

A Journey Between Unknowns

by /a/non

Preface

This is the result of something I don't normally do when I'm writing. Much of it is experimental, from the subject matter and the ideas inside it, to the tools I'm using to actually produce it.

Because of that, more elves. Half-elves. Looking at one of the characters in my previous story I submitted for the Autumn challenge, I wanted to create a decent back-story for them. This didn't end up doing that (aww, shit), but it explores the same universe at roughly the same time. This is in order to play with that concept and set up a few of the global events that would be happening at the time. Because I didn't take things too seriously last time, there's an element of that here too. I think I've been more serious and for longer due to the subject matter, but expect things not to get too heavy here.

I hope I will be looked upon kindly when the 'big reveals' actually happen here; my hope is that the reaction is "oh, that's clever/interesting" not "shit, why did you just rip the rug out from under me!?" However, I am realistic enough to understand I'm a giant hack and it won't all be to everyone's taste. I'm fine with that. I needed to get the ideas out. I only wish I'd had a bit more time. As things are, parts of this read a little bit too much like "edited highlights" sometimes. I think I've chosen my battles well enough to give a proper taste of who everyone is, though.

Parts of the credit for these plot-lines are Celarel's doing anyway—you'll meet her in a minute. Halfway through writing, she told me she wasn't going to be like *that* and could I *please* change her to something a little more interesting, like...how about this for the ending? The idea struck a chord with me, and the changes were easy enough to work in so I went with it.

Speaking more generally, I think things went well enough, and I really hope you enjoy / get a laugh out of it. The big take-

homes for me before anybody else passes comment are: a.) Don't try to write a slow-burn story that needs 40k words from inside a time/space constraint that leaves you struggling to fit 20k, and b.) LaTeX is one hundred percent here to stay. Even if I remain a bit clueless with it (especially wrangling the formatting into what I want—I'm sure there's a better way of doing some of this stuff), the gain has been more than worth the pain. I urge you to try it if you haven't already. I'm never going back now.

— Anon.

p.s.: The game being played at one point is not one thing nor the other. Pinning it down directly and stating what it is wouldn't suit the story (believe me, I tried). Rather, I took inspiration from a few different places and one very obvious thing in particular. Just in case you were wondering (or wanted to point out some rule I wasn't following).

p.p.s: Warning, may contain nuts, fish, and cheese.

I Faith

Pack Your Bags

Elas looked out across the lake as the sun set. The earth was still radiating warmth from the day, but there was a gentle breeze across the water. It took the edge off the heat, which had been oppressive for much of the day. Summertime was almost over, and that meant something this year that it hadn't before: His birthday was two days away, and that meant Elas was coming of age. As inevitably as rocks falling down a hill, the processes and people around him had conspired to put the heavy mantle of responsibility and expectations upon him.

Elas felt it as an invisible weight, pressing downwards upon his soul until there were times he felt he could no longer breathe. The only light in this darkness, he mused, was that he wasn't alone in being locked into this cage. As he pondered, he suddenly became aware of someone approaching him from behind. Two arms embraced him, and in an instant, he knew the warm body that hugged him from behind. "Penny for your thoughts, dear brother?" He shrugged. "Tomorrow, and all the days that come after it."

It came as no surprise to him that the arms now wrapped around him belonged to his twin sister, Celarel. She, like him, would have to face the rest of her life in two days time, but she seemed to do so with all the poise and grace of one who not only accepted her place in the world, but actively welcomed it as if it were made for her in the first place.

"So serious!" she giggled, squeezing him tighter. "Why, Papa will be pleased to know you're considering your responsibilities within the family with all the gravity they deserve. You'll be

growing a *very* sensible beard next."

"Aw, Celi, don't say things like that!" Elas brought his hands up to meet hers. "You make it sound as if the whole thing is already done and over."

"Like your life is when he puts the chains on you?" She mocked, gently. "Hey. Come on inside and just forget about it for a while, 'kay? There's food going on the table as I speak, and I can't talk to Mama anymore. She's trying to plan the birthday napkins."

"Again?" Elas frowned. "Okay. You go on ahead, I'll follow you in a minute. I'm not so hungry tonight, anyway."

"Aww...all right. Don't keep us waiting too long, though." Elas could hear the pout in Celarel's voice as she released him. "O-F-T, okay?" A gentle kiss landed on the back of his neck, and then she was gone just as quietly as she arrived. Elas frowned for a moment as the breeze cooled the new damp patch on the back of his neck. *Stupid O-F-T puzzle.*

The O-F-T thing? That had been Celarel's little saying for a long time, ever since they were kids. Once, when they were five, Elas had asked what it meant.

"It's a puzzle-secret!" Celarel had declared, smiling.

Ever since then, Elas had tried to work out what the meaning had been. *One Fat Trout?* Celarel laughed and shook her head. *Orange Furry Tiger* was met with a gentle rebuke:

"I was just a baby when I came up with that, El. We didn't know what a tiger was until we were 12, 'member?"

That much was true, Elas had thought. Back then, their ears hadn't even really grown their points yet, and playing with the rest of the kids in the village was still possible without being bullied. Soon after, though, they had learned very quickly to keep to themselves. *Only half-elf, but always rejected.*

Elas had spent much of his time afterwards with his tutors and practising with a bow his father had gifted him. Celarel had alternated between learning various scraps of herb-lore from their mother and watching Elas practice.

“One Flies True?” he’d offered once, while collecting up his arrows.

“Which ‘one’, El?” Celarel had asked, looking up from her book and gently tilting her head, smiling. “Well...” Elas started, before launching into a technical discussion of bows, arrows and feathers that he never truly completed. Celarel wouldn’t have understood it. As it was, Elas hardly knew how to put what he’d learned through years of silent practice into words anyway.

Still, it had bothered him. So much so, that in the end she’d limited him to one guess a day to stop him from being driven to distraction. If anything, the first few months had exactly the opposite effect. Elas became convinced that he was close and spent days coming up with lists of variations on his previous answers, which then burned months in the asking. For a child that had quickly become the academic one within the family, this was a score yet to settle. Celarel had outwitted him with this ‘puzzle’ of hers for a long time, and he wasn’t going to take it lying down.

Elas smiled to himself as he strolled gently back over the fields outside of the village of Min where they lived. *Gifts and parties be damned*, he thought. *What better time to crack this particular puzzle than on the cusp of becoming a man?*

* * *

When Elas got back, Papa was waiting for him by the door, pipe in hand. He packed his pipe thoughtfully as he spoke.

“Son, we’re *real* proud of you going to study over in Feshta. First one in th’family an’all to make it to a university...” Okay, *Pa...buuut?* Papa pointed at him with the end of his pipe. “All’s what I’m sayin’ is...the city ain’t like it is ’round ’ere, okay? Kids ’ere in Min might be kinda rough, but they ain’t *mean* like a man what’s ’ad no bread for a week.”

“I know, Pa. I’ll look after myself.”

Papa took a match to his pipe and puffed gently a few times before tamping the bowl down with his finger and reaching for another match.

“No, lad. You’ll do more than tha’.” He re-lit the tobacco, great clouds of fragrant smoke filling the air. “You’d better take care of Celarel, too. What with her natural good looks she *obvious* gets from ‘er father an’ said father bein’ many miles away...”

Elas nodded. Officially Celarel was to accompany him as far as Aunt Sakaala’s house and act as a live-in nanny for her two rug-slugs, but she’d already been making noises about not *really* knowing how to care for young children. Elas suspected she’d be finding herself some regular errand or cause in Outer Feshta so she could come visit.

For both of them, this was something of an unspoken concern; Celarel was carefree and kind most of the time, but behind that joyful exterior was an uncompromising mind that knew very well what it wanted. She was certainly stubborn enough that if one or the other expressly forbade it, she’d find an unsailable pretext in any case. Outer Feshta was not the kindest of places to pay a visit to. Known primarily for its community of *crusty otherworlders*, the densely packed, winding streets combined with the strange practices of the denizens of such areas made them a dangerous prospect for any unaccompanied young maiden.

“Still, les’ get on an’ *eat* somethin’.” Papa slapped him on the shoulder. “Your ma’ll have search parties sent out if we’re much longer. She saw some *mid’jits* in red robes today, of all things...an’ it’s got her proper spooked...”

* * *

The next day, the dawn was a brilliant, fiery orange. Elas woke on his birthday to find himself with company. Celarel was perched, like a fragile china ornament, on the foot of his bed. Wearing a sheer white nightdress, her form was gently accentuated by the light streaming in through the window behind her at the end of the room. Around her neck hung the same necklace she’d worn for years. On the end of the pure silver chain was the same small vial of red liquid that always hung there. It danced between her

slender fingers as she toyed with it, musing to herself. Unusually for Celarel, today her blonde locks were braided, and rested gently across her left shoulder. Elas watched her for a moment or two, before she noticed he was awake.

"Morning, El. Happy birthday." Her gentle voice wove its way to him along with the birdsong outside.

"Happy birthday yourself. Had to be first this year?"

"Of course! What kind of a sister would I be otherwise?" Celarel gently rose and moved to the head of the bed, where she stood a moment, watching Elas. "There are standards to be maintained, you know." Hesitating for a moment, she leaned forward and kissed him gently on the forehead. "O-F-T. My first present to you today is that you get *two* guesses."

"Opal Flecked Turtle? Open Faced Tollbooth?" The combination of sleep inertia and excitement got the better of Elas, leaving him to blurt out the first things he could think of.

"No, and *no*!" Celarel bounced and giggled at his random attempts.

"Ugh. I shouldn't have used both at the same time, I've only been awake two minutes." Elas scrubbed frustratedly at his eyes. "Give me ano—" An urgent yawn took possession of him and punctured the conversation. As he stretched his arms upwards, Celarel noted that he had left himself fatally unguarded. Seizing her chance without hesitation, she quickly placed her finger in his mouth and gently pressed his tongue, causing Elas to gag and cough in surprise.

"Ha! Gotcha!" she laughed.

"Ack! *Pth*! You haven't done that to me since we were kids!" He frowned, crossing his arms. "I should get another guess for that!" More laughter as she drifted out of the room. "Nope!"

* * *

The table was heaving with food. Of course, there was far too much for a family of four, so in the tradition of all good coming-of-age parties, anyone Mama could think of had been invited.

A sizeable number of local fossils had turned up with their gifts and good wishes, before helping themselves to food and standing around dispensing gossip.

As the twins made their socially mandated rounds, they received wildly conflicting and outdated advice on every topic under the sun. From house-keeping to animal husbandry, marriage to metallurgy, the room handed out nostalgia, rumour, intrigue, and superstition in equally heaping measures. All of it dressed up as well wishes and life experience.

After a while, Celarel became distracted by the conversations. Fidgeting, she took Elas by the hand. Making their excuses, she lead him out into the garden. There, in the shade of a favourite tree that they used to climb, Celarel rested her head on Elas' chest.

"Too much even for you, Celi?" Elas asked, somewhat confused that his more socially inclined sister might grow weary of a situation like that before him.

"Well, yes and no." Celarel smiled, nervously. "I wanted you all to myself for a few moments, dear brother. Hold me?"

Elas put his arms around Celarel and held her close. For a moment or two, nothing else needed to matter for either of them. Not the past, not the people standing in their parents' living room, not even the looming prospects of the future. Celarel rested her ear on Elas' chest and gently counted his heartbeats to herself, feeling her own heart drumming the perfect counter-rhythm. After a few minutes, she looked up for the first time at the adult holding her.

"Better?" A look of slight bemusement still lingered on his face.

"Yes. You remember Mama told us about how we were born, El?" Elas frowned for a moment before the memory came to him.

"Me first, you a just a bit later, right?"

"Uh-huh." She nodded, smiling. "At about 3 in the afternoon, Mama said. That's when you came along." She placed her index finger on his chest.

"I followed a little while after. About ten minutes." Elas gently scrubbed the stubble forming on his chin.

"Yeah, that sounds familiar...So, what's that got to do with us being out here?"

"Well..." Celarel paused to find a little courage. "You're already an adult, *Mister* Elas. I wanted to still be a little girl while you held me as a man." Elas thought about this revelation for a moment, and then gently kissed Celarel on the forehead.

"Well, it's a unique feeling, I'll give you that much." Celarel smiled, and rested her head on his chest again.

"By now I should be a woman. Hold me again and see if it feels different." Elas chuckled, and put his arms back around his sister.

"O-F-T?" He offered, still none the wiser as to its meaning. He felt the giggle more than he heard it. Adults or not, some things would apparently never change.

"Of course!"

A Long Road Ahead

In the early morning, the two set off for Feshta. Their horses were weighed down with papers and provisions needed for the journey. Looking over their shoulders, the twins waved back at their parents until they could no longer be seen. As the time passed, the village and everything they had known since childhood quietly melted away along with the dew.

Although Elas felt apprehensive about the destination, he was glad to be out on the road with Celarel. He hummed quietly to himself as the miles passed by. Although they'd started out with conversation about various landmarks they'd passed and memories they'd shared, Celarel had become quieter as that well had dried up. Elas looked over to see a face deliberately obscured by long hair, and a hand resting unconsciously on her necklace.

"Penny for your thoughts?" He ventured.

Celarel brought her hand to her face and gently brushed at one of her eyes, as if to wipe away a tear.

"I'll miss them, you know." Her wavering voice gave away her feelings—she had been trying hard not to cry for a while now, and had failed.

"Mama and Papa?" Elas brought his horse alongside. He reached out, and gently held the hand that was still grasping the reins. Celarel nodded silently, still rubbing at her face. "Well, it's not as if you *have* to go and *stay* gone in the same way I do, you know?" Elas offered, gently. "You don't *have* to stay with Aunt Sakaala if things don't work out...or if it doesn't suit you. You could always think something up and go home." Both horses had stopped, sensing something was wrong.

