

THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY

BOOK ONE

By Denzil Oakes

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CHAPTER ONE: MEETING

Who can tell what strange forces brought them together, in the same place, at the same time. Perhaps the gods themselves willed it to be so. Perhaps not !

Each of them was young and had just served an apprenticeship of sorts, each had arrived in town within the last four days, or so the story has been told.

It was two hours before sunset. A young lady had checked into The Charging Minotaur Inn three days before, around noon.

Since then she had kept her profile as low as possible, kept to herself, sitting in the evenings in a dark corner of the tavern, watching the activities of the regular patrons and guests. She had rejected the advances of numerous, hungry eyed men, interested in her femininity, despite her best efforts to look drab.

Two days ago she noticed the arrival of a young cleric in bright orange robes, emblazoned in red flames and backed by the face of a great cat.

Two minutes later a leather clad, youngish looking man had swaggered into the bar, slapped the priest on the back and spat out the words,

“Hi Preach.” followed by “Can I get you a drink ?”

“No, thank you, my good man.” The priest replied formally and coldly, took his room keys from the barman and withdrew.

The rough cut young fellow merely shrugged, winked at a serving girl and ordered a drink, a room and a meal in that order.

Over the next two days she saw the pair, the priest occasionally, as he entered and exited the Inn, the other as he made merry in the Tavern, mainly in the evenings, but possibly at any time.

Early ‘this morning’ she noticed the arrival of a very tall, muscular man. He walked into the barroom and into the path of a serving wench. When she moved to her left, he followed her to his right and then the opposite, seemingly intent upon blocking her way, affecting that this was an accident, a mere coincidence. Then he picked her up by her elbows and whirled her around, setting her down on the other side of the walkway.

“There you go little lady.” He said cheerily.

As she walked away he plucked a tea towel out from the belt around her waist and flicked her backside with it.

“Don’t you be forgetting this now.” He said, jocularly.

She snatched the cloth back. “I certainly won’t !” She said, either angrily or in mock anger, it was hard to be sure.

He then went up to the bar and ordered an ale and a meal and a room, in that order. He paid the barkeep the exact amount and invited him to 'keep the change'.

The young woman smiled to herself. Things were beginning to look interesting.

In the early afternoon a young man in immaculately kept chain mail armour strode into the bar, politely asked for the cheapest room available and then left. About an hour later a tallish, thin man with blazing red hair, also clad in chain mail, took a room a meal and then checked that he had enough funds left before ordering a drink. He sat through his meal relaxed and unvigilant, without the nervous, suspicious glances of many another patron, and then left. The girl, for she was still well in her youth, wandered up to her room. She took a short nap and freshened up. Then she took out her heavy, metal bound book and drilled herself in the correct procedures.

She was determined to learn everything so thoroughly that she would never make a mistake. Then she repacked her belonging and returned to the bar. She had an incredible feeling of excitement, a sort of premonition. The kind of thing that often comes to the desperate and the hopeful and is most often unfounded.

'Tonight something momentous will happen. It has to or tomorrow I will have to move out of here.'

Her small stock of money had almost run out, eaten away by the cost of her training and life on the road.

She entered the barroom, contemplating her desires, the shape of her future. She had heard that there was a quick living to be made from adventuring. One maybe two short adventures and you could be made for life, or else swiftly dead. It was a risk worth taking, a risk that she had to take. Besides no young one ever really believes that the bad stuff will happen to them. From what she had been told the secret was to find yourself a good and loyal crew. Form your own group and keep them in line. She was a designing young woman. She had looked around and seen what was available and she had a good idea what she wanted, what she needed and was determined to get it.

There was the cleric, sitting alone. This was strange, an omen. He did not generally frequent the bar. Right on the top of her list of things to get was a cleric. Stranger still was his harried expression. He had a gaunt, haunted look about him. Something was troubling him, she knew. She sensed it in the air.

'It's now or never.' She counselled herself. 'Don't get nervous.'

“May I sit here ?” She asked prettily. She knew about men and how some of them would jump through hoops for a pretty faced young woman.

“There are other seats.” He pointed out, not jumping through any hoops. Perhaps that edict didn’t apply to priests.

“What is troubling you my friend priest ?” She asked sympathetically.

“Couldn’t you just go away and let me suffer in peace?” He demanded

“Not if I can help you in any way.” She replied undaunted.

“Very well.” He acquiesced. “Don’t forget, you asked for it. Take a seat and I will explain.”

She drew up a seat.

“Can I get you a drink ?” She asked.

“Why not. It certainly can’t make things any worse.” He moaned. She hailed a girl and ordered two beers. Her budget wouldn’t stretch to anything else.

“I have been troubled by dreams.” He began “Visions of unusual clarity of a religious artefact, a relic long lost to my sect, in the hands of some vile monstrosity. I see places my eyes have never seen. I see myself following a path to where the object lays.” He stopped.

“And .” She prompted.

“My masters say I must follow this path and fulfil my holy quest. It is my destiny.” He explain

“So.” She goaded.

“In my visions I see one of my order, possibly myself, get his head smashed in by a giant with a huge club.” He confided.

“Dreams are very strange things. They may not be what they seem.” She asserted, comfortingly.

“You are very kind child, but isn’t it way beyond your bedtime?” He scoffed.

She was not to be dismissed.

“In your visions do you see yourself alone ?” She enquired.

“I can not tell.” He admitted.

“Then perhaps you can let me help you. Your god cannot object to that.” She proposed.

“He might.” He countered.

“Nothing can happen except as the gods wish it to be.” She argued.

“That remains to be seen.” He answered.

“I can help you too.” Came a voice from an adjoining booth. An unshaven face peeked over the top.

“What are you doing eavesdropping on our conversation ?” The priest blustered.

“Yes. That is what I am doing.” The man replied, haughtily. “And it’s a good thing for you I did. Let me come round there and set you young fools straight on a thing or two.” He offered.

Meanwhile, at the bar, three young warriors had come together drinking, as if like attracts like, so to speak.

A Red haired youth was at one end of the bar and a polished and gleaming individual was a few seats away.

The tall lad walked up to the bar and placed a copper piece upon it.

“Put that away.” Said the flame haired boy. “This one’s on me.”

“That’s very generous of you.” Said the tall one. “How about this guy, don’t he get one too ?” He gestured towards the other drinker.

“Absolutely.” Said the generous one, scratching around in his belt pouch for a few coins with which to pay.

“You really don’t have to.” The third replied.

“I know I don’t have to.” Said the original. “My treat.” He insisted.

They began talking and soon discovered they had all recently completed training in basic weapon skills under different masters.

This gave them much to talk about. They also seemed to be faced with the same dilemma. They were all looking for work and because of the lateness in the season work was exceedingly scarce.

The height of the season was three full months away and none of them had enough funds to last until then. They spoke much of the difficulty of finding appropriate work and the possibility that they may be forced to take any menial task which came along. The polished one suggested the city guard and said that he knew someone who might get them interviews.

The stranger sidled over, moving with all the grace of a cat.

“Good evening good knights.” He began wryly.

“What can we do for you sir ?” The neat one replied.

“Wondering if you were interested in a job ?” He slapped a gold coin on the counter and called to the barman.

“We’re on that table over there. Keep ‘em filled up until that runs out.”

“What kind of job ?” His tidiness asked.

“You’ll have to come over and talk to my friend the priest over there, hear what he has to say.” The small man replied.

“Not the god squad.” The tall one moaned.

“Well, let’s humour him shall we ?” Mister clean suggested.

“Of course.” The redhead replied. “Always the soul of discretion.” With that they moved over to where the cleric sat with a golden haired beauty, who had not been visible until they drew level with the booth.

“You wanted warriors. Express delivery.” Said the light footed one in a gloating tone. “Master priest, tell them your tale.” He invited.

Before long the tale was told and retold and the meeting had turned into almost a revel.

They had dubbed one another with nicknames. The fiery haired one became known as Red. The tall guy was laughingly dubbed Shorty. The rough character was hailed as Cat, because of the way he moved. The cleric became known irreverently as Preach. The blonde haired female they called Angel. Finally the well groomed warrior took on the name and honorary position of Boss.

“All we have to do is to sneak into a cave and relieve this ‘monster’ of this orb and then sneak out again.” Cat summarised, making it all sound so easy.

“And you want us to protect this priest.” Boss sought clarification.

“I want you to protect us all.” Cat corrected.

“How much is it worth ?” Shorty asked.

“Don’t worry.” Cat assured him. “Stuff like this is worth plenty.”

“Equal shares of everything we find.” Shorty insisted.

“Everything except the orb.” Preach put in nervously. “That must be returned to the church.”

“A reward ?” Shorty enquired.

“We will have to negotiate with my master.” Preach proffered.

“If his offering is generous enough” Shorty began.

“Hush.” Said Red. “Money isn’t everything.”

The deal was struck and they retired, the better to start early the next morning.

CHAPTER TWO

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

Now all six of these adventurers had been born and mostly raised in The Florenian Empire, which sat safely behind its great wall on a promontory of land to the south. There were no monsters there and fairies and magic were things talked about in tales.

Until they journeyed north, beyond the wall, which for most of them was very recently, they knew nothing of the world outside and didn’t know which tales to believe and which to dismiss.

Since arriving in the north each had spent most of their time training intensively, or else working to afford such training, in his respective trade. (Author’s note: hes means ‘his or her’). They had had little time for exploring or seeking after the truth of these things.

Rumours and tales they had heard might be just so much bunkum.

Some small snippets of information they had gleaned. Each of them

had, most likely, seen goblins working in the fields as slaves. Some few

dwarves, elves and halflings lived and worked amongst the spemen population or visited the town of Hud occasionally. They were few but they were present.

All of the six would have been assured that other monsters and other creatures existed and that magic really did exist. The young priest of AGNI would have been made to learn prayers which, he was assured, would bring down powerful blessings from his god. He would not be allowed to practise these, or to even witness such miracles, until he was ordained. The true test of his faith and his worthiness would come only when he attempted to call upon these powers. He was recently ordained and had yet to face a situation requiring such.

He was warned not to attempt them just to prove their existence , that should he do so he would never be granted the gift of having his prayers answered.

Angel had been exposed to magical theory. Much demanding practise in constituting inks and potions, theories of spell components and correct reading, writing and interpretation of magical symbols.

Then there were ridiculous sounding ideas on how magic worked, mental exercises and endless dexterity exercises, until she imagined that she was in a dance class rather than a magic class. Many of the things she was asked to do seemed silly and particularly remote from the point in hand. She was disposed to question the validity of all of this mumbo-jumbo.

Only towards the end of her months of training did she see any evidence of magic actually working. The effects were so slight as to be hardly worth the effort of studying. The minimum spells, known as cantrips would have her learning for half an hour to effect a spell to shine shoes when the shoes could be shone by hand in five minutes.

Preposterous !

Then she graduated to the study of real dweomers. She learned, piecemeal, the various components of five different spells. The words to speak, the timing and pronunciation, even the pitch of the voice, precise, like learning to sing a song. The intricate pattern of hand movements, like a complicated dance routine or martial arts kata.

The mental discipline to concentrate and manipulate the mystical forces of the world around her and within her. The disciplines of making inks and correct components, precise scribing and exact learning.

Most of the time she couldn't even get the cantrips to work and the spells seemed impossible to remember or to perform correctly. She

was almost ready to dismiss the whole idea as a cruel hoax, a scam to cheat her out of her hard earned money and to conclude that magic didn't really exist and never really worked.

"It is all in your state of mind." Her teacher would tell her. "If you don't truly believe then of course it will not work."

He worked a simple spell. Showed his empty hands and with motions and incantations unfamiliar to her he opened his hand to reveal a handful of sand and rose petals.

"If magic does not work, then how do I do this ?" He demanded.

"Sleight of hand." She suggested

"Then somewhere about me I have a pocketful of sand." He challenged. "Could I produce sand from it and not leave one grain behind, without magic at all ?"

"No." She admitted. "To so completely clean your pocket would require some sort of magic of a minor sort, but not the kind you claim

to be doing."

"Then search me." He offered "See if you can find so much as a pocket. Remember, if I can conceal such a thing so completely or make it disappear then that to is magic of a sort."

She found no sign of a pocket in his simple robe.

"You are indeed hard to convince. Yet if you remain unconvinced then I will have to declare you unteachable. No magic will work for you in your state of disbelief." He declared.

"I will try harder to believe, my master. It would help if you could show me something more convincing." She told him.

"Belief comes from here." He stated bluntly, placing his hand over her heart. "Nothing I can show you will sway you."

She stepped back, feeling uncomfortable.

"Tomorrow is the test. Rise early. Learn the *dweomer* to *jump*, completely and be prepared to cast it on my command. If you fail, I shall never teach you more." He concluded.

It would be the first time that she had ever learned all aspects of a real spell together. For safety and security reasons beginning apprentices were not permitted to do so.

The next day she cast the spell. She felt a tiny tingle of the power running through her. Apart from that momentary thing she felt no different. Yet she was able to leap from the ground up to a second floor balcony of the mage's house and land safely. She had cast her first spell. After that she felt tired and drained for the rest of the day, as if that single magical leap had drained all of her own life force from her.

"Well ! Were you able to do that without the spell ?" Her instructor demanded.

“No, master .” She conceded.

“Then never again doubt my word young lady. This session of training is ended. I can teach you no more until you have gone out into the world and practised what you have learned on your own. You may now declared yourself a mage. I wish you every success and hope that you will return soon for further instruction.” He announced.

“How will I know when I am ready to learn more ?” She asked , earnestly.

He placed his forefinger beside his nose and stated.

“When what you know now is no longer a challenge to you. You will know.”

That was six days ago. Since then she had moved north to the city of Hud and she had learned and practised her spell each day but never

needed to caste them. She was warned never to caste spells needlessly.

She wondered how she was ever to grow as a mage if she never had the opportunity to caste a spell. Rumour had it that great mages could caste many spells each day. How did they ever develop such powers?

Apart from the cleric and the mage, none of the others had ever seen real magic or even conceive of what it could do. Its powers remained a mystery to them. Rumours and stories they heard of mighty dweomers and fell mages, never knowing whether to believe.

The locals seemed to set great stock in these stories, much more so than the people of Florenia did. The citizenry of the Kingdom of Der Goth, in general, and of the town of Hud in particular, were very superstitious and very wary of those who were supposed to be mages.

Many of these seemed to survive merely on this reputation. There were no shortage of charlatans.

As to the others’ training, the three warriors had spent the last few months learning weapon skills. Warriors of the region were expected to be of more general use than to exclusively wield and polish swords.

If you expected to have any chance of getting a job in this town, which was a magnet for young warriors, being on the frontier, then you had to be prepared to do just about anything. Wagon guards would be expected to do every chore associated with keeping the wagons moving. There was loading and unloading and such chores as digging the wagon wheels out of deep mud. With lots of fighters

to choose from it was a buyer's market. With age and experience a warrior could demand a high price.

Our young lochinvars had taken the first step towards acceptance. They could name a, hopefully reputable, trainer who had taken money from them for training. They had heeded their trainer's advice and each learned an exotic language, at least sufficient to grunt a few useful phrases. Luckily they had each learned a different tongue. They each had a variety of skills learned from their childhoods.

Boss, after leaving his father's mixed farm, had worked as an errand boy and then a military runner and signalman for the Florenian army and had spent some time in the militia. Of them all he had the best pedigree, being trained by a military officer and having some real experience.

Shorty had worked the nets with his father, a poor fisherman. He had done some other sailing work to earn enough for his training and some irregular labouring jobs. For his youth he was rather large and very strong, which qualified him to be a navvy. Of them all Shorty had the most burning desire to be a warrior. He simply loved to fight, a trait which had earned him a lot of trouble in the past.

For Red being a warrior seemed like one option to earn a good living. He decided that he would try it for a while. Perhaps he could become a champion of justice, like the noble warriors of old, in all the tales. Red's family were subsistence farmers of the crop known as Krop. Since then he had learned to use a bow and done some hunting in the small patches of land of The Empire which were not totally given over to Krop farming.

Preach was taken into a monastery and educated in the ways of AGNI, or indoctrinated, after his parents were burned to death in a house fire. His training consisted of whatever his church thought would be useful to them.

Cat had been an orphan, living off of his wits in the worst areas of Floren City. Recently the city had become too hot a territory for him and he had had to leave. In his numerous, dubious exploits he had earned enough to get proper and expert training in his trade and to join the more respectable of the local guilds.

Angel claimed to have helped her stepfather mending roofs and cleaning chimneys in Floren City, where she developed a measure of skill in climbing and rope use. She had already served in one adventuring company in a jaunt to explore an island, wherein a lot of climbing was involved. Though she will freely admit that she only scored that job because the party leader had the hots for her.

However that short trip earned her enough money to pay the incredible expense involved in training to be a mage.

To a man, the entire party was almost completely flat broke, especially after they put together the supplies they needed for their trip. They were also completely unexperienced at this kind of endeavour, and in most other things. Each one brought to the party the bare minimum of skills needed for their respective professions. So much for history, now to the actual adventure.

CHAPTER THREE

SETTING OUT.

Today they were to wander off into the wilderness, the six of them alone. They knew nothing of what to expect, having never ventured across the river before into the wilderness north of The Kingdom of Der Goth, where they now resided.

After pooling their resources and purchasing the supplies they needed they shared the remaining money evenly. They each had only twenty copper pieces, enough to live at the bare minimal level in the city for a grand total of seven days. It was a bad time of the year to be heading north. In less than a month the winter snows would descend upon the land and make travel all but impossible. It wouldn't do to be caught out there somewhere, freezing to death. "If this little jaunt doesn't pay off we will have to find respectable jobs." Shorty quipped.

"Don't remind us." Cat intoned.

Cat had never done an honest day's work in his life and he didn't intend to start now.

Angel had been up for hours learning her spell for the day and Preach had spent a similar time in prayer and silent meditation. The other men had done their customary hours of gruelling weapon drill before breakfast. It was two hours after dawn by the time that they were ready to walk out through the town gates.

"Whereabouts are we going?" Cat demanded of the priest.

"Up north, into the wild lands across the river." Was as close to enlightenment as Preach could give him.

"And how will we find this place and this thing?" Cat pressed.

"By the power of faith and the grace of AGNI." Preach intoned.

"We're going to get lost, in other words." Cat complained.

"Sometimes you have to get lost to get found." Shorty guffawed.

"Ha, Ha!" Said Cat sarcastically "I'm going to get some more accurate information."

He went back into the bar and asked, returning minutes later.

“Keep going north until you reach the river, cross the river and there you are. That’s what they said.” Cat related, with a shrug. They left town. Within a couple of hours they stood before a river. It was too deep to ford, too wide to rope across and too fast flowing to swim. Of all of the adventurers only Shorty was able to swim and that not in chain mail and full travelling gear. The other side of the river was a hundred foot tall cliff, topped by trees. Vines grew from the trees and dangled over the cliff, in places reaching right down to dip into the river below.

“What now ?” Boss asked.

“Find a boat.” Shorty suggested.

“Where ?” Angel asked

“Downstream, of course. Boats adrift more likely to go downstream.” Shorty reasoned.

They walked along the riverbank eyes peeled for any form of transport. A few miles { Author’s Note:- a Spemen mile is about the length of a Kilometre on Earth. Read mile think of one kilometre. }

downstream they found a boat, a flat bottomed punt with a long pole.

“The current is running hard onto this bank. It’s going to be a hard job to pole across this, if it ain’t too deep in the middle to pole at all.”

Shorty pointed out.

“I’m lightest. I’ll get in first, you hold this thing steady.” Angel offered.

“It’s floating pretty low in the water.” Red observed. “I think it will only take one at a time.”

“Then I definitely want to get across first.” Angel announced. “No good if you make it across and I’m left stranded alone on this bank. I’m the one least likely to succeed.” Angel knew that at five foot nothing and a hundred pounds she was not as strong as even the smallest of the men.

“Someone take my chain mail and stuff. I want to be ready to swim, in case she falls in.” Shorty suggested.

“You can swim ?” Cat said, amazed.

“Of course. I was raised on the river.” Shorty confided.

It occurred to them how little they knew of those they were about to trust their lives to.

“If I make it, how do you get the boat back ?” Angel enquired.

The others looked at one another for an answer for a moment. The problem of there being six of them and only one boat had not occurred to them.

“Tie a rope to it.” Boss suggested, eventually.

“One rope’s not long enough.” Angel pointed out, she being most familiar with ropes.

“Someone’s coming.” Preach informed them.

“It’s a local farmer.” Red surmised, being familiar with farming folk.

“Good morning to you, sirs.” The rustic greeted. “Gots a bit o’ a problem ‘as we ?”

“Want to cross the river.” Said Boss. “I don’t suppose we could borrow a rope now.

“Borrow. You can buy one if ye want.” The man stated.

“How much ?” Cat broke in.

“Eight silvers.” The farmer posited.

“That’s money for rope.” Cat complained.

“That be what it is.” The older man agreed.

“Let me talk to him.” Angel suggested, the farmer seeing her for the first time.

“Beg pardon, madam.” He apologised. “I bain’t seein’ ye thar .”

“Don’t mention it, my good man. We really do only want to borrow your rope. None of us are rich enough to buy it.”

“Maybe. How am I t’ get it back ? An’ even so it will still cost ye ten coppers.” He pressed.

“Just to borrow it ?” She feigned amazement. “Oh please. We would be ever so grateful.”

“Gratitude don’t pay no bills madam.” He asserted. “I has a large family an’ my property ‘ardly feeds ‘em.”

“Lend us two ropes then. You can stand here and get them back as soon as we’re across the river. Two for four coppers.” She offered.

“Eight coppers.” He bartered.

“Five.” She countered

“Six or nothing.” The man affirmed.

“Good. Then it’s a deal.” She sealed it with a handshake.

The man went off to bring some rope. The adventurers took a swig of water and a few mouthfuls of dry rations while they waited.

Shorty stripped down to a loincloth in anticipation of his swim.

When the farmer returned with his ropes they were old and worn and in a filthy condition.

“Six coppers for these, you’ve got to be joking.” Cat challenged.

“This’ll break up in the water.”

“No it wain’t.” The farmer replied.

“A deal’s a deal Cat, let it be.” Shorty intervened.

So they tied the farmer’s rope to the boat and Angel attempted to pole across the river. Three times she tried and each time was washed back to the near shore.

“Try lightening the load. Leave all your gear with us and we’ll bring it over to you.”

So she tried that and still she failed.

“It’s not the weight in the boat it’s the strength of the current.” She declared.

“You show her how it’s done Boss.” Cat suggested. “When you get over there hold the boat and she can drag herself across on the rope.”

Boss made it across on his third attempt. Eventually he was able to catch hold of a vine. It broke off in his hand and he tumbled out of the boat. Shorty swam out and managed to reach him and pull him back to the shore. Preach pumped the water out of him and restarted his breathing.

After a short rest Boss tried again. This time he managed to catch hold of a vine which held and kept the boat across the river. Angel took off her robe and handed it to Preach. She hung onto the rope and managed to drag herself, hand over hand, to the boat and around to the vine. She then began to climb. Angel was no stranger to climbing and saw no reason to treat a vine any differently to any other rope. She made it to the top in next to no time. She hardly noticed a slight numbness and later a tingling in her hands. She did notice that she was up there alone and naked in the wilderness, without equipment or weapons. She realised the folly of volunteering to go first. She wondered if she might not be better off to hide until the others arrived. Yet she knew that the boat drifted constantly downstream.

They could end up with the party members strewn over several miles of the river bank. She thought that she had better keep an eye on their progress. She decided to climb one of the tall trees overlooking the cliff face. This would give her shelter and a view for several miles downstream.

To her amazement, and great embarrassment she fell. She lost her grip and fell from thirty nine feet up (13 metres) and landed flat on her back. She felt quite severely inconvenienced.

In the meantime Boss has attempted to climb the vine. He climbed a great deal more slowly than Angel had done. He was about seventy feet up when his hands refused to work anymore. He could not open them. He was paralysed, thoroughly stuck to the vine. Just as he realised this he heard Angel cry out and hit the ground with a thump. He could not see what was happening up there. He shouted.

“I’m stuck !”

Those on the bank were still hauling the boat back.

Cat saw Angel fall and shouted.

“What the hell is she doing ?”

“Help me !” Cried Boss. “I’m stuck up here.”

“I can’t help anybody.” Angel moaned. “I might have just broken my back. I’d better not move ‘till someone comes to get me.”

“Oh great ! What the hell can we do now ?” Shorty yelled.

“You have to get me over there somehow.” Preach implored “I can help them.”

“Alright everybody, let’s not panic. We can carry on as planned. I’ll go next.” Red suggested. “I can guard Angel while the rest of you follow.”

Red made it across the river in record time. He caught a strong vine. He climbed until he was fifty three feet up and then he too froze on the vine.

“I can’t move !” Red shouted.

“There’s something in that vine.” Preach announced. “Is there any way to avoid touching it ?”

The farmer had stood all this while with a bemused expression on his face.

“Gloves might come in useful.” He piped up.

“And you would just happen to have some I guess.” Shorty conjectured.

“Aye that I would.” The farmer confirmed.

“I suppose the chiseller is going to sell them to us.” Cat said , deliberately loudly.

“Well I was gonna give ‘em to ya , but not now.” The farmer said , bitterly. “Seeing as ‘ow yev insulted me.”

“Oh great !” Shorty railed. “you and your big mouth, Cat .”

“Hold it Shorty, don’t panic !” Boss shouted, from across the river.

“Just get on with it, my arms are going numb.”

“Yes, gentlemen , please be civilised.” Preach begged. “Dear farming gentleman, please let us have your gloves before any further tragedy befalls us all.”

“Threats now is it !” The farmer shouted.

“Not yet but it soon will be.” Cat forewarned.

“How much do you want for the gloves ? Quickly man !” Shorty demanded.

“A gold piece.” The man replied.

“We don’t have any gold piece.” Cat informed him.

“Then you don’t get any gloves.” The farmer taunted.

“Hand over the gloves.” Preach demanded.

“You what ?” The farmer questioned in amazement.

“Comply.” Preach *commanded*.

The farmer meekly complied.

“How did you do that ?” Cat asked.

“By the power of AGNI.” The priest replied.

It was the first time that Preach had ever worked a prayer of power, or Mantra, in earnest. He stepped into the boat and began polling across the river.

He caught a vine and began climbing, very clumsily. At fifty five feet up he could go no further. Whatever was affecting them must be able to soak right through leather.

“I’m stuck !” He shouted.

Now each adventurer had a waterskin except Cat. He had a wineskin, which was identical except for its contents. He had it filled with wine rather than water. Cat rarely drank anything but wine if he could at all help it. He wound strips of cloth, intended as bandages , around his hands. He took his wineskin from his back, unstopped it and poured a little wine over his hands.

“Now by the power of DIONYSUS.” He murmured as Shorty hauled the boat back in. Then he took a swig of wine for good measure before recorking the wineskin.

“I’ll try next, Shorty .” Cat said confidently.

“Do you think we should risk us all getting stuck ?” Shorty asked.

“You think maybe we should leave them over there.” Cat shrugged.

“No. I guess we have to try. I just wish we had a plan.” Shorty replied.

“I have a plan, Shorty, trust me.” Cat declared.

“What plan is that ?” Shorty asked.

“To not get stuck.” Was all that Cat would say.

“Good plan.” Said Shorty but with a puzzled expression.

It took Cat several attempts to pole across the river. He arrived at the cliff face and grabbed a vine. It came away in his hand and he teetered backwards, but he kept his balance. The next vine did the same and again he caught himself. The third vine held. Cat began to climb, hoping that the wine soaked cloth over his hands would protect him from whatever was in the vine.

“DIONYSUS, forgive me for wasting good wine.” He breathed in penitence.

He climbed with skill, trying to keep off the vine wherever possible.

The cliff face was soft and crumbly and, unfortunately, using the vines was necessary for most of the way. Cat climbed quickly, however, and , as Angel before him, reached the top before his hands succumbed to the paralysis. It was not possible to gage whether the wine was a contributing factor in his success but Cat would swear so ever after.

He stood atop the cliff and waved back to Shorty on the shore.

“Come over.” He invited.

Shorty hauled the boat back in. He untied the rope cut off a short piece of it and returned the rest of it to the farmer, whose expression was sour. Shorty was an imposing figure of a man and his present demeanour made the farmer hesitant to complain. It is generally not a good idea to argue with anyone who wields a longsword.

Shorty tied the two backpacks of equipment together and stowed them in the boat. He tied whatever he could not fit into the backpacks onto them. It made quite a heavy and cumbersome load. He slung the twin packs with sundry items dangling around them over his broad shoulders and began to pole across the river. Cat meanwhile walked to where Angel lay motionless.

“I have sometimes imagined you in this position.” He said, lecherously.

“Give me a break !” She implored.

“I think you’ve given yourself a break.” He said, blandly.

“Can you move ?” He asked, as his eyes scoured the bushes out in the wilderness.

“I’m afraid to try. I’ve heard of people crippling themselves that way.” Angel replied. Those who climb for a living learn about broken backs.

“You are lucky not to have been eaten or raped by goblins. I hear there are thousands of them out here.” Cat declared.

“Thanks for that nice thought.” She replied, ironically.

“Hey. My shoulders are going numb. I’m finding it hard to breathe.” Boss called out.

Shorty and the equipment made the punt float dangerously low in the water. Already waterlogged wood it began to fill, becoming more and more like a part of the river. Shorty had second thoughts about his load. Halfway across the river he slipped the backpacks off and lay them in the bottom of the punt, in case he might have to swim in a hurry. He reached the cliff face, the punt so full of water that it seemed about to go under permanently.

In his first attempt Shorty grabbed a weak vine. When it broke he took a backward tumble into the river. Swimming back he regained the boat and tried again. This process he repeated several times, drifting further downstream with each attempt.

Finally he found a vine which held his weight. He dragged the cumbersome, and now very wet, packs and slung them over his back.

He climbed up and up, sixty three feet to be precise, and there he stayed.

“Whatever you do don’t let Angel move !” Preach shouted.

“I’m still here Cat. Come and get me.” Boss added.

“How ?” Cat whispered to himself.

“Cut the vine below his hands and at all the places where its roots grow into the cliff. Then haul him up from the cliff top. Angel instructed.

“Ain’t she smart.” Cat quipped with a smirk. He knelt down next to her and kissed her, roughly.

“Hey ! That’s not fair !” She protested.

“Sorry. I couldn’t resist it.” He told her.

“Yuck !” She retorted.

“If you try anything else you’re a dead man.” Angel warned.

Cat hurried off to try to rescue the others. He climbed down to Boss and cut the vines, as Angel had described, having to dig their roots out of the cliff, sending a cascade of dirt over Boss’s head. Climbing back up he failed in his first two attempts to haul Boss up the cliff face.

“You’re too damned heavy !” Cat complained.

Then he felt his hackles raise. He felt a presence behind him. He let go of the vine and whirled around to see a small, humanoid figure standing behind him. The creature had a strange looking bow. It was nocked and cocked and aimed right at Cat’s heart. The stranger stood clad in green, like the forest. He had almond eyes and pointed ears.

“You are an elf ?” Cat asked, in his own , spemen , tongue.

“Nixt Elva.” It replied. “Vost ze gven ?”

Angel heard the exchange, although she dared not move her head to see the scene. She had learned a little elven from her master and had a pretty strong impression that this creature was not speaking in that tongue.

“Siarad Coblynaith ? She asked, in elven.

“Nixt elva.” The squeaky voice replied. “Vost ze gven ?”

“Hablo Ganol ?” Cat queried in Gnollan , the language that he had learned , though he did not know what a Gnoll might look like.

“Fala Orcas ?” Boss’s voice panted, from below, in Orcish.

The tiny creature began to look worried.

“Spreek u spema ?” Boss’s voice moaned desperately.

Boss spoke in the ancient language used by his church during their services to his deity ANHUR. Doing this was generally regarded as a sin. The language was supposed to be used exclusively for worship and never supposed to be spoken in front of any but true believers of ANHUR, God of War.

“Spreek U Gnomshe ?” The little man replied in the same tongue.

“Kant u mij helpen alstublieft ?” Boss wheezed.

The little one crab walked over to the cliff face in a wide arc, keeping his bow trained on Cat all the time. He peered over the edge at the four humans dangling there.

“Esse ishe goed ?” The gnome asked.

“Niets te danken.” Boss replied.

“Ik begrijp het.” The little man put up his bow and grabbed hold of the vine. Cat joined him and between them they soon hauled Boss up the cliff. Next they pulled up Preach and then the dragged Red up too.

Between cutting operations Cat renewed the ‘protection’ of the wine on his bandages. Yet as he was striving to free Shorty, Cat too succumbed to the poison of the vine. It was left to the gnome alone to haul up Shorty and then Cat. The little man had amazing strength for one only three feet tall.

“Huad Koster Det ?” Boss asked , once they were all rescued.

“Der er ikke.” The small one replied cheerfully as he took his leave.

After about an hour the men were recovered from the effects of the vine. Preach began to treat Angel. He prayed and laid his hands on her while clutching his flame emblem pendant. His first prayer to *cure light wounds*.

“Now that’s a job I wouldn’t mind.” Shorty whispered to Cat.

“Yeah.” Said Cat. “How come he gets to touch her and we don’t ?” At length Preach whispered to Angel.

“You are not fully healed but your back is no longer broken. It will be safe to move, even if a little painful.”

“Painful is good.” Angel replied. “Before I couldn’t feel my legs at all, which was really scary.”

The priest helped her, slowly , to sit up.

“I’ve never fallen in my life.” She claimed indignantly.

“Must have been the effects of the vine.” Preach comforted her .

“Now I can do no more healing until tomorrow. We must lie low here and avoid attracting attention to ourselves.” He added, which sounded not so comforting.

Angel regarded her own naked state.

“Hey guys. You all been gettin’ an eyeful ? How’s about protecting a lady’s privacy huh ?”

“Our humble apologies.” Said Shorty, throwing her her robe. She could tell that he didn’t mean it.

“I’m not your free peep show you know.” Angel declared.

Cat looked back towards the river.

“There’s no easy way back .” He observed.

“Thank you once again for that gem. Are you always so full of good news.” Angel commented.

“We can’t just sit around here.” Boss joined in. “We will be attacked by dozens of goblins or kobolds.”

“How do you know ?” Red queried.

Boss could have boasted about the action he saw in his army service but it wasn’t so much to boast about. The army had marched across the wilderness to arrive too late for the war and then marched back again. He had been this side of the river, but not this stretch of it. He did, however, know that it was pretty much the same in that respect.

“Something my weapon master told me.” He said modestly.

“Swarms of kobolds by the river, goblins further north and orcs in the hills over there.” He catalogued.

“We should have enlisted the aid of the diminutive fellow as a guide.” Preach pointed out, belatedly.

“Too late now.” Shorty said, teasingly. “We couldn’t communicate very well anyway.”

“I can track him for you.” Cat offered. “His trail may lead to somewhere safer than this.”

“Some folks might take exception to being followed to their safe haven.” Shorty pointed out.

They put it to a vote, a procedure that they had settled upon when trying to work out a way to pay for their supplies, and decided against it . No sense in alienating potential allies.

“Can you walk, Angel ?” Preach asked, solicitously.

“Just about.” She replied, testing her balance. She was a little shaky and her back hurt terribly with even the slightest movement.

“Then you’re just about as fit as the rest of us.” Cat declared callously.

Though their major paralysis had worn off they were all still partially numbed and movement without feeling is a little difficult.

“In time we would have been so thoroughly paralysed that we would have died from lack of breath.” Preach announced cheerlessly, a propos of nothing.

“Where to ?” Boss asked, to dispel the gloom of the thought.

“To the north, I guess.” Preach pointed , rather uncertainly.

They set of, rather shakily at first. Their first day of adventures was not going very well at all. Each had reason to wonder why they were doing this. They had time to reflect upon the danger and the fact that, as Cat had rightly pointed out, there was no easy way back.

They had begun without any consideration of such basic questions as how to travel there and back , what they might face along the way and how to survive it. Now they found themselves stuck with the consequences of their lack of foresight and planning. They

were behaving precisely like the amateurs that they were. Following in the footsteps of countless thousands of young hopefuls who had died on such foolish quests as this. They sought an illusive and perhaps none existent goal out of their desperate need to make a living. In their callow youth they underestimated the risks or believed that somehow they didn't apply to them. Everyone knows that tragedy only befalls others, not ourselves, and secretly believes that they are the exceptions to the rule. Still, every eye studied the surrounding forest for signs of danger. They became tense and prepared to defend themselves. They thought that they were ready for anything and equal to any danger. Yet they were scared as hell !

CHAPTER FOUR

GETTING SOMEWHERE

KOBOLDS

Suddenly a swarm of arrows shot out of the woods to either side of them. Shorty, Angel and Red were all hit. The group took off at full speed away from the river. Shorty and Red caught another volley and Cat was hit twice before they managed to get out of range of their unseen assailants.

They could not travel far before stopping to tend their wounded. They just had to hope that whoever had fired at them was not still in close pursuit. Preach removed arrowheads from those hit and did whatever mundane bandaging he could.

They rested in the shelter of some undergrowth without the comfort of a fire, for fear of discovery. They were silent and sullen. It was their first taste of adventure, their first real engagement as a group and they did not feel like heroes. They had no time to do anything but withdraw.

“We did the sensible thing.” Preach excused. “The only thing that we could do under the circumstances.”

HSIAO

The others were hardly encouraged by this.

The next morning they noticed a giant owl which had been watching them, patiently waiting, no doubt, for them to die or for one of them to wander off alone. Since they were not so obliging it decided to fly off to greener pastures.

HUNTER

They rested that whole day. Early in the night a Spemen hunter happened by. No doubt he noticed them but he acted as though he didn't. Boss and Preach were sharing the early watch. "A brave man to wander the wildlands alone at night." Boss noted. "I have heard of such a breed." Preach stated. "It is a wonder that they survive."

Preach bade Boss to turn in before him, saying that he needed to pray privately for a few minutes before waking Cat and Shorty and going to sleep himself. Boss trusted him and respected the priest's wishes. He knew that most priesthoods had some strange rules and customs.

Preach waited until Boss had dozed off and then moved over to where Angel lay and intoned over her a prayer of power for healing, the one known as *cure light wounds*. Then he did the same for both

Shorty and Cat. Unfortunately there were no prayers left for Red, the other wounded party member. Preach then woke Shorty and Cat and set himself to sleep.

On the morning of the third day they were ready to continue on with their quest. Red was a little disadvantaged by the two arrow nicks in him but he soldiered on. Angel, Cat and Shorty were miraculously almost totally well. Even Angel's back was almost perfect. Their wounds healed to leave the tiniest of white line scars.

Before moving Preach removed their bandages. Angel particularly was pleased at the lack of scarring she had received. Preach washed the bandaging material and left it for a time to dry. There was a limit to how much bandages they could afford and to what they could carry.

They moved off and walked for a time. Then Preach reached a place which he claimed was familiar from his dreams and pointed the way towards their destination. There was a stream running out from a ravine some twenty feet tall. Atop the walls of the ravine on either side were two trees which arched over until their branches met in the middle, forming an arch some fifty feet overhead.

"This is where it happened." The priest declared, with a shudder from the memory of it. "Here I saw the Giant kill the priest."

He looked around nervously for any sign of the giant.

"Don't worry." Angel said with a smile. "It can't happen now. In your dream you saw the giant take the orb from the priest. You don't have it yet." She pointed out.

“Then maybe it’ll get him on the way back.” Cat speculated, rather unkindly.

“Let’s go.” Red prompted, somewhat impatiently.

They followed the ravine and it grew deeper and wider around them. Soon they came to the sheer cliff face of the plateaux and found themselves standing in a clearing by a cave. The cliff stretched up over a thousand feet above them.

“This is it.” Preach announced soberly.

“Are you sure ?” Cat cautioned. “There are a heck of a lot of caves around here.”

“Well, one cave is as good as another to me.” Said Red. “We came here to explore, so let’s get to it.”

“Certainly Sir, but we’ll let the Boss go first.” Shorty quipped.

“Who’s the boss ?” Boss queried.

“By unanimous decision.” Red announced, pointing at Boss.

“Why me ?” Boss asked.

“We all have our appointed positions.” Said Red. “I am rearguard and you can take the point. At least you’ll see what hits you.”

“So where am I ?” Shorty asked.

“You stand behind me” Boss suggested, “because you’re taller.”

“Then Preach then Cat , Angel and Red.” Shorty enumerated.

“Where did you get those names from ?” Angel asked.

“I made ‘em up.” Said Shorty. “I always give folks nicknames. We’ve been calling you that since the first meeting, didn’t you know?”

“Not to my face you haven’t. I’m not sure I like it.” Angel stated.

“You’ll get used to it.” Shorty dismissed.

“So what do we call you ?” Cat asked.

“Folks call me Shorty.” Shorty replied, proudly.

“It isn’t height you’re short of.” Cat remarked.

“I always said that names are things use to talk about you, not to you.” Shorty pontificated.

“Let’s get on with this shall we ?” Red invited.

“Yeah , before someone gets separated from their breath.” Shorty threatened, glowering at Cat.

“Just remember, Short stuff, I’m right behind you.” Cat countered.

“Don’t you guys think we should work together. We’ll have enough to worry about without picking on each other.” Angel pointed out.

“I’d enjoy working with you sweet stuff.” Cat announced.

“In your dreams. I’d rather kiss a goblin.” Angel rebutted.

“You may yet get to do that.” Preach said seriously.

Boss moved ahead towards the cave.

Preach, you light a lantern. We’ll need some light in there.”

FIREFLIES

Inside the cave a dozen huge beetles rested, their abdomens giving off an eerie green glow.

“I vote we give these things a wide birth.” Said Angel quietly.

“Keep an eye on them. Be ready in case they attack.” Boss suggested.

“Uh Duh !” Cat expelled mockingly.

They attempted to cross the length of the cavern without disturbing the beetles. The creatures, each a couple of feet long, took to the air and began to buzz them.

Boss and Shorty were both bitten and Preach was bitten twice as the beetles hovered into the attack. At first Cat was the only one fast enough to cut into one of the attackers, driving it away. Then Angel was able to whack one with her staff, bringing it down, while Red sliced into another with his sword. Preach managed to swat one with his mace while Red , with one swift and accurate stroke, killed one outright.

“Stick together and keep heading for the exit over there.” Boss shouted over the clamour, pointing out the opening at the back of the cavern.

Meanwhile Cat, Angel and Red had each been bitten by the beasts. The scene inside the cave was bedlam. The small knot of Spemen tried to stay back to back, warding the swooping insects away with their weapons. They also tried to move, as a group, across the cave.

The beetles constant attacks made any progress difficult. They were bogged down for some minutes. Each minute saw many abortive attacks as the creatures flashed quickly out of the way with amazing speed. Then a beetle would swoop in and try to inflict a vicious bite.

Oftentimes the intended victim would parry but occasionally an insect beak would hit and tear at the spemen’s soft flesh. For those who had armour as often the insect found its jaws jangled as it pressed against the hardness of metal. While Boss, Angel and Red took more damage, Cat wounded another creature and Red killed his second one.

In this battle swiftness of reaction outweighed strength as a factor. Cat, Angel and Red proved the ones with the greater hand speed and seemed to be having more success than the others.

Slowly they fought their way across the cave’s wide floor. Finally they reached the exit tunnel on the far side of the huge chamber.

Cat was able to snatch up one of the beetles that Red had killed, on

his way through. They found that the remaining beetles did not follow far into the narrower tunnel where they would have had little room to manoeuvre and been easier to hit. Three beetles had been killed and two driven off. Now the remaining seven gave up the chase.

Had the adventures not moved out of the cavern the insects might have been feasting upon their carcasses very shortly. Each of the Spemen was injured and all were badly in need of rest and healing. Cat attempted to remove the glowing rear end of the beetle corpse that he had snatched up, without damaging it. He was unsuccessful. Its green light spilled messily over the tunnel floor.

“What are you messin’ about at ?” Shorty demanded.

“It would have made a good emergency light.” Cat explained.

After resting a while and tending their wounds they went on, looking for an out of the way cavern, a cosy little nook which would be easily defensible, in which to spend the night. They were not in a cheery mood. Their second real battle had ended, once again, in a forced retreat. They also realised that they had to recross the cavern of those giant beetles on the way back. If they tried to retreat from the caverns in a weakened state then that way lurked certain death.

BUGBEARS

There was a promising opening, off to one side of a larger cave, which they decided to explore. Boss and Shorty entered while Cat held a torch near the entrance. As usual Red watched back the way they had come whilst Angel and Preach kept an eye out in every other possible angle of approach.

Suddenly Boss and Shorty were jumped by two large beasts. The beasts were goblin like but much larger and hairier. The clumsy creatures swung large claws but both Boss and Shorty were able to dodge in time. The two warriors turned to do battle. The two humanoid monsters swung repeatedly but their blows rarely penetrated the warriors’ guard and as often clanged against armour , without doing serious damage.

Standing side by side Boss and Shorty backed into the larger cave, allowing their companions to enter the battle.

Cat rushed in and plunged his sword into one monster’s back, as the things stupidly followed the warriors into the cave. The thing let out a mighty bellow of pain. Angel hit the same beast with her staff but it had little effect on the creature’s thick skull. Then Red ran it through and it fell heavily to the ground.

The second beast caught Shorty with a powerful swipe. Its sharp talons ripped through his chain mail, bringing forth a spout of blood and pain. Its thrashing blows kept Boss and Shorty baled up against the back wall of the cave. They were fully occupied with parrying blows from the enraged beast. Once again Red's sword struck home, while his companions did no damage.

The monster spun around. Its deadly talons thrashing out and sinking into the first victim that they found. That victim was Angel, caught off guard by its sudden turn. Her torn robe began to soak in her blood as, once again, her creamy, soft flesh was mangled.

Now Boss had a clear aim at the beast's exposed back and his sword hit home. Cat too took aim and hit under the creature's raised guard. He drove his shortsword up towards its black heart. The monster fell to its knees with a roar of pain and collapsed in a river of black, stinking blood. It was done.

Only Angel and Shorty were injured. Preach began preparing to bandage them up.

"I'll do the lady first, if that's alright with you." Preach decided. Angel's wounds looked the worst, if blood was anything to go by. "No, you go ahead. I wouldn't like to see her bleed to death." Shorty replied magnanimously, though no doubt his own wounds were bad enough.

"Cat, help him off with his armour and hold this hard against the wound to stop the bleeding." Preach instructed, handing Cat a wad of cloth. Boss and Red stood guard at the entrance to the small alcove.

Preach had to peel back the robe from where it was pasted to her shoulder with blood.

"Such a waste to get yourself all torn up like this. I can understand these men, they are warriors by trade. What are you doing here?" Preach demanded.

Angel ignored him and turned to Cat and Shorty.

"Watch your eyes!" She warned.

"Why?" Shorty questioned. "It's not a pretty sight just at this moment."

"If you keep on this way you won't ever have to worry about men looking at you again." Preach warned her.

"Lucky it wasn't my face." Angel commented.

"One day it will be." Preach predicted.

"I don't think that I should rush into combat like that." Angel declared.

"What, you think you should just stand back and watch the rest of us get torn apart." Cat bellowed. "Just because you're a woman don't

mean you get a free ride. You're in for the same risks as the rest of us."

Preach was busily trying to tend Angel's wounds. She had claw marks just below her right breast. She was blushing red and trying valiantly not to leave her bosom exposed. It was strange the way she felt. She had never been self-conscious or shy of exposure before, regarding nakedness as normal. Where she had grown up many people just couldn't afford to wear clothes and never owned any.

"She's right, Cat ." Boss spoke out. "She's not here as a fighter. She has other talents which may be of better use to us."

"Yeah. I can see some of her talents from here. Like she ought to share them around. I could do with the priest's job right now." Cat leered.

Shorty drew his blade and thrust it within an inch of Cat's throat.

"Show the lady a little respect !" He shouted.

"If you don't be just a little quieter you will bring down a host of goblins upon us, or something worse." Preach cautioned. "Or do you want us all to die down here."

"Only some of us." Shorty hinted.

"Fire and lightning." The priest blustered. "We don't need to fight amongst ourselves."

"He's right, Shorty. Put up your sword, please." Boss implored, looking in. "We shall die soon enough without killing each other."

"We, somehow, have to learn to live together and fight for a common cause." Red declared, from outside. "Like the twin heroes, HUNAPU and XBLANQUE." He lifted a symbol from beneath his shirt. It was barely visible in the little light which filtered out to where he kept guard.

After Preach had spent several minutes bandaging wounds they prepared to hold up in the side cavern while they, once again, waited to heal. They cleared out the bodies and accumulated mess of the vile beasts and piled what large stones they could in the entrance, almost completely blocking it off. They had, of course explored their small shelter well enough to see that there were no other significant entrances for danger to come through.

For the next day Preach did what healing that he could. This gave them many hours to reflect upon their situation and the error of their ways.

Preach had not yet cast his prayers of power. He generally waited until the last possible moment to use them, in case he needed them in emergency. Once they were used they were gone regardless of need.

AGNI was generous to answer any prayers at all. That was the only way that the priest could look at it, otherwise he risked losing the privilege of prayer altogether.

The next day came, or so they judged. It can be very difficult to gage the passage of time in the constant dark of the underground. They ate and slept and lit the lantern for only a couple of hours during the day while they rested. Preach did his healing prayers.

After this excellent healing they were well enough to travel on. "I would rather wait." Preach implored them. "for tomorrow, when I will be able to regain my lord's favour."

"How do you mean?" Red enquired.

"My lord, AGNI will allow me no more healing this day. If any of us are near death I will not be able to save them. Tomorrow we shall go on and have a better chance to survive." The priest explained.

"It is your quest, Preach, you call the shots." Boss agreed.

"We have only five days food left." Angel pointed out.

They had not anticipated the affair taking so long but had bought what food they could afford and could easily carry.

"And water." Cat added.

"Then let us pray that our quest is not too long." Preach suggested.

By next morning everyone was fully healed. Because of the magical nature of the healing scars had almost totally disappeared.

"This healing is too good." Shorty quipped. "I shall never get to look like a warrior. No battle scars."

"Believe me, I don't wish to end up with ugly scars all over me."

Angel confided.

"Then stay at home and take up knitting, woman." Cat goaded.

"Can we go now." Red asked impatiently.

"Not yet." Angel declared. "I need to study some more."

Angel huddled as close to the lantern as she dared, to get enough light to read her spellbook by. None of the others understood the rigors of magehood.

"You studied yesterday." Cat observed.

"And I shall do so again tomorrow." Angel predicted.

"You are without a doubt the bookiest person I've ever met." Said Shorty.

"My sword arm is a little stiff. I shall need to warm up a little."

Red stated, to take the pressure off of Angel.

"And I must pray." Preach put in.

That was another mystery to the others. In order to gain the prayers which were useful Preach had to put in hours of prayers of no use at all, praising the name of his deity without asking for anything.

“Practise ?” Shorty said, amazed. “When have I ever seen you practise, Red.”

Mostly Red considered himself a bowman. The sword was a secondary weapon, to him. His practice time was usually devoted to archery. I must say that he had equipped himself very well in the last two battles for a none-swordsman. His swordsmanship, or lack of it, was a bit of an in joke between Shorty and Boss, mostly on Shorty’s part.

“I shall today.” Red announced, since archery practise would be nigh impossible within the confines of the caverns.

Surely you must have something to practice too ?” Boss asked Cat.

“Yeah. I’ll scout around outside.” He offered.

“Don’t go too far and don’t get lost.” Boss advised.

“Why not ?” Shorty laughed.

Cat ignored the jibe.

With the lantern tied up Cat had two choices, either stumble around in the dark or light a torch, making himself even easier to spot by every denizen of this dangerous underground maze.

He wandered for a short distance under torch light, wondering why he was doing so.

He reflected, wondering why he had come here at all. At one stage he had entertained thoughts of scamming these naive, starry eyed youngsters, taking them for the fools that they were. They would get themselves killed and he return home to cash in whatever they had on them. Yet he had heard that adventuring could yield bonanzas. His greed won out over petty thievery for the time being. If they did score big he wanted to be in on it and get his full share, or more ,if possible.

He might come out of this with a very valuable artefact, sacred to a certain sect, all to himself. Something for which he could name his own price. Besides getting back now would be a problem. He could not get through the cavern of the giant beetles if the rest were all dead. Even this heady consideration was not the heart of his present dilemma. Deep down inside somewhere his, generally icy, heart was thawing out. He was getting close to these young idiots, actually getting to like them. That he didn’t like very much at all. He had learned not to care about anyone and to keep all at a respectable distance.

If he gave in to sentimentality he would lose the hard edge of his advantage over the rest of humanity. If he became close to others people could get to him through them. He had never allowed the world that kind of hold on him.

Within an hour all were ready to depart. Cat had found no danger in the large chamber beyond their hold up. It was just as well, for

their lights and the sounds of their swordplay would alert every roaming monster for miles around.

“If we get separated today we meet back here.” Boss suggested.

“Let’s block it off completely then, with smallish stones, so that even I can get back in.” Angel advised.

She was thinking that, once so blocked, only certain kinds of creatures would be able to re-infest the cavern, keeping it relatively safer from invasion. This would not be conducive to a speedy re-entry, however. All things are a gamble.

After the alcove was blocked they set out on what was the sixth day of their adventure, as far as they could tell.

Preach knew why he was here. He was chosen to serve AGNI in this way. He virtually had no choice and he had to make the best of it. It wouldn’t do to complain or resent. AGNI knew his every thought. Preach would endure much rather than risk his master’s wrath. Once inducted as a priest of such a one it is not something you can easily walk away from. The God’s revenge follows long after mere death.

For the three warriors it was a matter of bread and butter. It was get a job or starve. They had chosen to be warriors lured by the promise of a good wage, if successful and no need to worry if you fail, you get a cheap and early death.

Angel had time to ponder. As a mage, which she was now, there were many ways to earn a living. She could sit back in town and cast the odd small spells for people or study and scribe. Yet she had heard that the way to any sort of reasonable power reasonably quickly was through adventures such as these. Sure nine out of ten met a swift, untimely death, but the other one came out having won real power.

She didn’t know why but even in these early days it was real power, more than anything else that she craved and she would risk anything to get it. Sure the men were all very nice. She liked them all in different ways and for different reasons. Strange how she had ended up with the ones that she had already picked out from the crowds at The Charging Minotaur Inn so easily. It was as if they had been fated to be together and she knew it. Shorty was so big and powerful looking and so goofy, yet he had a vicious temper which rose so easily.

Boss was likeable and agreeable and incredibly handsome. Red too was not without his charms. He had a strange aloof air of nobility about him. He was sort of quiet and shy, which she found an endearing contrast to the men she was used to. Cat was a real heartless rouse. He pretended affability but was ever aloof. She was drawn to the mischief in him. Also he was only five feet four

and of slight build, like an eternal youth, kind of cute. His lithe body movements were like a dance, like poetry and his steps could not be heard. Preach seemed always nervous, deeply disturbed and brooding.

He was an ominous, sinister figure who made those around him feel ill at ease. This Angel, perversely, found intriguing. You could never tell what the priest might be thinking or what ulterior motives he might have. Also, he was truly a wise man. He had a way of coming out with the most startling things, when he chose to share it. She respected his insightfulness.

GIANT CRAYFISH

It was not long before they came to an underground stream which crossed their path. Boss and Shorty went forward with Preach holding a lantern behind them.

A pair of giant claws struck out of the water and grabbed Boss, squeezing him hard. Within his flexible chain mail armour Boss felt and heard his ribs cracking under the pressure.

Almost immediately Shorty suffered the same fate. Both doughty warriors struck repeatedly at the offending appendages, but to no avail. The sword blows did little to daunt their attacker, its shell encrusted claws too thick to yield to their hampered strikes. The beast tried to haul its prey off of the bank and into the dark water. It was unable to do so and so merely continued in its vice like grip. Boss felt more of his bones give way. A huge lobster like head emerged from the water.

Angel muttered the arcane words of a spell, it would be the first time she had used magic to do damage to anything. She felt the incredible surge of magical energies gathering within her. Then she sprang forwards. She laid her hand upon the giant claw which held Shorty. She felt the most incredible exhilaration as the energies instantly discharged. It was the most intense feeling she had ever felt in her, yet so short, life. From here on in, she knew, she would be totally hooked upon the quest for ever more and more of such power.

A spark of blue energy discharged into the target. The claw sprang open, involuntarily, releasing its grip upon Shorty before he too could sustain more damage, as Boss had done. The claw hung limp for some time, immobilised temporarily by the electrical attack. It was the first time that Angel had worked magic which could have been visible to the men. She worried about how they might react to this. She knew that many were distrustful of and uncomfortable around mages, especially those of the warrior class.

This was not the least of her worries, for as the magical energy left her she was left drained and dizzy, her knees threatening to buckle under her. She wondered how anyone could discharge multiple magics each day and willed herself to stay on her feet and continue the fight.

Boss struggled to move backwards, hoping to coax the thing out of the water and expose a more vulnerable surface to attack. Shorty held onto the limp claw and pulled also. The creature would not be dislodged from its watery abode. Cat attempted to move to where he could attack the creature from behind, always thinking like the rouge that he truly was.

Preach smashed the crustacean with his mace. It hit with a loud crack, like hitting a rock. The beast was hardly aware that it had even been struck. Red stepped into the fray, hacking at the claw which held Boss again and again, but seemed to cause no damage at all.

Boss felt his chest collapse under the creature's strength and fell unconscious.

Now the second claw leapt back to life, grasped Shorty, taking him unawares and he too was crushed into oblivion.

The crustacean felt its prey fall lifeless and let the two warriors fall limply to the floor. It was ready to grasp its other assailants.

The heroes dodged adeptly. Preach and Angel beat on it to no avail.

Red's sword bit into its carapace but did not penetrate to its soft insides.

Meanwhile Cat had worked his way around to where he believed he had a chance. He leapt upon the beast's back and thrust his sword adeptly between two of the monster's bony plates. With a mighty heave he pushed the sword in up to the hilt, using all of the weight of his body.

The beast did not die !

Instead it caught Red in its icy claws and its steely grip began to crush him too. Another claw gathered up Angel, however the claws seemed to have lost some of their strength. Red and Angel were not quite so severely damaged as Boss and Shorty had been.

