

BROTHER MINE: CHANCE MEETINGS

A SMALL WORLD: BOOK 1

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CHAPTER I: ERRAND OF MERCY

[Illustration of group standing at the edge of the forest
goes here]

Late in the morning on the border of a snowy forest and a small village, four people approached the forest. 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 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.

One of the trio still on the cart stepped down and pulled back his hood to reveal a man in his early thirties. “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, elementalist 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.”

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. “Agreed. 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 oh-so-delicious conjured food again,” she added sarcastically.

Kirel entered the conversation. “You never did explain why we couldn’t just restock our food supplies while we were in Nighforest,” he accused Lelwyn.

“Their last harvest yielded insufficient crops for their own needs, much less have enough for trade with outsiders,” Lelwyn countered. “They’ll be eating conjured food of their own before the next Harvest.”

As Bewr cast her spells, Kirel used his magic to raise their tents. 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 started casting 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 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 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.

CHAPTER II: DISCOVERIES

[Illustration of group standing around a mound in the snow goes here]

The three mages immediately stopped laughing and turned their attention to the road ahead of them.

Lelwyn stepped off of the cart and walked up to Rikel. “What is it that you have seen?” he asked.

Rikel shrugged her shoulders. “I’m not sure yet,” She admitted before turning to him. “Get back on the cart and be ready to take off if any trouble starts,” she ordered, drawing her sword.

Lelwyn quickly followed her instructions and joined the others on the cart. Once there, the three mages started preparing spells in case of an attack.

Rikel quickly dismounted and approached the misshapen mound of snow by the side of the road. She bent down and used her sword to carefully remove some snow, revealing a tuft of gray fur around a broken jaw. “It’s the remains of a wolf!” she cried out in warning to the others.

Kirel rolled his eyes. “Wolves aren’t exactly unheard of in forests,” he mocked.

Lelwyn placed his hand on Kirel’s shoulder. “Kirel, now is neither the time nor place for such levity; I feel that something odd is afoot here.”

Bewr pondered the situation aloud. “While this might explain Rikel hearing a wolf during the night, why would there be a single wolf? Wolves usually travel in packs,” she

pondered to herself. “Can you tell how it died?” she yelled questioningly to Rikel.

Rikel stood up straight. “These are definitely combat wounds. Though I don’t know enough of the Healing Arts to be certain of the type of combat. Lelwyn, please take a look,” she requested.

Lelwyn nodded and ran over. When he reached the wolf, he knelt down and made a cursory examination. “This wolf was not felled by beast nor Elf. There is nary a scratch or bite on its fur. Further, I see no sign of puncture nor cut.”

At Kirel’s confused look, Rikel clarified. “Elves practically exclusively use swords or the bow and arrow. While the occasional dagger or ax isn’t out of the question, those would still show similar enough wounds in a corpse. I agree with Lelwyn; something else killed this wolf.” She turned back to the Healer. “Any idea of what weapon was used to kill it?”

Lelwyn scratched the beard that was starting to grow on his chin. “Bludgeoning, I’d say, is what did this wolf in. Given the large square imprint upon the poor thing’s skull, a large hammer is my guess for the weapon used against it.”

Bewr gasped in alarm. “Poachers!” she yelled. “They’d want to use weapons that do minimal harm to the fur and skin,” she explained.

Rikel started scanning the trees for signs of movement. “We need to get out of this area now! If the poachers see us, they’ll have to kill us to make sure we can’t tell the Elves what happened.”

As Lelwyn stood up to return to the cart, he accidentally stepped on part of the wolf’s body. When he did so, he and Rikel could hear the sound of somebody cry out in pain under the remaining snow.

Rikel pulled Lelwyn back. “This could be a trap,” she explained. “Let me.”

As he backed off, she started removing more snow from the wolf. Underneath the wolf was the shivering form of an Elvish girl who looked barely shy of adulthood.

Lelwyn quickly pulled off his cloak and wrapped it around the girl. “We have to help her,” he ordered. When the girl made no effort to move or talk, he turned to her. “How fare you?” He asked. When she continued not to answer, he tried again. “Know you my tongue?”

He stood up and turned to the cart. “Bewr!” he called. “You are versed in the Elvish tongue; I need you here now!”

Bewr jumped down from the cart and started running over. “Lelwyn! There’s actually more than one Elvish lang...” she started to lecture, stopping when she saw the girl wrapped in only Lelwyn’s cloak.

“Hello,” Bewr greeted the girl in the Wood Elf language. “My name is Bewr.” When the girl didn’t answer or show any signs of understanding, Bewr repeated herself in the High Elf language.

Bewr turned to Lelwyn and Rikel. “High Elf and Wood Elf are the only two dialects of the language still spoken,” she explained. “I don’t think her silence is from a lack of understanding us.”

Lelwyn pondered Bewr’s words. “I think we misread the signs of the battle. It appears as though she was attacked by the wolf and slew it instead, then spent the night beneath the foul remains until we let her out. It’s easy to imagine the poor child’s mind snapping in such a situation.”

Rikel barked out a humorless laugh. “Hardly. The wolf was on top of her when it was given the killing blow. She couldn’t have done that. Besides, if your assessment was correct, what happened to her clothes?”

Kirel surprised the others by speaking up next to them. “We all know what happened. I guess I’ll just have to be the only one who’s willing to say it. The girl was attacked, probably with sexual intent, by poachers and the wolf died trying to protect her,” he concluded.

Rikel nodded. “Bluntness aside,” she answered, “I agree with Kirel; that has to have been what happened.”

Kirel bent down to try to help the girl up. As he held out his hand, she showed the first signs of awareness since being uncovered by shrieking and backing away with tears running down her face. He stood back up and started walking back towards the cart. “Lelwyn, I think it’d probably be best if Rikel and Bewr try to take care of this without us,” he explained. “We’re just upsetting the poor girl unnecessarily.”

Lelwyn started to protest. “And should she have injuries beyond Bewr’s proficiency in Healing, what, pray tell, should she do then?” he demanded.

Bewr started pushing Lelwyn towards the cart. “If anything appears to be life threatening, I’ll have you help her directly. Otherwise, I’ll have you walk me through the basic spells; I do still remember the basic lectures on Healing magic,” she pointed out in annoyance. Lelwyn reluctantly nodded and returned to the cart.

Once Lelwyn and Kirel were out of sight, the girl started calming down. Bewr knelt down to try to comfort her. “It’s okay. You’re safe, now. Nobody here wants to hurt you.” The girl showed no sign of understanding Bewr’s words.

Rikel started pulling the wolf off of the girl. “We should get her out. Being covered by death can’t be helping her,” she commented. Bewr nodded, quickly casting a spell to help Rikel move the wolf off of the girl.

As they pulled the girl away from the wolf, she surprised them all by reaching for the remains. “Jolen!” the girl cried out, while struggling to get closer to it.

Bewr turned to the girl. “Is Jolen the wolf’s name?” Bewr asked her.

Instead of answering the girl knelt down next to the wolf and started silently sobbing. Bewr hugged the girl close and tried again to calm her down.

Bewr looked to Rikel. “Please go and ask the others to start making camp.” Before Rikel could protest, Bewr continued. “I know we just set out for the day, but I think she needs some rest to help recuperate.”

Rikel smiled sadly. “I was only going to suggest that we make camp out of sight from where this happened.” She stood up and headed back to the others. “Also, if you had tried to leave the girl here, I would have given back my pay and stayed here without you.” Bewr chuckled to herself as Rikel walked off.

As Rikel walked up to the cart, she heard Kirel casting a spell. Lelwyn turned to her. “How does the girl fare?” he asked in greeting.

“She’s crying now,” Rikel reported. “Bewr wants to make camp so the girl can rest. I think we should do so where she doesn’t have to see where this happened.”

“A sound idea,” Lelwyn agreed. “A league and half should be distance enough, I say.”

Rikel nodded. “I’m going to let Bewr ride with the girl on my horse. I’ll walk ahead and scout. Try to stay a good distance behind us. Will the two of you be fine on the cart?”

Kirel finished his spell as a simple set of wool clothes appeared in the air. “These will only exist for two to three hours,” he informed while handing them to Rikel. “We’ll be fine on the cart by ourselves.”

Rikel took the clothes and ran back to the girl. Bewr saw the conjured clothes and pointed to them. “Did Kirel make these?” she asked. To Rikel’s nod, Bewr continued. “Then they’re temporary. But they should last long enough to get to and make camp. Who’s riding where?” Bewr asked on a new topic.

Rikel summarized the plan. “You and the girl will ride my horse while I walk ahead. Assuming she’s calm enough to ride a horse, that is.”

Bewr shrugged. “There’s only one way to find out.” She turned to the girl. “We’re going to try to get you on the horse so you can ride. Do you think you can handle that?”

When the girl continued not to answer, Bewr and Rikel dressed her in the conjured clothes before sitting her on the horse. Though she made no movement to control the

horse, she kept her balance in a way that only a well trained rider could manage.

Bewr saw the way the girl sat on the horse and chuckled. “She’s probably a better rider than I am. Help me up?” she asked Rikel.

With Rikel’s, and the horse’s, help, Bewr managed to get on the saddle without falling off. The group traveled a fair distance along the road towards Midway before stopping and making camp again in the late morning.

Bewr and Rikel kept the girl calm while Lelwyn and Kirel made camp by themselves. Rikel turned to Bewr. “Should the girl sleep in your tent or mine?” the knight asked.

Bewr nodded. “Mine,” she answered instantly. “If she needs any healing before morning, I’d be more able to take care of it than you would. No offense,” she quickly added.

Rikel held up her hands and smiled. “None taken,” she assured the mage. “You were just stating the truth.

Once Kirel and Lelwyn finished putting up the tents, Bewr and Rikel helped the girl walk into the tent and lay down on the bedroll. As soon as the girl was set on it, she fell into a fast, if fitful, sleep.

Bewr looked at the girl sadly. “Tell Lelwyn that I’m going to try to keep her calm with some simple mind enchantments,” she ordered Rikel.

Rikel nodded her head and left the tent. She found Kirel and Lelwyn sitting around the campfire. She sat down and repeated Bewr's message.

Lelwyn nodded in understanding. "Though I strongly feel for the girl, our errand has been delayed far too long already," he announced. "At first light in the morning, we must be off with great haste if we are to be of any assistance to the denizens of Midway."

The others all reluctantly nodded, understanding Lelwyn's words about the importance of their quest.

Bewr entered the tent with the girl, leaving the others outside on their own.

Kirel started using his magic to play with the fire. "So, who do you think she is?"

Lelwyn sat down next to him. "The only one with the answer to that question is the girl herself."

Rikel started brushing the horses to fill the time. "Speculation won't do us any good. We have other things to worry about."

Kirel raised his eyebrow. "Such as?" he asked.

Lelwyn stretched. "The poachers are one obvious threat to us," he observed.

Rikel stopped brushing and turned to the two mages. "While the poachers are one threat, I'm more worried about

how they managed to remain in the forest without the Elves finding and dealing with them.”

“A fair point,” Lelwyn acknowledged. “We must endeavor to inform the authorities upon arriving in Midway.”

Kirel huffed. “It’s not like we can do anything about it while we’re here at the camp.”

Lelwyn turned to face him. “We are not leaving Bewr alone with the girl while we attempt to search for those who did this!” he admonished.

Kirel shrugged. “Our protection spells should keep them safe enough while we’re gone,” he countered.

Rikel pulled out her sword and handed it to Kirel. “If you want to go after the poachers tonight, you’ll be doing so by yourself,” she threatened. Kirel raised his hands in defeat and Rikel put her sword back in its scabbard. “That’s what I thought,” she smirked.

Lelwyn stood up. “We should all get some sleep so we can be ready to leave at first light,” he suggested.

The others all nodded and headed to their tents to keep themselves busy until going to sleep that evening.

CHAPTER III: NIGHTMARES MADE MANIFEST
[Illustration of group fighting shadows goes here]

In the middle of the night, a scream of terror sounded from Bewr's tent. The group quickly ran out of their tents and saw their snow-covered campsite surrounded by three large, vaguely humanoid, shadowy shapes.

Kirel, realizing what was happening, shouted out. "The girl's manifesting!"

Bewr ran back into their tent while shouting out. "I'll try to wake her up."

Rikel scrunched her face in confusion. "What does 'manifesting' mean?"

Lelwyn shook his head. "Now is not the time for explanations; battle awaits!"

Rikel nodded and drew her sword. "What are we facing here?"

Kirel butted in before Lelwyn could start another lecture. "In short: these are literally the girl's nightmares."

"Got it!" Rikel acknowledged. "Lelwyn, give me some light so I can see what I'm doing. Kirel, keep them from surrounding us. Don't worry about destroying any of them, just keep them in front of me," she ordered before rushing in.

Lelwyn quickly cast a light spell while Kirel put up a wall of lightning around most of the camp. Bewr came out of the tent and started casting curses on the shapes. "She's not waking up; we're going to have to kill these things," she

explained. “And be careful not to harm the forest in any way!” She added, suddenly remembering the Elvish laws.

One of the shapes moved towards Rikel while the other two entered the opening in Kirel’s magical wall. Rikel ducked under the first, clumsy, attack and cut the shape horizontally into two.

The two pieces fell to the ground and moved towards a different nearby shape. The shapes merged together, causing the remaining ones to get bigger.

Rikel spun in and kicked one shape while stabbing the other where a Human’s heart would be. That shape then melded into the final one, now almost eight feet tall.

The final shape grabbed Rikel by her shoulders and lifted her into the air. She kicked at the shape with both feet, causing it to drop her onto the ground.

Kirel held out his hand. “Stay down,” he shouted while casting an ice spell at the shape, freezing it in place. Bewr then lifted the shape into the air with her magic and slammed it into the ground, shattering it. As the ice rapidly melted, no signs of the shapes remained.

Bewr stuck her head inside the tent and came back out. “She’s sleeping peacefully now,” she reported. “It’s over.”

Lelwyn and Kirel ended their spells as Lelwyn addressed the group. “This excitement aside, do your best to

rest; we still depart at daybreak.” The others nodded and went back to sleep.

As Bewr started taking down her tent in the morning, the girl woke up. “Hello?” the girl greeted with a small voice.

“You’re awake!” Bewr shouted, happily. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Better than before,” the girl answered with a shrug. “It’s ‘Bewr’ right?” she asked. At Bewr’s nod the girl continued. “Nice to meet you, Bewr; my name’s Telina of the family Durana,” she introduced herself, holding out her hand.

Bewr shook the offered hand excitedly. “Telina, it’s really great to finally get to meet you,” she said while still shaking the hand. “We should probably head out so I can introduce you to the others.”

Telina laughed. “Are you going to let go of my hand first?” Bewr blushed and stopped shaking her hand.

As the two of them left their tent, Bewr joyously called out. “Everybody! Come meet Telina Durana!” she shouted.

Telina started blushing and made a clumsy attempt at a curtsy. “Hi,” she said while giving up on the curtsy and giving a small wave instead.

Lelwyn smiled broadly at Telina. “Greetings, fair Telina! You appear in far better spirits than yesterday!” he observed unnecessarily.

Rikel joined in the conversation. “I guess killing those shadowy things helped.”

At Telina’s confused look, Bewr leaned over and whispered to her. “You manifested in your sleep,” she explained simply.

Telina’s blush deepened as she hid her face in her hands in embarrassment. “I manifested?” she demanded. “I haven’t manifested since my ninth harvest!”

Kirel raised an eyebrow. “You manifested at nine years old? About what?” he queried.

Telina started to calm down and answered. “I was exploring the attic of my family’s estate and saw this huge rat that was almost as long as my hand.” Before anybody could point out the obvious fact that this was the normal (possibly even small) size for a rat, she continued. “It was huge to my younger self,” she clarified.

Lelwyn stopped the budding conversation. “While I’m heartened to see young Telina on the mend, we must hasten to Midway.; their blight will hardly wait for us to engage in idle banter. You are welcome to join us,” he added to Telina.

Telina smiled brightly. “I was heading back home anyway! I mean, I used to live in Midway. Point is, I’d love to come with you; thank you so much!” she yelled the last part while pulling Bewr into a hug.

