

Transformations

The next day they exited the underground barracks, through a door that was so well-designed it was almost impossible to see. It opened outside the walls of Ironforge, a seamlessly blending slab of rock few people knew about. It was like the doorway they had used a long time ago, when Ironforge was under siege. Mariel was holding Para's bridle and checking her packs. Zack and Beefsteak were also there, Sir Jean having sent for the horses and the things they would need. Gilot and Philippe brought the horses, laden with all the things they had left at Sir Jean's mansion and needed on the road. They were none of them paying much attention to the outside world, busying themselves with their horses and gear. But there was a sense of being watched that made the hair on their necks stand out.

It was Melvin who first saw the figure, but they all turned to look at him as the spell went off. It was another Fireball, in the middle of the party. It blossomed bright red and the horses screamed in terror at the sudden fire so near to them. Grimm had his axe in his hands, and was lunging for the figure that had attacked them. He stood in the bushes so very close by, that it almost seemed impossible that he would escape.

The figure vanished. Grimm screamed with powerless rage. "Come back you COWARD!!" The words reverberated off the cliff edge, and birds took flight as they scared from the noise.

There was a cracking of a few twigs, and suddenly Thamior stepped out of the undergrowth. He held up his hands in a gesture of peace as they all whirled around to look at him, and Sir Jean relaxed, patting Grimm on the shoulder to lower his axe as well. Mariel turned away to see to the horses, that had miraculously stayed together. They seemed to be centered around Silver Spirit, who was clearly the leading stallion of the herd.

"I had to leave;" Thamior said; "but I saw you had left the house and found you out here. What happened here?"

Sir Jean explained, keeping an eye out for Grimm, who seemed to be calming down slightly now that there was no more sign of an attack. Mariel touched each of her friends in turn and checked them for burns as she had with the horses. When she stood close to Grimm, he exhaled, still high on adrenaline.

"That was Sirc'al!" Grimm exclaimed. "He found me, and now he attacked me. He should've had the courage to face me one on one!"

Mariel shushed him. "There's nothing to do now, Grimm, he's gone. But you know we'll help you find him and bring him to justice."

Meanwhile, Thamior had explained to Sir Jean about what he had done while they enjoyed the party. He had found some evidence of where Z.A. was hiding, and they had a new route to follow now. When all were ready, and Sir Jean mounted, Thamior transformed himself into a bird, and soared into the sky, travelling with them on the winds.

They were travelling north, and made good time. Zack and Beefsteak were frisky, and both Silver Spirit and Para were happy not to be working hard on their training but out riding with the wind in their manes again. Mariel rode close to Sir Jean, both heavily armoured and both now capable of fighting from horseback.

Thamior conjured them a shelter that night, a rough brick house that had only one door, a small but clean kitchen area, and a loft where they could sleep. They tethered the horses outside.

After dinner, Grimm sat outside for the first watch, while Sir Jean took Mariel in his arms and they slept together. When Mariel awoke, Sir Jean was, predictably, already awake himself. He only needed two hours of sleep, thanks to his Ring of Sustenance, and would not move while she still slept, afraid to wake her. They got up and dressed quietly, and Sir Jean relieved Grimm of his watch.

Thamior had stepped outside too, wearing nothing at all. He held a flask of elven wine in his hand. He sat down next to Sir Jean, who declined the wine.

"Quiet night." Thamior said.

"Yes, it is." Sir Jean replied.

They suddenly heard a small snap of a twig. It was hardly noticeable in the background noise of the forest, but when it repeated itself a few times, Sir Jean quietly motioned to Thamior to check it out. Thamior stood up, and pretended to go to the back of the house in order to relieve himself. There, he mumbled a spell and turned invisible. He could sneak around better than Sir Jean, who was clad in his armour, so he went back to the front and checked it out.

Sir Jean had gone inside to wake the others. He helped Mariel with putting on her armour, and when they were back outside, Sir Jean pointed out a large shadow, moving towards them. It was covering the ground fast. It looked like a mass of smaller beasts.

When everyone was outside they walked on to meet it. They turned out to be wolves.

Mariel tried to get contact with the wolves, but they were insane, twisted by humans.

"These are no normal wolves." she announced.

"Then we can kill them?" Grimm asked, and stepped forward to meet the first of the wolves. Already, Melvin and Thamior were killing many wolves by their Ice Storms and Fireballs. Soon enough, the remaining wolves were fleeing.

"You didn't leave any for me!" Grimm shouted. Indeed his axe was still clean.

"Sorry" yawned Melvin. "Can we go back to bed now?"

But as they turned to walk back to the house, there was a person standing on the roof. He had just finished a spell, and from out of nowhere a giant scorpion appeared in front of them.

"He's mine!" Grimm yelled. He charged the beast. It scuttled towards Grimm, menacing him with the giant poison dart that was attached to its tail. Mariel flinched, afraid to even ponder what damage scorpion poison would do to Grimm, afraid to even contemplate how potent it would be from a beast that size.

Severed by Grimm's keen axe, the tail dropped off. Another blow, and the axe was buried in the head of the giant scorpion. It writhed for a moment, and then died. Then Grimm looked up to the roof of their little house, but the figure was gone without a trace.

In the morning Mariel returned from her prayers and she noticed there was a giant tiger in front of the doorway. There was nobody else outside, even though they had all agreed there should be at least one person keeping watch.

She tried to make contact with the tiger. It was friendly, and intrigued by the 'point-ear' that could talk with animals. Slowly, Mariel approached. She prayed in her armour when there could be danger around, but she removed the helmet so as to get a better connection with the tiger. She introduced herself, putting a name to her features other than 'point-ear' and a sharp smell of armour the tiger had associated with her. The tiger introduced herself as well. It was a female, and she told she had come with a 'half-point-ear' - a half elf - and they had found this house.

