

Enchanting work

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At breakfast, Sir Jean was looking into his teacup dolefully, the deck of cards he had received in the mail the day previous lying next to the sugar bowl. Mariel had left early that morning, and Melvin had returned to the gates of the mansion right afterwards. Leona, who had chosen not to accompany her, was already buttering a slice of bread when Grimm entered the kitchen. From the corner of his eye he saw a card jump out from the deck at Sir Jean, turning over on the table. The jack of clubs was in front of the human. From the card a shape rose.

"Defeat the dread wraith or forever be destroyed." the deck of cards said.

Before any of them could react, the wraith struck at Sir Jean, who recoiled. Melvin reacted immediately; a small dot of light shot from his hands, but it didn't seem to touch the wraith. Leona and Grimm were tossed back, the table overturned and even Melvin went heels-over-head. He picked himself up from the floor and from between the bits of breakfast that were now wasted. Grimm was swinging his axe at the wraith, but his axe hit nothing but air. The wraith was truly a ghost, and the axe swung through its body without hurting it.

Sir Jean stood up from his chair, and his skin and eyes began to glow. It seemed to come from deep inside him, and the room was suddenly as bright as day. He held up his sword and chanted an incantation. The dread wraith was hurt, but it was still standing.

Melvin gathered his strength, and tried again at casting a Disintegrate. This time, he directed the spell at the deck of cards that was still together, though it now lay at Sir Jean's feet. The cards turned to dust, all except the jack of clubs that was still underneath the dread wraith, and the queen of hearts that jumped out of the deck at the last moment and fell at Sir Jean's feet. From the queen of hearts card a sword fell to the floor.

Sir Jean ignored it for the moment, and chanted again, casting another Turn Undead to kill off the dread wraith. It disappeared without a trace, and Sir Jean sank down on the floor, as white as a sheet.

Melvin cursed in Halfling. Leona started to pick up some of the porcelein pieces. Grimm slapped Sir Jean hard in the face.

"Grimm, what are you doing?" Leona shrieked at him.

"He's not responding." Grimm replied. "Hey, Jean, snap out of it!"

Sir Jean shook his head and took the tea Melvin offered him. He got up from the floor, and sank down on a chair, barely keeping his knees from buckling.

"What's that sword doing here?" Grimm asked Sir Jean sceptically.

"I do not know." Sir Jean said, sipping the tea. "But I think it might have something to do with that deck of cards. I don't see how else a dread wraith could get into my house."

Melvin took the sword up to his bedroom to have a better look at it at Sir Jean's request. The sword gave off a faint light, which they had hardly noticed because Sir Jean was giving off daylight himself in the kitchen. Checking the room for any other magical items that might distract him, Melvin cast a Detect Magic to see what the sword could do. He returned shortly afterward.

"Here you go, it's a magical scimitar that can decapitate an enemy in one blow. It also ignores armour. Oh, and it gives off light." Melvin said cheerfully as he returned the sword to Sir Jean.

"Thank you Melvin." Sir Jean said. "I think I shall have a turn with it in the garden so I can practice with it. I am feeling much better."

Melvin had descended into a separate storage room after breakfast. It had been built on the premises of the estate, but it was a basement next to the kitchen. It was not actually connected to the manor house as far as Melvin could see, and a set of heavy oak doors closed over the staircase that was around the corner from the patio. There was a lot of old muck in the storage cellar. Moulded bags of hay mostly, which he left in place, but also a few barrels of alcoholic beverages. One of the barrels supposedly contained 'Olde Mead' and he could see dwarvish runes on a couple of others. There was also a rack filled with wine bottles against the wall that was closest to the kitchen. An old, heavy oak table stood in the center of the room, and a thick layer of dust had gathered on top of it. Melvin took a chair from the kitchen down the stairs and set it at the table, which he cleaned with a Prestidigitation spell and a wave of his hand. He had walked to the forge to get some crossbow bolts Grimm had made for him, and took them down the stairs also. He put them on an empty shelf so he could easily reach them, and overturned a barrel of dust so it was empty and he could store the bolts he was done with. Then he took the first crossbowbolt and tried to cast a Fireball into it, trying to enchant it so the spell would go off as soon as the arrow hit a target. Very carefully now...

Sir Jean was training in the garden. He was wearing his armour and had unfolded his wings. He was proficient with his sword on foot and on horseback, but he had not trained while flying yet. His new sword was lighter than his longsword, and the soft light it gave off was strange to see move through his vision. He had taken out some straw dummies and staked them on the grass. It would take some time, but he wanted to train his flying and fighting skills that week. It would be lonely without Mariel, and training took his mind off things.

Around lunchtime Leona came outside with couple of plates and called him down. There were some thick cheese sandwiches on the plate.

"I brought you some lunch." Leona said, "Because I don't know if the others are going to come inside for lunch. I'll bring



Grimm and his friend some lunch too, they're still working very hard in the forge."

When Leona set the plate down for them, Grimm wiped his forehead with his arm. It didn't help with the grime, because he was covered in it, but it prevented the sweat from running into his eyes. He was still busy on his armour and it took a lot of energy. He wanted it to be perfect. If it wasn't master quality, it could not be enchanted, but it was going to be his perfect armour. Anything less than perfect would not do. His attention had been slacking though, and when he turned to look at the thick sandwiches he realised that starting on the shoulder pauldron now would have been a bad idea. His fingers had been trembling slightly and one slight lapse in concentration could ruin the pauldron. Lunch was a very welcome change. They could spare a five-minute break.

