls and found answer from similar cries further along the ravine. Kristryd scrambled backwards, under cover of her shield, seeking better cover as more arrows clattered against the stones around her.

Another arrow skittered along the stones. Face down on the ground, Bagbag moaned piteously to himself. Crooking his arm up around to his back, his fingers closed on the shaft and fletching of orcish barb. He tugged gently to see if he might pull the barb free, but the pain made him cry out and writhe involuntarily. Abandoning that effort, he dragged himself under cover of a nearby boulder, propped himself up, and forced himself to focus on his craft. His lips moved to mutter the words of a spell. Of a sudden, a flash of lightning sprang from the wounded wizard's hands and struck against the higher rock on which two orcish archers perched. At the same instant, a crack of thunder echoed up and down the ravine. A half dozen dazed orcs staggered out from the rocks where the lightning had struck. Kristryd sprang to the charge, leveling her spear and thrusting her way back up the steep ascent with all the strength and resolve of her father's noble blood. The orcs stumbled about, blinded by the lightning and deafened by the thunder. They did not see her coming. The point of her spear caught the first one under the ribs. Her shield shattered a second and sent him tumbling

to the stones below. Unseen arrows leapt from Bagbag's hands, and two more orcs fell dead at her feet.

Bamadar Kadarel

"You'll do well to leave some for me!" a voice from up the slope shouted out in the dwarven tongue. A warrior came leaping and half-falling down the sharp incline of the hillside like a tumbling boulder. The momentum of his descent should have carried him over the edge of the ravine to break his bones upon the stones below. Instead, he broke his fall and kept himself from plunging off the side of the cliff only by launching himself ax-first toward one of the orcs. The momentum behind that ax blow severed the startled beast cleanly in two. Both halves of the bisected orc tumbled backward over the ravine. Catching himself on the edge, the warrior spun about and caught the last remaining orc with a chop to the back of its skull. The ax blow dropped the orc to the ground with the blade wedged in its bony head.

"From where did you come just now?" Kristryd asked in wonderment as she gazed on the new arrival.

"From up there!" the warrior said, pointing to a switchback in the path high above.

"By my beard!" Bagbag exclaimed as he made his way to the scene of the short battle. "Young Bamadar Kadarel! What brings you so far into the mountains and so far away from Thunderstrike?"

"I come looking for you!" Bamadar said. "I've got letters from Prince Olinstaad warning you not to come south this year, on account of the roads be too dangerous, but I found the way to Dengar flooded out, so I've been making my way out here on the surface."

"You've come too late," Bagbag said. "We are already half the way to Dunglorin, but now we've lost our pack animal and I have a damned barb stuck in my back!"

"Never mind that you old cuss," Bamadar said as he wrenched and twisted the arrow free from the wound. "Introduce me to this fairheaded shieldmaiden that you have protecting you."

Bagbag hollered from the pain, and blood sprang from the torn wound. Spluttering with rage, he cursed, "You insolent son of that pigheaded Kadarel! This is the Princess Kristryd, daughter of your sworn lord Prince Olinstaad. Show some respect!"

Bamadar looked abashed. He bowed low before Kristryd who was already busy trying to dress the open wound in Bagbag's back. "My apologies your majesty," the brash young dwarf said. "I have

never before had the privilege. I am utterly, utterly, utterly at your service.”

“Pardoned,” Kristryd replied with regal air. “Now descend your way to our fallen donkey and retrieve our bags. We will have to carry them on our backs the rest of the way.” Bamadar was a handsome dwarf, much younger than herself. A gold earring in his right ear and a richly embroidered traveler’s cloak bespoke wealth and prestige. His wavy black hair, fine glossy beard, and sincere brown eyes nearly stirred some foolish flutter in her heart. *Poopnoddy fool! The lad can be scarcely older than your son Grallson!* she scolded herself. *Besides*, she added in self-reproach, *Isn’t his manner bombastic and overfilled with personality?*

A Walk in the Mountains

Some miles further on, the three companions took refuge in a crumbled watchtower along the path. Bagbag fussed and moaned through the night, fumbling with his spell book and reading by light of a cantrip until he found a charm for closing wounds. Kristryd tried to sleep, but the thought of goblins lurking in the darkness kept her alert until dawn.

Despite such dangers and many more skirmishes along the way, Kristryd rejoiced to be free of the confining halls of Dengar. She felt as if a great weight had slipped from her shoulders. True, her heart pined for her three sons (and especially for young Pegli), but she thrilled with the lightness of spirit she felt free from the stifling life at court among the mountain dwarves. The open air, the springtime skies, the billowing clouds, the starry nights, the lights of Luna and Celene, and all the tree-clad mountain vistas inspired her delight. “Blessed of Ulaa; bequeathed of Berronar!” she declared, quoting the first words of an old hymn she had often heard sung in the temple of Hammer Hill.

The Lortmils are a low chain of mountains that cover an area of some 60,000 square miles, extending from Veluna in the north all the way to Ulek and the border of the Pomarj in the south. At some points, the mountains might better be described as ambitious hills, while at other points, they rise precipitously into majestic peaks, the tallest of which on the northernmost extent above Gilmorack can boast of snow-caps even through the warm summer months. Those white-topped northern peaks separate the lands of Gran March from Veluna before tapering off into the lower elevations of the Lorridges on the border of Bissel.

Overland travel through the mountains is confined to a few

major passes and a series of well-trodden trails that twist along the ridges. The going proves easiest on the east side of the range near the Kron Hills where misty forests of roanwood trees climb up the slopes from the Celene highlands. Undergrowth beneath their shady boughs is sparse, and the trunks of the enormous trees are widely spaced, making for easy passage. Only at the higher elevations do the roanwoods give way to poplars and firs.

The southern Lortmils, which dip down into Ulek and the Suss enjoy the moisture and subtropical climate of the Azure Sea and the Sea of Gearnat which compete with one another to produce terrific tropical storms and deluges of rain. The verdant mountain slopes descend into the Principality of Ulek cloaked in stands of maple, beech, and yew, while the upper elevations are a tangle of scrub pine. In the late weeks of the month of Harvester, the slopes blaze with autumnal colors. Travelers foolish enough to leave the regular paths or stray far from the passes, however, will find their progress through the mountains hampered by heavy underbrush and limited visibility. Even a wood elf could lose his sense of direction in those thick tangles and steep climbs.

The way through the central mountains follows no straight path but rather snakes back and forth from ridge to ridge, until at last the ways descend like small tributary streams to join the wider passes. Along those narrow twisting tributaries, the three companions made their way. Their route took them along treacherous trails seldom traveled except by those in extreme need. Ordinarily travelers made their way through the mountains only by three primary routes: through the Ulek Pass which is a hidden way between Enstad and the Duchy of Ulek, through the Celene Pass between Tringlee and the elven realm (the way guarded by Hoch Dunglorin), or through the narrow way called Druid's Defile which connects the County of Ulek to its frontier city of Courwood on Handmaiden River.

Bagbag and Bamadar made good travelling companions and good guardians for the princess. From time to time, the travelers met with trouble: a scraggly troll, an ambush from goblins, and several more scrapes with orcs. Kristryd had little reason to fear. Bagbag's prodigious talent for dweomercraft and Bamadar's strong ax made short work of the bandits and ambushers. Besides, she knew which end of the spear to grasp and which to thrust.

Back at Hoch Dunglorin

After several days the three travelers descended into Celene Pass

and soon were within sight of the strong walls of Hoch Dungalorin. That proud and ancient fort sat perched upon a steep rise near the head of the Kewl River, corking up the mountain pass and protecting the Duchy of Ulek beyond. All caravans and travelers descending into the Uleks needed to pass beneath its ramparts.

"It's called *Yudin* in the old tongue of Balnorhak," the lo-remaster announced for the benefit of Bamadar and Kristryd. "Tis the oldest continually occupied dwur fortress in the Lortmil Mountains."

Many centuries earlier, Thane Olbryn Hammerhowl established the fortress to take control of a strategic canyon-way that cuts through the mountains, connecting the Shedolamer Valley with the east side of the Lortmils. Prior to Hoch Dungalorin, the feet of goblankind stomped up and down the the canyon unchallenged. The hobgoblins used it as a main thoroughfare for coming and going from their holy city of Grot-Ugrat. Monsters walked that path openly, in numbers small or large, by day or night, as if they had nothing at all to fear. Thane Olbryn Hammerhowl built the fort of heavy granite stones, quarried from the living rock, and raised high walls and battlements which stood visible from miles away.

His great grandson, Thane Bolor Blackaxe, the keeper of the fort, received the three travelers warmly and brought them into his feasting hall. "The daughter of Prince Corond and princess of Dengar!" he exclaimed as he eyed up Kristryd. "A half century since the Prince Grallwen carried you away from my halls, but you look younger and fresher than a spring blossom!"

"Save the gray in my hair and the lines in my face," Kristryd laughed. "Since I saw you last, blessed Berronar has favored me with three sons, but my husband Grallwen is no more."

"So I have heard tell," Bolor said sympathetically. "Old Bagbag has kept me in the know over these many years. Let us drink to the memory of your noble Lord Grallwen!"

They did so more than once. Then Bagbag sighed and asked, "What news of the lands about?"

"Evil years," Bolor admitted thoughtfully. "The caravans and merchant trains come less frequently. Travelers in the mountain passes have learned to fear ambushes which seem to appear out of the stones. I marvel that you three have braved the journey."

"They had nothing to fear so long as I walked along with them," brash young Bamadar boasted. He hefted his ax for emphasis.

"In times past," Bolor Blackaxe reminisced, "None needed fear to cross the mountains even if travelling alone."

“It is past time, I think,” old Bagbag reflected, “To teach the vermin of Grot-Ugrat just who holds the hammer and the ax.”

“Many are saying it was a mistake to cast off Keoland’s yoke. We can barely hold our own,” young Bamadar added, utterly oblivious to impolitic nature of making such a remark in Kristryd’s presence. Kristryd glared at the child furiously. She agreed with the sentiment, but to speak it aloud seemed disloyal to her father’s honor.

Bagbag cleared his throat to dispel the ensuing tension. “Our kingdoms are divided, and our numbers grow fewer, but we need not stand alone,” he observed. “The trade routes through the mountains are important to everyone. Veluna, the Kronnish gnomes, Celene, and the Ulek states.”

“Just as you say!” Thane Blackaxe agreed, slapping the table for emphasis. “By my beard! The alliance of which we have spoken is forming. A delegation of gnomes passed by this way two months ago on their way to plead their case to Duke Gallowagn on behalf of the Kronfolk and the merchant houses of Waybury. The gnomes have promised the feyfolk will support the duke’s alliance.”

“Unlikely!” Bagbag snorted. “I should not be surprised if the duke capitulates to the demands of wealthy merchants, but the land of Black Ice will melt before the Celenese lend us their bows and spears!”

“Tis not many years past since the elves drove the Keoish men from our lands,” Bolor remarked. “They should bare as much the burden as any.”

“What of my father?” Kristryd asked. “Has my father joined this new alliance?”

“He needs be persuaded,” Bagbag said with stern resolve.

From Tringlee to Gyrax

The three travelers stayed briefly in Tringlee and took lodging with Duke Gallowagn. The high elf welcomed them and spoke as if no time at all had elapsed since their last visit to his palace. Kristryd observed that the timeless elf and the olven members of his court had not aged at all in a half century, but the menfolk among the duke’s afterlings were all dead and gone, replaced by a new generation of human courtesans.

Bagbag plied the duke with questions about the nascent alliance, but he would only say, “Keoland will not come.”

“Why should we need Keoland?” Bagbag asked. “Are you not assembling allies from the east side?”

"I have heard a great deal of talk, but no commitments to lend spears," the duke said evasively.

"If my father joins the effort, the rest will follow," Kristryd stated. "Perhaps even Keoland."

"Daughter. Your father is not a follower. He is a leader," the duke said gently. Then changing the subject, the high elf asked her, "Have you learned to scry with my mirror?"

She shook her head. "I have not my lord. I have no talent for magic."

"Keep at it," he encouraged her. "You will find it useful one day."

Refreshed with the duke's hospitality and outfitted with fresh supplies and a new pack animal, the travelers resumed their journey. Their path followed the river to Kewlbanks, Jurnre, and on to Gyra. The Prince Olinstaad Corond received his daughter gladly, for he had not laid his eyes upon her since the day he kissed her farewell and sent her to Dengar. But he would not be moved to muster soldiers. "Not without your father-in-law and the thane of Gilmorack," he insisted. "If such a war must be fought, it will be fought beneath the mountains."

Kristryd replied, "The undermountain kings of Gilmorack and Dengar already war with the orcs and goblins, battling for control of our ancient halls and for the Low Road. Did not my husband Grallwen fall in those clashes? And many fell beside him."

"But the undermountain kings are not willing to ally together," the prince observed, "And certainly not alongside outsiders such as myself. How much less then under an alliance led by an elf?"

Chapter 3

THE STOLEN ANVIL

THE URGENT TOLL of bells roused Kristryd from sleep. Blinking in the darkness of her bedchamber, she called for a light. A servant girl hurried in bearing a single candle and busied herself kindling the lamps. Their illumination quickly cast the shadows from the room, but the light did not dispel the confusion or uncertainties. “Why toll the bells of Dengar?” Kristryd demanded of the servant, but the girl could only reply anxiously, “I know not my lady!”

The ringing clamor continued. “Alarm! Alarm!” the bells seemed to warn. The blare of horns could be heard too, faintly at first, but soon answered by nearer trumpeting.

“Bring me a gown!” Kristryd commanded the maidservant. As she pulled the garment over her head, she caught the scent of smoke in the air, not smoke of candle nor lamp, but rather the acrid sooty smell of consuming fire. “Has a dragon come upon us?” she asked the servant girl. “I smell smoke.”

“I know not my lady,” the girl repeated innocently.

Young Pegli erupted through the bedchamber door, half dressed in armor, fumbling with the straps, chain links, and clasps. “Mother! Goblins have entered the lower halls! All the lower city is ablaze!”

“Clangeddin’s Hammer!” Kristryd exclaimed in dismay. Noting that her youngest son intended to join the fray, she added quickly, “You shall stay here, by my side to defend me. Let the warriors drive back the foe.”

“I too am a warrior of Dengar!” Pegli insisted. His injured tone of voice betrayed wounded dignity. “Help me fit this armor.”

Breach of the Lower Halls

Some say the watchmen on the walls and at the portals fell entranced beneath a sleeping spell, but no one knows. None survived to tell. Assassins scaled the walls of the outer gatehouse at Durin’s Chasm and slew them all. The gates from the long-

bridge that pass into the lower chambers were found unlocked and unbarred, presumably by traitors. A horde of goblins, orcs, and hobgoblins under the command of a powerful half-orc leader called Urgush crossed undetected and overran the outer defense on the Low Road. A ferocious running battle through the lower levels ensued. Horns blared and bells tolled, calling soldiers to arms, but the goblins had the advantage of surprise. Before the dwarves could muster, the orcs and goblins had already hacked and slaughtered their way into the underbelly of the kingdom.

They stormed through the lower halls and looted the lower treasury. More came up from across the long bridge, looting and pillaging as they went. By the time the warriors of Dengar had strapped on a helmet or hefted a shield, the lowest of the undermountain villages blazed in flames. The defenders fought their way through choking smoke and burning cinders to drive the savages back. The furious dwarves cut the goblins down so quickly and in such numbers that they could scarcely advance over the piles of carcasses. Meantime, Urgush made away with enormous fortune in the finest gemstones of Dengar and no small amount of gold too.

The Story of the Anvil

While the attention of everyone in the kingdom was fixed upon that dramatic battle for the lower halls, tragedy occurred. Thieves somehow penetrated the royal smithies, passed unseen through guards and sentries, disabled powerful glyphs of warding and alarm, and slipped away with the high anvil—a weight so heavy that it took four stout dwarves to lift it.

“Not the work of goblin, orc, or ogre,” Bagbag observed grimly. The superstitious took it as a dire omen. Some suggested that Moradin had sent his golem to take back the sacred gift. “What have we done to so displease the gods?” Thane Evrast, the undermountain king moaned. The priests of Moradin, Clangeddin, and Ulaa had a ready answer, “The gods grow weary because we have failed to cleanse these holy mountains!”

Seven centuries long past, the dwarves invoked the gods, pleading for divine help against the goblinkind. The high-priestess of Balnorhak fasted for the twenty-eight days of Fireseek, invoking the power of Moradin, beseeching him for a gift with which to smite Balnorhak’s enemies. On the twenty-eighth day, Moradin appeared to her in a dream and gave her the design for a great anvil on which to strike steel made red in the forge of the gods. The finest craftsmen of Balnorhak gathered in the shrine of Moradin

to craft the item according to the pattern revealed in the dream: the legendary Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains. They forged it from alloys of adamantine and steel and adorned with elaborately carved depictions of Moradin and Berronar laboring at the soul forge from which the soul of every dwarf is drawn and hammered into shape.

Any weapon fashioned upon that anvil yielded twice the strength and keenness of edge as might be obtained else. The dwarves of Balnorhak hammered out legendary enchanted blades which they wielded against their foes in the Lortmil Mountains. Moreover, nations far and wide coveted the weapons forged in the fires of Balnorhak and beaten upon that high anvil.

When Sire Evrast the First led the exodus from crumbling Balnorhak, he carried away the anvil with him in the arms of a powerful golem called "Rockborn." This creature was magically fashioned of granite in the likeness of a great dwarf, and it commanded awe and fear as if it were a god. Indeed, Sire Evrast claimed that the golem had been given to his clan as a gift from Moradin and that the voice of Moradin spoke through the golem. None dared challenge Evrast or his golem, and even the thane of Balnorhak feared Evrast and his monster.

Evrast led a great exodus from Balnorhak, including many renowned heroes, the sacred priests of Moradin, and the entirety of the Oimaeglin clan. Despite the helpless protests of the undermountain king of Balnorhak, the defectors also took with them the Anvil of Lortmil Mountains. The stone golem carried the heavy anvil in his arms at the head of their procession north. Prominent families of Balnorhak took this as a definitive sign of the gods' favor upon Sire Evrast and his divine golem, and they elected to follow him, forsaking their ancient halls. In the space of a few days, half the kingdom of Balnorhak abandoned the old undermountain king.

Sire Evrast and his followers traveled north through the Low Road, but they turned aside before reaching Gilmorack. The high priest of Moradin led them into a broad valley of mountain lakes and high cliff walls. "Beneath these stones," he piously declared, "Is the place our kind first were formed. Beneath these stones, Moradin first gave shape to Durin, and Durin begat his seven sons." (Whether his claims had any validity or not—let the dwarves settle their own arguments and sort through their own theology. Dwarves from outside the Lortmil Mountains scoff at the notion, but for those dwelling in the mountains, the new doctrine transformed all those hills and snow-covered peaks into a holy shrine, sacred to all dwarvenkind.)

The golem set the anvil upon a firm rock in the sacred valley, and they raised the citadel of Dengar (Rockhome) round about it. Then they turned their attention to the denizens of the valley. They flushed the goblinkind out from the networks of caves set in the cliff face, and they burned the hobgoblin villages that stood beside the lakes.

Five centuries later, Kristryd's father-in-law Thane Gavin Evrast the Fourth declared a quest, offering bounteous reward to whoever would find the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains and return it to him, "Up to half my kingdom!" Scrying spells searching for the whereabouts of the precious artifact could not locate it, nor could the priests divine it. Brave heroes took up the call and searched the mountains, and adventurers too, both above the rock and below, but all in vain. None found the anvil, but many found death. A year passed. Then came the old Vecke of Dengar, requesting audience with the undermountain king. She said, "Behold! The gods have given me a dream, and I have seen your missing anvil. Behold! Does it not sit as a trophy in the temple of Nomog-Geaya within the walls of Grot-Ugrat?"

Summons to Gilmorack

After these things, Bagbag came to Kristryd and her three sons. He gathered them around, locked the door to the chamber, and cast certain spells and wards to thwart eavesdropping and scrying. Kristryd and her sons wondered at this, for it seemed the old wizard had some matter of great import to impart.

Bagbag spoke directly to the young dwarves in confidential manner, as if he intended his words only for their ears, but not so quietly as to keep their mother from discerning. "The death of your father, the assault of the horde of Urgush, the theft of the crown jewels, and the disappearance of the sacred anvil betoken a new age of troubles," he told the boys. "The undermountain kings meet together in Gilmorack to draft a treaty of cooperation. Your grandfather, Thane Evrast, has sworn to war against goblinkind, to drive them from the Low Road and away from your kingdom. Even more, he and the king of Gilmorack have agreed to end their long centuries of isolation and appeal for help from the lowlands, even from your grandfather the Prince Olinstaad Corond."

"What have the affairs of kings to do with us?" Grallson asked suspiciously. "We three are neither heroes nor do we command influence at court."

“Perhaps less to do with you than with your mother,” Bagbag explained. “Thane Redmod and Thane Evrast have need of allies, but what do they know of the lowlands?”

This was true. For many long centuries, the dwarves of Dengar and Gilmorack lived in isolation, dealing with the outside world only so much as necessary to bring their wealth to market and feed their people. Bagbag observed, “They know not the modern names of the lands about the mountains nor their heads of state. But your grandfather Thane Evrast remembers that one of his household is learned and adept in all such matters, and she has recently traveled abroad and safely returned.”

“You think the undermountain king will ask my counsel?” Kristryd exclaimed incredulously, inserting herself into the conversation.

Bagbag turned to the princess and bowed. “My lady, his majesty the king already has asked for your counsel,” the old dwarf said with a smile. “He has summoned his daughter-in-law, the Princess Kristryd Olinsdotter to the vaulted halls of Gilmorack, where the undermountain kings take council together. I hold the summons here in my hand as it was delivered today. You must depart at once. I shall accompany you.”

“Mother, you bring us honor,” Grallson said with a bow. His voice conveyed a new tone of respect for his mother. “May the gods give you wisdom.”

“Would that I too might look upon the vaulted halls of Gilmorack!” Pegli said excitedly, tugging at the scraggle that he hoped would soon fill out into a proper beard.

“Your wish is fulfilled,” his mother said as she read over the document. “We are summoned to go, all of us, to the Kingdom of Gilmorack.”

The Story of Gilmorack

Seven centuries earlier, less than a decade after the establishment of Balnorhak, a second clan from Holgereth arrived on the far northern end of the Lortmil range and sunk shafts beneath the towering peak of Abharclanh. In that place, guided by a vision of a Berronar, they founded the vast hidden hall of Gilmorack. It rivaled any hall of Crystalmist clans, both for splendor and wealth, but it never knew peace.

The goblinkind who dwelt in the dens and deep holes beneath the northern peaks made fierce war against the newcomers, stormed their fortresses, and raided their supplies. The orcish shamans

believed that the mountains had been bequeathed to them as their inheritance from the One-Eyed god Gruumsh who had received it as his allotment after being tricked out his rightful share of Oerth. The orcs considered the arrival of the dwarves a test from Gruumsh, one that could be passed only by expelling the interlopers. They came in waves, swarming up from the deep places. The halls beneath the mountain rang with the shouts of battle, the clash of arms, and the screams of goblin voices. Many are the songs still chanted among the mountain dwarves to recall the valorous and heroic deeds of those underground battles.

In those days, the undermountain king of Gilmorack made a solemn covenant with the undermountain king of Balnorhak, and the latter sealed the covenant with a princely gift from the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains. He presented to the northern king a mighty hammer with which to smite the foe, and such enchantments he laid upon it that when it left a warrior's hand to strike his enemies, it returned on its own accord into the warrior's grasping hand. Many heroic tales are told of the first undermountain king of Gilmorack and his marvelous hammer. (Alas that the hammer has been lost, and none know what hand grasps it now.)

During the reign of the first undermountain king of Gilmorack, a bitter cold winter brought heavy snows to Mount Abharclanh, burying the roads beneath avalanche and isolating the kingdom such that none might pass. There has never been a winter like it since, nor was there such a one before it. Hungry orcs raided the granaries, burning what stores they could not carry away. The isolated dwarves of Gilmorack faced the grim prospect of starvation. The only path to survival led through the lower caverns and out to the lowlands where they might replenish their stores. Under threat of the death of every last dwarf and child in his kingdom, the undermountain king lead a company of one-hundred heroes to break the blockade, bludgeon through the lower tunnels, and escape into the lowlands (now possessed by the Archclericy of Veluna). But that great feat of heroism was not yet half the battle, for, on their return, the undermountain king and his men carried upon their own stooped backs great sacks of grain, each one bearing more than a donkey might have borne, and yet also so encumbered they did fight their way back up through lower caverns until they came again to their hidden kingdom. The deed is told in the chants of Gilmorack.

Treaty of Gilmorack

Kristryd adorned herself in her mithril-threaded tabard and trav-

eled to the north kingdom in the company of her three sons and her trueheaded adviser. The herald announced her as she entered the high-arched council chamber of dazzling Gilmorack. Faithful Bagbag walked at her side. All the chiefs of Dengar and Gilmorack rose to their feet at her entrance. Thane Evrast, the undermountain king of Dengar, and Thane Redmod, the undermountain king of Gilmorack, alone remained seated on their polished thrones.

“Speak to us daughter,” Thane Evrast invited his daughter-in-law. “School us regarding all the lands about. Do not withhold from us all that you know. For you came to us as a foreigner and a lowlander, and you know the ways and manners of the lesser races. What then is their number of men-at-arms, and what is their disposition for war? Tell us all that you know.”

So it came to pass that Kristryd Olinsdotter tutored the undermountain kings and all their advisers in matters of politics and foreign affairs, and who better prepared to do so? Raised in the Principality of Ulek, she knew the ways of men and all the nations whose trade flowed through the port of Gyra. Moreover, her father’s palace received regular embassies from Keoland, Yeomanry, Gran March, Onnwal, the Iron Hills, and the Great Kingdom. Had she not learned the lore of men and the history of their kingdoms in the schools of Niole Dra? Verily. And she had excelled in all her learning. Kristryd spoke of nations and alliances, kings and potentates, and all the matters of state which had been the common table talk in her father’s house. Moreover, she spoke of history, alliances old and new, the strength of nations, and the dispositions of their peoples. The old kings plied her with queries, and she answered all their questions to their satisfaction.

“Even today,” she declared, “My father stands ready to unite the lands all about our sacred mountains to beat back the goblin-kind. He waits for only one particular omen.”

“Speak it,” Thane Redmod said.

“He waits for the undermountain kings to set aside old rivalries and to join his cause,” the princess declared boldly. Many voices murmured at this, and many bearded heads wagged their assent. The kings and all their chiefs conferred.

Then a certain elder dwarfess with gleaming eyes rose up and said, “Thane Redmod, let me speak! The time for secreting ourselves away in our hidden halls has passed. No longer can we bear the weight of this burden alone. Let us chisel an agreement betwixt our kingdoms, a treaty and a pact of war, and let us ally ourselves

with the Prince of Ulek, and all his allies too. The time to unite our peoples has come.”

This they did.

“And you, my daughter, Olinsdotter, you shall be our ambassador to the lowlands and speak on our behalf,” decreed Thane Evrast. “Return at once to your father’s house and make our appeal. May the blessing of Moradin rest upon you.”

“Blessed be Moradin, and blessed be his consort,” she replied. Her heart nearly leapt out of her breast. *I shall be free to come and go as I please.*

The Ulek Alliance

Six years had elapsed since Kristryd’s last journey to Gyraax. This time a strong escort of mountain dwarf soldiers accompanied her as far as Hoch Dunglorin, so she dared to bring her three sons along with her. Prince Olinstaad Corond hosted a great feast to welcome his grandsons, all three of them stout dwarven boys, already bearded. Thus the sons of Grallwen were united with Kristryd’s brothers. Shouts of joy were heard and many eyes glistened with tears—a fond union of blood.

Kristryd quickly discharged her duty and appealed to her father on behalf of the undermountain kings, “My father-in-law Thane Evrast sends you tokens and small treasures, but he promises lordly wealth if you will muster the nations for his cause.”

Lest the prince should hesitate, Bagbag further filled Prince Corond’s ears, speaking of the atrocities of the raids and the scope of the danger. With tears running down upon his beard, he reminded the prince of Grallwen’s fall and how the hobgoblins had left his daughter widowed and his three grandsons fatherless. Moreover, he spoke gravely of his recent suspicions over Grot-Ugrat. “Some fiend,” he suggested, “has taken up residence behind those walls and now orchestrates the disparate tribes of goblin, orc, hobgoblin, ogre, gnoll, and flind. Perhaps a sorcerer, a lich, or a demon has occupied that cursed city and stolen away the sacred anvil. Why should Grot-Ugrat, and the many other lesser goblin cities like it, be tolerated in the mountain passes?”

Prince Corond gave ear to his daughter’s appeal, and his heart moved under the sway of his trueheaded friend. “The thing you ask is not easily done. Grot-Ugrat is near impregnable and impervious to siege, else the deed would have been done by our fathers long ago,” the prince replied. “And the cost of war will be paid in the blood of men, of many halflings and gnomes, and not a

few dwarves. But let it not be said that I failed to do my part to tame the mountains. We shall muster the lands all about, and if they will not heed our call, we shall open our treasuries and make mercenaries of them.”

It should be admitted that the Duke of Ulek had already formed such an alliance to fill the vacuum left behind by the absence of Keoland’s patrols, but, on joining that alliance, Prince Olinstaad took credit for its formation and considered himself its rightful head. The Principality of Ulek had always held the honor of protecting the wealth and resources of the southern Ulek hills, and Prince Olinstaad prided himself in keeping the trade flowing through those hills to the port of Gyraax for more than two centuries. Under the new Treaty of Havenhill, the three Ulek states united to reopen the mountain roads and protect the vital merchant routes. The Upper Ulek states promised to lend soldiers, rangers, scouts, and warmages to the effort. “Why shouldn’t we purge the mountains once and for all?” Prince Olinstaad asked.

It would not prove so easily done. The Pomarj lords had only just recently expelled Ulek from their lands and declared their independence, and they would not come. Keoland and Gran March felt little threat from bands of goblins high away in the mountains. The king of Keoland did not even proffer reply. Only Veluna promised troops, and a paltry number at that.

Disappointed by the tepid response, Prince Olinstaad Corond weighed his options. “I have hesitated to include Celene,” he admitted to Kristryd. “I know those stubborn mountain dwarves will refuse to fight beside elves.” True. The undermountain kings had no love for the elves and little respect for them either. Prince Olinstaad, on the other hand, owed grudging allegiance to the fey queen, for she had led the Ulek states in obtaining their independence. Moreover, trade to and from fey kingdom passed through his own, and for that, he commanded some sway among the fair folk.

“Father, the undermountain kings are desperate enough to overlook even this obstacle,” Kristryd assured him. “None of us can afford the luxury of old bigotries.”

Chapter 4

HER FEY MAJESTY

“HERE WE ARE,” Bagbag stated matter-of-fact as he and Kristryd and all their retinue crossed over the stone-arch bridge that spanned the splashing Handmaiden. “I’ve not set foot in this place since before you were born, but nothing has changed,” the old wizard observed. He punctuated the observation with a snort and a wrinkling of the nose to indicate his distaste. Still, he straightened his sorcerous hat and smoothed his coat as if to make himself more presentable. Indeed, Bagbag knew that many eyes were now fixed upon their small party, even if those watching remained unseen. The heavy-laden mountain dwarves glanced about fearfully, uncertain of their safety amidst so much fey devilshine. They drew together in a tight clutch and kept their weapons at the ready.

Enstad

Ignoring the apprehensions of her afterlings, Kristryd breathed deeply to take in the rich scents of the kingdom. Wood smoke from bakers’ ovens carried the sweet and nutty aroma of elf bread on the morning chill. Frankincense, myrrh, and the fragrance of flowers mingled with the peaty scent of the fallen roanwood leaves that carpeted the ground beneath her feet. The princess cocked her head to better fill her ears with the morning music. The occasional piping of unseen pipers, the gentle strings of lute and dulcimer, and the melodic chirp and trill of songbirds all blended together as if in chorus. In the distance, almost imperceptible, the rising and falling of perfect crystal voices, locked in ethereal harmonies, never ceased. Her eyes, too, took their fill of delights. The perfect architecture, naturally integrated into the roanwood-covered slopes of the foothills, made it appear as if no one lived there at all. She searched all around for some solid pattern to make sense of the city’s layout, but the whole of it seemed as random as the forest floor. Yet, somehow, she sensed symmetry like the petals of a flower.

Once upon a time, the fair city of Enstad was the center of a great elven kingdom that stretched through all the central Flanaess. Only a small slice of that august realm remained preserved in the wooded land of Celene. Enstad was of such construction and design that one might pass through it without recognizing it for a city. Those who did see past the illusions (which draped it as a heavy veil conceals the face) saw ancient stonework and rare construction built within concentric rings of walls, surmounted by fairy spires. Inside the city's confines, the elves perched their homes in the high branches of the trees, balanced upon platforms called flets, mostly concealed from the ground. Pleasant homes and cottages, here and there beneath the flets, looked to be part of the natural forest floor, camouflaged among mossy rocks and great logs of fallen trunks. Illusions often cloaked larger structures to make them appear as if they were not more than a vine-covered gateway into a rock wall or grassy hillside. Most of the city remained open to the sky, without buildings or houses, for most elves took no permanent shelter at all, preferring to spend the nights wandering beneath the stars or gathered around a common fire.

As the small party of dwarves drew closer to the Grand Court and the White Tower, a stately and elegant maiden came out to meet them. She curtsied before Kristryd, and introduced herself, "I am Almerayne, handmaiden of her Fey Majesty." Kristryd thought Almerayne, with her long auburn tresses, braided with lilies, to be the fairest creature she had ever seen. "The queen will receive you, my lady, in the Grand Court. I am to escort you there."

Almerayne brought the princess beneath the White Tower and into the Palace of the Faerie Queen, but old Bagbag was not allowed to enter, nor was any member Kristryd's retinue or bodyguard. The elves have little love for dwarves, and to many of the high elves, the presence of a dwarf in the elven court is an offense. Kristryd eyed the gold-chased silver domes and spires with respect, recognizing craftsmanship to rival her own kinsfolk. She entered the hall of the Grand Court with fanfare and all diplomatic courtesy and looked about her in amazement. Members of the high court of Celene stood at attention on all sides, clad in flowing robes and purpled in sparkling Lortmil gems. Kristryd herself wore her mithril-threaded tabard and a tiara of Dengar upon her head. A life at court had accustomed her to pomp and circumstance; all her life she had lived in palaces and moved among the nobility, but Enstad surpassed all others for beauty and elegance.

Am I inside or outside, in a garden or a hall? Kristryd asked

herself.

The Hall of the Grand Court, within the walls of the Palace of the Faerie Queen, followed the same aesthetic principle as the rest of the capital. Unlike the ornate cut stones of Gyrax or the carved arches beneath the mountains or the gaudy opulence of Niolo Dra, the Grand Court seemed to have grown from the trees, open to the vaulting sky, neither indoors nor out of doors. The polished Lortmil marble floor (quarried from the Duchy) reflected the sky above like a silver mirror, like a looking glass, like the surface of calm water. Plants and flowers bloomed everywhere, filling the air with intoxicating fragrance. Living fountains played over rocks and marvelous sculptures. Exotic songbirds croodled melodiously.

Before the Blossoming Throne

Whatever the magnificence of the hall, and whatever the beauty of Maid Almerayne, it all dimmed in comparison to the perfect beauty of the queen. Yolande rose from among the blossoms and leaves of the polished gnarlwood throne and extended her scepter to the dwarven ambassador. At the queen's side stood an elder olven mage who, in his own way, reminded Kristryd of her true-headed adviser, Bagbag. *So even the queen of the elves keeps a wise mage at her side*, Kristryd thought to herself.

The queen spoke in a voice deep and cool like water in hidden mountain pools, "You are welcome here Olinsdotter, ally and Friend's Daughter. Not long ago, your father received my own ambassadors, though I think he liked not their words. Ever the loyal friend to Keoland, he was not easily bent to join my cause."

"Now my father begs her Fey Majesty return the favor," Kristryd knelt before the queen. "Join our cause against the goblinkind who infest these mountains. Lend us your spearmen, swordsmen, bowmen, and knights to purge all evil from the Lortmil Lands."

"Purge all evil?" the queen laughed, dismissing the notion. "And who then shall purge the purgers? Here in Celene, we walk the path of Balance. Were not the euroz and jebli in these mountains long before the dwur folk dug their mines? Was not Grot-Ugrot a holy place to their kind from before the age of men?"

"Your Majesty," the old mage at her side interrupted the queen. "It would not be politic to refuse the overture outright. But let us send to the bearded ones a few companies of archers and spearmen, such as might be necessary, lest we give offense."

"Your Majesty," Kristryd objected, "Not for the dwarves, but

for an alliance of dwarf and man and gnome and halfling and elf. Have not the high elves of Ulek cast their allegiance with us already, every one of them loyal to the Light? Even your noble cousin, the Duke Gallowagn, has promised his troth. So too your kinfolk from Silverwood. They send their sons into danger. And what of the little peoples of Prinzfeld and the woodsmen of Courwood and the gnomes of Treehome? Shall they be sacrificed for Balance?"

Now the queen's gentle smile faded from her lips, and it seemed to Kristryd like sunlight fading behind grey clouds. "Walk with me," the queen commanded.

In the Perfect Flower's Garden

She stood and extended her hand. Kristryd took the Perfect Flower's hand, rose to her feet, and followed Her Fey Majesty into a nearby garden of fragrant spices. As they passed out of the hearing of the others, Queen Yolande spoke in a tone confidential and gentle, "I remember when your mother came to us, Olinsdotter. My mother, Her Fey Majesty the Queen Astaranthe, gave your mother a powerful blessing. If she had kept that boon for herself, there might have been a second daughter for my mother and a sister for me. I was jealous."

"We are grateful for the kindness of the elves," Kristryd said awkwardly, unsure of how to reply to such a confession.

Yolande smiled warmly. With her smile, the summer sun suddenly shone through the leaves and danced upon the rippling waters of the Handmaiden River. "My diviners say that fate favors you," the Fey Queen said. "I am glad that you have come."

"Your majesty flatters me," Kristryd stammered, blushing despite herself. She felt awkward as a schoolgirl mooning over a handsome young dwarf. "I have been sent by the dwur lords of the mountain kingdoms. I only seek an alliance between our peoples for the sake of opening the passes and cleansing the mountains."

"I have seen more centuries than you my daughter and have perhaps acquired more wisdom," Yolande cautioned. "I have never seen an alliance of our peoples that did not quickly sour."

"We dwarves have a saying," Kristryd replied, "My enemy's enemy is my friend."

The queen favored Kristryd with half a smile, and they walked on a while in contemplative silence. They passed by a hidden pool of crystal waters guarded by giggling nymphs. Kristryd averted her eyes and looked down at her feet.

"Tell me daughter," the Fey Queen sighed. "Have you ever

heard the legend of Esmerin?"

"Yes, your majesty," the dwur ambassador replied thoughtfully, "It is a children's tale of a mythical kingdom, a hidden land, where halflings and stone giants dwell in peace together."

"Yes," the queen laughed—a sound that reminded Kristryd of water splashing over stones." A fonkin's myth! How could opposites dwell together peaceably? Imagine the short ones riding on the shoulders of giants! The clever with the slow-witted!"

Kristryd frowned at this. *Does the queen mock me and my people?* Pulling herself up to her full dignity, the dwarf princess glared into the queen's beautiful lilac-colored eyes and objected, "We dwur-folk are neither slow-witted like giants nor do we seek to ride upon the shoulders of the elves. We only ask you to join us in clearing the roads we mutually share and in defending the helpless."

The queen smiled, "You misunderstand my words and mistake my meaning."

Princess of Bellmeadow and the Lion Throne

The undermountain king of Dengar had none better to make the embassy to Enstad than Grallwen's widow. Only she and Bag-bag knew the tongue of the elves or could invoke old alliance with elves.

Before relinquishing her seat on the Blossoming Throne, Queen Astaranthe spoke boldly about what must be done to preserve Celene and the lands of Lothromenoron. Yet she herself would not be persuaded to lead a war against the kingdom of men. She relinquished the Blossoming throne and sailed for Lendore.

The Grand Court of Celene assembled at Enstad to decide between the contending heirs. They chose Astaranthe's daughter the Princess Yolande of Bellmeadow, a fey spellcaster and noble warrior, to lead them against Keoland. Yolande called upon the Uleks to join against the Lion Throne. She placed an elf named Triserron at the command of all her soldiers. Her army expelled the garrisons of Keoland from the east side of the mountains and pursued them through the mountain passes. With the cooperation of Kristryd's father and the Ulek lands, Triserron drove the men of Keoland back across the Kewl.

Princess Yolande prepared the coalition for a reprisal and bitter war with Keoland, but the reprisal never came. Instead, Keoland withdrew their claims and acknowledged the sovereignty of Celene and the Ulek states. In celebration of her sweeping victory, the Grand Court elevated the princess to the title of queen over the

realm making her simultaneously the first queen of the newly independent nation of Celene and the sixteenth queen in the hereditary line of that dynasty of the Grey Elves.

These dramatic events transpired while Kristryd remained isolated in Dengar. They were recent history indeed when she arrived at Enstad on embassy for her father's alliance and on behalf of the undermountain kings.

The Art of Scrying

Elves are never in a hurry, and they seem to delight in trying the patience of shorter-lived peoples. Yolande took several weeks to reach a decision during which she frequently summoned the dwur ambassador for further consultation. During those weeks, Kristryd divided her time between wandering the groves of Enstad, taking in the delights of Celene, and enjoying long conversations with Her Fey Majesty. She did not realize how unusual it was to be so-favored by the queen, so she thought less of it than she might have if she had known how many ambassadors never received audience at all. The queen walked daily with Kristryd through the gardens of Enstad, plying her with questions about all things dwarfish, about Keoland and Nirole Dra, about her father's realm and the Ulek Alliance, about Dengar, Gilmorack, the death of her husband, the welfare of her three sons, and whatever else came to mind. It seemed to Kristryd as if the queen would thoroughly know all things about her but reveal little of herself.

The elven mage, Onselvon, once remarked, "Never has her majesty the queen shown as much favor to one of another race as she has for you Olinsdotter. Truly you have been set apart among your people."

Bagbag also remarked, "You have done well my daughter. You have captured the queen's heart and sealed the alliance for us."

On a whim, Kristryd once asked the queen to look at her silver-framed mirror and see if she might instruct her in its magic. Yolande recognized the mirror at once. "The craftsmanship is noniz, but the magic within it was written by my kinsmen in Lothromenoron. To make the magic work, you must do as the inscription says: *'Look into me and see what other eyes can see.'*"

"I know what it says, but what does it mean?" Kristryd pressed.

"The mirror can only show you what another sees, while he sees it. The magic will work only so long as you truly look through the other's eyes," the queen explained.

"Your explanation is not less cryptic than the riddle itself,"

Kristryd complained.

“It’s not a riddle,” the queen said. “It is empathy. The foundation of love and all that is good. You must truly look through the other’s eyes, not from the outside, but from the inside. Try it on me. Imagine that you are me, looking at you. See what I see, how I see it.”

Kristryd looked into the mirror, trying to imagine that she was the fey queen looking through the fey queen’s beautiful lilac-colored eyes. At first she saw only her own reflection as she might expect, but slowly the mirror clouded and the perspective changed. As if she peered through Yolande’s eyes, she could see herself holding the mirror and gazing into it. She looked not as she imagined herself, neither as pretty as she would have hoped nor as stately. The noble princess of the Lortmil Mountains, proud mother of three royal sons, prestigious ambassador of the Ulek Alliance looked like a dwarven child, like a schoolgirl, like a little girl playing at being grown up, fairer than most dwarves by the queen’s standards, but merely a dwarf. Kristryd put away the mirror and complained, “Such condescension!”

“You see. That’s how the mirror works,” Yolande said with even tone, unmoved by Kristryd’s wounded ego. “You saw through my eyes. But surely the reflection in the mirror also reveals that I count you as a friend.”

“Am I now able to peer through your eyes whenever I will,” Kristryd asked as she wrapped the velvet cloth around the magical item.

“No. Not through my eyes. I allowed it this once for a school lesson, but an elf learns to shield herself from scrying.”

“Then I have no choice but to remain in Enstad until her majesty reveals her decision.”

Chapter 5

THE FEY MYSTERIES

THE WIND IN her face stole away her breath. Kristryd plummeted, freefalling through darkness. Dizzy with terror, she felt her stomach lurch as she dropped from some great height. *From where have I have a fallen?* she wondered. She could not remember. The melodious call of a horn came to her, faintly, as if carried on the wind from a great distance. The sound of it pulled her from the dream and roused her before she struck the ground. She woke abruptly, gasping for breath.

A Horn in the Night

Only the light of the handmaiden moon and the starry sky shone through the open window, but dwarves have keen eyes, and they can see in the dark as well as most peoples can see by light of a lamp. Kristryd looked about the small cottage. Nothing amiss. In the other room of the cosh, she could hear trueheaded Bagbag snoring heavily. *Did I hear the call of a horn or was that the dream?* she asked herself. *Or was it just old Bagbag's snores?* As if in reply to the unspoken queries, she heard again the blare of a resonant horn calling in the woods—and merry glad voices too. The horn this time sounded nearer. She rose from her bed in the guest-cosh and gazed through the small open window. Most of the night had already passed. The grove shone dimly under the pale light of Celene. A fine fragrance of cool mountain air chased the sleep from her head and seemed to beck her into the night. After such a frightening dream, she had no aim to return to her sleep. *So long as I am already awake, why shouldn't I walk a bit under light of the moon?* she asked herself. She pulled on her soft boots, wrapped herself in a shawl, and went out into the night.

She had not strayed far when she heard again the sound of a horn and the song of laughing voices. As if entranced, she turned in the direction of those voices and made her way among the trunks and shadows of tall roans. Her feet led her up a steep, winding path. The pathway seemed alight with a shimmer of its own. She

climbed an ascent until she came to a flat and level clearing nestled among the broad crowns of surrounding roanwood trees. From the opposite side of the clearing came a procession of grey elves clad in silver robes. They carried finely crafted and carved lanterns shining with golden light. The queen herself walked in their midst, resplendent with starlight.

Abruptly a flock of half a dozen flying steeds dropped into the clearing, one after another, gently lighting down on talons and hooves. Kristryd squinted and blinked in amazement, for these were such creatures as she had never seen but only read of in books of zoology at the great library in Niolo Dra. The front of the creature appeared as an eagle of immense size, and yet the hindquarters took the form of a horse. Shining flanchards and shaffrons armored the beasts, and their chamframs bore the emblem of Celene. As each beast settled onto the turf, trotting a few paces as it landed, it folded back its great wings, revealing an elven soldier in polished mail mounted astride a saddle on the horse-like back. One of the warriors lifted a horn to his lips and winded it—the same magical sound which had stirred Kristryd from her sleep. The leader of the troop, a tall high elf, removed his helm to reveal long tumbling golden tresses and a face of delicate, almost effeminate, handsome features. *That is a beautiful elf!* Kristryd observed, privately blushing at her own childishness. The beautiful elf dismounted from the back of his griff and took up the queen into his arms. Yolande melted into the embrace. Kristryd watched, mesmerized, as if she saw a fairytale played out before eyes, and indeed, she did. The other riders, soldiers of the queen's elite cavalry, averted their gaze, and all the queen's retinue also lowered their eyes for modesty's sake. *So that's the Prince Consort Triserron!* Kristryd said to herself. A small stab of jealousy pricked her heart.

Of Yolande and Triserron

A century and more before Queen Yolande accepted her appointment to the Blossoming Throne, the lilac-eyed young bellbon strapped a flatchet belt about her waste, wrapped a travelling cloak around her shoulders, and went out into the world. "I go to see the great forests, broad plains, and wave-washed shores of the Flanaess," she declared. She wandered far from her mother's domains and from the house of Bellmeadow. In the guise of an adventurer and traveler, she passed from Celene to taste of the wide Oerth.

Yolande went first to her kinsfolk. Through many perils she

traveled to her cousins that dwelt in Rieuwood and Sunndi. She remained among them half century, learning poetry and politics and the taste of Sunndish lilac wine. Taking her leave of those fair folk, the lilac-eyed young maid crossed to Highfolk and the Vesve Forest where she learned the arts of war and strategy. For two decades she hunted with the rangers of the Gnarley, learning the art of the tracker and the life at camp. After these adventures and more like unto them, she returned to Celene powerful in spells and well-schooled in weapon craft.

Such was the spell of her blossoming beauty that, on her return to Celene, a college of bards dedicated themselves to composing hymns and odes to her name. Moreover, a school of mally suitors followed her about and dueled among themselves for the privilege to court her. Yet more still, a small farnet of pixies followed after her, coaxing flowers to spring up where the soles of her naked feet had tread upon the soil. When Yolande observed how her radiance discomfited them all, she concealed herself beneath a flackard and heavy shawl and only bared her face within the walls of the Faerie Palace and among her own kin in the halls of Bellmeadow.

Despite all these lavish attentions, the Prince Triserron showed himself indifferent to her presence. An adviser to the Blossoming Throne and hero of the realm, the prince frequented Faerie Palace to discuss matters of state and politics with her Fey Majesty Queen Astaranthe, but he never paid the least attention to the Perfect Flower. More than a century and a half her senior, he scarcely considered her a fully-grown elf maid. His indifference set Yolande ablaze, and she plied her best arts and wiles to snare his heart to no avail. He paid her no mind whatsoever. The greater her effort to catch his eye, the less he seemed to notice her.

At a midsummer ball of the Grand Court, in the presence of all, Yolande discarded propriety and bade Triserron dance with her. He could scarce refuse the invitation under such circumstance. The prince obliged the queen's daughter and led her by the music beneath the moons all that night and until the moons had set and the sun brightened the east. Despite the midsummer magic, he neither swooned over her nor did he genuflect before her. He did not call upon her afterwards, smitten as she expected. His indifference ate at the heart of the fairy princess until she took it for insult and sent him an anonymous challenge to duel with swords over the honor of the queen's daughter.

Triserron agreed to the duel reluctantly. He did not know the challenger, but he could not refuse the challenge issued under such

circumstance as it was. He expected nothing more than to face a green champion, some lovesick suitor jealous over the midsummer dance. Triserron supposed he would clear his name of any wrong-doing, defend the honor of the queen's daughter, and teach some young elf lad a lesson in swordsmanship. Imagine his surprise when, on the greenfield outside Meadhall, he encountered the Perfect Flower herself with a flatchet strapped to a belt that hung about her slender waist.

Triserron recovered himself quickly, put up his sword, and met steel with the clash of steel. All day, through the night, and all of a second day, the long blades of Yolande and Triserron clashed and rang. A crowd aimcriers gathered around to witness the battle. The contenders dazzled the onlookers with dangerous flourishes and the close conversation of thrusts and parries, feints and strikes. The queen's subjects loyally cheered for the princess and dutifully jeered the prince, but Triserron took none of it ill. He feigned defeat and let Yolande best him, calling for a barlafumble, but she slapped his face and swore at him, "Tethrin pierce you! Defend yourself or I send you to the halls of the Seldarine." The sun set, and the battle continued beneath the moons all that night and until they had set and the sun brightened the east. After three days and two nights of it, both prince and princess fell away from one another, exhausted by the fight. Ever after, they never parted until the priest of Hanali solemnized their union.

The Alliance Falters

Kristryd pressed her mission for the Ulek Alliance and did not cease her attempts at persuasion until the queen gave her an answer. The Blossoming Throne cautiously agreed to join Prince Corond's alliance, casting her lot with the Ulek States, the Kron Hill gnomes, Veluna, and the undermountain kings of Dengar and Gilmorak.

Kristryd brought the glad news of her success back to the cosh where she and Bagbag lodged in Enstad. Bagbag clapped his hands together at the news, then asked, "And what of the war plans against the hobgoblin lords at Grot-Ugrat? Do the elves agree to join your father?"

"Nay," Kristryd admitted. "The queen agreed to no specific action at all, but only to the principle."

"At least that is something," Bagbag conceded, his enthusiasm undampened. "Moradin's Hammer! You have done well Olinsdotter."

Kristryd and Bagbag returned to Dengar to report their success. For some time, the loose alliance sufficed to police the mountain passes and keep the goblins in check, but cooperation of nations and coordination of forces fell victim to mistrust and antipathy between the races. The entire coalition faltered when the elves suggested that the undermountain kings should fund the building and maintenance of keeps, outposts, and garrisons to protect the overland passes. "The Fey Court of Yolande is more interested in planning festivals than guard schedules!" Bagbag sniffed in disgust. "We waste our efforts squabbling over guard posts and garrisons when we should be taking the fight to the dens of the vermin!"

Some short time later, the alliance teetered on the brink of complete disaster and nearly collapsed under the weight of a grievous insult. The crisis ensued when a party of young hunters from Dengar pursued a raiding party of orcs up onto the surface and down into the Hidden Pass. The orcs shook their pursuers, leaving the wary mountain dwarves wandering and lost among the illusions of the foggy canyon. When they strayed too close to the forbidden city of Enstad, a patrol apprehended the war party and, to teach them a lesson, shaved their beards and sent them back the direction from whence they came. Word of the insult reached the dwarven citadels, and both the undermountain kings called for war, intending to march upon Celene and sack Enstad.

Kristryd and Bagbag hurried to Celene by the fastest routes under grant of diplomatic priority. As they traveled the distance, a dwarven host from Gilmorack mustered and descended into Veluna while another host set out from Dengar and descended into the Ulek Pass.

The fey queen received her dwur friend gladly. Contrary to expectation, Queen Yolande issued an unreserved apology on behalf of her kingdom, written in her own hand and stamped with her own seal. In addition, the elves offered up geld of one bulse of diamonds and gold for each beard they had shaven. Kristryd sent the queen's apology and the geld by swift messenger to her father-in-law, the undermountain king Thane Evrast. The weight of the bribe and the humility of the apology restored diplomatic relations just in time to prevent a disastrous war. Nevertheless, frosty sentiments between the elves and dwarves kept tensions high. Those tensions compelled Kristryd to remain in Enstad representing the dwarven kingdoms until warmer relationships might be restored.

The Heart of the Queen

With the hope of restoring goodwill between their peoples, Kristryd and the queen resumed their daily walks through the gardens of Enstad.

“Before you came here,” the queen said with a look of mischief in her lilac eyes, “I thought all dwarves the same: greedy, pugnacious, stubborn, and petty. You have stretched my measure of your race.”

“Her Fey Majesty flatters me and insults me in the same breath,” Kristryd retaliated, perhaps sharper than she intended. “Before I came here, I thought elves pompous and full of themselves.”

“And now?” the queen asked.

“And now I know it to be true,” Kristryd stated emphatically.

“You are not wrong,” Yolande smiled. “But you are not so different from me as you think. I see within you a spirit from the halls of the Seldarine. How it came to be trapped in the body of a dwarf—for that my mother will have to answer.”

Kristryd shook her head, “Nay your majesty. I live among my people, a dwarfess, the daughter of dwur.”

“That you are,” the queen agreed. “But did you know that when an elf perishes from this world, the spirit of the elf returns again to be reborn?”

“Our priests scoff at such superstitions,” Kristryd admitted. “The souls of dwarves are gathered to the halls of Dumathoin, and the souls of our warriors to the mountain of Clangedin.”

“From where do you say that your souls come?” the queen asked.

“Our god, the Father of the Dwarves,” Kristryd explained, “Fashioned us secretly of iron and mithral upon the Soul Forge. He heated the first of our kin in the fires that burn at the heart of the world. He shaped every dwarf according to his desire and made us his sons and daughters.”

“Go on. Say more,” the queen sounded curious.

“I’m not a priest nor a loremaster like Bagbag,” Kristryd demurred. “They say Moradin forged Durin and his sons long before there were yet elves and men, before gnomes and halflings. No other god knew of the deed, none suspected what Moradin had done. When the other gods learned of it, they protested, and they demanded that Moradin should destroy us. But he hid us away until the time we should emerge in Oerth.”

“You say he forged you like a smith forges the shoe of a horse?”

Yolande laughed. Her irreverence irritated Kristryd.

“As he draws each form out from the furnace, he holds him aloft in his tongs, and he blows upon the molten form to cool it. With the breath of Moradin, the soul of life enters the dwarf. Then Berronar nurtures us and sends us to the womb.”

“And this is what the dwarves truly believe!” the queen mused. “Many are the differences that divide our people. But tell me, would a dwarven queen hold the same sway over her people as I hold over mine?”

“Nay your majesty,” Kristryd admitted, “A she-dwarf rules only if her husband rules, and only so far as he allows. I am the eldest child of my father’s house, but my brothers will take his throne after him and all the inheritance too. Though I married the eldest son of the thane of Dengar, my husband’s younger brother will take that throne, and there shall be nothing for either me or for my sons. A dwarfess is only so strong as the dwarf to whom she is wed, and as he falls, so does she.”

“No so for the elves. Despite what differences distinguish male from female, we regard one another evenly. Queens are as common among us as elven kings. I hold absolute sway and all authority is vested in me.”

“What power does the Prince Consort command?” Kristryd asked.

“The Prince Consort commands my heart.”

Betrayed

Shortly before the midsummer festival in the common year four hundred and ninety-eight, the queen invited Kristryd for another walk in the garden. This time her majesty spent no effort on pleasantries or small talk, “I have commissioned the Prince Consort to travel to Tringlee and Jurnre to negotiate new terms. We create a trade alliance that will maintain the passes apart from the ambitions of the undermountain kings and your father’s house.”

Kristryd staggered. Her mouth fell open to object, but no words formed in her reeling mind. Had she heard the queen correctly? She stood awkwardly gazing up into Yolande’s lilac eyes, stammering to form some reply.

The queen spoke again, “I am sorry for it, for your sake, but the decision has already been made. Our peoples came too close to open war last spring over too small a matter to endure such an alliance.”

Kristryd snapped her mouth shut and fell silent. Her heart sank.

Her face flushed with anger and her features hardened like stone. Without another word, she turned and left the queen's presence in fury. Black thoughts swirled in her head the whole way back to the cottage where Bagbag waited to hear her report. "Nine hells!" she raged at Bagbag, slamming the door and kicking at a chair. "Surely we have been utterly deceived!"

Kristryd's trueheaded friend retreated before her fury. Kristryd continued her tirade, "The fairy witch betrayed us! Berronar smite her!"

"Daughter! Calm! What transpired?" Bagbag held his hands up in front of his face as if to ward off a blow. He thought her tantrum unbecoming the stoic dignity of dwarven royalty, but Kristryd cared not for the restraints of decorum.

"Yolande sent her gods-damned bed-toy to our allies! She means to cut us out of the alliance. That fairhead drossel made sport of me! She has broken faith with the dwur, and she takes away our allies with her." Angry tears stung at Kristryd's eyes. Her voice cracked and sobbed, "I want to go home!"

"Not so my daughter," the wise old wizard counselled. "Your job here is not finished. Your father needs you here in Enstad now more than ever!"

Chapter 6

LAY OF LARETHIAN

“TROLLS! A WALL of trolls block the way!” the rider shouted as he urged his horse forward. The druid furrowed up his brow and squinted down the narrow choke point of the mountain pass. He could see horse and rider galloping hard, but he could not make out the words. “What alarm is this?” the stoic priest of the Old Faith asked of the olven prince at his side. The scout’s warning could not be heard by human ears at such a distance from the party, but keen are the ears of the elves.

The Prince Triserron reigned his steed back and called a halt to the caravan at whose head he rode. He fixed his eyes upon the advancing rider. “To arms! Ready weapons! Secure the animals,” the noble prince ordered. He turned in the saddle to survey the company that followed after him: two dozen folk of Celene, servants with wains and pack animals, a half-dozen gnomes, a score of mountaineers, and several of them hardened rangers from the County of Ulek. Moreover, a powerful druid on loan from the pataline walked at his side.

“Well?” The druid asked.

“Your ranger rides nigh. He shouts into the wind a warning of trolls,” the prince replied without concern.

The druid cocked his head to incline his ear in the direction of the horseman. “Less than a day’s ride from Courwood! Beory’s Abundant Bosom! Why fuss over a few scragglings?”

The prince nodded. “Just the same, I will hear the scout’s reports.” The stallion on which Triserron sat snorted and cantered sideways nervously.

The scout arrived and pulled his mount back to a trot, but he did not dismount in the presence of the Prince of Celene as decorum demanded. Instead, he breathlessly delivered an animated report, “Ambush! Hobgoblins have blocked the way forward, driving a wall of chained trolls before them. We will not pass through the defile without a hard fight.”

“How many trolls?” the prince asked, unperturbed by the ill

report.

“Enough my lord,” the scout said.

“Lord Triserron. Hear my counsel and take the fight to them. By earth and sky! Let me call down lightning and storm, summon wind and fire, and open the way before us,” the druid swore confidently.

The prince shook his head. He muttered a quick prayer to Larethian, “Protector save us by your grace!”

Mission of the Prince Consort

In the early months of the year four hundred and ninety-eight, Queen Yolande sent the Prince Consort Triserron of Celene on a diplomatic mission to the Upper Uleks. The prince went out from Enstad upon a noble stallion at the head of a vanguard of courtesans bearing gifts and tokens to the duke and the palatine.

In times past, vigorous trade between Celene and the Ulek states brought wealth to both. Under the protection of Keoish patrols, Ulek caravans once carried fine flour, brown rice, oranges, lemons, limes, karafruit, cheeses, tobacco, peppers, cotton, fine lumber, powerfully sweet honey, strong honey mead, and other favorite crafts of the gnomes of Ulek to the frontier city of Courwood. From there, the merchandise found its way to the olven markets. On the return trips, half-elf merchants carried back goods from the gnomes of the Kron Hills and shipments of Celene’s exotic items: magical trinkets, bound books, woven fabrics, slender ropes, musical instruments, rare delicacies, green wine, and distilled spirits. The olven merchandise found eager markets in Tringlee, Kewlbanks, and Jurnre.

Ostensibly, the Prince Consort traveled to Tringlee to reopen the trading relationship with the Duchy and the County of Ulek under a shared plan to police the dangerous mountain passes. In reality, however, the Prince Consort sought to secure a private arrangement with the Upper Ulek states before Celene officially severed its ties with the dwarves. The new arrangement excluded Gilmorack, Dengar, and the Principality of Ulek.

The Trap Springs

With the new treaties signed and official copies in hand, the Prince Consort and his entourage began their return trip to Enstad. The palatine lent a powerful druid and a company of ranger-led mountaineers with gnomish slingers to escort the Prince Consort and his afterlings as far as Courwood, but they never arrived at

Courwood. On the tenth day of Coldeven, when less than a day's travel from that city remained, the party came upon a narrowing of the canyon called Druid's Defile. A line of chained trolls blocked their way forward.

"We should turn back quickly," the scout insisted. "Before the trap springs."

The Prince of Celene shook his head in disagreement. The druid voiced his thoughts, "We are far from help if we turn back now."

"I do not fear trolls," the prince said. "But I fear that we have already stepped into a snare. Blood will be shed this night."

Indeed, a second scout came riding from behind and confirmed his fears. "Orcs are in the heights! The sun sets, and so they descend upon us!"

Triserron looked to the west where the sun had already slipped behind the nearest mountains. "Well druid. Unless you can turn back the sun, we must prepare for an assault. No one sleeps tonight."

The goblinkind descended like a spring flood, more than either the elves or the mountaineers had seen of any single raiding party. War cries and orcish screams echoed off the mountains and canyon walls. From the way ahead, now audible, came the answering roars of the advancing trolls.

Prince Triserron was no stranger to warfare. Had he not commanded his lady's war against the Lion Throne? Had he not driven Keoland from her kingdom and pursued the soldiers of Tavish through those same mountain passes? He quickly organized his company. The mountaineers and Celenese warriors banded together to form a wall of bodies, shields, swords, and spears surrounding the Prince Consort's embassy. The prince himself stood at the head of their ranks.

The orcs came on fast, sprinting on hairy legs, brandishing swords, spears, and clubs. So long as the line held, the defenders dropped the carcasses of the *euroz* in tangled heaps and mounting piles on every side. Dark blood splattered every face. The Prince Consort fought valiantly, rallying the defenders behind the broad arcing swings of his enchanted blade. Besmirched with dark blood, he exhausted his considerable wealth of spellcraft against the marauders. Likewise, the worthy county druid called strokes of stabbing lightning and booming thunder against the orcs, and he smote them with fear. At length, the attack broke off, and the defenders thought themselves the victors. The noble prince gave a mighty shout, and all those with him that still stood joined their voices.

But before they could give chase, a hobgoblin commander rose up and scolded the retreating orcs.

“Back at it worm-food!” the hobgoblin shouted. His lackeys cracked whips at those retreating from the press, and by these means, they forced the attack to continue. By then, the trolls too arrived. Chained in leg-irons, one to another, they stumbled onto the battle.

Mounting up the fallen corpses of their brethren like soldiers ascending siege ramps, the orcs pressed in. They hurled themselves over the heads of the defenders and into the midst of their circle. Gnomish slingstones struck the leaping orcs midair, but still more came behind. None of the elves of Celene survived to tell the tale—only a single gnome and a wounded mountaineer escaped with their lives by crawling out from beneath the pile of bodies after the orcs had left.

Lament in Enstad

The elves came and burned the carcasses of the orcs. Over the corpses of the gnomes and mountaineers they raised a great cairn, but the body of the Prince Consort and those of his entourage they bore back to Enstad. The priests and priestesses of Sehanine came out to meet the returning prince. They formed a procession carrying lamps, barefoot and with hair-loosed, under the moons, lamenting and beating at their breasts as they went. The funeral procession arrived at Enstad shamefaced to bear the body of the Prince Triserron without his noble head, for the orcs had born it away and also the heads of all his company as trophies of their savage deed. Neither were the signed treaties carried by the Prince Consort ever found, or if they were, they were never acknowledged by Grand Court of Celene.

All Enstad observed the funerary rites for the fallen prince, and all the Kingdom of Celene wept. The priestesses of Sehanine closed the tomb and ordained ten days for mourning and the singing of lamentations. The queen’s lilac eyes spilled such abundant tears that the Handmaiden overfilled her banks.