Mariel stepped into the gloom of the little house. Grimm was eating breakfast, and gesturing with a piece of bread while telling tales of his bravery in a boisterous voice. He seemed to be very relaxed, all his attention focused on the half-elven female seated next to him. Only when Mariel did not join them at the table did he look up.

"Ah, there you are. I've been telling tales of us." Grimm said, pointing to a free space on the bench, where Sir Jean had sat only moments before. Sir Jean walked outside, relieving the tiger from her duty. The tiger bounded inside, playfully pawing at Grimm, who laughed uproariously. "Sparerib!!"

"Sparerib?" Mariel asked, cocking an eyebrow. "Your wonderful idea of a name again?"

"She's called Flow!" the half-elf said indignantly.

"We met outside." Mariel said, folding her arms over her breastplate.

"Mariel, this is Leona, a friend of mine, from Ironforge." Grimm introduced them. "Leona, this is Mariel, I told you about her."

"Hi." Leona said, eyeing Mariel from head to toe.

Melvin handed her some bread, and Mariel sat down. When Grimm and Leona continued their loud reminiscing of times past, Mariel nudged Melvin. "What's the story?"

"She came around while I was making breakfast." Melvin said, pushing a piece of bread into his mouth and spraying crumbs on the table. "An old mmfriend of Grimm's."

"And he trusts her? After what happened to Lorian?" Mariel asked. "Unbelievable."

Melvin shrugged, and continued his breakfast.

When they broke camp, Leona mounted the tiger Flow and rode with them, close to Grimm and Beefsteak. Their laughter echoed beneath the treebranches. They ate lunch on horseback, left-overs from the morning breakfast. Mariel stayed close to Sir Jean, who did not seem to mind that the half-elf woman had joined them.

"She is not evil, if that is what you mean." Sir Jean had replied to her question. "And Grimm seems to trust her."

Mariel had dropped the matter then, but promised herself to keep an eye out. If whoever was after them had gotten to Leona as they had to Lorian, it could deal Grimm a terrible blow if she were to become hostile after all. Beneath the boisterous exterior, Grimm was kind at heart. He had proved as much when he had left the party at Sir Jean's manor, afraid that his presence could hurt his friends.

Later that afternoon, Leona sat bolt upright on Flow's back.

"I just heard!" she exclaimed, pointing at a bluejay that was sitting on a branch close to her. "There's a large group of beings that are destroying the woods, up near the north edge of this forest."

"How far?" Mariel asked immediately.

"They'll be here in three days." Leona answered, and looked at Grimm.

Mariel spoke before Leona could. "They must not be permitted to continue their destruction."

"We have to go there." Leona said, glancing at Mariel and then speaking to Grimm. "We have to get to them NOW."

Grimm sighed, and eyed Sir Jean, who replied. "If it is several days' ride away, there is no reason why we should gallop away. We can not get to them soon enough."

"I agree." Mariel said. "As much as I would like to stop them, we must spare the horses. We'd ride them to death if we are not careful."

"But they're destroying the forest!" Leona moaned.

"Listen to Mariel." Sir Jean urged, and Grimm nodded. "If we go in haste now, we will kill the horses to get there. If you want to stop them, we will. But we have to spare our strength and that of our mounts so that we will be fresh for battle."

"I guess you want to go as well, Mariel?" Grimm asked.

"I shall not betray my Goddess at the first test." she answered grimly.

"Then north we shall go." Sir Jean said, and steered Silver Spirit away from the road.

"We need a battle plan." Grimm said over dinner. "We can't tackle so many foes without a solid plan. Thamior has made this camp invisible so this is a safe haven to retreat to." He moved pieces of food around on the conjured table. "This is the camp,



and here's the road. The forest has been cleared until here. There's about three thousand goblins, orcs, humans and other stuff on the other side." he laid a knife down where the edge of the forest was.

"That will give us a nice chance, a good bottleneck, if we wait for them there." Melvin pointed out. "I could levitate above the battlefield and throw Fireballs, Icestorms and Lightning Bolts on them from above."

"You'd be horribly exposed." Mariel pointed out. "And if you were to get hurt, I'd not be able to come closer to heal you."

"I can turn myself invisible." Melvin dismissed her concerns.

"But there might be one or more mages or shamans that can see through that. We've seen it before, Melvin, it's not unheard of."

"What are you thinking?" Sir Jean asked her.

"If we could hide him in plain sight, and not just with invisibility..." Mariel pondered. "I can control the weather, to some extent. He would be hard to see in dense fog, for example. Just to be safe."

"Good. And it will hide our numbers." Grimm said. "So you do that, right at the beginning. As the goblins start to pile up here;" he pointed at the bottleneck; "you and Melvin can do some damage. I remember that fire you rained from the sky in Ironforge, what was that called again? And Melvin has some nifty Lightning. Leona?"

"Hm. I can summon the forces of nature to help us. Some animals, perhaps. And I could obstruct the escape routes by helping nature grow some nasty brambles there. Very handy if they try to flank us." Leona said.

"I shall need a new lance, Grimm, could you help me make one before tomorrow?" Sir Jean asked, and Grimm nodded.

"It would also be a good idea if I took a look at your weapons and armour, just in case it needs mending." Grimm said.

In the early light of dawn, Mariel stepped outside. The air was still cool, though later that day it would get very warm in the sun, if the weather was like the day before. The last weeks of summer passed slowly in these parts. But the clinging heat would not bother them, since Mariel would cast her weather spell.

She looked at the horses for a moment. They were standing together, and Para was lying down, though she woke up when Mariel approached. She took a moment with her faithful horse, looking deep into the brown mare's eyes and sensing her mood.