Melvin finished enchanting another bolt. He was very glad to have been smart enough to take precautions; the Ice Shield around him had shielded him from the fire as the bolt exploded before he was fully done. Slowly, he got the hang of it. The first bolt had smashed him into the wall as it exploded and he was bruised from shoulder to knee. By the fourth bolt, they didn't explode anymore and the spell held. Carefully, he picked the arrow up from the table. "That went well." he said to himself. Then he rocked the arrow from side to side.

When he had picked himself up from the floor again after the explosion, he decided it was time for a break. Besides, he would soon need new bolts.

Dinnertime came and Melvin cooked them all a meal. Melvin was still bruised, Grimm was still covered in grime as badly as his dwarf friend, and Leona's hair was still dripping from her swim in one of the ponds of the estate. Just before dinner was done, Sir Jean stepped into the house, closing the door behind him. He looked weary and he sank down on a chair at the table. He paused a moment, and then pulled his shirt over his head and let it fall to the floor. Grimm was also bare-chested and found himself comparing his muscles to Sir Jean's. After Sir Jean's transformation the man had become larger and more muscular. Grimm fumbled with the buckle of his belt, and finally managed to unbuckle it. The belt was magical too, granting him more strength. Now that it was loose, the strength was gone from him and his muscles became slightly smaller. Grimm compared the muscles on his hairy chest to Sir Jean's muscles, and was pleased to see that he was still -though marginally- more muscled than the paladin.

Sir Jean did not eat very much, less than usual, and after dinner he and Leona went for a walk in the garden while Grimm dove into the bathtub to clean himself up a bit. Leona had half-promised to be very sweet to him if he had soaked in a hot tub for half an hour.

"Grimm told me that you were the one that brought me back from Ank'mar that morning." Leona said. "If it was you, I wanted to thank you for bringing me back. It wasn't wise of me to leave. I see that now." Leona said.

"It was me, and I brought you back because Grimm asked me to." Sir Jean said. He was looking at the budding crocuses. Spring was coming. "I will not do it again even if he were to ask me. I hope that you will stay with us for a little while longer." He was looking at her now, his blue eyes glowing golden.

"I feel safe here."

"If there is anything you need to know, please come and have a talk with me." Sir Jean said. "We are all in this together."

Leona joined Grimm in the bathroom shortly afterward and sank down on a stool next to the tub. It held a few towels, which she put on the floor instead.

"Sir Jean can see if I am pregnant." she said to Grimm; "although he can't say for sure yet."

"We have talked about this before, right? Since when do I change my mind once I've made it up? I already said that I would like to know if you are pregnant. The choice is still yours." Grimm replied. "But we can go down to talk to him. Let me just dry off here."

Leona helped him a bit, wrapping a towel around his legs and drying each in turn. Grimm put on a bathrobe, and followed Leona down the stairs.

They found Sir Jean outside, walking in the garden. When Grimm called out to him, he came up to them.

"What is it?" Sir Jean asked.

Grimm explained. "Leona wants to know if she's pregnant."

"Alright." Sir Jean said. "Please lie down on the table."

Leona clambered onto the patio table and took Grimm's hand. The wood of the table was cold and though she still wore her druid's garb, spring was only just starting and the night was cool.

"Please try to relax." Sir Jean said. He put his hand on her belly, but softly. Grimm bent over Leona and kissed her, softly stroking her hair to distract her. Sir Jean didn't move his hand, but just kept it in place, a light touch on her abdomen. He stayed there for more than ten minutes.

"I have to check one more thing." Sir Jean then said. "But I do not know if you will like it."

"Alright." Leona said, and looked at Grimm, trying very hard to relax while Sir Jean checked inside her. When he was done, he wiped his hands and said: "I am not a hundred percent sure at this stage, but I believe something grows inside you."

"Hey, thanks Sir Jean!" Grimm said cheerfully, lifting his girlfriend off the table. "That is GREAT news!"

Without waiting for a reply from either Leona or Sir Jean, Grimm walked, with Leona in his arms, inside. He took care not to bump her into something, and lowered her when they got to the jacuzzi, the dwarven bath. There, he took off the bathrobe and jumped in. Leona followed his example after she took off her robes. She moved into his arms and snuggled close to him.

"What if something happens to it?" Leona asked. "What if I lose the child?"

"Can't we just be happy with what we've been given?" Grimm asked. "If I were to stop and think of all the things that can go wrong, my world would be upside down. Why would we want to think of the things that can go wrong? Let us just be happy with this blessing."

"You're right."

"We will find out soon enough if it goes right. And whether it will be a boy or a girl."

"A dwarf and a half-elf - that's going to make for an interesting combination." Leona smiled up at him over her shoulder. "Do you remember the first time I went to Ank'mar? I was sixteen years old then."

Grimm smiled too. "I remember. You left, and that was the reason I started training so hard. I didn't have anyone left to talk to. Yeah, the Chief of course, but he is a very busy dwarf. Now that I know he is my uncle, I wonder if he made me a general because I am family."

"Of course not." Leona said. "He made you a general because you were better than the others. He wouldn't have given you that title if you didn't deserve it. But I know what you mean. It was hard for me too, back then. I was afraid I'd never see you again. And now here we are, together against all odds, and with a little one on the way!"

Grimm smiled, and hugged her even tighter. "Who would have thought."

Over the next few days they all went their own ways, meeting only at mealtimes. Grimm and his blacksmith friend worked on Grimm's new armour, pausing only for meals. Leona took turns swimming, practicing her archery and enjoying herself in- and outside the bedroom with Grimm. They spent hours in the jacuzzi and enjoying each other. Sir Jean spent a lot of time outside in the garden. Most days he was practicing, but after dinner he went outside again, strolling around the flowerbeds that started budding with the coming of spring.

