

Book Order:

1. Chance Meetings

2. Forgotten Secrets

3. The Experiment

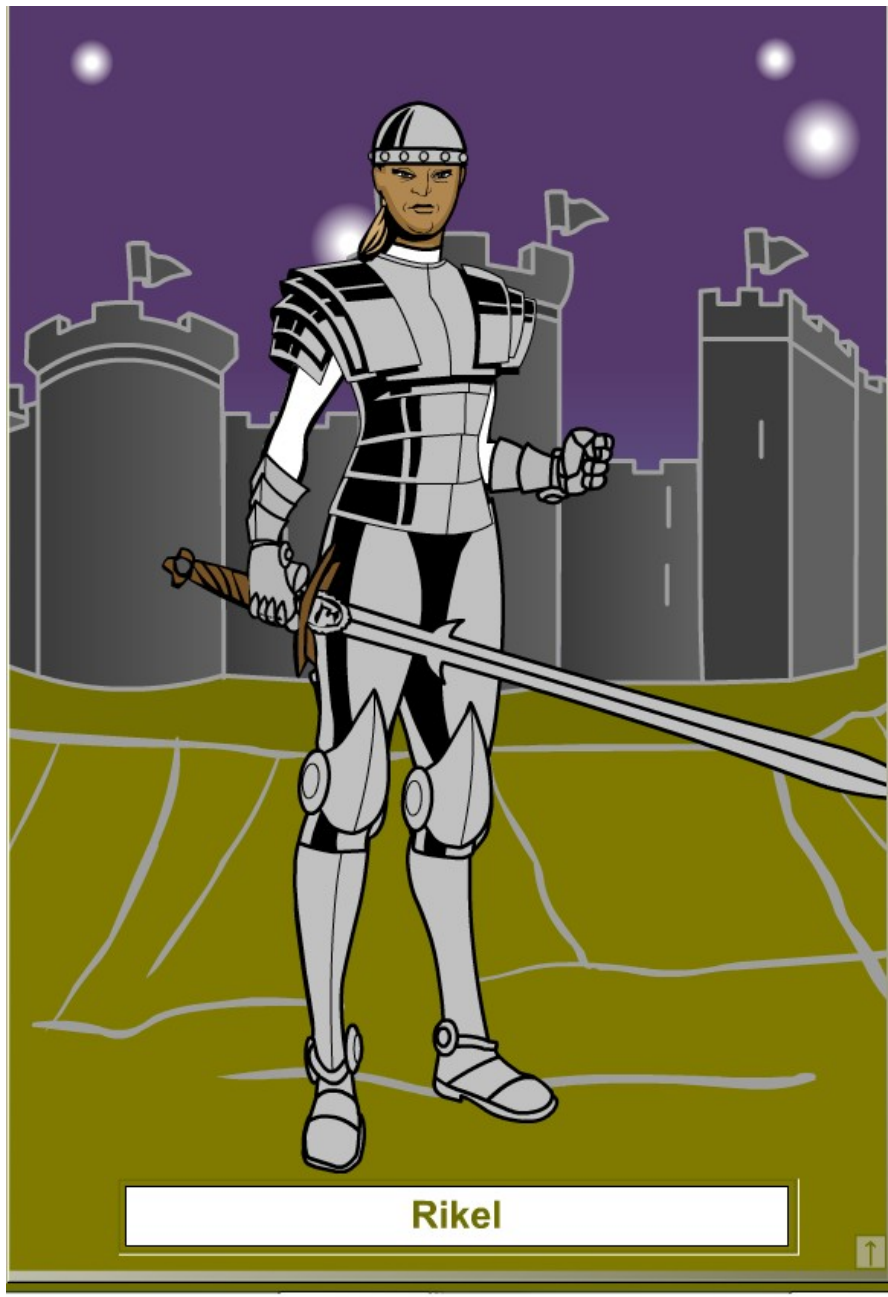
4. A Simple Plan

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Acknowledgments

CHAPTER I: LAYOVER
[Picture of group approaching village]



Late in the afternoon four people approached a small village. The front-most of the four carried a two-handed sword and was sitting atop her horse while wearing heavy steel armor, the horse himself simply clad in a saddle and wool. The other three sat in a horse-drawn cart with no visible weapons and wearing simple brown cloaks for warmth against the lightly, but steadily, falling snow.

As they got closer, the horse-rider slowed down to travel beside the cart and lifted the visor of her helmet, revealing a woman in her mid forties. “We should be safe enough here in the village of Nighforest,” she reported.

One of the trio still on the cart pulled back his hood to reveal a man with dark black hair in his early thirties. “I must concur, Rikel,” he answered. “You have done an admirable job in your duties as our escort thus far.”

Rikel shrugged. “Just part of the mercenary package, Lelwyn,” she dismissed the praise.

Lelwyn laughed. “While modesty may be a virtue, it is possible to overdo it,” he jokingly chastised. “But enough of this; we have finally arrived!”

Lelwyn stepped down from the cart and started heading towards the village. He turned to the others. “You are each free to do as you will for the rest of the day,” he informed them. “Just be ready to depart at first light.”

The group cheered and quickly parted ways while Lelwyn secured the horses and cart.

Rikel stretched and started aimlessly walking around the village to loosen her muscles after the long journey. As she wandered, she heard a shout behind her. “Captain Rikel!” the voice greeted.

Rikel turned around and saw an old colleague of hers. “Sargent Draleth!” she shouted back in delight. “What are you doing all the way out here?”

Draleth saluted in answer. “I got too old to be of any combat use and came back home to enjoy my retirement,” he explained. “What about you, captain?”