Of Gruumsh and Larethian

At times the sound of the ethereal voices seemed to draw close, as if the singers stood outside her cottage window, but at other times, the voices sounded far and distant. Kristryd tried to make out the words. The archaic forms were beyond her level of fluency. Nevertheless, the potent enchantments lulled her into trance-

like waking dreams in which she seemed to see the characters, the deeds, and the scenes described by the silver voices rising and falling on the night air.

"It is the story of Gruumsh and his wars with the gods," the old lore master explained. "We've been hearing it retold nearly every night." For the whole ten-day lamentation, the eerie keening melodies of Sehanine's priestesses kept Kristryd and Bagbag mesmerized, hushed, and reverent.

"You understand the words of their poetry?" Kristryd asked her tutor.

"Nay daughter, not scarcely half of it, but I know the tale as it's told in Enstad. Not like the version told by our priests. Here in Enstad, gods know, they have their own telling."

"I would know it if you can tell it," Kristryd said with a dreamy sigh. Though she could not make out the words, the olven songs stirred her heart with a sad and mournful pining she could neither express nor explain. Some wistful nostalgia in the melody tugged at her. It made her heart melancholy ... but wasn't it a sweet and beautiful sorrow?

Bagbag explained, "The elves of Enstad say their city is the birthplace of their people—the very place where the elven god battled the One-Eyed (may Moradin smite him) and their war came to its grisly conclusion. You know the tale?"

Kristryd nodded, "Gruumsh took insult when the Correlon Larethian failed to show him proper deference. As I have heard it told, the orc god hurled a spear which would paralyze any that it pierced. Larethian put an arrow to the string of his bow and shot out the left eye of Gruumsh. That's the tale I have heard."

"They tell a different tale here in Celene," Bagbag said, "and the orcs tell yet another version of the tale. The shamans under the mountains (may they choke on their spells) claim that Gruumsh never had two eyes! All their idols are cyclops. A single eye in the center of his boar-boned forehead. But they hate the elves. They claim that 'the Great Fairy' (so they name elven god) tried to blind the unblinking eye, but his arrow went astray ..."

"Tell me not what the goblins would say," Kristryd interrupted. "I would know only the merry-go-sorry story as the elves are singing it tonight over the Prince Consort's tomb."

"Very well," Bagbag agreed. He stroked his grey beard and considered how best to begin the tale. The sound of the song continued on the night breeze. After a few moment's reflection, Bagbag cleared his throat and began the story in a sing-song cadence like

the old chants of the dwur bards, “The olven god had a wicked and unworthy wife, treacherous as she was fair to behold. Deceived by her blinding beauty, Larethian knew nothing of the darkness hidden in her heart. Only his wife’s handmaiden, the one called Sehanine, knew the truth: her mistress was false. The bedswerver feigned to stray into the snares of Gruumsh. The orc god laid filthy paws upon her, imprisoned her in his castle, locked her away in his dungeons, but this was not but a ruse of her own design. All the while she conspired with him against her husband, seduced the boar-headed fool, to see her husband slain.

“Ignorant of her malice, Larethian went to rescue his beloved bride. He laid siege to the castle of Gruumsh, launched volley after volley from his magical bow, piercing Gruumsh and spilling his blood. But the bedswerver betrayed him. She gave into the hand of her captor a magically poisoned spear, a weapon of her own design. The spear might have struck the mark, might have pierced the target, but in his eager trembling haste, in his unbridled passion, Gruumsh sent the shaft a hair’s breadth wide.

“The battle between the two gods raged across all worlds and struck Oerth like a meteor, like a fallen star that smites the earth. Then Gruumsh fled from the hunter. (The orcs say Larethian fled from Gruumsh.) Larethian chased the Gleeded One across the Flanaess, pursued him into the Kron Hills (where, according to the gnomes, Garl drove him out). Gruumsh fled to the mountains and climbed a tall peak from which he could espy his pursuer’s approach. Larethian came hurtling after him, climbing warily into the heights, still hunting his quarry. Gruumsh ambushed Larethian, swept down like an eagle takes a hare, leapt down from the Lortmils. Larethian struck back with his holy sword *Sahandrian* and smote Gruumsh such a fierce blow that the blade shattered, broke into pieces, yet his hand still clutched the hilt. The two gods grappled one another, rending the earth and breaking the ground beneath them. They tumbled down from the mountains and fell upon the forest.

“Larethian’s strength waned as night drew near, but the strength of Gruumsh waxed. Gruumsh gnashed at his adversary and tore at his flesh with fingernails like claws. Seven great strokes rent the Seladarine’s flesh and bared his bones, one for each of the seven woes that would strike his people. The broken body of the dying god, still clutching the hilt of the broken blade *Sahandrian*, fell in the forested hills near the place where we now sit this very night. His blood poured out of his body and soaked the ground all about.”

The Handmaiden's Tears

Bagbag paused a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing the tale. Kristryd waited patiently. In the distance, the keening song continued. At length the story resumed: "From her place in Arvador, Sheanine Moonbow, the Handmaiden, listened to the battle unfold, helpless to assist under a moonless sky. When the two moons at last rose over young roans, the Handmaiden peered down upon Oerth and saw her master's lifeless body prone, sprawled out upon the ground, unbreathing and unmoving in the midst of a widening patch of blood-soaked soil. Sheanine made haste and descended into the Oerth, stepped lightly into the world. She wove together shafts of moonlight, stitched together moonshadow and mist to create a blanket of illusions that frightened and confused the pig-headed god and kept him distracted lest he come near and desecrate the body of her master.

"Now the Handmaiden came to the place where her master lay. She wept over his corpse, wailed over his body, anointed him with tears. Abundant tears spilled and mingled with the blood and with the soil of Oerth, giving birth the firstborn among the elves."

Bagbag broke off from the singsong of his chant to make a few prosaic comments, "That is how they tell it! The fountain of her tears swelled to form a river, this Handmaiden, that flows past us now, not but a league from where we sit, and so it is named even in the dwur tongue from ancient times."

"Tell on," Kristryd begged.

"The river lifted the body of Larethian and carried him downstream, like a leaf carried on the water. All the while his lifeless hand frozen to the hilt of broken *Sahandrian*. The river bore him away, carried him away, but moonlight on the rippling water revived him, glinting moonbeams resuscitated him. Sheanine's tears washed and healed the seven wounds (though the seven scars remain). Of a sudden, Larethian sprang up from the water and smote Gruumsh with the shattered butt of the blade of *Sahandrian*. He thrust the jagged hilt into the left eye of the orcish god, plunged it into the socket, gouged it out from the boar-headed skull, rendering him the Gleed (One-Eyed) forever after.

"Howling in pain, squealing like a sow, the Gleeded One fled back to the mountains, bleeding as he went. The mountain passes ran black with his blood. From out of that black ichor the orcs were spawned. Thus they claim the mountains as their birthright and sacred inheritance, for the blood of Gruumsh spilled on those

stones and gave birth to their race.”

Bagbag fell silent, but the mournful song of the elves continued the tale far in the distance.

“And is that how the story ends?” Kristryd asked.

“There’s more to the tale, but the essential part has been told,” Bagbag said. The tone of his voice said he had lost interest.

“Well finish it anyway,” she insisted.

Bagbag sighed. “The song concludes as the resurrected god rises from the water and takes the Handmaiden for a bride in the place of his treacherous wife. She is the Handmaiden Sehanine, the wife of Corellon Larethian, the Lady of Dreams.”

“Is it all true? Were the elves born here, in this very place, from the blood of Larethian?”

“True? What is truth, daughter?” Bagbag chuckled. “Priests and the bards say these things. They make good poetry and good religion. The priests here in Celene will tell you that these things happened here. They claim the inner sanctum of Corellon marks the actual spot where his blood soaked the ground. But what did you learn in Keoland?”

“In Keoland, they say that the story of the elves begins on the shores of the Lendore Isles, many thousands of years ago,” Kristryd said with some disappointment.

Bagbag snorted, “You see. You can’t trust priests, and you can’t trust bards. Boccob knows!”

“I wish it was true,” Kristryd sighed.

“Who can say? Perhaps it is in some a manner.”

Chapter 7

THE QUEEN'S WRATH

FOR TEN DAYS the elves of Enstad sang mournful chants and recited ancient lays over the tomb of Triserron. On the eleventh day, the Perfect Flower shed her mourner's garments, immersed herself in the pool of Hanali Celanil, donned a shirt of mithril, and took her seat on the Blossoming Throne. For a full day and a night, she sat silent, staring unseeing, cold-eyed, terrible, and fearsome to behold, and none dared speak nor enter her presence nor take leave of her.

The Crown of Triserron

While Enstad mourned the loss, brave deeds transpired beneath the mountains. A warrior called Dothmar, wielder of the great sword *Concluder*, rose up to avenge the Prince Triserron who was, in fact, his mother's brother. He considered himself a defender of the balance, but he hated orcs, and he refused to countenance such insult to olven dignity. "Who will follow me into the holes under the mountains?" he asked.

Before the prince's body had yet arrived in Enstad and before the ten days of mourning had commenced, Dothmar and a small company of Celenese rangers and warriors undertook the quest.

Tracking the marauders back to their deep lair, Dothmar and his warriors descended into the mountains, prowling along the Low Road where olven feet had rarely walked before. The trail of the marauders led them deep beneath the Lortmils through a dark maze of intersecting tunnels, ancient roads, yawning chasms, underground streams, and abandoned mines. At length they came upon the Karrak Bowl, a long-abandoned outpost of Balnorhak, built in a great hollow inside the mountain, where now dwelt the *euroz* vermin of the Red Fang clan.

Within the citadel stood a low tower, now partially collapsed. The watch fires of the orcs cast red flickering light and long shadows on stonework walls and ramparts. Upon the spikes of its battlements the orcs had impaled the heads of those elves slain in

Druid's Defile, and from that same vantage the unseeing clouded eyes of the Prince Consort Triserron gazed out into the darkness.

Dothmar and his warriors burst upon the lair with blinding wrath and ferocious blows such that their fury struck panic and terror among the orcs on the walls. A dozen elves routed one-hundred and twenty warriors. Any who dared stand to strike a blow at the warrior received a conclusive answer from his vicious sword. The elves fought their way into the inner palace. Dothmar scaled the tower and retrieved the severed head of the Prince Consort while arrows, barbed and poisoned, clattered all about him and pierced his flesh.

Then the orcs took courage and each one strengthened his fellow. They turned back to face the intruders, and they gave chase to the heroes over many long leagues under the earth. The fleeing elves quickly lost their path among the winding ways, slopes, turns, and tunnels of the Low Road. Wandering for days beneath the mountains, Dothmar's heroes fought and fled, suffering battles and ambushes, one after another, until none of their company survived to reach the sunlight save three. Dothmar himself and two others emerged from the tunnels under the bright light of a noonday sun. Their pursuers turned back. All that way beneath the mountains, and all the way back to Enstad, Dothmar carried with him his sorry trophy.

Agent of Wrath

On the twelfth day after the elves laid Prince Triserron to rest, Dothmar and his companions arrived in Enstad and entered the Grand Court to present themselves before her Fey Majesty. The hero knelt before the queen and delivered the parcel into her hands. Yolande took it into her lap, combed the matted blood from her lover's hair and washed the grime away from his once handsome face. Breaking her twelve days of silence, the queen turned to her maidservant Almerayne, who stood ready at her side, and commanded her, "Summon to my presence the dwur ambassador."

Kristryd scarcely recognized the queen. So hot smoldered the spirit of rage beneath the queen's skin that it shone through her pale flesh as a dull red glow. Her gentle lilac eyes now flamed with the light of devilshine. The queen's countenance, which previously appeared so comely as to sway all flesh, now flashed awful to behold, inspiring as much terror as ordinarily it inspired desire. In her hands she clutched the severed head.

Kristryd prostrated herself before the queen as if before a goddess of war, but Yolande set the decollated remnant aside and dropped to her knees. Her long slender arms pulled the dwarfess into an embrace, and she implored, "Forgive me my friend. I did not understand. Now I too have shared the loss of a husband."

Kristryd winced at the comparison. She had scarcely mourned the news of Grallwen's death when it came.

"Rise now and rally our alliance. I am at war, and I will lead the charge. From this day, Olinsdotter, be my ambassador, my apostle, and my voice."

Kristryd stood to her feet and tried to blink back the tears that came unbidden to her eyes, but she could not staunch the flow. They streaked down her face not for her own grief but for the sorrow of her friend.

"I have taken a solemn vow and a binding oath, one which should not be taken," the Perfect Flower said. Her delicate fingers wiped away the tears from Kristryd's eyes. "I have made sacrifices. I have invoked the names of all the Seldarine. I have sworn by my spirit: I shall not taste the green wine nor partake of the mysteries nor dance beneath the stars nor midsummer moons until I have purged the Lortmils of kobolds, goblins, orcs, hobgoblins, gnolls, and all their kin, above the ground or below it, from the Jewel to the Ulek States, from Veluna to the Azure Sea."

"Your majesty," Kristryd spake with trembling voice, "Let me be the agent of your wrath. I swear by Moradin, by Berronar, by Ulaa, by Clangeddin and by all the gods of my fathers, that I shall not rest nor sheathe the sword nor lower the axe until your vow has been fulfilled."

"Then we are bound together by our oaths my sister," the queen said, returning to her perfect poise upon the Blossoming Throne. "May the gods seal us to them."

The Elite Cavalry

The officers gave Kristryd the stirrup and bade her take a place behind the rider's saddle. Dwarves prefer not to ride on mounts, not even ponies or pack horses. A helmed cavalry officer peered down at her from atop the hippogriff, "This noble beast on which you are to be carried is called Emolasmairim. She has borne none upon her wings except me."

The officer extended a hand to the dwarfess as she put foot to the stirrup. "I am Darrion, captain of the queen's cavalry. Wrap your arms fast around my waste. Lean with me when I lean, but

not overmuch to the left or right," the rider told her as he hoisted her up to the back of the hippogriff. Kristryd shifted about behind the saddle, gripping the beast between her knees and wrapping her arms around the armored waste of the cavalry officer. Emolas spread her great wings and flapped them thrice as if testing the air before leaping into a full gallop. Kristryd had once ridden a horse while at school in Keoland, but on that occasion, only at a slow trot, led by lead-rope in the hand of a squire around a track. That experience terrified her enough. Now she hurtled forward through the air, the wind whipping all about her and snatching away her breath. Her legs clamped the hippogriff tightly and her arms held the rider fast. The beast moved in spanning leaps, landing talons first, then launching again from hoofs behind, faster than she might have supposed. The terror increased when she realized that her mount charged full speed and headlong toward the edge of a precipice. To her left and to her right thundered along the rest of Celene's elite cavalry, all galloping wildly toward the cliff's edge. For a moment she launched into weightlessness, and her stomach dropped. Then she felt the lift of the great wings as they beat against the air, and Emolas climbed toward the mountains.

Gyrax

Emolas carried her over forests, rivers, valleys, mountains, and hills, resting by night, flying by day, until they came to her one-time home, Gryax, capital of the Principality, a city of dwarves, halflings, and just as many men. Kristryd had never seen the great port city from such a height. From upon the back of the hippogriff, she could see the sails of ships out at sea as well as those ships docked in the harbors with sails furled.

The dwur of Balnorhak built ancient Gyrax on the Adirole Bay in centuries long past, but the Prince Corond had much improved the harbor until it ranked among the greatest harbor cities of all the Flanaess, rivaling Gradsul and Irongate on the Azure Sea. The location was once unfavorable for large vessels, but the Prince Corond contended with the difficulties by ingenious feats of engineering, fashioning breakwaters and channels to calm the waves until the city became the chief port of Keoland's holdings. Even after breaking with the Lion Throne, the Principality prospered tremendously from trade that flowed through Gyrax and passed through its markets, including merchandise from as far north as Celene and the Duchy. Gyrax also harbored the prince's navy, three score strong warships crewed by humans, and with these,

the Principality sailed the Azure to defend the southern coast and keep the shipping lanes free of pirates.

From her perch behind the captain, Kristryd directed Darrion toward her father's heavy-stone palace. The queen's elite cavalryman landed the hippogriff upon the bailey of the gatehouse and helped Kristryd dismount before the guards atop the walls had even sounded warning. Darrion pressed an ornate and gold-chased horn into his passenger's hands, "A gift of Her Fey Majesty. Should you be in need, whether to fight for your defense or only to carry you aloft, sound this horn. I will hear its call, no matter the distance, and I will come to you with Emolasmairim, by the command of Her Fey Majesty."

Upon the Speaking Stone at Gyra

Kristryd stepped up to the speaking stone before the prince's council, commanding the attention of elders, clan chiefs, noblemen, and advisers. Also present were men and halflings who served the prince and represented the interests of their communities and clans within the Principality. These latter folk seemed less intimidating to Kristryd than her own kin. Disregarding the sea of glowering bearded faces that regarded her so suspiciously, Kristryd took her place on the stone. *Dumathoin take them! I shall teach them that a dwarffess can stir hearts as well as a dwarf*, she told herself.

"Now hear my words," she began. Her strong steady voice belied her slight build. She spoke with authority as she had so often heard her father do. The tone of her voice arrested the attention of the gathering. "I speak as your ambassador to Enstad, and I bear a message from Her Fey Majesty. In years gone past, we dwarves have done what we can against goblinkind, but we have received little thanks and less help for the effort. Now the Fey Queen demands their utter extermination. Behold! The gods smelt together a new alloy of dwarf and elf—forging a new weapon to purge the mountains and take back the everlasting possession. Listen to what her Fey Majesty says, 'Let those who join our cause be called our friends and those who refuse be called our enemies!'"

Kristryd's father rose to his feet. All eyes turned to him. "Daughter," the Prince Corond said, "You speak well for Yolande, but we will not be made to dance at her whim like fairies at her midsummer's frolic. I, myself, the god's-own-appointed dwarf over Ulek, forged this alliance, and I command it to this day. If the elves will join our cause, very good. Let them lend us their swords.

Berronar bind my oath! I am no sellsword for the faerie queen!”

Kristryd recognized her father's strategy. She bowed before her him and yielded up the speaking stone. The prince did not bother to take her place upon it. Instead, he turned to face the elders and chieftans of his assembly from his counsel seat. “Now is the time,” he said, “to strike while iron glows red. Clangeddin's Ax! Let us sweep through the mountains, above and below, as a dwurwife sweeps out her home with a broom. Beat out the filth as a dwurwife beats out her rugs on the first day of open-tide.”

Upon the Speaking Stone at Havenhill

Prince Corond Olinstaad summoned a council of war to assemble at Havenhill, near the ancient halls of Balnorhak. The queen's elite cavalry provided flights back and forth between kingdoms until all necessary emissaries had been summoned. The Upper Ulek states came out of respect for the prince (they showed little concern for obligation to the queen or fear of her threats). Likewise came the gnomes from the Kron Hills. A company from Celene arrived by magical conveyance with Yolande's counselors of war, including Onselvon, the court mage of Enstad, and Bagbag, counselor to the house of Corond, who had been left behind in the elven kingdom in Yolande's haste to send forth Kristryd.

Kristryd asked herself, *How would Yolande address this council were she in my place? Would she not first dress the part?*

Kristryd donned a war helm over her black curls, a chain shirt of mithril armor over her slight frame and strapped upon her thigh a naked blade forged on the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains. So attired, she took her place upon the speaking stone and addressed all those counselors and masters of war, staring them in the eyes, daring them to raise objections. Standing above her younger brothers and above all the chieftans of the clans, she issued challenge, “Who will rise against my word? I speak today on behalf of my father, His Serene Highness, Lord of the Peaks of Haven, the Prince Ulek; I speak on behalf of my father-in-law, Thane Gavin Evrast the Fourth, undermountain king of Dengar; I speak on behalf of Thane Redmod Buddoken, undermountain king of Gilmorack, and I speak on behalf of Her Fey Majesty, the most-terrible avenging Solar of Celene. I say to you now, one and all, that the word is ‘War!’ most unrelenting, most hateful, and most savage, until not one of the goblinkind remain in any hole or hovel, cave or cavern, until we have utterly cleansed the Lortmil Mountains and taken back the Everlasting Possession of the dwarven people!”

All those gathered in the great hall looked upon her in amazement, for it seemed that she spoke among them as neither dwarf nor elf, nor gnome nor man, but a goddess of war.

Declaration of War

In the days leading up to the official declaration, Godsdays sermons in the temples of Moradin discoursed passionately about divine destiny, the inheritance of the sons of Durin, and the inviolable sanctity of the "everlasting possession." The ancient patriarch, Thunderblade, urged the faithful to action against the sons of goblin-kind. On the first of Goodmonth 498, the Prince Olinstaad published a notice of war and summons to allies:

To the People of the Freed Territories, and to those of my people who fight for the honor of our gods and noble blood, hear ye now the words of His Most Serene Highness Prince Olinstaad Corond, Lord of the Peaks of Haven, Chosen of Moradin, Defender of the Ulek States, Rightful Lord of the Pomarj, and Heir of the Glory of Balnorhak: We go to war!

To the cowardly mongrel goblin-kind cowering in your holes beneath the sacred mountains: We make war upon you!

To my friends and allies in the Sheldomar Valley, the County of Ulek, the Duchy of Ulek, the Gran March, the Lands of Veluna, the cities of Verbobonc and Greyhawk, to the Kron Hills, the Forest of Celene, and the Drachensgrab Hills: I summon you to a council of war!

To my brethren in the ancient kingdoms of Dengar and Gilmorak, and to the Gnomes of the Lortmil Mountains: We stand with you!

To every craftsman, adventurer and wanderer in my realm, to every dwarf, elf, halfling, half-blood and gnome, to every man, woman and child who can hold an axe, to all who hear these words or reads this proclamation: The time to purge our sacred inheritance has begun!

The Poor March

Not Keoland nor Gran March nor the Baronies heeded the summons to the prince's council of war. The prince sent Kristryd to Niole Dra to make the entreaty before King Nyhan IV, citing the ties between their people and noting that Keoland would benefit

as much from suppressing the goblins as would the people of the Lortmils. Nyhan the Listless replied contemptuously, "Tell your father, 'You and the Uleks have chosen a separate path, and Keoland honors your choice.'"

Prince Corond liked not the thought of such an undertaking without the strength of Keoland, but he deemed his Alliance could manage the mountains. Only the southeast side and Suss Forest, where neither Celene nor the Uleks commanded, remained vulnerable. "We need the Pomarj Lords to complete the noose and pull it tight," he told his daughter. "To wage and win such a war, we must rely upon strength derived from mutual defense and greater numbers. Our great lands were once united, and we shall be again, from here to the Drachensgrab Spine."

Celene's elite cavalry carried Kristryd from Havenhill to the Poor March house of Baron Billaro. Upon the Free Lords of Highport came, unannounced and unforeseen, dwarven royalty descending suddenly from the clear skies amidst an entourage of beating wings, hooves and talons, flanked by elven warriors in shining mail, all mounted upon flying beasts like those from children's tales. Kristryd entreated the Free Lord, "Thus says my father, His Serene Highness, Lord of the Peaks of Haven, Prince Olinstaad Corond of Ulek ..."

The House of Billaro swore their fealty at once and all the overawed Free Lords of Highport took upon themselves binding oaths to the prince of Ulek and the queen of Celene. They only begged permission to meet also with the other dukes and nobles of the Pomarj lands, for none possessed the authority to speak for all. "We will convene a council here in Highport, and we will give you an answer according to the oaths we have already sworn," they assured her.

In truth, the Free Lords harbored only contempt for other races, and they reserved an especial antipathy for the dwarves who, until recently, had ruled them as overlords. A full year after the war had already commenced, the Free Lords assembled in Highport to discuss their options. By then, the shock of Kristryd's auspicious debut had been forgotten along with their oaths, "If a man escapes from the murder pits, does he throw himself back into the hole? Why should we trust the bloody prince? That greedy bugger wants back what has slipped through his fingers!" They quickly reached a consensus: "Let the grubbers and the fairies deal with their own kind and their own troubles. We are men not bloody gnomes, and we need have no fear of goblins here in these lands."

When Kristryd received this word, she sent sharp reply, "Let your own imprecations find you out for the oaths you have broken."

Chapter 8

THE SUEL SPELL

HROTH'S YELLOW EYES narrowed as he peered heavenward. Half a dozen horse-birds wheeled about the sky over the holy city like vultures circling over a dying warrior. The nostrils of his thick blue nose flared as he sniffed at the air. "Elves!" he spat. Even at this distance from the city, Hroth and his warriors could hear the blaring alarm of the goblin war horns and the beating of the drums.

"Drop the corpses girlies!" he ordered. "Double time all the way home!"

His soldiers dropped their packages: a dozen orange-skinned carcasses, all of them beheaded, some of them also pierced with arrows, the fletching still visible in the wounds. Hroth unshouldered his own burden, a heavy burlap bag containing the dozen heads that once belonged to the bodies.

Three weeks earlier, when those heads were still attached, the priests of Grot-Ugrat dispatched missions to both Celene and the Duchy to protest the city's innocence in the matter of Druid's Defile, for rumor of those events had reached the temple. By then, dwarves, elves, gnomes, and men had been spied advancing into the mountains. The envoys to the west went before the duke. *Grind his bones!* Hroth snarled to himself as he kicked at one of the leering severed heads. *Grind all their bones!* The duke gave no heed to the protestations of the ambassadors, nor did he honor the custom of parley. *No. Not that noble one! What did he do? Murdered them all.*

The messengers dispatched to Celene received no warmer welcome from those long-haired pretty-boys. Archers in the trees dropped them before they reached Courwood. Hroth commanded an elite guard to retrieve the bodies—so treacherously slain—from the borders of the elven wood. The butchers had laid out the stinking carcasses where they could be easily found beneath a pile of bloody noggins.

"By Galtai's strong arm! To the defense of the holy city!" Hroth

ordered. Abandoning their burdens for the time being, he and his warriors fell into tight formation and launched a charge into the sacred valley. The stomp of their boots pounded out a steady galloping rhythm that answered to the beat of the war drums in the city. Despite the weight of weapons and heavy armor, the disciplined soldiers were conditioned to sustain such a pace all day and night if need be. In this case, they would need only an hour to reach the walls of Grot-Ugrat.

The troop encountered a few ranks of gnome warriors retreating, it seemed, from the city. The gnomes saw the disaster approaching and prepared for collision. They formed up defensively to meet the onrush of fifty hobgoblin soldiers. It would have been a short battle. But Hroth ordered his men to ignore the gnomes and their illusions and to circumvent their position. He would not slay them in the holy vale, not even if the little troll turds had come to undermine the sacred city. They quickly left the gnomes far behind.

The sunlight dimmed. Something felt wrong. Darkness seemed to descend from the mountain, and the air felt suddenly cold and sick like the smell of the undead. Hroth signaled a halt with a raised fist. The soldiers stopped the charge abruptly. Each one dropped to a crouch, instantly taking up positions in a defensive formation with weapons brandished and ready for action. Hroth's yellow eyes glanced about nervously, searching sky and plain. He could no longer see the horse-birds, nor the heights above the valley. He removed the helm from his head as if it would help him to better see and understand the meaning of the sinking cloud of gloom. Some terror settled over the holy city—some evil had condensed in the air. It fell like a fog onto the ramparts, obscuring the towers, and concealing the walls.

Grot-Ugrat

Some claim the gods themselves built the ancient city of Grot-Ugrat. The city sat in a high valley above the Celene Pass. Massive stone blocks, some weighing in excess of twenty tons, formed impenetrable walls, towering embankments, and steep retaining walls. Who carved those blocks out of the living stone, and who moved them into place in the valley below? None can say. But what can be said is that the *hoch-jebline* considered the whole valley sacred. They occupied the city since before the cataclysms and boasted that it had never fallen to an enemy. Temples to the unholy deities of goblinkind filled the city, but the hobgoblins dedicated the city to their god Nomog-Geaya. They believed he

had built the city, and therefore, all their kind in eastern Oerik felt it incumbent upon themselves to make pilgrimage to the holy valley at least once in their lives. Within the confines of the sacred vale, all tribes were considered equal, and no one was permitted to shed blood except the blood of victims on the altars. Nomog-Geaya and Maglubiyet kept rival temples in the holy city. The one preferred his victims burnt alive; the other competed to slurp up the blood of sacrifices. The worship of the goblin gods ordinarily inspired bloodshed among competing shamans and rival priesthoods, but not within the sacred valley. All those who came and went from Grot-Ugrat respected the ancient tradition and feared the consequences should they violate the valley's sanctity. Goblin, orc, hobgoblin, and ogre alike revered the sanctity of the valley, and none dared to break the pax. To do so was sacrilege. There alone, in all the world, members of other races were allowed to come and go among goblinkind, and at certain festivals, half-elven merchants from Ulek could be found selling wares in the city's markets. Even the undermountain kings of Balnorhak and Gilmorack had once sued for peace with the holy city.

Head of the Wyrm

While Kristryd Olinsdotter was at diplomacy in the Pomarj, her father the prince convened a war council in Gyra. Thane Bolor Blackaxe of Hoch Dungalorin spoke first, saying, "If you want to kill the cussed wyrm, cut off its head! For seven centuries, nay, for eight, the dwarves of Dungalorin have defended the pass from those devils. What thanks do you think we have received? But if you would show us your grate, put an end to that wicked city."

Likewise, trueheaded Bagbag stood in the midst of the council and declared in the hearing of all, "The Prince Consort of Celene was slain not twenty miles from that fell city." The truth was otherwise. The Prince Consort had been slain in Druid's Defile, near Courwood, many days travel from Grot-Ugrat, but no one at the war council seemed to know the truth better, and those who did know better deemed the error not worthy of correction. Even Onselvon of Celene let the statement stand without bothering to correct the record. (So it is recorded in the annals of the proceedings in the royal library at Gyra. Until today, the histories still contain discrepancies on this matter, some claiming that the Prince Consort was slain in the Celene Pass and others stating he was slain in Druid's Defile.)

The Royal Army marched out before the snows had yet melted

from the peaks. They came up through the Kewl Way to the Duke's Road through Tringlee. The main host of the Ulek states went up with them. The heavily armored ranks of Dengar and Gilmorack joined the muster at ancient Hoch Dungalrin. Gnomes from the Kron Hills joined soldiers from Celene and halflings from Prinzfeld to converge from the east.

As all these forces converged on the sacred valley, the priests of Nomog-Geaya dispatched their ambassadors to plead their innocence. The mission to the west fell into the hands of rangers from the County. They brought the hobgoblins before His Noble Radiance Gallowagn, the Duke over the Duchy of Ulek. In tribute to the Prince Consort of Celene, the duke ordered the emissaries put to death by hanging them from the walls of Tringlee. The mission to the east met no kinder welcome from the elven watch on the borders of Celene.

The Suel Spell

Despite the bitter reception of their ambassadors, the goblins felt secure behind the enormous stone-block walls of Grot-Ugrat. The city had stood for many centuries, survived many sieges, but never fallen. Was not the holy city defended by the gods themselves? They knew their enemies were not prepared to lay any extended siege. The goblins only needed to hold the walls until snows flew again when the attackers would surely fatigue and the armies would return to their homes.

Bagbag had a better plan than direct siege. In a secret counsel of the warmages, he revealed his strategy, "The battle cannot be easily won with sword or spear or sling or bow. But I have brought a worthy weapon." Obviously well-satisfied with himself, the old loremaster tried to suppress a proud smile as he withdrew an ancient scroll from its tube and unrolled the artifact on a table in the sight of all those spellbinders. "It is written in Old Suel letters," he explained. "It contains the necessities. The spell may be used but once. It needs to be translated and transcribed, then memorized for the casting. No one caster can wield the power alone. Each of us must learn a portion of the whole spell. Then on the day of battle, we will knit them all together."

The high mage of Enstad leaned over the table and regarded the scroll warily, "How came the dwarves by this ancient deviltry, and what will be the effect of it?"

"How we dwarves come by what is ours is our concern alone and none of yours," Bagbag snapped. "The effect of the spell will

be the defeat of our enemies and the conquest of that cursed city.”

Onselvon still demurred, “This magic was written before the cataclysms. I will not dally with devils.”

The trueheaded loremaster retorted, “If the spell is evil, so be it! But if evil be employed to save the lives of free folk, then I no longer name it evil but good.”

Even with such persuasions, Onselvon and the warmage from Tringlee could not be persuaded to participate in the cabal until they received a directive from Enstad.

“I shall fetch your directive,” Kristryd told the warmages when she heard of the impasse. She summoned Darrion and Emolas. Not many days later she returned with the orders, sealed with the impress of Her Fey Majesty.

The warmages sequestered themselves in the academy tower of Tringlee to prepare the weapon. Even with so many great minds committed to the matter, the spell took several weeks to translate, decipher, transcribe, divide, and memorize. When the warmages emerged from their sequester, they warned the allies to draw back their forces from the valley. “Let them draw back completely. Leave off the siege!” Onselvon commanded.

A Colorless Death

The elite cavalry of Celene mounted the spellcasters upon the backs of hippogriffs in order to convey them to a high summit above the scared valley. Even old Bagbag consented to the ride, for there was no other means of obtaining the height they needed to safely cast the spell. “Boccob blast it!” he exclaimed as they hoisted him to the back of Emolas. He took the position behind Darrion’s saddle to which Kristryd had become accustomed. “I shall be grateful if this creature does not drop me to the rocks!” Emolas reared back her eagle’s head, snapped her beak impatiently and pawed at the ground.

“You have nothing to fear,” Kristryd assured her trueheaded mentor, a mirthful smile spilling over her face. It amused her to see the dignified dwarf so discomfited.

“Fah!” the old loremaster protested as his hands sought some safe grip. He refused to hold fast to the elf in the saddle.

The sky above the valley of Grot-Ugrat filled with the beating wings of the eagle-horse steeds. Tower guards in the city below sighted the strange birds wheeling about the peaks, and they raised the alarm. The trumpeters blasted long notes on the great horns, and the drummers beat out urgent messages. The sound of horns

and war drums filled the valley, echoed off the mountains, and stirred up fear in the heart of every goblin.

From their vantage atop a rocky peak overlooking the valley, the warmages looked down upon the stone city and arranged themselves to deliver the spell. The most powerful illusionist and spellbinder of the Kron Hills, a mage of Veluna, sorcerers and warlocks from the Uleks, the old mage Onselvon of Enstad, and loyal Bagbag of Ironhelm formed a circle of power, spoke words of power, and combined their formidable power to weave a spell unseen since the Suel Imperium made war on the Bukluni. The magic took the form of a cloud of darkness which coalesced like mist and slowly rolled down the slopes of the mountain, slower than a creeping fog. It filled the valley like a noxious gas. There it remained, brooding over the whole valley in darkness, vile and sickly as hatred itself.

The beating of the war drums fell silent. The bray of the horns fell silent. The war cries of goblins fell silent. The cloud began to advance out from the city, rolling across the valley floor like a billow of smoke.

Hroth felt the hair on his neck and arms bristle in terror. He pulled back his lips to reveal yellow fangs, snarling orders, "Withdraw! Retreat! Flee!" The warlord and his warriors turned and fled from the sacred valley, all semblance of martial discipline abandoned. They ran headlong, cursing the sons of Larethian and swearing oaths of vengeance in the name of the Nomog-Geaya.

Expedition to the City of Temples

By morning the spell had expired. The darkness lifted to reveal silence and death. Not a bird chirped; not a blade of grass or single leaf of tree remained unwithered. Not a single heart still beat in the city or the valley around it.

A team of dwarves from Dengar entered the dead city to verify the spell's effect and to search for the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains, but they never emerged. A second team, led by Glowen Granitebeard of Dengar, took oaths to Moradin and entered the city, but they too disappeared among the corpses and never returned. Then Onselvon himself, with Kristryd's help, formed a brave party of adventurers with representatives from all the nations. Clothed with magical protections and various amulets and wardings, they entered the city and searched the temples. They found ghouls and ghosts among the rotting corpses of goblinkind. They found temple treasures, warded by deadly spells and protected by

devious traps, but they found no trace of the lost parties of dwarves, nor did they ever find any indication that the sacred Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains had ever been there.

Urgush and Hroth

The massacre of Grot-Ugrat inspired fear among all the tribes of the Lortmil Mountains. Before that calamity, no single tribe held the upper hand, nor did any dark lord or fiend succeed in uniting them. After Grot-Ugrat, every goblin's knees knocked together, every orc cut his own flesh to offer blood to Gruumsh, and every hobgoblin swore allegiance to Hroth's oaths of vengeance. (To this day, the hobgoblins of the Flanaess hate the elves with an everlasting and unrelenting hatred, holding them responsible for all that befell them.)

In the fear and confusion of the aftermath, bold Urgush raised a new banner bearing the visage of a gorgon painted in red. "Let the sons of Durin turn back to stone!" he said. He spoke to any who would give him ear, "Hear me now ye chieftains, shamans, and clansmen. Did not the one-eyed god bequeath this jagged strip of peaks and hills to us? And when these shit-licking, rock-stomping dwur came to pluck stones beneath the rocks, did we roll over and leave them to suck out the marrow from the bones of our ancestors? No! What did we do? We washed the rocks with their blood.

"But now those gundyguts mean to cheat us even out of these miserable pits and stinking holes! What shall I do? Shall I go kiss the feet of the cursed fairy queen and beg her favor? Hump me from behind! I have sworn by the hair on my balls to serve the daughter of Baba Yaga."

"She shall deliver us!" became the rallying cry in the mouths of goblins, orcs, hobgoblins, ogres, gnoll, and flind. Inspired by Urgush's boasts and Hroth's oaths, the tribes set aside their differences and united themselves against the alliance of dwarves, elves, gnomes, and men. Many recalled the old shaman prophecy about the half-blood who would unite the tribes and drive the dwur out from the heritage of Gruumsh. Many said to one another, "Let Urgush be the one!" Even Hroth took the iron helm from his own head and placed it at the feet of Urgush.

Chapter 9

THE DRAWING OF THE VEIL

THE AMBASSADOR TRAVELED to and fro between the nations of the alliance. Often she went afoot but, more often, clinging precariously on the back of a hippogriff and holding tight to a cavalryman of Enstad. Wherever the fragile alliance began to fray, Kristryd arrived to stitch together the rending seams and heal the wounds of insult with eloquent salve and articulate balm. If ever a nation began to flag or grow weary, she arrived with fiery words to stir hearts and strengthen resolve.

In all these efforts, she relied much on the magic of the silver-framed mirror. Many long hours, each day, she gazed intently into its reflection. Those who saw her doing so thought her very vain indeed. “See how she loves to look on the delicate lines of her fey face!” the dwarven women sniffed. “More olve than dwur, that one. And she loves none more than Kristryd!”

The dweomer upon the mirror worked in such a way that, if she looked long into it while focusing her mind on some person she knew, she could see through that one’s eyes and see what that one saw and even hear the words being said. The more she practiced, the more adept she became. *What a fine gift Duke Gallowagn gave to me. He could not have guessed how useful I would find it*, she thought to herself as she spied on Gallowagn’s own court.

Much she learned through the eyes and ears of others, and so she came to understand secret matters of state. Royalty, leaders, and aristocrats employed protective wards that the dweomer upon the mirror could not penetrate, but Kristryd found that, by turning the scrying magic to spy on the conversations of servants and lower court officials, she learned all she needed. The mirror gave her advantage in all her negotiations. She knew the truth of things behind the diplomacy, and she was not misled by deceptions, subtle lies, or even matters left unspoken. Yet she guarded her words carefully not to reveal too much of her knowledge. *They mustn’t discern that I have the power to peer into their private affairs*, she thought to herself. *If I do, the advantage will be lost.*

The mirror had disadvantages. Trusted friends and allies spoke unkindly of her in her absence. Their private words stung her like darts. Though she knew it petty, she could not help but treat them coldly thereafter, and so she acquired a reputation for haughtiness. To most, Kristryd seemed aloof and distant.

Not every court proved vulnerable to her probing. When she tried to employ the mirror on the Grand Court of Enstad, she found the wards around the capital of Celene impenetrable. *Not that I would ever use my mirror to spy on the queen*, Kristryd told herself.

The Fastaal's Charge

Had Kristryd's mirror shown her that which transpired in the Grand Court, she would have seen the new fastaal summoned before the Blossoming Throne. The elves had not forgotten about the Karrak Bowl. Fastaal Dothmar, wielder of the dread sword *Concluder*, desired to return to that deep and hidden outpost of savagery and avenge himself of the comrades he had lost on his last visit.

"Go," the Queen Yolande granted. "Take what heroes you will and fill the bowl with the blood of Gruumsh. But you will also take with you dwur folk who know those tunnels and can guide your coming and your going. For I would test the mettle of this alliance we have made with the bearded ones."

"My lady, surely not!" the fastaal objected. He fell to one knee before her beauty and bowed his head in supplication.

"Your queen has spoken," Yolande replied, unmoved by the entreaty. "Share the adventure with my cousin, Archosian, who seeks to make his name worthy of tales. See that no harm befalls a hair of his head."

"By Sehanine's bright night! Will we send an inexperienced sword beneath the mountains! His majesty is a child," the fastaal objected. His eyes sized up the homely elf prince who stood to the left of the Blossoming Throne.

Archosian drew himself to height and fumbled awkwardly for words, "I am not yet of your stature, but neither is my sword inexperienced." It was true, in a manner of speech. He had inherited the magical blade *Defender* from heroic forbears. The sword had tasted a great deal of goblin blood, only not by Archosian's hand. Orcs remembered the blade, hated it, and called it by the name *Razor*.

"Take Archosian with you," the queen repeated firmly. "You may find him useful in dark places. Onselvon has tutored the lad in cantrips, and his arrow rarely strays the mark."

"I'll take the Green Arrow," the fastaal acceded, but he assigned his new charge to his companion Peralay, a tall, left-handed olven ranger. A hunting hawk decorated Peralay's shield, the symbol of his noble house. In the sheath at his side he carried the magical blade *Gnoll-Cleaver*, a weapon forged in Balnorhak upon the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains. Peralay traveled with three vicious co-oshees that answered to his every command and understood the tongue of the elves. The green-furred sylvan dogs knew the scent of goblinkind and delighted in the hunt.

The three elven lords brought together a handful of loyal heroes. According to the queen's instructions, the expedition looked to the dwur for assistance. Mountain dwarves of Dengar and Gilmorack had maps of the Low Road, and they could provide an escort through those sunless tunnels. A company of dwarves from Ulek came too. The principality claimed the fortifications of Karrak Bowl, for it had once been an outpost of Balnorhak. Kristryd's father sent scouts and infantrymen of the Royal Army to accompany the mission and occupy the fort once the orcs were driven thence.

On an appointed day, the elves and dwarves rendezvoused in the city of Courwood, east of the mountains on the banks of the Handmaiden. Kristryd made all the introductions and smoothed the negotiations, but when she committed them all to the grace of Ulaa and bade them farewell, the mountain dwarves refused to leave Courwood with the elves unless she accompanied them.

"I already have enough charges to watch over. I shall have to account to Her Fey Majesty if her favorite dwarf suffers so much as a scratch," Dothmar complained. "Would it be fit to take a woman into man's fight?"

Kristryd burned at these words and retorted, "I am a daughter of the Ulek Dwur. I hefted battleaxe before I learned my letters, and I slew goblins before I saw twenty summers. I have hunted giants in these mountains with the priests of Gyra. Dwarf women do not cower at home while their men go out to fight as do the women of other races. We fight alongside."

"And so you shall!" the fastaal capitulated hastily. Besides, he needed her help. The mountain dwarves spoke not a single word of common tongue, and, moreover, they loved the elves not much more than goblinkind. Likewise, the Ulek dwarves hated the Dengar dwarves, and the mountain dwarves returned that sentiment with generosity. Olinsdotter stood betwixt all three parties: translator, counselor, and ambassador, with the wizard Bagbag

at her side.

“Do not fear daughter,” her most-trueheaded advisor said. “I will see that no harm befalls you, so help me Moradin.”

Peralay and the Green Arrow

They set out from Courwood on the thirteenth day of Goodmonth. The mountain dwarves kept to themselves; the Ulek dwarves kept to themselves; and the Celenese kept to the themselves. At their first encampment, the three remained at such a distance that one looking on from above might suppose the flames of their campfires had no relation. Only Kristryd enjoyed the favor and confidence of all three parties and moved between the camps unhindered.

On the second day’s march from Courwood, the parties turned aside from Druid’s Defile to follow the canyon-way to the north. Along this route Peralay and his cooshees tracked the ambushers back to their holes though their trail was now cold a year. They entered the sheltered valley, fearful of what eyes might be spying from the caves and rocks above.

In the camp of the elves, Kristryd found Archosian and Peralay reclining under the stars, sharing draughts from a skin. Peralay’s cooshees lay beside their master, curled up with their snouts tucked under their tales.

“Will you drink with us?” Archosian asked in the elvish tongue. “It’s an emerald!” The elves are well-known through the Flanaess for the golden-green “emerald” wine of Celene, a crisp, dry wine, best served chilled on a hot day. Even warm, the vintage tasted light, refreshing and rich with the aroma of summer nights—far too easy to drink.

“It’s not the local,” Peralay enticed. “I brought this from Enstad, from the earliest grapes of the season.”

“One should never refuse a gift of the elves,” Kristryd only quoted half the proverb as they handed her the skin. She raised it to her lips and sipped at it—enough to be polite but not so much as to lose her wits. Handing the skin back to Archosian, she asked the young elf, “Why do they call you Green Arrow?”

“Because he is green,” Peralay answered on behalf of his younger companion. He punctuated the statement with a silly giggle.

“I prefer to think it an homage to my marksmanship,” Archosian explained, “But Dothmar names me so because I am young and lack experience. Like green wood.”

“Like green wine,” Peralay jested, taking back possession of the skin.

“How many years are you?” Kristryd asked the young elf.

“I celebrated the drawing of the veil two score ago,” Archosian replied with the indignant tone of a teenager eager to prove himself an adult.

“The drawing of the veil?” Kristyd asked.

“It’s when an elf comes of age. It’s that age when we can no longer remember our previous lives,” Peralay explained. “It usually comes upon us after we have passed our first century.”

Elves are strange creatures! Kristryd thought to herself, but out loud she jested, “Then you are green indeed! Too young for green wine I think.”

“And how old are you my lady?” Archosian prodded.

“One never discusses a lady’s age,” Kristryd feigned an insult to her dignity. She took another sip at the wine Peralay offered her before continuing, “But since you have been so impolite to inquire, I fall three years short of finishing a century.”

“Aha!” Archosian triumphed. “The child among us! Younger than all of us! No more emerald for you!” He pulled the skin from her hands.

The Twisting Tunnels

On the seventeenth day of Goodmonth they came to the porch-hole and descended beneath the mountains. As they entered the undermountain, Bagbag warned dwarves and elves, “We show no mercy; we take no prisoners, and we give no heed to the lies of goblin tongues!”

Neither dwarves nor elves need much light of lamp or flaming torch to see their path in the darkness. They make their way dimly along as a man makes his way in the bright starlight on a moonless night. But when it came to consulting maps and checking journals, the mountain dwarves lit candles and lamps, spread out great parchments on cavern floors, and confirmed the party’s position with compass marks, ticks, and notations. Otherwise the troop moved quietly through the darkness, often without light of lamp or flame of candle, hoping to catch the *euroz* by surprise.

The tunnels through which they made their way were rough-hewn affairs, narrow passages with high ceilings. At more than one point the way constricted so much as to allow them to pass only single file. In other places, the tunnels widened into natural caverns. Pools of standing water filled a few of these, forcing them to splash

their way through. They fought off bats, stirges, giant rats, giant centipedes, and a disturbed a den of trolls. Though they saw no orcs or goblins, the stench of goblin filth made the air reek as they drew nearer to the Karrak Bowl. Peralay's cooshee dogs sniffed at the foul scent and growled eagerly.

On the second day in the tunnels, after warding off giant spiders and cutting through their webs, Dothmar took Kristryd aside and spoke to her in the elvish tongue, saying, "By now we should have come upon the Karrak Bowl. My memory is not so foggy as to forget the number of strides. Surely these dwarves of yours have led us astray."

"They are not my dwarves," Kristryd rejoined, "Forgive me if I trust their maps more than your memories of these winding ways."

Another day passed and even the mountain dwarves admitted that either maps had led them astray or the tunnels themselves had conspired to shift into a misleading maze. Kristryd translated these words into the elvish reluctantly. Her report elicited exasperated sighs from the fair folk.

"Cursed be the sons of Durin!" Dothmar exclaimed. "We must retrace our way at least a day's march and pick up the trail where we lost it." The sons of Durin sullenly agreed, but when the party turned back, they found the way that they had come blocked and impassible, as if no tunnel had ever been there at all. The cooshees growled apprehensively.

"Illusory arts!" Bagbag exclaimed. "We have been deceived by the tricks of the shamans." Scarcely had the words left his mouth than came the ambush. Orcs fell upon the party from before and behind. They poured down from hidden alcoves above. The tunnels rang with war screams. Bow strings twanged and black poison-tipped arrows swished through the air.

Chapter 10

A VOICE IN THE DARK

THE FASTAAL SHOUTED out orders in the elven tongue, assuming himself the commander of the situation. Likewise, the dwarven officers shouted their own commands in their own tongue, each one assuming himself the leader. Arrows punctured flesh, dwarves and elves clutched at wounds, and savages leaped toward them with thirsty blades.

As the chaos of the battle erupted around her, Kristryd seemed to float above it, as if observing these things happen to someone other than herself—as if playing war in a child’s game. The curious detachment had dreamlike quality. Despite the darkness all around her, her dwur eyes could clearly discern the orcs leaping from behind the stones and dropping from hidden alcoves above. *So this is how it ends, here on the Low Road, as it ended for my miserable and unhappy husband*, she thought to herself. Her thoughts turned to her three sons. *Shall I leave them as orphans?*

After only a moment of hesitation, she took charge, ignoring both the Celene officer and the long-bearded dwarven warmen. With a natural ease like one long accustomed to the battlefield, she shouted orders in elvish and dwarvish as the need demanded. Her clear-toned voice resonated above the din of battle. “Form up! Wall of shields! Hammers and axes between!” she commanded in the dwarvish tongue. “Archers aim low, drop the first ranks first,” she commanded in the elvish tongue. “Spellcasters! Light spells, magical arrows, and a wall of fire on the flank!”

Both the elves and the dwarves heeded the voice in the dark, for they had already grown accustomed to her translating on behalf of one another. The dwarves raised a wall of shields, hammers, and axes against the onslaught. The elves loosed away volleys of arrows, striking the first wave so that the second stumbled over them. Archosian employed cantrips to create light spells that revealed the enemy, blinded their eyes, and outlined them in fey light. The sturdy dwur wizard Bagbag threw down spells of power worthy of warmages. Nothing struck fear into the orcs as much as Peralay’s

dogs. The cooshees silently leapt at the orcs, ripping at throats. Dothmar and Peralay followed quickly with *Concluder* and *Gnoll-Cleaver*, both blades naked and unsheathed, flashing in their hands.

If any foe struck up a conversation with Fastaal Dothmar, *Concluder* struck twice in reply, putting in the last word. If any orc's ugly head strayed too close to Peralay's reach, *Gnoll-Cleaver* removed the offensive hairy bulb from its shoulders. The battle ended swiftly with the orc host falling back in retreat and cooshees, elves, and dwarves in full pursuit.

Bagbag Lost

They chased the Red Fangs for most of a day, cutting them down as they overtook them. The pursuit, however, seemed to wind about endlessly. The fleeing orcs led them no closer to the Karrak Bowl. The pursuers stumbled into traps, concealed pits, flame-strikes and wicked contrivances left behind by the fleeing orcs until nearly every member of the troop had some injury to show. Nor had their number escaped the initial battle unscathed. The wounded needed attention, both elves and dwarves, and some fell feverish from poisoned barbs. The whole enterprise became distasteful to all parties.

During the pursuit, Bagbag lagged behind. His old legs could not keep up the wild pace. By the time the party realized their wizard missing, they had already traveled miles beneath the earth. Kristryd insisted on going back to search for her trueheaded friend. She offered to take a few mountain dwarves to find the wizard, but the fastaal feared separating the party. "Surely he has fallen in the tunnels, slain by the orcs," he reasoned.

"Then I will find his body, carry it out over my shoulders, and bear him all the way to his tomb in Khundrakar," Kristryd insisted.

"I will go with her. My cooshees will find the wizard's scent and lead us to him," Peralay offered.

"And I too," Prince Archosian hastened to add, his thirst for adventure not yet slaked.

"Nay," the fastaal objected. "If any harm befall Kristryd or Archosian, how shall I walk again beneath the boughs of my lady's wooded realm? Tell the dwarves to take us out from beneath this mountain." He assured the elves still eager for vengeance, "Another opportunity will come. We shall yet fulfill our oaths."

The mountain dwarves unrolled their maps and consulted their charts. "If we return the way we have come, we may find him yet," they told Kristryd, "But the shorter path to the surface lies

ahead, not behind.”

Kristryd considered the options. This section of the Low Road was remote, far from the main thoroughfares, and few dwarves had walked those back alleys in recent centuries. They might find a friendly gnome village that could assist them—there had once been several nearby—but that hope seemed thin at present. Most of the tunnels near the Karrak Bowl had been orc and goblin nests for many years.

“Go back to the surface. Follow these dwarves,” she told Dothmar. “They will lead you and your people out of this maze. With Ulaa’s help, the hunter and I will find Bagbag whole and hale, and we will catch up with you.”

The Hunt for Bagbag

The fastaal could not prevent her. Still he refused to let Archosian go on such a dangerous errand. Kristryd took three of dwarves of Ulek. Peralay and the cooshees went with her too, the sylvan dogs leading the way. The small rescue party moved quietly, hoping to avoid attracting attention. Kristryd wanted to call out for Bagbag, but she feared her voice would call down the orcs or something worse.

Ancient hardhewers cut the tunnels through which they traveled by widening natural fissures. The way sometimes opened broadly but more often constricted into narrow passages where only two or three might walk abreast. Intersections, cave mouths, and the entrances to dark tunnels opened from time to time on the left and the right. At points the ceiling above rose so high they could not guess its height, but at other stretches of tunnel they had to stoop low. They stepped carefully, checking for traps as they went.

Peralay motioned for a halt.

“Have the dogs caught scent of him?” Kristryd asked. Peralay shook his head and pressed his fingers to his lips, urging silence. The cooshees cocked their heads, twitched their ears, and looked back in the direction from which they had come. Kristryd held her breath and strained to hear. The air seemed still and heavy, like the enveloping darkness. She could hear no sound but the hammer of her own heart.

“Something follows after us,” Peralay whispered. In soft tones, Kristryd translated the warning to the others. The dwarves concealed themselves in nooks and crannies and held their weapons ready. Kristryd gripped at the haft of her spear. Peralay hid himself behind a shoulder of rock; his cooshees crouched low at his

command, ready to pounce. Presently, a light appeared bobbing in the darkness—not the light of a lamp or candle but a magical light. For a few moments, Kristryd hoped it might be Bagbag come to find them, but as the light drew closer, she discerned the silhouette of a slender elf.

“Prince Archosian! You insufferable son of a fonkin’s strumpet! Did you defy the fastaal to follow after us?” Peralay stepped out from behind the rock, smiling at the mischief.

The young elf shrugged. An oafish grin spread across his face.

“Come with us now then,” Kristryd instructed. “We’ll make it right with Fastaal Dothmar later. But you must put out that light.”

A Call from the Darkness

They went on together for nearly an hour. At an intersection of ways, Peralay and his dogs surprised three orcs who were too distracted with setting a snare-trap to hear their approach. Peralay slew two before they had a chance to react; the cooshees slew the third no less efficiently. When the echoes of that brief scuffle subsided, Kristryd thought she heard a distant voice call out.

“Hush! Did you hear that?” Everyone stood still, straining to listen. A moment later, the voice called again.

“That’s him!” Kristryd exclaimed. “He must have taken the wrong turn and fallen into a trap.” Bagbag’s cry for help sounded faint and weak. “He is injured I think.”

“The voice comes from this tunnel-way,” the keen-eared hunter indicated the way with a nod of his head. “The cooshees like it not,” he added. The whines of the dogs communicated their objections.

“Bagbag! Where are you?” Kristryd hazarded a shout, speaking in the old dwur tongue. The sound of her voice echoed backed to her.

A moment later, a faint reply, “Help me daughter!” They set off in the direction from which the voice seemed to emanate. The path climbed sharply and, after some distance, opened into a broader cavern. The air smelled strong but not of orc stench. Some other stench.

“Help me! Please! Hurry!” Bagbag called again from the darkness ahead.

Kristryd frowned at this. *Ever we go further, but never does his voice seem closer. And how does the noble blood of Balnorhak plead for himself so piteously?* “We are deceived,” she said of a sudden. “A light! Quick! Archosian, give us your light.”

“We should turn back,” Peralay advised. The cooshees growled

with alarm, the hair of their napes stood on end.

“Too late. Something draws near,” Archosian announced as his light spell blazed forth and sent the darkness fleeing.

“Look at this!” one of the dwarves said with dismay. A painted blue eye gazed from upon a standing stone set in the middle of the way. “Gnolls! We have wandered into their dens.”

“Look at that!” Kristryd pointed to an ugly creature that stood leering at them a stone’s throw up the path. “What in the six-hundred sixty and six levels is that?” The creature’s head resembled the head of a giant badger, its body that of a stag, its tail like that of a lion, and its legs ended in sharp cloven hooves. Glittering, unblinking eyes fixed upon her. Fleshy lips peeled back to reveal malicious sharp bony ridges where one would expect teeth. More surprising still, this abomination spoke aloud in a dwur voice and the dwur tongue, “Help me daughter!” The voice no longer sounded to Kristryd like the voice of trueheaded Bagbag, not now that she could see the hideous face of the mimic.

Gnolls

Archosian’s magical light also dispelled the shadows which had concealed a pack of gnolls. Barking and snarling, they rose from their hiding places along the way. Kristryd estimated not less than a score. The dog-faced creatures brandished weapons and beat them against wooden shields. They raised their hackles and circled about, each trying to push another forward to the attack. None dared be the first. They hung back cowardly behind the weird creature, for their hopes had rested in a clever ambush, now foiled.

“You recognize this blade, don’t you dogs?” Peralay taunted the gnolls. The high elf hunter held *Gnoll-Cleaver* aloft above his head. The bare blade glowed with a hungry magical shimmer in the presence of its favored victims. The hated sword intimidated the gnolls, and Archosian’s magical light, stinging at their eyes, added to the intimidation. For a moment, Kristryd wondered if the dogs might withdraw. Not so. The beast lowered its head and pawed at the ground like a bull preparing to charge. Then it sprang. The gnolls followed quick after, baying and yelping with excitement. The sound of their gibbering and eager hoots chilled the blood.

“Stand fast,” Kristryd commanded. There could be no thought of flight. She raised her shield and set her spear to meet the onrush. The leucrotta stopped short, letting the stupid gnolls take the brunt of the collision. One of them impaled himself on Kristryd’s spear;

the spearhead punctured his abdomen and slid up to the heart. The weight of the gnoll's body wrenched the weapon from her hand. A rain of blows, blades, and cloven hooves came quick after. They fell hard and fast against her shield and helm, knocking her down to the ground. She felt cold iron bite her flesh.

The cooshees leapt silently at the leucrotta while Peralay's blade went slash-slash-slash, greedily devouring gnoll flesh. Acclumsid with fear, Archosian stabbed and jabbed, scoring small hits with *Defender*. He had no more cantrips or spells to offer. The three Ulek dwur fought like cornered beasts to defend their prince's daughter. Two of them interposed themselves between her body and the monstrous dogmen while the third pulled her back up to her feet.

Two cooshees tore at the leucrotta's legs, the third hung from the creature's torn neck by its teeth. The leucrotta screamed in pain and terror. It bucked and leapt and flerked about to shake the dogs. Meantime *Gnoll-Cleaver* feasted. Five, nay, make that six, gnolls already lay on the stones, quetching and bloodied.

From further up in the cavern came the sound of more howls and the cackling yelp of more hyena-headed monsters—more packs on the hunt. The baying of their brethren encouraged those still standing to press on all the harder. They fought to finish the job before the others arrived lest they be forced to divide the spoils. *There are too many of them*, Kristryd thought to herself as she stepped back from the fray.

The Sorceress

"Flee daughter! Flee or die!" a voice said in the old dwur tongue. Kristryd spun about, expecting to see another mimic at its pranks. Instead she saw an old dwur-wife in a noblecoat, white of hair and beard, eyes shining in the magical light. The old woman lifted an open hand to reveal a palm full of fine sand. She set it to her lips and blew the sand into the air, "Sleep!" Kristryd felt a drowsy wave of magic pass through her body. She shook it off. All around her, the gnolls dropped to the ground and heaped upon one another fast asleep. The dwarves set upon the sleeping gnolls to insure they would never wake. Peralay switched to his bow, nocked an arrow, and sent it into the hindquarters of the fleeing leucrotta. The arrow sank deep, nearly to the fletching. Another arrow followed for good measure.

"Who are you and from where have you come?" Kristryd demanded of the dwur-wife as she retrieved her spear from the body of a gnoll.

"No time for chatting, bellbon," the old dwarfess said. "Those dogs will be on your scent. Go back the way you came, and I'll delay them by dweomer-craft. Hurry now!"

"But who are you?" Kristryd asked again. "How are you here?"

"No time!" the other dwarves insisted, pulling her away. The yammering of the hunting packs drew nearer. "Do as the old woman says! We must flee!"

Peralay called back his dogs. The four dwarves and the two elves hurried away from the dens, running as hard as they could without abandoning their equipment. Kristryd found the going sore hard, for she had forgotten her wounds. After some distance, and hearing no sound of pursuit, they stopped to rest. She stumbled weakly and sank to the stones. Blood soaked all her shirts and covered her hands. Peralay helped her bind the wounds and also those of the others. Even the cooshees limped and whined from their pains.

They dared not tarry. They hoisted up their things and prepared to set off again when Peralay cautioned, "Someone comes. From the footfalls, I say a dwarf. Perhaps the old woman?" Everyone froze. They had not long to wait. Bagbag came stumbling down a tunnel, huffing and puffing from the effort.

"By Moradin's beard! He still lives," Kristryd exclaimed. "Blessed be Ulaa!"

"Blessed be Ulaa," Bagbag agreed, sinking down to the tunnel floor, wheezing to catch his breath. "I have passed through many hazards, but I have solved a vexing riddle."

"What riddle, father?" Kristryd asked, taking the old dwarf in her arms, she clutched his head tightly to her blood-sodden bosom for joy and relief.

"This dweomer-craft that has so confused our way!" he explained as he recovered his breath. "Tis not the work of orcish shamans as we supposed. Tis Balnorhak magic put to ill-use by an old sorceress of our people. By Bocob! I have seen her with my own eyes!"

"We too have had the pleasure of her acquaintance," Kristryd mused. "She saved our lives."

No Ordinary Child

Kristryd's party emerged from the mountains and found the encampments of their companions in the valley below. This time the camps of the dwarves, the mountain dwarves, and the elves were not separated so far as before, and all these shared the last of

their provisions together. Archosian took a seat next to Kristryd at a campfire where she sat among a circle of mountain dwarves. Firelight gleamed on the stoic eyes of the dwarves as they silently studied the elf prince, but Kristryd welcomed him and poured him a cup of steaming hot broth from the kettle over the fire.

“You survived your first real battles Green Arrow,” Kristryd observed.

“Only by hiding behind Dothmar and Peralay,” Archosian admitted as he sipped at the blashy broth. “But you proved your worth young one.” He spoke in the elvish tongue for her ears only, “I marvel that Fastaal Dothmar heeds your commands! Now I better understand why my cousin loves you so. You are no ordinary dwarfess, no ordinary child, nor an ordinary person at all.”

“Does the queen indeed love me so?” Kristryd asked.

“By the Lady Goldheart, she does!” the young elf swore. “And many tongues have wagged over it, for there are few among our own folk, much less among the other peoples wandering Oerth, who enjoy the queen’s confidence as does Kristryd the dwarfess.”

Chapter 11

WAY OF TEARS

“WE’RE ONLY HERE to burn the wretched city,” Hroth explained. “Outside of that, we don’t give a shite.” He gestured to the few dozen one-eared hobgoblin soldiers. They stood motionless at rigid attention—a study in military discipline. Many hundreds of miles had they traversed, under and above the mountains. They were footsore and hungry, on the last of the rations, and impatient for the fight. Now this dung-wad wanted to make excuses! Hroth hovered over Urgush and whispered, breathing his foul breath into the face of his lesser, “Where is your fiend-loving strumpet?”

Urgush Halfblood blanched and turned his face away from the hobgoblin warrior. “She has supplied us with spells, devilshine weapons, and armor too,” he insisted. He knocked his knuckles against the face of his shield to emphasize the point. “Tokens of her good faith!”

Horth’s yellow eyes blazed with menace. “We didn’t march a whole bloody moon for bloody tokens.”

From the height upon which they stood, the hobgoblin warlord and the half-orc looked down upon an open stretch of the Veluna High Road. A long caravan of gnomes descending from the Kron Hills snaked along the turns in the road, heading toward the fairy kingdom of Celene. Urgush pointed a clawed finger toward the caravan and snivelled, “What do you think those fonkin turds are doing? I watch ‘em come and go on that road, in and out, day after day. Buggerin’ elves, turd-nose gnomes, blasted dwarves! Armies and supplies! No one bothers them. No one hinders them.”

Hroth’s single remaining ear twitched.

“Take the High Road,” Urgush explained, “And we can saunter our way into fonkinland whenever we like.”

“I promised them pillage and rape,” Hroth said, gesturing again to the hobgoblin host he had led up from the south.

“I need dweomercraft; I need more devilshine weapons and armor,” Urgush objected. “I need time.”

“You have kobolds, goblins, gnolls, and more than a thousand

orcs ready now. We brought two fists full of hungry ogres and trolls! Someone's has to feed them soon!" Hroth growled. He added with a menacing grin, "Just don't get your fingers near their mouths."