Melvin made a visit to the mage's tower to fill up his component bag. He tied Zack to the gate and teleported to the mage's tower and went over what components he would need to buy from one of the dwarf mages.

"If you want everything...let's see, carry the seven... two thousand five hundred gold." the mage said, looking at the pile of components piled on the table.

"Do I get a discount?" Melvin asked hopefully.

"That's including the discount." the dwarf said.

"Ah." Melvin replied, pulling open his moneybag and digging around. He put fat gold coins on the table and started counting the contents. "I've got...seven, maybe eighthundred gold right here."

The dwarf took the gold. "I trust you for the rest. Payment as soon as possible."

Melvin nodded gratefully and put the components into a pouch. He transported back to the manor as soon as the pile had been piled into the various pouches he wore on his belt and looked around for the rest. He first found Grimm and Leona, both naked. Grimm was carrying Leona up the stairs to their bedroom.

Melvin did not flinch. "Hey Grimm, I need some money. I was out shopping for components, and I need two thousand five hundred gold for the stuff I need."

"Oh, alright. Um, Sir Jean has most of our money. I'll come along."

They found Sir Jean outside. He was sweaty and practicing with his new sword.

"How much will you need?" Sir Jean asked and consulted a scrap of parchment he carried in his pouch. "There is over two hundred and seventy three thousand gold left."

Leona fainted in Grimm's arms. She had no love for gold and would not need it to survive. But she had never heard of such a large sum of money either.

"Well, I paid eight hundred gold out of my own pocket, but I needed a bit more than that."

Sir Jean rummaged around in his bag of holding and handed Melvin a pile of gold coins. "That should do. If you need anything else, you will know where to find me."

Melvin took the gold and shoved it into a pouch, throwing the paladin a mock salute with two fingers. "Okay-dokey. See you in a bit."

Grimm brought Leona to by stroking her ear.

"Grimm, that's more money than you would earn if you were a general for the Chief for fifty years!" she exclaimed. The dwarf nodded.

"True. And do you know what my new armour will be worth?"

"More than that amount Sir Jean just mentioned?" Leona ventured. Grimm nodded again, with conviction.

"Now maybe you understand how known we are to the world. People would have killed me for my old armour. And now I am building a better one. Adamantinite is extremely expensive, and the armour will be magical too. People would kill whole towns to get their hands on this armour."

"I never thought much about money." Leona said.

"Well, we've worked hard to get here. Sir Jean still works, and you've seen the estate he has. We need the money to keep training, to keep defending ourselves. New gear is costly, but without it we would be lost. So, those two thousand gold Melvin needed is money well spent. I can imagine that if you live your life like Mariel and you don't have much need of money - well, whenever you do, just ask for it."



A few days later, Melvin was busy in his storage room again. Grimm had made another batch of crossbowbolts and he was busy experimenting with them. He was pretty sure that he had the knack of enchanting the bolts. However, they were hardly stable enough to be transported in a quiver.

He was done enchanting another bolt and was pleased with the result. It had been a while since one exploded in his face, but whenever he wiggled the bolts in the air - by Mage Hand - many of them still exploded then or when they were put into the barrel.

This bolt didn't explode even when the Mage Hand shook it, and Melvin cast a Detect Magic to see if the spell was indeed on the bolt. A soft red glow around the outline of the bolt assured him that the thing was indeed magical. Melvin then took his quiver of regular crossbow bolts and shook it empty on the floor, taking care to not let his attention waver from the crossbow bolt his Mage Hand was holding. Then he let the Mage Hand put the bolt into the quiver. As soon as the thing touched the bottom of the quiver, it exploded upward towards the ceiling, the blast focused like it was blown through a chimney because of the hard leather quiver. The one Melvin made after that exploded as he shook the quiver. The one after that was stable enough that Melvin deemed it ready for a test. He approached the space where Sir Jean was practicing flying manoeuvres with his new sword.

"Hey Jean! Do you have a target you wouldn't miss if it exploded?"

Sir Jean flew to a small storage shed off the side of the forge and returned with an old and battered sheet that had a bullseye painted on it. It was attached to a tripod and tightened around a square frame. Melvin called to Grimm and Leona to join them and carefully put the bolt onto his crossbow. The slot Grimm had made onto the crossbow to accommodate the Rod of Enemy Detection was empty.

"What's up Melvin?" Grimm asked, and put an arm on Melvin's shoulder.

"Well," Melvin said; "I have a crossbow bolt that will obliterate that target if I enchanted it right, and I wanted to demonstrate it to you guys. Could you take your arm away, I can't aim like this."

"Go right ahead." Grimm said. "Good luck." His voice sounded doubtful, but he took his arm away.

Melvin aimed, and loosed the bolt. It flew straight at the center of the bullseye. As the bolt struck, the Fireball blossomed from the heart of the bullseye. But something bounced back from it, and another Fireball flew into Melvin's face.

"WOOHOO!" Grimm cheered. "What in a bucket of nails was that?!"

Melvin carefully wiped his face. "That was not exactly what I had in mind."

He took the hand Grimm proffered him and stood up. He stood gazing at the demolished bullseye - now only a black mark on the bare earth - pondering what had happened. "Hm, if I try to do the incantation a little different, it will not bounce back at me. Maybe some less force..."

