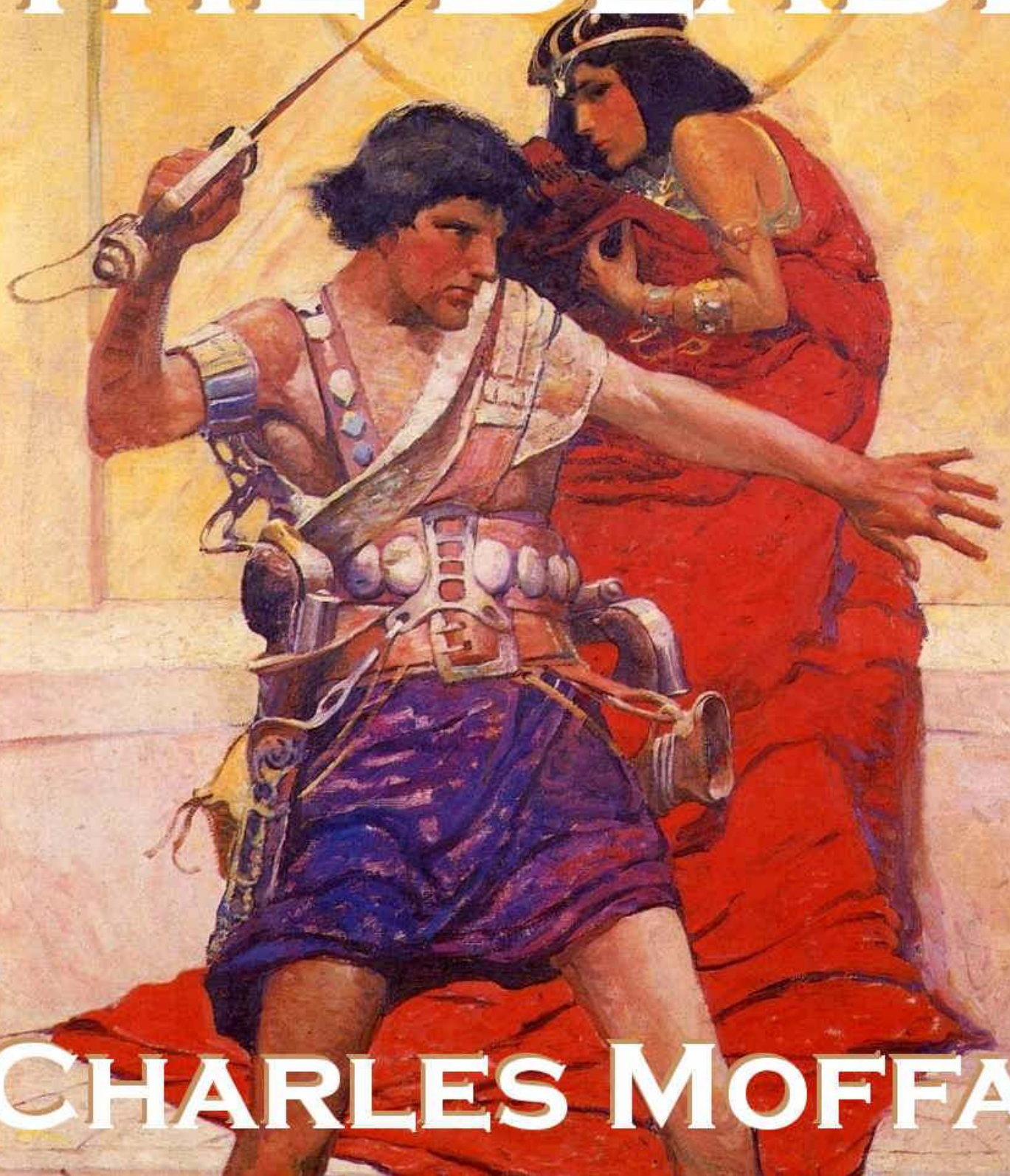


# RISE OF THE BLADE



CHARLES MOFFAT

## Foreword

The novel you are about to read was written in 1998 and was intended for publication around 1999 - 2000. It was my fourth novel at that point in my literary career and it was intended to be published as part of 'The Harpers Series' for the fantasy franchise series of books "Forgotten Realms".

Unfortunately TSR, the company which published "Forgotten Realms", was bought out by rival company Wizards of the Coast and the new owners decided to discontinue the Harpers series before my book could be published.

I have since debated many times what to do with this book. I could A) publish it and change the names of all recognizable characters from the Forgotten Realms world. I could also B) forget about it and never publish it all. However due to the requests of fans I have decided upon C) publish it as an eBook and let fans read it as it was originally intended to be published as.

I should note I have had the book online for years now, in various other formats, but never as an eBook. Wizards of the Coast haven't bothered to contact me asking me to remove my book from the internet. They seem to have chalked it down as a piece of fan fiction despite the fact it is a full length novel that was intended for publication. You might be able to find free versions of chapters floating around on the internet too, mostly on fan websites.

The difference of this eBook I suppose is that it comes with a front cover (painted in 1917 by American illustrator Frank Schoonover), will someday include illustrations which will be either by myself or artistic colleagues of mine (this 1st Edition version doesn't have any illustrations yet)... and various comments like this here forward.

It is not my intention to infringe on any copyrights with this book. I wrote it for the Forgotten Realms and I would like to keep it that way. Changing the names would change the *feel* of the book. I hope Wizards of the Coast lawyers will understand I did this for the fans and not for the sake of money. I should note therefore that this is an eBook PDF file. It could in theory be shared, emailed and proliferated across the internet and I won't receive a dime for each copy fans make. Oh well.

I would however ask that fans do make an effort to buy my other eBooks (*Paladin Assassin*, *Ice War* & *King Culprit*) which are based in a fictional world of my creation and copywritten by me. Enjoy the story!

Sincerely,  
Charles Moffat  
July 2011

# **Rise of the Blade**

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By Charles Alexander Moffat

## **The Harpers:**

A semi-secret organization for Good, the Harpers fight for freedom and justice in a world populated by tyrants, evil mages, and dread concerns beyond imagination.

Each novel in the Harper Series is a complete story itself, detailing some of the most unusual and compelling tales in the magical world known as the Forgotten Realms.

### Note on Pronunciation:

Chev is pronounced with a soft C, like Shev. Marque Draque is pronounced Mark Drake.

### Dramatis Personae:

**Doctor Pierce O'Hiram:** Dubbed Doctor by his comrades, Pierce is the only son of a boxer who became Waterdeep's premier warrior. After twenty years of adventuring, Pierce retired to Waterdeep and founded the Academy of Combat. Since birth he has been blessed with foresight and the ability to read minds. He has proven himself to be a valuable asset to the Harpers.

**Chev:** Once the greatest warrior in the realms, Chev was imprisoned in a statue for unknown crimes. Now that he is out, he seeks vengeance.

**Marque Draque:** Pierce's cigar-chomping drow elf comrade is a master of everything but truly shines when his magic is at work.

**Martinez:** A Harper comrade of Pierce's, Martinez is known for his overdrinking. The bald warrior fights for the Harpers because he has nothing left to do in his life.

**Rambertz:** The druid who watches over the Academy's gardens. Rambertz was once a drow elf but was changed into a monster half-spider, half drow thing known as a drider.

**Durnan:** A coordinator for the Harpers, Durnan runs a tavern known as the Gaping Portal, which features an entrance into the Undermountain

**Hiram:** Pierce's father is an extraordinary chef. His hardy visage and boxing skills make him one of the most feared people at the Academy.

**Valentino d'Or:** A smuggler belonging to a rich Waterdeep family.

**Ignazio d'Or:** Valentino's nephew, enrolled at the Academy of Combat.

**Witter:** Pierce's longtime friend and mentor. He died defending Waterdeep from smugglers carrying smoke powder.

**Valeska Ko'Ragur:** The drow bard causes more trouble than she should be able to handle. Her ability to escape capture has made her legendary.

**Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunson:** The Archmage of Waterdeep. "Blackstaff" is known for his black and white beard and the black staff he carries with him. A fellow Harper, Khelben rarely talks to Pierce but when they do they make a great team.

## Prologue:

The year is 1370.

Running his hands through grey hairs that betrayed his age, Witter sat quietly in the shadows of the early morning and waited. As the sun rose defiantly in the east, giving birth to the noisy bustle of the streets of Waterdeep, he remained there in his vigilant shadows watching the creaking timbers of a silent ship only forty paces away. Before him lay a simple task that he knew so well.

As simple and sharp as a saber's blade, as he stood and drew Spitzer from its sheath. He advanced confidently on the ship, spotting the guard before the guard spotted him.

"Announce yerself!" spat the sailor into the fog that rolled in off the ocean to his back. He squinted into the sunlight surrounding Witter like a holy aura. When the newcomer did not respond, he reached for the weapon at his belt.

Which should have been a cutlass. In any other place along the Sword Coast, that's what it should have been, but not here. Indeed, one could easily say that it was that weapon alone that had drawn Witter here, blade in hand. It was a pistol.

This ship was a gun smuggler. Guns were outlawed in Waterdeep. Witter belonged to the group known as Harpers. Harpers live and die, protecting Waterdeep. Go figure, thought the warrior.

Witter charged at the man, Spitzer flashing in to cut the man's hand from his arm but not before he pulled the trigger. The slug took the Harper in the belly and he winced it away as a second saber, Planereacher appeared in his other hand and sliced across the guard's throat.

"My lucky day!" Witter spat with sarcasm and sheathed Planereacher, clutching the bullet wound. He would live, he had no doubt about that. It was the five more sailors, roused by the noisy gunshot, that concerned him now. He had taken heavier wounds in his time, and no amount of grey hairs was going to change that.

With a silent prayer to his god, he touched the wound and it stopped bleeding. It still hurt like some fire demon was burrowing into his belly but he could ignore it. His healing skills would have to wait until after the battle.

Spitzer in hand, and Planereacher coming back out in the other, he met the five sailors with quick thrusts that fell the first three and made the last two wary as they levelled their weapons at him to fire. Witter was not about to be finished so easily and threw Planereacher towards one sailor, catching him in the side. Meanwhile he rolled desperately towards the other sailor and took the man's leg off with the extraordinarily sharp edge of Spitzer.

The man crumpled to the ground, his shot left to the open air as he landed beside Witter with a frantic scream. He grabbed at his leg in a bizarre attempt to reattach it. With pity in his eyes, the Harper removed the man's head.

"Wut in Cyric's black 'eart is going on up 'ere!" shouted a gruff voice, as a candle bearing captain appeared, lifting the latch with one hand and starting out.

Witter responded by cleaving through both boards and hand, ignoring the screams of the captain as he slammed a boot down on the latch and looked back at his only foe.

Who was gone except for Planereacher which lay on the deck, glistening red with blood. He scanned the ship quickly, trying to ignore the sounds below as more than a score of sailors rushed to the aid of their captain. Turning about, Witter saw the man scurrying up the ropes to unfurl a sail.

Looking to the docks of Waterdeep, Witter saw the beginnings of a crowd of spectators drawn to the sound of gunfire. No doubt a city watch patrol had already been alerted and was on its way. The watch rarely concerned themselves with gun smuggling, leaving that job to the Harpers who were more suited to intrigue.

The sailors, even the injured ones, knew the value of leaving the city and reaching the open sea before a patrol showed up and boarded the ship.

His originally purpose aboard this ship had been determine whether it truely held a vast hold filled with kegs of smokepowder. That had gone wrong the moment the sailor had chosen to carry a pistol instead of a cutlass which Witter could have handled quietly. Unfortunately, guns also happened to be very noisy and that plan had went overboard quite quickly and drowned. After all these years, Witter still had his sense of humour.

Now all that mattered was whether he could stall the ship until the patrol got here. Or at least, thats the way it should have been, were it not for the sudden emergence of sailors leaping out of the holds and diving overboard. More important than that was the presence of thick black smoke rising from latch where the captain had fallen.

On second thought, maybe it would be a good idea to get the ship as far away from docks and Waterdeep itself as soon as possible. Dropping Spitzer, he leapt up to the stern of the ship and wrestled with the wheel, turning the ship slightly to head out towards the open sea.

Already the sails were catching the strong wind pouring forth over the land, and pulling them out away from the dock. The mooring ropes reached their length and the entire ship creaked as it leaned to the starboard bow.

Even if the ship did topple, Witter doubted the water would douse the fire before it reached the volatile powder kegs. Vaulting back down to poop deck, he scooped up Spitzer and slipped across the tilting deck.

Stabbing into the wood with the saber like he mountain climbing, he scrambled up the deck towards the mooring lines that lined the port side of the ship. There was a loud snap as one of the lines broke under the strain of the large vessel and Witter clung to his sword as the entire ship shuddered, and took on an even more dangerous tilt.

Finally, with a groan that said his belly hurt like hell, Witter grabbed the railing and sliced the final thick mooring rope with a slash from Spitzer.

The ship gave a sudden lurch as it pulled away from dock, followed by a shift as it righted itself that would have left the Harper sick to the stomach had he not already been in so much pain.

The injured sailor, oblivious to the departure of his shipmates, was still up in the rigging, trying to untangle a knot desperately when the sudden lurch and shift through him like a boulder from a catapult towards the shore. He crashed into deck of another ship, breaking his neck in the process.

Witter, now alone on the ship with the exception of corpses, had come to the conclusion that a disaster was at hand, and that it was more or less his fault. Had it been someone else blaming himself, he would have said they had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time and that there wasn't anything else to do but make the best of it.

Which was precisely what the man planned to do as sheathed both sabers into his belt and ran back to the wheel. Grabbing the pegs, he pulled with his considerable strength and muttered a prayer to whatever gods were watching.

And thanked them many times over as the ship altered its course and started a healthy pace across the waves. For a mere moment time itself seemed to freeze and he was tempted to dive overboard. No, the wheel was too unsturdy. It would be better to simply stay and pray.

He was still counting himself as lucky when the bow burst upward into the heavens like a geyser of splinters. This was immediately followed by the main hull exploding.

For a record forty miles, over land and sea, the sound greater than a cannon shot across the land and in the distance faded into a sound akin to rolling thunder on a morning that had christened the sky a shade of baby blue. It was a sound many men, women and children would speak of in awe for years to come.

It was the last sound a number of spectators lining the docks would ever hear. Those that weren't killed in the heat wave that boiled their skin, were forever deaf.

The sound had been foremost among the history texts that scholars lined up to write. Next was the wave of heat that killed over a dozen people. Then there was the wave of water that had followed and left much of the docks in ruins. The last part, that only a few of the more detailed texts recorded, was the death of a Harper by the name of Witter.

No one, as far as history was concerned, mourned for this man. The essays written about the incident, and it was indeed recorded as only an incident and not a real threat to Waterdeep, were more concerned with the destructive power of smoke powder. Some essays were in favour of this invention, despite being frowned upon by fellows, while others declared that it was a pinnacle point in Waterdeep's history when it came to the banishment of guns and smoke powder.

A chill breeze swept across Waterdeep's harbour. The leaves had already started to turn colour for the autumn and the birds were heading south early. Today, in every inn, tavern and pub lining the many streets, alleys and boulevards of the great city, bards were singing a different tune.

In the harbour the flags flew at half-mast and nothing moved. The crowds were still there of course, plying their wares, but an unnatural silence had crept across the city. To many eyes this was perhaps a good sign, Waterdeep's populace humbled in an obscure way, to others it was a slow down in the market with the exception of the number of white wine sales that went up.

There was a sharp splash from the single ship in the harbour and Doctor Pierce O'Hiram closed his eyes as the body of his friend disappeared beneath the waves. Today was a day of mourning for a respected adventurer and, until recently, a little known Harper: Witter. The silence that followed the departure of his friend chilled the doctor to the bone and as he looked about the ship he could feel the grief of his comrades.

The cowed figure beside him spat and lit a cigar. Pierce glared at the elf for a moment, and then sensed the guilt surrounding Marque Draque's as the mage threw the cigar overboard without a word. He didn't have to say anything and he didn't as he went below the deck.

Looking about at his fellow Harpers, Pierce understood that the majority of them were thinking of the death of their friend, whereas the people on the shore were thinking of the death of a hero. Yet Pierce knew this was only temporary, the people of Waterdeep would soon forget the name of Witter. Oh sure, they'd remember how the ranger had died in defense of the city, but his name would be lost in the history books.

Pierce swallowed and remembered the feeling he had when he rode out of Waterdeep with Witter as a comrade on his first adventure. He had been a rolemodel back then, he had studied under the warrior, learning his fighting style the twin sabers, how to control a horse with simple leg movements and fight at the same time, but perhaps it was the noble heart of the man Pierce had wished for, the sheer disregard for his own life in favour of everyone else. The man had been pure virtue. The warrior sighed and shoved away the memories that brought tears to his already wet cheeks.

It was time to finish unfinished business.

In what passed for a broken down hovel on Waterdeep's waterfront sat a short pudgy man with freckled cheeks and a bulbous nose holding a monocle in front of his left eye. For a semi-retired ruffian, he had done well considering his rich, yet food stained, clothes. He looked up across his desk suspiciously, some sixth sense that kept him alive in this business told him he was no longer alone. He reached down for the blade hidden in his belt.

The sudden scrap of metal on wood warned him too late and he looked up at a three foot blade of blue steel posed at his nostrils. The

monocle fell off his nose and he swallowed as he stared up with blurry vision at the tall, broad figure with dark brown hair and greying temples. He looked down at the distinctive antique bronze breastplate and managed a vague smile.

"Please sit down Dr. Pierce," he rasped and gestured with a hand to the empty oak chair across from him. "To what purpose do I owe this visit?"

Pierce sheathed the saber and sat, promptly pouring himself a drink from a dusty bottle marked elvenquist. He spat it out quickly and smiled. "What makes you think I have a purpose?" he asked, knowing full well what Jimox thought. He threw the bottle casually at the wall beside him.

Jimox placed his monocle back on his nose. He stared at the wreckage of the bottle and the rat that scurried out of the cracks in the tiled walls to lick at the spilled wine. "You always have a purpose it would seem. You never just '*stop by*'. Although I simply must ask why you just fed part of my wine collection to Waterdeep's rat population?"

"Well, for starters it was watered down, and secondly the crooked merchant you got it from laced it with a nasty liquor called hemotoxin." The Doctor smiled knowingly.

The ruffian raised an eyebrow. He had learned in the past that Pierce enjoyed exercising a superior knowledge of practically everything. How he learned such things however was open to question.

When the ruffian did not reply, the warrior explained. "Poison. Death in roughly two minutes starting with intense stomach pain, vomiting, fever, heart pains, your skin turns purple or pale white and your heart eventually slows and stops," Pierce said in his usual nonchalant manner.

Jimox pursed his lips. "I'll have to remember that." He glanced at the already dead rat. He swallowed his saliva and thanked his pride that he refused to drink the rot gut he served his guests. The ruffian looked back up at Pierce. "So?" he said slowly. "What will it be this time?"

Pierce smiled. That same annoying, knowing smile. "Just a name."

Valentino d'Or the IVth felt as secure as any smuggling lord could feel when he learned that a whole cargoship of smokepowder had been hijacked by Harpers and subsequently blown up. Which wasn't that good. Indeed, he was deathly afraid his associates, the giffs, would send an assassin to his pathetic looking old caravel that hadn't moved from the harbour in over fifteen years.

One wouldn't have guessed the derelict contained life at all, even the rats avoided its rotting boards. Any food that had been present here had long since rotted away along with parts of the ship itself. Flotsam and algae clung to its sides thickly and small fish swarmed its sides in schools, eating the algae. The area this ship was docked in wasn't even worth noticing, just a bunch of leaky fishing boats that had been discarded. Those few people that inhabited the streets currently weren't planning on staying there either. This would be one of the roughest parts of the city were it not so underpopulated.

The smuggler sat amidst the rubble of the broken down cabin, trying to pour himself a drink of gin, his hand shaking constantly. Tears of

frustration ran down his cheeks and he kept casting worried glances out the window at the empty docks, half expecting a small army of giffs to appear, knock down his door, and demand payment for their lost smokepowder and arquebuses. Payment he simply didn't have.

Or rather, his family had the money, but they were too proud to bail out one of their own. Better to let him die rather than take the whole family down with him.

The rickety door did come crashing down a moment later, its rotting boards splintering and making a huge mess, but not under the great weight of a nine foot tall, eight-hundred pound giff. He was almost relieved to see only a six-foot-two soldier dressed in antique bronze armour.

Armour that shone brilliantly in the midmorning light, the sun's rays reflecting off the muscular breastplate and playing strange tricks on the eyes.

Valentino's heart stopped. He dropped the bottle of gin and it rolled across the floor spilling spirits on the rotten boards to stop at Pierce's leather riding boots.

The smuggler began praying that the giffs would rescue him. Dr. Pierce's ranger friend Witter was the Harper who had single handedly executed the hijacking of Valentino's ship, despite dying in the explosion that rocked the harbour and could be heard over a forty miles away.

Nevertheless, the city's bards somehow got hold of more specifics about the explosion and pretty soon every bard from the dandy Danilo Thann to the drow violinist Valeska Ko'Ragur were singing the tale of Witter, turning him into some kind of martyr against arquebuses. Within a day everyone had been talking about Witter's courageous sacrifice, giving his life to the city he loved. They portrayed him as a poet, a leader, a commoner, a saint. Every story exaggerated the facts, trying to make out that Valentino's crew had wanted to obliterate Waterdeep, which was entirely false.

And now, looking up at the steelblue eyes of Dr. Pierce, Valentino could only think of the punishment he would receive. He closed his eyes, waiting for the deathblow that would send him spiralling into blackness. He waited and heard movement but felt nothing.

"Any rumours you've heard of me having a temper are entirely false."

His heart started beating again. He peeked open an eye and saw the man seated crosslegged across from him in the filth. He lifted a hand to his neck, glad it was still there and finally let out a breath, realizing he had holding his breath.

Pierce smiled. "It's not you I want Valentino, although you will be useful."

Valentino wasn't stupid, and he was more sober right now than he had been in a long time. He could guess what Pierce was thinking. "For what? Bait?"

"Yep!"

Valentino saw the silhouette of the nine-foot tall giff and his twelve bodyguards walking down the length of the ship factory. The huge hippo headed giff stood out most of all, his ears appearing to be horns from this distance. They approached silently with a speed that left the smuggler feeling vulnerable in this dark and lonely place. All around was unfinished parts of a new schooner still in process of being built. "Why this place?" he whispered into the darkness.

"It's a Harper building owned by Waterdeep," Pierce replied from the shadows of a pile of slabbed wood. "The ship is being specially built for a number of purposes."

"Pirates or us smugglers?" Valentino glanced around the factory, his vivid imagination making him think he could see the Harpers hidden in the shadows all around him, ready to spring.

"Both."

The smuggler shifted his feet nervously. "You know, I don't understand why we can't sell arquebuses in the first place. You can still kill a man with a sword you know. Why don't you outlaw swords?"

"I don't make the law, I just preserve it. Let's just say that we want to prevent a future in which whole armies would march into battle carrying arquebuses. It would be a bloody mess."

"No more bloody than our current wars." Valentino grinned with a sudden thought. "Smuggling is just the transportation of such goods. What's wrong with that? Your own father buys smuggled drow vodka I understand."

"My father was a boxer. The bloodsport has been banned for a long time too. Do you really think he worried about getting caught with smuggled goods back then?" Pierce stepped back farther into the shadows and put a finger to his lips.

The hollow sounds of boots came closer and a giff's hippo-like head loomed into view, his face illuminated by the cracks in the roof. "Company halt!" the giff barked. The monster straightened his brown and green uniform and glanced at his bodyguards in a quick inspection as they formed into a line. He surveyed the shadowy surroundings and finally his eyes rested on Valentino. "Why did you choose this place?"

Valentino shrugged and his face flushed red. "Privacy. Now I'm sure that you've heard about the explosion rigged by my men--"

"Rigged?" barked the giff in fury. His huge hands clenched and he took a step closer. "You deliberately blew up a whole ship of smokepowder?"

Valentino smiled as best he could. "The smokepowder wasn't even on the ship. You can tell your kin that they have nothing to worry about. That was a magical explosion meant to throw the Harpers off our trail. It also provided my men a distraction to move the smokepowder to a new location."

The giff narrowed his large black eyes. "And where is the smokepowder? Or rather, where is my payment?"

"All in due time," replied Valentino. "My agents haven't sold off the bulk of the powder yet. We've had to be extra quiet since the explosion. Everyone has been talking about it and people have been very wary and

suspicious around smokepowder dealers of late. I'm planning to sell over half of it tomorrow for a huge profit." One thing was for sure, the smuggler thought, Dr. Pierce was no muscle-bound idiot. His excuses were almost flawless in every detail.

"I want the gold now," spat the giff. His biceps bulged against the sleeves of his tailored uniform-like shirt. "Or else my troops here will find a new way to dispose of your pathetic body."

Valentino swallowed and reminded himself that he was surrounded by a small army of Harper agents. With growing courage he wet his lips. "You know, I could have you killed at any moment now. I have about forty men hidden around us as we speak. More than enough to start a small war." He smiled at his own cleverness. "But we wouldn't want that would we?"

The giff sniffed his huge nose and drew a hand arquebus, pointing it straight at Valentino's head.

The smuggler only grinned and for a moment the giff looked uncertain. "You'll have your money in two days time."

"I want it now!" barked the giff.

"Perhaps you should wait awhile," said a hollow voice from the shadows to the giff's left.

The huge monster turned to the left, his hand ready to pull the trigger. And saw only the hollowed out piece of trunk. It took a second for him to realize what had happened, and by the time he turned back to face Valentino, the smuggler was gone and replaced by the downward stroke of a blue-stepped saber.

Pierce took a step back as the monster screamed. He watched as the giff dropped his pistol and clutched the wound that ran down the side of his face. He didn't even look to either side but immediately ducked under the swings of two bodyguards, and rolled backwards across the floor to come to his feet in a crouch, saber ready before him.

Ten bodyguards walked forward between the two piles of wood planks, in groups of two. Pierce reminded himself that the remaining two would soon find a way around the piles and come up behind him. He drew his other saber and stepped forward into the first rank of bodyguards.

"That's your small army!" screamed the giff. "One man? That's it?"

Valentino swallowed and cowered farther into the darkness. He hadn't known Pierce would try and take them all on. Or perhaps the fighter hadn't been expecting a fight, what with all those logical excuses he had provided. He wondered if he should make a run for an exit.

But Pierce had most definitely been expecting a fight. He had expected every detail of this meeting. Knew the exact words the giff would use ten seconds before he used them. Knew the bodyguards' swings before the bodyguards even thought of them. The good doctor, not only an incredible fighter and having earned the title of a doctorate of combat, making him possibly the greatest fighter in all the realms, was also blessed with foresight.

That ability, and that alone was what had kept the warrior alive and well in the adventuring lifestyle. Combine that with an excellent physical prowess and quick learning. Or perhaps, as Pierce himself thought of it, he was simply destined.

Didn't really matter as far as the Harper was concerned, his sabers ripped through one bodyguard after another as he slowly retreated back into an open area, instead of waiting for the two bodyguards to come up behind him. He retreated slowly, his blue adamantite sabers cleaving through armour and bone until there was only six bodyguards remaining. And they all were quickly coming to the conclusion that this man wasn't even getting tired yet.

They tried to attack but his saber was already there before they made their stab, parrying it easily and dodging past their defenses to jab through the holes of their chain mail to find flesh. When he didn't deflect their attacks, they simply bounced off his bronze armour without so much as a scratch. When he attacked, it was flawless, slipping past their weak defenses and biting into their skin.

Four remaining. His right saber took a head off while the left parried a blade away and disarmed the man. He dodged the third man's thrust and the fourth's blade clanged harmlessly off his breastplate.

Three. The disarmed man threw up his hands and backed away.

Two. The bodyguard on the left raised his bastard sword for an overhead chop at Pierce's head with both hands, when it came down however his one arm was missing and the swing went awry due to lack of balance. A quick saber thrust to the neck ended his surprise.

One. The last man screamed in defiance and hacked at Pierce with sheer ferocity, his blows were strong and could not be ignored. Pierce brought a saber up to block a swing in a test of strength and lifted the other until it was posed under the man's neck.

The warrior, his face red and sweat running down his face wanted to swear and his frustration was evident to even Valentino hiding in the shadows.

A strange silence followed as the giff came forward at last, and pointed his arquebus at Pierce. "You annoy me Harper. You, and Valentino will die."

The doctor never blinked, instead he kneed the warrior in the crotch and turned to face the giff, sabers lowered.

The gun dealer snarled and pulled the trigger.

The greatest thing about arquebuses, reflected Pierce was the fact that only nine in ten shots actually worked. The other one was when the gun either backfired, or didn't work at all. In this case it didn't work at all.

The giff tried again and nothing happened. A hollow click.

Pierce advanced on the giff who tossed down the arquebus and held up both hands in a pair of fists. No weak monsters were these, and a giff's punch was as good as a hill giant's. Pierce tossed down his sabers and held up his own fists to the nine-foot giff.

"How about I introduced myself? I'm Doctor Pierce O'Hiram. I admit my father, the boxer Hiram wasn't as famous as I am, but he still taught me how to box."

The giff frowned, which looked strange on his huge chubby face. Pierce's name was known all over the realms and even a giff from the south knew and feared his name. They also knew that Pierce was rumoured to have slayed the tarrasque, a monster so great and vicious that even dragons

feared it. Every giff dreamed of being distinguished as a mighty fighter and ever since the rumour of Pierce being the Tarrasqueslayer had begun years ago, many a challenger had sought that title. Which Pierce had defended time and time again. And now, instead of fear of the great warrior, the giff charged ahead, wanting the title for himself.

Pierce sidestepped easily and watched the giff slip on his fallen sabers, slide across the floor and impale himself on the unfinished foremast of the great schooner. A pool of blood dripped down off the giff's uniform and formed on the floor

The remaining bodyguard dropped his hands from above his head and stepped forward into the light, staring at the blood that flowed from the giff's wound. He turned slowly to face Pierce in awe.

"Eleven men," said Valentino as he too emerged from the shadows, staring at the fighter as he sheathed his sabers. "And a giff."

"Its not going to make any ballads I'm afraid," Pierce spat, who didn't like the constant awe surrounding his name. "People are still making up stories of how I killed the tarrasque."

"Did you?" asked the bodyguard.

"No," the Doctor said sharply. He sighed and muttered under his breath, "Stupidity rules."

Where the merchant district met the rich estates of the nobility, there was a building surrounded by a marble wall twenty feet high. Beyond that wall and its bronze gates was a garden maze of rose bushes, maple trees, and a vast assortment of plants in every size and shape. Beyond the maze and rolling lawns stood the proud white marble of the Academy of Combat. The stairs led up to the massive westwing, past marble pillars and ended at its heavy bronze doors. Soaring a hundred and fifty feet into the air was the dome, the central piece of the Academy with four wings extending out from it like a compass.

The Academy of Combat, the premier school in Waterdeep for teaching the arts of single combat was also one of the greatest feats of architecture in the city's history. The domed ceiling, inlaid with a multitude of windows to let the light in, was crafted by dwarven marblesmiths had been a feat alone where many dwarves claimed that it wouldn't hold and would collapse. That was before they learned that a powerful cleric had been hired to cast a dweomer that would help hold it. And so they built it and stood by it with confidence.

Only then did Pierce, as headmaster and founder of the academy, tell them that there had been no such cleric aiding the structure, rather it was the single column in the centre of the domed amphitheatre that held it. When the dwarves inquired about the nature of the column, the doctor assured them it was not witchcraft that made it so strong, but a substance stolen from drow mines.

Platinum they had asked. Mithril? Titanium? Pierce shook his head and drew his famous sabers. "Adamantite," he answered. A metal so impossible to break that it might as well be considered indestructable.

The dwarves had nodded, all knowing the value of adamantite. They wouldn't dare try to steal the blades though, and the hundred-fifty foot tall column of pure white adamantite wasn't about to be stolen. Unless you really wanted several hundred tonnes of marble dropping down on your head.

Rather, the statues that stood around the domed amphitheatre between marble columns, were worth far more. Each represented a famous fighter in the history of the realms, many of them from Waterdeep. Today, a new addition to the collection was a statue of Chev, the head bodyguard of the immensely wealthy d'Or merchant family. The warrior had lived over a hundred and fifty years ago and died, presumably in defense of the city or the family. The statue was considered to be one of the greatest due to its sheer amount of detail right down to the sweat on the warrior's face plus its heroic defensive pose with his sword held out in front of him.

"A little overdramatic for my taste," said Marque Draque, his thoughts betraying his true feelings. Even he couldn't refuse that it was by far the greatest statue he had ever seen. "Who made it?"

Pierce turned to face the drow mage. "No one knows. The donator was the family of d'Or. They said it was carved by one of their ancestors although Valentino said it was probably a bastard child raised by the family yet never truly recognized in their family tree." He chuckled and remembered the very thankful Valentino insisting on the present.

"Its magical," Marque Draque said abruptly, surprising the usually unsurprisable O'Hiram which happened often when he daydreamed.

"Really?" blurted Pierce, although he already knew the answer.

"Yes, although I believe the magic is there to keep that blade from breaking off too easily. Its amazing it hasn't broke already."

Pierce nodded and turned around completely, heading for the kitchen for he knew in a minute that his stomach would be growling at him. Marque followed quietly, taking out a cigar and lighting it with a minor spell. "Are you going to commission that statue of Witter from Tadd Rurik or aren't you?" asked the drow abruptly.

Pierce glanced at the dark elf, whose face was normally the ebony black of the drow elves was that of a Moon elf due to his constant illusion. Pierce knew the illusion was for good measure against the mobs of Waterdhavians who would rip the mage apart before one could say so much as a hello. The only drow elves Pierce knew of who could freely walk Waterdeep was Drizzt Do'Urden and Valeska Ko'Ragur, and even then they walked quickly and with a quick eye for trouble. Drizzt Do'Urden was a warrior who fought alongside the piratehunters, and thus a hero. The drow violinist Valeska however was another matter as she was constantly getting into trouble and ducking the guard, becoming quite the infamous bard for her ability to evade capture.

He paused and delved deeper into Marque Draque's subconscious thoughts, past the plans of making an improved version of his Vampiric Blades spell and the modifications on the Exploding Cigars spell, Pierce found what he was looking for: an image of Witter, or rather a statue of Witter sitting upon a sculpted warhorse, one hand on the reins and the other clasping the hilt of a saber.

"The dwarf is asking too high a price and we still haven't completed building the eastwing. I was wondering if you should be the one who sculpts it," Pierce said at last.

"Me? I can't sculpt!"

"You've never tried. Although, with your magic skills you should be able to accomplish the feat better than that greedy dwarf could."

The dwarf conceded that fact with a nod and didn't say anymore, his mind already going through the random possibilities he could take advantage of to make a sculpting spell.

Pierce stopped at one of the many doors and looked at the new sculpture adding to an already huge collection. He wondered what it had been like two hundred years ago, the merchants of the coast fighting for control, the constant chaos and intrigue. Certainly more interesting than teaching students how to kill, which in theory was not Pierce's goal.

The Academy's goal was to give the adventurers who followed him a fighting chance. Something many of his dead friends hadn't had. Many of his friends he had gained over the years had left at one time or another after some great quest. They only very rarely returned.

Pierce closed the bronze doors of his bedchamber behind him and looked about the room. For a moment his mind drifted back to when he had first opened the Academy back in the spring. The very first night he had spent here had been quiet. Deathly quiet.

Tonight he could hear the sound of the wind in the trees outside. The trees weren't very big, but they had grown a lot in the last six months thanks to Marque Draque and Rambertz's magic. The bulk of the birds had went south for the winter with the exception of the noisy chickadees and a few cardinals.

"I spend too much time with Rambertz," Pierce muttered to himself, recognizing the cry of a loon coming from the direction of the small pond in the south-east corner of the grounds. He had become attached to his druid friend over the summer and a week didn't pass that Pierce could not be found out in the orchard talking philosophy with the secretive druid.

On a whim, the retired adventurer went out to the balcony and opened the glass doors as he stepped outside. He instantly caught the distant, yet distinct sound of blades crossing. The students should all be in the dormitory which meant only one thing.

The orchard of the Academy's grounds was a favourite spot for a midnight jousting match, the moon's white light filtering down with an almost magical feeling. Two youths fought back and forth fiercely, a pair of blades flashing in the cool autumn air, their movements only broken by the sharp sounds of metal scraping on metal and their breathing and stress an enjoyment. They had never felt more alive.

The two youths broke apart for a moment, breathing heavily. A rustle in the leaves off to the side alerted the two and they turned to face the shadows, blades posed before them. It was against the rules to fight without a referee on the basis that a fight can get very personal and pass beyond a simple joust, and they were certainly breaking the rules.

The grizzled face of an old gardener appeared out of the darkness, carrying a rake. "Ye lads shouldn't be out here ye know! 'gainst thee rules!" He brandished the rake at them. "I oughta teach ye yipper snappers a lesson!"

"Bring it on old man!" replied Mitch and bared his blade confidently.

The old gardener smiled, twirled his rake, and swung slowly. Mitch parried easily and the blade caught the rake between its teeth. The student suddenly found himself without a weapon, whereas the gardener now advanced with both a rake and a sword.

"What the-?" cried Brek, desperately trying to parry off the combined attacks of both sword and rack, only to lose his weapon in a similar fashion. His blade flew up in the air, and fell twirling in the light.

To land easily in the hand of the elven mage Marque Draque. "Lads, do you have any idea what Pierce would do if he caught the two of you out here? You know its against the rules!"

Mitch stammered a reply about his father being a wealthy merchant to which the elf answered by levelling a blade at the student's neck. "Doctor Pierce is no fool, and doesn't take bribes, bantling!" He spat on the ground. "He doesn't give a damn about money and you'd be wise to learn the same."

Brek looked at Mitch and the pained expression that flashed between their eyes was clear and simple: They were going to get a speech. Brek wished he had an egg timer on him.

"Listen lads, when I was your age, which was quite some time ago since I'm an elf, I was all hyped up about adventuring too! I wanted to go out and make a fortune killing dragons! But I'll tell ye frankly, I have never met any man who can single handedly take down a dragon with a weapon. It takes team work." He grinned and clapped both lads on the backs, leading them away. Both winced when they learned the elf was stronger than he looked. "Or a really big fireball," he added.

They walked past an elm tree and turned onto the cobble walkway leading to the barracks in the north wing. "But that's besides the point! I learned very young that magic in general is meant for long distant fighting. You can't throw an ol' fireball at a guy five feet away unless you want to be roasted too! Thus, I became a rarity amongst elves: a fighter and a mage. A master of both trades." A cigar floated up out of his pocket, lit and he took a quick puff. He let go of the youths and opened the door to the barracks. "In you go you damn bantling!"

They hurried in, not sure what to expect next.

"By the way, I will confide with you two that I also became a master in a different trade." The elf smiled and held up their belts. "I'm quite the thief!" With but a word their breeches fell around their ankles and became stuck there as if glued. They cried out in protest but it was too late as he slammed the door shut and spoke another word of magic to lock it tightly.

He puffed on his cigar and walked away, enjoying the night air and the sickly sweet pleasures of a good smoke. Being a drow, he slept or stayed in doors a lot during the day, and only came out at night if he could help it. In the day the sun hurt his eyes and effected his ability to cast spells, fight and otherwise.

Why did he always refer to it as otherwise? He had made a fair profit thieving in the past. Was he growing restless again? Perhaps, he conceded and blew some smoke through his nose, feeling the burning sensation in his nostrils. Were it not for the fact that his favourite spell required cigars he would have stopped this habit long ago.

Well, maybe not. No point being dishonest with himself. He truly liked how confident he felt when the opponent was casting spells furiously, whereas he puffed away, waiting for the last possible second to throw his cigar almost dart-like. And then take out another cigar and light it on any ashes that were left of the person.

"A pleasant evening isn't it?" A large seven-foot tall figure loomed out of the darkness. Eight spider-like feet clawed the ground and a horribly twisted figure became distinct. It looked to be half-drow half-spider.

The supple drow, all reflexes and grace looked even now upon the grotesque figure of the drider with disgust. He pushed away his feelings and looked the drider in the eye despite the monster's good foot of extra height. "Good evening, Rambertz." He gestured to the grounds with his cigar. "How goes your gardening?"

"Very well now that those pesky bantlings are gone," the drider's deep baritone voice replied, the sound echoed in the chill night air. Normally, a drider was a bloodthirsty creature, quite mad and most definitely dangerous, but Rambertz had been spared that fate, and perhaps that fact had made his change even more torturous.

As they are raised, the drow elves undergo many tests of servitude towards Lolth, the spider goddess. If they fail, they are punished by being misshapened and cursed to live on in the madness of being a drider. Most of these tests are purposely made by priestesses of Lolth, others are the result of fate. Rambertz passed his tests, it was fate however that had decreed that he would become a drider.

Priestesses hold power in the Church of Lolth, but Rambertz belonged to a special order of monks. Vowed to silence, obedience and to be the fodder of the Church, the young drow monk was eager to kill in servitude to his merciless goddess. Then came the fateful day he led a troop of men on a raid to the surface. In the confusion of the raid, he was separated from the soldiers

He was left behind. He was afterall, only a male, and in drow society males ranked just above slaves.

When the sun came up, he saw a beauty unknown to his underdark eyes and quickly forsook his vows to Lolth, pledging new vows to Lathander Morninglord. It was that day, his first day in the overworld, that would change his life, his outlook on it, forever. It also cursed him, for when his drow kin found out and dragged him back to face punishment, he was perverted magically into the mindless monster: a drider.

Then on a day many years ago, the madness subsided, the spell warped. Something had went wrong with the spell that had held him in servitude. With a cry of vengeance, Rambertz surged forth and killed his captors before fleeing to the surface. He could only thank the Morninglord for his sudden release.

That strange twisted path shone in the sadness that poured from Rambertz eyes. Even now as he tinkered away at night, giving the plants of the academy compound new energy through his druidic magic, he felt the pain of his curse. He stayed hidden during the day and only worked at night, the prime reason why people weren't allowed to be outside at night. During the day he transformed himself into a creature of the sun and forest, usually an eagle so he can fly around the city and feel the glory of the sun on his wings.

Despite that, his shapeshifting skills were limited and the drider was always forced to return to his cursed form. He had tried many times to remove the magic of his transformation but the dark rites that had changed him were too powerful and even the strongest of mages and clerics could only offer temporary relief.

Marque Draque too had sought a cure for the drider, but not out of friendship, but out of pity for the beast and his own hatred of looking upon the misshapen form. Rambertz saw the hatred of his form every time he faced the drow and saw it in his eyes, tried to ignore it but couldn't help but wonder where this hatred stemmed from. What had happened to Marque in the past?

Only Doctor Pierce knew, and Rambertz was glad of that fact. He really didn't want to know where Draque's hatred sprung from.

Hiram passed through the swinging batwing doors of the kitchen carrying a wooden spoon, and a bowl of nuts mixed with dried bits of fruit. He walked through the halls lazily, his broad shoulders and shaved head causing the students, both young and old, to stand aside. He was not a large man, rather he was of average height and built like a moose. His skin was a weather worn leathery hide and many a student was scared of his hardy visage.

Hardly the image of a chef, but he didn't care. No one poked fun at his apron unless they really wanted to get in the boxing ring with him. His glare alone could chill hot chilly, so whispered the rookies.

He passed several dwarven carpenters working on a window. It seemed like there was always something being built here at the Academy. Whether it was fighting arenas, more gardens or refining the current buildings, there was always something. So long as they didn't touch his kitchen he was happy.