"It's not quite that easy, El. But it's a nice thought, anyway."

"You can tell me, you know that."

Elas gently squeezed her hand. Then, leaning over, he put his arm around her. This was the final thing that opened the floodgates, and Celarel buried her face in Elas' shoulder, wrapping her arms around him. What a position to find himself in! He held her as best he could while her body heaved with the sobbing. Celarel wept for a few minutes as Elas held her, the water from her eyes soaking into his shirt.

The two horses looked at each other. Although neither made a sound, a world of gentle understanding passed between them. *This is a new one. Yes, two-legs are strange.*

As the pain subsided, Celarel straightened herself back up, wiping the tears from her face. Elas felt the cool air on the damp patch she'd left behind on his shirt. He smiled at the red-eyed, snotty mess that had replaced the graceful form sat on the horse next to him.

"Come on, Celi. Tell me."

"Not yet, El."

Celarel produced a small handkerchief from her sleeve and daintily blew her nose, causing her horse to flinch. "You wouldn't understand it now. Later, when it's time."

* * *

After a long morning on the road, the twins found themselves on the outskirts of Setsa. There, they rested in the shade of a large tree. Celarel fished around in her rucksack, and produced some bread, meat and cheese left over from yesterday's party. The two ate quietly for a while before Elas broke the silence. He looked over at his sister, who had already finished what little she'd managed to eat and was absent-mindedly playing with her necklace again.

"You've been leaking." He observed.

"Huh?" She looked back at him with a frown.

"Your necklace. Wasn't the vial always full?" Celarel looked again at the necklace.

"I...I think it may have leaked a few times. There's probably a little red spot on the bed. Mama will have sent a letter on ahead of us asking if I cut myself or had a nosebleed or something."

Elas smiled at Celarel for a moment as an idea came to him. She looked back at him, tilting her head slightly and returning his goofy smile.

"What is it, El?"

"How about...Original Fancy Turnip?"

Celarel raised an eyebrow. "Huh? Oh. No...Sounds like a fast-food cart. I don't think turnips have ever been fancy. What parties can you go to where they serve turnip?"

"Well..." Elas looked to the sky for inspiration for a moment. "I guess if you hadn't eaten anything for a few days, just having a turnip to eat might be a party all on its own."

"True." A smile. "But still no."

* * *

The twins spent the afternoon in the small town of Setsa. Setsa was a newer town, built mainly on the river as a way-point for river traders wishing to have a place to stop. It was a modern

place every way you looked at it, with all of the buildings having been built in the last 50 years. Their construction was similar to the style that Elas and Celarel were already used to; single-floor, with wood, stone and straw being the most used materials. In the very centre of the town, a few of the official buildings were made from brick or cut sandstone, and stood three floors high. Around here, a bustling square had a few traders, and the twins spent some time looking through the various stalls for gifts to send home.

The first generation of human children born in Setsa had already grown up here and were busily starting families of their own, but most elven couples who first moved here had only just had their first children, such was the difference between the two races. Despite this imbalance, it was a place that felt hopeful and, for the most part, harmonious.

The inns at Setsa were pretty empty, so Elas and Celarel were able to get rooms for themselves cheaply. Although the rooms were little more than a bed and a table, the old couple who owned the place were very kind. They kept asking if there was anything more anyone needed. If they'd asked, Celarel joked, they might have gifted her half the town itself.

* * *

Morning was bright and clear, and soon the twins were back on the road to the Kalten Market. Despite the name, Elas explained, the Kalten Market was also a township in its own right. What had started as a simple trading post at the crossroads, had blossomed into a place to live for a few thousand people, most of whom were concerned with getting goods into or out of the market itself.

The twins spent much of their time looking in wonder at the scenery as their horses took them along at their own pace. This gave Elas plenty of time to think about things. Finally, it came to him.

“Ovine Fluffy Towels?”

“No!” Celarel laughed. “What’s an Ovine, anyway?”

“It means of or pertaining to sheeps.”

“Those would be some itchy towels. I think I’ll stick with cotton.”

* * *

The Kalten Market was a strange place. Instead of organising various sections of similar products and services together, the Kalten Market Organisation Committee chose to allocate the vast space it had available for stalls and stores to traders entirely in order of their arrival. As a result, there were vast rows and alleyways dedicated to entire families, covering items from doorhandles to dog-baskets, and clothes-pegs to calligraphy sets.

Around every corner, some random fishmonger’s wife would thrust a snapping crab or a flapping fish into their faces and asked if they might like to buy it. Larger family groupings had taken to decorating the outside of their areas in bright, inviting colours, giving the appearance the twins were walking into another market inside the market.

Armed with the knowledge that their journey would take them through The Longwood, Elas and Celarel wandered the vast space together. They’d worked out between them that they would need to purchase at least three days worth of food here, as this would be their last chance before reaching the other side of the forest.

Here and there, odd-looking but friendly vendors accosted them with plates of things to try. First came an old lady with some cheeses. Then there was a young boy, with some cured sausage his father was selling. Both caused the twins to part with some of their money. The third vendor was an old man with a comically large moustache who offered them some tiny little cured fishes. They were very smoky and salty, causing both Elas and Celarel to gag. Despite the vendor’s assurances that they would go well with melted cheese on toasted bread, with a brief

look the twins wordlessly agreed that it probably wouldn't be enjoyable. They made their best polite excuses and left the man behind without buying anything.

In the centre of the market-place, there was an open space with seats. Vendors were dotted around the perimeter with their carts, selling quick snacks that were terrible for your waistline. Elas bought two buns with fried sausage and onions stuffed inside them, as well as his very first legal ale.

Celarel bolted her food like a starved animal, knocked back some cold-brew dandelion drink she'd found earlier, and then disappeared into the crowd like an elf with a mission, leaving Elas with a bag full of her purchases at his feet. Elas, meanwhile, took a moment to rest, chew his food, and consider the call of the invisible cicada. The alcohol quietly found its way into his system as he watched the world go by, and slowly took the edge off his profound dislike of large gatherings.

"Look, El! I found those sweets you like!" Celarel had found her way into some of the stalls nearby, and had come scampering back, clutching a small box. She placed it on the table in front of him, then stepped back. Holding her hands together under her chin, she watched and waited for his approval. Indeed, when Elas looked inside the box, it was packed full of little brightly coloured boiled sweets he recognised at once. Each one was flavoured with the juices of summer berries or citrus fruits according to their colour, and inside was concealed a little dab of soda-powder that fizzed intensely upon your tongue.

"Oh, wow! I haven't had these in years!" Elas exclaimed, popping one immediately into his mouth. Celarel giggled in delight as she followed suit. Memories of bustling village summer fairs and taking it in turns to ride on Papa's shoulders came flooding back, and they sat together for a moment, quietly enjoying the sun as it continued its long, slow march from mid afternoon towards the tree-line and evening.

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The two determined to split up for a while. Elas suggested that, since Celarel had bought him some sweets, he might wish to find a small gift for Celarel in return. As much as Celarel didn't like to be apart from Elas, the idea of him buying something nice just for her was too exciting for her not to accept his proposition. As the light of the day faded, the two met up again just outside the market, and bought some fresh bread from a bakery just nearby.

"It's too late in the day to hit the road now, Celi." While neither had been in The Longwood before, Elas had seen similar places. They were dangerous to enter in the late evening, and it was hard to set up camp after night had fallen.

"I was thinking the same thing." She admitted. Although she didn't really know much in the way of trapping or hunting, she had spent many hours gathering herbs in the woods outside of Min, and things—nasty things—got much bolder when it got dark, even in safer places like home.

The twins wandered the town for a while, leading their horses. At this late hour, many of the places a traveller might stay had already been taken by those arriving from outside the town earlier in the day. A small inn on the outskirts of the area had one room left to offer them.

"We'd better take it," decided Celarel. "Otherwise we'll end up sleeping in the barn with the horses." The innkeeper had only to raise his eyebrows suggestively, and Elas decided that between Celarel and the innkeeper, the argument had been well made. More coin was handed over than Elas considered reasonable, and a place to stay for the night was theirs. Elas and Celarel had a simple meal of roasted pork and apples while the maids busied themselves preparing their room and—at Celarel's insistence—drawing them a bath.

"We've been a few days without already. It's probably going to be the last chance we get for a while," she said, in between bites. Elas pointed a fork at her and spoke through his food. "At least three days, Celi." Celarel smiled. "There you are then. Might as well make use of it." Elas nodded and continued chewing.

The room itself was relatively small, but comfortable. A gen-

erous hearth, freshly prepared for them, was already cosy with burning logs and a nearby wicker basket of spare fuel for later. A large wooden bed with comfy-looking linen and an old cracked leather wing-back chair took up most of the space in the room. At Elas' insistence, the chair also had a few blankets for him on it. Under the bed, there were drawers built in to the frame to allow for storage. Celarel took the opportunity to store all their food there. At the other end of the room, there was a second door that led directly to a small bathroom. In here, there was barely enough space for the tub itself. A small window at the end of the room allowed the rising steam a way out into the street outside. As Celarel had requested, the bathtub was filled with hot water, and, curiously, a small carved wooden duckling, painted yellow.

"Why don't you go first?" Elas offered.

"Why, *Mister* Elas, always the gentleman." Celarel giggled. "I was going to."

* * *

Elas flopped down on the bed and watched the fire. The hypnotic flames danced in the hearth as the logs crackled and spat. He thought back to evenings when their elven grandmother was still alive. When he was a small boy, he'd sat with her in the kitchen as she cooked, often helping out by feeding the fire for her. She had always said that you could see all the future in a fire. He peered deeper into the flames and wondered what the future might hold for them.

Just as his eyelids were getting heavy, there was an ear-piercing scream from the bathroom. Leaping to his feet with visions of rapacious bandits and ravenous monsters, he pulled the bathroom door open to confront whatever evil had snuck in past him to attack Celarel. Elas found himself staring at the perfectly naked, and nakedly perfect Celarel.

Celarel had stepped back out of the bath, and the towel had fallen at her feet. Her long, golden hair, still damp from being washed, cascaded gently over milky shoulders and down

her back, ending just before a shapely, firm bottom. Elas' heart skipped a beat. Although he'd seen Celarel naked before, that was a long time ago, back when they were still young. This was suddenly very different.

Hearing the sound, Celarel whipped round to face the door, and Elas found his eyes drawn uncontrollably to her. Celarel's flawless, silky skin was a wonder for him to behold. Her height and gentle curves gave a willowy and almost ethereal quality to her presence. Elas thought that if he reached out a hand, it might even pass straight through this vision before him. Celarel hesitated for a moment, before shoving past Elas and out of the room in a blind panic.

"S-spider!" Celarel squeaked. "Get it, El! Get it!"

Elas bent down, and picked up Celarel's towel. He shook it, gently, expecting a monstrous arachnid to come flopping out, jaws dripping with venom and hate. He found only the gentle smell of soap and warm, clean skin. Putting the towel down on the hard wooden floor, he knelt on it, and peered under the bath. Nothing but darkness and the gentlest of breezes coming up through the floorboards. A thud, suggesting a door pushed firmly shut in a nearby room caused a small puff of air to find its way to him.

Suddenly, something came darting towards Elas, causing him to flinch. A small clump of dust, dragging some dark, wiry hairs around like spider legs, came skittering out from under the bath. He watched, a smile slowly forming on his face, as it made a small lap of the space in front of him, and then started back under the bath as the air in the room teased it around. Elas blocked its path gently with his hand, and then picked it up for a closer look.

"You are an absolute monster. The scourge of Kalten itself." Elas declared. He opened a small window on the outer wall and gently blew the fake spider out into the street below. "Go and be mean to other girls."

"Got it." Elas poked his head back round the door. "Did you want the bath any more?"

Celarel had pulled on her nightgown and was sat cross-legged on the bed, brushing her hair. She blushed slightly as Elas looked at her.

“N-no. I’m all done in there. You can have it now, El.”

Closing the door, Elas undressed and settled down into the water with the yellow duckling. Smiling, he balled up a fist and gently bumped the duck’s beak.

“What a *night*, ducky.” He whispered. “The jokes will go on for weeks, you know?” The little wooden duckling bobbed up and down gently in the water. “Pervy Elas, better bolt my door, *blabla...*”

Elas held his hands up. “Yeah, I know. *I know*. Don’t make it seem like I’m made of stone or something...Like getting hit by lightning. ...hmm?” He tilted his head forward as if to hear the wooden duckling more clearly. “Oh sure. Sure. One for the ages...Huh? Well, the less said about *that* the better. That would probably be easier for *you* than it would me, eh?”

The duckling continued to bob gently in the water, but gave no indication that it knew or understood this conversation. “Still,” said Elas, leaning back in the bath, arms behind his head. “I suppose I should just pretend like it didn’t happen...”

* * *

Celarel looked up to see Elas come out of the bathroom, with a towel over his head. He’d pulled his trousers back on, but was holding his shirt in his hands. Celarel took a moment to appreciate the view. Elas was thin by human male standards, but years of training with a longbow had still had an effect upon him. Muscle definition in his chest and stomach were apparent, as well as well developed muscles in his arms.

He dropped his shirt on the chair, and perched on the edge of the bed for a moment. Here, he worked the towel vigorously over his head, drying his hair. The fire was burning lower, now, and the room had become much darker as Celarel lay sleepily on the bed.

“So...” Elas draped the towel around his neck for a moment and began tiptoeing desperately around the obvious. “Tomorrow we’ll start around Faslen Mountain. We’ll be in The Longwood for about three days. I think we have everything we need, right?”

