

Val Halla's Journey: Tristram

Prologue:

The devastation was near total. An enraged pack of mud runners would have done only slightly more damage. Hardly a melon in the entire field remained intact, as far as Chamberlain Shinobi O'Hattaran could see.

"May I speak freely, milord?" The voice came from near O'Hattaran's shoulder. He instantly knew two things: The first was that the farmer, who had worked this land all summer only to see most of his crop destroyed the day before harvest, was angry. The second was that he was going to speak his piece whether O'Hattaran granted him permission or not. In either case, the farmer had merely asked out of courtesy. The House of Halla was a progressive one and everyone under its rule was guaranteed a certain freedom of speech.

"Something's got to be done about Lord Halla's daughter," insisted the farmer. O'Hattaran, his back to the farmer, mouthed the complaint along with the farmer almost word for word. Of course, the problem was Lord Halla's daughter. It was beyond O'Hattaran how one girl could do so much damage and outrage so many people in a world where the days were only twenty-four hours long.

"The House of Halla will compensate your family for the damage to your crops," O'Hattaran assured him. This was a song he'd sung many times before as well.

"I know that, milord," said the farmer, grateful for the reassurance. "But it's not just the money. Caravan's coming through town in another day. Not having a crop to sell will hurt our reputation in other kingdoms. We'll have to sell cheap next year just to reestablish ourselves."

O'Hattaran sighed. He didn't have a ready answer for that one, although he knew it to be true. This and other incidents all reflected badly, not only on the House of Halla, but on all of Riparia as well.

There had been a time, perhaps as recently as when Shinobi O'Hattaran's father was Chamberlain, when a young Lady of the House of Halla could be expected to wait around the castle quietly until she could be married off to some prince or nobleman. Perhaps she'd dabble in the fine arts, or even take up a ladylike sport, such as badminton or croquet. The people, of course, would adore and admire her from afar, and young boys would fantasize about slaying a dragon or some other monster to win the young lady's love.

No one ever bothered to explain the correlation between killing a dragon and having a princess fall in love with you, but that didn't stop the idea from capturing the collective imagination of each generation of teenaged boys that came along. The smart ones got over it and eventually went into farming or entered guilds. The less smart ones trekked off into the wilderness, sword in hand, and were never heard from again. It's possible that the whole slay dragon = win princess formula had been concocted by the dragons themselves in order to keep a steady supply of tasty young would-be heroes marching into their lairs.

In any event, those days were on hold for the time being. There wasn't a young man in Riparia who was headstrong or delusional enough to believe he could slay a dragon big enough to impress Lord Halla's daughter. For one thing, she had already slain a dragon herself when she was fourteen. Technically, it had been a wyvern, and a rather small and sickly one at that. However, in the two-and-a-half years since she'd shot it out of the air, the tale had snowballed out of all proportion.

Regardless of the details surrounding her epic battle with the dragon, the young Lady Halla's speed and accuracy with a bow-and-arrow was undisputed and unmatched in Riparia. She also had a band of friends (or accomplices, depending on who was describing them) that she jokingly referred to as her Ladies in Waiting. Like her, they were rich, spoiled, and fairly skilled archers. Their hunting expeditions - when steered clear of the local farmlands - were rarely unsuccessful. These things, combined with the young Lady Halla's rapier-sharp tongue, made her one of the most intimidating people in the valley. The fact that Lord Halla felt the sun rose and set over her, his only child, didn't help matters either.

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"I will convey your concerns to Lord Halla," said O'Hattaran. *Yours and everyone else's*, thought O'Hattaran wearily.

The conveying of concerns to Lord Halla would turn out to be an even more difficult, and unexpectedly wrenching, ordeal than O'Hattaran anticipated.

Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens-over-Riparia of the House of Halla was finishing her dinner in the great dining hall when O'Hattaran concluded his meeting with her father. Her mood was ambivalent. While she loved nothing more than a good meal cooked from the efforts of one of her hunts, she still felt dissatisfied. She had already found excuses to bawl out the cook, her personal attendant, and a courier who had happened to be passing through. None of their offenses were the source of her moodiness.

She sensed the Chamberlain standing behind her chair. Without even turning around, she knew the expression on his face was disapproving. He would not have been looming silently behind her if he meant to tell her something she wanted to hear.

"What?" she snapped.

"You and your Ladies in Waiting destroyed a small fortune in star melons this afternoon."

"We were after the Black Stag," she explained. Every autumn, the Great Black Stag haunted the forests of Riparia, and every autumn, he somehow managed to elude Valeria's arrows. "We almost had him. I must have come within..."

O'Hattaran interrupted her. A drawn-out hunting story from the girl was one of the few things he could think of that would actually worsen his mood. "Be that as it may, you led your riders through farmlands and ruined an entire season's work for at least two families."

"So tell it to the Black Stag. We were just following him."

O'Hattaran shut his eyes tightly and began silently counting backwards from ten.

"Look," said Valeria, as the Chamberlain was beginning his second countdown, "I'll make it up to the peasants. A couple of extra hunts a month and they'll be eating better than they would have been based on a star melon harvest."

"Frankly, I don't think you can provide enough venison to compensate them."

"Oh don't you?" In a fluid motion, Valeria's short bow was off the back of her chair and an arrow sailed to the other end of the great hall. It embedded itself between the eyes of a mounted stag's head above the fireplace. One of the stag's glass eyes popped out and got under the foot of a servant who was carrying dishes to the kitchen. She and the dishes went down with a crash.

"Sorry about that," called Valeria. She was sincere, but not really concerned. It was the kind of apology one might make after brushing against a stranger on a crowded street.

O'Hattaran strode across the hall to help the maid to her feet. After he had ascertained that she was unhurt and excused her from her duties for the remainder of the evening, he returned to Valeria and said: "Secondly, it would help matters if you stopped calling the citizens of Riparia 'peasants.' They are the people who do the actual work in this valley, and a little respect would go a long way. If you would make some effort to wrap your mind around that idea, you would understand why a few pounds of meat this winter won't make up for what you did this afternoon."

Valeria rolled her eyes. "Citizen, peasant. Whatever. It really won't matter that much to them as long as they're fed."

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O'Hattaran sighed. "Anyway, the reason we're having this unfortunate conversation is..."

"Unfortunate?" Oh, Shinobi, don't you know it's always a pleasure to have you share your thought with me?"

"...is because your father wishes to see you..." He waited a beat and glanced over at the shattered dishes on the floor. "...after you clean up the mess you made."

"What?! You can't make me!"

"Of course, I can't," said O'Hattaran. "But I did go ahead and send the maid - you recall, the one that you tripped - to let your father know that you would be tardy."

"You had her tattle on me?!"

"I had her mention that you generously offered to assist the serving staff in their sometimes difficult daily chores." Smugness was beneath O'Hattaran. Usually.

"You massive boob of the stars!"

"It is always a pleasure to have you share your thought with me, milady," said the Chamberlain, turning to leave. "Do a good job and try not to keep Lord Halla waiting too long."

If any member of the serving staff had come within three rooms of Valeria, she would have ordered him or her to clean up the broken dishes. O'Hattaran was one step ahead of her, however. He had sent the entire household staff on an unscheduled dinner break. So, after spending several minutes looking for someone to delegate the work to, and then spending several more minutes sulking and muttering vile curses upon Chamberlain O'Hattaran, Valeria cleaned up the mess. She did a poor job, on general principle, however.

As appropriate as it would have been, Gregory Halla could not bring himself to be angry with his daughter. But, he reflected, perhaps that had been part of the problem these past sixteen years. He was running out of time to correct that problem, but he had already taken drastic steps in that direction this evening. Now all that remained was the unpleasant task of informing his daughter.

Valeria stalked into the study. Lord Halla knew she'd had another clash with O'Hattaran and had come out on the losing end.

"Father, I demand..." Valeria started to complain.

"Please," said her father softly. "Have a seat."

Valeria barely heard him as she began to launch into her tirade. Lord Halla cleared his throat. It was a long, loud, thick, phlegmy and thoroughly unpleasant throat clearing.

Valeria fell silent. This throat-clearing business had become a bad habit over the last six months or so. "What?"

Lord Halla sipped from a mug of hot spice tea. "You and your Ladies in Waiting did a lot of damage this afternoon," he said finally.

"Look, it was just a few star melons and I already offered to make good on the damage," she said.

"It's not just a matter of financial compensation," explained Lord Halla. "I need to be sure that you're ready to rule Riparia when I'm gone."

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"Well then," said Valeria confidently, "you have nothing to fear. Have you ever known me to back down from a challenge?"

Lord Halla smiled. "No, never," he said. "Of all the souls in Riparia, you have always been the most fearless. If I were to ask every single man, woman and child from Tears-of-the-Mountain to the mouth of the Badlands, I would find none who would question your courage, beauty, or skill with the bow."

Valeria beamed. She would never tire of hearing her father sing her praises.

"Unfortunately," continued Lord Halla, his heart heavy with the words he had to speak, "you have also shown yourself to be self-centered, arrogant, uncaring and just plain rude."

Valeria gasped as if struck. She was used to hearing (and ignoring) such assessments from Shinobi, but hearing it from her father bordered on the impossible.

"Although you are more than able to lead, people must be willing to follow you," said Lord Halla. "You have yet to give the people of Riparia any reason to have confidence in you. It pains me more than you can know to say this, but you are not liked. If you ruled Riparia, you would find yourself thwarted at every turn. Ultimately, your tenure would end in either assassination or exile."

"Father, how can you be saying this to me?"

Lord Halla cleared his throat noisily. "Because it is true," he wheezed and drank some more tea.

"Well, what about the Ladies in Waiting? They follow me."

"They are not liked either. Most of the kingdom views them as a pack of spoiled rich girls made even worse by your influence."

Valeria opened her mouth and then closed it again. "Well, who cares what the peasants think?" she finally said.

"You should!" snapped Lord Halla. He was growing weary of trying to spare the feelings of a child who simply didn't get it. "Those peasants, as you so crassly call them, are the source of your power and position. You owe them everything. Without them, you have no kingdom."

Valeria had no comeback. Speechlessness was not a state she experienced often and she did not like it at all.

Lord Halla went on: "The fault is my own. All your life, you have been perfect in my eyes and my willingness to turn a blind eye to your faults has in turn blinded you to them. If I were..." He cleared his throat and sipped some more tea. "If I were to die tomorrow, you would be unfit to rule."

"Unfit to rule?" Valeria was shocked. This went beyond a mere scolding.

"Fortunately," continued Lord Halla, "I do not intend to die tomorrow, and there is still time."

"Time for what?"

"Here is what will happen over the next week," said Lord Halla. "I've spoken with the parents of your friends and, effective this evening, the Ladies in Waiting are disbanded."

"WHAT?! You can't do this," cried Valeria. "I won't stand for it! Unless you plan on locking me in the tower, you can't prevent me from seeing my friends."

"True, but, as it turns out, they will be too busy to see you. Dannae will be marrying the son of Lord Zanbridge next week."

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"But that wasn't supposed to happen for two years!"

"The wedding date's been moved up. I've arranged safe transport for her and her family. They'll be leaving at dawn. Likewise, Jaxanna will be leaving for Runestaff to attend the School of Sorcery. The House of Halla will be financing her education and living expenses, just as it will be paying for Dannae's wedding. Actually, you've volunteered to pay for those things out of your allowance."

That last part had Shinobi written all over it. Royal weddings and college educations didn't come cheap. She'd be paying for those things for years. However, any protest and Jaxanna wouldn't go to school and Dannae wouldn't get married, and it would be all her fault. "What of Genara and Tia?" asked Valeria, suddenly feeling meek and defeated.

"They're both fine archers with a lot of potential. They've enlisted in the Riparian Rangers, Officer Training School. You're sponsoring them."

"But women can't serve as officers."

"Stupid law that pisses away some of the finest talent in Riparia. I'm repealing it tomorrow. My advisors tell me that a good number of young women in the kingdom will jump at the opportunity."

"Oh." No argument there. She herself had complained about the inherent unfairness of the military's males-only policies. "What about me?"

Lord Halla sighed and looked at his daughter. She was the spitting image of her mother, from her petite but athletic build to her penetrating green-eyed gaze, right down to the strands of auburn hair that always seemed to be in her face. If only Lady Halla were still alive, perhaps she might have been able to temper their daughter's fiery spirit with some wisdom and compassion. It was scant consolation that Lady Halla's sacrifice had been to save all of Riparia. Lord Halla had never felt so alone.

"Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens-over-Riparia," said Lord Halla. Pronounced correctly, the long name was musical and beautiful. He remembered how Lady Halla had sung that name to the tiny red-haired baby girl. "Between your skill with the bow and the sheer force of your personality, you have been a dominant force in this valley for much of your life. It's been comfortable for you, but it's robbed you of the perspective you need to view the world and your place in it accurately." He cleared his throat again. "When Caravan leaves at the end of the week, you will leave with it and travel to and receive instruction at a convent of the Sisters of the Sightless Eye."

"Y-you're sending me away? To become a Rogue?" It was too real. Had she truly been so awful that her own father wanted her to go away? She knew she could be rude and that she was sometimes mean, but she hadn't been that bad had she?

"First of all, never call a Sister a Rogue," warned Lord Halla. "Secondly, they will show you how to increase your prowess with the bow to levels you'd never imagined possible. They will also teach you how to observe and listen so that your every act is informed and disciplined. And, I fear you will learn some very hard lessons in humility."

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Interlude: Naked Came the Rogue

Val Halla was freezing. That was a natural consequence of kneeling stark naked on top of a butte overnight. Behind her the barrier mountains and their foothills loomed over her, regarding her from the darkness. The tower of Wraithespyre perched on top of one of those mountains, and the Convent of the Sisters of the Sightless Eye lay nestled at the mouth of the pass that joined the plains and forests of Westmarch and Khanduras with the Great Desert before her. The moon had set some time ago, but the Love Goddess, leading the sun on her early morning journey, had risen well above the horizon by now. She shined her pale light over the seemingly endless dunes, turning sand into silver.

So far, Val Halla's vision quest had yielded only a single vision: a nice warm fire. With Sister Sylverwraithe on a spit turning slowly over it. There had been several variations on this theme over the long night. Sister Sylverwraithe covered with red ants. Sister Sylverwraithe with yak hair sprouting from various bodily orifices. These all gave Val Halla a warm feeling inside, if nowhere else.

All right, I've been on this double-damned mountain all night, and I'd like to have something to show for it before the sun comes up.

Val Halla sat a little straighter, inhaled and exhaled slowly and deeply, and shut her eyes. She found what Sister Sylverwraithe had referred to, in dead seriousness, as her "tickle spot" and wrapped her mind around it. From there, she cast her consciousness out around her like a gossamer net.

Once again, it only got as far as the cramp in her thigh. Val Halla muttered a colorful oath describing a joining between Sister Sylverwraithe and a donkey.

She had left the previous afternoon confident that she'd be able to report success to her fellow Wild Angels. She'd even made a couple of side bets. After all, all she had to do was sense the location and nature of a small object that Sister Sylverwraithe had hidden somewhere on the butte six months earlier.

It should have been easy. The Sisters of the Sightless Eye had trained her to focus her senses sharper than the finest arrow. In six months, she'd gone from struggling to tell which of two doors was booby-trapped (and having icy water dumped on her when she guessed wrong) to being able to walk into a room and effortlessly tell whether or not someone had been there before her, and when. A strand of hair here or a bit of disturbed dust there shouted volumes to her.

With a bow in her hand, her senses were keener still. She had been good before, but now her accuracy bordered on supernatural. She could pick a nightscuttler off a lump of coal on a moonless night at a hundred paces. For the Sisters of the Sightless Eye, archery wasn't just shooting or hunting, it was a mind-altering experience. It was the purest form of meditation ever devised.

The possibility of failure never even occurred to her. Val Halla sighed. Sister Sylverwraithe had always told them that they should be able to find their tickle spots even if they were up to their necks in boiling blood maggots and riding the business end of a Horned Demon. For someone so utterly humorless, Sister Sylverwraithe sometimes had a way with a colorful phrase. Val Halla wasn't sure which was the business end of a Horned Demon, and she didn't care to ever find out. Either way, she was just too cold and sore to focus properly.

All right, so this one time, I won't be the best. At least I can be the warmest.

With that, she mouthed the words to a warmth cantrip she knew. It was really more of an old hunter's trick than an actual spell, but she'd used it on many hunts and campouts and it had always worked wonders.

She felt the spark of that bubbly sensation jump from behind her eyes. It traveled across the inside of her brain and coiled around the base of her skull. From there, it reached down into her chest with silvery feathers and then across

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her bare arms and legs like delicate strips of electric silk. Around her, the dirt, air and vegetation seemed to rustle as the blue rush of Mana gathered around her in response to her magical request for warmth.

Oh, great. Now it works. Now that I've disqualified myself.

The rule had been "No Magic, No Exceptions." There wouldn't be any point in trying to explain to Sister Sylverwraithe that it wasn't like she'd cast a Search spell or anything, or that she hadn't tried to cheat, and that she'd only wanted to get warm because she was tired, cold and demoralized. Sister Sylverwraithe would just give her that look, and maybe favor her with some cutting assessment of her many shortcomings.

Oh well, as long as I've got my tickle spot, I may as well use it.

Val Halla cast her senses out around her once more. She found the object at the base of a small cactus about a hundred yards away. She stood and was not surprised to discover that her legs felt like they were full of pins and needles. Except for the cramp in her left thigh. That felt like an acid hound gnawing on her femur. She lost her tickle spot in the effort it took to keep from falling over. No matter. She staggered over to the object and picked it up. It was a small gray pebble with a dimple on the top.

Val Halla limped back to the spot where her robe and bow were neatly laid out on the ground and knelt down again.

A rock. She had me up here looking for a rock. I'll kill her.

It wasn't the first time she had vowed to kill Sister Sylverwraithe. The first time had been outside of Tristram, on the River Talsande.

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1. Sylverwraith

Lord Halla, no doubt with Shinobi's help, wasted no time making good on his promises. By noon the next day, the Ladies in Waiting were gone and Valeria was alone. None of them had even bothered to find her and say goodbye.

As the initial shock of what she perceived as her impending banishment wore off, Valeria became moody and even more unpleasant than usual. The palace staff quickly learned to give her wide berth. It didn't take long for word to spread into the town that it was safest to treat the daughter of Lord Halla gingerly, if at all. Valeria went out of her way to avoid Shinobi, and she refused to speak to her father at all.

Caravan came into town the following day. When it left a week later, Valeria left with it. "Come to gloat, eh?" she had said when Shinobi came to see her off.

"Of course not, this is for your own good."

"Sure it is, Shinobi. You just want to be rid of me, just like everyone else."

"That's true," admitted the Chamberlain. "But it's also true that I look forward to serving under you upon your return."

"I'll bet."

"You will learn much from the Sisters of the Sightless Eye. Try to see this as a privilege, not a punishment. Your father has your best interests at heart."

"Speaking of my father, why isn't he here?"

"You made your feelings pretty clear that you did not wish to see him," replied Shinobi. "He was deeply hurt, but respects your wishes."

"Good," she said. "Then why are you here?"

"Because, unlike your father, if you wish me to respect your wishes -- or anything about you -- you'll have to earn that respect. You have a very long journey ahead of you, young Lady Halla." Shinobi turned to go. "I wish you a pleasant and enlightening voyage."

It was really too bad that he hadn't waited around to hear Valeria's stinging comeback, because it was a good one.

Eleven big barges carried Caravan and its merchants, performers and their belongings down the Trinhara River and out of Riparia. Throughout the year, Caravan traveled from the west coast to the east and back again. By river when possible, by wagon train when necessary. Vast expanses of wilderness separated the cities, and the hazards to merchants who wished to trade between them were legion. There were bandits, barbarians, wild animals, monsters, and the elements themselves. There were stretches of wilderness that only an army could have traversed safely, and so the groups of merchants who banded together for safety became a virtual army. When Caravan pulled into town, it was equal parts farmers market, traveling circus, museum and carnival.

It wasn't until Caravan was well outside of the glacier-carved valley of Riparia and into the high desert Badlands that Valeria admitted to herself that it might be good to get out of Riparia for awhile after all. Her cabin was actually a cargo bin that had been reserved for a shipment of star melons. As long as the House of Halla had had to pay for it, Shinobi decided against letting it go to waste. If he had intended it as a further punishment for Valeria, though, it fell short. In addition to being twice the size of the largest passenger cabin, it was also one of the coolest compartments on the barge and, with a bunk and a couple of other creature comforts thrown in, it was more than comfortable. Having seen the potential, the captain of the barge actually considered converting more of his cargo holds for the off-season.

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The only thing Valeria's quarters lacked was decent light. That was fine for her while she was finishing up her sulk, but once she started thinking of her trip as a vacation rather than an exile, she started spending more time on deck.

The Trinhara River was a tributary of the Talsande. Its origin lay at the northwest end of Riparia where the Tears-of-the-Mountain, giant waterfalls created by glacial runoff, fed the valley with clear near-freezing water. At the opposite end of the Riparian Valley, the river spilled out onto a high desert plateau known simply as The Badlands. The Badlands gave way to grassy plains and forests of Westmarch and Khanduras to the south, and the Great Desert to the east.