An Unpleasant Dream

In the fortress of Dorob Kiltlduum, the wail of horns and tolling of the bell startled the Sacred Heart of Berronar from an unpleasant dream. She prayed for light, and a holy luminesce filled the room. *What time is it?* She peered out the tower window and observed the position of the moons and the stars. Still the middle of the night. She called to her acolytes, "Go! Inquire of the watch. Why have they raised the alarm?" The bells continued to toll as she pulled a tent-sized shift over her head, donned her sacred vestments, and uttered a prayer for protection. A memory from her dream made her shudder, but she could not recall the specifics or bring the details into focus. A few minutes later, the acolytes returned. "Orcs and goblins on the High Road!" they reported with breathless excitement.

"How? Surely I should have foreseen it!" the high priestess mused aloud. Then the details of the dream returned. "Does Hagthar yet stand?" she asked.

"We have not heard tell," the second acolyte said. "But the castellan has mustered the axes, and he summons you to the keep."

Gilvgola strapped a long belt about her wide waist and hitched her heavy bespelled mace upon it. Then she rummaged about her things, selected a book of psalms, and set off for the keep. The bells had ceased tolling. All of Dorob Kiltlduum was awake. Guards had been doubled. Sentries posted. Soldiers, already armed and armored, stood at the ready in the lower chambers. The castellan awaited Gilvgola when she arrived.

"Surely Yolande will march out to meet them," he declared, tugging at his beard. His voice betrayed uncertainty. He searched the face of the old priestess for some affirmation. "I have doubled the guard and mustered the axes. If they come this way, we will be ready for them."

Ignoring the castellan's assurances, Gilvgola said, "I have seen a troubling dream. The corpses of the elves litter the High Road from Kron to Enstad. Celene is lost if we do not march out at once."

"Who remains to guard our own walls?" the castellan objected. "We have families to consider."

"I have no time to brook arguments. Send a summons by way of signal fires to Hagthar, Irondelve, and Rockhall. Berronar has

shown it all to me in a dream. Time is short. See to it!”

Ulaa's Blessing

The sun rose on the Kron Hills, and with it, a force of gnomes, several hundred strong, arrived from Rockhall. A priest of Ulaa called Father Furduch of Tulvar led them. “How did you come so quickly?” Gilvgola asked him. “It has not been but a few hours since we lit the signals.”

“But it has been a full day since Ulaa woke me with a dream and told me to muster a host and march to Dorob Kilthduum. Behold! We have come,” the gnomish priest explained, snapping his fingers with excitement and hopping from foot to foot.

“Blessed be Ulaa,” Gilvgola declared.

“And blessed be Berronar,” Father Furduch replied, clapping his hands together for emphasis. “Now we hurry off to the fight. Our brothers will follow down from the height.”

Gilvgola and Father Furduch invoked the blessing of their respective goddesses, offered sacrifices, read the omens, prayed over the soldiers, and hastened their forces to the High Road. By the time they arrived, corpses littered the road, just as the Sacred Heart had foreseen.

Way of Tears

Days earlier, Urgush and Hroth descended upon the High Road, overran the outposts, and slew every villager and traveler between Hagthar and Celene. As if the survival of her kingdom were simply a game to be played out upon a chessboard, the elven queen dispatched the main body of her soldiery to meet the threat. Her forces marched out under flying standards, trumpeting fanfare, and in polished armor. The glittering host believed they merely needed wave their noble banners and make a parade to cow the enemy. In the flight of their skitterbrook retreat, they left behind a trail of abandoned bodies from Hagthar to Enstad. No record tells the number of the slain, but the poets claim the quantity of blood rivalled that of Larethian from whence their first fathers sprang.

Coming late to the battle, Gilvgola's dwarves and Furduch's gnomes threw themselves upon the victors. Ferocious blows fell. Orcs converged and the gnolls howled with greed for blood. Goblinkind shot barbed arrows from behind the stones. Ogres roared with delight at the prospect of flesh (for they will not eat olven flesh). Gilvgola and Father Furduch led the charge. Their

soldiers slammed furiously up against the monsters. The axes of Dorob Kilthdum severed limbs and heads. The gnomes of Rockhall struck helms and horns. All the High Road was asplattered and gore. None could traverse it except they stepped upon the fallen and slipped upon the blood. It seemed that the efforts of gnomes and dwarves would fail, for the horde drove them back. But in his enthusiasm to satisfy Hroth and pursue the elves all the way to the Great Hall of Enstad, Urgush left his vanguard poorly defended. The dwarves and the gnomes rallied, gave a great shout, smote the hindermost, and the enemy fell back before them. Joy faltered when scouts came to report, "Marches forth now from the north, a second host drawing close."

"We are too few!" they wailed. "Come! Let us fall back, else we be trapped between the goblins and this second host."

Gilvgola addressed herself to the gnomes, "Surely Ulaa has not abandoned you. We will meet this new host and turn them back."

Father Furduch spoke to the dwarves, "What have dwur-folk to fear? Think you Berronar leaves you here? Gilvgola fights by your side buxom, strong, bold, and wide!" He punctuated his confident words with a handstand during which his cloak flipped up over his head and the contents of his pockets fell to the ground.

Heartened by the war priests, the dwarves formed up to hold the road; the gnomes took up flanking positions from which they could spring a surprise, but none of it was needed. Before the advancing host arrived, another gnomish scout came proclaiming the glad news, "Yonder host that comes upon us, no longer boasts that foes surround us! Not but men come out for war, Velunese from high Hagthar!"

"What means this jabber? Speak straight to me in the manner of dwarves," Gilvgola scolded the scout.

"We have nothing to fear. Velunese from Hagthar draw near," Father Furduch translated. He added an interpretive dance for additional clarity.

Rao Joins the Fight

A solemn procession of Raoan priests leading the ranks came to a halt before the fidgeting gnome and the sizable dwarfess. Behind them, the whole company of men halted. Gilvgola addressed herself to the chief priest among them, "Did you see our summons by signal fire, or did Rao summon you in a dream?"

In the decades leading up to the war, Veluna assisted its neighbors in the Lorridges and the Kron Hills against the goblins but

never with the genocidal fervor advocated by the Blossoming Throne. Instead, the Raoan priests held that the best course was to swiftly punish aggressive goblin bands while leaving less troublesome ones alone. In so doing, they gave both threat and reward to dissuade goblins from attacking humans and demi-humans alike. Such was their policy. Raoans reasoned that indiscriminately taking up arms against goblinkind would only inspire them all with reason and incentive to band together.

The goblins profited under Rao's liberality. They were fruitful and multiplied. Raiding parties grew ever bolder. Velunese fled from the mountain villages. The College of Bishops dispatched a large company to the southern Lorridges to pursue raiders back to their caves and warrens. On its first mission, the company chased a routed band of orcs deep into the mountains—where Urgush set upon them with an overwhelming ambush and slew them to a man.

The chief priest removed the heart-shaped mask from his face and regarded the gnome and dwarfess that stood before him. He replied in serene tones (as is the way with all of his cloth) as if he transcended all mortal concerns, "Indeed, Rao appeared to me and instructed me as I slept. The Implacable One appeared to me on the Night of Hopeful Judgment and declared that I should call the muster and march out to seek the Sacred Heart. We have marched a day and all through the night hither from Hagthar."

"I am the Sacred Heart of Berronar, the one you seek," Gilvgola replied. "Let your men rest their feet for a spell. A hard march and hard fight will be ahead."

Lightning Strikes

"Now we have a proper force," Gilvgola told Furduch. "Let's teach those pig-snouts to stay in their holes."

Gilvgola's army of gnomes, dwarves, and Velunese men smote the horde of Urgush up the backside like a goodwife spansks her unruly brat on the ass. The priests of Veluna called upon Rao for miracles, Father Furduch beseeched the arm of Ulaa, and Gilvgola asked Moradin's Bride to wield her gold and silver mace. Rumor passed among the orcs that the Sacred Heart had come out to the fight. The mention of her name seized them with terror, for they had not forgotten how Gilvgola slew Dregrak the cruel and banished his fiends so long ago. Now she drove their sons before her.

The unexpected, combined attack from behind sent the goblins headlong in careening reckless flight directly into the defenses of the elves. Goblinkind that crossed into the borders of the fey

kingdom found themselves misled and confused by powerful illusions from the priests of Sehanine. Elven archers concealed in the trees rocketed arrows down on the fleeing orcs, and the elven mages loosed potent spells. Onselvon, the queen's wizard, called down fire and lightning, erected dweomer-built walls of flame and blade, and rained down magical arrows. The queen's elite cavalry swooped down upon the trolls and slew them all. Even the Fey Queen strapped her flatchet belt about her hips, hung her gleaming sword upon it, and went out to meet the onslaught. Not a single goblin found his way to Enstad. Rangers and woodsmen from as far as Courwood hunted the survivors. By the end of the fourth day, the army of Urgush melted away. Those not yet slain fled into the mountains. Hroth and his hobgoblins vanished too.

The College of Bishops convened and signed the alliance treaties, officially committing Veluna to the war to the purge of the Lortmil Mountains. Gilvgola, Father Furduch, and their victorious gnomes and dwarves returned to unassailable Dorob Kiltlduum where they celebrated the victory with a day of feasting at the table of the Sacred Heart. Back in Enstad, however, the Celene celebrated no victory. Such numbers of their folk had fallen that the bards of Celene renamed that path the "Way of Tears" in reference to the tears Sehanine shed over Larethian. So the High Road is called to this day.

Head of the Medusa

Those sons of Celene who gathered the dead and committed them to the priests of Sehanine came upon a place of battle ringed about with many corpses. In the midst of these they found a toppled and broken stone sculpture of a single warrior. Though the flesh had been made stone, the petrified warrior still wielded his armor, weapons, and gear. "This is no work of an artist's hands," Onselvon said when he saw the broken remains. "This was Amras the son of Telfinwe."

Onselvon made inquiries among the survivors and found one named Eldaeron who had fought beside Amras on the High Road. "Tell us all that befell you," Onselvon urged.

"We fought our way through a clutch of black-armored ogre guardsmen wielding axes and spears. They ringed about the commander of the force, and we hoped to cut the head from the wyrm. Many fell on my left and my right, but Amras and I leaped through a gap in the ring and confronted the commander: a tall half-blood. That one carried a shield which bore goblin heraldry, painted in

red. Namely, the head of a gorgon, magically painted with such enchantment that the serpents of her head writhe and move upon the face of the shield. When Amras saw the shield he stopped frozen, even with his sword poised for the stroke. The color drained from his flesh, and in a trice, he turned to solid stone. This I saw with my own eyes, and to my shame, I turned and fled.”

Onselvon reported all these things to Queen Yolande, for he considered the matter to be of no small import. Every tribe of goblinkind has its own sign and heraldry, but now the tribes rallied under the red-painted standard of the medusa’s head.

The Scrying Wards

The failed expedition to the Karrak Bowl, followed by the disastrous battle for the “Way of Tears” sobered the people of Celene. Likewise, the mountain dwarves had spent centuries mapping out the Low Road, marking every goblinoid stronghold and den, but when they went to war against their foes, it seemed to them that the maps led them into traps, ambushes, and dead ends. Was it possible that the tunnels themselves had conspired to shift beneath the earth?

What is more, goblin, orc, hobgoblin, and ogre bands struck suddenly and unanticipated in the lowlands, as if appearing out of air to smite helpless villages, hamlets, and farms. They showed no ruth, burning and pillaging, ravaging women and taking many slaves. Before a retaliation could be mustered, the raiders vanished as mysteriously as they had appeared, leaving militia frustrated and trackers and rangers befuddled. The alliance arrived a few days late and a purse of coppers short to every conflict.

Moreover, the great war-mages complained that all their scrying spells went awry. The mightiest of the elven mages, like Onselvon and Queen Yolande herself, found their spells blocked behind an impenetrable and incomprehensible obscuring power. Even the queen’s diviners found no visions or dreams.

“Tell me this one thing,” her Fey Majesty said to Onselvon, “What shaman among the *euroz* and *jebli* wields the power to block my diviners and my scrying spells?”

“Your Majesty,” Onselvon said with a deep bow, “Surely none exist among the goblinkind that can hold a single candle to the luminescence of your own fey powers, but there are some few in the Oerth who might.”

The queen nodded gravely. “I have suspicions,” she admitted. “And if I my suspicions bear weight, we stand in greater peril than

orc raids on our borders and ambushes on our roads.”

“Ehlenestra help us,” the old mage agreed. “Some powerful fiend summoned up from the pits or perhaps the decaying lich of some wicked spellcaster now works against us.”

The queen shook her head thoughtfully before continuing, “Often of late I have felt a strong and brazen will working against my will, a strong magic against my spells, a spite blacker than my own, and it freezes my blood.” She hesitated ponderously before continuing, “This ‘goblin shield,’ whatever it may be, deflects my every arrow and blocks my every stroke.”

“Then we shall find the arm that bears the shield and break it,” the old mage assured her with hard resolve.

Tribes of the Lortmil Mountains

The Queen of Celene summoned Bagbag, the loremaster and old wizard of Ironhelm to stand before Her Fey Majesty. Never before had the ancient dwarf been privileged to enter the Hall of the Grand Court at the base of the White Tower or lay his eyes upon the Perfect Flower. Kristryd came along with him and stood beside him, encouraging him to be brave. Trueheaded old Bagbag looked pale as a corpse. He cast his eyes all about the hall, trying to take it all in at once. The sky, the trees, and the stones seemed to spin about him, and he staggered under a spell of dizziness. His agitation increased seven-fold when he finally dared to lift his eyes to the Blossoming Throne and look into the lilac eyes of the graceful figure perched upon it. His heart hammered; he flushed red and averted his eyes like one who looks away from staring into the sun. Composing himself, he trembled and stammered with fear, “Your Majesty, your servant has come to your summons ...”

The fey queen smiled like gentle sunlight through the leaves, but her lilac eyes fell knowingly on Kristryd with a glint of private mirth. Kristryd’s smirk revealed her own amusement over Bagbag’s discomfiture.

“Fear not master dwarf,” Onselvon the mage assured the bearded warlock. “We seek only to hear the names of the tribes of Lortmil Mountains, each according to its standard and under its pendant, and there is none among our court who will offer us such a recitation in translation from the goblin tongues.”

“Of course,” the old dwarf cleared his throat. He thought for a moment or two, folded his hands behind his back, and rolled his eyes up into his head, like a schoolboy about to recite a lengthy poem committed to memory. Then, translating to Elvish in his head

as he thought through the list, he began to recite the names of the principle tribes of the Lortmil Mountains:

These are the names of the tribes of the mountains. Behold the Gnollkind and the Flind: Black Tongue, Bleeding Moon, Bloody Axe, Blue Eye, Red Nails, Victorious, and Vile Epithet—these are the Gnoll and the Flind.

Behold, the Hobgoblin: Blue Bottle, Dog Humper, Dripping Eye, Flesh Hound, Long Cock, Meat Eater, Purple Squid, Puss Dripper, Rotting Kraken, Slave Raper, these are the Hobgoblin.

Behold, the Orc: Black Skull, Cracked Skull, Crooked Claw, Dead Dwarf, Demon Dog, Flaming Skull, Ground Meat, Hellhound, Highway Ambush, Hooked Cock, Jagged Blade, Loose Wheel, Reeking Rear, Plucked Eye, Red Fang, Red Rapists, Severed Hand, Saltburner, Shadow Doom, Tit Biter, Unblinking Eye, Violent Craven, these are the Orc.

Behold the Goblin: Angry Ogre, Belly Puncher, Bloody Eye, Dark Ones, Devil Baby, Dead Dog, Fairy Bugger, Forked Tongue, Goblin Boys, Hill Beater, Hungry Belly, Jab Stabber, Lich's Hand, Molesting Dog, Purple Dragon, Red Devil, Severed Cock, Silly Fellow, Wolf Brother, Wormridden Tree, these are the Goblin.

Behold the Kobold: Aching Bones, Backstabber, Bloodstained, Broken Tooth, Devil Dance, Fell Ichor, Fire Giant, Green Meat, Leaping Lynx, Long Fart, Ochre Tooth, Razor Edge, these are the Kobold.

When the uncouth recitation concluded, Onselvon severely scolded the old dwarf, "How dare you speak profanity in the presence of Her Fey Majesty?"

Bagbag offered no reply. Blushing brightly, he bowed low before the scowling queen. Kristryd offered her own scowl of distaste as if to distance herself from her ill-mannered companion.

The queen lifted her hand and the loremaster straightened before her. "Tell us," she said, "Of the Red Medusa tribe."

"My Lady," Bagbag stammered. "There is no such tribe named among the mountains."

Chapter 12

THE STIRGES' NEST

"FROM WHERE HAS this one come to your lands?" Kristryd asked the duke's daughter. He was certainly no Celine elf nor grey of Silverwood. She saw that clear enough. A long dandyish coat with polished brass buttons hung draped over his slim form. Boots of striding laced up to his knees. Tight-fitting elbow-length silken gloves concealed his hands and forearms. Colorful scarves like the kerchiefs of the Baklunish harem girls purpled his head. Baubled jewelry dangled from his ears. Trinkets, charms, and precious stones hung from a slender-linked silver chain about his neck. Glittering gems set in rings adorned his fingers. Kristryd observed that he conversed easily with the duke and seemed at home among the nobles in the palace yard at Tringlee.

"Deravnje is from Seltaren in Urnst," Nevallewen replied. "He is a most distinguished elf."

Overhearing his name, the foppish prickmedainty turned to Kristryd and the duke's daughter, executed a formal bow, and introduced himself properly, "To my kinfolk I am Deravnje, but I am simply Xaxa among friends."

"Xaxa? Is that a name?" Kristryd asked. To her, all elves seemed effeminate, but this one more so.

"It's a diminutive form. Xaxalander in full. And it is a name among the people of Urnst."

"It must be a difficult burden to bear such an uncouth string of syllables!" the duke's daughter flirted with feigned distaste.

"My lady knows that I am an uncouth elf. A rogue, expert treasure-hunter, dungeon explorer, magsman, and adventurer," Xaxa returned the flirtatious jest.

The Bountyman

"Are you one of the bountymen then?" Kristryd suggested impolitely. It seemed like a reasonable assumption. The undermountain kings had sent embassies to the lowlands to announce a bounty on the scalps of goblinkind. Their solicitations extended

even so far as Greyhawk and, indeed, into Urnst. Inspired by tales of the extravagant wealth of the mountain dwarves, adventurers and opportunists came to the mountains to make their fortunes. Hawkers in the markets of Tringlee made a song of it:

Five crown for ogre's scalp
Five star for orc's
Five flower for goblin's scalp
Five leaf for yours!

Sallywags, thieves, rogues, and ne'er-do-wells traipsed over mountain paths and through the tunnels of the Low Road to obtain the scalps. Most never returned to collect the bounties, nor were they ever missed.

"I came hither for the promise of reward, my lady," Xaxa conceded. The honey mead in his mug slurred his words. "But I am no mean bountyman. I am a talented professional and a master of my trade."

"What trade is that?" Kristryd asked. The honey mead in her mug gave her words a tone of unconcealed condescension.

"A professional reconnoiterer. I scale sheer walls, pick the pockets of dragons, slip unseen past lidless-eyed fiends, crack the locks of gnomish smiths, stand astride the backs of leaping centaur's, and creep up unbeheld upon beholders!"

"An adventurer!" Kristryd declared with wide-eyed sarcastic enthusiasm. The Great Xaxalander Deravnye nodded in affirmation.

"Deravnye has endeared himself to my father and all the court," Nevallewen hastened to the elf's defense. "He is a rogue through-and-through, but a gentleman about it and a noble personage as well. My father has sent him on one mission after another. In the mountains, he has worked closely with your Thane Blackaxe, fulfilling the dwarf-lord's bidding and campaigning against his foemen."

"For appropriate compensations," Xaxa added. He flashed a devilish smile at lithe Nevallewen.

The elfess returned a coy tilt of her chin and continued his praises, "Twice now he has led brave parties of heroes into the haunted ruins of Grot-Ugrat."

"And also into the dungeons below, to relieve the temples of their wealth," Xaxa explained.

How did such as this become favored of the duke's daughter, Kristryd wondered to herself. She asked aloud, "How is it that

you, being a high elf, fought for Thane Blackaxe and our folk at Dungalorin?"

"As you say, I am an adventurer," Xaxa explained as he held out his mug for refill from a passing serving maid. "Many times I have set out in pursuit of adventure with such colleagues. I feel akin to halfling, dwarf, gnome, half-elf, and man—even orcblood if they be true. You cannot be long bigoted against companions that daily save your life. Today a dwarf saves my life; tomorrow I rescue a halfling, and on the morrow after that, the halfling saves the dwarf. The adventurer's circle of life."

"I did not know that 'adventurers' could be so noble-minded. I thought them all mercenary, rogue-hearted, bandits, and low-born."

"You thought right!" Xaxa laughed. He lifted his now-refilled mug of mead as if in a toast. "By the gods' own word! Mercenary, rogue-hearted, bandit, and low-born. Describes ignoble Xaxalander Deravnje, jot and tittle."

"But you are not lowborn. You are a grey and the son of a noble ancestry," Kristryd objected. "Else I doubt the Lady Nevallewen would countenance your presence."

"Very true," Nevallewen sniffed.

"Tis not the duke's daughter who must countenance my presence, lady dwarf, but yourself," the rogue said. He sipped at the beverage and explained further, as if it was a matter of small consequence, "The Fey Queen has summoned me. I am to travel with you and your company when you return to Enstad."

Kristryd made no effort to conceal her surprise. "That may be, and little have I to say. But before I return to Enstad, I attend a council of war at Hoch Dungalorin. For that reason my father and I have come to the duchy."

Six in the Willow

The days of Patchwall drew near, and the mountain air felt cool and fine the morning that they set out. Kristryd and Bagbag rode in a wagon drawn by a team of sturdy mules. Prince Corond accompanied them with a troop of dwur from the Royal Army. Xaxalander Deravnje walked beside the wagon, keeping up a lively conversation with the dwarfess. She quizzed him for news of the distant lands and how things stood in Greyhawk and Urnst. Xaxa told her all he knew of the goings-on and what gossip came from all those northern parts.

Seeking some new topic on which to converse, Xaxa asked her,

“Why has the prince moved this council from Havenhill?”

Kristryd looked over her shoulder and set her eyes on the back of her father’s helm. The old warrior strode at the head of the troop, armed for battle and wielding a great axe, like a dwarf half his age. Turning back to Xaxa, she explained, “The Krons, the Celene, the Velunese, and the dwur of Dengar and Gilmorack desired a location more central to their nations.” Then she added in a confidential whisper, “Tis not the long journey to Havenhill they object to as much as my father’s heavy-handedness.”

“That may be, lady. I have heard tell,” Xaxa admitted, nodding towards her father. “But would he be a worthy dwur prince if his hands were lightsome?”

“I didn’t think I was going to like you Xaxa, but you have grown on my affections already,” Kristryd laughed. “The gods did not short you on charm.”

“I don’t like him, my lady,” Bagbag offered his unsolicited opinion without lifting his eyes from the book arresting his attention. He shifted his body so that his back faced the friendly chattering elf.

At times they came upon the grisly sights of war. The reeking impaled bodies of orcs and goblin heads stuck atop spikes adorned bridges and crossroads as garish warnings to others who might think to travel those routes. Likewise, when the goblinkind overran their enemies, they nailed the victims up on trees in grotesque poses as a warning to others. The desecrations inspired only more blinding wrath and vicious oaths of vengeance. On the second day out from Tringlee, the troop came upon one such place of sorrow where six corpses dangled upon ropes, hanging from the arms of an old willow that overshadowed the road.

“Take them down and raise a cairn over the bodies,” the prince ordered.

A team of dwarves set to work gathering stones. Xaxalander Deravnje sprang effortlessly up the tree. Pulling a long knife from where he carried it in his boot, he cut the ropes free and gently lowered each body to the ground.

“How have the goblins grown so bold so soon?” Kristryd asked.

“By Moradin’s bristling beard! These were peasant folk of the Duchy. Villagers. Shepherds. Not warriors,” the prince observed. “The Duke will hear of it!” Kristryd looked upon the corpses dispassionately. So much death she had already seen that such sights scarcely moved her.

“The goblins have grown only bolder since Grot-Ugrat,”

Bagbag answered her query. "A survivor called Hroth has made himself their warlord. He has rallied together ten tribes of his kin and made them take oaths of vengeance. From each warrior Hroth demands a token of fealty in the form of a severed ear. They give him their oaths and their left ears."

"They maim themselves?" Xaxa asked from where he still sat perched in the willow. "Why stop with one ear? Let Hroth ask the whole head! That would save us the trouble."

The dwarves ignored the jest. Prince Corond and Bagbag joined the others gathering stones to raise the cairn. When it was over, the prince sat down next to Kristryd and wiped the sweat from his face with a dirty hand. "It seems to me," he confided in his daughter, "That we have only managed to stir up the stirges' nest! These wars may break us all."

Kristryd offered no reply, but she observed that Xaxalander listened in on their conversation from his perch in the willow. Few things escape the sharp ears of the elves.

"All our efforts go amiss," the prince complained. "We pay a price in lives higher than I would suffer. Too many brave axes have gone out to fight and returned piled on wains. We should be driving goblinkind out from their holes, but we've only united them."

"May the blessing of Durin's Maker be upon us. I am under the weight of my oath," Kristryd replied with cold indifference. "I must see the matter through."

The Halfblood

Some miles further on, the troop came upon a lone orc-blooded man. They tied his wrists with tight ropes and set him before the prince. "We found this loathsome one in the way," they said. "Surely he knows the truth about those strung up duchymen."

"I beg you lord! I am a man of the duchy m'self and loyal to the duke as any man. By no fault of mine does the orcblood run in me veins," the man protested, but his protestations earned him the booted kicks of the prince's soldiers.

When the wars began, half-orcs enthusiastically volunteered their swords, as if they could prove their loyalty by fighting their mountain cousins. The commanders of Prince Olinstaad's Royal Army forbade it. "We have our hands already full of orcs and goblins, and we do not need these orc-bloods behind us, stabbing us in the back," the generals said.

Prince Olinstaad Corond looked on the bound man with some ruth. Most dwur think not much a humans and even less of

halfmen, but the prince was a cultured dwarf of learning, not a mountain bumpkin dwur. "If you're a true man of the duchy, what brings you so far into these mountains?" the prince demanded.

"I had vineyard. Now its burnt by those who fear me kind. I fled, as we all do. But there is not a one of our mothers who chose the sire, my lord. Why should we be punished of our father's sins?" the orcblood complained.

"Orcblood is bad luck," Bagbag called impatiently from where he sat in the wagon. "You and yours bring us all bad luck."

"And offend the gods!" Kristyrd added with a note of piety.

Prince Corond waved the comments away and asked the prisoner, "We hear of one called Urgush. They say a halfblood like yourself. Tell us what you have heard."

"Have I heard more than me lord has heard? Rumors and tales only," the man insisted. His piggish eyes shifted fearfully from bearded face to bearded face.

"What rumors and what tales? Speak or lose your tongue to my knife and never speak again," the prince warned.

The man sighed with resignation and stammered, "The half-blood summons the tribes and promises 'em hope. He gives 'em keen-edged weapons, fine armor, and such, all surpassin' the art of goblin smiths. The shamans name 'im Urgush the Bold, Urgush the Terrible, and Urgush the Agruwer. They paint 'emselves in the blood of victims with the sign of Red Medusa. They say, 'There 'as been none like him since Dregrak the Cruel!'"

"All this is known to me already," the prince growled. "Speak better."

"Me lord ... I know not more than others. Me father's blood grants me no secrets."

"Have you a name?" Xaxalander interrupted the interrogation.

Corond glowered at the intrusion, grumbling, "What matters his name?"

The orcblood replied, "I be Billy Lockes of Gliddensbar. Me vines were of Harrington."

"Lies unfitly spoken!" Bagbag announced from atop the wagon. "Would a halfblood own property in the duchy? I think not."

First Council of Dungalorin

Thane Bolor Blackaxe of Hoch Dungalorin offered the ambassadors and masters of war his hospitality and his wise counsel, but in those days, no one's counsel went heeded. Each nation looked after its own interests to the detriment of the whole. The members

of the alliance bickered over policy, strategy, and authority.

Kristryd reviewed the reports. Control of the surface territories shifted back and forth between the allies and the tribes in skirmishes and pitched battles. Warbands made sudden and unanticipated raids and ambushes all along the lowlands and in the mountain passes. Canyon walls echoed with the sound of snarling kobolds, shrieks of goblins, the screaming war cries of orcs, the roars of hobgoblins, and the blare of gnolls. All the tribes moved beneath their own peculiar heraldry and shields, but those of the North Lortmils also flew the Red Medusa.

Even the strong presence of Prince Corond could not make peace between the haughty elves, the peevish mountain dwarves, the ridiculous gnomes, and the others assembled for the council. After eight days of deliberations, the exasperated prince stormed out of the hall and set off to return to Gyra. He left charge of the proceedings in the hands of the Duke Gallowagn's son Grenowin and the Raoan priest from Veluna while Kristryd and Onselvon attempted to represent the interests of Celene. Despite Grenowin's prestige and the Raoan priest's eloquence and diplomacy, neither seemed to have a head for war. They only managed to add confusion to an already established strategy of chaos.

Kristryd observed the males arguing at counsel with distaste. *Fonkins and hoddypeaks! If Yolande was here, they would all heed her and do her bidding without objections*, she thought to herself. *At the very least we need a strategy*. The Lortmil Mountains occupied thousands of square miles. The task of purging even one mountain seemed impossible, how much less possible a whole mountain range and all the tunnels beneath it.

After twelve days, the counsel adjourned. The various embassies and statesmen departed and returned to their own lands. Kristryd and Bagbag set off with Onselvon and the Celenese delegation, for the Queen of Celene had summoned her to report on the proceedings and attend to several matters. Xaxalander traveled with them to fulfill his own summons to the queen.

The Wight

Not many days after the councilors of war had left the strong-walled fortress of granite stone, a strange visitor arrived at Hoch Dungalorin and demanded audience with Thane Bolor Blackaxe.

"I seek a dwarf," the skeletal old man in the weathered grey cloak hissed. The albino-white skin of his face and hands betrayed pure Suel heritage.

“Well you have found one!” Thane Blackaxe said with gravel and suspicion in his voice. “And I’ve got a whole fortress full of dwarves here, so unless you can be more specific, I’ll be of no further help to you.” Blackaxe regarded the bony hawklike features of the man’s face and thought to himself that the stranger bore too much resemblance to a wight he had once faced off with while exploring a forsaken tomb. “The seneschal will give you a meal and a coin or two, then you will be on your way. We don’t take up beggars and freeloaders here. Don’t you know that we are at war?”

“The dwarf I seek is called Bagbagotiouk Silverstonecutter,” the wight said, drawing out the ‘S’ sounds of the name Silverstonecutter like a snake’s hiss.

Thane Blackaxe felt the hair on his arms and neck bristle at the malicious sound of the albino’s voice. “There’s no one here by that name, nor have I ever heard tell of such a one!” Blackaxe lied, but he did not know exactly why he felt compelled to conceal the truth.

The old man whispered softly through yellow teeth, “When you see him again, please tell him that I came looking for him. Tell him that Mohrgyr the Old seeks to consult with him.”

“I don’t care who or what kind of lich or undead thing you are,” Blackaxe menaced. His right hand gripped the hilt of the magical dagger tucked into his belt, and his guards stepped closer, hefting their weapons. “If I see you again, I’ll have you thrown in the dungeon.”

“Tell him,” the wight said as he turned to leave. The old man passed through the gates and set off into the mountains. Blackaxe dispatched two trackers to follow the creature and to see where it went. The trackers returned six days later and reported, “We followed him as you said. He joined two others like him on the road. We tracked the three of them all the way to the gates of Grot-Ugrat, but we dared not enter the cursed city, nor did we see if they emerged again.”

Chapter 13

MOONARCH OF SEHANINE

A SNARL-HEADED ELF woman stepped out from behind a floral-canopied garden walk and hailed Kristryd in the elven tongue, “Behold! Errand-dwur of Yolande, I would a word with thee.” The she-elf looked more like a wild woman of the mountains than noble grey. A course hair-coat she wore tied about her waist with a belt of leather. The feats of her hair pagged loosely, knotted in dreadlocks and tangled with sticks and twigs and leaves.

Kristryd took two startled steps back, sneered her lip and re-torted in perfect olven, “I am the Princess Kristryd Olinsdotter of Ulek and Dengar, daughter of the Prince Corond Olinstaad, daughter-in-law of the undermountain king Thane Evrast. I am no errand-dwur! But who are you who dares address the queen’s embassy so disrespectfully?”

“I am Edda the Tested,” the wild elf said with such air of authority that it seemed she expected that the name should convey some significance to Kristryd. It did not. “I have a message for you to bear to the queen.”

“If you have a message to bring, do so. I will not be your messenger,” Kristryd snapped. For emphasis, she pushed the wild elf from her path and continued her way.

Edda recovered herself gracefully, effortlessly scaled up the trunk of a stately ipp, leapt to the limb of a phost, and followed after Kristryd, leaping from limb to limb, tree to tree, like a squirrel. She only left off the pursuit when Kristryd passed into the inner lawns. Even then, Edda called after the dwarf from her perch in a deklo, “Tell her that her lover-boy was betrayed.” Kristryd marched on stoically with her back to the woodness elf, deliberately ignoring her shouts, “Tell her that Edda the Tested gave you the message. You tell her that errand-dwur!”

The Queen’s Dream

Kristryd found the queen’s war cabinet already assembled around the Blossoming Throne. She recognized each face. In just over a

year's time, she had won the confidence of most of them and at least the grudging respect of the rest. The queen's wizard and chief counselor, Onselvon, she counted as a friend. Young Archosian lurked near at hand; his face wore a moping expression. At the table along with the noble advisors sat the queen's heroes and mally suitors: Fastaal Dothmar, Peralay the Hunter's Hawk of Celene, and the newest member of the competition, the magsman Xaxalander Deravnyc. Each remained ever fixed upon the queen's attention, and her scanty dress arrested their own. It offered them an eyefull of her comeliness, for she had clad herself in a clinging gown of delicate gossamer woven at the collar and hem with a brocade of silver thread. *Hardly attire for a counsel of war*, Kristryd sniffed with disapproval. *By the gods, doesn't she look dressed for a fairy frolic?* The ambassador dropped her eyes self-consciously to the chain shirt of mithril draped over her own slight frame. A belt of leather gathered it at her waist. Ordinarily, a blade hung from that belt, but she carried no weapon into the Grand Court.

"Welcome Olinsdotter. We have been awaiting your arrival," Onselvon began. "I have already briefed the counsel regarding the proceedings at Hoch Dunglorin, but the queen will hear your own summary in turn. Meantime, the situation has turned against the alliance again, and our expeditionary force has fallen back to Luskan ..."

War reports and various strategic deliberations occupied all of the morning and much of the afternoon. At the conclusion, the counsel commissioned Kristryd with an embassy to the undermountain kings requesting reinforcements to relieve the gnomes and elves now fighting in Luskan. She accepted the mission and the message, and the queen dismissed the council and all the court. Kristryd lingered in the queen's presence after the others had left. Only the queen's Companion Guard remained with them in the Hall of the Grand Court.

"Speak your thoughts, sister," her fey majesty invited. "I see your heart vexes over some uncertainty."

"Your majesty," she said with a bow, "I would know, who is Edda the Tested?"

A momentary blanch of surprise passed over the queen's ordinarily impassive face. "That one is banned from the court, and unwanted in Celene," the queen pronounced. "She and all the so-called 'Tested' are unwelcome here."

"She accosted me as I came hither," Kristryd complained.

"With a message for me," Yolande guessed.

"Indeed," Kristryd bowed low again. "But such a message unfit to be transmitted; the wild ravings of a lunatic."

"Lunatic indeed," the queen laughed. "By the shadow of Luna! The Tested call themselves devotees of Sehanine, but even the priests of the moon goddess disavow them. I will hear her message."

Kristryd swallowed hard and shifted her feet in discomfort. She forced herself to meet the queen's lilac eye before speaking, "She said that the Prince Consort was betrayed."

For long minutes, the queen spoke not a word nor did her face show that she had heard. Kristryd wondered if she had offended the queen and, perhaps, should take her leave. But then the queen bestirred herself, rose from the Blossoming Throne, extended her hand to the dwarf and said, "Walk with me in the garden, daughter."

They passed out of the hearing of the Companion Guard. Yolande said, "Last night, the Prince Consort appeared to me by a dream. He gestured to me urgently, beckoning me to draw near. I could see his lips moving in speech, but the sound of words I could not hear, nor could I read the movement of his lips." The queen hesitated before continuing, "He was in great distress. He has some urgent message for me and has left my heart in anxiety. I must finish the dream."

"I have always been told that elves do not sleep and dream as the other races do," Kristryd wondered.

"Not as the other races. We have no need for it, nor do we sleep, as your folk do. But in our own manner, we can walk in a world of trance or meditate upon some sublimity and so escape the grip of this life and its cares for a time," the queen explained. "In such state, Sehanine sometimes shows us things forgotten from lives we have lived before."

The queen fell silent, lost in her thoughts.

"I wish I did not need to sleep. I would accomplish twice as much if I could break that habit," Kristryd jested to lighten the mood. The queen smiled but made no reply. The two of them walked on together a pace among the garden's scented blossoms that seemed not to know the summer was at an end and winter at hand.

The Tested

Yolande broke the silence with a sigh, "I will speak to you of a forbidden matter, a great secret of my people, unknown even to

many of the olven folk.”

“Her majesty has my confidence,” Kristryd replied.

“There is a place not far hence where the Moonarch of Sehanine appears,” the queen said. “It is a holy place and forbidden by our people. Under certain moons, it opens a portal to other worlds. When Celene waxes full, one who passes through it enters the world of dream and vision.”

“I should not like that,” Kristryd admitted.

“Nay, nor should I,” the queen agreed. “Those who enter are tested. Many never return. Some who do return in woodness, seers and dreamers of dreams, distrusted and half-mad. Some seek the ‘Leaving.’ Yet there are others who pass the test of dreams and find the answers they seek.”

“Edda is one of the Tested? She has passed through this Moonarch?” Kristryd asked.

“Verily!” the queen said.

“And you, your majesty?” Kristryd asked.

“Nay, never. It is dangerous and strictly forbidden,” the queen said gravely. “But I resolve, let the Seldarine hear it, that I shall pass through the Moonarch when Celene has waxed fully pregnant. I would have you accompany me there.”

“Her majesty honors me,” Kristryd bowed again. “I would come with you wheresoever you desire. But why bring me and not Almerayne? What assistance can I be in matters fey?”

“I dare bring none of my own! Who should know of my sacrilege and folly? My enemies among the houses could wield no better slander than to name me ‘Tested.’ Nay! You, my daughter, must travel with me. Else I go alone! If I then return not, or if I should be touched, who will tell the tale of what became of Yolande?”

“Your majesty, why go at all if the thing is dangerous and forbidden?”

“Why go at all?” the queen mused. “I would know what message love bears me from the halls of Arvador.” After a moment of further thought, she added, “Moreover, I would know something about the will that blocks my will, the blind that blinds my sight and robs my diviners of insight? How shall I defeat it and avenge my heart?”

Walk to the Moonarch

Propelled by the great wings of Emolasmairim, Kristryd carried her errand to the undermountain kings and returned forthwith to deliver reply to Enstad. The kings did proffer what force they

could muster to lift the siege of Luskan, but they promised no certain number nor the hour of salvation. Having accomplished her mission for the time, she besought the queen that they might lay their plans.

“I would have thought the queen travelled by fiery chariot, or upon the back of a unicorn or handsome centaur, or at the very least upon a noble steed like Emolasmairim,” Kristryd remarked.

“Nay,” Yolande wrapped a large and heavy traveler’s cloak about her as she spoke. Under it she strapped her flatchet belt about her hips. “The Fey Queen travels not from Enstad at all. Not by chariot, palanquin, nor by noble steed. She goes by stealth or goes not.”

“Will she not be missed at the height of Needfest?” Kristryd asked.

“I have told my afterlings that I go to the inner chamber of Larethian’s sanctuary. None will seek me there nor disturb me from my meditations.”

“But will we not be recognized by all who meet us on the road?” Kristryd objected.

“Daughter,” Yolande laughed sweetly, “You forget my power. I set my illusory craft upon us. To all eyes that espy us, we shall seem not but two gnomish travelers making way across the hills.”

A warm wind from the east made the night pleasant for walking when the two “gnomish travelers” set off on their quest for the Moonarch. “It never appears precisely in the same place twice,” Yolande explained, “But Sehanine will guide us.”

The companions talked of war and strategy to pass the long miles. They reflected on their vows and the course of the wars, and they spoke with dismay over the power of Urgush and the strength of Hroth. For some of the distance they made their way up the High Road—the Way of Tears on which so many elves had recently fallen. When they looked upon the stones still stained by elvish blood, Yolande grew silent and pensive for a time.

“When an elf dies,” she said, “The spirit leaves the material body behind and ascends to the halls of Arvador. There she rests, bathing in the pools of radiance and washing away what stains and hurts she has endured in her centuries on Oerth. She may remain in those halls for days, years, or millennia. Then, if she so desires, she returns to be born again into the world as an elf child, to live again, through another life.”

“Do elves remember a previous life?”

“The child remembers in glimpses and visions, but after two

or three decades, she experiences ‘the drawing of the veil,’ and the memories fade.”

“What is the point of it if you don’t remember it?” Kristryd asked.

Yolande unexpectedly smiled like the summer sun emerging from clouds, and a keen light shone in her lilac eyes.

The Testing of Yolande

On the eve of Celene’s full waxing, the two cloaked and hooded “gnomish travelers” came upon it. Their path had taken them high into the foothills of the Lortmil Mountains, near the place the Kron Hills spill out to the west. A cold touch of frost bit the night air.

“This is the place then?” Kristryd asked. The Moonarch seemed to her nothing but a broad natural stone arching, such as Ulaa forms often enough when, given time, water carves away the softer sandstone and leaves a ring of harder rock about. At its peak the rock grew narrow, not but a few feet thick, and at its apex was carved the symbol of the full moon of Celene. On the other side of the natural arch a gully climbed into the hills. Nothing about the place indicated any special sanctity or magical property, nor was it evident that it had ever been visited before or hallowed in any manner.

“When Luna rises, I will pass through the arch. Before Celene sets, I will return if I can,” Yolande said. “If I do not return, go back to Enstad and tell Almerayne and Onselvon of Yolande’s folly and what has befallen her.”

In the chill of Fireseek, the women could see their breath take shape on the air. Kristryd wished for a fire to warm her hands and feet, but no trees grew on the rocky hilltop, nor did it seem right to light a blaze in a hallowed place. The shadows grew long as the sun set behind the Lortmils.

Luna’s glow slowly rose over the length of the Krons. The light of the full moon turned the world about them to silver, and the Moonarch seemed to shimmer with blue tint. Yolande lifted herself from where she had sat beside the dwarven princess, touched her dear friend lightly upon the shoulder, and said with simple resignation, “I go.” With that, she stepped through the Moonarch and vanished from sight.

Chapter 14

UNDER THE MOONARCH

LUNA CONTINUED HER slow journey across the sky. Kristryd shivered in the cold open air of the night and pulled her cloak tighter about her shoulders. *And what shall I do if the queen does not come back to me before the moon has set and sun breaks the east?* she worried to herself. *How shall I tell it in Enstad?* With thoughts such as these still astir in her head, she watched the Moonarch fixedly with unblinking eyes, willing the elf queen to appear.

In the last hour before dawn, as Luna began to slip behind the distant line of the Lortmils, Kristryd felt her drowsy head starting to swim. She rested her eyes only for a moment and plummeted quickly into a dream. Cursing herself for weakness, she leapt to her feet. *Am I not a dwarf?* she asked herself. *My people succumb not to sleeping spells!* She shook her head to clear the drowsiness, and abruptly her eyes beheld something new. Through the span of the Moonarch she glimpsed a sunlit land of trees and streams and grassy hills. She stepped nearer, only intending to see the vision more clearly. As she did the image drew itself closer to her, more real and substantial. She fancied she could feel the welcome warmth of those sunlit lands. *How pleasant it would be to chase the chill from my bones!* Vivid colors and deepening hues crystalized before her. The marvelous world beyond the arch looked more real and solid than Oerth. Indeed, by comparison, Oerth around seemed an insubstantial shadow.

Kristryd swooned but caught herself before she stumbled. She grasped the outstretched hand of a tall elf, clothed in green britches, shirt, jerkin, and cap. He drew her beneath the spanning stone.

The Trickster

“You’re not allowed in here,” the elf said with mischief in his voice. He wagged a warning finger. “I know your type. You dwur can’t resist the shiny things, can you?”

“Where is this?” Kristryd asked as she looked about the

turngiddy fey world in which she found herself. All the air hummed with song of bird and pixie wing. Intoxicating scents, colors, and sounds mingled together such that she could scarce distinguish the senses. Wherever she cast her eyes, all things shifted and moved as if alive and the world in motion. She stood in the midst of a forest, not a forest, a garden, more a field of flowers, an orchard really, like a vineyard heavy laden, nay, more an open field, rushes, reeds, and cattails swaying in the breeze beside the bank of babbling stream—not a stream, rather the sunny shore of a sea swept by endless washing waves. She turned to see if she could find her way back; she saw no sign of the Moonarch.

The Three Wishes

“You really should not be here; it’s forbidden,” the elf insisted. He emphasized the point with three sharp tugs to the short beard on her chin, and that surprised her, for she had been clean-shaven when she stepped beneath the arch.

“You brought me here,” she objected.

“I didn’t,” the trickster contradicted. “But so long as you are already here, I’ll grant you three wishes. But only if you guess my name.”

“I can’t guess your name. I have no notion.”

“Oh, I think you know,” the trickster laughed. She didn’t. He placed three glittering azure gems before her. They looked identical to her eye, each one a Lortmil stone of remarkable beauty and cut. “Choose wisely. One will grant you wealth: the stolen treasures of Dengar and your missing anvil too. One will grant you power: the hammer that strikes the anvil to drive your enemies before you and fulfill your oath. And one will grant you wisdom to forfeit the other two. Choose wisely.”

“They look identical to me. I don’t know which is which.”

“Then that’s your choice,” he said. “Take all three.” He handed her the three gems, but they turned to sourberries in her hand.

The Warrior’s Boots

“Put on these warrior’s boots so that you can tread upon the heights and trample your foes.” He handed her a pair of elven boots such as the type Peralay and Archosian wore. Kristryd sat down in the vivid green grass and unlaced her own heavy mountain boots. She set them aside and tried to put on the new boots.

“They don’t fit,” she complained as she tugged the first of the pair up over her foot. “These are elven boots. Far too long

for my legs.”

“The boots are not too long. Your legs are too short!” the trickster observed. “Let’s find out who’s inside you!”

The Nesting Doll

The trickster handed Kristryd a gnomish nesting doll upon which the simple squared image of a dwur-wife was painted in red and black and white paints. It looked exactly like a magical toy she had possessed when still a child in her father’s palace at Gyrax. “Open it up and see what’s inside.” She opened the silverwood doll by lifting off the top. The outer shell contained an inner doll, slightly smaller and nested inside. The smaller doll bore the same shape as its outer shell, but its features had been painted hideously to show an orcish face with one central eye like that of a cyclops. She recognized the idol of Gruumsh.

“Go ahead, open it up,” the trickster encouraged. She opened the doll again and discovered a dwur-wife inside the idol.

“What is this? Some nonsense reak about the Balance?”

“Open it up and see!”

She opened the dwurwife and found a Gruumsh inside, and inside the idol another dwur-wife, and so forth, a dozen more times, until she withdrew the final nesting doll—a tiny little fairy maid, shining like the sun. The miniature fairy stood in her open palm, fluttered its wings, then zipped away.

The Maze of Doors

“Don’t worry, you’ll find your way. Dwarves never lose their way,” the trickster assured her. She looked up to discover herself lost in a twisting passage lined with identical doors, each one leading into a passage lined with identical doors. Fear came rushing behind her; panic pursued her. A baying sound, laughing hyenas, the stomp of booted feet, a pack of hunting gnolls. “Flee daughter! Flee or die!” a familiar voice warned her. She fled, tripping and stumbling, one foot dragging the overlong flopping elven boot behind her. She knew not which way to turn. Through one door and to another she fled, each one leading to more uncertainties. The baying of the pack drew closer.

“This way child,” an old dwur-wife said from inside an open doorway. Kristryd recognized the old dwur-wife with the white hair and beard and keen gleaming eyes. The dwur-wife beckoned gently. Kristryd followed her through the doorway and found herself in yet another place with many portals leading further into

the maze. The yammering of the gnolls grew louder. "This way daughter!" the old dwur-wife gestured from one of the portals. Kristryd hastened to follow.

The River

So it went until at last she came upon the bank of a river. The dwur-wife no longer appeared before her, but standing in the tall grass on the other side of the water, the trickster beckoned. "Hurry. Swim across!"

"I can't swim!" she protested. Tears of frustration blurred her eyes.

"No choice! Swim across. You'll remember."

She looked all about, eyes wide with terror. She could see no other option unless she fled back into the maze. No. That would not do. Already the loping gnolls emerged from the way she had come. They sauntered toward her. Sloppy grins and peeled lips revealed yellow fangs. Long tongues lolled and panted at the air, tasting her scent upon it. Kristryd stripped down to her small clothes as quick as she might and tossed aside that wretched boot. She took a deep breath and plunged into the water, splashing and wading into the stream. The gnolls drew up on the bank, growling and snarling. The water deepened quickly, frothed about her, and tugged at her. Her bare feet lost their footing on the slippery stones. Tumbling into the water, she fought to keep her head above. Truly, she knew not how to swim. She thrashed about, but her desperate thrashing only hastened to sink her. The current dragged her downstream, and she slipped beneath the water. All her terror subsided the moment she did. Deep peace and sweet forgetfulness received her.

In her mind's eye, she could yet see the strange green-clad elf laughing at her from the far bank. He seemed to shrink away, diminishing in size, until he vanished completely.

The Sisters

She sank deeper, floating on the moonlight and the blue glow of Celene's fullness. The fairy moon peered down on her, like the face of a goddess, curious to see what she would do.

In those days, no man nor dwur walked Oerth. But in a certain land lived two sisters, nobly born. *Gods! Which sister am I?* Kristryd thought to herself as she turned about. She looked into a mirrored pool and saw not her own face gazing back but the delicate features of a fairhead maid. *Curse this fey trickery!* she lamented. Years passed. All things transpired. The sisters grew older

and beautiful. None could tell the one from the other except the most discerning eye. They shared all things, save one. Kristryd coveted the wine in the other sister's cup. When she found that goblet left unguarded, she snatched it up without a moment's hesitation and glooped it down. So sweet was that taste that one draught alone could not suffice, and ever after she contrived schemes and plots to taste it often again. Her heart felt light and lithe so long as the taste of the wine remained upon her lips. Her long and slender dream-arms (utterly unlike her real arms) clutched him to her bosom. None the wiser he, for even he could not distinguish the one sister from the other. Kristryd wept tears of joy for the love that welled up within her. Poetry fell from her lips. Such ecstasies utterly erased all thought of her unhappy years with Grallwen.

The handmaiden looked down in unsympathetic silence. Kristryd glared back at the pale moon. "What harm is it?" her voice cool and indifferent. "If you decreed that only one of us should know joy, why shouldn't it be me?" Even as she spoke these words, some little stab of shame pricked at her kidneys, but the dream quickly washed back over her like a numbing wave. Sleep felt so sweet and warm, the dream so delicious, she could not rouse herself nor lift herself out from its embrace.

The Olven King

Bile for the dwur-folk filled his liver. *Dare they brandish hammers and blades?* He spat the bitter taste from his mouth. *Will the dwur-folk march against me?* Was it not enough to suffer the malice of the Spider Throne? For what, then, had his own sons sacrificed themselves? Now the dwur trampled what few living things remained beneath their filthy boots. Without regard, they hoarded shining stones and metals, cut down trees to feed their forges, choked the air with smoke from foundries, and for love of their own honor and pigheaded pride, they spilled olven blood.

The king called upon his gods, praying fervently, "Slay them utterly and to the utmost! Drive them into deepest flossh and drown them there." He bared his flatchet sword and uttered an imprecation, "Larethian smite them! Cursed be the merciful! Cursed be the weak-bowelled! Let their bones return to the stones, and let the stones be crushed to the dust!" So vehement his hatred and passionate his spite that Kristryd scarcely noted the dissonance in the back of her mind. That vitriol swept her along like a bark swept along in the frothing rapids of a winter-swollen stream. Her own thoughts, such as they were, stumbled all acclumsid. Only a

small part of her mind protested, *But I am a dwarf!* No matter. The thought of grimy dwur-folk, mumpering and simpering, filled him with disdain. *Why should they walk above Oerth? Avaricious beyond all reason, materialist and petty! Let the unenlightened be forever darkened! I will not rest nor cease from my vows until I have driven them back beneath the ground.*

He stood amidst the smoldering ruins of what had once been a strong citadel. Had that unassailable rock not fallen before him? Kristryd leaned out over a shattered balcony to survey his army. He dangled a bloring dwur child by its heels over the edge. She recognized the child. Pegli. Her Pegli. The fullness of the fairy moon looked down upon him to see what he would do.

Gods! Damn their deceitful dreams!

The Demon and the Sword

Ragged black bat-like wings spread broad and wide enough to blot out the sky from her view. Fear and fury swooped down upon those wings, spewing waves of noxious horror from its vomiting mouth. Every instinct screamed for flight, but she alone stood between the demon and Pegli. “You will not have him!” she said through clenched teeth. She would not let it take any of them. Not her sons—her brothers. Yes. Her brothers. The nightmare shifted. Her mother now entombed. Her father still in mourning. The lads still young. She alone to mother them. She looked quickly about the palace chamber for some weapon with which she might defend them.

“Take it!” Bagbag stepped forward and offered her a wicked sword. “A cursed blade to slay a cursed one.” He held it out to her, hilt first.

She hesitated.

“You swore to protect them,” the sword urged. “Wield me, and I will smite.”

The demon hissed, crouching before the pounce.

She grasped the hilt and cursed at the gods, “To nine hells and the Abyss with your tricks and your tests!” She plunged the sword into the tanar’ri flesh. The blade sunk to the hilt, devouring its way through the filth. Black ichor erupted from the wound, splattering, hissing, and steaming, washing over her.

The Hungry Eye

“Wake up!” a woman’s voice spoke in her head. Kristryd opened her eyes and beheld a broad vista spread out below her. She recog-

nized the lay of the land and quickly oriented herself. She must be standing upon a high peak of the north, perhaps Mount Abharclamh. From that height she gazed eagle-eyed to the south. Such views she had seen before from the back of Emolas, but never had her eyes taken in such sweeping extent of the land. She could see impossibly far, over peaks and valleys, rocky heights and tree-clad slopes, cloud-draped high places and misty lowlands, even as far as her father's kingdom. Gilmorack lay below her, to the south Dengar, southwest Hoch Dunglorin, Grot Ugrat, Havenhill, Gryrax and the sun upon the white caps of the Adirole Bay. She kept gazing, and her eyes took in more and more, never satisfied with seeing, even unto the peaks of Drachensgrab in Poor March.

"All of these hang before you now like ripe fruit ready to be plucked," spoke the woman standing beside her. Kristryd turned her gaze from the awe-inspiring view to study her companion. A human. Beautiful by their measure, but fearsome. Flowing dark hair fell over bare shoulders and breasts left exposed by a stitched black leather bodice and nothing else on top. Leather trousers she wore like those of a man gird in costume armor except these were of a material pounded thin, cut close, and stretched tight to reveal the shape of the woman's body. Similar cut black leather boots laced up nearly to the woman's knees.

What strumpet dresses in such manner? Kristryd marveled.

The woman's ancient eyes burned with a green light and her imperious lips pulled back into an unkindly smile. "Why should Kristryd be less than the fey queen in might, power, and beauty? Make her the jealous one."

"I am not jealous of her," Kristryd objected.

"No?" the stranger asked unconvinced.

Lady of the Lortmils

Kristryd stood in a dwur hall with warm hearth fires stoked ablaze and hot merry-go-down set out on tables of stone. The heat of those fires felt warm upon her face, and the din of the revelers filled her ears.

"Hail Lady of the Lortmil Peaks and Depths!" the throng of dwur chieftans and nobles shouted as she entered their assembly hall. "Highly favored of Ulaa! Blessed of Moradin! Kissed of Berronar! Fist of Clangeddin!"

She gazed about the great hall impassively, cold as the queen of Celene among her afterlings in the Grand Court of Enstad. A dwuress and a queen! Her black curls had grown long indeed,

now streaked with bands of gray, and long too had her beard grown. She recognized her father, her brothers, her sons, old Bagbag, Thane Redmod of Gilmorack, Thane Evrast of Dengar, Thane Bolor Blackaxe of Hoch Dungalorin, Thane Durgeddin of Khundrakar. All those proud heads nodded and bowed to her. To left stood handsome Bamadar Kadarel and to her right the girthsome priestess Gilvgola. She recognized others in the throng. All rose to their feet to salute her.

“Behold the Lady of the Lortmils! Benefactor of the Kron Hills. First of Ulek. Mistress of the Pomarj! Queen over the Drachensgrab Mountains!” Bamadar heralded off her titles. The host beat their stone bowls and drinking horns upon the table in rhythm, chanting together, “Kristryd! Kristryd! Kristryd!” Slowly the chant evolved into the dwur word, “Victory! Victory! Victory!”

She motioned for silence. Instantly, a hush fell over the assembly. Taking her seat upon the bejeweled throne, she spoke imperiously, “We have long waited for this hour! Now the gods have thrust it upon us!”

The words came tumbling from her tongue, “Even now, the fairy host musters at our gates. Have we provoked them? No. We have been loyal and trueheaded, but they come to us with demands!” She held aloft a rolled parchment scroll and crushed it in her grip. “Will that one make demands upon our sacred inheritance, bequeathed to us by the gods, for which we have fought and shed the blood of generations? Will the ghosts of our fathers and brothers forgive us if we yield? Tell me now!”

The hall erupted into shouts, curses, epithets, oaths, and vows. A sorry look of disapproval clouded her father’s eyes. The fairy moon gazed intently upon on her. Kristryd looked away.

The Strong Tree and Sturdy Tower

“A queen will you be! Are you strong enough?” the lord of the dance asked her. His familiar form shimmered and shifted: grave and handsome elf lord, a laughing elf maid, a bubbling spring, a soaring eagle, a shining star, a drop of rain.

“I am strong enough,” Kristryd insisted.

“Show me,” he urged.

Kristryd turned herself into a tall tree with branches spread toward heaven. He became a mighty wind and blew against her. She creaked and swayed, her branches waved. He became a Gearnat gale. He stripped leaves from her crown, twisted her boughs, and tore branches from her trunk. She dug her roots deeper below the

mountains, wrapped and ramified tendrils tight around the stones, anchored herself with wide and twining lengths that spread through hidden places. He gusted and exhausted all his breath against her, but he could not topple her from her place.

"Are you sure enough?" he asked her. His form shimmered and shifted: a tender elf lad, a calm reflecting pool, a glint of sunlight, a serenade of cricket song, a rearing unicorn, a silver bell.

"I am sure enough," she replied.

"Show me," he said.

Kristryd turned herself into a tall tower built into the side of a precipice, extending up from the mountainside, cut from the living stone. He became a tremor in the earth and shook the ground. She shuddered; she cracked but did not crumble. The mountain trembled, groaned and grumbled, tumbled down boulders, rumbled, rolled, pitched and drummed, but Kristryd clung to the rock, bone of her bone and stone of her stone. Half the height fell away. A foggy cloud of dust rose, obscuring the valley. He could no longer see if she remained behind that wall of dust, so he became a breeze and cleared it away. The light revealed the tower still stood tall and strong.

"You are strong, and you are sure," he admitted. "But are you wise enough to administer justice?"

"I am wise enough," she replied.

"Show me."

The Sundered Bond

The sun rose high before she opened her eyes again. She shivered, stiff and cold, stretched out on hard stone. Memory returned abruptly. With a panicked start, she looked about, but she saw no sign of the fey queen or the wretched Moonarch. Where the arch stood the night before, flowers out of season had sprung up.

"Curse and be cursed!" she said to herself. "Wherefore did I agree to this fey mystery? What now shall I tell in Enstad?" She shouted and called for the queen. Only her echo returned to her, bouncing off the hilltops. Alone she waited in the gwendering for long hours, uncertain of what to do. The previous night's dreams swirled in her head in a confusion. Her mind reeled about. Details faded and reconfigured. She felt sick and feverish.

A day and a night she awaited the queen, but the Perfect Flower did not appear, nor did the Moonarch. Heavy of heart, Kristryd returned to the High Road and began the journey back to Enstad. No longer did the queen's illusory arts drape her form or disguise

her visage. No matter. She took no thought for herself. Without the presence of the queen to conceal, why pose as a gnomish traveler? Each passing mile her heart grew heavier. *Shall I never again look upon the fair face of my friend?* she mused. *And what of our oaths of war?* All prospects seemed dismal. All plans seemed futile.

When Kristryd arrived in Enstad, she first sought out wise Bagbag and asked his sage counsel. His words astonished her. "I know not what fey enchantment that witch has laid upon you my lady, but she is not lost as you say. She sits even now upon the Blossoming Throne. Go to her, and you will see."

Kristryd hastened to the white tower, but the Companion Guard did not admit her to the court. "The queen has not summoned you," Almerayne apologized, "Unless she does, no dwur should enter this hall."

"I am not *any* dwur," Kristryd objected. "I am her lady's wrath; I am her emissary." She stopped short of adding the words, "... and her personal friend." A solemn pitying expression darkened Almerayne's face. She shook her lilac braided tresses. The Companion Guard drew up to refuse the way.

Stung by the insult, Kristryd returned to her ambassador's cosh and poured out her plaint to trueheaded Bagbag. "I even sent message by that rapacious magsman Xaxalander," she lamented, "But he returned to me with a handwritten note set with the seal of the queen, yet not written from the queen, but in Almerayne's hand." Kristryd handed the note to Bagbag, and he read it aloud, "Her Fey Majesty requires not your attendance, nor your service at this time."

"Isn't this the pitchkettle?" Kristryd wiped away tears.

"Even among our own people monarchs might be fickle," Bagbag tried to comfort her. "Think nothing of such mentimutations. When the queen desires your presence, she will summon you as always."

The queen did not summon her that day, nor the next, but on the third day, Kristryd received her call to the Fairy Palace. The Perfect Flower sat impassively on the Blossoming Throne, never deigning to cast an eye upon the dwur ambassador. Onselvon spoke on her behalf, "Her Fey Majesty, Queen of the Faerie Kingdom, bids you bear a second summons to the undermountain kings. Let them send their axes to lift the siege at Luskan." Onselvon placed a document into Kristryd's hand, but Yolande kept her gaze fixed elsewhere. She did not even acknowledge the presence of her friend. Kristryd opened the scroll to scan the contents, but she could scarce

focus her mind upon the words. Instead, her thoughts reeled and spun around Yolande, and her eyes returned to the Blossoming Throne. *By the gods! What sin have I committed?*

Chapter 15

SPELLS & STRATAGEMS

WHEN THE SNOWMELT and winter rains subsided, famished goblin-kind came pouring out of their holes, seeking farms to raid and villages to plunder. This time, a surprise met the hungry hordes. The allies occupied every pass in the northern Lortmils, strangling the routes from the Pass of Celene all the way to the Lorridges. Under the earth, Dengar and Gilmorack garrisoned strategic positions on the Low Road, funneling the underground movements of the tribes. Kristryd had arranged it all. In the months prior to the snowmelt, she consulted with the generals and strategic thinkers of the alliance, negotiated troop placements, prepared supply lines, and sketched out contingencies. Once the action began, she played her role as liaison between the forces, moving rapidly back and forth between battlefronts mounted on the back of the great hippogriff Emolasmairim. Elves, dwarves, gnomes, and humans alike watched the sky for the wings of her steed. Field commanders and officers consulted her for information about deployments, supplies, and the movements of the enemy. She found herself providing answers to questions that exceeded the scope of her actual authority, and she did not hesitate to issue commands in the queen's name when necessary to do so. *Why shouldn't the Queen's Wrath take charge? Am I not the author of the strategy?*

Battle of Luskan Way

The northern squeeze corralled the tribes together into a wide vale between the Celene Pass and the way to the Luskan Mines. There they remained, bottled up, until Father Furduch arrived with a gnome army from the Kron Hills and Verbobonc.

Kristryd observed the fierce battle from the high ground where the warmages and the commanders had set up their pavilions. The high elevation gave the warmages strategic advantage to the extent of the range of their dweomercraft. They rained down fireballs, shot lightning bolts, released noxious clouds, placed spheres of darkness, erected walls of fire, and whatever other spells they could concoct

to pitch at their foes. The gnomes employed their illusory crafts, clever engines, smoke bombs, and fireworks to further discomfit the enemy. Harassed and harried by the onslaught of magics and pursued by a relentless host of gnome fighters, the goblinkind fell into panic and disarray. A bright sun, slipping out from behind grey clouds, only added to their hysteria. From their high vantage, Kristryd and the commanders could survey nearly the whole field of battle.

“Now we have them!” young Prince Archosian exclaimed with boyish enthusiasm. “The gnomes advance and the south stockade holds. They have no escape from the vale. I should like to join the fight and slake my sword!”

Kristryd nodded in agreement, yet something seemed amiss. As the armies of the alliance converged, it seemed to her eyes that the trapped goblinkind began to drain from the vale like water draining from a pool when the valve is opened. “Are there not less and less of them?” she asked.

“One should hope! That really is the point of a battle,” Archosian jested.

“Nay. They have found some hole in the ground,” she said. “Behold, they fall back before our host and disappear into the stones.”

“Passwall spells!” old Bagbag surmised as he observed the diminishing hordes in the vale below. “They use magnified versions of passwall spells to escape back beneath the mountains.”