Melvin turned back to the storage room and ignored his comrades. Leona was frowning and put her hands on Grimm's body, healing his injuries. She was having some trouble though, because Grimm, like Sir Jean, was laughing so hard his sides heaved. Melvin returned outside shortly afterward, now sure that he had managed to enchant the crossbow bolt to the right power. He shot it from the hip, aiming high into the sky. The bolt landed in the fields half a mile away, and again had a satisfyingly large Fireball blossoming. This time, it didn't backfire though. Sir Jean started a whole new bout of laughter, clutching his stinging side.

Now that he had the hang of it, Melvin could enchant faster, and came back shortly after with two more crossbow bolts.

"Sir Jean, do you have another old target I can demolish?"

"Sure. Can I have a try at that?" Sir Jean replied.

Melvin put one of the bolts on his crossbow. "Here you go."

"Wait." Sir Jean said. "I'll get my own crossbow and we can shoot together."

They aimed at the target together, Sir Jean counting down so they would loose the arrows at the same time. The resulting Fireballs trembled the earth. Leona was swimming in the pond again and the surface of the water rippled with the blast.

"Shall we try this with arrows for my longbow?" Sir Jean suggested, putting down three full quivers of arrows in front of Melvin.

"I can't guarantee it will work. I'm still in the experimental phase." Melvin said doubtfully.

"It worked before." Sir Jean shrugged.

It took Grimm another week to finish forging his new armour, but finally the day arrived and Melvin baked cookies so they could celebrate. The next morning, it was Melvin's turn to work on the armour. He was busy for four days to enchant the armour. As a last thought, Melvin added a Prestidigitation spell to the armour, so that it would clean itself if it got dirty. He didn't tell Grimm about it though.

"So, Jean, you're up next!" Grimm said, gesturing at the paladin with a piece of bread that was dripping beersauce.

"Indeed." Sir Jean nodded. "I shall have to take your new armour along for a little while, but I will return it when we are done."

Grimm shrugged. "I trust you with it, but bring it back in one piece please?"

"Of course." Sir Jean said.

The next morning Grimm wrapped the various pieces of the armour in lengths of silk fabric. It was already very beautiful, and he could hardly take his eyes off the adamantinite. Once everything was wrapped in silk, he packed the pieces in a box.

Sir Jean took the box out into the fields of his estate, and Grimm watched him go. Sir Jean set the box down on the grass and Grimm could hear a strange musical sound. Above the paladin, the clouds parted and a ray of sunlight illuminated him. Small

winged creatures descended and picked up the box.

Together with Sir Jean they ascended with the armour and the cloud cover returned.

Grimm felt a bit sad, but now that he could no longer work on his armour, he decided it was time to train his other skills. He had asked Melvin if there was a sort of spell that would enable him to conjure a foe out of thin air.

"I want to train my intimidating face." Grimm said. "So people attack me because I look dangerous. If I intimidate them, they leave Leona alone."

Melvin thought for a moment, tapping his index finger to his lips.

"Mmmmyes. There was something we used at the Mage Tower. I should be able to get a scroll or two to help you."

He stopped tapping his lips and wrapped his fingers around his mug of tea, and then drank the rest of the liquid. "I will return shortly with just the thing."

Melvin had returned with some scrolls and started by casting one. For five of the fat gold coins with some strange King's head on one side, Melvin had received enough scrolls of Minor Image to keep Grimm busy for two full days. And after that, the dwarf had promised, he would practice his defence with Leona, who would summon a rhinoceros. As the first sounds of a scowling and growling dwarf reached his ears, Melvin was already descending the stairs to the storage cellar. In the week before he had enchanted Grimm's new armour he had gotten the hang of enchanting the crossbow bolts and they hardly exploded in his face anymore. But during breakfast he had had an idea. If he would lay out all the components next to the arrows on the table, he would probably be able to enchant them all in a row. Getting all the components out took the most time, so if he got that bit out of the way, perhaps he could save some of his spells too. Inspired, he set to work.

Leona had been quite worried. She had not seen her parents in a while and after that visit when Grimm had thrown Jean-Pierre in the dungeons, they had disappeared. She was determined to find out what had happened to them. After the incident with her grandmother at Grimm's house, Grimm had a guard placed at the house of her parents, told him to report if there was any activity in or around the house. But so far no reports had come, and Grimm had assured her that the dwarf would have reported to him.

She took out the necklace she wore under her robes. It was the necklace her parents had given her for her birthday many years ago, but it used to belong to her mother. Although she had worn it for many years, she was sure the bond with her mother was still inside the necklace, and she used it to scry.

She saw a small stone hut on the verge of a beach. The waves broke gently on the sand, and the view changed to show her parents. Her mother was gathering some shells at the shoreline, finding the most colourful ones and holding them in the water to wash the sand out. Her father sat in a wooden chair. It leaned on two legs against the hut. He wore a look of contentment on his face and was puffing his pipe, his eyes closed.

Abruptly, the vision ceased. It was like someone had snuffed out a candle. Though her parents were content and obviously enjoying themselves, someone didn't want her to spy on them and had interfered.

After his return a few days later, Sir Jean had set up a range in the garden. A battered old target was raised and on the side of the manor three crossbows, one of them being Melvin's, were mounted on stands. Melvin squeezed the trigger of his crossbow while Sir Jean fired the other two crossbows. The arrows flew at the target, and three fireballs blossomed and obscured the target from view. When they had shot their arrows, Melvin went back down the stairs to grab the quiver of longbow arrows he had prepared for Sir Jean.

"I am not sure they are stable, but they should be safe to shoot with." Melvin said as he handed the quiver to Sir Jean. "Do you mind if I step back while you try them out?"

"No, just as long as you will hold on to this for me, just in case this does go wrong." Sir Jean replied. He handed Melvin a potion.