Standing on the deck of the barge, Valeria looked out over the Badlands. She had grown up hearing the legends about these mountainous desert lands. Somewhere to the east, the Battle for the Temple of Baal had taken place, and ended with the casting of the Armageddon spell. It was said that on certain nights, residual magical energy from that spell reflected off the clouds creating a spectacular light show. Unfortunately, for the duration of Valeria's visit, the nights were cloudless. Still it wasn't a total loss; the cool dry air of the Badlands was a perfect canvass for starscapes of the likes Valeria had never seen in Riparia.

Caravan made several short stops at small ports in the Badlands and in the plains, but the next major stop scheduled was the city of Tristram. It wasn't until they were only hours outside of Tristram that Valeria noticed the tall woman with the bow slung over her shoulder. She hadn't seen the woman before and figured that she must have boarded at the last port.

Valeria hadn't made any effort to talk to or get to know any of her fellow travelers. Frankly, they all seemed like commoners and didn't appear to be very interesting. There was a troupe of acrobats onboard who were talented and very entertaining performers. Valeria had watched them practice a few times and clapped politely when they stepped forward to take their bows. There was also a Bard who knew dozens of "Lord Cool & Stupidhead" stories, including several that Valeria had never heard before. As far as she was concerned, however, "Lord Cool & Stupidhead" was pretty lowbrow humor. The fact that she and the Ladies in Waiting had spent their early adolescence sneaking into taverns to hear them told was irrelevant.

The woman stood at the front of the barge, looking out at the Talsande. She was nearly six feet tall with long black hair and wore a weathered cloak over a suit of light mail. Valeria guessed that the armor was enchanted in some way so as to make it weightless and comfortable since few warriors chose to walk around in bulky armor when there was no need for it. Besides, a river was no place to be wearing forty pounds of armor.

What really interested Valeria was the bow slung over the woman's shoulder. Her own bow was a short bow carved from oak. It didn't pack very much power but it was an ideal weapon for horseback riding. It was also the weapon with which she'd shot down the wyvern. She rarely went anywhere without it.

By contrast, the woman's bow was a long battle bow inlaid with what looked like platinum. Even from where she was, Valeria could see intricate depictions of angels, and runes of some sort, that ran up and down the length of the weapon. She had to get a closer look at it.

"That's a nice bow you've got there," said Valeria, moving up to stand next to the woman.

"It is," she agreed, not bothering to look at Valeria.

"Can I see it?"

"You're seeing it now."

"No, I mean, I'm quite skilled with a bow-and-arrow myself," she said. "Watch this." Valeria slipped her own bow off her shoulder and drew an arrow. She let it fly and it struck a brass bell on the roof of the barge ahead of them.

The tall woman did not react in any way.

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"Do you mind if I try your bow?" pressed Valeria.

"Yes."

"Oh come on." She noticed that the quiver on the woman's back was empty. "I'll give you some of my arrows if you'll let me shoot."

"I don't need arrows."

"I just want to take a look at it." With that, Valeria reached for the bow.

The woman caught her wrist and squeezed until Valeria thought she could feel the bones in her wrist grinding against one another. "I said, no," insisted the woman coldly.

"I am Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens-over-Riparia of the House of Halla and you would do well to release me," ordered Valeria.

"I am Sylverwraithe," said the woman. "Sister Sylverwraithe, and you would do well to shut up." She let go of Valeria's wrist.

"Sister?" questioned Valeria, massaging her wrist and wiggling her fingers to restore the feeling. "Oohh, you're a Rogue!"

Never call a Sister a Rogue, her father had warned her. A lightning-quick fist connected with Valeria's chin. She barely had time to register the impact before she hit the cold, muddy water of the Talsande.

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2. Pepin

Valeria was cold and wet and heard distant voices.

"It seems rather unethical, that's all."

"I know, but think of it as starting her training a week or two early, and believe me, she needs this lesson. The next person she pisses off might tie a rock around her neck before dropping her in the river. I've got to make a side trip to Westmarch to pick up some more recruits and I won't be able to keep an eye on her."

"It's just that the Healer's Oath..."

"Forbids you from doing harm. This won't do her any harm. Quite the opposite, in fact. Now, unless you'd prefer to follow her around until she needs to be fished out of the Talsande again..."

"Oh all right. Gemma -- rest her soul -- always said you were a hard one."

"Ha! I'll wager that's not all she said about me!"

Valeria lost consciousness again.

When Valeria awakened again, she was warm and dry. She was lying on a bed, wrapped in blankets. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see her clothes drying on a rack near a fire in the fireplace. It was a small room with simple furnishings. The night sky was visible through the window opposite her. Despite this, there was a persistent clamor of voices and music from outside and from below her. She tried to sit up and winced. Her head felt light and her stomach lurched unpleasantly. Her jaw ached like nobody's business.

"Don't try to sit up," came a woman's voice. The speaker was a brown-haired girl about Valeria's age. "Here, drink this." She held a hot mug of some kind of soup to Valeria's lips. It tasted like a thick chicken broth with something in it that burned her throat a little, but settled her stomach almost immediately.

"Pepin!" called the girl, still helping her drink. "She's awake."

A reedy-looking man in a white smock hurried into the room. What remained of his hair was white and downy, and his face bore the pinched lines of someone who lived his life in a perpetual state of low-level anxiety. "Why don't you go on back downstairs," he told the girl. "I'm sure Ogden needs your help tonight, what with Caravan in town."

"All right," said the girl, "but don't hesitate to come find me if there's anything else I can do to help." She spared Valeria a reassuring smile and exited.

"How are you?" asked Pepin.

Valeria tried to speak, but her voice came out a raspy nothing.

"Oh, I'm sorry," apologized Pepin. "I'm afraid you've lost your voice for a few days. You drank a great deal of the River Talsande today and your throat's infected from it."

Valeria was determined to make herself heard. "Where?" she forced the word out and it emerged as a ridiculous high-pitched squeak.

"You're in a room above the Tavern of the Rising Sun, in Tristram," said Pepin. "You've been in and out of consciousness since about noon. I'm Pepin, the Town Healer."

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Valeria nodded. Actually, her question was going to be, "Where is that mangy she-dog who dared to strike me?" However, this was useful information too.

"You should try to get some sleep," Pepin told her. "You'll be better in the morning. I'll try to check on you then, but I'm afraid I'll be terribly busy. People tend to get into all kinds of mischief when Caravan's in town."

As if on cue, the sound of angry voices drifted through the wooden floor, followed by the sound of a piece of furniture being broken over someone's head.

Pepin sighed and turned to go. "I'd better go see what that was about. Good night."

Valeria lay awake for a few minutes and listened as the barroom brawl downstairs subsided as quickly as it had begun. A little while later a Bard, possibly the same one who'd been on the barge with her, began telling a "Lord Cool & Stupidhead" tale.

"Oh no! Not with the cow!" responded the drunken audience at the appropriate point in the story.

Valeria smiled in spite of herself.

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3. Gillian

"Good day," said the brown-haired girl. "How are you feeling?" Her voice was cheery enough, but her eyes looked tired from working well past midnight in the tavern.

Sunlight was streaming through the window and Valeria sat up blinking. Her jaw still ached and felt a little swollen, but otherwise, she felt fine. She tried to say so, but found that she still had no voice.

"Still can't talk?" asked the girl sympathetically. "I'm so sorry. I've brought you a pot of Mrs. Ogden's spicy berry tea. Perhaps that will help." She poured a cup for Valeria.

Valeria accepted the tea gratefully.

"We were never introduced," said the girl, pouring a cup of tea for herself and sitting by the bed. "I'm Gillian."

Valeria swallowed a gulp of hot tea. "I'm Val..." she squeaked. There was no way she was going to get all the way through "Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens-over-Riparia of the House of Halla."

Gillian smiled brightly. "Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Val."

Valeria shook her head furiously and tried in vain to speak. She did not want to be called "Val."

Gillian misunderstood her. "I'm afraid your clothes are a mess," she agreed, looking over at where Valeria's mud-caked clothes hung by the fireplace. "The river water is filthy this time of year. Most of the town water comes from wells and springs. I couldn't find you any clean clothes, so I brought you one of my own outfits."

Valeria looked around the room. There was no sign of the two heavy trunks that she'd brought with her on the barge from Riparia. Gillian got up and fetched a basket by the door. She pulled out a brown-and-blue dress and a pair of shoes.

"I'm a bit taller than you," said Gillian. "But this shouldn't fit you too badly until you can get your own clothes cleaned. If you don't care to do them yourself, the Tristram laundress does excellent work and her prices are quite reasonable. She's such a sweet old woman. I'm good friends with her niece."

Valeria eyed the dress critically. She hadn't worn a dress since she was nine. She sighed and got out of bed and put the dress on. It was either that or run around town in a sheet. The hem brushed the floor unless she stood on her toes, and the top had considerably more room than she needed. The shoes weren't a bad fit.

"Here," offered Gillian, "let me help you with that." She knelt at Valeria's feet and began pinning up the hem.

"Pepin says that you're on your way to train with the Sisters of the Sightless Eye," commented Gillian. "My mother was a Sister. She wanted me to follow in her footsteps, but I just never quite had the aptitude. I guess I've always been sort of a homebody at heart." She looked in her basket for more pins.

Valeria was torn. Though grateful that Gillian was going so far out of her way to help a total stranger, she really didn't need to hear the story of her life. If she'd been able to talk, she probably would have graced the girl with some clever put-down to quiet her. But then, if she'd done that, she'd be stuck in the room with a pile of muddy clothes.

"My mother was so brave," Gillian continued. "Not a day goes by when I don't miss her." She sighed. "But your mother must be quite proud of you."

Valeria just shook her head and Gillian caught the meaning in her eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Valeria just shrugged. It had been a long time ago.

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Gillian finished pinning up the dress and Valeria took a few steps. She froze. Her bow had been laid on the floor in front of the fire to dry which had been exactly the wrong thing to do with it. Valeria shoved past Gillian and rushed to the fireplace. She picked up her bow and held it up for Gillian to see.

Even though Valeria's outraged tirade came out as a series of ludicrously scratchy squeaks, the fury on her face was unmistakable.

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry," said Gillian, examining the warped bow. "I'm afraid Pepin is much better at caring for people than for fine weaponry. My mother would have skinned him and hung his hide from a flag pole if he'd been so careless when she was alive."

"I don't care about your stupid mother, you pointless bumpkin! Look at this bow! It's ruined! My God, were you people born idiots, or do you practice a little each day?!" Valeria wanted to say. Fortunately, the insults came out as squeaks and gasps that sounded comical even to her. The more she tried to talk, the funnier she sounded. It was infuriating.

Gillian had the grace not to laugh. "We'll take it over to Griswold. He's the finest weaponsmith in all Khanduras. He'll have that bow as right as rain in no time," she promised. "Come on."

Gillian gathered Valeria's clothes in her basket and led her downstairs into the tavern. The chairs were all up on the tables and all the windows and doors had been opened to air the place out. The morning sun streamed into the room, dispelling the previous night's excesses as if by magic. It would take more than magic, however, to banish, or even subdue, the smells of stale smoke and spilled beer. A plump little woman with a mop and a bucket of gray water was seeing to that.

"Greetings, good lady," she said to Valeria. "I trust you're feeling better."

"Yeah, whatever," came out as "Squeak, gasp." Despite the promise that her bow would be repaired, Valeria's mood was still grim.

The woman looked at her disapprovingly, understanding Valeria's tone, if not her words.

"She still can't speak," explained Gillian, who was either ignoring or oblivious to Valeria's bad attitude. "Mrs. Ogden, this is Val. Val, this is Mrs. Ogden." Gillian was going to introduce her to everyone as "Val." Valeria shut her eyes for a moment. If only she had a piece of paper, she could write her proper name down. But if she could have asked for a piece of paper and a pen, then she wouldn't have needed it. Mrs. Ogden gave her a curt nod.

"We're going to get her clothes cleaned and have Griswold repair her bow," said Gillian. "After that, I need to check on my grandmother and make sure she ate all her breakfast. She can be so stubborn sometimes."

Mrs. Ogden nodded and smiled knowingly at the barmaid. "Enjoy the morning, Gillian. Mr. Ogden was up late last night as you well know, but so was everyone else. I should be able to manage here until lunchtime."

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4. Hildy & Hogan

Caravan never really slept. It just rested a little when it could find the time. When Gillian and Valeria stepped out of the Tavern of the Rising Sun and into the early morning sun, the town square was already bustling with activity. Workers were constructing a stage opposite the tavern.

"King Leoric will officially open Caravan and welcome the merchants later this morning," explained Gillian.

Of course, Valeria didn't care if Old King Cole was going to welcome the merchants. She couldn't, and didn't, say so. She nodded at her warped bow.

"Right," said Gillian. "Come this way." She turned to the left where there was a small smithy on the other side of the street. Valeria could hear the steady clang-clang of metal being pounded on an anvil.

The clanging stopped as they entered. "Whoa! What kin I do fer ye?" It was a powerful, throaty voice, but definitely feminine. Valeria was startled to see that the blacksmith working at the forge was a red-haired girl of about twelve. She wore a heavy leather smock, thick gloves, and a visor made of smoked glass to protect her eyes. She lifted the blade she'd been working on from the anvil and examined it critically.

"Good day, Hildy," said Gillian. "Is your father in?"

Hildy Griswold put down the sword. "He's down at the docks. A huge shipment of rare ores came in from the west, including one that's supposed to have fallen out of the sky. He was so excited to go examine it that he left me in charge of the shop," said Hildy, clearly proud of the trust that her father had placed in her. "So, what have you got there?" She eyed Valeria's bow.

Gillian made the introductions. "This is Val. Val, this is Hildy Griswold," she said. "We were hoping your father could repair her bow."

"Let me have a look," offered the girl, taking off her gloves and hanging her visor on a hook. She was a stocky girl, and a coat of perspiration glistened on her muscular arms. Although she was an inch or two shorter than Valeria, she looked like she could have out-wrestled a mud runner.

"Took 'er swimming, didja?" smiled Hildy, running her fingers along the length of the bow.

Unable to retort, Valeria just sighed and nodded.

"She lost her voice from her fall into the river," explained Gillian.

"She's lucky that's not all she lost," remarked Hildy. "The river's pretty foul this time of year. It's from all the cow crud washing off of Farmer Lester's land. Someone oughtta do something about him." The blacksmith's daughter shrugged. "Anyway," she said to Valeria, "I can get the water squeezed out of your baby and have her as good as new again in no time."

"Y'great tomboy! Playin' w' Papa's tools again are ye?" a voice called from the entrance.

"Ah, get back t'yer kitchen y'great fat sissy!" retorted Hildy without looking up. There was a smile on her face.

Valeria turned to see the newcomer. His family resemblance to Hildy was obvious in his curly red hair and big-boned build. However, while Hildy was muscular, the young man who joined them was plainly someone more at home with a fork in his hand than a hammer. He was pushing a cart filled with fresh loaves of bread.

"This great lout," Hildy told Valeria, "is my brother, Hogan. The finest chef and baker in Tristram, and one day, he'll make some lucky man a fine wife."

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Hogan made a face at her.

Valeria's guffaw came out an embarrassing squeak. Damned laryngitis!

"Is Mama in?" asked Hogan. "I've got a loaf of bread for her. I'm taking the rest over to Mrs. Ogden." He nodded at Gillian.

"I've been out here since sunup, so I wouldn't know," said Hildy.

Hogan shook his head in mock disapproval. "A proper daughter would be helping Mama in the house."

"So why are ye still out here then?" Hildy wanted to know.

"Don't mind them," Gillian told Valeria. "If teasing were gold, they'd be the richest siblings in all Khanduras."

"You will come by my booth, won't you?" Hogan asked Gillian. "I'm going to be selling my latest creation." He held up a medium-sized loaf. "It's a split loaf of bread full of different meats, cheeses, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, onions, black olives and seasonings."

"Sounds delicious," said Gillian. "What do you call them?"

Hogan shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. Torvan says I should name them after myself."

"Griswolds?" asked Gillian. "How about 'Grissies?'"

"I know," suggested Hildy, "Grizzlies, because they're fit for a bear-sized appetite."

Hogan nodded thoughtfully. "Not bad, but it sounds a little too much like gristly to be appetizing. Actually, Torvan was thinking I should call them Hoagies." He shrugged. "Hopefully, something will come along to inspire me." He grinned broadly. "If I do well enough at Caravan this year, I'll have enough money to finish building my bakery. Then next year, I'll be able to send a booth with Caravan. Maybe I'll even go myself. In a few years, I could have bakeries all across the continent!" He was silent a moment, basking in future glories. "I'd better get this bread inside to Mama." He turned to his sister. "By the way, thanks for fixing that crack in my oven door. I set aside a sweet loaf for you. Make sure you don't get too busy here to come by and eat it."

"I'll be along as soon as Papa gets back," promised Hildy.

"We'd better run along too, if we want to get your clothes cleaned," Gillian told Valeria.

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5. Giselle

Gillian's generosity and hospitality were beyond question. While Valeria had been pondering how she was going to pay the Tristram laundress when all her money was presumably still in her cabin on the barge, Gillian quietly paid for the service out of her own pocket. Valeria had tried to thank her, but her voice still wasn't cooperating. Gillian just shrugged and smiled as if this was the way she treated all guests in her charge.

Valeria wasn't entirely sure what to make of the girl. In Riparia, she'd always gotten her way with people partly due to her status as Lord Halla's daughter, but mostly because everyone in the valley knew the grief she was capable of raining down on them if they crossed her. As far as Valeria knew, Gillian remained uninformed of both of these aspects of her guest's personal background. True, she had somehow known that Valeria was on her way to the Sisters of the Sightless Eye and, if she knew that, there was no reason she shouldn't know that she was dealing with the heir to Riparia. However, most people who dealt with Valeria back home did so as quickly and efficiently as possible, and then made themselves scarce. Gillian seemed genuinely interested in cultivating some kind of friendship. Part of Valeria wondered what the girl really wanted from her, but the truth was Gillian seemed utterly guileless.

After they'd left Valeria's clothes with the laundress and been advised that they could pick them up when they were dry later in the afternoon, Gillian took Valeria back to the little cottage that she shared with her grandmother.

"This won't take long," Gillian told her. "I just need to make sure she's eaten her breakfast and taken her medicine."

The inside of the cottage was humble, but tidy. Gillian had taken a great deal of care to make what she had look as nice as possible. "Grandmother?" called Gillian softly.

"I'm awake," came the reply from through the bedroom door. The voice reminded Valeria of dry leaves.

"Come on," said Gillian, heading into the bedroom. "I'll introduce you." She missed Valeria's indifferent shrug.

"Who is this?" asked Gillian's grandmother, spying Valeria. "An unpolished Sapphire?"

"This is Val," said Gillian. "Val, this is my grandmother, Giselle."

Giselle's appearance only reinforced Valeria's initial impression of dry leaves. Her wrinkled skin was leathery brown from a lifetime of journeys and her wispy hair reminded Valeria of frost. She seemed to be the personification of autumn passing into winter.

Gillian went to her grandmother's bedside and observed that the old woman might have taken one or two bites of her breakfast.

"Grandmother," she scolded gently, "you must eat more."

"I was playing chess with the Devil," replied Giselle, her eyes going glassy.

"Grandmother?"

"The Red Queen and Black Queen move to take the White Bishop. White Bishop to Black Bishop. Black Bishop to White King..." whispered Giselle.

"Grandmother?" repeated Gillian, shaking her gently this time.

Giselle continued, seemingly oblivious to her granddaughter's presence. "White King to Black King. White Pawns fall to the Black King. White Knight slays the Black King. White Knights to Black Knights. Black Pawns, Black

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Bishops and Black Knights gather 'round the Red King. White Castle falls to the Red King! White Castle falls to the Red King! Checkmate! Checkmate! Checkmate!" She was standing in her bed and shrieking.

"Grandmother! Grandmother!" shouted Gillian, trying to restrain her. She turned to Valeria, her eyes full of panic. "Oh, please," she pleaded. "Go get Pepin! Tell him Grandmother's having one of her spells. Pepin's hut is the first one on the right when you get to the Town Square. Please hurry!"

"Checkmate! Checkmate!" howled Giselle.

Valeria nodded and rushed out of the cottage.

Pepin was standing in front of his hut watching the workers building the stage for the official opening of Caravan. All around the square, merchants were setting up their booths for business.

Valeria tried to call to him, but no sound came out. She grabbed him by the sleeve and turned him to face her. She willed herself to speak with all her might.

"What's that you say? Gillian's fallen into the well?" asked Pepin, misunderstanding the raspy squeaks and whispers.

"No, you massive boob of the stars," Valeria wanted to say. "Gillian's grandmother is having one of her spells!" Instead she just pointed urgently in the direction of Gillian's cottage.

Now Pepin could hear Giselle's cries of "checkmate" over the noise of the square. "Oh my goodness!" he cried. He grabbed a pouch full of herbs and potions from a table just inside his door and hurried to the cottage. Valeria followed.

By the time they reached the cottage, Giselle's cries were loud enough to attract curious looks from passersby. Pepin rushed into the cottage and made directly for the bedroom. He ushered Gillian out and shut the door behind him.