“Not the work of orcish shamans,” Onselvon remarked. The olven mage stood to his feet and shielded his eyes from the bright sun so as to better make out the movements of the battle below. “It is as Her Fey Majesty has said. We must find the arm that wields that power and break it! Yet all our scrying remains blind, obstructed by a powerful shield.”

“Though magical eyes might be blinded, mine own see well enough!” Kristryd said. “Behold. Look how swift runners move back and forth, making the passage not less than half a dozen times already between the host and the copse of pines behind that nearest hill. In those trees, you will find the spellbinders.”

“Keen eyes for a dwur-wife!” Fastaal Dothmar exclaimed. Leaping into action, he summoned Peralay, Archosian, Xaxalander, and three longbowmen and began the steep descent. By the time they reached the pines, they found only an empty clearing, trampled by the orc and goblin hosts. Their hungry swords found no flesh to bite nor blood to drink. The armies of the alliance came upon

the vale like hunters whose quarry escaped the nets. For two days they combed all that ground, but aside from a stray company of skulking goblins here, a clutch of orcs cowering there, a camp of kobolds hidden here, and a pack of gnolls slinking there, the enemy had evaded them and disappeared beneath the earth.

Outflanked in the Ulek Pass

On the third night, while the watchfires outside the pavilions of the warmages still burned bright, the commanders from up the vale arrived from the field with a sorry report about the number of those goblins slain. Far too few to account for the size of the host. "Our efforts have been thwarted again," old Bagbag sighed. "These creatures have learned the arts of camp rats and moles."

A horn of Celene called in the distance. Kristryd stood to her feet, removed her helmet, and cocked her head to hear the distant clarion of the elite cavalry. She lifted her own horn and answered. Soon the bay of such trumps called and answered and echoed off the mountainsides. A short time later, Emolasmairim swooped low over the camp of the warmages, screeching like an eagle, breaking against the speed of her descent with beating wings.

As the wizened olven mage hurried to meet the rider, the turbulence of air buffeted up by the hippogriff blew the pointed wizard's hat from his head. Kristryd also stood waiting amidst the wind of flapping wings. "What news? What news?" Onselvon demanded as the great beast descended and its talons and hooves met the earth.

"The missing host has emerged again and gathers in the pass!" Darrion, captain of the Queen's Elite Cavalry reported. "They flank us, and nothing stands between them and Enstad."

"Seldarine smite me!" Fastaal Dothmar swore, "Between that horde and our holy city I have left no defenders! Only illusions bar their way."

"We must hasten our spears! Call them up from the vale!" Onselvon commanded in alarm.

"To reach the pass will take our spears two days hard march over high hill and mountain wilds, all untamed land. We here and the queen's cavalry must intercept this host and hold the pass until they arrive," the fastaal strategized. Darrion nodded his assent, and Onselvon set his pointed hat back onto his head, pulling it down snug over his brow lest he lose it again.

"Take me with you," Kristryd said to the fastaal. "I will school you in the dwarven arts of slaying *jebli* and *euroz*. The city will not fall."

The fastaal looked askance at Kristryd and the old dwarf wizard who stood at her side. "Nay. Not this time."

"I do not ask you your permission," Kristryd stated. She turned to Darrion who sat still astride the hippogriff, "Do you remain yet under the orders of the queen to bear me where I will?"

Darrion nodded his helmed head and extended a hand to her.

"Your highness," Bagbag objected as Kristryd took her seat behind the rider's saddle, "Your place is here among your people. We must move to the defense of your own kingdom."

Kristryd shook her head. "My place will be wherever my oath takes me."

Assembly of Heroes

From upon the back of soaring Emolasmairim, Kristryd peered into the darkness below her. The pale light of two moons glinted off the splashing shallows of the Handmaiden where it snaked its way, ribbonlike, through trees and among steep hillsides, visible only here and there. At length her eyes caught sight of torches, burning red and bright, and she beheld the host, spread through the valley, filling the pass, and hurtling toward Enstad.

Emolasmairim lighted upon a green hall, open to the sky, where the fastaal now assembled what few defenders he could quickly summon to stand between the Fey Kingdom and the oncoming host. With Darrion's assistance, Kristryd dismounted and turned to the other passengers still arriving from the warmages' camp. The olven warriors and the spellcasters dismounted from the backs of the cavalry steeds that had borne them. Here was Onselvon, the Fey Queen's closest advisor and magician. Here were the three princes: reckless and deadly Fastaal Dothmar, field commander of the queen's spears and wielder of the dread sword *Concluder*, young and inexperienced Archosian, "The Green Arrow," wielder of the blade *Defender*, and the left-handed, hazel-eyed hunter Peralay, wielder of *Gnoll-Cleaver*. Here too stood Xaxalander Deravnye, although no one knew how he came to be there with them, for they had thought they left him at Luskan Way.

Gathering together in the green hall came what elves that could be mustered from nearby and the remnant of those guardians and rangers who fled from before the advancing host. Here too came marching up the way a troop of halfling slingers sent by her father from Ulek. Having come late to the Luskan muster, they only now just arrived from Prinzfeld.

"Luck of the halflings!" Kristryd observed. "Better late than

on time!”

“Aye, my lady!” a dwarf commander agreed. He had the red axe of the Principality upon his shield, and he bowed before his princess. “Captain, Royal Army of Ulek. I am at your service.”

Kristryd recognized the captain at once—Bamadar Kadarel. She exclaimed, “By Clangeddin’s Sharp Axe! Bamadar!” Leaving aside all propriety, she embraced him in a tight armor-clad squeeze before stepping back to eye him up and down. He looked hale and strong, his gear fit and polished, his beard rolled up for battle, the braids of his long thick hair extending from beneath his iron helmet. “Have you truly come in the flesh? Or are you another deceitful dream?”

“What dream lady?” the winsome dwarf asked.

She ignored his question, “Are you the one leading this hobniz troop? Did my father send you?”

“I volunteered,” the warrior boasted. “Brought the slingers up from Prinzfeld. Glad we didn’t miss the whole battle.”

From the west, echoing down the canyon, the war cries, horns, and drums of the advancing host reminded them of the urgency of the moment. “You have won my grate!” Kristryd told Bamadar. She turned to the commanders and rallied them together, “Hear me now! We have not sufficient strength nor allies to turn back this horde, but let us raise a dam to stop up the flood until our own host arrives. We need only slow them a day or so. We will meet them as the sun rises!” Turning her attention to Onselvon, she said, “And we must put a stop to whatever sorcerous tricks make good their escape. This time, we will see their corpses piled for burning.”

Onselvon and the fastaal looked on the dwarfess with astonishment, but the daughter of Olinstaad ignored their gaping mouths and continued to issue commands as if it were fit for her to do so. Fastaal Dothmar motioned with his sword. The grim set of his countenance made him look as if he was about to silence her presumptions, but instead he ordered his men, “Heed her words!”

Collision Course

The sons of Gruumsh came leaping down the canyon, splashing through the headwaters of the Handmaiden, spurred on by the sound of their own horns, drums, and wild war cries. They quickly overran the outer garrisons and crashed through the archers’ lines. Kobolds and goblins scouted ahead of the screaming orcs, sniffing out the way and springing traps and magical wards. The main host came behind carrying torches, not for the sake of illumination but for the sake of burning all that they came upon. The

inhabitants of farms and villages fled before them, but most fled not swiftly enough. The army slowed only long enough to light the thatch of cottages and barns and seize upon the livestock.

“Keep going! Keep going!” Urgush Halfblood commanded them. He kicked at a soldier who carried bleating goats under each arm. “Leave them damn goats! No time for plunder, gundyguts. Save it for the fairies.” The half-orc commander had only a thin margin of time. The predawn sky grew brighter. He knew the elves and gnomes they left behind at Luskan Way must already come in pursuit. Urgush needed to bring his army into Celene while those hosts still lagged.

“Can’t blame them for snatching a few goats along the way,” Hroth said as he tore one of the bleaters open with his massive hands and commenced to rip at the flesh, stripping it from the bones with his fangy teeth. “We’re all half-starved.”

Urgush shrugged and flicked his tongue to lick at the air. He could taste the scent of the goat’s blood and fresh meat. His mouth watered. He could taste the coming victory. The half-orc warlord grinned at the prospect of despoiling the Perfect Flower. Of course, he would never have dared the venture without help—not after last summer’s disaster on the High Road. Urgush blamed Hroth for that piss-in-the-wind failure. The hobgoblin pushed him into it before he was ready. This time would be different. Thanks to his own genius, they had outflanked the elven host and all those damn turd-nose gnomes and blasted dwur too. They had more devilshine. His best soldiers carried artfully crafted weapons, spears, and blades, specially ensorcelled to smite elves. His shamans muttered new dweomers written to counter those fairy illusions. Best of all, under the standard of Red Medusa, he carried along one of the chief spellbinders—on loan for the sack of Enstad. “By tomorrow night, I will take my seat in the gates of the White Tower!” the half-orc gloated as the ranks of his army rushed past.

“You leave the fairy bitch for me,” Hroth warned between bloody mouthfuls of raw goat. “I have the score to settle for Grot Ugrat.”

“We’ll take our turns,” Urgush offered magnanimously.

Hroth growled to indicate his displeasure with the prospect of sharing, “Don’t forget, you half-breed dog’s dick, this whole thing is my plan!”

Urgush dismissed the hobgoblin’s bluster with a snort and a wave of his dangerously enchanted shield, “My army. My victory. My spoils. You and your one-eared pups can help yourself to what’s

left after I've plucked the flower." The serpents of the painted medusa head that adorned his shield writhed.

"Choke and die on your own shite! Don't count heads before they're severed," Hroth cursed.

Those cautious words proved prescient for, at that moment, the cavalry of Celene descended upon them from the air. The screeching eagle-cries of the hippogriffs terrified the front ranks of the horde. A flurry of beating wings and ripping talons swept down on them.

"Ignore the birds! Press on! Press on!" Urgush Halfblood commanded as he ran up the ranks from behind. Hroth tossed aside the shredded carcass of the goat, wiped his maw on the bicep of his bare arm, and picked up his javelin.

The orcs had a hard time ignoring the ripping talons of the hippogriffs and sharp javelins of their riders, but there came too few of those to stop the advance of the host. From horseback, Fastaal Dothmar rallied the elven line, and he led the charge up the shallows of the Handmaiden. The goblinkind of the first ranks beheld that bright prince in resplendent armor and all those warriors following, their steeds kicking up such a spray of water as to obscure their numbers. This was the doing of Onselvon's illusory arts. Only a paltry sparse number of warriors followed the charge, but under the powerful illusion spell woven by that great mage, it appeared to the goblins that a mighty host leapt forward from the dawn, silhouetted against the early rising sun just above the mountains. Blinking in terror, the front ranks scarcely had time to draw back before they learned to fear the three blades *Defender*, *Concluder*, and *Gnoll-Cleaver*.

Some unseen dweomermaster dispelled the illusion almost as soon as it had been cast, but the front ranks turned their backs too quickly to discern the truth of the small number that pursued them. The retreating goblins collided then with those who still advanced from behind just as the screeching eagle-horses and their deadly riders in the sky descended upon them again. Confusion and sudden bewilderment spread through the host. The advancing ranks tripped over retreating kobolds and goblins and orcs, and they turned their knives against one another. Three blasts on a heavy horn signaled a halt. Urgush had no choice. He ordered the host to dig in for the fight. They drew up ranks, threw up barricades, dug pits, crawled under rocks, and prepared to huddle down for the day.

Fastaal Dothmar and Peralay circled the camp on horseback, keeping outside the range of bow and spell, eyeing up the foe. The

catastrophe had been stopped, for the moment, but the fastaal could not press the fight with only a handful of soldiers and an illusory army.

“When the sun sets, they will resume their advance,” Dothmar sighed wearily. “How then?”

A Most Ignoble Course

The encampment of the goblinkind filled more than a mile of the pass. The holy waters of the Handmaiden stank with urine and filth. The muck-loving orcs and goblins hid themselves from the brightness of the sun in whatever holes they might dig. The officers and commanders took shade beneath the stretched skins of beasts and the heavy black canvas tents of their divisions. They raised the pendants of their tribes; the flag of Red Medusa flew at the center of the camp.

Kristryd summoned Onselvon and the roguish Xaxalander Deravnye to counsel. She said to the venerable mage, “I am but a daughter of stone and earth, and I do not presume to instruct the wisdom of the elves. But if I was a spellcaster of power like unto your own, sire, I would arm this rogue Xaxa with what magics as you possess to pass through the wards of their shamans unseen under their guards. Then I would send him into the midst of their camp to slay the spellcasters and the commanders while the host slumbers ‘neath the sun.”

“A most ignoble course of action,” Onselvon observed wryly, “Most unlike the proud dwur to resort to magic, assassination, and backstabbing.”

“My lord. Be it known! I am counted already a most-ignoble dwarf,” Kristryd agreed. “Now is the time for valor if not honor.”

Foppish Xaxa grinned and consented to the mission. “Now while the vermin take their sleep,” he said, “I will introduce myself to the commanders of their host and also to what devils work their magic.” He donned his elven cloak and soft boots, filled his pack with potions of healing and invisibility, and wrapped himself with such charms, spells, and sigils the elven mage could provide him. By broad daylight, he crept his way into the midst of the jebli and euroz camp. They sniffed at the air as he passed, snarled, cursed, and spat, but none laid eyes upon the rogue. Many a watchman was later found with slit throat, and many a sleeping orc or ogre never woke from that slumber. Bow strings he cut, and prisoners he released. Under the stretched skins of beasts and the canvas tents of the commanders, he moved with stealth to slay whoever

seemed important, if only it could be accomplished with none raising a shout.

The thief made his way toward the center of the camp. Under the flag of the Red Medusa he spied a small canopied pavilion of red cloth, set aside from the main tent. Quaffing a potion of invisibility, he made his way then beneath the canopy, and this is what he saw: a party of mountain dwarves gathered about a low table, murmuring in the old dwur tongue. One of them looked to be an old dwurwife spellcaster, and the rest looked to be her servants and advisors. Gemstones and bars of gold glinted in an open chest near the table, and wondrous items of magical properties seemed to overflow another chest set near the first.

Now we see how things are, Xaxa thought to himself. I shall make a quick end of this treachery. But if I reveal myself by striking the spellbinder, the others will raise a shout. If I must flee, I had best pilfer the goods first; no time for collecting treasures after I have struck.

Relying upon the spells of Onselvon to protect him from magical wards, he silently and invisibly made his way to the chest and quietly lifted out an ornate and gem-studded tierra. Onselvon's spells failed him. At once the chest raised an alarm, shouting in the tongue of the dwarves, "Thief! Thief!" Xaxa dropped the tierra and sprang to the attack.

The dwarves at table leapt to their feet and looked about. They did not see the assailant coming. His first blow punched his enchanted short sword through the back of the spellbinder, into her heart, and out through her left breast. He pushed her off the end of the blade. The attack broke the enchantment of the potion that concealed him, and all eyes fixed upon him. The dwarves shouted in alarm, but they did not take up weapons or spring to the attack as he expected. Instead, they drew back in fear, gaping at the bleeding corpse of the dwarfess that fell at Xaxa's feet.

From high above where Kristryd and Darrion circled upon the back of the hippogriff Emolasmairim, they saw a commotion erupt near the center of the euroz camp where the Red Medusa pendants fluttered in the breeze. A lone elf exchanged blows with an armored orog; archers shot at the elf, and from every side, ugly creatures brandishing clubs and spears rushed at him. Darrion spoke a few words to Emolasmairim. The enormous bird-horse wheeled about one more time and, with a piercing scream, soared into a steep dive toward the beleaguered elf. Kristryd felt her stomach lurch from the sudden drop and acceleration. She clung tightly to Darrion.

The wind of their descent stole away her breath.

In one swift, graceful swoop, Emolasmairim levelled out and took hold of Xaxa in strong talons, bearing him away from the camp. Arrows and spears trailed after them, but they all fell short. The only ones to find a mark did so by striking other goblin-kind in their fall back into the host.

Alton Chubb Quickbread

The halfling slingers from Prinzfeld brought with them a great asset in the form of one Alton Chubb Quickbread, a renowned halfling healer and holy man of Ehlonna who wandered about in their lands, doing good, healing the sick, and closing wounds. The holy Quickbread refused to wield a weapon of any type, but he showed no fear in the face of danger, and he did wield unrivalled healing powers. No matter how deep the puncture, how vicious the gash, or how fractured the break, his healing prayers and divine powers of invocation could mend it, even without an acopon.

Kristryd walked with him among the wounded and spoke with him while he worked. "You have healing hands like those of the Sacred Heart Gilvgola," she remarked.

"Nay," Quickbread objected with mischief, "Her fingers are fatter. Mine are small and clever." The tassel-headed halfling held up his hands and waggled his fingers for Kristryd to observe.

"Gilvgola's fat fingers wield a mace," Kristryd said evenly. "They say that you refuse to fight. It is well for you to wield no weapon so long as others do so for you."

"I suppose," Alton said without much thought, "But it would be even more well if none would wield weapons at all. Then there should be no need for my healing hands or hers, and I should apply my hands to arts for which they are better suited."

"For what arts could your hands be better suited?" Kristryd asked. "Never in my days have I seen a healer so puissant among elves or men or gnomes and none among my own kin save Gilvgola herself."

"My hands are better suited to the art of making muffins, tipsycakes, and hot tea," Alton said matter-of-factly. "Not without reason am I named Quickbread."

"I should like to live in a world where fine muffins, tipsycakes, and good black tea take priority over wars and weapons," Kristryd admitted.

"Stay close to me, your highness, and you may yet," Alton offered flirtatiously. A wide smile split his plain face. "I should

like to make muffins for a princess! Especially a fairhead as thee.”

Springing the Trap

The sun disappeared behind the mountains. As Kristryd had hoped, Xaxalander's ignoble work discomfited the host. As the jebli and euroz camp prepared to advance, many found their chiefs and captains slain. Lower ranking officers battled one another for possession of the vacant posts. Astonishment and alarm rattled the commanders that survived. But when they saw that Urgush still lived and breathed, the host took courage and organized under his commands. They divided into two columns and prepared to march, one on either side of the river. Their advance began as darkness fell. This time, instead of charging headlong, they shuffled along cautiously, even warily.

“Now we spring the trap,” Kristryd said from her point of observation upon a rocky ledge. She had hidden the halfling slingers from Prinzfeld all along that way and instructed them to wait until the foes came close enough for sure aim. Then they were to strike every third or fourth as the army passed. Arrows from elvish bows whistled through the night, piercing the throats of the biggest targets. The dual assault from both sides of the canyon forced the two columns of the advancing host to converge until they were tripping through the river, now swollen with winter rains and spring melt from the mountain tops.

Kristryd gave the signal to start the magical assault. The spellcasters found the scrying shield broken, and they could now see each rank and position in the enemy host. As the euroz and jebli drew near, the warmages unleashed batteries of spells. A deluge of fireballs, lightening attacks, unseen missiles, and all manner of war magic inspired shock and terror.

The magical barrage subsided, and the horns of Celene sounded. Onselvon cast a simple *dweomer* to amplify the sound of the horns and multiply their calls, making it sound as if army called to army and a great many elves now joined the attack. At the same time, the cavalry began their swooping attacks. Dothmar led Peralay and the Green Arrow on a charge directly into the front ranks. Onselvon cast powerful illusions to accompany them, depicting attacking forces of elven knights with gleaming eyes, and this time, no spellcaster among the jebli had the power to dispel his magic or deny the illusion. The hungry blades *Defender*, *Concluder*, and *Gnoll-Cleaver* cut a swath through the middle of the ranks. Under a cloak of stealth, Xaxa followed them, backstabbing, hamstringing,

and throat-slitting any who tried to flank the fastaal or attack him from behind.

Gradually at first, but then, more swiftly, the host began to reverse itself. As they turned their backs, the elves and halfling slingers descended on them. In short order, the *euroz* and *jebli* broke into full retreat, fleeing back up the canyon. The sparse host of allies kept up the pursuit all that night and into the morning.

Fog of War

The fleeing host became lost in the heavy fogs at the source of the Handmaiden that never clear. The same fogs disguised the smallness in number of their pursuers, and it confused the orcs in their retreat. The fog filled the canyon with a thick blanket of moisture, deadening all sounds and making everything appear ghostlike. Soldiers and monsters rose from the nyle like apparitions and then disappeared again. Goblin horns signaled back and forth, but the fog muffled their calls and further confused the retreating host. At midday, the fleeing fog-bound goblins collided with the main host of elves and gnomes which had marched continuously for nearly two days and crossed overtop from Luskan Pass. Father Furduch had taken leadership and hurried them along, invoking the divine powers of the Ulaa to shorten the distance and hasten their strides. A fierce battle, concealed in the fog, took place along the banks of the river. The swift currents of the swollen Handmaiden carried the bodies downstream, and, for seven days, the bloated corpses floated past Enstad.

The elves of Enstad held a festival at the sanctuary of Larethian to celebrate their salvation. The Queen of Celene honored the three heroes and saviors of the kingdom, but she reserved highest honor especially for Xaxalander Deravnje for his bravery. On behalf of the whole High Court, the queen gave the rogue a gift in commemoration of the battle—a large tapestry, magically embroidered with dramatic colors, depicting the battle of the Ulek Pass, some of it stitched by her own hand. She made no mention of Kristryd or her role in the battle, nor did she invite the dwarfess to attend the ceremony of the Grand Court.

Chapter 16

THE HALFBLOOD PROPHECY

FURY BURNED IN Kristryd's breast when she saw how her kin had had abandoned the fight at an hour so desperate. The dwarves did not accompany the march of Father Furduch. The hosts of Gilmorack paid no heed to the muster at all. Their undermountain king sent not a single axe to join the fight at Luskan. Nor did Dengar send its iron clad troops to the aid of the elves in the battle for Ulek Pass.

She dispatched a complaint to the undermountain kings from the field of the battle, and she sent an apology to Enstad, written in her own hand. The only warrior of her people to stand alongside Yolande's people in that desperate hour was the Thunderstrike dwarf Bamadar Kadarel. He had come up from the Principality along with the halfling troop from Prinzfeld, and, as such, had the privilege of contributing to the battle of on behalf of the Principality and the dwarven nations. His prowess on the field cast no shame on the reputation of the dwarves. His arms did not tire, and his legs did not falter, but many were the victims that fell beneath his axe.

The Corpse

On the day after the defeat of the horde, Kristryd summoned the winsome young Bamadar to her tent in the green hall and commended him, for he had fought bravely and in a manner worthy of her father's name and reputation. He tried to flatter her with his attention, "I fought only for the honor of the Noble House of Corond, my lady! For your Grace, and also for his Serene Highness, Lord of the Peaks of Haven."

"The Noble House thanks you," Kristryd replied, "But now I must charge you another errand—one you might not find so honorable nor to your liking."

Bamadar bowed and declared, "If my dishonor be for thy honor, my lady, what more could be to my liking?"

Kristryd ignored the words of ingratiation and continued, "Somewhere on the field of battle, near the encampment of the

Red Medusa, find the body of a dwarfess, an old spellcaster, slain through the heart by the blade of Xaxa. Find the corpse and bring it to me, for I must know who she is, from where she came, and with what companions she travelled.”

“Your Highness, permit me to provide the answers,” Bamadar intoned in imitation of the pontificating counselor’s of her father’s court. “Who she is? A dead bitch! From where she came? Who in nine hells cares? And with what companions she travelled? *Euroz* and *jebli!*”

“Nay,” Kristryd insisted evenly. “The truth matters more than you can know.”

Three days later, Bamadar returned bearing the foul corpse. “Found her in a cairn raised not far from the place of the *jebli* camp. They raised the stones with the honor of a noble dwurwife,” his voice became reverent. He uncovered the head of the corpse to reveal a face bloated by Nerull’s touch but still recognizable enough.

“I know this dwuress,” Kristryd exclaimed. “Burn this corpse upon a pyre and grind her bones to chalk. Then we must leave at once. I need you to accompany me back to Dengar in all haste. We take the Low Road, despite the dangers.”

“My lady honors me,” the bombastic Bamadar consented with a deep bow.

Return to Dengar

Kristryd and Bamadar entered the Low Road at Luskan Mines. An escort sent from Thane Evrast, her father-in-law, marched out to meet them and accompany them to the undermountain king’s halls. When she entered the vast pillared chamber of the king’s throne, trueheaded Bagbag already waited there, eagerly looking for her arrival. “My daughter, we were in fear for you and for all of Enstad. Blessed be Ulaa who has spared you and brought you safely home to us!”

“Blessed be the Stonewife,” Kristryd agreed. “Why did you not come to my summons for warmages?”

“I received no summons,” Bagbag objected. “I hastened back with our own army to stand for the defense of Dengar if need be.”

“If need be,” Kristryd scowled at the polished floor. “Need was where need was. But only this single warrior, a dwarf of my father’s principality, stood with Enstad in their hour of need.”

Bagbag nodded his acknowledgments to Bamadar, “A credit to your father, Kadarelson. A brave dwarf your father was. Quarried

from the same vein.”

Thane Evrast motioned for silence, “Enough of this. Thanks be to Smith! Blessed be Ulaa; blessed be Berronar! Daughter, tell us of the battle, what befell our foes, and what is their disposition? Thanks to my stratagems, we now control of the Low Road from Gilmorack to the Ulek Pass, and I would press the advantage.”

Kristryd raised her head. A flash of unchecked anger flared in her eyes as she briefly met the king’s gaze. *His stratagems? Let the hammer smite me!* She gathered her wits and lowered her head again, for a dwuress of the mountain dwarves never meets the eye of a male above her station. Remembering herself and her place in the undermountain king’s presence, she took a breath to calm herself before relating the tale of all that befell them in the Ulek Pass, but she omitted from her tale any mention of the dwurwife and the dwarves of the red pavilion.

The Old Vecke of Dengar

The princess of Dengar enjoyed happy reunion with her three sons, Grallsonn, Dwalynd, and Pegli. “Tell us every stroke of the battle!” Pegli pleaded. “Spare no single detail.” She recited the story, including the ignoble strategy so deftly executed by the elven rogue, but again she made no mention of the old dwurwife. The boys cheered the tale. They presented their mother with gifts that they had fashioned in her absence, adorning her with gems and jewelry.

“Fine sons you have mothered. A credit to your father’s house,” Bamadar exclaimed.

After time spent enjoying the company of the three young princes, Kristryd summoned Bagbag and Bamadar to the privacy of her own chambers. She closed the doors and shutters lest any of the servants be lurking near and overhear. “I recognized that spellcaster. It was the old vecke that scowled and slunk about these very halls. Xaxa described her companions, and it sounded to me as if they were all Dengar dwarves; some of the names I might guess. As it is, the presence of dwarves in the command of the horde places our alliance in jeopardy, but if it became known in Celene that these were dwarves of Dengar, we might find ourselves at war with the elves.”

Bagbag leaped to his feet. “By Bocob and all the gods!” he exclaimed. “Falseheaded are the dwur of this place!”

“Do you suspect the undermountain king?” Bamadar asked in wide-eyed shock, forgetting for a moment that his speculation

impugned Kristryd's father-in-law and the grandfather of her sons.

Kristryd ignored them both. She put a hand on Bagbag's shoulder, compelling him to sit back down at the table. The stony expression on her face silenced their bluster, "Bagbag, I adjure you by Truesilver's braided beard to tell me the truth. Who was that old vecke?"

The Prophecy and the Three Witches

Bagbag sighed and clawed nervously at his white beard. He stared into the corner of the chamber, refusing to meet Kristryd's eyes. For a minute or so, he said nothing at all, but then he declared, "For a tale such as this, I will need a bowl or two."

Bamadar slapped the table and blurted, "Well-spoken Sir Silverstonecutter! And for the hearing of such a tale, I shall need a bowl or three!"

Kristryd nodded toward the hogshead of merry-go-down mead that stood propped in the corner by the cupboards. Bamadar fetched flagons and poured up bowls. He downed his first in a single draught and refilled it before bringing the other two drinks to table. He favored all with a deep and worthy belch. Bagbag sipped at his mead and began his tale:

"The last undermountain king of Balnorhak died under suspicious circumstances. Some said that his eldest daughter, Gretyll, poisoned his soup. Others believed his youngest daughter, Gunhyld, venenated his mead. Still others supposed his middle daughter, Hedvyg, might have fed him death-cabbage and sausages. It may have been all three together; rarely does a dose of poison harm one of our people, but all three together might have availed. In any case, all agreed that the king had been poisoned, and all agreed that one or more of his daughters were responsible.

"The king's three daughters were, all three of them, spellbinders in the old tradition of secret dwarven arts. Some blame the magic for seducing their hearts to evil. I say the trouble started with Vergadain's prophecy." Bagbag cleared his throat and began a recitation in the old dwarven cant of Balnorhak:

Behold! A halfblood to unite the broken tribes.

Dwurdotter musters Durin's sons and

rings Moradin's bells.

As an ore cart heavy-laden crushes 'neath its wheels.

To tread upon your enemies, and wield the shield well.

*The arm that pulls the bowstring snaps it and
breaks the strongest bow.
The mightiest shall not save his life.
Strength fails the strongest foes;
The sure of foot goes stumbling;
the stout of heart flees tumbling.
O Lortmil, Queen of Mountains! Everlasting Possession!
Purge the peaks! Breast and womb!
Blessed above; blessed below!
Blessed of Ulaa; bequeathed of Berronar!
My heart goes marching on.*

“An ambiguous prophecy,” Kristryd replied cautiously. “Too often quoted and too much subject to vain interpretations.”

Bagbag nodded sagaciously and continued, “The prophecy filled their heads with foolish notions of power. Gretyll, the most powerful of the three, did wield spells of high level by any standard, but especially among our folk, where spellcasting is always frowned upon or forbidden. Employing those arts, she consulted with some fiendish powers from forsaken places to learn the meaning of the prophecy. Spake she to her sisters, ‘Our father sired no sons, and we are the end of his royal line. It is not the way of the dwur to let a daughter inherit her father’s title, but all Balnorhak knows that our mother came of the blood of the Hegoldem-Dwur (hill dwarves) and our father of the blood of Toherntik-Dwur (mountain dwarves). My sisters, we are the half-blooded. The prophecy states that one of us shall unite the broken tribes of dwurfolk; one of us shall muster the hosts of dwur to purge these mountains of goblinkind and take back our everlasting possession. Now, whichever one it be, let us swear an oath, one to another, that we will in no wise scheme one against two, or two against one, but shall ever be bound by covenant, share and share alike in power and wealth. If I am to be the undermountain queen, I will appoint you two as my left and my right, and if one of you shall be queen, likewise you shall appoint your sister and me.’

“The three sisters swore by rite of blood to that effect, and the matter became known throughout all Balnorhak and all the way to Gilmorack. When the undermountain king took suddenly ill and perished, all suspected the daughters of some plot against their father. Despite the prophecy, none of the three inherited their father’s wealth nor his title. The elders and the clan chieftans convened a council with the clerics of Moradin to decide the matter

of succession. The great halls, tunnels, and mines that had once belonged to Balnorhak had fallen to the goblinkind that nested in every unguarded nook and cranny beneath the mountains. In the lowlands, a kingdom of men called Keoland had risen and held sway over the dwarven lands. The council looked to the house of Corond, and they chose your father Olinstaad.

“The three sisters were banished under suspicion of patricide and witchcraft. I thought they had all three died long ago—until we arrived here in Dengar for your wedding to the Prince Grallwen. I was surprised to find old Gunhyld still alive and dwelling here. ‘What? Are you still among the breathing?’ I asked her.

“‘I am, and my sisters too,’ she said. ‘And I have brought a blessing for the bride.’

“‘What blessing, Gunhyld?’ I demanded, for I trusted her not at all. ‘Be gone old witch, and trouble us not, or I will have your presence made known to the undermountain king.’ That was the last I saw of her.” Bagbag fell silent.

Hope and Destiny

“My father has told the tale and how the youngest was jealous over my mother,” Kristryd mused. “But I don’t understand. What does Gunhyld have to do with goblinkind? And who are these dwur folk who travelled with her in the company of orcs and goblins?”

Bagbag gazed into his mead thoughtfully. Bamadar drained his own bowl and refilled it, adding, “In Thunderstrike, they say the lord prince put the three sisters to death.”

“Not to death,” Bagbag corrected. “I was there the day they were banished.” Turning to Kristryd, he continued, “I stood beside your father, the young Prince Corond, as he issued the verdict against them. Bitter Hedvyg put a curse upon your father the prince, saying to the prince’s face, ‘May your wife be barren as this stone.’

“Your father the Prince Olinstaad replied most nobly, ‘So be it! For the Lortmil stone is not barren as you suppose but pregnant with rich veins of silver and gold and a womb full of gems.’ Nevertheless, the curse seemed to find its mark. Your mother could not conceive, and no dwarfish remedy availed her. In distress over the matter, your father came to me and asked if I might have some charm or magic spell to remove the curse. Alas, I had not the power, but I told him, ‘There are among the elves ensorcellors more potent than I.’ I escorted your mother to the White Tower in Enstad where she received the blessing of the Fey Queen. Then your father’s seed

found fertile ground to root and blossom.

“On the day you were born, I looked up to the heights, and I remembered the prophecy: ‘*A halfblood to unite the broken tribes. Dwurdotter musters Durin’s sons ... O Lortmil, Queen of Mountains! Everlasting Possession! Purge the peaks!*’ Today, thank the gods, I can go in peace to join my fathers in the halls of Dumathoin, for I have seen the prophecy fulfilled. You, Kristryd Olinsdotter! You are the unifier of the mountain kingdoms; you are the dwarfess who musters the hosts to purge the everlasting possession.”

“Am I?” Kristryd asked. “Am I a halfblood then?” She recalled the halfblood they had encountered on the road to Dungalorin and recoiled at the term.

Bagbag shrugged. “Poetic language, that’s all. In your veins runs the blood of the Hegoldem and the Toherentik.” Standing to his feet, he lifted his bowl and said, “Surely, daughter, you are destined to restore the glory of Balnorhak, to purge the mountains, and to unite the kingdoms of our people.”

These words so moved the heart of Bamadar that he slammed his empty bowl down on the table, knelt before the princess, and trothed himself, “My Queen! Long live the Queen! Balnorhak endures!”

“Don’t be a lickspigot,” Kristryd snapped, her lips curled into a snarl. “Get up! I am no queen, nor halfblood; Balnorhak is no kingdom, nor does it endure.”

Chapter 17

AMONG THE TESTED

THE LEAVES TURNED color—some had fallen—before she returned to fair Celene on embassy for the alliance (Patchwall 500 CY). She waited in the garden of the Grand Court and mingled among other ambassadors: men from Veluna and Verbobonc, from the Duchy and the County, and from the free city of Greyhawk. Stranger still, she waited among faeries of the Seeley Court, gnomes from the Kron Hills, a centaur from Greenway Valley. *And for the dwur folk*, she thought to herself, *Kristryd Olinsdotter. So I am reduced in her Fey Majesty's esteem to just one of a bevy of whifflings in line for a moment of her attention.*

“Daughter, what transgression have you committed to incur the Queen Yolande’s disfavor?” the wise mage Onselvon interrupted her thoughts. She had not seen the magic user approach. The long-haired elven wizard sat himself down beside her on the garden bench. “She will not hear told any good of you, whether spoken by the princes, by Darrion, Deravnje, the Fastaal, or myself.”

“I have done the queen no wrong,” Kristryd defended herself. “None of which I know. But I am hated nonetheless.”

“She will not receive your embassy this day,” Onselvon apologized. “But she asks two questions of the dwur, and she sends me to make the awkward inquiry.”

Kristryd nodded. She kept a stoic frown. Onselvon continued, “Her majesty inquires of the dwur, ‘Why did you abandon us in our hour of need?’ And she asks, ‘Why did we find your kin leading the horde in the Battle of Ulek Pass?’”

“Bear the queen this message then: I myself commanded the engagements, as you yourself well know and can testify. As for the host of Dengar, we fell back to defend our own halls from the same such an onslaught as you also faced, or so the commanders thought. As for those few dwur found among the horde, call them not dwur folk nor my kin. They are traitors most vile, one of them a foul witch. And say to the queen on my behalf, ‘Forget not that I am your wrath! For your cause have I made this war!’”

"I will bring these replies to the queen," Onselvon stood and offered a ceremonious bow. "Return to your cosh. If you are needed further, or granted further audience, we will summon you thence."

Kristryd did not return to her cottage straightway but wandered the royal city aimlessly. Her heart burned too hot with anger at the queen. Her mind boiled with imaginary conversations and sharp exchanges. Neither the colored leaves of Enstad, nor the fragrances of autumn, nor the beauty of the city could in any measure lift a mood so black. She wondered over Yolande's callous treatment. Each time she rehearsed the matter, her heart grew more bitter. *I once called her friend? Why did I ever trust an elf? Damn them all to the nine hells!*

Elraniel

As if in answer to her thoughts, a wild-haired elf-woman leapt down from a tree branch above. She wore only a course hair coat tied loosely about her waist with a belt of leather.

Kristryd recovered quickly from the start, "Do you have a message for the queen Edda? If so, find yourself some other errand-dwur. The queen no longer receives my audience."

"I have a message for you, Kristryd Dwurdotter of Ulek and princess of Dengar," the wild elf blurted with a maniacal giggle.

"Speak on," Kristryd replied impatient, paying no heed to the strange address.

"A tale of three dwur sisters. If you would know the rest, seek the cave of Edda."

"I'll not play your prophet's games or guess at your riddles," Kristryd snapped. Too late. Edda leapt back up the trunk of the roanwood from which she had dropped and disappeared into the impossibly high colorful rustling canopy above.

Small wonder the queen hates the People of the Testing!

Kristryd found it difficult to obtain directions to Edda's cave. Whenever she asked about the prophetess, the Celenese smiled smugly or offered a gentle, condescending laugh, but they would not confess to know how to find Edda's home. The centaur from Greenway proved more helpful. He directed Kristryd to a path that wound past the Fane of Correlon, up a small rise and to a homely cave set into the rock, sealed with a moss-covered wooden wall and closed up with a simple rough-hewn door.

"Edda, I have come," Kristryd called out, and she knocked upon the door.

"Enter," a man's voice replied.

Kristryd pushed on the door and stepped into the dim lit cave, expecting to find polished stone, paneled walls, and rich furnishings such as one might find in a halfling's hole or a dwur home. Instead, she found a natural cave, swept clean, unfurnished except for a low table on which had been set a few wooden bowls, cups, and plates and a wooden platter piled with wild berries. A single lamp on the table cast the only light, leaving most of the cave shadowed and dim. On the other side of the table, on a cushion of leaf and dry moss, reclined an elf wrapped in a brown robe. Unlike Edda, he looked well-groomed and refined of manner, albeit frail and more aged than any elf Kristryd had ever seen. A slight palsy trembled through his hands, his hair was white with age, and his clouded blue eyes stared sightlessly. Edda herself sat cross-legged on the cave floor at the end of the table, tugging sticks and brambles from her tangled dreadlocks.

"I am Elrael," the stranger introduced himself. "A friend of Edda."

Kristryd nodded and executed a stiff bow, forgetting that the blind elf could not see her gesture. He continued, "I have come to warn you of a threat to your alliance."

"From where have you come?" Kristryd asked dubiously.

"From where have I come?" Elrael repeated thoughtfully as if the question was of such profound depth that it required contemplation. "Spoken like a true Tested One. I have come from the blood of Larethian, from another world, from Feywild. Though my hoary appearance puts the lie to it, I have been only for three centuries and a score of years consigned to this world and to this body. Indeed, I am younger than Yolande, though I look to be a thousand years older than the Perfect Flower." He colored the words "Perfect Flower" with intoned sarcasm.

"From where have you come today? Do you dwell here with Edda?" Kristryd asked.

"No. On the last fullness of Luna, I arrived here from my home in Midmeadow. I came here to seek you." He motioned to the table, "Please recline. Eat."

"I have heard that the People of the Testing eat only with their own," Kristryd objected. Elrael motioned again to the table.

Kristryd reclined at the low table and filled one of the bowls with wild berries. "I am listening," she coaxed.

"Elrael is a seer," Edda offered, as if this fact should explain everything. "He scries out things hidden to other eyes. He has come to warn us of a compact, which, if left to stand, will bring both the

dwur and olvenkind to our knees.”

The Bride of Fiends

“Why tell me? Why not tell the queen these things?” Kristryd asked.

“She is not my queen. Nor is the counsel of the People of the Testing welcome in the Grand Court,” Elraniel replied. “But I nurture concern, all the same, for the fate of Yolande’s subjects, and for every elvish spirit imprisoned in this material world. And also for you Dwurdotter. I seek your help because you have the power to muster strength of nations and break the arm of the Yatil Witch.”

“I have never heard tale of such a one,” Kristryd stated as she tasted of the wild berries.

Edda leaned forward over the table, supporting her weight with open palms on the tabletop. Her hair garment hung low, exposing her swinging breasts. The light of the solitary lamp cast shadows up her face, and her wild hair seemed to writhe in the flame’s flickering. She whispered menacingly, as if uttering a threat, “Yes you have heard of the Queen of Perrenland. The most powerful devilshine summoner that has ever been. You have felt her. You have sensed her malice. She rallies the vermin under her standard—a Red Medusa, though none such is she.”

“To the sons of Gruumsh she may appear so,” Elraniel corrected, “She takes many forms. A fair-skinned, dark-haired human, beautiful to the eye, ugly and twisted of soul. She is a whore of fiends, and something worse than a gorgon. An ancient magus. A mighty one of eld.”

“And what wants the Yatil Witch with us in the Lortmil Mountains?” Kristryd asked.

“Her power in Perrenland has been broken,” Elraniel gazed unseeing. “She seeks a new lair.”

“Does a roc take the nest of another unless it drives out the first? Does a dragon take the lair of another unless he slays it first?” Edda asked cryptically.

Elraniel nodded his assent. “She has found new allies in the Lortmils. I have perceived it, and you, Kristryd Olinsdotter, have been merely a tool in her hands.”

Kristryd’s temper flared. She snapped, “To the Nine Hells with all the elves and to the deepest layers of the Abyss with the Tested and their pitchkettling riddles! Dare you call me an agent of a witch?”

“Elraniel has seen what he has seen,” Edda replied.

Elrael continued, "For long centuries past, while the temples of goblinkind remained, the mountains fell beneath the warding of those fiends, like a bottle of Black Pomarj Wine stopped up by a cork. You have uncorked the bottle and spilled the contents. You have the blood of elves upon your hands dwurdotter, and the blood of the Prince Consort too."

"So these are the lies that you showed the queen under the Moonarch!" Kristryd exclaimed with growing comprehension. "It was you who turned her heart cold and bitter toward me! How true what they say: 'Ever the Tested turn the elves against the other races!'"

Elrael snapped his fingers triumphantly, "There it is! She has passed beneath it! It is as I had foreseen."

"Has she passed her tests I wonder?" Edda laughed, "She'll never admit to it."

By the gods, now I've done it! Kristryd thought as her face colored with shame. *I've spilled the secret and broken Yolande's trust.*

Edda laughed again as if Kristryd had made a great jest.

"You credit us too much! The Tested exercise no control over Sehanine's dreams. Nor have we any sway over Yolande's heart," Elrael sighed. "What a Tested One sees under the Moonarch is known only to the Tested, and none speak of what they learned or what trials they met during the testing."

Edda sank her hand into the bowl of wild berries and scooped another pile into Kristryd's bowl. "Eat!" she urged.

Elrael added, "I have not come to sow lies. I have come to warn you, Kristryd Olinsdotter, and I have come to prevent more shedding of Larethian's blood. I may be blind, but I have my eyes in all the lands of olvenkind, and I see more than most. These blind eyes have solved the riddle of the Red Medusa and unmasked a conspiracy between the three sisters of Balnorhak and the Yatil Witch."

"What conspiracy?" Kristryd asked, her mind suddenly returning to the tale of Gretyll, Gunhyld, and Hedvgy.

Elrael shifted forward and leaned upon the table, next to Edda. His clouded blue eyes gleamed dully in the light of the lamp. He lowered his voice, as if afraid of being overheard, "What did the sisters trade for her spells and her powers? Their souls? But all is not yet lost. You have already slain one of the three. Redeem yourself; finish the work before they finish theirs."

Kristryd fell silent, brooding over these words for a long while. Her mind turned over the tale of the three sisters and the revelations she had learned from Bagbag. *I will be damned to the Nine*

Hells myself before I trust these riddle-masters and dream weavers!

“Where must I find the remaining sisters?” Kristryd asked.

“One rules in Gilmorack; the other hides in Balnorhak. More than that I cannot tell you because more than that I have not seen,” Elraniel replied.

Conspiracies and Rumors

Kristryd returned to her cosh, mind spinning with conspiracies and distrust. She asked herself, *Why did I come to Enstad without Bagbag. If ever I needed trueheaded council, I need it now!*

She gave a start as she stepped inside the cottage. There in a chair pulled up to her own table sat a cloaked and partially hooded figure. In the gloaming half-light that came through the window, she recognized the sharp profile of Onselvon the mage.

“My apologies. I let myself inside to wait,” Onselvon explained. “It has reached the ears of Her Fey Majesty that you went about Enstad today seeking Edda the Tested.”

“Edda summoned me,” Kristryd replied. “Else I would have no cause to seek her.”

“Did she? Or did a certain hoddypeak deceiver called Elraniel summon you?” Onselvon asked. Kristryd detected a barely controlled edge of anger behind the mage’s calm voice. When she did not reply, Onselvon continued, “Know this Elraniel for who he is—an enemy of Her Fey Majesty and no friend of the Grand Court. If my queen had reason to distrust you aforetime, now she does all the more!”

“I am not a party to the intrigues of the elves. I dwell among my own people,” Kristryd replied evasively.

“But you are party now!” Onselvon snapped. “Tell me. What council did the People of the Testing provide you?”

Kristryd sat down opposite the mage. Her mind raced, trying to decide if she trusted Onselvon or not and whether or not she believed the words of Elraniel. Pulling her wits together, she said, “They spoke of one called the Yatil Witch, but I do not trust them. I think they are liars and that they have spread lies about me. Worse than that, I think they may have betrayed the Prince Consort to his enemies, and now they seek to shift the blame elsewhere. They would use me as a pawn in their games.”

Onselvon nodded gravely. “Not unlikely. You must tell me everything they told you.”

Kristryd repeated the general contents of her converse with the Tested, but she omitted their incriminating suggestions of collusion

lest it plant the idea in Onselvon's mind too. She focused on the threat of conspiracy between the three sisters of Balnorhak and the Yatil Witch.

"I know of this summoner of which they speak," Onselvon said. "Some few years past she enslaved Perrenland, and many feared her rising. But she came to nothing and is no more. Her lust for power was her undoing. They say that she summoned a powerful fiend, imprisoned him, and forced him into servitude. From his hand she derived her great strength, but in the end, he broke her bonds and slew her. The fact that she is dead and gone can scarce be doubted, for these things transpired a decade past. The tale is known among the wise."

"So then there is no Yatil Witch, or at least not anymore! I no longer know what to believe or who to trust," Kristryd admitted. "I will find the remaining two sisters and put an end to their mischief."

"On that quest, you will have my blessing and my help, even if not with the blessing of Her Fey Majesty" Onselvon conspired.

Chapter 18

BLACK ICHOR

FANFARE SOUNDED IN the high-arched council chamber of dazzling Gilmorack. The monolithic carved stone doors swung wide, opening the way into the audience of the undermountain king, the august Thane Redmod Buddoken. All the court stood to welcome the honored guests, save the undermountain king himself. The herald called out the names of each guest as he or she passed through the doors and under the arch of lances held aloft by the flanking guard: “The Princess Kristryd Olinsdotter of Dengar and Ulek.” Adorned in her mithril-threaded tabard, Kristryd carried herself with all pomp appropriate to her station. She cast a cold eye across the assembled court.

“Bagbag, Loremaster of Balnorhak.” Kristryd’s trueheaded advisor hobbled along at her side, mumbling to himself and nodding to the notables and chieftans in attendance.

“Bamadar Kadarel of Thunderstrike, Infantryman of the Royal Army of Ulek.” The bombastic Bamadar swaggered into the council chamber as if accustomed to such circumstances and as if he held such pomp and ceremony in little esteem.

“Father Alton Chubb Quickbread of Prinzfeld, priest of the Sylvan Lady.” The halfling cleric of Ehlonna scuttled into the audience hall dressed in clerical finery that ill-fit his diminutive stature. He bowed and nodded awkwardly with every few steps he took.

“Father Furduch of Tulvar, Kron priest of Ulaa.” The elderly gnome, clad in shimmering armor and with a holy mace at his side, tripped along, bowed low, danced a little jig, and winked at the king flirtatiously. The king scowled at the gnome. Father Furduch likewise returned the scowl, frowning up his brow so deeply that his eyebrows collided above his nose.

“Xaxalander Deravnje of Urnst.” A low murmur of disapproval audibly rose from the assembled court as the rogue elf sauntered casually into their midst. The tension inspired by his presence became all the frostier as the herald announced the last name of Kristryd’s party: “Prince Peralay of Celene.” Peralay the hunter

passed under the arch of lances gracefully, nobly, but without ostentatiousness. He bowed before the undermountain king and took his place beside Kristryd. All eyes fixed upon the two elves.

"Is this an embassy? Or a party of adventurers?" the undermountain king sneered sarcastically. "I cannot remember the last time one of olvenkind stood beneath our vaulted stone ceilings. Or was it never?"

Unwelcome Visitors

"These are heroes of that recent battle that took place in the Ulek Pass," Kristryd explained. "I have brought them for the festival and to the undermountain king's halls to regale his majesty with stories of the battle and to encourage noble Gilmorack to press our advantage in this hour of war."

"The undermountain king has no need to have his ears filled with the idle boasts of *olve*, *noniz*, and *hobniz*," Thane Redmod grimaced with the old name of each race. "Nor does he desire to hear their songs. The court will hear the business of the alliance in the morning, and then you will take your honored guests and hurry back to Dengar ... or Enstad if you prefer."

"Perhaps her majesty the queen would enjoy the telling of a few tales for Growfest," Kristryd suggested. "But I have not seen her majesty since our arrival. Fares she well?"

"She fares not well," Redmod replied curtly, "Nor will the sound of olven voices bring health to her bones."

"May Ulaa strengthen her bones," Kristryd offered in sincerity. "Might we be permitted to look in upon her? I have brought healers with me."

"Nay!" Redmod replied even more irritated. "You shall not see the queen. We do not need your healers, nor your minstrels, nor war heroes, nor tellers of tales, nor spies and thieves!" The king fixed his gaze upon the two elves with the words "spies and thieves." He added, "The sooner you have concluded your affairs here and gone your way, the better I like it."

"Surely his majesty means no such insult to his guests," Kristryd returned evenly. She momentarily locked her eyes with the undermountain king, a thing not permitted. Redmod only returned the stare.

"Tell him we shall leave his majesty's fair halls as soon as the business of the alliance is concluded," Peralay interjected in elvish. Neither of the elves understood more than a few words of the old dwur dialect, but they could comprehend the gist of the

conversation easily enough.

“One knows when one is not wanted,” Xaxa added.

Suiting Up for Action

The undermountain king’s servants escorted Kristryd’s party to a wing of the king’s palace reserved for visiting dignitaries. Kristryd had stayed in those lavish rooms on previous visits, but this time it seemed to her that the palace staff went to extra lengths to provide for their needs as if by way of apology for their cold reception before the king. They spread a generous Growfest banquet before the visitors, and waiters stood nearby to offer what service they might. Kristryd dismissed the servants, saying, “What we now covet is our own privacy.” Furduch checked the halls for any listening ears stationed behind the doors while Xaxa searched for spyholes, listening posts, and concealed entrances.

“That was not the undermountain king, not as I know him,” Kristryd complained. “He suffers under deviltry or bewitchment. I could see it in his eyes.”

“Often I have been his guest in times past, and never have I been so abused as this last,” agreed Father Furduch.

Kristryd removed the silver-framed mirror from her bag and gazed into it, as if considering the reflection of her own fine-featured face. “Something is amiss,” she mused.

“Whether bedeviled or bewitched,” Peralay remarked as he hung the sheath of *Gnoll-cleaver* from his magical belt, “We can help him best by slaying this witch of yours. I only want for my hounds. They would surely sniff her out.”

Bagbag shoved aside platters of food to make room on the tabletop. He spread out a map of royal district and its lower delving. He pointed a stubby finger at a chamber far in the depths, near the treasury, and he declared, “Here we find the Hall of Scrolls where I wager we will find our witch. Ever a lover of ancient books, that one. But remember, do not let her speak. If her lips move she is incanting a spell with which to smite us, a charm to snare us, or a lie to deceive us. Do not let her twist the truth.”

The party quickly unpacked the bundles they had brought for their task. Bamadar did so between mouthfuls and draughts of mead, trying to attend to the business at hand without neglecting the feast spread on the table. The party donned armor, hooded cloaks, weapons, and magical items. Bagbag cast a spell of powerful illusion upon the two elves and the halfling to make them appear to all beholding eyes as if they were guardsmen of Gilmorack such as

commonly patrolled the halls. Alton invoked blessings of Ehlonna on the party and spoke powerful wards of protection over them, and Furduch offered his own potent versions of the same. Then leaving most of the food untouched, they made their way out into the vaulted streets of Gilmoreack.

The Hall of Scrolls

At that late hour, torches sputtered out and lamps burned dim. Most dwarves were home at meal for the first night of the festival. Those they did encounter gave the party not a second glance. Kristryd and Bagbag were familiar faces in those halls. The gnomes kept their own quarter of the city, and many could be seen in the streets coming and going at any hour. As for the elves and the halfling, they magically appeared to be a common escort of guards, trailing along behind three dignitaries. No one challenged them, not until they arrived at the entrance to the Hall of Scrolls. Here they found the way blocked by two guardsmen.

“The library is forbidden except by permission of the undermountain king,” the first of the guards said.

Father Furduch, who spoke the dwarven tongue, commanded the guards by the hand of Ulaa, “Stand aside! Open wide!” The guards stood aside without a hesitation and swung the doors wide.

Kristryd stepped first into the brightly lit library hall, a bell-shaped chamber, encircled by three tiers of balconies connected by two stairways which wrapped about the interior of the hall. Alcoves and niches honeycombed the walls. Each one housed a sealed stone jar, and every jar contained a scroll or codex of great value: histories, sagas, songs, genealogies, deeds, titles, covenants, spells, and the lore of other lands. Great chandeliers lit with magical undying light spells illumined the room. Their light gleamed on furnishings of polished stone tables and ornately carved chairs. Elegant carvings and statuary adorned the walls; ornate scrollwork laced about the balconies rails. Heavy swag festoons hanging from the balconies spoke to the gaudy tastes of dwarven royalty.

No one was in the hall except a few old scholars, pouring over piles of texts strewn on a stone table, and one comely dwarfess in a decorated craftsman’s apron who looked down on them from a balcony on an upper tier. The scholars paid them no attention, but the dwarfess introduced herself in hissing tones, “I am the keeper of the Hall of the Scrolls. Do you come by the word of the Thane Redmod?”

“We come by the word of Ulaa, who binds you, Banished

One!” Father Furduch said unexpectedly, producing his flashing holy symbol. The dwarfess shrieked and transformed before their eyes into a nightmarish visage of a six-armed naga-like woman whose legs converged into the body of an enormous, twisting serpent. In each of her hands she held a deadly weapon. At the same moment, the three old scholars jerked upright and took shape as similar horrors. They looked like lossels with tusked maws, bloated bellies, banded legs, long arms, and shaggy hair. The librarian lurched over the edge of balcony, half leaping, half diving to the floor, breaking her fall with a levitation spell.

The light in the room extinguished into darkness. Kristryd felt herself hurtled through air and slammed against a wall. Stone jars toppled down onto her. She heard shouts and demonic screams, but she could see nothing in the darkness.

Picking herself up from beneath the fallen stone jars, Kristryd unsheathed her dagger and tried to make sense of the sound of commotion around her. “We should have brought a holy knight!” she exclaimed.

“Should have brought an army of holy knights!” Bamadar’s voice agreed from near at hand. A tidal wave of numbing terror washed through the room. Kristryd froze paralyzed numb with fear; her only thought to flee. As suddenly as it had come, the terror lifted, and with it, the darkness. Light returned to the room, revealing a scene of chaos. The six-armed serpent-woman radiated an aura of such revulsion that Kristryd felt her stomach lurch. A retching stench hung in the air and assaulted her nostrils. She tasted excrement on her palate.

A Desperate Fight

Alton the halfling priest stood atop one of the polished stone tables, holding his holy symbol aloft, uttering a prayer of adjuration which seemed to wrack the fiends with pain. Bagbag’s illusions no longer disguised the two elves. Peralay had already unsheathed *Gnoll-Cleaver* and leapt to the attack between the slashing blows and cutting swings of the librarian’s six-blades. Bagbag raised an unseen magical shield to defend from spells and attacks. Small winged fiends, previously concealed in alcoves above, leaped from the balconies to join the fight. The two unsuspecting guards posted outside the hall rushed in, swords unsheathed and lances in hand, to join the confusion. When they saw the monsters, they shouted bravely and ran forward, striking sturdy blows against ape-like demons. “Only an enchanted edge will bite this one’s

flesh!” Bamadar warned over his shoulder as he joined Peralay in the battle with the six-armed fiend.

Blasts of flame and magical fire scorched through the room as spellcasters and tenar’ri exchanged their strikes. Another wave of fear swept through Kristryd. The two dwarven guardsmen fell back, as if struck by an unseen blow. The small winged fiends swooped and smote at their prone forms with cackles of glee.

Xaxalander’s enchanted blades struck at the librarian from behind, and the clutch of the paralyzing fear broke again. Kristryd ran into the fight, letting her own short sword take its fill of tenar’ri flesh. Black ichor stained the blade. Heavy stone tables, of such immense weight that a half dozen dwarves would have struggled to move them, abruptly flipped up into the air of their own accord and smashed one into another, cracking and shattering. Stone jars hurtled from the walls like missiles, smashing down on the party. The librarian’s serpent tale wrapped around Xaxalander and began to squeeze the life out of the elf. The relentless slashes of *Gnoll-Cleaver* continued, severing an arm, and then a second arm. Black ichor splurched out from the wounds. It took three strokes of Bamadar’s axe to free Xaxa from the coiling tail. On the third blow, he completely severed it from the female torso. Ichor poured from the flailing snake’s tail. As the creature’s torso fell free, she dropped her weapons, using her hands to break her forward fall. *Gnoll-Cleaver* came down in one clean stroke and cleaved her head off. Foul and stinking gore puked out of the wounds. The remaining scholars winked out of sight, vanishing into thin air, and the cackling of the small flying fiends ceased as well. The twitching parts of the librarian dissolved into black goo and then faded from sight. The party found themselves alone in the Hall of Scrolls.

“I did not expect a reception of that caliber,” Bagbag muttered as he checked himself for injuries.

“When Onselvon sent us on this quest,” Xaxa complained, “He neglected to mention anything about tenar’ri.”

All members of the party still stood and still breathed, some with broken bones and bleeding wounds. As for the demons, even their foul odor dissipated. Alton turned his attention at once to the art of healing, using the powerful divine gifts of Ehlonna to repair shattered bones, close jagged wounds, and mend torn flesh. Only the two sentries could not be helped; they had both been savaged by the flying imps.

Bamadar examined the curved and cruel blades the librarian had been wielding. Unlike the creature itself, the blades remained.

“Those are evil weapons, heavily cursed, and they radiate evil,” Alton warned. “Take a care not to touch them.”

“But finely forged and exquisitely crafted nonetheless. These are dwarven-made or I’ll cut my beard off!” Bamadar exclaimed.

Chapter 19

THE CAGING OF GRETYLL

“SEARCH THE HALL for secret doors,” Bagbag instructed. “And beware traps, wardings, runes, and magical symbols.” While the others recovered their strength and their wits, Xaxalander conducted the search. His efforts quickly revealed a cleverly concealed door set behind a shelf of ancient tomes. Bagbag examined the entrance and found a large glyph of warding clearly displayed, but also a hidden line of script above the lintel. “These glyphs are meant to keep out the fiends, not us. But the door is also warded with hidden runes,” he said. “Unless one knows the password, opening the door will release some spell to strike us.”

“Then undo the enchantment,” Kristryd said resolutely. “For we must assuredly open this door.”

Bagbag opened his own book of spells and rifled through it until he had found a *dweomer* he considered sufficient to the task, then he set about it. The entire affair took far too long, and with every passing moment, Kristryd expected guards to burst in on the Hall of Scrolls or fresh fiends to appear. When at last the work was complete, Bagbag admitted, “I have done my best. The rest remains in the hands of the gods.”

“So be it,” said Alton the halfling. He invoked the protection of Ehlonna while Father Furduch called upon Ulaa’s grace. Bamadar stepped forward, heedless of the danger, and pushed the portal open. Kristryd flinched involuntarily, expecting a fireball or some withering spell, but Bagbag’s measure availed. The line of script above the lintel faded. Bamadar called for light, and Bagbag spoke a cantrip to ignite the lamps inside the room. “She is not here,” Bamadar announced. “Unless she be invisible.” The thought made Kristryd shudder. They looked around a small study strewn with magical accoutrements. Books, potions, magical trinkets, crystal balls, scrolls, charts, diagrams, and various arcane clutter lay in heaps. A summoning circle at the center of the room revealed the type of work ordinarily performed in that study.

“Touch nothing, take nothing. A sickness on this pilfer, a curse

upon this filth," Father Furduch warned. Bagbag's eyes fixed upon a single brassbound codex marked with strange symbols and glyphs. "Now that will be a potent book!" he muttered. "That's no dwarven magic; that's a summoner's guide."

"And what is this?" Xaxalander asked, holding aloft a wondrously made brass birdcage which contained a tiny three-inch-tall living dwarf, shouting silently for release.

"Weren't we just told not to touch anything you damned fool?" Bamadar scolded.

"By the gods," Kristryd exclaimed. "That is the undermountain king in the cage." Bagbag produced a magnifying lens and looked closely at the urgently gesturing, tiny dwarf locked inside. "So it is," he affirmed. "This is Thane Redmod Buddoken or I'm a halfwit."

"We must release him!" Kristryd demanded. "Release him at once."

But that proved to be a difficulty. The door of the cage could not be opened, the bars could not be bent, and no magic seemed sufficient to unfasten the lock. "The secret to opening the cage will be found somewhere in these books," Bagbag said, looking around at the heaps.

"Alas! That could take hours, days, to find!" Kristryd objected.

"Yes, but I expect the matter is explained in this devilshine tome," the wizard said, gesturing to the cursed summoner's books with the brass bindings. Kristryd nodded her assent.

The Brassbound Book

Bagbag unfastened the brass clasp that bound the book and opened the tome. A hairless demon with a pointed skull and ears turned backwards leapt up from the opened pages, taking full form in a long-limbed crouch overtop the brassbound book. "Here's a kiss from Tasha," the Rutterkin snarled, and then it struck the dwarf a terrific blow, knocking the spectacles from his face and sending the old wizard tumbling across the room. His body crashed into the wall and blood ran from a broken nose. Before the Rutterkin could leap away, Peralay skewered the unclean creature with one quick thrust of *Gnoll-Cleaver*. Bamadar leapt up onto a stool and swung a wide arc with his axe, severing the abomination's pointed head from its shoulders. Black ichor belched out from the wound, but the Rutterkin moved equally quick. The headless corpse pulled itself free from *Gnoll-Cleaver* and leapt through the air with long arms extended, catching the tumbling head before it hit the floor. Then the guardian vanished

from sight.

"We need to be more careful," Bagbag murmured groggily as he sat up. He returned his spectacles to his face and staggered back over to the open book.

"Let me help you," Xaxa offered.

"Unless you can read the magical scripts too, you can be of no help, no matter how keen the eyes of the elves," Bagbag refused. While the old wizard studied the vile tome, the priests prayed and invoked the gods for protection. It took him more than an hour, but at last the trueheaded old loremaster's eyes lit upon a page titled "Prison of Zagig." He carefully deciphered the magical writings, wrote out a copy of the page, and then committed the spells and command words to memory. "It is a simple matter," he exclaimed closing the book and latching its clasp. "Bring me the cage!"

Xaxalander set the brass cage down atop the closed tome. Bagbag spoke a command word. A door in the cage popped opened and the tiny dwarf vanished. In the same instant, the undermountain king appeared, full size and in the flesh, amid his liberators.

"Blessed be Ulaa!" the king said. "Blessed be Moradin who hears the prayer of the prisoner and releases the one bound in darkness."

"How long your Majesty?" Kristryd asked.

The undermountain king shook his head, "I know not. Only that the hag trapped me in her cage on the first night of Richfest in the last year of the century."

"More than a year and a half, Your Majesty," Kristryd did the math. "Today is the first of Growfest in the year 501 of the common reckoning. Meantime some doppelganger in your guise sits upon your throne and commands your kingdom."

"That will be the old hag," the undermountain king said. "She deceived me, fool that I am, with promises of power and strength. Come with me to the smithies, and I will reveal her deviltry."

By then the hour had grown late indeed. The party gathered themselves and prepared to leave. Bagbag opened his pack and dropped the brassbound book inside and the brass cage as well. "Before we leave this cursed place, we must take away her power of summoning, lest she bring all the powers of the Hells and the Abyss down upon us," he explained.

"I've done my part to disarm her as well," Xaxalander laughed, shaking a canvas bag bulging with magical items, potions, and valuable looking things he had pilfered during their stay in the witch's study.

The Holy Anvil

In haste Thane Redmod Buddoken led the party of strange guests through the winding halls and broad streets of Gilmorack, a naked broadsword in his hands. No longer did the spell of disguise cloak the elves or the halfling priest; they had no such need, for all who saw the king prostrated themselves before him. Fury burned on his face; his subjects shrank back before his flashing gaze. As sentries, soldiers, and guards saluted their king, he commanded them, "Fall in behind me."