Then, Mariel sat down under one of the larger oak trees that surrounded their encampment, and began to pray. The night previous, after having helped Grimm by cleaning her armour and that of Sir Jean, she had also prayed, speaking to her Goddess about the creatures that were destroying Her woods, and that they would try and stop them, and asked Her if She could cup Her hands around them and protect them whilst they fought. Now she would ask Ehlonna to grant her those particular spells they needed. The fresh dawn light flowed through Mariel along with the power Ehlonna granted her.

Armour jingling, Silver Spirit side-stepped as Sir Jean mounted. He was nervous and alert, a true war-horse ready for a good fight. Para was also armoured, and Mariel sat on her back comfortably. Leona had mounted her tiger, something Mariel found strange. Surely the tiger would fight better without Leona on her back, and Leona would be more safe if she stayed with Grimm and cast her spells from there. But she would not ask Leona about it now. The half-elf had been welcomed by Grimm as an old friend, but Mariel knew just how safe friends were, the life-time friend of Sir Jean having been corrupted only recently, leading to Lorian's death in the end.

They took up positions on the road. Leona next to Sir Jean, then Grimm and Mariel. Melvin, opposite them, winked, saluted with two fingers to his forehead, cast a spell and disappeared. Mariel had already cast another handy spell on him which allowed him to walk on air, so he was more mobile. She had done a round when they were still in the camp, casting spells left and right so she could keep an eye on their health while they moved through the fight, enhancing their armour, or their strength. She had cast Eagle's Splendour on Sir Jean, which made him glow from within and allowed him to cast more healing spells if necessary.

They waited a few moments so Melvin could lift himself above the treetops, and then Mariel raised her hands to the sky, sitting Para in perfect quiet. Para flicked her ears as Mariel moved, but now knew all too well what was expected of her.

Clouds began to form above. The blue sky had some high clouds drifting here and there, but thanks to Mariel's spell they became larger and changed to an almost inky black. The first drops fell, and then the rain came in earnest. It was one of those rains that was very heavy but would not last long in normal weather. But because this was a spell, it would go on for hours on end, obscuring the view, transforming the forest floor to mud, and nothing would stay dry.

"Rain." Grimm commented, through the 'plink plink plink' the rain made on his armour. There was no enthusiasm in his voice.

"Thanks, Mariel."

The goblins cheered their war cry as they saw them, Sir Jean raised his lance, and with Mariel at his side, they charged forward towards their foes.

One, two, three goblins keeled over from the cuts Mariel inflicted on them, and she could feel that Para had kicked another and she saw her horse run down another, trampling it as they charged through the mass. The throng of bodies was none too thick yet, and the horses could still run unobstructed. If they would go too far, they would be swamped by the goblins though, so after a few moments, they turned their horses around again and charged back through the throng. To their right, an Ice Storm raged as Melvin started to cast. Then they turned and behind them Lightning struck. It branched out from the first victim, snaking through a dozen goblins and leaving only the dead, scarred and smouldering, in its wake.

Sir Jean and Mariel returned and took their places on either side of Grimm. He was scowling, the water running through his beard even underneath his helmet. The rain did not improve his mood.

Ahead of them, the goblins were suddenly less eager to advance. There was a slight panic around the area where Melvin had

struck. Then there was a frantic whistling, a signal of some sort. Goblins tried to force their way to the back, while trying very hard to keep an eye on the group that was blocking their way. Their main problem was that behind them were a few hundred goblins in the second row and beyond that were trying to push them forward.

Leona muttered under her breath, making a gesture. To the right of her, a rhinoceros appeared.

Ahead, the goblins were jumping up and down, some tearing at the tufts of hair coming from underneath their helmets, others whistling frantically, their free hand at their mouth but afraid to turn their back. The push and heave of bodies was a terrible sight to behold. The back ranks pushed forward, but the front ranks tried to stay where they were or push back. Larger shapes of orcs loomed behind the first ranks, and then there was a sudden silence.

Mariel had pulled her holy symbol free from underneath her armour, and raised it imploringly to the sky. Some of the goblins who saw her move, ceased their jumping and whistling, staring in horror at Mariel, afraid to even contemplate what would befall them now.

It rained fire from the sky, the Flame Strike that Mariel had cast killing many goblins that were packed tight together in the bottleneck. To the goblin's further horror, another Ice Storm smote and froze many goblins on the other side.

They shoved the orcs forward, the whimpering goblins trying to hide behind the bulk. Leona summoned three more rhinos, and Sir Jean hefted his lance once again. He charged forward, flanked by two rhinos on each side, Mariel on the right side of the line, Leona on Flow on the left side. Some of the braver goblins had tried to attack Grimm, but had died almost instantly.

Sir Jean, Mariel and the rhinos charged into the heart of the orcs that were bounding along, readying their axes and clubs to kill them. Sir Jean charged around one orc, a huge brute clad in black armour, sporting a club that was as big as Sir Jean himself. This brute charged onward towards Grimm. Sir Jean impaled four orcs on his lance in a perfect attack and then dropped the lance that would now be useless in the fight. He drew his flail, and continued, Silver Spirit trampling and kicking as a good warhorse should. The rhinos killed several orcs, and Mariel decapitated two more, hurt a third one, and felt Para shoving and kicking at the orcs as well.

One of the orcs she had cut raised his club, and smashed it into her side. It hurt, it hurt so much. Then she felt another stab of pain in her body. She had insisted Sir Jean should wear his ring of Friend Shield, that would protect him somewhat from the harm the orcs and goblins would do. In return, she would take some of his pain. Whenever Sir Jean would get hit, stabbed or struck, she would take some of the hurt, some of the wounds, and some of the pain. Mariel gasped. She swayed in the saddle for a moment but she recovered and turned Para around. If she stayed she would be attacked again, and she would probably not be able to survive. Even so, if Sir Jean were to be pulled from his horse, they would both die. In fights as these, the chance that they would be swarmed by the goblins, pulled from their horses and torn to shreds was quite big.