Gillian and Valeria stood side-by-side in the living room. Gillian stared tensely at the closed door, as if trying to will herself to see through it. Valeria shifted her weight from one foot to the other, uncomfortable and not quite sure what to do. She supposed she could just leave. She could go back to the barge and retrieve the trunks containing her clothes and money. It didn't seem quite right leaving Gillian without knowing that her grandmother was going to be okay. Also, wandering around a strange city with no voice was a little more intimidating than Valeria cared to admit.

The cries from the bedroom died down quickly and, after a few minutes, Pepin came out. He wore a damp cloth tied over his mouth and nose and a powerful sour-smelling incense permeated the room. Both Gillian and Valeria sneezed. Pepin closed the bedroom door and took off his mask.

"She'll sleep for a few hours," he told them. "The incense will dehydrate her, however, so make absolutely certain that she drinks a lot of water when she awakens. A little fruit juice will be helpful in restoring some sugars too."

"Oh dear," said Gillian. Her face showed both relief that her grandmother was all right and worry over how having to care for her for the afternoon would affect her other obligations. "Mr. and Mrs. Ogden are expecting me to wait tables this afternoon. Val, could you...?"

Valeria backed away, shaking her head furiously. Granted, she was beginning to think that Gillian was a fine person for a commoner, and was even getting to like her. But there was no way in hell Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens-over-Riparia of the House of Halla was going to serve drinks to anyone. She stumbled over a footstool and nearly fell.

"No, of course not," realized Gillian. "I've been so wrapped up in my own worries that I forgot you can't speak."

Pepin stared at his shoes for a moment, and then hurried out citing some pressing business back at his hut.

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"Perhaps Nova can fill in for me," said Gillian. She went to a desk in the corner, found a charcoal stick and some paper, and wrote a quick note. "May I ask a favor, Val?" asked Gillian as she finished her note.

Gillian was going to ask whether Valeria gave her permission or not, so she just shrugged. "Could you take this message to my friend, Nova? She lives with her father just down the road."

It sounded simple enough. Valeria accepted the note and pointed at the desk behind Gillian.

"What?" asked Gillian. Then she saw that her guest was pointing at the charcoal stick and sheaf of paper. "Oh, of course!" laughed Gillian. "That would be a useful thing for you to have. Go ahead and take as much as you want."

Valeria took most of the paper and two charcoal sticks. She was on her way out the front door when she hesitated. She wrote something on the top sheet of paper, using the doorjamb as a desk. She tore the sheet in half and held up the half she had written on so Gillian could read it.

It said, "Thank you."

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6. Nova

A thin old man with a gray beard and matching eyes answered the door at Nova's house. "Hello, my friend!" he said. "Stay awhile and listen!"

Nothing could have interested Valeria less. She thrust the note Gillian had written into his bony hands. He unfolded the piece of paper and read the message.

"Nova!" he called into the house. "Someone here to see you!" Then he said to Valeria, "She'll be here momentarily. I am Cain, the Elder."

"And I am tired of you already," Valeria wanted to say.

Cain glanced at the note. "It says here that you've lost your voice after a fall in the river. Perhaps Pepin could..."

"If you're quite finished reading my mail."

Cain shrugged and handed the note to his daughter. Nova was a few years older than Valeria. Although her face was rounder while Cain's was more angular, she had his steely gray eyes. A light sprinkling of freckles danced across the bridge of her nose and she wore her long brown hair in a loose braid thrown over one shoulder.

"Oh, why today of all days?" complained Nova after she'd read the message. "I was hoping to do some shopping. Maybe buy some spell books or even a staff. I guess I'll be working late at Ogden's instead."

"I'm sure it is for the best," volunteered Cain, turning to go back into the house. "Remember: men are wizards, women are witches. Unsupervised dabbling in sorcery is no pastime for a young lady."

Valeria could actually hear Nova's teeth grinding. "Yes," said Nova through a clenched jaw. She waited until her father was out of earshot. "A bar full of strangers is a much, much better place for a young lady to spend her time." She exhaled loudly, turned to go, and almost crashed into Valeria who had been standing silently, of course, in the doorway.

"Sorry," Nova apologized. "You must be Val."

Valeria nodded.

"Gilly's note says that you fell off a barge and lost your voice, and now you're stuck waiting for your clothes to be cleaned and your bow to be repaired."

Valeria craned her neck to see the note. Gillian must have been a very fast writer. Nova showed her the note. It was no less than a full page of tidy, compact handwriting that covered everything from details about Gillian's grandmother's attack to information about Valeria to a long pleading promise from Gillian to Nova that she'd somehow make this unexpected imposition up to her as soon as she could.

"Anyway, I'm Nova. Why don't you come with me to the Tavern of the Rising Sun. We'll be able to check and see if Hildy's done with your bow yet."

Having nowhere else to go, Valeria went with her. Besides, she found that she sympathized with Nova's annoyance with her father and was willing to listen to her rant for awhile.

"What really steams me is that he's even said that he would've taught me sorcery if I'd been a boy!" fumed Nova. "Right now he's holding out for the hope that I'll take a husband and produce a grandson for him to train. Bloody Horadrim! Don't you think they're a little old to be afraid of girls?"

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Valeria gave a raspy chuckle.

"If he's in such a desperate hurry for a grandson, maybe I ought to skip getting married and just have one! After all, that's what people do when Caravan's in town," grumbled Nova. "That'd show him."

Nova sighed and gave Valeria an apologetic look. "Here I am, venting family grievances at a total stranger. You must think I'm a crazy woman."

Valeria smiled and shook her head.

"Then you've got the patience and generosity of Zakarum himself."

Valeria gave another raspy laugh. She couldn't recall anyone ever describing her as patient and generous before. There didn't seem to be any point in trying to explain that her current state of politeness stemmed entirely from her inability to talk.

The square was packed with people. The workers were putting the finishing touches on the stage as the crowd waited for King Leoric to come and declare Caravan officially open. Nova and Valeria made their way to Griswold's smithy. Hildy was around the side with Valeria's bow. As they approached, the young weaponsmith let loose an arrow at a target mounted on a bale of hay. The arrow found the bullseye with a soft thunk.

"Ah, there you are," called Hildy. "Perfect timing."

Valeria eyed her bow appreciatively. Even from where she stood, it was apparent that the girl had done good work. She wrote a quick note for Hildy: "What do I owe you?" Valeria had salvaged a few coins from her pockets, but probably nowhere near enough to pay Hildy for her efforts. She would probably have to go back to the barge and retrieve the rest of her money, along with her own clothes and other belongings.

Hildy read the note and grinned broadly. "Nothing," she answered. "As long as you promise to tell everyone that Hildy Griswold did the repairs."

That was more than a bargain. Of course, Valeria wasn't able to tell anyone anything at the moment. She held up her hands.

Hildy laughed. "Don't worry about it. You can hold up your end of the deal when you get your voice back. Do you need some arrows?"

All of Valeria's arrows were floating down the River Talsande and were probably halfway to Seagate by now. She nodded.

Hildy handed Valeria her bow and bundle of wooden target arrows. Valeria tucked them under her arm and wrote her second "Thank you" of the day.

"Whoa! What have we here?" Valeria turned to see a middle-aged man approaching. Angus Griswold was obviously Hildy and Hogan's father. They had his stout build and thick, curly red hair.

"Papa!" greeted Hildy. "I just did some work on a short bow."

"May I?" he asked Valeria, pointing at her bow.

Valeria shrugged and handed it over.

Griswold inspected his daughter's work critically. "Aye," he muttered. "A fine job. Y'can use a wee bit less wax an' still achieve the same result, but excellent work. Ye've done yer Papa proud." He handed the bow back to Valeria.

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Hildy glowed with pride.

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7. Albrecht

A loud fanfare quieted the crowd in the town square. "Sounds like King Leoric's goin' t'open Caravan," commented Griswold.

"I'd better be going," said Nova. "Staying around here will just remind me what I'm missing." She turned to Valeria. "Will you be all right?"

Valeria nodded.

"Gilly's going to be tied up taking care of her grandmother well into the evening. Why don't you come find me at the tavern later tonight and we'll have some dinner?"

Valeria nodded again. It sounded good to her.

"All right then," concluded Nova. "I'm off to feed and water the teeming masses." She darted across the road to the Tavern of the Rising Sun. Moments later, a trio of knights in white armor cleared the street to make way for the royal procession. Down the road, the gray spires of the great cathedral peered over the treetops to watch over Tristram. The secretive wizards' guild, the Horadrim, had originally built the cathedral to serve as a monastery. However, when the Horadrim were nearly wiped out in the Sin War, the structure was abandoned. It was only in the last thirty years that King Leoric and his followers had converted the cathedral into a royal residence. The royal family only used a portion of the building, much of it, particularly the subterranean areas were sealed off and remained unexplored.

Valeria watched King Leoric, Queen Lenore and Prince Albrecht ascend to the stage with their attendants and personal guards. Already onstage was Pepin, an Archbishop, a knight in gleaming white armor, and a knight in mottled green armor and a brown cloak. All stood at attention.

The crowd applauded respectfully as the King waved to them and then helped Queen Lenore to her seat.

They applauded fondly as Queen Lenore gave them a wave before taking her seat.

The crowd cheered wildly when Prince Albrecht smiled and waved before taking his seat. They continued to cheer until King Leoric held up his hands and called for silence.

"Citizens! Merchants! Honored guests!" King Leoric addressed the gathering. "We are here on this beautiful Tristram morning to celebrate the safe arrival of Caravan and to open the week's festivities.

"In the past, I have performed the official opening, but this year, I would like to break with tradition and establish a new one. As of this year, my son and your future King will open Caravan! Without further ado, here is Prince Albrecht."

Valeria had never seen a crowd quite so enthusiastic as this one was for Albrecht. Albrecht held up his hands for silence, but it was some time before the mob was done adoring him. Finally, just as it quieted down enough for him to speak, someone off to Valeria's right shouted, "Give 'em hell, Al!"

King Leoric scanned the crowd disapprovingly, but Albrecht just laughed and shouted back, "Thank you! I'll try!"

"Beloved friends and neighbors," began Albrecht. "Ever since I was a very small boy, Caravan has been a special time for me. One of my earliest memories is of how I cried and cried when my mother informed me that Caravan had to move on to the next city. So it is indeed a wonderful privilege that my father has passed on to me, to be able to welcome personally Caravan to my home town."

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Valeria watched and listened carefully to the young prince. He was barely her own age and seemed to be a thoroughly average individual in every way. Average height, average build; not bad looking, but not strikingly handsome either. Yet the locals and even some of the out-of-towners were hanging on his every word. In Riparia, when Valeria had been required to address her subjects-to-be, they listened quietly and politely because it was expected of them. Valeria had never sensed any sort of affection toward her from the populace, nor had she ever expected it. By contrast, if someone here had stood up in the back and started handing out free money, most of these people probably wouldn't have even turned around until the Prince was done speaking.

"Before I open Caravan," he said, "there are a few people I want to introduce for the benefit of our guests. If, knock on wood, you hurt yourself or overindulge and get sick while you're in Tristram, Aaronus Pepin is the man to come see. He is a skilled Healer and one of the most kindly souls you are likely to meet anywhere." He nodded to Pepin. "Stand up so the people can see what you look like."

Pepin stood and waved shyly.

"If you're staying outside of city limits or are leaving or entering Khanduras, you'll rest easier knowing that Hector Gorash and Khanduran Rangers are on the job keeping the forests and fields safe for everyone. You can recognize the Rangers by their green armor and brown cloaks. If you need help on the road, they're the people to look for." Albrecht nodded at the man in the mottled green armor.

Hector Gorash stood and pumped his fist in the air. He seemed to be another favorite of the crowd, although Valeria detected a predominance of male voices cheering. Gorash was in his thirties and looked just the way Valeria expected a Ranger to look. He was tall, tanned and a little weather-beaten.

"Now then," continued Albrecht, as Gorash sat down, "While you're in town, you can count on the gentlemen in the white armor to help you if you're having trouble or to make you behave if you're causing trouble. Tristram is a safe and pleasant city, and Captain Lachdanan keeps it that way."

The man in white armor stood and nodded to the crowd. While Gorash had been ruggedly handsome, as far as Valeria was concerned, Lachdanan was just plain gorgeous. His face was angelic, with curly black hair and dark blue eyes. His armor gleamed and he held a jeweled helmet tucked under one arm.

"Finally," said Albrecht. "it's my pleasure to introduce the Archbishop Lazarus who will bless the week's festivities." Lazarus was a plain-looking middle-aged man. He was dressed in the full ceremonial splendor of his station however. He tapped his golden staff on the stage, and the crowd, believers and non-believers alike, bowed their heads in reverence. Lazarus delivered the blessing in the Old Language, so Valeria, and most of the people present, did not understand its exact meaning. The Archbishop's voice was both powerful and soothing. It reminded Valeria of a cool cloth on a fevered forehead.

"All right then," finished Albrecht, after Lazarus had delivered the blessing. "I know you people are all looking forward to a week of shopping, trading and general carrying on, and probably aren't interested in standing in the sun listening to some crown tell you how great it's going to be."

From somewhere off to Valeria's left, several teenaged girls shouted in unison, "We love you, Al!"

"I love you too!" cried Albrecht, and then continued his speech without a pause. "Personally, I'd rather be over at Hogan Griswold's booth sampling his latest culinary masterpiece than up here exercising my vocal chords!"

Valeria glanced at Hildy and her father and saw them both beaming with pride.

"So, I offer these words of advice," concluded Albrecht. "Spend wisely and deal fairly. Make new friends and rejoice in the people around you. With that, I hereby declare Caravan open!" A raucous cheer went up and a band began to play.

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For long minutes, the adoring crowd shouted Albrecht's name.

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8. Lester

Valeria was fuming. She had gotten back to the barge only to learn that a mule train had departed for the Convent almost as soon as they'd made port in Tristram. Her belongings had automatically been packed up and were already on their way. The captain of the barge assured her that there would be at least two more small caravans leaving in that direction before Caravan ended, and that she should have no trouble catching up with her gear.

That didn't change the fact that she was stranded in Tristram in a borrowed dress, with no voice, and only a few gold coins to her name. "Who told you to move my things?" Valeria wrote.

"Sister Sylverwraithe," answered the captain, squinting to interpret Valeria's ragged, angry handwriting.

"I'll kill her," she tried to wheeze. The sound that came out was somewhere between a hiss and a chirp.

"Pardon?" asked the captain.

"Where is she?" wrote Valeria.

He didn't know.

Valeria started writing an in-depth critique of the captain's intelligence and breeding. She was even going to include a diagram of his family tree when she realized the riverman was waiting patiently for her to finish her note. He was a very big man with knotted muscles and powerful callused hands. Valeria crumpled the note, stuck it in her pocket, and thanked the captain for his time. The last thing she needed was another dip in the Talsande.

There were a dozen or so cows milling around the dock near a stack of wooden crates and barrels. As Valeria reached the bottom of the gangplank, a big fat Holstein trotted up to her to investigate her. The perfect end to the perfect morning.

She was about to push her way around the cow when she heard the voices of two men coming from the other side of the wooden barrier.

The first voice had a Riparian accent: "Please, Mr. Lester, you have to understand. The shipment of star melons I was expecting was lost. You have to give me more time."

The other voice was that of an older man. Its tone was gentle and folksy, but the underlying menace was clear: "Now, you know the rules. I'd like to make an exception, but how do you think my other customers would feel about that? It just wouldn't seem right. Now, you have until the end of Caravan to make good on your debts."

"But that's not enough time," pleaded the first man. "What am I going to do?"

"Well," suggested the other man, "if you honestly can't come up with the money you owe me, there's certainly nothing I can do to make it magically appear. I'm sure we can work out some other arrangement. Perhaps your sons can come to my farm for a few seasons to work off your debt."

"My sons? But how will I run my business without them? I'll go broke!"

"Well then, what about your daughter? I can always use an extra milk maid."

There was a silence. That suggestion obviously hadn't gone over well either.

"There are a few games of chance going on here in town during Caravan," offered the second man. "I've been known to wager a few coins myself now and then. In friendly games, of course. Perhaps you can win the money you owe

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me." There was a significant pause. "But then again, that's the real reason you're in this mess, isn't it? Well, I'm sure you'll work something out before Caravan leaves."

"Please..."

"Now, now. I wish I could stay and visit longer, but I've kept my cows standing on this cold riverbank for too long as it is. It's bad for their milk, you know."

Wishing to avoid meeting the man who seemed to be in such dire straits over what was surely the star melon harvest she had destroyed, Valeria had begun inching around the crates to go the other direction. She suddenly found herself face-to-face with the second man. She let out a gasp.

He was a wiry, tanned man in his early sixties. He wore a pair of olive-drab bib overalls and a straw hat on his head. The crow's feet around his slate-gray eyes seemed to deepen as he looked her up and down.

Valeria had been stared at by men many times. Often simply because she was a beautiful young woman, but more commonly in open-mouthed shock at whatever insult she'd just delivered. This man looked at her in a way she'd never been looked at before. It was as if he was coldly calculating whether or not she had any value to him. Apparently, he decided that she had none. He tipped his hat to her, "Young miss," he nodded, and allowed her to pass.

Valeria fought down the shudder she felt and hurried past him. She wondered if that was how a mouse felt when a snake was watching.

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9. Adria

Valeria's flight from the old farmer and his reluctant business partner took her away from the heart of town and north along the river bank. She came to a small shack, in front of which, a black cauldron hung bubbling over a low fire.

Idly curious and a little bit hungry, Valeria peeked into the cauldron. She recoiled in horror. The pot was full of severed ears floating in a watery red broth.

"I sense a soul in search of answers." A woman in a long black dress came out of the shack. She had pale skin and long, straight black hair with a wide streak of white down the middle. Despite the white hair, however, it was impossible to tell her age. Her face was free of wrinkles, except for tiny ones at the corners of her eyes and mouth, so she could have been middle-aged. She had a large basket of sliced potatoes in her arms that she hefted without difficulty, so she could have been younger. Her black eyes reminded Valeria of midnight. They were ancient. If forced to guess the woman's age, Valeria would have estimated it at somewhere between 35 and 105.

The strange woman emptied her basket into the cauldron so nonchalantly that Valeria dared another look.

They weren't severed ears after all. They were just slices of dried tomato.

The woman stirred the soup a bit and then took a moment to study Valeria. "You have traveled a great distance to be here today, but I sense that you have lost something along the way."

Both assessments were correct, but were also vague enough that they could have been true for anyone in town. Valeria gave the woman a look intended to convey her opinion that fortunetellers were for commoners, dullards and particularly stupid farm animals.

The woman understood her perfectly and laughed. "I sense a skeptic in search of answers. I am Adria. Come inside and perhaps I'll tell you something useful."

Valeria followed Adria into the shack. Despite, or maybe because of the gloomy light inside, the interior of the shack appeared to be three or four times bigger than the exterior would have suggested. Shelves of potions and powders lined one wall. A library of hundreds of books of all sizes lined the opposite wall. In the far corner was a rack of staves. Not far from them manacles and bizarre instruments of all sizes hung from the wall. There was a large golden pentagram inscribed on the floor beneath these. Incongruously, in the opposite corner was a big luxurious bed with a pale pink canopy. It looked like it could have slept three or four people with room to spare. In the center of the room was a shallow pit that burned with heatless, smokeless orange flames.

Adria sat down, cross-legged, on the floor across the pit from Valeria. She studied Valeria with those bottomless black eyes for a few seconds and then smiled. "I don't suppose it would be enough to improve my credibility if I told you that I sensed recent turmoil in your life and that you have recently embarked on a voyage of great personal change and self-discovery?"

Valeria smiled and shook her head. While the assessment was again essentially accurate, it was still too vague to impress anyone except the most gullible.

Adria sighed. "Very well then. It is fortunate for you that I am still establishing my reputation here in Tristram." She reached for a heavy glass cover and placed it over the fire. The strange flames did not seem to need air either, because they continued to flicker underneath the glass. "Sit down," invited Adria.

As Valeria sat, Adria produced a deck of cards and distributed them, seemingly at random, across the glass tabletop. The cards were larger and fewer than an ordinary deck of playing cards, and whenever one settled on the table, it turned translucent revealing luminous metallic highlights and deep shifting shadows.

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"There," announced Adria with satisfaction as the last card settled. "This will paint a fuller picture." She pointed to the one nearest to Valeria. It depicted stacks of glittering gold coins. "You come from wealth and power. Am I correct?"

Valeria nodded.

The next nearest card depicted a tornado tearing across the countryside. The lights and shadows in the room made it look as if the storm was actually moving. "The Whirlwind is a sign of change," explained Adria. "Note how the card landed: with the tip of the funnel pointing toward you and the wide end pointing away from you. It shows that the nature of the changes in your life involve growth rather than loss."

Adria pointed to the next card. It was black with a pair of glowing golden feline eyes. "Cats' Eyes see what we do not," she continued. "They indicate spiritual or metaphysical gains rather than material ones. The close proximity of the Cat's Eyes to the Whirlwind promises that the coming events will leave you a very different person from who you are now."

Valeria stifled a yawn. Adria frowned, apparently not appreciating the fact that Valeria had even attempted to stifle the yawn was something of a compliment.