On and on the fight continued. Cat struggling to remain atop the mound of the creature's squirming body. He tried to retrieve his sword, pulling it left and right and inching it upwards. The others were beating on the crustacean's hard carapace to no avail. Angel and Red held within its claws, too firmly to escape and yet not crushed to death. Not yet at least.

Red was drawn close to the monster's mouth. It made as if to bite him in half. Then he thrust his sword deeply into its unholy

cavernosity. A stream of rancid ichor poured forth , followed by a frothing, gurgling sound and the claws fell limp as a dead dogs dick.

Angel spilled out onto the floor and Red staggered out of the releasing grip. The body of the beast slid down into the water. It sat there, a once living stepping stone, across the rushing stream. Cat was half dipped in the water, still struggling to remove his sword. He wrestled with it for another minute or two and then wallowed up to the top of the crayfish's back and leapt back onto the shore.

Preach, meanwhile , rushed to his fallen comrades and worked frantically to save their lives. By the time he had stabilised Boss and Angel it was touch and go with Shorty. Yet the priest brought them all back to safety, in as much as they would not bleed to death within the next few minutes. All three were still very weak. The remaining three decided to try to move their wounded back to their secret cavern of the day before. Cat and Preach dragged Angel a little way up the tunnel. Preach stayed with Angel while Cat returned to where Red guarded the others.

“This isn’t going to work.” Cat complained. “One of them will still be left alone.”

“You take Boss, I’ll take Shorty.” Red suggested.

Neither of the fallen warriors were light loads, especially decked in their chain mail and loaded with equipment. It was a struggle for both carriers, especially for Cat.

GOBLINS

The pair were dragging one load each when a group of goblins came padding up the tunnel towards them. The two groups stared at each other in suprise for a few moments. Then the goblins charged.

Cat caught a vicious thrust which sent him reeling.

Thereafter the battle settled down into a long, drawn out, affair of cut and thrust and parry and counter thrust in which neither side could make headway and no one gained ground.

Then Red cut deeply into one goblin, which went down. Almost simultaneously Preach arrived, drawn by the sounds of battle, he had risked leaving Angel’s fallen frame down the tunnel unguarded. The priest charged into the fray, taking one goblin unprepared. A neat whack on its head, with a mace, sent it staggering dazedly backwards.

To everyone's amazement Shorty, from a propped up, half seated position weakly waved his sword and caught the staggering goblin on its heel, bringing it crashing down.

What happened next was not convenient. Over the next half a minute each of the three standing heroes was hit. Cat went down. Spurred, no doubt, by the exhilaration of battle Shorty staggered to his feet and chopped a goblin's head neatly from its shoulders, while Red and Preach were bogged down amid the cut and thrust. The remaining goblins, thinking that they had seen a corpse come to life behind them, broke and ran off in panic. Red seized the opportunity to thrust his sword through a goblin back, ending its retreat. Shorty thereafter promptly collapsed in a heap. With four of their number now critically wounded there was now no possibility of further retreat. At least they had moved a little way from the stream and its threat of attack by more giant crustaceans.

HOMUNCULUS

They sought whatever sheltered spot they could find in the nearby passageways. Red hurried off to gather Angel to it and, to his great relief, found her safe and returned with her.

Red took the first watch and Preach was to take the second.

Preach was on look out. A strange creature came padding up the corridor towards him.

It was not a goblin. It was smaller than a goblin and, if possible, even uglier. Vaguely humanoid in shape, it had red glinting eyes, leathery wings and sharply pointed teeth and claws.

It took to the air and rushed towards the priest. Despite his attempts to swat it away, it flew to his throat and sank its vile teeth into his neck. He felt suddenly drowsy and fought to stay awake, even as he struggled to shake off the beast.

"Awake !" he shouted frantically. "Murder ! Red ! Awake !"

There followed moments of terror as he struggled with the pain in his throat, trying to lever the abomination free. He was desperately fighting the urge to lie down and sleep, or perhaps even to lie down and die. He finally tore its mouth free, leaving a gaping wound behind.

It lunged its head forwards again and found itself new purchase. It pumped more of its vile venom into him. This time he could no longer resist its lure. He fell into a deep slumber.

Red, meanwhile had awoken. Grabbed his sword. Charged over. Struck at the beast. With a beat of its wings it glided over his head.

Sword swished through empty air. Beast plummeted towards his unguarded rear.

Red whirled about deftly. In the dim lantern light he marked its black, fleeting shape. He swung just before it closed on him. Too soon before. Again his sword cut through the void between them. His opponent was on him in an instant. Its fangs found purchase in a small, unprotected area of his cheek. He felt himself slip into unconsciousness.

Angel had benefited somewhat from Preach's magical healing. She stirred and, in the dim light saw the shadowy battle, almost like a dream. She struggled to her feet. Must help. Must find her staff. Cat also stirred fitfully. He was weak and unsure where he was and what was real. He staggered, clumsily and noisily towards the commotion.

Both of the heroes made pathetic attempts to hit the attacker. It darted adroitly between their blows, like a radar sentient bat. It dove for Angel, who seemed the fitter and most dangerous of the two. It bit into her unprotected flesh and pumped its poison into her to do its work.

Surprisingly she resisted. She struck out at it blindly, bringing her staff down on the leading edge of its wing. Cat, seeing double, thrust his blade into the air a good foot behind the shadowy villain. It sank its fangs deeper and increased the flow of its poison.

Angel succumbed. Her body went limp. Her muscles failed to respond. She felt herself falling and then she felt nothing at all. She drifted into sleep, a blackness of total oblivion overtook her.

Cat was barely aware of himself, staggering about in the narrow tunnel, fighting off this shadowy demon. It was a surrealistic dream. A dark shape came and went. It dove at him. He thrust at it. It wheeled to the side. It disappeared. It waited for a lapse in his attention. It was waiting, he knew, for him to collapse and leave them all helpless.

On one of its passes he even hit it. His elation lasted but a moment. Then he realised it was not a killing blow. He fended it off again and again. It bided its time, It knew how weak he was. It dove. He missed. It vanished into the darkness. It tried to lead him away from the others, away from the safety of the light. Cat was not that delirious.

"Cunning Bastard!" He railed.

Three minutes, four minutes. The drama dragged on. Cat knew that his time was limited. He could not hold on indefinitely. It narrowly missed him. He was so wide of the mark. He thought of himself as a devout coward and he was now the whole party's only hope. He

felt a stinging pain in the back of his neck. He slipped into oblivion with only one last thought left.

“The little bastard’s got me !”

GARISHAMAL

Preach awoke to find himself hog tied in a small dimly lit room with motionless bodies and an amazing collection of assorted junk. Junk was the only way to describe it. It was not good enough to be rubbish but far too good to be garbage. Among the bric-a-brac was a hotchpotch of assorted odds and ends, the occasional white elephant and an arrangement of curios, some souvenirs and a few leftovers. Along with makeshift devices and any number of bits and pieces were a rag tag collection of do-hickeys and thingamajigs and a really large, ogreish looking ,female creature with a winged demon like thing perched upon her shoulder like a demented parrot.

“Garishamal aa vey !” She spake.

“Ich nicht vischtehn.” Quoth he .

“Zu ist ehre Rabbit .” Spake she.

“Speak you spemen ?” He asked.

“Don’t ve all.” She replied. “Rest ye for now. Explain later.” At this she turned and departed.

Soon after Red awoke and then the others, whilst Cat drifted in and out of consciousness, sporadically mumbling incoherently.

Their host reappeared, carrying a large bowl and a spoon. To Preach she spoke.

“I let you go, you feed others, yes ?”

“I will.” Said Preach.

“No trickses.” She intoned.

“No tricks.” Preach assured her.

“You swear .” She demanded.

“I swear.” Preach said, sounding sincere.

“By what you swear ?” She interrogated.

“By the flames of AGNI and by his grace.” Preach invoked.

“What is this ?” She queried.

“My god.” He announced. “See his symbol, look.” He nodded towards the pendant around his neck.

“I see.” She admitted. “God of flame. Not good, this god of flame, not good.”

“He is a Great God indeed.” Preach protested.

“Aye. Great is he. Great are they all. Yes. All gods great. Must not speak ill of them, never. But not good, this god. Not a good god.”

“I must protest.” Preach began.

“Alright. Dequesce Illicitimus Dominis Absolutas .” She mouthed.

“I don’t understand.” Preach replied.

“Exactly.” She gloated.

“Dominis Est Proquis Singularum.” Boss interjected.

“Good boy. You speak for him, yes ?” She queried.

“Absolutus.” Boss proclaimed. “Te Est Veritabulus.”

“Then so be it.” She conceded. “Now what do you believe ?”

She poked around the warrior’s neck.

“Ah, the cord of ANHUR. Warrior est . Dangerous spemen. Even a noble warrior capable of killing, Yes.”

She walked over to Preach and released one of his hands.

“Now you feed friends, yes.” She instructed.

“But how ?” He began.

“ You find way.” She said threateningly. “or they starve.

Then she walked out .

Preach struggled to move himself and the heavy pot, bowl and spoon and feed his comrades. Repeated attempts to untie himself did not work. It was a long and difficult task to feed them with one hand free and no legs. He managed to intone a prayer over each one and completed the magical ritual of healing.

Only once each day did their hostess bring them food. Her small winged servant collected the bowl and spoon.

“Who are you ?” Preach asked, the next day.

“Garishamal. I have said .” She told him.

“What are you ?” He demanded.

“I am half and half , and yet I am half and half.” She chuckled.

“But which half is which ?” Shorty put in.

“Funny man.” She glowered at him. “Not like funny men.” She bared her two inch fangs at him.

“I am impressed.” Said Shorty. “Loose these bonds and I’ll take up dentistry.”

“Don’t antagonise her.” Said Red “She did save our lives.”

“How ? By not killing us ?” Shorty declared.

“Should have. Maybe should have.” She considered. “Still could. Maybe still could. “

“Yeah maybe.” Said Cat. “But not certainty.”

“You tied up.” She pointed out. “What you do ?”

“Not tied up.” Said Angel. “Make friends.”

Angel threw her bonds on the floor and stiffly moved to a comfortable seated position.

“How you do ?” Garishamal said, irritably. “You bad girl. Naughty prisoner. Not untie ropes. Must not.”

“I’m sorry mummy. I didn’t mean to.” Angel whined.

Garishamal looked perplexed.

“Garishamal not stoopid . Not treat like fool . I not your mother. You be in big trouble.” She pouted.

“But why ? I only want to be friends.” Angel implored.

“No friends for Garishamal.” She insisted. “Garishamal alone.”

“Then untie us and we will go.” Angel pleaded.

“You not see where Garishamal live. Must not I say.” She railed.

“You can blindfold us. Lead us back to where we were. We won’t trouble you again. We promise.” Angel bargained.

“Maybe.” Garishamal considered. “I think. I tell. Soon I tell. Now you must tie up again, please.”

“But why ?” Angel began.

“No argue. No fight. Not safe. Lie on belly, Now !” Her tone brooked no argument. “Hands behind, Now.”

Her sprightly assistant swooped out of nowhere and began tying Angel’s bonds once more.

“Make good this time.” His mistress shouted. “Or Bashmosh not eat one week.” Then she left, followed shortly by her fiendish friend.

“What was that half and half stuff ?” Boss asked.

“That’s easy.” Angel boasted. “She’s a half orc and half spemen and she’s a witch doctor , sort of half cleric and half mage.”

“How do you know ?” Asked Preach.

“She’s obviously a cleric, from the holy symbol and the altar over there and some of the things she has in here but she has a familiar. Our friend with the wings. I know it’s her familiar because that’s one of the spells I know and normally”

“Clerics don’t have familiars.” Preach completed.

It was the first time that Angel actually intimated that she was herself a mage, though the rest had probably assumed that from the start.

“You’re still only guessing.” Cat pointed out.

“How much do you want to bet ?” Angel challenged.

“It’s of no consequence what she is.” Cat argued. “When you had your hands free you should have untied us all. We could have escaped.”

“Maybe.” Shorty agreed. “On the other hand we might all be dead. Any bets Bashmosh is always watching us.”

“Who ?” Asked Red.

“Bashmosh !” The others cried out in frustration.

“The winged terror.” Shorty elucidated.

“We don’t know how powerful Garishamal might be. I wouldn’t take a familiar until I became powerful enough to handle it.” Angel cautioned.

“Why is that ?” Shorty enquired.

“I can’t give away trade secrets. Lets just say that there are inherent dangers in taking on a familiar.” Angel said evasively. “So you have this spell which is totally useless to you.” Cat observed.

“I might use it. When I am more sure of my powers. After a few more years training.” She excused.

“But it’s useless now.” He pressed.

“Yes.” She admitted, reluctantly.

“And how many spells do you know?” Cat enquired.

“Now that would be telling.” Angel refused to reply.

“Come on. We want to know how good a mage we’re teamed up with.” He insisted.

“I don’t ask you how few inches you’ve got.” Angel said indignantly.

Red sprang to her defence.

“Yes Cat, let’s not start questioning each others’ abilities.

Remember how she made that giant lobster let go of Shorty.”

“Remember he was stupid enough to let it grab him.” Cat criticised.

You wait ‘till the next time you’re in trouble.” Shorty warned.

“You need help, ever, I’m gonna look the other way.”

“The feeling’s mutual, Bimbo.” Cat proclaimed.

“Quit it you two. We can’t afford this kind of foolishness.” Boss pointed out.

“Our very lives depend upon our working together.” Preach told them.

“No.” Said Cat, flatly. “Our lives depend on a demented half orc and an imp that likes to bite people.”

“Thank you brother for those kind words of encouragement.”

Shorty chuckled. “And Angel. Thanks for making that beast release me that time. You probably saved my life.”

“ ‘Twas nothing really.” Angel disclaimed, modestly. It was only the second time she had ever caste a spell in earnest need. The first had been several days ago with the farmer. He was intent on screwing the adventurers for all they had. Standing behind the men Angel had caste a *friends* spell upon him. That was why she was able to barter his price down so well. When she was away the man reverted to type until Preach *Commanded* him. Angel had tried to keep her magical powers a secret. After all she was really with a bunch of strange men in a frightening wilderness. If they were unsure what she could possibly do to them they would be less likely to turn on her. Now they knew of her *shocking grasp* spell. That might make them wary of her.

“All in all girl, you’ve not been very useful.” Cat critiqued. “If you can do more please do so.”

“Let’s not get into who’s useful and who’s not, mister last into battle.” Shorty derided.

“Yes , let’s not, shall we.” Boss pleaded.

Once again Preach was left to serve up lunch and he did more healing on those who were most in need. At this rate the whole party would soon be in quite good shape again.

The next time that Garishamal visited she spoke decisively.

“Me troubled. Me make deal. Strike bargain. Yes.”

“What kind of bargain ?” Boss was interested.

“You kill my enemy. I let you go free.” She proposed.

“Kill who ?” Boss asked.

“Kill minotaur. Mighty beast. Him hunt down poor Garishamal. Try to kill her. You kill him. Yous go free.”

“How do we know this minotaur deserves to be killed ?” Cat demanded. “He might be a good guy.”

“We’ll take her word for it.” Boss stated. “and since when were you ever concerned about what was right ?”

“I ain’t gonna be taken for no fool.” Cat declared.

There followed much debate and negotiation which I don’t wish to bore you with, resulting in a reluctant agreement upon compliance. Boss’s surprising support for the proposition was because he knew something of Garishamal’s true disposition that the others didn’t. She had spoken to him in words of worship, Words that he believed she could not possibly have known unless her heart was true. He believed that she was not evil, just naturally cautious of her own security. After all she survived almost alone in a very dangerous neck of the woods.

Besides Boss had heard many stories and legends of minotaurs and , so far, had never heard of the existence of a good one.

She had them all tied up in a line.

“This how it works.” She said “ I lead you to big chamber. You go with Bashmosh. Find minotaur. Kill minotaur. You come back. I keep woman here. You no come back, she die. You kill Bashmosh, she die. You understand ?”

“We understand.” Boss told her.

“How will she know ?” Cat said cryptically.

“Don’t try anything please.” Angel warned. “She will know.”

“I will know.” Said Garishamal. “Have ways. I will know.”

Bashmosh led the rest of them away and untied them further on.

Angel stayed behind with Garishamal.

“Which one you love ?” Garishamal asked.

“I don’t love any of them.” Angel stated, almost without thinking.

“I know better. You fight with them. You hurt, they hurt. They hurt, you hurt. Must love them all a little, can’t help it.” She espoused.

Angel thought about it. Perhaps Garishamal was right, even Cat, who was repugnant and annoying, she felt for him when he suffered. Inconceivable.

“I don’t love any of them.” She protested. “We haven’t been together long.” She added, perhaps as an excuse. She didn’t want her hostess to think her unfeeling.

Garishamal nodded her head and sat silently for a while.

“Which one you like best ?” She prompted.

“Oh really, Garishamal. You weren’t supposed to torture me. That wasn’t part of our agreement.” Angel grumbled.

“See. You do love them, or one of them.” Garishamal observed.

“Nonsense.” Said Angel, perhaps too vehemently.

“Then tell me. Which one you like best.” She insisted.

“Shan’t .” Angel said stubbornly.

There were things happening deep inside her that she didn’t want to acknowledge and certainly didn’t want to admit to. She couldn’t deal with them and thought to hide them even from herself.

“So which one do you like best ?” Angel asked, falteringly.

Was she seeking a second opinion ?

“Ah !” Said Garishamal, knowingly. “Big one is funny. Muscley and funny. Boss man is good and likeable and handsome. One with hair like flames”

“Red” Angel supplied.

“Yes, Red. He sym...pathetic” She said struggling over the larger words. “and calm and dip...lomatic. Priest , he like all priests, pious and respe...ctful yet dark inside. Other is we love to hate, hate to love.

Still we love. Love for danger in them. Gets juices going to fight with them, be abased by them.” Garishamal nodded and smiled to herself. She was satisfied with her own appraisal of them.

Angel was astonished at her perceptiveness, but something else struck her as well.

“You like them all don’t you !” She blurted out.

“I lonely female and frus...trated. One want me I cling to him. Treat like king. Look at me. Only half woman. No man rock with me. They look, see only half -orc. Ugly I am to their eyes. Repulsive. Male orcs, I hate them and them me.”

Angel suddenly felt sorry for her captor, who faced a whole lifetime of loneliness.

“You take advice. You pick one man of these. Love and cling to him. He rock with you every night. Please you up good, yes.”

Angel blushed at this.

“So which you choose.” She challenged.

“Garishamal. There are other men in the world.” Angel pointed out.

“Not in my world.” The wikka confided. “You think to meet other, better. You wait, miss this chance. S’pose you wrong. No one comes later. Tomorrow you like me. You not beautiful, not desirable. You gather while you can. Not wait. Not miss. Not live like me.”

Angel was ashamed of her youth and beauty and good fortune and full of misgivings for the future.

MINOTAUR

Bashmash stopped them. “It’s time.” He hissed.

He untied them. Boss first and then Red and took off their blindfolds.

“You go on.” He said, nervously. “I wait back there.”

He left them to untie the others. “You tie up all or I not lead you back.” He called back to them.

They waited a while for the feeling in their hands to return. In a small pile behind them was a minimum of equipment. Lantern, oil and a hand weapon each.

“I hope this thing ain’t far.” Cat proclaimed.

Almost immediately a dark shape emerged from a tunnel a little way ahead, bellowed and, head down, charged, hitting Shorty with its long horns, it tore into him and knocked him to the ground. With a human torso and the head of a great bull this thing was massive, making even Shorty look like a dwarf in comparison.

Minotaurs are renowned for their strength, their toughness and their savage skill in battle. Yet it was simply outnumbered. No matter how it turned, there were always people in front of it and others behind. It could not fend them off in all directions at once. Preach whacked it with his mace and Cat thrust his sword into it. It struck Red a nasty blow with one horn but sword thrusts came at it from all sides. Preach hit again with his mace and Cat and Red skewered it with their blades. The minotaur went down.

“It didn’t give us a chance to refuse to fight it.” Said Preach, as he began to tend Shorty’s wounds. “I guess Garishamal must have been right to fear it.”

“Among fishermen there is a tale of another kind of minotaur. One which plies the seas. They are said to be more civilised than this

beast and yet extremely dangerous when roused.” Shorty recounted.

Shorty and Red both shored up, Boss tied up the others and led them to where Bashmosh was waiting. He tied up Boss and took them back to Garishamal. There they were blindfolded and taken on.

After a meal they were again tied and blindfolded and escorted back to where they had been picked up. They took their leave of the pair.

“I would like to come back and visit you someday.” Angel plied.

“But how will I find you ?”

“You come this far Bashmosh find you. He very good scout.”

Garishamal said, noncommittally . “But I may soon have to move from here. Getting too busy, too dangerous.”

“Think well on what I have said.” The strange lady shouted as they walked away. “much food for thought have I now.” She muttered to herself.

CHAPTER FIVE

FURTHER AND DEEPER

Further and further, deeper and deeper they travelled. On and on they went, like this style of writing.

“How can you be sure we’re going the right way ?” Cat demanded of Preach.

“I told you. I keep seeing places like the ones in my dreams.”

Preach explained.

“Seen any lately ?” Cat goaded.

“Now that you mention it, not many.” Preach admitted. “But why would my god fail to direct me ?”

“To see if you are worthy, and what happens to us if he decides that you are not ?” Cat scorned him.

“In the name of all the gods, be quiet back there, before you bring a pack of goblins upon us !” Shorty demanded.

“or the wrath of the gods, perhaps.” Cat replied.

They entered a cavern which was very large, stretching far beyond the range of their meagre lantern light. The roof , barely visible, was hung with a myriad of stalactites. They had seen a few such things in their travels so far but nowhere seen so many and on such a large scale. Some were very large, others were tiny.

The floor stretched before them smooth and there was not a sound of dripping water anywhere to be heard. Not being geologists, none of them noticed these anomalies, or else they thought nothing of their portents.

“This is a great place for an ambush.” Cat declared.

“What’s eating you now, Cat ?” Shorty asked.

They spoke in whispers, as people do in such places, but their whispers carried far across the caverns.

“We get in the middle, no idea what’s on either side, or ahead or behind. Could be a thousand goblin archers lining the walls. We could be seriously dead before we knew what hit us.” Cat explained.

“What do you suggest we do ?” Boss queried.

“Stick to one wall.” Cat suggested. “That way we can’t be completely surrounded.”

“He has a point.” Red supported.

“Alright. Are we agreed ?” Boss asked.

Everyone nodded. When they woke up they continued their journey, sticking close to the left side wall.

PIERCERS

Stalactites began to fall from the roof. Three barely missed Boss, Cat and Preach but one hit Angel. She cried out in pain and shock. It struck her like a falling rock but then it pierced her and seemed to be sucking the life force out of her.

“Get it off me !” She shrieked.

This was the first time that she had panicked and sounded like a whimpering woman. The event was so unexpected and the attack felt so strange.

Everyone attempted to hit the creature. It was left to Red to hit it. He deftly chopped the bulk of it away, leaving a small residue embedded in Angel’s flesh. She felt the drain on her fade away as the monster’s life force declined.

However, they were not out of trouble. More of the beasts were falling and those already on the ground were also attacking. One hit Cat, a minor injury, but it had begun to feed on the wound.

“Let’s get out of this chamber.” Cat shouted. “We can get rid of these later.”

With the assailant sticking to his leg, he hobbled on, not knowing how far the chamber reached.

The thing on Cat’s leg did not have strong purchase and fell out , leaving a bleeding, open wound.

Three more of the fell beasts rained down from above, none finding its mark. Ones already on the ground could move only slowly and were soon left behind. Preach pounded on one with his mace as it narrowly missed him. The creature’s hard casing ensured that it took little damage from this.

They reached the end of the chamber. The horde of attackers were all behind them.

Angel looked back.

“If we had been in the middle we’d have been targets for many more of them and much larger ones.” She observed.

“She’s right.” Red agreed. “and who knows how much damage they would do ?”

“Garishamal, perhaps.” Boss put in. “We could have asked her what to expect of this place.”

“But we didn’t did we ?” Cat pointed out. “So how about bandaging my leg, someone.”

Preach bound up Angel’s wound and Cat’s. Then they had a rest, a meal and moved on.

What greeted them in the next chamber was a wonder to behold. The air was increasingly hot and humid. Water seeped and oozed and dripped everywhere. There were genuine stalactites with stalagmites growing up to them. Some combination of moisture and warmth made the place a haven for life. There were green glowing plants encrusting everything. The walls, the floor and even the ceiling were covered in a green carpet. The glow of these plants was just bright enough to see by but not bright enough to cast shadows. It was like a very dim, eerie, green coloured moonlight. In the midst of these low plants stood numerous mushrooms of various sizes. Tiny animals crept warily around, eating these or scraping the caves surfaces clean of the phosphorescent mosses and algae. This left numerous darker splotches and fine trails in the weave of this amazing tapestry. “Welcome to the underdark.” A voice sounded faintly inside Cat’s head. He looked at the others first for the source of the voice.

“What ?” He asked.

“What, what ?” Said Preach.

“Who said that ?” Cat demanded.

“Preach said it.” Shorty pointed out.

“No. You klutz, not that.” Cat grumbled.

“It was me.” The voice in Cat’s head proclaimed.

“Who ? Where are you ?” Cat demanded.

The others looked at him suspiciously.

“He’s flipped.” Said Shorty.

“Sh !” Cat shushed, vehemently.

“Purr !” Shorty baited. “Living up to your name eh Cat ?”

“Shut up, you dolt. Don’t you hear anything ?” Cat railed.

Everyone fell silent. For a moment , at least.

“If I show myself, promise that you won’t attack me.” The voice demanded.

“Anything. Yes, anything you say, just get out of my head.” Cat pleaded.

“Very well.” Said the voice. “But remember what you have promised and know that I can know your thoughts. I can attack you inside and you are helpless to stop me. Tell them not to harm me or I will fry your brains.”

“OK ! OK !” Cat agreed. “I’ll tell them but just let me be. Listen guys. There’s something in here. Something very dangerous. It has the power to mess with people’s heads. It says if we attack it I’m a goner.

So don’t make any false moves. OK.” He pleaded.

“Sounds like a bargain to me.” Shorty joked.

“You’ve got to promise me you won’t mess with this thing. I mean it.” Cat panicked.

“Whatever you are, if you can hear us, we mean you no harm.”

Angel spoke out. “Show yourself. We won’t attack you.”

“Even if I am hideous to you ?” A voice rang out in Angel’s head. Angel paled visibly.

“Oh my goddess. Mighty ISIS what is this ?” She exclaimed.

“Calm down.” She told herself. “It’s some sort of spell. I don’t know what, but something.”

“Not you too !” Shorty exclaimed.

“Hush.” Angel said, gently. “There is something trying to communicate with me.”

“Very well, oh mighty being. We all swear that we will not seek to harm you, unless you attack us first.” Red proclaimed.

PSEUDODRAGON

From the dark recesses of a cavern far ahead came signs of movement. There emerged a creature about three feet long from nose to tail, with half of that length being a long thin tail bearing a nasty looking spike at its end. The beast was as dragon like in form as anything they had seen or imagined. It had small leathery wings folded over its scaly back.

“What business brings you to my home?” It asked Cat, mentally.

“We’re just passing through.” He blurted out, startled. “I thought you weren’t going to pick on me.” He added in complaint.

“Very well. You may go. Pass through now.” It instructed.

Cat strode, bravely, past the diminutive creature and out of the chamber.

“What business brings you to my home ?” It projected mentally to Angel.

“We’re guarding this priest on a holy quest.” She stated truthfully.

“Tell me more.” It prompted.

“To recover a holy relic.” Angel added.

“Hey, don’t say too much.” Preach warned.

“Why not ?” The tiny dragon demanded of the priest.

“How do we know that we can trust you ?” Preach asked.

“You don’t.” The dragon noted. “But do go on with your story.”

“Why should I ?” Preach demanded.

“Do you want to pass ?” It questioned.

“Most assuredly I do.” Preach assured it.

“Then do go on.” It encouraged.

“I had a dream.” The priest began. “In which I saw the orb stolen and a priest murdered and the creature which did that evil deed came here.”

“How do you know ?” The tiny tyrant asked.

“I have seen this place in my dream and the chamber with the pointed rocks in the roof. That pink column I remember rather well.” Preach told.

“I bid you all good day and good luck on your quest, master cleric, but be warned, do not try my patience too often. I will allow you to pass this way again when you leave this place and that is all.” It said ominously.

“You speak boldly for so small a creature.” Preach observed.

“Don’t antagonise it.” Angel counselled. “Mustn’t endanger our mission. “

“We quake in fear before you, oh diminutive one.” Shorty bust out.

“Go now to meet your fate, oh great warrior.” It contacted him, in similar spirit.

“What do you know of our fate ?” The big man asked.

“Only this. You shall meet with giant rats before long. These are my usual prey, in a chamber over there.” He informed. “Try not to kill too many of them or I shall go hungry.”

“Small dragon.” Boss spoke out. “Have you seen a creature pass through here carrying an orb, a sort of round ball thing ?”

“I know what you mean.” It replied. “But no. I have never seen such a thing. Nor do I wish to. Leave now. I grow weary of your conversation.”

It withdrew from their path and took on the colour of its surroundings. It was indeed hard to see, except for those who had seen its arrival.

They egressed. They found Cat seated in a green lit tunnel beyond.

“Fine one you are, afraid of a friendly little fellow like that.”

Shorty taunted.

“I don’t like anything messing with my head.” Cat excused.

“Fraidy, fraidy, fraidy.” Shorty teased.

“Let’s not start feuding shall we.” Red cautioned. “Time enough to fight if we get out of here alive.”

“Giant rats up ahead.” Shorty announced. “It told me.”

“How many ?” Boss asked, worriedly.

“Never asked.” Shorty replied.

“Well it’s a good job your name ain’t Smarty.” Cat criticised.

“Fraidy, fraidy, fraidy.” Shorty called out again.

It brought home to Cat just how young were the people he had chosen to go adventuring with. Preach was nineteen, pretty mature really. Boss eighteen. Angel, Red and Shorty were all tender fifteen year olds, vintage 61, since the year was now 44,876 in the Finlan’s Island Reckoning, abbreviated to FIR by custom. In a sense the name was wrong, since the calendar was struck and maintained by the great sphinx, who resided upon that isle. By rights the year was in the reckoning of the Sphinx. Most spemen don’t know that.

Cat at twenty three was a late bloomer and the veteran of the bunch but, due to his slight stature, his age didn’t show, he was capable of seeming as young as the rest of them.

Any way they settled down and returned to business. They moved on.

They soon came upon a chamber in which the walls were pock marked with small holes, tunnels and chambers, obviously rat holes.

Boss came to a halt. “Let’s not hang around in here. We want to get through this without having to fight hundreds of these things. If we get through quickly, we may avoid meeting too many of them. If we’re attacked form a defensive square and keep moving towards the far exit.” He pointed towards the small black dot in the distance, marking the far end of the chamber.

GIANT RATS

There were three rats visible in the chamber.

The party tried to slip by them unmolested.

The rats paused, noses in the air, turned and ran, squeaking and squawking towards them. The group fended off their first attacks.

Cat and Red each killed a rat.

Giant rats were notoriously vicious and dangerous. Even none adventures had heard stories about them, especially their tendency to attack in huge numbers. This place was no exception. More rats were summoned by the commotion. Eight more emerged from various holes and from behind the cover of larger rocks and mushrooms.

Though they will eat almost anything, such rats are extremely opportunistic and will leap at the chance of any change in diet. They find meat of any kind a particularly choice delicacy. One rat raced up and bit into Angel's leg. Boss and Shorty each brought one down. More rats were streaming into the room. To attempt to stop and fight them off would have been a lethal mistake.

The adventurers, however, were nearing the exit and only those rats already close to the fray followed them into the narrowing exit. Preach was bitten. One Rat climbed Cat like a tree and gave him a nasty bite on the neck. Cat was bitten again and Angel was bitten again and again, because she wore no armour.

Red chopped up another rat. Still the spemen kept moving. Now only five rats harassed them. Boss and Shorty both struck home. Then there were three. Rats were fighting back there over the flesh of their newly fallen comrades.

Another rat took away another chunk of Angel's fair flesh. Shorty chopped up one rat. Preach crushed one beneath his mace and Angel hit at the last one with her staff. It fell dead at her feet, in a pool of her blood.

They ran on for a while, to ensure that they would not be attacked again, before coming to a halt.

After Preach had done what healing he could they sought a defensible position in which to rest 'the night'. Night time was entirely subjective to them now. They chose it when they thought they had gone far enough and felt weary.

If they stayed without any light they could only just make out darker patches amongst the 'greenglow' of the caverns. They could not make out the details of things, so dim was the illumination. If they lit a lantern or a torch then the light of it banished the greenglow, overpowering it in a small local area. Then everything outside the circle of light appeared as dark as the darkest cavern in existence.

The choice was theirs. They knew that any light source would make them obvious at quite a distance to any enemy around. An enemy that they would not see. With light things close up would be seen clearly. Without it things were obscure enough that many things could remain hidden from them or leap out and surprise them.

They chose to move without light. One reason was that lamp oil was getting scarce. They obviously had a long way to go. Even if they recovered the orb right now, they still had to make the long

and hazardous journey back. Many miles of caverns behind them had no green glow at all to light their way. They would try to preserve what light they had for such places.

They found a chamber formed by an overhanging shelf in the roof of the tunnel. It was barely large enough for all of them to fit into together.

“We’re going to be cosy tonight.” Cat leered as he set himself down next to Angel.

“No you don’t.” She said, angrily. “Get over there. I’m going next to the opposite wall and , Let’s see. Who can I trust ? Preach . You sleep next to me, but not too close.”

“Way you go Preach.” Said Shorty. “My turn tomorrow night is it ?”

After an short pause he added. “Only joking Angel, OK.”

“No it’s not OK. Don’t even think about it .” Angel protested.

“Relax Angel. You know you’re just one of the boys.” He smirked.

“So many cuts and scars on her, you wouldn’t be able to touch her anywhere anyway.” Cat scowled.

“Don’t mind him , Angel, your beauty remains undiminished.” Red tried to console her.

“Don’t you start as well. That’s all I need. Everybody’s hitting on me.” She yelled her exasperation.

“I’m not ...” Red blurted out.

“Best just to drop the whole subject.” Preach whispered to him.

“Three watches .” Boss proposed. “Red and Preach up first. Cat and I take second and Angel and Shorty last watch. Any objections ?”

“What’s wrong with you ? You not hitting on me ?” Angel said, sarcastically.

“I wanted to make sure I didn’t look like I was.” Boss stated.

“Because you really are, I suppose.” She accused. “Very sly.”

“What’s eating you, woman ?” Shorty protested. “If we’re nice to you, you don’t like it. If we’re not, you don’t like it.”

Preach signalled silence to him.

“Let her sleep. She’ll be fine in the morning.” He advised.

“Like you’re the expert on women here.” Shorty chuckled.

“Boy are we in trouble.” Cat agreed.

“Lights out people. We’re only safe up here if we don’t announce our presence.” Boss pointed out.

“Speaking of light. This greenglow stuff was a great help. We’re down to our last flask of oil.” Preach declared.

“Then I suggest we save it for the return journey” Boss whispered.

“Now can we get some sleep ?”

The night passed without further incident.

In the morning Angel complained of a sore throat. Her nose was running profusely and she had a slight fever.

“Rats.” Preach proclaimed.

“Yea. Rats !” Angel squeaked, her voice almost completely vanished.

“Oh ISIS, my spells ! I need my voice to caste my spells.”

“Then I suggest you save it if you can. No talking.” Preach advised, pressing his finger against her lips.

She turned her head away, blushing.

“What are you two up to ?” Said Shorty brusquely. “One night close together and you’ve become lovebirds, conspirators.”

“Don’t be silly.” Angel attempted to say, her voice a whisper.

“Then why are we whispering ?” Shorty hammed it up. “It’s alright . I won’t tell a soul .”

“Stop it !” Angel shouted, quietly, stamping her feet, gritting her teeth and clenching her fists. “Explain it to him will you ?” She implored Preach.

“Don’t worry, he’s only teasing you. Now rest your voice.” He said kindly.

“You should see those two billing and cooing.” Shorty said to Boss.

“Shut up !” Boss burst out.

“What’d I say ?” Shorty shrugged innocently.

“We’re all going to die.” Cat muttered to himself. “If the devil don’t get us we’ll carve each other up over some dumb broad.”

Angel had to plead with Boss to allow her to spend some precious lantern light to study her spells by. She persuaded him.

They walked on in near total silence that day. Everyone was feeling tense. Perhaps it was the strain of several days underground, or maybe it was that of near death experiences. Only Preach and Red had not yet been almost killed since entering the caverns. Perhaps they each had their own private demons to wrestle with.

“Angel.” Cat whispered, dropping back a couple of steps. “I have something bothering me.”

“So you should have.” She spoke, hoarsely.

“Look. I know I come on like an arsehole sometimes.” He began.

“Sometimes. Try all the time.” She mouthed.

He leant closer, in an attempt to hear her faded voice.

“But it’s not that.” He continued. “Look at this.”

He took her aside to a section of the cavern wall.

“Wait up guys.” Red spoke , his voice bouncing eerily off the cavern walls.

“What are they on ?” Shorty asked.

“I dunno.” Said Red “Whispering about something.”

“Well, I wish they’d share it .” Shorty smiled.

“Quiet back there.” Boss hissed, although they had seen nothing but tiny scurrying and slithering creatures for miles.

“What do you make of it ?” Cat asked.

“Make of what ?” Angel croaked. “It’s some sort of rock formation.”

“Bands of metal. I’ve noted them for miles but not like this.” Cat explained. He pointed to a spot further up the wall. “See. This is the same stuff, how it has looked until now.”

“So ?” She said uncomprehendingly.

“Come on lady, you’re supposed to be the smart one. This area is rusted, eaten away by something. There’s this heap of rust on the floor, see.” He explained.

“You’re the tracker.” She shrugged.

“But no alchemist.” He declared. “What could do this ?”

“Forces of nature. Some metals tend to rust.” Angel speculated.

“Why down here and not up there. Same air, same water, same time most likely. I don’t like the look of it. Keep your eyes open and your wits about you.” Cat cautioned.

“What’s the hold up ?” Boss demanded.

The observers jumped almost out of their skins.

“Don’t sneak up on people like that.” Angel spoke, her throat attacking her on every syllable.

“Why the secret whisperings ?” Boss demanded.

“I’m not whispering !” She stated through gritted teeth.

“You don’t want us to shout, do you, and bring a thousand monsters rushing out at us ?” Cat spoke deliberately loudly.

“I mean what gives, that’s all. Please, if you notice anything share it with us.” Boss attempted to soothe their feelings.

“Rust.” Cat hissed. “Rot and decay, just like in that cranium of yours.” He flicked the top of Boss’s helmet. “Just be careful, soldier boy, that’s all.”

“What ?” Boss bemused.

“Go away.” Angel pleaded. “Give us a minute.”

“Anything you say.” Boss agreed.

“Aren’t I allowed to talk to anyone now ?” She complained.

“I haven’t ... I didn’t Oh , what’s the use.... Do what you like, woman, it’s all the same to me.” He shook his head and stomped off.

Angel went to walk off too but Cat stopped her. He pinned her shoulder to the wall.

“Wait a minute. I have something to say.” He began

“Well.” She challenged, quietly.

“Look, I know I come on like a jerk but I don’t mean to. All of that macho bullshit. It’s the company I was brought up in and it’s all talk anyway. I have no more designs on your body than any of these prudes around here. I’m just more open and honest about it is all.”

He explained. He didn’t know why. He had never cared to make excuses to anyone before.

“Well thanks, Cat. That makes me feel a whole lot ...” She paused because her throat hurt terribly and she needed to try and swallow. “Ouch.... A whole lot more insecure around here.... Knowing that all men are jerks.... Just like you.”

“I was trying to apologise.” Cat said, letting her go.

“Accepted ... I’ll believe you when you ... don’t say... Stop making stupid comments.” She fought the words out and not only because of her throat.

“I’ll do what I can, but I can’t promise anything.” He said, walking away.

“Oh great ! That’s just what I need. He’s pretending to be nice to me too now. Why am I so confused ?” She thought to herself.

“There’s something weird about this place. I’m certain of it. Perhaps it’s that damned dragon attacking our minds.” She speculated.

For his part Cat’s thoughts were clearer.

“Never again will I go away with a party with women in it. Especially not a group of several men with one woman. It’s a recipe for disaster. She’s not even that good looking. Why am I interested in her at all ? Just because she’s the only piece of tail in twenty miles. Or maybe because she’s off limits. That’s it, forbidden fruit. If she were available I would have been used to her by now. I’d be taking her for granted, offering to share her around with the rest. ‘Go on Shorty give her a tumble.’ I would say ,nonchalantly. You keep your eyes off of her Shorty or I’ll slit your throat. I’ll have you yet, you bitch. I swear I will.”

The situation was complicated by the intimacy of their lives here. None could make the slightest movement but the rest were right there. There was no privacy. They could not afford to wander off alone. The caverns were much too dangerous for that. It was especially a problem for Angel, being the only female. She had to have the men stand guard over her while she did her ablutions. They all saw her various body parts exposed while Preach worked his healing upon her. She noticed them looking at her strangely and it unnerved her. Suppose they conspired to rape and murder her ?

How well did she know these men really ? How far could she trust them ? Why had she ever embarked upon this stupid adventure?

When they stopped for a meal, which by the way food, water and light were getting scarce adding to the tension, Angel approached Preach. She thought of him as pristine, being a priest he was supposed to be above that sort of thing. The one least likely to hit on her. So she felt relatively more comfortable with him. Which was strange because he was the most unnerving of people.

“I need to talk, Preach.” She confided.

Her throat was no longer a bed of sharp daggers. It had settled down to a dull edge. Her squeak had migrated to a husky growl.

“Your new voice suits you.” He complimented.

‘Ouch’ She thought. ‘Et tu Preach ?’

“Don’t suck up to me. I can’t stand all these comments and compliments” She began. “That’s part of the problem.”

“What, you want me to insult you ?” Preach asked blandly.

She looked around at the others. She saw, or perhaps imagined, four pairs of eyes glaring jealously. Four young, virile men lusting after her body.

“Look at them.” She stated. “They’re going to start fighting over me next.”

“I admit it’s possible.” Preach allowed.

She was shaken up inside to hear him say that. If he felt it too, then it was more than her imagination at work here.

“What can we do about it ?” She asked.

“By we, you mean you and I, or all of us ?” He enquired.

“Wait a minute, you’re not interested in me too are you ?” She suspected.

Preach weighed his words, not wishing to add to her problems. But then, he was only spemen and had problems of his own.

“I would not lie to you.” He said cautiously. In point of fact he would lie to her if it served his purpose. He didn’t have to tell her that.

“What’s that supposed to mean ?” She said in a voice like hot chocolate or liquid honey.

“You are a very interesting woman.” He observed.

“I’m not the prize in some stupid contest.” She complained.

“I never said you were.” Preach disclaimed.

“Aren’t priests supposed to learn how to advise people. I mean.

Don’t people go to priests for advice all the time?” Angel demanded.

“I am but a young acolyte. I have been a priest for all of one week. As far as giving advice goes, I’m afraid you are my first customer.”

He confessed.

“Oh great ! I’m talking to a bloody amateur.” She complained.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, my dear, we are all amateurs here.”

He assured her.

“You really know how to cheer a girl up, don’t you.” She commented.

“I guess it’s a gift.” He quipped.

“Now that I’d expect to hear from Shorty.” She appraised.

“Don’t be insulting.” He feigned outrage.

“Fine. I can see I’ll get no help from you.” She stormed off.

“Your feelings are your feelings.” He shouted after her. “Only you can deal with them.”

“Men !” She shouted “I hate you all.” As loudly as her wretched voice allowed.

“What’s eating her ?” Shorty asked.

“No one.” Said Cat. “That’s her trouble.”

“Don’t go wandering off.” Boss called after her. “You’ll get yourself killed .”

“Fat lot you care.” She said, finding herself unable to shout.

RUST MONSTER

She didn’t know how far she had walked. She didn’t much care. Ahead she saw a dark shape against the green glow of the cavern wall.

She heard a shuffling sound as it moved and a snuffling sound of its breathing. It was the strangest looking beast she had ever beheld.

In contour a little like a portly dragon. It had a long tail with a club like end and a head which bore two long, slender antennae. It stretched up against the tunnel wall. The tips of its antennae searched out slender veins of metallic ores or , where possible, pure metals .

She approached within twenty metres. It took no notice. She saw it drop to the tunnel floor. It’s antennae touched a streak of bright metallic hue. The metal fell away as a cloud of rust, painting the tunnel floor a reddish brown.

“It feeds on metals.” She thought.

It turned near sightless eyes upon her. It shuffled and snuffled towards her. It showed her no particular interest as it corroded a large deposit of metal, nearby, almost instantly. So powerful an effect.

Then she thought of her companions in their metal armour. She thought of them stripped of their weapons and armour. It would

make them as vulnerable and easy to wound as she was. She had to warn them. This creature was as great a threat as a hundred goblins.

She turned to leave, but too late. It had noticed her, discovered something interesting about her. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her. Yet it closed upon her rapidly. It was amazingly fast on its stumpy, little legs. It overtook her and turned. She stopped but could not get away in time.

She swatted it with her staff, to no avail. Its hide was tough and leathery and its head was hard with solid bone.

She thought it might kill her. She should not have wandered off on her own. It reached out with both of its appendages and touched the blade of her dagger. The one that she kept on her for emergencies but never used for anything except for eating with.

The weapon she would most likely do more damage to herself with than an opponent if she should try to attack anything with it.

In an instant the dagger rusted to a fine powdery dust, which drifted gently to the floor. All that remained was the ebony shell of the hilt. It clattered to the ground.

Next the creature touched her belt buckle, something she took for granted and never considered to be under threat. It too was destroyed. Her belt slid away to the ground.

“Stop it !” She whispered, harshly. “Go away.”

She poked at the beast. Her robe billowed out in a shapeless cloud, admitting a blizzard of cold air to attack her breasts and stomach.

Her strongest lunge daunted the creature not a jot.

“I have nothing else you can destroy now.” She gloated silently.

“Help !” She cried , her shout no louder than a normal speaking voice.

Its antennae seemed to be searching her further. They wandered over her body, like a clumsy, teenage boyfriend’s hands.

“That tickles. Don’t do that.” She squirmed.

Its attacks seemed to do her no harm. She was relieved that it was not going to kill her. She decided not to make any further attacks on the creature. Then it struck again. On the brooch which fastened her robe.

“You idiot !” She berated herself. “You overlook such obvious things. What else is metal ? Stupid girl !”

Now her robe was really in danger of falling off on her every movement. This was beyond a joke and the joke was on her. She had nothing to replace this invaluable item, this essential piece of

costumery. At this rate she would spend the next week as good as naked to the prying eyes of five, sex hungry men.

“Leave me alone.” She beat on the pest as savagely as she could. It ignored her attacks completely.

The antennae were too thin and pliable to be damaged by her staff. They merely bent out of the way. Its eyes were too small and well set back in its head to take damage from her attempts to poke her staff into them. It seemed to have hardly any mouth at all to attack in that region.

“What does it want now ?” She wondered. “Buckles ? Oh no!”

She realised that it could render her backpack completely useless.

“I must get away from this thing, while I have something left.”

One of its antennae touched a buckle. She noticed that it had no effect. It was struggling to touch the small target with both antennae at once.

“I have coins on me too.” She further considered and then worst of all. “My spellbook !” She realised finally. It was in a metal bound cover. It would fall apart.

“Can’t fight this thing. No good to run. I don’t want to lead it to the others and render them defenceless.” She reasoned.

“What to do ? Climb. Get up high, out of its reach.”

It was lifting its head, trying to reach behind her with its appendages.

“That’s it , you pest, you die !” She decreed.

She struck it as hard as she could underneath, between its front legs. She thought she had damaged it, but it reacted not at all.

Undaunted it continued its intimate searching of her.

“I’ll move over near the wall and find a large deposit of metal to distract it while I slip away.” She plotted.

Now one of its antennae was inside her backpack, probing around. After searching for what seemed an eternity, with it probing and fondling her belongings, finally she found a large metallic streak in the cavern wall. It focused its attention upon this rich source of food and she was able to slip away. She had to hold her robe closed as she picked her way back to the others. Then she began to have second thoughts about it.

If they went in, swords flashing, armour glinting, swords rusting, armour crumbling, they would become disarmed and unprotected.

Then she would be disarmed and unprotected. None of them would survive the perils of the underearth . She could not allow that to happen. Must not, would not. She must go back and defeat this monster alone. She moved back a little way. Wrapped her backpack in her robe, which would only trip her up in battle in its

present state, and padded back to the monster's demesne alone and naked, carrying only her wooden staff.

To her disappointment it was not in the tunnel. She searched further up the passage until she came to the mouth of a cave. The cave mouth was littered with thick rust. Inside she could hear heavy breathing. She looked in. The creature was alone and asleep, resting after its feast, she presumed.

She walked in and smashed the thing, mercilessly, with her staff. It awoke. She beat at it for several minutes before she hit it hard enough, in what she considered to be a vulnerable spot, and actually felt that she had done some damage. She kept on attacking with all her might, until she was lathered in sweat and totally exhausted.

"You idiot." She thought. "Use your spell."

She stopped her tirade. Rested from her barrage and worked the spell. The only one she could learn for the day. It should do considerable damage even to this creature. The monster could only try to push her out of its lair while she performed the spell. Once the spell was cast Angel had just one minute in which to touch the beast before the magical energy produced drained away from her uselessly.

"It should not be too difficult to do." She thought, but she was wrong.

During her attacks with the staff the creature had tried to ward off her blows with its antennae with some success. She found it much more successful at blocking her attacks with her bare hands. She tried again and again to hit the thing but it easily turned her blows aside. She had to touch with her hands to be effective. If she tried to touch its antennae they moved out of the way too quickly. If she tried to touch anywhere else they pushed her arms, quickly turning her blows aside. The beast was too quick and manoeuvrable to allow her to outflank it.

She continued her attempts with dogged determination until she was quite certain that the spell must have worn off. Then she continued for a while longer, just to be completely sure. It was no use. The spell was wasted. Resignedly, she took up her staff once more.

"Angel!" She heard her name called. Nickname that is.

"Oh no!" She was devastated. "Go away!" She shouted, but her shout was not loud enough to carry outside the confines of the creature's cavernous bedroom.

The creature turned abruptly, sensing a veritable feast of tasty metal, and raced for the exit. She desperately gave it a parting shot.

She felt the end of her staff sink a little into its more tender underside.

The beast was apparently unstoppable. It did not pause in its onward rush. Unlike Angel it remained fresh after their ten minute long duel.

Boss saw the beast charging towards him. He took a rapid but ineffective strike at it.

It struck his chain mail armour with both of its antennae. The armour dissolved into a pile of powder.

“Get out of here, all of you.” Angel shouted, as she raced out of the cavern. Her soft words were lost in the commotion of battle.

The hungry metal tyrant pushed past Boss and one antenna touched Shorty’s armour.

Everyone was chopping and batting at the beast but to no avail.

It remained unharmed by their blows.

Shorty swatted its second antenna and avoided its corrosive attack.

It struck Shorty’s armour several times but never with both antennae together.

Boss stopped trying to chop at the creature. He withdrew, grabbed Angel’s robe and thrust it at her.

“Put this on.” He offered.

“I can’t fight with that hanging loose.” She protested.

“I don’t care. Then don’t fight. Just put it on.” He insisted.

“Alright.” She huffed. “Don’t have a fit !” She didn’t see what the fuss was about. In the underglow all they could hope to see was a silhouette anyway, and they were far too busy fighting even for that.

Meanwhile Shorty thrust his blade home. The only one with the strength to penetrate the beast’s thick hide. The blade sank deeply into the creature, which collapsed in a heap. The sword did not turn into rust as Angel had apprehended. The corrosive power of the monster was in its antennae only.

“What on spem where you doing ?” Boss demanded.

“I was trying to kill the thing. To stop it from destroying all our equipment. What did it look like I was doing ?” Angel challenged.

Boss fell strangely silent.

“This robe is a nuisance now, it won’t close. I lost my belt buckle and my clasp. When I saw what the beast could do I tried to stop it from getting to you. Now look at you. Your armour is totalled. Why’d you have to show up ?”

She was flustered and busily fighting with her robe, trying to get it to stay in place.

“You shouldn’t have tried to tackle it alone. What if it had been dangerous ?” He chided.

“It was dangerous to you. You have no armour now and it damn nigh took Shorty’s as well.” She pointed out.

“I don’t want you taking risks like that.” He insisted.

“Why not ? I’m part of the team aren’t I ?” She challenged.

“Because I care about you !” He said vehemently. “Em ... Like I care about all of us.” He corrected himself.

“What was I supposed to do ?” She said either not noticing or ignoring his last remarks.

“You should have come back and told us. We would have worked something out. Cat has leather armour. The two of you could have handled it. Or we could have left our armour and all attacked it together. That’s how a team works, together. Together we are strong.” He asserted.

“I suppose.” She conceded. “I’m sure I nearly had it. I’d been beating on it for bloody ages.”

“You are a remarkable and very brave woman.” Boss stated.

“Listen people.” He addressed them all. “I don’t want anyone wandering off and trying to handle situations on their own. Our best chance is if we stay together and work together as a team. Report anything out of the ordinary to everyone immediately. Any objections?”

Everyone was silent. There was a pregnant pause in which the only sound was the occasional drip of water.

“Let’s rest here shall we ?” Said Cat. “Angel looks exhausted.”

She was not generally a physical person and her illness along with ten minutes of attacking the monster had completely drained her.

Now that she was cooling down her overworked muscles had begun to seize up and her body was wracked with aches and pains. Still she looked daggers at Cat for his apparent consideration. She couldn’t help wondering what he was up to.

Everyone was awkward as they sat silently eating. She caught them looking at her strangely, or so she thought, even more strangely than before. She winced inside when Cat approached her. He sat beside her and spoke in a low voice.

“That was quite a show you put on just now.”

She fought to hold her emotions down, gritted her teeth and decided not to respond. She hardly had the energy left for a proper riposte.

“I’d just like to say , I think you have nice tits.” He said, nonchalantly.

She blushed, her head cast down, her hair falling over her face. She said nothing. After a few moments of awkward silence Cat leaned closer and whispered.

“I’m not really interested in you, but that’s no reason why we couldn’t have some fun. If you know what I mean.”

She thought for a while not knowing what to say.

“I’m afraid I will regretfully have to decline your kind offer.” She said, attempting to sound it diplomatically.

“Why ?” He Queried.

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea.” She replied “For people in our situation to become involved, romantically or otherwise.”

“That’s fair enough.” Cat hissed. “Now you just remember that. Sauce for the goose, they say, is sauce for the gander.”

“What do you mean ?” She puzzled.

“You know what I mean.” He insisted. “Or if you don’t yet, you’ll work it out. You’re a pretty bright girl.”

With that he stood and walked back to his former seat.

She looked up to see the others eyeing them suspiciously.

Later , while they were packing to leave, Boss approached her.

“What did Cat say to you before ?” He asked.

“Nothing !” She said, rather too brusquely.

“If he bothers you, just let me know and I’ll have a few sharp words with him, make him think twice about doing it again.” He proposed.

“Thanks, but I can take care of myself.” She replied.

“Listen. I’m sorry about making a fuss before, I…” He began.

She put her finger to his lips.

“No apologies necessary.” She claimed. “I don’t know what you must think of me.”

“I think you are very intelligent and brave. Why should modesty matter when you’re fighting for your life. What I did was stupid. I just couldn’t bear the thought of the others.”

Again she silenced him. This time with a look.

“Don’t talk like that. Don’t even think it. We can’t afford to get involved. Things are tense enough around here as it is.”

“Maybe if we tell them we’re an item it will end all the rivalries.”

He suggested, purely to take the pressure off of her, of course.

“I don’t think so.” She replied. “I don’t want you guys fighting over me. And why ? Only because I’m the only woman available. If we were back in town none of you would give me a second look.”

“I would.” He said, fervently.

“No.” She said. “Don’t lie to yourself, or to me.”

And she walked away.

They were ready to leave now.

“Listen up.” Said Boss “We are heavens know how far underground and we have just two days food and water left. If we don’t find food or drinkable water soon we shall have to start back. Anyone disagree?”

“I am sure that My Lord will provide.” Preach supposed.

“What lord ?” Cat challenged. “Why should your god give a tinker’s curse for me ?”

“Then your lord, not mine. “ Preach countered.

Cat laughed loudly. “I don’t think so.” He surmised.

“What god do you follow ?” Preach asked. It was not a question often asked of people. Generally only priests discuss religion.

“What’s it matter. Most follow some god or other. Yet an awful lot of people die just the same.” Cat argued.

“Cat’s right .” Angel put in. “No god guarantees protection. If we act like fools we’ll get what we deserve. The gods themselves have decreed this to be so.”

“Then let’s start back now.” Shorty proposed.

“We need to vote on it.” Said Boss. “Who’s for turning back ?”

They voted to turn back. Though Angel and Red suggested that they look for food and water first. They decided to strike out for the surface right away.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WAY BACK

After travelling for some time they were beginning to doubt their direction.

“Are you sure we came this way ?” Cat called.

“No. We’re not.” Shorty concurred.

“We can’t have gone wrong.” Preach hoped. “We followed the broadest way all the way in. So we must follow the broadest way all the way out.”

“These places can be deceptive.” Angel pointed out.

They decided to continue in their present course, for the want of a better alternative, and to trust to providence. Their course to this point had been tortuous. They must have passed thousands of side tunnels and junctions.

SHRIEKERS

Soon they came to a place where there were several strange mushrooms hanging from the roof. They obviously hadn’t come this way before.

Boss approached carefully. They had learned from things dropping from the roof previously. Nothing untoward happened.

Shorty approached. "Maybe edible." He said wistfully.

Suddenly the air was filled with the most ear piercing shrieking.