The undermountain king's growing procession followed after him into the lower halls. They descended by the great central stairs into the Wide Ways and then to the Armor Smithy where the furnaces burned hot and hammers fell in ceaseless rhythms on a hundred anvils. All the air smelled of coal fires and the acrid taste of molten metals. The king came to a certain furnace that seemed stoked to full heat, the metal door glowing red, but the king laid bare hands on the metal casting, swung open the grated iron door, stepped into the flames and commanded, "Follow me!" Kristryd thought the flames should surely consume him, but he stepped through untouched. Bamadar plunged after the king, calling back to the others over his shoulder, "Not but an eye-biting illusion!"

The rest of the axes and worthy dwarves-at-arms followed after, as did the remainder of Kristryd's party. They stepped into a Grand Smithy, the king's own secret chamber, and there before them they beheld two muscled and shirtless dwarven smiths laboring with hammers over a wondrous anvil. All about the room stood precariously placed stacks of arms and armor, piles of spears, axes, swords, hammers, and maces. Here too were cruel jagged scimitars and curving blades such as the orcs preferred and such as the six-armed tenar'ri had been wielding—and no wonder about that, for overseeing all the work stood a towering, glowering beast with the torso of an ape, the legs of a boar, and a fang-laden face. Small, feathered wings extended from behind his hunching back, fanning the air.

The creature sprang to attention as the king entered. An expression of confusion and fear twisted the demonic features. Then he saw the soldiers, sniffed at the air, and snarled. The two craftsmen laboring over the anvil stopped their work and looked dully toward their king. "Slay them!" the tenar'ri lord ordered, his voice grinding gravel. He clapped his mighty paws, and, with a great clatter and clang, swords and spears and axes and hammers

around the room hurled themselves at the king and his men. Cruel and crooked blades sliced through the air and swished about as if swung by unseen hands. They pierced the undermountain king as he threw himself against the monster, sinking his magically enchanted broadsword into the place where the creature's heart should have been. Peralay flanked the creature, using *Gnoll-Cleaver* to hack at its bulging arms. The tenar'ri crushed the undermountain king in his enormous paws, lifted him to his gaping maw, and bit at his shoulder. The monster gave the king's body a shake as if he shook a child's doll of rags. Wretched ooze gushed from the wound in the monster's chest. An agruwing wave of fear and revulsion filled the room, and the lesser soldiers shrank back. Alton and Furduch stepped forward with their holy symbols raised aloft and words of adjuration and banishment on their lips. Xaxalander leapt over the heads of the dwarves and landed atop the enormous anvil. From that position, he dodged and warded off flying swords, spinning axes, and hurtling spears. Some of these he caught in the air and hurtled back at the fiend. The axe of brave Bamadar cut through one ugly boar's leg, severing it at the knee and unbalancing the top-heavy monster. With his arms wind-milling and wings beating to regain his balance, the monster dropped the undermountain king to the floor. From atop the anvil, Xaxa kicked at the beast's chest, toppling the unbalanced fiend backwards. Striding up onto the prone form, Peralay let *Gnoll-Cleaver* finish the work. The demon seemed to sink away into the floor. All the weapons that, until that moment, still hurtled about in the air, fell with a noisy clatter. The two dwarven smiths also dropped their hammers and sat down on the floor, forlorn expressions on their faces.

"The undermountain king is sorely hurt!" Kristryd shouted. Alton hurried to the fallen king's side and administered what divine healing he could bring forth in the name of his gods, but the full extent of such injuries went beyond even his considerable ability to rectify.

"How comes this sacred relic to Gilmorack?" Bamadar asked, pointing to the great anvil upon which Xaxa still stood. There was no mistaking it. The old lettering of Balnorhak, the images of Moradin's Forge, the immense size ...

"Beyond all hope! 'Tis the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains, stolen from Dengar, here in the halls of Gilmorack!" Bagbag exclaimed.

"Forgive me," the wounded king wheezed against his wounds. "With this gift, she deceived me most bitterly. I have paid the price

for folly and greed.”

The Bird Cage

The injured king, Thane Redmod Buddoken, thirteenth undermountain king of Gilmorack, ordered the sentries to open the door to his private chambers. “But Your Majesty, how did you come to stand outside these doors? None have seen you leave your apartments all this gladsome festive night.”

“Unlock them!” the king demanded. He had not the strength to stand alone. Two stout dwarves supported him on either side. The guards unlocked the doors to his apartment. The king’s constabularies poured in through the open door. From inside the chambers, Kristryd heard the false undermountain king’s voice shouting in surprise, “Treason! Treason! Treachery!”

A few moments later, the constabularies emerged with the false undermountain king bound in chains, cursing and spitting. The servants of the court gathered around to see this spectacle as Thane Redmod Buddoken faced off with Thane Redmod Buddoken.

“How have you escaped your little bronze cage?” the false undermountain king hissed in venomous tones.

“Gag her! I told you not to let a witch speak!” Bagbag stepped forward through the press of bodies. A gag went over the false king’s mouth.

“Were you referring to this little curiosity?” Bagbag asked. He held the bronze birdcage aloft; its door already hung open. The eyes of false King Redmod grew wide indeed as Bagbag spoke a series of arcane words and commands, concluding with the naming: “Gretyll Athama Dorisdotter of Balnorhak!” In that moment, the false king Redmod vanished, the cage snapped shut, and inside the cage, a little three-inch version of old Gretyll appeared, still bound and gagged. Bagbag presented the cage to the true undermountain king with the instructions, “Keep it safe. Do not let it fall into the wrong hands. Only I know the command words to open the cage.”

Gretyll’s Mischief

Thane Redmod Buddoken did not die of his wounds, but neither did he recover his strength. The combined healing power of Alton’s prayers, Father Furduch’s invocations, and the care of all the priests and healers of Gilmorack only sufficed to keep the king alive. As the truth of Gretyll’s treachery became known, his strength waned.

The monstrous extent of the witch’s atrocities quickly came

to light. After she had imprisoned the undermountain king in the brass cage, she transformed herself into his guise to deceive the court of Gilmorack. Using the devilshine book, she summoned fiends to assist her and to carry out her plots. She employed magic, enchantments, poisons, diabolical murders, and a series of unlikely accidents to slay the undermountain king's family and many noble dwarves of the kingdom. She slew the queen, all the king's sons, and all the heirs to the royal houses of Gilmorack. Those who occupied preeminent positions of power she replaced with fiends and imposters like herself. Meantime she used the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains to forge cursed weapons bespelled in such a way that the warrior wielding one of the foul creations fell under her enchantment and carried out her bidding in a battle. "With weapons such as these she intended to control the dwarven hosts and goblinkind both," Bagbag observed.

When Thane Redmod Buddoken learned that the Shield of the Red Medusa had been crafted in his own smithy, and many foul and cursed weapons too, his heart lost the will to beat. When he learned how Gretyll had deceived him so utterly with her honeyed promises, his soul despaired of life. Moreover, word of these things reached faraway Dengar. The undermountain king Thane Evrast mustered his army and marched in full haste upon Gilmorack to take back the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains. The dwarves of Dengar clashed with the dwarves of Gilmorack, and many lost their lives in the tunnels of the Low Road. The news of the battle smote Thane Redmod sorely. For shame he felt over his collusion with Gretyll in the theft of the anvil, the king renounced his crown and threw himself upon his own sword. They buried him on the eighteenth day of Flocktime in the tomb of his fathers, and they lamented over him in a manner befitting the kings of Gilmorack, but necessity cut the days of mourning short.

Lady of Gilmorack

On the fourth day of Wealsun, the court summoned Kristryd to the high-arched council chamber. She donned her mithril tabard and entered through those heavy doors. All stood to salute her; not one remained seated. Old Bagbag stood beside the council of clan chieftans, advising them as they conferred.

The eldest of the dwarves present spoke on behalf of the chieftains: "Now our clans are in turmoil and confusion. The heads of our royal houses are all slain or missing, and the sacred blood of House Buddoken has been poured out on the stones. Their light has

gone out from the world. Yet fiends still lurk within these walls and among the halls of Gilmorack, and some of our own once-trusted lords remain under their sway. None know who to trust or where to turn, and there is no one who can take charge over the whole of us.

“Meantime, an army from your own kingdom marches against Gilmorack, and your husband’s father, Thane Evrast the undermountain king of Dengar, comes to lay siege to this ancient delving. He strikes us in the hour of our greatest weakness and need. He has the strength, the numbers, and the rightness to do so, for we have sinned against him and all his house, and we are all discomfited before him.”

“What would you have me do?” Kristryd asked. “There is little I can say to stay his wrath.”

“Your Highness, if we have found favor in your eyes, and you would have mercy upon our ancient kingdom, wear upon your fair head this crown, the crown of Gilmorack, and steward over our throne until this crisis has passed and we have crowned a new king under the mountain. We are certain that your father-in-law will not lay siege to his daughter.” With these words, the elders brought forward the crown of Thane Buddoken. All those assembled gasped, and even the royal herald sank suddenly to the floor as if his knees had failed him.

A disapproving murmur rose among the dwur-wives who waited behind the rail. One Dame Thresstone, a prominent dwarfess of standing in Gilmorack, opened her mouth as if to speak, but she remembered her station and stayed quiet. Kristryd felt the lance of her gaze nonetheless.

“This is not the way of our people,” Kristryd objected. “A dwarfess does not rule.”

“Your Highness,” the elder dwarf stammered, “You are no dwur-wife. You are Kristryd Olinsdotter, our savior and our redeemer, the hammer of our gods!”

So they mean to make a hostage of me by placing me on the throne, she realized. A cautious cheer arose in the room, and some of those assembled began to chant her name. Bagbag tapped his staff on the stone floor and motioned toward the empty throne of the undermountain king. *Am I dreaming under the Moonarch again?* Kristryd asked herself. *Is this not the very thing I desired?* Her heart hammered hard within her chest, and she blushed furiously. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself tall and regal, beautiful and terrible, like Yolande. Moving in a dream, she seated herself on the throne of the undermountain king. They placed the

crown upon her head and sounded the horn.

“Long live the Lady of Gilmorack!” they shouted.

Chapter 20

THE UNDERMOUNTAIN QUEEN

SIEGE! THE MAIN host of Dengar, more than fifteen hundred axes, marched up through the Low Road, driving the soldiers of Gilmorack back before them. They pitched camps outside the Drake Gate and began to prepare for siege. A second force moved swiftly overland by way of the Great Western Road, crossing Veluna at Asnath and Kempton. Concealing their true motives, they told the Velunese they merely moved troops against the goblins, and they invoked the treaties of the alliance which Kristryd herself had negotiated. In this way, Dengar laid siege to Gilmorack from above and below, cutting off that ancient kingdom from all hope of escape or rescue.

The newly enthroned Thane Kristryd Olinsdotter made no attempt to break the siege or escape the noose. She only ordered the gates sealed. When the armies of Dengar converged, she sent emissaries out to parley with the undermountain king and to escort him back to the halls of Gilmorack under assurances and pledges.

“My daughter. You have done well. You have united our people,” Thane Evrast declared when Kristryd received him in the vaulted hall. “Not so long ago, you stood before me and Thane Redmod Buddoken in this same chamber, but today, I stand before you.” He bowed before her.

Likewise, Kristryd stood up from the throne and awkwardly bowed before her father-in-law in the manner of the dwurwives. “I have acted according to the will of the gods and done what is best for our people,” she said. “I did not come to Gilmorack seeking any crown except the head of this wicked witch.” Kristryd motioned to the bronze birdcage which hung from a hook set in the wall beside her throne.

“Will you defy your own father? Will you wage war on your own people?”

“Will you wage war on your own daughter? We have no stomach to fight our kinsmen nor to make war upon allies.” Kristryd took a step closer to him, squaring off eye to eye. “Should we

be punished for the actions of a miserable witch? The house of Buddoken has suffered sufficiently for their crimes! Every last one of that hoary dynasty now sits in the halls of Dumathoin.”

“Then surrender Gilmorack to me,” Thane Redmod hissed through clenched teeth.

“I cannot, and I need not. We have stores laid up to outlast your siege, and you shall not take these gates by force. If you persist against me, you will have all the Uleks to fight as well the goblins, and Celene will come too.”

“Then I name you a traitor.”

“Traitor! Have I betrayed my father, the Prince Corond Olinstaad? Have I betrayed you, your majesty? Or my husband who rests beneath the hallowed stones of your halls? Have I betrayed my sons who remain in your safekeeping? Have I betrayed our allies, those nations sworn to stand against the sons of Gruumsh and purge our Everlasting Possession of goblinkind? How then am I named traitor?”

“What of the Anvil, our sacred heritage and the foundation of Dengar?” Thane Evrast cut to chase. The fingers of his right hand closed around the hilt of a knife tucked in his belt.

“I swear by Berronar’s Bosom, the anvil shall be returned to its place,” Kristryd declared, but then she lowered her eyes in the submissive manner of a dwurwife and drew nearer yet to the king, taking him by the hand, and leading him to a seat beside her own throne. When she had settled beside him she spoke confidentially, in soft tones intended only for his ears, “I beg you to suffer me some time father. I must yet persuade the lords of Gilmorack of the matter, and we must first forge new weapons upon that anvil with new spells woven into the steel. We dare not delay. There remains yet one more witch. Until she has been defeated, we fight demons and fiends rather than euroz and jebli. Berronar and Ulla help us! Moradin and Clangeddin! Give me some time to rebuild this people and redeem that sacred anvil of all the blasphemies created upon it. Then we will together chase the horde out from their holes like a boy smokes out a rabbit.”

“Blessed be Ulaa, and blessed be Moradin,” Thane Evrast snapped unhappily. “If the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains has not been returned to me, as you have sworn, before the end of this very year, I shall surely march against you again and make war, even against you, my daughter! Forget not that your three sons remain in Dengar as a surety against your oath.”

“My sons are your own grandsons,” Kristryd reminded him.

The Slander of Dame Thresstone

Not everyone in Gilmorack esteemed the new monarch—indeed, most found no pleasure in the appointment. Kristryd Olinsdotter took power, they said, by exploiting a moment of weakness. Though she was but a steward, her ascension to the throne overturned centuries of tradition and the claims and aspirations of many long-standing dynasties. No sooner had she seated herself upon that stone chair than she earned the contempt of the old families. Among these, none stirred the animosity more than Dame Thresstone, the widowed wife of Lord Bofur Thresstone.

Until the coming of Gretyll and her fiends, Lord Bofur Thresstone took a chair among the most prestigious seats of the kingdom, but like other elders of Gilmorack, he did not survive the reign of the false undermountain king. He was slain with the others, his death made to look like an accident, but his wife remained after him in possession of his estates. No sooner did Kristryd receive the crown of Gilmorack upon her black curls than Dame Thresstone appeared before her, obsequiously fawning, flattering, and begging her favor. Behind Kristryd's back, the old blob-tale whispered in every ear that would listen, "How have we fallen so low? What have we done but passed the throne of our fathers from one witch into the hands of another?"

Many heads nodded. The other noble dwurwives of Gilmorack readily agreed. They spat upon the stones whenever Kristryd's name was mentioned, and they said, "She is not my queen! Who is this foreign fiendess who has been set over us? She knows not her place and oversteps all bounds."

Then Dame Thresstone would say to her circles of blob-tales, "Think you nothing of the fact that she keeps that witch Gretyll ever by her side in a magical cage? Is that not the work of a witch?"

They said, "Half dozen of one; six of another! It takes a witch to cage a witch."

Dame Thresstone added to those words, "Did I hear it said that she is a secret friend of that drossel, Yolande the fey witch, our old enemy? She even dragged elves from that daggel-tail's kingdom into our vaulted halls!"

They said, "Observe how a fey look stamps the very the lines of her face! Who can say if she is really a dwarf at all?"

All the while, Dame Thresstone came before Kristryd under false pretense, lickspigotting and feigning friendship, alliance, and confidence. She spoke warnings in Kristryd's ear, "Others speak ill

of thee my queen. So-and-so speaks abusively of thee, but I, for my part, always defend thee against their baseless charges.”

Politics & Policies

Kristryd's policies won no friends among the nobility. Without political consideration, she pressed her authority and called upon every citizen of Gilmorack to contribute to the war effort. She put a stop to other programs and turned all available hands and every resource to preparation for the purge. She spent down the treasuries laying up supplies and hiring gnome mercenaries. She put the entire delving on strict rationing and began laying up food supplies for the army. Both males and females reported for regular training, and everyone was fitted with arms and armor and expected to become proficient in their use. Day and night the anvils rang with forging of new weapons and armor. They shattered those weapons tainted with Gretyll's devilshine and the curse of demons, melted them down, and reforged them. Craftsman and smiths worked continuously at the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains, smithing exceptional arms, each one laden with enchantments, charms, and spells to increase their strength, sharpen their edge, and better wound their foes.

“We will not be used. We will not be pawns in anyone's game,” she told her people, “Not by witches, demons, goblins, or fiends. Not by elves and not by men. We will teach them all with which end of the spear we thrust!”

Her wise and loyal advisor, Bagbag of Balnorhak, cautioned her, “You make enemies of the noblemen and aristocrats. You refuse their bribes, and you offer them no exemptions. Even those who at first supported you resent the impositions of a foreigner.”

“They resent the rule of a dwarfess. They wait to rejoice over my tragic fall. But my ears are long past filled with murmuring. I need not hear the same from you. Give me your wise counsel, not your noodling.”

“Your majesty knows that I am always and only concerned for her wellbeing,” trueheaded Bagbag assured with a bow. She had few other friends she could trust. Those in whom she would have liked to confide fell under the influence of the intrigues of court and the poisons of politics. *Would that I might have remained a bosom-friend to Yolande. Surely she needed a trusted ear as much as I do.* Often she searched the silver-framed mirror for the face of her friend, but the Fey Queen's wards kept such simple magics at bay.

Friends & Allies

From among those few other friends she could trust, Kristryd appointed the impetuous and handsome Bamadar to the position of field-commander and captain over her personal guard. She rebuffed his amorous advances. "I am no longer a young dwarfess with her first whiskers, nor do I grow younger," she scolded. "I am too old to play at poop-noddy. I need a dwarf-at-arms I can trust."

She beseeched her other suitor, Alton Quickbread, to remain with her in Gilmorack to serve as a healer and friend, but he declined. "Come with me if you fancy lazy mornings of fresh muffins, tipsycakes, and black tea. If, instead, you have decided to break my heart, I now return to my own people," he said forlornly. "I have no delight in tunnels and caverns, regardless of their grandeur. Nor do I care much for demons, devils, and witches."

Likewise, Peralay and Xaxalander Deravnys returned to Celene loaded with handsome rewards from the undermountain queen and lavish gifts to bear back to their queen.

The old gnomish priest, Father Furduch, agreed to remain for a spell to serve as first laird over the gnomes of Gilmorack. Kristryd consulted him often. She cherished his wisdom almost as much as the counsel of trueheaded Bagbag, and she needed his assistance to drive out what fiends remained prowling the delving.

All the while, she worked her diplomatic magic to prepare the allies for a great push. "We need more than soldiers," she told the war council, "We need secure supply lines, commitments of food, grain, and all necessities, and promises of coordination and cooperation." She could no longer make the necessary embassies herself as she once did on the back of the great steed Emolasmairim. Instead she sent out gnomish ambassadors carrying letters composed in her own hand, written in magical gnome's ink which appeared visible only for the addressee. The letters explained her intentions, detailed her objectives, and petitioned for commitments of support in the coming campaigns. Through these efforts, she secured the support of faraway Irongate where her father's kinfolk dwelt. To Irongate she promised splendid Lortmil stones and better access to her father's ports in Gyrax. In return, the dwarves of Irongate promised Kristryd one-thousand elite and doughty soldiers to be placed under the direct command of her father, Prince Olinstaad Corond.

Bagbag reviewed all these dealings. "You have done all things as I would have advised," he congratulated her. "The student has

become the teacher. You show more skill in the designs of war than many a general who has taken the field in times gone past.”

“Only by your wise counsel,” she replied. “But for today, I only need one thing of you. Find old Hedvyg, the third sister. Elraeliel told me that Hedvyg hides in Balnorhak. That remains a riddle for us to puzzle upon.”

“Would that Balnorhak yet remained,” Bagbag sighed. “We have already sent letters to your father, the Prince Corond. By now his agents search the Principality.”

Durgeddin the Black

A blare of trumpeting fanfare called those in attendance to attention. “Durgeddin the Black, Smith of Balnorhak, Lord of Glitterhame and Thane of Khundrakar!” the herald announced. The carved stone doors swung open to reveal an elderly dwarven lord of noble bearing, broad-shouldered and strong of limb. His grey-streaked beard glittered with jewels and gold. Gemstones studded his leather jerkin. Rings glittered on every finger. At his side hung a great craftsman’s hammer.

Everyone in the audience hall stood to their feet, even the undermountain queen. Durgeddin bowed politely, his long beard sweeping the floor. Kristryd returned the bow, as did all those present.

“Your Majesty,” the old dwarf said, “I have come to your summons.”

Kristryd’s eyes narrowed just slightly. Old Bagbag hastened to explain, “Your majesty. I took the liberty.”

Kristryd nodded. “Thane Durgeddin, you are most welcome in these halls. Had I known of your journey, I would have sent an escort to receive you in royal fashion.”

“As soon I received your letter, I marched out with a dozen of my strongest,” the noble dwarf said. “Our journey from has been long indeed, and we have tales to tell of the perils through which we passed. Plenty of orcish blood along the road, but blessed be Moradin and blessed be Berronar, we have arrived.”

“We shall hear those tales and more in the feasting hall this very day!” Bagbag exclaimed. Unable to further suppress his enthusiasm, the warlock hobbled across the hall to welcome the noble dwarf. Kristryd saw tears moisten the cheeks of her old friend as he embraced and kissed the newcomer.

“Old friends, long missed? Dwur lords exchange a kiss?” asked Father Furduch at Kristryd’s side.

"Indeed. Very old friends," she replied softly.

Father Furduch and all the court of Gilmorack heard the tale of Durgeddin the Smith that night in Kristryd's feasting hall. The noble smith and his companions crowded around the queen's table. If they expected a lavish banquet, the Khundrakar dwarves were disappointed. Kristryd imposed the same austerity and rationing on her own table that she imposed upon the other houses of Gilmorack. Nevertheless, she fed them well. Hanseath smiled on the throng. After a few rounds of merry-go-down, the tale-telling began.

"When I was still a young dwarf in my father's house," Bagbag said, "This Durgeddin was the greatest smith of Balnorhak. Before Evrast and before the people of Dengar stole away the anvil, his father's father beat out fine treasures upon that heirloom. But Durgeddin surpassed them all. In those days, none of us ever saw him unless covered with soot from the fires of his forges. Durgeddin the Black!"

"Thanks to me, the term 'blacksmith' was first coined!" Durgeddin interrupted jovially. None laughed louder than brash young Bamadar. Durgeddin continued in a solemn tone, "When those coal diggers stole the anvil away from Balnorhak, my grandfather felt as if someone had stolen away his bride. He would have followed the anvil to Dengar if not for loyalty."

"Such is the fidelity of our folk!" Bagbag put in. "But where was the loyalty of Dengar?"

Durgeddin nodded. His piercing eyes met Kristryd's implacable gaze for a lingering moment before he continued. "As the strength of Balnorhak faded, we could no longer defend our own outlying halls. Orcs took clan Silverstone and slew us, including the females and children. Only those fortunate to be absent at the time survived. I was one of those."

"And I too," Bagbag sighed. "I served in the court of Thane Dori. Durgeddin as well, tending the king's forge."

"I lost a wife, a son and a daughter," Durgeddin spat bitterly. "I took a solemn oath on the names of our father and mother at the forge to make unrelenting war."

"Many of us have sworn like oaths of late," Kristryd said.

"The last undermountain king of Balnorhak died," Bagbag continued the tale, addressing his words directly to Kristryd. "Your father, the Prince Olinstaad Corond, inherited the remains of our crumbled kingdom. Old Balnorhak became Ulek of today. Your father also inherited the court and all Dori's officials. Durgeddin here became master smith of Ulek. I became advisor and court

magician to your father.”

The Magicians of Khundrakar

“These things were already known to us,” Kristryd said. “I would hear the tale of how this Durgeddin departed from my father’s court.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Durgeddin shrugged. “Keoland appointed your father over the Poor March. The prince grated us rights to open new mines in the Drachensgrabs. I led the scragglings of Silverstone to Glitterhame beneath Stone Tooth, north of Blaisingdell. I dug Khundrakar where I plot my vengeance against the *euroz* and *jebli*.”

“Before laying in place the first stones of the stronghold, we carved out twenty-three sepulchers beneath the mountain, one for each of the dwarven noblemen of Clan Silverstone.”

“My own tomb is among them, waiting to receive my bones,” Bagbag added, shaking his head thoughtfully. “Now I am here, in the north, and all my books are there, in the south.”

“Arundil has his nose in them,” Durgeddin laughed.

Bagbag hmped and snorted unhappily. “We learned spell-binding together, but he followed gnomish spells: walking tea pots, cups, and saucers, brooms that sweep the floor themselves, shovels that dig with no one holding them, that sort of thing. Childish!”

“There’s more to it than that,” Durgeddin boasted between mouthfuls. “Bagbag, Arundil, and Old Hedvyg built a fearsome fiery furnace. The greatest forge ever created, hotter than the fires of all the hells, and it smelts steel with the alloy of vengeance.”

At the mention of witch’s name, Kristryd sat up straight. All the mirth drained from her countenance. “Where is Hedvyg today?”

“We seek her most urgently,” Bagbag told Durgeddin. “She and her sisters betrayed us all.”

Durgeddin frowned at this news and shook his head in puzzlement. “She remained with us at Khundrakar in the early years, but I have not seen her or heard any tale for a century. She was old back then. Surely she is long since dead.”

“No my friend,” Bagbag said, “Not dead. Not yet.” Turning to Kristryd, he changed the subject, “Your majesty. Durgeddin desires to bring the Anvil to Khundrakar.”

The blacksmith added to the petition, “Please your majesty. Then we shall have our vengeance, and Balnorhak shall rise again!”

Kristryd’s stoic face betrayed no inner thought. She replied, “Thane Durgeddin, so long as you remain here in Gilmorack, our

anvil is yours to fashion upon it what you will as you will.”

Unexpected Proposal

Durgeddin found a place of prominence among the smiths of Gilmorack. He labored long at the forge and the anvil, melting Gretyll's cursed blades into slag and forging them anew into works of beauty. Each one received his personal mark, a sign of the blade's integrity and wholesomeness. With Bagbag's help, he added potent magic to the finest.

Some score of days after his arrival, he presented Kristryd with a crafted helm, adorned with silver sigils and interlacing patterns of golden knots. Gilded wings, like the wings of Emolasmairim, swept back from each side. Soft worked leather on the interior of the helm made it fit comfortably; a strap under the chin pulled it snug.

“This is a fine helm,” Kristryd admitted in genuine admiration of the work.

“The finest I have ever made,” Durgeddin boasted with a humble bow. “For the finest head I have ever seen.”

Her eyes widened, but she recovered herself quickly. “My lord flatters the queen.”

“Would that I was your lord and you my queen! Surely the gods have twined our destinies together,” Durgeddin faffled over the words. “You would make for me a fitting wife. Your father would not forbid it, I am sure.”

She set the glistening helm down on a table at her side and glanced about at her servants and the members of court. No one dared to breathe. *If I outright refuse, he will be humiliated. Then I shall pay the consequence.* She looked over to trueheaded Bagbag. Her trusted friend lowered his eyes as if to apologize for his old friend's impertinence.

“My lord. I am flattered,” Kristryd replied with careful diplomacy. “I will consider and inquire after Berronar's will, but not before I have fulfilled my vows to finish this war and purge our eternal possession.”

“Fitly spoken,” Bagbag encouraged, but Durgeddin shook his head.

“Nay your majesty,” the old smith said. “I have outlived three dwur-wives already, and my beard has grown long. I too have vows of vengeance, not unlike your own. Together we will fulfill our vows.”

Kristryd smiled graciously, “You shall have an answer after I have had time to think on it.”

Later in the privacy of her own chambers, she collapsed onto her couch, shaking with laughter. "I did not see that coming!" she said to Bagbag.

"No laughing matter! He will not take 'no' for an answer. He never has," Bagbag warned gravely.

"I don't intend to tell him 'no,'" Kristryd laughed.

"You will take him as a husband? He is older than I!" Bagbag objected. "He wants only the anvil! Give it to him and let him be gone."

"Are you jealous?" Kristryd taunted the elderly dwarf.

"By Moradin's grey beard!" her old tutor huffed in disgust.

"I do not intend to refuse him," she laughed again at her own joke. "Neither will I ever accept."

"You are a shrewd one Olinsdotter," Bagbag conceded. "Be careful. A strong-willed and tenacious dwarf as ever was, that one."

Chapter 21

BAGBAG'S TROUBLES

OLDID SILVERBEARD, STEWARD of Ironhelm at Eastpass, put on his spectacles to better read the script on the parchment. *Curious indeed! An anonymous letter in the old hand of Balnorhak and sealed with the seal of Thane Dori.* He tilted the wick of the oil lamp for better light and read over the words a third time. It explained the recent treachery of the three sisters, and it provided detailed instructions for finding the lair in which Hedvyg concealed herself. It concluded with a stern warning, "Give no ear to her lies! Silence the old hag; cease her crooked lips from moving."

Silverbeard shook his head in disbelief. "Here in the Principality? After all the years? Well, I shall see to it!" The elderly dwur noble assembled a party of worthies to enter the hidden lair and slay the witch. The adventurers found the halls of Hedvyg, but they did not catch her unprepared. Cruel traps she readied for them, and fearsome monsters she had collected to defend her secret holdings. A certain vampiress of Perrenland gave her command over chilling wraiths and foul necromancies. Hedvyg was ready. Those heroes sent by Oldid Silverbeard never returned, and who can say what became of them?

Hedvyg cast the smoke-raising herb onto the scryer's pot and called out for her sisters, but they did not answer. She called out for the Yatil Queen, but she received no reply. *So I am all alone now,* she thought to herself. *Now it's my time.* She strode into the dusty halls of her father's gone and vanished kingdom. Dark-helmeted dwarven guards flanked her, granting her the appearance of one to be taken seriously and not trifled with. Undead on loan from Drelnza trailed along in her retinue, striking terror. Hedvyg swept into Eastpass, freezing the blood of all who beheld her and curdling the milk of their cows and their goats while it yet remained in the udders. She declared herself the sole remaining heir to the throne of Balnorhak, the last surviving daughter of the undermountain king. She called upon the houses of Balnorhak to rally to her, and she charged them to cast down the upstart Prince Olinstaad Corond.

None came to her summons except Gilvgola, the Sacred Heart of Berronar, priestess from the fortress of Dorob Kiltlduum, the old stronghold of Balnorhak at the headwaters of the Clearwater River. What errand the priestess had in the Principality of Ulek that summer, the saga does not tell, but, fortunate for the Prince Corond, she happened to be present. Gilvgola brought a strong party of priests from the Blue Mines in Havenhill, clerics of the Soul Forge and warriors of the Holy Axe. Heroes of the Prince's Royal Army too. Gilvgola and the priests dispelled Hedvyg's undead, and the warriors slew her dark guard. They bound Hedvyg in bespelled adamantine chains. They imprisoned the humiliated witch in the dungeons of Havenhill to wait for a trial before the Prince Corond on charges of treason, treachery, witchcraft, and patricide.

The Prince Olinstaad Corond sent Gilvgola back to her home, but before she left, he bade her carry summons to Bagbag in Gilmorack. "I will need my trueheaded friend present for the trial of this witch," the Prince Corond said.

Bagbag's Strange Fits

When the Sacred Heart of Berronar arrived at Gilmorack and told the tale of Hedvyg's capture, Bagbag seemed ill-pleased. "A shame they do not burn her like cordwood and be done with it!" The loremaster seemed even less pleased over the prospect of a long and treacherous trip to the Principality just to attend the trial. "What lies did Hedvyg speak?" Bagbag asked.

"The old witch is not allowed to speak lest she use her mouth to beguile or cast a spell," the priestess assured him.

Bagbag had other troubles with which to contend. Since the fight in the Hall of Scrolls and the discoveries in Gretyll's private chamber, an unseen fiend pursued him like a recurring nightmare. It leapt upon him unexpectedly and at the most inopportune moments. Only with great difficulty could he free himself from its grip and thrust it away. To make matters worse, no one else could see the assailant. To all who looked on, it appeared that the old dwarf fell suddenly into a seizure or some queer fit. He thrashed and flerked about, cursing and faffling, and then it ended as abruptly as it had started. He would sit up, dust himself off, straighten his jacket, and carry on about his business as if nothing unusual had befallen him. The attacks occurred almost daily, often leaving the old dwarf with blackened eyes, swollen bruises, and long scratches across his flesh.

Father Furduch offered to assist the dretched wizard, "I see

what's unseen! Let me banish this fiend!"

Bagbag refused the offer, "I can well take care of myself." He preferred to seek the solution to the daily menace in the vile book he had taken from Gretyll's study. Many long days he spent deciphering the contents of those occultic pages. He took over the room that had once been the private study of Gretyll, for he felt safest in that place. He decorated it with wards, sigils, diagrams, and geometric patterns, laced with magical scripts, to protect himself. But if ever he left that room, the unseen attacker leapt on him.

This malady did little credit to Kristryd's reputation. Dame Thresstone took full advantage, pointing out the mage's frightening condition to those both high and low. "You see," she said to them, "Kristryd holds the old mage under her power, and if ever he crosses her or thinks to disobey her will, she sends one of her demons to attack him."

Bagbag's malady continued until the day the priestess Gilvgola arrived in Gilmorack. Much to Bagbag's embarrassment, as he sat at table in the feasting hall, the fiend assailed him and threw his face down into his soup. Crockery and platters spilled over the table as Bagbag thrashed. The serving maids screamed with fright. The elderly dwarf rolled over the table, spluttering and snarling out curses, trying to push his unseen attacker away. A thick brown chowder soaked his proud white beard, and spittle sprayed from his mouth as he strained at the unseen being.

Gripping the Braid of Berronar in one hand, Gilvgola clutched at the air with her other hand and spoke words of prayer and adjuration. Bagbag fell free from the unseen creature's grapple. Holding the creature in her invisible grip, the Sacred Heart said to the kitchen lads, "Bring flour and fairy dust, and be quick about it." (No one has explained why the kitchen of Gilmorack kept a store of fairy dust in the larders.) Gilvgola held the unseen fiend tight until the dwarf lads returned with the flour and the fairy dust which they sprinkled liberally over the invisible fiend. Under the magic of the fairy dust, the fine flour remained visible, revealing the misshapen form of the fell creature. Durgeddin the Black, ancient smith of Balnorhak, rushed upon it with his enchanted hammer and smote it into black ichor.

Umbrage in Enstad

The shortest road to the Principality went east of the mountains. Bagbag accompanied Gilvgola and her party as far as Dorob Kiltduum before continuing south. The way to Ulek led him through

Enstad. His credentials as a diplomat of the alliance granted him the right of passage, but it seemed to him that the elves allowed him that privilege grudgingly. The Grand Court gave Bagbag and his small entourage lodging for one night, but they did not receive him, nor did the Queen of Celene accept his petition for audience. Nevertheless, Onselvon, his colleague in the magical arts, paid him a visit.

"We have heard the tales from Gilmorack. Is it true that your prodigy now sits upon the throne of that kingdom?" Onselvon asked.

"My lord knows it to be so," Bagbag replied stiffly. "None are worthier than she nor is there any name worthier than that of her own house for such honor."

"That may be true enough," Onselvon admitted. "But do not suppose that she attained that high power without the help of this kingdom."

Bagbag snorted, "On the contrary. She attained that high power despite the obstinance and arrogance of your kind. But if you wish to take the credit, do something creditworthy and join her war plan, as you will find it explained in these documents which she has addressed to your queen."

Onselvon bowed low, "I will see to it that Her Fey Majesty receives this correspondence and reviews the proposals. But one unresolved problem yet remains, and that is the matter of the third sister."

"Again the elves come to king's banquet a day late and without an invitation!" Bagbag snapped. "Already my lord the Prince of Ulek has captured Hedvyg and holds her in chains in his dungeons. We dwarves take care of our own problems, and the business of the three sisters is none of your own."

A troop of elven rangers and border guards escorted Bagbag and his company through the Fey Kingdom until Courwood. Arriving in Rittersmarche in the Province of Prinzfeld, he made inquiries about the halfling priest Alton Quickbread. None knew any halfling by that name, and those who seemed to know of an itinerant healer of Ehlonna matching his description could not say where he lived or from where he came.

Hedvyg's Escape

By the first Godsdays in the month of Reaping, Bagbag arrived in Havenhill where Hedvyg was enchained. Behold, that same day, Hedvyg escaped her chains and vanished from the dungeon cell.

The Prince Corond, who had come up from Gyra, apologized, "Forgive me my old friend. I have made you travel all this way for naught!"

"Would that I might learn the spell of teleportation! Long was my journey and disappointing its end. Surely Hedvyg's escape will do us worse mischief," the old wizard lamented. "If only you had slain her or cut out her lying tongue on the day you captured her."

"She is the daughter of an undermountain king," Prince Corond demurred. "There are laws in this land. I hoped we might settle the matter together and, afterwards retire to Gyra for some days of planning and strategy. But now I think it best you tarry not. Some Keolanders have been about, asking for you, and I like not the look of them nor the manner of their inquiry."

"What is the look of them and what is the manner?"

"Humans of the old Suel blood. One skinny albino they called Mohrgyr the Old. He desires to consult with you, but if I take their meaning, he desires to see you arrested and hauled back to the Silent Tower," the prince warned.

"Arrested? For what crime?" Bagbag humphed.

"What does it matter?" Prince Corond assured his trueheaded friend. "I sent them back the way they came and said unto them that, if I ever see their kind lurking about Ulek again, I'll show them the other side of dwarven hospitality."

Chapter 22

HAMMER AND THE ANVIL

“THE VERMIN MOVE beneath these mountains like rats in a sewer!” Prince Olinstaad Corond complained. He sent teams of workers to close unused tunnels, underground passages, and abandoned mines. Goblin raiders harassed the stoneworkers and the hardhewers as they labored to wall off their roadways, seal their exit holes, and cut off their access to water. The laborers carried a pickaxe in one hand and wore a shield on the other. The work progressed slowly. By Fireseek CY 502, the workmen secured the crumbled halls of ancient Balnorhak, purged forgotten mines, closed off rat holes, and pressed on to the tunnels between the Lortmil Mountains proper.

The Sweeps

The ways into the Lortmil tunnels were less easily sealed, for the Low Road is not a straight narrow path through the mountain’s roots. It makes its way through a maze of passages, now following natural caverns, now cutting through fissures in the rock, now descending by steep steps cut into the granite, now following along underground riverways for winding miles, now exiting by cave mouth and crossing overland, now descending back into the undermountain by hidden door set in the mountain side, now narrowing to tunnel through solid stone for miles ... and so it went. In the spring, after winter rains and snowmelt, lower caverns flooded and became passable only by barge and boat. Underground rivers turned to impassable torrents and plunging waterfalls. The battles raged regardless of the season or the dangers. The blood of dwarves and goblins mixed together and pooled in the deep places.

The prince commissioned heroes and warriors of the Low Road to clear old mines, route out dens of monsters, and protect laborers from goblin attacks. The so-called “mine rangers” laid ambushes against the goblinkind, chased them from hole to hole, and banished monsters that lurked in unlit chambers. They led explorations

and surveys, mapped out the old tunnels, and charted the mazes of interconnecting mineshafts, arteries, and veins that cut to and fro through the stone. (To this day, mine rangers continue to patrol the deep tunnels between the dwarven kingdoms.)

According to Kristryd's war plan, her father's Principality became the anvil. The combined armies of Gilmorack and Dengar struck like a hammer. The goblins stood between the hammer and the anvil. From the north, the forces of Gilmorack and Dengar conducted systematic sweeps, striking the enemy with speed and ferocity. Father Furduch led gnome teams armed with explosives, flash powder, and smoke-makers. Gnome trappers devised all manner of ingenious cruelties: spike traps, pit traps, flame-strikes, poison gas clouds, collapsing ceilings, and other devious inventions to harass goblinkind and teach them not to tread wherever they like. (Many of their traps remain yet in the deep places beneath the Lortmil Mountains and, even today, more than a century later, they yet claim unwary victims who stray from the main thoroughfares.) Bagbag schooled spellcasters in the art of fireballs and lightning strikes. Bamadar led young dwarven warriors armed with spears, lances, and spiked shields charging through the tunnels, striking terror into their adversaries and sparking panicked flights of whole clans. When they encountered well-defended fortresses and lairs, rather than take the time to purge them, Kristryd's forces isolated them from reinforcements and resupply.

The wars dragged on. The stench of corpses mingled with the filth of orcs to taint the air under the mountains. The dwarves burned the carcasses of their victims, polluting lower chambers with the sweet, sick-smelling smoke of burning flesh.

The Battle of the High Caves

While the dwarves made war beneath the earth, the lowland nations provided them with succor and supply. They guarded the passes and struck against goblinkind who tried to quit their holes and creep down from the mountains. The County sent druids after the armies to heal the wounded and add what they might to the efforts. The Duchy provided provisions and mountain patrols. The Velunese armed a defensive line from the Lorridges to the Kron Hills.

Kristryd's advances dislodged the clans under the mountains. Kobolds, goblins, and orcs fled the lower halls and took shelter in remote caves set in high places. To obtain food, they raided the villages along the Celene slopes, slaying gnome shepherds, stealing

flocks, burning elven vineyards, and marauding through villages. The villagers put together troops of hunters to climb the slopes and purge the caves, but the kobolds dropped rocks on them, the goblins showered them with darts and arrows, and the orcs descended downsteepy upon them, slew them, and desecrated their bodies. The raiders grew bolder and came again upon all the villages of the lower slopes and ridges. Before help arrived from the elves, the orcs looted and pillaged a dozen villages and set them ablaze.

Queen Yolande sent Fastaal Dothmar and his heroes to pay out the retribution and drive out the killbucks. Peralay and his cooshee dogs sniffed out the goblin trails and pursued them to hidden lairs. The goblins feared the cooshees more than they feared the elves.

Observing that, if they attempted to climb up to the caves, they would be slain as the hunters had been, Peralay and Xaxalander devised a new strategy. The elves whickered together enormous baskets and lowered them by paggling ropes from the height above the cave entrances. As the baskets dangled outside a cave mouth, elven warriors leapt out and into the cave mouth with weapons and flaming brands. They moved silent as cats and pounced just as quickly too. The canyon walls echoed with the screams of surprised kobolds, goblins, and orcs.

At times matters went awry. The orcs cut the ropes on a whickered basket, and the elves fell headlong to the stones below. The goblins set a basket aflame and burned alive the warriors in it. Some cave mouths proved so narrow that the elves could scarcely crawl in except one at a time; those who tried were slain.

The elves appealed to their allies in Gilmorack for help. They returned to the endeavor the next year upon great war platforms constructed by Durgeddin the Smith. They suspended them by chains fashioned on the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains. They lowered them to the caves by means of winches contrived by the Kron Hill gnomes.

With the fire in his eyes and the sharp edge of the blade *Concluder* cutting its swath, Fastaal Dothmar struck terror into the goblinkind and sent the gundyguts squealing and careening to the canyon floor. Xaxalander Deravnje joined the effort; leaping from the boxes, scaling up canyon walls, and slipping unseen into the caves. He slew all that he found. Prince Archosian, the Green Arrow, commanded a company of archers to watch over the entrances, and their feathered shafts found marks if ever a goblin dared poke his head up from the hole. Onselvon sent a wizard on the platforms adept with the fireball spells which turned many

otherwise inaccessible lairs into hellish infernos.

The Gods of War

The conflict inexorably drew more and more gods into war. The dwarven gods involved themselves from the start. Gilvgola, the Sacred Heart of Berronar, offered the goddess's blessings and auguries. The priests of Clangeddin offered up prayers to the dwarven god of war, "We will anoint the battlefield with our enemies' blood and beat their weapons in your name!" They boasted of fighting with *alaghor*, a word describing "those who demonstrate valor in battle." None exemplified the concept more persuasively than the devotees of Clangeddin, Lord of the Twin Axes, whether they hailed from Ulek, Dengar, or Balnorhak.

Ulaa's fellowships and churches suffered from the goblins. The displaced clans of goblinkind overran small communities, settlements, and miner's towns in deep places and along the Low Road. The losses inflamed the wrath of the faithful, and they swore themselves to Ulaa's revenge.

The gods of the elves could scarcely hope to avoid the Hateful Wars, though they sighed over the conflict and turned their faces away from it. Ehlenestra begged for peace, but Larethian fell under the swoon of his ancient struggle with Gruumsh. Peaceful Rao found himself also drawn into the conflict along with the Velunese that revered him, and the wars perplexed him no small amount.

Kristryd prayed to Berronar, poured out libations in her name. She offered up incense and sacrifice. She made special votives to Clangeddin before each battle. She kept the name of Ulaa upon her lips too, and she did not neglect her service. She offered prayers and performed the necessary rites herself before marching out with the armies of Gilmorack, resplendent in shining mithril armor. Her troops saw her as the incarnation of Ulaa, girded for war. She inspired fanatical devotion among the young dwarves. The poets composed songs about her, and the soldiers sang her praises as they marched.

*Thousands of fanged face did the mountain thanes slay;
Ten times that number of blood runs black
Before the axe and before the blade
O Undermountain Queen of Gilmorack!*

The clan chieftans and nobles heard the songs; they liked them not. When Thane Evrast, Undermountain King of Dengar, heard

the songs praising his daughter-in-law chanted also in the camps of his own soldiers, his heart turned hard as stone.

The Place it Belongs

The time came for Kristryd to return the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains to its place in Dengar, as had been agreed, but Bagbag protested, "Will you truly surrender to Evrast the greatest artifact of your father's kingdom? Will you give those rebels and deserters the gift of the gods?"

"I will not," Kristryd agreed. "Nor did I promise to do so. I only agreed to return the anvil to the place it rightfully belongs."

Bagbag clapped his hands together in glee. "As shrewd as Vergadain!" he exclaimed. "Surely you are the rightful and destined heir of Balnorhak!"

"Whether I am for this destiny or another, or for this kingdom or that, I do not hazard to suppose," Kristryd replied in haughty tones. "But I send the anvil to the place it belongs—the front lines of our advancing forces. Let the weapons and armor of our brave soldiers have the benefit of its dweomer!"

Durgeddin and his men agreed to carry the anvil along with the army of Gilmorack as they advanced through the Low Road. They marched out of the vaulted halls, carrying the anvil as on a palanquin aloft upon their shoulders.

Meantime, Thane Evrast of Dengar sent a delegation to retrieve the anvil from Gilmorack, as Kristryd had promised. The dwarves of Kristryd's kingdom turned his delegation back at the gates. "The anvil has departed from here," they said. "The undermountain queen has sent it now to the place it belongs."

The Low Stream

"We've cut the gravy too blashy," Bamadar warned his queen. "We have scarce the strength to hold the roads. Supply lines stretch hundreds of miles, and one host is far separated from another by a fortnight march. How shall we fare if Urgush comes against us now?"

"And I am sick to death of goblin stench," Kristryd admitted. "But I will hold every inch we have taken. If our lines collapse, there remains no shield between our kingdoms and the goblin host."

"I called for reinforcements, but they send us lads who have not yet seen their first whiskers," Bamadar complained. "We run out of dwarves!"

"The price of such a war," the queen shrugged. "Dwarves do

not leave a thing unfinished.”

By the first of Reaping (503 CY), Kristryd’s dwur controlled the west spur of the Low Road between the Ulek Pass and the Celene Pass. From all those caverns and snaking tunnels, they ousted the nests of goblinkind. Such remarkable advances cost her heavily. In those days, the dwarves called the Low Road “the Low Stream” for the quantity of dwarven blood that streamed through those caverns and ran down those tunnels.

Displaced tribes of kobold, goblin, orc, hobgoblin, gnoll, and ogre tried at times to flee the mountains and seek refuge in the lowlands. The Rangers of Triserron patrolled the Druid’s Defile. Hunting parties from Celene watched the banks of the Handmaiden. If any of the gundyguts ever dared cross the Handmaiden River, the elves of Celene cut them down. If they fled to the south, they met the stout troops of the Principality. If they fled to the west, they faced the ready men, elves, and gnomes of the Ulek states.

Kistryd the Terrible

The Flaming Skull tribe occupied a long-ago abandoned stronghold called Bennoth Tine, a hewn-stone fortress of Balnorhak that had once guarded a critical junction on the Low Road. “We shall be hard at it to lay siege to Bennoth Tine,” Bagbag warned. “Our fathers built it to stand the test of war.” But when Kristryd’s forces arrived at the undermountain fortress, the orcs readily unbarred their gates. Most of their warriors had already been slain in the conflicts. Only females and young remained to defend the walls. In accordance with the orcish custom, they prostrated themselves to signal their surrender. They came out of their holes groveling and weeping and licking at the stones. The village elders bowed and scraped before the armored dwur captains. They sacrificed mountain goats and invited the heads of the invading army to a banquet of peace.

“I will not eat with orcs,” Kristryd told Bamadar. She ordered her soldiers to enter the hall of their feasting and slay them all. She sent her soldiers to sack every home, slay every orc, and burn every cosh and hovel. Many they burned alive inside their lairs. The young and the squealing infants that fled the flames she ordered dropped from the battlements and dashed on the rocks. Black smoke and the stench of burning flesh filled the caverns and choked the air. When none but a few dozen of the clan remained, Kristryd had them rounded up and brought to the center of the fortress, bound in thick ropes. The survivors dropped to their knees,

pleading and begging before her unsheathed sword.

“See the weeping mothers,” she said to Bamadar. “Don’t pity them. They keep their younglings in a feeding pit, and they throw fresh victims to the cubs like Peralay throws scraps to his Cooshee hounds. Only the most savage survive. That’s the orc way. They know nothing of compassion, nor shall I be their teacher.”

“Spare the cubs today, and they’ll take vengeance tomorrow,” Bamadar agreed. “Everyone knows it’s bad luck to let a goblin live.” He sounded as if he tried to persuade himself.

“Every orc-dame we leave alive will birth a litter tomorrow,” Kristryd observed. “Nevertheless, I grant these their lives.” Speaking through a half-blood interpreter who knew the goblin tongue, the undermountain queen said to the groveling survivors, “I spare your lives, not for mercy, but to serve as my messengers. Go now sons and daughters of Gruumsh; tell your kin what fate awaits them at the hands of Kristryd the Terrible.” She personally cut their bonds and set them free.

The survivors of the massacre fled and noised it about, telling all that had befallen them in Bennoth Tine at the hands of Kristryd the Hateful. All those who heard these tale quaked and trembled. The villages and nests of goblinkind all along the Low Road, from Gilmorack to Ironhelm, left their places and fled from before the advance of her troops. Some fled deeper into the caverns, some spilled out onto the mountain slopes.

Bennoth Tine

“Stone upon stone!” Bamadar exclaimed as he and Kristryd explored the defenses of Bennoth Tine. “Our fathers’ built this fortress well.” Indeed, the undermountain king of Balnorhak raised the stones of Bennoth Tine upon the ancient foundations of a dwur fort from times forgotten. Bennoth Tine was once the northernmost outpost Balnorhak kept upon the Low Road. The name translated into the common tongue as “Northfork.” In those nearly forgotten centuries past, the undermountain king garrisoned the fort to challenge the kingdom of Dengar and keep the traitors from crossing over into the tunnels of Balnorhak. Northfork’s spacious halls had room for many soldiers and for provisions to withstand long siege.

“It stinks of orc,” Kristryd complained. “Have the soldiers remove the filth, scrub out every stone, and wash out every hole.”

“Your majesty. The orcs must have occupied this fortress now two or three centuries. It will take more than a few days to clean

it up and make it fit for habitation,” Bamadar objected.

“You understand the strategic importance of this junction as well as any. We cannot let this fortress return to the vermin,” Kristryd insisted. “We will hold our advance here and wait for the Royal Army to reach us from Ulek.

Bamadar led a party of adventurers into the depths and secret places of the fort. They crawled their way through dungeon chambers, secret doorways, hidden chambers, old waterways, and echoing caves. They avoided traps and hazards as they went, and they fought a menagerie of monsters who had come to make their homes in the dark places. Then the soldiers exchanged their axes and swords for brooms, scrubbing brush, and swabbing rags. Engineers set to work repairing damage and restoring the defensive structures. The broken towers they rebuilt, and tottering walls they set aright. They drained the cistern, scraped away the plaster and resurfaced it with fresh plaster before refilling it. They dismantled the disgusting altar of Gruumsh with which the orcs had defiled Moradin’s shrine. Gnome caravans and merchant trains from the Duchy arrived with fresh supplies. Durgeddin the Smith and his men set to work restoring the ancient forge that once burned in the heart of that Bennoth Tine, and, with Bagbag’s help, they reignited it and enchanted it with a magical fire.

During the course of the renovations, the old loremaster delighted to discover the shards of broken stone tablets inscribed with dwarven runes. These he found among the debris. Piecing them together, he read in the old tongue long-ago records of an early undermountain king. The fragmentary inscriptions described a shipment of a staggering inventory of supplies for some enormous construction project somewhere within the mountains.

“Not in Dengar, nor in Gilmorack, nor in ancient Balnorhak, has ever such a project been undertaken!” Bagbag told Kristryd. “Surely this speaks of long-forgotten Haradaragh. The legends of Bleredd’s city may be true after all.”

Harnekiab

The dwarves completed the work in six months. Kristryd summoned Gilvgola, the Sacred Heart of Berronar, and also Father Furduch, the gnomish priest of Ulla, to attend the dedication of the fortress and to conduct the solemnities. Bagbag used his spellcraft to light up the ancient caverns with a blaze of continuous magical lights and continual flames that shone from pillars and towers. Moreover, finely crafted lampposts erected by the dwarves

to drive away the darkness lit up the three roads and all the streets of Northfork. Kristryd assembled the elders of Gilmorack and all the heads of the tribes, the commanders of the army, and all the soldiers who had fought for her, including the commanders of the host of Dengar. Also came Thane Bolor Blackaxe of Hoch Dungalorin and all his nobledwarves to applaud the recent victories. From as far away as the Principality, Kristryd's youngest brother Orin also came to represent the prince. All of them assembled around her at the Festival of Ulaa's Hunt in the month of Flocktime to celebrate the cleansing of the mountains.

When all these hosts had gathered in the wide cavern where the three roads converge, Kristryd appeared on the ramparts in her resplendent mithril armor and winged helm. Beside her stood Bagbag and the two priests. Bamadar, Thane Bolor Blackaxe, and her brother Orin stood behind her. Cheers rose from the hosts, and the army shouted out a rhythm of "Kristryd! Kristryd!"

The undermountain queen lifted a long horn to her lips and sounded a single blast. The host fell silent. Pushing their way through the midst of the assembly came Durgeddin the Black and all his men carrying the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains. The crowd parted for the unanticipated procession. Bronze bells cast especially for the occasion rang from the towers, and cheers and shouts filled the halls. The ancient gates of Bennoth Tine swung open dramatically to receive Durgeddin's procession and the holy relic.

Durgeddin's dwarves placed the anvil and all the sacred smithy-ing vessels and tools in the newly restored smithy. Gilvgola sacrificed sheep and goats to Berronar on a new altar for Moradin. Father Furduch chanted the Odes of Ulaa the Huntress in honor of her festival. Durgeddin fired the forge. Its flames made such a roar and blast of heat that none could stand near it. The radiance made all the stones glow red.

Gilvgola lifted up her hands, red with the blood of sacrifices, and prayed, "Mother and Father over the Anvil of Souls. Take back thine own, namely thy ancient habitation. Having cleansed your temple and returned thy sacred relic to thy service, this very anvil, bless thee the stones of this fortress and the hosts of thy children who battle for the everlasting inheritance thou hast bequeathed unto us. Now, with the permission of Blessed Ulaa, let this Festival of the Hunt be celebrated hence as the Festival of Cleansing, a week of festivity and thanksgiving for the cleansing of these halls and the cleansing of the mountains!" Gilvgola spread her blood-stained fingers toward the assembly and blessed the entire host.

So began the annual Festival of Harnekiah. Whole flocks of sheep and goats they offered up that week, and all the host of dwarves in Dorob Kiltduum feasted that day and for all the seven days of Ulaa's Hunt.

To this day, dwarves of the Flanaess celebrate the Feast of Harnekiah even beyond the clans of the Lortmil Mountains. All winter, young dwarf children sigh with anticipation for the month of Flocktime. During the week of Harnekiah (Flocktime 8-14), the Lortmil dwarves conduct ritual goblin hunts in keeping with the traditions of Ulaa's Hunt. Dwarves everywhere light their halls brightly, feast before the gods, and celebrate the cleansing of the mountains.

Circle of Death

Kristryd garrisoned her advance forces in Bennoth Tine. Day and night the hammer of Durgeddin struck steel upon the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains as her craftsmen repaired arms and forged new weapons to outfit the soldiers of the alliance. The goblinkind also heard the ringing of that heavy hammer upon the anvil, and to them, it's strokes sounded like a bell tolling out their doom.

The nations of the alliance created a noose around the Lortmil Mountains, and Kristryd pulled the end of the rope ever tighter, choking the throat of the goblinkind. "We have confined them and we have walled them off in a circle of death!" she told the members of the alliance. The elves, dwarves, gnomes, and men coordinated their efforts ever more closely to seal off options for escape. "We will squeeze them from every side, and we will cut them off from raiding and from resupply," she explained. "They cannot eat the gemstones of the mountains. Let them cannibalize their own flesh."

Chapter 23

HEDVYG'S REFLECTION

"WHERE ARE YOUR demon lovers now? Where is your Witch Queen?" the yellow-eyed hobgoblin snarled at the half-orc.

"Trust the plan," Urgush insisted.

Hroth slapped the half-orc a staggering blow across the face as if to waken him from enchantment. Urgush fell backwards, landing hard on his butt. The silver crown fell from his head and rolled along the narrow cliff's edge. Hroth crushed it under his booted foot. "Time for a new plan half-blood," he barked.

Urgush pulled himself back up to his feet and thrust a long clawed finger at the menacing hobgoblin, "You'll pay for that you swollen one-eared sack!" He lifted his shield with the face of the red medusa toward the hulking hobgoblin, intending to petrify him where he stood. The painted serpents on the face of the shield writhed eagerly. Hroth roared, tore the shield free, and tossed it over the side of the cliff. It sailed through the air like a saucer, disappearing into the vale far below. Urgush nearly leapt after it, cursing and spluttering.

"I'm going home," Hroth announced. He took with him his hobgoblins and a fair number those once loyal to Urgush. Treacherous was the journey. By secret ways and hidden paths, they found their way to their brothers who still made war in the valleys, caverns, tunnels, and hilltops around the forsaken Vale of Grot-Ugrat. Hroth found the goblins there broken and wandering, like kine without herdsmen.

He dispatched ravens to the mountain tribes and clans. He summoned them to hear his words, "Urgush is yesterday's fart gas! That one led us to the edge of disaster! Hroth is your salvation."

The Parley

While Kristryd tightened her circle of death around the Lortmils, Dame Thresstone of Gilmorack tightened her own circle of intrigues. The bitter dwur-wife sought some scandal she might use to denounce her rival, and she paid her spies and informants gen-

erously. Through them, she learned that adventurers exploring the Vale of Haradaragh chanced upon the shield of Urgush. Patrols outside Gilmorack apprehended the adventurers when their path strayed too close to the dwarven kingdom. The dwarves confiscated all they carried, including the Goblin Shield. The smiths examined it, and one of them presented it before Dame Thresstone, "This is the shield for which Urgush seeks. There is none other like it."

Dame Thresstone's fingers caressed the edge of the artifact. "Not the work of goblins," she observed.

"Indeed!" the smith admitted. "Forged in Gilmorack and hammered out upon the holy anvil."

"How came it to be so ensorcelled?"

The smith offered no answer.

"More of Gretchell's mischief?" Dame Thresstone answered her own question. She averted her eyes from the face of the medusa lest it change her flesh to stone. "You did right to bring the artifact to me. I myself will see it sent to Kristryd in Bennoth Tine."

That she did not do. Instead, she herself went out to the Vale of Haradaragh under the protection of a private guard of loyal mercenary gnomes and heavily armed lancers and spearmen from the royal guard of Gilmorack. Her soldiers fortified an encampment and pitched her pavilion beneath the ancient mountain. As night fell, they looked warily into the misty darkness, fearful of a sudden ambush. "Surely we have been led into a trap," they murmured. The fullness of Celene illuminated the night and cast ghostly shadows in the swirling mist. The shadows seemed to gather about the camp of Dame Thresstone and take shape as the spirits of the ancient Flan who once dwelt in those mountains. Then abruptly, from out of the mist, a lone figure stepped.

"Halt! Who goes?" the watchmen challenged.

A half-orc resolved in the light of the torches, swaggering fearlessly. "I am called Urgush," the half-orc boasted. "I see you recognize the name! Then you will believe me when I tell you I am not alone. If this is some treachery, all your bones will bleach in this valley."

Dame Thresstone wasted no time with exchanging threats and formalities. She nodded to her gnome afterlings, and they brought out the shield wrapped in black cloth. "Behold, beneath these wraps concealed, we hold the Red Medusa Shield!" the gnomes said. They placed the shield upon a prepared table.

Dame Thresstone unwrapped it warily. She observed how the serpents of the medusa writhed in the presence of their master.

"This shield was beaten out upon the anvil in Gilmorack," Dame Thresstone said to Urgush. "How came it to you, and who enchanted it for you? If you would have it back, speak only the truth."

Urgush did not seem to hear her. The shield rivetted his attention. His orcish face shone with delight. Tears of gratitude moistened his eyes. With trembling hands, he seized it, held it aloft in the moonlight, turned it over, and examined it's every surface.

"I have kept my oath, now keep yours, or may your gods strike you according to your word!" Dame Thresstone hissed.

Urgush fit his arm to the straps before replying, "I was there when your anvil yet remained in Dengar. Your hated queen was not but a hated bride, unloved by her husband. A nobody! I led the host against the lower halls while the dwur witch and her warlock untethered its magic and disappeared with the anvil. And you ask me, 'How did you come by it? Who enchanted it for you?'"

"Do you say that Kristryd stole the anvil from Dengar and made you her mercenary?" Dame Thresstone asked too eagerly.

"Not that one! May Gruumsh grind her bones!" Urgush spat at the mention of Kristryd's name. "I speak of Gunhyld, the old hag and your warmage. They brought the anvil to Gretyll. Gretyll fashioned the shield; Gunhyld painted it's face with the blood of victims; Gretyll enchanted it with devilshine summoned from the book."

"Do not lie to me half-orc. I must have proof of Kristryd's involvement!" Dame Thresstone pressed eagerly.

"Ask Gretyll," Urgush suggested. "Release her from her cage. Send for Hedvyg."

Dame Thresstone tried again, "Tell me Kristryd Olinsdotter and Bagbag contrived this plot with the three witches!"

"If you say it is so," Urgush smiled, "It is so, just as you have said."

The Spreading Tale

Dame Thresstone returned to Gilmorack and summoned her counselors and all the globtales of the court. "I am of a mind to take a journey to visit our cousins in Dengar," she told them. "Disturbing lies about our queen and her trueheaded friend have reached me, and I would see if I might, by means of my efforts, exonerate them of false charges. For it is now noised about that it was they who conspired with the three sisters and the Yatil Queen to steal the anvil from Dengar's halls." These things she said as if appalled at the suggestion and eager to dispel an evil rumor, but in

truth, she only meant to spread the tale. "I will speak with Thane Evrast, face to face, and clear the name of our noble queen."

As she prepared for the journey, Dame Thresstone repeated the tale to all the nobles of Gilmorack. Hundreds of miles away, in the underground fort of Bennoth Tine, Kristryd watched these conversations transpire through the silver-framed mirror that she kept ever at her side.

"Slander and lies!" Kristryd exclaimed as she related the matter to Bagbag. "Treachery and treason! None will believe such shameless fictions."

"Slander and lies against the ruler of a people are always readily believed by the people ruled," Bagbag warned. "If she spreads this tale wide, your alliance will surely crumble."

"We will return the anvil to Dengar at once," Kristryd panicked. "We must deny these allegations."

"No daughter! Surrendering the anvil would only imply some guilt. Then the damage will be done!" Bagbag counseled. "Let me consult my books. There may be a spell to silence a slandering tongue."

Prying & Scrying

Truly I am hated! Kristryd lamented. She wiped tears of self-pity from her eyes. Such was the price she paid for her forays into people's private affairs and conversations. Daily she passed many hours peering into her silver-framed mirror to search out what advantage she might find in all her dealings. "*Look into me and see what other eyes can see,*" the runes etched along the frame encouraged. She knew well enough that folk always speak ill of their leaders and criticize their commanders, for she herself had often wagged her tongue against those set over her. How much more so should she have expected her name abused? The first dwarfess to command the army or sit upon the throne of a dwarven kingdom! Was she not a broad target for cruel darts? Nevertheless, that knowledge did not soften the sting of the vicious remarks revealed to her by means of the silver-framed mirror.

"By the magic of this mirror," the undermountain queen confided in Bagbag, "I spy easily upon whoever I will. But I would not be spied upon so easily myself. What charms can be laid upon me to protect me from prying eyes like my own?"

"Already I have enchanted you and surrounded you with thick walls through which no eyes can peer," Bagbag assured her. "But when you employ the magic of the silver-framed mirror, those walls

must necessarily be set aside. When you spy upon others, know that you are then most vulnerable to be spied upon."

"That lesson I have learned already," she admitted. Sometime earlier she reached out with the magic to find Hedvyg. Immediately the witch appeared in the mirror looking back at her with keen gleaming eyes. The scowling white-bearded face so startled Kristryd that she nearly dropped the mirror. If the face had once been fair and kindly, the long years had chiseled away all comeliness.

"Looking for me?" Hedvyg asked in the old dialect of the Lortmil dwur.

Kristryd recognized her from her dreams beneath the Moonarch and from her adventure searching for Bagbag under the mountains. Recovering herself quickly, she asked, "How is it that you see me and that I see you Hedvyg?"