When Para had turned around, she noticed something else. The orc they had passed by so that Grimm could take care of it, now stood in front of the dwarf. From this distance, Grimm looked small in the grey rain, especially because he faced that brute that carried the huge club. From the corner of her eye, she saw that Leona had turned around as well, blood coming from the flanks of her tiger, though it didn't look like Flow was hurt very badly.

When she gave Para free rein to run back, the orc swept his club under Grimm, taking his feet out from underneath him. With a clang, Grimm landed on his back, the wind blown from his lungs and mud splattering everywhere. Para had sped up to a gallop, and from the corner of her eye, she saw that Leona and Flow were following close behind her.

Mariel muttered a healing spell under her breath. If Sir Jean was hit again - and she suspected he did not turn around but charged on - she would need to stay conscious. Slowly, the wounds knitted closed, a tingling sensation at the best of times, and none too comfortable while riding a horse at full gallop.

She would need only a few more moments to get to Grimm, there were no more foes but that orc between her and him, but the orc had raised his club over his head and it plunged down to the breastplate of the helpless dwarf beneath.

From the sky above, another chain of lightning came, striking first into the orc, and then onwards through the other orcs that had pursued Mariel and Leona.

Most of the bolt seemed to writhe on the orc's armour, burning him but not thoroughly wounding him as Melvin had hoped.

That was when Mariel arrived. It was a tough choice: to attack the orc, or to heal Grimm. She could see Grimm was unconscious, and another attack would surely kill him. In the past she had prided herself that none of her friends had ever been killed, but now she faced an impossible decision. She judged the orc and his wounds. He looked beat up, but not so bad that she could kill the brute all in one go. And if she were to attack him, he would probably turn around to attack her in turn. If he could almost kill Grimm in so short a time, she would surely not survive an attack. It would only buy them seconds, but not enough for Sir Jean to reach them.

She only had a split second to decide, and she did. She let go of the reins, and clasped the saddle with her left hand, sliding almost down and reaching down behind the orc to touch Grimm's foot. It was hard, her muscles strained, but she felt the healing take hold, knitting the broken ribs and repairing some of the damage. It was not enough, not nearly enough, she knew.

Leona jumped off her tiger, careless of the orc, and rushed towards Grimm. Behind them, Sir Jean was swarmed by dozens of orcs; Silver Spirit whinnied and side-stepped, trampling a last orc before he too was covered. Far above, Melvin tried to cast one last Fireball, but could not discern where Sir Jean started and the orcs stopped.

Suddenly, silence pressed on their eardrums, and a shockwave spiraled outwards. There was a flash of bright white light. It seemed to go on forever, and standing in the white light, Mariel heard a woman's voice. It was a sweet voice, like the tickle of water over rocks, the sigh of a leaf falling from a tree, light like the growing of moss.



"Mariel, my brave crusader;" the woman spoke "I am proud of you, you have My approval. This is My gift to you, for your suffering and hard work."

There was a vision of the forest floor littered with demolished trees, young trees were now growing, plants were sprouting between the fallen trunks. The white light passed in a flash of silence.

Mariel passed out.

In the center of the shockwave stood a shape. Around it were the bodies of orcs and goblins that had been flung away and died or disintegrated in mid-air. The shockwave had killed the rest, rank upon rank, for a hundred feet. The remainder of the goblins, humans, and orcs, were running for their lives, away from the green forest, back to where they came from. In the mud were puddles where feet had left a trace. In larger puddles lay the dead foes, completely splattered with mud and blood. Not a single armour was clean. It was a terrible view, rank upon rank of dead.

And in the middle of it all, Sir Jean.

He was almost naked, his armour and clothes had vanished, and he was wearing only a white loincloth. Above his shoulders rose two enormous wings, 12 feet across at least. The rain pearled on the feathers. The breeze ruffled them slightly, drops rolling off.

Sir Jean surveyed the battlefield. The dead orcs did not seem to move him, but the sight of his companions did. Leona had been trying to get Grimm away from the orc but was knocked over by the blast. Grimm was still unconscious, and Mariel lay on her back, her hair escaping from underneath her helmet. The orc was dead, killed by Grimm in the lasting flash of light, the orc's body taken away by the retreating goblins.

Sir Jean knelt down next to Mariel and took off her helmet. She was beautiful despite the dried drops of blood, despite the mud caking her hair. She looked very peaceful, even though her injuries must have been uncomfortable.

With a soft touch, he stroked her pointed ear. Mariel slowly came to, and the first thing she saw through the murky rain was a pair of wings. She sighed and blinked, looking up at the shape above her. It was not what she had thought it to be. Instead, it was Sir Jean, looking quite worried, and frowning over her injuries. In a flash, Mariel clung her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately, glad that he was there with her. Slowly she realized they were still alive, and that Sir Jean took her arms from his neck.

"What about Grimm?" he asked her softly.

Without another word, Mariel turned around, and ran to Grimm, stumbling to get up, and then falling heavily on her knees at his side. She checked his wounds, winced, and groped in her pouch for the beautifully carved rod she had received in Ironforge, a wand of healing that could cure serious wounds.

A soft voice behind her. "Mariel, let me." Sir Jean said, and knelt next to her. Sir Jean focused, and the wounds on and in Grimm's body healed, ribs that were broken were now mended.

Mariel called Para over, and with Leona lifted Grimm, who was still not able to move, though he was conscious now, onto the horse.

