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THE HARPERS' BAND

By

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Chapter 1.

NOODLE

Noodle Shepherd was doing what he liked to do most – as little as possible. It was a beautiful day for doing nothing. The early spring sun was warm overhead. A mild breeze blew through the new leaves in the trees along the little stream that wandered down from the mountains. Noodle, however, was unaware of his surroundings. He lay motionless, face down with his nose an inch above a still pool, his eyes fixed on the green depths below him.

Two large orbs slowly emerged from the depths below, rising to stare back at the lanky boy. Noodle continued to murmur softly to the great grandfather fish, his eyes almost crossing as they sought to focus on the scaly head just beneath the surface. He had no idea how long he had been lying there, but he was immensely pleased with himself.

Noodle had always had a way with animals, as a child he found he could calm the rambunctious sheep in his flock with gentle words and a soothing song. He was always talking to the small animals in the forest. Not talking like a conversation that you and I might have, to be sure, but a conversation, nonetheless. He would look gently into their eyes and talk quietly to

them. They would listen as if in a trance, and seem to understand his meaning and lose their fear of him. As long as he could remember he could charm the simple creatures with a comforting patter of kind words and calming thoughts.

Today, however, Noodle had a new plan. He wanted to see if his gift would work on the lower forms. So there he lay, his nose to the water and his feet in the air, looking down at the great fish that had come at last to his call.

It was then that something unusual occurred. Noodle was using his usual quiet patter of consoling words, not quite sure what to say to a fish. He had found that each type of animal had its own approach. Cats usually like flattery, dogs like to be loved, deer liked words of summer winds and green fields, and foxes were proud of their wits. The question was what in the world would a fish like?

“We are particularly fond of small wriggling creatures, and the shade of a mossy bank,” the great fish just beneath his nose replied. Noodle almost fell in stream. Of course, the fish didn’t actually reply, not in words like you or me. Instead Noodle heard the words, or more like felt them, inside his head. They were accompanied by mental images of succulent grubs and cool green waters. None the less, this was certainly enough of a surprise for the unassuming lad.

Momentarily losing his usual flow of comforting small talk, Noodle brilliantly blurted out, “W..w..what did you say?”

The fish was not impressed with this rather pitiful repartee, and added to Noodle’s confusion. *“I was hoping I could find another of your species intelligent enough to talk to, but perhaps I should keep looking...”*

Noodle was not at all sure how to take this piece of information. On one hand he was unsure whether or not he should be insulted that he was considered insufficiently intelligent by a

fish. On the other hand he was quite interested in whom else this rather unusual conversational partner was communicating with. Curiosity won out over ego.

“Excuse me, but is there someone else who can talk to you?”

“Oh yes, there is another young human who lives further down below, where this stream turns into a river. We have had many useful conversations.” replied the fish, quite smugly. *“In fact, she is the one who sent me.”*

Somehow Noodle’s brain was not moving as quickly as the new ideas the fish kept throwing at him. It was, however, always interested in the subject of girls. “Ah...She?” Noodle blurted, which probably did not improve the fish’s opinion of his conversational skills.

“She is in trouble, and needs your help.” This was accompanied by an image of golden hair and a feeling of being wet and cold and trapped, that Noodle found most disconcerting. *“She sent me to find someone to help. When I heard you calling I swam to get you.”*

Now Noodle was suddenly much more excited by this whole situation. First, he was talking to a fish, which was a situation of some unusual novelty in itself. Second, the fish was actually talking back (or thinking back more precisely). Finally, and by far most significantly in Noodle’s adolescent mind, it somehow involved a beautiful golden haired damsel in distress. Noodle, of course, had immediately concluded that the blond haired vixen must be 1) beautiful, 2) young enough to be interested in a gangling guardian of grazing animals, and 3) in dire straits that only he could overcome. Before the fish had completed his thoughts, Noodle was already contemplating the sweet rewards that awaited him.

“How do I find this girl?” (for so Noodle had assumed her to be).

“I think you will find her quite wet.” The fish replied, and promptly swam away.

Now all this left Noodle with quite a lot to think about, which, naturally, he did not. The

poor boy was sufficiently stewing in adolescent hormones that the only thoughts he had were very practical ones, like how to get this rescue business over as quickly as possible to get to the rewards. He could leave the flock for awhile. The heard was happily feasting on the fresh spring growth, and there had been no signs of predators around for more than a year. His parents expected him to stay out with the flock as long as the weather cooperated. His pack (which he knew he had left somewhere around there) had food for several days. To be honest, these thoughts hardly flashed through his mind before he pulled his nose out of the water and headed downstream.

Actually, to give him his due, Noodle did take a quick look at the sheep. They were still contentedly chewing the tender young grasses covering the meadows above the stream. He even had the presence of mind (barely) to grab his pack as he started down the path that followed the stream that lead down into the forest below.

At first the quest seemed quite thrilling and heroic to the intrepid adventurer. However, it wasn't long until the thickening woods seemed to gather together along the path. Noodle realized he had entered further into the forest than he had ever gone before. From the sunlight that managed to filter through the thickening foliage overhead, Noodle could see that it was well past noon. This reminded his stomach that it had been a long time since his breakfast, so Noodle took some bread and goat cheese from his pack.

Knowing time was urgent, Noodle kept walking as he ate his lunch, and considered his situation. He knew that the damsel (for so he thought of her) was in some sort of (wet) danger. The wet part was potentially good news, for it implied a natural threat, and not some large hairy villain, evil wizard, or ferocious beast. Noodle was not quite convinced, though; looking at the

ever deepening forest the thought of ferocious beasts became much more plausible. In fact, Noodle was becoming more and more concerned about ferocious beasts or other unnamed attackers that might be lurking for him behind the suddenly ominous looking trees. He realized the simple knife that he carried would prove little protection against any very determined adversary.

Looking around, Noodle spotted a small grove of young oak saplings. Since the damsel might be breathing her last at any minute he made short work of finding a likely candidate and cutting himself a hefty walking staff that could also be used for fending off unknown adversaries. Thus fortified, Noodle once again set out on his noble, and potentially perilous, quest.

It was at about this time that Noodle realized that something rather amazing had occurred. As he walked through the forest, the young man (for such was how he suddenly was considering himself) noticed a change occurring around him. He had always been aware of all the creatures that resided around him. He noticed their paths and droppings, and had a knack for spotting them where they hid.

This day, however, was suddenly different. As he walked deeper into the older parts of the forest Noodle noticed that he was aware not only of the creatures around him, but also of their thoughts and feelings as well. There was a small chipmunk hiding behind a rotten log beside the trail, who was irritated at the interruption of his midday meal. Over in a thicket a fawn was lying frozen with fear of the noisy intruder. In the distance a brown bear was feeling hungry and looking for food.

Noodle didn't know if it had something to do with the strange fish, this mysterious part of the forest, or just his overactive imagination. No, it wasn't his imagination, Noodle thought, as a clear image of eggs in a hidden nest came from a small bird flitting nervously above. He reached

over and parted the branches of a small bush to reveal neat little nest with three speckled eggs, just as he had pictured. *It's a good thing I just ate, little bird; otherwise I might have had eggs for lunch.*

This gave Noodle almost as much to think about as the giant talking fish. He had always had a rapport with animals. His mother was fond of telling a story from his early childhood. She had come into his room and found Noodle talking to someone and staring raptly outside his window. "What are you doing?" she had asked, and Noodle responded in a whisper, "Ssh, I'm talking to a raccoon." Sure enough, there was a large raccoon perched on his windowsill, staring back at the toddler. She always knew that that boy was strange.

He soon found that even the wildest and shyest creatures would respond to his call. One day he saw a faun grazing in a meadow. So as not to startle her; Noodle started singing softly to timid deer. She raised her head nervously but was captivated by the novel sound. Noodle kept singing and slowly began moving closer. The faun stood her ground. Before long her brother and their mother came over the crest of the small hill and stood beside her. Noodle wasn't singing anything special, but tried to sing songs of the out-of-doors and happy things. He was vastly pleased with himself, and didn't stop.

Soon a family of foxes with two small kits came up to sit by the deer and listen, too. He looked down at his feet, and there was a rabbit sitting right next to him, calmly watching him and listening to his song. Noodle was amazed, rabbits don't just sit down out in the open a few feet away from a group of foxes. This wasn't something normal; these shy creatures should have run as soon as they knew he was there. Noodle could feel a special magic in the air. Not a big bold exciting dangerous magic, but a gentle magic, soothing but potent none the less. Noodle kept on singing to his wild audience, until the light grew dim and his voice grew hoarse. He slowly

backed away and stopped singing and watched as the animals (where the two bucks and other rabbits came from Noodle wasn't sure) calmly turned and walked away.

It may not have been much, but the boy knew that he had just a little bit of magic about him. Noodle had told his family and a few of his friends about the incident, but no one really paid it any mind. Who knows, they probably thought that this daydreamer had just imagined the whole incident.

No one except Noodle, that is. He loved the animals, and took every opportunity to practice his simple art. The neighbors would see him sitting talking to a squirrel, mouse, or the barn cats and shake their heads. It wasn't the practical type of occupation that befitted a sober member of the hamlet of Edgewood.

Noodle didn't mind, though. Talking to the animals (mostly talking at them, since they seldom replied other than by listening) was rather useful for a shepherd. Most of the time he could talk the sheep into coming when he called and following him without having to run up and down the hills.

This talent was not altogether an unmixed blessing. It was soon widely agreed around the village that anyone who spent their time having one way conversations with dumb animals was not altogether right. True, the boy was bright and considerate enough, but he was just a little too strange for most of the simple villagers. The other children never knew quite what to make of him, and, like children everywhere, could be cruel at times.

Still, Noodle had some supporters. His mother always accepted his idiosyncrasies, and encouraged him to think and learn. She taught him to read and told him about the history of men and elves. Forge Smith down at the Smithy was usually glad to talk to him about tools and metals and how things worked. Old Granny Mender, the midwife, liked to talk to the inquisitive

boy. She taught him of disease, herbs and medicines and how to bind wounds. As he grew into adolescence however, that was of little consolation. His sixteen year old mind was far more concerned about getting more female attention than the polite indifference he got from the girls in the village.

Thinking of girls brought his thoughts back to the current situation. He shouldn't be too far from the blond haired girl! He began to cast his mind farther afield. He could sense the bear looking disappointedly at an unfruitful berry bush that it remembered from the summer before. Far above he felt the watchful presence of a bird of prey circling slowly in a warm afternoon updraft. As he concentrated Noodle could sense the bird's feeling of cold ruthless confidence in its own powers as it scanned the ground below. He also noticed that not too far ahead the bird could see that there were a series of clearings in the forest along the river. One of these held a small house and barn beside a cultivated field or large garden.

At this Noodle came to an abrupt halt. This was definitely going too far. Maybe he had gotten some bad porridge, and was hallucinating all of this. Giant talking fish, golden haired damsels, grouchy bears and bird's eye views were too much for even Noodle's fertile imagination. Maybe it was time to head home and call the healer.

Noodle raised his palm to his forehead and felt for a fever. No, it felt normal enough. He looked around. His vision seemed normal, no blurring, strange apparitions, or other peculiarities. *Whatever is happening, he thought, I feel normal enough. Wait... maybe I am dead. That's it, I must be ghost.* He suddenly gave himself a sharp pinch, and let out a sufficiently reassuring yelp in response.

Well, if I am not sick, hallucinating or dead, Noodle mused, then maybe this beautiful (as he was now completely certain that this unknown blond female must be) damsel really does need

rescuing. With that reassuring thought Noodle jumped up and eagerly resumed his heroic mission, promptly forgetting the other odd occurrences of the day.

It wasn't long before he could see a lightening in the foliage in front of him. The stream had been roofed by a canopy of leaves from great old trees on either side. Now it merged with another stream to form a larger river that the trees could no longer span.

Rounding a turn in the river, Noodle suddenly emerged into a small clearing on the bank of the river. He did not immediately walk out into the open. He had never been in this part of the forest before, and he was feeling more than a little cautious.

Not that Noodle was particularly cowardly, mind you. Spending much of your time talking nonsense to small animals was not the way to impress the townsfolk in Edgewood, especially other, and generally larger, adolescent males. Noodle had soon learned that a stiff defense was the only approach that half-way worked. Not that it hadn't cost him a few bloody noses, cuts and bruises, however. Still it didn't take long for the town bully to search for easier targets.

Noodle was also used to spending nights alone up in the mountains watching their sheep and cattle grazing in the high meadows. He had frequently had to protect them from predators. On more than one occasion he had had to scare away hungry wolves or mountain lions with a flaming brand from the fire. Once he even encountered a stray black bear looking for an easy breakfast. Noodle hadn't thought, but just ran to get in between the bear and his flock, wildly shrieking for the bear to go home and frantically waving his arms. Whether it was his talent or just the sheer absurdity of the gyrating child is unknown, but the bear soon decided to seek calmer surroundings and headed back down the slope to the forest below.

There appeared to be nothing moving near the meadow, and the quiet thoughts of its smaller residents showed no alarm. Not for the first time, Noodle realized that this sudden intensification of his gift could come in very handy. A waterfall and some rapids in the river masked the noises of the meadow, but if anything was seriously amiss his small friends' alarms would alert him.

Firmly clutching his staff, he stepped out of the trees onto the path that followed the bank of the river. He had not gone far when he suddenly heard, or thought he heard, a small cry for help coming from the river. Walking close to the rapids Noodle thought he saw a flash of yellow near the middle of the stream. He stepped out on a large boulder for a better view. Yes, it looked like the head of someone just barely sticking out of the water.

"Hello." He cried. "Are you all right?" This was probably not the most brilliant way to start a conversation with a partially submerged head, which might belong to a beautiful damsel in distress. However, it was the best Noodle could come up with on short notice.

The head turned towards him and uttered a weak cry of "Help" and Noodle jumped into action. No, I mean action, not the river at first. He was wise enough to know that one did not jump into unknown rapids without exploring the alternatives. He moved out onto the rocks until he was only a few feet away from bobbing head. He reached out his staff and two delicate hands emerged to frantically grasp it.

"Can you pull yourself out?"

"No, my foot is caught in a snag, and I can't get it out."

Indeed, this was the voice of a girl, or at least a young boy, Noodle had the time to briefly note. He did not hesitate long, however, since it was clear the girl or boy was very weak and probably suffering from hypothermia (a condition very familiar to those who spent time alone in

the high mountains). Stripping off his tunic and boots, Noodle probed the river with his stick. He could feel the bottom about four feet down, so he slid into the water.

“Be careful,” the head said, there is a pothole here.” Noodle moved carefully ahead, probing with his staff he was almost within arm’s reach of the victim before the staff found the edge of the submerged pit. He ducked under the water, which was chill and moving fast. Unfortunately, he could only see a few inches ahead, so he groped downwards for the bottom. Soon he could feel the tangle of branches or roots from a tree that had been caught in the pothole. He came to the surface near the (he hoped) girl. It was easy to see that he or she was having difficulty keeping their head afloat. Noodle shoved his staff between the branches beside her (or him).

“Here, hold onto this while I see if I can get you free.” He shouted, over the rush of the water. The extra support of the staff seemed to help, and the bobbing head rose a little higher above the water. “Thank you,” it said. “I don’t know how much longer I can hold out. I’ve been trying to stay afloat here for hours.”

Noodle dove down again, but before he could reach the snag the current started to carry him away. “It’s no good,” he said, “the current is too strong.”

“You can hang onto me now and follow my leg down. The staff is helping support me”

Noodle swam back and grabbed onto the staff with one hand and followed a slender arm to grab onto the victim’s shoulder. To his surprise all he felt was naked (and rather pleasantly soft and smooth) flesh. He took a deep breath and began to work his way down, groping for the trapped leg. His groping hand met nothing but soft flesh as he worked his way down. Suddenly a small patch of blond hair emerged from the murk of the water. Noodle noted that this definitely was not boy, as he proceeded lower to more immediate tasks.

Her (for now Noodle knew for a fact that she was a female) leg was firmly caught between two large roots of an old tree stump. Noodle bobbed to the surface, still keeping hold of the girl with one hand. For the first time he looked directly at her face, but only had time to briefly note a pair of brilliantly blue eyes. "I've got to move the staff," he sputtered as he once again followed the girl's flank down into the tangle. He grasped the stout staff with one hand and wedged it between the offending roots. Regaining the surface, he braced his feet on the boulder, put his shoulder against the staff and pushed with all his might. In an instant the girl pulled her leg free, only to be pulled downstream by the current.

The exhausted girl was helpless against the rushing water, weakly flailing against the flood. Noodle swam towards her, only to see her disappear beneath the water. Quickly diving after her, Noodle soon found her limp female form. Noodle was not a strong swimmer, but somehow managed to keep her head above the water and work his way over to the bank of the stream. Fortunately, the girl was light in his arms and he wearily dragged the girl and himself onto the grassy shore.

To his credit, Noodle paid little attention to the supple form of the naked girl lying before him. He could see her shallow breathing, but her lips were blue and her body was cold to the touch. He needed to get her warm, and quickly. He ran for his pack and spotted some large fallen limbs at the edge of the woods. He wrapped the girl in his thick woolen blanket and carried her exhausted form back to the forest edge.

Fortunately, the branches were tinder dry and the boy quickly struck a small fire with the flint and steel in his pack. Piling up some larger branches to make a good blaze, Noodle knew he must work quickly. He had known others to die from the wet and cold in the mountains, and

twice had nearly succumbed himself. Knowing what to do, he shed his sodden trousers and wrapped the girl and himself in the blanket.

The girl's breath was still shallow, her face pale and her hands icy cold. Noodle began to briskly massage her hands and arms, pressing his warm body as close to the unconscious girl as he could. Slowly, he could feel the warmth returning to her, but they were still high in the Eastern Mountains and breeze in what was becoming a clear spring evening already held a chill that promised cold night to come.

The fire was still blazing warmly, and Noodle had a chance to consider his immediate position. The girl was breathing more deeply and some color was back in her cheeks, but her limbs were still icy cold. For the first time the adolescent boy began to realize the unusual situation he was in. Women in his village were decently modest, and other than his little sister when they were young, Noodle had never seen, much less held, a naked girl before. To his great credit, however, Noodle did not dwell on this subject, other than to notice appreciatively that this was indeed an attractive, if somewhat slender, young woman. Instead, he thought of more practical matters. Briefly he got up and made two more small fires forming a triangle around the girl, so that the two of them could lie inside a circle of warmth. For the next several hours Noodle held the now shivering girl, leaving only to stock the fire. Fortunately there was plenty of fallen deadwood nearby and a bright three quarters moon above so the boy had to leave her side only briefly.

Sometime after midnight the girl's shivering stopped and her eyes flickered open briefly, fear flashing briefly in them as she saw the strange face next to her. "It's all right," Noodle murmured, "I am not going to hurt you." He continued to murmur to her, as he would a frightened fawn, and soon she fell into a deep exhausted sleep. Her hands felt warmer, and

Noodle decided the worst danger had passed and he could safely let her sleep by herself.

Still, he was worried about leaving her alone. He didn't know who or what might be around in this unknown part of the world. Thinking this made him aware of the animal thoughts nearby. Amidst the quiet voices of the small night dwellers there were the sharper thoughts of mother mountain lion and her cubs. Noodle could sense her contentment, she had had a successful hunt and she and her little ones were full and drowsy. He had an image of their den, in a small cave in a bank of the stream. Noodle called softly to her, and could sense her ears pricking up. He began a song of hunting and cool night air. In only a few minutes he could see the eyes of the cat and her two cubs reflecting the light of the fire in the night. "Please," he thought more than said, "My friend is weak and cold, take your sleep with her, warm her and protect her for the night." He could sense their fear of the fire, and sang to them of peace and warmth and safety. Soon the three great cats snuck through the fires to lie with the sleeping girl.

"Stay here," he whispered to them. "I'll be back soon." Their only response was a chorus of sleepy purrs, as the cats snuggled closer to their charge. After the strange events of the day, Noodle didn't even notice how remarkable this was, or think of how the girl might respond if she were to wake up and find herself covered with wild carnivores.

He got up and fed the fires, realizing that he had nothing to eat or drink since jumping into the river. There was food in his pack, but first he had to get dressed. The fires had dried his trousers so he pulled them on and went to look for discarded his shirt and shoes. The moonlight was bright in the meadow, and he soon found them, and his thick homespun tunic felt good in the chill of the night. He followed the trail to the other side of the small meadow where he saw a glimmer of white in the bushes, reflecting the light from the cool white moon. Hanging from a bush near the stream were the girls cloths. There was a white under dress of some fine material

like linen, but finer and softer and a simple smock, but again of a finer material that was unfamiliar to the village boy. He couldn't tell the color in the moonlight. He wondered about the girl, where she was from and why she was swimming in the river so early in the year.

Chapter 2.

FEY

Fey Seer dreamt of her parents. She saw her mother, delicate and pale as moonlight on a winter snow, bending over her to place a tender kiss on her brow.

“Fey, dear,” she whispered, “Today the fates part their skeins and a new path begins to open before you. Listen to your heart and seek where you must. Your children’s lives and the future of the East are in the balance.” Fey could not see her father, but heard him singing a wistful song of destiny, loss and sorrow with a voice of unearthly beauty.

It was a strange dream, for she could barely remember her parents. She had a vague memory of her mother’s face, with silver blond hair and eyes as blue as the sky reflecting from a still mountain lake. Her father’s face she could not remember, all she recalled was a song of love and tenderness and distant sorrow. His voice was fair and brilliant and his song always comforted and reassured her.

As long as she could remember she had lived with her Uncle Bard in a small cottage in a

forest glade at the foot of the Eastern Mountains. Her years had been happy ones, filled with the simple pleasures of the forest. Her Uncle was devoted to his niece, if somewhat eccentric. She never knew exactly where he came from, or how he came to be living alone in the high forest. She did know that he loved her deeply, and did what he could to care for his precocious niece.

Most days he would spend fiddling with strange contrivances, brewing foul smelling potions, or with his nose buried in some ancient tome; plucked from one of the teetering stacks of books the surrounded his workshop. In the spring he would help till and plant the gardens and in fall he would help gather firewood for the long winters. Fey did most of the work around the house, cooking, cleaning, tending the gardens, and minding the chickens, the cow and a few farm animals.

These few chores still gave her ample time for herself. She spent the winters in her Uncle's workshop, where he would spend long hours teaching her to read the ancient texts, helping him mix his potions and listening to his unending stream of stories of ancient times and distant places. In the spring and summer she would spend the days in the forest and fields, looking for the herbs, plants and other local ingredients for her Uncle's work.

Her Uncle was the local sage, and the midwives and physicians from the hamlets and villages in the area would come to the cabin to stock up on healing potions, salves, and restoratives. Fey loved these visits, for they brought her a view of the outside world beyond her little valley. While their guests brought goods and food to trade for their medicines, Fey loved the news they brought even more. Most of their visitors would stay the night before their long journey home, and Fey would sit at their feet and listen to their news and stories of the goings on of the people in their villages. But most of all she loved the stories of faraway lands, of cities and castles and of kings and princes. While in many ways her Uncle knew more of these things than

the simple villagers, every once in a while a wandering trader or minstrel would have brought them news from afar.

The visitors never seemed to mind Fey's questions. She had a slender delicate beauty and wide icy blue eyes, with just a hint of wistfulness that won their hearts. Normally bright and cheerful, the thought of distant lands and people filled her with an unknown longing, and a strange feeling of loss. It was as if there was some part of her that was missing, that she just couldn't quite identify. Somehow it seemed that her destiny lay beyond her forest home, in unknown lands that she could only dream about. As much as she pleaded, her Uncle never would take her into town. His only answer was "It is not safe for you out there," but he never would tell her why.

Someday, she knew, she would have to leave her Uncle's cottage, but for now all she had were her dreams. And Fey had many dreams. At night her sleep was filled with vivid images of strange events, both near and far. Many were of grand events; royal weddings, coronations, births of heirs, and terrifying battles. Some were of places; a soaring castle high in a mountain valley, a great city by the sea, a moonlight meadow where eerily beautiful dancers moved to entrancing music. She even dreamt of the local villages and the people that lived in them.

These dreams felt strangely real, and Fey had often wondered how she could have conjured them up from her sheltered imagination. Then one day when she was still a slip of a girl there had been a dream of particular power. A plague had struck a village and she could see wailing mothers holding dying babes in their arms. The local midwife stood by, unable to stem the spread of the disease. Fey recognized her as Granny Mender, who often had brought Fey small treats when visiting her Uncle.

The dream was so vivid she told her Uncle as soon as he awoke. He looked at her

thoughtfully, and then told her to hurry her breakfast and go gather special herbs quickly, while the morning dew was still upon them. Going as fast as she could, Fey was soon back inside the workshop preparing ingredients, grinding them with a mortar and pestle and readying infusions under her Uncle's careful oversight. They worked throughout the day, making many vials of the medicine. Just as they had finished, Granny Treat knocked on the cottage door, exhausted from her long trek up to the remote glen. She described the symptoms of a plague ravishing her village. It was just as Fey had dreamed.

Uncle Bard bid Granny Treat stay, rest and take care of his niece. Grabbing his cloak, staff and a shoulder bag to carry the potions, he rushed out the door to the village. Two days later he returned, exhausted but satisfied that the tide had been turned against the disease.

Other dreams were of people. Some came and went, but a few entered her dreams on many nights. Ever since she could remember there were dreams of a tall slender man, with long silver hair bound by thin silver crown. Often he carried a silver harp, and would sing her soft lullabies of such beauty she would want to cry, or stirring tales of ancient wars and the trials of the mighty. On waking she would remember the dream, and even the stories, but the melodies were always just beyond her reach.

Lately she had been seeing other faces. One was a young man, or boy. He was tall and auburn haired, but with the gangly awkwardness of youth still in the throes of adolescence. Often he would be surrounded by small creatures of the forest, some sitting at his feet, others perched on his shoulder and with birds fluttering in the branches overhead. Recently those bucolic scenes had been replaced by darker images: a glimpse of his face leaning over her, his hair dripping wet and a look of concern on his face; nighttime journeys through dark forests; and moments of fear that she could not explain.

Other faces appeared as well. One was a dark haired giant of a man, with sweat glistening from the light of red hot coals. Another was a girl, small and quick, with dark brown hair and darting eyes. Her image was often followed by another, a handsome young man with mischievous eyes and a fine cloak that looked more than a little the worse for wear. Who these people were she did not know, but somehow she felt they would come to mean something to her.

There were happenings surrounding Fey that would have seemed strange to outsiders, but seemed natural to her. Like the auburn haired boy, the animals of the forest did not fear little Fey. She needed no song or soft words, the animals could sense her gentle soul and feel a soft aura of magic around her. Often on her walks in the woods she would be accompanied by them. Out of loneliness, perhaps, she would tell them of her thoughts and dreams. The villagers would have been frightened had they seen this slip of a girl wandering fearlessly through the forest talking earnestly to a deer, or telling fables to an aged black bear, meandering lazily beside her on a summer day.

Other, stranger, creatures would also appear to join her. From the time she took her first toddling steps she would be visited by small magical creatures. The wood brownies would often appear from behind a Jack-in-the-Pulpit or from inside a hollow log. The brownies were little creatures, who looked much like you or me but much smaller, with brown skin and hair that helped them disappear in the woods. They loved to laugh and joke, and loved to make fun of the slow mama porcupine or serious owl. Fey would often sit with them and listen to their somewhat improbable stories of the forest residents. They were magical creatures, but with a simple magic. They could move so quickly and quietly they would seem to appear and disappear, and they could talk to any creature, even humans if they ever would so desire.

For truth to be told, brownies were not particularly fond of humans, who usually made

too much noise and left a mess of the forest wherever they went. They were, however, rather fond of human food. Well, to put it more specifically, they were greatly enamored with sweets. After baking day the brownies would be eagerly waiting for the cookie or small piece of cake that Fey would bring them. They were particularly fond of small flat cakes Fey would bake and cut up into small squares for them. When she brought these into the forest the brownies would make such a show of laughing, dancing and singing that Fey named the simple cakes after them, and Brownies became a frequent treat in her Uncle's house.

On rare occasions, but most often when the moon was full, the day equaled the night, or the noonday sun was at its highest or lowest points of the year, Fey would see Fairies. They appeared tiny and beautiful, flitting quickly hither and yon on gossamer wings. Sometimes they would ask Fey for a song, for her voice was as clear as the ice cold waters of a mountain stream and as warm as the sun over the meadow on Midsummer's day. They most loved the old songs her Uncle had taught her, songs of love and loss and grand events from long ago.

Occasionally the Fairies would bring her little gifts, bits of ribbon, particularly rare and beautiful flowers, or sweet herbs woven into a garland for her hair. They were shy creatures, and did not dare to show themselves too often, but when they did they brought a joy and laughter to the solitary girl. But knowing how shy these sprites were, Fey did not tell anyone about them, even her dear Uncle.

Her other friend and teacher was old grandfather catfish. She met him one warm summer day after a swim in the river. There was a quiet pond in the river just above a small waterfall, near the edge of the highest meadow above their cottage. The water was not deep and Fey had taught herself to swim, after a fashion. Even in the summer the water was cool from the runoff of the mountains above. Fey lay on large flat rock that jutted out into the pool, soaking in the sun on

her back and humming an old lullaby as she gazed lazily into the water.

She became aware of a great grey green shape moving just below the surface. Soon the two large black eyes and a whiskered fish face stared up at her from the water.

“My dear,” said the ancient fish, “I haven’t heard that tune for many years now. A lovely little water nymph used to sing it to her fry. Would you mind singing a verse or two for me?”

Fey nodded and, after wishing the fish a polite good afternoon, began the song. The fish lay basking in the shallow water beside her, lazily waving its tail and drinking in the soothing song and the young girl’s exceptional voice. From then on Luna would frequently go to the pool on warm sunny days and sing for her aged friend. In turn, he would tell her of the ancient times, of gods and titans, elves and men.

Thus time passed for the young girl. She was quite happy in her own way, but always there was a small part of her that wished for a real playmate. Deep inside, there was an even more secret wish for real parents. No matter how kind her Uncle was to her, she longed for a real mother and father to sing her lullabies and kiss her goodnight. Sometimes these wishes would float near the surface, and a distant, wistful look would come to normally cheerful eyes.

Then one day, soon after the little girl had begun her transformation into a young woman, she had another visitor. Fey was working in the garden, weeding the rows and gathering vegetables for their evening meal. As she bent over she saw a fleeting shadow flash across the tilled soil, and then return again after a few moments. Looking up, she blinked in the mid-day sun and saw a large bird soaring high up above. As she watched the bird poised, and shot down from the sky like a falling star. Fey started to turn and run when, with a beat of mighty wings, a great bird of prey swooped to perch on the garden fence beside here.

She could see immediately that this was no ordinary bird. Its feathers were brilliant white and its wingspan was as broad as the adolescent girl's outstretched arms. A small gold crown was on its head, a gold medallion hung from a silver chain about its neck, and its claw clutched a golden bracelet. The regal bird looked at Fey for a moment, and then launched itself back into the air. It circled over her once, dropping the bracelet at her feet and then disappeared into the sun.

Fey stared after the great gyrfalcon as it climbed high into the sky, rapidly winging its way north and west. Her eyes followed it until the small speck disappeared from view, and then remembered the bracelet at her feet. Picking it up, she noticed a small piece of parchment wrapped around it and held by a small scarlet ribbon. She undid the note and it revealed only a single word, written in a graceful script with silver ink. The single word was:

Fey

The bracelet was a simple gold band about one inch wide. In the center was an emblem of a silver harp surrounded by a delicate lacework of vines carved in relief. She turned it over in her hand, feeling the solid weight of the precious metal. There were no other markings that Fey could see.

The bracelet looked rather large for her slender wrist, but Fey tried it on. As she put it on there was a flicker of a strange sensation of movement, but it passed so quickly she decided she must have imagined it. To her surprise, the bracelet fit snugly on her wrist. As she examined the bracelet Fey suddenly felt strangely disoriented, and found herself in the midst of a powerful vision.

The silver haired man or elf in her dreams stood before her, girded as for war. Fey had

always assumed he was an elf, just from the more than human beauty of his music and features. Now his hair was pulled back behind his head with a silver clasp revealing his elfin ears. He wore a hauberk of fine silver links and a silver breastplate which had the same harp symbol as her bracelet engraved on it. A long slender sword with a hilt glittering with white jewels was sheathed in a silver scabbard at his side. He stood on the battlements of a great castle.