"You gaze into your toy mirror; I peer at you by my scryer's pot," Hedvyg explained patiently as if schooling a young dwarf in reading lessons.

"You were seeking me?" Kristryd asked. She shuddered involuntarily.

"You have things that belong to me daughter," Hedvyg spoke with honeyed voice. "A book taken from my sister and an anvil that belonged to my grandfather."

"I'm sure I do not," Kristryd objected. "I have nothing that belongs to you or ever belonged to your sister, but I do keep Gretyll in a bronze cage that cannot be opened. I will put you on a cucking-stool like unto it if you try to hinder me."

"Hinder you?" Hedvyg keaked in the manner peculiar to witches. "Olinsdotter, why should I ever hinder you? Am I not the one who set you to your task?"

Kristryd shuddered again and put the mirror away, wrapping it back in its cloth. *I shall never use the mirror again!* It was not the first time she made that promise to herself. She found that, so long as she tried to resist the urge to peer into the mirror, the desire grew keener within her until she succumbed to the temptation. She soon found herself consulting Hedvyg by way of the silver-framed mirror.

"I too will serve you Olinsdotter, and declare you my true queen," the third sister promised. "Only surrender to me the book and the anvil, and I will use them in your service."

"Your sister Gunhyld lent her spellcraft to the goblins. Your sister Gretyll summoned fiends and slew all the noble dwarves of Gilmorack. And you have dallied with the undead," Kristryd replied. "I do not want your service."

“Gunhyld hated the elves. Gretyll loved Iggwilv’s pets,” Hedvyg shook her head sadly to indicate her disapproval. “Not I. I am for the glory of old Balnorhak, even if it be remembered only among the dead.”

Hedvyg laced all her words with magical charms and honeyed tones. Under the powerful enchantments of the witch’s petitions, Kristryd felt herself sway. *I only want to please this noble dwarfess, she thought to herself, and to do her bidding, whatever it may be.* But then she would shake herself and mentally scold herself, *Fool! You are falling under a witch’s spell.* Ashamed at her own weakness, she put the mirror away again, vowing not to look in it further or let Hedvyg speak to her again. Some few days later, however, idle curiosity, a craving, or something else, drew her back to gazing in the scryer’s mirror, and eventually, to find Hedvyg’s face in the mirror again.

“Your numbers dwindle. Why waste the blood of dwarves when orcs are happy enough to kill orcs. They are all mercenary. For small payment, they will betray one another,” Hedvyg counseled. “They will serve you for horses’ flesh!” Kristryd sent half-blood agents to hire goblin tribes for the price of horse flesh.

Chapter 24

GHOSTS OF VELSTAR KEEP

THE GUARDS POSTED in the lookout towers atop Mount Abharclamh sighted signal fires. "The hosts muster again!" they told the Undermountain Queen. "Our western watch has lit the signals!"

"What woodness? I must see their movements," Kristryd insisted. "I would know their numbers and see their disposition."

"Their wardings blind my spells," Bagbag protested.

Kristryd and her true-headed friend had only recently returned to Gilmorack to settle affairs, administer matters of the kingdom, and silence the false rumors spread by Kristryd's adversary. Dame Thresstone's mysterious disappearance raised questions. Many murmured about Kristryd behind her back and named her a witch. By use of the silver-framed mirror, Kristryd heard what things they spoke of her. Those who murmured against the queen, she removed from position. Some she banished without explanation. So the dwarves of Gilmorack learned to fear and dread her all the more.

Then came this fresh trouble with the host of Urgush, and it puzzled her much. "Does he mean to flee these mountains or merely to raid Gran March?" She rolled out her maps and parchments on the stone tables of the Hall of Scrolls and mused over the possibilities. "Let Yolande hate me as she will," Kristryd resolved. "I will summon Emolasmairim." That same day, the queen ascended to the lookout tower atop the slopes of snow-covered Abharclamh. From that great height, her eyes could see Veluna. She fancied she saw even the southernmost peaks of the Yatils. Far to the southwest, smoke yet rose from the signal posts near the Haunt of Haradaragh. She filled her lungs with the cold mountain air, put the horn of Celene to her lips, and sounded a blast. The note rang clear and true and echoed back to her from distant peaks. The effort made her head swim, so thin the air at that height. She sat down by the watchfire and waited. The sun dipped low in the west. Icy mountain winds whipped up the mountain snow. Celene showed not her face that night; Luna offered only a waning sliver of her

crescent. The dwarves stationed in the lookout post did their best to make their queen comfortable in their eyrie. They heated water for her and offered her their rations. Darkness fell over Oerth. Kristryd wrapped herself in furs and drew herself closer to the warmth of the fire.

Pursuit

In the last hour before dawn, a horn sounded on the wind. The lookouts roused their sleeping queen. She lifted the horn of Celene to her lips to answer the call. She dressed herself in her shirt of mithril mail and strapped her winged helm to her head. The distant horn responded, then closer again, and then came Emolasmairim, lighting upon the watch post. Two other hippogriffs, also carrying grey elves, circled about at the ready. "I thought perhaps you would not come," Kristryd confessed. Her abashed smile revealed her grate at seeing her old friend.

"We came as soon as we heard the summons," Darrion replied from upon the back of hippogriff. "Emolasmairim has flown through the night, and indeed, the magic of the horn shortened the miles by a day's flight or more."

"Let your mounts rest," Kristryd suggested. "They will need strength for the journey. I must have you carry me west, even as far as Gran March."

By the time the sun reflected bright off the white snow-covered slopes, Kristryd had taken her seat behind Darrion's saddle. The griffs shrieked with delight as they leapt from the top of the mountain tower. Catching the thin mountain air beneath their great feathered wings, they glided away. All that day, they carried Kristryd and the cavalry officers from peak to peak, resting an hour or so as they needed. By nightfall, they arrived atop Mount Saac where they nested down and waited for night to pass. Early in the morning, Kristryd stood upon the lookout post atop the Haunt of Haradaragh. The dwur told her, "We lit the signal because we saw orcs in the vale mustering under the banner of the Medusa. They passed over the hills, west toward Menawyk."

The three hippogriffs and their riders set off in pursuit. The red setting sun hung before them over the lowlands of the Marches by the time they flew down from the hills and spied the horde, breaking camp at the shores of a long river lake. The cavalry officers landed their mounts on a broad island in the lake, safe from the reach of orcish scouts and far out of the range of their bows. "The steeds must rest and eat," Darrion explained. "We have flown them hard

these many days.”

“How large do you think the host?” Kristryd asked.

“Not large. I say five hundred, perhaps six hundred,” Darrion estimated.

The riders took to the air before dawn silhouetted the mountains behind them. Under the darkness of the moonless sky, the red glow of burning farms and villages clearly marked out the path the orcs had travelled. By the time the sun rose, the hippogriff riders overtook the raiders and passed overtop the horde. Kristryd observed the orcs loping and galloping across the land, hurtling themselves headlong, it seemed, in the direction of Hookhill. Darrion urged more speed from Emolasmairim, and the griff beat her wings hard.

Battle at Velstar Keep

By noon, Kristryd and the cavalry officers alighted upon the city green and raised the alarm. Those wary men of the Gran March could scarcely dismiss such awesome warning. Hippogriffs were almost never seen in the Marches, nor were Grey Elves ever a common sight. Kristryd, the Undermountain Queen, resplendent in her mithril armor, commanded attention and respect even from the Commandant and the Keoish noblemen at his side. “Prepare for siege!” Kristryd warned. “Mustering now and go out to meet this host of orcs before they reach you. Fight them in the open field, or fight them at your walls.”

A force of knights, Gran Marchers, and Keoish soldiers came slow to the muster. The sun had already set before they left Hookhill. They found the orcs already encamped at the ruins of Velstar Keep, not more than ten miles northwest of the city.

“*Why make camp here when they might have pressed on to the city?*” Kristryd asked herself. She and the elves made hasty strategy with the men of Hookhill while the orc shamans carried out some unholy rituals under the dark sky. Bonfires illuminated the ruins of the keep, and fairy fire spells danced about.

As the sun rose, the cavalry officers of Celene led the attack from upon the backs of their screeching eagle-headed horses. The terrified orcs imagined that all the cavalry of Celene had fallen upon them. Seasoned warriors, they did not flee. The baleful creatures took up positions in the crumbled stones and dug themselves in around the ruins to hold their ground all that day. Many fell under the attacks and sorties of the brave men of Hookhill, but the orcs had the greater number and the better ground. The men of Gran

March wearied themselves against the host.

The mounted knights created a tight perimeter, intending to contain the orcs until more reinforcements could arrive. The reinforcements had not yet come when the sun set on Nerull's Night. Then the ghosts of Velstar Keep moaned on the wind. The orcs feared the ghosts more than they feared the men of the March. Fleeing in panicked terror, they broke through the perimeter, slaying horse and rider that stood in their way. The knights dared not pursue the orcs in pitch darkness, thus Urgush and his tribe escaped back to the mountains.

The court at Hookhill proclaimed Kristryd heroine of the March, and she received from the commandant a banquet in her honor. "Now I appeal to you again," Kristryd said to the commandant and to all the council at Hookhill. "If you will not join our alliance, at least patrol your own foothills. Do not let these killcows and gundyguts replenish themselves by raiding your lands. I mean to starve them in their holes."

The commandant agreed and swore an oath to it.

The Tale of Velstar Keep

Back in the Hall of Scrolls, Kristryd held counsel with Bagbag and Father Furduch. The undermountain queen queried her counselors, "What did these raiders seek? To lay siege to Hookhill? Does Urgush think he has the strength to fight the lands of men?"

"Nay, not with half a thousand strong. A force that small would not last long. Surely he went to raid and steal, rustle, pillage, and sack for goblin meal," Furduch speculated.

"Here is the pitchkettle. If only to raid, why drive so deep into Gran March?" Kristryd asked. Her finger traced out the route on the map she had spread across the stone table.

"Hookhill was never his objective," Bagbag announced ominously. "Urgush sought only the haunted keep where you found him."

"What does Urgush seek inside that haunted keep?" Father Furduch asked.

Bagbag tapped his finger on the location of Velstar Keep. "Remember Dregrak the Cruel?"

"Yes," Kristryd replied. She knew the tale. Dregrak was a powerful orc shaman who once united the orcs of the Lortmil Mountains. "I grew up hearing the stories. But Dregrak is long gone from the world."

"Long gone. Yes he is. But this Urgush fancies himself Dregrak

redux. That is why he went to Velstar Keep.”

“Cryptic hints will not avail. Speak your thoughts in plain told tale,” Father Furduch waved his hands to indicate his impatience.

Bagbag ignored the gnomish priest and addressed his tale to the undermountain queen, “More than a century past, before you were born, the noble Velstars had a reputation as summoners. They took their devilshine secrets and left Keoland lest the Silent Tower sniff out their sorcery. They built Velstar Keep when Hookhill was yet a clapboard outpost of the Lion Throne.

“In those days, the orcs came down out of the mountains to raid Gran March every spring and fall, as sure as the late rains and the early rains. The Lord Agilmir employed his secret arts and summoned an abyssal fiend to ward them off. They say he sacrificed his own father to coax that nightmare up from the abyss. In exchange, the fiend promised to do the summoner’s bidding, or so he made it appear. In truth, he deceived Agilmir. The fiend subdued the goblins of the mountains and took command of them. He empowered a lowly orc shaman as his agent, and he placed this Dregrak over the orcs as a shaman-king.

“Now the fiend turned against the one who summoned him up. He demanded the sacrifice of Agilmir’s twin daughters in exchange for his continued service. The nobleman refused to pay the wages. The demon sent Dregrak and his host of orcs down from the mountains to take the prize he desired. They overran the March and laid siege to the keep. Dregrak slew the Lord Agilmir and sacrificed the two daughters in an evil ritual. He bound their souls as undead in Velstar Keep.”

Kristryd shuddered. “From where did you learn such a wretched tale?”

“The tale is often recounted by Gilvgola. She it was that slew the shaman and banished that fiend. Besides, all these things transpired in recent times, scarcely more than a century past,” Bagbag explained. “And if you would know the truth of it, I have discerned some missing pieces of the tale from my studies in Gretyll’s book.”

“A story such as that? A mouse calls up a cat! And you think it wise to play with summoner’s arts? You’d burn that book if you were smart!” Father Furduch snorted, pinching his nose as if in disgust over some noxious smell.

“If the gnomes have no desire to see an end to this war, I will do so at once,” Bagbag replied with placid condescension. “But if you would see our enemies defeated and my lady’s vows fulfilled, then I use what weapons the gods vouchsafe with me.”

“I still do not understand,” Kristryd protested. “What did Urgush want at the haunted keep?”

Bagbag tugged at his white beard thoughtfully, “Some forgotten secret. A portal perhaps. Or perhaps just a name. Urgush grows desperate. I must travel to the ruins myself and learn what can be learned.”

Chapter 25

THE SCRIBBET ON THE STONE

“NO MORE WILL the blood of dwarves be shed to slake the thirst of a witch!” declared Thane Evrast, the undermountain king of Dengar. He recalled all his soldiers and formally withdrew from the alliance. Kristryd’s sons, Grallsonn, Dwalyn, and Pegli, denounced their grandfather for speaking slander against their mother, but the undermountain king showed a letter sealed with the impress of Dame Thresstone of Gilmorack. The king’s scribe read the letter aloud in their hearing:

Be it known that Urgush, the shaman-king of the Red Medusa orcs, colluded with Kristryd and with the warlock Bagbag to loot the treasuries of Dengar and steal away the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains.

“Lies and forgeries!” Kristryd’s sons said. “Who is this Dame Thresstone and where is she? Let her come and testify about these matters.”

Thane Evrast clapped his hands. Dame Thresstone stepped into his audience hall, adorned in all the finery and wealth of an undermountain queen. “I will testify before you by Moradin’s beard and by all the gods. Moreover, Kristryd has sent her demons to torment me. She has made my life a terror and a nightmare. Had it not been for the mercy of Hedvyg and the power of her wards and sigils, I should already be pulled alive down into the Abyss!”

Kristryd’s sons reasoned with all who would hear them, “How is it that our mother is called a witch in league with witches when she leads the fight against the witches? How is it that our mother is a friend of goblins when she leads the fight against the goblins?”

Thane Evrast gave ear to the counsel of Dame Thresstone. Said she, “Why chase the rabbit if the rabbit will come to us.” The undermountain king put his grandsons in chains and imprisoned them in the dungeons beneath Dengar.

Kristryd's Resolve

Came then word of these matters to the underhalls of Bennoth Tine where the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains still rang under the hammer blows of Durgeddin the Smith. Kristryd said to Bagbag, "I will not suffer that fool any longer!" She sent letters to the alliance and to all the commanders in the field, informing them of Thane Evrast's treason and how he had taken her sons as his prisoners.

She thought to use the silver-framed mirror to look on the condition of her sons and see how they fared, but she found the magic of her scrying blocked.

"I will go to Dengar, and I will free them," Bagbag assured her.

"I go with you," the queen hissed through clenched teeth. "We will bring our trueheaded friends, Bamadar, Archosian, Peralay, Xaxalander, and Father Furduch. I will summon Darrion and the cavalry of Celene. I will send for Gilvgola. I will even find Alton Quickbread and call him back to my service. Together we will make a dungeoneer's party to storm Dengar, liberate my sons, and teach those traitors the price of treachery."

"Not this time," Bagbag said firmly. "I go alone."

Battle for the Anvil

While Bagbag travelled toward Dengar, Thane Evrast personally led his army away from that hidden vale on a march to Bennoth Tine. By the time Bagbag passed unseen over Durin's Chasm and through the Long Bridge Gates, the armies Thane Evrast already laid siege against Kristryd's stronghold. The great cavern outside the sealed gates of the fortress ran red in a terrible bloodletting unlike any since dwur-folk first set foot in the Lortmil Mountains. From inside the safety of the citadel, Kristryd watched the battle in dismay. *How has it come to this?* she asked herself as dwarves spilled the blood of dwarves.

Bamadar and Durgeddin marshalled the defense of Bennoth Tine, but Evrast's company outnumbered them. The Gilmorack dwarves retreated inside the citadel and sealed the gates against the besiegers. Durgeddin the Smith and his men swore to defend the anvil to the last drop of their blood. He assured Kristryd, "So long as I live and breathe, no hair of your head will be harmed. Let these Dengar dwarves come taste the weight of my hammer."

The dwarves of Dengar worked with their gnomish allies to design clever siege engines, and the dwur inside Bennoth Tine

labored at countermeasures. The dwarves of Dengar dug tunnels around the defenses, but Durgeddin's miners undermined their tunnels and walled up the breaches. When the besiegers brought a ram up against the gates, the defenders buffered its blows with a counter ramp of earth-pack against the inside of the gates. When the besiegers brought up a hook to pull down stones, the besiegers dropped a chain to loop it and pull it away. The siege continued for days; days became weeks, and weeks became months. Sufficient foodstuffs had been laid up by the queen; her defenders had no fear of starvation. Water was another problem. A deep welling spring fed a cistern inside their walls, but the dwarves of Dengar tunneled through the stone, drained the cistern, and diverted the watercourse. By the time the deed was discovered, there was little to be done about it. Bamadar ordered water rationing, but even so, he could not see how they might long survive. "We cannot drink our own urine!" he complained, "And we aren't expecting rain any time soon beneath the mountains."

"Let the priests invoke the gods to bring forth water from the stone," the queen suggested.

"Already done and the quantity is not sufficient to fill a hogs head," Bamadar replied.

She wished her trueheaded friend was present. The queen began to discuss offering terms of surrender. "I might yet trade the anvil for our lives and the ransom of my sons," she suggested.

"Never!" Durgeddin exclaimed. "The thieves of Dengar will never have the anvil again. Even if I must melt it into slag before we are slain."

Bagbag's Bargain

While the battle raged outside Bennoth Tine, Bagbag moved unseen through the halls of Dengar. Cloaked in spells of invisibility and silence, the old wizard made his way past sentries and down into the lower dungeons where he expected to find Kristryd's sons imprisoned. As he stepped into the guard room, the hair on the back of his neck stood up, for he found no guards present. He looked about warily. Hedvyg appeared before him and spoke a word to dispel magic. Bagbag's invisibility spell broke, and she laid her eyes upon him. In her hand she held a magical wand which she levelled at the old dwarf in a threatening gesture.

"My darling," Bagbag said without affection. "You have not grown comelier."

"True," Hedvyg giggled like a schoolgirl and smacked her lips.

Her smile turned abruptly to a scowl, and she was all business, “You have a certain book. It belonged to my sister, and now it belongs to me. Surrender the book and the anvil, and I give you Dengar.”

Bagbag sighed wearily. “The book has brought me nothing but trouble and vexation. And I will deliver the anvil to you as well. But you must first release Kristryd’s sons and exonerate their names.”

“Do you make demands?” the old witch keaked.

“Yes,” Bagbag replied. “I have the book, I have the anvil, and I have something greater yet: the true name of Lord Agilmir’s fiend, the demon of Dregrach the Cruel.”

Hedvyg lowered the wand that she still clutched as she considered the implications of those three claims. “Swear it to me!” she demanded, shaking the wand for added emphasis.

Turmoil in Dengar

Bagbag left Dengar in a state near to anarchy. The mountain dwarves divided between those loyal to the alliance and those loyal to Thane Evrast. Kristryd’s sons, now free of the dungeons, garnered sympathies and gathered strength. They denounced Thane Evrast and laid a challenge against their cousins—rival heirs to the throne. Young Grallson made no secret of his designs. “I am the son of Prince Grallwen son of Evrast and Thaness Kristryd Olinsdotter, rightful heir to this throne as much as any other who can make claim.”

When word of the chaos at home reached the ears of Thane Evrast, he lifted his furious siege of Bennoth Tine, recalled all his forces, and marched back to Dengar in great haste. These things transpired none too soon for Kristryd and the thirsty dwarves still trapped inside the walls of Bennoth Tine.

Thane Evrast hurried back to Dengar, but by the time he arrived there, he found all his royal court in upheaval. Kristryd’s sons had installed themselves in Upper Dengar and taken control of the mountainside citadel. Moreover, they sealed the shafts to the lower city and declared that they would not open them until the undermountain king abdicate his crown.

Rage and fury seized Thane Evrast, and a strange malady beset him. Some fiendish woodness took hold of him. He writhed, flerked about, and frothed like a rabid beast. All who had sworn fealty to him tugged at their beards and muttered, “By Moradin! The undermountain king has fallen under some curse or spell.”

Bagbag's Tale

Bagbag returned to Bennoth Tine, troubled in spirit. He told Kristryd much of what had transpired in Dengar but not all things. Then he retired to the tower chamber he had designated for himself. Kristryd found him there at work, surrounded by candles, open books, charts and symbols, and all sorts of paraphernalia she shuddered to guess at. The old dwarf knelt on the floor at the center of the room with a scribber of charcoal, chalking out a summoner's circle and scribing it with runes, glyphs, and signs which he carefully copied from the brass-bound book.

"I wonder how you freed my sons and set them over Dengar," Kristryd mused as Bagbag scribbled on the floor.

"I made a bargain," the old wizard said without looking up. His tone became urgent, "Now is the time to take the anvil back to your father's kingdom. I would hear the Anvil of the Mountains ringing among the bells of Hammer Hill in the Gyra! I would see it blessed in Havenhill, in the Temple of the Blue Mines!"

"How is it, wise teacher," Kristryd pried, "That you have orchestrated all these things?"

Bagbag looked up from inside the summoner's circle. "Have you been spying on me with your silver-framed mirror?" he snirtled, a twinkle in his eye.

"Often have I tried. Well-warded are your secrets."

"I'm no fonkin!" Bagbag chuckled. "Of a truth! I have only ever served you and your father before you, and the king of Balnorhak before him."

"Not so," Kristryd's tone hardened. "Who did you serve when you plotted the fall of Grot-Ugrat? From where did you obtain that Suel spell? What role did you play in the theft of the anvil from Dengar? If you would have me trust you, O trueheaded Bagbag, tell me your tale."

"Very well," Bagbag hmphed. He stood to his feet and slapped the soot and chalk dust from his trousers. "I will tell you my tale. When I came first to Dengar to negotiate your bride price, I flattered myself with the fancy that you might one day be made queen, fulfill the old prophecy, and return to Balnorhak with the anvil. Then perished your husband, the Prince Grallwen. I saw that I must take things into my own hands. But I did not *steal* the anvil. I merely arranged to take back that which belongs to your father by all rights! Dengar stole the anvil from Balnorhak centuries past. I took back what is ours."

“Did you indeed conspire with the witches?”

“The sisters deceived me! Gretyll was to take the anvil to Gilmorack where it could be hidden away until such time as we could safely bring it home to the Blue Mines.”

“Or do you mean to Khundrakar? Surely Durgeddin is part of your thieves’ guild,” Kristryd’s voice trembled with scarcely contained fury.

“One who takes back from thieves what belongs to him is no thief,” Bagbag insisted. “The Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains belongs to Balnorhak alone. You know that better than most. I could not have known that Gretyll would let the vile hands of abyssal fiends hammer upon it.”

“Yet you knew exactly where we would find Gretyll in the halls of Gilmorak.”

“Yes,” Bagbag shrugged. “I knew to look in the Hall of Scrolls, for it was there that she and I and both her sisters laid the plans for the siege of Grot-Ugrat. Gretyll obtained the spell for me, although, at the time, I knew not from where. Not until you found Gunhyld slain among the dead did I understand that the sisters had been playing another game.”

Kristryd pressed on, “What was their game, Bagbag?”

“They dallied with the Yatil Queen, so recently deposed in Perrenland. Who can say what designs she drew?”

Kristryd fell silent. She thought back to Elraniel’s warnings. Bagbag resumed his work on the floor. For long moments, the only sound in the tower was the scratch of the scribbet on the stone. At length, Kristryd asked, “Were we merely pawns for the Yatil Witch to break Grot-Ugrat?”

Bagbag scoffed, “That’s a pitchkettle way to interpret events. But it’s over now, and no harm was done. Tasha’s power is broken; the sisters of no further account. You, Kristryd, are the one destined to rule these mountains. Not the three sisters nor the Yatil witch. Before you alone, your majesty, bow the knees of those above the stones and those below.”

The Anvil Departs

That same night, Kristryd told Bamadar to select twelve of his trueheaded and most stout dwarves and bear away the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains. “Take it away from this place and bear it to the place I tell you,” she told him. “Speak of your mission to no one. Make your dwarves swear solemn oaths.”

Bamadar chose twelve stout warriors, four to carry the heavy

anvil and eight to protect them on the road. They went by way of the Low Road until the Ulek Pass, but they found the path ill-going on account of the heavy burden that they bore. By the time they emerged from the Low Road and stepped down into the pass, melting snows and spring rains made the path a misery. The party arrived at their destination with soggy beards and backs bent under their load.

It did not take Bagbag long to realize that Kristryd had deceived him. "You have acted foolishly," he spat angrily. "You have put yourself and all of us in danger! Have you surrendered it to Dengar or sent it to your sons?" Kristryd offered no answers.

When Durgeddin the Smith found the anvil gone, he grew so wroth that he spoke not a single word. He and his men departed Bennoth Tine and marched toward Dengar.

"We are left few in number," Kristryd lamented to Bamadar upon his return. "Urgush threatens our gates in Gilmorack, and all the nobles there whisper against me and plot my downfall. Dengar is a kingdom divided. It collapses under the contention and intrigues. My sons remain in danger so long as Evrast lives. I no longer trust Bagbag, and Durgeddin would see me dead for taking the anvil from him. What is more, the Lady Yolande will neither receive me nor return my missives. All around us, the alliance totters, and our enemies grow bold again."

"Your majesty speaks the truth," Bamadar agreed, "But she forgets that she has yet a most-loyal, handsome, and hardy dwarf at her side."

The queen ignored the jest. "We have come to the brink of utter disaster. The goblins will not forgive us for what we have done them. The reprisals will be terrible."

Hedvyg's Claim

On the eleventh day of Coldeven (506 cy), a patrol of dwarves came upon the remains of a battle on one of the branches of the Low Road near Bennoth Tine. Corpses of dwarven warriors and goblins lay strewn about on the stones, but one dwarf, wounded and gray-skinned from loss of blood, still held the breath of life in his lungs. They bound his wounds and hurried him back to Bennoth Tine.

"Open the gates!" the patrol shouted as they came in sight of the watchmen on the walls.

They summoned a priest to pray for healing, but the wounded dwarf waived the priest away. "No!" he said, "I have a message

for Bagbag. I must see him and speak to him alone.”

They summoned Bagbag. The wizard stood over the bed of the dying warrior and said, “I am Bagbag. Speak your message, son.”

The wounded warrior sat up in bed and said with sudden strength, “Don’t you recognize me? I have come for my sister’s book and my father’s anvil.”

“Hedvyg!” Bagbag nearly fell over in his surprise. “Damn you! You have come too late! The anvil has departed, and the priests have destroyed the book!”

“One lie and one truth,” Hedvyg observed. “But which is which I wonder? No matter. I levy my fee for breach of contract.”

The witch spoke a word and a sphere of impenetrable darkness filled the room. Bagbag dispelled the magical darkness with another spell, but by then Hedvyg was gone. “Alarm!” he shouted to the guards. “Hedvyg is here! Protect the queen!”

Panic seized the halls of Bennoth Tine. Hedvyg summoned screaming banshees and laughing haunts to make a racket and add to the confusion. The lamps along the streets went dark, and an unearthly chill fell upon the fort. Watchmen in the towers rang the bronze bells. Guards and soldiers shouted back and forth to one another. “Foes! Fiends within the walls!”

As Kristryd stepped out from her chambers to see what the alarm betokened, Bamadar took her by the arm and said, “My Lady. You are to be taken to Bagbag’s tower. He has drawn a circle of protection for you.”

“But the way to Bagbag’s tower lies in the other direction,” Kristryd objected, pulling herself free from Bamadar’s grasp.

“Where you have taken the anvil?” the false Bamadar’s face twisted in rage.

Kristryd did not hesitate. She blunted the false Bamadar a solid blow to the face with such a head-butt as to break his nose. The illusion spell vanished, and there stood Hedvyg in the place of Bamadar, staggering and reeling about with blood flowing from both nostrils, soaking her beard.

“That’s how you do that!” exclaimed the real Bamadar as he came upon the fight. He hefted his axe and made ready to end the witch’s life before she could recover herself, but the wand in her hand flashed a spell that froze the warrior in place.

Hedvyg vanished. The wail of the banshee’s and haunts fell silent.

Chapter 26

THE SIEGE OF JURNRE

“THAT WITCH-LOVING LICKSPIGOT Urgush led us to disaster after disaster, but we are done with him and his drossels!” Hroth paced back and forth, glaring at the fanged faces of the tribal chiefs and shamans gathered about him. They were heads of tribes no-longer loyal to Urgush and what clans remained among the lower Lortmils. Hroth tossed a log onto the bonfire, sending an eruption of bright sparks wheeling up into the nighttime sky. “No more fighting among ourselves. No more orc against goblin and goblin against orc. If you want to feed your bellies and see your young ones live, we need one chief. As I am the only one without his head up his own ass, it can only be me. If anyone says otherwise, say it to my face or crawl back to your shithole and hide.”

The goblin chiefs, orc elders, gnoll pack leaders, and all their shamans jeered at the imaginary dissenters.

“Swear by your gods, by your demons, or by your devils. Makes no difference to me. Just give me your oath!” Hroth shouted. He rubbed at the scarred stump of his left ear to emphasize the point. “You too, you mud-humping sons of Gruumsh!” he gestured toward the sullen orc captains. “Let’s seal it in blood.”

The last suggestion inspired a cacophonous caterwauling of enthusiastic approval. Drums pounded. The shamans dragged victims to the stone. One after another, they took turns, soaking Hroth’s new covenant with the blood of prisoners which, until that moment, the warlord kept caged and bound near at hand. The shamans mixed upon the stone the blood of men and women snatched from villages, dwarves captured in battle, unlucky halflings, unhappy elves, and even gnomes. They smeared it on the faces of the goblin chieftans and the all the orc elders, and the gnolls lapped at it as it pooled around the stone.

Weariness of War

Weariness weighed upon the allies. Fields, groves, and vineyards fell into neglect as the war continued to siphon off the able-bodied

ied. What food supplies and resources could be spared went to feed the war effort. In the three Uleks, prices for goods and services exceeded the common person's purse; many went hungry. The peoples of the Principality entreated the prince for an end to the seemingly ceaseless battles. The treasuries were spent, the war chests long empty, and only by raising taxes and tariffs could the Prince Corond Olinstaad continue the campaigns. In the eighth year of the conflicts, people began to murmur against Gyra; some spoke openly of appealing to Keoland and returning to the Lion Throne.

The goblinkind also suffered. Kristryd's "circle of death" left them starved for resources and desperate for solutions. Hungry orcs fought with goblin and kobold tribes beneath the mountains, and to the victors went the flesh of the victims. Starved hosts looked down from the mountains and out to the west. Their eyes fell upon the County of Ulek, and they coveted the flocks, the herds, the fields, and the orchards of that goodly land.

The Old Faith druids of the County spoke loftily of peace, neutrality, and balance. From the beginning of the conflict, the County participated only under pressure from their Ulek neighbors, and they cooperated in Kristryd's campaign to purge the mountains only because of the bloodguilt they owed for the Prince Consort of Celene—for his blood had been spilled in Druid's Defile, not far from Courwood. For the duration of the war, the County provided support, primarily to the Principality, in the form of food supplies to feed the armies. They sent druids to heal the wounded and add what they might to the efforts of the war. They took little thought for their own defense, and they had little resistance to offer as the hordes of the lower Lortmil Mountains swept down upon their lands.

Hroth's War

Hroth waited until the month of Harvester when the granaries would be full and the cattle well-fed. Gnolls from the rocky ledges led the advance. They came yelping and baying out of their holes and, in no time, they overran the Triserron Rangers who guarded the pass called Druid's Defile. A host of hungry orcs and goblins followed. Goblins, orcs, gnolls, and hobgoblins flowed together into the narrow pass and marched west, toward the rich fertile lands of Ulek. Driven on by hunger and desperation, they crashed up against those forts and keeps the County of Ulek had built under Kristryd's plan to stop up the pass. They scaled the walls, leapt

over battlements, threw up ladders, and savaged the defenders. The mountains disgorged and vomited up more hordes from the bowels of the earth. The whole length of the pass rang with war horns and the pounding beat of battle drums. Many thousands of goblinkind, all hungry for plunder, descended and spilled out on the County of Ulek.

The onslaught came so fast and so unexpectedly that the alliance could scarcely muster any response. The raiders overran and ravaged all the lands between the mountains and the Kewl. They burned farms and villages, slaughtered the livestock, and looted the granaries.

Beautiful Jurnre

The inhabitants of the County fell back before them, fleeing as they might, to take refuge in the walled cities, fortified manors, keeps, and strongholds of the various baronies. The raping horde moved faster than the refugees, cutting off their escape to Tringlee and Kewlbanks, forcing many to flee for Jurnre. Those unable to travel the distance quickly enough became playthings for the goblinkind; their corpses littered the land. Fleeing men-folk still choked the roads to Jurnre when the yammering hordes began to close upon them. The refugees abandoned their burdens, left their wagons behind, and fled with nothing but their loved ones for the protection of the city walls. Not that the walls offered much protection. They were neither high nor thick.

Though the city boasts itself the oldest continually inhabited city of the Flanaess, beautiful Jurnre never suffered siege before the onslaught of 506 CY. Her citizens took pride in the city's well-swept wide streets, its sparkling fountains, its colorful flower gardens, its exotic market squares, and its clever gnomish architecture, but they gave little thought for its defenses.

Jurnre was not a large city. Less than ten thousand men along with some clans of gnomes and halflings lived within its walls. During the siege, that population swelled up ten times the number. The city so proud of its clean streets, pure fountains, fragrant flower gardens, and well-planned sewers quickly found itself suffocating in the stench of overcrowding, human waste, and an immediate food supply crisis.

The first of the mountain hordes to reach the walls came as wild raiders and killcows, not an organized army with siege equipment, well-disciplined ranks, or any strategy to execute a successful siege. They took more interest in the abandoned wains and wagons left

behind by the fleeing refugees than in laying siege to the city, and they exhausted themselves squabbling over the spoils rather than scaling the walls of Jurnre. They encamped about the city, shot at the defenders on the walls, and lobbed the severed heads of their victims over the gates.

The Count Palatine of Ulek summoned the druids. They performed their ancient rites and made war against the attackers as druids will. The besiegers found themselves terrorized by mauling lions, hampered by sudden violent changes in weather, struck by thunder, tripped and entangled by roots, vines, and branches of growing things. Walls of thorns grew up all around the perimeter of the city. Plagues of stinging insects and biting flies appeared, as if out of nowhere, and harassed the besiegers.

On the tenth day of the siege, Hroth arrived with his elite force of trained hobgoblin warriors. Unlike the orc, goblin, and gnoll warbands that preceded them, the hobgoblins came marching in disciplined ranks, organized under commanding officers. They marched to the beat of drum and blare of horn, and their deep voices boomed out cadences calling for the death and dismemberment of their enemies.

The orc captains forsook their vows of fealty, rose up against the new arrivals, and defied Hroth, "Turn back your soldiers. We came first to this place, and all the plunder belongs to Gruumsh." Hroth gave the order and his ranks closed on the orcs. A short skirmish left dead orcs and goblins on the battlefield and the orc captains slain as well.

"Now unless anyone else has a better plan, let's take down this wall!" Hroth declared. The host of besieging humanoids cheered wildly, casting their renewed allegiance behind the warlord.

Hroth's hobgoblins began to fashion ladders and battering rams. To these the druids applied their arts, making their ladders spring with tendrils and vines that entangled the one climbing. Likewise, battering rams rotted away and splintered as they slammed against walls magically reinforced by spell-craft stone.

On the fourteenth day, Jurnre's lookouts spotted the great wings of a giant eagle from the direction of Tringlee. Hroth's archer's shot at it, but the eagle wheeled about the sky far beyond their bowshot. Then it dove for the safety of the walls. A shout went up in the city, for this was no common bird, but a certain friend and ally of His Noble Mercy, the Count Palatine of Ulek. Soldiers surrounded the great bird with cheers as it lit upon the courtyard of the citadel. The Count Palatine came forth to hear what tidings

the new arrival brought him.

"I came hither whence I did hear the tidings," the giant eagle spake. "Fear not Noble Mercy. Already the muster from Tringlee sets out, and the Duke Gallowagn sends what cavalrymen he can spare to thy succor. Behold! Are they not already nigh by way of Kewlbanks, three days ride, four at most?"

"What of the Prince Corond?" The anxious Count Palatine asked. "Comes there help from the Principality?"

"Nay! Look not to that vain hope. Half their number remains yet deep in the mountains whilst the remainder takes the field east of the hills to hold his border. Other allies we must summon forth."

"Our spells are exhausted," the Count Palatine lamented. "Yet the walls may hold longer than the stores of bread. We have not yet felt the grip of famine, but we have already emptied our granaries and all our stores too."

"Stay thyself and hold thy walls but a few days, a week at most," the eagle assured the Count Palatine. "Salvation comes."

The Sior Kerrita

As events unfolded, Jurnre did not need to hold the walls for a full week or even a few days. On the fifteenth day of the siege, druids making their way from Silverwood called up a heavy fog to blanket the Kewl River. A herd of centaurs emerged from Silverwood, quietly crossed the river some few miles upstream from Jurnre, unobserved in the fog. With them came a troop of sylvan elves, armed with bows and spears. When the fog abruptly lifted, revealing the bright light of the midday sun, the centaurs charged down on the besiegers. The baying of their horns and the thundering of their hooves terrified the goblins. So sudden and unexpected came the attack that even Hroth was caught off guard. His hobgoblins forgot their training, dropped their weapons and gear and fled for the mountains with Hroth cursing and shouting at them all the way. The centaurs circled Jurnre, splashing along the banks of the Kewl. The sylvan elves struck hard, singing as they did, like women in the field on the day of harvest.

Those within the city crowded onto the walls to watch the spectacle. The battle unfolded all about them, on every side of the city, including the banks of the river. A thousand gave chase to ten thousand. The centaurs pursued the retreating horde across the Ulek plains. The terrified gnolls, goblins, orcs, and hobgoblins shed their swords, shields, packs, bags, and equipment as they fled before the thundering hooves. The litter of their gear stretched

more than a mile. The centaurs tirelessly gave chase as long as the sun remained in the sky that day. They cut the goblins down as they overran them, stampeding them beneath their hooves. All the while, a giant eagle careened about, swooping down now and again to pluck a terrified goblin up in its talons, lift it high into the sky, and drop it from a height.

The Count Palatine declared the festival of Sior Kerrita to commemorate the day when the centaurs of Silverwood crossed the Kewl River and saved the people of the County. The festival of Sior Kerrita is still celebrated to this day, once every seven years, in the manner of the Old Faith.

Chapter 27

THE BATTLE OF RIECHSVALE

“THIS WAR OF yours may profit the dwarves, but my people suffer! Unhappily we joined your alliance. Now our lands have been raped while yours remain whole and untouched.” The Count Palatine spoke from bitterness of heart.

Kristryd replied with sympathy, “Peace to you and upon all that is yours. They caught us unprepared this once, but we will not suffer it to happen again.”

Several months had elapsed since the siege. The queen of Gilmorack and her retinue did not arrive in the County until Ready’reat. By then, Journre’s wide streets had been swept clean, the fountains sparkled again, the gardens had been prepared and pruned, and the market squares restored. Yet the dwur queen’s eye had not failed to notice the ravaged lands all about. Her journey took her past burned-out villages, ransacked farmsteads, orchards stripped bare, and vacant-eyed, broken people. *What will they eat this winter? Where will they find shelter from the rains?* she wondered.

Kristryd summoned a council of the alliance in Journre and promised assistance to those who had lost homes, farms, and villages during the raids. Her father and her brothers came up from Gyra. Duke Gallowagn’s daughter Nevallewen arrived from Tringlee, demanding reparations. Nevallewen spoke on her father’s behalf, “You drove them out of the mountains and into our lands. Villages are burnt, granaries looted, vineyards trampled, and people slain. Who will compensate for loss of life and home?”

“We are at war!” Kristryd answered boldly, irritation punctuating her words. As much as she admired the duke, she did not like Nevallewen, and she made no attempt to hide her distaste for the elfess. “We have all suffered. Don’t speak to the dwur about your losses. The blood of our folk stains the stones above and below because, when there is a job to be done, by Moradin’s hammer, we dwarves get it done! All of us have paid a heavy price.”

“That may be so,” the duke’s daughter conceded. She lowered

her voice, as if sharing a globtale's gossip, "But we have heard that the dwarves fight among themselves beneath the mountains."

"Idle rumors! Nothing more," the Prince Corond growled. His tone implied a threat.

Kristryd exchanged a worried glance with Bagbag. *Does the whole alliance now know of Dengar's treason and the battle at Bennoth Tine?* She quickly changed the subject, "This raid undoes much of our labor! The hordes have resupplied. We shall not again suffer them to break out upon the lowlands."

"Do you offer some assurance?" noble Nevallewen asked. "Or has the time come to turn back to Keoland and beg Lion Throne's protection?"

Prince Corond bared his teeth and scowled at that remark so fiercely that the elfess looked away and returned to her seat. The prince took the speaker's stone and said, "My axes, already, I have spread too thin. I cannot be expected to hold down both sides of the mountains and battle in their belly all at the same time." He threw his hands into the air for emphasis, "If giants or trolls came upon my lands, they would surely find me squatting with my britches around my ankles."

Nevallewen blanched at the uncouth expression, but Kristryd smirked. She had rarely seen her father so flustered. Taking up Nevallewen's tactics, she pressed the Prince of Ulek further, "Father! The dragon's share of my own host remains locked in stalemate at Bennoth Tine; the few that remain hold the gates of Gilmorack lest Urgush come. Who will secure the west if not Ulek? We cannot rely only upon Chalcedor and Hoch Dungalorin! Father, you must put more skin in the game."

"Tell your blooming lady to put some of her fair skin in the game," the prince grumbled.

The remark stung, and for a moment Kristryd felt she lost her footing. Only for a moment. Clearing her throat in regal manner, she replied, "If we speak of her Fey Majesty, then know this: Celene has already reinforced the line and doubled the fairy kingdom's numbers all the way down the Handmaiden and Jewel to the Mill at Altimira. The elves fight and fall no less than the dwarves."

"The line is too long, our numbers too few," the prince protested helplessly. "At the very least, for the love of Berronar's bosom, give me the cooperation of the Pomarj Lords! Else we leave the back door standing open!"

Kristryd did not return to Gilmorack or Bennoth Tine that winter. She and Bagbag spent the rainy months in Gyra with her

father and her brothers Orin and Olin. They laid plans for the spring and the disposition of the armies. At Kristryd's behest, the prince placed the stronger forces of the Royal Army on the west side of the mountains to prevent a repeat of the autumn raids. At the prince's behest, Kristryd made one more desperate appeal to the Pomarj Lords. Again, they paid her entreaties no heed.

Defile's End

Kristryd placed the main strength of her father's army west of the mountains to defend the Uleks, for she supposed that, whatever spoils the tribes carried away in the last raid must be exhausted by spring. Only a matter of time until they struck again. She was in no wise prepared for the word of the scouts, "A host descends from the mountains and marches east down Druid's Defile!"

"You have brought us to the brink of ruin! We could lose the Principality!" Kristryd's brothers Orin and Olin complained. "Pride has blinded you sister. Now we see why a dwuress should not rule."

"The Principality will not fall little brothers," Kristryd pretended to laugh off the affront. "You'll yet see! When I have vanquished the foe, I shall charge you an assything of gelt for such saucy words." Despite the confident bluster, her heart felt sick with dread. She had, indeed, made a terrible blunder. If the alliance had been prepared for war in the east, they might have met the armies of Hroth in that narrow pass and massacred them. As the situation stood, however, they had need to defend the Principality.

Only the fortress called Defile's End stood between goblinkind and the Jewel River Valley. Outnumbered, two-score goblins to every man, the defenders of that worthy fortress looked out over their battlements in dismay as the bowels of the mountains disgorged upon them. The soldiers might have been overrun in a single night if not for the heroism of one Captain of the Watch called Javis Harn. This man rallied the fort and spoke words of courage, urging his soldiers to die and die well rather than abandon their posts. Fourteen days Javis Harn and his heroes held the walls while the Principality mustered. In years thereafter the fort was renamed "Heroes' Hold" in honor of their bravery and resolve.

Muster at Riechsvale

While those noble souls at Heroes' Hold yet held the walls, Kristryd and her father hastily cobbled together men and halflings from Prinzfeld, gnomes of Treehome, the remaining part of the Royal Army, including her father's personal Adamantine Guard

and hastened north. She sent urgent summons to the rangers and woodsmen of Courwood and, with Bagbag's help, a message to her Fey Majesty in Celene by means of magical courier. *Will Yolande send help?* Kristryd's stomach soured at the thought that her one-time friend would let them perish.

A small hodgepodge army came together under the standards of the Principality. The troops pitched their camps on the plains near Urgo's Mine and Foghollow. They made their stand at the mouth of the wide valley called Riechsvale, some day's march from the Mill of Altimira.

Kristryd inspected the camp. Bamadar strode proudly beside his queen, swaggering in his armor and weapons as if he was Clangeddin himself. Kristryd also took the field, gird in her mithril armor, her shield upon her arm and her spear in her hand.

A warm breeze from the south fluttered the banners and pendants. As the sun began to sink behind the mountains, scouts returned from reconnaissance. "A horde of jebli and euroz have joined, one to another, tribe after tribe, until the number of the soldiers we could scarcely guess. Not hundreds, but many thousands!" the halfling scout said.

"Speak plainly," the Prince Corond Olinstaad demanded. "What number? Five thousand?"

"Twice that," the halfling squeaked. "They have overrun Defile's End. They follow close upon our heels and will march through the night. They will be upon us before the dawn."

Kristryd looked around at the encampment and fortifications. She and her father had assembled less than half that number. She smiled grimly. Summoning the captains and commanders, she roused them with steel spirit and brave words, "This is the battle for which I have long waited—the fruit of our hard labors these eight years. The rats forsake our mountains. Now is the tipping point. We have lanced the wound and squeezed the pus out from the infection." With words like this, she raised their spirits and set their resolve more firmly. Likewise, the Prince Corond stirred them with similar slogans, "Tonight, we fight for the Principality! If we fall, so do all those homes from here to Thunderstrike and Havenhill." Then came the battlepriests with their blessings, anointing the soldiers with oil, splashing them with holy ale, and smearing their helms with the blood of sacrifices.

Engineers and stone masons erected barricades, dug out pits, and raised short defense towers. Darkness fell. A long tense night of watching ensued. Soldiers checked and rechecked weapons and

gear. Archers pulled at the bowstrings, testing their draw. Halfling slingers counted and recounted the smooth stones in their pouches. The heavy infantrymen laced up shirts of adamantine chainmail, pulled helmet straps tight, and bound up iron-shod boots.

Both moons rode high by the time the host arrived, but even the keen-eyed halflings could scarcely see the goblinkind as they took the field across the vale. The goblins crept silent as the evening mist until they had come half the way across the vale where they met the first volleys. Then they struck flame to torches and lifted them aloft, lighting torch to torch, until the whole valley seemed ablaze. Under the canopy of licking flame and red light, they rushed forward with the sound of the horns, drums, and shrill screams.

A Worthy Song

Bagbag and the warmages met the host with spells, striking at the advance ranks with lightning, fire, and unseen arrows. Their dweomercraft flashed in the darkness like the flashing of a summer storm, and still the goblins came.

“I like not these odds,” the Prince Corond Olinstaad remarked as he peered into the darkness. The light of the goblin torches revealed their numbers. “We may well die this very night.”

“Then let’s make our deaths worthy of a bard’s song,” brash young Bamadar boasted.

“I don’t care for songs like that,” Kristryd replied pensively. She swept her black curls away from her eyes and tucked them beneath her helmet. “Here they come!” she exclaimed as the torches drew nearer. The ground shook under the pounding feet of the advancing horde.

“Archers at the ready!” the Prince Corond commanded.

“Listen!” Kristryd interrupted. Above the din of drums and war screams, she heard the familiar sound of single horn of Celene, winding in the sky. She lifted her own Celene horn to her lips and answered the call. By the light of the two moons, she saw the distant wings of hippogriffs spread against the sky. Her heart soared with hope and delight.

Swooping down from the darkness, the cavalry of Celene descended on the charging ranks. Darrion led the dive. The hippogriffs pierced the night with their shrieks, scattered the advancing troops, and broke the front line. Cavalry officers mounted upon the bird-horses struck furious blows with lances and swords. Fastaal Dothmar rode at the head of the queen’s cavalry, wielding fearsome, flashing *Concluder*. A chaos of beating wings, ripping talons,

hammering hoofs, and clashing steel collided with goblin, orcs, and hobgoblins. The front ranks turned back and fell beneath the stampeding feet of those who followed.

One great orc rose up and hurled his heavy spear. The point found its mark and unseated Darrion from the saddle of Emolasmairim. That worthy captain of Celene dropped into the midst of the press. They hacked the cavalry officer to death. The dwarves later found his nearly unrecognizable body, trampled and torn, among the dead.

With the elves came Onselvon of Celene. The elvish wizard arrived with a small company of warriors. He offered his services as warmage alongside trueheaded Bagbag, and the two of them hurried to concoct what further spells they might employ. Kristryd's friends, Archosian, Xaxalander, and Peralay greeted her too. "We cannot leave all the glory to the dwarves lest Kristryd's head swells to bursting," young Archosian jested.

The battle lasted the rest of that night and into the day. The allies hoped that the rising of the sun would grant them fresh advantage, but with the morning light came heavy dark rain clouds, carried on the wind up from the Azure. For the duration of the day, the goblinkind pushed their way forward.

"We are overmatched," the Prince Coronad Olinstaad admitted as sun sank again behind the mountains. "We may hold them another night, but we will yet die in this valley!"

Kristryd agreed, "Let this valley be the place we rest our bones."

It might have proven to be just so. Hard pressed were the defenders that night, and none slept. Bagbag and Onselvon waged war with spellcraft until their spells fell silent, both mages utterly exhausted. "Had I the time to prepare, I would raise a mighty ally for our cause!" Bagbag sighed to the queen confidentially. "Alas, I fear that I have failed my lady."

So the magic users spent their spells, and the archers, likewise, spent their arrows. Still the goblins came. The prince's heavy infantry formed a wall of axes with their own armored bodies and warded the hateful creatures back.

Dengar Comes

On the third day the tides turned with the arrival of a fresh column of dwarven soldiers. "Who are these?" Bamadar asked as the new arrivals marched onto the field under the sound of horns and pipes.

"By Ulaa's grace," Kristryd exclaimed. "Those are the colors of

Dengar and pendants of my husband Grallwen. Beyond all hope, my sons have come.”

Kristryd's sons Dwalynd and Pegli led five hundred doughty warriors onto the field. Indeed, those beards had set out from Dengar to march to the Principality months ago. Only by happy coincidence and the design of the gods did they come upon the time and place of battle.

Beneath the pavilion of Prince Olinstaad, Dwalynd and Pegli knelt before their mother. “Your majesty,” they said, “We have come! Moreover, we have left your son Grallsonn on the throne of Dengar, may he reign as long as stone endures! Evrast has been banished. Dengar is united.”

“How? By what woodness or miracle?” Bagbag wanted to know.

“The woodness of our grandfather, Thane Evrast, was miracle enough. The elders of Dengar banished the undermountain king. He left his halls with the host of those few that remained loyal to him, and we closed the gates behind them,” Dwalynd explained.

“This day, I have seen the glory of Balnorhak restored!” Prince Corond Olinstaad wiped tears from his eyes, “Long live my grandson, Thane Grallsonn! Long live my daughter, Kristryd, Queen of the Lortmil Mountains!”

“As long as stone endures!” Bagbag echoed. They all took up the cheer, “As long as stone endures!”

Kristryd's heart hammered inside her chest like Moradin's hammer upon the anvil. She shook herself. “There will be time for toasts and cheers after the work at hand is done,” she reminded them. “First we go to finish these hateful wars.”

Kristryd Falls

They did not finish the wars that day.

In the thick of battle, Kristryd fell at Bamadar's side. He did not see it happen. None did except the one who struck her from behind, a certain treacherous dwarf from Dengar, one yet loyal to Evrast and carrying out his bidding. (For the deed he received a bag of gold and precious gems, and when the matter was discovered, some years later, he received the gibbet.)

Bamadar fought on boldly, assuming the queen and her guard to be yet safe behind him. He chopped through a clutch of hobgoblins and an ogre too, but when he turned back to find the queen, he saw her not, nor her guard. As the press of the battle bore him on, he shouted her name until his voice turned hoarse and could

no longer make a sound.

At the end of it, a mass of the goblins lay heaped and strewn on the field of battle. The lesser part of the host turned back and fled into the mountains from whence they had come, but a greater part broke through the line and advanced into the south.

“Woe to us,” Prince Corond lamented. “Now the land lays naked with none to stop these gundyguts all the way down the Prince’s Road. They will loot and pillage a peaceful people and set all Prinzfeld to the torch.”

Chapter 28

SIEGE OF CASTLE HAGTHAR

“Now the rats flee as the ship sinks,” Urgush remarked to himself. Tidings of the battle of Riechsvale had travelled quickly through the mountains. “Gather around me,” the half-blood summoned the leaders of those few clans that yet remained under his sway. He tried to imagine how Hroth might rally their hearts if he were present. He chose his words accordingly. “Hear what I will say. I won’t wait here to be buggered by bearded dwur boys and frolicking olvin ass-lickers.” He lifted his eyes reverently in the direction of the distant Yatils even though they remained far out of sight from where he stood on the high slopes of the northern Lortmils. “Am I not the servant of the great witch? Time to leave these stinking dwur-shit holes and join her fight against those putz-sucking Perrenlanders. Then we will eat and drink without fear, and she will feed us the flesh of men!”

With inspiring words like this, he rallied those tribes and clans that remained yet loyal to him. Urgush gathered up the treasure of gemstones he had stolen from the treasuries of Dengar. He loaded the precious cargo on wagons with many other treasures, indeed, all the treasures of his tribe and those beneath him—a lovedrury to place before the archmagis.

Urgush dared not lead his meager host along the roads of the dwarven kingdoms. He brought them instead over the Kron Hills. They passed uncomfortably close to the borders of Celene. They crept along beneath the wide-spreading boughs of mighty Roanwoods, where no road winds. They made their way swiftly and in silence, as best they could. The gnomes they encountered fled before them. At length, Urgush descended onto the Veluna High Road as he had done before many years earlier. On the previous occasion, he marched his host boldly (and foolishly) against Celene. This time, he turned north toward the lands of Vol.

None rose up to challenge them until they reached the border. At the edge of the theocracy, a formidable keep called Castle Hagthar stood as a resolute sentinel straddling a steep uplift in the

land overlooking the Veluna High Road where it crossed the border. A certain Knight of Veluna called Sir Clayborne commanded the garrison and kept the watch.

Urgush and his horde laid siege to Castle Hagthar on the first day of Planting (cY 507). They far outnumbered those within the walls, but the strength of the fortification and the height which it commanded gave the defenders every advantage. Urgush sent his goblinkind to scale the escarpment and take the walls, but the defenders repelled his fang-faced soldiers with arrows, boulders, flaming pitch, and scalding oil.

Urgush sent reconnaissance missions to strip the lands about to build siege equipment, but his reconnaissance missions never returned from the elven woods. By a stroke of good fortune, he captured a clutch of trolls and forced them to hurl rocks against the battlements and to beat a roan ram against the gates while his goblins wasted volleys of arrows launched over the walls. From time to time, Urgush came out and brandished the Red Medusa shield. Not only did the site of the shield inspire his followers, it terrified the men defending the walls. Inevitably, one of them turned to stone. The trolls took turns trying to shatter the petrified soldier with hurled rocks.

Sir Clayborne sent urgent summons to the allies. He dispatched messages to Enstad, to Gilmorack, and to Dengar, beseeching them to break the siege. If Kristryd had received the message, she might have hastened some relief, but she had fallen at Riechsvale. Behind her she left the forces of Gilmorack stretched so thin they could scarce guard their own vaulted halls, much less offer assistance to the Velunese. "Besides," the chieftans at Gilmorack observed, "the halls of Dengar are closer to Hagthar; let the duty fall to the neighbors."

Meantime in Dengar, the new undermountain king, Thane Grallsonn, received the summons with disinterest. "I have not yet sufficiently consolidated my power," he observed. "Nor can I risk sending off another contingent until my brothers return from the south. Are the heads of ten Volman worth the blood of a single Dengar dwarf? Not according to my exchange rates! If the goblins want to flee, I say, 'Let them flee.' So much the better for us!"

Nor did the summons move the heart of the castellan at nearby Dorob Kiltlduum. The priestess Gilvgola who resided there might have led a troop of axes to the rescue, but on word of Kristryd's fall, dark dreams and visions of the future haunted her. She advised the castellan seal the gates of the fortress and withdraw the bridge. This

he did, so the summons found no welcome. Meantime, Gilvola travelled south to make her rounds.

Nor came any answer from Celene.

The Priests of Rao

There were living near Hagthar, in those days, some holy men of Rao who heard about the siege. One of their high priests led a dozen of these to Castle Hagthar and prevailed upon Sir Clayborne, saying, "Let us go down to the euroz and jebli and speak words of peace with them. Surely Rao will smile upon our efforts."

Pious Sir Clayborne, a paladin of St. Cuthbert, doubted the efficacy of such an effort. He thought not much of the ways of the holy men of Rao, but neither did he feel it fit to deny them that which they asked. They appeared as wise men with long beards and flowing robes, and over their faces they wore the mask of Rao. "Who am I to naysay men of god?" Clayborne conceded.

The twelve holy men descended to face Urgush beneath a flag of parley. Urgush took them, one and all, and impaled them on stakes before the walls of Castle Hagthar, one man per day. Each day he said, "Open your gates and surrender your walls! My people will pass through your lands peaceably. But if not, tomorrow I impale another of your raggedy men, and the day after that, another." After twelve days, twelve martyrs of Rao hung limply upon sharpened stakes set into the ground before the walls of Hagthar.

Alone at Castle Hagthar

Urgush smeared their blood upon an altar, burned the choice fats and entrails, and offered prayers to the Yatil Queen, but she did not answer him. The Velunese watching from the walls turned their prayers to St. Cuthbert and Heironeous. The siege continued for nine months. Travel between Veluna and Enstad came to a halt. Reinforcements from Veluna came, as did allies from the Kron Hills gnomes, but the silence of the elves and the dwarves became a matter of deep offense to the Velunese.

Urgush employed goblins to undermine the walls. They might have succeeded had they not gone astray and missed the castle. By night, Urgush sent kobolds to scale the walls and creep in through arrow loops and balistaria. They slit the throats of what sleeping guards they found before being discovered and tossed over the walls. Urgush brought a band of ogres and set them to work heaping stones to create a siege ramp, and this enterprise kept his forces busy most of the summer.

The orcs and goblins hunted the hillsides for game meat, but they found not enough. By the end of the summer, the army had exhausted their supplies, eaten the kobolds and smaller goblins, and started to eat their way through the larger ones. Meanwhile, the men in the fort had all they needed, and plenty more in supplies, for Urgush could not pen them in so long as his soldiers remained below the escarpment.

By Sunsebb, Urgush and his goblins completed an enormous sloping siege ramp reaching to the top of the escarpment and a second one that laid up against the castle's wall. As they sounded their horns and rushed up the ramp to finally take the walls, gnome sappers provided by Father Furduch detonated magical explosives cleverly concealed beneath the ramps. The detonations turned the piles of stones into a cascading landslide which buried the charging soldiers. Those waiting below to take their turn at the ramps also disappeared beneath the collapse of tumbling stones.

The dust settled. Urgush wailed and clutched at his head. That night, under the cover of darkness, he slunk away with the remainder of his hungry army, back into the Lortmil Mountains.

The Velunese who held that fort for nine months should have had a song to commemorate the deed, but their heroism went mostly unnoticed. What did not go unnoticed was the failure of Kristryd's alliance to come to their aid. The Velunese College of Bishops convened and voted to officially withdraw from the effort. Thus the pious Velunese washed their hands of the Hateful Wars.

Chapter 29

ESMERIN

A SOFT MATTRESS in a clean, well-lit place. Sunlight poured in through a round window. Beside the bed stood a small chair and desk. From pegs on the far wall hung a coat of glimmering mithril armor. Next to it, a short sword, still in its scabbard.

Kristryd passed her hands over her body, but she felt no wounds. On the desk beside the bed she found her personal belongings, including her comb and her silver-framed mirror. What was the last thing she remembered? A stab in the back, a blow to the head, a slow tumble into darkness. “How came I to this place?” she asked aloud as she sat up in the bed. “Where is this place?”

“How did you come here?” Alton Chubb Quickbread came through the open doorway into Kristryd’s room. He waved his hands above his head dramatically as he explained, “Your big griff carried you here. Upset all the eagles too. They were screaming at each other, swooping around, but your horse-bird set you down in the town square. They told me, ‘Alton, you will never believe what just happened. A big blonke hippogriff carried the broken body of pretty dwarfess, all dressed in mithril armor, and laid her down right in the center of town.’ I didn’t need to be told twice. I knew it could only be you, my fairhead.”

“You healed my wounds?”

“I also made muffins!” the halfling boasted.

“Is this Prinzfeld?” Kristryd asked, swinging her legs out of the bed.

Alton shook his head. “You’re not in Prinzfeld, my lady.”

He brought her a wash basin with heated water, and he set out some fresh clothing: a heavy fabric skirt, such as the halfling women wear, a pair of knee-high soft leather boots with long laces, a silk blouse that ruffled at the sleeves, and an embroidered vest, set with precious gems for clasps. Kristryd washed, put on the clothing, and then examined herself in the mirror as she combed out her hair. *I look like a proper hobniz wife!*

Stepping out from her bedroom, she found herself in a

comfortable hillside hovel. Paneled walls, wooden floors, and finely worked wooden furniture made the underground rooms feel finished and homely. The sun shone in through a large round porthole window onto a small dining table already set with teacups, saucers, and a platter bearing a neat stack of muffins, still steaming from the oven. Alton appeared from the kitchen with a kettle of hot water.

"You're looking whole and healthy," he observed as he poured the water for tea. "The clothes fit too."

"I fell on the battlefield," Kristryd's mind searched to make meaning.

"A good as dead you were! But now it's time for muffins and tea." He gestured toward a chair, and she sat. Her eyes moved to the window, and she gave a startled gasp. She was looking out over a pleasant garden at the end of which stood two enormous women hanging out wash on a line strung between the tops of two tall spruce trees.

"The neighbors," Alton explained casually as if it were a matter of indifference.

"Those are stone giants," Kristryd corrected with dismay.

"Yes, they are."

The Hidden Land

After muffins and tea, Alton Chubb led Kristryd out into the town proper, a beautiful village of pleasant groves and gardens. Kristryd struggled to take it all in. "I thought the hidden land a wives' tale!"

"There's some truth to wives' tales," Alton replied.

The city sat at the center of a forested valley surrounded by tall, wooded mountain slopes. A fabulous waterfall, more than a mile in the distance, plummeted from an impossible height. It formed a rushing river which wound its way through the valley before disappearing in a whirlpool called The Swelchie on the eastern side of the valley. Giant eagles wheeled about lazily in the sky above, guarding the valley below from any who might wander too close.

"Apart from the eagles, I don't know if any eye has ever seen the Valley of Esmerin from above. A powerful illusion cloaks the entire land to conceal our home from those who would pillage us," Alton explained. "But your hippogriff seemed to find us easily enough."

"Yolande asked me about Esmerin. I thought she mocked me," Kristryd mused.

In most ways, Esmerin could have been a typical halfling village, such as Riddling's Pass in Prinzfeld. Tallfellow halflings lived

in comfortable hillside homes like Alton's. He himself boasted Lightfoot ancestry. "I'm not originally from here," he admitted. "But they let me come and go as I please." He shrugged, "I guess I have a trustworthy face."

"How do folk come and go from this place?"

"Not easily," Alton chuckled. "The giants have their own paths, but the rest of us enter the valley only by a most-forbidding secret pass. It involves scaling sheer cliff walls and taking passage through tunnels concealed in the mountainside behind magically hidden doors. "

Despite exterior appearances, Esmerin was not a typical halfling village. Alongside the halflings lived clans of peaceful stone giants. "The giants and halflings of Esmerin have lived in mutual harmony, hidden away in this valley, for centuries," Alton told Kristryd as she looked with wonder on the enormous folk going about their daily chores.

"That's a difficulty for me," she admitted. "If there's any one certain thing I know about being a dwarf, it's that we hate giants and giants hate us. In Gyra, where I grew up, there were priests of Ulaa who made pilgrimage into the mountains every year just to hunt giants. I myself accompanied them more than once."

Alton sighed. "Here in Esmerin, we gave up on hatred centuries ago. The giants here have learned the good-hearted ways of the halflings, and the halflings have learned their disinterest in the affairs of the outside world. They are remarkable craftsmen; their skills with the chisel and forge rival those of your own people."

"How do you feed them? In all the places I have ever been, giants will eat halflings and dwarves and anything else that they can fit in a pot," Kristryd said with a shudder.

"We have rich soil, fertile fields, abundant gardens, and healthy flocks. We have plenty for everyone," Alton assured her.

Of Muffins in the Morning

The fair secluded valley seemed to her like the reward of paradise reserved for those who have lived virtuously. *Have the gods indeed favored me, despite my sins, to bring me to such a place of light and laughter? Surely I am lost in one of Sebanine's dreams!*

The citizens of Esmerin had an easy and unsophisticated air about them. They conducted themselves without pretense as if they held their personal honor and prestige of little account. They did love to laugh at simple jokes, the more-often told the better received. They knew little that transpired in the world beyond their

secluded vale, nor did they show any interest in hearing about wars and alliances. Theirs was a world regulated by a common love for daily routines and the regular business of tending gardens, fishing for trout, and following flocks. The rise and set of the sun and the changing of the seasons ordered their lives. The soils of Esmerin lavished such abundance that none had any great need, for anyone who so desired could plant a garden or sow a field and reap thirty, fifty, or even one-hundred-fold.