"Move !" Preach shouted, but his loudest voice was inaudible in that din. He bolted forwards, grabbing Shorty by the arm and attempting to drag him with him. At first Shorty resisted. Then he recognised Preach's intentions. The others followed. Fifty feet up the corridor the noise seemed slightly less. Then it stopped, as abruptly as it had started.

"Must be those mushroom things." Boss said, loudly because of the ringing in his ears. The siren sound started up again.

The companions hurried on a little further. The wailing didn't keep up for long.

GIANT SPIDER

The wailing didn't keep up for long. They were still moving precipitously when Boss came to an abrupt halt, signalling wildly.

"What ?" Shorty asked, in his version of a whisper.

"Sh !" Boss hissed. "What's that ?"

He pointed to a thin strand of light glinting ahead of them.

"What ?" Shorty asked again, peering intently.

Boss described a line with his finger.

"A web or something." Shorty saw at last.

Boss nodded. After further inspection they noticed a few other sundry strands.

"I think we're meant to rush away from the noise makers and right into those." Boss pointed out. "Some sort of trap, or warning."

"Whatever it is it expects us soon, unless it's totally deaf." Shorty appraised.

"So what do we do ?" Boss asked.

"Let's see what it is. Sort of pull on its strings. Want to see my spell to summon monsters ?" Shorty joked.

"Sounds too dangerous to me." Boss reasoned. "Maybe we could dodge between the strands ."

"And if one of us tripped one , we wouldn't know which one of us would get attacked. Angel and you are unprotected. Better if Red and I face whatever it is. You can be close by in case we need you."

"We should discuss it with the others." Boss suggested.

They withdrew a little way off and informed their comrades of the situation.

“Some creatures don’t like flame.” Preach suggested. “perhaps we should light a torch.”

“I say we try to sneak past.” Angel preferred. “Shorty first. Red can cover him with a bow and Preach can have a torch ready in case ordinary weapons don’t work.”

“Why shouldn’t they ?” Shorty asked.

“I’ve heard of strange creatures that can’t be hurt by swords.”

Angel pointed out.

“I’ve yet to meet such a beast.” Shorty scoffed, drawing his blade.

“Old wives tales. I doubt that they can be true.”

“Your confidence in your blade is misplaced.” Preach spoke. “In my training as a cleric I too was warned of such beasts. But do not worry, they are supposed to be the denizens of Hell.”

“We should rest first. I may be able to relearn a spell that could help.” Angel offered.

“The one that failed to kill the metal eater.” Cat snided.

“The one that freed me from the Giant Lobster .” Shorty countered.

“We can wait a while.” Boss decided “But a little further from here.”

When all was prepared Shorty stepped gingerly forwards. He stepped straight into a line of wire, despite all precautions. The stuff was extremely tough for its thinness and very sticky. He attempted to swat at the strand with his sword but was unable to pick its exact course. He pulled himself backwards and released its grip with shear strength. A dark shape darted towards him. Boss and Cat hastily let arrows fly. Too hastily, they missed their mark. It moved rapidly towards Shorty. Red’s arrow was slower in coming as he aimed with the cool precision of an experienced hunter.

It struck through the spider’s bloated, three foot diameter abdomen

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yet the creature did not falter. It continued towards Shorty, committed to its course.

Angel’s heart jumped to her mouth as the noisome beast reared to bear down on Shorty, showing its deadly fangs. In the instant before it struck Shorty’s sword flashed upwards. The spider’s downward strike impaled it upon the blade. It stopped , inches short of a fatal blow. A green ooze bubbled from the wound. Shorty extricated himself from the remains of the creature. No more irksome monster ever lived. It took three of them to turn the spider over and prize free Shorty’s sword and Red’s arrow.

“See.” Said Shorty, gloating. “Everything falls to the sword.”

“I hope you’re right.” Angel commented.

“Arrows help too.” Said Red.

“Spells help too.” Angel whispered to herself.

“I’ll have a devil of a job to clean this thing.” Shorty complained.

“Lend us a knife, somebody.” Angel asked.

“What for ?” Asked Cat.

“Souvenirs.” She said, impishly.

“Bring it back clean.” Cat warned.

“Of course.” She assured . She began prizing out the spider’s eyes.

“That’s a bit ghoulish isn’t it ?” Shorty scalded.

“Part of being a mage.” Angel excused. She cut off its fangs, collected a vial full of its rancid blood and began cutting further into its mouthparts.

“What are you looking for ?” Preach asked.

“Poison glands.” She said, unflinchingly.

Cat’s ears pricked up. “Can I have them ?” He pleaded.

“For a price.” She bartered.

“It’s my knife.” Cat stated blandly.

“Then you cut them out.” Angel challenged.

Cat considered the possibilities, broken poison sacks ,him dying, that sort of thing.

“It’s my kill.” Said Shorty. “If there’s any profit to be made it should be mine.”

“It’s my idea to collect them. I’m taking the risk of being poisoned.” Angel countered. “You would have left them here to rot.”

“Hey I shared that kill.” Red put in, matter of factly.

“Who asked you to ?” Shorty rebutted.

“Fine. Next time we can leave you to it.” Said Red, tongue in cheek.

“Wait a minute.” Boss interjected. “Firstly, I don’t think you should mess with that thing at all Angel. It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s my life.” She pointed out.

“It’s a life we all value.” Said Boss, unhesitatingly.

“Some more than others, apparently.” Cat commented.

“Secondly.” Said Boss. “We shouldn’t be arguing about treasure of any kind. You didn’t face that thing alone Shorty. We all would have put our lives on the line to keep you alive. We shared the risk, we share the spoils, equally. If we don’t start working together we’ll die down here. I say we vote if we want to collect this stuff or not. If we do we share the benefits, equally.”

“Same goes for any treasure.” Shorty added.

They voted and only Cat came out for extracting the poison.

“What happened to you, Angel.” Cat complained. “It was your idea in the first place.”

“I see the wisdom of leaving it alone.” She decided. “I don’t see how we could share it anyway.”

“Sell it and share the money.” Cat suggested. “Or give it to me and I assure you I will use it to our combined benefit.”

“I wouldn’t want to work with a poisoner anyway.” Shorty stated.

“You kill things. What’s the difference how you do it ?” Cat demanded.

“That’s an argument we’d better not get into.” Red put in.

“We’ve decided.” Boss spoke. “The party doesn’t want to risk it. If anyone wants it for themselves, it is no longer party treasure, but they have to take it themselves.”

“Think on it, carefully.” Angel said, ominously. “If you get so much as a smear of it on your skin you could die, after a week of writhing in agony.”

“Writhing in agony eh.” Said Shorty. “A little writhing in agony never hurt anybody, did it ?”

“Grow up Shorty.” Cat sniped.

“If it helps anyone to know, I was thinking of the stuff as a spell component, not to use as poison.” Angel excused.

“I remember the last week I spent writhing in agony. Best time I ever had in my life.” So Shorty revealed, for the first time, his talent for out and out lying, with the tallest tale since the last one.

“I was held in the grip of this giant octopus, you see and...”

Further along the way they stopped for a short, none exploring break.

“Here.” Said Boss. “You can borrow my belt.”

“Why ?” Angel asked.

“To keep you’re robe in place. The men find it distracting.” He said ,
clumsily.

“The men do, do they?” She interrogated. “They’re going to have to get used to it then aren’t they.”

“Take it.” He said, insistently.

“And what are you going to do with your sword ?” She asked.

“I can carry it.” He said.

“I can cut off a piece of rope. I’ll make do with that. I promise you I’ll try not to embarrass you anymore, OK !” She said , testily.

“And, incidentally, I need to go again, so post a guard.”

“Fine.” He said. “You can do it here. We’re about to leave anyway.”

Toilet was a problem, since she had to find a niche in which to secrete herself but could not risk wandering of in search of true privacy. They would post guards in front and behind but not too far

away. She was hoping she wouldn't start to bleed while they were down here. That would really be a nuisance.

They trudged on from tunnel to tunnel, cavern to cavern, ignoring numerous smaller, side passages and difficult climbs and chasms. It had been a long time since Preach had seen anything reminiscent of his dreams.

They were beginning to lose their high spirits in the constant dim light and growing awareness of their short supplies.

"You know, I don't reckon this god of yours is going to let us find a way back." Cat declared, matter of factly. "That's the way gods work. They push people around."

"I should never have turned from the true path." Preach moaned. "I have shown myself unworthy and am being punished."

"This way is as good as any." Said Boss, trying to keep spirits up. They had grown unwary. Once a new cavern would have invited caution. Now it was just one of many. Trudging on mile after weary mile, it had been a long time since anything had happened to put them on their guard. No one can remain vigilant constantly.

STIRGES

Flashing through the still air in that pale green glow came winged beasts, thirsting for blood. Any kind of blood would satisfy their, long unquenched, thirst. Winging swiftly, they dived without warning.

One flew into Cat, stuck its thin, tube like mouth into leather armour, withdrew and took off again. A second alighted upon Angel's back, stuck its proboscis into her pale, slender neck and began to suck away her life's blood greedily. Its contracted stomach shivered with anticipation of the feast to come and pulsed in waves of gleeful suction.

Angel felt a weight on her back and a spot on her neck suddenly numbed. The absence of feeling was more terrible than any pain that she had ever felt.

Preach was astonished when a creature suddenly found bare flesh on his throat and its feeding tube plunged deeply into him. A flutter of powerful wings blurred his vision.

Boss fell prey to a third of the loathsome, fly like creatures. Its abdomen began pumping blood from his wound.

The fourth beast found its mark on Red, despite his proliferation of armour.

Angel threw herself on the ground, in the hope of squashing the thing. It was larger and tougher than she anticipated and proved to be lightning quick in response. As if it expected this move, it beat

its wings and twisted out of the way. Angel fell heavily on her back and succeeded in winding herself.

Boss chopped at his attacker, though it was almost too intimately attached to secure a hit upon. In a neat downward stroke he cut through it from face to tail, almost taking off his own nose with it. The proboscis sticking out from his neck spouted with a flow of his blood. The legs still clung to the links of his chain mail, bearing a small portion of its body. The bulk of the creature lay on the floor, atop its, still twitching, wings.

Shorty heard Angel fall. He turned, strode up and skewered the pest as it fluttered beside her. Its proboscis, beneath her, stopped its throbbing attack. Blood still flowed out of her of its own power. Preach swatted ineffectively at his attacker. Cat turned and risked a swipe at the beast. His stroke hit hard through the evil thing and clanged against Preach's chain mail before bouncing down towards the floor. Cat had come dangerously close to chopping into his comrade.

Red's sword flashed and the monster fell away from him, severed through its mouthpiece and legs. He chopped the remains in half as it fell through the air. Wings beating, involuntarily, kept it aloft for a few seconds more, until Red chopped it again, quartering it neatly.

Preach looked down at the marks of Cat's swordsmanship on his chain mail, then at the insect's tube, pouring forth blood. His blood.

"Stop up these tubes !" He shouted, panickily , placing his thumb over the end of his own. "Cat . Remove this thing from me."

"Sure." Said Cat , coldly , pulling out his dagger.

"Be careful ! Be careful !" Preach blustered.

"Keep still then." Cat cautioned. "You want me to slit your throat, do you ? I must admit, it's a tempting prospect sometimes."

Cat neatly extricated the proboscis from Preach's throat. Preach reached for a, thrice washed, bandage.

"Now hold this tight for a few minutes. Don't anybody else do anything until I get to you. Block the tubes and leave them where they are. You don't want to bleed to death, do you ?"

"Calm down, Preach." Cat advised. "Why don't you sit down, before you fall down."

"Yes, that's a good idea. Is everyone else alright ?" Preach asked, hastily.

Boss had one hand stopping the tube in his own neck. He offered the other hand to Angel, to help her up. She was too giddy and groggy to even think about refusing. A stream of blood flowed from the tube in her neck , unabated.

Once she was seated Boss sat in front of her. He took hold of the tube protruding from her and stopped its flow of red life.

“Here.” He said. “We can help each other. Hold this.”

He offered her his funnel to hold. She was just barely able to resist fainting. With his , now free hand he gripped her and held her steady.

“Now don’t pass out on me, you understand ? We depend on each other for survival and for strength.” He chatted to her continuously , saying anything, to keep her awake.

Shorty went to help Red.

“I’ll hold this. You sit quiet ‘till Preach gets here.” He offered.

“I think I’m OK.” Red protested.

“Still, best be sure.” Shorty insisted. “It doesn’t take long to bleed to death, so I’m told. “

“That’s a comforting thought, Shorty.” Red observed.

“Yeah , I’m always this cheerful.” Shorty replied.

Half an hour later Preach had attended their wounds , they had rested a little and they moved on, still a little weak from loss of blood.

They moved more slowly now. Preach had decided to try to forage for food among this strange selection of phosphorescent plants and large mushrooms, which in some places were scarce and in others formed thick forests, littering the various surfaces of the caverns.

Red tried some hunting, collecting a few of the various small animals, which fluttered and scampered about the caves.

During the course of the day they gathered a reasonable amount of material. They could not be sure of the edible qualities of these. Someone had to be the first to test each kind of ‘food’ available. Cautiously each of them sampled a very small amount of one different item. They were lucky. Only Red became violently ill, after trying the wrong kind of mushroom. He was fine a few hours later.

Angel was still quite severely disadvantaged by the disease that she had picked up from the rat bite. Preach assessed that she was on the mend and should be fine within a few days.

Only the gods knew how long they had been down there now and how long they would have to endure this gruelling obstacle course.

TROGLODYTES

They had given up all hope of going back the way they came. They continued on in the hope that one of the many channels would bring them back to the surface.

Two reptilian bipeds leapt out at them. One stepped swiftly in front of Boss and smashed him with a clawed hand. A second bashed into Red from behind.

Suddenly the air was filled with the most amazingly repugnant odour. Boss, Shorty, Cat and Red all gagged and retched, so violently that they were unable to do anything else, even defend themselves.

While the others made ineffectual attempts to attack only Angel and Preach remained relatively unaffected by the smell. Preach's aim missed. Angel, however intoned her ancient ritual of magic, daintily stepped towards the creature, which was attacking Red, and laid her hands upon it. There was a dance of blue sparks, a crackling sound and a faint smell of ozone. The beast fell to the floor, dead, a small burn mark in its scales in two places, one showing where Angel had touched it and the other where the electricity had gone to ground.

Meanwhile, Red had taken a second raking from the creature's claws and Boss had been hit again and again. The attacker at the front then turned its attention towards Preach, who also took a hit. Boss fought his sickness. He was able to fight it back, momentarily.

He struck out. His sword bit into his opponent. The others, also partially recovered, moved in. Now the beast was completely surrounded, its wild claws and gnashing jaws flailing wildly in a desperate attempt to defend itself from all sides. It proved able to move with incredible speed.

Shorty stabbed at the beast, burying his sword home and thrusting deeply into the creature. The monster fell dead. The adventurers moved some distance away from the stench to bind wounds, clean up, rest and eat.

The others looked upon Angel with a new respect. They had all seen, for the first time, the devastating efficiency of magic well caste.

They began to realise just how dangerous mages in general, and this woman in particular, could be. As in many cases in life nothing was said on the matter. So many important issues are rarely touched upon.

Angel, after resting, relearned her only attacking spell, which was incidentally the only spell she could fit into her memory at one time. She had not learned any other of her spells since beginning the quest. She wondered if she might not lose the ability to learn them at all.

It seemed hardly any time before they were off again. They figured the sooner they were out of the underground the safer they would be.

Sleeping was difficult down here and fatigue from that, as well of the rigours of the day, was beginning to tell upon them all.

Their separate chores had to be done every day. Angel learned spells. Preach prayed. The warriors did their weapon drills, silently now, weapons swinging without contacting anything, to avoid attracting unwanted attention.

These things attended to they were soon on their way again.

They came to a large chamber. In its centre was a large stone block. At the heart of the block sat a ball of metal six inches in diameter.

“The Orb !” Preach whispered, incredulously, and stared in awe.

“Let’s approach this carefully. I’m getting wary of being jumped out at.”

“You’re right, Preach. I’ll head forwards and watch the front.

Shorty, to the right. Cat, on the left. Red, take the rear. Preach and Angel, check out the platform. Keep in sight of one another.”

Boss organised, drawing upon his time in military service.

They moved to the suggested positions. The chamber was large and had several entrances, some of which were only three feet tall, others were up to twenty feet high.

SPRIGAN

As Preach and Angel moved towards the stone table, a very large creature, twelve feet tall, muscular and wearing chain mail armour, stepped into the chamber ahead of Boss. It let out a challenging roar and charged at him. Its only weapons were its hands.

It hit Boss, hard and he strained to keep from crumpling. His own attack was swept aside. He felt like a child brandishing a wooden practise sword. A second hit sent Boss reeling. He barely managed to wobble back onto his feet.

“Stay down.” Preach advised, pushing him back to the ground.

The priest judged that, in his unarmoured state, another good hit would kill Boss outright. As far as the acolyte knew there was no remedy for death.

Angel completed the casting of her *shocking grasp* spell. She moved forwards and touched the giant. She felt the tingle of power coursing through her, the most exquisite feeling she had encountered in her life so far. She felt the electrical impulse drain from her spell and from her body, leaving her empty and

exhausted. The creature's, iron clad, leg jumped involuntarily but the monster seemed to just shrug off the effects of the spell. It was far too tough to be killed so easily.

Red, from across the cavern had already released one arrow. It had glanced harmlessly off of the enemy's thick armour. The archer was aiming at a rapidly moving dark shape in a whirling dance of figures by the light of the greenglow alone. His second shot fared no better, striking only just above the line of Shorty's head. It did not penetrate the foe at all. The others were all around the giant, trying to attack, except for Cat, who was nowhere to be seen, as usual, from Red's perspective.

Now the giant, in outrage, hit Angel. Her legs turned to jelly. She fell to the floor.

Arrow after arrow Red fired at the Giant, none penetrated its excellent armour.

Shorty, finally, caused the enemy some slight inconvenience, raising a spot of blood to the surface of its ironbound form. Shorty and Preach faced the creature, trading stroke for counterstroke.

Red, from sixty feet behind, sent more arrows flying towards it. Angel and Boss lay dazed and in pain, possibly bleeding to death from internal bleeding.

Cat was off somewhere doing something, we presume.

Shorty chopped into it again, adding a new blood stain to its outfit. It hit Preach and he staggered a few steps backwards.

Another arrow bounced off of it ineffectually.

Its heavy fist pounded into Shorty, who was visibly shaken. An arrow stuck into the creature's armour, briefly, and then was shaken off. Shorty stabbed again. Preach beat off the beast's powerful attacks. One of Red's arrows ricocheted off of the target and struck home, embedding itself into Preach's flesh.

The attacker hit Shorty again and he fell, motionless, to the floor. Preach, quickly, rushed over to him and intoned a prayer of healing.

His touch returned Shorty to consciousness, but the tall man was still barely alive.

The giant strode up and gave Preach a powerful whack, knocking him over. Red sent another arrow skittering off its heavy links.

From the height of the platform came a mighty shout.

Cat sprang up, from where he had laid in wait, and jumped onto the enemy's broad back. He thrust his sword, hard, penetrating the giant's armour, with the full power of his momentum. He clung to his foe, around the neck, with his other hand.

Even this blow, however, was not powerful enough to fell the giant.

The monster did not topple, as Cat had hoped that he would. Perhaps the man mountain staggered a little, from Cat's position it was hard to tell.

From in front of the creature, Red took aim once more, still having seen nothing of Cat's activities. He had gone beyond his regrets at choosing to stay back and shoot. He knew this gave him more opportunities to hit. His strategy was correct and should have worked. How could he have counted upon such rotten luck. He could not see Cat hanging on behind the giant's back. He took careful aim. Shot, true to the mark and, once again, the giant's body twisted and the arrow was deflected harmlessly away. The chain links of his armour were so hard, so thick and heavy that only a perfect hit would penetrate to the flesh beneath.

The giant was angrily trying to shake Cat off of his back. Cat hung on, to save himself from grim death. Red summoned every inch of his patience and grim determination. The situation had gone beyond desperation into the realm of the truly critical. He crept forwards, hoping to add just a little more chance of a bull's-eye and a little more power to the shot. Taking an arrow he noticed that only seven more remained. He prayed for the chance to use them. He prayed even more fervently that he would not need to. Cat's situation was so precarious, the man mountain flailing to throw him loose, he could not find purchase to make another attack.

It was all that he could do to avoid falling to his doom. He pictured the giant falling on his back, crushing the life out of the flea that dared to assault him.

For Red another two shots went astray. He was down to six chances.

The creature reached behind him, plucked the hapless Cat from behind his back and flung him heavily to the floor. Cat lay winded for some seconds.

Red's arrow struck and pierced the giant's armour and sank deeply. The beast cried out in pain.

Red nocked another arrow and carefully took aim.

The battle sounds echoing through the cavern had quieted to the low murmur of Preach praying fervently, then even this stopped abruptly.

The creature was about to stomp Cat into the ground.

"Hey!" Red Shouted, as loudly as he could muster. "Back off or you die."

The giant hesitated, momentarily.

Fear motivated Cat and brought him back from his preoccupation with pain. He rolled away from the enemy and into a low, crouching position, like his namesake, ready to strike.

A sinister sneer crossed the lips of the goliath. Perhaps what passed for a smile amongst his kind, perhaps an attempt to hide how greatly he smarted from his accumulated hurts.

“Her cans’t spolich !” He uttered , in a language unfamiliar.

To Preach’s ears it sounded a little like dwarves. He thought he would attempt to communicate in that language.

“Kan jag fa orben , tak. Vi ressa im fred .” He stuttered in pigeon dwarven.

“Tell him if he moves he’s dead.” Red shouted. “ Will you tell him that?”

“It is already said.” Preach told him.

“I can’t hold this damned bow forever .” Red shouted.

The giant asked what he would get out of the deal, to which they answered his life.

His response was to suddenly charge at Red. Perhaps he hoped to take him by surprise, before he could fire the bow. Or perhaps he hoped that his opponent’s first shot would miss, as so many others had done, and was determined that his first shot would be his last. In the Sprigan’s estimation Spemen were weaklings. The few he had faced had fallen down with only one or two hits from his powerful fists.

Red’s arrow took flight on the giant’s first stride and sailed straight at his black heart. The full on hit found a chink between the heavy links of armour and buried itself deeply within the enemy’s flesh.

The giant continued on , thundering towards Red, looking as though it would trample him underfoot. Red hastily plucked up another arrow from its sheath and tried the impossible, to load and fire his bow within a few short beats of his rapidly racing heart, or several giant strides. The heavy creature crashed to the floor a few feet away from its quarry. Its legs had carried it several steps further, before they received the message that it was dead.

Red , hands shaking , took one deep breath to calm himself, nocked the arrow to his bow and stood with the bow in a ready position, loosely cocked , as hunters often do. He surveyed the cavern, straining his eyes into the half-dark for signs of further danger. Another of the inhabitants of this nether realm may appear at any moment and they had at least eight directions to choose from. Red realised that he was the only adventurer left reasonably healthy.

The only one who could still put up a fight, and he was still weak from being recently poisoned by food tasting. He saw that Preach

was able to move and Cat was still coiled up in his ready to strike position. He judged that he could get off one shot at any attacker which emerged. He knew that one shot was unlikely to be enough to fell another of these leviathans.

As he remained watchful of all directions he moved slowly around the cavern seeking used arrows which might still be serviceable.

He found six arrows that were still in reasonable condition.

Preach began the long process of tending everyone's wounds.

After he had seen to them all, including himself as far as he could, Shorty in particular was in a very poor condition.

"I think we can't risk moving him." He counselled .

"I think we can't risk staying here." Boss pointed out. "In this condition, none of us would survive meeting another one of those creatures."

"Where is it ?" Asked Cat , who had been greedily eyeing the orb. On the floor, where the giant had been , was a small , ugly gnome.

"Returned to its true form ." Angel informed him.

"You mean that shrimp gave us all that trouble ?" Cat complained.

"Hang us all for a bunch of suckers."

"Cat, keep nit ." Boss suggested strongly.

"Preach and Red, you'll have to try to move Shorty. I can't manage just now." He felt dizzy and as weak as a kitten. The pain from broken ribs was enormous.

"That's alright Boss. You are seriously injured yourself and should really be resting." Red allowed.

They dragged Shorty to the entrance of the cavern , struggling over his great bulk ,while Cat guarded their retreat. Then Preach went back to the stone table to pick up the orb.

"O mighty AGNI" He invoked. "I pray that we can safely deliver this most holy artefact safely back to the bosom of your church. I pray by your sacred fire and lightning that it is not trapped and that I am worthy to be the instrument of your pleasure. Amen."

He took up the orb and , for a brief instant , fancied that it glowed slightly. He felt a slight warmth and a prickle of static electricity crawled up the back of his hands. The hair on his hands and lower arms danced a jig and then stood straight. He felt an urgent impulse to drop the orb and run away. An impulse he determinedly resisted. The thought scared him, that he held in his hands something powerfully consecrated and sacredly dedicated to his god , ensorcelled and imbued with mighty , mysterious , arcane magics , perhaps even enchanted by the god himself.

Just then another of the giant gnomes stepped into the chamber.

Cat was hiding in the shadows , waiting. He dove upon its back and buried his sword in it up to the hilt . The creature roared with rage.

In a moment of panic, Preach, holding the orb , cried. “Most Holy AGNI, save us !”

In a blinding flash a bolt of lightning flared out from the orb. Just as Cat crashed onto the floor, shaken off of the Gnome’s back , the electrical attack seared through the hapless giant and carried on down the corridor out of sight. There followed thirty tense seconds in which no one could see a thing but the ghost of that brilliant white light playing before their eyes.

A crashing sound was heard. Red had released an arrow with no opportunity to see where it ran. The others were running across the cavern , into battle , and were plunged into a state of light blindness.

When vision returned they saw the small body of the evil gnome burned and twisted , almost beyond recognition , laying in a cloud of rising steam. Cat , miraculously , rose unscathed from the ashes. Preach stood , orb aloft , mouth gaping. Red found another arrow broken beyond repair. “and then there were nine” He recited. Finally , Preach managed to articulate. “All praise Almighty AGNI.” He said , pale and shaking. “ Thank you for your blessings this day and for this display of your greatness. May your power always shine before us .” He carried on grovelling in this vein for quite some time.

When they had all settled down they moved on, or rather back. They travelled only a short distance , wrestling with the weight of Shorty, searching for a safe haven in which to hold up and heal. Luckily they encountered no further difficulties that day and found a suitable blind cavern.

“Water is getting to be a problem.” Preach announced.

After a night of fitful rest the adventurers were sitting in silent contemplation. Preach had used his prayers from the day before. Shorty was barely able to sit up by this time. All were sore and sorry and covered in half healed wounds , more or less recent. They were full of aches and pains , nicks and scratches , bumps and bruises , the most horrible bruises of all being on their egos . Preach had prayed incessantly , to everyone’s annoyance , and generally praised his god , who , lets face it , put them into this condition in the first place. Angel had studied her spell and thought herself pathetic for her inability to wield more than one dweomer at a time. She remembered the immense flood of energy the orb had produced and compared it with her own feeble magical attack , the thought made her quite physically ill.

BATS

There came a gentle twittering, almost too high pitched for spemen ears to catch. Suddenly the air was filled with bats. They had bodies only one foot long but with a four foot wingspan their rapid motion and sheer density in the air were both confusing and intimidating. They whirled and glided around the cavern, wing tips brushing the walls and other inhabitants precariously.

The heroes thought them, at first, just an annoyance and tried to shoo them off, waving weapons threateningly. The bats, however took exception to this and decided to attack, or perhaps this had been their intention all along. One, then another of them either bit, or scratched sundry heroes.

The spemen responded with ire and valour. Lunging into battle as best they could. Shorty could barely wave his sword in his own defence. The others felt as if their efforts were no better.

The bats proved very agile and despite their huge, flimsy looking wings, extremely hard to hit. Worst of all, they were remarkably persistent, diving and attacking repeatedly. This fracas went on for about six minutes, during which time everyone except Angel sustained at least one minor wound, some a few. Boss, always lucky, was bitten or scratched no fewer than five times, whilst one of Cat's injuries was a particularly nasty bite on the cheek, dangerously close to the eye.

After six minutes of this, the already sore and dejected adventurers were practically exhausted beyond caring to defend themselves, but they valiantly fought on. They were not about to end their adventures ignominiously, being eaten by bats!

At this point nine of the bats were either dead or dying, their anguished cries almost indistinguishable from the general bat squeaking. Heaven only knows how many bats has flown away injured.

Then they flew off, those that were relatively healthy, that is. They simply glided out of the cavern, en masse, as suddenly as they had arrived. Clearly they decided, in the midst of their high pitched, bat conversation, that this prey was too dangerous and took off to find a meal which did not fight back, or not so vehemently.

One of them had the gall, on its way out, to dive and scoop up one of its dead comrades, inviting it to dinner no doubt.

"Looks like batsfor breakfast eh!" Shorty panted.

Some looked at him with disgust. Preach spoke soberly.

"Entirely possible." He said simply. "Entirely possible."

“I like their delivery service.” Boss smiled.

“I hope they don’t serve up giant lobster next.” Red cautioned.

“Yeah. We should have eaten that .” Shorty realised.

“Might be the best meal we get down here .” Cat observed.

“Nothing to cook with.” Angel pointed out.

“Proper rations of food and water left , enough for one day.” Preach gave the status report.

“Eight bats .” Cat put in.

“And sundry mushrooms and small , unknown animals that we think wont kill us instantly .” Preach continued. “Maybe enough for one more day. Water is the main problem. We will have to go out and do some foraging, those of us who can .”

“You and Cat and Red.” Boss suggested. “Red is a hunter and Cat can also track and set snares.”

“Which leaves no one here fit and well armed.” Angel said, concerned.

“We are safer here if we keep a low profile.” Said Boss. “Moving around out there is more dangerous.”

“Are you sure about that ?” Angel asked holding up a batish attacker.

“Oh for the love of the gods, Angel, what other choices do we have ?”

Shorty shouted vehemently.

“Hey now, Shorty. Take it easy .” Red said , soothingly.

“Have to make a great debate” Shorty stopped to take in a painful breath. “About everything.”

“No more debate.” Said Boss. “Just do what we have to .” He shooed them away.

Hours passed in their rocky hideaway.

BOOKWORM

Angel let out a startled scream. She hastily grabbed her staff and rammed it at her backpack.

“Damn !” She shouted. “Missed it !”

Boss hurried over to see what the fuss was about .

“Something crawled into my backpack.” She explained .

She hastily fumbled at the closing straps. “Some kind of worm like creature.” She told him.

She opened the pack and rummaged through its contents. Boss caught her arm and dragged her hand out of there.

“Suppose it’s poisonous ?” He cautioned.

She batted at him , trying to fight him off.

“Let go. I’ve got to catch the thing.” She panicked .

He let go , picked up the pack and unceremoniously dumped its contents onto the floor.

“Careful , that’s my spellbook !” She shouted.

“Keep it down !” Shorty called, firmly but unloudly.

The creature could not be seen lurking in the recesses of the backpack or amongst the items spilled on the floor. Angel hugged her precious spellbook to her, as if to keep it safe from harm. It had cost her almost every copper piece that she had ever earned.

“To me this is as your sword and armour are to you. It is my whole life. I am helpless without it.” She muttered.

“What armour ?” Boss declared , holding his hands out symbolically , as if to say ‘I am defenceless .’

“Light the lantern so we can see better.” Boss suggested .

“Enough oil left for four hours.” Shorty stated. “On the way back we’ll have to be in the dark for a whole day.”

“Have to make a great debate about every little thing .” Angel quoted back at him.

Lamp lit, belongings thoroughly searched through , no sign of any little beasties.

“You sure you saw anything ?” Shorty questioned . “Sure you weren’t imagining it ?”

“I don’t imagine things.” Angel said , hurt.

“No imagination huh .” Said Shorty. “I imagine all sorts of things and I’m nowhere near as brainy as you are.”

“Oh shush .” Said Angel , realising that he was teasing her.

They searched and searched and found no sign. They gave up , almost. She sat cuddling her spellbook and wondering.

“Where could it be ? It can’t just disappear. I don’t think that worms fly.”

“Great worms do.” Shorty observed. His fisher folk family were full of such colourful old yarns.

Several minutes Angel sat before inspiration hit. A blinding flash of terrifying insight . The spellbook ! It might be inside the spellbook. It might have gone inside the spellbook. She imagined it stretched out cosily along the spine or something. She opened the book to check it. To her horror the thing was there. It was not , as she had envisaged , in the space of the spine. Nor was it flattened between the pages.

It was in the pages. It had eaten a worm shaped hole right into the pages of the book. Several pages were ruined. Worst of all some of those ruined pages contained the spells which had cost her a fortune and taken ages to assemble.

Without these magic runes she would be unable to learn her spells or caste those magics. She attempted to push the worm out of the

hole , not wishing to damage the pages further by squashing it in there.

It rapidly burrowed further and destroyed even more of her most prized possession . As she poked at the front end it would rapidly turn and burrow around or below her probing.

In frustration she took up her staff , rapidly opened the book to where the bulbous , two inch , maggot could be plainly seen , temporarily , for it moved very quickly , she slammed the end of the staff violently into the white blob.

It succumbed in a spectacular way. White mess oozed and splattered everywhere , destroying still more of Angel's life's work.

Boss looked on , stupefied .

"Couldn't you have helped !" She yelled , distraught.

She took a piece of ragged cloth and dampened it with a few spots of her remaining water , arguably more vital now than even her spellbook. She carefully and tenderly attempted to clean up the sticky mess. As she did so further pages of her spellbook seemed to dissolve away before her eyes. The ichor was causing it to rot.

"I shall have nothing left at this rate." She moaned , tears forming in her eyes .

For all that they had been through, in danger or in pain , Boss had never seen her cry before . Seeing it tore at his heart. He desperately wanted to help her, to comfort her , but there was nothing he could do.

"Perhaps if we remove the offending pages before it spreads any further." She realised.

She attempted to rapidly tear away the section of the book which was worst affected . The pages of a spellbook are exceptionally sturdy. They would not yield to her lithe frame.

"Let me try ." Boss offered.

"Try not to destroy the whole thing ." She requested.

He wrenched at the pages but they proved stronger than he imagined. Even he could not rip them out. He had an idea. He pulled out his dagger and was about to begin cutting into them.

"No !" She screamed. "She grabbed his arm , with both of her hands, and struggled to restrain him. "Sweet ISIS only knows what might happen if you touch a rune with that."

They went tumbling on the floor together. The dagger in his hand threatened to plunge deep into her. He managed to catch her weight on his other hand , saving her from an untimely end.

"You silly" He bit his tongue , stopping the curse short. In time , he hoped , to do no harm. But he was still livid with her and the thought of her dying on the point of his blade.

“Don’t ever” He was too exasperated to complete the thought , let alone the sentence.

“You two lovebirds having fun over there ?” Shorty put in. Boss dropped the blade to his right side and rolled to his left , bringing Angel underneath him .

“What do you think you’re doing ?” She panted , her heart racing. “Making sure neither of us gets stabbed .” He explained , but seemed reluctant to move.

“Get off me , you great oaf. No need to make a meal of it is there.” She complained.

“I do apologise .” He said, still unmoving. “We seem to be stuck here. How can I get up without squashing you ?”

“You’re squashing me already.” She said.

“And enjoying it.” Shorty laughed.

Finally Boss rolled away and deftly leapt to his feet.

She lay breathless and panting on the floor, her hear , fluttering like a butterfly, almost leapt out of her mouth .

Boss walked over to her spellbook and began tearing out half destroyed pages one at a time.

“Oh no !” She jumped up , so quickly she became dizzy and stars danced before her eyes. “Be careful what you take out and how you do it Please” She added the latter apologetically. “I didn’t mean to Um Be mean ... I mean .”

“You were upset.” He said, tearing pages with a vengeance to offset his frustration.

“I know you were only trying to help.” She said.

“Don’t mention it. Always keen to help .” He replied , angrily.

“Look , don’t be upset. Stop. Calm down. Leave it to me.” She said, falteringly.

“Don’t trust the oaf with your precious spellbook . Think I’m so dumb I can’t manage to tear out pages , is that it ?” He accused.

“I never meant anything, really” She disclaimed.

“You know , you really shouldn’t look down on people , your ladyship.” He said , resentfully.

“What ladyship ! Me ?” She laughed. “You may see me that way, but I was dragged up in the slums like everybody else.”

He stopped. The worst of the damaged pages were removed.

“I’m not some fantasy woman you’ve made me up to be. I’m just plain me .” She paused and waited for this to sink in. “OK .”

“Sure.” He said , noncommittally.

She took her spellbook away from him and began to survey the damage. The only spell that was ruined was one that she didn’t intend to use for a long time anyway. The dangerous spell which would bind the life of another creature to hers as a familiar, like

Garishamal and her warty friend. If Bashmosh were killed the shock of the separation would most likely kill Garishamal too. They would be together in death as they were in life. The remainder of the damage was to blank pages. Still it amounted to hundreds of gold pieces in value.

“I shall have to have the whole book stripped down and rebound.” She complained. “I will be lucky if any of the spells still work. We’re lucky it didn’t explode or one of the spells become misfired.”

“Is that dangerous ?” Boss asked.

“Multi-dangerous .” She informed him. “Magical energy , if disturbed , has to go somewhere .”

“Then the power of the spell is in the remains of the worm .” Boss supposed.

“That’s a very bright assumption.” She commended.

“Don’t sound so surprised.” He chided.

“Then if we tried perhaps we could get it to work .” She speculated.

“But how ?” He demanded.

“Maybe if you eat the maggot.” Shorty suggested , tongue in cheek.

“Yes.” She enthused. “And learn the rest. We will also need other things.”

“You can’t be serious.” Boss was astounded.

“Why not ?” She decided. “Stranger things have happened. You can’t afford to be squeamish when you’re a mage. I’ve heard of spells that you have to eat live spiders to caste and things more gruesome even than that.”

“It sounds sort of dangerous .” Boss warned.

“Very.” She admitted. “But hey, look where we are, everything is dangerous. You don’t run away from battle do you ?”

“Only if I have to.” He admitted. “By the time you get to that stage running is no longer an option.”

“Then why should I back down from this challenge ?” She reasoned. “It’s my first magical experiment.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

FORAGING

They travelled with Cat in front , Preach in the middle and Red behind.

CAVE CRICKET

Something leapt across their path , between Cat and Preach. It looked like a very large grasshopper , except there is no grass in the deep caverns. It was about four feet tall and twelve feet long. Its legs were covered in wicked looking , jagged spikes of razor sharp , hard chitin. They looked capable of slicing like daggers. Preach was taken aback. These blade like structures had whizzed past his head , almost , he imagined . decapitating him. No sooner had it jumped in front of him than it landed and jumped back behind him. It seemed likely to do the same again. Whether it meant to harm him or not it was too dangerous a situation to ignore.

They all turned and tried to beat it away.

It hopped off , coming to rest not very far away. They hurried on past. It did not pursue them. They reasoned that such creatures may need water and might lead them to some. They decided to turn back and try to follow the giant insect to its water source.

“Jump !” The critter did it again, this time narrowly missing Red. “That does it !” Red decided . “This thing has to go .”

He twanged his bow. His first shot missed. “Thwack !” His second shot hit the beast , stuck home , and quivered for several seconds. The cricket leapt back towards the trio. The arrow shaft in it hit against a rock and broke off. Red’s third arrow pierced the approaching menace. The creature jumped forwards towards them. It landed near Preach. With his mace he belted the arrow shaft protruding from the beast’s head , pushing the arrow even deeper into

the insect’s skull. The cricket twitched violently and collapsed in an awkward, legs tangled , heap.

Red recovered the arrow which had missed.

“Only seven left , none of them intact .” He counted.

“So much for finding water.” Cat dismissed.

“There still may be a trail .” Red submitted.

They followed what marks they could find. The motion of the insect was higgledy-piggledy and erratic. There was little to indicate the direction of each leap and signs were contradictory , as if the thing changed its facing in mid air.

BLIND CAVE FISH

To their amazement Cat soon led them to a shallow pool of water with a sparse trickle of water running through it.

“So much of the water down here is caustic.” Preach cautioned.

“Who is going to try it ?”

“Not me .” Cat assured them .

“Look.” Red pointed.

There were small , dark shapes moving in the water.

“Blind cave fish. It must be fresh water.” He assumed.

“Be my guest .” Said Cat , gesturing towards the water.

“Don’t worry , I will .” Said Red.

He knelt and took a tiny sip.

“It seems OK.” He said joyfully.

“Don’t drink anymore.” Preach cautioned. “We will see if you are alright tomorrow.”

Red was a bout to fill his water skin.

“Don’t contaminate the water you have. Only if this checks out OK.” Preach instructed. “You’re sure we can find this place again ?”

“Pretty sure.” Said Cat .

“Be sure .” Preach insisted.

“We will make a clear trail of this incessant greenglow stuff.” Red suggested. “Let’s see if we can catch some fish.”

After several attempts Red had no fish to show for his efforts. He didn’t know how they sensed him coming , but they did.

“We need Shorty for this .” He commented. “He’s supposed to be a fisherman.”

“Come on then klutz , let’s go. We’ll attract every monster in the underdeep. “ Cat berated.

On the way back they travelled through an area in which the tunnel opened up to a large crevice overhead. Something shot past Red’s head. It seemed to be some sort of fine line , which was now being reeled in.

“Run !” Red shouted.

CAVE FISHER

This they did. When they had travelled some way they paused briefly.

“What spooked you back there ?” Cat asked.

“Something shot a sort of line at me.” Red related.

“We’d better be careful going back.” Preach suggested. “in case we’re being followed.”

They made their way back in stages , stopping occasionally in places where Cat could hide and check if they were being followed. He saw no sign of pursuit.

CAVE MORAY

Some time later, in a narrow passageway , something shot out of a hole in the wall and latched onto Preach. It pulled him against the tunnel wall with a steely grip.

It ripped a hole through his chain mail and a large chunk of flesh was chewed away. Preach was allowed to slide down to the floor in a pool of his own blood.

The others rushed up to him. They quickly grabbed his ankles and dragged him away from the section of the wall which was pock marked with holes. He was out cold long before they reached him.

“What can we do ? We are not healers .” Cat declared.

“The Orb .” Red suggested. He began to untie Preach’s backpack.

“We don’t know what it might do to unbelievers .” Cat warned.

“Then we won’t touch it.” Red put forward .

He found some of the cloth Preach used for bandaging. He wrapped it around the Orb and carefully lifted it out. He placed it onto the wound, which gaped open in Preach’s chest. He thought of the kind of thing that Preach might say, when he was not speaking in the holy language of his church that is.

“Oh mighty.” The name escaped him . “Lord of Fire and Lightning, forgive us unworthy unbelievers , but we beg you to restore the health of this , your faithful and valiant servant , whom we know as Preach.”

There was an almost imperceptible glow from the orb, or perhaps they fancied so. Then Preach began to breathe regularly.

Red reached for the orb once more , carefully replacing it in the backpack. He was also at great pains not to touch the metal directly. He placed a wad of cloth into the wound and wrapped a strip around Preach’s chest , as he had seen Preach do frequently for others in the past week. Between them they carried Preach , not always gently , back to their sanctuary.

When they arrived back they found Angel indulging in some very strange ritual and about to eat the loathsome remains of a dead worm.

BOWLER

For hours Angel had prepared , studying the remains of the spell runes and sigils , sorting out the components and so on. She lacked charcoal but she found a type of black rock which she believed might substitute. She pounded lumps of it into small pieces and arranged them in a makeshift hearth.

When the others arrived she rifled through Preach’s pack to find some herbs and incense she needed. Then she indulged

remarkable fortitude and composure as she feasted on the raw remains of the horrid , white grub. She fought not to gag on it. She went into a reverie which lasted for several hours, so much so that the others feared that she had poisoned herself to death and discussed trying to arouse her. Angel felt a strange presence entering her mind. She felt a link was forming but she saw no sights through any kind of animal eyes. She thought no thoughts that she could recognise as such. What under heaven had she contacted ? It had the strangest senses and perceptions , things unimaginable to spemen. It aligned and attuned itself to the very earth itself .

It seemed to gather information from the solid rock around it. It was coming closer , she knew. It was slow , very stable and solid in disposition and it felt rather than thought or saw.

It rolled towards the entrance of the cave. The link was complete. Her familiar was here. The spell had worked , after a fashion. Fair enough. It had been caste after a fashion. In the dark underground she had taken as a familiar a creature of the depths. A thing of stone itself.

“What are you , my companion .” She thought.

She thought it replied “A boulder.” That was what it looked like, certainly. A large , round , piece of solid rock. It stood some four feet in diameter and must have weighed more than a thousand coins , certainly. The language , if it was such , in which they communicated was not spemen , it was in waves of pure thought, or perhaps empathic energy.

“Do all boulders live as you do ?” She questioned.

“A Bowler, your kind would call me.” He corrected.

“I shall call you Petrock.” She told him empathically.

The spell complete Angel was now at liberty to come out of her trance like state. The ascent was a difficult one for reasons that she could not explain.

Boss was on watch. Almost a whole night must have passed.

“Boss.” She said , falteringly , words forming with difficulty.

“Yes Angel .” He replied in a strange inflection , so glad to see her back again.

“I have done it. I have linked myself to a familiar.” She announced.

“Where is it ?” He demanded.

“Just outside. I thought I had better warn you of its approach. I didn’t want you to kill it.” She told him. “Whatever happens promise you won’t attack the next creature that enters here .”

“Of course I won’t .” He assured her. “What is it ?”

“A Bowler.” She confided.

“A what ?” he said , startled .

“A rock cousin , a stone creature , an earth wanderer, a living stone.” She said pedantically.

“Are you alright .” He asked , concerned , for she sounded strange.

“Come .” She thought and then said “I will summon it.”

The gigantic ball of rock rolled slowly and ponderously into the cavern.

“Petrock , this is my friend Boss and these sleeping beauties are Red , Shorty, Preach and Cat.” She thought , communicated at the speed of rock, rather slowly that is. “Boss this is Petrock , my pet rock , you see. From now on he must never be far away from me , so you’d better get used to each other.”

Boss stared at the thing open mouthed. “For that you ate worms ?” He marvelled.

I think he could be very useful .” She replied, although she was not sure how yet.

“Carrying your backpack I doubt.” He said sarcastically. “What are you going to do with that in the city ?”

“Petrock” She thought and said. “You must promise me never to attack my kind unless they attack me first.”

“As you command , I will obey.” Petrock replied in his manner.

What , to him , constituted her kind she could not be sure. Would he be able to distinguish a spemen from any other thing which moved on legs ? When she awoke from the strangest dreams she had to explain the whole scenario over again to all there assembled.

“We’re one mile underground.” She said , quite out of the blue.

“How do you know that ?” Cat scoffed.

“I know what he knows.” She said , pointing to the boulder.

The Bowler , as yet , hadn’t made its presence felt.

“I think you are having us on.” Said Shorty.

“I’m not.” Angel replied. “Hey Petrock move over here.”

To everyone’s amazement the rock rolled several feet.

“Enough .” She said and it stopped.

“We’re going to be attacked by huge centipedes.” Angel announced five minutes later.

HUGE CENTIPEDES

They looked around and there were five of the creatures. After they had killed one each, Preach being still immobile, they began to believe that Petrock would be useful after all.

The rest of that day passed uneventfully within the cavern.

Our foragers, now down to Cat and Red , now had to carry all of the waterskins to the pool . This meant braving the tunnels which

housed the highly dangerous creatures that they tangled with the day before. They emptied the dregs of five waterskins into the sixth, to leave in case they did not make it back. At least that was the principle.

When it came to Cat's skin he refused to hand it over. Even after they explained it to him he still refused.

"Why, Cat?" Angel enquired.

"Because it's not a waterskin. It's a wineskin. Want a taste?" Cat offered.

Angel shook her head and sniffed the bottle.

"So it is. What's the idea of bringing wine?" She asked.

"Who drinks water?" Cat shrugged. "Also wine can be very useful. It makes a good cure for anything."

"Really Cat." She said, disparagingly.

"Yes really. Also it's dedicated to my god." He claimed.

"Oh come on." She scoffed.

"No really. DIONYSUS, God of Wine. Can I help it if my family were vintners?" Cat reasoned, and prevaricated.

"So is there any left?" She asked.

"Very little." He told her. "and it will ruin any water collected in here. Then the water will spoil any wine I try to keep in it after. If you put water in it you might as well throw the thing away. It will be ruined for all time. Believe me. Trust me on this one. I kid you not." He claimed emphatically.

"May I suggest you bring a waterskin along with you as well next time." Boss requested.

"What for?" Cat asked.

"In case of emergencies like this one." Boss growled.

"I should load myself down with waterskins then." Cat complained.

On the way down to the pool they hurried past the 'dweller in the holes', keeping to the middle of the tunnel, hoping that it would not be able to reach them. In this way they were able to sneak past without it attacking. Perhaps they were just lucky this morning. Similarly they hurried past the fissure and were not attacked.

On the way back Red attempted to do some hunting. He wanted to collect enough for all six of them for at least a day. He and Cat systematically scoured several side tunnels. They explored small sections at a time so that they might not get lost.

One cavern was infested with centipedes even larger than the ones which had invaded their cavern overnight. They were attacked by two of these before they decided not to explore any further in that direction.

GIANT CENTIPEDES

You might not think fighting centipedes would be particularly adventurous or dangerous , but these centipedes were absolutely enormous and their bite most likely fatal. They were very agile and their bony exoskeletons were difficult to penetrate. Each one took several minutes of hard fighting to destroy. After the second one attacked Cat and Red were unanimous. It was far more sensible to turn back. They were extremely lucky that neither of them was bitten.

DERRO

Later that day, they had been hunting for perhaps nine hours and were beginning to tire. They were in a place which was an extremely complex set of caverns , canyons and ledges the likes of which they had never seen before. It would be extremely easy to lose oneself forever in such a labyrinth.

“Thwack !” Something ricocheted off a rock behind them. They both sought cover. The ubiquitous green luminescent plants were present here but in uneven patches , broken in many places , leaving a complex pattern of dim glow and deep shadows. It was easy for an enemy to hide in this environment. They could not spot their attacker. There were many possible sources for the attack , some of which they could spend hours trying to work out how to get to.

“I like not this place.” Cat whispered. “An assassin’s dream world.”

“Thunk !” Another arrow struck wide of its mark.

“Crossbow bolt.” Red recognised. “We’re dealing with intelligence here.”

Crossbows were used by dwarves as far as Red understood. Not many were used by Spemen and those probably of dwarven make.

“Maybe he just wants to chase us out of here.” Cat speculated. “If we withdraw he may not think us worth chasing.”

“Trouble is , the way out is right across his line of sight . He gets at least two clear shots.”

“I’ll take that risk , rather than sit here and let him take pot shots at us all day.” Cat assessed . “If we stay here he’ll hit us eventually.”

“Too true , my friend. You bolt for it. I’ll cover you. When you get to the exit you cover me.” Red plotted.

“You have only five arrows left.” Cat observed. “I should stay. If it goes wrong I can hold him off for longer.”

“Shtack !” A bolt hit close to Cat’s shoulder.

“He’s zeroing in . Better move now .” Cat prompted.

Red ran towards the exit in an evasive pattern.

Cat waited for the enemy’s next shot , so that he could move out as the foe reloaded.

Trouble was the next shot hit Cat in the forearm. He fought back the pain and focused on his desperation to get out of the death trap. He ran pell-mell for the exit, never once looking back. Neither of the adventurers had seen their attacker. Red had a pretty good idea from which direction the last shot had come.

“One more shot , mister , and I’ll nail you .” Red said , confidently.

“The bastard hit me.” Cat showed him.

“Can you still draw a bow ?” Red asked , concerned.

“Maybe .” Cat was unsure.

“I’ll get down the corridor there. You hide here somewhere. Wait five minutes. See if he follows. If not I’ll cover your retreat.” Red planned. They , apparently , were not followed.

“So why’d you let me go first , Cat ?” Red asked , later.

“Because I’m scared , right. “ Cat said , candidly .

“How’d you mean ?” Red enquired.

“I’m always terrified .” Cat said. “If I’d have gone first I would have just kept on going and left you for dead.”

“You don’t mean that.” Red contradicted.

“No , straight up. I have to watch myself all the time.” Cat affirmed.

“So , why’d you let me go first , Cat ?” Red repeated.

“If I blow it like that we’ll all die before we get back , including me. So I was really only thinking of my own good. You’re a straight up sort of guy. You will risk your life to keep me alive. I won’t do that for you. No way.” Cat admitted.

“But you just did.” Red pointed out.

“Not really.” Cat argued. “Just figuring the odds. You had as much chance of being cut down first.”

Red thought about that. He never had trusted cats.

They came at length to where the ‘line spinner’ had been. Sure enough its stand like projectile shot down towards them. It missed. They hurried past , not giving the mysterious beast a chance at a second shot. They proceeded quickly and cautiously past the ‘hole dweller’ again without being attacked. Soon they arrived back safely with the others.

“Our friends return .” Angel stated, matter of factly, a short time before the pair arrived.

“I find that rather unnerving.” Boss confessed. “Are you always going to know everything before it happens ?” He asked.

“Only as long as Petrock is in contact with solid stone.” Angel replied “And stays close to me.”

Red returned, followed moments later by Cat.

“ How is your arm ?” Angel asked without looking at Cat.

“It hurts like...” He began , then “Hey what is this ?” He asked.

“You were shot by an arrow of a Deridyn . Such bolts are poisoned to your kind . You are lucky that you were not killed.”

“How do you know all of this ?” Cat marvelled.

“Because rocks have nothing better to do than sit around all day and gossip. Nothing happens fast in the world of the rock folk except for the travelling of news. The coming and going of the fast folk is a source of constant amusement to us. You are like our errant children.” Angel spoke as if she had become one of the rock folk herself.

“I’m beginning to think that our Angel has become possessed by this rock demon.” Preach intimated.

“Not at all, my dear Preach. I am entirely myself.” She defended.

“Besides aren’t you meant to be unconscious ?”

“I am much better thank you .” Preach replied.

Boss carefully removed the orb from Preach’s backpack.

“Here. Hold this .” Boss instructed.

“What for ?” Preach asked.

“Now pray.” Boss ordered.

“I don’t think I should .” Preach objected.

“The sooner we’re all healed the better the chance we have of getting out of here in one piece.” Boss argued.

“Very well.” Preach agreed “but I do so under protest.”

They received some healing from their priest , using the power of the orb. They spent another peaceful night there.

Angel , having discovered the black rock to make excellent fuel , made a fire and roasted the various small animals that Red and Cat had collected , to Petrock’s disgust and constant complaints.. He didn’t appreciate his rock brothers being tortured and destroyed in the least. The adventurers feasted upon these mini snacks that morning and ate some of the plant life which Preach had collected previously. All had been tested somewhat. It made lean fare but it sustained them for another day’s march. They kept their last day’s iron rations in reserve for extreme emergencies. They began to drink the water from the pool and insisted that Cat did the same, keeping the small amount of alcohol remaining as a medicinal supply.

“I am now in a position to guide you out of this infernal region.” Angel boasted. “Though the dangers are many along the way.”

“No safe route ?” Cat supposed.

“Down here no way is safe.” Angel affirmed.

“This is like meeting a completely different woman.” Shorty observed. “What have you done with our friend Angel ?”

There was no reply.

Their road took them back towards the pool.

“There must be a safer way than this .” Cat complained.

“No way is safer.” Angel declared.

Following all precautions they were able to sneak past the ‘hole dweller’ safely.

“Should we leave such a dangerous, evil creature behind ?” Boss queried.

“What’s the alternative ?” Cat wanted to know.

“We’re all pretty healthy now. Maybe we should destroy the thing.” Boss proposed.

“I don’t think so .” Cat refused.

They voted. Two for and four against. Similarly they managed to avoid the ‘line caster’. The vote was tied three all.

“The majority have to want to do it.” Boss declared. “Not very adventurous are we ?”

“I just want to get out of here alive.” Cat declared.

Angel pointed the way to where Cat and Red had been fired upon.

“Are you sure you aren’t leading us the most dangerous way you can find ?” Cat accused. “How do we know you are not trying to kill us all off. ?”

“Cat, that’s a terrible thing to say.” Angel said, hurt.

“How do you know you can trust this pet rock of yours ?” Cat demanded.

“He is my familiar. He can’t even have a thought that I don’t know about. How can he deceive me ?” Angel defended.

“Suppose you’re wrong ? Suppose it doesn’t work that way ? Or maybe the spell didn’t work and this brick of yours is the underworld’s biggest con artist. Have you thought of that ?” Cat speculated. He always tried to figure all the angles.

“You certainly have a devious mind , Cat .” Angel commented.

“You tend to live longer that way.” Cat replied , with pride.

“Shall we proceed ?” Boss prompted.

“Something’s going to start raining arrows down upon us shortly.” Red pointed out.

“We may be lucky.” Boss said optimistically.

“So what’s the strategy ?” Red demanded.

“You take these five arrows and back us up. We’ll all cross the danger zone together as quickly as we can. Then we’ll try to cover you while you cross. “ Boss proposed.

“I can help. If anything is out there Petrock can locate them and he may be able to help us. Then will you believe he is on our side ?”

Angel looked accusingly at Cat.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” Cat said , sceptically.

They arrived in silence near the place where the attack was expected and put the simple plan into action.

“Clank !” A crossbow bolt ricocheted off of a rock and bit into Boss’s flesh.

“Where is he ? Find him for me. Yes , you can have him.” Angel communicated with Petrock. Petrock had to eat and Angel had just given him permission to attack the Deridyn.

The spemen moved across the wide cavern in which they were targets, moving from cover to cover, like scurrying mice.

“Chung !” Another bolt bounced around, but well wide of any mark.

The next bolt slammed into Angel’s tender young flesh. She cried out in pain.

The wound burned with an unnatural agony. That was the poison , she realised. Red was watching carefully. He let fly an arrow which , he judged , would land not far from where the attack had begun.

He was unaware of just how close he had come to hitting his opponent. His arrow struck just inches from the enemy.

The next bolt was far from any target, as if fired in a hurry.