Bewr hugged back briefly before putting her broken down tent into the back of the cart. Lelwyn and Kirel, long having finished packing, got onto the cart to leave as well. Rikel mounted her horse and the group continued on.

Telina tapped Lelwyn's shoulder. "I just want to make sure I'm remembering your names correctly," she told him. "Your name is 'Lelwyn' and he's 'Kirel' right?" she asked. At Lelwyn's nod, she continued. "And the knight is 'Rikel' and the horses are..." she trailed off. "I never did hear you call the horses by their names."

Rikel turned back. "They're rentals; if they even have names, we don't know them."

Telina pouted. "That just won't do!" she objected. "Let's see..." she tapped her finger to her chin. "The knight's horse has white fur around his legs. I'll call him Snowhoof!" The others all shrugged. "And I'll call this little lady... Silreth!"

Kirel leaned over and whispered in Telina's ear. "We don't really care what we call the horses; we won't see them again in a few weeks anyway, sorry." Telina turned to him and stuck out her tongue.

Bewr started laughing. "Don't make me separate you!"

Lelwyn, laughing along with the others, started handing out food. Telina took a sniff of the food and grimaced. "Is this meat real or conjured?" she asked.

Kirel huffed. “Conjured,” he complained. “We ran out of real food days ago.”

Telina gave a sigh of relief before starting to nibble on the food. “Elves don’t like to eat real meat,” she explained. “Or any food that requires the death of a plant for that matter.”

Bewr took out her journal and wrote into it. “I never knew that!” she exclaimed, happily. “I need to write this down in case we ever need to offer Elves food in the future,” she finished while putting her journal back in her bag.

Kirel finished off his food and turned to Telina. “Speaking of names, I’m guessing that ‘Jolen’ was the name you gave to the wolf we found next to you.”

Lelwyn glared at Kirel, “your tact is wanting.”

Telina sighed. “It’s okay,” she assured Lelwyn. “He was named after my younger brother; Jolen was the only one from our village who didn’t treat me like a pariah just because I had a Human mother. He wrote to me about the blight; it’s why I was coming back.”

Lelwyn smiled at her, “this is fortuitous indeed. The Order of the Golden Shield sent me and my friends to offer aid to your home.”

“I studied Summoning more than Healing but I’ll help out however I can!”

Kirel got a proud look on his face. “I met Tirledus!”

Telina looked at him skeptically. “You met Tirledus?” At Kirels nod, she continued. “Tirledus, the longest serving member of the Mage’s Council, the hero of the Mage’s War? That Tirledus?” she clarified.

Bewr put her hand over Kirel’s mouth. “Don’t do the whole story again,” she lamented. “We’ve all heard it more times than we can count. Here’s the short version: Kirel was on his way to talk to one of his teachers at the same time that Tirledus was leaving; they didn’t even exchange a dozen words. Hardly as impressive as he tries to make it sound.”

Telina giggled. “Thank you for the short version, Bewr.” She turned to Kirel. “I can believe that version of the story happened. Did the three of you meet at the Academy?”

Lelwyn nodded his head. “Aye. Though Kirel was a year our senior in studies.”

Telina saw something on the side of the road and jumped out of the cart, running into the tree line.

Rikel dismounted her horse to follow. “Telina!” She shouted. After a few feet, Rikel saw Telina glaring at a small cottage with animal skins drying on the banisters. “Are these the same poachers who,” Rikel struggled to find her words, “attacked you?”

“Yes,” she answered bluntly. “Though not in the way that you mean. Well, they tried to but Jolen was able to stop

them before they were able to get to that part,” she added reassuringly.

Rikel nodded to the cart. “Get the others; we can make sure this never happens again!”

Telina ran back to the other while Rikel drew her sword. After Telina explained to the others what was found, the Mage trio got off the cart to help deal with the poachers.

When the four of them reached the cottage, a poacher was aiming a crossbow at Rikel, who had her hands raised. “He ambushed me,” she grimaced.

The poacher saw Telina and leered. “I recognize you, girl! Did you decide to come back so that we could finish what we started last night?”

Telina turned to the side, raising one hand towards Rikel and the other behind her. “Last night you caught me by surprise and I was scared. Today, neither is true.” As soon as she said that, Rikel vanished and reappeared behind Telina.

Kirel quickly raised a barrier of lightning as the poacher fired his crossbow at the group. The bolt reflected off the barrier and bounced into the trees.

Rikel and the poacher quickly drew their weapons.

Before any of the others could cast any spells, Rikel was upon the poacher and they were locked in melee. He tried to crush her with an overhead strike. She sidestepped

the swing and cut off his hands at the wrists. He held the bloody stumps to his body. "I surrender!" he yelled.

Rikel slipped behind him and stabbed him through the back. "Well, I don't accept your surrender." She quipped. "Let's go!" she ordered. "The others are likely still inside!"

While Rikel drew her sword from the dead poacher, the four Mages ran to the door of the cottage, Telina getting there first. As Telina swung open the door, a crossbow bolt flew from inside right through her neck.

Telina fell to the ground, blood pouring from her neck. Lelwyn bent down and started casting spells on her. "Pursue the brigands!" he ordered. "There is no aid you can render to me at this time," he continued.

The other three carefully stepped around before rushing ahead. As they turned a corner, they saw the remaining two poachers snap a stick into two before vanishing. Bewr groaned in frustration. "How can a trio of poachers possibly afford a teleportation snapper?" she asked. "Oh, Telina!" she cried before breaking down in tears.

Rikel tried to calm Bewr down. "Just how expensive are we talking, here?"

Since Bewr was crying too much to be coherent, Kirel answered the question. "A thousand times your pay for escorting us would be considered ridiculously cheap."

Rikel bent down to help Bewr up. “We should get back to Lelwyn and Telina.”

Kirel helped Rikel carry Bewr as they returned to the entrance to the cottage. There, they found Lelwyn weeping over Telina. “Her injuries were beyond even my skill,” he explained. “There was naught I could do aside making her passing less painful.”

Kirel grasped Lelwyn's shoulder. “Did she have any final words?”

“Nay,” he shook his head. “The damage to her throat was too severe for her to have even the comfort of parting words. Pray tell me the other two have met their end, at least.”

“A very wealthy benefactor gave them a teleportation snapper,” Kirel explained.

Bewr pointed at Telina and used magic to lift Telina's remains into the air. “The least we can do is take her body home,” she sobbed, levitating her into the cart.

The three mages somberly got onto the cart and covered Telina's body with a conjured sheet. Once secure, Kirel picked up the horses reins. “Let's go, Silreth.”

They reached the village of Midway that dusk. As they entered the village, Lelwyn introduced himself. “My name is Lelwyn. I have been sent by the Order of the Golden Shield to offer aid against the blight rampaging your village. Also,

please inform Jolen Durana that we must have words with him as soon as possible.” The Elvish guards ran off.

A short time later, a well dressed Elf woman approached them. “I am Mayor Tethith,” she greeted. “Your offer of aid is gratefully accepted. Please follow me to the Hall of Healing.”

The four followed the Mayor to the Hall of Healing, drawing the cart behind them. Once there, Rikel stayed with the cart outside so Lelwyn could start treating the ill while Bewr started casting spells on one of the patients. As she saw the results, she grew more and more frantic. Lelwyn saw her agitation and left one of the patients to walk over to her. “What vexes you so?”

Bewr forced herself to breathe deeply in an attempt to calm down. “I used Nertel’s Method for determining spell results,” she rasped out, “This isn’t merely a disease; a Necromancer cast a growth stasis field curse on this village!”

Before Lelwyn could react, an Elf entered the room and introduced himself, “my name is Jolen; I was told you wanted to speak with me.”

CHAPTER IV: FRAGILE PEACES

[Illustration of group leaving Midway goes here]

Bewr closed her eyes and sighed heavily. She took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and turned to face Jolen. “You’re Jolen Durana, brother of Telina?” she asked.

Jolen nodded. “Though, she’s only my half sister. We have different mothers,” he clarified.

Kirel fled the room while Lelwyn stepped forward. “Hail, Jolen! Your sister spoke well and at length of you. I am Lelwyn, Healer from the Order of the Golden Shield. Beside me is my friend, Bewr. The one who departed was Kirel and Rikel was the Knight you probably passed as you entered.”

Jolen held out his hand. “You met my sister? Do you know where she is?”

Before Lelwyn could grasp the offered arm, Bewr started pulling Jolen outside. “She’s,” Bewr swallowed a sob. “She’s outside.”

Jolen, quickly piecing things together, started running after Bewr. “What happened?” He demanded with worry. Bewr led Jolen to the cart and lifted the sheet, revealing Telina’s remains.

Lelwyn placed his hand on Jolen’s shoulder. “I know not the depth of your grief for your sister. She was indeed taken too...”

“Later!” Jolen interrupted. “We have an entire village that needs to be saved,” he continued, holding back his tears.

“Don’t mistake me, the lot of you will be telling me the entire story as soon as we’re not dealing with this,” Jolen paused to think, “curse is what you called it. Right?” he asked to Bewr.

Mayor Tethith saw the commotion and came over. “What happened?”

Lelwyn bowed to the mayor. “We discovered news that needs to be reported to the Order in utmost haste. Have you a speaking stone?”

She shook her head. “No, our village is too small to need one and too poor to afford one.”

“What about a Summoner or any mage who studied summoning?” Bewr asked.

“We haven’t had a mage live in our village for generations,” the mayor answered. “What did you find that’s so important?” she demanded.

“The blight afflicting your village is not natural; ‘tis a curse, Necromantic in origin,” Lelwyn explained.

Tethith gasped in shock. “Weren’t they destroyed in the Mage’s War almost 400 years ago?” she demanded.

Bewr entered her lecture mode. “As a group? That’s correct. However, sometimes a stupid, evil mage decides to try to revive the practice.”

Lelwyn attempted to assure the mayor. “Worry not. We three are graduates of the Mage’s Academy. We have all

been well trained in the art of opposing Necromancy,” he assured her.

The mayor nodded her head in relief. “Okay. What are we dealing with here? I mean, what does this curse do?”

“The formal name for this curse is growth stasis field,” at the mayor’s confused look, he continued. “Have you any training in the magical arts?”

“None,” she admitted modestly.

Bewr reentered the conversation. “In short, nothing can grow: people, plants, animals, nothing.”

The mayor nodded. “That’s why even our crops and milk animals have stopped growing.”

Bewr added, “I’d bet that your animals have even stopped giving milk or laying eggs.”

“You’d be right,” the mayor admitted.

Lelwyn pulled Bewr back. “We must gather the others and track down the Necromancer who cast this vile curse. There is naught I can do until then.”

The mayor nodded in agreement. “It’s too late now to travel safely. I’ll see to it that you’re given lodging for the evening and provisions in the morning.”

“The lodging will be most welcome,” Lelwyn smiled. “However, we will accept no food from those who have none to spare. We shall conjure our own provisions”

The mayor bowed in agreement. Jolen turned to Lelwyn. "I'm going with you," he announced in a tone that would not brook argument.

Lelwyn smiled, "a guide would be welcome, my new friend. We shall await you at the village gates. We leave at dawn," he announced.

"Good," Jolen answered. "That will give me time to lay my sister in our family tomb."

Mayor Tethith looked aghast. "What! She's a half-human mongrel! Why would you defile your family's crypt like that?" she demanded.

Jolen took a deep breath to calm himself. "She's my sister! I'm laying her to rest with my family and that's final!" After he calmed down a moment. "Besides, she was my father's first child. That makes her the family heiress and you know it," he smirked.

Tethith nodded in reluctant acceptance, barely keeping her rage in check.

Bewr walked over to Jolen. "I apologize if this is a breach of protocol but, would it be okay if we helped you with Telina's preparations. She was our friend, even if we didn't know her very long."

Jolen smiled sadly, "no offense is taken. Our burial rites are very specific, though, family only." At Bewr's

crestfallen look, he continued. “When this is over, we’ll have a memorial; you’re invited to attend that.”

Lelwyn placed his hand on Bewr’s shoulder. “Then we shall attend. Until the ‘morrow, Jolen,” he bowed.

While Jolen left to make arrangements for his sister, Bewr and Lelwyn went to search for Rikel and Kirel. They quickly found them at the tavern, drinking heavily with several untouched drinks in front of them on the counter-top.

“No!” Kirel hiccuped around his drink. “I was the one at fault! If I had kept my barrier spell in front of her, she wouldn’t have taken that crossbow bolt to her neck,” he argued with slurred words.

Rikel put down her drink. “You had no way of knowing she’d get that far ahead of us. It was my job to keep you safe; I’m the one who failed.”

Lelwyn walked up behind them. “Neither of you are at fault, my friends. Kirel, you know very well that barrier spells have an extremely short range. Rikel, your sword was still stuck in your foe while she ran in,” he explained to them.

Bewr chimed in. “The only one responsible for her death is the one who shot her,” she assured them.

Kirel belched. “Some day, I may actually believe that,” he used. He then handed both Lelwyn and Bewr a drink. “To Telina,” he toasted. “Taken from us far too soon.”

The others raised their glasses and echoed the toast before downing the drinks.

Rikel finished off her drink. “Are you done for the day already, Lelwyn?” she asked.

“Nay,” he answered, “while I was rendering aid, Bewr discovered that what was thought a blight was actually a growth stasis curse.”

Kirel spit out his drink. “Sobering spell, now,” he ordered. Bewr smirked and cast the spell to return Kirel and Rikel to sobriety.

When Bewr was done, Rikel stood up. “How are you so certain about the curse?” she asked.

Lelwyn gestured to Bewr. “Bewr used what’s known as Newton’s Method to determine the nature of a spell or enchantment. Though, we could be mistaken,” he admitted.

Kirel rolled his eyes. “Yes Lelwyn, this is the first time in the history of magic that Nertel’s Method has ever been wrong,” he answered sarcastically.

Rikel tried to diffuse the growing argument. “What are we going to do about this?” she asked.

Lelwyn nodded. “We leave at dawn in search of the Necromancer who cursed this village; Jolen will be acting as our guide. He has also invited us to partake in a memorial service for Telina after this crises is dealt with.”

Rikel nodded. "Then we should probably get some sleep before we head out," she suggested.

Lelwyn smiled. "To that end, Mayor Tethith informed us that she'd arrange for us to have lodging for the evening," he informed her.

As though summoned by that announcement, the owner of the tavern walked up to the group and handed out keys. "Your rooms are ready. Mayor Tethith explained what you're doing. Your drinks and the rooms are on me."

With that, the quartet went to their rooms to prepare for the next day.

Morning arrived without further incident so the quartet returned their room keys and made for the village's gate to meet with Jolen. Fortunately, it the snow hadn't yet resumed, though the skies were still cloudy.

As the group reached the gate, they found Mayor Tethith arguing with a pair of Elves. Jolen walked over to the group. "Our little village has been graced by the great generals themselves," he informed sarcastically.

Kirel laughed. "Sorry, who?" he asked in confusion.

Jolen pointed at one of the Elves. "The lady with the sword that looks like it weighs more than I do is Tirlena of the family Icebear, general of the Wood Elf army." Jolen then pointed to the other Elf. "Whereas he is Nole of the family

Darius, the general of the High Elf army and is supposed to be something called a Spellbow.”

Bewr gasped excitedly. “A Spellbow! Those are real?” she practically screamed.

Rikel whispered to Kirel, “what’s a Spellbow?”

The generals in question overheard the conversation and walked over. General Darius chuckled at Rikel. “It’s quite understandable. We can hardly expect a mere to know about the intricacies of Elvish Magic,” he patronized.

Rikel, placed her hand on her sword and glared at the High Elf general. “Do not insult me, Elf!”

General Icebear threw her head back and laughed. “Is it your plan to drive away the only hope this village has? Or do you think you can cure this blight single-handily while exhausted from travel?”

Lelwyn decided to come to his friend’s aid. “This is no mere blight. You are familiar with Nertel’s Method, are you not, General Darius?” he challenged.

“Of course!” the general boasted.

Bewr, seeing what Lelwyn was up to gestured towards the Hall of Healing. “Examine one of the patients,” she suggested to the general.

As General Darius headed off to the House of Healing, Kirel finally answered Rikel’s question. “A Spellbow is an elf

who learns to cast spells through their bow, allowing their arrows to have magical properties.”