Rikel smiled with a mock glare. “We’re both retired now; get that arm down!” she pretended to admonish him while continuing to wander. “But, to answer your question, I also got too old and I refused an administrative promotion. I’ve been keeping busy with mercenary work ever since.”

Draleth nodded in understanding and followed. “Are you allowed to discuss your current mission?” he queried.

Rikel’s smile widened. “In general terms? Yes,” she told him. “I’m escorting a trio of Academy mages to some elvish village in the forest to deal with a blight.”

Draleth frowned in worry. “Be careful old friend,” he told her. “I’ve heard strange tales from the woods lately.”

Rikel raised an eyebrow. “Anything specific or just the usual rumors surrounding the forest?” she countered.

Draleth shook his head. “The elves haven’t come to trade with us once since before the last harvest,” he reported. “We also had an elf girl recently go through the village on her way into the forest.”

Rikel paused in shock. “Why would an elf need to go back into the forest?” she asked rhetorically.

Draleth shrugged his shoulders. “She didn’t stay long enough for anybody to find out,” he told her. “Now enough about magic and elves; I still owe you a drink for saving me during that ambush!”

Rikel sighed. “How many times do I have to tell you?” she asked. “I was merely doing my duty as a commanding knight when I saved you.”

Draleth laughed humorlessly. “You mean like the ‘mighty’ general who hid in the tents the entire time?” he asked sarcastically.

Rikel nodded reluctantly. “Okay, maybe not every knight in the army deserved a knighthood,” she admitted. “Fine, one drink,” she relented. “And it has to be a cheap one.”

Draleth laughed and put his arm around Rikel’s shoulder. “I knew I’d get you to see reason eventually!” he joked while leading her to the tavern.

When the two of them got to the tavern, Rikel ignored the many games of chance being played at most of the tables and headed to a table already occupied by a blond man in his mid thirties nursing a drink. “Draleth, this is Kirel,” she introduced. “He’s one of the mages I’m escorting. Kirel, this is Draleth. He used to serve with me in the army.”

Kirel slightly lowered his head and held up his glass in greeting. “Nice to meet you,” he slurred out. “Any friend of Rikel is an acquaintance of mine,” he joked.

Rikel raised an eyebrow. “You’ve been here at most an hour,” she observed. “How much could you have possibly had in that time?” she asked.

Kirel’s face darkened. “If you’re going to lecture me,” he began. “I get enough of that from Lelwyn.”

Rikel chuckled. “He can be rather strict at times, can’t he?” she commented. “Well, given that we’re here to drink ourselves, it’d be hypocritical for us to judge though, right?” she asked in an attempt to diffuse the situation.

Draleth, realizing what Rikel was doing, nodded. “That it would be,” he agreed. “Now, what kind of drink did you want, captain?”

Rikel smirked. “The kind with alcohol?” she joked.

Draleth laughed loudly. “That’s not always a given here,” he joked. At Kirel and Rikel’s blank faces he continued.

“A lot of the tavern’s business is with the elves; elves favor drinks that taste good over alcohol content. If you want to get sauced by your drink, you have to make sure the bartender knows that when you order,” he clarified.

Kirel laughed. “That’s why the first drink I ordered tasted of berries!” he realized. “Thanks for the tip, mate!”

Draleth laughed. “The bartender must have assumed that a mage would drink like an elf,” he teased.

Kirel pointed at Draleth, spilling part of his drink in the process. “If I was less drunk,” he started, “I’d explain all the many ways that that’s wrong.”

Draleth laughed again before going to the bartender to order, leaving Kirel and Rikel at the table. Kirel belched. “I’m just glad that we got to Nighforest before we had to start eating conjured food,” he announced.

Rikel nodded. “You and me both,” she agreed while Kirel finished his mug. Rikel looked at Kirel. “Just to make sure,” she started. “You are going to be sober when we leave in the morning, right?”

Kirel shrugged. “If not, I can always have Bewr or Lelwyn cast a sobering spell,” he hiccuped. “Well, Bewr would cast it; Lelwyn would probably just lecture at me for a few hours and make me stay drunk to teach me a lesson,” he mused to himself.

Rikel grinned. “Think either of them be willing to cast that spell on me?” she asked.

Kirel downed another drink. “Sure!” he answered. “You’re not the one that...” he suddenly stopped himself. “Neither of them would have a reason to tease you about it,” he corrected himself.

Rikel let the comment go when she saw Draleth returning with their drinks. Draleth passed out drinks to the trio. Rikel raised her mug. “To finding friends in unexpected places,” she toasted.

Kirel lazily touched his mug to Rikel’s. Draleth slapped Rikel’s back playfully. “Hear, hear!” he shouted.

The three downed the mugs and laughed. Two drinks later, Kirel tried to stand up and almost fell over. Rikel put down her drink. “Are you okay, Kirel?” she asked him.

Kirel nodded. “I will be,” he answered. “Well, as soon as the floor stops moving, that is.”

Rikel looked at Kirel with pity. “You are very drunk,” she told him. “Come on, let’s find Bewr so she can cast that sobering spell you mentioned.”

Rikel stood up to help Kirel walk. She turned to Draleth. “Nice meeting you,” she told him. “Until next time.”

Draleth raised a mug. “Until next time, captain,” he answered while heading to join in one of the games of chance.

Rikel nodded and escorted Kirel out of the tavern in search of Bewr. After a few minutes of fruitless searching, Kirel tapped Rikel on her shoulder. “Find books and you’ll find Bewr,” he slurred out in suggestion.

Rikel turned to him. “A village this small isn’t exactly going to have a library or a well-stocked schoolhouse,” she protested. “Maybe the temple,” she muttered to herself while trying to keep Kirel from falling over while she lead them through the small village.