For Kristryd, each morning began with hot black tea, fresh eggs, and warm muffins, or pound cakes, or raisin bread, or salted soda bread, or twist-bread, or tipsy-cakes—depending on the whim of her host. Over a long lazy breakfast, Kristryd and Alton discussed all the matters of the world: philosophy, theology, poetry, geography, geology, zoology, and xenology. Although she was twice or thrice the halfling's age and could claim a prestigious degree from the schools of Niole Dra, the halfling priest seemed by no measure less educated. He could speak with authority on a wide variety of subjects, and he knew the goings-on of many nations and peoples. He spoke fluent elvish and both the dialects of the dwarfish tongue commonly employed in the Lortmil Mountains. "I enjoy these breakfast conversations," Alton often said. "The folk of Esmerin have good hearts, but most of them know precious little of the rest of Oerth or the affairs of the Flanaess, and those that do know the outside world prefer to forget!"

After breakfast, they fed the chickens and spent a few hours laboring in Alton's garden's, weeding and pulling, culling and cutting. Kristryd always kept herself busy. "Indolence is a sin," she warned. "At least that's what we dwarves always say."

"Then I am a frightful sinner without hope of reform," Alton countered. "Ehlenestra have mercy upon me!"

After lunch, Alton received callers. The peoples of Esmerin sought his talents as a healer. The sick, those in pain, and those suffering from various bodily ailments, travelled to the village where Alton dwelt. For some he prepared medicines; upon others he laid hands, and over still others, he prayed in the name of Ehlonna and all the gods of light and healing. Stone giants also sought Alton's healing, and the priest healed them without reservations. In payment for his services, many of his visitors brought him food-stuffs: wheels of cheese, salted mutton, pickled vegetables, and fresh produce. Kristryd never went hungry in the house of Alton Quickbread. The giants offered remarkably cut gemstones which glittered in sunlight and cast prismatic rays of splendor. The gems

arrested the attention of the dwarffess, for she had not seen the like of them even among the most skilled of gnomish and dwarfish gemcutters. "You should see the fitted-arches and spanning blocks of their homes! These are not cave-dwellers. In working stone and gems, the stone giants have no peers!" Alton said one morning over breakfast.

"In my father's kingdom," Kristryd mused, "Men and dwarves, halflings and gnomes, live peaceably. And in the Duchy of Ulek and in Veluna, elves and men dwell at peace. But who has seen such opposites dwell as closely or as peaceably as the peoples of Esmerin?"

"The rule of Esmerin is simple enough for any people to live by," Alton replied. "Put yourself in the other's shoes."

"I can't imagine a giant's feet would fit too well into hobniz shoes!"

"Nor will a giant's shoes fit my feet," Alton agreed. "That is just the point. One must imagine what it is like to have big feet, or small feet, as the case may be."

"I don't know," Kristryd dismissed the idealism with a shrug. "A giant's shoes will always be too large for a halfling, and a halfling's shoes will always be too small for a giant."

Alton poured a second cup of tea and sipped at it thoughtfully for a moment, peering out the round porthole window over his sunlit gardens. "I'll tell you a story about the first giant and the first halfling of Esmerin," he said at length. "Hobniz owned a farm with gardens, fields, orchards, and vineyard. Giant herded flocks of sheep and goats on the mountainsides. Both had large families and many mouths to feed. When the harvest came, Hobniz said to his goodwife, 'We small folk have an abundance and all that we need to feed our children, but our neighbor is large and his family too. Will he have enough to feed his children this winter, or will they suffer famine?' The next day Hobniz hitched his pony to a wagon loaded heavy with produce from his gardens, fields, orchards, and vineyards. He set out for Giant's home. Who should he meet on the way but Giant who was, at that very hour, on his way to the halfling's home with a flock of sheep and goats. 'Where are you going with these flocks?' Hobniz asked. Giant replied, 'We giant folk have sufficient for what we need to feed our children, but you, Hobniz, are so small. How will you feed your children this winter or keep them warm? I bring you these sheep and these goats.'"

The Water of Oblivion

The days in Esmerin faded dreamlike one into the next. Kristryd

could not say if she had been weeks or months in that place. Alton marveled over the improvements she made to the garden and the grounds. "Thanks to my houseguest, I have fine new walk paved with flat stones that fit together tighter than the pieces of a puzzle," he boasted. He could point to other improvements to the property, "Best part is that she works for muffins and tea."

On market days, Kristryd and Alton visited the market square of Esmerin proper. She delighted in the variety of vegetables, fruits, nuts, peppers, breads, cheeses, spices, flavored oils, dried goods, fresh fish, dried fish, salted meats, woodcraft, glassworks, pottery, scrimshaw arts, leathercraft, wool, linen, items of clothing, and everything a person might find needful, both in halfling sizes and giant sizes—all of it made locally within the valley.

Not everyone she saw was a halfling or a giant. She caught sight of unexpected characters in the streets of Esmerin, working behind a market stall or lingering in the gardens or wandering about the shady lanes or strolling the riverwalk near the swirling Swelchie. Here and there she saw an elf or human, occasionally another dwarf; gnomes were not uncommon. Even more surprising, she espied an orc cobbler selling shoes and boots, goblin hoopers working at barrels, an ogre peeling potatoes, and once by night, she saw a dark-skinned and white-haired elf woman playing a reed flute beneath the light of the stars and moons. Kristryd's eyes beheld a stranger one yet—an unoerthly beautiful creature resembling a woman horned and hooved, winged and clawed, blinking in the sunlight and nodding politely, revealing fangs behind a timid smile.

"From where and whence comes one such as that creature?" Kristryd asked Alton the next morning at breakfast.

"The River Lethe that flows through this valley flows also through other worlds," Alton explained. "It flows from the highest of the Seven Heavens and empties into the lowest of the Nine Hells. It has happened that, a few times, some from the lower regions have found their way upstream and risen from the Swelchie, but in their passage, the water has purged them of all malice and wickedness. Those who wash themselves in Lethe purge their souls of all memories. The river washes away guilt, impurity, all shame, all memory of being, draining it all away into the lowest hell. Conscience-stricken sinners seek out fabled Esmerin. The inconsolable broken-hearted come searching too. They seek to bathe in the water of sweet oblivion. Only a few ever find their way. Those fortunate few who do, immerse themselves and find a true rebirth."

"Is that what the stone giants did?"

“The giants came before the time of men and dwarves and before the time of halflings. They discovered the river. Esmerin, they named it. In their tongue, the word means ‘oblivion.’”

“How did the halflings come to Esmerin? Did they too drink the water of oblivion?”

“That will be another story, but as long as we yet wait for the tea kettle to sing, I can tell it in brief.” Alton’s voice took on a singsong quality as he told the tale, “Centuries past, the Flanaess suffered in cruel bondage under wicked Vecna. (No need to blanch so. No evil will come of speaking the name in this place.) That foul sorcerer, father of liches, sought to purge the world of what is good and lives in the light. He hated living things and especially the olvenkind and hobniz folk. In those days a certain village of tallfellows survived the purges only because a neighboring clan of human folk protected them. Those men hid away in a certain lair that Vecna could not find, and their rangers did the armies of the Spidered Throne much mischief through ambush and traps. Vecna’s agents turned to the tallfellows and said, ‘We have no quarrel with you hobniz. Reveal to us the hideaway of these men and we will spare your village.’ Perhaps from fear or perhaps by some greed for gain, the folk of that village betrayed the secret location of the rangers’ clan. Vecna thanked them by slaying the tallfellows along with the menfolk. Insane with terror and tormented by shame and guilt, the survivors found their way to Esmerin to drink from the Lethe and wash away their sin.”

“Now I know you’re making things up. If the Lethe really made the halflings forget everything, they would not have been able to remember that tale to tell it to you in the first place,” Kristryd laughed.

“I hadn’t thought of that! Perhaps you’re right. But the properties of the river are beyond dispute,” Alton insisted. “I myself have no memory of how I first came here or why.”

The tea kettle began to sing and Alton retrieved it from the stove. Kristryd stared pensively into the tealeaves that floated to the surface of her cup.

Leaving the Hidden Land

“As much as I would prefer to live here forever more in your peaceful valley,” Kristryd explained to the elder’s circle of Esmerin, “I cannot stay here. Nor can you require it of me. I am a noble born and noble wed queen among my people. The lives of many good folk depend upon me. I have already stayed far too

long. What is worse, I am under a most terrible oath before the gods, and I must strive to fulfill that vow so long as any strength remains in my bones.”

“It is not our way to let strangers enter our valley,” Bunglethumbs the stone giant intoned his words slowly. “But when they do, our law says the stranger must never leave. Why not bathe yourself in the river and forget your sorrows?”

“But you allow Alton to come and go as he pleases,” Kristryd objected. “Surely you can also make an exception for me.”

“Alton comes and goes,” the tallfellow called Lord Theophilus admitted, “only because he was coming and going before we knew he was coming and going, and before we realized it, it was already too late to do much about it.”

“And I have a trustworthy face,” Alton put in helpfully.

“I have a mission and destiny to fulfill,” Kristryd insisted. “It is a mission and destiny which will benefit Esmerin too. I am sworn to purge all these mountains of goblinkind.”

“How would your war be of any benefit to Esmerin?” Lord Theophilus asked. “The goblinkind protect these mountains from men and dwarves who would otherwise stumble into our hidden valley, discover our secrets, and steal away all that we value.”

“We dwarves have a saying: ‘A thing is either done or it is not. There is no half done.’ I must finish what I have begun, though I no longer have any stomach for it.”

Alton sighed. The elders shook their heads.

“Consider this,” Kristryd tried again. “I do not even know where I am. I was carried here while unconscious. Whether near or far, north or south, I have no way of knowing. Let me leave the way I came, blindfolded, and I swear by Ulaa and Moradin and Berronar, I shall never reveal your secret or tell another soul of this place.”

“I will agree to this,” Bunglethumbs resigned. “Let her be blindfolded, and I will carry her by winding ways so that she will not find her way back, even if she would want.” The elders’ circle agreed, albeit reluctantly and only after further debates.

The following day, Bunglethumbs carried Kristryd away on his shoulders. Although a blindfold tightly covered her eyes and Bunglethumbs did his best to confuse her, pacing this way and that, turning around and turning back, climbing and descending, she could not be disoriented. She knew exactly where she was. Dwarves have a keen sense of the lay of the land and especially their own mountains. Nevertheless, Kristryd made as if she could not

be certain if the giant turned north or south. While Bunglethumbs carried her aloft, she made conversation with him.

“A pity I have sworn not to tell anyone about this adventure. I should like to boast of riding upon a giant’s shoulders.”

“You mustn’t speak of it,” Bunglethumbs cautioned.

“If not for this blindfold, I could boast of having seen further than others by standing upon your shoulders,” she jested.

“I am sorry for the blindfold,” Bunglethumbs rumbled sincerely. “A necessary evil.”

“Is evil necessary? I wonder how Esmerin remains neutral when there is evil in world?” she mused. “Some would say that’s evil.”

“Were I the euroz, dwelling in these mountains so many generations, I would name you the evil one,” the giant hmphed.

“I see things differently,” Kristryd argued. “I believe that good is good and evil is evil. Evil might wrongly think itself good, but the gods are the judges!”

“Then let the gods be the judges,” Bunglethumbs agreed. “I am too simple to decide who is evil and who is good. What is right and what is wrong I can say easy enough, but the question of who is evil and who is good, that one lies far beyond me. When good does wrong, is it not evil? And if evil does right, is that not good?”

“I have burned orc families alive and thrown their children and infants to their deaths, dashing them upon the rocks. Do you call me evil or good?”

“Well now! There you go. It’s an agathokakological puzzle. That’s why I take no sides.”

Late that night, Bunglethumbs gently lowered Kristryd to the ground and removed the blindfold from her eyes. Her dwarven senses had not failed her. She knew exactly where she stood, only a short way from Defile’s End, near the cairn that marked the place the Prince Consort had been ambushed.

“I thank you Bunglethumbs,” Kristryd said as she straightened herself and hoisted up the sack of her belongings and her supplies. “Perhaps we will meet again.”

“If not this time,” Bunglethumbs agreed, “Then another, just as we have surely met before.”

Kristryd bowed low. The stone giant returned the gesture before turning away and stomping off in the direction of Esmerin.

Chapter 30

BACK FROM THE DEAD

THE LORTMIL QUEEN carefully folded the garments of Esmerin and packed them away in her sack. She girded herself in her mithril armor and strapped her sword to her side, and pulled a red travelling cloak overtop. Slinging the sack over her shoulder, she set off toward Courwood. Not long had she walked before passing the burnt ruin of Defile's End. The blackened and broken stones made her shudder. She offered prayers for the fallen.

A few miles further brought her to the cairn that sheltered the bones of the Prince Consort's host. Like a wight clambering out from a tomb, a wild-haired and wild-eyed elfess climbed from behind the stones and leapt up on top of the cairn. She wore only a loose-fitting hair cloak bound at the waist by a thin leather belt. "Hail, Queen of the Lortmil Mountains," Edda saluted. "What now for Kristryd Olinsdotter?"

"Edda!" Kristryd exclaimed as she recovered from the start. "I am almost glad to see you. Have you more riddles for me?"

"Just this one," Edda replied. "How did the Red Fang orcs know to waylay the Prince Consort at this place?"

"I imagine they fell upon him as a random act of savage banditry, not unlike a dozen's dozen that occur in these mountains every year."

"Perhaps. Perhaps you are right," Edda feigned a naiveté that belied her words.

"I feel as if we have had this conversation before Edda. If you know something more, you might say so." Kristryd grew impatient and rested her hand upon the hilt of her sword where it hung at her belt.

The wild elf continued, "The Grand Court whispered about the People of the Testing. Some said that we plotted against the life of the Prince Consort."

"I don't understand your pitchkettle riddles Edda."

"Perhaps you have not heard that the queen's dandy led a strike deep beneath the mountains. They say that the third time

is the magic. This time the fastaal made good on his oaths. None of the Red Fang orcs remain in the bowl, though many begged for their lives.”

“That’s good news to my ears.”

“Is it? The fastaal persuaded the unhappy survivors to spill the true tale of the ambush. They said an old dwurwife hired their tribe for the deed. She paid them in horse’s flesh.”

A stab of fear plunged into Kristryd’s heart.

Walk through Fairyland

Kristryd made her solitary way northward along the main road until she came beneath the boughs of Celene. *At least the queen has not yet banned me from her kingdom, else I would have been turned back by now.* Although she saw them not, she knew that half a dozen elven warriors of the borderwatch (not less) marked her steps. She walked all that day, and as the sun slipped behind the Lortmils, she resolved to continue on without stopping that night. The evening felt warm, like a midsummer night, but midsummer had long since passed. *It must already be the end of Reaping and start of Goodmonth! By the gods, I was in Esmerin longer than I thought!*

The familiar fragrances and scents of summer in the Fey Kingdom evoked a nostalgia for days long past when she had enjoyed the delights of the elven land under the queen’s good favor. As dusk settled on the woods, a distant tinkle of bells caught her ears—elves dancing in the Twilight Woods. Fireflies flickered in the thickening darkness; pixies darted about and illuminated the night with their own magical light, and phosphorescent mosses made the wide roadway through the trees glow like magic. All the night air filled with the swelling symphony of crickets, frogs, nightingales, and the laughing waters of small springs and splashing brooks. In harmony with the sounds of the summer night, unworldly voices of the elves sang aching odes to the Seldarine. Kristryd sighed over the beauty, adjusted her pack over her shoulders, pulled the strap tighter, and continued on her way.

In this manner she passed through the Fey Kingdom over days and weeks. By night she slept under the open air, fearing no danger. By day she gathered berries and mushrooms to supplement the supply of apple bread, almond cakes, sesame nutrolls, soda bread, hard sausages, and cheeses that Alton had packed into her sack for the journey. She saw few travelers on the road. Elves recognized her with surprise and greeted her politely as “Your Majesty.” From

these she learned news from Enstad and the course of the war.

Each step took her closer to the capital where she knew her Fey Majesty must yet be seated upon the Blossoming Throne. An irrational thrill of hope rose in her heart. *Perhaps I will be welcomed!* She drove the thought from her head and scolded herself, *I will not be so quick to forget the insult the queen has done me! She treats me like one of her spurned and mally suitors.* Still, the hope persisted. *If she summoned me to her gardens ...*

The Three Heroes

The Fey Queen did not summon her, nor did the elven guard ever acknowledge her presence as she passed through the midst of their kingdom. No one paid her much attention at all, not until she reached the place where the road passes over the Handmaiden near Enstad. Three old friends stood upon the bridge awaiting her: Xaxalander Deravnye the Magsman, Young Prince Archosian, and noble Peralay of the Hunt.

“May I have your permission to cross the river?” Kristryd asked according to the rules of etiquette that govern fairy lands.

“You may ask, but you will not receive until you have paid our toll,” Prince Archosian yawned with false air of disinterest.

“State the price.”

“Tell us the tale of how you have passed over from the land of the dead,” Peralay said. “If we deem it a worthy tale, we will grant you leave to pass over this water.”

“And tell us where you have been hiding since you were lost at Riechsvale,” Xaxalander Deravnye added. “We searched the whole battlefield, and we even pursued the orcs back into their holes, lest you had been taken prisoner.”

“If the tale is the toll for crossing, it is a price I cannot afford to pay. I shall have no recourse except to swim across the river, and I don’t know how to swim.”

Archosian insisted in good humor. “Then you cannot pass. You must, instead, dine with us tonight in Enstad.”

“Nay,” Kristryd shook her head. “I will not enter that city again unless the queen summons me.”

The three heroes agreed to let her cross the river after all, and they agreed to accompany her on the Way of Tears as far as the Kron Hills. As they walked beneath the roans, evening shadows stretched across the road. They told her the tale of all that had befallen them since the Battle of Riechsvale.

Battle at the Edge of the Void

Having failed to find Kristryd among the wounded or the dead, Peralay set his cooshee hounds on the scent, but even the hounds could not track her. Xaxa and Archosian assumed she had been dragged away by Hroth or perhaps by the Red Fang Orcs. The Fastaal Dothmar proposed another attempt to penetrate the Karrak Bowl to satisfy his oaths against the Red Fang tribe and perhaps rescue Kristryd from their clutches. The heroes agreed. The fastaal brought along a company of elite elven swordsmen summoned from Clan Sherendyl. They took no dwarves with them this time, nor did they consult their maps. Instead, they relied upon Peralay's cooshee hounds to lead them through the winding maze of those the dark depths.

On the third day beneath the mountains, they came to the Karrak Bowl. Xaxalander the Magsman crept through the outer encampment, scaled the walls undetected and, at a prearranged time, removed the bars of the gates. Fastaal Dothmar and his warriors came upon the fortress so quickly that the orcs within it scarcely understood before the doors flung open and elven warriors poured into their midst. Indeed, the Red Fang were unprepared. They still licked at their wounds from Riechsvale where they had lost the better number of their warriors.

The orcs shrank back before the flashing sword *Concluder* until a shaman of Shargaas came casting mighty spells like a seasoned warmage. The elves fell to unseen terrors and the chill touch of the undead that the shaman commanded. Yet they persevered. The Karrak Bowl filled with the blood of Gruumsh.

The orcs retreated before the elves and closed themselves up inside a temple dedicated to their gods. Fastaal Dothmar and his heroes fought their way through temple and into the depths therein. In those awful dungeons, they came upon a place of vile darkness. Baleful evil rose like thick smoke from a great round hole in the stone, twenty feet in diameter, ringed by profane monoliths to foul gods of the orcs. No light could penetrate the gloom of that place. The orcs fought savagely to defend their sacred ploutonion, and many of the fastaal's heroes fell along the rim of that portal to darkness.

Soaked in the blood of his foes, Dothmar fought on in the darkness. Unstopped by the dweomercraft of the shaman and the icy touch of undeath, the fastaal prevailed. One after another, he cast the wicked priest and his acolytes into their own sacred pit

while the Sherendyl warriors slew the last of the orcs. Such a ghastly wailing terror of ghosts and undead came rising up from the pit that the elves fled the unclean place and did not return even to retrieve their own fallen. Content that they had at last avenged the Prince Consort Triserron, they quit the dark places beneath the mountains.

Witch Hunt

When the three warriors had finished their tale, Kristryd said, "Edda told me some pieces of that adventure. She also said that you took prisoners who spoke of being paid to ambush the Prince Consort."

"Indeed! We puzzled over that a long while," Peralay said. "Some among us speak the tongue of the euroz and the jebli. Dothmar interrogated a few of those who begged his clemency. In the end, he slew them too, for they knew no language but flattery and lies. But a certain acolyte of the shaman knew a good deal of all that had transpired. From the tongue of that miserable spell-binder, the fastaal learned that one of the three sisters, Hedvyg I heard him say, had paid them handsomely in horseflesh to ambush the Prince Consort."

Kristryd spat upon the ground at the mention of Hedvyg's name. "Would that all three sisters were dead and forgotten."

"Yes, and that is the real matter of our business with you. Her Fey Majesty has commissioned all of her heroes to hunt down Hedvyg and make an end of her. We intend to be the ones to accomplish that quest," Archosian explained.

At the mention of Yolande, Kristryd stopped in her tracks and stared vacantly over her shoulder in the direction of Enstad. Her mind turned over an idea. "I know the bate that will draw out the witch. But it will take some time for me to settle matters and to set the trap. Travel with me now, and we shall catch the third sister and bring an end to these wars."

The Binding Oath

The Lortmil Queen and her elven travelling companions turned aside from the road to avoid the siege of Hagthar still underway. "I have neither time nor strength of arms for such an entanglement now. Let the men of Veluna hold their own border," she sighed. The detour took them east to Dorob Kiltthduum where dwelt Gilvgola, the Sacred Heart of Berronar. The priestess had only just returned from her summer rounds, arriving back at the dwarven fort she called home on time for the moon of Brewfest.

The corpulent priestess welcomed Kristryd as one might welcome a dear departed friend when found alive in a happy dream. The priestess offered up festival sacrifices of thanksgivings in addition to those of the holy day.

At the conclusion of the festivities, Kristryd sought counsel of Gilvgola, "I have taken a foolish oath in the names of Moradin, Berronar, and all the gods of my fathers. I spoke in haste and under sway of passion. I would now renounce my oath and have it annulled."

The Sacred Heart smiled with pity upon Olinstaad's daughter but shook her head resolutely. "If I had the power to annul oaths, I would be powerful indeed! You have sworn in the name of our Father and Mother. The matter remains between you and the gods. Who is Gilvgola to absolve you or annul your obligations?"

"By Berronar's beard!" Kristryd cursed bitterly. "Then I have no recourse but to continue this hateful affair! If you cannot free me from this burden, you must help me carry it. Come with me to Gilmorack, you and all your best warriors too. The tide turned against us at Riechsvale. We must move with alacrity or lose all the stones for which we have labored these many years."

The Sacred Heart gave thought before replying. "Already the castellan has sent away what axes we can spare. Already our young dwarves have fought for you, and many have fallen on faraway fields. Scarcely enough of us remain here to defend these walls or hold these lands about us. Even now Urgush lays siege to Hagthar, a few days march from here."

"Yet you will come with me," Kristryd insisted emphatically. "Ask Berronar, seek an oracle, fast and pray, divine what signs you must, but come with me you will! Mother! I need the gods with me if I am to satisfy the debt, and I need you beside me too."

The Sacred Heart inquired of Berronar. The auguries were good. At the conclusion of the festival, Kristryd left Dorob Kiltlduum with Gilvgola and the remaining warriors of that place, several hundred strong.

Kristryd's Sons

From Dorob Kiltlduum the small army crossed over to Irondelve and recruited Father Furduch for the mission. The gnomish priest of Ulaa executed a few summersaults to express his delight over the unanticipated good news of Kristryd's survival. "Salvations surely earned! From the dead you have returned!" he observed. Father Furduch came out with sixty gnome warriors, each one a

veteran of the recent battles.

The path from Irondelve brought them north until the road to Tristane and to Devarnish, where Kristryd's sons, Thane Grallson and Pegli, came out to meet her. They arrived at the crossroads of Devarnish with canopied pavilions under the noble pennants and colors of Dengar. A host of dwarven warriors lined either side of the road to cheer her approach. The fanfare of sixty trumpeters announced her arrival.

"Mother, have you returned from the halls of Dunathoin?" Pegli asked. "We have already observed the thirty days of mourning over you."

"I yet live," she said through tears, but she would say no more nor satisfy the curiosity of her sons. The young nobledwarves embraced their mother, kissed her, and wept over her. She clutched them tight to her breast. They told their version of all that had transpired at Riechsvale, how they sought for her with Bamadar, and how they despaired.

Kristryd pressed them for news of Dengar.

"Our ignoble grandfather has disowned us, and we have deposed him," Grallson lamented. "He wanders the mountains, still seeking the anvil. Many remain loyal to him—a formidable host of greybeards. But we hold the lower halls, the upper halls, and the whole of the vale too. He and his troop dwell alone among the old stones of First Pillar."

Kristryd turned to another matter of concern, "Where is your brother Dwalynd? Say not that he has perished!"

"Nay, not fallen mother. Rather he has risen above his station! We sent him to steward Gilmorack in your absence," Pegli explained.

"We thought it best to hold one foot in that door before it closed. At least until matters be resolved," Grallson added.

The undermountain queen nodded. "Upon such matters I have long reflected." In truth, she had seen all these things already by means of the magical reflection in her silver-framed mirror.

Thane Grallson kissed his mother and returned to his new kingdom, but his brother Pegli and two dozen loyal young mountain dwarves who had only recently sprouted whiskers joined Kristryd's growing company. She arrived in Gilmorack, some months later, sheathed in a spirit of wrath, flanked by three elven warriors, surrounded by several hundred axes from Dorob Kilthduum—every one of them of the old stock of Balnorhak. Behind these came Peg with his mountain dwarves and Father Furduch with his gnomes.

Dwalyn in Gilmorack

Dame Thresstone hastened to meet Kristryd as she approached the first gate. The old globtale faffled and blustered, "I thank the gods! We feared that you had passed to the halls of our fathers! But now you have returned not one moment too early! Traitors conspire against your throne and against your son, Dwalyn, who stewards it."

Kristryd ignored the lickspigot and left her groveling on the pavement of the gatehouse among the boots of the warriors. The queen entered the audience hall and took her place upon the throne of Gilmorack. Wasting no time, she summoned the old herald of Thane Redmod and bade him present himself before her. The reprobate came trembling and bowed himself to the floor, scraping before the undermountain queen. Kristryd drew out her short sword from its scabbard and placed it across her knees. The herald kissed at her booted feet.

"Did you think you could hide your designs from one such as me?" she demanded. "Do I not see deeds done in darkness? Do I not hear words whispered in the ear?"

"Nay your majesty," the old herald protested.

"Get up on your feet!" she commanded cold as ice. "Do your job and herald the entrance of Thane Dwalyn, undermountain king of Gilmorack."

The herald rose to his feet and announced the entrance of the very dwarf against whom he had so maliciously plotted, "Thane Dwalyn Kristrydson." Young Dwalyn knelt before his mother for the christening.

"He is yet a child!" Dame Thresstone objected. All pretense of honeyed-tone was gone from her voice, and she keaked shrill. "Have we no worthy dwarves of the stock of Gilmorack that we must kneel to a halfblood boy from Dengar?"

"Teach your tongue some wisdom!" Kristryd snapped. "Who is Dame Thresstone and what is her house? Does Dame Thresstone hold the loyalty of the warriors and hardhewers? Do they chant her name or recite her victories in odes? No? I thought not!

"Behold! I am the sovereign here: Undermountain Queen, Master of the Dwur of War, Wrath of Celene, Fiend Slayer, Rider of the Griff, Champion of the Nineteen Battles, Jailer of the Witch, Scourge of the Mountains, Lady of Bennoth Tine, Hammer of the Lortmil Anvil, and the Throne of the Vaulted Halls! I bequeath my crown to the one I will."

Dame Thresstone shrank back as the Sacred Heart of Berronar stepped forward to confirm the matter, bringing an end to all objections. The high priestess conducted the solemnities of coronation and made the transfer official with binding oaths and vows in the name of Moradin—the father and king of all dwarves. As Kristryd placed the crown of Gilmorack upon Dwaly'n's head, she instructed him in the hearing of everyone present, "If ever anyone challenges your throne, you shall open the door of this bird cage that hangs here beside your chair and release wicked Gretyll. She will deal with your adversaries according to your word. And believe me, no sigil will ward her off!" Kristryd sealed these instructions with a menacing glare at Dame Thresstone and a private wink of the eye for her son. Dwaly'n received the crown of Gilmorack from his mother's hands on the thirteenth day of Fireseek (508 cY) and, at the same time, took away from his brother Grallson the title of youngest dwarf to ever sit upon a Lortmil throne. Dame Thresstone disappeared that same day and never returned to Gilmorack.

More Reunions

Having settled matters in the vaulted halls, the queen turned her attention once again to affairs of the alliance. She dispatched letters to all members, announcing her "return from the dead." She told them, "I have returned to fulfill my vows. Pull the noose tight. Let no raiders descend to find succor or provision." (The distribution of those missives explains the rumor of Kristryd's resurrection. It was widely believed that Gilvgola had summoned her back from the halls of Dunathoin through some arcane ritual. They said she returned from the dead to fulfill her vows and finish her war against the goblinkind. Kristryd herself never denied the rumor. The story is thus told in popular versions of the saga even today.)

With her escort of heroes from Celene and warriors from Dorob Kilthdum, Dengar, Irondelve, and Gilmorack, Kristryd set out under the mountains and marched the Low Road south at the head of a formidable host. Some weeks later, they arrived at the underground fortress of Bennoth Tine where tolling of bells welcomed their arrival.

Bamadar hastened to meet the queen. He threw himself at her feet and begged her forgiveness for losing her on the field of battle. Kristryd bade him rise, drew him close, and whispered something in his ear. A grin lit his face.

She found old Bagbag sequestered away in his tower. He wiped

from his foggy eyes the tears that formed at the sight of his one-time student. He ran his gnarled fingers through her unruly black curls, now streaked with grey. “We recited the laments in your name!” he exclaimed. “I received your letter as one receives a message from beyond the veil.”

“Could I leave the task unfinished? A thing is either done or it is not. There is no half done.”

Chapter 31

HAIL, KRISTRYD

“THE MESSENGER HAS returned,” Bamadar announced. He had to shout to make his voice heard above the thrumming of rain on the oiled skin canopy stretched over the pavilion.

“Step in, Bammer, and dry your beard,” the queen summoned. The soggy soldier lifted the heavy fabric of the door flap and stepped into the dimly-lit pavilion. He shook his head and shuddered his shoulders like a dog shakes itself dry. Turning his attention to the thane’s table, he bowed before the queen. Kristryd reclined next to trueheaded old Bagbag. Her son Pegli sat on her other side. No others were present. “Well, you look comfortable and dry!” Bamadar observed.

“Don’t leave the man standing in the rain,” the queen scolded.

Bamadar raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You would have him enter your pavillion?” he asked for clarification.

“Before he melts or floats away,” she insisted.

Bamadar shrugged and stepped back out into the rain. A moment later he returned with the messenger, an equally soggy traveler, shivering with the cold. He stooped to enter through the low-cut canvas door flap. As the traveler stood to his full height, Pegli leaped to his feet in astonished disbelief. “Mother! That’s an orcblood!” he stated the obvious in protest.

“I recognize him,” Bagbag observed with distaste. He narrowed his eyes and sized the man up. “Claimed to be a Duchyman and a vinter.”

“Billy Locks of Gliddensbar, m’lords and lady,” the orcblood executed a quick bow toward the dwarves reclining at table. Somewhat self-consciously, he edged nearer to the hot coals burning on the open brazier at the center of the room. His pig-like eyes darted from face to face as he warmed himself. The glow of the hot coals cast a play of shadows which made his orcish features the more devilish.

“Mr. Locks has proven himself a servant most-reliable,” Kristryd offered in his defense.

“One of your horse-flesh traders?” Bagbag asked with a dismissive snort.

Kristryd focused her attention on the half-orc. “Were you able to deliver my invitation?”

Billy Locks nodded eagerly. “Yes, m’lady. That I did. Ol’ gundygut’s lonely ear went all atwitch with the news. He’ll take yer bait fer sure.”

“What’s this? With what have you baited the trap?” Bagbag asked.

“We are the bait,” the queen explained. She turned back to the half-orc, “How long before Hroth comes?”

“He’s gathered his headmen, and all the tribes too. They’ll be already on the march by now.”

“They won’t march in the rain,” Bagbag asserted.

“Oh, they’ll march in the rain, they will!” Billy Locks contradicted the wise loremaster. “Hroth’s promised plenty o’ spoils, and he tells them they’ll be wintering in Tringlee and Jurnre too.”

“Mother, what have you done?” Pegli asked wide-eyed and wary.

“How many does Hroth bring to the field?” Kristryd asked the spy.

“All of them!” the half-orc promised.

Four Pendants

The watchman’s horn sounded from the yet-distant walls of Hoch Dungalorin. Rain obscured the view but apparently not so much that the approaching force could escape notice from atop the towers of the granite fortress. Rain-soaked Bamadar Kadarel lifted a horn to his lips and returned the call according to the signal of the alliance.

“Show them our pendants,” Bagbag urged. Two of the mountain dwarves in Kristryd’s company hoisted and unfurled the gonfalon of Gilmorack. Another lifted up the pendant of Dorob Kiltthduum on behalf of Gilvgola and her axes, and Prince Pegli himself raised the arms of Dengar. Father Furduch’s gnomes lifted the ensign of Irondelve and the holy symbol of Ulaa. The banners fluttered and flapped in the stiff mountain wind. The rain soaked the fabrics. “Will they see the colors from this distance?” the old wizard asked. “Surely they can.” As if in reply to the query, more horns from the fortress bade them welcome.

“That’s the sound of a warm fire, dry clothes, a hot meal, and soft bed!” Bamadar laughed enthusiastically. The whole host of

dwarves and warriors agreed, and they hurried on towards that hope, hunching under the wind and rain. Only the three elves and their Cooshee dogs seemed indifferent to the inclement weather.

Kristryd's retinue ascended the prominence upon which sat the fort. Six strong young dwarves of Dorob Kiltthuum bore a heavy-timber palanquin upon which the obese priestess reclined, protected from the rain by a canopy. Kristryd preferred to walk; she strode at the head of the party. A long line of soldiers followed. A proper road paved with enormous smooth limestone pavers, now slick with rain, led to a sturdy barbican that stood before a rain-swollen moat. From atop the battlements of that structure, the captain of the watch called out the challenge, "Who draws near to Hoch Dunglorin in time of war?"

"Don't stand on your formalities, Tyren!" Xaxalander, the roguish elf hero, sauntered to the front of the company. He spoke to the captain in the dwarvish tongue, for he recognized the fellow from his previous residence at the fort, some years past. "We come to you cold, wet, and hungry. Will you make us shiver in the rain while you recite your protocols?"

Bagbag threw back the soggy hood over his head to reveal his hoary head to the captain. He growled, "Will you ask, 'Who draws near?' I will tell you. Olinsdotter, Undermountain Queen of Gilmorack and all her company! Gilvgola, Sacred Heart of our holy mother! Good Father Furduch and his fighting gnomes. Not to mention a certain irritable wizard who may turn you into something unpleasant if you delay us in the rain!"

The captain of the watch considered the small army of dwarves and gnomes still ascending the hill. He shook his head with apprehension, but another glance back to Bagbag's scowling face persuaded him to expedite the matter. "As you wish. But you will not find your welcome so warm as you imagine," Tyren replied cryptically.

"What's he mean by that?" Pegli turned to his mother for some assurance.

The captain of the watch ordered his men, "Drop the bridge! Open the gates! Raise the portcullis!" Tyren gestured from his perch atop the barbican, bidding the new arrivals to pass. The horns sounded a royal fanfare. Heavy chains lowered a bridge of hewn logs to span the moat. The immense stone doors of the gates slowly swung outward, pivoting smoothly on polished stone hinge posts. Within the gatehouse, a strong iron portcullis with adamant bands rose to open the way into the fastness of Hoch Dunglorin.

A Cold Reception

Dwur soldiers occupying the walls and guarding the gates regarded the newcomers with stoic indifference. Bamadar ordered Kristryd's small host of warriors to occupy the courtyard and stand at the ready until the quartermaster could show them to lodgings, but he afforded them the dignity of shelter beneath the colonnade.

Kristryd and her companions crossed the courtyard and entered unbidden into the polished granite hall of Thane Bolor Blackaxe. Noblemen and ambassadors of the alliance reclined at table before the powerful warlord. All eyes turned to look upon the rain-sodden newcomers. When they recognized Gilvgola and Kristryd, they leapt to their feet. Only Bolor Blackaxe himself remained seated at his place with Dame Thresstone standing at his side. The old dwurwife stood on the high dais adorned in all her finery. She smirked innocently at Kristryd and rested her hand upon the warlord's shoulder possessively.

Contradicting and confused thoughts exploded in Kristryd's head. Utterly flummoxed, she exchanged an indiscreet glance with Bagbag. The old wizard's scowl betrayed his great displeasure. Grimacing to maintain some composure, Kristryd looked to her other travelling companions: Bamadar, Gilvgola, Xaxalander, Archosian, Peralay, Father Furduch, and her son Pegli. Their shocked expressions mirrored her own. None had foreseen this turn of affairs.

"You favor my halls once more with your presence," Thane Blackaxe observed without warmth. It was neither the polite thing to say nor the proper way to address Kristryd or the high priestess of Berronar.

"You see," Dame Thresstone hissed in his ear, yet loudly enough for all to hear, "The usurper has risen from the dead."

"Indeed! Scarce did I believe the reports. Now I see with my own eyes. Have you come for the war counsel Olinsdotter? Or have you come to retrieve your trophy?"

Kristryd's eyes flashed with anger, "Of what trophy are we speaking?"

"That one of which you bade me swear not to speak," Blackaxe spat his words. "That trophy which has now brought trouble on my house, disgrace on my name, and summons foemen to my gates."

"Don't blame him for spilling your little secret," Thresstone purred. She ran her fingers through warlord's curling mop of silver hair. "It's not his fault. He thought you dead and his oaths

dissolved. Besides, you should know that no one keeps secrets from me.”

“The anvil rests here?” the heavy priestess Gilvgola huffed. She reprimanded Kristryd to her face, “You should have disclosed this to me!”

“And to me,” Bagbag added sulkily.

Kristryd glared at her host. Cold menace flickered in her eyes. “Whether I be dead or alive, you swore by the goddess not to reveal this matter, and she will require it of you! Who else knows of this?”

“I know of it,” said a familiar voice. Durgeddin the Blacksmith stepped forward from the shadows behind the throne. “I’ll not leave Hoch Dungalorin without it.”

“Thane Evrast knows of it,” Thresstone said. “I myself sent him word. He comes now with an army of loyal Dengar dwur.”

“By the fire of nine hells! He shall not have it,” Durgeddin swore through clenched teeth.

“Nor his throne back!” young Pegli blurted out.

“Thus you have nicely turned us all, one against another,” Kristryd observed bitterly.

“Not against one another,” Thresstone replied. “Only against you, dear.”

Kristryd looked from Thresstone to Blackaxe to Bagbag to Gilvgola to Durgeddin. “The anvil belongs to none of us. It is Moradin’s gift, and he bestows it upon whomever he chooses. Let the counsel decide the fate of the anvil. As for me, my companions and I have come in all haste to warn you and to warn all the delegates that Hroth and his hosts are on the march again, not more than a few days behind us. We barely escaped their advance.”

A Desperate Plan

“Considering how many dwarves wish me dead,” Kristryd remarked to her three elven companions, “I should have either stayed dead or remained in Celene. But then again, I think Yolande prefers me dead too.”

“Not so. If my cousin wished you dead, you would already be,” young Archosian assured her.

“That’s scarcely encouraging,” Kristryd lamented.

Not everyone in the fortress regarded her so tepidly. Her brothers Orin and Olin had come for the counsel of war—another happy reunion with tears of joy. They brought with them companies of the Royal Army which now quartered in the fort. Their strength of arms coupled with that of her own fearsome entourage gave her

advantage despite Dame Thresstone's machinations. Gallowagn, the Duke of Ulek, (also present for the counsel) happily received her and her three elven companions. He gave the three Celenese heroes into the charge of his son, Grenowin, and daughter, Nevallewen. "We shall do what we can to make you comfortable despite the deprivations of Hoch Dungalorin."

With Dame Thresstone snooping around the inner chambers of the fortress, Kristryd preferred to take lodging among the soldiers' barracks in the outer defenses. Thane Blackaxe gave Kristryd and Bagbag the entire third floor of the west tower. "These chambers suit me fine," Bagbag told the seneschal as he observed the sparsely furnished rooms. "I will need a chamber pot, a desk, a chair, a lamp, and a locking door. See to it."

Kristryd took the room that overlooked the ramparts. Should siege come, as she expected it would, she would lose it to the defenders, but until then, the room afforded her a magnificent view of the mountains and the entrance to the canyon pass.

That first night in Hoch Dungalorin, Bagbag summoned her and Bamadar to his chamber for private counsel. The old wizard had already spread out his books and scrolls and begun scribbling his wards and sigils on the walls and on the floors. "You have quickly made yourself at home," Kristryd observed.

"I would be prepared when the fight comes to us. Whether it be Evrast, Hroth, Hedvyg, or Durgeddin, or all of them together, I would be prepared," the old wizard muttered. He wagged a finger at Kristryd and added, "As should you!"

"The anvil is no longer safe here," Bamadar interjected. "So long as that nasty eyethurl has the ear of Thane Blackaxe, none of us will be safe here. She would return the anvil to Evrast and see the throne of Dengar returned to him as well."

"Act quickly and decisively or we shall have war within these walls," Bagbag warned Kristryd. "Tomorrow, convene the counsel and take command of the alliance. The duke will support you, and Blackaxe must submit to the duke's will, for he is no true king but only a subject of the duchy. Declare yourself Queen of the Lortmil Mountains."

"This is no time for jesting. I have no right to convene the counsel, nor will they hear me take false titles for myself. They'll throw me from the ramparts," Kristryd rolled her eyes.

"Let them try!" Bamadar boomed out. "By Clangeddin's hammer and axe, no harm will befall you again so long as I stand beside you."

Kristryd put her finger to her lips and whispered, "Speak softly. Spies are about, and all of our words might be overheard."

"I have taken precautions. What we say in this room cannot be overheard, nor can any scrying spell pierce my wards," Bagbag assured.

Despite the assurance, Kristryd continued in a whisper, "Until today, most of those here thought me dead and gone. Should I appear and call myself queen of the mountains, will they not rightly say I have gone mad with delusions of grandeur? In all our long centuries, no monarch has ever laid claim to all these peaks, and never has a dwarfess reigned over our people."

"Bah!" Bagbag dismissed the objection with a vigorous shake of his head. He waved a hand as if to clear her words from where they hung in the air. "Think on the matter! You will only be stating the truth as it already stands. Your father follows your counsel as if you were his liege. He has dispatched his Adamantine Guard at your command, and your brothers are here to cast the vote on his behalf. Your own sons now hold the undermountain thrones. And you are indeed a daughter of the line of Balnorhak. Even the Sacred Heart grants you her blessing and speaks the oracle of Berronar over you. Who can object if you state the truth?"

"You know our people. The dwur will never consent to be ruled by a dwarfess. I am not Yolande ..." Kristryd spluttered out a faffling string of additional objections but her trueheaded old friend was not finished. Talking over her, he continued, "Think on it my lady. This hour has long been coming, but now, my lady, my queen, now the hour is thrust upon you. If you hesitate even a day, we lose the anvil, the alliance, and the war."

Kristryd stammered, "Bagbag, all this dabbling in arcana and spells and scribbling magical circles and stars has driven sanity from your old head. You speak sheer madness like some hoddypeak prophet."

"Yes, daughter! Prophecy! This day has been foreseen! Even Hedvyg has foreseen it, and that is why she seeks your soul!" Bagbag replied. "Act now or put us all in peril."

Bamadar sank to one knee and bowed his head before his queen. "Your majesty," he said. "Show them strength. Your friends stand with you."

Kristryd put a hand on the back of his bowed head, "Rise son of Kadarel." The brash young warrior stood to his feet and hazarded a flirtatious wink.

Turning her silver-framed mirror over in her hands, Kristryd

asked her trueheaded friend, "Are you prepared for Hedvyg?"

"If she comes, we will know. My wards will not allow her to enter this fort, no matter what her guise, without first alerting me to her presence."

Hail, Kristryd

The counsel was not scheduled to convene until after Godsday, but Kristryd assembled an emergency session. "Hroth comes, and by the time we are scheduled to convene, we may already be under siege," she explained. She ascended the speaking stone to stand before the assembly. She wondered how much the scandal of the anvil had hurt her, and how much more poison Dame Thresstone had mixed among her allies. *By the gods*, she thought to herself, *I would rather face an angry dragon than stand before this room of globtales. Would that my father stood here beside me!* She looked for her brothers' faces among those gathered in the hall, hoping to bolster her confidence with their friendly eyes. *Gods! What would Yolande do?* she asked herself. She swallowed, took a deep breath, and burst into the words she and Bagbag had prepared the night before.

"Kristryd is not dead!" she declared before the assembly. "I live and breathe! I have returned from the halls of Dumathoin, and death flees from before me. Know me! I am the Hammer of the Gods. I am the Keeper of the Anvil. I am the Heart of the Mountains. I am the Fey Queen's Wrath. I am the Undermountain Queen, the Mother of Kings over the thrones of Dengar and Gilmorack, and I am the daughter of Balnorhak and Ulek. I am queen over the Dwur of the Lortmil Mountains, and today, I lead you to victory and a conclusion of these hateful wars!"

Stunned shock froze the room. For long moments, none breathed. Kristryd did not flinch or waver. Her eye caught the face of her own bother Orin as he stared at her wide-eyed, his mouth hanging agape. There was Bamadar, grinning idiotically behind his whiskers. No one dared to speak. Then the high elf, Duke Gallowagn, stood to his feet and broke the silence with sincere acclamation, "Hail, Kristryd! Queen of the Lortmil Mountains! The Duchy of Ulek acknowledges the title."

Chaos erupted. Angry shouts. Threats. Cursing and spitting. Dame Thresstone's shrieking voice. On that signal, Pegli entered the chapel with the young dwarves of Dengar, all of them armed for battle and brandishing weapons. From the other end of the hall strode the looming girth of Gilvgola, leading the choice axes

of Dorothea Kilthdum. The scowling heavy-jowled priestess raised her arms in threatening invocation. The room fell silent before her. She turned toward the one still standing upon the speaking stone and declared, "Hail, Kristryd! Queen of the Lortmil Mountains! The dwur of Dorob Kilthdum cast our allegiance with you, and Berronar grants her blessing."

A gasp and murmur of dissent rippled through the room. Father Furduch hopped up to stand upon the bench where had been seated and proclaimed, "We mean what we say, and we say what we mean! Kron Hill gnomes say, 'Long live the queen!'"

"Veluna casts no vote into the affairs of the dwur, but we support a strong and united alliance," the priest of Rao said diplomatically despite having come to the counsel only to withdraw Veluna's membership.

"The County of Ulek neither approves nor disapproves," the ambassador from Jurnre said. "We only say, 'Let there be an end to these wars.'"

"I speak not on behalf of the Fey Queen nor do I speak for my people," Prince Archosian declared. "But the archers of Celene stand behind the queen."

"As do I," Xaxalander added, and Peralay said the same.

"The Principality of Ulek stands behind the queen!" Kristryd's brother Orin said impulsively, but he quickly added, "At least until my father is present to ratify the matter."

The smaller clan chiefs began to cave to the pressure. One consented, then another, and another, until the hall burst into such raucous applause that their enthusiasm took Kristryd herself aback. Gilvgola waddled her way through the cheering crowd and declared, "Tonight shall be a festival and coronation according to the old custom of kingmakers. I myself shall set the crown upon her head, and Berronar herself shall place her kiss upon the queen."

Bamadar took the role of herald, "Behold the Lady of the Lortmils!" Other voices took up the chant, and soon the whole room was repeating her name. Slowly the chant evolved into the dwur word, "Victory! Victory! Victory!" A fresh rush of anxiety welled up in Kristryd's heart. *I shall be a wise and beautiful queen over them, as Yolande is for her people*, she told herself, but she believed it not.

Not every dwarf joined the cheers and acclamations. Many shook their heads sullenly. Blackaxe, Durgeddin, and Dame Thresstone scowled and glowered at the others. Kristryd ignored their sulks and grimaces. She motioned for silence and continued

her speech, "Today I bring you good tidings. Our alliance prevails. War is at an end! We are diverse peoples: dwarves, gnomes, men, elves, and halfling-folk too. Together, we build a strong tower, not fashioned from worked stones uniformly cut nor cemented together as a common people. True strength we build together from unity of purpose, stone upon stone, fitted together to form an unfailling bulwark.

"In the past, we have let our differences divide our efforts. Today we smelt away the dross of pride and bigotry and all that divides us. Today we reforge ourselves anew.

"Durgeddin, master smith of Balnorhak, stands here among us. To him I give charge over the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains. Let his hammer ring upon it again!"

Durgeddin dropped to his knees, his eyes welling with tears. He exclaimed, "My lady and my queen! I shall fashion a work worthy of Moradin."

Dame Thresstone realized that things had gone too far. She could feel the ground collapsing under her feet. She spoke up, "I too hail my queen. I am at her service. As always, she possesses my loyalties."

Kristryd raised an incredulous eyebrow. Several times she had seen Yolande execute the same graceful expression to dismiss the idle words of flatterers. "Your service will be required soon enough," she replied without betraying any hint of emotion. Turning her attention to Bolor Blackaxe, she said, "Our noble host, Thane Blackaxe, shall retain his ancestral title and claim, so long as his loyalties remain undivided." A look of panic stole across Bolor's face. His eyes shot nervously from Kristryd to the duke to Dame Thresstone who stood at his side. Whatever inner conflict he felt, he quickly resolved with a gracious bow to the queen, "Your majesty, Lady of the Lortmils. It is my honor to serve."

Fifth Counsel of Dungalorin

Kristryd nodded her acknowledgement before turning her attention back to the war planning. She proceeded, "Starvation is our best ally. She has driven our ancient foes out from their hiding holes one last time. Now we must gather the remnants that remain to hold the passes and defend the lowlands. Then let the edges of our swords and axes slake their thirst."

The assembly cheered and shouted, "Hail, Kristryd! Queen of the Lortmil Mountains!" She waited for the din to subside before continuing, "Hroth caught us squatting with our trousers around

our ankles two years ago. He made away with enough plunder to feed his hordes a year or more. But scales have tipped. We have cut them off from all succor. We have sealed them up in their holes like corpses sealed up in tombs. We have stopped their raids into the lowlands. We have emptied the mountain villages. We have burned their mountain crops and salted the soil. We have cut down their groves and slaughtered their flocks. They have no recourse. The vermin abandon their holes and flee their hallowed mountains. Hroth advances upon us now to raid, else they must eat their own young! Let him come and throw himself against these strong walls. For that, we are well-prepared.”

More cheering and “Hail, Kristryd!” *By all the gods*, Kristryd thought to herself. *How easy to stir their passions!* Before continuing, she reminded herself of Yolande’s cool and regal resolve when addressing her subjects. *No need to shout slogans.* She pressed on with deliberately delivered words: “Here in the south, the hobgoblin marches out against us. In the north, the Red Medusa orcs lay siege at Castle Hagthar. We must hold all these fronts. Let the Velunese and the Kron Hills stand fast against Urgush as they must. Here in the south, we will keep Hroth from the Ulek plains. Even now, my father marches to Foghollow, and the Celenese take their stand in Courwood. We are, indeed, thinly spread in this most-critical hour. If we would see these wars ended, we must not let them resupply their hordes with our livestock, our cattle, and our granaries.”

The queen turned the speaking stone over to Bagbag. The face of the old dwarf beamed with pride and satisfaction. He bowed before his queen before rising to take his place upon the stone. Speaking gravely to the alliance commanders, he said, “The goblinkind come for war, not just raiding. They are desperate, and our long labors have paid off at last. Our patrols report empty nests, abandoned halls. They muster all their numbers, and they leave none behind. Even the infirm, the elderly, and the young are gathered to the muster. Only this fortress and its sisters stand between Hroth and the Ulek plains. Prepare for the onslaught. We will stop them here. When they come, we will mow them down as a scythe cuts ripe barley.”

Peralay of Celene took the floor, bowing before the queen and before Bagbag. “Your majesty,” Peralay interjected. “It is not my place nor my station to object. But I know a thing about goblinkind, and they do not take their younglings raiding with them nor to war. This is something else. They swarm like bees leaving the nest.”

Chapter 32

COMES THE TRAMPLING HOST

GILVGOLA CONDUCTED CORONATION solemnities, sacrificed flocks and herds, and declared a sacred meal. The dwarves swore vows and took oaths to Kristryd in the presence of the Sacred Heart. The feasting went long into the night, and the dwarves lifted many bowls to their queen. Kristryd sat at the head of table with Thane Blackaxe at her right and grey-bearded, sorcerous old Bagbag at her left. Sullen-faced Dame Thresstone glowered dejectedly from her place at the women's table, two steps lower than the table where Kristryd sat.

As the night degenerated into bawdreaming songs of Hanseath and Wenta, Kristryd excused herself to the privacy of her room. She removed her silver-framed mirror from its velvet cloth wrap and spoke into her own reflection, "Hedvyg! Hear me!" The old witch's face failed to materialize in the mirror, but Kristryd continued. "Hedvyg! I live and breathe! Mine is the sacred anvil of your fathers, and mine is the devilshine book. I am made queen of the mountains without your assistance. You have failed. I am prophecy fulfilled. You are nothing."

The first faint glow of the new day began to brighten the sky. Kristryd found her way through the austere halls of Hoch Dungalorin to the chamber where the high elf Gallowagn stayed. She tapped softly on the door. Despite the hour, she knew the duke would not be sleeping.

"Does the Queen of the Lortmil Mountains request my audience?" Gallowagn asked with surprise as his servant showed her into his chambers. "Should I not rather request audience with her?" He stood to his feet and bent at the waist in a graceful bow.

Kristryd frowned at the chiding, "I come not as a queen but as a friend."

"Then come, friend. Sit with me beneath the fading stars and watch the sun rise over your mountains." He led her to a stone bench on a small balcony outside the chamber. The sun had not yet risen over the mountains. The chill air smelled like rain. Kristryd

spoke softly, "We boast boldly at council, but, in truth, I fear for your duchy and all the Uleks. The *jebli* and *euroz* come in greater numbers than we have seen before."

"This much is already known to us," the duke replied. "Does her majesty seek me now, at this early hour, to tell me what has already been said in the council hall?"

"No," Kristryd admitted. "I have come to return your gift." She handed him the silver-framed mirror, still wrapped in its cloth. "I thought I had mastered the art of scrying, but it has mastered me. The magic brings me bitterness and grief, yet I cannot look away."

"Are you certain? I should think that her majesty will find the mirror all the more useful. For a queen has no true friends, only flatterers," the duke warned.

"I am certain," Kristryd insisted. "Your gift has served me well. I used it to build this alliance. With its help I have attained this high station that no dwarfess of these mountains—or any others—has ever before attained. But I will not look on it's polished face again."

The duke received the magical item from her hand, "If the mirror has taught you to see the world through the eyes others, then it has been worthwhile and served its purpose."

"Perhaps it has," Kristryd wondered sincerely. "But I do not wish to spy on friends, foes, or flatterers any longer. My eyes have grown weary of peering."

"All things grow weary," the elf said. "Even the undying elves."

Striking the Anvil

By the time the sun had risen, Thane Blackaxe had his dwarves preparing for siege. Most had not slept at all; many still felt the effects of the previous night's merrygodown. Blackaxe sent messengers to the chain of forts that stretched across the ways lest the host come by some unanticipated path. He sent out scouts, ordered supplies laid up, recalled patrols, closed roads and bridges, sent warnings to the villages, and dispatched messengers to allies.

Kristryd sounded the horn of Celene from atop the tallest battlement of Hoch Dungalorin even though she knew that Darrion was dead and could not answer the summons. At her request, Thane Blackaxe sent the dungeon master with a half-dozen strong dwarves down into the depths below Hoch Dungalorin to bring up the anvil from its hiding place. Durgeddin stoked a forge and began smithying. Kristryd took a seat upon a small wooden dais in the open courtyard of the fort. Bagbag hovered nearby. Kristryd's brothers, Orin and Olin, remained on either side of her, and her son

Pegli took his place upon a lower throne at her feet. The dwarves bearing the anvil entered the courtyard accompanied by the fanfare of trumpets. They set the sacred relic down upon a flat stone before the queen's dais.

The Sacred Heart came forward and laid her hands upon the relic, invoking the favor of the gods. She splashed holy ale upon it to consecrate it and to cleanse it of any lingering taint left behind by the demons who beat their cursed hammers upon it. Then she turned to the dwarves and the gnomes and said, "Let everyone of you present blades and points before the queen and swear them to her service. Durgeddin will examine each one, and I will give each my blessing."

The warriors came, one at a time, to present their weapons before the queen, swear their allegiance, and then set them before the old smith of Balnorhak. Durgeddin examined each one, ordering this one sharpened, that one straightened, this one tightened, and that one reforged completely. Soon the sound of his hammer on the anvil echoed in the canyon.

Peralay, Xaxalander, and Archosian stepped forward to do the same. "Will you really swear your blades to me? Will Yolande share your loyalties with me?" Kristryd asked her olven friends.

Foppish Xaxalander shrugged. "Why not? We're all on the same side, right?"

"Are there not two moons in the night sky? Yet they do not compete, one with another. My cousin reveres the reclusive handmaiden, but I prefer bright Luna who dispels the darkness for every nation," Archosian the Green Arrow added.

"I accept your troth," the queen smiled. "May both moons lighten you."

The elves presented their weapons. The old smith took a keen interest in Peralay's blade, *Gnoll-Cleaver*. "My grandfather's work!" he boasted as he examined the blade.

Dame Thresstone watched all these proceedings in stoic silence. Kristryd summoned her to the dais. The dwarfess bowed obsequiously before the queen, but behind her smiling mask, hatred burned in her eyes.

"Dame Thresstone. What shall I tell my father-in-law?" Kristryd asked. "The old fool hurries on his way here to seize my anvil. Seeing that you summoned him, I send you to meet him in the way. Deliver a message for me. Say to him, 'Your daughter-in-law, the mother of your grandsons, lives. She will show you clemency, but if you will not have it, a she-dwarf will cut the beard

from your chin.”

“I will say no such thing!” Dame Thresstone spudded.

“Deliver to him my message lest I send him your withered head cut from your shoulders,” Kristryd insisted patiently. To her satisfaction, she saw panic in the old blobtale’s eyes.

“But what of the hobgoblin army?” Thresstone implored. “Surely the road is not safe to travel!”

“Pray that Hroth is more long-suffering than I,” Kristryd dismissed the dwurwife. Dame Thresstone set out on the journey with four of Pegli’s Dengar dwarves later that afternoon. Gallowagn also left in haste, along with his son, Grenowin, and daughter, Nevallewen, to return to Tringlee and to ready their city for siege. The ambassadors from the County and from Veluna also left the fort, hurrying to escape before the battle arrived.

Murder Outside the Walls

For three days, villagers and farmers arrived at the fort to take shelter from the advancing army. They brought with them what supplies they could carry in haste. Thane Blackaxe received them all.

On the third day since Kristryd had sent Dame Thresstone on her errand, Evrast arrived outside the walls of Hoch Dungalorin with an army of one hundred and twenty warriors, every one of them a hardened loyal dwarf of Dengar, tough as stone. His grey-beards raised a shield wall only a bowshot from the walls. A lone dwarfess left the company and strode to the barbican. Tyren called out from atop the structure, “Who draws near to Hoch Dungalorin in time of war?”

“Lady Thresstone, noble dwur of Gilmorack. I bring a message for Kristryd from Thane Evrast, true undermountain king of Dengar.”

They ushered Dame Thresstone to the inner hold where she addressed her words to the queen, “Your majesty, I have said and done what can be said and done to persuade the undermountain king. He is a stubborn dwarf. You know his head is harder than granite. He will not set aside his pride. Here is what he says, ‘Deliver to me the anvil of Moradin and I will withdraw. If not, I lay you siege this day.’”

“He will pay for that folly with his life and the lives of his followers outside these walls. Even now Hroth descends from the high road into the pass. They will be upon us by sunset,” Kristryd warned.

“Your majesty. I beg of you, by the gods,” Dame Thresstone implored. “If a portion of decency remains with you at all, spare your own kinsmen and your father-in-law, the grandfather of your sons. Offer them truce to take shelter until the storm has passed.”

“Let the mumper renounce his ambitions against us and release his claims on the anvil. I will first hear his oath of truce, sworn in the name of Berronar before the Sacred Heart Gilvgola.”

Dame Thresstone’s voice hardened, “So you have murdered them all.”

The Scouts Return

Xaxalander and Archosian followed Peralay and his cooshee dogs to put eyes upon the advancing host and measure their number. They made their way up the vale and onto a precipice above the narrows from where they had elevation to number the ranks of Hroth as they descended. Goblins flowed downsteeply from the high paths, like streams draining into a river. While taking their views from that vantage, an advance patrol of orcs took the road beneath them, cutting them off from safe return to the fortress. With no other recourse or alternate path by which they might return, they agreed to set upon the patrol. *Defender* and *Gnoll-Cleaver* flashed and stabbed. Peralay’s cooshee dogs leapt upon their prey like famished wolves upon rabbits. Xaxalander moved nearly unseen, striking orcs from behind and cutting throats before they could turn to flee. Those that did flee returned in all haste to the camp of Hroth and reported to him, “The bugging fairies ambushed us. We saw them retreat back to Dungalorin.”

Hroth peeled back his swollen lips and grinned maliciously. “Maglubiyet has put a sword of vengeance in my hand!”

The elves returned safely to the hoch only hours before the advance troops arrived. Kristryd summoned her court to hear their report. “We saw riders mounted on wargs at the head of the host. After them came whole tribes and clans of goblinkind, warriors, females, children, gibbering and screaming, beating on drums and sounding horns, and many lesser goblins driven by warriors wielding whips. We heard the howling of gnolls. Ogres walked in their midst too, and giants. We saw three of them from where we stood, but there may have been more. Behind them come the marching ranks of Hroth, all of them armored head to foot, marching in step, with no fear of the daylight. Their numbers are vast, greater than the host at Riechsvale.”

"These walls will stand fast," Thane Bolor Blackaxe boasted. Dame Thresstone had resumed her station, hovering at the dwarven lord's side with her hand upon his shoulder, inciting Kristryd's ire.

"Our task is not merely survival," Kristryd reminded the war counsel. "We must turn them back, else Tringlee and the lowlands are lost, the harvests are forfeit, and all our efforts for naught."

"Your majesty," Peralay spoke in grim dismay. "If we had ten times the number inside these walls, we might then turn them back. This is no raid. The mountains are vomiting up all the contents of their stomachs. Will we fair better than Defile's End?"

"They outnumber us, and they come fighting for their lives and the lives of their young," Archosian added. "They are starved and crazed. Why else do they set out from their lairs so late in the season?"

"Because they've taken my bait. I have dug the hole too deep this time," Kristryd admitted. "My reign over these mountains may be a short one."

"Majesty, we are not helpless," Bagbag assured her.

Kristryd nodded. "Prepare what tricks you have," she told her trueheaded friend.

"You must hold them outside the walls at least until first light," Bagbag warned her. Without waiting for further discussion, he hurried from the chamber.

"What of Thane Evrast and his ten dozen axes?" Dame Thresstone persisted. She placed her other hand upon the other shoulder of Thane Blackaxe and shook him gently to emphasize her urgency. She pleaded with the lord of the fortress, "They will not survive an hour outside your walls! Will you abandon them?"

"Yes. I abandon them," Kristryd replied on the dwarf lord's behalf.

Chapter 33

SIEGE OF HOCH DUNGLORIN

GREY SKIES CONCEALED the sun. A keen-eyed hawk, serving sentry duty high above the fortress, screeched out urgent warning. Her sharp eyes focused on mounted wolves slinking down the pass. They scouted the defenses and circled about the elevation upon which the granite stones of Hoch Dunglorin rose. They drew closer, even braving the ascent, but their riders took care to steer the wargs well beyond the arrowshot of the dwarves upon walls. Darkness obscured the advance of the rest of the host except for the orange light of torches which seemed to extend all the distance up the canyon. Echoing out of the mountains came din of drums and horns. Shouts and war screams, no longer distant, announced the arrival of advance ranks. Presently came another sound to the ears of the soldiers listening from atop the battlements. Heavy voices, chanting in unison, called off cadence. The hobgoblins had arrived.

Before midnight, the assault began. The defenders heard crashing sounds like rocks striking rocks as they tumbled down an avalanche. The sharp eyes of the dwarves saw well enough in the darkness to discern orcs and goblins moving about, carrying heavy loads. Tall ogres drew near. They held aloft enormous shields to protect the workers from darts and arrows.

Tyren, the captain of the watch, called for light. The arch-clerics, Gilvgola and Father Furduch, invoked their goddesses to shed divine light and illuminate the area outside the walls at the point of assault. Sublime effulgence burst into being and exposed the contrivances of the goblins. The vermin stooped under loads gathered from their march—stones and rocks and whole trunks of trees. Some of these they piled up in embankments to reach the walls where the steepness allowed them. With the rest they filled the shallow moat that protected the easier approaches. Giants and ogres piled immense boulders against the walls.