General Icebear chimed in. “Only High Elves can become Spellbows. No Wood Elf has ever quite been able to learn the technique. Though, not for a lack of trying,” she whispered the last part.

Before anybody could reply, General Darius ran back, face ashen. “A Necromancer cursed this village,” he reported.

General Icebear’s playful mood instantly evaporated. “What can we do to break the curse?” she demanded.

Mayor Tethith cleared her throat to get the attention of the two generals. “As I was saying before the Humans arrived, they’ve already offered to find the Necromancer who cast the curse and break it. I suggest we allow them to get on with it,” she ordered, suggestive nature of her words aside.

As the two generals nodded in agreement, Bewr chimed in, “do either of you have a speaking stone on you to call for reinforcements?”

When they both shook their heads, Lelwyn continued. “Then, should we fail in our mission, it falls on the two of you to arrange for others to save Midway from this vile curse,” he challenged them in dire seriousness.

General Darius nodded solemnly. “I’ll inform Queen Sireleth of these events at once,” he informed the group.

General Icebear saluted the small group with a smile. “And I’ll let King Fireraven know.” She then turned to the other general. “And you make sure you rest up before we meet again; I want our next fight to be a fair one!” she ordered him good-naturedly.

Mayor Tethith walked up to the group. “Thank you for your help in diffusing that situation. If there’s anything else you require before you leave, please don’t hesitate to ask,” she bowed formally.

Lelwyn bowed back to the mayor. “We have that which we currently require,” he answered. “Thank you.”

Bewr shyly raised her hand. “Um, before we leave, we should probably tell you about the poachers we ran into on our way here,” she advised.

Jolen raised his eyebrow while Tethith turned to Bewr. “Poachers, in our forest?” she demanded.

Lelwyn briefed the mayor. “We encountered a trio of poachers on our way here. We tracked them to a small shack a half day’s journey to the east. We slew one but the others absconded in cowardice before they could be dealt with.”

The mayor nodded. “Thank you. I’ll tell my scouts to keep an eye out in case they come back,” she explained.

Kirel got onto the cart. “If we’re done wasting time here, can we leave?”

Bewr got onto the cart next to Kirel and lightly slammed her shoulder into his. “The famous Kirel tact strikes again!” she mocked.

Lelwyn got on the cart between them. “The day is too young for such antics, you two,” he admonished. “Jolen,” he shouted, “please be seated next to us! Rikel shall ride Snowhoof while keeping lookout.”

Once Jolen found his seat, Kirel tried to get the horse moving. “Silreth, stop eating the grass; we have to leave,” he groaned. When the horse didn’t move, Kirel cast a spell that created an illusion of fire behind them, scaring the horse into moving forward.

Bewr turned to Kirel while trying to calm the horse. “Did you really need to scare the poor horse half to death?” she demanded.

Lelwyn placed his hand on Kirel’s shoulder. “I find I must concur with Bewr, my friend. Utilizing your magic to frighten the animal was excessive.”

Kirel shrugged. “We’re in a hurry, aren’t we?” He turned to Jolen, “aren’t you going to chime in, too?”

Jolen shrugged back. “Just walking there would have been fine with me.”

Bewr finally managed to calm the horse down enough that she was merely trotting instead of galloping in fear. “And

what exactly did Silreth do to deserve that?" she demanded in annoyance. "You scared her half to death!"

Kirel huffed in annoyance. "Right now, I just want to get this blasted mission over with so I can return home and continue my research," he complained.

Bewr glared at Kirel. "As you know, this was a volunteer mission; you weren't forced to come along with us," she reminded him.

Kirel laughed humorlessly. "As if you'd have let me hear the end of it if I didn't go with you."

Bewr ground her teeth. "What did you say?"

Kirel smirked cruelly, "if you're having problems with your hearing, why don't you ask the Elf to repeat my words?"

Jolen held up his hands. "Don't pull me into the middle of this!" he pleaded.

Lelwyn placed his fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly. "Cease this foolishness at once!" He ordered. "Bewr! Kirel! Your behavior is hardly befitting that of graduates of the Mage's Academy of Elrlith! While I will not be so parental as to force the two of you to clasp hands, I do expect you to at least keep civil tongues inside your heads!"

Kirel started to protest but Lelwyn interrupted him. "Do not try my patience in this!" he warned. "And I care not as to who is more at fault!"

As the uncomfortable silence stretched, Rikel let out a sigh. “About time,” she muttered under her breath.

Jolen, being the only one to hear her turned around, “What did you mean by that?” he shouted back to her.

Rikel chuckled. “Only that if I had acted like that while I was still in the army, I would have lost my knighthood then and there,” she explained, smiling.

Kirel and Bewr spent the next several minutes refusing to talk to each other. When Jolen got tired of the silence, he gestured to the Silreth. “So, how did your horse come by having an Elvish name?” he asked.

Kirel dropped his shoulders. “Telina named them,” he whispered sadly.

Jolen nodded. “I suspected as much,” he admitted. “Let me guess, the lot of you never bothered to name your horses so Telina decided to give them names before any of you had a chance to object.”

Bewr laughed sadly. “That’s pretty much how it went,” she choked out.

CHAPTER V: REVELATIONS

[Illustration of group exploring cottage goes here]

Lelwyn took the reins from Bewr. “Now that we’re well outside of the village, where should we begin our search?” he asked the others.

Jolen got Lelwyn’s attention. “How about where you saw those poachers?”

Lelwyn shrugged. “Unless anybody else has a better suggestion, the cottage where you fought those poachers is as good a place to start as any I can think of,” he admitted. When nobody offered any other ideas, Rikel started leading them back to the cottage.

While they traveled, Jolen turned to Lelwyn. “So, just how are we supposed to fight this Necromancer?” he asked.

Kirel chuckled. “We’ll be doing the bulk of the actual fighting,” he explained. “You and Rikel will mostly be keeping the Necromancer’s minions off of us. Alive and otherwise.”

Lelwyn sighed. “Kirel’s usual bluntness aside, he is correct. Also, know you that a Necromancer can animate corpses. Should you encounter one you know to be dead, try not to hesitate at their countenance,” he informed them.

Bewr placed her hand on Jolen’s shoulder. “Try to remember that it won’t actually be them, just a magical construct that just happens to be made out of what used to be their bodies,” she added.

Jolen nodded. “I’ll try to keep that in mind,” he gulped.

Rikel laughed humorlessly. “Don’t worry yourself too much. According to the briefings I had in the army, nobody reacts well the first time it happens to them,” she assured him. “It’s supposed to be one of those things that one must encounter for themselves to truly understand.”

Kirel huffed. “Wait! The army actually gave useful information to their personnel?” he asked, sarcastically.

Rikel glared at him. “As a former knight, I have to officially take offense to that kind of joke. As a former foot soldier, well, I may have found it amusing. Unofficially, of course!” she quickly clarified.

Kirel nodded. “Of course,” he agreed with a smile.

Rikel turned to Lelwyn. “So, other than reanimating corpses, what else can a necromancer do?”

Lelwyn chuckled. “A full listing would take days to recount. To put it concisely, a powerful necromancer can do a twisted negation of anything a normal mage can do: healing, summoning, enchanting, and even elemental.”

Bewr chimed in, “that’s why it’s so important that the both of you let the three of us deal with spell-work. At best, you might act as a slight distraction to a necromancer. At worst, you’ll distract the three of us and we’ll all die.”

Rikel nodded. “Understood.”

Jolen added, “if you think that best.”

Rikel held up her hand. “This is where we need to get off of the road,” she informed the others.

The group stepped down from their cart, tied their horses to a tree, and followed Rikel to the cottage.

Rikel drew her sword. “Let me go in first,” she ordered. “I’ll let you know when it’s safe for the rest of you to follow.”

Jolen turned to Lelwyn. “One thing I’m not understanding. Aren’t you the one in charge of this little group?” he asked.

“Aye,” Lelwyn answered. “Though, with Rikel’s years of service as a captain in the army, we all agreed that she should be in tactical command should combat occur.”

Rikel’s voice called out from the entrance of the cottage. “The entrance is clear! You can come in!” The group quickly followed her.

While the group tried to find anything of use in the cottage, Jolen suddenly laughed. “Rikel,” he started, “I need you to take about two paces towards Bewr.”

Rikel, confused, did as she was asked. Once where she was directed, Jolen started lifting the rug off of the floor, revealing a hatch.

As Rikel made to lift up the hatch, Jolen stopped her. “Wait!” he warned and then turned to Bewr. “You said you saw them leave. How?”

Bewr walked over to him. “They used a teleportation snapper.” She told him. At his confused look, she continued. “It’s an enchanted object that, when broken, will teleport the holder, or holders, to a predetermined location. I still have no idea how they managed to get their hands on one; they’re outrageously expensive!”

Jolen nodded. “Why not use the hatch?” he mused before snapping his fingers. “The hatch is a trap for us!”

Rikel drew her sword. “They know we’re back?” she demanded in terror.

Jolen lifted his hands up reassuringly. “Not us, specifically,” he clarified. “I meant, it’s a trap for anybody who discovered the cottage.”

Kirel started channeling his magic. “Would a lightning bolt through the hatch disarm the trap?”

Lelwyn barked a humorless laugh. “Aye. It’d likely also demolish the building and flatten the woods for a league in any direction,” he warned.

Kirel dismissed the spell he started. “Okay, bad idea.”

Jolen pointed at Kirel. “Can you put up a barrier?” At Kirel’s nod, Jolen continued, “okay, make one. Everybody but Rikel, get behind it while the two of us deal with the trap.”

Rikel nodded at the plan and the mages did as instructed. Once the mage trio was safely behind a lightning

barrier, Jolen looked at Rikel. “Can you lift the hatch by less than an inch?” he asked. Rikel nodded and did so.

Jolen flattened himself on the ground and looked under the hatch. “I see a rope I could cut. It should disarm the trap. Though, I’ll need your sword to do so,” he admitted to Rikel. Rikel pulled out her sword and handed it to him. He took the sword and carefully slid the blade under the hatch, cutting the rope underneath.

Once the rope was cut, he lifted up the hatch, revealing a ladder going into the darkness. He nodded to the mages. “It’s as safe as it’s ever going to be,” he mused.

Rikel descended the ladder while Kirel brought down his lightning barrier. Before Lelwyn started down the ladder, he cast a light spell, revealing a tunnel dug from the dirt.

Once they were all finished climbing down the ladder, Lelwyn addressed the group. “Odd that the ladder would be at the very end of the tunnel.”

Jolen shook his head. “Not if they knew exactly what they were looking for and where it was.”

Lelwyn turned to Jolen. “Were that the case, would they not have dug to the precise location of what they were looking for?”

Rikel got between the two of them. “This tunnel heads back towards the road. Any attempt to dig there could have

been discovered. Stay behind me,” she ordered before walking down the tunnel.

Kirel put up another lightning barrier in front of the group and kept it moving in front of them.

Jolen leaned over to Bewr and whispered, “I know little of magic,” he admitted. “But, from what my sister told me, I was under the impression that keeping a spell up like that is exhausting.”

Kirel grunted. “I’m not letting that happen again if it’s the last thing I do,” he swore.

Bewr and Lelwyn lowered their heads in grief while Jolen raised an eyebrow in confusion.

Lelwyn walked in front of the others. “Let us make haste. We don’t want Rikel to get too far ahead,” he observed.

As they reached a small room at the end of the tunnel, the three mages all grabbed their heads in pain, causing Kirel’s barrier spell to end.

Jolen quickly started pulling them back into the tunnel with worry on his face.

Lelwyn stopped Jolen. “It was a momentary distraction,” he assured. “Now that we are aware of the magical ambiance of the area, we shall be able to adapt.”

Bewr walked to the center of the room. “I don’t think I felt this much ambient magic at the academy!” she exclaimed.

Rikel cleared her throat. “If the three of you are okay now. There’s something here you should see,” she reported.

The three of them walked towards Rikel and saw a space carved out of the side of the tunnel.

Bewr reached her hand out to the hole. “This is magic on a scale I’ve never encountered before. I think there was a Nertel artifact here!” she screamed in terror.

Jolen got the group’s attention. “I’ve heard the name ‘Nertel’ before but I have no idea who that is,” he admitted.

Kirel walked back to Jolen, motioning for Rikel to join them. “I’d rather only explain this once,” he told her once they were all together. “Nertel was the first Enchanter of the Mage’s council. He’s considered by most to be the greatest enchanter who ever lived. If an artifact made by Nertel fell into the wrong hands, the damage that could be done would literally be unable to be put into words,” he explained in uncharacteristic seriousness.

Bewr cried out in terror again. She turned to the others with tears rolling down her face. “All of the magic that we’re feeling is just the residual energy from this artifact having been here. I can’t even imagine what an artifact with this much power would have been designed to do!”

Rikel nodded. “Okay, is there any way of tracking the magic from this artifact?”

“Nay,” Lelwyn answered. “Magic is naught but undetectable unless one is practically on top of it and cannot be tracked from afar. Otherwise, we’d be able to track the origin of the curse that befell Midway,” he added.

Rikel rubbed her chin. “Without some clue about where to go, I think we should risk splitting up. Somebody needs to head to Elrlith and brief the Mage’s Council.”

Lelwyn nodded. “I concur. Let us venture back whence we came to deliberate who goes where,” he ordered.

As the group started leaving the room, Jolen bent down and picked up a dagger that was lying on the ground.

Bewr turned to him. “What do you have there?” she asked in curiosity.

Jolen handed over the dagger. “It’s just a dagger I saw lying on the ground,” he explained.

Bewr let out a low whistle. “Don’t you have some pretty enchantments?” she asked the dagger rhetorically.

Rikel was immediately on her guard. “Why would the poachers leave behind such a valuable weapon?” she asked.

Bewr sighed while continuing walking back outside. “Without getting into all the nuance of Enchantment theory, it’d be easiest to just say that only a mage would be able to use the dagger as it is now. To anybody else, it’d just be a well-made dagger,” she lectured.

Bewr motioned Kirel over before continuing. "If you give the two of us some time tonight, we should be able to analyze the Rune Matrix. If it's not dangerous, we'll tune it to Jolen so he can use it," she added.

Before anyone could comment, they reached the door leading out of the cottage. As they were leaving the cottage, Kirel suddenly pulled Lelwyn and Bewr back. "Wait!" he shouted in alarm. "What happened to the poacher that Rikel killed yesterday?"

Jolen rubbed his chin. "Could the poachers have been working with the Necromancer?" he asked.

Bewr whimpered in fright. Rikel turned to her. "What's wrong, Bewr?"

Bewr gulped. "There are some extremely powerful Necromancy spells that require living sacrifices to power them. Depending on how many they corpses they brought, the Necromancer could cast an extremely powerful spell. The growth stasis spell could even be expanded to cover the entire forest!" she realized.

Kirel lost his balance. "It may be even worse than that. What if the Necromancer got his hands on the artifact that was dug out from the tunnel?" he asked.

The color drained from Bewr's face. "Then the curse could even reach Elrlith," she whispered in fright.

Rikel nodded. “Okay. You said that tracking the origin of the curse on Midway directly is out. Is there any way of tracking the corpse of the poacher I killed?”

Bewr and Lelwyn smiled at each other. “Well, that depends,” Bewr started. “How thoroughly did you clean your sword last night?”

CHAPTER VI: BLOOD BONDS

[Illustration of Jolen testing dagger goes here]

Rikel drew her sword. “What does my sword have to do with anything?” she asked.

Bewr shook her head. “It’s not the sword, itself, that I need; it’s the blood of the poacher you killed that was on it,” she clarified.

Lelwyn took Rikel’s sword and started examining it. “Utilizing the blood drawn in a mortal wound allows the tracking of the remains left behind. Normally, this being useful is rare,” he admitted. “Though, this would be far easier if Telina were here; there’s a Summoning component to the ritual,” he added.

Rikel nodded. “It’s getting late anyway. We should make camp so you work your magics,” she suggested.

Kirel cleared his throat. “What about the cottage that’s right here?” he asked. “It’d be much easier to secure than a campsite. Not to mention that it’d be lot more comfortable to sleep in than a flimsy tent,” he complained.