When Sir Jean fell behind, Mariel turned around, motioning to Leona that they should go on to the shelter. She turned back to Sir Jean.

"Jean?" she asked him, and looked him into his eyes. They were glowing golden in his pale face. Sir Jean looked back at her serenely. He still didn't realize what was wrong, though he had stopped walking forward. His wings were stretched wide behind him, though he did not seem to realize this. They were stuck behind a pair of trees, and because he seemed to be floating a few centimeters above the soil, he was walking in the air, but didn't realise he wasn't moving.

Mariel softly took his arm, and lifted it to his face, pointing the skin out to him. No armour, no clothes, just pale skin, also with a gold sheen to it. Sir Jean looked, finally realising what was missing.

"Look at your feet." Mariel said softly. Sir Jean obliged, not seeing what was wrong. Mariel moved her right foot in the empty space that was underneath his feet. He was standing on thin air. Only then did Sir Jean notice the wings for the first time. Surprise dawned on his face, and suddenly both his feet were back in the mud.

Then, he sank to his knees and started to pray to his God. "What happened to me?" he asked Heironeous aloud.

Mariel stood by him, and, unseen to her, Melvin also stayed close by them. He was still invisible and had decided to keep an eye out for them, though the enemy was retreating and was building an encampment half a mile away.

Above them, the clouds opened, and a ray of sunlight shone on Sir Jean, his blond hair shining gold with the light.

Mariel looked up and saw another winged shape descending towards them. Her eyes started to water, and she looked back at Sir Jean. She recognized a solar angel, and sank down to one knee in front of him, showing her respect. Only the Gods themselves stood above these angels, and for Heironeous to send a solar angel to Sir Jean was a great honour.

Sir Jean looked up, and the angel spoke to him in a strange tongue. Then Sir Jean answered in the same language. Their conversation lasted a few minutes, and finally Sir Jean bowed his head. The angel laid a hand on him, and looked once more at Mariel. Then he put his hand on her as well, and a warm feeling like a blessing spread through her, and the angel took flight again, flying to the sunny spot in between the clouds and vanishing from view.

Sir Jean got up, and Mariel also, and together they walked back to the camp. Leona had prepared a bed for Grimm, but she was not strong enough to lift him off Para herself. Mariel assisted her, and they put Grimm to bed. Mariel frowned at his armour. It looked like it had been broken and then mended again, but at least they could take it off now. Mariel instructed Leona to get some water and a clean cloth, and cut Grimm's shirt off. Underneath, his chest was a mass of bruises and blood, but though he

was still black and blue, it was fading fast. There was something strange though, something like a fresh tattoo on his chest. And there was something else. When they took off his helmet, the feather tattoo that had been on his forehead was missing, it had vanished without a trace.

When they took the water and cloth and tried to wash the blood from his chest, Grimm cried out in pain, a hoarse bellow echoing from the walls. Scared, they took the cloth away again.

"Does it hurt so much?" Mariel asked Grimm, puzzled.

"Yes." he replied through clenched teeth. "Let it be. Don't touch it!"

"How do you feel?" Mariel asked him, laying her hands on his now unpainted forehead and checked him for injuries like she often did. Though the fiery red marks on his chest were a testament to the contrary, her intuition told her that Grimm was as healthy as ever, though his muscles would ache from the strain for a few more days.

"Like someone turned my ribcage inside out." Grimm said. "Can't move. Muscles hurt."

"You nearly died." Mariel said. "And though you are healed, your muscles still remember the hurt. It will take a few days. There's nothing I can help you with. And what is that tattoo on your chest? It looks familiar."

"I've no tattoo on my chest." Grimm said gruffly.

"I've seen it too." Leona said. "At the Chief's house. Two axes, crossed."

Grimm didn't speak for a few moments. Then he turned to Mariel. "I need to talk with Leona alone for a little while."

Mariel took the dirty water and went outside. She threw it away and felt arms closing around her waist. Sir Jean took her gently in his arms, flapped his wings, and took off.

Mariel swallowed. This was certainly a first. Luckily she wasn't afraid of heights, and had climbed many trees.

Sir Jean handed her a rope he had been holding in his hand. "Tie this around your waist." he said, and flew on, towards the enemy camp half a mile away. In the distance, Mariel could see some activity, Magic Missiles appearing from thin air. They hit a person she could not see - Magic Missiles never missed - and more missiles appeared.

Sir Jean suddenly dived, folding his wings neatly beside his body, plummeting to the ground. Mariel's stomach protested at the abuse, but she managed to keep her breakfast inside. They landed next to a corpse, the huge orc with the black armour lay in a ring of humans, orcs and goblins, who dispersed somewhat when they saw the winged creature descend at such speed. Sir Jean nudged Mariel.

"Flame Strike." he urged her. Not quite an order, just a suggestion.

Mariel took out her holy symbol again, raising it to the sky, and again the divine fire rained down. The goblins and orcs that were closing in on them, glad with such an easy prey, looked up to the sky in horror. Their faces turned ashen, as the fire seared their flesh and they died a horrible death.

Sir Jean picked up the corpse of the orc that had almost killed Grimm, and Mariel dug in a pouch for a scroll. In seconds, she had it.

An unfortunate human that was closest to her, unhurt by the Flame Strike, suddenly felt a hand on the side of his face. Mariel read from the scroll, her hands burning the human as the Inflict Serious Wounds spell that was written on the scroll cast through her.

...her counterpart's eyes blazing into hers, burning hatred and burning hands, Mariel's body writhing, thrashing, trying to move away from that burning feeling, and never managing to shake them loose...

With a shock, Mariel returned to the real world. She had not had a flashback to her vision in months, and this one was very vivid. She did not have much time to think about it. With a jolt, the rope that tied her to Sir Jean drew her into the air as he took off. They rose above the treetops and left the howls of pain and fury behind them.