Munching on his breakfast, the ex-boxer wished he had added some fresh milk or even some cream. Recently he had found he was getting pickier with his food, desiring to spice it up more, alter it somehow. Maybe its just the cold weather getting to me, he mused.

Entering the amphitheatre, he took a place along the wall and leaned against it, eating his breakfast and studying the anxious rookies fighting back forth, blades flashing in the air. The sun streamed down upon the combatants from the windows and mirrors placed strategically in the domed ceiling so that every part of the amphitheatre was lit. He smiled up at those windows knowing that a druidic dweomer was at work amplifying its brightness.

A scream from the floor and the one of the youths crumpled to the ground, his hand going to his chest. His opponent and referee rushed to his aid, as did many others who turned and ran for help.

Hiram hurdled seats and ran up to the quickly drawing crowd of people just in time to see the youth stand and knock his opponent's blade away and pin his neck with a rapier. A sudden silence followed. A simply acting ploy perhaps but that last move had been amazingly quick and was no small feat of finesse.

"I withdraw," the youth's opponent said quickly, taking several quick steps back, feeling his neck to make sure there was no blood there.

Hiram drew closer to the youth, a fiery red-headed boy of seventeen winters. He didn't look like much more than a pretty face and yet the chef knew better than that. This boy had the look of one of the rich brats that hang out in the slums just for the excitement.

"You think so eh?" Pierce glanced at the youth from across the grounds. He smiled at his own words and looked back at his father. He knew exactly what his father was thinking.

Hiram nodded and went back to munching on his cereal. "He's enroled as a commoner and yet I'd swear he's had formal training. That's not something you come across easily unless your father happens to be a fighter."

Pierce nodded in agreement. "I'll meet you in the cafeteria for dinner okay?"

Hiram never answered and simply waved over his shoulder as he walked away.

Walking across the grass Pierce arrived at the training rope, which was, essentially, a large, braided enchanted rope that dangled from an ancient maple. Students swung at it with wooden swords, learning a rhythm as the rope fought back, trying to tangle up its opponent. To win, the student was required to either tangle the rope up in the tree's limbs or impale it on one of its holes knotted into the rope.

"Ignazio d'Or?" the Doctor said more than asked. He had to remind himself to ask these questions. Too often in the past people started to catch on to his powers. He hid them on the basis that he didn't like being separated from the crowd. It was lonely being the only one.

The red-headed youth turned, batting away the rope without even looking. He stepped closer and looked up at Pierce. "Yes, but its Ignazio the Fourth. Yes milord?"

"I'm not a lord," Pierce said with a grimace and leaned against the tree. "But you didn't tell your instructors that you've already had formal training."

Ignazio nodded. "My uncle Valentino suggested that it would be better if I was enroled as a commoner so as to not appear too fancy." He looked up, his thoughts betraying his admiration for the warrior before him. "My family isn't very rich, Sir, but we do maintain certain disciplines." His voice trailed off and he recited mentally the family motto: *Pride Is All There Is*.

"I know your family well," Pierce said quickly, drawing the Ignazio's attention back to him. "They would sooner have let Valentino die rather than admit to his mistake." The youth's face flushed as he agreed with him yet his pride demanded that he fight back against the insult to his family. "Yet," the Doctor said quickly. "You and I both know someday your family will shine again." He paused. "That's why you want to adventure right?"

Ignazio swallowed and nodded.

"Well then let's get started," Pierce said abruptly. He stood up straight and drew the silver longsword that had been his mother's. He took several steps back and gestured with his left hand to the youth's swordbelt lying on the ground. "You're going to need a good instructor for the amount of wealth you desire, and I'm the best there is."

Eyes down, yet mind reeling, Ignazio stooped and drew his rapier from the embroidered sheath. When he raised his eyes it was accompanied by a fierce swing and follow up thrust.

Which could have killed Pierce were not the warrior expecting the thrust. He deflected the boy's attacks effortlessly, all the while he was assessing the boy's strategy. Which was non-existent, he quickly concluded. Everything was pure hack and slash, all the speed and agility was there, but it lacked any form of plan.

A plan. Pierce had learned that so many years ago, but he hadn't learned it until his father had put him in the boxing ring and showed him what boxing was really about. Strength forged of guts and intelligence. If you lost either intelligence or guts you'd soon be knocked senseless and the rest of the fight would be wild swings, and thus miss.

Pierce almost yawned as he deflected another attack effortlessly. "Lad, you have got to start planning more. My father told me of that acting trick you pulled in the amphitheatre. That was a good move but you still need to strategize each and every swing."

"Every swing? I can't do that! I can't even pull that acting trick since you won't swing back!"

"You want me to swing back?"

"Yes!"

Pierce shrugged and tossed the longsword to his other hand and brought it down in a half swing. He waited for Ignazio to move to deflect it, then he rolled his shoulder and brought the blade into a thrust from the side, ripping the youth's shirt. He pulled back on the thrust, not wanting to disembowel him.

He gave a quick stretch, knowing he would need it or else risk putting a really bad krink in his back. He feinted up and then dodged under Ignazio's parry, his blade snagging the shirt once more and shredding the back of it.

Many thoughts of awe awakened him to the fact that there was many people watching now, pausing in their own fights to watch the excitement. He took two steps back and knelt as Ignazio turned quickly.

And tripped on Pierce's outreached foot. Before he could even fall Pierce had caught him and levelled the blade to his neck.

Ignazio ignored his anger and tried to smile, albeit feebly.

"You'll do okay," Pierce said with a smile, letting the boy go and sheathing his longsword. "Keep practicing but keep in mind: Strategy is all." The connection to the d'Or family motto was obvious and Ignazio wouldn't be able to forget it now, so closely it was tied to his pride.

Very little moonlight crept through the clouds overhead and darkness once again swept over the compound, sleep taking its resident students. Except for two youths who once again had decided to forgo the warnings of Marque Draque. This time they crept into the domed amphitheatre, their way lit by Mitch's magic longsword which glowed a light blue.

Pierce sat in a dark corner of the huge domed room, waiting for them. Rich brats, dandies, he surmised as they entered. Always thinking they could get away with breaking the rules so long as their families paid for the fines and bail. He sighed and sat back to watch for awhile.

Brek drew his own blade, an elven sword, its quality obvious to Pierce's keen eyes. It too was magical, but not as much as the other. Elven steel was hard to come by at all and usually had to be a gift. Brek's father was a wealthy merchant and had ties with elves obviously.

The veteran warrior looked down at his two favourite blades, Tarrasqueslayer and Sidekick. Dwarven sabers fashioned of adamantite and then enchanted by Marque Draque. Strapped across his back, he wore his mother's longsword, which was also magical with special properties against elementals.

It was true that the first saber had killed the Tarrasque, or rather chopped its head off. The great beast would have regenerated and returned had they not found a way to dispose of it. It was immune to fire and acid was the only other form of destroying it. There had been no lakes of acid present however and the only solution came from Marque Draque's portable hole, an extradimensional magic hole that he stored his belongings in. They had gathered up the tarrasque's regenerating remains with the aid of an air elemental, and shoved it all in the magic hole. Draque tied the hole shut and Pierce used Witter's saber, Planereacher, to destroy it.

That encounter had not been without a cost, he recalled. He reached up and plucked at his gray hair. Marque Draque's numerous spells he had cast that fateful day on him had aged him a couple years.

Forcing his mind back to his friend Witter, his mind wandered to the weapons adorning his bedchamber. Spitzer and Planereacher, two sabers of

incredible magic power, yet only a portion of the power of Tarrasqueslayer and Sidekick contained. He really needed a new name for the left saber. Sidekick sounded so demeaning to a sword that was actually the more powerful of the two.

For some unknown reason he felt that the sword had feelings, an intellect of its own, yet hid its power from its master. For many years now Sidekick had become a trusted friend, the magical and psionic powers invested in it amplifying his own powers of telepathy and foresight.

His foresight interrupted his thoughts and told him that something seriously wrong was about to happen. He looked up to the two combatants. They were locked in a test of strength, trying to wear their opponent down. They broke apart suddenly and then swung back at each other, two magical blades striking in the middle ground between the two.

Pierce had risen to his feet and was in the process of hurtling seats when the two blades met. An explosion caused by breaking a magical weapon was rare indeed for the chances of breaking a magical weapon were quite slim, combined with the random effects depending on what part of their magical enchantments buckled under the strain.

"Marque Draque, where are you?" the Doctor demanded as the fiery explosion threw the two youth's apart, singeing their skin and burning their eyebrows off. They collapsed to the floor, more in shock than in pain.

A relative silence followed as Pierce ran across the marble tiles and stooped at Mitch's body. He drew his mother's sword and swept it over the boy's body, the magic blade's powers quenching the fires that lingered on his clothes. Next he moved to Brek, who had survived the blast quite well with the exception that a large portion of his hair had been burnt away and would take many weeks before he looked even half-way normal again.

Still something wasn't right and every defensive instinct told him he was missing something. He looked back to the two blades. The elven blade had snapped and was glowing red hot. Mitch's sword was nowhere in sight.

He stood and scanned the room. In the darkness and only slightly illuminated by the faint blue light of the magic sword, a figure was crouching and looking about. Its thought patterns were fast, confused and filled with images of a woman.

Pierce stepped closer. "You there! Who are you?"

The figure turned to face him, his eyes shining in the darkness. He lifted the blade abruptly, taking a defensive posture. "I might ask you the same thing," replied a deep voice. His thoughts were still a jumbled mess of images.

Pierce did his best to ignore the confusing messages he was receiving, recalling Marque Draque once speculating that the human mind processed several million ideas in a single day. An elf, being more intelligent and having more memory due to a longer lifespan processed even more and the number of ideas a gnome had in a day went into the billions. This man before him was undoubtedly into the billions and Pierce simply couldn't keep up.

"I'm Doctor Pierce, the headmaster. What are you doing in my Academy?"

The dim light showed the man sneer. "Well, I'm certainly not one of the statues," came the vague reply. He advanced on Pierce with unexpected ferocity, swinging the longsword in with startling speed.

The Doctor moved to deflect it with his mother's sword but his grip hadn't been ready and when the stranger twisted his blade upward it caught the hilt of Pierce's sword and he disarmed him easily.

Pierce dodged backwards, the next swing bouncing harmlessly off his breastplate as he drew both sabers and held them before him. Pushing away his thoughts, he concentrated on a simple goal: disarm his opponent.

Sparks flew as he struck out against the stranger and Tarrasqueslayer slid off the carbon black buckler covering the man's arm.

The Doctor's problem was that this was no beginner he was up against, and as their blades met, he found the stranger twisting out of his swordrange and avoiding Pierce's disarming tactics. Even when faced with two sabers instead of one, the stranger parried them both away with a simple swing and pressed his own attack.

Pierce deliberately stepped into the thrust and the blade slid harmlessly off his breastplate to the side. Over many years he had deliberately trained himself, like his father had in the boxing ring using his fists as shields, to use his armour to full advantage. Using both sabers he swung in twin arcs towards the stranger's neck.

And was kicked backwards onto the floor, his blades never reaching his foe. He raised Tarrasqueslayer to block a chop that would have sliced his leg off but the stranger's strength proved superior and the saber was knocked from his grasp. Even so, the magic blade still sliced his leg.

A candle flickered and a tiny creature composed of glowing blue flames leapt out of the fire onto Marque Draque's onyx scroll-top desk. It ran across the desk to the slumbering wizard, and pulled a cigar from the mage's pocket. The burning figure lit the cigar and then poked it gently into the drow's cheek.

"Ouch!" Draque yelped and stood quickly, rubbing his face where he had been burnt. He glared down at the fire faerie. "Whats wrong? Whats happening?"

The faerie sprouted wings of orange flame and flew towards the door, tugging on the handle. It looked to Draque anxiously.

The drow grabbed a large glowing emerald and followed the faerie towards the dome.

Instincts flew into action and Pierce rolled to the left, coming to his feet in time to parry aside the stranger's swing. He backed away cautiously from the man now carrying both Tarrasqueslayer and Mitch's longsword. Foresight in hand, he jabbed out his foot, caught the crosspiece of his mother's sword and flipped it upward into the air with his toe.

Even before it landed in his hand his attention was focused on parrying away Mitch's sword and ducking under the reach of Tarrasqueslayer. He dodged backwards with a smile, foresight telling him once more that Marque Draque's warning spell had went off and the drow was on his way.

The stranger, his face lit by the glowing magical blades, sensed that something was wrong in Pierce's new tactics and backed away towards the doorway.

A moment later another oak door opened with a bang and Marque Draque entered, his way lit by a fire faerie. He smiled and placed a cigar in his mouth, giving Pierce's foresight time so the warrior could run for cover. He held up a hand, pointed two fingers and twin arcs of blue-white light flew towards the stranger.

The first struck the man in the chest, throwing him backwards into a heap. Whereas the second struck Tarrasqueslayer and travelled up the warrior's arm to shock him even more. Dropping the hot blade, he rolled through the doorway out of sight.

"How badly are you injured?" Draque demanded, running towards the Doctor.

"Just my leg, I've got two of them," Pierce spat with a half-grimace, half-smile, realizing how much it stung as the pain finally started to register in his brain. As always he was a little annoyed at how motherly Draque was at times. Even when they had first started out adventuring together, Pierce's foresight had been a mystery to the mage and they had went through many experiments to determine its range, strengths and weaknesses. "And even should I lose it, I'm sure you could replace it."

Draque ignored him and ripped the arm off his tunic, using it as a crude bandage which he tied quickly with a cantrip spell even as Pierce ran across the domed amphitheatre and scooped up Tarrasqueslayer. "I'll alert the guard and wake the rest of the barracks," he shouted after the Doctor. "Keep your wits about you!"

Pierce grunted and ran down the hallway in pursuit of the stranger's footsteps.

Taking a scroll from his belt marked 'Display', Draque looked up at the windows in the domed ceiling with a wicked smile. The spell, designed by a colleague was actually several spells bound together into one big explosion of magical energy. The problem Draque had found however was that it took so damn long to learn. Using a magical scroll solved that problem when it came to emergencies such as this.

Unrolling the scroll, Draque glanced at the fire faerie who flew up to provide the mage with light to read. Speaking the arcane words, he lifted his hand to an open window. His smile spread as he felt the warm glowing feeling of power building within him and travelling up his arm, ready to be released.

The sharp bang and crackling explosions that followed woke up more than half of Waterdeep and alerted the watch that not only was there something wrong at the Academy of Combat, but it was also a pretty impressive display of fireworks. Among those who heard the call to arms was a bald drunk named Martinez, a warrior who despite his frequent bouts with the bottle was a Harper who had fought alongside Doctor Pierce on more than one occasion.

Hefting his longflail, a weapon that was more quarterstaff than flail, in one hand, and giving out a belch that sobered him as much as he ever was these days, the warrior charged down an alley way and spat out a word of magic that made him airborne as he used a spell that allowed him to ride the wind. A normal mage would have realized that the wind was heading the wrong way but then again, a normal mage wouldn't have been a sailor in his youth and would know how to tack into the wind and still use it to his advantage.

Help was on the way.

It was incredibly, Pierce's thoughts whispered to himself. This warrior, a stranger totally unknown of, was a superior warrior than he. He found it hard to believe. True, he had never set out to become the best of the best, but he had also become accustomed to being the best, and therefore, unbeatable.

He stood corrected as he ran through a doorway into the foyer and was kicked in the side. Tucking his sabers into his sides so as to not stab himself with the sharp blades, Pierce rolled across the length of the foyer dodging slashes before getting to his feet to view his opponent.

Sparks flew as Mitch's blade missed again and hit the marble tiles. The stranger loomed into view, lifting the longsword before him defensively.

Pierce swallowed and held his sabers ready out in front of him. "Who are you? An assassin sent by the giffs?"

The confusion of the stranger's thoughts told him no, but one word did ring out in his thoughts that clarified the situation: Chev.

"Chev," Pierce blurted out loud and dodged backwards as the warrior swung at him, knocking over an ancient vase that fell to the marble floor with a crash. All of the sudden it was crystal clear. Chev, a bodyguard once belonging to the d'Or family. Reputed to be Waterdeep's greatest warrior over a hundred years ago. And still was Waterdeep's greatest warrior now that he had been somehow released from his magical statue.

"We don't have to fight. I'm not your enemy-"

Chev didn't hear him as he swung again. He fainted and then stabbed at the same time kicking pottery up at Pierce like a boy kicks snow at a beggar in cruel delight.

The Doctor stepped backwards, arms going up to shield his face from the flying shards. Instinctively, he angled his breastplate towards Chev's stab

so the blade slid across his breastplate. Dropping his arms down, Pierce clamped them onto the blade and wrenched it away from the warrior at the same time bringing down Tarrasqueslayer in a slash to the warrior's leg.

And was blocked once more by that annoying buckler. Pierce turned to face the man and received a headbutt to the forehead.

Falling backwards into the shadows of a doorway, Pierce lifted his sabers ready for Chev's next onslaught as the warrior picked up Mitch's longsword. "Chev. I'm not your enemy."

The warrior merely spat and swung down, his blade aimed to knock the saber out of Pierce's hand. Instead, he went flying off to the side into another vase. A new prescence was in the room and Pierce struggled to retain his wits as Draque had told him so he could understand the nature of this new person.

A weathered face with a balding head came into view. He kneeled and held out a hand to the fellow Harper which Pierce quickly took.

Standing, the two faced off against Chev as they had once faced off against the Tarrasque fourteen years ago. Pierce reminded himself that Martinez had once been the greater warrior, a man awed by all as one of the best, if not the best of the best. Even Witter had looked up to Martinez who at that time had been the captain of a famed elven cavalry despite being human.

Martinez took his longflail in both hands and twirled it like a quarterstaff. Taking the first step in he allowed Pierce a quick moment to breathe as he tested Chev's defenses which proved to be flawless.

It was Martinez, although quite sober now, who couldn't keep up with Chev's superior speed and he fell under a quick stab to the leg, limping backwards, blocking the warrior's attacks as best he could.

Pierce stepped in with renewed vigor. The smell of blood was hot in the evening air and the adrenaline pumping through his veins was like warm cider to a sore throat. He exchanged slash with slash, ignoring the scratch along his forearm that Chev managed, pushing the warrior backwards out of sheer determination with a little help by the burning desire to end this fight.

Never before had he felt the power in his heart pounding blood through his ears so loud it was hurting. Never before had he wanted to win like this. Always before it had been the adventure and the enjoyment that came with a good fight. Now, for some strange inexplicable reason, it was personal.

Chev saw that hatred in the pale moonlight as he backed onto the marble stairs leading down to the main gate. He knew that with Pierce at an elevated position and with his own strength starting to sap he could not last long. He took a quick step forward into what Pierce thought might be a charge but instead it was leverage for a backflip that sent the warrior flying through the air and landing in a roll at the base of the stairs.

A moment to breathe calmed Pierce's nerves and his momentum was lost as he relaxed. He realized how tired he was, the fatigue and strain bearing down on him. Looking back at Martinez limping through the door he knew that neither of them could follow Chev when their legs were slowing them down.

He bit his lip as he thought furiously. He didn't want Chev to get away yet had no choice in the matter. He thought frantically for something he could use but knew ahead of time, like he always did, that nothing would help him.

But Chev didn't know that.

"Leave Chev." Pierce said quietly and the warrior at the base of the stairs looked up at him strangely. "Get out of my home!"

With a peculiar salute with Mitch's longsword, Chev turned and charged to the gates. They were locked but the warrior was far from weak, as many legends had told, kicking the gates open with one heavy boot. He disappeared into the darkness.

Pierce collapse to the marble stairs, leaning on a saber to keep himself upright.

"Don't it just piss ye off?" asked Martinez, spitting out a wad of blood and spittle. Pierce knew the warrior was refering to not being able to run after Chev. He sat down beside him and uncorked a bottle of whiskey. He took a quick drink and offered it to Pierce.

The Doctor took the putrid tasting stuff and took a long drink. He sniffed the air and frowned at his sabers. "Yep," he said with a sigh as he glared up at the heavens.

In 153 years Waterdeep had changed in more ways than one, but the landmarks were still the same. Perhaps the biggest change had been during the Time of Troubles when denizens from the abyss had poured through a hole in reality to lay seige to the city. The fighting had taken to the streets and the battle had raged back and forth within the city, many buildings being destroyed in the process.

Regardless, Chev knew instinctually the places where he would best find rest and time to lick his what little wounds he had. In a dark alley along the docks he walked into an inn called the Last Hammock, and promptly killed the one-eyed innkeep with a single sword thrust. There were no patrons and no other staff to notice his actions as he nailed the front door shut. He worked until the sun peaked the cliff to the east, boarding up the every corner of the slummy inn, preserving his safety when he finally lay down on top of the bar to rest.

From behind the bar he grabbed a bottle of old black rum, broke the neck of the bottle off and poured the thick black stuff into glass after glass. When the bottle was empty Chev threw it across the room and closed his eyes. The confusion in his mind, the fury that had come with it was starting to level out.

From stone eyes he had seen everything before him in the last 153 years. He knew countless secrets and horrors about the d'Or family. This time however he would not be protecting them. They had wanted him dead. Now it was their turn to die.

"Holy Sword of Ao," swore Pierce as the cleric probed his wounded leg. "Why can't you just heal it and be done with it?" He was in too much pain to read the man's thoughts, and trying to concentrate on pink butterflys so he could ignore the pain wasn't exactly helping right now.

"Because if it hurts as much as you seem to think it does its probably infected and I can't heal that," the cleric of Konarr replied sternly. He pulled a quill from his vest pocket and poked the deep wound.

Pierce's leg spasmed and he nearly blacked out from pain. He grunted and gritted his teeth. He spat out blood from biting his tongue and looked up expectantly as the door opened.

Marque Draque smiled and led several students within. "Now class, as you can see this is very painful. Just look at the sweat pouring down the dear Doctor's face!" He winked and Pierce made a conscious attempt to smile. "Keep that in mind when you go out adventuring, its not wise to go running off into a fight without properly bandaging any wounds so they will heal without infection." He paused for emphasis. "And trust me, infection alone can kill a man. At the very least they can embarrass you!"

Pierce cursed Marque Draque mentally for this embarrassment but supposed he deserved it. He could have waited a while longer to tighten the bandage better but he hadn't. One of his weaknesses of not being able to foresee anything beyond the near future he supposed.

He did however foresee the dinner bell ringing and the students racing out of the room like a stampede of minotaurs towards the dining hall. Thank the gods everyone likes my father's cooking, he reminisced. He was about to grin up at Draque when he foresaw intense pain and looked down at the cleric sharpening a scalpel with a spell.

A moment later he passed out from the sheer pain.

"Well, its certainly turned into a favourite topic for gossiping," Hiram grinned and wiped his thick hands on his apron. He jocked a finger towards a group of serving girls who had stopped to talk with several students about last night's excitement. "Strange how rumours of a fight can get around so quick even though there were only a few people involved, eh?"

Draque smiled briefly and sat down at his table in the corner of the packed dining hall. "Did I mention that Martinez was a bard before he started to lose his hair?" He motioned the ex-boxer to join him as he popped the cork off a bottle of drow vodka. "No doubt he went out, got drunk and wandered from every inn and tavern in Waterdeep spreading the tale."

"Wasn't he injured too?" The broad man sat down and studied the clear liquid that poured from the bottle. The smell alone made him thirsty.

"Aye, Chev seems to like aiming for the legs. Doesn't matter to Martinez though. He's built like stone and even tougher when it comes to pain. He'll be healed up in no time." The elf smiled fondly. "There is a persistant rumour that when he was in his youth, at a mage school, of course, he developed and fermerted a wine that worked as a healing potion."

Hiram grinned and did his best imitation of a drunken sailor's drawl: "And any sailor worth his weight in whiskey will tell ye he didn't stop drinkin' when he was all heal'd up!"

Draque laughed heartily and drew stares from several nearby students. It was rare that the elf ever broke a smile let alone laughed. Reminding himself of his reputation, he frowned and drew out two halves of a black adamantite sword and laid them on the table in front of Hiram.

The longsword was flawlessly smooth and well crafted, the crosspiece was etched with ruins while the handle was bound in gold chain for extra grip. Hiram stared at the skull-shaped pommel most of all and it stared back at him with ruby eyes that seemed to follow his every movement.

Pierce's father pursed his lips and picked up the hilt. He dropped it immediately and it fell with a hollow clunk. He could feel the evil in the blade. With a look of wonder, he stared up at Draque.

"It's Chev's magical sword, Gravebringer. When Brek's blade exploded, one end went flying across the amphitheatre and broke the marble sword of Chev's statue. That was what released him from the spell. Now," Draque said, lifting the two-foot long piece of black adamantite. He sighed. "This was a magnificent sword. Evil, yes, but a magnificent sword nevertheless."

"And you want to fix it?" Hiram said, eyeing the evil blade.

"It was crafted by a master drow craftsman. Unlike other drow blades it hasn't rusted away on the surface. Perhaps because of the special way it was forged-"

"How do you know all this?" Hiram demanded abruptly.

"I asked it."

"Oh! And I suppose it answered you eh?"

"As a matter of fact it did. The blade is sentient. Alive and quite aware that we are talking about it." Draque looked down at Gravebringer, studying it speculatively. "And it knows I'm going to disassemble its enchantment too, thus killing it."

Hiram swallowed and looked at the skull-shaped pommel. He wasn't so thirsty anymore.

Pierce grimaced from behind his oak desk as he sat down and looked out the bay window of his office. Normally, such an office would be positioned at the back of the huge building in the centre so to achieve symmetry and balance, something that tended to bestow a sense of authority, but the Doctor had decided against that formality, wanting it to be less formal and more open. In the end he had chosen a room on the third floor off to the side of the stairs. It was adjoined to his private chambers and had a glorious view of the gardens and orchard outside, and in the distance, a view of Waterdeep itself.

There was no knock on the door as Mitch entered followed by his father, Lord Clinton who owned a castle south of Waterdeep. The man was more merchant than noble and that fact was reflected in the new age architecture of his fortress, which had been built to impress people, and in

the event of a true battle, would be almost useless. Nevertheless, the merchant-lord commanded a great deal of power with his own small army of men in his service to protect his goods.

Among these men were several hired wizards who manufactured magical weapons and items for both use by his men and for sale. The manufacture of magical items however was costly in the extreme, each casting of the spell *Permanency*, according to *Marque Draque*, weakened a mage and stole from his life force. Yet the three mages working for Lord Clinton suffered no hazards of health and were still turning out large numbers of magical weapons, something that intrigued many wizards, *Draque* among them.

Lord Clinton himself was an imposing man, a fellow adventurer in his youth who had retired in luxury to raise a family. He suffered no wrinkles or gray hairs yet, his mages undoubtedly being well paid to prevent that. Another intriguing fact that bothered *Pierce*.

The Doctor ignored that focusing on the fact that Clinton was boiling mad at having his son expelled from the Academy. This would prove to be a sticky situation, *Pierce* foresaw immediately, seeing many random possibilities for the future ranging from Clinton leaving happily with his son re-enrolled or trying to kill *Pierce* and swearing vengeance for his humiliating defeat.

Time to change the topic and give Clinton the political run about, *Pierce* almost muttered under his breath as he stood and held out his hand. "G'day Lord Clinton, I'm sure you're here concerning your son's recent expellment. Please take a seat, both of you."

Clinton shook it and sat down, motioning his son to do the same. "I'd like to talk about that. Don't you think that was a bit rash expelling him without taking the time to talk it over with me?"

"No. In fact I deemed that move best for your son's safety," *Pierce* replied, thinking quickly. "He was in direct violation of the boarding rules. You could, of course, have him board within the city, and he could walk to the Academy everyday, as many of my students already do. The more important fact is that the Academy is not a place for private duels, at any time whether it be night or day." He made a point of looking directly at *Mitch*, who lowered his eyes and stared at the floor. "That is a law that surrounds all of *Waterdeep* and the Academy is no exception. He could have easily have been thrown in jail last night for tha havok he caused."

"And what of the Victor boy? Brek?"

"He's still in our infirmary being treated for his injuries. He asked to resign as soon as he was well enough to walk. He's not injured that badly, its more shock from the magical explosion. I doubt he'll ever be an adventurer now. He said he was going to pursue his first love and try to become a bit of a bard. Seems to think it will aid him in the merchant trade."

*Coward*, thought *Mitch* bitterly.

*Pierce* ignored the boy and focused on his father, who was confused as to why this was for his son's own pretection. He loved his son dearly and wished he had more in common with the boy other than the thirst for a good fight. "Back to *Mitch* however." *Pierce* said with a smile, deciding to play on the father's feelings. "He's got the guts in him no doubt and could go

adventuring any time he wants but I suggest you invest some of your own time in teaching him yourself. No doubt you miss the road yourself right?"

That surprised both father and son and they looked at each other and back to Pierce. Clinton spoke first: "I hadn't thought of that, but it might prove to be a good idea." He tapped his belly. "I've been getting too lazy of late and could use the exercise no doubt!" Already the warrior in him was coming back and he was remembering all the places he had wanted to go looking for adventure but had never had the chance. It wasn't too late was it? He looked at the older Pierce closely.

Reading his thoughts, Pierce stood and stretched. "I'm not used to being indoors this much. Much better to be outside," he said, leading the way to the door. He grimaced inwardly whenever he put weight on his right leg but refused to show it, sensing Clinton's thoughts. "After all, I have a runaway statue to catch," he said with a wink as he walked down the hallway.

Clinton stopped in the doorway and looked at his son fondly. "What say we go find ourselves some horses and supplies?"

Mitch looked up at him with newfound love and respect.

Pierce turned a corner and scanned the almost barren street. This was a ritzier part of the city where the only thing that plagued the streets was carriages, servants and beggars looking for a generous noble. Of which none existed. If they did, they wouldn't be rich for long when the beggars flocked to their door.

He had a good idea using his foresight of which direction was more likely to find Chev, and with a small group of veteran Harpers following closely behind him he had no doubts that they'd probably find the warrior within the hour. It was when it occurred to him that the d'Or Estate was just down the street that he decided it was time to pay the family a visit as this was most likely Chev's destination.

The elderly ceremonial guards at the estate's gate were actually members of the family, showing that they couldn't afford to hire guards. The pair didn't seem to mind however as they sat at the gate exchanging tales over a game of cards.

The band of warriors coming to the door surprised them a fair bit and then they saw Pierce's tell-tale antique bronze armour and relaxed. Were it not for the fact that it had become his personal symbol, Pierce would have dropped the armour years ago in favour of a suit of field plate. Now however, it was like a second skin to him. Its lack of protection in certain places had been fixed by Marque Draque's enchantments combined with Pierce's own ability to optimize the plates to maximum protection.

The problem was the lack of protection on his legs as the sharp pangs told him everytime he took a step.

Ignazio opened the door for Pierce and ushered them into a parlour room. "Would you care for anything to drink?"

Pierce held up a hand. "No, that's not necessary." He studied the boy, his mind probing into his subconscious thoughts. "We're here to speak with your grandfather and any other elders in the family."

"The statue?" Ignazio blurted.

"Yes."

"I better get mother too then," he said and disappeared with a quick bow.

Pierce glanced around the quaint room at his fellow Harpers. Only Martinez stood at ease, although that was probably due to the bottle of elvenquiss tucked into his belt. He leaned against the wall with his longflail dangled from his shoulder as usual, his leather armour worn a different colour where the chain rubbed constantly.

The Doctor yawned and knew this would be a long wait. He looked around at the other four Harpers: Iacova, a simple swordsman perhaps but his skills at stealth were superior to the average assassin; Thirza, a half-elf enchantress; Kanute, a large and highly skilled warrior with a honest face; Cap'n Tyn, an old seadog. They were all uneasy about this assignment, more because it really had nothing to do with the Harpers' goal than they were afraid of Chev.

Pierce looked up expectantly as a withered old man, Ignazio the Third, hobbled in using a cane for support. Martinez stood up straight and helped the elderly man into a seat. Silence as he turned to face Pierce, his wrinkled face turning red with anger. "You wake me up to tell me something I already know happened? What do you want from me?" he rasped.

"I meant no disrespect sir. We only seek to learn more about the history of that statue your family gave us," the Doctor replied stoically. His mind delved past the older man's raw, harsh exterior and saw he was quite senile. Memories of his youth floated eternally on his thoughts, nagging him with all the mistakes he had made. "Could you tell us anything that might be of use?"

"No," the old man snapped, despite his thoughts which Pierce concentrated on. Ignazio the Third was seventy-eight but he had been related the tale by his nanny when he hadn't even been ten. This thought was followed by fond memories of the nanny telling him bedtime stories and nursery rhymes. It was amazing how easily the old man's mind wandered.

Kipriana d'Or had been Ignazio d'Or the Second's favourite daughter. When she was kidnapped by a rival merchant family, Chev completed a daring one man rescue and returned her, yet was for some unexplained reason punished and turned into a statue. It had been the nanny's theory that Chev had demanded a huge pay increase and Ignazio the Second had refused. The old man sitting before Pierce doubted that theory however, not wanting to believe it. Instead, his version said that Chev had tried to kill his grandfather and had been turned into a statue by a mage in self defense.

Nevertheless, Pierce was positive that this would help him somehow. The question was how?

He turned abruptly towards the window in fear, foresight warning him of the onslaught to come. He hurled himself at the old Ignazio, pulling him

to the floor using his body as a shield as the window exploded inwards, showering everyone with glass. The old man would have died under such an assault. Instead he was only unconscious and already dreaming of warmer days.

Crouching over the old man's body defensively, Pierce turned to face Chev.

The warrior shook the glass off his armour and held Mitch's longsword out in front of him. The Harpers looked at the warrior in awe for a moment. Chev, now that Pierce could finally see him in daylight, was no small man. He towered about six-foot-four with a body build any warrior would envy. Strength and grace combined into an almost perfect warrior. He had executed the jump through the window perfectly, much like the backflip the night before.

As if he wasn't already incredible, Chev's square jaw, clear complexion and sharp blue eyes made him quite handsome judging by Thirza's immediate hopes that they didn't have to kill him. Pierce stepped forward into the light, using the symbol of his armour shining in the light to remind her who's side she was on.

The warrior's face broke into a grin and he stared directly at Pierce even as he watched out of the corner of his eye, the Harpers circle around him in a ring. "We meet again Doctor Pierce. Do you know why I'm here?"

Chev's mind was open to the headmaster at last. He sought revenge. The annihilation of every member of the d'Or family. Of which there was quite a few.

"The two guards at the gate?" Pierce asked, already knowing the answer.

"Quite dead."

Vicious and without mercy, Chev slashed out with the longsword as quick as lightning, taking Cap'n Tyn's head from his shoulders. Even before it hit the ground he had blocked Iacova's swordthrust and disarmed the swordsman with a quick slash to the man's wrist.

Kanute stepped forward swinging his huge two-handed sword and was blocked easily by that annoying buckler which absorbed the blow. He stepped backwards while Chev pressed forward with a thrust, which turned out to be a feint. The gullible warrior took the bait however and swung downwards, his huge sword getting knocked out of his hands when it struck the floor.

Thirza, startled by the sheer speed in which Chev moved, fell backwards over the sofa, coming to her feet with her spell component already in hand: a piece of solidified milk fat used normally for making cheese.

Suddenly, Pierce felt somewhat awkward and unsure. He glared at her questioning.

"It's an area spell! It's centred on Chev!" she yelled in response as she backed away and tripped on a rug. "It makes everyone clumsy!"

Moving slowly and deliberately, Pierce stepped backwards and lifted the old Ignazio over his shoulder.

Martinez held out a hand and motioned to Pierce. His thoughts told the Doctor to hand the old man over. With a quick grunt, he passed the man

onto the bald warrior's shoulder and stepped back to face Chev. Pierce's skills would be needed now.

Chev, as the centre of the spell, was also moving slowly and deliberately. He backed towards the window, knowing his skills were being hampered and that perhaps now was not a good time. He growled in anger and leapt backwards out the window.

And tripped on the sill, falling headfirst into the grass below.

The fighters charged after Chev and tripped over themselves in their mad rush, sprawling on the floor in the broken shards of glass.

"Thirza," Martinez said from the hallway. "Isn't there another version of the Fumble spell you could have cast? The one which only affects a single person?"

The enchantress swallowed and nodded. "Yes, but I didn't memorize it. I was meaning to use it during a bar brawl sometime." She gave a weak smile. "It worked though right?"

Pierce groaned from the floor. He had hit head against the wall and it smarted more than he cared to admit. "Yes. It definitely worked. I just wish it hadn't worked on me." He sighed and sat up, eyes immediately going to Tyn's head beside him. "I think we can officially say Chev is a threat to Waterdeep," he said, dusting himself off.

He looked about at his fellow Harpers, seeing their anxious expressions. Martinez and the others didn't agree, as it was obvious that Chev's focus was primarily the d'Or family. A family composed of more corruption and greed than the average Waterdhavian could imagine.

Perhaps they were right, but Pierce didn't like ignoring his instincts.

There was an air of confusion and haste as the d'Or family left Waterdeep the next day aboard several of their merchant ships. They spared no expense at safety, right down to the last cousin. No one was to be left behind. The family went south, their sails raised and full.

Pierce and Marque Draque watched in silence as the ship disappeared over the horizon, each feeling uneasy about this abrupt arrangement. Chev was a wanted man, but it only went as far as the city watch, as he was no threat to the Harpers.

Or at least that's what Marque Draque thought. Pierce knew the drow's thoughts as well as his own and he fidgeted on the deck. His hand constantly kept going to the hilt of Tarrasqueslayer, which he tried to ignore but knew that he was anxious to greet Chev once more in battle.

All of his senses told him the warrior was still in Waterdeep, which boded well for the d'Or family and yet Pierce still felt the family was doomed to never be seen again. He swallowed and led the way under the deck of the Harper owned ship.

Chev had watched as the d'Or family departed also. Had watched in vain. The dock had been swarmed with hired soldiers, all wanting a piece of him. Someone had passed around sketches of him and already his sword had been used several times today, fresh blood still on the blade.

Now, wandering the streets in vain he vented his frustration by shoving through the crowds of people, picking his fights against those who didn't like to be shoved. He was far from weak, even after so many years of being trapped it made no difference; he was as young and strong as ever.

Yet not alive. Not truly alive, in the true sense of the word. His soul was dead, beyond repair and he knew it. He had been tortured for what had seemed an infinity, and during that rare moment of the Time of Troubles, the fact that he couldn't move was doubled tenfold. Before, he had simply been held still without ability to move even the slightest, but the Time of Troubles, when magic had become unstable, gaps in the magic that preserved him appeared. They had stung him like pins or hot coals, and still he could not move. Could not scream.

Oh, but now! Now he could move! Every step he took was a joy to be able to move again. He felt power and certainty in his step and his arms ached to feel the vicious cuts he would dig when he found his revenge.

Revenge. The word knawed at him as he walked calmly into a livery and shoved his sword through the neck of a stablehand. Even before the boy had slumped to the ground, the reins were in Chev's hands and his foot reaching for the stirrup.

He looked around in a daze as a man screamed and shouted for the guards. With a face of stone, Chev clenched the sword in his hand and ran the man down. Out into the street he rode, bloody sword in hand while people fled from his path, shouting and screaming in alarm.

Shoving the blade in his belt, he paid them no heed as he spurred the horse mercilessly, driving it southward. He had no time for this nonsense. He could take on a hundred men quite confidently, his strong heart telling him that a single swing or thrust would kill any one of these fools Waterdeep kept as guards.

With no doubts in his mind, he rode south out of the city towards Bravepike Manor. It was there he had defeated his enemies the last time. Massacred the whole works of them. Now the castle belonged to the d'Or family, and they were no doubt headed there. They didn't know that he had seen and heard their every secret for the last century and a half. They'd never know.

The wood split apart easily and fell into two slabs on each side of the cutting block. Pierce hefted the axe over his shoulder and moved another wood block in place. Down came the axe, his fury driving the axe downwards, driving through wood and getting stuck in the cutting block.

Marque Draque watched from the shadows of the basement. Pierce knew he was there of course. It wasn't a matter of hiding, it was a matter that

the furnace with its billowing smoke and seething flames cast a light that hurt his weak eyes.

The Doctor grunted and pulled the axe out, stumbling back a step from the effort. He swore inwardly and shoved another block of wood in place. Down came the axe again, a curving angle that ended in splintering wood. Throwing the axe to the side, he picked up the smaller pieces and threw them into the furnace. He slammed the furnace door shut with his foot.

Draque pursed his lips and lit a cigar in the darkness. Placing it between his charcoal lips he breathed in the smoke and watched the tip of the cigar burn more brightly as it sought the ever precious oxygen in the air.

Pierce hacked and spat. His eyes were rimmed with red but it wasn't from the smoke of either furnace nor cigar. He threw down his leather gloves and rubbed his cheeks to get the life back into them.

Draque breathed out the smoke. His eyes wrinkled as he looked at Pierce. "You know, with all our current funds, we could get a gnomish furnace down here. I could place some magical safeguards on it of course in the event of an explosion, of course. Then we wouldn't have to worry about heating the place in the fall and winter."

The warrio shook his head. "Not worth it. I can tell you right now that the gnomes would insist on expanding this room and then later volunteering-" he said the word sarcastically. "-to set up a experiment laboratory down here."

"How about a gate to the elementally plane of fire perhaps?" Draque asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Perhaps, but then we have the chance of a elemental slipping through and burning the place down." Pierce managed a weak smile. "Besides we all remember the last time we went up against fire elementals."

Draque remembered and grinned. "You wasted all your strength fighting them and when that ogre grabbed you and threw you against the wall you were quite ready for a long nap."

Pierce also grinned, although he remembered it a slight differently. "And then you and Witter dragged me back home to that infirmary, dropping me on my head a dozen times-"

"Strange, it didn't effect your intelligence. You're still as dumb as ever!" The drow extinguished his cigar with the heel of his boot and bolted for the door with a vengeful Pierce in pursuit.

Even as he felt his hand wrap around the cloth of the mage's cloak, Pierce knew he wouldn't actually grip it. He slammed into the door with his momentum, letting out an "Oof!" He staggered back and the door opened.

Draque popped his head inside. "Nice new spell, eh? I call it Astral Jump. Lets you made a quick leap through the astral plane and come out on the other side of things. I developed it specifically to get around prismatic wall."

Ignoring his aching jaw, Pierce peered up at the drow mage. "You better cast one of those quick before I get my hands on you. You're gonna need all the walls you can-"

He stopped abruptly, knowing Draque was already gone. He smiled despite himself, knowing the threat had meant nothing. The drow would make a good bard considering his ability to cheer someone up.

Tonight, Pierce thought as he opened the door and climbed the stairs into the chill night air, was a night he needed to be cheered up. Gazing upwards into the heavens, the constellations of the gods' staring back down at him, the fighter again felt at peace.

Normally, in a city one could never see the stars that shone overhead due to the constant lights and sounds. Waterdeep was never quiet. Even in the middle of the night people walked the streets in drunken revelry. The Academy was the exception however, a powerful enchantment of Rambertz's keeping the stars shining above and the sounds of the city dulled until it was lost in the chirping of insects.

He took a step forward into the orchard and before he knew it he was wandering from one part to the next. A night not so long ago, he had felt this way. Empassioned with the seemingly mundane services he tried to uphold for the good of all people, and yet somehow at peace with the rest of the world. Stopping at a pool of water he looked down at the reflection of the stars captured in it.

He leaned over even farther and saw his weathered face and prematurely greying hair. He was getting old far too fast for his taste. He wasn't as strong as he used to be.

Running a hand through his grey temples, he stared into the basin. Chev had pushed him back easily in that test of strength and Pierce was still considered to be incredibly strong. He could have pushed back five years ago though. Could have beat Chev to a pulp.