Bewr shook her head. “It could easily be cursed,” she countered. “I think it would be best to make camp somewhere else. Also...” she trailed off motioning her head towards Jolen.

With that, the group traveled a few minutes away from the cottage and set up camp. After setting up their protection spells, Lelwyn conjured a meal and handed it out to everybody.

Bewr turned to Jolen. “Don’t worry,” she assured him. “It’s conjured food so no actual animals or plants were harmed to make it,” she explained.

Jolen took some of the food. “How did you know about that custom?” he asked.

Kirel made a face as he took a bite of the conjured meal. “Your sister told us about it the first time we gave her conjured food.”

Lelwyn nodded. “Aye,” he agreed. “She refused to eat until assured that nothing had to die for her meal.”

After eating, Lelwyn and Bewr worked with the sword while Kirel started analyzing the Rune Matrix on the dagger that Jolen found.

Rikel, in boredom, started walking around the camp. When she reached Jolen’s tent, she heard crying from within. “Jolen, may I come in?” she asked.

“If you must,” he sighed in resignation.

Rikel entered the tent and discovered Jolen hugging his arms and crying. Jolen looked up. “The cottage is where my sister died, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she admitted. “She got to the door before the rest of us and was shot through the throat by a crossbow bolt.”

Jolen chuckled ruefully. “That was my sister; rushing in without thinking.”

Rikel sat down next to Jolen and put her arm around him, letting him cry into her shoulder. “I opposed her going to the academy, you know. Our argument about that was the last conversation we ever had. I never even got to apologize to her!” he sobbed.

Rikel lifted Jolen’s face by his chin. “Look at me, Jolen.” Once he did, she continued. “From just your letter about your home, she came rushing back to help. She wouldn’t have done that if she hadn’t forgiven you. From the little I knew of her, I’m sure she forgave you long ago. She didn’t act like the kind to hold grudges.”

Jolen smiled sadly. “You’re right, she never did hold a grudge for longer than a day or two.”

Rikel smiled. “I thought not. Would you mind telling me about when she was younger? Other than the rat in the attic and being bullied, she didn’t speak much of her life at home in Midway.”

“The night that she saw that rat was when we found out that she had magic,” he began. “Father was so proud to have a Mage in the family. Mother was furious that a mere ‘half-human’ could wield that kind of power. Did she tell you why she went up into the attic in the first place?” he changed the topic suddenly.

“No, she didn’t,” Rikel admitted.

“I stole her favorite quill and was hiding from her. When I did things like that, the attic is one of the places I’d hide.” At Rikels glare he continued. “She would often do the same to me; it was a game we played in good fun. She even left Midway with my favorite jerkin,” he added.

“It sounds like to two of you were very close.”

Jolen nodded. “The two of us were the only children in our family; father never had any others.”

Rikel yawned, causing Jolen to laugh. “It is late,” he admitted. “I’m feeling better now. Thank you. We should probably get some sleep before heading out in the morning.”

Rikel nodded, standing up. “If you need to talk again...”

“I’ll let you know,” Jolen interrupted.

As Rikel returned to her tent, Bewr stopped her and returned her sword. “We’ve finished the spell,” Bewr informed her. “Lelwyn wants us to leave at first light.”

Rikel nodded in agreement and went to sleep.

As the group finished their conjured breakfast the next morning, Rikel addressed the group. “Now that we have a specific direction to travel in, I take back what I said about separating the group; it’d be safer for us to travel together.”

The group agreed and started breaking their camp. Once finished, Bewr walked up to Jolen. “We figured out what the dagger does; it has the standard sharpness and durability

enchantments but, more interestingly, it will teleport back to its wielder upon command. We're going to need a drop of your blood," she announced out of the blue.

Jolen raised his eyebrow in intrigue. "Why?" he asked out of curiosity more than suspicion.

Bewr raised her hands. "We only need it so we can tune it to you."

Rikel, overhearing the conversation, chimed in. "What does it mean to tune something, anyway?"

Bewr got onto the cart before answering. "Normally, using a magic item draws upon the magic of the Mage using it. Tuning an item means that that item can also be used by somebody who doesn't have magic. Once an item is tuned to somebody, they, or somebody who shares their blood, can use it as though they were a Mage. If I tune that dagger to Jolen, he'll be able to use its magic. His children probably could, too. His grandchildren may or may not be able to," she explained.

Jolen shrugged his shoulders while getting on the cart himself. "What do you need me to do?" he asked.

Bewr laughed. "We'll just need a drop of your blood when we make camp tonight. The three of us will take care of the rest from there," she explained.

Lelwyn and Kirel got on the cart as well while Rikel mounted her horse. "So, how does this work?" she asked.

Bewr blushed. “I was supposed to explain this last night! I forgot, sorry,” she apologized. “Hold your sword out, even with the ground. The sword should pull towards the body of the poacher. The closer we are, the stronger the pull should get,” she explained quickly.

Rikel drew her sword and held it aloft. When the sword ended up pointing mostly southward, she sheathed it again. “South it is,” she commented.

The group started traveling in the direction indicated by the sword. While they traveled, Jolen walked up to Rikel while she rode her horse. “So, I can understand why the mages would come along on this journey, but why would a knight care?”

Rikel smiled back. “I’m retired, actually. And, to be honest, I just needed the money.”

Jolen looked at her in confusion. “I thought knights got decent retirement pay.”

Rikel nodded. “For basic living expenses, yes, I get enough. It’s just, well, there’s this sword I wanted to buy in the Adventurer’s District in Elrlith,” she admitted sheepishly.

Bewr, overhearing the exchange, piped in. “What sword were you looking at? We may be able to make one like it,” she explained.

Rikel shouted back, “oh, it was called...”

“What it’s called doesn’t matter,” Bewr interrupted. “What was it supposed to do?”

“It had the ability to switch back and forth between being a sword and being a spear,” Rikel explained.

Bewr turned to the other two mages. “Sounds like a pretty straight-forward triggering transmutation. That should take us, what, two, maybe three, nights?” she asked. The other two did some quick thinking and then nodded in agreement.

Rikel almost fell off of her horse. “That sword cost enough for ten of these trips! The three of you can just make one in a few nights?” she demanded.

Kirel laughed. “We’d have to tune it to you,” he explained. At Rikel’s confused look, he continued. “The sword you wanted to buy is so expensive because it was made to be genral; a general item can be used by anyone instead of just a specific bloodline. Making an item that can only be used by a tuned bloodline is actually a lot easier than making a generic one. Though, not quite as easy as making one that draws on the wielder’s magic,” he admitted.

Rikel calmed back down. “I take it you’d need a drop of my blood tonight as well then,” she surmised.

Bewr shook her head. “We’d have to get the Rune Matrix worked out first. Tuning an item, when needed, is the last step. We won’t need your blood for at least two nights.”

Rikel chuckled. "Perfect timing; I'll easily be able to give you some blood about that time."

Bewr looked at Rikel in confusion. "What changes in a few nights?" she asked.

Rikel tried to hide a smirk. "You've been spending far too much time among men if you have to ask that question, Bewr. Think about it," she laughed.

As the three mages figured out Rikel's meaning, Bewr looked at her in sympathy while Lelwyn and Kirel started blushing and looked at the ground.

Jolen roared with laughter. "Why is it human men are so squeamish about that?" He asked. "While I won't be so boastful as to claim I've encountered men of every other race, of those I have, none treated this as such a taboo subject," he added between laughs.

Bewr shrugged her shoulders. "I wish I knew the answer to that myself. As you can tell, even Mages act this way." She then turned to Rikel. "Oh, when the time comes, Lelwyn has a spell that can help you with your cramps."

Lelwyn's blush deepened. "Aye," he agreed. "I shall, of course, cast that spell as required to ease your discomfort."

"Where were you during my twelfth Hunting season?" Rikel asked rhetorically. Bewr started laughing so hard she had to hold her sides.

Jolen stopped laughing. “Rikel, do you happen to have a bow with you?” he asked conversationally.

Rikel raised an eyebrow at Jolen. “What’s this, an Elf who doesn’t carry a bow with them?” she joked. When she saw the serious look in Jolen’s eyes, she stopped laughing and answered. “No, I don’t. Why do you ask?”

Instead of answering, Jolen bent down and picked up a stone off the ground. He quickly spun around and threw the stone up into a tree above them.

A moment later, a bird’s skeleton fell to the ground, startling the rest of the group.

Lelwyn got off of the cart and examined the bird. “This poor avian has been defiled by a necromantic curse. Bewr!” he shouted. “Assist me that we may remove the curse!”

Bewr jumped off of the cart so she and Lelwyn could quickly get to work on the bird while Rikel and Jolen scanned the trees for further potential threats. Soon, the bird’s bones turned to dust and Lelwyn breathed a sigh of relief and looked at Jolen. “You have a sharp eye indeed, my friend! Looking straight at it, I saw naught but a normal bird.”

Rikel nodded her head. “That was probably the point. Can you tell what it was for?” she asked.

Bewr smiled. “We lucked out; it looks like this was just supposed to be a scout,” she announced. “Now that we’ve

dismissed its curse, it won't be able to report back. Until it's noticed missing, we should still be safe."

Jolen hopped back onto the cart. "Then we should get going again. Time appears to be against us," he pointed out.

The group made way again and traveled until nightfall. After the group made camp for the evening, Bewr tuned the dagger for Jolen while Lelwyn and Kirel started the Rune Matrix calculations for Rikel's weapon.

Once Bewr was finished, she handed the dagger to Jolen. "Here, try it!" she smiled.

Jolen took the dagger and threw it at a nearby tree, embedding it to the hilt. Jolen let out a low whistle. "I aimed for the dagger to bounce off the bark," he explained as he held out his hand. A moment later, the dagger disappeared from the tree and reappeared in his hand. "This will definitely come in handy!" he laughed.

While Jolen sheathed his new dagger, Bewr's stomach rumbled audibly. "Tuning does work up a bit of an appetite," she excused. "How about we eat?" she suggested urgently.

Jolen nodded and the two of them returned to the others. Bewr grabbed some food, sat down, and started devouring the conjured food.

Rikel laughed at the display as she started eating. "In all my time as a knight in the army, I don't think I've ever

seen anybody tear into conjured food like that! You act like you haven't eaten in days," she observed.

Kirel stopped eating for a moment and answered for Bewr. "That's because casting a spell with this complexity and power works up an incredible appetite." he explained while Bewr practically inhaled her food.

The group finished their meal quietly and went to bed.

The group woke up the next morning to another light snow. Lelwyn sighed and conjured another meal for breakfast.

As the group started breaking up their camp after eating, Jolen stretched and subtly motioned everybody over to him. Once the others gathered around him, he looked at Lelwyn. "We're being watched," he warned the others.

CHAPTER VII: WANDERERS

[Illustration of group meeting “My Lady” goes here]

Rikel put her hand on her sword. "Can you tell by what or who?" she demanded, too loudly for Jolen's comfort.

Before Jolen could answer, a voice rang out from the trees. "I apologize," it said. "My intent was not to startle you. May I approach?" it asked.

The group looked to Lelwyn who nodded. "Aye!" he yelled. "Just do so with weapons away," he warned.

From the trees walked an Elvish woman wearing a dark green cloak. She had the hood up, obscuring her face and hair. Jolen looked at her for a moment and then bowed. "My lady," he greeted formally. "I am Jolen of the family Durana."

The woman started backing away. "Have we met?" she asked cautiously.

Jolen shook his head. "No, my lady," he answered. "And, if my lady wishes it, we have not met this day, either."

The woman nodded her head. "I wish it, son of Durana," she ordered.

Lelwyn bowed towards the woman. "Greetings! I am Lewlyn, a Healer sent by the Order of the Golden Shield to..."

"I already know of the situation in Midway," she interrupted with her hand raised.

Rikel raised her eyebrow. "Word must travel fast in this forest. Is there something you wanted of us lady...?" she trailed off, wordlessly asking for the woman's name.

The woman nodded curtly. "I only seek directions to the village of Nighforest."

Jolen pointed to the north. "Head north until the road. The path east heads to Nighforest, my lady," he explained.

The woman gave a slight bow. "You have my thanks, Jolen of the family Durana." Before anybody could answer, she started walking towards the road to the north.

Once she was out of earshot, Bewr chuckled. "Why do I get the feeling that she's even more important than a certain mere agent of the Cardinal?"

At Rikel's confused look, Lelwyn answered the unasked question. "It is a trivial matter that would take far too long to explain and has no bearing on our current quest in any event. Speaking of, we should make haste," he ordered before getting on the cart.

Rikel mounted her horse while the others got on the cart. Once everybody was situated, they headed out.

Bewr poked Jolen's shoulder. "So, who was she?"

Jolen turned his head to Bewr. "Who was who?" he asked with a grin. "The only people I've seen today are the four of you," he added.

Kirel, picking up on Jolen's play on words turned to him. "Okay, who didn't you see this morning before we left the camp?"

Jolen turned back to the forest ahead of them. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Rikel turned back to the cart. “I’d leave it,” she suggested. “If he wants to tell us about her, he will.”

The three mages pouted, causing Rikel to laugh.

Jolen chuckled. “Hypothetically,” he started, “if we were to have encountered somebody this morning, she’d be the only woman I know of who had a more difficult lineage to deal with growing up than my sister. Hypothetically, of course,” he added with a stern look.

Bewr started to ask him a question but was stopped by Lelwyn, “Leave him be, Bewr. If he wishes to hold his tongue on this, prying would be counter-productive.”

Jolen was about to reply when he held his hand up for silence. “Does anybody else hear that?” he asked.

Rikel shook her head. “Hear what?”

Jolen tilted his head. “It sounds like a large number of animals running together.”

Bewr’s eyes widened. “A stampede!” she shouted.

Rikel jumped off of her horse. “Quick! Turn over the cart and get underneath it!” she ordered. The group quickly did as instructed.

Kirel used his magic to put up a barrier around the turned-over cart.

Moments later, stampeding animals were upon them, going around the cart and magical barrier as though they were merely a rock in their way. Snowhoof, scared by the commotion, ran along with the stampede. Silreth, on the other hand, was still tied to the cart and was hurting herself trying to run. Jolen, seeing this, threw his dagger at the rope, freeing the frightened horse. Once Silreth was freed, Jolen summoned his dagger back.

Once the stampede had passed, Kirel groaned in agitation. “And now we don’t have horses!” he complained. “It’s going to take us even longer now to catch up to the corpse of the poacher!”

Bewr slammed her shoulder into Kirel’s side. “We should probably be more concerned about what scared those poor animals enough to stampede like that!”

Kirel rolled his eyes. “Yes, because stampedes are so unheard of,” he countered, sarcastically.

Jolen raised a finger. “Actually, a stampede in the forest is exceptionally rare. This isn’t a savanna,” he pointed out. “I agree with Bewr, something major must have scared them to get them to stampede like that.”

While Jolen and the Mages argued, Rikel let out a loud whistle. Kirel turned to her. “What purpose did that serve?” he asked, rubbing his ears in pain. “Beyond deafening us.”

Rikel smiled. “The horses should have heard that. If they did, they’ll start heading back. I’d suggest continuing on while we wait but the cart looks too heavy for us to carry.”

Bewr looked the cart over. “I could try casting a spell to reduce its weight; but it’d take longer to cast than just waiting for the horses anyway,” she admitted.

A few minutes later, the horses trotted back towards the group. Bewr walked up to Silreth and tied her back to the cart while Rikel got on Snowhoof.

As the group continued on their way, Lelwyn turned to Rikel, “we are fortunate that our equine companions have such good hearing.”

Jolen suddenly silenced everybody by holding up his fist. “Everybody, to the trees!” he shouted while jumping off the cart and running towards the treeline.

Everybody else quickly ran to the trees just in time for a large shadow to pass them by.

Lelwyn turned to Jolen. “What in the name of the gods was that?” he demanded in fright.

Jolen tried to calm himself. “That was a dragon,” he gasped between breaths.

Bewr forced herself not to faint. “I thought there hadn’t been a confirmed dragon sighting for almost a thousand years!”

Rikel helped support Bewr. “Never mind how long it’s been since a dragon was seen! Where was this one going?”

Jolen look at Rikel with horror. “It was heading straight for Nighforest.”