Another exchange of bolt for arrow ensued. Then the bowler struck . It rolled right into the deridyn attacker. He was pushed to the brink of the precipice atop which he was perched and almost toppled over. Red had a momentary clear view of the gnome sized creature, for scant seconds, as it stood , precariously balanced, on the edge of its cliff face hideout. Red loosed his arrow just as the little man dived back into the safety of the shadows. Or rather danger of the shadows, for there the bowler awaited and would attempt to crush him again.

The others had gained a position of relative safety on the opposite side of the chasm. From there they beckoned for Red to make his crossing. Cat and Shorty stood, bows cocked, ready to ward off the attacker.

Petrock rolled after the deridyn. He dodged. Cat and Shorty caught a glimpse of the creature. Both fired and missed.

The deridyn struck Petrock with his gnome sized hook-fauchard. A chip of rock flew out from Petrock’s surface. Angel felt a sudden pain as Petrock was damaged. Cat let an arrow fly at the shadowy

figures battling above them. He missed the enemy fairly well but struck very close to Petrock. Shorty's arrow hit the mark. It stuck firmly in the attacker's back. Petrock kept the assailant barrelled up at the edge of the cliff where the others could get clear shots at him. Unfortunately Shorty's next arrow missed the evil gnome and clattered into Petrock's hard surface, further damaging him.

Angel winced with the new pain. "Petrock, get out of there."

She commanded. She feared the consequences should he be killed. Cat's arrow missed again. Once again Shorty's arrow missed the enemy and hit Petrock. This time it buried deeply into the familiar and Petrock shattered into a dozen shards.

Angel let out an almighty scream and collapsed in a heap.

When Angel came too in an unfamiliar chamber she was acutely aware of feeling particularly weak.

"You killed him Shorty. You killed Petrock and you have ruined me." She blurted out.

"Well I'm sorry." Shorty said earnestly. "Fortunes of war."

"You sent it up there." Cat pointed out, callously.

"Let's look at it this way." Red offered consolation. "He died saving my life. Would you rather Petrock had lived or I?"

"You don't understand. The abilities he gave me. I could never get lost or be attacked by surprise."

"As long as you live in a cave." Boss commented. "I, for one, am glad that it is gone. I didn't like the affect it had on you. You really weren't yourself back there."

"What is done is done." Preach philosophised. "You have to accept it and move on."

"You know what happens when you lose a familiar?" Angel asked, pointedly "I am very much weaker now. I will never be fully well again. Part of my life force died with that thing."

"Then don't take any more familiars." Said Cat, coldly. "If you can't take the consequences. Stop bleating about it and get moving."

"Petrock knew the way out. I don't." Angel informed them.

"I'm sure we will manage." Boss said, heartily. "Now we are back to where we should be."

"Lost." She said in exasperation.

"AGNI will guide us." Preach said, confidently.

AGNI led them through a long series of complicated, winding, narrow passages and numerous caverns of all shapes and sizes, past a huge number of side passages, any one of which might have been the way out.

Red let out a scream of pain. Everyone whirled around to see a grey dwarf wielding a pick . The pick was tipped with blood . It had recently been embedded in Red's back.

The tunnel was too narrow for anyone but Red to respond. Red warded off the hacking attacks of the pick wielding dwarf. They seemed equally matched in stroke and counterstroke. The attacker's small size made it hard for the others to see what was going on.

Boss and Shorty ran down the passage, looking for either a widening or a side tunnel which might lead them around in order to flank the attacking forces. They could not be sure that there would not be several, perhaps an army of these creatures. Why would one of them attack six spemen after all ?

Meanwhile Red had cut his opponent but it had also chopped into him. Red's armour absorbed much of the damage of its next strike. The smaller opponent was striking much too often. Again Red failed to block an attack and the pick chopped into him. Red swung in exasperation. His opponent deftly turned the blow aside. Red seemed to be tiring. The dwarf was still fresh and swift. After several more feints and passes it struck home again.

Red's jabs and lunges all hit the empty air as his opponent stepped back or dodged aside. The pick strokes barely punctured Red's armour but he was being hit on the arms and legs and finding it increasingly difficult to move.

Slowed by the crippling blows, Red still made a valiant effort and held off his pint sized predator for another agonising minute. The thought entered Red's mind that he could ultimately fail. This was turning into the most infuriatingly frustrating battle of Red's life.

Again and again he swung and missed. He used all of his best combinations and was unable to draw the dwarf out or to penetrate his guard. Those strikes that he made failed to penetrate the small man's tight linked armour . Several minutes passed with neither opponent doing further damage and neither giving ground.

"Why do you attack us ?" Preach called from behind them , barely able to make out that the assailant was vaguely dwarf like in stature and appearance.

"Death to the intruders !" Came a plaintive cry in response.

"We come in peace." Preach replied.

"I piss on your peace !" The grey dwarf taunted irreverently.

"If we promise to leave will you stop this insane attack ?" Preach offered.

"You will die for your insolence." The dwarf took a hissing breath and swung mightily. "In coming here."

Red took another blow. This time on the hip.

Angel, who was next in line, saw Red limping badly.

“Change places, Red, while you still can.” She offered.

“No way.” Red rebuked her. “He’d cut you up in no time.”

“Let a warrior through.” Said Shorty, as he returned from his scouting foray, having found no way around the problem.

“No me.” Boss spoke, from not far behind.

“You have no armour.” Shorty pointed out. “and someone has to guard the rear.”

Both opponents came close to making telling blows but neither was quick or accurate enough after ten minutes of battle.

Red hit but the total effect was no more than a nick on the dwarf’s arm. Red wished that his own armour could perform that well. The red haired fighter seemed to be gaining on his opponent. The next telling attack also went his way. The stubborn dwarf still gave no quarter.

“My turn.” Shorty said, shortly.

“This is my fight now.” Red insisted.

“Grudge match huh!” Shorty grunted. “Maybe we should sell tickets.”

Finally Red saw a perfect opening and thrust his weapon hard home. It struck just as his opponent was about to close the gap. Too late. The little fellow was run through and stood wide eyed and gaping

in amazement. His eyes glazed over and he slumped.

In his exhaustion Red was taken by surprise at the sudden weight on his sword arm. He let go the sword. Sword and victim crashed heavily to the ground, driving the blade even more deeply home. Red sank to his knees, his lungs bursting for air, pain in every limb and joint.

Shorty moved quickly past, in case more attackers were about to swoop. “Thank heavens there weren’t two of them.” He said, flippantly, as no new attackers were in evidence.

“Keep your eyes peeled.” Boss advised. “They may surprise us again at any minute.”

To their amazement Preach bent down and began praying over the enemy’s body.

“What the!” Red began to lunge at Preach, as if to restrain him.

Shorty caught him.

“I don’t understand either.” He said. “But it’s Preach’s decision.”

Soon the evil dwarf was returned to consciousness. Boss and Shorty held him as he awoke.

Preach spoke in his own rough version of dwarven.

“I have saved your life.” Preach told him. “You owe me much.”

“What’s he saying ?” Cat asked , suspiciously .

“Who knows ?” Shorty shrugged. “Probably asking after the price of fish.”

“Please don’t interrupt .” Preach asked politely , in Spemen.

In dwarven he asked the strange dwarf if he could lead them to the surface.

“Ich verstehe nicht.” Said the dwarf.

“Es war mir ein vergnugen .” Preach pronounced and hit the helpless captive hard on the head with his mace. The grey dwarf fell dead a second time.

“Your prize I believe , Red .” Preach announced as he walked away. Everyone fell into a stunned silence for some minutes.

“What was that all about ?” Shorty asked , eventually.

“I thought he could lead us out of here” Preach explained. “But he wouldn’t co-operate . I think that a swift death is more merciful than a lingering one , don’t you ?”

“Fair enough.” Said Shorty. “But isn’t that cold blooded murder ?”

“You kill all the time.” Preach stated.

“In combat. When both parties are armed and able to defend themselves.” Shorty explained.

“If I have made an error in judgement , I most humbly apologise.” Preach remonstrated. He realised that they all , now , saw him as a cold blooded killer.

Had Preach been a priest of some other god he would not have been allowed to work a curative prayer upon the evil dwarf , except in the case of some religions in an act of genuine compassion. Or else the prayer may have worked but it would have been his last prayer granted or the last until Preach enacted a powerful rite of contrition, probably with the aid of a very senior priest. However , Preach was lucky in this regard. His deity, AGNI , is not so particular about such prissy conventions. AGNI understands the exigencies of necessity in a rough world and gives his priests a little leeway in this regard. Yet AGNI is also fickle and whimsical and his judgements in certain matters can be somewhat impulsive and unpredictable. Priests of AGNI have to live walking a fine line between these advantages and disadvantages. You never know when AGNI might take strong exception to the slightest transgression and his judgement is swift and punishment terrible. On this occasion Preach enjoyed his master’s favour. The priest could not rely on that too far. They travelled on. The atmosphere was muted. The others had reason to reflect. What manner of priest was this that they were aiding ?

They had assumed a priest would be kind and good and noble as they. Yet they had heard strange tales of dark religions and evil priests and their atrocities. Had they inadvertently fallen into the service of the wrong kind of god ? Would they , by helping Preach bring down death and destruction upon thousands of innocents and dishonour themselves, even condemn their own immortal souls , consigning themselves to Hell or the stygian darkened wastes of the Abyss.

FORMIAN ANTS

They heard strange clicking noises from the chamber ahead of them. Cautiously they approached. There they saw four very large ant like creatures in the large chamber. The ants were four feet long and stood one or two feet high. The walls of the chamber ahead were pock marked with holes three to four feet tall , obviously leading into a hive. In the limited light of the greenglow they could not see the far end of the chamber. They hoped that it led through and not into the depths of the ‘anthill’.

“Our best bet is to get through here without disturbing them.” Boss whispered , thinking of the likely consequences of stirring up an ant’s nest.

“If we get attacked , form a defensive square and try to keep moving forwards. Unless they seem to be coming from all ahead, then move back here.” He suggested.

They moved through the chamber for the next several minutes without being molested , picking a path between any ants which appeared around them. The tunnels , however , were still dotted with holes at regular intervals.

“We’re not out of the woods yet .” Boss commented.

“Sh !” Shorty hissed. “I hear ‘em .”

All around them the clicking noises gathered and faded again. They entered another chamber. It was a large cavern. Even the greenglow did not extend far enough to see its boundaries. They crept along nervously. Now they were far enough in that the walls behind them disappeared but none appeared before them or to either side. For the first time in ages they were plunged into darkness. The floor was visible , a faint green carpet in a circle all around them beyond that all was black, like standing outside on a moonless and cloudy night. They were wrapped in a small circle of half light which seemed to be the entire universe. There was only a black void beyond.

“This feels like a trap.” Preach whispered. “How intelligent do you suppose these things are ?”

As if to prove the priest right , four dark shapes rushed out of the darkness. The heroes had very little time to react. Angel and Cat were pierced and held in strong chitinous jaws. Shorty and Preach managed to stave off their attackers. Boss and Red looked around warily but no other assailants emerged from the inky blackness. Cat and Angel were being wrestled and dragged away. Shorty and Preach both felt the pinch of powerful jaws closing on them but managed to stand their ground. Red chased after the ant which had taken Angel and chopped at it with his sword. The blow struck home , opening up a great gash in the creature's belly. It picked up its prey and started to run with amazing speed. Red took off after it and managed to chop it again before it could escape. It fell. Everyone realised that any ant which escaped would bring many others upon them in a short time. Shorty slashed his attacker across its face. It responded by crushing his leg harder. Preach was also being further crushed and cut by the sharp mandibles. He felt the bitter sting of acid in the wounds. Boss went after Cat's enemy and hacked at it. Shorty cut down his target. Cat stabbed at the eyes of his captor. They heard the rhythmic click of other ants approaching , sounding even louder than before. Red freed Angel from the lifeless jaws of her assailant. Cat pried himself loose of the beast which was wrestling with him. Shorty wrestled with the jaws clamped around his leg , but they were clamped tightly shut. Boss hit Cat's attacker once more . It fell lifeless save for a spasmodic twitching of six , splayed out limbs. Red rushed over to Preach and cut at his nemesis. In panic it lifted Preach up and bolted away. Shorty took a swipe at it , from his jawed prison , as it hurried past , and ended its flight. It crashed, dumping Preach on the ground. Red prized Preach free of the enclosing jaws. Shorty finally freed himself from the creature's vice like grip. Our heroes crept away as quietly as they could , hopefully in the right direction.

GALEB DUHR

They moved on until no further ant noises assaulted their ears and no further ant holes lined the tunnel walls. They searched for a convenient place to hide in for what they judged was the night. But this was not to be. Behind them the noises started gathering again. Closer and closer they crept , louder and louder they became. The Spemen gathered up their goods and chattels and set off as quickly as they could manage. It seemed from the gathering sounds that many ants were following , searching for them.

They rushed into a chamber and found it a dead end. A very large , bulbous mass of rock blocked the end of the passage. The sounds were rapidly approaching.

“You are a friend of the rock.” Angel heard.

“Yes.” She said , puzzled , but eager.

“Yes what ?” Cat said testily.

“Be quiet .” Angel ordered , imperiously. “I’m communicating .”

“With what ?” Cat demanded.

“Where are you ?” Angel asked.

“I am here .” The voice seemed to boom out from behind the large boulder blocking the passage.

“The ants are going to kill us. Please help us .” She cried.

“How ?” The basso profundo thundered.

“Show us the way out of here .” Angel begged , as ants began to appear back along the corridor. Though Angel spoke in spemen words with her tongue she thought her message to her conversator in the strange language of the stones.

“They’ll be attacking at any time. “ Shorty announced. “If we block this passage” He stepped into the breach.

“There is a way .” The voice droned , painfully slowly , though only Angel could hear it. The large rock before her sprouted short , thick, powerful legs and stomped sideways.

Everyone , even Shorty , whirled around. The giant rock creature’s formidable appearance and heavy footfalls threw fear into them.

“Don’t worry everybody. He’s a friend .” Angel assured them in a tremulous tone. “I think.” She whispered to herself.

“Pass beyond .” The low voice crooned. “But beware the eater with many mouths.” It advised.

They moved out of the cavern. The ants rushed forwards. The rock folk drew his bulk up at the opposite entrance and sat , blocking it off completely.

“You are safe now from ants.” It stated , cryptically.

“Thank you .” Angel said , gratefully. “How can I repay you ?”

“You are rock friend. I can tell you were touched by rock.” It commented. “Live long and prosper .”

“Stay in peace.” Angel said , she knew not why .

The face that had appeared in the rock while it had moved now shut away again . “Thank you. Sleep now.” It said wearily.

Angel felt its presence withdraw , back into the great stone.

“The stone will keep the ants away .” Angel declared. “ We can rest in this cavern in safety.” She surmised.

She felt very peaceful there. For a while they could hear the ants scrambling behind the rock creature. Then the sounds receded.

Preach did what healing he could. He also called upon the healing

powers of the orb, but a modest amount. He was wary of using it too greedily, for fear of angering his deity. By that time the ant sounds had died away. Boss and Angel took first watch, Cat and Shorty second and Preach and Red last.

During his watch Boss donned Red's armour, for safety. At first this area of tunnel had been totally dark, which the adventurers had thought strange. The ubiquitous green luminescent plants slowly began to return. Thousands of tiny, pin prick, stars of green light appeared on the cavern walls. These then slowly grew. After a few hours there were splotches about half a centimetre in diameter. Many had joined with their neighbouring lights to form intricate and irregular shapes. The plants were very thin, only a fraction of a millimetre. In other places the travellers had seen plants in cushions up to a centimetre thick. The disappearance of these had been quite abrupt, no one had considered why. Boss was talking of this with Angel. They sat with their backs to the rock creature.

"I thought, perhaps the ants had cleared them." She said. "Time to wake the others?" Angel suggested.

"Perhaps just little while longer." Boss implored her.

"You just want me all to yourself." She chided. "I'm tired now and I must get some sleep, if I wish to learn my spells tomorrow, or is that today?"

"You can sleep. I will watch a little while longer." He suggested.

"That doesn't sound very safe." She argued.

"Alright." He conceded. "You win." And went to rouse Cat and Shorty.

"What's that?" She whispered.

"What?" He froze halfway across the cavern.

"I thought I heard something." She intimated.

He returned, joyfully, to her side.

"Like what?" He asked fervently.

"A sort of scraping sound, from up in the corridor. Shush!" She listened intently.

"I don't hear anything." Boss whispered.

"Sh! I do." She said urgently.

"That sounds very nice when you say it." He teased.

"Quit it! I'm serious!" She said, angrily, far too angrily.

They sat, silent for half a minute.

"Don't you hear it?" She asked, incredulously.

"Maybe." He thought he caught a hint of a sound, but not enough to be sure. "Lots of strange noises in caverns. It might just be air currents or dripping water somewhere." He explained. "You'd think we'd be used to it by now."

“Wake the others .” She suggested . “Before something arrives to eat us.”

“Not all of them. It’s nearly Cat and Shorty’s watch. I’m sure the four of us can handle whatever it is.” He said , confidently.

“Don’t be too sure .” She corrected him. “Of anything , ever.”

He woke Shorty with a hand over his mouth.

“Sh ! Maybe trouble.” He said , quietly. Then he did the same with Cat. They donned their armour , as silently as possible.

“Shorty and I will scout down the corridor. Angel and Cat , sit tight.” Boss instructed.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to split up .” Angel said , nervously.

“How come the corridor is green all over except for that black stripe on the roof ?”

“Plop !” A large mass of jelly like substance dropped onto the floor. It sprang up with several protruding mouths , lined with viciously sharp teeth and began to make the most noisome chattering and gibbering noises.

GIBBERING MOUTHER

Red and Preach were awoken , immediately and sat staring , open mouthed. Shorty and Cat were halfway into their armour. They were stunned into inactivity by the confusing babble.

Boss , weapon drawn , stood transfixed on the spot . Angel let out a scream of shear panic and ran right past the strange intruder. It responded by snapping at her with six wide mouths. Two of them caught hold of her and ended her retreat. The mouths clamped onto her , hard , on her leg and back and pulled her towards the bubbling mass of jelly. Angel was bitten by three more mouths and they seemed to be trying to pull her to the ground. She had the distinct impression that , if she lost her footing , she was a goner. Somehow , in the midst of her blind panic , she found the strength to keep her legs . She tried to caste her electrical touch attack but she was facing away from the creature and wrapped up in its sinewy projections. It would be difficult indeed to hit the thing , even if , in her pain and terror , she could weave the dweomer correctly.

Cat stood and watched as everyone did absolutely nothing. He believed they were all under the same kind of magic spell . He moved in to attack but a sword thrust through the soft belly of the creature seemed to do it no harm whatsoever. It simply flowed around the blade , taking no wound. Cat was totally freaked. He chopped and slashed at the thing to no avail. It seemed easy to hit, impossible to hurt. Cat was grabbed by two of its mouths.

The rock creature raised itself ponderously on its stubby legs. Thinking “Who disturbs my sleep.” It moved towards the mass of gibbering , quivering jelly. “You trouble me for the last time , mealy mouthed creature.” It warned.

The mouther finally succeeded in pulling Angel off of her feet. She slid down underneath it where a dozen mouths were poised ready to devour her. Affected by the spell of the babbling mouths Shorty ran in panic up the corridor. Angel fought ferociously but was bogged down in a weight of slime. Cat wandered aimlessly but was still attached to the creature by two tendriled mouths. The others stood enthralled.

“Let the little one go.” The stony guardian challenged. He gave the mouthling a powerful blow with his rocky fist. The creature flattened to a pool of jelly , but it was not finished. Seconds latter it reformed into a seething mound of snapping mouths.

Preach awoke , as if out of a dream , and attacked the nearest thing. In his confusion he waved his mace harmlessly around Red. Cat and Red were both transfixed and motionless.

Boss wandered off in confusion. Shorty was still running in panic far away up the corridor. Angel was nowhere to be seen. She was dragged under the mass of jelly mouths and was being chewed on by many of them. The galeb duhr had been affected by the chattering mouths and was wandering aimlessly about the cavern. Angel fell unconscious from her many wounds. Her life force began to slip away and her soul prepared for its long journey into eternity. Something stirred in the tiny cavern. A solid ball of platinum rolled out of Preach’s backpack and into the pile of slime. It touched Angel and glowed faintly for a few seconds. Angel returned to consciousness. She was still in the same danger as before. As Preach recovered from his confusion Cat became affected. He now attacked Red in Preach’s place. As Boss still wandered around and Shorty came to his senses and started his long run back, Angel noticed that the many mouths which snapped at her did her no damage. Preach prayed that this infernal chattering might stop and all about the beast fell silent.

An unnatural silence fell over them . There was even a total lack of the normal noises of battle. Preach was dumbfounded. He had been granted a boon which was far beyond his normal capacity to ask for. “Praise be to AGNI .” He mouthed , silently.

The rock being was recovering from its former confusion. “Let go of her I tell you .” It thought as it prepared to deal the mouther a hefty blow. It stomped on the creature , squishing it flat. Angel felt a sudden weight , which she judged should have crushed her to death , but it didn’t , somehow she survived.

The mouth jelly moved no more. The adventurers all recovered from their states of confusion and Shorty and Boss returned. The rock folk regained his position in front of the exit to the ant caverns.

“Can sleep now .” He mumbled to himself.

Angel heard this and whispered “Goodnight , my friend and saviour.” She attributed her miraculous escapes from death to him and to some extent she was right , but for the wrong reasons.

When Preach checked everyone only Cat had taken minor damage.

“Why aren’t you hurt ?” He marvelled at Angel lack of wounds.

“I was cut up real bad.” Angel confided. “Then I woke up and I was perfect. Never felt better. A dozen mouths were chewing on me and I wasn’t getting hurt. The rock thing stomped on me and I wasn’t squished flat.”

In the middle of the mess that used to be their attacker stood the orb. Cat looked at it and was tempted to take it for himself. He collected it. “ We’ll see how long it takes for them to notice that it’s missing.” He told himself.

“What’d you find , Cat ?” Angel asked.

“Nothing .” He said , making a half-hearted attempt to conceal it.

“Come on Cat , don’t hold out on us .” Angel challenged.

“What are you doing with that !” Preach shouted.

“It’s not what you think .” Cat assured him. “Look it was in the goo, see .”

“Now I understand your miracle.” Preach said to Angel. “By the grace of AGNI we were saved.”

“I think that Rocky over there had a lot to do with it.” Angel claimed.

“An instrument of AGNI perhaps.” Preach testified.

“Since when. He’s a rock, not a bolt of lightning.” Cat observed.

“Let me sleep.” Rocky spoke to Angel.

“Sh !” She pointed. “We are not being good house guests.”

“Yes .” Boss agreed. “Second watch starts now.” And they settled down.

The next morning they went through their private routines and packed up to leave.

“May the gods bless and keep you stone one.” Red said to the rock as he walked away.

“And you man of flesh .” The rockling thought , though Red could not hear it.

They travelled on through Chasms and canyons , cliffs and caverns , corridors and crossways , tunnels and passages , rifts and ravines. They crossed underground streams and at times even walked along them. For all they knew they might have been walking right

underneath their own home town. They assumed that they , with every step , drew further away from it. Their path was convoluted in the extreme and they could not tell one direction from another nor even up from down some of the time. The byways and side channels that they passed must have numbered in the thousands. There seemed no end to the murky depths beneath the lands of spem.

LUCK EATER

From the roof dropped a golden coloured cat. Its decent was interrupted by Boss's broad shoulder. The animal seemed as surprised as he was. In a swift reflex action Boss swatted it to the floor. It landed safely , as most cats will. It darted this way and that and the travellers , alert and edgy , swatted and swiped at it. Though none of them hit it.

It whirled in confusion , found itself a small niche to hide in and sat trembling as they gathered around .They had it baled up now. Then it began to purr loudly.

"We're getting combat fatigue." Boss said. "Jumping at shadows. It's a cute little fellow really."

They fell in love with it instantly , even the generally hard-hearted Cat, everyone except Angel.

"Let's leave it alone. It's probably as cute as a scorpion." She stated.

"How'd you work that out ?" Boss asked.

"It survives down here somehow." Angel observed.

"You're getting paranoid , Angel. You're suspicious of everything." Cat accused.

"We can take it with us." Red suggested.

"No way ! Leave it alone !" Angel advised.

"Oh , come on Angel , what's the harm ?" Shorty cajoled.

"Oh alright !" She gave in, throwing up her hands . "But on your head be it ."

They travelled for about another hour through difficult passages.

"Does anybody happen to know where we're going ?" Angel complained.

"Relax Angel , we're bound to get somewhere eventually." Shorty said.

"To an early grave , most likely." She predicted.

"We're going up." Boss assured her.

"I don't see how ?" She replied . "We seem to be heading down at the moment."

"It'll turn up eventually." Red said , optimistically.

“Great. I’m stuck down here with a group of morons.” She ranted.
 “Oh yes , miss smarty ass. I don’t see you leading us out of here !”
 Cat said , vehemently.

“There’s no need to abuse her !” Boss defended.

“Just ‘cause you want to pork her .” Cat accused.

“And I suppose you don’t !” Shorty jumped in.

“No more than you, Shity !” Cat taunted.

“I’ll tear your balls off !” Shorty shouted. “And make you eat
 ‘em.”

“I’m waitin’ for you to try it.” Cat challenged , drawing his sword.

“Don’t fight over a stupid woman . It’s not worth it .” Red shouted,
 coming between them.

“Not so much of the stupid.” Angel objected.

“You know what I mean .” Red excused.

“No I don’t know what you mean.” Angel said , scathingly.

“Look , stay out of it . You’re making it worse. I’m meant to be
 calming them down.” Red argued.

“Calm yourself down first.” Angel advised.

Shorty and Cat , at least , were temporarily distracted from their
 argument by this new one.

“If we are going to argue over the lady’s affections.” Preach put
 forward. “There is only one logical solution.”

Every eye turned towards him, awaiting his words of wisdom.

“We will have to share her.” He finished.

“You utter bastard !” She railed and flew at him with clenched fists
 flailing. “How dare you suggest such a thing ?”

“Why not ?” Cat put in. “It wouldn’t hurt you to .”

He was interrupted by Boss attacking him.

“Stop !” Shouted Red , trying to intervene.

Shorty stood in his way. “Fair fight.” He observed. “Two onto
 one’s not .”

“I’m not taking sides.” Red interjected. “Stop them you great oaf.”

“Oaf , am I “ Shorty exploded and drew his weapon.

There followed a long period of general melee . The three pairs of
 combatants attacked one another vehemently for many minutes.

Angel and Boss , both being unarmoured , were both injured twice.

After what seemed an eternity of fighting they all stopped, quite
 literally together. They stood , panting with exhaustion , their
 minds overwhelmed with incredulity. The battle rage over, Angel
 felt the sudden onslaught of pain , where Preach had struck her
 with his mace , once on the jaw and once in the ribs . Both were
 probably broken. Boss had two nasty gashes from Cat’s sword
 strokes. Preach threw up his hands.

“Oh my god , what have I done to you ?” He cried dramatically.

“Let me make amends .”

He was about to cure her. She flung his hands away from her and turned away.

“Leave me alone , you pervert !” She cried , her words obscured by her injuries.

“You’re needed over here, Preach.” Boss said, slumping down. His hands made futile attempts to stem the flow of blood from his wounds.

Satisfied , Cat wiped his sword and sheathed it .

Preach ran over to Boss and began to bind his wounds.

Red and Shorty took the measure of each other. They had fought for many minutes without either succeeding in a decisive strike , though each had many new nicks and slashes in their armour.

“Something weird just happened ?” Boss announced.

“I know.” Said Cat , bewildered.

“Where is that damned feline ?” Angel queried , fighting through the pain in her jaw and the mounting swelling. “It did this. I just know i .” She insisted.

“What’s she saying ?” Shorty asked.

“The cat caused this.” Red interpreted.

“I think Cat caused it alright .” Shorty corrected.

“No one’s to blame.” Preach said. “It played upon our emotions .”

“The idea was there .” Angel complained . “It just helped bring it out.”

“I can’t understand what you’re saying .” Preach told her.

“How convenient .” She slurred.

“Let me fix that jaw or it will never heal back properly. Do you want to be disfigured for life ?” Preach scolded.

“Maybe it’s a good idea.” Angel assessed , sounding worse all the time and the pain increasing. “Then idiots like you wouldn’t fight over me.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it , with a body like yours.” Cat stated.

“I don’t take that as a compliment .” She attempted to say.

“Stop trying to talk.” Preach ordered. “You may be doing more damage to yourself.”

When he had finished binding Boss’s wounds , Preach attempted to approach Angel.

“Get away from me !” She shouted, as much as one can shout without the jaw moving.

“Let him help you .” Boss suggested.

“No !” She insisted.

They had a light meal , all except Angel , who found it too painful to eat. They were restricted to half rations now, or even less.

They went on. Preach foraged as they moved and Red attempted to hunt. This slowed down their progress and yielded only more mushrooms and other low plants of little value. They may fill their bellies to stave off the hunger pangs but starve to death with their stomachs full.

MONGRELMAN

A strange creature leapt out of the surrounding gloom. It had an orc like face , with four inch long tusks protruding from its lower jaw. Its arms were ape like and hung down to its knees. It was supported by lizard like legs and behind it were folded a pair of bat like wings. It grabbed hold of Boss in its hairy arms and began to squeeze and crush him in a powerful bear hug.

Try as he might , Boss could not break free. The creature stood with its back to a wall , using Boss's body as a shield.

The others stood a few feet back , taking stock of the situation , not wishing to risk running Boss through in an attempt to get at the beast. Red readied his bow and shot a little wide.

"That's a warning , ape man ." He threatened.

Cat ducked into the shadows and moved around to where he could attack from the creature's side. His dagger thrust was neatly dodged.

The beast further crushed Boss, who felt his ribs crack under the strain. He summoned up his last ounce of desperate strength and broke free.

Angel leapt forwards, having already painfully intoned the words to her spell. Shorty slashed at his narrowing view of the creature's side. Red let his arrow fly at the most inopportune time. Shorty stepped into the arrow's path. It thudded into his back. The creature took flight in the confusion. Boss leapt up , sword flashing , and caught it as it rose above him. His powerful swing brought its flight and its life to an end.

"I got an arrow here !" Shorty shouted. "Preach , get this thing will ya ? Red you arse hole ."

"Er . You got in the way , Shorty ." Red excused.

"That was quite a leap you made there , Boss." Preach complimented. "Looks like the ribs are broken . Lie still awhile. I have to get this arrow out of Shorty."

"Don't be too long ." Boss pleaded.

"Anything I can do ?" Angel asked.

"Just keep him quiet and comfortable." Preach advised.

"I'll guard the front . Cat , you take the rear." Red planned.

“Who died and made you king ?” Cat complained.

“I did.” Boss winced.

“You OK Boss ?” Angel asked , concerned.

“I’ve been better.” He commented wryly.

“You always this cheerful ?” She demanded.

“No.” He said . “I’m a masochist.” Then he added. “What was that thing you did to the monster ?”

“Shock touch spell .” She dismissed , nonchalantly.

“Like you did to the crab thing ?” He remembered.

“Yes , why ?” She asked , warily.

“It don’t half feel strange. Like tingly all over.” He described.

“Really.” She said , raising her eyebrows. “I didn’t think it would affect you.”

“I was just touching the creature when you hit.” He said.

“You’re lucky it didn’t fry you.” She said , earnestly.

“Felt strange but not unpleasant. You couldn’t do it again could you?” He jested.

“In your present state it would probably kill you .” She guessed.

“Not a bad way to go, from a touch” He began.

She knew he was about to say something stupid so she covered his mouth with her hand.

“Don’t carry on. I told you , I’m having no more of this nonsense. You are supposed to be resting. It’s hard for me to talk.” She added.

“Me too.” He said , when she let him go. “We’re a bright pair aren’t we ?”

“Hey , what are you two up to over there ?” Shorty bellowed.

“Kissy, kissy .”

“Don’t go .” Boss pleaded . “Give me a drink of water .”

“Alright , but no nonsense.” Angel conceded.

When wounds were tended they found a small alcove in which to rest for a while.

“Angel , you stay put and look after Boss for a while.” Red suggested. “The rest of you , I’ll need you to watch out for me.”

“Why ?” Cat asked , suspiciously.

“I’m going hunting.” Red claimed . “I’m sick of mushrooms.”

“Anything you catch might make you sicker.” Preach warned.

“I’ll take that chance.” Said Red.

“Hey. I’m walking wounded .” Shorty complained. “Shouldn’t I get a rest ?”

“You’re as fit as a bull.” Red claimed. “Come on.”

Reluctantly they followed. A little way from the hollow Red began his discourse.

“This thing with Angel.” He began , out of the blue. “There’s only one way to settle it.”

“We fight for her.” Shorty enthused. “Best man wins.”

“No , you great pudding.” Red replied. “It’s obvious , being males we compete for her , even if we don’t really want her.”

“Speak for yourself.” Said Cat. “I could go a piece of that.”

“Yes , but she’s not that much of a fox is she ?” Red pointed out.

“In a bar full of good sorts you wouldn’t give her a second look. It’s only that were stuck here with nothing better.” Red paused to let this sink in.

“I’m not competing for her.” Preach claimed.

“Maybe not openly , but in here.” Red pointed to his head and then his heart. “And in here , you are. What was it you said when that thing turned what’s inside out ? Let’s share her, you said. Deep down inside that’s what you want, a piece of her, yes.”

Preach fell silent.

“Don’t go poe-faced , Preach , it just means you’re normal , no better than the rest of us.” Shorty told him.

“I want to be better than the rest of you.” Preach said, half to himself.

“So , I reckon Boss and Angel have this thing going. I mean he really likes her and she would like him if she gave herself a chance. Then if they are a couple there’s no problem. No more competition. No more hidden seething rivalries.”

“I don’t think it works that way .” Preach warned.

“Well I never in my life hit on a mates bird.” Red confided. “And I don’t think that any of you are that low either.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Cat complimented , “It’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said of me . I think you’re wrong , but it was a nice , naïve thing to say.

“So we all admit defeat. Say OK Boss , the best man , won and leave it at that .” Shorty summarised.

“Yes , but they need a little push .” Red added.

“So we not only have to give up, we have to help the other guy to win the prize. That’s going too far.” Cat griped .

“I really think it’s unwise to meddle in such things. People end up getting hurt .” Preach postulated.

“You just want her for yourself .” Cat accused.

“We’ll give it one week.” Said Shorty. “And if they are not set in cement by then she’s back on the menu .”

“I really don’t want to get into this.” Preach complained.

“What alternative do we have .” Red challenged.

“I think we should all swear off her. None of us should try to woo her , including Boss .” Preach challenged.

“That would just give you a clear field , wouldn’t it Preach ?” Cat pressed.

“Besides , it wouldn’t work . We’d fall over ourselves supervising each other and if anyone looked at her or said a kind word we’d be at each other’s throats. “Said Red.

“We all vow not to chase her and not to get in the way and let whatever happens happen .” Said Cat , decisively .

“And that includes not teasing them , Shorty.” Red added.

“What ! Where’s the fun in that ?” Shorty remonstrated.

“No fun , Shorty . This is serious.” Said Red. “Now let’s hunt . I really do want some descent meat .”

They continued on until they came to a strange track , which Cat judged may have been made by some kind of snake. A wide path of green luminescent moss had been crushed by its passing.

They followed to a large cavern. There they saw a snake with a body one foot in diameter and at least twenty feet long.

GIANT SNAKE

“They reckon snakes are edible.” Cat whispered.

“Let’s go .” Said Red , eagerly .

The snake sniffed the air with its tongue and felt the vibrations of each footfall , through its scales. It soon knew they were there.

Cat was creeping around , trying to get behind it.

Preach and Shorty approached the head as stealthily as they could.

Red stood back and readied his bow , in case the snake tried to break in either direction. The snake was long enough , he judged , that hitting his companions would not be a problem. His arrow , aimed at a point along its tapering body , went astray when the tail twitched.

Preach and Shorty swung at the head and the snake dodged , surprisingly fast for its bulk.

Cat leapt on the snake’s back and plunged his sword home . It buried deeply into the creature but found no vital spot. The head spun and snapped at him. The coils wrapped around him. He felt himself being squeezed.

Red fired another arrow and one again. Both did no damage.

As the serpent head turned away from him , Shorty moved in and slashed a great gash into its throat.

The head turned back and its teeth sank into Shorty with a powerful , armour piercing bite. The snake’s coils tightened around Cat , squeezing him just a little more.

Shorty chopped at it. Preach swung and did no damage. Cat had little movement in his arms but stabbed as best he could , opening up a number of small wounds.

Red fired again and again. His arrows were ineffective against the scaly beast.

Now the snake was squeezing Cat in earnest and crushing him. He felt his ribs pop and his lungs could draw no breath.

Preach bashed the snake on top of its skull. Its flashing jaws slowed visibly. Cat was rapidly losing consciousness. The will to fight was being crushed out of him. Red fired his last two arrows. They skipped harmlessly off of the snake's rounded contours. Cat managed one last stab. The snake fell limp. Its head hit the floor. Its coils unwound.

Red ran up and started collecting back his arrows. He recovered only six this time. Preach ran over to Cat and began binding up his chest. Shorty sat holding a pad of cloth against his own wound.

Deep ophidian fang puncture marks in him oozed blood.

"Don't mind me." He said, ironically "I'll be alright. I'm as fit as a bull."

When they were bandaged and rested they moved out. Cat lead the way. The others carried the snake between them. It was only about twenty cubic feet of meat , but it should last them for a little while. With Boss and Cat pretty badly mauled and Shorty slightly cut up , they thought it wise to rest the rest of that day and night. They filleted and roasted , or dried the giant snake meat , using large amounts of the black rock that Angel had discovered.

They engorged themselves with as much fresh meat as they could , having several meals in their rest day.

"I'm getting sick of snake already." Angel confided.

"No kidding." Said Boss , lazily.

"Want to hear something really weird ?" She asked.

"What ?" He said , trying to find a more comfortable position.

"When we were attacking one another , Preach hit me once really hard with his mace , the first time , and it should have caved my head in , but it didn't . It just bounced off and I never felt a thing." She explained.

"You're a really hard headed woman." Boss teased.

"No , really. It was as if my head was made of solid rock." She said seriously.

"Sometimes we get so involved in battle we can't be sure what's happening anymore." Boss suggested.

"No. I didn't imagine this. Same as when I was under the slime creature and its mouths didn't hurt me anymore and when the rock jumped on me and it didn't crush me to death. Something else was

happening. Some sort of magic kept me from harm. I want to find out what that was. I want to learn how to do it ." Angel enthused.

"You want to learn how to do it ?" Cat butted in , his keen ears having picked up only the last statement of the conversation. "Hell I could teach you that !"

"Not 'THAT' , butthead ." Angel dismissed .

"Hey , Cat ." Red called , "Your watch ."

"Sais who ?" Cat mumbled , walking over to Red and they had a quiet chat about something.

Now that Preach had done all of the healing he could for the day he was exhausted and sound asleep. Shorty was nodding off.

Angel finally allowed herself to be healed . Preach said he had caught it just in time to remove any permanent disfigurement.

She could speak comfortably now that the swelling in her jaw was removed.

"I think there's some sort of conspiracy going on ." Angel noted.

"What do you want to do when we get out of here ?" Boss asked.

"You mean if ." Angel corrected.

"Well ?" He pressed.

"I want to have a bath ." She replied.

"Very ambitious." He quipped. "What about the future ?"

"I plan to live one day at a time." She said. "But eventually I want to learn more spells , stronger magic."

"Why ?" He asked , earnestly.

"Because it's there." She answered , frivolously, before answering properly. "Magic fascinates me. I can't get enough of it or learn enough about it. It's my obsession." She explained. "My first love ."

"Is it the power ?" He queried.

"Maybe. The feeling you get when you make something happen. When it works it's suddenly worth all of the hard work you put into it. What I can do now is so small , so weak , but one day I'll learn to move mountains, cause hurricanes , or stop them , grow crops or wither them."

"Sounds like you want to be a God ." Boss accused .mockingly.

"Maybe." She considered , seriously. "Eventually."

"To me you are already a Goddess ." He said , gushingly.

"Can't we just be friends ?" She begged. "Do I have to put up with this, this Sickness of yours ?"

"I can't help it. You are my obsession." He confessed.

"Today. Who will it be tomorrow ?" She demanded.

"You are cruel." He said , sullenly .

"I don't mean to be." She said , apologetically. "But I know how it works. When you're young you think you're in love , for a while ,

then it passes. Someone else comes along and it changes. The one you love turns out to be different to what you thought they were , or they change . Everything gets ruined and it hurts. It hurts for a very long time. Is it really worth a week of pleasure for a month of pain ?”

“It’s not like that for me. I’m only eighteen years old . I never felt this way about anyone before. Anyway ...” He said , running out of arguments. “Nothing ventured , nothing gained .”

“Nothing lost either .” Said Angel.

If it seemed that she had a lot of experience for a fifteen year old it was all second hand, from observing her mother and her succession of ‘stepfathers’ .

“You’re too smart for me .” He said. “But are you sure ? Nothing lost ? Sure , nothing lost , only love , that’s all. What’s it all about if not love ? Love is the strongest magic I know. Don’t they teach you that ? Those mages of yours ?”

“Well , anyway.” She said , reticently . “I don’t want to talk about it. Not here. Not now. Not yet . OK !”

“Fine, deny yourself.” He said , resignedly . “I’ll wait.”

“Don’t wait.” She said . “I’ll only end up hurting you. Put it right out of your mind. Promise me.”

“I can’t make such a promise.” He insisted.

“Don’t then. Just don’t chase me . I told you , I don’t want to hear anymore of this , didn’t I ? Don’t bring it up again.” She walked away in a huff.

With her experience of relationships , her mothers that is , you couldn’t blame her for being a little afraid of getting involved. She was very young and was yet unused to the attentions of men. Boss’s position was different. His parents had loved one another for as long as he could remember and seemed destined to remain together ‘til death. To him love worked out that way , or was supposed to. For now the subject rested amongst the bric-a-brac of the adventuring life.

It was not until late the next day , in the traveller’s estimation , that they resumed their trek. They had a good supply of meat , which had proven not instantly poisonous , and had collected several vials of oil, from cooking the snake.

They had come upon several sections of caverns without an inherent light source and were forced to try ‘snake oil’ in their lamps. It burned adequately. They presently moved through miles of tunnels which were dark. They took this as a sign that they were near the surface. Angel had lost her amazing abilities to state distances underground and the communication with things of rock would gradually fade out of existence.

MYCONID

They came to a cavern at the entrance to which stood a large mushroom. It was about nine feet tall and had a cap of about the same diameter. As they approached it shook its cap and a cloud of spores filled the air. They soon found themselves choking on spores, despite all precautions they could take. Then things became very strange.

Almost immediately a dark shape emerged from a tunnel a little way ahead, bellowed loudly and, head down, charged.

Hitting Shorty with its long horns, it knocked him to the ground. Shorty sank into the blackness of oblivion.

The ground beneath Boss's feet turned to water. Suddenly he was sinking in a stream. Giant claws closed around him. He was being crushed again. He could not stand the pain. He could not draw breath. His lungs bursting, he lost consciousness.

Red felt something peculiar happening to him. His arms lengthened and broadened and sprouted feathers. His face elongated and formed itself into a beak. He became a bird. Some kind of hawk. He took to the air. The cavern roof opened up into a bright steely grey sky. He soared over a fantastic landscape of orange glowing trees. He could make out tiny details of the ground below him.

There an archer stood, his bow strung. He let an arrow fly. It came closer and closer to the bird, with amazing speed.

Red felt the arrow pierce him through. He nose-dived. His wings retracted. He began to spin helplessly. The ground, whirlpooling beneath him, rapidly approached. He crashed onto the ground and everything went dark and very silent.

In the corridor Preach, Cat and Angel stood choking on the fine dust of the mushroom man. Shorty gave a mighty cry and drew his sword. He swung wildly at the empty air and then flew backwards, as if hit by some invisible opponent. He fainted dead away.

Boss let out a strange cry and lay on the floor with his arms flailing. He too passed out. Red began to flap his arms sinuously. Then he spun around faster and faster until he fell to the ground, panting and lost consciousness.

The mushroom appeared to grow. No. It was walking towards them. It shook its cap once more and fresh spores seeded the air. Cat, Angel and Preach stood dumbfounded as they each heard a strange voice inside their heads.

"Go back." It seemed to say. "There is nothing for you here. Do not invade our world. The way to your world lies behind you."

They each received a picture of a place where several ways meet. They knew which path to take.

“Thank you , mushroom man .” Angel mouthed , but could not tell if it understood her.

He shook his cap. “Others will come soon. If you are still here you will die.” A cloud of spores drifted off into the cavern from which he had come.

With difficulty they dragged the three warriors further down the passage. After a couple of minutes and a hundred feet of dragging the men came to. They were groggy and unsure of what had happened. Each told their own fantastic story.

“You were subdued by the mushroom men’s magic.” Preach explained.

“We must leave , quickly , or they will kill us .”

“They know the way out .” Said Angel.

“Can we be sure ?” Cat wondered. “They say ‘we’ll kill you’. Why should they help us ?”

“They just want to get us out of their territory.” Angel supposed.

“So why should they help us ? It’s to their advantage to send us to our deaths , then nobody knows where their territory is.” Cat explained.

“I don’t believe they are as evil as you seem to be.” Angel castigated.

“Me ? Evil !” Said Cat , ingenuously . “Preach is way more evil than I am .”

“I’m afraid you may be right .” Angel admitted. “But his being worse doesn’t make you any better.”

“Oh yeah , and you’re so perfect aren’t you .” Cat snided.

“Quit it , Cat or I might have to teach you some manners .” Boss threatened.

“What , you want me to slit you again ?” Cat challenged.

“We don’t have time for this right now , we’d better move.” Red nodded down the corridor towards the lair of the mushroom men. At the edge of the lamplight stood at least ten shadowy figures , the outlines of mushroom men.

“Just leaving .” He waved back at them dismissively.

Our heroes turned and hurried away.

In his backpack Cat carried a piece of snakeskin three feet wide and fully eighteen feet long . He had insisted upon cutting it very carefully and keeping it intact. Angel had collected two huge snake fangs and a pair of snake eyes. Apart from her normal gear she also had her pack almost brimming with the black rock which burns. Preach had a pack brimming with fungi and dried lower plants , some meant to be eaten , others as healing herbs and some just as

interesting specimens. Boss and Shorty carried packs almost full of cooked , smoked and or dried snake meat. Red's pack was left almost empty, in case anything interesting should be found along the way.

Despite Boss's lack of armour he still insisted on heading the party. This arrangement was tactically stupid. Cat could have been more use up front , since he had some tracking ability and a trained eye for tricks and traps. Red may have been more use up front for his hunting abilities. By the time that the whole party had passed by any natural game was well out of the way.

Who among them knew any better? Boss had been badly beaten about at the beginning of every battle. There was nothing to be learned from being constantly injured. The others had all gained much valuable experience along the way . Boss's only experience consisted of taking a lot of punishment. Were it not for Preach calling upon AGNI for healing each of the party would have been incapacitated for weeks after each serious injury. Broken ribs and jaws don't heal overnight.

The combined healing powers of Preach's prayers and the orb now made it possible for two or three people to be healed back from seriously discomforted to reasonably sound in a single day.

Without this they could easily all have perished or be lost , too crippled to move, deep underground and totally out of food and water. Wounds , left untended , would not necessarily heal at all but could get worse and fester and lead to serious infection.

Now things were looking up. They found new optimism in the hope that they would soon be back above the ground again. They even began to grow more civil to one another , and to grow more careless, with each passing step.

PECH

"Clink , clunk , tink , plunk ." Came a sound to their ears. Then it stopped. After about a minute it reappeared . "Plink , clank, crack." And again it stopped. This continued in a similar vein with increasing intensity for quite some time.

Eventually , they entered a chamber where a solitary dwarf sized creature stood , facing a wall , wielding a pick. It was so intent upon its task that , at first , it did not notice them .

"Chack !" It struck at something in the rock before it.

Boss had stepped forwards , seen the sight and beckoned for the others to stop. Now he edged forwards , slowly , weapon drawn. The others drew closer and Preach moved forwards a few steps to

throw the light further into the cavern , as Boss was approaching the edge of the light .

“Smack, wallop .” Went the pick and stopped abruptly.

The small man turned. He had finally noticed the growing light as his own shadow had appeared before him. He turned swiftly , pick raised in a defensive posture. The creature wore no armour. His skin was deathly pale. His head was topped with red-brown hair and chin lined with a beard but more startling were his large , pupil-less eyes. He gave a high pitched squeal and raised his arm in front of them , as if the dull lantern glow stabbed at them painfully.

“Puhutteko Kobol ?” He shouted.

“Kylla .” Shorty replied , hesitantly.

“Hyvaa Paivaa .” It responded. “Hauska tutustua .”

The adventurers were beginning to understand why employers were interested in guards who spoke exotic languages. You never know when or where they might come in handy. Shorty’s grasp of this , his only none spemen language was tenuous and the big man guessed that this thing spoke it equally badly. Yet somehow they understood one another.

“He says he’s pleased to meet us .” Shorty announced , proud to know , for a change , something that these other smart arses didn’t.

“I doubt that very much .” Cat assayed. “What language ?”

“Kobold .” Shorty said , with pride.

“Then he’s probably evil .” Cat decided.

“I speak it .” Said Shorty , insulted.

“Tata tieta, olkaa hyva.” The short figure gestured.

“He wants us to approach him .” Shorty interpreted.

“Suuri kuuma huono .” It attempted.

“It says , big heat bad .” Shorty transliterated. It was only the fact that they both spoke the language so atrociously that allowed this exchange.

“The lantern .” Angel intuited. “It’s too light . It hurts his eyes.”

“Could be a trick , to put us in the dark .” Cat warned.

“Turn it backwards .” Angel suggested.

The lantern now shed its cone of light away from the creature.

They walked slowly towards it.

“Valitan , mutta en pida sii ta.” It called.

“He doesn’t like the light .” Shorty transposed.

“Meilla on kora kiire .” Shorty said , tentatively. “Missa on Um ulkouolella ?”

The creature’s already wide eyes opened even wider.

“Ulkopulella ! Drau Ben ! Udenfor ! Ylos .” It pointed up.

“A couple of words I don’t understand .” Shorty said then “Up .”

“One is goblin for outside .” Said Red.

“The other is orcan for the same thing.” Boss affirmed.

“Missa ?” Shorty repeated , gesturing towards the various exits.

“Voitteko nayttaa minulle , jotakin parempaa !”

“Olen eksesissaa .” It said , sadly , shrugging its shoulders.

“It claims it doesn’t know.” Said Shorty. By now they were hovering close to the beast in their cocoon of light.

“Someone should watch our backs , this could be a trap.” Preach advised.

“I’ll go .” Said Cat. “Nothing interesting here anyway .”

He walked to the far wall where he could see anything entering the cavern from either side and readied his bow.

The little man walked up to Angel and took her hand.

“You are stone friend .” He communicated. “Your friend has died. You spoke with Grandfather Stone. You are honoured by my kind. I am humble stone-worker. I wish I could help you. I know nothing of the place with no roof, above the rocks. Go with grace, Ground-walker.”

“Go with grace, Rock-child.” She projected , instinctively.

The others saw the little critter take Angel’s hand and the two of them stood , motionless, staring blankly into space, for a very long time. A similar thing had happened when she claimed to be communicating with her rocks. Both Petrock and the Rock Lord had had this affect upon her.

Eventually they parted hands. She came out of her trance-like state.

“He can tell us nothing .” She said , sadly.

“Perhaps he lies.” Cat called , from across the cavern.

“Stone children do not lie .” She said , firmly.

“How do you know ?” Cat rebutted.

“Not in the sacred language of the stones.” She clarified . “There is no word for lie in that language.”

“In the parlance of rouges there is no word for steal .” Cat claimed.

“I’m sure you would know , Cat .” Said Shorty with a grin.

“Shall we go.” Boss offered. “We can’t hang around here all day.”

The Rockworker stood and watched them recede , shaking his head. “Strange creatures .” He thought . “No interest in stone whatsoever.” He turned back to his preoccupation , a very thin band of rock buried deeply within so many layers. “Tap, tap, clunk !” His musical pick wielding began again. He was working very carefully , not wishing to violate the spirit or the form of the rocks . A large chunk of rock fell away and he caught it with his off hand. Half buried within it a tiny glitter of light revealed the top of a small diamond. He carefully crumbled the rock around it. It was a rough shaped , clear stone about the size of the top of a

man's thumb. The Rockworker peered into it. It was almost perfect and what flaws there were would not appear in its final shape. He mapped out its cutting and grinding in his head. Very quickly he knew every facet, every surface and detail of the finished product perfectly. "This one will do nicely." He thought. "Strange creatures never even asked me about the stone or how my work was progressing. Only interested in outside?" He dropped the diamond into his pouch to join the others. A dozen other precious stones rested there, unmolested by the uncaring intruders. "I estimate this place is good for another fifty." He appraised and went off to survey some more territory. What he really wanted to find was some mithril or adamantite, things of true value and rarity. Still, his king would be pleased with a few more trinkets and the journey so far had been well worth the trouble. Our travellers travelled on, oblivious to missed opportunities and untapped fortunes of the deep. Their preoccupation was with escaping its dark confines. Onward they travelled and, seemingly, upwards.

GIANT RATS

They entered a chamber where they were set upon by a number of giant rats, which tried to mug them. Perhaps it was a combination of the rats' long hunger and the fact that the adventurers wreaked of snake-meat.

Boss took a nasty bite. Shorty cut one rat in half. Preach pummelled one into the ground. Cat skewered one. Angel felled one with her staff, breaking its back. Red killed the last one with a clean sweep, making a very quick, clean sweep of it for the heroes.

"We killed one each and you got bitten." Shorty told Boss. "We'll have to change your name to lucky."

Boss was not amused. "I'll have better luck next time." He hoped. After what seemed several hours of travelling they stopped for a short break. Boss and Shorty watched before and behind.

SANDLING

Shorty suddenly found himself half buried in coarse, very abrasive sand, which appeared to be trying to wear him away to nothing. It literally tore the flesh off of him. He gave a great wailing howl of

pain and attempted to rise from the weight of sand which engulfed him.

Shorty thrashed at the sand mass with his sword but it flowed around the blade . Still the big guy had the notion that this was some kind of creature which was attacking him.

Certain masses of sand moved as though they were limbs. While the others arrived Shorty shouted out. "This sand creature is attacking me. Get it off !"

His allies ran up and attempted to hack at it with no effect whatsoever.

Except for Red. He stood back and loosed two arrows into the limb-like extensions which were forming. Both arrows struck home and seemed to have some effect , for the limbs stopped , briefly , and then receded.

"I think it can be hurt." Red cried. "It doesn't like arrows much." "Don't use arrows in melee." Shorty shouted . "Look what happened before."

Boss was chopping at it ineffectively. Shorty thrust his blade deeply into the thickest part of it , a part that only he could reach , since it engulfed him. Preach had no hope of penetrating. Hitting sand with a mace seemed somewhat ineffectual. Cat and Angel were also having no apparent affect upon it. Red's next shot hit the pile of sand , sunk in and thundered into Shorty's leg.

"Argh ! Red you idiot. I told you to stop that !" Shorty gasped.

Red continued , unfazed , convinced that this was the only way to affect the monster. He calmly reloaded his bow and sent another arrow flying. This time it carried right into the centre of the mass of sand.

The sand stopped moving. It lay , a lifeless mound of sand. Shorty found himself able to pull himself free. He hobbled towards Red. Red took off at speed.

"You give me that damned bow. I'll break the stupid thing around your neck !" Shorty bellowed.

"Fine ." Said Red "Don't thank me for saving your life. If you hadn't been in the way I would have killed it sooner ."

Boss walked over and took hold of Shorty's shoulder.

"He did save your life." Said Boss. "How much longer do you think you would have survived in there ?"

The entire bottom half of Shorty's armour was soaked in his own blood. The others sat him down and began to pull the chain mail leggings off of him. He had no skin at all on any part of his legs. It was all one gaping , open wound. Shorty passed out with the pain and the shock of it.

“The glamorous life of an adventurer.” Cat whispered in Angel’s ear.

She jumped half out of her skin. “Don’t sneak up on people !” She shouted , swatting at him ineffectively . “And don’t say things like that either.”

Boss looked up from swabbing Shorty’s wounds.

“Is he bothering you ?” He asked , concernedly .

“No .” She said , quickly , not wishing to provoke a fight .

“We could use all the help we can get down here.” Preach suggested. “I don’t know if even magic is up to this.”

“Then start praying , quickly , before you lose him .” Cat advised.

“You’re a callous so and so .” Angel said , angrily .

“So and so .” Cat said , teasingly . “Wash your mouth out with soap. I’ve never been so insulted in my life .”

“I think what she means” Said Boss , coolly . “Is you’re a heartless bastard.”

Preach was intoning a prayer and , once again , invoking the powers of the orb , which he didn’t believe himself worthy enough to use.

“O mighty AGNI , I do most humbly apologise for begging this favour of you .” Cat said , mockingly.

The others looked daggers at him.

Red was collecting his arrows . There were only four of them left in good condition. That includes the five that Boss had given him in the cavern of the Derridyn .

“None of you guys seem to use your bows much .” He began , uncertainly. “I wonder if you could lend me a couple of arrows ?”

“Ask Shorty when he comes round .” Cat said , amused. “I’m sure he’d be glad to oblige.”

Preach finished his ritual prayer and laid the orb on Shorty’s body. To his amazement the wounds healed up as if they had never been . The skin on Shorty’s legs was completely replaced and the arrow wound left only a faint white dot. Shorty became conscious immediately.

“You see.” Said Angel , reverently . “Your god deems you worthy.”

“What are you looking at ?” Said Shorty to Angel. “We’re not allowed to look at you .”

“I was just ... em .” Angel stammered , red faced.

Shorty burst out laughing.

“The look on your face.” He chuckled. “I got you a beauty.”

“I told you, you should have left him dead.” Cat said , deadpan.

“What dead ? I was far from deadWasn’t I .” Shorty asked.

“This far .” Said Boss , holding up a thumb and forefinger close together.

“That’s what you say .” Said Shorty , dismissively. “Now where’s Red ? I want to wring his bloody neck .”

Red , ever vigilant , had decided that someone should keep watch and set about doing so.