The duo soon found themselves inside the temple where they saw a brown haired woman in her early thirties looking through several dusty tomes.

They were able to walk up to her without her noticing. Rikel cleared her throat. “Bewr,” she said softly.

Bewr jumped slightly in her seat without losing her place in her book. “Sorry, I didn’t notice you two there,” she told them while blushing.

Kirel laughed loudly. “You were reading,” he pointed out. “The building could have burned down without you noticing,” he teased with slurred words.

Bewr looked the two of them over. “Wow, our first day back in an actual settlement and the very first thing you do is get yourself drunk,” she observed. “This is a record even for you,” she added.

Kirel snorted. “If you’re just going to lecture me, I’ll just find Lelwyn for a sobering spell,” he objected.

Bewr rolled her eyes. “There’s no need to get dramatic, Kirel,” she admonished. “Let’s head outside so I can sober you both up,” she suggested.

Rikel raised an eyebrow. “What wrong with casting it here?” she asked in confusion.

Bewr giggled and shook her head. “The spell’s a little on the noisy side,” she explained. “Also, the temple frowns on spells that bypass consequences of actions like that.”

Rikel nodded and managed to help Bewr escort Kirel out without him tripping over himself. Bewr turned to Rikel. “Have you ever had a sobering spell cast on you before?” she asked in seriousness.

Rikel shook her head. “I never had the wealth or prestige for that much interaction with mages,” she answered.

Bewr nodded. “I thought as much,” she admitted. She then blushed when she realized the implications of what she just said. “I didn’t mean to imply...”

Rikel interrupted her with a laugh. “No offense taken,” she assured the mage. “You were just speaking the truth.”

Bewr let out a sigh of relief. “Anyway,” she changed the subject. “You’ll probably want to sit down before I cast this spell,” she advised.

Rikel nodded in understanding and helped Kirel sit down before doing so herself. Once the two of them were settled, Bewr cast the spell to remove their intoxication. “That was the simplest version of that spell,” she started. “Do either of you still feel drunk or do I need to try a more advanced version of the spell?” she asked.

Kirel shrugged. “Not enough that I won’t be able to travel in the morning after a good night’s sleep,” he assured.

Rikel nodded. “Likewise,” she answered. “In fact, I’m going to try to walk the rest of this off,” she told them before heading back to the rest of the village.

Bewr waved to her. “See you in the morning,” she called out in farewell. Rikel waved back over her shoulder.

Kirel cleared his throat. “Thanks for the sobering spell,” he told her. “And for agreeing not to inform Lelwyn that any of this happened.”

Bewr’s eyes widened in shock. “Now hold on!” she objected. “I never agreed to any such thing!”

Kirel sighed. “Why tell him?” he protested. “It’s not like it’s any of his business what I do in my free time anymore anyway!” he added.

Bewr took a deep breath to collect her thoughts. “Your agreement with Lelwyn aside,” she started, “he’s still the one in charge of this little expedition.”

Kirel rolled his eyes. “Does my being drunk tonight make a difference to the outcome of our mission?” he asked sarcastically. “Assuming I’m fully sober by morning.”

Bewr chewed on her bottom lip. “I suppose not,” she admitted. “I just don’t like all the secrecy, you know?”

Kirel smiled at Bewr. “And we all know how good you are with secrets,” he teased.

Bewr gently shoved Kirel with her shoulder playfully. “Better than you are with manners!” she teased back.

Kirel stretched. “On that note, I suppose I should head to the inn to see about getting us all rooms,” he mused. “It’ll be so nice not having to sleep in a tent for a change, won’t it?” he asked her with a smile.

Bewr grinned. “Very nice!” she agreed while standing up to return to the temple.

Bewr returned to the temple and discovered Lelwyn talking with a priest. Her curiosity peaked, she decided to walk up to them. “What’s going on?” she asked in greeting.

Lelwyn turned to her and smiled. “Bewr, your timing is most fortuitous,” he told her. “I have unfortunate news to impart; we shall have to sleep in the temple this evening instead of the inn.”

Bewr groaned. “Why?” she demanded. “We were all looking forward to sleeping in actual beds tonight!”

Lelwyn nodded. “Fortunately, that part of your plans for the evening is not in any jeopardy, for the priests of this temple have graciously agreed to grant us lodging for the evening,” he explained.

Bewr sighed in relief. “Thank the gods,” she muttered. She then looked shocked and turned to the priest. “Sorry,” she apologized with a small voice.

The priest laughed. “A short prayer of thanks after being given good news is hardly blasphemous,” the priest pointed out.

Bewr nodded to the priest in appreciation and turned back to Lelwyn. “Why not the inn, though?” she asked.

Lelwyn gestured to a bench so they could sit down. “The last harvest bore insufficient crops,” he explained. “Nighforest has not enough food for their own needs, much less a group of travelers.”

Bewr groaned again. “Let me guess,” she started. “We have to eat conjured food tonight as well as sleep in the temple.” Lelwyn merely nodded in answer.

Bewr poked Lelwyn’s chest. “You’re the one telling the rest about this,” she ordered.

Lelwyn nodded and stood up to leave. “Then I had best get to it,” he observed. “Until tonight.” Lelwyn then left the temple to find the others.

Bewr huffed in annoyance before going to look for the book she was reading earlier.

Lelwyn found Rikel perusing the wares of the village's blacksmith. He walked up to her and cleared his throat. "I must apologize in advance, but we shall not be able to lodge in the inn this evening," he informed her.

Rikel raised an eyebrow at him. "What happened that caused such a drastic change in our plans for the evening?" she asked in resignation.