Adria pointed to the next set of cards, even more determined to make a believer out of the girl. One card depicted a mountain, its snow-covered peak partially hidden by shimmering fog. The next showed an unremarkable diamond divided into four equal-sized diamonds. The third card of the group depicted a pale-skinned woman wailing alone in a darkened cemetery. These three cards, in turn, overlapped a card bearing the image of a glowing white sword, and one depicting a great crimson-skinned demon with horns. Adria interpreted their meanings: "The Mountain foresees great challenges ahead for you. It is also possible that you will climb a mountain in a more literal sense." She shrugged.

"This tragic lady is one that I know too well," continued Adria, indicating the woman in the cemetery. "She is the Maiden of Anguish. Her card overlaps the Diamond, or Sign of Four. It suggests that great Anguish will come into your life four times in the coming year." She paused. "However, if you are to endure your final encounter with the Maiden of Anguish, you will need to wield great power indeed."

Adria paused again and studied Valeria. "It may be a moot point, however." She indicated the last two cards fully visible in front of them. "These are the Sword of Justice and the Lord of Terror. You will take up a just cause that you will have to see through to its end. If you are to be successful, you will have to overcome Terror. If you allow Terror to consume your soul, all you hold dear will drown in Anguish." She waited to see the girl's reaction to the dire predictions.

Valeria had written a note. She handed it to Adria: "Is this the part where you tell me I'm going to meet a tall, dark stranger?"

"The cards do not foretell such an encounter," said Adria. "However, I also arrange marriages. Perhaps I can introduce you to one."

Valeria shook her head and gave a raspy laugh. The fortuneteller was almost certainly a fraud, but she had an excellent sense of theatre.

"You appear to have lost your voice," observed Adria.

Valeria would have liked to favor Adria with a stinging comment on her grasp of the obvious.

"I sense that you would like to make a sarcastic comment regarding my grasp of the obvious," said Adria with a sly smile. "Perhaps I should tell you something that is not so obvious: It appears that you are about to meet a tall, dark stranger after all." With that, she got up and walked around Valeria to the exit.

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Curious, Valeria followed her. Valeria's first thought was that, while they'd been inside, someone had built a stone wall outside Adria's shack. Then the wall moved and looked down at her with huge red-rimmed yellow eyes. The creature stood around eight feet tall and its chest was nearly as broad as Valeria was tall. It had a hide that reminded Valeria of muddy cobblestones and stood on a pair of heavily callused talons. A single curved horn, about three feet in length, projected from its forehead. It opened its mouth wide and revealed a set of triangular saw-edged teeth.

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10. Hrrarrgrsh-chutt

Valeria let out an involuntary squeak and leaped backwards. Her bow slipped off her shoulder and into her hand. She sent a volley of arrows sailing through the air at the menacing giant. Adria dove for cover.

Nobody could have missed a target that big from as close as Valeria was to the horned monster. Unfortunately, she only had the cheap target-shooting arrows Hildy Griswold had given her. They splintered harmlessly against the creature's armored hide.

"Do you mind?" Adria snapped at her. "This is Hrrarrgrsh-chutt, one of the Horned Folk. He brings me supplies from the Badlands."

Hrrarrgrsh-chutt reached down and offered Adria a massive taloned hand to help her up. His fingers were each as big around as Valeria's wrist. Adria accepted one and allowed herself to be pulled effortlessly to her feet.

Hrrarrgrsh-chutt looked down at Valeria and bared his jagged yellowish-white teeth again. "And I greet you too, little she-mammal," he said, absently scratching himself where her arrows had impacted. His voice was like boulders mating.

Although her heart was still pounding in her throat, this time Valeria recognized the giant's expression as a smile. She had shot him, point-blank, with four arrows, and he thought she had been shaking hands!

Of course, Valeria had heard of the Horned Folk. Everyone had heard of the Horned Folk of the Badlands, but that didn't make it any less unnerving to find one suddenly looming over you.

Hrrarrgrsh-chutt's forebears had been a pack of Horned Demons in the service of Baal, the Lord of Destruction. They won their freedom from that servitude with his defeat at the Battle for the Temple of Baal and his subsequent imprisonment by the Horadrim. Freed from their master's time-consuming imperative to "Destroy, destroy and destroy some more," the Horned Folk (who now objected to being referred to as "Demons") began to pursue other interests. They became farmers and raised hardy crops and livestock able to thrive in the Badlands. Many hired out as mercenaries. Others began trading with human tribes and passing caravans. Despite their relatively small numbers, the Horned Folk quickly developed a culture of their own that reflected their love of raw meat, fighting and, strangely enough, haiku.

Hrrarrgrsh-chutt was pulling an ox-cart filled with his wares: Weapons and armor won in combat, produce from the Badlands, and an iron cage containing three of the ugliest hounds Valeria had ever seen. Their grayish hides were hairless and covered with scars and oozing tumors. The largest stood almost three feet tall at the shoulder, and all three wore heavy muzzles made of metal and thick leather. Their red eyes were slightly luminous and blazed with hatred.

"I've brought the three finest hounds in my pack," Hrrarrgrsh-chutt told Adria. "Shall I milk one for you?"

"That would be excellent," said Adria.

Hrrarrgrsh-chutt lumbered over to the cage and opened the top. The hounds inside growled and whined and tried to press themselves into the cage's corners. Hrrarrgrsh-chutt grabbed the biggest dog, a vicious beast the color of slate, by its scruff and lifted it out of the cage. The dog kicked and whined some more but finally gave up and settled down.

"This way," said Adria. She led Hrrarrgrsh-chutt around the side of her shack. Valeria followed and saw a huge still.

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Jaxanna, one of Valeria's Ladies in Waiting, had once built a distillery in hopes of brewing her own Mana potions, among other things. The results of those efforts had been memorable. At least, the parts that Valeria could remember were memorable.

Adria's still put Jaxanna's to shame. It was a monster. It extended the entire length of the shack and consisted of metal pipes, glass containers, cloth, rope, clay, and countless other materials. A leather bellows inflated and deflated a sac made from the bladder of some giant creature. A rainbow-colored liquid trickled from a tube made from the leg bone of a monster. Orange, red and blue flames danced under different containers and, every few seconds, the contraption would give a reptilian hiss and belch out a cloud of steam that smelled like dirty laundry.

Hrrarrgrsh-chutt carried his dog to the front end of the still and slipped the muzzle off the dog's snout. He pinched its mouth open, revealing a set of blackened fangs, and then forced its mouth over the lip of a metal bowl at the top of the still. Once the hound was firmly in position, the horned giant massaged its abdomen. The hound whimpered again, and Valeria felt a little sorry for the vicious, ugly mutt. What seemed like gallons of smoking, bubbling acid poured out of the dog's mouth and into the bowl. Finally, as the flow of liquid tapered off, Hrrarrgrsh-chutt muzzled the dog again and put it back in the cage. The dog wobbled a bit and collapsed, exhausted.

At the other end of the still, Adria watched as the first drops of an almost blinding blue liquid began to leak into a crystal container. "This will be a fine batch, you've done quite well," she complimented Hrrarrgrsh-chutt. "I'll be able to brew many potions from this. There are few sources of liquid Mana more pure than that distilled from Acid Hound venom, and none purer than that from your pack."

Hrrarrgrsh-chutt flashed that terrifying smile again. "We do our best," he said humbly. "I understand some people are starting to favor Mana potions distilled from zombie eyes."

"Pfah! An inferior mixture to be sure," snorted Adria. "Will I be able to get more before you return to the Badlands?"

"I do not know," admitted Hrrarrgrsh-chutt. "Alchemist Zhar, Healer Pepin and Conjuror Ichabod have all placed orders, and my hounds will need to rest. They do not travel well."

"Well, if your hounds are able to spare any more, bring them to me and I will pay you handsomely," said Adria. "Speaking of which..." She darted into her shack and returned dragging two huge chests full of gold coins.

Hrrarrgrsh-chutt picked up a chest in each hand and placed them in the wagon. "It is a pleasure doing business with you, as always," said Hrrarrgrsh-chutt. The horned giant looked at Adria's shack. "You look as though you are planning to stay here in Tristram for awhile."

Adria nodded. "I've seen too many omens to ignore. Something of great mystical significance is going to happen here within the next year."

"I too have smelt something in the air about this city," said Hrrarrgrsh-chutt. "Something dire. Be careful."

"I always am."

Valeria realized she was no longer the center of attention and that there would be no more horned giants, acid-spitting hounds, or other spectacles. She turned to leave and found herself face-to-chest with a huge, broadly muscled Barbarian. He was not a handsome man and had a definite brutish quality about him.

The Barbarian nodded and stepped around her.

"I sense a soul in search of answers," she heard Adria say.

"Merchant gave Dumptruk magic staff in exchange for escort across Badlands," the Barbarian explained to Adria. "Is staff worth anything?"

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"Well, let us take a look at what you've got...."

Valeria headed back toward the center of town.

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11. The Tavern of the Rising Sun

It was well into the evening when Valeria made it to the Tavern of the Rising Sun to meet Nova. She had spent the afternoon wandering around Tristram and enjoying the hubbub of Caravan. She had been too busy sulking to enjoy it when it was in her own hometown. The fact that no one recognized her and hurried to satisfy her demands and/or get out of her way made it a unique experience. That, plus her inability to speak, made it easy for her to be ignored.

Valeria found that anonymity was not without its advantages. She found herself eavesdropping on all manner of conversations: business transactions, friendly banter, sordid secrets. People, whom she would normally have considered beneath her, if she considered them at all, were suddenly fairly interesting.

Ogden's tavern was busy, but Valeria was able to find a table in the corner, near the kitchen. There was no point in dwelling on the knowledge that, if she'd been back home, she could have (and probably would have) cleared the room with a word and picked any table she fancied.

Nova came by Valeria's table after she'd been sitting for a minute or two. She looked weary from the long afternoon and evening of waiting tables, but seemed to be in good spirits. "The tips have been good and the propositions haven't been too obnoxious," explained Nova. "I see you got your clothes back."

Valeria nodded. She had picked up her shirt, vest, trousers and boots from the laundress and then taken Gillian's dress back to its owner. She had found Giselle asleep in her bed and Gillian in the chair beside the bed, asleep as well. She draped Gillian's dress over the back of a chair and had been turning to go when Giselle's eyes half-opened.

"How about a nice game of chess?" she said.

Valeria startled. "No thanks," she had tried to reply, momentarily forgetting her laryngitis.

"No matter," continued the old woman. "Although the pieces are already moving into position, the game will not begin until you return. And if you win, you'll be in Diablo Too." With that, she fell asleep again and Valeria hurried out of the cottage.

"Mrs. Ogden will be closing the kitchen soon," Nova was saying. "After that, I'm pretty much free."

There was an uproar at a table at the other end of the room. This was accompanied by the pounding of mugs and glasses on a wooden tabletop.

Nova sighed. "Duty calls. Can I bring you a drink?"

"Wine," wrote Valeria.

Nova nodded and hurried off.

"Who is that magnificent creature?"

Valeria turned to see who had spoken. She recognized one of the three robed men at the next table as Nova's father, Cain. Of the other two, one was thin and middle-aged. His complexion was pale and his hair was receding. He wore a gray robe. The other man was the youngest of the three. He wore an orange robe and had a ruddy complexion. He was the heaviest of the three and Valeria judged him to be in his late thirties.

None of the three was looking in Valeria's direction. They were looking toward the bar where Ogden was serving a drink to Adria.

"That is Adria," Cain told the man in the orange robe. "She is a witch. She moved into the shack across the river just before Caravan arrived."

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"She tells fortunes, traffics in rare and magic items, and arranges marriages," explained the man in the gray robe.

Cain nodded. "I've been thinking of employing her services on Nova's behalf."

"Well," said the man in the orange robe. "I've just got to meet her, or I'll go mad, I tell you, mad."

"Settle down, Mr. Zhar," said gray robes starting to get up. "I'll go tell her you want to meet her."

Zhar grabbed him by the sleeve. "Not a chance, Mr. Ichabod," said Zhar. "The last time I let you talk to a woman for me, you told her that I only had one testicle and suffered from chronic incontinence. I'll do it myself."

With that, Zhar got to his feet, a little unsteadily, and made his way toward the bar.

"Watching the Robed Wonders in action?"

Valeria turned and was startled to see that she now shared her table with a brown-haired boy, some three or four years younger than she. He was a strange-looking boy. His eyes were set a little too far apart and they were a shade of hazel that would have bordered on yellow in the right light. He had a square jaw of the sort that might have made him handsome, if only the rest of his head was proportionally larger. As it was, he reminded her a little bit of a bulldog.

"Who?" wrote Valeria.

"The Robed Wonders: Sage Cain, Conjurer Ichabod, and Alchemist Zhar," explained the boy. "Archbishop Lazarus has been known to share a drink or meal with them on occasion. Illusionist Sawhill used to be one of their regulars until he left town on a quest of some sort last year. Except for the town undertaker, Necromancer Veeble, those are all the major wizards who live in Tristram. Hardly enough members to form a guild, so they just formed sort of a drinking alliance. Everybody calls them the Robed Wonders." He glanced back at the bar. "Ha. It looks like Zhar is going to try to get Adria to be a disrobed wonder. I'll bet you anything that she sends him back to his table with his tail between his legs."

Valeria remembered the luxurious king-sized bed in Adria's shack and recalled a woman in Riparia who had also made her living casting enchantments and arranging marriages. She too had been a mysterious and somewhat shady character, and it was rumored that many young men of Riparia and the surrounding valley had been to interview with her. The controversy surrounding her aside, though, the marriages she set up rarely, if ever, failed. "I'll take that bet," wrote Valeria. "Twenty-five gold." She had less than half that amount on her person, but she was confident she was going to win the bet. Adria had said she was new in town and, if she was going to be arranging marriages in Tristram, she would not pass up an opportunity to gather intelligence on the local bachelors.

The boy looked surprised, but nodded. "You're on."

At that moment, Zhar grabbed a handful of Adria's bottom. The ageless Enchantress jumped. "I sense a soul in search of answers," they heard her say.

Zhar said something to Adria, and then Adria whispered something in Zhar's ear. The Alchemist's face turned even redder than it had been before and he broke into a huge sheepish grin. Adria finished her drink and then led Zhar out of the tavern. Zhar glanced back at his companions. His face was that of a boy who had just learned that Father Christmas was going to bring him something very nice this year. Cain and Ichabod broke into laughter and applause.

As the tavern door swung shut behind Adria and Zhar, Valeria looked at the boy expectantly. The boy opened a pouch hanging from his belt and produced a stack of twenty-five gold coins. He set them on the table in front of Valeria with a sigh. "I'm Toby Wirt," he said. "You must be Val."

Valeria nodded. Considering the number of people in town this week, it sure seemed like a lot of people were specifically aware of her presence.

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Nova brought Valeria's drink and noticed Wirt. "I see you've met Toby," she said. "Watch him. He's trouble."

"Me? Trouble? Hey, I just sat down here and I'm already down 25 gold."

"You got money out of him?" Nova asked.

Valeria smiled and indicated the pile of coins in front of her.

"You're my hero," Nova told her. Nova pulled up a chair and sat down. She had brought a mug of beer for herself in addition to Valeria's wine.

"None for me?" asked Wirt.

Nova shrugged. "The kitchen's closed and I'm officially off duty. If you're thirsty, you'll have to find your own way to the bar just like everyone else." She turned to Valeria. "Mr. Ogden figures, by this time of the evening, anyone not capable of stumbling to the bar and ordering his own drink has probably had enough. It really has cut down on the number of brawls in this place."

Nova took a sip from her mug and grimaced. "I hate warm beer." With that, she gripped the mug in both hands and whispered a brief magical stanza. A wisp of white mist surrounded her drink and a coat of frost formed on the outside of the mug. "That's better," she said, shaking the cold from her fingers. "Cool yours off?" she offered Valeria.

Valeria nodded and passed her glass across the table. "How did you do that?" she wrote.

Nova smiled. "Just an old bartender's cantrip."

"I'd love to learn it," wrote Val.

"Sure, there's nothing to it," said Nova. She glanced over at the table where her father and Conjuror Ichabod sat. Cain had his back to her, so she said in a low voice, "What I wouldn't give to learn some real magic instead of these parlor tricks though."

"You know, I can get you spell books," offered Wirt.

Nova looked hard at the boy. "Toby," she said firmly. "No."

"Have I gotten around to warning you never to buy anything from this..." she began to tell Valeria. Then the tavern fell silent. Hrrrrgrsh-chutt lumbered into the room, ducking so his horn could clear the doorway.

"Greetings, good monster!" called Ogden from behind the bar. "Welcome to the Tavern of the Rising Sun!"

Hrrrrgrsh-chutt's laugh reminded Valeria of an avalanche. "'Good monster.' Master Ogden, you are without question, the funniest human whom I've not yet killed and eaten," said the horned giant as the other tavern patrons hurried to clear his path to the bar. "Do you have my usual this evening?"

"I mixed a batch as soon as I heard you were in town," said Ogden. He pushed a heavy wooden barrel out from behind the bar.

"Let me get that," offered Hrrrrgrsh-chutt. He picked up the barrel and set it on the floor in front of the bar. Then he popped the lid off and inhaled deeply. A man seated close enough to see inside turned slightly green and edged away.

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Hrrarrgrsh-chutt held the barrel up in both talons. "Cheers!" he bellowed to everyone present, and then guzzled the contents. He set the barrel on the floor and wiped his mouth with an armored arm. "Perfect," he told Ogden. "As always!"

"Dare I ask?" whispered Wirt, looking at the empty barrel.

"A mixture of cow's blood and river water with an assortment of dead rodents and a twist of lemon," answered Nova.

"Oh," said Wirt weakly. Valeria felt a little queasy herself.

"I'd better stalk off into the night," said Hrrarrgrsh-chutt, setting a bag of coins on the bar. "A number of your customers look to be on the verge of tears."

"Pshaw!" snorted Ogden. "You're polite, you pay for your drinks promptly and you appreciate my efforts. I'd rather have a hundred of you in here than some of the louts who darken my door and vomit on my floor."

At that moment, one of the aforementioned louts leaped to his feet, his sword drawn. His wooden chair clattered to the floor behind him. "Have at thee, vile demon!" he challenged Hrrarrgrsh-chutt, his voice thick with ale. "Fear not, fair Glorianna," he told the young woman who was making a valiant but futile effort to restrain him. "I'll protect you!"

"Tommy Farnham! You put that sword down right now!" warned Ogden.

"So!" accused Farnham. "The beast has tempted you to evil! Poor deluded soul. The stain on your character can only be washed away by this creature's blood!"

Hrrarrgrsh-chutt closed his eyes and shook his horrible head. His sigh was like the winter wind.

There was a confused commotion among the tavern patrons. Half wanted to get out of the way of the imminent brouhaha, and the other half wanted a better view of it.

Farnham charged Hrrarrgrsh-chutt. Remarkably, he stumbled only once. The flat of his blade clanged against the giant's armored hip.

"Fierce gnat buzzing 'round / Tiny man with tiny blade / Wars best left unfought," haikued Hrrarrgrsh-chutt.

Farnham's blade clanged against Hrrarrgrsh-chutt's hide a few more times. It was a cheap short sword and the swordsman was both drunk and unskilled. Finally, Hrrarrgrsh-chutt reached down, grasped Farnham by the shoulders and lifted him off the floor until he was face-to-face with the man. The horned giant bared his shark-like teeth and made sure that the would-be hero got a good whiff of the smell of blood, polluted water, and dead rats on his breath. Just for good measure, he gave Farnham a vigorous shaking before setting him down again. Farnham reeled across the floor in a series of crazy figure eights until he crashed into a table and threw up on a Barbarian.

"You stupid son-of-a-bitch!" swore the Barbarian. With that he gave Farnham a brutal shove.

This time Farnham collided with a table of Tristram Rangers. He vomited on them as well.

"You dolt!" shouted one of the Rangers. "What do you mean by throwing him over here?"

The Barbarian stood up. "Did you just call me a dolt?"

The three Rangers stood as well. "Yes, I did," said the Ranger.

"That's what I thought," said Dolt Lungren.

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12. Lachdanan

Things quickly got out of hand and degenerated into a barroom brawl of truly inspirational proportions. Valeria and Nova backed into a corner and pulled a table in front of themselves for cover. Wirt disappeared into the melee, crawling under tables. Valeria caught a glimpse of him helping himself to an unattended purse.

Conjurer Ichabod opened a Town Portal, and he and Cain disappeared through it.

Ogden shouted in vain for order while Hrrrrgrsh-chutt looked on with what Valeria interpreted as amused fascination.

Farnham was sound asleep on the floor.

Nova and Valeria were considering making a break for the kitchen exit when the Town Guard, led by Captain Lachdanan himself, finally arrived to restore order.

The white-armored warriors were efficient, professional and, most importantly, sober. They quickly separated the instigators from the victims from the innocent bystanders. By the time Pepin arrived to tend to the injured, they were allowing patrons to leave in small groups. Ogden stood by the door, collecting payment for drinks and damages.

"A most outstanding floor show," Hrrrrgrsh-chutt told Ogden. He handed the innkeeper another bag of coins. "Please accept this subsidy for future performances." He lumbered out the door.

"I'd better get home myself," said Nova finally. "If Ogden sees me, he's sure to put me to work. Besides, the longer I linger here, the more likely my father is to come up with some way of pinning all this on my unladylike interest in sorcery. I'll see you in the morning."