He wasn't so sure now though. His foresight did strange things sometimes and even now, after years of learning how it worked, he still didn't have a clue sometimes.

Feeling the despair getting to him, he dunked his head in the cold water and then brought it back up. The icy cold water ran down his face and the back of his neck. A sliver of pain as he arched his back from the sudden sensation of water rolling down under his wool tunic.

Shaking his head, he ran his hands through his hair once more before looking in the basin. As the water stilled, despite drips landing in the water and causing tiny ripples, he saw a new image: He was young again. His hair was vibrant and dark brown, almost black. It was an illusion of course, a trick of the water and its ability to make wet hair look darker.

"Pierce?" It was Rambertz behind him.

"Good evening. Beautiful isn't it?"

"Not as beautiful as the sun in all of its glory," the drider responded.

The Doctor turned and flashed a knowing smile at the druid. Shaking his head, Pierce left the water basin and headed for the warmth of his room.

Vinci d'Or studied the racing horse from his seat beside the gatehouse of Bravepike Manor. He could see it coming from a half mile away, as soon as it had crested a hill and came charging down the roads straight for him. At first it had been a vague silhouette against the rising of the sun but as the man rode closer his features grew more distinct. "A

messenger?" he mused aloud as the darkly cloaked man rode closer. Setting down his woodcarving of a loon, he stood to greet the traveller.

The cowl fell back off the man's face, his face haggard from travel. He slumped forward in the saddle and the horse slowed dramatically until it was barely a cant. Neither horse nor man looked well.

Vinci ran forward, fearing the man was dead from exhaustion, but it was he that ended up dead on the tip of Chev's blade.

The warrior dismounted calmly, shaking off his cloak. He had no need of such warmth today but the cloak had aided his disguise. His acting skills were still untarnished from time as he stepped over the crumpled form of Vinci.

Using the pommel of the sword he rapped on the gate. A holler came from inside but it was vague and unintelligible. "Open the door or let Ao spite thee!" Chev shouted. "Your guard is sick and in need of help!"

There was several curses and lots of banging around until finally the wooden gates were pried open and a guard looked out. Chev shoved his face in the door to block the man's view.

"Open it dammit! He's getting sicker by the second!"

The guard stepped out of sight and there was more shuffling around as he pulled the brace out from behind the gate to open it wider. When it was barely two hands wide Chev already had his left arm through the door and his right arm ready for a swing he knew so well.

It was too easy. He had done this before. He knew where everything was. What things he shouldn't do and what things he should. Yet this time it was so much more gratifying.

Revenge was sweet and as Dr. Pierce would say, stupidity rules.

Inside Chev's mind the past blurred with the present. Before long he was swinging at shadows of the mind and men at the same time. It was so perfectly clear inside his head. The memories so clear as if they had been yesterday.

He had come through the gate with vengeance in his heart. His longsword had flashed forward and severed the guard's head from his shoulders.

It was so simple. The other guards charged as one and died in pairs as Chev pulled every trick in the book and left behind a wake of dead bodies. The Bravepike warriors were met everywhere he went and killed on sight.

Chev killed them all. Guards. Servants. Bravepikes. Guests. All of them and they only seemed to keep coming. It wasn't until he reached the northwest tower overlooking the Sea of Swords that he started to encounter some difficulty. He was tiring down and he was surprised that he had even made it this far.

When he did, he was up against a group of the best warriors along the coast. Five of them. On the stairs leading up clockwise.

The first had been Clayton.

The two had locked together, with Clayton using his superior size and weight to push Chev back against the wall of the tower. The warrior held

him at bay with his buckler and kicked out and pushed Clayton back against the opposite wall.

Holding him there with one braced foot, Chev had sliced at the burly man and chopped the arms off him before he could respond.

Chopping off the man's legs, Chev picked up the still dying man by the neck and used him as a fleshy shield as he charged up the stairs and met the next warrior.

Rowell. A newcomer to the Bravepikes' bodyguards. Chev shoved his living shield in the man's face and while he was distracted, gutted him with his sword from underneath. The young man slumped to the ground and groped at the blood that spilled from his belly and finally bubbled up out of his throat and out his mouth.

By now Clayton had died from loss of blood but he still made a useful shield as Chev held him above his head and continued up the stairs.

Tom Truman was waiting at the top. Here Chev stopped and gauged his opponent for he knew Truman to be both a fabulously skilled warrior.

"You'll die here Chev. You know that don't you?"

"If I do, I'll still be making the history books cuz I'm taking the rest of you with me?"

"And what about Kipriana? Your dear Kipriana? Only the old dork doesn't know that you love her. He's the only one. Do you think that saving her will win you his blessing? The old damsel in distress is given to her lowly rescuer as a bride? I don't think so."

Chev wasn't listening. He charged forward and threw Clayton's dead torso at Truman's feet. The man only sidestepped and stabbed out at Chev's neck.

Up came Chev's buckler and he blocked it and held it there as he pulled his blade slowly across Truman's swordarm.

The bodyguard backed off with only a stump of an arm left and spurted blood all over.

Chev grimaced and stabbed Truman in the left arm, severing bone. He followed up by kicking the warrior's feet out from under him.

Truman lay on the floor gasping, both arms crippled. He looked up to see Chev leaning down over his face.

"For that, I shall leave you alive Truman but it will be a horrible existence for I have crippled you for life. No magic will fix your arms. Gravebringer's magic makes sure of that." Chev straightened and gave him a mock salute with the black adamantite sword. "Have a nice crippled life."

The next warrior surprised Chev from around a corner and stabbed him in the side. Together they had grappled and fallen down the stairs headfirst. Holding his buckler above his head, Chev ignored his bruises until they came to a stop at the landing where Truman was.

Rolling forward, Chev swatted Gravebringer behind him and nicked his assailant's ear. When he finally got to his feet, he saw that he had also nicked the man's temple. Looking closer he recognized the warrior as the youngest son of the Bravepike family, Gareth.

Hoping to use him as a tool, Chev severed Gareth's head from his shoulders and carried him by his hair up the stairs to where the last warrior

waited. The oldest brother Matz Bravepike and leader of the family now that their father was dead.

Gareth's bloody head clunked to the floor at Matz's feet. The Bravepike looked up in shock at Chev just in time to get a sword through his forehead.

Alone at last, Chev looked at the steel door. "Kipriana?"

"Chev?" Her voice was low and trembling.

The warrior looked at the blood covering the floor and he quickly threw the body of Matz out the window into the courtyard below. Gareth's head soon followed. Finally, he took a step back from the door and kicked.

The steel door held firmly. The door was meant to swing outwards.

For a moment Chev wondered if he had just thrown the key out the window. Angered by the possibility of a mistake, he drew gravebringer and slashed at the door's hinges repeatedly until they were useless hunks of steel dangling off the wall.

He pulled the handle and stepped to one side as the door crashed the floor. When the dust cleared, he saw her within.

Her brown hair was dirty and unkempt. Her pale face was streaked with tears and her fair skin was scarred and scratched. She looked awful indeed but to the warrior's eyes she was the goddess of beauty incarnate.

They left Bravepike Manor that very night and two days later arrived in Waterdeep with Chev's cloak wrapped around her to keep her warm. The guards who met him at the gate saw a man who was so covered in brown caked blood had first thought him to be a zombie.

He almost was too. When he got to the d'Or estate at last it was with a subdued celebration. Chev was immediately separated from Kipriana and sent to clean up before appearing before old man d'Or.

When the warrior finally entered the room, his leather armour cleaned and buckler polished. His shirt was a dashing red silk with a black sash around his middle. The moment he heard the d'Ors' mage chanting, he ripped off the sash immediately and drew Gravebringer but by that time it was too late.

A grey bolt of energy struck him in the chest and spread across his body as he was turned slowly to stone. For a moment he panicked when he realized he couldn't breathe. Then his senses, for he could still see and hear, focused on old man d'Or.

"Chev. Chev. Chev," mumbled the old man and approached the solid statue. "You did a very brave and stupid thing, and now you've paid the price. What else was I supposed to do with you? You knew I had betrothed my daughter to the Orsan lad. It wouldn't have mattered if she had died in the hands of the Bravepikes. She would have still have achieved her purpose and got the Orsan's to ally themselves with us. Now all the Bravepikes are dead and I have no competition except for the Orsan family. They don't even want her now! They think that you've corrupted her and I'm inclined to agree!"

Inside the statue Chev was fighting a mental struggle. He wanted to scream out loud. He wanted, no needed, to lash out at the man before him but couldn't so much as blink at him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kipriana crying and he wanted to soothe her and wipe the tears away.

He could do nothing though. Nothing but watch and listen.

The old man had Chev placed in the corner of his office and as the years past, the warrior watched him become more and more senile. Their money was starting to run low, the d'Or told him, and they were being forced to make alliances in order to keep their rich lifestyle.

Chev had a brief moment of joy when he learned that the old man had died late one night. He had developed an illness and a terrible cough. Finally the cough had gotten so bad that he was bleeding inside his throat. He had drowned on his own blood and Chev could only think about laughing. That joy didn't last though as he stayed where he was, eyes fixed forward, never sleeping.

Kipriana had come to him one night. There was a party down stairs and Chev could hear the musicians. She was older now and her skin was no longer pale. Standing before Chev's statue, she sipped on her drink as tears rolled down her cheeks and landed on the old red carpet. She swallowed sharply and ducked under his swordarm as she hugged him and leaned her head on his shoulder.

The repressed feelings within him built up to the point where he wanted to scream but could do nothing. He tried to order his arms to move and hug her but no such thing happened.

"I love you Chev," she whispered. She stepped back from him then and took her drink off the desk. Closing her eyes she finished it. The light in her eyes was no longer there when she opened them again. She was dead before she hit the floor.

Waterdeep was quiet today. Initially, the explosion almost a week back had shocked the city and there had been an almost instantaneous buzz of events. Then it had quieted down and grown somber. Yesterday the noise had risen more than normal when people finally started to talk more again, indeed catching up on lost conversations they should have already have.

Perhaps it was just in comparison to yesterday that it felt quieter, the Doctor wondered. Much like hot tea feels twice as hot when you've been outside in the cold for two long.

He ignored his burnt tongue and set the cup down. "Its a little hot. I'll wait for it to cool a bit before a drink anymore."

Hiram nodded and downed his cup. "Can you taste the spices?"

Pierce shook his head. "Its so hot I can barely taste it at all. You didn't put chilli powder in it did you?" He knew the answer, as he always did, but such formalities led to more information.

"A little basel and some more rare ones I bought from Shamuni Dioune, but otherwise I think they work well together." The older man stretched his arms and stood. "The trick is that I can't taste the basel although I know its in there."

Pierce smiled as his father as the old man walked away. That last statement was practically a metaphor for his formalities. He knew something was there, but couldn't taste it. Couldn't experience it until he had actually

done it. He let out a sigh and waited, knowing the drink would soon be cooler and ready to be tasted.

The black cowl slid off her head and revealed long white hair and skin the colour of onyx. Like a marble statue, she was a symbol of physical perfection. Her muscles toned and strong like an athlete's and she had the serene face of an angel as she cocked the crossbow before her.

So far down the crowded street that they barely seemed to be dots was a group of bodyguards that bestrode power. They were trolls, huge lanky things with green mottled skin and long faces and even longer claws. They were dressed in large black chainmail cloaks covered with the symbol of the drow elf goddess Lloth: the spider.

Unlike normal trolls, these walked stiffly and in formation, but the act was not one of intelligence and training but one of magic. The eight bodyguards formed a circle around a single dark figure, a woman with skin black as the night. It was she who held the beasts under control.

Surrounding the bodyguards on all sides was a good fifty Waterdeep soldiers, all keeping their distance from the trolls despite their lack of aggression. They marched as a group towards Piergeiron's Palace, the home of Waterdeep's most famous Harper. Once there, the soldiers could relax within the walls and drink away the ominous fear they felt at having trolls within the city.

The assassin shifted her cowl and lined the sights up with the back of the neck of the coveted woman at the centre of the formation of trolls. "Welcome to Waterdeep Ambassador," she muttered and pulled the trigger.

A gurgle sounded from the Ambassador as the bolt thudded into her neck and blood poured from the wound like beer from a keg. Another bolt took her in the heart soon after and a third in the head. The mass of dripping blood slumped forward and fell on the pavement like a discarded doll.

The trolls looked about for the first time, saliva dripping from their lips. They immediately tore into the ranks of the soldiers around them, their long claws stabbing through the holes in the chainmail like a hot knife through butter.

Shocked from the sudden chaos around them, the soldiers rallied against the huge trolls, using nets to disable the huge beasts and then stab them with spears through the holes in the nets. Even then the trolls still slashed through the nets in an attempt to free themselves and killed soldiers in the process. The spear hits only increased their ferocity and savageness, using their bulk strength to rip soldiers apart like a dog with his master's shoe.

Mages hurried to the scene and immediately pummeled the beasts with magical missiles until all that was left was a mass of flesh that was vainly trying to rebuild itself. The problem with trolls is their abilities to regenerate and reform. The soldiers quickly dragged the wounded and dead away from the mass of trolls while the mages prepared a series of fireballs that left the trolls as a smoldering mass of burnt flesh.

"Nothing like the smell of burnt troll to whet one's appetite," muttered the assassin as she shouldered her crossbow and disappeared around a corner.

Almost by habit, Pierce walked the grounds of the Academy right after his meal. His mind sorted through the details of recent events and he made notes for the future. The d'Or boy, the Doctor had forgot what his first name was, would have been meeting him at this time for private lessons but instead was over fifty leagues to the south. He doubted he'd see the boy again.

As he came closer to the gate he saw a familiar figure waiting. He was dressed in loose fitting trousers and a wool poncho. Both were stained brown with dirt and the knees of the trousers were worn out, showing hairy knees. The longflail dangled from one shoulder, brushing against the warrior's side.

"G'day Martinez. What news from the people?" Pierce greeted heartily. His heart wasn't in it but he didn't let that show to his friend. The problem when talking to Martinez was the man was never sober, and thus was hard to determine what he was thinking about. Currently the bald man seemed preoccupied on whether to grow a beard or not.

"Not much. Except that Valeska Ko'Ragur has become a nuisance again." The veteran warrior scratched his unshaven cheek. "She killed a drow ambassador from Menzoberranzan. The woman was here on official business concerning the smuggling of goods."

"Arquebuses or smokeweed?"

"That and more. Anyway, from what I've managed to get ahold of, this ambassador, Jovan Kerovache was her name, belongs to the Fourteenth House of Menzoberranzan. The tricky part of this house is that they have no declared alliances with any other noble house, and thus makes a perfect representative. An Embassadorial House is considered to have some form of diplomatic immunity and thus are isolated from the rest of the city's internal struggles."

"And thus, Valeska can kill her without hassel from other Noble Houses, yet the bulk of the city's merchants will still be annoyed," surmised Pierce. "And what are we supposed to do?"

"Jovan was killed twenty feet from Piergeiron's Palace with a crossbow bolt right in the neck." The bald man smiled briefly. "Followed by a bolt in the head and another in the right shoulder."

The Doctor snorted. "A crack shot as always. No wonder she was once one of the drow elves' best assassins."

"Anyway," Martinez said, his favorite word next to brandy. "We're to track down Valeska and bring her in for sentencing." His unenthusiastic voice showed how thrilled he was about tracking the elusive drow bard.

"Has it ever occurred to Durnan that Valeska has been at large for over the last century and has not once been brought in for justice? He expects us, even experienced Harpers, to be able to snag her?"

Martinez looked at his scuffed boots in response. "Durnan said we should take it as a test of our professional abilities. As far as I'm concerned

this is another case that's more suited for someone other than us. We have more important things to worry about than try to find a bard that doesn't want to be found, let alone caught."

"How about we go down to the Yawning Portal and have a word with Durnan."

"At swordpoint?" the warrior joked.

"No, but he'll certainly know I disapprove of chasing around a drow who can teleport. Surely there's something more feasible that can be accomplished."

"Like?"

"I don't know. Attacking Zhentil Keep and killing every last one of them?"

"None," was Durnan's reply. "There's nothing else I can give you. It's been awfully quiet lately and Valeska's assassination is the only thing of interest." Asides from Chev beating Pierce in a duel, he snickered inwardly.

Pierce frowned. He and Durnan rarely got along it seemed. The owner of the Yawning Portal, an inn of no small fame, was actually one of the secret Lords of Waterdeep. For a somewhat short yet broad-shouldered veteran warrior, you wouldn't have guessed it though.

The city's democratic council was made up the Lords of Waterdeep, noble-hearted Harpers with a strong sense of protecting the city. They were elected secretly by the council and kept a secret to protect from assassination from the city's many enemies. The problem with Durnan is that the council had voted to make Pierce a Lord of Waterdeep. Not once, but three times they had offered him the position in which every time Durnan voted against the warrior.

And Pierce refused everytime, claiming his first duties was to his pupils, followed by the Harpers and last to the city itself. Perhaps it was his humble-pride that told him to refuse the honor or maybe it was his foresight warning him he wouldn't have the time to spend contemplating politics.

Durnan looked around the inn's common room, eyeing the slow atmosphere this afternoon with distaste. They sat in a booth in the corner which had been protected magically from all known forms of scrying and eavesdropping.

Even so, Pierce spotted the eyes of a young woman at the far end of the bar following their lips. She was too far away to reach her mind. Keeping his eyes on Durnan, he paid little attention as the man rambled on about the latest Harper expeditions, but meanwhile Pierce's mind was hard at work.

Foreseeing the future was not precise, indeed it took a lot of concentration and was filled with many random possibilities. Pierce saw them all and had to choose the most likely or favourable course of action. Thus he could foresee turning to face and study the woman closer, his foresight telling him what he would see, and then not do it. Marque Draque had argued that this goes against laws of nature and time, and at the same

time was intrigued by the fact. The study of magic itself was something that went against laws of nature Pierce had rebuked, but Draque insisted that this ability went beyond the norm even for foresight.

Thus, the seer also saw much more. The young woman looked to be in her late twenties, still beautiful and yet with a cold calculating intelligence that shone in her eyes. Her bandanna covered her black hair and framed her pale face. She was somewhat short and light of limb, a combination that provided an uncanny grace despite an obvious strength as she lifted a huge tankard and sipped.

Any other woman her size would have had a trembling arm when lifting it, but no, she lifted it with ease and drank until it was empty. While she drank, Pierce interrupted Durnan. "Who is that woman?"

The Harper looked at her and back at Pierce. "A bard who frequents here, occasionally going below into the Underdark. Her name is Elfrida the Eager."

"Talk about a name," the warrior snorted. He smiled inwardly at the jest of the inn's name "Yawning Portal", which actually made reference to a well dug in the back of the inn which, for a price, was a quick route to reach the Underdark. The reason he smiled now was not because of the Underdark reference, but the fact that the tavern felt quite sleepy at the moment. He feigned a yawn.

"Not something I'd call my daughter," Durnan agreed and took a drink of white wine. He eyed Pierce, recalling rumours of the warriors prowess with women in his youth.

The Doctor tried to ignore Durnan's thoughts but they plagued him without mercy. Fourteen years ago he would have been up at the bar seducing every woman with long legs. He had been a handsome young buck back then, full of charm and stamina. Now it was all stamina and the charm had dwindled away into small wrinkles and grey hairs.

"Whats up with Lady Nicole?" Durnan asked abruptly.

Pierce's concentration fled and he turned to face the Harper. Nicole was a noble lady who he had frequent exchanges with whenever he mingled with the wealthy. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I haven't seen you two together for quite some time now. Last time you two were together was the derby right?" Durnan seemed to think that Pierce and Nicole would make a perfect couple. Pierce was renowned for his ability with a horse and Nicole was equally good. They also had similar tastes in clothes and antiques and the facts, as far as Durnan was concerned, was that they were made for each other.

"Yes, but I don't go out of my way to see her. I scarcely know her."

"So? With things died down so much lately maybe its time you got to know her?"

Any fool should have seen this coming.

Valeska watched Doctor Pierce leave from her stool at the bar. She sipped from her tankard slowly and wondered if the veteran Harper would ever catch up with her. Probably not. He didn't seem to particularly

care about her plight and she didn't particularly care about his. Turning back to the bar, she went back to writing on a scrap of paper.

The problem with writing her poetry in common and also in drow was that the translations never rhymed. Some words simply couldn't be translated either. The words in the drow tongue didn't exist or the words in common didn't. It was a very frustrating process, but the drow bard was up to the challenge.

She sipped from her tankard and glanced about the Yawning Portal. Where else but smack dab in front of the Harpers' noses could she hide so effectively? To them she was simply another adventurer trying to make a living on the road. With a name like Elfrida the Eager, people tended to ignore her.

Perhaps it was a sense of loneliness that drove the Harper towards the Academy's horse stables in the north west corner of the Academy, seeking an old friend. True, Bartholomew was just a horse, and not even a good one, but he had spirit that never failed to intrigue the Doctor. Whatever it was that made Bartholomew special, he was a damn fine warhorse.

Upon opening the doors to the stall he was greeted by a mean-tempered black stallion that pushed Pierce backwards. It took several large steps forward with prancing hoofs, forcing the man to dodge or get pinned under the foot of a two thousand pound warhorse.

Bartholomew snorted and looked down at Pierce with what looked like a scowl. He scratched the floor with a horseshoe.

The Doctor scowled in return and got to his feet slowly. "I see you're just as charming as always," he mocked with a seemingly polite smile. The problem with horses, and all animals it seemed, was that Pierce couldn't delve into their minds. They were blank, hidden from his prying mind. He couldn't fathom what Bartholomew thought of him, for it was both a love and hate relationship. The horse respected him for his skill and control, yet hated him for the same reason.

"Okay Bart," Pierce said with a grunt as he mounted the horse bareback, his preferred riding style, especially when Bartholomew hated the bulky saddle and tended to be even more tempersome than normal. "Lets go see Nicole." He clicked his tongue and tapped the horse's flanks with his boots.

Bartholomew, as well trained as he was huge, started off at a gallop. Today he was happy to be out and about once more and it was undoubtable that the stallion was feeling invigorated despite the chill autumn wind.

A throne of white marble sat amidst the weavings of shadowy webs that glistened in the pale light that permeated from the gloomy surroundings without a source of name. The throne itself changed colour

constantly, its white marble changing to black in an ever churning cycle of corruption.

The robust figure of a grey skinned half-elf, or rather a half-drow, sat upon it. He was both tall and broad shouldered, an unusual trait for any half-elf, and he sat in a slumped position that was both lewd yet graceful.

Here sat the god of corruption, known only to his benefactors as Korehren. For one to assume that this avatar was everything that was the god, they were naive indeed. The figure that lay so limply upon the throne and stared into the gloom was but a facet of a greater thing, for one could not call it a creature in any way or form, that spread itself across the universe and planes in a multitude of forms.

He was within the heart of every man, woman and child, tempting the minds of the weak with the desires he forged in order to corrupt their wills until they were solely under his control. The question many theologists asked was, where did Korehren come from? Had he always been there? Or had he been willed into form by another, more powerful being? Ao, the overlord of the gods perhaps?

Of course, another theory was that he was actually the bastard son of Cyric and Lloth and was relatively young in the ways of gods, yet certainly had a knack for it. It didn't really matter what such theologists thought, not to Korehren at least. His faceted attention was more focused on the doings of the kind of warrior the realms had not seen in over a hundred and fifty years.

The image within Korehren's mind was not vague and neither was it a single perspective. He saw everything about Chev, from every possible angle, with detail that was unfathomable. This depth of vision was beyond mortal comprehension and only a god, or at the very least a demi-god, could accomplish it.

It did have its rewards however. Korehren knew everything that Chev could accomplish physically, something the warrior didn't even know, and was very impressed by the mortal's level of physical perfection. The problem however was that Chev now stood in what remained of the Bravepike Manor.

Which was little more than a cinder after Chev had burnt it to the ground. The feat of one man, against a small army of warriors, was incredible, indeed, well nigh impossible. Yet, even the impossible was a goal that could be reached, and Korehren decided that he saw a very simple goal before him.

It was just a question of motivating Chev into action.

The thundering of hooves and the power one felt when a mount made an incredible jump was something all experienced riders knew was something remarkable, yet so very confusing. To Nicole, it was like being given a moment of glory as she soared off the ground, and then the moment was over even before the horse's hooves hit the dirt once more on the other side of the fence.

She turned the horse expertly and reined it in for a quick stop as she looked back towards the fence. Giving into temptation, she dug her heels

into the stallion's flanks and drove it towards the fence once more. The huge white creature seemed to lurch and then soar as it went over the fence, and once more, Nicole felt that moment of glory.

She wanted to keep going, keep jumping, as if the constant jumping would make the horse so great that it might sprout wings and fly. Yet, with the days getting longer, and the sun getting lower over her gloomy estate, she knew it was time to head for the stables. Hopefully it wouldn't start snowing for awhile, as she knew the weather always put a damper on her equestrian skills until spring.

The stallion snorted and pulled up of its own accord, taking a quick step backwards. Clinging to the reins, Nicole looked past the horse's head to the shadowy figure riding towards them across the park-like surroundings of her estate. It wasn't until she caught a glimpse of the rider and saw the gleam of the tell-tale bronze armour that she realized who it was, and was only too happy to dismount in order to formally greet her guest.

"G'day Pierce. What brings you to my humble estate?" she bowed low as his horse slowed, deliberately so and watched him blush and look away from her corset.

"Although uninvited, I was wondering if I might join you for dinner." Pierce dismounted and ignored Bartholomew's stomping hooves and vicious snort. "Its been awhile since I've seen you."

"Agreed." She smiled. "You've saved me from another boring meal with courtiers and relatives I don't even know."

Bartholomew pawed the ground and Nicole's stallion backed away and kept its distance. Why Bartholomew was being so hostile was beyond Pierce, but he paid the horse only scant attention as he took Nicole's arm in his and headed towards the manor.

"Well, ye certainly look lost!" cackled a deep voice.

Chev leapt to his feet, longsword posed at the shadows surrounding his tiny campfire in the midst of the burnt out castle. Nothing should have been able to sneak up on him. He blinked his eyes, recalling that he had been quite content staring into the fire and listening to its crackle. Perhaps it wouldn't be so hard to sneak up on him afterall.

The figure of a farmer bearing a pitchfork came to the edge of the fire's light and levelled the fork at Chev. "Be ye friend or foe?"

The warrior sheathed his blade and sat back down, allowing himself a quick smile. "Neither, for I hardly know you," he said, glancing over his shoulder at the farmer.

The farmer cackled and came closer, revealing his face in detail. He was moderately handsome, despite several days worth of beard and an overly large nose. Tall and lean, the peasant walked past the warrior with a firmness that unnerved Chev.

"Wall, lets see 'ere!" said the farmer, planting his fork in the ground beside him as he sat down across from Chev. He inspected the spit of roasting meat that lay across the fire. "Smells like duck! May I?"

"Help yourself old boy," Chev replied, again with a smile as he regarded this somewhat charming farmer.

The farmer promptly drew a rusty knife from his belt and carved off a chunk of meat which he ate with his bare hands. "Ye certainly are hospitable to a complete stranger! Most strangers around here get snarly and act like they know everything. It comes from living so close to the Sea Caves. The influence of the damned drow in there bring out the worst in people!" he said after several bites. "Ye got a name?"

"Chev."

"Chev! Why I reckon I know that name!" the farmer exclaimed and for a moment Chev was afraid he'd have to kill this charming fellow, but the farmer sat deep in thought as if trying to recall some long lost memory.

"Chev," the farmer muttered to himself. "Wasn't that the name of a fighter around 'ere parts?"

The warrior smiled and decided to play along with the farmer. "I was named after him."

"A good name it is too!" the farmer declared. He pointed his finger around the manor. "Belonged to a mighty warrior! He single handedly took down this 'ere fortress many years ago! Before even my grandfather's time if I reckon rightly!"

"I take it you saw the flames, as I did, and investigated?" Chev asked quickly.

"Aye! This ol' place has been wanting to burn down for years ye know! It's a shame I didn't notice it when I was slaughtering chickens for the winter or else I would've been here sooner to watch the sucker burn!" He cackled and took a huge bite out of the duck meat.

"What about the d'Or family? What do you know about them?"

"Now that's a bit redundant!" cackled the farmer and explained. "That 'D' in front of Or stands for 'the'. When was the last time ye heard anyone say 'the the'? With the exception of someone who stutters constantly, these dorks are the only time I hear it!"

Chev laughed, genuinely, for the first time in what seemed like a long time. "You certainly are knowledgeable for a peasant! Were you a sage in your last life?"

The farmer seemed flustered suddenly. "No, I jist like me history thats all! Don't go putting no scholarly cap on me, ye hear? I've got no plans on becoming one of those city slicker wussy boys!"

Again Chev laughed and reached into his pack for a wineskin which he tossed to the farmer. "I have no intention of ruining your reputation. Have a drink and maybe share some of your knowledge with me. I'd like to know more about my namesake!"

The farmer grinned and downed some of the wine greedily. He smiled even wider when he set it down.

On a myriad avatars, all spawned by the god of corruption, a wide smile formed. My, how easy it is to manipulate mortals sometimes, they laughed inwardly with one unified thought. Sometimes too easy.

The meal was exquisitely delicious, but if asked what it had been, neither Nicole or Pierce could remember what it was. The Doctor couldn't have cared if the chef had slaughtered Bartholomew, stirred him up in a frying pan and fed them the horse. He was far too absorbed with talking with the woman across from him to notice.

It wasn't until Pierce sighed and started to bite down on his empty fork that he realized the food had long since disappeared. He stared at the fork for a moment as a sudden thought came to him. "What time is it?"

Nicole glanced at the Shou clock in the corner. "Eleven twenty," she whispered, also realizing that the servants had long since went to their chambers for sleep.

Pierce frowned sternly. "The night is still young and I am still hungry, what say you?"

"Would you like me to wake the chef?"

"No. Not necessary. I was thinking more along the lines of going out to a place I know."

Walking the streets of Waterdeep at night could be hazardous, yet Nicole didn't doubt Pierce's ability to protect her. Indeed, she couldn't think of anyone else she'd rather have as a bodyguard, not counting gods of course. And even then, they'd be running a close second.

At first she thought they were going to the Yawning Portal, but when Pierce strode past that without even a glance at its rowdy crowd Nicole began to wonder just where he was intending. Off to the side of the street, he led her down a series of cobbled steps to a large oaken door. The inscription carved into door read "The Spitfire Saloon".

Opening the door, Pierce escorted Nicole into what looked like a foyer. The walls and floor were panelled with black walnut and the ceiling was lit with a mobile with pieces of quartz suspended from it. Each piece of quartz was enchanted with a light spell and the resulting lights reflecting off the dark walls and floor.

The moment Pierce stepped within the building his foresight and mind delving abilities went silent, for which he was thankful, knowing that the multitude of thoughts he would come across in the room beyond would give him a headache.

A single guard stood in the room with a drawn sword. His armour and race was hidden by a long cloak and a cowled hood. "Good evening Doctor Pierce," the guard said flatly. "Who is your guest?"

"This is Lady Nicole of Waterdeep. She is native to the world Toril."

"Have a good evening." The guard moved aside in a graceful movement that made it look like he flowed more than walked.

Pierce led her into the dimly lit room through the swaying batwing doors with his right hand holding hers and his left arm around her back. "You may have heard rumours of the Yawning Portal containing an entrance to Undermountain, but what you don't know is that this place has a much greater reason for secrecy: It has an entrance to the planes."

She almost knew it was coming but wasn't sure what to think. Her knowledge of magic was limited to the magical pranks nobles sometimes played at parties and social gatherings. Beyond that, it had an air of utter mystery that she simply could not comprehend, but the planes? Worlds

beyond her own where she could freely travel to with only a hop and a skip? That was beyond all of her dreams. She preferred more solid, less fanciful things. It was obvious to her that Pierce was trying to impress her and was succeeding.

Sensing her anxiety, Pierce continued to talk. "The people in this place are unlike any others you will see in Waterdeep, or the rest of the realms for that matter. It is also one of the few places where they can meet freely without violence."

"What about the guard at the door? If they don't have fights in here, why the guard?"

"This room is extradimensional. In reality, it does not actually exist. It is made up of illusion and held together by magic. The moment we stepped through that oak door back there, we were no longer in Waterdeep but in a place created entirely of magic and imagination. The problem with extradimensional magic, is that you can't have an extradimensional object within an extradimensional object. You follow?"

"I know about bags of holding and portable holes if that is what mean. If the two are put together, they'll cause a planar rift like that accident at Hariko Barkeb's party last year."

"Ah, yes! The mage tried to steal a bowl of everfull punch by sticking it in his magical pocket. A rookie mistake for a mage. He got sucked into another plane along with a good chunk of the silverware!"

"So the guard at the door is there to determine whether we're carrying any extradimensional devices?"

"Yep. His sword is enchanted to glow when it senses one other than the one we're standing in," Pierce replied as he helped her into a dark booth and then sat down across from her. He snapped a finger and the raspberry scented candle on the table lit with a purple flame.

Nicole shrugged and finally got a chance to look around the dark room. "How do these people see? Infravision? Like elves?"

"Yes, again. Ninety percent of them probably can see in the dark and the other ten have magic that lets them. The problem with infravision is that its heat sensitive and that doesn't help with reading a menu, thus the candles."

She nodded slowly. "Magical candles that light when you snap your fingers. This place must be terrible expensive."

"No and yes. The candles aren't magical but the cost of having food from almost every known plane is very expensive. The advantage with the planes however is that these people tend to have a lot of gold and other valuables."

"Okay then how did you light the candle?"

"A cantrip spell. A minor spell taught to apprentices. The only magic I know I'm afraid, and thus I don't flaunt it much." The Doctor pulled a menu from a cubbyhole in the wall and opened it between them. "What would you like? Remember that this place also tends to be spicy."

Nicole glanced down the long list of things like curried landshark, cream of osquip soup, poached dragon egg. "Um," she said aloud as she continued down the list. "Isn't there anything from Toril that's kinda, you know, normal?" She glanced up, her eyes catching his and holding them.

Pierce swallowed. "Well, there's lifesyrup, which tastes identical to maplesyrup. Marque Draque makes it with a little help from my father. I think the screech soaked cod comes from Luskan north of Waterdeep but I've never tried it. They all taste wonderful, I'm sure."

"Well, since I've never been to Luskan, or any of these other places for that matter, I'll try the cod."

If Pierce had known that Screech was actually a drink with a lot of alcohol in it he would have persuaded her to take a different meal, but he considered the experience something to remember and would never make the same mistake twice. The opposite side of the coin was that he got to carry her up the steep stairs for she was too weak in the knees to make it. He just hoped his back could make it.

Setting her down at the top, he helped her along with one arm around her back and supporting her as they made their way down the torch lit streets, scouring it for a carriage taxi. When none could be found, he cursed himself inwardly for not bringing Bartholomew, but again knew that everything had been worth it. He hated the horse anyway half the time. It would never have stayed in the stables down the street and would have wandered across half the city.

The cold autumn air was doing its part in sobering Nicole as they wandered the streets in the general direction of her estate. She enjoyed the cool breeze contrasting with the warmth of Pierce's body. Even his bronze armour was warm to the touch, but she wondered if that was the Screech in her blood talking.

"This town house belongs to Martinez," he said abruptly as they neared the poor building. "He's a Harper comrade of mine. If you ever meet him, you'll know him by the longflail he always carries."

Nicole nodded and looked towards the house which looked like it needed to be boarded up and condemned. When she looked up at his shadowed face again however, his eyes were distant and alert. The street seemed awfully quiet now. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing hopefully," the warrior lied easily, trying to keep her hopes up. Up ahead he knew that three young thugs lay in the darkness of the alley, deeply immersed in the merchant that had ambushed by surprise and dragged into the alley to be beaten senseless. Then they stopped at the sound of approaching feet.

Pushing Nicole into a doorway, he threw his cloak overtop of her. "Stay here and be quiet." On a sudden impulse he took off his sword belt and handed it to her.

The footsteps resumed and the thugs edged closer to the corner, listening carefully for the intruder. The leader, a tall half-elf, knelt within the entrance, ready to leap.

"Greets man," Pierce drawled in a slang tongue he hadn't used since his childhood during his own youth on the street. "Wutcha upto?"

The thugs relaxed and the half-elf stood out in the open. "Nuttin'. Jist sum spare change. Got we a fat merch!" he said loudly, to which his two comrades went "Sssssh."

"Ye're purty lucky dat Harper didn't hear ye, wut wit alda racket!" Pierce whispered in response.

Wut Harper?" demanded one of the thugs in the back.

Pierce hoped the alcohol in his own blood wouldn't slow him down as he tapped on the building they were standing beside. "Da one dat lives in here, course!" he hissed. "Course, 'e's also a drunk, but dats besides the point. Martinez is still a fighter extraordinaire!"

The half-elf narrowed his eyes. Pierce had slipped into the common tongue to use the latter word and now the leader had consciously changed his elven eyesight from infravision to light sensing, and thus was able to see the glint off the warrior's bronze armour.

"Pierce!" the rogue cried out and backed away in a hurry. His fellow thugs tumbled into the street and regarded the founder of the Academy of Combat with both fear and awe.

"He's not wearing his blades," muttered one of them, thanking the god Mask for his luck. With an unspoken agreement, the three thugs moved in closer, hoping to surround the warrior.

But the god of deception wasn't about to help a trio of blundering thugs as it would take nothing short of a miracle sent from the heavens to save them now. A lightning bolt for example, but the sky was clear and the god wasn't going to waste the energy or effort in summoning up some clouds, and thus angering some other gods who disliked the world's natural order being played with. Especially not for three thugs who should've known better.

Thus when Pierce stepped forward and gave the first thug a few practice kicks, trying to recall his knowledge of kickboxing, he really had nothing stopping him from continuing to kick the boy, and he was scarcely more than a boy, to death. After the kid was down, he was tempted to continue and vent his rage on the kid everytime he moved. Thankfully his conscience stepped in, and Pierce backed away from the boy.

The other two thugs had disappeared but that wasn't what concerned the man that fell to the cobbles now, a sob racking his lungs. "I could have killed him," he whispered aloud, and he knew this to be the truth, for his farsight indeed said it had been a huge possibility.

Pushing the tears away from his eyes with the back of his hand, Pierce knelt over the injured boy who shied away in fear. "I'm not going to hurt you," the Doctor said slowly. He ripped the arm off his sleeve and inspected the boy's wounds.

They totalled, as the price for Pierce's anger, four broken ribs, one broken leg, a twisted wrist and a bloody lump for a shoulder. It was that shoulder most of all that concerned the Doctor as he bound it tightly to stop the bleeding. If he had any of his healing poultices, he would have used those to clean the wound but one couldn't foresee everything.

At his side, he knew there was Martinez and Nicole, both of which were unsure of what to do but both wanting to do something. It was amazing that the bald Harper was sober enough to have heard the fight at this time of

night. Lifting the boy slightly, they lay him down on Pierce's cloak and used it as a makeshift stretcher as they carried him inside of Martinez's townhouse.

Nicole blanched when she saw the interior of the Harper's house, covered with scrolls, old liquor bottles and a basic array of junk. Where there should have been walls, there was only space as the walls had either rotted down years ago or Martinez had simply removed them. Only the staircase, a few supports and a large iron pole coming through the ceiling showed any sign that the place wouldn't collapse any second.

The fat rats scurried into the darkness as they entered, retreating into a corner that appeared to be a kitchen turned carpentry shop judging from all the wood shavings and carvings. No doubt, Nicole thought with an inner laugh, that Martinez had to be at least somewhat good at carpentry to keep this place from becoming condemned.

Up the stairs they went, past a shelf stacked with rows upon rows of Martinez's bottle collection, all empty of course. They foraged through the filth, trying to reach a hammock in the corner. They paused by the iron pole, making sure to keep their footing so near to such a drop. Finally, the trio lay the boy down in a hammock.

Looking over the boy carefully, Pierce noted that he had long ago fallen unconscious but would soon awake in a lot of pain. "What do you have for healing potions?"

"Just my own special brew," Martinez replied and handed Pierce a bottle filled with a yellow liquid. "And if that doesn't ease the pain, there's a bottle of drow vodka at your feet that should go down well." The bald Harper smiled and winked at Nicole. "I'll be back with a cleric of healing!" he said as he wrapped his legs around the iron pole and slipped through the hole in the floor to the filth below.

Pierce forced the boy to drink as much of the potion he could get down and ignored Martinez's offer of vodka. He was almost tempted to lift the bottle to his own lips, but the gods knew he felt awful enough already. Instead he slumped down beside Nicole on a clean patch of floor.

"How you feeling?" he asked, sensing her thoughts to be in a similar state of haze.

"Awful yet kinda giddy," Nicole replied and leaned on him gently. "I'm going to have the biggest hangover in the morning," she mumbled as she fell asleep.

Pierce sat alone with his thoughts as he waited for the return of Martinez. There were times he envied the rarely sober fighter. He was a good man, who led a simple uncomplicated life from Pierce's perspective. He certainly didn't let his anger get in the way when scaring off some thugs.

Darkness seeped away from the City of Splendours, leaving behind the golden wake of the sun as it poured down its light from the heavens. In the Academy, Rambertz gave thanks to the Morninglord and assumed the form of a gold falcon as he soared up above the city and was absorbed into the feeling of freedom he felt under the sun's rays.

Elsewhere in the city, a man named Belchamp Dumont sat up in an alley and looked around. He was thankful to be alive, but the thing he was more thankful for, and even more perplexed by, was the fact that he still had all his jewelry and coin pouch. Surely, the thugs last night hadn't done this for sport?

"Wake up beautiful," Martinez shouted and waved a cup of coffee under Nicole's nose. "The pigs and roosters are up and so should you be!"

The lady rolled over in the filth and covered her ears with her hands.

"Well, that settles it. She's hungover," the Harper said with a grin and downed the coffee for himself. "No need to waste good beans!"

Pierce glared up at the Harper, once again remembering that he rarely counted Martinez among his friends. "Could you be a little more discreet? Surely you've had your share of hangovers?"

The bald man frowned and nodded. "Aye, but I haven't had one in about five years, which tells you the last time when I was sober."

"Sober?" mumbled Nicole with a self-mocking giggle. "What is 'sober'? I didn't know there was such a word!"

The half-elf boy on the hammock groaned and tried to roll over but Martinez caught him before he rolled clear out of the hammock. "The cleric fixed most of his injuries while you were asleep but the boy still won't be able to walk for at least two weeks," the Harper said matter-of-factly.

Pierce nodded and swallowed. "I'll give him a room at the Academy."

"Well what if he has parents? They're not all orphans you know."

Pierce shook his head. "Nope, this one is an orphan."

"How do you know?"

Pierce swore inwardly and hated himself for not paying more attention in the early hours. His mind was still in a daze from the night before. "A hunch. Sort of like how a mother has hunches that an unborn child will be a girl or boy."

Martinez shrugged and changed the subject. "Still nothing new from Durnan. Everything is annoyingly quiet and he says that it means something is up. No doubt all of our enemies are going to do something at roughly the same time and the end result will be a dragon's worth of chaos."

"A dragon can mix up a lot of chaos," nodded Pierce. "Let's hope it doesn't blow up like some gnomish experiment."

"Only one man could have pulled off the stunt of kidnapping d'Or's daughter Kipriana. A Harper called Rewt Nachent-"

Chev interrupted the farmer by nicking his neck with a levelled sword. "A Harper? Why did the Harpers help the Bravepikes?"

The farmer swallowed slowly, the lump in his throat brushing the tip of Chev's sharp blade. "Well, as you may have heard, their family was really into smuggling things under the cover of rug merchants-"

"And wine, armour, weapons, slaves. Get to the point!"