The dwarves cast down large stones on the attackers, shot at them with volleys of arrows, and launched engines for throwing

stones and lances down on the besiegers. If the goblins drew close enough to the walls, the dwarves poured out scalding oil and flaming pitch prepared ahead of time. As the front rank of attackers fell, more stepped forward to replace the fallen. The bodies of the victims they threw onto the heaps and embankments they stacked against the walls.

By the blaze of the divine light, the bulk of a tenterbelly dwurwife came into view atop the gatehouse, attracting a clatter of arrows. Gilvgola leapt back and took shelter behind a stone of the bartizan.

“You make a large target. Best not to tempt them,” Archosian the Green Arrow warned the high priestess. The three elven companions stood near her atop the gatehouse, peering out into the conflict below. Elven cloaks of Enstad made them nearly invisible in the shadows.

“Now would be a good time for a wizard to play warmage,” Xaxalander observed.

Archosian agreed as he unfastened the string of his bow and relieved the wood. “I have already spent all my arrows and exhausted my few cantrips. Where is Bagbag? What is he cooking up?”

“Wizards are not the only ones wielding powers fit for war,” Gilvgola muttered. She tugged at her beard for emphasis. “Magic can only extend so far, but the power of the gods knows no limits!” To illustrate her point, the priestess turned her attention back to the battle below, raised her hands into the sky, and reigned down strikes of fire and lightning and whatever miracles she could muster to drive the besiegers back. Giants and the ogres made the most tempting targets.

Father Furduch called upon the blessings of Ulaa to protect his gnomes and sent them sallying forth. The gnomes hurried down over the walls, dropping by ropes from loopholes and arrowslits. They dismantled what they could, toppling ladders and pulling away the shields that covered over the goblin work parties. Despite these efforts, orcs and goblins sprinted up the embankments and hurled themselves at the bastions. If ever one or more came over the top, they met the angry axes of the soldiers upon the walls.

Gilvgola Sallies Forth

Outside the walls, Thane Evrast of Dengar and his greybeards formed a circle of shields to protect themselves from the first wave of the horde. Evrast quickly saw they could not survive the night if they did not give up the field. They fell back to the walls of

Hoch Dungalorin and, with some persuasion, took occupation of the barbican where they made their stand against the growing army of goblinkind. The host soon pressed in on their small fort. Orc shamans wielding fire spells assaulted them and ignited the shingled roofs of the short towers. Evrast and his warriors found themselves caught between the flames and the blades.

“Can’t you help them?” Dame Thresstone demanded of Gilvgola as, from atop the gatehouse, they watched the barbican burn. “Listen! They are dying! Do your ears not hear the shouts?”

“Daughter, I do what I can,” Gilvgola sighed.

“For the sake of the gods! Drop the bridge and open the gates. Grant them to fall back inside these walls! I beg it of you!”

“I will not transgress the command of the queen,” Gilvgola shook her heavy jowls. Yet when she saw Dengar dwarves aflame or pushed back to fall over the edge of the moat, her sacred heart moved. The priestess called upon the gods and besought them to affect the fires and cool the flames lest Evrast and his greybeards be burnt alive. That done, she resolved, “I will go out to them and stand with them. If Gilvgola falls beside Thane Evrast; I fall.”

The loyal dwarves of Dorob Kiltthduum gathered about their priestess to sally forth with her. Also went the three elven warriors and cooshee dogs, eager to take the fight to the enemy. Evrast and his men gave a mighty cheer when they saw the portcullis rise and the heavy bridge drop. Peralay and Archosian led the charge. A heavily armored host of dwarves and gnomes followed, and behind them came the unmistakable girth of the Sacred Heart. The sight of the rescuers and the holy priestess so heartened Evrast and his men that they launched forth against the assailants, driving them back from the flaming barbican.

“Did my daughter send you out here to spare us?” the old king asked of Gilvgola. Exhausted from the fight, he leaned upon his axe, breathing hard.

The Sacred Heart shook her head, “Nay, lord. Berronar has sent me.”

The old king nodded grimly.

The priestess applied her healing arts to those wounded. The gnomes extinguished flames. The dwarves piled up a quick wall of fallen stone from the upper course of the barbican towers. Archosian, Peralay, and Xaxalander took positions to hold the three arches.

The Demonhead Ram

Hroth's lieutenants reported that the first engine now stood ready. The warlord grinned eagerly. "Let's show these piss-pants how to throw stones!" The catapult crew set to work, lobbing heavy rocks and flaming pitch over the wall and onto the hoch. "Get the ballista working too!" he ordered.

More effective than the siege engines, goblin shamans engaged in their dweomercraft. Fireballs and lightning strikes targeted dwarves on the walls.

Hobgoblins wielding grappling hooks on chains came up against the defenders at the barbican. When they beheld the three elven heroes holding the arches to block their way, they hooted with joy at the prospect of slaying their hated enemies. A grappling hook and chain hooked Archosian's legs and pulled his feet out from under him. The brutes leapt upon the fallen elf and would have surely dismembered him barehanded had not Xaxalander struck them from behind. He dragged his wounded friend from the fray. That left Peralay and his hounds alone to face the goblins down. The hobgoblins jeered at the one elf, but they feared *Gnoll-Cleaver*, and they feared the cooshee dogs. More gathered until, made brave by their numbers, they rushed at him in rage and wrath as if they had discovered the elf solely responsible for the fall of Grot Ugrat. Peralay fell back before their assault, escaping only by leaping behind the makeshift wall the dwarves had assembled. He fell bleeding at the feet of Father Furduch while his green-patched cooshees yelped and bayed.

Father Furduch attended to the wounded elves while the Dengar dwarves defended the wall. Three gnomish warriors appeared around him as if materializing from thin air. The gnomes brought a report from up the field. "They be bringing up a swinging rammer slammer ..." one of the faffling gnomes jabbered breathlessly.

His colleague interrupted, excitedly spilling words out of his mouth in an incoherent squeaking jumble. "We went out connoitering and reconnoitered a rattening bam! Unseen I seen a mean team of sixteen hoch jebline with a beam."

A third gnome added, "It's got an iron head of a devil head mounted ahead of its head and its headed this way!"

Sixteen hobgoblins carried the unhewn trunk of a giant roan on swinging chains. As they marched to the rhythmic beat of a great war drum, the ram swung lazily to-and-fro like an athlete warming up and flexing his muscles in eager anticipation of the game. A

company of shieldgoblins went before the rammers to provide them cover as they came within range of the walls. True to the report of the gnomes, the iron head of the ram had been fashioned to appear as the leering horned head of a tanar'ri.

Rescue Plan

Inside the inner fort, none slept. Kristryd received reports on the battle every few minutes. The messengers told the queen how Gilvgola and the dwarves of Dorob Kiltlduum had disobeyed her and descended from the gatehouse and faced certain death in the barbican. Kristryd observed, "The rescuers now stand in need of rescue."

"What is to be done?" Dame Thresstone demanded. She locked eyes with the queen. Neither one looked away.

Without breaking off from the staring contest, Kristryd rose from her throne and declared, "I myself will lead this charge and sound the horn of Celene. We will drive them back from our walls and rescue both our friends and foes."

Thane Blackaxe objected, "Who remains to defend the walls? Already I am nearly overrun. By Berronar's Bosom! I will go down to Dumathoin in shame if the goblins take this fortress."

"All your axes remain with you. I will take only three score of Pegli's young warriors. We will strike fast and send the skitterbrooks into flight before they see how few our numbers. While their backs are yet turned, we will withdraw back to the safety of these walls and bar the gates until Bagbag completes his spells."

"For Dengar, Gilmorack, and Balnorhak!" Pegli exclaimed. The young prince hefted his hammer and swung it at the air.

"Not you son. You remain to command the defense of these walls," growled Bamadar as he strapped Kristryd's winged helmet to her head and placed her spear into her hand.

"Flesh and bone!" the young prince cursed. "My own grandfather in deadly peril, and I should remain safe inside these walls?"

Kristryd glowered at her youngest son, and he retreated from her presence.

"I will go out with you, your majesty, and all my dwarves of Khundrakar with me," declared the Durgeddin the ancient smith.

"Nay. You and yours guard the holy anvil," the queen replied as Bamadar handed her round shield to her.

Lest he dishonor himself in the presence of the queen, Thane Blackaxe rose to his feet and took up his axe too. "I go forth to fight beside my queen and to rescue the Sacred Heart," the warlord

resolved.

“Nay,” the queen refused. “You remain with those who hold the fort for the sake of your fathers’ bones.”

Kristryd Sallies Forth

The gates swung open and the bridge to the barbican dropped again. Kristryd winded three long blasts upon the horn of Celene—just to put the fear of elves into the air. She leveled her spear and leapt forward near the head of the charge. Pegli’s young warriors gave such a shout as to shake the stones, and those greybeards pinned down in the barbican made hearty reply. The queen’s thrust poured out over the bridge to join the trapped warriors of Dorob Kilthduum and the dwarves of Dengar. A deafening cheer they raised as the newcomers arrived at the barbican. Together, the combined force made a new sortie and rushed headlong, up over the makeshift wall, tumbling kewkaw into the darkness, colliding with the hobgoblin ranks, cracking blade to shield and steel on steel. “In the name of our holy mother and for all the sons of Durin!” Gilvgola roared. She waded into the thick of the assault, swinging her hammer as one possessed of a berserker’s rage.

The sudden explosion out of the fort, accompanied by the blasting of the elven horn, discomfited the attackers. The front rank of shieldgoblins fell back, dropped their shields, and left the soldiers bearing the ram fully exposed. The dwarves fell upon the hobgoblins and slew all sixteen in a moment. The heavy beam fell to the ground crushing a few fleeing goblins and more than one dwarf beneath its weight. Bamadar leapt upon the great trunk of the ram and, with two dozen chops of his axe, he cut off its demonic iron head and held it aloft. The iron head was nearly twice the size of the dwarf. With a mighty shout, he hurled it at the retreating goblins.

Evrast’s Stand

In the mad rush of the charge, old Thane Evrast fell behind. The weary king would make his way back to where his greybeards fought into the press, but orcs fleeing the sortie outflanked him. The cowards espied the old dwarf struggling alone, and they drew nigh, baring yellow fangs and licking at their lips. The old king defended himself like a cornered animal. A half dozen he slew. Carcasses he dropped in a grizzly ring around him as he ward-offed further attacks. One shaggy orc with a wicked short bow stepped up to the circle and leisurely nocked an arrow, unleashing

it at short range, then another, and another. The undermountain king neither flinched nor ducked away. The arrows bounced off his enchanted shield and mithril armor, slamming him about, but none found a mark, save one, which sank to the fletching into his chest above the half plate. Evrast swayed precariously as if he might collapse. The shaggy orc nocked another arrow.

Pegli's first hammer blow smashed the archer's legs out from under him from behind; the second blow crushed the fallen archer's shaggy head. The young warrior prince turned on the remaining few and drove them away from his beleaguered grandfather. Despite the queen's word, Pegli had joined the charge, for he feared for his father's father and hoped to find him on the field. Not a moment too soon did he come. Rescued from the immediate danger, the undermountain king sank to his knees.

"Get up grandfather! Let me help you," Pegli urged. "We dare not rest here!"

"Is that you, my son's son?" Thane Evrast asked; his voice rasped weak and pained.

"It is I, majesty," Pegli helped the old king back to his feet. "This night, all is forgiven!"

"Yes. All is forgiven," Evrast agreed. His dagger found its way between the prince's armor plates. He plunged the blade into his grandson's belly and carved him open. "Not again will Balnorhak's hammer strike upon Moradin's anvil!" Pegli collapsed at the feet of the undermountain king.

Chapter 34

CEREMONIES

“THEY FALL BACK before us!” Bamadar roared. Jubilant and maddened with battle rage, he hacked his way forward into the thick press of goblins. Behind them the first light of morning already softened the dark sky. Kristryd risked a glance over her shoulder. Her eyes anxiously searched the dark silhouettes of turrets and towers until she espied a faint green light flickering and flashing in one of the high tower windows. Turning her attention back to the fight that boiled all around her, the queen’s eyes narrowed with concern. They had strayed too far from the protection of Hoch Dungalorin’s walls.

“Hold Bamadar! We dare not further! If they outflank us, we are cut off and the gates undefended,” she shouted. Her voice could not carry above the din of battle. *I must signal them to fall back!* Pushed along with the crush of the fight, she struggled to lift the horn of Celene to her lips. Before she could sound the note, a sudden eruption from the fight ahead abruptly reversed the forward momentum and sent Bamadar tumbling backwards and crashing into her. She fell to the ground with the heavily armored dwarf sprawled backward on top of her. As she disentangled herself, a mad blur in the darkness emerged from the goblin line. A half-score of hobgoblins pushed and shoved their way forward at impossible speed and with impossible strength. Charging like stallions, they passed by her as a rushing wind. So quickly they moved that eye could scarce follow their pace. They tossed aside goblins, orcs, dwarves, and gnomes that stood between them and the gatehouse. Before Kristryd could recover her feet, they were already leaping the makeshift wall the dwarves had placed across the entrance to the barbican. Bodies of dwarves went hurtling over the moat and cracked against the stone walls of the fort as if thrown by giants.

“Raise the bridge! Seal the gates!” Kristryd urged. Even if her voice could have been heard, the order came too late. Moving with ridiculous speed, the hobgoblins were already across the bridge and wrenching at the heavy portcullis with unreal strength. The

defenders in the gatehouse hurried to react, but by comparison with the magically quickened hobgoblins, they seemed to move sluggishly. Hot oil gushed down from murderholes, but the quickened hobgoblins deftly leapt away. The oil splashed harmlessly on the pavers where they had stood, slicking the stones.

Kristryd tried to run for the gatehouse, but her legs remained frozen in place. To her surprise, she found she could not move a muscle.

“Bind her hands and feet! Be quick!” The voice belonged to Hedvyg. Strong hands took hold of her and bound her hand and foot. Kristryd knew Bamadar was near her, within reach, but she could neither turn her head to see him, nor could she move her tongue to call out to him. She tried to scream, but she could utter no sound.

The old dwurwife seemed to have materialized out of the darkness. She threw back the hood of a cloak and produced a single flame of fire, like a burning lamp, that hovered in the air to illuminate her ancient face. The naked flame cast long shadows that played over the witch’s features. Her ancient eyes glittered in the reflection like black onyx. “Look at me, drossel! Face to face. Now I will teach you to see through these eyes.”

Bamadar exchanged blows with another of the one-eared hobgoblins. He disengaged and turned about to locate the queen again, but a clutch of Dengar greybeards had gathered around her and concealed her from his view. *The queen has been wounded!* he panicked. Yes, so it seemed, for they lifted Kristryd to their shoulders and set off toward the gates. Abandoning his fight with the hobgoblin, Bamadar leapt off in pursuit of the Dengar dwarves, shouting and raving wildly. His headlong charge ended abruptly when he tripped over the crumpled body of a dead gnome. He recognized the face of Father Furduch.

Bagbag’s Weapon

For a moment, the predawn light in the sky seemed to retreat into itself, swallowed into blackness. The light spells cast by Father Furduch and Gilvgola also faded, affording only a dim glow through some thick and dreadful darkness that had fallen upon the battlefield. Clambering back to his feet, Bamadar staggered and swooned under a nauseous wave of fear. It emanated from within the fortress—not from the direction of the attacking host. A hush rolled out from Hoch Dungalorin and over the battlefield like the expanding ripple on the surface of a pool into which a

stone has been dropped. The clash of steel on steel fell momentarily silent as it passed. The shouts of dwarves and their cries of pain fell silent. The pound of war drums fell silent. The shrill screams of orcs and goblins fell silent. The wail of war horns fell silent. The whole field of battle drew its breath in fearful anticipation. *Here it comes!* Bamadar growled to himself. An unnatural dread choked him, and a nauseous stench seemed to fill the air.

Ignoring the devilshine, the Sacred Heart waddled across the battlefield, took Bamadar by the hand, and pulled him back up to his feet. "Fall back!" she shouted. Her resonant voice carried the weight of authority. "Some fell thing has been loosed upon us," she lamented. Her eyes fell upon the face of Father Furduch where he lay at her feet. "Bring him too!" she instructed Bamadar. He hoisted the body of the dead gnome over his shoulder and called to his companions, "Fall back! For the queen!"

Fight for the Gatehouse

A dozen dwarven bodies scattered about the floor of the gatehouse indicated that the battle with the quickened hobgoblins had not gone well for the defenders, but there also lay the dismembered remains of several of those intruders, chopped and hacked apart. "We held them back best we could, and great the price!" Tyren gestured toward the carnage. Blood slicked his own armor.

Bamadar laid Father Furduch's lifeless body on a bench along the wall. "Did you see the queen borne hence by Dengar dwarves?" he demanded of the captain.

"While we fought these bequickeners, a clutch of greybeards passed through this gate, carrying her majesty aloft, but if she be dead or merely wounded, I could not say," Tyren reported. Bamadar waited for no further explanations. He set off in pursuit of Kristryd.

Thane Blackaxe entered the gatehouse of his citadel, armed for the fight. Wasting no time for concern over those yet fighting outside the walls, he ordered the captain raise the bridge and close and bar the gates behind him before the besiegers rallied. Alas! The bridge could not be raised, the gates could not be closed. Some enchantment held them fast. The gatehouse guards worked furiously at the winches and the chains, but a clever spell held the mechanisms frozen in place.

Young prince Archosian staggered into the gatehouse, bedecked with wounds and weals, but he declared boldly, "Peralay and I shall be your gate, and Xaxalander shall be the bar. Let them come and

batter themselves against us.”

As if to fulfill the young prince's boast, the attackers rallied themselves and charged across the bridge, emboldening themselves to force entrance like a bandit come upon an unguarded maiden in a field. Those loathsome intruders found themselves chastened back by the chaste belt of *Defender* and *Gnoll-Cleaver*, the stealthy backstab of Xaxalander Deravnye, and the ripping fangs of Peralay's last surviving cooshee dog. “Elves! The elves have come!” they squealed before their heads fled from their shoulders. The report travelled back through the ranks, inspiring fear and dismay among those following. “Elves within the walls!” the goblins cursed.

Not alone did the elves stand. Gilvgola added her efforts to their defense and worked what powers remained within her to undo the bindings of Hedvyg and seal up the gates. Until she could dispel such magics, the flashing blades of *Defender* and *Gnoll-Cleaver* piled high the gundyguts.

Vlixipur

“Vlixipur, I speak your name!” Bagbag commanded of the abomination that now flickered before him within the confines of the summoning circle. “I adjure you! Descend upon our enemies, even those of goblinkind that now besiege this fortress! Smite them with fear and terror; strike them with death and devastation; turn them about and send them fleeing in dismay. Then return unto me to hear my command!”

“I do your bidding, master,” the archfiend snarled. His words dripped with venomous sarcasm, but the summoner's binding spell held him fast. From the menacing shadow that rose behind him, Vlixipur partially unfolded two great bat-like wings to the extent the ceiling and walls of the chamber allowed. They blazed dark with black-fire. A light in the demon's piggish eyes flashed like strobes of devil's red and piercing white-heat. Compelled to obey by the spells Bagbag marshalled from the brassbound book, Vlixipur turned toward the tower window that overlooked the battlefield below and launched himself from the high tower like an arrow loosed from a bow. His great wings fully unfolded and caught the air. The demon wheeled about in the sky. An unholy azure light flashed about him like lightning. Fire and fear and chaos rained down on the besieging hosts below. Eyes melted away in the sockets of heads; skin bubbled and cracked; bones turned to dust; and joints turned to water and weakness. Goblins died from fright in the wake of his passing, and hobgoblins pissed themselves.

Those great bat wings of black fire spread to blot out the sky; an abyssal scream turned the blood of every foe toxic in its veins and unleashed pure panic and mayhem. Goblin turned upon goblin, weapon upon weapon; they smote one another in the terror of their flight and trampled one upon another in blind fury under stampeding boot and claw before the swooping fiend. All semblance of order disbanded; all discipline of rank and command evaporated. In only moments, the whole of the besieging host broke off in mad flight, shrieking like banshees, dropping shield and sword and stripping arms. They haphazardly littered trails of gear behind them leading in every direction away from Hoch Dunglorin.

Hedvyg's Prey

"Drop her there," Hedvyg commanded. The bespelled Dengar dwarves obeyed her every command. They dropped Kristryd indelicately on the stone floor at the feet of Dame Thresstone.

"What will you do with her?" the noble-dwarfess of Gilmorack asked.

"Lichify her!" old Hedvyg keaked excitedly. Kneeling over the queen, the witch used a charcoal scribbet to scribble out magical runes on Kristryd's face. "Just need to snatch her soul and stick it in my purse. First take me to Bagbag! He owes me a book and anvil."

Dame Thresstone's face betrayed no inner thought, neither her glee at the prospect of at last seeing Kristryd defeated nor her revulsion at the witch's necromantic designs. "Follow me. He rooms in the high towers above the barracks," she said. Regarding Kristryd's crumpled form Dame Thresstone added, "And bring her along. I will help you with the deed."

The Dengar dwarves hoisted the queen's inert body back up over their shoulders and set off to follow Dame Thresstone. With a torch in hand for illumination, she made her way through the austere stone halls and chambers of Hoch Dunglorin. Servants and dwur-at-arms stepped aside. "The queen has been injured," she explained to no one in particular. "We bear her to her chambers." None stood to challenge them; most had been dispatched to the defense of the walls, and those that remained suspected no mischief.

Dame Thresstone led Hedvyg and the greybeards up the flights of the high tower stairs to the door to Bagbag's chamber, but he had magically locked and warded it. No matter. Hedvyg sliced through his spells and wizard locks with ease. The door swung wide, thrown open by unseen magical hands. Hedvyg charged in with a spell already on her lips. Dame Thresstone and four Dengar

dwarves carrying the body of Kristryd Olinsdotter entered the chamber behind the witch.

All the room seemed afloat with magic and devilshine. The candles, lamps, and magical illuminations pulsed and flashed like strobes. Strange swirls of kaleidoscope colors spun about the tower chamber. A summoner's circle, etched upon the floor in chalks and bloods seemed to slowly rotate. Startled by the sudden intrusion, Bagbag's looked up from the brassbound book upon which he concentrated. "Stay Hedvyg! You err gravely!" he warned. "This is not the time!"

Hedvyg completed the spell she had already been casting. A nearly invisible globe of shimmering magic expanded around her. "Do I err, oath breaker? I've come to claim what's mine!"

"Not so!" Bagbag argued. "Spare the queen. For her life, I will trade what trophy you ask of me, but you must spare her life."

"You know the bulse I want. Give me the devilshine book you hold in your hands!" Hedvyg laughed. Bagbag looked from the face of the witch to the face of Dame Thresstone who stood near at hand. The dwurwife of Gilmorack smiled sweetly and executed a sarcastic curtsy.

"Release her," Bagbag pleaded.

Hedvyg nodded toward the four Dengar dwarves. They threw Kristryd's body to the stone floor as if dropping a sack of onions. The queen's helmed head cracked noisily against the stone. Kristryd felt the blow to her bones. The wind rushed out from her lungs. The paralysis spell did nothing to cushion the pain, nor did it close her eyes or ears. She heard and saw all that transpired about her.

Hedvyg knelt over the queen's inert body and pulled the helmet from her head. Kristryd's dark curls spilled loose. "Such a pretty one!" the old witch sighed as she resumed sketching magical runes on Kristryd's face. In the other hand, she held a cruel dagger.

Chapter 35

INTO THE ABYSS

HEDVYG LIFTED THE dagger, poised to plunge it into the queen's heart. The Dengar dwarves turned their grey-bearded faces away, unwilling to watch the sacrifice. Dame Thresstone took three steps backward toward the open door. She scarcely dared to breathe.

"Hedvyg! The book for the life of the queen!" Bagbag offered. He slammed the book shut. It closed with a clap like thunder. "Take it! I keep my oath." He latched the brass clasps and dropped the heavy tome amidst a clutter of parchments, books, and candles strewn atop a wooden table. The magical devilshine in the room flickered and faded away. The eerie swirls of color disappeared, and the all the illuminations returned to those of normal light cast by candles and lamps. The summoners circle which, until then, had slowly revolved at the center of the floor, also faded away as if it had never been there.

Hedvyg laid the dagger down upon Kristryd's chest. The blade rested upon the finely-crafted ringlets of the queen's mithril shirt. Moving slowly and cautiously, never taking her eyes off Bagbag, the witch rose to her feet. The expression on her ancient face indicated that she expected treachery. She edged her way to the table and warily crept up on the brassbound book. She glanced at it only briefly, lest Bagbag take advantage of her distracted attention and utter a spell. "The book should have been mine from the start," she sniffed. "Drelnza wanted *me* to have it, not Gretyll."

"Yes," Bagbag agreed. "It should have been from the start. And now it is."

Encouraged by that thought, Hedvyg pounced upon the book and snatched it up from the table.

"Do not delay! I have brought up a powerful fiend. Bind him and wrack him before he strikes us all," Bagbag urged her to act. "I can teach you the incantation. I will reveal the name."

"I need no teacher," the witch retorted. Her hungry fingers moved quickly to unfasten the clasps. As soon as she lifted the cover, an ugly rutterkin leapt up from the pages, as Bagbag knew

it would. Hedvyg shrieked. The rutterkin snarled, "Here's a kiss from Tasha!" The ugly fiend struck the witch a terrific blow. She dropped the book to the floor and fell flat on her back, blood streaming from her mouth.

Dame Thresstone, who had watched all of this transpire, leapt on top of the witch, clutching at her throat. "Die witch! Traitor! Devil!" she screamed. Hedvyg thrashed about, trying to speak a spell, trying to reach her wand, pleading for her life, but Thresstone only tightened her grip, crushing the witch's throat under her fingers. Hedvyg's body flerked about. She tried to throw the dwarfess off from on top of her, but Thresstone held on tightly, squeezing until the witch ceased to thrash. The rutterkin applauded the spectacle, grinning stupidly.

"Release her, Dame Thresstone. She is dead," Bagbag observed. He snatched up the open book and quickly turned its pages. "You have done us all a great service," he added.

Hedvyg's spells dissipated. The paralysis left Kristryd's body, and she slowly sat up from the where she lay prone on the floor. She tossed the cursed dagger aside. Dame Thresstone released her stony grip on the corpse of Hedvyg and turned to help Kristryd to her feet. "Your majesty," she said. "I have slain the witch and saved your life. If I have found favor in your eyes, pardon what grievances you hold against me." The four greybeards of Dengar also came to their senses, confused and uncertain about where they stood or how they had gotten there. They blanched at the sight of dead witch and the leering rutterkin still perched in a crouch atop the table.

"Time enough for pardons and reconciliations when I have taken back control of the fiend. Leave me now!" Bagbag urgently flipped through the pages of the devilshine book.

"You're too late!" croaked the vile rutterkin. The cackling creature hopped across the table and climbed back inside the book, even as Bagbag turned the pages.

Entrance of the King

Thane Blackaxe scarcely understood the shifting fortunes of the battle. He cowered among the warriors atop the gatehouse as the demon swooped low and passed over their heads. The appearance of the fiend frightened and discomfited him and his soldiers no less than it terrorized their enemies. The nauseous stench made the iron-willed dwarves reel about and stagger under a heavy wave of fear. The terror of the abyssal presence paralyzed the warriors. Brave dwarves dropped their weapons, their hands hanging limp-

ly at their sides. Likewise, the squealing goblins below discarded weapons and gear in a maddened flight from before the demon. They scattered in all directions. The shadow of the winged tanar'ri lord pursued. As the demon passed from sight of the gatehouse, the light of dawn seemed to brighten.

"He's done it!" Thane Blackaxe declared. "The old wizard has done it! Gods be damned! He's unleashed the Abyss against our foes. Look at them run."

Big Gilvgola's mace smacked Thane Blackaxe across the back of his helmeted head so hard that the dwurlord dropped to the floor. "What the Nine Hells did you do that for?" he cursed.

"If you blaspheme again, you'll feel it again," the Sacred Heart scolded.

"Nothing good can come of devilshine," Peralay observed. "This is bad business, and we will yet pay the price."

"Here's what I know," Blackaxe said as he lifted himself back to his feet. "Up until that demon came, we were losing this fight."

As the goblins fled, Thane Evrast and the last survivors of the Dengar dwarves broke through and arrived at the gatehouse. "By Moradin's forge, have mercy," Evrast pleaded. "Give us leave to enter lest we perish outside your walls."

"Enter brothers," Blackaxe called down from the top of the gatehouse. "Durin's sons are all welcome within these walls tonight. Help us hold this gatehouse fast, for some enchantment prevents us from raising the bridge and sealing the gates."

"By Clangeddin, we shall stand here and die here along with you if the gods will it," Evrast promised.

Gilvgola peered over the edge between the gatehouse battlements and looked down on the old king. "Tis no light matter to swear by the gods," she warned. Thane Evrast had no intention of keeping his oath. He left the dragon's share of his greybeards to help hold the gatehouse, but he himself took seven of his best and slipped away into the fortress.

Some short space of time later, Hedvyg perished and with her perished her spells. The wizard locks which barred the bridge from raising and the gates from closing also failed. Gilvgola, Thane Blackaxe, the three elves, and all the dwur with them descended into the gatehouse, hauled up the bridge, closed the great gates, and dropped the bar.

"We are indeed saved!" Thane Blackaxe exclaimed. "Never again will I doubt that old wizard."

"Salvation from the Abyss is no salvation," Gilvgola warned.

Where is the Queen?

Bamadar crashed through the austere halls of Hoch Dungalorin, calling out for Kristryd. "We saw the queen carried to the tower. Dame Thresstone went with her. Surely her majesty has been sorely wounded," they told him.

"Nay! Treachery is afoot!" Bamadar bellowed as he raced for the high tower and the queen's chambers. Alas! He found her chamber empty. *Where have they taken her?* Panic gripped his heart and tears clouded his vision. He sat down on the donge and wiped the tears away. *Think, you young fool!* he scolded himself. *I must warn Bagbag that Hedvyg is here and that she has taken the queen.*

Leaping back to his feet he hastened toward Bagbag's chamber. Around the corner, down the hall, the door stood open. He shouted as he tumbled through the open door, "Bagbag! Hedvyg has the queen!" He stopped short, nearly tripping over the dead body of Hedvyg which lay inert upon the floor before his feet. The old wizard paid no attention to the corpse nor to the entrance of the young dwarf, so engrossed he was in his magical tome.

"Bagbag! Where is the queen!" Bamadar insisted.

The old wizard did not lift his eyes from the page, but with one hand, he waved the brash young dwarf off.

"To the hells with your spells!" Bamadar tried pulling the book away from Bagbag, but the old wizard snatched it back.

His concentration broken, he would need to begin the spell again. He scolded the dwarf, "Not now! Leave me! I have no time!" The wizard lifted a hand and an unseen force pushed Bamadar out through the door he had entered. At the same moment, the door to the chamber magically swung shut and locked. Finding himself suddenly in the hallway, Bamadar tried the door but could not open it. He kicked at it angrily, then turned to resume his search for the queen.

Day of Vengeance

On the fields around Hoch Dungalorin, Hroth's fleeing forces experienced an abrupt change of heart. Hroth focused his yellow eyes upon the bat-winged horror in the sky. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "We are sent a savior!" A thrill of joy coursed through his body. From all across the field of battle, a mighty shout rose from the throats of goblinkind. "Unto me! Unto me!" the joyous words sang in all their heads. The hobgoblin lord shouted orders and took control of his no-longer fleeing army as best he could. War horns sounded

again, and the host turned itself about to resume the siege.

"It drives us back then summons us to its side?" Hroth's lieutenant asked.

"The lord of Dregrach the Cruel. We are sent a savior at last!" Hroth thundered. "This is the day of vengeance!"

Blood on the Anvil

Inside the walls of Hoch Dungalorin, another battle raged. Thane Evrast and seven of his most loyal Dengar dwarves, now inside the fortress walls, fell upon the two guards Durgeddin entrusted to protect the Anvil of the Lortmil Mountains: Kristryd's brothers Orin and Olin. Indeed, Kristryd herself had commanded that those two should remain within the safety of the fortress, guarding the anvil, for she feared her father's reproach should her brothers perish on the field of battle. Heavily armored in the best of Durgeddin's craft and wielding the sharpest of his arms, the two sons of Prince Corond were not to be easily slain or overpowered. They raised the alarm and shouted for help, but in the midst of the calamity all around, none heard the shouts. Evrast and his men hammered at the brothers from all sides and slew them both. Then sank Evrast to his knees before the anvil and lifted his bloodied hands to Moradin in gratitude.

"What now, lord?" his most loyal greybeard dwarf-at-arms asked.

"Take up the holy anvil and bear it to the place it belongs. The halls of Dengar!"

That loyal greybeard looked askance upon his master. "How should we carry such a treasure away in the midst of battle? Will we not be captured and put to death as thieves and murderers?"

Evrast dismissed the objection with an unconcerned shrug. "The witch has promised to open an eldritch portal through which we will travel to our halls in an instant. In like manner, she and her sisters stole this anvil away from our hallowed halls by the power of their magic book. Now, she returns us thence and the anvil with us."

"Else we perish. But for what purpose does she tarry?"

Before Evrast could offer a reply, a wave of abject terror and nausea swept over him and all his greybeards. Vlixipur returned, hurtling through the air like a comet. Hope and light and goodness and beauty scurried away before him. Despair of heart choked every breast.

Bagbag Broken

The besiegers that had scattered in reckless retreat now returned rushing back together like a returning wave that washes again upon the rocks. They shrieked in delight and ecstatic frenzy. Their enthusiasm diminished only slightly when they found the open gates they had abandoned now closed fast against them. The barred doors of Hoch Dunglorin could not stop Vlixipur. In the blink of an eye, he stood within Bagbag's high tower chamber, seeking the summoner that had brought him up from the Abyss.

Vlixipur did not find trueheaded Bagbag completely unprepared. The circle of protection was gone, but the old dwur wizard had wreathed himself in spells of protection quickly gleaned from the devilshine book. The moment the demon appeared, Bagbag began uttering an incantation that would banish the fiend from Oerth. Before he could finish reading the spell, the grinning tanar'ri lord struck him a terrible blow with his long-clawed paw. The brassbound book flew from Bagbag's hands. The old dwarf crashed against the chamber wall; his weary bones shattered like pottery.

The tanar'ri scooped up the book from the floor and secreted it away as a souvenir. With merely a nod of his horned head, he opened a gate to his native plane. Bagbag had studied the brassbound book for many years before he could open such a gate. He had spent long hours in recitations and incantations to create the portal through which Vlixipur had come to Oerth. The tanar'ri lord could accomplish the same trick without effort or the assistance of spells written in a book. Up from out of the Abyss came leaping into Bagbag's chamber three more terrible fiends, each as vile as the first. They gathered around his crumpled body, leering and cackling.

"Bagbagotiouk Silverstonecutter," Vlixipur hissed as he poked at the dwarf with the dagger-sharp claw at the end of one enormous toe. "Verily! I know well thy name. Hear my voice. Long thou shalt serve thy new master in the Abyss, even as I have rendered service unto thee." Turning to the three newly arrived fiends he had summoned, Vlixipur commanded, "Slay the dwarves, sparing none. Also elves and men tear asunder and devour. But leave for me this old fool that doth play at summoner's arts. I make a toy of him."

Chaos Unleashed

While these things transpired in Bagbag's chambers, Kristryd, Dame Thresstone, and the four Dengar dwarves came upon an unexpected treachery in the open courtyard of the hoch.

“Fiend! Have you spilled the blood of these noble dwur?” Kristryd nodded toward the bodies of her brothers. Hedvyg’s evil runes still marked Kristryd’s face, making her visage frightening and witchlike in the thin morning light. Rage and wrath flashed in her eyes as she realized the fate that had befallen Olin and Orin. Their blood yet seeped from their wounds and soaked the soil around the anvil. Evrast’s soldier-thieves drew back fearfully as the queen approached. Evrast himself stood unmoved atop the trophy, brandishing the blade with which he had carved open his grandson.

“In war, blood is shed, my daughter,” the maddened king replied. Addressing the four Dengar dwarves and also Dame Thresstone, he commanded them, “By Moradin’s enormous stones! Mingle her blood with the blood of her brethren!”

The four Dengar greybeards, so recently liberated from Hedvyg’s spell, hesitated. Uncertainty and fear clouded their grizzled faces.

Dame Thresstone thrust a defiant finger at Evrast. “Nay my lord,” she demurred. “We beg the queen’s clemency, for Hedvyg utterly deceived us. That sour witch now lies dead by my own hand.”

“Woe! Gods have mercy!” Evrast’s loyal greybeards exclaimed in dismay. They tore at their beards and rent their garments.

“You have ignobly spilled the blood of noble dwur. Your lives are all forfeit,” Dame Thresstone spat at them on Kristryd’s behalf. “If you want to live, swear allegiance to the queen and help us defend this fortress.”

“Fah! I do the deed myself with Moradin’s good pleasure,” Evrast declared, thrusting his blade.

Bamadar Kadarel emerged from the high tower and took in the scene from across the open courtyard. “Bandit!” he shouted. The brash young dwarf rushed to the defense of the queen. The twelve from Dengar overmatched him, but he hastened to the fight heedless of their axes and hammers. They gathered around the anvil, weapons bared, prepared to defend their king and strike down the brash interloper. Bamadar snarled through gritted teeth, “Gods blast you all!”

As if in reply to the curse, a demon descended upon them from Bagbag’s window in the high tower. It screamed like an eagle swooping down upon a rabbit. All the dwarves fell away in blinded terror. The creature landed itself upon the anvil and lifted Evrast in one terrible talon. Its horned beak tore the king’s body asunder. Blood and gore poured out over the sacred relic.

Bamadar dropped his axe, swept Kristryd up in his arms, and

fled. The raised wooden dais upon which Kristryd's throne had sat the day before stood nearby. Bamadar and Kristryd dove into the narrow space beneath the planks and hid themselves as best they could.

The fiend leapt upon the rest of the Dengar greybeards with orgiastic enthusiasm, tearing them to pieces. All was limbs and heads and entrails. The smatter washed over Dame Thresstone where she fell to the ground, limp from terror. From where she cowered with her head buried in her arms, she could no longer see the gory horror. She covered her ears, but she could not block the sound of the screeching fiend, the agonized screams of the dwarves, or the sickening sound of ripping flesh and snapping bones. Presently the cacophony of the battle fell silent. The old dwur-wife remained unmoving, praying fervently that the demon might ignore her. At length, she cautiously opened her eyes and lifted her head. It was gone. The remains of the dwarves lie strewn all about the courtyard. The anvil was gone.

The Avenger

Outside the walls, the host of Hroth screamed and raged in demonic ecstasy. The battlefield boiled like soup in a cauldron. Inside the walls, the tenar'ri murdered their way through the chambers and holdings of Thane Blackaxe. No one could stand in their way or stop them. They killed everyone they encountered. They unleashed unlimited spells. They tore and maimed. They created darkness and terror. Ordinary weapons took no bite against them.

Hroth ascended the ruins of the barbican and looked toward the gatehouse. His nostrils flared. He licked at the wind, savoring the mixed flavors of blood and fear. Turning to his one-eared lieutenant, the warlord declared, "The plan changes! Maglubiyet has sent an avenger. Send good tidings to the tribes. No more leaving the mountains."

"Let the altar fires of Grot Ugrat burn again!" the lieutenant prayed. Grateful tears welled up in his yellow eyes.

As Vlixipur's great shadow rose over the top of the gatehouse, Hroth and his lieutenant prostrated themselves upon the stones, worshipping the fiend in adoration.

The Queen's Resolve

"Bagbag has failed," Kristryd observed. The queen sat down on the edge of the dais under which she had been hiding only a few moments earlier. Still soaked in the bloody gore of the Dengar

dwarves, Dame Thresstone approached and sat down beside of the queen. Kristryd looked down on the dismembered corpses strewn all about the courtyard. Her eyes fixed upon the bodies of Olin and Orin. "I have led us to ruin, and their blood is on my head."

"Yes," Dame Thresstone agreed, collecting her wits. "The queen speaks the truth at last."

"This battle is lost. I must secret the queen away to safety," Bamadar told them as he collected his axe. "I will hide you away in the dungeons beneath the fort until the danger has passed."

"You will not!" Kristryd scolded him. "I am a dwarfess, and I will die as one and not as a coward hiding in a hole."

The Divine Word

Vlixipur appeared upon the top of the gatehouse sheathed in black fire. The hosts of Hroth that beat at the gates below cheered when they saw the fiend take that stand above them. Vlixipur roared and fanned his fiery wings. The whole goblin army fell prostrate before him. In an instant, the other three fiends appeared beside him. All four demons stood upon the gatehouse, flaunting their fearsomeness, seething in evil, and hissing like serpents. The stench of their presence choked the air. Darkness, sickness, dread, and fear smeared across every heart like filth.

"The fiends stand above us. They stand upon the stones above our heads!" Thane Blackaxe told the defenders inside the gatehouse. Prince Archosian, Peralay, and Xaxalander invoked the names of Corellon and Elhonna before hastening to the attack, but the Gilvgola stopped them. "This is beyond the strength of weapons," she warned them. "I go alone!"

The Sacred Heart prayed as she hauled herself up the stone stairs to the roof of the gatehouse, "Mother Berronar, if ever you have heard me, hear me now. I shall sacrifice to you whatever is needful. Only turn these fiends away from us and spare these your sons and daughters."

"The cost is more than you can bear to pay, daughter," the goddess replied.

"And yet, I will pay it still," the Sacred Heart vowed. "Whatever the cost."

Forcing her great girth through a narrow trapdoor, the priestess emerged into the morning air atop the gatehouse. She clutched in one hand her mighty mace and in the other she held aloft the sacred braid of Berronar. Those who looked on from the walls

beheld not the porknell priestess but Berronar herself. The four tenar'ri roared and raged at the goddess. Black flames burst into existence all around them, and they struck at the goddess, gleeful in the hope of slaying one so exalted. Terrible dissonance shook the whole fortress. Even the massive immovable granite stones of Hoch Dungalorin trembled in terror.

Barbed tails, razor sharp nails, teeth like swords, flaming whips, fireballs, and strokes of lightning erupted. The goddess did not flinch, nor did she suffer injury. Drawing herself up to face those nightmares squarely, Gilvgola spoke a single divine word imbued with the power that shaped the world at the dawn of creation—a word known only to the Sacred Heart from the lips of Berronar. Her voice rang out clear and true and pure, a sound like a flash of bright light that dispels all darkness. For a moment all of Oerth shuddered. By the power of that word, the fiends and the archfiend vanished—banished back to the Abyss. Then came silence. The demons were gone. The goddess was gone. The rotund priestess stood alone atop the gatehouse.

Hroth's hosts picked themselves up from the ground, blinked in the light of the morning sun, and slunk away back into the mountains from whence they came.

Chapter 36

END OF WAR

“YOU FAILED US. All this for nothing!” Hroth’s lieutenant moaned as he licked at his open wounds.

“Not for nothing, skitterfoot,” Hroth snarled. The grizzled warlord scratched at the hole in his head where his left ear had once been. Those half dozen that remained of his hobgoblins sat with him upon a mountain perch above the forlorn ruins of Grot Ugrat. As much as they desired to look again upon the altar of Maglubiyet, they dared not descend into the sacred valley.

“We just got our asses kicked. Again,” the lieutenant reminded the warlord.

“Shut your fanghole!” Hroth growled. “What do you know about survival, pissy pants? Strategy? Ever heard that word? We fought in the west so ten tribes could go east; slip into the lowlands; feed and breed. The day of vengeance will roll around.”

On the other side of the mountains, the dragon’s share of the Lortmil tribes cascaded downsteeply like snowmelt flooding the gullies in the open-tide of spring. Elves of Celene and woodsmen of Ulek fell back and fled before them all the way to the Mill of Altimira where they joined the advance posts of the Royal Army of Ulek and prepared to make a desperate stand. Fastaal Dothmar called up the reserves of Celene, for he supposed that goblins would next sack Courwood, cross the Jewel, and enter the Fey Kingdom. But Hroth deceived them all. Only a small feint of goblins and gnolls came to Courwood, and these fled before the elves and did not stand to fight. Rather they shrank away. So it was named “The Battle of Empty Blows.” Meantime, the rest of the great host turned south and crossed the Jewel near Treehome. The old Suss Forest seemed to swallow them whole, and they were seen no more.

All the month of Coldeven, stragglers continued to descend. They crept out of the Lortmils by secret and hidden paths. Unwalled villages fled before their trampling feet. The Royal Army raised forts to stop the flow, but the goblins skirted them. For most of a month they passed through Prinzfeld, travelling under cover of

darkness, tribe after tribe, clan after clan, family after family. They carried with them great packs, heavy sacks and bags, and many pulled wains behind them. Not a rampaging army of marauders, as might have been expected, but instead, long trains of refugees, males and females both, warriors, elders, younglings, and cubs. Scarcely daring delay to loot or pillage as they went, they hurried along their way, slipping beneath the boughs of the Suss.

The migrations continued through the summer. Skirmishes took place through all the mountains, and by the time snow fell in the north again, all the lowlands reported bands of goblinkind deserting their mountain homes. Rangers and hunters patrolled the western foothills, cutting down any that dared cross inhabited lands. On the southeast, however, near the cairns of Riechsvale, the allies could scarce stem the tide. The soldiers and militia men of those lands, wedged between the mountains and the Suss, contented themselves with defending their own towns and villages, for the monsters passed through quickly, hurtling themselves toward the protection of the forest and the borders of the Pomarj.

Gilvgola's Cairn

Gilvgola and the surviving warriors of Dorob Kilthdum returned to their home in the Kron Hills, but they received no hero's welcome. Instead, they found their halls garrisoned by a strong band of orcs who in no wise intended to leave. This is how the matter came about. While Gilvgola and the axes of Kilthdum had been away in the west, fighting for Kristryd, the famine in the mountains became so severe that the sparse remaining orc tribes resorted to desperate measures. Most fell to raiding and were quickly cut down, but some of the gundyguts showed a clever treachery. One troop, emboldened by hunger, clad themselves in the garments and armor of slain dwarves and made their way down from the mountains. In this guise, they came to the head of the Clearwater River where stands Dorob Kilthdum. They came so attired that even the sentries atop the gatehouse thought them to be their own folk returning from Kristryd's wars. The welcoming fanfare of trumpets hailed them as they approached, and the orcs found the gates opened before them. In mad frenzy, they swept through the halls and left nothing alive. Having taken that strong fortress, they summoned more of their kin. Many clans that yet remained in the northeast came with great joy and took up residence in the halls of Dorob Kilthdum. That once proud stronghold of ancient Balnorhak became a den of devils. From within its secure walls,

raiding parties went out and harried all the lands about, slaying whole villages, raping and plundering without fear, slaking their thirst for blood. Then the bandits slunk back to the safety of the unassailable fortress.

Gilvgola and the returning axes made repeated attacks against their own strong walls, but they found that their fathers had constructed their defenses too formidably. Now on the outside, they could not take the walls nor break down the gates. Many died in the vain attempt, driven mad by the thought that they had abandoned their own wives and children to such a cruel fate. They appealed to the Celenese for help, but none came. They appealed to the Velunese for help, but none came. They appealed to the sons of Kristryd for help, but none came.

Gilvgola appealed to Berronar, but the goddess had fallen silent since the battle of Hoch Dungalorin. Such was the price for that victory. The joy of life bled out from Gilvgola's heart, and the fire in her eyes burned low. The Sacred Heart of Berronar, ascended the cliffs above the entrance to Dorob Kiltlduum and called down a terrible curse on the stronghold in the name of Moradin's bride. Having no other sacrifice to offer, clutching the braid of Berronar in her hand, she threw her own heavy body down from the cliffs and smashed herself upon the rocks. The goddess heard Gilvgola's blood cry out from the stones, and she inclined her ear. The face of the cliff from which the Sacred Heart leapt fell away, burying the entrance to Dorob Kiltlduum beneath the fallen rock. The survivors of the once-great stronghold beheld these things before their eyes. They saw the clouds of dust come to settle, and they saw that the last remaining outpost of Old Balnorhak forever buried. They turned their backs upon it and scattered themselves across the Flaeness. For their misfortune, they blamed Kristryd Olinsdotter, Queen of the Lortmil Mountains, and they surnamed her Hasput, the goblin name by which she was already known, which is being translated as "Hated One."

The stones of that place are called Gilvgola's Cairn to this day. Many a team of adventurers have sought entrance to those buried ruins, but none have yet succeeded.

The Flight of Urgush

Urgush led all those yet loyal to him by winding ways overtop the Lorridges and into the plains of Veluna. They brought with them heavy wains and loaded wagons dragged along by slaves and trolls. The cargo included the great treasure hoard of gem-

stones looted from the treasuries of Dengar—a lovedrury for the Yatil Queen that she might burn them in her hallowed lamp. *Has she not waged all this war only for the sake of Lortmil gemstones? Well, I will bring her these and earn her grate.* He flattered himself, *Why shouldn't I sit beside her as a king?*

The patrols of Bissel saw the trains descending from the hills by way of the Low Ridge Road. Urgush could not move faster than the wagons he pulled, and he was not willing to abandon the lovedrury. By the time he entered the gap and set his face toward the Yatils, the combined cavalry of Bissel and Veluna, joined by valiant Knights of the Watch, came out to block his way at Falsford. The battle bloodied the fords, blunting the host of Urgush and driving them back from the river. Then the warlord rose before his warriors, lifted high the writhing shield, rallied them and emboldened them and called upon them to die nobly. They struck the Velunese and Bisselite and sent them fleeing across the fords. Urgush and his troop crossed after them. They looted Falsford and burned it to the ground as they passed. Ahead of them loomed the high Yatil Peaks, the promised land, and the way to Iggwilv's Horn.

Now so close to his goal, Urgush drove on without rest. By the time his host arrived under the shadow of Mount Tsojcanth, the peoples of that land had mustered against him. A stand of halfling, human, and elven forces came out to meet Urgush. Only recently freed from the witch's tyranny, the good folk of that land would turn no blind eye to invading Lortmil orcs. They fell upon Urgush in the Vale of Falwar.

Urgush suffered great dismay and discomfit, for until then, he believed that the Yatil Queen waited to receive him—if only he could reach her dominion. The welcome he received from the folk of Perrenland was less warm. Urgush called out to her by all her names, but no answer came from her silent horn. The warlord turned south, fleeing into Bramblewood of Ket. Perhaps he set his hopes upon the Barrier Peaks.

The young lord of Polvar Province, Sandor the Headstrong, heard that the invaders brought with them cartloads of treasure and precious gemstones. He determined not to let that vast wealth pass through his lands. In a series of forced marches, punctuated by ferocious running battles among the thickets of the Bramblewood, he pressed his soldiers to pursue Urgush and his dwindling troop. Day after day they harried the orcs. More of Sandor's soldiers fell from the pains of exhaustion than wounds of war, but still he pressed them on. They ran like hounds on the tail of a fox.

The running battle through the woods and the relentless pursuit continued from one Godsdays to the next. Like a hunted animal, Urgush fled this way, then turned that way, for he knew not the lay of those lands. So it was he led his followers up an unknown valley in the foothills of the Barrier Peaks. The refugees found themselves in a strange terrain of hot springs, steaming geysers, cascades of bleached white stone, still pools of strangely tinted waters, and unearthly blood-red lakes. The wains and heavy carts which they had already pulled for hundreds of miles through river fords, across muddy fields, over mountain roads, and through trackless forest, now bogged down in bubbling muds and steaming ground.

Sandor and his men drew ever closer. It seemed to Urgush that he must abandon the treasures or make his last stand. He called a halt, drew his host together, and dug in for the fight.

Then Rao remembered the twelve holy men impaled before the walls of Castle Hagthar. A powerful wind swept down from the mountains, tumbling goblins, orcs, and all that host onto their faces. The carts and wains which Urgush had pulled all the way from the heart of the Lortmil Mountains overturned and spilled their precious contents into the mud. Trees snapped at the base, and geysers erupted. A poisonous choking gas belched up from the blood-red lakes and filled the valley, stealing away the breath of orc and Ketite warrior alike. In this way, the hosts of the Red Medusa met their end—and so did the hunt of Sandor the Headstrong. Tales say the treasures of Urgush yet remain in that hidden valley, strewn among the bleached bones of the dead. Many adventurers, greedy for gain, have sought them out.

Chapter 37

A TASTE OF THE LETHE

“I BEG YOU to accompany me on one last embassy to Enstad. The Fey Queen is to be honored for her victories. The Grand Court intends to invest her with the Mantle of the Blue Moon, raising her to the title ‘Lady Rhalta of All Elvenkind.’”

Bagbag snorted. “What did she do? Mope about on her faerie-flower throne while you did all the work. They should name you their queen.”

“Will you accompany me?” Kristryd ignored the old wizard’s bluster.

“We have come to a changing of the guard,” Bagbag mused philosophically. “One feels it. The wars are at an end. Kristryd is made queen over the mountains, her sons over Gilmorack and Dengar. Urgush is no more. Hroth is no more. Gilvgola and Furduch have fallen. In Tringlee, the Duke Gallowagn passes the Shining Crown of Lothromenoron to his son and takes his leave. In Keoland, Senestall II ascends to the Throne of the Lion. All things change, but not in Enstad. In Enstad, they heap more honors upon do-nothing Yolande.”

“‘Yes’ or ‘no,’ old dwarf,” Kristryd pressed. “Will you walk with me to Enstad this summer?”

“I am ever at your service, your majesty,” Bagbag said with a bow. “But why should the Queen of the Lortmil Mountains walk? You should be carried upon the wind or teleported by means of dweomer.”

“I prefer to forget my sorrows with a long walk, and I desire your company,” the queen said. “Just the two of us. I leave Bamadar to look after affairs.”

On the Way to Enstad

Bagbag agreed. He leaned heavily upon his sorcerous staff each limping step of the way. His old bones had refused to properly knit back together, even under the healing power of the Sacred Heart. But the trueheaded loremaster felt glad enough to enjoy the

journey through the mountains with her once again. They went by way of the Celene Pass to Anyanes, just the two of them together, with no escorting guard or afterlings. In reward for all their labors to purge the mountains, they walked without fear of ambush. As they travelled, they reminisced over all that had befallen them and all they had endured during twelve years of war.

On a fine summer evening under stars hung in the mountain air, sitting across a small campfire from her old friend and guardian, Kristryd produced from her sack a skin of good merrygodown. When both their hearts felt light and merry, she pressed him for information. "Now tell me truly the tale of Bagbag and the three sisters, sparing no detail," she insisted.

"I keep what secrets I may," Bagbag chuckled happily. Still, he cleared his throat and began to speak in the practiced tones of a loremaster's recitation. "In time past, whilst the three sisters still dwelt beneath the vaulted chambers of their father's palace in Balnorhak, they made acquaintance with another young noble—a handsome and clever-minded young upstart called Bagbagotiouk Silverstonecutter. Yours truly! This Bagbag was younger than they by some half a century, but all three daughters loved him and vied with one another for the right to court him. We dwarfolk aren't numbered among the spellcasters, but the sisters found he had a quick mind for the arts, and they taught him their craft. Each one considered him to be her personal apprentice. When they all three were banished on account of suspicion of treachery and patricide, each of the three bade young Bagbag to accompany her alone into exile. Being loyal to the new prince and his young wife, Bagbag would go with none. Instead, he swore his allegiance to the house of Corond. The spurned and bitter Hedvyg, the youngest of the three sisters (and most winsome too), spoke that ignoble curse upon the prince of Corond, saying aloud to the prince's face, 'May your wife be barren as this stone.'

"So it came to pass. In distress over her shame, Sjarrdys turned to me, seeking a magical elixir or some charm to counter the curse, but what could I do? It seemed to me, in those innocent days, far beyond my power or that of the dwarves to remedy. I suggested, 'You might beg leave for a journey to Celene. I myself will escort you there to set you before the fey queen, for I have heard that the blessing of Astaranthe can unlock the womb.' And so I first came to those elven woods, guardian to your mother. And it worked. Under the blessing of the Faerie Queen were you born, and after you, your two brothers (may their names be honored in stone).

Had she not perished so young, she might well have born more sons and daughters to your father.

“For my part in these affairs, I ever cherished Vergadain’s prophecy of one who would ‘unite the broken tribes! Dwurdotter musters Durin’s sons!’ The three sisters taught the oracle to me, but they stumbled over its interpretation. Each sister imagined herself the queen of the mountains, but I attributed that destiny to none of them. Oh, but when I beheld Kristryd in her mother’s arms, then I knew of a certainty: ‘O Lortmil, Queen of Mountains! Everlasting Possession! Purge the peaks!’ Since that day, I have long labored to arrange matters in such a way that I should not be disappointed in my interpretation of the riddle.”

The loremaster paused the telling of his tale.

“Yes, you arranged my betrothal to Grallwin of Dengar, but I am left to guess at your other labors. I adjure you by Truesilver’s braided beard to tell me the truth. Hold nothing back. Now is the time for spilling secrets,” Kristryd prompted.

“I’ll admit it. And what’s done is done. When you came of age, I sought out my teachers, the three sisters, and I bragged to them of my prodigy. ‘She is certainly the one,’ I told them. Gunhyld swore to assist me. Gretyll also lent me her counsel. Hedvyg entered my confidence. The sisters promised me their help and even to set you, my queen, upon the throne of Balnorhak reborn. Indeed, they took oaths before me, promising to serve you and to deliver into your hand the whole of the Everlasting Possession. But I was a fool to trust the word of witches. I was most bitterly betrayed. How could I know they had already cast their allegiance with Iggwilv, the Yatil Witch?”

Bagbag sighed deeply and fell silent again for a spell.

“I would know only one more detail of this story,” Kristryd implored. “Promise me, on your loyalty, that you will answer what I ask.”

“On my loyalty,” her trueheaded friend replied. He took another pull from the skin of merrygodown.

“How did Hedvyg come to know the Prince Consort’s path through Druid’s Defile on that day and hour? And how did she know he carried such documents as he did for the dissolution of our alliance?”

Bagbag sniffed and grimaced, “A witch can scry things by means of her spells, even as you would do by means of your silver-framed mirror!”

“Perhaps so,” Kristryd allowed. “But perhaps there is more

to it than a scrying spell. Had the Prince Consort completed his mission, and Celene withdrawn from the alliance, could we alone, without their spellcasters, have levied the Suel spell against Grot-Ugrat? Could we have prevailed in these conflicts?"

"Perhaps not," Bagbag conceded.

"And if Grot-Ugrat still stood fast, we scarcely could have won the mountains," Kristryd continued.

"True as well," Bagbag admitted, but his tone now turned suspicious. "Is there some target at which you aim your arrows?"

"There is indeed," Kristryd resolved to keep her voice steady, but a tremor betrayed her anxiety. "Outside of the Grand Court, only you and I, my friend, knew the Prince Consort's mission and his errand, his route and his whereabouts."

Bagbag scowled silently at the dying flames of their campfire. "Your majesty. My ways may not always seem proper to your eyes, but I have only ever served you," he insisted.

"I do not question it, nor do I forget your friendship, true-headed Bagbag. But will you not tell me one more thing if I ask it?"

"Ask it my lady, and I swear, by Berronar's beard, I withhold nothing."

"Am I truly a daughter to the Prince Olinstaad Corond?"

Bagbag's eyes widened in surprise. He looked away and scratched at his chin, "Why ask such a thing? How could anyone say otherwise?"

The Lady Rhalta

When Kristryd arrived in Enstad, she went first to the stables of the elite cavalry where she found Emolasmairim nested down and well-attended. "I have brought a brace of rabbits to repay you for plucking me up from Riechsvale and delivering me to Alton," she whispered in the ear of the hippogriff. "Goodbye, my brave friend." The hippogriff pawed at the stable doors and nuzzled her beak under Kristryd's arm.

The Grand Court of Celene invested Yolande with her new titles and stations during the midsummer festival of Richfest. The whole court blazed with light on the sacred night when both moons showed their fullness: pale Luna and blue Celene. Lanterns set with crystal lenses, colored gems, and glinting mirrors hung from the branches and shone in the trees. The flames of slender tapers, reflecting in polished mirrors, added their gentle light to the brilliance of the double moon. The whole of the court glimmered with fairy light, and all the chambers and rooms and pleasant

gardens about the grounds glowed softly with luminescence, each a different hue and color. The heady scent of blossoms floated on the nighttime breeze, and only the leafy cascades of vining floral walls separated court from court. Sweet strains of olven song rose and fell on crystal voices accompanied by lyres, harps, flutes, and the tinkle of distant bells.

Resplendently clad in her mithril tabard, the Queen of the Lortmil Mountains stood among the onlookers that watched the fey host, all purpled in their colored silks, satins, and leafy gowns, as they danced on the polished alabaster floor of the Grand Court. Despite the enchantments and all the romance, she had no desire to join the dancing, for she remained in her months of mourning. In any case, she would have felt oafish, ridiculous, and clumsy-footed among the graceful grey elves, high elves, sylvan elves, and fairy folk. Child-like Archosian, who also felt too shy and clumsy for the dancing, spotted her standing alone in the crowd and came to her side, relieving her awkward sense of embarrassment. The extravagantly foppish Xaxalander Deravnye danced the night with dryads and nymphs, while the graceful hunter Peralay rotated through elven maids. All the while, Kristryd's eyes searched the green for her fey majesty. At long last, a clear note sounded on silver horns and golden pipes. The dancers parted at the fanfare to make way for the entrance of the Perfect Flower. She arrived, tall and slender, clad in the flattering green gossamer dress with the embroidered brocade. The glance of her lilac gaze quickened hearts and stole away the breath. A gentle smile, warm as the summer night, drew a sigh from all who looked on her face. Noble elven princes and princesses stepped back to open the way before the fey queen. They averted their eyes from her splendor, bent their knees before her, and bowed their heads.

"Behold," the herald proclaimed, "The Lady Rhalta of All Elvenkind, Victor of the Lortmil Wars."

Silence and anticipation fell on the dancers at the ball. Xaxalander, Peralay, Fasstal Dothmar, and a host of other elven princes, each more handsome than the next, stood at the ready. Yolande regarded them all evenly before extending her delicate hand to Fasstal Dothmar. He stepped forward, beaming with pleasure; the music resumed, and they danced the Midsummer Frolic.

Confessions to the Fey Queen

On the fourth day of Reaping, Kristryd stood barefoot, clad only in her mourner's smock, beneath the White Tower outside the

Grand Court in Enstad. "Will you not dress yourself in a manner befitting a queen?" Onselvon scolded her.

"I would," Kristryd answered, "If the Lady Rhalta would grant me an audience."

"Enter then," Onselvon said. "I myself will usher you."

So came Kristryd, clad only in a simple peasant's smock, to stand before the Blossoming Throne where sat the Lady Rhalta of All Elven Kind. "How now, Kristryd Olinsdotter, have the lines of your face grown so deep and the hairs of your head turned to grey?" the ageless Yolande asked as she extended her blossom-wreathed hand to Kristryd.

"The years of war have worn heavy. Your wrath has grown weary, your majesty," Kristryd said, taking the queen's hand in her own.

"Let us walk together in the gardens as once we did," the queen suggested.

In this manner, hand in hand, like sisters reunited, they walked together in the gardens of Enstad until they could be certain they had left behind all prying ears. Then said Kristryd, "Unless Sehanine has already revealed all things to your Fey Majesty, I would confess my sins."

"Confession corrects the spirit," Yolande mechanically recited an olven dogma. "Those things we renounce not, we are doomed to live again."

"Then know this," Kristryd sighed, "I am no longer your wrath. I have labored hard for your majesty, but no more. I have satisfied my vows with awful price: the blood of my own brothers and the blood of my youngest son. And all these sorrows for naught! This friend of mine, called Bagbag, old warlock of Balnorhak, betrayed us through all these years of war. He consorted with witches and demons and drew us all into his schemes. The war he waged on Grot-Ugrat he made at the bidding of the three sisters: Gretyll, Gunhyld, and Hedvyg. The Suel spell he called down on that ancient city came by the hand of the dread of Perrenland (may her name be forgotten). Moreover, this same traitor betrayed the whereabouts of the Prince Consort to Hedvyg, witch of Balnorhak. I know not how or by what means, but he certainly passed to that witch those words he heard from my lips concerning the embassy of Prince Triserron. This he did to slay the prince, inspire your wrath, and spark these hateful wars."

"All these things, sister, I have already seen," Yolande sighed. "No more will I spill the blood of elves in the affairs of other races,

nor will my people again be drawn into their schemes.”

“My lady, I have brought him hither,” Kristryd suddenly sobbed.

Yolande’s gentle hands wiped away her tears. “Be of good courage, sister. These hateful things lie behind us now.”

The High Court of Enstad arrested Bagbag, bound him, caged him, and sent him gagged and manacled to the Silent Tower in Keoland. Onselven confiscated his personal spellbook into which the dwarf had transcribed portions of *Demonomicon*, and he burned it together with the other magical items the old dwarf carried on his person.

A Walk with Edda

Kristryd left Enstad alone without her trueheaded and loyal friend. She made her way south along the Handmaiden River. As she passed near Courwood, Edda came out to meet her.

“You have prevailed over your enemies,” the wild-haired prophethess congratulated her. “But have you passed your tests?”

“I have passed no tests, and I am sure that I have rectified no wrongs. I have only incurred new ones,” Kristryd admitted. “I have stained my hands with the blood of friends, allies, my own brothers, and my son. I was merciful when I should have been severe, and I was severe when I should have been merciful. I have taken counsel with a witch; I have been manipulated by a warlock, and I have employed the power of demons. If I have prevailed, it has been at the cost of my soul.”

“Yes. That is the cost of war,” Edda observed. “The same price every king, queen, or ruler has always paid and always will. But now that you have prevailed, what will you do? Will you reign over these mountains for which you have so long labored?” She gestured to the majestic towering peaks that climbed the sky into the west.

Kristryd shook her head. “I wanted to be a queen like Yolande. I suppose I did. Now that I have prevailed ...” she hesitated, “I want ...” She paused to think for a moment before starting the sentence again, “I will utterly forget myself and all these sorrows too. I will take my place where warm muffins are served with fried eggs, some pickled fish, and some salty cheese—where the kettle sings of hot black tea in the morning.”

The End