“He saved your life.” Angel asserted , pushing Shorty back down as he began to rise.

Shorty grabbed her and pulled her on top of him,

“I can wrestle you instead , madam , if that’s what you prefer.” He began to tickle her.

“Stop.... that....get offyou oaf .” She said , between giggles.

“Hey , she’s ticklish guys . You know what that means ?” He said with a wink.

“Don’t be disgusting !” She snapped.

“Just a bit of horseplay .” He excused , letting her go.

“When you’re done.” Red said , from across the cavern. “You’d better come and look at this.”

“You ! Come back here , Red . I want you .” Shorty jumped up and raced after him. Red took a hint and raced into the next chamber. He had no desire to mix it with his travelling companion , not out of fear but for ethical and practical reasons.

Shorty ran after him. When he reached the next chamber he stopped dead in his tracks. There , covering the floor was a seething , writhing mass of sand. Dozens , maybe even hundreds of very small sand creatures covered virtually the entire floor.

Suddenly he remembered the extreme pain of being slowly worn away by abrasion. Thoughts of chastising Red all but forgotten.

“Red , where are you ?” He asked , worriedly. He had visions of his companion somewhere underneath that writhing mass , scrubbed down to the very bones.

“Don’t worry , I’m right behind you .” Red spoke , from a small alcove. Red had his bow nocked and cocked.

“I’m not after you now.” Shorty said , calmly. “Look at these little bastards. I’m not leaving here while one of these lives to grow up , are you with me ?”

“Sure .” Said Red. “Go ahead. I’m right behind you .”

“You fire that thing around me I’ll break your neck , I swear.”

Shorty warned.

“No sweat.” Said Red.

The others arrived as Shorty began cutting his way, systematically , across the room.

“Better watch out , there may be more grown ups around.” Red warned.

“Then you’d better bleedin’ well watch my back.” Shorty declared. Shorty slashed and stabbed at the sand for an hour. He finished , lathered in sweat and sore all over. He still could not be sure that all of the sand creatures were dead , but there were no more that he could see moving. The others just sat and watched him.

“Are you through now ?” Angel asked.

“Aye , damned nigh through .” He admitted.

“Here , take a drink.” Said Cat. “It’s the last drop of wine.”

“That’s very civil of you.” Shorty accepted.

“Good for what ails you. DIONYSUS’S blessing.” Cat advertised.

After resting for a while they moved on.

“So you guys are a big help .” Shorty observed.

“We thought you were enjoying yourself.” Cat sneered.

They travelled on until they came to a large cavern , so large that they couldn’t see from end to end. Things began falling off of the roof .

Boss was hit by one. It attached itself to his face and began to gnaw at him. It covered his eyes so he could not see.

“Get it off me !” He shouted and tried to chop at it himself.

Shorty rushed around and tried to swing at it. He was too worried about cutting Boss’s face off and swung wide. Preach hit the creature with his mace, but not very hard. Cat started to cut the thing off with his dagger.

SCUM CREEPER

“Let’s get out of here first .” Angel cried. “There may be more of these things than we can handle.”

They began to lead Boss out of the chamber. Cat felt something bite into his leg. Heeding Angel’s advice, he didn’t stop to investigate. When they were out of the chamber they stopped and Boss cut the creature off of his face. Cat began to prize a similar beast off of his leg.

They were blobs of slug like creatures with hard , rasping mouths. Preach belted the one on Cat’s leg. Cat finished cutting the creature away. The adventurers moved a little further off before stopping to tend their wounds. A dull grey light seemed to pervade the passageway.

“What is that ?” Angel questioned.

“No more problems please .” Shorty pleaded.

“Turn out the lantern.” Angel requested.

“No need . It has a hood on it.” Boss reminded.

Preach shut the hood on the lantern.

“Isn’t it a little bit light up there ?” Angel asked.

There was a tiny point of a faint glow further up the corridor.

“Shall we check it out ?” Shorty offered.

Angel looked around. Preach was tending to Boss and Cat.

“Red , you can keep an eye on our rear ?” She asked.

“Love to .” Said Red “That’s been my position all along .”

“OK , Shorty I guess it’s you and me .” Angel accepted ,

ungrammatically . “Lead ahead .”

They moved up the tunnel and came to a cavern which opened out into daylight . The cavern appeared to be empty of all signs of occupation.

“This is too good to be true .” Angel said , suspiciously. “It can’t be over this easily.”

“Better check it out thoroughly .” Shorty suggested.

They explored the cave and then took a brief peek outside. The sun appeared to be setting.

“Maybe it’s rising .” Shorty said , uncertainly.

“Only one way to find out .” Angel declared.

“What’s that ?” Shorty said , thickly.

“We wait and see .” Angel sighed , amazed at his lack of intelligence.

They stayed hidden and looked out for signs of movement , whilst the sun set. They saw none. Not a hint of danger anywhere for the first time in what must have been weeks and felt like decades.

“Gee , we’re through .” Angel exclaimed , with a deep sigh of relief .

“I didn’t even know we’d been together.” Shorty let out one of his lame jokes.

“Shorty , don’t be a pain .” She scolded.

“There’s one kind of pain I’d like to share with you .” Shorty said suggestively.

“Yes , the sun is definitely setting.” Angel stated , to get off of the awkward topic. “Now let’s get back . It looks like”

He pulled her to him and kissed her hard on the lips. To his surprise she didn’t fight him off. The move had taken her so completely off guard and at such a moment , she had no time to think or react at all. It just happened . As they began to wrestle with each other they were both wrestling with their consciences. He had agreed to Red’s scheme not to make a play for her. She was determined not to break her vow to herself , not to get involved with any of the men she was adventuring with. It would be an extremely foolish thing to do , she knew. Even as she succumbed to him , she knew. In the elation of that moment , escaping from the depressing underdark , nothing logical registered. He went to

second base. She didn't struggle . She had no will to resist at that moment. It should have been Boss she was with , she thought.

Minutes later it was over , as quickly as it had started. He was her first male intruder. If he had known that he was her first he might not have entered into it. For her the expected pain and bleeding that she had heard about turned out to be hardly anything. For all these years what had she been so afraid of , she wondered.

"Oh you gods , what have we done ?" She sighed.

"I think it's called ..." He began to lampoon her.

She covered his mouth "No one must ever know about this. Promise." She insisted.

"I won't be the one to tell ." He said , with a wink. "We'd better get dressed , we'll be missed." He was amazed that she had given in so easily. She didn't come across as a girl who was easy.

She regretted bitterly what she had done. All her danger signals were sounding at once , too late now though to be of any use. She was afraid that she had fallen in love with the great lummoX . How could she live the rest of her days with a clown who was as thick as old boots ? Surely a few weeks alone with him would drive her insane.

"Thanks." He said "That was nice ."

She rolled her eyes and drew in a deep breath to keep from screaming.

Pretend that he didn't say that , hope that he didn't mean it. Did he say 'nice' ? He obviously didn't mean to say that. He just had difficulty expressing himself , in words at least. 'stuff it I shouldn't have done that' she thought. Now she was no better than her mother. She had vowed never to be that way.

They returned to the others. She hoped , beyond hope , that they could not see anything different about her . The miscreant pair told the others about the cave and the sun and how they had waited to see if it was rising or setting.

"Then the sunset looked so 'nice' ." She emphasised that word strangely. "We sat and watched until the light faded."

As she said this that way she fancied that Cat gave her the strangest look. 'Now I'm going to start imagining things.' She thought .

Cat was not the one who noticed the strange inflection. Red , who sat out of her line of sight , also had his curiosity piqued.

Suddenly she realised , it was the first time that she had been securely alone with any one of them. What would happen when she was alone with one of the others ? Would she lay down for each of them in turn ?

"My goddess ." She thought "I'm turning into a whore or , even worse, my mother." Now she blushed , imagining that all could

see what kind of girl she was. "I knew I would regret this." She thought

"I just never realised how soon ."

"Any clue as to where we are ?" Said Boss , mercifully breaking her train of thought .

"We couldn't tell ." She stammered.

"You didn't happen to notice any one thousand foot cliff behind you or anything like that ?" He prompted.

"No . We saw no cliffs did we Shorty ?" She could not look Boss in the eye as she spoke. With his eyes upon her she felt as though she might explode. She looked for support , wondering why she was answering all of the questions . She looked and Shorty was sound asleep. Obviously she had been too much for him.

"All the fighting must have worn him out , poor bugger." Cat said , in sinister tones.

Cat and Angel were on first watch , Boss and Red on second and Shorty and Preach on third.

Some time into their watch Cat approached her.

"Angel" He whispered "I think I hear something ."

"Where ?" She asked.

"Towards the entrance ." He informed .

"We should wake the others ." She suggested , sensibly.

"No . Let them sleep , but we ought to investigate. I'll sneak on up there. You come up a little way behind . Just keep me in your sights." He said. "If I get in trouble you can alert the others."

It sounded like a reasonable plan.

"Alright , but be careful ." She warned.

"Hey , this is Cat you're talking to . I'm not one of these clod hopping warrior types that stomp along tripping over themselves."

After his little speech he set off along the corridor. Ever so often he would stop and beckon her on to the next safe station. She was impressed with the way that he moved , so silently , just like his namesake . He looked for all the world like a cat on the prowl. He stopped once more at the edge of the exit cave. He watched for a while. He certainly was being as cautious as he had promised to be. Then he beckoned for Angel to stay put and disappeared into the cavern. She waited ,breathlessly , for several minutes. She began to worry. Had something eaten him by now ?

She wondered if she should follow him or race back to the others.

"Why should I worry about Cat ?" She thought . "I don't really even like him do I . Or do I ?" Confronted with the thought of suddenly losing him she had to admit that deep down inside she had a certain... No. She wouldn't even think it. He had a certain rough charm . His very abrasiveness had an appeal for her.

Probably it was an act to hide his true feelings . Some men were like that . Nobody could really be such an arsehole , could they ? There had been moments when he had let his true feelings show. For just a moment or two he had been almost nice to her. Perhaps he liked her in his own way . She tried not to even think about it. The harder she tried the more she thought about it. Then he reappeared and her heart leapt into her mouth. He was safe. Everything was OK. Or was it ? He beckoned her on. She had certainly heard no noises. She walked towards him. He returned to a vigilant aspect.

She crept up to him “What is it ?” She whispered.

“Whatever it was it’s gone now.” He said , keeping up the pretence.

“Then we can go back .” She breathed a sigh of relief.

He caught hold of her arm. “Not so fast .” He said , a little abruptly. “I mean , let’s just sit here and chat for a while .”

Her internal alarm systems began buzzing again.

“What are you up to ?” She asked , accusingly.

“There’s a moon out there.” He said. “Let’s go see the moon .”

“No way.” She said , urgently.

“Calm down . What’s your problem ? I only want to talk to you , that’s all .” He said , soothingly.

“I think Cat is not a good name for you. I think snake suits you better.” She said , pointedly.

“Yes, I like that. I do have quite an impressive snake. You want me to introduce you to it ? Come and see the moon . Or isn’t it as interesting to you as the sunset ?” He said , accusingly .

“You know .” She said, her resolve worn away.

He looked thoughtful for a second and then let out a rare, wry smile. “I do now .” He admitted.

“Well , it’s none of your business. It’s none of anybody’s business. If you must know I wish I hadn’t . It was just something that happened. It was just a moment” She would have gone on but , suddenly she found his lips pressed against hers , his hands caressing her body.

This time she struggled as hard as she could. She thought of screaming out . Then she thought of the others arriving , and of swordplay , and of fatal wounds caused by her virtue , or lack of it . She didn’t want to be the cause of such violence. It would break up her team. So she tried to fight him off. He would give up if she convinced him that she was really opposed to this. He wasn’t that much of a villain , she was certain. Then she was beginning to get aroused by all this. Adrenaline was pumping and she felt a tinge of excitement , along with the anger and frustration. After quite a long

time of this wrestling stalemate she managed to push him away from her . She grabbed her staff and threatened him with it.

“You’d better keep away from me .” She said , menacingly.

“You don’t want to hit me with that .” He said in a soothing voice.

“I mean we’re partners , right . We’ve risked our lives together.”

“You’re risking your life right now , buddy .” Angel said , earnestly.

“Look , you put out for Shorty and not for me . Now how fair is that ?” He reasoned. “Shorty welched on our agreement. “

“What are you talking about ?” She asked , curious.

“Red came up with this idea to try to push you onto Boss, so we all agreed to lay off you .” He informed , eloquently.

“Don’t give me that .” She scoffed. “ You conniving little...”

“So , you don’t recognise the truth when you hear it.” Cat said , noncommittally.

“I wouldn’t believe you if you Well I’ll never believe anything you say , ever. You scum... you ... you’re lower than a snake’s belly.”

At this she broke into tears.

“Well erwe’d better get back then , shall we .” Cat said , falteringly.

“I can’t go back like this .” She said between sobs.

“I’m not leaving you here alone .” He said . concerned.

“Well , wait then .” She blustered . “But don’t come near me.”

Soon she settled down and felt confident that she could stay that way.

“Come on then. Let’s get back , before we’re missed.” She said.

“I’m warning you , you say a word and you’re toast. “

“As if I’m going to casually announce that I nearly raped you.” He said. “and admit that I failed.” Moments later he spoke again. “I know you really like me . I felt the heat in you back there.”

“Let’s drop it OK!” She turned on him “I’m rapidly losing patience with you.”

He grabbed her. “Look, I’m sorry OK ! I didn’t mean to , you know. I just thought if you ... you know... with Shorty then you might ... There I go again , makin’ a mess of things. I’m trying to apologise. Damn it ! and I’m only making it worse .”

She thought she detected a faint tinge of sincerity in his words , not a lot, but some , which was quite exceptional for Cat.

“I know you didn’t mean any harm , and I know you don’t understand why I would reject you, but you have to understand how easily these things can degenerate into something ugly. That’s why , like I said , I made a mistake with Shorty. It shouldn’t have happened. I can’t erase that mistake by making another one with

you, can I ? I'm sorry if you think it's unfair , but what do you want me to do ? Lay down for all of you ?”

“I'm game .” He said , devoid of diplomacy.

“You really are incorrigible .” She complained.

“And you love it .” He quipped.

She made no comment.

This time they heard noises. Little clanking noises , as of things moving in armour , and low grunts and growls. It sounded , to them , like goblins approaching.

HOBGOBLINS

“Look out ! Goblins !” Angel shouted at the top of her lungs and bolted forwards .

Cat watched her go and crept back silently , from shadow to shadow. The entire place became one big shadow , except for a faint glow ahead of her lantern .

“She's going to get herself caught.” He thought .

The others were asleep , their armour beside them . The small noises of the approaching enemy had not yet disturbed them .

They heard Angel's cry , amid their fitful slumbers , and then they awoke . Boss , Shorty and Preach sprang up and clutched at their weapons . Red sort of half awoke and turned over . Boss rushed over and kicked him .

“Get up , Red .” He hissed and then he rushed to the entrance of their bedroom cave .

The Hobgoblins , for hobgoblins they were , heard the shout ahead of them . A voice . A high pitched spemen voice . ‘A female’ , they thought . ‘No threat’ , they thought . They fell silent , as silent as Hobgoblins could , and moved cautiously , as cautiously as hobgoblins ever had . Which meant that they moved quickly , weapons drawn , but did not actually speak .

They saw a single spemen , armed with a longsword , covering the mouth of a cave . He was wearing no armour , thus he was no threat .

‘The female must be inside’ , they thought and did not look for her further . They went straight into the attack , well six of them did . Their valiant leader held back . His job, after all, was to tell the others to fight .

Two hobgoblins could attack the spemen at once . The others stood behind, waiting for a chance to get into serious bloodletting .

Once again Boss found himself taking damage . One hobgoblin sword cut into him . Trying to battle two foes at once , Boss did no damage himself .

Shorty , Preach and Red took advantage of the time that Boss bought them to put on their armour .

Angel came galloping down the corridor . The Hobgoblin leader saw her and moved into place , so that she could not attack his preoccupied troops from behind . He took up a defensive stance and growled at her aggressively . She was about ten feet away from him , staff in one hand , lantern in the other , all out of breath . She planted her staff in the debris of the cavern floor .

The hobgoblin bared his sharp fangs at her . She coolly placed her lantern on the floor . This meant kneeling down , a tricky manoeuvre in a robe which was not pinned properly . She deliberately squatted in as unladylike a manner as she could contrive to , letting her knees come apart and a wide gap open above her breasts .

‘Take a good look’ , she thought , ‘It’s going to be your last .’

He stood and ogled her and drooled .

She had never seen a goblin this big and ugly before . She didn’t know a hobgoblin from a bar of soap , neither did she care much . She heard the sounds of battle before her , caught glimpses of Boss fighting with just two of the creatures . At least they had not arrived in the cave quickly enough to slit everyone’s throats in their sleep .

The hobgoblin was enjoying his commanding view and in no hurry to attack . He thought , perhaps , that a little rapine would be more appropriate than simple murder . In short , he just couldn’t believe his luck . To him Angel looked like an angel compared to the females that he was used to . He knew of spemen women , so soft and mewling . He was going to take great pleasure in her . But first came the overpowering . He stood with a great , ugly , stupid grin on his face and sheathed his sword . He didn’t want to cut short his pleasure . Corpses proved so boring as sexual partners , they so very rarely struggle . He had never had a spemen before .

She had begun to uncoil from her squatting position . He didn’t know what she was up to . He didn’t much care . He was a hobgoblin warrior . She was no threat to him .

She rose and started making strange sounds and stranger gestures . He took no notice of her sinuously weaving arms . Perhaps some mating ritual , he thought .

Her chanting stopped as he lunged at her and threw his gangling arms around her in a bearhug . He squeezed her , hard , just to subdue and intimidate her . She felt the pain of his strength pressed

against her and then she touched him , laying the palm of her , half captured , hand against his groin .

He gave a sharp yelp , like a kicked dog , as the electrical energy coursed through him . His arms and legs went into spasms and he could not control them . His arms flung open and he was jolted back, his legs wobbly .

She felt a tingle of electricity which was not unpleasant . The exhilaration of controlling that much energy enthused her . Quickly she grabbed for her staff and wielded it .

“Come and get some more , honey !” She taunted , raspily , as she moved in and took a swipe at him .

He grabbed his sword and parried the blow . She was to have been a dalliance . Now she had made herself an enemy in earnest . ‘No more mister nice guy’ He thought . ‘kill first , use her after.’

She was bitterly disappointed that her spell didn’t kill him outright . Perhaps her batteries were running low . (PS , this was not her thought , her people did not know of electricity in the way that we do.)

For the next minute or so Boss battled the two hobgoblins and collected another injury . Cat arrived and joined in the fight against the hobgoblin leader with Angel . The leader began to be hard pressed and Angel managed to split open his head with her staff . He fell and the two adventurers beat him to death .

Two Hobgoblins noticed them , turned towards them and shouted . Shorty appeared behind Boss , followed by Red and Preach . This was too much for the hobgoblins , the odds were too even . The hobgoblins gave a startled cry and turned to flee . The pair which were closing in on Angel and Cat saw their brothers retreating and also spun around , taking to their heels .

Angel and Cat gave chase , finding the hobgoblins easy to run down. Both of the heroes hit the same hobgoblin from behind and brought him down . Shorty and Red chased and hit a second .

“Don’t let them get away .” Boss shouted . “They will return with an army of their kind .”

They chased the hobgoblins down and killed them one by one .

They returned to their temporary hideaway where Preach did his healing and they slept the rest of a peaceful night , save for those on watch .

In the morning , over a breakfast of snake and mushrooms , Boss sat next to Angel for a chat .

“Where’d you get to last night ?” He asked , bluntly .

“Cat said he heard something so we went to investigate .” She said , truthfully , just leaving out parts of the truth that Boss might not want to hear .

“I can excuse Cat but you are supposed to be intelligent .” He said , disapprovingly .

“What’s that supposed to mean ?” She challenged .

“You should have woken us up . Next time at least have the sense to leave one of us awake on guard .” He instructed .

“There isn’t going to be a next time .” She said , flatly .

“How do you mean ?” He queried .

“I’m not going on any more of Cat’s little wild goose chases .” She said , determinedly “Perhaps he imagines things . I certainly never heard anything .”

“Maybe it was a goblinish trick to lure our guards away so they can kill us in our sleep .” Boss suggested .

“Perhaps .” She agreed . “But , at any rate , I don’t want to be left on guard with him again .”

“That’s simple enough to arrange ,” said Boss “but why ?”

“I don’t particularly like him and I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw Shorty .” She confided . “And while we’re on the subject , I don’t want to left alone with Shorty either .”

“So what’s wrong with Shorty ?” Boss wondered .

“Nothing .” She said . “That’s the problem .”

“I don’t understand .” Boss said , bemused .

“I don’t want you to understand . Just trust me on this . O.K.” She said , a little flustered .

“So who do you trust ? Only me and Preach ?” Boss questioned .

“Preach . I’m beginning to think he is the worst of all .” She noted .

“In what way ?” Boss asked .

“He kills things that are tied up and helpless and he suggests that I should share myself out , like I’m a pack of rations or something .” She said , bitterly .

“He said that ?” Boss asked , amazed .

“Not in so many words , but he implied it .” She claimed .

“Maybe you misinterpreted .” Boss excused .

“Yeah , like he was speaking hypothetically .” She scoffed .

“So you don’t trust any of us ?” Boss evaluated .

“You I trust , more than any of the others .” She said , coyly . “But I don’t trust myself with you .” This last a whisper , almost to herself . She blushed and turned away .

“What was that ?” He asked , ingenuously .

“Oh , nothing >” She said weakly .

He moved and squatted down in front of her , moving her face so that she had no choice but to look into his eyes .

“No , I think it was something .” He challenged . “So say it so I can hear it .”

Her jaw dropped in disbelief and she could not answer his gaze .

“Leave me alone .” She said , deliberately .

“It’s just that I detest that , when someone mumbles something and then says it was nothing . If it’s nothing don’t say it .” He told her , gently .

“O.K.” She said , noncommittally . “Shall we go now ?”

“There’s Red .” Said Boss .

“Oh yeah , Red is OK .” She conceded . “I think , but then I used to think...” She stopped .

“What ?” He asked .

“Oh , nothing .” She said .

He fought back his exasperation . “Yeah .” He said , after a pause .

“Let’s go .”

WAY HOME

They found themselves in an eerie landscape . It was mainly a grassy plain but was dotted here and there with large boulders and patches of thick vegetation and occasional , solitary , stunted trees , their branches gnarled and twisted into threatening shapes . Most troublesome of all were thick patches of fog , which obscured sight and dampened clothing . Inbetween these patches were chilly wisps of vapour , like outstretched fingers and a general haze , which hung over the ground to a depth of three feet . It was like walking on a cloud .

They walked the morning , heading south , as the fog lifted . Their spirits were somewhat dampened with the realisation that they were still far from home and most likely in hostile territory . They travelled in the open , very much exposed from all sides . Fearing ambush , they kept as far away as they could from concealing boulders and thickets .

Their path was difficult , strewn with sharp stones and spiky plants , the ground variously hard and swampy . Here and there they caught glimpses of normal animals . Numerous birds flitted away from them as they passed . Small lizards scampered in the undergrowth along with the normal compliment of rodents . Deer and a bear were sighted at a distance .

RETCH PLANTS

At noon they sought a place in which to rest and eat . They spied a grove of strange looking trees , tall , palm like , these trees stood in a circle , their shade making a patch clear of the ubiquitous sea of grass , which obscured sight of anything less than three feet tall .

They approached cautiously . Cat crept forwards , disappearing below the level of the grass heads . He scouted around the clearing and found it empty of intruders . He then returned to the others , reporting that all was clear .

“If anything attacks we will have a good sixty feet in which to react ” He informed .

They approached the clearing . Closer up they could see that each palm bore clusters of up to a dozen large , purple fruit .

“Are these edible ?” Boss asked .

“I have never seen or heard of anything like them .” Preach admitted.

“Are they dangerous ?” Said Red .

“I don’t know .” Preach confessed .

“I’ll go and check them out .” Boss offered .

The travellers were standing about twenty metres before the grove . Their travels had made them suspicious of everything . Boss walked forwards and under the trees .

“They don’t seem to be attacking me .” He observed , wryly .

“They’re waiting for you to get in the middle .” Cat said , half in jest.

Boss walked to the middle of the clearing .

“Nothing .” He shrugged , turning to face his companions .

The others walked forwards to join him .

“Plop ! Splash !”

Two of the coconut sized squishy masses dropped down from the trees , splashing the five with sticky mucous pulp , which smelled like rotten meat.

One of the bombs landed right on Shorty’s head and he was plastered in the squishy mass .

They were through the line of trees now and into the clearing .

They ran forwards . The stench was overpowering .

They spent the next few minutes incapacitated , as their stomachs emptied . Thereafter they all felt decidedly weak and tired and every effort to remove the stench from them failed . At that point Cat regretted having polished off the last of his wine , which might have made a reasonable cleaning agent

“We should have kept some alcohol , it might have helped .” He managed , between retches

“That’s your solution to everything .” Said Preach .

They rested for an hour before anyone felt like doing anything .

They spent most of that time trying to scrape off pieces of sticky pulp[from their clothing and from themselves .

They tried bathing in a pool of water near the centre of the clearing , probably this sustained the palm-like trees . The smell would not leave them .

Meanwhile Boss made a fire and cooked a meal .

After eating and drying out they carried on their trek .

Some hours later the stench of them began to abate .

In the mid-afternoon they saw two figures approaching . At a distance it was not possible to accurately gauge their size . At first they seemed vaguely humanish . They stood straighter than goblins and their bodies were solid and bulky .

“They seem to be heading this way .” Said Shorty . “Perhaps we should make ourselves scarce . “

“There are only two of them .” Boss observed .

“Yes , but two of what ?” Red wondered . “And how dangerous might they be ?”

They decided to hide and there were lots of bushes and boulders to hide behind within easy reach .

The creatures in question turned out to be about ten feet tall . They were male , muscular and exceedingly mean looking . It seemed that they were aware of the area from which the travellers had disappeared . They looked for signs but failed to track individual party members to their hiding places in the uneven ground cover . The monsters spoke in loud growling voices in a language which sounded , to Red , similar to Goblin . He was unable , however , to make out specific words .

“Er vas der Elfes vielleicht !” One spake , crouching over a set of tracks .

“Elfes ich nicht gesehen .” The other replied .

“Spemechen bist oo ?” The one called . “Wir gefunden ze . You hear, leetle Spemen , we find you and zen we eat you, Yes .” He taunted .

“Yo not get away from as .”

They began searching , moving towards where Preach was hiding . Red broke cover . He was standing now on top of the large rock that he had been laying upon .

“Stand where you are !” He shouted . His bow was nocked and cocked and aiming right at them . “Leave this place and we will let you live .”

The massive creatures turned to face him .

“Yo any good vith dat sing ?” One said , sporting a wry smile upon his ugly face .

“Good enough .” Said Red . “And you are a very big target .”

“Vere you frenz are ?” The creature queried .

“Close enough to put a dozen arrows through your leathery hides .”
Red threatened .

“Him talk good , yes .” Said the other .

“Vat you vant ?” Asked the first .

“To travel in peace .” Red told him .

“Vie you come here ?” The ogre pressed .

“Travelling south .” said Red , shortly .

“Zis our place .” His antagonist told him . “Ve hunt here . You go anozzer vay . Yes .”

“We travel through . You will leave us alone .” Red challenged .

“You so brave leetle manz . Ve show big ‘spect . Ve over zere . You go zat vay . Keep zat vay , we let you live . Got it , leetle manz ?” The leader said, in conciliatory tones .

“Go then .” Said Red “Let there be no blood shed between us .”

“Ve go , you go . See you ‘gen , you die .” He turned slowly and the pair retreated the way they had come .

Red watched as the pair retreated they way they had come . After about forty metres their spokesman turned and shouted .

“You tell leetle frenz not follow .” pointing off into the bushes a little way to the side of the path .

“Who ?” Red puzzled .

“It’s me .” Said cat , waving from beside his covering bush .

“You try sneak us .” The one said . “Ve no like .”

“I was making sure . . .” Cat began .

“Make sure !” The tall one shouted loudly . “No make sure . You stay put or Groltar smash head in . Got it leetle manz !”

Cat was holding his bow with the arrow pointed down to the ground. He was about twenty metres from his opponent .

“You can’t be too careful , you know .” Cat said , tremblingly.

“You smart one , huh !” The large one said . “Save it for gobledies . I not gobledy . Ogre am I . You take my word .”

“Must be sneak thief .” Said the other . “Think like gobledy , sneak like gobledy .” He added , contemptuously .

The two ogres walked off .

From his vantage point Red watched them until they disappeared from view . He waved the others out of hiding .

“Better go before they come back .” Boss suggested .

“Why’d you do that Red ?” Asked Cat .

“I thought they were about to find Preach .’ He explained .

“It was either very brave or very foolish .” Boss commented .

“Or both .” Red agreed .

About an hour later the air was filled with blood curdling screams .

The huge , hulking brute of an ogre jumped out in front of them .

His slightly smaller companion leapt out behind them . The

adventurers were trapped in a narrow passage between two immense boulders .

The large ogre smashed into Boss , almost knocking him senseless . The other aimed a blow at Red , who managed to duck under it . Another blow pounded into Boss , who was sent reeling back . Shorty stepped up and slashed the culprit with his sword . Preach aimed his mace at the ogre's knee and hit solidly . The ogre's kneecap was so hard his blow bounced off and Preach felt a stinging in his hand , as if he had hit solid rock . Red was busy bobbing and weaving , avoiding the ogre's attempts to stomp him into the ground . Cat was swinging ineffective blows at this opponent .

Shorty's cut had slowed his opponent down . Now he thrust his blade home, deep into the monster's gut . Thrusting up as he was his blade pushed towards Groltar's heart . It was a perfect killing blow . The ogre tottered , threatening to fall on top of its attackers . They managed to dive out of the way in time to avoid being crushed beneath its weight .

Cat , battling the smaller ogre , found his target , making a deep gash in the ogre's side . Angel had stayed back and quietly intoned the ancient tongue . Now she stepped forwards and thrust out her hand , barely touching the ogre's massive thigh muscles.

The bulging mass shook violently . The hulking brute sank to his knees . Its eyes glazed over , its shaggy hair standing out straight in an almost comic pose . The ogre's body went limp and it hit the floor.

"Teach you to mess with us, you overgrown idiot." She spat . The others stood amazed . Angel looked around at the circle of surprised faces .

"So I took him out , so what's the big deal ?" She shrugged . "I am a magic user , after all ." She added , after an awkward pause . 'Yeah .' She thought to herself . 'I am a magic user after all !' Shorty turned his attention to another problem . His sword was stuck up to the hilt underneath the huge ogre .

"This thing probably weighs over eight hundred pounds ." He complained , as he failed in his attempts to move Groltar's body . Preach , meanwhile , noticed Boss's problem . The warrior was doubled over with pain .

"I think ." Boss slurred . "My ribs are broken . I think my face is broken . I think everything is broken ."

It was true , he was pretty badly beaten about .

"Don't worry ." Said Preach , gently . "Lie still . Try not to move too much."

"I'm trying ." Boss gasped .

“And don’t try to talk . Your jaw is dislocated , or worse .” He attempted to steady himself , to remember the ritual words to call upon his deity for healing .

“Oh my goddess !” Angel exclaimed , as she noticed Boss’s plight . “Are you alright Boss ?”

“No .” Said Preach , “He’s far from alright .”

“Well help him gods damn you !” She screamed .

“Just give me a minute to prepare myself . I don’t want to screw this up .” Preach begged .

Cat roughly grabbed Angel and pulled her away from the pair .

“You’re getting in the way .” He said gruffly . “Let the man do his job .”

She swatted at him ineffectually .

“Let me go . I’m alright .” She insisted .

“No you’re not . You’re hysterical . If you don’t sit down I’ll knock you down .” Cat threatened .

“I’ll never move this damned thing .” Said Shorty , hardly noticing the drama around him . “Where’s Red when you need him ?”

Preach calmed himself and began his prayer for healing .

“Angel , Cat !” Shorty bellowed . “Come and help me move this thing !”

“You’ll keep .” Said Angel vehemently , glaring at Cat .

They began a series of attempts to roll the ogre over , with various manoeuvres , each of which failed .

“Now I understand the old nursery rhyme .” Shorty puffed .

He waited patiently for someone to feed him the next line .

Angel sensed his anticipation but didn’t want to offer him the bait .

At length she weakened .

“Alright Shorty , what nursery rhyme ?” She said , annoyed with herself for not resisting her curiosity .

“You know the one .” Shorty asserted . “Find the ogre , kill the ogre , roll the ogre over .”

“Never heard of it .” Angel said , flatly .

“And I thought you were well educated .” Shorty scoffed . “No culture at all .”

“I’d hardly put much faith in anyone who quotes nursery rhymes .” She declared .

“There’s a lot of wisdom buried in old wives tales , if you know where to look for it .” He assured her .

“Whatever you say Shorty .” She patronised .

“Women are such ignorant apes .” Cat put in .

“You men think with your dicks .” She said , aggressively .

“I think a lot of you .” Said Cat , nonchalantly .

Angel knew which way his conversation was heading .

“One more word out of you and I’ll slit your throat while you sleep.” She claimed .

“Er , like I’m sure you would .” Cat discounted .

“Why don’t you two try to get along ?” Shorty queried . “Just for the sake of survival .”

“I’ll get my staff and we can lever him up .” Said Angel , eager to change the subject .

“Might break it .” Shorty warned .

“Rope’d do better .” Cat offered .

“If we had somewhere to sling it to .” Shorty added .

“After several minutes Preach had done all of the healing that he could without evoking the power of the orb, a thing which he was loathe to do . The ogre’s body had been turned over and Shorty’s sword recovered . To his amazement it was unbroken .

Red returned .

“Where have you been ?” Shorty asked , gruffly .

“I thought I’d better scout around . You lot were making enough noise to wake the dead . Suppose there’d been other ogres lurking out there ?” Red countered .

“Point taken .” Said Shorty , apologetically .

“It’s about time we started acting like professionals . We’re never going to survive here otherwise .” Red warned .

By now Boss was up and about , feeling just a little sore .

“You know , if Preach wasn’t such a miracle worker I’d have been laid up for months with those wounds .” Boss marvelled . “I call that very professional .”

“Hear , hear .” Said Angel . “We never really thanked you properly.”

“Yeah Preach .” Said Cat , noncommittally . “Why don’t you take him for a walk and thank him properly .” He added , suggestively . Everyone glared at him .

It was just a suggestion .” Cat said , nonchalantly .

“If you’re so interested in his welfare ,” Said Shorty “Why don’t you offer him your arse ? That’s just a suggestion .” He smirked .

“When you’re finished getting into each other , I think we should get out of here , time’s a wasting and the quicker we get back the safer we’ll be .” Boss suggested .

“The sooner we’ll be safe , you mean .” Angel corrected .

“I’m taking the point again . Without armour you’re a sitting duck , Boss .” Shorty insisted .

“Then lead on , stout heart .” Boss allowed .

And they continued upon their dangerous way .

It was early evening and the sun , hanging low in the sky , made observation difficult .

“Let’s find a place to stop .” Red called . “When it’s like this the devil could pop out in front of you and you wouldn’t see him until he’d eaten you .”

“We’ll head east a little .” Boss suggested . “That’ll take the sun out of our eyes . It doesn’t matter , since we don’t know where we are anyway .”

“East is good .” Cat agreed “The river should be east somewhere . Maybe we could catch a boat .”

“Still , we should bed down soon , while we have light enough to set up camp .” Red suggested .

“We all know that .” Said Cat . “Stop trying to be the expert .”

They walked for a few minutes and then heard a crashing sound , as of something pushing through the undergrowth , which was growing even thicker and taller around them as they moved . Everyone halted , hushed and tense . They were unsure of the exact direction that the sound had come from . They drew closer together .

“I don’t like this .” Boss admitted “We can’t see very far in this stuff .”

“Shall we scout around ?” Red offered .

“No .” Said Boss “We’d better stick together .”

“Clump ! Crash !” Came a sound from close ahead of them . Then an animal pushed through some bushes and onto the path that they were travelling .

“It’s a mule .” Angel breathed .

“Ain’t education marvellous .” Quipped Shorty .

“It’s pretty well loaded .” Said Cat , greedily eyeing the boxes strapped to its back .

“Who’s going to catch it ?” Asked Boss .

“I can try .” Preach offered . “All of you walk away a little .”

“We don’t want to leave you here alone .” Said Angel . “What if it’s a trap?”

“Then I’ll scream my lungs out .” Said Preach , shooping them away .”

Cat signalled to Red to circle around . Red nodded agreement and they went off in opposite directions .

“Wait a minute .” Boss hissed , but they were already gone , darting into the undergrowth . “That’s not a good idea .” He said , shaking his head .

“We haven’t seen much dangerous all day .” Shorty whispered , “Aside from the two ogres .”

Somehow Boss found that not at all reassuring . “Be ready for trouble .” He whispered .

“At night the goblins come out to play .” Shorty quoted .

Angel felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck and a shiver ran through her , as if icy fingers were clawing at her .

“Don’t say that .” She remonstrated .

Meanwhile Preach had walked slowly forwards towards the beast . Then he stopped , took off his backpack and , turning his back to the mule , began to rummage through it .

“Do , te do , te do .” He sang “No , that’s not it .”

He began to take out items and ceremoniously lay them out on the floor .

“What’s he doing ?” Asked Shorty .

The mule looked towards the priest and cautiously took a step forwards .

Preach ignored the animal completely , slowly took up a small twig and started poking the ground . He crouched low and stared intently .

“Do ,te do , te do .” He repeated . “What is that ?”

Now he leaned over and took a handful of dried herbs and cave mushrooms .

The mule gathered confidence walked forwards a little more and , by degrees , edged up to the priest .

“Now I get it .” Said Shorty , quietly . “He’s baiting the animal with curiosity .”

When the mule was right next to him , Preach slowly held out his hand and allowed it to smell the goodies inside his clenched fist .

The mule muzzled it . Preach opened his hand and allowed the animal to chew upon its contents . After a few moments pause it allowed him to touch it gently on the nose . Then he stroked and scratched its neck . Finally he carefully took hold of its reins .

“There you go , my beauty .” He crooned softly . “Steady boy .”

He gestured for the others to come forward , slowly .

“Very good , Preach .” Angel commended , softly .

“It was nothing .” Said Preach , feigning modesty .

Angel joined him in petting the beast , which began to enjoy the attention .

Shorty poured a little water from his skin into his helmet . “Here boy .” He said , gently . The mule lapped at it eagerly .

Cat moved in , silently , about thirty metres ahead in the track .

“Very touching .” He commented . “Now what’s in the boxes ?”

“Belongs to Preach .” Said Shorty , shortly .

“Party treasure .” Cat contradicted .

“Preach caught it .” Shorty said , firmly .

“Stop bickering you two .” Preach broke in . “Whatever we get we’ll share .”

The mule began to get nervous .

“Preach is right .” Said Boss , decisively .

“Where’s Red ?” Angel said , worriedly .

“Wandering off again .” Cat dismissed , with a shrug .

“Shall we split up and search for him ?” She asked .

““And risk all getting lost ? No.” Boss objected .

“He’s a big boy . He’ll find his way back when he wants to .”

Shorty supposed .

“I’m going to see what we’ve got here .” Said Cat , beginning to undo the luggage straps from the mule .

“Watch , the boxes will fall and break .” Boss warned , taking the weight of the box on his side . “Then we’ll have no way of carrying whatever is inside .”

Shorty jumped to catch the other box.

“These are quite weighty .” He observed.

The four men were preoccupied with wrestling the boxes to the ground .

Angel looked around . No sign of Red . She was worried about him . She decided to go and look for him herself . She wandered , unnoticed , into the bushes . In only a few moments she caught a glimpse of a figure crouching in the undergrowth ahead . She could make out no details , because of the obscuring vegetation . She assumed that it was Red and sought the clearest path towards him , which lead her , by a roundabout route to approach him from the front .

When she drew close enough to be sure that it was him she was also near enough to discern just what it was that he was doing . She was astonished , amazed and embarrassed . She turned to sneak away again , hoping to withdraw without him noticing her arrival or departure .

“Crack !”

She stepped loudly upon a fallen branch .

Red dropped what he was doing and leaped to his feet , hand grasping for a more conventional weapon .

“Who goes there ?” He challenged .

“It’s me , Angel .” She replied , turning to face him .

“What are you doing here?” He gasped in exasperation .

“I was worried about you . I came to find you .” She said , honestly .

“Well you found me .” He noted , embarrassed . “Or should I say , you caught me ? My guilty secret is out , I’ll never live it down .”

The irony of what he said struck her and she suppressed the urge to giggle.

He stood there , erect , his trousers on the floor behind him .

“It’s no sin . There’s no law against that . And just what should make you think that I would tell anyone ?” She said , indignantly
 “I was just ,” He excused , falteringly “Relieving my frustrations .”
 “Can I help ?” She said, on an impulse, and then wished that she hadn’t .

“You don’t really mean that ?” He enquired , uncertainly .
 She gulped . She had done it now . She had made the offer and she couldn’t back out of it . She didn’t have the heart to . She was no tease .

“Yes .” She said , reluctantly , though clenched teeth .

“Well you’d better come over here then . “ Red said , clumsily . “I can’t reach you from here .”

His attempt at humour , if it was that , passed right by her .
 She was hardly aware of what happened in the next few minutes .
 It was as if she were in some dream like trance , no longer in control of her will or her fate . When it was over they sat together for only a minute or so .

“I will marry you , if you want me to . You know that .” Red said , firmly , but coldly .

“That won’t be necessary “ She said , equally coolly “You know and I know that we don’t really love each other .”

“Then how did this happen ?” He questioned .

“The gods only know .” She complained . “It was just another one of my stupid snap decisions . I have my whole life ahead of me and I’m sure I’m going to make an unholy mess of it . Gods I’m so stupid .”

“I was thinking about you , you know .” He confided .

She looked at him coldly .

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better , is it ?” She challenged.

“Hey , I never forced you .” He excused .

“I’m not blaming you .” She conceded . “I’m not annoyed with you at all . I’m just angry at myself . I have no self control at all .”

“It’s true , you should save yourself for your husband .” He said , unthinkingly .

“If you think that way, why didn’t you refuse me?” She argued .

“Come lady , since when could a man refuse such charms as yours?” He flattered .

“Your gallantry amazes me . One law for women and another for the men . I suppose you will think less of me now .” She speculated .

“On the contrary . I do love you , just not the way a man should love his wife .” He confessed .

“You’re a very good friend .” She admitted . “We’d better get back or we’ll be missed . This is strictly between us , O.K. ?”

“On my honour .” Red swore fervently . “You know , you really should give Boss a chance .”

“A chance to what ?” She challenged .

They spoke now as they walked along . Both moons were up and nearly full , although there were large patches of deep cloud both moons had found gaps through which to shine down upon the mortals’ shenanigans . It was quite light enough to see a moderate distance .

“Love you . I think you’ll end up together eventually .” Red predicted .

“In your dreams Red . Especially if he finds out about this .” She said , her heart fluttering strangely . She looked at the twin moons .

“Even the gods are spying on us .” She picked up a stick and flung it , as if to hit those moon eyes . “Blasted perverts .” She railed . “I think they did make this happen just for their sport .”

“Yes .” Said Red , quietly . “Blame the gods for all our failings .”

“What ?” Angel questioned .

“Nothing .” Red replied . “I said nothing .”

They arrived back to find Cat pawing over his finds . One box contained a large amount of normal mining equipment , picks , shovels and such and normal travelling gear , like a large-ish tent , a cooking pot , dry rations and so on .

The second box contained a more macabre cargo . It was the remains of a large spemen male , not too long dead , folded up to fit in the box . On the body was a note on fine parchment , in expensive ink , scribed in dwarven , so Preach claimed . It translated simply . ‘NO SPEMEN ALLOWED .’ A chilling message .

“Dwarves !” Shorty shouted . “Bastards !”

“What’s going on ?” Angel asked , and they explained the finds to her .

Cat , unconcerned , moved from the equipment box to searching the body . It was old enough to be a little on the nose .

“They were protecting their own . Who knows what this man was , or what he has done to deserve this fate .” Preach philosophised .

“He was just a prospector , that’s all . A harmless old prospector .” Shorty decided .

“To the dwarves he was nothing but a jewel thief .” Cat declared .

“And here’s the proof .” He emptied a pouch , displaying three small , cut gems , four platinum pieces , six copper pieces and a dozen , rough , uncut and unpolished gemstones , which might have been the fruits of months of laborious digging .

“Hardly worth a life , is it ?” Shorty noted .

“In Floren City , the authorities , the good and noble rulers , string up children for stealing a handful of Krop , because they’re starving . So maybe dwarves ain’t so bad by comparison .” Cat argued .

“And maybe goblins are only protecting their own .” Said Red , sarcastically . “What are you doing looting the dead anyway ? A bit ghoulish isn’t it ?” He demanded .

“So you don’t want your share of the treasure then . Cat challenged . “It’s all we’ve found this entire wretched journey . Not much to show for a couple of weeks work , between six of us . We might as well be labourers.”

“What’s it worth ?” Asked Preach .

“Are you in this too ?” Red accused .

“I’m not being judgmental .” Preach claimed .

“These things , only a couple of gold pieces each . The cut ones , maybe five .” Cat evaluated .

“So you say .” Shorty queried .

Boss turned to Angel .

“Where did you get to ?” He asked .

“I had to take a wizz , O.K. What is this , everytime I make a move you.” She began to Vent her ire , more specifically it was guilt which inflamed her .

“Hold on ?” He interrupted . “I only asked .”

“Well , you don’t own me , so don’t go checking up on me all the time O.K. !” She burst out .

“I’m not . Not especially on you anyway . I’m about to ask Cat and Red not to wander off alone too . There’s a lot of danger out there . I’m worried about you . All of you .” He explained . “Each of us must learn to let the others know what they are doing .”

“All the time ?” She demanded .

“As long as we’re in this wilderness .” Boss explained . “We’re going to have to camp here now .” He concluded . “There’s no going on in the dark.”

“Do we risk a fire ?” Boss asked , when a camp had been established.

“No .” Said the others in unison , in agreement for once .

“Then it’s cold , old snake to eat .” He observed .

“Yummy .” Said Angel , mischievously .

“I’d as soon suck a dead dog’s cock .” Cat claimed , but he ate the snake meat anyway .

Boss and Angel were on watch together . They had sat for some time in the balmy night , in the light of one or other of the two moons , as the clouds drifted over them .

Boss's eyes were drawn to her , her hair silvered by the moonlight , her face pale against the night's dark . A very large bat flew by and seemed to dip its wings at them . It didn't seem interested in attacking and eating them , so they left it unmolested .

Boss could not resist her any longer . He walked , quietly , over to where she sat watching , back against a large bush , or small tree . He sat , facing the opposite direction , his back to the same trunk .

"Angel ." He said , in a dreamy voice .

"What ?" She said irritably , snapped out of her reveries .

"I've been thinking ." He began .

"Congratulations ." She joked . "Did it hurt ?"

"Yes ." He said , seriously . "What do you plan to do when this is all over ?" He asked .

"I guess I'll have to sleep for a week ." She said , disingenuously .

"Beyond that ." He said , patiently .

"I don't plan much beyond that ." She generalised .

"Would you think of seeing me ?" He asked , outright .

"When this is over ." She said , thoughtfully "Because I don't think It's very good indeed to get involved with people you're working with . There's too much at stake to risk getting heavily involved with them ." She explained .

"Except when it's Red ." He probed .

"How do you mean ?" She said , innocently .

"You wandered off with him in the bushes ." Boss said , accusingly

"You certainly know how to woo a girl , don't you Boss ." She observed "Believe me , Red and I are in no way romantically or emotionally involved ." She said , convincingly .

"So the answer is yes ." Boss concluded .

"You've lost me , Boss . What's the question again ?" She asked , sincerely .

"You will think of seeing me , when this is over ." He repeated .

"Sure ." She said . "I'll think about it . When this is over . I'll let you know the answer then . In the meantime I don't want to hear another word about it , or the answer will definitely be no . I'm not going to commit myself to a man who stands a very good chance of being dead within a week . But if it's sex you're after , I'll let you screw me anytime , no strings attached ."

The next twenty minutes are censored , but she wished they would last forever . They didn't .

The night air began to grow chill as they lay in each others' arms .

"Don't love and sex go together with emotional involvement and commitment ?" He asked .

“They can .” She supposed . “But they don’t have to .”

“We’re supposed to be on watch .” He reminded her .

“Well , we’re watching .” She told him .

“We’ve probably just put on a show for a thousand goblins.” He speculated .

“So why don’t they applaud ?” She asked .

When it came time to awaken the second watch he went to lay right next to her .

“No you don’t .” She whispered . “We don’t want everyone to know .”

He shrugged his shoulders and lay on the opposite side of the tree , which was surrounded by a patch of dark , cushioning moss .

In the morning , when Red awakened her , Angel arose in a state of utter confusion . She recognised nothing and no-one . She didn’t even understand any of the words that they spoke .

She felt herself being gently shaken and opened her eyes to behold a strange red haired man . She screamed and backed away in fright .

“)*\$!” He said . “@^%> &#< ?”

Inside , her head was void of memory , a complete blank . It is an experience impossible to articulate or describe to anyone , especially for those who are experiencing it currently . She searched for words that weren’t there . She had not even a conception of what it was that she was grasping for . All that she had was a vague apprehension that something was missing . Her instincts still believed that she had a way to defend herself . She struggled to find it . There were words hidden in the deep recesses of her mind but somehow she knew that they were not the words she normally used . Her thoughts translated to ‘What am I missing here?’ She tried to find “Leave me alone !”

She thought and spoke “\$#^ &) <?\@ !”

Red experienced this with great apprehension . He had seen Angel speak in strange words and use strange gestures and then kill an ogre with just a touch . Now , it seemed to him , that she was casting some strange and powerful magical spell at him . He wasn’t sure quite what to do , but he knew that he must act quickly , before she completed the incantation .

Reluctantly , he drew back his hand and slapped her face as hard as he could , thinking to interrupt the suspected casting . Then he grabbed her hands and wrestled her to the ground , knowing , by now , that many mages relied upon freedom to move their hands in order to complete a spell .

The others were quite startled by this .

Shorty and Preach thought that she was trying to cast a spell . They saw Red's reaction as a wholly necessary self defence . They were angry at Angel for her unprovoked attack upon one of her companions , upon one of them . They saw that Red now had the situation under control and saw no reason to interfere . Cat saw the same situation and interpreted it differently . He thought that , perhaps , Red had done something to provoke the attack and something else took over his reactions . Something he hardly expected to find lurking deep within himself and would be loathe to acknowledge at all . He suddenly felt incredibly angry and jealous and he had the unaccountable urge to side with her and protect her .

For Cat this came as a shock , as he rarely felt any sympathy towards any but himself . This annoyed him further and only served to amplify his ire . He thought , perhaps , that he could even win her for himself by helping her . Though the thought of needing another was abhorrent to him .

Cat reached for his bow and strung it deliberately . Given time , he would have forced Red to let Angel go , or even shot an arrow into him . Cat was unperturbed by the prospect of harming any of his companions and would be quite capable of slitting the throats of them all , even her , if he found it necessary to his own survival . Boss was awoken by a scream and , half asleep , noticed the signs of a scuffle from behind him . He looked and saw a strange man wrestling a strange woman to the ground . Three other strangers looked on . One was stringing a bow . They were not paying any attention to him but he believed they were dangerous . He did not recognise the bow as a bow but he recognised it as a threat , as some wild animal might do . He saw a long, thin thing beside him . He did not recognise it as a sword but he instinctively grabbed it as a weapon . His instinctive reaction was to slink away . He could circle around these intruders and take them from behind .

Shorty was busily donning his armour . Still he managed to notice Boss walking away .

"@> (/ \$ (/>)@* ." He said , or that was the way Boss heard it , unaware of any significance of these sounds to him .

"Angel's acting strangely ." Said Red . "She's gone delirious or something ." He asserted as he grabbed Angel's rope and began to tie her hands behind her back .

"Hey Boss !" Shorty shouted , but elicited no response .

"Boss is affected too !" Preach realised . "We have to stop him ." Cat had just finished stringing his bow . He plucked an arrow from his quiver and went to load it .

“Not that way !” Shorty shouted , urgently . “We want to stop him , not kill him .” With that he took to heel , running after Boss .

“No . This is for Red .” Said Cat , calmly aiming his bow at his target . “Let her go .” He ordered .

“Are you crazy too ?” Red asked . He was not too concerned now that he had succeeded in binding Angel’s hands , seeing her as by far the most serious threat .

Boss saw the tallest of the strangers begin to run towards him . He turned to face his pursuer , curious as to his intentions . He wielded a sword , which was still in its scabbard . He somehow knew that it felt strange in his hand . Perhaps Boss was not so seriously affected by whatever it was as Angel had been .

“Que veut tu ?” He asked , not even realising that he could no longer speak properly . The sounds that he spoke were complete gibberish .

Shorty pulled up short . He saw his erstwhile companion , but heard him speak in a strange tongue and threaten him with a sheathed sword .

“Calm down Boss .” Shorty said , gently . “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Of which Boss understood not one syllable . He recognised the gentleness of the voice and the peacefulness of the gestures . He did not , however, entirely trust them . He saw , behind the tall one another stranger , who held a nasty looking weapon and spoke harshly . Boss turned and began to run off into the bushes .

Shorty took off again and tried to tackle Boss . At that precise moment Boss leapt into the air , to clear a broken branch that lay across the trail , and Shorty’s tackle missed .

Shorty arose and ran Boss down , his long legs striding hard . He caught up to his quarry once again and tried another dive . This time Boss side-stepped neatly . Shorty again caught up and failed a third tackle . This crazy bush football seemed destined to last forever . On the fourth attempt Shorty managed to grab Boss by the legs and bring him down . At this stage Shorty was just about out of wind , he couldn’t have kept up the high speed chase for another minute . Boss tried to kick free but could not release Shorty’s powerful grip .

After a long struggle , Shorty managed to wrestle Boss to the ground and bring him completely under control . He marched his apprehensive prisoner back to the camp .

Red let go of Angel , as Cat had instructed , sure that she was no longer a threat to them in her present state .

“Now untie her .” Cat ordered .

Preach attempted to knock the bow out of Cat’s hands .

Cat moved swiftly , holding on to both bow and arrow . He momentarily lost his aim , however , and Red seized the opportunity to roll away . He took refuge behind some bushes .
 “Cat . Can’t you see what’s going on here ?” Preach demanded .
 “There’s something wrong with Angel and Boss . They are not themselves .”

“Let’s ask her , shall we .” Cat suggested , as he stepped back and turned his bow on Preach . “Angel , what’s afoot ?”

Angel , having no way of knowing that Cat was addressing her , made no reply .

Cat backed up towards her , trying to keep both Preach and Red’s entrenched position within his sight .

“Angel .” He called . “Answer me .”

“Can’t you tell .” Preach counselled . “She doesn’t understand you . She’s somehow forgotten how to talk .”

“Forgotten how to talk .” Cat scoffed , contemptuously . “Don’t talk rubbish . How can anyone forget how to talk ?”

“Why don’t you ask her then ?” Preach challenged . “I don’t know how this can happen . I only know that it has .”

Cat knelt beside her . “I can fire a bow from this position .” He warned . “Angel , speak to me .” He said , shaking her by the shoulder . She had the impression that this one wanted to help her , while the others seemed to want to bind her .

“)/& \$@ .” She said , in pleading tones .

“Speak common .” Cat ordered . She heard this as ‘+)^ #@|>’ , which made no sense to her at all .

“I don’t know what’s going on , but I think we should let her go .” Cat suggested .

“So she can run off , like Boss did .” Preach pointed out . “We can’t help them if we can’t find them .”

Red stepped out from behind his cover . He raised his arms in surrender .

“You shoot me if you like .” He offered . “But it won’t help her .”

“How come she can speak that strange language ?” Cat asked , suspiciously .

“I don’t know .” Preach confessed . “And if you don’t stop acting like such an asshole we’ll never be able to find out .”

Cat , gently , brushed away the dirt and hair from Angel’s face and spoke gently to her .

“Don’t worry , Angel . We’re going to help you , somehow .”

She was not so sure now that he was helping her . She took

exception to his touch and snapped at his hand , trying to bite it .

He rapidly withdrew it , his quick reflexes defeating her attempt to attack him .

“You’re right .” He said , at last convinced . “She’s gone loco .” Shorty returned , in a little while , with Boss in an armlock . He had tried talking gently to his captive along the way but could not communicate effectively .

Boss , however , had recognised the friendliness of his tones and gained the impression that his captor meant him no harm .

Boss and Angel occasionally tried talking to their captors , but both soon realised that the effort was futile . The others tied them up and breakfasted . Then they fed their prisoners , trying to gain their confidence .

“Why them and not us ?” Red asked .

“Maybe they’re the victims of some spell . One hears of magical , woodland creatures which mislead people .” Preach speculated .

“You don’t believe in fairies , do you ?” Red asked .

“Maybe something to do with this place .” Shorty surmised .

“What is there where they were that wasn’t where we were ?”

Preach questioned .

“The tree , perhaps .” Said Red , though it was just another small tree , or large bush , like the ones that they had slept next to .

“My tree looks the same in every aspect .” Preach reasoned .

“Except for this black moss .” Shorty noted .

They inspected all of their sleeping sites . This was the only one on which the strange moss was present .

“Do us a favour Shorty” Said Preach . “Lay down here for an hour and see if you forget anything .”

“No way .” Said Shorty . “ You do it .”

“Alright .” Said Cat . “Let’s assume the moss took away their memories . Now how do we get them back ?”

They all just looked to one another for the answers . The two most intelligent and most likely to figure out this sort of thing had been the ones affected by the curse .

“Perhaps , if we cook it up for them and feed it to them .” Said Cat , after a great deal of pondering .

“Suppose it’s poisonous ?” Preach asked .

“So they die, they’re useless as they are anyway.” Cat shrugged .

“Well .” Preach considered . “If we damage the stuff too much , that might destroy their memories . So , we can’t risk cooking it . I’m going to eat a little bit , from way over here , away from where their heads were , and if I get sick we can’t risk making them eat it .”