Bewr started running towards the cart. “We have to warn them!” she shouted.

Kirel stopped her by placing a hand on her shoulder. “If we do that, not only would everybody in Midway die, so likely would the rest of the forest. Maybe even beyond, depending on what the Necromancer is up to.”

Lelwyn stepped forward. “Kirel is right. We have the unenviable position of having to decide between saving a small village or an entire country. And you know that splitting up would simply place us all in greater peril, threatening both quests with failure.”

Bewr looked to Lelwyn with tears in her eyes. “And what if the dragon heads to Eirlith next?”

Lelwyn laughed. “A dragon would be no match compared to a single member of the Mage’s Council, let alone all four of them at once! And that’s assuming none else in the city aided in its defense.”

Kirel placed his arm around Bewr’s shoulders. “Lelwyn is right, Eirlith has more than enough defense without us; we’re all that this forest has right now.”

Bewr sobbed into Kirel's chest. "And we're just going to sacrifice the people of Nighforest to do it?" she asked.

Rikel started walking back towards her horse. "There's no way we'd get there in time to warn them, anyway," she pointed out.

Bewr looked at Rikel. "I know speed enchantments I could cast on Snowhoof," Bewr pointed out.

"Nay," Lelwyn countered. "Such a spell would drain you, literally, to death. Even were you willing to make such a sacrifice, it would be unlikely for Snowhoof to be able to reach Nighforest before the dragon in any event. Even if he could, the dragon would be all but on his heels. Along this path of thinking, madness lies."

Bewr sobbed. "I don't like the idea of not helping!"

Kirel started pulling Bewr back towards the cart. "We know; there's simply nothing we can do about this. If we had a Summoner with us, things might be different. Even Mages can't do everything you know."

Bewr looked to Jolen. "Well, what about at least warning that woman we met this morning. Can we do at least that much?" she begged.

Jolen shook his head. "I don't doubt that she's smart enough to want nothing to do with a dragon. In fact, her not leaving the forest might be a good thing," he mused out loud.

Lelwyn got back onto the cart. “As much as it saddens me to leave the denizens of Nighforest without protection, our current quest must take precedence,” he ordered “To that end, we should make haste to follow the animated remains of the poacher that Rikel slew.”

With that, the group reluctantly headed out.

As it was approaching noon, Jolen randomly chuckled. Rikel raised her eyebrow. “What’s so funny?” she demanded.

Jolen pointed at a small clearing away from their path. Following Jolen’s direction was a single skeleton walking in a circle because its legs didn’t have the same length.

Bewr scratched her head. “So,” she started. “Do we just leave it alone or do we do the honorable thing and put it out of its misery?” she asked the others.

Lelwyn shook his head. “As entertaining as watching the skeleton tirelessly wander in circles may be, should it be repaired, it could become an actual threat,” he explained and then turned to Kirel. “Kirel, would you do the honors?”

Kirel shrugged and quickly cast an ice spell, freezing the skeleton solid. The skeleton’s momentum forced it forward, where it shattered into several pieces upon impacting against the ground.

Bewr pretended to swoon. “My hero!” she joked.

Kirel started blushing in embarrassment.

Jolen, catching onto the joke, slapped Kirel's back. "That was quite a heroic display of magic!" he mockingly complimented.

Lelwyn placed his hand on Kirel's shoulder. "Aye," he smiled. "That is indeed the kind of great battle that epic songs and poems are made of; this day will be long remembered!"

Kirel shrugged Lelwyn's and Jolen's hands off of him in annoyance. "If you're done teasing me, don't we have a village to save?" he asked.

Rikel smirked. "You mean we can't do both at the same time?" she asked rhetorically.

Kirel rolled his eyes and urged the horse pulling the cart to go faster.

Later that afternoon, Jolen jumped out of the cart. "Wait here a moment," he commanded before climbing a tree. He shouted down to the rest of the group. "There is a white tower about an hour's walk to the southeast."

Rikel drew her sword, finding it wanting to point strongly in the precise direction Jolen indicated. "That tower must be where the poacher's remains were heading," she observed, spurring her horse to go faster.

Jolen got back into the horse. "If we hurry, we should be able to get there by nightfall," he explained.

Lelwyn nodded. "Then let us make haste," he ordered.

CHAPTER VIII: IVORY TOWERS

[Illustration of the group standing in front of the tower goes here]

The group reached the tower as the sun was starting to set. Jolen turned to Lewlyn. “Are my eyes playing tricks on me or is this tower made out of bones?” he asked.

Lelwyn shook his head. “Your eyes do not deceive you, my friend. The tower is indeed constructed from bones.”

Bewr placed a hand on the tower. “There’s some strong enchantments on this tower,” she announced while drawing some runes in the dirt.

Kirel looked over the runes that Bewr was drawing. “Are you sure about this Rune Matrix?” At Bewr’s look of annoyance, he continued. “Okay, you’re sure. Among other things, there’s a spatial compression spell on here.”

Bewr turned to Jolen and Rikel. “In non-mage speak, that means that, while the tower only looks a dozen or so stories tall, it’ll probably be much larger inside.”

Lelwyn walked up to the tower. “Should we dispel the enchantment?” he asked.

Before Jolen or Rikel could ask the obvious question, Kirel turned to them. “If we dispel the spatial compression spell, everything, and everyone, inside will be destroyed. As well as everything in the vicinity.”

Jolen turned to Kirel. “How big a vicinity?” he asked.

“It’s proportional to the strength of the compression spell on the tower,” Kirel answered.

Jolen looked at Kirel. “Meaning what?” he asked in annoyance.

Lelwyn pulled back Kirel. “In simpler terms, the bigger the discrepancy between the inside and the outside of this tower, the larger the area of destruction once the spells is ended,” he explained.

Jolen nodded in understanding. “So we won’t know for sure until we do it,” he summarized.

Bewr stepped back from the tower. “There’s more to it. If we dispel the tower, any prisoners that might be in there would die. Also, we’d lose our best chance at finding out what the Necromancer was up to. There’s also no guarantee that it would even lift the curse on Midway. Finally, the necromancer may not even be here. I vote we leave the enchantment alone.”

Lelwyn and Kirel nodded in agreement. Before either Jolen or Rikel could vote, Lelwyn turned to them. “My friends, I cannot ask you to accompany us any further. Should the spatial compression spell be broken or ended while we remained inside, we would experience a most gruesome death. None of us will think any less of either of you if you elect not to proceed,” he assured them.

Jolen grasped Lelwyn by the shoulder. “I would never be able to live with myself if I let you risk your lives for my home while I did not. I’m going,” he promised.

Before Rikel could answer, Lelwyn turned to her. “Our agreement was for you to escort us to Midway so we could aid with their blight. Fighting a necromancer goes well beyond that,” he informed her.

Rikel shook her head. “While I was in the army, there were some things that I did that I’m not exactly proud of. I try to console myself with the knowledge that I was merely obeying orders. This,” she paused pointing at the tower, “is why I joined the army in the first place. To protect those who could not protect themselves. You’d have to render me unconscious to keep me from coming along!” she concluded.

Lelwyn nodded and addressed the group. “Then we have another conundrum ahead of us. Do we make camp for and likely be ambushed or do we head inside now and risk exhaustion? Both choices are wrought with peril,” he advised.

Kirel spoke first. “I say enter,” he offered.

Bewr nodded. “Enter,” she agreed.

Rikel hopped off of Snowhoof. “I agree, enter,” she added while securing her equipment.

Jolen pulled out his dagger. “I concur. Entering now is our least bad option,” he concluded.

Lelwyn started tying the horses to a tree. “Then we are in accord; let us be off!” he ordered while handing out backpacks to everybody.

The group each put on their backpack and entered the tower, Rikel going first.

Waiting on the other side of the door was a small group of zombies.

Bewr hastily pulled Rikel back as Kirel cast a fire wall.

Lelwyn threw up a light spell. "Do not allow the zombies to touch your skin!" he ordered. "We can ill afford to succumb to Zombie Corrosion. The healing process is both painful and will cost us time we cannot afford to spend!"

Jolen threw his dagger past Lelwyn into the forehead of a zombie that was getting through the fire. "You can explain to us what that is after we win this fight," he grunted.

Bewr grabbed Kirel's hand and the fire wall grew in height and temperature.

Jolen summoned his dagger back to him and threw it at another zombie. "How long will this fire wall hold them back?" he asked.

Lelwyn looked back and saw the look of concentration on Kirel's and Bewr's faces. "Not long enough," he admitted. "Even with Bewr's help, Kirel will not be able to maintain this spell much longer. We must dispatch these zombies quickly."

Rikel walked up to the flames and looked back over her shoulder. "Can you open a hole just big enough for me to fit through?" she asked.

Bewr and Kirel looked at each other, then nodded. A moment later, the flames in front of Rikel spread apart, leaving just enough room for her, or a single zombie, to fit through at a time.

Rikel stayed in the front, stabbing any zombie that tried to enter the gap. Meanwhile, Jolen threw his dagger at any zombies that tried to brave the flames directly. Lelwyn cast a spell that pushed the zombies back. Using this tactic, the group was able to dispatch the zombies before Bewr and Kirel ran out of energy.

After the battle ended and Kirel brought down the fire spell, Rikel turned back to them. “Do you need to rest or can we press on?” she asked them.

Bewr panted and help up a hand. “We can press on,” she gasped between pants. “Just, not quickly,” she amended.

Kirel started walking forward. “Also, if we get into another fight, don’t expect the two of us to be able to contribute for a while,” he added.

Rikel nodded. “Understood. We’ll proceed slowly for now,” she assured them.

Lelwyn cast a simple healing spell on the group. “Let us be off,” he ordered before heading into the tower.

Bewr looked down and gasped in shock. “Wait!” she shouted to the others and pointed at one of the zombies. “This

zombie! This is one of the poachers that attacked Telina!” she shouted in recognition.

Jolen ran over to the zombie. “Are you certain?” he asked her while glaring at the zombie.

Bewr nodded her head with tears in her eyes. “I’ll never forget this face for as long as I live,” she swore.

Jolen sighed. “On one hand, I want to make him pay for my sister’s death,” he admitted. “On the other hand, is there anything I can really do to somebody who’s already dead?” he asked rhetorically.

Lelwyn walked over to Jolen and placed a hand on his shoulder. “If you would like, I can easily cast a spell on this corpse that will keep it from ever being able to be animated again,” he offered.

Jolen nodded his head in answer and Lelwyn began casting the spell. Once the spell was finished, the group finally entered the tower in search of the necromancer behind all of these events.

As the group entered the tower, they found a hallway with several closed doors along the sides. Rikel walked up to the first door and quietly opened it.

On the other side of the door she discovered a room full of various torture equipment, fortunately not currently, but obviously recently, in use. She quickly closed the door and

turned to the others. “No reason to go in there,” she informed them while trying to keep her food. “Trust me on this one.”

Lelwyn raised an eyebrow. “If you think that best,” he acceded. “Let’s try the next one.”

Rikel nodded and opened the next door, revealing several buckets, mops, and other cleaning supplies. Bewr blinked slowly. “The necromancer has a broom closet in their tower,” she observed in disbelief. “I... don’t know how I feel about this,” she admitted.

Kirel playfully shoved Bewr. “If this is the scariest thing in the tower, I’d be pleasantly surprised,” he joked.

Jolen walked up to them. “I agree with Bewr,” he added. “It seems odd that a mage devoted to a foul art such as necromancy would have something as mundane as a broom closet in their domain.”

Lelwyn nodded. “Aye, especially given that spells that can clean are extremely simple,” he agreed. “Any student in their first year of study would be more than capable of such.”

Rikel closed the door. “Could it have been a leftover from a previous occupant?” she theorized.

Bewr shook her head. “This tower definitely required necromancy to create,” she countered. “The necromancer had to have created the tower with the broom closet. For some reason...” she added, still perplexed at the closet’s existence.

Lelwyn cleared his throat. “As bizarre as this may be,” he interrupted the conversation. “We have loitered here long enough. We had best continue on,” he ordered.

The others nodded as Rikel went to the next door.

As Rikel opened more of the doors, not finding anything of note, Bewr turned to Lelwyn. “So, what strategy should we use on the necromancer?” she asked him.

Lelwyn rubbed his beard stubble. “That is quite the conundrum,” he admitted. “Without more knowledge of the necromancer’s talents, making precise plans now would be an exercise in futility.”

Bewr nodded. “Besides, no plan survives contact with the enemy,” she quoted.

Rikel paused and turned around. “That’s a rather astute observation about combat for a mage,” she admitted, impressed with what Bewr said.

Kirel glared at Bewr. “It’s a quote from a general,” he quickly explained in an attempt to derail the conversation.

Rikel raised an eyebrow. “I already gathered that part,” she acknowledged. “I was just curious as to which one.”

Lelwyn raised his hands. “That is not important right now,” he interrupted.

Bewr giggled. “What is important is who had fish for dinner,” she joked.

Kirel and Lelwyn both glared at Bewr, causing her to stop giggling and raise her hands in supplication. Lelwyn turned back to Kirel. “Back to strategy, do either of you have anything of use to add?” he asked.

Kirel shook his head. “You and Bewr counter the necromancer’s curses while I blast him with elemental magic?” he shrugged.

Bewr stepped forward and blushed. “My usual jokes aside,” she offered in apology. “There really isn’t much planning we can do for now.”

Lelwyn sighed. “I suppose you are correct. There is little planning of use we can do at the moment,” he lamented.

(More magical discussion)

Jolen cleared his throat. “If the three of you are done,” he interrupted. “I believe I found something.”

The three mages walked over to him and saw a discarded necklace. Jolen gestured to it. “I thought that this might be magical,” he explained.

Bewr picked up the necklace and quickly scanned it. “It’s clean,” she announced while holding it up for the others to see. “No enchantments on it at all.”

Kirel shook his head and laughed. “It’s just a practice necklace from the Academy in Elrlith,” he explained. “The kind we practice casting enchantment spells on for class or for experimenting with. Not sure why the necromancer would bother with one though. There are easier, and less tacky looking, options for making magical jewelry,” he mused.

Lelwyn sighed in annoyance. “It matters not,” he declared. “Let us continue on to the next door.”

Rikel opened the next door and turned to the others. “I found what appears to be a library or a study!” she shouted out to them while waving them over.

The others entered the room and discovered bookshelves and candelabras along the wall, open windows, and a fireplace in the corner. As the three mages started examining the books, the door and windows loudly slammed shut with solid coverings while the fireplace turned on and the flue closed.

CHAPTER IX: IN THE THICK OF IT
[Illustration of the group in the study goes here]

Jolen quickly ran to the door and tried to open it. “We’re trapped inside!” he announced.

Rikel turned to the mages. “Can any of you use your magic to free us?” she asked.

Bewr shook her head. “Not without risking damage to the spells keeping the tower in place. If I remove the wrong spell, we’re all dead,” she explained.

Kirel walked towards the fireplace and started casting a spell. A moment later, he turned to the others. “There’s a barrier preventing me from putting out the fire!” He explained before holding his hand up towards the fire place. Within moments, wind started pushing the smoke back. “We have maybe an hour before the smoke fills the room despite my wind spell and kills us all,” he advised them.

Jolen walked over to Bewr. “How much about the magic in this trap can you tell me?”

Bewr shook her head. “There’s too much ambient magic in this tower for me to be able to analyze the trap.”

Jolen lifted his finger. “I don’t need details. I doubt if I’d be able to understand all of it anyway.” he admitted. “Can you tell me something simple? Such as if this is a one-time trap or if it was designed to reset after certain conditions?”

Bewr nodded and started concentrating on the magic in the room. “I don’t know what causes any of the changes,

but this room is designed to set the trap, return to normal, then be ready to spring the trap again.”

Jolen started talking to himself. “Okay, the trap can trigger over and over. What would change when an intruder is dead?” he asked himself.

Rikel turned to Jolen. “No movement?” She then faced Bewr. “Could the trap be triggered or ended by movement?”

Bewr shook her head. “No, a trigger like this would have to be based on a simple state of a known object. Like a door being opened or closed or a book being in a bookshelf.”

Jolen snapped his fingers and ran to one of the candelabras and started blowing out the candles. Lelwyn and Bewr, seeing what he was doing, quickly moved to do the same to the other candles.