Below him an army was gathered, as if ready to march to war. At the lead rode its general on a beautiful white horse. At his side were flag bearers flying green flags with emblems of silver harps. The man looked straight at her and said, "Take this daughter, for it will help you see and your powers grow strong. Gird yourself for struggles ahead and guard your safety. Our enemies are strong, and this conflict may yet find you." With that he held up the golden bracelet in his hand. There was a flash of white and the strong beat of wings, and then was gone from his hand, grasped in the talons of the great gyrfalcon that soon was lost from sight.

With that the vision vanished and Fey was left staring amazed into the thin air. She called out for her Uncle and ran quickly inside. Seeing her agitation her Uncle Bard sat her in a chair, poured her a cup of tea and made her repeat her story. He asked many questions and asked her about the smallest details of her vision. Finally satisfied, he asked her to let him see the bracelet. At first Fey thought that the bracelet was too snug to be taken off easily, but as she concentrated on removing it, the bracelet suddenly slid off easily.

She handed it to her uncle, who took a quick look at it, turned it over once in his hand and returned it to her. "Put it on," he bade her, "There is elfin magic about it, and it can do you no harm."

"But Uncle," she pleaded, "tell me more. Was that a dream, or was it real. It felt so real, as if I were seeing it; I could even taste the dust in the air and smell the oiled leather. Who was

that man, and why did he call me daughter? What castle was that and where were the Armies going? What do I need to be afraid of, and what struggles was he talking about? There is so much I don't understand!"

Her uncle gave a deep sigh and looked long into her eyes. "That is Strum, who must now be king of the elves. When I last saw him he was still a young prince, the third in line as heir of the Harper throne. You were not yet born. When I was younger his father, Pluck, was my friend, who eventually became the ruler of the Mountain elves. Strum had two older brothers, who should have assumed the throne on the death of King Pluck. These are hard tidings. It greaves me greatly to think Plucks' reign was cut so short. With the elves' great lifespan, he might have served for five hundred years, as his father did before him. This bracelet belonged to his Pluck's wife, Queen Harmony. I believe it was, even then, an ancient heirloom of the Harper line."

"But... but, why did he call me daughter?" the perplexed girl asked.

"When Strum was still a prince and only third in line for the throne as the youngest of three brothers, he fell in love with a beautiful mortal girl. That girl was my sister, Sibyl. Oh, she was a powerful Seer; the second sight was strong in her. She saw that their love was doomed, but that could not conquer their hearts. They were married quietly in the woods near this very place, and soon Sibyl found herself blessed with a child. But the prince could not stay, and affairs of the Kingdom drew him back to the North. Your mother was too weak to travel, and Strum was afraid the elves would reject his human wife and Halfling daughter.

Sybil was to follow him, but she knew it was not to be. She knew her days were numbered, and feared Strum's enemies would strike at him through their child. She begged him not to tell of their union so their daughter could stay hidden here, safe in her anonymity. Reluctantly, Strum did as she bid. He left, vowing to return as soon as his affairs were settled.

But alas, it was not to be. Before you (yes, their Halfling daughter is none but you, my dear) were three years old your mother's strength failed. These thirteen years since I have raised you here in the safety and solitude of our forest."

"But Uncle, why did you never tell me of this? How could you have hidden it from me?"

"Dear, I hated keeping these secrets from you, but I knew your best hope for safety lay in secrecy. I had heard disturbing news of troubles between humans and elves, and knew that many would wish to do you harm. I feared that if you knew the truth, that as an innocent child you would sooner or later let slip some small piece of the story. Elves are almost unknown in this land, and are but dim legends to many here. Stories of an elfin child would quickly spread to the enemies of your father, who would search the land until they found you.

But now you are no longer a child, and I trust in your father's wisdom. There are perilous times ahead, and you have much to learn. We must get to work!

Her uncle was true to his word. From that day on her education redoubled. He continued her work on potions, but focused on practical lessons; healing salves and poultices, draughts to promote sleep or keep one alert, serums to draw the truth from the unwilling, stains to dye the hair and skin, poisons and their antidotes. Her readings focused more on Elfin magic, charms and the history of the Elves and Western peoples.

He also made her exercise her second sight. He started with childish guessing games of 'which hand holds the bean', or 'which card am I holding?' Fey was surprised to find that soon she was able give him the correct answer almost every time. Before long she could see the card he would draw next in her mind's eye. Her lessons progressed to distance seeing. At first he would have her hold a personal item of his, like his pipe or his harp and then go into the next

room. She would try with her mind's eye to see what he was doing.

At first she could see nothing, but then it would start to come into focus. Fey found that if she stared at her Father's bracelet it was easier to see, and the vision, instead of being a dim image in her imagination appeared before her as an image. If she concentrated sometimes she could more than just see. As with the vision of her father (how strange it felt to her to think of him thus) sometimes she could hear and smell as if she were actually there. She mentioned this to her Uncle, and they experimented with the bracelet. Fey discovered that it was very difficult to take off the bracelet, unless she consciously willed to loosen. Her uncle actually measured the bracelet as it rested on her wrist, and as it slid off her hand, and found that it had actually expanded a half an inch, and become a quarter of an inch narrower.

"There is definitely magic at work in this bracelet," her uncle mused. "I know this belonged to your grandmother, Queen Harmony, but I suspect its origins are much more ancient. It seems to magnify your second sight, but whether that is its primary function or just a side effect remains to be seen. I suspect it is capable of much more. Elfin magic ran strong in your grandmother Harmony. She was a powerful prophet and sorceress, as were most of the Harper Queens. Each generation would have added what they could to powers of this band.

It is said that all human magic flows from the elves. While elves and men do not usually mix, as with you such pairings do sometimes occur. Throughout the ages there have been elves that were captivated by human lovers. By now their seed is spread to many humans. Perhaps by chance or possibly because humans that already had some elfin blood were more likely to charm their immortal kindred, the elfin magic runs strong in a few humans. Most men have only the faintest touch of the elfin brush, and their magic is easily ignored as chance or imagination. In a few others it lies dormant, until the contact with some magical creature or object awakens it. I

have no doubt that Elvin blood ran strong in your mother. As I have told you, her powers were very strong for a human. That means that you, my dear, are definitely more Elf than human.

This may be fortunate. The elves will sense this, and may recognize you as more of an elf than a Halfling. If your path ever takes you to the courts of Craigdale, this may be a critical argument in your favor.

I have little in the way of magical abilities. I have some gift with potions, but most of my gifts are more human. Like you, I have a love of learning and reading, and an inquisitive mind that loves to learn more. Elves are not generally so inclined, they take a much longer and slower approach and are more involved in the past than the future. Most of my skills come from study of the writings of those far wiser than myself.

You are different. In spite of your mortal blood the elfin magic is very strong in you. I think you have just begun to find your true power. It usually lies largely dormant in children, even the children of elves, only to blossom as they enter adulthood. I do not know for sure what form it will take in you, but it is clear that like your mother and your Father's mother you will have a powerful gift of the second sight.

More and more you will be able to see not only the present, but also the past and the future. Queen Harmony once told me of this. The past came to her frequently from places and objects that were present where powerful events occurred. It is almost as if the events left their images imprinted in them as a scribe to a book. The present is easiest to see for those who are tied to you by strong emotions like love, or even hate. Many mages have worked to imbue physical objects with the power to make things visible from afar. Crystal orbs, precious gems, mirrors and other objects have been used by some, either to view distant places or as a means of communications between their owners.

Your bracelet may be one of these, but I suspect this is just one aspect of its power. A queen of an ancient elfin lineage does not lightly adorn herself with trinkets. You and I must do more research. Somewhere in these tomes there may be a clue to its origination or powers.

Some day you may need to travel to Craigdale, the capitol of your Father's realm, to learn more from him and the scholars and lore masters there. However, that is a long and perilous journey in these unsettled times. In the olden days the great Eastern kingdom of men and the United Kingdom of elves lived together in harmony. Wide roads would have taken you there in safety. But those days are long vanished, and the realms have splintered into many small kingdoms and tribes. You would find no easy path these days." With that her Uncle grew silent and sat gazing into the fire to contemplate these issues.

Fey long pondered her Uncle's words, before falling into a fitful sleep. Her dreams were populated by strange images of villages in flames, marching armies, Elfin kings, her father's care worn face, and the boy with auburn hair. The rapid succession of fearful images was terrifying to the sleeping girl, until suddenly they stopped. They were replaced by the image of her mother and another woman. The other woman was tall and serene, with golden hair and the finely chiseled features of an elf. Her gowns were of simple white, but with a subtle pattern of sparkling white gems. On her left arm was a golden bracelet adorned with a silver harp.

Fey heard her mother speak, "Fret not, my love, you sleep safe tonight, great friends and allies will come to your aid, and you will win the hearts of many." Behind her Queen Harmony added, "And if you prove true and choose wisely, one will also win your heart with a love that will echo through the ages."

Their words were followed by an unspoken message of peace and love and comfort. Fey slid into a deep and untroubled sleep. She awoke in the early morning aware that the simple days

of her childhood were behind her. She knew that her peaceful days with her Uncle were destined to come to an end. Fey did not understand what forces were at work in the outside world, but knew she had a role to play, and a potentially dangerous one at that. She was determined to use the remaining time with her Uncle to learn what she could for the times ahead.

Time passed quickly; throughout the fall and winter Fey continued her studies. She learned much of the history of Elves and Men. She studied maps and journals of travelers throughout the inhabited lands and asked endless questions of her Uncle. She especially studied the lands between where they lived in the foothills of the eastern mountains and Craigdale in the Northern Mountains, far to the Northwest.

At times visions would come to her; many were of distant places and people unknown to her. Often she could not tell if these were visions of the past, present or future. Three she knew were of the future. In one she saw herself lying naked on the ground, her limbs tinged in unhealthy blue and no sign of breath from her chest. The auburn haired boy was leaning over her. In the next she was sitting by a campfire in the forest, the auburn haired boy was there, but Fey saw herself garbed in traveling clothes, deep in argument with a young man with brown hair and a road weary leather jacket. Seated beside him was a petite brunet girl dressed in black and a large strongly muscled man with black hair and a neatly trimmed beard. She had seen these faces before in her dreams, but never together with her in a setting like this. Finally, she saw her Uncle, alone and lying in his bed, his head beaded with fever's sweat and his breathing labored.

"Uncle," she asked, "What are these visions? Are they things destined to be, or can the future be changed?"

"I talked many times of this with Queen Harmony." Her uncle replied. "She likened it to

a skein of fine threads laid out on a long table. Many of the threads flow fairly smoothly alongside each other, but occasionally they tangle in a knot. The paths are changed after the knot, and often it is difficult to tell which path a single thread will take. The moments of crux originate from the convergence of many threads and are not easily avoided. What paths and groupings are taken on emerging from the nexus, however, may be often be changed by the smallest of forces, applied at the critical moment. So have hope, she told me; strength, wisdom and a steadfast heart can overcome, and a small hand can steer the course of destiny.”

The spring came at last, and Fey spent much of her time in the forest, gathering ingredients for her Uncle’s work. One warm day her search carried her far up the valley, gathering the sap of the Hemlock tree into a small jar. It was hot messy work and soon her hands and arms became covered with the sticky pitch. Fey finally had enough, put the stopper in the vial and added it to her basket of herbs.

Looking at her hands, Fey decided to go down to the stream and bathe. Hanging her garments on a bush, she waded into a sandy bench in the pool above the waterfall. The water was still chill with runoff from melting snow from the mountains above, and she emerged shivering and sputtering after a dunking her hair in the water. She took up a handful of soft sand and began to scrub at the sticky resin. She took off her golden bracelet to scrub it inside and out, and placed it beside her on a boulder at the edge of the waterfall. As she turned to get more sand Fey’s foot slipped on a hidden rock, ground smooth by the insistent current. Arms flailing, she reached to brace herself on the boulder and watched in horror as the precious band was knocked spinning through the air and into the rocky rapids below the waterfall.

Marking where she could find the spot where she thought the bracelet landed, Fey raced

to the shore and made her way to the bank below the waterfall. She climbed out on a large rock projecting into the river and lowered herself in. The water was little more than waist high, but too murky for her to see the bottom. All she could do was duck down and feel for the bracelet. Realizing how unlikely it would be to find the small treasure given to her by her father, Fey burst into tears and began to search about frantically.

Suddenly her feet slipped. The currents had carved a deep hole in the bottom of the stream, and past floods had filled the hole with fallen branches and snags of uprooted trees. Fey's foot slipped between two tangled roots, firmly trapping her in the icy waters. Fortunately her head was not held beneath the water, and she could arch her head up mere inches above the flood and breathe; but struggle as she might she could not free herself from snag.

"Help!" she cried hopelessly, knowing there was no one nearby to hear. She focused her mind on her Uncle, but could get no response. She had to get some help, but there was no one nearby that could hear her. Then she thought of old grandfather catfish. She pulled up a mental picture of the great fish in her mind and willed the single word "Help" with all the focus she could muster. A faint image of the ancient fish swam into the view of her mind's eye.

"Are you in trouble, little one?" he asked. "I am too far from you to arrive quickly."

"I am trapped in the rapids, and need help. Find someone to help me. I do not know how long I can hold on here." She pleaded.

"Fear not, I have heard someone calling to me all morning. I will send him to help you."

With that the image faded, and Fey was left alone, struggling in the chill water. And the water was so cold. She could keep her head above the water, but constantly had to struggle to maintain her balance against the swiftly flowing current.

The following hours were a grim blur of numbing fatigue and cold. The sun was lowering

in the evening sky when she heard someone cry out to her. All she could do was let out a weak whisper of “Help me.” In a few brief moments she heard someone, and then a young man slid into the water beside her.

She warned him to watch out for the sink hole and told him of her trapped foot. He disappeared for a moment and then returned with a stout staff. Feeling his way with the staff, he found the edge of the pothole. Realizing her fatigue, he placed the staff for her to grasp. Weakly, she clung to the wavering support while the boy (or was it a man?), ducked below the water to examine her trap. Taking the staff from her failing grip the boy pried open the offending roots with a momentous heave, and Fey felt the strong current gripping her and pulling her away as he freed her from the snag.

The next hours were just a sequence of vague images for the girl who was nearly chilled to death. She remembered being wrapped in a coarse blanket, feeling the glow of a fire, and the warmth of boy’s body holding her close. Then she faded into a deep restful sleep, only punctuated with dreams of great purring cats.

Chapter 3

NOODLE AND FEY

The sun was already above the horizon when Noodle woke. He had gotten little sleep that night; waking up every few minutes fearful that the fires would die out. He got up and gathered a last few armfuls of wood. The girl was sleeping peacefully now. He felt her forehead.

Fortunately there was no fever, and her flesh had taken on a healthy color, though naturally pale and flecked with the freckles gathered in her years of wandering in the forest and fields. He could see now that her hair was the palest gold, and her face had the beauty of a fine statue. It was far different from the pleasant but less refined faces of the healthy village girls he was used to having populate his fantasies.

Most of the girls of his village were merely pleasantly polite to Noodle Shepherd. Noodle's Grandfather and Father had been hard workers and astute businessmen, and their family had prospered. They lived in a solid two story house not far from the village, and owned large herds of cattle, sheep, goats and fowl. He would have made a good match for a local girl, if it were not for his peculiar ways. Noodle had little mind for the labors and chores of the day. He

sent his days dreaming of distant lands and muttering incoherent words to any animal that would stop to listen. When the girls did talk to him, he was usually too embarrassed by their attention to give a coherent reply.

It wasn't that he wasn't handsome enough; he was tall, although still with the angular awkwardness of a youth being stretched into the frame of a man. His eyes were green and his skin was fair, with Auburn hair. There was a twinkle of laughter always somewhere just beneath the surface of his eyes, along with an intelligent stare and easy gentle smile. Still, he was a strange lad and not the sort that would make a good sober husband for a sensible girl.

The mother mountain lion heard his movement. She hardly even glanced at the boy whom she instinctively trusted. Giving a great stretch she glided out into the meadow to relieve herself and get a morning drink. The cubs still slept soundly. One was nestled in the crook of the girl's arm, while the other lay on her chest; its face only inches from hers. Noodle worried briefly that the girl would be startled if she woke up to find herself surrounded by lions. On reflection, however, he decided that any girl that could talk to giant fish would probably not be surprised at a couple of purring kittens.

With that Noodle started to prepare some breakfast. He set some water boiling, and tossed in some dried meat from his pack. The bread was starting to get a little stale, so he crumbled it into the water as well, to make a crude porridge. Pleased with his work, he sat back to nibble on some stale bread and goat cheese. It was good to sit there and watch the peacefully sleeping girl. Her face was beautiful and framed in an aura of golden hair, wild and unruly after her adventures, but ablaze in gold with the first rays of the morning sun. She was still wrapped in the thick blanket, but Noodle remembered (not for the last time, mind you) that the rest of her was quite acceptable as well, if somewhat on the slender side. If this was what the job of

rescuing damsels in distress was like, Noodle was all for it.

Fey felt the sun in her eyes, and finally began to stir. At first she just lay there, absorbing the sounds and smells around her. She could hear the crackle of the small fire, and feel its warmth in the chill of the spring morning. She was aware of warmth and a weight on her chest and her arm, and could hear the loud purring of the two mountain lion cubs. She lay quietly for a moment trying to fathom where she was and slowly remembering the events of the previous day. She remembered her rescuer, and decided she probably was in no danger. Other than a few aches from sleeping on the ground, she seemed to none the worse for wear. Cautiously she opened one eye, only to find herself staring at a purring lion cub nestled in her arm. Momentarily alarmed, both eyes popped open, only to see Noodle calmly sitting by the fire stirring a small pot. Suddenly reminded of how hungry she was, Fey carefully lifted herself on one elbow, trying not to disturb the resting cubs.

Noodle saw her move. “Don’t worry about the mountain lions, I’ve asked them to take care of you. They won’t do you any harm. Their mother should be back any time now, but she won’t bother you.”

“We almost lost you from the chill. I’ve seen it before in the mountains, and it is nothing to take likely. Are you feeling all right? No fever or pins and needles or numbness in your hands or feet? “

“No, I am feeling fine, if a little stiff from sleeping on the ground... I think I have to thank you for saving my life.”

“You really should thank that big old fish. If he hadn’t told me about you I would never come here.” With that, Noodle looked shyly over at the young girl, and realized that the blanket had shifted, revealing far more of her pale female skin than he was accustomed to seeing. His

face turned bright red. “Um, here are your clothes. I, uh, found them on a bush on the other side of the clearing.” He couldn’t help but notice that her blush reached much further than her face, as she quickly clutched the blanket and reached for the clothes.

The two cubs rolled over and stretched, wakened by her sudden movement. Noodle discretely looked away as Fey pulled on her garments and ran a quick hand through her hair. “I’ve made something for you to eat. It isn’t much, but a little porridge will do you good.” Fey gratefully accepted his offering, and went over to sit beside him. Noodle got up and threw the blanket over her shoulders. “It is still cool,” he said, “and you really should stay warm and rest for a day or two.”

“I feel fine, thanks to you.” At this she took a more careful look at her rescuer. She was no expert in men, having seen only her uncle and a few older physicians who came to visit except for the faces in her dreams. Even so, he was not altogether bad looking. Those green eyes were striking, and he had a compassionate intelligent face. For a moment his eyes met hers. There was something magnetic about his gaze and Fey let out a gasp. She knew those eyes. This was the face of the boy in her dreams! “Wait, I don’t even know your name?”

To Noodle the world had seemed to melt away into two ice blue pools, and his heart was pounding as he wrestled his eyes away from her captivating gaze. “Oh,” he stuttered, “Um..., well ..., ah... they just call me Noodle, Noodle Shepherd. My mother named me Crown, but that means head (you do remember Jack and Jill, don’t you), so everyone just calls me Noodle.”

“Well, Mr. Noodle, I am very pleased to meet you. I am Fey Seer. I live a couple of miles downstream with my Uncle Bard.”

“Oh, I have heard of him. I live just outside of Edgewood. Doesn’t he make medicines for Old Granny Mender? I heard he had a beautiful little girl living with him, but you are

certainly no little girl.”

“Thank you, I think.” she replied, with a small smile and a curtsy. Right at that moment the she lion wandered back into camp. Fey drew back a little bit, and Noodle called to the lioness, “It’s all right mother, you children are well, and this is our friend.” With that she walked over to the cubs, gave them a gentle nudge, and turned to rub her head against the amazed girl’s leg. “Why that’s amazing!” She exclaimed, “Can you do that with other animals?”

“I think so. I have always had a way with the animals. I could calm them down and usually get them to obey just by talking to them. But after I talked to that old fish, I suddenly could see and hear what they are thinking. It seems like I can command them when I want. I was so worried about getting to you that I really haven’t had time to think about it much.”

Fey told him that her Uncle had said being exposed to magical creatures or objects could bring out latent magical abilities in those gifted with elfin blood. Noodle thought for a second, but couldn’t remember anyone in his family having elfish roots. However, the talk of magical objects jarred Fey’s memory. Only then did she remember the events leading up to the accident that almost drowned her.

Fey fought back tears. “Oh my! My bracelet! I lost it in the river.” She wailed, “I don’t know how we are ever going to find it now!”

Quickly, she told him about the bracelet and how she had lost it, leaving out the part about an Elfin King. Noodle thought for a moment and said, “It’s going to be hard to find it. I could only see a few inches down there.” At this he blushed slightly, but quickly went on. “And the current may have washed it further downstream.” He thought about the problem for a moment, and then got an idea. “Wait a second,” he exclaimed, “Let me try something.” He went and sat by the stream near the spot where she lost the bracelet, listening quietly to the thoughts of

the animals around them. In a few moments he found what he was looking for. He could sense two otters playing gleefully in the river, some distance downstream. He tried to picture them in his mind and then called to them mentally, just like he had done the night before with the lioness. He could feel them stopping their play and turning to swim rapidly upstream.

“We have allies coming,” he reassured Fey, telling her of the otters. The two sat down to wait. They each were enjoying their new found companion and the spring sun that had driven off the chill of the morning. Noodle told her of his parents and two older half brothers, whose mother had died when they were young. Fey had many questions to ask about life in the village, which seemed big and exciting compared to her sheltered life. In turn, Fey told of her life with her Uncle, learning his potions and reading of the ancient times. Noodle was fascinated. His mother, who came from a family of substance, had taught him to read, but books were rare and expensive, and formal schooling was rare in the villages.

An hour or two passed and before they realized the sun had risen high in the midday sky. Suddenly the two otters skimmed up the river and hopped up on the shore where the two youths were sitting. Noodle had Fey describe the ring, and did his best to plant the image of the shiny jewelry in their minds, along with instructions to bring it to them. The otters jumped around and slid effortlessly into the water. In moments they could be seen bobbing in and out of the water as they dived to the bottom searching for the glitter of gold. The bracelet was heavy, and had not gone far. In only a few minutes one of the two sleek heads appeared holding the circle of gold in its mouth. It jumped onto the shore, dropped the bracelet at Fey’s feet and plunged back into the water. Its mind was filled with visions of some tender muscles he had seen on the boulders where he found the ring.

Before she knew it Fey was kneeling on the ground, clutching the bracelet to her breast

with tears falling like rain. Between the fear of losing her Father's gift, and all the adventures of the last day, the girl could not stop her sobbing. Noodle could do nothing but hold her in his arms, stroking her golden hair and muttering soft words of comfort as he would a frightened creature of the wild. They stood like this for several minutes, with Fey letting the tumult of emotions overcome her. Finally she stopped sobbing and pulled herself back a little, so she could look deep into her rescuer's eyes. "Thank you Crown Shepherd, you saved my life, and returned a great treasure to me." Taking his head in both her delicate hands, she kissed the astonished boy briefly on the lips. She quickly pulled away and began gathering their things.

"We must hurry back to my Uncle's cottage. I have never been gone overnight before, and he must be beside himself with worry."

"I... I don't know," stuttered a very startled and blushing young man, "I p... probably should be starting back. My family doesn't expect me back until tomorrow, but I should get back to the flock."

"Nonsense! Our cabin is only an hour from here. You can still be back to your sheep by dark." Handing him his pack and staff, Fey took his hand and led the stunned down the path by the river and into the forest.

They walked together for several miles until Fey led them down a side path and deeper into the forest. They had only gone a few hundred yards when the forest opened up into a wide meadow. There sat a small stone cottage with a single central chimney and a steeply sloped thatched roof. Nearby was a small shed that served as a barn for their few chickens, three goats and a cow. There was a small fenced in pasture, and a rather large garden that contained far more herbs and exotic plants than vegetables and potatoes. A small courtyard in front of the cottage

featured a well, and what was left of the winter's wood supply. Small flowerbeds had been carefully planted in front of the cottage.

As they entered the clearing, Fey called out to her uncle. He appeared almost immediately. Noodle found him to be a most interesting figure. He was a short man, with thin, bird like features. His hairline was receding and he had unruly shoulder length silver grey hair, which seemed to have had little attention other than being brushed back from his face. He wore a brown robe, like a friar's and a heavy pair of sandals. A simple belt about his waist was festooned with a number of strange devices; a silver flute, some calipers, spoons, measuring cups, and even a brass astrolabe. He beamed as Fey ran to him and jumped into his outstretched arms.

"My dear, what happened to you? I was ready to go to the village to get up a search party!"

"Oh Uncle, I lost my bracelet and almost drowned. This young man saved my life!" Fey quickly gave her uncle the outline of her adventure, and Noodle's part in it.

Bard clapped Noodle on the shoulder. "That was quick thinking, lad. That chill could have killed her as surely as drowning. I owe you more than I ever can repay."

At that Noodle blushed deeply again, and muttered an incoherent denial. Uncle Bard continued, hardly taking a breath, "But there is more to this story than you have told. I need to know more of this talent you seem to so suddenly have developed. Come inside, you must be ready for a mid day meal, and there is much to discuss." With that he ushered them inside.

The large central room was comfortable and tidy. It had a great fireplace on one side with sprigs of sweet scented herbs were hung above the fireplace to dry, filling the room with the smell of peppermint and lavender. A large trestle table filled the center of the room, with a chair

at each end, two benches along the sides and a ceramic vase with fresh flowers in the center. Two doors on each side led into interior rooms and another in the back led outside. The walls had cupboards made from shelves with brightly colored cloth hanging in front instead of doors. Above the cupboards were shelves, filled with neatly arranged utensils and baskets of foods and provision. Bright curtains decorated the two front windows the small window in the back door.

Bard sat the young people at the trestle table and began bustling around the room muttering to himself as he gathered up cups and plates and took a kettle off the fire. He stripped some dried leaves from one of the bundles of dried herbs and tossed them into a teapot with some boiling water from the kettle. The scent of chamomile wafted from the cups, relaxing the two young people, who were still quite excited about their adventures. Before Noodle could catch his breath bread, fresh butter, a jar of berry jam, a cup of tea and a pot of honey appeared before them. With a rattle of the instruments on his belt, Bard plopped down into the chair at the head of the table. As soon as he saw they were helping themselves to the food he made them each tell their tale from the beginning. He asked many questions but he was particularly interested in the old grandfather catfish, and the details of Noodle's new found ability to control and read the thoughts of animals. The old scholar asked the boy many questions about his childhood and family, especially about his mother.

Noodle had to admit he knew little of his mother's ancestors. She had come from the South, near the great coastal city of Fairport. Her family was prosperous, and she had been taught to read and been given the education of a lady of quality. She had come to the area to live with her father's sister and had soon met and married Noodle's father. He was a widower with two young sons, and his new wife soon bore him a third, whose name his mother insisted be Crown.

Uncle Bard thought about this. It was clear that this lad had much elfin blood, for his talents were remarkably strong for youth with no training. Yet the lad insisted there was no elfin blood on his father's side, and his mother had never mentioned any. The circumstances surrounding his mother's coming to the remote village of Edgewood were unusual as well. There seemed to more to this story that perhaps his mother could tell, if she were willing.

When they had finished Bard poured himself a fresh cup of tea and sat thinking for a long time. Noodle was starting to get uncomfortable with the silence when Bard looked up, scratched his head and began to speak, almost as if he were a teacher addressing his class.

“Well, well children, it is clear to me that this adventure is not due to simple happenstance. There are major forces at work here, and you are almost certainly going to be swept up into the middle of them. First,” he held up a single finger, “I believe your great grandfather catfish is none other than the great Pisces. He may well be older than any other living creature. Over the ages many have worshiped him as a god. That he should take special interest in both of you indicates the coming together of great events. Second,” he continued, raising another finger, “that two children of humans with talents such as yours should be born at so nearly the same time and place goes far beyond chance. Destiny is at work here.”

Noodle and Fey both looked skeptically at each other and then back at the increasingly excited old scholar.

“A time is coming of great events, and I fear you both are to become embroiled in them. What is left of the once great Elvin Empire has fallen apart over the centuries leaving two separate kingdoms; the Mountain elves in the North and the Forest Elves in the interior. These days they choose to have little to do with each other or the outside world. However, they may be brought together in a war that could prove fatal to their kind. “

“In the West a great empire of men is growing strong, and looking greedily at all those around it. Already it has defeated many smaller kingdoms on its borders, and it girds itself to take over all the lands. Its ruler bears no love for elves, and covets their fabled wealth. Soon the elves and the human kingdoms may have no choice but to join together or be overrun.”

“I would shield you from becoming ensnared in such a tangled skein of dangerous events if I could. I fear, however, that the fates have already marked your destinies. Forces are in motion beyond any of our powers to prevent. I must think more of this, but it is clear that your destinies are linked in the coming struggle between elves and men. Your feet are in both worlds. You have been raised as humans, but gifted with powers of the elves. Fey we know is half elf and half human, and it is clear from your gift with animals that Crown has more than a little elfin blood. “

“Now the very existence of the elves may be threatened by humans, and the two of you have been brought together to play major roles in the coming conflict. The fates have given you unusual powers to meet great challenges. Such paths will almost certainly be fraught with peril, and you will need all the skills and knowledge you can garner. Both of you need whatever modest training and education I can give.”

Now Noodle only thought he understood about half of this, and the part he did understand sounded pretty farfetched. He could tell Fey was special; she had a strength about her that belied her small and delicate stature, and a captivating aura that few could resist. To look upon her was to love her. Noodle had to admit that he had certainly fallen under her spell. However, to think that he, a simple Shepherd from an insignificant hamlet, could have any great destiny, or play a role in the affairs of the great and powerful, was too ridiculous to be considered. In fact, most everyone in the village would probably vote him the boy least likely to make anything of

himself. Bard must be mistaken. He had heard that the old seer was a little bit daft, and this certainly seemed prove it.

Still, when Bard had shown him his laboratory and the library of books piled high in his workshop, Noodle was intrigued. The laboratory was a fascinating clutter; dried herbs hanging from the rafters, shelves filled with bottles of mysterious ingredients, potions, and strange contraptions, pots bubbling over small charcoal braziers, and books piled everywhere. The air hung rich with the smells of the herbs and acrid whiffs from the brewing potions. There were more books than he had ever seen. He had loved to read what books he had been able to borrow, and loved to learn of far off places and distant times. He certainly wouldn't mind having a chance to spend some time reading about them here.

And of course, there was also the promise of being able to spend more time with Fey. Noodle wasn't sure what Bard had meant by 'training,' but it sounded like a fine excuse to be near her. The more he thought about it, the more that Uncle Bard's 'training and education' seemed like a very good idea, indeed!

Fey went outside to do her chores, thinking excitedly about her Uncle's. She was eager to explore her Uncle's new openness. She understood why the old man had wanted to shelter her from the truth, but now curiosity overwhelmed her. She wanted to know all she could find about her mother and especially of her father and his people, the elves. To her elves were only figures in stories and legends and rumors from far off lands. Now suddenly they had become a part of her, a key to her past, and a doorway into a broader and more wonderful future than she could ever have imagined as a child. Besides, she had to admit she was also eager to spend more time with that boy with the fascinating green eyes who, always seemed to know what needed to be done.

“Crown,” said her Uncle (for he would not call the boy Noodle) “I know you have a good heart, or the animals would not trust you. Much of what you have learned about my Niece could cause her great harm if word of it reached the wrong ears. News of your own abilities, as well, would also be misunderstood and mistrusted by many. I beg you to keep these things secret for now. Tell no one, not even your closest friends, about these things. Tell no one, except perhaps your mother, under her dire promise to keep them secret. Tell them you are going to be my apprentice and learn the Apothecary’s trade. Can I have your word on that?”