He ate a little of the moss and thought that it tasted vile . It’s texture was awful . After a couple of hours he was still alright . He had vivid visions of sticking his hairy nose into a hole in a tree and getting dozens of bee stings and the sweet taste of honey . The

beestings were not too painful and the honey tasted very nice . On the whole it was a favourable trade .

“I think , maybe , one night a bear slept over here , he said , cryptically .

“That stuff really messes with your head , huh .” Shorty noted .

“Eat a piece and see what you think .” Preach offered .

“No way .” Said Shorty . “I might get some of Angel’s memories stuck in my head . That I couldn’t handle .”

Cat looked interested now . Some of the things that she had known might be useful , he assessed . “I wonder where her spells are ?”

Red moved to protect the area .

“You keep away from here altogether.” He suggested , strongly .

“Why ?” Cat demanded . “What is there you don’t want us to know?”

“I just don’t want her to wake up and find part of her memory is still missing .” Red told them .

“Which part , Red ?” Cat pressed , unable to encompass the concept of altruism in his small mindedness .

“Stop it , you two . This is not helping .” Preach blustered .

“Did you see that ?” Cat asked , urgently .

“What ?” Shorty asked , guilelessly .

“No use trying to distract us .” Red pointed out .

“No. Really. I fancied I saw a sort of giant bat , just over there .”

Cat pointed .

“A bat , in the daytime . Really , Cat , you can do better than that .”

Red argued .

“I tell you that I did .” Cat was adamant .

“We’d better be on our guard .” Preach suggested . “We can get into a lot of trouble by disbelieving one another .”

Cat recognised the allusion to his own earlier doubts .

“Now you know what it’s like not to be believed .” Red nettled .

“How do we get these people to eat this stuff ?” Shorty asked .

“And then we ought to get out of this place , fast .”

“Why ?” Asked Red .

“This giant bat thing might be an advanced scout for an army of necromancers , or something .” Shorty pointed out .

“Eat .” Shorty turned to the bound and seated pair and took a small piece of moss from the edge of the patch and started to chew upon it . He stopped short a few seconds later . “E = MC Squared ?” He spake , bewildered and shook his head .

“What does that mean ?” Red asked .

“Stuffed if I know .” Shorty dismissed .

“Maybe you should eat a bit more and find out.” Red suggested .

“Not me .” Said Shorty . “Too much of that stuff will really send you gaga .” He suspected .

Red was not too sure if he meant the moss or the $E=MC$ squared , as a matter of fact , neither was Shorty .

Cat tried a nibble and then said . “ ‘Who’s been sleeping in my bed?’ said the momma bear ?”

“Let’s not waste any more of this stuff .” Preach cautioned . “We might destroy a piece which means something important to someone. Something which could save our lives one day .”

“Well , you’ve all tried it , so I may as well .” Red insisted , taking a tiny piece . He popped it in his mouth , chewed and swallowed and a few seconds later he jumped almost out of his skin .

“Wha !” He shouted .

“What did you see ?” Asked Cat , noting the fear in Red’s eyes .

“A very large ogre with a very large axe , as it cut my head off .” Red retold .

“Obviously someone’s very last memory .” Cat theorised .

“This is really freaky . If we feed this to them , how’re we going to know what they get back is what they should have ?” Red worried .

“It can’t hurt to remember more things .” Said Cat .

“I think it might .” Said Preach . “A memory like the last could cause someone to die of shock . Yet it’s a risk that they have to take .”

Boss and Angel had witnessed these strangers eating the black moss but were still uncertain of what this was all about . In fact they lacked the intellectual framework to form such cognisances .

“Let’s get on with it .” Shorty said , impatiently .

He plucked a piece of moss from where Angel had been laying and offered it to her . She sat , closed mouthed and shook her head , obstinately .

Shorty looked up at the others .

“We’re going to have some trouble here .” He prognosticated .

“Come on , eat , yum-yum , it’s good .” He gestured .

Cat , meanwhile , ignored the others’ activities and kept his bow half -cocked , looking around against the approach of a giant bat .

He was one more concerned for his own safety than the fate of his fellows .

Shorty , unthinkingly , offered the same piece to Boss , who took it in his mouth and rapidly spat it out , not from any sense of recognition .

“Not that piece .” Red gasped . “That’s Angel’s memory .”

“He didn’t get any , anyway .” Said Shorty , searching frantically for the same piece . “I’ll have to be more careful . Angel , I just made you forget something . Ah , here it is .” He breathed a sigh of

relief , offering the morsel to her again . She looked at it and then at him , in disgust .

Shorty , not known for his patience , totally lost it then .

“Eat it !” He screamed and , forcing open her jaw , roughly , crammed the stuff into Angel’s mouth . She tried to bite his hand in repayment . He forced her head back and tried to make her swallow , which eventually she had to do .

He was in danger of choking her to death or breaking her jaw with such force . His concern for her welfare had blinded him to her safety.

“Gently . Gently .” Preach fussed , beginning to panic . He was on the verge of attempting to do something which would restrain the , obviously deranged , warrior .

“I hope this works when they don’t chew it .” Shorty declared , his voice a shout , far from his intention . “Sorry Preach this is the only way .”

“I don’t know about that .” Red disagreed , coming close to the point where he would have to intervene on Angel’s behalf , despite his desperation to see her restored to health .

This all would have been so much easier if they had not grown to feel so intimately and tenderly towards one another . There is a danger in caring too much which can not be shaken and can become extremely dangerous to all concerned . Angel’s instincts were right , those who shared danger as often came to grief from being too intimately involved as from the opposite.

Shorty grabbed a larger piece and thrust it at her .

“Eat !” He bellowed , harshly , not appreciating that this was anathema to the desired result .

“Come on , eat it , you bitch !” He shouted .

She refused .

Then he slapped her , hard , on the face . She stubbornly refused to open her mouth . He grabbed the top of her head and her lower jaw and again proceeded to force her mouth open , threatening to dislocate her jaw .

“Somebody stuff the thing down her throat !” He raged .

“Alright .” Said Cat , springing forwards .

Now Red was angry too , but not at Angel . He took a few steps back as he raised his bow .

“That’s enough you two!” He shouted . “Back off or I’ll shoot you .”

“We have to get them to eat it .” Shorty moaned .

“Not that way !” Red insisted. “You risk killing her with your cure .”

“Fine one you are in a crisis .” Cat complained . “You should be helping here , not hindering . Too gutless to take the necessary steps? If you can’t help , then don’t hinder . Never heard that one ?”

“ I don’t believe in beating up women .” Red said , firmly . “Not for any reason . Now , Shorty , let her go .”

“I don’t believe I will .” Said Shorty , calmly , now beyond rage . “So you shoot me , if you have to .”

“Please , Please ! All of you , just calm down . We can work this out like civilised people .” Said Preach , whiningly . He went on like an old fishwife but what he said made some sense .

“Shorty , let go of Angel and And Red lower your bow and let’s work out a solution together.”

“Like what ?” Cat said , exposing the weakness in Preach’s argument . “I’m n.. not s.. sure b.. but , I’ll think of s.. something .” Preach stammered , uncertain of himself .

“Pathetic .” Said Cat , cruelly .

“No . Listen .” Said Preach . “We first have to win their confidence and ..er .. convince them that we mean then no harm ...a.. and then we can get them to eat the stuff ...later .”

“And we all live happily ever after .” Said cat , sarcastically .

“Now . Will you two wimps back off while we get on with what has to be done .” The rouge concluded .

During times of crisis some folks reveal the worst aspects of themselves while others show only their best .

“You back off , Cat , or you’ll be the first to die .” Red warned .

“Don’t make us fight you , Red .” Said Shorty , firmly .

“My arm is getting mighty tired .” Red threatened .

Shorty let go of Angel’s jaw and turned to face his newest enemy .

“I don’t much like being threatened .” He declared . “Either you lower that bow , now , and we forget this whole thing , or one of us is going to come to grief .” He said , in calculated tones .

“Shorty’s not a man to bluff , Red .” Cat added .

“Please , all of you , calm down .” Said Preach , running around and flapping his arms wildly , anything but calm himself .

“You calm down , old woman .” Cat responded , bitterly .

There was a moment of utter silence and a feeling of macabre suspense permeated the air .

Angel was sitting , watching these barbarian antics . She understood that they were fighting , probably about her , but she knew nothing of what was being said . Suddenly something drifted through her memory, something from long ago . A spoken word , her mother’s smile .

It struck her like a bolt of lightning . She fell on her face and started trying to fill up her mouth with bites of the strange , black plant . It tasted bitter and felt disgusting but she chewed on it greedily . She had realised that it was her memory .

Red lowered his bow and Shorty was about to bolt at him and tear him apart .

“Look !” Red shouted , pointing “She’s got it .”

Boss looked at the strange woman and her bizarre behaviour and wondered what on spem was going on , but not in words that he normally would use .

“Que le diable se passe .” He said

“Hey paisano , mangiare .” Preach intoned .

He was using a language that he had never been taught , one that he thought he had made up himself . Later he had learned that it crystallised , magically , out of the universe. He thought that , perhaps , Boss would understand it too . Boss heard the word mangiare and thought it sounded semi-familiar . It was almost , but not quite , mange and since the sinister female was eating , he gathered that they wanted him to eat the black stuff too. He didn’t know why and wasn’t sure that he even wanted to . He decided to wait and see what became of the pretty little creature with the strange appetite first

Cat leapt forwards and cut the rope binding Angel’s hands . She preoccupied herself with pulling up handfuls of weeds and cramming them into her mouth in a most unladylike fashion . So ardent was her feeding frenzy that she took on the aspect of a wild animal .

“I think she’s had enough for a while .” Preach cautioned . “No knowing what she might be picking up .”

Cat grabbed her and pulled her away from the moss . She was struggling wildly and chewing ardently , gesticulating towards the vegetation .

“I know . I know .” Said Cat . “But not too fast .”

“You’ll have to tie her hands again .” Red advised . “She’ll scratch your eyes out .”

“I’ll break her fingers if she does .” Cat claimed .

“You don’t want to ruin our only mage .” Red countered .

He went over to them and retied her hands while Cat controlled her

.

Shorty took hold of Boss and lead him to the patch where the latter had slept . He sat Boss down and took a sprig of moss .

“Now , my friend , You .” He pointed dramatically and acted out each word . “Eat ... this ... like her ... understand ?”

“Comprende , mangiare la pianta .” Preach added .

“Plus tarde” Said Boss “Peut etre .”

Preach thought that he might know what Boss was trying to say but he couldn't be sure .

“Let him think about it a while .” He advised .

“Alright , but we don't have all day .” Said Shorty .

“Why not ?” Preach contradicted . “What's the rush .”

Angel chewed on the wad of black fibrous substance , which filled her mouth too full to swallow . As she sat there , a flood of memories came back to her . Each was complete , intense , as new . Sometimes she was moved to laugh or to cry . Sometimes she was frightened or angry . Occasionally she was struck by some incongruity .

The memories were jumbled , like a patchwork , and some did not seem to be in the right place . There were numerous gaps and some pieces didn't seem to fit at all . She had a suspicion that some of these memories were not hers . It would all take a lot of sorting out .

She remembered a husband , but she was beginning to piece together enough to know that she had never had a husband . She was living parts of other people's lives and other creatures' lives along with her own . She began to recover her critical faculties and her power of speech .

She realised now that she could never hope to swallow the great ball of slimy fibres in her mouth . She tried to gesture to the others to empty it for her , without success . In frustration she spat it out . She searched for words that would not come .

“Put it in .” She managed . “Slowly .” she added .

“I bet you say that to all the boys .” Cat smirked . “Is that the first thing you learned to say ?”

This was met with a blank stare . He was lucky that she did not fully understand yet .

Red did as she asked .

“There you go , Angel .” He said , tenderly . “You'll soon be your old self again .”

“Angel ?” She puzzled .

“That's you .” Red assured her , touching his finger to the end of her nose .

“Look .” Said Shorty “She's alright .”

Boss was still unsure .

After half an hour Angel had polished off quite a patch of moss . She was controlled enough now to have her hands free . She ate a sprig of moss at a time and waited to see what it contained . She

began to run more and more into things which didn't make sense , when stacked up against the main body of her experience .

"You guys better start telling me everything you know about me or I'm never going to sort out all this stuff ." She asked .

Eventually she was satisfied that everything she tried , in all different directions was alien to her life .

"Well, that's it folks . Now let's help Boss ." She said , confidently .

She walked up to him and looked him in the eye .

"Hello ." She said . "I'm Angel . I heard you had a problem , wouldn't eat your vegetables ." She took a little piece of moss and dangled it in front of his face . Now are you going to eat this for me ?" She said , jauntily .

She offered it to him . He turned his head away .

"Oh now , don't be difficult ." She smiled She leant over and kissed him , hard , on the mouth . He responded . She offered him her tongue . She stopped abruptly .

"There now , that wasn't so bad , was it ?" She asked , in a sing-song voice

She turned her head for a moment and popped a Boss memory pill in her mouth . She leaned forward again and kissed him again . As they kissed , passionately , she pushed the moss into his mouth . She held the kiss for the longest time possible. She could not get him to swallow the piece . Eventually she had to stop . She covered his mouth with her hand , to prevent him from spitting out the wad . She breathed .

"Gee , you're a tough son of a bitch ." She said , as she began again .

After a very long time ,he finally had to swallow . She withdrew.

"Did you get it ?" She enthused . "Wait a minute , you'll get it ."

After a brief pause , she offered him another piece of moss . He refused it .

"Aren't you the stubborn one ?" She said , cheerily .

"If you offered me the same choice , I'd take it the same way ." Cat declared .

"You think he's malingering ?" She asked .

"I think he's smarter than you are ." Cat declared .

She continued on , repeating the procedure .

"There now , what do you think of that ?" She said .

His eyes widened . He had a vision of himself in a play sword fight with his brother .

"Want some more ." She said , holding up a piece of moss .

This time he took it . She went behind him and released his hands .

"You won't run away now , will you ?" She asked .

He sat there , chewing over his life history , but he did not help himself to the moss . She offered it to him a little piece at a time . Occasionally she would pop a little piece into her mouth and kiss him again . He lay back and let her dangle it in his mouth .

Then , suddenly , he sat , bolt upright , and spewed the whole lot up again . She narrowly missed wearing it all .

“Oh my goodness !” She fretted . “We’ve got to put it all back in again .” She frantically tried to scoop up the sticky mess with her hands . .

It was not very pleasant trying to eat it all a second time but , eventually , most of it was managed .

“Angel .” Boss said , suddenly .

“Yes , Boss , it’s me .” She beamed . “Welcome back .”

“Boss ?” He queried , puzzled .

“That’s what we call you . You must have missed that bit . I wonder if .it’s this oneopen .” She held out another sprig of moss to him . You two are having entirely too much fun with this .” Cat complained .

“And taking far too long .” Shorty added . He had just returned from collecting Boss’s sword , from where it had been dropped in the bushes.

“Relax you two .” Red advised .

“I haven’t forgotten , you know .” Shorty Reminded .

“We want no fights , no feuds and no hard feelings .” Said Preach , with uncharacteristic authority .

SAURIALS

A strange figure appeared out of the bushes . It was reptilian and bipedal with a crest-like protuberance upon its head . It carried only a spear and a waterskin and wore a simple tabard and split leather skirt.

“Bore da .” It said , in a hissing voice .

The men scrambled for their weapons .

“Bore da .” Angel replied , politely . “Don’t anybody attack him .”

She added hurriedly “He’s speaking elven .”

“Mae hi’n debyg i law .” The lizard informed .

“What’d he say ?” Shorty asked .

“He said it looks like rain .” Angel translated . “Pa mor bell yw hi i Dar Geth ?” She asked .

He shrugged .

“Ble rydyn ni nawr ?” She queried .

“Mae’r qwersyll nesa un milltir i ffwydd .” He replied .

“He says they have a camp about a mile away .” Angel announced .

“Shall we trust them ?” Shorty asked .

“Of course not .” Said Angel and Boss agreed .

The others thought that a dry camp would be most welcome , if it was about to rain .

“We weren’t invited along there anyway .” Said Angel . “He merely pointed out that it exists .”

She turned to their guest , or was it host .

“Allwn ni gerred yma .” She asked .

“Ydych chi’n cerdded i ben ?” He asked .

“He wants to know if we are walking to the top?” She told them.

“Waelod .” She said , indicating what she thought was south .

“Pwy ydyn nhw ?” He gestured to her companions .

Now it was her turn to shrug . She didn’t know what to tell him or how to say it . Who were they indeed ?

“Oes bwyd gyda chi ?” He asked .

“Offer him some food .” Angel advised .

“Preach brought out some of his cave mushrooms and primitive plants . He was unsure whether to offer a Lizard Man snake meat to eat , them being close cousins and all ., Though men eat cows , don’t they ?

The reptilian man shook his head .

“Dere nol gyda fi I’r gwesyll.”

“He wants us to go with him to their camp.” She informed them.

“Tell him no thanks .” Boss instructed .

“I’m not sure how .” Angel admitted . “But I’ll try . Dydyn ni ddim yn mynd , diolch ofnadwy .” She said , falteringly .

“That was , no thanks ?” Said Shorty .

“I think so .” Angel replied .

Several of the lizard creatures stepped out from the bushes .

“I guess this means that he insists .” Angel interpreted .

Six creatures hovered overhead , which had the aspects of large bats , or perhaps featherless birds . They came to roost atop the surrounding bushes . Four large , bipedal reptilians appeared . Each had large , bony projections , shaped like fins , on their backs . Finally an even taller and more solid looking individual stepped forwards . He had an immense collar of bone sticking out from his neck region .

“Please .” He said , in a hissing voice . “Put up your weapons .” He waited for them to comply .

Shorty , Preach , Cat and Angel did so . Boss and Red did not .

“We mean you no harm .” He assured them .

“Do you know anything about this ?” Boss asked , pointing to the mule . “Or its cargo ?”

“No .” replied the lizard leader .

“You ever seen this note ?” Boss waved the parchment .
The large creature nodded to one of his guards . One of the flying creatures swooped down and plucked up the missive , dropping it into its leader’s hand . The chief read it .

“Not very agreeable sometimes , dwarves .” He commented .

“There’s an old prospector dead over there . That was on him .”

Boss informed .

“That is a great tragedy .” Said the speaker . “Any man’s death diminishes me .”

“We only wish to go about our business in peace.” Boss announced .

“So do we all .” Said the sage . “But can we not share what comfort we have with you ?”

“Forgive my companion’s manners .” Angel excused . “We have been in the wilderness overlong and are unused to such civil receptions .”

“Your friend’s caution is understandable .” Said their captor .

“You may have never seen our kind, for we are very rare in this world .”

“What are you ?” Boss asked , bluntly .

“We are Saurials .” The spokesman replied . “We are of four kinds but we are one people . Our people were captured and transported from our homeland long ago and lived as slaves for many years . Now we are free , but free only to roam a place which is hostile to us . We may never find our way home .”

“Why not ?” Boss asked , naively .

“It is much too far and we know not the direction . Come . The rain will arrive soon and we can not abide the cold .” He urged .

“I’d just as soon be on my way .” Said Boss , stubbornly .

“As you wish .” Said the Head Saurial . “Peace be with you .”

The Saurials turned and left .

“How dare you answer for all of us ?” Angel turned on Boss .

“They seemed quite civilised .”

“So . That doesn’t mean we have to go with them , does it ?” Boss countered . “We can’t afford to take everything at face value out here . I’m not walking into any more traps if I can help it . We’d best move on before they decide to come back and finish us off .”

“What nonsense . That moss must have gone to your head.” Angel claimed. They trudged on and were soon mired in mud and torrential rain .

They found the going hard and could not go very far for the rest of the day. They slogged around and squished around , getting muddier and grumpier by the minute . They couldn’t get any wetter . There was no sign of shelter anywhere to be found . Ahead of

them , through the grey sleet , they saw the figure of another saurial . It was one of the more common , fin-headed beasts . It moved towards them , but moving strangely , as if in slow motion .

“And to think , we could have been dry now .” Angel was whinging , when those up ahead came to a halt .

“More saurials.” Said Boss, quietly. “Shall we go around them?”

“Looks like just the one .” Shorty observed .

“He doesn’t look well .” Angel noted .

“What’s wrong with him ? Is he drunk ?” Boss queried , as the finhead staggered towards them .

“He’s sick . We should help him .” Angel suggested .

“Yes . We should .” Red agreed .

“He’s not one of us .” Cat argued , meaning neither the group , nor the race.

“Three for , one against .” Angel countered .

“He’s no threat to us . Why not ?” Shorty conceded .

They approached him , cautiously . He seemed to be moving more slowly by the minute .

When they reached him Preach looked him over . He was almost completely paralysed by now , able to move only very slowly , with seemingly great difficulty .

“What is it ?” Angel asked , concerned .

“Maybe it’s just the cold .” Preach surmised .

It was the coldest day of the year , so far , and the sudden chill had taken them all by surprise .

Angel touched his scaly flesh .

“He’s like a block of ice .” She marvelled .

“Cold blooded .” Preach explained . “He’s going into torpor .”

“Can you help him ?” Angel asked , concerned .

Preach looked around. Nothing here could be made to burn.

He shook his head .

“He needs warmth and quickly .” He pronounced .

“Body heat .” Angel suggested .

“Probably not enough in this downpour .” Preach assessed .

Boss looked back along the trail pensively . Then he spoke decisively .

“Nothing for it .” He said “We have to hike him back to his people . Even if he dies before we get there it is appropriate that we should hand his body over to them . Shorty and I can carry him . Red , take the point , Cat the rear .”

They each took their positions without question or complaint and began to march back . Through the pouring rain and the mud they pushed on into the darkness .

Cat was able to guide them to the reptilian lair . They found tracks leading to a low mound , perhaps ten feet tall . One hundred metres ahead they saw it opened into a cave . At the entrance stood two finheads . A thin strand of smoke rose from a fire , around which huddled four others , warming themselves . As the adventurers approached closer the guards barked a warning . One of them sprang from the fire and ran into the dark recesses of the cavern . The other three snatched up weapons and ran to guard the entrance . Those already on guard moved back to the fire to stand close to it . Boss handed his weapon over to Shorty , all except his dagger , which was hidden . He took off his backpack and left it next to Shorty . He took the reptilian body and walked slowly forwards , shuffling along from the weight of it .

“No matter what happens” He said . “Don’t attack them . If they kill me make good your escape .”

He approached . The saurials chattered furiously in their own language and peered into the grey twilight . One of them recognised Boss’ bundle .

“Alletacabeza , Guardia Frontera .” He said .

The guards made no move , aggressive or welcoming . Each had three spears and Boss was well within throwing range . He stopped about a hundred feet away , hoping to judge their reactions , but they displayed no emotions . They stayed at their designated guard posts and made no attempt at communication .

Boss stood and made no attempt to approach closer , to withdraw or to communicate . Two minutes passed silently . The guards by the fire moved into defensive positions . A group of Saurials emerged from the dark recesses of the cave . There were a large horn headed one , two medium sized blade-backed individuals and four more finheads .

Outside a mist was forming and gradually thickening . Looking back Boss could hardly see his companions . Unseen , dark shapes wheeled overhead . Shorty and Cat caught a glimpse of something . Shorty’s eyes darted at the shadow but it disappeared in the haze . Cat pointed in the opposite direction .

“Look out !” He warned . “It’s one of their flyers . We’re surrounded by now .”

Boss saw some vague shapes moving slowly through the mist , along the ground . Angel caught a glimpse of one too , then it became veiled . She continued , peering in that direction , trying to get a clear view of whatever it was .

The lager of the beasts and apparent leader waved his staff aggressively . Boss ignored the warning . He stood as still as his burden allowed . The body seemed like a lead weight in his arms . The leader began a loud cry and took up a chant , which was answered by voices from all around the cavern and all around the visitors , high and low.

Boss had lost sight of the others and the cave mouth was rapidly disappearing from view . He suspected some sort of magic was afoot.

For several minutes there was no further activity on either side . Then the leader of the saurials spoke in spemen .

“Welcome speman . I see your intentions are not aggressive .”

“I’m bringing you back one of your own .” Boss said , firmly .

The reptilians were moving forwards , as the fog thickened they were staying as far away as Boss could see .

“What is wrong with him ?” The creature asked .

“You tell me ?” Said Boss . “I know nothing about your kind .”

“You will allow my comrades to take him from you .” Came the voice . Boss wasn’t sure if it was a question a request or a command.

“They will leave their weapons behind .” Boss requested , in a similar vein.

“As you wish .” Their leader allowed and spoke to his ‘men’ .

Spears were thrust , blunt end into the soggy ground and four of the creatures began to move forwards . They lifted their companion by the legs and shoulders . They carried him to one of the bladebacks , who examined him carefully .

“Helado .” He pronounced .

“He will recover .” Said the leader .

“I am glad of that .” Boss assured him .

“You may shelter in our outer cave .” The other said , dispassionately .

He raised a chant , which was echoed from all around . He turned and walked towards the cave and his fellows followed . The chanting receded in the direction of the cave .

“Hey , people , where are you ?” Boss shouted .

“Yo !” Shorty answered .

“Come this way .” Boss shouted .

“You sure ?” Cat cried .

“Yes , Cat , come in .” Boss replied .

They blundered their way forwards .

“They say we can take shelter in their cave .” Boss declared .

“Do we trust them ?” Cat enquired .

“I sure would like to dry off .” Angel announced .

“I could help .” Cat offered .

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that .” Angel replied .

“I won’t .” Said Shorty .

Angel flashed him a scornful look and shook her head .

“What ?” Boss asked . “What’s going on ?”

“Nothing .” Said Angel . “Let’s get out of this rain and fog .”

So they walked towards the sound of reptiles chanting , walked past the motionless guards into the cavern and settled themselves around a large fire , along with four guards .

The guards changed every ten minutes . Each pair spent ten minutes on watch and twenty minutes warming themselves by the fire .

Apparently they could not take the cold for any length of time .

After a night of rest , except for normal watches , the travellers arose unmolested , breakfasted and went through their usual preparatory routines. They readied themselves to leave as the rain still poured .

The large reptilian leader approached , along with a smaller finhead .

“This is Kedrum .” He began . “He wishes to thank you for helping him .”

“No thanks are necessary .” Preach stated .

“So many of your kind scorn us .” Said the leader .

“They mistake you for Lizard Men .” Angel excused .

“In a way , we are .” Said the saurial . “We are feared because we are different . It will continue to rain for the next two days . On the third day it will snow . You are welcome to shelter here , until it is fit to travel .” He offered .

“That is very neighbourly of you .” Said Red . “But we will run out of food .”

“Then we must be better hosts and offer you food also .” He offered .

“I don’t know if we could accept such kindness .” Angel replied .

“You have saved one of our kind . How could we do less ?” The saurial argued .

So the adventurers stayed three days with the saurials and were fed and sheltered . On the morning of the fourth day the saurials suggested that they stay one more day , to allow the ground to dry out .

They had been eating a mixture of terrestrial food , caught by the saurials before the storm broke and subterranean food cultivated by the saurials in the underground caverns . Before they left the saurials gave them food supplies for a week .

During their time with the saurials they were barely able to communicate with any of them except their leader , who was not in the habit of visiting them often and not talkative when he did . They witnessed the regular changing of the guards and the flitting to-and-fro of the scouting flyers . The saurials would be difficult to attack by surprise .

ELF

After a short stroll , they came to where everything was grassy plains as far as the eye could see . As far as the eye could see was about six miles .

The grass was up to three feet tall . offering perfect cover for creatures the size of kobolds . Human sized creatures would be visible from miles away . “This is too open .” Angel complained . “We’re sitting ducks here .”

“We could always crawl home .” Boss quipped .

“Look at it this way .” Said Shorty “Anything big comes after us , we can see it coming miles away .”

Looking out over the sea of grass they could see the plain dotted with the backs of animals , which may have been cattle or horses , or any one of a dozen other grazing animals . It’s hard to tell when you can’t see the entire animal and can’t get closer than a couple of miles. There were irregular patches of grasses which had been eaten or trampled down . An occasional swathe of disturbed grass showed where an animal had pushed through . Ahead , in the grass , was a clearing , eaten by some animals down to a fine stubble . Across the clearing sat a lone elf .

“Hail , Spemen .” He greeted them . “You move like buffaloes .”

“I’m sure we could find something choice to say about you too .” Angel answered .

“Ah , a female jester .” Said the elf , enthusiastically . “You are a little far north , are you not ?”

He sat with his bow resting on his lap an arrow nocked .

“We travel where we please .” Said Boss , firmly .

“And so you should .” The elf agreed “But do it carefully . It’s a wonder that you made it this far north alive .”

“Thank you for your concern .” Said Preach . “We came north through the caverns and seek only a quick return to Dar Geth .”

The elf’s eyebrow raised even higher .

“It is a wonder indeed that you survived in the world below .” He marvelled .

“We had a bit of luck .” Said Red .

“I hope that it continues .” The elf replied , politely .

“Tell me , noble elf , how do you survive in this wilderness ?”

Preach beseeched him .

“The wilderness is my home and survival is my trade .” The elf replied . “In short , I hide a lot . When I move I make little noise . I am short enough to use the grass for cover and yet tall enough to see above it if I please . My senses are sharp and creatures seldom creep up on me . I am friend to bear and wolf and know them by name . Only evil races hunt me and they are too slow and clumsy to catch me .”

“And so modest too .” Shorty added .

“I am sure that what he says is true .” Said Red , diplomatically .

“Perhaps you can teach us some of your skills and help us to survive .” Cat asked .

“I fear I am no guide and no great teacher . Nothing I can do will make you an elf , nor am I a spemen .” He declined .

“Then we bid you good day , sir elf .” Said Red . “And may your gods speed you .”

“Indeed they may .” Said the elf , as he retreated into the long grass . After a few steps he ducked his head and disappeared completely .

The grass through which he had moved was hardly disturbed . Cat and Red tried , but could not follow his trail . They returned a few moments later , shaking their heads .

“I guess he wasn’t boasting after all .” Boss declared .

“Trouble is , we don’t know whereabouts he is out there , or what he is getting up to .” Shorty observed .

“Don’t worry , Shorty .” Angel counselled . “If he meant us any harm , we’d probably be dead by now .”

“He could have passed us by without being seen .” Shorty noted .

“Why do you think he decided to let us see him ?”

“We may never know .” Said Angel . “Elves are reputed to be strange folk , with strange ways .”

“I think he meant to warn us .” Said Preach . “In case we didn’t realise that we are such easy targets .”

“That’s a comforting thought , Preach , are you always this cheerful?” Said Angel .

“Let’s get well away from here .” Said Cat . “Before the elf and his friends decide to use us as target practice .”

So they travelled on , hopefully towards the River Floren , The Great Rift and The Waterfall .

“We know for sure the plateau ends south of here .” Said Cat .

“We can’t be sure if we crossed the river in our travels . We might be making a long trek of it .”

“So we travel for one day east and if we don’t come to the river we’ll head back south again .” Red suggested .

“We may come to a river .” Preach stated . “But how do we know it will be The River ?”

“We’ll be crossing that river when we come to it .” Said Shorty .

AXEBEAKS

They came to a small , trampled area of grass , in the centre of which was a mound of vegetation . As soon as they entered the clearing they heard strange , hollow clacking sounds from all around .

Birdlike heads popped up from the sea of grass , followed by most of the rest of the bird , only the base of the legs and the widely spread feet remained below grass level . The birds were seven feet tall and had huge , raptorial beaks , each ending in a nasty , sharp hook .

There were four birds , each within thirty metres of the travellers . The birds screamed , wildly and barrelled towards them on long , powerful legs. They were like ostriches on steroids .

Shorty , Preach , Cat and Red closed ranks around Boss and Angel , both of whom wore no armour . The group moved , in formation , to the top of the mound . Even though it was only a couple of feet high it gave the adventurers an important height advantage .

Very quickly , they learned to appreciate the power and the danger of those legs and sharp claws . While they were concentrating on warding off the birds’ powerful beaks , Preach and Red were both kicked , their armour torn and bloody open gashes ripped in their flesh . Shorty chopped into one, his sword opening a deep wound in its side , while another lashed out at Cat .

Cat side-stepped the worst of the attack , but was still slashed on the leg . Shorty’s sword thrusting to the side , the bird upon him brought its beak down , heavily into his chest , penetrating his armour .

Blood began to run down Shorty’s armour , his own blood .

After a few more exchanges of parry and thrust , Red suffered a similar fate , a huge , open mouthed beak fastened upon his shoulder and tore through his armour , it’s point penetrating into his shoulder blade .

Preach and Cat gave their opponents slight wounds . Shorty , Preach and Red all sustained serious damage .

“I think they are protecting this mound .” Angel screamed . “Let’s get off of it and see if they will stop attacking us .”

The company attempted to push their way off of the mound and yet remain in formation .

Cat hit his target , slashing its long neck . Shorty was kicked in the gut and faltered , crashing to the ground . With one last scream of pain , he fell unconscious . Cat was kicked on the upper leg .

With Shorty down , his adversary reached into the breach and savaged Angel with its beak . Angel jabbed it in the eye with her staff . The bird let go of her , recoiling its long neck , with the speed of a striking snake . Boss moved into the gap left by Shorty’s fall .

“We have to continue our retreat .” He shouted , desperately .

“Angel , do whatever else you can think of . We need a miracle to get us out of this .”

“Preach , help Shorty .” Angel shouted . “ You guys have to keep all the birds busy .” She added .

“Oh , thanks !” Boss replied .

While Preach knelt down , to tend to Shorty , Angel wrestled with the priest’s pack . Tearing it open she rummaged around for the orb . “Come on AGNI , do your stuff .” She said . “Sweet ISIS , forgive me .” She added , as an afterthought . “May your magic flow through this thing and help us to survive this hour .”

Luckily , the birds did not attack those who were bending low to the ground . Perhaps it was because Boss was swinging wildly at them and being hit by them both .

A wickedly pointed beak slashed at his throat and blood began to spurt and pump out of the wound . Boss fought on , with his left hand pressed hard against the wound .

Angel threw the orb at the nearest target . It hit the bird which was attacking Red . It shook its head groggily , turned about and ran off , with a drunken , staggering gait .

“Yes !” Angel hissed . “Thank you , My Lady of Mystery .”

Though perhaps no magic was involved in stunning the bird .

They fought valiantly against the remaining three birds .

Shorty rose to his feet only to be damaged further by a kick from those lashing , deadly legs . Cat was kicked again and Preach badly beaked . Boss swung mightily , catching a long necked birds off guard and neatly decapitating it . It was his first damage dealing blow of the entire battle .

The orb , seemingly with a will of its own , sprang into Preach’s hands .

“Use the orb for The Gods’ sakes , Preach !” Angel implored , as the fourth bird , recovered , returned to the attack .

Preach threw the orb . His aim seemed incredibly bad . Then the orb spun and curved , hitting a bird , which fell heavily . The orb continued its erratic flight and returned to Preach's hands .

“Way you go Preach !” Angel shouted , enthusiastically . “Do it again .”

Angel caste her *shocking grasp* spell and managed to touch one of the birds . To her disappointment the creature did not fall dead , neither did it run in panic . She had the impression that the damage it took was very slight .

“Sweet ISIS , I said I was sorry for using the orb . I really did .” She mumbled .

Red was kicked and went down . Shorty was bitten and followed him.

“Preach , help them and we will fight .” Angel shouted .

Cat thrust his sword deeply into one of the birds' breasts . It fell heavily and breathed its last . Angel was grasped , firmly , in the last bird's beak and was being simultaneously cut and crushed . She pummelled the bird's head with her staff . She managed to persuade it to let go but it still kept on attacking .

Meanwhile , Preach prayed fervently over Red's Prone form , begging AGNI to spare the bowman's life .

The last bird , now clear of Angel , Boss chopped at it , hitting it between the eyes . His sword cut through the heavy skull and must have come to rest inside the bird's tiny brain , for the creature reeled and fell dead .

Preach knelt over Shorty now , intoning a prayer of healing .

Now they were left with two companions who would not be able to travel for another day .

“I guess we rest now , until tomorrow .” Said Preach . “They will take no more healing this day .”

Preach was not about to let on that he could , indeed , work no more curative prayers until the morrow .

Angel, of course, had worked her one and only spell for the day .

“Better we use the orb to heal us all as much as you can .” Angel suggested . “I wouldn't like to get attacked again in this condition .”

“I don't like using it .” Said Preach “I do not consider myself worthy of that privilege .”

“Why don't you let The Gods decide who is worthy ?” Boss

argued . “If you weren't worthy , then it wouldn't work for you .”

“I don't want to anger The Great One by calling upon his powers too much . It doesn't pay to get greedy .” Preach tutored .

“It doesn't pay to get dead .” Said Cat , caustically .

“It is my choice .” Said Preach “And I choose to keep its powers in reserve for dire emergencies .”

“I should think it would be better to use it to avoid dire emergencies .” Angel contested . “ If you’d have healed sooner , Red and Shorty would not have almost died . Then we could move out of this dangerous region .”

“Yeah !” Cat agreed . “Heal us before we fall down and we’ll protect you.”

“We were protecting Boss and Angel because they have no armour , remember .” Preach reminded .

“Then , perhaps , it’s time for a change of tactics .” Boss suggested . “ You let me wear your chain mail and I’ll protect you .”

“At the moment Shorty and Red are in no need of their armour . Neither of them will fight more this day .” Preach pointed out .

“I mean when they are fit and we are travelling .” Boss elucidated . “You had chain mail of your own and you were careless with it.”

Preach accused .

“We’re supposed to be a team .” Said Cat , evenly .

“Like you would give up everything for us .” Preach challenged .

“That’s beside the point .” Said Cat . “I’m saying what makes sense.”

“So , what makes sense ?” Angel asked . “Do we light a fire ?”

“Here ? No way !” Said Cat , emphatically . “There could be a thousand goblins a hundred yards away .”

They fell into a sullen silence .

They stripped off Shorty’s armour and helped Boss into it . It was just a little roomy for him . Then they stripped off Red’s armour , so that he could rest more comfortably .

“The orb even worked for me .” Angel whispered to Preach . “I think you were meant to have it .”

“Who made you the devil’s advocate ?” Preach berated her .

“It is a test of my faith to try not to call upon its powers too much . I would be a poor priest indeed if I abused such a gift by overuse .”

“I don’t understand that . If ISIS gives me magic and I don’t use it to the best advantage she would think me a wretched , ungrateful excuse for a mage .” Angel claimed .

“We are insignificant mortals . It is presumptuous of us to make demands of The Gods . Any magic you do , you can caste by virtue of your own will. No god grants you your powers . You take it , wresting it from the energies around you . My abilities come directly from My Lord.

I have to beg for his favour and every prayer answered has its price . I become deeper in his debt and will spend my life trying to repay his kindness . Nothing I can do will be enough .”

“You have rescued his orb for him and will deliver it to his church only if he grants you the power to do so .” She pointed out . “I can not believe that he wants you to fail .”

“It is nought to him if I succeed or nay . If I prove myself unworthy he will allow me to fail . Another priest will succeed another time . A thousand years are nought to him . The affairs of men are small to him .”

“Then prove yourself worthy by making the best use of the orb that you can .” She challenged .

“You won’t sway me with your spurious logic . I am no child to be tricked out of his convictions .” Preach was adamant .

“Well , look .” Angel began . “ I need to be healed because , if I don’t get healed by your special talents then I will be scarred for life. Do you want to have that on your conscience ?”

“Just how important is it to you ?” Preach asked .

“It’s very important .” Said Angel , emphatically . “Very important . No woman wants to go through life bearing ugly scars all over her .”

“Yes , but if I heal you tomorrow , or even the next day , it will still not be too late for the wounds to heal almost perfectly .”

Preach pointed out .

“What if we get separated before that happens . It’s not a chance that I want to take .” She told him .

“It’s a risk you will have to live with . For today , all I can do is to offer you mundane healing .Where are you hurt ?”

“That’s just it .” Said Angel “My back and my side and” She paused and drew a deep breath and her voice dropped from a whisper to a shadow of a whisper . “My breast .” She added , blushing . “It’s a real mess . I was hoping you could do something to heal it without having to touch and ogle me .”

“You will have to leave your vanity and insecurity behind .” Said Preach . “Don’t be self-conscious with me . I am a priest .”

“But you are still a man .” said Angel .

“I didn’t think you had noticed .” Preach replied .

“Well , if you are going to bandage me up properly , I don’t want the others looking over your shoulder .” Angel pleaded .

“Very well .” Said Preach “But how shall we excuse ourselves without arousing suspicion .”

“Just tell them the truth, of course, if you have to say anything.”

Angel replied , rather loudly .

Boss and Cat looked over at them .

Preach walked over to Boss and whispered briefly to him .

Boss nodded and Preach turned to walk away .

“And when you are finished, I could use some myself .” He said .

Preach led Angel a short way off and tended her wounds . She was badly torn in several places .

“You see .” Said Angel . “My breast will never return to the proper shape .”

Preach shook his head and relinquished all will to refuse her .

He doffed his backpack and took out the orb . He prayed to AGNI and begged for his indulgence .

Then he began the mystical healing ceremony in earnest . He laid the orb against Angel’s breast and prayed .

When he had finished she thanked him profusely .

“Any ordinary wound , I wouldn’t worry so much .” She excused .

He put his hand over her mouth to silence her .

“Hush .” He said , gently . “I understand . You have no need to explain yourself .” He took his hand away .

“Still. I owe you , big time . If ever I can do anything in return .”

She offered .

“Anything .” Preach mused .

“That’s what I said .” Angel confirmed .

“Even .” Preach intimated .

“I expected better from you , Preach . One day , perhaps , I will be able to pay up big time .” Angel boasted .

“One day , perhaps , if you survive , if we survive . There are too many ifs . What I have in mind is more certain and more immediate and vastly more enjoyable .” Preach confided .

“How can you think of that at a time like this ?” Said Angel .

“Look at you . You are so pale , practically bleeding to death .”

“Yes . It’s true . But I don’t have to take payment now , do I ?”

Preach said, callously .

“I’m not having you hold this over me for any length of time .”

Said Angel bitterly . “If that’s what you want take it now or forget it .”

“Very well , then I have no choice .” Preach said , taking up the orb and beginning to pray .

“For emergencies , you said .” Angel chided .

Preach continued in his chant , unperturbed .

“Thank you , oh Great Lord .” He said , when the prayer was completed . “I feel much better now .”

He smiled at Angel , an ironic smile .

“Now then .” He said , as he took hold of her roughly .

Over an hour later they were done , or at least he was done in .”

“I’m sorry .” He said . “I shouldn’t have .”

She lay with her eyes closed . He thought she was asleep .
 “Shit !” He swore and rolled off of her . He dressed and then he shook her gently . “Angel , we must go .” He said .
 She pulled away from him .
 “Why ?” He demanded .
 “You blackmailed me .” She replied .
 He made no reply .
 She knew that he had not ejaculated , but she said nothing on that subject . She still felt soiled .
 Meanwhile Boss and Cat had tended their own wounds , as best they could .
 Angel and Preach returned to camp , both sullen .
 “Major surgery was it ?” Cat said , sarcastically .
 “Very .” Preach confirmed .
 “Meanwhile we’re bleeding to death .” Boss complained .
 “I will tend to you now .” Said Preach , coldly .
 “What about me ?” Cat asked . “I’m wounded too .”
 “Yes , but you have nine lives .” Preach stated .
 After Preach had bandaged the others properly they ate and then rested . They arranged a roster of watches for the rest of the day and night . Boss placed them without fear or favour and making no allowances for sensibilities .
 “If you’re part of this team” Boss told Angel “You will work with any and or all of us . We’ll make no special arrangements for you .”
 “What’s eating you ?” Angel asked “Why so mean all of a sudden?” “I’m just doing what I have to do .” He excused . “I didn’t ask to be put in charge .”
 “So , I’m on third watch with Cat .” Angel affirmed .
 “That’s the way it is .” Boss retold .
 Second watch was shared between Boss and Preach . One second there was nothing to see or hear . The next there were nine elves , barely visible in the dim light of the crescent moon , surrounding the clearing which housed the group .
 One of the elves gave a gesture which might have been taken as a greeting .

ELVES AGAIN

Boss and Preach resisted the impulse to grab for their weapons .
 “What do you want ?” Boss asked , in spemen and then in orcan and then in that language that he didn’t even know that he knew .
 Gaining no response he said “Preach , speak to them .”
 The elves stood implacable .

Preach said “Good morning and welcome .” In spemen and in dwarven and in his god given tongue , the language of his church . They made no reply .

“Angel speaks elven .” Preach said , on the edge of panic .

“Calm down Preach .” Said Boss “Elves aren’t dangerous , are they? Just don’t make any sudden moves .”

“We should wake Angel .” Preach said , a little more calmly .

The elves began to move forwards slowly . Boss and Preach froze in place.

“Gooden Acht .” One elf spake in dwarven .

Preach replied in like kind .

The elf explained that they were merely travelling by night and meant the companions no harm .

Preach asked them where they were . The elf told him .

“We will leave you to your sleep .” The elf said , in dwarven .

“May your travels be rewarding .” Preach replied .

The elves walked , silently , away .

“We are west of the river .” Preach told Boss . “And west of The Devlin Khanate . They say that it is not a good place to visit , but that it is quicker to take a boat down the river from there .”

“Elves speaking in dwarven .” Boss queried .

“Only one of them .” Preach pointed out .

Soon after , it was Angel and Cat’s turn on watch .

Boss and Preach roused them and then were soon asleep .

Cat crept up to Angel at the opposite side of the clearing .

“Angel .” He whispered . “Can we talk ?”

“Apparently you can .” She stated , whimsically .

“I’m really sorry about ...” He began .

“Can it Cat . I don’t want you pretending sincerity on me , alright .

I just want you to know that you don’t fool me one bit .” Angel retorted .

“But you got me jiggered . I don’t understand you a t all . You let yourself get taken by all the others . So what’s wrong with me ?”

Cat complained .

“I’m not a sack of food to be shared out equally .” Angel pointed out.

“I never thought you were .” Said Cat , earnestly .

“Then what’s your point ?” Angel asked .

“I want you .” Said Cat , pointedly .

“Oh , how romantic .” Angel mocked .

“Damn it , I ain’t no smooth talker .” Cat said , vehemently .

“Ah , poor Cat .” Said Angel , crooningly and rested her forehead on his . “You see , Cat , if I want to give myself , I do it in my own

good time and on my terms . No guy is going to use me or take me for granted .”

“I wouldn’t even think of taking you for granted .” Said Cat .

“That’s it Cat , tell me what I want to hear .” She said “I bet you think that’ll work , don’t you ?”

He said nothing more . He simply took her in his arms and kissed her fervently . What followed took up almost their entire stint on watch together . Angel thought that it would never stop and , at times , found herself wishing that it would . By the time that they were done they were both exhausted .

“I really wish that we hadn’t done that .” Angel said , indiscreetly . “Why ?” Cat asked .

“It just makes things so complicated .” She explained . “None of this should have happened . Travelling together our lives depend on one another . We really can’t afford emotional attachments , rivalries and jealousies .”

“You know your trouble , Angel ?” Said Cat , candidly . “You think too much . Everything will work out just fine .”

Something in his tone worried her . She had never heard him truly mellow before .

“But I think the others want me exclusively to themselves .” She worried . “What’s going to happen when the shit hits the fan ?”

“Anything you do is alright by me .” Said Cat “I won’t judge you and I won’t reject you , no matter how you screw around .”

“Hey , watch it !” She said , punching his arm . “I don’t screw around .”

“Of course not , my mistake madam .” He said cheekily .

“Probably time to wake Boss . He and I are on last watch .”

“How am I going to face him ?” She said , thinking aloud .

“Why do you care what the prudish , pompous asshole thinks ?”

Cat goaded . “He insisted you share this watch with me .”

“Yeah , that’s right .” She agreed “He brought it on himself .” She clutched at straws to ease her guilt and share the blame .

“So , you screwed me just to spite him .” Cat concluded .

She didn’t bother to deny it .

ELVES AGAIN , REVISITED

When they looked around they saw a large number of elves watching them. Angel’s eyes grew wide .

“How long have you been here ?” She asked , in elven .

“Long enough.” An elf replied . She found this utterly humiliating . The elves broke into a round of applause .

“It was quite a performance .” Said their leader . “Not quite elven but adequate for your kind .”

“You ought to be ashamed of yourselves , spying on people .”

Angel berated him .

“On the contrary .” Said the elf . “We find it uplifting to share in your innocent pleasures . Our hearts are made light by the strength of your love .”

Angel didn’t know where to look . Cat , on the other hand , rose to the applause and bowed like a circus performer . He had no shame .

“In fact, we would deem it a pleasure to join in your festivities .”

The elf offered .

“No way .” Angel protested . “You must be crazy .”

“No mistress .” Said the elf . “I am merely an elf .”

“Go away and take your innocent fun with you .” Angel said , but her body was roused and her heart was beating double time .

“Could it be that an elf is too much for you , mistress .” The elf challenged.

“At this moment , Yes .” She admitted . Her eyes told her that this particular elf was extremely attractive , the kind of beauty she was used to seeing in females of her own kind (but without the breasts of course) .

“Then , perhaps some other time .” The elf said , gallantly .

“Come brethren , the spemen folk are tired and need their rest . We will see you anon .” The elf spoke in parting .

“What’d they say ?” Cat asked .

“Nothing important .” Angel lied . “Just chit chat .”

“Just chat .” Said Cat . “What a load of chit .”

They woke Boss and Angel collapsed immediately into a profound sleep .

Preach used the healing powers of the orb to revive everyone that morning.

“Why the change of heart ?” Angel asked .

“What change of heart ?” Preach demanded .

“About using the orb ?” She pressed .

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t use it . I just don’t think it’s a good idea to use all of my powers and exhaust the orb as well . Suppose we were attacked during the night and there were no healing forthcoming ?” He excused .

Angel shrugged . “Alright Preach , doling out the healing is your province . I shouldn’t have interfered .”

“So how is your ?” He crossed his chest . “You know .”

“Some marks are still visible .” She told him . “But it’s not a bad job, considering it was like mashed potato.” She commended.

“Thanks .”

She said , gratefully , and kissed him in a friendly way .

He waved her away , obviously feeling awkward and embarrassed .

Cat flew at her . “What the fuck are you doing !”

She looked coldly . “What ?” She said , incredulously .

There seemed to be some invisible contest of wills taking place as their eyes met . Nothing more was spoken . Cat just stood there as if transfixed , his mind in a turmoil of conflicting emotions , but he could not challenge her . Her will was stronger than his , he could feel it . He fought back his anger . The issue temporarily resolved , the tension broke .

“Good morning to you too , Cat .” She said , with a smile , feeling her victory and suddenly struck by the absurdity of the situation .

She turned to Preach .

“Must have got out of the wrong side of the bed this morning .”

She shrugged .

She thought to herself that she was going to crucify Cat later for such an indignity .

Everyone packed up that morning with such an air of noncordiality. The atmosphere was as a storm about to break .

“There’s something very strange happening here .” Red commented , cryptically .

No one replied .

“Let’s get going .” Said Boss , and they did so in silence .

BEASTMEN

By mid morning they had reached a place from which they could see a thin dark line , representing the presence of trees far off in the distance . They also saw , approaching them , a group of nine small , slender , hairy creatures carrying clubs . The creatures were advancing rapidly .

“Shall we run ?” Preach asked .

“Nowhere to run to .” Cat pointed out .

The adventurers waited until the creatures were within hailing distance .

“What do you want ?” Shorty shouted , in his booming voice .

“We are known as Beastmen .” Came a growling reply , in a strange accent. “We are border guards for Devlin Khan.” He continued .

“You must pay a toll if you wish to enter The Khanate .”

“Your leader may approach .” Shorty shouted .

“I and one other .” Said the spokesbeast .

“Very well .” Shorty allowed .

The two approached . The others dropped down below the level of the grass .

“Tell them they must remain visible .” Shorty proclaimed .

“Very well .” Said the beastleader and barked a sharp order .

The others appeared . The beastman with the leader carried a leather satchel , which looked out of place on him . The two drew near .

“You must pay one silver piece , each . We will give you a pass to travel The Khan’s highways . It is valid for a month anywhere in The Khanate except the capitol . In Devlin itself a further toll is required.”

The travellers handed over six silver pieces for six flat stones with stylised pictures of Beastmen and sheaves of some ripe grass carved into them .

“You would do well to cross the border rapidly . Some of The Khan’s patrols are worse than brigands . They may rob you blind and leave you for dead .”

“If this Khan is so evil , then why do you serve him ?” Angel asked

.

“It is a matter of survival . If we collect his tolls he leaves us in peace .” Said the beast-leader .

“But you can not guarantee our safety ?” Preach asked .

“No-one can guarantee that .” Said the creature . “But you are better off for having met us first . The other patrol leaders know that we will mention having met you here . Questions may be asked if you go missing .”

“We bid you farewell and good fortune.” Said Red , politely .

“Where may we find passage down-river ?” Boss enquired .

“Only in Devlin City itself . All traffic is closely supervised . They will want to know from whence you came and whence you hie and what was your business hereabouts .” Said the officer .

“Thank you .” Said Boss , offering another silver for the information.

“The money has little use for us , except to pay off The Devlin and we must account for all our toll stones .” The creature replied .

“Then , is there anything you will take instead ?” Boss asked .

“We will accept the good fortune that your friend has bestowed upon us .” Said the leader . “Go in peace .”

“Stay in peace .” Boss returned , and they continued upon their separate journeys .

In the late afternoon , they were approaching areas in which there were trees scattered here and there . They , quite suddenly , found themselves close to a dozen minotaurs .

They were primitive minotaurs , like the one that the company had faced in the caverns , but they were nowhere near as large as he had been . They were , perhaps , only juvenile minotaurs . An army of mere babies , cheap to pay and even cheaper to arm . One could not call them unarmed, for each sported horns on their heads several inches in length and large and powerful fists . Neither were they devoid of armour , since each had a body covered in tough leathery hide . It would be no simple matter to overcome them . The smallest was well over six feet tall and rather heavily built .

MINOTAURS

They emerged from the first copse of trees that the wayfarers approached closely and had evidently been stationed there to that end .

“Halt ! Who goes there ?” The lead minotaur shouted , in a deep , booming voice .

“We are a party travelling south .” Said Shorty .

“You are travelling east .” Said the minotaur , suspiciously .

“To the river , where we are told we can get rapid transport south .” Said Shorty .

“Then you are in a hurry .” The minotaur concluded .

“We wish only to be spared a lengthy walk .” Red put in .

“Well you know that travel on The Khan’s river is not free .” The minotaur fished .

“We suspected so .” Shorty replied .

“Then you are rich enough to pay ?” The leader assumed .

“We have little of anything . We hope that there is enough for our needs .” Red assured him .

“What will you do if you find that you do not have enough .” The guard asked .

“We will have to look for work .” Angel supposed .

“You will not rob people on the khan’s highways ?” The beast demanded , or perhaps threatened .

“We will hold to the laws of the land .” Red claimed .

“Which are ?” The minotaur queried .

“What do you mean ?” Cat asked .

“Your friend here is evidently a lawyer , since he proports to know the laws of the land . I was wanting him to explain them to me , since I have never understood them .” Said the minotaur , sarcastically .

“He was speaking figuratively .” Said Boss “We only assume that laws are similar everywhere , and that no lord desires travellers in his realm to be waylaid by bandits .”

“From whence do you travel ?” Asked the minotaur .

“We are from Der Goth .” Said Boss , immediately .

“How did you come here ?” The other interrogated .

“By foot . We became lost in the caverns .” Said Preach .

“In the caverns !” The minotaur wondered . “You are indeed mightier than you look .”

“We are a great deal luckier than we might .” Said Boss .

His humour was lost upon the minotaur .

“Why were you in the caverns ?” He inevitably asked .

“Exploring .” Said Angel , with enthusiasm . “We love adventure .”

“I have an adventure I could offer you .” The minotaur said , with the emphasis upon the last word , quite suddenly becoming as big as a bull .

“She is under our protection .” Said Boss stalwartly “And we are ordered to see to it that she does not misbehave .”

“Then she is worth something to you ?” The minotaur divined .

“Now I discern the truth of your mission and the value of your cargo.” He had jumped to the wrong conclusion and indeed a dangerous one .

“I fear you are mistaken .” Said Preach .

“Then your companion is a liar .” Said the minotaur , harshly . “Do you know the penalty for lying to The Khan’s Officers ?”

“Sudden death , I expect .” Said Preach , shaking visibly .

If the minotaur could have smiled , then he would have smiled .

“Quite right , little man .” He spake .

“We have passes .” Said Red , holding up his stone disc . “And the right to travel the Khan’s highway unmolested .”

“The beastmen have worked that little scam on you, have they?”

Said the minotaur . “Only The Khan’s official officers have the right to grant passage . Those things are worthless here .” He claimed .

“Then sell us proper passes and we will be on our way .” Preach demanded.

“I doubt that you could meet our price .” Said the minotaur , evenly .

“We have paid once . We’re not about to pay again .” Said Shorty , drawing his sword . “Come and meet our price .”

“Do you challenge me , little spemen ?” The captain demanded . Almost simultaneously Angel stepped between them .

“Don’t be ridiculous , Shorty !” She shouted .

“A challenge has been issued !” The minotaur Shouted . “Do you hide behind a woman’s skirts ?”

“No , I do not .” Said Shorty , evenly . “Angel , get out of the way .”

“Hold . Hold .” Said Cat . “What are the terms of this contest ? What spoils to the victor . What forfeits the loser ?”

“Now you would be the lawyer .” The minotaur bellowed , exasperated .

“If it’s to be a true challenge of honour these things must be addressed .” Boss insisted .

“He forfeits his life and the woman .” The minotaur stated .

“And the rest of us ?” Cat asked .

“Will go unharmed .” The minotaur allowed .

“It is too much for the affront , his life and hers .” Boss plied .

“Fight to a wound and she is not his to bargain with .”

“Then you offer me nothing .” The minotaur complained , “His death alone will satisfy me .”

“And what do you offer if you lose ?” Angel demanded .

“Then you all go free .” The minotaur growled his concession .