The farmer was sweating now. "The Harpers were against their slave dealing and had no qualms about allying themselves with the Bravepikes."

Chev sheathed his sword again. "Sorry about that. Please continue."

The old farmer nodded thankfully and resumed his story that had last most of the night and into the morning. His knowledge was incredible, despite his tendency to ramble and go into detail about nitty gritty things that Chev didn't care about. Still, the old fellow had an unexplainable charm about him.

Now however, as the man rambled on, Chev sat quietly, deep in thought. The Harpers were the real reason he had been trapped in that accursed statue! Even more importantly, they had separated him from Kipriana d'Or, the only person he had ever loved. The thought tore at his soul like a barbed dagger.

"Old boy," the warrior interrupted as he stood and stretched. "It's good to have met you! It seems like a long time, a very long time, since I last enjoyed such a conversation!"

"Leaving so soon?" asked the farmer, standing and starting to hand back the nearly empty wineskin.

"Keep it friend. Have a good day!"

Marque Draque pored over his necromancy notes, checking one last thing before he cast the intended dweomer. Standing up from his stool, he walked past the fire faerie to where Gravebringer lay. "Light please," he muttered.

The fire faerie flew up and fluttered beside the mage's shoulder, shedding light over the stone-walled laboratory.

Draque nodded and sprinkled black diamond dust over the broken parts of the blade. Touching the two halves, he moved them slowly together while speaking the arcane words that would have seemed gibberish to any other.

With a plume of white smoke, the two pieces fused together.

Blinking his eyes against the smoke, Draque looked down at the flawless blade. One could swear that it had never been broken in the first place. "The question," the elf said to himself, as was his habit. "Is whether the magic fused properly?"

Removing a glass lens from its case on the shelf, Draque cast a spell that allowed him to literally see the magic that flowed around and within an object. For over a hour he inspected every magical detail of the blade, determining that only a minor magical power that allowed the sword to regenerate its bearer no longer functioned at all.

"No wonder Chev could take on a whole castle without much risk," the mage said at length, sitting down on his stool and relaxing. He had toiled throughout last night and well into this morning and the lack of rest was showing on his drooping eyelids. He let out a lengthy yawn.

"Tomorrow," he said, looking at the blade. "I will tear those enchantments off you and put them to good use. No point in letting an evil

spell live." He chuckled as the blade glowed an angry red in a futile attempt to scare the elf. "I don't want to know what its like to be a blade like yourself, with thoughts that are so instinctive they go beyond the normal boundaries of evil."

The Gravebringer seethed with magical fire but could do nothing.

The mage gave it a wry grin. "I would have made a better poet, don't you think?" He sighed and sat down in his overstuffed chair and picked up a poetry book to help him fall asleep.

Valeska Ko'Ragur's poetry had long been something Marque Draque admired, but that fact he kept to himself, using spells that prevented even Pierce from finding out what he really thought about the drow bard.

### *Sun Slave*

*The sun is a burning, aching sphere.  
It burns my eyes and dries out my hair.  
My skin scalds red under its sheering yellow.  
My mind aches and blood wants to overflow.  
It has it in for me.  
A hatred any blind man can see.  
It tortures me continuously.  
Whipping my torso mercilessly.  
For long hours I toil under it.  
I don't care for the sun one bit.*

Draque agreed with only part of this poem and he turned the page quickly to the next. He had always found the sun to be a very powerful source of magical energy and had used that power to create his lifesyrup. Which in turn had made him a lot of gold in the past because of the syrup's healing properties.

### *Valeska Ko'Ragur's Return*

*The darkness is endless  
The time clock swings on  
And myself the drow bard  
Am chaos' pawn*

*The caverns are aging  
The shadows turn grey  
The goddess goes on killing  
Keeping me away*

*My lifeblood is fading  
An arrow that dies  
Even before the shooting  
Before my own eyes*

*Lloth's grim hold is fragile  
A web catching flame  
Hark! I return from exile  
To use deadly aim*

*The darkness has faded  
The slaughter is here  
The chaos is unleashed  
We all smell Lloth's fear*

Draque couldn't help but wonder if Lloth truly feared a rebellion among her worshipers. It seemed too far fetched. Still, the drow mage had to give Valeska credit for trying.

### *Lloth's Lost Gem*

*Kendrick Leopold,  
A drow known for being bold,  
Stood up to the Matron Mothers,  
Ran past poisoned daggers.  
His fight ended with great chaos.  
Everything lost in the cavern's moss.  
No one knew where he had went.  
He and his clan was Lloth's vent.  
Her anger released, she was blinded,  
For the Leopolds, had fled unscathed.  
Above on an island,  
Beyond Lloth's reaching hand,  
Is the isle of Dragonspade,  
Laughing at Lloth's attempts to raid.  
She can't even find them.  
Dragonspade, the Lost Gem.*

This myth had always intrigued Draque. He had asked conjured demons about the existence of Dragonspade last year and gotten the vague answer: "The home of Luzinarth? Nay, the great dragon lies dead and so does his isle." Draque had pursued that topic but the demon had refused to answer any more questions, claiming ignorance of the issue.

### *Lloth's Toys*

*In the beginning, Lloth was a foundling.  
By elves she was raised, and widely appraised.  
But not for her deeds, but her killing needs.  
Chaos was her weapon, filled with poison.  
There is no foundation for her desire,  
Only an evil core filled with black fire.*

*I am but one drow who ignores her flame,  
Watching as she plays out her ruthless game.  
We are but toys to our wretched goddess.  
But even we toys are far from helpless.  
We have great might and far greater power.  
Enough to make even dark Lloth cower.  
I gather my forces for my great strike,  
To stick Lloth's head on the end of a pike.*

Draque laughed inwardly at the last idea. He was still chortling when he drifted off into the meditative trance all elves call sleep.

"Where in Ao's hair is Marque Draque?" demanded Pierce, his patience at a loss since his foresight wasn't helping.

Hiram snorted and sat down across from the Doctor in the bustling cafeteria. "If he's in Ao's hair, I'd wager he's lost! Last I heard however he was quite busy in his laboratory working on that damned sword-"

Pierce had been ready to collapse into his seat and enjoy a leisurely meal with his father but instead he leapt up from the table, vaulted a table to the stunned faces of his students (who never in their lives could have guessed that a two hundred pound man weighed down with over 80 pounds of armour and weapons could have vaulted a table so easily), and ran out the doors to the south wing.

Hiram closed his jaw and scratched what little hair he had atop his shaved head. Things like this seemed to be getting quite ordinary, as far as the old boxer was concerned, but he smiled ruefully. "At least things never get boring!"

He promptly ate Pierce's pork chops.

The door slammed down under the weight of Pierce's boot and he stepped inside the now dusty room. Blinking his eyes and coughing, he realized it would have been much simpler to have just turned the knob. Perhaps it was the back of brain that had planted the idea to knock the door down. He had never liked that door anyway.

The fire faerie in its alcove to the side of the door hopped to attention, ignoring its daily meal of wax. The faerie's presence alone was reassuring for it was bonded with the mage and could never go very far from Draque. Flexing wings of blue flame, it looked up at Pierce expectantly.

"Where is Marque Draque?"

The fire faerie flashed brightly like a fire fly and dashed across the musty chamber to one of many doors bearing runes that were no doubt magical. It flew right into the lock and played with mechanism, opening it with an loud click.

The Doctor still wasn't ready to even touch the door, but he foretold no danger despite his fears and opened it hesitantly.

The loud snores relaxed the warrior more than words could tell, but in the next millisecond his defenses were back on overdrive. The pervading sense of evil emanating from the room not only became an almost tangible substance, but reached into Pierce's mind like a set of sharp daggers.

Instinctually reaching for Sidekick, Pierce entered the room and at the same time forced his thoughts to the words of a riddle, the idea springing from the open poetry book on Draque's lap:

The drow on the bow seeks no hardship  
She lives her life with power and whip  
Carrying chaos she imposes on slaves  
Leaving behind nothing but shallow graves  
Life is but a game for our dread goddess  
Can you guess the goal within her bodice?

Those words, written by the drow bard Valeska Ko'Ragur, had haunted Pierce for years with their constant references. He had always liked her poetry but didn't tell Draque that. It occurred to him then that Draque also must have hidden his own preference for Valeska's poetry from him somehow. Annoyed by that fact and overwhelmed by fear of the sword, he grabbed the slumbering elf by the collar and hauled him out of the room.

Draque choked out a curse as he awoke in mid-drag and pulled himself to his feet. "What's wrong? Is the place burning down?"

"No! I-" Pierce stopped and slammed the door shut to block the invading evil mind. "What is that thing in there?" he demanded.

"Chev's sword? I fixed it," Draque crossed his arms and levelled his eyes at Pierce like a stern father. "Explain."

Taking a breath, Pierce pulled up a stool. "I've been looking for you all morning and then when my father said you were working on that sword-"

"And your foresight told you something?"

"Well, no-"

"Then it was your imagination running off on the loose. Even you can't get through the protections on that door-" Draque stopped abruptly in his speech and looked at the open door in awe. "How in Mystra did you open that door?"

Pierce pointed to the fire faerie.

"Oh, of course! It figures that the little bugger would retain that knowledge! Probably can pick a lock better than I can! Anyway, as I was saying! That door, and the chamber itself bears the first copy of my Insignia of Protection. Nothing short of a god could get through it without knowing how." The elf paused to glare at the fire faerie who had flown back to its alcove to eat more wax.

"It's a good thing I can read your mind then," the Doctor replied. "Now I'll be able to bypass the Insignia, although I'll need one of your magical scrolls just to be able to cast that spell."

"No doubt," Draque snorted. "You're one of the few fighters who will ever learn even a smidging of magic and that makes you blessed in a very

small way. If I ever tweaked your power, I'd say you'd have the magical might to cast a fireball if only you knew how."

"I have watched you a fair bit and my foresight helps!"

"Ah, but you still don't understand fully! When I first taught you how to light a candle, you lit the candlestick and we ended up with the tablecloth starting on fire!"

Pierce stood and clapped his friend on the back. "Which reminds me! I'm famished and after toiling away on that stupid blade you should be hungry too!"

Draque nodded and motioned the fire faerie to lock the door behind them. "I'm going to have to teach the little fellow more respect. Maybe if I stop buying such expensive waxes for him to eat he'll get the hint."

"I doubt that. If he's like his creator, which he's supposed to be, he'll probably rebel and eat the wax off your scroll seals and then you'll have a problem identifying them all. Best not to anger him, but simply motivate him." The fighter smiled lewdly. "Maybe you should get a female apprentice and teach her the spell? That would certainly motivate him to be more of a gentleman."

"Aye, but then I'd have to clean the place! Couldn't let one of these Waterdeep upstarts think that I can't even clean a room without some magic."

Chev's arrival in Waterdeep just after the sun had reached its peak for the day, was marked by his overwhelming feeling that this was indeed the first time he had seen the place in over a hundred and fifty winters. There was no doubt in his mind, that he was beginning anew in a way he could begin to comprehend. He felt very alive.

There was also an incredible sense of *deja vu*. He had done this before a hundred and fifty three years ago and still it felt a lot like yesterday.

Before entering however, he was stopped by the guards at the city gate and asked his business.

"Sword juggler," he replied simply. No one doubted his claim, but Chev knew it had very little to do with his reply. Rather, it was because of the solid line up of people and caravans that needed inside the city. They simply had no time to argue and check over story in ridiculous detail. Which made Chev question why they bothered to guard the gates at all. They didn't seem to be stalling anyone more than a few seconds, which made the whole idea quite pointless.

Drawing three ornate daggers, remnants of the d'Or family, Chev juggled them as he walked through the gates in a display of showmanship. The guards didn't seem impressed, as they probably saw this kind of talent on a regular basis. Nevertheless, Chev continued to juggle as he walked down the street.

The flashing blades relaxed him and the amount of concentration needed soothed his mind as he went over his plan in detail. It would be, in his entire history of fighting, the single most dangerous and long term task ever. The question was where to start?

He passed a street musician, a fiddler who was quickly drawing a crowd with her music. She was dressed in a simple shirt and flowing skirt and her hair was held back by a bandanna. "A bard," he pondered aloud and sheathed the daggers in his belt. He elbowed his way through the crowd and stopped in front of her wide brimmed hat that lay on the ground.

The glint of a platinum coin caught the bard's eye as the warrior tossed it in the hat and her violin screeched as she stopped to regard the warrior. "You must be pretty rich to be tossing around coins like that," she stated.

"I pay even better for words that please my ears," Chev responded cryptically, knowing he had caught her undivided attention.

The small crowd of gawkers got the hint and filtered away into the hordes of people. Chev watched them go and then turned his eyes back to the bard who was dumping the coins into a pouch tied to her slim waist.

She had the awkward grace of a half-elf and her tight fitting kilt and fluffy white linen blouse displayed a figure that was simply delectable. "Perhaps my knowledge of lore can help you then if you'd like to buy me a drink or two with that pouch of platinum." She strayed dangerously close to the warrior and his money pouch.

Chev placed a hand over the pouch and she smiled broadly. "If you can't take a tease good warrior, I'm afraid you have me at the disadvantage. Your name, if you please?" she asked, with an appraising look up and down the handsome warrior.

"Chev."

"Just Chev?"

"Just Chev."

"Very well Just Chev," she smiled and took his arm in hers. "If that's your real name," she said with mock suspicion. "My name is not to be given away lightly, but I shall share it with you. I am Valeska Ko'Ragur and I go by many other names, but none more infamous."

"Never heard of it."

She gave him a look as if she was going to pout or cry but shrugged instead. "Just as well then. I prefer it that way," she said, opening the door to a cozy looking inn. "After you."

Entering the inn, which was indeed cozy, warm and smelling of soft spices, Chev concluded that he had chanced upon no ordinary bard. She had an extraordinary gift for being likeable, unlike that farmer, whose gift had always unnerved the warrior. As she led him to a booth, he concluded that she was a natural leader and accustomed to doing so.

An elderly woman with short curls came forward, drying her hands with an apron. "What will ye have my dears?"

Chev looked about for a menu but saw none. "What's on the menu?"

"Practically ev'rything for a starving traveller," the woman winked at Chev.

Snorting, Chev said "Okay. How about soup, some bread and anything else you can think of." He set down a platinum coin, the only type he kept in his purse.

"Well, gods bless my fat cheeks!" she exclaimed and snatched up the coin. "Ye'll be getting a meal fit for royalty!" She nudged Valeska on the arm. "Except ours tastes better!" Cackling, the old woman walked away.

"Interesting woman," Chev commented.

"I've met a lot of interesting people in my time human," Valeska replied. "They say that you can judge someone better by the number of miles they've walked in other people's shoes better than their own shoes. With many names under my heel, I've walked more than my share."

Chev was intrigued by this bard yet wanted nothing more than to conduct his business and head out. "I only rarely leave Waterdeep I'm afraid. My business has always been here and yet right now, after many years of not being here, I need information."

"I understand," Valeska's eyes narrowed. "Such as?"

"I need to know more about Waterdeep's Harpers, in particular names and faces."

"Do you seek any particular ones?"

"Nope. All of them."

The half-elf's eyes widened momentarily and she pursed red lips. "There is no way I can give you such a long list, but I can certainly give you the knowledge of those that I know of." She paused dramatically. "For a price."

Chev grinned and clapped his hands twice. "Well met! Name your price my dear scholar!"

"One platinum for a name, one for their face. That's a total of two per person," she responded eagerly. "And trust me, my list is extensive if not complete."

Chev nodded slowly. If she knew anymore than thirty Harpers he would be short on coins and have to revert to a diamond hidden in the sole of his boot. He hoped it was still there after a hundred and fifty years. "How many?"

Valeska pursed her lips again. "At least sixty, although I'll probably think of more as we talk." She leaned over the table to get a better look at his money pouch. "You sure you have enough in there?"

"No, but I have a diamond that will more than cover it."

"In that case I'll be as detailed as possible." Valeska leaned back in her seat and pondered what she could do with some new found wealth.

A darkly cloaked burly figure walked down the alley behind the Yawning Portal. He paused in the shadows every couple of seconds, listening for the slightest sounds. He tweaked grey mustaches as he studied a form lying against the wall of the tavern before rushing to the side of his fellow Harper.

Mirt the Merciless had many names but he was known more commonly as Mirt the Moneylender. He knelt beside the broken and battered form of a young Harper named Rolt. He found the silver pin of a harp lying on the boy's chest. Someone had deliberate left this behind as a message for Mirt. Had the drow caught up with the boy on thr surface somehow?

The Old Wolf pocketed the silver Harper pin and lifted his apprentice over his broad shoulder. Going around the corner, he stepped through the back door of the Yawning Portal to have a long talk with Durnan.

The evening was growing long and the candle on the table between Pierce and Nicole was getting short when their meal was interrupted by a knock on Pierce's private chambers. The Doctor smiled as he got up from their table and crossed the small room to the bronze door. He knew immediately that it was Martinez and that in itself marked that something was wrong. He opened the door and feigned surprise. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?" he demanded.

Martinez waved at Nicole and entered. "Thanks for inviting me in," he replied sourly. "We're having a huge meeting at the Yawning Portal," he whispered.

"Right now? Why?"

"Since noon we've lost fourteen of our Underdark agents. They're dropping like flies."

Even on social occasions Pierce had never before seen such a gathering of Harpers all in one place. In a dusty old wine cellar to say the least. There was Mirt the Moneylender, Durnan, Khelben 'Blackstaff' Arunson and numerous others, but the key connection that the Doctor noted was that they all had something to do with drow in general. The evil elven race had apparently declared war on the Harpers.

This was, according to Pierce's memory the loudest of the occasions also.

"This is all Valeska Ko'Ragur's fault! If she hadn't shot their ambassador we wouldn't have this problem!" roared Asefen, a burly bear of a man, over the din. "We should have taken care of her years ago!"

"We're not assassins you moron!" Durnan shouted in response. "Besides, two hours ago someone found twelve drow dead right below the well and another three down at the docks! Maybe it is her fault, but kill for kill we're getting the upper hand!"

"Well then who in the Abyss is doing all the killing?" Asefen shouted and slammed his tankard down on the table and splashing ale over the worn table. "Someone is doing it!"

"Obviously," Pierce muttered under his breath. Concentrating on shutting out other people's thoughts in a situation like this was excruciatingly timestaking, but it had to be done or else he might mistake someone's thought for actual words and respond to it before they say it, which would prove to be a difficult thing to explain. Thus, Pierce tended to stay away from the conversation and sat beside Khelben, Waterdeep's resident archmage.

The mage knew of Pierce's extraordinary power but had long ago been sworn to secrecy. They had both agreed that certain things were better left in

the closet and it was a mutual agreement for Pierce could just as easily say a thing or two about the archmage that wouldn't be that well received in public.

Khelben snorted and took a quick drink of Durnan's prized ale. "The fourth Harper found was just behind this wall in the alley," the mage whispered under Asefen's shouting. "He was carrying knowledge of the whereabouts of a secret cache of drow artillery in Undermountain. Dark elf heavy ballista is widely regarded for its ability to punch through even magical defenses. Even your vaunted bronze armour would be crushed in such an impact but what about castle walls? Selling those things to the Zhentilar could turn a huge profit for the drow and drastically slim the chances of some of our agents. We had hoped to intercept that transaction but now we don't even know where it is."

"Couldn't we use a Speak With Dead spell to determine who killed him?"

"Forbidden," Khelben grimaced at the thought. "Some time ago somebody decided that it would be much better if we respected the dead some more."

Pierce turned to face him. "You don't actually have to cast it. Simply start to cast it, and I will do the rest."

Khelben smiled at the thought and he enjoyed the philosophical errors that had just been overstepped. "Not a bad idea Pierce! We'll have to that later tonight however. Right now I want to get out of this place for a breath of fresh air!"

Looking around at the badly ventilated cellar filled with a score of sweating, drinking and arguing Harpers, Pierce was quick to follow the archmage up the stairs. He passed Martinez at the door, who had been assigned as a guard not because the bald man was a good fighter, but because Durnan didn't want him in the wine cellar sampling everything.

Pausing in the alley way, Pierce stopped at the blood stains and breathed in the autumn air. "If it wasn't for the times we live in, I'd probably be at the Academy helping my father brew lifesyrup right now." Which wasn't exactly true. With Nicole there, that would have been the last thing on his list.

"Ah yes!" Khelben cried a bit too loudly. "Made from maple syrup? I love that stuff! Can't get enough of it, it seems!"

"Grow a orchard of maples around that black tower of yours and Marque Draque will gladly give you the recipe, for a price of course."

"I already have a copy of his Lifetree spell. I was one of the first to buy his Nekrolog when it first came out but I simply don't have the time to grow such an orchard. The process is quite time consuming, albeit delicious."

Pierce's stomach growled as he thought of the ambrosia-like liquid that Marque Draque brewed with his father's help. The magical food strengthened the consumer on top of satisfying their belly. The cost of making the boiling room needed for boiling the excess water out of the maple sap in order to purify it had drained the Academy's funds tremendously because the boiler had to be made of purest silver and the same went for all the buckets to collect the syrup. It had been worth it however

with the high level of injuries at the school when considering the lifesyrup's ability to heal small wounds.

"Where is Draque anyway?"

The Doctor turned to the archmage and glanced around. "When Chev was released from his statue he left behind the two halves of his broken sword. Draque has since repaired it and tonight he's working on memorizing the right spells needed to dismantle it."

"Whats wrong with the blade the way it is?"

"Its evil. Evil in a way I can't even begin to explain. I could feel it probing my brain at one point." The warrior turned away and the mage got the hint that the Doctor didn't want to talk about the sword.

Their comraderie and small talk coming to an end, the night felt very cold right then and they both felt it. "By Mystra its cold out here," Khelben said with an involuntary shiver.

"No," Pierce said as he looked up into the sky and held out a hand to catch a snowflake. "Its just something in the air." He furrowed his brow and looked at the ground. "Khelben, can you make the snow come down a bit harder?"

"You're asking me to play with the weather? Sorry, I don't have the right spell memorized to do something as hard as that. Why?"

"If we could, we'd be able to see the foot prints in this alley, assuming its rarely used."

The archmage frowned in deep thought. "Stand closer to me. I've got something that will work." He paused and quickly cast a protective sphere of energy around the two of them.

"You're going to summon an air elemental?" Pierce guessed more than probed. "You better summon it to the east so its wind doesn't ruin the tracks." The Doctor didn't like the idea of elemental spirits at all, especially those of fire and rock. On his first adventures with Witter and Draque he had learned the value of respecting those awe inspiring creatures. His mentor Witter, more than anyone else had taught him that elementals were things to be taken quite seriously. Even dragons fear them with good reason.

The mage nodded and turned about to face the blank wall of the building behind the Yawning Portal. Taking out the required components, Khelben spoke the arcane words and then became silent.

It didn't happen soon, but that was normal. Even so, it took longer than normal as the breeze gathered together in front of the pair, swirling together until it formed a visual, seething mass of blowing snow that resembled a miniature tornado. Two black dots stared back at the Harpers from within the tornado. Pierce knew immediately that this elemental was larger and more powerful than normal and that Khelben had not been expecting this change of events.

The archmage remained unimpressed by the appearance of the elemental noble and he displayed that as he spoke sternly and evenly. "Make it snow more so we may follow the tracks in the dirt left behind by our prey. Do not ruin the tracks however with your wind."

The task was not an easy one for even an air noble but the being complied. A moment later the snow angled down in lines about them. It took a minute to discern the difference in tracks between Pierce, Khelben, Mirt

and the dead Harper, but the Doctor eyes riveted to the sets of toes and heals made by riding boots.

"Follow the trail," Khelben commanded. He watched the elemental go ahead of them. "I hope this isn't a wild goose chase Pierce."

The Doctor merely smiled. "Call it a hunch and a night out on the town if you will. I'd rather be out here getting lost than being in there, getting drunk."

The mage nodded consent and the pair followed the trail gamely.

Over five thousand silver buckets of maple sap waited patiently to be boiled and purified into a hundred buckets of lifiesyrup. One of the key problems Draque had first run into with his quest to make money off maple syrup was the fact that it took so many damn buckets just to make a small portion. He and Hiram had worked for the last year on this project of theirs and both of them agreed that they had to be patient.

Over a year ago, during the summer of '69 Draque had cast the Lifetree spell on over fifty trees. When fall had come, those trees had grown in size and produced over five hundred buckets of sap. At that time the Academy's foundation had finished and the place had been a huge mess. They had built the boiling shack where the east wing is now and it had taken over a week to boil all the sap into ten buckets of syrup.

Those ten buckets had proved themselves to be worth pure gold as they had sold not only quickly, but had been an excellent bartering piece with the dwarven builders. The dwarves didn't care much for food that came from a tree, but they certainly had a sweet tooth.

The dwarves had been back to work early in the spring, wanting more of the lifiesyrup they knew was being brewed. They had brought help in the form of whole clans and for the next four months the Academy was abuzz with a swarm of dwarves building up the Academy's dome like some gigantic bee hive.

They had left early this year for unknown reasons, but had assured Draque that they'd be back in the spring for more lifiesyrup or die trying. To Draque this meant he would at last have a surplus of the precious stuff and be able to market it more effectively. When spring came about he'd have two batches of syrup ready and this one was the biggest batch yet. The spring batch promised to be even better.

During the summer Draque bought land north of the city and cast the Lifetree spell on an entire forest of maple trees. He was determined to have ten times the amount of Lifiesyrup as last year. He carried the buckets in from the loaded wagons with the help of several students eager to have the first taste of the new batch. In his head, he was doing figures, trying to figure out just how much gold he'd make off this year's batch.

Meanwhile Hiram monitored the boiling process, content to be out of the kitchen for once and breath in the fumes of boiling sap. The sweet taste permeated the air and made him giddy as if he had drank ambrosia of the gods. This was the cook's second favourite time of the year, the first being the spring since the smell was a little bit more alive.

The black rum coursed down Chev's throat as he used it to shake off the cold. Sitting in the corner behind the bar of what remained of the Last Hammock, he searched his memories of Waterdeep. Surely there was a less drafty place he could stay in that wouldn't attract attention easily.

The warrior didn't doubt his ability to attract attention as his arrogant pride and supreme confidence was unmarked by failure. With the possible exception of magic to where there was no true defense, and thus he didn't count being turned into stone a symbol of failure.

Perhaps the fact that he had maintained his sanity throughout the ordeal said something for his pride and he banished that thought with a quick drink of rum. Spitting out the putrid stuff, he threw the bottle over the bar to crash beyond unseen.

Forcing himself back to his original thought, Chev wished that he wasn't so darkly handsome for once. It was beyond a doubt that in his early days he had been eyed by both maiden and servant girl alike as the most handsome bodyguard in the d'Or's service. With a dark complexion and a face reminscent of both gentleman and rogue, he had inspired the best in everyone.

The sword had helped with that, and Chev knew intimately its powers that could both strengthen and weaken its bearer. The sword had bestoyed upon him an unmistakable charm that went beyond mortal ability, yet was only semi-magical for it had combined with his already incredible looks and overall charisma.

The problem was that since the loss of the magical sword, Chev had noticed a definite fallout in his ability to charm people to his wishes. The guard at the gate of the d'Or residence had hesitated, something that had not happened a hundred and fifty years earlier. It was something that simply should not have happened, and that uncertainty told the warrior to be wary of his actions when confronting people.

Outright avoidance was therefore the key to survival. Chev was no coward, he knew that, but at the same time he also knew that he was far from a fool. Right now however, he concluded that it was time to get out of this dung heap and find a place to shelter him for the night. Some place less drafty, he quickly mentally rephrased as he vaulted the bar and walked towards the doorway.

Some place without a man wearing antique bronze field plate standing in the doorway, he amended even faster. Without flinching the warrior charged forward into Pierce's waiting blades and knocked the twin sabers aside with his buckler. Lightning quick, he drove his knee upward to connect with Pierce's groin.

The Doctor fell backwards into the alley, knocking aside Khelben as he stoically ignored the pain that made his knees wobble.

Chev's blade glowed a sharp blue light as the warrior strode easily into the alley and sidekicked the archmage in the belly, interrupting Khelben's intended spell with an "Oof!"

Facing Chev now in better lighting, Pierce was amazed once more by Chev's incredibly fast working mind, which was so confusing to the seer, but he was even more amazed by the level of the warrior's physical perfection. Every muscle was toned and fluid, displaying both finesse and incredible strength.

Khelben backed away from the two warriors as they met once more with blades seeking openings that simply were not there. For the mage to stand back and watch, it told him that even he, a great and powerful wizard who could have obliterated both warriors easily, was privileged to watch a fight such as this. No where else in the realms had anyone ever before witnessed such battle prowess in a pair of individuals.

He knew he should be helping Pierce, but had to concentrate to maintain his control over the air elemental. To let such a monster loose in the dock ward would be unforgiveable and result in many angry sailors showing up at the archmage's door.

Reflecting upon this, the archmage turned his thoughts to some of the greats that walked the realms: Arilyn Moonblade, Drizzt Do'Urden, and Martinez. Of those three, two had received formal training in elven schools whereas Martinez had actually been a dropout from a mageschool (indeed the drunk had even caused the school to be short lived due to his practical jokes that had left his instructor a babbling fool in an asylum). Even so, if rumour was paid attention to, Martinez had disguised himself as an elf and joined an elven griffon cavalry, gaining the rank of captain before his honourable discharge when his balding head revealed his true race.

Yet here before Khelben, who considered himself a fair judge of sword skill, were two fighters that surpassed all the previous. It was obvious to the archmage that Pierce had the shorter of two straws in this match for he was well past his prime whereas Chev was in his prime.

Pierce knew Khelben's thoughts before the archmage even thought them and whole heartedly agreed. Regardless of some warriors believing that two swords were better than one, the Doctor knew that the correct phrase should be two swords are more difficult than one. He knew all the combat strategies, indeed taught them to others, and yet he knew beyond a doubt that Chev knew them just a little bit better.

Pierce would have been dead long ago however were it not for his ability to anticipate attacks and angle his armour to most effectively meet them. That fact, and that alone kept Chev's single blade from ending his fighting career about once every two swings compared to that annoying buckler that seemed to absorb everything the Doctor could send at it.

Once Pierce managed to slip a blade through Chev's defenses but it only slid harmlessly off the warrior's finely crafted studded leather. It became quickly obvious that he couldn't keep up his array of attacks without some form of physical advantage. Higher ground in the dock ward? Not likely.

After three minutes of jabs, slashes and parries too quick to follow, Khelben was growing impatient. Summoning up the spell energy, he dispersed the air elemental into the wind and started on releasing a sphere of electricity that would fry Chev into "little tiny pieces" as Marque Draque

had said when he returned with the new spell as commissioned by the archmage.

Being an archmage meant having very little free time, and thus Marque Draque's business of researching new spells on commission had become highly profitable, and thus the Academy's best source of income. Needless to say that it was worth it, at least as far as Khelben was concerned. Marque Draque's skill with even the most difficult spells was envied by all in Waterdeep, but it was his skill in creating them that made him truly shine.

Pierce retreated away from Chev, knowing that if the spell engulfed the warrior that it was quite likely he would tackle the Doctor and take him along for a journey beyond the Gates of Death. In afterthought however, Pierce realized that by doing so it made it painfully obvious what Khelben was doing and Chev was far from stupid.

The warrior leapt backwards into wrecked tavern, escaping what he thought was the classic mage fireball as Waterdeep's archmage sent a tiny ball of blue-white light chasing after him. One could not outrun this ball of energy but Chev wasn't about to. With the strength an average man could only dream of having, the warrior wrestled a broken table up against the door and used it as a shield as the ball collided.

The bright crackling light blinded both mage and seer. This was followed by the crack of thunder that deafened everyone within a block and alerted the city guard throughout the city. The two Harpers fell away from the alley, blocking their eyes from the radiance and trying unsuccessfully to cover their ears at the same time.

"Draque didn't say the thing was this loud!" Khelben shouted angrily and swung his staff at the cobblestones, secretly wishing they were the drow mage's head. The cobble shattered under the blow, broken shards tearing the archmage's enchanted robes and simply bouncing off Pierce's armour.

"You're not supposed to fire it at point blank either! What did you think would happen if you stood beside a lightning strike?" Pierce shouted back in disgust. He clutched his armour where his heart was, fearing for a moment that he was having a heart attack.

"At least he's dead at last," Khelben said after a long pause. He started to straighten his robes and was caught unaware when Chev's fist came around the corner of the alley.

The Doctor barely caught the hem of the archmage's cloak as he slumped to the ground, but at the same time he was wishing he hadn't for he now lacked a weapon. Frantically thinking, he cursed his own fear for leaving the two sabers in the alley. He started to reach for his mother's sword but found Chev's blade poised neatly below his chin. He looked up to meet the handsome warrior's eyes.

"I'm not going to take pleasure in killing you Doctor Pierce. You aren't really a Harper and we both know that. You would much prefer to live an easy life without the espionage, to retire once and for all. Correct?" Chev's voice was amazingly level. His thoughts were much the same: level and confident.

"Correct," Pierce croaked, not wanting his adam's apple to bump the tip of the blade. "How do you know this?"

"I have my own sources, as do you. A bard of no small fame relinquished to me a sizeable list of Harpers. When she came to your name she went into detail, expressing her own belief that you really didn't like the attention and hassle. That's why you turned down the offer of being made a Lord of Waterdeep."

"A job that pays nothing except headaches." Pierce narrowed his eyes. Chev's thoughts were focused and everytime the Doctor tried to delve farther into their future the warrior spoke and brought him back to the present.

"And broken bones and blood if you're a Harper lackey."

"So why let me live?"

Chev smiled and sheathed that blade in his belt. "Perhaps because I respect you Pierce. You are the only man who has ever been able to withstand my skill and we both know that that's no easy feat." His head leaned to one side as if studying Pierce. "Especially for one your age."

The Doctor choked back his anger and wetted his lips before speaking. "I'm like a fine wine. I get better with age."

"You get weaker with age," Chev responded without thinking and then wondered if he should take that back. He straightened with pride. "I pray I never grow old Pierce. It would be much preferable to die young while I'm still in my prime."

"Because you have nothing else to live for," the Doctor blurted and also regretted it. He jumped back quickly and drew his mother's longsword in time to block Chev's own blade. They stood locked there, each wanting to continue that stroke and finish the other.

Chev's eyes had taken on a cold glint. "Perhaps," he said. Without another word he spun around and ran down the street.

Pierce wanted to follow and run the warrior through the back if murder was necessary but instead dropped to Khelben's side and cradled the archmage's head on his lap. Inspecting what his foresight told him was a broken jaw, he concluded that the mage wouldn't be using any verbal spells for a long time.

Darkness hid the Academy beneath its shroud and Pierce took to the gardens for a late night walk. This was one of the few places in Waterdeep where a person could walk without getting cold mud on their boots. While everyone else was freezing, the Academy was getting a warm rain that streaked down the Doctor's cheeks and hid the tears only he could see.

Only at times like this did he stop and contemplate his place in the world and what he learned didn't please him at all. "I'm an old man," he muttered to himself. "An old, weak man."

"You're still stronger than me human," rumbled a voice out of the mist. Long spider legs stepped into the light before Pierce and Rambertz stared down from his nine-foot height to meet the Doctor's gaze. "I may be a monster, but despite that you could still beat me in an arm wrestle."

Pierce nodded in consent although mentally he did not agree. "You will outlive me druid. I will be useless dirt before this century is done."

"Is that a prophesy?" Rambertz asked, head cocked to one side. He folded his legs much like a horse would and sat down on the well trimmed grass. "Or are you simply wallowing in self pity?"

Pierce didn't respond. Instead he looked away and tried to find an answer to his own thoughts.

"You are as much trapped in your form as I am in mine," the druid said at length. "When I was first transformed into the monster you know see, I feared I would never again see the surface and that the Morninglord would never shine his grace upon my horrid body." His handsome visage smiled. "Yet milord did something even greater. Where his servants are normally priests, he granted me the shapechanging abilities of a druid. Now instead of walking in the sun in this awkward form, I can walk, or fly, beneath his light. He blessed me twice that day. He removed my guilt about my form and accepted me despite my race."

"And me?" Pierce asked, looking skyward.

"You are blessed with a body and intellect most men would kill for. You may be about ten years past your prime but you still can hold your own. Did Chev not congratulate you? That's what I heard on the grapevine."

"He did. He said I was incredible for someone so old."

"A compliment. It is hard to find an opponent who takes the time to accurately evaluate you and find your strong points. I find it hard to believe that this Chev is totally evil."

Pierce nodded again. "He isn't evil at all. He simply wants vengeance." He paused and thought for a moment before turning back to the druid. "How do the drow define evil?"

Rambertz nearly laughed. "I don't know if we even have a word for it! All drow are evil, or at least most of us are. As for a definition? Untrustworthy might be its equivalent, which also applies to almost all drow."

"Okay," shrugged Pierce, sitting down crosslegged before the druid. "How would you define it?"

Rambertz frowned and pondered before replying. "Greed perhaps. That alone can explain everything." He jocked a finger towards the Academy walls in the direction of the merchant quarter. "We have a lot of evil all around us Pierce. Greed corrupts in the most profound way. There is no limit to what it can do."

"And why are people greedy? Even I must admit that I help myself to more than my fair share of sweets when it comes to my father's cooking."

"Now that we're getting into philosophy, perhaps its because people are generally insecure about themselves. If they see someone else with something they don't have, they start to think less of themselves, and thus try to improve themselves."

"Like children fighting over who gets the biggest cookie," mused Pierce.

"Like drow fighting over who gets to be Lord or Lady of the Underdark," Rambertz added. He looked down at Pierce. "That's why you feel threatened by Chev and hate his guts, and yet he, knowing that he's

better, doesn't care because he doesn't feel threatened. Because of that state of mind he can take the time to appraise you and compliment your skills."

Pierce nodded. "And back to when I die?"

Rambertz merely shrugged. "That comes down to who you worship. There is no God of Combat to my knowledge and if there is, she's disappeared. Perhaps died during the Time of Troubles." The Doctor noted how all drow tended to refer to gods as being female, something that had been bred into them from Lolth, the Spider-Queen.

Pierce pursed wet lips and stared up at the heavens. "A time when even the gods were made low and forced to walk amongst mortal men. I hope that never happens again."

"Not all gods," the druid said abruptly. "Not Lord Ao."

"Ao," Pierce said slowly. The overlord of all the gods had no followers. At least none that Pierce had ever heard of. "Why is it that no one worships him?"

Rambertz shrugged and droplets slid down his smooth obsidian body in a torrent. "He doesn't need to. He has the power to destroy any god, or all the gods at once, if he so felt like it. Why he doesn't is something we should debate in the future." The drider lurched and started to stand.

Pierce stood up quickly, almost slipping in the mud. "Why not now?"

"Because right now I should go and check on that boy you nearly killed. He should be quite asleep so I can check and make sure the stupid cleric did it right." The drider shook the rain off his huge frame and glanced down at Pierce. "They're amateurs these humans! Not a bit of healing skill amongst the lot of them!"

Szymon awoke with a start and stared around the pitchblack room. The only window was covered by canvas. "The eastwing," the half-elf said aloud. Letting his eyes adjust to the darkness, he switched to infravision. He looked about but saw nothing and heard nothing. He could have sworn something cold had touched his leg. "Probably a draft," he told himself and settled back down to sleep under the layers of warm quilts.

The eastwing was the last part of the Academy to be built and due to lack of funds had been postponed for at least a year until the school was making a profit. Pierce had explained that this was the best place to keep the boy because no one else went to the eastwing. This included the showoff rich brats that the school seemed to cater to.

That opinion of the place had changed with what little Szymon had seen of the place. Older fighters came here too, both rich and poor, to trade adventuring tales and test their mettle against the best of the best. Of which Pierce was, according to the latest rumours, second best.

The half-elf shifted and groaned. Why was this bed so damn uncomfortable? He wanted to get up and walk around but knew he would only end up falling flat on his face. He invisioned the cleric visited him in the morning and finding him on the floor helpless. That would be an embarrassing start for Szymon at the Academy.

Of course, Pierce had only hinted at admitting Szymon for free so the boy would live longer, but one could hope. The people who came out of the Academy had the typical haughtiness of the wealthy but they also had the skill to match their confidence. Perhaps it was the confidence the boy sought he admitted to himself, but it certainly felt good to imagine such things.

"Ten against one?" he murmured into the night air. "That's cowards odds! That makes all of you cowards!" he grinned despite the pain. Daydreams faded into real dreams and he was asleep only moments later.

Hiram scowled at the frying pan and flipped the egg skillfully in the air and caught it with a sizzling splat. "Fry damn you! Fry!" he threatened with a fist. He was more than a little impatient to try some lifesyrup on his eggs since all the work last night.

"Something wrong with the woodstove?"

Hiram shook his head and turned to face Pierce who leaned against the kitchen door. "I think it's the autumn air. It just doesn't want to fry quickly sometimes."

"Give it a minute," shrugged Pierce. "It will be fried by then."

Hiram didn't argue and wiped his greasy hands on his apron. "So are you going to hunt down Chev or what? Did Draque find anything?"

Pierce sighed. "Not a trace. He says that Chev has somekind of magical item that blurs his location. The most we know is that he's still in Waterdeep and-" The headmaster stopped to purse his lips.

"And?" Hiram prompted.

"Draque isn't going to approve of this but I'm thinking of getting some help from some gold elves."

Hiram swallowed. Anybody who knew the drow knew that he had an outright hatred of the golden haired High elves and only tolerated Moon elves at a distance. This was why Draque's illusionary appearance was that of a Moon elf and not the more respected High elves. Or at least respected by every surface dweller but Draque. It was in the drow's breeding perhaps but he'd rather spit on a surface elf than look at one.

Pierce too had a similar hatred of gold elves but his was based on their general haughty attitude. Yet the Doctor was still prepared to set aside his prejudices and shake an elf's hand.

Provided of course the elf didn't have a sword pointed at Pierce's throat. The Harper merely smiled and let his hand fall back to his side. "I'm here to speak with Petre Gizehalle. I have an appointment."

Looking down without fear, the Doctor wondered if the elves had deliberately built the Twisting Tower in a spiral to make people dizzy.

The gold elf scowled and signalled to a lieutenant to check Pierce's story with a list. The young elf nodded and the captain lowered his sword. "You may pass, Pierce O'Hiram," the captain said in a light lyrical voice despite the intended gruffness.

The Doctor ignored the lack of his proper title and stepped past the guard into the tower. Petre was one of the few elven Harpers in the city, but he also was one of the few who vied with Blackstaff for the title of Archmage of Waterdeep. His intelligence bested Khelben vaunted knowledge yet lacked the Archmage's skill and that was the elf's chief flaw.

The elf was also a telepath and like Pierce and Khelben's mutual agreement, Petre and Pierce had agreed to let sleeping dogs lie. For elves however, Petre's gift was not hidden but displayed openly as a threat to those who bore evil thoughts. His abilities at delving into another's mind surpassed the Doctor's but also had the added advantage of being able to track a mind like a bloodhound tracking a wounded deer.

Stepping past more guards, Pierce entered the barroom that housed some of the wealthiest elves in the world. As if that wasn't enough, the newly built Twisting Tower, so typical of elves, was built on a trio of spiralling stilts. Looking to the centre of the room, the Doctor spied the balcony overlooking a fountain in the centre of the stilts. This building was one of Waterdeep's greatest splendors but the view from the balcony with the fountain only yards away was inspiring.

Looking about, Pierce wondered how hard it was to hide a short, fat elf in a room filled with tall skinny ones. The elf he sought was a rarity amongst rarities and his physical attributes was just the beginning.