“You may have that and more. I would never do anything that might bring harm to Fey!” promised the suddenly earnest lad.

“Excellent, but I need more from you than just your silence. I need you to help me watch over her and protect her. I am too old and slow to journey far with her. She will need a companion she can trust and rely upon, and I hope you can grow to be the champion she needs.”

This took Noodle more than a little aback. He had never thought much about his future and had never been responsible for much more than his flock. Now to be asked to be some kind of a champion like the old hero’s out of the legends, was just too much. It was clear that Bard was taking too many of his own potions. But, if meant staying close to Fey, Noodle was perfectly willing to go along with the old scholar’s delusions.

Before long Noodle had to leave to mind his flock, and prepare to return them to the lower pastures in the morning, lest they overgraze the still young grasses in the high meadows. Before he left Bard made him promise to return as soon as he could to begin his education. Fey prepared a small bundle of food for his dinner, and gave it to him as he started to walk out of the courtyard. Standing on tiptoes, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and said, “Crown, thank

you again, not just for what you did for me, but for being my friend. I hope we see you again soon!”

With that Noodle began his trek back into the mountains. At least he assumed that he began his trek, for he certainly could not remember much of anything about the first few minutes of it. Thoughts of the lovely girl dazzled him, and his cheek still glowed where she had kissed him. He knew it was silly to think for one second that such a grand girl, the daughter of an elfin king, no less, would care for a simple herder of sheep. Still, it gave him much to think of as he hurried to get clear the forest before the early dusk of a spring evening could overtake him.

As he walked through the forest he concentrated on listening to the animal voices around him. A few, like the fox and the crow almost spoke in words, but for most creatures it was more feelings, sights, sounds and smells. He thought of his flock; of Bell, the leader ram who had a steel bell attached to his collar, of Good Mother, who had born more lambs than any of the others, and Quickfoot, Pearl and Stumble, her three newest offspring. As he thought of them, he made contact. Bell was concerned that Noodle had not returned. Last night there had been no comforting fire to tell him their human protector was near. Noodle sent the ram a thought that he would be there soon, and was glad to know all was well with their flock.

When Noodle returned home, he told no one of his adventures or of the lovely young Sorceress (for he had come to realize that so she must be, or would soon become). No one, that is, except his mother. When he got a chance to talk to her in private he outlined their adventure, although leaving out many of the details of Fey’s background and abilities. His mother looked at him long and thoughtfully. Finally she said, “I believe I agree with Bard. Your destiny may reach far beyond this village, and I welcome an opportunity for you to study with such a sage. Still, as

a mother I must be cautious. I must speak to this man before entrusting my son's care to him.

You must take me there at our earliest opportunity. However, Bard is wise to be cautious. These matters are best kept secret for the time being. Take care to talk to no one but me.”

The next time Noodle took the flock to the upper pasture his mother accompanied him. As they walked she had Noodle show her what he could do with the animals. Soon the woodland creatures began suddenly appearing beside the trail to calmly sit and watch the two as they passed. Small birds came to flutter about their heads, and high above larger birds soared in graceful circles above them. “Enough,” she said, “We have no wish to announce our presence.” Noodle paused for a second, closing his eyes. “It's all right mother, no one is anywhere near.” But he sent all but one of the big birds away. That one, a large buzzard, he let continue circling to watch over journey.

Soon they reached the pasture. Assuring himself there were no predators around he warned the flock to stay in the meadow, and gave special instructions for Quickfoot to stay near his mother. As an added precaution, he had the buzzard stay over the flock, so Noodle could watch over them from afar.

The journey through the forest went quickly with his mother for company. It was not yet noon when they arrived at the little cottage. Bard and Fey came out to greet them, and Bard made his mother welcome. She had brought some fresh bread and a berry pie for the old bachelor, and they soon were enjoying their mid-day meal. When they had finished he ushered the children outside. “Leave us for a while,” he told them, “your mother and I have much to discuss in private.”

This did not distress the teenagers. Noodle had hardly been able to take his eyes off of Fey since they arrived, looking hastily away and feigning disinterest whenever she would glance

his way. Fey, however was not deceived, for the lad's blushes gave him away. This is not to say that Fey was not delighted to see her new friend. She had never had another child to play with, just the company of her studious uncle and an occasional elderly visitor. Besides, she was instinctively drawn to this shy boy with his unassuming nature.

The two walked into the woods, talking of the little things that had happened since they last saw each other. As he had done for his mother, Noodle had the small creatures come and gather around Fey, with songbirds perched in the branches above her. Spying some blue winged butterflies flitting across the meadow, he had them come to them. First they fluttered above the pair, with more and more of the brilliant butterflies joining them. Then Noodle had them land on the heads of the pair, forming crowns of iridescent blue about their brows. Fey laughed and clapped her hands in delight.

“Wait,” she exclaimed, “I have something to show you, too.” With that she called to the brownies that had been hiding nearby, watching the unusual performance of their forest brethren. They came out somewhat shyly at first, but soon there were several score of the creatures surrounding them. Before Noodle could say anything a fairy flew before him and hovered briefly him, staring intently into his eyes. He could see it was a small female, no larger than his little finger but perfect in every way. She wore a white tunic made of the finest down, and a strand of tiny jewels that looked like drops of morning dew were about her head. She nodded at him, and flitted away. Soon there were a dozen of the tiny fairies flitting about. Fey told them, “Queen Titania, this is my friend Crown Shepherd. He saved my life when I was drowning in the stream. He is beloved by the animals, and means you no harm. Please, be friends to him like you have been to me.”

At this the brownies began to cheer and laugh and sing. Their songs were largely silly

nonsense about heads and crowns and noodles, but happy enough for a spring day. The fairy queen flitted back in front of him and kissed him on the forehead. "Hail Crown! May your powers and wisdom grow so you may always protect Princess Fey. She is precious to us."

The staid like this for several minutes, until Fey grabbed Noodle's hand and pulled him away, bidding farewell to her forest friends. They soon found a sunny spot beside the river and sat together watching the flow of the waters. Their talk turned serious, for her uncle's words had given them both much to think about.

It was clear to Noodle that Fey was no ordinary farm girl, and it was easy to see that great events might evolve around her. His part in this, however, was much more difficult to perceive. He was a simple shepherd of no particular lineage or merit. All his neighbors thought him a lazy dreamer, and he had to admit they were probably right. Still, listening to Fey recanting stories of the wars of men and elves filled him foreboding. This girl belonged in the forest glen, surrounded my wildflowers, songbirds, and strange and wonderful creatures; untroubled by the worries of the world. If her path led her to darker places, Noodle vowed to do all he could to defend her from harm.

It also was clear to the boy that he was involved in much he did not understand, and that he was poorly equipped to play the paladin. He knew that he lacked the knowledge and skills he might need in the days ahead. To be truthful, however, some images of a knight on white charger carrying off the fair damsel did enter his adolescent imagination. From that day on he threw himself into his studies with Bard, and took every opportunity to learn more of the outside world and its dangers.

On that his mother and Bard had agreed. She did not talk of their discussions, except to say that she agreed that her son should receive instruction from the scholar. When she returned

home she told her husband of meeting with Bard, that she had arranged to have Noodle tutored by him, and that perhaps the boy could become his apprentice.

Virgil Shepherd was cautiously in favor of the plan .The reclusive healer had a good reputation in the village since his potions had saved many lives from the plague. He just might be able to teach Noodle some valuable career. It was clear to the practical man that, unlike Noodle's older brothers, his youngest son did not have the makings of a hard working farmer. He was too much of a dreamer, and while he could work hard when he put his mind to it, most of the time his attention was fixed far away from the mundane labors of the day. Perhaps the old hermit could teach Noodle something of value like the mixing of medicines or better yet to learn his letters and be a scribe.

Chapter 4.

LESSONS

The rest of the spring and summer went by in a pleasant rush for the two newfound friends. On his way to the upper pastures Noodle would drive his flocks through the forest to the meadows next to the river. There they would graze for a day while he went to the cottage for his lessons. He would return in the afternoon laden with books and parchment, which he would take with them up the mountain and study for the next several days, until it was time to return to the village.

Fey and Noodle both enjoyed their days together, although Uncle Bard drove them hard at their studies. They would sit together at the great trestle table in the main room, books piled in front of them and parchment for practicing ancient scripts. Both were proficient at reading and writing in the common tongue, but Noodle knew nothing of the ancient scripts of elves and men. But with Fey to help him, he soon became skilled at the script. Bard discovered that Noodle had a sensitive touch and a delicate hand that lent itself to the elfish script. Before long he was able to read, again with some help from Fey, from the ancient texts. He loved his evenings under the stars up in the mountain pastures, nestled next to a fire reading tales of ancient kings, kingdoms and powerful magicians.

Fey's education that summer was of more mystical nature. Her uncle had her begin to study ancient parchments and scrolls of charms and magic. She learned that all magic involved controlling flows of power from the earth, air, fire, water and the ether that surrounded them. Some of these powers mankind had started to learn to harness without magic, like fire for heating and forging, air for driving ships and windmills, and the earth for copper, iron and steel. The

elves, on the other hand, could control these using their innate magical abilities. Much of their learning focused on ways to channel and amplify these forces by magical means. This magical control could come from the force of their own will, from chants and spells, or focused in potions or magical objects. Bard explained that in some sense the magus served as a conduit and focus that drew in the energies around him and converted them into a useful form dictated by his will. Elves had the power to manipulate these forces by will alone, while humans without elfish blood must use physical means such as chants, potions and charms.

Both the children (for so he considered them) clearly had the elfin powers, and his goal was to help them harness and enhance them. First by sharpening their mental skills and ability to gather and focus the powers, and second, by teaching them the use of spells, potions and charms to store or channel the energies. There was not much time and an elf might spend many lifetimes of man perfecting his or her powers. He did not know how much time they had, but doubted they would have many months, or a few years at best, before outside events would reach this remote part of the Eastern Mountains. He had another major problem; while he knew that his charges were exceptionally gifted, he himself possessed little, if any, magical abilities. He was a scholar and a singer of the ancient songs, and his knowledge was from books or word of mouth, not the doing. If he had any magic it was in his voice, which he felt was poor enough compared to elves. Still, it was his to do, and he had more than a little knowledge of these things. In his younger days he had lived in the Elvin capitol of Craigdale. He was friends with prince Strum, and spent many hours reading in their great library and discussing magic with Strum's mother, Harmony, who was one of the greatest of Elvin prophets and sorceresses.

That led him to thoughts of the bracelet. He had often seen it on Harmony's arm, and had the impression that it had been an heirloom of the Harper dynasty for millennia. If it was truly a

focus of her power, it could be a mighty talisman, but of its strength and nature he could not tell. A magus could use such an item to store power and spells, so that a mere thought could raise a spell of such complexity and power that it would take hours, days or even months to execute unaided. If the mightiest of elves had contributed their additions to it over the eons, the proper use of it could release immense powers in the proper hands. Even worse, in the wrong hands it could do immense harm. Unfortunately, he could find nothing in his tomes that mentioned the bracelet, much less hinted at its sleeping powers. All he could do is help the girl probe its powers, and strive to prevent any unwary accident that might unleash forces beyond their control.

Their training took three parts. The first was to learn the ancient languages and alphabets and read the great histories. The second was to help them identify their strengths and train their minds to use their gifts. The final was to help them learn to use spells, potions and charms to extend their powers. This must be done with the greatest haste, focusing on those things that might be of the greatest practical value. It wasn't long before he had consulted his references and began their lessons.

The two students made good progress in the ancient languages and texts. Fey had been studying them for several years, so she was already well versed in the major languages. Now she was studying the more obscure languages, and helping to tutor Noodle. Noodle, however, had a natural gift with languages and quickly learned their alphabets and vocabulary. He particularly liked reading the old books and parchments. Bard was pleased to notice this scholarly bent in the young shepherd and kept him well stocked with reading material, often picking out specific passages or sections and discussing them at length with his young students.

The both practiced their magical abilities. Fey worked on seeing things at a distance, and

projecting her thoughts into the minds of Noodle and her Uncle. She told her Uncle that she wished she had been able to tell him when she was trapped in the river. He responded that he was not surprised; long ago he had put up wards to prevent others from looking in on them. They surrounded the cottage, so Fey had to either go outside to search afar, or work in the cottage on whoever happened to be inside.

She steadily improved her ability to far see, although it was difficult if it did not involve a major event, strong emotions, or someone that wanted to communicate with her and with whom she already had strong connections. After a time, Noodle got used to Fey's voice whispering to him out of nowhere, even when he was at home in the village. She promised she would not use her far sight on him, unless he gave her permission. However, Noodle was never quite sure she never took a little peek.

Noodle's gift gave him a sort of far sight, as well. If he could make contact with the mind of an animal, especially one of the more intelligent ones, he could often see through their eyes. Uncle Bard soon found that Noodle was constantly aware of the thoughts of the animals nearby. If they were alarmed, he would generally know. Bard made him practice this skill, until Noodle could quickly sort through the background thoughts to pull out the unusual ones. The boy practiced with his own animals, and found that with practice he could make contact with Bell and Good Mother from many miles away, have them take a look around for him, and give them simple commands. The sheep were not particularly bright, however, and his scope was limited.

Noodle could communicate better with the more intelligent animals. With Scout, the family dog, he could almost hold conversations, listening to the dog's eye view of the world around them. He was surprised at how much the dog could discern simply by the smell of people. Scout could tell who was afraid, who was mean and who was kind, just by smelling

them. Scout could also perform fairly complex tasks, as long as he didn't get side tracked by a careless squirrel or the neighbor's cat.

It was not long until Noodle could set up a zone around himself, his home, and Fey's cottage where he would be alerted if anything unusual occurred. If he was particularly interested in some event, such as Fey's return from the forest, he would set up watchers to alert him of her return. The animals, however, did not find this one sided. There was something about the boy's calm presence that comforted them, and they could sense the love and care he had for them all. Soon the animals began to rely on him. If one was hurt or ill, they would come to the cabin and wait for him. He and Fey would care for them as best they could. Many animals would just wander by to see if Noodle was there. He usually carried something for a little treat for them; some seeds, a scrap of bread or some old cheese or dried meat. It was not unusual to see Noodle and Fey sitting together under a tree, with any number of small animals nestled at their feet, or sitting in the branches above them. Sometimes they would bring the pair presents, their latest catch to show off, a particularly nice piece of fruit, or a fresh wild flower.

As the summer wore on, Uncle Bard decided it was time to see if they could expand their Magical abilities. He started by giving each of them a simple test. On a bench outside the cabin he put five objects. The first was a common grey rock, the size of one's hand. The second was an empty glass vial. The third was bowl with several smoldering embers. The fourth was a bowl of water, and the last was a crystal globe, the size of large man's fist.

He told Fey to go into the forest until she was called, and turned to Noodle. "Boy, I want you to look at each of these in turn, and focus your will on it. Try to feel its essence, and ask it to show you its power. Take your time, but if you soon feel no response go on to the next. Noodle looked at the rock; if he closed his eyes he could feel the weight of deep dark places. The rock

began to tremble, and small pieces began to flake off. After a few seconds, however, the movement stopped.

“Very good, now try vial of air.” Noodle concentrated, and the small cabin seemed to fill with the voices of many animals. “Think of Fey,” the Scholar commanded. Noodle concentrated on the vial and formed a mental image of the girl at the same time. Suddenly her voice seemed to whisper in the cabin, apparently in a conversation with a brownie about the silly ways of the blue jay.

“Enough. Now regard the fire.” Noodle looked at the smoking ember, till glowing red at its edges. The embers suddenly flared up into flickering yellow and blue flames, which steadily grew until the bowl flamed as if it were a torch. Startled, Noodle looked at his mentor, and the flames suddenly died down. Bard pointed to the water, but try as he might, Noodle could get no response from the bowl of liquid.

“Now look into the crystal.” Bard continued. “The crystal is a gateway into the ether, the universal forces of space and time that shape the universes.” Noodle focused, but try as he might he could see nothing, other than the upside down reflection of the cottage. After a few minutes Bard put his hand on the Boy’s shoulder.

“Well done lad, you have some contact with the Earth, and much more with Fire. The Air is a symbol of the mind and communications, and it is by far your strongest gift. There is something different about your use of it, though. Most view these elements as sources of power, and strive to control them. I feel your power is of gentler sort, it is fueled by compassion and love. What implications or advantages this may have, I do not know.”

“You seem to have little affinity to water or ether, but you should be proud, what you have shown would have been the envy of many a renowned magus. I have never heard of the like

of your affinity to other living beings. I believe there is some connection with the very souls and spirits of those you touch. I think it reflects a purity that you may not realize within yourself. Your path may not be the ways of power, but those more of the spiritual. Enough; go and send Fey to me.” With a wave of his hand he ushered the somewhat confused boy off.

When Fey returned, her uncle gave her the same instructions. She stared at the rock, now lying quietly on the bench. Images came to her of diving into dark depths, of titanic pressures, and finally of a fluid sea of rock, glowing almost white with incredible heat. Suddenly there was a rumble, and the very ground beneath their feet began to tremble. “Enough, her Uncle barked, “Let us leave the cottage standing.”

Fey turned her attention to the vial of air, and suddenly in the midst of a calm day, a strong breeze began to blow. She turned to the fire, but the breeze did not stop. Other than a slight brightening of the embers from the wind, there was no response from the glowing coals. However, when she looked upon the water, a cloud began to form above the bowl, growing and lifting itself into the air. The bottom began to turn grey, the wind increased, and Fey thought she heard the faint whisper of distant thunder. “Stop,” commanded her Uncle. “Will it to be calm and dissipate!” Fey did as she was told, and soon the cloud dwindled to nothing and the day once again became calm.

“Now try the crystal,” he urged gently, as if half afraid of what she might do. Fey gazed into the crystal sphere, and was suddenly lost within it. Many shifting images flashed before her; Noodle sitting in the woods with his animals, villagers going about their daily chores, barges laden with barrels being drawn up the river by oxen, a fair city with great ships with billowing sails coming and going from its harbor, another great city at the juncture of two mighty rivers on a great plane surrounded by high walls and parapets, distant snow capped mountains over a snow

white castle in a high valley.

Then the visions grew darker. She saw burning villages, and men dying in battle. An army sailed forth from the city on the plane, and then she saw her Father, his crown gone, his clothes torn, chained to a stone wall and sitting on a straw covered floor of some distant cell. The vision changed, as if she flew straight up from the cell, soon a castle lay before, dwindling as her perspective rose. Soon the castle disappeared amid a vast panorama of mountains, green plains, rivers and seas. She went even higher and details were lost, she rose far above the clouds, until the skies were dark as black velvet, punctured by thousands of brilliant stars.

The world lay beneath her like a round saucer, decorated with white clouds, blue seas, white mountaintops and green and brown lands. Still further she rose, until the world became a small star itself, and then disappeared. Moving even farther she saw the stars gather to form into giant clusters, spirals and clouds. Slowly they dimmed to yellow and red, and then, one by one, blinked out until nothing was left but utter cold and blackness. Then suddenly there was a sharp pinpoint of light of unbelievable brilliance, and a blinding explosion that filled the heavens.

The vision was broken as her uncle threw his cloak over the crystal ball. The girl swooned in his arms, overcome by the strange and powerful visions. "Uncle, she gasped, I saw the future, at first it was simple and calm, and then wars came. I saw my father in chains, and then I traveled to places I do not understand. I rose until the world became but a distant point of light and even the sun was lost in a vast sea of stars. I watched as ages of ages passed, until the universe itself winked out and died of old age, and then was reborn anew in a terrible explosion of light."

Her uncle dropped the crystal into a silken purse, and put his cloak around the frightened girl, who was still shivering with the fading memories of the unbearable chill of the dying

universe. Noodle came running into the courtyard, “Fey,” he cried, “Are you all right? Something frightened you. I could feel your fear.” She sat on the bench where her Uncle guided her and replied hesitantly, “I am all right, it was just some strange and fearful vision. “

“It was more than that, my dear.” Her uncle said soothingly, “I have never seen such strong reactions to earth, air, water, and most of all the ether.” You have journeyed farther into the vast reaches of time than I ever imagined possible, to the death and rebirth of the very universe itself. Your first attempts to control the elements resulted in earthquakes and storms! I believe my challenge with you is to teach you to control these forces, to make them come and go at your bidding, and to take the form you will. Powers this strong can easily strain and even pervert all but those of the greatest strength and purity.

Fey cradled her still spinning head in her hands and Bard saw the bracelet on her wrist. “Or course!” He exclaimed. “I forgot about your Grandmother’s Bracelet. There must be great power stored within it. It must have served to magnify your powers. I do not know if it replenishes itself from the energies around it, or whether it will empty itself like a vessel of oil being burned off. Until we know more of it, we must use it sparingly, if at all. I would not take it off. Your father sent it to your for a reason, and I do not believe he would have done so if it offered you serious harm.”

“Go children, and relax outside until dinner. I have much to contemplate.” With that he disappeared into the cottage. There shortly followed the sound of a tottering pile of books cascading onto the floor, and an exclamation of “Aha! There you are!” The boy and girl looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, and set out into the Forest. They wandered aimlessly until coming to one of Fey’s favorite places, a sunny dell in the forest with a small spring fed stream bubbling through it, cascading over ancient mossy stones. There were a few stones

standing nearby, clearly the remains of some ancient building or structure lost in the mists of time. It was here that she most often encountered the Fairies.

They sat on one of the fallen stones, and told each other of their tests. Fey was much more impressed by Noodle's results than he was. "I think it is amazing that you should have such a power over living creatures, and control the elements of the earth and fire as well. I do not believe there are many, if any, other men living today with such powers. If I know my Uncle, what you have seen will be just the beginning."

Noodle was not nearly as certain. "Well, I have a little skill with the Gods' creatures, but compared to you, it seems little enough." He muttered awkwardly.

"Nonsense," Fey retorted, "I think much that occurred to me may have come from my Father's heirloom, and little enough from my own doing."

"Well, it seems likely it had something to do with it, but it must have worked on skills you already had. I know that even without it you had powerful second sight, and the Elvin power within you is strong enough to call the brownies and fairies."

"Perhaps," she admitted, "but I am concerned with my Uncle's warnings about the perils of that ornament, the visions I had of war, and I am most fearful over the fate of my Father." Laying her hands on his, she stared deep into his eyes and implored, "Crown, I am so glad you are here. I don't know how I would face this alone, but it isn't fair to draw you into my troubles."

"Dearest Fey," he exclaimed, holding both her hands in his. "I have been lost to your cause since the day that I met you. Whatever may come, I will always be there for you." He looked down into her wide eyes and waiting lips and knew he should draw her close and kiss her. Instead, a nameless terror gripped him, his knees seemed to be in danger of collapsing and he looked away, muttering, "It seems much more likely that it will be my bacon that you will be

pulling out of the fire.”

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As the summer drew on, Bard focused the pair on bending the elemental powers to their will. Noodle learned how to use the power of the earth to bring strength to things around him and himself. Like the strong roots of the tree, he learned to reach down to the earth and bring strength and substance to his will. Reaching up into the air he could bring speed and motion, and fire to bring energy and light. Bard told him “the Magus can reach up to the power of the heavens and down to the strength of the earth to shape the world with his will. By the strength of his will he can make things so.

Those sounded like fine words, but the youth found it more than a little harder to do than to say. Bard had him making sand castles for weeks, until at last Noodle could draw strength from the earth beneath him to harden the delicate structures into solid rock. “This is potentially quite useful in the building of houses and roads,” he complained, “but I am not quite sure how this is going to help me against mysterious unknown enemies.”

Bard slapped the side of the boy’s head and remonstrated, “Can’t you see what is in front of you? You have learned to take the strength of the earth and apply it where you will. It may be easiest for you to do this with sand and mud, but with practice it will work as surely wherever physical strength is needed.”

The fire was definitely more fun. Noodle quickly passed from lighting candles and warming water for tea to creating balls of light from thin air. These were quite useful, although they took a little concentration to maintain. He would be sitting in the hillside at night with his sheep, a small ball of light hovering conveniently above his head, reading some rousing tale of ancient battles when, just as he got to the exciting part, his concentration would slip and the light

would vanish.

However, he could not seem to get the knack of drawing enough power for anything truly impressive. When he mentioned this to Bard, the scholar said, “The elemental powers are not a uniform field, spread evenly through the cosmos like butter spread on bread. They flow, more like streams down the mountainside. The magus needs to sense these flows and draw from them. Earth flows through the ground, as does the Air keep its place. Water flows both through the earth and air. Fire requires the air, and Ether permeates and defines it all. With practice you will sense where these powers are strongest, and draw your strength from there.

Here, let me give you a little trick that may help. First, go to some place where you have a clear view for a ways. Then try to sense where the fire and air forces flow with your mind’s eye. Just trust your instinct and try to imagine them as slightly brighter or warmer streams in the air. Next send a number of small balls of fairy light radiating out from you. See where they flare the brightest, it should be where you sensed the power flowing. Draw energy from there and your power should be much increased.”

Noodle was not sure about this imagining a vision of invisible flows of energy, but the fairy lights seemed like they might be fun. The next evening as he sat in the mountains above the forest he practiced generating several small balls of light. First he just imaged them floating together before him, then he sent them flying slowly away from him in all directions. That was so intriguing he tried it with five and then ten balls, and then sent them exploding out like shooting stars. For a while he was so pleased with his fireworks that he it took him a while to notice that there were, indeed, places where their lights flared brighter. He walked to one of these places and sent out the lights again, leaving one where he stood. Then he went to where he saw another light flicker brighter, and repeated the process. Soon he had a series of the little lights

tracing where the powers of air and fire concentrated in that portion of the hillside. He walked over to where two of the streams crossed each other, and willed a nearby fallen branch to light, imagining the energy flowing from the confluence of the invisible streams through him to the branch. It blazed into a large ball of fire that lit up the entire hillside. He extinguished it immediately, hoping that half the village had not seen the flare of light on the mountain.

Fey's training ran in different directions. Bard had her focus more on fine control than on strengthening her powers. Instead of sand castles she started by using her control to form the sand into intricate patterns, often those of ancient characters. She found that if she focused on the area and visualized the change the sand would move and flow into the shapes she desired. Then Bard had her take the shapes and transform them into rock. Before long she had collected many little medallions of rock that appeared to have been carved into intricate lattices.

Next Bard had her locate a nexus of earth power flows, and told her to focus the power onto her character sand to make it heat and fuse. As she worked the sand started to glow, until it shown yellow hot. Bard told her to send the air to cool it gently, so as not to crack it from the shock. Her first attempt was crude, not only the sand character, but a large clump of the earth below it were fused together into shiny obsidian colored volcanic glass. With practice she was able to fuse just the character itself, and cleanse the glass of impurities until it became clear as spring water. She made one of these in the shape of the outline of a crown, threaded a ribbon around it, and gave it to Noodle as a keepsake.

With water her training consisted of more practical matters. First Bard had her work on sensing where water was flowing within the earth, and then having it bubble to the surface in the form of a spring. Then he had her focus on the waves and foam in the river below the rapids, until with a wave of her hand she could still the waves. Bard made a game with her, throwing

small sticks into the river, and having her control the currents to bring them back to her.

Next he had her do much the same with the air. At first she found she could raise or calm a breeze at will. Her uncle then had her take the wind and lift a leaf or a feather and move where she desired with the breeze. Her uncle had her practice for days with this, until she could take a feather and make it do intricate looks and spirals, and land it deftly in a small box by her bed.

Then she worked at combining the water and air. She would start bringing in a warm breeze, and concentrating the water in the air around her to saturate the warm air. Then she would call in cool air from high above to chill the moist air. In time she found she a small cloud would form. If she kept feeding it water and warm and cool air the cloud would get larger and rain would start to fall. For several days it greatly amused Noodle to see Fey walking through the garden with a small raincloud dancing before her watering the plants.

Her Uncle told her that if she had enough power, made the clouds large enough, and caused the winds around it to spin she might be able to make a cyclone. However Bard cautioned her that such large manipulations of weather required great power, and were often difficult to control. Sometimes, he had read, drawing great flows of power could cause them to reinforce each other; generating forces too strong for their wielder to control. Harmony had told him that a wielder of power needed constantly monitor the powers being used, and be ready to ease them when required. More than one sorcerer had become so enraptured with their power that they had been overcome by the very forces they had summoned.

Fey and Noodle found this to be a pleasant, if busy and somewhat exhausting summer. They both looked forward to being able to spend time studying together. Neither had close friends before. Fey had never had the opportunity to meet other children her age, living alone with her Uncle. Noodle had some friends in the village, but most of the other children had found

him too strange for their comfort. Besides, Noodle spent much of his time up in the mountains with his animals. As a result, he was usually alone or watching from the outskirts of the activities of the other children in the village. More than one observant girl had noticed that he was somewhat pleasing to look at, and did, indeed, have a kind and friendly spirit. Unfortunately, they never could figure out how to approach the strange boy who seemed to prefer being alone with his animals than playing or gossiping with the others of his age.

The two soon became very close. The events that brought them together had broken the ice, and then finding they both shared magical talents gave them something special that only they shared. Both were very bright and loved to learn, and enjoyed talking to each other about their readings. But best of all were the times they got to wander together in the fields and forests, meeting the animals and magical creature and laughing and joking with each other. Any dangers or problems of the outer world seemed very remote, and only occasional would their conversations turn to those more somber issues.

It was a special time for Uncle Bard, as well. He soon became quite fond of the boy. The boy was a quick student and had a gift for languages. He also appreciated Noodle's gentle spirit and unassuming good nature. Most of all, perhaps, he was delighted to have two such apt pupils. Bard was a scholar, not a sorcerer. His magical talents were minimal, largely evolving around the power of his voice and a knack for making potions and minor charms. But he loved to try to understand how magical and physical forces worked, and how they could be controlled. Now he had a chance to test out his theories on two very powerful, but untrained young adepts. Strange, that was; that two such gifted humans should be found so close in age and location could only be caused by the fates. What their destiny may be, Bard was certain that it must lie outside their mountain retreat.

When they left, it seemed clear it would not be for pleasure or education, but in response to dire events. He knew his time was limited, although it seemed like they might yet have a little while before events reached them. Bard was determined to give them what knowledge, skills and weapons he could. But Bard was a scholar, not a warrior, and if the fates had sent these two children to him, then they must require that which he could teach them.

Bard's father, Virgil, was not as sure about the two. His wife had convinced him to let Noodle study with the hermit, and he felt that apprenticing to an apothecary was as good a career as any for the boy. His father knew the boy had a quick wit and a love for learning, but felt he lacked the practical nature needed on the farm. While he was still unsure of the teacher Constance had chosen, he was willing to support the endeavor. If Noodle could wind up with a respectable and profitable career, it would be worth it to lose his help with the animals.

However, when Noodle talked about Bard's niece, his father was concerned. It wouldn't do for an apprentice to get too involved with his Master's child. One little indiscretion and he could get sent packing. Virgil made to make sure his youngest son was very aware of this risk, and warned him to keep a friendly distance with the girl. Once he had finished his apprenticeship and was working on his own, well that would be a different matter. Then the Uncle might look favorably on a bright and hard working young man. Until then Noodle must keep his distance and work to please the Uncle, not the girl.

While Noodle was not at all sure that he was being trained as an apothecary, he did see the wisdom in his father's warning. His mother agreed, although having met Fey she was certainly in favor of the lovely girl as a potential mate. Uncle Bard had placed a great trust in him, letting him into his and his niece's life and their secrets so freely, and Noodle would not want to betray that trust. Besides, he could not stand the thought of being separated from Fey for

any reason. As much as he adored the beautiful young maiden, he vowed to be patient. Besides, as much as he liked the girl, she was a princess and probably destined for a much grander mate than he would ever be. So, while Noodle and Fey spent many happy hours together, Noodle always kept a little distance between them.

This caused no end of frustration to the Fairies, who of course could easily read the true emotions of the humans. Many times Fey would flee into the forest to confide in Queen Titania and Mote, her servant. “I think he likes me, but every time we get too close he changes the topic or moves away.” Titania would laugh and stroke her cheek. “The foolish boy is probably so afraid of being spurned he hasn’t the courage to show you how he feels. It’s clear the lad is love with you. If you want I’ll get Puck to slip him a love potion.” But Fey would have none of it. “I’ll win him honestly, or not at all.”