Melvin had returned to their camp. It had been him, still invisible, fighting with a couple of other mages in the air above the battlefield. Melvin had found out that he could teleport only moments earlier, when he desperately wished to be back on the road as he saw a Fireball whizzing in his direction.

"Melvin, I need you to go to Ironforge." Grimm had said when Melvin came to check up on him.

Melvin nodded, and suddenly realized that he no longer was in the encampment, but standing in a kitchen. It looked like an underground kitchen, and it looked familiar.

He focused hard again, and was back at the bedside, a scowling Grimm looking for him.

"Okay." Melvin said. "Now what?"

"Smartass." Grimm mumbled. "I'll make a list of things we'll need, here's a letter to the Chief, take that along too."

Sir Jean untied the rope from his waist when he landed in the encampment again, folded his wings and marched into the house, still carrying the orc. His transformation had saved them, and now he would offer Grimm the chance to let off some steam. Mariel stayed outside. She untied and recoiled the rope, and then began to search in her pack. She planted the acorns and pinecones she had gathered around the clearing, staying away from the larger trees so the seeds had a chance to sprout, and carried water from the numerous puddles to the patches. Then, satisfied at a job well done, she took off her armour, piling it under a large oak tree, nimbly climbed to the highest branches, and started to pray to her Goddess.

A day and a night passed without Mariel realising it, still deep in her prayers in the treetops. When she finished praying she carefully clambered down again. There were a few hundred dwarves setting up camp around them, and she saw Grimm with



what were probably the officers. They walked over to him.

"What's all this?" she asked.

"Ah, Mariel. Seeing how I have to leave for Ironforge right away, I arranged for backup, five hundred of the best fighters the Chief could send, to finish up what I leave undone here." Grimm replied.

"To Ironforge? Why are you going to Ironforge?" Mariel asked him.

"I have stuff to take care of there. I will explain later."

Grimm winked at her, and turned to the rest of their friends, who had also come down to say goodbye to Grimm. Leona and Flow sided with Grimm, ready to leave with him.

"Be safe." Mariel said. She could still not make heads or tails of it, but Melvin and Sir Jean seemed to accept the fact that Grimm was leaving.

Grimm winked, saluted at them, and stepped into a circle with Leona and Flow, and they teleported away.

Sir Jean took out a bit of parchment. He unrolled it, and showed it to them. There was a family tree on it, and many markings in dwarvish Mariel could not read.

"Grimm left me in charge." Sir Jean pointed out at the top of the pyramid. He pointed at four names beneath him next. "And this is you, Melvin, and you, Mariel. Each of you will head a contingent of dwarves. They are divided into groups: healers, defensive, and offensive. Mariel will obviously be in charge of the healers. Melvin has a few mages and a defensive contingent under him. You can talk about strategy with your seconds."

Sir Jean nodded at two dwarves close by, and they plodded over to introduce themselves.

After they had discussed strategy, Mariel walked over to her horse. Para was standing forlornly next to Beefsteak and Zack, and she looked unhappy.

Mariel took one of the horses' saddleblankets, and spread it on the forest floor. The ground was still very muddy, but the patches of moss had soaked up much of the water, and the blanket would keep her dry enough. Para came, at a nudge from Mariel, to lie with her, and Sir Jean sat on the other side, putting his arm around her shoulders. She was still wearing her prayer-robe, and Sir Jean was, oddly enough, still without his armour as well.

Mariel sighed, and leaned into Sir Jean.

"Is everything alright?" Sir Jean asked.

Mariel put her free hand to her forehead, enjoying the coolness it provided. "Yes. Yes it is." She smiled, putting her hand back on Para's side. "Ehlonna has told me she is glad to have me as her divine crusader."

Despite her smile, there was a touch of age to her. There were small lines around her eyes, a hint of a frown in her features.

"What is wrong?" Sir Jean asked softly.

"There is just so much to think about, Jean. Grimm almost dying, and now he's leaving for something. The upcoming battle, and tactics and strategies. I have to think about what spells to use, and then there's so many other things." She sighed again.

"Your transformation, my transformation, where Thamior has gone to and what is going to happen." She paused. "It's so much."

Sir Jean pulled her closer, planting a soft kiss on her forehead. In his embrace, her worries melted away. There was nothing that was too important to wait, even the strategy of the battle could wait. All that was important now was the two of them.

After a while, Mariel noticed a tear on Sir Jean's face.

"What is wrong?"

"I miss Silver Spirit." Sir Jean said sadly.

"Where did he go to?" Mariel asked. "I haven't seen him since that battle."

"I suspect he has gone back to where he came from." Sir Jean answered.

Mariel pondered this for a moment. It was puzzling. Silver Spirit would never leave Sir Jean like this, not without a very good reason anyway. "You mean to Ironforge?"

Sir Jean looked at her for a moment before carefully saying: "Mariel, you do realize Silver Spirit is not just any horse?"

The puzzle seemed so simple now that she took into account that there were very special mounts. Somehow, Mariel had never thought of Silver Spirit as a creature from another plane of existence, though now she pondered it, it seemed silly that she had not thought of it before. All the signs were there, and she smiled at Sir Jean. "I am sure he will come to you when you need him." she said. Tactics and strategy were not her strong points, but when it came to the spiritual side of things, she knew exactly what to do. She sat up, and placed her hand on Jean's face, laughing gaily at him. "If I am right, he probably went through the same transformation you did."

"How can you be so sure?" Sir Jean asked. He had never looked so alone and small. He had always been confident and sure; he had always had Silver Spirit with him, and he had always known he could trust in his mount.