Spotting Petre, the Harper stepped around several tables and stood in front of the elf's balcony-side table. "You know why I'm here?" The elf was one of those few people who was immune to Pierce's mind and yet Pierce couldn't defend against the elf even if he tried.

"I sensed your mind the moment you started to ascend the stairs," the elf replied and offer Pierce a seat. "Please sit my friend and enjoy some elverquisst." He pushed his own crystal glass across the table in an ancient symbol of trust and friendship.

The headmaster sat down gratefully. "Can you track Chev by using his mental residues found in my mind?" Taking a sip, he frowned at the buzz in his ears he always got from drinking potent alcohol.

"Its possible Pierce, but not for me," the elf said quickly, sparing Pierce the wait. He smiled knowingly. "But together," he said slowly. "If I lower my mental barriers and you lower your feeble ones-" He grinned broadly. "Then together we could use our combined powers to track him."

The Doctor sat up straight. "I didn't know that was possible."

"The mind has no limits, but your sword reach does."

Chev's sword reach didn't have many limits and he drove his blade home through the chest of yet one more warrior. Looking up at the elves overhead, he only smiled as arrows bounced off the invisible barrier shielding him from their deadly fire. Alarms were sounding and more elven guards poured down to swarm the warrior.

Only to be slaughtered as he continued his path upward.

"I feel him!" Petre shouted unexpected and stood bolt upright. His chair fell over with an audible thud in the silence that followed the mage's outburst. "Chev is attacking! Gather weapons and magic!" he roared in a voice that carried throughout the building.

With speed and grace the elves responded to their fat leader's command faster than any loyal soldiers could have to a paladin's order. In seconds a vast arsenal of weapons had appeared and magic using elves were readying their spell components.

"Remember!" shouted Petre. "Time your magic carefully! We don't want the magics to interfere with each other and result in an explosive backlash!" Pierce agreed with that summary, knowing that elven magic tended to be more complex and that these complexities could easily get warped. It reminded him of a childhood story in which the mage turned the knight into a frog, but the mage's spell went awry and the frog turned out to be twenty feet tall. It was strange how his mind worked sometimes.

Drawing his sabers, the Doctor elbowed his way past slim elven guards to the doorway. He stood confidently before the bolted door and didn't even blink in surprise when Chev kicked it down. His twin blades flashed out and the younger warrior blocked both easily with a swipe of his shield.

Chev's longsword jabbed past Pierce's blades and slid harmlessly off bronze plate. The fighter was not finished however and he jerked the tip upwards to nick his opponent's cheek.

Surprised with this unexpected last second move, Pierce fell back with his blades concentrating on defense while elven guards swarmed around to attack Chev's flanks. The Doctor immediately regretted that move as three quick jabs and a booted kick to the neck from the warrior before him felled four elves in rapid succession.

Petre released a string fiery missiles which dissipated like a candle in thick fog against Chev's magical shielding. The buckler, Pierce knew now, was the cause of this protective wall, but was there anyway to remove it? Certainly not with his blades, he quickly decided even as he parried away Chev's attacks and held him in check. Unless he could remove that buckler, the elves would either be slaughtered under a sharp blade or stand in confusion as their spells were proven useless.

A smile crept across the Doctor's face and this puzzled the ex-bodyguard but not as much as it shocked him when Pierce dropped his sabers and held up his fists in a boxing stance.

"What the-" murmured several elves.

Chev sheathed his blade in a flash of steel and met Pierce's armoured fists with his own as they boxed back and forth exchanging quick punches that left their jaws in agony. Whatever anyone could say about Chev, they could at least say he was honourable and enjoyed fighting for the mere feeling of fighting.

It didn't take a mind reader to know that the warrior reveled in expressing his abilities and enjoying the activity. You could see it in his eyes. What Pierce saw in his mind went farther however. He could see Chev's fast paced memories of fighting in the back alleys of Waterdeep in

his youth, memories similar to the Doctor's own upbringing. They were filled with the simple joy of being alive and yet so close to death. It heightened his pulse and made every sense so much faster.

But not fast enough when Pierce's greater reflexes got past the warrior's defenses to place a foot solidly behind Chev's. The Doctor smiled and took the warrior to the ground with one of the first wrestling moves he had ever learned. Now it was simply a matter of getting that buckler off.

"Pile on top of him!" shouted Petre and young elves nearly tripped over themselves in their haste to burden down Chev.

Ignoring the rough movements of the elves and the punches of Chev, Pierce tore the buckler off the warrior's arm started to get up. He wished he had taken his time however in order to let more elves pile on top for Chev's strength was more than enough to drag himself to his feet despite the welterweight elves.

Falling backwards against the balcony railing, Pierce saw it coming.

With fluid kicks and a level of finesse no other mortal warrior could have achieved, Chev surged to his feet and charged Pierce in desperation. Without his magical buckler he knew just how vulnerable he was. The two men grappled for a moment but it was mere icing on the cake as the railing snapped under their combined weights and they fell into the roaring water fountain.

Closing his eyes and trying to ignore the dizziness and queasy feeling in his stomach, Pierce waited for the impact that would surely come. Taking a deep breath as he fell free of the fountain, he curled himself into a tight ball and hoped his armour wouldn't weigh him down too much in the deep water.

The bane of the d'Or family did likewise but had no worries about his ability to swim. Rather he held tightly to his buckler with a grip an ogre couldn't break. The roar of rushing water filled his ears and froze his heart as it occurred to him that he was falling over fifty yards and that the water might as well be granite when he finally landed.

A great elven bard had once said that water was the most powerful element of all. Without it one would die of thirst. With too much one could drown with ease. With time it could wear down mountains and build forests. With just enough, it made Chev's hands slippery and the impact of a two hundred pound man falling fifty yards was more than enough to tear the buckler from the warrior's clenched hands.

Pierce hit with a similar splash which was marked by his silent scream as he plunged underwater. Pain like he had never felt before wracked his frame and oblivion threatened to steal his world back from him. His feet hit the bottom of the pool of churning water and agony shot up his injured leg, again threatening his consciousness.

Gritting his teeth despite the loss of air, the Doctor swung his arms valiantly and bobbed to the surface long enough to draw breath before his armour pulled him back down. Water filled his ears and he concentrated on the direction to the edge. To his side he glimpsed Chev's form diving below the surface in search of the missing buckler.

Reason defying his own quest to take down Chev, Pierce walked slowly across the bottom of the pool towards the edge. He swam to the

surface every few steps to gasp in another breath and float back to the bottom. He could feel the water getting shallow and the bottom slanting towards the edge. Before long he could stand on his toes and breath easily once more.

At the water basin's edge servants and guards awaited him with towels and helping arms. They pulled the warrior out of the water like a gardener plucking carrots out of the ground and set him down gently beside the fountain. Someone handed him his sabers and it took the Doctor awhile to determine that it was Petre, his mental shieldings preventing him from discerning who it was until he saw the chubby elf's face.

The elven guards quickly scoured the fountain basin but found no trace of Chev. They looked expectantly to Petre who nodded in the direction of the merchant quarter. "Does he still have that buckler?" the mage asked hopefully.

Pierce tried to speak but found that his throat was too sore from lack of air. He shook his head instead and mouthed the word "No."

"Well, then we'll turn this over to the Fifth Cavalry. The Moon elves can deal with him."

The Crescent Spur was a private inn owned by the Moon elves of Evereska. Only members of their elite army of elven warriors could stay at the prestigious inn. This rule had one exception and he was considered a regular at all of Waterdeep's taverns, pubs and inns: Martinez. By default, the ex-griffon cavalry captain was the only human who could eat at this inn and by chance, his old unit, the Fifth, happened to be in Waterdeep on this fateful day.

And thus, when news arrived that game was afoot, the elven captain happily tossed his riding gloves to his teacher. "Do you feel like flying?" said the elf with a wry grin.

Martinez downed the liquor in his glass and set it down with an audible thud. "A chance to ride ol' Scarbeak and show him who is still the master?" He stood and gracefully hurtled a table on his way to the door.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," the elven captain shouted and chased after their ever charismatic leader. Despite years of drinking, the elf could still admire the cat-like grace of this extraordinary human. The same grace that allowed the warrior to fool many elves into thinking he was actually one of them.

It was true that they had felt betrayed by his race when it was discovered years afterwards, but they had stood by him in defiance when the Elders of Evereska demanded that Martinez be removed in order to preserve tradition. If Martinez left, so would they all the elves of the Fifth Cavalry had responded.

Such outright defiance would not be tolerated and the Cavalry was banished and ordered never to return to their jurisdiction. Since then the Fifth had wandered up and down the Sword Coast and in all directions around Evereska, but never going near their home city. It hurt them that the elders had been so stubborn about it but the cavalry was equally stubborn

and earned quick renown for their valiant defense of the elven city and all neighboring communities.

The army itself respected the Fifth's decision but valued their family ties more. They met the Fifth outside of Evereska's boundaries with open arms and at the same time bearing news of friends and family back home. It was the elven captain's secret hope that he might return home sometime in the next twenty years but it would take a miracle of bards to change the hearts of the Elders.

Maybe today was a day for a miracle.

Running past smoky chimneys, Chev wished he had taken time to learn more about dodging arrows rather than relying on his buckler's magic. With the shield lost somewhere on the bottom of that accursed elven fountain he had no choice but to continue running across the roofs of the merchant quarter and ignore the pain of the arrow stuck in his side.

Overhead griffons shrieked and swarmed around the fleeing warrior. Led by Martinez, they raised their voices in an elven chant and flooded the air around Chev with well crafted arrows.

Jumping over the edge of a building, Chev tumbled to the ground and rolled to his feet with arrows bouncing off the cobbles near his heels. Pushing into the crowd, he disappeared into the bustle and confusion of one of Waterdeep's busiest streets. Moving slowly and confidently, he lost himself in the swirl of people and vanished into the doorway of a tailor's shop.

Behind the counter, a halfling looked up in surprise at the injured warrior. Chev's disgust of halflings was evident as he picked the stocky humanoid up from behind the counter and over it so the little one was face to face with the warrior's angrily twisted face. "Where's the nearest healer?"

"Ugh, uh," blubbered the halfling and started to stammer. Chev shook him viciously and tightened his grip around the tailor's neck. "Down the street. Ijade's Poultices," he croaked.

The warrior tossed the halfling aside and went towards the back of the shop. He charged through a silk curtain and past a storage room filled with rolls of cloth both fine and coarse. Coming to the backdoor, he kicked it off its hinges and stepped out into the alley.

Four doors down, with bad spelling so typical of charlatan healers, hung a sign reading "Ijadas Poltisses". The door below it fell off its hinges and Chev stormed inside with sword in hand. Charlatan or not, her meager healing skills would have to do.

"Accursed guards," grumbled the barrel chested dwarf as he closed up his shop early and locked the oak door behind him. "Messed up a good work day with all their running around and lookin' fer some stupid warrior who's probably not even-"

A sword point nicked the dwarf's backside and he straightened like he had just sat on a thistle. Clearing his voice, despite his fear, the dwarf held up his hands to show he was unarmed. "What do ye want?"

"An excuse not to kill you for insulting my abilities," Chev replied. "I am far from stupid and if you're smart enough, you might actually live to see your anvil again."

"My anvil?" the dwarf started to ask but felt the sharp tip of the sword bite further into his back and warm blood trickling down.

"Yes. I'm looking for some quality weapons and I'm certain you're just the smart dwarf to give them to me."

The weaponsmith nodded urgently and started to reach for his keys to reopen the his shop.

Chev tripped the dwarf and shoved him up against the door like he was a battering ram. The oak held under the dwarf's weight and Chev's strength, but the hinges did not. The door crashed inwards, upsetting a table of scrolls.

The warrior reached down and scanned what was the dwarven equivalent of architectural blueprints, except it was for a weapon.

"Interesting," he said and tossed the scroll aside. He knelt down beside the semi-unconscious dwarf. "You know what? I've killed eight Harpers today, fourteen elves and nearly finished off Doctor Pierce. If you don't stand up pretty soon I'll add a dwarf to my list."

The smith swallowed and grimly got to his feet despite the groggy feeling in his stomach. He hadn't felt this awful since the morning after a dwarven mead drinking contest. He hated to admit it, but even dwarves get hangovers.

Chev glanced around the somewhat crude shop, eyeing the merchandise. "I was thinking of something similar to a rapier, but with more power to it."

The dwarf's mouth twitched out of fear when he spoke but he did so nevertheless. "A rapier is a wussy weapon. It takes talent to wield one properly but you're hitting the anvil right on when you say it needs more power."

"Something similar to a short sword perhaps? I want to be able to wield it in my left hand."

The dwarf wrung his hands and tried to smile despite the circumstances. "A saber might be--"

"Doctor Pierce's weapon is a saber. No thank you."

"A cutlass perhaps?"

"Perhaps but its not good enough for stabbing. I need something that is more versatile."

"Versatile," the dwarf almost grumbled in mimicry but chewed on his lip instead. "I'm afraid I can't help you. I--" He stopped and his eyes nearly bugged out as he stared at the sword poised ready at his throat.

"Then you better tell me where I could find weapons that suit my needs."

The dwarf wrung his hands behind his back and stuttered as he tried to think quickly. "Well, uh. I, um, think you could--" He stopped and took a deep breath. "You could find the best weapons there are at the Academy."

"The Academy of Combat?" Chev asked, slowly withdrawing his sword.

"Ah, yes," replied the weaponsmith nervously. "They have perhaps the largest collection of rare and magical weapons along the Sword Coast."

Chev shrugged and punched the dwarf solidly in the chin. He wouldn't kill this dwarf after all, but he couldn't afford to have the smith running off and telling the city guard of his destination.

Valeska Ko'Ragur was accustomed to things going her way. It was simply one of those things she had been raised with and become used to. If they didn't do what she wanted them to, she used her knack for charming or outwitting someone. This was not the case when Chev pushed her into a booth and sat down across from her. It didn't take a seer to figure out that he wanted something, but it did take her a moment to recover from the shock of meeting him again. Let alone here.

After hearing about his handiwork of the last couple days, she preferred to keep her distance from this incredible warrior. The question that raced through her mind now however, was whether she could stay alive that long. She was incredible with a crossbow, but up close against a fighter such as Chev? Mince meat, she mentally concluded.

Chev laid a dagger on the open table in front of him and glanced around the Yawning Portal. "You'd think we'd both know better than to wander around the dragon's den. I know my reasons, but what are yours?"

Valeska shrugged. "What better place to learn more about the dragon? I must state however that my skills at disguise are far superior compared to yours."

Chev conceded that point with a nod. "That's why I'm here. I need your expertise."

"You want me to disguise you?"

The warrior snorted and shook his head. "No, but I do need someone to help me get into the Academy."

The drow bard raised an eyebrow, thinking that she had overestimated Chev's intelligence. "Well, you could simply walk in, ye know-"

"I was referring to the vault."

She sat up straight at the mention of latter word. "The magic vault? Did I hear you correctly? You want to get into the Academy's vault?" She kept her voice low and even despite her mounting hysteria.

Chev nodded slowly. He knew it would be a challenging task but not impossible. Still, he was concerned by the amount of respect Valeska apparently held for this vault. "What do you know about the vault?"

She shook her head as if breaking a spell. "Well, lets see. Number one: its perhaps the largest vault in all of Waterdeep. Number two: its also the most well defended. Number three: its magical traps are designed by Marque Draque."

"Which means?" Chev prompted.

"Draque is the most paranoid mage in Waterdeep and he's also considered a master thief. He knows the methods thieves use to get into a

vault and has a reputation for having an arsenal of spells that are the most complicated, dangerous and altogether unique. No doubt he has a trap set for everything a thief could possibly do."

"But you're not a full-fledged thief and magical traps can be dispelled, correct?"

Valeska tried to look for an alternative but knew Chev was too smart for that. "Yes, they can be dispelled, but my-"

"Your skills should be more than adequate. You and I are going to go in there and we're going to ransack that vault. You are going to need plenty of time to do so however, and I realize that." He smiled and took a sip from his mug of mulled brandy. "Which is why I'll be providing a long distraction."

The bard narrowed her elven eyes at him. "And what's in it for me besides from nearly getting killed and a lot of gold in my pocket? I've been around too long to throw my life away simply to get rich when I have much better things to fight."

Chev took another quick sip and cleared his throat before singing:

"The drow on the bow seeks no hardship  
She lives her life with power and whip  
Carrying chaos she imposes on slaves  
Leaving behind nothing but shallow graves  
Life is but a game for our dread goddess  
Can you guess the goal within her bodice?"

Under the table, the drow bard clenched her fists and ignored the drawn attention to their booth from the tavern's other patrons. "You've done your homework," she hissed. "Do you mean to blackmail me into helping you?"

"Did you mean to give me the names of Harpers that deal with the drow only?" Chev rebuked. "Nay, I won't blackmail you. Indeed, I believe this will aid you immensely."

"In what way?"

"Your infamous reputation. You want the drow back home to revere you and follow you in a rebellion against the matron mothers. To do so, you must win their admiration and that is very hard to do when you're so far away, is it not? The only time they hear your name is when pieces of your poetry, or news of one of your assassinations trickles through the ground and back home." He took a quick sip and stared deep into her eyes, penetrating her will. "Think of your reputation if you run off with the Academy's vault?"

Gambling had been a favoured past time in Pierce's youth, and his skill at sleight-of-hand had nothing to do with his ability to always win at cards. The combination of foresight and mind reading had got him accused of cheating many times, but each time the young Pierce had won out by betting one last bet: Let the accuser shuffle the cards and cut the deck and if he could pull out a card, with sleeves rolled up and both hands on the table,

that was higher than the card they pulled, they would have to agree that he was simply blessed with luck.

The other instructors at the Academy had a card game every night and always, against their better judgement, invited Pierce to play. These days the warrior was smarter with the way he played, deliberately losing a couple times and falling for their bluffs, but at the same time winning more than he lost. They assumed, of course, that it was pure skill that kept him ahead in the winnings and they vied against each other to see who could beat Pierce's score.

He could have made a fair living as a gambler he supposed, but it would have been fairly boring compared to the intricacies of combat. The veteran warriors around him found cards relaxing compared to the constant barrage of swordplay, and as a time to bond and make crude jokes about Waterdeep's leaders. This was one of the simpler pleasures Pierce always took time to enjoy. He hoped however, that he wouldn't become like many other old men who spent their last days playing away with other old men until the fatal heart attack.

Looking across the table at the younger warriors, the Doctor wondered if it would have preferable to have died young, rather than endure the torture of growing old. "Grey hairs," he mused aloud.

"Huh?" murmured Ricarg to his right. "Wha'ye mumbling 'bout?"

"We're all getting grey hairs," Pierce explained with a shrug.

"Probably the fault of our students!" snorted Ricarg. "We're probably lucky to still have hair unlike your friend Martinez! He probably pulled it all out while having to deal with those bothersome elves!"

Pierce ignored the biting criticism. He too had a distaste for what seemed to many humans as an elven tradition based on snotty superiority. Still, the Doctor knew better than to let such criticism go unchecked. "Actually, Draque claims that baldness is hereditary. If your father was bald, so will you. Sort of like your big nose," he said, nudging the warrior to eliminate any hard feelings.

Ricarg shrugged it off and went back to studying his hand. He barely noticed the incident and would surely forget it by next morning. That was one thing Pierce had always admired about his pals: They could shrug off insults without blinking. It was in human nature, or at least male nature, to ignore threats to their ego.

The Harper nearly fell out of his chair at the sudden realization. Chev ignored him as a threat, but he was undoubtedly a threat. "Game over guys!" Pierce said as he leapt to his feet. "You can keep my gold! I've got to go!"

"Appeal to his ego? I doubt it. By all your accounts, he's too smart to fall for that old trick," muttered Draque. He pored over the pages of his spellbook, scarcely paying attention to Pierce. "You may know him better than any other living person, but you can't predict whether he's that stupid to fall for such an obvious ploy."

"But that doesn't matter," Pierce responded with a grin. "He'll ignore the threat because he is so confident, and really has nothing to lose."

"So what? What makes you think that you can actually beat him, even if you do manage to corner him?"

"I don't plan to. Surely your magic could subdue him."

"Yes, but the chances of turning him to stone again would be highly unlikely. Over time, people build up a strong resistance to magic and after a hundred and fifty years of being trapped in such a powerful spell its going to take a spell that I can barely cast to recapture him. To say nothing of the fact that at the moment I don't even have the spare energy to cast it. I've focused all of my magical powers towards fixing that blasted sword-"

Pierce and Draqe looked at each other and then across the room to the magically protected door. The Doctor could sense the evil behind it, seeking to get out of its confinement. "Bait?" they said in unison.

"Perhaps," muttered Pierce. "Let's start by letting more people know about the fact that you fixed it. When word leaks down to Chev, it might be the one thing that will draw him in. Lets start by tripping the guards in case he comes back for the sword earlier than we expect."

Ko'Ragur crouched in the darkness and hoped she didn't step on a twig. It would have been somewhat ironic had she been hunting and stalking a deer, but right now she'd only end up dead. The idea played with her imagination and chilled her to the bone like the rain that trickled through her collar, down her neck, and along her spine.

For a brief moment she was too afraid to move. She felt vulnerable and exposed out here and yet she knew quite well that she was safely hidden behind a row of bushes and a sturdy maple. Paralysed and agoraphobic, she stayed hidden in the shadows of the tree.

Beside her she heard the sharp tapping of raindrops steadily dripping into a tin bucket meant for collecting maple sap. She couldn't stand such irritating sounds. With her adrenaline tapped she leapt the wall of bushes and landed silently beside Chev.

The veteran warrior spared her only a glance and saw the white in her eyes. He was beginning to doubt whether or not he should have blackmailed her into this mission. He could have compared this mission to walking into a dragon's maw, and he wondered how far she would go. He could only hope her nerves wouldn't be totally ruined by the time they reached the vault or else the effort would be for nothing.

There was over a hundred yards to the door and there was no cover. A guard pranced nervously beside it in the rain while another two sat near the gate. If the first guard gave a shout...

Licking her already wet lips, Ko'Ragur set a crossbow to her shoulder and lined up the sights with shaking hands. Chev refused to watch as she pulled the trigger and there was an eerie silence.

A solid thud and the guard slumped against the wall with a crossbow bolt in the neck. Long legs bolted and the woman ran across the yard. She

seemed impossibly fast to Chev's eyes and yet to her own, those seconds seemed an eternity of being shieldless and vulnerable.

Chev ran after her confidently, trying to ignore his own fears should the guards glance this way. He moved more slowly and avoided slipping on the wet grass. If he slipped and was caught out here...

Working frantically, Ko'Ragur recocked her crossbow and held it upright against her shoulder. Chev cracked the door open, and together, fearless now that they were safe indoors, headed down the corridor.

The sheer number of guards lurking within the Academy walls was testimony to Chev's reputation. By Valeska's estimate however, the sheer number of guards left dead in their wake was a greater reason to fear Chev. As she watched, the warrior never broke stride, never grimaced, never even paused to wipe his blade clean as he strode down the hallways.

"Like watching death incarnate," she muttered in the drow tongue and followed behind in the shadow of the avenging warrior. She wondered if she might actually live through the night. Turning a corner she nearly ran into the warrior and would have impaled herself were it not for Chev's lightning fast reflexes.

Holding her steady, Chev turned back towards the twelve-foot tall bronze doors that was the entrance to the vault. On both doors, just above the keyhole, was a black and white swirling insignia bearing the letters "MD."

The half-drow swallowed and let out a silent prayer to Ao. "That's Marque Draque's Insignia of Protection. A god couldn't even break those doors."

Chev crossed his arms severely. "So? Dispel them."

"Dispel them?!" Valeska nearly shrieked but Chev clamped a hand over her mouth. She tried to calm down and took several deep breaths through her nose. Finally he removed his hand and she took another deep breath. "It can't be dispelled. Draque made some form of magical barrier that not even a dispel can get through. His Insignia of Protection is permanent, utterly impossible to destroy." She turned back to face the symbol in despair. "It is perhaps one of the most powerful spells ever created. Not even a genie wish could get through it. You can't teleport past it. Astral travel is hazardous and you'll come out on the other side with bodyparts and valuable insides missing. Negative energy would cause a rift in reality and we'd be sucked into another dimension. Even the hinges are on the other side of the door. The only thing that might work is..." Her voice trailed off.

"Is what?" prompted Chev.

"Is picking the lock," she sighed and reached for her pouch of lockpicks. "In which case there's probably a dozen mundane and magical traps that I'll have to bypass which will take a long time."

"Time which you'll have," Chev guaranteed her with a sword salute and walked away in perfect confidence.

Valeska watched him go and looked back to the huge bronze doors. "Even if I get past the lock, how do I get the damn heavy doors to open?"

She sighed and sat down cross legged in the dim lighting to sort through her picks.

Magical sword in one hand and a short blade taken from a fallen guard, Chev walked down the broad corridor of the west wing. Coming to the foyer the three guards on duty heard his arrival and one moved to the door to sound a bell alarm. The warrior ignored the guard at the bell and advanced on the other two guards.

Not very impressed by Chev's stature, the larger of the two advanced and swung a heavy claymore towards the warrior's head. The huge sword was blocked with both blades and pushed to the side while Chev kicked at the big man's vulnerable groin. The guard fell backwards more in shock than in pain and landed in a heap only to be finished off with a quick jab to the throat.

The other two guards backed themselves into corners out of fear. Chev advanced on one and then the other, killing with the brutal efficiency that was his preference when dealing with such pathetic warriors. Had he been fighting someone like Pierce he would have taken the time to evaluate his opponent but such careful examination of a foe would have been a waste of time on the guards before him. True, he was trying to buy time for Valeska, but there were better ways to keep the guards busy.

The bronze doors leading outside started to push open under the weight of more guards coming to join the fight. Chev looked about and dodged through a draped archway that held the staircase leading to the second floor. As he ran he took his time to make sure they heard his ascent.

"Up the stairs!" came the shouts from below as guards surged after the lone warrior.

Had Chev known a bit more about Doctor Pierce's history he would have known that Pierce had been cursed with the much exaggerated story of how he had killed the famed Tarrasque, a beast so large and vicious it made dragons tremble in fear. After the legendary battle, Pierce skeptics had hunted him down and challenged him. After several months of duel after duel, the Doctor's title was considered confirmed as he was unbeatable in single combat. Now that Chev was Pierce's superior, the thought of becoming the best of the best and the fringe benefits that came with it was such that the guards below were scrambling over each other to get at him.

The fighter waiting at the top had a vague idea that the commotion below was becoming a contest of sorts, but thought it ironic that they were scrambling to be the first to die. Bravery was one of Chev's strong points, but he was far from being stupid or foolish. He had no doubts that had he been physically weaker that he could still best any opponent set before him. Sure, in the example of Pierce, it would take some time and a good deal of ingenuity, but he was up to any challenge.

The first guard to reach the top however was not and after being stabbed by four twisted swings he fell backwards onto his comrades. The next warrior pushed himself past his dying comrade only to realise that the corridor constricted his movement in a fashion that he couldn't dodge much

and couldn't get a decent swing whereas Chev was out in the open and could do as he pleased. It was with a fair amount of respect in his eyes that this man fell in the doorway wounded.

The next guard charged forward to discover the same mistake only too late, but at least he had bought the ground needed for the following guards to surge out of the doorway.

Pierce rolled over in his canopy bed and pulled a pillow over his ears. "What's all the damn racket for?" he muttered, only half-awake. A draft from his door opening caused him to look up with bleery eyes and be blinded by a figure with a lantern.

Correction, make that Marque Draque and that annoying fire faerie Pierce's foresight predicted and he started to get a vague idea of what was wrong.

"Get up!" shouted Draque, shooing the faerie away with a hand. "Chev's on a rampage! This may be a chance to stop him if we can contain him until more Harpers get here!" The elf ran back out through the door with the faerie in flying pursuit.

Pierce sat up in his bed and looked at his bed head in the mirror on the wall opposite the door. "Couldn't Chev have at least waited until I've combed my hair?" he grumbled and crawled into his armour.

Dropping the short sword, Chev favoured the bull whip at his belt as he backed down the hallway, fending off six warriors at a time. With a little sleight of wrist he lashed the whip around a man's neck and pulled him forward to be impaled on Chev's thrusting sword. Loosening the whip, the warrior fended off more swings while preparing the whip for another deadly lash.

When it came Chev went for a leg, and the man screamed as he was pulled forward and killed with a clean thrust. A guard off the side charged forward in the same moment, seeking a chance to flank the warrior. He was met with a kick to the face which was quickly followed up with a slash to the throat.

A charismatic guard near the stairwell was trying to rally the men to charge and overwhelm the warrior, but was not getting much support after Chev's display of battle prowess. Pushing through the ranks, the self-proclaimed leader shouted for the men to backoff so that he could take on Chev one on one. They did so with cautious looks at Chev.

Chev smiled at the advancing warrior and made pretense of raising his blade in defense. He could see the sweat on the man's brow and the white knuckles on his hands. His eyes flickered and he opened his mouth to order his men to charge. A blur of steel later and Chev slid his sword tip out of the leader's gaping mouth and wiped the gore on the man's cheeks with a quick one-two slap.

The guard fell down face first on the ground and for a moment the only sounds in the corridor were the groans of those lucky enough to have only been crippled. The warrior backed away from the stunned guards and slapped his sword against his buttocks as he taunted them.

The guards in the rear of the group suddenly decided that it was their turn to go for help. The guards closest to Chev glanced at each other nervously, each wanting someone else to make the first move and die. Someone in the rear coughed loudly.

Toril's greatest warrior stood before the cowering guards and pawed the ground with the toe of his boot. "Next?" he asked with a wry smile.

"I'll take that challenge," said a calm voice from behind Chev. The warrior glanced over his shoulder and down the poorly lit corridor. Into the light strode a tall, broad figure dressed in tell-tale bronze armour.

"Good to see there's actually someone around here still worth fighting," Chev replied and put his back against the wall so he could keep one eye on the guards and another on Doctor Pierce. He looped his whip and tied it with one hand to his belt. Stooping, he picked up the dropped short sword and held it upside-down like an assassin. "Shall we test your mettle one more?"

"How about we test just how much that magical buckler aided you?" Pierce responded, drawing his sabers and rapping them together. The sound echoed down the hallway towards the dome.

"I'm afraid you'll find that my leather is also magical and stronger than steel. I've known men who have broken their hands trying to punch it. Are you so certain your fancy blades will make much difference?"

"Only one way to find out, isn't there?" Pierce grinned and stopped three yards from Chev.

The warrior stepped away from the wall, blades at ready. "What are you waiting for?"

Pierce smiled and continued to delve past the blur of Chev's confusing thoughts. There had to be a reason why the warrior had come... "The vault!" he blurted out loud.

Chev's eyes went wide for only a moment and then he became a flash of muscle and steel as he charged Pierce's blades and the two were locked into battle. Steel flashed in the dim light as the two warriors danced between their blades and their weapons bounced harmlessly off each other. Chev's understanding of Pierce's ability had come to full and he was actively shutting Pierce out of his mind through sheer stubbornness.

"Get to the vault!" Pierce shouted above the clash of blades as he backed his way towards the dome. Under the onslaught of Chev's fury, the veteran decided his best chance at survival would be to lead the warrior into the dome where the open area and better lighting would make it easier when help finally arrived.

Chev wasn't about to be lead about so easily however and he waited until the guards had left the corridor before dodging past Pierce and running towards the dome. Pierce's thrown saber nearly tripped him but he kept going. Through the wide archway, he vaulted the stone balcony, knowing full well that Pierce in his heavy armour wouldn't be able to follow so quickly.

Landing on the wooden pews below, he ran across them to the bronze doors leading to the south wing. Jumping off the last pew he barrelled his two hundred pounds of muscle into the door with his shoulder and broke the hinges off it. Landing in a dusty heap, Chev hoped he was moving fast enough.

Rolling to his feet and running past a side corridor, he heard the sound of running guards and knew he had plenty of time. Perhaps the only question left in his mind was whether he had given Valeska enough time.

Rounding a corner, Chev nearly tripped over the crouched bard. "We don't have much time left! How much more time do you need?"

Wide-eyed Valeska looked around as if for the first time in years. "There's just one trap left, but if I spring it I'll likely get poisoned-"

Chev pushed her out of the way and kneeled down to take a quick look inside the lock. "Is it that U-shaped piece to the left?"

Rubbing her bruised side and tempted to kick Chev in the head, Valeska growled, "Yes, but that will take-"

Chev shoved his little finger into the keyhole and pushed the U-shaped mechanism. He heard a sharp thunk sound and a poisoned needle bounced harmlessly off his leather gloves.

Standing, Valeska took care to close her gawking mouth as Chev removed his unharmed gloves and watched as the warrior kissed his little finger in thanks. With an air of extravagance, she threw aside her lock picks and put her shoulder to work as the two pushed the extra thick bronze doors open.

Only a large crack was needed and Chev forced his shoulder through to stand within the vault. Valeska followed, bumping into the warrior. Unsheathing his sword so it shed some blue-white light, the warrior glanced at her and back to mounds of coins before them.

The drow bard took a deep breath and was tempted to do a quick dance on the coins were she not so afraid for her life. Looking around the vault she saw that it was at least twenty yards wide and twice that as long. The floor was sloped so the majority of coins and wealth were at the opposite end. Penetrating the darkness with her infravision, the half-drow ran forward and started scooping up gems into a magical pocket.

Chev surveyed the room quickly, swinging his magical sword back and forth so that he could see more. Finally he saw what he was looking for and knelt to pick up a lightweight cutlass. The weapon was made of simple etched silver, or was it platinum? Chev couldn't tell for certain in the dim light. Drawing it from the sheath, the warrior was happy to see that this one also shed light, albeit an emerald green light.

The empty sheath landed with a clunk and the warrior looked down at a finely crafted dwarven crossbow. Hooking it with his toe, he tossed it into the air towards Valeska. "Here we part Ko'Ragur!"

The bard looked up and had to drop the baubles in order to catch the crossbow. For a moment she was awestruck by its craftsmanship but the moment passed and she looked up to say thanks.

Chev was gone and she could hear heavy boots coming down the hallway.

"Time for a teleport spell," she murmured, hoping that since the doors were open that they would no longer interfere with the spell. She closed her eyes and wondered where to go. Old Betsy's Tavern, Valeska's booth. She just hoped there was no one already sitting in it. Speaking the words, the bard ignored the strange feeling like she was floating in syrup and reopened them to the strong smells of a tavern.

"Well, gods bless me fat cheeks! Girl, what in tarnation are you doing popping up like that and startling me!"

Valeska looked at the table before her with a smile and back up elderly woman. "I was in a hurry for some of your cooking of course!" she said quickly as she set the crossbow down on the seat beside her. "Bring me some hot cider and don't let anybody sit down across from me. I've had problems enough with men lately."

"Okay," the old woman shrugged and hurried off to warm some cider.

Valeska breathed out a sigh of relief and hoped that was the last of her adventures for awhile. Or at very least the last time she'd see Chev.

Pierce kicked the coins across the vault and looked at Marque Draque for an answer. The elf only shrugged and looked to the heavy vault doors. "There's only about twelve thieves in the city that could have gotten past all of those traps," the Doctor began.

"And Valeska isn't supposed to be one of them," Draque finished for him. "She either got lucky or is better than any of us thought. That door takes me half a hour to pick and even then I can't bypass the last trap. The mechanism is too heavy to move with normal picks and too complicated to get at with anything else other than the proper key. Even if you do move it, you end up getting poisoned when a needle pops out.

"Perhaps it did work, and she's just resisting the poison?"

"Not likely. Its a rare fungus that's part magical. Normal antidotes and magical cures don't work. Unless Valeska has skin stronger than steel, she should be dead-"

"Leather stronger than steel," Pierce growled. "Chev's leather has been enchanted so it is stronger than steel," he said slowly, looking up at Draque with a half-amazed expression.

Draque pursed his lips. "Well, in that case all he would have to do is-"

"Stick his finger in it," Pierce muttered. He sat down on tired legs and half-cried, half-laughed.

Draque didn't think it was so funny.

It had been many years since Sharkslayer had been out of its sheath and already it was beginning to earn a new name: Lethal. So sharp and precise, its keen edge could cut through both steel and stone, and that was just the beginning. In Chev's hands the weapon knew no mercy and the gods above quickly became aware of this paramount of mortal fighters that

now roamed Waterdeep's darkened alleys and strode confidently in broad daylight.

Without pause and without fear, Chev entered a noble estate with both swords at the ready. He slew the guards without pause and walked up to the grand oak doors and promptly kicked them down. The elderly retainer standing in the foyer was crushed under the door and died in silence as his heart refused to pound any more.

The servants fled to safety, some out through the kitchen, some going down to the wine cellar and only a few seeking the protection of their lord. Lord Kyron however, a local noble, past adventurer and long time Harper stood his ground when he should have been fleeing. It was like Chev had stomped on an ant hill and all the ants had went scurrying away while the queen stayed behind to protect the hive.

For only a moment Chev saw the Harper's fear and felt saddened that such a brave warrior should die so quickly. He paused and made a pretense of combat as the two parried and slashed at each other. He then kicked Kyron backwards and jabbed Sharkslayer through his throat.

Wiping the blades on the drapes of a window, Chev kicked the window open and dropped three stories to land in a roll. Feeling invigorated, the warrior set out for a tavern to satisfy his stomach with a meal.

"Every so often he just goes on a killing spree," Pierce said to the very few Harpers assembled in the Academy's dome. "He comes and goes as he pleases and by the time the guards get there he's already gone. Not that the guards could stop him anyway, he'd simply makes pork chops out of them."

"Pork chops?" Draque muttered to himself. "Its nice to know Waterdeep's guards can be compared to pigs. Waterdeep's prized pigs. I like the sound of that."

Khelben Arunson snorted like a hog and elbowed Draque gently. His wry smile told his compatriots that he was still quite serious about the issue.

"I've come to the conclusion that there is no mundane way of capturing or killing Chev," Pierce finished and looked about at the silent room. "Which means we need magical traps of some sort and we need them fast. Until we find such a means, I can only ask that everyone spreads the word that all Harpers in Waterdeep should find a hiding place and stay there until they hear that Chev has been captured or slain."

From bow to stern, the ship was a masterpiece of naval vessels. Even to Chev's land-lover eyes there was the undeniable aura permeating the wooden planks that made up what would soon be dubbed Wavedevil. Running a hand over the smooth wood, the warrior swallowed and wondered how he could destroy such an incredible piece of craftsmanship.

He firmed his jaw and looked down the length of the hull. This was Doctor Pierce's pet project; A magical ship that could take on any other ship

or beast the sea had to offer. A ship that Chev had learned would be piloted by Harpers and only Harpers.

Lifting the torch in the dark and dusty warehouse, Chev set it against the hull and waited for the timbers to catch flame.

A sudden unknown draft snuffed out the flame.

Fumbling around in the dark, Chev relit the torch and waited a moment before trying to set fire to ship once more.

Again the draft of air blew out the flame.

Cursing, Chev relit the torch and tried once more just to confirm his suspicions. Again the torch was blown out and he threw it down in frustration. Annoyed that someone had thought far enough ahead to cast an enchantment to protect the ship from fire, the warrior went out in search of magical means to aid his purpose.

He couldn't go to Valeska. He would honour his unspoken promise to her and never bother her for help again. He didn't doubt that at first opportunity she would quickly desert him anyway.

A mage was what he needed right now and he had a feeling this would cost a fair bit. Magic was never cheap.

Grymav the Grand was scarcely more than a has-been. During his younger years he had been an adventurer of sorts, but after a near fatal fall that had left his right leg somewhere in the northern regions and himself a cripple, he had retired early to the easy life of a mage for hire. He made modest spells and enchantments and sold them for a flat fee.

He lived in a short, squat building with very little dirt on the outside but with plenty enough on the inside. Grymav never cleaned his house and he was notorious for being the only one who could safely get past the foyer alive, so thwarted with magical mayhem and discarded potions that had turned foul. Only a fool would seek out Grymav in his own house.

Unless that fool didn't use the door and came through a window in the middle of the night and pinned poor Grymav to his bed with two blades braced against his neck. The mage could do little but squirm his lower torso and stare up into the shadowy face of a man.

Chev licked his lips. "You are Grymav, correct?"

The mage tried to speak but could only croak. He nodded in the darkness and hoped the man could see him.

"I am Chev. I need your assistance." The warrior removed his swords from Grymav's neck and sheathed them quickly. "Get up and get dressed. Make one wrong move and I'll take off your other leg."

Grymav nodded quickly and got up slowly.

"Get moving! I don't have all night!"

Shocked into action, the mage hopped about desperately on one foot and pulled on his fur cloak.

Loaded down with magical scrolls that might come in handy for the task ahead, Grymav squinted around the pitchblack warehouse and quickly muttered a light spell. Simple yellow light lit up the warehouse and the mage got his first look at his task ahead. He also got an excellent view of Chev's cutlass pointed at his throat.

"Make one wrong move and I'm dead," he croaked, more to himself than to Chev, and approached the ship. "I'm just going to cast a detection spell now. I need to see what protections this has."

Chev nodded and lowered the sword to his side and waited.

Grymav fumbled about in his pocket for spell components and finally cast his desired spell. Inside he was tempted to grab the smoke powder and cast Ancient Flames, a spell he had devised in his youth and was still trying to perfect. The question was whether he could incinerate Chev with it.

The warrior waited with arms akimbo. "Well?"

"I, uh," Grymav fumbled for words. He knew now that the enchantment was a basic one that protected the ship from only mundane fire. It was defenseless against the Ancient Flames however. "I could burn it with a spell I have."

"Well, then cast it." Chev tapped the hilt of his sword impatiently.

"We'll need to stand back then. There's a lot of power behind this spell."

Chev gave him a doubtful look and with sword in hand he backed away from the ship. Grymav followed obediently, trying to figure out a way to keep his distance from Chev so that he wouldn't also be incinerated.

Chev paused and then grinned, the shadows adding a particularly evil touch to his wicked smile. "I know what you're thinking. Fire it at the ship. You'll just have to trust my code of honour. I won't kill you provided you complete the job." The warrior approached and clamped a hand down on Grymav's shoulder. "Go ahead, cast the spell."

The mage swallowed and licked his lips. He went through the delicate movements and spat out the command words.

It took a few seconds of silence but Grymav could see his spell starting to work. The wood turned a dull, dark brown and the iron fittings and nails turned orange with rust. Finally the whole length of the ship erupted into a roaring flame as the air itself caught flame and sent an explosion of energy erupting through the wooden ceiling of the warehouse.

Chev grabbed the mage and hurtled himself behind a stack of wooden skids. The action was not so much saving the mage from the backdraft of flame that swept through where they had been standing, but a living body shield against the falling debris that followed.

Martinez swayed in the doorway of a tavern when the explosion lit up the sky only blocks away. A quick jog of his vodka stained brain told him that Pierce's ship was in the same area and the fact was too much to be a

coincidence. His curiosity aroused, the Harper spoke a command word and was lifted into the air on a draft of magical energy.

Floating down on the ruined building, he used a bandanna to keep his lungs clear of the smoke which didn't go well with his churning belly. Swirling through the smoke with his longflail at the ready, the fighter landed lightly like a prancing faerie. His trained ears caught the sound of movement near the back.

Stepping into the air once more, Martinez soared over the ruined ship and spotted a robed figure struggling with a broken skid that had landed atop of the poor mage. Drifting downwards, the Harper lifted the skid off the figure's back and tossed it aside with ease.

A smoke stained mage peered up at the warrior. He wet his sooty lips with a pink tongue and coughed at the taste. "Chev's getting away," he finally croaked.