Mote would fly over and whisper in her ear about feminine powers far more ancient than and as powerful as Titania’s potions. Mote would hover next to her ear and whisper advice. The Fairy would urge her to take matters more firmly into her own hands, and offer specific pointers about the most effective approaches. Fey would blush to her toes at some of Mote’s more graphical suggestions, many of which seemed not just embarrassing, but most likely to be physically impossible.

Puck, King Oberon’s servant, would frequently appear on Noodle’s shoulder and kick him in the neck or slap his ear in frustration. “Can’t you see the girl is begging for a kiss, you stupid clot! Just grab her and have done with it! You better take advantage of the situation before she actually meets someone who’s not afraid to! Bah! I wouldn’t waste a love potion on a young idiot who passes up one of the fairest maidens in all the lands.” Then, like Mote, he would continue to elaborate exactly what he would do with such an opportunity.

Noodle, however, withstood Puck's urgings. It wasn't just that he took his father's advice to heart. Whenever the time was right to show Fey how he felt, his limbs would freeze and he could not force his voice to speak. Like the horse that balks just before the jump, he just couldn't force himself to take the critical step. Besides, he had no right to think this girl, who appears to actually be a Princess of the Elves, would have anything more than friendship to offer a mere commoner like himself.

Summer faded into fall and then into the long mountain winters. Now Noodle would stay in the Seers cottage during the week, returning home to spend the day of rest and worship with his family. Bard focused their learning more on books and memorization. In addition to studying histories and geographies they advanced their studies of potions and medicines. They spend many hours perfecting recipes and formulas that Bard had gathered from many sources. Many had come from the great library of the Mountain Elves, where there were scrolls that were supposed to have dated back more than two millennia.

However, their most serious studies now turned to spells and charms. Magical spells, Bard told them, involve words and incantations that heighten the powers of the magician, summon other powers, and focus them on achieving a specific end or effect. Charms, on the other hand, are spells worked on physical objects. There were two basic types of charms, those that stored power and those that released power in a desired direction. The charms that released power could either be general spells that worked constantly, such as good luck or fertility charms. Others would be released by command of the owner of the charmed object.

Most magi would have one or more charmed objects they keep, both as reservoirs of power and as a repository of stored spells, ready to be released when needed. That way they

could work intricate and time consuming spells at their leisure, ready for whenever they might be needed.

“I believe the Harper bracelet your father sent is such an object. It is clear it has stored an unknown amount of power. Given the skill of Fey’s grandmother, and the probability it had been used by generations of Elvin sorcerers, it is almost assuredly a vessel for great powers.”

“The real unknown, however, is what other spells have been added there. Again, it is reasonable to assume that there are some powerful charms residing in it. Unfortunately, I have found no book or writings that describe them, and Harmony did not reveal its secrets to me. Still, I think that Fey would be well advised to continue to use this heirloom for such purposes. If nothing else, the time may come when you need to wield the powers stored in it. In the meantime, we can work in our own small way to add to the powers and charms it contains.”

“There is danger in this. Those charms that we add you will know and be able to control. The others may reveal themselves by design or chance. My fear would be that you would inadvertently unleash some power or spell that is either too strong for you to control, or that has some unanticipated ill consequences. We will start cautiously; I would like you to have some practice before working on an object of such power.”

“Here are my notes on a number of simple spells. I want you each to select some of interest to you to practice with. Remember, the spell itself has no power. All the power resides within you. The spell serves only to focus your power on a specific outcome. At first you must focus clearly on the spell and envision the outcome you desire. With repeated use, the spell will serve as a stimulus and aid, and achieving its results will take less and less effort. It is much like a musician learning a new song from a sheet of music, at first he must labor to follow the music, and the music may be halting and untrue. With practice the tune becomes stronger and the effort

easier. With more practice a quick glance at the music is enough to remember the entire song, and the musician can focus on the feelings and nuances of the tune. Eventually just the name of the tune brings forth music of far greater depth and impact than a mechanical playing of the score.”

“Magic is much the same. You have both shown the ability to manipulate the great forces, and have developed some techniques for playing them. Now it is time to learn to play the pieces that Magi have painstakingly developed over the centuries. Some are simple enough for any village healer to play; others require all the skill and delicacy of a great Mage. As a rule humans with the gift tend to jealously guard the secrets of the spells they develop. Often it is because they mistakenly believe it is the spells themselves that have power. We are fortunate that some of their notes were found after their deaths.”

“The elves are more farsighted. While some secrets remain, much of their work has been gathered and copied by the scholars at their great libraries. Others have searched the world to find the notes left by human wizards, and brought back copies for the learned. If you ever journey to the great Elvin citadels of Craigdale of the Mountain Elves or Parkwood, capitol of the Forest Elves, you may have a chance study them yourselves.

Fey and Noodle spent much of the next week practicing basic spells. Fey learned that with the help of a basic spell she could summon a small ball of light, even though her control of fire was relatively weak. Noodle found spells that could help see into the minds of men, not just animals. He learned to sense their feelings and the truth of their words. They both learned to see the auras around people and assess their meanings. At first they need to recite the spells and concentrate carefully, but with practice these and other basic tasks became easier.

When his students had grasped the knack of learning simple spells, they progressed to

learning spells to charge objects with power. Bard brought out one of the glass amulet Fey had made from the sand in the shape of the ancient elfish character for “fire.” With the help of one of the oldest of known spells, Noodle worked to draw energies of fire and store them in the amulet. When he finished Bard handed the amulet to Fey and told her to make a light. When Fey complied the light flashed out far more brightly than she had ever accomplished on her own, filling the main room of the cottage with white light and illuminating the objects within in stark contrast. The light beamed bright for several minutes and then began to fade. Before long it had died down to the warm glow that Fey could maintain by herself.

Through the short winter days and long into the evenings Bard kept his charges practicing their craft. Noodle loved the time spent working in Bard’s laboratory. He learned to dry and preserve the herbs, mushrooms and other local ingredients Bard used for his potions. He would prepare tinctures and ointments for Bard to have on hand when the local healers would come for medicines.

There was one elixir Bard was particularly concerned with. After the harvest a local farmer brought Bard a number of bags of wheat, rye and other grains. Bard carefully weighted and mixed these together and set a number of sacks aside for use in the coming year. He had them crack the grains in a large pestle, and then mix them with water and honey in a special crock that kept warm besides the fireplace. After a week or two he ladled some of the liquid into a large flask that he put to boil over a charcoal brazier. The stopper of the vial had a long tube coming out of it, and a clear liquid slowly dripped out into a smaller flask. Noodle’s job was to make sure that the large flask never boiled dry, and to put stoppers in the small flasks and replace them when they were full.

Bard was unusually concerned about the elixir; measurements had to be made very

precisely, and Noodle had to keep the apparatus happily bubbling from morning to night. Bard used the clear fluid in a number of ways; it was used to clean wounds to prevent infection, dissolve herbs for medicinal tinctures, and could even be burned with a wick to heat small batches of potions. Bard was also careful to keep a flask on his belt, from which he would occasionally sip, especially when his students were being particularly dense about learning their latest lessons. Bard never would tell Noodle its purpose, other than to say that he was too young to be concerned about it yet.

When the weather started to turn cold Noodle went out back and dug a charcoal pit He filled it several times with dry hardwoods that he would set afire and cover with earth to smolder into charcoal. He took great pleasure in using ever more flamboyant spells to light the fires, until Bard had to warn him not to set the entire forest ablaze.

Before long it was time for Mid-winter celebrations. The day before Noodle went home to celebrate the holiday with his family, the three of them worked all day to decorate the cottage. They strung up fresh pine garlands and holly around the main room and prepared a feast to celebrate the traditional day of festivities and giving.

After dinner the three sat down to exchange gifts. Each of them had been working in secret on gifts for the others. Bard went first. "Crown," he said, "perhaps you do not remember this, but it helped you save my niece. That day you stopped in the forest to cut a sapling for a staff. It was not by chance that you should choose a staff of oak, for many believe it is holy." With that he brought out the oaken staff Noodle had used to free Fey from the snag. "I knew at once that it was no accident that you choose that tree. Well, every good wizard needs a staff." With that he went into his workshop and returned with a staff that was hardly recognizable. Bard

had spent many evenings working on the stout pole. He had carved images of many forest creatures linked by a spiraling vine on the length of the staff, and carved the head of a falcon at its apex. “We will work the rest of this winter to charge this with the spells befitting a wizard.”

He then turned to Fey, and gave her a small mirror. Mirrors were rare and precious, and she was amazed to see her reflection looking clearly out at her from the silver disk. “With your help,” her Uncle promised, “We will turn this into a tool to help your second sight.”

Now it was Noodle’s turn. He had worked with his mother to make a warm pair of leather slippers for the old scholar. Each of the slippers had a pocket on the top that contained a small flat stone. Noodle had used the magic of earth and fire to enable them to gather the heat of fire and keep the slippers warm throughout the cold winter nights. To Fey he gave the amulet of the fire symbol they had used in their first lesson in charms. He had worked with Bard to lay a spell of renewing light, that would glow as long as needed without growing dim, and charged it with as much of the Fire power as her Uncle felt it could hold. “I hope this will light your way and give you warmth when you are cold.” Noodle told her, placing the amulet around her neck. He was pleased with himself for not stumbling over his little speech, which he had been practicing for over a week. His composure was shaken nonetheless, when Fey reached up to kiss his cheek in thanks.

Fey, in turn, gave her gifts. Her uncle received a charm in the shape of her name. When he looked at the charm and thought of her, it would bring up an image of her on a bright spring day with a garland of flowers in her hair. To Noodle she gave a white robe, made of the same material as her dress, and a small locket containing a lock of her hair. “Hold this next to your heart and think of me, and I will know what your heart feels.” She said. Noodle did not know what to say, but held the token to his chest as he looked at the small girl before him. Immediately

she could feel what was in his heart, and what he felt was reward enough for her.

Chapter 5.

FORGE

Forge Smith stood outlined against the glowing coals, gazing in satisfaction at the orange hot blade. He had been working on the sword for days. The local ores from mines in the Eastern Mountains produced some of the finest steel in the West. He had spent many hours folding and re-folding the bar of red hot iron, mixing it with just the right amount of carbon and a mixture of rarer metals of his own concoction to give it the desired mixture of strength and flexibility. He quenched the blade in a hiss of steam, and began the final process of tempering the blade.

Next he would send the blade off to the carver to etch designs of strength and honor in the blade and add details to the pommel and guard. When they were done the blade would be returned to Forge to assemble the sword, fixing the pommel and the cross bar of the guard to the tang of the blade. Then it would go to the wire maker, who would wind the handle with supple braded wire to provide a sure grip and the leather carver who would fashion the sheath. Only when they were done would it be returned to Forge for final sharpening and delivery to the Lord who had ordered it.

Forge loved his work. To him being able to take the plane dirt and simple charcoal and turn it into an object of beauty, strength and function by the strength of his arm and the skill of his hands was a source of unending satisfaction. It did not matter much to him what he made, as long as it served a useful function and he could think of some way to improve make it better. He loved his tools and the iron and steel, and was constantly coming up with new tools and

inventions to help his customers with their work. He loved the glow of the charcoal in the forge, the smell of the almost smokeless fire when the bellows blew it nearly white hot, and of the sparks from the metal when his hammer struck it against the anvil. He was a young man, just over one score years, but already he had earned a reputation for making the best blades in the region.

Forge looked every inch a Smith, as well. He was a gentle giant of a young man. He stood six foot and four in his bare feet. His with fair skin and blue eyes contrasted with dark black hair and a neatly trimmed beard. Years of working in the forge and carrying heavy loads had given him strong legs, massive arms and a chest like a barrel. His shoulders were as wide as an axe handle, and he could bend iron horseshoes in his bare hands. He was wearing his usual attire, naked from the chest up save for a heavy leather apron, with rugged black pants and heavy hob nailed boots that made him seem even taller.

“Forge, it’s time for dinner, wash up and fetch in some water.” His mother, Fillet, called. His family had gathered around the table, his father, his younger brother and teenage sister were already helping themselves to the meal. “Forge,” his father said, “I need you to go down to Headwater tomorrow. That order from the Duke is ready, and I would feel better if you went along to pick up supplies and bring back his payment.”

The Duke was concerned about recent reports of raiding parties from the Western Islands venturing up the rivers and had ordered a large shipment of spears, swords and chain mail. The Smiths had been working on the order for most of the winter, but spring was coming to the foothills and the river would be open to the ships of the raiders once the worst of the spring floods were done.

“Be careful,” he cautioned, “it is not a very large town, as towns go, but there are still

plenty there that would be glad to separate a young man from his gold. Stay away from games of chance and easy women.”

“It’s more likely he’d be spending all the gold on sausage and sweetbreads!” His brother Sledge jibed.

“...or some new gadget from the tinker.” His sister added.

Forge gave a loud laugh and threw a roll at his brother. “At least I wouldn’t throw it all away on the first little wench that batted her eyes at me!”

“Yes Flint dear, but he just might look around a little. It’s time a grown man like Forge should be finding a wife,” Fillet added. “And he just might want to pick up a new tunic and stay for the Spring Festival. All the girls will be there and he should look his best.”

Forge thought that sounded like a very good idea. After all, he did want to stop by the tinker and visit the town smiths for the latest in smelting techniques and metalworking tools. He wasn’t too sure about the finding a wife part. All the girls he’d met seemed far too silly for his taste. On the other hand, it would be fun to see how they celebrated the Festival in such a big town.

Forge’s father agreed, not too reluctantly. The boy was as sensible and reliable as they come. All he cared about was his work and an occasional pint with the men at the tavern.

Besides, anyone thinking to give that lad any trouble had better bring a lot of friends.

More than once had Forge waded in to thwart the plans of the local bullies, and left them with a lesson they did not soon forget. That lad was strong. He could lift a man with a single hand and throw him across the street without breaking his stride. And he loved the weapons he made; he could throw an ax or knife with deadly accuracy, and had taken the time to learn something of sword fighting; “just in order to understand how to make a better blade.”

Still, it wouldn't hurt to be careful. "All right, he conceded, but arm yourself. You'll be carrying a fair purse of gold on the way back, and that load weapons could bring a band of brigands a pretty penny." That night they went to the warehouse together and picked out his gear. They chose a short sleeved hauberk of their strongest mail, over a stout leather vest. A small leather pocket carried his necessities; flint and steel, a good whetstone, his purse and other personal items. A heavy belt with a brass buckle carried a hook for a double bladed battle ax and a sheath for a cross handled short sword, that looked more like a long knife on the Forge's massive torso. He also took a heavy mace; a stout oaken club with heavy iron spikes on the end, to carry in the cart beside him.

The next morning he set out bright and early, accompanied by two strong men who worked at his father's foundry and an ox drawn cart laden with weapons and armor. The men would return with the cart and supplies from the town as soon as their business was completed. The men laughed and joked as they walked through the forest. The trip was a welcome adventure for the village men. Forge and the older man had been in town a few times with his father, but the younger miner had never been that far from the village.

Still, there was reason for caution. There were occasional bands of brigands who would view the contents of the cart as a virtual treasure trove. Even more dangerous were the Northmen who would take their longboats far up the river to raid unwary settlements, or even a raiding party from a neighboring kingdom. Neither of these had been reported for years, but it paid to be careful. They spent the next two nights in the forest but did not camp beside the trail. As a precaution the stopped and cooked their evening meal and then moved on a ways before moving off the trail to stop for the night. Anyone who might have spotted their fire through the trees and snuck back for a middle of the night attack would have trouble locating them in the dark. They

took turns on watch, but the nights passed uneventfully.

The small party reached the edge of the forest near mid-day, and could see the town of Headwater before them. Duke Fairtrade's castle stood on a bluff overlooking the town Headwater. The town was located at the end of the navigable waters of the Green river and was prospering as a center of trade for the region. Metals from the mines in the mountains and agricultural goods from the area farms would be shipped downstream and barges of goods from the harbor at Fairport came upstream in return.

There was a cluster of buildings on their side of the river, including a tavern with some tables outside and a livery stable and corrals. The three men stopped for mid-day meal and a sample of the local brew where they could sit outside and keep an eye on their cart. Forge arranged with the owner of the livery to leave off their cart and ox for the night after their delivery. Then they set out through the town to the Duke's castle.

There were docks for the barges and other ships at the water's edge, along with a row of warehouses, small shops, taverns and other establishments for servicing the needs of the barges and their crews. Higher up the banks, below the bluff where the castle stood, was the rest of the small town. A bridge crossed the river above the docks, and a road across it snaked up through the town and then zigzagged up the slope of the bluff. Small alleyways branched off the main street, lined with two story wooden buildings with slate or tile roofs.

As they passed the docks some of the barmaids shouted their greetings, and invited them back after their day's work. Small shops and vendors lined the street, often under the overhang of the second floors. The main street was wide enough for two carts to pass between the stalls, but in the side streets the overhanging buildings often would almost block out the sky. The three villagers paid little attention to the merchants, but did keep an eye out for cutpurses or sneak

thieves who might try to snatch some of their goods.

It did not take long to pass the small business area and bustling town square and begin the climb up to the castle. The road was designed for protection more than commerce, and the ox cart could barely navigate the narrow cobblestone path. At strategic locations there were wider spots where pedestrians would step aside for the cart to pass. Large rocks and small boulders were strategically piled at these places. If attacked, the defenders could easily drop them down on the advancing enemies below.

However, the town was at peace and the gates were opened wide to all. Only a sleepy guard stood near the gate, with two archers stationed on the parapets over the gatehouse. As they passed through the gate they could see it was part of an outer wall that followed the edge of the bluff. The wall surrounded a wide area, with a higher wall surrounding the inner keep taking up one end of the defended area, and a number of open areas, barracks, stables and other outbuildings in the remainder.

Forge led the wagon over to the armory, and looked around until he found old Guard Martial, the armorer. He was out in the practice field setting up straw dummy for the next training session. The old soldier's hair was white as snow, his face was scarred, and a patch covered one eye. But his back was still straight and his shoulders broad from time spent with a sword, training the Duke's men.

"Hello young Forge. I see you got here right on time." They went out to inspect the delivery, and Forge asked him if there was any news of raiders.

"No, no news of them." The old warrior replied. "But it looks like war is brewing in the North and West. Something has the Elves all riled up, and the Western Empire is gearing up to start expanding its borders into elfin lands. I wouldn't be surprised if it broke out into a full ware

between men and elves. They say the Emperor has himself a new wizard and thinks they can defeat the elves.”

“That’s all pretty far from here, though, isn’t it?” Forge asked.

“You never can tell. We’re not too far from the Eastern border of the Empire, as the crow flies. We’ve got the old mountains between us, but there’s more than one good pass through them. I’ll be glad to get another couple of score of men under arms. He held one of the hauberks up to the light to examine the welds and then picked up a sword, looked down its blade and tested its balance. “Your work gets better each year, lad. All right, let’s count these up and you can take the invoice to the chancellor for payment.”

An hour later Forge was ready to leave the castle. His purse was much heavier after the payment. On the way back down they stopped at several shops and warehouses along the way to buy supplies to take back to Edgewood. It wasn’t long until they noticed a couple of rather rough looking characters following them. It would not have been hard for them to figure out that the trio had made a delivery to the castle, and had the payment with them. Forge guessed that either they would have someone distract them while they cut his purse from his belt, or they would ambush them after dark in some alley.

Surely enough, a few minutes later the three were stopped at a stall examining some imported linens for Forge’s mother. A rather attractive young woman in a conservative smock and bonnet stopped to look at some cloth as well. She was carrying a small basket of vegetables, which she put down on the table to pick up a bolt of cloth. “That is lovely linen,” she said, turning and smiling at the three men. As she turned, her arm bumped the basket, and it fell to the ground, spilling the vegetables across the street. The other two men instinctively stooped to help pick up the produce.

Forge, on the other hand, had been expecting this. He suddenly turned around; just in time to see a one of the men that had been following them jerk his hand back from the general area of Forge's purse. The Smith guessed the other hand, which was hidden in the man's cloak, held a knife for cutting the purse from his belt.

For a large man, Forge was quick. He reached out and grabbed the man's hidden hand, wrenching it outward. As expected, a small razor sharp dagger was clutched in the culprit's hand. Forge pulled the man's hand straight up in the air, until he was forced to stand on his toe tips. With his other hand he grabbed the man by the throat, leaned his face down until their noses were almost touching, and said, "Drop the knife." To help him make up his mind, Forge started to squeeze the offending wrist. The thief wriggled, but couldn't budge the hulking Smith's bulky arm. In a second he dropped the knife, and Forge stepped on it with his hobnail boot.

"I wasn't doing nothing," the suddenly frightened man gasped.

Forge laughed. "The next time you do nothing with a knife at my back I may have to let my hand do a little nothing... around your neck." He replied as he tightened his grip on the gasping man's throat. Forge threw him backwards into the street, reached down and picked up the knife. "Simple blade, but good steel and well sharpened." He commented, as he slid the blade into the top of his boot. "Now be off with you and your female friend here, before I call the guard!"

The cutpurse picked himself up, shot Forge a menacing glance, and disappeared down the alleyway. The girl gave a disdainful sniff, put her nose up in the air and stalked away in the opposite direction, the picture of a lady suffering great insult.

The shopkeeper and the young giant's two companions understood what was happening as soon as they saw the knife. "My apologies, good sir, we usually don't see the likes of these up

here in the town.” Forge laughed again, slapping the man on the back so hard he almost tipped over a table piled high with bolts of cloth.

The three companions continued on down the streets, thrilled by the variety of the shops and the unusual bustle of activity in the prospering town. After stopping to sample some of the baker’s sweets and looking at a few more shops, they wandered down to the docks. The sun was going down, and they walked by the taverns and Inns until they found one with the rich smells of something good cooking on the hearth. They went inside and sat down on a bench one of the several long tables that were about half full of customers. Some were local but most were obviously crews from the barges.

The food was good, and soon the trio was contentedly full and their plates empty. Forge’s companions were ready to order another round of ale, but he cautioned against it. “That pair may have friends waiting to ambush us on our way out. They probably figure us to stay and have a few to celebrate our trip to town, and will wait to catch us when we aren’t alert. Let’s keep our wits about us, and head to the Inn across the river where we’ll spend the night. The beer will be as just as good there.

As a precaution they did not all leave together. The older man went out first, to take the cart and keep an eye out for trouble. Forge went next, and told the younger to follow behind by him 20 paces, and be ready for trouble in case he should need help.

Fortunately, there were no further incidents, and the three soon had the ox and cart safely deposited at the stable. They spent the evening pleasantly sitting at a table in the courtyard enjoying the local brew and watching the lights of the town come on and the evening activities along the waterfront across the river.

In the morning they took the cart to pick up the supplies they had ordered the day before.

The bulk of it was supplies for the smelter and smithy. Most of these were chemicals or metals used in alloying the metals or manufacture; such as tin and lead for making bronze and pewter.

Mines in the local Eastern Mountains provided ore, and Forge's father owned a small smelter that produced iron, copper and even some gold and silver. Some was exported in ingots for trade down the river, while most was used at the smithy or by local artisans in Edgewood and crafted into tools, metal goods or jewelry.

Forge also bought other goods for the household; cloth and ceramic wares, seeds for the garden, hops for ale, boots for his father and brother, and some lace and ribbons for his mother and sister.

It was midmorning when Forge bade his companions farewell, warning them to be careful on the journey. He didn't really expect trouble. They had met two other farmers that were also returning to Edgewood. They had five stout sons between them, so the group would be large enough to deter most thieves.

The old armorer had invited Forge to stay with him in the castle until after the Spring Festival. The young Smith was looking forward to the visit. The old campaigner knew a lot about weapons, armor, siege engines and military engineering. In the meantime, he walked back through town, stopping to talk shop with the blacksmith, jeweler and tinsmith.

He particularly enjoyed talking to the tinsmith, who had an inventive mind, and was always coming up with new tools and gadgets. This time the tinsmith showed him a device with two thin metal strips welded together back to back, one of copper and the other of steel. When he heated the strip it would bend, and the hotter it got the more it bent.

The tinker explained that the copper expanded more when it was heated, making the double layered strip bend toward the steel side of the strip. When Forge arrived, the Tinsmith

was fastening the strip into a clamp, on a broad flat base plate. The strip stood straight up, like a candle in a sconce. Then the tinsmith put a flat plate of metal behind the strip with lines etched in it to measure how much the strip bent.

Forge was festinated; he could use the strip to measure the temperature of his fires, marking the place where the strip pointed at the desired temperature on the back plate. Watching this, he vowed to test different metals to see which might be most sensitive at different temperatures. Thinking about it, he realized this might make an ideal gift for his mother, who could use it to measure the temperature of the Dutch oven she used for her baking.

Forge spent the rest of the day happily immersed in discussions about metals, tools and machines until he realized the sun was getting low in the sky. Forge walked up to the castle carrying his pack and wearing his traveling gear. He found the armorer in his shop, working on an old set of plate mail. Guard Martial put down his awl and thread and looked carefully at Forge. "I see you came dressed for trouble." He said.

"My father wanted me to be prepared. I'll still have a fairly fat purse on me when I walk home. My mother told me I should get a new tunic to wear to the festival, but I have no knowledge of fashion or finery."

The grizzled warrior thought about this a second and said, "Well, perhaps my niece, Barb, can help you pick out a tunic. That's certainly not my specialty, either. However, let's look at how you are armed. That, I may be able to do something about."

With that he took Forge's ax, tested its balance and gave it a one and then a two handed swing. "Very nice weapon, but it is a bit blade heavy. Let's see if we can fix that." They spent the next hour working on the ax, finally deciding to put a ring of lead above the leather handle grip. "That way it can catch a blocked enemy blade and guard your hand. There, now let's see

how it balances.”

They went out into the practice yard, and tried a few throws at a scarred wooden target. After adjusting the new weight a little with the file, the ax threw true, and Forge could easily plant it soundly in the target from near or far. Picking up a training sword, Guard gave the young man some tips on using the ax in combat.

They were still practicing when a girl came into the yard.

“Uncle Guard, it’s time for dinner.” She informed them.

“Well, what is this?” She took the battleaxe from Forge’s suddenly numb hands, tossed it spinning high up into the air and deftly grabbed as it came down, double blades flashing red the setting sun. Without a pause she raised the heavy ax over her head with both hands and sent it whistling into the center of the target, some twenty paces away.

Her uncle laughed, seeing the slack jawed look of amazement on Forge’s face and the twinkle in the eye of his niece. “Barb,” he said, “This is Forge Smith from Edgewood, maker of the finest blades around. Forge, this is my niece Barb. As you can see, she has spent far too much time around this old soldier.

“Niece, I hope you know something of fashion. I promised this lad you could help him pick out some clothes suitable for the Spring Festival.”

“I wouldn’t be too surprised if his mother sent him down here looking for a sensible girl to court.” He added, with a wink to his niece.

“Hmm,” she nodded, looking Forge up and down. Thumping his chest like checking a pumpkin to see if it was ripe she chuckled, “I think we might have to try the sailmaker to find something big enough.” But she gave his massive bicep an appreciative squeeze and looked up at the awestruck lad with a wink and a winning smile that took any sting out of her jest.

Forge was lost. This was not a girl, she was definitely a healthy piece of woman, perhaps the goddess Diana herself. She must have stood Five foot Ten in her bare feet, and looked every inch the daughter of some Northern Island war chief. She had long blond hair fixed in two braids, sparkling blue eyes, fair skin, and freckles across her nose. She wore a white peasant blouse under a smock with a tight fitting bodice that laced up to just under her breasts.

From his height Forge couldn't help but notice she needed no padding to emphasize her assets. Her form displayed the voluptuousness of strong muscles on a healthy girl, who wasn't afraid of hard work and fresh air. He stood there a moment, his jaw still hanging, and admired the freckles that spread across her shoulders and chest, disappearing into an ample chasm that was more emphasized than concealed by the peasant blouse. "P--ple... pleased to meet you," he finally managed to stutter.

"Come along then," she bade them, gesturing them to follow and making sure to give her hips an extra wiggle as she turned. She admitted to herself that her Uncle hadn't misled her. This young Smith certainly *was* an impressive hunk of a man.

While not an Adonis, his face was strong and honest and his eyes were kind and intelligent. His shoulders were so wide they would almost scrape the door jambs as he walked through, stooping a little to keep from hitting his head. Of course that wouldn't impress her uncle, who was more interested in a quick mind, sober disposition and hardworking character. *I think I know who I am going with to the Spring Festival*, she thought to herself.

Her mother welcomed them to their quarters next to the armory. Her husband, Guard's younger brother, had died in a skirmish years ago, and she and her daughter had been living with Guard ever since. She bade them sit and sent Barb out to the spring house to bring back some cool ale. She couldn't help but notice that the dark haired giant couldn't take his eyes off her

daughter, or that Barb made sure to bend over before him as she set down the beers. *Well, well,* she thought, *Guard says he's a responsible lad from a prosperous family. Barb could certainly do worse... and she's not getting any younger.* He certainly looked like he could take care of anything that came their way.

Both women went out of their way to make the men comfortable, and they all enjoined the dinner that followed. It didn't take long to get Forge talking about his family business, and his plans for improving the foundry. The boy was modest but frank, and it didn't take long to determine that here was no girl back in the village that had caught his eye.

While the women cleaned up, the two men sat by the fire and began discussing the castle's fortifications, and how it could be strengthened against a siege. Guard found that the boy was quick to understand the principles of defense, and asked good questions. He had a number of novel ideas about minor changes in the battlements that could improve the archers' field of fire, and devices that could help dislodge siege ladders and grappling hooks.

The next day was a happy one for Forge. Her mother gave Barb the day off to escort him around town and to find him some reasonably priced dress clothes. The two started off by exploring the castle; walking along the parapet on the outer wall to enjoy the grand view of the town and the river valley below, or the forests and mountains on the other side. They looked the forge, armory, stables, and well house in the outer courtyard. Then they went through the gate into inner courtyard. It was surrounded by high inner curtain walls and contained the tall keep provided a final defensive position. They looked into the great hall with its long tables and great fireplace. A group of musicians were practicing their pieces for the festival, and servants were scurrying about decorating the hall with fresh greenery and extra torches and candles.

They climbed the tallest tower and looked down on the village below. The river wound

north and east up the valley between two spurs of the foothills of the Eastern Mountains until it disappeared into the forest. Forge could see where Edgewood must be located, up near the tree line where the valley walls merged into the great mountains to the east. The Eastern Mountains still had snow on their peaks and great white fair weather clouds were blossoming above them.

Downstream he could see the valley widened and flattened out. The river took a meandering course through fertile farmlands along the valley floor. They could see barges moving up the river, the crews probably anxious to reach the town in time for the Festival. The spring air blew chill across the parapet and Barb nestled up against her large companion, who instinctively put his strong arm around her shoulders. They stood thus for a moment, before breaking apart, just the slightest bit embarrassed by the contact. "Come; let us find a tailor who can alter up some clothes for you." Barb announced, leading him down from the tower into the village.

The afternoon passed pleasantly, if uneventfully. While Forge had no interest in shopping for clothes, Barb's company more than made up for it. The girl had grown up with the soldiers at the castle, and showed none of the shallow giddiness that had always kept him uninterested in the village girls. There was good common sense in her, and no nonsense. She went straight to the task of finding her charge an outfit, not wasting time with frills and lace that might have delighted a more delicate flower. Nor was she afraid to bargain with the merchants.

She'd soon have them laughing and joking with her so they hardly minded getting the worst of it. Her laugh was hearty and heartfelt, not like the silly giggling of the village girls. She was a strong lass, too. She could pick up a full keg of ale and hold it with one arm against her hip, as easily as village woman held a babe. *Ah, now this is a wench fit for a real man*, Forge thought. *Not like those delicate little things I'd be afraid to snap in two with a hug*. Of course, his

opinion was not lessened by her pleasant face and voluptuous figure, which she did contrive to show off to good advantage whenever she could.

Before long their mission was accomplished. She had picked out a simple white ghillie shirt, with a wide collar, leather draw cord at the neck, and ample sleeves with a fitted cuff. Over this was a fitted black vest. Black trousers and some soft ankle high boots completed the outfit. “No way am I going to be dancing with you in those great hobnail boots!” She had said, laughing.