“Mmm?” Asked Celarel, who was smiling at him. She hadn’t really been paying too much attention to what Elas had been saying, in favour of appreciating the well-developed muscles in his back.

“Food and stuff, Celi. Do you think there’s enough?” Elas picked up the poker and rearranged the fire.

“Oh, I should think so.” Said Celarel, somewhat dreamily. “...erm. Three days, I think, you said?”

“Yeah, sleepyhead.” Elas added a few more logs to the fire, in the hopes that it would take them through until early morning. He pulled on his night-shirt, and took a blanket from the chair.

“Don’t be over there, El.” Celarel looked at Elas, who had busied himself in setting up the chair for the night. “Come over here, at least until I’m sleeping.”

“Won’t I wake you up when I move away?”

“Only if you do.” She smiled. “Only a little. I won’t even remember it.”

“Well, okay then. Just for a while.”

Elas turned down the lamp on the bedside table and took the other side of the bed. He stayed on top of the sheets, but covered himself with one of the blankets he took from the chair. As they lay there, quietly watching the fire in the dark, Elas tried hard not to think about what he’d seen earlier. Celarel fidgeted awkwardly for a few moments, as she found the perfect position to lie in. Elas scratched and then made a few adjustments, based on Celarel’s new position. Slowly, they settled down and were content with listening to each other’s breathing.

“E-El?” A wavering voice found its way through the uncomfortable silence.

“Mmm?”

“N-now you’ve...well...Am I pretty?”

“Of course you are.”

The following morning, Elas woke to find himself lying on the bed next to Celarel. She was already awake, and had turned over some time during the night to face him.

"Morning, *sleepyhead*," she whispered, smiling at him. "It's still pretty early."

Elas looked around. The fire had burnt down to the embers, and there was just the vaguest suggestion of light coming in through the window.

"Must still be before five."

"I think so, yes. No clocks in here, so no way to know for sure until you get up...and it's so warm in this bed!"

"I'll bet you're a little warmer under all that than I am up here, too." Elas said, waving his single blanket around and tickling her nose with it. "Even so, it isn't so bad here, either."

In the end though, their deliberations gave way in short order to another, more pressing matter. When you find yourself in need of the bathroom, that is that. Of course, once you're up, there's nothing for it but to get dressed and make up the fire; you'll never get the warmth back that your spot in the bed has lost.

Lamps burning again, the twins dressed themselves. Before Elas could offer to excuse himself to the bathroom so as to give Celarel some privacy, her nightgown was already up over her ears and on the bed. He averted his gaze like a gentleman should to start with, but his curiosity soon found him stealing a glance as he dressed.

"It's okay if it's you, El." Celarel declared, as if she could detect his eyes upon her. Her smile quickly became a mischievous grin. "Besides, after last night, it's not as if I have anything left to hide from my Peeping Elas..."

Elas' face flushed bright red as he pulled on his trousers. "You were the one who nearly screamed the place down," he huffed.

"It's a wonder the maids didn't come storming in here wondering what terrible harm I'd done to you."

"I don't think you could ever do anything to hurt me, *Mister* Elas." Celarel gave him a gentle hug from behind as he was fastening his shirt, and kissed the back of his neck. "Besides, they probably just thought we were newly-weds or adulterers or something. That stuff goes on all the time on the road."

"How in the world would you know about that?"

"Word gets around, if you're willing to listen. The old ladies back in the village did tell some pretty detailed stories from time to time."

"Oh." Beetroot has looked less red.

* * *

A simple bite for breakfast and a quick stop to buy food for the horses saw Elas and Celarel back on their horses before the morning mist had burnt away.

As the sky cleared, the Faslen Mountain loomed large in the distance, snow-capped and ringed with a protective moat of trees. The twins had been travelling for less than an hour before the simple hedgerows and wide open spaces either side of the road started to break up. Here and there, trees with bark as black as night started to impose themselves on the landscape, harbingers of The Longwood.

There was no fixed point or dividing line after which the two could be said to be inside The Longwood, as opposed to being outside it. Many fairy-stories and folk tales will talk of their brave adventurers, coming to the point at which the woods abruptly begin, and, after holding their horse back in order to steel their nerves, forge bravely onwards into the dark and unpleasant unknown. Elas and Celarel simply continued onwards, noticing only after a while that they were truly inside. However, things were no less unpleasant in The Longwood for this distinction.

Between the trees and the mountain, much of the sunlight was blocked from ever reaching the forest floor. So, the first

thing that they noticed was how cold they were getting. Celarel felt it first. She reached into her pack and pulled out a towel she'd swiped from the inn. This was draped over her shoulders like a shawl. Soon, Elas was reaching for his jacket, and then Celarel hers, too. Shortly after, the two of them began to notice their breath, hanging in the air.

"Gawwwrrr..." huffed Celarel, making a small cloud around her as she did. "I am the dragon of these mountains! You shall bring me pretty virgins to eat, puny elf-man!"

Elas raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Oh yeah? What if I don't?"

"Raaawwwrrr... Then I will eat *you* instead, you're kinda cute and it's not like you've ever done anyone!"

"Who says?"

"Raww—wait...you *have*?"

Elas smiled. "Can't keep your eye on me all the time, Celi."

Celarel shook her head. "You haven't!" She pouted, hoping she could still see through him. "You *wouldn't*..." She lowered her head and spoke quietly this time.

"You haven't either."

"That's *different*."

"First time I ever heard of a celibate dragon."

"He was an orphan! Raised in the local monastery from a young age and devoted himself to his studies!" Celarel giggled. "It's not his fault he can't meet women now he's older! He's got villages to burn, people to eat!"

The conversation devolved into peals of laughter and the two pulling funny faces at each other.

* * *

By late afternoon, Celarel could look at Elas without bursting into another dragon-monk induced fit of giggles. As they made their way around the mountain, the breeze had changed direction, bringing warmer air in towards them.

"Old Frosty Timbers?" Elas offered.

"There are many of those here, El. But no."

The two came upon a place where trees had shrunk back from the road, making a small clearing on either side where one might rest. Elas decided that it was time to stop for the night and put their tents up before evening took what remained of their light away. That done, they sat around the fire and ate a meal comprised of ham, melted cheese, and a curious fruit with a spiky exterior the vendor had called 'annas', all on top of toasted bread. The kettle went on the fire to boil up some water for tea, the horses were fed and blanketed, and there was time to kill.

At this point, out came the secret weapon: "Orange Flavoured Toothpaste?" he offered.

"Oo, now that's *sneaky*!" She giggled. "Where did you get that?"

"At Kalten Market." He shrugged. "You remember the vendor with the little yellow hat? Near the sausage seller?"

She nodded, turning the gift over in her hands. "I like it!" Elas watched her expression carefully to see if she might give anything away.

"...but no." She smiled. "You're still not right."

"I still managed to sneak two guesses in a day though. Even if one of them was gifted to me by fate."

"Naughty!"

They sat and watched the fire a little longer. Celarel sat close to Elas, her eyes drawn to the stubble on his face.

"Didn't feel like shaving this morning?"

"I figured I'd get a head start. It's not like I'll be doing it while we're out here. No mirrors, precious little water to find. Why waste time and space with it?"

"Hmmm..." Celarel absent-mindedly took her hand and gently rubbed it against the stubble on his face, enjoying the sensation. "You'd look good with the right kind of beard, El."

"Hmm? I don't know. I tried once."

"You did?"

"Yeah, remember when you went to stay with the Inchling Collective? I was going to surprise you when you got back."

“Oh? What happened?”

“I got about three or four days in and then it itched so much that I got fed up with it. Speaking of which...can you stop rubbing my face now? It's not comfortable.”

Celarel kissed his cheek where her hand had been; a silent apology. She rested her head on Elas' shoulder, and they stared at the camp fire for a while. The towel from the inn was produced again, and wrapped around them as they huddled together for warmth. Oddly, as they stared into the flames, Elas found that he started to miss the hand rubbing at his face.

* * *

Celarel found herself awoken by the cold early on the next day. Although it was still very dark outside, she found that no matter how tightly she bundled herself up, her feet and her hands were still unbearably cold. There was nothing for it but to get out of bed and build up the fire.

Luckily, there was still a little firewood spare from earlier, and the still hot embers were quickly coaxed into a healthy flame. Wrapping the stolen towel around her, Celarel started to gather more wood to throw on the fire. It wasn't long before she heard stirring from the other tent, and Elas emerged to join her.

“Couldn't sleep either, huh?”

“No. It's too damn cold here. My feet woke me up, so I thought I'd stamp them around for a bit.”

“I don't blame you. I still can't feel mine yet.”

The two rummaged around for firewood for some time, over-compensating for their cold with a roaring great bonfire. The horses looked on, worriedly, as the sparks shot ever higher. *Stupid two-legs, they'll let the red flower get away from them.* Thankfully, it never did.

Breakfast consisted of slightly crispy sausages with the darkest of dark toast, served up with cups of scalding hot tea. Wrapped in their blankets by the fireside, they waited for the sun to peek through the trees. As the light came to them, they

packed away their tents and got back on to the road. The horses were grateful for this, because moving gave them a chance to be warm on their own terms, rather than having itchy blankets thrust upon them, or running the risk of being bunt alive.

They moved as quickly as the road allowed, and, as the day wore on, they found themselves leaving the worst of the forest behind them. Out of the shadow of the mountain, they found themselves getting warmer. The sun started to peek more and more through the trees, dappling the forest floor and warming their skin.

Lunch was taken still riding, with bread and cheese being portioned off and passed between them as needed.

“Elas?”

“Mhhmm?” Her brother still had his mouth full.

“Do you still have any of those little sweets left?”

Elas reached into his pocket and produced the box containing the sweets.

“Here, help yourself.”

Celarel popped one into her mouth. “Thanks. How much further is it, do you think?”

“Well, we should be able to keep going for another few hours here. We’ll have to set up camp in the outskirts of the forest for tonight. Tomorrow should be the last day, we’ll probably be out of the forest itself by lunchtime, and then the road to Bedfortress would take us into late afternoon.”

The two continued to ride on, eating the last of Elas’ sweets between them. As the sun dipped lower and lower in the sky, they started to look for somewhere just off the road to set up camp.

“I’ve been thinking,” Celarel ventured.

“Uh oh,” retorted Elas, jokingly, “Celi’s been thinking. Prepared for another terrible idea.”

“Weeell...” Celarel brushed her hair behind her ear, before pointing at Elas. “You know how Papa keeps worrying about me being safe out here and all?”

Elas rolled his eyes. "Yeah, figures you'd pick up on that. He never did get the idea that volume control needed to be a thing when he's got kids with elvish hearing." He scratched his arm, absent-mindedly. "Truth is, I'm a little worried about you, too."

"Aww, big brother looking out for his little Celi?" She mocked him, gently. "I'm only older by a few minutes," he reminded her, quietly.

"Even so," she said, "it was nice of you to come out first and check the coast was clear." Elas smiled. Looking into her eyes, he felt there was something that he needed to say, but words had become insufficient to capture the feeling.

"O-F-T". She said, confidently. "That's what that is, El."

He nodded, knowing better this time than to get baited into taking a wild guess too soon. "Maybe it is. So, what's this master plan of yours?"

"I need to sleep with you."

"What!?"

Giggles. "In your tent, I mean. But—"

"Oh. Wh-what brought that on?"

"Well, think about it, El", Celarel explained. "If I'm out here in my cold little tent all on my own...and someone sneaks up on us when we're sleeping..." she watched carefully as the gears turned in Elas' head.

"Yeah, you've got a point," he conceded. "It was too cold last night, even with the fire. And besides, it's different for couples. Any thief or otherworlder would just as soon assume a couple's keeping each other distracted while they make off with the horses or something." Celarel nodded, smiling. "You see. It's safer for both of us, really. Papa would approve."

::: center *Somewhere, far away, fate tucked her loaded dice back into her pocket.* :::

* * *

It was dark and somewhat cramped inside the tent, but the two could see well enough that they could make out the shadows of

branches cast on the canvas by the rising moon. As their eyes adjusted further to the darkness, the shape of their bodies, lying together, became vaguely apparent. Elas watched as his sister's chest gently rose and fell in time with her breathing.

"Celi?" He asked, not sure if his sister was still awake.

"Mm?" She answered, neither awake nor asleep.

"Orcs Flaying Trolls?" He offered, not overly committed to the suggestion.

A pause as her breathing changed. "No...but a funny thought."

"Don't let the trolls hear you say that."

Celarel pondered this for a moment. "El," she started, "What happens if we just keep going?"

"Hm?"

"You know, just disappear out into the world and pretend that we're not who we are. Maybe they'd think the trolls got us or something..."

"We couldn't make them worry about us like that, Celi. It'd tear me up inside to know they were looking for us. *Besides*, I thought you were looking forward to your future as a babysitter."

Celarel huffed. "I'm just better at hiding it than you are. I'm better at hiding lots of things, El."

"Oh? More secrets to spill?"

"Not yet. There's a time for these things." She explained.

"Wake me when it's time."

A smile spread across her face. Although Elas couldn't see it directly, the tone of her voice betrayed her mood. "Maybe I will."

* * *

Time passed quietly, as Celarel watched Elas. As she became sure he was sleeping, she leaned forward and kissed him gently on the forehead.

"Good night, dearest. O-F-T." She smiled to herself as her fingers gently ran through his hair.

The summer night was relatively short, and Celarel spent most of it watching over Elas. As she did, she whispered many of her secrets to him, gently brushed his hair, and sang sweetly when his dreams seemed to trouble him. Finally, as dawn broke, sleep caught up with Celarel, and she closed her eyes.