"He did what?" screamed Pierce, his voice thundering through his packed office and down the marble hallways. "My ship? He destroyed my ship?"

Martinez looked at Durnan for help. Durnan looked at his boots.

Martinez looked the other way at Mirt. The moneylender looked out the window.

Finally the Harper looked at Marque Draque, the only person in the room who wasn't a Harper and yet helped out now and then provided there was something in it for the mage. Draque was busy scribbling notes on a scrap of parchment and looked like he hadn't even heard anything.

A vein stood out on Pierce's forehead and he clutched his desk for support. Mumbling something about needing a stiff drink, he sat down and put his head in his hands. Martinez sat down in Durnan's chair, took a quick sip of brandy from a bottle in his pocket and handed it to Pierce. The Doctor took it and downed it without a word. He leaned back in his bronze armour and stared at the ceiling. Taking a deep breath, Pierce stood and set the bottle down with a sound similar to a gavel. "If anyone needs me, I'll be in the basement chopping up more wood for the winter."

It was with an eerie calm that Chev stayed low for the next few days. He stayed for long hours in shadowy taverns, watching the hours drift past. There was no more Harpers. Actually, there were more, but they had all disappeared. He didn't eat much and the food was always cold because he took his time eating.

He had caught a glimpse of Valeska in a crowd but she had spotted him first and disappeared faster than a quickling could blink. The bard had a right to avoid him but at the same time Chev had a feeling she was enjoying her sudden renewed fame so soon after the drow assassination. He too was getting more than his fair share of recognition.

Fame was something he had never wanted. Perhaps it was humbleness that had made him great, Chev mused in the darkness of his booth. He was a simple warrior, asking for nothing more than an excuse to keep his sword edge sharp, food in his belly and-

"Love," he said loudly, interrupting a bard's story.

"Love?" the fair haired man laughed from his stool by the bar. "I was about to say I fell in a pit, and you blurt out the word love? If you were being chased by an angry ogre, which would you prefer to fall in? A pit or in love? I for one would not want to fall in love with an ogre! Mystra's breasts man! What were you thinking of?"

Chev stood with casual ease and shook back the hood of his cloak to reveal his handsome face and brown hair. "I was thinking of a fair woman. A woman so fair and beautiful that any man would find it hard not to blurt out such a word. Can your bardic tongue put words to such a feeling?"

"Stupidity?" the bard blurted and his head rocked back from Chev's fist before he had even finished the word.

"Try love," Chev said evenly and lifted the young man by the neck with one hand and threw him across the room to crash into several alarmed patrons. "A feeling that leaves a man sick to the stomach for all eternity," he said as he walked through the room of parting people. "Do you know the kind of agony a man can endure when his soul is torn with a lost lover?" he said as he lifted the bard by the back of the shirt and held him at arm's length so that they were eye to eye. The man's arms and legs dangled down as if he was a mere puppet.

A stern heavysset barkeep positioned his head in between the two and looked Chev in the eyes. "You sound like a man with more than his fair share of stories. Instead of wreaking the place, how about you share a few with us?"

This was the kind of courage Chev liked. He saw in the barkeep a sense of comradeship that he had not seen in a long time. He had seen a bit of it in Pierce but he had always been too busy fighting to take a closer look. The warrior dropped the bard to the floor and broke open a smile. "You want a story, eh?"

And so it was that overnight Chev's fame spread across the realms. He told a story of a man caught between death, love and loyalty. A story that spanned a hundred and sixty years of Waterdeep and ended with one man's vengeance. When the first rays of dawn peaked over the cliffs to the east and shone down on the vast, sprawling City of Splendors, it showed a city that was abuzz with historians young and old, digging out ancient tomes and records and fleshing out more details of what could only be defined as a born again legend.

Sitting at outdoor cafes and indoor pubs, at the bars and in the back rooms of taverns, aspiring bards scribbled away hastily at ballads, poems and stories. By noon, there was a thousand variations of Chev's story, each distorting the truth and claiming to be the only true version.

Alone in her darkened booth, Valeska bit her lip to keep from laughing at the bard currently trying to convey Chev's real story. He portrayed the warrior as a romantic gallant with a heart of gold who had singlehandedly sought out his fair lady and saved her from the grip of his enemies only to be betrayed by her father. Finally, the bard held aloft a sword.

"This is Chev's sword!" the bard declared to his small, yet attentive audience. He brandished the rapier in the air. "He gave it to me after he fought with Doctor Pierce. The good Doctor is great indeed but he was no match for Chev's superior skill and loving strength."

The drow bard started to laugh hysterically and the story was cut short as the audience turned to face the darkly cloaked stranger. Trying to control her laughter, Valeska stood and shook her cowl back from her face, revealing her half-elven features. She took a deep breath and used her years of experience to control her face as she smiled at the bard. "Your story is so far from the truth, I'd swear you were talking about a paladin and not the treacherous Chev," she said, her well chosen words coming naturally.

"Treacherous?" squeaked the bard. "Are you calling Chev a villain?"

"He was a bodyguard belonging to one of Waterdeep's most ruthless family of villains. He is not only treacherous, he is conniving, greedy, vengeful, and without pity. He backstabs, betrays, and blackmails."

The bard's face turned beet red and he lowered his rapier at Valeska. The woman only smiled and twirled on one toe, her adamantite-toed boot connecting with the bard's ribcage and knocking the air out of him. The man collapsed to the floor beside his fallen rapier and clutched his broken ribs.

Looking about at the shocked crowd, Valeska sat down and told her own story, despite the fact that her version would never be accepted. The truth must be known however, and she was determined that this might be her chance to gauge how well people accept her words when she told them something they did not want to hear.

Some of the people left, but those who stayed learned the truth and understood how the truth is so easily lost. The drow-bard saw this in their now knowing eyes, and wondered how many stories she'd have to tell before her own people saw the truth behind Lloth's lies.

The liquor flowed from the bottle in bubbly glops. Martinez tilted the bottle upright and stoppered it with a twist of his wrist. Taking the wine glass, the bald Harper swirled the red liquid and breathed in the smell.

Pierce grunted and split another log under his axe.

"You know, it's really kind of you to let me have access to your wine cellar, although I must admit the selection is far from complete," Martinez said before taking a sip. "The Fifty-Eight Dessarin correct?"

"That was an interesting year." The Doctor rested for a second before swinging once more.

"Indeed. The Time of Troubles left many a brew touched by magic that year."

"I must say that it was also my favourite year. Adventurers were in demand that year and the pay was sky high."

"Don't tell me ye stock this stuff just because of the year?"

"No, I stock it cuz I like it," Pierce drawled.

"You're definitely no wine connoisseur."

"I never wanted to be one. I still don't know what I want to be."

"It's a little too late for planning your future. We're both old men Pierce, we've already had our day and we messed it up."

"I killed the tarrasque. Was that a mess up?"

"That was luck and quick thinking. The rest was just a combination of stupidity and foolishness. We're not immortal."

"You're smarter than you look, you know that?"

"I'll take that as a compliment," the bald Harper smiled and downed his drink.

Pierce set another log up and sliced it down the middle with his axe. He kicked the twin pieces aside and placed another log on the cutting block.

Martinez poured himself a drink from the bottle marked Kicbor Red Sixty-Three. He paused as he poured it and looked up at Pierce. Pierce stopped and looked at the Harper, delving past the alcohol fogged thoughts. "How much better is Chev?" the bald man said bluntly, seeing the Doctor's intent look.

Pierce frowned as he chopped downward at the wood block, splitting it easily and left the blade stuck the cutting block. The Doctor swallowed and wet his lips. "On a scale of one to ten?"

"Sure," Martinez shrugged and leaned against the wall as he sipped straight from the bottle.

"Chev would be a perfect ten and I would be an eight."

"And me?"

"You'd be about a six, maybe a seven."

"And yet together, we still couldn't beat Chev."

Pierce shrugged and jerked the axe out of the cutting block. "A perfect ten. We have to remember that Chev is in his prime and he is still more experienced than both of us. Who knows how many battles he went through years ago?"

"Does it matter? If you've heard everyone talking about him then you know that he's now a legend and a public hero."

"I've heard, but he's also a murderer. How are we supposed to bring him to justice when we don't even know why he's killing Harpers? The public doesn't know that they're dying either because we always cover up the deaths. There's only been three occasions when he's actually attacked and had witnesses."

"So?"

"Don't look at me for answers. I never wanted this authority in the Harper ranks, it was more or less thrust upon me." Pierce held up a single finger. "One job I did for the Harpers. Just one! When I returned they were passing out silver Harper pins like there was an endless supply of them!"

"Perhaps they knew that you have nothing else to do and wouldn't refuse it?"

Pierce snorted. "Nothing else to do! Indeed! I train adventurers now and only when I'm not busy being a Harper lackey!"

"You need a hobby. Ever thought about becoming a wine connoisseur?"

The Doctor shook his head and sliced another log down the middle. "This is the closest thing I have to a hobby."

"Chopping wood? Congratulations! You're now a lumberjack!"

"Har har! I wish it was that simple!"

"Light."

Nothing happened. Draque frowned and spoke again. "Light!" he commanded. There was no sign of the fire faerie. The mage tossed down the parchment he had been wanting to read and went to the door.

The east wing was far from finished but Draque had taken the opportunity to use its space and privacy to set up a workshop to conduct experiments. In the corner a huge silver cauldron bubbled with purified lifestyrup, heated by his Everhot Bricks. Without light the mage wouldn't be able to tell if the cauldron was ready for the experiment because he needed to see the colour change from golden to white.

Unjamming the door, the elf opened it and looked down the hallway. "Where are you?" He shivered and pulled his cloak around him tighter as he headed down the hallway. The ceiling of the hallway was incomplete and snow had drifted down through and landed in the corners where the sun couldn't get at it.

"Of all the times the little brat could disappear," Draque muttered and followed the sensation of heat with his heat sensing eyes and found it down the hall coming from the half-elf boy's room.

Lighting a cigar with a minor spell, the mage approached the door with all the silence of a night owl stalking its prey. He opened the door and found the fire faerie playing tic-tac-toe of all things.

"Haven't I told you not to disappear when I need you?" the elf scolded, one hand on his sword and the other on a wand.

The faerie fire dashed up into the ceiling and hid in between the rafters. This was one of the few rooms out here that actually had ceilings. There was no escaping the mage however and he motioned the faerie towards the door and it flew out in a flash of light.

Alone in the darkness with only his cigar for light, Draque looked at the half-elf Szymon. "I see you're feeling better. Have you a knack for distracting my construct?"

"Construct?" the boy said, his voice puzzled.

"Yes, a construct. Sort of like a golem or a gargoyle. A creature that is animated magically."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought it was a pet."

"More than anything else the little brat is part of me. He has all my skills but a completely different personality. He has intelligence but is more child than anything else because he's only about twelve years old."

"So, he's the only one?"

"Of his kind? No. I've sold the spell that makes fire faeries and now they're becoming quite popular amongst the older mages who lack the patience for stupid golems and even dumber apprentices."

There was a moment of silence while Szymon absorbed this information. "I should let you get back to your work."

Draque looked about the dark empty room. "Can you walk? I could use someone to talk to and you sound like you'd be good at listening. Provided you keep your hands to yourself."

"What? Watch you?"

"Why, do you want learn some magic too while I'm in a good mood?"

Stupid question, the mage thought to himself as the boy led the way down towards the docks. What street rat wouldn't jump at the opportunity to learn some magic? The problem was finding a place with enough residual magic to begin even the most basics. Draque's answer: A rather burnt out warehouse near the waterfront.

When they arrived at the ruins, Draque was happy to stand watch while the boy took his time picking the lock at the door. It took a bit longer than the mage had expected but then again he was used to dealing with experts of the artform and not amateurs. Still, the boy had the lock open in less than a minute which would have been quite satisfactory in most situations.

Stopping in the doorway, Draque waited for the fire faerie to provide suitable enough light before proceeding into the darkness. The light coming through the gaping hole in the ceiling only illuminated the charcoal ruins of what had been a complete workshop and a long husk of a ship. "You can see that there was a very large explosion in the area-"

"Fireball?"

"Similar to one but for our purposes it will do. All we're going to do is use the magic left over in the air to attune your senses so you can learn how to detect magic."

"How?"

"A very good question! Half of magic is the mystery of it all however and if I were to spill the beans and just tell you, then magic wouldn't be quite the same would it now?"

"Um, no. It will still be magic."

"You learn quickly. Now, let's get started."

Nicole paced across her parlour and back again, her hands fidgeting with her horse whip. It had been quite some time since she had seen Pierce. Of course, the last time she had also ended up with the hangover of hangovers, but she blamed herself for having the Screech Soaked Cod.

Tonight was a banquet night and she simply didn't feel like hobnobbing with old dowagers on an evening such as this. The trick was

finding a suitable excuse to visit Pierce even though he undoubtedly had troubles of his own.

A polite knock at the parlour door disrupted her thoughts and she turned to face a stableboy. The lad grinned sheepishly and combed his hair between his fingers. "Mister Jark would like to talk to you-"

"Tell him I'm in no mood to talk at the moment."

The boy swallowed and decided it might be best to disobey. "He says that if you can't control your new horse-"

"New horse?"

"Yes, the huge black one with the bad temper."

Bartholomew hated stalls more than he hated being ridden and as such was more than happy to let Nicole ride him so long as he was freed from his stall. He had kicked three separate stall doors off their hinges before the stablemaster had decided to use a bit and bridle to hold the beast in place.

The huge black stallion would have none of that however and had sawed through the bit with his teeth and chewed whatever ropes had barred his path. The gardener had nearly had a heart attack the next morning when the huge horse was found munching lazily on his prized asters.

The stablemaster had responded by using a length of chain for a choke collar and placing the stallion in a secluded stall at the rear of the stables where he had gone unnoticed by all but the stableboys for almost a week.

That had ended this afternoon when Bartholomew was found in the orchard this time, helping himself to a bushel of freshly picked apples. The chain was still around the horse's neck but the stall was in shambles from the stallion's ruthless kicks. The stablemaster was getting tired of this and started back to the stables with the horse in tow.

His mistake was that of grumbling something about geldings and castration. The next thing the man knew, his feet were tangled up in the chain and Bartholomew was dragging him towards the rose garden when the gardener came to the rescue.

The question Nicole now wondered was whether the gardener was rescuing his roses and not the stablemaster. It was strange how the huge horse was so badly tempered in the hands of his supposed masters and yet a perfect gentleman when she had arrived on the scene. Or maybe that was simply her biased opinion based upon the horse's proper owner.

She didn't particularly care and she doubted the gardener or stablemaster cared either for the Bartholomew's two-faced nature so long as Nicole returned the horse. The stablemaster had no objections to letting someone else handle the horse and Nicole wasn't about to take no for an answer since she had been waiting for a suitable excuse such as this.

As she approached the gates of the Academy, it occurred to her how dark and somber it looked. Foreboding, was a better word she decided. The two veterans she passed at the gate only waved briefly, never pausing in their card game as they traded old wat stories.

Autumn had set in a little later in here. There was no snow on the ground, just cold frozen leaves. It was odd that there was an inch of snow outside and yet none in here and she couldn't help but wonder what sort of magic was at work.

A livery boy approached her and took Bartholomew's reins. The huge horse snorted and shook his head vigorously before glaring down at the boy. The lad only firmed his jaw and tightened his grip. The mean stallion was known for his temper at the Academy's stables and wasn't about to be forgotten simply because he had been missing for quite awhile.

Nicole slid down off the saddle and patted the stallion's rump to soothe him. She hoped he wouldn't cause too much trouble. "Where's Pierce?" she asked and missed the horse's ears perking up attentively.

"In the basement. There's a door in the stables that leads down there."

The Academy's basement was a mess of old rooms filled with broken or disassembled catapults and other large military equipment. The land on which the Academy had been built on had originally been the city's old armoury and siege depot before it had been separated and moved to several different locations so it would be closer to the city walls. When the city had moved the stuff that was still good, they had left behind the broken parts as junk for whoever was brave enough to buy the land.

The foundations of the originally building had still been good and so Pierce had brought in a team of gnomes and dwarves and together they had renovated the foundation for the new building. The gnomes had insisted that they try and salvage the old siege weapons. The dwarves took one look at it and promptly locked away the larger pieces away for "safe keeping" and burnt the rest.

Five years later, the locks had rusted away and the doors opened easily under Nicole's gentle push. Shoving her torch into the darkness, she revealed the wickedly pointed and barbed head of what looked like a huge harpoon. "One thing I wouldn't want to get impaled on," she murmured with a grimace and closed the door as she continued down the hallway.

Burning away the cobwebs, the lady continued on with her riding whip held out to the side at ready. There was light up ahead coming from around a corner and as she crept closer she could hear the solid thuds and the splitting of wood under a heavy axe. Stabbing the torch against the wall, she ended its flickering life and tossed it aside.

As she looked around the corner she saw the half naked form of the man she adored. He stood alone with his back to a blazing fire as he chopped away viciously at the wood before him. The wood, she saw, was what remained of the old catapults and after years of drying out they split easily under the axeblade.

The warrior kicked the wood aside into a ready wheelbarrow and set up another piece of wood to be split. He paused then and straightened, the sweat running down his bare chest and making streaks in his hair. Doctor Pierce turned towards her then and for a moment she thought he had heard her and so she ducked back into the darkness.

The man smiled and chopped downwards once more and kicked the split halves into the wheelbarrow.

Summoning up her courage, Nicole took a moment to breathe consciously before stepping into the open and knocked on the wall with her fist.

Pierce seemed only mildly surprised and he smiled at her. "I thought I heard someone coming down the hall. What are you doing here?"

"I was returning your horse and I decided to see you to make sure you knew."

The man only shrugged his broad shoulders and chopped another piece in half and kicked the results aside with his boot. "Thanks. I had forgotten about the old brute. How much trouble has he been?"

"My stablemaster threatened castration at one point," she smiled, hoping to get a smile in return.

Pierce only shrugged. "I hope he was talking about Bartholomew and not me for forgetting the damn horse was even there."

Nicole's thoughts turned naughty, and she blushed and put her hands behind her back. Banishing such thoughts, she looked about the room for something to talk about.

"You've heard about Chev I'm sure?"

"Yes," she replied slowly, unsure about how Pierce felt about the now famous man and Waterdeep's new greatest warrior. "Have you given up hope of catching him?"

"Not hope. I'm questioning the reason behind it all."

"I know about all the Harpers being killed. Is murder not a good reason?"

"I meant what is Chev's reason for killing the Harper's in the first place. It can't be a personal vendetta against me or else he could have killed me in my sleep a hundred times by now."

"Someone hired him?"

"Thought about that, doesn't make sense. He simply wants all Harpers dead and buried."

"Then why not you?"

"Because I'm not really a Harper, not in the truest sense."

Nicole crossed her arms. "And who is?"

"Danilo Thann is, if you can believe that. You wouldn't know it if you saw it in public. He has the heart of a Harper. He's perfect for espionage and loves every second of it."

"And you?"

"I'm supposed to be retired. I was never a Harper. I was always a survivor and a leader, and I like the Harper concepts but I don't belong with them. My soul isn't there."

Nicole saw through him then. She saw the frustration, the years wearing down on his shoulders, and the tears left unshed for friends long dead. He had adventured for so long he didn't know how to stop and was afraid to stop for fear of growing old and dying. So here he was, getting older and greyer and all the while biting back the tears belonging to dead friends.

Her heart ached to reach out and hold him. She could not help but respect and pity him at the same time. Then there was Witter, Pierce's mentor who had died not so long ago. He wasn't done grieving the death of his friend and she could see it on his face.

It wasn't sweat that stained his face and chest. It was tears.

He looked at her then, his face full of fear and his eyes welling up. A moment later she was in his arms kissing him passionately, how she had gotten there was a blur. Everything was a blur as she wrapped her arms around him and lost herself.

Pierce slid his fingers across her soft cheek and wondered what the servants were thinking. It had been the middle of the night when he had carried her up the stairs wrapped in his cloak and laid her down on his bed. She had slept silently curled up together with him, her smooth legs intertwined with his thick hairy ones. He had laid there the entire night dreaming the things she dreamed, sharing her most intimate thoughts.

He could not help himself, so intrigued he was as he studied her in her sleep, delving past her tanned face and into her mind. She was proud and defiant, holding herself up with a rigid code of honour, respect and common sense. Under that all was her strong opinions, something Pierce had also loved in people in general because his telepathy would pick them up. Even if those people lacked the courage to voice their opinions, Pierce knew about it and was quick to suggest that the person give their ideas. Nicole wasn't the quiet type however and that was only one more reason to love her.

Rising from the bed, the Doctor ordered a bath and returned to his canopy bed. She looked like a nymph sleeping there under his white silk sheets which clung to her curves. Sitting down, he pulled on his adamantite-toed boots and paused as he started to lace them up. Kicking them off, the warrior crawled back under the sheets and slid his body up beside hers and held her close.

She awoke with a start and splashed Pierce with soap suds.

"Thanks. I needed my forehead cleaned anyway," the warrior commented and wiped the soap away.

Nicole looked about Pierce's bedchamber and then back to the porcelain bathtub in which she lay neck deep in warm water and bubbles. "Well, well," she said slowly. "Such service! I must command the manager to give you a pay raise!" She gave him a crooked smile.

"I am the manager and I don't get paid anything," Pierce replied.

"It's nice to know someone else shares my weird sense of humour. How long would you like to continue this facade?"

"Eternity? I have nothing else planned."

"Nothing planned? Oh, I have plenty of plans!" Nicole leaned forward and kissed him delicately.

Pierce caught a glimpse of a mental image of a moonlit beach and straightened. "There's something I want to tell you-" he began and was interrupted by her panicked thoughts of marriage. "It's something very important and I know you're going to be a bit shocked."

"And impatient," she said, wanting to kiss him again.

"I'm a seer."

Nicole closed her mouth and for a moment her mind was a blank slate as the words registered. This immediately followed by a tumble of emotions and questions. "What like a fortune teller?"

"No, not like that. Just the immediate future. I could tell you how many fingers you are holding up before you even held them up."

The lady felt very vulnerable and utterly naked despite the bubbles covering her. When she spoke at last her words were slow as she sorted them out from her jumbled thoughts. "And if I changed my mind about how many to hold up?"

"That's the other thing. I can also read minds."

Nicole blinked and again she was confused and her thoughts were jumbled up with mixed emotions towards this news. "Okay, so let me get this right." She licked her lips. "You can tell me what I'm going to think even before I think it?"

Pierce paused and looked perplexed for a moment as he thought it through. "Yes, I can, but then I would be changing the future and it would never happen the same way as I had originally foresaw it."

Nicole's thoughts went back to yesterday and remembered what had happened yesterday.

"I foresaw you entering the room and knew ahead of time that you were hiding behind the wall and watching me because of your future thoughts."

"Which is why you kept chopping so you wouldn't mess up the future," she whispered.

"I can't mess it up, but I can get confused if I disrupt it too much but changing the future. When I fight, every second counts and I don't have time to ponder through a billion different possibilities for a single swing."

"So you kept chopping so you wouldn't get a headache?"

"More or less."

She smiled and stayed still. She wanted to ask more questions but couldn't think of any more at the moment. It would take time to adjust to thinking this way. "Who else knows about this?"

"Marque Draque, Rambertz the gardener and of course my father."

"Why would your gardener know?"

"You've noticed how it's warmer in here than out in the city and the sun is a little bit brighter. It's because Rambertz is a sun druid and an old comrade when it comes to adventuring."

"Never heard of such a thing as a sun druid," Nicole said with a shrug.

"That's just the beginning."

Chev stopped in the alley outside the tavern. His instincts told him this was a trap but not a typical one. He could turn around and leave but he had a stinking hunch that would only result in a crossbow bolt in his back. Taking out one sword, he advanced into the midday shadows.

A crunch of snow up ahead alerted him and his other sword was out and prepared. "Who are you?" he said slowly.

"Well, we're not Harpers if that's what you mean," said a deep voice off to one side, hidden in the shadows. The sound came from above meaning that the speaker was either really tall or was standing on something.

"Then stand out in the open," Chev responded, snapping his two blades together.

A huge ten feet tall hippo-headed beast stepped forward and levelled a pistol at Chev.

The warrior had no experience with such creatures and even less knowledge of guns. Nevertheless he decided that whatever the weapon was, the giff held it as a mage might hold a powerful wand and thus was to be respected. He waited, swords held at ready.

"I am Hiortan."

"That's nice."

The giff frowned and his fat face filled with bulging wrinkles. "I'm the leader of the gun trade."

"So? What's this about?"

The creature's face turned a shade of red. "Why aren't you afraid of me? I could kill you in an instant!"

"Maybe. What's your point? What's this meeting about?"

The beast growled and his big fist tightened around the handle of the gun. "I want you to kill Doctor Pierce!"

"Why?"

"Because he's stopped my gun trade! Ever since the explosion down on the docks no one has been willing to talk to me and since the Valentino d'Or died I haven't been able to smuggle in any guns because everyone's so afraid they'll blow up or something."

"Why don't you kill him yourself?" Chev asked, knowing by now that he was too valuable to kill and the giff wouldn't do so unless Chev became a threat. The mention of the d'Or hinted that the beast and the d'Ors had been allies at one point, a good excuse to kill the giff were he not so feebly armed. He had to determine how powerful this gun thing was before trying anything.

"Because no one among us can beat him in combat and we can't get a gun within a hundred yards of the Academy without Marque Draque's magic system sounding an alarm."

"You'll excuse me if I don't know much about guns. How do they work?"

"Like a crossbow. You just aim and pull the trigger."

"That's it?" Chev asked skeptically. He didn't like ranged weapons. They seemed too much like a coward's weapon.

"Yep!"

"And what's it do when you pull the trigger?"

"It shoots a small lead ball."

"That sounds pretty pathetic."

"No its not! Its so fast you don't even see it coming! Just the bang and then you're dead! Goes right through you!"

For a second Chev was scared but then he remembered he didn't have anything to live for anyway. Just as quickly he was disgusted by the fact that anyone could pull the trigger and kill so easily. It was too easy and too much like child's play. The very thought of it revolted him in a way he couldn't quite understand. All of his life he had made his life by the sword, perfecting the art of killing and along comes this tool, not a weapon a tool, that could kill with the pull of the trigger.

Without thinking Chev advanced on the giff and sliced off the arm holding the weapon. Three quick jabs and a slice across the neck and the giff was a fountain of blood that crumpled to the ground. Gun shots sounded like cracks of thunder and Chev felt something nick him in the side. He looked down to where the bullet had grazed his chest and ran forward into the alley where two more giffs with pistols waited.

Blades thrust faster than fat fingers could load and Chev left the two giffs in a puddle of their blood. The rage inside lasted only a moment more as he sliced at the pistols with Sharkslayer and ruined them beyond repair. It took him a moment to realize how severe the wound in his side was before he sheathed his swords and ran from the alley, stemming the blood with his left hand.

"Three giffs," Martinez reported. "And not one of our people know who killed them. One of us think that the one is Hiortan but its too hard to tell because his head was so stained in blood. All three of their pistols were sliced in half as if they had been placed on a guillotine. I can't think of any sword except yours that could through metal so effectively."

Pierce looked down at Tarrasqueslayer and shook his head. "I can. We had a sword kept in the vault called Sharkslayer. It had almost twice the slicing power as mine which is why we kept it locked away. It was simply too dangerous to be allowed into the hands of an inexperienced fighter. In Chev's experienced hands though-

"What is the sword on a scale of one to ten?" Martinez asked, pouring himself a drink from a bottle. Pierce had always noted that the warrior liked to rate things on a scale of one to ten, most likely because that was the way he rated sweetness of wines. An eight was very sweet and a two was a very dry wine.

"Tarrasqueslayer would be a six and Sharkslayer a perfect ten."

"Doesn't make much sense that a tarrasque is forty times bigger than a shark, but okay," Martinez muttered and downed his drink.

Pierce smiled and looked about the empty cafeteria. The huge wooden tables and benches had been pushed off to one side for a jig party this evening. A prize of one magical object from Pierce's vault for the best bard would bring the best musicians in all of Waterdeep.

Over time the warrior had collected a vast assortment of magical items and he didn't have much use for the bulk of them. Most of them had been brought back from his trips to Chult where lucky treasure seekers had found the very best in magical artifacts. Pierce hadn't found much of great value other than gold a wide assortment of magical twinkets. Draque occasionally drained some of the twinkets of their magic in order to create some more powerful enchantments but other than that the stuff stayed in the vault where they were safe.

Twice a year, since the opening of the Academy last spring, Pierce had a party and gave away a twinket to the best bard. Last spring the winner had been a half-elf bard Pierce hadn't seen for almost twenty years. Diego had adventured with Draque and Witter so long ago it seemed like another life time. The bard was the bastard son, one of many, of Diego the Wistful, the man who had taught Pierce to read and write.

"You aren't going to compete tonight are you?" the Doctor said, turning back to the little table in the corner and Martinez with his bottle.

"Me? I haven't sang much in fifteen years. I don't have much reason to either. I have everything I need right?"

A sense of purpose would be nice Pierce thought, but chided himself that sometimes he didn't know what his purpose was. "Right," he said. "There's no everfull wine bottles in the vault as far as I know."

He wondered if Martinez was insulted by the comments he made sometimes and was always certain to delve into the Harper's alcohol-fogged mind. As usual, the bald warrior didn't give a damn. He had long ago given up caring about his pride because he knew it was the truth of the matter. He was a drunk and didn't care.

Pulling himself back out of the man's mind, Pierce focused his attention elsewhere. He always got depressed if he delved too far into Martinez's mind. Sometimes he wondered if it was possible to lose himself in someone's mind to the point that he forgot what was real and what was a person's memories.

The bald Harper downed the last of his drink and wiped his chin on his shirt as he stood. "Time to go get into more trouble. Any messages for Durnan?"

"Ask him if he's coming to the party tonight."

"Will do. See ye later"

Magic is the power of mystery. It boggles the mind and yet fits so perfectly. For a paradox to be understood, one must take the time to study its various components and develop a theory about how it works. It then takes time and experimentation before one can truly understand the workings of magic. Even the great mages like Elminster have problems working out how magic really works. No mortal really knows the reason why magic does what it does.

In ancient times it was believed that witches controlled evil spirits and ordered them about. In exchange for achieving these tasks, the witch would

make sure that certain goals were met so that the spirits were happy. Today, we know that this is not true.

Magic is a non-sentient energy and as such can only be controlled by force. It takes a measure of will power combined with the mage's knowledge to complete a task. An apprentice eventually becomes a full mage and the simpler spells get easier as they attempt harder spells.

Magic sometimes requires fuel to make a spell work. You cannot create a fire without kindling and wood to burn, but also the initial spark. Thus a spell is like a recipe in a cookbook and every mage must learn the spell properly unless he wants his cake to be burnt.

Szymon set down the book and looked up at Draque who was busy scribbling notes beside the cauldron. The half-elf understood that he had an enormous opportunity before him to learn magic but that it was going to require reading the rest of Draque's book which was obviously an introduction to magic.

The problem the apprentice had right now was that he scarcely knew how to read and had come to a word he had never seen before. "Sir?"

Draque looked up. "What?"

"I've come to a word I don't understand."

"What's the word?"

"It might be magic-"

"Rubbish! You don't have the knowledge to use it anyway. You can say the word a dozen times but if you don't know what it means it won't do anything!"

"Czarodziej?"

"Ah, you've come to a word in elvish. It means magician."

"Sir, I'm a half-elf. I do know elvish and that's not an elvish word."

The drow nodded and lit a cigar as he stood up. He walked over to the boy. "That's because it's a dark elf word."

"Drow?"

"Yes. Believe it or not, but yes, I speak drow. Better than I speak elvish I'm afraid. Comes from all my years in the Underdark."

"Have you met Drizzt?"

"I've seen him on the surface right here in Waterdeep. I can't say that I was particularly impressed either. He looked so naive."

"Have you met any other drow?"

"Yes, I've known many drow in my time. They're mostly evil too. You can only begin to imagine how vicious my people are."

The "my" took a moment to register and during that time Draque dropped the spell that hid his black face.

Needless to say the half-elf fainted.

Pierce took one look at the unconscious boy and smiled at Draque. "You won't need the Forget spell, the boy is going to follow you around like a puppy I'm afraid. Congratulations! You're now an idol! You can thank the stories about Drizzt Do'Urden."

Draque puffed on his cigar and wasn't sure if he should be pleased. "It looks like I have an apprentice now."

"In more ways than one," Pierce pointed to the sword on Draque's belt. "He's a thug turned apprentice. With any luck and no large explosions you'll have a fine companion in a few years."

"And a brat I didn't want to raise."

"Perhaps, but consider this: He'll be a legacy of your knowledge when you die. Can you ask for much more?"

"Immortality? I could always use that."

The Doctor shook his head. "No, but I'm certain you'll have fun. If that's not one reason, how about this: You've already become regarded as the best mage when it comes to creating spells. Indeed, other mages hire you to create new spells for them. Now is your chance to prove that you can also teach that ability."

"Teach how to create spells? I doubt the boy has the aptitude for it!"

"You taught me how to cast minor cantrips didn't you?"

"Yes, but you can only use minor elemental ones, like lighting a torch or blowing out one. You can conjure a drink of water to splash someone in the face at most but that's it."

"I did scare that troll off by lighting my hand on fire."

"Faerie fire which isn't real. Trolls aren't always that stupid."

"What else was I supposed to do? Wrestle him with my bare hands?"

"It would have been an interesting fight to watch."

"Nevertheless, you're stuck with the kid."

Draque snorted smoke out his nose like a dragon. "Indeed."

Nicole stopped at the main doors and looked about the Academy. It was near dusk and the air was humid within the walls. The sun's power still warmed the grounds and yet outside in Waterdeep there was several inches of snow that hadn't melted during the day. Tomorrow there would be even more snow on the ground. She couldn't help but wonder how long this Rambertz could hold winter at bay.

She decided to take a quick walk around the grounds and try to find the druid. She doubted that Pierce would mind if she was late for their date. It wasn't uncommon for a noble to be deliberately late so as to make a more illustrious entrance.

As she walked, she swore the place felt more like late summer than early winter. It was muggy and had that feeling in the air that excited the pulse and made you feel so much more alive. Perhaps that was a magically induced feeling, but she doubted it as she passed a row of orange rose bushes.

A solid hoof print before her in the ground made her smile. Following the tracks she found the huge stallion hidden behind a row of red maples chewing on a grape vine that hung down from the trees.

"Bartholomew," she scolded with a smile to which the horse snorted in response and continued to chew lazily. She leapt atop the horse and dug

her heals into his flanks, using his mane to steer him back to the stables as he started out at a gallop.

"I'm surprised Pierce lets you get away with this. I don't understand why you could like flowers and leaves better than oats. Every horse knows its a treat to have oats, let alone all the time!"

"Well, not exactly."

Nicole reined in the horse and for a moment thought that Bartholomew was the one who had spoke. Looking up at the huge maple overhead, she saw a dark torso hidden between the limbs looking down at her.

"Bart knows that the best foods are out here in the sun. Especially with a little magically tweaking from myself and Marque Draque, these gardens are probably the best tasting ones in all of Waterdeep."

"You are Rambertz right?"

"How much do you know of me?"

"Not much other than you're a gardener of sorts."

"A druid. The sun has an enormous power to provide life once properly harnessed. The plants you see around you have all been tweaked magically so they do several things."

"Like?"

"Well, for starters they taste better. They're immune to disease, and they absorb and release heat in a fashion that prevents the frost from harming them during this time of year."

"And the reason you're up in the tree is so you can watch the sunset better?"

"Yes and no."

"No?"

"I have other reasons, but I'll leave those up to Pierce to tell you."

Nicole shrugged and dug her heals into Bartholomew's flanks. She was suddenly anxious to be near her date and away from this strange druid.

Pierce watched her go and came out from behind the limbs and sat down across from the drider. "She knows about my abilities but I don't know what she'd think if I told her you were a drider. I don't know if I should even tell her about Draque."

"The mage has his own problems so I hear from the birds in the trees," the drider grunted.

"A bad case of hero worship I'm afraid. The boy thinks of Draque as many others think of Drizzt. He's going to be a bit disappointed when he finds out that Draque works for money and doesn't hunt pirates."

"Draque has the drow curse of greed in him. From what I know of the vault, nine tenths of the gold in there is his and he doesn't know what to do with it all."

"Asides from build a bigger, better vault when spring comes. He's already working on plans for having four sets of doors, all with different versions of his Insignia on them. He estimates it will take four hours to check for all the traps, disarm them all and finally open the doors."

"He told you this?"

"No, I caught his thoughts by chance."

"Ah, but what is chance? Is it fate?"

"Chance is fate?" Pierce questioned aloud.

"What else could it be? You didn't see it coming did you? It simply happened with no warning."

"Shouldn't that be the other way around? If it was fate, then I would have seen it coming right?"

"Yes, you should have. Does that mean that chance is the opposite of fate? That you can't predict good luck?"

"Are we talking about karma now?"

"Yes we are. Karma is the feeling that something is simply better. You don't know why, other than a hunch that it is somehow better. When you hold up two swords, you have a feeling that one is better than the other so you use the one that simply feels better."

"I see what will happen and feelings have nothing to do with it."

"Yes, but where do we find a distinction between a karmic feeling and foresight? Both do roughly the same thing don't they?"

"Foresight tells me whether I'll hit with the sword and karma tells me that I believe I'll hit with the sword."

"So foresight is certain and karma is based on belief. What happens if you believe in good luck?"

"Then you have a paradox."

"How so?"

"Its circular reasoning. If I say that I believe in good luck because I have a good feeling about it, then when I miss I realize that I was wrong and should have done the other thing."

"Hindsight is twenty twenty. How would we rate your foresight? Can you see the future with your left eye better than your right?"

"Its a mental image. If I close my eyes I still know what will happen even if I can't see it visually with my eyes. My mind will still see it in my head."

"So if a person thinks in his head that one sword is better than another, even though they both look exactly the same and feel physically the same, he'll pick the one that he thinks will work better. Is it fate that causes him to pick one over the other? Or is it chance?"

Pierce shook his head and wanted to scream. "You enjoy confusing my foresight don't you?"

"These philosophical talks help you though right? Over the years your foresight has gotten stronger and you can see things with a clearer mental image."

"Yes, it is stronger, but do you have to confuse me like that? I won't be able to sleep tonight because I'll be trying to figure it out in my head."

"Is that your foresight speaking or a karmic prediction?"

Valeska looked down at the revelry from her place in the rafters. The cafeteria was filled with people, young and old, rich and poor. Bards and musicians from every race waited in a long line to have their turn at entertaining the populace. She waited until a gawky looking half-elf stood up on the piled tables which was the stage before she made her interruption.

The clear smooth sound of her violin drifted down slowly at first and then drowned the people in her music. It was a sound more melodious than a Harp and smoother than anything else. It calmed the nerves and sang in the hearts of every man and woman who suddenly found themselves rooted to the ground and spellbound as they raised their eyes to the rafters and saw the drow standing there on the beams.

Valeska whispered a mental prayer to her god and continued to play. The music grew and the tempo increased dramatically as people realized who they were watching. The entire chamber was quiet, with the possible exception of one corner.

"Do something Draque!" Pierce hissed in the drow's ear.

"No," replied the drow and puffed on his cigar.

"Why not? We've been trying to catch her for years!"

"The Harpers have. I haven't. Valeska is a nuisance to you, but she is one of the people the Harpers should be protecting. Besides, I have an arrangement with the Ko'Ragur," Draque said matter-of-factly.

"An arrangement? But-"

"But you didn't know about it? Yes, Pierce, I've perfected my Mind Shield spell so you can only get parts I let you have. For years now Valeska and I have made deals with each other. I make her speciality spells and in return she does special errands for me. Then there is the matter of her goal to overthrow Lloth. She doesn't need Harpers getting in her way when she already has a hard goal like overthrowing a goddess in front of her."

"But-"

"Let me continue! You and I both know the Harpers can never defeat the drow in Undermountain. So what does the city do? They try and work out trade deals with the drow, hoping to appeal to their greedy side in order to ensure the safety of Waterdeep itself. What do the drow do? They send an ambassador which Valeska promptly kills. She, and I for that matter, don't care how many drow die in the process so long as our people are finally freed from Lloth lies. Its time our people weren't brainwashed from birth."

Pierce frowned and stared at Draque, knowing there was something else. "What else are you not telling me?"

Draque puffed on his cigar and glanced at Pierce sternly. "When Valeska goes back to the Underdark to take Lloth down, I'm going with her. I'm going to die eventually anyway so I might as well serve my people."

Pierce looked back to the drow bard. From so far away it was hard to get inside her mind, especially with the confusion of the many minds all around him. As soon as he caught hold of her thoughts, he grabbed hold and held on tight with his mind. It was like trying to grab a swaying rope that was just out of reach and finally catching it.

Closing his eyes, the Doctor locked onto Valeska's thoughts. She was primarily concerned with the intricate details of her violin playing but underneath that was the subconscious ideas whirling about. She was afraid. Deathly afraid and it wasn't of heights because she knew she could levitate to safety. For a moment the warrior was struck by a sense of total vulnerability and had to remind himself who he was and where he was. She was out in the open. Shieldless and vulnerable to attack. After a hundred years of evading her people and humans on the surface she had become paranoid about being in open places. The clustered alleys of Waterdeep and caves below it in Undermountain were more suited to her and even there she was always fighting to keep alive. He saw images of cozy booths in taverns as havens and tables in the middle of taprooms as a place of vulnerability.

Pierce had never thought of taverns in such a way. He had always sat at the bar or at most at a table near the door so he could leave quickly if necessary but that was it. After twenty years of adventuring one could easily forget all the different taverns and inns he had stayed in but Valeska hadn't. Each one was different and a clear facet of her mind.

The crossbow, he realized quickly was another facet of her. It was a long range weapon with enormous force that could punch through the hardest of armours. She preferred it over any other weapon because it could keep her hidden and safe away from trouble. The twin hand crossbows at her belt were made for speed and enchanted to be incredibly quick and self loading. She could shoot them at least eight times before an opponent even got near her and by that time the mix of poison would have taken effect.

The drow bard used sleep poison like all drow, but she also tipped them with various other poisons that could cause death or simply slow their heart down until only a trained person could tell that the victim was still alive. She had kept some of the drow who pursued her alive and then-

Draque nudged Pierce and broke the warrior's concentration. The mage held him upright with one arm and nodded upwards.

The Doctor looked up at Valeska and saw that she was near the finale. When she finished it was a long note which she cut off suddenly like the music had simply given one last burst and died.

Silence.

Pierce put his hands together and clapped.

Draque followed suit and whistled shrilly.

The drow bard looked down upon the throng of people as their clapping grew and swelled into a thundering cheer. Tears ran down her cheeks as she bowed and slid her violin into the harness on her back. She turned to leave through a latch in the ceiling used by the janitors to clean the top of the three story high room.

"Come down!"

"Come down!" more people shouted.

Looking back, Valeska spotted Pierce and Marque Draque motioning her to come back. Acceptance? she wondered for a moment.

"Draque, cast a flying spell on me quick," Pierce muttered, taking off his swordbelt.

The mage nodded and took an eagle's feather from his belt and tapped it on the warrior's shoulder while murmuring his enchantment.

At will the warrior soared upwards into the rafters and stood floating before the bard. Holding out a hand, Pierce smiled hopefully. "You're safe with me. The Academy's walls shall be your shield tonight," he whispered.

The words touched the woman profoundly and she couldn't help but hold out her hand and accept his offer.