They went down to the town square for some lunch and to look around while the clothes were being let out to fit Forge’s broad shoulders. The square was bustling with preparations for the festival. Merchants were readying their wares and decorating their stalls while citizens were assembling a small stage and stringing garlands, lanterns and banners around the square. Over by the central fountain a traveling storyteller had a small crowd listening to his tales of ancient heroes and the news from outside.

The two stopped to listen while he talked of problems between the Western Empire and the Elves. The elves had reined over two great kingdoms since ancient times. The Mountain Elves lived in the highlands along the Northern Mountains. The western reach of their lands included a broad high plateau to the North of the Western Empire. Its capitol was the ancient stronghold of the elves, Craigdale, ruled by the great Harper dynasty.

The Forest Elves lived in the great Old Forest to the East of the Empire. Their capitol, Parkwood, was buried deep in the forest and seldom seen by the eyes of men. It had been ruled by King Forest and Glade, his Queen, for as long as men could remember. Along the coast and to the South and East of the Empire lay the lands of the Southern Kingdoms, a loose confederation of city states and small kingdoms. The greatest of these was the great trading city state of

Fairport, ruled by their Commander, Tiller of the Noble House.

In recent years the might of the Western Empire had been growing. The ambitious Cesar Dominus Maximus had been building his armies and had begun to move against some of the kingdoms along his borders. His empire was also encroaching on the lands of the elves. Great stretches of the old forest were being cleared for new farmlands and cities, and ranches and forts had been being built in the edges of the high plateau of the Mountain Elves. In the past Men had been afraid of the magic of the elves. The magic was strongest in their ancestral lands, and no human army had been able to encroach upon them until now.

Now there was word of a great sorcerer that had joined forces with Cesar Maximus. Where the sorcerer had arrived from, no one knew, but in the past few years the Cesar's power had become absolute in the Empire. His enemies mysteriously disappeared or suddenly died of strange diseases. The magic of the elves seemed to have diminished power against armies of the Empire and a number of smaller human Kingdoms had been overrun with scarcely a fight. Rumor had it that the citizens of the Empire were terrified by Maximus, and would not speak out against him, even in private. They claimed that he knew all and could see all, and that no secret was safe from him.

The bard then told the story of the death of King Pluck Harper and his Queen, the great sorceress Harmony. Pluck was one of the great Elvin kings. Long ago he had defeated a vast armada of Northman from the Western Islands. In more recent times he had helped to reconcile the differences between the Mountain and Forest Elves, and helped begin friendly relations with the humans. Then, mysteriously, Strum and Harmony were found dead, apparently killed by some dark sorcery. They did not go without a fight, though, for their quarters were battered and seared, as if by giant winds and great heat.

The same night King Strum's eldest son, Tone, was found dead in his chamber, from no apparent cause. Many said he died of grief for his father and mother. Others claimed it was poison or sorcery, to keep him from the throne. His brother, Scale, assumed the throne, but not for long. For Pluck had another son.

Strum Harper was third in line for the throne, and never took much interest in palace politics and affairs of state. He was much happier wandering the fields and forests and mountains. He loved meeting with those that dwelt there and serenading the occasional wanderer he met in the wild places.

It is rumored that he lost his heart to a beautiful human prophet and seer. Some even say he sired a female child with her, somewhere near here in the Eastern Mountains. Many were his adventures, in one he rescued and was befriended by Soar, the great white king of the gyrfalcons. Strum would send Soar far afield, where it is said Strum would know all the gyrfalcons great eyes would see below him. It is said that Soar went to the castle and, learning of the death of the King, raced to the Prince to urge him to return to Cragdell.

The Prince's journey was beset with peril. It was clear that someone with great powers had learned of his return and was determined to stop it. Quiet marshes turned into viscous swamps where living vines strove to drag him to his death. Great trolls and packs of wolves came out of the high mountains to pursue him, and monstrous snakes appeared in the night to crush his bones to dust. Ever his travels were followed by great ravens, until he called up a thick fog to cloak his movements.

When he returned to Cragdell he received cold welcome from his brother, now King Scale. Tensions ran high in the palace, and Scale was girding the kingdom for war with the humans. Strum's suspicions were aroused, for the death of his brother did not run true. Tone had

always been healthy, good natured and practical, with no propensity for ill humors or sickness. Scale, on the other hand, had always been ambitious and had studied long the roots of magic and the ways of power. Strum wondered if his brother's studies had led him too deeply into the dark arts.

Certainly Scale had not looked like the elf Strum remembered. His eyes were sunken and his skin had the pallor of ashes. When he greeted Strum there was no warmth in his hand or his eyes. Indeed, his eyes had something about them of the serpent them. Cold and merciless, they brought chill and terror upon those their gaze fell upon.

One night soon after his arrival four royal guards came to escort Strum to see the King. The guards took him into the room stationing themselves outside the door in case their King should beckon. Strum's brother was waiting there, cloaked in black robes and holding an iron staff with the head of a serpent. "Brother," he hissed, "The time has come to end this game. Give it to me now and I may yet let your live."

"Give you what?" Strum asked, realizing that the time of pretense was over, His brother had, indeed, gone mad with his lust for power.

"The bracelet, you fool, the Harper's amulet of power. I know you have it. Give it to me now, or we all may perish! I know our mother must have sent it to you.

"The Fools! They hadn't seen what I have seen, and they wouldn't give it to me either. I thought her dead, but she must have lived a few moments longer. The sound of their futile resistance roused the guards and I had to leave her still breathing. I raced down secret ways to my tower, only to see your pitiful white bird flying from their window. I returned when the guards summoned me to their chamber, but it was gone!

"I know she sent it to you. Give it to me now, or perish like your brother!" he demanded,

his voice rising to a shrill scream.

Scale raised his staff, and dark mists began to gather around its head. His eyes seemed to become yellow and silted, and hatred glared from within them.

But Strum had come prepared for this. He had suspected his brother would try to use dark powers against him. Strum threw a small vial at his brother's feet. It flashed into a brilliant white hot ball, engulfing the staff and his brother's arm. Scale drew back, his hand and face blackened, and his robe smoldering. He reached down to take his staff, screamed, and dropped it as the heated iron scorched his hand.

"You fool! I'll destroy you like I did our parents and brother!"

At that the guards burst into the room and the alarm bell rang. "Hold traitor," they called to him, for they had heard his shouted words, even through the heavy door.

With a wave of the sorcerer's hand, a black fog filled the room. When it cleared, Scale and his staff had vanished. The guards quickly spread the tale of what they had heard, and the next day Strum was crowned King of the Mountain Elves.

"Thus ends the tale of the Death of King Pluck." The storyteller concluded. The young couple had been listening, enthralled, and burst into applause along with the crowd. Forge tossed a copper in front of the old man, and the pair walked away to eat their lunch.

"You know," said Forge, washing down a mouthful of bread and cheese with some new wine, "there is an old apothecary that lives in the woods not too far from Edgewood by the name of Bard Seer. He lives with his niece Fey, whose mother, Sibyl, was supposed to have the second sight."

"Granny Mender, our midwife, goes there on occasion to get medicines. She says the girl is fair and beautiful and is learning of charms and potions from her Uncle. Granny said the girl

foretold the plague that struck our village, so that she and her uncle had the medicines ready when Granny came to them for help. They likely saved the lives of many in our village. I wonder if she could be the girl the storyteller mentioned?”

“Well, if she is, she’d be a Halfling and Princess of the Elves. Of course, I’m not sure how the other elves would think of a Halfling as the heir to their throne.” Barb responded. “You know, if we can figure this out, others might as well. I can only imagine that she has been hidden out here in the wilderness for her own safety, but it looks like her secret may be out.”

“If that is so, then she may be in danger. A young lad in our village, Noodle Shepherd, has been apprenticing with her Uncle. I’ll have a talk with him as soon as I get back to Edgewood. I know everyone in our village will do anything we can for that girl and her uncle.”

They talked for a while of elves and kings and princesses, even though neither knew much about them. Barb knew something of the ways of the castle and the intrigues that plagued even the court of the Duke of a small town. Living there she had heard more news from wandering minstrels and storytellers. Often she would to dinner with her Uncle at the great hall at the castle. “In fact, we shall have dinner there. tonight My uncle said the Duke would like to meet the maker of this fine batch of swords. It should be very lively; guests have been arriving for days now to be here for the Spring Festival.”

They spent their time watching people in the square. There were many strangers in town, including a variety of troubadours and street performers. A number of these were already demonstrating their crafts, trying to win a few coins from the townspeople who had time to stand and watch. They noticed that one was dressed as a gypsy. She was a striking girl, short and lithe, with grey eyes and curly dark hair. A colorful bandana was on her head, and she wore white blouse and a black dress with an embroidered bodice and skirt. She was playing an ancient shell

game, challenging any comers to wager on which shell the pea was under. Business was slow, but a few young men would stop briefly by, enticed by her patter and exotic looks. None seemed to have much luck, though. Before long the guards took notice and told her to take her tricks down by the waterfront.

It was all too soon, as far as Forge was concerned, that they had to go back and pick up his new outfit. He tried it on, and Barb whistled appreciatively. "Now you look like a handsome young swashbuckler. I'm going to have my hands full keeping the other girls off of you," she said, taking hold of his arm.

They went back to the castle and found her Uncle in the practice field with a young nobleman. He looked about Forge's age, and was testing his sword against one of Forge's new swords wielded by the Armorer. It didn't take Forge long to see that the young man's reflexes were lightning fast. The Armorer was expert with most weapons, but could not seem to score against him. The young man kept to the defense, but it was only by resorting to a very elaborate and little known offense that the weapons master finally managed to score, his sword tip at the Noble's chest.

"Good job youngster," old Guard beamed, "you could have hit me a number of times, couldn't you? I've never seen reflexes so fast. It's as if you know what I am doing before I do it.

"It's a gift I have, master. Alas, it seems to be about the only gift I have, unless it is to find new and inventive ways to get myself into trouble." They both chuckled, and turned to the two onlookers.

"Barb, this is Lord Squall Noble, son of Pilot Noble of Fairport. Lord Noble, this is my niece, Barb. The young giant with her is Forge Smith. He is the one who made this blade, and many more like it." The tall young Lord gave a slight bow to Barb, who curtsied in return,

flushing a little at the attention from a handsome noble.

Squall stood at nearly six feet tall, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. His shoulder length hair was held back by a circlet of bronze. He was fair of feature, and had the casual self confidence of one who knew it. There was a mischievous twinkle in those deep hazel eyes.

Looking at Forge, he said “I am very glad to meet you. These new swords are excellent. I’ve never seen steel like that in standard grade weapons, perhaps not in any steel made by men, and every one balances perfectly.”

Forge was quite pleased with the complement; this young man seemed to know something about weapons. “Aye, it’s true some of the Elvin blades are said to be of matchless quality. Unfortunately, we don’t get many around here. I’d love to get a chance to take a good look at one.”

“Well, here is your chance,” Squall said, pulling his sword from an elaborately engraved leather scabbard, with a silver tip and collar. He flipped it in the air, caught the blade, and handed it guard first to Forge. It was beautiful. Forge stared at it for moments, amazed by the craft that had gone into it. The single handed sword was actually more of a saber. It lighter than a cutlass or the military blades Forge was used to. There was enough of a curve to it to make it useful for slashing from a mount or the rail of a ship, but it was straight enough for fencing with the point. And what a blade! The blade was thinner and more flexible than any he had seen, but he felt sure it was strong, nonetheless.

Like Forge’s military weapons, it had a blood groove down its length so it would not be caught in the body of a fallen foe. Looking closely he could see the fine striations of where the steel had been folded and re-folded at the forge. They were all but hidden by beautifully and elaborate engravings, with a nautical theme and what looked like the family crest, a ship with a

single billowing sail on a calm sea. It had a basket guard with the bars of the basket engraved like hempen rope, and decorated with deep green and blue gems. The grip appeared to be of shark skin, cross woven in a pattern Forge had never seen. The Pommel was engraved like the blade, with a large deep blue gem on the end.

Forge sighted down the blade, and made a few passes in the air to test its balance. He frowned a little. The balance was a little off towards the guard for his taste. “Did someone add some jewels to the guard?” He asked. “It seems a hair off balance.” Squall nodded with an appreciative smile. “The big blue gem on the pommel was put there when it was given to my Father when he came of age.”

Forge thought a minute, carefully examining the hilt. “Well, there are a few things we could do about it. The simplest might be to drill a few holes in the pommel hidden underneath the gem to compensate. We might be able to shave down the steel at the end the pommel, but then we would have to re-build the casing for the gem. I’d need my workshop for that. In the short run, though, I could add a little lead wire here, around the grip right up inside against the front of the guard. No one would notice it, and it shouldn’t interfere with the grip.” He handed the blade to Squall, showing him what he had in mind.

Old guard laughed and nodded to Barb. “I think we may have lost these boys for a while. We’re going to have dinner in the great hall tonight and you may as well go on and get ready. I’ll make sure to drag them out of here in time.”

“Very well, but make him take off that new shirt and vest before he steps foot in the smithy! And you - make sure that you keep those new boots out of the mud and manure.” She stood on tiptoes and gave Forge a surprise peck on the cheek, and left with flounce of her skirt.

Forge watched her walk off, a look on his face like a deer in the torchlight. Squall

laughed, slapping Forge on his broad back “Guard, I think that girl may not be single too long. I doubt there are any others around here man enough to meet her fancy.” Forge didn’t say anything, but he thought of her bouncing a Smith babe on her hip like the keg of ale, and seemed just right.

The men disappeared into the smithy, where it didn’t take long to get the balance adjusted to Squall’s taste. “Gods,” he exclaimed, “It seems to come alive in my hand now. Thanks Forge. Someday I’ll have to get you to make this permanent. There is no other man I’d trust to do it.” He reached out and shook the Smith’s hand. Forge was quite pleased, he had taken an immediate liking to this brash young lord, who didn’t make much of his rank and treated them like comrades. And besides, he would like to work on that blade. There had to be a better way than drilling holes into that Elvin masterpiece.

The great hall was ablaze with light and filled with guests, servants and entertainers. Forge sat at one of the lower tables with Old Guard, Barb and her mother. They could see Squall seated at one end of the head table. Forge couldn’t hear what was being said above the commotion in the hall, but the handsome Lord was obviously charming all the ladies within earshot.

A small orchestra was playing near the head table and several sets of troubadours and musicians were playing at different places in the hall. Trenchers of fresh baked bread were waiting at each place setting, and each guest, except those at the head table, brought their own knife and mug. Servants walked by; laden with pitchers of ale, wine and platters of food.

Though it was still the night before the Festival, the Castle was bursting at the seams with guests from throughout the region and the festivities had already begun. Most of the guests, and the Duke and his retainers would be celebrating in the town the next day. A tournament field had

been set up outside town for tests of skill, and the town square would be the center of the evening's festivities.

The evening passed quickly for Forge. This was a great change from life in the village, although it would have its own festival in the square. He had never seen so many people dressed in such finery nor heard all the musicians and troubadours. He also was quite impressed by the quality of the beer, and had to stop the servant girl frequently for refills. The girl didn't seem to mind this much, and made a show of taking care of this unfamiliar hunk of a man. Forge couldn't help but notice her attentions, especially as she bent over to fill his cup. He couldn't help it if his eyes followed his nose and found themselves staring down into the girl's generous cleavage. Of course, Barb could also not help it if her elbow suddenly found itself bashing against the big oaf's ribs! He sputtered out a mouthful of beer, and decided that he may have had enough for the moment.

He looked at Barb, and asked her if she would mind dancing with a clumsy boy from the hills. The dinner had wound down and the staff was clearing tables and moving them to the sides of the hall, where they were laden afresh with sweetbreads, fruit and drink for the guests' refreshment. The hall suddenly quieted as the wandering musicians stopped playing and joined the orchestra near the head table. The Duke and Duchess stepped to the floor and the Orchestra struck up a formal dance. There was great applause and more than a few shouts of approval for the pair as they began to dance. Before long the floor was full of dancing couples. Forge noticed that Lord Squall was looking very handsome, indeed, spinning across the dance floor with practiced grace and the lovely wife of one of the Duke's officers floating, enchanted, in his arms.

The song ended and the band struck up a lively jig. Barb grabbed his hand, and pulled the village boy out onto the crowded dance floor. Actually, Forge was not as much a stranger to

dancing as she may have thought. His mother came from a good family in Headwater, and she insisted that all her children learn to dance and the proper behavior for polite society. His father was a prominent enough citizen in the village and he was a presentable enough lad to ensure there were plenty of young girls willing to take the floor with him whenever the opportunity arose. Besides, he enjoyed the music. The beat of the tunes reminded him of the beat of the hammer on the anvil. He especially enjoyed the part where he would hold them by the waist and toss them into the air as they spun on the floor, although he found that tossing Barb took a little more effort than those little girls back home.

When they finally stopped to take a breather, Forge headed over to get them some ale. He couldn't help but notice Squall surrounded in the corner by a half dozen of the young ladies of the court, several of which appeared to be the wives of the Duke's officers. The group was clearly captivated by the lad's wit and good looks, not to mention his Noble birth. When he saw Forge, Squall raised his cup and called, "Forge, come see me at the tournament tomorrow!" Forge thought about this for a second. To be honest, he had not thought of what he would do at the festival, other than to hope he could spend it with the Armorer's niece. Still, the tournament might be fun, and he might even try his own hand at some feats of strength and skill. He raised his cup in return and replied that he would see Squall there.

Barb was thrilled by the news. She was enough of the sword maiden to enjoy seeing the men test themselves against each other. Besides, there were a couple of events she would like to see Forge try his hand at, just to see if he was nearly as strong as he looked. She wouldn't mind showing him off to some of the other girls from the castle, either. If they were there as guests of the young Lord they would have a ring side seat to watch the contests. She gave forge a big hug, and said "That's wonderful; maybe you can even win yourself a victor's purse. Come, let's get

some fresh air. You will be needing your sleep before the contests.”

They went outside and climbed the stairs to the parapet walk on top of the barbican; the fortified gatehouse that controlled the main entrance to the castle. Round towers, or bastions, jutted out of each front corner, to give archers a cross fire to protect the drawbridge and portcullis that could be closed to deny enemies access to the castle. The air was crisp and cold as they climbed up to sit on the battlements and look out over the town and the river below. Forge took his cloak, made warm from wool of the mountain sheep of his village, wrapped it around the girl, and drew her close so they could share its warmth. They sat like this for a long time, talking of nothing in particular. Forge told her of his family and their businesses, life in the village, and the beauty of the high mountains. Barb told him of life in the castle, her memories of her father, and dreams for a strong family and warm hearth. The time flew by. Before he knew it Barb’s mother was calling up to tell them to come down and get to bed.

The two reluctantly began to climb down. As the great lad reached up to lift Barb down from the wall, they somehow found themselves locked in tight embrace. Barb was aglow with how warm and safe it felt in this gentle giant’s great arms. Forge thought how wonderful it felt to have this amazing woman snuggled against him. Barb raised her lips and their first kiss was a natural and hearty as the two of them. How long it lasted neither could say, but it was punctuated by her mother’s repeated call for them to come down. Forge walked the girl to her door, and then went back to the barbican where he was bunking with a number of the single guards. His dreams that night were full of blue eyes, blond hair, soft lips and flying battle axes.

The Festival day arrived cool and dry with cloudless blue skies. Forge wore his traveling clothes, including the hauberk, in preparation for the tournament. He left his short sword behind, but brought the battle ax. He stopped by Old Guard’s quarters for breakfast and to pick up Bell.

The castle staff was already setting up the outer bailey for the evening's festivities, for many of the castle's guests would celebrate there rather than in the crowded town square. They wandered down to the town square, and sat for a while with cups of tea watching the activity.

Around mid-morning they went over to the tournament field. A large bulletin board displayed a list of all the events. These ranged from contests of arms, to tests of marksmanship, skill and strength. Horses were uncommon in the region, so there was no jousting, but trials by sword and spear were the featured events of the day. It would end with a grand *mêlée*, where the combatants would be divided into two teams, white and black, and would fight with shields and blunted swords until a single victor emerged. Forge was adequate, but no expert, with a sword and decided it was wiser to watch those events as a spectator. However, there were a number of tests of strength and an ax throwing contest he was planning on entering.

They went over to the tents where the nobles were preparing and found the one with the flag with Squall's crest of ship and sea flying in front of it. Squall was there donning a heavy leather jacket with leather greaves that would serve as armor for the contest. He was equipped with a small round shield and a one handed practice sword. He waived at them as they entered. "Forge, glad you could come. From your clothes, it looks like you are planning on joining in on the fun."

"Yes," came the reply, "I plan on entering the ax throw, open, light and heavyweight stone tosses, the hammer throw, and the weight over bar." Most of these involved standing stationary and throwing various weights, and so relied mainly on the sheer strength of the contestants." "Great," Squall said, "I'll come over to watch between matches."

They all went out to watch the first of Squall's elimination rounds. He was paired with a hulking member of the Duke's private guard, for both noble and commoner were welcomed at

these games. The guard was even taller than the young noble, with a greater reach and heavier sword. As the horn sounded, the guard lumbered forward with a massive swing at Squall's head. With an apparently effortless twist, he parried the guard's stroke, and danced aside to slap the guard on the thigh with the flat of his blade. Squall wanted to warm up with the big oaf, and knew that over time the bruised thigh would slow his opponent down. The match went on for a while, although it became clear that Squall was in charge from the onset. He seemed to parry almost before the thrust was made, and was always moving out of the way easily before his opponent could strike him. Finally, Squall decided it was time to end the bout, not wanting to get too tired before the later rounds. He quickly stepped inside a lung from the tiring guard, who suddenly found Squall's sword pressing against his throat. "Win!" cried the judge.

Squall left the field until his bout in the next round. Forge and Barb came over to congratulate him, but he shrugged it off, saying, "I hope the competition will get a little stiffer in the later rounds. I'd like to feel like I earned my wine when this is over."

They all walked over to watch the Archery contest. Bowmen had come from near and far to test their skill. There were more than a score competing, many with the ash longbows favored by the forest rangers, a few with shorter double curved bows favored in the West. All the contestants took turns shooting at the target at the starting distance, some 60 paces. Those hitting the central mark with at least one of their two flights would go on to the next round. The targets would be moved 10 paces further away for the next round. By the third round the field had dropped to only five; two hunters in green and brown, two archers from the garrison, and one stranger. The stranger was short of stature and dressed in a brown leather jerkin and black trousers, covered by a long grey cloak. The stranger kept the cloak fastened across his chest, and the hood drawn over his face. It soon became clear the stranger was the one to beat. Every arrow

flew true to the very center of the target, even though he shot with almost casual ease.

The next round lost one of the hunters and one guard. The three remaining contestants all made their mark, and the targets were moved again. The stranger raised his hand, shaking his head “no.” He pointed to the targets and waved them backwards. The marshal looked over at the other two opponents, who nodded their heads in agreement.

The marshal commanded the targets be moved back an additional ten paces. The guard took careful aim, but it was clear that the distance was starting to tell for his short bow, and both arrows went wide of the mark. The long bow of the hunter fared better. His first shot barely missed the center circle, and his second was well inside. Smiling, he bowed to the stranger, and gestured him to take his stand. The stranger’s technique had not changed. He walked up almost casually to the toe board and nocked the arrow, drew the bow and let fly in one fluid motion. At this distance the arrow seemed to wobble a little in flight, but wound up well inside the center circle.

The next round the distance was too much, and both the hunter’s arrows fell low. The hunter muttered that this distance was too far for anyone, and glared a challenge to the stranger. For the first time the stranger laughed, throwing off her cloak. For all were amazed to see that the stranger was no man, but a young woman with curling long brown hair and laughing grey eyes.

While earlier in the competition the marshal would have had her removed, he was too intrigued to eliminate her now. Once again her movements were effortless. Once again the arrow wobbled a little in flight, but flew itself straight into the center of the mark! The crowd was stunned for a second, and then burst into cheers and applause. The girl walked down to retrieve her arrows, gave a bow, and vanished into the crowd.

“Hey,” said Barb, “isn’t that the girl we saw with the shell game in the square

yesterday?” Forge had to admit it could have been. The hair and stature was right, but it was hard to picture her in this warrior’s garb. They told Squall about what they had seen the day before, but none of them could make sense of it. “Still,” Squall admitted, “I would like to meet that girl, she certainly was comely enough, and I bet she has an interesting story to tell.”

They all went off to watch the young Lord’s next two matches. The first was with a mercenary from the south. He had clearly had some study of the blade, and his moves were careful and studied. It was obvious he had seen the Squall’s first match, and was determined to stay on the defense and make no mistakes. The strategy worked no better than the all out attacks of the guard in the first round. After a few exploratory feints from Squall, the mercenary found his parry effortlessly avoided and the Lord’s sword at his chest.

The next round was more of a challenge. This was a nephew of the Duke, who had obviously studied long with a master swordsman. The duel was a joy to watch. The nephew’s moves were so practiced there was scarcely any thought involved. Still, whatever technique he tried somehow Squall’s blade had anticipated it, and he slid away with the grace of a dancer. It wasn’t long until the nephew started to tire, and his parry faltered just the slightest. Before he even sensed his mistake, Squall’s blade was inside his guard, and the match was over.

Forge had to leave for the ax throw. There were a number of lumbermen with their double bitted felling axes as well as several mercenaries and a number of the Duke’s men with their battle axes. Instead of targets painted on cloth over a straw backing, these men threw at the crosscut end of logs from a large old tree.

Forge held his own until the final round, when his ax hit a knot and was deflected from the log. His opponent, a lumberman nearly as large as Forge, had no such ill luck. Still, Barb was impressed with his prowess, and assured him that “he’d beat that silly lumberjack 9 times out of

ten.”

Forge fared better in the feats of strength. It started with an open stone toss. The contestants threw a large stone of some 15 pounds and rounded by the currents in a nearby creek. They could take a running or spinning approach, and it was clear that some had practiced long to improve their technique. Forge had no such advantage, and came in third overall. He did better however, in the light and heavy stone toss, where all contestants had to stand firm and throw. There his massive arms, thighs and chest could power the stones into the air, and he easily won them both. It went the same with the heavy hammer throw. The hammer was even larger than Forge’s blacksmith’s hammer, and again, had to be thrown with both feet planted firmly on the ground. Forge was delighted to feel the heft of the hammer in his hand, and no one, not even a monstrous bargeman with legs and arms huge from pulling a barge along the tow path, could come close.

Barb was thrilled with his victories. She had been cheering and applauding for the villager all the way. Forge was going to win the purse for the strongest man at the Fair! Just let those other girls eat their hearts out. She thought, as the buxom blond planted a series of kisses on her hero’s face. The rest of the day she was glued to Forge’s arm, ready to do a little tossing herself, if any of those other girls sought to make a pass at her man.

Squall fared nearly as well. His final opponent was taller than Forge, although not as broad. He relied on an incredibly long reach and sheer strength. As usual, Squall’s first several parries were as flawless as in a drill in the training grounds, but this time his perfect parries were beaten back by the sheer strength of his opponent’s arm. Twice he barely managed to dance out of the way of his opponents thrust. In this match it was Squall who had to be cautious, circling his opponent and giving him no easy opening for attack. He tried a couple of attacks, but

couldn't get inside his opponents reach. Instead, he finally decided to feint an attack, and then feign a slip on his parry of the counterattack. His challenger immediately launched another strong attack, only to find Squall's repost sliding through his guard to win the match.

Forge and Barb went over to congratulate their swordsman friend. Fortunately, they stood head and shoulders taller than the crowd of castle girls and women that had gathered to admire the dashing young nobleman. They shouted their approval, and Squall replied that he would see them in the square for the presentations that night. The young couple walked back to the Castle so Forge could change into his new finery and Barb could show him the town.

The two spent the rest of the afternoon walking up and down the main street and around the square. The town was alive with music, street performers, and the smells of savory treats coming from stalls. Vendors had set up small tents throughout town and around the tournament field. Rides, swings, and games of luck and skill all beckoned those with a little copper to spend. The town was bursting at the seams. It seemed that every farmer and villager within a day's journey, and many from much further away, had come to see the festival.

Before long the sun was starting to set, and it was time for the awards. The town square was packed, but the giant Smith and his Valkyrie partner managed to shoulder their way to the front by the stage. The orchestra from the Great Hall the night before had been joined by half again as many musicians and they all were playing at the top of their voice. Duke Fairtrade and the Duchess took the stage and waved to the band.

The band stopped, except for a great fanfare from the brasses. The duke made a short speech that no one appeared to be listening to, and then began the awards. The winners were all called to the stage. Forge found himself standing next to Lord Squall and the young woman who won the archery tournament. The judge called her name, "Breeze Swift, champion of the

Archery tournament.” If he hadn’t seen her in the square the previous day, Forge wouldn’t have recognized her, for she too had changed. Now she wore a simple dress and her hair was put up in a conservative bun. She was a little thing, the top of her head hardly reached Forge’s chest. But even in this conservative attire, she was a handsome woman. He noticed that this was not lost of Squall, who kept trying to catch her eye. She appeared to take no notice of him, though, and accepted her reward with a proud bow, rather than a more feminine curtsy. There was a mixed reaction from the crowd, most applauded but there were a few boos and catcalls mixed in. Many felt in improper for a woman to compete with men, and even worse to win.

The crowd gave a hearty round of approval when Forge, towering over the Duke, accepted his purse. They were even louder in their approval of Squall, and there definitely were more calls and whistles from the normally gentler sex. The real hero of the day, however, was the winner of the Mêleé; Colonel Shied, the commander of the Duke’s private guard. He was hoisted on the shoulders of a number of his men and paraded around the square. When Forge looked around the gipsy girl had disappeared, and Squall was being carried off by a pack of ladies from the Duke’s court.

Gathering up Barb, the young couple made their way back up to the castle for the Evening Dance. The guards were more alert this evening, for the festivities at the castle were for invited guests only. However, they recognizing Barb and the strongest man at the fair, they waved the couple inside. The day was warm for the first day of spring, but still a little chill was in the night air. Even so, a session of energetic dancing soon had the couple warm and thirsty. They decided to get some ale and a bite to eat, and then get some air up above the donjon, where they had such a memorable time the night before. As they worked their way over to the food filled tables surrounding the courtyard they spotted Squall. The young Lord was deep in

conversation with a very lovely red haired lady of the court. “He’d better be careful,” Barb warned, “that is lady Shied, who is reputed to have an eye for handsome young men. She is wife to Colonel Shield, who is a very jealous man. More than one duel has been fought on her account, and the Colonel has never lost.”

This night the roof of the gatehouse was much more crowded, but Forge somehow managed to clear their way to the wall overlooking the town. The two leaned against the battlements looking out one of the crenels that looked out at the approach to the castle. Before they had finished their food and drink, they noticed a commotion below, as a man in dress uniform was pushing his way angrily up the zigzagging road to the castle, which was crowded with festival traffic. Barb pointed and said, “There’s trouble. That’s Colonel Shied. Someone must have told him about his wife and Squall!” Forge didn’t waste a moment, but grabbed up his date and shoved his way down to the courtyard floor, somehow managing not to critically hurt anyone in his path.

They spotted Squall out on the dance floor, dancing perhaps too enthusiastically with an equally expressive Lady Shield. Forge lumbered over, as if slightly drunk, and threw his arm casually over the startled Lord Squall’s shoulder. “Ah, there you are!” boomed the Smith. “You must have forgotten, you said you would come out and celebrate with me. Come, the night is wasting!” So saying, Forge practically lifted Squall off his feet and started to the exit. Before the surprised Squall could utter a protest, Barb cooed to the Lady, “Ah my lady, I hear that your husband approaches with great haste. Seeing how beautiful you look this evening, I can see why he is so eager for a dance!”

Squall was taken aback enough not to protest as Forge ushered him away from the dance floor. It didn’t take Barb long to explain about the Colonel’s propensity for jealous duels.

“Thanks my friends!” Squire exclaimed. “I’ve had enough trouble with such affairs, if you pardon my expression. In fact, my father insisted I take time to travel to learn more of the world because of a very similar incident. Come, let’s find someplace where we can sit and have a drink or two in celebration of our victory!”