Valeria just nodded. She was busy watching Captain Lachdanan.

Nova shrugged and smiled. She had gotten over her crush on the handsome Captain of the Town Guard years ago. She slipped out through the kitchen.

A moment later, Valeria noticed Wirt at her elbow, his pockets jingling slightly. "C'mon," he whispered, "Nova's got the right idea. Besides, Captain Wet Blanket doesn't like loiterers."

Valeria forced herself to speak. Her voice was a raspy whisper. "Who?" she asked.

"Outside," insisted Wirt.

Reluctantly, Valeria followed the boy out through the kitchen. Once outside, they worked their way around the tavern to the town square where they could watch people leaving.

"Captain 'Wet Blanket' Lachdanan," snorted Wirt. "What a stiff."

"What's wrong with him?" wrote Valeria. She was beginning to find that she shared Nova's distrust of the boy. On the other hand, he was the only one around who would tell her about Lachdanan.

"I won't say he's rigid, but if you were to stand him next to a two-handed sword, most people wouldn't be able to tell the difference," said Wirt.

Valeria shook her head.

"You know that jeweled helmet he wears? He calls it the Veil of Steel," continued Wirt. "I bet you're wondering how he can afford such fine armor on a Captain's salary."

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"He won it in battle?" wrote Valeria.

"Hah! Not hardly," laughed Wirt. "Every night before he goes to sleep, he sticks a lump of coal between his butt cheeks. When he wakes up in the morning, it's a diamond!"

Valeria had heard enough and got up to leave.

"I'm telling you the truth!" called Wirt. "You want to go see for yourself? I can get you into his house."

Valeria kept walking.

"Of course, if you're afraid," suggested Wirt, "I'll understand."

Valeria stopped. She was not afraid and she had nothing to prove to this sawed-off little runt. Still...

A half-hour later, Valeria found herself hiding under Lachdanan's bed and wondering exactly what she'd gotten herself into. She decided that, whatever happened, it would all be Wirt's fault. The longer she'd listened to that smug, obnoxious little voice, the more she wanted to show him up. Anyway, she'd never backed down on a dare in her life.

Maybe it could be Nova's fault and that rich Tristram wine she'd served her. It was a lot stronger than the Riparian stuff she was used to. Maybe it had something to do with the lower elevation and the warmer climate. Anyway, if Nova had stuck around, maybe she would have been able to talk her out of this misadventure in the making.

Every time Valeria had risen to Wirt's challenges, he'd upped the ante. She had finally drawn the line when Wirt dared her to actually stick a lump of coal between Lachdanan's buttocks. As it stood, there was 500 gold pieces riding on this dare. She had a small ball of clay. All she had to do was get the impression of Lachdanan's ring.

This was clearly a very stupid thing to be doing, and it was Sister Sylverwraithe's fault. After all, she was the reason Valeria was stuck in Tristram with no voice and no money.

Still, she was quiet enough and quick enough, and Captain Lachdanan would certainly be exhausted. She could get away with this easily. Then she'd collect Wirt's money and wipe that irritating smile off his face in one blow.

Lachdanan's house was a small two-room affair. "Spartan" would have been an understatement. The main room contained a small bookcase, a wooden table and three chairs. A small iron pot hung in the fireplace, and there was a shelf nearby that held a few dishes and utensils. The remaining furnishings consisted of a couple of large chests pushed against one wall, a wooden rack for weapons (two swords, a mace and a halberd), another rack for his armor, and a thin rectangular rug. The small bedroom contained a narrow bed with a thin mattress, a wooden nightstand, a wash basin, a third chest and a small closet.

But the place was spotless. Not only that, but every single item in the house seemed to be at a right angle to something else. The books on the bookshelf were arranged from largest to smallest, as were the dishes on the shelf by the fireplace.

When Lachdanan came home, he took off his armor and laid each piece on the table. Then he sat down and carefully cleaned and polished each piece. As he finished with one, he'd get up and place it on the armor rack. The last two pieces to be cleaned were his sword and the Veil of Steel.

Next, he sat at the table for a dinner that consisted of a couple slices of bread, a piece of cheese and a very small glass of wine. While he ate, he silently read passages from a well-thumbed copy of *The Wisdom of Zakarum*.

Valeria waited. Finally, he finished his meal and returned *The Wisdom of Zakarum* to its place in the bookcase. Between waiting for him to come home and then waiting for him to tend to his weapons and eat, Valeria had been

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under the bed for well over an hour-and-a-half. She had already vowed to kill Wirt and Sister Sylverwraithe, and maybe Nova, just for good measure, several times over. At least Lachdanan's obsessive tidiness extended under the bed. There was not a single speck of dust there to tickle her nose.

Now that Lachdanan was done eating, Valeria hoped he would go to bed so she could accomplish her mission and leave. Lachdanan wasted no time in dashing those hopes. He retrieved one of the swords from the weapons rack, stood squarely on the carpet, and began his evening exercise routine.

Each move was precise and methodical. Not a single motion was wasted. "Guard. Turn. Parry. Dodge. Spin. Ha! Thrust." Second repetition. "Guard. Turn. Parry. Dodge. Spin. Ha! Thrust." Third repetition....

Valeria found it absolutely scandalous how someone so handsome could be so boring. Then she had a thought that cheered her up slightly: Perhaps all he needed was the right woman to break him out of his rut and add some excitement to his life.

Lachdanan completed twenty-five repetitions before returning his sword to its place on the weapons rack. Then he knelt on the carpet in prayer.

Of course, thought Valeria. *What'll he do next? Compose a short opera? Will this man's day never end? And Wirt is dead meat on a stick. He doesn't realize it yet, but he is.*

Finally, Lachdanan rose from his knees and turned out the lantern. While Valeria's eyes were still adjusting to the dark, he disrobed, folded his clothes, put them away and climbed into bed. Efficient as ever, Lachdanan was asleep within minutes.

The cheap wooden bed sagged under Lachdanan's weight and Valeria found herself pinned to the floor with nothing between her and Captain Lachdanan but a thin straw-filled mattress. Valeria fought back a rush of panic.

She exhaled, trying to make herself as thin as possible. When Lachdanan shifted position, she scooted out from under the bed.

Lachdanan was asleep on his stomach; his arm hung over the edge of the bed and his hand rested on the wooden floor. Valeria could see the glint of his ring in the moonlight. She reached into her shirt for the lump of clay and waited until she heard Lachdanan snore. Then she carefully reached for his hand and gently pressed his ring into the soft clay.

Nothing to it, thought Valeria. She rose to a crouch and then slowly stood. It was a warm night and Lachdanan had pushed his blanket down to his ankles.

As she pocketed the clay bearing the impression of Lachdanan's ring, Valeria took a moment to admire the way the moonlight played across the muscles of his back. Regardless of Wirt's theory on the subject, she was not about to check Lachdanan's butt for diamonds, however.

Valeria smiled. The Ladies in Waiting would just die when they heard about this one. She turned to leave. Four paces, and out the window. Nothing could be easier. Just as Valeria moved to take her first step, a tomcat outside decided he was lonely.

Just perfect, thought Valeria wincing. As she leaped for the window, Captain Lachdanan lunged out of bed and caught her by the ankle. She felt like a fish on a line as he dragged her back across the floor and stood.

"What in Zakarum's name...?" began Lachdanan angrily.

Even if Valeria had been able to speak, she would have been at an utter loss for words at that moment. Lachdanan still had her by the ankle and was holding her more-or-less at arm's length. Her ears burned and she felt the blood rushing to her cheeks. This was not entirely due to the fact that she was dangling upside-down.

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Lachdanan looked down and saw what part of his body was at eye-level to the intruder. "For crying out loud," he muttered. He grabbed the blanket off his bed with his free hand.

"Who are you?" demanded Lachdanan, dropping her none too gently on the floor and wrapping the blanket around his waist.

Valeria looked up at him and he studied her face for a moment.

"I take it back," said Lachdanan. "I don't want to know. I don't care." He reached down, grabbed Valeria by the wrist and shoulder, and marched her out of his house. In short order, he handed her off to a white-armored Town Guard and instructed him to lock her up.

During Caravan, jail for small-time offenders like Valeria consisted of two outdoor pens across the river at the west end of town. The guard relieved Valeria of her bow and quiver, and locked her in the women's pen.

The accommodations consisted of a latrine in the far corner, a barrel of water, and a few blankets of dubious cleanliness. Except for a 200-pound woman sleeping off a drunk, Valeria had the pen to herself. She sat down on a rock and sighed. Seeing her locked up like this would have made Shinobi O'Hattaran's entire life.

Then a memory made her smile. Once, she and the Ladies in Waiting had sneaked into a tavern and there had been a Bard telling erotic stories for the audience. The Bard, Solo had been her name, had used a number of creative euphemisms in her telling of the adventures of a naïve young Amazon. One of them became a running joke among the Ladies in Waiting and was almost guaranteed to break the group into fits of laughter. In fact, more than a few hunts had been spoiled - the prey frightened away by girlish giggles - when one of them had uttered the phrase, "Massive Staff of Manhood."

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13. The Pen

"On your feet, Rangers!" shouted Hector Gorash.

Valeria awakened. It was not quite dawn. Across the path, Gorash stood outside the men's pen. There were more people in the men's pen than in the women's pen, and Valeria recognized a number of them. Alchemist Zhar was curled up asleep in one corner, an odd smile on his face. Tommy Farnham lay sprawled in the middle of the pen, snoring loudly. Wirt was sitting on a rock, watching Gorash address the three Rangers who had picked a fight with the Barbarian at the tavern the night before. The three Rangers looked like they had fallen off a cliff.

Gorash shook his head. "Pathetic. Just pathetic. Were you possessed by demons or just plain stupid?"

There was an uncomfortable silence among the jailed Rangers. "The Barbarian started it," accused one lamely.

"Excuse me," shouted Gorash. "You people are supposed to know better than to get involved in barroom brawls! And if you do get into one, you're supposed to win! That Barbarian gave you three such a sound thrashing that he was happy to pony up his share of the damages to Ogden and be on his way. You're lucky I wasn't able to find him because I would have given him your jobs if he hadn't left town!"

The three Rangers studied their boots silently.

"Do you have any idea how much I love having one of the Town Guards come tell me in the middle of the night that three of my men are in jail?" continued Gorash. "Do you have any idea how long I'm going to be hearing about the lax discipline among the Rangers from Captain Wet Blanket? I'll give you a hint: Get your high boots and see Pepin for some bug repellent, because it's almost as long as you three are going to be on swamp patrol!"

This time there were moans and groans from the Rangers.

Gorash called to a Town Guard who was standing some distance away and ordered him to release the three Rangers. The white-armored guard made a Herculean effort to hide how much he enjoyed watching Rangers receive a dressing-down. The effort was a colossal failure.

"Report to me at the North Bridge for inspection in two hours," Gorash told his men. "Dismissed!" Gorash watched his men trudge off and shook his head. "Of all the damned silliness," he muttered and then left.

"Psst! Over here," Wirt called to Valeria after Gorash left. "Did you get it?"

Valeria reached inside her shirt for the lump of clay. It had hardened slightly during the night, but still bore the imprint of Lachdanan's ring. She held it up for Wirt to see.

"Pay up. Five hundred gold pieces," she said. Her voice was starting to return. The sentence still came out as a hoarse whisper, but without the embarrassing squeaks and squeals that had plagued her the last couple of days.

Wirt sighed. "Yeah, yeah. As soon as we get out of here."

"And when is that?" Valeria wanted to know.

Wirt shrugged. "When somebody comes to get us."

"Why are you in jail?" asked Valeria.

"Captain Wet Blanket had me picked up after he caught you," said Wirt, "on the grounds that I must have had something to do with it."

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Once the sun came up, people began showing up to get their friends and relations out of the pen. It was a simple and informal procedure. The Town Guards released prisoners into the custody of just about anyone who seemed willing and able to be responsible for them for awhile.

Farnham's brother showed up to secure his release. Tommy Farnham staggered to the gate, clutching his head and whimpering a little.

"Hey, Bill," Wirt called to him. "Could you vouch for me too?"

Bill Farnham shook his head. "Toby, you're trouble and you know it," he replied. "Ordinarily, I can respect that, but I've got my hands full with my little brother here." He looked at Tommy and shook his head sympathetically. "Tommy, you've got to stop drinking so much. They say you tried to impress Glorianna Lester by picking a fight with Hrrrrgrsh-chutt."

Tommy groaned. "I don't remember. Can we go home?"

Bill sighed and retrieved Tommy's sword and other belongings from the Town Guard on duty. "Let's go get you cleaned up and dried out."

Valeria watched the Farnham brothers leave. Bill Farnham was every bit as dashing as Tommy wasn't. He wore a neatly trimmed beard and mustache, and his blond hair in a ponytail. Shaggy would have been the kindest way to describe Tommy, though mangy might have been a little more accurate. Bill's clothes were clean and colorful; Tommy's, not surprisingly, were filthy and stank. Tommy's weapon was a short sword; a soldier's weapon, and a low-ranking one at that. A sabre hung from Bill's waist; a gentleman's weapon. Bill had a lute slung over his shoulder. The only thing over Tommy's shoulder was a damp smear of vomit. Valeria wondered briefly how he'd managed to barf down his own back.

A short time later, Conjurer Ichabod showed up to collect Zhar. Alchemist Zhar greeted his fellow Robed Wonder with a broad grin on his face.

"What in the name of Mana happened to you?" asked Ichabod.

"That Adria is an amazing, and flexible, woman," grinned Zhar. "What a night. You would not believe some of the things she can..."

Ichabod cut him off and changed the subject. "Why are you in jail?"

"Well," smiled Zhar. "While we were resting, we got to talking shop and it turned out that she had some interesting ideas about some of the potions I've been working on, so I ran out to get them for her. I was on my way back to her house when someone leaped out from behind some crates, hit me and robbed me. Next thing I knew, one of the Town Guards was shaking me awake."

"And they put you in jail for getting mugged? Boy, Captain Lachdanan gets stricter every day," said Ichabod.

Zhar just grinned and limped out the gate to his friend. "Well, it's not entirely their fault," explained Zhar. "Ever since I was with Adria, I can't seem to stop smiling. I guess they thought I was drunk. What a woman though. There's this thing that she does..." He gestured vaguely.

"I don't want to hear it, Bryon. What did you lose when you were mugged?" asked Ichabod.

"Just a few gold coins," smiled Zhar, "and, let's see, there was an experimental batch of growth serum, a flask of Oil of Duplication, some mutagenic compounds, an Oil of Hardness and a bunch of Mana potions. I suppose the Oil of Hardness and the blue potions have some resale value, but the rest of it's pretty unstable and useless, unless you have a fully equipped alchemy lab. I just hope whoever has them has the good sense not to mix them together." Alchemist Zhar grinned. "You know, I never knew what the studs on studded leather armor were for..."

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Conjurer Ichabod sighed. "Will you please wipe that smile off your face?"

"I can't," grinned Zhar.

By late afternoon, Wirt and Valeria were the only two people unclaimed. Realizing early on that she had nowhere to go and nothing to do anyway, Valeria did not spend as much time brooding over her incarceration as she might have otherwise. Besides, it was finally beginning to dawn on her that she was no longer in Riparia and wasn't entitled to special treatment. All she could do was wait and see what happened.

Aside from periodically reminding Wirt that he owed her a fortune (watching the boy's mood darken each time she mentioned the money never failed to brighten Valeria's own spirits), Valeria did something she rarely did back home: She sat and thought. Maybe there was something to Lord Halla's banishing her. The Lachdanan episode was probably a little over the line even for her. On the other hand, what harm was really done? In the grand scheme of things: none.

Then again, there was the matter of those star melons. She remembered the man with the Riparian accent pleading for more time to pay his debt. She and the Ladies in Waiting had damaged the crop of star melons he had been counting on. Granted, at least part of the problem seemed to be of the man's own making. The House of Halla had reimbursed the farms involved for their loss, and there had been the suggestion that the Riparian man had actually gambled away the money he owed Farmer Lester. Nonetheless, Valeria felt a certain responsibility. She shrugged. There wasn't much she could do about it from jail.

Valeria had been napping near the side of the pen when Captain Lachdanan, Prince Albrecht and a third Town Guard arrived. She awakened when a shadow passed over her face and then let out a startled yelp when she saw Lachdanan glowering down at her. "All right," he said. "Feel free to explain yourself. What were you doing in my house last night?"

Now that her voice was coming back, Valeria felt at a loss for words.

"Apparently," volunteered Albrecht, "she had a bet with our good friend, Toby Wirt."

Valeria looked across the path and saw that the Prince had already ordered Wirt's release. Albrecht caught her eye and the instructions on his face were clear: It would be best if you were to apologize to Lachdanan immediately and sincerely.

The number of times in her life Valeria had apologized to anyone could have been counted on the fingers of one hand. She sighed. There probably wasn't any other way she'd be getting out of jail.

"I meant no harm," she told Lachdanan.

"Nevertheless," accused Lachdanan, "you violated my home and my privacy like a common thief! Why should we not treat you like one?"

What rankled Valeria the most was being called "common." "I apologize," she said.

"This time, that's all we need," said Albrecht. He nodded to the guard on duty to release her.

"My Prince," began Lachdanan, not eager to let Valeria off the hook so easily.

"Now, Michael," the Prince told him gently. "If we imprisoned every girl who did something foolish for you or because of you, we'd have to dig another dungeon. I'm afraid your good looks and the strength of your character are twin curses that you'll just have to continue to bear."

Lachdanan sighed and shot Valeria a warning glare. Valeria smiled, turning on all the charm she could muster up. "Just think what a great story this will be to tell our grandchildren."

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When so inclined, Valeria was more than capable of charming the boots off any ordinary man. Unfortunately, Michael Lachdanan was no ordinary man. He didn't even crack a smile. "There will be no grandchildren," he said icily, and turned his back to leave.

Valeria bit her lip, annoyed at the rebuff. "Captain Lachdanan?" she called.

"What?"

"You have the most magnificent ass I've ever seen on a man," she deadpanned.

His face flushed and he turned and stiffly walked away.

Prince Albrecht sighed and shook his head. "I wish you hadn't needed to get that last dig in. Captain Lachdanan is a proud man, and that pride is justified. As the Captain of the Town Guard, he sees it as his duty to set an example of honor and decency for all the people under his protection. In his mind, when people fail to live up to a certain standard, it's not because of flaws in their characters, but rather because he somehow failed to be an adequate role model." Albrecht paused and glanced over at Wirt to make sure he was paying attention too. "It hurts him very deeply when people call him 'Captain Wet Blanket.'"

The Prince allowed his words to sink in and Valeria was surprised to realize that she felt a little bad for the Captain and how she had behaved toward him.

"Now then," continued Albrecht, "what I really want to know, Toby, is just how you came up with 500 gold pieces to lose on this ill-advised wager."

"I had a run of good luck shooting dice with some rivermen down at the docks," explained Wirt.

"Toby," warned the Prince.

"I swear, My Prince," said Wirt. "You know I would never tell you a lie."

Albrecht smiled. "I know," he agreed, "but you're not telling me everything either."

"I won 500 pieces of gold and a few odd magic items," said Wirt, and then hesitated. "Ahh, some coin pouches got separated from their owners during the brawl at the tavern last night."

The Prince nodded. "Very well then. Pay Val what you owe her. I want you to donate anything that might have come your way last night to Lazarus," he instructed the boy. "Understand?"

Wirt bowed low. "Yes, My Prince." He turned and obediently handed Valeria a sack of gold coins.

Valeria was startled. Wirt was like an entirely different person in the presence of Prince Albrecht. There was no trace of the smug, obnoxious little schemer.

Albrecht seemed to have a way with his subjects-to-be that lay far outside any experience she had ever had with the citizens of Riparia. What made the people of Khanduras adore him while the people of Riparia barely tolerated her? She had to know.

Valeria wasn't even quite sure how to address him. 'My Prince' would not have been appropriate since he wasn't actually her prince. Technically, they were equals, so she could have called him 'Albrecht' or 'Prince Albrecht.' A number of the townsfolk seemed comfortable calling him 'Al,' but that certainly didn't seem right. Valeria decided to go with the other extreme. "Your Majesty?" she began. Besides, he had no way of knowing that she was the heir to the Riparian throne.

"Please," smiled Albrecht. "My father's 'Your Majesty.' Call me Al."

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Valeria couldn't help smiling herself. Then it occurred to her that if anyone back home had dared to address her as 'Val,' she would have made it her personal mission to bring grief of epic proportions to the offending party's life.

"Al, it is then," she said. She went on to explain briefly her situation. By the time she finished, her recovering voice was barely a whisper.

Albrecht listened attentively. "It sounds like you've had a challenging few days," he said. "I'd very much like to compare notes with you about our respective kingdoms. Would it be all right with you if we were to meet this evening by the fountain? I've promised Torvan here that I would join him and his family for dinner." He indicated the Town Guard who had accompanied him and Lachdanan to the pens. The guard's stout build and curly red hair identified him as a member of the Griswold family even more effectively than a sign around his neck would have.

Valeria overcame a momentary urge to demand that Albrecht break his appointment with his lackey. "That would be fine," she agreed.