Wrapping one firm arm around her, the warrior dropped to the floor below slowly and floated down to the cheering people. It wasn't until now that Pierce realized how short and diminutive she really was. Barely a couple inches over five feet and incredibly lightweight.

"You're making a huge mistake, you know that right?" Valeska whispered.

"If the Harpers and your kin don't like it they can't do anything about it except kill me. The Harpers won't resort to it, and your kin are more likely to want you dead more than ever and forget about me. The only drow warrior who could stand a chance against me is Drizzt Do'Urden and I think we can both agree where his allegiance would be."

The remains of the d'Or ship in the harbour was the quietest place Chev could find for a decent night's sleep. His description was widely known now and it was getting incredibly hard to find rest which he especially needed with his new wound. Before settling down to sleep he made certain that the wound was bound tightly so it wouldn't become infected easily.

His eyes were just about to drift into the realm of sleep when he heard a crash from above the deck. Looking up, the warrior saw moonlight coming through a hole in the ceiling where a booted foot had fallen through a rotten board and gotten stuck.

Throwing caution to the wind, the warrior stood and severed the foot from its owner and listened to the screaming curses from above. The sound was cut off by a sudden shout followed by a splash. Chev ducked under a beam and climbed up the ladder to the hatch and pushed it open with his blue glowing longsword.

A grisly dwarven face looked down at Chev and wiped slobber off black beard with the back of his hand. "That was a mean move!" he snarled.

Chev cocked his head to one side so he could see the dwarf better. "What's it to you?"

"Me?" the dwarf laughed between scarred lips. "I never cared for that guy's leg anyway. I'magin he don't think that way though! Can't swim that well with only one foot!"

"Any reason why you're trying to sneak up on me?"

"Other than to have our feet cut off by a professional?" asked the dwarf. "I'magin it's cuz the boss wants to hire your bald rear end."

"I don't want to know what other body parts you dwarves grow hair on," Chev replied. "Is your boss up there, or is he absent for this meeting?"

"I still have my legs if that's what you mean," said a stern deep voice.

"And will you treat my head the same should I stick it through the hatch?"

"Your head is far more valuable where it is. That would be like cutting down a large diamond into dust and what good is diamond dust? What good are you without your head?" asked the stern voice.

"Rat food I'magin," grunted the dwarf.

Chev climbed the latch and held his sword at ready and his other hand on the sheathed Sharkslayer. The blue light off the blade and the yellow flickering torchlight added a green touch to everyone's features.

A tall broad man with rough features and black hair stepped forward. "Ever been to Undermountain?"

Undermountain. Perhaps the most dangerous place in the whole Realms next to being inside an active volcano. This labyrinth of caves below Waterdeep was filled with some of the most vicious and truly unique monsters. It was easy to get lost, killed and eaten down there and it was as simply as that. Those humanoids who survived down there were either really lucky, or had proven themselves to be worthy adventurers.

Chev had never been to Undermountain. He had only recently learned of the maze of tunnels below. Now that he was in them however, he could only wonder if he wise being here. Already two of the men had been killed by a group of rampaging umber hulks and another to a cleverly conceived drow trap which had left the man's body parts smeared across half a cavern.

They were after a cache of magical items stolen by drow. The dark elves had fortified themselves within a dead end tunnel. The drow had placed crossbowmen strategically around the entrance so that anyone who entered would be filled with bolts the moment they stepped into view and that was the limit of what Chev had been told. If he could get past the bolts, he would have first pick of exactly half of any of the things they found.

A group of men had stayed behind to guard the entrance and wait the drow out but the elves were still there. That much was evident by the bodies laying in the entrance riddled with quarrels and bolts.

"Can you do it?" demanded the group's large leader.

"Will you care if I use their bodies?" Chev nodded to the bodies and flashed his glowing blue sword at the top one.

"Go right ahead."

"Okay, does anyone have a grapple or something with which I can get them out of there with?"

"You can use my harpoon," offered the dwarf and shoved a particularly wicked-looking harpoon at Chev.

The warrior took it and noticed that it still had gore on it from its last use. Likely the umber hulks they had encountered earlier. Stabbing the weapon at the fallen men, he dragged them back from the entrance and stacked them up against the wall.

"Now what?" demanded the leader.

"Now you shut up and tell your men to do the same," Chev said and tossed the harpoon back to the dwarf. Hoisting a dead half-orc on his left arm like a shield, the warrior approached the entrance and shoved the man within.

There was a series of sharp thunks and Chev hauled the body back quickly and then shoved him in again and immediately got several more thunks. This time he followed the body in and charged between the narrow stalactites.

A drow appeared before him with two blades drawn and Chev promptly buried the elf under the dead body and rolled off to one side as more crossbow bolts missed him.

Two blades out, the warrior kept rolling until he was behind a large section of stone that had fallen off the ceiling long ago. A startled drow beside him dropped his crossbow and reached for his swords but dropped them when his head fell to the ground beside them.

Standing and backing himself against a wall, Chev watched the five drow warriors fanned out around him and stalled for time while he planned a strategy. Finally he swept the glowing blade around in front of him, using its light to blind the light sensitive drow and used that moment of shock to stab at them.

By the time the drow recovered, there was only one left standing and he backed away from Chev for fear of falling to the same trick. A harpoon tip appeared where the elf's adam's apple had been and the look of fear was made permanent as the dwarf behind him pulled him to the ground and kicked him off his harpoon.

Chev saluted the dwarf with his glowing sword and looked about for this so-called cache of magical items. A large sack beside him beckoned to the warrior and he opened it slowly with the tip of his sword.

Several large glowing gems fell out and rolled across the cavern floor.

"Those are mine!" declared the leader of the thugs.

Chev turned to him slowly, swords raised. "You said I get first pick."

"Shove it! That's-"

"Not acceptable," Chev finished for the leader and removed Sharkslayer from the man's throat.

The rest of the thugs backed off except for the dwarf who only narrowed his eyes. In the blue light Chev saw the respect and fear in the dwarf's eyes and at the same a sense of comraderie.

"I never cared for that guy's neck anyway," spat the dwarf. "You get half and first picks."

Chev had been running low on coin from the start of his vengeance. He had stolen food and killed at random for anything he needed but had always kept his word in the end by letting informants live. Now he had a pouch of platinum to bargain with and speed up those information sessions.

Too much too late however. All the Harpers had went into hiding and those hadn't were dead. At the very least the warrior could finally get some new clothes and throw away the ragged tunic and pants he had been wearing for the last century.

When the warrior finally left a tailor's shop late that evening, it was in a warm brown leather cloak, matching pants and a red silk shirt. His boots

he had kept, to which the tailor wasn't about to complain. Not with the customer paying with platinum.

Many people saw Chev leave the building out the front door too and business would undoubtedly boom into a proverbial gold mine in the next couple days.

Under that warm cloak was a belt with a lasso dangling from it. The belt and the lasso was the only things he had taken and they were all he needed. The gems he had given to the dwarf Hivar.

After he had left, Chev didn't doubt that the thugs would criticize his choice to kill their leader over the gems and then not even keep the gems. It was a matter of principles as far as Chev was concerned. He had made a deal and if the person wasn't going to keep up their end of their bargain it was their own fault. The warrior had no pity for liars of that sort.

Valeska had awoke this morning in a guest room just down the hall from Doctor Pierce's and Marque Draque's. It was mind boggling that she was somehow a honoured guest. Then she heard the shouting from down the hall.

"You had no right! That drow should be killed! She is evil and a spy from Lloth!"

"I truly doubt that she's a spy! She's been on the surface longer than you have!" yelled back Doctor Pierce's stern voice. "And I have every right to allow her within my home. It is afterall, my home."

With only a cloak gathered around her shoulders, the drow bard crept down the hallway and peaked through the crack between the door and the door frame. She tightened her grip on her hand crossbow.

"Not for long if you keep up this up! Her presence alone in Waterdeep threatens every elf on the surface! The drow have been planning a huge surface raid for years! What happens when they finally emerge from Undermountain in the tens of thousands?"

"Valeska Ko'Ragur is more opposed to that idea than any other person I know. You gold elves have a habit of sticking your pointy noses and ears where they don't belong!"

"We have the right to defend ourselves! No second rate has-been is going to tell me what to do!"

"Has-been?" Pierce said deceptively quiet. "You're calling me a has-been?"

"Yes!" shouted the elf and wagged a finger at the Doctor from across the desk.

Lightening fast, Pierce lifted the arrogant elf into the air with one hand and shook him roughly. "Look, you drunken little castaway! I've adventured for more years than most elves dream of doing! Did you know I spent ten years exploring Chult? To say nothing of two years enslaved in a gladiator pit? I killed the tarrasque while I was still in my first year on the road and I'm telling you right now that Chev is four times better than I was back then! If you want to take on a fighter who could kill the tarrasque four times over without breaking a sweat, you can go right ahead!" The Doctor

dropped the flush-faced elf and took a step back. "And when you do, I'll be there to take bets on which of your body parts he removes first. Most likely your head because I doubt he'd like looking at that thing you call a face. Just because Chev can beat me in a fair fight doesn't mean that I can't still kick your skinny elfen rear halfway across Waterdeep!"

The gold elf noble drew himself up and his hand went to the sword at his belt. "Do you know what it means to treat someone of my station in such a fashion?"

"It means that if you don't get your face off my property your station will be beside whatever gods you worship and your head will be placed on a pike outside my walls as a warning for all those that follow that I will not tolerate some stuck up elf telling me what I can and cannot do on my own property! Now get out!"

Valeska dodged back and hid behind a marble column as the elf stormed out of Pierce's office and down the grand staircase. She waited a moment before stepping out.

The Doctor jumped back at her sudden appearance and his hand went to his heart. "Whoa! You nearly gave me a heart attack there!"

The bard smiled. "Sorry, I didn't mean to." She looked up at him. "So you were in a gladiator pit?"

"A long time ago. Thirteen years ago or so. They held me in there magically for two years and it wasn't until the Time of Troubles that I escaped."

"You must have some interesting stories right?"

"Indeed. I wouldn't want to go through them again though."

"If you recall some history, my father was also a slave gladiator. The Ko'Ragur family used it as a place to make alliances with other noble houses and at the same time make a profit by wagering on the gladiators. They bet human gladiators up against the best drow warriors other houses could come up with and down played the humans so they could increase the stakes."

"They told the matron mothers that the humans were blind in the dark and weaklings?" Pierce asked, already knowing the truth.

"Yes, but they were far from it. They're other senses had been magically intensified and surviving alone in the Underdark had built up their strength. The Matka Matrona got rid of many an enemy house's best warriors that way. If she lost, oh well, it was just a dead human to feed to the giant lizards."

"And your father, or tatus in the drow tongue, was?"

"The victor of one particular fight. She made a deal with him that he would lead a slave revolt and attack another noble house that the Matka Matrona wanted destroyed. In exchange she offered him his freedom and so much more."

"She kept her word? That would be a first for any Matron Mother."

"She did. Kolezenstworygor means rigorous comrade and we were a little more honourable than average."

"The salt of the earth in drow terms?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Explains why our house fell. Too honourable for the tastes of other drow."

"I know about your goal against Lloth," Pierce said slowly, leaning over the balcony and looking at the marble floor below. "You've got your work cut out for you if you think poetry is going to persuade a whole race to abandon their patron goddess."

"The drow appreciate beauty. Its simply a matter of showing them how ugly Lloth really is and offering an alternative. That's the hard part."

Hiram sat down at a table in the corner of the cafeteria across from Marque Draque and watched the clean up crew working on the mess that was the cafeteria itself. Turning to the mage, the ex-boxer summoned up the courage to speak. He had never been one for words. "How's the sword coming?"

"Gravebringer? I haven't been working on it much lately. I should probably get back to it sometime soon. At the moment the sword is basically disabled. Crippled." The mage shoved his cigar into the table and flicked the ashes onto the floor for the janitors to clean up. "The maples should be done dripping within the next week and we can finish the last batch of lifesyrup. That is, of course, provided that Rambertz doesn't keep the sun out for too long. If we drain too much sap out of the trees, they'll be slower when spring comes and the harvest won't be the same."

"You always think in terms of money don't you?"

Draque paused and lit another cigar. "These things aren't cheap you know? I have to send away all the way to Menzoberranzan and have them smuggled up through Undermountain past the Harpers in crates. That kind of stuff doesn't come cheap. Once they're here, I have to keep them in special cigar boxes just so the sun won't ruin them."

"Surely they don't cost that much!"

"They're required for my favourite spell and I go through about twenty to thirty a day. At the bargain price of one gold piece per cigar, that's about seven hundred and fifty gold per month. That's more than what a city guard makes in a year."

"Okay! Okay! You've made your point! The vault would run dry if you didn't pull your weight by making the bulk of the money here!"

Draque pursed his lips together and sucked on the cigar. Breathing out, he pointed the smelly thing at Hiram. "While we're on the topic, lets stop and consider how much the Academy costs annually. We've got janitors, guards, cooks, teachers, stableboys, stablemaster, and the dwarves who are still working on the east wing but have quit for the winter to visit their folks and won't be back til spring. We have to provide food, and lots of it cause they're hungry little beggars, for the students who have their dormitories in the north wing. Our heating is based on the wood in the basement which Pierce chops up in his spare time and whenever he's exceptionally angry." He paused and stomped his foot on the marble floor. "Marble doesn't come cheap either if I do recall and this building is made mostly of marble and the occasional set of bronze doors. We had to fix a number of them recently too thanks to our good friend, Mister Chev. If I had my way, I'd sell the adamantite column thats holding up the dome and

reinforce the ceiling with some magic. The problem with that is that magic can be dispelled quite easily by even minor mages. We wouldn't want several hundred tonnes of marble suddenly falling because some green apprentice tried to dispel a cantrip and ended up dispelling the whole thing. Until I perfect my Protection from Dispel enchantment, we're stuck with that ugly blue thing in the middle-

"Actually, I always liked the colour-

"I'm not finished! Have you seen our budget? Have you counted the zeros? This place is expensive in the extreme! You think my cigars are expensive? Wait til you see the bill when the dwarves finally finish the east wing in the spring! Those greedy bastards could suck gold out of the sand if they tried hard enough!"

Hiram looked about and saw that people were staring. Standing, the cook clapped Draque on the shoulder. "Thank Ao I'm only a chef."

Korehren sat on the chimney and watched the warrior from above. Chev had proved to be an excellent distraction. While the Harpers were busy worrying about the warrior, his agents had been moving into positions of authority and pulling strings behind the scenes. "Corruption is an art form," he explained to the pigeon sitting beside him.

The pigeon blinked at the god and stepped closer.

"You see, to corrupt someone, you must find their weaknesses and exploit them. Over time this weakness becomes very important to them, to the point of addiction," he said soothingly.

The pigeon took another step closer and cocked its head at him.

"Then, when the time is right, it's simply a matter of offering them the thing they most desire in exchange for what you want." He motioned the bird closer and pulled a piece of sweetbread from his pocket.

The bird cocked its head the other way, confused yet intrigued.

"They are always unsure at first, but eventually come around."

The pigeon stepped closer and pecked at the bread.

Korehren's fingers became claws and he snapped his fingers shut and killed the bird. Looking closely at the mess of feathers and blood, he smiled. "Yes, my dead feathered friend, corruption is most definitely an art form." He stood and watched Chev disappear into the crowded streets. "It's a shame Chev doesn't realize that."

"Got a coin to spare Chev?"

The warrior paused in his stride and looked about. His face was hidden under the cowl of his cloak and yet someone had still recognised him.

A beggar motioned the warrior over.

Intrigued, the warrior stepped closer and knelt beside the beggar.

"What do you want old man?"

The man was covered in dirty rags and his face was smeared with mud. What looked like some kind of fungus was eating his shoulder until there was almost no flesh left on it and Chev could see the bone sticking through. "Some coin would be a nice change," the man said, peaking out from under a drooping eyelid.

"How did you know who I am?" Chev said, gripping the man by the neck and squeezing.

"I am, or was, a historian," the man choked out. He scratched at the arm holding him with scrawny arms.

"You know me well enough to spot me on the street with a hood over my face?" Chev demanded, loosening his hold on the diseased beggar.

"I've seen your statue. I wasn't sure at first because of the swords but then I saw your boots-"

Chev released the man. Staring at his glove he saw that the fungus was alive and trying to eat through the magical leather. He quickly scraped the stuff off on the cold cobblestones. "Are my boots that distinctive?"

"Oh yes! That style of embroidery hasn't been used in almost a hundred and forty years. Very stylish! The insignia on the back of the heel is that of the d'Or personal bodyguards."

"I see this stuff hasn't effected your memory," Chev said, pointing to the fungus with a platinum coin.

"No, it hasn't," the beggar said, reaching eagerly for the coin. His eyes were unnaturally white.

Chev dropped the coin into the man's hand rather than touch him. Standing, he made sure his money pouch was safely tucked into his belt and drew his cloak around him to ward off the chill.

"Where's your sword? Gravebringer?"

Chev shrugged. "It broke when I was released from the statue."

"But Marque Draque fixed it, so where is-"

Chev lifted the beggar up by the neck and held him in place three feet off the ground. "Draque fixed it?"

"Yes," the beggar gurgled. "Didn't you know?"

"Apparently I'm the last one to know!" the warrior snarled and threw the old man aside. He walked away, casually pulled a man off his horse and vaulted into the saddle as if there was nothing to it.

Korehren watched him go and helped the beggar to his feet. "This should be fun to watch."

The beggar nodded and his form changed into a shapely woman clothed in black and white robes. "I am honoured by your presence Korehren. You could have chosen a more worthy cleric for this job."

"I could have, but I have chosen you for several other tasks. I needed to test and gauge your skills. You want power Aza Brooke, and you shall have it provided you do several things for me."

"What do you want?" she asked without hesitation.

Evening settled over Waterdeep like a blanket but the City of Splendours was far from falling asleep. Chev approached the Academy slowly. Taking the lasso from his belt, he wondered how many times he would have to break into the Academy in the future. The gods knew he had already been here enough times to know the place off by heart.

The front gate would have brought too much attention to the fact that he was here and so the lasso would finally come in handy. There was no place for the lasso to grip the marble walls, but the magical rope needed no such thing. Chev simply threw it up over the wall and tugged on it to make sure it had taken a firm grip. He then walked up the wall, hand over hand pulling himself upwards.

Rising over the top, the warrior sat down and tugged the rope again three times and felt it go slack on the third. Gathering the rope together, he tied it into a reef knot and dropped it to the ground below. He followed soon after and landed with a crunch on the frosted grass.

Checking to make sure he hadn't been heard, Chev kicked the rope under a juniper in case he decided to leave this way later. With any luck he'd leave through the main gate with Gravebringer in hand. If not, Pierce will have killed him.

Nicole lead Pierce down the marble hallway and opened the door to his bedchamber. A cold draft of air rushed past her and she shivered involuntarily.

The Doctor frowned and stopped her, one hand going to Tarrasqueslayer. "Go down to Valeska's room, will you? I'll explain later."

The noble lady looked up confused, but saw the worried look on his face. "Should I go get Marque Draque?"

"No, would be useless. He's at Blackstaff's tower. Just go."

She nodded and clutched her cloak as she hurried down the hallway towards the bard's guestroom.

Pierce opened the door and stepped within, his saber going up to block the downward stroke of Chev's cutlass. He grunted and pushed the warrior away, drawing Sidekick from its sheath. "What's the occasion?"

Chev's face had a hollow, sunken look in the shadows. "I'm here to get my sword Gravebringer back. Its as simply as that."

"That's a pretty powerful sword if I recall," Pierce replied. "Why should I allow such a powerful weapon into your hands?"

Chev held both blades up in front of him. "It was mine to begin with. You have stolen it." He jabbed forward with both blades.

Pierce parried the first easily and let the other slide off his armour. It was a close one though and the Doctor knew Chev could have pressed the attack and stabbed clear through the bronze, but that would have meant exposing his flanks to Pierce's other saber. "Then you should be talking to Marque Draque. It is his now."

Chev shook his head and smiled like an imp. "You and I both know that you'll never leave with it. Before I can get it, I must die or you must die." Dancing backwards, the warrior assumed a fencing stance with the longsword pointed at Pierce and the cutlass raised and ready.

The veteran was tempted to draw his mother's longsword and use its better reach. He decided against it because he knew the longsword's couldn't hold up against Sharkslayer, whereas the adamantite sabers could. "Perhaps. Still something keeps puzzling me. Why did you kill all those Harper agents? Did someone pay you?"

The warrior snarled and lashed out viciously with his swords. "Do you know so little about history? The Harpers caused all of this! My Kipriana would have never been captured were it not for you meddlers!"

Pierce stayed calm and parried both blades away and stepped back into the hallway. He had found a weakness in Chev's armour and he couldn't help but press his new found advantage. "Kipriana d'Or? Is that her name? Very pretty."

Chev advanced steadily on the lone veteran. Pushing through the doorway with blades bared like fangs, he fought his way into the open. "It is. I don't hold you responsible Pierce. You only aid them when you're asked to. The others meddle all the time without being asked." He smiled and stabbed out viciously.

Pierce moved to intercept with one saber and found Chev's longsword in the way. His parry had been parried of all things! That was one move Pierce didn't know! The cutlass bit into his side and stayed there for a moment as both warriors stopped to look at the wound. Shocked into action, Pierce brought his foot up and kicked Chev backwards. While he was still in part fall, the Doctor brought both sabers down in a cross slash at the cutlass.

One grazed Chev's forearm and the other knocked Sharkslayer from his hand. Ignoring the wound in his side, Pierce continued forward and was greeted by an intricate parry that pushed both his sabers to the floor while Chev kicked out, not at Pierce himself, but at his right arm.

Releasing Tarrasqueslayer from his grip, Pierce backed off.

For a moment the two stayed still, eyes fixed on each other and not at the fallen swords.

"I didn't know the Harpers had anything to do with that incident so long ago," Pierce said slowly, edging towards Tarrasqueslayer but not doubting that Chev would only let Pierce get it if he saw a chance to get the cutlass back.

Chev only smiled and held his ground, longsword raised and ready to stab or parry. "History is easily forgotten Pierce. The Harpers have been writing it for so long they've lost sight of their real purpose?"

"Which is?"

"Freedom and justice. I'm seeking justice for a wrong to done me and right now I'm seeking to free Gravebringer."

Pierce shuddered inwardly, remembering his last encounter with the sword. "Did you know that sword can possess people?"

Chev shrugged and switched hands. "I know, but it can only possess the weak minded ones. You know I am far from that." The warrior slowly uncoiled the whip from his belt.

Pierce didn't flinch. He simply drew his mother's longsword from the sheath on his back. "And what if you agree with it at some point? From what Marque Draque tells me that sword can possess you through an idea and then twist that idea until you are totally under its control. That sword would cleave through a small army in your hands before you finally fell dead."

"It's done it before," Chev replied nonchalant. "I took on the Bravepike Manor and when I left there I was the only one left standing with a sword in my hand. The only other was a cripple which I left alive deliberately."

Inside Chev's head, Pierce could see the warrior forming strategies. It was only a matter of time. The Doctor wasn't going to let him have it though. "I'm tired of this Chev. Can't we just kill each other and get it over with?"

"No Pierce. Neither of us will be quick to die. I agree though. I'm eager to get started." The warrior stepped across the fallen saber and snapped his whip forward in an attempt to entangle.

The Doctor backed off and held his weapons out to the side but at ready. "I'm not going to fall for that one. You probably haven't heard that I was once a gladiator."

Chev nodded and snapped the whip at Pierce's quick feet. "I've heard. How were you captured?"

"Magic," Pierce grunted as he jumped over the whip and landed before Chev, both swords lashing out.

Chev dropped to a crouch and parried both blades away with an overhead slash of his sword and came back with a stab to the gut.

Pierce parried with the handguard of his saber and brought his longsword down for a keep jab in Chev's forearm. He was rewarded with a spray of blood from the deep wound.

The crouching warrior dropped to his back and kicked out with both feet, connecting with Pierce's breastplate. The Doctor fell backwards and scrambled to grab his fallen saber as he rolled to his feet.

He was dismayed to find that Chev too had his fallen cutlass.

"So much for your attempt to disarm me," Chev said with a shrug and looped the whip onto the hook on his belt.

"A chance I had to take," Pierce said grimly and sheathed the longsword behind his back. For a moment he considered that action a lowering of his defenses but then he remembered Chev's respect and honour. Chev was a true duelist, and as such refused to attack even though the opportunity for a quick lethal hit had been there.

For a moment Pierce saw how Chev fought. He was utterly lethal when dealing with amateurs, but he had a level of respect for well deserving opponents that he wouldn't stoop to that level. He would sooner kill himself than let a true warrior die without honour after a well fought battle.

"I don't understand-" started Nicole.

"That's right! You don't!" Valeska said harshly. She stood before the door of her suite, blocking Nicole's path. "Perhaps I should explain it to you.

Pierce and Chev are destined to fight this battle. I have it at very high authority."

"Why?"

"It involves a number of gods. Do you really want to hear the details?"

"Yes," Nicole said firmly.

Valeska shrugged. Taking her hand off her holstered crossbow, she held it out the noble. Nicole hesitated and then took it. The moment their hands connected the two women vanished from the room.

Pierce realized that he was in trouble when he noticed that Chev had cornered him in the direction of the balcony. The last time he and Chev had fought near a balcony it had resulted in a long fall. The ground below was paved with bricks and not water. That was more than one good reason to avoid the balcony.

Skipping past Chev's quick blades, the Doctor dodged around the balcony and down the grand marble staircase. Chev followed quickly, charging down the steps in quick jumps. Pierce was ready for him and the two clashed together in the torch light.

For a moment Pierce realized how beautiful it was. The reds and oranges of the torchlight mixed with the clear blue of Chev's longsword and the pure white glow of Pierce's blue sabers. The light reflected off his bronze armour and his torso was bathed in an aura of almost godly light. Right now was not the time to be inspired to paint however and it was a saber in his hand and not a paint brush.

Swords met and were brushed aside with deft blades. The two warriors circled on the steps one more. They turned in a deadly spiral, heading down to first floor.

The noise of their battle resounded throughout the empty south wing. It was a symphony of clashes, reverberations and solid clangs as Pierce let Chev's blades through his defenses to hit harmlessly against his breastplate.

Every offensive swing was both cunning and deadly and every defensive parry was both swift and intricate. It was an one way battle however for it was Chev's swings and Pierce's parries that forced both men down the staircase as Pierce retreated to favourable ground where he could fight back without Chev having the upper hand.

"Flawless," Chev commented. He stepped off the last step and onto the marble tiled floor. "I would like to have seen you in your prime."

Pierce was tempted to ignore the verbal jousting but decided not to on a whim. "I was a foolish young man who got in more trouble than I could usually handle."

"You handled it well enough it would seem."

"Draque cheated. The grey hairs on my head are from spells that enhanced my talents temporarily but resulted in aging me. It was better than being Tarrasque food."

"So I've heard. Quite a historic rumour with no body to show as evidence. I would like to know where the body went. Were you to die, then the secret would die with you, and if I fail, then I die without knowing."

"You really want to know?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll make you a deal. We take a break to catch our breath and I shall tell you. Do you accept?"

"A reasonable offer," Chev shrugged. "I give you my word that I shall not attack until the end." He immediately backed off and lowered his swords. "After all, you'd know if I was going to attack anyway right?"

Pierce nodded and lowered his sabers and backed off. He took a deep breath and adjusted his armour so it was more comfortable. "I cut its head off with Tarrasqueslayer. That only disabled it however, for it was quick to regenerate. The Fifth Cavalry-"

"The same elven cavalry that shot at me recently?"

"One and the same. They kept the Tarrasque from regenerating by beating it into a pulp while Draque and I tried to find a way to stop it. In the end, we used a minor wish spell to stick all of the Tarrasque into a magically bag of Draque's. Then we destroyed the bag using Witter's sword Planereacher."

"Would that really destroy it? From what I know of magic, it should have ended up going through a rift into another plane."

"It probably did. Whatever the case, it is now banished from Toril. I can only hope it ended up in the elemental plane of fire. The end." Pierce's sabers flashed upwards at ready.

Chev waited a moment. He was tempted to simply quit. Lie down and die. No, he said mentally. Not yet.

Pierce used this momentary lapse in Chev's defenses to charge forward, push aside Chev's blades with his own and kick upwards with his adamantite toed boot. There was an audible "Oomph!" as Chev reeled backwards from pain. Pierce followed quickly behind, sabers leading the way.

The bodyguard blocked them despite his agony, keeping his wits about him. He straightened deliberately, fighting to maintain in control.

Pierce couldn't help but admire Chev's will power as he closed in. This would not be the end, he knew that much, but it was definitely a step towards Chev's defeat. Both sabers dove in, twisting towards the warrior's vital parts, but were knocked swiftly away despite Pierce's efforts.

"That was mean," Chev responded. "Although no less than I probably deserve right?"

"I'm not the judge of that," Pierce muttered grimly as he backed off at last and studied Chev's wounds. "I can't help but wonder how much stress you can put on that body. Certainly you're getting tired?"

Chev grinned and stood up straight. "Tired? Whats that mean? I don't think the word is in my vocabulary." As if to prove his point, Chev launched into an elaborate, high speed attack.

Pierce clicked his tongue and brought his sabers down to block, hoping to tire Chev out. What he didn't expect was the sudden waving swords in his face, blocking his view. When the blades came back down, the Doctor was expecting them and brought both sabers up in a parallel parry, knocking the blades away.

With his defenses up high, Chev used his new found opportunity to kick Pierce in the chest, knocking the Doctor backwards onto the floor.

Stunned, Pierce took a moment to stand up, pausing to study his waiting opponent who had not attacked while he was vulnerable.

"One must fight fairly," Chev shrugged, reading Pierce's expression, as much as Pierce read Chev's mind.

"If you're going to kill me, you might as well hurry it up and strike. One of us shall die tonight and if you're going to continue to let me live, it will likely be you," Pierce muttered as he crouched and held his sabers off to the side.

Chev gave his typical nonchalant shrug. "I can't say that I care. If I die, then I die and I'll finally be at peace. If I live, then I'm simply continuing my quest for vengeance. I've had enough vengeance, but a little more will make the historians, your history-loving Harpers, wary the next time you interfere with the lives of others. Its great that you try to spread justice and freedom for everyone, but that doesn't include robbing others of their right to transport goods."

"The smuggling laws are made by Waterdeep. I am merely a protector of my home. Can you blame me for it?"

"And Marque Draque's cigars? Martinez's Drow vodka? Where do you draw the line? Why is it okay for Harpers to break their own laws, but not for the people of Waterdeep to break laws they didn't make?"

"Those laws are sanctions to prevent Undermountain from having ample opportunity to raid the surface. Already they have the forces to do so but are caught up in their own petty squabblings to do anything about Waterdeep. The sanctions make Waterdeep more of a threat than a hapless city to be plundered."

"That still doesn't give the Harpers the right to interfere and place innocent lives at stake!"

"If there is a rogue Harper that decided to take desperate measures a hundred and fifty years ago, then he's long dead and buried. As long as we keep talking however, you're not going to be seeing that dead man for a long time unless you really want me to send you to see him!"

Chev paused and gave a snort. "You're the one with the foresight, how long are we going to argue about this?"

Pierce smiled. "We're going to stop right now," he responded and charged in, sabers flashing. With Tarrasqueslayer leading the way, the Doctor feinted an attack at Chev's bleeding forearm.

Chev ignored the feint and deliberately pushed both sword and cutlass into Pierce's sabers, holding them off to the side as he sidechecked the older warrior into the wall.

The Doctor only grunted and used his bronze armour to grind it into Chev's side, making sure he took more bruises for his effort.

Backing off for a second, Chev came back with an overhead swing which Pierce blocked easily. Then he brought the pommel of the cutlass down and struck the Doctor in the forehead.

Disoriented, but far from out of it, Pierce leaned against the wall and brought his boot up to connect with Chev's groin once more. Shaking his

head to remove the sudden dizziness, the Doctor looked down at Chev's prone form.

A moment later Chev rolled away from him and leapt to his feet beside a statue. He muffled a groan and glanced at the statue in the torchlight. "Its one good thing I'm no longer part of the decor."

Pierce shrugged and followed Chev as the younger warrior backed down the hallway towards the better lighting coming from the dome. They passed between the bronze doors and entered a realm of streaming moon light.

"Where we first met," Chev muttered. "A good place to fight don't you think?"

"A glorified gladiator arena," Pierce spat. "I only added it to the architectural plan because we needed a place to hold tests. We needed the place to look official, so the students knew that what we were doing here was important. The dwarven architect who helped with the designs decided to make it the central feature of the Academy. I never imagined it would end up being so big."

"Or expensive," Chev replied, pointing to the single adamantite column in the centre of the huge chamber. "That dwarf certainly knew what he was doing. This building will be a legacy long after you and I are dead and buried."

For a moment Nicole's eyes adjusted to the sudden change of light. She was standing on a sunny beach. The sky was a bright blue and there was a warm breeze coming from inland where giant maples swayed gently. Turning about, she looked across the azure waters and heard a distant sound of water splashing.

"Twenty-three," Valeska said abruptly. "Very impressive."

Nicole turned about to face a long haired half-elf dressed in only a kilt. His face and skin was a shade of bronze from countless days under the sun. He looked like he hadn't shaved in several days and his brown hair waved in the breeze like the maples not so far away. His eyes were a sharp, bright blue, the same as his kilt.

"Not bad," the half-elf admitted with a deep harmonic voice and picked up another skipping stone from the multitude of stones that stretched down the beach. "I've gotten up to thirty-seven before, but only because I magically tweaked the waves so they were just the right height and distance between them." His blue eyes passed over Nicole and the noble maiden shivered suddenly. "You've come to watch?"

"Watch what?" Nicole asked, daring at last to speak.

The half-elf flashed a charming smile and knelt down beside the water. Sliding his hand into the water, the waves abruptly diminished and the surface became as smooth as glass, if not smoother. Taking his hand back out, the man brushed it over the surface.

As she watched, the surface began to glow and images appeared under the surface of the water. Taking a deep breath, Nicole stepped closer and recognized the figure dressed in tell-tale bronze armour.

"Now I shall introduce myself," said the half elf. "I am Konarrathamoras. Konarr for short. For simplicities sake, I am a wizard of a sort."

He knelt down beside the image in the water and pointed to the two men. "You are looking at the two greatest mortal warriors ever. On one side is the symbol of strength and perfection of skill. On the other side is the symbol of knowledge and experience. I am not the only one who sits quietly tonight and watches these two. There are many evil and bad omens in the cosmos that point to this night. At the same time there are many good omens. These two will make history tonight, but the outcome will be both good and evil. Anybody who is anybody knows that this night is unique, but doesn't know why. They also know that interfering in it is a bad thing for there's supposed to be enough power released tonight to destroy several gods. As a result even the gods are tentative in interfering with tonight's destiny."

Nicole put two and two together. "So you're stopping me from interfering?"

Konarr nodded. "For your own good too."

"Isn't that interfering though? By removing me, the fact that I'm not there to interfere with destiny, doesn't that interfere with destiny?"

Konarr glanced at Valeska. "Why do I always get the smart-aleck ones?"

"A legacy?" Pierce quizzed. "You think that's why I built this place?" he demanded, gesturing with Tarrasqueslayer.

Chev eyed the deadly blade. "Other than trying to make money with it? Yes, I think that's exactly why you built it. You're an old warrior with nothing more than experience to pass on to younger generations. This building is your greatest triumph, a symbol of the man who killed the mighty tarrasque! Your pride is the foundation of this building, not the stones it rests on!"

Pierce's eyes narrowed and for a moment Chev thought he would charge him. The Doctor relaxed visibly however. "I will have you know," he said through clenched teeth. "That I built this place upon the memory of all the comrades that have fallen beside me. I am blessed, I know that much, but if it wasn't for all those comrades who went before me, I would never have made it this far."

Chev paused, lowering his blades and yet keeping them at the ready. In the moonlight, only feet away, the warrior could see tears streaming down Pierce's face beside the blood dripping from the cut in his forehead. In all of his years, the bodyguard had never seen a grown man cry. He knew then that Pierce spoke the truth.

"Not so long ago, a warrior named Witter died defending Waterdeep," Pierce said slowly, his voice cracking. "He was my mentor, but not the only one. Beside him lie Diego the Wistful, Shamuni Dioune, and Vicet Tor'Gamon. The first was a bard who taught me to read and write. The second was a paladin from the east who taught how to kill, but only when

necessary. The last was an elven gladiator, a slave who taught me how to use my skills to their greatest advantage. Witter though-" Pierce stopped to wet his lips. "Witter was just a man. A man that stood for something and believed in it."

"You can stop Pierce," Chev said abruptly. "I respect you enough that I do not want you to feel pain. You might even say that I care for you, but I wouldn't go that far. I've had my share of comrades die and I never cared for that feeling of emptiness afterwards." He gestured about the dome. "Obviously your emptiness was greater than mine."

Pierce snorted despite himself and wiped away his tears, confident that Chev would not attack while his guard was down. Looking at his gloved hands, the Doctor saw the blood in the light from Sidekick. His blades flashed up, and looked at Chev squarely. "It is time we finished this."

Chev shrugged and held both swords out to meet Pierce's sabers. He came in slowly, weaving a path with the cutlass. Pierce met both blades and pushed them away easily, when he tried to move however, he looked down to see Chev's foot firmly clamped over his own.

The bodyguard brought his longsword down and stabbed into Pierce's held left foot. Pulling the blade back out, he dodged backwards before Pierce could respond. He watched from afar as the Doctor bit his own tongue from the agony and maintained his stance. "How much pain can you endure Pierce?"

The old warrior shook his head. "I don't know and I don't particular care to find out." With that said, he took one step forward with his injured foot and grimaced as he put his weight on it. Looking up at Chev, Pierce narrowed his eyes. "Hurry up and kill me. You claim that my pain is something you do not desire and yet you draw this fight out?"

"I know better than to charge you when you're like that," Chev whispered into the quiet. "You might try something desperate and we'd both end up dead faster than you can say tarrasque."

Pierce gritted his teeth and deliberately stomped on it several times. When the pain subsided, he felt easier as he took several quick steps towards Chev and held his sabers out.

"Impressive," Chev smiled and charged at Pierce.

It was Pierce's turn to retreat and he did so by backing towards the eastwing. The lack of good lighting in the eastwing would be to his advantage due to his foresight and to Chev's disadvantage. With his foot slowing him down, it was a very long painful retreat too.

Backed up against the closed bronze doors, Pierce leaned up against the right door as he blocked Chev's attacks and kicked the left one open with his good foot. The warrior knew what he was doing in terms of light but didn't know what Pierce was also planning. It was just a question of whether Pierce could keep blocking Chev's intricate attacks.

When the jumble of wood came into view Chev got a vague idea of what Pierce was planning and charged in immediately.

Pierce was ready for him and dropped to the ground at the last possibly moment and rolled forward, tripping the charging man in the shadows. Sheathing both sabers, Pierce didn't wait for Chev to recover as he dodged past a stack of logs and disappeared into the shadows.

The bodyguard came to his feet and swept the glowing swords around him, searching for Pierce.

Twenty feet away, Pierce was scrambling to dig a cobblestone from the floor. Looking back at Chev, he was thankful that the light from the swords also made Chev an excellent target.

Out of the darkness a brick came soaring towards Chev and struck him in the knee, driving the warrior to the floor with a broken knee cap.

"That's gotta hurt!" Pierce shouted and lobbed another brick at Chev.

Despite his agony, the bodyguard rolled off to the side and narrowly dodged the brick that would have crushed his skull. He came face to face with a leather harness that had been left behind from some forgetful carpenter. He snatched up a hammer and looked about just in time to duck another brick.

"Oh! That was a close one!" Pierce shouted and scrambled away with the knowledge that Chev now had a suitable throwing weapon.

On a hunch, the warrior threw the glowing longsword first, using its bluelight to shine up the area like a torch. He caught a brief glimpse of Pierce's tell-tale armour moving farther back into the darkness.

The hammer soared past Pierce's shoulder and crashed into the darkness beyond. Hoping to fool Chev however, the veteran shouted an oath of agony and quickly scrambled back farther and took shelter behind a skid loaded up with marble tiles. From here he could still gauge the distance accurately enough for the bricks to be deadly and at the same time the marble tiles would provide a reasonable shield.

Glancing around the marble tiles, the Doctor saw Chev limp into a doorway and peak out for some sign of his opponent.

For a moment the only sound Pierce could hear was the heaving of his chest. This would be not such a bad time for his heart to give out on him. He could certainly do without the pain in his foot, to say nothing of the throbbing ache in his forehead.

When Chev finally leapt from his hiding place, Pierce was ready for him and threw a brick straight at his head. The bodyguard ducked under it and scooped up his fallen longsword. He passed right by Pierce and stumbled on the Doctor's good leg.

In an instant Pierce was upon him, using his weight and heavy armour to pin Chev to the ground. The bodyguard dropped his swords and tried to roll to the side but Pierce's position was perfected and the weight too much for even Chev's arms. If he hadn't been injured he would have been able to push the bronze clad warrior off him but not now.

On top of Chev, Pierce shoved his arm under the warriors neck and pressed down in an attempt to choke him. Chev's hands flashing out of the darkness and pounding on the Doctor's jaw, stunning him.

That split second was all the young warrior needed and he pivoted his good knee underneath Pierce and rolled off to the side. With the heavy armour off him, Chev rolled past his cutlass and scooped it up.

Pierce rose to his knees and drew both sabers just in time to deflect Sharkslayer away from his neck. They stood locked for a moment, Chev leaning forward with Sharkslayer bare inches from Pierce's neck and the Doctor kneeling with both sabers raised in defense.

If they continued this pose for much longer Pierce knew his injured arm would give out on him. He wasn't about to tell Chev that though. "You know you can't keep this up," Pierce said, licking dry lips. "Your arm is injured too much." He raised his good foot and planted it underneath him firmly and started to rise.

Chev backed off and pulled his whip from his belt. He flashed it forward and snagged Pierce's bad leg and pulled.

The Doctor fell to floor with a howl of agony but quickly rolled out of harm's way as Chev charged in to stab at his exposed back.

Rising up, Pierce kicked out with the heel of his foot at Chev's uninjured leg. The warrior crashed to the ground, both legs failing to hold his weight under his momentum. Ignoring the thrashing warrior, Pierce rose and stood over Chev.

Chev lay on the ground with his back exposed, barely conscious. Pierce hesitated and in that moment of hesitation Chev rolled to the side, cutlass rising to deflect the slowly descending sabers.

Pierce backed off and considered his opponent. With both legs injured, Chev was at an incredible disadvantage at last. The words of Vicet Tor'Gamon rang in his ears: "Use your surroundings. If the guy is short, stay on higher ground and take advantage of your height. If the guy is tall, try and get him where he has to duck. If he hits his head on the ceiling and knocks himself out, then it's a good thing!"

Without looking up at the heavy wooden beams overhead, Pierce hoped his leg wouldn't fail him. Foresight leading his way, the Doctor backed away from Chev and tossed both sabers on top of the skid of marble tiles. Since Chev couldn't walk that fast, Pierce had a fair amount of time to haul himself up on to the tiles and use it as a stepping stone to the beam running along the top of the wall.

Moving slowly along the top of the wall, Pierce avoided the warrior's swings from below and started to climb higher. He deliberately muttered to himself about finding something to throw, making sure Chev understood that even if the warrior didn't follow him up onto the beams, he would certainly kill him with ceiling tiles or something worse.

The bodyguard had a vague idea of why Pierce wanted him up there but was confident enough in his balance that he could keep up with the older warrior. His broken knee cap was only slowing him down and the other leg only had a bruise.