Barb led them to a tavern at the bottom of the access road to the castle. In front of the tavern was a sign composed of a shield, with a tankard of ale emblazoned on it, hanging from a pole shaped like a military spear. As they worked their way in, the tavern owner shouted over the din of the crowd, “Hello, Barb! It’s been too long since we’ve seen you here at the Shield and Spear” He was a tall thin old man, his face etched like old leather, with one great scar running diagonally from his forehead, across his nose to the opposite cheek. Several other scars kept it company, and he walked with a pronounced limp. It was clear he was an old campaigner, as were a number of his customers. Barb told them it was a favorite watering hole for the guards at the castle. He delivered the beer and plates he was carrying, and pulled a bench and table over into a corner for the trio. He disappeared before they could give their order, and returned laden with a pitcher and three steaming plates. “Well now, Miss Marshal, who have we here?” Barb introduced her companions, bragging about their victories at the Tournament. “Well, is that a fact? This must be my night, for that yon lass is supposed to be the champion Archer.”

Sure enough, Forge looked across the room and saw the brown haired girl, this time back in her leather jerkin and trousers. She was engrossed in a game of dice with a number of tough looking men, who had the look soldiers off duty. She glanced their way, and gave a quick wave of acknowledgement to their nods of greeting before returning to the game. She appeared to be doing well, and as they talked, the three’s conversation was frequently interrupted with her cheers of victory, and disappointed expletives from the men around her.

They talked a little of their homes and families. Squall was the youngest son of the Commander of Fairport, probably the second most powerful realm in the known world, after the Western Empire. The lands from Fairport along the Southern Coast, including the Coastal Isles and all the lands along the great Eastern River were under his domain. That was all well and good, Squall complained, but there wasn't much going on to interest the fourth son, other than politics and the business of trade. He certainly was raised with enough politics, but his father was a good ruler, and fair, and managed to keep the intrigues of court down to a minimum. Squall, however, had little interest in such pragmatic matters; his tastes ran to more adventurous endeavors. He learned early that he had a unique gift. Often he could sense what was about to happen a fraction of a second, or a second at most, before it occurred. He found out that this gave him a great advantage in fencing and on the field of battle. He also found that in the gentle battles between the sexes, anticipating a lady's responses could earn a young man quite a reputation among the female half of his father's court. Unfortunately, the combination of skill with a blade and with the ladies can easily lead to trouble. On more than one occasion Squall had become involved in duels with jealous husbands or suitors.

Fortunately, the fashion at court was to duel to first blood to settle honor, not to the death. Still, his Father knew it was only a matter of time until some headstrong boyfriend or husband would insist on a duel to the death, which Squall was sure to win. After one particularly close call involving the fiancé of his chancellor's son, Squall's father informed him of the importance of taking an extended tour of the realm, adding the admonition not to return until he could keep his hands off other men's' ladies.

"Well," said Forge, "Why don't you come along with me, come see my village and take a look at the great Eastern Mountains. The hunting and fishing are shaping up to be great this year,

and I can work on that sword of yours. Besides, it may be a good idea to seek new environs until a certain Colonel has time to calm down.” Squall admitted he didn’t have a better offer, and he wanted to see the mines, foundries and fine metal workers at Edgewood. They were a source of much profitable trade, and a vital resource in case of any future trouble with the West.

The talk had just shifted to politics and troubles with the Western Empire, when the sound of loud voices interrupted them. “You dirty cheat. I’ve never seen any dice move like that before, stopping on craps and the hopping over to come up sevens. Either these are some kind of trick dice, or you are some kind of a witch!” someone proclaimed. “You’re nothing but a sore loser,” she countered. “I can’t help it if I’m having a streak of good luck. If you played better you might have some of your own.”

This did not seem to placate the burly man, who reached over to grab the girl’s wrist and seize the dice. “I think you are a cheat, and I think it’s time for you to give us back our money!” He cried, to a chorus of agreement from the six or seven men around them. In a flash, a thin dagger appeared in the girl’s other hand, coming to rest with its point under the loser’s unshaved chin. He automatically stepped back, and another player grabbed the girl’s arms from behind. Drawing a large knife of his own, he advanced towards the girl. “Now let’s see who’s going to play this little game.” The girl kicked up and knocked the knife from his hand, and almost wrenched her way free of his comrade’s grasp. Furious, her opponent drew back to strike her with his fist, only to find it stopped in mid-air!

“Now, now, let’s not do anything rash,” said Forge reasonably, in his great deep voice; easily holding the other’s hand as still as if it was encased in rock within his great fist. “I’d hate to see all you big strong men gang up on such a little girl.” Two of the soldier’s friends jumped on the big man’s back, but he shook them off like a dog shakes off fleas. His opponent,

forgetting the girl, swung his other hand at Forge, and smashed him on the jaw. Forge shook his head and smashed a backhand blow to the soldier's face, forgetting he still held the man's other hand captive in his fist. The blow staggered the big soldier. Forge grabbed him with both hands and threw him across the table at two of his friends, and they all fell backward into the wall.

One of the men the Smith had shaken off picked up a large stein and smashed it against the side of Forge's head. He staggered for a second and turned to this foe, only to see Barb pick up a three legged stool and knock his attacker senseless to the floor. Pulling back, she let the stool fly, and knocked another of the soldiers to the ground. Grabbing each of their collars in a hand, she started to drag the out of the tavern. "I'll dump these and come back for more." She promised Forge.

The girl, Breeze Swift, appeared to be handling herself fairly well. She stomped on the instep of one of her attackers. When he howled and released his grip, she bashed her other captor with her palm, smashing it to one side. He released her, too, but then gathered himself and lunged at her. Breeze sidestepped and stuck out her leg, tripping the man. She gave him an extra push in the back on the way by, and he smashed into the floor. Two more men went to grab her, but found themselves jerked backwards into the air by two ham sized fists. Forge bashed their heads together and they sank onto the floor.

The girl's original accuser had retrieved his knife, and one of his two still standing companions drew his. Before they could turn on Forge they were stopped cold by sword dancing inches from their faces! Squall had been watching the fight with amusement, figuring that Forge and the girl were probably a match for the lot of them, hand to hand. In fact, the girl moved with a speed and grace that were amazing to behold. However, Squall had no intention of letting any of them get seriously hurt and it looked like things might get out of hand.

“Just stay where you are, and nobody gets hurt. Forge, why don’t you and the lady join Barb outside while I keep these gentlemen amused?” Seeing that all their attackers were either lying on the floor or trying to avoid being used for a pin cushion by the champion swordsman, Breeze and Forge walked out the door. Squall followed them, walking backwards and keeping his sword between them and the rest of the patrons. As he left he took two gold coins from his purse. He tossed one to the innkeeper, saying “That coin should cover any damage. He threw the other coin on the floor in front of the men who had been playing dice “Split that to cover your losses, today’s no day to leave the Duke’s good soldiers with no money to celebrate the Festival” With that he ducked out the door to join his friends.

Breeze was looking at Forge and Barb, saying grudgingly, “Thanks for your help, but I could have handled that.” Squall laughed, and noted “Perhaps, but I don’t think those soldiers were in any mood to lose more money, so the party was ending here, anyway. I notice you did manage to pocket the winnings before you left.”

Forge chimed in. “Come on; let us head back up to the castle for some food and drink. This little fight has whetted my appetite.”

Breeze remarked that then she would take her leave, but Squall intervened. “No, please join us. We all should celebrate our victories today, and I think we would be most interested to find out a little more about our mysterious Archer.” Barb chimed in taking her by the arm and saying, “Come on the food and drink is better up there, and young Lord Nobel here can get you in.”

Breeze relented, and before long they found themselves seated on the battlements with plates of food and a couple of pitchers of beer, watching the festivities below. Forge and Barb introduced themselves and Squall gave Breeze a deep bow, “Squall Noble of Fairport, forever at

your service. I am the youngest son Commander Pilot, and have been sent forth into the lands to seek my fortune.” Breeze laughed, and took a good look at her new companions. Barb and Forge had already shown themselves to be good friends to have at your back, and the tall darkly handsome young Lord was certainly pleasing enough to look at. He did seem a mite too slippery, though.

Still, she thought it wouldn't hurt to spend a little time rubbing shoulders with the nobility. There might even be some money to be made, although stealing from Lord Squall didn't seem like too good of an idea. She had seen the quickness of his blade, and doubted that those hazel eyes ever missed anything. Besides, Barb was right, the food and beer were better up here, not to mention the music and chance to watch all the upper crust dancing in their fine clothes.

A couple of drinks and a full stomach later, she found herself quite comfortable with her new friends. So comfortable she surprised herself by telling them her story.

“I grew up near the waterfront of Fairport. I never knew my mother; I think she must have died in childbirth. My dad was a sailor, but he paid her brother and his wife to take care of me. I saw him for a few days every six months or so, but he was usually drunk or hung over when he was in port. I guess he was a good seaman, though. He was a mate on a large cargo ship. Anyway, when I was about nine he just never came back.

After about a year when my Aunt and Uncle figured out he wasn't coming back things got bad. They kept complaining about having another mouth to feed and treating me like a slave. It started out with non-stop work and progressed to beatings and worse.

When I was 12 my body started to change, and so did my Uncle. One night he tried to grab me, so I grabbed a knife and stabbed him. I don't think it killed him, but it slowed him

down enough so I could grab a cloak and get out of there. I never went back.”

“That’s awful dear, what on earth did you then?” Barb gave her a quick hug and urged her to go on, realizing that this was not a story Breeze had often told. It seemed to work, for the girl continued.

“I didn’t have a lot of options; there wasn’t anyone I knew who would take me in. It was a poor part of town, and no one had food to spare. I did what I had to do; it started with stealing food, and went on from there. It wasn’t long until I was noticed by an old Gipsy called Nanny Rook. She took me in and trained me in the ways of the thief.”

“I guess I’m lucky; I could have wound up in the hands of a flesh trader. Nanny was a harsh mistress, but clever. I think she had some minor magic about her, and could cloud your mind and make whatever she said seem reasonable. She taught me how to pick pockets, and all kinds of cons and scams. She trained me as an acrobat, not just for street performances, but so I could be a second story man and cat burglar. I had a gift for it. I’m good at moving without being noticed.

But that wasn’t all. Granny sensed there was something different about me, and tested me for all kinds of magic. After all, she could turn almost any magical gift into a money making scheme. One day she had me concentrate on a needle lying on a cork floating in a bucket of water. To my surprise, the needle started to spin in the water. She kept me practicing at that for months, and I got better at it. Before long I could even lift or move small objects. Nothing big, mind you, a couple of coins maybe, but not a whole purse.”

Squall laughed, “I guess that would be pretty handy in a game of dice, though.” He nodded appreciatively. While he didn’t approve of stealing in general, he knew an orphan girl on the streets did what she had to survive, and there was something in him that admired a good

piece of larceny.

“It wouldn’t hurt in the old shell game, either.” Barb chimed in. Breeze’s story had melted her heart, and she couldn’t bring herself to hold it against this wee bit of a girl.

“I guess it could probably help an arrow find its mark, too.” Forge chimed in.

“Yes, and anything else I can throw,” she continued. “It wasn’t too bad. Nanny and her gang gave me a place to stay and protection. It would have been much worse without them. After awhile I became one of her top earners, so she treated me pretty well. She was a stickler for training and hard work, though. I learned to fight with my hands, a staff and a blade. I can pick most any kind of lock, and can follow a man without them knowing it. I had nice clothes, so I could get close to wealthier targets and travel freely in the better parts of town. She even taught me to read and write so I would know what to steal and take notes on potential targets.

Then a couple of years ago she finally died. Nanny Rook’s gang split up, and I decided to go legit. I’d had a bit stashed away and bought myself a small book stall. Those were good days. I loved the books and made enough to get by. It didn’t last long, though. Somehow word got around about my abilities, and all of a sudden the leaders of three different gangs were all trying to force me to work for them. I couldn’t see going back to that life, so I grabbed what I could and snuck out of town.

I’ve been living hand to mouth since then. So far I’ve managed to stay out of the thieving business, but a win at a game of chance or a wager on a test of skill now and then helped bring in enough to keep me in food and drink. I and figured this Festival was a chance pick up a little coin, and so here I am.”

Breeze was surprised at herself for telling them her secrets. It was partly the beer and good food, but it was also these three. They didn’t have to help her out and had nothing to gain

by it, but they did anyway. Barb and Forge were good hearted, simple, straight forward souls. The young Lord had a way about him that seemed to say nothing would shock him and he knew how to keep a confidence. Besides, she'd probably never see them again after that night. With her purse from the tournament she had enough to pay her passage up the coast to the West to find one of the larger city states where she could settle down for awhile.

That plan was about the change, however. "You know," Squall said, "those men you were playing dice with were members of the castle guard. Fortunately none of them looked like they were seriously hurt, so we probably won't find ourselves in the stocks or a cell. Still, the word will get around, and you are probably going to be in for trouble if you stay here.

Forge here is leaving in the morning, and I have my own reasons for making a timely exit. I was thinking of going along with Forge to have him do some work on my sword. I suspect you came here from down river, so why don't you come with us up to Edgewood. The villagers and miners are always happy to for any entertainment they can get, and you can probably make a little honest money up there.

"You know," Forge added "the owner of the only inn and tavern up there is getting old and talking of retiring. I bet you could buy the place from him if you could add a little to the purse you won at the tournament today. The miners would be drawn in like bees to honey to a pretty girl running the place. If she ran a straight table, she could make a pretty penny helping them spend their pay by doing a little gambling, too."

"That sounds like it might be fun," Barb chipped in, "maybe you could use a barmaid to help you out. I've got a little saved up. I even could buy in for a piece of that." "*Besides*, she thought, "*I need to be in Edgewood to keep an eye on this big lug.*"

Now that was starting to sound like something to Breeze's liking. "All right," she agreed.

“We can check it out. Just to avoid any trouble, I think I’ll slip out of town tonight. I’ll meet up with you on the road out of town in the morning.” For the first time since she had to leave her bookstore, there seemed to be a glimmer of hope that someday she might actually be able to live a normal life.

They talked until well after midnight, when the festivities below showed some signs of winding down. Breeze bade them farewell, and Squall gave her a long thoughtful look as she left. *“I don’t see many women like that he thought. She’s tough as nails, and just as sharp. I like it that she didn’t come on strong when she found out who I was. Pretty, too, I wonder what she would look like dressed up for a ball ...”*

However, such speculation didn’t accomplish much for the present. “I’ll bid you two good night. I would like to catch one more dance while the band is still playing.” With that Lord Nobel kissed Barb’s hand and disappeared down the stairs. A few minutes later they spotted him on the dance floor with one of the court’s lovelier members. “At least she’s not married.” Barb noted.

It took them a long time to say good night. Forge knew it might be a while before he saw Barb again and there was little he could say. Fortunately, Barb didn’t feel like saying much either. Finally they pulled themselves apart at Barb’s door. Barb made Forge promise that he would stop by for breakfast before he left.

The morning came clear and cold. Forge could see his breath as he walked over the Armorer’s quarters. Servants were already out cleaning up the mess from the night before, to the sounds of the clattering of dishes and the whisk of straw brooms on the cobblestones of the outer ward. He knocked on the door and let himself in.

Barb was at the stove, making a show of cooking a large breakfast, and her mother was

setting the table. Forge sat down and talked to Guard about the festival the day before and his journey home. “Don’t be a stranger here boy, come again soon. I’ve got a new order for ironmongery. The Duke thinks that trouble is brewing, and wants to be sure to have enough to arm the townspeople if the Castle is attacked.”

Forge thought it was unlikely Headwater would be attacked. It was an important trade center, but far from any potential enemies. As they were finishing breakfast Squall knocked on the door. “Ah, I thought I would find master Forge here. He couldn’t tear himself away from your daughter all day yesterday.”

Forge blushed and Barb beamed. Working up his courage, Forge asked Guard and Barb’s mother if he could come back and court Barb. They both laughed. “Of course you can, I have never seen Barb so happy as these last couple of days.” Her mother said. “She’s right.” Guard added. “After all, if you had been any later bringing her home last night, I would have had to call for the priest on the spot!”

They said their goodbyes. Barb gave Squall a hearty hug, and asked him to take care of Forge on the way home. Forge she gave a chaste kiss but a more lingering hug. “Come back and see me soon.” She begged.

Neither of the young men said anything as they walked down the hill and through the stirring town. Forge could see that Squall looked a little the worse for wear this morning, as if he had had little sleep that night. He was dressed for traveling, with a leather jacket and trousers and tall boots that reached up to his knee. He wore his sword in a functional scabbard, with along with another short sword. Forge also noticed he had a throwing knife tucked into his right boot. Squall carried a medium sized pack, large enough for a few changes of clothing and a bed roll.

Forge was also prepared for trouble. He was still carrying more money than made him

comfortable, with what was left of the pay for his delivery and his winnings from the tournament. He wore his mail and battle ax. He didn't like to wear a helmet, but old Guard had given him a steel circlet with leather padding and he wore it to protect his head. He had a huge pack, laden with gifts and supplies for his family, but he walked as if he hardly noticed it.

Shortly after they had crossed the river and entered the forest, Breeze suddenly appeared beside them. "Well, it took you long enough to get here." She quipped. "Hey handsome, you don't look too hot. You must have had more fun after I left than I did." Squall just groaned.

Breeze was ready for the cool morning with her grey cloak and her archer's attire. Her bow was slung along side of her pack along with a quiver of arrows. As she walked, Forge noticed that she had several small throwing knives in holsters sewn on the inside of her vest. Still, she was in a good mood, and helped time pass telling them improbable stories of her adventures in Fairport.

They made good time, and passed an uneventful day. The weather was clear, and the forest was alive with the songs of birds looking for mates and the smell of new growth. Barb had packed them food for the journey, and they stopped beside a small stream for a big dinner before moving on to camp for the night.

The next day they were only a couple of hours from town when darkness overtook them. The moonlight was bright enough through the trees for them to follow the well trodden path, so they decided to keep on walking. Warm beds and good food at Forge's home sounded better than a cool night on the ground.

The conversation had died down when Breeze suddenly raised up her hand and gestured them to stop. "Do you hear that?" She whispered. Forge and Squall listened, and they heard the distant sound of raised voices. "Something's not right, it may be bandits." Forge whispered back.

“Someone from the village might be in trouble.”

Forge started forward but Breeze grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “Let me take a look,” she whispered. “I am better at moving quietly. They would hear you coming before we were halfway there.”

“Just be careful,” Squall cautioned. “Don’t start anything, just come back and report.” Breeze waved back at him and disappeared into the forest. The two men waited quietly, and it seemed that the voices grew louder, and at last were punctured by a distant scream. Squall lurched forward, afraid that Breeze had been captured, but Forge held him back.

“That wasn’t a woman’s voice. Wait a few more minutes for Breeze.”

It was only a couple of minutes when the girl materialized soundlessly in front of them.

“This is strange. It looks like a military scouting party, or I’ll eat my hat. They have an elf captive, and are trying to get some information out of him. They keep asking him about a Halfling girl and an old seer. They must have started torturing him. He started screaming while I was on my way back. There were eight of them with the elf at a campfire, and there were two more on watch. Now what in the world would a military party and an elf be doing way out here?”

“What do you mean there *were* two guards?” Squall asked. Breeze shrugged, “I figured it would be easier if they were out of the picture.” She whispered, pulling a suggestive finger across her throat.

“We need a plan, there’s too many of them for a frontal attack.” In the moonlight Forge could see Squall rolling his eyes. It wasn’t exactly their fight, and they were outnumbered two to one by trained soldiers. “*Still,*” Squall thought, “*I should find out what a military party was doing in Duke Fairtrade’s territory.*”

“All right,” he said. “We’ll work our way around them. I’ll attack from the right and Forge can take the left. Breeze, stay back but get a clear field of fire. When I make a noise they should look my way. Breeze you take out the one nearest the elf, two if you can shoot fast enough. Then fade back and move to another position. Forge, when her arrow hits, wait, give a count of two, and then attack. I’ll do the same. Breeze, your job is to keep them off the elf until we can free him.” Given the odds it didn’t seem like a brilliant plan, but then the elf screamed again. Breeze and Forge nodded their agreement.

Leaving their packs, they threaded their way into the forest following Breeze’s lead. The men did their best to imitate her noiseless passage. Squall had been an accomplished hunter in the woods near his father’s summer lodge, and did fairly well. Forge just concentrated on not stepping on any dead branches.

Soon they could see the light of a hidden campfire reflecting off the new leaves of the trees, and Forge noticed a still dark lump beside the deer trail they were following. The lump had boots on and must have been one of the guards. Breeze pointed at Forge and then at a small gully on the left. He nodded and started working his way around.

Before long he was within fifteen feet of the party, and could see them clearly in the light of fire. The elf was bound to a tree beside the fire, stripped to the waist. The men were all wearing the same leather armor and mail shirts. All had knives, but most had taken off their swords. One of the men was talking; “Come on now, tell us. Where’s the Halfling girl and what’s a woodland elf doing in a place like this?” With that the apparent leader took a smoldering brand from the fire and pressed the glowing end into the elf’s chest. The elf let out a cry, but said nothing.

At that moment Squall let out a call “Hello the camp!” Startled, the men looked off into

the darkness. Their eyes, accustomed to the bright light of the fire, could see nothing in the forest beyond its light. At the same instant there came the twang of a bow, and an arrow sprang out of the leader's neck. Before he could hit the ground another feathered shaft sprouted from the chest of the man beside him. Confused, the remaining six men looked back across the fire toward the source of the arrows.

Forge paused for two seconds and jumped out of the bushes with a great yell, his battle ax in one hand and his short sword in the other. Two of the men turned to face him with their knives, while another dived for his sword. Forge hit one backhand with the double bladed ax, and blocked the other's attack with the sword in his left hand. His ax didn't pause as he swung it back and dealt the second man a deadly forehand blow. As he turned around the third man had found his sword, and was starting towards him. Forge pulled his ax back and let it fly. Just as it struck an arrow hit the soldier from the side. Forge sprang forward and wrested the ax free of his chest, looking around for another foe.

There weren't any. Squall was reaching down to wipe his blade on a blanket. He looked at the fallen men around him, and prodded one with his toe. "Good, this one is still alive. I'd like to get some information out of him." About then Breeze pushed past him and drawing a knife from inside her vest, cut the elf free. Suddenly released from his bonds, the elf slumped to the ground. Forge looked around and found a water bottle. He handed it to Breeze, who helped the elf take a drink. "Don't worry," she said, "we're friends. We are not going to hurt you." The elf looked at her and nodded, taking another deep drink.

Squall was working on the only survivor of the brief encounter. "Look, you have two choices; tell us what we want to know and we will take you to the village and treat your wounds, or say nothing and we'll leave you here to die." The man had a wicked gash on his side, and a

stab wound through his thigh. He just looked at them and glared. Squall merely said “So be it.” and started looking through the party’s belongings, trying to find clues about their origin and mission.

In a few minutes he went back over to where Breeze was tending to the elf. Forge had gone back for their pack to get bandages and salve for the elf’s wounds. Breeze had thrown a blanket across the elf’s shoulders. While the elf had a number of bruises and cuts from where he had been hit, and three burns on his chest, he was not seriously wounded.

“Are you all right?” Squall asked.

“I’m not seriously hurt, thanks to you three,” replied the elf. “My name is Thistle Vale, and I am in your debt.”

“Nonsense, we couldn’t let them do that to anyone. I am Squall Noble of Fairport, and we are at your service. We are on our way to Edgewood, which less than two hours away. It’s a good thing we decided to keep going after dark and that Breeze heard them from the trail.”

Forge returned with the packs and handed some of his burn medicine and some bandages to Breeze. “Always carry these with me, Forge said, “Burns are a risk of the trade.” Grinning, he pulled up his right sleeve and showed them a pattern of burn marks on his forearm.

Breeze soon had the elf bandaged and Forge found his shirt and hat. The elf was dressed in a dark green tunic with brown pants and a dark green cloth hat. He donned his shirt and hat and found his leather belt, short sword, bow and quiver nearby.

“What should we do with him?” Breeze asked Squall, nodding at the wounded soldier. “Bandage him up and leave him. There is food and water here and his friends might find him before the wolves. I doubt that he has much more to tell us than we already know.”

Squall had found some bread and cheese to go with the water, so they moved out of the

prisoner's hearing and ate while they discussed the situation.

"These were definitely a reconnaissance squad for a larger force." Squall started. "Long range scouts would be dressed as foresters, not soldiers. Their main party must be close. The only carried food for one or two meals. The stamp of the Empire is on their scabbards and blades. Maybe our new friend can tell us who they are and what they are doing here."

"I have been following the party since they crossed a part of the old forest. King Park wanted to know what they were doing as well. You are correct, there is a large Empire raiding party, some ten score large or more. They are camped up in the hills to the west on the other side of the river, about 10 miles from here. They sent out a number of scouting parties and are probably waiting for them to report. As to what they were doing, it seems that my capture has revealed some of that. They kept asking me about a Halfling girl living with an old seer and some golden bracelet. Apparently the Emperor is very keen on finding them."

Forge nodded. "I was afraid of that. At the festival I heard a storyteller talking of a Halfling girl, the daughter of the Elf King, Strum Harper, who might live in the area. It sounds to me like it might be Fey Seer, the niece of old Bard Seer. They live in the woods up above Edgewood. If her father really is the new King of the Mountain Elves, I bet the Empire would love to get their hands on her."

Thistle jumped to his feet in alarm. "We must warn her! If their scouting parties get wind of her, they will scour the area until they find her. We must warn the village of Edgewood, as well. It is reputed to be rich in gold, silver and steel and the raiding party will need some spoils to reward their troops" "

"Do you know anything of the gold bracelet? I believe it is one that Queen Harmony set great store by. I saw her several times at her court, and she was always wearing it. From the

interest the Empire has in it, it must be lost and they hope to retrieve it. With the King's daughter hostage and a major Harper talisman under their control the Elvin kingdoms would be in great peril. You have already done more for me than I could ever ask, but I beg you to help me find the girl. We must get her to safety."

"I don't know anything of a golden bracelet, but if Fey is in trouble then the whole village will be at your side." Forge exclaimed. With that he threw on his pack, grabbed up the elf's and made ready to go. "The village is on the way. We will stop there and warn my Father. The village is ill prepared for an attack by so many. Even the garrison at Headwater would be hard put to move against them."

With that the party moved off through the woods. It was almost midnight by the time the party reached the village. Forge wasted no time rushing to his home and rousing his family. "Father, Mother!" he shouted as soon as he reached the door. "Wake up! The village is in danger!" In a few moments the Smith's great room was filled with the still awakening family. Forge quickly summarized the Elf's story about the threat to Fey and the village. His father did not hesitate to hear more. He sent Sledge to wake the Mayor and constable and then to go alert the foremen at the mines and smelter.

Forge quickly introduced his companions to his parents, for he was anxious to set off to warn Fey and old Bard. He knew approximately where they lived, but none of them had ever been there. "I wish Noodle Shepherd were here. He's been spending a lot of time with them this past year."

"Oh, but he is!" his sister Spark exclaimed. "Noodle brought Fey down to town for the Spring Festival. I think she went back home, but Noodle was going to stay the night with his family. That was the first time she has ever come to town and all the boys can talk of nothing

else. She is the fairest girl they have ever seen. It's clear that Noodle is gone on her, too. I'll run over and get him." With that, she threw a cloak over her night clothes, gave her brother a hello hug, and rushed out the door.

His father sat them all down at the table, while Forge's mother warmed up the stove and put on a large kettle for tea. It was clear that no one was going to get any sleep for quite a while. The Mayor and Constable arrived before long, followed shortly by Spark, Noodle Shepherd and his mother.

Forge thought Noodle looked quite different now. He was wearing a long white robe with a leather belt at the waist, with a grey hooded cloak thrown over his shoulders. He carried a tall staff, with the head of a falcon carved on it. He had lost most of the awkwardness of an adolescent, and had an air of some unknown strength about him. His long auburn hair set off his fair skin and blue eyes, grave with concern for Fey.

Flint Smith had the company tell their stories from the beginning, asking many questions along the way. Finally he said, "The three of you took quite a chance tackling an armed party of that size, you are lucky none of you were hurt or killed. Still, without it we would probably have been taken completely by surprise. We would have had no hope against a raiding party of that size. Even with the warning it is hard to fathom how we will defeat them if they attack. We have perhaps half that many able bodied men in the mines and the village. I will work with the Mayor and Constable to plan our defense. I think it best if Noodle and the four of you head out to warn old Bard. Just use the utmost care. There probably are other scouting parties about."

As they were preparing to leave, Constance Shepherd kissed her son good bye and, nodding to the elf, asked "Greetings Thistle Vale, have you word of your cousin?" The elf bowed, and said "He is well, My Lady, but has been busy with the defense of the Old Forest. I

see that your son has grown wise and fair.” Noodle was confused by this exchange, but it would have to wait. There were more pressing matters to attend. The day Old Bard feared had arrived.

Chapter 6.

CAPTIVE

The sky was starting to lighten as the party neared Bard's cottage. Noodle had been listening to the animals as they walked. He heard of no disturbances nearby, but there was something going on the other side of the river.

He sent a fox over to explore. Sure enough, it was another reconnaissance squad, just like the one Squall had described from their earlier encounter. They seemed to be just stirring, and Noodle guessed they were going to keep following the river north. Still, he would have them followed, just in case they decided to cross at the ford bellow the waterfall.

He found a lingering owl and had it climb high to examine the countryside. It didn't see anything through the trees and all looked normal back at the village. Noodle willed the rooster at Bard's cottage to crow, even though the sun was not yet over the horizon. He hoped it would wake up Fey and her uncle. Later on, when the sun had a chance to start making warm updrafts, he would enlist a flock of buzzards to look for the intruders, and keep watch over the whole area.

Fey awakened to the call of the rooster crowing awake. Since the sky was still dark she wondered what had aroused the cock. Getting dresses quickly, she went outside to check on the animals. All seemed well, so she went ahead and did the morning chores; feeding and watering the animals, milking the goats and letting them out to pasture. She made one last stop before washing up and going inside to make breakfast.

The sun was just starting to rise when she left the privy. Suddenly she found herself grabbed by a set of rough hands. Fey tried to scream, but a strong hand was over her mouth and she was quickly dragged into the bushes behind the outhouse. She couldn't see her attacker, but there was also a second man there. He was dressed in the dark greens and browns of a hunter, with a bow and short sword. She tried to struggle, but they dragged her deeper into the woods, bound her feet, tied her hands behind her back and gagged her with the sash from her dress. Without a word one of them picked her up over his shoulder and they moved further back into the woods.

The men moved rapidly for what must have been a mile before they stopped and put her down. "Just like you said Flint, a fair blond girl, and look here!" The second man pushed her over to expose her wrist. "That's the trinket we're after, or I'll eat my hat. She must be the one. By the Fates! We will be rich men when we get her back to the Commander!" With that, he picked her up, and moved on into the forest.

Fey started to struggle but her captor gave her a blow to head that made her black out for a moment. "Keep still now if you know what's good for you! They want you whole, but no one said we couldn't rough you up a mite."

They went on for a few minutes more before Fey began to start thinking clearly again. These weren't local men. They had a strange accent and talked like they were part of a military

unit. She would have to get out of there, but how?

She focused on Noodle; maybe she could get a message to him! It was difficult concentrating as she was hauled through the woods, but after a while she could feel a contact. She felt his concern and feeling of urgency, and felt more than saw him moving through the woods with some others. *“Crown, Help me! I have been kidnapped!”*

Noodle almost lost his footing when he heard the voice whispering in his head. He had worked with Fey before when she had been practicing under her uncle’s instruction. But then they had been near each other, and he was concentrating as well. This time felt different; fainter but more urgent. *“Are you hurt?”* He thought. *Who did it?*

“I am all right for now, she replied, but I don’t know for how long. They are two men in forest green, but they seem to be taking me to meet up with others. I think they are taking me to the rapids where we met to cross the river.” At that moment, her captor threw her to the ground by the bank of the river, breaking her concentration. Exhausted from her mental effort and stunned by the impact, it was all Fey could do to lie there and listen to them.

“My, but she is a pretty one. Too bad there’s no time to get better acquainted! There’s no telling how long soon someone will be coming after her. I won’t rest easy until we’ve turned her over and got our reward.”

“I agree,” the taller of the two replied. “I’ll be happier when we get shed of her. I don’t know why the Emperor wants her, but this amulet stinks of witchcraft. That’s the family seal of the King of the Mountain Elves, or I miss my mark.”

He grabbed her wrist and tugged at the bracelet. It wouldn’t budge. It was as if the metal had become part of her skin, and was now far too small to be pulled off over her hand. “You see, there’s sorcery involved in that.”