Melvin stepped back and Sir Jean put one of the arrows on his longbow. He drew, aimed, and loosed.

The shockwave of the arrow was so intense that Grimm, Melvin and Sir Jean were blasted off their feet. Leona had been shielded somewhat by the rhino she had summoned for Grimm to train with. Sir Jean was covered in soot from the explosion, and though he was flat on his back he was grinning widely at Melvin.

"That was awesome." Grimm said once his hearing had returned. "But Melvin, could you keep it down next time? We're trying to train here!"

Melvin and Sir Jean went to check on the blast area. As they approached the site, they saw that there was a 10 foot crater in the ground. Bits of shrubbery were smoking on the edges.

"Let's hope that was not one of Mariel's rosebushes." Melvin said drily. "I saw something strange when you shot that arrow though, like the spell backfired. I don't know if it happens with all the arrows."

"Let's find out." Sir Jean replied.

If anything, Melvin's experiments were good for honing their reflexes. Some of the arrows still exploded when rattled in the quiver. Some of the arrows landed so far away that the explosions did not even cause their ears to ring anymore.

The one incident that was forever etched in their memories was when the arrow landed so close to Sir Jean that the paladin could not laugh it off. When the smoke cleared, Sir Jean was lying on the scorched earth, bleeding heavily. Melvin poured the contents of the potion into Sir Jean's mouth and some of his wounds closed, but he was still badly injured and unconscious.



Grimm had slung Leona over his shoulder and ran towards the paladin. The half-elf knelt next to Sir Jean and cast a powerful healing spell. Sir Jean blinked, and sat up immediately, ignoring Grimm's outstretched hand. He took Melvin by his arm and dragged the halfling to the kitchen, where he made Melvin a cup of tea.

"That worked beautifully." Sir Jean said. "Granted, my aim was off, but it worked! This is what I did: I can sacrifice some of my strength into an attack, that is called Divine Might. I wanted to try that out, and it worked - but I did not shoot the arrow far enough."

"I have one arrow left," Melvin said; "but we're running out of healing potions fast. If both you and Leona are knocked out, we're going to need some serious potions."

"Mariel would try to make some in the sanctuary of Ehlonna in Margden Woods." Sir Jean said; "But I can make some tomorrow. Or I could go to the temple of Heironeous to pick some up there. Or the temple of Ehlonna."

"Or you could not do that Divine thingy." Melvin said, winking.

While Sir Jean was out to buy them some Healing potions the next day, Melvin was once again enchanting arrows in his experiment room when he made an error.

Lucky for him, Sir Jean was back already, and he had heard the explosions.

Melvin had tried to enchant nine arrows at a time, using his technique of preparing the components for each of them and using one Fireball spell to enchant all of them at once, cutting production time for each of the arrows down. However, his attention had lapsed and the arrows had started smoking. Thanks to his Ice Shield he was not dead, but he was buried beneath the rubble of what remained of the storage shelves. When Sir Jean lifted some of the rubble, Melvin crawled out and could survey the mess in the storage room. The keg of "Olde Mead" had been hit by the explosion and it was leaking the golden liquid onto the tiled floor. The oak table had been shattered, the table top splintered and scorched at the places where the arrows had been, and the legs blown out underneath it. The shelves had come crashing down from the walls and their contents of jars, dust, various dried fruits and baskets of herbs were spread out on the floor. The sacks of dried hay were smouldering slightly.

"Are you alright?" Sir Jean asked as he helped the halfling up.

"I need a good cuppa." Melvin said. "But I don't think I am up to cooking anything just now."

"Are you sure you are alright?" Sir Jean asked. He looked worried. Melvin not cooking would only happen if the halfling was dead or dying. When he checked him for injuries though, the only thing he could find were bruises. He helped Melvin to the kitchen and prepared a cup of tea for him.

After the incident, Melvin took a break for a couple of days. He was pretty sure he had the hang of the enchanting of arrows. He worked leisurely on some quivers of fireball arrows for each of them, taking his time to finish each one. There was also something else he wanted to do, and for that he had to visit the temples of Heironeous, Ehlonna and Yondalla, his own Goddess. His idea was to figure out how to do a Divine Empowerment. It was a spell that could double the effects of any divine spell cast by either Sir Jean or Mariel, and perhaps even Leona.

Sir Jean and Melvin went out early to visit the temples. Grimm and Leona would have the house to themselves that day, and would no doubt make good use of it.

The priests at all three of the temples were enthusiastic. Melvin explained his ideas to each of them, and they browsed in their library, pulling out thick books and lending them to him. Their titles were promising: "Combine the Arcane and the Divine" was Melvin's favorite. He would have started reading it as soon as they returned to the estate, but it was deep in the night before they did, and Grimm and Leona were already fast asleep.

In the following days, the finishing touches of the armour of Grimm were done. Sir Jean went out into the fields again to fetch the box back. He called Grimm, who was hopping from foot to foot in anticipation.

"Take it upstairs;" Sir Jean said; "and take your time."

Grimm carefully took the box from Sir Jean and walked to the bedroom he shared with Leona. He put the box down on the bed and removed the lid. On top of the silk fabric was a longbow. The designs on it looked elvish, and there was a note attached to it. On the note was scribbled something in elvish. Grimm took the bow and put it on the covers, and then carefully removed the sheet of silk. Underneath it was the armour he had created with the help of his friends. It was laid out in the way he would have, each component next to the one it attached to. The helmet was snug in a pile of the silk at the top, the rim of it only separated from the chestplate by a thin layer of silk. Grimm took his time unpacking it and putting on the armour. It was more beautiful than he had imagined. When he had strapped on the last greave, he straightened up and looked at his reflection in the standing mirror.