“We go free win or lose . There is no victory here for us .” Preach countered .

“If he wins you will deliver us safely to our destination in the south.” Cat proposed .

“Only if we fight to the death .” The captain insisted .

“Fight until one of you claims victory .” Red suggested .

“Excellent .” The minotaur enthused . “And there is to be no armour on either side and no weapons .”

“No weapons ! Are your horns not weapons ? Are your fists not weapons ?” Red argued .

“Very well .” Said the minotaur . “For fists I offer fists and for horns I offer a dagger .”

“And is not your hide worth a suit of armour?” Cat pointed out.

“For my hide I offer a shield .” Said the minotaur . “Now no more concessions , no more of this wretched discussion. We do battle.”

“So be it .” Said Shorty , stripping off his chain mail .

Soon they faced each other over an open field of short grass surrounded by trees . Boss had put on Shorty’s armour . The companions had bows strung. Preach prayed , quietly .

The minotaur charged , head down , attempting to impale its victim . Shorty neatly side-stepped and opened a gash in the minotaur's side with his dagger .

The minotaur wheeled about and again tried to gore his opponent , again unsuccessfully . Shorty stabbed it again and again , catching the minotaur's horns on his shield .

Once , the minotaur's horn slipped through Shorty's guard , opening up a large rent in the warrior's side .

They fought for a few minutes with no quarter given on either side . Finally Shorty plunged his dagger deeply into the beast and it fell heavily, blood flowing profusely. It gurgled falling into unconsciousness .

"I claim victory ." Shorty said , panting .

Preach walked up and administered first aid to the minotaur and was able to revive him somewhat .

"Now we will have to wait here for a whole day ." Angel announced.

"But we shall have a strong escort home ." Boss noted .

"If they keep their side of the bargain ." Preach warned .

"If we don't trust them we're likely to run into a dozen more bands like them along the way ." Cat pointed out .

"Can't we release them from the agreement ?" Shorty asked .

"Not honourably ." Said Angel "They would be insulted . Perhaps insulted enough to kill us all ."

Preach did all of the healing that he could for Shorty's wounds and his own and Cat's earlier ones .

Untrusting of their minotaur escort , the adventurers stayed on their guard , keeping normal watches throughout the night . A couple of minotaurs left and returned a couple of hours later . No-one in the party could communicate with them to find out where they had been. Only the minotaur leader spoke significant spemen .

The next day the minotaurs tabards , with their emblems of The Devlin Khanate , were not in evidence . The group rested the whole day while the minotaur commander healed . He was not too happy to find himself alive , having been defeated and humiliated before his comrades . He took it stoically . By that evening Preach had restored him to full health .

The next morning they moved off together , six humans and twelve beast minotaurs . The minotaurs proved excellent guards . With their lifetime of military training and excellent sense of smell they were difficult to take by surprise . They also had an unerring sense of direction and had next to no chance of ever getting lost . Not surprisingly , they remained unmolested by brigands , other guards , which passed frequently , and other travellers . The

minotaurs were not , however , good travelling companions , spending most of the journey silent, sullen and apart , brooding over their servitude .

At midday , when they had stopped for a meal , the adventurers were soon disturbed by a lot of shouting , in harsh minotaur voices . The minotaur leader was battling another minotaur . They charged into one another , clashing horns , like wild bulls . After a few passes the former leader fell dead .

The new leader walked away , surrounded by his fellows , making it understood that the spemen were lucky to be allowed to live .

They carried off the former leader's body with them .

"They are making sure that you don't revive him , Preach ." Boss discerned .

"Perhaps we are lucky to be rid of them ." Preach replied .

The spemen could work out that , with the change of leadership , all bets were off between them and the minotaurs . The new leader would not be bound by the old leader's liabilities .

LARINA AND ALDETIA

The wanderers soon met up with another set of companions . Two women sat near the roadside , in the shade of a tree . One was a lady in her mid thirties , wearing a blue robe and sporting a staff . The other , a girl in her mid to late teens , wearing studded leather armour and bearing a long sword and dagger in sheaths in her weapon belt .

"Good afternoon ." The older one hailed them as they approached . When they drew close they saw that both women were rather striking looking , the older perhaps the more beautiful of the two . The men in the party were quite taken with them . Angel glared at her companions, seeing their eyes bug out .

Boss stopped to talk .

"Good afternoon , madam ." He said politely .

"Do you journey far ?" The elder asked .

"Far to the south , via Devlin ." Boss informed her .

"You hie to Devlin . That is good . We are lucky we met you ."

The spokeswoman said . "We also journey to Devlin . We are two helpless females alone on the road . Perhaps we could keep company with you on the road . The journey is safer when friends are many ." She pleaded .

"Certainly you may join us , for our mutual safety ." Boss replied .

"Then we accept your kind invitation ." Said the madam .

"How do you know that you can trust us ?" Preach demanded .

“Because you have thought to ask such a question .” The lady replied . “Villains never do so .”

During the afternoon’s walk they began with the older woman walking up front with Boss and the younger taking the rear with Red. During the course of conversation this arrangement was called into question .

“This isn’t right .” Said the young lady . “I’m supposed to be guarding Larina . She shouldn’t be up front .”

“I’m supposed to be guarding our rear . I’m not doing a very good job of that .” Red confessed .

“We’ll have to fix things up .” Said the other , who’s name was Aldetia .

Meanwhile Boss was asking Larina all kinds of pertinent questions about The Devlin Khanate and its workings .

“So , these passes are good if you don’t run into the wrong guardsmen .” He asked .

“Yes .” Larina confirmed .

Red came trotting up .

“Aldetia says she would like to take the point for a while . Would that be O.K.?” Red asked .

“Certainly .” Boss replied .

“I mean , if we take the point .” Red clarified .

“I take your point , Red .” Boss replied . “Shorty , would you like to be rear guard ?”

“A promotion at last .” Shorty joked .

They walked on for a few more hours . Boss and Larina drifted towards the rear .

“I’m not keeping up too well .” She excused . “I am not used to so much walking .”

Everyone wearied of the walk and conversation became too much of an effort and died down . Life became a matter of endless plodding .

When they came to a fork in the road Aldetia pointed the way .

“It’s lucky you came along .” Red commented . “We would never find Devlin without your help .”

“We might not have made Devlin on our own .” She returned .

Towards evening they stumbled into the main streets of another small village , like so many others they had passed through that day . In the village the streets were narrow and hemmed in on both sides by wooden buildings . There was barely room for a single wagon or carriage to pass through and only three or four persons could walk abreast .

Aldetia now strode , seemingly tirelessly , out in front , with Red a few paces behind , admiring the view . Next came Preach and Cat followed by Angel then Boss and Shorty while Larina lagged a few paces behind , looking very road weary .

Marching down the narrow street towards them came a proud looking young lady , dressed in finery , primed and preened . She was accompanied by three guards , one middle aged and one younger behind and a very young man immediately before her .

The lady was exceptionally good looking and statuesque .

“Would you mind stepping aside .” The young guard asked Aldetia , politely .

Aldetia , with lightning speed , flashed out her sword and ripped it into the young man’s gut , occasioning him more than a little embarrassment and pain . This happened so quickly that no-one had a chance to react . Everyone stood for a few seconds in amazement .

The young man belatedly drew his sword and attempted to defend himself , his life’s blood gushing out even as he did so . Even in the absence of another wound he might not survive for long .

When Aldetia saw that he was preparing to defend himself she tore into him with a barrage of blows , which he weakly defended for a short time .

“It’s a set up !” Cat shouted . He whirled around , drawing his sword as he did so , and flew back past Boss and Shorty , straight towards Larina .

Angel ran forwards towards Aldetia .

“Go for help !” The older guard shouted . The younger turned , quickly , on his heels and ran down the street , shouting loudly .

The young lady went for her sword . The older guard grabbed her from behind , in a bearhug , and dragged her , kicking and screaming , to the nearest doorway and pushed her through it .

Red began to chase after the young guard .

“Let him go , Red !” Preach shouted after him .

On his knees , clutching at his wound , the youngest guard did his best to ward off Aldetia’s attacks . Angel attempted to restrain Aldetia but failed .

Cat reached Larina only after she had completed her incantation .

He found his swordstroke neatly parried by Larina’s staff . She seemed to be moving with lightning speed .

“Keep her inside .” The older guard shouted at the occupants as he turned and closed the door behind him . He stood guarding the door .

Aldetia still swatted at her quarry , oblivious to Angel’s attempts to stop her . The youngest guard barely managed to parry her blows .

Larina was casting another spell . Cat was trying to attack her , but she dodged his blows as if he was standing still . Angel found a similar situation . Her attacks on Aldetia were totally ineffectual . She stopped trying to hit the murderess and began to cast her one useful spell .

Boss turned and Grabbed Larina , though she had finished her second spell by this time . She struggled to break free but could not break his powerful grip .

“What are you doing ?” He asked .

“I was just defending myself .” She reasoned .

Shorty grabbed Aldetia from behind , but only briefly . She broke free of his grip and turned her attention to him .

Preach rushed forwards and began to approach the young guard .

“Let me help you .” The priest pleaded .

He attempted to staunch the flow of blood but the gaping , open wound defied his best efforts . This was too serious a wound for mundane healing . The young man’s gut was torn and filth spewed out into his system . Preach began a prayer .

Angel touched Aldetia with her shocking grasp spell completed .

A wave of electrical energy poured into her and Aldetia fell dead at Angel’s feet .

The spell had had more effect than the mage had anticipated .

“Oh , sweet ISIS , what have I done ?” Angel moaned . “I didn’t mean to kill her .”

Red had pulled up short , in confusion . His quarry long since fled he returned in time to see Aldetia fall .

“You sure you weren’t driven by jealousy ?” Red said .

The older fighter approached .

“You did a good job on her , lady .” He commended .

Preach completed his prayer and moved to tend to Aldetia . He succeeded in restarting her heart .

Then came the sound of Cat shouting .

“What the hell is going on ?” He cried .

He was floating a few feet off the ground and slowly rising .

“Let me go .” Larina warned Boss “Or I’ll let him go , very suddenly .”

People were gathering up and down the street and gaping . The other warrior returned to view , leading a contingent of orcish guards from the local militia , a dozen of them .

“You don’t have to be like that .” Said Boss “As far as anyone is concerned you haven’t done anything wrong , yet .”

“Bull crap !” Cat shouted . “I want that bitch .”

“Be careful , my friend .” Said the older warrior . “Or you may talk yourself into an early grave .”

“Yes .” Said Larina . “Speak very nicely to me , or you are heading for a fall .”

By now Cat was hovering twenty feet off of the ground .

“I’ll let you down gently , if you promise not to attack me .” Larina offered.

“I promise .” Said Cat , aggressively .

“You’ll have to do better than that .” Said Larina .

“I promise .” Said cat , with saccharine .

Cat was twenty five feet high now and still rising . Larina let him glide gently to the floor . The older soldier spoke to the orcish commander in goblin , as Red noted .

The orc approached Aldetia and spoke to her , gruffly .

“Why you attack him ?” He demanded .

“I move aside for no man !” She spat .

The orc let fly with a backhand across her cheek .

“You stupid woman.” He shouted. “No reason. No good reason.”

“It’s the truth .” She said , staring at him , defiantly .

“You in big trouble .” Said the orc .

The young lady stepped out of the house in which she had been deposited .

“Give her to me .” She said . “I will see to it that she suffers sufficiently .”

“No way .” Said the orc . “She my prisoner .”

While they argued Aldetia’s fate Larina brought Cat to the ground and Boss released her . The older warrior moved up beside the wizardess .

“What was your part in this ?” The bodyguard asked .

“Me ? I did nothing .” She said . “Except for being attacked by this clown here and defending myself .”

“What were you chanting ?” He demanded .

“Just something to protect myself with , in case of need , and it turned out I had need of it after all .” She told .

“I’m supposed to believe that ?” He asked , sceptically .

“You believe what you like .” She said , nonchalantly . “I’m not responsible for that young hothead am I ?”

“You caste some spell on us .” He accused .

“Naturally . It was meant to slow you all down , so that I could be safe . Unfortunately it didn’t work well enough to affect you all .

The spell does no real harm . What becomes of my bodyguard ?” Larina asked .

“She won’t be any use as a bodyguard when they get through with her .” He related .

“Then I need another . Perhaps you might serve ?” She offered .
 “I have an excellent position already , thank you madam .” He replied , coldly and walked away .
 “Thank you for speaking up for us .” Red greeted him .
 “I calls ‘em as I see ‘em .” The bodyguard replied . “But you came close to taking the wrong side .”
 “Heat of battle .” Red excused , with a shrug .
 “Follow the good priest’s advice always .” The older man advised .
 “I will that .” Said Red , shaking his head .
 The orcs had Aldetia tied up and lead her away , pushing through the curious crowd of onlookers .
 When the comrades looked back they discovered that Larina had taken off . She was nowhere to be seen .
 “How’d she do that ?” Cat declared .
 “No matter .” Said Preach . “We are probably better off without her .”
 “That’s what you said about the minotaurs .” Boss reminded .
 “You don’t get it do you ?” Preach began . “You can’t trust anybody in this place . The whole country is teeming with evil .”
 “O.K. Preach , we believe you .” Said Cat , condescendingly . “No need to get excited .”
 “It’s O.K. for you , Cat .” Said Boss . “You never trust anyone anyway , so you’re used to it .”
 “Used to it .” Said Angel . “That’s the way he likes it .”
 “Let’s find a place to rest for the night .” Shorty suggested , and they did .
 They spent the night in the common room of a cheap Inn in poor repair . This cost them another silver apiece . It was their first night in a long while not spent on cold , hard ground .
 In the morning they were visited by the elegant young lady . She thanked them , profusely and awarded them with five gold pieces each .
 “At last .” Said Cat . “We turned a profit .”
 They left the village and headed towards Devlin , which was clearly signposted from here to the city itself .
 The road was lined with a row of trees bearing nuts .

HALFLINGS

The wayfarers were approaching two trios of halflings , stacked on each others’ shoulders . The halflings on top were busily picking nuts and throwing them down . Those at the base were catching these in their sacks . As the travellers passed by one of the halflings hailed them .

“Hello .” He squeaked , in his lightweight voice .

“Hello .” Said Boss .

“Can you help us ?” Said a second little man .

“Of course he can .” Said a third . “Look how tall and strong he is .”

“What would you like ?” Boss asked .

“Maybe we shouldn’t .” Said Shorty .

“Yes . Maybe they shouldn’t .” Said one of the halflings .

“What harm could it do to help them ?” Red asked .

“Yes.” Said another pint sized person. “What harm could it do ?”

“Then we would owe you something .” Said one of them .

“Just what are we talking about here ?” Said Shorty , inquisitively .

“Yes , what do you want ?” Preach asked .

“We’re collecting Valentines .” Said one .

“And we’re up as high as we can get .” Another piped up .

“And ?” Boss asked .

“And we’ve picked about all we can reach .” Said another .

“And if we could get a lift up higher .” One added .

“Then you could collect more .” Cat finished .

“That was my line .” Said another .

“So why should we help you ?” Cat demanded .

“Because we’re so nice .” Said Shorty .

“Or maybe we’re not .” Preach considered .

“Or maybe they’ll pay us .” Cat suggested .

“We have nothing to pay them with .” Huffed a halfling .

“We have lots of nuts .” Countered another .

“Who wants nuts ?” Shorty asked . “We’re not working for

peanuts.” “Can’t we just help them , just to be civil ?” Boss asked .

“What do we get out of that ?” Asked Preach .

“If we’re after more nuts and they help us and then we give them away to these people for helping us and then what do we get out of that ?” The halfling on top demanded .

“See. We waste our time talking to these people.” Cat dismissed .

“But if we give them half of any extra Valentines we collect then we both make a profit .” Said the other picker .

“What do you say guys , do we help them ?” Asked Red .

“We’re only talking nuts here .” Cat pointed out .

“Not just nuts .” Said one little guy .

“These are Valentines .” Said Another .

“They are very special .” Put in a third .

“Too good to give away .” One of the foundations moaned .

“I’m tired .” Said the other . “Let’s take a break .”

“No !” Said the topman . “We have to hurry . Left a little .”

“Valentines have to be picked in a hurry .” Said a baseman .

“Because they go off very quickly .” Said the other .

“And we have to get them to market .” Said a middleman .

“Sounds kind of suspicious to me .” Said Angel .

“So do we help them ?” Asked Red .

“Please .” Said the nearest middleman .

“What do we have to do ?” Asked Boss .

“Lift them up .” Preach explained .

“Get down as low as you can .” Said the second picker .

“And we’ll climb on your shoulders .” Said his foundation .

Soon the stacks of little men were almost six feet higher as Boss and Shorty supported a stack of three halflings each . Nuts rained down and sacks were rapidly filling .

Suddenly a man appeared from behind a hedge , wielding a hoe and shouting very loudly .

“Get off me nuts !” He cried , hysterically , as he swung at the nearest target , which happened to be Cat , who stepped easily out of his way .

Cat drew his shortsword and issued a challenge .

“Try that again , old man , and I’ll slit your gizzard .”

There was a commotion as six halflings tumbled everywhere , gathering up their sacks and rapidly disappearing into the undergrowth .

“You thieving scum !” Shouted the farmer . “I’ll have the law on ya .”

Cat grabbed at the attacker’s hoe and wrestled it from his hands . He threw down the implement and advanced upon the unarmed man .

Boss and Angel each grabbed Cat by an arm .

“What are you doing ?” Shorty demanded .

The farmer moved forwards .

“The man claims he was being robbed .” Said Red . “Let’s hear him out .”

“You were pinching my nuts !” He shouted , shaking with rage .

“We were helping the little guys .” Said Shorty . “We didn’t know these things weren’t theirs .”

“Is there any way we can make amends ?” Asked Angel , sympathetically .

“They’re worth a silver each .” The farmer said .

“They haven’t taken many since we arrived .” Angel told him .

“Only a couple of hundred .” Said Cat .

“That’s ten gold pieces worth .” Said the man .

“That’s about two gold pieces each .” Red worked out .

“It was our mistake .” Said Angel . “It is only right we should pay for it .”

“If you insist .” Preach handed over two gold pieces .

“I didn’t help the little buggers .” Cat complained . “I don’t see why I should ...”

“Come on Cat .” Said Shorty , laying a heavy hand on his shoulder . “If you ain’t with us you’re agin us .”

He looked around at the others’ disapproval and fished out two coins. “But he did attack me .” Cat excused .

Shorty completed the collection .

“This may or may not compensate you fully for your loss , but whether or not it is all we can offer . We consider the matter settled . If this is not enough for you or if you be the kind to harbour grudges, then don’t accept it and we’ll offer you cold steel in its place .” Said Shorty , ominously .

“I will take it .” Said the farmer . “As my due .” and he snatched it up .

“And isn’t this common land ?” Said Shorty , poking the farmer with his stout finger .

“’tain’t no such thing .” The farmer claimed .

He walked over to his hoe , picked it up and strutted off .

“What do we do now ?” Angel asked .

“I vote we pick some nuts .” Said Cat “ We already paid for them .”

“I don’t think so .” Boss contradicted .

“How about we destroy some nut trees ?” Cat suggested .

“No way .” Said Boss , firmly .

“Let’s just move on ,” Said Shorty . before Cat gets us into any more trouble .”

“Wasn’t Cat’s idea to help them .” Preach pointed out .

“Alright . We all make mistakes , don’t go on about it .” Said Boss .

They walked on until they came to the walls of Devlin City . It was dark by then and late enough that the gate was not crowded with other travellers .

They were stopped at the gate by eleven elven looking guards . They were not normal looking elves , however . These elves had an un-natural lack of pigment . They were totally albino . They had paint white skin and hair and pink eyes . Their eyes were also extremely large , as if they had spent too long underground .

“What is your business in Devlin City ?” Their spokesman demanded .

“We wish to hire a boat to take us down river .” Boss said , earnestly.

“It is late . Why should we let you in this night ?” The guard asked .

“What reason could you have to refuse ?” Boss queried .

“Why should we bother to re-open the gates at this hour ?” The other responded .

“It is what you are paid to do .” Boss pointed out . “You will be here all night if you let us in or not . Why should you get paid to stand around here and do nothing ?”

“Why indeed .” Said the strange elf . “If not to kill possible invaders , spies and villains ?”

“If they don’t want to let us in , let’s go .” Said Shorty . “We can’t do anything until tomorrow morning anyhow .”

“It’s probably cheaper and safer to camp out here anyway .” Angel stated .

“It is illegal to camp outside the city gates .” Said the dark elf .

“Oh , of course it is .” Said Red “And we will be in big trouble unless we persuade you to let us in .”

“Which is going to cost us a lot of money .” Angel supposed .

“Strange that we are so new to the area and yet understand so well how everything works , isn’t it .” Said Red .

“So , how much do you guys want ?” Angel asked .

“A platinum piece each .” The evil elf plied .

“Sorry , we’re all out of platinum at this point in time .” Cat informed .

“We never were that rich , as a matter of fact .” Said Boss . “In fact I’m not even sure what Platinum looks like .”

“I saw one once .” Said Preach , ingenuously .

“Don’t try and kid me .” Said the guard . “We might be forced to arrest you.”

“We just might enjoy that .” Said Shorty , confidently .

“Don’t antagonise the man .” Said Red . “He’s only doing his job .”

“As a point of fact.” Said Shorty . “He isn’t doing his job at all . He’s supposed to open the gate , take a toll and let us in .”

“Which is worth one silver piece , I reckon .” Said Red . “Unless we was born yesterday .”

“Which I wasn’t .” Shorty asserted .

“You two can argue all you like .” Said the guard leader “But we don’t have to let you in until we get paid .”

“If the toll is really a platinum each no-one would ever be able to afford to get into the city and it would disappear.” Said Boss .

“I say the toll to you is five gold pieces , just out of the kindness of my heart .” The draw offered .

“Your kindness is overwhelming .” Said Red “Now make us an offer we can believe .”

“Let’s put it another way .” Said Shorty “We find out you cheated us and we’ll track you down and skin you alive .”

“Now Shorty , don’t be hasty .” Said Angel “You know how we hate cleaning up after you . I’m sure this one can be more reasonable .”

“Let’s just make a lot of noise and wake up their commander , shall we ?” Cat whispered , loudly enough to be overheard .

“We can give you passes for the normal price of one gold piece each.” Said the guard leader . “We can do no better than that .”

“The boss’ll throttle us .” Said his companion .

“He’s not going to know how many there were .” The leader stated .

“I’m getting sick of this.” Said Boss . “Shall we get taken for a gold each?”

“I’d rather let our friend here waste them all.” Angel confessed .

“Rhywydd !” Shouted the leader , in a language not quite elven .

Instantly ten loaded crossbows swung into position .

“You are accused of threatening an officer of The Khan’s Imperial Guard . How do you plead ?” He shouted .

“Ignorant .” Said Shorty . “I’m an ignorant pleader .”

“You have to be some sort of an asshole .” Said the guardsman .

“You’re lucky you caught me in a good mood . Open the gate .” Shorty demanded .

Two soldiers hurriedly complied .

“One silver each .” The gate keeper demanded . “I hope to cross swords with you in battle , one day .” He told Shorty .

“The pleasure will be all mine .” Shorty assured him , not knowing that this was a dark elven tribute to courage .

“What the heck just happened ?” Angel mused .

“It takes one asshole to impress another .” Boss whispered .

They were given passes , in return for one silver piece each . They entered the City of Devlin .

The streets of Devlin were crowded with creatures . Some of them could see by the dim light of the moons and occasional scattered lamps in the street and lamplight filtering through windows .

Others were evidently creatures of the dark who ,like the dark elves , had huge , round , bulging eyes and were annoyed by the patches of moonlight and lamplight alike .

The travellers were surprised to see one of the Saurial Finheads on the street . The temperature at that moment was neither high nor low , hovering around ten degrees . The creature staggered down the street , our heroes thought that it might be in trouble .

Angel apprehended it . “Can I help you ?” She asked .

It stood there , unsteady , grinning stupidly for a few moments .
Then it drew a knife from its belt and threw it at her . Its aim was atrocious .

“Are you looking for an early grave ?” Preach enquired of the creature .

It waved at him vaguely .

“It’s drunk .” Said Boss . “Leave it be .”

Too late ! It drew its sword and charged into them . Quick as lightning Cat drew his sword and parried the attack .

Boss and Red each caught hold of the creature, one on each arm.

Boss held its sword arm . It struggled free of Red’s grip but Boss held its weapon firm .

Preach bashed the thing on the skull , with his mace , a blow which would have stove in the skull of any ordinary man . The beast’s bony skull plates took the blow and the mace bounced off , doing little damage to the finhead but stinging Preach’s hands .

“Hey !” Cat shouted . “Who’s in charge here ?”

Boss twisted the lizard’s arm until it was forced to drop the weapon . Then he held it in a hammerlock , from which it could not escape .

“Y’gna r’get this s.s.s.pemen .” It slurred .

Cat was still hollering at the top of his lungs .

“Call out the guard . We want some attention here .”

A gnome emerged from what was now a gathering crowd .

“Yes , my son . What can I do for you ?” He greeted eagerly .

“I want a guard , not a priest .” Cat railed .

“I can serve as an official of the city .” The gnome assured him .

“What is your problem ?”

“We have a drunken saurial on our hands . I don’t believe that he should be allowed to run around attacking people .” Cat

complained. “Oh dear , a saurial .” Said the gnome , with a sigh .

“A drunkard and a trouble maker . Where is this criminal ?”

The saurial in question was mumbling curses , quite unintelligibly .

“There he is , your holiness .” Said Angel , purposefully exaggerating the title .

“My holiness , why yes indeed .” The gnome beamed and strutted around , looking most important . “I guess I am pretty holy at that , but I didn’t know that , but I didn’t know that it showed . I thought I hid my light under a bushel, so to speak. So you’re the culprit.” He said , pointing at the finhead .

“Now listen here my finheaded friend , you just can’t go around drunkenly disturbing people like this . You understand ?”

The creature unceremoniously emptied its stomach all over the little priest, dispersing a veritable mountain of ugly green gunk .

“Oh boy , now you are in trouble .” The gnome gasped .

“Attacking a cleric in the service of his duty . This will not go well for you , let me tell you .”

“I think he intends to talk him to death .” Cat asserted .

“A rare and unusually harsh punishment .” Preach declared .

The gnome was , in fact , speaking so quickly that hardly anyone could understand him . The crowd , however , appreciated the vomiting and cheered loudly . The street took on a carnival atmosphere .

“I don’t like this .” Said Angel “We are attracting too much attention.”

“Now release the prisoner into my custody .” The gnome was saying. “Are you sure you can handle it ?” Preach queried .

“I know what I am doing .” Said the gnome .

Then he addressed the saurial .

“Come with me and I’ll give you this and there’s more where we’re going.” He dangled a strip of green , weed-like stuff in front of the reptile’s nose . “They love this stuff .” The gnome explained .

The saurial’s eyes focused on the object of its affections and it staggered after the gnome obediently .

“We’ll have to get hold of some of that stuff .” Cat declared .

The adventurers and everyone else went about their business . Cat picked up the saurial’s sword and dagger before leaving . The spemen walked along , not knowing where they were bound .

“What are we looking for anyway ?” Preach asked .

“A place to stay , I presume .” Said Cat , his eyes darting back and forth warily . They were passing a suspicious looking group of seven lizard men.

“You looking for lodgings ?” One of the reptiles asked .

“Why yes .” Red confirmed .

“Hold up Boss .” Preach called . “Let’s not get separated .”

“I can guide you to a good place for a small fee .” The lizard man offered .

“How much ?” Preach asked .

“Just a silver .” The lizard suggested .

“Of course , if you require bodyguards , we are all available for the right price .” Another lizard man piped up .

“I think we can fend for ourselves in that department .” Said Shorty

.

“Don’t let’s get into debating on that .” Boss cautioned him quietly

.

“But a guide we could use .” Shorty said , heartily .

“Then follow .” Said the lizard man , succinctly and lead the way .

They wandered through the narrow , winding streets of the grimy city .

“You don’t suppose he’s trying to get us lost .” Said Shorty quietly

“I expect he’s succeeding .” Preach replied .

The lizardman lead them by a seemingly circuitous route to a large Inn . There was a sign suspended above the door .

“What’s it say ?” Cat asked .

“Sophila’s place .” Angel read .

“This is the place .” Said their guide .

“What kind of place is it ?” Angel asked .

“Good place , safe place .” The lizard man assured them .

“Cheap place ?” Shorty demanded hopefully .

“Reasonable place .” Said the guide “Cheap places are not good , not safe , not clean , not honest .”

“We will have to see if it will suit us before we pay you .” Preach insisted.

“Your choice .” Said the lizard man .

They entered a wide vestibule with a counter to one side and doorways leading off on either side . Behind the counter stood a creature about nine feet tall . He was a humanoid of great bulk and massive musculature , obviously a person to be reasoned with .

“Welcome ladies and gentlemen .” He said , cordially , his voice echoing from the rafters . “What is your desire ?”

“We require modest lodging and simple fare .” Said Preach , formally .

“How modest ? How simple ?” He asked . “Two coppers a night for a common room .” He recited . “One silver piece for a private room . One silver each for a basic meal . Special party rooms can be made available of any size , but .” He paused for effect . “No weapons allowed inside . You can leave them in my tender care . We have a secure room , locked at night and constantly supervised .”

“I’m not sure about going unarmed .” Boss hedged .

“Everyone else does .” Said the attendant . “That’s what makes the place so secure . A great hulking brute like you shouldn’t have any worries .”

“How do we know we’ll get the same ones back ?” Red demanded

“Oh , that’s an easy one .” Said the attendant “We tag them all .

Each tag is different and you keep this identical token . Hand in the token , you get your weapon back .”

They discussed the situation and Boss and Red were uncertain .

They went along with the majority decision .

They handed over all of their conspicuous weapons and were about to enter when the big fellow spoke again .

“And .” He began “Any concealed weapons or potentially dangerous items ?”

“As if we would try to cheat you .” Shorty feigned outrage .

“Search me if you like .” Red said , nonchalantly .

“I’m sure I may , but not all of you are so forthright .” The large one hinted.

“You may enter .” He said to Boss . “I will have a little chat to these three.”, indicating Angel , Preach and Cat .

Boss , Red and Shorty stood by , in case of trouble .

“Now , sir .” The attendant turned to Cat . “You wouldn’t happen to have a certain item secreted in your boot , would you ?”

“I’ve given you my dagger .” Cat said , innocently .

“Come now , sir , let’s not underestimate one another , shall we . Just hand it over . It’s no big deal . We have excellent security inside .”

“Come on , Cat , we don’t want to hang around here all night .” Red complained .

“Here .” Said Cat , slapping the dagger down on the counter .

“Very good , sir .” Said the attendant , patting Cat on the head .

“Now madam .” He turned to Angel “What’s that suspicious bulge in your backpack ?”

“That’s just a book .” She replied .

“Very well , then you won’t mind leaving it here .” He said .

“Yes I would .” She said , embarrassed .

“We wouldn’t want an unpleasant scene, now would we madam ?” Said the attendant , patting his bo-stick .

“Come on Angel” Said Preach . “We have to trust someone sometime .”

Angel took out her precious spellbook and handed it over .

“You’d better take good care of this .” She warned .

“Naturally , little lady . I never mess with the likes of you .” He winked . “Now you , sir , what is that rotundity in your backpack , an extra ball is it sir ?”

“No , you’re not taking that .” Said Preach .

“Then find lodging elsewhere .” Said the attendant , firmly .

“You have to trust someone sometime .” Echoed Red .

Preach reluctantly picked up the orb , secured in a sack , and handed it over .

“For a silver piece you can secure a box with a key .” Said the attendant .

“Will the book fit in there also ?” Angel asked .

“It might .” He informed . “Come and see .”

He lead them into a sizeable storage room loaded with weapons .
On a separate bank of shelves they saw a stack of thick , metal
boxes with sturdy locks .

“They are built in .” The attendant assured them .

He locked the book and the orb into it and handed over the key .

“You see , sir and madam , we aim to please . Enquire about rooms
and food within .” He informed .

“Pay now .” The lizard man insisted , took his silver piece and
departed .

With these preliminaries over , they entered Sophila’s Place . What
they found in the bar was as strange an assortment of characters as
could be found anywhere .

At the door stood a bouncer , a creature nine feet tall and heavily
muscled , looking like a clone of the weapon store attendant .
Along with a large number of spemen and spemwomen were a
variety of other races with strange appearances and even stranger
habits .

Many were of creature types that none of the adventurers were
familiar with . Some of those that they did recognise they were not
pleased to see there . There were about a dozen wart faced orcs ,
several goblins , wallowing around , half stewed and shouting very
loudly in their ugly guttural tongue . There was every kind of
humanoid that you can imagine , few of them of good disposition
or reputation .

“Let’s just keep a low profile , shall we ?” Boss suggested . “Try to
survive the night and hope to get out of this place early in the
morning .”

They walked over to the bar .

“One room for six .” Boss ordered .

“That’ll be one gold .” said the bartender .

“Cat and Angel , you get to eat .” Boss said . “Two wayfarers’
meals delivered to our room .” He asked .

“Sorry , sir , no meals in the rooms . We’ve had people wallpaper
the walls with them .” The barkeep shrugged .

“Then two meals over there .” He pointed to a table .

“I’ll have a lobster .” Said Cat “And make it snappy .”

“I’m sorry , sir we don’t do lobster .” Said the barkeep , quite
seriously .

“He’s joking .” Boss explained “Just common meals and two beers
, thanks.”

“Two silvers and two coppers .” The barkeep tallied .

Boss paid him out of their meagre cash supplies .

“We’ll take your things up .” He told them . “Everyone enjoy your meal .”

Cat was busy checking out the patrons for signs of weapons . They seemed to have none , except for a very large beast minotaur , which entered bearing fourteen inch horns .

“No weapons huh !” Cat observed .

A comely woman in skin tight apparel strode up to him .

“You have a complaint ?” She said , gently .

“What’s it to you ?” Cat asked .

“You’re addressing the owner .” She stated , simply . “I’m Sophila .” She offered her hand .

Cat looked her up and down , a not unpleasant task . She was in her late twenties , perhaps early thirties , but had obviously taken good care of herself . She was nearly six feet tall and had a muscular , athletic figure . ‘She probably works out.’ Cat thought . She had a deeply tanned skin , which was not yet weather beaten , medium length , dark hair , which was thick and luxurious and hung straight and strong , framing her face , of aquiline nose and high cheek bones . Her eyes were as dark as a subterranean cavern and betrayed no emotion as she stared at him perceptively .

“Nice place you have here .” He said , paying lip service as his eyes continued their survey of her features .

She was slender , yet well muscled and dangerously well curved . Her breasts were moderately sized and unremarkable . At her waist she wore a belt with a silver buckle . It was threaded through the loop of an iron bottle. The bottle bore intricate runes in faint gold letters and was firmly stoppered .

“You like my bottle ?” She asked , straightforwardly .

“Yeah .” Cat said , ambiguously .

“Don’t even think about it !” She warned , chucking him under the chin .

“What ?” He shrugged , innocently .

Angel grew impatient as the others wandered off with their combined equipment .

“We’d best get a table .” She said , brusquely .

Cat glared at her . “You can manage .” He said , curtly .

Angel stomped off , petulantly .

“Is she yours ?” Sophila asked .

“No.” Said Cat, thoughtfully. “No, just a travelling companion.”

“I thought I saw something there is all .” Said Sophila , perceptively.

“How d’you mean ?” Cat asked .

“A little jealousy .” Sophila asserted .

Cat looked puzzled and distracted for a few moments .

“Nah .” He dismissed the thought , with a shake of his head .

“So , are you here all night ?” He asked , checking out her shapely legs and snakeskin , thigh length boots .

“Yes .” She said , flatly . “It’s my business .” The tone invoked no possibility of flirtation . “Now , if you have no complaints , I’d better get back to it .”

“No .” Said Cat , “No complaints , yet , but I’ll think of something .”

He looked deeply into her eyes . She returned his gaze unimpressed .

“You’d better not .” She said , emphatically .

He took it as a warning .

They parted company . He sauntering over to Angel’s table , Sophila marching over to the bar . She whispered to the bartender .

“Watch the sly looking one .”

“I fancy my chances there .” Cat spoke to Angel .

“Do you really ?” Angel replied , feigning disinterest . She was blushing red .

A waitress approached carrying two tankards of beer . She was dressed in a black uniform , with hips that swayed violently and had an immense expanse of cleavage .

“Your beer , sir .” She said , serving Cat and ignoring Angel .

“What’s your name ?” He demanded .

“Nerina .” She informed him .

“It’s a good name .” He flattered .

She giggled .

“So what are you doing tonight ?” He asked .

“Working .” She said , simply .

“Uh duh !” He said , mischievously . “I meant after .”

“Sleeping .” She said , emphatically .

“With anyone in particular ?” He asked .

“My boss is watching .” Nerina replied and gave a little curtsy as she withdrew .

“You’re very busy tonight , aren’t you ?” Said Angel , between clenched teeth .

“Hey , I haven’t seen a woman in months .” He said , before thinking . “Present company excepted .” He corrected , after thinking .

“It’s no use pretending to be gallant , Cat . I know you’re a scoundrel .” Angel spat .

“Keep it down .” Cat said , looking around .

“You’d better behave yourself .” Angel warned . “This seems like a rough place .”

“I can handle myself .” Cat whispered .

“The way you’re striking out tonight you’re going to have to .”

Angel laughed .

“Har , bloody har .” He shouted , slamming down his beer mug . They waited in silence for the others to return . They each checked out the place and its patrons . Perhaps the strangest sight was a dog like creature in a top hat and tails sitting , playing cards with a couple of men and an orc .

“What the hell is that ?” Angel demanded .

“I don’t know , but you’d better not stare at it .” Cat advised . “Some critters can be a might touchy .”

The others returned but ate and drank nothing , watching hungrily as Cat and Angel ate .

“What’s the deal with the food ?” Angel asked .

“Just a precaution .” Said Boss . “If you two are still alright in an hour or two Shorty and Red can have something . Preach and I will wait until last .”

“Thanks for volunteering me .” Preach said , with vitriol .

“We can’t afford not to have our healer healthy .” Boss said , by way of defence . “We need to keep our guard up , this looks like a very unsavoury place .”

Sophila happened to be passing by , within earshot .

“You have a complaint ?” She asked , politely .

“No .” Said Boss “I was describing the city in general , not this establishment .

“Then everything is to your liking ?” She asked .

“Fine so far .” Said Boss . “I am Brogan Burrigan .” He offered his hand . She shook it with the merest touch .

“Sophila .” She introduced .

“We just call him Boss .” Angel butted in .

“Which of you is the lucky guy ?” Sophila asked , inquisitively .

They sort of looked , furtively , from one to another .

“We just travel together .” Angel explained .

“I see .” Said Sophila , suspiciously , then continued where she had left off . “Brogan is a very strong name .” She said .

“Sophila is a very exotic one , soft and lyrical and sophisticated , like yourself .” Boss complimented .

“I don’t know where I’m soft .” She said . “Unless it’s in the head .” “That I very much doubt .” Cat put in . “If you really run this place .” “I don’t only run it .” She said haughtily . “I own it .”

After a short , silent pause she excused herself . “If you’ll excuse me , I do have a business to run .” and withdrew .

“A mite touchy , ain’t she .” Cat stated .

“I found her charming .” Boss said .

“You made that fairly obvious .” Said Angel , petulantly .

“Don’t worry Angel , she’d have to go a long way to replace you in my affections .” Boss said , sincerely .

They all fell into a stunned silence , which was pierced by the general din from the bar .

Angel didn’t quite know what to say to that . She also didn’t know whether to laugh or cry . That Boss cared for her in any way whatsoever was totally news to her . She wasn’t sure how to respond to the news or how she felt about it . After a moment’s reflection she said .

“Just what are we talking about here ?”

“I mean .” Boss began , self -consciously . “We’ve been through a lot together , sharing danger , saving each other’s lives and all . I feel that we’re sort of ... Well , a bond has grown between us .”

“Like as if we were friends or something .” Cat said “Scary ain’t it .”

“Well it’s not like I’ve never had friends before .” Boss stated .

“But this is different . This is more than just ordinary friendship .”

A creature sitting at a neighbouring table turned around . He had a bulky body but long , thin , gangling arms and legs and huge wide eyes . He was obviously some creature which belonged deep underground .

“You are speaking of the battlebond .” He said , sagely .

“Were we talking to you ?” Cat said , impolitely .

“No , let him speak .” Said Red .

“People who risk life and death together or any who weather adversity feel the battlebond , some mistake it for love . Some say it is love , for some it grows into real love .” He concluded .

“That is very interesting .” Said Red . “What other sage tales can you tell?”

The small creature rose to his full four feet and turned his chair to face their table .

He spoke with Red at length and pointed out all of the various races present and their inclinations . He was a regular gossip but seemed to know whereof he spoke .

In a way Angel was disappointed that Boss had not had the opportunity to make protestations of love to her . Whether she really wanted his love or not she was not sure but she would have enjoyed his protestations .

The little man , who described himself as a Pech , a very deep dwelling sort of gnomish creature , spoke of The Devlin Khanate and its ways and of the evil Devlin Khan , who ruled there ruthlessly . He spoke of his special security spies , who roamed the land seeking out dissenters and those who would plot against The Khan and any who were deemed too powerful to be allowed to

operate in the area . The worst of these , he spoke in hushed tones , were the faceless ones , strange creatures with mouths ringed with tentacles , which could destroy people's minds and reputedly were fed the brains of slaves that had outlived their usefulness.

"Be careful when you are around them ." He cautioned . "For it is certain they can read your minds . You must guard your thoughts well if you have any secrets to keep ."

Preach immediately worried about the orb . What if they discovered its powers and coveted it . Then he realised that he was thinking about it and perhaps drawing attention to it even now .

This would be very difficult , he realised , to always govern one's thoughts .

"We have to leave here as soon as possible ." He announced .

"Relax , Preach ." Cat said "There ain't any of those things around here ."

"They are never far away ." Said the Pech "And seem to have the knack of showing up anywhere there is trouble .

"We thank you for your kindly advice ." Said Preach .

"Look me up if I can be of any help." The Pech offered .

"We need a boat down river" Angel stated .

"Someone who won't scuttle you on the way ." The Pech surmised . "I will find someone suitable ."

"Thank you . Take the blessings of AGNI with you ." Said Preach .

"It is my pleasure to help you ." The little man claimed and departed.

An hour later Red and Shorty were starting their meal , having decided that Cat and Angel's food had not been drugged or poisoned and that it was safe to eat here .

Their friend , the Pech , returned followed by a burly minotaur .

This Minotaur was of a different type to the beast minotaurs the company had seen before , but no less impressive in stature . He had hooves that clip-clopped across the floor .

"This is Angred the boatman ." The Pech introduced . "He will offer you passage down river as far as the great falls . He is the most trustworthy sailor in the land ."

Angred bowed his great bull head .

"Can we offer you a bevy , captain ?" Boss asked , politely .

The great minotaur pulled up a chair and sat beside him .

"A jug of ale ." His voice boomed out in its basso profundo .

"And mead for me ." The Pech piped up .

"I'll get them ." Angel offered .

Already this trip was costing the adventurers two silver pieces .

"Are you not drinking yourselves ?" Angred asked .

“We eat, drink and sleep in shifts when in strange lands , as a precaution .” Boss explained .

“I will hear of no such insults to Sophila’s hospitality . No-one will try to poison you here .” The minotaur said , his voice loud enough for the entire bar to hear .

Several patrons and a couple of employees glanced their way and there was some sneering and shaking of heads .

“Nevertheless , we remain on our guard .” Said Boss , unabashed .

“We have survived thus far by being careful .”

“Careful or cowardly , is all the same to me .” Said Angred .

“Among my people it is said , only the craven fear death and look for it at every turn . The brave and the mighty are heedless of danger . What you look for looks for you . The more fervently sought the sooner is found . Thus the small man perishes while the great man thrives . Is it not so , my friend Lonitil ?”

He spoke to the Pech .

“I always agree with everything Angred says .” Lonitil chirped .

“One tends to live longer that way .”

Angred lowered his voice to a shout , the minotaur version of a whisper .

“When must you leave ?” He asked .

“As soon as possible .” Boss replied .

“We can depart at first light .” Angred stated . “The trip will take a whole day . The trip back will take me two whole days . I could not undertake such a venture for less than six gold pieces .”

“Offer him ten .” Lonitil advised .

“I wish we could .” Boss bewailed . “but we have made no money at all this trip and our meagre funds are being eaten away .”

“You could always walk for seven days , that would cost you nothing .” Said Angred.

Angel arrived with a large jug of ale and a tankard of mead .

“Thank you fair damsel .” Angred said . “Your hospitality is as kindly as your face .”

“Why thank you , kind sir .” She said beaming . “You are the only true gentleman here .”

“Gentle minotaur .” He corrected her and turned back to Boss .

“What say you to six gold pieces ?”

“Is that six gold pieces each !” Cat asked , exasperated .

“Ho , ho , ho .” The minotaur laughed , a deep, booming laugh .

“No, little man , I am no usurer . Six gold pieces for the trip . Six each ? For such a price I would indeed be able to retire within a year . What would I do then for the rest of my life but wither in retirement . No sir , let me ply the waterways yet a little while longer , for I am not yet feeble enough to retire.”

“Happy is the man who loves his work .” Said Boss , tritely .

“Aye and I do love my river .” Angred pined “The currents and eddies , the fine autumn breezes , the balmy summer days , the splashing of the fish , all music to my soul .”

“Isn’t it unusual for one of your kind to be a riverman ?” Shorty asked , ignorant of minotaur ways .

The minotaur took it as opposed to an ocean going sailor .

“Aye , though minotaur be great seafarers there are some few who take to the calmer waters . Our cousins , the Tauri , Beast Minotaurs you understand , are dwellers in deep , labyrinthine caverns , mostly barbarous in nature, but we Ansalon Minotaurs are civilised .”

A couple of Beast Minotaurs looked up from their half drunken stupors and gave Angred a look of hatred . Apparently they were too far gone to pursue the matter , or else they dismissed him as an unfortunate , poor relation , not worth the trouble of correcting .

“Your people are great sailors then ?” Boss asked .

“Aye , for some reason lost in antiquity some know us as Ansalon Minotaurs . Ancient legends tell of our ancient homeland , far away , in which we rule a half a world and have our own continent .”

The adventurers were left to puzzle what was meant by the expression s ‘World’ and ‘Continent’ . They were not geographers .

The Minotaur’s diatribe rambled on regardless .

“At times Minotaurs here have risen to conquer half a continent , but our ancient empires ever fade . Many hot headed young uns talk of conquest , of forging a new homeland or of re-finding the original , but it is all youthful bluster and self-importance . Each one thinks he shall become the great leader to reforge The Empire . Thus , what few of us there are squander themselves in fighting for the crown . The imperial crow to an empire which has long ago faded into legend . If we didn’t kill each other , we could easily destroy any race the gods send against us . There are no warriors finer than an army of well trained minotaurs , and that includes our Taurian cousins .” He raised his jug and drained it in one easy gulp . It contained four mugs of ale . A half drowsy Beast Minotaur raised his jug and slurred . “Here , here .”

A large ogre stepped up and , in defiant tones , he cried .

“I spit on your minotaur ancestors .”

The minotaur rose rapidly and , without a single word , began to lay into the ogre with his fists . The ogre , drunken as he seemed , either dodged or blocked the tirade of blows and soon the pair were trading blows and parries like professional pugilists .

The other patrons of the inn , as though quite accustomed to this , whipped the tables and chairs out of the way , crowding the furniture and themselves into the edges of the room to make a largish fighting arena .

The inn house entertainment of gentle harp music and discrete, unobtrusive singing faded away . Everyone suddenly became spectators . The two half-ogres belonging to the inn stood by , wielding large cudgels , in anticipation of weapons being drawn or a general brawl breaking out.”

The patrons were wildly enthusiastic in their support of one side or the other . The combatants were oblivious to it all . Entrepreneurs began taking bets on the outcome .

The fighting continued on through its first minute .

A gnomish waitress harried the newcomers .

“Get out of the way .” She flustered . “Move the table .” She ordered.

The spemen waitress , Nerina , turned a table over onto its side in a corner, and ducked down behind it , to stay out of the firing line .

“It is not healthy to stay here .” Lonitil whispered to Preach . “This kind of thing attracts the faceless ones .”

“So .” Said Preach , feigning nonchalance .

“I sense you have a secret . You wouldn’t want them to find out about it , would you ?” The Pech warned .

“But we can not leave Angred .” Preach began .

“Don’t worry about him .” Said Lonitil “He’s big enough to look after himself .”

“And the others ?” Said Preach .

“They are too involved in the entertainment .” Lonitil stated .

“Only your thoughts betray your true purpose .”

“How can you know my thoughts ?” Preach began , defensively .

“Not here .” Lonitil cautioned . “Let us go somewhere more private.”

“As you wish .” Preach relented and , in his misapprehension , completely overlooked the consideration that Lonitil himself might be attempting to lure him away and entrap him .

They left without alerting the others to their departure .

Angel , concerned for Angred , but not sharing her male companions’ enthusiasm for brawling , remained aware of other events around her . She considered that some scheme might be afoot to catch them unawares or to entrap them with false accusations of causing trouble . She kept half an eye on the duelling titans and still took in the priest’s imminent departure .

‘Not a good idea to get separated.’ She thought to herself, but she had little time to react and didn’t want to bring attention to the group. She scurried after Preach.

“Preach.” She hissed, tugging on his robe. “Where are you going?” “Up to the room.” He said.

“Not alone.” She advised.

“With our friend here.” He stated.

“Not alone with him either.” She whispered.

Lonitil stood by the exit to the stairs, waiting impatiently.

“Then follow.” Preach instructed, “Discretely.”

‘This is not good.’ Angel thought. ‘We’re getting split up.’

In the background the sounds of the contest and its accompanying cheers were growing louder and more rowdy. Against her better judgement, Angel let Preach have his way. Lonitil merely smiled knowingly, as he allowed Angel to believe that she was following them discretely.

Meanwhile the battle continued into its second minute. The ogre had just slammed the minotaur, making him reel. The crowd roared its approval. The fight continued and the minotaur took his revenge with a hefty uppercut.

The minotaur studiously avoided attacking the ogre with his dangerous horns, weapons being prohibited. He knew that it would be a simple matter to ‘accidentally’ slit the ogre open but his code of honour precluded this.

For two more minutes they systematically tore into one another. Both of them were beginning to tire and were very much the worst for wear. They both continued stubbornly, each one too proud to show pain or fear.

For the next two minutes the minotaur began to emerge as the eventual winner. The ogre looking more and more beaten until, with one final blow, he fell heavily to the ground.

The minotaur stood for a few seconds, took a deep, snorting breath and shook his head to clear it, and perhaps in disdain of ogreish stupidity. The other minotaurs, though not precisely of his race, gave him a salute and a rousing cheer. He returned their accolades reluctantly, unwilling to snub them.

“Shamach brateriv.” He hailed.

They were calling him ‘warrior’ and ‘conqueror’ in minotaur. He shrugged. “It was only an ogre.” He said, in minotaur, at which they laughed heartily.

Angred walked over and apologised to Sophila for the trouble.

“Seems like he asked for it.” She said, kindly. “That’s why we didn’t interfere. You’d better leave. The snoops will be here

pretty soon ." She winked at him . "I know you're not a troublemaker ."

"I heap honour on your ancestors ." He said , fervently .

"Spare some for me too ." She quipped .

He approached the four spemen .

"I must leave , my friends . Be on dock four at sunrise ." He said , succinctly and walked off .

Tables were moved back to their usual positions and patrons settled down . Bets were settled and everything looked as normal and natural as could be , as if nothing had happened .

"Where'd Preach and Angel get to ?" Shorty demanded .

"Shall we look for them ?" Cat asked .

"They'll be alright ." Red dismissed .

Suddenly , an unnatural hush fell across the room , as if everyone present collectively held their breath . People from spemen to orcs froze in their present poses , all words and actions seemed self-conscious .

Nine bugbears entered the bar , which was , in itself , not a cause for major concern , but they had in their midst a sinister cloaked and hooded creature. As previously described , it had a ring of tentacles , which either ringed its mouth or constituted its mouth . It was , in appearance , absolutely abhorrent , and in its presence even the most valiant warrior could not help but feel a shiver run down his spine . The travellers felt a strange tugging at their minds as the creature stood and scanned the room . Sophila stiffened visibly and gritted her teeth as she steeled herself to approach the invader .

"Welcome Xaxchlitchvli ." She said , cordially . "To what do we owe this honour ?"

Boss could not help but admire the woman's composure and she rose several points in his already considerable estimation .

The creature looked expressionlessly at her , implacable and inscrutable .

"What is the trouble here ?" It demanded , though none but Sophila heard its telepathically projected speech .

To Boss the vile thing seemed only to stare at the mistress of the inn with a stare which burrowed into her brain .

"The ogre drank too much and became rowdy ." Sophila lied . "We had to subdue him ."

To untutored onlookers it must have seemed as though the lady was speaking to the empty air , quite out of the blue . To those who were perceptive or knew of the Illithid's powers it was evident that the inn owner was being interrogated , mentally .

The Mind Flayer or Illithid , for such were the names by which the race was known , stared at the bugbear sergeant who barked out orders to his troops . Four bugbears grabbed the ogre by the arms and legs and carried him aloft .

The ogre was beginning to come around . He stared blankly at his captors and then saw the faceless one and paled visibly . All thought of resisting , an ogre's natural inclination , suddenly drained from him . He was suddenly sober and suddenly deathly afraid . He knew he had to submit mildly to this indignation to survive at all and to keep his punishment to a bearable level . At best he would be imprisoned , worked hard and possibly tortured . He didn't wish to end up enslaved or as fodder to the faceless ones .

The snoop glared at his massive prisoner and the prisoner seemed to quake and cower .

"I have committed no crime ." The ogre shouted , as if to convince himself "I have committed no crime ."

In his mind the ogre pushed this one thought forward , admitting nothing else to his consciousness , but his resolve lasted only momentarily under the power of his opponent's interrogation . It burrowed into his mind until this thought surfaced .

'I should never have started that fight .'

The ogre shouted .

"No . You can't do this to me !" and then fell silent .

Further protestations were totally useless , he realised , as he was carried off .

"I have never seen an ogre show fear ." Someone muttered behind them .

The Illithid paused at the doorway and scanned the room before leaving . His dark eyes seemed to come to rest on each and everyone present , momentarily , and it seemed as though he took a little from each of them .

The travellers felt as if their most private and innermost secrets had been dragged out of them and defiled by its touch .

Each one felt a wave of revulsion pass through them . Then the mind flayer turned and shuffled away and the unease subsided .

"That sort of thing turns you inside out , don't it ." Said Red , the very first in the whole bar to speak . In fact of all present , even those used to dealing with Illithids , Red had seemed , strangely , the least affected by the creature's presence .

Then , the silence broken , a hubbub of voices poured forth , as if all were now talking just to ease their tensions .

Boss walked over to Sophila , who was still staring out of the doorway , wrapped in her own private thoughts .

“I’d like to thank you for protecting our minotaur friend .” He said

She was brought back from her , seeming , trance with a start .

“Hmm !” She voiced , questioningly and he repeated himself .

“The less said the better .” She said , at length . “Besides , Angred has been a friend of mine for years and , as far as I can tell , you have only just met him .”

“I didn’t mean to presume .” Boss began to apologise .

“Don’t trouble yourself with apologies .” She said , warming to him . “Those things always leave me a bit rattled . Can I offer you a drink , on the house ?”

“I would be honoured .” He accepted and followed her to the bar . She gestured to the barman , who knew her signals well .

“You can’t have know him for so very long .” Boss said , hinting at Sophila’s youthful appearance . It was a clumsy compliment .

“You are very gallant .” She complimented in return . “You are also very young and naïve and I really shouldn’t be taking advantage of you .”

Over a drink they talked of many things .

Upstairs Preach and Lonitil talked of many things .

In the foyer a mind flayer stopped for a moment and listened with its mind. Something very strong was tugging at it from not too far away. Some nearby mind was deeply troubled , something big and important to someone was going down .

It couldn’t be sure of the content of the matter . It could be just some housewife’s domestic dispute or something else trivial to all but the possessor of the troubles . It found such human preoccupations beneath contempt , but something raised its antennae and it had a hunch that it might be really important . It might well mean a promotion in the order , every Illithid’s dream . It might allow it to escape from this exile in the human world .

‘I will seize the moment.’ It thought ‘Take charge of the prisoner.’ It ordered the bugbear sergeant , telepathically . ‘Then return swiftly to me . I might need you .’

Four of the bugbears turned , as if they were automatons , and followed several metres behind the snoop .

The Illithid’s nose for trouble lead it up into the bowels of the inn , with its labyrinthine passages and rooms . No challenge for a mind flayer , this simple building , compared to its usual haunts in the bowels of the earth .

In a corridor stood a human female , an unremarkable specimen of no importance , but clearly loitering . Her thoughts were of protecting someone , of watching out for them .

The bugbears , though some way behind , made far too much noise and the faceless one informed them so .

‘This is not the one I seek’ He told himself ‘but may be a connection .’

In a room , a little further ahead , was the deeply troubled one .

One with a secret he was fighting mightily to hide , that is what had alerted the wily Xaxchlitchvli .

‘This guardian must be chased away .’ Xaxchlitchvli thought and summoned a psionic blast to throw upon her. He released his attack

Angel , suddenly , for no apparent reason , felt an immense fear welling up inside her . She wanted to run . She hardly dared to breathe . Her stomach turned over and she struggled to fight the feeling down . The wave of fear subsided but left her pale and shaking inside . She felt as if a ghost had passed right through her and she looked around for visible threats . She saw nothing , no reason for her sudden feeling of panic .

‘Calm yourself down girl .’ She thought . ‘What’s wrong with you ?’

Xaxchlitchvli watched with disgust as his psionic attack failed .

‘The stupid spemen female is stronger than I anticipated .’ He thought . He would have to expend every ounce of his mental prowess to successfully drive her off . This would leave him vulnerable to physical attack . He wondered if it was worth it ?

This whole thing might be a wild goose chase. He had been forced to use his powers far too much this night .