The Darkest Knight

The sun shone brightly in the sky, having climbed a fair bit of the way up already. Elas had been awake for an hour when he reached back into the tent and gently nudged his sister, who was still as active as a fallen tree. Her hair was draped across her face, and she had been gently sucking on the ends.

“Come on, Lump! Breakfast’s ready.” As Celarel slowly became aware of the world again, the smell of eggs and bacon gently toyed with her senses. Looking up at Elas, she noticed he was smiling in a way he’d never smiled in front of her before.

“Penny for your thoughts?” She yawned at him, hair still plastered to the side of her face.

Elas laughed at his sister’s request. “Why should I charge, eh?” came the reply. Celarel frowned for a moment at this unexpected response. “It’s a wonderful day, dear sister, and here you are, lying in there. I’ve got food for you. *Fooooood*. Remember food? In the time before the sleeping sickness cruelly took you away from me? Better than slowly ingesting your own hair.”

“Okay, okay.” She grumbled, yawning again. “Give me a minute.”

* * *

Soon, the two were back on the road. “There should be a song for this.”

“What kind of a song, El?” Celarel tilted her head and looked at him.

“Being back on the road again after a long night somewhere. The wind in your hair, the sun in your face...”

“Scruffy bearded face.” She giggled.

“Scruffy bearded face, yes. Especially you.”

Celarel grabbed her hair and held it over her face. “Behold, and wonder! When the deepest night of Winter comes, I am transformed! What would thou have as thy present, young master Elas?”

Elas laughed at her booming impression of the Frostfather, and started counting items off on his fingers. “Well...I’d like a new quiver and some jade arrowheads, some exotic fruits from a far off land, erm... some more of those sweets my fat sister scoffed yesterday...”

“Hold thy tongue! I have yet a perfect figure!”

“...a new leather jerkin...oh, and a buxom maiden to warm my bed!”

“You’ll be lucky!”

A thought hit Elas. “How about: Oak Fortified Tea?”

“My goodness, young master...” The realisation hit Celarel as she was speaking that this was another guess and she broke character for a second. “No, El.” Elas noticed an odd kind of sadness in her eyes. The false beard quickly found its place again. “Now, about this maiden...”

They continued to spar in this manner for quite some time. As they travelled further down the road, the forest thinned out. Slowly at first, but then more and more the trees gave way to fields and farms again. Behind them, the Faslen Mountain loomed large in the skyline but did nothing to warrant their attention now they were past it.

Signs of civilization had started to emerge. They saw others on the road for the first time in four days. There were a few houses dotted along the road as they went, and at one point, a run-down old chapel. Fences and hedgerows reappeared at the side of the road, each neater and nicer than the last.

“We’ll be at Aunt Sakaala’s soon enough.”

“I know, El. I don’t really want to think about it.”

“You can always come and visit me, you know that.”

Celarel smiled, weakly “Thanks, El. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’d find an excuse and turn up anyway. At least now you have permission.”

Celarel giggled. “You know me too well, Mister Elas.”

“Better than anyone, Lady Celarel.”

“*Lady?* Oh, I like that!”

Presently, the two noticed a fork in the road up ahead. Standing there was an odd-looking man. As they got closer, the two got down off their horses and approached the man on foot. Standing before them was nothing less than a Knight with black hair that reached down as far as his waist. His chest-plate had evidently been quenched in oil, for despite it’s jet-black appearance, it was highly polished and shone brightly in the sun. His arms and legs were clad in the darkest boiled leather. He stood before a shiny red box with a carrying handle, and some implement the two couldn’t quite make out slung over his shoulder. Off to one side they noticed a very bored looking horse. The Knight raised a hand as the two approached him.

“None shall pass.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Beg it all you want. *None* shall pass, man!”

“Oh.” Elas stepped to one side as a woman dressed in a black and white habit bolted past them on a pair of what could only be racing sandals.

“Rock on, sister.” The Knight waved the nun through with a little bow of his head. “Nun *did* pass. Carry on.”

“Ah, *that* kind of nun! I misunderstood you for a second there, good Sir Knight. I thought you were barring the way.”

“Nah...That ain’t cool. Why would *I* do that?”

“You tell me, you’re the knight standing there saying ‘None shall pass!’, like you’re guarding that road or something.”

“Naah, dude. This here is the road that leads to Bed-fortress...but I don’t want to hold up any nun that’s on the run, you feel me?” Elas was pretty sure he didn’t want to feel The Knight, but he nodded.

The Knight turned to look down the road behind him. The nun was, by now, quite the diminutive blur in the distance. He whistled as he took in the view.

"Amen to *that* one. She's hauling some *serious* cargo. Hey, dude, get this:", The Knight grasped the invisible watermelon for a second before chucking a thumb back in the direction of the rapidly disappearing nun.

"...bet she puts in a good word for us."

"With who?" Asked Elas, somewhat puzzled.

"With the Big *Man*, my dude! The Great Rock *God* in the sky, man!" The Knight explained, jabbing his fist skywards, forefinger and pinky raised.

"I see." Elas said, seeing little and understanding even less. Behind him, Celarel giggled to herself.

"Woah, I didn't see you had a *lady*-friend there!" Exclaimed the Knight. "I just thought, two cool *dudes* hanging out, proper rock-stars with long hair, going places together..."

"Ah, yes. This is Celarel." Explained Elas.

"I am!" she giggled, holding her hands up in mock surrender, before introducing her brother. "And this gentleman is my dearest brother, Elas." She smiled. The Knight bowed gently as his breast-plate allowed, hand across his midriff as he did so.

"And you, good Sir Knight? We didn't catch your name earlier?"

"Call me Chad, kay? Chad Cummings."

"Chad...*Cummings*? Oh brother." Elas put his hand to his face in desperation.

"*Brother!*" Chad exclaimed, copying the gesture. "You're from the Brotherhood of Men and Elves then? *Awesome!*"

Elas brought the other hand to his face and exhaled strongly. "Yeeess..."

"Rock on! There's an inn not so far from here, Brother. Just outside of Bedfortress, there's this *really* cool guy who's part of the Brotherhood too. He gives *all* Brothers a 10 percent discount. Plus, right, *plus...*" Chad looked around and then leaned forward, cupping his hand to his face. "His girl's a *right proper* looker." He

looked over at Celarel again. “Not that you’re *not*, miss, if you’ll be so kind as to see what I mean.”

“Well!” Said Celarel, beaming at Elas. “Looks like we’re all going the same way then. Won’t it be nice to have such a brave knight with us? If something bad comes along to trouble us, he can whack it with his large sword.” Elas raised an eyebrow.

“Ah, mama. I don’t do swords.” Chad explained, drawing out a lute. “But! I have something *better*. I have this...”

“That’s a strange looking lute...” pondered Elas. Although he couldn’t play well, he was passingly familiar with the instrument. This Lute had many extra elements to it, mostly fashioned out of brass and copper.

“Yeah, it’s an *electromechanical* one. Here. I’ll give you a sample...” Chad grabbed the box that was just behind him, and attached an odd looking cord to a hole on the front of the lute. As he strummed, the box emitted a harsh

BRWAAAAAN!!

causing the half-elves to cover their ears and all the birds nearby to take flight. “Rock and Roll, *yeah!*” shouted Chad over the sound of his rampant axe-murdering. The two looked on as Chad continued to play, unable to understand many of the other things he was yelling.

* * *

And so, despite the rather odd introduction, the group found themselves chatting easily on the road to Bedfortress together as the day went on.

“SO! So...” ventured Celarel as her ears finally stopped ringing, “If I understand things rightly, you’re a Knight/Bard who defeats his enemies with the power of song?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s something like that.” Chad shrugged. “The class system is kinda...*for other people*. It’s just like I was saying, music is my *life*, yeah?”

"Is that why you're on the road now, then?"

"He's on *tour*, Celi." offered Elas, smiling.

"Got it in one, dude." Chad shot Elas with two finger-guns before turning back to Celarel. "His brain moves faster than that feisty little nun did. I'm looking for something our guild lost a *looong* time ago."

"Oh?"

"We used to be some of the greatest record-keepers of all time, man!"

"Record-keepers?" Injected Elas. "I've seen a few record-keepers, they're mostly all stuffy old wizards and scholars. Don't tell me you're the odd one out in your guild?"

"Not those kind of records, E-man!" Explained Chad. "It's all songs and stuff. Or rather, *was...*" he trailed off for a moment as the memory choked him up. The two half-elves looked on expectantly. "You see... We had one of the best song collections of all time. Music for the *ages*, man! A song for every occasion, every mood, you name it and we'd know the chords." He spread his arms wide. "Until the infamous garage-sale..."

"Garage sale?" Celarel asked, scratching at her head.

"Yeah. The cursed day that marked the gnarliest low of the *Clearing Out*. You see...our guild leader got himself a *woman*, and... and..." Chad wiped his eyes, overcome with the feelings of great loss. "She made him give up the record collection!"

Face in his hands, Chad's shoulders heaved with the emotion. His horse, sensing it's master's sadness, paused on the road for a moment and looked back to check upon him. The twins pulled up to wait.

"Er, dude...that's *so* not right of her." Elas started, but found there was nowhere else to go.

"I knew a *Brother* would understand!" sobbed Chad through his hands.

* * *

“...and so that’s why I have to get to Bedfortress, you know?” Chad explained. “The only known existing copy of the Thin White Viscount’s *Station To Nowhere* is on back order, but *Motherfish*...Led Zebrafish’s platinum hyper-vinyl is the most...*insane* medium for reproduction. It’s like you’re right there in the room with them, but it needs to be treated with extreme care. Leaving it to any old messenger—even one from the guild—is a recipe for disaster. If it’s looked at, touched, or even played the wrong way only once, it’s perfect beauty is lost to the world forever.”

“This record collector...” asked Elas “How did *he* come to find such a special item?”

“Wish I *knew*, man.” Chad shrugged. “It’s not even a cert he’s got it, or if he has, that it’s survived. All I know is, he’s afraid to keep it. That means at least he has some idea of what he has. That in itself gives me hope.”

* * *

The three stopped for lunch in a small grassy area by the side of the road. Further up, they could see that the path led into an orchard. Chad hunted around for a moment for a fallen apple. Finding a suitable specimen, he gifted it to his horse. The twins watched as he unpacked his knapsack and perched on the red box he called an “Amplifier” to eat.

After they had eaten, Chad reached for his lute again. The twins instinctively went to put their hands to their ears, but Chad stopped them.

“Nono, it’s OK, dudes. She only wails when she’s plugged in and turned up to eleven, see?” He indicated the socket on the front of the lute where the cord had previously been. “This is a little sweeter for sensitive company. Check it out.”

Elas and Celarel sat and listened as Chad picked out chords for a few of the songs he could remember. He sang songs that were beautiful and uplifting, songs that caused them to question the nature of the universe, and one song that was a lament for things lost.

As Chad finished this last song, they noticed a little old man standing in the road. His hair was quite white, and he lent on a stout ebony stick as he listened to the music. He smiled at them.

"...Long time they wandered, long time they roamed. Cydonians looking for things from their home."

"I seek that which was lost, mush." Said Chad, swinging his lute back over his back. "Who would you be then?"

"Something that's lost can surely be found. Beware of the catfish that wobbles around."

Celarel looked at the man, rather confused. "Perhaps this one is..."

"The names I have had are more than just many. The one you have chosen is complimentary."

"The Builder?" she ventured.

The man nodded, gently. "Builder you call me, builder I be."

"No way!" said Chad, awe-struck. "The Builder is older than time itself..." He approached the old man, who was now standing upright without the aid of his cane. "*Old Dude*. You have to tell me. Where is the *Motherfish* album?"

"It lies in two places, that much is true. The first of these places lies inside of you."

The horses distracted Elas for a brief moment, and he looked away from Chad and The Builder. When he looked back, he noticed that at some point, The Builder's hair had become brown. He looked taller and younger than he had just a moment ago.

"And what of the second place?" asked Chad.

"Seek you a shop on Old Patterkin Street. The door bears a number that's holy to me."

Celarel felt a gentle tickle in her nose that rapidly evolved into a sneeze. The force of the sneeze compelled her to close her eyes. When she opened them again, Chad was standing with a young man, well into the prime of his life. Curly brown hair flowed over his shoulders, and muscles seemed to hide just beneath a close-fitting shirt. She frowned. Was this still The Builder? Chad was still discussing things with him as if he was.

“A number that’s holy to you?” Chad asked, closing his eyes to think for a second. “What number is that, old ma—”

A small boy stood before him, and Chad stepped back in shock. The boy smiled at him, and spoke as The Builder did. “Search out a number you know to be true. That number will somehow be precious to you.”

“W-well. Okay then, smaller dude.” Chad found himself *totally* freaked out by the rapid transformation of the person that had stood before him. The small boy smiled again, bowed gently to each of them in turn, and then skipped off down the road, as if life had never happened to him.

The three decided as one that they’d better pack up and get the hell out of there.

* * *

The group hurried along the road to Bedfortress. Suddenly, there was a violent explosion. The ground heaved, windows shattered, and gusts of smug erupted into the air.

“Look, there it is! Just where I thought it would be!” The words rang out great and terrible across the hills and trees like thunder as the buildings in the distance fell.

Surveying the general destruction, the group thought as one. *Well, that wasn’t part of the plan. What the hell happens now?* In the distance, the great town of Bedfortress was a burning ruin. Elas broke the difficult silence.

“Well, then...It seems that a wizard or possibly necromancer of unimaginable power has used some kind of terrible magic here. We’ll have to help out.” Celarel stifled a little giggle before coming to her senses. *He’s so adorable, even during a disaster!*

So, the team set to work. As they moved through the once-proud streets of a wonderful town that had taken many ages to construct, they tended to those that were wounded, and helped those who had become trapped in fallen buildings.