Lelwyn shook his head. "It is a long telling that I would prefer to not have to repeat unnecessarily," he countered. "Suffice it to say for now that we shall be accepting the hospitality of the temple priests 'til morning."

Rikel sighed. "Very well," she answered with a nod. "I'll track down Kirel and let him know."

Lelwyn held up his hand. "It would probably best if I should be the one to inform Kirel," he told her. "I shall meet with you at the temple presently."

Rikel, recognizing a dismissal when she heard one, nodded and headed to the temple.

When she got there, she found that Bewr had gone back to reading the temple's books. Instead of bothering the mage, Rikel decided to hunt down one of the priests to find out where she would be bunking for the evening.

Not having much else to do, and not having had an opportunity to do so in some time, Rikel decided to pass the time with a bath. After she finished, she heard a knock on her door. She quickly slipped on a bathrobe to answer the door and saw Lelwyn standing there.

Lelwyn rose an eyebrow. "If this is an inopportune time, I can return later," he assured her.

Rikel shook her head. "I just finished with my bath," she explained. "What did you want?"

Lelwyn nodded. "When you're ready," he started, "I was prepared to explain why we are lodging in the temple this evening instead of the inn, as originally planned; the others are already waiting in the dining room."

Rikel nodded back. "I'll get dressed and be up there in a few minutes," she announced before closing the door.

Lelwyn waited for Rikel to finish and walked with her to the dining room. Rikel turned to him. "I already knew where the dining room was," she told him. "You didn't need to escort me there."

Lelwyn laughed. "I was actually avoiding the others," he admitted. "Had I returned without you, they would have badgered me to tell them what was happening without you."

Rikel smiled. "Ah," she said as they reached the dining room. "Well, we're all here now," she observed.

Kirel stopped pacing and sat down. “What she said,” he agreed. “So, spill. Why are we in this temple when we could be in a nice inn?”

Lelwyn took a deep breath. “While Rikel was browsing for weapons and you were, almost assuredly, getting drunk, I was speaking with the head of the temple.”

Before Kirel could complain about the implied insult, Lelwyn continued. “During our conversation, it was revealed to me that the last harvest of the farmers of Nighforest yielded insufficient crops for the village’s needs, much less have enough for trade with outsiders,” Lelwyn explained.

Rikel sat down in shock. “Just how bad was it?” she asked in concern.

Lelwyn turned to face her. “About seven twelfths of the expected yield,” he answered.

Rikel let out a sigh of relief. “Okay, that’s not too bad,” she mused. “Assuming they normally farm enough extra for trade with others, they should have enough to last until almost the next Harvest season.”

Lelwyn nodded. “Aye,” he agreed. “Though they’ll be eating conjured food ‘ere that next Harvest arrives.”

Kirel grunted. “Okay, assume I agree about the food thing,” he started, “that doesn’t explained why we’re here instead of the inn.”

Bewr rested her face in her hands. “Do you really think that the inn would let us spend the night without trying to serve us food?” she asked.

Rikel nodded. “Bewr’s right,” she agreed. “There’s no way we would have been able to spend the night at the inn without being offered food that they wouldn’t be able to afford losing.” She turned to Lelwyn. “You did the right thing by having us stay here,” she assured him.

Lelwyn blushed at the compliment. “I simply believed each other option was unconscionable,” he deflected. “I, too, had hoped we would be able to avoid resorting to conjured food for this trip, both for the evening and for the rest of our journey to Midway,” he admitted.

Kirel groaned. “How long until we can restock in Midway?” he asked.

Bewr grimaced. “Several days,” she answered.

Before the group could process the news, the sounds of panicked screaming echoed from outside the temple. The quartet looked at each other in shock before hurrying outside to determine the cause of the commotion.

Once outside, Lelwyn stopped one of the villagers. “What has transpired?” he demanded.

The villager pointed to the south of the village. “A griffon is circling the village!” the villager screamed.

CHAPTER II: FOREIGN PROTECTORS
(Group defending village)



Rikel followed where the villager pointed and saw the griffon. “There it is!” she shouted.

Bewr turned to face Rikel. “This doesn’t make sense!” she protested. “The griffons never come this far north.”

Lelwyn placed a hand on Rikel’s shoulder. “It matters not why it is here,” he explained. “What matters now is that we must prevent it from harming the denizens of Nighforest.”

Rikel nodded. “Lelwyn’s right,” she agreed. “I’ll run inside and get my sword. Unless it attacks first, wait until I get back,” she ordered.

Kirel turned to her. “What about armor?” he asked.

Rikel just shook her head and ran inside. Bewr turned to Kirel. “Do you have any idea how long it takes to put on armor like that?” she asked him. “Our fight with the griffon would be long over before Rikel finished getting it on.”

Kirel nodded. “Which would explain why she wore it during the entire trip here,” he mused.

Moments later, Rikel ran out of the temple with her sword in hand. “Are you ready?” she asked the mages. When they all nodded, she ran into the main part of the village.

They soon found Draleth shouting orders to the civilians to flee to the town center. Rikel ran up to him. “I need to find whoever is in charge of the town guard,” she told him briskly.

Draleth smiled. "You're looking at him, captain!" he answered while herding the civilians to safety.

Rikel nodded. "We wish to help in your defenses," she told him while motioning to the three mages.

Dralthe breathed through his teeth. "I don't exactly have any experience leading mages into battle," he admitted. "But I'd be a fool to refuse any help at this point," he added. "Stay inside the village proper. Focus on keeping the civilians safe. Casting any offensive spells on the griffon is to be your second priority. Is that clear?"

Lelwyn stepped forward. "It will be as you say," he assured the soldier.

Draleth snorted. "It better be," he told them before grabbing Rikel and pulling her after him. Rikel jogged to keep up with him.