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14. Red Vex, Black Jade & Lazarus

"Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens-over-Riparia of the House of Halla." Prince Albrecht greeted her as he and Torvan crossed the Town Square. She had been 'Val' for so long now that Valeria almost looked around to see whom he was addressing.

Valeria smiled. "You can call me..." She hesitated. She couldn't quite bring herself to tell him to call her 'Val.' "...ah, Valeria will do."

Valeria had been waiting by the fountain for quite some time. It seemed that the people of Tristram enjoyed long meals. There had been periodic pangs of annoyance at being kept waiting, but, for the most part, Valeria kept her peace. She had developed a newfound patience over the last couple of days. Plus, a town square in the middle of Caravan was never a dull place to be. She had crossed the square to Hogan Griswold's stand and tried one of his 'hoagies.' Hogan himself had been home dining with his family and the Prince, of course, but he'd left an assistant on duty. After she ate, she watched some actors perform a skit based on a "Lord Cool & Stupidhead" story. It was a quality performance that, at its climax, even featured a real cow.

The Prince sat beside her on the edge of the fountain. Torvan stood nearby. It occurred to Valeria that Prince Albrecht might have been one of the ten people in the world least in need of a bodyguard, and she told him so. "From what I've seen," Valeria told the Prince, "there's not a soul in this town who'd wish you harm. And if there was, he wouldn't last long at the hands of the other townsfolk."

Albrecht laughed. "My father insists that a guard accompany me when I leave the palace, but that's all right." He reached up and playfully punched Torvan on the arm. "I enjoy the company."

"And we enjoy yours," added Torvan. His voice bore only traces of his father's accent. "Guarding the Prince is a much sought-after duty among the Town Guards."

Valeria sighed. When she'd had guards assigned to her in Riparia, they were almost always low-ranking rookies. Anyone able to avoid the duty did. Certainly, no guard had ever invited her to dine with his family. The reason was obvious: she abused and belittled her guards. She hadn't realized just how unpopular she was in Riparia, or why, until she'd seen Prince Albrecht. Throughout their conversation, Albrecht had waved to passersby and greeted most of them by name. Valeria didn't know the name of her own chambermaid.

"Are you all right, Valeria?" asked Albrecht.

"I'm sorry," said Valeria. "It's just that I've never seen the kind of loyalty you inspire in your subjects." She waved her arm at the busy square. "There's not a single person here who wouldn't storm the Gates of Hell itself for you."

"I think you're exaggerating," smiled Albrecht. "I'm just..."

"She's right, Al," interrupted Wirt, joining them.

"One day you'll be the greatest king Khanduras has ever known," agreed Torvan.

"Well, I do the best I can," said the Prince humbly.

"My Prince," said Wirt. "You do much more than that. No one in this land knows that better than I do. I owe you my life, my identity -- my very humanity."

"Toby, I did nothing for you that one friend wouldn't have done for another," argued Albrecht.

"Before you came along, I had no friends," said Wirt. "Believe me when I tell you, if you need the Gates of Hell stormed, I'll be the first in line."

Val Halla's Journey: Tristram

Suddenly, the sound of strange music came from a tent at the southwest corner of the square. Valeria couldn't quite identify the instruments at work other than a steady, almost hypnotic, drumbeat. In any event, the music had an eerie, unearthly quality to it.

"Have you seen the dancers yet?" asked Wirt, nodding toward the tent. "I hear they put on quite a show. I was on my way over to see for myself when I saw you here."

"Shall we go have a look?" suggested Albrecht.

Valeria nodded and she, Albrecht, and Torvan followed Wirt to the dancers' tent.

The source of the music was a small band playing near a simple wooden stage. There was a man playing a mandolin, two men playing Pan pipes of some sort and a fourth man pounding on an array of different-sized drums before him. All four members of the band were emaciated pale-skinned old men. Their eyes were glassy.

There were no seats inside the tent, and it was packed to capacity. Valeria was not able to get much further in than the doorway. The combined body heat of the audience and the non-existent ventilation within the tent was almost unbearable. Only the cool breeze from the doorway on the back of Valeria's neck provided any relief. Furthermore, a strange musky scent hung thick in the air that immediately made Valeria feel fuzzyheaded and distracted.

No one else seemed bothered by the oppressive heat and odors inside the tent. The entire audience, which consisted of mostly, but not entirely, men, was staring mesmerized at a red-haired young woman dancing on the stage. In each hand, she held a razor-sharp scimitar and, as she danced and spun, she used them to slice pieces from her flimsy costume and fling them into the crowd.

Valeria frowned. (The outside air felt positively icy down her back and neck.) There was something wrong with this scene. Such a performance should have been accompanied by hoots and cheers from the audience. But, except for the music and the sound of the dancer's light-footed tread on the wooden stage, this place was as silent as death. Valeria felt a black dread grip her heart. She tried to speak. She wanted to shout to everyone present that they were in grave danger and that they should run for their lives, but her voice seemed to be gone again. She took a half step backward toward the salvation of the fresh outside air.

Then, the dancer looked Valeria straight in the eye and Valeria froze. The dancer licked her lips seductively. She arched her back as the two scimitars went over her shoulders behind her. As she straightened her arms, the curved blades sliced up the sides of her gossamer costume from the inside. It fell to the stage in two pieces and a soft sigh rippled through the audience.

The dancer regarded her audience with a green-eyed gaze, licked her lips again and then spun offstage behind a black curtain. At the same moment, a second dancer leaped onto the stage. She was just as lovely as the first, but that was the end of the similarities. This one had olive skin and long black hair that snapped like a whip when she tossed her head. Where the first dancer's costume had been white and delicate like mist, the new dancer wore black leather and matching thigh-high boots with four-inch heels. Instead of swords, she had a six-foot snake.

As Valeria watched the new dancer perform, she had a nagging feeling that there had been something she was worried about. She couldn't imagine what though.

After awhile, the black-haired dancer retired the snake backstage and was joined by the first dancer. The two girls slithered around each other to the music and the temperature in the tent began to rise. They twirled and spun in and out of embraces, their fingers, lips and hair dancing across each other's bodies.

A gust of cool air from outside blew against Valeria's back and she startled. Beside her, Wirt, Torvan and even Albrecht stared at the stage, their eyes glazed.

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Look at them, thought Valeria in disgust. She was especially disappointed in Albrecht. They're probably imagining being with those dancers; touching their soft smooth skin and stroking luxurious black and orange hair. Fantasizing about nimble delicate fingers freeing them from my clothes, and hot wet kisses tracing across my skin...

Valeria shivered and stepped backwards to regain her balance. She found herself outside, where the fresh air broke the spell. Valeria felt disoriented and feverish. She had no idea how long she had been in the tent, but it was fully dark out now. She staggered over to the fountain, trying to sort out, or at least fully recall, the odd thoughts that had been running through her head.

When she reached the fountain, she plunged her head into the cold water.

Valeria stayed submerged until her lungs ached. Finally, she pulled her head up and gasped. The cold water dripping down her front and back helped ease the symptoms brought on by the performance in the tent.

As Valeria emerged from the water, someone handed her a handkerchief. "Been to see the dancers," he stated as she wiped the water from her eyes.

The Archbishop Lazarus sat on the edge of the fountain, a half-eaten hoagie in his hand. He was wearing a simple white robe with gray trim rather than the full ceremonial garb he'd been wearing the last time Valeria saw him.

"They've created quite a stir over the last day or two," said Lazarus as Valeria handed him back his handkerchief. "They're enhancing their performance with magic, you know. It must be fairly powerful magic to affect such a large audience of both men and women."

"Can't you stop them?" asked Valeria. On the one hand, it was good to know that her libido hadn't just charged off into the wilderness on its own accord. On the other hand, she didn't like the idea of being under anyone's spell.

Lazarus shrugged. "They're not doing anything illegal. It would be different if they were using sex magic to commit a crime or to gain an unfair advantage over someone, but as far as I can tell, it's being used strictly for entertainment purposes."

Valeria sat down and tried to wring some of the water out of her hair. "I still don't like it," she complained. "I feel like I've been violated."

"I'm afraid I can't help you much beyond advising you to stay away from them," said Lazarus. "As I said, it's perfectly legal. Believe me, nothing would make Captain Lachdanan happier than catching those dancers committing a crime and having an excuse to make them leave town."

The mention of Captain Lachdanan gave Valeria a guilty start.

"In fact," continued Lazarus, "Lachdanan tried to have such performances barred from Tristram. Unfortunately for him, he was opposed by both the United Flesh Workers' Guild and by Dashan Warriv, the President of the Caravan Merchant and Performers Association. King Leoric finally ordered him to abandon his campaign when Warriv threatened to have Caravan bypass Khanduras and make two stops in Westmarch instead."

"You sound as if you didn't share his opposition," ventured Valeria.

"Philosophically, I did and still do," said Lazarus. "But Lachdanan is a Warrior. It's in his nature to battle all evil whenever he encounters it. I have the luxury of avoiding losing battles. This one was destined to end in failure. Even without the threat of a boycott by Caravan, Lachdanan's cause only enjoyed lukewarm popular support at best. In fact, without Mrs. Ogden's very vocal support, he probably wouldn't have even done as well as he did."

"People don't like being told what to do," suggested Valeria.

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"On the contrary," replied Lazarus with a mischevious wink. "To a certain extent, they need to be told what to do. It's being told not to do something that really ruffles their feathers."

Valeria laughed. She'd keep that in mind if she ever got back to Riparia.

Lazarus shrugged. "The truth is small temptations are good for the soul. They give us the opportunity to test the strength of our convictions and, if we find ourselves wanting, we can make improvements. Sometimes a small stumble on the Lighted Path may be what saves you from falling into the darkness." He paused. "Hmm. Pardon me for a minute." Lazarus reached into his pocket for a notepad and a charcoal stick and then scribbled a quick note. "I might be able to use that in my next sermon."

Across the square, the music died down and lights came on inside the tent. Valeria could hear the groggy voices of the audience as the spell wore off.

"Still," mused Lazarus. "It's a pity Captain Lachdanan didn't get a chance to take his case to court. It would have made an interesting trial. I've always been fascinated by law. My father was an Advocate, and I myself was studying to be a Counselor when I answered the call of Zakarum. Ah well. 'One door closes, another one opens. We choose our paths and they choose us.'"

People were starting to wander out of the tent. They looked dazed and disoriented.

Lazarus got up. "It looks as though I'd better go man the Confessional." He held up his hand and made the Sign of Zakarum. "It's been a pleasure visiting with you. May Zakarum guide you and protect you."

"Thanks," replied Valeria. She was not of a religious persuasion and was not quite sure of the proper response. "You too."

Lazarus favored her with a good-natured chuckle and turned to leave; unaware of the path that would choose him within the next forty-eight hours.

Valeria saw Wirt, Albrecht and Torvan exit the tent and called to them.

"Where did you go?" asked Albrecht. "We looked for you inside."

"I got bored and left," lied Valeria. "You three seemed to be enjoying the show so much, I hated to disturb you."

"Well," said Albrecht, "they certainly weren't the kind of dancers I was expecting. Though, in hindsight, I don't see why not. Nobody gets that excited about acrobats."

"I need a drink," said Wirt.

"I need a cold bath," volunteered Torvan.

"Try the fountain," suggested Valeria.

Albrecht noted her dripping hair and didn't hesitate. "You're right," he said, when he pulled his head from the water and wiped his face with his sleeve. "That does help."

Wirt and Torvan followed suit.

"Now then," said the Prince. "I believe Toby said he was going to buy us all some drinks."

Wirt's jaw dropped. "But..." he began, and then finished. "Yes, My Prince."

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"Oh come on, Toby. I'm just teasing you and you know it." He patted the younger boy on the back. "Drinks are on the Royal Treasury."

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Val Halla's Journey: Tristram

15. Glorianna

As Valeria, Albrecht, Wirt and Torvan approached the entrance to the Tavern of the Rising Sun, they heard a scream from within. Seconds later, a man raced out the door, holding his crotch. Inside, Nova shook the cold from her fingertips.

"He asked for something that wasn't on the menu," Nova explained in answer to the questioning looks of the Prince and his party.

"You have got to teach me that spell," insisted Valeria, her eyes full of admiration.

Nova showed them to a table away from the heavy traffic around the door and the bar. "Mrs. Ogden just closed the kitchen, but I'm sure..."

Albrecht held up his hand to stop her. "Mrs. Griswold prepared an outstanding and very large meal for Torvan and me. Valeria? Toby?"

Valeria and Toby both shook their heads.

"Just a pitcher of beer and a little something to keep it settled then," said Albrecht.

"Albrecht, I'm shocked at you," said Mrs. Ogden, when she brought their order. "I saw you coming out of that immoral little peepshow. What would your father say?" Behind her, Nova wore a helpless "don't blame me" expression.

"I doubt he'd approve, but then he doesn't quite approve of me being here in town either," answered Albrecht with a smile. "The truth is, we didn't realize what kind of show it was until we got there."

"I didn't see you come out before the end of the show," observed Mrs. Ogden.

"It's not his fault," interjected Gillian, who had been passing by with a tray full of empty mugs. "They cast some sort of spell on you in there." She hesitated, her face flushed. It was clear to Valeria that Gillian would have preferred not to volunteer the information she was about to give, but felt it important in defending her prince. "You know I've always loved dance, so I went the first night," she said. "When I saw what was going on, I turned to leave but then the black-haired dancer caught my eye. I couldn't move and I lost all track of time." She looked at the floor and shook her head. "All through the next day, I had the strangest thoughts running through my head."

Mrs. Ogden looked at Gillian sympathetically. "That's all right, dear," she said. "I'm sure no one here thinks any the less of you." She turned to Albrecht. "You're not off the hook quite so easily. Regardless of whether you were misled into that tent..." She spared Wirt an accusing glance. "...as our future ruler, we're counting on you to have the force of will to resist temptation."

"I know," said Albrecht. "And you're right. I'll try harder in the future."

Mrs. Ogden finally favored him with a broad smile. "I know you will, My Prince." She set their order on the table and bowed.

Nova joined them as Mrs. Ogden returned to the kitchen. "Sorry about that," she apologized. "You know how she gets."

"If someone had spoken to me like that in Riparia, I'd have had her cleaning the stables with her fingernails for a month," said Valeria.

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"Our friend is the heir to the House of Halla in Riparia," explained in response to the questioning looks Gillian and Nova exchanged. "Anyway, Mrs. Ogden has the best interests of the kingdom at heart," he continued. "Her concerns, whether I entirely agree with them or not, are valid. But even if I thought she was a crazy woman, I would have still given her my full attention while she spoke her piece. Part of it is simple good manners, but a lot of it has to do with the fact that anyone can come up with a good idea or insight from time to time. You just have to listen."

Albrecht paused thoughtfully. "For example, Mrs. Ogden got me thinking: If I was bewitched or enchanted, then that's a weakness that could endanger the entire kingdom. It might not have occurred to me if she hadn't pointed it out. I'll go see Lazarus after Caravan leaves. Maybe he can show me some way of protecting myself better."

Valeria nodded. Taking the time to listen. That was his secret. Mrs. Ogden had walked away from that table beaming, knowing that she had made a difference. If that was the way everyone felt after talking to Prince Albrecht, it was no wonder Khanduras was so crazy for him. Valeria doubted she'd ever be able to develop the kind of patience that Albrecht used to such advantage.

While they were talking, Gillian had taken her dishes to the kitchen and returned to the table. She was about to join her friends when she spied a young woman sitting alone at an adjacent table. "Oh no," breathed Gillian and excused herself.

The woman at the table was the same one who had been with Tommy Farnham the night before. She looked to be about Valeria's age, perhaps a year or two older, and was pretty in a mousy sort of way. Her makeup had been heavy-handedly and inexpertly applied though. A tear had plowed a canal through it as it rolled down her cheek. She sat, head resting on hand, and elbow resting on the table, staring into a glass filled with a blue liquid.

"Glorianna Lester, what are you drinking?" Gillian asked.

"Blue Whoopee," said Glorianna without looking up. A Blue Whoopee contained wine and spices, but the key ingredient was extract from a Full Mana Potion. The blue potions that spellcasters used to restore their magical energies were well known for the slight side effect they had on the imbiber's libido. In a Blue Whoopee, the aphrodisiac effect was magnified five to ten times.

"Who served you that?" Gillian asked, and shot a glance at Nova who shook her head.

"Mixed it m'self," replied Glorianna. "Was busy. No one was behind the bar."

"Glorianna," said Gillian gently. "Don't you know you're only supposed to drink those with someone you love?"

"I know," said Glorianna with a sad sigh. "It's just that I thought I would've found somebody by now."

Valeria found it a little odd that a relatively attractive young woman would have trouble finding a companion in a tavern where the barmaid had to just about freeze the balls off of unwanted suitors.

The tavern door opened and Hector Gorash entered. There was a knot of men gathered at the end of the bar near the door, so he stepped around them and strode up to the far end of the bar. He was just about to order a drink from Ogden when Glorianna spotted him.

"Hector!" she called.

Even through his cloak and armor, Valeria imagined that she could see his shoulder blades tense as he recognized the voice. He did not turn around.

"Hector!" she called again, this time rising to her feet. Her voice was clear over the surrounding conversation. "Come on, don't be like that."

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Gillian and Nova both tried to get her to sit down again, but Glorianna was having none of it. "Oh, Hector, I'm all alone. Won't you take me home?" pleaded Glorianna, and then giggled at the half-rhyme.

"No," muttered Gorash firmly. "Go away."

Glorianna came up behind him and tried to wrap her arms around him. "Won't you take me to the barn and teach me the Fleshdance again?"

Gorash pulled himself free, shoving Glorianna the other way. "I said no!" he snapped. "What the hell do you want from me anyway?"

"I want you to take me in your arms and dance the Fleshdance with me again," breathed Glorianna.

The tavern had fallen silent to watch the unfolding drama, and Valeria could see the heat rushing to the Ranger's cheeks. "Damn you!" said Gorash, backing away. "Thanks to you, I got demoted and Farmer Lester's got a lien on everything I own for the next five years. Isn't that enough?"

The demotion explained why Valeria had never heard him addressed as Captain Gorash even though he commanded the Khanduran Rangers. The proper title for his current rank would have been Sir Gorash. No doubt Albrecht had introduced him by his first name at the opening ceremony to spare the man from having his dirty laundry aired in front of strangers. Unfortunately, Glorianna seemed to have her mind set on making a public spectacle.

"You said you would love me forever," accused Glorianna.

"And you said you were Farmer Lester's niece!" Gorash shot back.

Glorianna shrugged. "I lied. You lied. Let's kiss and make up."

Gorash stepped back a pace, reaching for his sword. His hand lingered near the hilt for a long moment, murder in his eyes. He took a deep breath. "We are through," he told her finally. "I want nothing more to do with you. Ever." He turned his back on her to leave.

Glorianna screamed and hurled her drink at him. She missed.

Gorash looked down at the pool of blue liquid and broken glass and shook his head. Then he spoke loudly enough for all the patrons in the silent tavern to hear: "I'd advise the rest of you to have nothing to do with this madwoman either. She's poison." He stepped around the mess and made for the exit. As he reached the door, it opened and Farmer Lester stepped in.

Farmer Lester assessed the situation with those cold, calculating eyes that Valeria remembered from her encounter with him at the docks. "Come to bang my wife again?" he asked Gorash in that deceptively folksy voice. "That could cost you."

The temperature in the Tavern of the Rising Sun dropped many degrees. "Don't," said Gorash, "push it."

Farmer Lester, apparently unperturbed, stepped aside and allowed the Ranger to leave. As he did, he touched the brim of his straw hat and nodded politely. "Sir Gorash."

Farmer Lester waited until the door had swung fully shut behind Gorash. "All right then. Come along, Glorianna," he said. "Your chores aren't getting done while you're wasting time here."

"I'm not going," said Glorianna sullenly. "I'm going to stay here until I find someone to do the Fleshdance with me." She looked around the bar. Not a man met her eye. "What's the matter with you people? Isn't there a man who'll do the Fleshdance with me?" She looked at Valeria. "How 'bout you, Red? I've never done the Fleshdance with a girl before."

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Startled, Valeria just shook her head. After her experience with the dancers, the proposition made her skin crawl. Besides, there was something wrong with Glorianna that went far beyond too many Blue Whoopee's and a broken heart.

Farmer Lester strode across the floor and gripped her by the arm, his strong fingers digging into her flesh through her sleeve. "Now that's enough," he told her, the warm folksy facade momentarily gone. "You've caused more than enough commotion for one evening."

The look in Farmer Lester's eyes was all it took to banish the drunken rebellious teenager and reveal the very sober, very frightened child underneath. Valeria froze, half-standing, half-sitting. She wasn't sure what to do, or what she could do.

It was Albrecht who interceded. "Perhaps," he ventured cautiously, "she does not wish to go with you right now."

Lester looked startled for a split-second. "Oh, I didn't see you there, Al." He smiled. "No need to bother with us. My wife is full of girlish foolishness. Nothing that can't be disciplined when we get home."

Glorianna paled at the loosely veiled threat.

"If girlish foolishness is a problem for you, perhaps you shouldn't have married a thirteen-year-old," muttered Nova. She had spoken louder than she probably intended and Farmer Lester pierced her with a baleful glare.

"Now, now," said Lester calmly and smiling again. "Our marriage is perfectly legal and Glorianna herself consented to it as a way of settling her family's debt to me. Didn't you?"