Throwing his longsword and cutlass up on top of the tiles, Chev scrambled up and scooped up his weapons. Deciding that the longsword and whip actually to be more favourable, he sheathed the cutlass and followed Pierce's glowing sabers into the darkness.

Pierce realized his mistake immediately when at last he stopped retreating on a thick beam three stories up. Chev's whip would be an incredible advantage on such narrow footing. Looking about, he wondered if there was anything else he could use to his advantage.

Straight below was the ceiling of the boiling room and alchemy shop which Draque used to make his lifiesyrup out of specially prepared maple syrup. Should Chev fall from this height and somehow survive, the lifiesyrup wasn't powerful enough to heal much anyway. The same could be said for

Pierce however. At the very least, the Doctor knew that Draque had several alarm spells on the boiling room that would alert him if someone broke into it.

It was very quiet as Chev at last stepped onto the beam, whip poised to strike.

Pierce held Sidekick out before him, holding Tarrasqueslayer behind him in reserve. When the whip came forward at last, Pierce blocked it with Sidekick and then slashed through the held whip with the reserve saber.

Chev charged it at last, legs moving sluggish-like as he slashed with his longsword across the older warrior's forearm.

Dropping Sidekick, Pierce backed off and changed his position so his good right foot was out front with Tarrasqueslayer.

"How much longer Pierce?" Chev asked, trying to smile despite his pain.

"Not long," Pierce muttered grimly and took one firm step closer so their blades met. A split second later their blades became a blur of blue glowing white steel and blue adamantite. Pierce scored a minor hit and Chev scored one of his own. For a moment they backed off and eyed each other in the light coming off the swords.

The moment didn't last and once more the two masters of combat danced back and forth across the beam, their blades shining with red blood and their bodies coated with sweat and wounds. The minutes passed and through a haze of pain, both warriors still had their wits about them and were striving against each other for every small advantage. Pierce's foresight was at last taking a backseat as he couldn't afford a distraction that would be his end.

Below them, the beam creaked under their weight and sudden jerky movements. The Doctor saw his chance. This was no foresight that told him what to do next, but an insight based upon his experience. Retreating backwards several steps, the warrior sliced Tarrasqueslayer downward through the beam.

Chev felt the beam shudder beneath his injured legs and knew he only had a split-second to act. He charged forward across the slowly descending beam and knocked aside Pierce's saber.

With one hand gripping a north-south beam above him, the Doctor took his feet off the beam below him and kicked out at Chev wildly.

The warrior took both feet in the chest and fell backwards on top of the beam. That sudden impact ended the beam's slow descent and crashed downwards through the ceiling of Marque Draque's alchemy shop. Chev dropped his sword and scratched desperately at the air as he disappeared into the darkness below.

Pierce breathed heavily and dropped his saber, taking the beam above him in both hands and holding on. With slow, deliberate movements, the veteran climbed across the beam to the safety of the supporting studs. He was thankful it was his arms that had carried him to safety and not his legs for he was certain they would have given out on him.

A moment later an explosion shook the studs and Pierce grabbed hold of the wooden supports for fear of falling to his death. Looking at the hole in the floor two stories down, he saw white glowing mist rising upwards out of

the hole like smoke. "Marque Draque, where are you when I need you," he grumbled.

Shaking off the pain, Chev felt a sudden awareness unknown to him. He could sense every molecule in his body flex and move, and understood all too clearly how they worked. Normally, when a muscle flexes the individual cells move at separate time sequences resulting in a constant power. Reaching out with his mind, the fighter understood that by flexing all of them at once he was capable of incredible strength and speed.

With little effort, the rock and debris pinning the warrior went flying across the room with the strength of ten men. It crashed through the stone wall like it was a catapult boulder. The whole chamber shook and Chev ignored the debris that fell around him.

Sitting up and looking at his numb legs, the fighter opened his eyes to the power surrounding him. He was bathed in an aura of white and green light. Even as he watched, the blood covering his legs were absorbed through his flesh until he was whole again.

"Magic," he murmured slowly to himself, half in fear and half in intrigue. Looking about the broken chamber, he felt the magical energy present. It flowed around him and through him like a swirling river of yawn. "The magic weave," he said aloud in understanding. The magical weave revolved and flowed around the world like a ocean of magical energy. Wizards used its power to access energy that was normally beyond mortal ability.

The glowing man looked beyond that simple, and it did indeed feel simple now that he understood it, and knew that this was also a source of power used by the gods. The warrior smiled, the light around him shining even brighter as he did so. Reaching out a hand, he grasped a magical strand and felt the raw energy passing between his fingers.

Looking down at himself, Chev saw strands that were not moving. Yellow strands interlaced with red ones in an intricate pattern. Swallowing, the warrior studied the strands closer and felt himself getting drawn into them. Strands of magical energy gathered around his eyes like a lens at his will.

The farmer at the Bravepike ruins. No, not a farmer, a wizard, Chev decided mentally. A moment later he broke through the magical enchantment Korehren had cast on him and understood how he had been duped.

Duped? Chev could scarcely believe it, but there was the proof right before his eyes like some holy vision. It was not the Harpers who had instigated his lover's capture. That had been merely an excuse for the wizard to start Chev's killing spree.

Magical adrenaline composed of weaved strands coursed not only through Chev's veins but all around him as his fury mounted. To have been trapped within a statue for over a century was one thing, but to be so easily enchanted by another wizard was unforgivable. With a flex of glowing

muscles, Chev snapped the chain-like magical strands that bound him with the ease of a child breaking a twig.

The raw energy of the breaking strands stung his skin but the moment passed and the warrior looked about him in a sense of wonderment. Broken flasks and glowing green gems. A huge cauldron had been tipped over and spilled a glowing white syrup across the rough wooden floor. Where the syrup touched, the wood grew bark and sprouted twigs with leaves.

Shifting and kneeling in the puddle, Chev reached out a hand to touch the syrup and absorbed the substance through his skin. Taking a deep breath, the warrior watched as magical strands of energy raced through his hand, healing his wounds and restoring strength to his muscles.

On impulse, the warrior rolled over in the syrup and felt the magical energy coursing through his body. Every tiny molecule screamed for more energy and he swam in a sea of ecstasy. The moment did not last and he awoke as if from a dream.

Looking about him, Chev spotted his fallen and broken sword pierced by the Doctor's saber. Magical energy poured from the wounded weapon across the floor like spaghetti from a bowl. Reaching out a hand, Chev felt a sudden jolt of energy as the magical strands whipped about his body. He spasmed without pause but could not release his hold on the broken sword.

Draque had just gotten back from Blackstaff's tower when the warnings went off in his head like his whole world had suddenly disintegrated and forgotten to take him with it. Someone was trying to steal his lifestyrup! How dare they!

He cursed himself and raced across the grass towards the east wing at the far end of the grounds. His hands fell to his own weapons and he raised a wand. A bolt of crackling energy struck the bronze door and only jolted it. Under the elf's weighty foot however, the door's melted hinges and mechanism stood no longer and it crashed to the marble floor with a heavy clang.

Down the cluttered hallway, an explosion like lightning caused his pointed ears to perk up and he saw glowing smoke rise out from underneath the door of his alchemy shop. Making his way through the cluttered hallway, Draque couldn't help but wonder what magical thing the thief had managed to break. He could only hope that the explosion had killed the stupid thief. No one steals from Marque Draque and gets away with it.

Muttering a quick protection to ward away the effects of magical residue, Draque paused before the doorway and debated whether to blow it off its hinges or knock first to see if the thief was still alive.

He chose the latter and was disappointed to hear a large, yet harmonious grunt.. "Whoever is in there," he said loudly and as sternly as possible. "I know there was a magical explosion in there. Anything could happen in such a case-"

The bronze door and its frame wrenched out of the wall and rammed Draque against the far wall. An unyielding force held the wall in place and crushed the air out of the mage. He couldn't breath and his mind raced for

some form of escape. With no other choice, the mage twisted a ring on his little finger with his thumb. His form blinked out of existence and reappeared instantly twenty feet away down the hallway.

With the lack of a body behind the door, the bronze door crashed into the marble wall with a solid clang. Releasing the door from his grasp, Chev looked down the hall at Draque's rematerialized form.

Draque astonishment was so complete that his cigar fell out of his limp lips and he stared open mouthed at the glowing white form of Chev. He took several hasty steps backwards and mouthed the words "What happened?"

Chev smiled and the entire hallway shone with magical light. "A fluke of sorts," he said, looking down at his own naked torso which shone with white energy. "My magical sword exploded and when I crashed through the ceiling I tipped over your cauldron. My magical armour was absorbed through my skin and my clothes burnt away by energy. I absorbed that cauldron of syrup, followed by the remains of my sword."

Draque took another quick step backwards. If Chev could absorb magic at will he would be helpless should the warrior decide to kill him. He looked to his wand and threw it down and unbuckled his swordbelt.

The warrior only smiled, having a vague sense of what Draque was thinking. "I won't kill you. I do think you could help me however. I've learned that I was tricked into hunting down the Harpers and now I intend to rebuke the mage who ensorcelled me. I need my sword more than ever now."

The drow frowned and shrugged off what was a weak attempt of a charm spell by Chev. Whether the attempt had been a conscious effort by Chev was open to question. "The blade is evil, I've been dismantling its enchantments."

"I can fix that."

"And if it blows up in your face and takes the rest of the Academy with it?"

"Then I will await you to bring it to me outside in the rose garden."

Draque ignored the prying enchantments and held his will in place. "Why should I do this favour for you? I am no Harper but I call many of them friends. I'm not about to betray them by handing over a weapon of such power."

"Even I, with my newfound powers cannot break your magical locks Marque Draque," Chev said, paying the mage a compliment. "But with that sword I could challenge a god to a duel and likely win."

"I don't doubt it. You still haven't answered my question."

"My foe is a mighty mage, twice as strong as you are. I'll need my sword if I'm to challenge such a power. The world would be better off with such a mage."

"What's the name of this mighty mage?"

"Korehren, I believe."

Again Draque was shocked and couldn't say anything.

"What's wrong?"

"Korehren is the name of the God of Corruption." The mage swallowed and gauged his distance to the nearest door.

"All the more reason to end his reign."

That thought struck the mage profoundly and for a moment he checked himself to make sure he hadn't fallen under some spell. He knew it was indeed possible to kill a god. Cyric, the God of Murder, had done it several times while still mortal and dubbed his own sword Godslayer. He turned half away from Chev and was tempted to run for him. The other half of him begged him to let Chev have the sword and watch as history unfolded.

History and overwhelming curiosity won out and Draque dug into a pocket and pulled out a cigar. It lit on its own as he put it to his lips and bit down on it. "Follow me."

The door creaked open upon the dusty room and Chev felt the overpowering sense of chaos emanating from the sword. Stepping through the door, he stretched out his hand and the blade flew across the room at his will and was reunited with its master. It cried out in a plaintive voice, begging for the warrior to skewer the mage that had harmed its enchantments and broken its will.

Chev ignored the blade's pleading thoughts and looked about to see that the mage had fled the room. In his left hand, the warrior held aloft Tarrasqueslayer and smote it with the evil blade in his right. It did not explode, for the instant the magical bonds snapped, the glowing man reached out with his will and channelled the released power through his sword, healing the broken enchantments of his sword and silencing its evil urges.

The leftover energy flowed down the blade and joined with his swordarm. When the last of the magically fabric had been absorbed, Chev tossed the blue adamantite saber aside. He held aloft Gravebringer, its black adamantite giving off a dull shine. "Happy now? I ruined a perfectly good sword in favour of fixing you. If I have anymore complaints I shall complete Draque's dismantling and use your magical energy for myself. Is that clear."

The sword flashed light angrily but stayed silent.

Pierce leaned heavily against the wall as he walked and thanked Ao he was safe back on the ground. Grabbing Sharkslayer and Sidekick, he used them like canes as he headed north, hoping to find Rambertz. Reaching the bronze doors to the north, he opened them and breathed in the night air. He could smell the dew on the grass and wanted to roll over and over in it like a child until he fell asleep exhausted. The problem was that he was already exhausted and badly in need of some healing magic before he rolled over and died.

"Rambertz," he called out in the darkness, his voice low and shaking. "Rambertz," he called again, trying to raise his voice desperately.

He wet his bloody lips and tried again. "Rambertz!" he called out, his voice breaking the silence and ending with the warrior collapsing in the doorway.

Eight hairy legs walked out of the darkness and a handsome elven face looked down at the fallen warrior with concern. His eyes lifted to the sky and saw the first rays of dawn coming. He needed that power to heal Pierce's wounds and would have to wait before he'd be able to heal much. Still, he could do something for now.

Kneeling like a horse might, the half-man, half-spider ripped rags from Pierce's clothes and worked to bind his bleeding wounds. It would be awhile before he could use his healing magic at full strength.

"Why are you here?"

Pierce opened his eyes and blinked in the twilight. He could hear waves in the distance crashing against the rocks. The sky was a painted swirl of red and purple that fell into a sea of darkness. The wind rushed past his ears as he stood and faced a lone figure in the darkness.

"Who are you?" the Doctor demanded, his hands going to the sabers that were not there.

"That question is open to negotiation. A better question is who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I'm Pierce O'Hiram. I don't know why I'm here."

"None of us know. Least of all you."

"I'm dreaming."

"Maybe you're dead."

"No." Pierce said firmly. "I can feel Rambertz's thoughts. I won't die."

"Not yet. The day has only begun," replied the man and took a step closer, his face becoming more distinct.

"Is this a vision? Who are you?"

"I might be a vision. Or maybe everything you've ever known is a vision. Maybe you've dreamt your whole life."

"When I die, will I wake up?"

"Maybe. Does it matter so long as you serve your purpose."

"What purpose?"

"Existence. Nothing more."

"So if I die, it makes no difference so long as I have served my existence by simply existing."

"Not exactly. Everyone is unique, and it is that uniqueness that makes your existence important. For every life, there is a billion ideas and concepts born, added themselves to the infinity of the universe."

"And if I die?"

"Then you have failed. Don't fail me Doctor Pierce. I am counting on you."

"I think he's coming to," Draque muttered and waved his cigar under Pierce's nose, hoping the awful smell would help wake the warrior.

"Get that damned thing out of my face!" Pierce grumbled. His eyes cracked open and he glared up at the mage. "I don't particularly like smelling like an ashtray!"

Rambertz grunted and hauled Pierce to his feet. "I think he's fit enough to walk. His foot should be fine, provided he doesn't put too much stress on it." The drider didn't release his strong hold however, waiting for Pierce to take a step.

"I'll be fine," Pierce said, nodding to assure to the drider. He took several steps and tripped on awkward legs. He fell forward and landed in a crawl. "I have to find Chev."

"Did we fail to mention that he's close to godhood at the moment? You can't stop him."

"I'm not going to stop him," Pierce said slowly, fixing his hands underneath him and struggling to rise.

"You're half dead!" shouted Draque, reaching out to stop Pierce. "You can't do anything short of killing yourself!"

Pierce growled and rose trembling to his feet. He straightened his back and ignored the wave of agony that threatened to buckle his knees. "Just watch me."

With slow determined steps, the Doctor walked across the grounds towards the gate. He had a good idea where to find Chev, knowing how much the warrior prized that buckler. He adjusted Sharkslayer and Sidekick in his belt, drawing strength from the feel of their firm grips.

"Help him Draque," Rambertz said grimly, crossing his thick arms. "Surely you have a flying spell on you?"

"No," Draque muttered. He looked up and after Pierce. "I do have a spell called Astral Jump however..."

Bending the magical strands to his will, Chev surged skyward and was a shining white beacon flying over Waterdeep at such a speed that he was easily mistaken for a falling star. The wise ones knew better however, knowing that falling stars go down, not up.

The wind slid over Chev's naked form and he felt exhilarated as the magical energy he encountered was absorbed into his skin. He could never have imagined that there was so much magical energy just floating around and waiting to be used. To his eyes, it seemed like he was swimming rather than flying.

His mind racing as only his could, the warrior swerved downward and scanned the lantern lit city for the elven twisting tower. Closing and reopening his eyes, he focused his thoughts on the buckler. Down below, he sensed the buckler. It wasn't sentient like the blade was, but he could feel its magical strength fighting against the rusting effects of the water around it.

Like a diving owl, the glowing man plummeted downward and crashed through the ceiling of the elven tower, through the elven chamber and straight down the fountain to the water below. Reaching out a hand, the water surged around the warrior and formed into a whirlpool with the waterdrain at the centre.

There, jammed into the waterdrain's bars, the buckler lay. Chev slid down the water like it was sand and scooped up the buckler and blew the water off it. A moment later the buckler attached itself to his arm and he flew upward once more, already wondering what to do next.

Cause a commotion would be a start. The warrior rose more slowly this time his light shining like a lighthouse as he rose up past the thundering water and entered the elven tower. His face was benevolent as he gazed at the elven guards who stood bravely in front of the guests. The fat mage, the Harper, responded with a bolt of crackling magical energy that hit Chev's buckler and was absorbed through the warrior's glowing flesh.

The ex-bodyguard only smiled at the mage. "I call upon any clerics and mages to contact Korehren and tell him that Chev desires his presence."

A cleric of Corellon, the patron god of all elves stepped forward. "Why do you seek to contact a dark god, unknown spirit?"

"To destroy him. You will soon witness a god-duel."

"Why don't you call him yourself?" demanded Petre. "Are you really a god or is that simply an illusion?"

Chev glared at the fat elf but still he smiled. "I am no god and my abilities are not honed as well as yours but I can assure you that my power exceeds yours by far."

Petre was skeptical and started to nod at the cleric when a simply clad elf stepped forward within two feet of Chev. His clothes were made of the finest deer leather and otherwise unremarkable. His face however was that of utter perfection and beauty. The golden hair flowed from his bronze-tanned skin and he stared at Chev with clear blue eyes.

The warrior took a quick step backwards. The sheer amount of magical energy surrounding the elf was almost blinding. Huge magical strands thicker than Chev's arm flowed through the elf as a constant source of incredible energy.

"Chev, combat is forbidden amongst us gods."

"I'm not a god," Chev responded, summoning all of his energy together. His light stopped glowing and the strands surrounding him started to grow in thickness. He still shone a little, but the majority of the magical might was no longer leaking out.

"Perhaps, but you have the power to rival one. Albeit a small one such as Korehren. The sheer destruction however is something I will not allow."

"So says you," snorted a booming voice. "I wouldn't miss this fight for all of Ao's power."

The two beings turned to face Tempus, the God of War. He was dressed in a flagrantly intricate and shining armour and carried a great warhammer the size of a sledge. His face was stern and filled with a myriad of scars. Like Corellon, thick strands of magical energy swirled around the Lord of Battles and down his huge weapon which was composed of pure energy rather than actually substance.

"Nice hammer," Chev commented and immediately won Tempus's admiration.

"Thanks," the god responded and turned back to Corellon. "If you're so worried about destruction, we can take this battle outside."

"Are you challenging me to a duel?" Corellon demanded, his sword materializing in his hand.

"No, although I might take it up with you on a later date just to see how long it would take me to beat you to a pulp. I was suggesting that Chev and Korehren have their little fight outside, away from your precious tower."

"Strange that no one ever asks my opinion on this," a black-skinned elf commented. He stood and his skin shifted colour to a white as he mimicked Chev's form. "Surely I should have been asked more formally as this is rather abrupt and I do have a busy schedule. So many people to corrupt, so little time."

Chev lowered his sword at the god, sizing up the the energy strands that swirled around the being. "Care to take this outside?"

"And if I don't comply?" Korehren said with a charming smile at Corellon.

The leather-clad elf looked at the god of war and a silent agreement passed between the two. With a smile, Tempus hefted his hammer in one hand and pointed it at Korehren's head. "How many powerful beings do you want helping Chev? If this building gets destroyed, he'll have both me and Corellon helping him. Who knows who else might decide to help out?"

"Cyric? I'm sure the god of murder would side with me. Lloth might decide to pop up too for all I care. Then again, we wouldn't want a godwar on our hands would we? We'd destroy half of Toril with such a fight."

"You'd be the first to fall," Corellon promised. "Why not let the future show what it will and have your little battle outside."

Chev ignored the banter and searched for a weak spot in the god's defenses. The problem with fighting gods he realized immediately was that they regenerated faster than trolls and were a lot harder to hurt in the first place. He concluded that there was no weakspot, but rather something more important. Taking four steps towards the god, he stabbed with his sword, but not at the god himself.

His blade bit into the thick strand of magical energy, and he forced his will upon it and redirected the power towards himself.

In response Korehren charged the warrior and stabbed him in the side with a wickedly curved sword.

Chev ignored the injury as the energy passed through his sword, down his arm and repaired the damage done. Grabbing another thick strand, he pulled the god with him as he rolled backwards and over the fountain balcony.

Falling once more, the glowing warrior grabbed a strong hold around Korehren's thickest strand and kicked himself away from the god, stealing the strand. Together the two beings tumbled downward, but in those mere seconds, Chev felt the power of god-hood fill his veins with energy and when he landed it was on both feet with sword in hand.

Korehren smiled and his magical energy swirled around him and cloaked him like armour. He bound and interlaced it with knots that could not be pulled away, creating a fabric of writhing energy.

Chev studied this for only a moment and then did the same, but placed the strands under his skin rather than around it. He could feel energy escaping from him in the form of light and understood that there was only so

much power that he could hold within himself without exploding. He was tempted to throw raw energy at Korehren but knew it would only weaken himself and at most stun his opponent. No, it was much better to simply let Korehren bleed out his energy until there was none left.

The two beings faced off against each other, Chev with Gravebringer and Korehren with a curved longsword outstretched before him. Immediately, the warrior concluded that Pierce would be a better fighter than Korehren had he the god's magical strength and speed. The lesser power had skill indeed, but he used it unwisely with showy swings and no true skill.

As they came together, Chev blocked and turned the curved sword aside easily, following up by kicking Korehren in the belly. The blow landed softly but sent the god flying across the cobblestones to crash into one of the spiralling posts holding up the elven tower.

Corellon stood beside the tower and strengthened it magically to prevent a crack from spreading up its length. Tempus appeared at the other side of the post and threatened jokingly to smash it with his hammer. The elven god frowned and crossed stern arms, indicating that such a blow might be the god of battles' last.

Standing, Korehren held his sword more wisely this time and gauged the distance between himself and the glowing warrior. Without a word, he stamped one foot on the ground and blackness spread from his leg onto the ground. Stepping backwards, the puddle of darkness continued to grow as Korehren willed it to.

Unsure of what this was, Chev stepped closer and came nose to nose with an emerging denizen. He stabbed forward with Gravebringer at the base of the monster's neck and twisted. Green blood poured out of the wound all over the glowing warrior as he pulled the blade back out.

Two red eyes looked down at Chev with utter hatred.

The warrior's sword dove once more, this time into the denizen's chest. Once again Chev twisted the blade and pulled it back out. He sensed Korehren moving around behind him but knew he had to finish this beast quickly or be caught between the two.

It was Chev's third blow that proved fatal. He swiped the blade across the beast's belly, spilling out its greenish brown innards. The creature wasn't even fully out of the portal in the ground when its body turned to wisps wrapped with magical power.

The glowing warrior wasn't about to let the thing escape however. His hand flashed out and he pulled on the magical strands, shredding them with his claw-like tendrils of magic that sprouted along his hand.

He jerked as Korehren's sword stabbed cleanly through his back and came out where his heart was. The god didn't back off however, pulling Chev's life essence through the weapon. A black hole spread around the wound like the charred remains of a burnt corpse.

Feeling the lifeforce weakening, Korehren pulled his sword out and went into for another hit.

His attack was knocked aside by a flash of blue.

The god blinked and stared.

Pierce stared back with equal determination. In one hand he held the cutlass Sharkslayer and in the other he held his saber Sidekick. "Marque Draque isn't going to like the fact you've been using his Vampiric Blades spell without his permission. In the meantime, I believe you and I have to discuss the small matter of some dead Harpers."

Korehren simply swung his sword at Pierce's neck.

Knowing that he couldn't possibly parry due to the god's superior strength and adrenaline, the Doctor ducked under the blade and stabbed out with both blades. They bit into the god's chest and ripped through life energy like a hot knife through butter.

The shock, combined by the arm jarring pain he received when Chev turning about and unexpectantly met the backslash meant to take Pierce's arm off, was enough to cause the god to back off from the two unexpectantly. "The Harpers are an annoyance to my church. I need them removed," Korehren replied as he concentrated to heal his wounds faster.

"So you can corrupt the leaders of Waterdeep into doing gods know what?" Pierce shook his head. "Over my dead body."

Korehren began a retort. "That can be-"

"Arranged?" demanded Chev. "So can yours by the smell of your blood on the ground! You are a coward of the first kind to say nothing of a pathetic warrior."

"I am a GOD!"

"And I thought Pierce had a big ego," snorted Chev. He held out a hand to the Doctor. "I'd like to borrow Sharkslayer, if you please."

Pierce handed the blade over after a moment's consideration. "How do I know you won't backstab me with it in the far future?"

"The same way I know that you won't do the same to me," the glowing man replied, and gave the Doctor a quick glance. For a moment, the two connected on a purely mental level. This was no glimpse into the other mind, no probing, just pure communication with incredible clarity.

Then the moment was gone and Pierce had to check himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. He stepped back from the two supernatural beings, Sidekick raised and ready. He hoped this battle wouldn't last long.

The saber fell from between limp fingers and Pierce's jaw dropped. The future was so clear. No longer was there the multitude of possibilities and choices to be made. There was nothing he could do, for it would happen so quickly. Perhaps it was the insight into Chev's mind, Pierce couldn't be certain. Never before had he seen the future with such simpleness.

Chev tossed Gravebringer into the air in front of Korehren's head. Sharkslayer's sharp blade came down, slicing clear through the black adamantite sword. For a millionth of a second, Pierce heard the magical sword scream in his mind and then was gone as it exploded.

Both beings were knocked back from the released magical energy. Chev crouched, his buckler raised defensively before him as he concentrated on absorbing the magical energy that had been released around him. Then he stood, striding through the magical chaos of energy and levelled Sharkslayer at the prone Korehren's neck.

The god was still in a state of shock when he looked up the curved blade of the cutlass to the man at the other end. His face, normally a

combination of darkness and light turned pale. Chev stared back without expression.

There was a feeling of nothingness in the air. Everything had simply went still. What was it, Chev wondered. He only had to plunge the blade forward and vengeance would be his.

The place was unnaturally silent despite the sudden appearance of a multitude of godly figures. They encircled the area and watched with interest to see if they would be witnessing the birth of the new god of corruption.

From their ranks, a blue-white entity stepped forward, her figure becoming distinct and enticing as she approached. "What are you waiting for?" Mystra asked.

Chev looked up, an urge telling him that he would find his answer in the heavens above.

"Enough!" boomed a chorus of voices that bellowed down from the heavens with a million stern shouts. "If you value your existence you will cease this!"

The eyes of every mortal and immortal in Waterdeep followed Chev's lead and turned skyward to the towering being that was Lord Ao. To Chev's eyes, the being was pure energy and nothing more. He was one gigantic weave of energy as if his very existence would cease to be in the event that all the magic simply disappeared. He was also perfectly balanced. Every part of him had equal amounts of colour and shade and yet he did not appear to be grey or brown as a whole, but rather was simply everything.

"The Balance will be preserved and such a concentration of power will only result in a backlash of energy. Disperse!"

One by one, the gods vanished in the next second until all but Korehren and Chev remained. The gods watched from afar of course, for none wanted to miss such a rare event.

"Leave!" Ao commanded, his white eyes were twin suns bearing down on Korehren. The god blinked out and was gone, his form travelling across the weave of magic in bubbles within the strands.

Chev held his ground and stared upwards at the Overlord. "And what of me?"

"The role of the God of Duels is awaiting you. If you seek aid in understanding your role, you may call upon Oghma, God of Knowledge to aid you."

Marque Draque took a quick step forward, and took a quicker one backwards when he realized what he was doing. "Doesn't he have to replace another god to become a god?"

"No. There are two ways to achieve godhood. The first is to slay and replace one and the second is to earn it by achieving perfection in a particular art."

Draque realized he was staring at nothing and looked to his side at Pierce. The veteran shrugged and looked at Chev, the only deity left.

Chev was cloaked and armoured like he was when Pierce had first met him in the Academy dome. The only thing different was that his face was now flawlessly perfect and his eyes shone with a brilliant light. He smiled, a smile that was infinite in its happiness. Without a word, he turned to face the Doctor.

Pierce smiled in return, unsure of what else to do. Chev's mind was closed.

"It has been a pleasure fighting with and alongside you Pierce," Chev said at last. he held out a hand.

Before he knew what he was doing, Pierce shook it. When he realized the full meaning of that simply action Chev was gone. The warrior stood there for a moment shaking only air before dropping his hand in silence.

Draque lit a cigar to celebrate.

Jimox shoved the woman in the closet at the sound of the approaching boots and jumped into his seat just as Pierce walked through the door. At first he didn't recognize the warrior without his armour and was a bit confused by the fact that Pierce was carrying a wood chopping axe instead of his customary sabers.

"G'day Jimox. I was in the neighborhood and I thought I'd just stop by." Pierce smiled knowingly and glanced at the closet as he sat down across the desk from the rogue. He poured himself a drink of red wine and smelled it first. "Elven?"

Jimox shook his head and for once smiled. "No. I'm afraid your talents as a wine connoisseur are incorrect. That's from Cormyr."

Pierce tossed the glass against the wall where it crashed beside the last one. The bottle followed soon after with a louder crash.

Jimox swallowed, having a vague idea that Pierce was a little annoyed at Chev becoming a god and everything.

Instead Pierce smiled that same annoying smile. "I was refering to the poison. It's dark elven. Made from the glands of giant spiders."

The rogue's thoughts went to the throwing dagger in his boot as Pierce stood and hefted his axe.

"You know," the warrior said with annoying smile. "I've always hated your desk." His axe came down in an arc and left the desk a splintered wreck.

Jimox grabbed at his dagger and threw it deftly towards Pierce's unprotected heart.

It landed smoothly in the veteran's deft hand and he taunted the rogue with blade. "I've never liked this dagger either," Pierce said as he dropped the axe and took the dagger in both hands, twisting the dagger until it was bent at a ninety degree angle. He tossed it aside and it landed beside the broken glass.

Jimox held up his hands in defense as Pierce came around the wreckage of his desk and stood before the rogue.

"I've always hated your shirt too," Pierce said with his annoying smile as he grabbed the greasy, food stained tunic and ripped it right off the rogue.

Jimox just stood there, stunned.

Pierce walked back around the desk and scooped up his axe. "Have a nice day!"

The rogue waited for the warrior's footsteps to disappear down the hallway before letting out his breath. He stood there for a moment shaking.

Aza Brooke stepped out of the closet. "What happened?" she purred seductively.

Jimox shook his head. "I'm not sure, but I think Doctor Pierce just stopped by."

"Today has certainly been interesting," muttered Martinez. His face was even more haggard than usual and he had the distinct look of a man who hadn't had any sleep last night, was hungover, or both. He sat down across from Pierce's father and looked about the empty cafeteria with distaste. Whether the distaste was for the lack of people or bile rising in the back of his throat and threatening to overflow was debatable.

Hiram looked up from his meat and potatoe casserole. He planted his fork down and looked about the empty room with a smile. "They're all out in the city. Who would stay in here when everything is so much more exciting out there?"

"I don't live here and yet I came for your cooking," Martinez stated, defending his right to be here right now.

"I'll take that as a compliment for my cooking," Hiram replied with a shrug and shoved his plate across the oak table. "Have at it before it gets cold."

"Cold casserole? Ugh!" Martinez grimaced and grabbed the fork and started shovelling greasy food down his throat. Ignoring the hot spices, he made a face and swallowed.

"Well? What do you think?" demanded Hiram.

"It's better than anything I can cook," Martinez muttered between a mouthful.

"No, I was talking about this whole Chev being a god business?"

"Oh!" Martinez stopped and pondered, actually chewing the food for a moment. The spices set in and he coughed and swallowed. He immediately grabbed a bottle of drow vodka from a pocket and twisted the cork out. Leaning back, the bald warrior poured the liquid down his throat and washed down the spices.

Hiram waited patiently throughout the tirade and picked up the bottle when Martinez set it down with a thunk. He took a quick swig, remembering the old days when he had drank the stuff like water in between the fights to calm his nerves.

Martinez sat and pondered and finally shrugged. "I really don't know what to think. On one side I think Chev should be hung for killing all those Harpers, but at the same time I can't help but admire him for taking on a god and then becoming one. It takes a lot of guts to go up against a god."

Hiram nodded. "What about Pierce? I have a feeling he's pretty confused right now. Last I heard he went down to the docks to let off some steam. You haven't seen him since this morning, have you?"

"Me? Nope. I haven't got a clue where he is."

"What a mess!" shouted Draque and kicked over the cauldron. The silver had tarnished to the point that it was paper thin and it crumpled easily under the elf's foot. "Years of hard work went into this project! I spent a fortune in silver and now look at it! Magical residue staining everything and destroying everything it touches!"

Szymon bent over and picked up a blackened mushroom that had grown up through the floorboards and then died. "What happened here? The boards grew bark and leaves and everything!"

"And now its all dead!" Draque shouted and kicked a dead branch that had grown out of the floor. "The magical energy from the lifesyrup was corrupted by the sword exploding. Chev said that he drained the cauldron dry but what he didn't realize was that he had also drained the life energy from everything else in the area. He sucked it dry like some overzealous vampire who drinks the sap of plants!"

"They can do that?" Szymon asked.

"No, but it is theoretically possible," Draque consented. Taking a deep breath, the mage sat down and tried to light a cigar with a cantrip and failed. He threw the cigar down with disgust

"Couldn't we use this place for something?"

"Firewood?" muttered Draque. "Nope, not even firewood. Wood has life energy in it and thats what gives fire its power. This stuff isn't even wood. Its more like the ashes left after the wood has been burnt away.

"No, I meant for magic-"

"Its dead. There's not even magic here. I can't even light a cigar. Chev even drained the magic out of here until even that is gone."

"Does that mean magic doesn't work in here?"

"That's cor-" Draque looked at the apprentice sharply. "That is indeed right! I can use this room for storing magically unstable things! After long periods in here, the accursed things power will eventually die out!"

Szymon beamed proudly. "Now what?"

"Now we go get all my magical experiments I hid in the basement and stick them in here. Who knows? Maybe in a hundred years the power in this room will have transformed and we can conduct some more useful experiments to see if we can finally use it!"

Szymon paled. A hundred years? This sounded like a lot of work.

The first thing Chev learned was that gods has duties to fulfill to their people. This included preserving those who belonged to him in life, or should have belonged to him had he only been a god before hand. This was only one of myriad duties as he spread his consciousness across the cosmos and took up conversations with every god he came across.

They all wanted to talk to him, to make sure that this powerful warrior was on their side. To Chev however, he wanted only to talk to Kelemvor, the Lord of the Dead.

Called by some the Justice Bringer, Kelemvor had replaced Cyric as Lord of the Dead and brought justice to the realm of unliving. It was here in Hades that unwanted souls gathered and continued their existence. Before

Kelemvor had come, those poor souls, mere shades of their former selves, were tortured for not being pious enough to be admitted into the home of their chosen god.

When Chev arrived in Hades, he expected a vast turmoil of darkness filled with souls who would have to be sorted through to find which ones were worthy of Chev's home amongst the stars. What he found instead was a barren wasteland with neat, orderly lineups of souls all waiting their turn to be judged before the Lord of the Dead. One of these lines, a long one stretching past eternity called out his name.

They shouted with one voice, a loud, commanding voice so much like his own. They spoke bravely and honourably. These were the duelists who had died defending their honour, the bodyguards who had died defending others, and every warrior in every shape and form who fought with honour and loyalty. Good and evil meant little to these people as they had lived their lives by the sword and died by the sword.

Chev rode over them, tossing down an infinity of whips which were grasped and pulled upon as they were carried upwards towards their saviour.

Two shining beacons flew down to meet Chev and they followed alongside him as he collected his faithful. Chev knew these two to be Mystra, the Goddess of Magic and Kelemvor himself. He did not stop for them, but continued on his way, collecting the warriors who swarmed up to follow him in a huge growing army of souls.

"Where do you stand?" Mystra asked. To Chev's eyes she was almost pure magical energy. What little that was matter was linked magically to Kelemvor. The warrior recognized this bond as a strange form of communication between the two.

Chev recalled Mystra and Kelemvor's religious war against Cyric. "I stand everywhere that my avatars place their feet. At the moment I am neutral to your war against the God of Strife. I do however seek a minor mage I believe belongs to one of you."

"You speak of Kipriana?" Mystra stated more than asked. "She took her own life. The old Mystra refused her entry into my domain. She is Kelemvor's-"

Chev ignored her and turned about to face Kelemvor. The Lord of the Dead only smiled and pointed to the horizon where a single speck against the dull brown sky rose and raced across the sky.

"She never was a warrior or worshipped any war-god. Still, I'm sure we can break the normal rules and allow her to go with you. She loves you more surely than any warrior in the ranks behind you." Kelemvor glanced at Mystra, exchanging a smile.

Chev paid no attention to the two greater powers. He released magically energy in an explosive blast that sent him hurtling across the sky towards his love. When he neared her, he pushed magically to prevent a collision. Kipriana did the same and the two beings spiralled together in a churning spiral of magical energy. At last they embraced, energy flowing over the two in a cyclone of power

Pierce returned to the Academy late in the evening, his limping stride carrying through the gates past tired guards. They only nodded and went back to their game of cards. He nodded in return and kept going.

The heavy bronze doors had been left ajar, and Pierce didn't bother to close them as he passed between them and down the dark hallway. He could hear crickets outside and he wondered how long Rambertz was going to maintain this enchantment which kept the Academy in autumn when it was winter outside. He didn't really care if winter ever came.

He entered the dome and looked about. Nothing. No Chev. His imagination must've been playing tricks on him again.

Then he saw the statue. There on the far side of domed amphitheatre was Chev. The god was carved out of white marble and he stood there plainly, hands in pockets, staring back at Pierce. His face was both noble and evil, a strange yet familiar look Pierce had grown used to.

The Doctor strode across the marble floor and stood before the statue which stared back at him. "Well Chev? Is this all you have to say for yourself? A statue?"

"No, not exactly," the statue muttered and winked.

Pierce looked twice and blinked. "I must be getting senile," he muttered and hefted the axe on his shoulder. Walking south, he paused at the bronze doors and looked back at the statue. He turned about, seeking the solace of his bedroom.

"Talk about impatient!"

The Doctor paused in his tracks but did not turn. That voice was not the voice of Chev. It was a voice filled with experience and undeniable brotherly love.

Pierce turned slowly and met the eyes of the warrior who stood before the adamantite column.

He was tall and broad, with short brown hair and sharp curled moustaches. He wore simple riding leathers and boots with silver heels and toes. He smiled out at Pierce from under those moustaches and gave a quick nod as a salute.

Pierce nodded in return, openmouthed as he took a step closer.

"What's wrong Pierce? You've seen ghosts before!" The warrior waited impatiently.

The Doctor swallowed. "Never one that was my friend. How long can you stay?"

"Not long," Witter admitted. "My goddess will want me back shortly. Chev pulled the strings that got me here, of course, if you're wondering."

"If you see him, thank him," Pierce whispered.

"I already have and he hears you better than I do at the moment so speak up!"

The warrior blushed and walked forward slowly, approaching his friend with uncertainty. "Does it hurt being dead?"

"You know that feeling when your leg falls asleep? It's kind of like that. It doesn't hurt and it isn't enjoyable. It's just kinda numb. There are some plus sides however!"

"Like?"

"Old friends you get to see again, along with new ones you make. The pleasures of the flesh are gone, the pleasures of the mind and soul remain," Witter replied. He peered at Pierce, studying him. "I hear you've been picking your fights with gods lately?"

"The rumours get around even up there eh?"

"They do. I have some advise for you though before I go."

"Which is?"

"It is time you stopped and enjoyed your life Pierce. The Harpers aren't your thing, even if it was mine." The ghost looked upwards at the moonlight streaming through the ceiling. "Besides, you're a father now!" he said with a wink and disappeared like a snuffed candle flame.

Pierce found Nicole in the rose garden outside sitting under a huge maple. Upon first seeing her, he delved into her mind and saw that she knew nothing of her impending pregnancy. Indeed, she wasn't even pregnant. Yet.

She looked about when he stepped on a twig and smiled up at the warrior. Then she frowned when she saw the axe whirl past her head and thud into the tree beside her. She swallowed and looked back at Pierce. "Are you trying to impress me or kill me?"

Pierce shook his head. "Neither." He grabbed the hickory handle of the axe and yanked it out of the tree. "But I would suggest moving because I intend to chop this tree down."

"Might I ask why?" came a perturbed voice from above. "I happen to like this tree!"

"It's also going to make a great statue, so get down and introduce yourself to Nicole okay?" Pierce didn't wait for the drider to come down and immediately started chopping away at the tree.

The drider muttered from above and floated down to the ground below with a levitation spell. He landed in a bow before the stunned Nicole.

What happened next, Pierce didn't notice or care. He knew everything would fine in the end so he simply continued to concentrate on the tree. His foresight was working too frantically to worry about seemingly trivial things.

The axe thudded with a rhythm all its own as he continued to work out a huge wedge in the tree. He could see the statue unfolding before him as he pondered every detail right down to the curls of Witter's moustaches. Everything was so perfectly clear and simple.

The druid and noble woman sat down beside each other, content to watch the drama that was unfolding before them on the trunk of the massive tree. They were not the only ones who watched from afar. Only fifty feet away a dark shadow sat atop the Academy's wall and watched.

Finally he dropped to the ground below and collected the rope lasso hidden under a juniper. He took one last look at Pierce and then bolted skyward. Matter became energy, and his rising black star soared ever upwards.

Outside the tall walls the snow was a good half foot deep. Inside however the morning sun shone down on green grass still wet from the frost melting. The sap in the maples dripped merrily into silver buckets. There was a constant buzz of people and insects as the Academy churned with the excitement over the recent battle and the ascendance of a new god.

Things like that didn't happen every day but those who knew what to look for would have seen another history in the making: Doctor Pierce. The aged veteran stood at the base of a huge felled maple and chopped away with an axe. Five men could have wrapped their arms around the trunk and still not completed the circle. There he stood for hours, axe working away steadily at the trunk of the tree, envisioning the horse and rider that lay within.

In less than a week the statue would be complete and it would be a monument for all those who followed. The marble walls of the Academy and the limbs of its founder would be dust in the wind before the wooden statue lay to rest. Its hard surface would endure the elements for many generations of students at the Academy. It would bear graffiti and have to be scrubbed clean by the offenders before the century was done. Its colour would take on a classic aged look but still be just as strong. Much the same could be said of the artist when he was done for his grey hair had the classic look of a man who had grown wise and strong with his years. At the base of the statue, he inscribed in block letters the words "WITTER, MY IDOL, MY MENTOR, MY COMRADE, AND MY FRIEND".

The drow bard overlooked the vast city from the eastern cliff. In the distance she could see the sharp blue of the Swordcoast. She hoped this would not be the last time she saw the City of Splendours and yet at the same time she hoped she would never return. She loved this city dearly. It had been her haven for many, many years of exile. If she survived the next few weeks however, she could only hope that she never saw it's wonders again.

It would be awhile before Pierce noticed that his horse was missing, indeed he might never notice. Already Valeska had determined that Bartholomew was the most tempersome brute she had ever come across. She would need the huge stallion where she was going however.

She turned the horse stiffly and Bartholomew gave a great shudder as he raced away from the city at gallop. The snow and dirt under his feet churned and left a muddy wake of chaos.