He contacted Angel’s mind and tried to force her to leave the area .

He used a trick which was usually very effective on spemen .

All of a sudden Angel was overcome with an almost irresistible urge to pee. Almost , but not quite irresistible .

‘There’s something strange going on .’ She thought as she felt the urge dissipate as quickly as it had arisen . Looking down she made sure that she had not pissed herself . ‘Somebody’s messing with my mind.’ She concluded .

She thought about checking out the corridor but felt that she shouldn’t leave her station . ‘Somebody wants me to move .’ She discerned . ‘So I’m not going to .’

Her opponent knew her thoughts only too well and was mentally screaming out in frustration .

‘Stupid spemen .’ He raged inside . Not used to being defied, he felt himself on the verge of doing something indiscrete .

‘Mustn’t alarm the quarry .’ He counselled himself . ‘Must be patient.’

In the bar of Sophila's place the half ogre weapon room attendant strode up to his mistress and whispered in her ear . She looked worried and paled a little as she nodded her head . Boss picked up on her sense of panic .

"What's the matter ?" He asked , concernedly .

"That damned spy is still about ." She replied , bitterly . "He's poking about upstairs ."

"What does that mean ?" Boss asked .

"He's sniffed out something he shouldn't ." She intimated .

"Which is bad news for everybody ."

"Anything I can do to help ?" Boss offered .

"Not likely ." She said , emphatically . "You can't order them out , they're allowed everywhere ." Then she thought . "Hey , you don't happen to have any deep , dark secrets do you ?"

"How do you mean ?" Asked Boss , stupidly .

"You haven't done anything to anger the powers that be ?" She pressed .

"We only just arrived here . No one knows us ." Boss assured her .

"You sure , there's nothing important . Nothing anyone might want from you ?" Sophila fished .

"No , only the ..." Boss almost let out before checking himself .

Then he thought 'This could all be a ruse to get information out of us.'

"Nothing ." Boss denied .

"Come on , this is important . You and your friends could be in grave danger ." She implored .

"How so ?" Boss enquired .

"Thousands die at the hands of the khan every year . Some for no other reason than that they drew attention to themselves . It is as much a crime here to be under investigation as it is to commit murder ." She told him . "If you have anything at all worth hiding or worth investigating you'd better leave this place , sooner than spemanly possible ."

"Thanks for the advice ." Boss thanked her .

"I mean immediately ." She said , urgently . "Don't wait 'til morning. Don't wait another minute , even if the matter seems unimportant to you. The powers that be may make something of it ." "I'll hope to meet you again someday ." Boss said as he sculled his ale and walked over to his friend's table .

"Good luck ." Said Sophila , in parting , and then to herself 'great gods , I hate this place .'

"Did she brush you off." Cat asked, as Boss hurried up to them .

Boss leant over the table and whispered . "Don't make it obvious but we'd better leave in a hurry . I mean right now ."

They arose and attempted to saunter off as nonchalantly as possible , taking care not to whistle , which is always a dead give away .

Within the travellers' bedroom , Lonitil quite suddenly jumped to his feet , as if he had been bitten .

"Something's amiss ." He said , fretfully pacing the floor . "Open the window ."

As Preach moved to do so Lonitil changed to his true form . He shrank to pixie size and sprouted pixie wings . Even as he did this he was speaking in a high pitched pixie voice .

"I have just had a premonition . I have the second sight , you know , lots of us do . You have to leave . Meet me at the docks as soon as possible . I'll find Angred and make preparations ."

Preach , wrestling with the window shutters , noticed none of this . He thought that his Pech friend was only squeaking out of excitement .

"There ." The priest said , in satisfied tones . "That's got it ."

Meanwhile Lonitil became invisible . Preach turned around and saw the room empty of his companion .

'Where did he go ?' He thought 'And if he was going to go , why did he want the window open ?'

Preach turned around and began to shut the window shutters .

Lonitil darted past him as he did so , getting out just in time .

Preach felt a gentle breeze waft by him and heard a faint buzzing sound . He fancied something brushed past his cheek .

'Probably a fly' He thought . He walked over and sat on the bed , bewildered . 'What an odd fellow Lonitil is .' He thought .

The four spemen were about to climb the stairs . Ahead , in the gloom , they caught sight of four bugbear guards . The companions knew them as the Illithid's escorts . The men fell back .

Luckily the bugbears were not enthusiastic about guard duty and were far from vigilant .

"This way ." A husky voice called , as quietly as a half ogre could .

The men turned to see the hulking brute which had harassed them on the way in . He was beckoning to them . He lead them outside , where he grabbed a ladder , which he placed just below an upstairs window .

"Climb and knock gently ." The attendant instructed .

"Guess this is my line of work ." Cat smiled , as he raced up the ladder effortlessly and , in no time at all , had the shutters open .

Preach whirled around as the shutters seemed to fly open by themselves . He jumped almost out of his skin when a face suddenly appeared beyond them .

"Cat , what are you up to ?" He demanded .

“Sh !” Cat gestured . “Get all the gear and get down here .” He ordered , precipitously . “Where’s Angel ?”

“Outside .” He told . “She seems to think she’s guarding me .”

“By the gods no !” Cat exclaimed “The spy thing is out there.”

Preach was about to rush out and call her .

“No .” said Cat , urgently . “Pass the equipment first .”

They handed the packs down to those on the ground . Cat climbed in the window and hustled Preach out of it .

“You get going . Wait at the docks no more than five minutes .”

Cat said .

“Cat , you surprise me .” Preach began .

“Yeah , yeah , I’m a regular saint . You have a lot to learn about moving in an emergency . Now get going , fat head .” Cat said , gruffly and closed the shutters behind him .

Cat emerged from the room , smiling and seemingly carefree .

Angel , standing in the corridor was flabbergasted to see him approach from that direction .

“How’d you do that ?” She queried .

“Yeah , I’m a regular magician , ain’t I .” Cat toyed with her .

“Preach is asleep and Boss wants you downstairs , now .” He said , taking her by the arm and starting to walk her off .

“He can’t order us around .” She protested “Just because we call him Boss...”

“Did I ever tell you how pretty your eyes are , especially in this light .” He said , to distract her .

“All right , Cat .” She said , shaking his hand off her and stopping in mid corridor . “What’s going on ?”

“It’s Boss’s birthday . We’re giving him a surprise party .” Cat said , with enthusiasm brilliantly faked .

“It is ?” Angel said , surprised .

“We just found out . Now , are you coming ?” Cat Prompted .

“But Preach ...?” She objected .

“Look .” Said Cat . “I hate to tell you this , but that bitch , Sophila has her claws on him and if you don’t come down you’re going to lose him , alright .” Cat lied , brilliantly .

“You what !” She flew into a genuine rage and they hurried off downstairs.

It was no great feat for the Illithid to secrete itself in the , mainly dark , recesses of the hotel corridor . It found the trivial affairs of its spemen targets loathsome to inspect . It hated this kind of eavesdropping . It was distracted , momentarily , from its true purpose .

Now these sycophantic , childlike mentalities had receded it stretched out its mind to its real target and found it lacking . The

real subject was receding rapidly into the oblivion of the odious outdoors.

Poor Xaxchlitchvli would have to pursue it . How he hated the open air, even when that tyrannical, yellow orb was absent from the sky .

‘But it shall not escape my grasp .’ He vowed .

As they walked past the bugbears , proof of their pursuer’s presence, Cat considered that he ought to stall for long enough to allow the others time to collect their things . He hoped these thoughts did not betray his purpose . He made a grab for Angel’s arm and held her back .

‘You love him , don’t you !’ He shouted , as loudly as he could .

‘Let go of me .’ Angel shouted back .

A couple of curious bar patrons walked over and began to mill around at the bottom of the stairwell .

‘Answer me !’ Cat screamed .

‘I love all of you guys , O.K ! Each of you is very special to me .’

She became aware of the loudness of her own voice and dropped it down dramatically . ‘In your own way .’

‘Well it doesn’t work that way .’ Cat said , maintaining his volume . ‘You can’t love all of us .’

‘Cat , don’t .’ Angel pleaded , desperately . ‘Please don’t do this to me .’

‘What do you think it would do to him if he knew about us ?’ Cat continued , unabated .

‘About us ! There is no us , Cat .’ Angel denied him .

Cat decided to tread more lightly now . He didn’t want his eyes scratched out .

‘Well , you have to decide .’ He said . ‘Either you want him or you don’t . Commit to something , just once in your life !’

‘I’m committed .’ She said .

She was about to say ‘to magic’ but she suddenly realised that she had no idea of people’s attitudes to magic in this kingdom . She had heard of places where it was considered a crime to use it at all

‘To my trade .’ She edited her thoughts .

It was too late . The Illithid was at the top of the stairs and picked up her thoughts easily .

‘A mage .’ He thought ‘I should have known . How else could she resist me .’

Cat was pleased . There was a crowd gathered below them . He thought to cause her the maximum embarrassment in order to hide his real motives for having them there .

‘He’s up to something.’ The mind flayer thought .

“If you were that dedicated , you wouldn’t be gallivanting around the world with the likes of us .”

“Cat , why are you doing this ?” Angel demanded .

“What is it with you ? Always suspicious ! Bloody women . Pain in the arse .” He said , playing to the crowd , theatrically .

The weapon attendant appeared and gave a surreptitious gesture , which Cat recognised as the all clear .

“So .” Said Cat . “Shall we go ?”

Xaxchlitchvli marvelled at the stupidity and inanity of these creatures’ thought processes . Listening to them was beneath his dignity , an unbearable chore to him .

Angel didn’t have a clue what was going on , but she knew all this signified something and decided to play along .

The Illithid spy now knew the pair were trying to hoodwink him.

Cat shouted “Fight !”

He thumped some poor guy in the stomach and pushed him into the crowd and took to heel .

The crowd erupted into a spontaneous brawl , people just hitting anyone in the confusion . Angel found herself dragged out of the throng by Cat . Quickly the attendant thrust her weapons and spellbook at her and said ,

“Run to the docks , quickly , and good luck .”

Cat shook his head and grabbed his own weapons , saying .

“Thank you , my friend . One day we will repay your kindness .”

“If not in this life then in another .” Said the half-ogre .

The area at the foot of the stairs was in pandemonium . A body of orcs surrounded its captain and tried to push through the crowd of fighting , writhing bodies .

The pair ran out into the street and pulled up short .

“Which way ?” Cat shrugged .

A faerie figure materialised above them , hovering just out of sword’s reach .

“Follow me !” It chirped , squeakily , its wings abuzz .

They were unsure at first , but they followed obediently .

Lonitil lead them into a dark alley where the others awaited them .

“I am too conspicuous like this .” He noted . “Go over and ask one of those lizard men to guide you to the docks . Offer him a silver piece .

He indicated Angel for the task . She soon returned with a guide in tow .

They walked , purposefully , but without obvious hurry . Their path wound down several streets , through rough looking parts of the city , or perhaps every part of the city looked so .

They were crossing a wide intersection interrupted by a square. Suddenly an order to "Halt !" was barked .

Before them stood a creature of elven appearance and stature , but with an unusually white skin and large , dark adapted eyes . He wore a captain's uniform with the arms of the city upon it , faintly etched . Both the armour and the blazon were in total black , making the entire figure almost imperceptible .

He was flanked by two others , bearing small one handed crossbows. A quick perusal of the courtyard revealed eight more such soldiers , strategically placed to block off every exit route from the square .

"What brings you here in the dead of night ?" The commander was saying .

"They be's new to town ." The lizard man spoke , moving cautiously forwards . "I be's guiding them . Showing them the sights , your honour ."

"I'm not a judge ." Said the dark elf , sharply , apparently immune to attempts at flattery .

"Sorry captain , sir ." Said the lizard man , straightening .

"Passes , quickly !" The drow demanded .

Two guards moved forwards to obey him . The travellers hurriedly searched for their passes and held them up .

"Heddiw !" Shouted one of the guards , in an accent so thick and unexpected that Angel almost failed to recognise it as elven . In the mouths of these creatures the normally lyrical and beautiful tongue of the elves sounded harsh and ugly .

The captain nodded knowingly . "I suggest Dyn Modrchwilen , that you conduct your tours during daylight , when your customers can see the town . If I were in your shoes gladwrl , I wouldn't want to follow treacherous Modrchwilen after dark , gwirionyn die that way . I wish stupidity were a crime , then I could arrest you .

Instead all I will ask is a little cash . Anything you can donate would be appreciated . Empty your pouches !" He ordered .

"Do as he says !" The lizard man advised , and lizard men were never known to be cowardly . "As you value your lives ."

They each turned over what little cash they had left . They noticed that the lizard man was untouched .

The captain answered their accusatory stares .

"We don't take from locals , it's bad business ." He stated .

You are now vagrants and if I wished I could arrest you and have you sold into slavery . I hope you thank me for my kindness . Now clear off and don't attempt to enter Dockward again after curfew .

If you are trying to leave the city illegally you will die . That is my solemn promise ." He finished .

They withdrew a little way along the route by which they had come .

“The drow are not busy tonight . They have nothing better to do than guard the streets . This is not good .” The lizard man hissed .

“What do we do ?” Asked Boss , concerned .

“We will travel another way .” The lizard man offered .

“But how will we pay you ?” Preach fussed .

Shorty dug him in the ribs .

If the lizard man could have smiled he would have .

“You are still young of your tribe and not yet weaned.” He said .

“If you have no coin , yet you are not poor . You have much of worth about you , little speman . Offer me anything .”

“I have a dagger , which I only use for eating .” The cleric offered .

Cat gave a loud intake of breath .

“Now I am smuggling you . Much danger . It is a good price . Your friend thinks it too much . Let me see this dagger .” The reptile requested .

Preach handed it over and the lizard man examined it .

“Yes . It is a very good price . You do well to be generous with me.” He agreed and handed back the goods .

“Follow .” He instructed . “And say nothing .”

He lead them to a derelict building , half fallen down and in a dangerous condition . There they headed for the basement . In half-standing rooms drunkards slept off the night’s over-indulgences . Walls and beams creaked precariously overhead in a stiffening breeze .

The basement was dimly lit by a single torch-light and the ashes of a fire , which was being kept just barely alive by the addition of one slender plank at a time . There were half a dozen hoboos huddled around the curling smoke .

“No-one cares about this part of the city.” The lizardman said , impassively. He banged on a section of the wall on the far side of the room, after stepping around pieces of fallen beams . The hilt of his dagger made a dull , echoing sound . A panel of the wall swung outwards to reveal the shadowy figure of an orc in armour and with sword .

“Who ?” He demanded , shortly .

“Khaskhemar !” The lizard man intoned .

“What do you want .” Asked the orc , sounding decidedly unfriendly.

“Passage.” Said the lizard man , curtly .

“How many ?” The orc snorted .

“Seven .” Khaskhemar counted .

“Where bound ?” The orc demanded .

“The docks .” The other replied .

“Seven silver .” The orc rubbed his hands greedily .

“Done .” Khaskhemar agreed , handing over a handful of coins .

“In !” The orc ordered, hastily, pushing the lizard man roughly .

He seemed to believe that no-one could walk without his help . He gave each one a shove as they moved past him .

Inside , the passage was as dark as the gates of hell .

“Light for these spemen .” Khaskhemar demanded .

“Get-cha own .” Said the orc , gruffly , his face inches from the lizard man’s . “ ‘Ere wha’sat smell .” He sniffed .

“It’s what’s left of our giant snake-meat .” Said Cat “It’s a little bit old , I reckon .”

“Mm !” The orc grunted , licking his chops . “Smells real tasty .”

“You want it .” Said Red “We’ll take the seven silver and a light for it .”

“How much you got !” The orc asked , brusquely .

“A whole lot .” Said Shorty .

They emptied the rancid mass on the floor of the passageway amid the trampled dirt .

“What’d ya say fellers ?”

The orcish captain spoke at length in orcish and was greeted by assorted grunts and groans .

The party gathered that they were surrounded by orcs . They had never thought that they would ever greet these vile creatures as allies.

The orc issued a command , which sounded like “zazhech !” and a torch was lit .

There were nine orcs in all , large and ferocious looking . Cat noticed how they squinted at the light and had to look away from it .

Boss listened as the orc explained the deal to his companions , not letting on that he , Boss , understood a little orcish . The commander told his orcs to say that no-one passed this way this night , to cover for the missing toll .

“This is good .” Boss thought .

“Cogvareevatsya !” The commander sought his troops agreement .

The orcs all echoed their commander’s word . The coins and torch were handed over to the lizard man .

“Go then !” The chief orc shouted , as he stooped and grabbed a claw-full of rotting , stinking meat and gnawed upon it with relish . The other orcs grabbed handfuls and tore upon it wildly . Our heroes were glad to leave the ugly scene in great haste .

“I reckon you could have asked three times as much for that .” The lizard man informed .

“We’re glad to be rid of it .” Cat stated . “Probably poisonous by now .”

“Not to them .” Said Khaskhemar . “Not to me .”

“One man’s meat is another man’s poison .” Said Boss , inanely . They came , at length , to a passage , which lead into a large square chamber . Therein stood a dozen spemen , poorly armed and partly armoured , but obviously meant to be guarding .

Khaskhemar was greeted with crossed spears across the doorway .

“We seek exit .” He said , mildly for one of his kind .

“Arani !” a guard shouted .

Their leader strode over . He was evidently in command , since his armour was fully matching and he was better equipt and fairly well presented . He might have been a guardsman in any man’s army . He even gave a polite salute to the refugees .

“What is it , sergeant ? And do call me captain .” He said in polished aristocratic tones .

“Yes , sir , captain sir !” Said the guard , stiffening visibly , if not necessarily militarily .

“We seek exit .” Khaskhemar repeated.

“To what end ?” Arani enquired .

“They have drawn the eye of the doom watchers .” He said , ominously .

“What is your crime ? Arani asked , eyeing the adventurers .

“Indeed , we have committed no crime .” Red said , firmly .

“Then why do they pursue you ?” The captain pressed .

“We have no idea .” Shorty assured him . “Just took a dislike to us , I guess .”

“It’s true . There is no system of justice here . Many are falsely accused and many real criminals thrive and take up public office .” The captain loquated . “But even falsely accused know the accusation .”

Khaskhemar quietly took his payment and departed .

“They haven’t caught us yet .” Said Angel “And I , for one , am not going to hang around and find out what they want of us . Would you have us die of curiosity ?”

Arani’s eyes were drawn towards Angel for the first time and lingered there for a few moments as he pondered his reply .

“Excuse my caution , fair lady .” He began . “But we are all fugitives here and the powers that be are devious . It should be difficult for anyone to claim to be outlaws in order to infiltrate our organisation?”

“We really need to get out of here in a hurry .” Preach blustered.

“Where are you headed ?” Asked Arani .

“The docks .” Boss replied , disingenuously .

“What is your escape plan ?” Arani demanded .

They looked from one to another .

“Er...We’re going to sail into the sunset .” Said Angel , sheepishly

“That’s a great plan .” Said Arani , “I wish you lots of luck .”

“We were hoping to get to the docks fast , before they can react , but you’re slowing us down .” Cat railed .

“I am sorry , your worship , but it doesn’t work that way .” He said , ironically . “What about the curfew and the usual guards on the dock?”

“We don’t know anything about that .” Shorty announced .

“Well , fortunately for you I do .” Arani boasted . “You lay low here and I’ll get someone to check out the situation .” He offered .

“How do we know that you’re not going to turn us in?” Boss demanded .

Arani shrugged . “Why would I ? I hate The Khan and all he stands for .”

“Easy to say .” Said Shorty .

“Look around you .” Arani protested “If we wanted to take you we could .” He walked away , dispatched a couple of his guards and then

returned .

“You might as well make yourselves comfortable while you’re waiting .” He invited .

He walked them over to where there were spaces to sit on boxes scattered around the room .

“Accommodations here are rudimentary .” He apologised . “You are not of Devlin .” He probed . “What brought you here ?”

“In search of adventure and the making of our fortunes .” Red explained .

Arani raised his eyebrows . “And did you ?” He asked .

Red shook his head , wistfully . Arani then seemed to aim his further questions and all of his attention towards Angel exclusively

“Where are you from ?” He asked .

“The Empire .” Angel replied .

“Which empire ?” He asked , dully .

“The Florenian Empire , is there any other ?” She asked , incredulously .

“I known not .” Said Arani . “What are you called ?”

“In this company I am known as Angel .” She said , coyly .

“I can see why .” Arani flattered .

“I have to return south immediately .” She said , emphatically .
 “I know .” He said , sadly . “I wish it were otherwise .”
 “Why ?” She asked .
 “I would like to get to know you .” He replied , earnestly .
 “She’s not available .” Red said , flatly .
 “Since when ?” Angel cried out in surprise . “You can’t answer for me .”
 “She’s like a sister to us .” Cat claimed . “We look out for her .”
 “She’s no sister to me .” Boss announced , cryptically .
 “If you say you are interested , I would gladly give up my life here and travel south with you .” Arani offered .
 “That’s very kind of you .” Said Shorty , ingenuously . “But , I think there are enough of us already .”
 “I’m asking Angel .” Arani attempted to spell it out for him .
 “It’s not a good idea .” Red butted in .
 “Red’s right .” Angel agreed “You don’t want to get mixed up with me . Really you don’t .”
 Angel mistook her recent behaviour for signs that she was a bad person and not to be relied upon .
 “Why not . The life here is wretched .” He protested .
 “We don’t exactly live a life of luxury either .” Red informed .
 A soldier returned and beckoned his commander . They whispered , briefly . Arani returned .
 “It seems you are in luck and my hopes fade .” He announced .
 “We can escort you to where your vessel awaits you . It is very far from the docks . If you’d turned up there you would have been in big trouble . Big trouble .” He emphasised .
 “We thank you for saving us that trouble .” Said Cat , graciously .
 “I will escort them .” Arani announced . “Follow me .”
 They did so . It was a long and complicated journey through miles of twisting , convoluted tunnels and chambers .

On the way they saw several groups of spemen and humanoids and some mixtures of different species . They all huddled in dark recesses for warmth, each one looking more wretched than the last . They had few possessions and most looked sickly and starving . It was difficult to see how they could eke out a living crowded into the squalor beneath the City of Devlin .
 They came , at last , to a guard post , manned by ten dwarves . None of the adventurers had ever seen more than two dwarves together before . The dwarves were as healthy looking as any dwarves they had seen back in Hud. They were iron clad and spit and polished , an immaculate , military looking outfit .
 “Stand and be recognised .” A dwarven guard challenged .

“I am Arani , of the underground , Captain in the Dockward .”

Arani announced , proudly .

“I am Duriken , Son of Olverin , Captain in the Gateward of The Underground .” Came the formal reply . “Welcome .”

“I have six people wishing to escape the whim of The Evil Eyes.”

Arani informed him .

“Let them advance .” Said Duriken , and continued without a pause .

“Do you solemnly swear never to divulge anything of what you have seen or heard beneath the City of Devlin and never to make known its highways and byways , its entrances and exits .”

“Say, ‘I so swear’ .” Arani advised .

“I so swear .” They each said , fervently .

“You are bound by your honour , and may swift retribution fall on you should your honour fail , your gods and your good fortune forsake you and yours for eternity .” Duriken swore , ominously . It was quite a powerful curse . “Pass now and go with luck all those who are true .”

“Mange tak og farvel .” Preach uttered , as he passed .

“Honour to your ancestors .” Duriken replied .

Beyond the cleverly formed dwarven doorway they found themselves squeezing through tighter and tighter spaces until they were compelled to crawl up a fairly steep slope of loose soil . They emerged , through little more than a rabbit hole covered in thick bushes , through which they had to push . Even before they could see in the fading moonlight , they heard the sounds of the river off to their left .

“I must leave you here .” Arani whispered . “Use no lanterns or torches . Follow the river south . You will come to a small inlet , well hidden by hanging willow branches . There your boatman should be waiting . May your gods guide you and protect you , especially you Angel .

I will never forget you .”

With that he descended the narrow tunnel , taking the torch with him .

Following his instructions they soon found the place he had described . Beneath the willow branches it was very dark . They made out only a dark shape . A faint glimmer of light caught on the surface of one white horn , showing it to be the shape of a minotaur . He stood implacable with his arms crossed , looking out over the expanse of his beloved river . He had picked out their shapes advancing from a hundred metres away .

When they approached close enough he greeted them .

“Do not be alarmed .” He began “The goblins are my crew .”

Indeed they were not alarmed , for they had not yet seen any goblins. Goblins there were however . Ten of them in number . They were his rowers , he the helmsman and cox , the captain and boson .

The goblins feared and revered him . In his boat he was in total command .

The boat in question was a long , thin affair , a largish sort of canoe. There was room for the ten rowers and their captain and easily enough room for as many passengers and as much luggage again . The boat was light and swift , for its size . Its sharp shape cut through the water easily and it was of very shallow draught . Angred claimed that it could go anywhere where there was water at all to sail.

They travelled through the night . The river flowed rapidly and the goblins rowed diligently , speeding them on . The travellers slept in shifts .

At one point they pulled into a narrow side channel .

“What’s going on ?” Preach demanded .

“River patrol .” Angred told , succinctly .

They watched as a boat pulled away into the distance .

“We will work our way through the swamp for a while .” Angred explained.

They moved through a maze of narrow , twisting channels , amid the din of a million frogs and stranger sounds . In places they were inches from the bank . The goblins forsook their oars and poled the canoe along , pushing through a thick soup of mixed vegetation .

“This place stinks .” Preach complained .

“No kidding .” Said Angred , whose sense of smell was many times more sensitive .

At times spreading bushes arched their branches , forming a thick canopy above the narrow waterways and willows bent low , dipping their leaves in the water .

Luckily Angred was on his guard .

SCUM CREEPERS

From hanging branches three slug-like creatures fell into the boat , with a faint plop , plop , plop , which was hardly noticeable amid the surrounding water noises and creature noises of the swamp .

“Creepers !” Angred shouted , leaping to try to grab one of the monstrous molluscs . “Light a lantern , search the boat .” He snapped out orders . “Get the salt .”

One of the goblins gave a mournful yowl . A foot long , bloated slug had attached itself to him and was beginning to suck his blood .

Angred grabbed the creature , yanked it away and squeezed it in his powerful grip , rendering it into a pulpy mess . Its remains squirted out and oozed between his fingers in thick strands of sticky gore .

Boss awoke , grabbed his sword , reflexively , and thrust it through the bloated belly of one of the creatures . He scraped it off on the side of the boat and it plunged into the water with a splash .

Shorty chopped at one and removed its tail but this didn't seem to cause it any great discomfort .

Angel ground the creature's head into the deck with the end of her staff .

"This is the business end , apparently ." She speculated . "Yuck , how am I going to clean this thing ?"

A goblin arrived with a bag of salt and sprinkled a handful over the creature's remains , which shrivelled visibly .

"I think you're a bit late for that ." Cat observed .

"I'll take some . I might clean the end of my staff with it ." Angel said , stealing a handful of salt .

"Don't waste it ." Said Angred . "Make a thorough search of the boat , backpacks , boots , everything . If any of these catch you unawares they can drain you completely dead ."

After searching for several minutes they found no more stowaways . Satisfied , but still wary , Angred continued the journey .

After a short respite they were set upon by a dozen two foot tall , bipedal reptiles , which looked like miniature tyrannosaurs .

MUCKDWELLERS

"Muckdwellers !" Angred shouted . "Keep polling ." He instructed his goblins .

The tiny lizards raced up and down the muddy shores of the swamp , dipping their heads to suck up mud .

"Watch your eyes ." Angred counselled the adventurers . "Try to chase them off the boat ."

They soon discovered what Angred was shouting about . Six mini-dinosaurs remained on the shore and squirted mud at their eyes .

Boss , Angel , Cat and Red were blinded by these attacks . Six other muckdwellers hopped onto the canoe and began tearing into both crew and passengers , using their gaping mouths , full of tiny but extremely sharp teeth .

Boss , Shorty and Preach were bitten almost immediately . Angred jumped onto the shore and attacked the muckies there. With one swipe of his double headed axe he chopped one monster clean in half . The others scampered around him . Shorty cleaved his opponent and knocked it flying into the swamp . For his trouble he caught a squirt of mud in his eye , from those ashore . Red was also squirted again and blinded for the second time . Angel and Red were both bitten .

On shore the creatures were darting around , managing to keep up with the boat and avoid the minotaur’s flailing axe . On the boat , Preach bashed one with his mace , but managed only to squash its long , thin tail . By now everyone was blind except Preach . Boss and Cat received toothy bites .

On shore , Angred cleaved a second muckdweller and then a third . He was charging around wildly , swinging at the rapidly moving targets .

Now Shorty and Preach were blinded . The rest peered through sore, bloodshot eyes . Boss managed to chop up one victim . Cat stabbed the one that Preach had wounded . Angel knocked one senseless with her staff . Red , Preach and Cat were each bitten . Then Boss , Angel and Red were blinded . Angred killed one of the culprits , Shorty destroyed another . The remaining few scampered off , back into the safety of the swamp .

Soon after that they emerged from the swamp into the relative tranquillity of the river .

GIANT OTTERS

A few hours later those who were sleeping were again rudely awoken . This time there was a loud bang and the boat was rocked .

Almost instantaneously a couple of feral heads emerged from the water , snapping viciously at the boat’s inhabitants . These creatures were evidently intent upon feeding and also attempting to capsize the canoe to further this end .

“Giant Otters !” Angred shouted . “Distribute the weight .” He ordered his goblins , which scurried to the other side of the boat , joyful of a chance to escape the snapping jaws without seeming cowardice .

One goblin had no chance to escape . He was snapped up in powerful jaws and chewed on by very sharp , lengthy teeth . Preach and a second goblin narrowly escaped flashing jaws . Cat was not so lucky . An otter head emerged from the water and , with

lightening speed , plucked him up and chewed greedily . His body went instantly limp.

Angred's double headed axe bit into the creature , forcing it to drop Cat's body to the deck . Preach rushed over to attend his fallen comrade , heedless of thrashing jaws and crashing weapons . One otter escaped with a dead goblin in its jaws . The other three , with their combined weight , succeeded in capsizing the boat . Plunged into the water Boss and Angel managed to grab hold of the boat . Shorty , the only swimmer among the passengers , caught Cat and kept him afloat . Preach and Red had to be rescued .

Angred took up Red , while two goblins supported Preach , who took a swipe at a passing otter with his mace , but could not damage the beast severely .

Then an otter's jaws fastened upon Red and shook violently, attempting to release him from Angred's grasp. Angred held onto Red and succeeded in coaxing the otter in towards the boat , the beast being too greedy to let go of its quarry . By the gash on its chest Angred recognised it as the animal which had gored Cat . As soon as it was in range Angel belted the beast on its crown with her staff . It let go of Red's body and darted away just in time to save itself from the sword thrust which Boss attempted .

There were still three hungry otters gliding effortlessly through the water . They were so manoeuvrable that they could attack from anywhere without warning .

Six of the goblins set about righting the boat . When that was done there was a scramble to get into it before the other otters struck again. One returned to attack Red , drawn by the scent of his blood . He struck at it and opened up a gash in its side as it sped past . Two of the otters took a goblin each . One of the prey was still alive and screaming as it was dragged away .

The third went after Preach , snapped at him and received only a jaw-full of chain mail links for its trouble . It released its grip on this painful mouthful and glided on again , disappearing beneath the boat .

With the help of the remaining goblins everyone was lifted into the canoe , except for Boss and Angred .

The last of the otters jumped up onto the boat , grabbed a goblin in its massive jaws and dived off again . Shorty and Angel managed to get a swipe at the beast . Then it was gone , flashing through the water .

"Four goblins gone ." Angred raved , as they dragged him out of the water . "We're going after them ."

"I'm with you ." Said Boss . "Let's rid the river of this menace ."

“That’s not a good idea .” Red moaned .

He was hurt pretty badly . Preach bent over to tend him .

“I’m in .” Said Shorty .

“You guys are crazy .” Angel berated them . “Preach , tell them they’re nuts .”

“I have to go along with them .” Preach stated .

“Nets !” Angred shouted . “You three net the healthy one . You take the second . You and I will destroy the third .” He said pointing at Preach . “And you two valiant warriors can take the fourth . Little miss can stay in the boat with her injured friends .” He finished .

“And when you’re dead , how can I travel the river alone ?” Angel demanded .

“Self , self , self .” Shorty teased . “That’s all she ever thinks about .” “They’re adventurers Angel , you can’t expect them to be sensible .” Red told her .

The goblins were grumbling as they hauled out two very large nets . They rowed out to a hundred yards downstream of where the giant otters were last seen and trudged upstream .

Angred followed the scent very easily , hardly needing his eyes to pinpoint them exactly . They took the giant otters by surprise . A trio of goblins managed to wrap one of the otters in their net . Boss scored a hit against one of the other animals . Between them Preach and Angred laid a third to rest .

The healthy otter , however , moved swiftly to evade its would be , goblin , captors and dived at Preach . Its snapping jaws bit him savagely , cleaving him almost in twain . His body fell , seemingly lifeless , to the floor . An otter’s jaws clamped uselessly onto Shorty’s armour and attempted to worry him , like a dog with a bone . It released its grip and , with a lunge forwards , took a proper hold , not only biting into Shorty but also thrashing him around , like a rag-doll . The healthy otter snatched up a goblin and crushed its head in powerful jaws . The beast’s movements were so quick and violent that it was impossible to net .

Boss thrust his sword deeply into an otter’s belly . The creature ceased its thrashing of Shorty and fell dead . Angred and three of his goblins dispatched the otter which was netted .

“Now get that one !” Angred snarled angrily , pointing out the still healthy beast .

Angel and Red had watched the others walking off .

“Shall we leave them to get killed ?” She asked .

“Boss should have at least worn my armour .” Red pointed out .

“We’d better go and save their arses .” Angel decided . “If you feel up to it .”

“I don’t . But there’s really no choice .” Red agreed .

Thus they followed a little way behind . So it was that they arrived to see Preach in grave danger and Shorty also close to death .

Angel , keeping low , dashed across the ground , dove forwards and tore at the straps of Preach’s backpack . She dragged out the orb , once again and laid it on Preach’s chest .

“Sweet ISIS forgive me .” She prayed . “Oh mighty AGNI , if you value your priest , please restore him . Excuse me for I know not the right words to say .”

The orb glowed a little and Preach began to breathe , almost imperceptibly .

Red moved in , with all the stealth he could , and dragged Shorty out of the combat zone . Angel attempted the same with Preach’s fallen frame .

The remaining otter tore into another goblin and ripped it apart . The three goblins on their net failed miserably in their attempts to ensnare it . Angred chopped into it once . Then it was almost netted but managed to struggle free . It bit into Boss’s leg . He hacked at its neck with all his might . Angred’s blade tore into its hindquarters . Finally the goblins managed to wrap it up in their net . It tore through the net with its teeth and grabbed a goblin by the throat , tearing out his life .

Boss delivered the final blow , chopping into the otter’s windpipe from below . A bubbling froth issued forth as the beast exhaled its last .

Angred , uninjured , stood back and surveyed the scene . He noted Angel tending Preach and Red binding Shorty’s wounds .

“You see , we have survived .” He gloated .

The remaining , surly looking , goblins slunk back and fell exhausted to the ground .

“Preach was nearly dead and still is very near .” Angel commented . “It is bad for us when our healer goes down .”

“Somebody help me bind my leg , or I shall join him .” Boss announced .

“Have no fear , brave warrior .” The minotaur said , cheerily . “It was a good kill we made this night .”

After the wounds were attended Angred skinned the four otters .

“Strange.” He claimed. “Otters are not generally so aggressive. I have never heard of them attacking boats . Then again , I guess few are crazy enough to sail the river at night .”

“You have to be crazy to sail at night ?” Boss asked .

“Why couldn’t you tell us this before now ?” Angel demanded .

Angred looked at her coldly .

“Take care , little one . You will need my good will to survive . I will make a good deal . In place of the coins you offered me , I will take these pelts . It will recompense me for the loss of my slaves . It will cost me much to replace them . They are not easy to train either.”

“We helped kill those things .” Shorty pointed out . “Two are yours by right . One we will offer you for the trip and to replace your goblins . The other we claim .”

“We are talking about seven goblins . Seven of excellent quality and training .” Angred argued .

“We are talking about four pelts . Four .” Shorty countered .

“And three of those goblins you killed yourself .” Angel accused.

“Then I take three skins and you pay me the six gold pieces .”

Angred haggled .

“We don’t have six gold pieces . Some drow guards stole them from us .” Angel related .

“That is a great pity .” Angred said , without sympathy . “Then you must offer us something else of value .”

“The only thing I have of value is my sword .” Said Red .

“How about the bauble ?” Angred proposed .

“That is of value to no-one but our priest .” Red believed .

“Then another priest would pay dearly for it .” Angred tried .

“No use to a priest . Not even another priest , only the priest to which it is gifted . Only him will it serve .” Shorty bluffed .

“I saw her use it to heal him .” Angred told them .

“And only because it was him did it work at all .” Shorty lied .

Angred considered the matter .

“Then three pelts and your sword will do .” He agreed .

Shorty whispered to Angel

“I think he gave in too easily .”

She nodded her understanding .

“We will be safer on the river .” Angred told them . “Let us move , before we fall prey to something else .”

“Are you sure ?” Angel asked , suspiciously .

“Of course . The giant otters are dead and since this is their stretch of the river what other large , dangerous beasts could possibly survive here ?” Angred’s argument made sense .

“Tomorrow you people will have to learn how to row .” The minotaur announced .

“I can row .” Said Shorty , haughtily .

“You should rest .” Boss counselled him .

“The goblins and I will bring the boat upstream . It will save us having to drag the near dead all that way .” Angred offered .

“I will go with you and you can leave your goblins here .” Angel suggested.

“Ah , such trust is very gratifying .” Angred said , sarcastically .

“Just when I am about to give up on you , you suddenly win my respect , little one .” She was indeed almost half his height .

“If I pole , then you must learn to steer .” He told her .

“What’s she up to ?” Boss queried .

“She thinks if she lets them all go off together , that they will either leave us here to die or come back and ambush us .” Shorty explained.

“But this way he could kill her and Cat at his leisure . You , Preach and Red are nearly dead and I’m unarmoured and pretty badly injured .” Boss analysed .

“Either way , if he’s a villain we’re done for anyway .” Shorty remarked . “We just have to trust him that much .” He spaced his fingers very close together as he said this .

As he did this nine bugbears appeared from the swamp-ward side , trapping them against the river . Behind the bugbears a sinister , dark-cloaked figure . It was the mind-flayer . He had tracked them down and incensed the giant otters into their feeding frenzy , using them to weaken and divide the adventurers .

“Now we know what it is you carry of such great value .” He communicated to them . “We also know that you are in no condition to fight . The otters served my purpose exceedingly well . I am so brilliant don’t you think .” He couldn’t help but gloat and congratulate himself . “You thought that you could escape the clutches of the mighty Illithid race. You are about to learn who truly rules this empire . Devlin Khan is a mere puppet , a comparative simpleton . The land is the Illithid Khanate . Do not think of resisting. I know your every move before you make it .” If they had tried to make a move bugbears would have run them through before they could do anything .

Boss lay waiting for something to break the deadlock , ready to spring . Perhaps it was his thoughts that the mind flayer referred to . He was sure his companions harboured similar thoughts . He knew Red and Shorty never liked to submit .

“Don’t do anything stupid guys .” He said , calmly . “They have us dead to rights .”

They commanded the attention of two bugbears each . One bugbear , nonchalantly , intimidated the goblins into instant submission , whilst two others stood in guard positions to either side and just in front of their leader .

Things looked pretty grim for our erstwhile adventurers .

Then , from out of the sky dove a solid , dark winged shape . It emitted a mighty roar . Six bugbears ran off in panic , as did two of the goblins .

Boss seized the opportunity , grabbed The Orb of AGNI and threw it at the mind flayer . The orb struck with a mighty crack and a flash of lightening . The mind flayer stood stunned for several moments . The bugbear guarding the goblins cut down the remaining goblin and was , in turn , stabbed by Red .

Boss and Shorty advanced towards the bugbears guarding Xaxchlitchvli . Boss took a hit form one . The large , ugly , hairy , goblinish creature sneered at him in challenge .

Just then Angel and Angred pulled up in the boat and splashed ashore (or rather aswamp , since none of the land was really dry hereabouts .)

The dark creature circling overhead swept down and brushed past Boss with its wing-tip . To Boss's surprise the bugbear which he was facing him turned away from him and attempted to pick up the orb , which was laying in the swamp in a cloud of steam . The bugbear lit up , with lightening playing all over its body . When the sparks ceased their dance of pain the bugbear was nothing but charred remains . The air around smelled strongly of a mixture of ozone and burned flesh and fur , in addition to the usual stench of the bog .

Shorty and Red were both hit by bugbears and Shorty fell unconscious . Angred charged in and hit a bugbear with his axe . One of the minotaur's nets raised itself up and began to wrap itself around the orb . The orb floated up and allowed itself to become entangled .

Boss stabbed at the faceless one . It took the wound without flinching . The orb was wrapped in several yards of netting . The Illithid proved more than capable of dodging Boss's blows whilst drawing the object towards itself . It obviously planned to grab the orb and then escape , somehow . Boss couldn't see how , but the creature obviously had some very powerful magics at its disposal .

Angel , meanwhile , had worked her way behind the creature . She tried to attack it with her *shocking grasp* spell . She felt the magical energy rise within her . She felt it release as she managed to contact her prey , and then she felt it drain , harmlessly away , as if the creature had opened up some void , into which to absorb it . Other forces were at work , unseen by any spemen eye . During the melee , since the appearance of the mysterious , winged beast another tiny helper had been busy . It had attempted to *dispel* the Illithid's *Telekinesis* but had failed .

It had busied itself firing tiny arrows at the monster , but to no avail. Five arrows had hit the beast , five arrows of mighty enchantment , but to no effect .

The diminutive warrior decided to try a different approach and save his last magical *sleep* arrow for emergencies . He hovered over the ridiculous looking blob of warped flesh and touched him , letting a little of his magical mischief and mayhem take effect upon the enemy . Obviously the beast was busy elsewhere , because the pixie's magic broke through its magical barriers . The mind flayer was struck with a strange feeling of *confusion* .

It lost track of its present plan to carry off the orb and wondered what it was doing here . It tried to recapture its intentions but to no avail .

It stood , quite dumbly , wondering what was happening and what to do . The orb and its wrapping , no longer controlled , fell to the floor with a swampy splash .

While Red and Angred both battled a bugbear each , matching them stroke for stroke , neither side gaining ground , a large , winged creature landed beside Shorty and touched him gently with a massive paw . Shorty's breathing became stronger and his pulse quickened minutely .

The pixie flitted around collecting its arrows from the Illithid's flesh, dextrously dodging Angel's staff blows , which seemed to do no harm at all to the object of their rage . The mind flayer was apparently beyond feeling pain . Boss's swordstrokes seemed to do damage but the

dark spy behaved as if it didn't notice , it moved but not in response to any stimuli . Then its eyes focused upon the leonine form before it and it ran screaming at it .

The Sphinx parried the dark one's flailing tentacle attacks , but the odds were four tentacles against two paws and one tentacle attached itself to the lion head .

Angel , suddenly robbed of a target , ran over and whacked a bugbear from behind . The loud clunk was more heard than felt by the thick sculled beast .

The pixie , who was Lonitil , sorted through his arrows mournfully . "Ruined , ruined , ruined , ruined ." He sniffed , then , "Oh! This one's alright ." One of his arrows had somehow retained its magic . "Two sleeps and four forgets ." He counted , quite oblivious to the fact that there was still a battle raging around him .

Xaxchlitchvli wondered where he was and what he was doing . He left off attacking the largish , lionish creature and wandered off , aimlessly into the swamp . Boss was not about to let him get away .

He thrust his sword right through him . The mind flayer felt a sharp feeling in his back but paid it no heed .

‘Must be something important around here . Otherwise I wouldn’t muck about in a swamp . What was it I was looking for ?’ He thought .

Red stabbed at one bugbear whilst Angel beat it about the head . It swung wildly , trying to ward off both attackers at once , with a singular lack of success .

Angred merely hefted his axe into his opponent’s skull and drove it down into it’s bug-brain . It fell heavily , very dead . He recovered his axe , with difficulty , from the depths of bone and leaned upon it , panting heavily .

‘That’s it .’ He thought . ‘I’ve done my share .’

‘Finish it , valiant warriors !’ He bellowed , lustily .

The bugbear was almost as confused as his master . However it tried to manoeuvre , to get both opponents before it , at least one of them remained behind it .

Angel whacked it across the ear and it turned on her only to be run through by Red , and then it was very definitely dead .

Boss chopped and hacked at Xaxchlitchvli . Pieces of horrid , purple hued , slime glistening flesh hung off him everywhere .

Chunks of him went flying into the swamp and he , took no more notice than if he was being annoyed by flies .

‘What are these strange , stinging pains I’m getting ?’ He wondered . This carried on for several minutes , the pair wandering further and further into the swamp , until poor Xax , still confused , thought his last confused thought and fell dead .

Boss , so annoyed by this charade , just to be sure , spent a further three minutes chopping the remains up into minuscule pieces , especially making sure to chop off its head .

Lonitil hovered overhead and gave a high pitched chuckle .

‘I ...he...he... think its dead now ...ha...ha don’t you ?’

Boss was shaken out of his grim obsession . He looked up .

‘I’m not sure .’ He said . ‘What the hell are you anyway ?’

‘I’m Lonitil...titter ...titter ... The pixie ...chuckle ...chuckle ... and I’m pleased to meet you too ...ho...ho...!’

‘You’re the little grey guy with the big eyes from Sophila’s .’ Boss connected .

‘Yep , that’s me .’ Lonitil confessed .

‘Then what do you really look like ?’ Boss demanded .

‘Anyway I damn well please .’ Lonitil quipped . ‘But seriously , this is the real me .’ Then he became invisible ‘But this is how I generally look , unless I try really hard to be seen . You couldn’t have killed that thing , you know .

He would have taken the little ball and gone clean away . Only I confused him . Oh thank you , sir .” He became visible again . “I am good , aren’t I ?”

“I guess so .” Boss didn’t feel like arguing the point .

“Don’t worry about being lost deep in the swamp . I can lead you back to the others . Dangerous out here , you know .” The pixie winked . “There are six bugbears wandering about .”

“I suppose you did that too ?” Boss enquired .

“No .” Said the pixie . “That was my big friend , Anaximander .

“You’ll like him . He’s a Sphinx you know . He’s a bit stern at times, but he’s alright when you get to know him .”

They returned . The others wounds had been tended and the canoe packed . Angred was cutting up slabs of giant otter meat to replace the food they had lost in the capsized .

“We must rest and heal .” Angred said .

“We can rest and heal on the river .” Red replied . “The longer we remain in the wilderness the smaller our chances become of ever getting back alive.”

“As you wish .” Angred deferred .

They carried the casualties to the boat , stowed their supplies and equipment and set off once more .

Angred dropped anchor in the middle of the river .

“It is my turn to sleep .” He stated . “Unless you wish to have an accident , I suggest you don’t try to navigate the river without me . I will awaken in a couple of hours .”

That time passed and everyone aboard fell asleep .

When they awoke they were greeted by the first rays of the morning sun . It was the beginning of the twenty fifth day of their quest . On the riverbank there sat two sullen looking goblins . They waved frantically at the first signs of movement within the boat .

“Are they your slaves ?” Boss enquired .

“Quite possibly .” Angred shrugged .

They rowed into shore and picked up the pair . The goblins chattered incessantly , in their own crude tongue . Angred nodded at their excuses and then berated them for their cowardice, implacably .

They drifted downstream for the entire day . Angred and his goblins took turns at the tiller . By nightfall they had reached as far downstream as they could go before The Great Falls .

“We will rest here for the night and take our leave of you in the morning .” Angred announced . “There is safety in numbers .”

While they were anchored there three freshwater dolphins played around them .

The next morning Preach , Shorty and Cat were well enough to move around . Preach tended their wounds and prayed for healing . They breakfasted on roast otter . I know that this sounds evil but they were not the friendly otters that we know and love . Angel studied her spellbook , which was none the worse for its spill into the water , on account of its water resistant carrying satchel . After the routine of breakfast they took their leave of Angred and his two goblin companions.

“The journey back will take five days now .” He complained “This trip has really cost me .”

“Alright guys , what do you say we give him the other pelt ?” Boss suggested .

They took a vote and agreed (It was four to two in favour . I do not intend to sully anyone’s reputation by revealing who voted which way or why .)

Angred thanked them profusely and left them with instructions on how to walk down from the plateau .

They walked until they came to a small village , where they might have had a meal and taken a boat down river , if they had any money at all .

“We could always sell something .” Red suggested .

“How about the sword which you are always giving away ?”

Preach scolded .

“I thought with giving him the otter skin that he wouldn’t need the sword as well .” Red excused .

“A deal is a deal .” Preach preached , though possibly only because he enjoyed giving Red a hard time , not by dint of any real principles on his part .

“If he’d wanted the sword .” Angel pointed out “He would have taken it .”

“Wait here .” Cat told them .

He disappeared into the inn for ten minutes and then returned .

“We are booked in for dinner.” He announced, with a wry grin .

“What did you do , Cat ?” Shorty demanded .

“Nothing illegal , Shorty , trust me .” Cat replied .

“I don’t trust him .” Red announced .

“Who cares .” Said Preach “As long as we get to eat .”

“Also , I hired us a boat down to Hud , O.K.” Cat declared .

They looked at one another incredulously .

“I work better on my own . O.K.” Cat stated .

After a sumptuous meal and a few drinks they left the inn and took a trip on a rowboat , which was barely large enough for them , with a farmer named Kosak .

During the long row Kosak sat quiet and looking distracted for hours and then he started talking .

“I took your strange deal , mister Cat , because I needed to talk to someone outside the village . The village is being held to ransom .”

He told of an Ogre , which held several village children to ransom .

“And the villagers are a scared to do anything about it . Afraid he will kill their children .”

“And you are not ?” Cat asked .

“I’d as rather have my little girl dead as living amongst goblins and ogres , untold harm will come of it .” Kosak declared .

“So , how can we help ?” Boss asked .

“Well , you see , anybody could storm in there and get the children killed . The trick is not to .” Said Kosak . “And if the villagers find out , then they will try to stop you . I’d as soon not go getting them killed .”

“That is understandable .” Said Red .

“So , if you can come up with a creditable plan , I will consider you for the job .” Kosak offered .

“For how much ?” Preach asked .

“For the good of our children .” Kosak stated . “And whatever you can pick up .” He gave a wink .

They made it all the way to Hud without any further incident . Cat paid their silver pieces to enter the city .

They made their way to The Charging Minotaur Inn .

Cat paid for a shared room and a simple supper .

“How much money did this guy give you , Cat ?” Red asked .

“He didn’t give me any .” Cat claimed . “He owns my soul .”

“You keep your little secrets , Cat .” Shorty smiled .

That night Preach re-dressed everyone’s wounds and did what healing prayers he could . In the morning he prayed while Angel studied her spells . Cat paid for breakfast .

“So , how’s the money holding up ?” Preach asked .

“Enough for about three days .” Said Cat .

“Then , maybe we should sleep in the common room and eat gruel .” Preach advised .

“Today we go to see your priest friend and hopefully get paid . If not, we have a job to go to , courtesy of yours truly . If that doesn’t pan out , I plan to hang around and make enough money to get some decent training .” Cat was in a manic mood . “Hey , don’t worry , we came back alive .”

They had to walk for half a day , to Dar Geth City , to find a high priest of AGNI with whom to negotiate the return of the orb , and the possibility of a reward.

At the gates of Dar Geth they had to pay another six silver pieces .

HIGH PRIEST

They entered the temple of AGNI . It was a small building . It was a small , obscure sect hereabouts , though it had strongholds elsewhere , much like most religious sects on spem .

“Let me do the talking .” Preach begged .

“I don’t know .” Red was dubious . “You’re likely to just give the thing away . Maybe Cat would drive a harder bargain .”

“Cat’ll get us strung up , more likely .” Shorty teased .

A young novice approached them . Preach knew his rank by his garb .

“We wish to speak to His Eminence .” Preach requested .

“Just one moment .” Said the novice . “Do you desire a clean robe , father?”

“If you wish , my son .” Preach allowed .

“The novice scurried off and returned a few moments later . He helped Preach off with his robe and dressed him in a new one .

“Do we get free clothes too ?” Cat said , impishly .

“Are you priests ?” The novice asked , aggressively . “I am to escort you to His Eminence , The High Priest of AGNI in Dar Geth . You must , of course , leave your weapons here . No-one will steal them , I assure you .”

The novice took their weapons and deposited them in a large strongbox to one side of the entry hall . He locked the box and handed the key to Preach .

“Now , if you will come this way ?” He led them .

They entered a small waiting room and then a private chamber .

There sat a grey-haired priest in opulent robes , quite in stark contrast to the austerity of his surroundings and the poverty of his sect . Behind the priest stood two temple guards , bearing long spears . The high priest noted the adventurers’ suspicious stares .

“Do not be alarmed by my guards .” He said . “They are both deaf and dumb . Nothing said here leaves this room .”

“We are more concerned about the weapons than the ears .” Cat piped up . “You see , we have none .”

“Then what’s that in your boot , Sir ?” The high priest castigated .

“I do apologise .” Said Cat , bare-facedly . “I forgot about that one .”

“Father Casgoine , I can hardly recommend the company you keep .” His Eminence began . “Now , what brings you to my office ?”

“You know of the dream , of The Orb , Your Eminence ?” Preach stammered .

“Yes .” The high cleric affirmed .

“I have it here .” Preach announced , whispering .

“Do speak up , father ?” The other requested .

Preach cleared his throat and took a deep breath .

“I have recovered The Holy Orb, Your Eminence .” Preach declared. He struggled to wriggle out of his pack .

“Here , let me help .” Angel offered , kindly , and did so .

She held the pack before him . He trembled as he attempted to undo it . Cat shoved him , roughly aside .

“Here , Preach , let me help .” He said , gruffly and opened it up with consummate ease . “Now calm yourself down .” He instructed , and allowed Preach to reach inside and pull out the orb .

“That is it , is it ?” The high priest said , coolly , sounding disbelieving .

“Yes , Your Eminence .” Preach affirmed .

The high priest rattled off an incantation as easily as if it were his own name . He looked towards the orb and seemed to shield his eyes with his hand , as if looking into the sun itself .

“Most impressive .” He said , calmly . “We thank you for this service .”

“But , your eminence , the orb is not mine to give .” Preach said .

“These people have risked their lives to bring it here and suffered many grievous injuries and terrible hardships beyond retelling . It is as much theirs as it is mine .”

“It belongs to the church .” His eminence argued . “More than that , it belongs to The Great God , AGNI himself . What mortal would lay claim to what is HIS ?”

“These people have done these deeds in hope of some great reward .” Preach explained .

“They will find their reward , in the fullness of time , by the grace of AGNI . He will smile upon them , no doubt .” The high priest assured them .

“But , in the meantime , they require some tangible reward , so they may continue to do good work .” Preach beseeched him . “Do not sell them short , lest you usurp the will of AGNI . As his agent you should deliver , on his behalf , the rewards that he has promised .”

“I see , so you have spoken to him personally , have you father ?” He asked, aggressively . “And he himself has promised this reward to these people ?”

“No ... I mean ...” Preach faltered .

“Let’s put this another way , shall we .” Boss intervened . “We have found this object and , by law , it belongs to us . We are

asking you if you wish to purchase it from us and expect you to offer a fair price, or else we shall keep it .”

“You seek to hold The Church of AGNI to ransom ?” The High Priest accused .

“We want what is our due .” Cat proclaimed .

“Then what do you consider a fair price ?” The High Priest demanded .

“A hundred gold pieces each .” Red proposed .

“A hundred gold pieces is a lot of money.” His Eminence stated .

“It is a thing of powerful enchantment and worth a great deal more .” Said Angel “But we ask only this token reward , in respect for yourself and your church . Call it a finders’ fee .”

“But , in the light of your present attitude , I think we should demand a thousand gold pieces each .” Boss interjected .

“Come now ,” Said the priest . “Let us not be rash . Our church is not large and therefore not rich . I can not offer you a thousand , nor can I offer you a tenth of what it is worth . Nor can you peddle it anywhere else , since it will serve none but we .”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that .” Boss challenged . “Who knows , someone might pay handsomely for it , just to destroy it .”

“I will offer you a thousand gold pieces for it , in total and not one copper more , you may split it any way you choose .” He offered .

“I , of course , will not claim any part of the money .” Preach declared .

“That, at least , is commendable .” His Eminence congratulated .

“Two hundred gold each for the rest of you . Is it agreed ?”

They voted . The vote was four to two against accepting the offer .

“Let us put it to the test .” Boss proposed . “If AGNI thinks we are being unfairly treated he will allow me to carry the orb out of his church without harming me . If the orb attacks me , then he is satisfied

with your dealings .”

“You don’t propose to test a God !” His Eminence was outraged.

“No ! Only to test the integrity of his high priest .” Boss challenged

“I beg of you , don’t do this .” Preach implored him . “Remember what it did to the bugbear .”

“I am no bugbear .” Boss declared . He plucked up the orb and turned to walk away .

“No , wait !” Shouted the high priest . “I will give you four hundred gold pieces each , except for you , father .”

This time the vote was four to two in favour of accepting .

“You don’t really want four hundred gold pieces do you ?” The high priest said . “Take three gems each and twenty platinum .”

Cat appraised the gems offered and approved the deal .

“Now , father , it is time for you to return to cloisters and receive further instruction . Say goodbye to your friends , you will not see them for at least a month . And you , young adventurers , it was a challenge to haggle with you . Incidentally you could have bumped up the price to at least a thousand . I hope that you have learned from this experience .” The old priest winked at them . “This affair is at an end , farewell .”

EPILOGUE

This is the continuing saga of six young people and their adventures. The next volume is a collection of five short adventures . In the first instance our heroes decided that it was too dangerous to go off on an adventure without their cleric to heal them . They also thought it impossible to find another priest to accompany them . They would just have to wait until Preach was released from his church duties and able to accompany them . This left them in limbo for at least a month and poor Kosak’s problem unsolved . Rest assured that the farmer’s plight , however , was not forgotten .