Mariel looked at Sir Jean. Her face was now radiant with joy, her troubles momentarily forgotten. "How can you not be?" she returned a question. "Look at you. Do you really think that Heironeous would reward you in this way if you had done something wrong? Yes Jean, I think that you have been rewarded. And you had the chance to ask your questions. The One you asked, you can always talk to. The other was the one He sent you, to give you the answers."

Sir Jean slowly nodded. He thought for a moment, and sighed. There was a bright light, not unlike the light that flashed when Sir Jean transformed from a mere human to his new form, and Silver Spirit returned to Sir Jean, greeting him and Para and Mariel in one perfectly happy moment.

The next morning was the day of the battle. Mariel had been surprised to find the Chief there, who returned her formal greeting with a clap on her shoulder like he used to do in Ironforge. Melvin had asked the Chief why he had come, and the answer was worthy of a dwarf. "I can't have my best dwarves fighting without joining in the fun!"

Before her prayers, Melvin had tried to convince Mariel that a heavy rain, and wind from their backs would be the best weather conditions for the fight.

"Melvin, you might not mind the rain, but look at Grimm. Now we would have five hundred chagrined dwarves in stead of just the one. Besides, the wounded would have to retreat against wind and rain as well. It's not worth it."

Mariel had also approached Para. It was the first time she would ride her horse into a battle they could have avoided, or planned differently. She would not force Para, however close they had become, into a battle she did not want to fight. It would be only fair to ask. But Para stood in perfect quiet and was not distraught at the prospect at all. She seemed confident, and when Mariel was putting the armour on her trusted horse, she nudged Para playfully. "You got your man back, eh?"

The rows and rows of dwarves stood ready for the battle. Sir Jean stood in the center, mounted on Silver Spirit and wearing borrowed armour that creaked slightly. To his left was the Chief, to his right Mariel, the only other person on horseback. Thamior, who had returned during the night, winked at them, and disappeared, closely followed by Melvin. Sir Jean shouted a command in Dwarvish, which Mariel could understand thanks to one of her spells. The line started to move forward.

The enemy had constructed a camp from the fallen trees. They had had several days to mount defenses, knowing full well that after the initial skirmish the battle would continue. Perhaps they had not anticipated to be up against half a thousand dwarves, but in the rain and with all the confusion they would have had little idea what had hit them in the first place. Their camp was surrounded by a rough wall of trunks that had been set into the earth. The gate could actually open and shut, and it looked sturdy enough so the Chief had ordered a battering ram be constructed. In strategic places there were plateaus, so that archers and sorcerers could peek over the impromptu wall and take potshots at whoever was approaching. Between the dwarves and the camp, three groups had gathered. In front of the gate was a mass of pikemen, hidden behind huge shields that were planted in the ground, and would keep the attackers off them for a long time. To either side of them were groups of goblin, orc and human skirmishers carrying shields and axes or swords, mostly armoured in hides or leather.

The healers split off the marching line and set up camp a good bit away from the would-be battlefield, out of range from sorcerer or archer. Mariel had seen the preparations of her second-in-command and had acknowledged that he knew very well what was expected of him. Thanks to Melvin's ideas, she would only be needed to transport the wounded when the sorcerers and wizards ran out of the Floating Disc spell. Until that time, she would be keeping an eye on Sir Jean. He had shown her that he was wearing the ring of Friend Shield again, and explained that he would need it. Though he had several new benefits after his transformation, he had lost some of his constitution and would be knocked out if he wasn't careful.

"I'll try and slow those pikemen." Melvin announced from her right. He was invisible too now.

"No, Melvin, let me." Mariel said, raising her eyes and one hand to the sky. "I'll thin their ranks a bit."

The clouds above them churned, and from the heavens above the pikemen, a column of fire roared down. The air was thick with the sound of rushing fire, and when that died away there was a lot of whimpering from the wounded. About a third of the pikemen had died in that one Flame Strike, and a lot of them were wounded badly.

Row upon row of dwarves marched forward, Mariel, Sir Jean and the Chief in the middle, but only Mariel and Sir Jean on their mounts, clearly visible in their gleaming platemail. And again, she raised her eyes to the skies, softly chanting an incantation and a prayer to her Goddess. Again, the skies opened and heavenly fire roared down on the pikemen. Melvin threw a last Fireball into their midst though most of them had died by now. Their shields, still planted in the earth, paid homage to their memories, but they would be no obstruction.

The battle started. It was a typical battle, as battles go. Goblins, humans, orcs and dwarves fought furiously. Mariel cast spells from the scrolls the Chief had given her, the parchment crumbling as the spells were released. She summoned creatures to their side to help in the battle. An elephant appeared, and then Sir Jean summoned another. Three giant eagles, and bears as well. She sent them to help the dwarves where their resolve was threatened. The elephants she sent ahead, into the camp, so they could wreak havoc and throw the enemy off guard.

Mariel turned Para, looked at the camp of the healers, the mages busy towing the wounded there on their Floating Discs. When she turned hastily back, she saw the flanks surging forward to meet the orcs that had taken up defensive positions outside the camp. The clang of metal on metal and the cries of pain were thick in the air. She could hear the noise of the battle, voices and screams alike. And she could understand what they said.

A moment stretched out, becoming an eternity, in which all she could hear were the wailings of the orcs, the goblins who muttered curses, the cries of pain from the dwarves, hear the despair in the voices of the wounded.

The right flank was failing.

Time came rushing back, and she and Sir Jean charged forward, oblivious to the fact that the gate was opened, and what was going on inside. They charged into the milling throng, and turned back. Mariel turned towards where the right flank had been falling back in a carefully guarded retreat. She urged Para onward, attacking the mass of orcs from behind. It earned the dwarves some respite, and they rallied. The orcs in turn were now driven back. Mariel raised her sword high, like she did back in Ironforge on the practicefield. "Hold your ground!" she shouted encouragement.