"Yes, My Husband," said Glorianna miserably.

"And didn't you consent to be an obedient spouse and helpmate?"

"Yes, My Husband."

Albrecht stared pointedly at Lester's hand gripping his wife by the arm. "Why don't you let go of her?" he suggested.

"Oh, I couldn't do that, Al," said Lester jovially. "The last time I let go of her, that Ranger of yours defiled her. We can't risk that happening again, now can we? After all, *The Wisdom of Zakarum* says that a man's wife is the greatest of his possessions."

"Actually," said Albrecht, "*The Wisdom of Zakarum* says that 'The love of thy spouse is a greater treasure than all thy possessions.'"

"I'm a working man and haven't had time to do all the reading you've done," said Lester. "So I'm sure you're right, Al, but that's the way my pap taught it to me and it was always good enough for my ma."

"I'm sure it was," said Albrecht. "But I asked you to release her." He waited a beat. "And call me 'Your Majesty.'"

A startled murmur rippled through the room. "He never tells anyone to call him 'Your Majesty,'" Nova whispered to Valeria.

Lester let go for an instant, changed his mind, and finally let go again. "Well, Your Majesty," he said, touching the brim of his hat politely. "Glorianna has been my wife for almost five years and, by law, that gives me the right..."

Albrecht shook his head. "Glorianna is one of my father's subjects. That gives her the same rights you have." He looked at Glorianna. "Do you want to go home with him?"

Glorianna gave a barely perceptible shake of her head.

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"Of course she does," answered Lester, ignoring her. "No one else will have her. Even Sir Gorash can't stand the sight of her anymore."

"He wasn't asking you," came a new voice.

Lester looked around. The tight crowd of men at the end of the bar had parted to reveal the two dancers at its center. It was the red-haired dancer who had spoken.

"We'll be glad to look after her for tonight and for as long as she wishes to stay with us," volunteered the black-haired dancer.

"We know what she's going through," added the other dancer.

Albrecht looked a little surprised at the new twist. "If you prefer," he told Glorianna, "I can have Lazarus grant you sanctuary. He can help you find your way and, if you want..." He glanced up at Lester as he played his trump card. "...my father can grant you a divorce. As early as tomorrow morning."

It amazed Valeria how Lester seemed to cling to his kindly old farmer guise despite all evidence to the contrary. "Now you know that a divorce would render our contract with your family null and void," he told Glorianna gently. "That might make things hard on them. Unless, perhaps, your little sister is willing to take your place."

"You know the law well enough to know that any agreement entered into under duress isn't valid. So I hope that wasn't a threat," said Albrecht softly.

"Of course not, Your Majesty," said Lester. "I was just talking about a simple business arrangement."

The two dancers had moved on either side of Lester. "We think you should take your business elsewhere," said the black-haired one. Her voice was almost a purr. Lester looked her in the eye and the blood drained from his face. He took a step back and stumbled slightly. He tried to turn away, but only succeeded in being caught in the green-eye gaze of the other dancer.

She smiled charmingly. "Sometimes a girl just needs a little space to work things out," the red-haired dancer told him. "I'll bet you just about anything that your Glorianna will be back for you before you know it." Something in her tone made it more a threat than a reassurance.

Lester touched the brim of his hat. "Well, I'll hold you to that, young miss," he said weakly. He was backing toward the exit. He nodded to the Prince. "Your Majesty. It's always a pleasure," and then he was gone.

Albrecht looked confused. "Thank you, ladies," he told the dancers.

"I'm Scarlett and this is Jade," said the red-haired dancer.

"Well, thank you, Scarlett and Jade," said Albrecht. He turned to Glorianna again. "Would you like me to take you to Lazarus now?"

"No offense," said Jade, placing a comforting hand on Glorianna's shoulder, "but the last thing this girl needs is another man telling her what she should do. Let her stay with us for tonight. We were planning on going to see Lazarus tomorrow anyway."

"Is that what you want?" Albrecht asked Glorianna.

"I-I think so, My Prince," she said. "I'll be all right now."

"Very well then," said Albrecht. "If there's anything I can do for you, come find me or let one of the Town Guards know to come find me." He nodded at Torvan to make sure the order got passed on.

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"Thank you, Al," said Glorianna. She managed a smile. "Thank you for everything."

Scarlett and Jade followed Glorianna out the door. As they passed by Valeria, she heard Scarlett whisper to Jade: "Such Hatred."

"Delicious," agreed Jade.

"Mr. Ogden," called Albrecht. "Serve everyone a drink, on me."

A cheer went up and business and conversation in the Tavern of the Rising Sun quickly resumed.

Albrecht exhaled and sat down heavily. Valeria noticed that his hands were shaking a little.

"My Prince, you were magnificent," enthused Wirt. "You stood up for Glorianna just like you stood up for me against the Goblin King."

Albrecht smiled, drained from the confrontation. "Farmer Lester and my parents have been at cross-purposes from the very beginning. We want a happy and prosperous kingdom. Lester seems to prefer dealing with people who are miserable and indebted."

"People are just cows to him," said Nova. "He milks them and milks them until they have no value to him anymore."

"Then he has them butchered and eats them," added Wirt brightly.

"Toby!" scolded Gillian.

Wirt just smiled. "No one here can prove that he doesn't."

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Val Halla's Journey: Tristram

Interlude: The Ruin of Many a Poor Boy

If anything had gone right for Bers Jeffcham in the last couple of weeks, he must have blinked and missed it. It had started when Lord Halla's daughter and her band of girl thugs had ridden stampede through his family's star melon harvest. Thank Zakarum his grandfather had been able to get the House of Halla to pay for the damages. He had been counting on profits from that harvest to pay off his debt to Farmer Lester.

He had arrived in Tristram with roughly a sixth of his harvest and 800 gold pieces from the House of Halla's treasury. That was plenty to pay off Lester and still have a respectable profit left over. When he saw some rivermen playing a game of Skull Dice on the docks, Jeffcham saw a golden opportunity to build on that profit.

After three throws, he had to dip into the 500 gold pieces he owed Farmer Lester. After ten more rounds, he was down to his last gold piece. If he didn't get that money back Lester would all but own him and his entire family. There was nothing to do but to wager the last coin, pray to whatever gods were listening, and throw the dice.

He won and doubled his money.

He threw the dice again and won again. Four gold pieces. He threw again and won again.

And again.

And again.

Five incredible throws later, he had 512 gold pieces. Fortune had blessed him. He knew in his heart that he would just keep winning for as long as he kept playing.

Then that Wirt kid showed up and won it all on a single throw. Lousy little square-headed yellow-eyed wad of scavenger droppings had raked it all into his bag with a smug little smile on his face. He'd had no intention of giving Jeffcham a sporting chance to win it back.

Farmer Lester had been somewhat less than understanding. He gave him until the end of Caravan's stay in Tristram to come up with the money or Jeffcham would be looking at years of indentured servitude. A usufruct, he'd called it.

Well, he was usufruct all right. He'd sold most of his remaining star melons, but that hadn't even come close to raising the funds he needed. Particularly after he'd gambled those meager proceeds away.

It was after his last loss that he'd noticed the grinning wizard. The man had practically been skipping along the docks. Wizards were rich and this one was obviously drunk. If that wasn't opportunity knocking, nothing was.

Jeffcham smacked the orange-robed man across the back of the head with a barrel stave and went through his pockets. He must not have been a very good wizard, because he didn't have much money. He did have a belt full of potions though.

Selling the potions had been a problem since he didn't know what most of them were. The innkeeper at the Tavern of the Rising Sun wouldn't offer him more than a lousy twelve gold pieces apiece for the Mana potions. That seemed to be the going price. Ogden had thrown in a bottle of wine, and that was about the best deal he was going to get.

Now Jeffcham sat next to his last half-crate of star melons on the dock with an empty bottle of wine and a collection of potions that he could neither identify nor sell. Something had been growling at him from the darkness.

"Ah, shut the hell/hell up," shouted Jeffcham at Hrrrrgrrrsh-chutt's dogs. Acid hounds weren't so tough once they were caged and muzzled. He threw the empty bottle at them and one of them whined.

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Jeffcham considered his potions. He remembered a tale he had once heard about a bottle, much like one of these, that had had a genie inside. Shrugging, he opened one. It smelled vile.

Nauseated, he tossed the vial to the ground. No genie in there. He pulled the stopper out of another potion, and then stopped. Some of the potion had splattered on one of the star melons, and now the melon was making a curious stretching, tearing sound.

Jeffcham leaned forward and watched as the melon ballooned to three, then six times its normal size. He thumped it. It sounded solid and ripe.

He reached down and rolled a second melon through the small pool of liquid. It too swelled up to the diameter of a wagon wheel. "Oh yes," he breathed. "This is more like it." He reached for a third melon and accidentally dripped some of the potion in his hand on the giant star melon.

There was a loud pop and the giant star melon turned into two giant star melons.

Jeffcham looked at the vial and laughed. This was the answer. This would solve everything. He'd be able to sell these giant melons and pay off his debts. If he only hadn't spilled that growth potion.

He stared down at the puddle. Then he looked at the potion in his hand. Then he looked back at the puddle. He had an idea that was so crazy, it just had to work.

He poured the Duplication potion into the puddle of Growth potion. Instantly, the puddle began duplicating itself and spread across the dock like it was being pumped out of a well. The star melons it touched grew and cloned themselves. He was glad he hadn't gotten any on his hands. He was also glad that his ma had fixed the hole in his boot before he left Riparia.

As the puddle continued to spread, it reached a tiny cobweb at the corner of an empty crate. Its occupant crouched, dying, waiting for her offspring to emerge safely from the tight little silk ball that held thousands of her eggs. Once the eggs hatched, her job, and her life, would be over. Her babies would eat her body (and probably a high percentage of each other) and then march boldly into the world.

Then the first fine mist of the magic solution struck her.

Jeffcham was thinking about adding one of the other potions to the mix when he sensed something large moving behind him. He turned and started to say something, but whatever he had had in mind to say turned into a scream. A very short scream. A blur of claws separated his head from his body and dropped it into the puddle. The last thing he saw was a giant-sized copy of his own severed head staring back at him.

The potions that had been in Jeffcham's hands also landed in the puddle, adding their contents to the mixture. The pool began to bubble and glowing tendrils of liquid coiled out of it.

The first tendrils speared the dying giant spider and reeled her into the concoction. The next ones lanced across the dock and tore open the cage holding Hrrrrgrsh-chutt's hounds. The two smallest acid hounds were dragged into the pool and added to the mother spider's dissolved carcass. The large slate-colored dog managed to evade the sorcerous liquid, fled across the docks and dove into the river. In the coming days he would make his way into the caves and make a home for himself in the volcanic caverns under Tristram.

Meanwhile, the chemical mixture began to settle. The life-like liquid tendrils evaporated and the entire pool turned a soft, luminous blue.

Then the first spider eggs began to hatch. Thirsty, the tiny black spiders scuttled to the edge of the pool and began to drink.

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16. Spider Lords

Considering how early in the morning it was, there was a fair amount of activity in the town square. Hogan Griswold was serving up toasted hoagies for breakfast and the smell was irresistible. Torvan, Albrecht and Wirt had already gotten theirs and were eating over by the fountain while Albrecht struck up conversations with passersby. Bill Farnham, Gillian, Ichabod, Zhar and Nova were all waiting in line ahead of Valeria. Captain Lachdanan stood near the entrance to his house, watching over the square while, nearby, Farmer Lester was busy entering one of his prize-winning Holsteins in the annual competition.

Nova was chatting about something or other, but Valeria wasn't really listening. She had never had to wait in line for anything in Riparia and was feeling a little irritated, not to mention hungry. On top of that, she had slept poorly the night before. Her sleep had been plagued by disturbing erotic nightmares; a legacy of having been under Jade and Scarlett's spell.

At first, Nova and Valeria paid no attention to the noise from the river. It could have simply been the ordinary sounds of barges being loaded and unloaded. The raised voices could have been rivermen shouting orders to one another, or even singing one of their traditional songs. But then the commotion took on a distinct metallic tone like the clash of swords and shields in battle. And there were screams and shouts that could never have been mistaken for song. Underneath it all was a constant hissing babble of a sound that defied identification.

Then they heard Hrrrrgrsh-chutt's roar over it all.

Valeria and the people in the square turned and stared. A mob of gigantic black spiders, each the size of a pony, was scuttling toward them from the river. They moved about on their hind four legs, and used the front four to slash at their opponents. They spat globs of flaming acid at anything they could not reach with their claws.

The far side of the river was thick with spiders. South, along the shore, Valeria saw more Town Guards and a band of Rangers, led by Sir Gorash, trying to halt the monsters' advance in that direction. In the opposite direction there was a flash of Fire Walls as Adria attempted to keep the creatures out of her hut.

There were two approaches to the town square from the river. The north-east approach was the road that separated Griswold's and Lachdanan's homes. On the other side of Lachdanan's house a path accessed the square from south-east. On the opposite side of the path, Jade and Scarlett's tent stood nestled among the piles of jagged boulders that the Talsande had deposited there in centuries past.

A quartet of Town Guards and a Ranger were trying to bar the monsters from the town square on the north-east road. Even with Hrrrrgrsh-chutt fighting at their side, Tristram's protectors were being driven backwards. All the men had sustained acid burns and most were bleeding from the spiders' razor-sharp claws. Hrrrrgrsh-chutt's armored hide was smoking where he'd been stuck by acid.

Captain Lachdanan leaped into the fray to protect his men. "Fall back!" he ordered them. "We need reinforcements." Lachdanan's men reluctantly, but obediently fell back. The Ranger fighting at their side did likewise. Hrrrrgrsh-chutt lowered his massive head and charged at the lead spider, goring it on his horn. Giant spiders leaped at the horned giant's unprotected flanks, clawing and spitting acid. Hrrrrgrsh-chutt bellowed in pain and backed off, shaking loose the three spiders attacking him.

Blinded by acid and smoke, Hrrrrgrsh-chutt reached out for something to throw. He grabbed Farmer Lester's Holstein, who was stampeding away from the predators with her owner.

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"Oh no! Not with the cow!" cried Farmer Lester, unconsciously repeating the punchline of nearly every "Lord Cool & Stupidhead" skit ever performed. Hrrrrgrrsh-chutt hefted the bovine over his horned head and hurled the cow at the approaching Spider Lords.

The lead two monsters were crushed underneath the flying cow, and all the others tore into it hungrily. Hrrrrgrrsh-chutt wiped his burning eyes and stepped back, watching the carnage with apparent satisfaction.

Captain Lachdanan took advantage of the momentary lull. "Get the prince to safety!" he ordered.

Torvan was already hurrying Albrecht and Wirt away when four more spiders came around the rear of Griswold's smithy, blocking the path to the Cathedral. Torvan raised his sword and shield to defend his prince.

Valeria heard a scream from her right and saw Glorianna, Jade and Scarlett run from their tent, four more Spider Lords in pursuit. As the three women reached Hogan's stand, Jade turned and set her snake down on the ground. It slithered toward the approaching creatures and, as it reached them, tripled in size and sprouted a quartet of arms. Scarlett tossed her scimitars to the new monster and he went to work, slashing and biting at the spiders.

"How did you do that?" breathed Glorianna wonderingly.

Scarlett just shook her head and smiled. "We have so much more to teach you, my glorious little Glorianna."

Valeria felt her skin crawl, and it wasn't entirely from the proximity of the giant spiders.

Bill Farnham joined Lachdanan and Hrrrrgrrsh-chutt. Working together, the three managed to hold the main path from the river. Hrrrrgrrsh-chutt refrained from charging at any more of the creatures and instead used his massive bulk and heavy claws to prevent them from passing.

Lachdanan and Farnham battled on either side of the horned giant. Lachdanan had a full set of plate mail, a kite shield and a bastard sword. He cut down the monsters he fought with methodical and professional efficiency. Valeria imagined she could almost hear his thoughts: "Guard. Turn. Parry. Dodge. Spin. Ha! Thrust." Uncharitably, she wondered if his lips moved when he fought. Still there was no question that he was a man who took his business seriously. He would gladly die a million deaths before he let any of these creatures harm the people under his protection.

Even me, thought Valeria.

Bill Farnham, on the other hand, looked like a man having the time of his life. He had no armor other than a cape, and he kept it flapping and moving behind him to make it appear to the spiders that he was a bigger target than he actually was. On one arm, he had a small buckler, and, in the other hand, he wielded his sabre. He danced with the spiders, eluding their nimble claws and poisonous spittle, teasing them as often as slaying them. Few seemed able to lay a claw on him, and none could silence his merry, mocking laughter.

Two Town Guards had arrived to help Jade's serpent bar the spiders from the south-east approach to the town square. It didn't take them long to realize that the giant Cave Viper was somewhat indiscriminate in its defense of the area. They backed off and stayed well behind the monster to pick off any spiders that got past it.

Meanwhile, at the northern approach, between Ogden's tavern and Griswold's smithy, Torvan had his hands full. Wirt and Albrecht were, for the moment, safe behind him as he battled the Spider Lords, but there were more approaching.

"Over here!" Nova beckoned her, going to Torvan's aid.

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Valeria hesitated. With the exception of the wyvern she'd shot down a couple of years ago (and Hrrrrrrsh-chutt the day before yesterday), the most dangerous thing Valeria had ever drawn her bow at was a bear. And that had been on horseback and from across a gorge. Hunting was one thing, but these things were a lot bigger and meaner than anything she had ever planned on picking a fight with. Getting any closer to them than she already was would have been insane. Besides, the Town Guards were handling it. That was their job.

None of this seemed to have occurred to Nova. She was already beside Torvan, guarding his right flank. A bolt of fire leaped from the young sorceress' fingertips and struck a spider. She succeeded only in annoying it.

"I should not be doing this," Valeria muttered under her breath as she followed Nova.

The spider approaching Nova had already taken two Fire Bolts and did not seem to be slowing. Valeria drew her bow and let fly an arrow. It struck the creature with a solid thunk, embedding itself between the spider's number four and six legs. The Spider turned and spat a blob of flaming acid at Valeria. The projectile just missed her, leaving a poisonous bubbling pool near her feet.

Nova took advantage of the spider's distraction and broadsided it with a third Fire Bolt. It staggered and tried to turn, but Nova hit it with a fourth Fire Bolt to finish it off. The Spider Lord deflated like a punctured water bag, spewing its caustic innards on the ground around it.

Nova let out a whoop and turned her attention to the next advancing Spider Lord.

As Valeria moved to back up Nova and Torvan, she heard Gillian cry out.

When the Spider Lords first appeared, most of the townsfolk in the square had fled to safety along the north-west road that ran between Pepin's hut and the tavern. Gillian had run that direction too, obviously to get back to her grandmother, but one of the spiders had gotten around Torvan's left flank and was blocking her path. That wasn't the reason she was yelling for help, however. The spider was chasing, and about to catch, a small girl.

Albrecht saw the situation and raced to rescue the girl. He caught her and they rolled out of harm's way as the spider spat a glob of acid past them. He came to a rough landing, the girl still in his arms, against the fountain where Gillian was hiding. The spider turned to follow. Its prey was neatly pinned down and would not escape this time.

Out of the corner of his eye, Torvan saw Albrecht leave his protection. He turned to call out to the prince and a huge serrated claw raked down his side. Another claw caught him on the opposite side and knocked him to the ground.

Nova suddenly found herself without the warrior's protection and paled. She had nearly drained her ball fighting the first creature, and now another one was looming over her. She hit it with a Fire Bolt, but, even at point-blank range, Fire Bolt was not a powerful spell. The spider reared up and lunged.

Valeria hesitated again, not sure who she should try to save. There was a spider menacing Albrecht, Gillian and a little girl; and another one towering over Nova and the semi-conscious Torvan.

For Wirt, there had been no decision to make. He had taken off after Albrecht the second he had gone to save the girl. Now, seeing his friend in dire peril, he cried out, "My Prince!"

Suddenly, Wirt was on the spider's back, biting it and clawing at it with his bare hands.

Meanwhile, Nova screamed as the spider sank its poison-laden fangs deep into her shoulder and its claws raked across her back and sides.

Valeria fired a perfect shot and her arrow sank into the spider's head, right between its largest two eyes. The spider relaxed its grip on Nova and she crumpled to the ground, her blood rapidly pooling around her. Unfortunately, the

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spider really didn't use its small brain for much. Having an arrow through it was startling and painful, but that was it. It resumed its attack.

Near the fountain, the other spider had managed to shake Wirt off. Wirt stood his ground between the prince and the attacking monster. This time, he leaped straight into its horrific face, clawing and biting again.

Valeria sank two more arrows into the spider she had already hit. That was enough to distract it from Nova and Torvan, but now it was coming for her. Others were following.

Something glass shattered in the midst of the spiders and they paused. Valeria smelled the pungent scent of fresh blood even over the monsters' acid stench. Somehow, Alchemist Zhar had gotten around the spiders and was hiding behind some barrels alongside the Tavern of the Rising Sun. He had thrown a vial at them, and that was the source of the smell.

"Come and get it, boys!" he shouted, uncorking another vial of what Valeria later heard him refer to as 'Blood Perfume.' As one, the spiders turned and started scuttling toward the smell. Zhar poured the Blood Perfume into the barrels in front of him, and then poured a few drops from another vial into each barrel. He hurried out of the way.