Presently, they reached what was left of Patterkin Street. About halfway up, a ruin that used to be the old record shop was

being slowly picked over by a few young men to find surviving instruments and sheet music. Chad felt a lump forming in his throat as he approached the senseless carnage.

“Dudes!” He choked. “What news of the gaffer?”

One of the younger lads looked up. “The shop-keep? He’s over on that wall, there.” The three followed the direction of the boy’s finger and found themselves looking at an old man. Wrinkled and covered in tattoos, the old man had long, curly hair that was mostly black but with a significant number of grey strands running through it. His rose-tinted spectacles were cracked and taped together at the bridge of the nose, and he was picking gently on an electromechanical lute that was very much the worse for wear. Chad walked over to meet the man.

As Chad approached, the shopkeeper looked up. “Dude. In our hour of need, welcome.” He placed his hand upon his face.

“Brother!” Chad copied the gesture. “I only wish that our meeting was under better times, you feel?”

“I feel.” The old man nodded, and then picked at his guitar again. It was a similar tune to the last one Chad had played, full of sorrow and loss.

“You should meet these two.” Chad indicated towards the twins, who had followed him over. “Another Brother for you to meet.”

“Well met, Brother.” Said the shopkeeper, and placed his hand to his face again.

“Brother.” Nodded Elas, who then touched his face as the others had done. Given that things were too far gone now, there was no point explaining himself or trying to get out of it. He only hoped to all the gods that nobody would ask for a membership card.

“And this little lady here, is Celarel.”

“Hello!” She smiled. “I’m sorry about your shop and...well, everywhere else, pretty much.”

The old shopkeeper smiled at her. “Hey little one, you truly are a pretty light on a dark day.”

Turning to Chad, the shopkeeper addressed the matter in hand.

"It wasn't here at the time, man. You don't need to worry about that part...but there is something perhaps worse."

"The Motherfish? Where was it, dude?"

"Stolen, brother. Some creepy little dudes came in and swiped it yesterday evening."

"Wha?"

"They moved in and just swiped it. They swiped loads of records. They knew just what they were doing, too. They wore goggles and gloves so they didn't do the hyper-vinyl ones any harm...and they had a protective case for them too. They looked *the business*, man."

"So, who were these dudes? Any ideas?"

"Well, they were just...kinda *tiny dudes*, you know? They wore little red robes and hats..."

"Creepy little dudes...On your life it's some kind of cult."

Elas had a thought. "There's a dragon-fellowship that hides in the forests outside of Hebrin, some hundred day's ride from here...They're seldom seen, but spoken of as little men in red robes."

"That's right." Celarel confirmed. "Papa used to tell us bed-time stories about them when we were small. Scared the life out of me! But that's a long way to come...things would need to be pretty important to get them this far south."

The Shopkeeper smiled at them both. "Maybe you're right, friends. But what would they want with my record collection?"

"Whatever it is, it's got to be pretty bad." Chad nodded. "I'm going to need a bigger amp."

* * *

It was late in the afternoon when they came to the street where Aunt Sakaala lived. Surprisingly, most of the houses here didn't look so bad. As they got further down the street, they noticed her. Out in the garden in front of her house, was Aunt Sakaala,

with her two children playing on a mat outside. She looked up and waved as the three approached. "Hoo, kids! What a time you pick to make a visit!" She smiled at them. Elas and Celarel both got their rib-crushing hugs, and then Chad was introduced.

Chad took a moment to appreciate Sakaala. She was an older elf, born to elven parents, and so still very well in her prime. Her appearance was much like Celarel's: her eyes were blue and her hair was a dirtier blonde, but her curves were much more pronounced, and she stood easily half a head higher even without her shoes.

"So, you seem to have come through this pretty well, auntie!" Celarel stated. "How lucky."

"Not quite, Cel." Sakaala wandered over to the house, and beckoned them follow her round the back. "Here. Look at *this*! As you can see, although everything *seems* fine from the street, there's a little bit of a problem going on here."

The back of Sakaala's house gave the game away well and truly: the walls here had shifted and there was quite the gap between them. Elas could easily have jammed a fist into the gap and not touched the sides at some points. Various parts had been propped up by planks and poles, ensuring that the damage couldn't progress any further, but it was obvious that the house was going to need some pretty serious work.

"Oh, wow." Said Celarel. "What do you even do with a house when it gets like that?"

"Well, there's a guy coming to start sorting that out for me next week, that's where your uncle has wandered off to. But it's not going to be safe to live in for some time." Sakaala pointed to a tent at the back of the garden. "We've got that for the night now, and then it's off to stay with a few friends just this side of The Longwood for a few weeks while we figure out what to do. For now, at least, that means you'll have to make arrangements for Celarel to stay with you in Feshta."

Elas nodded. He knew that such things wouldn't be impossible, under the circumstances.

"In the meantime, you're welcome to sneak in and raid the pantry." Sakaala said, matter-of-factly. "If it's not eaten, it's going to spoil, so you might as well have whatever you need."

The three parted company with Sakaala later that evening. The trip to Outer Feshta would take them more or less a full day as a group, so being on the outskirts of Bedfortress before nightfall would be to their advantage. Elas had originally fancied that he might ride much longer and faster alone with a well-rested horse, but that wouldn't be an option now.

* * *

The three found a little forested area just outside of the town as dusk fell. Chad had found himself deep in thought for most of the ride. *Creepy little dudes*. As the twins started making camp and putting up their tents, he came to a conclusion.

"Dudes. This is going to be bigger than something I can handle on my own. I think I'll have to summon...a Wizard."

Celarel looked up from the campfire she was lighting. "You can do that?"

"Well, it's an old alliance, dudes. I can't *demand* they come...but I can ask."

"How?"

"Well, first I need to get somewhere high, like a big hill or a mountain..." Chad waved with his arms, unintentionally swatting many of the bugs that were trying to bite at him. "Once I'm up there, I can be heard for miles around."

"And then you play the summon-the-wizard riff?" Chuckled Elas, looking up from the tent he was erecting.

"Kind-of, dude. Although it's more of a 'If you aren't busy' solo." Chad looked deeper into the forest behind Elas. "The ground goes up that way. Don't wait up, dudes. This might take some time."

Chad wandered off, carrying the electromechanical lute and his amplifier.

"Why didn't he just take his horse?" Mused Celarel.

“Probably scare it too much.” Said Elas, sympathetically patting Chad’s horse. “At least we can say he’s kind to his animals, even if he deafens *every friend he ever met*.” He smiled gently at her, betraying the mock-seriousness in his voice.

Celarel giggled. “That’s true. Still, I’m glad he deafened us.”
“Hmm.”

“We’ll need some more firewood soon, El.” Celarel had exhausted their first scavenge for dry branches already.

“Okay.” He pointed. “You go that way, and I’ll go this.”

The two of them spent time wandering in the nearby forest, gathering up branches. Far in the distance, Chad had turned up his amplifier and stunned all the local wildlife into submission. Elas was first back to the campfire with an armful of heavier branches he’d found.

Celarel had left a nice, neat little sum in the dusty ground by the campfire. Elas stared at it for a moment.

$67 + 76 = ??$
Life is too short, El!

Picking up a stick that was nearby, Elas gently scratched into the earth, completing the sum.

$67 + 76 = 143$

“Huh. I wonder why she did that. All sixes and sevens...”

When Celarel returned, carrying a bundle of sticks in her arms, Elas was sat by the fire, feeding the flames. The kettle was gently steaming. He turned to face her, just as she was putting the firewood down.

“Old Father Ti—” Celarel interrupted Elas by placing her finger on his lips. “Not yet, El. Tell me about the sum.”

“Well, it’s simple enough on the *surface* of it, but knowing you...”

“Yes?” She sat down next to her brother, watching him carefully.

"There's some kind of deeper meaning to it. There, on the left. It's two numbers made of the same things...sixes and sevens, right? But they're two totally different things."

"Just like us?"

"Yeah, made in the same place at the same time, cut from the same cloth...and yet different in important ways. So, this part is us...and together we equal...I'm not sure what. Something bigger than either one of us alone?"

"Not quite. It's a message of sorts, you see..."

"Well, there's only really one thing I can think of that's left. The lighthouse keepers."

"Lighthouse keepers, El?"

"Yes. They send patterns of flashing lights out to send messages. So, one-four-three ends up being shorthand for 'I love you'. See? There's 'I', which has one letter, 'love' has four, th..."

Celarel tilted her head and blinked at Elas, who was suddenly gupping at her like a fish out of water. O-F-T. After what felt like a lifetime, his brain reconnected itself.

"You *love* me?"

Celarel smiled, nervously. "Y-yes. I love you."

"Well, I know *that*." Said Elas, somewhat perturbed, and oblivious to context. "After all, you're my si—" Celarel placed her finger on Elas' lips, silencing him mid-thought.

"No, El. I don't think you do."

Celarel knew that failing to act now would mean being heart-broken forever. *Life is too short for you to catch up, El*. She leaned forward, and their lips met. Celarel was a very gentle kisser, and her lips teased Elas' own for the briefest of moments before she stopped.

Elas, somewhat stunned, could only look deeply into Celarel's eyes. There, he found something that had always been there, waiting for him. Until today, it seemed, he'd been fool enough not to notice. Acting mostly on instinct, he brought his hand up to caress her cheek, and returned her kiss. This time, however, it was the kiss of a couple who knew that nothing in the world would ever tear them apart. Their tongues met, darting

over each other, teasing and chasing as years of emotion bubbled to the surface. When Elas finally came back up for air. Celarel's head was spinning.

Elas kissed down Celarel's face to her neck. Her scent was warm and enticing, calling him ever further with his lips. Celarel allowed herself to melt into him completely, resting her head against his shoulder. His stubble tickled against her skin, a perfect contrast to his soft, loving kiss. Elas allowed his left hand to wander. Gently, it found its way down Celarel's back, before a gentle squeeze as he found the destination. In response, Celarel quietly moaned into his ear. Her hands found themselves drawn to his shirt, gently tracing the lines formed by his muscles. The buttons fumbled unseen in her fingers for a few moments before she managed to find the warm, muscular skin underneath.

Elas traced Celarel's collarbone with more kisses, gently moving her top aside as he did. Her skin felt even softer here, and tasted even sweeter. Elas allowed himself to drift lower, until he was headed unmistakably into her cleavage. Sensing his intentions, Celarel gently reached up and unbuttoned her top so that he could get as far down as he wanted, and then ran her hands through his hair. Elas allowed a hand to slip inside her top. Gently cupping a warm breast in his hand, he took the nipple into his mouth and sucked on it, before circling it with his tongue. Celarel gasped in delight as he did.

Celarel's hands found their way to Elas' trousers, where she could feel his manhood pushing against the material, eager to be released. She found his belt buckle and carefully worked it free. Gently taking him into her hand, she was amazed to discover how soft and velvety, yet firm it felt, and how it twitched in response to her movements. She could feel the heat growing between her own legs. Elas' hands were wandering up into her skirt, too, and she knew that soon he would want to have all of her...and she could never refuse him now.

"Whoa, dudes! Get a room, yeah?"

“Hey, man,” said Chad, “It’s cool. It’s all cool. I don’t judge. Especially not a Brother when he’s more than welcome where he’s going.” Chad waggled his eyebrows, suggestively. “There are lots of people who might, though.” He looked around, somewhat nervously. “I can feel their *totally* gnarly eyes on us, even here.” Elas looked at the floor and shifted uneasily in his seat, his face bright red.

“It’s OK. He’ll just need a little time,” said Celarel, gently squeezing his hand. “I’ve had a lifetime to understand my own heart and what it means for me. I’ve played this day over and over in my head, never daring to dream it would ever come.”

Enter The Withard

The next morning, Elas packed up his tent in silence. He’d spent the night on his own, much to Celarel’s chagrin. Although the temperature overnight had been bearable for her, sleeping alone tore at her heart in a way she hadn’t been ready for. She emerged from her tent to start breakfast, and found Elas already sat there, staring into the campfire. His hands were idly playing with a wide, flat blade of grass.

“M-morning” She ventured, her eyes still somewhat red and watery.

“Hey.” He looked up at her and smiled. *Well, at least he doesn’t hate me*, she thought to herself. Elas’ smile was infectious, and Celarel found herself smiling back. She sat across the fire from him and they waited for each other.

“Look I’ve been thinking—”

“You first, Celi.”

She held up her hands. “Nono, you first, El.”

“Well, I don’t really have much to say...but I’ve been thinking about it. *Us*, I mean.”

She looked up at him, expectantly.

"When I started to think about how my life would go, this isn't what I thought it would be..." he continued. "So last night I started to think...well, what did I expect? What should it be?"

"And what do you want life to be, El?"

"Well, it comes down to this: I can't think of any way my life might go that doesn't have you in it."

"I feel the same way. Maybe, though, I got too silly. Maybe we should forget it. Maybe we're just bett—"

"Or maybe not." He brought up the blade of grass he'd been gently turning over in his hands. While they had been talking, he'd twisted and folded the leaf over on itself until it formed a perfectly round ring. He looked through it at her, the most perfect person he'd ever known.

"Elas! Is that?"

"Given the way this world is, I doubt it could ever be a real one... but I'd like for you to wear it anyway. If you'll have me."

* * *

Chad woke up conveniently late. By the time he poked his head out of the tent to see if the coast was clear, Celarel was sat next to Elas, and breakfast was well under way.

"Morning, dudes."

"Morning, Chad." Celarel smiled.

"Things are okayish...*right*?" He wiggled a flat hand in their general direction.

"Right." Elas nodded at him.

"Thank the big man for that one. I was *busting* in there. Be right back."

Chad waddled off to the bushes and disappeared. Moments later, there was an almighty "Aaaauuhhhhn..." as Chad managed to relieve his own pressure.