“There should be a scouting party over on the other side. We should link up with them on the way back to the main camp. I’ll feel better with a few more swords at our side. There’s no telling what kind of trouble might come of this.” His partner nodded his agreement, and they began to work their way across the rapids. Overhead three large birds circled, gliding easily on an updraft high above them.

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Noodle could feel the contact break. “Hurry,” he commanded, “someone had kidnapped Fey.” He started running, and the rest of the party followed close behind. It was only a few minutes until they reached cottage. Bard was outside, looking around anxiously and calling of his niece. “Crown, what are you doing here? I can’t seem to find Fey.”

“She was taken by two men in forest green!” Noodle replied in a rush. “The Emperor has scouts looking all over for her and her bracelet. She was in contact with me for a moment. She thinks they are heading for the crossing at the rapids.

There’s a large raiding party waiting in the hills northeast of here. They are probably going to take here there. You had better go to the village. There may be other reconnaissance squads about that would like to get their hands on you. They are probably going to attack the Edgewood, and the villagers will need your help. Go to the Smith’s. Forge’s father can fill you in. I’m going after them, and there is no time to waste.”

On their journey through the woods Noodle had noticed the quiet ease that Squall and Breeze had shown moving through the forest, and he remembered their tale of rescuing Thistle. The elf and those two would be good to have in the woods.

Noodle was afraid Forge was less suited to slipping quietly through the undergrowth. “Forge, maybe you had better stay and keep an eye on Bard. There may be other scouts nearby

who would love to get their hand on him, and he needs help carrying supplies. I think you had better help get the village defenses prepared, too. If we can get Fey back the first place they are going to look for her is in Edgewood.” Forge reluctantly agreed. He would rather have joined the chase, but realized they needed to leave someone with Bard.

Thistle called from behind the house. “They went this way!”

Noodle, Forge, Squall and Breeze followed Thistle, and in a moment the entire group had disappeared into the woods. Old Bard stopped for just a minute, and then rushed back into the cottage to gather supplies he might need in the village.

The five moved quickly through the woods, trying to make up for the scouts’ lead. They were only halfway to the river crossing when Forge was alerted by one of the buzzards he had on watch. For a moment he stopped and closed his eyes. “What is it?” Squall asked.

“I can see them, they are crossing the river. Fey is with them, but she is tied up and they are carrying her.”

“How do you know that?”

“They were spotted by a buzzard I sent to watch. If I try I can see what it sees. No time for explanations.” With that Noodle ran on, leaving the others staring at each other behind him.

“Well, Forge said he was always was good with animals.” Squall said uncertainly.

“His Elvin blood runs true. It is storied that some in his father’s family had such a gift.”

Thistle’s words raised more questions than they answered, but the others moved quickly to follow the Shepherd. Questions would have to wait. If they were going to get the girl back, it had to be done, and quickly.

Noodle’s mind was racing. It was clear that he needed to do something to slow the two

scouts down. He needed something to distract them. Noodle cast about on the other side of the river for some creature that was ferocious enough to detain the two armed men. There were no large carnivores nearby, although he could sense some black bears a mile or so away.

He listened to the thoughts of the smaller creatures. *Wait, this one might do. Now, if I could just find the right place ...*

The scout in the lead suddenly came to an abrupt halt. The larger man carrying Fey almost smashed into him. Cursing, he asked “What’s the blooming problem? We have to keep moving.”

“Quite,” his partner said, gesturing him to move up to take a look. At first he couldn’t see anything, until he noticed a small animal on the trail. The path was moving along the side of a gorge. A swift moving brook had carved a steep sided valley and the narrow trail was cut along the side of the ravine. There were steep slopes above and below the narrow path.

There, in the middle of the trail, was a black animal with a single white stripe going down its back and onto its tail. The path was being blocked by a skunk! “Good grief,” he muttered, reaching down to pick up a stick to throw. Before he could let fly, the skunk turned its back on them and lifted its tail. Both men froze in their tracks, afraid to trigger an assault by the skunk. They backed up slowly and put the girl down while they discussed the problem.

Fey saw the skunk and laughed to herself. *It must be Crown. He knows where we are!* At that moment she felt something warm and soft rubbing against her leg and her hands. Looking down she saw a rabbit rubbing against her leg. She could also feel something gnawing at the ropes on her hands and feet. The two men had settled down to standing well out of the skunk’s range, and throwing rocks and sticks at it. After a few minutes the smaller one said, “Oh the heck

with it,” and grabbed a long stout stick. He ran at the skunk, apparently expecting to scare it away. Instead, it waited until the angry man was only a few feet away, spun around as it lifted its tail and let fly a cloying stream of scent. It caught the man square in the chest. It was so strong it almost made him retch, but he kept going. Before he got within reach of the skunk it turned, gave him a disdainful look, and sauntered slowly away, its tail still raised in a cautionary reminder.

Fortunately for Fey, it was the bigger man picked her up again and set out along the path. They hadn't gone far when they met another group of men dressed in mail and leather.

“Oh my god, Flint! What happened to you? We could smell you a half a mile away.” Fey felt desperation growing inside her. *Oh gods, she thought, there must be even more of them around. I must get away.* With that she started to strain against her bonds, hoping that whatever had been gnawing at them had weakened them enough for her to get free. In a minute she had broken her hands free.

Looking up, she could see the men in a heated discussion, and could hear them arguing over something about bracelets and rewards. Fey's numb hands fumbled with the cords around her ankles. Sharp lances of pain shot through her feet as they were released. She gathered her strength to dash away, knowing they would slow her down.

Looking for some way to slow her captors, she noticed a large boulder on the hillside directly above where they were arguing. Focusing on the stone she willed it to move. For a second it remained still, and then it slowly started to rock back and forth. With a slight tremor, it broke free of the ground beneath it, gaining momentum as it began to roll down the hill. It crashed down the steep slope, sending rocks and dirt tumbling along with it.

It had almost reached them before the arguing men noticed it. They looked up in astonishment for a second, and then jumped away at a run. Two men did not jump fast enough,

and were struck by the rock. It rolled over one and threw the other off the trail into the ravine below.

By that time Fey was up and running, or hobbling, away. Her feet were so numb it was hard to walk, much less run. Still, she did the best she could, and soon found herself around a bend out of sight of her captors. She could hear their shouts and knew they were close behind.

Fey realized she couldn't outrun her pursuers. She looked for a good spot to make a stand, and saw it. Just ahead the path led around the edge of a massive outcropping of granite, and was just wide enough for a single person. Below, the slope fell off steeply into a jumble of rocks along the swiftly moving stream. Glancing back, she could see the soldiers coming after her, followed by the two scouts.

Their leader saw her and gave a triumphant shout. "There you are. We've got you now! Come on boys!" They surged ahead, and Fey turned to face them. She was about to summon a gale to blow them off the trail when there came the twang of a bowstring from behind her. An arrow appeared in the chest of the leader, and he fell into the waiting rocks below. Fey glanced behind her and saw a young woman in a grey cloak struggling to draw another arrow from her quiver. The narrow path made it difficult to manage the bow.

"Let me through," she heard a man's voice say, "this is a job for a blade." The woman flattened herself against the rock, and a young man pushed past, pressing her against the wall to keep from falling from the narrow path. Quickly he came to Fey, and pushed past her as well. For an instant as their bodies pressed together she caught sight of a handsome face and captivating grey eyes.

"Forgive me my lady, in any other circumstances this would be an ideal place to linger, but I must move on." So saying, he moved past and gave her a push away from the oncoming

soldiers.

The girl with the bow had backed up the path to where it widened enough for the two to pass, and she gestured Fey on. The Seer looked back to see the tall brown haired man laughing at soldiers coming at him. “Here now,” he said, “it’s just me, one man against all of you. Come, do your worst.”

The attackers rushed forward, but could only attack one a time on the narrow path. They were armed with swords and daggers, and had to face Squall on even terms. If they had spears or bows the contest may have been far different, but they were meeting an expert with his chosen weapon.

Fey watched in awe as Squall fought on the narrow path. Every enemy thrust found him dancing out of the way at the last instant, and every parry and counterthrust found an opening. His sword danced as he kept up a steady patter, commending his opponent’s skill or mocking their clumsiness.

The first member of the reconnaissance squad fell after three hits, one in the arm, one in the leg, and the final coup de grace to the throat. The second did not fare as well; one quick repost ran through his chest. The third took his time and advanced cautiously, testing Squall’s defense. The first series of tentative thrusts was easily parried, but suddenly Squall’s foot slipped on the edge of the path, and he seemed to lose his balance. His opponent moved in quickly to take advantage of the slip, only to find Squall going down on one knee and striking a deadly blow up under his guard. “I can’t believe you fell for that old trick,” commented Squall, watching him disappear into the ravine.

At that the other soldiers hesitated, in spite of the urging of the two scouts in the back. Squall went on the offense, charging straight at them. The next two men fell before they could

strike back. The rest of the party turned to flee.

Noodle acted immediately. He knew that if any of them got back to the main party they would never stop trying to capture Fey. “Squall, duck!” He yelled. “Shoot them before they escape!” he called to Breeze and Thistle, who both stood with bows ready, afraid to shoot unless they hit Squall.

The second the tall Nobel ducked there was the twang of two bowstrings releasing and the whistle of two arrows going inches over his head. They were followed by a roar and a blast of heat that erupted from Noodles upraised staff. The first two soldiers fell, pierced by arrows. The third dropped, clothing ablaze.

The two scouts were still unharmed. They had started to run even before Squall’s last victim hit the rocks below. They were out of range of Thistle’s short bow and the elf started out after them at a run. Breeze stood motionless for a moment and took careful aim. Her arrow flew high and far, at the last minute it dropped to land square between the shoulder blades of the hindmost forester. She drew another arrow back, but the lead forester rounded a turn in the path and disappeared before she could shoot.

Thistle was running after him, but was delayed a few precious seconds by the bodies blocking the trail. Squall followed close behind, his long legs slowly gaining on the shorter elf. Soon they, too, disappeared down the path.

Noodle took Fey in his arms. For a second she collapsed against him, holding on to him like a drowning woman on a float. “Are you hurt?” he asked.

“Not really,” she said, pulling away. “But my hands and feet are numb, and I don’t think I can move very quickly.”

“Sit down and let me see.” He commanded. Fey sat on a boulder and Noodle looked at

her hands and feet. He slowly massaged the bruised circles around her ankles. Within seconds the bruises started to fade. In a minute they were gone.

Fey and Breeze watched this in amazement. The touch of this village boy's hands had healed the girl! Fey wiggled her feet. "Crown, I don't believe it. They just stopped hurting. They are fine now. Thank you, but hadn't we better follow them?" She added, motioning to where Squall had disappeared around the bend in the path.

"Yes," Noodle agreed, "we must stop them before they reach the main party. We don't want them, or the Emperor, to know that they found you and the bracelet."

They hurried down the path after their two comrades. It wasn't long until they met Thistle and Squall, coming back to them looking glum. "We lost him up in the rocks. Whatever else he was, he knows how to hide his trail. Thistle here could probably track him, but it would be slow work. They would likely be back with the entire company before we found him." Squall explained, still panting from the run.

They sat there for a few minutes to give Squall and Thistle a chance to catch their breath. Noodle introduced Fey to the others. When he introduced her to Thistle the elf doffed his hat and gave her a low bow and said "It is an honor to meet you, your highness. It is many years since I have seen your Father, but you bear his likeness."

For a moment Noodle was more than a little taken aback by this. He may have known intellectually of Fey's status, but to him she was still the orphan girl that lived in the forest. He quickly gathered his wits and gave her a brief summary of what Forge and the others had learned about the Empire's search for her, ending with, "We had better get your Uncle go to the village. The raiders are almost certain to attack there in hopes of finding you or information about you, as well as for the spoils. They probably outnumber the villagers by more than two to one. We've

got to get back to help them.”

Thistle went ahead to scout as they walked back to the cottage. Squall dropped back and struck up an easy conversation with Fey. The innocent girl was intrigued by this handsome young man with the fine clothes, educated tongue and dancing sword. Other than Noodle and her one quick trip to the Spring Festival, she could not remember seeing any other eligible young men.

While she was very attached to Noodle, there was something exciting and just a little dangerous about this grey eyed nobleman. His every breath seemed to evoke the sights and smells of distant cities, beautiful courtiers and the clash of steel. His features were finely etched, his stature lean but lithe, he moved with the grace of a cougar, and his eyes were like the cold grey of a winter sky. She was not sure this stranger was to be trusted, but she was more than intrigued by the brash young Lord.

Breeze noticed that Squall’s attention was having its usual effect on the backwoods girl. Fey was pretty enough, but what could he see in a naive country girl who had hardly stepped foot out of her forest? Besides, she was definitely too young for him. She couldn’t be more than 16 or 17.

Breeze was more than a little surprised to find herself feeling jealous over a hick girl. She wondered if he was just paying attention to Fey to make her feel that way. Well, she thought, that cocky rich boy isn’t the only one who can play that game.

Breeze unbuttoned another button on her blouse and walked past them to strike up a conversation with the village boy. She was a little intrigued by this young man. Noodle was like

no other she had met. She was used to rogues and clever knaves, and had her share of fun and heartbreak from them. What she had not really seen before was a man that was so clearly decent and caring.

All she had to do was see the clear open look of Noodle's hazel eyes to know here was a man she could trust. She had never thought about it before, but this was the kind of man that you could stick with, and who would stick with you. She struck up a conversation that soon led to how he had met Fey and how they had been studying together with her Uncle.

Breeze could see that Noodle was clearly infatuated with the girl, but he did seem to be enjoying the attention he was getting. Indeed, Noodle was not immune to the charms of this striking gypsy girl. Their conversation was easy. He found she had a quick wit and a dry sense of humor. His adolescent eyes also couldn't help but glimpse the occasional flash of cleavage from this slender, but obviously well endowed, dark eyed beauty.

Worried as he was about the presence of the Empire troops and the treat to Fey and the village, he lost track of time. Almost before either he or Fey realized it, they had arrived back at Bard Seer's cottage.

Old Bard was scuttling around his workshop gathering up potions, medicines, herbs, and other treasures to take to the village. He would find something new, give an appreciative exclamation, and hand it to Forge to put on the table in the great room for packing. By now the table was starting to groan with its load. Forge had no idea how they would carry it all.

"Ah," said Bard, "this could come in handy." He held up a small vial of some unknown powder and handed it to Forge. "Don't drop it. It has a tendency to explode if you shake it too hard." Forge reached out gingerly to take it when Bard noticed the many burn scars on his right

forearm.

“Oh my. I guess those burns must be an occupational hazard for an ironsmith. Wait, I might have just the thing for you.” He scurried over to a large pile of books, swept them onto the floor, and rummaged around in an old trunk that had been hidden beneath them.

“Yes, here it is. I picked it up in Cragdell many years ago. It is clearly very old, and the elves were hanging onto it, so it must have some value. Still, they had forgotten its history, and I figured I would do some research on it.” He pulled out a black leather vambrace, or forearm guard. It had bronze buckles on the underside, and the top was embossed with a single character.

“That’s the symbol of the god Vulcan in an ancient script.” The scholar explained. “There is no sense leaving it here. No telling what will happen to the cabin with the Emperor’s troops foraging around. Here, it may do you some good.”

Forge took it and buckled it on. It fit perfectly. As soon as he had put it on, Forge was frozen in his tracks. The entire room seemed to darken, and a vision appeared before him. He could see a vast subterranean chamber lit by the flickering red orange glow of molten rock shining up from vast cracks in the floor of the cavern. Here and there the walls glittered with unknown crystals.

He seemed to be grasping a massive hammer and a pair of tongs holding a red hot bolt of metal on an anvil. He heard a voice say “Greetings my son. I see the time has come for my talisman to find its way to a worthy wearer. I think there is much work for you to do. This will help give you the strength you need. Use it wisely; the fate of your world may depend on it.” With that the voice gave a hearty laugh and the vision ended. Forge was back in the cottage with Bard.

He told Bard what happened. The old man was delighted with his vision. “It’s just as I

hoped. That wasn't just some old piece of cheap armor. That was Vulcan himself, and this must have been of his own making. From the looks of it, he must have used it himself. See those burn marks on the front. I bet no ordinary fire could have done that. My, my, just think. You are wearing a talisman made by a god. I must say, he made a good choice in you, my lad. You certainly look the part"

Forge didn't know what to make of that. Magic and gods and ancient talismans were not to his liking. He preferred the feel of good metal taking useful shape in his hand, and a good sound physical problem to solve. This was all too vaporous for him. He shrugged. *Well, it may come in handy. At least it will give me a little protection at the forge.*

Thinking of protection brought his mind to the village defenses. It was going to be a difficult job. This had been a small village in a poor farming region before the mines were dug and the smelter, forge and foundry were built. It wasn't designed for defense. The river was on one side and the enemy had to cross that. Other than the bridge there were few places to ford the river. Fortunately it was spring and the river was moving high and fast with melt water from the mountains. It was unlikely they had brought boats overland across the mountains.

He hadn't had long to follow this line of thinking when Noodle, Fey and the others arrived. Bard ran out to greet his Niece with a cry of joy and a big bear hug. "My dear, thank the fates you were unhurt. I knew Crown would get you back."

"Yes. Thanks are also due to Squall, Thistle and Breeze. They had to fight off an entire squad of soldiers." Fey added. She quickly introduced the three to her uncle and told him of her escape and the battle at the gorge.

Bard looked at his students thoughtfully. "I am sorry this day had to come so soon. I had hoped we would have another winter or more to continue your training. It is not an easy thing to

use your powers against another living soul, no matter how evil their intent. Do not be hard on yourselves; you only did what you must. I am proud of you both.”

“Alas, one of them got away,” Thistle observed. “I am sure by now he is drawing close to their main party. Tomorrow their scouts and patrols will be all through this area. An attack on the village will probably follow soon behind.”

“Yes, I am afraid this is the last I will see of my lovely cottage.” Bard collapsed on a bench, reaching for a small vial on his belt. He drank some of the potion inside, grimaced briefly, and heaved a great sigh. “Those barbarians will probably burn it with all my books. Still, there is nothing to be done. We can’t defend this place ourselves, and we are needed in the village. Many lives will be lost if they are overrun. We’d better hurry”

With that they all set to packing Bard’s treasures. By splitting the load among themselves they could carry most of it. Noodle had gone immediately to the shed where the livestock were penned. He opened the stalls and pen doors and spread out enough food for a week, warning them to hide in the woods during the day and only come out to eat at night. The goats and cow he brought outside. Noodle helped calm the animals so they could lash the rest of Bard’s things to them. At the last minute Bard ran back inside the cabin and returned carrying several large jars of his personal elixir, which he adamantly refused to leave behind. Noodle tied their necks together, slung them across the mule’s back, and the entire group set out for the village.

Chapter 7.

DEFENSE

As they entered the forest the path was wide enough for the small group to walk two abreast. Thistle went ahead. The elf could travel silently and effortlessly through the brush and to scout the trail, in case there were more Empire woodsmen in the area. Forge and Squall came next, followed by Noodle and Fey. Uncle Bard followed, having struck up a conversation with Breeze, and the mule and goats trailed behind.

Noodle was more than a little confused by the recent rush of events. He really hadn't had much of a chance to think things through since learning that Fey was in danger. From that moment on he had lost sight of everything except getting her to safety.

Now that he had a few moments to reflect, the full impact of what had happened began to set in. He didn't think about his first taste of combat, or that he had instinctively used the skills he had been practicing for the last year. Instead, he was terrified by how close Fey had come to capture and probably torture and death. *"I'm an idiot! I should never have let her go home*

without me. I'm just lucky she managed to escape and I had the others there to help." It was a good thing that Bard had taught them something about their powers, or it might have turned out far differently.

Still, Noodle knew that they had just begun to learn. The great warlocks spent scores of years mastering their powers, and the elves spent many lifetimes of men learning the craft. To them, he would be the merest beginner.

Even Fey had been studying since she was a child; although without her knowing until the day they met. How could he, who had never been more than a day's journey from home and knew so little of magic or the world and its ways, protect her from Armies and Emperors and Powerful Elvin Sorcerers! *"I've definitely gotten myself in over my head, and that's a fact."*

It must be said on Noodle's behalf, he didn't spend much time feeling sorry for himself. He pushed his doubts aside as soon as he looked at Fey waling beside him, looking small and delicate as the spring flowers beside the trail. "I don't care about all the armies and sorcerers in the world; if they want to harm Fey, they will have to come through me first!"

"Fey, are you all right? This must have been a terrible ordeal for you?"

"I'm all right Crown." she said, taking hold of his hand and looking up at him. "I didn't have time to be afraid, and when I needed you most – there you were. I owe all of you so much!"

"After that I was too busy worrying about Uncle Bard to think about it much." She paused thoughtfully for a long moment.

"You know, I think I might be more scared of myself. When that boulder started down towards those poor men, I could feel the power welling up in me. If you hadn't arrived then I don't know what might have happened. I might have brought the whole mountainside down on us all. "

“I think I know what you mean. I didn’t have time to think or draw in extra power. I just tapped a spell your Uncle had me place on my staff. I just needed to stop those soldiers. I don’t know what would have happened if I really *wanted* to hurt them.

“Still, having you safe is the main thing. I don’t know what I would do if you had been hurt. That band on your arm may make it much harder for you to control, but don’t ever be afraid to do what you need to defend yourself.”

Fey could hear the concern in his voice, and looked up at him, squeezing his hand. “I will, but I don’t have to worry, if you are there to protect me.”

Noodle looked into her eyes and felt his head spin. He blushed, and muttered “I...I...could n...never leave you.” There must have been a root or a loose stone on the trail, because he suddenly stumbled, flailing his arms to regain his balance.

The moment was broken, and Noodle spent the next few minutes railing at himself. “*What an Idiot. I should have told her how I feel. That smooth talking Lord Squall, wouldn’t have wasted an opportunity like that.*”

Squall and Forge had started discussing defenses almost immediately after the small party entered the forest. Forge outlined the force they could expect to pull together. There were about 50 men and boys old enough to fight in the village, and about 30 that worked in the mines and smelter. Another score or more might come in from the surrounding farms, if they could be convinced to bring their families in to the relative safety of the village. Squall estimated that the enemy force was somewhere over 250 strong, including the scouts and reconnaissance squads.

The enemy would outnumber the villagers by almost three to one. They might not know about the men from the mines, and they would expect little effective defense from untrained villagers and farmers. With any luck they would be overconfident.

“We have another thing in our favor.” Squall added, looking back at Noodle and Fey.

“We have a wizard and a sorceress on our side.

It was nearly dark when the tired group arrived in Edgewood. They found the town bustling with activity. Barricades were being constructed to block off entrances to the village, barrels of water were being placed at strategic locations, and children were making arrows and bandages. As they came into the town square they saw men training with pikes.

Fey and Noodle stopped by his house on the way, while the others went on to the Smith's. Forge's house had become the command center for the defense of the village. The stone house was at the end of the village on a low bluff with a good view of the bridge and river. Along the river were the stone buildings of the forge, smelter and two warehouses. The sound of chisels and mallets rang out where men from the mines were cutting narrow slits in the walls that archers could fire through.

Flint Smith and the Mayor were pouring over a map of the area, trying to devise a strategy that could protect the vulnerable village. Noodle's mother and sister prepared them some food and drink while the travelers told them of Fey's kidnapping, rescue, and the escape of one of the scouts.

Forge's father filled them in on the activities in the village. They had sent word to Duke Fairtrade at Headwater asking for reinforcements and weapons to arm the villagers. Runners also went out to tell the neighboring farms that raiding parties were in the area. Farmers and their families were starting to trickle into the village.

Some of the teenagers had been sent out to collect the weapons and armor from the squad Forge and Squall had attacked in the Forest. The soldier they had wounded had been brought

back to the village. He was resting fitfully, but might survive.

What weapons and armor the Smiths had in the warehouses were being distributed and the few men with military experience were training their neighbors. The forge and smelter were going non-stop producing spear and arrowheads. No one in the village had considered leaving. Not only would they lose everything they could not carry, but stragglers caught out on their own would almost certainly be robbed and killed.

After they had eaten and rested, Bard took Noodle and Fey aside. “We need intelligence.” he said, “I need you to tell us what you can find out about the raiders. We need to be able to anticipate their moves and, if at all possible, to think of ways to delay them.”

Bard brought out the crystal globe and motioned for Forge to get his staff. “Look around for lines of power where you can work.” Fey selected a hill behind the village where she could overlook the whole area. Noodle had already assessed the village and places nearby. His favorite place was in the woods on the other side of the river, not far from the bridge.

Fey went to her chosen spot and looked into the clear orb. As she focused the world seemed to fade around her until all that was left was the globe. In a moment she was looking down on the hill and could see herself where she was sitting on a stone wall separating two fields. Then her viewpoint rose as if she were getting higher and higher. She could see the village and the river spread out beneath her.

As she went higher she could see the entire valley and the hills around it; forested on one side and reaching up to the mountains on the other. Her thoughts focused on the Empire raiding party and its commander. She tried to form a mental image of what the camp might look like. Suddenly her viewpoint soared downward, like a falcon diving on its prey. The leaves of the forest parted and she caught a brief glimpse of a camp with many tents spread out under the

leaves.

Her view focused on a group of men standing around a small table. They were looking over a map and talking:

“They will probably take her to the village, or try to make it South down to the castle at Headwater. They aren’t likely to head west, with us over here. The mountains will block them to the north and east.”

“The patrol watching the trail should pick her up if she is heading south. She definitely fit the description they were given. My bet is village.”

“Yes, and now they know we are here, we’d better move quickly before they get help from the Duke.”

“I don’t think he will do much. With raiders in the area and the news of our scouts from the village the Duke will be afraid Headwater might be our real target,” said a tall older man in a bronze breastplate, who was obviously their leader.

“We will march on the village. I want us to own the West bank by nightfall tomorrow and be ready to move on the village at dawn the next day.

“Just in case the girl went back to her home I want two squads of scouts to take the northern ford tomorrow and see if they can find her. They can also reconnoiter for a flanking attack from the north. I want to send a unit to cross at that ford, and then move down on the village on that side of the river, I want that attack coordinated with the main assault on the bridge. Say, five tent groups from the third century. 40 men, plus the scouts, should serve for that. I’ll keep the other half of the third century to the South in reserve. The first and second centuries should have no trouble handling the village. I doubt they will be able to field 100 untrained men.

“Tell the men the village is rich and there is silver and gold there for the taking! We’ll break camp tomorrow after morning meal.”

With that the contact broke, and Fey slowly became aware of her surroundings. She was lying on the grass, now moist and chill with the evening dew. She could smell the wood smoke from the fireplaces in the village, and hear faint sounds of the continuing preparations.

Fey didn’t know how long she had been unconscious. The conversation must have taken place earlier in the evening. It had been twilight in her vision and it was fully dark now. She felt drained, more from the exertion needed to focus her vision than from her trials of the day.

Suddenly, without a sound, Thistle Vale was kneeling beside her, helping her sit up and putting his cloak around her shoulders. He gave her a drink from a canteen slung across his chest. “My lady, you should not work these magics alone in an unguarded place. Your efforts tax the very forces of life within you. Some have faded away forever when they gazed too long and far.” Gathering her strength, she stood with Thistle’s help and, still leaning heavily against the elf, they made their way back to the Smith’s to tell what she had learned.

Noodle made himself comfortable on a fallen log beside a small clearing only a few hundred yards into the woods on the other side of the bridge. Within a few moments many small animals of the forest came out to sit with him. He sat unconsciously stroking a red fox that came to sit on his lap. He closed his eyes to better listen to the voices of the animals. It took him only a moment to locate the squirrels he had set to watching the enemy camp. The camp was concealed under the trees, and it was clear they were being careful not to give away their position. Only a few smokeless and carefully shielded fires stood among more than two score tents.

Noodle could see the men were bedding down for the night, so they were probably not

going anywhere until morning. There were too many men and guards for the local animals to attack, but he could at least make their night as miserable as possible.

The question was how to use them most effectively? “I wish I had that trickster Puck here. He’s known throughout the forest for his practical jokes.” Noodle pondered for a few moments until he was startled by a small popping sound, as Puck materialized in the air before him.

“If there is mischief to be done, Robin Goodfellow is at your service. Queen Titania asked my master for me to assist, and here I am.” Puck announced, with a bow and a sweep of his forest green cap. “Now, who do we have nearby to lend us a hand?”

Noodle cast his mind abroad near the camp and found the usual woodland inhabitants nearby: small lizards and snakes, including a large nest of rattlesnakes, mice, chipmunks, squirrels, possum, porcupine, skunks, fox, rabbits, raccoons, a variety of birds, and a number of deer. There were also several black bears not too far away.

It didn’t take the two long to come up with a plan. Noodle touched each of these in turn, and gave them the desire to do their tasks, while Puck went to the camp to supervise.

Noodle scouted the camp through the eyes of a spotted owl. There were actually three separate camps, each with ten eight man tents and one or two tents for the officers. There were a few mules for carrying supplies tethered a ways away from each camp, with canvas covered piles of supplies nearby. Guards were posted around the perimeter of the camps and next to the mules. There were no guards inside the camp, except for two posted outside the tent with the battalion’s standard flying in front.

Noodle sent squirrels to gnaw through the ropes tethering the mules and on the tents in the campgrounds. The snakes and skunks he sent to find warm places to sleep in the tents. It

wasn't long until the owl heard confused yells from waking soldiers struggling to get out of their collapsing tents.

After giving the squirrels time to part the mule's ropes, Noodle sent in the black bears. Soon the mules heard the crash of the bears through the woods followed by fierce roars as bears reared upright in front of them. The terrified mules ran for their lives, braying and bucking, with their guards chasing after them. Noodle made sure the frightened animals stampeded through the campsites before giving them an extra nudge to make sure they would keep running until dawn. Then he sent the bears to break into the food stores and spread them out where the mice and other rodents could get at them. In the tents the rodents ate holes in the soldier's packs to scatter and spoil the food they carried

He saw Puck riding into camp on the back of a large raccoon, waving his cap and urging his steed on. The raccoons and squirrels were to take whatever they could find and hide it in the woods. In a few moments he saw Puck's mount sneaking out of the commander's tent carrying one of his boots and several bronze belt buckles.

The camp was in chaos. The soldiers, thinking they were under attack, struggled out of their tents one by one and fumbling to find their weapons. By the time most of the men had emerged from their tents packs of braying mules stampeded through them; scattering men, equipment and smoldering campfires. At almost the same time groups of frightened deer dashed through the camps; knocking over anything left standing and dashing away before the startled troops could respond.

Noodle was quite pleased with the resulting chaos. The troops would have little sleep and empty bellies in the morning. Puck stayed behind to continue their misery; loosening the flaps of the hastily raised tents for bats to enter during the night, guiding rats to tempting targets, and

directing snakes and stinging insects to where they could do the most good. *It may not cause many casualties*, Noodle thought, as he rose to return to the village, but a couple of nights of that would certainly leave the troops short of supplies, sleepless and demoralized.

When he reached Forge's house, Fey was just arriving. They gave their reports to Forge's father, Squall and the Mayor, who were still working on plans for the defense of the village. Their first concern was to counter the scouts coming from the north and prevent the following troops from crossing the river. They decided to send out a party to the North to try to intercept the scouts during the day and ambush the flanking units at their camp on the other side of the river that night.

Noodle, Breeze and Thistle agreed to lead a group of 25 bowmen, most of them men and teens that were experienced hunters from the farms and woodlands. They would rest and return to Edgewood as soon as they could the morning of the expected attack. There they could serve as a reserve to be used where needed. The others were to remain in the village and help with preparing the defenses. Finally, exhausted, Fey, Noodle and Breeze retired to the Shepherd's house for what was left of the night.

When Noodle awoke the first light of dawn was showing in the Eastern sky. Breeze and Thistle were already assembled with the rest of their company. Mrs. Smith handed them packs with food for the next day, and bread, ham and boiled eggs to take with them for their breakfast. They set out quickly, heading for Bard's cottage. It seemed likely at least one of the scouting parties would head there first. Noodle was hoping they could reach it in time to prevent it from being damaged. He knew that many of Bard's books and scrolls were irreplaceable.

As they traveled Noodle sent the Buzzards north to follow the scouts. They had guessed right. The First party had already crossed the river and was heading to the cottage, and would get there before the villagers. Noodle needed to delay them, and found several bears, including a mother bear and her cubs fishing in the river near the cottage. He had them go sit in the yard in front and behind of the cottage. Hopefully it would take the soldiers a while to figure out how to get past them.