When the two of them got to the line of guards outside the village, Rikel turned to Draleth. "Just how bad is this likely to be?" she asked him.

Draleth chuckled humorlessly. "Well, none of the town guard have ever dealt with anything more than a bar-fight."

Rikel rolled her eyes and tightened her grip on her sword. "Just great," she answered him sarcastically.

Draleth led Rikel to the front of the formation. "Listen up you lot!" he ordered. "For the duration of this fight, I'm

making Rikel here a member of the guard and my second in command. She has more real combat experience than all of you lot put together so I don't want to hear any grumbings of being passed over or you're being dismissed from the guard on the spot! Is that clear?" he demanded.

The entire formation snapped to attention. "Sir! Yes sir!" they all shouted.

Draleth pointed at three of the youngest in the formation. "You, you, and you!" he shouted. "I want the three of you to keep the civilians inside the town center where it's relatively safe. Keep them from doing anything stupid like leaving the building to try to fight the griffon themselves!" he explained. The three guards nodded their heads and headed back into the village.

The griffon screeched and dived at the grass to the east of the village. Rikel held up her hand. "Hold your fire!" she ordered. She turned to Draleth. "It's testing our attack range."

Draleth nodded. "Listen up!" he ordered. "Our absolute first priority is to protect the lives of the people of the village. Our second priority is the livestock. We lose too many of them and people starve!" he explained.

Rikel turned back to face the formation. "The only buildings you should worry about are the town center, where all the civilians are gathered, and the food stores," she added.

“The other buildings can be rebuilt easily enough. The lives of the villagers are more important!”

As the two seasoned soldiers were giving orders, storm clouds gathered in the sky. Draleth turned to Rikel. “Is this one of those mages?” he asked.

Rikel shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’ve never seen them in a fight before,” she added.

Draleth grunted as a lightning bolt fell from the sky and missed the griffon by mere inches. The griffon looked up and screeched a challenge.

When no further lightning bolts came, the griffon turned back to the village and made another dive. Rikel saw the trajectory of the griffon and her eyes widened. “Archers, fire!” she ordered. “The griffon’s going after the cattle!”

A volley of arrows passed over her head and went towards the griffon, forcing it to abandon its dive to avoid the arrows. Rikel smiled. “Good shooting people!” she complimented with a shout. “Preventing the griffon from grabbing anybody or the livestock is more important than actually hitting it.”

A strong gust of wind blew the griffon further away followed by another lightning bolt. The griffon changed its flight-path and dove at the guards. “Scatter!” Draleth ordered over the building storm with a shout.

The griffon landed on top of one of the guards. Rikel ran at the griffon while screaming wordlessly. The griffon, hearing her, turned from the fallen guard.

The griffon opened its mouth to bite the knight but she rolled under its mouth to protect the fallen guard.

The griffon kicked at her with its powerful hind legs, knocking her back and on to the ground.

Rikel rolled over and then stood up with her sword in her hands. While Rikel was distracting the griffon, the guards had recovered from their shock and started firing arrows at the griffon, wounding it slightly. The griffon tilted its head back in pain. Rikel saw the opening and ran forward to stab it in the throat, killing it instantly.

Rikel carefully pulled the sword from the griffon's neck and checked on the fallen guard, finding them to be wounded but alive. She pointed at one of the guards still standing. "Go find the mages and lead them back here!" she ordered while trying to stop the guard from bleeding to death.

The guard saluted and ran off. Draleth ran over to her. "Good work, captain!" he told her.

Rikel shook her head. "Compliment me after we save this guard's life," she objected.

Before Draleth could retort, the three mages came from inside the village. Rikel saw them and motioned them

over. “Lelwyn!” she shouted. “We need your healing magic over here!”

Lelwyn ran over and immediately started casting some healing spells on the wounded guard. “It is fortunate that we were already on our way when we were summoned,” he mused. “Had we been any later, it would have been too late.”

Draleth lightly slapped Rikel on the back, causing her to wince in pain. Draleth raised an eyebrow at her. “Just how hard did that griffon hit you?” he asked.

Rikel held back a groan. “I’ll live,” she answered. “I’ll just be in a fair amount of pain for a few weeks.”

Lelwyn, overhearing this exchange looked up at her. “Once I have finished with the rest of the guards, I’ll heal you as well,” he announced.

Bewr walked up to the griffon’s remains and knelt down to examine it. “Well, that explains that,” she mused.

Draleth turned to her. “Explains what?” he demanded.

Bewr stood up and dusted off her robes. “You can see the griffon’s ribs through its skin,” she explained. At the blank stares from everybody else gathered, she continued. “It was starving and just wanted something to eat,” she summarized with tears in her eyes.

Kirel walked up to the sobbing enchanter and placed an arm around her shoulder. “We had to kill it,” he explained.

Bewr nodded. "I know," she answered. "That doesn't mean that I have to like it."

Draleth kicked the griffon's remains. "This may solve one of our problems, though," he mused and pointed to one of the guards. "Tell the butcher to get over here! This griffon should feed everybody in the village tonight!" The guard saluted and ran off to find the butcher.

Lelwyn walked up to Rikel. "I have finished with the others," he told her before casting healing spells on her. "You may be sore tonight. If you still feel any injury in the morning, inform me that I may cast another round of healing spells on you," he ordered.

Rikel nodded in understanding. "I feel much improved already," she told him. "But I'll let you know if that changes." Lelwyn smiled before Rikel walked off when Draleth. On their way back to the main part of the village, Draleth led the around the outskirts of the village. "We had best make rounds on our way back," he explained. "No telling what kind of mischief some of our less savory townsfolk have been up to while the entire town guard were distracted with this little fiasco," he pointed out.