After the last candle was blown out, the door and windows opened and the flue started allowing the smoke to leave the room again.

Once the smoke in the room cleared, Kirel ended his wind spell and turned to Jolen. “That was genius!” he shouted. “How did you figure out that the blowing out the candles would reset the trap?” he asked.

Jolen blushed. “I didn’t,” he admitted. “I was just thinking about putting out the candles to prolong the amount of air we had left.”

At Jolen's admission, the others started laughing.

Lelwyn stopped laughing first. "Now that we have been fortunate enough to survive this trap, let us press our good fortune by examining this library in detail!" he ordered.

With that, the mages started examining the books while Jolen searched for any other traps that may have been in the room. Rikel kept a look out in case anyone, or anything, tried to enter the room.

After several minutes, the group met in the middle of the room. Jolen smiled to the others. "I didn't find any signs of other traps," he announced.

Kirel held up the charred remains of a book. "I just found some research into necromancy theory dating all the way back to Xosha. A simple fire spell took care of those nicely," he smiled menacingly.

Bewr let out a soft whimper. "I know that the knowledge was evil," she admitted. "I just hate the idea of any books or research being destroyed."

Lelwyn placed a hand on Bewr's shoulder in comfort. "It is unwise to leave such foul knowledge behind to tempt others," he pointed out. "Back to the matter at hand, I found naught but a list of items the Necromancer wanted procured; most of it was simple foodstuffs with the occasional reference to spell components," he admitted.

Kirel raised an eyebrow. “So you managed to find the necromancer’s shopping list?” he joked.

Before an argument could start, Bewr held up her hands. “All I could find was copies of your standard magic tomes,” she told them.

Lelwyn nodded. “Then we had best make our way onward in search of the necromancer,” he ordered.

The group left the room to search the rest of the floor.

(Fights more undead)

Rikel walked to the final door. “We’ve searched every other door; be on your guard,” she ordered.

She then opened the door to reveal a spiral staircase going upwards. Jolen entered the stairway and looked up. “I can’t see the top,” he announced.

Bewr shrugged her shoulders. “Upwards it is, I guess,” she commented.

CHAPTER X: OLD MYSTERIES

[Illustration of group climbing stairs goes here]

Jolen quickly looked over the door for traps. Upon finding none, he nodded to Rikel who carefully opened the door. Once she saw that the room was clear, she motioned for the others to enter.

Once they entered, they saw a room with walls covered in writing. Bewr walked up to one of the walls. “This almost looks like High Elvish,” she whispered.

Jolen walked up beside her. “Not quite,” he countered. “While the lettering is definitely High Elvish, the words themselves are not.” Jolen walked to one of the other walls. “Similarly, these are Wood Elf letters but the words are unknown to me.”

Bewr turned to Jolen. “Could the two languages be written in the other’s letters?” she asked.

Jolen shook his head. “Not only would that be a serious violation of Elvish custom, neither language’s lettering really allows for the other’s sounds.”

Kirel walked over to them. “Okay, we don’t know what any of this says. Is there any way to figure out how old it is?” he asked.

Bewr cast a spell and did some quick math. “Fifteen thousand years, give or take five hundred,” she concluded.

Rikel turned to Jolen, “how quickly do the Elvish languages evolve?” she asked him.

Jolen chuckled. “Both languages have remained unchanged for five thousand years,” he boasted. “According to legend anyway,” he added. “I do know that there are at least two other Elvish dialects that have since died out.”

Rikel abandoned that line of questioning and turned to the mages. “What about a translation spell?” she asked them.

Lelwyn shook his head. “Nay, such spells work through understanding the thoughts of the person being spoken with. They are unsuited to the written word.”

(Another reference to the early days of magic)

Jolen carefully opened another door and looked inside. Once he did, he stumbled backwards. “No!” he shouted. “How did you end up here, my friend?” he asked in anguish.

The others quickly ran up to him and saw the remains of an elf laying on a table, partially dissected.

Bewr ran out of the room to vomit while Lelwyn placed his hand on Jolen’s shoulder. “Do you wish to remove his remains from the tower before we press on?” he asked.

Jolen clenched his jaw. “No!” he countered. “Let us press on with great haste! I want to stop this necromancer from doing anything like this to anybody else!” he swore with tears in his eyes. “Just, cast that spell that makes it so his body

can't be used for evil before we go," he demanded with a pained voice.

Lelwyn nodded in agreement and cast the requested spell before the group headed for the last door on the entry floor of the tower. As the group made their way to the last door on the floor, Rikel readied herself for anything while Jolen carefully opened the door.

Behind the door was another spiral staircase leading upwards, the top of the staircase hidden from view.

CHAPTER XI: DESCENTS

[Illustration of group arguing goes here]

The group opened the door and found another spiral staircase going upwards. Rikel went first while Jolen followed behind the others. As they neared the halfway point to the next floor, the step Jolen was standing on collapsed. As Jolen tried to grab the stair in front of him, it disappeared.

Kirel, hearing the commotion, turned around. "Jolen!" he shouted. The others quickly gathered around, trying to find out what happened to Jolen.

Lelwyn cast a light spell, revealing a dark pit hundreds of feet deep. Kirel held out his hands to try to prevent anybody else from falling in.

Rikel raised her eyebrow in confusion. "Didn't we just walk up stairs where this pit is?" she asked the others.

Bewr shook her head. "Due to the magic in this tower, the normal rules of space don't apply," she explained.

Kirel turned to Rikel. "Why do you think none of us bothered trying to draw a map?" he asked her venomously.

Lelwyn put his hand on Kirel's shoulder. "Come now, my friend. Rikel has done naught to deserve such harsh words," he reprimanded.

Kirel angrily shrugged Lelwyn's hand off his shoulder. "You're right!" he shouted. "You're the one I should actually be angry with. If you hadn't let her and Jolen come into the

tower with us, he might still be alive!” he accused with tears in his eyes. “Haven’t we lost enough for this trip?”

Bewr got between the two arguing mages. “Both of you stop this!” she ordered.

Kirel ignored Bewr and continued. “I can’t even believe how you’ve been acting right now!” he shouted. “How can you be so careless with people’s lives? Especially after I..”

Bewr stopped Kirel by putting her hand over his mouth. “Careful, Kirel,” she warned. “You don’t want to say anything you can’t take back later.”

Lelwyn glared at the two of them. “No, Bewr. Let him speak his piece,” he ordered. “I wish to hear what he intended to complain about this time; he always finds the most creative ways of complaining about what all of us are experiencing.”

Bewr turned to him. “Lelwyn! That was uncalled for!”

Kirel rolled his eyes. “Bewr, stay out of this!” he ordered. “Gods forbid that you let the two of us have a simple argument without butting in as you always do!” he continued. “Did it ever occur to you that you can’t fix everything?”

Rikel stepped between the arguing mages. “What kind of discipline is this?” she asked them rhetorically. “How could the three of you children stop bickering long enough to even learn how to use magic in the first place?” she demanded.

Kirel scoffed at her. “What was that? You think a mere knight knows anything about how the Mage’s Academy works? Give me a break!” he taunted.

Rikel drew her sword and aimed it at Kirel. “Oh, I’ll give you a break!” she threatened angrily.

Bewr stepped back “Stop this!” she shouted. When the others all turned to her, she looked around the staircase where they’d been arguing. After a moment’s reflection, she picked up a torch off the wall and broke it in two with her hands, stopping the argument.

The group all stumbled slightly as Bewr fell into a sitting position. Rikel walked up to her. “What just happened?” she asked the mage in concern.

Bewr threw the two pieces of the torch into the pit where Jolen fell and sighed. “The torch had a spell on it that made us more irritable than we would normally be,” she explained. “Breaking the torch should have broken the spell but we should probably hurry up and get far away from here anyway, just to be on the safe side,” she added.

The others nodded before continuing up the stairs. Kirel walked up to Lelwyn. Before Kirel could say anything, Lelwyn held up his hand. “I know your mind well enough to predict what you want to say to me. We all said words that

perhaps we shouldn't have. I will accept no apology from any of you as I feel none are needed," he explained to the group.

Rikel nodded. "We should get going," she agreed.

The now sullen group continued up the tower.

As they reached the next floor, they could hear voices from behind a door.

"I hate trying to get through this place!" one voice complained. "It's like it's different every time we're here!"

"You heard what the boss said," the other voice countered. "We have to stop whoever broke into the tower or he'll turn us into zombies or worse! He can do it too; you saw what he did to Hosil!"

The group stopped and looked at each other. They all recognized those voices as the same poachers who killed Telina. With a silent nod, the four prepared themselves for battle. Rikel held up her hand and reached for the door. She silently counted down on her fingers.

When the last finger went down she opened the door and the group stormed in. Kirel started by throwing up a lightning barrier spell to ward off any projectiles. Rikel quickly reached the first poacher and beheaded him.

The other poacher started drawing his weapon but was distracted by a light spell in his eyes cast by Lelwyn.

While the poacher was distracted, Rikel stabbed him through the stomach.

Kirel took down his spell and sighed. “The timing was terrible,” he lamented.

Rikel turned to him in confusion. “How so?” she asked.

Lelwyn placed a hand on Kirel’s shoulder. “I concur with Kirel: Jolen deserved to be here for this battle, short it may have been, as well,” he explained. “At least we avenged her on his behalf.”

Bewr choked back a sob. “It’s not the same and you know it!” she accused.

Lelwyn nodded. “Aye,” he agreed. “But there is naught we can do about it in any event. Let us continue on; the necromancer behind this all awaits!” he shouted.

(More party bickering)

CHAPTER XII: DEFENSES

[Illustration of Bewr giving Rikel the sword goes here]

Bewr walked up to Rikel. “If you think this is a safe enough time,” she began, “we’ve finished the calculations for the Rune Matrix for that sword enchantment you wanted.”

Rikel nodded. “How long will it take from here?”

Bewr shrugged. “Twenty minutes max; five if I draw all the runes perfectly the first time,” she explained.

Rikel drew her sword and handed it to Bewr. “Kirel,” Rikel shouted. “Keep one of your barrier spells up while Bewr works, just in case we’re attacked.”

Lelwyn nodded in approval. “A wise precaution,” he acknowledged.

Bewr blushed. “I’ll also need that drop of blood now,” she explained. Rikel laughed and dug through her bag for a used blood cloth, handing it over when found.

Ten minutes later, Bewr returned Rikel’s sword with a smile. “Just so you know,” the Enchanter started. “We decided not to make it voice activated for stealth reasons. Instead, you should simply be able to imagine the weapon changing shape and it should do so.”

Rikel took the weapon and tested it, making it change back and forth between its sword and spear modes repeatedly. “Nice work,” Rikel complimented.

Bewr shrugged. “It was actually pretty simple, just tedious,” she explained.

Kirel took down his spell. “We should probably get going,” he suggested.

Lelwyn stood up and walked over to Kirel. “I agree, my friend,” Lelwyn exclaimed. “Let us be off!”

Before the group could continue on their way, a door near them opened up and revealed a large number of monsters. Bewr gulped. “That’s... that’s a lot of skeletons.”

Kirel laughed humorlessly. “Don’t forget the zombies,” he added unhelpfully. “And I think I see a ghoul.”

Rikel ground her teeth. “If you have nothing tactically useful to say, be quiet!” she ordered tensely while turning her sword back into a spear.

Kirel put up a wall of lightning to try to hold back their foes. Bewr quickly ran up to him and held his hand to strengthen the spell.

The skeletons in the front of the group got pushed into the wall, killing them. The skeletons behind them were able to stop, waiting for the spell to end.

Rikel tightened her grip on her spear. “I really wish I had a bow or something right now,” she lamented.

Lelwyn shook his head. “It cannot be helped,” he countered. “We must make do with what we have on hand.”

Lelwyn then placed a hand on Rikel’s shoulder and cast a spell. “This should increase your resistance to their

attacks,” he explained. “However, it will hardly make you invincible, so remain vigilant in your defense,” he warned.

Rikel nodded in understanding while Lelwyn turned back to the other mages. “Bewr, cast spells to enhance Rikel,” he ordered. “I’ll aid Kirel with his spell,” he assured.

Bewr nodded and started casting enchantments on Rikel while Lelwyn grabbed Kirel’s hand. “I know this goes against our agreement,” Lelwyn began in a whisper.

Kirel shook his head. “Our lives are at stake,” he countered, whispering back. “That takes precedence, for now.”

(More combat.)

As the group finished searching the remains of their foes for clues, Kirel huffed. “We’re wasting time!” he shouted.

(Even more bickering)

(Party encounters automated defenses?)

Bewr tried to stifle a yawn and failed. “Any idea what time it is?” she asked groggily.

Kirel did some thinking. “Only a few hours until dawn,” he announced.

Lelwyn started pulling out the camping gear. “We best get some rest before heading on,” he ordered. “We will hardly be able to defeat a necromancer while exhausted and famished. Losing in such a manner will be of no help to the denizens of Midway.”

Rikel nodded in agreement. “There’s nothing here of use anyway,” she admitted.

CHAPTER XIII: REFLECTIONS

[Illustration of four hallway room goes here]

After Bewr groggily cast the spells needed to keep them safe while they ate and rested, Lelwyn handed out a meal of conjured food.

Kirel took the offered food and broke off a piece. “I have a question for you,” she told the mages. At their looks of curiosity, she continued. “How were the necromancers defeated during the Mage’s War?”

Kirel shook his head. “There was no trick or super-spell that was used, if that’s what you were getting at,” he explained. “They were defeated through simple combat tactics and numbers,” he added.

Rikel nodded in disappointment. Lelwyn chuckled. “Indeed, it would have been advantageous for there to be a simple weakness to necromancers that we could exploit,” he lamented. “Alas, it is not to be.”

Bewr cleared her throat. “I know I’m probably the last person to say this,” she started. “But we should probably not distract ourselves with unnecessary conversation tonight and instead focus on our task at hand.” The others all nodded and finished their meal in tense silence.

(Yet even more bickering)

The group entered a large, circular room connected to four hallways, including the one they just came from. Bewr, Kirel, and Lelwyn each walked to entrance of one of the other hallways to get a better view.

Rikel walked to the middle of the room. “Which way should we go?” she asked the mages.

Before any of them could answer, they each saw Jolen walking down the hallway towards them. Once all three figures entered the main room, Kirel laughed humorlessly. “The Knight and Knave Clones spell?” he asked in disbelief. “Really? Just how inept is this necromancer? We’re taught about this in our first year!” he pointed out.

Lelwyn placed a hand on Kirel’s shoulder. “Perhaps the necromancer remains unaware of us. Let us deal with this absurdity quickly so we can resume our quest,” he ordered.

Bewr walked over to Rikel and held out her hand. “May I borrow your sword?” she asked. Rikel shrugged and handed over the sword. Bewr took the sword and walked to the three Jolens. “I’m going to ask some questions. If you don’t answer a question, I’ll stab you. If you answer this first question with a lie, I’ll stab you,” she explained. “How old was Telina when she first manifested?”

Bewr walked to the first Jolen and held the sword at his chest, waiting for an answer. “Nine years,” he answered.

Bewr walked to the second one. “It was her ninth harvest,” the second Jolen replied.

Bewr walked to the third Jolen. “Last summer,” he answered. Bewr casually ran the sword through him, causing him to disappear into nothingness. “So far so good,” she mused with a smirk.

Bewr faced the other two Jolens. “If you answer this question truthfully, I’ll stab you. What creature did we hide from on our way here?”

Bewr walked to the middle one again and waited. “An eight-tailed fox riding a purple unicorn,” he winked.

Bewr chuckled and walked to the first one she interrogated. “A dragon,” that Jolen answered. Bewr tiredly stabbed that Jolen, causing him to also disappear. Bewr then went back to Rikel and returned her sword.

Rikel put her sword away. “What just happened?” she asked the mages in confusion.

Kirel rolled his eyes. “The Knight and Knave Clones is a spell that creates two copies of a person, down to their memories,” he explained. “One is incapable of lying; the other is incapable of telling the truth. I honestly think this is the first time that that spell has ever been attempted tactically.”

Lelwyn pulled Kirel back. “It matters not how inane of a plan this was. We have surpassed it and must continue

onward.” He turned to Jolen. “Have you any idea which way we should proceed?”