Breakfast was cooked quickly and eaten slightly burned. *When two people are distracted mainly by each other, the time for drop-*

scones and bacon has long passed, thought Chad. I'll have to take over the cooking before they poison us at this rate.

The ride towards Feshta was easy going and delighted the horses. Chad's horse had made friends with the other two, and so the Universe was put to rights as they went:

...not that your two would ever notice today, right?

Right...just look at them making eyes at each other.

I think it's sweet. Such devotion!

Pah. It's a wonder they don't fall off, I've seen two-legs do that before...

* * *

Lunch was taken on the edge of a field alongside the road. The wheat was nearly ready for the harvest, and the horses took great delight in watching the proceedings. Chad tried—and largely failed—to make something edible that didn't require him to run the risk of burning the whole field down while the happy couple made doe-eyes at each other some more.

They'd not been back on the road for long before a curious figure stepped out from a nearby thicket.

"Behold! A Withard Appeareth!" Lisped the Wizard, because he had. Standing before the group was a rather unassuming man with a patchy neck-beard. He was wearing a pointy hat, and a cape which was marked *Property of Bio-Med Sciences Ltd.* "Finally! I wath thtarting to think you'd never get here."

"You knew we were coming?" Asked a rather confused and slightly impressed Celarel. "I didn't think wizards had that much power..."

"Weeell..." Started the Wizard, looking rather sheepish, before striking a dramatic pose and flourishing his cape. "That and more. I guethth in thith case you could thay it wath male intuition." the Wizard laughed behind his hand, but everyone tried to ignore it. Still, no matter, the subject changed quickly, as the adventurers were interested in knowing the Wizard's real name.

“Nameth have much power!”, explained the Wizard, flourishing his cape again, as if luring an imaginary bull. “If you know thomething’th true name, then you can command it. That’s why catt have *three* nameth.” Elas rolled his eyes. “Therefore, you shall know me ath...” he thought for a moment. “The Withard!”

“Really?!” Exclaimed Elas, holding his face in his hands. “You don’t want to be Kaltar the Magnificent or the All-Powerful Nevaeth?”

“...Nnnooo”, said The Wizard, as if he’d been somehow caught out. “You *know* thothe nameth and I don’t *like* to have nameth today.” Celarel giggled. She felt the fabric of the universe tear slightly as she took Elas’ hand and smiled at the new arrival.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Mr. Wizard,” she smiled. “I’m Celarel. This here is my *dearest* Elas, and the gentle knight with the electromechanical lute there is Chad.”

Chad raised a hand in greeting, and then pointed at the half-elven twins. “Sup dude. They’re siblings, by the way.”

“What? Ew, that’th meththed up.”

“I know, right? Cruel fate or some dealie. Let’s just rock on, quest on, yeah?” The Wizard looked somewhat surprised.

“You chothe the quetht already? I mean...fate herthelf has theen fit to thrutht adventurerth thuch as uth into a whirling maelthtrom of an adventure? *And while I wath thtill looking for my hat and cape?* To what endth?”

“Yeah, while you were rocking around the general Bed-fortress area looking for your hat, no doubt.” Explained Chad, with a smirk. “We’re on the quest to find a mint copy of Led Zebrafish’s final, greatest album: *Motherfish*. In platinum hyper-vinyl, the way it was *meant* to be heard, yeah?”

“Oh, brother. What the fresh hell is thith?”

A Night at the Inn

The four of them continued along the road, reaching Outer Feshta by nightfall. The Wizard made obvious attempts to look

cooler than he was, and everyone tried really hard to ignore it.

Finally, they found their way to an inn that had some spare rooms. Celarel talked to the innkeeper while the others found a table in the corner. Presently, a buxom woman came out from behind the bar, a tray heaving with food and drinks in her arms. They drank far too much of the local ale, and The Wizard insisted on playing card games he was rubbish at. Even when he was sober.

"Jutht want to give other people a chance to win, guyth!"

"Dude. Pull the other one, it's got bells on it."

"Nono, thith is part of the whole Grand Dethign!"

"What's the Grand Design, Wizard?" asked Celarel.

"Oh, *gods*." said Chad, throwing up his hands. "Now you've started him."

Over the next twenty minutes, the Wizard lisped his way through his political manifesto. A perfect utopian vision that was simple, obvious, and totally wrong. By the end of it, Celarel was having trouble keeping her head off the table.

"And *that'th* how it'th going to be, friendth! A perfect world, thining brightly with the light, love and underthtanding thatth needed. Peath, love, and the unity of men and womenth everywhere!" The Wizard waved his arms wide and slopped what was left of his beer all over the floor behind the table.

Unfortunately for him, it caught the eye of the innkeeper, who decided he'd had enough. The Wizard was quickly offered two options: He could either pay for his bedchamber now and retire to it for the evening, or leave at waist height via the nearest open door, accompanied by raucous laughter from the other patrons.

Since The Wizard apparently had no need of money in his new utopia, he chose the second option.

* * *

The three remaining adventurers made their way upstairs to the rooms they'd booked. Chad looked slightly sheepish.

"Sorry about the Wiz, dudes. Others in the guild have worked with him before. He's mega useful to have in a bad spot, but he very often seems to *be* the bad spot if there isn't one nearby."

Celarel smiled, slightly the worse for the ale and having to sit through a party political broadcast. "It's okay. I think he's okay...*Is he okay?*" She put her arm around Elas, who looked at her and smiled, reassuringly. "I'm sure he can survive, Celi. He's a Wizard, after all."

"Oh yeah," said Chad. "Dude *looks* fragile but once he's in trouble he's actually pretty lucky. He never gets into enough trouble to actually *be* in serious danger, just a lot of really awkward places." They continued down the hallway, and Chad found his room first. "Well, time to hit the hay. Sleep tight, dudes."

The twins soon found the room that Celarel had booked for them. Since it was on the end of the hallway, it had the advantage of being a slightly larger space. Elas put the key in the door and opened it. Walking inside, he was surprised to notice Celarel wasn't following him.

"What is it, Celi?"

"Some husband you are!" She huffed, folding her arms in mock anger. "Aren't you going to carry me over the threshold?"

Laughing, Elas picked up his Celarel, who was surprisingly light in his arms. "This better, Lump?"

She kissed his cheek. "Yes."

"Come on then, let's go to bed."

"What a good idea, El." She giggled. "Now, where were we yesterday?"

As Elas passed through the doorway, he pushed the door shut with his foot, leaving the rest of the evening's proceedings shrouded in mystery.

* * *

Outside, The Wizard sat around a rather strange campfire that had no fuel to burn.

“That’s it.”, said The Wizard, suddenly without his lisp. “I’ve had enough, and I need a leak, *bad*.”

II

Hope

A Natural Break

Back in the basement of Kevin's house, Steve looked up from the gaming table, and shook his head.

"I can't run a game like this when you're being this autistic, Kevin. *A lithping Withard!?*" Kevin took off his robe and wizard hat and walked purposely up the stairs to the doorway, before throwing the hat back in the general direction of his chair.

"Me?!" Kevin retorted as he passed through the doorway, without breaking his stride. The hat tumbled and flopped comically through the air and onto the floor nearby. *So much for all that peace, love and unity of man stuff he was talking about earlier, thought Will.* Will glanced over at David, who was still holding his inflatable guitar.

"H-he's coming back, right?" A shrug along with David's expression told Will not to expect too much. Steve held his hands up, apologetically. This had been a risk that really hadn't paid off. Bringing a *girl* into the group was provocation enough, but when Kevin didn't like the way a story line was going, he *really* wasn't shy about it.

"Well..." Steve thought aloud, "It wouldn't be the end of the world. I've handled worse before, and they do say *withards are thubtle and quick to anger...*" he tried a smile that met a largely unresponsive audience. "Erm...I guess they do tend to go off and run errands every now and again, let me think for a second..." He trailed off and leaned back, the chair squeaking in protest as he fixed his gaze on the ceiling. A few moments passed in silence. Laura fidgeted awkwardly with a loaded d20 she had under the table and smiled in Will's general direction. She'd always liked

Will, despite the teasing of some of her friends. Although it had been awkward for her to say how she felt, even inside a fantasy world like this...Steve had come up with a cunning plan just as he promised, and although her face still burned with the embarrassment of it all, her heart soared. *Steve is nice to care about his friends so much*, she thought, *but wow. Does Kevin have to take everything so literally?*

Will broke the silence. "I think I might go outside for a little fresh air," he announced, looking up at the basement's window. "The sun's still setting, I think." Laura brushed her blonde hair behind her ear, and took the hint exactly as he'd hoped. "Hmm, it is a bit warm in here...I might join you for a bit?", she offered, in a way that rather suggested she was trying just a little too hard to sound nonchalant. As they left the room, David smiled at Steve, who was still staring upwards.

"At least that part of the plan worked...I guess?"

"Hmm."

"I should take a short break too. Kevin shouldn't be too much longer in that bathroom."

"Hmm." Steve had counted all the speckles on the ceiling tile directly above him, and was now trying to beat the time he'd just set by counting the one next to it. He hardly noticed that David had left the room, and had just started in on the third tile when someone interrupted his count.

"I thought it got kinda quiet in here, and after you all seemed to be getting so excited, too."

Recognising the voice, Steve stopped counting. "Oh. Hi Mrs. Logan. Well, things didn't quite go..." his voice trailed off as he met Mrs. Logan's gaze. She had changed into an outfit that caused his heart to skip erratically in his chest. Gone was the normal jeans-and-tee-shirt combination. Instead, Mrs. Logan was standing before him wearing a chunky peach shoulder-less sweater, paired with a way-above-the-knee black skirt. Smooth, shapely legs in sheer stockings reached all the way to the ground, and nestled their feet gently in a pair of black kitten heels. She

crossed the distance from the door to the table in a way that made Steve think of a tiger stalking its prey.

Laying her hands on the back of the chair next to him, she teased it over so she could sit next to Steve, her leg gently brushing against him as she spoke.

"Well, now. That's just too bad. I think Will owes you a favour, though." She smiled and leaned forward, the sweater she was wearing creating a gap that wasn't there a moment ago. Steve's eyes were drawn inexorably to the view that now presented itself, the air suddenly fragrant with jasmine and white musk. "Are you guys hungry? I could do something nice...just for you." Steve's brain short-circuited as he contemplated the unknown before him.

"Huh?" He forced his eyes back up to meet hers. His heart was suddenly pounding, and it felt as if the sweat was pumping out of him. Shit! All those stolen glances, all those reasons to call in for Kevin when Steve knew damn well he wouldn't be there...*she knew!*

"I was thinking pizza," Mrs. Logan offered, not waiting for Steve's brain to reconnect itself. "Or maybe a meaty hotdog...I've got some buns..." The hotdog in Steve's underwear twitched involuntarily as she spoke. *Yeah*, thought Steve, *I noticed*. Mrs. Logan smiled gently, and then placed her hand on her chest in mock surprise. The fabric pushed against her chest in a way that left Steve in no doubt about what wasn't being worn underneath.

"Oh, so you've *seen* them then? My, my...I can't keep *any* secrets when you're such an *observant* young man."

Steve flushed bright red. Holy shit! He'd only gone and actually said it out loud! Right in front of her and all! Mrs. Logan moved slightly closer, her hand placed gently on Steve's thigh.

"I have another secret for you, too—"

"Well, genius?" a voice cut through the air like nails on a blackboard.

"Got a way out of it this time?" Mrs. Logan wheeled around like a leopard caught licking the floor in the dairy aisle. "Kevin,

sweetly!" She purred. "We were just...discussing *food*, yes. A-are you hungry?"

Kevin made a non-committal grunt that probably meant *feed me, but I don't really care what*. Mrs. Logan pushed the chair back slightly with a sigh, and stood up to go.

"Oh, honey. You dropped your little wizard hat!" Mrs. Logan made a big show of bending forward at the waist, giving Steve a perfect rear view as her skirt revealed more and more of her legs...Somehow—not that Steve would ever know how—the hat made its way back to the table, and then Mrs. Logan was gone. Kevin shrugged and flopped back into his seat.

"Sorry about my mom, dude. I know she gets kinda...uncool sometimes." Kevin offered. "Dad's the fun one. You'll have to hang out with us soon." Steve knew that was as close as he was going to get to an apology in a while, and he was glad for the distraction.

"Is it this evening you go over to stay with him for the weekend?" He asked, as nonchalantly as he could manage.

"Yeah, but it's not for a few hours yet. We've got something big planned for tomorrow..." Kevin explained, waving his hands to indicate just how big the bigness was. "We're going to try out that kart-racing place. Got the idea when you mentioned you'd been along the other week." Steve nodded and chose his words carefully. Getting an invite to go go-kart racing with Kevin could be a life-threatening experience.

"Saturday's supposed to be a good day for it. Always lots of competition, but not as crowded as Sunday gets."

"Thought so." Kevin paused for a moment, as if trying to remember something. "Ah, that was it! The rear axle is fixed, right? So, when you're turning in..."

The Axeman at the Door of Twilight

In the EEEEEEEEEEEEEevening...When the day is done...

The sounds of Led Zeppelin drifted out to the patio. Will sat himself down on the steps leading up to the back door and took a long pull from his beer bottle. The setting sun had splashed the sky with a vibrant palette of oranges, purples and reds. Birds, now done with the bustling activities of the daytime, settled down in a nearby birch tree. Their gentle chattering making an accompaniment to Plant, Page, Bonham and Jones.

Laura emerged from the kitchen, Coca-Cola in hand. After a moment's hesitation, she sat down on the step next to Will, the warmth of the step and his body both a comfort to her in the cooler night air. She waited in silence for a while. She knew Will well enough that you didn't interrupt the thought process, and this one mattered to her like nothing else she'd ever wanted in her whole life. She drank her Coke and waited him out.