Rikel shrugged in answer while following. "How likely is that?" she asked. "And, what kind of mischief could they have gotten into in so short a time?" she added.

Draleth laughed. “Well, we have our usual youthful pranksters, just like any village,” he pointed out with a smile.

Rikel stopped in shock. “Certainly, even the most rambunctious of children would know better than to try anything during a griffon attack!” she countered.

Draleth shrugged. “You’d think that, wouldn’t you?” he asked back. “But you haven’t had to deal with a half-elf child with more gumption than sense have you?” he asked in admonishment.

Rikel let out a low whistle. “You’re right, I haven’t. And wow, I’ve heard stories of half-elves,” she admitted. “You have my sympathies, my old friend,” she added with a mischievous smile.

Draleth smirked. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up,” he joked back while the two of them walked.

During the rounds, they walked through the cemetery. While there, Rikel saw a statue in the middle of the cemetery and walked up to it. “Who was this?” she asked in curiosity.

Draleth bowed his head towards the statue. “That was Perhithos,” he answered. “The way the tale was told to me, while the two of us were still in the army, he came through the village. While here, the village was attacked by some kind of monster. Perhithos fought the monster but died from the wounds he suffered during the fight. If you want more details

than that, you'd have to ask somebody who was living here at the time," he finished.

Rikel hummed in thought. "Perhithos," she mused. "That name is really familiar."

Draleth barked out a laugh. "With a name as unusual as that, how could you forget hearing it?" he asked.

Rikel snapped her fingers. "I didn't!" she shouted in realization. "I read it in a report!" she explained.

Draleth shrugged. "Maybe you read a battle report of how he died?" he suggested.

Rikel looked at Draleth in pity. "No offense to your village here," she started. "But there's no way that anything that happened here would have shown up on any of my official reports," she told him.

Draleth chuckled. "None taken," he assured her. "It was just a guess anyway," he added.

Rikel yawned. "That's a mystery that'll have to wait for another time," she explained. "I had better get back," she added. The two soldiers saluted each other and Rikel headed back to the temple.

As the knight rejoined the others in the temples' dining hall, a dwarf walked in carrying a tray of roasted meat. Lelwyn raised an eyebrow. "What is this?" he asked while pointing at the meat.

The dwarf barked out a laugh. “It’s your share of the griffon meat,” the dwarf explained. “And if you even think about trying to turn it down, it’ll not only be an insult on me, but my entire clan of chefs.”

Kirel grinned. “You heard the dwarf, Lelwyn,” he said. “If we don’t accept the food, we’ll be insulting an entire clan. You wouldn’t want to be rude, would you?”

Bewr poked Kirel. “Like you’re one to warn against somebody being rude,” she joked.

Kirel smiled. “Rude to an individual is one thing,” he started. “Rude to an entire dwarf clan is something else entirely. Especially when a freshly cooked meal in place of conjured food is in question,” he finished with a wink.

Lelwyn sighed in defeat. “Very well,” he said while taking the meat and passing it around so the group could eat the griffon meat for their evening meal. “You will be joining us for our meal, though,” he informed the dwarf with finality.

The dwarf barked out a laugh. “It’ll have to be a small portion, you’re not the first to insist I eat with them tonight,” the chef explained. Lelwyn nodded and gave the dwarf a small piece of the griffon meat. The dwarf took the offered meat and took a bite.

Rikel, instead, ripped off a piece of the meat and tore into it. “This is incredible!” she shouted between bites.

Kirel burped loudly. "I have to agree with Rikel!" he announced. "This is the best meat I've ever had!" he added.

Bewr rolled her eyes. "Kirel's terrible manners aside," she admonished, "I have to agree."

Lelwyn turned to the dwarf. "My companions speak truthfully," he added. "Your skill as a chef does your clan proud," he complimented. "What is your clan's name, should we have need to call upon their culinary skills in the future?"

The dwarf shook their head. "Knowing my clan's name won't do you any good. Last I knew, I'm the only one not at home and the others would likely to kill you as cook for you."

Kirel laughed loudly. "There goes that idea, doesn't it Lelwyn?" he teased.

Bewr put down her food and held up her hands. "Gentlemen," she warned. "Though, I suspect that I may be diluting the meaning of the word by applying it to the two of you," she added jokingly.

Rikel and the dwarf laughed loudly at Bewr's joke. "The three of you have to have gone through much to be so free with each other," Rikel intuited.

Lelwyn finished his meal. "That would be a tale for another time," he announced. "We had best retire for the evening," he suggested. The others finished their meals and headed to their rooms.

CHAPTER III: INTO THE WOODS
(Picture of group walking into the woods)



Early the next morning, the three mages and their knight escort gathered their horses and cart to made their way out of the village and head into the forest. Bewr saw Kirel's exhausted face and grimaced. "It looks like that griffon took a lot out of you," she sympathized. "Are you going to be okay today?"

Kirel nodded and yawned. "I'll be fine," he assured her. "Fighting a griffon is an experience I'd like to never repeat."

Bewr sighed. "Likewise," she agreed as they traveled.

As the quartet reached the edge of the forest, a voice cried out from the trees. "Who are you and what is your business in our woods?" the voice demanded.

Lelwyn got out of the cart and pulled back his hood to better speak with the voice. "Greetings! My name is Lelwyn. I am tasked by the Order of the Golden Shield to offer aid to those afflicted by the blight in Midway," he explained.

"You are a healer." The voice half asked and half surmised. "Who are the others," it asked.

"Indeed, I am," Lelwyn confirmed then motioned to the others on the cart. "The two who remain on the cart are my friends and fellow mages, elementalists Kirel and enchanter Bewr." He then motioned towards the woman on horse-back. "The knight sitting vigilantly on her horse is our bodyguard and escort, Rikel," he finished.