Jolen shrugged. “There’s nothing of any real interest in the hallway I came from,” he admitted. “Assuming the rest of you searched the way you came from thoroughly, that leaves two hallways left. Anybody got a coin?” he joked.

CHAPTER XIV: ONWARD

[Illustration of Jolen leading group goes here]

Bewr ran up to Jolen and hugged him. "I'm so glad that you're alright," she told him.

Lelwyn pulled Bewr off of Jolen. "While we are all relieved to see Jolen hearty and hale, it would not do to suffocate him while over enthusiastically demonstrating that relief," he teased her.

Bewr made a face to Lelwyn before smiling at Jolen. Rikel cleared her throat. "I have to agree with Lelwyn," she announced. "While it really is great to have you back, Jolen, we should try to figure out what to do, or where to go, next."

Lelwyn turned to her. "I am open to suggestions," he admitted. "For I have none myself."

Kirel shrugged. "Don't look at me," he ordered with a smile. "I don't have any ideas either."

Bewr pointed down one the tunnels. "Since nobody has a better idea, how about we just follow the left-hand rule from here on?" she suggested.

Rikel cleared her throat. "For those of us who didn't go to the Mage's Academy, what's that?" she asked.

Kirel sighed. "Simple version. Always keep a wall to your left. If you discover a loop, mark it and treat that path as a wall. It's extremely slow and it's outrageously tedious, but it always works," he explained in a bored tone.

Bewr smiled and pointed down the left hallway. “Leftward, ho!” she jokingly shouted as she started walking, the rest quickly running to follow her.

Rikel rushed up to Jolen to walk beside him. “You never did tell us how much you remember after falling into that trap,” she pointed out.

Jolen shrugged. “That’s simply because the only thing I can remember after falling down that pit is walking into that chamber and seeing the four of you and my two doppelgangers,” he admitted.

Rikel smiled. “Come on, you have to remember more than that!” she demanded.

Jolen smiled while looking back over his shoulder. “I think this is the way we need to go!” he shouted while running ahead.

Kirel ran to catch up with them. “You better slow up,” he warned. “Bewr and Lelwyn are having a hard time at this pace,” he said while motioning his head back.

Jolen slowed enough for the two trailing mages to catch up. As Bewr started to catch her breath, she tapped Jolen’s shoulder. “Where are you leading us?” she asked.

Jolen smiled. “I figured the center of the tower would be our best bet,” he answered.

Kirel raised an eyebrow. “Not the top?” he asked in confusion. “Isn’t that where all evil mages hide in the stories?” he added rhetorically.

Lelwyn placed his hand on Kirel’s shoulder. “That is precisely why Jolen is leading us to the center! Unless I miss my mark in Jolen’s reasoning,” he added.

Kirel shook his head. “Nope; still confused,” he admitted in annoyance.

Rikel sighed. “If all the stories place the villain at the top like that. That’s the first place they’ll expect us to look,” she explained. “That leaves either the center or the bottom as the next two most likely places to look.”

Bewr smiled in excitement. “”And the bottom was the first place we looked!” she pointed out.

Jolen shrugged. “Unless there’s a basement we missed,” he acknowledged. “But I doubt it,” he added.

Kirel laughed. “If you want to go back down and check by yourself, feel free; the rest of us will be up here,” he joked.

As the group’s laughter died down, Bewr walked up beside Jolen. “There’s something you should know,” he told him. “While we were exploring the tower while you were, well, wherever you were, we found the poachers who murdered your sister.”

Jolen stopped and turned to her. “And then?” he asked.

Kirel looked back over his shoulder. “And then we slew them on the spot!” he boasted.

Jolen bowed his head in solace. “Then I thank you for doing what I could not,” he told the group.

Bewr placed her hand on Jolen’s arm. “If we had known how close we were to finding you again, we’d have save at least one of them for you,” she promised.

Jolen shook his head. “It matters less to me who got the kill than the fact that justice was done,” he informed her.

Lelwyn placed his hand on Jolen’s shoulder. “Well said, my elvish friend!” he shouted. “Now come, we have a necromancer to dispatch!”

(Party discusses plans for after the quest)

CHAPTER XV: RITUALS

[Illustration of group making up goes here]

Before they entered the staircase, Kirel cleared his throat. “There’s, there’s something I need to say. About how I’ve been acting on this trip...”

Lelwyn interrupted Kirel by placing his hand on his shoulder. “My friend, you seem to forget that the two of us have known you for nigh on fifteen years. We know your sarcasm is how you deal with worry,” he assured him.

Bewr drew Kirel into a hug. “Yeah, you may act like a jerk at times. Many times. Most of the time. Point is, you’re our jerk and we love you for it,” she smiled at him while squeezing him lightly.

Rikel started clapping sarcastically. “If we’re done with this overly sentimental display, can we get back to saving Midway, and possibly, the rest of the world?” she asked them with a coy smile.

Jolen smiled at them. “While making up with each other after an argument, that I apparently missed, is nice, my home is currently under mortal peril,” he scolded them jokingly in a voice not at all matching his words.

(More dead ends and more abandoned research)

As the party climbed the tower, each of the mages felt a powerful release of magic coming from another part of the

tower. What none of them knew was that release was felt by all magic-sensitive beings across the entire planet. The full ramifications of this one event wouldn't be known for many years to come.

(Lelwyn and Kirel avoid each other awkwardly)

CHAPTER XVI: FALSITIES

[Illustration of group fighting Tyren goes here]

As the group reached the center of the tower, they found an ornate room with an older man reading a dust-covered tome sitting in an elaborate chair. He closed the tome and looked at them. "So, you're the group who stumbled into the way of my plans," he mocked in greeting. "I don't suppose it's too much to ask that you're here to assist me?" he asked.

Lelwyn stood in front of the others. "Never, foul necromancer!" he shouted in defiance. "We will make you pay for your misdeeds!"

The necromancer sighed. "I see." He snapped his fingers. "Where are my manners?" he asked rhetorically. "My name is Tryen," he introduced himself. "And you are?"

Lelwyn, taken aback by Tyren's politeness answered in reflex. "My name is Lelwyn, Initiate of the Order of the Golden Shield. With me are my fellow mages, Kirel and Bewr. The knight is Rikel and the elf is Jolen of.."

"My family's name is not important right now," Jolen interrupted. "Just what do you think you are you doing in my forest?" he demanded.

Tyren bowed his head. "Simple research, Jolen," he answered. "There are so few places where a necromancer can study in peace."

Bewr and Rikel readied spells while Rikel drew her sword. "So you admit to being a necromancer!" Rikel accused.

Tyren sneered at Rikel. "I believe that is was what I just said," he answered in the same tone one would use with an inattentive child.

Jolen held Rikel back before she could attack. "We don't know yet if he actually broke any laws," he told her.

Bewr scoffed. "Merely studying necromancy is a crime in the country of Elrlith." She explained. "Which the forest is not a part of," she realized. "Do the elves forbid necromancy?" she asked Jolen.

Jolen shrugged. "I never bothered to study the laws pertaining to magic; I never figured that they'd ever pertain to me," he admitted.

Kirel stepped forward. "It's not like we can just leave him here," he pointed out sarcastically.

Tyren cleared his throat. "If I may make a suggestion?" he asked the group. When they made no move to stop him, beyond readying their weapons or spells, he continued. "I am willing to travel with you to the elvish authorities to make my case of innocence," he announced.

Rikel turned her head back towards the others. "I don't like this. It smells like a trap," she informed them.

Lelwyn nodded to her. "While I agree that this is rather unorthodox, I have no alternative to offer, save for slaying him where he sits," he added.

Jolen shook his head. "I will not be a party to that."

Kirel rolled his eyes. "Does one of us at least have any rope?" he asked.

Jolen started searching through his bag. "I do!" he announced, pulling out a coiled cord of rope.

Lelwyn pointed a Tyren. "If you make any attempt to escape, we will slay you at once," he warned. "Be sure to secure him thoroughly," he ordered Jolen.

Jolen walked behind Tyren and quickly bound the necromancer's hands behind his back. "You'll pay for casting that curse on my home!" he swore while tightening the ropes.

Tyren looked over his shoulder. "There is no curse cast by me affecting your home," he announced.

Rikel drew her sword and held it to Tyren's throat. "And we're to just take you at your word?" she demanded.

Lelwyn held back Rikel's arm. "Hold fast, my friend," he ordered. "Slaying a prisoner in our care is beneath us. Let him answer for his crimes to your people."

(Party discovers Jolen is an impostor because he helped Tyren escape)

Kirel, in a moment of extreme rage, cast a powerful fire spell at the false Jolen's feet, immolating him instantly.

“Nobody makes a mockery of my friends like this!” he swore in contempt.

Bewr walked up to Kirel and placed her hands on his shoulders. “If the real Jolen is anywhere still in this tower, we’ll find him,” she promised. “And, we’ll make Tyren pay for impersonating Jolen.”

Lelwyn walked up to the two of them and placed a hand on each of their shoulders. “Well spoken, Bewr,” he complimented. “Now that we have Tyren’s measure, we can be certain not to underestimate his subterfuge again!”

Rikel nodded. “We should head back to where we picked up the impostor,” she suggested. “Maybe we’ll luck out and find him for real. Or at least get a lead to track down Tyren again.”

(Lelwyn and Kirel continue to avoid each other)

Rikel walked up to Lelwyn. “Wouldn’t it be easier if we just leave the tower and destroy it from the outside?” she asked him.

Bewr shook her head. “Unless we see the necromancer die, we’ll have no way of knowing he didn’t just escape,” she explained in frustration. “Also, if Jolen is still alive in here, destroying the tower would kill him.”

Kirel frowned sadly. “I hadn’t thought of that, sorry,” she apologized.

Lelwyn grasped Kirel’s shoulder. “Nay. ‘Twas a good suggestion,” he countered. “Be not afraid to offer more. After all, you are the only one here trained in combat tactics, are you not?”

CHAPTER XVII: COALESCING

[Illustration of group fighting Tyren again goes here]

After trudging back down through the tower, the group finally returned to the hallway where they met the false Jolen and went through the door where he had to have come from. Inside, they found large glass containers filled with unknown liquids.

Inside one of the containers was Jolen. Before Kirel could break the glass, Rikel stopped him. “Do we have a way of knowing if this is actually the real Jolen?” she demanded.

Bewr nodded. “Now that I know to check for it, the spell’s pretty straight-forward. So much so that I feel silly for not having cast it the first time,” she blushed.

Lelwyn placed a hand on Bewr’s shoulder. “It matters not. Neither Kirel nor I thought to check ourselves. Further, it is in the past. Dwelling on such mistakes ill does us any good. Do not blame yourself,” he ordered.

Bewr smiled sadly and cast some spells. When she was done she turned to the others. “That’s really Jolen. I’m sure of it,” she announced.

Rikel nodded and broke the glass with her spear, releasing Jolen and the strange liquid onto the floor. Lelwyn quickly looked Jolen over for injuries. “With a cursory glance I detect nothing wrong beyond a simple sleeping spell. Though, we are too pressed for time for me to do a more thorough examination,” he lamented.

Lelwyn ended the sleeping spell on Jolen, causing him to wake up in a coughing fit. “What happened?” He asked between coughs.

Lelwyn helped Jolen stand up. “We are too pressed for time for a complete telling,” he explained. “In short, you fell down a pit and have been held captive here since. The rest can wait until a more opportune time,” he ordered.

Jolen nodded. “So, do you have any idea where the necromancer is?” he asked.

Kirel pointed at the door at the other end of the room. “That’s the only part of this tower that we haven’t searched yet,” he explained.

Jolen smiled savagely. “Then let’s get going!” he shouted before running towards the door, the rest of the group following close behind.

Behind the door, the group found another staircase going up. Before they could start climbing it, Kirel turned to Jolen and pointed at him. “Be careful of traps in the floor!” he ordered with a sad look in his eye.

Jolen nodded solemnly. “I will be careful, my friend,” he assured. “Not just of traps in the floor, but of the walls and ceilings, too.”

With that, the group started climbing the stairs, not seeing any doors until the very top of the tower itself.

At the top of the tower, the group found Tyren looking out at the forest. Before Tyren was aware that they were there, Jolen pulled out his dagger. “My name is Jolen of the family Durana. You cursed my village!” he shouted.

Bewr, unable to help herself, smiled. “Prepare to die,” she added in a fake accent.

The other mages rolled their eyes while Jolen and Rikel looked at Bewr in confusion. Tyren shook his head. “If you’re an example of the quality of students that the Mage’s Academy is producing now, I need not have bothered with preparing any subterfuge,” he insulted before quickly casting a curse on the group.

Lelwyn and Bewr quickly grabbed each others hands and cast a spell together to act against the curse. Kirel then started casting spells on Tyren.

While the three mages fought against Tyren, dark shapes rose from the floor and coalesced into several vaguely humanoid shadowy shapes. Rikel drew her sword. “Jolen, help me hold off these things while the others deal with the necromancer,” she ordered.

Jolen nodded and threw his dagger at a shadow, only slightly slowing it down. “Easier said than done,” he grumbled before summoning his dagger back to him and throwing it at another shadow.

Rikel turned her sword into a spear. “Yeah, that’s the way combat usually goes,” she admitted while slicing a shadow in two. Each half of the bisected shadow rose and became a separate, smaller, shadow.

(Party really fights Tyren)

CHAPTER XVIII: JOURNEY'S END
[Illustration of memorial goes here]

(Telina's memorial is sad and depressing and I don't want to write it right now)

As the group reached Nighforest shortly before sunset, Rikel took a look at the pristine village and turned to the others. "Could we have been wrong about the direction the dragon was heading?" she asked them.

Jolen walked over to her. "The dragon was flying in a straight line in this direction. It was either going here or to the mountains to the north," he explained.

Rikel saw an armored man walking nearby and shouted out to him while running up to him. "Excuse me! Did you see anything odd overhead recently?" she asked him.

The figure turned to her. "I am not a resident of this village and I only arrived here this morning," he explained. "If you'll excuse me, I have business in the temple," he excused with a bow of his head before taking off.

As the armored man ran off, Kirel got the group's attention. "Maybe the dragon was just an illusion to scare us off," he theorized.

Bewr scratched her chin while thinking. "I don't know, Kirel. It'd take a lot of power to create an illusion accurate enough to create a stampede like that," she countered.

Rikel shrugged. “Whatever happened, the only way to get more information is to ask around. Let’s meet at the inn at sunset, agreed?” she suggested to the group.

The group nodded and parted ways. They reunited as the sun set at the inn as they agreed. Bewer shrugged apologetically. “Sorry, nobody I talked to saw anything strange since the last time we were here.”

Jolen stretched his arms. “The strangest thing I found out about was me and another elf leaving the forest recently. Not that we’d know anything about who that could have been, of course,” he smiled.

Kirel shook his head at Jolen’s antics. “That’s about all that I was able to find out, myself.”

Lelwyn walked into the inn. “I fared no better. It appears that all of our hopes in uncovering the truth lie with you now, Rikel,” he joked.

Rikel rolled her eyes. “Of course, there’s no pressure, right?” she joked back. “In seriousness, I didn’t find out anything, either.”

Lelwyn sighed. “It appears that we must accept that this mystery must remain unsolved, at least by us. Come, let us procure rooms for the evening and conjure ourselves a supper,” he ordered.

At Jolen's confused look, Bewr chimed in. "Nighforest had a bad harvest. Lelwyn doesn't want to risk further depleting their food stocks by buying food they may not be able to spare."

Jolen nodded. "Could the curse have spread this far?" he asked in concern.

Bewr shook her head. "We stopped him before he could have spread the curse beyond Midway. This was just a coincidence. Assuming you believe in coincidences."

Jolen snorted. "Of course I do! I just never trust them when they do happen."

Bewr started laughing so hard she almost fell over where she was walking. Rikel raised an eyebrow and looked to Lelwyn. "Care to explain the joke?"

Before Lelwyn could answer, Kirel butted in. "Short version: Jolen almost quoted a character from one of Bewr's favorite stories." He then turned to Bewr. "And no, I'm not joining you as you catch up on what we missed while we were on this journey," he told her.

Lelwyn shrugged. "I never particularly cared for that story, myself." he admitted.