He looked like he felt: a brick house. But in a good way.

Once downstairs, Melvin, Leona and Sir Jean ooh-ed and aah-ed at the armour as expected. Suddenly, Melvin bent down and grabbed a handful of mud.

"Oh Grimm..." he called tantalizingly, and threw the mud at Grimm. Before the dwarf could raise his shield, the mud splashed onto his breastplate.

"Melvin! For crying out loud, it's just new!" Grimm looked down at the stain. It slowly dissolved before his eyes. "What the...?"

Sir Jean too threw a handful of mud at the dwarf, and it too dissolved within seconds.

"Self-cleaning armour!" Melvin said cheerfully; "And watch this!"

The halfling took Sir Jean's sword, and dragged it over the family crest on the shield. It scratched the emblem from left to right. "What are you doing?!" Grimm exclaimed. "My family crest! Melvin, it's just finished, what the hell has gotten into you!" It took longer this time, perhaps half a minute, but slowly the scratch on the shield disappeared too.

"I knew you were up to something when you took a day longer to enchant the armour, you sly devil." Grimm said, grinning broadly. He put his arm around the halfling. "Now let's have a turn to see how strong it is."

They started to train after Sir Jean had also put on his new armour. It was adapted to accommodate for his wings, and Grimm checked to see if it worked well. They sparred for an hour, using their swords, and then dodged some Fireballs and Lightning Bolts Melvin threw at them.

Grimm had given the longbow and the note to Leona, who had thanked Sir Jean profusely. She had loosed some arrows at Sir Jean with her old bow. Sir Jean's armour had some new perks as well. Despite Fireballs exploding in his face, he hardly got hurt. When she was looking at the two men fighting, she suddenly heard a voice in her head. "Hello love." it said.

Leona looked at Sir Jean with a frown. She knew he could read their minds and talk to them in their minds, but he had never called her 'love' despite his obvious upper-class accent. She doubted he would too, now that he had Mariel.

"Are you my new owner?" the voice in her head said. It was a soft, warm voice, and now that she focused a little more, she could hear it was the voice of a woman. Leona turned her head and looked at her new longbow in horror. Could it be possible that it was speaking to her?

She asked Sir Jean about it, but the paladin had very little to say about it.

"Why do you not ask it yourself?" he said, and shrugged. "Her." he corrected himself. "I will show you. Milady? Would you be so kind as to speak?"

The bow talked back, but not in his head. The voice was the same as the one Leona had heard earlier. "Good day milord."

Sir Jean walked away as there was nothing else Leona wanted from him. The latter turned to her bow once more.

"What are you, what are you doing here, and what is going on?"

"I am a longbow, I am here in your hands, and what was your last question again?" the bow answered.

Leona was flabbergasted for a moment, but recovered remarkably quick. "Who sent you?"

"Ehlonna did." the bow answered.

"Okay, Ehlonna, okay." Leona said, pondering what Ehlonna's she knew except for the most obvious one: her Goddess. No others sprang to mind. "Why would Ehlonna send you to me?"

"She thought you could use a little help." the bow answered calmly. "But I do think you are being quite rude. Shall we start anew? Let us begin by you introducing yourself to me."

Leona's jaw dropped. This longbow reminded her awfully of how her grandmother treated her when she was still a little girl.

"Hello Leona, how are you today?" the longbow asked.

"Good. I think. Do you have a name?"

"My name is Quinga. Pleased to meet you."

"So, Quinga is it? How old are you?" Leona asked.

"I am three days old." Quinga answered patiently.

"And, er...can you tell me more about whether I am pregnant or not?" Leona asked hopefully. "If it's a boy or a girl?"

"I can, but I am not allowed to." Quinga answered patiently. "I can tell you that you are, one hundred percent sure, pregnant."

Leona smiled then. The idea of having a longbow that talked back would still take some getting used to, but this was good news. Although their first introduction was a little awkward and their first conversation was more like an interrogation, Leona could get used to the idea of having a talking bow. For one, it was very sleek and powerful; secondly, drawing it was like a dream. And every time she loosed an arrow she knew whether it would hit the target or miss.

Melvin disappeared for a day. He was seen at breakfast, eating an extraordinary amount even for his sake, and said he'd be 'out' for a day. The next day he returned. His trousers had grass stains in them, and his brown curls looked uncombed. All of this paled besides what he brought home with them. Bounding along the path next to him, acting very much like a puppy, was a small bronze dragon. It came no higher than Melvin's knee and its wings flapped feebly when it tried to stop abruptly.

"Hi guys!" Melvin said cheerfully, even though it was obvious he had not slept. Even worse, his stomach was growling loudly, testimony to the fact that he had not yet had breakfast. "Meet my familiar. She's called Aethelinda."

"What is she?" Leona asked.

"She's a pseudodragon." Melvin said, and yawned. "Sorry, I didn't sleep tonight. Pseudodragons are tiny dragons but far less dangerous and more playful than their big cousins. She's a bronze pseudodragon."

Melvin's reappearance with a familiar was the cause for celebration, so when Sir Jean knocked on Leona and Grimm's door the next morning before the sun was up, Grimm was surprised to be fully awake.

"Grimm, Leona, could you get dressed and come down quickly please?" Sir Jean called.

"Is there danger?" Grimm asked, sitting up in bed.

"I don't know, but please hurry." Sir Jean said, and woke Melvin too. Ten minutes later, the four of them were seated at the kitchen table. Grimm was wearing his new armour, though his helmet was on the table next to his elbow, and Melvin and Leona too had all their gear ready downstairs. Sir Jean had handed Grimm a letter which showed the reason for his alertness.