The dwarves rallied magnificently, encouraged by her support. The orcs that were still alive turned and ran, some struck down from behind by the aggressive dwarves. The flank was theirs again, but it had taken a heavy toll. Over forty percent of the



dwarves that had been in the right flank were wounded or dead.

Mariel rode to the center of the throng of dwarves. "Catch your breath for a moment. Grab a shield if you lost yours." She closed her eyes for a moment, and concentrated on the dwarves around her. Her healing had changed over the years. She always needed to touch a person if she wanted to check his injuries, and the best healing was done like that as well. But for the battlefield she had found a new way of healing. She used it that day; centered on her and radiating outwards, a warm pulse spread through the dwarves around her. Though her eyes were closed she could see their bodies behind her eyes, like blue shapes of light, the angry red wounds knitting closed and disappearing.

The moment passed, and her eyes snapped open again. The dwarves were ready to go again, encouraged by her healing. A group of dwarves that had just returned from the healer's camp had joined them, and Sir Jean came riding up as well.

"Mariel, can you still call the divine fire from the sky?" Sir Jean asked her.

"Only once more." Mariel said. "But it will be very hot."

"Alright. Can you do that for me? Take Silver Spirit, and when he stops, call the divine fire right in front of you?"

"I will if he lets me ride him." Mariel said, dismounting and patting her own horse.

"He will." Sir Jean said, and helped her up onto his mount. Silver Spirit unfolded his wings, only slightly hampered by his armour, and looked at Sir Jean, waiting only for a barely perceptible nod before rising up into the air.

Silver Spirit flew over the camp, and at one point he stopped moving forward. His wings were still beating, but he was hovering above a set of tents, presumably waiting for her to cast her spell. She readied herself and cast her last Flame Strike, the most intense one she had prayed for just as the rays of the sun touched her brow that morning. Her domain was the sun, and this divine fire seemed to come straight from the sun.

But it was not just the one beam she had expected. To her left blossomed three more columns of the divine fire, and to her right as well. There was another right behind her and of course the original one she had cast in front of her. For a moment, she was startled. Then, when the amazement passed, she felt her power pass away with it as well, and a great weariness settled in her limbs. Though she was certain she had only cast one spell, and that her power did not really leave her, it upset her for a moment.

When the moment passed, she noticed she was slipping. It was too late to grab a hold of Silver Spirit's armour or bridle now, and though she made a grab at the stirrup, she missed, and tumbled down.

Sir Jean made a dive. He had unfolded his wings as well, and when he saw Mariel slip from Silver Spirit he moved in to catch her. But his hands grasped only air when he missed her by inches. There was a tug at his leg though; Mariel had managed to clasp her hands onto his shoe, trying very hard not to fall the last 12 meters down to the earth.

She was slipping.

Silver Spirit hovered under her now, and Mariel decided to let go. If she was lucky, she'd land on Silver Spirit now that she could still try to aim. If she clung to Sir Jean's shoe and it fell, eventually, she could not even try to aim, and would probably plunge to her death. And every second they hung suspended and helpless in the air above the camp they would risk being shot down by a Fireball - or worse - from the remaining spellcasters Melvin and Thamior had not yet killed.

As luck would have it, she managed to land on Silver Spirit. She put her feet into the stirrups and tried to give her bruised nether parts some respite, but fell painfully back in the saddle when Silver Spirit took her to a safe place. She dismounted, and took out her smallest wand of healing and cast one of the spells on herself.

She returned to the dwarves and mounted Para again. Sir Jean came to check on them, and they charged one last time into the fray. The dwarves followed them, ready to fight anew, their courage and lust for battle unwavering. Mariel slashed left and right, striking orc and goblin and human alike until there were no more in front of her and she had to turn around. The remainder of their enemy was preparing to run, some already clambering over the now torn and battered pallsade.

"They're trying to run, GET THEM!" she yelled at the dwarves, fuelling their lust for battle even more.

Sir Jean screamed a warning, and an uncomfortable wave washed over her, leaving her disoriented in its wake. When she looked back at Sir Jean, he held up a halfling that was speared onto his sword. "This was your fearsome leader!" he bellowed in many tongues, including Elvish and Orcish.

If the enemy was retreating before, they were running now. Goblins tried to clamber over the lumbering orcs in an effort to get away.

Melvin stopped them. In front of the orcs, a Wall of Stone appeared out of thin air, conjured by Melvin. He curved a Wall of Air around the group, and put a Wall of Fire in the enclosed space with the creatures, so that those that were still panicking would burn themselves.

Mariel, at Sir Jean's nudge, mounted Silver Spirit again, and they both went into the enclosed space from the open top. The creatures were torn apart by the viscous blows of the two swords, blood and entrails running down the walls. The sickly scent of burnt flesh and hair wavered in the air.

When it was over, Mariel dug her heels into Silver Spirit, and he flew up and out of the confined space. They landed under one of the trees. Mariel stumbled down from the horse's back, and fell to her knees. She vomited noisily into the grass. She got up again, still retching, and willed her body into compliance. Slowly she sank down beneath the tree, her back to the wood.

"They are all dead, my Goddess, and Your woods are safe once more;" she prayed. "I shall help the forest here, so it can grow strong again."

When she finished, Silver Spirit was nudging her. "Alright." she said. "I'm coming."

The dwarves were leaving through another teleportation circle, presumably back to Ironforge. Sir Jean, Para, Melvin and the Chief were waiting for her there.

Focusing one last time on the young forest surrounding them, Mariel cast a spell that would protect the forest, and nodded that she was ready to go.