Bewr made a face at the other mages and entered the room she was to share with Rikel, leaving the men to shrug at her antics.

CHAPTER XIX: DELINEATIONS

[Illustration of group heading home goes here]

When the group arrived in the village of Grainmarket, Lelwyn immediately led them to the town hall. Jolen walked up to Lelwyn. “Why are we going here before doing anything else?” he asked in playful curiosity.

Lelwyn turned to Jolen. “Grainmarket has a speaking stone in their town hall that may be used by the public,” he explained. “I was going to utilize it to inform the Order of our heroic success. Otherwise, days would pass before they would be able to be made aware of what has transpired.”

As Lelwyn finished his explanation, they reached the town hall. The group secured the cart and the horses and entered the building.

Once they reached the reception area. Lelwyn explained to the receptionist why he needed the speaking stone. The receptionist nodded and motioned to one of the benches so they could wait until the speaking stone was available for use again.

A few minutes later, Lelwyn was escorted inside to make his report while the others waited in the lobby. While they waited, Jolen turned to Bewr. “Why are speaking stones so rare if they’re so useful?” he asked her.

Bewr sighed. “First of all, they’re extremely time-consuming and difficult to make, causing them to be expensive,” she started. “Also, all speaking stones are able to

hear anything said to any of them, making them bad for sensitive information.”

Kirel nodded. “Yeah, if a Necromancer got their hands on one, they’d be able to find out that we stopped Tyren,” he pointed out. “Because of that, I’m sure Lelwyn is going to have to be vague in his report.”

Rikel smiled. “That actually explains much,” she shouted in excitement.

The others all looked to her and Kirel smiled. “Are you going to share your little revelation?” he asked her.

Rikel chuckled. “It’s just that we were trained in using specific, and sometimes odd sounding, phrases when using a speaking stone. If they’re not secure, that training makes a lot more sense,” she admitted.

Before their conversation could resume, Lelwyn walked back into the lobby with a smile on his face. “The Order has been made aware of our triumph!” he announced.

Kirel cheered. “Great! Let’s return the horses and get us some real food for a change!” he suggested forcefully.

As the group left the town hall, Lelwyn stopped Rikel and handed her a small pouch. “As per our agreement, here is your earnings for your stalwart contribution to our journey.”

Rikel looked into the pouch and saw twice the agreed upon price. Before she could protest, Lelwyn held up his

hand. “The agreement was to escort us to a small village and back so we could help with a blight. It said nothing of battling against a Necromancer nor any of the other feats you accomplished on this journey. The Order of the Golden Shield strongly believes that such heroism deserves reward.”

While Rikel was still stunned speechless, the group returned to the horse wrangler where they had rented the cart and horses. Lelwyn gave Silreth a pat while the wrangler looked over the horses for injury.

The wrangler smiled at Lelwyn. “The two of them look even healthier than they did before you rented them.” The wrangler then took the reins for the horses and started heading back inside the stable.

As the group was about to leave, Rikel ran up to the wangler. “How much would it cost to buy him?” she asked, gesturing to Snowhoof.

The wrangler looked Snowhoof over and nodded. “The fact that I haven’t seen him looking this healthy in years will reduce the price somewhat.”

The two of them quickly haggled over price. Rikel smiled as she handed over most of the pay she was given for escorting the mages to Midway and back. Rikel patted the horse’s head and smiled. “Let’s get going, Snowhoof,” she told the horse.

As Jolen and the three mages continued on, Rikel ran to catch up to them, pulling Snowhoof behind her.

Lelwyn paused and turned back to Rikel. “You are aware that this marks the end of your contract with us, are you not? You don’t need to travel with us anymore,” he informed her, surprised by her actions..

Rikel nodded with a smile. “I’m heading back to Elrlith anyway. If you happen to be heading in that direction, that’s your own business,” she told him. “Also, if I decide to let my horse rest by traveling slowly, well, a long trip is made less boring by pleasant conversation,” she added with a smile.

When they got to the village’s inn, Rikel arranged for a stable for Snowhoof and followed the others inside to partake in their first meal of real food in a long time. As soon as they were inside, Kirel walked to the counter to get the innkeeper’s attention. “Innkeeper! A feast, for me and my friends!” he shouted while dropping a small bag of coins on the counter.

The innkeeper picked up the bag and quickly counted the money. As she did so, Kirel leaned to her and whispered something in her ear while pointing at Jolen. He nodded her head and then quickly ran into the back to inform the kitchen to ready the feast then returned with a tray full of ale.

The group sat at a small table in the corner and slowly savored the frothy ale. Rikel sighed and sat down her mug.

“It’s amazing how little time it takes on conjured food to truly appreciate the real thing again,” she observed wistfully.

Kirel held up his mug. “I offer a toast,” he announced. When the others all looked to him, he continued. “To the successful completion of our quest and to whatever adventure awaits us next,” he said while looking sadly at Lelwyn.

Lelwyn looked down at the table while the others clinked their mugs with Kirel and drank their first round.

Jolen poked Lelwyn. “Don’t worry,” Jolen assured him. “With how thoroughly we destroyed Tyren, there’s no chance that the necromancer will ever be able to get up to anything else; we won and we’re safe now!”

Lelwyn smiled sadly at Jolen, “you are indeed correct, my friend; this is a time for celebration!” he shouted while taking a large drink, his smile not quite reaching his eyes.

The rest of the group cheered and drained their mugs. As Kirel emptied his fourth mug, Bewr leaned over to him. “I haven’t seen you drink this much this quickly since you and Marin called it quits.”

Kirel made a face. “Please, don’t remind me of her!” he begged, putting down his mug.

Jolen, overhearing the conversation, turned to the two of them. “Who is this ‘Marin’ you speak of?” he asked, suspecting a good story from the mages.

Lelwyn smirked at Kirel. “Now that is a name I have not heard spoken in quite some time!” he acknowledged.

Kirel put up his hands. “There’s not much of a story to tell. She was just a younger student I dated briefly during my last year of studies. It was a mutual breakup anyway so there’s not even any drama to the story,” he pointed out.

Bewr shrugged. “Something must have happened though. She left the Academy not long afterwards.”

Kirel turned to her. “She left the Academy? I never knew that,” he whispered. “It’s a shame though, her innate understanding of Elemental magic made me look like a dunce,” he admitted. At Bewr’s look at shock he added, “yes, Bewr, I’ll admit when somebody knows more than me about something, even if it’s Elemental Magic.”

The group laughed at that while the innkeeper arrived with the first course of their feast. Lelwyn gave a quick prayer of thanks while the others dug into the food.

Kirel leaned over to Jolen. “Don’t worry. I made sure to have non-meat options for you,” he assured the elf.

Jolen nodded in thanks and dug into a salad.

After the feast, the now well fed group retired to their rooms for the evening.

The next morning, they ordered a large breakfast to keep up their spirits before heading out to continue their

journey. After they ate, Kirel, made a point of purchasing enough food for the entire group to eat real food each day until they reached Elrlith.

Rikel saw Kirel do this and leaned over to him. “Thank you,” she told him. “I’ve had enough conjured food to last me a lifetime,” she admitted jokingly.

Kirel turned to her. “As far as I’m concerned, any conjured food is too much,” he joked back.

With that, a laughing Rikel gathered Snowhoof from the stable and the group started traveling to Elrlith.

As the group ate at their camp a few nights later, Bewr was a bundle of loosely contained energy. Jolen laughed. “What has you so excited tonight?” he asked.

Rikel sighed. “If we continue at our current pace, we should reach Elrlith by this time tomorrow,” she explained.

Jolen raised an eyebrow. “I can understand being excited to return home but don’t you think you’re overdoing it a bit?” he asked her.

Bewr stood up and practically bounced in place. “I haven’t slept in my own bed for over a month!” she complained. “Also, I finally get to catch up on...”

Kirel silenced her with a stare. “Do not get started in your stories,” he ordered in mock annoyance. Bewr simply made a face at him in answer.

Lelwyn chuckled at the pair's antics while finishing his meal. "Bewr's excitement at returning home aside, we had best get some sleep," he advised the group. "At least, for those of us capable of achieving sleep," he added with a smile.

The others all nodded and turned in for the night.

The group awoke the next morning to a rainstorm drenching the countryside. The group gathered their drenched camping gear and headed out, hoods drawn to protect against the heavy rain.

Not long after leaving their camp, the group traveled around a large hill. As the group turned around the hill, Jolen gasped in astonishment at seeing Eirlith for the first time. Despite the fact that they were still almost a day's travel away, the outline of the city was easily visible to the human eye. To an Elvish eye, the gate in the wall and the archers standing guard were visible as well as the multitudes of people going in and out of the city. "Is, is that Eirlith?" Jolen asked, stuttering in amazement.

Lelwyn walked up beside him. "Indeed it is, my Elvish friend! Come! The capitol city, and more importantly, cover from this torrent, awaits us!" he shouted before continuing on towards the city.

Jolen pointed at the distant city, "we're still miles away!" he protested.

Bewr laughed. “Yup!” she agreed. “And we’d better hurry up if we want to get there by nightfall.”

Kirel walked ahead. “Yeah, I’d rather not spend another evening in a tent, if I can avoid it; especially with all this rain” he added, gesturing towards the clouds.

Rikel shrugged at Jolen and followed the three mages. “I know elves enjoy the outdoors,” she started. “But being inside a city would still have to be preferable to all this rain.”

Jolen sighed and ran after them.

CHAPTER XX: PROMISES MADE

[Illustration of group outside of Elrlith goes here]

(Gatehouse, reverse drawbridge and other defenses)

The group made their way to the gate, reaching it shortly before nightfall. From there, Jolen could get finally get a better sense of the size of the city.

The gate alone was thick enough for three grown men to stand shoulder to shoulder next to it and it was taller than a twenty story building.

The walls, which reached two stories taller than the gate, had archery towers every forty feet and guards patrolling between the towers.

Through the gate, were farms and animal pens lined along the side of the rain-soaked stone road. The road went along the inside wall of the circular city to a shorter gate on the other side of the city. Jolen could not see beyond that gate from the entrance of the city.

Jolen stopped walking forward, forcing the other road-weary travelers to go around him. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure if I could handle being inside such a city," he admitted. "I'm too used to the forest," he added.

Bewr placed a hand on Jolen's shoulder. "We understand. I was more than a little intimidated the first time I saw the walls, myself."

Instead of answering, Jolen pulled Bewr into a light embrace. "I cannot thank you and your friends enough for all you did. Not just for my home but for myself and my family."

Kirel joined in the hug. "I just wish your sister could have been here with us, too."

Lelwyn, instead of hugging, simply placed his hands on Bewr's and Kirel's shoulders. "Then we must simply keep her alive through our memories of her," he advised the others. "What say you, Rikel?"

Rikel laughed. "While I'm not the hugging kind, I do wish you well in your travels, Jolen."

Lelwyn playfully poked Rikel. "Come now!" he chided them. "There's no reason this has to be the final time we lay eyes upon each other. Let us agree to all meet again," he suggested. "How does the first day of Planting Season in two years time sound?"

Jolen nodded. "Agreed. I'd rather not go inside Eirlith, though," he admitted. "And I'd rather not have you all travel all the way back to Midway, either," he added. "How about the village of Grainmarket?" he suggested as a compromise.

Bewr smiled. "Sounds good to me!" she agreed.

Rikel nodded. "I'll be there," she added.

Kirel shrugged with a smile. "Well, if I have nothing better to do," he joked while Bewr playfully shoved him.

Lelwyn laughed. "Then we are in agreement!"

With their pact made, Jolen started heading back to the forest while the others went through the front gates into the city of Elrlith, each looking forward to catching up with the others when the time came.

As the quartet reached one of the gates, Rikel turned away from the mages. "I need to head back to my home in the soldier's district," she explained. "If you ever need somebody to go with you on a journey like this again, let me know."

Bewr walked up to Snowhoof and petted his head. "We'll be sure to do that. You just take care of yourself!"

The three mages all waved to Rikel as she headed home before they walked back to the magic district.

When they reached their home district, Kirel put his arm around Lelwyn's shoulder. "So, do you think this will impress the Order of the Golden Shield enough for you to finally be fully admitted?" he asked.

Lelwyn shook his head. "It is hard for me to guess. It matters not, though. I have decided against joining the Order in any event," he announced.

Bewr stopped and turned to Lelwyn. "What?" she demanded. "Joining the Order's been your dream since you first learned that it existed! What changed?"

Lelwyn shrugged. “I simply realized that I could do just as much good in the world outside the Order as in.” He then blushed. “Also, I didn’t relish the idea of being away from Kirel for such a length of time.”

Kirel sighed and drew Lelwyn into a hug. “We’ve already been over that,” he countered. “I’m not going to be the one to stand in the way of your dream. You helped me achieve my dream of getting a research position at the Academy. Me helping you is only fair. Besides, I already promised to wait for you until your probationary period ended,” he pointed out with a sad smile.

Lelwyn returned the hug. “I remember,” he assured. “I simply don’t believe that you deserve to wait like that.”

Bewr came over to the two of them and hugged them both. “I just have one question for the two of you,” she announced. “Which one of you will be first to ask me to be your maid of honor?” she joked.

Kirel coughed. “I’m not sure if we’re quite ready for...” he started.

Lelwyn interrupted Kirel with a fierce kiss. Lelwyn ended the kiss and stepped back. “Kirel, would you honor...”

“The answer is yes,” Kirel interrupted with a smile on his face. “Just, please don’t make a scene,” he begged to both Lelwyn and Bewr.

Bewr got a mischievous smile on her face and turned to the crowd trying to get inside from the continuing downpour. “Everyone!” she yelled with magic-enhanced volume, causing many to stop and look at her. “May I have your attention? I have an announcement to make! Healer Lelwyn and elemental Kirel are now, finally, engaged to be married!” she informed the crowd with a laughing smile.

Kirel blushed in embarrassment while Lelwyn laughed at Bewr’s antics. Meanwhile, some of the crowd continued on their way with no reaction at all, most applauded politely, but the few who knew the two cheered loudly in celebration.

Kirel ground his teeth while the crowd continued on their way. “I will repay you for this, you know,” he threatened.

Bewr made a face at Kirel. “The two of you have been together off and on since we were at the Academy. Your friends are just happy to finally see this happen,” she explained in supplication.

Lelwyn pulled Kirel close to him. “While I do not appreciate Bewr’s sudden and public announcement, I find no fault in the sentiment of sharing our joy,” he added.

Kirel leaned over and whispered into Lelwyn’s ear, causing the healer to laugh loudly. “Better you than me to risk her ire in such a manner,” Lelwyn admonished.

Bewr looked at them sternly. “What did he just whisper?” she demanded.

Kirel winked at her. “Oh, I just made a suggestion about the bride’s maid dress we’ll have you wear at the ceremony,” he laughed.

Bewr pointed her finger at him. “You wouldn’t dare!” she warned him.

Kirel smiled back. “Oh, I don’t know,” he teased. “I think chartreuse would be a good look on you! What do you say, Lelwyn?”

Lelwyn held up his hands in supplication. “I shall not be drawn into this,” he announced, trying to not to have to take sides. “It is late and we had best head to bed in any event,” he added.

Bewr nodded and headed to her apartment while the other two went to their shared home.

Late in the afternoon on a battlefield in a desolate wasteland, a single warrior was easily mowing down opponents. Wielding a large two-handed hammer and wearing heavy armor, the figure moved around the melee as though it was nothing more than a dance, both dodging blows and returning them with equal abandon.

The warrior continued the deadly exchange until long after the last rays of the days sun shone down, only stopping when approached by a messenger who was holding a letter and shaking in fear.

The messenger bowed nervously to the warrior. "Sir, I apologize for the interruption. This message was just sent via speaking stone and I was told that it was to be delivered to you immediately."

Instead of acknowledging the messenger verbally, the warrior held out his hand silently to demand the letter. The messenger placed the letter in the warrior's hand before running off in terror.

As the messenger fled, the warrior tore open the letter and started reading, getting angrier and angrier with each word. "Tyren, I shall avenge your death; I swear it, brother!"

The warrior crumpled the letter in his armored fist and returned to the battle, fighting even deadlier and mercilessly than before.