Another voice rang out from the trees. “Very well, you are hereby granted leave to be in our forest but must be gone before the first day of Planting. Should we find you still in our forest after that time, you will be killed on the spot,” the voice threatened them.

Lelwyn nodded in understanding. “It will be as you say,” he acknowledged while returning to the cart. He sat back in his spot next Bewr, who sat between him and Kirel.

Once Lelwyn was safely seated, Bewr picked up the reins and got the horse underway.

As the quartet started heading into the forest, the first voice warned. “Remember the laws for guests of the Elvish woods: damage any living tree or kill any animal (save in self defense) and your lives are instantly forfeit.”

Lelwyn nodded again while putting his hood back up to protect against the thickening snow. “It is nearly midday,” he told the others. “We best make haste.” Lelwyn spurred the horse drawing their cart to go faster.

As night started to fall in the forest, Rikel brought her horse to a stop and turned to face the others. “We should stop and make camp soon; traveling the woods in the day is dangerous enough, even more so at night,” she advised.

Lelwyn nodded his head. “I am forced to agree. Bewr, the advanced forms of the sentry spells tonight, please. The

standard versions will be insufficient given the situation,” he ordered.

Bewr sighed. “If you’re going to make me spend the extra hours needed for those spells, I expect some real food tonight,” she countered, directing that last part towards Rikel.

Rikel held up her hands in defense. “Sorry, I’m rubbish at hunting,” she apologized. “Besides, we wouldn’t be able to kill anything due to the laws of the forest, anyway. We’ll just have to make do with the oh-so-delicious conjured food,” she added sarcastically.

Kirel entered the conversation. “I still wish you would have let us purchase from food while we were in Nighforest,” he complained.

Lelwyn’s face darkened. “They won’t have enough food to feed themselves until their next harvest,” he explained. “We are not taking any of their food.”

Kirel turned away from Lelwyn and used his magic to raise their tents while Bewr cast her spells. Rikel turned to him. “It still amazes me that you can do that,” she admitted.

Kirel stopped his spell and laughed. “Elemental magic is more than just fire balls and lightning bolts,” he explained with a smile.

Lelwyn interrupted. “It would be best to let the matter rest, Rikel,” he warned. “If not stopped, Kirel has been known

to wax eloquent about his chosen field of magic long into several days after his audience has any semblance of interest.” He then cast the spells needed to conjure their evening meal.

After the mage trio finished casting their spells hours later, the group started to eat. Kirel made a face as he bit into his meal. Lelwyen saw the face and smiled. “Come now, my friend; conjured food is hardly that bad,” he commented.

Kirel scoffed. “It may be better than staving,” He admitted. “But not by much,” he joked. “While I may have never been much of a cook, even I could make something better than this. If I had ingredients, that is”

Bewr chuckled. “I think I’m going to have to agree with Kirel,” she added. “Which I think marks the first time in the history of the planet Terris that that particular sentence has ever been uttered,” she added with a wink to Kirel.

Kirel replied by simply making a face to Bewr.

Rikel sighed. “I get that conjuring food is hard enough without making it tasty. But I wish we had a few real spices or other seasonings on hand. At least then the food wouldn’t be quite so bland,” she lamented.

The three mages all looked at her in horror. Bewr recovered first. “Right, you’re not a mage,” she reminded herself. “You didn’t spend several years learning about the Apprentice’s Malady at the Academy.”

Rikel looked towards Lewlyn with a raised eyebrow. “Dare I ask?” she mused.

Lelwyn placed a hand on Bewr’s shoulder. “Allow me to field the answer to this one.” At Bewr’s nod of acceptance, he continued, “it pertains to Veorn’s Fourth Law of Magic.”

Rikel laughed. “That doesn’t exactly explain anything to me,” she teased.

Lelwyn nodded with an understanding smile. “A spell, without a significant expenditure of additional energy, will only be temporary,” he quoted. “Put simpler, it takes a lot of effort for a mage to make any spell, conjured food for this discussion, permanent. Further, mixing any real food in with conjured food can often cancel the permanence of said food.”

Rikel scrunched her face. “But food isn’t meant to be permanent anyway, right?” she asked in confusion.

Kirel cleared his throat. “Think of it this way. What happens to food after you conjure it?” he chimed in.

Rikel shrugged her shoulders. “You eat it?” she answered slowly in confusion.

Kirel rolled his hand. “And then?” he prompted. Instead of answering, Rikel started to look at him in disgust. Realizing the mistake of his question, he quickly clarified. “I meant the food that stays inside you. As in, where does it go at that point?”

Realization finally dawned on Rikel's face. "Ah," she answered. "I," she paused for a moment. "I guess I never really thought about it before."

Lelwyn cleared his throat. "Most don't," he admitted. "However, the nourishment your body assimilates becomes part of your body. Should that food disappear, so would go your body. Such events are almost certainly fatal."

Rikel nodded her head. "I see," she almost whispered. "That almost sounds like it might make a good weapon to use," she trailed off nervously upon seeing the looks of rage on the faces of the three mages.

Lelwyn glared at her. "Not even the necromancers used such a tactic before their destruction in the Mage's War. It is a needlessly cruel death. Also, it takes so long for the victim to die that it has negligible tactical use," he admitted.

Bewr stood up. "On that delightful note," she started sarcastically. "We should probably get some sleep."

The others nodded and headed into their tents to get some sleep and warmth against the falling snow..

After the group broke camp for the fourth morning in the woods without incident, Rikel was intensely watching the road ahead for signs of danger while personally grateful that the snow had finally stopped falling sometime during the previous night.