"How long?" The question surprised Laura when it finally came, causing her to jump slightly.

"How...long?" She repeated.

"How long have you felt like this?"

Laura paused to collect her thoughts. Truth was, she wasn't sure. Will seemed to sense this.

"...Roughly."

"Well, remember when we went to the Summer Fair last year?"

"Mmmhmmm. You wore that blue dress. I've never seen you look like that before."

"Like what?" She asked, curious, but trying not to sound as if she was. *He remembered it!*

"Well, *pretty*. Erm...I mean, you were always *nice*, but that was..."

"Something special?"

"Hmm." Will nodded, and then took another drink. "I—I mean...I kinda knew then, too."

Laura smiled, letting the words hang in the air, undisturbed and perfect. They watched the setting sun and finished their drinks, just enjoying the feeling of togetherness. At some point, Laura became aware that her free hand, warm from the step it

was resting on, had an equally warm, loving companion. Will had found enough courage to gently squeeze Laura's hand.

"They're probably waiting for us now."

Laura giggled. "They probably think we're busy kissing."

"Wait—why aren't we?"

Rematch

With everyone seated around the table again, Steve re-set the scene.

"Two months later, and following news of the tragic passing of Elas and Celarel's parents on the very day that they left home, Elas finds himself the head of the household. With Elas' time at the University in Feshta deferred until he finds peace, our adventurers return to the tiny village of Min, where Elas and Celarel grew up. Fortunately, for them, they now have a brave Knight and a cunning Wizard in tow, *who has just recently been cured of a terrible lisp, Kevin....*"

"Okay, okay. Fine."

"The best lead that Elas and Celarel have right now is that a small band of short dudes in little red robes, had been seen poking around the village at the same time. For what purpose, the villagers were unsure...but their encampment on the far side of Faslen Mountain had recently been discovered."

"One evening, rumours of a mighty dragon reached the villagers. It was said that this winged beast had taken up residence inside Faslen Mountain, and was blamed for the recent razing of Bedfortress..."

"Not only do our heroes have to discover how the parents of Elas and Celarel died so suddenly and so tragically, but they must also defeat the dragon that razed Bedfortress and has come to rest in the caverns on the southern side of Faslen Mountain."

"*And find the Led Zebrafish album, man.*"

"Yeah, all right."

It was well into autumn when the four found themselves on the road again. The twins were mostly quiet and didn't look back. There was little left to look back for. The Wizard, meanwhile, scratched his head and took one last look at Min.

"It's a nice little village. I would've given a lot to grow up somewhere like this. I think I'll miss it."

"I expect it'll still be there when we're done, dude", Chad said.

"I hope we will be too."

"You're not worried, are you? I'd expect a bad-ass wizard dude to be pretty fearless."

"Dragons are another thing entirely. They're so old, they know pretty much all there is to know. The things that they don't know, they can either guess or drag out of you by cunning. You also don't get to live that long without gaining some serious magic of your own."

"So, it's not just a fire-breathing mother, it's also a spell-casting mother too?"

"Not in the traditional sense you'd understand it. All living things accumulate magic over time. Dragons have been alive for so long, they naturally end up having vast reserves of it."

"How is that different?"

"Well, for someone like me, I can use what magic I have accumulated to direct the flow of magic in other things. Dragons just *think* and the world bends around them." A thought occurred to Celarel, and she broke her silence.

"What about poison?"

"Poison?"

"Yes. I know a little herb-lore. Could you poison a dragon?"

The Wizard gently stroked his beard. "I suppose it's possible, but you'd need a lot of poison...or something very potent. You'd also have to be very subtle about how you did it. Any Dragon that realised it was being poisoned could simply reverse the effects by

burning through its own reserves of magic and wait things out. Those two requirements don't sit so well together."

"I see."

"You have to realise one thing before all others...Dragons only really die one way: they get arrogant and forget that all power—even theirs—will have its limits. Since they don't train to master their magic, they're undisciplined and inefficient with it. If you could stroke a dragon's ego enough, it would probably be fatal."

* * *

The group rode hard, passing through Setsa and stopping in the Kalten Market for their first evening. Celarel had hoped that they might stay in the same inn as last time, but a determined search in the early twilight bore no fruit; the inn was nowhere to be found, and nobody else had space. They made do with bed-rolls and a dry barn on the outskirts of the Market.

The next morning, Celarel was the first to awaken. Even the birds outside were still silent. In the dim light of their makeshift bedroom, she could just make out the features of the face lying next to her. For the first time in a while, Elas' face was relaxed. The lines had gone from his forehead, and the weight of the world was—for a few moments more, at least—no longer upon him. Although she desperately wanted to spend some time with him, Celarel knew instinctively that it was better to let a sleeping Elas lie. The road ahead would be much harder, and there would be many dangers to face.

As dawn broke, Celarel was treated to the chattering of various birds. This was followed shortly by a rustling noise. Chad had turned over and gone back in for seconds. She breathed a sigh of relief. The Wizard started shifting in his bed moments later. That marked the end of her solitude. Time would not stand still forever, it seemed, no matter how much she might wish it. Sighing, she leaned forward and gently kissed Elas on the forehead before anyone could see it.

“O-F-T”, she whispered.

“*Mhm...*” came the unconscious reply.

III

Clarity

A Wizard Going

The Wizard departed early that morning.

“Well, m’dudes. I’m off to watch television.”

What an ass.

Celarel tilted her head and watched as The Wizard rode off.

“What’s a teller-vision, El?” She smiled.

“Must be a Wizard thing.” Elas shrugged.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, the group was ready to depart. They called into a shop for bread and cheese, and then made their way towards The Longwood.

“Who’s that on the road, dudes?”

Up ahead, there was a woman sat on a horse, seemingly waiting for them. Wearing a wizard’s hat and a black, off-the-shoulder dress with a split that ran up to her thighs, she was draped side-saddle upon her horse, which seemed only too happy to be carrying her hourglass figure. As the three approached her, she smiled, much like a cat who had finally found the warmest spot on the bed.

“I hear tell you’re missing one Wizard. I’m Catherine, The Sorceress. Is this a private party, or can anyone join in?”

The three exchanged glances briefly before Elas spoke for the group. “Why not. Can’t be any worse than the last guy. I’m Elas, and this is my *beloved* Celarel.” Celarel beamed at this gentle confession of love.

“They’re siblings, you know.” Chad interjected.

Elas glared at him. Catherine smiled, gently bowing her head. "Sometimes love is found in places you wouldn't expect. It's nice to meet you both." She turned to Chad. "And who do we have here?" she purred.

"This is Chad," Elas explained. "He's a knight who defeats his enemies and friends alike with the power of music."

Catherine raised an eyebrow and gently placed a hand on her ample chest. "My, my. Well, that's certainly different."

"Well, ma'am," Chad explained, drawing himself up to full height and sucking in his gut. "Our guild were the greatest record-keepers of all time. Albums, singles, you name it, we had it. Even 8-track."

"That's fantastic. I have a modest collection myself, if you'd ever like to swap notes."

And so, the band of three became a band of four again as they travelled into The Longwood.

* * *

This time, the group steered their horses around the other side of Faslen Mountain, taking the longer, far less travelled roads through The Longwood. The going here was slow; there were many roots and branches across the path, and the horses picked their way carefully through.

At the end of the first day, the group found themselves a path that lead to a clearing just off the main road. Elas and Chad made themselves scarce in order to gather firewood, leaving the women alone for a moment.

"So...what do we do when we find these guys?" Asked Catherine. "It's hardly going to be a fair fight when we get to them, from everything you've told me."

"Well, we're not even sure if they really did poison our parents..." said Celarel. "For now, it's just the best lead we have, and since Chad wants to find this Motherfish album..." She shrugged. "What else could we do?"

"I see. It's sometimes better to be doing something rather than nothing." Catherine sighed. She looked around. The guys were still out of earshot. "Just between us girls, the life of a sorceress is quite a solitary one."

"You're not invited to take on quests all the time?"

"Well, there's plenty of *work*, if that's what matters. It pays well enough to get by...but nobody comes to visit in the days between."

"Oh, that's kinda sad. Maybe they're just kinda nervous, sorceresses have a great deal of power."

Catherine sighed. "It would seem that way. There's even this guy I like...and he seems like he likes me."

"So how come it hasn't happened? Does he know you like him?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure he knows I like him. I told him before I'd leave a light on in the spare room when I'm alone, so he knows he can just drop by." Catherine winked in the general direction of nobody in particular. "But yes, I think it's like you say, he's just a bit nervous. But he shouldn't be! I'd treat him very gently...well, the first time."

Celarel giggled as Catherine continued to embarrass the gods of this region.

Suddenly, Celarel felt two hands over her eyes.

"What are you girls talking about?" Asked Elas, playfully.

"Now your backs are turned, you guys, of course!" Celarel giggled, turning to face him.

"Hopefully good stuff, dudes."

"All the best bits!" Catherine smiled.

Chad put his hand on the back of his neck and pretended to look worried.

"Oh, dude. I'm not sure I like the sound of *that*."

"They'll eat us alive while we sleep." Elas laughed, as Celarel showered him in kisses.

"Promises, promises!"

On the third day, they spotted a cave entrance to Faslen Mountain that looked promising. Smoke gently rose from its entrance, and there seemed to be light coming from within.

"We'll camp here for the night," said Elas. "We'll need to watch from a distance and see who comes and goes from this place."

"I guess that means no fire, no warm food, right?" asked Celarel, who was already shivering.

"I'm afraid so. Otherwise we'll give ourselves away."

That evening, the group found themselves munching on cold cheese and bread, and taking it in turns to watch the entrance to the cave. Celarel was just starting her second watch when she heard rustling in the forest ahead of her. Sure enough, after a few moments, she could make out a shape coming towards her.

As the figure moved closer, it started to hum, and then, suddenly, it burst into song.

*"Oh, I once knew a girl in ev'ry port,
They're not the type that you have to court,
da-da-dada-da, da-da- sort.
Something, something to hold...
HUUH!"*

Celarel laughed quietly to herself as the person came into view. It was The Wizard, with an arm full of firewood. She watched for a few moments more as he grappled with the lyrics and passed her by, and then stole back to the group to breathlessly relay the news.

"...and so he's out there in that cave, singing sea-shanties to himself that he doesn't know the words to!"

"But we're miles away from the sea, Celi..." Elas frowned.

"Doesn't seem to have discouraged him." Celarel smiled.

"Okay. We'll go and see him in the morning. If we go up and get him now, there's a chance we'll freak him out, and he'll let off some lightning bolt or something that'll make enough noise that everyone will know we're here."

* * *

In the morning, the group rose early, and found that The Wizard was just as aware of them as they were of him. As they were emerging from their tents, he wandered back into their clearing, as if he had just popped out for pipe-weed and some ale.

"Hey guys. About time you woke up."

"Hello Wizard." Celarel smiled. "How were the teller's visions?"

"Eh, nothing worth watching, so I've been waiting for you to get here."

"Have you seen any of the creepy little dudes, dude?"

"Dragon-fellowship guys? No, not really. I've seen The Dragon itself a few times, though."

"Really?" Elas frowned.

"Yes. It flies out over that way..." The Wizard pointed in the general direction. "It looks like he's going off to find food out near Hebrin somewhere. They raise a lot of sheep down that way, don't they?"

"Well, probably more used to by now, if they're feeding a Dragon."

"Right."

"So, if you know where it's going...do you know where it's coming from?"

"Oh, sure. The Dragon's cave is less than an hour's walk from here. This way..."

* * *

The group soon reached The Dragon's cave. A small sign in neat copper-plate handwriting on the outside read, "Bless this mess" and then underneath, "The Dragon will eat you now." So, with that, into the mouth of the cave they went.

In the heart of the mountain, on a pile of scrap metal that was entirely worthless, slept The Dragon. Elas took a moment to appreciate the creature that had been a source of wonder and fear in equal measure since he was a small boy. Lying in a curled up ball, The Dragon was still easily two floors high, and covered all over with reddish-brown scales that looked like an interlocking wall of diamond-shaped shields.

Dragons and Driftwood

The Dragon's eyes opened slowly. Fixing them with a bleary-eyed stare, it yawned in a way that shook the foundations of the very earth they were stood upon.

"Loathsome expungefactors!" It declared, in a voice that would make even the most talented *basso molto profundo* weep with jealousy. "For what purpose wouldst thou rouse me?"

"Begging your pardon, squire," started Chad, while tugging an invisible forelock, "But the word on the street is that you've got something I was looking for."

"Oh? And what, pray tell, might that be? Some trinket or bauble, no doubt?"

"A record."

The Dragon raised its eyebrows. "*Phonography*? Pray, Sir Knight, continue."

"No, *Records*, not smu...oh, *Phone*-ography! Gotcha. Yes! It's by Led Zebrafish. It's the platinum hyper-vinyl release of Motherfish. I hear those who worship you...*ahem*...came upon it just before you razed Bedfortress."

The Dragon looked at them, balefully. "*Diminutive* sorts? Attired all in crimson? Hm. I crunched *them* when they came a-visiting. As for Bedfortress...verily," it rasped, "word hast

reached mine ears that t'was due to a piffling wizard-autist, who didst, in his misguided desires for such accoutrements, raze the town whilst *searching for his HAT*".

The puff of air and sparks that came along with it as The Dragon increased in volume knocked The Wizard's hat to the ground. He scrambled to pick it up and dust it off before it could get *burninated*.

"Nay, good Dragon," said Celarel. "Truly, such tidings are falsehoods! You know how the printing-press is, I'm su—"

The Dragon turned its menacing eye to Celarel, silencing her instantly with its glare.