Guys,

We have a problem. I want you to come to Andorhall as soon as possible so I can explain what is going on.

*Grombeard the Strong
The Chief*

"Shall I fetch Mariel?" Melvin suggested.

"No. Let's go to the Chief's first, to see what's up. There's no need to get her just now. If there is, it's the Chief's call." Grimm said, tucking the last things into his backback.

Sir Jean had already saddled the horses. Silver Spirit was wearing a new armour too, something Grimm had made for the horse. It also had spots where the wings could unfold, just like Sir Jean's new armour. It shone like Sir Jean's armour too - both were made of mithril.

Sir Jean mounted his faithful steed, his lance with the banner of Heironeous in his hand. He was armed to the teeth, just like Grimm. Melvin had strapped a quiver of his special new arrows to the pommel of his saddle. He was sure he got these right and that they would not explode so easily, and he kept his crossbow in his hands. Aethelinda sat next to Zack, but as soon as they set out she unfolded her wings and flew level with Melvin.

Sir Jean set a sturdy pace. Initially, he took it slow, but as soon as the horses had warmed up a bit, their canter turned into a gallop. Even in the busy streets of Ironforge he did not slow, but took out his horn to warn people they were coming. The citizens of Ironforge scattered as the handsome paladin of Heironeous on his warhorse approached, and gazed after him and his unlikely companions after they had passed before continuing on their way.

They arrived at Andorhall quickly despite the distance. The horses were lathered with sweat and a stablehand would rub them dry. Grimm and Sir Jean marched into the Chief's office, closely followed by Leona, Melvin and Aethelinda. Aides were running left and right with stacks of paper and weaponry. Three dwarves were dressing the Chief into his armour. Grimm gave the Chief a pat on the shoulder and shoved one of his aides aside, taking over the task of closing the clasps of the armour. When he was properly dressed, the Chief walked over to his strategy table that was now cleared of the paperwork. He bent over the map and pointed to the fields nearby.

"There's a second army approaching Ironforge, coming to finish what the last one couldn't achieve. My scouts tell me it's more of what we faced last time they were at our gates and their intentions are the same: to lay siege to Ironforge and take the city." he looked at Grimm, who was looking excited. This would be the ultimate test for his armour.

"I have a different task for you." the Chief continued, and pointed to a small village on the map. "There is a village here. It's a day's travel from Ironforge. This village is the home of a mage who holds an artefact we shall be needing in the upcoming battle. This artefact should be in Ironforge, where it can be protected."

"Who is this mage?" Melvin asked.

"I shall pass around a note later, so you can read his name, but I do not wish his name to be spoken aloud. In your heads it'll be safe." the Chief said, glancing around the empty room. "I am sending you four because the artefact is protected. And I can tell you little more, because we do not know who else is listening."

"Will we need Mariel?" Grimm asked bluntly.

"There is no time." the Chief said brusquely. "I have called for reinforcements -- but there is no time." he repeated, looking at Grimm directly now. When Grimm nodded doubtfully, the Chief took a small chest and brought it to Sir Jean. He shortly spoke to the paladin in dwarvish. "You'll know what to do with this."

Sir Jean nodded and opened the lid. Inside were scrolls, potions and wands. He distributed these over various pouches and his bag of holding and handed out several potions to them as well.

As soon as the paladin was done, the Chief motioned for them to go, and quickly stuffed a small note in Sir Jean's hand. Sir Jean saluted, turned and gave the note to Grimm before he marched out of the room. The rest followed him quickly.

They rode out again, and Grimm passed the time by talking to Quinga. Leona had started talking to her bow again, and he had become curious. The longbow could, like Sir Jean and Aethelinda, talk in his head too. By the time Leona had moved Flow forward in the column of riders - disgruntled at being left out of the conversation - Grimm was chatting with Quinga in his head. The sensation was strange at first, but soon he got used to it.

After an hour or so, Aethelinda moved from her perch behind Melvin and sat on Beefsteak's head. The pseudodragon was quite small, no larger than a terrier, and Beefsteak was not hindered by her weight at all. He did not seem to mind the dragon near him any more than Zack had.

Grimm was staring blankly ahead of him, focusing on the conversation with Quinga, when he heard another voice in his head.

"Watcha doin'?"

When he focused, he saw the small dragon staring straight at him, like it was waiting for an answer.

"Hello Scales." Grimm replied in his head. "I'm talking to Quinga, Leona's bow."

"Why do you call me Scales?" the pseudodragon had replied.

"It's a nickname. I call my horse Beefsteak, and Leona's tiger Flow is called Sparerib. You have tiny scales, so I call you Scales."

The dragon cocked its head to one side and kept looking at him inquisitively. Soon enough, Grimm found out that the animal was quite curious and had her very own personality and sense of humour. She talked to each of the party in turn, flying from the head of Beefsteak over to Silver Spirit to talk to both Sir Jean and his mount in turn. They did not stop for lunch, though Melvin balanced on Zack's back with his magic cooking set and cooked without a fire.

By nightfall, Sir Jean started looking around for a campsite. Though he and Grimm could see rather well in the dark, Leona and Melvin were as good as blind. The clouds obstructed any light from moon or stars, but Grimm managed to perch two tents. While Melvin cooked, Sir Jean rolled himself in his blanket and fell asleep. His Ring of Sustenance provided him with enough rest, so he needed to sleep only two hours uninterrupted each night. By the time Grimm was done eating, Sir Jean was awake again, ready to stand guard while they slept.