Even as Tristram's Alchemist scurried to safety, the ground behind Valeria opened up. Conjurer Ichabod had conjured a Guardian. Ichabod's Guardian took the form of the three-headed serpentine creature. The three dragon-like heads scanned the square for enemies, and one of them spotted the spider battling Wirt. It immediately began spitting balls of fire. The first one caught the spider square in the back, and the second one finished it off.

As the spider collapsed, it dropped Wirt into a pool of its own acidic blood and the boy let out a cry of pain that sent a chill down Valeria's spine.

Just then, one of the spiders reached the barrels beside the tavern and tore one open. The barrel exploded in a ball of fire, setting off a chain reaction that ignited the adjacent barrels. The blast scattered spider parts across the street and into the square. Not a single creature in the area was left standing.

"What in the name of Mana was that?" asked Ichabod, picking Nova up in his arms.

"Just a little brew I call Compound 77423," said Zhar, helping Valeria drag Torvan to the relative safety of Hogan's stand. "It makes wooden barrels explode. Up until today, I've never had a use for the stuff."

"Bryon," said Ichabod, "that's got to be the dumbest thing you've ever concocted."

"Tell me about it," replied the Alchemist. "I must have a hundred gallons of the stuff back at my lab, but it's not as dumb as Compound 77424."

"Dare I ask?" pondered the Conjurer.

"It makes squirrels explode."

Valeria wondered how Zhar had discovered that particular property. Had he just tried it on different animals until one blew up? She also had to wonder at the nonchalance of the two sorcerers. Her heart was pounding in her throat, but these two were bantering back and forth just like they had in the pen the day before. It was if giant spider attacks happened every day. But then again, they were wizards. Maybe for them, this was an everyday occurrence.

Finding no more enemies to attack, Ichabod's Guardian returned to the earth, not leaving so much as an overturned pebble as evidence of its passing. Albrecht picked up Wirt, and Gillian picked up the little girl. They too hurried toward Hogan's stand.

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Hogan's booth stood at the east end of the square, near Lachdanan's house. It included a massive brick oven, complete with an eight-foot chimney. High piles of firewood, long tables for dining, and the metal racks that Hildy had made to let Hogan's bread cool evenly provided some measure of cover to those seeking refuge there. Those who had made it to the shelter of Pepin's hut or the Tavern of the Rising Sun had barred the doors shut behind them. Even if they hadn't, however, more spiders entered the town square from the now undefended north path, cutting off the only possible escape routes.

Ichabod conjured two more Guardians to retard their progress. Valeria was certainly willing to help, but she was down to her last four arrows. Furthermore, they were just target-shooting arrows and hadn't been that effective anyway.

"How's everyone?" asked Albrecht, crouching behind an overturned table, his back to the brick oven.

"Nova's in a bad way," said Gillian. "She's lost a lot of blood and I think the spider bite was poison. We've got to get her to Pepin."

The distance between their location and Pepin's hut was thick with scuttling black monsters. Pepin would be safe inside to tend the wounded later, if there was a later. Only Griswold's smithy was open to the air. Valeria caught a glimpse of Griswold and Hildy in the back of the smithy, side-by-side, fully armored, fighting to keep the spiders out of their house. They had a massive armory at their disposal and the relatively cramped quarters worked to their advantage. They seemed to be holding their own.

"I'm all right," Torvan insisted, trying to struggle to his feet. He gasped and collapsed again.

Hogan was kneeling by his brother's side. "You rest still, y'great lout. Ye'll get yerself killed. Everything'll be all right."

Torvan groaned and tried to get up again.

"Listen to your brother," Albrecht told his guardsman. "That's an order."

Valeria saw Albrecht crawl to the other side of the great brick oven. There, Scarlett, Jade and Glorianna crouched behind the woodpile to watch the giant Cave Viper battling on their behalf. Albrecht seemed to accept the unexpected demonstration of their powers. He'd already had a taste of their enchantment spell, so there was no reason they shouldn't know other spells. Besides, it made sense that two young women traveling alone across the country would be able to conjure up a monstrous protector.

"Where is your band?" Albrecht asked the dancers. "Did they make it to safety?"

Scarlett said something and Jade elbowed her in the ribs.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Albrecht.

"She said that they're shallow and grave and went off in the woods somewhere last night," offered Jade. "You know musicians." She gave an innocent shrug and her partner snickered.

Prince Albrecht turned away from the two dancers frowning. It was clear that he distrusted them, and may even have been a little concerned about Glorianna's welfare under their protection. But he also had more pressing issues to worry about, not the least of which was his best friend. Valeria stood behind him as he knelt next to Wirt.

Toby Wirt looked awful. His complexion had gone almost slate-gray. Strangely, his too-square jaw looked almost twice the size that Valeria remembered it being, and those bulging too-far-apart eyes looked bigger as well.

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"Toby?" whispered the prince.

Wirt's eyes opened and Valeria startled. They were definitely yellow now, and slightly luminous. "I'll be all right, My Prince."

"Toby," scolded Albrecht gently, "you should not have taken the risk. You know what could happen to you. To your very soul."

Wirt reached up with a hand that had twisted into some kind of claw, and gripped Albrecht's shoulder. "Without you, I might not have had a soul in the first place. I would gladly risk it a thousand times to save your life."

Valeria wondered, purely hypothetically, how she'd respond if someone had expressed that kind of devotion to her. She had no idea. As it turned out, Prince Albrecht didn't have a response either. He smiled and shook his head slightly. "You just rest easy, my brave friend." He gave Wirt's twisted hand an affectionate pat. "All will be well."

Wirt nodded and closed his eyes. As he relaxed, his features began to soften from the monstrous contours they had assumed during the fight.

Valeria had good reason to doubt Albrecht's assurance that all would be well, but her newfound tact prevented her from saying so out loud. The part of the square they had fled was crowded with spiders and, in the opposite direction, Lachdanan, Farnham and Hrrarrgrsh-chutt had been pushed back almost to the stand. While Jade and Scarlett's monster held its position and was not faring too badly, it had allowed several opponents to get past it.

They were surrounded.

One of Conjurer Ichabod's Guardians caught an advancing spider in the back and it collapsed across the counter that served as their cover. Valeria shot an arrow into it where she thought its heart should be and it stopped twitching. She tried to retrieve her arrow, but only pulled out a smoking stub of wood and feathers. She was down to three arrows.

"Hey Bryon, take a look at this," Ichabod called to Zhar. He had pried a jagged piece of glass out of one of the spider's feet. It still had a bit of a barely legible label attached to it. 'B. Zhar,' it read.

"Oh hell/hell," muttered the Alchemist. "I guess we know where my stolen potions went. Oil of Duplication, Growth serum, mutagenics."

"Does that help us?" asked Ichabod.

"It might," said Zhar, checking the selection of vials adorning his belt. "See if Lachdanan or somebody knows where these beasts originated."

"I'll go," volunteered Valeria. She wanted Ichabod to stay right where he was and keep conjuring Guardians.

Captain Lachdanan was on the other side of the stand fighting as efficiently as ever. Dozens of spiders lay dead around him. Valeria noticed that several of the dead spiders also had identical pieces of glass embedded in their feet. That duplication stuff must have really worked.

A spider reared up over Lachdanan, and Valeria drew her bow and shot at it. The arrow flew over Lachdanan's shoulder and sank into the spider's neck. It let out a gurgling cry.

"Watch where you're shooting!" snapped Lachdanan, finishing the beast off.

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Valeria sighed. She wondered what she was going to have to do to ever get on the Captain's good side. "Alchemist Zhar needs to know where these creatures came from," she said.

"They came from the dock where my hounds were caged," volunteered Hrrarrgrrrsh-chutt. "I can see the spot from here. There is a glowing area at the end of the dock, and it smells like Mana gone bad."

Valeria lacked the horned giant's height and sense of smell, so she took his word for it. She relayed the information back to Zhar.

"Well, that would have been too easy," said the Alchemist sadly. He had a vial full of silvery liquid in his hand. "I have a vial of Compound 0000, my most powerful neutralizing agent. But it has to be applied at the source."

"There's no way anyone will be able to get through all those spiders and across the river without getting killed," said Albrecht. "Could you conjure a Golem, Ichabod?"

"Sorry, Al," apologized the Conjurer. "My ball's nearly empty. Maybe we could tie it to Farmer Lester and have Hrrarrgrrrsh-chutt throw him."

Albrecht smiled, but shook his head.

"That's a great idea," shouted Valeria.

"Say again?" asked Albrecht.

"What if we tie the vial to an arrow and I shoot it across?" said Valeria.

"That's an impossible shot," said Zhar. "You can't even see it from here."

"Maybe from the top of the oven," suggested Valeria, gesturing toward the eight-foot brick chimney. "Besides, the only other option is to have someone make a break for it, and those odds are even worse."

"Valeria's right," said Albrecht after studying her thoughtfully.

For a split second, Valeria could almost see people the way Albrecht did. His people-sense truly bordered on the supernatural. He knew little about archery and whether or not the shot was possible. But he knew everything he needed to know about Valeria for that moment. He took the vial from Zhar and handed it to Valeria.

Silently, Valeria tied the glass vial to the tip of her arrow. She then picked the arrow up, feeling how its weight had changed.

She nodded at Albrecht and he nodded back. His implicit faith in her was undeniable and inspiring. In that instant, Valeria knew she could not fail him.

Valeria climbed to the top of the oven. Since it was a temporary structure, the builders hadn't bothered with much mortar. It made for a treacherous climb. What was worse, once she was out from behind cover, the spiders began spitting at her. A glob of acid struck the back of her thigh and the pain was excruciating. She willed herself to ignore it and climbed faster.

From the top of the chimney, she could see across the river to a glowing pool on the dock. That was her target. Valeria took a deep breath and let it out. She drew her bow and aimed for the sky.

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She took another deep breath and let it out.

Then a spatter of acid rained across the small of her back and she nearly dropped the arrow. Her concentration was shot and she wanted to climb back down.

Instead, Valeria stood again and aimed her bow. *I can do this*, she thought. *I've been telling everyone that I'm the best for my entire life. I can prove it right here. I can do this.* She drew the arrow back and aimed for the sky once more.

Another blast of acid struck her and she lost her balance, but this time, the arrow sailed high into the air and over the river. As the chimney's loose bricks collapsed underneath her, Valeria saw her arrow strike the dock, just at the edge of the glowing pool.

The vial of Compound 0000 shattered and a dull, vibrating thud that made everyone's teeth ache rippled across Tristram. Every single spider simply vanished. At the same instant, Valeria hit her head on a brick, but instead of stars, she saw great golden letters in the sky.

"Duplicates destroyed?" she gasped and then lost consciousness.

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Epilogue

As Valeria awakened, she heard Nova arguing with her father.

"...All I had was a crummy Fire Bolt spell! I almost got killed because you won't teach me any decent spells," Nova was complaining.

"You should not have been in the middle of battle in the first place," admonished Cain. "You, young lady, need to learn to mind your place. And your manners."

"I don't care what you say," fumed Nova. "One day I'm going to be a powerful Sorceress."

Cain sighed wearily. "That's enough for right now. Please try to get some rest."

Valeria opened her eyes in time to see Cain walking away from the cot where Nova lay, his shoulders slumped. He stopped, as if he was going to say something else to his daughter, but the words seemed to fail him. He turned and kept walking.

Valeria herself was lying on one the two-dozen or so cots set up in the town square outside Pepin's house. Pepin, Gillian, Albrecht and a few others were moving from cot to cot aiding and comforting the wounded.

Pepin had healed Valeria's acid burns, but her skin still itched furiously where she'd taken hits. Her head hurt too, and was tender where she'd struck it falling off the chimney.

"Our hero awakens!" said Albrecht brightly, when he noticed Valeria trying to sit up. A soft but sincere applause rippled across the square. Valeria started to look around and then realized Albrecht had been talking about her. Across the square, she saw Captain Lachdanan snap her a crisp salute before turning his attention back to his wounded men. Valeria felt uncharacteristically self-conscious.

"That was a magnificent shot," Albrecht told her as he crouched next to her cot. "We all owe you a great debt."

"I," Valeria hesitated. "Is everyone all right? Nova and Torvan and Toby...?"

"Are all recovering under Pepin's care, as are the other injured," said Albrecht. "There were no casualties, thank Zakarum."

"There, there Cecilia," said Gillian. "I'll make you a new friend. Perhaps a nice bear." Then she added, in an aside to Nova, "I can't believe her parents gave her a doll based on those awful Lord Stupidhead stories."

The heart-rending wail of a small girl contradicted him. Gillian sat on a cot on the other side of Nova, comforting the girl Albrecht had rescued. The girl held in her arms the smoking remains of what had been a truly hideous stuffed blue dog. She had dropped it when Albrecht carried her out of the way of the spider's attack.

"I lost Deathspit!" wailed the girl. "I lost my best friend!"

"All right," allowed Albrecht with a slight smile. "One casualty."

"There, there Cecilia," said Gillian. "I'll make you a new friend. Perhaps a nice bear." Then she added, in an aside to Nova, "I can't believe her parents gave her a doll based on those awful Lord Stupidhead stories."

"That's 'Lord Cool & Stupidhead,'" corrected Nova automatically. "Besides, they're just harmless fun."

"Well, I don't think they're appropriate for children," said Gillian. "That Stupidhead always winds up sleeping with a cow..."

Val Halla's Journey: Tristram

The debate over the redeeming social value of 'Lord Cool & Stupidhead' stories had been going on almost as long as the Horadrim-Scribes Guilds wars, and had been almost as fierce.

"I tell you, I'm fine!" Torvan was insisting. He limped over to them, accompanied by his father, his sister and a plump blonde woman who could only have been his mother. Torvan had her eyes and chin. "My Prince," said Torvan, "will you please tell my parents that I'm fit for duty again?"

Albrecht shook his head. "Why don't you take it easy for a little while?"

Torvan looked crestfallen.

"You did an heroic job against nearly impossible odds," continued Albrecht. "You deserve a break." He beckoned Torvan closer and whispered. "Besides, this has been an ordeal for your mother and father too. I think your company would make them feel a lot better."

Hogan, the final member of the Griswold clan, joined them. He was carrying a huge tray of food and drink. "Free hoagies for everyone!" announced Hogan. "But I'm not going to call them 'hoagies' anymore. I'm renaming them in honor of the brave men and women who put their lives on the line to protect us all. I'm calling them 'heroes!'" The townsfolk cheered their approval of both the gesture and the prospect of free food.

Wirt joined Valeria and Albrecht as the Griswolds excused themselves to go help pass out Hogan's 'heroes.' Though still a little gray, his complexion had returned to normal and there seemed to be no trace of the unsettling transformation that Valeria had witnessed earlier. Except for the fact that his clothes were in tatters, the boy looked unscathed.

"I heal fast," shrugged Wirt, in answer to Valeria's questioning look. He was unwilling to look her in the eye though.

Giselle stared down at Valeria with her ancient eyes, saying nothing. Finally a smile touched her wrinkled mouth. "I see our unpolished Sapphire shining a little brighter. More than she was, but not yet all she can be."

Before Valeria or Albrecht could respond, they heard Gillian interrupt her conversation with Nova to call out to her grandmother. "Grandmother! You shouldn't be out here!"

The old woman was slowly, but determinedly making her way to the cot where Valeria sat. "You let me be, child," she insisted. "I'm fine, and I want to see our new hero."

Giselle stared down at Valeria with her ancient eyes, saying nothing. Finally a smile touched her wrinkled mouth. "I see our unpolished Sapphire shining a little brighter. More than she was, but not yet all she can be."

Gillian had called Pepin to come help her deal with her stubborn grandmother. "Giselle," said Pepin firmly, "as your Healer, I must insist that you go get some rest. You're still not fully recovered from your spell the other day."

She shot the Healer a look of forced tolerance. "I was just leaving anyway," she said as she allowed Gillian to lead her away. She hesitated for a moment and stared at Wirt.

"What?"

Giselle just shook her head. "Too many shoes," she said dismissively, and then turned to follow Gillian home. Wirt shuddered.

At that moment, Sir Gorash called to Prince Albrecht from the other side of the square. Albrecht quickly thanked Valeria again, wished her a speedy recovery, and excused himself. Wirt followed.

"Ah," Pepin said, trying to get Valeria's attention once they were more or less alone. "I wanted to thank you and congratulate you on your fine shooting."

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"Thanks," said Valeria.

"I..." he hesitated. "I also wanted to apologize."

"About my bow? Don't worry about it. Hildy fixed it better than new," replied Valeria generously.

"No, I meant, about your voice."

"Sorry?"

"When Sister Sylverwraithé fished you out of the river when you first arrived, she had me give you a dose of powdered cat-got-yer-tongue root," explained Pepin. "She insisted that it was for your own good."

Valeria bit her lip. "And that's why I lost my voice? It wasn't the river water?"

Pepin nodded. "I'm sorry."

"That's all right," said Valeria. "I think Giselle was right. I am a bit more polished than I was when I first arrived, and learning how to be quiet and listen for a change was part of the key. In fact, I'll tell you a secret..." She beckoned him closer so she could whisper in his ear. When Pepin leaned down, Valeria grabbed him between the legs and invoked the cold cantrip that Nova had taught her the night before.

Pepin screamed and ran into his hut to find some warm water. "And I accept your apology!" Valeria called after him.

"I hope you're not planning to try that on me. I'd hate to have to drop you in the river again." Sister Sylverwraithé had returned.

"You," swore Valeria.

"Me," affirmed Sister Sylverwraithé. A few girls, mostly younger than Valeria, accompanied her. "By most accounts, you seem to have acquitted yourself well while I was away. After our first meeting, I admit to finding that surprising."

Valeria stood and faced the Sister. Sylverwraithé was more than a full head taller than she. "Who gave you permission to even care?" breathed Valeria. The tone would have set almost any native Riparian quaking with anxiety.

"Your father," replied Sylverwraithé. "Now then," she continued conversationally, "my current assignment is to escort you and these other young ladies to the Convent and submit your qualifications to train as Sisters of the Sightless Eye. Do you wish to join us?"

"I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice. Personally, it makes little difference to me, but I believe Bard Giselle's assessment was basically correct: You are more than you were, but still not as much as you can be," said Sylverwraithé.

Valeria thought. The days since her arrival in Tristram had been eventful in more ways than just the obvious ones. It was the first time she'd ever been on her own, without the resources of the House of Halla at her beck and call. She had discovered new insights into relating with people, as well as a new self-reliance, but she would need more if she was going to return home and rule Riparia fairly and effectively. And, after all, that was the whole point to this forced journey she'd been sent on, wasn't it? "All right," said Valeria Desdemona Sapphire Stars-in-the-Heavens-over-Riparia of the House of Halla. "Count me in."

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Two days later, Valeria, Sylverwraith and her other recruits were ready to leave for the Convent.

Prince Albrecht came to see them off, despite the minor crises that had arisen to occupy his time. No one seemed to be able to find Archbishop Lazarus, and there was some concern over who was going to bless the closing of Caravan if he didn't return. Likewise, Farmer Lester was raising a stink around town demanding to know where Glorianna was. She, Scarlett and Jade had also made themselves scarce.

"Frankly," Albrecht concluded, "Glorianna's probably better off anywhere that puts her out of Lester's reach."

Valeria nodded in agreement.

"Make sure you let us know when you're coming back," Albrecht told her. "I'll hire Hogan to prepare a feast in your honor." He grinned. "That shot was one in a million. Tristram will be talking about it for generations to come."

Albrecht was wrong, of course. There weren't going to be any generations to come in Tristram. Although Valeria would return to Tristram in six month's time, there would be no Hogan Griswold to prepare a feast, nor would there be a Prince Albrecht to preside over it. In fact, by the time Valeria returned to Tristram, most of the people she had met would be dead. Many of the others would be much worse than merely dead.

Deep in the caverns beneath Tristram, an ancient slumbering evil stirred....

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Val Halla's Journey: Tristram

Every Day is Thanksgiving!

Here's where I give credit where credit is due: First of all, I need to thank the talented people at [Blizzard Entertainment](#) for giving us Diablo in the first place. Likewise, to [Sierra On-Line](#) for Hellfire, the only authorized add-on to Diablo.

Major thanks goes to the wacky gang at the alt.games.diablo newsgroup. After I graduated from college, I didn't think I'd ever be part of a wacky gang again, but you people are the greatest. Without your encouragement (or at least quiet tolerance), who knows whether or not my muse would be speaking with me?

Also, a big thanks to my composers. There is a lot of talent out there on the Internet, and I'm confident that I found some of the best. Click on over to the [music page](#) to hear their tunes again, visit their sites and e-mail them some feedback. if musicians are anything like writers, and I'm pretty sure they are, it would make their days to hear from you.

Finally, finally. Special thanks to my wife, Catherine, for her support and patience. Despite the fact that she thought the story contained too much sex, she helped me scour the 'Net for composers. She's also a tough editor who helped make Val Halla's Journey a better story.

Val Halla's Journey isn't over yet. Look for Val Halla's Journey: Wild Angels and Val Halla's Journey: Tales from Diablo, coming soon to alt.games.diablo. Just as soon as I take a bit of a breather and give some overdue attention to some other projects, both on and off the Web.

See you then.