The plan was partly successful. Noodle could get a buzzard's eye view of the conflict. The soldiers arrived and sent men around the cottage. They found a mother bear and her cubs calmly sunning themselves by the front door. When they sent a man around the back, he was greeted by another bear blocking the back door. Their initial attempts to scare the bears off were ineffective, but finally they lit a fire and managed to scare them off with flaming brands. Noodle and his men reached the edge of the forest as the soldiers entered the cottage. They moved cautiously to where they could see the cottage without being seen. Thistle took five of the men and went around the back to cover the rear, while the remaining men positioned themselves in bowshot of the front of the cabin.

Noodle figured that what had worked before would probably work again. He had found a family of skunks living nearby, and after his men were in place, he had the mother and her kits walk into the open front door. Almost immediately the scouts started pouring out of the building. Thistle and his men quickly dispatched the three soldiers that ran out of the back door and entered the cottage to prevent the others from retreating back into it. They carefully stepped out of the way as the mother skunk calmly led her troop back out the rear door to return to their afternoon nap.

Noodle waited a few seconds until he was sure all the men had emerged from the cabin

and raised his staff. There was a flash of light and a clap like thunder and the man closest to the door fell. Twenty arrows flew and the hapless soldiers were down. Noodle dashed inside, and confirmed that the library was safe. He went outside and had the bodies dragged a distance away from the house. They quickly built a pyre of firewood left over from the previous winter. Noodle walked over to it and said a prayer of forgiveness for the dead. Lifting his staff, the pyre burst forth into flames. Soon a pillar of black smoke rose into the sky.

“Shouldn’t we go after the second group of scouts?” Breeze asked.

“No, I think they will come to us.” Noodle replied. He looked at her, but his gaze was far away. His eyes in the sky could see the second group of scouts crossing the river and looking toward them at the pillar of smoke. “They should be here within the hour.”

The villagers moved off in a group in the direction of the village. They followed the path, leaving ample tracks for the scouts to follow. In about a mile they split off into two groups and headed back on either side of the trail. They moved in until they were only a few hundred yards from the edge of the clearing. They fanned out to loosely surround the clearing. Noodle watched through the eyes of the buzzards circling overhead. In about a half an hour the reconnaissance squad arrived at the clearing. They sent out two men to scout the area but they did not see Noodle’s men, lying well back from the clearing, were well out of sight. Noodle could see the scouts returning to report to the leader of the squad, and then the whole group moved in to examine the pyre.

Suddenly the rooster crowed. This was the sign from Noodle that the villagers had been waiting for, and they all stepped out into the clearing, their bows drawn and pointed at the soldiers. Noodle stepped out, tall and imposing in his white robe and staff. His voice rang out, louder than was natural; “Lay down your weapons or die like the others.” Their leader turned and

started to draw his sword, only to have Breeze's arrow strike him through the heart. His men stood speechless for a moment and then, one by one, put down their swords and knives. In a few moments their leader was added to the pyre, and the men were bound and moving towards the village, with five of the villagers accompanying them.

Noodle led his party to the waterfall in the river and across the rocks to the other side. They withdrew a distance from the ford and settled in to wait for the arrival of the Empire's flanking party and nightfall. Setting up sentries, both humans and animals, Noodle, Breeze and the others got what rest they could before their night's work.

It seemed like only moments to Noodle when he was awakened by a gentle tapping on his shoulder. It was Thistle. He whispered in Noodle's ear that the enemy had arrived and was camped a short distance away. "Did they send out any more scouts?" Noodle asked.

"Yes, three, but they won't be coming back." Thistle said patting his knife with a satisfied grin.

Again that night Noodle relied on a surprise attack. With the animals to find and point out the sentries they were soon dispatched by Thistle and Breeze. The two could move like ghosts in the night, without a sound or sign of their passage. The villagers surrounded the camp and Noodle set the local rodents to gnawing on the ropes of their tents. In a matter of minutes the ropes parted accompanied by startled yells from inside the tent, struggling to make their way out as the tents collapsed around them.

Noodle waited until about half the men had left their tents. Then, with a muttered incantation, Noodle lifted his staff. A brilliant white light flared from the head of the staff, illuminating the entire area. The soldiers that looked at the light were blinded by it, but the

villagers had been warned to look away. A score of bows sang and sang again, felling most of the enemy standing outside. Several that escaped the first volley rushed their attackers. Two of the villagers were brought down before the three were overwhelmed. The pace of firing slowed as the villagers were picked off the remaining soldiers as they emerged from their tents. In a few brief minutes chaos of the battle went quiet, punctuated only by the occasional moan from the wounded.

Noodle went through the camp, sorting out the dead and caring for the wounded. Only two of the villagers had been injured. Timothy Gardner, the eldest son of Rye Gardner, who had a farm south of Edgewood, had been killed when the three soldiers had tried to break through the lines. His brother Millet had been stabbed in the arm and side, but did not seem to be too severely wounded.

Eight of the soldiers had survived the attack, but two died soon after from their wounds. Noodle treated the remaining six. The worst of them he laid his hands on until he could see their wounds starting to mend. The others he treated as he had been taught by Bard, with clean water, disinfecting and painkilling salves and clean bandages. He wanted to do more for them, but knew he needed to save his strength for the battle ahead. As it was, he was exhausted. He lay down and fell fast asleep; trusting the others to do what must be done.

The day had been a busy one in the village of Edgewood. Forge was busy in the smithy and smelter, overseeing the distribution of weapons and armor. Fey and Bard had moved into the Shepherds' house, where they took over the kitchen making preparations for the battle ahead. The room was filled with strange smells of potions brewing, flashes of light and crackles like the sparks that flew from the fur of a cat on a cold winter night. Squall roamed the town, inspecting

the hastily constructed defenses, giving orders for improving them and making sure that everyone knew their roles and stations for the battle ahead.

Around noon there was a commotion at the bridge. An old man and a blond woman arrived, leading two large carts and twenty soldiers wearing the colors of the Duke's castle guard. Forge came out of the Smithy to see what the noise was about, and was almost bowled over by the assault of the girl.

She ran at the startled young giant, embraced him with a bear hug that would have crushed a lesser man, and smothered him with an enthusiastic kiss. When she finally came up for air, Forge looked into Barb's blue eyes, put his hands on her waist, and lifted her into the air as if she were a child. "What do you think you are doing here?" he bellowed. "Don't you know it's not safe here?"

Barb laughed, "That's right, and I am going to be right here to make sure to keep you in one piece! I'm not about to let something happen to the only boy around here that's man enough for me!"

"The Duke decided to send Uncle Guard with what weapons and men he could spare on short notice, I decided to come along. We marched all night to get here in time"

"I tried to stop her," Guard Martial added, chuckling, "but it was like trying to stop a she bear from protecting her cubs. I figured I'd better let her come if I wanted all my men to get here in one piece. Besides, she can handle a sword or ax better than most men. She's been training with me since she could walk."

Forge set Barb down and looked at her. She was wearing a bronze breastplate that had obviously been specially made to contain her robust figure. A one handed sword hung at her side. A steel helmet adorned with two horns in the style of the raiders from the northern islands

lay on the ground, where she had dropped it when she rushed the big Smith.

Forge decided that he, too, thought it would probably be dangerous to try to change her mind. Instead, he wrapped his soot stained arms around her, pulled her close, and kissed her in return. The kiss may not have been quite as energetic as Barb's, but it was definitely longer and more thorough.

By dusk the village was appeared to be settled down for a normal night. Two constables kept a lazy watch on the town side of the bridge and all was quiet. The townspeople had been warned to stay silent and out of sight unless absolutely necessary. Only the normal lights and sounds of a quiet village evening were allowed.

They knew that the Empire troops had occupied the opposite bank, and were watching their every move. Fey had contacted Noodle, who confirmed the animals were noticing a large number of men spread out in the forest across the river from the town. They hoped to convince the attackers that the town was unaware of the impending attack, so they would be tempted to make a single bold frontal assault across the bridge.

Several hours before dawn runners snuck through the sleeping village, telling everyone to take their positions. Under the cover of darkness and using the buildings and terrain to conceal their movements, the townsmen moved into their positions.

Fey and half of the archers moved up the hill and hid behind the stone fence that partially surrounded the large field to the south of town. The miners and castle guard were hidden in the stone buildings along the river. The women set up a field hospital in the church on the village square, which was the largest stone building in the village.

The commander of the Empire's troops was in a foul mood. There were dark circles under his red, blood shot eyes a bandage around his head, his shoes didn't match, and his belt was lashed together with leather thongs. The last two nights had been miserable.

Gods! The very forest itself had seemed to rise up against us. The men were tired and edgy. There were grumblings of evil spirits and angry gods. Several men had been lost from snake bites, and more than a score had broken limbs or other injuries from being kicked, trampled or simply tripping over each other in the dark. Almost all their mules were lost, along with a two third of their supplies. Still, they were well trained, knew their duties, and were eager take their frustrations out on the sleeping village. His officers had the men in place, hidden just inside the woods, and awaiting the command to attack.

As the sky began to lighten in the east, two Empire scouts slipped into the water below the bridge and swam silently across. Apparently by accident, just as they slipped out of the water below the two village guards, one guard happened to lean over the side. "Halt! Who goes there!" he cried, drawing his sword. His partner took a step back, spotted the second scout and blew a blast on the horn hanging at his side.

While the two guards engaged the scouts, Empire troops emerged from the woods and ran for the bridge. Just as the troops charged a light came on from the stone house next to the bridge and four men came out, pulling on their gear: a big man with the leather apron of a smith or a farrier, a tall brown haired dandy with a slender sword, an old man with the scars of many battles, and a uniformed officer who wore the insignia of a colonel in the Duke's guard. The four reached the center of the bridge first and stood facing some five score of men coming at them from the forest.

The bridge was narrow, and there was hardly enough room for four men to walk abreast.

The first empire troops to reach the four fell almost instantly. The giant wielded a big battle ax like a toy. His long arms gave him a reach longer than their short swords, and cut through shields and mail as if they weren't there. His three companions were clearly expert swordsmen, and none of the soldiers stood a chance against them. For a few minutes the four held the bridge alone, slowly being pushed back by the sheer number of enemy pushing each other get across the bridge.

Reinforcements from the village trickled in, a few burly minors and veterans joined them, trading places with the lead men when they started to tire. Rough voices from the Empire ranks got the attackers into better order, forming the men up into lines of four and driving them on across the bridge.

Slowly the villagers were forced backwards, as new soldiers pushed their way over the bodies of their fallen comrades. The Empire soldiers knew that if they could push the villagers off the bridge, they would surround and easily overwhelm the handful of defenders. As if realizing this, the defense intensified. The young dandy jumped in front, his sword flashing red in the rising sun and his body twisting like a contortionist as he dodged and struck. For a moment the attackers were shocked and started to fall back, only to be pushed forward into his dancing blade by the row of men behind them. Slowly they pushed forward, and Squall was forced back into the line with the others.

Just as they were about to be pushed past the end of the bridge, where they would be overwhelmed he shouted "Fall Back!" The entire group of villagers turned and ran back up the road, with the four fighting a rearguard action to cover their retreat.

The Empire soldiers gave a cry of victory and stormed after the villagers as they ran up the hill. The rear guard held them back until the villagers rounded the corner of the road and

disappeared between the buildings that lined the street through the village.

As they chased the defenders up the street, the Empire troops hardly realized the alleys and spaces between the buildings had been barricaded. Suddenly, just before the road opened up into the village square, the defenders stopped and turned to face the onrushing soldiers. A score of archers and pike men ran out of the surrounding buildings to form a line behind them. Their arrows flew as the villagers advanced towards the startled soldiers. The front ranks of the attackers melted in before the sudden onslaught.

Again, the Empire troops started to bunch up behind the leaders, who were slowly being pushed back by the villagers. Suddenly a rain of stones and darts started falling on them from the buildings above. A few tried to climb over the barricades in the alleys, only to be brought down by the townspeople behind them.

Before the trapped soldiers could make an organized counterattack there was the sound of horns and drums, and a clattering of metal on metal. The four defenders and their supporters suddenly parted, and vanished into the square.

Suddenly a herd of 20 or 30 angry bulls appeared before them; being driven towards them by a circle of village boys blowing horns, beating drums and banging pots and pans together. From the far side of the river Noodle filled the bulls' minds with visions of fertile heifers and rival suitors in the field outside the village. Aroused and enraged, the bulls plowed into the Empire's troops as they turned to flee back out of the village.

When the Empire's troops began bunching up on the road into the village, some of the men who came behind sought other ways into the village. They found the side street that ran between the Smiths' buildings along the river and the bluff below the village appeared to be unguarded. Thirty or forty soldiers streamed off the bridge and down past the stone buildings.

When they reached the end of the last warehouse there was a shout from the building, and a rope that was lying across the road suddenly went taut. The rope was tied to a stake that was holding back a pile of large logs, perched on the side of the bluff. The logs rolled down the hill, bouncing and tumbling on the way down and smashed into the attackers at the end of the road. A number of them were caught in the avalanche of logs, and the rest pushed back into the men behind them. In the confusion archers started shooting from the slits that had been chiseled in the buildings. Young boys ran along the top of the bluff, tumbling down boulders, logs and barrels that had been positioned there. The logs at the end of the street formed a crude barricade, and a number of miners with pikes and maces kept their victims from fleeing into the village.

Soon a horn sounded. The villagers at the end of the road formed ranks and started moving up the street, and the miners and castle guards poured out of the buildings lining the street. They pushed the survivors back down the street to the bridge. Some tried to push their way back across the bridge, but it was still crowded with the last of the units being sent across the river. Their only choice was to move into the field on the other side of the road.

The field was now filling with soldiers fleeing from the village in front of the bulls and from the street by the waterfront. Suddenly Fey raised her hand and a flash of light and a clap like a peal of thunder sounded. That was the signal for the archers that had been hiding behind the walls to stand and start firing into the milling men below them. The field was a mass of confusion. The raiders had nowhere to go. Some of the raiding party tried to set up formations in the field, only to have them smashed by charging bulls. Others tried to make it over the far fence. A few managed to escape, but most were brought down by the defenders' arrows.

Across the river the commander realized the battle was turning against him. Hoping to distract some of the villagers he gave the order to set fire to the village. He did not have many

archers, and it was a long shot from the bushes along the river into the town, but a few fire arrows could start the wooden buildings of the village ablaze. In moments a volley of burning arrows were arcing towards the village.

Fey had been waiting for this. With a wave of her hand a great wind blew up, blowing the arrows away from the village and onto the men still trying to cross the bridge. A second volley met the same fate before the archers stopped, realizing it was futile. The commander called up his last group of reinforcements, and sent them to break out from the bridge and attack the villagers from behind. To distract the villagers he also ordered one squad to swim across the river further upstream and set fire to the village.

The second attack on the bridge failed. By this time the miners and guardsmen had thrown up a barricade at the end of the bridge to make sure that no one escaped the field or came across the river to support them. The 50 reinforcements were not enough to break through. Some made it over the barricade, only to be outnumbered and quickly overwhelmed. Eventually they fell back into the forest to avoid the arrows of archers still firing on the bridge from the Smith's house.

Barb Martial was busy caring for the wounded and carrying them back towards the hospital when she saw an Empire soldier with a torch setting fire to the rear of one of the buildings near the church. With a fierce yell she drew her sword and charged the startled man. He had no time to draw his sword, and parried her first cut with the torch. She swung again, a simple stroke to the head that he easily blocked. This time, however, Barb let her blade slip down the length of the torch. Unlike a sword, the torch had no guard, and her blade slid down to slice through the hand holding the torch. Fingers flew into the air as the soldier dropped her torch,

leaving himself open to Barb's slicing uppercut across the body.

Three of his squad mates heard his scream and came running around the corner, swords drawn. Dropping her sword, Barb picked up a rough wooden bench hewn from a half a log. She threw it at the men, bowling them over.

Grabbing her sword she struck one of them down before they could regain their balance. Another made a weak thrust only to have his blade driven aside and his chest slashed by her counter. The third soldier was luckier. He had time to gain his balance and take a fighting stance, sword *en garde*. Barb engaged him, and for a few moments they dueled back and forth in the street.

By that time Constance Shepherd and a number of the younger boys had come running out of the church. "Ring the bell, get help! There will be others! Find them." Barb yelled. The boys scattered. Moments later two more raiders rounded the corner and moved to attack Barb from the rear.

Barb was unaware of the new threat, but not so Fillet Smith. She grabbed one of the fallen soldier's swords and with a cry of "NO!" brought it down on the back of one of the two new attackers. Her sword lodged in his shoulder and was wrenched from her grip. His partner turned towards them and, in a single arching cut, sliced Noodle's mother open from chest to stomach. Barb turned and gave a backhand blow that nearly severed the man's head. Seeing the fallen women, Barb let out a wild yell and attacked the remaining foe like a berserker. The force of her attack drove him back against the wall where she beat down his defense with brute force and finished him off.

The church bell pealed above the sounds of the battle as Barb ran to the stricken women. Barb grabbed her up as easily as if she were an infant and ran into the church, calling for help.

Bard Seer and the midwife ran over, and began trying to staunch the blood flowing from the grievous wound. Barb knew the wound was almost certainly mortal and that this brave woman had sacrificed herself to save her life. Tears running down her face, she turned away to retrieve her sword and look for more infiltrators.

The house that had been set on fire was ablaze. Smoke and flame billowed from the windows, and licks of flame were starting to show in the roof. As Barb reached to pick up her sword a small boy crawled out of the building. She grabbed him up and moved him away from the flames.

“Mommy!” the boy cried pointing into the burning building.

Barb put the boy down, calling “stay here,” as she rushed into the building. The main room was filling with smoke. The side wall was ablaze and flames were licking across the roof. The thick smoke was hovering a few feet above the floor. Barb ducked down and could see the form of an unconscious woman lying near the fireplace. Taking a deep breath, Barb rushed into the room, grabbed the woman and pulled her out into the street. As she was leaving the burning house, she thought she heard the cry of an infant. “Is there anyone else in there?” She asked the boy. He nodded and said “My baby sister.”

Barb almost yelled, “Where is she?” The boy sobbed and pointed into the house “Her cradle is by the fireplace.”

By this time the flames were starting to come out of the windows and door of the wooden home. Barb grabbed the woman’s shawl. Ducking it in a water barrel, she warped it around her nose and mouth and ran back into the building. Under the smoke she could see the cradle on the other side of the room. Barb crawled across the room and found the baby, who was silent now. The room was ablaze all around her as she picked up the baby and started to cross the room.

With a sudden rumble a section of the roof gave way, and a falling joist knocked Barb to the floor. Before she could rise there was a crash as the side wall collapsed and the massive ridge pole crashed down into the room. The pole fell across her back, knocking her down and pinning her to the floor. As she fell, she tossed the unconscious infant out through the door, shouting “Get the baby!”

The battle at the field was winding down. Disorganized raiders were either surrendering or being mown down by archers. At the first sound of the bell Forge knew there was trouble in the village. Shouting “Follow me” to the men around him, he ran to the Church. Seeing the smoke from the burning house he ran around the side of the church. A small soot stained boy and his mother were staring into the house. There was a crash and burst of flame as one wall and half of the roof collapsed. Suddenly a baby flew out of the door and landed in the soft dirt of the alley. The mother grabbed the infant and shouted, “She’s still in there! She saved my baby!”

Forge rushed inside. The collapse of the roof was followed by a gush of fresh air that fanned the flames, but momentarily cleared the smoke from room. There on the floor was Barb, lying silently under the weight of the great ridge pole. The log was forty feet long, nearly three feet thick, and smoldering along most of its length.

Forge tried to pull Barb out from beneath it, but its full weight was resting on her back. Forge could see she was still alive by the bloody bubbles of shallow breathing at her mouth. Not thinking, he grabbed onto the log and gave a mighty heave. The log came clear of the floor and he tossed it easily aside, as if it had been some simple fallen branch.

Grabbing Barb’s limp form he raced out of the burning building. Tears streaming down his face, he carried her crushed body as carefully as he could into the church and laid her down

on the floor. For a moment her eyes opened and she looked up him. “Is the babe safe? I didn’t throw her too hard…” Forge nodded, “Yes, she’s safe.” Barb gave a little smile, the blue eyes closed, and she faded away.

The main battle for the village was all but over. The last of the Emperor’s troops were making a final stand in the field by the bridge, but the villagers were clearly taking the day. There still remained, however, the raiders in the woods on the other side of the stream. The commander had gathered forty or fifty men who had not made it to the other side of the bridge or swam back across the river. He didn’t know how many more were scattered in the forest. If he could get them together there might still be some hope of capturing the girl. He cared little about looting the village, but dared not return to the Emperor without the girl.

Noodle and his party were ready for their part of the mission. The birds could see the battle of the village was largely going as planned. He waited until it was clear the raiders were not going to commit any more men to crossing the river. Then he took his staff and sat down at a clearing where he could feel the power of air was strong.

His mind reached out. He could feel the anxious thoughts of many creatures that were frightened by the strange men moving around in their woods. Noodle summoned his power and sent forth images of the soldiers and feelings of anger and the need to attack. This time he did not send it to particular animals, but to all of those near the enemy hidden in the woods along the river.

It worked far more powerfully than he had imagined. All the creatures, big and small felt the call. They were threatened, their hive, their babies, their mates were threatened, and they rushed into headlong attack. Suddenly the troops were being beset from all sides, stinging

insects flew from their nests to attack, ants, spiders, and snakes crawled out of the ground to attack them. Mice and rats swarmed up their legs looking for places to bite, rabbits and foxes attacked their feet. Birds flew down from the branches to attack their heads. Deer, cougars, wolves and bear attacked with mindless ferocity. Some men tried to fight back, but simply broke and ran. Most ran south or east, away from the village, but nearly half ran for the river and began to swim away.

Again, Fey was prepared. As the soldiers started to flee into the water she began a powerful incantation of protection to the power of water. She could feel the power flowing through her as she raised her palms to the river and released the energy. A wall of water ten feet high swept down the river. Behind it the riverbed was scoured dry for 50 paces before the waters behind rushed in to cover it up.

The swimming men had no chance. A few managed to survive the flood and were washed away downstream. There they were picked up by patrols from the village, ravens sent by the young wizard crying out their locations. The rest were found floating downstream in the river for days afterward.

The day had turned cloudy and cool, and Fey could see dark grey rainclouds forming over the mountains. She also could see several buildings in flames in the villages, and villagers rushing to fight the fires and try to keep them from spreading to the vulnerable wooden buildings nearby.

Again she gathered power to her and released it into the air above the village. Suddenly a wind blew, a gust front coming before a storm. Dark clouds billowed and a steady rain started to come down on the village, wetting dry wood and saving the buildings not too engulfed in flames for the rain to quench.

Squall looked up in awe at the slight figure of the girl. She had thrown off her cloak, and stood on the crest of the hill, her long blond hair and white robe streaming behind her in the gale. Her robe seemed to glow with a light of its own against the dark grey of the storm clouds and she was untouched by the rain. Lightning cracked overhead. She looked like an Elvin Queen from the legends of old. Never again would he look at her as some naïve village girl.

He was not the only one to notice the sorceress on the hill. One of the Empire officers and a small group of his men had formed a circle and were making a stand in the field below the girl. With a cry from the officer they began to work their way towards the top of the field.

Squall saw their movement. It was clear the officer was hoping that stopping her might disorganize and demoralize the villagers and give his men time to escape. With an oath, the young lord smashed his opponents face with the guard of his sword and broke off from the engagement. He ran to the top of the hill, yelling at the top of his voice, and pushing through the swirling mass of combatants. Just as he jumped to the top of the stone wall separating the two fields he saw the Empire Officer grab a spear and hurl it towards the defenseless girl.

In his mind's eye Squall saw the spear striking Fey a mortal blow through her unprotected back. Without thinking he leapt into the air, twisting into path of the flying spear. He felt the spearhead strike, spinning him around as he crashed to the ground at the girl's feet. He grinned up at her weakly "That was the first time that I ever tried to dodge into the thrust."

Forge was already running up the hill towards her, hardly noticing the sudden storm or the wounded man in her arms. "Fey," he cried. "We need Noodle at the church. His mother and Barb are wounded badly, and need his help." Fey stopped and focused on the Shepherd. She could feel him across the river, but she could not contact him.

“I know where he is.” She said, “But, I’ll have to go down and get him.” She looked down at Squall. Grimacing, he reached up and pulled the spearhead from his shoulder. “I don’t think it hit anything serious, you go get Noodle. Forge can help me over to the church to get this bandaged up.” Fey folded her scarf and pressed it against the wound. Placing Squalls hand against it and instructing “Press on this to stop the bleeding.” She turned and ran down the road to find Noodle.

It took her but brief minutes to cross the river and come to the clearing where she found Noodle on his knees. He was holding the body of a dead doe in his arms. He looked up at Fey with tears streaming from his eyes. “She did this for me,” he cried. “It was not her fight; if I hadn’t made them do this for my own sake they would still be alive. Their blood is on my hands.”

Fey reached down and drew him up into her arms. For a moment he stood there sobbing, with his head resting against hers. She held him for a moment and gave him a tender kiss.

“I know your pain, but their sacrifice saved many lives. The guilt is not yours, but lies with the men who brought violence to them. Take strength now, you are not done for this day.

“Your mother and many others at the church are wounded and need your help. Come, we must hurry.” With that she took his hand and led him out of the clearing.

Noodle rushed into the church and found his mother. Constance Shepherd lay near the altar, her torso wrapped in bandages. Blood still seeped out of a long slash running from her right shoulder down left to her waist. Noodle could sense the damaged organs and deadly loss of blood, and knew there was nothing he could do to help her. He reached down and cradled her in his arms.

“Crown, is that you?”

“Yes mom, I’m here. Just be quiet. It will be all right.”

“No, I know better. But I am content; you are safe and have grown into a man I am proud of.”

“Be quiet mother, save your strength.”

“No, I must tell you this. Take my ring; it was given to me by your father. By it he will know who you are.”

“Don’t worry mother, my father knows me already.”

“No, Virgil is not your true father. When I was young, one moonlight evening I met a handsome elf in the forests in our land near Fairport. We fell in love, but Elm could not stay.

“Later I found I was with child. My parents sent me here to my aunt to hide my shame. I met your father and we married. He is a good man, and took you in as his own son.

“...I am getting tired... Thistle can tell you more. He is your father’s friend and will be yours too...” With that she gave one last loving look at her son and closed her eyes.

Noodle kissed her on her brow, his tears glistening on her cheeks. He could feel her body still as the life flowed away. Sobbing quietly, he laid her gently on the stone floor. He was too overcome to fully feel the grief that would come later, and he had others to tend.

Forge was holding Barb’s head in his lap. Old Guard was beside them, holding her hand. The wounded girl was unconscious, her breathing shallow and her lungs gurgling with each breath. Her breastplate had been removed and salve rubbed on her. Bard came up beside him.

“I don’t know how much internal damage there is. It looks like a rib has punctured her left lung, and there may be internal bleeding. If so, she has little chance.

“Fortunately, the breastplate took a lot of the blow and kept some of the weight off her.

She has some nasty burns on her leg and arm, but they should heal.”

Noodle knelt down beside her and moved his hands across her body. He could sense where the broken rib has punctured her lung, and damage to her organs on the left side. For long minutes he knelt there, his eyes focused far in the distance. His skin grew pale and perspiration beaded his brow from the force of his concentration.

Slowly her breathing eased and the gurgling ceased. The color started to return to her face and her eyes flickered open. She looked up at Forge’s worried countenance. “Hey big guy, you didn’t think a little fire could keep me away from you, did you?” Her voice died to nearly a whisper, “We’ve got babies of our own to make, you know.” With that she closed her eyes, nestled her head in his lap and dropped into a contented sleep.

Epilog.

Two months had passed and the spring was turning into early summer. It was the equinox, the first day of summer. A small crowd stood on the hill where Fey had made her stand. They were dressed in white and a priest and a young couple were standing before them.

The bride was dressed in a simple white gown with an empire waist. Her yellow hair hung down to her waist girded by a garland of wild flowers. She was tall and strong, but her head barely came to the shoulder of the groom. He was a big man with neatly trimmed black hair and beard. He wore a white shirt with black pants, and his only adornment was an old leather armguard on his right forearm. It was clear they were paying little attention to the words of the priest, for they constantly were looking aside to grin at each other.

At Barb's side stood her Uncle Guard, Fey and Breeze. Noodle and Squall stood beside Forge.

The six had become fast friends in the days since the battle. The first days had been busy ones. Noodle spent his time with the injured, both human and animal. He had parties sent to scour the forest for the wounded to bring them back to the church for treatment. Side by side with Fey and her Uncle they worked. The boys touch helped heal the most seriously wounded,

and their potions and salves helped relieve the rest. The village was fortunate; there had been few casualties among the villagers.

The raiders were not so fortunate. Almost half their number had been killed. Most of the rest had been injured or captured. After mending their wounds they were marched back to the Castle to serve as conscripts in the Duke's army. Knowing their reception if they returned to the Empire, many were glad to offer their service to the Duke. A few, possibly a full score, had managed to escape back over the eastern hills. Thistle took his leave, vowing to alert his brethren and keep them from ever passing through the old forest back to tell the Empire about Fey.

Before he left, Noodle pulled Thistle aside. He told the elf of his mother's last words. The elf bowed his head to acknowledge his grief.

"Lord Crown," he said, "there is more at work here than chance and happenstance. The elf your mother met was no common creature. He was the son of Ash, the head of the Park dynasty and king of the Forest elves.

"I was with young Aspen at the time. Your mother was young and beautiful, even by elfin standards, and had clearly been blessed by the fates. They met in the woods one midsummer's night. She walked into the clearing just as our ancient ceremony was reaching its peak, and they both were swept away with the passion of the moment.

"Do not blame your mother; these rites bring forth that which is not easy for mortals to control.

"Such encounters are not uncommon in our history, but they seldom result in offspring. Elves are not as fertile a race as you humans. Many decades or even centuries usually separate their births.

"For you to be born from the union of a human and a prince of the Forest elves in the

same village and nearly at the same time as young Fey is no mere chance. The Fates have manipulated many a skein to bring the two of you together at this time and place.

“What will become of it, I cannot tell” Thistle bowed deeply, “but I tell you this, if ever you call, Thistle Vale and King Park himself are at your service. I will tell your father of the man you have become, and he will be glad. Be not afraid to show yourself in the old forest, for you will always be made welcome!”

Squall had led the search for the stragglers of the Empire’s raiders. He had been key part in the planning or the defense of the village, and it had changed him. Unnoticed by Squall, but clear to those who knew him, the young Lord had gained a new sense of confidence and purpose. For perhaps the first time he found himself useful and important in his own right.

He had thrown in his support for this unimportant town largely due to an instinctive friendship with the big Smith. Before the end, however, he acted out of care and concern for his new friends and the innocent people of Edgewood. Both Fey and Breeze noticed the change. The glib young man started to take on a new depth of character, to the silent approval of both of them.

Breeze and Barb had taken jobs at the Inn. The old innkeeper was feeling his years and needed the help. Besides, the quick wit of Breeze and Barb’s bantering manner and easy laughter (not to mention their physical attractions) made the inn much more popular with the young men of the area. The innkeeper figured that the two more than paid for themselves in increased business.

Breeze was happy there, even happier than in her old bookshop. Here she was known and respected for her part in the battle and felt like she belonged. Her new friends accepted her as an equal, and she almost stopped looking over her shoulder for the next threat.

These thoughts and more were going through their minds as the four watched the priest finish the ceremony with the exchange of vows. Forge reached over to grab Barb, who jumped into his arms with whoop! He lifted her high into the air for a heartfelt, if all too brief, kiss. The guests exploded into applause, coupled with more than a few catcalls from Forge's brothers and the men who worked for his father.

The party was starting to turn back to the village, where a feast was being prepared at the Smith house. Suddenly there was a flash of white, and the great gyrfalcon tumbled from the sky and fell at Fey and Noodle's feet.

The noble bird's crown was dented. His feathers and the ribbon around his neck were singed by some unknown flame. His side was streaked with blood. Noodle knelt and lifted the bird, staring into its eyes. He looked at Fey with great concern, saying "It is your father. He's been captured."

THE END