"Thou art an *Elfmaiden*?"

"Well, half. And this is my dearest, Elas."

"...They're siblings, you know." The Wizard interjected. Celarel glared at him.

"Verily so? Mmhmm...Miscegenation *and* incest. Such *degenerate* natures." The Dragon smiled, showing off a yellowed row of sheep-shredding spikes. "Perhaps thou art more interesting than I had at first conceived, *Half-Elf*. Still, since thou art *not* a maiden, I would have precious little use for thee."

The Dragon stretched, opening its wings and arching its back. The accompanying yawn went ringing through the cave like a foghorn. It looked upon the group again. "Yet besides. Thy suitor would seem to be quite the jealous fellow. I would not be slain by the likes of *him*." The Dragon paused for a moment, as a thought suddenly occurred to it. "I should surely crunch thee all..." It pondered. "And yet...I found myself well sated yestereven. Mut-ton surprise. I'faith, it certainly *was* surprised! *Gwoooaarrr...*" The Dragon mimed the scaring of the sheep for the group's entertainment, before flashing another razor-sharp smile at them.

"Dost thou have anything to bargain with, perchance to exchange for said record?"

Catherine stepped forward. "I volunteer myself, Dragon!"

"*Uh, really?* ...Thou art not a maiden either. For what purpose wouldst thou surrender thyself?"

“Well, unlike younger girls, I know *exactly* what I’m doing. Besides, I’d be left all alone without you.”

The Dragon flushed bright red from nose to tail. If you’ve ever met a dragon, you’ll know that this is a hard thing for a dragon to do.

* * *

The Dragon spent near on twenty minutes talking about its Quadrophonic record collection to the group, most of whom were not so interested, but didn’t like the idea of being crunched. Chad, on the other hand, was transfixed by the genius of this technological master. *Four channels, dudes!* Finally, though, The Dragon went back into one of the caves, and brought out a rather special looking box.

“These are the things I’d be willing to trade for the Sorceress,” it stated, rather matter-of-factly. “Be careful as you rummage, there are some *very* special things inside.”

The group peeked carefully inside the box. There lay a few vacuum tubes, a few other old components that would only be useful to someone with a working quadraphonic setup, and a rather curious looking lute case. It was inlaid with gold and carved with four rather curious runes. Chad suddenly found himself very excited. *Could it be?* He picked up the case carefully, and laid it on the ground before them. Waving his hands over the case, index and pinky fingers extended, he carefully intoned the sacred words:

*“Hey hey mama, said the way you move,
Gonna make you sweat, gonna make you groove!”*

Inside the case he found an electromechanical lute, the likes of which hadn’t been seen by generations of men or elves before

today. The intricate carvings on the white, glossy body were inlaid with pure gold. On the neck of the device, the fretboard was made from purest mother-of-pearl, and fretted with polished flat rubies. Chad lifted the instrument, holding it as he might a child or a long-forgotten treasure.

"Dude. No way. It can't be."

"Can't be what?" Elas asked.

"Ooo, pretty!" Exclaimed Celarel.

"This might just be..." He picked gently at the strings, making the very sweetest of noises. "I don't believe it...it is the legendary axe itself! The one upon which *The Stairway* was first climbed. The Progenitor of the *Fishmir*."

"Sounds expensive." The Wizard interjected, obviously bored.

"And nerdy." Added Elas.

"It lies beyond all monetary values, man. It is the Alpha and the Rho Mayo."

"Omega." Corrected Elas. "Otherwise it doesn't go."

"That too." Agreed Chad. "Either way...*Dudes!* This is a way greater treasure than Motherfish! I'll have to get this somewhere safe."

Chad placed the Progenitor Lute into its case again, all comfy and snug amongst the soft, cushioned black velvet.

They left the Dragon pretty much as they'd found him. Given that he'd eaten the *little dudes* that were the most likely ones to have killed Elas and Celarel's parents, the trail was well and truly cold. Elas dared to fancy that everything had worked out for the best, considering. As they slipped out, they could hear Catherine and The Dragon talking. The sounds echoed off the walls and found the ears of the two half-elves all the way out to the forest.

"So tell me, O Dragon...Is it fun to burn villages? Watch them all... suffering and helpless?"

"Forsooth. Just because I have parleyed for thee, does not mean that thou should *not* become a morsel. Art thou a shrew?"

"No, dearest, it's only a simple question."

"'Tis the biggest thrill a Dragon may yet have!"

"Now, how much more fun will it be when you have someone to *tell* about it afterwards? *Mmm-hmm?*"

"Well, thou makest a persuasive argument..."

April and Afterthoughts

The group made it back to the cave where they'd found The Wizard. At this point, they were interrupted by a phone call from the great beyond. Mrs Logan got up from the table and went to answer it.

"Hello?

"Oh, hi Jeff! When are you coming to pick up Kevin?

"Right, right. Seems like the game's just about wrapping up for the night, anyway...Uh-huh. About 20 minutes, then?

"Sure. Do I get to meet April too? Well of course I do!

"I'm sure she is. Right...Okay...Will see you then, then."

Mrs. Logan came back to the game, where the group were waiting expectantly.

"That's your father, Kevin. He'll be over in about 20 of *his* minutes. Which probably means half an hour or so. Time to wrap things up for the evening."

Steve and David slowly started to gather up their notes and the items on the table, while the others stood around, chatting.

* * *

"So..." Asked Laura, curious. "What happens to Celi and Elas?"

"Well," said Steve, "I'd had a few ideas based on how things might go during the rest of the game...but I guess we can close things off here...lemme see." Steve looked down at his notebook for a moment, rolled a few dice, and then spoke:

"Elas and Celarel moved far away, in the hopes that nobody would recognise them. But the truth was always ten steps behind; an unguarded comment by one of them, or an astute observation made by one of the locals would set tongues wagging.

In the end, paranoia would rear its ugly head and drive them out long before the villagers could even think of doing so. In truth, very few of the people they met would have ever suggested it, even if they'd been told the truth directly. The village elders in these places had seen it all before.

"A home, self-built and thrown deep into the wilderness became the only place left that they could hide from themselves and what their union represented. It was here, after two years, that Celarel started to feel sickness in the mornings. In time, her belly started to swell, removing any doubts the two may have had.

"As the autumn leaves fell and progressively heavier snows dusted the landscape, Celarel gave birth to a baby girl with blue eyes and fine, white hair. Elorel, Child of Midwinter. A child who would only know winter.

"One day, as Celarel was outside, gathering up wood for the fire, she heard strange voices in the distance. As she filled her basket, the voices got closer and closer. Celarel closed her eyes and wished with all her might: *Don't let them come this way, don't let them find us.*

"Thirty minutes later, the knock on the door struck like thunder. Celarel went out to greet the man there, a smile on her face and Elorel in her arms, but dread in her heart. There were three other men with this interloper, she learned, employed in the business of tree felling. Just over the way, a new village was planned to be built starting in the late spring. Plenty of pre-cut wood would be needed, so, here they all were. They would be cutting logs for the next few days, and they hoped she wouldn't mind the noise too much, what with the baby and all.

"The cycle had started again, it seemed. Even here, even in the depths of nowhere and with no real value to the land whatever, fate—hard, unforgiving fate—would continue to find them and root them out."

* * *

"Elas came home later that night. Too late to play with Elorel, who was unusually quiet and tucked away in her bedroom. Hunting had been more difficult than usual for this time of year, and the deer he had with him didn't look like it would sustain them for long. But, he claimed, somehow they would make do; they always did. Celarel didn't mention the men. *No point in causing a fuss on this of all days*, she thought. They talked as Celarel prepared their food. Watching her, Elas couldn't help but shake the feeling that something about her today was different. As she talked, Celarel revealed that she'd plaited her hair the other way around. Elas shrugged. She didn't plait it that often, so perhaps...

"Elas sat down with her and ate. The stew Celarel had made was mostly roots and other woodland scraps, bound over with what little meat they had access to...and one other, final thing. Elas felt a warm, satisfying glow radiate through him as he finished his meal. It was as if his entire body was relaxing and thawing out after being in the cold for so long. His day caught up with him; limbs got progressively more sluggish and clumsy, and his eyelids heavier and heavier. They moved over to the sofa to watch the fire, and here, finally, Elas spotted what was bothering him: Celarel's necklace. Today, the vial was totally empty. Mama. Papa. It was her. It had always been her. But now, as his vision faded away, it was far too late to care.

"Celarel smiled, as Elas slumped into her lap, and she closed his eyes for the last time. *Everything would be perfect now*, she thought, as she stroked his hair. *This world could never tear them apart*. As Celarel's sight grew blurry and her head grew heavier, she leant forward and touched her forehead to his, her tears falling on his face.

"As the colours went from her vision, she closed her eyes and whispered her devotion...

*One
Final
Time*

Here's to you, Mrs. Logan

Laura brushed away a tear.

"Well, what can you expect from Steve, a happy ending?" Will had somehow found the bravery to put his arm around Laura in front of other people. He felt his face going bright red as he was doing it, but it was good. It was even better when Laura put her arm around him and held him back.

* * *

Mrs Logan smiled. "You'd better get yourself ready, Kevin. your dad will be here any minute."

"Okay, mom." Kevin made his farewells to the group, and headed back up the stairs out of the basement. The others followed along just behind him, chatting about the game they'd just played. Soon, they found themselves in the hallway, just outside of the kitchen.

"Oh, Steve?" Mrs Logan beckoned to him. "Could you give me a quick hand in the kitchen? Only you're quite tall and I hate to get the stepladder out in these heels."

"Sure thing, Mrs Logan." Steve followed her and tried really hard not to look at her ass. Mrs Logan kept up the chatter as if nothing was up when it totally was.

"Kate, please. We're all adults now. Even Kevin will be a man in a few weeks time, even though it doesn't seem that way sometimes..."

In the kitchen, Steve beheld the domestic goddess in her lair. Kate leaned back against the counter-top and smiled dreamily at him, the time for deceptions well and truly coming to an end. Steve swallowed his nervousness. Even her beauty was enough to intimidate him at times, but he knew that above all else, he shouldn't show any fear.

"Well, Mrs. erm, Kate, how can I help you?" Kate was shaken from her thoughts.

"Oh, right. It's just in that pantry there..." She pointed. "You see those cake tins on the top shelf, right at the back there? If you could just get them down for me..."

"Sure thing."

Steve wandered into the pantry, and Kate took a moment to appreciate the view before following him in. As Steve found his way to the back of the room, the sound of the door closing behind him made him turn around. Standing right in front of him was Kate.

"No more games, okay?" She had closed the distance between them in an instant, and pulled him into her.

"E!" Managed Steve, before Kate's lips met his. As their tongues danced over each other, Steve put his arms around Kate, no longer caring if they got caught, or why his fantasies were suddenly coming true. He was just glad that they were.

As quickly as it had started, Kate broke off the kiss. She smiled down at Steve, who looked a little like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. Assuming rabbits pitch a massive tent in their underwear.

"Well, what say you, brave adventurer? I'm all yours tonight if you'd claim me."

Steve made some noises in response, but didn't manage to say much of anything that could legitimately be called *language*. Kate laughed gently, like a clear waterfall on a warm summer's evening.

"Go for a short walk. We can tell your parents you're having a sleep-over with Kevin, and then it would be just the two of us. If you *want* to..." She smiled again and gently traced a fingernail down his chest. Steve smiled too. It was a strange situation, true, but he didn't hate the idea. Far from it...

* * *

The night air was cool against Steve's bare arms as everyone left Kevin's house. Electricity arced invisibly across his bare skin as it turned to goose-flesh. Walking along with the oth-

ers, he found himself ignoring their chatter as they wandered on in front of him. Kevin would be gone from his house soon, and then Mrs. Logan—Kate—would be alone and waiting. Waiting for *him*. The light in the spare bedroom would signal that the coast was clear...but what to do? His heart pounded in his chest like a kettle-drum as the sweat pumped out of him.

"I guess he's all tired out, huh?" Reality suddenly interjected. The others were looking at him, expectantly.

"Huh?" Steve's blank look was evidence enough that his mind was well and truly elsewhere. Laura laughed.

"See, I told you! All that world-building must really take it out of him!" She reached out and touched Steve's arm. To her surprise, he didn't flinch.

"Here. This should go back in your pocket, along with my gratitude." Laura offered up the loaded d20 with which she'd rolled for her man earlier. David looked over at Will and winked, indicating something was up. "That's okay," Steve smiled at Laura. "Keep it. I hope it brings you both luck, you know?"

"Waitwait..." began Will, realisation suddenly dawning. "That d20 was Steve's trick d20 all along?" Laura nodded, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "I wanted to be sure I got you, so Steve let me use it." She put her arms around Will's neck.

Will laughed, and pulled Laura close. "Guess I didn't stand a chance, did I?" A kiss gave him all the answers he'd ever need.

One by one, Laura, Will and David peeled off to their respective front doors as the end of the street came up. When it was time for Will to say goodnight to Laura, David rolled his eyes repeatedly as the two love-birds gave off enough sweetness to give everyone fallout diabetes. After David was the last to part company with him, Steve continued quietly to the end of the street, almost meditative in thought. He paused for a moment at the corner of the block. *Decision time, Steve. Be you man...or mouse?* It was either left, and then slowly around the block to kill some time before spending the night with Mrs. Logan...or straight on,

and home to the safety of a single bed, his Transformers bedlinen, warm Ovaltine...

Twice Steve gently lifted his foot, as if to start walking forwards, before stopping himself. Finally, he turned left and started his journey into the next Great Unknown. *This group already has one natural Wizard*, he thought to himself, *it doesn't need another.*