The night passed uneventful and the next morning they set out early. Sir Jean had estimated that though they had made good time, it was still a few hours' travel. When Leona stepped out of the tent she saw Flow and Aethelinda nose-to-nose curiously sniffing each other. Flow had, like Leona herself, never seen a pseudodragon before, and Aethelinda's curiosity was hard to contain. Leona laughed heartily at the sight and cuddled her tiger warmly.

In the distance, black plumes of smoke rose to the horizon, and Sir Jean increased their speed. Half an hour after they first saw the smoke, they came upon a barricade on the road. People were hiding behind the trunks of trees and barrels that had been set in the middle of the road, and Grimm could see weapons poking out at various points.

"Grimm, wait." Sir Jean said, as Grimm nudged his horse forward. "They are not evil. Let me see if I can accomplish something by diplomacy. We have little time to lose, and this may be a better solution than fighting them."

Sir Jean manoeuvred his horse with his knees, and raised his hand in salute. He had noticed a man in armour standing next to a bannerpole, and directed his horse towards him. The man, obviously their leader, stepped away from the barricade and approached them as etiquette required. His hands were away from his weapons, and his face was visible. He approached Sir Jean slowly, and showed he had no harmful intentions.

"What is going on here?" Sir Jean asked politely, observing etiquette himself. His hands were at the reins, but in sight and nowhere near his sword.

"Our village has been attacked." the man answered. "A large group of enemies was at our doorstep and we had little warning. We've tried to evacuate as many people as possible, and the rear guard is keeping them busy so we have time to make camp there."

Grimm looked at where the man was pointing and saw that there was the beginnings of a camp half a mile away. He could see that there were women tending to the wounded. Men were raising tents and managing supplies, handing out rations to people.

"Can we be of assistance?" Sir Jean asked. The man did not answer straight away. He looked at Sir Jean critically for a moment, but when the banner in Sir Jean's hand caught the breeze, his eye was drawn to the crest of Heironeous.

"Yes." the man finally said. "Our rear guard can use any help you can give them. There will still be wounded in the village itself, and to retreat safely, none can be left behind."

Sir Jean nodded gravely, and raised his lance with the banner of Heironeous. "Then we shall continue on this road and render assistance."

The leader stepped aside, motioning to his men to let them pass. Grimm covered the rear, making sure that they would not be attacked from behind. They passed safely and Sir Jean set a hard pace towards the village. They arrived soon enough, and they paused for a moment to take in the situation. The attacking side had not noticed them yet and was still blindly flaying at the defenders. This was not so very strange, because now that they were closer, they could see that they were undead: zombies and skeletons.

It was pandemonium. The wall had not yet been breached, but the gates of the town were torn asunder. What was left of the city guard had poured out, trying to keep the undead at bay so the gates could be repaired with timber. Melvin was sure he could not get a clean shot with one of his special arrows, because the humans were in the midst of the fray, giving their lives to defend their town.

Sir Jean raised his holy symbol to the sky in a gesture that reminded Melvin of Mariel - he had seen her cast Turn undead before too - and several undead crumbled to dust. Many others fled from Sir Jean, running into the town itself and struck down by the second line of defense, or running along the wall as fast as their dead bodies allowed.

Sir Jean raised his lance so the banner caught the wind, and urged Silver Spirit forward. They cantered into town, unhindered by the townsfolk. One townsman cried the name of Heironeous, and then they were inside. Houses were burning, and the chaos inside the walls equalled the chaos at the gates. Women tried to carry children to safety, while others were salvaging food from barrels. Soot-faced, grim expressions were all around them.

Sir Jean mumbled a spell to monitor Grimm's status and then cast some protection on himself. When he was done, he found Leona at his side.

"I can designate this place as holy, and I think you can too. Why haven't you cast that spell here?" she asked.

"Because this is not the place to make a stand." Sir Jean said. "There is too much chaos here. A square with few entryways would be best. If you can find it, cast it there. Perhaps the church square will be sufficient. Let us clear a path to the church and get everyone there."

Sir Jean galloped on ahead, killing everything that was undead and was in his path. Grimm handed Leona his holy mace and ran after the paladin, closely followed by Leona and Melvin. At a crossroads, they went right where Sir Jean had gone straight



ahead. Immediately he was faced with an undead ogre. He dived under the ogre's swing of a club, got up in a crouch and sprang up to strike the beast across the chest with his axe. A mighty boom resounded between the houses and the earth shook. Another blow and the ogre was dead, and the three of them went on ahead. The smaller road they had been following ended in a smaller square with alleys leading off it. Near the houses was a small pile of bones.

Something moved in his peripheral vision, and Grimm turned towards it, diving beneath his shield just in time. When he glanced around his shield he saw that it was a bone dragon. How he could have missed it was beyond him, because the shoulders of the dragon reached higher than the rooftops. The dragon raised its head and snapped its jaw at Grimm. He tried to deflect the bite but the teeth of the dragon screeched over his armour. Grimm stepped forward to attack it. It was quite hard to miss, really. The dragon was as big as the square and could hardly move either way. When Grimm stepped forward, Leona and Melvin passed behind him, getting ready to attack the bone dragon themselves. Leona loosed two arrows at the dragon, Quinga singing in her hands. One arrow flew into the skull of the dragon, the other at its ribcage. She was glad that her bow was a holy weapon, because against this foe that would mean the damage she did would be even greater.

A few seconds passed after the arrows impacted and suddenly Quinga shouted gleefully. The dragon's bones all turned to ashes simultaneously, crumbling to the cobbles.