Kirel laughed and interrupted her train of thought. “Rikel, the foliage can’t be that fascinating,” he joked.

Bewr chuckled. “On the contrary, I believe that the particular shade of green in that tree’s leaves is slightly different than that of the five thousand or so trees we’ve passed so far on our journey,” she jokingly added.

Rikel rolled her eyes. “I don’t know about you, but I’m rather worried about that wolf that I heard howling during the night; it sounded way too close to us for my comfort,” she countered. “Wolf attacks are hardly unheard of in the forest.”

Bewr entered her lecturer mode. “A single wolf is unlikely to bother a group of four beings bigger than they are. Besides, if a pack did attack us, we’d be able to fight them in self-defense,” she explained.

Rikel shook her head. “Not necessarily,” she answered. “I’ve heard tales of people in these woods getting attacked by wildlife and still being executed for harming the animals.”

Bewr turned to Rikel. “Wait! If they were executed, who was able to spread the story?” she asked in confusion.

Lelwyn interrupted the brewing argument. “It doesn’t matter if it’s true or not. It’d be better to err to caution in this. Should we be attacked, it’d be best for us to flee if we can and only fight if no other avenue is available to us,” he ordered, Rikel nodding in agreement.

Kirel shrugged in answer, not caring either way.

Bewr nodded. "I suppose that makes sense," she reluctantly conceded. "I wasn't exactly looking forward to fighting woodland creatures, anyway," she quickly added.

Kirel loudly sighed. "I still don't understand why we're going all the way out to Midway to cure this blight," he complained while changing the subject. "Can't the Elves just deal with it themselves? Why do they need us to come in and help them?"

Lelwyn shook his head. "Your lack of knowledge of the forest's politics does you ill," he scolded. "Midway has been laid claim by both the High Elves and the Wood Elves."

"So?" Kirel countered. "What does that have to do with anything? Shouldn't that mean that both sides of the civil war would be willing to help?"

Rikel looked back over her shoulder. "Basic tactics, mage. Since the city's been claimed by both sides, they're both pretending the other side doesn't have a claim. As soon as either group sends official support, the illusion is shattered and the lull in the war would likely end, resuming the war," she finished her impromptu lecture.

Bewr continued the line of thought. "Whereas if the Order of the Golden Shield sends help, both Elvish nations can save face, keeping the peace," she lectured.

“Precisely,” Rikel complemented her. “Though, there’s one thing I never did quite figure out on my own. Why did you specify ‘humans only’ in the bodyguard/escort job posting? Wouldn’t another race have worked just as well and have been faster to fill?”

Lelwyn took the question. “The Order posited that a group of only humans would be interpreted as the least offensive by the Elves,” he explained.

Rikel pondered this. “I can see your point, now,” she acknowledged. “While humans and centaurs are both barely tolerated by the elves, the centaurs are too isolationist to likely want to get involved. Further, most of the other races would have probably been killed on sight. A dwarf would specifically be seen as an insult and I don’t even want to think about what they would have do to a demorkan who tried to enter their forest, even with an offer of help. Finally, other elves are obviously out or it’d disrupt the illusion of Midway being on both, or rather neither, of the sides of the civil war at the same time.”

Kirel scratched his head. “Elf politics gives me a headache,” he complained.

Lelwyn turned to Kirel. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand you, Kirel,” he stated. “You’ve made multiple significant advances in the theory of Elemental magic yet you

can't seem to grasp the simplest facet of Human, or in this case, Elvish, interaction. Why is that?" he asked.

Bewr laughed. "the answer is simple, Lelwyn," she joked. "Unless it's about Elemental magic, Kirel doesn't care about it in the slightest."

Kirel turned to Bewr. "Not all of us tried to memorize the entire contents of the Mage's Academy's library when we studied there, Bewr." He teased back. "Some of us had these little things called 'lives' outside of studies we also had to deal with at the time."

"Do not tease an enchanter, Kirel!" Bewr warned jokingly. "It tends not to be conducive to one's long-term health," she added, raising her hands as though to cast a spell.

Kirel motioned to Lelwyn. "Then it's a good thing that we have our own healer sent by the Order of the Golden Shield with us, isn't it?" he rebutted in the same humor.

Lelwyn turned to him. "There is a potentially fatal, though possibly subtle flaw in your reasoning, my old friend." At Kirel's confused look, he continued. "Your strategy is based upon the assumption that I would deign to utilize my, admittedly, not-inconsiderable healing magic in your aid should you be injured in a fight against Bewr."

Kirel pouted in an exaggerated manner. "You would really let me die instead of healing me after all we've been

through together?” he asked in mock horror. “What kind of monster are you?”

Lelwyn winked back with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. “Merely one who has grown somewhat exasperated by your ceaseless antics,” he replied.

Kirel rolled his eyes as Bewr laughed again. “Then it's settled!” she announced. “I get to attack you with impunity!”

Kirel held up his finger. “Ah! But I'm a living being inside the forest and would, therefore, count towards the laws protecting the animals of the woods,” he countered with a smug look.

Lelwyn chuckled. “I believe that such a comparison is a disparagement to the non-sapient denizens of the forest,” he joked along with the other mages.

Rikel rolled her eyes at the mage trio's antics while Bewr and Lelwyn laughed. Kirel crossed his arms in mock annoyance. “Oh, I see how you two are,” he joked.

Bewr lightly bumped her shoulder against Kirel. “Aw,” she laughed. “You know we tease because we love you!”

Lelwyn chuckled. “You have gotten in more than your fair share in yourself,” he added.

Rikel suddenly stopped while raising her fist. “Hold up! I think I see something ahead,” she warned the three bantering mages.